

When Fools Cannot Win: Social Determinism and Political Pragmatism in Bodong's Reception of *Sakya Legshe*¹

Miguel Álvarez Ortega

(University of Seville & Kyoto University)

1. Introduction

In her influential dissertation on the Kingdom of Derge in the late 19th century discussing religious-political alliances in peripheral Tibet, Laurant R. Hartley brought a *nītiśāstra* work by Mipham Rinpoche ('ju mi pham rgya mtsho, 1846–1912) to the attention of Western academia.² Commissioned by the local king in a moment when the royal succession was uncertain, it attests to the late cultivation of the *specula principis* genre not only as a compilation of beautifully versed worldly wisdom but also as a tool legitimizing regal power. In Hartley's consideration of native Tibetan *nīti*, we find a much less well-known reference she takes from Puma Bhumi: the existence of a *rājanītiśāstra* (*rgyal po'i lugs kyi btan bchos*) in the works of Bodong Pañchen (Bo dong pañ chen Phyogs las nam rgyal, 1375/6–1451), attested by his biographer Amoghasiddhi Jigme Bang ('jigs med 'bang, unknown dates).³

Considered the most prolific scholar in Tibetan history, Bodong created an impressive encyclopaedic production: his *Collected Works* comprised of 137 volumes and almost a thousand texts.⁴ His *nītiśāstra* represents a marginal role in this mammoth corpus, which has mostly

¹ This paper has benefitted from the generous assistance and insights from various scholars. I would like to express my gratitude to Sangs rgya skid, Snying byams rgyal, and Maria Coma for their help locating texts and manuscripts, to Geshe Thupten Gawa for his philological comments, and to Chok Tenzin Monlam for sharing his knowledge on Bodong. I am also grateful to professors Andrey Klebanov and José Cabezón for their critical feedback. Needless to say, any possible inaccuracies and shortcomings remain my sole responsibility.

² For a recent translation and study see Cabezón 2017.

³ Hartley 1997: 69.

⁴ Maher 2017: 106.

remain unstudied.⁵ A great deal of Bodong's gnomic composition directly borrows from Sakya Paṇḍita's (sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251) *Sakya Legshe* (*Legs par bshad pa rin po che'i gter*),⁶ the Tibetan *nīti* par excellence up to that point in time. For this reason, Bodong's work has been dismissed as just "a copy".⁷ Even so, there are still good reasons to conduct an academic study of Bodong's text. First of all, it is the first *nītiśāstra* to actually use the Tibetan equivalent (*lugs kyi btan bchos*) in its title, which, as we shall see, is relevant in better comprehending a genre often deemed ambiguous. Secondly, dismissing a text merely for supposed plagiarism seems at least a rushed judgement considering the complex notions of authorship, tradition, and knowledge in the Indo-Tibetan context. In this regard, Bodong's work may provide valuable information concerning the uses and adaptations of varied previous sources. Also, there is a whole chapter in Bodong's *nītiśāstra* with no parallels in *Sakya Legshe* which is dedicated to rulers and officials. Finally, the epigrammatic character of these gnomic compositions often makes it difficult to explore a systematic reading of the normative social model they intend to endorse. It is therefore a good opportunity to ponder how the anthropological characterizations and social structures within the Tibetan aphoristic tradition relate to the social order at their time of composition, in this case, the 15th century. Far from purely consisting of a collection of charming and innocuous maxims, I argue that Bodong's *nītiśāstra* legitimizes a caste-like social structure and a pragmatic approach to government.

2. Bodong Paṅchen: life and context

A descendant of scholars, yogis and translators both on his paternal and maternal sides, as well as the son of a self-taught craftsman poet and a pious woman, Bodong Chokle Namgyal is said to have been born in the year of the Fire Dragon (1376) according to his biography,⁸

⁵ Besides the extension of his works, a commonly alleged reason of this academic neglect is the confusion of Bodong with Jonang Chokley Namgyal (1306-1386), according to Smith 2001: 179.

⁶ Davenport 2000 provides an English translation including the commentary of contemporary Sakya scholar Khenpo Sangye Tenzin; Kajihama 2017 offers a Japanese version along with a thorough study of sources and references.

⁷ Jinpa 2018: 465.

⁸ This was in the year of the Wood Hare (1375) according to the *Blue Annals*. Diemberger et al. 1997a: 37. References to Bodong's life are taken from the already mentioned biography written by Amoghasiddhi Jigme Bang in 1453 *Bo dong pan chen gyi rnam thar* = *dpal ldan bla ma dan pa thams cad mkhyen a phyogs las rnam par rgyal ba'i zhabs kyi rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar gyi dga' ston zhes bya ba* (translated as *Feast of Miracles* in Diemberger et al. 1997b), as well as from a 16th century account of

in a place called Yigu (*dbyi gu*) in Southern Latö (*la stod lho*), Southwest Tibet.⁹ He was ordained at the age of seven by his uncle, and is said to have had varied mystical experiences (for example, Saraswati is said to have appeared to him frequently and revealed prophecies to him) and scholarly prowesses during his formative years, such as the full comprehension of *pramāṇa* (*tshad ma*) in his pre-adolescence, the ability to memorize complex Sanskrit texts in a single morning at age sixteen, and the mastery of epistemological treatises and commentaries in his early twenties. This solid academic background at such a young age earned him the title of “young *paṇḍita*” from his delighted uncle.¹⁰

Known as a prolific polymath, his works encompass all subjects and topics of the scholastic curriculum, from Abidharma and Vinaya to embryology, mathematics, and astrology. In particular, he is considered a specialist in tantra and an invincible debater (hence *phyogs las rnam rgyal*, “victorious in all directions”). Anecdotes of his prolixity picture him lecturing to twenty scribes on different matters “like a great river flowing,” or enabling even the slowest amanuenses to complete thirty pages a day thanks to his blessing.¹¹ Having become the 23rd Abbot of Bodong E (Nyingtri, founded in 1049), he managed to spread his influence and his tradition became a school unto itself: the Bodongpa¹². He retired to Pemo Chöding monastery (Porong)¹³ in his seventies and passed away in the year of the Iron Sheep (1451) at the age of seventy-six¹⁴.

The figure of Bodong has lately attracted scholarly attention due to his illustrious disciples, and to the history of the decline and revival of his tradition. Among Bodong’s students, not only do we find the 1st Dalai Lama, but the fascinating character of Chokyi Drönma (*chos kyi sgron ma*, 1422–1455), “princess of Gungthang, fully ordained nun, and incarnated deity”, who established the most important and arguably the first female incarnation lineage in Tibet: that of Samding Dorje

the Bodongpa tradition called *bo dong chos 'byung* = *dpal de kho na nyid dus pa las bo dong chos 'byung gsal byed sgron me zhes bya ba dpal thams cad mkhyen pa 'chi med 'od zer gyis mdzad pa* (translated as *The Lamp Illuminating the History of Bodong* in Diemberger et al. 1997c). For a summarized version of Bodong’s biography, see Rechung 1984, and Monlam 2005.

⁹ Diemberger et al. 1997b 42-43. Diemberger et al. 1997c 108.

¹⁰ Diemberger et al. 1997b: 46-49.

¹¹ Diemberger et al. 1997b, 73, 86. Monlam 2005: 98.

¹² Maher 2017: 106; Monlam 2005: 94-95.

¹³ The monastery is in Nyalam county, Shigatse Prefecture. For a historical and contemporary geographical description, see Bauer 2009. Diemberger (2013: 107- 113) addresses the current situation of this pastoralist enclave.

¹⁴ Diemberger et al. 1997b, 88.

Phagmo.¹⁵

The Bodongpa's decline is commonly associated with the rise of the Gelugpa and the gradual marginalization of minority schools, so that by the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, the tradition was already in dire straits.¹⁶ During the Cultural Revolution that followed the Chinese occupation, the two main monasteries of the tradition, Bodong E and Pemo Chöding, were turned into storehouses and later destroyed, but were partially rebuilt in the 1980s.¹⁷ From the 1960s onwards, efforts were made to preserve relics and texts by smuggling them into India and Nepal.¹⁸ The exile community of Porongwas in Kathmandu led the revitalization of the Bodong tradition. They constructed a small monastery in Boudhanath, and had the son of a local merchant recognized as the reincarnation of Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltzen (bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312-1375), a famous Sakya scholar ordained in Bodong E monastery and mostly known for his *Clear Mirror of Royal Genealogies* (*rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*). The recognition of the tulku was confirmed by the Dalai Lama in 1996.¹⁹

According to native chronology, Bodong's time roughly corresponds with the 7th cycle (*rab 'byung*) of the Tibetan history (1387-1447), and is inserted in what Venturi calls the "long" 15th century (1361-1517)²⁰, a period described as a time of "cultural blossoming and political unrest."²¹ According to Venturi, following the end of the Yuan-Sakya rule, neither the regime established by Phagmodrupa Changchub Gyaltshen (byang chub rgyal mtshan, 1302-1364) in 1352 nor the ensuing lords of Rinpung were able to exert an effective control over Tibet in its entirety, despite their efforts to revive the empire. And

¹⁵ Diemberger et al. 1997b: 78. Chökyi Dronma also helped compile and edit his corpus of writings. Bodong is considered a pioneer in his defense of female monasticism and of women's practice and study in general. Diemberger 2007: 27, 133, 252.

¹⁶ Significantly, some of the most important Bodong monasteries were transformed into Gelug centers. Diemberger, 2007: 266, 280.

¹⁷ Sudbury 2002: 205-209.

¹⁸ Maher 2017: 109.

¹⁹ After the enthronement in 1997 of Tenzin Thutop Jikdrel Rinpoche (b. 1992), the Porongwa exile community has been very active, under the guidance of Geshe Pema Dorjee, in creating the Bodong Research and Publication Centre (Dharsamsala, 2003), investing in the education of monks in Kathmandu's Porong Gumpa and aiding in the recovery of the Bodong curriculum. The academic results of such endeavors may be observed in a PhD dissertation on Bodong's Biography (*An Analytical Study on the Life and Works of Bodong Chokley Namgyal*; unpublished) defended in 2005 by Chok Tenzin Monlam, a student of Geshe Pema Dorjee. Maher 2017: 110-116.

²⁰ Venturi justifies her choice on the significant impact of two events: the dissolution of the Sakya-Mongol alliance (1361) and the expulsion of the Karmapa school from Lhasa by the Gelugpas (1517). Venturi 2017: 98.

²¹ Caumanns and Sernesi 2017.

so, opposing a somewhat dated thesis that defended a proto-nationalist centralizing period,²² she depicts a decentralized scenario with power shifting among polities and increased political rivalry and turmoil.²³ Paradoxically, this instability seemed to favor great cultural achievements thanks to local lords seeking religious legitimation through sponsorship of different scholars and religious projects.²⁴ Bodong was thus exposed to the complex political tensions among highly autonomous neighboring kingdoms and lordships, namely Southern and Northern Latö, Sakya, Porong, and Mangyul Gungthang²⁵. In this regard, Shaeffer eloquently refers to the relationship between the rulers of Gungthang and Bodongpa religious leaders as “a multigenerational affair”.²⁶ It is probably no accident that Bodong's biographer, the aforementioned Amoghasiddhi Jigme Bang, belonged to the ruling family of the Yamdrog region.²⁷

When describing the social structure of the time, it is common to resort to general references to “traditional” or “premodern” Tibet, partially due to the scarce availability of sources and to scholarly research choices. Most approaches to this subject focus on the late Gelugpa period, or rely on anthropological research conducted in specific enclaves or among exiles. This means that the characterization presented here is necessarily “broad”, though hopefully representative enough to understand the type of society with which the studied text deals.²⁸ Leaving aside the potential inaccuracies of projecting Western categories onto a distant reality, as well as the unavoidable political discourse

²² This is the thesis classically defended by Tucci in the late 40s (Tucci 1999 [1949]:23, 38). See also Dreyfus 1994.

²³ Venturi, 2017:100 ff. Also, Diemberger et al. 1997a: 25.

²⁴ Diemberger et al. 1997a: 25 ff.

²⁵ Petech, 1990: 53 ff refers to the autonomy of these polities, also addressed in Diemberger, 2007: 30. For a historical approach specifically to Southern Latö and Mangyul Gungthang, see Everding 1997 & 2000; Everding and Dzungphugpa 2006. In the *History the of Bodong* there are references to the thirteen myriarchies and the reluctance of Bodong to meet local rulers when retired for meditation. Diemberger et al. 1997c 109, 119. As Chok Tenzin Monlam summarizes, his biography, though, describes numerous encounters with “the rulers of Tibet Wang Drakpa Gyaltsen (1374-1432) and Wang Drakpa Jungney (1414- 1445), and many other regional lords such as Trigyal Sonamde (1371-1404) and Tri Lhawang Gyaltsen (1404-1464) of Gungthang, Situ Rabten Kunsang Phag (1389-1442) of Gyalkhartse, Situ Choekyi Rinchen (?-1402) and Situ Lhatsun Kyab of Southern Latoe, Jangpa Namgyal Drakzang (1395-1475) of Northern Latoe, Drungchen Norbu Zangpo of Rinpung, Jigme Bang of Nakartse, Taglung Ngawang Drakpa (1418-1496) of Taglung and many other monastic leaders.” Monlam 2005: 92.

²⁶ Schaeffer 2009: 135.

²⁷ Diemberger, 2007: 80, 334.

²⁸ For a fairly recent overview comparing social classifications for traditional Tibet in contemporary literature, see Fjeld 2005: esp. 22-34.

associated with the post-1959 Chinese regime (“serfdom” and “feudalism” have become terminological mine-fields),²⁹ it seems fair to accept the description of the socio-political structure as an estate-based society typically marked by hereditary membership to superordinate and subordinate groups, an aristocratic control over power and land, households bearing tax and corvée obligations, seignorial jurisdiction, and strong social and political presence of monastic institutions.³⁰ It has been argued that local hereditary lords of fiefdoms (*rdzong*) find their origin precisely in this age, overlapping and finally substituting Mongol-established myriarchs.³¹

Social mobility seems to have been reduced, and in any case, Goldstein argues, to have been more flexible among the status of commoners (*mi ser*) than among the aristocracy (*sger pa*), who monopolized ruling positions as estate lords, ecclesiastical leaders or officials.³² Despite the possibility of commoners and even nomads becoming wealthy, their accession to a high ruling position appears to have been rare, and mostly occurred in the case of successful monastics.³³ Even in this context, chances for social accession were limited, considering that the majority of monks had no access to education, and that hereditary class was still relevant both inside and outside monasteries.³⁴ In this scenario, the uncle-nephew (*khu dbon*) succession lineage played an important role in legitimizing high lamas.³⁵ Bodong Pañchen was no

²⁹ Samuel has argued that the well-known dispute between Goldstein and Miller in the 80s over these terms “refers more to nomenclature than to substance” (Samuel 1995: 117). For a deconstruction attempt, see Monroe Coleman 1998.

³⁰ See extensively: Goldstein, 1971a, 1971b, 1986: 94. See also Saklani 1978.

³¹ Petech 1990: 120.

³² Goldstein 1971a: 524. In general terms, later developments do not seem to offer a more flexible context. Travers’ work on the last period of the Ganden Phodrang administration (1895-1959) still depicts official positions being monopolized by the aristocracy, with a strong hereditary component and overrepresentation of rich high-rank noble families in the highest positions (see Travers 2011: esp. 155-157, 172). Cassinelli and Eckvall do refer to some participation of commoners in certain governmental positions in Sakya for the same period, but mainly due to a conjunctural the scarcity of nobles (Cassinelli and Eckvall 1969: 146-150). For a comparative chart of social hierarchies according to what the author identifies as the Tsang code (first half of the 17th century) and the Dalai lama code (second half of the 17th century), see French 1995: 114.

³³ This seems to have been the case for Sakya, as reported by Cassinelli and Eckvall 1969: 300, 308. For a more general approach, see Jansen 2013.

³⁴ Goldstein 2010: 9; Dreyfus 2003: 51ff; Jansen 2015: 70ff.

³⁵ Monastic succession in the case of celibate practitioners was solved by resorting to a nephew. Dreyfus, 1995: 128. In the words of Caumanns and Sernes: “The fifteenth century marks the transition from transmission based on blood genealogy to one based primarily on religious genealogy of reincarnation. Prior to this date, reincarnated lamas had been rare. Political power had been mostly in the hands of a religious aristocracy ruling over familial and monastic domains” (2017: xiii.). On

exception.³⁶

3. *Bodong's Examination of Fools: accommodating the Sakya Legshe*

Bodong's *nītīśāstra* appears in his encyclopedic opera magna *Dpal de kho na nyid 'dus pa*, commonly known as *De nyid 'dus pa* (*A Compendium of Suchness*), structured along the lines of "Four Entry Gates" (*'jug pa'i sgo bzhi*). The first gate is dedicated to unlearned people (*byis pa*), and is divided into three sections covering body, speech, and mind. According to Bodong's biography, in the section on the mind we find a treatise on worldly affairs (*'jig rten lugs kyi bstan bcos*) addressed to kings, ministers, and common people. Lauran R. Hartley and Chok Tenzin Monlam seem to suggest the existence of a specific *śāstra* for each of these three types of people, which is possible considering that the extant versions of *De nyid 'dus pa* are deemed incomplete, yet the literal wording of the *rnam thar* also allows for the interpretation of a common treatment in a single treatise.³⁷ In any case, the only surviving Bodong *nītīśāstra* today is entitled *Byis pa 'jug pa'i sems kyi bslab pa bstan par lugs kyi bstan bcos blun po brtag pa*, which could be translated as *An Examination of Fools: Nītīśāstra on the Higher Mind Training to Initiate Unlearned [or Immature] People*. The text is preserved in *kham* script in a xylographic reproduction of Bodong's *Collected Works*, published by Tibet House in Delhi (1969-1981) and edited by S.T. Kazi.³⁸ There is

the origins and development of the reincarnation tradition with special reference to the Karmapa, see: Gamble 2018: 50 ff; for a focus on the Dalai Lamas, Van der Kuijp 2005.

³⁶ His uncle-nephew lineage is identified as running from Pang Lotsawa Lodoe Tenpa (1276-1342) to Lochen Jangchub Tsemo (1303-1380) to Lochen Drakpa Gyaltzen (1352-1405) to Bodong Chokley Namgyal (1376-1451). Monlam 2005: 94.

³⁷ Monlam 2005: 97; Hartley, 1997: 69-70. Hartley specifically cites a work entitled *Rgyal po la gtam tu bya ba*, but provides no exact bibliographical reference. The only instance of such wording I could find was a generic allusion to the composition of works of advice to kings along with other genres in folio 88 of the *rnam thar*: "rgyal po la gtam du bya ba la sogs pa'i gzhung du ma dang / rgyal bu dge don gyi rtogs brjod thar lam gsal ba la sogs pa phra rgyas kyi rtson pa yang du ma mdzad (...)." In any case, a work with such a title is not found in the available editions of Bodong's collected works. Remarkably, a legal treatise from Bodong's time (*Khrims yig zhal lce bco lnga pa*, see the conclusion section below) presents three *śāstras* attributed to Nāgārjuna (*Ratnāvalī*, *Rin chen 'phreng ba*; *Prajñāśataka*, *Shes rab brgya pa*; and *Jantupoṣaṇabīṇḍu*, *Skye bo gso ba'i thigs pa*) as being respectively addressed to kings, ministers, and ordinary people, but there seems to be no basis in these texts for such distinctions. The threefold reference might therefore be nothing more than a nominal one, reflecting a common classification scheme of that time.

³⁸ *Encyclopedia Tibetica. The Collected Works of Bo-don Pan-chen Phyogs-las-Rnam-Rgyal*, Volume 9, folios 132-188, edited by S. T. Kazi, Reproduced by Photographic Process by Tibet House, New Delhi, 1970.

also a recent *dbu can* edition published in Beijing (2014-2015), which unfortunately is neither critical nor accurate.³⁹

Bodong's *Examination of Fools* consists of ten chapters (484 verses) preceded by an introductory stanza. Verses are presented in the form of sententiae or aphorisms called *subhāṣita*, "well-said" or "beautifully expressed" maxims. Most are constructed as typical 4-line stanzas (a Tibetan adaptation of Sanskrit *anuṣṭubh* into 7-syllable lines),⁴⁰ in which one or two lines contain the moral or truth, while the other lines illustrate that truth with relevant references.⁴¹ As stated before, it heavily borrows from the *Sakya Legshe*. The relationship between these two texts is complex. It would not be fair to claim that Bodong just "copies" Sakya Paṇḍita's composition and rearranges the headings of the chapters; yet presenting his *nīti* as an inventive reappraisal of the most relevant previous sources would probably be an overstatement. The following chart compares the chapter structure of the two texts, showing Bodong's preference for a dual exposition of opposing elements (learned vs fools, noble vs low, etc).

Chapter Structure Comparison	
<i>An Examination of Fools</i>	<i>Sakya Legshe</i>
1. mkhas pa brtag pa (On learned people)	1. mkhas pa brtag pa (On learned people)
2. blun po brtag pa: (On fools)	2. ya rabs brtag pa (On noble people)
3. ya rabs brtag pa (On noble people)	3. blun po brtag pa: (On fools)
4. ma rabs brtag pa (On vile people)	4. spel ma brtag pa (On opposing characters)
5. spel ma brtag pa (On opposing characters)	5. ngan spyod brtag pa (On bad conduct)
6. rang bzhin brtags pa (On inner nature)	6. rang bzhin brtags pa (On inner nature)

³⁹ Also, the introduction states that the collection is based on the manuscripts preserved in India. Bo dong Paṇ chen Phyogs las rnam rgyal. 2014-2015. byis pa 'jug pa'i sgo las sems kyi bslab pa bstan pa lugs kyi bstan bcos blun po brtag . In *Byis pa 'jug pa'i sgo. Bo dong paṇ chen gyi gsung 'bum chen mo bzhugs so*, Volume ka; pages: 98-137. Hi mā la ya'i Rig mdzod 'tshol bsdu phyogs sgrig khang, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang (民族出版社), Beijing.

⁴⁰ For a detailed philological explanation of this Sanskrit meter see Steiner 1996. The Tibetan adaptation typically uses a "metrical line of three feet with a single syllable in the last foot," as explained in Beyer 1992: 410.

⁴¹ Sternbach 1981: 99.

7. mi bya brtag pa (On things to be avoided)	7. mi rigs pa'i tshul dpyad pa (Examination of inappropriate conduct)
8. bya bar 'os pa brtag pa (On appropriate behavior)	8. bya ba brtag pa (On appropriate behavior)
9. khyad par gyi lugs bshad pa (Explanation of special principles)	9. chos brtag pa (On Dharma)
10. mthar thug brtag pa (On the final goal)	

Bodong's *rnam thar* indicates that he relied on nine Indian treatises translated in the Tengyur⁴²:

- Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* (*rgyal po la gtam bya ba rin po che'i phreng ba*)⁴³
- Nāgārjuna's *Prajñāsataka*, (*Shes rab brgya pa*)⁴⁴
- Nāgārjuna's *Jantupoṣaṇabindu*, (*Skye bo gso ba'i thigs pa*)⁴⁵
- Nāgārjuna's *Prajñādaṇḍa* (*Shes rab dong bu*)⁴⁶
- Ravigupta's *Gāthakośa* (*Tshigs su bcad pa'i mdzod*)⁴⁷
- Vararuci's *Śatagāthā* (*Tshigs bcad brgya pa*)⁴⁸
- Amoghavarṣa's *Vimalaprasnottara Ratnamālā* (*Dri ma med pa'i dris lan rin po che'i phreng ba*)⁴⁹
- Cāṇakya's *Rājanītiśāstra* (*Tsa na ka'i rgyal po'i lugs kyi bstan bcos*)⁵⁰ and
- Masūrākṣa's *Nītiśāstra* (*Lugs kyi bstan bcos*).⁵¹

However, in the existing version, less than roughly 10% of the verses correlate to just five of the mentioned Indian treatises, while more than 85% of the verses clearly parallel *Sakya Legshe*. The rest (17 stanzas) appear to have no parallels to previous works. Correlations by chapter can be seen in this table (for a detailed, verse-by-verse analysis, see

⁴² *Bo dong pan chen gyi rnam thar*, folio 103. Tengyur texts are referred according to the Derge edition.

⁴³ Toh. no. 4159. English translation in Hopkins 2007.

⁴⁴ Toh. no. 4328. German version and study in Hahn 1990.

⁴⁵ Toh. no. 4330. For a translation from Mongolian into English, Frye 1994.

⁴⁶ Toh. no. 4329. English translation and study in Hahn 2009, 2010, & 2011.

⁴⁷ Toh. no. 4331. See Sternbach 1968; Hahn 2007 & 2008.

⁴⁸ Toh. no. 4332, English version in Norbu 2001.

⁴⁹ Toh. no. 4333, translated in Schiefner 1858.

⁵⁰ Toh. no. 4334. See the philological analysis in Sternbach 1969. See also Hahn 1985: 4.

⁵¹ Toh. no. 4335. English version in Flick 1996.

Appendix 1 below):

<p>Chapter 1 (On learned people): 41 verses</p> <p><i>Shes rab brgya pa (Prajñāśataka):</i> 14 verses <i>Sakya Legshed :</i> 20 verses <i>Skye bo gso ba'i thigs pa (Jantu-poṣaṇabindu):</i> 6 verses No matches: 1</p>	<p>Chapter 6 (On inner nature): 64 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 63 verses No matches: 1</p>
<p>Chapter 2 (On fools): 35 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 35 verses</p>	<p>Chapter 7 (On things to be avoided): 53 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 49 verses <i>Shes rab sdong bu (Prajnādaṇḍa):</i> 1 verse <i>Tshigs su bcad pa brgya pa (Gāthāśataka):</i> 3 verses</p>
<p>Chapter 3 (On gentle people): 41 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 26, verses <i>Shes rab brgya pa (Prajñāśataka):</i> 13 verses <i>Shes rab sdong bu (Prajnādaṇḍa):</i> 1 verse No matches: 1</p>	<p>Chapter 8 (On appropriate behaviour): 91 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 91 verses</p>
<p>Chapter 4 (On low people): 51 verses</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshed:</i> 47 verses <i>Tshigs su bcad pa brgya pa Gāthāśataka (tib):</i> 2 verses No matches: 2</p>	<p>Chapter 9 (special principles/officials): 23 verses</p> <p>Masūrākṣa's <i>Nītiśāstra</i> :11 verses No matches: 12 verses</p>
<p>Chapter 5 (On opposing characters): 43</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 43 verses</p>	<p>Chapter 10 (on the final goal): 41</p> <p><i>Sakya Legshe :</i> 40 verses <i>Shes rab brgya pa (Prajñāśataka):</i> 1 verse</p>

The integration and articulation of verses does not follow a consistent pattern, and greatly varies from chapter to chapter. For example, in chapters 1 and 3 we find verses from different sources interwoven in a balanced fashion, while chapters 5 and 8 contain nothing but *Sakya Legshe* material. Some verses are ordered in the same manner as the parallel source, while other verses are omitted from a certain sequence, or the original order is altered. Regarding the fidelity to the Indic texts or to the *Sakya Legshe*, some verses simply duplicate these sources verbatim. Other verses have missing lines and/or contain small spelling variations and mistakes; or borrow from different prior sources. And of course, there are verses that contain “original” lines and/or slight rephrasing.

In assessing Bodong's work, we must take into account that Indian *nītiśāstra* works are themselves heterogenous amalgams of varied material drawn from multiple sources, some identifiable in other works and some pertaining (sometimes at the same time) to what Sternbach calls “the floating mass of the oral tradition”. Thus, we find elements occurring in epics, *kāvya*s, *purāṇa*s and different *śāstra*s (namely the *Arthaśāstra*). This does not necessarily equate to direct borrowing. And then, of course, there are elements composed by the alleged author and or successively added by different editors or compilers in different collections.⁵² Their authorship is prompted by the ambivalence of both conforming to this alluded “floating” oral lore, and relying on the true or imputed original creation of noted writers. In this regard, a great deal of the critical study of the aforementioned Indian *nīti*s translated into Tibetan has focused on the search of its sources and parallels. And so, dedicated German philologists Anton Schiefner, Ludwik Sternbach and Michael Hahn—the latter went so far as to publish a paper titled “Cry for Help”⁵³ asking others to help him find sources—established many correlations between the verses in these Tibetan translations and different Indian texts, pointing to *Cāṇakya's Sayings* (*Cāṇakyaśāstra*, 10th century) as their leading source.⁵⁴ Following this method, the same hunt for correlations was applied to *Sakya Legshe*. Although the composition has been fiercely defended as “ein überwiegend selbständiges und originelles Werk der tibetischen Literatur”,⁵⁵ scholars have so far identified 43 parallels and assume an overall Indian influence in

⁵² Sternbach 1974:4-7.

⁵³ Hahn 2003.

⁵⁴ See Sternbach 1966, along with the references provided above for the studies on Indian *nīti*s contained in the Tengyur. For an overview, see Pathak 1974 and Hahn 1985.

⁵⁵ Hahn 1984: 60.

themes, metaphors, analogies, and stories.⁵⁶

Contextually, it is important to note that during the 15th century, block printing spread across Tibet⁵⁷ and initiated a key age in the process of textual canonization. In this regard, Smith and Schaeffer attribute Bodong's oeuvre with the quality and significance of a canonical compilation conceived and arranged with pedagogical purposes.⁵⁸ Cabezón points out in one the few works dedicated to this issue that the notion of authorship in such (and any other) cultural and historical context appears as a construct. In classical Tibet, he states, authorship was a collective enterprise involving multiple agents as well as "extreme intertextuality", "a kind of 'promiscuity' that to the modern mind would seem to border plagiarism."⁵⁹

Bodong's *Examination of Fools*, lacking a colophon and preserved in an incomplete and damaged manuscript, leaves room to speculate about the intentions, flaws, and means of the different actors responsible for its creation. Its sheer existence and position within such a body of work shows that *nītiśāstra* was an important part of an ideal educational curriculum, while its choice of sources point to the relevance of various Indic works and of the *Sakya Legshe* to Tibetan culture. Bodong's compositional intent is not only expressed in the complex and heterogeneous correlations mapped above. While Sakya Paṇḍita preferred the label *subhāṣita* (*legs par bshad pa*), Bodong is the first Tibetan author to employ *nītiśāstra* (*lugs kyi bstan bcos*) in its title. Even though both notions tended to converge historically, they refer to different dimensions. *Nītiśāstra* alludes to a treatise on proper behavior often aimed at rulers (regardless of the explicit mention of *rāja*)⁶⁰, common throughout the Indo-European milieu.⁶¹ *Subhāṣitas*, on the other hand, are well-said maxims that are not restricted to matters of proper or moral behavior, potentially including topics as varied as gardening

⁵⁶ Sternbach 1980, 251. There is still controversy over which exact sources were used, namely if the animal stories are borrowed from the *Pañcatantra* or from Buddhist Jatakas and tales found in the Vinayas. Sternbach, 1980: 252; Davenport 2000: 13-17; Jinpa 2018: 9-11. For a theoretical distinction between direct and re-elaborated Indian influence on Tibetan culture, see Seyfort 2004: 328.

⁵⁷ Jackson 1990: 114

⁵⁸ Schaeffer writes of "an alternative Tengyur, containing much of the same material found in the 'orthodox' Tibetan canons yet organized into a coherent course of education" (Schaeffer 2009: 136). Similarly, Smith situates the *De nyid 'dus pa* in the context of canonical compilations, highlighting the fact that it preserves translations purged by Buton (bu ston rin chen) from the *snar thang* Tengyur as one the values of the text (Smith 2001: 181-183).

⁵⁹ Cabezón 2001: 251. See also Steinkellner 2006: 194.

⁶⁰ Cabezón 2017: 244.

⁶¹ See e.g. West 2007: 442- 423; Forstson: 2010, 51-52.

or archery.⁶² In this sense, Bodong's labelling seems to be a conscious choice of genre disambiguation, which is also confirmed by the inclusion of a specific chapter on rulers and officials with no parallels in *Sakya Legshe*, and by his preference for socio-politically loaded terms for the chapter headings. This also jibes with the idea that the author was a competent Sanskritist looking to the ancient Indian tradition of paṇḍits and siddhas as a model.⁶³

If the contemporaneous *Ganden Wise Sayings: A Bouquet of White Lotuses* (*Dge ldan legs bshad padma dkar po'i chun po*), composed by Pañchen Sönam Drakpa (pañ chen bsod nams grags pa, 1478–1554), has been characterized as an “important supplement” to *Sakya Legshe*,⁶⁴ it is probably fair to describe Bodong's *Examination of Fools* as a reception of Sapeñ's text that emphasized its socio-political dimensions.

4. Characters, Rulers, and Qualities: A Socio-political Narrative

As already stated Bodong's text is meant as a pedagogical composition aimed at *byis pa* (immature or unlearned) people. Specifically, the author explains that it is a treatise on worldly affairs (*'jig rten*) covering both the religious and secular systems (*chos dang 'jig rten gyi tshul lugs*).⁶⁵ This characterization, common in Tibetan gnomic texts, here entails the definition of a frame within which advice is given mainly to help individuals pursue their earthly goals, but always in accordance with Dharma, and with the understanding that complete liberation only comes through ultimate spiritual realization.

The structure of the work requires consideration, since one of the defining features of the genre is its compilatory character as a collection of maxims (*saṃgraha*), which entails a complex relationship between the meaning and power of the individual stanzas and the systematizing purposes of the author/compiler. Considering stanzas as discrete units has encouraged both traditional and modern commentarial scholarship to take a correspondingly atomistic approach, providing lengthy philosophical explanations and cultural, historical, and religious references for verses constrained by a defined number of

⁶² Ali 2010: 24; Sternbach 1974: 5.

⁶³ Maher 2017: 106; Monlam 2005: 95.

⁶⁴ Jinpa 2018: 14.

⁶⁵ 1.39. Stanzas shall be quoted referring chapter and number. Jinpa explains the concept as an evolution of the old distinction between *mi chos* (human law) and *lha chos* (divine law) dating to the times of Songsten Gampo (2018: 7-8). A similar duality is found in the reference to the “two laws” (*khriṃs gnyis*), a common way to allude respectively to the secular and ecclesiastical normative domains. See extensively Pirie 2018a.

syllables and often containing obscure references. Systematic readings, though, are much less frequent and present their own challenges. The titles of the chapters do not always reflect their heterogenous content (e.g. the chapter "On Things to be Avoided" is hardly a list of things to be avoided), and different topics are addressed in a scattered fashion throughout the text. Even more important, it is not unusual to find seemingly contradictory advice on the same issue. For example, should one be kind and help one's enemies, or avoid them at all costs? Both answers seem to be defensible by appeal to different stanzas:

*When people undeceivingly provide
All sorts of kind help to their enemies,
These foes will reciprocate undeceivingly
And a great bond will be established.⁶⁶*

*With long- time resentful enemies
One must not mingle, even if they turn out friendly.
Even if water itself is boiling so hot,
Does it not put a fire out upon contact?⁶⁷*

In this regard, Sternbach has pointed out that since *subhāṣitas* were intended to be used as witty responses in cultivated conversation, the repertoire needed to make opposing views available according to the context and position of the speaker.⁶⁸ It also needs to be noted that Buddhist normative discourse seems to prefer contextual responses rather than a rigid taxonomy.⁶⁹ The overall picture, when presented as an acritical horizontal sequence lacking an explicit hierarchical structure, may appear to contain all the ingredients for an apprentice lawyer's or ethicist's nightmare. However, a more comprehensive hermeneutic may be attempted. In the first place, instead of sticking to a linear or sequential reading, it seems more fruitful to identify recurring focal topics. In the second place, rather than assuming that apparent contradictions are in principle unsolvable, the analysis of the frequency and strength of certain positions seems to allow the

⁶⁶ 6.37: *mi gang dgra la g.yo med pas// rnam pa kun tu phan btags na// dgra yang de la g.yo med pas// mdud pa dngos po'i che ba yin//.*

⁶⁷ 8.62: *yun ring 'khon pa'i dgra bo dang// mdza' ba byed kyang bsre ma bya// shin tu khol ba'i chu nyid kyang// me dang phrad na mi gsod dam//.*

⁶⁸ Sternbach 1974: 1, 5.

⁶⁹ For "gradualism" (the relevance of social position, capacities, compromise, intention, etc. in moral assessment) and contextualism in Buddhist Ethics, see, e.g., Harvey 2000: 51ff; for the flexibility, temporal adaptability, and casuistic origin of monastic regulations, see Perret 1987, 78; Prebish 2003, 45-74; Gombrich 2009, 173; among others.

identification of some views as general rules and other views as exceptions. This approach permits engaging in the quest for the underlying socio-political discourse of the text, even if it cannot totally exclude diverging readings to the one I shall try to defend. In what follows, Bodong's reception of *Sakya Legshe* is analyzed through four general themes: 1) Qualities and Characters; 2) Merit, Karma, and Wealth; 3) Rulers and Officials; and 4) Soteriology.

4-1. Qualities and Characters

Generally avoiding abstraction and theoretical speculation, the *nīti* is built upon the archetype of exemplary individuals endowed with particular qualities that define them as a "group". Significantly, a work attributed to Sakya Paṇḍita is entitled *A Classification of People*.⁷⁰ As Daub Ali points out for the Indian context, the discourse centers upon the identification and cultivation of virtues (*guṇa* in Skt.; *yon tan* in Tib.), and the avoidance of faults and vices⁷¹. In Bodong's *Examination of Fools*, this dichotomy is framed around the characters of the learned and the noble, on the one hand, and the fool and the vile, on the other hand.⁷²

The learned (*mkhas pa*)⁷³ are those endowed with wisdom (*shes rab*), the highest virtue of all, which brings happiness.⁷⁴ They put a lot of time and effort into their studies, focus only on what is relevant to master, and take good advice from whomever it is offered.⁷⁵ They need not be coerced into acting properly.⁷⁶ They cautiously pursue their goals, think before they act, and work hard on their foundations to benefit themselves and others.⁷⁷ Learned people have the insight to identify and put an end to their own faults and defects, as well as to tell right from wrong in grey situations.⁷⁸ When they are in trouble, they neither go astray nor are deluded, and instead become even sharper.⁷⁹ However, they are able to effectively deceive when

⁷⁰ *skyes bu rnam 'byed bshad pa gzhon nu'I mgul rgyan*, translated and introduced by Cüppers 2004.

⁷¹ Ali 2010: 24-25.

⁷² A collection of verses depicting "good men" vs "villains" in Sanskrit court poetry may be found in sections 37 and 38 respectively of Ingalls 1965.

⁷³ *Mkhas pa* is most frequently used, but other terms include: *blo gros chen po*; *blo dang ldan pa*, or *shes ldan*.

⁷⁴ 1.1, 1.2, 1.20.

⁷⁵ 1.22, 6.24; 1.39; 1.41; 10.22.

⁷⁶ 1.34.

⁷⁷ 1.16, 1.17, 1.8; 1.38, 1.18, 1.19; 1.37.

⁷⁸ 1.23, 1.5, 1.21.

⁷⁹ 1.30, 1.31, 1.24.

necessary, and their wisdom allows them to defeat strong enemies.⁸⁰

A lack of wisdom makes persons similar to ignorant beasts who are subject to other peoples' will and cannot tell right from wrong.⁸¹ These individuals are called fools (*blun po*).⁸² Constantly compared to animals, fools act unreflectively, selfishly, and avariciously.⁸³ They do not develop any understanding or erudition, so giving them Dharma teachings is as pointless as anointing pigs with perfume.⁸⁴ Fools hardly ever succeed, and if they do, it is only by chance; their actions cause only suffering, even when they are trying to help.⁸⁵ They also show a special disregard and unease towards the wise, particularly if they are poor.⁸⁶ Even if they are dependent and needy, they mistreat the very people on whom they depend, and cannot be trusted to comply with responsibilities or to keep their word.⁸⁷

The other positive character is mostly referred as *dam pa* (superior, holy, excellent), although the corresponding chapter heading revealingly uses the term *ya rabs*, meaning "noble" in a socio-political sense.⁸⁸ The virtues of such individuals are appreciated wherever they go in most circumstances.⁸⁹ They always act properly, even in tough contexts, and avoid even the smallest misdeeds.⁹⁰ Noble people look after their peers and others in general, including those who have wronged them and low people who do not reciprocate;⁹¹ so they treat all beings as if they were alike.⁹² Despite their knowledge and insight, they are not arrogant, showing a calm, stable, peaceful, and decorous demeanor.⁹³ These excellent beings are generous and grateful. If they suffer decline, it is just momentary, and they do not lower themselves or retaliate, remaining incorruptible no matter the circumstances.⁹⁴ In

⁸⁰ 1.32, 1.33; 1.3, 1.4, 5.32.

⁸¹ 1.5, 1.11, 2.32

⁸² *blo chung* and *mi mkhas pa* are also used.

⁸³ 2.11, 2.5, 2.8, 2.12.

⁸⁴ 6.52. They will not understand treatises even if they are elegant (10.31). They also follow others with no reason (2.32, 5.17).

⁸⁵ 2.22; 2.25, 2.1, 2.23; 2.3, 2.33, 5.19.

⁸⁶ 2.13, 2.15, 2.16, 2.17; 2,27, 5.15; 2.18; 2.7, 2.21; 2.29.

⁸⁷ 2.31, 5.35; 2.2, 2.10.

⁸⁸ According to the Jäschke dictionary: "*ya rabs*: the higher class of people, noblemen" (1881: 534). Actually, *ya rabs* is only used in two stanzas. Other terms employed are: *che rtags*, *chen po*, and *skye mchog*.

⁸⁹ 3.1, 3.11, 3.12, 3.38.

⁹⁰ 3.6, 3.5.

⁹¹ 3.7, 5.8; 5.12, 5.19, 5.3.

⁹² 3.32, 5.13.

⁹³ 3.34, 3.35; 5.7, 5.43, 3.30, 5.22.

⁹⁴ 3. 17, 5.31; 3. 19, 3.20, 3.23, 3.21.

essence, they are trustworthy people who follow the Dharma.⁹⁵

The character opposed to *ya rabs* is *ma rabs*, a term describing vile and vulgar people but also connoting a low-class status, so much so that Jäschke translates it as “plebeian”.⁹⁶ The description offered in the corresponding chapter centers much upon their cowardice in the battlefield and their deceitful nature and speech.⁹⁷ If they ever show proper behavior, it is either artificial or instigated by harsh treatment (literally by being beaten).⁹⁸ Their rare accomplishments are swiftly destroyed by their own behavior, and yet they blame others for their own faults.⁹⁹ Unlike the noble, vile people are selfish, ungrateful, and regarded as harmful both for themselves and others.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, it is pointless and dangerous to offer them help, and one should avoid relying on them at all costs.¹⁰¹

At other times the text takes a less character-based approach and discusses virtues and features in a general fashion. Possessing virtues and doing good deeds is not “all or nothing”; people are endowed with different skills, and it is rare to possess either all or none.¹⁰² In principle, virtues are deemed more important than other social assets like lineage (lineage without proper behavior is meaningless), but they need to be complemented by proper external appearance (proper attire) to garner respect.¹⁰³ There is also an emphasis on the need of exertion, cultivation, and study,¹⁰⁴ along with references to the same virtues characterizing the wise and the noble without making them their exclusive domain.¹⁰⁵ It would then be fair to wonder about the static or dynamic nature of these social characters.

Some stanzas appear to endorse the possibility of prosperity and redemption for vile and low-class individuals. Verse 3.8 reads:

⁹⁵ 3.28.

⁹⁶ Jäschke 1881: 649. Also called: *ngan pa*, *dman pa*, *blo chung*, *g.yo can*, *gzhung ngan*.

⁹⁷ They are characterized as boastful, cowardly, lazy and untrustworthy in battle (4.5, 4.8, 4.9, 4.6, 4.7, 5.37). They use sweet talk for self-interest and their way of speaking is deemed cunning, deceptive, and vulgar (4.13, 4.14, 4.16, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20, 4.41).

⁹⁸ 4.2, 4.11, 4.24.

⁹⁹ 4.3, 4.46, 4.4.

¹⁰⁰ 4.44, 4.47, 7.12.

¹⁰¹ 4.4, 4.38, 8.83.

¹⁰² 6.20, 6.40.

¹⁰³ 3.16; 7.22, 7.26, 6.26.

¹⁰⁴ 3.80, 8.3, 8.73, 7.14., 7.49. *Those intelligent and wealthy, if lazy, / It is hard for them to be prominent* (6.51).

¹⁰⁵ For example, the importance of being calm, modest, and discreet (8.26, 8.27, 8.28, 8.47, 8.48, 8.49) or of examining and removing one’s faults and shortcomings (8.50, 8.51, 8.52) are addressed in the chapter on proper behavior.

*Those who see far into the future,
And have great conscientiousness and patience,
Notable perseverance and diligence,
Can become masters even if they are servants.¹⁰⁶*

However, the best opportunity for improvement relates to associating with the wise and the noble (“*Properly instructed by intelligent people / Even coarse people can excel*”; “*Even the low and weak / Succeed when relying on the great*”),¹⁰⁷ which correspondingly entails the possibility of the virtuous person degenerating when befriending evil people¹⁰⁸. This idea is quickly compromised in verses touting the impossibility of such an ascent or reform¹⁰⁹. It is, in fact, this last notion which prevails in the text. Revealingly, the features of social characters are considered primarily a question of their inner nature or natural tendencies:

*The conduct of both the noble and the ignoble
is different through habituation.
There is no need for bees to be trained
To seek flowers, or for waterfowls to enter the water.¹¹⁰*

So, the noble, like a flame that always blazes upward, and the wise, like a lion that becomes more dangerous when hungry, will not decline regardless of the circumstances¹¹¹. Meanwhile, the ignoble are overwhelmingly represented as helpless; just as charcoal cannot be turned into white no matter how diligently washed, they cannot become wholesome or remedied¹¹². Their nature is such that even if they

¹⁰⁶ *phyi rjes ring du lta ba dang// bag yod pa la bzod sran che// brtson 'grus che zhing brtan la grim// bran g.yog yin yang dpon du gyur//.*

¹⁰⁷ *blo gros ldan pas legs bskyangs nas// skye bo dman pa'ang mchog tu 'gyur//* (8.7); *nyam stobs chung ba'i skye bo yang// chen po gzhan la brten na 'grub//* 8.8.

¹⁰⁸ 8.8; 5.42, 8.88; 5.41. Interaction with friends, enemies, noble, and ignoble people is a recurring theme in the *nīti*, which faces the challenge of reconciling the ideals of the “omnipotence” of the wise and the noble and the Buddhist value of altruism, on one hand, with the apparently equally strong evil nature of low people and contextual pragmatism, on the other.

¹⁰⁹ 4.39, 4.42, 4.35, 4.38. In a commentary to *Sakya Legshe* 178, Khenpo Sangye Tenzin writes: “Evil people, whose nature is dark as coal, may try every way, direct and indirect, to mix with and serve good people, whose nature is fair as a conch shell. How can they can ever succeed? It is impossible because their qualities are totally opposite! No matter how much every sort of transient material means is used to cure death, the type of impermanence unique to living beings, it is never possible to abide carefree, eluding death's inevitability.” Davenport 2010: 131.

¹¹⁰ 5.38: *dam pa dang ni dman pa yi// spyod pa gnyis ka goms pa'i shugs// bung ba me tog 'tshol ba dang// ngang ba chur 'jug bslab mi dgos//.*

¹¹¹ 3.6, 3.20, 1.23.

¹¹² 4.34, 4.46.

possess virtues or knowledge, there are very few chances that these attributes will be beneficial, and so it is pointless to treat these individuals properly.¹¹³

The social model endorsed in the text therefore takes a static stance, nuanced and complemented by the need for cultivation, so mobility and change appear as liminal exceptions. The notion of a clear endorsement of aristocracy, which by now seems more than a suspicion, is further confirmed in the stanza opening chapter 5:

*Even if low-status (dman pa) individuals acquire great wealth
They are still outshined by the [destitute] members of a noble family.
[Just like] the roar of a hungry lion
Makes a monkey fall from the treetop.¹¹⁴*

4-2. Merit, Karma, and Wealth

Virtues are not the only defining elements in the socio-ethical position of individuals. Other factors—like karma, merit, and wealth—also play a role. In effect, a treatise dedicated to worldly affairs and success (*'jig rten*) understandably dedicates much space to riches and resources.

The image of affluence is generally very positive, a clear sign of good karma¹¹⁵. The power that people have depends proportionally, among other things, on their wealth, which also makes their talk sound beautiful and attracts those seeking to prosper.¹¹⁶ The core idea here refers to the need to share and put resources into use. Generosity is both a valued virtue beneficial for oneself and others, and an economic instrument that brings more prosperity.¹¹⁷ Then again, it makes a big difference for such purposes whether the individual is a great being, a low person, or a fool. Wealth in the hands of the latter two only makes them meaner, profits no one, and is bound to lead to their decline.¹¹⁸ In order for resources to be valuable and useful, they need to be properly

¹¹³ 4.51, 4.27, 4.43, 4.12.

¹¹⁴ 5.1: *dman pa longs spyod che na yang// rigs ldan rgud pas zil gyis mnon// bkres pa'i stag gi ngar sgra yis// spre'u shing gi rtse las llung//*

¹¹⁵ Goldstein has pointed out how power and, indirectly, authority were a by-product of wealth, which was directly linked to the hereditary possession of land. Goldstein 1971: 74.

¹¹⁶ 5.29, 6.23, 6.35.

¹¹⁷ 6.36, 6.42, 6.69, 6.64, 8.56, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.9, 10.12. Correspondingly, sheer accumulation is harmful (7.24), a sign of madness (7.17, 7.28), and leads to ruin (7.37, 7.52, 10.7).

¹¹⁸ See 5.36, 4.1, 6.15 for the low, and 2.26, 5.17, 6.33 for the fool, who is also accused of neglecting his kin (2.28, 2.35).

obtained and utilized by people with merit and good karma.¹¹⁹

In general, merit stands as a necessary element for virtues to display their whole potential and for wealth to abound. What is more,

*Wealth, wisdom, power and such
Aid those with merit.
Yet for those who lack merit,
They act as a cause of destruction.*¹²⁰

This explains why learned people strive to accumulate merit, “the sole cause of prosperity,” and consider their stores of merit before acting.¹²¹ Interestingly, in line with the aristocratic reading proposed above, the text deems accomplishments achieved by the power of merit to be somehow superior to those obtained by perseverance, since the former depends on nothing else.¹²²

The importance of karma in social configuration is also crucial, since “*Any relationship between sentient beings / Is determined by the karma of past deeds*”.¹²³ Although the text states that being rich or poor are contextual dynamic states linked to the far-reaching effects of karma, it swiftly clarifies that those who cannot enjoy their wealth (or profit from teachings) are affected by bad karma, seen as intrinsic to fools.¹²⁴ In the case of the wise, however, karma appears to function mainly as an excuse for their rare deviations from proper conduct.¹²⁵

4-3. Rulers and Officials

Bodong explains that his *nīti* is “specially aimed at kings, ministers and so forths”. Along with profuse references throughout the text (about 30 stanzas), it includes a specific chapter (number nine), dedicated to laying out “special principles” (*khyad par gyi lugs*) for rulers and officials.¹²⁶

The accession to kingship, like any other high position, assumes that the appointee is most probably not ready and therefore is encouraged to perform a self-assessment before undertaking his or her

¹¹⁹ 7.25, 7.36, 5.30, 7.19.

¹²⁰ 7.40: *'byor dang shes rab stobs la sogs// bsod nams ldan la grogs su 'gyur// bsod nams med na de dag kun//bdag nyid brlag pa'i rgyu ru 'gyur//*. Similarly, the very virtues one may possess may ruin oneself if lacking merit (6.4).

¹²¹ 7.41, 7.44.

¹²² 6.43.

¹²³ 6.63.

¹²⁴ 8.91; 7.19, 7.16; 2.30. Also 10.24.

¹²⁵ 7.34.

¹²⁶ 9.1.

duties.¹²⁷ This does not mean that the figure of the ruler completely escapes the rigid subject-based dichotomies seen so far, concretized in the characters of the bad (*ngan pa*)¹²⁸ king and the *dharmarāja* (*chos rgyal*).¹²⁹ Many considerations are also expressed as abstract desirable or undesirable features and attitudes of those in power.

Kings who speak deceitfully, indulge lasciviously in sexual misconduct, oppress and harm their subjects and retinue, and do not generally rule in accordance with Dharma, create fear and mistrust among their subjects as well as the conditions of their own decline¹³⁰. Their misrule is considered a matter of character, which is shown, for example, in the consideration of their benevolence just as likely to benefit others as the knowledge of a charlatan.¹³¹

Just rulers, those who act in accordance with Dharma, are considered rare.¹³² They are endowed with multiple virtues, such as being knowledgeable, powerful before their enemies, respectful, considerate, able to attract wealth and subjects, perseverant, unshakable, and resourceful.¹³³ Above all, they are devoted to compassionately protecting people and clearing away their suffering. This creates a fruitful reciprocal relationship in which subjects fulfil their goals and attain happiness, and kings are granted respect, obedience, and prosperity¹³⁴. This seems to be especially true in the case of the retinue:

*To the extent that the ruler
Governs his retinue with kindness,
To that extent will his retinue and servants [act accordingly];
And so, his glory will constantly be known,
And his very tasks accomplished [by those surrounding him].*¹³⁵

The king's retinue, for their part, are expected to be hard-working, discreet, and pleasant in their speech, and follow instructions diligently¹³⁶.

Allusions to other official positions and roles are scattered

¹²⁷ 6.1.

¹²⁸ Also referred as "evil" (*sdig spyod*).

¹²⁹ The expression, however, is hardly used. See, e.g., 3.3, 3.4.

¹³⁰ 7.4, 7.6; 3.3, 3.4, 4.29, 5.39; 7.1, 4.25.

¹³¹ 4.51.

¹³² 6.7.

¹³³ 6.7, 9.2, 6.30, 3.32.

¹³⁴ 3.32, 3.2, 3.24.

¹³⁵ 3.25: *ji lta ji ltar rje dpon gyis// 'khor la drin gyis bskyangs gyur pa// de lta de ltar 'khor g.yog rnams// de la rtag tu dpal grags rnams// rje dpon nyid kyi bya ba sgrub//*. Also 5.40 explains that Dharma-kings are even kinder to their retinue when encountering enemies.

¹³⁶ 9.20, 9.21, 9.21 or 9.22.

throughout the text, though most are concentrated in chapter nine, starting with ministers (*blon po*): “Intelligent and righteous ministers/ can accomplish all the aims of the king and his people.”¹³⁷ Perfecting the three doors (body, speech, and mind), they impress everyone while staying respectful to the king, and are extremely diligent and skillful in all tasks.¹³⁸ The description of other roles is more succinct, sharing royal trust and respect, and competence in their duties as common features. Bodong considers the figures of battle-wise generals (*dmag dpon*), royal treasurers (*mdzod pa*), assistants (*'dren byed*), seat keepers (*gdan gnyer*), and receivers (*mjal sna*)¹³⁹. Spiritual¹⁴⁰ and intellectual professions, such as scribes (*yi ge pa*), scholars (*klog khan*), or doctors (*sman pa*) are also referred to,¹⁴¹ finally followed by manual laborers like keepers (*srung mkhan*), lady's guards (*btsun mo'i srung ma*) and, more generally, workers (*las mi*).¹⁴²

Along with this personal quality-based approach, it is interesting to notice more objective descriptions of what fairness represents. In this regard, Bodong's *Examination of Fools* not only emphasizes the importance of moderate and fair taxation,¹⁴³ it also proposes arguably the first description of ideal adjudication (*gis khrims*) in a Tibetan *nīti*:

*Solid, based upon evidence and then reasonable,
[Decided] with great wisdom, understanding what is right and wrong,
And with proportion and moral determination:
Thus are the rulings to be rendered by the king.*¹⁴⁴

Besides this static picture of evil and just rulers, the fluctuations in power, and the responses to that fluctuation are important for understanding the logic of the social dynamics supported by the treatise. Though evil kings appear irredeemable, just kings may decline when their rule no longer follows the Dharma.¹⁴⁵ Does that entail a breach of

¹³⁷ 6.9.

¹³⁸ 9.3, 9.4.

¹³⁹ 9.11. The stanza is based on *Masūrākṣa* 115, which refers to *pho nya*, “messenger” or “ambassador”, who are “Mentally sharp, speak clearly and are smart,/ Capable of fully gleaning the ideas of others,/ And speak with self-confidence and in accordance with their orders” (*gyid gzhung tshig gsal shes rab ldan// gzhān sems nye bar mtshon nus dang// brtan cing ji skad bsgo bzhin smra// rgyal po'i mjal sna de 'dras bya//*).

¹⁴⁰ 9.6, 9.7, 9.9, 9.10, 9.11.

¹⁴¹ 9.13, 9.14, 9.16.

¹⁴² 9.18, 9.17, 9.19.

¹⁴³ 8.19, 8.20.

¹⁴⁴ 9.15: *brtan cing dpang por rjes su 'os// shes rab che zhing legs nyes rtogs// rgyal pos tshod mkhas snying stobs can//de 'dra ba yis khrims gcod bya//*. The stanza is based upon *Masūrākṣa* 199, which addresses punishment (*chad pa*).

¹⁴⁵ 4.25.

the reciprocal duties between lords and subjects? It certainly does not. There is an unconditional defense of compliance with the law and obedience to the ruler, no matter how aggressive and hostile he may be.¹⁴⁶ The only real consequences derive from cultivating bad karma,¹⁴⁷ but no single passage allows for some sort of criticism or *ius resistendi*, common in Western medieval literature.¹⁴⁸ Revolts, of course, may be a (karmic) result of misrule but never encouraged or justified. Quite the contrary, there is a permeating sense of realism which glorifies strength and effectiveness. Just like a strong man has the capacity of both harming and helping, the text tells us that kings capable of harsh punishments are able to practice generosity too; but should they be determined to harm someone, there is no possible protection.¹⁴⁹ Since kings and subjects need each other to prosper, reciprocal cooperation is in everyone's best interest for practical reasons. This is a pragmatism that values, à la Hobbes, efficacy and presumably stability over other possible considerations.

4-4. Soteriology: the ultimate goal

The last chapter of the treatise is dedicated to *mthar thug* (the ultimate goal, the end of the journey). It revisits the topics of wealth and lineage, and insists that even if one pursues worldly goals, the wise succeed by following the Dharma.¹⁵⁰ Such goals are not, of course, the final end of the Buddhist path, complete liberation. The reader is reminded of the ephemeral nature of life stricken by suffering, and is urged to enter the path as soon as possible and to practice as diligently as possible.¹⁵¹ In this regard, though meditation is deemed an important tool, it needs to be complemented by studying (namely the present treatise itself)

¹⁴⁶ 8.15: *Even if your country's ruler is hostile/ Serve him graciously and stay there.* Also 8.27 discourages people from leaving their dwelling place, which may as well be interpreted as an advice for commoners to stay with their lord.

¹⁴⁷ This is the notion of decline mentioned above. Related to this issue, verse 7.35 (*Sakya Legshe* 304) tells the Puranic story of how the almighty and cruel Asura Valāka (usually referred to as Hiraṇyakaśipu in the *Purāṇas*; see Mani 1975: 314), disrespectful of the law and persecutor of Vishnu's devotees, was finally killed by Vishnu in a man-lion form. This story has been interpreted by the traditional Tibetan commentarial literature as an example of the unavoidable karmic retribution of those who "employ cunning and deceit to disrespectfully violate the two excellent traditions of law in spiritual and worldly affairs." Davenport 2000: 287. See also Jinpa 2018: 171.

¹⁴⁸ For a brief overview of Western philosophical literature, from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, defining the tyrant and the legitimate responses to their rule, see Turchetti 2006. The *ius resistendi* is extensively treated in Zancarini & Biet 1999.

¹⁴⁹ 6.8, 7.10.

¹⁵⁰ 10.3 to 10.13; 10.14.

¹⁵¹ 10.15 to 10.18.

and receiving teachings, the contents of which must be implemented, as well as by mastering skillful methods (completion of cause and effect).¹⁵²

And so, drawing from the *Prajñāsataka*, the composition concludes:

*Having resorted to “humanist” dharma (mi yi chos lugs)
The celestial realm is not a long-distance away.
If one climbs the stairway of gods and men,
One will be close to liberation.*¹⁵³

5. Conclusion: Fools and Jackals

Even though it is known that Buddhist literature, namely sutras, presents seemingly political elements, the study of their intent and historical significance is polarized. Interpretations range from parody, humor, and exaltation of monastic renunciation on one hand¹⁵⁴, to enthusiastic readings in democratic terms on the other¹⁵⁵. Although not every scholar defending the political relevance of Buddhism has such a utopian take, many tend to agree that Buddhism stands in opposition to the Brahmanical world. The Buddhist ruler then is as a benevolent king, compassionately governing alleged “equal” subjects, while the cruel Brahmanical king is expected to maintain social class divisions based on divine distinctions and the use of force¹⁵⁶. How do Tibetan Buddhist gnomic compositions fit within this framework?

The interpretation of Tibetan *nītis* often evince an intriguing paradoxical ambivalence. Gnostic compositions are described as a minor genre, as compendia of folk wisdom aimed at uneducated individuals which lack the depth, systematization and sophistication of proper philosophical treatises. These compositions should, it is somehow implied, be taken with a grain of salt, or, in any case, be given marginal value within the vast context of Tibetan scholarly literature. At the same time, their influence on and presence in such socially relevant sources as legal texts has been noted by diverse specialists¹⁵⁷. For

¹⁵² 10.20, 10.21, 10.25; 10.22 to 10.27, 10.33, 10.40; 10.32, 10.34 to 10.36; 10.29.

¹⁵³ 10.41: *mi yi chos lugs longs spyad nas// lha yul bgrad pa thag mi ring// lha dang mi yi them skas la// 'dzeg na thar pa gam na 'dug//*. For an analysis of the isolated character of the expression *mi yi chos lugs*, see Jinpa 2018: 464, note 14.

¹⁵⁴ Stephen Collins is a well-known advocate of this approach. Collins 1993: 317 ff; Collins 1998: 419–423, 480–496.

¹⁵⁵ See, among others, Gokhale 1969: 733; Sharma, 1996: 49ff; Rogers Macy 2010: 38–52; Samdhong Rinpoche 2014.

¹⁵⁶ E.g.: Ghoshal 1968: 62; Tambiah 1976: 20–22; Chakravarti 1996: 152.

¹⁵⁷ This ambivalence may be observed in Van der Kuijp, who has claimed that: “Though the *subhāṣita*, *legs-bshad*, *geyen* or *gnome* cannot be said to belong to the most inspiring genre of the literature of India and Central Asia, it does have a use

example, in the *khirms yig zhal lce bco lnga pa*, a law treatise contemporaneous with Bodong which contains edicts and guidelines for judges, the origin of the laws covering the ten non-virtuous actions (*mi dge ba bcu*) draws from Nāgārjuna's *nītiśāstra* works. And so, some passages clearly coincide with *An Examination of Fools* both in their formal structure and content¹⁵⁸. Although the precise juridical and institutional impact of these legal texts is still not fully understood, *subhāṣitas* are quoted to articulate normative stances along with other Buddhist elements, whose purpose has been described in terms of political legitimacy.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the educational importance and popularity of texts such as *Sakya Legshe* is evident. Therefore, it seems reasonable to accept a *prima facie* case for the socio-political relevance of *nīti* material.

The systematic reading proposed in this paper has shown the social discourse endorsed and legitimized in Bodong's reception of *Sakya Legshe*; both texts were authored by members of the ecclesiastical aristocracy of their time. Far from merely compiling agreeable items of popular wisdom, the narrative of *An Examination of Fools* builds upon the sharp distinction of types of individuals whose prosperity, social position, and value is determined by group membership and (hereditary) wealth, only marginally allowing for ascending social mobility. In this regard, the composition mirrors the social description of pre-modern Tibet, rather than pointing to an emancipatory horizontal model. It deploys a conservative defense of the status quo with, one may even infer, an emphasis on monastic hegemony by monopolization of knowledge, and a pragmatic approach to kingship. It is therefore in line with the anthropological studies that characterize that society in terms of casteism, and that point to the use of karma as a

apart from giving a glimpse of the folk wisdom which it compactly expresses;" their main utility being a suitable material for teaching Classical Tibetan (1986: 620-621). At the same time, he has referred to the presence of such proverbial verses in legal documents (1999: 279-280).

¹⁵⁸ To provide just an example, we may compare the treatment of wealth seen in Bodong with the explanation of the origin of law on covetousness:

*chog shes med pa'i nor 'dod ni/ Those with an insatiable desire of wealth
'dir sdug phyi ma ngan song lhung / Suffer in this life and will fall into a lower realm in the next life.*

chags zhen med pa'i li tsa byi/ Lacking desire and clinging, the licchavī (a devout clan from Vesālī) [nobleman]

bde la phyug pa ngo mtshar che / Was wealthy in happiness. How marvelous!

zhes pa la brten nas/ Relying on such advice,

brnab sems spangs nas chags pa skyung ba'i khirms bcas so/ giving up covetousness, the law on abandoning attachment was defined.

Khirms yig zhal lce bco lnga pa, folio 10. The circumstances and reasons of the creation of this legal treatise are addressed in Pirie 2018b. The author also offers an online translation of fragments of the text at: <http://tibetanlaw.org/texts/mirror>

¹⁵⁹ See Pirie 2017.

deterministic instrument that legitimates the social hierarchy¹⁶⁰.

The social landscape depicted in the text is thus very much in tune with non-Buddhist collections such as the famous *Pañcatantra*, whose animal fables endorse castes and have social determinism as a running theme.¹⁶¹ So even if these Tibetan *nītis* present original elements, like the “dual system”—religious and worldly—they seem to represent more of a continuation of Hindu socio-political ideas than a clear break from them.¹⁶² Bodong’s fools, the claimed target of his treatise, like the jackal who famously tried to pass himself off as a king after acquiring an indigo coating, will eventually reveal their true nature and fail. They cannot win.



Appendix 1

The following chart presents the concordances with *Sakya Lesghe* and Indian *nītiśāstras* translated in the Tengyur. SL: *Sakya Legshe*; PS: *Prajñāśataka*; JP: *Jantupoṣaṇabiṇḍu*; GS: *Gāthāśataka*; PD: *Prajñādaṇḍa*; MS: *Masūrākṣa*. N.M.: no match.

Concordances for Bodong Pañchen’s an Examination of Fools	
Chapter 1 (Learned)	Chapter 6 (Inner nature)
1.1. = PS (4, 5)	6.1 - 6.21= SL (193-213)
1.2. = PS (5, 6)	6.22 = N.M.
1.3. = SL (25)	6.23- 6.27 = SL (214-2.18)
1.4-1.9 = PS (7-12)	6.28 - 6.29 = SL (222-223)
1.10-1.15 = JP (16-21)	6.30 = SL (219)
1.16-1.19 = PS (14-18)	6.31 =SL (221)
1.20 = SL (18)	6.32 = SL (220)
1.21 = SL (20)	6.33- 6.34 = SL (224-225)
1.22= SL (2 lin.24)	6.35 -6.53= SL (227-245)
1.23-1.28= SL (4-9)	6.54- 6.57 = SL (246-249)
1.29 -1.31= SL (12-14)	6.58 -6.64 = SL (250-256)
1.32 = SL (17)	
1.33 = SL (150)	
1.34-1.36= SL (21-23)	
1.37= PS (92, 93)	

¹⁶⁰ E.g. Aziz 1978: esp.53-57; Allen 1978; Gombo 1983, Gombo 1985; and Obeyesekere 2003: 75 ff.

¹⁶¹ See Olivelle 1999: xxxvi-xxxvi and extensively Taylor 2007.

¹⁶² A recent questioning of the Brahmanism /Buddhism dichotomy is developed in McGovern 2018.

1.38-1.39 = SL (27-28) 1.40= N.M. 1.41=SL (30)	
Chapter 2 (Fools) 2.1 = SL (61) 2.2-2.32 = SL (64-94) 2.33 = SL (156) 2.34 = SL (158-159)	Chapter 7 (Inner nature) 7.1 - 7.3= SL (257-259) 7.4 = PD (93) 7.5 - 7.6 = GS (71-72) 7.7 = GS (89) 7.8 - 7.37 = SL (260-289) 7.38 = SL (303) 7.39 - 7.43 = SL (290-294) 7.44 - 7.51= SL (295 -302) 7.53 = SL (319)
Chapter 3 (Nobles) 3.1-3.7= SL (31-37) 3.8- 3.23 = SL (39-54) 3.24 - 3.26= SL (56-58) 3.27 = PS (50) 3.28 = PS (18) 3.29 = PS (26) 3.30 = PS (65) 3.31-3.33 = PS (95-97) 3.34 = PD (91) 3.35 = N.M. 3.36 - 3.40 = PS (38-42) 3.41 = PS (19)	Chapter 8 (Appropriate behavior) 8.1 - 8.15= SL (304-318) 8.16 - 8.39 = SL (320 - 334) 8.17-8.42 = SL (335- 346) 8. 43 = SL (348) 8. 44 = SL (347) 8.45-8.52 = SL (349-356) 8.53-8.58 = SL (358- 3.63) 8.59= SL (366) 8.60 - 8.76 = SL (365 -3.81) 8.77- 8.81 = SL (383-386) 8.82-8.88 = SL (389 - 395) 8.89- 8.91= SL (396- 398)
Chapter 4 (Vile people) 4.1-4.2= SL (59-60) 4.3 -4.4= SL (62-63) 4.5 - 4.9 = SL (95-99) 4.10 = GS (52) 4.11-4.12 = GS (58-59) 4.13 -4.17= SL (145-149) 4.18- 4.22 = SL (151-155) 4.23 -4.24= SL (161-162) 4.25 - 4.27 = SL (163- 165) 4.28 - 4.43 = SL (167-182) 4.44-4.48= SL (187-191) 4.49 = N.M. 4.50 = N. M. 4.51 = SL (226)	Chapter 9 (Special Principles) 9.1-9.4 = N. M. 9.5 = MS (122) 9.6 -9.7= N. M. 9.8= MS (123) 9.9-9.10= N.N. 9.11-9.15= MS (115-119) 9.16= N.M. 9.17-9.18= MS (125-126) 9.19= N.M. 9.20-9.21= MS (100-101) 9.22-9.23= N.M.
Chapter 5 (Opposing characters) 5.1-5.41= SL (102-141)	Chapter 10 (Final goal) 10.1-10.8 = SL (399-406)

5.42- 5.43 = SL (143-144)	10.9-10.12 = SL (408-411) 10.13 - 10.40 = SL (429- 456) 10.41 = PS (98)
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