


Compte-rendu

Matthew Akester: *Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's Guide to Central Tibet*, Serindia Publications, Chicago, 2016; 1-824 pp., incl. 15 maps, ca. 250 historical (black-and-white) photos, ca. 500 colour photographs and numerous illustrations of Tibetan images.

Guntram Hazod
(Vienna)

he short text that forms the basis of the book under review, Khyentse Wangpo's list of holy sites in Central Tibet,¹ has been well known to generations of Tibet students since Alfonso Ferrari's critical edition and translation of it nearly sixty years ago. It was especially the supplementary annotations by L. Petech and H. Richardson, dedicated to identifying the individual sites, which for many years made Ferrari's volume one of the most cited works in Tibetan history studies.² In addition, in the last twenty-five years, a number of micro-historical or pilgrimage site-specific studies have appeared, both in the West and at Tibetan institutes in China, and these have greatly expanded our knowledge of the historical geography of pre-modern Central Tibet. As a result, today many of the original annotations regarding the sites in Khyentse's Guide seem out of date. So what might be the reason for presenting this text again, a text whose basic contents – a list of certain (exclusively religious) places and information on how to get there – are today widely known? A first leafing through Matthew Akester's book reveals the answer, one already portended on the cover: it is a book designed "to appeal

¹ 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po Kung dga' bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po (1820–92). *Dbus gtsang gi gnas rten rags rim gyi mtshan byang mdor bsdus dad pa'i sa bon*, Rdzong gсар edition (fol. 1-18), trans. and facsimile ed. in the appendix of the present book (p. 692-710), hereafter referred to as "Khyentse's Guide".

² Ferrari, Alfonso, 1958, *mK'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet* (completed and edited by Luciano Petech, with the collaboration of Hugh Richardson), Rome: Is.M.E.O.

to the lay reader while presenting in-depth research." Indeed, what we find in the more than 800-page volume is a wealth of new information. When combined with the attractive presentation of the accompanying pictorial and map material, this makes this new edition of Khyentse's Guide a particular highlight for current studies on Tibetan places.

Akester is well versed in the work of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–92), one of the most influential religious figures of 19th-century Tibet, who from his eastern Tibetan homeland, Derge in Kham, set off on several extended trips to Central Tibet.³ In the fine introduction, the author points to specific connections that can be seen between Khyentse's selection of the sites he visited and his religious career (which started with the *Sa skya pa*), his experiences and visions as *Rnying ma gter ston*, and finally as the genius of the eclectic Non-sectarianism (*ris med*), which came to flourish in Kham.⁴ The author sees the geography of Khyentse's Guide, with its description of sites of different religious provenience, to be a "typical product of the non-sectarian approach" of the *ris med*, a characteristic concern of this religious movement having been the revival of old transmission lineages (p. 17). Indeed, this interest in long-forgotten lineages explains the notes on a number of rather obscure peripheral sites in Khyentse's Guide. The author points to an unusual aspect in Khyentse's development: he turned down an institutional career offered to him in Central Tibet and instead chose a life of peregrination, on foot, the modesty of a simple pilgrim driven by the "enthusiasm for hard travel" (p. 15). This is an important detail for understanding the present volume. It was just this form of travel that Akester adopted when he set off in the early 1990s to gradually visit, over a decade, all of the approximately two hundred sites in Khyentse's Guide. The information he collected on this trek plus extensive additions from various Tibetan history books has resulted in the creation of a new pilgrimage guidebook, one steered less by academic questions than by the personal motive of experiencing the spirituality of Khyentse Rinpoche's original journey. The text-based additions to the individual sites primarily contain details of the religious topography and the activities of different masters at these places. Any additional historical information represents a by-product, albeit a quite valuable one. Together with this, the volume aims at displaying what has become of the individual sites. The approximately

³ Cf. Matthew Akester (trans.), 2012, *The Life of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo*, Delhi: Sherchen Publications.

⁴ For parallel and even earlier non-sectarian activities in Tibet, see Rachel H. Pang, 2014, The Rimé activities of Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781-1851), *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 29: 5-30.

250 historical images (including photographs from the precious Sikkim Lha yum [Queen Mother] Collection, 1930–35), as well as some 500 more recent photographs accompanying the descriptions of individual locations provide a historical document of these places' fortunes since they were visited by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo.

The main part of the book (geographically subdivided into middle, southern and western provinces, i.e. Ü, Lho and Tsang) follows the structure of the original text, and has been divided into several sections forming additional geographic subchapters. In a few cases the original order of the sites has been changed. For example, the district of Stod lung (near Lhasa), which ends the original text, has been moved to a chapter where it makes more sense geographically. The original sequence of the sites can be found in the facsimile of the Tibetan text or the separate translation, which are both included in the appendix.

The book seeks to meet two requirements – to be an easily accessible pilgrimage reader and at the same time, to be a source book that is useful for scholarly research. The latter is the case, despite only occasional references to secondary literature. Due to these two aims, the rendering of Tibetan names and terms has been divided in a rather unusual way: phonetic transcriptions in the main text (including citations from historical texts that have been added to the descriptions of certain places) but technical transliteration in the footnotes. This adjustment seems to have been done for the supposed different types of user, namely general or specialist readers, but there are inconsistencies. The translations in the appendix follow the scholarly transliteration style, seemingly indicating that these translations will not be interesting for lay readers. But while the maps also use this transliteration style, they seem also aimed at potential pilgrims: they are printed in the neo-traditional Tibetan style, whereby the course of the main river forms the axis for topographical and historical entries. For some readers this might be tedious, since to read the lower half of each map, the (heavy) book has to be turned 180 degrees. If this form of cartographic labelling was intended to ease the reading of the maps for Tibetan users (and not merely based on optical criteria), it would have been more useful if the names on the maps were not transliterated but consistently in Tibetan script.

Otherwise the (in total 15) maps illustrate the topographical positions of the individual sites very well, with all of these sites described in great detail in the main text. These descriptions also make it clear that during his travels, the author visited many more sites than mentioned by Khyentse (among others, so it appears, those listed in the much-quoted Dbus Gtsang Guide of Ka thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho [1880–1925], but also apparently most of the sites mentioned in the similarly data-rich *Myang chos 'byung*). It is a pity that these other

places have not been included on the maps. Also regrettable is the lack of maps of eastern Lho kha ('Ol kha and Dvags po) and La stod Byang. The author's argument for not including them – the fact that Khyentse did not visit these places personally (p. 9) – is not really understandable, since Akester describes these sites at length. It seems to me that would be reason enough to illustrate them cartographically as well.

Maps of smaller areas are the exception (Sa skya [p. 565], Mang mkhar [p. 597] or Yar lung [p. 440]). It would have, however, been particularly desirable to have maps of little known areas, for example the Upper Shangs (in the old G.yas ru district), including the major Rnying ma pa sites of Zab bu lung and Sog po 'Dzul khung (p. 555). Although I said at the beginning of this review that the places mentioned by Khyentse are today largely known to scholars, in many cases this means only minimal knowledge, often based on a few references in primary sources. The sites in the Upper Shangs, for instance, are described here in detail for the first time. Among other places described for the first time are the upper Yol valley (p. 240), the area around Jo mo Nags rgyal (i.e. Brag ram, Snying ri and other places; p. 628ff.), Upper Rta nag (p. 556f.), and several areas in Myang (487f.) and in Dvags po (the Dvags lha Sgam po complex, including the actual site where the ancient Dvags rje Mang po rje rulers resided [p. 394, fn. 39], and the Sa nag po area in southern Dvags po, p. 401). The merit of having the location of such places documented (also cartographically) should not be underestimated. This provides information beyond the specific religious history of such sites. Their locations augment the virtual map of ancient settlement history, which in Central Tibet, as elsewhere on the Tibetan plateau, is a history involving constant re-settlement since the Neolithic period if not even earlier. Indeed, the countless cave complexes that we encounter in religious histories as (first) "openings" were probably used in some way since the beginning of human occupation of the respective area, hence representing crucial references to a thick cross-linked settlement-pattern geography that continues to this day, as seen, for example, in the many recent re-openings of ancient mining sites.

There are several sites which are noted in Ferrari 1958 as "cannot be located" and which to the best of my knowledge remained in this state until Akester visited them. One example is the village of Sgrags Grong mo che. It is noted by Khyentse as being the birthplace of Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes – the 9th-century Phur ba master whose biographical data in Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las' *Rnam thar* (indicating the birth-date of 844 CE) helped Roberto Vitali provide a more accurate date for the rebellions (*kheng log*) following the collapse of the empire in Central Tibet (p. 345, fn. 13). The Sgrags district itself is well

known as Gnubs chen's birthplace, but Akester has been able to identify Grong mo che with the place known today simply as Sgrags mda' (Lower Sgrags) at the eastern entrance to the valley (p. 343). While this information may at first seem rather marginal, this in situ identification now permits a more precise idea of the "Gnubs land" (*gnubs yul*) of Sgrags referred to in a 17th-century text as being the area around this birthplace. This suggests the presence of an early branch of the imperial Gnubs family (assuming the Gnubs yul of Gtsang as its original seat), which in the 8th and 9th century apparently shared the estates of the Sgrags district with the noble family of Mkhar chen higher up the valley, near the "soul lake" of Ye shes Mtsho rgyal, the Mkhar chen bza' or "Lady of Mkhar chen" of the Padmasambhava vita story.

Sgrags provides a good example of how fruitful Akester's surveys are: In Khyentse's original text, the entry for the five sites in this area, which were probably not all visited by Khyentse personally, is only two-and-a-half lines long (fol. 5b, l. 3-5). Akester, in contrast, provides eleven large-format pages with dense descriptions, giving a rich insight into the religious topography of this small side valley. He includes a unique presentation of the highly significant Rnying ma pa retreat complex of Sgrags Yang rdzong, as well as a first description of Ngar phug, the *sgrub gnas* even further up the valley that is known from the biographies of the early Bka' brgyud pa. The author went to all of these places on foot; when compared to Khyentse's descriptions, Akester's are much more accurate in terms of how to get there and how long the journey takes. The caves of Ngar phug, for example, are reachable from the valley floor only after a difficult climb of several hours. If one calculates the walking distances in Sgrags according to Khyentse's Guide and then considers that the author visited more sites than Khyentse's two hundred, each combined with his conducting intensive in situ surveys and finding corresponding textual sources, the enormous effort behind this volume becomes clear.

The example of Sgrags, however, also makes it clear that this work was never intended to be a historical study of these areas in a broader sense, taking into account open questions about places not in Khyentse's Guide. For example, it is briefly noted that Ngar phug was one of the chief sites for spiritual realisation of Gung thang Bla ma Zhang (1123-93), certainly the most important politico-religious founding figure in the Lhasa valley of the post-imperial pre-Phag mo gru pa period. And yet we know of several other *sgrub gnas* of Zhang in the same area that are just as important, such as G.yu brag (after which he was also named, i.e. Zhang G.yu brag pa Brtson 'grus grags) or Bzangs yul Mon gdong, whose location and arrangement are only vaguely known. Although relevant primary and secondary sources are

known to Akester (with some listed in the bibliography), these places are not mentioned in the main text. Here as elsewhere, the chapter focusses almost exclusively on Khyentse's list of places and refrains from any further explanations. On one hand, this is understandable, since doing this would have gone far beyond the scope of an already extensive work. Nevertheless, it is often a pity when the author withholds information about important places whose geographical position and other details he apparently knows. This leaves us hoping that someday he will follow up with a postscript to this volume, one that informs us about sites that Khyentse himself had no idea about, but about which the later-day traveller following him is well informed. This would teach us not only about these Bla ma Zhang sites, but probably also where exactly the Sgrags places mentioned in the *Old Tibetan Annals* are located and what they look like, namely, Bya ts(h)al of Sgregs and Lha lung of Sgregs (= Sgrags), the latter known as the birthplace of Emperor Khri 'Dus srong (676–704).

Very important are the author's corrections of certain statements in Khyentse's Guide (and in secondary literature referring to it) that have proven incorrect. One such case concerns the Bkra shis 'od 'bar stupa of Lo gdong steng (due east of Bsam yas). Based on information from Khyentse (or his source, 'Jig med gling pa's *Gtam tshogs*), the author of this review and others have in the past referred to it as the foundation of the Bka' gdams pa Spyan snga ba Tshul khri ms 'bar (1038–1103). In fact, it dates to (the Sne'u zur pa disciple) Don steng pa Chos skyab bzang po (with ca. 1120 as its foundation date; p. 336f.). Other corrections relate to sites that were incorrectly identified in Ferrari, such as Mtshur Lha lung; Akester notes that this site "has been confused with La yag lHa lung in lHo brag in some of the secondary literature, notably Ferrari (1958) p. 139" (p. 206, fn. 41). This is one of the few references to secondary literature we find in the book. In general, the fact that secondary literature has been largely ignored, although not entirely, has led to problems of consistency. For example, in the presentation of the *Byang gter*-specific site of Ri bo Bkra bzang (p. 660), the author refers to Bellezza 2005 (rightly, since Bellezza was the first to investigate the older context of this area known as Tho yor nag po). Then why in the description of Bo dong E doesn't he mention the first (in situ) investigation of this site by P. Wangdu and H. Diemberger (1996, 1997)? And there are many other places for which detailed text- and ethnography-based studies have been available for some time. At least a brief reference to these would have been helpful for drawing general users' attention to further reading material, or, more importantly, to show how this new visit has resulted in additional or improved information.

A few formal oversights might be noted:

– Sometimes statements are made without specific references. For example, on p. 455, fn. 25 states that the mountain god Zur ra ra skyes (known as protector of the Hidden Land of Mkhan pa lung) is also the guardian of the hidden treasures of Seng ge rdzong (the important retreat in southern Lho brag). It is however unclear which of the four texts referred to in this long footnote served as the actual source for this statement. There are also statements that lack any references or otherwise supporting explanations at all, as for example when the author writes that the inscription pillar at the SW corner of Ra tshag dgon (in Stod lung) is “clearly not its original position” (p. 203). This sounds quite interesting but is of little use to the reader (regardless of whether a “specialist” or a “general reader”) if no arguments for this assessment are given. Then again, in a similar case, that of the Tshur phu inscription stele, the author accordingly offers such an explanation when questioning the stele’s present place at this monastery (p. 210, fn. 50).

– References to primary sources are often without page or folio number.

– Biographical data about people are often too general (“12th-century master”) or even missing completely, even when a name is being mentioned for the first time (as for example, Bla ma Zhang, p. 53).

– The translations do not indicate folio numbers.

– There are no page headers. This is something that one misses in a book of this size, particularly when using the (very good) place and personal name index.

– The bibliography is incomplete (e.g. Akester 2004 is missing)

– There are a few minor typos, although that is something inevitable in a book of this length.

– Some of the colour photographs are heavily magenta-tinged. I would blame this flaw on the publisher. The manuscript was kept for five years or so at the publishing house, which postponed the publication (first announced for 2012) for unknown reasons until the end of 2016. This would have been enough time for test prints and corresponding improvements to the photos.

In no way of course do these points lessen the value of this great work. Akester’s surveys fall into the “golden age” of travel conditions in the Tibet Autonomous Region. That such an age will not return very quickly (or will perhaps never return) is an untoward side effect of Realpolitik. It is also sad to see in retrospect that the period of the 1990s and early 2000s saw far too few Western researchers tracking their texts with similar meticulous, on-site visits. Akester’s work is a unique testimony to the simple fact that one really understands a place only if one has visited it. In sum, with *Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo’s Guide to*

Central Tibet, not only has a wonderful pilgrimage guide been presented, but also a vast source book which will be indispensable for all future Tibetan historical studies, especially those mapping the religious history of Central Tibet.

