

In his Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture

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“But what my power might else exact—like one
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie, he did believe
He was, indeed, the Duke, out o’th’ substitution
And executing th’ outward face of royalty
With all prerogative. Hence his ambition growing—
Dost thou hear?”
“Your tale, Sir, would cure deafness.”

W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

It should not come as a surprise when we observe that among documents from ancient medieval cultures, not least among those boasting a rich and diversified written or scriptural tradition, we far too often encounter writings ascribed to a celebrated person when in fact it is not the case. The degree of forgery and manipulation involved naturally varies from case to case, the camouflage, intended and not seldom unintended, being enacted more or less openly or indeed covertly, so also the degree with which the issue was addressed or queried, not to mention being tacitly accepted at face value within the milieu that fostered it. The phenomenon nevertheless is ubiquitous and now well documented across many cultures (Seidel 1983, Rosenblum 2000, Ehrman 2012 and Farrer 2012). In the present case we shall investigate a unique and, fortunately, quite verifiable case of forgery, a case in point prestigiously associated with the unsurpassed national icon and historical figure in Tibet, and a forgery that proved to be accepted in wide circles in Tibet. The paper is an elaboration of a former essay by the same author (Sørensen 2000a), yet this time preceded by a general, albeit brief discussion on forgery and specifically offering an outline of the cultural ambience within which it proved possible to manufacture such a hoax.

“Among the Tibetans, grapholatry is more real than idolatry.”
Robert Ekvall, *Religious Observances in Tibet*

A Phenomenon of Trite Ubiquity: Spurious Scriptures

Within most of Buddhist hermeneutical traditions, not least where textual and stammatic transmissions constituted a formative element, the dilemma surrounding spurious scriptures was not only constantly negotiated but also richly documented. No doubt, over the course of time, the orthodoxy and time-tested dependency on scriptural—mostly canonical—authority (*āgama*—the all-out criteria for scriptural veracity and authenticity not least in India and Tibet)¹ played a decisive role and proved consensually mandatory. This circumstance prompted the compilation of texts and writings manufactured in order to tinge otherwise anonymous or dubious texts and entire corpora with the nimbus or aura of authorial or scriptural authenticity in order to meet the criteria of scriptural legitimacy and common approval. To meet these ends, not few works invariably were ascribed or attributed to a legitimizing source: mostly to a great pioneer—divine or human, to a founding figure of a particular school, or to a reputed master of yore. The nature and variety of forgeries conducted in this context lays bare a broad and complex picture of textual manipulation and it is beyond the pale of this small paper to address the many variant forms of attempted or intended forgery as well as the theoretical issues that accompanied this process.

Doubtless as philologist one encounters the phenomenon from time to time not only within strictly religious and scholastic literature where it is richly documented but also in secular literature—to complicate matters in assessing the degree of fraudulence, not seldom cases of false identity or dubious attribution were perpetrated with-

¹ The concept *āgama* (Ch. 阿含, Tib. *lung*) in Buddhism commonly refers to a collection of discourses (*sūtra*) of the early Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, by extension in a Tibetan context it generally acquired the overall significance of alluding to authoritative canonicity. The issue whether texts and scriptures embodied (transmissional) authenticity proved to have a long history in Tibet. In scholastic, commentarial and hermeneutic writings among Tibetan masters, it was obligatory when propounding a theory, a thesis or a doctrine to provide convincing validation by way of two criteria: the argumentative strength of logic (*rigs*, *yukti*) and reference to scriptural authority (*lung*, *āgama*), in the latter case a scholastic argument or thesis required the canonicity-proven reference to substantiate the thesis or claim, by referring to authoritative (often canonical) sources as validation or proof. Yet in Tibet the reference to “writings” allegedly penned, transmitted through, or originating with pioneer masters and sages like Guru Rinpoche held the same authority, at least within one’s own tradition. This principle of providing authority to a claim also proved relevant in the present case of a faked royal biography.

out any intention of committing a hoax, or deliberate deceit. To varying degrees, and in different contexts we encounter attempts at what we shall call pious or sacred plagiarism, not just a simple act of duplication but as a sort of mechanical and non-committal process not driven by personal or self-promotional concerns, but rather guided by humility (bereft of any immoral stance) and religious motives to promote a certain doctrinal position or scholastic tradition. A large amount of so-called apocryphal writings was motivated by such rather unintentional or unwitting motives (see Ehrman 2011: p. 130ff.).

In Tibet, and this might be the case in other Buddhist countries as well with a huge scriptural production, it is not impertinent to note the incentive and vivid interest behind such proliferation and reproductions, the blessing power stemming from the pen. As noted by R. Ekvall, when it comes to the crucial merit-building, it may wonder but acts of grapholatry not seldom outnumber that of idolatry (Ekvall 1964, p. 114). The result was a unending engagement and commitment to text production (*gsung rten*, the 'verbal support,' sacred scriptures) as a gateway to a better and swifter rebirth, a cornerstone or rather stepping-stone within the Buddhist soteriological program.

Incidences of what we shall characterize as intentional or personally motivated "pseudonymity" (i.e. a state of disguised identity) nevertheless abound in Tibet too. We here come across writings of dubious provenance with no clear or identifiable (original) author, or—as in the present case with the fake royal biography, an obvious enactment of regular imposture, perhaps even a case of conscious impersonation. Samples of mechanical but clearly false ascriptions are legion: During the most part of the medieval period, Guru Rinpoche, addressed and hailed as a Second Buddha throughout the Tibetan religious universe, served either as the "original author" or "spiritual inspirer or ultimate source" behind countless texts and teaching cycles, when the very texts in question in fact had been penned by his adherents, not seldom confusingly claiming themselves to be embodiments or spiritual incarnations of the Indian master and not least his disciples—a circumstance that makes it (ontologically?) problematic, at least ambiguous to question the nature of genuine "authorship" in each case.² Tellingly, the assumption or

² The number of studies on Padmasambhava of Uddiyāna is now sizable; see most recently Hirshberg (2016), Mayer (2013), and lately Doney (2014, 2018) on the text transmissions and artistic representations associated with the figure. The extent of his historicity remains shaky and inconclusive. What one so far can assume, prior to the mid-13th century, narrative elements found in Dunhuang and other Guru Rinpoche narrative vignettes f.ex. traced in *Sba/Dbā' bzhed* proved the existence of an increasingly strong cultic undercurrent around his figure, yet Padmasambhava remained at best an Indian master of some note, before a row of

claim that these teachings and texts—in one way or another—originated with the 8th century Indian thaumaturge was roundly mooted but never fundamentally disputed at least not among his most pious followers, the enormous prestige and unchallenged repute enjoyed by the Indian master invalidated and blocked any serious critique that might have questioned the inadequacies of authorship, it did however fuel heated polemics when rarely within the inner circles of his followers. This culturally sensitive conundrum remains a phenomenon that is richly documented in Tibetan religious literature as it will be addressed below. Nevertheless, these later authors evidently were no more than compilers (others denote them successive tradents,³ when referring to those who later transmitted these teachings whether in text-form or oral) who here served as a sort of “porte parole” or purveyors of the “original author” allowing them to claim that these writings—uniformly considered the very words or *ipsissima verba* of the original source or author—transmitted or channelled from him to them through dreams, revelations, visitations (or *dag snang* i.e. “pure display and appearance”) or through sheer inspiration, a circumstance that in medieval Tibet alone would meant to serve as incontestable proof. A large bulk of esoteric texts transmitted within the Old School in Tibet hence is often displaying a spurious provenance.⁴ The quest and urge to provide authenticity

“hagio-/biographies” dedicated to him eventually turned him into a mythological figure of quite staggering dimensions. Here again one can pose the same question: How much of the writings and rituals ascribed to him (or “originating with him” as it is often phrased) are actually the product of his pen. We have little or almost no way to prove it.

³ As suggested by R. Mayer, we may talk about “tradents” instead, resembling what we know from a Rabbinic Jewish context: a person who hands down or transmits (especially an oral, as much as, we should add a literary) tradition. Yet they remain essentially apocryphal. An added complication, treasure texts often display a fluid transmission, being the object of emendation and interpolations through many hands, thus producing a veil over any original format.

⁴ Cases involving different forms of fraudulence are legion and diverse. In a Tibetan context, texts and writings classified as the “ancient or early mantric/esoteric Rnying ma translation tradition” (*snga 'gyur rnying ma*)—were throughout the early post-imperial epoch as well as throughout most of the ensuing medieval period by Indophile purists and doctrinal opponents alike deemed to lack validity, and not few writings being dubbed “self-fabricated” (*rang bzo*) by their purist opponents, in other words it often represented works produced in Tibet and penned by Tibetans. In order to enhance their scriptural validity, they were claimed to be of Indian origin, originally translated from Sanskrit—the litmus test and hallmark of authenticity and originality in an overly Indophile society such as the Tibetan. Hermeneutically well-documented and authoritative teachings and cycles verifiably of indisputable Indian origin (reflecting Buddha’s *ipsissima verba* or that of an Indian scholar saint) usually were transmitted and blue-printed through an Indian Paṇḍit and a Tibetan *lotsāva* at an early point increas-

was imperative, the one crucial criteria for acquiring universal approval and scholarly or doctrinal compliance. Indeed, searching for dubiously ascribed writings amounts to opening up Pandora's Box, the textual profusion unquestionably indicates that it is an integral part of the entire literary production in Tibet (doubtlessly as much as in other Buddhist traditions) and hence in no way unknown to the development of Tibetan literature. As said, it is documented both in secular, but by far most often in religious and post-canonical writings.

Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

Apocrypha or spurious writings have long vexed philologists, historians of literature and of religion alike. Apocrypha according to the general definition has as a concept been borrowed from Biblical studies, being used there to designate a class of literature which albeit not necessarily considered heretical, were not included into the biblical canon during its formation at the time of the first few centuries after Christ, usually excluded on account of doubts concerning authorship or questions of doctrine.⁵ Similar to the cases in Tibet with a large number of texts within the Rnying ma pa corpus and the large number of texts ascribed to their founder, here also numerous texts are classified as apocrypha. The entire gamut of *gter ma* treasure texts, a prolific and unique genre of its own, may be considered apocrypha in one way or another but where the term "mythographa" possibly would be more precise, albeit this genre in no way contained "canonical material i.e. (Kanjur/Tenjur)." This or these sorts of compilation and writing proved to be popular and were produced in a great number for centuries.⁶

The term apocrypha is largely used as a specific category of its own in China. An increasing number of Sinological researchers have dedicated their study to this particular genre. In a Buddhist context such scriptures were composed in China and Central Asia and contain elements peculiar to Chinese Buddhism or met particular Chinese cultural sensibilities; in the same category of apocrypha, we find a considerable number of indigenous works composed for over a

ingly competed with teaching systems and text transmissions of more spurious or apocryphal origin. It gave rise to disputes and ingrained polemics over this heated topic and over the normative standards of veracity, a dispute that continued to mar Tibetan hermeneutic discourses for centuries.

⁵ *Op. cit.* Muller (1998), p. 63.

⁶ The issue of authenticity concerning the *gter ma* or treasure literature has been vividly discussed in numerous studies, see most conveniently the discussion in Hirshberg (2016).

millennium and beyond, penned by Chinese masters and scholars who deliberately made exclusive use of Indian elements.⁷ The indigenisation of Indian Buddhism exported and transposed onto Chinese soil, contrary to Tibet, went hand in hand with a row of significant cultural compromises that Indian Buddhism had to strike with a strong and culturally autarchic Chinese civilization. In other words, only by absorbing and channelling concepts and words through a Chinese filter—a complex conceptual process of Sinification—was it possible for Buddhism to gain a firm foothold there.

Returning again to our discussion concerning the written legacy in Tibet, the transmission of Buddhist scriptures and teachings early proved to be very far more conscient and resilient in its “canonical” orthodoxy vis-à-vis the Chinese adaptation and reception of Buddhism. It may not surprise, since early on attempts to achieve linguistic uniformity held high priority in Tibet not least in order to develop a normative “canonical language.” Already in the late 8th century, a committee by royal decree revised and regularized the Tibetan language by introducing new standards or rules for orthography and terminology, an enterprise prompted by the needs required when converting the first huge backlog of Buddhist writings into the newly invented Tibetan language, mainly transposed from Sanskrit with its complex and foreign stock of doctrinal, ethical and philosophical concepts as well as complicated grammatical and syntactic rules. To meet this end, major changes in the Tibetan language were exacted (see Scherrer-Schaub 2002). The outcome of this thorough linguistic reorientation—in syntax and vocabulary itself largely an artificial construct—eventually came to be known in general as the vehicle or medium—*chos skad*—and propagated with unparalleled consistency. Throughout the ensuing centuries, the new language was used to render the huge Buddhist canonical corpus into Tibetan, and not least the numerous correlative tracts within Buddhist hermeneutical literature as well as within countless indigenous writings inspired by this huge corpus. The attempt to retain the “noble or sacred nature” of the source language from the outset prevented any excessive proliferation of apocryphal writings to the same extent as we witness with Sinitic Buddhism, still cases of pseudepigrapha in Tibet were never absent—due also here to the relative “openness” in the redactional process and for a general lack of critical censorship when assembling the canonical writings, or “sacred writings,” the Kanjur but especially the Tenjur proved more vulnerable to redactional manipulations. As

⁷ The topic has been studied by an increasing number of researchers initially by a host of Japanese Sinologists, later by Sinological scholars like (Buswell 1990), Teiser (1994), Muller (1998), Seidel (1983) among others.

said, the exclusion over time of certain Rnying ma scriptures from the Kanjur were conducted due to considerable lack of trust in their Indian pedigree.

For the scriptural door-keepers, cases where texts passed through the eye of a needle of censorship did happen. A canonical case in point among others may here be illustrative: The commentary on Āryadeva's *Lamp that Integrates the Practices* (*Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*) attributed to Sākyamitra, a highly influential scholastic work in the "Esoteric Community" (*Guhyasamāja*) tradition of the Noble Nāgārjuna,⁸ was penned by a Tibetan pseudegraph, still it was included among the Tantric Commentaries (*rGyud 'grel*) and hence a part of the Canon. Other spectacular canonical cases could be broached: the Bengali Master Atiśa—probably the single most important figure in the indigenisation of exoteric Buddhism onto Tibetan soil in the crucial 11th century—along with his team of devout Tibetan translators, during his stay in Tibet, produced works of dubious attributions or they invented treatises under a new title by re-assembling fragments from other works. Here as elsewhere the end often would tend to justify the means, in the sense the message of the contents of a treatise often outweigh the significance of the contents' origin. It was arguably due to careless redactional procedures or in order to provide new texts, so for example the text *Madhyamaka-Ratnapradīpa*, an independent anthology which over long stretches consists of lengthy extracts derived from the *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* and its commentary *Tarkajvālā*. Many works ascribed to the father of Madhyamaka, the 2nd century Nāgārjuna, are spurious, a number of these works are of a relative or demonstrably later date wherefore their authorship is attributed to an otherwise still unidentified Deutero-Nāgārjuna. The list could be prolonged.

Naturally, to raise the issue of the authenticity of a work is already to be begging the question, the issue of authorial attribution must be solved in each case, since every case is unique. In the canonical field, a role for the production and influx of this sort of literature was naturally the very structure of the canons, in China as well as later in Tibet, the steady editorial improvements and retranslations or the sheer production of later scriptures that in language and style resembled many of the traditional canonical writings paved the way for the inclusion of new scriptures that often slipped beyond the porous walls of censorship. In fact, each editor of the numerous canonical editions in Tibet were to take responsibility for removing texts he considered spurious or to replace them with a new or variant translation. In the end, we are faced with a genre that easily could be dubbed "Canoni-

⁸ See the details and analysis in Wedemeyer (2009).

cal Apocrypha." In China, the number amounts to several hundred. In Tibet, particularly the Tenjur collection of the Sacred Writings, itself the signifier *par excellence* of authenticity, the "Translated śāstras or Commentatorial Treatises" (both of Māhayāna and Non-Māhayāna treatises) were often awash with works of more dubious origin, at best they were redactionally reassembled, partly with authentic material, to constitute a genuine source ascribable to a renowned former Indian Buddhist author that in Tibet served as the litmus test of authenticity.

Turning now our attention to Tibet's autochthonous or non-canonical literature—our main concern in this paper—the situation is no less complicated. In the sphere of proper biographies, Tibetan literature abounds in false attributions, mentioned can be the biography of Klong chen rab 'byams, the biography Sixth Dalai Lama among other life-stories that proved to be falsely attributed. In case of the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706) in this fictional after-life biography called the Secret Biography written 1757—recounting his life after 1706, the year of his death, it is recounted how he lived on as an *Doppelgänger* or impersonator in Alashan of today's Inner Mongolia, experiencing a life of peregrination until his passing 1746. This fictional text and the institution it established (Baruun Heid monastery) to this very day prompted the creation or establishment of two incarnation lines stemming from the Sixth Dalai Lama and his erstwhile Regent who once had identified him (Aris 1989; Jalsan 2002, p. 34). Fictional literature does have some impact in shaping history.

Moving further into the aberrations of Tibetan literature, and employing the term *pseudepigrapha* broadly, the huge *gter ma* production, as indicated above, alone can be considered a native format or genre of religious and historical narrative literature, most of which were consciously antedated by several centuries, arguing that the actual authors were pioneers or historical figures active during the heydays of the Tibetan empire (7–8th century). Our present interest here is limited to an ensemble of so-called testaments or biographies (*bka' chems*, *zhal chems*, *nam thar*, *bka' thang*) that were all discovered—*gter ma*-style—but more likely compiled and composed by a number of 11–14th treasure-finders since indisputable evidence (or proof) of their putative origin during imperial time is uniformly absent.

Among these historically problematic sources, a number of post-imperial texts were attributed or dedicated to two key figures in Tibet's founding period, individuals that were later massively and quite hyperbolically promoted and championed as cultural and national heroes: the aforementioned 8th century thaumaturge Padmasambhava and the 7th century founding monarch Srong btsan sgam po. For our present purposes we shall pay particular attention

to the last one. Still, these texts served to highlight their larger-than-life stories, being idealized narratives that recount how they—almost singlehandedly—were responsible at different stages and in different capacities for Tibet's conversion to Buddhism during the golden heyday in the 7th and 8th century. Their ubiquitous presence in this capacity as national heroes would not only permeate but also be widely and uniformly acknowledged in all historiographical sources throughout the coming centuries.

Who were the authors behind the number of “treasure texts” related to these cultural heroes—we shall meet two or three of the most prominent ones—if they were not actual authors then at least compilers or tradents of a number of biography-style narratives. In order to approach these biographical text cycles we shall look behind the curtain. The topic however is well known, having been broached several times, and only the sketchiest outline is offered here (Sørensen 1994; 2000a; 2018; Hirshberg 2016; Kapstein 1992).

The National Foundation Charter

It may prove instructive and conducive to a proper appreciation of the textual basis and ideological context behind the formation of the spurious biographies, if we briefly address the presuppositions and cultural milieu that led to the gestation of the fake royal biography. It is in particular instructive to introduce a few points relevant to the core narratives behind this document. Needless to say, the protagonist in this tale is known to everybody. Tibet's key or towering historical figure embodies in many ways the national history and allegory of Tibet in his very person: the 7th century Khri Srong brtsan, i.e. Srong b(r)tsan sgam po (605?–649/50) was ancestral sacral ruler, monarchic founder, Buddhist Saviour Saint and the cultural hero *par excellence*. He indeed was the recipient of multiple projected and layered identities assembled in one person, identities ascribed to him when seen in a *longue durée* perspective. His legacy (*phyag rjes*), whether assumed or real, both in a literary and material context, is enormous, despite the circumstance that we know relatively little about his real mundane and historically verifiable life. Still, he was subject to a number of permutations in terms of identity, possessing a number of *aliases*—as said only surpassed in this capacity perhaps by another, far more nebulous figure to whom many embodiments similarly were projected, all largely fictitious: the omnipresent thaumaturge Guru Rinpoche to whom a large number of larger-than-life identities and timeless roles were ascribed by his most ardent followers. At places it turned into a veritable Guru-mania in the ensuing centuries giving birth to countless real life persons proudly claiming

to be mundane embodiments or manifestations of the thaumaturge and not least his most prominent disciples,⁹ an embodiment industry that would run into the thousands.

Like the successive rulers of the erstwhile Tibetan dynasty that followed the founding figure, Srong btsan sgam po was regarded as an embodiment or manifestation of a *bodhisattva* already during late dynastic times, but in particular from the very outset of the post-dynastic spell (11th century) where he was consistently identified with and transfigured into the “Lord of the World,” Lokeśvara or Avalokiteśvara, alternatively known as Mahākāruṇika, the paramount Bodhisattva Lord and Saint of Compassion. The *bodhisattva* deity’s immense role in the dissemination and popularization of Buddhism in most countries is witnessed and documented in numerous instances following in the trail of its proliferation.¹⁰ It was not much different in Tibet. It is a fascinating tale how this figure in particular was conducive to making Buddhism in Tibet endemic, indeed a major reason for its relatively smooth indigenisation on the soil and tracts of the “Roof of the World.” Not only the massive popularization of the Lokeśvara cult in the Licchavi period of the present-day Kathmandu valley served, together with Khotan, as the initial gateway for the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, also the prevailing Māhāyāna Buddhist literature exerted decisive and formative influence in this regard, opening up for the concept repeatedly addressed in the literature that Buddha’s lifespan and eventually his bodily manifestations and transfigurations were hyperbolic and sheerly endless. This sort of corporeal hyperbolism literally accounts for the polytheistic invasion of deities in a multitude of forms in the ever-expanding pantheon throughout these countries. Anyhow, a veritable multitude of human epiphanies, as said, was transformed into “saintly embodied beings” that invaded even remote corners of the Tibetan society.

In the early post-imperial era following the collapse of the Tibetan dynasty, a period steeped in chaos and civil war, local historians (followed later by a row of peregrinating esoteric ascetics) gradually attempted to retell the drama of the country’s early history, to some extent also competing in “reconstructing” the past in tune with their ideological sensibilities and preferences. This all-out reconstruction proved necessary, since the country at that point was facing a dearth of texts and documents that stemmed from the imperial period, doc-

⁹ The literature on the unique phenomenon, incarnation and their proliferation is now appreciable, see conveniently Hirshberg *et al.* (2017); Gamble (2018).

¹⁰ The development resembles the role of the deity that took place in Śrī Laṅka, cf. Holt (1991).

uments lost in the throes of warfare and turmoil. They instead took recourse to what amounts to a pious reconstruction in their ideological emulation of Tibet's glorious past, the remoulded portraiture and narrative amplification of the country's history soon became entirely wrapped up in a wholly new Buddhist visionary attire.¹¹ Historical figures became Buddhist figures with corresponding identities. The hazy beginning of Tibet was rewritten into resembling the beginning or introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. Avalokiteśvara soon was staged as Buddhism's principal tutelary deity, or Saviour Saint, doctrinally propped and inspired by a row of cosmomagic (importantly canonical) narratives, in the first place the seminal 5th century *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* ("Basket's Display") that recounted the virtually endless virtues and cosmomagic feats of the *bodhisattva* saint. It here also prominently introduced the famous six-syllable formula (*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*), described as the quintessence (*paramahṛdaya*, also called *mahāvīdyā*) of the deity (Sørensen 1994 pp. 96-108 ; Sørensen 2018; Studholme 2002; van Schaik 2006).

The popularity of the deity cult soon led to the composition or rather compilation of number of Vita narratives attuned to this sutric rendition, notably, as commonly known, *Bka' chems Ka khol ma* (the *Pillar Testament*) and *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum* (i.e. *Jewel Collection*) both considered early *gter ma* or *gter chos* texts)¹² followed by later historiographical treatises that were to draw extensively and almost authoritatively on this corpus of indigenous narratives, notably what should become the Tibetan master narrative *par excellence*: *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*, that in many ways should set the standard for how to depict Tibet's early royal history and its pioneering heroes of yore. This particular depiction of the king should become standard and surprisingly authoritative too, also for lack of assertive alternative portraitures. Indeed, the transmitted depiction of the king in these "biographies" paints the picture of a pious and divine soul, a worthy Buddhist saint. It generally lacks any substantial reference to verifiable historical events, aside from the mere names of the *dramatis personae* (kings, queens, ministers or councilors in the narratives, amid a number of

¹¹ Parts of the formation of a national consciousness, not seldom involved a territorial dimension to the ethnic one, a memorizable and sacralized territorialisation of history, the concepts merging to become a so-called 'ethnoscape', see Anthony D. Smith (1999, 2000).

¹² Cf. Sørensen (1994) *passim*; Sørensen and Hazod (2007): pp. 467-69; van der Kuijp (2013) pp. 124-25. The latter text is laced with esoterica and lore of Rnying ma and Rdzogs chen origin. Their status as *gter ma* text is still an open issue in some corners. Modern Tibetan authors are at variance as to its "authenticity"; *Dung dkar Tshig mdzod chen mo* pp. 1-2; Rdo sbis Tshe ring rdo rje (2015) *Bka' chems bKa' (sic: Ka) khol ma chen mo* Intro. Whereas others express their doubts, see rGya ye bkra lo (2012): pp. 326ff.

semi-historical figures) commonly known to us from more reliable sources. And the tales, highly fictitious (mythopoetical would probably be the better word) were to a large scale constructed or aligned as 'Life Stories' of the king, here the protagonist was perpetually committed to liberate living beings and bring them onto the Buddhist path, the historical figure now towering as a worldly Avalokiteśvara in person. Contemporary emic hermeneutics consistently claimed that the 11th-12th century basic texts stemmed from, that is were written by the king himself, which here meant that they at least were ideologically ascribed to the king personally—allowing for the last, the putative ascription to the erstwhile king is ironically another early case of false or problematic ascription if not plain pious forgery that is commonly observed in religious writings, not least those that were categorized as *gter ma* literature. Signally, Avalokiteśvara in these tales was championed as the "Father," the very genitor, of all Tibetans. It culminated in the widely celebrated, and no less fanciful, legend of the origin of all Tibetans from the union of a rock-demoness and a *bodhisattva*-monkey, a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara—as part of an envisaged commitment of his to take upon himself the task of "converting" (i.e. civilizing) Tibet. The goal was to turn Tibet into a vibrant Buddhist stronghold and haven, a country that long since had been predestined to be his *buddhakṣētra*, his "field of conversion."¹³

One site, intimately associated with the king as its founder, was held in common awe and exuded adequate cultural prestige to become a national centre, and thus contribute to the centrality of the king in the mind and memory of the Tibetans. Over the coming centuries with the political situation in medieval Tibet still marked by decentralisation, it not least was the enduring struggle for supremacy over the central Lhasa area as home of Tibet's true *sanctum sanctorum*, namely Ra sa 'Phrul snang (and its core part Jo khang) that governed and shaped medieval Tibetan politics. This special legacy of the imperial period would eventually become a prestigious (and in due course national) commitment for all denominations in Tibet, associated from the very start with this key site and national shrine that ultimately turned Lhasa into the most sacred pilgrimage site throughout

¹³ A number of the narrative tropes found in the popular retelling of the mythic origin of Tibet (including aspects of the king's remote past) prove to have been derived or adapted from canonical sources, but in a revised or altered form. For example, the origin of the Tibetans from a rock-demoness and a bodhisattva-monkey displays narrative elements from the Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (other historical vignettes again with borrowings from *Mahābhārata*) and the narrative about the meeting of the king with two Khotanese monks seems to have been ultimately adapted from the canonical *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*.

Central Asia (Sørensen and Hazod 2007, App. II; Vitali 1990, Gyurme Dorje *et al.* 2010). Taken together and considering the impact and influence these ideological and legendary narratives enjoyed—a standard *topoi* in all subsequent historical writings in Tibet—it is not amiss to consider these tales part and parcel of the country's national foundation myth, or its towering master narrative.



Fig. 1 Chos rgyal Srong btsan sgam po in Avalokiteśvara-style posture crowned by Amitabha.



Fig. 2 G.ya' bzang pa Chos kyi sMon lam. Local Yar stod ruler that claimed to be a Reborn Srong btsan sgam po.



Fig. 3 The Yar klung Valley. Corona Satellite.

The Popularization and Esoterization of the Cult

Who were the masterminds that were to vigorously promote the cult around Avalokiteśvara and the king in the first post-imperial centuries, almost a millennium ago—the divine-human salvific pair now being considered and treated as an inseparable unity, associated with his edifice erected in mid-7th century, the central *sanctum* in the heart of Lhasa? We know who these compilers (or, as in most cases, assumed treasure-finders as they are called), at least the most prominent ones, were: The Bengali master Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982–1054), assisted by a number of successors and followers (some of the leading Bka' gdams pa were in fact scions and descendants of the erstwhile dynastic rulers),¹⁴ forcefully promoted the cult of Srong btsan sgam po as a manifestation of Lokeśvara/Avalokita and not least the meditational precepts associated with the deity. It is recounted that it was the authoritative Atiśa who stood behind the “detection” (i.e. provided the impetus for its compilation) of the exoteric Pillar Testament, *Bka' chems Ka khol ma*, the earliest, mid-11th century, “biography” or “manifesto” (ideologically) ascribed to the founding king. The document was envisaged to serve as a sort of voiced or written will of the king, composed for the sake of perpetuating his counselling legacy to his descendants and for posterity. However, whatever its ultimate provenance, the text was copied several times, experiencing interpolations, and its oldest, currently extant exemplar may have originated in the early 13th century.

A little over one hundred years later another anthology of similar largely “biography-styled” material was compiled, this time expanded and supplemented with esoteric material ascribed to the king, centered around the king and his national mission for converting both country and people to Buddhism. The figures behind this text corpus, which was promoted or propagated as the “king’s own biography,”—similarly a fraudulent ascription—were a circle of actors for the promotion and ideological fixation on Avalokiteśvara (and, equally important, on Padmasambhava). The central figure here was the mentor and esoteric master Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192), a Rnying ma pa master who here was assisted by his disciples

¹⁴ A large number of scions of the erstwhile dynasty known as the *Yar lung jo bo* lineage were throne-holders in a number of monastic seats adhering to the Bka' gdams pa and hence displayed a vested interest in the enterprise; cf. Sørensen and Hazod (2005): pp. 314–19; Sørensen (1994): pp. 465–480. Adding to the emanational nexus Avalokiteśvara and Srong btsan sgam po, Atiśa too ingeniously included his principal pupil 'Brom ston rGyal ba'i 'byung gnas who conveniently was considered an embodiment of both (the divine-human pair) and a manifest instantiation of royalty.

when they detected (*gter ma*), i.e. compiled the *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum* (i.e. so-called *Jewel Collection*, ca. 1160?–1200). The biographical and saintly portraiture of him experienced in the non-sūtric section of this corpus a remarkable esoterization both in language and content, wrapped up in Rnying ma and Rdzogs chen lore. In the biographical section, these treasure-finders evidently had been inspired by the narrative strategies implemented by Atiśa and the Bka' gdams pa in disseminating and personalising the Avalokiteśvara cult centered around the role of the king in this narrative. Equally important, Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer also revealed (i.e. compiled or rather authored) the pioneering Padmasambhava hagiography *Zangs gling ma* (i.e. *Copper Island*), the first of a number of myth-laden, yet celebrated and widely disseminated biographies dedicated to the esoteric thaumaturge. A closer look at both hagiographical corpora unfolds a number of striking similarities, no wonder when the creator behind both documents is the same. Padmasambhava was regarded as a child or “son” incarnation of Amitābha just like Avalokiteśvara was depicted as a filial incarnation or manifestation of the same (Doney 2019: p. 39; Sørensen 1994: pp. 576–77). He went a step further and attempted to integrate and adopt the role and essential teachings of the king as delineated in *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum* to be part of a larger religious legacy left behind by the former, in other words, the afore-mentioned Rnying ma esoterization of the royal legacy; as its key architect, it was Myang ral's deliberate and grand project conceived as a soteriological scheme, but now to stage Padmasambhava at the centre of this overall legacy, not least through the esoteric-ritual triad *bla rdzogs thugs*, “Guru-rDzogs chen/Atiyoga-Mahākāruṅika, a meditative scheme as a means that enabled practitioners to attain swifter enlightenment. This reading of the overall national religious legacy conducive to liberation and national happiness was in fact a hybridization of the two above projects engineered and adapted by Myang ral. A project that thus staged the thaumaturge as the central figure, and equipped with the same salvific commitment as the king, and who in the national drama and foundation charter now was seen to be the decisive catalyst or its ultimate *porte-parole*. This Rnying ma initiated project, a retelling or re-evaluation of the national legacy going back to the founding king would prove successful, and at least popular in some corners of the society, whereas in bKa' gdams pa and Dge lugs pa circles and later the Dalai Lama court, heading the Dga' ldan pho brang government, still remained focussed on the original monarchic legacy, centre-staging the king as the original and sole national progenitor,¹⁵ with-

¹⁵ Sørensen (1994): pp. 7-8; Sørensen in Sørensen and Hazod (2007), pp. 463–71; Davidson (2019): p. 64; Kapstein (2000): pp. 141-62; Hirshberg (2016): pp. 3-5;

out, incidentally, belittling the subsequent role of Padmasambhava in the introduction of Buddhism, whether real or fictitious. As it seems, the national charter issue, central to the cultural memory of Tibet, in the coming centuries reflected an ongoing and often subtle controversy, in part ideologically framed, that was fought between factions from different denominations, the *Bka' gdams pa* and *Dge lugs pa* versus the *Rnying ma pa* in gaining pre-eminence in the battle, as it seems, for holding interpretive sovereignty in this matter.

Returning to the two major “royal narratives”—as said both ascribed to the king and representing his “word” (*bka'*) as it is claimed—allow us, at least in the case of the *gter ma* literature, to see authorial ascription to include cases where a work is seen or deemed to be written in the envisaged and incontestable “spirit” or “ultimate intent” of a postulated “author,” solely on the grounds that a narrative either displayed strong similarities to or involved descriptions commonly associated with the person in question or that an early ascription, standing untested, already had corroborated this “authorship.” The last assumption is noteworthy: A peculiar circumstance often seems to be operating, the longer back in time an authorial ascription held currency and authority, or the text’s celebrity (i.e. fame) and singularity often warranted its time-tested uniqueness, all the easier was the posthumous readiness to uncritically accept its authorial claim, almost as if time itself and the appealing aura of antiquity alone claimed to yield and guarantee particular validity. Admittedly, authorial attributions, rightly or wrongly, seldom were a direct object of reflection and scrutiny, it all the more was effectuated when in former times either an authority mechanically had indicated some form of approval of its “authorship,” or, in contrast, the legitimacy of a treatise or work would be dramatically invalidated when the ideological ascription to the celebrated author was not kept intact. From a modern viewpoint, any critique raised on that score would easily prove futile, a circumstance alone that opens up for new, almost impenetrable perspectives in handling and evaluating authorial ascription.

Latest Avatar—National or Ethnic Hero

Looking into the most recent times, the literary, biographical and later physical and material legacy associated with the king and his edifices (prominently centered around a number of early imperial temples such as *Ra sa 'Phrul snang*, *Ra mo che* and *Khra 'brug*) indeed paved the path for *Srong btsan sgam po* to become the nation’s

primary unifying icon or figure in the memory of the Tibetans. In the course of time, the king's legacy and status was prolonged or propped by his prominent inclusion into the incarnation succession lineage of the Dalai Lama (as a former rebirth) in which the king towered prominently, a lineage configured by the 5th Dalai Lama (and the Potala court), who in his writings incessantly stipulated his identity with and indebtedness to the king's pioneering role during the initial phase of imperial-era nation-building. The 5th Dalai Lama and the Potala court at the core of their incarnational template on their side had tapped into the 11-12th cent. 'Brom ston legacy that essentially was built around the same Avalokiteśvara-Srong btsan sgam po nexus, to the extent that the Dalai Lama lineage must be deemed to be nothing but a seamless extension of the 'Brom ston lineage (Sørensen 2005). The 5th Dalai Lama saw himself or was regarded as a natural successor to the king as the central figure and "the National-Spiritual Father of the Tibetans," basically continuing the original mission and time-honoured commitment of Avalokiteśvara in safeguarding and converting people to Buddhism. In the ongoing permutations the omnipresent king underwent, the most recent development taking place in Tibet, now part of China and actively furthered by the regime, includes his recent status as an Ethnic or National Hero (*mi rigs dpa' bo*, 民族英雄). In his birthplace alone, the Rgya ma Valley, tourists and visitors are now welcomed to the "Birthplace of Srong btsan sgam po" (*srong btsan sgam po'i 'khrungs yul*, 松赞干布出生地), a small cairn marking the birth site now accommodates a huge Srong btsan sgam po Memorial Hall (*dran gso khang*, 纪念馆) (Sørensen 2018). In the wider political development not least among Tibetans in Diaspora, the king all the more is called upon as a sort of "homme providentiel" exuding the nimbus of a national redeemer during the recent woeful political crisis.

*Mangled Literature and Imperial Legacy:
Bka' chems Mtho mthing ma*

The Impersonator: G.ya' bzang pa Chos rje Chos kyi smon lam

It was in this hazy physical and ideological atmosphere of "royal presence," teeming with its powerful and persistent royal-imperial *imaginaire* (Kapstein 2000: pp. 141-62), spurred by the author's hegemonic ambition that was paired with a habitual ease in identity-shifting by way of re-embodiment and the deity's purported salvific agenda and mission that both nurtured or paved the way for the cre-

ation of the fake biography. The text in question is called *Bka' chems Mtho mthing ma* ("Sapphire or Dark Blue Testament;" compiled around 1210–30?),¹⁶ and in this case we have an identifiable imposter or impersonator (Sørensen 1994: p. 21; 2000a; Ehrhard 2013: p. 147). Tapping into this national charter and celebrated founding tale delineated above was a local religious ruler of considerable repute, G.ya' bzang *chos rje* Chos kyi smon lam (*Dharmapraṇi[dha]) (1169–1233), in short G.ya' bzang pa. The Dharmasvāmin descended from the celebrated Snubs clan.¹⁷ He was considered the founder of a local seat called G.ya' bzang. His career was groomed by a circle of disciples that had followed in the wake of the illustrious Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po (1110–1170). From his foremost teacher Skal ldan Ye shes seng ge (d. 1207), he received the essence of the Bka' brgyud pa tradition, not least the Māhamudrā and the Six Yogas of Nāropa. In addition to various teaching cycles related to Avalokiteśvara, Zhi byed and Gcod, these teachings formed the basis of the G.ya' bzang esoteric lore and creed. G.ya' bzang pa had also during his ecclesiastic socialisation and career studied Vinaya extensively, to the extent that he eventually held the title Vinayadhara. Most interesting was an idiosyncratic cycle stemming from the pen of G.ya' bzang pa personally, it adhered to a set of medical and esoteric cycles dealing with the diagnosis and therapy of illnesses caused by the planetary deity *gza' bdud* Rāhula, a cycle known as *Nyi ma mdung gang ma* stemmed from his pen. The therapy of these apotropaic *gza'* text cycles would eventually reach beyond the boundaries of G.ya' bzang, being regularly studied in Rnying ma pa circles and aroused the particular interest of the 5th Dalai Lama (Sørensen 2000b).

While approaching G.ya' bzang pa's religious background and orientation we should not ignore to emphasize once again the physical surroundings that he held sway over in the core area of Southern Central Tibet. The geo-historical and cultural ambience had a tremendous impact on his personality and, we are convinced, his sense of self-perception. At the heart of the uphill district of G.ya' bzang (lit. "Solid Slate Stones") stood its religious center or abbatial seat, Dpal G.ya' bzang kyi chos sde chen mo (est. 1206), the precinct also accommodated the throne that housed G.ya' bzang's local political institution that would soon play a role in Tibetan politics. It was (and still is) situated deep to the south in the Yar klung Valley (i.e. Yar

¹⁶ The term *mtho(n) mthing*, Skt. **abhinīla*, is a deep blue colour, commonly used for the colour of eyes, hair but also a colour of pillar and beams; Sørensen (1994): p. 21. The title of the work no doubt was an attempt to resemble the 11th century *Pillar Testament*, that served as *Vorlage*.

¹⁷ The following section draws heavily on the study in Gyalbo, Hazod and Sørensen (2000); Sørensen and Hazod (2005).

stod, Upper Yar klung) in Central Tibet, in other words, in the region that constitutes no less than the cradle and home of the erstwhile Tibetan dynasty. His institution and adjacent school, the G.ya' bzung bKa' brgyud pa moreover should soon gain a name. It paved the way for its rise as a regional religious and political entity that reached its zenith in the tumultuous 14th century during the Yüan Mongol supremacy in Tibet where they played a major role as an important and influential myriarchy (*khri skor*) approved by the Yüan court. His biography lists the area of his domain, specifying the areas of g.Ye/E, gNyal and Yar (stod), which covers a major part of present-day southern lHo kha (i.e. Shannan), with the Yar lha Sham po mountain massif towering in its midst.

In this milieu, the *chos rje* (alt. *rgyal ba*) G.ya' bzung pa's repute and influence grew dramatically following the establishment of his see in 1206, to the extent that a large amount of local donors from all over Southern Central Tibet, including the entire area of Yar klung treated him as a Dharma-king (*chos rgyal*) of supra-regional stature (cf. *Blue Annals* 770–71, Roerich tr. 656–67; Tucci 1971, pp. 193–94). It is recorded that he ruled according to the conceptual dyad, the dual “religious-secular” system (*lugs gnyis*)—in other words served in his dual function both as a religious ruling prelate and as a secular lord (*Gu bkra chos 'byung*, p. 968). He must have propagated his claim of being a genuine embodiment of the erstwhile dynastic founder from early on. Small wonder as we have noted, the area under his control and the wider Yar klung area and its environs are verily steeped in the country's royal and mythic history, it certainly can pride itself on being “Tibet's core royal landscape” that accommodated many “historical and civilizatory beginnings,” such as the allegorical anthropogenesis (union of a bodhisattva-monkey and a female demoness; cf. Sørensen 1994: pp. 125–34) of the Tibetan people, but also the many royal seats and the ancestral mountains (prominently Yar lha Sham po, home of the pre-Buddhist ancestor gods), the four towering castles of the early pre-historic kings, as well as the “royal necropolis,” the large burial ground or tumuli of the royal lineage—these monuments and cultural hallmarks are all situated in a bewildering number in the core area, known as “the Emperor's Valley” (Tucci (1987) under G.ya' bzung pa's sway. In dynastic time the area was part of the province of G.yo ru (with Khra 'brug defined as its centre, Tibet's “first” temple, the erection of which is ascribed to Srong btsan sgam po (Sørensen and Hazod 2005: p. 22ff. *et passim*; Hazod 2009: pp. 197–198). Finally, in terms of further royal legacies, the area under his sway was the area where two competing royal lineages met, respectively stemming from Yum brtan and 'Od srung lineage, the last true direct scions of the erstwhile dynasty (cf. Sørensen and Hazod 2000,

p. 14ff.).

Whether concrete or visionary: The density and strategic locations in this area therefore suggest a culturally and historically territorialized landscape. Surrounded by these ancestral monuments and celebrated sites and no doubt a still-vibrant tradition of nostalgia reverberating with Tibet's glorious past, this historically rich *terra sacra* was to have a tremendous, perhaps decisive impact on the G.ya' bzang pa, our impersonator.

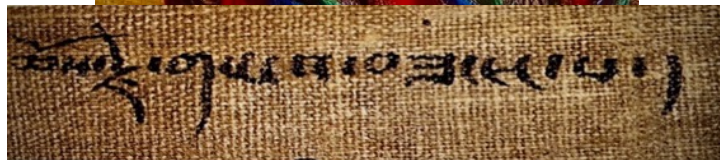




Fig 4 G.ya' bzang Monastery.

We are fortunate enough to have at our disposal a small number of early contemporary sources (14th–15th century) that offer some telling clues as to G.ya' bzang pa's motives, and, as we have seen, to the cultural ambience that gave rise to the document. In addition to the currently sole surviving (manuscript) exemplar of the Testament [*Bka' chems*] *Mtho mthing ma*, we have access to a bundle of highly informative medieval manuscripts from G.ya' bzang himself and his surroundings that reiterate the assertion and claim laid down in the Testament. Studying the texts from G.ya' bzang and a number of art works traced in the local monastery (Gyalbo *et. al.* 2000: pp. 243-258; Mignucci 2001) highlighting the ideology, the prevailing cult and legacy of the Saviour Saint, it becomes very clear to what extent the cult of Avalokiteśvara and of the king suffused and dominated the doctrinal and intellectual tradition of G.ya' bzang and its lore. His spirituality was wholly anchored in this tradition. It permeates all available documents, being evident on every page. G.ya' bzang pa clearly was obsessed with his royal identity and the latter's historical role. Text-cycles related to Avalokiteśvara dominated the pillar in G.ya' bzang's religious curricula. It was crowned with the claim, vigorously repeated in numerous texts by the founder G.ya' bzang pa

himself, that he was nothing but the very embodiment and living manifestation of the king. A lot of energy must have been invested in this claim. Its rigidity, its espousal, perhaps unsurprisingly in a medieval Tibetan context, was to be roundly accepted in all corners of the society.

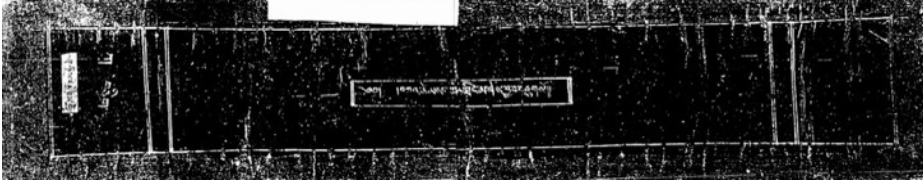


Fig 5 *The Testament: bKa' chems Mtho mthing ma.*



Fig 6 *The Bundle Containing Medieval G.ya' bzang Manuscripts, the Dharma History of G.ya' bzang including the Biography of Chos kyi Simon lam.*

The King's Sainly Portrait in Text and Art: The Biographical Wall Paintings in his Tomb

The text in question,¹⁸ the *Mtho mthing ma* consists of three sections: the first introductory part constitutes a cosmographical exposé in which is mainly enumerated a list of the names of Buddha-fields and *lokadhātu*, a visionary exposition of cosmic interpenetration that has been drawn, at least in part, from the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra* and a still non-extant, but evidently cognate text known as *Me tog brgyan*

¹⁸ Cf. Sørensen (2000a) for details.

pa'i zhing bkod.¹⁹ The second, major part contains a 15-chapter *Jātaka* collection dedicated to Mahākāruṇika, which finds a striking and verbatim parallel in a similar collection of brief rebirth-stories found in the King's standard Vita, the popular and often reprinted *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum*.²⁰ Finally, as the climax and evidently as the clue to the entire narrative, the text contains a brief or contracted narrative dedicated to the saintly or pious life of Srong btsan sgam po, here composed as a sort of brief autobiography, the voice in this section introduces the king himself as a first-person speaker.

This text's concluding section or sketch, which closes the book, includes all the standard scenes found in the biographical recast of the king, culminating in the king's "last act," akin to the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, i.e. the well-known scene with the ritual absorption or apotheosis of this king and his two principal consorts (*rgyal po yab yum thugs kar thim lugs*) into his tutelary statue of the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara Ekadaśamukha (see Fig 9, 10, 11 for the royal triad), accompanied by the enumeration of a number of well-known future prophesies (*ma 'ong lung bstan*) purportedly proclaimed by the king on this occasion (Sørensen 1994, pp. 330ff. for the lengthy section; Dotson 2019: pp. 68-69).

A Literary Pastiche

The section is well-known, and is almost verbatim gleaned from the identical passages found in *Ka khol ma* and *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum*. There can be little doubt that the *Bka' chems Mtho mthing ma* here, as in the other parts of the work, must be considered a replica or literary clone, indeed a cento, of the above Vita collections. His approach is also evident: The work is not an individual piece of writing but consists almost exclusively of long verbatim excerpts skilfully compiled (*sgrigs*) and excerpted by using the traditional scissor-and-paste method (Sørensen 2000a: pp. 152-54, 166). As can be gleaned from the closing lines of the text, it is purported that the "life-story scenes" of the king,

¹⁹ I.e. **Puṣpālankara(kṣetra)vyūha*. Cf. Sørensen (1994): pp. 21, 345; Davidson (2003): pp. 67-69; Ehrhard (2013): p. 146. The cosmic panoramic scenario depicts the realm of Vairocana, i.e. the (all-embracing) cosmo-deitic origin of all: Vairocana Great Glacial Lake (of Gnosis), *[Jñāna-]Mahāhīmasāgara, i.e. rNam snang (Ye shes) Gangs chen mtsho. Cf. Sørensen (1994): pp. 494-97 for the background. For similar scenes, *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*; see Cleary (1993): pp. 203ff. To what extent *Me tog brgyan pa'i zhing bkod* reflects a lengthy excerpt from the latter sūtra, or a Tibetan adaptation of the same, is still not clarified in detail.

²⁰ Cf. Sørensen and Hazod (2007): pp. 467-69; Ehrhard (2013): 146f. The first xylographic version of the text was printed in 1521 under the auspices of the Mang yul Gung thang royal court, scions of the erstwhile Yarlung kings and ultimately related by blood to Srong btsan sgam po.

including the crucial “last act,” had been painted as murals (*rgyud ris*), paintings executed evidently in the early phase of the post-dynastic period, or during one of its ensuing renovations of the adjacent temple atop his royal tomb in the Yar lung valley.²¹ The same ? feats of the king had already been painted on the walls of the Ra sa ‘Phrul snang raised in the 640’s (Sørensen 1994: p. 291), paintings that might have served as model for the tomb paintings.²² It is revealing—and anticipating the unravelling of the story below—that *Ka khol ma* (possibly in a later, interpolated edition of this text, post 14th century?) similarly claims that *Ka khol ma* and *Mtho mthing ma* were painted on the walls of the king’s tomb, i.e. as life story murals or wall paintings. This was evidently the case, and in particular what concerns the scenes depicting the celebrated saintly version of the king’s life delineated above that illuminates the king’s magic feats and faculties worthy of a true Avalokiteśvara, where the paintings were seen to constitute a visual reification of a textual tradition. Does this imply that the (deplorably non-extant) paintings were based upon or followed the narrative in *Ka khol ma* and in *Mtho mthing ma*,²³ or alternatively this text (or these texts) was composed, following existing paintings already executed, from murals that inspired the Testament to be written down? Both options represent an exciting and feasible assumption and taken at face value, we assume with the statement that the *Mtho mthing ma* Testament (or at least some of the crucial saintly scenes and acts described, such as his “last will”) by G.ya’

²¹ Sørensen (1994), pp. 21, 345–46. The tomb was called sKu ri smug po, i.e. “the Maroon-coloured Mount Entombing the (King’s) Body.” Akester (2016), pp. 436–37 offers us some insights into the history of the king’s colossal Red Tomb or Bang so dmar po located in ‘Phyongs rgyas Valley. The Gtsang khang dmar po on the top of the tomb was equipped with 12 pillars founded in late 13th century. It is to be assumed that the tomb accommodated an even earlier temple that was replaced by the 13th century construction. A point that is not fully clarified: the wall-paintings were either executed inside the tomb itself, or more likely, in the adjacent temple atop the tomb. See also ‘Jigs med gling pa, *Bkra shis srong btsan bang so’i dkar chag*; Deroche (2013): p. 98ff.

²² There is little room to believe that these wall-paintings of king’s wondrous feats, depicting him with a strong Buddhist profile, were part of the artistic programme in the 7th century, following the king’s sepulchral interment. These paintings in Ra sa ‘Phrul snang were obviously painted in the 11th century at the earliest since we have grounds to believe that they represent an artistic reproduction based upon a written template, most likely the *Bka’ chems Ka khol ma*.

²³ In other words, either the biographical scenes in these texts served as *Vorlage* for executing the wall-paintings of the king’s life or, alternatively, the paintings, assuming they were executed early on and prior to the existence of both *Ka khol ma* and *Mtho mthing ma* (resp. 11–12th and 13th century) served as artistic matrix for the texts. We shall opt for the first explanation, since we cannot conclusively clarify when the wall-paintings were executed, probably not prior to the 11th century, when *Ka khol ma* was compiled.

bzang pa came into existence following renovation work at the tomb of Srong btsan sgam po is plausible, a tomb, as indicated above, that was under his jurisdiction between 1206 and 1233, the year he passed away.



Fig 7 Srong btsan sgam po's Tomb in Yar lung Valley.

Amalgamating Divine Command and Worldly Demands

Borrowed Feathers

Now the scene is set to approach the crux behind the unique case of forgery. Our reflection in the sequel attempts to look at the case from a number of angles. How did G.ya' bzang pa go about to underpin or promote his personal agenda by claiming an all-out identity with the king? In fact, he took recourse to a time-honoured literary and rhetorical tool that proved to be probably by far the widest used tactical and political device in medieval literature: prophecy (*lung bstan*). Employing predictions or issuing (consciously post-executed but predated) *ex eventu* foretellings are a very common, almost compulsory instrument in the ritual and political discourse in Tibet (and its extensive employment or deployment in literature). Strangely enough, they seem in theory and in a temporal sense to have been operational progressively as well as regressively: the operability of temporality hence allows us to depict and envision the future of the past.

The passage occurs in the concluding sentences of the last part of the text when the king in a valedictory note responds to the question as to where he was now heading for after his passing?—a statement proclaimed just before he immersed himself into his Tutelary Deity. The choice is crucial in the entire narrative. The scenario alone would amount to the Māhayāna ideal of a dynamic (*apraṭiṣṭhita*) *nirvāṇa* bound by an Avalokiteśvara-style commitment driven by altruism,

i.e. to return into this world to work tirelessly for the welfare of the living beings in the future.

The prophetic passage in the *Mtho mthing ma* (283b3–b5) reads:

The King spoke: “Listen! You Domestic Ministers headed by Minister (mGar), after passing away in the Iron-Male-Dog year (i.e. 650 AD), I (*bdag*) will be (re)born (*’khrungs*) 525 years later counting year by year in the Great Golden Ox year (i.e. 1169 AD) in the mountainous region of the Kingdom of G.yor (ru, District = Yar klung) as Bhiksu “Dharma Resolve” Dharma-praṇi (i.e. Chos kyi sMon lam). Seven domestic ministers (of mine), headed by you (mGar) (listen carefully!), you too shall (at that point) be born as (my) son(s), and we shall meet the other (i.e. remaining ministers) again. Speaking thus, and grasping two lotus flowers in his hands, the King himself was absorbed into the heart of (the statue of) Mahākāruṅika.”

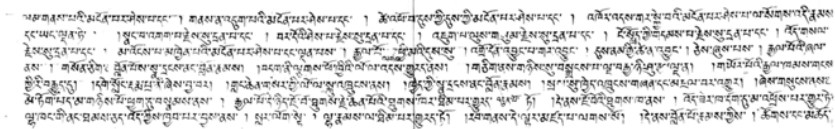


Fig 8 *The Passage in the Testament with the Prophecy.*

The Dialectics of Prophecies, G.ya’ bzang pa’s Hegemonic Strategy and Salvific Ideology

Modelling Kingship: Real cum Performative Lives

Notable here firstly is the faulty calculation, due to the notorious sloppiness in numerical calculation among Tibetans as documented in numerous cases when works are copied and recopied. It should be 520 years had passed, a simple typo and the correct calculation and figure is confirmed in G.ya’ bzang pa’s biography where the same passage is quoted almost verbatim.²⁴ If nothing else, it indicates that

²⁴ Cf. g.Ya’ bzang chos ’byung 17b4–18a1: *rgyal po’i zhal nas / gson cig blon po mgar gyis sna drangs blon po bdun / bdag ni lcags pho khyi’i lo la ’das na(s) / gcig nas gnyis su bgrang pa’i lnga brgya nyi s(h)u na / g.yor po’i rgyal khams gangs gi ri rgyud du dge slong dharma pra ni zhes grags pa / glang chen gser gyi lo la ’khrungs nas / khyod kyis sna drangs nang blon bdun po rnams / sras su khyed ’khrungs gzhan rnams mjal bar ’gyur / zhes gsungs nas me tog utpala gnyis phyag tu bsname te / rgyal po jo bo thugs rje chen po’i thugs kar thim par gyur to*, see Gyalbo et al. (2000), pp. 67, 123. The last G.ya’ bzang text (*ibid.* pp. 105, 141), similarly a brief biography of G.ya’ bzang pa again cites the relevant passage (for the first time surely documented in the Testament) above wherefrom it is almost verbatim copied by Gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po* (pp. 770–71), but the latter author adds some interesting comments

our currently sole surviving exemplar of the *Mtho mthing ma* Testament is an apograph. The importance of the prophetic statement is corroborated in his biography where it towers prominently at the very beginning of the text (Gyalbo *et al.* 2000: pp. 66-68, 105) as if to corroborate and foreground its valued significance for his entire life. The centrality of the prophecy to the entire text is also indicated by Kaḥ thog Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755), who labels the document *gYam bzang lung bstan Tho ling* (*sic* = *mTho mthing*) *ma* in his oft-quoted *Bod rje btsan po'i gdung rabs* (Gyalbo *et al.* 2000: pp. 19-20).

In this statement that is tarnished as a personal prophetic passage—a genuine *vaticinium ex eventu*—in other words a post-diction here heralding a future birth, we revealingly observe that the compiler of the Testament, G.ya' bzang pa himself (or some scribe in his service putting pen to the paper what his master dictates) designates his district as the “Kingdom of G.yor ru,” the imperial time designation of the district, clearly an attempt to heighten and add the notion of a royal realm to the status of his regime. Further, in this very passage choreographed by G.ya' bzang pa, as mentioned above, he introduces a royal setting with the protagonists involved in this “farewell or departure scene” where the King and his two consorts (here turned into lotus flowers) were ritually absorbed into the statue (cf. also Dotson 2019: pp. 69, 72). The scene reproduced in *Mtho mthing ma* is a dramatically reduced version compared to the lengthy version found in the corresponding Vita-narratives (cf. Sørensen 1994: pp. 330-39 for the original versions) that served as his source. To reduce this celebrated and crucial royal farewell scene to merely consist of the final prophetic words of the king that heralds the king's future rebirth as G.ya' bzang pa allow us to see the extent of a calculated manipulation conducted by the author.

Equipped with the two major royal testaments that served as textual basis or *Vorlage* for his own work, these proved to be a useful and rich template that reduced the need to conduct major changes or offering alternative narratives in the text. In order to maintain and

on G.ya' bzang pa, stating that he regularly claims to be Srong btsan sgam po in person as well as recounting many stories such as the history of the erection of Khra 'brug and how precious objects and sacred books were concealed there ... *rang nyid srong btsan sgam po yin pa dang / khra 'brug rtsigs lugs / nor dang chos kyi gter sbas lugs la sogs mang po yang gsungs / nga nyid lnga brgya tha ma tshe / bzhi brgya nyi shu rtsa lnga na / lho phyogs g.yor po'i rgyal khams su / glang chen gser gyi lo la 'khrungs / mtshan ni dharma pra ni zhes / rgyal po 'di skad gsung zhes par / dam pa'i chos rnams 'chad par byed*. The *Blue Annals* adds in the following that G.ya' bzang pa, the Dharma-King, after he had erected his monastery (i.e. 1206 AD), was invited by alm-givers and donors all over Southern Central Tibet. See Roerich (tr.), *Blue Annals* 656–657; Tucci (1971), pp. 193–94. See also sDe srid Sangs rgya mtsho, *Drin can rtsa ba'i bla ma* 110a2-112a2; Ahmad (1999): pp. 188-90.

preserve the authenticity of the biographical legacy, G.ya' bzang pa's hands in this matter evidently were bound, an entire new retelling of the King's life would probably have jeopardized the effect and significance of his own retelling, risking him to bring a lot of new material that had no parallel in the literary transmission related to the king.

Indeed, the *Mtho mthing ma's* mangled version of Srong btsan sgam po's valedictory must have exerted a sizeable impact on contemporary readers and audience once it became known. As can be gleaned from the note in *Blue Annals*, G.ya' bzang pa was in this period addressed as a Dharmarāja (Chos rgyal), in itself not an overly important epithet. In due course, he was able to gather around him enough donors and adherents, suggesting to us that his "new identity" seemed to work at least within the larger area he controlled. In fact, it suggests to us that G.ya' bzang pa in his heydays saw his "small kingdom" located in the very heartland of the former kings—the cradle of the Tibetan Empire—as a revival attempt to duplicate, on a small level, Tibet's glorious imperial past, centre-staging himself as the one-time ruler and with this written document re-enacting the latter's pioneering salvific mission, and thereby with the local retinue under his tutelage staging a royal scenario. In any case, G.ya' bzang pa with his rule and supra-regional ambitions, laid the foundation for the ensuing rise of G.ya' bzang as a major player as an influential myriarchy in the struggle for power in the ensuing Mongol-Yüan period and thus helped shape and influence Central Tibetan policy.²⁵ What we still cannot answer is to what extent G.ya' bzang pa foremostly was inspired or motivated through spiritual visions, revelations or visitations of the ruler.²⁶ Illuminating in this respect is a case in point, as his biography recounts, once when asked: "Are you (really) Srong btsan sgam po?" As answer, G.ya' bzang pa merely stared directly into the sky and did not respond in any other way. But since numerous instructions based upon [gestures like] this were given [i.e. displayed] [everyone] were [anyway able] to understand their meaning."²⁷ Again this scenario is adopted from the celebrated biography preserved in *Ma ñi bka' 'bum*. Beyond that, the response implies consent through sheer silence. The passage nevertheless might be taken

²⁵ See Petech (1990) drawing mainly on the key source for the period *Rlangs*.

²⁶ Detailed information is missing whether G.ya' bzang pa, similar to some of his contemporaries, entertained more elaborate *guru yoga*-style mnemonic and inspirational visualizations of Avalokitesvara through the king, that again served as a gateway or impetus for his assumed identity; see Hirshberg (2016); p. 188f.

²⁷ *chos rje la khyed srong btsan sgam po lags sam zer bas spyan nam mkha' la gcer gzigs nas yan man gang yang mi gsung bar de la brten pa'i gdams pa mang po gcig gsung pas don go bar gda'*. This scene resembles or is inspired from a passage from *Ma ñi bka' 'bum*; see Sørensen (1994): p. 327f.

to indicate that some sort of scepticism reigned about his status as a kingly manifestation, a suspicion that he here encountered with a tellingly voiceless gesture, true, by the way, to nature's ultimate reality that is and remains indescribable or unspeakable. Another telling case in point, in his private chamber, on its inner walls inspirational murals (*rgyud ris*) had been drawn with scenes from the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra* and *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* (Gyalbo *et al.* 2000: pp. 71, 85, 125, 129). All in all, whether seen as an expression of corporeal duality in unity or unity in duality, Chos kyi smon lam, as it seems, at one and the same time evidently not only *lived a [factual] life* as G.ya' bzang pa but also *performed a [royal] life*—as an assumed divine being.



Fig. 9 Mask of the King Srong btsan sgam po manifested as Avalokiteśvara crowned by Amitābha.
Emanational Mask Play: One Body, Many Identities – One Identity, Many Bodies.



Fig. 10 Bodhistava Avalokiteśvara in the Tradition of King Songtsen Gampo — Central Tibet; 13th century. Pigment on cloth. Rubin Museum of Art. Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin. C2003.50.5 (HAR 271).



Fig. 11 The Thousand-armed, Eleven-Headed (Ekadaśamukha) Avalokiteśvara. Thangka from G.ya' bzang. The King and his two Queens seated in the upper register right.



Fig. 12 The King and his two Queens aligned in the Departure Scene to be absorbed into the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara Statue. Detail from previous Thangka.

What had happened? Was the “testament,” a literary document, the culmination or the beginning of his assumed additional or extra identity? What was in his mind when this document *Mtho mthing ma* was drafted? Was there a particular need on the side of Chos kyi sMon lam for this manifestation? On a personal level, this much seems warranted, its gestation evidently mirrored an insatiable wish to underpin his status as a truly rightful royal manifestation and from the scattered references available, he must have firmly believed in this identity-shift or identity-amplification, a case of corporeal or embedded alterity, evidently stated with conviction by a charismatic person craving to assemble ample authority. G.ya’ bzang pa was enacting Srong btsan sgam po in life and writing, (ab)using history to his own ends. An important step in this direction was effectuated by him within the territory he controlled, as one of the first in Tibetan history—here arguably inspired by Bla ma Zhang (Sørensen and Hazod 2007, pp. 37-38, 88, 615; Yamamoto 2012: pp. 202-03; see below)—G.ya’ bzang pa sealed off his territory by way of *ri rgya lung rgya lam rgya* rituals, “sealing off (*rgya sdom pa*) the mountains, valleys and roads,” no doubt a political step to demarcate his territory and as such it marks him as the local ruler of a district that was not crossable without a travel-permit, and in a wider sense implemented in order to introduce the rule of law by establishing “protective zones” in the area, a demarcation that later played a role in the Yüan time local skirmishes and feuds among disputing myriarchies, due to their ar-

chipelagic and territorially overlapping structure that fuelled countless conflicts.²⁸

The identity process itself obviously proved less difficult for him: “Borrowing identity,” as noted above, indeed was a common phenomenon when seen on its idiosyncratic Tibetan background. In due course, up through the following centuries, all hierarchs in Tibet claimed to be embodiments, either referring to the body of their predecessors or promising to re-appear in form of a successor in entire catenating lineages. It was a regulatory system that at one point turned into an ecclesiastical industry of clerical and hierarchic promotion by way of the “rebirth” principle (*yang srid*). Adding to this was the quality of an assumed “divine profile,” where (often the self-same) hierarchs, proclaimed (or: were proclaimed) to be embodiments of a saint or a divine being. It is worth reiterating that this was a natural development, from the 11th century onwards, to proliferate the bodhisattva concept that had been introduced and anchored in the bygone imperial period where kings were considered embodiments of Buddhist deities. G.ya’ bzang pa was in this role not a pioneer, among spectacular predecessors counted Lama Zhang G.yu brag pa (1123–93), who similarly—as an embodiment of the founding king—nurtured hegemonic ambitions that involved the seizure of territory, military battle, as well as enforcing secular laws in the role as a local *cakravartin*-styled ruler.²⁹ As discussed above, countless ascetics and religious masters now claimed or were being claimed to be manifestations—not rarely of Avalokiteśvara, this proved to be a favourite choice or call due to the latter’s appealing salvific profile—the sole proof underpinning their assertion or claim often rested upon the accompanying or confirming availability of prophecies. It is an important point to broach. The discursive dynamics of such often strictly (self-?)promotional and, as it seems, self-operating prophecies ensured that the individual in question was capable of assuming an appropriate identity tailored to his specific needs and missions, as in this case. Not seldom, the tactic seemed to reflect a tenacious inclination for a complacent *Selbstinszenierung*.³⁰

Prophecies nevertheless are a phenomenon of trite occurrence in Tibetan ecclesiastic and historical literature concerning Tibetan masters, often appropriately underscored by citing allegedly authorita-

²⁸ Gyalbo *et al.* (2000): pp. 19-20; App. VII. It originally indicated a hunting ban, yet in a wider sense *ri rgya lung rgya* involved two different but parallel traditions: The first is tantamount to ‘monastic codes of rights and regulations’, and the second is public decrees or laws enacted by a ruler. See Huber (2004): p. 133. For the Yüan time myriarchic skirmishes and ensuing court cases, see Petech (1990).

²⁹ See Sørensen and Hazod (2007): pp. 30-39; Yamamoto (2015).

³⁰ See Sørensen and Hazod (2007): pp. 486–94 for this phenomenon.

tive canonical sources (*lung*) where for instance their birth or imminent coming are hinted at. We find them in most biographical narratives, quoted to provide “canonical” confirmation of a person’s unusual origin or miraculous coming. Most notably, such divine or canonical approval was deemed absolutely indispensable to ensure wider public acceptance. For the person in question being raised to the status of an incarnate, the prophetic certificate (*lung bstan*), written or spoken, was essential and when reading numerous reports and biographies, it appears to have been a treasured commodity. It is not much amiss to maintain that Tibetan history (and indeed Buddhist history) over long stretches often was formed and accompanied by prophecy-laden narratives (at least as they are deployed and recounted in historical and religious literature), since as a rhetoric tool their repercussions were conducive to impact and alter the resultant course of action. The prophetic message delivered—the voice of the Gods or as here of the Avalokiteśvara-manifested king of yore—served as a final verdict, the outcome of which changed both plot and narrative, becoming thereby a game changer. Prophetic literature and medieval historical writing in Tibet in many cases prove to be nothing but a form of historiographical providentialism, a genre trafficked in narratives replete with prophecies and prodigies. Abolishing, so prophecies seem to operate, the porous barriers between past and present, the past in such statements serves as a prerequisite, in fact a mirror to the present and the future. As it seems, the issue of temporality hence is being staged as the observer’s or protagonist’s individual “timescape.”

Embodiment and Incarnation as Sainthood and Social Vocation

Where prophecies served as a verbal catalyst paving the way for the legitimation and recognition of an embodiment, the very concept of embodiment itself remained a decisive socio-religious hallmark emblematic to Tibetan religious culture: the virtuosity, flexibility and convenience with which in Tibet the production of “other/extra-bodiness” took place, and to this must be added the general acceptance of such staked claims. In the larger perspective, their modus operandi concerns the core issue of heritage or inheritance. It can be described as an inventive and resourceful industry and regulatory principle that eventually produced an endless flow of “borrowed and constructed identities,” in other words the conscious manifestation of embodiments/re-embodiments by way of incarnation (*sprul sku, skye ba*). It proved to be socially acceptable and successful: The proliferation of successive and catenating lineages of incarnations in number literally exploded in the 17th century. Evidently, it was a phenome-

non that was deemed culturally legitimate, even endorsed, perhaps in some corners badly required, as a means to further an ecclesiastic career or construct a saintly profile as basis for an incarnation line. If not representing or shaping a double life, at least it was considered to be an extended accretion to earthly life and profane identity. Encountering such incarnation-shifts in countless sources, and how they took form, it appears that there are not seldom grounds to suspect that an ascetic's or hierarch's intense meditative or spiritual visions of or contact with a certain deity proved sufficient enough to lay claim of being a manifestation of that very deity in question. It was to become the cornerstone for ensuring and perpetuating spiritual and abbatial regulation, for the ascent to seats and thrones, and, in short, for acquiring social prestige and for upholding and legitimising hard-won spiritual and secular prerogatives. In the present case it provided the ideological stepping-stone for a local monk-ruler equipped with adequate religious and secular ambitions. The spiritual capital won through his exalted position and hegemonic aspirations were to galvanize political power and repute, both within and beyond his own realm.

*Scriptural and Personal Ennoblement:
Avalokiteśvara in Human Form*

The Person Who Would be King

The vicissitude and actual diffusion of the *Mtho mthing ma* document itself in the following centuries is difficult to trace. What we can note is that nonetheless in due course the document was in wide circles accepted as the words and text of Srong btsan sgam po. Accepting this meant accepting Chos kyi smon lam as his embodiment, a cakravartin-styled ruler. *Mtho mthing ma* was authoritatively listed as a part of the king's "written legacy" in later editions of the more universally accepted *Ka khol ma* and *Ma ŋi bka' 'bum*, thus entering the mainstream text-tradition related to the king, studied and read within all denominations in Tibet irrespective of credal affiliation and preferences, ranging from the Dge lugs pa to the Rnying ma pa. A number of Mss of *Ma ŋi bka' 'bum* was in circulation until it was first printed, as a Royal Print of 1521 AD at the ruling court of Mang yul Gung thang, a ruling house boasting descent from the erstwhile Yarlung Dynasty, and hence their heads ambitious descendants and scions of the founder king. To be true, *Mtho mthing ma* is listed in *Ma ŋi bka' 'bum* in an interlinear scholium, a sort of scholarly comment to the transmission of the latter text, just as it being mentioned in *Ka khol*

ma,³¹ which, oddly enough, however was never printed or xylographed. A crucial question remains as to at what point or when this mentioning of *Mtho mthing ma* was inserted into these texts. A fair guess is somewhere in the 14-15th century.

Nowhere, so far, has any serious critical comment been mooted that questioned its claim for authenticity. True, G.ya' bzung pa's Testament was never, as far as we know, transmitted down through generations of masters (*gsan yig*-style) as we can document for the other two major "biographies" (Sørensen and Hazod 2007, pp. 463–70), it must have circulated in a few copies only, accounting for the stray quotations found so far. Nevertheless, the "success" of G.ya' bzung pa in embodying the king went further: Assisted by his resourceful Regent, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, with his own status as a genuine manifestation of Avalokiteśvara and of the king at the centre of his own claim for authority, ennobled G.ya' bzung pa by including him into an extended but authoritative lineage of previous incarnations behind the Dalai Lama institution in the 17th century, G.ya' bzung pa—by then widely recognized as a prominent manifestation of the king—now was enrolled and lauded as a virtual pre-incarnate of the Dalai Lama by the Potala court, a late or posthumous gratification.³² Why was he included into the Dalai Lama prestigious pre-incarnate gallery? No doubt the 5th Dalai Lama, in this process most ingeniously aided by his Regent, had scrutinized Tibetan history in search for eligible candidates and forerunners from the past that ei-

³¹ The *Mtho mthing ma* is already mentioned in *Bka' chems Ka khol ma* (fx. 2015 ed. 197-98) and a scholium (*mchan*) in the dKar chag of the *Ma ni bka' 'bum* (6a2 in the Punaka printed ed.) where it is claimed with certainty that it is part of bKa' of the king and therefore suitable to be included in the Mdo section of the latter text, an inclusion that apparently never took place. See also Sørensen (1994): pp. 21, 345; Ehrhard (2013). At the core of this claim rests the crucial issue what the Tibetans actually meant with *bka'*? The *ipsissima verba*, i.e. true words of the king or words that approximate or convey the sense in tune with or resembling what one assumed to reflect the king's ultimate intent. The Tibetans would probably endorse the first option.

³² Lin (2017): p. 150; see sDe srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Drin can rtsa ba'i bla ma* 110a2-112a2, 137b2; Ahmad (1999): pp. 188-90. The tutor of the 5th Dalai Lama, Gter bdag gling pa, who regularly advised the Great Fifth on doctrinal matters, acknowledged G.ya' bzung pa among many predecessors as an genuine embodiment of Avalokiteśvara due to the capability of simultaneous and successive multi-bodging; cf. *Rin chen phreng ba*, 243-44: ...*bod kyi rgyal rabs lta bu yab sras 'khrungs rabs su byung ba dang / bla ma zhang dang g.ya' bzung pa chos rgyal 'phags pa dang gu ru chos dbang mnga' ris pañ chen byang bdag gnyis po thams cad mkhyen pa sku na rim 'ga' dang thog mtshungs pa sogs byung yang 'gal char mi 'gyur ba 'dra lags te.....'dir 'phags pa'i rnam sprul tshad med pas dus gcig la sku'i bkod pa du ma ston pa mi 'gal pa yin te / 'phags pa'i mdzad pa gdul bya'i snang ba la go mi 'gag par thugs rje'i 'brel bas snang bar sgrub pa'i phyir /*.

ther were regarded as manifestations of the Saviour Saint themselves (and the number of candidates here proved to be quite staggering, albeit only the most celebrated or the most politically acceptable figures were chosen) or otherwise had served as protector of the physical or spiritual legacy of the erstwhile king. In a few cases, even candidates who only remotely contributed to the legacy or perpetuation of teachings and cycles associated with him, found their way into the pre-incarnate lineage.

Indeed, among these, G.ya' bzang pa proved a suitable candidate, the very existence and circulation of the Testament surely here also carried more than ordinary weight, albeit it apparently nowhere turns up in the extensive writings of the 5th Dalai Lama and the Regent. The Great 5th had otherwise distinguished himself as an astute, self-assured and overly sensitive historian, a circumstance witnessed among others in his comments throughout the popular *Bod kyi deb ther*, contrary to the issues and the stance taken by him regarding his own incarnation lineage. G.ya' bzang pa's narrative is nevertheless a minor contribution to Tibetan (proto-)nationalism, a set of stories on which, in particular during the Ganden Phodrang era, the emergent Tibetan nation-state was to be founded.

"The Wheel of the World swings through
the same phases again and again."

Rudyard Kipling (1888),
The Man Who Would be King

A Narrative Analogization and Figural Interpretation

Within Western historiographical research, the typological concept of figural interpretation and fulfilment interlinking temporally disparate historical sequences has recently been broached as useful analytical instrument, based upon ideas originally inspired by E. Auerbach. The concept is useful and conducive to explicate the narrative strategy of G.ya' bzang pa and his life. Instead of seeing personal events as individual or separate destinies (or timescapes), the concept offers an explanation how antecedent incidences and foregone events, including persons of the past foreshadow and predestine (or: re-embodiment, as in this case) a contextually similar event/person of the present, thereby become prophecies of later ones in which they find their fulfilment. At the core of the analysis rests our understanding of the relationship between persons or events by way of comparison or semblance. In the binary structure of the relationship between the king of the past and G.ya' bzang pa of the present both seem equally interdependent to the narrative. In the figural typology, the signifi-

cance of the past is helping to (re)affirm the present, the old, so to say, becomes a prophecy of the new by functioning as its pre-determinant. Serving as a providential scheme, dissolving the distinction or barriers between past and present, the past here becomes an explanatory principle. A telling example is Christian medieval chroniclers who in their historical comparative construction drew analogies of the lives and roles between their rulers and that of bygone rulers like King David, Alexander the Great, or Constantine, not only by listing the ideal or positive attributes of such erstwhile rulers, but also by narratively establishing a casual relationship between what these rulers once had achieved and that of a new ruler.³³ The *Mtho mthing ma* Testament in question is a case in point, suggesting a set of common properties. This analogous narrative mode and typological interpretation by way of comparing a ruler (in casu G.ya' bzang pa) in the self-staging narrative championed by him with an ideal figure means that the barrier between the past and the present is abolished, the temporal interdependence in the emplotted narrative entails that the historical significance of the past only can be validated by an instantiation in/of the present. This kind of typology is often used when the narrative concerns issues such as genealogy and descent, i.e. the genealogical model. The interlinkage between the former king and G.ya' bzang pa can be regarded as a relational form of genealogy—and formally genealogy, as defined by G. Spiegel, deploys history as a series of biographies (or, we can add, a case of extended biography) linked by the principle of succession, again whether factual or merely ideological-symbolic.³⁴ In Tibet, such purely ancestral kinship or pedigree types of genealogical models also included non-human content—yet transmitted by successive lines of religious masters—found other expressions too, the same genealogical terminology (*brgyud*, etc.) was also used for transfers of wholly spiritual “genealogies” of religious and esoteric text cycles. In the Srong btsan sgam po G.ya' bzang pa “genealogy,” a conflation of these modes would seem to merge, it is as much a proper “incarnational-divine genealogy” of an anthropomorphized Avalokiteśvara as much as a transmission of Avalokiteśvara-related spiritual text material embodied and transmitted through these figures.

³³ See G. Spiegel (2002): pp. 83-85. Spiegel (2007): p. 4; Spiegel (1997): pp. 91-92.

³⁴ G. Spiegel (1997): pp. 106, 108.

*Forgery: The Ethical and Epistemic Question,
and the Justification of Rule*

Evidently, Umberto Eco (Eco 1979: pp. 224-26) here would talk about a case of ostension (or even pseudo-ostension), where factual events parallel pre-existing legends, and where *narratives become facts*. But assessing the issue and case of forgery within or between different cultures is often problematic, albeit the concept of an absolute universal has long held sway, opening up for attempts to apply functional and valid global comparisons between distinct entities. Recent theories have argued for a universal application of a historical consciousness, universal to all cultures, allowing us to deal with comparable historical processes. It is argued that a shared historical consciousness does prevail, defined as an anthropological universal and allegedly common/universal to all cultures, as said, that allow us to draw a certain amount of viable and valid comparisons of historical processes across different cultures.³⁵ Yet, the constraints of conducting theory-based global comparisons of historical (or here writing or literary) processes, however appealing and occasionally viable, involve an appreciable amount of both latent or open individualized presuppositions fraught with dissimilar conceptual, ethical, logical, epistemic and not least linguistic differences that render any cultural analogy risky, inconclusive and at best inchoate.

Whether seen from a modern or a historical perspective in a Western context, the *mTho mthing ma* case is regarded as a forgery. By contrast, in a medieval Tibetan context, the entire issue of forgery may surely be seen and evaluated differently.³⁶ The emic cultural context must here never be left out of sight: The medieval world (and here an Oriental or Occidental perspective may not differ much)—contrary to the modern world, generally had no or little conceptual alternative to the belief in wonder and miracles, saints or the inexplicable *modus*

³⁵ J. Rüsen (2017): pp. 41-42, 110ff.

³⁶ To the medieval mindset, supernatural or otherworldly agencies, or as here agential divine beings, regularly intervened through signs (or voices) in order to indicate their approval or rejection of human endeavour. It was wholly rational. Dreams, mnemonic visions and miraculous manifestations, and prophetic voices could here be included, were significant components in the political and ritual discourse, and signs and visions considered perfectly sensible elements in such narratives. The *modus operandi* chosen therefore often remained obscure or vaguely understood to outsiders. Tibetan historical narratives truly abound in numerous samples of the transformative power of rituals interacting with politics within a historical context. It often implied the involvement of cultural symbols and signs—in other words the language of rituals essential for the creation and formation of hegemonic order.

operandi of the supernatural,³⁷ whether in popular or scholastic circles. Also in the present context with G.ya' bzang pa, people were reared in an environment where the supernatural regularly intervened in order to solve any quandary of human nature or, as here, to provide a viable justification or functional verdict to mundane or human problems. The fundamental distinction in speech and thought that characterized Greek literature moving from *mythos* to *logos*, i.e. from symbolic to rational discourse (Lincoln 1999: pp. 3-4) never was fully implemented in Tibet up to most recent times. The production of this document was fostered within a religious culture where the soteriological authority and salvific ends, i.e. the ultimate message of liberation conveyed in the document, generally justified both means and modalities of its production when contemporary needs and claims were relegated by being grounded in verdicts of yore.

Whatever guided G.ya' bzang pa's motives, a closer look reveals that the author, at least outwardly, with this action was breaking any normative code prescribing modesty within his own ethical codex. A Buddhist author usually needs four prerequisites for composing or drafting treatises:

- Expressing respect (*mchod par brjod pa*),
- Pledging to compose (*rtsom par dam bca' ba*),
- Casting away pride, i.e. displaying humility (*khengs pa bskyungs pa*), and
- Generating Joy (*spro ba bskyed pa*).

Although the text in question in no way falls within the category of claiming to be a traditional piece of scholastic literature—we recall it falls within the category of the less authorized and often most dubiously deemed “treasure literature”³⁸—the prescriptive codes would apply. Here, the third clause to float arrogance or haughtiness (Skt. *samunnata*), in other words to display humbleness—including refraining from attempts of conscious manipulation, no doubt—remained a prescribed attitude expected by all monks, Buddhist writers and practitioners. But any criticism raised, again, seems nullified when the author or compiler has no sense of having committed a hoax!

On the one side, the case remains unique because it is a document allegedly ascribed to a national founder and hero of Tibet. We safely

³⁷ See Goodich (2007) for a thorough study of medieval miracle stories.

³⁸ Nowhere is it indicated that *Mtho mthing ma* is to be classified as a *gter ma*, yet due to its genre affiliation in form and content to the other *Vita* collections, the assumption is warranted.

suspect a suitable amount of “brazenness,” or audacity displayed by the compiler in what we see as forging or manipulating this document, yet the assumption of foul play carries little weight when it is seen as a process that was considered to be natural and legitimate in the eyes of the Tibetans. Why? Because the rhetorical vehicle had been embedded and framed within a story deployed to substantiate the claim, referring to an authority or to a tradition that stands incontestable: The source and authority (*lung*) of the prophetic claim that is demonstrated (*bstan*) is the king himself, the king’s statement moreover is tantamount to a sort of *vox Dei*. In this process, like in most cases of prophetic utterances, it is non-committal for the one reinstating it, here the compiler. G.ya’ bzang pa, the claimant, by placing his own words under the authority of someone else—disregarding any amount of manipulation exercised—was merely masquerading “the truth” and thus eschewed or withdrew himself from any “personal authorship” and responsibility by referring to the king as the final, validating source.

Looking behind the screen: Far from committing any *dolus malus*, is G.ya’ bzang pa nevertheless *consciously* or just *routinely* manufacturing a scribal fabrication, above and beyond a very personal level, to fake a biography when he truly believes he is the king, and to an appreciable degree internalized this identity and his surroundings and court in addition (were made to) believe it? The question might sound irrelevant, not least in a Tibetan context, where any search for the “real or original” author far too rarely was questioned. Is it deceit?—if the entire community, surroundings and oneself believe that it is not deceit or did not pose any question! In that context, issues of morals and principles arguably are irrelevant to moot. Perceiving his own actions, there clearly was not the slightest sense of self-deprecation. It is tempting to see this as an incidence of a charter myth at work as suggested by B. Malinowski (Malinowski 1926), where the underlying “national myth” (i.e. the Avalokiteśvara-*cum*-Srong btsan sgam po nexus and its etiological narrative) here authoritatively served to justify and underpin the purported or real prerogatives and status quo of a local ruler. In other words, here the function of a myth serving as a sanction of culture, with the added note that this nexus was operating within a living culture, in a vibrant society dominated by a mythical ambience with its idiosyncratic presuppositions. It is again worth reiterating that the issue boils down to the delicate question of cultural norms and sensibilities that naturally differ from society to society. “Reality” or rather the representation of the same are perceived differently, contemporary Western concepts demanding, when possible, the explicit identity of a concrete authorship in no way correlate with medieval concepts in Tibet, where ab-

stract or fluid concepts regarding authorship reigned, allowing it to be seen as the product (or byproduct) of spiritual or corporeal transmission.

What nevertheless makes the case remarkable: Where we have a large number of textual witnesses and documentation in Tibet's past of persons identifying themselves as manifestations or incarnations, most of the cases render spiritual or otherwise unverifiable references as validating argument for their incarnation status, rarely do we encounter, like in the case of G.ya' bzang pa, it repeatedly underpinned and spectacularly enacted—even when taking into consideration the cultural sensibilities outlined above—his claim must have been guided by an exceptional sort of the aforementioned identity-obsession, in our eyes a narcissistic? craving for social and spiritual recognition to underpin his hegemonic ambitions. Albeit his identity-amplification had proven to be culturally legitimate, still his justification and authority was surely paving the way for a swifter, more efficient and obviously popular and overall acceptance of this initiative. A widespread definition of upholding and ensuring hegemony that was part and parcel of this endeavour—contrary to what one would expect, namely involving acts and concepts of brute coercion and rigid force—suggests that in order to function more efficiently, it involves the development of a sense of shared “consent” that again generates a common will for shared values (Gramsci 1971: pp. 57-58),³⁹ on the basis of which an undisputed claim to authority is staked. A parallel example and a role-model for Chos kyi smon lam during this early period would be the charismatic Lama Zhang (1123-93) whose eccentric life and personal identity-shifts were equally remarkable, if not more spectacular. In many corners of a fragmented medieval Tibetan society, it would, to varying degrees, serve as a model for a local rule. Lama Zhang, who claimed to be multi-embodying (or multi-manifesting) both Guru Rinpoche, Amitābha and indeed Srong btsan sgam po too—whether simultaneously, successively and possibly opportunely—at one point served as a guru for G.ya' bzang pa.⁴⁰ As already indicated, like in the case of Zhang, G.ya' bzang pa's „double

³⁹ Cf. Laclau and Mouffe (2001): p. 105f. and Yamamoto (2012): pp. 25-26. The more benign forms of hegemony in this context aims at generating and ensuring rule by way of controlling the cultural or ideological sphere with its symbolic realms.

⁴⁰ Sørensen and Hazod (2007), pp. 36-39; Yamamoto (2012). In case of his manifestation as Guru Rinpoche, it is said he is of one nature with the thaumaturge, which might vaguely indicate being or sharing either a spiritual nature or a physical identity with one another. The biography of the 'Bri gung founder 'Jig rten mgon po too, regarded as a manifestation of Khri Ral pa can, resembles the procedure that Chos kyi smon lam experienced; Gyalbo *et al.* (2000): p. 19.

life" as noted above, integrated both an undisputed life as a *real, identifiable individual* as well as one as a constructed *performative, if divine individual*.

Summing up, the incidents and episodes listed so far, speaks for a strong personal involvement from the side of G.ya' bzang pa, nevertheless in his case it remains problematic to outright and unconditionally apply the definition of literary forgery even on our terms, namely a writing whose author falsely claims to be another person with the intent to *deceive* readers, or to concoct mendacities and dishonesty. Such a query might be begging the question. The focus here is both on the author, his motivation and the degree of deception involved (Ehrman 2012, p. 97; p. 128). G.ya' bzang pa's deeper agenda, as far as we can infer, has already been broached above, and to consider it a telling case of conscious or misleading deception at face value is equally difficult to evaluate exhaustively, albeit the elegant concoction of the sources contrived (by him or a scribe commissioned to conduct it in his name) in the document speaks for itself, since it presupposes a proper assessment as to what extent he consciously was guided by a need or will to deceive, for which we as argument "only" have the textual manipulation registered and his undeniably obsessive preoccupation with the Patron Saint and the king's towering physical and written legacy. One could argue that the manipulation "only" concerns the last biographical scene with the king's prophesizing valedictory, yet it constitutes the narrative's climax and turning point, the rest of the text represents lengthy borrowings or parallel renditions from the kindred testaments as discussed above. Yet, exactly this farewell scene, kept in first-person narration, is the turning point in the narrative. Behind it all, what was G.ya' bzang pa's relation to truth or untruth, did he have a tactical relationship to truth? reassuring himself that the authoritative validity of the *ex eventu* prophecy alone remained unquestioned or unchallenged.⁴¹

Despite the above theoretical ruminations, to pass a verdict nevertheless is possible: By all counts we are here naturally dealing with a case of blatant scriptural forgery. But then what kind of forgery? It seems to be what is called a case of so-called redactional or embedded forgery. Plainly told, with a small variety in the definition, we might have a case of a particular kind of forgery, namely some writings, or as here embedded text passage(s), that make the explicit claim to be authored by a well-known person, with a first-person

⁴¹ Tradition commonly lends credence to authority, what is known as "the authority bias," a phenomenon within psychology that tells us that "authority" (in a Tibetan context, galvanized through the prophecy-carried *lung*-status of authenticity hailing from the past) *per se* holds and guarantees a high(er) level of veracity and hence common approval.

narrative without differentiating the first person from the author (Ehrman 2012, pp. 34–35). G.ya' bzang pa did not add a colophon where he revealingly claims to be the author or compiler, so no smoking gun here. To his defence and in his own understanding, as we have now seen, there was no need, if we follow its own logic: The “authorship” of the text, the protagonist of the narrative *is* the king and the latter *is* staged as having re-embodied himself as Chos kyi smon lam, eliminating all need for further scrutiny, a convenient epiphenomenon of a personal drama, making the latter a mere extended *porte parole* of the first.

In the end, in search for the most obvious or simple clue to this idiosyncratic identity-conundrum or rather to the degree of forgery involved, we may conclude—revealingly perhaps—with the stance held by Tāranātha (1575–1634), the great historian:

Here in Tibet, whatever account, no matter whether correct or not, is acceptable: if there is something widespread among all people, due to its great fame, even though something else absolutely true is said, it does not come to the ear (i.e. is not believed, remains unheard).⁴²

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⁴² *Bod 'dir dag rung mi dag rung gtam gang yang rung ba grags chen pos skye bo kun la yongs su khyab ba zhig yod na shin tu bden pa'i don can gzhan zhig smras kyang rna bar mi yong // Tāranātha, rGya gar chos 'byung, see Torricelli (2018), p. XVII.*

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- Fig. 3, 4, 6, 7. Guntram Hazod.
- Fig 9. Mask. Paper-mâché (Polychrome) (39.1 x24.9 x 14.3 cm). Bruce Miller Collection.
- Fig. 10. Central Tibet. 12th century. Thangka (50.8 x 45.1 cm). Rubin Museum of Art. HAR 271.
- Fig. 11 and 12. G.ya bzang. 12th century. Thangka (38.1 x 29.5 cm). Aldo Mignucci Private Collection.
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