

# The significance of the Byang gter in the Life and Legacy of Thang stong rgyal po

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## *Introduction*

**T**hang stong rgyal po (1361–1485) is a towering figure of Tibetan Buddhism. He was born some decades after Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337–1408) but enjoyed a very long life. He was active for almost all the 15th century and played an important role for early members of the Northern Treasures. It is said in his biographies that he lived for 125 years and had over 500 masters. He is traditionally considered one of the most widely traveled persons in Tibetan history, although many of his travels were visionary. Often regarded as a non-sectarian master, he did not belong to any specific order and his legacy is preserved in many lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and on Tibetan soil in general. The 15th century was a time of effervescence in Tibet, but also a moment of consolidation of traditions. Although the 14th century witnessed a lot of cross-fertilization in lineages, with towering figures such as the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, (1284–1339), the great scholar Bu ston Rin chen grub, (1290–1364), the rNying ma exegete and philosopher Klong chen rab 'byams (1308–1364), and the Jo nang master Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361), in the 15th century, sectarian affiliations became somewhat more rigid, especially with the establishment of the dGe lugs pa order stemming from Tsong kha pa's (1357–1419) teaching. Thang stong rgyal po's tradition, for its part, cannot be classified as belonging to any specific order. He gave rise to his own tradition, the Iron Bridge Tradition (*lcags zam lugs*), a reference to his activity as a builder of iron bridges and other means of crossing rivers. It was maintained in his monasteries and infused in all other lineages, although he is also particularly associated with the gCod and Shangs pa bka' brgyud lineages. Just to give an example of his fame in Tibet from an unrelated context, Thang stong rgyal po is mentioned by name in Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas's (1812–1899) *Calling the Guru from Afar* on a par

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with lineage founders such as Atiśa (982–1054), Mar pa (1000–1081), and the first Karma pa (1110–1193), as well as Khyung po rnal 'byor (990/1050–1127), Pa dam pa Sangs rgyas (11th c.–1117), and Ma gcig lab sgron (1055–1149).<sup>2</sup> He became a cultural hero in Tibet for his building of bridges and his association with the welfare of the population, be it through medicine or theater. He was an active inspiration for the spread in Tibet of the *maṇi* practice of Avalokiteśvara, the main *yi dam* of Tibet.

The importance of Thang stong rgyal po within the Northern Treasures today is reflected in Chos dbyings's treatment of this saint in *The History of the Northern Treasures*, where his biography is nearly as long as Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's.<sup>3</sup> The goal of this article is to describe and assess his place in the history of the Northern Treasures Tradition. Although the main reason may be the high social and symbolic capital he enjoyed in Tibet, it is likely that the geographical and spiritual proximity he had with the early Byang gter tradition played a decisive role for his importance in the Northern Treasures tradition. Thang stong rgyal po was born in the same region as Rig 'dzin rGod ldem and received his treasures from the latter's direct disciples such as Renunciate (Kun spangs) Don yod rgyal mtshan (14th c.) and lHa gdong pa bSod nams mchog pa (14-15th c.). Thang stong rgyal po also founded one of the important monasteries of the region, gCung Ri bo che (gCung Ri bo che), which often had close ties with the Byang gter lineage and was visited by many of the early masters of that lineage. Above all, he was famous for his exceptional longevity, prophesied by Padmasambhava. It is claimed that it was achieved through his practice of the *Iron Stalk* (*lcags kyi sdong po*), a longevity practice (*tshe sgrub*) belonging to the Heart Practice (*thugs sgrub*) of rGod ldem's revelations.<sup>4</sup> His biography also states that he obtained a high level of realization by following the *Direct Revelation* (*dGongs pa zang thal*), rGod ldem's rDzogs chen revelation.

Thang stong rgyal po's significance within the tradition of the Northern Treasures is deeply integrated into the way that the tradition presents its own history. For example, the Northern Treasures are often said to have been transmitted from Rig 'dzin rGod ldem in three separate lineages. While the first two are clearly important because they began with his consort and biological son and later included

<sup>2</sup> Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Chos dbyings 2015. This *History of the Northern Treasures* (*Byang gter chos 'byung*) is in vol. 62 of the *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*. The biography of Thang stong rgyal po is located on pp. 133-171.

<sup>4</sup> This is the *Nang sgrub lcags kyi sdong po* (Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 279-285). For more information on this transmission and its larger textual formation, see Shinga 2024 (in this volume).

many patriarchs of the tradition, the third lineage seems to be significant primarily because it verifies the connections between Rig 'dzin rgod ldem and Thang stong rgyal po.

*Biographical sources and Existing Literature on Thang stong rgyal po*



Himalayanart item 65773. Lo chen 'Gyur med bde chen Collected Works, vol. 3, p. 453

Given Thang stong rgyal po's importance in Tibetan religious history, there is a substantial quantity of Tibetan biographies and Western studies on him.

Regarding English-language sources, early tibetologists such as Rolf Stein and Giuseppe Tucci mention this figure. Stein introduced his legacy in Tibetan performing arts, and especially Ache Lhamo, and Tucci proposed a first assessment of his biography.<sup>5</sup> From the 1980s onward, two American scholars, Janet Gyatso and Cyrus Stearns, devoted considerable work on this figure. The former wrote her PhD dissertation and several articles on Thang stong rgyal po's teach-

ings, characterizing them as "visionary."<sup>6</sup> Cyrus Stearns made his master thesis on the topic of the saint's biographies, and published in 2007 a monograph containing a study and translation of the main biography, with detailed references to most of the predating works on the Saint. Stearns' book is to date the main source of knowledge about Thang stong rgyal po's life and teaching.<sup>7</sup> He studied the more than 1800 Tibetan pages describing the Mahāsiddha's activity to give a comprehensive presentation of his life and tradition and fully translated one of the longest biographies, which was composed by Thang

<sup>5</sup> Stein 1959, pp. 32, 238; Stein 1962, pp. 79, 276-277; Tucci 1949, p. 162. For a further presentation of the origins of Ache Lhamo, see rDo rjee 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Gyatso 1981, Gyatso 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Stearns 2007. For more references on Thang stong rgyal po by Shambhala, see their [Guide for Readers](#) (accessed 10.10.2023)

stong's descendant Lo chen 'Gyur med bde chen (1540–1615), the abbot of the Ri bo che Monastery in Thang stong's native region of Byang Ngam ring. This biography includes and synthesizes most earlier sources and is the text that became standard in Tibet, as it circulated on woodblocks from the time of its publication in 1609. In this monograph, Stearns also presents in notes the alternative versions of Thang stong's life. It is one of these earlier biographies that constitutes the main source of Chos dbyings's biography in the Byang gter compilation. It was composed by the Mahāsiddha's direct disciple, Shes rab dpal ldan, and is entitled *Ocean of Marvels* (*Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*).<sup>8</sup>

The research by Gyatso and Stearns provides good access to Thang stong rgyal po's life and teaching, but his role in the Northern Treasures Tradition is somewhat left in the background. More recently, Kanako Shinga wrote several articles and her dissertation on Thang stong's practice of rGod ldem's revelations, especially the longevity practice of the *Iron Stalk*.<sup>9</sup> The present work is based mostly on the studies by Gyatso, Stearns and Shinga, as well as the translation of Chos dbyings's biography. Its aim is to give a description of Thang stong rgyal po's life and teaching with a specific emphasis on his role in the Northern Treasures history.

#### *Dates*

According to Stearns,<sup>10</sup> there is some uncertainty on the lifespan of Thang stong rgyal po. One of the main reasons for this uncertainty is that Thang stong rgyal po himself declared at the end of his life that he was both young and old and that the number of years elapsed since he had been born did not matter. This promoted the idea that he had gained control over his life and was immortal, and this in turn legitimized his tradition of longevity practices.

Although the earliest biography—authored by his direct disciple Shes rab dpal ldan (the only one who witnessed his death)—does not indicate Thang stong rgyal po's age when he passed on, it states twice that Thang stong rgyal po's final accomplishments occurred in 1484. Shes rab dpal ldan's son, Kun dga' bsod nams grags pa dpal bzang, declares that the Saint died when he was 128, in a snake year after the Nya mgo bridge was constructed. 'Gyur med bde chen, the biographer who compiled the life translated by Stearns, says, like Shes rab dpal ldan's son, that the Mahāsiddha died in 1485 and that he lived up to 125 years, thus was born in 1361. Padmasambhava's prophecy

<sup>8</sup> Shes rab dpal ldan 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Shinga 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2020, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Stearns 2007, p. 11-12.

revealed by Thang stong rgyal po considers that he was born in an ox year. Hence, if he was 125 when he died, that would fit with the Iron Female Ox Year 1361.<sup>11</sup>

The dates 1361–1485 are therefore the ones generally accepted in Tibetan historiography, and these are also the ones accepted by the rNying ma historian Gu ru bkra shis (18th c.).<sup>12</sup> bDud 'joms Rin po che maintains in *The rNying ma School of Tibetan Buddhism* that he was born in 1385 and lived for 125 years (i.e. died in 1509),<sup>13</sup> and one finds other hypotheses in early Western historiography (Stein, Tucci, Gene Smith). The explanations provided by Stearns, however, tend to prove that, as far as we can know based on biographies and outer events, the most likely lifespan of Thang stong rgyal po is indeed 1361–1485. The main points justifying 1361 as his date of birth are that Thang stong said that he was a reincarnation of Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, who died in 1361, and his alleged lifespan of 125 years. Regarding the year proposed for his death, it is supported both by the date of the construction of the Nya mgo bridge and the fact that no event post-dating 1484 is related by Thang stong's direct disciples.

If the iron-bridge builder was born in 1361, it means that he could have met Rig 'dzin rgod ldem in person, as the treasure revealer was born in 1337 and is said to have died in 1408. None of the biographies of either figure mentions this, however. Thang stong rgyal po received Northern Treasures traditions, not from rGod ldem himself, but from one of his disciples, Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan, a hermit living in rGod ldem's and Thang stong's birth region, Byang Ngam ring. He also attended Don yod rgyal mtshan's nephew, lHa gdong pa bSod nams mchog pa.

Regarding the first encounter between Thang stong rgyal po and Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan, the latter is said to have come and visited Thang stong rgyal po's mother shortly after his birth:<sup>14</sup>

Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan came to meet him [after his birth]. The previous night he had a wonderful dream where he was told, among other things, that O rgyan Padma[sambhava] would come to the world from the land of the *rākṣasas* in the south-west to accomplish

<sup>11</sup> For more details on the question, see *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14, and notes 44 and 45, p. 470.

<sup>12</sup> Gu ru bkra shis 1990, pp. 507-511.

<sup>13</sup> bDud 'joms 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje et al. 2002, pp. 802-803.

<sup>14</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, p. 135: *kun spangs don yod rgyal mtshan dang mjal bas | khong gis mdang nga'i rmi lam du lho nub srin po'i yul nas o rgyan pad+ma 'dzam bu'i gling du sems can gyi don la 'byon gyi yod zer ba sogs rmi lam ngo mtshar can byung tshul dang | gnyid sad pa na dang sngar dang mi 'dra ba'i sems la dga' ba dang | lus la bde ba'i snang ba dpag tu med pa byung bas bu chung 'di 'gro don nus pa zhig yong bar 'dug gsungs | mtshan khro bo dpal 'bar du btags | tshe dpag med kyi dbang dang | rnam joms kyi khrus chog shes rab blo 'phel gyi thabs sogs mang du gngang.*

the benefit of beings. Upon waking up, he felt an immense mental joy and physical pleasure unlike ever before and said that this baby would become someone with the capacity to accomplish the benefit of beings. He named him Khro bo dpal 'bar (Wrathful Blazing Glory) and performed many [rites] such as the Amitāyus empowerment, the purification ritual of Vajravīdāraṇa and a method for increasing his intelligence towards wisdom and so on.

Thus, if Thang stong rgyal po was born in 1361, Don yod rgyal mtshan met him for the first time before rGod ldem discovered the Northern Treasures of Zang zang lha brag in 1366. It seems that at that time Don yod rgyal mtshan was recognized as a local master, but not yet a hermit as he had some interaction with the local population. The next time the two are said to meet, Thang stong rgyal po is 14, so it could have been 1375. At that time, biographies describe that he received from Don yod rgyal mtshan the main Great Perfection teaching of the Northern Treasures Tradition, the *Direct Revelation*, and that this was instrumental in actualizing his realization of the true nature:<sup>15</sup>

When he reached his fifteenth year, he received from Don yod rgyal mtshan, the renunciate hermit, the *Great Perfection's Direct Revelation of Absolute Good's Contemplation*, the [Vision] of Manifest Reality, the cycle of the *Seminal Heart of Dākinīs* as well as the cycle of *Severance of Equal Taste*. He also received the empowerment of the peaceful and wrathful [deities] of the *Net of Magical Illusions* and of Amitāyus, etc., as well the *sādhana*s and authorizations for [Paṇḍita]śavarī, Vasudhārā and so on. It is said that, since this day, there was no [way of] going any further in his realization.

Although Rig 'dzin rGod ldem left Ngam ring shortly after discovering the treasures in 1366, he returned there on several occasions. He was at Mount bKra bzang between 1384 and 1389, when he was offered land at Mount dPal 'bar by the king of Gung thang. At that time Thang stong rgyal po was already in his twenties and allegedly traveling around. It is therefore possible that although the two men lived at the same time in the same region, they did not meet. It may also be possible that Thang stong rgyal po was born later than 1361, maybe in 1373 or 1385, and therefore did not meet rGod ldem as he was much younger than him. A hint of this possibility is a lineage of transmission described in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Record of Teachings Received* with

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136: [...] *dgung lo bco lnga par | kun spangs ri khrod pa don yod rgyal mtshan las | rdzogs chen dgongs pa zang thal | chos nyid mngon sum | mkha' 'gro snying thig la sogs pa'i chos skor | ro snyom gcod skor | sgyu 'phrul zhi khro | tshé dpag med la sogs pa'i dbang | [136] ri khrod ma | nor rgyun ma la sogs pa'i sgrub thabs rjes gnang mang po gsan | skabs de dus las rtogs pa mtho ru 'gro rgyu ma byung bar gsungs.*

two masters between rGod ldem's son and Thang stong rgyal po (see below for more detail on this). As there are no clear information allowing us to decide anything in that regard, it is therefore preferable to stick with the generally recognized year of birth of 1361, while keeping in mind that Thang stong rgyal po does not have clearly datable interactions with other masters in his youth: it may therefore never be possible to conclusively settle the matter.

*Thang stong rgyal po's training in the Northern Treasures Traditions*

As described above, the training of Thang stong rgyal po in the Northern Treasures started with his practice of the *Direct Revelation* that he received from Don yod rgyal mtshan in his teens. At this time, he focused more particularly on the *Vision of Manifest Reality* and presumably attained a realization of it. This term is an allusion to the first of the four visions (*snang ba bzhi*) of *thod rgal*, described in a text that is part of the *Direct Revelation* cycle, the *Ultra-secret and Unsurpassable Great Perfection, Manual of Instructions on the [Vision] of Manifest Reality*.<sup>16</sup>

Thang stong rgyal po is said to meet Don yod rgyal mtshan a third time, when he received all the other Northern Treasures and attained realization by practicing the longevity practice of the *Iron Stalk*.<sup>17</sup>

When he went to request teachings from the hermit Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan, each treasure guardian (*gter bdag*) appeared to the great renunciate to exhort him. In particular, Padmasambhava came with a retinue of *dākinīs* and told [Don yod rgyal mtshan], "I am the one who concealed as treasures the dharma teachings you possess. As I will stay in this land of Tibet to protect disciples for up to 180 years, give these treasure teachings to me!"

The great renunciate then told his monks, "The fully consecrated

<sup>16</sup> "rDzogs pa chen po yang gsang bla na med pa chod nyid mngon sum gyi khrid yig," In *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* 2015, vol. 1, pp. 531-562.

<sup>17</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 138-139: *kun spangs ri khrod pa don yod rgyal mtshan gyi drung du chos zhu bar byon pa'i dus kun spangs chen po la gter bdag so sos mngon sum du skul ma byung zhing | khyad par o rgyan chen po 'khor mkha' 'gro dang bcas pa byon nas | khyod la yod pa'i chos rnams gter du sba mkhan nga rang yin | nga bod yul 'dir lo grangs | [139] brgya dang brgyad cu tshun gdul bya skyong ba la sdod rgyu yin pas gter chos rnams nga rang la thong gsungs pa byung nas | kun spangs chen pos grwa pa rnams la dge slong brtson 'grus 'dir byon pa 'dug khong gter kha 'di'i tshe sgrub lcags sdong ma la brten nas tshe yi rig 'dzin brnyes pa zhid 'ong bar 'dug 'o skol gyis sne len bzang po dgos gsungs nas bsnyen bkur phun sum tshogs pa mdzad | kun spangs chen po de nyid las rig 'dzin chen po rgod ldem can gyi gter chos thams cad gsan | gzhan yang brgyud 'dzin bsod nams mchog bzang las kyang byang gter gts'o bor gyur pa'i gter chos mang du gsan. This part corresponds to Stearns 2007, pp. 130-131.*

monk named Perseverance (brTson 'grus, Thang stong rgyal po's consecration's name) is coming. He will, on the basis of our *Longevity Practice Iron Stalk* from [rGod ldem's] treasures, attain the *vidyādhara* level of longevity. We should extend him a good welcome!" Thus, [Don yod rgyal mtshan] treated [Thang stong rgyal po] with utmost respect. [Thang stong rgyal po] received all the treasure teachings of the great Rig 'dzin rGod ldem from the great renunciate himself. In addition, he received again from Lineage Holder bSod nams mchog bzang many treasure teachings hailing mostly from the Northern Treasures.

The Northern Treasures teachings that Thang stong rgyal po received from Don yod rgyal mtshan's nephew, bSod nams mchog bzang, are described further on in the text:<sup>18</sup>

From lHa gdong pa bSod nams mchog pa, he completely received the treasure cycles on rDzogs chen from the lineage of sPrul sku Rig 'dzin chen po [rGod ldem] as well as the *Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs*, the *A ro Cycle on rDzogs chen*, the *Cycle on Vajrapāṇi*, the *sādhana* and authorization of the Great King Vaiśravaṇa, and many others.

Regarding the teaching cycles Thang stong rgyal po received from Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan and bSod nams mchog bzang, it is interesting to note that they are not exclusively Northern Treasures, but also other rDzogs chen cycles of the period. As shown by Stéphane Arguillère in the present volume,<sup>19</sup> there is a literary and spiritual proximity between on the one hand the rDzogs chen teachings of rGod ldem (here the *dGongs pa zang thal*) and on the other hand the *bKa' 'gro snying thig* revealed by Padma las 'bral rtsal (1291–1315/19), developed by his disciples and, later, expanded by Klong chen rab 'jams (1308–1364). As he argues, it is very likely that Me *ban* Rin chen gling pa (1289–1368), one of Padma las 'bral rtsal's disciples, taught rGod ldem; one generation after rGod ldem, Don yod rgyal mtshan continued to teach both cycles to the same disciples, which shows that even close to Ngam ring there was a great fluidity in teachings shared and practiced. Regarding the *A ro Cycle*, this refers to rDzogs chen teachings of the Sems sde class revealed by A ro Ye shes 'byung gnas,

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142: *lha gdong pa bsod nams mchog pa las | sprul sku rig 'dzin chen po las brgyud pa'i rdzogs chen gter ma'i skor yongs rdzogs | mkha' 'gro snying tig | rdzogs a ro'i skor | phyag rdor skor | rgyal chen rnam sras kyi sgrub thabs [142] rjes gnang sogs mang po gsan.*

<sup>19</sup> Arguillère 2024. See in particular the biography of Rin chen gling pa and Arguillère's conclusion that "the *Heart-Essence of the Dākinī* and the *dGongs pa zang thal*, and why not Rin chen gling pa's *A ti rdzogs pa chig chod* [...] might be better regarded, so to speak, as *various states of one and the same text or corpus revealed and decoded by different individuals* rather than as altogether completely different works (as the tradition tends to have it)."



a 13th-century master.<sup>20</sup>

Outside of Thang stong rgyal po's biography, what is known about Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan and his nephew comes from a history of the *Direct Revelation* compiled by A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (15-16<sup>th</sup> c.) and published in a 13-volume collection of texts from Kaḥ thog Monastery.<sup>21</sup> dKon mchog rgyal mtshan may have lived at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was a student of Thang stong rgyal po's disciple named Kun dga' Nyi ma (see below for more on this lineage).

As mentioned earlier, some of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's biographies consider that Don yod rgyal mtshan gave rise to one of the three Northern Treasures lineages:<sup>22</sup>

Northern Treasures Dharma lineages are generally known to be three, the son lineage, the consort lineage, and the disciple lineage. The lineage starting with Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan is known as the disciple lineage, thus he is considered one of the sources of [later] lineages.

This distinction seems to derive from the *Dharma History of Treasure Revealers* of Karma Mi 'gyur dbang rgyal (17th c.) although the number "three" does not appear in that text.<sup>23</sup> It lists the lineage of the son (*sras*), that of the authentic emanation's great consort (*mtshan ldan sprul pa'i yum chen*), and that of Don yod rgyal mtshan, without labeling it a disciple lineage, although it clearly is a lineage that begins with a non-familial disciple. Rather than being followed by the number "three," the list is followed by the word "etc." (*sogs*), signifying that this is just the beginning of a larger list.<sup>24</sup> The main Northern Treasures lineage is the one also named the "son lineage," that is to say the one that first circulated locally in rGod ldem's family, and especially in the person of his son rNam rgyal mgon po, as well as in the Se and Me

<sup>20</sup> There are two volumes of his teachings in vols. 94-95 of the Sems sde section of the *rNying ma bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa* (bDud 'joms Edition of 982-1987, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW19229>). For a biography, see Gu ru bkra shis 1990, pp. 199-200.

<sup>21</sup> A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan 2004, vol. 5, pp. 76-79. This is reproduced in the Byang gter Compilation, vol. 2, pp. 957-1012. See below for details.

<sup>22</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, p. 127: *byang gter gyi chos brgyud 'di la sras brgyud | yum brgyud | slob brgyud gsium du grags pa las | kun spangs don yod rgyal mtshan las brgyud pa la slob brgyud ces grags pas brgyud pa'i chu mgo gcig tu brtsi.*

<sup>23</sup> Zab bu lung Karma Mi 'gyur dbang rgyal 1978, p. 72: *de nas sras rnam rgyal mgon po nas rim par brgyud pa dang | mtshan ldan sprul pa'i yum chen nas brgyud pa dang | kun spang don yod rgyal mtshan nas brgyud pa la sogs yod pad pa la [...]*

<sup>24</sup> Another way to describe the early Byang gter tradition (in A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan 2004, p. 73.) is to distinguish between the seven heart-sons and the three thousand karmically fortunate disciples, etc.

families, and continued with the “Northern Lords”—bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603)<sup>25</sup> and the seat-holders of rDo rje brag.

As nothing indicates that Don yod rgyal mtshan was seen as a particularly important disciple of rGod ldem for his contemporaries, it is not clear why this threefold presentation emphasizing him was chosen by some later historians and why it was repeated. One of the possibilities is that Don yod rgyal mtshan was a particularly accomplished practitioner, a siddha, and, although a hermit, had many disciples who displayed siddhis. An example of such an accomplished disciple given by Karma Mi 'gyur dbang rgyal and Gu ru bkra shis is that of Lord of Secrets (gSang bdag) bDe chen lhun grub, a disciple of Don yod rgyal mtshan who attained the rainbow body with his practice of the *Direct Revelation*.<sup>26</sup> This man, who was also a disciple of rGod ldem's son rNam rgyal mgon po (1399–1424) and held other rDzogs chen teachings, was such a source of inspiration that his life story is narrated at length just after that of rGod ldem in Chos dbyings's biography.<sup>27</sup> What these narratives emphasize, more than deeds of bDe chen lhun grub himself, is that his relics as well as his manuscript of the *Direct Revelation* carried blessings that induced others who came into contact with them to experience the natural state. This shows that Don yod rgyal mtshan's transmission of the *Direct Revelation* was seen as legitimate and endowed with blessing.

Another, perhaps more compelling, reason for Don yod rgyal mtshan's *a posteriori* importance is Thang stong rgyal po himself, who became an important figure for Tibet at large and a well-known representative of the potency of rGod ldem's revelations, especially the *Direct Revelation* and the *Iron Stalk* (see below for details). It is interesting to note that Don yod rgyal mtshan and Thang stong rgyal po were born in the same region as rGod ldem, Byang Ngam ring. This was where rGod ldem revealed his treasures, where his disciples settled and where Thang stong rgyal po founded an important monastery, Ri bo che. Perhaps the “disciple lineage” is, therefore, to be distinguished from the other two by the fact that it is completely unrelated to any of rGod ldem's family members, be it his son, nephews, wife, etc., while being a local power with significant effects on the transmission of rGod ldem's treasures outside of the Northern Treasures tradition itself. Don yod rgyal mtshan was “just” a disciple, as were bDe chen

<sup>25</sup> See n. 33 below for details on this title and Byang bdag bKra shis stobs rgyal.

<sup>26</sup> Zab bu lung Karma Mi 'gyur dbang rgyal 1978, pp. 72-75; Gu ru bkra shis 1990, pp. 488-489. Arguillère 2024 (in this volume) shows that bDe chen lhun grub was also a disciple of Rin chen gling pa's disciple bSod nams rgyal ba (based on one of the three lineages of Rin chen gling pa's rDzogs chen teaching, the *A ti rdzogs pa chig chod*, received by the Fifth Dalai Lama (*Thob yig*, vol. 3, pp. 590-595).

<sup>27</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 129-131.

lhun grub and Thang stong rgyal po. What made them great was their realization of rGod ldem's treasures. In other lineages where simple master to disciple lineage is the norm rather than the exception, this may be obvious; by contrast, the "disciple lineage" emphasizes the prime importance in rNying ma traditions of blood as the main justification of authority.

Regarding the way Don yod rgyal mtshan received rGod ldem's revelations and transmitted them to Thang stong rgyal po, the hagiographical narrative by A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan first declares that Don yod rgyal mtshan was predicted by Padmasambhava. He was born at the foot of Mount bKra bzang in Byang, at the summit of which rGod ldem found his main treasure in 1366<sup>28</sup> and where he founded in 1370 a practice center that remained the epicenter of the Northern Treasures for several generations.<sup>29</sup> Don yod rgyal mtshan initially practiced Mahāmudrā, which awakened his habitual patterns and led him to request the transmission of all precepts and oral instructions of the *Direct Revelation* from rGod ldem. The transmission began in the 1370s, when rGod ldem was in Mount bKra bzang, and lasted for three years. Don yod rgyal mtshan was given the entrustment seal of the cycle by rGod ldem and the seal of protectors—which shows that he was already at the time considered by rGod ldem as an important, and probably gifted, disciple. He remained in retreat in Mount bKra bzang after that and it is said that he was constantly abiding in a state of luminosity, had visions of the *yi dam*, prophecies from *ḍākinīs*, etc. He remained day and night in the state of luminosity, enjoyed the pure fields of the five Buddha families, and was going along with oath-bound protectors as if with human beings. Thus, he was an accomplished master possessing the innumerable qualities of the supreme and common siddhis.

Thang stong rgyal po also learned rGod ldem's revelations from Don yod rgyal mtshan's nephew, lHa gdong pa bSod nams mchog pa, also called Lineage-holder (brGyud 'dzin) bSod nams mchog bzang. He came from the same area as Don yod rgyal mtshan.<sup>30</sup> bSod nams mchog bzang was probably his uncle's assistant and the main teacher at his hermitage at the end of Don yod rgyal mtshan's life. He trained

<sup>28</sup> Valentine 2013, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> For a biography see A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mTshan 2004, vol. 5, pp. 79-81. bSod nams mchog bzang is only mentioned *passim* in Thang stong rgyal po's biographies. Note that the text calls him dPon po mChog bzang, which must be emended to *dbon po* mChog bzang, this meditator being Don yod rgyal mtshan's nephew (*dbon po*) rather than a "leader" (*dpon po*). Both men are from the lHa gdong pa family. See e.g. Stearns 2007, n. 310, p. 493 for details. This text quotes the same prophecy found in A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan 2004, pp. 81-83.

intensively in the two processes of the Mantrayāna associated with various treasures found by rGod ldem (the golden yellow treasury in the south, the copper red treasury in the west, the iron black treasury in the north) until he had visions of the *yi dams*, *dākinīs* and protectors and could request empowerments and instructions from them. He then obtained from his uncle instructions on the conch white treasury in the east, the rDzogs chen cycle of the *Self-Emergent Self-Arisen Primordial Purity* (*Ka dag rang byung rang shar*), and finally received instructions of the central, brown agate treasury—the *Direct Revelation*. He actualized them and was given the seal of entrustment by Don yod rgyal mtshan.

Thang stong rgyal po received instructions from him and from Don yod rgyal mtshan. A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan's narrative says that the incentive for receiving the transmission of the *Direct Revelation* was a twelve-year retreat Thang stong rgyal po completed in lCags phur can, the "Iron Dagger Cave" in lHo brag, where he reached ordinary and supreme siddhis.<sup>31</sup> After this retreat, he started to engage in the four types of activities for the benefit of beings and had a vision of Padmasambhava, who predicted that he would reach Buddhahood in one life, enjoy the *Direct Revelation of Absolute Good's Contemplation*, and accomplish the benefit of beings with it. Padmasambhava granted him the four empowerments and Thang stong rgyal po went in search of a master that would grant him the transmission of the *Direct Revelation*. He met Don yod rgyal mtshan from whom he received again the four empowerments<sup>32</sup> and most oral instructions. To perfect them, he also requested instructions from the Renunciate's nephew, mChog bzang, who also gave him the seal of protectors and taught cycles revealed by other *gter ston*. Thang stong rgyal po then became a great accomplished one benefitting being through this teaching. It is said that he had eight disciples who held the maṇḍala, fifty who were realized (*rtogs ldan*), and an infinity of karmically fortunate ones who received his teaching.

*Byang in the 15th century: Encounters between  
Thang stong rgyal po and Early Byang gter Masters*

After this initial training, Thang stong rgyal po traveled extensively. In the later part of his life, he settled in Byang Ngam ring and founded the monastery of gCung Ri bo che near his birthplace of 'O ba lha rtse

<sup>31</sup> According to Stearns 2007, p. 288, Thang stong rgyal po went to this cave associated with treasures of Gu ru Chos dbang but did not stay in long retreat there.

<sup>32</sup> According to Arguillère 2024, it is strange that four empowerments are mentioned in this text as the *dGongs pa zang thal* (like the *mKha' 'gro snying thig*) have five empowerments.

along the gTsang po River. Construction was allowed and sponsored by Byang bdag<sup>33</sup> rNam rgyal grags bzang in 1449 and lasted several years.<sup>34</sup> A nine-storied stūpa of many doors of blessing (*bkra shis sgo mang*) was built there, and the nearby bridge became an important structure in the region.<sup>35</sup> Thang stong rgyal po lived in closed retreat at the peak of the mountain overlooking the monastery and died there in 1485. His death was kept secret and revealed only in 1514, when a stūpa was built to enshrine his body.

During Thang stong rgyal po's tenure at gCung Ri bo che, many regional masters associated with the Northern Treasures came to visit him to receive not only his Iron Bridge Tradition, but also his teachings of the *Direct Revelation* and other Byang gter specialties. One significant visitor was 'Jam dbyangs rin chen rgyal mtshan (1445–1558), the father of mNga' ris Pañ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542) and Legs ldan rdo rje (1512–1580, considered to be rGod ldem reincarnation and the second Rig 'dzin chen po). The history of the *Gathering of Intentions* (*mDo dgongs 'dus*) composed by the 4th Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las (1641–1717) describes how Rin chen rgyal mtshan went to Ri bo che, where he received from Thang stong rgyal po Iron Bridge Traditions such as the Six Dharma of Niguma, Mahāmudrā, and Avalokiteśvara practices, alongside the two central traditions of the Byang gter that had become central in his monastery, the long-life practice of the *Iron Stalk* and the *Direct Revelation*. He stayed in Ri bo che for two weeks and before he left, was blessed by Thang stong rgyal po, who prophesied that he would have a very long life and that “father and son” would meet in Akaniṣṭha.<sup>36</sup> This transmission is reflected in a lineage for a practice pacifying vampires (*sri*) outlined in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* and whose manual was composed by Rig 'dzin

<sup>33</sup> The title “Northern Lord” or Byang bdag may be a generic name for rulers of that region. As Byang bdag bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603, for more on this character, see Martin 2024 in the present volume) was both a secular ruler and a religious master, the title then came to refer to the Northern Treasures religious leaders, although they did not lead Byang Ngam ring anymore. It must be noted also that this title does not refer to rGod ldem and his reincarnations, called Rig 'dzin chen pos, but to the ones leading the Northern Treasures Tradition in their interim. Further research is needed to clarify when the title was institutionalized. It is clear, however, that it was not so during the time of rGod ldem or shortly thereafter, and therefore that Byang bdag rNam rgyal grags bzang is not to be particularly considered a Byang gter master, although he might of course be related to one of the family lineages who inherited rGod ldem's transmission.

<sup>34</sup> See descriptions in Stearns 2007, p. 363 *passim*. This is described in Chos dbyings 2015, 163-164.

<sup>35</sup> See Akester 2016, pp. 653-656 for a presentation of the history of gCung Ri bo che with some pictures.

<sup>36</sup> Stearns 2007, pp. 25-26. This description relies on the *mDo dgongs 'dus* history of Padma 'phrin las, in *Byang gter dpe sgrig tshogs chung* 2015, vol. 41, pp. 307-308.

Padma 'phrin las and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen rtse dbang po.<sup>37</sup>

Another example is that of Mes Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1454–1541), the patriarch of the estate of bDe grol in Ngam ring, whose three meetings with Thang stong rgyal po are emphasized in his biography.<sup>38</sup> The first took place in 1454/1455, when Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan was an infant and was granted his name by the great siddha. Later on, he mostly received from him teachings of the Iron Bridge tradition, and it is clear in the biography that the most powerful authority in Ngam ring in the mid-15th century was Thang stong rgyal po. Among Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's disciples, there are also important disciples of Thang stong rgyal po, such as his nephew, the Tsa gong abbot Nyi ma dbang po and other lamas of Ri bo che.

It thus appears that in the second half of the 15th century, Thang stong rgyal po was an important figure in Ngam ring, and his authority often mingled with that of political and spiritual leaders of the early local Byang gter tradition.

### *Monasteries*

#### *gCung Ri bo che*

In his older years, Thang stong rgyal po was very active in construction work. Although his bridges are the most enduring and remembered trace of his activity in Tibet, he also established several monasteries in the places where he taught and converted disciples and they later became seats of his Iron Bridge tradition. The three main sites are ICags zam Chu bo ri in Central Tibet, seat of the ICags zam tulkus,<sup>39</sup> gCung Ri bo che in Tsang, seat of his descendants and stronghold of his influence in Ngam ring, and rTsa gong in Kong po (South-West Tibet).

<sup>37</sup> Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2007, p. 375-376: *lha sras rnam rol mang lam ri khrod pa bzang po grags pas rgyang yon po lung nas spyang drangs pa sri zlog 'khor lo 'bar ba'i gzhung* | *de'i lag len dang ngag 'don padma phrin las dang rje mkhyen brtse gnyis kyis mdzad pa* | *brgyud pa ni* | *shākya'i tog* | *rig 'dzin byang sems* | *o rgyan chen po* | *lha sras* | *bzang po grags pa* | *rgod ldem* | *ri pa sangs rgyas* | *nam mkha' mchog bzang* | *thang stong rgyal po* | *rin chen rgyal mtshan* | *legs ldan rje* | *byang bdag yab sras* | *chos dbyings rang grol* | *rdo rje thogs med* | *pad+ma phrin las* | *kun bzang rgya mtsho* | *chos nyid rang grol* | *pad+ma bshes gnyen* | *ngag dbang kun bzang* | *kun bzang gsang sngags bstan 'dzin* | *rje mkhyen brtse'i dbang pos bstsal pa'o*. In this lineage, the identity of Thang stong rgyal po's teacher, Nam mkha' mchog bzang, is not clear. It may refer to bSod nams mchog bzang.

<sup>38</sup> Valentine 2018, pp. 107-109; translation pp.117-133, with mentions of Thang stong rgyal po p. 118. See Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 207-208 pp. 207-208.

<sup>39</sup> Akester 2016, pp. 242-246.

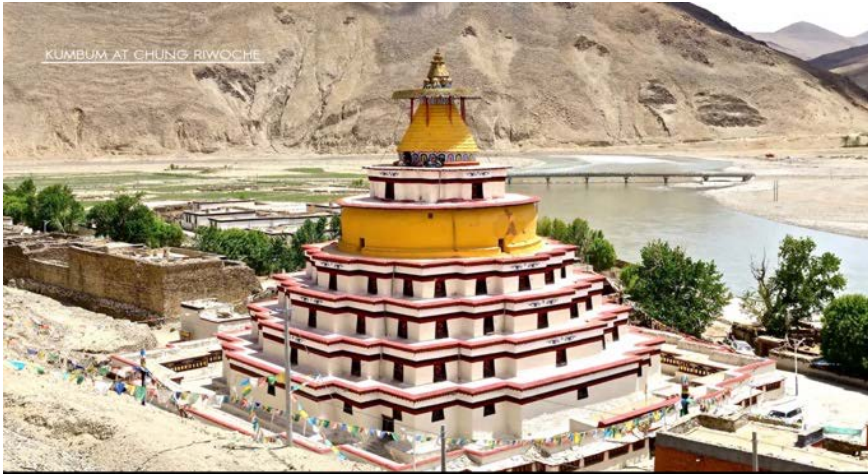


Figure 1 - Extract from a YouTube video on Thang stong rgyal po, view of the renovated gCung Ri bo che Stūpa and the iron bridge

As just mentioned, the monastery located in Thang stong rgyal po's home country was gCung Ri bo che. According to *Gu ru bkra shis's History*,<sup>40</sup> after Thang stong rgyal po's death, the monastery was kept by his family lineage (*dbon brgyud*) until Lo chen 'Gyur med rdo rje, the author of the standard biography translated by Stearns. One of Lo chen's disciples was Yol mo ba bsTan 'dzin nor bu (1598–1644),<sup>41</sup> the third incarnation of the Yol mo *sprul sku* and an important Northern Treasures master. The first Yol mo *sprul sku* was Śākya bzang po (16<sup>th</sup> c.), a teacher of both mNga' ris Paṅ chen and Legs ldan rje, and bsTan 'dzin nor bu was himself a disciple of the third rDo rje Brag Rig 'dzin Ngag gi dbang po (1580–1639). bsTan 'dzin nor bu studied as a youth with Lo chen in Ri bo che, and Lo chen handed over the leadership of the monastery to him. The next abbot was Yol mo ba's brother sGam smyon Phyag rdo nor bu (d. 1663),<sup>42</sup> who was obviously an important Northern Treasures master as he authored a series of biographies of representatives of that tradition.<sup>43</sup> Sometime afterwards, the abbacy came back to Thang stong rgyal po's descendants, as the Sa skya master Kun dga' legs pa'i 'byung gnas (1704–1760) shared teachings there

<sup>40</sup> Gu ru bkra shis 1990, p. 664; also translated in Stearns 2007, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> For a short biography see Bogin 2014. A longer work is Bogin 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Although *Gu ru bkra shis's History* has the spelling sGom smyon, the spelling should be sGam smyon, the "madman from sGam po dar," as in bsTan 'dzin nor bu's autobiography, a spelling that also reflects the fact that he was considered an emanation of sGam po pa (see also Stearns 2007, p. 17 and n. 71, p. 472).

<sup>43</sup> Bya gtang Phyag rdor nor bu, 2015, *Byang gter bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar bsam 'phel ma ni ka'i 'phreng ba*, in *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, vol. 59, 457-546.

with Ngag dbang yongs grags, the monastery's abbot and paternal descendant of Thang stong rgyal po. The fact that the leadership of gCung Ri bo che oscillated back and forth between Thang stong rgyal po's descendants and prominent patriarchs of the Northern Treasures further demonstrates the close relationship between these two lineages.

### *Chu bo ri*

Another monastery where the interaction between Thang stong rgyal po and the Byang gter Tradition is clear is that of Chu bo ri, a mountain located at the confluence of the gTsang po and the sKyid chu, the river that flows through Lhasa, where hermitages associated with Padmasambhava have been in existence since the 9th century.<sup>44</sup> In 1433, Thang stong laid the foundation of a temple and stūpa on Chu bo ri and started the project of a bridge on the gTsang po. After gathering iron for the bridge in Bhutan, he started work in 1438, and the bridge and monastery were concluded after much difficulty in 1445.<sup>45</sup> The monastery became the seat of the lCags zam mChog sprul ("Supreme Incarnations of the Iron Bridge Tradition") after Thang stong rgyal po's passing, the mChog sprul being considered the incarnations of the disciple sKyob pa bzang po.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the monastery built at the southern extremity of the bridge, another important building was lCags zam rtse at the peak of the mountain.

In the 16th century, Rig 'dzin Legs ldan rje, the second Rig 'dzin chen po, became the main master in charge of lCags zam rtse and spread the *Direct Revelation* there.<sup>47</sup> His biography describes how he often visited the monastery while traveling in Central Tibet. He practiced there a Northern Treasures protector ritual after which he had visions of many protectors of the rNying ma and gSar ma traditions.<sup>48</sup> Although he died in Byang Ngam ring where he had gone to give teachings to the Northern Lord bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1603), Legs ldan rje's body was taken to lCags zam rtse where it was enshrined.

<sup>44</sup> See a full description in Akester 2016, pp. 242-248.

<sup>45</sup> Stearns 2007, p. 250, 292, 298-300. See also Akester 2016, pp. 242-243.

<sup>46</sup> Akester 2016, n. 70, p. 244, based on Gu ru bkra shis 1990, p. 667.

<sup>47</sup> Akester 2016, n. 74, p. 245. See also Legs ldan rje's life in Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 344-345: *de nas chu bo ri lcags zam rtse'i dgon bdag mdzad cing zang thal gyi khrid ka btsugs pas gzigs snang lung bstan dpag med byung*.

<sup>48</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 350-351: *chu bo rir byang gter mgon po bstan srung yongs rdzogs kyi ljags bsnyen mdzad pas gsar rnying gi chos skyong rnam ki zhal cig char du bstan pa dang*. This text, whose short title is *bsTan srung yongs rdzogs* belongs to the *bKa' brgyad rang byung rang shar* cycle. It is a ritual dedicated to all rNying ma protectors with a specific form of mGon po phyag drug pa at the center of the maṇḍala. Thanks to Stéphane Arguillère for this reference.



When the 4th rDo rje brag Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las visited the place in 1669, he describes that it was filled with Northern Treasures relics, statues and paintings.<sup>49</sup>

*Thang stong rgyal po's Teaching Legacy*

Thang stong rgyal po's tradition is characterized by its visionary nature. As pointed out by Janet Gyatso,<sup>50</sup> Tibetan Buddhist teachings can be divided along three main lines: they can be transmitted by master to disciple in a lineage; this is the case for most traditions coming from India during the Later Spread of the Doctrine in Tibet as well as the *bka' ma* teachings in the rNying ma school. Secondly, they can be treasure, that is to say teachings concealed at a point in time, either in a material form (*sa gter*, "earth treasure") or within the mind (*dgongs gter*, "mind treasure") in order to be revealed later by specific individuals. Thirdly, they can also be visionary in nature (*dag snang*, often translated as "pure vision") when the teachings transmitted are originally received by a realized master from a buddha, deity, or accomplished master of the past who is encountered in a visionary experience. Although Thang stong rgyal po received all kinds of transmissions from masters of the gSar ma and rNying ma schools,<sup>51</sup> most of the teachings making up the Iron Bridge Tradition goes back to visions he had of enlightened beings such as Avalokiteśvara or Tarā, or Indian masters such as Niguma or Virūpa. According to Janet Gyatso, Thang stong rgyal po's most important writings are the cycle called the *Glorious Giver of Immortality* (*Chi med dpal ster*), a long-life practice of Amitāyus; the *Benefit of Beings as Vast as the Sky* ('Gro don mkha' khyab ma), an Avalokiteśvara *sādhana*; a version of the Shangs pa teachings of Niguma; the *Aural Transmission of the Secret Conduct* (*gSang spyod snyan brgyud*), a version of the gCod meditation; the *sPrin gseb ma*, a *sādhana* for Pañjara Mahākāla; a *guru-yoga* on Vajradhara; and a meditative rite on the Dākinī Siṃhamukhā. Related to his teachings are also cycles revealed by later masters, such as the *Heart Essence of the Mahāsiddhas* (*Grub thob thugs tig*) revealed by 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892) or cycles revealed by 'Jigs med gling pa

<sup>49</sup> Rig 'dzin 04 Padma 'phrin las 2015, p. 250: *lcags zam rtse mjal bar phyin | gnas 'dir rig 'dzin legs ldan zhabs kyi gdung khang gser zangs kyi mchod rten nang du rGod ldem can gyi ring bsrel sran rdog tsam bzhugs pa'i rdo rje drag po rtsal gyi sku dang | rig 'dzin rje'i gter gsar rta mgrin pad phrin dregs pa srog 'phrog gi sgrub rten rta phur sogs byin rten mang du bzhugs nges pa dang | rig 'dzin rje'i zhabs phyags | mdo phugs steng 'og kun tu byang gter kho na gtso bor gyur pa'i logs bris rig 'dzin yab pa sras kyi sku sogs mjal spro bar 'aug pa legs par mjal |*

<sup>50</sup> Gyatso 1992.

<sup>51</sup> See a summary of his masters according to the various lineages in Shinga 2017b, pp. 43-46.

(1729–1798) and brTul zhugs gling pa (1916–1965).<sup>52</sup>

*Northern Treasures Lineages Tracing to Thang stong rgyal po:  
The Direct Revelation of Absolute Good's Contemplation*

The most central and respected teaching among Northern Treasures is the rDzogs chen cycle called the *Direct Revelation of Absolute Good's Contemplation* (*Kun tu bzang po dgongs pa zang thal*). As described above, traditional sources maintain that Thang stong rgyal po received this cycle from both Renunciate Don yod rgyal mtshan and his nephew mChog bzang, and that with those teachings he attained the level of supreme *vidyādhara*.<sup>53</sup> Thang stong rgyal po probably taught the *Direct Revelation* to many students, but the one presented as a lineage holder in later narratives was called Bodhisattva Kun dga' Nyi ma. This individual is mentioned several times in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Record of Teachings Received* but what we know about him comes from A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan's narrative in the *Rosary of Jewels: A History of the Direct Revelation*.<sup>54</sup> As explained earlier, this narrative is different from Thang stong rgyal po's translated biography (Stearns 2007) and from the one composed by Chos dbyings for the *Northern Treasures Compilation*.

According to the *Rosary of Jewels*, the disciple who received Thang

<sup>52</sup> Gyatso 1992, pp. 95-96 summarizes the writings of the Iron Bridge Tradition attributed to either Thang stong rgyal po or his disciples (as he himself passed on the teaching but did not write it down).

<sup>53</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, p. 133 and 136. According to the *Records of Teachings Received* by the Fifth Dalai Lama, there were several other lineages that Don yod rgyal mtshan gave to Thang stong rgyal po: *The Supplication in Seven Chapters* (gSol 'debs le'u bdun ma, vol. 2, p. 385), the *Outer Practice of White Jambhala* (Dzam la dkar po phyi sgrub, vol. 3, p. 144a), and *Mahākārunika* (Thugs rje chen po 'gro ba kun grol, vol. 3, p. 65a.). This lineage is also outlined by Kong sprul in his index of the *Rin chen gter mdzod* (Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2007, pp. 43-44): *chos sku kun bzang yab yum | longs sku zhi khro rab 'byams | sprul sku ston pa bcu gnyis | rgyal sras rigs gsun mgon po | bka' babs rig 'dzin grub thob | kun 'dus pad+ma 'byung gnas | zhu mdzad las can rnam lnga | gter ston bzang po grags pa | rig 'dzin dngos grub rgyal mtshan | kun spangs don yod rgyal mtshan | brgyud 'dzin bsod nams mchog bzang | grub thob thang stong rgyal po | byang sems kun dga' nyi ma | sngags 'chang shākya bzang po | pañ chen padma dbang rgyal | gtsang ston ngag gi dbang po | zhiḡ gling 'od gsal sgyu ma | 'khrul zhiḡ bkra shis tshe brtan | bdud 'dul seng ge rtsal rdzogs | 'gro 'dul padma nor bu | padma bde chen gling pa | rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu | dam chos bsam rdzogs rgyal po | rdo rje gtsug lag dga' ba | rgyal dbang bdud 'dul rdo rje | rje bla ma padma nyin byed dbang po | [kong sprul]. It is interesting to note that this lineage passing through Thang stong rgyal po reenters the classical Northern Treasures lineage two generations after him in the person of Śākya bzang po, and then mNga' ris Pañ chen, etc.*

<sup>54</sup> Arguillère 2022a, pp. 243-250 gives an account of the various *Direct Revelation* practice manuals, several of which come from Kaḡ thog.

stong rgyal po's transmission and taught it to A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mtshan was Bodhisattva Kun dga' nyi ma, a native of Kyi mo gzhung in Central Tibet.<sup>55</sup> He first studied various treasures transmissions and traveled throughout dBus gtsang, meeting with realized and learned masters of all lineages and receiving all kinds of transmissions (Madhyamaka, Kālacakra, gCod, Zhi byed, Dwags po, Karma, 'Brug pa and Shangs pa bKa' brgyud cycles, rNying ma traditions, etc.). He trained in these instructions and progressively obtained signs of realization. He stayed in retreat in Zab bu lung for seventeen years. At that time, he received teachings on the *Direct Revelation* from a realized yogi, but because of the behavior of some disciples, the yogi stopped teaching. He received, however, a prophecy from the teaching guardian and various signs indicating that he should teach Kun dga' nyi ma. He therefore gave Kun dga' nyi ma all empowerments and instructions but ordered him not to pass a word on to anyone else. The yogi entrusted him with the seal of the teaching guardians. After that, Kun dga' nyi ma practiced and had experiences, but could not get further instructions. He went to Byang to meet Thang stong rgyal po and received again empowerments and instructions on the *Direct Revelation* from him. When asked about key instructions, the Mahāsiddha looked in the sky, unlocked essential key points, and taught them in detail to Kun dga' nyi ma, saying that he was only repeating the transmission of Padmasambhava who was constantly staying in front of him. Thus, he said, although that teaching was very restricted, Padmasambhava had unlocked the restriction for him, and Kun dga' nyi ma should benefit beings through it, as it was a transmission with a particularly high blessing and activity. Thang stong rgyal po added that he had received many teachings of both the Old and New Traditions, but the *Direct Revelation* was the one people were requesting the most and which had the most benefit.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, Thang stong rgyal po is said to have had visions of Padmasambhava related to the *Direct Revelation* before he received it from Don yod rgyal mtshan, and he continued to receive further instructions from Padmasambhava during his whole life. This is why his teaching of this cycle is sometimes called a "re-revelation" (*yang gter*).<sup>57</sup> It is likely that his realization, his fame, and this short lineage

<sup>55</sup> This paragraph is a summary of A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mTshan 2004, pp. 83-89. See also the version in the *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, vol. 2, pp. 1007-1012.

<sup>56</sup> A rdo dKon mchog rgyal mTshan 2004, p.88.

<sup>57</sup> Arguillère 2022b, p. 16 states: "A phenomenon that is perhaps almost unparalleled in the history of religions is the extraordinarily amazing system of 're-revelations,' or *yang gter*: a second (or third, etc.) revelation of the exact same body of texts by a later 'treasure discoverer.' Apart from emic justifications, retreasures most often

from Padmasambhava all contributed to the success of his lineage and a justification of Thang stong's spreading the lineage although the transmission may have been restricted in other circles. His transmission circulated quite widely, reaching Kaḥ thog with A rdo dKön mchog rgyal mtshan, but also Kong sprul who included it into the *Rin chen gter mdzod*.<sup>58</sup> Bodhisattva Kun dga' nyi ma also gave it to another disciple, Sangs rgyas brtson 'grus (called either Dran mchog or mTshungs med Sangs rgyas brtson 'grus), whose lineage eventually reached the Fifth Dalai Lama.<sup>59</sup>

The Fifth Dalai Lama describes an alternative lineage passing through Thang stong rgyal po but not Don yod rgyal mtshan:<sup>60</sup> from rGod ldem, it goes to his son rNam rgyal mgon po (1399–1424), and then to bDe chen lhun grub (also Don yod rgyal mtshan's disciple), who transmits it to a realized yogi called Grags pa (rTogs ldan grags

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occur when a high-ranking rNying ma lama cannot properly obtain the transmissions of a given tantric cycle, especially [...] because it is jealously guarded by an institution as one of its specialties. This idea can only be understood if one considers the crucial character of proper transmission from master to disciple in the tantric systems: no one can improvise himself or herself as a teacher of a corpus that he or she has not properly received; and if its legitimate custodians do not want to entrust it to him or her, his or her only resource is to receive a direct revelation of it, which adds nothing to its content, but confers the legitimacy to teach it. Besides Thang stong rgyal po's 're-treasures' that have already been mentioned, certain cycles of the Northern Treasures have thus gained new popularity thanks to the enormous number of 're-treasures' found in the *Rin chen gter mdzod*. [...]

<sup>58</sup> Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 2007, pp. 499-500: 'dir dgongs pa zang thal gyi gnad thams cad bsdus pa'i don khrid bu 'bor ba bkra shis rgya mtshos mdzod pa tsam bzhugs | bryud pa ni | kun tu bzang po | rgyal ba rigs lnga | rdo rje sems dpa' | dga' rab rdo rje | 'jam dpal bshes gnyen | shrī singha | des padma 'byung gnas dang | bi ma la mi tra | bai ro tsa na gsum la ngang | de gsum kas khri srong lde'u btsan | ye shes mtsho rgyal | rdo rje bdud 'joms rnam la bshad | slob dpon gsun ka'i dgongs nyams gcig dril gter du sbas pa rig 'dzin chen po dngos grub rgyal mtshan gyis bton | de nas rim [500] bzhin kun spang don yod rgyal mtshan | rgyud 'dzin bsod nams mchog bzang | grub thob thang stong rgyal po | byang sems kun dga' nyi ma | 'khrul zhig dkon mchog rgyal mtshan | dkon mchog rdo rje | shākya rgyal mtshan | byang chub seng ge | bkra shis rgya mtsho | he pa chos 'byung | ston pa rgyal mtshan | kun bzang shes rab | padma lhun grub rgya mtsho | padma nor bu | karma bkra shis | karma lha dbang | karma 'gyur med | karma kun bzang bstan 'dzin gyi zhal snga nas bka' drin du btsal pa'o.

<sup>59</sup> Dalai Lama 05 Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1991, vol. 3, p. 126a: grub thob thang stong rgyal po | byang sems kun dga' nyi ma | dran mchog sangs rgyas brtson 'grus | bye tshang pa rin chen dpal 'byor | rgyal sras sangs rgyas bde chen | rje btsun nyi zla sangs rgyas | rdo rje 'chang pha bong kha pa dpal 'byor lhun grub | des bdag la'o.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 125b-126a: yang lugs gcig la | sras mchog rnam rgyal mgon po yan gong ltar nas | gsang bdag bde chen lhun grub | rtogs ldan grags pa'i mtshan can | grub pa'i dbang phyug thang stong rgyal po | sprul sku bde ba [126a] bzang po | dran mchog rigs 'dzin chos rdor | sprul sku tshe ring rdo rje | mtshungs med kun grol rdo rje | bla ma chos dbang grags pa | rang grol chos dbang lhun grub | lha btsun kun bzang rnam rgyal man gong ltar ro.

pa'i mtshan can), and from him to Thang stong rgyal po. Then the lineage continues through Thang stong's disciples, either bDe ba bzang po or Byang sems Kun dga' nyi ma. This transmission is peculiar inasmuch as it has three masters between rGod ldem and Thang stong rgyal po. Interestingly, it does not appear in Thang stong rgyal po's biography translated by Stearns, which does not mention bDe chen lhun grub either. A reason for this may be its apparent discrepancy in terms of dates; it is possible, however, that Thang stong rgyal po received the *Direct Revelation* from Don yod rgyal mtshan early in his life, and received it again much later from a master called Grags pa. It could probably be dated to 1450s or 1460s, after Ri bo che was founded.

*The Iron Stalk (lcags sdong ma)*



Himalayanart item 66254, Modern representation of Thang stong rgyal po

Another Byang gter practice that was very important for Thang stong rgyal po was that of the *Iron Stalk*,<sup>61</sup> a longevity practice that is part of the Heart Practice (*thugs sgrub*)<sup>62</sup> of rGod ldem and on the basis of which Thang stong rgyal po is said to have reached the *vidyādhara* level of longevity.<sup>63</sup> The best sign of success and accomplishment of Thang stong rgyal po's practice was his very long life. His traditional representation with a longevity vase in the left hand and an iron chain symbolizing his achievement as civil engineer and bridge builder in the right portray him as the embodiment of longevity and

constructions for the benefit of beings.

<sup>61</sup> The name of the practice, "iron stalk" (*lcags kyi sdong po*) is translated according to Shinga 2017a, pp. 53-58. Stearns calls it the "iron tree." Shinga 2020 (in Japanese) is a dissertation on the topic of that practice.

<sup>62</sup> The "Heart" or "Essence Practice" (*Thugs sgrub*) is a cycle belonging to rGod ldem's treasures and containing practices related to *yi dam* practice (*lha*), Avalokiteśvara in particular (*thugs*), and rDzogs chen (*rdzogs: lha rdzogs thugs gsum*). The cycle fills three volumes (6-8) in the *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*. The texts associated with the longevity practice called *Iron Stalk* are in vol. 7, pp. 273-354. Tulku Thondup 1986, p. 120 states that what is generically called a "Heart Practice" is a category of treasures made up of three types of practice, on the guru (i.e. the peaceful and wrathful forms of Padmasambhava), on *yi dams*, especially Avalokiteśvara, and on rDzogs chen.

<sup>63</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, p. 133.

In addition to the *Iron Stalk* that Thang stong rgyal po received and practiced, there are several other longevity practices revealed by rGod ldem that are part of other cycles. One is the *Longevity Practice of Vajrakīla* (*rDo rje phur pa'i tshe sgrub*),<sup>64</sup> which belongs to the *Vajrakīla* cycle (vol. 13, pp. 139-154) and another is the *Tshe sgrub yongs rdzogs* that is part of the *bKa' brgyad rang byung rang shar* Cycle (vol. 11, pp. 459-508). These cycles are not particularly related to Thang stong rgyal po, although he may have received them. He for his part revealed and spread another longevity practice, called *Glorious Bestower of Immortality* (*'Chi med dpal ster*), which is based on a treasure he revealed at bSam yas mchims phu and on visions he had of Padmasambhava.<sup>65</sup> Both the *Iron Stalk* and the *Glorious Bestower of Immortality* gained their success and fame with Thang stong rgyal po and his disciples' longevity:<sup>66</sup>

A direct disciple of this Mahāsiddha, Dharma Lord from Mang yul 'Phag pa blo gros, lived until he was 120 years of age. A natural *yoginī* living near rDo khog in Kham, the Mahāsiddha's direct disciple, lived up to 130. A master from 'Tsho sgo ba lived for 112 years. Also in Kham, a disciple of the Mahāsiddha lived for 100 years, living in various places. It is said that it was because the Mahāsiddha himself had gained power over life that many of his disciples too had power over life.

In terms of the content of the practices, these various cycles differ from each other and do not seem to be related, except for the obvious common presence of Amitāyus and Amitābha.<sup>67</sup> The *Iron Stalk* is more complex than the *Glorious Bestower of Immortality* and contains outer, inner, secret and ultra-secret levels of practice.<sup>68</sup> Most of this cycle's texts were extracted by rGod ldem from the southern, yellow side of the treasure chest he revealed in Zang zang Lha brag, but some were also found in the central chest.<sup>69</sup> In the main text of the cycle, the one

<sup>64</sup> Shinga 2022 proposes an edition and translation of this practice.

<sup>65</sup> See a description of the practice's history and examples of recensions in Gyatso 1981, pp. 142-159; Stearns 2007, pp. 28-30. As Thang stong rgyal po's *'Chi med dpal ster* was particularly well-spread, there are many versions of the practice. See *Ibid.*, n. 116, p. 477 for some examples.

<sup>66</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, p. 170: The list is based on Gu ru bkra shis 1990, p. 511.

<sup>67</sup> See below for details. This is also stated by Stearns 2007, n. 119, p. 477.

<sup>68</sup> For more details on this practice and its various phases, see Shinga in the present volume.

<sup>69</sup> Collective 2015, vol. 7, pp. 269-354. The [*Instruction for the*] *Outer Practice* [*of Making the*] *Vase of Jewels* (*Phyi sgrub rin chen bum pa*), the [*Actual*] *Inner Practice* [*Called*] *Iron Stalk together with the Empowerment* (*Nang sgrub lcags kyi sdong po dang | dbang yig bcas la*), the *Secret Practice Space Vajra* (*gSang sgrub nam mkha'i rdo rje*), and the

properly called *Iron Stalk*, the practitioner appears as Amitābha holding a longevity vase in two hands in the meditation posture, which is filled by the nectar of longevity.<sup>70</sup> He focuses on the central channel that is seen like an iron bamboo stalk, straight, hollow and robust like a pillar, hence the name of the practice.

Regarding the *Glorious Bestower of Immortality*, the practice was codified and written down by Thang stong rgyal po's disciple's Nyi zla bzang po, and later expanded by bsTan 'dzin ye shes lhun grub (1739–1795), the seventh lCags zam *sprul sku* of Chu bo ri.<sup>71</sup> In that cycle, the practitioner appears as Aparamitāyurjñāna, with his lama and the lineage above his head, including Thang stong rgyal po, Padmasambhava, Amitāyus, Hayagrīva and Amitābha. Their qualities enter the longevity vase held by Aparamitāyurjñāna and spread into the practitioner's body. The same elements are found in later re-revelations of Chos rje gling pa<sup>72</sup> and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen rtse dbang po.<sup>73</sup> In Chos rje gling pa's cycle, the practitioner visualizes him or herself as the four-handed Avalokiteśvara. On the practitioner's crown sits Amitābha and a red *hrīḥ* is envisioned in the heart. From Amitābha's longevity vase, nectar drips into the central channel. In front of the practitioner, Thang stong rgyal po appears, also holding a longevity vase. Dwelling at his head, throat, and heart are manifestations of Amitāyus, Red Hayagrīva, and Padmasambhava. In the end, Thang stong rgyal po's vase overflows into the practitioner's central channel. The treasure revealed by mkhyen rtse dbang po is part of a larger cycle, the *Mahāsiddha Heart Essence*, aimed at revitalizing Thang stong rgyal po's teachings. In that cycle, one appears as Amitāyus, with

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*Ultra-secret Single Hrīḥ (Yang gsang hrīḥ gcig ma)* were in the southern box (although this is explicit only for the outer and secret *sādhana*). The auxiliary practices *Inner Longevity Practice based on the Saṃbhogakāya (Nang longs spyod rāzogs sku la brten nas tshes sgrub pa)* and the *Longevity Essence Extraction of Nectar (Tshe sgrub bdud rtsi bcud len)* were found in the central box. No detail is provided for the *Tshe'i 'khor lo bri thabs*. Note that the prophetic guide states that the cycle contains eleven texts divided into outer, inner and secret practice, but the categories do not fit the texts actually present in the collection (*tshe bsgrub lcags kyi sdong po la: phyi nang gsang ba'i bsgrub thabs gsum: dbye na chos tshan bcu gcig yod: phyi bsgrub rin chen bun pa la: bdud rtsi bcud kyi snying po yod: kha rgyan dpag bsam sdong po yod: nang bsgrub lcags kyi sdong po la: 'od lnga bcud kyi yal ga yod: 'chi med rdo rje'i 'bras bu yod: gsang bsgrub nam mkha'i rdo rje la: rang gsal 'od kyi sgron me yod: rgyun chad med pa'i chu bo yod: dmus long mig 'byed lde mig yod: las tshogs rin chen char 'bebs yod:*).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 281. See Shinga 2017a for a study of this text and Shinga 2024 (in this volume) for the various levels of development of this text in an early manuscript and in later Byang gter compilations.

<sup>71</sup> Gyatso 1981, p. 151 for the codification, p. 143 for lCags zam versions.

<sup>72</sup> Chos rje gling pa 1976, vol. 1, pp. 489-498. For a translation, see <https://www.lot-sawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/choje-lingpa/chime-palter>.

<sup>73</sup> 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po 1976, vol. 1, pp. 431-473.

Amitābha, Hayagrīva, Padmasambhava and Thang stong rgyal po above one's head. They then dissolve into light and into the practitioner's heart. There are yet other systems inspired by Thang stong rgyal po, for example in the Sa skya lineage. They too are related to Thang stong's *Glorious Bestower of Immortality* and not to the *Iron Stalk*.<sup>74</sup>

If we return now to the Northern Treasures practice of the *Iron Stalk*, this is how Cyrus Stearns describes it:<sup>75</sup>

[...] The practice of the *Iron Tree* [= Stalk] [is] a section of Gökyi Demtruchen's hidden treasure teachings. The *Iron Tree* is the section in the Heart Practice cycle of Gökyi Demtruchen's treasures for sustaining the essence of life through meditation on Amitābha, Amitāyus, and Hayagrīva. This treasure text is believed to have been written in the symbolic language of the *dākinīs* by Padmasambhava's secret consort, the goddess Caṇḍālī, and hidden in a casket of maroon rhinoceros hide until rediscovered by Gökyi Demtruchen. The Sakya master Ngawang Kunga Tashi, in his explanatory text for bestowing initiation into these teachings, says Thang stong perfected the attainment of immortality through practice of the *Iron Tree*. The *Iron Tree* is believed to be the specific technique that Padmasambhava himself used to achieve immortality. It is said that Amitāyus actually appeared to Padmasambhava when he was in Maratika Cave meditating with his consort, the Indian princess Mandarava. Padmasambhava requested many teachings from Amitāyus, including the *Iron Tree*, which both he and Mandarava used to achieve the immortal, indestructible, vajra body.

It is not exactly clear when Thang stong rgyal po received that important Byang gter practice from Don yod rgyal mtshan as it is not mentioned explicitly as a transmission he received when he was fourteen. It might be during their third encounter as Don yod rgyal mtshan tells his monks before Thang stong rgyal po's arrival that he would reach immortality with the *Iron Stalk*.<sup>76</sup>

From these short descriptions of the *Iron Stalk* and the *Glorious Bestower of Immortality*, we can deduce that the two are unrelated, but

<sup>74</sup> Contemporary masters of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the 41<sup>st</sup> Sa skya khri 'dzin or the 17<sup>th</sup> Karma pa O rgyan phrin las give longevity empowerment according to Thang stong rgyal po's lineage. See <https://aribhod.org/events/lhh-the-sakya-trizin-rinpoche-longevity-empowerments-1> and "Long Life empowerment (lineage of Thang stong rgyal po)" for the Sa skya event, and "Thang stong rgyal po Longevity Empowerment" for the Karma bka' brgyud transmission. The Sa skya transmission is based on a text composed by the 30<sup>th</sup> Sa skya Throne-Holder Kun dga' bkra shis (1654–1711) and kept in the *sGrub thabs kun btus* (Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po 1976, vol. 1, pp. 427-470). See Stearns 2007, n. 116, p. 477.

<sup>75</sup> Stearns 2007, pp. 26-27.

<sup>76</sup> Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 138-139.



both gained their success because of Thang stong rgyal po's longevity and fame. It is not known whether he continued to transmit the *Iron Stalk* as no lineage with his name appears in the Northern Treasures corpus or in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Record of Teachings Received*. That narrative, however, states that Thang stong rgyal po's teaching was transmitted in the Byang gter lineage. An alternative lineage tracing from Thang stong rgyal po's disciple Nyi zla bzang po passed on to the Northern Lord bKra shis stobs rgyal, and on to the Fifth Dalai Lama through sMan lung pa Blo mchog rdo rje (1595–1671).<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

From this presentation of the interrelation between Thang stong rgyal po and the Northern Treasures' masters and teachings it can be deduced that although the Mahāsiddha cannot be considered a Northern Treasures lord as he was himself a phenomenon of his own and the founder of the Iron Bridge tradition, rGod ldem's treasures were instrumental on his path towards enlightenment and he probably had a particular liking for the rDzogs chen cycle of the *Direct Revelation* and the longevity practice of the *Iron Stalk*. His transmission of these practices can be considered to be both Byang gter and lCags zam—Thang stong rgyal po received them from human sources, the 'long lineage,' and from Padmasambhava himself, the 'short lineage.' In some ways there is a close parallel between Rig 'dzin rGod ldem and Thang stong rgyal po, a proximity expressed by the fact that both were considered mind emanations of Padmasambhava. Another resemblance is that they both discovered hidden lands, Sikkim and six others for rGod ldem, Glo and other southern lands for Thang stong rgyal po.<sup>78</sup> Above all, their proximity can be explained geographically: they both came from Byang Ngam ring and lived at the same period. Many of later masters from both traditions were therefore familiar with both traditions and had fluid relationships with either institutions, be it at Ri bo che in Byang, or later in Chu bo ri in Central Tibet, which continued to be closely related to the neighboring Byang gter institution of rDo rje brag.

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<sup>77</sup> Dalai Lama 05 Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1991, vol. 3, f. 242b.

<sup>78</sup> See Heckman 2020 for more details on Thang stong rgyal po and hidden lands.

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