


Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra The "bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia"

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Introduction

 Previous scholarship brought to light a rich literary corpus of life-and-song-stories regarding rJe btsun Mi la ras pa that had come into being from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries – 1488, when gTsang smyon Heruka's *Life and Songs* was created.¹ By comparing the early biographies and gTsang smyon's work, these studies illustrate the gradual build-up of an increasingly detailed narrative of the yogin's career, from his childhood to his search for a teacher, his apprenticeship under Mar pa, his meditative experiences, his teaching career, and finally his death.

Since the publication of Roberts' and Quintman's work, an increasing number of texts has come to light – mainly thanks to BDRC. This allows us to make an in-depth comparative study tracing the new inputs integrated into the texts as time went by.

As a tool for the comparative study of the texts, I created detailed Song Charts in which each song is identified and labelled with the corresponding chapter-and-song number in gTsang smyon's work.² In this way, it becomes easy to observe multiple layers of narrative development in the description of the great rJe btsun's life. From the analysis of the short liberation stories compiled in the Golden Rosary

¹ Tiso 2014; Roberts 2007 and 2010; Quintman 2010, 2012, 2014a and 2014b; Ducher 2017a & b, 2020; Torricelli 1995, 2001 and 2019; Sernesi 2007, 2011 and 2021; Larsson 2012 and 2016.

² As these song charts are quite voluminous, they cannot be included in the present article, but they can be consulted on my Academia.edu page, <https://independent.academia.edu/kristinblancke>. For the "Life of Milarepa", the corresponding page is given in Quintman's English translation, and for "The Hundred Thousand Songs", the page in Stagg's English translation is given. The songs are indicated with the chapter number in gTsang smyon's work, followed by the song number in the chapter. (e.g., 1.1 means chapter 1, first song). The outlines of each text studied here can be found in Bock's Appendix A pp. 157-215 in this volume.

collections and the elaborate "biographical compendia"³ dedicated uniquely to Mi la ras pa's story, we see how life writing was adapted, responding to changes in the approach to the spiritual path, social changes and lineage priorities.

The broader scope of this research is articulated in my forthcoming book *In Search of Mila's Collected Songs. Back to the Basics*. The present article concentrates on the study of a group of biographical compendia here called "The bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia."⁴ This name, so far not used in academic literature, is here adopted because it is associated with the systematic designation of Mi la ras pa with his secret name bZhad pa'i rdo rje in the colophons of all these compendia. The analysis of the structure, narrative episodes and songs contained in the presently available compendia reveals typical changes manifested over time and allows characterising each compendium according to its specificity.

Before getting there, we need to take a step back to the accounts of Mi la ras pa's life and songs found in the Golden Rosary collections. These life stories – called *rnam thars* – create a framework against which to evaluate further developments. Golden Rosaries contain short biographies of the successive great masters of the lineage to which the compiler of the life stories belongs. In fact, the liberation stories of Mi la ras pa and his disciples vary in content and structure depending on the lineage in which they were transmitted – whether descending from sGam po pa, Ngan rdzong ston pa or Ras chung pa.

In the *rnam thars* in the lineages descending from sGam po pa,⁵ different episodes are narrated one after the other, without a particular structure to the text. There are few songs, and the text is not subdivided into "qualities" as would be the case later on.

³ For the use of the term "biographical compendia" see Quintman 2014a: 82-83.

⁴ My sincere thanks go to Étienne Bock for his intensive collaboration on the article. This study is a joined effort, hence sometimes the plural pronoun 'we' is used.

⁵ This topic is discussed in the first chapter of Blancke, *In Search of Mi la's Collected Songs. Back to the basics* (forthcoming). As an example of three translated life stories of Mi la ras pa transmitted in sGam po pa's lineage see Quintman 2014a: 191-98 (sGam po pa/Khyung tshang pa), Khenpo Könchog Gyaltzen 2006: 123-43 (Don mo ri pa) and Tiso 2014: 173-246 (rGyal thang pa).

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

Ngan rdzong ston pa's life story of Mi la ras pa⁶ – subdivided into twenty "qualities" – is the first example of a liberation story compiled in the Saṃvara Aural Transmission (*bDe mchog snyan brgyud*) tradition. In this tradition, the life stories of the lineage masters are codified as part of the "Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Lineage" (*brgyud pa yid bzhin nor bu*), and aim at the elimination of doubts regarding the lineage and its masters. As Sernesi writes:⁷

The Aural Transmission instructions are grouped into three Wish-fulfilling Gems. (...) The first Gem is called the Lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem (*brgyud pa yid bzhin nor bu*), and is defined as "externally, to cut the doubts, the instructions of the emanation-body" (*phyi sgro 'dogs gcod par byed pa sprul sku'i gdam ngag*). (...) The Gem of the Lineage is defined as "cutting the doubts", because it establishes the authenticity of the revelation and its transmission within a succession of enlightened beings, which assures its preservation and shows its effectiveness. (...) The intimate link between the Aural Transmission's Gem of the Lineage and life-narrative is reflected in the structural device adopted by the main hagiographical tradition of the Aural Transmission.

Also the lineages that consider Ras chung pa as Mi la ras pa's principal disciple belong to the same Saṃvara Aural Transmission tradition. Here, Mi la's life stories are structured in the form of two main chapters – called the quality of overcoming problems at his early age and the qualities resulting from his meditation practice. The second chapter is again divided into seventeen or eighteen sub-chapters.⁸ Each of these qualities that brought Mi la ras pa to liberation is illustrated with a short narrative frame and one or two short songs.

Within this same Saṃvara Aural Transmission tradition, presumably starting from the 13th century comprehensive "compendia," dedicated exclusively to Mi la ras pa's life and songs, were created. In the present study, the name "bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia" indicates a group of

⁶ See the translation of this account in Blancke 2021c, *The Complete Liberation of Mi la Vajra-Victory-Banner*.

⁷ Sernesi 2010: 405-6.

⁸ Song Charts 4 & 5 on my Academia.edu page give outlines of the chapters and songs included in the main Golden Rosary life stories of Mi la ras pa and Ras chung pa in Ras chung pa's lineage.

voluminous texts explaining the liberation story of rJe btsun Mi la ras pa in terms of 17-18 qualities he developed on the path to realisation.

Nowadays there seems to be a tendency to consider all these compendia as belonging to the same textual family called *Black Treasury* (*mdzod nag ma*). Quintman writes:⁹

As a general title, *The Black Treasury* does not indicate a single text or even multiple editions of a single text. Rather, the name refers to a broad collection of biographical compendia sharing common (if not always identical) sources, structures, and content. In this sense, *The Black Treasury* seems to have been understood as a container into which all known material about Mi la ras pa's life and career might be locked away.

The term *mdzod nag ma* seems to be especially linked to the biographical literary corpus of Mi la ras pa – not only to the "compendia" but also to other texts regarding Mi la ras pa. For example, citing the early nineteenth-century *History of Drakar Taso*, Roberts writes,¹⁰

The one named Shiché Ripa (*Zhi-byed Ri-pa*) who is famous for having read a hundred and twenty-seven different biographies of the venerable one, composed *A Dark Treasury* and a block print of this previously existed amongst the retreat centres of Chuwar (*Chu-dbar*), as is described in the biography of Gamnyön Chardor Norbu (*sGam-smyon Phyang-rdor Nor-bu*).

According to Roberts,

A Dark Treasury (*mdzod-nag-ma*) is a generic title for texts that should not be made available to the public. It refers to that part of the home where precious things not put on display are kept. This room, or closet, has no windows and therefore is in darkness.¹¹

⁹ Quintman 2014a: 104-107.

¹⁰ Roberts 2007: 32.

¹¹ Ibidem, 229n128, citing a pers. comm., Khenpo Sonam Tobgyal Rinpoche, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 5 October 2005.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

Thus, in its broadest sense, *The Dark Treasury* in this case could be considered "a collection of rare texts regarding Mi la's life and songs."

From the present research, it will become clear that the texts analysed here indeed belong to the same family as far as their structure is concerned. However, there are two reasons why applying the name *Dark/Black Treasury*¹² to all these texts does not seem appropriate. First, by doing so, some significant differences between the different strata of the texts are overlooked. Second, this designation exclusively links these texts to the Karma bKa' brgyud lineage. As Quintman further explains:

But the tradition is also closely associated with the line of the Karmapas, Kagyu hierarchs famous for their iconic black crowns, for which reason the name might equally be rendered "the treasury of the black." It is now clear that the name refers to a specific chapel – or perhaps a single room in a chapel – in southern Tibet associated with the Karmapas wherein an early version of The Black Treasury was preserved.¹³

By designating all these texts as "*Black Treasury*", the fact that similar texts were transmitted in other lineages – e.g., the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud, the sTag lung bKa' brgyud, and the dGe lugs – is overshadowed.

For these reasons, we do not agree with Quintman's use of the term "*Black Treasury*" for all the compendia. Instead, we suggest the name "*The bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia*" as a more accurate designation, based on the use of the name bZhad pa'i rdo rje present in all of them. Here the expression *Dark/Black Treasury* is used exclusively to refer to the text in Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's *Collected Works*. The occurrences of this term are analysed in detail in Étienne Bock's article below.

It is noteworthy that in this literary tradition many manuscripts are characterised by a typical pattern of illuminations introducing new episodes.¹⁴

¹² In this article, the expression *Dark/Black Treasury* is used for the translation of *mdzod nag ma* respectively by Roberts and Quintman.

¹³ Quintman 2014a: 105.

¹⁴ A detailed description of the illuminations is included in Étienne Bock's article in this volume pp. 56-81.

In an attempt to classify the bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia based on their content, we have divided them into two main strata: a first stratum, containing a group of texts we call *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and its variants, and a second stratum, including *A River of Blessings*, *The Dark/Black Treasury*, and an untitled manuscript kept at the British Library.¹⁵

List of the studied texts

First stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia					
A. Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples <i>Ras pa bu chen bcu gnyis (RBC)</i>			B. Variant versions RBC		
Ms-Oxford / RBC Paltsek	Ms-Newark	Ms-Drukpa / Ms-Gansu	Ms-Bordier	Ms-BDRC	Ms-Lhasa

Second stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia						
Dark/Black Treasury <i>mdzod nag ma</i>	A River of Blessings <i>Byin rlabs kyi chu rgyun (BCG)</i>					British Library Manuscript
	Group A		Group B			
DNM-RD	Ms- Smith	Ms-India	Ms- Drepung	BCG- Drikung	BCG Si khron	Ms-BL

Unfortunately, among all the copies available to us, none predates the late 15th century. We posit these texts are witnesses of an 'original' work created in the 13th /14th century, transmitted in time with several later additional narrative developments. The main reason why we presume it was created in the 13th /14th century is the endorsement by the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* as a valid source of Mi la's life and songs and the slightly amended new compilation of the text he supposedly created.

As will be explained in this article, the versions we consider as belonging to the first stratum maintain the core characteristics of the presumed 'original' work. The second-stratum versions contain specific characteristics that distinguish them from all the versions included in the first stratum.

¹⁵ On *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and *The Dark/Black Treasury* see Roberts 2007: 20-25 and Quintman 2014a: 86-104.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

I. First-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia

1. General description of The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples

"Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra" (*dPal bzhad pa'i rdo rje'i rnam thar 'gur chings dang bcas pa*) is the end title of the first "biographical compendium". This title is mentioned only in the colophon of the text and it is common to all the versions of the first stratum studied here. In academic circles the work is known by its informal title, "The Twelve Great Disciples" – *bu chen bcu gnyis* – referring to the presumed contribution to the composition of the text by Mi la ras pa's twelve most important disciples, such as Ngan rdzong ston pa Bho dhi rā dza and the others. As a matter of fact, the complete Tibetan expression being *ras pa bu chen bcu gnyis*, it seems important to refer to the text as *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, adding the detail that the sources of the text are said to be the "ras pa" disciples, thereby indicating the cotton-clad community, not the monk disciples. Thus, *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* (abbreviated RBC, *ras pa bu chen*) is the name we use to distinguish the compendia in the first stratum from those in the second stratum,

What was the exact contribution of these disciples to the composition of the text is not clear. Some versions claim the work was created by them; others claim it was written according to their words. As will be explained further on, the latter seems to be more likely. The colophon of the text states:¹⁶

This Life [of Mi la ras pa] has been written down for the benefit of worthy meditators, by /in the words of/ the twelve great *ras pa* sons such as Ngan rdzong ston pa Bho dhi rā dza and the others.

¹⁶ E.g., RBC-Pt 515, *rnam thar 'di skal ldan sgom chen rnams kyi don du/ ngan rdzong ston pa bho dhi rā dza la sogs pa'i ras pa bu chen bcu gnyis kyi yi ger bkod pa'o/*.

Ms-Oxford, Ms-Newark and RBC-Pt share the wording *ras pa bu chen bcu gnyis kyi yi ger bkod do*. Ms-Stockholm, Ms-Drukpa, Ms-Gansu, Ms-Bordier, Ms-BDRC and Ms-Lhasa use the instrumental particle *kyis* instead of the genitive *kyi*, thus attributing the work to the *ras pa* disciples. See Roberts 2007: 21. Although this grammatical difference may be of little significance (see Quintman 2014a: 250n29), it does not take away the other reasons cited below to doubt the authorship of the text.

The attribution of the text to the rJe btsun's twelve *ras pa* disciples headed by Ngan rdzong ston pa does not seem realistic. Although the above colophon is similar in style to other colophons written by Ngan rdzong ston pa,¹⁷ it may have been adapted from another text. The reasons to doubt are the following.

First, various earlier liberation stories of Mi la ras pa and his disciples already existed in the Golden Rosary collections, including the liberation story by Ngan rdzong ston pa himself. These biographies lack the wealth of details introduced in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

Second, in Ngan rdzong ston pa's biography written by his disciple Dam pa ras chen¹⁸ there is no mention of this work, and it surely would be a point of honour for a disciple to include such an important work of his teacher.

The above colophon is followed by a list of Mi la ras pa's male and female disciples, especially the twelve *ras pa* disciples, and a second piece of colophon, repeated in all versions:¹⁹

This has been written down following the *bla ma's* words
out of fear that those with lesser intelligence [amongst] the future
lineage holders of this lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Saṃvara
Aural Transmission might forget it.

Except for those individuals in later generations
who are fit vessels [for the teaching] rejoicing in empowerments,
blessings, *gaṇacakras*,
and making offerings to *dākas* and *dākinīs*,
this [text] has been sealed by the Lord guru's command.

¹⁷ See for example the colophons of the Tshe ring ma chapters in Quintman 2014a: 199-202, or the colophon of Ngan rdzong ston pa's *Complete Liberation of Mi la Vajra-Victory-Banner*, Blancke 2021c.

¹⁸ Dam pa Ras chen 1985: 1-17.

¹⁹ E.g. RBC-Pt 516: *snyan rgyud bde mchog 'khor lo yi/ rgyud pa yi bzhin nor bu 'di/ ma 'ongs gdung rgyud 'dzin pa rnams/ blo dman rjed pas 'jigs pa'i phyir/ bla ma'i gsung bzhin yi ger bkod/ bla ma mkha' 'gro'i bzod par gsol/ phyi rabs rten gyi gang zag rnams/ dbang bskur byin rlabs tshogs 'khor dang/dpa' bo dpa' mo mchod la sogs/ dgyes shing ghang ba ma ma gtogs pa/ bla ma rje yi bka' rgyas btab/ gal te bka' las 'das gyur na/ mkha' 'gros ko long dam pas na/ yi ger ma spel gsang bar zhu/ brgyud pa yid bzhin nor bu da ki sa ma ya.*

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

If one transgresses that command,
 the *ḍākinīs* will become extremely angry.
 Therefore, please do not promulgate these writings, but keep them
 secret.
 The lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem, *ḍāki*, samaya.

Accordingly, *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* would be part of the "Lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem" of the Cakrasaṃvara Aural Transmission.

These "Wish-fulfilling Gems" can be traced back to the life story of Tilopa, in particular to the episode in which Tilopa asks instructions from the Gaṇḍola wisdom-*ḍākinī* (*jñāna ḍākinī*), in the land of Oḍḍiyāna. The instructions he requests are called "Three Wish-fulfilling Gems". In the earliest available life story of Tilopa, the first Gem is called the "General/Common/Ordinary Wish-fulfilling Gem" (*thun mongs yid bzhin nor bu*), the second is the "Commitment Wish-fulfilling Gem" (*dam tshig yid bzhin nor bu*), and the third is the "True Nature Wish-fulfilling Gem" (*gnas lugs yid bzhin nor bu*).²⁰

²⁰ There are various life stories of Tilopa. The earliest available biography I have seen – included in Byang chub bzang po's *bDe mchog mkha' 'gro sñan rgyud* – is attributed to Mar pa Lo tsā ba (1012–1097/1000–1085). This attribution might be spurious, but the text, although undatable, is anyway old. I wonder whether it could be written by Shangs pa Mar ston Tshul khriṃs 'byung gnas (second half of the 12th century), a disciple of Khyung tshang pa Ye shes bla ma (1115–1176), considering that the lives of Mar pa, Mi la ras pa and Ras chung pa in Byang chub bZang po's collection also could be written by him, as I argue in *In Search of Mila's Collected Songs*, Chapter 1. (About Mar ston Tshul khriṃs-'byung gnas and his biography of Mar pa see Ducher 2017b: 76-78).

This Tilopa life story is recounted and commented upon by the XII Khentin Tai Situpa (1988: 40-69), and translated by Fabrizio Torricelli (1995: 34-60 and 2019: 171-77). Here I follow this earliest version. Among the different life stories of Tilopa mentioned by Torricelli (1995: viii-xi) only Don mo ri pa (13th century) follows the same classification of the Wish-fulfilling Gems as the one in this early *ram thar* (see Khenpo Könchog Gyaltzen 2006: 40). The 13th-century *ram thars* of Tilopa by rGyal thang pa bDe chen rdo rje (dKar bgryud gser 'phreng 1973: 27-28) as well as the one by O rgyan pa (bKa' brgyud yid bzhin nor bu yi 'phreng ba 1972: 20) both classify the Wish-fulfilling Gems as *brgyud pa yid bzhin nor bu*, *smin lam yid bzhin nor bu* and *grol lam yid bzhin nor bu*, as would be the case in later times.

In later times, this very special Aural Transmission, at first transmitted only orally, was written down – probably in the early thirteenth century by Zhang Lo tsā ba (†1237).²¹ From then onwards, in all the successive life stories of Tilopa, the first Wish-fulfilling Gem is codified as the "Lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem" (*brgyud pa yid bzhin nor bu*). It contains the basic instructions of this transmission intended to eliminate doubts regarding the emanation bodies – the lineage gurus – as well as the liberation stories of the masters of the past. The second Gem becomes the "Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Path of Ripening" (*smin lam yid bzhin nor bu*). The third, the "Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Path of Liberation" (*grol lam yid bzhin nor bu*), includes the General, the Commitment and the True Nature Wish-fulfilling Gems. Thus, this codification seems to be a later development.

Together with the already stated reasons of doubt regarding the direct authorship of the twelve great *ras pa* disciples, the use of the later codified term "Lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem" in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* could be another indication that this work should be considered a new creation, in which the words of the *ras pa* disciples are brought together into one great compendium. It was presumably composed by one or more anonymous author/s in the thirteenth century and transmitted over time in different lineages (mostly bKa' brgyud – 'Brug pa, Karma, sTag lung, 'Bri gung – but also dGe lugs).²²

Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples follows the 17/18 quality structure of the hagiographic tradition in Ras chung pa's lineage – as explained on page 9 – so presumably the work was created within that lineage. In the first half of the thirteenth century, Ras chung pa's lineage was already absorbed in the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud lineage, and some changes – such as considering sGam po pa as the main disciple of Mi la ras pa instead of Ras chung pa – had already taken place. These were incorporated in

²¹ See Torricelli 2001. The doctrinal aspects of the Aural Transmission are contained in the manuals by gTsang smyon Heruka, (1452–1507), Kun mkhyen Pad ma dkar po (1527–1592), Byang chub bzang po (sixteenth century) and 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899). See also Sernesi 2007 & 2011: 179-209. A detailed outline of Zhang-lo's *thim yig* can be found on page 186 of the latter article. See also Callahan 2023: 173-9. In Blancke 2021g, *Zhijé Ripa. The Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams*, I suggest that this "Introduction" may be wrongly attributed to Zhang Lo tsā ba and be datable to a later time.

²² See a detailed description of the texts below.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

the text, much in the same way as gTsang smyon Heruka would integrate further variations in his work two hundred years later.²³ In the Golden Rosary collections, each lineage considered its founder as Mi la ras pa's main disciple. In contrast, starting with *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, the rJe btsun's main disciple is stated to be sGam po pa. There are two instances in the text in which this is clarified. To the question of patroness lCam me whether the rJe btsun would have realised disciples, the rJe btsun replied,

According to a prophecy of the *dākinīs* regarding emanation bodies, Dwags po will rise like a sun for the beings, and Ras chung will be a moon-like emanation body.²⁴

The next reference to sGam po pa's preeminence in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* appears in a chapter titled "The episode of the prophecy of Dwags po lha rje's future arrival" (*Dwags po lha rje 'byon pa'i ma 'ongs lung bstan gyis bskor*),

Ras chung pa asked again, "While you were with *bla ma* Mar pa from lHo brag, with his noble heart he chose you to inspire us. Will there be someone to protect the instructions and the community of our Dharma lineage? As I was the first one to meet the *bla ma*, will you give that permission to me? Or do you think there could be someone else?" [The rJe btsun] was slightly displeased. He said, "Ras chung pa, don't talk like this! When lHo brag Mar pa pointed his staff to my heart and said 'I entrust my lineage to you' he also had many other good disciples, and he chose me not because I was his favourite, but because there was an auspicious connection [for me] to uphold the lineage. In a few days from now, the one who will uphold my lineage will arrive."²⁵

²³ See the discussion about the demotion of Ras chung pa in Blancke, *In Search of Mi la's Collected Songs*, Chapter 2 (forthcoming).

²⁴ E.g., RBC-Pt 182, *mkha' 'gro'i lung bstan sprul pa'i sku/ dwags po nyi ma 'gro la shar/ ras chung zla ba sprul pa'i sku*. The same episode is found in gTsang smyon's Chapter 55, song 2, gTsang smyon 1981: 769; Stagg 2017: 648.

²⁵ E.g., Ms-Oxford 164a. *Yang ras chung pas zhus pas/ bla ma lho brag mar pa'i drung nas/ rang re la sku snyan pa che ba'i thugs rtsis mdzad zin pas/ nged rang gi chos rgyud 'di la/ khrid dang tshogs pa skyong ba e yong/ nga yang bla ma dang mjal snga bas bka' gnang 'dra e yod/ 'o na gzhan 'dra la mchis sam zhus pas/ thugs chad pa cig byung nas/ ras chung pa de skad ma zer/ nga la lho brag mar pas sba ber snying khar gtad nas/ nga'i rgyud pa 'di khyod la gtad pa yin gsungs nas/ gzhan slob ma bzang la mang po yod de/ nga la thugs rtse ba ma yin te/ rgyud pa*

2. Versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*

The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples survives in different versions.²⁶ The following six versions were consulted:

- The Oxford manuscript (Ms-Oxford), an untitled manuscript kept at Oxford University's Bodleian Library. The text ends: *dPal bzhad pa'i rdo rje'i rnam thar/ mgur chings dang bcas pa mdzogs so*, "The life of glorious bZhad pa'i rdo rje, together with his songs, is completed." This closing sentence is common to all extant copies.
- The Newark manuscript (Ms-Newark), titled *rJe btsun chen po mid la ras pa'i rnam thar zab mo*, "The Profound Life Story of the Great rJe btsun Mi la ras pa." Because of the illuminations in the manuscript, it can not be dated earlier than the late seventeenth century.²⁷ It is a version of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* transmitted in the dGe lugs lineage. Compared to the Oxford version, especially in the chapter on sGam po pa's stay with rJe btsun Mi la ras pa, many details regarding the differences between the teachings of the bKa' gdams pa-s and those of Mi la ras pa have been left out.²⁸
- A recent edition of Ms-Oxford published in book form by the dPal brtsegs Tibetan Rare Texts Research Center in the Ancestral Legacy Series (RBC-Pt),²⁹ as the first of five volumes of *rJe*

'dzin pa'i rten 'brel cig shar ba red/ da nga'i rgyud pa 'dzin mkhan cig zhag mang po mi 'gor bar 'ong bar yod gsung ngo. The episode is narrated in a much more dramatic way in gTsang smyon 1981: 625, Stagg 2017: 492.

²⁶ For an outline of the different versions and the songs compiled in them see Blancke 2023a, Song Chart 7.

²⁷ See Quintman 2014a: 88.

²⁸ Ms-Newark 213-21; see Blancke 2021d, *Gampopa Sonam Rinchen Meets Jetsun Mi la*, and compare the episode in Sang rgyas 'Bum's biography [identical as in the other *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*] with the one in the Newark version. The latter abbreviated version eliminates all forms of criticism by Mi la ras pa versus the bKa' gdams pa-s.

²⁹ RBC-Pt *dPal brtsegs yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, Mes po'i shul bzag* 2011; the second and third volumes of the *gsung 'bum* contain *The Dark/Black Treasury* included in Karma pa Rang 'byung rdo rje's *Collected Works*. The fourth volume contains the *rdo rje'i mgur drug* – "The Six Vajra Songs" – as well as some doctrinal texts such as the *Phyag rgya chen po ye shes gsal 'byed* – "Mahāmudrā,

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

btsun mi la ras pa'i gsung 'bum, "The Collected Works of rJe btsun Mi la ras pa." It corresponds to the Oxford version, with fewer scribal errors. It bears the same title as the Newark version.

- Ms-Drukpa,³⁰ an *dbu can* manuscript in the BDRC database titled *rJe btsun mid la ras pa chen po'i mgur 'bum*, "The Collected Songs of the great rJe btsun Mid la ras pa." Nothing is known about the origin of this text. It contains 20 illuminations of lineage masters, the last of which are gLing ras pa (1128-1188), gTsang pa rgya ras (1161-1211), rGod tshang pa (1189-1258) and Yang dgon pa (1213–1258).³¹ This collocates the manuscript in the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud lineage, hence Ms-Drukpa. Considering that its content is almost identical to Ms-Gansu, it is a late version.
- Ms-Gansu, an *dbu med* manuscript reproduced in facsimile in a collection printed in Gansu (China), titled *rNal 'byor dbang phyug mi la chen po'i rnam thar bka' 'bum chen mo grub thob ras pa bcu gnyis kyis bsgrigs pa ngo mtshar kun 'dus*, "The Life and the Great Teaching Collection of the Great Mi la, the Powerful Yogin, compiled by the twelve *ras pa* siddhas: a collection of marvels." After the general colophon of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* – identical to the one cited above – the scribe adds the printer's colophon of the xylographic edition mentioned by Roberts as the "Stockholm version" that belonged to the collection of Toni Schmid and was donated to the Stockholm Folkens Museum Etnografiska, but is now missing.³² As a Central Tibetan printed edition, that text can not predate the fifteenth century. Consequently, as Ms-Gansu seems to be a handwritten

Clarifying Primordial Wisdom" – and the *Bar do blo chod* – "Three Profound Instructions Pointing Out the Intermediate States for Reaching the End of the Path with the Mind" (*lam blo nas gcod pa bar do ngo sprod kyi gdams ngag gsum*) (translated in Blancke 2021f). The fifth volume contains four short biographies of Mi la ras pa – the last being the one by Ngan rdzong ston pa (translated in Blancke 2021c) as well as Zhi byed ri pa's *Nyi zla'i 'od zer sgron me* – "Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams" – and a prayer to Mi la ras pa.

³⁰ BDRC W3CN22290, vol. 2 315 fols. We thank Marta Sernesi for kindly providing us with copies of both Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu. These two manuscripts form an important contribution to the hitherto known other versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

³¹ See Bock's outline of the text in Appendix A pp. 169-172.

³² Roberts, 2007: 21-22.

reproduction of the xylographical edition, it also can not be dated earlier than the fifteenth century.

Thus, no early witness of the compendium is available, and none of these five copies – except the modern edition RBC-Pt – is exactly datable. As we will see from their content, they all seem to be quite late.

Why, then, could *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* supposedly be dated to the thirteenth century? One reason is that three slightly 'variant' versions of the text have been found, one of which was allegedly compiled by the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339). All three bear the same main colophon as the above versions, and their content is almost identical.³³ Therefore, we posit that these 'variant' versions are based on a late thirteenth–early fourteenth-century version of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* complemented with some details from sources that have not yet come to light.

- Ms-BDRC. The BDRC database has a manuscript with a damaged title page that is catalogued as *rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug rje btsun mi la'i rnam thar – ras pa bu chen bcu gnyis kyis bsgrig*, "Liberation Story of rJe btsun Mi la, the Powerful Lord of Yogins, Compiled by the Twelve Great *Ras pa* Disciples."³⁴ Nothing is known about the origin of the manuscript, except that it came from Central Tibet. For the moment it will be referred to as Ms-BDRC.
- Ms-Bordier. The Bordier manuscript, preserved at the Tibet Museum – Foundation Alain Bordier in Switzerland, bears the title *rJe btsun mi la bzhad pa rdo rje'i 'gur bum rnam thar 'bril ma*, "The Collected Songs of Mi la bZhad pa rdo rje, together with his Liberation Story."³⁵ The main colophon is the same as the one in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*. As shown in Étienne Bock's article below,³⁶ it has an additional colophon,

³³ Blancke 2023a, Song Chart 7.

³⁴ BDRC W3CN25684, 418 fols. The manuscript's title page is only half readable, with a title referring to a different text ([...] *bcas dbu'i gzigz phyogs legs par bzhugs so*); the last few folios are missing. For a detailed discussion see Bock's article.

³⁵ 323 fols, in *dbu med*. I thank Étienne Bock and Alain Bordier for allowing me to study this beautiful manuscript.

³⁶ Bock pp. 53-54 and pp. 94-106.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

"The History of the *Dark Treasury* transmitted by the Karma pa," very similar to a transmission history in the *River of Blessings* versions Ms-Drepung, BCG-D and BCG-Si.

- Ms-Lhasa. This manuscript was kept in the archives of 'Bras spung monastery, Lhasa.³⁷ Quintman considers it to be the earliest *mdzod nag ma* text, calling it DNM-Lhasa.³⁸ On close inspection, there is nothing in this text that refers to a *Black Treasury*: the title page is missing and it is catalogued as *rJe btsun mi la rdo rje rgyal tshan gyi rnam par thar pa*, "The liberation story of rJe btsun Mi la rdo rje rgyal mtshan."³⁹ The main colophon is the same as the general *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples'* colophon. It has a second colophon, in which the scribe of the text writes that Rang byung rdo rje endorsed *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* as a valid source of Mi la's life and songs; he somewhat edited the manuscript and had a new copy made.⁴⁰

³⁷ 'Bras spung Catalogue: phyi ra 42, 017082. About the texts found in these archives see Ducher 2020. I thank Andrew Quintman for kindly providing me with a photocopy of the text.

³⁸ Quintman 2014a: 107-9.

³⁹ Note that this title corresponds to the title of Ngan rdzong ston pa's liberation story of Mi la ras pa! (see Blancke 2021c). However, the title is not mentioned in the text itself, nor is the name rDo rje rgyal mtshan, making it only the cataloguer's choice.

⁴⁰ Ms-Lhasa 308b. This interpretation is how I understand Ms-Lhasa's extremely confused colophon. For an elaborate discussion, see Bock, pp. 82-88 in this volume. Without this colophon and its reference to the Karma pa's contribution, it would have been more logical to date *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* to the late 14th-early 15th centuries, just after or around the same time as the compilation of the *bDe mchog sNyan brgyud Biographies* and Zhi byed ri pa's *Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams* (the latter completed in 1381). These two texts are examples of the 18-quality life stories of Mi la ras pa included in the Golden Rosaries of the Saṃvara Aural Transmission. Zhi byed ri pa – who says he had access to 127 of Mi la's life stories – seems not to have known about the existence of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, which sounds rather strange. One possible explanation could be that the circulation of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* was extremely restricted. Zhi byed ri pa mentions a few of its song cycles, which he might have read in the second Zhwa dmar pa mKha' spyod dbang po's *Clouds of Blessings – byin rlabs kyī sprin phung*. mKha' spyod dbang po (1283–1349) also dedicates limited space to the stories in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*. As a disciple of the fourth Karma pa, he was introduced to texts with limited distribution. In his liberation story of Mi la ras pa, similar to those in sGam po pa's lineage, he does not follow the quality structure: he does not include entire song

The same second colophon was possibly included also in Ms-BDRC, although the last page is not completely readable. In contrast, Ms-Bordier manuscript does not include it. Through this second colophon – referring to a compilation made by the Third Karma pa – *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* is brought into the Kam tshang lineage, and it can be dated to the late 13th- early 14th centuries.

3. Content of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*

The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples consists of detailed song cycles (*skor*) narrated following the same quality structure as the liberation stories in the Golden Rosaries of the Saṃvara Aural Transmission tradition in Ras chung pa's lineage. Many new songs appear within each chapter, with Mi la granting Dharma teachings and meditation instructions to various disciples and patrons.

Part of the new material in this work is derived from narratives in Ras chung pa's life stories in the Golden Rosaries:⁴¹ Ras chung pa's first meeting with rJe btsun Mi la, his trip to India and Nepal and his relationship with Mi la. In *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, the stories of the yak horn and the wild asses are introduced. Although in the Golden Rosary biographies of Ras chung pa we find one song included in the yak-horn chapter and two included in the wild-ass

cycles from *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, but only parts of their stories. However, that he does mention some of these stories attests to the existence of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* before his and Zhi byed ri pa's time. See Blancke, K., 2021g. *Zhi byed ri pa – The Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams*.

⁴¹ For an overview of Golden Rosary life stories of Ras chung pa see Blancke 2020, Song Chart 5 – *Outline and Songs in The Life of Ras chung pa in Golden Rosaries in Ras chung pa's Lineage*.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

chapter,⁴² there the narrative of the tension between Mi la ras pa and Ras chung pa found in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* is missing.⁴³

The chapters of the conversations between Mi la and the Tshe ring ma sisters and the meeting with *ras pa Zhi ba 'od* probably come from Ngan rdzong ston pa's lineage.⁴⁴

Other songs and episodes have been elaborated from narratives transmitted in the lineages descending from sGam po pa, especially from the biographies of Mi la ras pa included in the Golden Rosaries by Don mo ri pa, rGyal thang pa and Sangs rgyas 'bum – for example, the episode at Brag dmar chong lung (Mi la gathers wood) and the journey to La phyi chu bzang.

However, many episodes of encounters with disciples are not found in any of the Golden Rosaries – e.g., the meeting with Se ban ras pa, dPal dar 'bum, 'Bri sgom ras pa, gSal le 'od, to mention but a few. These episodes might have been narrated in a presumed early *Mi la'i mgur 'bum*; some extra content might have come from the oral tradition, or it might have been a later enrichment.

From a quick overview of Song Chart 7⁴⁵ we notice a truly remarkable consistency in the content of all versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*. Except for the differences stated below, on the whole, we find the same song cycles and songs included in all of them.

Ms-Oxford, compared to the Newark manuscript as well as to the three 'variant' versions, contains three additional chapters which are also found in the compendia in the second stratum:

⁴² gTsang smyon Chapter 38, second song, Stagg 2017: 447 – song in which Ras chung pa recounts the teachings received in India;

Chapter 39, 9th song, Stagg 2017: 476 – a song about Mi la's hopes and fears regarding Ras chung pa;

Chapter 39, 10th song, Stagg 2017: 478 – Ras chung pa's song about defeating debaters.

⁴³ For details about the demotion of Ras chung pa to the profit of sGam po pa in *The Twelve Great Disciples*, *The Dark Treasury* and gTsang smyon's work, see Roberts 2007, 179-82 and Blancke, *In Search of Mi la's Collected Songs – Back to the Basics* (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Tshe ring ma Chapters 28-31, Ms-Oxford 124a-145b; Stagg 2017: 307-81. As mentioned in Blancke's forthcoming book, Ngan rdzong ston pa is supposed to have written a text called *Tshe rings skor gsum*.

Zhi ba 'od Chapter 17, e.g., Ms-Oxford 99a-100a; Stagg 2017:159-90.

⁴⁵ <https://independent.academia.edu/kristinblancke>. The Song Charts are found scrolling down the page.

- The episode in the bZang rgyud kitchen (*bzang rgyud phyag tshang gi skor*, gTsang smyon's Chapter 24, where Mi la ras pa performs an elaborate Bon ritual for a dying Bon po)⁴⁶
- The episode with the old grandma (*a phyi rgan mo'i skor*, the first song included in gTsang smyon's dPal dar 'bum Chapter 14)⁴⁷
- An episode with minor songs (*mgur phran*, a medley of different songs put together without constituting a particular episode).

The first two additional episodes are shared by both Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu. These two versions also include most of the songs of the *mgur phran* episode, inserted as an extension in another song cycle – *dbus gtad zhal ta'i skor*, the advice to Ras chung pa before his final departure to Central Tibet.⁴⁸ At the end of this extension the transmission of the *bDe mchog snyan brgyud* to Ras chung pa is briefly mentioned (in a single sentence), which is not the case in any of the other RBC versions

Besides the three above-mentioned chapters, Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu include two extensions to the Lha rje g.yang nge cycle⁴⁹ – both untitled in Ms-Drukpa, in Ms-Gansu titled *sKor la thog gi bskor* (the cycle at the Kora pass) and *La stod rgyal gyi rtsibs ri skor* (the cycle at the rTsib ri mountain in La stod),⁵⁰ with songs also included in the second-stratum compendia. Moreover, they both contain the *gSal le 'od kyi zhus lan*, (questions and answers with gSal le 'od)⁵¹ as well as a long

⁴⁶ Blancke 2023c, *Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra – The Episode at the Zangyü Kitchen*.

⁴⁷ Blancke 2023d, *Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra –Meeting Paldarbum*.

⁴⁸ Ms-Drukpa 277b-294b; Ms-Gansu 25: 20-50.

⁴⁹ gTsang smyon's Chapter 56, Stagg 2017: 653-61.

⁵⁰ The first cycle (Ms-Drukpa 163a, Ms-Gansu 24: 36) includes the narrative frame of gTsang smyon's Chapter 20, with three songs from that chapter that are also included in the second-stratum compendia. The second episode, at rTsib ri, (Ms-Drukpa 165b, Ms-Gansu 24: 41) narrates Mi la ras pa's meeting with 'Bri sgom ras pa (gTsang smyon's Chapter 16, where rTsib ri is replaced with Śrī ri, Stagg 2017: 155), but it includes songs from his Chapter 44 (Stagg 2017: 542) and part of the episode of the broken clay pot in *The Life of Milarepa* (Quintman 2010:151). Also these songs are included in the second stratum.

⁵¹ Ms-Drukpa 153b, Ms-Gansu 24: 28; from gTsang smyon's Chapter 37, Stagg 2017: 431. Only two songs are included, as in the second-stratum compendia.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

untitled chapter with miracles and songs to Ras chung pa similar to the ones in the *rkyang* episode. However, here, instead of the miraculous view of the wild asses, Ras chung pa explains the marvels he has seen on his trip to India.⁵²

To summarise: we see that in contrast to Ms-Newark and the three 'variants', similar content to that of the second stratum is added in Ms-Oxford, Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu. Also, the great number of extra songs regarding Ras chung pa firmly collocate the latter two versions in the 'Brug pa lineage. However, as we will see, none of the typical characteristics of the 'variant' versions nor of the second-stratum compendia are present. This confirms that these three versions belong to group A of texts in the first stratum of the *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*. Considering the slight differences between Ms-Oxford and Ms-Drukpa/Ms-Gansu, we tend to think that Ms-Oxford might be dated a little earlier than the latter two.

In group B of the first-stratum compendia – the 'variant' versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* (Ms-Bordier, Ms-BDRC, and Ms-Lhasa) – the following typical characteristics are found, absent in the above-discussed versions.

- The episode of Ras chung pa arriving at Mi la's cremation site. It is missing in the other *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* versions as well as in DNM-RD, but it is found in *A River of Blessings* and the British Library manuscript (Ms-BL).⁵³
- The *bar do* song included in gTsang smyon's Chapter 41⁵⁴ appears here for the first time.
- After the rJe btsun has bestowed all his blessings and empowerments on sGam po pa, suddenly Tārā, who is helping the rJe btsun take care of his texts, exclaims joyfully how marvellous all this is. Mi la ras pa then places a *gtor ma* on sGam po pa's head and tells him that he will be of enormous benefit to sentient beings, more than himself, because of all the clear signs he had

⁵² Ms-Drukpa 260a, Ms-Gansu 24: 236.

⁵³ Ms-Bordier 310b, Ms-Lhasa 237a. (in Ms-BDRC the page is missing). For DNM-RD, *A River of Blessings*, and Ms-BL (British Library) see below.

⁵⁴ Ms-Bordier 287b, Ms-BDRC 374a, Ms-Lhasa 275b. (It is also included in Ms-Drukpa 265a and Ms-Gansu 24: 228). Song 41.6, Stagg 2017: 515.

seen before sGam po pa's arrival, and because of a dream in which sGam po pa resulted as the winner in a contest with the rJe btsun.⁵⁵

As these elements are present in all three 'variant' versions, it seems these could belong to an independently circulating later version of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

Ms-Lhasa, a copy of the text said to be compiled by Rang byung rdo rje, contains the following supplementary chapters as compared to the other versions:

- The episode at Brag skya rdo rje rdzong (*brag skya rdo rje rdzong gi skor*, found only in this text and DNM-RD)⁵⁶
- The question-and-answer chapter between the rJe btsun and a beautiful girl (*rje btsun dang bu mo yid phrog ma gnyis kyi zhus lan*, included also in the texts of the second stratum)⁵⁷

⁵⁵ This episode is not included in DNM-RD, but it comes in the three variant editions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* (Ms-Bordier 290a, Ms-BDRC 370b, Ms-Lhasa 278b), in *A River of Blessings* and in Ms-BL: *de yang lcam lhan cig skyes pa'i sgron ma rje btsun gyis phyag dpe'i gnyer mdzad pa yin ste/ bla ma rin po che la de shin tu dgyes pas/ chos kyi nang byan mdzad/ gsang sngags bla med kyis rgyud thams cad dang/ gdam pa lhag lus med par rdzog spa'i mthar/ gtor ma chen po zhig dbu thog tu bzhag nas/ mkha' 'gro chos skyong gi dbang bskur nas/ bu khyod kyis sems chen dpag tu med pa'i don 'grub par 'dug gsungs/ de cir lags zhus pas/ dang po khyod 'ong khar yang rtags mtshan gsal po byung la/ 'di na yod pa'i tshe yang nga dang khyod sang 'gren pas khyod ngon la thal ste/ nga bas khong (?) sems chen gyis don rgya che bar 'dug byas pa cig rmis.*

Whether lCam lhan cig skyes ma'i sgron ma refers to the goddess Tārā or to a female disciple of the rJe btsun with that name is not sure. There are two instances in which she appears in the sky (see below p. 41n99); at least these two cases seem to refer to a supernatural being. The detail of the *gtor ma* and of the rJe btsun saying that sGam po pa would be better than himself appears for the first time in an autobiographical fragment by sGam po pa included in the *Dwags po bKa' 'bum*, in the chapter *Answers to the Questions of Dus gsum mkhyen pa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhus lan)*. See Blancke 2021d and Kragh 2015: 96-97.

⁵⁶ Ms-Lhasa 60a-61a; DNM-RD 2006: 122.

⁵⁷ Ms-Lhasa 124b-132a.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

- The extension of the chapter of the hunter Khyi ra ras pa, with songs to his wife (included also in the texts of the second stratum)⁵⁸
- The episode with the goat herder Ra dzi ras pa and the sheep herder Lug dzi ras pa (included also in the texts of the second stratum)⁵⁹

The last two supplementary chapters are also found in Ms-BDRC, while all four are missing in Ms-Bordier.

In the cycle at Brag skya rdo rje rdzong, there is a short episode (only 2 folios) not found in the other *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, in which a rabbit riding a fox appears,⁶⁰ following which are two songs by Mi la ras pa, and an interesting definition of the term *mahāmudrā*:

phyag: non-dual primordial wisdom;
rgya: uncontaminated by the errors of saṃsāra;
chen po: the union of both;
 realising this is *phyag rgya chen po*.⁶¹

This definition of *mahāmudrā* is very close to a quote in the *phyag rgya chen po ye shes gsal byed*, "Mahāmudrā, Illuminating Primordial Wisdom," one of the doctrinal texts attributed to Mi la ras pa.⁶² That it is later found in some of the second stratum compendia – DNM-RD and group B of *A River of Blessings*, which are based on the text attributed to Rang byung rdo rje – might indicate that this could be one of the contributions of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje.

⁵⁸ Ms-BDRC 189b, Ms-Lhasa 145b.

⁵⁹ Ms-BDRC 191b-193b; Ms-Lhasa 147b-149b.

⁶⁰ This detail is similar to the monkey riding a rabbit – instead of a rabbit riding a fox – found in gTsang smyon's Chapter 6, *Kyangpen Sky Fortress* (Stagg 2017: 67). The detail cited above is found also in the second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia. Surprisingly, gTsang smyon Heruka changed this.

⁶¹ Ms-Lhasa 60b; DNM-RD 2006: 123; Ms-Drepung 2: 83: *phyag ni ye shes gnyis med/rgya ni 'khor ba'i skyon ma gos/chen po ni zung du 'jugs pa ste/ de rtogs pa phyag rgya chen po yin*.

⁶² In the *ye shes gsal byed* we read, *phyag gnyis med kyi ye shes ngos bzung ba/rgya 'khor ba'i rgya mdud grol ba dang/chen po zung'jug gi sgron me bltams pa'o* (Byang chub bzang po 1973 vol. 2: 469; Pad ma dkarpo 1982 vol 2: 74).

In summary, both groups of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* have a distinctive identity based on specific additional material – whether narratives, songs, or cycles – most of it also being found in the second-stratum compendia. Nevertheless, if we take away these supplementary elements from the first-stratum texts, there remains a common ‘core’ identical in all versions. This could hypothetically correspond to the ‘original’ *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* from which all these texts derive.

II. Second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia

*The Dark/Black Treasury, A River of Blessings, and a manuscript
at the British Library*

1. General description of the second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia

As indicated in the introduction, in the present study a clear distinction is made between a first literary stratum consisting of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and its variants, and a second stratum gathering different versions of a text called *A River of Blessings*, the so-called *Dark/Black Treasury* contained in Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's *Collected Works*, and one other similar Life-and-Song Compendium kept at the British Library.

These compendia written throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries further elaborate on the ‘variant’ versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*. In the 14th century, other texts had become part of the literary corpus of Mi la ras pa – e.g., *bDe mchog sNyan brgyud Biographies*, Zhi byed ri pa's *Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams*, mKha' spyod dbang po's *Clouds of Blessings*, and another unknown text supposedly written at Gung thang dPal gyi gtsug lag khang mentioned as one of the sources of the second-stratum compendia.⁶³ Some elements from these texts were integrated into the

⁶³ For a discussion of these texts see Blancke *In Search of Mi la's Collected Songs. Back to the Basics*; for examples of the impact of these texts in the narrative of the teaching transmission from Mar pa to Mi la ras pa see Blancke 2021a, *The Teaching Transmission from Mar pa to Mi la in the Hagiographies*.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia (in both the first- and the second-stratum compendia, as seen above).

However, the compendia classified as second-stratum contain new narratives, in some cases quite different from *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

In the present research the designation *Dark/Black Treasury* is applied only to the compendium in the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's *Collected Works*. In *A River of Blessings*, the name *Dark/Black Treasury* is found in the colophon, but only where Rang byung rdo rje is mentioned as the compiler of one of the sources of the new compilation. Even though a few title pages mention that the compendium was compiled by Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, this claim does not seem plausible considering the amount of new content found in these later compendia as compared to the above-mentioned Ms-Lhasa. Not only are there several new songs and song cycles, but there are also significant changes in the way of presenting some events. Therefore, these attributions are considered untrustworthy, as explained in detail by Étienne Bock below.

2. Versions of the second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia

In *The Yogin and the Madman* Quintman enumerates five [recognised]⁶⁴ versions of *The Black Treasury*, divided into two strata. An earlier stratum, closer to *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, includes DNM-Lhasa (the already mentioned manuscript found in the Drepung Archives, here Ms-Lhasa) and DNM-RD (published in the *Collected Works* of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje). As a later stratum, he indicates the following works: DNM-I (a two-volume modern edition published in India); DNM-S (a manuscript in the private collection of E. Gene Smith); and DNM-D (published as part of the extensive collection called *The 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud Great Dharma Treasury*).

As explained earlier, there is no reason to consider the so-called DNM-Lhasa (here Ms-Lhasa) as a *mdzod nag ma* text. Applying the

⁶⁴ Quintman mentions two other copies, unstudied in his work, one in a private collection (Ms-Bordier?) and one at the British Library, so far unstudied. For the British Library manuscript see below.

criteria used in the present study – based upon the differences in content and time – it should rather be considered as a 'variant' version of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

The second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia at present known to us can be divided as follows: the *Dark/Black Treasury* in Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's *Collected Works*, the texts identified by their colophon as *A River of Blessings* and the Life-and-Song text kept at the British Library (Ms-BL).⁶⁵

The first *Dark/Black Treasury* text (DNM-RD 1)⁶⁶ is a 2006 modern edition with the title *rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug mi la bzhad pa rdo rje'i gsung mgur mdzod nag ma zhes pa karma pa rang byung rdo rjes phyogs gcig tu bkod pa*, "Songs of the Powerful Lord of Yogins Mi la bZhad pa rdo rje called *The Dark/Black Treasury*, compiled by Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje." The text ends with the sentence *dpa*⁶⁷ *bzhad pa rdor je'i rnam thar mgur chos zhal gdams dang bcas pa rdzogs so*, "Herewith the life story of the hero bZhad pa rdo rje, with his songs, teachings and oral instructions, is completed." Then follows a succession of different colophons. All the elements of the colophon in

⁶⁵ For an outline of the different versions of *A River of Blessings* and *The Dark/Black Treasury* and the songs included therein see Blancke 2023b, Song Chart 8.

⁶⁶ At the moment 3 editions of this text are known.

(1) A one-volume computerised *dbu can* pecha published in Ziling in 2006, 774 pp.

(2) An edition of the same text in 2 book volumes published by the dPal brtsegs publishing house in 2011, as the second and third volumes of the *rJe btsun mi la ras pa'i gsung 'bum* (BDRC MW1KG14335). The title of the second volume is *rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug mi la bzhad pa rdo rje'i mgur 'bum mdzod nag ma zhes pa karma pa rang byung rdo rjes phyogs gcig tu bskod pa*; the title of the third volume is identical, except that *mgur 'bum* is replaced by *gsung mgur*. After verifying a sample of this edition I noticed the content is identical to the below 2013 edition; therefore I did not include a detailed analysis of it in Song Chart 8.

(3) A 2013 edition by dPal brtsegs, as the 23rd volume of the *Karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs*, 862 pp, with title *Mi la ras pa'i gsung mgur mdzod nag ma* (BDRC MW3PD1288). One song cycle – the *bzang rgyud phyag tshang gi skor* – as well as a number of songs have been added to the above-mentioned 2006 Ziling edition, to include as many songs as available related to Mi la ras pa. This additional content is included also in the 2011 edition. See Bock's outline of the text in Appendix A: 189 and Blancke's Song Chart 8.

⁶⁷ *Sic* in all three the versions.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

Ms-Lhasa are repeated.⁶⁸ However, it is noteworthy that the expression *mdzod nag ma* is completely absent from the text and the colophon, and appears only in the title.

According to the colophon, the compendium would be entirely compiled by Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, an assertion that raises multiple issues. First, this is in direct contradiction with the statement that the text was compiled by the twelve *ras pa* disciples. Second, this very same colophon was already mentioned in Ms-Lhasa, but, as can be seen from Song Charts 7 & 8, many new elements are included that are not present in Ms-Lhasa but are in common with *A River of Blessings* and with Ms-BL, a compendium that is not linked to Rang byung rdo rje. Therefore, it is likely that at least one additional source has been omitted from the colophon.

The *Dark/Black Treasury* has a final colophon explaining that the original manuscript was written down by Blo gros rgya mtsho, main scribe (*dpon yi ge pa*) of the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes, (1453–1526). Therefore, the work can be dated to the last quarter of the fifteenth or the first quarter of the sixteenth century, around or shortly after gTsang smyon Heruka's *Life and Songs*. It is said to have been edited like a beautiful gem – this possibly means that it was an illustrated manuscript. The text was consecrated with empowerment and revised by two experts in scriptures and reasoning.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ For a detailed analysis of the colophon see Bock p. 84.

⁶⁹ DNM-RD 2006: 772-73: *de lta bu'i skyes bu dam pa de'i rnam par thar pa mdo sngags kyi lam gnad mtha' dag phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa'i glegs bam 'di ni/ de nyid la mi phyed pa'i dad pa'i blo gros gser gi sa gzhi/ 'khor 'bangs rgya mtsho'i dbus su/ rigs rus cho 'brangs kyi mngon par tho ba gtong ba sogs kyi kha bzang gis spras zhing/ yi ge 'bri mchod sogs kyi rol mtshos rnam par brgyan pa/ lha bran srid sde ris bdun gyis gus par 'dud pa/ 'phags nor bdun gyi shing yongs 'dus legs par spud pa'i ri dbang mi dpon bzhed rtsa blo gros rgya mtshos lhag bsam rnam par dag pas yang yang bskul nas/ cha rkyen thams cad phun sum tshogs par byas te/ gar dbang rdo rje chang gi rnam 'phrul/ zhwa dmar cod pan 'dzin pa bzhi pa chos kyi grags pa ye shes dpal bzang po'i dpon yig pa blo gros kyi nyi 'od kyis legs par bshad pa sum rtags gnyis/ dag yig gnyis/ ka la pa sogs sgra yi bstan bcos rgya mtsho lta bu rnam kyi pad tshal/ mkhas pa'i dbang po śākya ku mā ra yi bka' drin la brten nas legs par kha 'byed par gyur pa/ blo gros rgya mtshos sdebs legs nor bu'i rgyan gyis rnam par brgyan te/ lha lam shog bu'i ngo la/ rab gsal dbang zhu ba'i bdud rtsi mkho la snag gis mdzes par bkod de shar ba'o/ zhu dag mkhan ni lung rig smra ba śākya'i dge slong rin chen bzang po dang/ śākya seng ge gnyis kyis mdzad pa'o/.*

* * *

The next group of second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia, called *A River of Blessings*, is available in multiple versions, out of which five are studied here.

- Ms-Smith, a single volume *dbu med* manuscript with title *rJe rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug dpal bzhad pa'i rdo rje'i 'gur tshogs tshad phyog gcig tu bsgrigs pa lo rgyus kyis spras pa*, "The Collected Songs of the Powerful Lord of Yogins, the Glorious bZhad pa'i rdo rje; a compilation embellished with historical anecdotes." There is no mention of the Karma pa or *The Black Treasury* on the title page. Considering the illustrations in this manuscript, it seems to have been transmitted in the Upper 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud lineage.⁷⁰
- Ms-India, a two-volume *dbu med* manuscript published in India in 1978, with the same title as the above-mentioned DNM-RD (including the name of the Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje as the compiler and the name *mdzod nag ma*). The English title page states that the text was "reproduced from a rare manuscript from the library of Dbon-sprul Rin-po-che." It seems to be a copy of the above Ms-Smith or of a common source.⁷¹
- Ms-Drepung,⁷² a two-volume *dbu med* manuscript reproduced in facsimile in the *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs* series of the dPal brtsegs publishing house. This is a very exciting find because it is from this manuscript that the next two editions –

⁷⁰ Quintman 2014a: 254n83. BDRC database states that this manuscript was found among the text collections at The Sixteen Arhats Temple (gNas bcu lha khang) in 'Bras spungs monastery. For the importance of these text collections see Ducher 2020.

⁷¹ So far we have not been able to fully access one version of this collection, filmed in Boudhanath by NGMPP, reel number E/2511/12. From a written conversation by Étienne Bock with the Berlin State Library and the inspection of four pages of the text, it results to be a copy of Ms-India.

⁷² This manuscript might also have been found in The Sixteen Arhat Temple at 'Bras spungs monastery. It was reproduced in vols. 111 & 112 of *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs*, dPal brtsegs bod yig dpe snying zhib 'jug khang, mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2015.

<https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:I4PD3130#open-viewer>

I thank Étienne Bock for pointing out this text to me.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

BCG-D and BCG-Si, see below – seem to be copied. As a matter of fact, BCG-Si, a modern copy of Ms-Drepung, opens with a discrete watermark reproduction of 4 pages of that manuscript's illustrated folios on its flyleaves.⁷³

The title page of Ms-Drepung is missing, but the text is catalogued as *rJe btsun mi la ras pa'i rnam thar rdo rje'i glu dang mgur rnams phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa*, "Life of the rJe btsun Mi la ras pa together with his spiritual vajra songs" and it is attributed to Rang byung rdo rje by its cataloguers. The manuscript counts many illustrations. Among these, there are ten lineage masters from the Ri bo che branch of the sTag lung lineage, the last being Chos rje 'Jig rten dbang phyug (1454–1532). This allows us to date the manuscript to *circa* the sixteenth century. It is noteworthy that there is no reference to these masters in the recent editions of the same text.

- BCG-D (Drikung), a 2004 two-volume *dbu can* handwritten edition titled *rJe mi la'i rnam thar mdzod nag ma*, "Lord Mi la's life story [called] The Dark/Black Treasury," included in the '*Bri gung bKa' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo* collection (vols. 7 & 8)⁷⁴
- BCG-Si (Si khron), a 2008 computerised edition of the same text by Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, in two book volumes, with title *rJe rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug mi la bzhad pa rdo rje'i gsung mgur mdzod nag ma zhes karma pa rang byung rdo rjes phyogs gcig tu bkod pa*, "The Collected Songs of Mi la bZhad pa rdo rje, Lord of Yogins, [called] *The Dark/Black Treasury*, compiled by Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje." The two books contain several colour-printed illustrations and black and white drawings that refer to the song episodes.

These five versions of *A River of Blessings* are similar but not identical. As can be seen from Song Chart 8, they can be subdivided into two

⁷³ These images are found in Ms-Drepung facsimile vol. 111 on the pages 145, 149, 154 and 168.

⁷⁴ Ducher 2020: 15 mentions, "According to the present Che tshang Rinpoche there were around 40 boxes of 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud texts in the Sixteen Arhats Temple. He personally heard about their presence within 'Bras spungs in the 1980s and organized the reproduction of several volumes he was interested in. A large part of what is now called the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo comes from there [...] this collection has been completely rewritten by hand."

distinct groups: group A – Ms-Smith & Ms-India – and group B – Ms-Drepung & BCG-D & BCG-Si. All the versions end with the following sentence:

The Collected Songs of the powerful Lord of Yogins, the glorious bZhad pa'i rdo rje; a compilation embellished with historical anecdotes. A River of Blessings relieving the tormenting heat of mental defilements.⁷⁵

Hence, these five versions are referred to as *A River of Blessings*.

At the end of the texts, there is an elaborate list of disciples (different from that in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*). The original colophon of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* – and thus the reference to the twelve *ras pas* as well as the claim of the text being the "Lineage Wish-fulfilling Gem" of the Saṃvara Aural Transmission – has been elided. All five versions mention the following three sources.

- "Regarding this life story of the great rJe btsun Mi la ras pa together with his spiritual vajra songs, the Dharma Lord Karma pa has said..."⁷⁶ and then follows a slightly modified version of the Ms-Lhasa colophon about Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje writing the text. A major difference though is that the text compiled by Rang byung rdo rje is here clearly identified as *mdzod nag ma*, whereas the colophon in Ms-Lhasa does not mention this designation.
- "[A text] said to be a compilation of seventeen different collected songs excellently completed in the Gungthang Pelkyi Tsuklakhang."⁷⁷ So far this source has not been identified, except for the place of the compilation: "Gungthang Pelkyi Tsuklakhang,

⁷⁵ Ms-Smith 318a, Ms-India 2: 551, Ms-Drepung 112: 367, BCG-D 2:855, BCG-Si 1133, *rJe rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug dpal bzhad pa'i rdo rje'i 'gur tshogs tshad phyog gcig tu bsgrigs pa lo rgyus kyis spras pa/byin rlabs kyi chu rgyun gyis nyon mongs pa'i tsha gdung sel bar byed pa*.

⁷⁶ Ms-Smith 318a, Ms-India 2:554, Ms-Drepung 112: 366, BCG-D 2:508, BCG-Si 1033: *rJe btsun chen po mi la ras pa'i rnam thar rdo rje'i glu dang mgur rnam phyogs gcig tu bsdu pa 'di/ chos rje karma pa'i zhal nas...* (see Bock's detailed analysis of the colophon p.85).

⁷⁷ *Gung thang dpal gyi gtsug lag khang*. Quintman 2014a: 210 gives the full transcription of the colophon.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

a monastery near Lhasa established by Lama Zhang in 1187 as a seat for the Tselpa Kagyu tradition. The author was likely a member of this lineage, perhaps an abbot or prominent monk, after the fashion of Sangyé Bum."

- "[A text] said to be a compilation [made] having seen one hundred and twenty-seven different biographies of the Jetsun. These [versions] have been compiled and supplemented with as many of the Jetsun's song collections as could be found."⁷⁸

Both Roberts and Quintman suggest this third source could refer to Zhi byed ri pa's *Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams*, completed in 1381, as he also mentioned that his text was based on 127 biographies. Zhi byed ri pa's short biography of Mi la ras pa included in the first part of his *Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams* is almost identical to the Golden Rosary life story of Mi la ras pa in the *bDe mchog sNyan brgyud Biographies*.⁷⁹

* * *

The British Library has an illustrated manuscript catalogued as *The Life and Songs of the Yogi Milarepa (Mi la'i rnam mgur bris ma)* [Ms-BL].⁸⁰ It contains a great number of illuminations with various life scenes.⁸¹ At the end of the text some images of lineage masters are included, collocating the manuscript in the Ri bo che branch of the sTag lung

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 110.

⁷⁹ For a description of the content of this text see Blancke 2021g, *Zhi byed ri pa – The Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams* and Quintman 2012. Besides the above-mentioned short biography in the Golden Rosary style of the Saṃvara Aural Transmission, this text contains many other details such as lineage histories, conversations between Mi la and his disciples, lists of teachings received by the author, a list of Mi la ras pa's most famous songs, etc.

⁸⁰ There was an online sample of this manuscript on the British Library website that is not available for the moment (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-life-and-songs-of-a-famous-tibetan-yogi>, shelfmark Or 16756). I thank Marco Passavanti for drawing my attention to this online sample. My greatest thanks to Burkhard Quessel and Charles Manson for giving me access to the manuscript.

⁸¹ For a description of the illuminations see Bock's article pp. 56-68 and his Appendix A: 207-215.

bKa' brgyud school.⁸² This lineage was founded in 1180 by sTag lung thang pa bKra shis dpal (1142–1210), a disciple of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po, direct disciple of sGam po pa (1110–1179). The fourth lineage holder – and the third source for the collection, see below – was Sangs rgyas dbon (1251–1296).

This manuscript does not seem to be another edition of the second-stratum compendia connected with Rang byung rdo rje, for two reasons.

- The main text of the manuscript ends as follows (f. 392a).
dpal bzhad pa rdo rje'i rnam thar 'gur ma 'chings dang bcas pa rdzogs so. This corresponds to the final sentence of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* – e.g., Ms-Oxford f. 191b.
- There is no mention of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje as a contributor to the text.

Instead, in the same way as in the case of the different editions of *A River of Blessings*, the compendium also states it is based on multiple sources. Unfortunately, the relevant page is slightly damaged and some words remain difficult to decipher.⁸³ The mentioned sources are stated as follows:

- First, "Taking as the basis the text of *The Twelve Great Disciples*"⁸⁴

⁸² See Bock pp. 75–77 for an illustration of the lineage masters in the text. The last two depicted masters are 'Jig rten dbang phyug (1454–1532) and mChog sprul bKra shis dpal (1461–1508).

⁸³ Ms-BL 392b: *dpal bzhad pa rdo rje'i rnam thar/ 'gur ma'i chings dang bcas pa rdzogs soha// [rnam thar 'di dad] dang ldan pa dpag tu med pa'i don du/ ngan rdzong ston pa bo de ra dzā la sogs pa bu chen bcu gnyis kyi dpe la dan byas nas/ gzhan yangs rdo rje 'dzin pa 'jam dbyangs (...) khang du/ 'gur 'bum bcu bdun bsags nas/ bsgrigs zin pa'i nang nas thus pa dang/ rje mar pa'i rnam thar nang nas bsdus pa dang/ slar [?] yongs 'grub chen sangs rgyas dbon rin po che'i phyag dpe dang/ phyogs du ma nas dpe rnyed tshad thams cad btus pa dang phyogs gcig tu mi dbang chen po ratna mangala shri (...) / bzhad pa rdo rje'i rnam thar gsungs sgros nmams/ dad ldan bten pa'i mtha' can bdag cag gis/ gus pa'i sgo nas 'di bzhengs/ dge ba*

⁸⁴ *Ngan rdzong ston pa bo de ra dzā la sogs pa'i bu chen bcu gnyis kyi dpe la dan byas nas.* The meaning of *dan* is unclear, but it could be understood as *rten*.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

- Then, "*rDo rje 'dzin pa 'Jam dbyangs...*(Grags pa?), having gathered seventeen song collections, collected their contents and also summarised [elements] from Lord Mar pa's hagiography"⁸⁵
- "A text of the sTag lung master sGrub chen Sangs rgyas dbon rin po che (1251–1296)"
- Finally, the compiler (or the scribe) of the text adds that he has gathered, summarised and arranged in a single [text] other elements from different places, as many as he could find

At the end there is a partially truncated name, *mi dbang chen po ratna mang gha* (...). It seems to indicate Rat na mang gha la.

Although it is not clear who is the final compiler of the British Library manuscript, it is interesting that a life-and-song compendium of Mi la ras pa was transmitted in the sTag lung bKa' brgyud lineage, enriched with new contents – very similar to the new contents in the other second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia – in the Ri bo che branch of the sTag lung bKa' brgyud lineage instead of the Karma bKa' brgyud lineage.

3. Content of the second-stratum bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia

All the texts in the second stratum follow the quality structure of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, except for the last chapter. In *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* (except Ms-Bordier and RBC-Pt) the seventeenth quality – the quality of introducing *mahāmudrā* (*phyag rgya chen po ngo 'phrod pa'i yon tan*) – is the last chapter and it includes also the death episode, whereas DNM-RD⁸⁶ and *A River of Blessings* place the last part of the life in an eighteenth chapter – the quality of

⁸⁵ *rDo rje 'dzin pa 'jam dbyangs (...)* [*grags pa?*] '*gur 'bum bcu bdun bsags nas bsgrigs zin pa'i nang nas thus pa dang/ rje mar pa'i rnam thar nang nas bsdus pa*. I have not been able to find out who this master is. Interestingly, the contribution of the manuscript's second source was based on seventeen song collections, as mentioned also in the colophon of *A River of Blessings*. Could this be the same text as the one compiled at Gung thang dPal gyi gtsug lag khang, as well as one the hidden sources in DNM-RD?

⁸⁶ In the 2006 Ziling version the 16th quality was mistakenly numbered as 17th, the 17th as 18th, and the 18th also repeated as 18th (see Bock Appendix A pp.190-94).

realising the unified vajra-body in one lifetime and showing how it dissolves in a rainbow body (*tshé gcig gis zung 'jug rdo rje 'i sku 'grub cing 'ja' lus su yal ba'i tshul bstan pa'i yon tan*).⁸⁷ Apart from this difference, these texts include all the songs included in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, so they are clearly based on that corpus.

A few major differences between all versions of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and the second-stratum compendia are found in the first chapter of the text.

For example, on the occasion of the first meeting between Mi la and Mar pa, when the latter is ploughing his land and tells Mi la he should continue digging in his field while he goes to call for the *bla ma*, he pronounces three oral instructions, which Mi la does not understand:

- The essence of the oral instructions of the *bla ma*: when gathering the subtle body elements in the central channel, the defilements are subdued, and the result will quickly ripen.
- With the blessing of a lineage-holding *bla ma*, the mind's nature rests spontaneously in its essence; when the defilements are subdued through mindfulness, the fruits of the autumn harvest will quickly ripen.
- When satisfied with the beer of great bliss – this secret intrinsic reality – the defilements are fully subdued, and the fruit will quickly ripen.

With these, Mar pa had given *mahāmudrā* pointing-out instructions for beings with higher, middle and lower capacities to Mi la ras pa, but he had not understood them.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ In Ms-BL neither the 17th nor the 18th qualities are mentioned as separate chapters, although the text does contain the same content as the other late compendia.

⁸⁸ DNM-RD 2006: 10; BCG-D 7: 30, BCG-Si 1: 37; Ms-Smith: 11b; Ms-BL 8b; there are some differences between the versions; the main transliteration is from DNM-RD, between brackets BCG and Ms-BL.

(1) [DNM-RD 2006] *bla ma dam pa'i man ngag gnad* [BCG+MS-BL *bla ma dam pa'i gdams ngag gis/ rtsa khams dbu mas* [BCG dbu mar] *bsdus byas ste/nyon mongs thal ba* [BCG+Ms-BL *nyon mongs kyi tha ba*] 'dul lags na/ 'bras bu myur du smin te mchi.

(2) *brgyud ldan bla ma'i byin rlabs kyis/ sems nyid lhug pa ngo bor gnas/ dran pas thal ba* [BCG+MS-BL *dran pa'i tha ba*] 'dul lags na/ ston thog 'bras bu myur du smin.

Further changes in the first chapter are the following:

- At the time of Mi la ras pa's initiation he sees the *maṅḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara in the sky.
- During his retreat, Mi la ras pa has a vision of a *ḍākinī* who tells about the possibility of becoming enlightened by applying a special '*pho ba* practice, without the need to meditate. After Mi la ras pa reports this to Mar pa, his teacher makes a third trip to India to receive the teachings for entering another body (included in *A River of Blessings*, but not in DNM-RD or Ms-BL).⁸⁹
- Mi la ras pa has the dream of the Four Pillars and describes it in a song to Mar pa, whereas in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* Mar pa has the dream which he then explains in a song.⁹⁰

Some new stories are added in the second-stratum compendia, sometimes with variations between DNM-RD and *A River of Blessings*. Often the contents are switched around in the various song cycles.

The content covered in this group needs further study. Looking at Song Chart 8, we notice that, in contrast to Song Chart 7 where the content was very similar in all versions except for a few added chapters, here each text group uses a different order in presenting the episodes. However, on the whole, the content included is not that different. The following examples are but a few general impressions obtained from the comparisons.

(3) *bde ba chen po chang gi ngom* [BCG+MS-BL *ngos*]/ *yang dag don chen gang ba 'di* [BCG+MS-BL *dis*]/ *yang dag gi thal ba* [*tha ba*] '*dul lags na/ 'bras bu myur du smin te mchi* (...) *de'i dus su mar pas mi la ras pa la phyag rgya chen po dbang po rab bring tha ma gsum du ngo sprod par 'dug ste ma go bar 'dug* [BCG *dbang po rab 'bring gi chos khrid byas pa yin/ Ms-BL dbang po rab 'bring gnyis du ngo sprod pa yin par 'dug*] (in both versions ordinary beings are cut from the sentence!).

⁸⁹ The first two details appear for the first time in mKha' spyod dbang po's *Clouds of Blessings*. See Blancke 2021a, *The Teaching Transmission from Marpa to Mi la in the Hagiographies* and Zhwa dmar 02 [n.d.]: 23.

⁹⁰ More differences in the first chapter can be seen in Blancke 2021a.

- In DNM-RD, the complete chapter recounting Mi la ras pa's meeting with Na ro bon chung and the conquest of the Kailāśa as a holy place for Buddhists is found (identical to gTsang smyon's Chapter 22). This chapter is missing in the early Golden Rosary biographies, in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and in Ms-BL. In *A River of Blessings*, there is but a brief mention in prose of a dispute between rJe btsun Mi la and Na ro bon chung, with Mi la's victory through miraculous powers; no songs are included.⁹¹
- In the second-stratum, part of the story of gSal le 'od is recounted, but only two songs are included.⁹² The other four songs constituting this chapter in gTsang smyon's *Songs* are missing. The entire chapter is missing from *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.⁹³ In Ms-BL, in addition to the songs in DNM-RD, two extra songs not found anywhere else are included.⁹⁴
- All second-stratum compendia include many songs dealing with details about meditation practice. One example is the song of realisation on the dividing line between happiness and misery.⁹⁵ As this song is quite different from the "usual" song style, it might be a later addition. Especially DNM-RD includes several new songs about view, meditation, conduct and fruition.
- In all second-stratum compendia, the entrustment of the bDe mchog sNyan brgyud lineage by Mi la to Ras chung pa is included, while it is missing in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, and it is also omitted by gTsang smyon Heruka.⁹⁶

⁹¹ DNM-RD 2006: 440-48; gTsang smyon 1981: 378-85; Stagg 2017: 224-30. The passage in BCG-D is translated in Quintman 2014a: 257n101. For a detailed discussion see Bock pp. 125-131.

⁹² Songs 37.5 and 37.6, DNM-RD 2006: 593-95; BCG-D 8: 67-69; gTsang smyon 1981: 575-76; Stagg 2017: 441-42.

⁹³ As already mentioned, the cycle is also included in Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu.

⁹⁴ Ms-BL 234b-237b.

⁹⁵ Song 40.4, DNM-RD 2006: 150; BCG-D 7: 308; gTsang smyon 1981: 616; Stagg 2017: 485. Also this song is included in Ms-Drukpa: 225a and Ms-Gansu vol. 24: 158. The song is missing in Ms-BL.

⁹⁶ See Blancke 2021b, *The Entrustment Of The Saṃvara Aural Transmission To Ras chung pa*. As mentioned, in Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu it is shortly mentioned (in a single sentence).

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

- DNM-RD includes a list of "fortresses" (*rdzong*) as well as some "special places" (*khyad par gi gnas*).⁹⁷ In sub-group A of *A River of Blessings* (Ms-Smith and Ms-India) the fortresses are not mentioned whereas in sub-group B (Ms-Drepung, BCG-D and BCG-Si) they are mentioned in a first addendum.
- The second-stratum compendia contain elaborate lists of disciples. They also mention a special group of followers.
 - In DNM-RD and Ms-BL "three supreme yogins and yoginīs" are mentioned:⁹⁸
 - The supreme one to subdue human beings: sGam po pa;
 - the supreme one to subdue non-human beings: bKra shis Tshe ring ma;
 - the supreme one to subdue *ḍākinīs*: the co-emergent mantra-born Tārā (*sngags skyes lhan cig skyes pa'i sgröl ma/sgron me*).
 - In *A River of Blessings*, the special group of followers consists of four "special great sons":
 - Regarding the four great sons: the local guardian *ḍākinī* Tshe ring ma subdued gods and demons with a mental body; the co-emergent mantra-born Tārā subdued hidden beings of superior capacities; Dwags po Candrakumāra subdued real human beings; Ras chung pa was the being who was the holder of the essence of the oral instructions of the Aural Transmission. These four are the foremost among all the great sons.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ DNM-RD 2006: 768.

⁹⁸ DNM-RD 2006: 769; Ms-BL 392a. *mchog gi rnal 'byor pho mo gsum ni/ mi rnams 'dul ba' mchog sgam po pa/ mi ma yin rnams 'dul ba'i mchog bkra shis tshe ring ma/ da'ki rnams 'dul ba'i mchog sngags skyes lhan cig skyes pa'i sgröl ma* [in Ms-BL *sgron me*]. This list was first seen in mKha' spyod dbang po's *Clouds of Blessings*, Zhwa dmar 02 1978a: 316.

⁹⁹ BCG-D 8: 505-6, *Bu chen bzhi ni/ yid gzugs kyi lha 'dre dbang du sdud pa zhing skyong gi daki tshe ring ma/ lkog gyur dbang po yang rab kyi skye bo dbang du sdud pa sngags skyes lhan cig skyes pa'i sgröl ma/ mngon sum mi'i 'gro ba dbang du sdud pa dwags po zla 'od gzhon nu/ snyan rgyud kyi gdams ngag gi bcud 'dzin pa'i skyes bu ras chung pa ste/ bzhi po 'di bu chen thams cad kyi gtso bo yin no*. The presence of Tārā in this special group is intriguing, as she is not mentioned in gTsang smyon's work. She is found in a few more instances, in some cases in both *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* and the late compendia:

(1) When Mi la, after staying with rNgog, is ready to return to Mar pa, he has nothing to offer. rNgog presents him with a small gift, but he tells Mi la that he should pronounce a dedication prayer when offering it. When Mi la admits

A River of Blessings offers the largest compilation of Mi la ras pa stories. These versions are more inclusive and except for the complete Na ro bon chung episode, they seem to collect all the available material about Mi la ras pa, first narrating one version and then another one, as noted by Roberts and Quintman.¹⁰⁰

- The first chapter about the hardships Mi la ras pa had endured ends with an 'alternative story', clearly inserted from another source, in which elements of Mi la ras pa's later return to his village are included, as well as a later visit to Mar pa and rNgog and a meeting with Mar pa's son mDo sde. This episode is not included in DNM-RD, but it is included in Ms-BL in a different – and more plausible – way.¹⁰¹
- The last instruction of the rJe btsun – showing the calluses on his behind – is granted to the two main disciples, Ras chung pa and sGam po pa.¹⁰² In *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, as in the other liberation stories in Ras chung pa's lineage and DNM-RD, it is granted only to Ras chung pa – although in some cases the page with this compromising detail was removed from the text!¹⁰³ Instead, in the narratives in sGam po pa's lineage – and in gTsang smyon's work – this special instruction is given only to sGam po pa.
- Songs regarding two ordained monk-scholars are included, also found in gTsang smyon's *Songs* (Chapters 42 and 44, *Lo ston dge*

he does not know how to do that, Tārā comes into the sky and makes the dedication prayer, and Mi la becomes very good at it.

- (2) When the patroness ICam me needs to pronounce a dedication prayer, unexpectedly Tārā comes into the sky and sings a dedication song.
- (3) The third instance comes in the question-and-answer episode between Mi la and sGam po pa. (See above, p. 26).

¹⁰⁰ Quintman 2014a: 111; Roberts 2007: 140.

¹⁰¹ See below p. 44 and Blancke 2021d, *Gampopa Sonam Rinchen Meets Jetsun Mi la*, where the episode in both texts is translated.

¹⁰² Blancke 2023b, Song Chart 8, the episode of q & a between lord Mi la ras pa and the incomparable rin po che from Dwags po (sGam po pa) and the episode of advice before departure to Central Tibet (Ras chung pa).

¹⁰³ Blancke 2023a, Song Chart 7, Ms-Oxford and Ms-BDRC.

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

'*dun gyi skor* and *Li skor phyra ru ba'i skor*).¹⁰⁴ These chapters are missing in *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*¹⁰⁵ as well as in DNM-RD. This content might be taken from an unknown text in sGam po pa's lineage.

- Sub-group B includes the narrative of Ras chung pa's strange illness and his first trip to India to get cured, which is also mentioned by gTsang smyon Heruka.¹⁰⁶ The episode is missing in DNM-RD, sub-group A and Ms-BL.
- Sub-group B includes three additional pieces of information after the colophons.
 - A list of the dwelling places of Mi la ras pa, identical to that of DNM-RD.
 - A text by 'Ba' rom pa dar ma dbang phyug (1127–1194),¹⁰⁷ in which some visual appearances of gods and demons present in Mi la ras pa's life stories are explained in terms of interconnections with Mi la ras pa's meditation practice on the channels, winds and drops.¹⁰⁸
 - The *History of the Dark/Black Treasury, the Collected Songs of Mi la ras pa, King of the rJe btsuns, transmitted by the Karma pas*.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ E.g., BCG-D 7: 492, Stagg 525-526; BCG-D 7: 139, Stagg 546; BCG-D 8: 78, Stagg 542.

¹⁰⁵ Some of them are found in Ms-Drukpa and Ms-Gansu.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., BCG-D 7:213, Stagg 106-107.

¹⁰⁷ Spelled 'Ba' brom pa in the three copies.

¹⁰⁸ E.g., BCG-D 8:508. For an English translation of this fragment see Blancke 2021e. A sTag lung lineage history called *sTag lung religious history - an ocean of marvels* (*sTag lung chos 'byung ngo mtshar rgya mtso*) compiled in 1609 by sTag lung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal (BDRC W17276) includes a short life story of Mi la ras pa (pp. 145-58) in which the hindrances that Mi la ras pa encountered – such as attacks of demons and the like – are explained in terms of blockages of the channels, winds and drops in a way very similar to this addendum in BCG-D attributed to 'Ba' brom pa.

¹⁰⁹ E.g., BCG-D 8: 513. *rJe btsun gyi rgyal po mi la ras pa'i 'gur 'bum karma pa nas brgyud pa'i mdzod nag ma yi lo rgyus ni*. See Quintman 2014a: 105-6. For a comparison between this lineage history and the one included in the Bordier manuscript, see Bock pp. 94-106.

Regarding Ms-BL, it is interesting to note some significant differences not contained in any of the other second-stratum compendia – a possible indication that it was not depending on these: even though mainly the same sources were used,¹¹⁰ some specific sTag lung input provides for a slightly alternative account. To give just a few examples:

- In this text, when Mi la ras pa leaves Mar pa, the teacher tells him that he should return once he has obtained some success in his meditation practice. Thus, after going to his village and practising alone, he goes back to meet Mar pa¹¹¹ and only at that time does he receive some more instructions, together with the advice to go to India. As mentioned above, this same episode is partly inserted in *A River of Blessings*, as an alternative narrative at the end of the first chapter. Whereas in Ms-BL Mi la ras pa receives his main instructions from Mar pa only during that later visit, in *A River of Blessings* the second visit is merely an account of Mi la ras pa's progress made on the path and Mar pa's acknowledgement of this.¹¹²
- On f. 83b a short biography of Ngan rdzong ston pa is included, lacking in all other texts.
- Regarding Mi la ras pa's disciples, in Ms-BL Ras chung pa is mentioned as having received most oral instructions, whereas Ngan rdzong ston pa is described as the holder of the Aural Transmission Lineage.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Strangely enough, although there is no reference in the text to Rang byung rdo rje or the *mDzod nag ma*, all the typical characteristics mentioned in Ms-Lhasa and the other 'variant' versions are also found in this compendium.

¹¹¹ The episode comes in the first episode of the third quality chapter, the quality of recognising blissful heat, Ms-BL 34a-42b. A similar return by Mi la ras pa to IHo brag is described also in Zhi byed ri pa's work. In this case, the visits took place after Mar pa's death. (Blancke 2021g)

¹¹² See Blancke 2021a, *The Teaching Transmission from Marpa to Mila in the Hagiographies*, where the episode in both texts is translated.

¹¹³ Ms-BL 391a, *thugs kyi sras bzhi ni/ gdam pa che bar grags pa gung thang gi ras chung rdo rje grags/ snyan rgyud gdam pa'i rgyud 'dzin lcim lung gi ngam rdons ston pa byang chub rgyal po/ sgrub pa mthar[...].stag mo'i gling kha ba 'bri sgom pa/ bde gsal mi rtog pa la nus gyur pa mdo bkra'i se ban ras pa dang bzhi'o.*

Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra

Surprisingly, Ms-Drepung, also transmitted in the sTag lung lineage – as can be seen from the illustrations of the lineage masters included therein – does not include these alternative elements. This could mean that Ms-Drepung is itself a copy of a text that was transmitted in the Karma Kam tshang lineage, as the colophon mentioning Rang byung rdo rje as the compiler of part of the text seems to indicate. The same may be true also for Ms-Smith: although the masters illustrated in the manuscript belong to the Upper 'Brug pa lineage, the colophon includes the reference to the text compiled by Rang byung rdo rje.

* * *

The numerous copies of the compendia still available show how important they are. These works continue to be reproduced, despite gTsang smyon Heruka's more attractive version from a literary point of view.

Concerning the relationship between the second-stratum compendia and gTsang smyon Heruka's *Life and Songs*, it is difficult to come to precise conclusions regarding dates and narrative developments. One could speculate that the plethora of biographies witnessed in the early sixteenth century might indicate an attempt to protect this particular corpus of the bZhad pa'i rdo rje literary tradition as a reaction against some narrative changes introduced in gTsang smyon Heruka's *Life and Songs*.

Moreover, it is intriguing to notice that a compendium compiled within the Ras chung snyan brgyud tradition in the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud lineage is later considered almost exclusive to the Karma Kam tshang lineage. This impression is the result of the creation of new titles and colophons that include the designation *Dark/Black Treasury* with the presumed authorship of Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje and the addition of a transmission history of the text in the Kam tshang lineage.¹¹⁴ On the contrary, the Ras chung snyan brgyud tradition remained part of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud lineage, passing on the one hand through gTsang smyon Heruka and his disciples, and on the other

¹¹⁴ For details about the transmission line see Quintman 2014a: 105-106 and Bock's article in this volume.

hand through the third 'Brug chen 'Jam dbyangs chos grags (1478–1523) and the fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po (1527–1592).¹¹⁵

The Fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos sgrags ye shes seems to have been a key figure in the preservation of this particular literary tradition. In a short biography of the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa hosted on the BDRC database¹¹⁶ it is said that Chos grags ye shes at some point of his life gave a reading transmission (*bka' lung*) of his predecessor the second Zhwa dmar pa mKha' spyod dbang po's *Collected Works*. mKha' spyod dbang po had written an elaborate life story of Mi la ras pa and sGam po pa, in the episodic style used in the lineage of sGam po pa. Therefore, one could wonder why Chos grags ye shes would have authorised a new compilation based on *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* if his predecessor had not done so.

According to rGod tshang ras pa sNa tshogs ming can (1494–1570, a disciple of gTsang smyon Heruka)¹¹⁷ gTsang smyon had sent all his written materials to the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa. In the latter's above-mentioned biography, we read that in his fifties – meaning in the early sixteenth century – Chos grags ye shes gave teachings on the *Mi la'i mgur 'bum*. Would this have been gTsang smyon 's *Songs* or the work that was compiled under his authority?

Moreover, it is interesting to note that there seemingly was a strong connection between the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa and the Ri bo che branch of the sTag lung lineage. Among the texts included in his *gsung 'bum* we find a praise to Chos rje 'Jig rten dbang phyug – the last sTag lung master mentioned in Ms-Drepung and the second last in Ms-BL – written by the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa.¹¹⁸ More historical information about this particular period and the relations between the different bKa' brgyud schools at that time could shed some more light on this question.

¹¹⁵ For charts regarding these lineage transmissions see Callahan 2023: 891-99. See also Sernesi 2021.

¹¹⁶ *Zhwa dmar chos grags ye shes kyi rnam thar mdor bsdus*, a recent biography by Mi nyag mgon po (1923–2008) 1: 205-17 (BDRC W25268_I1PD36334).

¹¹⁷ See Quintman 2014a:132 and Sernesi 2011 & 2021: 145 and 203n63.

¹¹⁸ "dPal stag lung thang po'i gdung rgyud ri bo che'i chos rje 'jig rten dbang phyug la bstod pa bzhugs so", *Zhwa dmar* 04 2009c 4:231. (BDRC W1KG4876_I1KG4881). I thank Étienne Bock for pointing out this text of praise to me.

Conclusion

This article gives an overview of a group of voluminous texts regarding the life and songs of Mi la ras pa here called "bZhad pa'i rDo rje Compendia" – manuscripts dated around the 15th and 16th centuries and recent editions. All these texts are based on an earlier presumably 13th/14th century anonymous work known as *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* but actually titled *Life and Songs of the Glorious Laughing Vajra*.

As has been demonstrated, in all the above-discussed versions the same basic structure is maintained, namely a division into two main chapters: Mi la ras pa's difficulties in his early life and the 17 or 18 qualities he developed through meditation. This method of life writing was seen earlier in the Golden Rosary biographies in Ras chung pa's lineage, which suggests that the original *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* originated from that lineage. First presented as the words of Ngan rdzong ston pa and the other cotton-clad disciples of Mi la ras pa and connected with the Saṃvara Aural Transmission, in later times a great deal of the authorship was attributed to the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje.

What differentiates all these texts are additional pieces of information consisting of new episodes and new songs. From the study of detailed song charts, it becomes clear that the texts can be divided into two main groups: a first stratum, consisting of different late texts derived from the presumed original but unavailable *Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* as well as some slightly 'variant' versions; a second stratum, consisting of three types of texts – the so-called *Dark/Black Treasury*, various versions of *A River of Blessings*, and a life-and-song manuscript kept at the British Library.

A major distinction between the two strata lies in some narrative developments, started with the new compilation of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples* attributed to the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje. That new compilation became the basic source for the second-stratum compendia. All the new elements from that compilation were added in the second-stratum, together with new inputs coming mainly from the unknown text in Gung thang dpal gyi gtsug lag khang and other sources mentioned in the colophons, from a later time with respect to *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*.

In my opinion, another point of divergence between the two strata seems to be a shift of this literary tradition coming from the Saṃvara Aural Transmission towards more sGam po pa-oriented lineages (Karma Kam tshang, 'Bri gung, sTag lung) by adding more anecdotes regarding sGam po pa and accentuating the importance of *mahāmudrā* teachings. However, also the entrustment of the Saṃvara Aural Transmission to Ras chung pa, which was absent in the first stratum, was added in the second stratum.

Although less interesting and captivating from a literary point of view than gTsang smyon Heruka's *Life and Songs*, this particular tradition is still vibrant and alive. One cannot but wish that the presumed 'original' version of *The Twelve Great Ras pa Disciples*, the missing source from Gung thang dpal gyi gtsug lag khang and early manuscripts of all these versions could be found!

