

## Introduction

### For A Critical History of the Northern Treasures

Stéphane Arguillère  
(Inalco / IFRAE)

**N**y interest in the ‘Northern Treasures’ goes back to 1989, when I was led to make the acquaintance—to serve him as French interpreter—of the famous ‘C. R. Lama’ (‘Khor gdong gter sprul’ Chi med rig ‘dzin rin po che, 1922–2001).<sup>1</sup> There is little trace of this in my earlier publications, but to be fair, my 2016 book, *Le Manuel de la transpiration immédiate*, is the fruit of a quarter century of work on a manual of practice for the *dGongs pa zang thal*, one of the two main cycles of rDzogs chen in the Byang gter—so it is no exaggeration to say that in fact the Northern Treasures have been a focus of my attention almost from the moment I began learning Tibetan.

But it was during the preparation of the last IATS conference in Paris (2019) that I had the good fortune to get to know Dr. Jay Valentine and his work—especially his doctoral dissertation, which is the actual real starting point of all critical history of the Byang gter—*The Lords of the Northern Treasures* (2013). It was he who took the excellent initiative of setting up a first Byang gter panel, which was admittedly modest in terms of both the number of participants and the audience, but which can be seen as the unofficial inauguration of a new branch in Tibetological research. The present issue of the *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, of which he was the sole project manager, marks a further step in the foundation of this new research pole, as well as our obtaining, in July 2021, of ANR funding for the collective research project described below, which itself will be supported by the next major IATS conference in Prague (July 2022).

### The Research Project

This special issue of the *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* is an opportunity for us to publicize the existence of this collective research project, funded by the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche, CNRS, France), entitled ‘For a Critical History of the Northern Treasures’ (FCHNT, which I submitted on behalf of a group formed by Jean-Luc Achard, Jay Holt Valentine and myself).

---

<sup>1</sup> For a short biography of this interesting figure, see: Ritiman Das (2021).

This project will last four years from February 2022. The purpose of this introductory article is to outline the spirit and method of the FCHNT project, while providing a more general framework for the papers presented in this special issue of the RET.

We will begin by discussing the difficulties encountered in researching the history of Tibet in relation to the nature of the documents that form the main—and most abundant—basis of the historian's work. Then we will indicate how research based on the accessible sources on the Byang gter is rich in potential in this context.

To this end, we will briefly describe what the Northern Treasures are, based on a compilation of this tradition published in 2015 in 63 volumes, and that is, if not exhaustive, at least very complete. We will try to show how it is a relatively compact tradition, in the sense that it constituted the first and perhaps the only real 'order' within the nebulous rNying ma family. But this relatively closed and well-defined character is far from having prevented it from playing a very important role in Tibetan history, with a peak in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, followed rapidly by a collapse due to the 1717–1718 Dzungar invasion.

We will then discuss the important text that will serve as a basis for the FCHNT project: a great history of the Northern Treasures, written by a contemporary author, not well identified yet, who signed his name as Chos dbyings and who is obviously a monk from the 'Khor gdong monastery in the Golok area, or from one of its branches. In any case, the exact identity of the author, who is above all a compiler, is of little importance.

In conclusion, we shall say a word about the benefits that can be expected from a critical and complete translation of Chos dbyings' (2015) *A History of Dorjedrak [and the] Northern Treasures*.

### **1. WRITING TIBETAN HISTORY: DIFFICULTIES AND DOCUMENTS.**

The history of Tibet remains obscure in many of its parts, despite the research accumulated during the past decades. And yet, there are tens of thousands of pages of historiographical material that remain unexploited.

This abundant documentation tends to take the form of religious genealogies—series of biographies of individuals belonging to spiritual lineages or institutions, which represent themselves as if they were families or clans. Writing history often has to do with constructing legitimacy. In Tibet, this takes the form of the construction of the spiritual pedigree of the Buddhist (or Bon) masters: the transmission

lineages of tantric, etc., materials have to prove themselves to be *authentic, continuous, and illustrated by heroic figures* who, in each generation (or at least some of them) must have displayed, in any spectacular way, the power and the value of what they were transmitting. Thus, so as to get a global view of a given period, one must first follow these many and singular threads, and then try to reweave them in the way they were actually interwoven into the real fabric of Tibetan social history.

Of course, one can only face the difficulties that the historian always encounters, when she or he works on the basis of documents that have not been designed by their authors to satisfy her or his appetite for knowledge of material, social details—be it even those relating to religious institutions and the concrete conditions of the exercise of even the most valued activities: there are few specific elements, for example, even about *libraries or the circulation and the availability of the texts* in Tibet. It is only incidentally that hagiographies, when very carefully read, provide us with this kind of information.

A keen awareness of this state of affair obliges us to introduce an intermediate stage between the raw sources and the *historian proper's* syntheses: the task of the philologists who edit and compare the documents, restore their meaning, detail what is reported of the facts while trying to locate and date them through crossing the available sources, with also the idea to give them more context.

This preparatory part therefore has to be carried out by specialists whose skills include: philology (a strong knowledge of the classical Tibetan language), a solid training in the field of Tibetan religious studies and a real familiarity with Tibetan hagiographies, allowing the reconstruction of chronologies and the discernment of implicit assumptions—researchers of the kind of the Bollandists composing the *Acta Sanctorum*. Only should a later stage involve professional, 'broad spectrum,' historians, for global syntheses.

## 2. THE CHOICE OF THE SPECIFIC OBJECT: THE NORTHERN TREASURES

For such a preliminary work, one should ideally pick up, among the many Tibetan religious lineages:

1. one that is sufficiently documented through a well-preserved literature;
2. one that kept a well-defined sense of its singular identity over many centuries;
3. one that played an important role in many aspects of Tibetan life, and whose study is likely to cast light on many unknown

aspects of Tibetan cultural and political history.

Among various possibilities, the researchers associated in this project—many of whom also participate in the special issue of the RET—have chosen one branch of the ‘Ancient Order’ of Tibetan Buddhism: the Byang gter or ‘Northern Treasures.’

### **1. A tradition that is sufficiently documented through a well-preserved literature**

The ‘Northern Treasures’ are a branch of the rNying ma, the ‘Old School’ of Tibetan Buddhism, which traces its origins to the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. But most of its materials belong to the category of ‘hidden treasures’ (*gter ma*), the fruits of a later process of continuous revelation of which the Northern Treasures are a typical, albeit singular, case.

As it is well-known, both of the branches of the Tibetan religion that have their roots before the second diffusion of Buddhism (11<sup>th</sup> century)—the rNying ma pas (who consider themselves Buddhists) and the Bon pos (who do not)—have in common, with some differences, a system of beliefs and practices connected to this idea of ‘hidden treasures’—texts and other objects supposed to have been concealed between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. to be rediscovered at some later time, when the circumstances would be ripe. This is an immense literature, covering various genres and enjoying diverse degrees of authority in those two different traditions.

These ‘revelations’ obviously tell us a lot about the times in which they were ‘invented’—one of their functions clearly being to ‘upgrade’ these ancient traditions to the supposedly more advanced level of Indian tantric material brought into Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, so that the Bon pos and rNying ma pas could compete with the ‘modern’ (*gsar ma*) orders of Tibetan Buddhism. They also construct the myth of a glorious past, which participates in giving them a particular legitimacy. But whatever part of their content is rather attributable to the time of their later ‘invention,’ a close scrutiny also reveals the presence of strata, at least, of older material, perhaps rewritten or edited, but whose archaic features are probably not entirely the work of their ‘discoverers’—who, in this respect, should rather be considered as their *editors* than as their *authors* in the full sense of the term.

Be it as it may, in 1366, in central Tibet, a ‘Treasure Revealer,’ Rig ‘dzin rGod ldem (rGod kyi ldem ‘phru can, dNgos grub rgyal mtshan,

1337–1408)<sup>4</sup> is said to have extracted from a cave a collection of such texts now known as the ‘Northern Treasures’ (15 first volumes of the 63-vol. collection described below), one of the most famous sets of ‘hidden treasures’ among the many collections of such revelations known in the Ancient Order of Tibetan Buddhism.

A singular characteristic of these Northern Treasures is that this charismatic figure founded a tradition that has become, so to speak, ‘an empire within an empire’ inside the rNying ma family of Tibetan Buddhism—a branch whose main legacy includes, uniquely to this degree in Tibet, not only his own revelations, but also those of figures regarded as his later reincarnations (*sprul sku*), in a process of constant expansion at least from the 1366 revelations of Rig ’dzin rGod ldem to those of Rig ’dzin sKal bzang Padma dbang phyug (rGod ldem’s 4<sup>th</sup> reincarnation, d. 1770 or 1771). This is quite unique among the rNying ma pas and this very specific character has not yet been properly studied. The most surprising aspect of this feature is that this corpus includes revelations by some ‘Treasure Revealers’<sup>5</sup> who are not otherwise regarded as wholly Byang gter—as if the Byang gter was *originally an organic unity* whose ongoing revelation was a collective work over the centuries, tending towards a complete whole to which many could contribute for a larger or smaller part (the idea of this *complete whole* seems not to have been theorized, though, and remained implicit, but was definitely there at the background; and the criterion that made some revelations ‘Byang gter,’ and others not so, is so far also a bit obscure).

The corpus, in a, now, much broader sense, also includes other

---

<sup>4</sup> According to the most commonly accepted chronology, which is not above further critical examination.

<sup>5</sup> Especially: mNga’ ris *pañ chen* Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542), Byang bdag bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550–1602 ?), whose revelations are more or less regarded as wholly ‘Byang gter,’ plus the stranger cases of *gter ston* whose revelations are regarded as *partly* Byang gter, in a way that does not seem to be absolutely well settled: bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535) and Gar dbang rdo rje (1640–1685). The fact that some *gter ston* who are not *sprul skus* of Rig ’dzin rGod ldem can discover ‘Treasures’ that belong to the Byang gter, on the one hand, and that in some cases their revelations wholly belong to the corpus, while in other cases they don’t, is quite puzzling. What is more, there are discrepancies between the description of the Byang gter found in the preface of the 1973 edition of the *dGongs pa zang thal*, on the one hand, and the corpus that we actually find in the 63-vol. compilation (2015), on the other hand. Anyhow, the corpus seems to have been regarded as closed with the death of Rig ’dzin sKal bzang padma dbang phyug, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It would be interesting to make a field-work inquiry so as to understand why, for example, the ‘*Khor gdong gter gсар*, revealed by a series of *gter ston* starting with ‘Khor gdong *gter chen* Nus ldan rdo rje (1802–1864) in an otherwise completely Byang gter context, are not regarded as ‘being Byang gter’ though practiced only by people who identify themselves as Byang gter practitioners.

older tantric systems of which the masters of the Northern Treasures have become the depositaries and specialists, but that are called ‘Byang gter’ only in that sense and not regarded as belonging to the unitary whole to the same degree.

As mentioned above, a very large part of the fruits of all this history has recently (2015) been published in the form of a 63-volume compilation of its literature, highlighting an enormous collection of as-yet-unknown material from perhaps the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the most recent years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A complete copy of this collection, as a basis for the FCHNT project, has been purchased by the Institut d’Asie of the Collège de France in Paris (the whole set of which is also freely available to scholars in pdf format on the BDRC/TBRC website<sup>6</sup>).

Thanks to this long-awaited publication, which has no equivalent for the other branches of the rNying ma pas, the Northern Treasures are a perfectly suitable choice for ‘pre-historiography’ in the sense that we understand it, meeting perfectly, first of all, our first criterion—that of being ‘sufficiently documented by a well-preserved literature.’

As for this 63-vol. compilation, a cursory analysis shows the following major subdivisions:

1. The revelations of Rig ‘dzin rGod ldem (1337–1408?) – vol. 1-15.
2. The cycle of *Vajrasattva’s Heart Mirror* (*rDo rje sems dpa’ thugs kyi me long*) of Gar dbang rdo rje (1640–1685)<sup>7</sup> – vol. 16.
3. The cycle of *The Sow With a Profound Seal* (*Lung phag mo zab rgya*) by bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535)<sup>8</sup> – vol. 17.
4. The cycle of *Mañjuśrī Master of Life* (*‘Jam dpal tshe bdag*), mostly (but not wholly) ‘invented’ by rGya zhang khrom (11<sup>th</sup> Century?)<sup>9</sup> – vol. 18-27.

<sup>6</sup> Reference in the bibliography in the final pages of this volume.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that in the preface (Gene Smith?) to the 1973 edition of the *dGongs pa zang thal* (vol. I, p. 7), which calls him mNga’ ris gter ston Gar dbang zla ba rgyal mtshan, 6 volumes of his revelations are supposed to be ‘Byang gter,’ including the following cycles, besides (1) the *rDo rje sems dpa’ thugs kyi me long*; (2) *sPyan ras gzigs rtsa gsum snying thig*; (3) *Padma’i snyan rgyud yang gsang dri med*; (4) *Zab tig chos dbyings rang gsal*; (5) *rDo rje phur pa’i skor*; (6) *Tshe sgrub rdo rje rgya mdud*. The reasons why these do not appear in the 63-vol. collection remains to be researched.

<sup>8</sup> On this figure and his *Yang tig ye shes mthong grol*, see Achard, Jean-Luc (2004). The *Yang tig ye shes mthong sgrol*, incidentally, is, for any reason, never regarded as Byang gter. The case of the *Lung phag mo zab rgya* is extremely interesting, as this is explicitly a complement (like another part of the same jigsaw puzzle) to a section of Rig ‘dzin rGod ldem’s revelations, a sub-section of the *dGongs pa zang thal*.

<sup>9</sup> On this figure, see, in the present volume, Dr. Dylan Esler’s contribution, pp. 190-215. This is considered ‘Byang gter’ only in the broader sense, that of traditions that became organic part of the spiritual legacy of the Byang gter masters.

5. The cycle of Rāhula, *The Poisoned Razor*, 'discovered' by Padma las 'brel rtsal (end of the 13<sup>th</sup>-first years of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>10</sup> – vol. 28-29.
6. The cycle of Padmasambhava, *The Complete Gathering of the Knowledge-Holders* (*Rig 'dzin yongs 'dus*), revealed by mNga' ris paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542)<sup>11</sup> – vol. 30-32.
7. The revelations of Rig 'dzin Legs ldan rdo rje (1452 [1512?] – 1565): *Liberating the saṃsāra in the Dharmadhātu* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dbyings grol*) and the cycle of *Amṛtakundali* (*Tshe sgrub bdud rtsi 'khyil pa*) – vol. 33.
8. The *Nine-Headed Wrathful One*, revealed either by Rig 'dzin Legs ldan rdo rje or by mNga' ris paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal – vol. 34.
9. The revelations of *Byang bdag* bKra shis stobs rgyal (1550 (?–1603): *Karma Guru* and *The Essential Meaning of the Mother-Tantras* (*Ma rgyud snying po don gsum* or *Ma rgyud khrag lung ma*) – vol. 35.
10. The complete writings of Rig 'dzin Padma 'Phrin las (rGod ldem IV, 1641-1717) – vol. 36-50.
11. The autobiography of Rig 'dzin sKal bzang Padma dBang phyug (rGod ldem V, 1719–1770) – vol. 51.
12. The revelations of Rig 'dzin sKal bzang Padma dBang phyug: *The Epitome of the Precepts* (*bKa' 'dus*) – vol. 52-53, the *Wrathful Padmasambhava*:<sup>12</sup> vol. 54.
13. The Byang gter-related writings of *sPrul sku* Tshul lo or Tshul khrim bzang po (1895–1954) – vol. 55-56.
14. Writings by Theg mchog bstan 'dzin (mGo tswa mkhan chen, 1878–1949) – vol. 57.
15. Writings by Kun bzang bstan 'dzin (d. unknown) – vol. 58.
16. A collection of biographies of masters of the Northern Treasures – vol. 59.

<sup>10</sup> This figure was so far known as the revealer of the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* and as Klong chen pa's predecessor in a lineage of reincarnations. His chronology is full of obscurities despite his close association with extremely important figures like Karma pa III Rang byung rdo rje. A close scrutiny of this gZa' corpus might bring more light on his life than what could already be derived from the *mKha' 'gro snying thig*. As the previous one, this cycle is 'Byang gter' only in the broadest sense.

<sup>11</sup> There is also some uncertainty as to what portion of his revelations should be included in the Byang gter, even though there is no discussion of Padma dbang rgyal's characterization as a Byang gter master and as one of the founding fathers of the rDo rje brag tradition (on this figure, see A. Sukhanova and J.-L. Achard's contributions to this volume). Again, one would have to begin by comparing, for example, the catalog presented in the 1973 edition of the *dGongs pa zang thal* and the contents of this 63-volume collection, searching why some of the texts that appear in the 1973 catalog are not present in the 2015 collection.

<sup>12</sup> Not mentioned in the *dGongs pa zang thal* preface.

17. Writings mostly by Bāḥ gnas *mchog sprul* mDo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan (1888–1964) – vol. 60.
18. Common recitations / basic rituals of the Northern Treasures – vol. 61.
19. *A History of rDo rje brag [and the] Northern Treasures* – vol. 62.<sup>13</sup>
20. Table of contents (*dkar chag*) [of previous editions] and ‘checklists of received teachings’ (*gSan yig*)<sup>14</sup> on the Northern Treasures – vol. 63.

To be more specific about the historiographical materials scattered in this collection, here is a list of the main ones:

- Among n° 10:
  - Vol. 36-37 (1180 p.): autobiography of Rig ‘dzin Padma ‘Phrin las (1641–1717).
  - vol. 41: a history of the lineage of the *Gathering of Intentions* (*mDo dgongs ‘dus*) by Padma ‘Phrin las (439 p.).
- N° 11 (vol. 51: 814 p.) is the autobiography of Rig ‘dzin dKal bzang Padma dBang phyug (1719–1770).
- N° 16 (559 p.) includes biographies or autobiographies of:
  - Rig ‘dzin rGod ldem
  - mNga’ ris *paṅ chen* Padma dbang rgyal
  - Legs ldan rje
  - Rig ‘dzin Ngag gi dbang po
  - A series of biographies of the masters of the lineage from the beginning to Yol mo bsTan ‘dzin nor bu (1589–1644)
  - Thub bstan chos dbang mnyam nyid rdo rje (1886–ca. 1935)
  - The autobiography of mGo tswa *mkhan chen*

---

<sup>13</sup> The author of this historical compilation signs ‘Chos dbyings’ and introduces himself as a monk of the ‘Khor gdong monastery in eastern Tibet; we earlier supposed that it would be ‘Khor gdong *mkhan chen* Chos dbyings khyab brdal, but it is not the case: the publication is very recent (2015) and as the history continues up to around 2011, while Chos dbyings khyab brdal died in 1997.—Just when I was doing the final proof-reading of this article, I fortuitously came into contact with *dGen* O rgyan btsan ‘dzin, a monk from the rDo rje brag monastery in India, who knows the author personally and confirmed that he is indeed not *mKhan chen* Chos dbyings khyab brdal but another *mkhan po* Chos dbyings, who spent a long time in India, is still alive and is now back to Khams.

<sup>14</sup> Those two types of items are meant to establish the correctness and completeness of the published corpus.



- Theg mchog bstan 'dzin (1878–1949)
  - A biography of Bāḥ gnas *mchog sprul* mDo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan (1888–1964)
- No. 19 (vol. 62: 905 p.) is a history of the Northern Treasures (in Tibetan style: a series of hagiographies) and is, if not our main primary source, at least the most up-to-date synthesis of the history of this tradition, which will serve as the basic framework for this research.

In total, therefore, in this collection we have, as a basis for historical research, just under 4,000 p. of primary materials; but, in fact, many valuable pieces of information are scattered throughout the 63 volumes, especially in the ritual texts in which the 'spiritual pedigree,' *i.e.*, the lineage of masters and disciples who transmitted the practice, is often mentioned. It is sometimes there that we must look for the only remaining traces of certain figures—or at least, the mention of their name sometimes opens the way to research in other sources, which allows us to establish a richer and more refined chronology.

In some cases, available documents that are directly related to the history of the Northern Treasures have not been included in this collection, or are merely summarized in the large historiographical compilation of vol. 62, though they fall within the scope of our project.<sup>15</sup> Since the main purpose of the Tibetan writing of religious history is to establish simple lines of transmission (with more or less *one individual per generation*, from the beginning of a tradition to the present day), besides the omission of almost all social, political, etc., context, there are figures that, in fact, played an extremely important role in the actual history of these traditions who may be completely omitted in such hagiographic compilations, or, in the best case, heavily understated—for example, because they belonged to what, in retrospect, appear to be *secondary lines* or even *dead arms* of the tradition (or aspects of it to

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, we have autobiographical writings by bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480–1535). It is also quite well-known that Thang stong rgyal po (1351?–1485) was an important figure of the early history the Northern Treasures, which he himself partly 're-revealed,' though this aspect does not appear so much in Cyrus Stearns (2007) and though he is barely mentioned also in our n°19 (*A History of rDo rje brag [and the] Northern Treasures*). Another good example would be Zur Chos dbyings rang grol (1604–1669), a master of both the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las, of whom we have a large biography by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—and the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1617–1682) himself who was one of the important links in the transmission of the Northern Treasures and whose life is well documented. These two figures are not omitted in Chos dbyings (2015), but the large, available sources for their biographies have not been included in the collection.

which, for whatever reason, it preferred somehow to ignore).<sup>16</sup> Though neglected in our main sources, these figures will not be ignored in our project.

## **2. A tradition that kept a well-defined sense of its singular identity over many centuries**

The Northern Treasures are not merely, as we have already said, one of the main branches of the Ancient (*rNying ma*) ‘School’—or rather: *family*—of Tibetan Buddhism: one could go so far as to say that, for many centuries, it was the only institution among the *rNying ma pas* that tended to build itself, with some success, as a religious order, like those that existed among the ‘Modern’ (*gsar ma*) trends of Tibetan Buddhism. In this sense, the Northern Treasures are quite opposite to the dominant style of the Ancient School—which tends to make the *rNying ma pas* a kind of protoplasm: they have always lacked an institutional centralization, a canon of texts with a well-defined perimeter, a clear magisterium (other than the *sensus fidei* of the *rNying ma bla mas*) to define what is authentic and what is apocryphal, or even an undisputed corpus of authoritative authors or a fully unified doctrine.

Instead of a central authority, the Ancient School has always had a large number of leaders, each of whom enjoyed a kind of partial and local authority—in the sense that he had authority over his own patrimony, both in a material and social sense (a more or less extended community with its related movable and immovable property) and in a sense of textual content (its unique share of the common spiritual patrimony). Each of these provincial institutions (many of which did not last more than a few generations) tended to cultivate a unique and distinctive style, despite a very strong ‘family resemblance’ between them all, and a rather fluid tendency to borrow elements from each other, which created a background of unity in a network otherwise devoid of a center of gravity. The *rNying ma* family of Tibetan Buddhism is thus, if we dare say, a *blob* from which new tentacles constantly emerge, new shoots that can then be reabsorbed into it, which does not prevent them from being reactivated later on. The whole is full of life but absolutely chaotic, even according to the feudal standards of the other tendencies of the Tibetan religions.

The *Byang gter*, although it is originally one of the many pseudopods that grew from this anarchical background, contrasts quite strongly with it, in that, for example, it has a slightly more precise

---

<sup>16</sup> A good example, besides *Thang stong rgyal po* or *bsTan gnyis gling pa*, is all the tradition stemming from the former that flourished in the far eastern *Kaḥ thog* monastery, which I try to reconstruct somehow in my article below (p. 233-298).

sense of its canon. This is a strange fact as such, given that, as all the other Nyingma canonical corpuses, it has enjoyed a process of constant growth as we have already said and as shown by the list provided above (n° 1-3, 6-9 and 12, mostly, altogether more or less 24 bulky volumes).

Just as the corpus of the Northern Treasures forms a somehow strongly interconnected whole distinct from the fluid mass of other rNying ma literature, so too does this tradition exhibit an institutional compactness that distinguishes it from most others, especially in the earlier period. Similarly, although the center from which the Northern Treasures radiate has shifted over the centuries, the precise location of that center at any given time has always been clearly fixed without equivocation or discussion. And, for example, the title 'Master of the North' or 'Lord of the North' (*Byang bdag*, meaning, the head of this tradition, the holder of its transmissions) has been for centuries in use among the rNying ma pas, and there is no true equivalent for other branches of the Ancient School,<sup>17</sup> at least before the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

The combination of the well-defined character of both the content of its textual, liturgical and spiritual traditions on the one hand, and its organizational structures on the other hand, makes this 'order' fully satisfy our second criterion.

### **3. A tradition that played an important role in many aspects of the Tibetan life, and whose study is likely to cast light on many unknown aspects of the Tibetan cultural and political history**

Some of the revelations of rGod ldem and his successors have had an influence that, to this day, extends among the followers of the Ancient School far beyond the confines of the Northern Treasures institutions. Two examples: the tantric cycles related to Vajrakīla (Boord: 1992,

---

<sup>17</sup> This is a quite bold assumption and maybe a very daring hypothesis—mostly based on my reading of many biographies, especially in the context of my former researches about Klong chen rab 'byams (1308–1364), in which I found no evidence of well-organized, long-lasting institutions, besides the chains of master to disciple transmissions that can be reconstructed. In a slightly later period, it might be the case that something a bit similar, though less centralized, crystalized around Padma gling pa (1450–1521) and his successive incarnations. The case of Kaḥ thog in the Far East might also be an exception, but the tradition of this monastery, while very old in its roots, took on an eclectic, not to say catch-all, character very early on, and Kaḥ thog was more than once refounded on apparently largely new grounds, which makes one wonder how this tradition could be characterized in a way that would remain valid through the centuries. Indeed, the nature of the capture by the masters of this monastery of at least part of the Byang gter legacy and the treatment they gave it—which I discuss in my article, below p. 233-298—illustrate this extremely eclectic bias, already deeply marked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

1993, 2003...)<sup>18</sup> and those related to the ‘Great Perfection’<sup>19</sup> are considered ‘classic’ among the rNying ma pas.<sup>22</sup> Research on the Byang gter will thus shed light more generally on the entire rNying ma branch of Tibetan religion (the study of which has long been central, incidentally, to the intellectual traditions of French Tibetology).

A phenomenon that is perhaps almost unparalleled in the history of religions is the extraordinarily amazing system of ‘re-revelations,’ or *yang gter* (literally: a ‘re-treasure’): a second (or third, etc.) revelation of the *exact same* body of texts by a later ‘treasure discoverer.’ Apart from emic justifications, *retreasures* most often occur when a high-ranking rNying ma lama cannot properly obtain the transmissions of a given tantric cycle, especially (the case of Byang gter might well be a perfect example) because it is jealously guarded by an institution as one of its specialties.

This idea can only be understood if one considers the crucial character of proper transmission from master to disciple in the tantric systems: no one can improvise himself or herself as a teacher of a corpus that he or she has not properly received; and if its legitimate custodians do not want to entrust it to him or her, his or her only resource is to *receive a direct revelation of it, which adds nothing to its content, but confers the legitimacy to teach it*. Besides Thang stong rgyal po’s ‘re-treasures’ that have already been mentioned, certain cycles of the Northern Treasures have thus gained new popularity thanks to the enormous amount of ‘re-treasures’ found in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* (110 vols.), which contains, among other things, numerous Northern Treasure materials torn away from the Byang gter institutions (for reasons the details of which would also deserve being researched—maybe the decadence in which the Northern Treasures institutions had fallen in the times when the *gTer mdzod* was compiled, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

Beyond the dissemination of Byang gter content in an overtly recognizable form (including through the ‘inheritance capture’ of the ‘re-treasures’), there is also a tendency in the rNying ma ‘school’ to synthetically recycle (without always citing) older ritual materials into

---

<sup>18</sup> See our general Byang gter bibliography below pp. 299-305.

<sup>19</sup> Turpeinen, Katarina S. (2015); Malcolm Smith (2016); Arguillère 2016 and 2018b; Karl Brunnhölzl (2018).

<sup>22</sup> One might also wonder, for example, how the *bKa’ brgyad rang shar* cycle (vol. 9-12 of the 63 vol. collection) fits into what appears to be the progressive construction of the *bKa’ brgyad* system, the main earlier levels of which were laid down by the revelations of Nyang ral Nyi ma’i ’od zer (1124–1192) and Guru Chos dbang (1212–1270). Various recent developments in research about the rNying ma pa world are now shifting the focus to what might be called ‘biographies of textual corpora’—the history of their transmission and the successive roles they have been made to play (along the lines of e.g. Jake Dalton’s *The Gathering of Intentions*).

later liturgies, even in cases where the latter present themselves as revelations and thus, theoretically, as not requiring an inherited tradition as their basis. Because of this feature of the rNying ma literature, in the Tibetan cultural world, only a few scholarly liturgists are able to identify the accumulated layers of textual elements. In many ways, rNying ma scholarship is an art of allusive citation and composition of texts that are skillfully crafted puzzles from a large number of sources.<sup>23</sup> Only a thorough analytical dismantling of these constructs can deliver their full meaning—and for this reason, any research on the Northern Treasures (which can be considered the best preserved part of the relatively ancient ‘hidden treasures’) will allow us to better understand the history of Tibetan religions.<sup>24</sup>

The Northern Treasures, as a complete distinct sub-school of the Ancient Order, also inherited many other traditions considered ‘oral transmission’ (*bKa’ ma*) and developed distinct exegeses and liturgies for them. Jacob P. Dalton (2016) shows, for example, that the contrasting hermeneutics of one tantra, the *Gathering of Intentions* (*mDo dgongs ’dus*), had a structuring function in the history of this Order. The central figure of the Northern Treasures in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Padma ‘phrin las (1641–1717), played a key role in the exegesis of the *Gathering of Intentions* and thus in the construction of the identity of the whole rNying ma school. Although the syntheses proposed a little later, notably within the rival rNying ma institution in central Tibet, sMin sgrol gling, eventually became more popular, the followers of Byang gter have preserved to this day their own rich hermeneutics of the *Gathering of Intentions* and the specific liturgies that derive from them.<sup>25</sup> Padma ‘phrin las’ exegetical works on the *Gathering of Intentions* (which also include an extensive history of its transmission) are well preserved in various editions, and their historical side, at least, falls

---

<sup>23</sup> On this point, our research closely depends on Cathy Cantwell (2020—output of an AHRC project on ‘Authorship, originality and innovation in Tibetan Scriptural Revelations: A case study from the Dudjom Corpus.’ This is the most up to date piece of research on these internal borrowings in the case of tantric rituals). But my own (Arguillère 2016: Tülku Tsullo, *Le Manuel de la transparution immédiate*) integral ‘de-construction’ of an important meditation manual belonging to the Byang gter tradition also shows in details (and this will get even clearer in the English version that is under press) to what extent a Tibetan text can be a pure patchwork of many barely paraphrased texts, embroidered upon pre-existing canvasses.

<sup>24</sup> But this also works the other way round: part of the Byang gter may surely be regarded as a reworking of earlier materials—especially of Nyang ral Nyi ma’i ‘od zer (1124–1192) and *Guru Chos dbang* (1212–1270)’s revelations. We are not, however, focusing so far on this aspects of things, for fear of getting lost in the too many paths of research that any investigation into the Byang gter automatically opens.

<sup>25</sup> For example, ‘Khor gdong *gter chen* Nus ldan rdó rje comes all the way from the ‘Go log area to rDo rje brag in the 1850s in order to receive all the transmissions for this cycle (Arguillère 2018a).

within the scope of our research project, as this history of the transmission lineages of the *Gathering of Intentions* is part of the construction of legitimacy of the Northern Treasures institutions. But deep research in this field is also likely to provide insights into the early centuries of the rNying ma school, building upon the foundation laid by J. Dalton (2016), one of the most groundbreaking recent contributions to the historical understanding of the Ancient School of Tibetan Buddhism, along with the work of the group active in recent years around C. Cantwell and R. Mayer).

The Byang gter institutions were not only custodians of their own specific corpus and of all this common heritage of the rNying ma school. They also became, as we have said, a repository for other sets of 'hidden treasures.' Most notable among them is the *Mañjuśrī Master of Life* (vols. 18-27 in the 2015 63-vol. edition), incorporated into their spiritual heritage. This very large corpus, quite central among the systems of 'war magic' that helped grant the Byang gter institutions their central political status in the seventeenth century, may in fact be somehow older than any other 'hidden treasure' that has been the subject of academic research to date: a large part of its revelation is attributed to rGya Zhang khrom, who might well antedate Nyang ral Nyi ma'i 'od zer by a century. This, as such, would be a major reason to study the Byang gter legacy.

The Order of the Northern Treasures, born in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, reached the height of its glory with the foundation of the rDo rje brag monastery (at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and from then on the mother house of the Northern Treasures), and later under the reign of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1617–1682), mostly with the activity of Padma 'phrin las. Now, one of the functions devolved at rDo rje brag during the reign of the 'Great Fifth' (and somehow until the Cultural Revolution put an end to it) was precisely this 'war magic' and more broadly the performance of all kinds of magical rites for the protection of the sovereign and for the order and integrity of the territory. Then, rDo rje brag (and hence Byang gter as such) suffered badly from the Dzungar invasion of 1717–1718, an episode that is not yet fully understood but whose specifics are probably not unrelated to rDo rje brag's status as, dare we say, a 'launch pad for magic missiles' on Tibet's enemies.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> On this point, our ANR-funded research project is naturally linked to the work carried out within the framework of the TibArmy project in the CRCAO (Paris), from which the 'war magic' aspect is not absent. See most notably, in connection with both TibArmy and *'Jam dpal tshe bdag*: George S. Fitzherbert (2018): 'Rituals as War Propaganda in the Establishment of the Ganden Phodrang State' in Travers, Alice and Federica Venturi (eds.), *Buddhism and the Military in Tibet during the Ganden Phodrang period (1642–1959)*, special issue of *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie*, EFEO, vol. 27, 2018: 49–119.

The subsequent survival of the Northern Treasures was in some respects a long twilight—despite some form of revival in Eastern Tibet from the late eighteenth century onwards, well documented in the historical text that provides our research with its basic framework. Surprising as it may seem, an in-depth study of Byang gter institutions would allow us to understand more precisely many aspects of the reorganization of the Tibetan state and society under the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—as well as aspects of its foreign policies. It is plain, for example, that the perception of the Tibetan state as capable of fighting its enemies by magical means is not to be overlooked, however strange this may sound to us, in order to understand the history of this region in those times.

The political dimension of the Northern Treasures, however, goes far beyond this—admittedly very important—charge of magic in the service of state power. Indeed, as it is well-known to Tibetologists, in Tibetan civilization, the ultimate ideological foundation of all political power lies in the reference to the imperial period and in particular to that of King Khri srong lde'u btsan (8<sup>th</sup> century), closely associated, according to traditional accounts, with the heroized and even deified Indian master Padmasambhava. And it is through the 'hidden treasures' of the Ancient School that this revered legendary past resurfaced in the following centuries, made *effectively* accessible through the revealed rituals of the rNying ma School. In addition to the strong awareness, among the followers of the Northern Treasures, of their duty to bless and protect the state and its rulers, the Byang gter corpus contains, for example, the coronation rite used for the current king of Bhutan and other rulers before him. The links with political powers should be very carefully examined in all the remarkable figures we propose to study.

Finally, the Northern Treasures are not only a religious current remarkable for the many insights it offers into periods of the Tibetan past, about which much is still unknown. It is, in fact, a tradition that is still alive, not only in a scholarly form in a number of monasteries in Tibet or in the Tibetan diaspora, but also, even today, a fairly widespread religious affiliation in a more popular form (and which some might consider degraded, but this normative assessment is of course of no interest to researchers) in the Himalayas, among populations whose religion is Tibetan Buddhism. A solid knowledge of the ritual literature of the Northern Treasures is often necessary to analyze the materials that anthropologists encounter among these populations, which are much more accessible to fieldwork than those of the PRC.

### **Context, positioning and objectives of FCHNT Research objectives and hypotheses**

The interest of the subject being now well established, and the context—that of the publication of this vast 63-vol. compilation of the literature of the Northern Treasures—somewhat clarified, one still ought to present the method that we plan to implement in relation to the state of the art.

Basing ourselves on Chos dbyings' *A History of Dorjedrak [and the] Northern Treasures* (2015: vol. 62), the FCHNT project and team plan to entirely translate this text (with the exception of a few irrelevant sections<sup>27</sup>), while adding critical notes and commentaries, *etc.* In fact, many more chapters of various nature will have to be added.

This work of critical translation will enable us to establish a 'sectional view' of a large portion of the Tibetan history (a millennium, if we count the amalgamated materials from before the 14<sup>th</sup> century) based on the literature of the Northern Treasures, using the traditional historiography of this singular lineage to reconstruct a path—or a few paths—through the forest of global Tibetan history. As already explained, we consider the expected outcome of our research to be preparatory material for future historians, who will find in our work some of the many factual threads that they will later have to weave in order to reconstruct the concrete History.

In practice, the 800 or so pages that are to be translated will be divided, roughly, into four 200-page sections. Each 200-page segment (intended to form the basis of one English-language volume) will be shared among the contributors according to their expertise and more particular interests. They will be expected not only to translate the text rigorously, but also to do all the secondary research required to achieve the greatest possible clarity and accuracy. Each participant will also be expected to reread the work of the others, in order both to clarify the parts of the text for which she or he will be responsible, to harmonize the style of the translation and to help the other translators to cope with any difficulties they may face, or to suggest useful clarifications. The work of editing the whole will have to eliminate redundant commentaries: as this is a relatively homogeneous tradition, a good system of internal cross-references, well-designed prefaces (or

---

<sup>27</sup> In fact, there are almost a hundred pages at the beginning of this chronicle that are superfluous, at least for research purposes (at a later stage, a complete translation could certainly be desirable, so as not to detract from the work under study; but this is not a priority: one more life of the Buddha, one more legendary biography of Padmasambhava, one more general account of the mythical beginnings of the Ancient School of Tibetan Buddhism, would not bring anything new or scientifically sound).



appendices at the end of the volumes) should make it possible to pool many of the required explanations.

From a disciplinary point of view, therefore, this is mainly a *philological* type of work mobilizing a strong specialized competence in the *history of religions* and *religious anthropology*, since the text under consideration is stuffed with allusions to a whole doctrinal, ritual and meditative literature for the understanding of which a *very solid knowledge of classical Tibetan* and of the *general history of Tibet* are required, but would not be sufficient.

In conclusion, we can only express our wish to be joined in the field of 'Jangterology' by many colleagues—well beyond the first circle that formed around the first Byang gter panel organized by Jay Valentine at the IATS symposium in 2019. Far from wanting to appropriate this field as our own, we hope in this introduction to have made its many facets shimmer enough to persuade many researchers, especially in the younger generation, that there is an abundant wealth of material here to draw on with both hands and that, provided good communication and coordination are established and maintained, this field opens up innumerable possibilities for research which it is to be hoped that, like the Northern Treasures themselves, revealed little by little by many visionaries, they will all fit together harmoniously like the pieces of a vast and coherent picture puzzle.

