

# *gNyan chen Thang lha* and His Three Vows in Byang gter

Yuewei, WANG

(EPHE / PSL / CRCAO)

## *Introduction*

**D**uring March 2019, I attended the conference “Recherches en cours sur les religions Bon et non-bouddhistes au Tibet,” where I discussed with Stéphane Arguillère the chapter on *gNyan chen Thang lha*, the theme of my Ph.D. thesis, in Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s book *Oracle and Demons of Tibet* and mentioned my concern about some texts lacking clear references. In that conference, Stéphane Arguillère provided me with important information: Lama ‘Khor gdong gter sprul rin po che ‘Chi med rig ‘dzin, also known as C.R. Lama, one of the lineage masters of the rNying ma Byang gter tradition, was an important informant providing Nebesky-Wojkowitz with resources on the rNying ma tradition. Since, however, many of the Byang gter writings now available were not published when Nebesky-Wojkowitz wrote his book, the provenance of some of the information on Thang lha in his book was not given. With this in mind, I explored the 63 volumes of the Byang gter collection published in 2015 in order to find more references to *gNyan chen Thang lha*.

The 63-volume Byang gter compilation includes a large amount of previously unknown material from the 10th century to the most recent years of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> It is in volume 15 that sixteen important texts wholly devoted to Thang lha can be found. These texts provide a detailed map of Thang lha’s identity, title, power, image, history, and ritual. The titles of the sixteen texts on Thang lha in Volume 15 of Byang gter are:

1. *gNyan chen Thang lha’i phyi nang gsang gsum gyi sgrub pa las lo rgyus* (*History of the Inner, Outer and Secret Sādhanas of gNyan chen Thang lha*). Vol. 15, pp. 321-324.
2. *lHa chen thang lha’i phyi sgrub* (*Outer Sādhana of lHa chen thang lha*). Vol. 15, pp. 325-333.

---

<sup>1</sup> *sNga ’gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*. Byang gter dpe sgrig tshogs chung, 2015. The collection is quoted as “Byang gter” in this article.

3. *lHa chen thang lha'i gsang sgrub* (Secret Sādhana of lHa chen thang lha). Vol. 15, pp. 335-345.
4. *lHa chen thang lha'i las tshogs gsang sgrub shog dril* (Scrolls on the Secret Sādhana for the Activities of the Great God Thang lha). Vol.15, pp. 347-367.
5. *gNyan chen Thang lha'i mchod phreng las bzhi lhun grub* (Rosary of Worship to gNyan chen thang lha: Spontaneous Peaceful Activity). Vol. 15, pp. 369-374.
6. *sNgags 'chang yol mo bas mdzad pa'i lha chen 'bar ba rtsal gyi mnga' gsol yid bzhin rgyal mtshan* (Wish-fulfilling Victory Banner of the Enthronement of lHa chen 'Bar ba rtsal, Written by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Yol mo ba sprul sku bsTan 'dzin nor bu). Vol. 15, pp. 525-529.
7. *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi srog gtad kyī rjes gnang mu ti la'i 'phreng ba* (Rosary of Pearls, Authorization of the Life force Entrustment of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal). Vol. 15, pp. 531-543.
8. *lHa chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi gser skyems sogs* (Libation Ritual and so on of lHa chen rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal). Vol. 15, pp. 545-547.
9. *Zangs mdzod gter bsrung rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi mchod sprin yid bzhin sprin phung* (Banks of Wish-fulfilling Offering Clouds to the Guardian of the Copper Treasury rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal). Vol. 15, pp. 549-560.
10. *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi rten 'dzugs kyī rim pa gsal bar byed pa dwangs shel me long* (Mirror of Limpid Crystal: Clarification of the Gradual [Actions] for Building the Object of Veneration of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal). Vol. 15, pp. 561-581.
11. *gNyan chen Thang lha'i bstod bskul mu tig phreng ba bzhugs pa'i dbu phyogs lags mdzad byang med pa* (The Body Position Practice: Rosary of Pearls, Praise and Exhortation to gNyan chen Thang lha). Vol. 15, pp. 583-595.
12. *rGyal dbang lnga pa rin po ches mdzad pa'i lha mchog 'bar ba rtsal gyi phrin las brgya phrag nyi ngos 'dzin pa'i snang gsal* (Lamp Catching the Orb of the Sun, the Hundredfold Enlightened Activity of the Supreme Deity 'Bar ba rtsal, written by the Fifth Dalai Lama). Vol. 15, pp. 597-645.
13. *Thang lha'i phyi rten 'bul thabs* (Offering Method of Outer Ritual Objects to Thang lha). Vol. 15, pp. 647-650.
14. *Thang lha'i bka' gtad smyo 'dre rgod kyī 'grim shul* (Thang lha's Entrustment Ritual: Wandering Traces of the Passage of Demons who Cause Madness and rGod Demons). Vol. 15, pp. 651-660.
15. *Dam can 'bar ba rtsal gyi rgyun khyer* (Daily Practice of Dam can 'Bar ba rtsal). Vol. 15, pp. 661-662.
16. *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi rten mdos bzlog mdos kyī rim pa rgya 'bag mig gi rnam 'phrul* (Stages of the mDos Rituals of Support and Reversal of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal: Chinese Masks and Visual Illusions).

Vol.15, pp. 663-696.

The Byang gter text no. 5 provides the crucial piece of information that Thang lha and Padmasambhava met three times, and that Thang lha took three vows in front of the Master. Each vow is distinct in content and brings a new identity to Thang lha as a Buddhist god.

1. **First vow:** becoming a *srung ma* and obtaining a secret name (*gsang mtshan*): Thang lha takes the first vow in front of Padmasambhava in the area of Byang lam bar ba. There, his life force (*srog snying*) is crushed, and he becomes a protector (*srung ma*) of Buddhism. Padmasambhava gives him the secret name rDo rje mchog rab rtsal. One must note that in the Byang gter texts, Thang lha's secret name is rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal. This variation is significant, and its implications for Thang lha's identity are explored below.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Second vow:** becoming a *sku lha* and a *srog gi lha*: the second encounter between Thang lha and Padmasambhava takes place on the mountain of Has po ri at bSam yas Monastery. At this meeting, Padmasambhava, Khri srong lde btsan, and Thang lha meet, and Thang lha is designated as the body god (*sku lha*) and life-force god (*srog gi lha*) of the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Third vow:** becoming a *gter bdag* of the Copper Red Treasury (*Zangs mdzod dmar po*): the third meeting between Thang lha and Padmasambhava takes place on the summit of Mount bKra bzang, where Thang lha is given a *sādhana* by Padmasambhava and becomes the guardian (*gter srung*, *gter bdag*) of the Copper Red Treasury<sup>4</sup> in the divine cave called Zang zang lha brag [to the west of bKra bzang].<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Byang gter, vol. 15, no. 5 (*Rosary of Worship to gNyan chen thang lha: Spontaneous Peaceful Activity*), p. 370: l. 1-p. 372: l. 2 ; no.7 (*Rosary of Pearls, Authorization of the Life force Entrustment of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal*), p. 534: l. 3-p. 535: l. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Byang gter, vol. 15, no.1 (*History of the Inner, Outer and Secret Sādhana of gNyan chen Thang lha*), p. 322: l. 1-p. 324: l. 3; no. 3 (*Secret Sādhana of lHa chen thang lha*), p. 336: l. 2-p. 338: l. 1; no.14 (*Thang lha's Entrustment Ritual: Wandering Traces of the Passage of Demons who Cause Madness and rGod Demons*), p.653: l.3-p. 655: l.2; no.7 (*Rosary of Pearls, Authorization of the Life force Entrustment of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal*), p. 535: l.1-p. 537: l.5.

<sup>4</sup> In the fivefold repository of hidden treasures found by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem in Zang zang lha brag, *Zangs mdzod dmar po* is the western compartment, essentially containing the *gter chos* connected to the Lotus family (Avalokiteśvara, peaceful Padmasambhava and the Hayagrīva cycle that includes all this literature connected to gNyan chen Thang lha).

<sup>5</sup> See Byang gter, vol. 15, no. 2 (*Outer Sādhana of lHa chen thang lha*), p. 331: l. 4-p. 332: l. 3; no. 4 (*Scrolls on the Secret Sādhana for the Activities of the Great God Thang lha*),

*Thang lha's identity and his three vows*

The general identity and the three vows of Thang lha are summarized towards the end of the invocation in text no. 5. This text is well-known and commonly recited in the Byang gter tradition. It could be considered the main Byang gter invocation of gNyan chen Thang lha:<sup>6</sup>

Then the master took the little crystal drum in his hand, and said: “Hūṃ, may the extent of the citadel that I have generated not be small! May the throne decorated with lion and elephant not be low! May the brightness above the seat of the sun, moon and lotus not be weak! May the supreme gods of wisdom be steadfast and not distant! May the power of achievement of the worldly protectors not be small! Now you please come here and sit on the sun and moon seat!

*rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal sa ma yā a dza dza! Hūṃ!*

The name of the *sku lha's* father is 'O de gung rgyal; the name of the *sku lha's* mother is g.Yu bya zhog gcig<sup>7</sup>. The name of the *sku lha* himself is Yar zhud gnyan gyi lha. The name of the place where he abides is 'Dam shod snar mo; khri rgod g.yu ljang 'khril (?)<sup>8</sup>; and full of delight is this abode, [in which] not only green are the summers, but winters too. Happy is the country where this god resides!

The name by which you are known according to the custom of humans is Thang lha yar zhud; the name by which you are known according to divine convention is King of the Gandharvas, Zur phud lnga pa! The secret name by which you are known is rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal!

What do you wear on your body? You wear white silks and white cotton clothing. What do you ride as your mount? You ride a pale horse of the *lha*. You roam through the three worlds, and your white color is of a radiating brilliancy. With your right hand you lift a cane

---

p. 365: l. 1-1. 2; no. 7 (*Rosary of Pearls, Authorization of the Life force Entrustment of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal*), p. 536: l. 5; no. 10 (*Mirror of Limpid Crystal: Clarification of the Gradual [Actions] for Building the Object of Veneration of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal*), p. 562: l. 4-p. 563: l. 2; no. 11 (*The Body Position Practice: Rosary of Pearls, Praise and Exhortation to gNyan chen Thang lha*), p. 592: l. 2-1. 3; no. 12 (*Lamp Catching the Orb of the Sun, the Hundredfold Enlightened Activity of the Supreme Deity 'Bar ba rtsal*, written by the Fifth Dalai Lama), p. 635: l. 3-1. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Byang gter, text no. 5, pp. 371.4-374.6.

<sup>7</sup> In A 'dzom 'brug pa's edition of the *dGongs pa zang thal* (1973, vol. 4, p. 601: l. 3), the mother is clearly called g.Yu bya gshog gcig, “one-winged turquoise bird”: *rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal...../ sku lha'I yum smos pa/ g.yu bya gshog gcig lags/[...]*

<sup>8</sup> Another spelling in the *dGongs pa zang thal* is *khri rgod g.yu ljang ldem* (1973, vol. 4, p. 601: l. 4). This can be translated as “ferocious throne [made of] green turquoise [that] protrudes.”

whip and send forth the seven mother-goddesses to perform tasks. With your left hand you count the beads of a crystal-rosary. You recite the mantra of your sworn deity in absolute space. Which emanations are you sending forth? A regiment of a hundred thousand divine soldiers. Together with your servants and your retinue, come today to this place and carry out your work!<sup>9</sup>

You are the god for all those faithful to their sacred oath, you are the killer for all those who betray the master to whom they have sworn faithful obedience, you are a demon for all traitors, you are the protector for all yogis, you are a friend to me, the excellent practitioner! The share of virtuous deeds that falls to you is to subdue the demons who cause madness,<sup>10</sup> and to cut off the life of hate-filled enemies! Quickly tether your horse, heavy is the auspicious lightning of the hooves! Sharpen my weapons so that they are keen, and let the points not be blunt! With whomsoever I compete, let me dominate, for sure!

As for the competition of speed and distance, you have the capacity to surpass others in a horse race! You have the capacity to catch the hate-filled enemies and the ability to provide protection with your compassion! Time has come, samaya!<sup>11</sup>

Please follow after what you remember. It is time for you to act—you are the ruler of the obstructive demons. Perform the virtuous deeds that have been apportioned to you. You are the *yul lha* of the four districts of dBus gtsang! You are the *sku lha* of Khri srong lde'u btsan who is the divine son, the protector of the Dharma! You, who have been oath-bound by Padmasambhava, listen in order to obey your general instructions: for future generations, at the end of the Dharma, the secret mantras of the followers of O rgyan Pad ma 'byung gnas; the descendants of the divine lineage of the *dharmarāja* Khri srong lde'u btsan; those whose power touches the sky, and also the lowest of the low—these you shall protect as if there were your own children. You will protect the four districts of Tibet as if they were your cattle and protect the bSam yas temple as your treasure.

If you do not provide protection for all sentient beings until the end of the world age, will you not remember that, first of all, the Master

<sup>9</sup> The English translation here for p. 373 is based on the translation in Nebesky's *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 1996 [1956], p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> The "demons who cause madness" might indicate Pe har, the arch-demon subdued by gNyan chen Thang lha (See Byang gter vol. 15, text no. 4). Pe har is the *rgyal po* spirit par excellence and the *rgyal pos* are said to cause madness in both those who worship them and those who offend them (or that they are ritually made to attack).

<sup>11</sup> This means times has come not to take the vow but to accomplish what he has promised.

of Secrets (*gsang bdag*) oppressed your vital-heart mantras at Byang lam bar ba? Second, will you not remember how, at bSam yas Has po ri, the powerful Padma Heruka overpowered you? And finally, will you not remember that, after he had assembled all the worldly gods and demons on the Kingly Mount bKra bzang, the great glorious Vajrakumāra (Vajrakīla) bestowed on you your oath. I am Padmasambhava, you are *gNyan chen Thang lha*, this place is the four districts of dBus gtsang, the blessing is like the clouds *thems se them*, compassion is like the falling rain, and the radiance of the vows is like amazing flashes!

Awesome Thang lha, please approach! To you, the awesome *sku lha* and your retinue, I make food offerings of the finest kinds of magnificent items! I make offerings of pure brook water and glacial water! I make offerings of the smoke of the sweet-scented frankincense! I make offerings of a gift of the five precious things such as gold and silver and of silk and brocade; I make an offering of a secret sheep and white rice.

*om badzra thang ka ra mun nyid khu sha li amṛta [kha hī kha hī] svāhā.*

So this is the offering to the sphere of the high blue sky. At this time, you should meditate on Vajrapāṇi; beating the small drum slowly, first make the exhortation with the melody [called] the “Offering of the Lion”. After that, if you recite the oath by singing the “Majestic Song of the Hero” and make offerings, [Thang lha] will protect all the yogis, and protect all the classes of the white dharma. This is the accomplishment of the deeds of offering clouds to *gNyan chen Thang lha*.

*Sa ma ya, rgya rgya rgya.*

This invocation and its brief introduction of Thang lha’s three vows are well known, having been partially translated by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz<sup>12</sup> and David Snellgrove.<sup>13</sup> Snellgrove translates Thang lha’s name as “God of the Plain.”<sup>14</sup> A translation also followed by Geoffrey Samuel, who quotes Snellgrove’s translation of this invocation to illustrate Thang lha’s identity in Buddhism and his three vows.<sup>15</sup> John Bellezza quotes a sTag lung invocation, entitled *Stag lung pa gNyan chen Thang lha gsol lha*, which is similar to this Byang gter invocation. This sTag lung text introduces Thang lha’s identity, family and image as the Byang gter invocation does, but does not involve the three vows.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Nebesky [1956] 1996, p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> Snellgrove 1957, pp. 239-242.

<sup>14</sup> Snellgrove 1957, p. 239.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel 1993, pp. 185-186.

<sup>16</sup> Bellezza 2005, pp. 195-198.

According to this invocation text in Byang gter text no. 5, we can conclude the general information of Thang lha's name, family, and image:<sup>17</sup>

<i>sKu lha</i> father	'O de gung rgyal
<i>sKu lha</i> mother	g.Yu bya zhog (gshog?) gcig
<i>sKu lha</i> himself	Yar zhur gnyan gyi lha
Domain	'Dam shod snar mo
Name as <i>lha</i>	Dri za'i rgyal po Zur phud lnga pa
Secret name	rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal
Dress	White silks and white cotton cloths
Horse	A horse of the <i>lha</i> with white heels
Body color	Radiant white
Position	Meditation
Attributes	Right hand lifts a whipstick, and left hand holds a crystal rosary
Retinues	A hundred thousand units of mounted riders

The identity, power and duty of Thang lha may be summarized in the following table:<sup>18</sup>

Identity, title	God for those faithful to their sacred oath
	Killer for those who betray the master to whom they have sworn faithful obedience
	Demon for all traitors
	Protector for all yogis
	Friend to the excellent practitioner
	Ruler of the obstructive demons
	<i>Yul lha</i> of the four districts of dBus gtsang
	<i>sKu lha</i> of Khri srong lde btsan
Duty	Vow-holder in front of Padmasambhava
	Offer the fortune of his virtuous deeds
	Subdue demons who cause madness
	Cut off the life of hating enemies
	Follow the tantric teaching and secret mantra of Padmasambhava

<sup>17</sup> Byang gter vol.15, no.5, p. 373, 1.2-1.6.

<sup>18</sup> Byang gter vol.15, no.5, p. 372, 1.6-p. 373, 1.6.

Afterwards, according to this invocation by Padmasambhava, the three vows can be summarized as follows:<sup>19</sup>

	<i>Deity</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Event</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> Vow	Vajrapāṇi	Byang lam bar ba	Thang lha's life essence was crushed
2 <sup>nd</sup> Vow	Padma Heruka	bSam yas Has po ri	Thang lha was overpowered
3 <sup>rd</sup> Vow	rDo rje gzhon nu	Summit of Ri rgyal bkra bzang	Thang lha was bound by an oath

Among the sixteen Thang lha-related texts of Byang gter, the overviews of the three vows of Thang lha are distributed in different texts. This article will show how the different texts in the Byang gter collection describe the three oaths.

### *The first vow of Thang lha*

The first vow of Thang lha, as summarized in text no.5, is as follows: "First of all, Master of Secrets Vajrapāṇi (Phyag na rdo rje) crushed your life-essence (*srog snying gzir ba*) at Byang lam bar ba."<sup>20</sup> Here, Vajrapāṇi is Padmasambhava, and Byang lam bar ba is the location of Thang lha and Padmasambhava's first meeting when this master came to Tibet from Uḍḍiyāna, which is also the location of Thang lha's mountain range.

#### *1. Early Buddhist texts on Thang lha's first vow to Padmasambhava*

The earliest known Buddhist textual accounts of Thang lha can be traced back to the legend of Padmasambhava being invited to Tibet by the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan (755–797/804). According to the legend, Padmasambhava had to subjugate the autochthonous deities and demons who were preventing the establishment of bSam yas monastery in Tibet. During his journey from Uḍḍiyāna to Tibet, Padmasambhava also encountered the god Thang lha and successfully subdued him. As a result, Thang lha was bound by an oath to protect Buddhism, which became an important factor in the spread of the religion in Tibet. This story highlights the crucial role Thang lha played in the establishment and protection of Buddhism in Tibet.

<sup>19</sup> Byang gter vol. 15, no. 5, p. 373, l. 6-p. 374, l.2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373, l. 6.



The earliest Buddhist texts on Thang lha include:

- 1) The earliest Buddhist text, *dBa' bzhed* (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries), records Padmasambhava's entry into Tibet, but does not describe in detail the process of subjugating Thang lha.
- 2) The earliest works recording the life of Master Padmasambhava and his work in Tibet were written by Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192)<sup>21</sup>:
  - *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* (abbr. MTN, 12<sup>th</sup> century);
  - *Slob dpon pad ma'i rnam thar zangs gling ma* (abbr. ZL, 12<sup>th</sup> century).
- 3) Subsequently, the *lDe'u chos byung* (abbr. DChB, late 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>22</sup> and *Pad ma bka' thang* (14<sup>th</sup> century) also describe the context of Padmasambhava's entry into Tibet and how Thang lha was subjugated by this master and became a Dharma god.

The identity of Thang lha in ZL, MTN, DChB, *Pad ma bka' thang*, and *dBa' bzhed* shows that Thang lha undergoes a transformative process in the earliest Buddhist texts:<sup>23</sup>

- 1) Firstly, Thang lha was considered the autochthonous, indigenous god of Tibet before being tamed by Padmasambhava. After his transformation, Thang lha became a Buddhist protective deity.
- 2) Secondly, in his initial encounter with Padmasambhava, Thang lha tested him and was eventually tamed. After offering his vital syllables (*srog snying*) to the Master, Thang lha was bound by an oath and given a new identity as a Buddhist protector, with the secret name rDo rje mchog rab rtsal.
- 3) Thirdly, during his meeting with Thang lha, Padmasambhava revealed the deity's various identities and names, including Dri za'i rgyal po Zur phud lnga pa and Klu yi rgyal po Ni le thod dkar. Thang lha is not only a *gnyan* and a *lha* but also a *klu* and the king of the Gandharvas (*dri za'i rgyal po*).
- 4) Finally, after being tamed by Padmasambhava, Thang lha's image was transformed into that of a respectful, white-colored

<sup>21</sup> There is some suspicion about Nyang ral being the author of the *Chos 'byung me tog snying po* because its narrative is not consistent with that of the *bKa' thang zangs gling ma*.

<sup>22</sup> DChB was written in 1261. (Karmay, 2009 [1997], p. 482)

<sup>23</sup> About how early Buddhist texts narrate Thang lha's first vow in front of Padmasambhava, see Yuewei, W, Ph.D. thesis, (defended on July 26, 2023), *The cult of the mountain god gNyan chen Thang lha in Tibet*, Chapter Five.

young man with five topknots on his head, known as Zur phud Inga pa (“five topknots on the head”). This image became the most common portrayal of Thang lha in both peaceful and wrathful forms, as seen in later Byang gter texts.

2. *gNyan chen po'i 'phrin las* (no. 5)

In text no. 5, at his first meeting with Padmasambhava, Thang lha makes his first Buddhist vow of being a *srung ma*, and finally receives the secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal:

I pay homage to the great Guru Rinpoche! When the great master Padmasambhava who is the emanation of the glorious Vajrapāṇi arrived at the barbaric Tibetan land, all the *lha* and *srin* of Tibet showed contempt for his high teachings, and Thang lha ya shud (*sic*)<sup>24</sup> caused snow to fall on the master. A blizzard swirled about his feet, and fog obscured the path. The master became angry and frustrated, and after performing the meditation of Vajrapāṇi, all the gods and spirits were alarmed and became unconscious. On that occasion, he tamed Thang lha yar zhud (*sic*) and bound him with an oath, saying: “Mighty god Thang la yar zhud (*sic*), what is your vital-heart mantra? What deeds have you the power to perform?” Thang lha helplessly offered him his vital-heart mantra: *om badzra thang ka ra mu nyid khu sha li a dza dza sa ma yā hūṃ phaṭ*, then he offered him [Padmasambhava] his secret name, rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal. A dza dza.<sup>25</sup>

This text reveals the following significant information:

- 1) In contrast to the five early Buddhist works, this text does not mention Thang lha transforming into a big *yakṣa* or a white snake to test Padmasambhava. Instead, it simply states that Thang lha sent snow to obstruct Padmasambhava when he passed by the foot of his mountain.
- 2) Padmasambhava is seen as the emanation of Vajrapāṇi, and he visualizes himself as Vajrapāṇi when responding to the challenge set by Thang lha.
- 3) The title for Thang lha in this text is Thang lha yar zhud or Thang lha yab shud. From Dunhuang ITJ\_0734 and the early Bonpo myth

<sup>24</sup> Ya/yar shud/zhur/bzhur, etc. often appear as Thang lha's names in both Buddhist and Bonpo texts. In the earliest Tibetan text, the Dunhuang Tibetan Documents, Thang lha is called Thang lha ya bzhur (ITJ\_0734, 1.7r306, 1.7r308). The title “gNyan chen” does not appear in Dunhuang documents.

<sup>25</sup> Translated from no. 5, p. 370, l. 1-p. 372, l. 2.

- sTod lha rabs*, we can find these titles of Thang lha.<sup>26</sup>
- 4) Thang lha yab shud fails in his challenge to Padmasambhava; he is bound by an oath, then offers his life essence (*srog gi snying*). Finally, Thang lha asks for a share of food from his subduer Padmasambhava and specifies what the content should be. Then Padmasambhava performs a ritual to Thang lha and announces his secret name. In this text, Thang lha's secret name is rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, which is different from the secret name rDo rje mchog rab rtsal given in the *Pad ma bka' thang*.<sup>27</sup>

3. rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi srog gtad kyi rjes gnang  
mu thi la'i 'phreng ba (no.7)

The Byang gter text no. 7 is attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama. As it is indicated in its colophon:<sup>28</sup>

This is the authorization of the life force entrustment of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal..... This was written on the 18<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> of the month when the Gro zhun star shines, at the Palace of Potala, by the writer (the fifth Dalai Lama), and the exhortation is done.

In the following passage, the Fifth Dalai Lama says that he excerpted this text from the *Thang yig*, i.e. the *Pad ma bka' thang*):<sup>29</sup>

In the *Thang yig*, it is said: "Then to test Padmasambhava, *sKu gnyan* Thang lha [transformed into] a white snake and stretched himself so that his head reached the land of Gru gu, and his tail extended to the Sog river and g.Yer thang in Khams, and blocked off the narrow road. Master Padmasambhava planted his staff in the middle of the body of the snake and said: "You are the king of the *klu* whose name is Ni le thod dkar, and the king of the fragrance-eaters whose name is Zur phud lnga pa. Go away and prepare a *gaṇacakra* feast!" Thang lha fled to the snow mountains, but the snow melted, the peak appeared completely black, and rocks rolled down. Thang lha was unable to bear this suffering and brought the food offering. Then

<sup>26</sup> About Thang lha in Dunhuang Tibetan Documents, see Yuewei, Wang, Ph.D. thesis (defended on July 26, 2023), *The cult of the mountain god gNyan chen Thang lha in Tibet*, Part I, École pratique des Hautes Études.

<sup>27</sup> "Then in order to test Padmasambhava, Sku gnyan thang lha [transformed into] a white snake (*sbrul dkar*) and stretched himself so that his head reached the land of Gru gu, [...] After offering his life force he was entrusted with a hundred treasures and was given the secret name rDo rje mchog rab rtsal." (*Pad ma bka' thang*, 1987, 363-364)

<sup>28</sup> Byang gter no. 7, p. 543, l. 2-1. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534: l. 3-p. 535: l. 1.

Thang lha transformed into a turquoise child with five hair-knots, wearing a white silken turban, and circumambulated [the master] while making prostrations. After offering his life force (*srog snying*) he was entrusted with the seal of the treasures (*gter rgya*) and was given the secret name rDo rje mchog rab rtsal. So it is said. This is the story about Thang lha being appointed as an oath-bound guardian (*dam la btags nas srung mar bskos*) by Padmasambhava with the eternal great seal (*phyag rgya chen po*).

This text is broadly consistent with the *Pad ma bka' thang* with two differences:

- 1) At the beginning, Thang lha is called *sKu gnyan* Thang lha, "Thang lha, the *gnyan* of the body."
- 2) After Thang lha fails in his second attempt to defeat Padmasambhava, he offers food to Padmasambhava and prostrates in the form of a peaceful young man with five topknots. He also offers his life essence to Padmasambhava, who in return gives Thang lha the secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal and appoints him as an oath-bound protector (*dam la btags nas srung mar bskos*). Although the Fifth Dalai Lama cites this text from the *Pad ma bka' thang*, he gives Thang lha's secret name as rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, while in the *Pad ma bka' thang*, it is rDo rje mchog rab rtsal.

### *The second vow of Thang lha*

The second vow of Thang lha is: "Secondly, will you not remember how, at bSam yas Has po ri, you were overpowered by the powerful Padma Heruka (dbang chen pad ma he ru ka)?"<sup>30</sup> Has po ri is a hill close to bSam yas monastery, while bSam yas itself is the destination of Padmasambhava's trip to Tibet, where he met Khri Srong lde btsan and helped the king to build this monastery. Padma Heruka is a wrathful form of Padmasambhava.<sup>31</sup>

#### *1. Thang lha's explanation of why he can be the sku lha of the king: no. 1 and no. 7*

The full text of no. 1 is the *lo rgyus* (story) of how Thang lha and Padmasambhava met for the second time and Thang lha made his second Buddhist vow to be the *sku lha* and *srog gi lha* of the Dharma

<sup>30</sup> Byang gter no. 5, p. 373, l. 6-p. 374, l. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Padma he ru ka (Heruka) is Hayagrīva. Although it is Padmasambhava who subdues Thang lha, he does the activity of subjugation assuming the form of Hayagrīva. In the Byang gter system, gNyan chen Thang lha is subordinate to Hayagrīva.

king Khri srong lde btsan.

- 1) gNyan chen Thang lha arrives at bSam yas, presents himself in front of Padmasambhava and Khri srong lde btsan and pays his homage to the latter:

When the great master Padmasambhava arrived in front of the Has po ri hill of bSam yas monastery from the middle route through Byang (*byang lam bar ba*), that shining deity gNyan chen Thang lha appeared here in front of the master as a white yak with horns reaching to the sky, with its four hooves crushing down the demons of places of the four districts of dBus gtsang. This white yak saw the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan, and from his magical emanation as the white yak that manifested from his nature, he then manifested as a man with a white handsome face as white as a conch shell, and his head decorated with five turquoise-blue topknots; and having transformed into this form, he paid homage and prostrated to the king.<sup>32</sup>

- 2) Padmasambhava and Thang lha have a conversation about why the latter has decided to protect the king:

At that time, the great master Padmasambhava gave teachings as follows: "gNyan chen po thang lha, since you are an oath-bound worldly divinity (*lha srin*), why do you protect and befriend the king Khri srong lde btsan?" Thang lha said: "I have a connection: 1] Because I am the *yul lha* for the four districts of dBus gtsang, and since the king Khri srong lde btsan is the king of Tibet, so we are connected by our great united force; 2] Because I like friends who have a commitment to me, and since the king's vow is pure, so we are connected though our vows; 3] Because I am the *pho lha* for the marvelous males, and since the secret law of the king is great, so we are connected through good karma and deeds; 4] Because I like those who are virtuous rulers, so we are connected by means of our great united merits!"<sup>33</sup>

- 3) Thang lha lists the reasons why he is angry at the vow breakers and hostile demons he encountered when he was traveling to bSam yas:

Thang lha said: "O, great master Padmasambhava, the reason why I have come in a body of anger and rage is that I am the life-taking demon for those who violate their vows; I am the executioner of

<sup>32</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 322: l.1-l.3.

<sup>33</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 322: l. 3-p. 323: l. 3.

vow-breakers; I will crush defilement, and I will crush down the inferior *gnyan*; and since I am the antidote for the demons that cause madness and the *rgyal po* and *gong po* demons, so as soon as I saw all of them [on my way here], then spontaneously anger arose in me and I became angry and enraged!<sup>34</sup>

- 4) Padmasambhava feels satisfied with Thang lha's answers and appoints him as the *sku lha* of the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan and his successors:

Then the great master Padmasambhava said: "Well then, *gNyan chen Thang lha*, since you spontaneously support the king, so from the king himself until the last member of the clan of the gods of clear light has returned to the sky, you shall be a *sku lha* for them! Let the king make offerings to you!" This is the story behind the prayer of the great deity *gNyan chen Thang lha* and the dharma-protecting king of Tibet (*bod kyi chos skyong rgyal po*).<sup>35</sup>

The important messages we can take from this text are:

- 1) Location: The opening sentence, "When the great master Padmasambhava arrives in front of the Has po ri mountain of bSam yas monastery from the middle route through Byang" indicates the timeline when Padmasambhava arrived at bSam yas from the Byang lam bar ba area where he first encountered Thang lha. This marks their second meeting, with Thang lha already identified as a Buddhist protector (*srung ma*) after being bound by an oath by Padmasambhava during their first encounter.
- 2) Thang lha's prostration and his two discourses: In this text, Thang lha's attitude towards the king Khri srong lde btsan is very respectful, because at that time he is already a Buddhist protector. Meanwhile, King Khri srong lde btsan is a "semi-mythological Buddhist king" as attested in the earliest Tibetan sources from Dunhuang.<sup>36</sup> Khri srong lde btsan is both a secular and a religious figure in Tibetan history. He has a triple identity: as a powerful emperor of the Tibetan empire, as a Buddhist king who has the core role of spreading Buddhism in Tibet, and as a tantric disciple of Padmasambhava.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 323: l. 3-p. 324: l. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 324: l. 1-l. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Van Schaik and Doney, 2009, p. 193.

<sup>37</sup> Doney 2011 raises the viewpoint that Khri Srong lde btsan is an emperor (*btsan po*), a Buddhist king (*chos rgyal*), and a tantric disciple (*mahāyogin*). Dotson 2017 also

As a Buddhist protective god who took an oath to become a protector of the doctrine in front of Padmasambhava, it is reasonable that Thang lha should prostrate to the Buddhist king, Khri srong lde btsan. Thang lha arrives at bSam yas in a wrathful form as a white yak as a consequence of his encounter with vow-breakers and hostile demons. However, upon seeing Khri srong lde btsan, he transforms into a man with a handsome white handsome face and five turquoise-blue topknots on his head and pays homage to the king. This image with five topknots is the form of *Dri za'i rgyal po* Zur phud lnga pa, which Thang lha transformed into after being subjugated by Padmasambhava during their first meeting, as recorded in the five early Buddhist texts.

Thang lha's two speeches to Padmasambhava convey important information. Among them, the first is about why he spontaneously supports and befriends king Khri srong lde btsan, and the reason given by Thang lha is that he is already connected (*'brel ba*) to this Dharma king in several ways. The other speech is about why he came as the angry white yak, i.e. that he wants to destroy vow-breakers, suppress pollution and inferior *gnyan*, and be a counter-agent—an “anti-dote”—to demons. These declarations demonstrate that Thang lha has taken on the role of protector of Buddhism, and his responsibility, identity, and values are all aligned with this Buddhist identity.

3) sKu lha, *Thang lha's new identity*  
after the second meeting with Padmasambhava

This meeting involved three figures: Thang lha, Padmasambhava, and the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan. From this meeting, the main identity that Thang lha attained from Padmasambhava is that of *sku lha*, which is the “god of the body” of the Dharma kings (no. 1, 324: l. 1-1.2).

After Thang lha transformed from a wrathful yak into a respectful man with five topknots, and after performing prostrations to the Darma king, Padmasambhava asks Thang lha why he wants to protect and befriend Khri srong lde'u btsa. Thang lha's answer is very interesting. He gives four *'brel ba* (connections), showing his similarities with the Dharma king, and it is these similarities that make Thang lha willing to support and be the friend of the king as an equal. The four connections are:

- 1) Thang lha and Khri srong lde btsan are connected by an equal

---

argues that Khri srong lde btsan is a core Buddhist monarch, also showing the King-Centric Representations, and Yogin-Centric Representations.

- great united force (*che mnyam dpung gis 'brel lo*);<sup>38</sup>  
 2) by vows (*dam tshig gis 'brel lo*);<sup>39</sup>  
 3) by karma and deeds (*las dang spyod pas 'brel lo*);<sup>40</sup>  
 4) by great united merits (*chem nyam bsod nams kyis 'brel ba lags so*).<sup>41</sup>

These four similarities demonstrate that Thang lha decided to protect and befriend the king because they share equal strength and values, indicating an equality between them. After hearing Thang lha's explanation, Padmasambhava appointed him as the *sku lha* of the king.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Padmasambhava asked the king to make an offering for Thang lha (no.1, 324: 1.2). This type of food offering in exchange for protection also indicates an equal exchange relationship between the god and the king.

Text no. 7 first quotes *Pad ma bka' thang's* account of Thang lha's first meeting with Padmasambhava.<sup>43</sup> The Fifth Dalai Lama quotes the second meeting of Thang lha and Padmasambhava. He does not say the name of the quoted text but says: "This is the historical story according to the revealed treasure in the divine cliff."<sup>44</sup> From this indication and the textual contents' comparison, we can conclude that this text is in all likelihood *gNyan chen Thang lha'i phyi nang gsang gsum gyi sgrub pa las lo rgyus* (Byang gter text no. 1).

Following this quotation, the Fifth Dalai Lama comments:

So it is said, and this is the historical story according to the revealed treasure in the divine cliff: through being the special body god (*sku lha*) of the Dharma king who brings immediate blessing and long-lasting fortune, this great god himself was orally appointed as the guardian of the western copper treasury. The most precious treasury includes seven quintessential instructions, and they are hidden as the concealed treasury of the teaching cycles in the divine rock of Zang zang area.<sup>45</sup>

This refers to the fact that Thang lha has gained another identity, *gter bdag*, from a certain event after the second encounter with the Master Padmasambhava. So, what is this event? From the following section

<sup>38</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 323: 1. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 323: 1. 1-1.2.

<sup>40</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 323: 1. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 323: 1. 2-1.3.

<sup>42</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 324: 1. 1-1.2.

<sup>43</sup> Byang gter, no.7, p. 534: 1. 3-p. 535: 1. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Byang gter, no.7, p. 536: 1. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 7, 536: 1. 4-1.6.



"The third vow of Thang lha: his last encounter with Padmasambhava," we can see that Thang lha's title *gter bdag* is derived from the event of his third encounter with Padmasambhava.

From no. 1 and 7, we see that the main content of these two texts concerns Thang lha's explanation of why he is willing and able to support and befriend the Dharma king,<sup>46</sup> and why he hates the vow-breakers and harmful demons;<sup>47</sup> these determine why he can and deserves to be the *sku lha* and *srog gi lha* of the sacred Dharma kings.<sup>48</sup>

2. *Khri srong lde btsan explains why he deserves  
a srog gi lha and a sku lha (no. 3 and no. 14)*

The *lo rgyus* sections in texts no. 3 and 14 share the same context and theme as those in texts no. 1 and 7, but add one section of Khri srong lde btsan's request for requiring a *srog gi lha* from Padmasambhava.

The *lo rgyus* content of no. 3 is as below:

- 1) The Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan requests Padmasambhava to give him a "life-force god" (*srog gi lha*):

When O rgyan chen po (Padmasambhava) was putting an end to all the gods and spirits and evil people, the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan made this request to the master: "Oh great master! I don't pursue high status, and I don't harm others. As for my nature of primordial wisdom, I am capable of relying on future states; as for my action, it is in harmony with the worldly realm; as for my deeds, I am able to accomplish the four kinds of activities without hindrance; abiding in compassion, and in accordance with my vows, I am able to take care of all my subjects without separating from them as if they were my children. Since you have unlimited power, I pray you to give me a god to subjugate the demons that cause madness and the *rgyal po* demons, a god I could worship as a life force god, for I, the Dharma king, through the kindness of you, the master, request you to please give me such a god!"<sup>49</sup>

- 2) The master Padmasambhava suggests Thang lha, the king of Gandharvas, to be the Dharma king's *sku lha*, and appoints him as *srog gi lha* of the Dharma king:

Then the master Padmasambhava replied: "Generally speaking,

<sup>46</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 322: l. 3-p. 323: l. 3; no.7, p. 535: l. 4-p. 536: l. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 323: l. 3-p. 324: l. 1; no.7, p. 536: l. 1-l. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Byang gter, no.1, p. 324: l. 1-l. 3; no. 7, p. 536: l. 3-l. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 3, p. 336: l. 2-p. 337: l. 2.

among the mass of gods and demons of Tibet, since they belong to the family of harmful eight classes of spirits, they will be destroyed by the power of the great god Thang lha, the king's *sku lha*, who was in the past blessed by many buddhas. Since he is the great king of Gandharvas who dwells on the earth and sees the truth expressed in the sūtras, and since he possesses the supreme qualities without exception, we should appoint Thang lha to be the life force god of the king!" This is what the master said.<sup>50</sup>

- 3) Thang lha arrives and commits to the Dharma king within the *maṇḍala* of Śrī Hayagrīva. Then Padmasambhava gives Thang lha the secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, and appoints him to be the *srog gi lha* of the king:

Then since the master, Padmasambhava, remained in the meditation of the glorious Hayagrīva, the great god Thang lha and his retinue actually came, and said to the master: "What kinds of deeds should I do?" And then the master Padmasambhava said: "You, the great god Thang lha, and the king, should make commitments to each other in the *maṇḍala* of Śrī Hayagrīva!" Then the great god Thang lha got a secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal and was appointed to be the life force god of the king.<sup>51</sup>

If we compare this *lo rgyus* with that in texts no. 1 and 7, similarities are:

- 1) The participants: first Padmasambhava and Khri srong lde btsan are present, and then Thang lha arrives and joins.
- 2) Location and time: both describe the events taking place after Padmasambhava's arrival at bSam yas and his assistance in establishing bSam yas monastery. The meeting between Padmasambhava, Khri srong lde btsan, and Thang lha takes place at the Has po ri hill in bSam yas.
- 3) The general outcome: the result is that Padmasambhava endows Thang lha with a new identity as the *sku lha* and *srog gi lha* of Khri srong lde btsan.

Differences are:

- 1) The initiative of Khri srong lde btsan: Text no. 3 portrays Khri srong lde btsan as playing an important and active role. He is

---

<sup>50</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 3, p. 337: l. 2-p. 337: l. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 3, p. 337: l. 4-p. 338: l. 1.

depicted as the one who first requests a *srog gi lha* from Padmasambhava, giving reasons why he deserves such a god. However, in texts no. 1 and 7, there is no such proactive speech from the king. Instead, the texts begin by stating that Thang lha arrives at bSam yas Has po ri and explains his reasons for befriending and supporting the king in front of Padmasambhava and the king.

- 2) The secret name of Thang lha: Text no. 3 describes the second encounter between Thang lha and Padmasambhava and states that Thang lha is given the name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal during this meeting with Padmasambhava and Khri srong lde btsan. However, text no. 5, which recounts the first encounter between Thang lha and Padmasambhava, reveals that Thang lha was given this secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal during their initial meeting rather than during their second encounter.

Text no. 14 resembles no. 3 above as it not only presents Thang lha's discourse about his duty and devotion to Buddhism, but also includes Khri srong lde btsan's request for a particular *srog gi lha* and *sku lha* for himself. The text begins with the introduction of Thang lha's first encounter with the master:

When Padmasambhava (O rgyan chen po) arrived in Tibet, Thang lha sent a snowstorm against him. Since fog obscured the path, the master meditated on Vajrapāṇi and transformed into the form of this divinity. Thang lha was consequently subdued, and offered his life force and received his secret name.<sup>52</sup>

Afterward, text no. 14 follows up by saying that after this first meeting, Thang lha has a second encounter with Padmasambhava and Khri srong lde btsan at bSam yas's Has po ri mountain.

- 1) Thang lha makes prostration to the king Khri srong lde btsan, and tells the king that he himself is the executioner of vow-violators, the killer of the demons that cause madness, the *rgyal po* gods and the *'gong po* demons and so on:

After that, when Padmasambhava arrived at the Has po ri mountain of bSam yas monastery, Thang lha arrived, appearing near the master in the form of a white yak with horns reaching into the clear sky and his four hooves surpassing the seven levels of the four regions. He saw Khri srong lde btsan, then transformed into a

<sup>52</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 14, p. 653: l. 3-1.4.

handsome man with five topknots on his head and showed homage and made prostrations to the king. He happily said to king Khri srong lde btsan, "I am the life subduer of the vow-violators and the executioner of the vow-breakers. I seize polluting demons and the low-class spirits by their necks. I seize demons that cause madness, the *rgyal po* gods and the *'gong po* demons, by their necks! And, by my virtuous deeds, the demons that cause madness are also subdued and the hate-filled enemies are killed!<sup>53</sup>

- 2) King Khri srong lde btsan informs the master Padmasambhava that he wishes to have a *srog gi lha* and lists the reason why he deserves such a god:

After these words the king said, "O, master! I don't pursue high status, and I don't harm others. Regarding the meaning, the power should rely on future lives as a wisdom being; regarding the manner, it should be under the worldly life, and I should have the ability to accomplish the four virtuous deeds without obstruction; and abiding in compassion, and accordance with my vows, I should be able to take care of all my subjects without being apart from them as if they were my children! And since you have unlimited power, I pray that you to give me a god to subjugate the demons that cause madness and the *rgyal po* demons, a god whom I, the Dharma king, might worship as a god of the life force (*srog lha*). Through the kindness of you, the master, I request you to please give me such a god!<sup>54</sup>

- 3) The master Padmasambhava appoints Thang lha to be the *sku lha* and *srog gi lha* of the king Khri srong lde btsan:

Then the master Padmasambhava replied: "Generally speaking, among the mass of gods and demons of Tibet, since they belong to the eight classes of harmful spirits, they will be impotent under the power of the great god Thang lha, the king's *sku lha*, who was in the past blessed by many buddhas! Since he is the great king of the Gandharvas who dwells on the earth and sees the truth, as the scriptures say, and since he is possessed of supreme qualities without exception, we should appoint this particular one to be the life force god of the King!<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 14, p. 653: l. 4-p. 654: l.2.

<sup>54</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 14, p. 654: l. 3-1.5.

<sup>55</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 14, p. 654: l. 5-p. 655: l. 1.

- 4) Thang lha and Khri srong lde btsan receive the initiation and do the samaya reinforcement in the *maṇḍala* of Hayagrīva, and the king is told to prepare a food offering for Thang lha:

After saying that, both the king and Thang lha received the tantric initiation and the samaya reinforcement through the *maṇḍala* of Śrī Hayagrīva. Until the last of the line of the gods of clear light has returned to heaven, you shall be their *sku lha*! Then the king was told to prepare an offering.<sup>56</sup>

The content of texts no. 3 and 14 show slight differences from no. 1 and 7: in texts no. 3 and 14, Khri srong lde btsan plays a central role in explaining why he deserves a *srog gi lha*.<sup>57</sup> Padmasambhava then decides to appoint Thang lha, the *sku lha* of the Dharma king, as the king's *srog gi lha*.<sup>58</sup> Thang lha and the king then make a vow to each other in the *maṇḍala* of Hayagrīva, with Thang lha becoming the king's *sku lha* and *srog gi lha* and the king making an offering to Thang lha.<sup>59</sup> Both texts emphasize that Thang lha, who is already the *sku lha* of Khri srong lde btsan, is further appointed as the *srog gi lha* of the king. However, texts no. 1 and 7 only refers to Thang lha being appointed as the *sku lha* of Dharma kings, rather than as the *srog gi lha*.

### 3. *rGyal po Pe har, Thang lha, and the Fifth Dalai Lama*

As evidenced in several texts (nos. 1, 3, 5, 7, 14), the phrases “Thang lha subdues the demon who causes madness” and “the *rgyal po* demon” are recurrent. In Byang gter documents, it can be speculated that the demon responsible for madness, i.e. the *rgyal po* demon, is Pe har. These texts depict a pronounced antagonism between gNyan chen Thang lha and Pe har. For instance, in text 4, Thang lha is described as transforming into three forms to subdue Pe kar / dkar (*sic.*), referred to as *rgyal po* or *dkor bdag rgyal po*. The adverse influence of *rgyal po* Pe har, in this case, manifests in various diseases, including madness:

Since the *rgyal po* demon Pe kar (*sic.*) has brought and supported all the diseases and illnesses of all eight classes of demi-gods, for this, in the beginning, people depended on the male god (*pho lha*) to wipe away the following demons that appeared, but finally, the *rgyal po* demon stole the vital principle of people as a thief of the vital breath, and ruined and cut off the villages of human beings. Then,

<sup>56</sup> Translated from Byang gter, no. 14, p. 655: l. 1-1.2.

<sup>57</sup> Byang gter, no. 3, p. 336: l. 2-p. 337: l. 2; no.14, p. 654: l. 3-5.

<sup>58</sup> Byang gter, no. 3, p. 337: l. 2-p. 337: l.4; no.14, p. 654: l.5-p. 655: l.1.

<sup>59</sup> Byang gter, no.3, p. 337: l. 4-p. 338: l. 1; no. 14, p. 655: l. 1-1.2.

he caused malicious jealousy, the eye attacking, the numerous illusionary display, and in particular when he entered into the heart of any man, it caused the disease of *rgyal po*, such as madness, unstable mind, upper body distress, liver disease, parasites in the blood veins of the brain, wars, etc., and when he was doing this, Tibet was destroyed at that time.<sup>60</sup>

In order to pacify these disturbances, Padmasambhava employed the *sādhana* cycle (*sgrub skor*) of the great divinity Thang lha as the method to subdue *rgyal po* Pe har. Padmasambhava concealed the method within the text of the copper treasury.<sup>61</sup> The general content of this method is:

Then, as for subjugating the eight classes of demi-gods, the gods causing madness, and the *rgyal po* gods, you take the essence of the great god (Thang lha), and visualize your form as a white wild yak whose size is about that of a mountain, whose two horns are like two sharp fir trees lifting up, and the vapor of your breath is like the mist, and your bellow is like the thundering of a dragon. The thunder is like catching fire by a flame, which terrifies the *dkor bdag rgyal po* (Lord of Debts) Pe dkar (*sic*) [...] And you visualize yourself as a falcon hunting for food flying in the spacious sky, and the *rgyal po* Pe kar (*sic*) as a white little bird like a pigeon, and this falcon grasping and eating it [...] Furthermore, you visualize your own body as a black iron scorpion, with its body covering the ground, and its belly and its tail lifting up to the sky, and from its mouths, there are light rays spreading out like an iron net, then the *dkor bdag rgyal po* Pe dkar is taken in this net, then you lead this net near to you and by that time you take the god's heart out by your scorpion's fangs, then half of the god's body is eaten by you.<sup>62</sup>

The conflict between Thang lha and Pe har is a central theme in the original core of Byang gter material. However, the animosity between Thang lha and Pe har completely disappears during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), who himself strongly supported the cult of Pe har. In the two texts about Thang la authored by the Fifth Dalai Lama in the Byang gter collection (texts no. 7 and 12), the antagonistic relationship between Thang la and Pe har is not mentioned at all.

What happened is a process of transformation of the identity of Pe har. Initially, Pe har was classified as an evil *rgyal po*, but gradually, his identity underwent a transformation and became a positive figure. The

<sup>60</sup> Byang gter, no. 4, p. 348: l. 4-p. 349: l. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Byang gter, no. 4, p. 349: l. 2-3.

<sup>62</sup> Byang gter, no. 4, p. 349: l. 4-p. 351: l. 1.

cult of Pe har and the *rgyal po* group can be traced back to the great treasure revealer Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124-1192), and Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer was a source of the Fifth Dalai Lama's promotion of *rgyal po* cults.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, due to the support of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Pe har became the prominent protector of gNas chung Monastery and one of the central protectors of Dalai Lama Lineage.<sup>64</sup>

**sku lha: an equal relationship between  
mountain god and the king**

In the above Byang gter text, Thang lha is identified as the *sku lha* of the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan. There have been many significant discussions in recent years regarding the meaning of *sku lha*, including the works of Per Kvaerne (2021, 2023), Nathan Hill (2015), Michael Walter (2009), as well as earlier works by Ariane Macdonald (1971) and Samten Karmay (1996), among others. In this section, I will discuss Thang lha's identity as a *sku lha*.

1. *The meaning of Thang lha's sku lha identity  
in the Byang gter context*

The core identity of Thang lha in texts no. 1, 7, 3, and 14, is that of the sacred Tibetan Dharma kings' *sku lha*. By combining the contents of these texts, we can determine the features of Thang lha's *sku lha* identity in the context of the Byang gter tradition:

- 1) The term *sku lha* refers to Thang lha as the protector deity and divine embodiment of the Tibetan Dharma kings, including Khri srong lde btsan. As a *sku lha*, Thang lha serves as the protector and friend of the Dharma kings.
- 2) The four "connections" (*'brel ba*) between Thang lha and the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan serve to illustrate their similarities, which in turn make Thang lha willing to support and befriend the king.
- 3) According to the Byang gter text, it was the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan who first requested Padmasambhava for a *srog gi lha* and explained why he deserved such a god. Subsequently, Padmasambhava appointed Thang lha to be the *srog gi lha* and *sku lha* of the Tibetan Dharma kings.
- 4) Thang lha and the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan make mutual vows in front of Padmasambhava, and the king performs a

<sup>63</sup> Bell, 2022, p. 165, pp. 170-172.

<sup>64</sup> For the details, see Bell, 2021.

- ritual offering to Thang lha as his *srog gi lha* and *sku lha*.
- 5) The activities of Thang lha being the Dharma kings' *sku lha* and *srog gi lha*, and the Dharma king making offering to his *sku lha*, and their combined vows to each other, are all voluntary actions that highlight the mutual respect and close relationship between Thang lha and the Dharma kings. Thang lha willingly supports and befriends the Dharma kings, while the latter also voluntarily recognize Thang lha as their protector and make him ritual offerings.

Through the above features of Thang lha, we find two key characteristics of *sku lha* in the context of the Byang gter tradition:

- 1) The *sku lha* concept reflects the kingship function and significance of the god Thang lha as the protector of the Dharma kings of Tibet.
- 2) The *sku lha* status also symbolizes the equal relationship between Thang lha and the Dharma kings. They have reciprocal vows, are "friends" rather than king and minister. Thang lha protects the king and the king worships Thang lha.

Regarding the term *sku lha*, two points need to be added. Firstly, here, *sku lha* is likely to be another name for *yul lha* (territorial god) in Buddhist texts after the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as Per Kvaerne states in his study of the *bsGrags pa gling grags* (abbr. GLG):

"In Tibetan post-11<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism, some of the *yiillha* (*yul lha*) are also styled *kulha* (*sku lha*)."<sup>65</sup>

According to GLG, Thang lha is one of the four great *yul lha* in Tibet:

"The 'lineage of gods protecting the (four) cardinal directions' refers to the four *yiillha* associated with, and at the same time perhaps identified with, four mountains: west-Yallha Shampo; north-Nyench'en T'anglha; south-Donglha; east-Mach'en Pomra."<sup>66</sup>

As a *sku lha*, Thang lha is believed to protect the Tibetan Dharma kings, just like *yul lha* protect the local communities and territories they are associated with.

In addition, regarding the transformation of the meaning and form of *sku lha*, Per Kvaerne suggested that it may have undergone a transformation of *sku bla / lha* to *mgur lha*.<sup>67</sup> In the Byang gter literature,

<sup>65</sup> Kvaerne 2023, p. 53.

<sup>66</sup> Kvaerne 2023, p. 53. See p. 309 for more details on these four mountains.

<sup>67</sup> Kvaerne 2021, 2023; Ramble 2023.



as a Tibetan god that has been tamed to become a protector of Buddhism, Thang lha is endowed with the identity of *sku lha*. However, an earlier form of *sku lha* (*lha* means “god”) was *sku bla* (*bla* means “soul”) in the Tibet Imperial period. In the Dunhuang texts, only *sku bla* appears, with the meaning of “the spiritual proxy of the Tibetan emperor,”<sup>68</sup> the Tibetan emperor’s manifestation and “deified persona.”<sup>69</sup> This is different from the meaning of *sku lha* in the Byang gter texts summarized above.

## 2. sKu bla in Dunhuang and sku lha in Byang gter

The concept of an equal relationship between local/mountain gods and Dharma kings, as embodied by Thang lha’s *sku lha* identity, has a long history reflected in Dunhuang Tibetan documents. Although there is no word *sku lha* in these texts, the term *sku bla*<sup>70</sup> refers to a type of personal god that protected the kings. The meaning of *sku bla* in Dunhuang text PT\_1047 shares some similarities with *sku lha* in Byang gter, but there are also some differences.

In her 1971 article “Une lecture des Pelliot Tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047 et 1290 : Essai sur la formation et l’emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Sron-bcan sgam-po,” Ariane Macdonald translates the text PT\_1047 and interprets its meanings, especially that of the word *sku bla*. Her conclusions may be summarized as follows:

1) The *sku bla* are a class of divinities who protect the early kings’ bodies:

The *sku bla* is a personal god with the mission of protecting the life and power of kings and their ministers when they are pleased and satisfied. The *sku bla* is the leader, and all *sku bla*(s) have the power to control and command other deities and demons and bring punishment to kings, ministers, and subjects if they behave improperly. The *sku bla* will not abandon kings and their people who worship and rely on them, but they will abandon them if they are betrayed.<sup>71</sup>

2) The *sku bla* are assimilated with the *gnyan*, a class of mountain gods:

*gNyan* usually dwell on the tops of the mountains, and the *sku bla* is

<sup>68</sup> Hill 2015, p. 53.

<sup>69</sup> Hill 2015, p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> PT\_1047: I. 1-111.

<sup>71</sup> Macdonald 1971, p. 295 (my translation from the French original).

therefore a type of mountain gods.<sup>72</sup>

3) The term *sku bla* and the role this deity played in people's lives predates both Buddhism and Bon:

PT\_1047 describes a religious world in which Buddhism plays a minimal role and Bon also has only a limited influence. The deities that have a significant impact on the lives of humans and animals are primarily the *sku bla* and the *mu sman*, although there are other deities such as the *yul lha* or "land gods," *thab lha* "kitchen gods," as well as *gnyan*, *klu*, and *myi lha*.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, according to Ariane Macdonald's interpretation of PT\_1047, the meaning of *sku bla* can be summarized as follows: The *sku bla* are a class of divinities that protect the bodies of early kings, typically in the form of *gnyan* and usually associated with mountain gods.

Nathan Hill and Per Kvaerne also argue that the *sku bla* have represented a parallel status with the early Tibetan kings. In his 2015 article "The *sku bla* Rite in Imperial Tibetan Religion," Nathan Hill offers his definition of *sku bla*, which is that the "the *sku bla* is the spiritual proxy of the Tibetan emperor."<sup>74</sup> In Hill's interpretation, the *sku bla* is a spiritual agent, or the deity as a symbol, a "deified persona,"<sup>75</sup> of the Tibetan emperors. Hill considers *sku bla* to be parallel deity of the divine emperor: "In terms of social hierarchy the *kula* sits as the spiritual parallel of the Tibetan emperor at the head of the great chain of being which rationalized the imperial Tibetan universe."<sup>76</sup>

In line with Hill's argument, in his paper "The *sku bla* of the Tibetan emperors—metamorphosed in Yungdrung Bön?" Per Kvaerne succinctly summarizes Hill's argument to the effect that "in other words, the *kula* is the 'spiritual parallel' of the emperor, and hence not identical with the emperor."<sup>77</sup> He argues that *sku bla* are deities, not men: "Personally I am in no doubt that the *kula* has important characteristics of a deity, especially that of being distinct from the emperor and being able to abandon the emperor under certain conditions."<sup>78</sup>

In what follows, I compare the concept of *sku bla* and their parallel relationship with the early Tibetan kings as described in the Dunhuang texts with the interpretation of the meaning of *sku lha* in the Byang gter

---

<sup>72</sup> Macdonald 1971, pp. 300-301.

<sup>73</sup> Macdonald 1971, pp. 291-292.

<sup>74</sup> Hill 2015, p. 53.

<sup>75</sup> Hill 2015, p. 55.

<sup>76</sup> Hill 2015, p. 54.

<sup>77</sup> Kvaerne 2021, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup> Kvaerne 2021, p. 32.

literature and their equal relationship with Tibetan Dharma kings:

- 1) *sKu bla* and *sku lha* have similar fundamental meanings. They are divinities who protect the king's body; the king needs to worship them, and they have a relatively equal, parallel relationship with the king.
- 2) *sKu bla* and *sku lha* differ with respect to their historical setting and the type of kingship they represent. The term *sku bla* appears in the Dunhuang texts, but the term *sku lha* does not. Moreover, in texts from the Dunhuang collection, Buddhism has not been fully developed in Tibet; the concept of the king as a Dharma king or Dharmarāja, who is the divine heir of the celestial Phywa clan (the *gnam lha khri bdun* and their descendants) is not manifest yet.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the kings being protected by a *sku bla* are celestial kings (kings who descended from the sky), while the kings protected by a *sku lha* are Dharma kings (manifestations of bodhisattvas). The concept of Dharma king (*chos rgyal*) appeared after Khri srong lde btsan's support for Buddhism and his alleged suppression of Bon.

However, there are other understandings of *sku bla* and their relationship to the early king:

- 1) *sKu bla* may not be mountain gods, but are possibly humans, or the early kings' manifestations. In *Buddhism and Empire*, Michael Walter considers that *sku bla* are a group of men rather than a group of divinities: "All possibilities circle around the same concept: That it [*sku bla*] was a government entity relating to the 'corporate body' of the Btsan-po".<sup>80</sup>
- 2) The relationship between *sku bla* and early kings is not necessarily parallel, but possibly identical. Like Macdonald, Karmay also refers to the *gnyan* form and the mountain god form of *sku bla*, to the kingship protection function of the *sku bla*, and to the *sku* as the king's body; but Karmay interprets *bla* as "soul" rather than just "god," so that *sku bla* would mean the soul of the early kings, not only the gods of their bodies; in this case, *sku bla* are the early kings themselves rather than their protectors.

Karmay further proposes that the initial nine local/mountain gods (collectively named *lha dgu*) in early sources were all considered as the *sku bla* of the Tibetan kings, and *sku bla* means the soul of the early

<sup>79</sup> Yuewei 2023.

<sup>80</sup> Walter 2009: 97. Walter's discussion about *sku bla* are seen in Pages 2, 23f, 30, 43, 97-106, 142-151, 231, 233, 250 (see Walter 2009, p. 310, index).

king's body:<sup>81</sup>

In early texts, the soul of the king is called *sku bla*, 'soul of the body.' The word *sku* here is an honorific term for the body of the king. By extension, through the genealogical system, the nine mountain deities—the first Tibetan king's 'cousins'—are also considered *sku bla*. It is no wonder then that these nine mountain *gnyan* spirits were the object of propitiation as 'ancestral deities' by later Tibetan kings even when they became Buddhists in the eighth century.

Indeed, there seems to be no evidence of *sku bla* as a mountain god in the Dunhuang texts, even in PT\_1047, the one focusing on the *sku bla* deity. I agree with Nathan Hill's argument that in the Dunhuang texts, a *sku bla* is not a mountain god, but a "spiritual proxy,"<sup>82</sup> a "spiritual parallel"<sup>83</sup> of the king, and the king's "deified persona."<sup>84</sup> Per Kvaerne's argument is that the *sku bla* has the important characters of a deity without actually being a *sku bla*. As shown in the quote given above: "*Kula* has important characteristics of a deity, especially that of being distinct from the emperor and being able to abandon the emperor under certain conditions."<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, we have no evidence of *sku bla* as a mountain god from Dunhuang Tibetan Documents. However, as evidenced in Byang gter, during post-Imperial period, the term *sku bla* disappeared and was replaced by the term *sku lha*, with a meaning different from the *sku bla* in Dunhuang. In later Buddhist texts, the term *sku lha* also means that Thang lha and the king have a parallel relationship, they are both vow-keepers, rulers of the land, etc. We have to note, however, that in the context of kingship, the king in these Buddhist texts is different from the king in Dunhuang. In Dunhuang, the king is either a local king such as Zing po rje or a celestial king such as gNam lha khri bdun. In the Byang gter tradition, the king is the Dharma king, not originated from the sky god, but the incarnation of a Bodhisattva.

The term *sku lha* emphasizes more the god's duty of protecting the king than the king propitiating the god, which is different from PT\_1047 that emphasizes that the *sku bla* can abandon the king if the king doesn't worship them properly. One assumption is that this can be due to the disintegration of the central power related to the degeneration of kingship of the Imperial time and the generation of

<sup>81</sup> Karmay, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>82</sup> Hill 2015, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup> Hill 2015, p. 54.

<sup>84</sup> Hill 2015, p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> Kvaerne 2021, p. 32.

Buddhist power: the previous kingship and its close association with pre-Buddhist gods weakened, and terms such as *sku bla* indicating a close relationship between king and local gods also degenerated. The term *sku lha* was then coined to retain part of the previous meaning, but with less emphasis on the king's closeness with the god and the god's high status so that he should be worshiped by the king.

### *The third vow of Thang lha*

The third vow of Thang lha as summarized in text no. 5 is: "And finally, will you not remember that, after he had assembled all the gods and demons on the summit of the Mount (*ri rgyal*) bKra bzang, the glorious rDo rje gzhon nu bestowed on you an oath?" (no. 5, 374: l. 1). Here, the emanation of Padmasambhava is Vajrakumāra (rDo rje gzhon nu), embodying the enlightened activity of all the Buddhas and one of the eight Herukas of the rNying ma tradition.

It should be noted that the Mount bKra bzang is the place where Padmasambhava is said to have concealed the three whetstone keys for the treasures buried in Zang zang lha brag, Mang yul, and Yang le shod. In 1366, Rig 'dzin rGod ldem revealed the first of these treasures at the cave of Zang zang lha brag on Mount bKra bzang.<sup>86</sup>

#### *1. lHa chen thang lha'i phyi sgrub (no. 2)*

The third vow of Thang lha is recounted in the *lHa chen thang lha'i phyi sgrub* (text no. 2) of the Byang gter collection:<sup>87</sup>

The master Padmasambhava came to Tibet and did the virtuous deeds of subjugating the property guardian (*dkor bdag*) of bSam yas monastery. After Padmasambhava composed the *sādhana* of gNyan chen Thang lha, at the time of going to subjugate the demons of the southwest at the peak of Byang bKra bzang, all the gods and demons of Tibet were bound by an oath at the master's command. To the great *gnyan* god Thang lha, the master said, "You, the great god of Ho yul, who has great power and merit and a glorious shining mind, on the waist of the divine cliff Zang zang lha brag (*zang zang lha brag gi sked la*), so that in the future the Gung thang kings are benefitted, I shall conceal a treasure containing four treasuries! The red copper treasury is in the western side (*nub phyogs zangs mdzod dmar po*): you, Thang lha, must act as the treasure guardian (*gter srungs*) of this secret

<sup>86</sup> See Valentine 2023 for more details on this topic.

<sup>87</sup> Translated from no. 2, p. 331: l. 5-p. 332: l. 2.

treasure as you have a specific link with it. When those who have the proper karma come, you should reveal the treasure to them. When those who don't have the proper karma take the treasure, you must destroy their senses!

The main points conveyed in this text are as follows:

- 1) Context: The events described take place after the gods and demons of Tibet have been bound by an oath at the master's command, and the master has hidden the treasure on the waist of the divine cliff Zang zang lha brag.
- 2) Location: The event takes place on the summit of Mount bKra bzang in Byang.
- 3) Appointment of Thang lha: Thang lha is designated as the treasure guardian (*gter bsrung*) of red copper treasury concealed by Padmasambhava at in the Western side of the treasure casket found by rGod ldem in Zang zang lha brag.

2. *lHa chen thang lha'i las tshogs gsang sgrub shog dril* (no. 4)

The third vow of Thang lha is described in an exhortatory passage (*bkskul ba*) at the end of text no. 4, which serves as the conclusion of Thang lha's Buddhist vows, identities, and responsibilities. The ritual practitioner recites this exhortation to either Thang lha or the god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal as a reminder of their vows and duties: "I am Padmasambhava engaging in subjugation and wrathful actions, and you are the great god 'Bar ba rtsal. By recalling the promise you once made, your power and emanation will be increased! (no. 4, 364: l. 4). The vows and responsibilities of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal include:<sup>88</sup>

*Hūm!* On the top of the royal Mount bKra bzang in the region of g.Yas ru, you were the powerful Rig 'dzin rdo rje!<sup>89</sup> When you were bringing all gods and demons under your command, you were the *sku lha* of Khri srong lde btsan!<sup>90</sup> You were appointed as the mind-treasure guardian of the divine rock (*lha brag thugs gter bdag*), and as the protector of Great Perfection yogis.<sup>91</sup> You were appointed as the antidote and executioner of all *rgyal po* demons, *'gong po* demons, and samaya violators of the dark age!<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 365: l. 1-2.

<sup>89</sup> The third vow.

<sup>90</sup> The second vow.

<sup>91</sup> The third vow.

<sup>92</sup> The second vow.

The summary in text no. 4 (p. 365: l. 1-2) is also quoted in text 11 (p. 592: l. 2-3) and 12 (p. 635: l. 3-4). It is important to note, however, that this summary overlooks the first vow made by Thang lha, which established him as the protector (*srung ma*) and earned him the name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal. Instead, it emphasizes only the second and third vows.

Thang lha's third Buddhist vow conveys the following key messages:

- 1) Location: The vow was made on the summit of Mount bKra zang, in g.Yas ru (the region where Byang is located).
- 2) Responsibility: Thang lha was appointed as the guardian of the mind-treasure of the divine rock, with the duty to protect the Great Perfection yogis.

In the same text no. 4, there are fragments of information on Thang lha's identity as the *gter bdag* of *Zangs mdzod dmar po*:

As for the activities of the great treasure-guarding god of the western red copper treasury, this is the *sādhana* of his most profound essence teaching.<sup>93</sup>

For the future lineage of Padmasambhava, he [Thang lha] is concealed as the protector (*srungs ma*) of the supreme horse copper treasury (*Zangs mdzod rta mchog*).<sup>94</sup>

This is the activity of the secret accomplishment of the great god 'Bar ba rtsal, who is the powerful protector of the western copper treasury, the treasure guardian of Zang zang lha brag, and the chief of all.<sup>95</sup>

### 3. Other texts on Thang lha being appointed as *gter bdag* of *Zangs mdzod dmar po*

Thang lha's appointment as the *gter bdag* of the red copper treasury is also frequently found in other Byang gter texts. In the *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi rten 'dzugs kyi rim pa gsal bar byed pa dwangs shel me long zhes byed ba* (no. 10), the corresponding passage runs as follows:

You, the *sku lha* of the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan, are the guardian of the Byang gter's copper treasury (*byang gter zangs mdzod kyi bka' srung*) with six names including King of Gandharvas, rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, and the great supported god (*brten pa'i lha*) of

<sup>93</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 348: l. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 355: l. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 367: l.1.

the Eternal Bon religion of Tibet before the glorious Padmasambhava (dPal O rgyan chen po) arrived at Tibet. When the guru lama Padmasambhava came to Tibet, you received his command, took the oath in front of him, and were appointed as the guardian of the western copper treasury (*nub zangs mdzod kyi srung ma*). The treasure-revealer Rig 'dzin rgod ldem found the yellow scrolls of this *sādhana* cycle at the invitation of the *ḍākinī*.<sup>96</sup>

In the *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi srog gtad kyi rjes gnang mu thi la'i 'phreng ba* (no. 7), the passage is as follows:

So through being the special body god (*sku lha*) of the Dharma king who brings immediate blessing and long-lasting fortune, this great god himself was orally appointed as the guardian of the western copper treasury.<sup>97</sup>

***Conclusion: the three vows of Thang lha***

Drawing from all the above Byang gter texts, we can summarize the places, events, and titles that Thang lha received from the three encounters and three vows as follows:

	<i>The Form of Padmasambhava</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Event</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> Vow	Phyag na rdo rje (Vajrapāṇi)	Byang lam bar ba, where Thang lha's mountain range is located	Thang lha's life-essence is crushed; he becomes the protector of Buddhism and is given the secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal.
2 <sup>nd</sup> Vow	Pad ma he ru ka (Padma Heruka)	On the mountain of Has po ri of bSam yas monastery.	Thang lha is appointed as the body god and life-force god of the Dharma king Khri srong lde btsan.
3 <sup>rd</sup> Vow	rDo rje gzhon nu (Vajrakumāra)	at the peak of Mount bKra bzang	Thang lha is given the <i>sādhana</i> by Padmasambhava; becomes the treasure guardian of the red copper treasury in the Zang zang lha brag.

The key messages conveyed by Thang lha's three vows can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Through the three encounters with Padmasambhava, Thang lha progressively gained his triple identities as *srung ma*, *sku lha* or

<sup>96</sup> Translated from no. 10, p. 562: 1.4-p. 563: 1. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Translated from no. 7, p. 536: 1. 5.



*srog gi lha*, and *gter bdag*. These identities demonstrate the deepening and evolving Buddhist status of Thang lha. The three meetings and vows of Thang lha with Padmasambhava can be seen to symbolize the gradual process of his Buddhicisation.

- 2) One noteworthy feature of Thang lha's three vows is that all of them were taken in mountainous locations. The first vow was taken near the Thang lha mountain, the second vow on the Has po ri mountain within the bSam yas monastery, and the third vow on the summit of Mount bKra bzang.<sup>98</sup>
- 3) Furthermore, regarding the secret name rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, since it was given to Thang lha after his first encounter with Padmasambhava, this title encompasses all the identities that Thang lha gained during the three encounters, including the core identities of *srung ma*, *sku lha*, *srog gi lha*, and *gter bdag*. This is one reason why all sixteen texts related to Thang lha in vol. 15 of the Byang gter collection consistently use the official title rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal or lHa chen rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal to refer to Thang lha.

In conclusion, Thang lha's three vows only refer to his three vows in front of different manifestations of Padmasambhava, and the gradual consolidation of his Buddhist status.

### *Bibliography*

#### *Primary Tibetan Language Sources*

A 'dzom 'brug pa' (ed). 1973.

*Byang gter kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal ka dag rang*, in *Byung rang shar*

---

<sup>98</sup> Mountains are characterized by their physical features of rock and stone, and it is a common human practice to take vows while standing on a stone because it represents firmness, steadfastness, and dependability, symbolizing the unwavering nature of the vow. As Frazer said: "At initiation a Brahman boy is made to tread with his right foot on a stone, while the words are repeated, "Tread on this stone; like a stone be firm; and the same ceremony is performed, with the same words, by a Brahman bride at her marriage. In Madagascar a mode of counteracting the levity of fortune is to bury a stone at the foot of the heavy house-post. The common custom of swearing upon a stone may be based partly on a belief that the strength and stability of the stone lend confirmation to an oath. Moreover, the old Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus tells us that "The ancients, when they were to choose a king, were wont to stand on stones planted in the ground, and to proclaim their votes, in order to foreshadow from the steadfastness of the stones that the deed would be lasting." (Frazer 2009, p. 85). However, on the other hand, the function and significance of a mountain here might not be based on its stony quality, but its *height* (this idea is from Per Kvaerne, email communication, April 2023).

*gyi chos skor* (abbr. *dGongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor*), vol. 4., S.W. Tashigangpa

lDe'u jo sras. 1987.

*Mkhas pa lde'u mdzad pa'i rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa* (abbr. DChB). Lhasa: Bod rang skyong ljongs spyi tshogs tshan rig khang, bod yig dpe skrun khang.

Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer. 1988.

*Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* (abbr. MTN). Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dbang dpe bskrun khang.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 1989.

*Slob dpon pad ma'i rnam thar zangs gling ma bzhugs* (abbr. ZL). Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

O rgyan gling pa. 1987.

*Pad ma bka' thang*. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs (abbr. Byang gter). Byang gter dpe sgrig tshogs chung, 2015. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center* (BDRC), [purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW2PD17457](http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW2PD17457). [BDRC bdr:MW2PD17457]

#### *Secondary English and Other Language Sources*

Arguillère, S. 2022.

"Introduction—For A Critical History of the Northern Treasures." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* (62), 5-21.

Bell, C. 2021

*The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*. New York: Oxford University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2022.

"Tsi'u dmar po: How a Northern Treasure God Became Ecumenical", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* (62), 164-189.

Bellezza, J. V. 2005.

*Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet: Calling Down the Gods*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Dotson, B. 2017.

"Tri Songdétsen." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.201.

Doney, L. 2011.

"Transforming Tibetan Kingship: The portrayal of Khri Srong Ide brtsan in the early Buddhist histories," Doctoral dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2014.

*The Zangs gling ma: the first Padmasambhava biography*. IITBS GmbH. International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.

\_\_\_\_\_. (Ed.). 2021.

*Bringing Buddhism to Tibet: History and Narrative in the Dba' bzhed Manuscript*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Frazer, J. G. 2009 [1890].

*The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*. The Floating Press.

Hill, N. W. 2015.

"The *sku bla* Rite in Imperial Tibetan Religion." *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 24: 49-58.

Karmay, S.G. 1996.

"The Tibetan Cult of Mountain Deities and its Political Significance." In: Blondeau, A.M. and Steinkellner, E. (eds.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Verlag de Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft, 59-76

\_\_\_\_\_. 2009 [1997].

*The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Mandala Book Point.

Kvaerne, P. 2021.

"The *sku bla* of the Tibetan emperors—metamorphosed in Yungdrung Bön?" In Diana Lange, Jarmila Ptačková, Marion Wettstein, and Mareike Wulff (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Tibetan Studies Unlimited*. Prague: Academia Publishing House, 32-44.

Kvaerne, P, and Martin, D. 2023.

*Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books.

Macdonald, A. 1971.

*Une lecture des Pelliot Tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047 et 1290. Essai sur la formation et l'emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Sroñ-bcan sgam-po. Études Tibétaines : Dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*. Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 190-391.

Meisezahl, R.O. 1985.

*Die große Geschichte des tibetischen Buddhismus nach alter Tradition: rÑin ma'i chos 'byuñ chen mo.* Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de. 1996 [1956].

*Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities.* Book Faith India.

Ramble, C. 2023.

"The Mountain Palace of a Worldly Divinity." In K. Debreczeny & E. Pakhoutova (eds.), *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, New York: Rubin Museum of Art and Scala, 293-295.

<https://projecthimalayanart.rubinmuseum.org/essays/mountain-god-kula-khari/>

Samuel, G. 1993.

*Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies.* Smithsonian Institution Press.

Sobisch, J.-U. 2002.

*Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism: A Comparative Study of Major Traditions from the Twelfth through Nineteenth Centuries.* Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag.

Snellgrove, D. L. 1957.

*Buddhist Himālaya: Travels and Studies in Quest of the Origins and Nature of Tibetan Religion.* Bruno Cassirer.

Van Schaik, S., & Doney, L., 2009.

"The Prayer, the priest and the Tsen-po: An early Buddhist narrative from Dunhuang." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 30 (1-2), 175-217.

Valentine, J. H. 2023.

"A Preliminary Analysis of the Prophetic Guides and Concealment Narratives of the Northern Treasure Tradition." In ?, ? (eds.) *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. Vol.?. (pages) ?-?.

Wangdu, P. and Diemberger, H. 2000.

*dBa' bzhed: The Royal Narrative concerning the bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet.* Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Walter, M. L. 2009.

*Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet.*  
Brill's Tibetan studies library.

Yuewei, W, Ph.D. thesis, 2023 (The thesis was defended on July 26),  
"The cult of the mountain god gNyan chen Thang lha in Tibet,"  
École pratique des Hautes Études.

