

## A study of written and oral narratives of Lhagang in Eastern Tibet

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**I**n her article “Discourse Analysis and Narrative”, Barbara Johnstone states that, “the essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, examining narrative is a crucial way to understand beliefs and variations of social practices. Richard Bauman has argued that the investigation of narrative is the study of social and cultural life, and emphasizes the role narratives play in creating and fashioning a particular community.<sup>2</sup> Adopting these views, I shall maintain that studying narratives may provide significant tools for understanding a local community’s perceptions and thoughts, focusing especially on how these narratives have been appropriated, elaborated and used as social strategies to underpin claims to status and privilege.

In order to explore that assumption, this article examines narratives of the village of Lhagang (lHa sgang) and its surroundings that describe it as a distinctive place, and the significance of these narratives for different communities there. In order to do this, I will present and analyze two written texts and three oral narratives – two from Lhagang and one from the neighboring town of Rangakha (Rwa rnga kha) – with a particular focus on the motif of the Chinese Princess Wengcheng<sup>3</sup> and the Lhagang Jowo statue. On her way to Lhasa to marry the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) in the seventh century CE, the Chinese princess is said to have stopped at Lhagang. As part of her dowry she brought a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, later known as the Jowo (Tib. Jo bo), ‘the Lord’, of which the Lhagang Jowo is widely believed to be a replica, made while the princess was staying at Lhagang.<sup>4</sup> I will compare the written and oral narratives, and then attempt to define their function in

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<sup>1</sup> Johnstone 2001:635.

<sup>2</sup> Bauman 1986; Johnstone 1991.

<sup>3</sup> In Tibetan sources she is called Gyaza Kongjo (rGya bza’ Kong jo). These sources generally say that she was the daughter of the Chinese Emperor Tang Taizong.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the statue of Buddha Shakyamuni preserved in the Lhasa Jokhang (lHa sa jo khang) as the ‘Lhasa Jowo’, and the one in Lhagang as the Lhagang Jowo.

promoting different agendas in a context of a rapidly changing society. The article will demonstrate that although different communities use the narrative for different purposes, they all try to connect the local narratives of topography to the sacred geography and the religious center represented by the dominant Tibetan culture of U-Tsang (dBus gtsang) in order to validate their claims. In this way the local communities attempt to show their importance and sense of belonging in the context of the greater Tibetan history.

Lhagang is situated in Kham (Khams), one of Tibet's three cultural regions. The inhabitants of Lhagang believe the site of their village is a crescent created by the main river running through the village and the four holy hills adjacent to it.<sup>5</sup> They consider this topography to be very auspicious, as it constitutes what traditionally is regarded as a perfect geomantic combination. Of special significance is the belief that Lhagang monastery preserves a Jowo statue. Nicola Schneider and Gillian Tan have pointed out the high reputation and importance of the Lhagang Jowo statue throughout Kham,<sup>6</sup> regarded as having the same historical origin as the Jowo statue in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, and locally believed to equal it in importance.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, local people sometimes call the Lhagang Jokhang the "Little Jokhang Temple (Jo khang chung chung)".

However, the actual route of Princess Wencheng's journey to Lhasa is still a controversial issue among scholars.<sup>8</sup> Alexander Gardner noted that, "Neither Tucci (1962) nor Richardson (1998[1997]) discuss Wencheng's passage through Khams".<sup>9</sup> He also pointed out, "Shakabpa (1967) mentions that the Chinese escorted Wencheng to "the Tibetan border," without indicating where that border is."<sup>10</sup> Yet, a number of local legends are told regarding Wencheng's route and her activities in Kham. For example, there is a temple called "Princess Wencheng Temple" in Jyekundo (sKye rgu mdo),<sup>11</sup> supposedly built to mark the spot where the princess stopped for a month on her jour-

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<sup>5</sup> In Lhagang it is believed that the hills are the residences of four major divine figures in Tibetan Buddhism: Jampayang (Manjushri), Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara), Chakna Dorje (Vajrapani), and Drolma (Tara).

<sup>6</sup> Schneider 2016:3; Tan 2013:197 and 2017:4.

<sup>7</sup> For the history and description of the Lhasa Jokhang, see Gyurme *et al.* 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Sanggye Rinchen 1988; Chabgak Dorje Tsering 1991; Bai Yu and Zheng Yufeng 1994; Benard 2000; Cameron 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Gardner 2003:62.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*:84. See n. 6.

<sup>11</sup> This is a translation of the Chinese 'Wencheng Gongzhu Miao'. The temple, which has been promoted by the Yushu (Yul shul) local authorities in recent years, is known locally as "Bis rnam par snang mdzad", as the statue of the Buddha Vairocana found there is considered to have been brought by Princess Wencheng.

ney from the Chinese capital to U-Tsang.<sup>12</sup> Other examples are the “Bridge of Princess Wencheng” in Dartsendo, and the legend of the princess told in Zungchu (Zung chu) County, Ngawa (rNga ba) Prefecture, as well as Palyul (dPal yul) monastery in Palyul County, Ganze (dKar mdzes) Prefecture.<sup>13</sup> All these narratives suggest that there is a widespread tradition claiming that the princess went to Lhasa through Kham. Alexander Gardner notes that, “Wencheng of course is cast in both a political and religious role, her passage through Khams, real or imaginary, symbolizes the presence there of both Buddhism and of the Tibetan Empire.”<sup>14</sup> In the same way, people in Lhagang attempt to trace their early history through connecting with historical famous figures, as they believe that the narratives of Wencheng and the Lhagang Jowo not only signify the coming of the dominant culture to their land but also show the importance of their Jowo statue in the history of Tibet.

The narrative of Princess Wencheng’s journey is described in two texts,<sup>15</sup> the *Yang gsang dkar chag* and the *gNas bstod* (both of which may be assumed to have been composed in Lhagang), as well as in oral legends. Both the texts and oral legends give an account of the origin of Lhagang and explain why this auspicious place is considered by people in Kham to be equivalent to sacred sites in India and Lhasa (such as Bodhgaya and the Lhasa Jokhang). In the course of my fieldwork, I made numerous interviews in Lhagang, and all my informants, whether old or young, expressed their firm belief that Princess Wencheng had been to Lhagang and built a temple for the Jowo that later became Lhagang monastery, while in Rangakha people believe that the princess also went through their land and the Jowo statue stayed in Lhagang for the benefit of the whole area, not for that of only Lhagang. Somewhat different versions of the narrative are accordingly circulated in Lhagang and Rangakha, but the differences are subtle, of degree rather than kind. I shall present and compare both versions below.

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<sup>12</sup> Bian *et al.*:6851-6856.

<sup>13</sup> Nyíri 2008:140-156.

<sup>14</sup> Gardner 2003:62.

<sup>15</sup> Both texts were published along with numerous texts of all monasteries in Ganze Prefecture by Karma Gyantsen (Karma Gyantsen 2005:288-314). I had already found the same two texts during my fieldwork, and only later discovered that Karma Gyantsen had published them.

*The sacred Lhagang according to the written narratives.*

Both *Yang gsang dkar chag* and *gNas bstod* were printed in Lhagang monastery. Neither the date nor the author of the first text is known, while the second text was composed by Thupten Zhenpen Nyima (Thub bstan gZhan phan Nyi ma) on the 25th of the middle month of autumn in the Fire Bird Year (1957).<sup>16</sup> Gillian Tan also refers to a version of the history of Lhagang: "The particular version presented in this article was written in the 1970s by a monk named Pema Tsewang and it is currently the version that is used by the Town's main monastery."<sup>17</sup> However, without giving any further information about this text and where she obtained it, it is unclear whether in fact she refers to *Yang gsang dkar chag* or *gNas bstod*, or perhaps another text.

During my fieldwork in Lhagang in 2012, only two monks had the texts and some young monks did not even know of their existence. I was told that although the texts were authoritative in the monastery, copies having been printed and given to every monk in the 1990s, they received little attention as the monks concentrated on reciting ritual texts.<sup>18</sup> However, when I visited Lhagang again in 2015/2016, I found to my surprise that most of the monks were familiar with the texts, and I even met two college students from the village who were using them for their studies. It thus seems that the texts are gradually receiving attention in the community. In fact, monks as well as lay-people are now, as will be argued below, using these narratives to further their respective agendas. Thus, in order to explore how and why narratives are used by different groups, it is necessary first to look at how Lhagang and Princess Wencheng's arrival there are portrayed both in written texts and oral accounts.

*Yang gsang dkar chag*

The full title of this text is *Yang gsang mkha' 'gro'i thugs kyi ti ka las / lHa dga' ring mos gnas kyi dkar chag*. As stated above, there is no information about who wrote the text and when, but it is stated in the colophon that it was compiled from two *gnas yig*<sup>19</sup> and a three-page appendix derived from Tibetan historiographical texts, and that the scribe copied the present form of the text from Lama Sangye's archives (Sangs rgyas, the abbot of the monastery between 1976 and

<sup>16</sup> *gNas bstod*, fol. 16b: ...*thub bstan gZhan phan nyi ma dpal bzang po[s] me bya'i ston zla 'bring po'i nyer lnga'i thun la legs par phab pa...*

<sup>17</sup> Tan 2013:194.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the abbot, 15 August 2012.

<sup>19</sup> For more on *gnas yig*, see Huber 2008:116.

1987) in 1990.<sup>20</sup> The text has 15 folios and contains descriptions of the origin of Lhagang and its monastery as well as the Lhagang Jowo statue, together with some historical information in the form of short narratives.

The first part of the text (fol.1a-8a) tells the story of the origin of the land and of its name Lhaga (lHa dga'), and how the name changed over time. In addition, the text describes the attributes of the site. According to this account, Shakyamuni consecrated Lhagang at the same time as Vajrasana in India.<sup>21</sup> The site used to be a lake, in the middle of which there was a magical square-shaped stone. Thus, the valley was given the name Tsolung (mTsho lung, 'Valley of the Lake'). To make the Buddha's teaching available to more living beings, Avalokiteshvara chose an auspicious place to disseminate the Dharma. He even predicted that after scattering 'seven grains of rice (*sa lu 'bru bdun*)', the Buddhist teaching would be promoted in Lhagang in the future. Hence, when the seven grains of rice fell into the lake, it gradually receded, exposing the land, but the magical stone remained. At that time the Naga king, who lived under the lake, rode a 'water ox' (*mtsho glang*)<sup>22</sup> and came to meet Avalokiteshvara. The Naga king complained that if the lake disappeared, he would be forced to live underground without ever seeing the light of day. He therefore knelt in front of Avalokiteshvara and begged him to give him a window through which he could look at the world. The Bodhisattva agreed to his request and uttered a prophecy that if the Naga king promised to protect this sacred land, it would welcome many saints who would come to worship the place and promote Buddhism. Later, when Princess Wencheng came to Lhagang on her way to Lhasa, the Jowo statue, which she brought with her as her dowry, wanted to stay in Lhagang. So the princess had to make a replica of the original statue, and it was also described that one half of the statue miraculously appeared without any labor work. The text also states that the Tibetan minister, Gar Tongtsen (mGar sTong btsan) built a statue of Avalokiteshvara next to the Lhagang Jowo with holy water and soil. Then all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas appeared in the sky and praised Lhagang, being happy to acquire a sacred place, so it was also given the name Lhalung (lHa lung, 'Valley of the Gods').<sup>23</sup>

The middle part of the text (fol. 8b-11a) mainly deals with various religious masters' visits to Lhagang, and how they hid 'treasures' or

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<sup>20</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 15b.

<sup>21</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 2a-b.

<sup>22</sup> It is believed that in their own world the nagas have domestic animals.

<sup>23</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 7a.

*terma* (*gter ma*)<sup>24</sup> there and built stupas. The text maintains that demons were occupying Lhagang and all beings were suffering from war and disease. Among these masters was the Indian Manjushrimitra who came to Lhagang and subdued the demons.<sup>25</sup> He also hid *terma* and consecrated hills in Lhagang. Numerous auspicious signs appeared; all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas gathered in the sky and were pleased to obtain the sacred land of Lhagang. So the place was also named Lhaga (lHa dga'), 'Deities are Happy'. The text also mentions another Indian master, Humkara, who magically built a stupa and consecrated it in the presence of all the guardian deities. All the Buddhas praised the stupa and named it the 'Hungchen Kara Siddha Stupa' (Grub thob Hung chen kara mchod rten, today's Drupthop Chöten (Grub thob mchod rten) shrine in the monastery). The text also states that later many Indian masters built stupas in the four directions behind Lhagang monastery in order to protect it. The text also mentions other famous religious masters that came to Lhagang, such as Vairocana (Bai ro tsa na), Padmasambhava and Yudra (g.Yu sgra), all of whom hid *terma* and consecrated the site,<sup>26</sup> but no further information concerning them is provided.

The last part of the text (fol. 11b-15b) focuses on the benefit of worshipping the Lhagang Jowo. It indicates the most promising time for worship, when many auspicious signs appear and serious diseases can be cured. The dates specified are the 28th of the first month, the 8th of the fourth month, the 10th of the seventh month and the 25th of the eleventh month.<sup>27</sup> The text also describes the three circumambulation paths around the monastery and explains that prostrating along them will yield immeasurable merit, the three paths being the outer, the middle and the inner route. The first takes two and half days to complete; by making this circumambulation, one can completely purify the sins of thirteen rebirths. The middle route takes half a day to finish, and purifies the sins of seven rebirths, being the equivalent of reciting the mantra *guru siddhi* 700 million times. The inner route will purify the sins of five rebirths, especially if performed on the 8<sup>th</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month, the best days for worshipping.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that the last two folios state that the text was written down by Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal (mKha' 'gro Ye shes

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<sup>24</sup> *Terma* are various forms of hidden texts that are crucial to Tantric traditions in Tibet. See Gyatso 1993; Wheeler 2015:1-18.

<sup>25</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 7b.

<sup>26</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 11a.

<sup>27</sup> The text does not explain why these particular dates are auspicious. *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 11b-12b.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: fol. 14a-15a.

mtsho rgyal)<sup>29</sup> on the order of Guru Padmasambhava.<sup>30</sup> The monks at Lhagang, however, maintain that the text is a rediscovered text, a *terma*, concealed, not written, by Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal.

From the above summary, it is clear that elements of myth and the supernatural can be frequently found in the text. For example, the story of how Avalokiteshvara transformed Lhagang into a holy place in order to disseminate the Dharma and then appointed the Naga king to protect Lhagang is similar to Avalokiteshvara transforming Tibet into a civilized Buddhist sacred land, as well as how Padmasambhava subdued local spirits in order to establish Buddhism in Tibet. In addition, stories such as Lhagang being a lake that later became dry land is similar to the stories of how the Lhasa Jokhang was built.<sup>31</sup> This links the popular stories with narratives that are traditionally associated with the culturally dominant region of Central Tibet.

The second part of the text further reflects the blessedness of Lhagang through depicting visits of Tibetan and Indian religious masters. As Ernest Gellner has shown, history includes its own storehouse of creative stories when it is deployed to legitimate identity.<sup>32</sup> Although the text does not say how and when these masters came, it is obvious that it primarily portrays masters of the Nyingma tradition such as Manjushrimitra, Humkara and Padmasambhava and their activities in Lhagang, possibly in order to represent an unbroken lineage transmitting teachings that were introduced in Lhagang, thus validating the long history of the monastery. Therefore, analyzing such narratives along the lines proposed by Carol Fleisher Feldman as “narratives of national identity as group narratives”,<sup>33</sup> they become comprehensible as ways of creating and strengthening distinctiveness. The text highlights how people in Lhagang selected several well-known religious masters or ‘heroes’ in Tibetan history and incorporated them in “patterns of interpretive cognition”<sup>34</sup> to define themselves. The members of the community were able to give meaning to their own locality and their monastery, at the same time bolstering their sense of pride, and thereby communicating their narrative to others in an effective way.

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<sup>29</sup> For more on Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal, see Gyatso 2006:1-27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: fol. 15a-b.

<sup>31</sup> Sakya Sonam Gyaltzen 1995:147.

<sup>32</sup> Gellner 1983.

<sup>33</sup> Feldman 2001:129-143.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.:129.

*dPal lha sgang gi gnas bstod*

Compared with the *Yang gsang dkar chag*, this text is written in a somewhat colloquial style. It has 16 folios, containing detailed information concerning King Songtsen Gampo's reign and how Princess Wencheng built a temple for the Lhagang Jowo. Especially the text mentions the princess selected the site for the 108 stupas that are to be seen behind the monastery today. This description is not appeared in the first text, and it will help one to understand and appreciate how the inhabitants of Lhagang perceive and present the general Tibetan narrative as their own history.

The first part of the text (fol. 1a-3b) is similar to the descriptions appearing in the first text; thus, it also mainly deals with the sacredness of Lhagang and the origin of the monastery, including how numerous favorable signs appeared in Lhagang and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas blessed the place. However, it gives a considerably longer description of King Songtsen Gampo's marriage to the Nepalese and Chinese princesses, especially the arrival in Lhagang of Princess Wencheng and her dowry, here said to be three precious Jowo statues. Although the text does not specify the other two statues, it does state that one of them, the Jowo Mindro Sungjon (Jo bo mi 'gro gsung 'byon, 'The Jowo Who Said 'I won't go') miraculously spoke, expressing its wish to stay in Lhagang.

Like the *Yang gsnag dkar chag*, the following pages (fol. 4a-9a) provide information about famous religious masters and their activities in Lhagang. For instance, Vairocana, Dramze Gonpo (Bram ze mgon po) and Mipham Nyima Gyaltzen (Mi pham nyi ma rgyal mtshan) consecrated Lhagang by staying in retreat there. The text also mentions Padmasambhava subdued all evil spirits that caused great suffering to the population in Lhagang as well as in Tibet, so that all sentient beings could be happy once again. Apart from that, the text also notes in passing that Princess Wencheng chose the location for the 108 stupas, including the four main stupas behind the monastery.<sup>35</sup>

The last pages (fol. 9b-12b) of the text describe the merit to be obtained from worshipping and making offerings at Lhagang monastery as well as to the Lhagang Jowo. For example, the text states that if one offers a flower to the Lhagang Jowo, one will gain an attractive "divine body"; if one offers incense, one will get stainless moral dis-

<sup>35</sup> These stupas, facing the four cardinal directions, are painted in different colors: the yellow stupa in the southern direction symbolizes enrichment (*rgyas*); the red stupa in the western direction symbolizes subjugation (*dbang*); the green stupa in the northern direction symbolizes wrath (*drag*); and the white stupa in the eastern direction symbolizes pacification (*zhi*).



cipline; if one offers a butter lamp, the imperfections of the senses will be removed and become like a lamp, and so on.<sup>36</sup> In short, by worshipping and performing offering rituals at Lhagang, one earns great merit. Finally, the text deals with the author's intention in writing the text; he says that he did so at the request of the senior monks,<sup>37</sup> and that it will be like a teacher who guides one to learn the history of Lhagang, and especially to guide one on the way to liberation from the round of birth and death.

In this text, however, one finds an important shift in focus with regard to the topography of Lhagang which is presented as equal in terms of sacredness to Lhasa. For example, the text connects hills and mountains in Lhagang with the visits of various prominent historical and religious masters, so that each spot in Lhagang becomes consecrated and regarded as equivalent to religious sites in U-Tsang. The narratives about the landscape of Lhagang are also highlighted by Gillian Tan: "The mountains that ring Lhagang are physically striking topographical features in the landscape of the area. Perhaps for this reason, they are consistently and easily referred to in the circulation of narratives about place."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the text also states that the famous scholar Vairocana<sup>39</sup> came to meditate at the foot of Mount Zhadra (bZhadra brag)<sup>40</sup>, and that one can see his meditation cave (*sgrub phug*) from far away. As for the Indian master Dramze Gonpo, monks told me that this Indian master came to Lhagang and left two footprints, one on the Chakna Dorje hill to the east of the monastery, the other on the Jamyang hill to the west of the monastery. The cave on the Jamyang hill is stated to have been the location where the earth was excavated that was used for building the Lhasa Jokhang.<sup>41</sup>

On closer examination, both texts seem to answer Mark Freeman's questions concerning the rhetorical dimension of the narrative and identity relationship, "...what is being *done* through narratives, what its function or functions might be...".<sup>42</sup> The relationship between nar-

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<sup>36</sup> *gNas bstod*, fol. 9b.

<sup>37</sup> The author acknowledges his teacher Khen Khyenrab Ozer (mKhan mKhyen rab 'od zer); the Sakyapa shrine-keeper Namkha Tenzin (Sa kya pa sku gnyer Nam mkha' bstan 'dzin); Chokhrim Rinchen (Chos khriims rin chen); finally he refers to a person simply by using the title Nyerpa (gNyer pa) (*gNas bstod*, fol. 16a-b).

<sup>38</sup> Tan 2013:200-201.

<sup>39</sup> Schaeffer 2000:361-384.

<sup>40</sup> Zhara is believed to be the third son of the sacred mountain Amnye Machen in Amdo, and is regarded as one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in Lhagang. Many religious masters and lamas from other Tibetan areas have stayed in retreat on the mountain for long periods of time (Tan 2017:19).

<sup>41</sup> Interview with the abbot, 15 August 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Freeman 2001:290.

rative and identity is well reflected in both texts, and both endeavor to identify Lhagang as a distinctive religious site and an important place in Tibetan history through locating Lhagang in relation to distinctly Buddhist sites and historical narratives. Another function, shared by both texts, is to articulate local history in such a way that it comes to play an essential role in how community members tell their oral narratives; thereby the narratives have the function of providing a solid basis for their identity as Lhagang Tibetans. Besides, both texts employ motifs from traditional Tibetan historiography to emphasize that Lhagang also has a long history. For example, the Tibetan minister Gar Tongtsen and the Chinese Princess Wencheng are described as emanations of Vajrapani and Tara respectively – embedding historical figures into mythical narratives makes the latter reasonable and acceptable. Through such narrative elements, Lhagang becomes not simply a place among many others in the surrounding area, but a blessed land chosen by the Buddha, i.e. the Jowo, and religious masters as their special field of activity.

*Princess Wencheng and the Lhagang Jowo in oral narratives*

Narratives are a dynamic form of transmission and thus they have a high level of immediacy, especially oral narratives that can be easily disseminated and that reveal subtle changes in plot or structure in order to conform to local aspirations. Thus, compared to written texts, oral narratives easily appear in several different versions. The narrative of Lhagang is a good example of this process; as it spread, it was modified to serve different intentions. Before investigating in greater depth the concerns and agendas behind different versions of the oral narrative, I will first present the oral narrative of Princess Wencheng's journey and Lhagang Jowo according to its articulation in different groups.

Through interviews and conversations with people in Lhagang, I have collected several short oral narratives about Lhagang, most of them focusing on nearby hills, mountains and retreat caves. These narratives are not widely known locally; on the other hand, I found that most people enjoyed telling narratives regarding Princess Wencheng's stay in Lhagang, how the Jowo statue refused to leave, and how the princess built a temple to house the Jowo statue. This story is popular not only in the village of Lhagang, but in neighboring areas as well. Thus, in this section I will focus on presenting two oral versions circulating in Lhagang and Rangakha respectively. I will also add another version told by monks in Lhagang monastery that seems to focus more on the historical side of the narrative, probably because monks have access to the written texts. Finally, I will

compare all three versions.

*Oral narratives in Lhagang*

When I was gathering oral narratives of the origin and the Jowo statue of Lhagang in the village, I did not specifically ask people to tell me the history of Lhagang and its people, preferring to leave my questions quite open. To my surprise, I found that monks actually tell these narratives as the history of Lhagang, while laypeople never say that the narratives they tell are history,<sup>43</sup> even though the content is similar to that of the version told by the monks. Thus, although the narrative of the princess and the Lhagang Jowo is known by almost everyone in Lhagang, details differ depending on whether the story is told by monks or laypeople.

A layman told the following story:

A long, long time ago, when the Chinese Princess Wencheng was invited up to Tibet, the (Chinese) Tang Emperor gave her a Jowo statue. So the Chinese Princess wanted to bring the Jowo statue with her to Lhasa. When they arrived in Lhagang, the Jowo statue spoke, "This place is so beautiful, I don't want to go up to Lhasa." Then the Chinese Princess said, "You have to go and I need to bring you to Lhasa." The Jowo replied, "Make an exact copy of me and leave it in Lhagang, and then I will go to Lhasa with you." So the princess made an exact copy of the Jowo and built the Lhagang temple to house the statue, locals call it Lhagang Jowo. Because of what the Jowo statue spoke when it arrived in Lhagang, the place is named Lha dga', "The deity's favorite place". Therefore the original name of Lhagang is Lha dga'. After many years had passed, the name was transformed to Lhagang, but the actual name is Lha dga'.

Monks in the monastery tell a more elaborate version:

At that time, the Tibetan kingdom was becoming stronger and its economy prospered. Songtsen Gampo sent his minister Gar Tongtsen to propose a marriage alliance with the Tang dynasty. In order to live peacefully with the Tibetan kingdom, the Chinese Emperor decided to marry his daughter to Songtsen Gampo. It is said that when Princess Wencheng arrived in Lhagang on her way from the Chinese capital Chang'an to Lhasa, her dowry, a statue of Shakyamuni as a twelve-year old boy, could not be moved due to a sudden increase of its weight. The princess wished to travel

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<sup>43</sup> Monks call the local narrative *logyu* (*lo rgyus*, 'history'), while laypeople call it *narap* (*gna' rabs*, 'account of ancient times').

on to Central Tibet and take the statue with her, but the Jowo statue refused to be moved, and hence became locally known as the Jowo who once said, "This place is so beautiful, I want to stay here." The princess ordered artisans to make an exact copy of the statue and build a temple for the replica, which is believed to be the origin of Lhagang Monastery.

From the above oral narratives, it is clear that both accounts underline two important points. Both refer to historical figures, such as Songtsen Gampo, the Tang Emperor and Princess Wencheng, who are all widely known by other Tibetans. The other point is that both narratives stress the Jowo statue's preference for Lhagang. Both monks and laypeople even claim that the original name of the place, Lhaga (lHa dga'), derives from the story of the Jowo [*lha*] being so happy [*dga'*] that he wanted to stay there. Thus, these oral narratives not only function as a certification for emphasizing the connection with Tibetan history, but also serve to emphasize the importance and attractiveness of their own village, irrespective of whether the narratives are disseminated as 'history' by monks or circulated by local lay people as 'accounts of ancient times'.

#### *Oral narrative in Rangakha*

The narrative of Princess Wencheng's journey is also widely known in Rangakha Town, but with a different content. However, it is worth mentioning that people in Rangakha do not know of the existence of the two texts referred to above, nor do they have other written narratives referring to Princess Wencheng and the Lhagang Jowo.

When the Chinese Princess Wencheng, bringing her enormous dowry, arrived in Lhagang on her way to Tibet, she found that plague was rampant in the area, and many children suffered from this terrible disease. Under these circumstances, one of the Jowo statues that she carried with her spoke, "I can't leave this place anymore; I have to stay here to cure those who suffered from the plague." Therefore, Princess Wencheng decided to leave this speaking Jowo statue in this place. The Jowo statue, which was left by the princess, is the Jowo statue that is housed in the Lhagang monastery today.

Apparently, this version emphasizes that although the Jowo statue stayed in Lhagang, it was in order to help all those who suffered from illness in that area. This version allows us to see how a narrative can be changed and circulated in different places. In the next section I will therefore compare each oral version with the written narratives.

*Differences among written and oral versions*

When comparing the written and oral narratives of Princess Wencheng and the Lhagang Jowo statue, significant differences with regard to details can be found. These differences often regard the climax or main point of the narrative, at the same time providing information about the narrator's intention.

First, the written narratives are longer than two of the oral narratives, but they only briefly describe Princess Wencheng's journey, focusing instead on the sacredness of Lhagang and on the visits of religious masters. The oral narratives, on the other hand, are shorter but place more emphasis on the princess coming to Lhagang and on what happened once she had arrived there. For example, according to one of the oral narratives told by laypeople in Lhagang, when the princess arrived, the Jowo statue suddenly became very heavy and no one could move it. The Rangakha version even claims that the Jowo wanted to stay in order to cure people who were ill. The version told by monks in Lhagang is longer than the other oral narratives, and contains more detailed descriptions, for instance describing the situation of the Tibetan kingdom in the 7th century when King Songtsen Gampo sent his minister Gar Tongtsen to conclude a marriage alliance with the Tang dynasty.

Second, the role of the Jowo statue is different in all narratives, particularly in the case of the two narratives told by laypeople in Lhagang and Rangakha respectively. For example, the number of Jowo statues carried by the princess is different. The Lhagang oral narratives relate that she only carried the single statue that had been given to her as dowry, while the story in Rangakha focuses on one of several Jowo statues brought by the princess. The latter story does not mention how many Jowo statues were with the princess, but the narrative says that one of the statues spoke, so clearly it was more than one. This account also agrees with the *gNas bstod*, according to which the princess had three statues, of which the Jowo Mindro Sungjon stayed in Lhagang,<sup>44</sup> whereas the *Yang gsang dkar chag* simply states that the Jowo statue suddenly became too heavy to move, without giving further information.<sup>45</sup>

The third difference is whether the princess and the Jowo statue had a conversation or not. The oral narrative told by laypeople in Lhagang describes the conversation; thus, when the Jowo statue said, "This place is so beautiful, I want to stay here", the princess replied, "You have to go to 'the upper place' and [I] need to bring you to Lha-

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<sup>44</sup> *gNas bstod*, fol. 2b-3b.

<sup>45</sup> *Yang gsang dkar chag*, fol. 5a.

sa." Then the Jowo said, "Make an exact copy of me and leave it in Lhagang, and then I will go." On the other hand, the two written narratives and the oral narratives told by monks in Lhagang and laypeople in Rangakha only refer to the Jowo's speech without referring to any conversation with the princess.

Yet another difference is whether the Jowo statue is the original one or a replica. The *Yang gsang dkar chag* and oral narratives told in Lhagang maintain that the Jowo statue in Lhagang monastery is a replica of the original statue which is in the Lhasa Jokhang. According to the oral narrative told by laypeople in Lhagang, it was the Jowo himself who asked for a copy to be made and to be left in Lhagang. The *gNas bstod* and the oral narrative from Rangakha, however, claim that the speaking Jowo is the one now housed in Lhagang monastery. There is no reference to Princess Wencheng making a copy of it. Cameron Warner also noted that the most important item in Princess Wencheng's dowry, the real Jowo statue, is believed to have remained in the Lhagang temple, while the replica was sent to Lhasa.<sup>46</sup> These differences may reflect different sources that have circulated in different places, thus illustrating the changing nature of oral narratives.

Finally, the reason for the Jowo remaining in Lhagang is also variously explained. In Lhagang both written and oral narratives state that the reason was that it is a special and beautiful place. The Jowo statue said that he wanted to stay there because Lhagang was so beautiful. Lawrence Epstein and Peng Wenbin refer to this story, saying that the Lhasa Jowo was attracted by this auspicious place (Lhagang), so he refused to go to Lhasa.<sup>47</sup> However, in the Rangakha oral narrative, the reason is said to be that the whole area, Lhagang as well as Rangakha, suffered from plague, so the Jowo wanted to stay and cure the people. It seems that the Lhagang oral narratives stress the uniqueness of Lhagang, while the Rangakha oral narrative endeavors to establish a connection with the Lhagang Jowo in such a way that it is understood that actually the Jowo stayed for the benefit of the people of the entire area, not only for the people in Lhagang. Thus, everybody can get the same blessing and grace from the precious Lhagang Jowo as the Lhagang people claim for themselves. Despite the narratives having a common basic theme – Princess Wencheng's trip and the Jowo's preference for Lhagang – I argue that the variable elements indicate different agendas. Narratives are functional and purposeful; according to Catherine Kohler Riessman, a narrative is when "...a speaker connects events into a sequence that is

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<sup>46</sup> Cameron 2011:252.

<sup>47</sup> Epstein and Peng 1994:34.

consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience."<sup>48</sup> In other words, narratives, in their multiple formulas and in various communities, play an important role in conveying the claims of different actors for specific listeners. In Lhagang, the narrative is particularly aimed at the people from nearby areas, who came to settle there in a context of social change, starting around the turn of the millennium.

### *The sociopolitical context of Lhagang*

It is essential to recognize the circumstances in which the narrative in question has arisen, namely the implementation, starting in 2000, of the state policy of 'Development of Western Regions (Xi bu da kai fa)',<sup>49</sup> which aims to encourage the growth of the local economy and create jobs and income for the inhabitants in the western regions of China. This policy has gradually opened the door to the development of tourism as well as a significant increase of the population in Lhagang. Especially when the 50th anniversary of establishing Ganze Prefecture was celebrated in Lhagang in 2000, people from surrounding areas gathered in the village, and for the first time people in Lhagang engaged in various kinds of activities related to tourism. This occasion not only raised the reputation of Lhagang as a 'must visit' tourist site in China, but also marked the transition to a new economic reality for the local population. Because of these new opportunities, people from neighboring villages and Chinese traders moved to Lhagang in order to benefit from the new economic opportunities.

This process was accelerated by the state's policy of 'Construction of the Socialist New Villages (She hui zhu yi xin nong cun jian she)', introduced in 2005, focusing on infrastructural development in road and house construction. This massive social project had a negative impact on the local population, on a vast scale and within a very short space of time. In the case of Lhagang, many pastoralists from neighboring areas were forced to settle down in the village/Town and they had difficulties in adapting to the new lifestyle. Therefore many pastoralists later came to work in Lhagang. Families finally chose to settle permanently and build houses in Lhagang. Within a short period of time the population increased dramatically, which was perceived by people in Lhagang as a threat to their village and

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<sup>48</sup> Riessman 2008:3.

<sup>49</sup> See Saich 2000, Goodman 2004.

sources of income. Thus, they quickly realized the urgent need to defend their territory and economic interests by defining themselves as the 'natives' of Lhagang. It is under such circumstances that people in Lhagang have created a local identity through using local narratives.

*The function of written and oral narratives*

Narrative is like a "tool kit for do-it-yourself definitions",<sup>50</sup> in which people can choose to accentuate certain aspects of narratives. Accordingly, narratives not only present different communities' views, but also convey what is important in the way they see themselves. This means that narratives are never identical, as they serve the purpose of expressing different priorities. However, since one can only speculate concerning the motivation for articulating narratives in a local community, it is best to adopt a functional approach when studying them.

In Lhagang, the two written narratives serve as history; as I mentioned above, they are referred to by the monks as 'the history of Lhagang'. Both authors seem to present the "history" of the village on the basis of organizing, processing and refining the events they consider relevant, turning them into a complete narrative with an inherent logic. There is no denying the fact that narrations are constructions, but they are constructions which articulate the aspects and elements that are perceived as essential. For example, both texts use the history of the construction of Lhasa Jokhang as a model for the establishment of the Lhagang temple, thus giving credibility to the history of Lhagang but also enhancing the reputation of the monastery. Mark Freeman argues that one of the functions of narrative is reflecting on and making sense of the past, and that "it is making-present of the world in its absence; it is thus seen to provide a kind of 'supplement' to ordinary experience, serving to draw out features of the world that would otherwise go unnoticed."<sup>51</sup> For monks in Lhagang monastery, the written narratives make it possible to generate new and meaningful understandings of the past. Therefore the *Yang gsangs dkar chag* and the *gNas bstod* are quite authoritative among them.

Oral narratives, on the other hand, contain elements that reveal how people improve the material they are telling and to further their agenda. People in Lhagang and Rangakha have vested interests in making their places famous so that they will attract pilgrims and

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<sup>50</sup> Ryan 2007:30.

<sup>51</sup> Freeman 2010:54.



tourists. Particularly with the development of tourism in recent years, they have learned that Princess Wencheng's journey is partly well known in China, which can potentially attract more tourists to the village and the monastery. The inhabitants of Lhagang use the popularity of the oral narrative to promote tourism and thus support economic development in the area, bringing substantial income to the village. For instance, oral narratives told by laypersons in Lhagang match stories of the Princess Wencheng. In this way, they believe that these oral narratives can help outsiders experience the importance and attractiveness of Lhagang, so that the number of visitors to Lhagang will increase. People in the neighboring town of Rangakha have also seen this economic opportunity, and want to promote the story of the princess. They have therefore added new elements to the story to alter it to their own advantage. However, to explore to what extent local economy has affected the popularity of this oral narrative is beyond the scope of this article. Another important motivation for circulating the narrative is that rapid urbanization and tourism development has resulted social fluctuation and the fluidity of migrants. These dramatic changes have aroused people's need to find a sense of belonging and to be included as an important part of Tibetan history.

#### *Conclusion*

This article explores how different groups try to find a way to create their identity and preserve their own interests in the context of the state's various development policies. People in Lhagang and Rangakha use the narrative of Princess Wencheng and the Lhagang Jowo not only for legitimizing their past and creating a sense of identity by connecting with well-known events and figures in Tibetan historiographies but also for promoting their own agendas. This study attempts to go beyond the 'historical reality' of Lhagang narratives, trying instead to understand what people themselves believe is true and how these narratives have been reinterpreted for different purposes and audiences, allowing us to take an inside path to understanding how different communities connect themselves to their social world.

#### *Acknowledgement*

*I would like to thank Per Kværne, Gerald Roche and Tsering Samdrup, as well as Hiroyuki Suzuki for their suggestions, comments and help to improve previous drafts. My gratitude also goes to the people of Lhagang, whose generosity has allowed this paper to be possible.*

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