

Re-adapting a Buddhist Mother's Authority in the Gung ru Female *Sprul sku* Lineage

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In August 2013, about 1,000 Tibetans, including many dressed in traditional garb, traveled by motorcycle, by horseback and by foot to the estate of the Gung ru Ye shes Mkha' 'gro ma female *sprul sku*, or reincarnation lineage.¹ These Tibetans arrived at the estate located behind Brag dkar (Baishiya 白石崖) Monastery, a small monastery in the Dge lugs tradition founded on the Rgan gya (Ganjia 甘加) grassland of Gansu in 1644 that in the 18th century became a subsidiary to Bla brang Monastery (Labulengsi 拉卜楞寺) in Xiahe 夏河, Gansu.² They attended the final session of the annual five-day recitation of *Gcod*, the Buddhist practice of cutting the ego³ founded by the yogini Ma gcig lab sgron (1093–1191). After Brag dkar's monks finished the climactic *Gcod* blessing in front of a large fire, many locals prostrated in front of the *mchod rten* of Bskal bzang dam chos sgröl ma (Gacang Danqu Zhuoma 尕藏丹曲卓玛, 1936–2013, Bskal bzang from hereon), the 6th Gung ru *sprul sku* who passed away in January 2013 and, who along with Rgan gya elders, re-started this popular *Gcod* event in 2000.⁴ In fact, the line to lay a *kha btags* at Bskal

¹ The Bsam sding Rdo rje phag mo lineage is the other. The Gung ru lineage is one of only two contiguous female *sprul sku* lineages out of more than 2,000 total lineages in Tibetan history (Schneider 2015).

² See Yang 2009: 111, 142 and Nietupski 2011: 67, 69. As one of the major Dge lugs monasteries, Bla brang developed a large periphery in present-day Gansu and Sichuan provinces with many subsidiary monasteries, such as Brag dkar. Bla brang opened in 1709 and quickly developed into one of the major Dge lugs monasteries of Tibet.

³ See Gyatso 1985, Edou 1996, Harding 2004, and Sorenson 2012 for descriptions of the *Gcod* practice.

⁴ This document provided by Brag dkar Monastery in August 2017 claims that Bskal bzang and the sponsors in Rgan gya restarted the *Gcod* event in 2000.

bzang's *mchod rten* placed in the estate's shrine room extended outside the estate's main gate and remained that way for nearly two hours.⁵

Around the same time as the *Gcod* event at the Gung ru estate, Bskal bzang's youngest son Bde dpon Bkra shis (50) handed me an electronic copy of Bskal bzang's Obituary, a 14-page document written entirely in Chinese but with no confirmed author or publication history. Due to the Obituary's meticulous historical and religious detail, presumably, the author was a part of the Tibetan religious establishment or the People's Republic of China (PRC) government where Bskal bzang had worked for decades in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) of Xiahe (Bla brang), which is located 35 km south of Brag dkar. Two local sources from Bla brang told me that the Obituary resembled an official government document or presentation, which would explain, in part, the significance of an author writing the text in Chinese.⁶

Bskal bzang first joined the government in the early 1950s and later as a laywoman entered the CPPCC, where she served on several local and provincial Buddhist and women's associations and helped manage nunneries in Bla brang after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Bskal bzang and many other *sprul sku* laicized in 1958 after the Chinese communist government's forceful response to local protests against the PRC reforms imposed in A mdo.⁷ She later married and had four children prior to and during the Cultural Revolution, when she was a laborer.⁸

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Obituary's authorship and publication—not uncommon in Tibet and the genre of Tibetan life writing more broadly⁹—this Obituary, given its extensive detail about Ma gcig lab sgron, the Gung ru lineage, A mdo, and Tibetan history, deserves the scholarly attention as a new text composed about a Tibetan woman. In this regard, this well-written text belongs in the conversation with the Gung ru lineage's lone *rnam thar*¹⁰ titled *The Biography of the Gung ru Wisdom Dākinī Called the White Lotus Vine*, or the *Lotus Vine*, written about the 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo (1814–

⁵ The author of the article attended this event in August 2013 at Brag dkar Monastery in Rgan gya.

⁶ Conversations between the author and two Tibetans in Bla brang in 2019 who suggested that the Obituary was likely a CPPCC work and perhaps an official presentation given the headings contained in the document.

⁷ See Slobodnik 2004: 8–9.

⁸ Anonymous, Bskal bzang's Obituary written in 2013.

⁹ See Diemberger 2007: 83; Gyatso 1998: 103.

¹⁰ There are about 2,000 total *rnam thar* of Tibetan figures from the 8th to the 20th centuries. Less than one percent are *rnam thar* about women and autobiographies by women (Schaeffer 2004: 4).

1891) in 1897.¹¹ Even though Bskal bzang's Obituary is not a *rnam thar*, this Obituary that describes her birth, her deeds, and her enlightenment raises important questions about how it uses narrative and legitimation strategies that represent and bolster Bskal bzang's authority as the 6th Gung ru *sprul sku*. What strategies does the Obituary use, and how does the Obituary deploy gendered discourses as part of these legitimating strategies to represent Bskal bzang's authority? Significantly, how does the Obituary resemble the narrative and legitimation strategies as rooted in *The Lotus Vine* about the 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo? This article will discuss the answers to these questions.

Bskal bzang's Obituary shows many examples of how an audience of monks, nuns and laymen and women in Rgan gya and Bla brang judge the insignia, speech and actions of Bskal bzang to be "right" as a charismatic universal Buddhist mother who was an emanation of Ma gcig lab sgron, as the *mkha' 'gro ma*¹² Vajravārāhī and as a surrogate mother in the community thereby producing the "effect" of her authority.¹³ Here, I employ Bruce Lincoln's model of authority as a guide that suggests that the "effect" of authority is discursive and relational rather than inherently given or adjudicated from a top-down position.¹⁴ To be clear, by Buddhist motherhood, I refer to Reiko

¹¹ Zhang ston Bstan pa rgya mtsho's four-volume collected works were edited in 2009 and include the 18-folio biography of Rig 'dzin dpal mo titled *Gung ru ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ma'i rnam par thar ba pad dkar 'khri shing zhes bya ba bzhuvs so* [The Liberation Story of the Gung ru Wisdom Dākinī called the *White Lotus Vine*] (2009: 181–208). The *rnam thar* was first printed in 1897.

¹² A *mkha' 'gro ma* (Chin. *kongxingmu* 空行母, Skt: *dākinī*), literally a "sky goer," can assume many roles and functions, including a "goddess, a yogini, a consort, a wife, a message-bearing epiphany or a woman" (Gyatso 1998: 246). See also Sarah Jacoby's description of *mkha' 'gro ma* who "can be worldly and thus enmeshed in *samsara* and thus of questionable virtue, or they can be wisdom *dākinīs* who are fully enlightened" (Jacoby 2014: 135–137).

¹³ Many great works (e.g., Schaeffer 2004, Diemberger 2007, Jacoby 2014) discuss issues pertaining to motherhood and how it is used (or not used) in narrative structure. Max Weber writes that charisma represents a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, exceptional powers and not accessible to ordinary people, but regarded as divine" (Weber 1947: 358–359). In contrast, Worsley (1968: xii) defines charisma as a social relationship and not an attribute of an individual personality or mystical quality.

¹⁴ Lincoln (1994: 10–11) defines authority as a relational "effect" and not an entity super-imposed from a top down source or what can be labeled as extraordinary or superhuman charisma. Rather, authority occurs when an audience judges or trusts as "right" a figure's speech, actions and insignia that produce an "effect" that builds off Worsley's description of the relational dynamic of charisma. Weber, on the other hand, describes "charismatic authority" as occurring within an audience but in his description of charismatic authority he elides authority more with the position of the ruler or leader as "rule over men to which the governed submit

Ohnuma's analysis of Indian Buddhist mothers who appear in texts as signifiers of Buddhist principles, such as universal compassion and renunciation of householder life. These Buddhist mothers garnered acceptance and prestige from a patriarchy such as Bla brang for showing love for all beings like the Buddha does, as opposed to the "particular" love shown by an actual mother for her own children.¹⁵

Along these lines, Bskal bzang's Obituary links Bskal bzang to Ma gcig, who ironically was an actual mother of five children in the 12th century, but who later became known as "The Great Buddhist Mother" and has been feted by current scholars as an "authorizing referent" for many Tibetan women, including women in the Gung ru lineage.¹⁶ As it was already mentioned, Bskal bzang's Obituary also connects Bskal bzang with the famed *mkha' 'gro ma* figure Vajravārāhī, a wrathful form of Vajrayoginī associated in *yab-yum* consort practices with the deity Heruka in Cakrasaṃvara tantric rituals that were often practiced in the cave located behind Brag dkar Monastery and elsewhere around Bla brang.¹⁷ Moreover, the Obituary highlights the numerous deeds that Bskal bzang performed in Rgan gya and Bla brang as a surrogate or proxy mother, such as helping to rebuild the destroyed Brag dkar Monastery in the 1980s and manage nunneries in the 1990s in Bla brang after the Cultural Revolution.

Yet, in order to understand the full "effect" of Bskal bzang's authority as a charismatic mother within this community—and by that, I suggest the profound "effect" not only as an elite Buddhist practitioner but as a vital temporal symbol of peace and harmony across this A mdo grassland community—it is important to analyze the intention or function of the Obituary that was written for a specific audience. To do so, it is necessary to study Bskal bzang's Obituary as a master narrative where the author, in the words of Michel Foucault's critique of grand stories, "reconstitutes a tradition with a story based on an evolutive curve and a recourse to metaphors for life."¹⁸ Following this track, motherhood became the main metaphor

because of their belief in the extraordinary qualities of the specific person" (Weber 1948: 295).

¹⁵ Buddhist texts rarely feature actual mothers because of what is deemed a mother's attachment to their own children as opposed to caring for all beings. Two examples of idealized Buddhist mothers who never became involved with or later renounced the householder life include Māyā, who became a deified figure after she died shortly after giving birth to the Buddha, and Mahāprajāpatī, who became a nun after she raised the Buddha. See Ohnuma 2012: 8, 14–16, 34–36, 43, 50, 116.

¹⁶ See Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 22 where they lay out "authorizing referents" for Tibetan women including Ma gcig and also Ye shes mtsho rgyal, the alleged consort of Padmasambhava.

¹⁷ Epstein and Peng 2004: 324.

¹⁸ Foucault 1972: 12.

deployed by the Obituary that celebrates Bskal bzang or “reconstitutes the tradition” of her as an elite practitioner linking her to past *sprul sku* in the Gung ru lineage feted as an emanation of Ma gcig Lab sgron, the *mkha' 'gro ma* Vajravārāhī and as a surrogate mother. Just as significant, the Obituary also “reconstitutes a tradition” of Bskal bzang in the Gung ru lineage as a beacon of unity, peace, and reconciliation on these A mdo grasslands in the wake of the chaotic Cultural Revolution when thousands of Tibetan monasteries were destroyed, including Brag dkar and Bla brang.¹⁹

What's remarkable is that Bskal bzang's Obituary utilized many of the same legitimating and narrative strategies that the *Lotus Vine* deployed about the 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo (Renzeng Huamaozeng 仁增华茂曾, 1814–1891) in the 19th century. And while this article does not compare these two texts extensively side by side, it does show areas where the Obituary resonates with the *Lotus Vine*'s authoritative narrative (or its “textual authority”²⁰) and even re-adapts certain important parts of the *Lotus Vine* to represent Bskal bzang's authority as a charismatic mother, in particular as an emanation of Ma gcig, Vajravārāhī and as a surrogate mother in the local community. In other words, the Obituary pays homage to the *Lotus Vine*, or what I label as the “Gung ru Master Narrative,” that “reconstituted a tradition” about Rig 'dzin dpal mo and the elite community of A mdo *sprul sku* in which she interacted during the political tumult in the 19th century, which included inter-monastery rivalries and grassland violence. In this vein, Bskal bzang's Obituary written over a century later follows the *Lotus Vine* model of charismatic motherhood. Like the *Lotus Vine*, the Obituary presents Bskal bzang's authority as an elite Buddhist practitioner and as a figure of reconciliation during this post-Cultural Revolution temporality in Rgan gya and Bla brang when monasteries and *sprul sku* functioned at a lower status within the new religiopolitical power structure.²¹

Equally remarkable is that Bskal bzang's Obituary, like the *Lotus Vine* before it, featured as its main protagonist a compassionate Buddhist mother figure that resonated as “right” within the religio-social fabric in this A mdo society, in particular where sons felt indebted to their own mothers and in many cases worried about their

¹⁹ Slobodnik 2004: 9.

²⁰ See Diemberger 2007: 4–5 for a discussion about textual authority with various audiences in changing temporalities.

²¹ See Makley 2007: 76–134. Makley discusses how *sprul sku*, who once maintained great power assuming many roles in Bla brang, faced new roles within the new “father” PRC state.

mother's future rebirths.²² For example, the renowned A mdo yogin Zhabs dkar (1781–1851) from Reb gong (Tongren 同仁), Qinghai in his autobiography and the famous Gesar in his epic demonstrate their devotion and concern for their mother's future rebirth—a situation that many monks and *sprul sku* in Rgan gya, Bla brang and across A mdo likely encountered. Therefore, a metaphorical representation of motherhood worked well both as a legitimating strategy for Bskal bzang and the Gung ru lineage in a society that values the continuity of mothers in the Tibetan family and as a tool of propagation of the Buddhist faith and temporal prosperity in the region. Fascinatingly, Bskal bzang, as a mother figure, stands at the hub of this wheel of continuity. Today, in the period before an official *rnam thar* gets published about Bskal bzang and her *sprul sku* (the 7th Gung ru) returns to Brag dkar perhaps by autumn 2020, Bskal bzang's Obituary links Bskal bzang on the continuum to the Gung ru lineage's past, the lineage's present and to its future in A mdo and the PRC. Motherhood—and the legitimating authorizing power of its charisma with others—has proven to be the lynchpin of her story.

1. Re-adapting a Mother's Authority as Ma gcig labs sgron

Likely taking a cue from the *Lotus Vine* of the 19th century, the author of Bskal bzang's Obituary prominently features Ma gcig lab sgron the "Great Mother" at the outset of the text. In fact, the Obituary includes a lengthy biographical section about Ma gcig right after the opening segment that detailed Bskal bzang's 35-km funeral procession in January 2013 from Bla brang to Brag dkar. This high placement of Ma gcig's story before any further details of Bskal bzang's life illustrates Ma gcig's significance as both a religious and temporal symbol to adjudicate Bskal bzang's authority as a "right" charismatic Buddhist mother in the period after the destructions of the Cultural Revolution.

Whereas the *Lotus Vine* opens by beseeching the mother Ma gcig saying, "Ma gcig, out of great love you always protect the sacred site of Brag dkar, the home of the distinguished victorious mother *mkha' 'gro ma*,"—words that can be interpreted as both a religious and temporal plea for help at that time—Bskal bzang's Obituary adopts a more didactic tone.²³ The Obituary's section on Ma gcig linked the Gung ru lineage's authority to Ma gcig the "Supreme Buddhist Mother" stating:

²² See Ricard's translation of Zhabs dkar's autobiography in 2001: 200–203. See Kapstein's (2007: 359–363) analysis of Gesar's epic and the Chinese Mulian legend.

²³ Zhang ston 1897: 181–182.

The successive generations of the [four-century old] Gung ru Ye shes Mkha' 'gro ma lineage is a reincarnate lineage of Ma gcig the Supreme Mother of Tibetan Buddhism and founder of the *Gcod* Buddhist tradition. *Gcod* originated from the famous monk Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, who is from south India. Ma gcig is one of the most famous female tantric Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Tibetan history and is the only woman in Tibetan history to establish a tradition. This is a rarity in human religious history.²⁴

Furthermore, the author includes historical information about the famous Ma gcig and the spread of the *Gcod* tradition that the *Lotus Vine* did not. The Obituary mentions:

As for the *Gcod* tradition, by using the unique teaching method and having a distinct practice, it became distinguished from other sects in Tibetan Buddhism. Ma gcig lab sgron not only deeply influenced the many various schools of Tibetan Buddhist thought, but her teachings were also popular in Tibetan areas and had a huge influence among Tibetans and on Tibetan society and livelihood—such as the sky burial being the most popular way to bury the dead. The custom of sky burial arose in Tibetan areas, and the fact that it spread is directly due to Ma gcig and the *Gcod* tradition.²⁵

In another key move that resembled the effective legitimating strategies of the *Lotus Vine*, the Obituary represents Bskal bzang's authority as Ma gcig the "Great Buddhist Mother" as a renowned practitioner of the *Gcod* practice mentioned in the introduction to this article. While the *Lotus Vine* shows how the 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo studied *Gcod* with the famed Bsod grags dkon mchog rgya mtsho (1790–1858) *sprul sku* of Bla brang and then became a well-known teacher of *Gcod* herself, the Obituary illustrates how Bskal bzang, too, studied with top teachers as a young girl around A mdo. Bskal bzang recited *Gcod* in 1946 at Sku 'bum byams pa gling Monastery (Taersi 塔尔寺) in Qinghai with the 10th Pañchen Lama Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1938–1989) in attendance. The author quotes her teacher La

²⁴ 历代光日益西堪玛玛为藏传佛教尊母玛久拉仲的转世世系，玛久拉仲一为藏传佛教息解派的创建者，息解派源于南印度著名僧人帕丹巴桑杰，由藏族著名的女密宗大师玛久拉仲所创立，是藏传佛教史上唯一由女性创立的一个宗派，这在人类宗教史上尚属罕见 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 2–3).

²⁵ 该宗派，以自己独特的教法义理和别具风格的修持方法，成为藏传佛教中独树一帜的宗派。她不仅对藏传佛教诸宗派产生过深刻影响，而且曾几度风靡整个藏区在藏族社会生活中产生过巨大影响，天葬是本民族最普及的丧葬方式，天葬习俗在藏区的产生和传播直接归功于玛久拉仲及其息解觉域法，在全世界唯有藏族有此习俗 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 2–3).

gu Rin po che Rdo rje 'jigs med rgya mtsho (1877–1949) praising Bskal bzang and linking her to Ma gcig, the “owner of this great teaching.”

[Bskal bzang] was able to recite from memory Ma gcig Lab sgron's composed text (*The Conduct and Logic of Gcod*) and religious classics [...]. In 1946, the [La gu] Rin po che Rdo rje 'jigs med rgya mtsho performed a Kālacakra Ceremony at Sku 'bum [Monastery]. At that time, the 10th Panchen Lama and other reincarnate figures, including Bskal bzang, sat in the front of the hall. [At the Kālacakra], La gu told the Mkha' 'gro ma, who was only ten years old, to recite the prelude of the *Gcod* [sutra]. After she finished, La gu let her sit next to him, and from that time, he started to teach *Gcod* to the reincarnates who were assembled there [including the 10th Panchen]. After the teachings ended, La gu held her hand and said, “Today, I have returned this *Gcod* practice back to the owner of this great teaching.”²⁶

However, in order to understand the full “effect” of Bskal bzang's authority as Ma gcig in Bla brang it is imperative to unpack the Obituary's most stunning adaptation of the *Lotus Vine* that featured the metaphor of Ma gcig acting as a mother of elite A mdo sprul sku, her figurative sons. Ironically, in the 12th century, Ma gcig was an actual mother of five children, including three sons.²⁷ This metaphorical arrangement where A mdo sprul sku serve as reincarnations of Ma gcig's actual sons illuminates a distinct temporal dimension to Bskal bzang's authority as a charismatic Buddhist mother who represented unity and reconciliation around Bla brang. Following the *Lotus Vine* and even the precedent of the 18th-century biography of the 1st 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648–1721), Bskal bzang's Obituary calls on this unique gendered adaptation of a mother-son network that linked her to three of the most powerful male sprul sku in the Bla brang region as emanations of Ma gcig's three sons. In his biography, the 1st 'Jams dbyangs bzhad pa is quoted as saying: “I can confirm that I am [a reincarnation of] the son of Ma gcig lab sgron,” and that Ma gcig prophesied through the revelation of a treasure (*gter ma*) where to build Bla brang Monastery.²⁸ Bskal bzang's Obituary states:

²⁶ 能背诵始祖空行母玛久拉仲撰著的《息解觉域教法义理大品》等教法经典，此为觉域法的根本教法。一九四六年多杰强久美嘉措（拉阔）仁波切在塔尔寺举行时轮金刚灌顶大法会，届时聚集十世班禅等金座大活佛在前厅，仁波切当众点十岁的光日堪召玛祈颂息解觉域法开场。祈颂完觉域法后多杰强久美嘉措（拉阔）仁波切让堪召玛就做与自己身边，给众活佛授权觉域大法，授受完毕，多杰强久美嘉措（拉阔）仁波切拉着佛母之手扬言说道：“我今将息解觉域大法归还给了大法的主人了” (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 6).

²⁷ Kollmar-Paulenz 1993: 101; Sorenson 2013: 6.

²⁸ Ngag dbang bkra shis n.d.: 141a.

In [Ma gcig's] biography, the author said, "Her disciples together are boundless." She is really proud of her 18 favorite disciples, and so forth, who helped spread the practice of *Gcod* all over the Tibetan Plateau, including her second son, "To Ning Sang Gu," [Thod snyon bsam 'grub] and "Dong Da E Ge Ang Xiu" [Dong sde ngag dbang phyug] (the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's previous incarnation) and "Shao Dai Jiang Nai" [Grol sde rgyal chung na] (the De ba's previous reincarnation) [at Bla brang] and "Ro sai Yang Zhen" (the Bse tshang reincarnate) [at nearby Gter lung].²⁹

The *Lotus Vine's* passage is as follows:

Furthermore, a reliable source states that Ma gcig's first son, Dong sde ngag dbang phyug, is the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa. Grol sde rgyal chung na is Sde khri rin po che, and Thod snyon bsam 'grub is Thu'u bkwan. The mother and her sons came together here in this region, blessed it and hid many treasures (*gter ma*) here, and so forth. And similarly, the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa founded Bla brang.³⁰

The *Lotus Vine's* passage reflects a 19th-century temporal context that became more unstable in Bla brang's periphery throughout the 4th Gung ru's lifetime, thus heightening the importance of the Gung ru lineage at Brag dkar to Bla brang. Regional violence between monasteries in A mdo intensified as Rong bo (Longwusi 隆务寺), Gter lung (Shagousi 沙沟寺) and Gtsos (Heicuo 黑措) monasteries opposed Bla brang's expansive periphery. Grassland disputes littered the landscape near Brag dkar, and groups of Muslims from territory in the present-day Qinghai and Gansu provinces threatened the political and economic status quo in Bla brang's periphery. Furthermore, Tibetan relations with the Khoshut Mongols, who had been the chief patrons of Bla brang Monastery, had deteriorated after the Mongolian Palace at Bla brang burned to the ground in 1883, creating more instability in-and-around Bla brang.³¹ This turmoil likely compelled the author to write the *Lotus Vine* and "reconstitute a tradition" of a glorious and continuous past about the Gung ru lineage and Bla brang as a powerful

²⁹ 其传记中写道：“她的徒众与天共齐，无边无垠”，众弟子中有尊母次子托宁桑珠，有“东代额个昂秀”[加木央大师前世]，“召代江乃”[德哇仓前世]，“赛央真”[赛仓活佛]等十八位得意门生，众门徒学成各自为业，弘扬息解觉域法，遍及整个雪域高原 (Bskal bang's Obituary 2013: 3).

³⁰ *de yang yum chen lab kyi sgrol ma'i sras stong sde ngag gi dbang phug ni kun mkhyen bla ma yin cing grol sde rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas sde khri rin po che dang/ thod snyon bsam grub ni rje thu'u bkwan pa yin par tshad ma'i lung las gsungs la yum sras rnam lhan cig phyogs 'dir phebs nas byin gyis brlabs te gter sbed pa sogs gnang ba bzhin kun mkhyen chen bos bkra shis 'khyil phyag 'debs mdzad* (Zhang ston 1897: 205).

³¹ Nietupski 2011: 137–141; Yang 2009: 112, 124, 141–144.

Sino-Tibetan borderland community. In this scenario, the *Lotus Vine* promoted the 4th Gung ru *sprul sku* as Ma gcig the powerful and unifying mother within a network of high-ranking A mdo *sprul sku*, including the Thu'u bkwan from Bla brang ally Dgon lung Monastery in present-day Qinghai.

On the other hand, Bskal bzang's Obituary's passage of Ma gcig's motherhood of A mdo *sprul sku* represents the political realities under a new state dynamic in the PRC where *sprul sku* no longer maintained the all-powerful status that they did before 1958.³² Along these lines, Bskal bzang's Obituary switched out the names of two reincarnations of Ma gcig's sons. The Obituary replaced the Sde khri *sprul sku* with Bde ba and included the Bse tshang *sprul sku* from nearby Gter lung (Bla brang's old rival) in place of the Thu'u bkwan of Dgon lung. This switch likely reflects the changed temporal circumstances in which the Sde khri and Thu'u bkwan no longer maintained close religious and temporal ties with the Gung ru lineage and with Bla brang. Nevertheless, linking Bskal bzang to these three A mdo *sprul sku* connects her authority to the current elite *sprul sku* establishment and, by extension, to the PRC in which all of these *sprul sku* (including Bskal bzang) operated.³³ For example, the 6th 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Blo bzang 'jigs med (b. 1947) still carries major political, religious, and social influence in the Tibetan community as a lay married government official based in Lanzhou and Beijing. As for the Bse tshang reincarnate at nearby Gter lung, Bskal bzang long maintained a close relationship with him.

However, this unique Ma gcig mother-son metaphorical dynamic also signifies another key religio-social reason why a charismatic mother figure in the Gung ru lineage resonated as "right" in A mdo: sons often showed indebtedness and even anxiety about the fate of their mother's future lives or rebirths in a Buddhist context. The autobiography of A mdo yogin Zhabs dkar and the Gesar epic exemplify sons who exhibited filial anxiety over their mother's Buddhist rebirth around the time of their mother's death.³⁴ Zhabs dkar expressed regret about not seeing his mother before she passed away and how he devoted his own Buddhist practice toward securing her a favorable rebirth. The Gesar epic describes Gesar's own journey to liberate his mother from the lower realms. Hence, given that many monastic men around Rgan gya and Bla brang likely encountered this fraught situation regarding their own mothers, it makes sense that a charismatic mother like the one described in Bskal bzang's Obituary (and the *Lotus Vine* before it) in the personage of Ma gcig would

³² See Makley 2007.

³³ Yang 2009: 112.

³⁴ See Ricard 2001: 200–203; Kapstein 2007: 359–363.

resonate with the dutiful son's goal to liberate his own mother. Therefore, in the end, the charismatic mother figure came to symbolize the ideal of Buddhist liberation (including actual mothers) and also temporal prosperity of Bla brang, which, of course, resonated well with the Buddhist patriarchy and also the PRC.

This first section demonstrated how Bskal bzang's Obituary, like the *Lotus Vine*, utilized the "right" maternal symbol of Ma gcig the "Great Mother" to legitimate Bskal bzang's authority in the Rgan gya and Bla brang community as both an elite practitioner and a symbol of temporal unity. As part of the Obituary's goal to "reconstitute a tradition" about the Gung ru lineage and the temporality in which she lived, the "Great Mother" Ma gcig came to represent both the continuity in the four-century-old Gung ru lineage and also the larger temporality in post-Cultural Revolution Rgan gya and Bla brang. The next section describes how the Obituary fetes Bskal bzang for performing the "right" actions or deeds as a needed and valued surrogate mother among this audience of *sprul sku*, monks, nuns, and laity in Bla brang and Rgan gya after the Cultural Revolution.

2. Bskal bzang as a Surrogate Mother of the Masses

While the Obituary does not elaborate at length Bskal bzang's role as a practitioner of Cakrasaṃvara practices—even though the text briefly mentions that she practiced such rituals at the Brag dkar cave and nearby Lo kya tun like her Gung ru predecessors—Bskal bzang's Obituary, like the *Lotus Vine*, presents her authority as a talented and heroic surrogate mother of the masses. Along these lines, the Obituary fetes her for performing numerous activities in the monastic and lay communities in Rgan gya, Bla brang, and across A mdo. These activities include the rebuilding of Brag dkar in the 1990s, managing two nunneries in Bla brang, donating to Ma gcig's home monastery in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), acting as a Buddhist teacher and solving numerous local grassland disputes that had turned deadly around Rgan gya, as will be explained below.

However, the significance of these events for how the Obituary presents and legitimates Bskal bzang's authority as a surrogate mother of many in the monastic and lay community who had been separated from their own mother, while important from a Buddhist ritual efficacious perspective interacting with monks, nuns, and the laity, must also be interpreted from a vantage point of the post-Cultural Revolution temporality in A mdo. In other words, Bskal bzang's actions as a surrogate mother figure carry significant temporal meaning in this Bla brang and Rgan gya community that, once again,

resemble the *Lotus Vine's* "reconstituting a tradition" about the 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo's authority as a substitute mother. Specifically, the *Lotus Vine* shows how Rig 'dzin dpal mo performed rituals in lay people's homes, donated alms to the sangha, restored people's speech as a medical healer, acted as a peacemaker on the grasslands and taught others how to control their mind in the peripheral outpost of Rgan gya during the 19th century.³⁵ To compare, Bskal bzang's Obituary depicts Bskal bzang as a talented surrogate mother who helped maintain peace, harmony, and security in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution—or this is how the Obituary author, and perhaps the monastic establishment and the PRC, would want to "reconstitute a tradition" around the Gung ru lineage acting as a needed heroic Buddhist mother who helped to re-establish this important A mdo community.

Accordingly, the Obituary illustrates Bskal bzang's authority as a surrogate mother within the monastic community who took the initiative to rebuild Brag dkar and manage nunneries in Bla brang through the help of the 'Jams dbyangs bzhad pa and the PRC government. The Obituary describes the restoration process that began in the 1980s:

In 1986, the Mkha' 'gro ma brought Rgan gya lay representatives with her to go to Lanzhou, where she sat before the 'Jams dbyangs bzhad pa to apply for permission to repair the main hall of Brag dkar Monastery. The Mkha' 'gro ma also applied to the government for 100 cubic meters of wood to build the main monastery hall, and in two years, in 1988, the monastery's main hall was built.³⁶

However, Bskal bzang's effort to rebuild Brag dkar was not the first time that a Gung ru *sprul sku* renovated the monastery or the Gung ru estate. The *Lotus Vine* shows how the 4th Gung ru expanded the main prayer hall and the sleeping rooms at Brag dkar and that the 5th Gung ru did the same.³⁷

Furthermore, Bskal bzang's Obituary touts her authority as the "right" mother figure as a *sprul sku* to manage two nunneries from different Tibetan Buddhist sects (Dge lugs and Rnying ma) under difficult logistical circumstances in Bla brang in the 1990s. These circumstances, according to the Obituary, included sectarian conflict

³⁵ Zhang ston 1897: 193–201.

³⁶ 1986 年佛母携甘加僧俗代表前往兰州嘉木央坐前申请重修寺院大殿并获准，佛母又向国家申请了建寺用的 100 方木材，历时两年 88 年建成了寺院大殿 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 7).

³⁷ Dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2008: 81.

between the local nuns who did not have a permanent place to build and establish a consistent Buddhist practice. The Obituary states:

The 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa in 1994 entrusted Bskal bzang to raise money to build Co'u rgya (Jiujia 九甲) Nunnery. But the nuns were not very rigorous and were also impoverished. Bskal bzang carried a heavy burden and made a sincere wish to build a nunnery, but she experienced many hardships. It took 13 years before two nunneries from two sects—the Dge lugs nunnery Dge ldan bstan rgyas gling (Danjielin 丹杰林) and the Rnying ma nunnery Bslab gsum Dar rgyas gling (Lasen Dajielin 拉森达杰林)—were built. These two nunneries had over 120 people living there year-round, and each nunnery built a sutra hall. Nowadays, many Buddhist worshippers continually come to make offerings to the nuns helping to ensure their livelihood. The atmosphere of [each] nunnery is genuine and sincere with incense burning vigorously. The nunnery's management is in good order, and the current [management] standard in these nunneries is magnificent and unprecedented [in their history].³⁸

Moreover, Bskal bzang's work in the community as a problem-solver and a peacemaker elucidates her authority as a charismatic mother figure as the Obituary details how she solved several deadly grassland disputes. This list includes the exact number of deaths incurred in each dispute. It shows that the Gung ru lineage (i.e., Bskal bzang) still held jurisdiction and considerable authority, i.e., she maintained trust with herders who counted on her to help solve these disputes. The Obituary states:

In order to [preserve] this herding area's peace and to prevent the further loss of husbands and fathers, the Gung ru Mkha' 'gro ma had the power to rally support among the people. She used her kindness and energy to take the initiative herself to mediate the grassland conflict and end the dispute. Because they were touched by her leadership ability and the power of her strong personality, the dispute

³⁸ 为此，1994年嘉木样大师委托光日仓活佛筹建九甲尼姑寺，拉卜楞尼姑僧众有宁玛派和格鲁派共有两百多人众，两派都无正规诵经场所，也无完整的规章制度，面对如此松散、贫穷的尼姑僧众，活佛担此重担，发大愿心，着手建设，历经千辛万苦，历时十三年，建成了两座派系尼姑寺寺院，即格鲁派尼姑寺丹杰林与宁玛派尼姑寺拉森达杰林，拉卜楞庞大的僧尼群体纳入规范的国家民族宗教寺院体系，并制定寺院内部各项管理制度，建立了规范的寺院管理。两寺常住僧众各达到一百二十多人，两派僧尼有了各自的经堂，现如今香客施主络绎不绝，供养不断，众僧尼生活有了保障，寺院道风淳正，香火旺盛，寺院管理井然有序，管理规范，盛况空前 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 7).

ended peacefully for both sides, and the matter was resolved with her even-tempered reasoning.³⁹

Another passage details the prevalence of these disputes across Rgan gya and in the region:

Since the 1980s, the Gung ru Mkha' 'gro ma successfully mediated several grassland disputes, including a dispute in Bsang khog (Sangke 桑科) south of Bla brang and Mdo ba (Duowa 多哇) Township in Qinghai where two people were killed. One person died in fighting between Rgan gya Ri sngon (Renai 仁爱) and Qinghai Mgar rtse (Guaerze 瓜尔则). There was a dispute between Rgan gya Zhol skor (Xike 西科) and Phu di (Fudi 伏地) outside of Bla brang, but no one died. She mediated a dispute between Rgan gya and Hor tshang Mar dang (Madang 麻当), where one person died, and also many other disputes.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Bskal bzang's Obituary also elaborates her distinct role as a healer and benefactor in the greater Bla brang community and across Tibetan regions. For example, the Obituary shows how she helped care for those living in her native community of Rgyal bo (Jiawu 加吾), Reb gong, Qinghai and Ma gcig's home monastery of Zangs ri Mkhar dmar (Sangrikamasi 桑日卡玛寺) in southern Tibet. This shows how she not only strengthened her link to her home herding village, where in the early 1940s, at the age of seven, she was chosen as the 6th Gung ru, but how she also became a benefactor to Ma gcig's home monastery in southern Tibet. The audiences in these places welcomed Bskal bzang back after many years:

During the summers in 2002, 2007 and 2009, the Mkha' 'gro ma was invited three times to return to her homeland in Rgyal bo, Qinghai, a place she had left over 50 years ago. The Rgyal bo tribe's troops greeted

³⁹ 为了这片地区的安宁祥和，为了更好的牧民家庭不再失去孩子、丈夫、父亲，光日仓活佛发挥她在群众中的精神号召力，用一颗仁慈之心，积极、主动地参与甘加地区每件草场纠纷和矛盾的调解，向参与争端的双方晓之以理、动之以情，在她的循循善导和人格魅力的感召下，争端双方都心平气和、理性的接受调解，化解了事态 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 7-8).

⁴⁰ 自八十年代以来，光日仓活佛亲自参与调处成功的草场纠纷还有：甘肃桑科乡和青海多哇乡的草山纠纷（两条命案）、甘加仁和青海瓜尔则的草山纠纷（一条命案）、甘加西科和伏地的草山纠纷（无命案）、甘加乡和麻当乡的草山纠纷（一条命案）、还有诸多甘加乡内部纠纷、桑科乡内部纠纷、卡加道乡内部纠纷的调节并一一调和化解成功 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 8).

her with a grand welcome, and she went in person to greet every family.⁴¹

The following passage is about Bskal bzang at Zangs ri Mkhar dmar:

In 2010, the Mkha' 'gro ma raised money in Rgan gya and Rgyal bo and in the tenth month of the lunar calendar, representatives from these two places, the Mkha' 'gro ma herself and her son Bde dpon Bkra shis, and a disciple Sbyin pa accompanied the student Bstan pa rgya mtsho to Zangs ri mkhar dmar to make offerings and to teach and to spread *Gcod* teachings more broadly.⁴²

On top of her role as a benefactor and healer, Bskal bzang's Obituary shows that she was a teacher who helped monastics and others along the Buddhist path, even when her health failed toward the end of her life. Here is one example from the Obituary that describes how Bskal bzang, who was sick at the time, imparted her wisdom in her role as a teacher of the community at the *Gcod* festival held at her estate at Brag dkar in 2009. She even scolded her students as a teacher would discipline his/her students or as a mother might scold her own children:

[Bskal bzang] was propped up with a crutch under her arms, and she benevolently greeted every visitor who came to see her at the *Gcod* festival. As she became extremely fatigued during the festival, she only laid down after the last visitor left, and she showed up again the next day. While she lay on her couch, she did not resign from trying to solve the local grassland disputes, and she advised the monks, nuns, and the laity gathered there to not participate in politics. She told them not to instigate and induce any harmful activities, and the Mkha' 'gro ma admonished the monks and nuns that the benefits of Buddhism must, in turn, be of benefit to the people and that the goal of Buddhism is to benefit humanity. Buddhist figures must take it upon themselves to promote human happiness and to lead prayers for blessings for the prosperity and stability of the great masses.⁴³

⁴¹ 2002 夏季、2007 年夏季、2009 年夏季前后三次佛母应邀回归了阔别五十多年的故乡青海加吾，加吾部落盛大阵容迎接佛母，佛母亲临加吾部落每一个家庭 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 9).

⁴² 2010 年佛母在甘加和加吾部落筹集资金，十月委派两地民众数名和佛母次子德红扎西、门生金巴护送佛母高徒旦巴嘉措前往西藏桑日卡玛寺经行供养和圣地觉域法的普及 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 10).

⁴³ 又拄着腋下杖慈祥地为每人摸顶，一天下来佛母身体疲惫不堪，信众走完便一头躺下，次日又一如既往。卧榻期间，不辞幸劳的调节民间纠纷，集结信众和僧尼劝阻不要参与时政政治当中，不要被煽动和诱导所迷惑，实施不良举动，佛母告诫僧众

Finally, the author evocatively called on the mother metaphor as he represented an audience in Bla brang and Rgan gya who begged for Bskal bzang to remain and later mourned her passing. These concluding lines in verse, which resemble the *Lotus Vine* and most Tibetan *rnam thar* literature, demonstrate the local audience's devotion to their needed mother and the intimacy of their relationship in Rgan gya, in particular:

Mother, do not go! The daytime here will return as before. When our eyes are turned away from you, darkness pervades on all sides. The earth still needs the nourishment of the sun to illuminate each and every place.

Mother, do not go! The people here still need you to take care of them and show [them] the direction of the path and tell them to abstain from evil and to do all virtuous things.

Mother, do not go! The posterity of the grassland especially needs your blessing and empowerment so they [locals] can benefit all sentient beings and accomplish their merit.

Mother, you have not left! Your appearance and smiling face have already been engraved in the pupil of everyone's eye. Whenever the sun rises, we will think of You and recall your love. Our long life is like an endless river and there is always a ray of warm sunlight shining on us. That warm light is like gold cast in our heart that lingers from age to age.

Mother, you have not left! Every time the darkness falls, a bright moon lingers over the heads of our bed, and the love that you showed us for a century reappears in the light. In the same way that smoke [from guns] lingers [as] in the movies and television, your body image is like that of a Venerable Mother surrounded by bright light who lingers for a long time and descends slowly from the top of the cloud. You are the benefactor to whom we will sing our praises forever.

Mother, you have not left, listen! We can still hear your sweet-sounding chanting of *Gcod*, the sound of nature that cleanses our spirit, the wisdom of enlightenment that edifies us all!

Mother, you have not left! Nobody is able to obstruct your footsteps; you merely went on a long trip, letting us feel the difference between your existence and your departure. When a crow soars in the sky and down the wall of a rampart and arrives at Brag dkar, the snow turns

和僧尼：佛教的利益必须与人民的利益结合起来，佛教的宗旨是要造福人类，佛教人士当以人间和平和幸福为己任 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 10).

into rain, the sunshine glitters about, and the blue sky is all the more azure blue. The buds born in a soft shoot of a winter day slowly bloom, listening attentively as the voices of spring arrive. You (Mkha' 'gro ma) sit in the center of the lotus flower radiating in all directions. You are wearing bright golden clothes and dancing like a breeze moving softly like water and pure like snow. You must come back! Listen, from a distance, the sound of your footsteps has already been heard.⁴⁴

3. Conclusion

Despite a gap of over a century, Bskal bzang's Obituary extraordinarily exhibits the vital legitimating and narrative strategies that illustrate Bskal bzang's authority as a charismatic Buddhist mother—the strategies first established in the *Lotus Vine rnam thar* about the famous 4th Gung ru Rig 'dzin dpal mo. The *Lotus Vine* proved to be an important model or archetype for Bskal bzang's Obituary that now reflected a completely different temporality in Amdo after the Cultural Revolution. Strikingly, Bskal bzang's Obituary, like the *Lotus Vine* before it, presented Bskal bzang as the "Great Mother" Ma gcig and as a surrogate mother figure in a 21st-century context in Bla brang and Rgan gya. Therefore, motherhood, in addition to being connected to the performance of Buddhist doctrine, also signified heroism, unity, security, and reconciliation in an ever-changing socio-temporal dynamic.

Just as striking, however, today and going forward is what the Obituary does not discuss in detail—Bskal bzang's laicization in 1958 and her subsequent motherhood of four children. While the text does

⁴⁴ 佛母你别走，这里的白天依旧会到来，我们眼光背开了你时，四面都是黑暗，大地依旧需要太阳的滋润，光照每一片角落。佛母你别走，这里的人们任然需要你眷顾，指引人性的方向，让人们诸恶莫作，诸善奉行。佛母你没走，您的音容笑貌已镌刻在每一个人的明眸中，每当太阳升起的时候我们会想您，想起佛母的爱，在我们生命的长河里始终有一缕灿烂的暖阳照耀，那暖阳象金子一样浇铸在我们的心头萦绕在我们心头生生世世。佛母你没走，每当夜幕降临，就会有一轮明月萦绕在我们的床头，那月光里会浮现出你一个世纪对我们的牵念，影视般的硝烟中你的身影像尊母身带光环伫立于云翔顶缓缓飘落的情景，你是我们永远歌颂不止的恩人。佛母你没走，听！那觉域法音声中我们任依稀听见你咏唱悦耳动听的声音佛音，天籁之音，荡涤心灵，启迪智慧，澄澈开悟。佛母你没走，没有人能阻挡你的脚步，你只是出了一趟远门，让人们感受下你的存在与离去的差异，当红嘴鸦翱翔于天空，白石崖半壁俯冲而至的时候，当雪已化雨，阳光灿烂晃眼，蓝天愈加湛蓝，那些萌生于冬日的嫩芽、花苞伸展着，倾听着，春天到来的声音之时，莲花中央的你闪耀万丈光芒，着阳光的金色羽衣，舞着清风般的灵秀凌波乘风，带着水的柔情，雪的洁莹，一定会到来，听，远远地，你的脚步声已踏响 (Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 11–12).

mention that she attended college in Gansu (1958–1961), joined the CPPPC in 1961 in Bla brang. That Brag dkar was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution when Bskal bzang worked as a farm laborer, the text glosses over Bskal bzang's laicization, i.e., what happened to her during this period.⁴⁵ Given the stakes of producing such a text, not to mention the political realities of bringing up such a sensitive story set in the period before and during the Cultural Revolution in the PRC and also likely the Tibetan aversion of mentioning actual mothers in texts about Buddhist figures, this omission is not overly surprising. At least two contemporary stories about Tibetan women, including the current Bsam sding Rdo rje phag mo female *sprul sku* lineage holder and the treasure revealer (*gter ston*) Ta re Lha mo in Mgo log, did not focus on having a family (or becoming a mother) or the perils and changes wrought by the Cultural Revolution. In Ta re Lha mo's case, she is portrayed in her *rnam thar* as a Buddhist heroine who, according to Holly Gayley's analysis, was "unscarred" by the chaos of this time.⁴⁶

Minimizing these details about Bskal bzang, which I take up in greater detail in my forthcoming larger project, helps elaborate the high stakes of sanctification in the Gung ru lineage via a text/*rnam thar*—if and when a *rnam thar* about Bskal bzang comes off the press. Yet, given the presence of Bskal bzang's well-written Obituary and the narrative model before that in the *Lotus Vine*, the authorizing figure of a universal charismatic mother will be at the apex of her story.

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⁴⁵ Bskal bzang's Obituary 2013: 7.

⁴⁶ Diemberger 2007: 299–312. Diemberger recounts the oral version of the life story of the current Bsam sding rdo rje *sprul sku* as told by the *sprul sku*'s sister. See Gayley's (2017: 78–83, 104–115) fascinating analysis about the details that Ta re Lha mo's *rnam thar* does not mention the hardships of the Maoist period before and during the Cultural Revolution.

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