

TOPICAL REPORTS

Thang-stong rGyal-po - A Leonardo of Tibet

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In 1985 I served as consultant to the Royal Government of Bhutan for Art and Architecture. Travelling freely within the country and making drawings, I started to trace the life and works of Thang-stong rGyal-po, the genius Mahasiddha, whose name is known within the Tibetan Himalayas, but who remains virtually unknown among western scholars, except for his accomplishments as builder of iron bridges. R.A. Stearns was the only scholar who carried out research on Thang-stong rGyal-po and came to understand his importance. Janet Gyatso and Cyrus Rembert Stearns, in 1979 and 1980 respectively, published papers dealing either with the spiritual traditions or the life story of Thang-stong rGyal-po. Stearns, whom I met in early 1986, has since collaborated with me in my research and shares responsibility for the results I present here. In this report I emphasize the diverse artistic achievements of Thang-stong rGyal-po as seen by myself, also an artist.

Thang-stong rGyal-po was a Mahāsiddha of renaissance character, who in the course of his lifelong travels also engaged in teaching, building, constructing, performing, painting, composing, healing, etc. He lived 124 years, from 1361-1485. His methods of perceiving, acting and reflecting within the world were strategically open-minded, interdisciplinary, intermediary, social and 'crazy' (*grub-thob smyon-pa*) because he was in the first instance a sensuous and pragmatic person, an actual bridge builder as well

as a symbolic one, bridging gaps in Tibetan society, such as the one between the 'classes'. He practiced as a blacksmith, thus adhering to a 'lower' class, and at the same time acted as a philosopher, teacher and reincarnated emanation (*thugs-sprul*) of *Guru Padmasambhava*. By trespassing from one 'profession' upon another, he could show up common prejudices about differences between sentient beings.

We consider Thang-stong rGyal-po, as Janet Gyatso does, as *the* example of a Mahāsiddha as artist. In addition to his unrivaled contribution to Tibetan architecture (*zlum-brtsegs lHa-khang at sPa-gro, Bhutan*); he was also a poet, bridge and ferry builder, composer, sculptor, painter, engineer, physician, blacksmith, philosopher, the founder and promoter of the *A-iche-iHamo* drama theatre and the originator of the seemingly lost ritual of Breaking the Stone (*pho-bar rdo-gcog*). Many of his activities may be compared with those of his contemporary Leonardo da Vinci. In this report we exclude his life-story, his aspect as a *gTer-ton*, his reincarnations, his spiritual traditions, his tantric and medicinal practices, his *mahāsiddha*-powers and legendary aspects and concentrate on four of his activities that we investigated in the Himalayas: bridge building, architecture, frescos and ritual enactments -- the results of which were displayed at the First International Thang-stong rGyal-po Expedition organized by me in 1988 with the support of the Technische Universität Berlin.

The expedition took place from August till October 1988. The members came from different national backgrounds: the Polish expert on Buddhism and iconography Marek Kalmus, the Polish anthropologist and second cameraman, Waldemar Czechowski, the Tibetan Padma Wangyal, the American Tibetologist Cyrus Rembert Stearns and myself as artist, film maker, initiator and leader of the expedition.

The route of the expedition, as far as the results given here are concerned, was as follows. Starting in India at Dharamsala we travelled around Spiti to Tabo, Kye, Lhalun, Kibber and the Pin-valley (names in international transcription), then to Kathmandu and Bodhath in Nepal, then into Tibet to 'Bri-khung, bSam-yas, rTse-thang, Zwha-lu, rGyal-rtse, gZhis-ka-tse, sNye-thang, Bras-spungs, Lha-rtse, rNam-ring, Ri-bo-che and Ding-ri. In this brief report comments are offered on only five of the works of Thang-stong rGyal-po that we encountered: 1. the iron chain suspension bridge at Yu-na; 2. the iron chain suspension bridge at Ri-bo-che; 3. the *mchod-rten* of *gCung-* resp. *Pal Ri-bo-che* as an example of architecture; 4. the frescoes of Ri-bo-che as an example of painting; and 5. the ritual *pho-bar rdo-gcog* as an example of the link between performance and theater.

We would not have discovered what we did, without the preliminary work of Stearns, his thesis on Thang-stong rGyal-po's life (1980) and his translation of the biography *Lo-chen 'Gyur-med bde-chen* (1609) under the title (1989)

The iron chain suspension bridge at Yu-na

The spelling Yu-na follows local pronunciation. The bridge is located in

the upper sKyid-chu - valley north of LHa-sa south of 'Bri-khung til. The historic iron chains span about 30 meters, but contemporary steel cables stabilize the bridge today. The neighbouring former monastery of Yu-na was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Relics, such as carved wooden pillars, beams and stone reliefs, are embedded today in the foundations on both sides of the stream. Round boulders with central holes for the suspension of the chains with an iron bolt at either side seem to be original or are indistinguishable from traditional designs. On two of the iron links we found incisions.

The roughness of the inscriptions are probably more a sign of the difficult process of producing them during the red glowing phase of the hammering rather than a sign of age. Technically the inscription could only have been accomplished by use of a long chisel, which gave enough distance to protect the hands from the heat. The pointing of the chisel and the configuration of the syllables must have been difficult. Therefore the characters are simple and read: *rin-chen lCzags-zam*, Treasurable or Valuable Iron Bridge. The often used term *rin-chen* denotes that the bridge must be made by, in honor of, or related to an important person, and/or must be situated at a holy place, etc.

The other incision we found supports this, saying: *khyi-chu*, dog-water, thus giving a date, which could be the year 1442 within the Tibetan 60-year calendar cycle, if we consider the life time of Thang-stong rGyal-po relevant. Within his life the first dog-water-year would be the time, when he was only about twenty years old, the next one is the assumed date and the last one some time after his death. Both inscrip-

tions give us reason to trust in the date 1442, since Thang-stong rGyal-po did not start bridge-building until he was 69 years old. Not surprisingly his biography mentions his activity in this area of the upper sKyid-chu right during that time.

The iron chain suspension bridge Ri-bo-che

Ri-bo-che monastery, called gCung-or Pal Ri-bo-che, not to be mixed up with Ri-bo-che in do-Khams, was, in addition to Chu-bo-ri, Thang-stong rGyal-po's main seat. Here several thousands of monks lived and Thang-stong rGyal-po's followers stayed until its destruction. The site at the 90 degree bend of the gTsang-po river, south of rNam-ring in U-Tsang, is dominated (and this is the only architectural structure which survived the ideological 'purification' in tact) by a gorgeous seven-storey-high *bKra-shis sgo-mang*-type *mchod-rten* or *sku-bum* with a processional path *skor-lam* at the base, completing the *maṇḍala* structure, and an iron-chain-bridge nearby.

The bridge is a childhood dream of a bridge. It bridges the river *gTsang-po*, here in the upper part not wider than 100 meters, in two steps, a longer and shorter suspending part, as usual with Thang-stong rGyal-po's bridges, starting on a pile of river stones, originally found there or piled up, as Thang-stong rGyal-po did at *rTse-thang* and other places, mentioned in his biography. Yakhide and leatherstrings, which are fastened to the links of the chain at either side, hang down and loop under wooden planks and logs, which function as foot paths. The chains serve as handrails as well, though they reach the height of one's hips. According to the

biography the bridge was built in 1436; and as we anticipated, it looks its 550 years. The foundations of the bridge at the river side are crowned by *ma-qi chu-skor*, and enormous trunks of old willow trees are used within the stone masonry work. The iron links themselves are the expected and known type that I have examined in Bhutan. They are one foot long, oblong shaped, more like squeezed ellipses, covered by a bronze-like smooth brownish to reddish patina, with a particular diagonal soldering seam of arsenic-containing iron. Therefore the seams, usually the weakest part, are of additional strength and free of any rust; as the chains are entirely free of iron-mould, probably as a result of the rather unclean composition of the blacksmithed iron.

The perfect condition of the bridge, which is an object of private daily worship and religious service by the inhabitants of the village finds its explanation, no doubt, in one of the prophecies known in the region: Buddhism will flourish in Tibet as long as this holy bridge stays. Thus the bridge has been defended and taken care of down through the centuries.

The documentation we took are the first photographs, films and videotapes ever. There is no other visual record of the bridge, apart from a sketch made by Peter Aufschnaiter more than forty years ago, passing by the village on his escape, not daring to enter it. The bridge can be seen at the very left of his drawing next to the *stupa* of Ri-bo-che.

The *mchod-rten* of Ri-bo-che

The *mchod-rten* is definitely of Thang-stong rGyal-po's hand, the construction process is described in detail in the biography. It is a seven storey high hierarchical structure, if we

count the structurally visual elements from the outside. Seen from the interior, we may add another storey inside the double-storeyed *bum-pa* and a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* like the three *sku-bum* of rGyal-rtse, rGyang (this one Thang-stong rGyal-po is said to have helped building), and Jo-nang. The building was erected between 1449 and 1456 with the active support of the *rNam-ring* ruler who provided labourers and materials. There was also severe resistance by the workers, several assassination attempts, thefts and some collapses of walls. Wonderful stories concerning building techniques, spiritual teachings connected with the labour, and legends of the wild and crazy life of the Mahāsiddha are told. After the *mchod-rten*'s completion even the Emperor of China sent loads of presents to its consecration.

In this context it should not be neglected to mention the most important and most innovational architecture of Thang-stong rGyal-po in Bhutan, the *Zlum-brtsegs lHa-khang* in the sPa-gro-valley, showing some of the same inside features as the *Ri-bo-che sku-bum*. To the best of my knowledge, the construction of a *mchod-rten* as a temple did not occur before the time of Thang-stong rGyal-po.

The frescoes of Ri-bo-che

Within the very small and narrow chapels of the two storeys above the basement, used for processional circumambulation, we observed and documented frescoes, luckily preserved in their lower parts. The rubble that fell from the massive wood, mud and slate rooves, when they had been destroyed by the Red Guards, protected the murals from decay. The frescoes are of great interest and, we believe, of Thang-stong

rGyal-po's own hand, or commissioned by him. They were probably at least, in part, iconographically initiated and supervised by him. All the paintings of the second storey, for example, are *maṇḍala*-compositions, a rarity in Tibet, and a significant attribute of centres for higher level-tantric practices.

The style of the paintings varies between floral design in earthy colors and free-flowing, heavily dark outlined figures of the same colour in material and character. Some of them have a transparent coating and the colours look different in brightness because of the slight gloss. We did not have enough time to examine them in the three days of our visit, which were filled with documentation work. They have to be urgently researched before they vanish under new frescoes, for 'restoration' work has already started. I may say here, that we believe from our experience as artists and researchers that the frescoes may date from as early as the 15th century. The artist's or artists' 'hand' is very personal, even quite daring within the given framework of the iconographic regulations. It is a way of unpretentious, direct depiction of the necessary features of the figures, which proves the strong personality(ies) of the artist(s), characteristics which can be attributed to Thang-stong rGyal-po himself. Incomparable to other 'schools', we may only say, there is a certain relationship to *Ngor-Evam*, as far as the *maṇḍala*-character is concerned.

The ritual *Pho-bar rdo-gcog*

We found the Thang-stong rGyal-po attributed ritual 'breaking of the stone' (*pho-bar rdo-gcog*) in the lonely and politically forbidden Indian border-valley Pin of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. This ritual, which was

believed lost forever after having been first observed by tibetologists over fifty years ago, was recorded in full with 16 mm film, video, photography and audio equipment. We agree with Stein that this *bon*-related ritual is a link between the story-telling and lecturing activities of the wandering *ma-pi-pa*, which I observed in Bhutan, and the Tibetan performances of *A-lche-lHa-mo*. With actors of Ri-bo-che, Thang-stong rGyal-po founded a school of such fame, that according to witnesses they usually enacted the first drama among the various troupes at the *Nor-bu gling-kha-yoghurt*-festivals.

The abbreviated historical background of the three hour-long ritual can be given as follows. By request of *Tsong-kha-pa*, so the story goes, Thang-stong rGyal-po is asked to come to lHa-sa to help cure a severe epidemic. He arrives, miraculously flying on a white eagle, and finds the cause of the disaster to be either the demon *dBang-rgyal*, or *Hala rTa-brgyad* or *Drang-srong chen-po gzha-bDud* (*Rahula* with the sea-snake *chu-srin*) inside a stone at the threshold of the *Jo-khang* door. He initiates and then performs the ceremony on the market-place. The stages of the ritual are: asking the demon to leave the stone, then making an offering to him, then blaming him and urging him to go, and finally demonstrating one's superior supernatural powers to the evil force by balancing his body on the tips of swords. Thang-stong rGyal-po is not able to have the demon react at all. So he announces he will break the boulder and force the demon to appear in open light. The threats have no effect so Thang-stong rGyal-po must do what he threatens. The rock, which requires two men to lift, is placed on the chest of third actor, lying in trance on his back

on the floor. If the stone breaks by the first stroke of another riverstone, the omen is *dharmakāya*; by the second, *nirmāṇakāya*, etc.

The tone of the ritual is somewhat interrupted in the introductory scenes by a historical 'lecture' that begins humorously and ends with a deadly fight. The lecture sheds light on the unexplained relation between the King of the North' *byang mi-rgod rGyal-po* and the *dharmarāja Chos-rGyal Nor-bzang*, a story which could stem from the legend of Thang-stong rGyal-po building a *mchod-rten* at the northern border to prevent Mongolian infiltration. Surprisingly we found a *Nor-bzang* theme depicted in the nearby Tabo monastery on the *tsug lHa-Khang*-wall. But this, and its possible relation to the ritual, still has to be examined closely.

Before the ritual takes place a travelling altar *mchod-bcams* with, in this case, two Thang-stong rGyal-po statues, is set up and *A-lche lHa-mo*-performances, the initial prayer is sung to Thang-stong rGyal-po, asking him to purify the site, space and situation.

When we showed our *bu-chen*-people from Sagnam the text Roerich had written down about 60 years ago with the help of the *lo-tsa-ba chen-po*, the *lo-chen* leader and main magician of the troupe of married lamas, they could hardly hold back their tears. This was their grandfather's and great grandfather's text, used over the generations and even now given further for the initiation of the leader's eldest son. This we take as a proof of having found the same lineage of *pho-bar rdo-gcog*-performers. Neither in Bhutan nor in Tibet could I find them or other *bu-chen*.

Our knowledge of the other diverse professional activities of Thang-stong rGyal-po and of his life story, which for reasons of space cannot be illustrated here, enable us now to give an exact picture of his works and life. A privately financed archive has been established in Berlin in order to collect and diffuse information on this Tibetan genius. We took some eighty hours of video documentation, three hours of 16 mm film and three thousand slides in the course of the expedition, but we are still looking for more photos, audio- and videotapes, films, literary sources and quotes, ritual and profane objects connected with his tantric practices, etc. An illustrated book and videofilm portrait is in preparation; and a film in eight parts has been planned. The first part, entitled 'The Demon in the Rock' and depicting the search for and discovery of the 'breaking of the stone' ritual, has already been cut.

Please help us trace additional materials by sending your information to: Thang-stong rGyal-po Archiv Berlin, Prof. Wolf Kahlen, Ehrenbergstraße 11, 1000 Berlin 33, Germany (Tel 030-831 37 08).

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