

Compte-rendu

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This book marks a milestone in the research on the Vajrabhairava-Yamāntaka cult in Tibet that has been remarkably understudied in academic scholarship, despite some recent contributions (Wenta 2020,¹ Brown 2021²) that are, however, not mentioned by the author. In this book, Bryan J. Cuevas introduces a rich collection of over three hundred Tibetan manuscripts recently discovered in Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar) and Khams (Jyekundo, Yushu county) dealing with the cult of Vajrabhairava-Yamāntaka, thus opening up a vast opportunity for the future scholars interested in studying this topic. The best part of the book comprises of the collection of personal writings attributed to the famous Vajrabhairava sorcerer, Rwa lo tsā ba Rdo rje grags, the so-called *Rwa pod* ("Rwa Book"), which is catalogued in the book according to the seven different manuscript collections.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one has three main sections. The first section examines a history of Vajrabhairava-Yamāntaka cult in Tibet focusing on the Tibetan lineages that were influential in the dissemination of Vajrabhairava-Yamāntaka on the Tibetan plateau and were adopted, especially by the Sa skya and Dge lugs traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. It also discusses the *Rwa pod* collection and examines the two 'original' catalogues, i.e., Rwa lo's own index, called the *Thim yig* ("Faded document") or *Them yig* ("Registry"), and its later expansion by Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, called the *Dkar chag*. The former is said to have been written by Rwa

¹ Aleksandra Wenta. 2020. *The Vajramahābhairavantra. Its Origins, Intertextuality, and Transmission*. DPhil Dissertation, University of Oxford.

² Amanda Brown. 2021. *Hail-Casting and Other "Magical" Rites from a Compendium of Nyingma Rituals Invoking Yamāntaka: A Study and Catalogue of the Moon's Mystery Handbook (Zla gsang be'u bum)*. MA Thesis, Florida State University.

lo himself and it contains some fifteen (later sixteen) amalgamated works of Rwa lo's own translations of the Black cycle as well as various transmissions he had received. The author also gives a brief overview of Rwa lo's main textual compositions found in the *Thim yig*. The second section examines all the seven manuscript collections of the *Rwa pod* that have come down from two different locations: the National Library of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar and the Sa skya monastery of Skye rgu Don grub gling in Khams; the latter belonged to a private collection of one of his residents, Mkhan po Phur ba lhun grub. These manuscript collections have been since entered into the BDRC digital database. The third section contains a semi-diplomatic edition of Rwa lo's *Thim yig* and Shes rab rgyal mtshan's *Ākar chag* based on the five principal manuscript witnesses. Part one ends with the lineage charts that serve as useful visual aids to understand various transmission lineages discussed by the author and the order of transmissions. Part two is the *Rwa pod*'s catalogue proper, containing an itemized entry for each manuscript in all the seven manuscript collections. Each manuscript entry is accompanied by a transcription of the opening and closing words, colophon, date and place of composition, name of the authors/compilers, subjects of the work, etc.

This review will concentrate only on the history of Vajrabhairava lineages in Tibet. Cuevas draws on an important set of sources, mostly little investigated religious histories (*chos 'byung*) by Tāranātha, Ames zhabs Ngag dbang kun dga' bsod nams, and 'Khon ston Dpal 'byor lhun grub. The author has done a laudable job of presenting the concise picture of the convoluted history behind the diffusion of Vajrabhairava cult in Tibet through a detailed analysis of the specific line of teachers through which the Vajrabhairava-Yamāntaka texts and ritual methods have been transmitted to Tibet. However, some of the author's analysis could be sometimes improved by investigating further lines of inquiry that I will briefly mention below. These comments should be regarded simply as research directions for the future investigation of the Vajrabhairava lineages in Tibet and are not meant to demerit, in any way, the value of this important book.

The classification of the discrete tantras of Vajrabhairava and Yamāri/Yamāntaka in Tibet into the tripart division as *Nag 'jigs skor gsum* or *Dgra gdong 'jigs gsum* (p. 15) could be more detailed. According to Tāranātha, this tripart division evolved around the time of Bari lo tsā ba, who supplemented those three with the **Yamāntaka-krodhavijayatantra* ("Victorious Wrathful Yamāntaka Tantra"), thus the "Triple Black Cycle" became the "Quadruple Black Cycle" (*nag po*

skor bzhi).³ It would be useful to investigate this topic further and examine the reasons behind Ba ri lo tsā ba's decision to augment the so-called Triple Black cycle, especially since as the author rightly states Ba ri lo tsā played an important role in the transmission of the Vajrabhairava to Sa skya.

The author states that the Zhang lineage established by Cog gru Shes rab bla ma goes back to Dīvākaracandra (p. 37). Actually, Tāranātha gives the name Devākaracandra (ca. 1030–1130), (and not Dīvākaracandra), but the explanation of the author's choice to change the name to Dīvākaracandra is missing, so is the attempt to understand his identity. Tāranātha identifies Devākaracandra as *bla ma* Mgos khub, the Scholar-monk who Had a Consort (*mkhas btsun mo can*). According to Cabézon (2017)⁴, however, Devākaracandra was a Bengali *paṇḍita*, the great master of the *Guhyasamāja* and one of the two great disciples of the Indian master Gomiśra in the lineage of Śrīgupta, from whom the 11th century Tibetan translator Mgos khub pa lhas btsas received the teachings of the *Guhyasamāja*. According to the biography of Rwa lo tsā ba, Mgos khub pa lhas btsas was killed by Rwa lo through the magical technology of Vajrabhairava (see Cabézon 2007). According to Tāranātha's *Rgya gar chos 'byung*,⁵ Devākaracandra, also known as Za hor kyi mkhas btsun mo can, was a contemporary of Amoghavajra and a direct disciple of Nāropā. Among his other teachers were Sa 'dres pa (Gomiśra), Vāgīśvarakīrti and *Dharmabhadra (Chos kyi bzang po), whose common name was Rong zom *paṇḍita* (1040–1159). The latter figure seems important, especially since as the author himself states (p. 39), "special transmissions [of the Zhang lugs] were absorbed into a few of the other independent traditions, including apparently that of Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po who was purportedly a follower of the Zhang system [...]." Lo Bue (1997: 636)⁶ argues that Devākaracandra was a Newar *paṇḍita* who gathered around the Indian *paṇḍita* Jinadatta and accompanied him to Bodhgayā along with Virendraruci (Ha mu dkar po/ Punyākarabhadra) and others. Since he studied in Vikramaśīla and stayed in India for a long time, he was called "Indian" (p. 637). In the *Blue Annals* by 'Gos lo (1984: 477),⁷ Devākara is called "Indian" in-

³ See Tāranātha's *Gshin rje chos 'byung* (p. 20): *ba ri lo tsa ba ni de'i steng du gshin rje gshed rnam par rgyal pa'i rgyud bsnan nas/ nag po skor bzhi zhes tha snyad mdzad.*

⁴ See Cabézon 2007, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Go-Khukpa-Lhetse/5803>

⁵ Chattopadhyaya 1990: 305.

⁶ Lo Bue, Erberto. 1997. 'The Role of the Scholars of the Nepal Valley in the Transmission of the Indian Buddhist Heritage to Tibet.' S. Karmay et M. Sagant (eds.) *Les Habitants du toit du monde. Hommage a Alexander W. Macdonald.* Nanterre: Société d' ethnologie, 629–658.

⁷ 'Gos lo Gzhon nu dpal. *Deb ther sngon po.* Khreng tu'u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun

deed, and is also said to have assisted Rin chen bzang po in the translation of two texts (see Lo Bue, 1997: 638). According to the *Blue Annals*, Devākaracandra's secret name was *Sūnyatāsamādhivajra (*stong nyid ting 'dzin rdo rje*). Man (1998: 91)⁸ estimates that Devākaracandra was alive in between 1030–1130. For *Sūnyatāsamādhivajra, who is also called Devākaracandra, see 'Gos lo 1984 :476–477, 985; Roerich 1979: I 392–394, 842; Szerb 1990: 100.⁹

The author is correct that the Zhang lugs's greatest contribution to the development of Vajrabhairava in Tibet was the establishment of a unique tradition of the 49-Deity Vajrabhairava system (p. 39). The tradition of the 49-Deity Vajrabhairava *maṇḍala* was known at the Yuan court as evidenced by the *kesi*-silk tapestry *thangka* (now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), designed in the 14th c. Sa skya style,¹⁰ usually commissioned for imperial initiation rituals. The *kesi* features a nine-headed, thirty-four armed and sixteen-legged Vajrabhairava as the central figure of the *maṇḍala*, surrounded by 48 attendant deities, suggesting the 49-Deity form of Vajrabhairava according to the Zhang lugs. 'Phags pa Chos rgyal, who, according to the historical accounts, served as the imperial preceptor of Kublai Khan's Yuan dynasty and the vice-king of Tibet and whose Vajrabhairava lineage the author rightly traces to Ldong ston Shes rab bla ma (p. 69) was familiar with this transmission. 'Phags pa wrote a *sādhana* dedicated to the 49-Deity Vajrabhairava that was based on the teachings of *ācārya* Lalitavajra. The colophon of *Zhe dgu ma'i sgrub thabs zhi khro rnam rol bzhugs* indicates that he completed the text in Mdo Khams on the 8th day of the month of Āśvin in the year of the Wooden Pig.¹¹ The fact that Kublai Khan received Vajrabhairava initiation (p. 65) by the teacher of 'Phags pa (misspelled 'Phag pa twice on p.65), Ldong ston Shes rab provides an important evidence highlighting the role played by the Sa skya masters in the transmission of the esoteric Buddhist teachings to the Yuan court.

The Gnyos lineage of Vajrabhairava goes back to the *paṇḍita* Bhalita (alias Balyācārya; Tib. B[h]a ling ta/Ba lim Ācārya) (p. 40). Again, some attempt at identifying this figure would be helpful.

khang, 1984. See also Roerich 1949-53 (repr. 1996). *The Blue Annals* by 'Gos Lotsawa. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

⁸ Man, Naresh Bajracharya. 1998. *Buddhism in Nepal (465 B.C. to 1199 A.D.)*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.

⁹ Szerb, Janos. 1990. Trans. *Bu ston's history of Buddhism in Tibet*. Wien: Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

¹⁰ The position of Vajrabhairava's first pairs of legs shows him in a dancing pose. The dancing pose appears on some of the Sa skya forms of Vajrabhairava, which distinguishes it from the Dge lugs pa ones, devoid of this feature.

¹¹ *Zhe dgu ma'i sgrub thabs zhi khro rnam rol bzhugs*, Sa skya Bka' 'bum dpe bsdur ma, vol. 21, pp. 88-100, Pe cin: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2007.

Balyācārya or simply Balin *ācārya*, or, according to 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod* (W5488, p. 324) Baliṅgācārya, may be either Kṛṣṇapāda Junior (Nag po zhabs chung) or Kṛṣṇapāda Senior (Nag po zhabs chen po). In this regard, the *Blue Annals* ('Gos lo 1984: 452; Roerich 1979: I 372) says: "Balin *ācārya*, a contemporary of Śrī Nāropā, who was also known as Kṛṣṇapāda Junior" (Nag po zhabs chung ba). In the *Blue Annals* ('Gos lo 1984: 299; Roerich 1979: I 243), different information is given, namely that Balyācārya is also known as Kṛṣṇapāda Senior (Nag po zhabs chen po). The *Rgya gar chos 'byung* (Chattopadhyaya 1990: 294), however, seems to identify Balyācārya with Kṛṣṇācārya Junior (Nag po spyod pa chung ba), who is the same as Kṛṣṇapāda Junior. Another piece that seems to be missing from Gnyos lo's account are his translation activities undertaken in collaboration with Gayadhara. The author (p. 41) correctly states that the "Gnyos lo tsā ba annotated Nag tsho lo tsā ba's earlier translation of the *Kṛṣṇayamāritantra* and also produced his own original translations of the *Kṛṣṇayamāriṣaṇmukhatantra* and the *Vajrabhairavatāntra*, as well as associated works by Śrīdhara". However, Gnyos lo also collaborated with Gayadhara, also known as the Red *paṇḍita* (see Rinpoche 2016: 82-86)¹² and this work comprised of the *Guhyasamāja* teachings and *Kṛṣṇayamāri*: see Cha rgan, lam, 30a, in Stearns (2001: 220)¹³; Sørensen and Hazod (2007: II, 382, f. 32).¹⁴

The author (p. 45) is right when he states that "Skyo 'od kyi 'byung gnas also requested these [Vajrabhairava] tantras from Zhang Cog gru lo tsā ba, which if true would help to validate the Sa skya pas' assertion that Zhang's tradition was absorbed into the practices of the Skyo and preserved by his followers." Another point that makes this connection between the Zhang and the Skyo even stronger is the fact that according to Skyo 'od byung's biography, reported by Tāranātha, Skyo ston met Dge 'dun bzang po (who also features as a master of the Vajrabhairava Zhang lineage) in 'Brim mtshams, and received from him the complete cycle of Dgra/Gdong/'Jigs as a "backup" of previous teachings (See Tāranātha's *Gshin rje chos 'byung* pp. 121-122). Further, the author states that the Skyo lugs was very successful and appoints this success to the fact that 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, who received the Skyo transmission from Gnyan

¹² Dhongthog, Rinpoche. 2016. *The Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism: A History*. Trans. Sam van Schaik. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

¹³ Stearns, Cyrus. 2001. *Luminous Lives: The Story of the Early Masters of the Lam 'Bras Tradition in Tibet*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

¹⁴ Sørensen, Per and Hazod Guntram. 2007. *Rulers on the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: a Study of Tshal Gung-thang*, 2 vols. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

'od srung, spread it in the Sa skya (p. 48). Tāranātha, however, states that the lineage was not very successful and it lasted only for three or four generations (Tāranātha's *Gshin rje chos 'byung*, p. 124: *rigs brgyud kyang gnyan ston rdo rje grags kyi bar du mi rabs bzhi lnga tsam chos brgyud zin pa*). It would be useful to understand the reasons for these conflicting statements. A plausible explanation is actually given by Tāranātha himself who states that the Skyo lugs flourished under the Rwa lugs (*rwa lugs kyi 'og nas lugs srol*) and perhaps it was due to this absorption that the Skyo lugs was successful in the Sa skya. In this regard, Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan's *Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil gyi gdan rabs lha'i rnga chen* reports the existence of the Rwa Skyo lugs containing the names of the masters associated with the Rwa lugs tradition (See Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan's *Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil gyi gdan rabs lha'i rnga chen*, pp. 198–199).

The author (pp. 52–54) lists two Black cycle transmissions received by Mal lo tsā ba: the transmission of Nāropā that he inherited through Klog Skya Shes rab rtsegs, a direct disciple of Pham 'thing pa and the oral exposition of Black Yamāntaka according to the teachings of the *ācārya* Jñānapāda, which he received in a direct transmission line from the Newar Ha mu dkar po/Varendraruci (whose real name was Bsod nams 'byung gnas bzang po). However, Mal lo is also known as a recipient of a special Mahākāla transmission bestowed upon him by Gyī ljang dbu dkar pa lo tsā ba (10th/11th century) that was passed down to Sa chen (Stearns 2001: 224). This “special” Mahākāla transmission was different from the transmission of the “Lord of the Pavilion” Pañjaranātha Mahākāla in the lineage of *lam 'bras* Virūpa that was received by the Sa skya pas in the transmission of Gayadhara; see Linrothe *et al.* 2004: 124)¹⁵, for it was received by Gyī ljang in India from the *mahāpandīta* Lalitavajra, “who lived in a charnel ground and was also known as Dur khrod Nag po ro 'dzin” (*ibid.*). Stearns (*ibid.*: 224) reports the existence of a *Mahākālatantra*, entitled the *Dpal nag po chen po'i rgyud dur khrod nag po le'u gsum pa*, translated by the Indian *pandīta* Nag po ro 'dzin or Nag po ro langs and the Tibetan lo tsā ba Gyī ljang. Although it is not sure whether the ‘Mahākāla Lalitavajra’ and ‘our Vajrabhairava Lalitavajra’ are one and the same person, this should be researched further. A piece of evidence in support of such identification is the text entitled *Vajrabhairavasādhana* (*Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi sgrub thabs*, Toh. 1999) composed by Lalitavajra, which describes Vajrabhairava as the manifestation of time (*kāla*), and correlates Vajrabhairava's iconographic features with

¹⁵ Linrothe, Robert N. and Marylin M. Rhie. 2004. *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art and SerIndia Publications.

different facets of time.

In conclusion, Cuevas's carefully researched study is an immensely valuable contribution to the Vajrabhairava history in Tibet and will become a reference book on this subject for many years to come.

