

# The Invention of a Tibetan Lama General: a Biographical Account of Bla ma dkar po (1835–1895)

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## Introduction

**I**n the past, reincarnated lamas, or *sprul sku*, were at the top of the social hierarchy in Tibet. This is demonstrated by the succession of Dalai Lamas who were the head of the Tibetan government. Moreover, *sprul sku* played important roles in every aspect of Tibetan life, as almost all villages and monasteries had their own reincarnated lamas. Thus, for a long time it was assumed that the social status of *sprul sku* emerged only through monastic training, religious practice, and various reincarnation systems. While it is true that most *sprul sku* lineages developed from this standard tradition, there are many exceptions, as the establishment of incarnation lines may also have resulted from attributions to prominent actors in the political or social sphere including figures of war. In using the Tibetan biographical account of Bla ma dkar po,<sup>2</sup> known as *Rje btsun byams pa mthu stobs kun dga' rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar* (“The biography of the venerable and almighty Byams pa mthu stobs Bla ma dkar po”), I will show how an ordinary young monk became one of the most important *ho thog thu* in the Qing empire. By historical coincidence, he found himself in the midst of Islamic rebellions in

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<sup>2</sup> Although Bla ma dkar po is well-known in Amdo and studied by some Chinese specialists on Xinjiang, as far as I know, there are virtually no works about him in Western languages. This is first attempt to engage the important yet ignored history of this lama, who played a crucial role in the later Qing dynasty, Xinjiang, Tibet, and China. In exploring Bla ma dkar po’s biography, I have discovered a great number of historical materials that are not only available in Tibetan and Chinese, but also in Manchu, Russian, Mongolian, and Nepalese. This is only an explorative draft of his biography—a detailed account of his life will be come out in the near future. At the moment, his Tibetan biography constitutes the main source; Qing documents as well as the Russian, Manchu or Nepalese materials are yet to be fully explored. The presence of any mistakes or inaccuracies will be rectified in due course.

Xinjiang and turning his military skills into an advantage, he soon rose to the rank of local general, a status reinforced by his recognition as *ho thog thu* by the Qing imperial court. In discussing how he maneuvered politics at the Qing court and settled disputes in Lhasa, I will argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not determined by past religious achievements and cultural norms. Rather, it could be invented through war, violence, and destruction.

*Background of the sprul sku system*

Bla ma dkar po has been known by many names in different languages. In Qing official documents, he was referred by the Chinese name Gun ga za la shen 棍噶扎拉参 in Chinese. Even in Tibetan his name presented a variety of spellings: Kun dga' rgyal mtshan or Byams pa mthu stobs Kun dga' rgyal mtshan following his re-ordination in Lhasa in 1883, Bla ma dkar po, Cha kan ho thog thu or Cha han ho thog thu, Tsha gwan ke kân. In Amdo and Mongolia, he was widely known as Bla ma dkar po ("The White Lama"), hence the decision to use such an appellative in the present article.

Although the Qing official documents refer frequently to the life and events of Bla ma dkar po in Xinjiang and elsewhere, my contribution mainly draws from his Tibetan biography. The original manuscript, found at Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil in the early 1990s, counts two Chinese editions (in 1990 and 1994), each totalling 737 pages. According to the colophon, during Bla ma dkar po's stay in Amdo in the 1890s, the author of the biography sKal bzang legs bshad asked him permission to write his life-story. Bla ma dkar po not only agreed but also assisted him by giving thirty or forty pages he had drafted himself. In 1903, eight years after Bla ma dkar po's death, sKal bzang legs bshad began writing Bla ma dkar po's *rnam thar*, relying on what the master himself had told him as well as on interviews with those who had known him. The biography was concluded in 1905, yet it offers no information on its compiler apart from his name and year of completion of the work.

According to the biography, Bla ma dkar po was a *sprul sku*, a Tibetan word that, although specifically referring to the reincarnated body, may also indicate a religious institution unique to Tibetan Buddhism: the *sprul sku* system had not only a religious connotation but also a political and social one.<sup>3</sup> The concept is deeply rooted in Buddhist ideas of sainthood, *samsāra* (mundane existence), and rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists believe that all sentient beings must go

<sup>3</sup> On the history of *sprul sku* and their formations and roles in Tibetan society, see Schwieger (2015: 1–50) and Gamble (2018).

through cyclic existence until each reaches final enlightenment. According to this view of cyclic existence, all sentient beings are born and die again and again in accordance with their karma, regardless of their personal choices. However, there is a class of enlightened beings—the bodhisattvas—who have control over the cycle of birth and death. Known also as *sprul sku* (“Emanation Body”) in Tibetan, these individuals may assume many different forms, including that of a human, in order to serve all sentient beings. The Dalai Lamas, for example, are believed to be reincarnations of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion descended into the human world for the benefit of the living beings. Thus, for Tibetan Buddhists, the idea of reincarnation is the “reliving” of the previous life<sup>4</sup>—in a sense, death is not the end of life but can be considered as a transitional phrase from one form of existence to another.

Views about reincarnation and ideas of rebirth have been intertwined with Tibetan religious culture for a long time. As a consequence, the *sprul sku* system was institutionalized and has been the most important factor in the social hierarchy. The system emerged in the early 13th century after the disciples of Karmapa Dus gsum mkhyen pa recognised, in accordance with his prediction, Karma Pakshi as the reincarnation of their master. Since then, the practice has been accepted by all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. After an important lama or religious saint passes away, his disciples usually identify a new child, often a boy, as the *sprul sku* of the deceased. The boy then inherits the status, wealth, and prestige of the person of whom he is thought to be the reincarnation. When the searching party found the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, for example, he not only inherited his predecessor’s title, but also his power, wealth, and the government itself. *sprul sku* are generally regarded as emanations of Bodhisattva endowed with special abilities and ideals, and as such are encouraged to live and act according to such patterns.<sup>5</sup> Since the ideas about what a *sprul sku* is are based on the bodhisattva model, for a long time it was commonly assumed that reincarnations were the outcome of monastic training and religious practices alone, and that they were deeply embedded with the Buddhist concepts of compassion and enlightened beings. In other words, only the death of an important scholar or accomplished practitioner required the search for a reincarnation.

However, this is not the whole story since, throughout the history of Tibet, the reincarnation system has complex religious and political connotations. While it is true that most *sprul sku* emerged from

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<sup>4</sup> Gupta (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Schwieger (2015: 12–13).

religious training and practices, there were some who rose from unusual and abnormal circumstances. One of the most unusual reincarnation practices is the transferring of consciousness from one body to another, known in Tibetan as *pho ba grong 'jug* or as *ma 'das sprul sku*, "Emanation before passing away". This system, part of the Six Naropa Yogas, had existed for a long time in Tibet. Among the *ma 'das sprul sku*, the most famous one was the third reincarnation of sTong 'khor ho thog thu.<sup>6</sup> In 1639, after rGyal ba rgya mtsho died at the age of fifty-two due to smallpox, a twenty-year-old Chinese man was identified as his reincarnation, thus becoming the Fourth sTong 'khor Don yon rgya mtsho (1619–1683).<sup>7</sup>

Reincarnation lineages could also emerge due to non-religious circumstances, such as political events, wars, and conquests of other lands. Bla ma dkar po is one of such *sprul sku*. Through his military efforts—in other words, through his participation in the suppression of the Islamic rebellions, he established himself as an important leader of Xinjiang, being later recognised as a *sprul sku*. Just by glimpsing at his life, it is clear that Bla ma dkar po's biographical trajectory is different from that of other Tibetan *sprul sku*—not only was he not recognized as a reincarnation in his youth but was also an ordinary individual with no prior status and position in either secular life or religious system. However, his situation changed drastically during the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877), the ethnic and religious war fought in 19<sup>th</sup>-century western China, when he emerged as one of the most important political and military leaders in Xinjiang and distinguished himself as a great defender of Tibetan Buddhism and the Qing. For his military contributions, he was recognized as a *sprul sku*, and received the title of *ho thog thu* from both the Qing court and the Tibetan Buddhist authorities in Amdo and Lhasa. At his death, his reincarnation was sought and the lineage of Bla ma dkar po started, an event that suggests the existence of many types of *sprul sku* and indicates how the system, far from being fixed, relied on different methods and practices.

In general, the history of the Bla ma dkar po's lineage is not just about Tibetan Buddhist militarism and how the militancy created a reincarnation system but it is also closely related to Buddhist ideas of war, Tibetans' relationship with the Mongols, Muslim rebellions in western China, and Bla ma dkar po's role in the Qing's re-conquest of

<sup>6</sup> The first sTong 'khor *ho thog thu* was Zla ba rgyal mtshan. Born into a Bon family in Khams, he became an important dGe lugs pa bla ma in the region. The second Yon tan rgya mtsho was the student of the Third Dalai Lama bSod nams rgya mtsho; he was the emissary of the Dalai Lama in Mongolia where he promoted Tibetan Buddhism among the locals.

<sup>7</sup> See the biographies of sTong 'khor ho thog thu ([n.a.]: 193–220).

Xinjiang and their relationship with Russia, as well as other political matters, such as the ways the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa dealt with the Qing and Nepal. All these details and issues will need to be addressed in due course. In this paper, however, I will limit myself to a brief study of the biography of Bla ma dkar po, focusing on his military and political career. In doing so, I will argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not determined only by past religious achievements and cultural norms but could also be invented through war, violence, and destruction.

*A normal child with a drifting life*

Bla ma dkar po was born in the tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1836),<sup>8</sup> in a place called Chos dpal zhing khams sde ba. It was part of a cluster of villages which is today locally known as Chas pa'i srib or Chab bu gshis in Co ne (also known as Choni), a historical border town<sup>9</sup> in the northeast of Tibet, in today's Gansu province. Co ne is a semi-nomadic area, that meaning that the population includes both farmers and nomads. Historically, Co ne was not only known for its principality, printing house, and copper works, but also for its association with great scholars and important persons in Tibetan history. Several of the regents in Lhasa, for example, were born in this area. Due to its border town nature, many locals spoke several languages, including Chinese.

Bla ma dkar po was born into a Bon family. His father's name was Tshe dbang nor bu and his mother was known as Rnam 'joms 'tsho. He also had two brothers—the eldest one, dKon mchog bstan 'dzin later came to Xinjiang and worked with him until 1886, whereas the younger sibling, dKon mchog tshe ring, married a local woman and did not leave the house. In his youth, Bla ma dkar po was sent by his parents to the local monastery of dGa' ldan bshad sgrub gling to become a Buddhist monk. Here, he became familiar with Buddhist scriptures and prayer rituals, and learned basic reading and writing under the tutelage of the scholar Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin. Despite the small dimension of the monastery limited his training, preventing him from learning how to debate or studying philosophical tenets, he appears to have been a curious young child. From a monk named A

<sup>8</sup> In his biography, the date appeared to be written in the Chinese lunar calendar year. In this paper, I use the occurring date as written by the biographer. I converted the lunar years into the Gregorian calendar years, excluding the months and the days since many dates given in the biography still need to be crosschecked with other sources.

<sup>9</sup> On Bla ma dkar po's birth, childhood, and visit to Xinjiang, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 249–268).

khu rig 'dzin, who was based in the local hermitage of A khor brag dkar ri khrod, he studied Tibetan orthography and mastered the subject. Around the same time, he also started to study Tibetan poetry. Judging from a letter that he sent from Xinjiang during the war, he was good writing at poetry and letters.

He left his home monastery for the first time in 1847, when he accompanied an elderly monk named Ngag dbang bstan pa to Hoboksar 和布克赛尔 in today's Hoboksar Mongol Autonomous County in Xinjiang. The place, located at a distance of about two 280 kilometres from his hometown, was the centre of Dzungaria, and was mainly inhabited by Tibetan Buddhist Oirat Mongols.

In the 18th century, Qianlong defeated the Dzungars and established Ili as the centre of the Qing's power in Dzungaria by dispatching there a great number of Manchu and Mongol soldiers. Those men, hailing from other areas such as Helongjiang, Shengjing, Jehol, and Changjiakou, became residents of the Ili Region.<sup>10</sup> The general of Ili was in charge of the overall command of the local Qing troops in the region. Since many of the Mongols and Manchus were Tibetan Buddhists, they also built monasteries and maintained a strong religious relationship with Tibet. Although Bla ma dkar po's biography does not state it clearly, it appears that the reason why he went there was to collect donations for the monastery. It was common for monastic agents or even individual monks to undertake such a journey to distance places to collect alms. Bla ma dkar po's stay in Hoboksar was limited as he soon returned to his monastery in Amdo.

In 1852, he made his way to the mountain region of Altai in Xinjiang, where Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan intersect. Among Tibetan Buddhist Mongols, he performed ritual prayers and practiced medicine, becoming a *grong chog pa*, a "village ritualist", one of the ordinary monks who did rites for village farmers and nomads. However, because of his healing power and ritual practices, his reputation grew among the local people. At some point, he also became acquainted with the Qing officials who lived in Tarbaghatay in Mongolia, today's Tacheng 塔城. Gradually, he became known among the locals as Tsha gan dge rgan ("The White Teacher"), the Mongolian rendition of the Tibetan Bla ma dkar po.

In 1843, when he was twenty-eight years old, he visited Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, one of the largest monasteries in Amdo, where he resided for several months. During that time, he studied poetry with the well-known scholar Thub bstan rgya mtsho. In Bla brang, he met

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<sup>10</sup> Kim (2004: 52).

many important lamas including the prominent dGe lugs scholar Shes rab rgya mtsho, (1803–1875). However, almost all of those encounters appear to have occurred as part of public functions and meetings rather than during private gatherings. For example, when he wanted to see the head of Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, the young Fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa sKal bzang thub bstan dang phyug (1856–1916), he could not arrange a private audience, and like the rest of monks, had to content himself with seeing him from afar at the public audience.

Around 1854, he returned to Co ne, where he took many Buddhist initiations as well as the vows of a *dge slong* (fully ordained monk) in front of Tshe smon gling Ngag dbang 'jam dpal tshul khriims rgya mtsho (1792–1864), the previous regent of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. It is not clear whether Bla ma dkar po was involved with the invitation and arrangements of Tshe smon gling *ho thog thu's* visits to Xinjiang. However, around that time, Bla ma dkar po was also present in the region. Unfortunately, Tshe smon gling *ho thog thu* passed away in Torghut in Xining around 1862.<sup>11</sup>

In 1863, Bla ma dkar po moved back to Tarbaghatay. Initially, he wanted to stay at a monastery known as Zhi ne ang gi but his sojourn was prevented by the local monastic authorities. Left with no other choice, he set camp outside of the monastery and practiced his medicine there. At that time, a skin-rash epidemic struck the region, and no one was able to contain the disease. Using his medical skills, he treated many people and put a halt to the plague. Perhaps, it was due to his medical practice that the Qing officials who lived in Tarbaghatay heard about him and invited him to visit them at the fortress.

In spite of all this activity, until the Dungan Revolt in 1863, Bla ma dkar po was still an ordinary, drifting monk. Unlike *sprul sku* in Tibet, he was not recognized as a reincarnated lama, nor did he have personal tutors or a private residence. He was just one of many ritualist monks or healers who travelled to distant places to seek some economic benefit and collect some donations.

### *The Dungan Revolt*

Bla ma dkar po's ordinary life dramatically changed when the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877)<sup>12</sup> broke out in Xinjiang. He was caught in events that went beyond his control. The Dungan Revolt was mainly

<sup>11</sup> Brag dgon pa bstan pa rab rgyas (1982: 658).

<sup>12</sup> For more information of this war and on Xinjiang in general, see Kim (2004) and Chu (1958).

an ethnic and religious war fought by the Qing army against Islamic adherents in the west of China. The original cause of the Dungan Revolt appears to have been related to a minor issue. It was not started as a planned uprising or as an attack on Qing officials. In 1862, in Shangxi province, a fight broke out between a Han merchant and a Hui Muslim over the price of some bamboo poles. Soon Qing officials became involved in this dispute, and that led to the massacre of Huis who lived in a nearby village. As a consequence, a Hui mob attacked the Hans, and eventually this evolved into a total rebellion against the Qing. The imperial army suppressed the rebellion, and many of the defeated Huis fled to Gansu and Qinghai. After hearing the news of Hui rebellions in Shanxi and the resulting surge of refugees, the Salar—originally Oghuz Turks—and other Hui groups in Qinghai began to rebel. These uprisings first started among the Salar in Ya rdzi or Xunhua 循化 in Chinese and then spread quickly across Qinghai—particularly to the northern parts near the Tsong chu also known as the Huangshui River 湟水河. Eventually, the Hui in sTong skor, a fortress city, joined the upheavals. In 1866, they raided and looted Tibetan monasteries such as gSer khog and dGon lung, all institutions located in the northern parts of Tsong chu.

Religious establishments and villages on the south side of Tsong chu were not spared in the frequent raids. On the eight day of the fifth month of Water Pig Year (1863), sKu 'bum Monastery was sieged by Muslims forces and the Fourth A kyā Ye she skal bzang mkhas grub rgya mtsho (1817–1869), at the time forty-six, had to take charge of both the military and religious affairs of the monastery. As the Hui army was approaching sKu 'bum Monastery, the Fourth A kyā organized a military unit from the villages of sKu 'bum, sTong skor, and Khri ka to defend against the Muslim army.<sup>13</sup>

When news of the Hui rebellions in Shangxi and Gansu reached the Muslims in Xinjiang, revolts mushroomed in the whole area. Seeing this as an opportunity, Yaqub Beg (1820–1877), a Tajik adventurer, took up arms against Qing control in the Tarim Basin. On the seventeenth day of the third month of the Water Pig Year (1863), the Muslims in Ili region also started to rebel against the Qing. Two hundred Tungans living in a town called Sandaohezi attacked a Qing garrison at Tarchi. On the eighth month, they also attacked the fortress at Qur Qaraus.<sup>14</sup> Suddenly, the war was everywhere, and the people were suffering. The Buddhists were under attack and the Qing were losing control over a territory they had controlled since

<sup>13</sup> Gser tog Blo bzang tshul khirms rgya mtsho (1982: 114).

<sup>14</sup> Kim (2004: 53).



the 18th century.<sup>15</sup>

*Bla ma dkar po at war*<sup>16</sup>

In this midst of the wars, the Qing's authority in Xinjiang collapsed.<sup>17</sup> At that critical time, Bla ma dkar po took up arms and led a larger Mongolian voluntary army to reaffirm the imperial control and defend Tibetan Buddhism in the region. Largely due to his efforts, the Qing were able to keep their vast western territories. Modern Chinese scholars have recognized him as a great defender of motherland.<sup>18</sup> His biography reads:

On the first day of the eleventh month of the Wood Bull Year (1865), suddenly the Hui army arrived. Among the three Ambans (in Tarbaghatay), they killed the oldest one. Due to the war, the people were suffering greatly, especially the Mongols, Manchus, Xibe, Solons and Chinese, who were under the authority of the imperial Qing [...] the war was everywhere. Thousands of towns and villages were destroyed and lots of people were killed, temples and halls as well as monasteries were burned, and all holy objects were taken away. Thang ka were used for horse saddles, books were used for shoe soles. The *tsha tsha* and statues' heads were cut off and stomachs were plucked out. All food and possessions were taken away. Hui, Hotans, Kazaks, Salar, Russians, and English, who were not Buddhist, cut off the people's access to communication and travel. One third of the total population was really suffering like it was hell on the earth.<sup>19</sup>

It was under these difficult circumstances that Bla ma dkar po decided to take up arms against the Muslim army. Since he was a monk, it was not an easy decision. In his biography, the author goes to great length to justify his military actions and to explain how such a behaviour was not only allowed in Buddhist doctrine under extraordinary circumstance but also how it was necessary for the sake of his own people and Buddhism itself. However, before taking arms against the Hui, Bla ma dkar po had a personal issue to solve. He was an ordained monk, and therefore he could not kill—such a realisation must have tormented him quite a bit. After deep reflection

<sup>15</sup> On the background of this revolts in Xinjiang, see Chu (1958: 248–271), Kim (2004: 37–72), Millward (2007: 117–118).

<sup>16</sup> For Bla ma dkar po's wars and political activities in Xinjiang, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 277–334).

<sup>17</sup> Chu (1958: 250).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Zhao Tong Hua calls Bla ma dkar po 卫疆英雄, "the heroic defender of Xinjiang".

<sup>19</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 277).

on the *dge slong* vows and on the suffering of the people who experienced the attacks against Buddhism, he came to a decision. To benefit most people, he claimed that Buddhism allowed monks to take up arms against the enemies of the Dharma. In 1865, he went to a monastery known as *Zhi ne ang gi* and gave up his *dge slong* vows.

His first military engagement was not on a big scale. According to his biography, as the wars were raging everywhere, the people were scared and had gathered at a place called *Kā tsar u tsur*. Among these refugees, he organized a group of people who was willing to fight, taught them "the tactics of maneuvering and fighting," and "issued strict military orders and expected everybody to follow them." On the nineteenth day of the third month of the Wood Bull Year (1865), after hearing that the Hui army was approaching the camp, he took thirty soldiers with him—the small army squad "killed a thousand enemies."<sup>20</sup>

Following the ambush, his reputation as a military leader grew among the people and many were those who followed him. One of his most celebrated battles was the liberation of Tarbaghatay fortress. After the rebellions started, Hui and Kazakhs came to Tarbaghatay. At the time, the Qing army and its officials still inside the fortress were put under siege by the Muslim attackers. On the second month of the Fire Tiger Year (1866), *Bla ma dkar po*'s force defeated the Hui and Kazakhs who had surrounded the Tarbaghatay, thus delivering much needed food to the people of the fortress. It was in the aftermath of this battle that the name of *Bla ma dkar po* appeared in Qing imperial records for the first time.

In the sixth month of the fourth year of Tongzhi (1865), the reincarnation *Bla ma dkar po* led an army to defend Tarbaghatay fortress. He achieved a victory never obtained before. His military service was excellent. The rewards that must be given him and detailed information on the people who helped such military victory will be written and sent quickly. Then imperial decree and rewards will be issued quickly.<sup>21</sup>

Soon, the imperial court issued a decree and gave him the title of *A chu ho thug thu*. That was very unusual in the Qing court, as a title as important as *ho thog thu* was generally bestowed only to important religious figures in Mongolia and Tibet and not to military and secular individuals. Acknowledging a Tibetan ex-monk and local military leader as *ho thog thu* was therefore against all norms and practices of the imperial court. Such an action might have been the

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*: 284.

<sup>21</sup> *Materials on Xinjiang*: 198.

result of some confusion within the Qing court. In any case, the conferral of the title of *ho thog thu* appears as the first indication of his later identification as a *sprul sku*. While the Qing officials were discussing Bla ma dkar po's heroic deeds and rewards, he was leading his army to war. In the course of a battle fought in a place called Bu rān tā ban, he allegedly defeated thousands of Hui soldiers—a likely event since most of these men were civilians—and 10,000 sheep, 5,000 horses, 100 camels were taken as military bounty.<sup>22</sup>

By the second month in the Fire Tiger Year (1866), his force had protected Tarbaghatay for two years and had provided food to the army and people. However, the military campaign did not end well. With local Muslim support, the Dungan had taken most of the towns and villages around Tarbaghatay and the Chinese, Mongols, and Manchu were now surrounded on all fronts. It was at such a critical time that Bla ma dkar po suggested that these people move to the extensive pastures of the Altai region. However, when in the fourth month of that year, they reached the grasslands, the local Qing officials did not welcome them. The general of Uliastai and the Amban in Hovd, today's Mongolia, sent a letter to Beijing to mediate the situation. After hearing and reading the official reports from Tarbaghatay, the emperor issued a decree and rewarded Bla ma dkar po by giving him title and seal of *ho thog thu* Kun dga' rgyal mtshan. According to Bla ma dkar po's biography, this was the second time he was granted the title of *ho thog thu* by the imperial court. The emperor also gave provisions and silver currency to his soldiers. Furthermore, he was given permission to write directly to the emperor without having to rely on the imperial mail system, an extremely rare honour.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the military campaigns continued. At a place called Tho mar bo kā, he led his army against the Muslims, conquering several thousands of Hui families and taking their possessions. In the winter, in order to face a famine, he ordered that fish be caught from the river, an unusual practice that saved people from starvation. In 1867, Liu Yunlin 李云麟 (1834–1897), the Military Governor of Uliasutai in today's Mongolia, gave Bla ma dkar po's forces provisions and commanded them to protect Bayandai Town (also known as Ba Cheng 巴城). Bla ma dkar po returned to Xinjiang in 1866 and was later appointed as the counsellor of Tarbaghatay fortress, thus becoming the general in charge of Ili.

According to his biography, in 1868, a fight broke out among the

<sup>22</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 291–292).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*: 293–294.

Chinese soldiers who were stationed in the region, following the arrival of a Qing official from Beijing, on a mission to see Bla ma dkar po. On the way, some of these local soldiers sent to escort the envoy, robbed him of his silver. As a reaction, in May, thousands of Chinese soldiers came to Bla ma dkar po's monastery and surrounded it. The local militia managed to ward off the enemies twice, yet a part of the Chinese soldiers defected the army and began to pillage and plunder the areas nearby. In the following year (1869), Bla ma dkar po ordered his armed forces to contain those defectors. He said, "These runaway Chinese soldiers are extremely harmful. If we do not eliminate them, there will not be any peace in the country." Apparently though, Bla ma dkar po needed not to be concerned himself. A few months later, a disagreement emerged among the Chinese defectors, and their leaders were arrested and handled over to the Tibetan general, who consigned them to the Qing officials stationed at Hovd in Mongolia.<sup>24</sup>

His final battle was the liberation of U sā su tha fortress from the Hui army in 1871. His help was directly requested by the Qing court but, by the time his army arrived, the fortress had already been looted and his forces could only clean the area. Whilst Bla ma dkar po was camped in Bu ral tho hā, the imperial court sent Li Yunlin with gifts and money to ask the Tibetan general to settle down and build a town. Under the Fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's guidance, Bla ma dkar po built the monastery known as Chīn ho zī (Chenghua Si 承化寺), the largest in the region.

As his reputation grew, around 1871, thirty thousand Kazakh families came to the Altai region to ask for his protection. Although he allowed them to stay, the local Russians were not pleased with his decision and demanded the return of these Kazakhs to Russia. When Bla ma dkar po arrested four Russians and put them to prison,<sup>25</sup> his relationship with the Russian delegates deteriorated, so much so that he became known as the most anti-Russian officials in the Qing empire.

From 1871 to 1881, the Russians occupied the Ili region of Xinjiang in what was known as the "Ili Crisis". Such an event became an important issue for both the Qing and Russia; indeed, it formed the basis for the diplomatic negotiations between Russia and the Qing dynasty. After Russia occupied Ili, the overall situation more or less stabilized. The Dungan force was not able to make any headway, and Bla ma dkar po never managed to eradicate the Muslim force completely. By then, Russia was the established force in the region.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*: 301–302.

<sup>25</sup> On Bla ma dkar po's relationship with Kazakhs, see Noda (2006).

At that time, the Qing officials, particularly Li Yunlin, were concerned about Bla ma dkar po's next moves. In particular, they worried about Bla ma dkar po's hatred of the Russians. This is because they had actively sought Russian participation in the negotiations over Ili. Although Li Yunlin disliked Bla ma dkar po, during the war, he came to rely on the general's forces for protection since there were no Qing armies in the area. He had to listen to whatever Bla ma dkar po demanded and asked him to do. Yet, from the 1870s onwards, their relationship gradually but inexorably worsened.<sup>26</sup>

Bla ma dkar po also became involved in helping the Qing's reconquest of Xinjiang. By 1876, as the military situation improved in China, following the crushing of Hui rebellions in Qinghai and Gansu, the Qing court decided to reconquer Xinjiang. At that time, although some parts of the Dzungarian Basin were under the control of Qing loyalists, such as Bla ma dkar po, the South Tianshan was still controlled by Yaqub Beg. The Qing court appointed the renowned General Zuo Zongtang (1812–1885) as the military leader in charge of retaking all of Xinjiang. However, Zuo's army faced a lot of logistical problems, especially due to the distance between the mainland and Xinjiang that prevented the military from getting supplies delivered on time. Consequently, General Zuo Zongtang's general asked Bla ma dkar po's help, that arrived in the form of sheep and horses bought with the taxes collected from the Kazakhs. As Zuo Zongtang's army was slowly taking Xinjiang, Bla ma dkar po planned his next move—a trip to Lhasa.

#### *Bla ma dkar po's journeys to Lhasa and to Beijing*

Bla ma dkar po refers to his journey from Lhasa to Beijing as a pilgrimage.<sup>27</sup> In the seventh year of Guangxu, on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month of the Iron Snake Year (1881), Bla ma dkar po left Xinjiang for Lhasa. Setting off from his monastery in the Altai region, he and his entourage arrived in Ürümqi, where they celebrated the Spring Festival. They moved on to Lanzhou, where they met the local Governor General. After passing through Xi'an, in the third month, they arrived in Chengdu and met the Governor General of Sichuan

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<sup>26</sup> The dispute between Li Yunlin and Bla ma dkar po, see Zhao Tong Hua (2014: 88–90).

<sup>27</sup> For Bla ma dkar po's travels to Lhasa and Beijing, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 334–502).

Ding Bao Zhen 丁宝楨 (1820–1886).<sup>28</sup> The governor believed that there was going to be a war between Russia and China and advised him against travelling to Lhasa. In spite of the warning, Bla ma dkar po persisted on his journey towards Central Tibet, and headed to Dar rtse mdo, a historical tea-trade town between China and Tibet. Here, he purchased a large amount of tea bricks to be offered in religious rituals in Lhasa. His party moved on, arriving in Li thang) and then in 'Ba' thang in the eleventh month of the Horse Water Year (1882).

On their way to the monastic town of Brag g.yab, the entourage encountered two Russians, who, in approaching Bla ma dkar po, refused to dismount from their horses in sign of respect. Bla ma dkar po's attendants, judging their behaviour to be an act of aggression, arrested and beat up the two Russians. Bla ma dkar po intervened and told the Tibetan and Chinese officials who were travelling with him, "There should not be any Russians in Sichuan." After reasoning with the Russians, he let them pass. Slowly, Bla ma dkar po and his entourage arrived at the historic town of Chab mdo. 'Phags pa lha, the head of Chab mdo Byams pa gling, the largest dGe lugs pa monastery, came to greet him. Bla ma dkar po stayed at his monastery for several days.

Before Bla ma dkar po's departure from Chengdu, the Sichuan governor informed the Qing Ambans in Lhasa of his arrival in the city. The news created some uncertainties among the Tibetan officials, as they were uncertain about which protocols and manners should be used to receive him. The government officials consulted gNas chung, the official deity, who told them to receive him with respect. In accordance with the oracle, a first greeting party, formed by officials, was sent to Chab mdo to welcome Bla ma dkar po. Another reception was then organised outside of Lhasa by the bKa' shag, and, at that time, all the government officials, including the regent and the representatives of the Three Seats, came to greet the Tibetan general.

Bla ma dkar po entered the city on the second day of the second month of the Water Sheep Year (1883) and he immediately headed to the Jo khang, the holiest place in Tibet. In front of the Jo bo, he wept and said loudly, "For days and nights, I have been thinking about this but now I see it [with my own eyes]."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> He was born in Guizhou and considered one of the most honest, courageous, and progressive officials at the Qing court. In 1864, he became the Shandong governor. In Shandong, he established college known as Shandong Xunfu 山东巡抚 and set up a foreign affairs office. In 1876, he became the governor of Sichuan.

<sup>29</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 348).

The eighth day of the third month was the day that was set for his audience with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933), and he demanded a specific protocol to be followed during the event. In particular, he said, “The emperor entrusted me with his imperial greeting for the Dalai Lama, to be given during my audience. Therefore, the Tibetan king cannot not be seated on his chair. He must stand up until I leave.”<sup>30</sup> In this instance, it is clear that he was acting as the emissary of the Qing emperor and that his status has to be understood as equal to that of the regent of Tibet. The Tibetan “king” Bla ma dkar po is referring to was no other than the regent of Dalai Lama’s, the Tenth rTa tshag rje drung Ngag dbang dpal ldan chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1850–1886), a pragmatic individual known for containing the smallpox epidemic in Lhasa. In the morning, dressed in a Qing official dress, Bla ma dkar po went to see the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, and, according to the latter’s biography, Bla ma dkar po kowtowed nine times in the Chinese style and also prostrated in the Tibetan style, showing no arrogance.<sup>31</sup>

During his stay in Lhasa, Bla ma dkar po generously donated to monasteries and religious lamas and scholars. He spent all the money that he had brought from Xinjiang, to the point that he even had to sell his official dress to support himself. His economic difficulties were partially solved when a group of Mongols, hailing from Xinjiang, handed him some cash. At that, he remarked, “I have become rich again.”<sup>32</sup> In Sera monastery, he met the young Tsha rdor *sprul sku*, the soon-to-be dGa’ ldan khri pa and regent of Tibet. Previously, Bla ma dkar po had helped him to rehabilitate his position in front of the Qing when he was in Xinjiang.

Even in the course of his religious visit to Lhasa, politics were not far from his sight. As soon as he arrived in the city, he was in fact caught in the midst of a crisis between Nepalese and Tibetans, and his mediation proved fundamental in solving the matter. Apparently, the conflict started over a minor trade issue. In the thirty-first day of the second month of that year, during sMon lam chen mo (the Monlam Prayer Festival), two Tibetan women attempted to buy some coral beads from a Nepalese shop owner. As the two women looked at the corals, one of them dropped some coral beads on the ground, and they could not find them. Angered, the shop owner not only verbally abused them but also demanded the price of the dropped coral to be paid. Among the crowd who witnessed the incident were numerous monks who had come to town to celebrate the New Year.

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*: 359–360.

<sup>31</sup> Thub bstan byams pa tshul khri ms bstan ‘dzin ([n.d.]: v1, 181).

<sup>32</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 366).

Siding with the Tibetan women, they began to throw rocks at the shop owner and his Nepalese friends. The situation soon got out of control as the mob destroyed most of the Nepalese shops in Lhasa.<sup>33</sup>

Several days later, while peace seemed to have been restored, Nepalese traders in Lhasa gathered secretly and wrote a joint letter to the authority in Nepal to ask for a military intervention. On the twentieth day of the seventh month of that year, the Tibetan government received news that the Nepalese king was preparing to go to war. The bKa' shag requested Bla ma dkar po to intervene the situation.<sup>34</sup> The general agreed to settle the issue, that he believed to be of economic nature. He therefore suggested the Tibetan party to reimburse the Nepalese shop owners in Lhasa, stressing the importance of framing the payment as a "gift" and not as a "compensation". According to his instructions, the money was not taken from the government's treasury but from "from the Tibetans themselves, including the monastic establishments."<sup>35</sup> Bla ma dkar po also asked the Qing Amban to contribute. Since the monasteries had difficulty paying what was requested, he personally donated the money he originally wanted to use for tea offerings.<sup>36</sup> Despite his direct intervention, the money was still short. To make up the difference, he borrowed 80,000 silver pieces from the governor general of Sichuan and used them to pay off the Nepalese. The settling of Tibetan-Nepalese issue pleased the emperor, who honoured Bla ma dkar po by issuing an imperial decree title known as Yi Shi Du Xin Chan Shi 伊师笃信禅师.<sup>37</sup>

In 1884, his activities in Lhasa mostly focused on pilgrimages and donations to various monasteries and monks. He also sponsored the building of a temple in Pha bong kha monastery and the replacement of the Jo bo's head ornament. In that occasion, many people donated their personal jewelry and precious stones, include a huge diamond from the Nepalese government. In April, the crown was completed and consecrated by all the important lamas in Lhasa.

In 1885, Bla ma dkar po made preparations to leave Lhasa. He sent a group of people to Xinjiang through the northern route via mNga' ris while a small advance party was sent to China through the

<sup>33</sup> For the general background of Nepal-Tibet, see Uprety (1980). On this incident, see Rose (1971: 123–127).

<sup>34</sup> His actives in Lhasa could be corroborated by his letters to the bKa' shag and by the Amban letter to Sichuan. Fortunately, we still have some of these letters at the Tibet Archive in Lhasa.

<sup>35</sup> Cha han tho thug thu nas phyag bris khag bzhi gngang 'byor gyi ngo bshus, at the Tibet Archive in Lhasa.

<sup>36</sup> See Uprety (1980).

<sup>37</sup> See *First Historical Archives of China*: 502—1379.



southern route. Bla ma dkar po moved to Sichuan, and, at his arrival at Chengdu, he immediately went to see the Governor General Ding Bao Zhen 丁宝桢 (1821–1886), who expressed his radical political projects. “[Lhasa] is far away from here. How about [we] move the two Jo bo—the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama—and all the monasteries, such as Se ra, ‘Bras spungs and dGa’ ldan to the Khams-area of Tibet?” Referring to Russians in Xinjiang and British in Tibet, the governor continued, “dBus-gTsang is near India, so sooner or later, the Europeans will come to Lhasa. Bodhgaya is in India, but it should belong to China. I will give a hundred of thousand soldiers.”<sup>38</sup> For a few days Bla ma dkar po did not reply to the governor, then, he made the request to have a private audience with the emperor. As it is recorded in his biography, “Although he had served the emperor for thirty years, he had never seen the emperor himself. If the governor permitted, he would like to go to Beijing to see the emperor.” Without much choice, the Zongdu agreed.

After sending some of his attendants to Ili, in 1886 he visited Mount Emei, travelling then to Hunan, Huibei, and Nanjing, eventually reaching Shanghai. During his stay there, he wanted to visit Mount Putuo, a Buddhist holy island southeast of Shanghai, but the heavy waves prevented him from doing so. He moved therefore to Tianjin where he met the famous Chinese official Li Hongzhang (1823–1901).

He reached Beijing in the mid of the fourth month, an experience that proved to be a deep disappointment for him, as he found a city infested with corruption and incompetent officials. The Qing dynasty as he knew it was dying. On the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the Fire Dog Year (1886), officials from the Lifan Yuan met him and inquired about the reasons for his travels. Their questions came as a surprise to Bla ma dkar po, as he had informed Beijing of his movements before leaving Chengdu. The officials, pretending not to have been aware of his trip, said that an audience with the emperor could now be arranged only by payment. He responded, “I was invited by the imperial court. I did not choose to come. I have no money to pay to see the emperor.”<sup>39</sup>

On the sixth day of the sixth month of the same year, the emperor queried the officials of the Lifan Yuan about Bla ma dkar po’s visit. Suddenly nervous, the officials agreed to arrange an audience for free. On the ninth day of the sixth month of the Fire Dog Year (1886), at the age of fifty-two, Bla ma dkar po met with the Guangxu

<sup>38</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 457–458).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 463.

Emperor (1871–1908), although the audience appears to have been more ceremonial than substantial in its nature. The biography does not much say about the meeting itself. It seems that while in Beijing, Bla ma dkar po petitioned several issues to court and met the officials from Lifan Yuan and the Ministry of Rites officials several times.<sup>40</sup> He asked them to solve several issues including his new status in Xinjiang and whether he was allowed go back to Xinjiang or not. The decision did not come easily. While waiting for the imperial decision, he undertook a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai 五台山 (Five-Peak Mountain) in Shanxi and spent the first days of 1887 on the holy mountain. Almost one year later, he got imperial permission to return to Ili. In the second month of the Earth Rat Year (1888), he went back to Beijing.

Meanwhile the Governor General of Sichuan Liu Bingzhang 刘秉璋 (1826–1905) informed Beijing that the British were engaging in war in Darjeeling and suggested that, “Only Tsha gan *ho thog thu* could solve this problem.” The court was uncertain whether or not to appoint Bla ma dkar po as the Qing’s representative to deal with British aggression in Darjeeling. While waiting for the decision, Bla ma dkar po decided to visit the Tianjin Military Academy 天津武備學堂. There, he met the famous general, politician and diplomat Li Hongzhang (1823–1901). Li received him enthusiastically and showed him his military and modern weaponry, including a recently purchased hot air balloon, in action. He was summoned back when the court decided against appointing him as Qing’s general in Lhasa, on the account of his being more useful in Tarbaghatay in Xinjiang.

In third month of the Iron Tiger Year (1890), Bla ma dkar po decided to go back to Co ne for a short visit. After passing through Lanzhou, on June 1, he arrived at his birth place, for the first time since he left the village thirty years prior.

#### *Final years as a Buddhist sprul sku*

Bla ma dkar po’s final years<sup>41</sup> were filled with disappointments and disillusionments about the Qing dynasty and politics. Besides commenting on certain political issues, he mainly focused his attention on the construction of bKra shis chos ’khor gling in Co ne.

<sup>40</sup> Although these issues and petitions appear to have been important, the biography does not say what he petitioned for nor does it elaborate on what the issues concerned. In due course, all of these questions need to be examined vis-à-vis Qing official court documents.

<sup>41</sup> For Bla ma dkar po’s travels to Lhasa and Beijing, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 503–654).

The idea of establishing a new monastery in his hometown came while he was in Lhasa, and already at that time, he began to send some money to initiate it. In Beijing, he petitioned the imperial court for economic support and when he arrived at the monastic site on the seventh day of the sixth month of that year, he informed the Governor General of Lanzhou that the construction of the monastery had started and that it would host 400 monks.

Since he was considered a Qing court official, many asked his advice and intervention in local issues and disputes. For example, on the way to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, he was requested to settle a dispute between the monasteries of Bla brang and gTsos. At Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, Bla ma dkar po saw the completion of the rooftop of the gSer khang (the Golden Temple), made from the Russian copper that he had bought and had shipped to Bla brang while he was in Xinjiang.

On the fifteenth day of the ninth month, he set off towards Xinjiang. Passing through Lanzhou, he reached Urumqi later that month. His sudden arrival caused confusion among the local Qing officials since they did not know what kind of arrangements and accommodation were appropriate for him. They asked Beijing for advice and the court ordered Bla ma dkar po to be lodged at the monastery of An chig Gan, until his return to Amdo.

During his stay in Xinjiang, he acted more like a *sprul sku* than as a general and a politician. His activities and travels centered mainly on religious rituals and purposes. At the end of 1892, for example, Bla ma dkar po was summoned by the general of Ili for a purification ritual, since the man believed that his fortress was infested by ghosts.<sup>42</sup>

Bla ma dkar po's stay in Xinjiang was brief, and already on the tenth day of the sixth month of the Wood Horse Year (1894), he set off for Amdo, "with countless camel loads, thirty carriages and horses."<sup>43</sup> Before leaving Xinjiang for the last time, he sent one of his attendants to Lhasa to get the name and title for his home monastery. He arrived at his monastery in Co ne in August.

When he was in Xinjiang, he continued to send silver coins to Co ne to build the monastery and its four Grwa tshang or colleges. Each college had prayer halls and residences for monks. All rituals and curricula were modelled on Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, and teachers and instructors were invited from that monastery.

Although removed from the imperial court, he continued to pay close attention to Qing politics. Streams of information came to him

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*: 550.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*: 568.

from all over the Qing empire, as he was at the centre of a communication network. It was through one of these messages that he learned of the outbreak in Korea of the first Sino-Japanese War on July 25, 1894. In a few days, the Japanese army crushed the Qing imperial army. Although a Japanese victory was expected, the speed of it wrong footed the predictions of many observers. The defeat seriously affected the Qing army, both on the military and psychological level. The news deeply upset Bla ma dkar po, who felt hopeless and despondent. It was with such a heavy heart that he decided to leave for Lhasa.

In his biography, he appeared to be desperately waiting for the spring of the Wood Sheep Year (1895), when the warm weather allowed for the long journey to Lhasa. He spent the New Year at his monastery, meeting frequently with the Khri chen *sprul sku* from Bla brang. Once Bla ma dkar po confessed him, "All my life, there are a few enjoyments but much misery and sufferings."<sup>44</sup> Eventually, the time came to go to Lhasa and preparations were made. Since there were no motor vehicles, the people had to ride horses, whereas bags were loaded on mules and *mdzo*.<sup>45</sup> Lacking saddles for the *mdzo*, he sent one of his attendants to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil to borrow some. Suddenly, his dreams and plans of a Lhasa journey were shattered. On third day of the third month of Wood Sheep Year (1895), he became seriously ill. In the fifth month of that year his health improved, yet it was still uncertain whether he would be able to face the journey to Lhasa. The following month, he decided against it, resorting to send his treasurer instead, telling him, "I cannot go to Lhasa. I would like to leave my remains at this place."<sup>46</sup>

During the last part of his life, he met many important lamas, including the author of his biography. He expressed many political statements and dire predictions on the collapse of the Qing dynasty. Once, he told Khri chen *sprul sku*, "This dynasty is not going to last too long. I am worrying about it."<sup>47</sup> When he was asked what would happen to the Qing, and what to do if the emperor could not defend himself, he replied, "They should run. He should run to Sichuan." Or, "The crisis could be solved if the imperial court would give to the enemy what they wanted." And, "After signing an agreement, the emperor could return to Beijing [... because] Chengdu is the old capital, it is the centre of the dynasty. Even if the emperor loses some

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*: 620.

<sup>45</sup> Hybrid between yak and domestic cattle.

<sup>46</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 631).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*: 634.

peripheral territories, at least he still could be emperor."<sup>48</sup>

It was at that time that sKal bzang legs bshad asked Bla ma dkar po some materials for his biography. Bla ma dkar po warned sKal bzang legs bshad to write honestly and truthfully, without exaggerations or flattery. He said that all the actions he performed, whether in China or Tibet had been recorded in documents and files and agreed on writing thirty or forty pages about his life. Sadly, that same afternoon, Bla ma dkar po's health took a turn for the worse. On twenty-eighth day of tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1895), after summoning his managers brTson 'grus and sByin pa, he told them, "Now my old monk's life is over."<sup>49</sup> Yet, many were the issues left unfinished, and when asked whether he wanted a reincarnation to be found, he answered, "If everything is accomplished, I have no reason to come back."<sup>50</sup> Tellingly he passed out amid sentence, a strong indication for the establishment of a *sprul sku* lineage. Bla ma dkar po was no longer able to talk and he died at his monastery in Co ne on the thirtieth day of the tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1895) when the sun had just appeared on the top of the mountains surrounding his monastery.

#### *The invention of a Tibetan sprul sku*

The invention of Bla ma dkar po as a *sprul sku* was largely due to his militancy and wealthy patronage of Buddhist lamas and monastery. As we have seen, he was born as an ordinary young boy in Amdo and was not identified or recognized as a *sprul sku* in his youth nor was he an accomplished religious scholar. However, due to his rise as important military leader in Xinjiang, the imperial court granted him the title of *ho thog thu*, usually bestowed only to high ranking *sprul sku* from Tibet and Mongolia. It is possible that this event, against all political forms and rituals, was a strategic move played by the Qing to contain Bla ma dkar po's military power within the religious sphere without acknowledging it at a secular level. The bestowal of the title of *ho thog thu* was a honour, but spiritual rather than political. Nevertheless, as he proved to be a strong military leader, able to

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*: 634–636. Following Bla ma dkar po's predictions of the oncoming collapse of the Qing dynasty, the author of his biography, sKal bzang legs bshad, ascribes the reason for it to the loss of the principles of governing policy. Using Qianlong's words, he writes, "If the Qing dynasty had not cut off its matrimonial relationship with the Mongols, had not given the Wang position to Chinese, and had respected Tibetan Buddhism, then the dynasty would last long and be safe." The disregard for these three principles is considered by the author of the biography as the major reason for the demise of the Qing dynasty.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*: 646.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*: 647.

defend Buddhism and attract wealthy patronage from many monasteries in Xinjiang and Tibet, the idea that he might indeed be a *sprul sku*, a reincarnate lama, began to take form.

During his military years, as his reputation grew, and he became richer, Tibetan rulers and dignitaries from all over the plateau began to send him greeting parties and ask him for donations. As a Buddhist devotee, he was happy to oblige to their requests. From bKra shis lhun po monastery in the central Tibet, the eighth Panchen Lama bsTan pa'i dbang phyug (1855–1882) dispatched his treasurer rGya mtsho with a decree sealed with the golden rDo rje with the intent of congratulating him on his recent victories. Around 1872, from Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, the fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa sent his treasurer Blo bzang to request a donation for the rooftop for the golden temple. Bla ma dkar po agreed to sponsor the construction of both a golden roof and one thousand Maitreya Buddha statues. In 1873, Bla ma dkar po's treasurer was sent to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, and during the prayer meetings, the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa told him that Bla ma dkar po himself was the reincarnation of the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho(1653–1705), the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama.<sup>51</sup>

The lineage of Bla ma dkar po began with one of the most important and recognised reincarnations of previous Buddhist lamas and kings. His biography, written in the form of *rnam thar*, or hagiography, strengthened and legitimised these claims, by presenting Bla ma dkar po as the reincarnation of successful saints, lamas, kings, and rulers of the past and asserting his coming to this world as a servant of the Dharma and all sentient beings. Although he was liberated or enlightened many years ago, he decided to be reborn again and again in different forms to serve and guide others. From pages 9 to 249, the work lists short biographies of twenty-eight saints, kings, or rulers, all said to have been one of the previous reincarnations of Bla ma dkar po. Among them are Kublai Khan and the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, as well as other lamas and scholars.

After his death, he was honoured by many spiritual figures and his reincarnations were sought and enthroned. The news of his passing was reported to Beijing and funeral rituals usually reserved for high lamas were performed in Amdo and Lhasa. Even the Thirteenth Dalai Lama issued a decree bestowing him the honorary title of Sha cin sdel gig che. Many important lamas, including the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, predicted that his reincarnation would be born in Amdo and search parties were sent in earnest from

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*: 322.

his monastery in Co ne. The second Bla ma dkar po, sKal bzang tshul khrim bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, was born in 1896, and enthroned in 1901. Sadly, the boy did not live too long, as he passed away in Xining in 1911.

The third reincarnation of Bla ma dkar po, sKal bzang 'phrin las lhun 'grub chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1911–1954), was found shortly after, and he lived an active life in his monastery and region. The fourth Bla ma dkar po, Blo bzang bshad sgrub pa'i bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1954–1978), was born in a tumultuous time. He saw his monastery destroyed in 1958 and died before seeing it rebuilt in the 1980s. The current reincarnation was born in 1981 and was identified by the Dalai Lama as the Fifth Bla ma dkar po in 1994; he lives in his monastery in Amdo.

The rise of Bla ma dkar po, an important reincarnation lineage in the late 19th century, shows a different side of Tibetan Buddhists. Before the war, he was an ordinary young monk. By historical coincidence, he found himself in the midst of Islamic rebellions in Xinjiang, an area linguistically, ethnically and geographical different from Amdo. He became a great warrior who took arms against Hui Muslims. In recognition of his heroic defense of the Qing's interest in Xinjiang and the patronage of Tibetan Buddhism in Lhasa and Amdo, the imperial court in Beijing installed him as *ho thog thu*. Many Tibetan lamas—including the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama—recognized him as a spiritual leader and reincarnation of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama. After his death, his reincarnation was sought, and his lineage has continued as one of the most important in Amdo.

#### *Further questions and issues*

What has been said so far raises questions on the role that both violence and the reincarnation system play in Tibetan Buddhism. In times of upheaval, in contrast to many people's beliefs, violence was not only allowed but was also encouraged by Tibetan Buddhism. When Bla ma dkar po decided to take arms against Hui rebellions in Xinjiang, there was a common acceptance among the Tibetan Buddhists in Amdo that the war was justified, since Muslims were attacking not only civilian militants but also woman and children, as well as monasteries and temples in the northern parts of Amdo. Due to this background, many were the lamas and monks who participated in the conflict. They considered their participation to be for the greater good of all sentient beings and Buddhism. Judging from the Bla ma dkar po's case, we could argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not achieved through past religious achievements

and cultural norms. Rather, a *sprul sku* could be accomplished through war, violence, and destruction.

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