

MKHA' 'GRO DBANG MO'I RNAM THAR,  
THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE GTER STON MA  
BDE CHEN CHOS KYI DBANG MO (1868-1927?)<sup>1</sup>

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 In 1998 sPrul sku bsTan pa'i Nyi ma published in Lhasa a version of the Bonpo *bKa' rten*. A catalogue of this collection has been edited by Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano in 2001.<sup>2</sup> Volume 149 contains a text, marked as 149-5 in the *Catalogue*,<sup>3</sup> which has no initial title but carries the marginal title *mKha' 'gro dBang mo'i rNam thar*, written in *bsdus yig*,<sup>4</sup> which consists of 382 pages (800-1182). This is the hagiography of bDe chen Chos kyī dBang mo, whose birth in Nyag rong shod (dKar mdzes district of present-day Sichuan Province) is placed by the sMan ri Abbot Nyi ma bsTan 'dzin (1813-1875) in the Earth-Dragon Year, *i.e.*, 1868.<sup>5</sup>

bDe chen Chos kyī dBang mo was a student of the famous Bon teacher Shar rdza bKra shis rGyal mtshan (1859-1934).<sup>6</sup> When she was 51 years old (Earth-Horse Year/1918), near the hermitage of Nor bu phug, at dMu-rdo in rGyal mo rGya'i rong, she revealed a textual treasure (*dBang mo'i rnam*

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution was presented at the X<sup>th</sup> IATS Conference, Oxford, 2003. The study of the biography of this remarkable figure was undertaken within the general frame-work of a research programme commissioned by the University of Rome, focused upon the liturgy and practices of *gCod* in the Bon tradition. As we shall see, bDe chen Chos kyī dBang mo represents a modern protagonist of this type of teachings, in view of the *gCod* texts that she is said to have revealed and compiled. I wish to thank Dan Martin, who prompted me on the existence of this biography, Hanna Havnevik and Tsering Thar for their much appreciated help, as well as the 33<sup>rd</sup> Abbot of sMan ri Lung rtogs bsTan pa'i Nyi ma dPal bzang po, for his very kind advice.

<sup>2</sup> See *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*, Karmay and Nagano eds., 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 975.

<sup>4</sup> The word *mKha' 'gro* is mistakenly rendered as 'grogs' in the above-mentioned *Catalogue*.

<sup>5</sup> The place of birth is given in the hagiography as lHang lhang Brag dkar Nor bu Yang rtse, *i.e.*, Brag dkar lHang lhang Nor bu Yang rtse, which refers to a sacred mountain where the *gter ston* Sangs rgyas Gling pa, who was connected to the monastery of rTse drug as an incarnation of Blo ldan sNying po (b. 1360), revealed many treasures (see *Survey*, Karmay and Nagano eds., 2003, pp. 181-189; for Blo ldan sNying po, a representative of the Bon Aural transmission, see references in Karmay, 1977). The veneration of the site falls every Dragon year (*Survey*, p. 424). I wonder whether there could possibly be a connection with the fact that bDe chen dBang mo was also born in such a year. A footprint of mKha' 'gro bDe chen dBang mo is said to exist near Lung dkar monastery in sBra chen rdzong in north-eastern Tibet (*ibid.*, p. 138).

<sup>6</sup> However she also received many teachings from other non Bonpo masters, such as, for example, A 'dzom 'Brug pa 'Gro 'dul dPa' bo rDo rje (1842-1924), a famous *rdzogs chen* master and treasure revealer (see Namkhai 1986, p. 153), who bestowed upon her a long life empowerment when she was 26 (1893); see *dBang mo'i rnam thar*, p. 824, *passim*.

*thar*, p. 1089). This *gter ma* contains sixteen hagiographies of female saints, including those of Maṇḍarava and Ye shes mTsho rgyal, and seems to be one of the few Bonpo treasure texts revealed by a woman in recent times. bDe chen Chos kyi dBang mo's discovery is mentioned by Shar rdza bKra shis rGyal mtshan, in his *Legs bshad mdzod*, as the *mKha' 'gro bka' thang*.<sup>7</sup> bDe chen Chos kyi dBang mo is also credited with the compilation of a liturgical text on the practice of *gCod*, entitled *Yum chen kye ma 'od mtsho'i zab gsang gcod kyi gdams pa las phran dang bcas pa'i gsung pod*.<sup>8</sup>

The structure of the biography is based upon different sections that contain, year by year, the principal activities carried out by this *mKha' 'gro ma*, the places visited, the teachers met, the spiritual practices accomplished, and most importantly, the dreams, the very many dreams of clarity that accompany her spiritual development, but that at some point of her life become even more crucial, inasmuch as they represent the key for the opening of textual treasures that are mind-generated, or of the indexes (*dkar chag*) of texts and the texts themselves, that are materially obtained and found in numerous places by the greatly active *gter ston* gSang sngags Gling pa (b. 1864), a list of whose discoveries is contained in the above-mentioned *Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen texts* (*Indices*, p. 301, and the *Catalogue* itself, p. 156, *passim*).

bDe chen dBang mo becomes gSang sngags Gling pa's spiritual friend and consort, and thanks to her visions/dreams, gTer chen, as he is always called in the text, successfully obtains many of his *gter ma*.

It is this team-work, this exalted spiritual cooperation gradually emphasized, that represents in my view one of the most emblematic features of this piece of literature.

There is a kind of *iter* that is repeated anytime a *gter ma* is to be discovered. When the *mKha' 'gro ma* finds herself in any given place for pilgrimage or practice purposes, she has a dream. She recounts it the next day to gTer chen and/or to other teachers who happen to be with her at that moment. Then she goes with gTer chen to the place that has been revealed as holding treasures, following his request for assistance, where mystic signs of all sorts appear to everyone. Offerings to the Three Jewels are performed, and during, or immediately after this stage, gTer chen receives the *dkar chag* of different *gter mas*, most of which are actually styled 'new' (*gter gsar*). Then the treasure place is sealed, with more offerings and invocations performed to invoke the benevolence of the Protectors. These revealing activities become more and more frequent during the course of her life, and towards the middle part of it, it becomes

<sup>7</sup> See Karmay, 1972, p. 189, where she is mentioned as *mKha' 'gro bDe chen dBang gi sGron ma*. The text has been the object of a preliminary study by this writer, presented during the VIII<sup>th</sup> IATS Seminar at Bloomington, Indiana, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Tshering Wangyal, TBMC, Dolanji, 1974. Her prayers to the sacred Bon ri mountain of Kong po are also extant; see Karmay 1977, p. 76.

really clear to the teachers involved the key role that bDe chen dBang mo plays in this respect, and as a result, teachers compose praising long life invocations in her honour, which are reproduced in the text.

bDe chen dBang mo's dreams begin at a young age, at 6 or 7 — when, starting to be more knowledgeable, she shows great inclination for virtue and a great shame for misbehavior — especially with the appearance of a mystical girlfriend, who takes her to beautiful places, where they gradually meet religious figures, and deities that are of primary importance for the Bonpo and the Buddhist tradition respectively. She indeed was a disciple of Shar rdza rTogs ldan, from whom she received full cycles of *rdzogs chen* teachings.<sup>9</sup>

These teachings, especially those of *Khregs chod* and *Thod brgal*, became her main practices, together with long life practices, and other teachings derived from the *gter mas* of her consort.

The fact that she also received essential instructions from non Bonpo masters is especially meaningful within the context of her spiritual awakening, because the indications provided by her dreams and visions gradually confirm that she is indeed an incarnation (*yang srid*) of Ye shes mTsho rgyal, and that it is through secret words and communications linked to this queen of the *Dharma* and the Buddha family of Padmasambhava, who also appears to her on numerous occasions, that she is able to retrieve her own *gter mas*, and provide gTer chen with the mystical keys to unfold his treasures. This is also confirmed by the way in which the teachers who write long life invocation prayers for her describe her connection and her status with respect to the tantric consort of Padmasambhava. There is no qualitative contradiction whatsoever in terms of Bon/Chos teachings, which in the *mKha' 'gro's* visions/dreams are primarily of a *rdzogs chen* nature, and thus challenge, *de facto*, any sense of sectarian limitation. These visions/dreams are so many — with a rate of about one if not two per page — that sometimes, when reading the text, it is hard to remember or distinguish the boundary between the different levels of reality, a boundary that seems to progressively fade, to become almost inconsistent and maybe unnecessary, when viewed from the direct

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<sup>9</sup> She met Shar rdza at his hermitage, called Shar rdza bDe chen Ri khrod, when she was 34, and received teachings such as *Tshe dbang Bod yul ma* (see *Bon Kanjur*, Martin, Kværne and Nagano eds., 2003, p. 323), *gCod, A khrid* (see Kværne and Rikhey, 1996), *Phur pa* (see *Bon Kanjur, op.cit.*, pp. 295-297), *rDzogs chen Yang rtse Klong chen* (Sherab Wangyal, TBMC, New Delhi, 1973), *Khro bo rGyud drug gSang ba bSen thub* (see *Bon Kanjur, op.cit.*, pp. 343-346), *Zhang zhung sNyan rgyud* (see *Bon Kanjur, op.cit.*, pp. 510-525), *Zhi khro* (see *Bon Kanjur, op.cit.*, pp. 659-678), *Ge khod rGyud chen* (see *Bon Kanjur, op.cit.*, pp. 384-398), and teachings on *rTsa lung (dBang mo'i rnam thar, p. 895)*. She also received teachings on *gCod* from lCang sprul Tshe dbang g.Yung drung. This *Bla ma* was the 26<sup>th</sup> in the lineage of lCang lung g.Yung drung mThong grol gling, a monastery situated in dPal yul county, dKar mdzes prefecture; see *Survey*, Karmay and Nagano eds., 2003, pp. 406-409.

perspective of the increasing profoundness of bDe chen dBang mo's spiritual accomplishments.

The biography is mostly narrated in the first person, and proceeds year by year, as noted above. We learn that she was born in mDo smad Nyag in the Earth Male Dragon Year (1868). She is immediately recognized for being of superior birth by some *Bla mas*. She shows loving kindness from a very young age, and expresses her compassion for simple and unfortunate people like beggars and disabled ones; she protects animals, and preserves the life of even the tiniest of insects, such as fleas. We also learn that for many years she severely suffered from an imbalance of phlegm (*bad kan*), and for that reason, she had many long life rituals performed for her, and consequently, also practiced those rituals herself.

Each section, comprising several years, is compiled by one of her disciples whose names are related. We read of the numerous pilgrimages undertaken together with gTer chen, even to Khyung lung dNgul mkhar of former Zhang zhung. Then there are several religious visits, in Central Tibet, to the main Bonpo and Buddhist sites, and in the mDo smad area, which later becomes the main location for the couple's *gter ma* activities. At first, it is only a matter for her of receiving teachings from different *Bla mas*, but when her spiritual status and role become consolidated, a shift occurs in the way those religious meetings unfold, and the travels are undertaken upon specific invitations that are issued to the now well-known gTer chen Yab Yum, who in turn dispense their teachings, and discover treasures under public amazement. What follows is an example of this process.

[1159] gTer chen Yab Yum are invited to go to Hor yul upon invitation of the monk bsTan 'dzin Phun tshogs. They slowly travel there, stopping at various monasteries and temples, offering ceremonial scarfs, performing rituals, consecrations and so on.

At a lake there, she obtains a *gter ma* statue of Klu grub Ye shes sNying po,<sup>10</sup> as well as a text, directly from the Klu btsan mo guarding the treasures of that lake. Once they get to Hor, they are received *en route* by a procession on horse composed of high *Bla mas*, *sPrul skus*, officers, as well as Ga rgyal, the King of Hor himself; then they are escorted to the royal palace. On the way, bDe chen dBang gi sGron ma has a vision, whereby the history of, and the actual local deities are revealed to her. Then they go to the palace of the prince, and the Hor king sponsors a huge event, with dances etc., after gTer chen has bestowed the empowerment of two of his *gter mas*, the sTag la Me 'bar and Long-life/Prosperity ones, together with teachings of the A khrid sNgon 'gro. She is asked to give teachings too, and the way in which she refers to this fact appears as being altogether

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<sup>10</sup> An important gShen connected with the propagation of the tantric cycles of *sPyi spungs* teachings (for references see Rossi, 1999, *passim*).

very humble and inconsequential. Then the invitation from a nearby monastery arrives. During the night, she has a pure light vision of a woman whose words are like crystal beads, and who tells her that emanations will come uninterruptedly [1166]. The next day, when they get to the place called Klu phug, an old lady actually gives her a crystal rosary. She sees this as a very good sign. Everybody exhorts the couple to 'open the treasure door', which has been identified in the back of the mountain. They reach the place with all the others, perform ritual offerings and libations (*tshogs*), and from the cave gTer chen retrieves a long-life text, here called *tshé ril*, while she reveals a statue of the Bon deity gShen lha 'Od dkar. They see many signs and letters, and pure visions of profound spiritual connections arise. Then they seal the opening, do a great consecration of the place including maṇḍala offerings, and then go back to the royal palace. On an auspicious day, they expound the text, and gTer chen finalises the index of the contents of the *gter ma*, which is related in the biography [1167].

Progressively, we also learn about the way in which the political situation degenerates in Nyag rong, with incursions carried out by the Chinese army. The struggles intensify in 1911. Her old maternal uncle and younger brother, who both had a very prominent role in her life, have to move elsewhere; the subjects undergo extreme suffering, her father and other relatives are captured.

The visions and prophecies revealed to mKha' gro bDe chen dBang mo do not lack descriptions about the degenerate times that human beings are mostly contributing to worsen by way of their mean and irresponsible behaviour; of how difficult it will be to practise the sacred *Dharma*, and how little hope is there to evolve spiritually, even if the teaching is present, although the possibility does exist for those who have the strength to go against the current of egotism and mental delusiveness.

There is no colophon in the text. When bDe chen dBang mo reaches the age of 59 (in the Tiger Fire Year/1926), the text relates how she receives a prayer-invocation from gTer chen, which is reproduced, and which describes in loving terms their spiritual connection and his wishes for her long life [1180]. Then it describes another vision of her about the pure field of Ye shes mTsho rgyal, followed by a request from her retinue to open the door to another *gter ma*, which she does, and to write down the *dkar chag* of the *gter ma* [1181]. The biography ends with a dream about O rgyan Rinpoche, who appears to bDe chen dBang mo surrounded by Wisdom Holders, *mKha' 'gro mas* and Protectors, in an explosion of rainbows, wondrous signs and auspicious omens [1182].<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> mKha' spyod dBang mo (?-1987), sister of sMon rgyal lHa sras, and daughter of Kun grol Hūm chen, the Sixth Kun grol Grags pa (b. 1700), was considered an incarnation of

The number of places visited by bDe chen dBang mo, and of the teachers mentioned in the text is quite impressive. Except for the few quoted here, identifying the exact location of monasteries as well as gathering information about all the teachers represents an interesting aspect of the study of this inedited source, requiring a detailed research that falls beyond the context of this contribution, but that needs to be addressed nonetheless. The text, in fact, broadly provides us with useful data in terms of the monasteries that existed, the teachers that were active, the teachings that were expounded, the patrons of Bon, the sponsoring of the publication of teachings, including the *gter mas* of gSang sngags Gling pa, but also the new compilation of the Bonpo *bKa' 'gyur*,<sup>12</sup> and also the gTer chen Yab Yum's visit to the sPa lineage monastery, and the meeting with sPa mchog g.Yung drung bsTan pa 'Brug grags (alias 'Brug sprul),<sup>13</sup> as well as the religious gatherings in hermitages, and travels with the then 28<sup>th</sup> Abbot of sMan ri, mKhan chen Phun tshogs Blo gros.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, when considered from the perspective of the various Tibetan literary typologies,<sup>15</sup> this *rnam thar* represents a good example in terms of a description of the spiritual progress of a specific saintly figure, which in itself should serve the purpose of inspiring, if not exhorting devotees to the practice of *Dharma*. It is also a valuable source for understanding, to a certain degree, religious life in relevant areas during the end of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries. Moreover, it could also be considered as a confirmation of how *gter mas* continue, still nowadays, to represent a significant element within the spiritual and cultural expressions of the Tibetan people.

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mKha' 'gro bDe chen dBang mo, and was herself a *gter ston ma*. For an account of one of her discoveries see Hanna, 1994; cf. Havnevik, 1989, p. 82, and *Survey*, pp. 437, 440.

<sup>12</sup> Which is mentioned as consisting of 158 volumes. This would have happened when she was 58 years old, that is to say, during the Ox Year/1925 (*dBang mo'i rnam thar*, p. 1163).

<sup>13</sup> For whom see *Survey*, p. 133. For a study of Bonpo clans and family lineages see Lhagyal, *New Horizons*, 2000, pp. 429-508.

<sup>14</sup> See *Survey*, p. 30. For a biography of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Abbot of sMan ri, see Bya 'phur Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> See Cabezon and Jackson eds., 1996, p. 30, Kvarne, and Gyatso, in Cabezon and Jackson eds., *op. cit.*, pp. 138-146, and pp. 147-169 respectively.

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