

**THE JONANGPA AFTER TĀRANĀTHA:
AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS ON THE TRANSMISSION OF
ESOTERIC BUDDHIST KNOWLEDGE IN SEVENTEENTH
CENTURY TIBET**

MICHAEL R. SHEEHY
TBRC/The New School University

Though recent scholarship has shed light on the history of the early Jonangpa in Central Tibet during their formative period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it is well-known that the tradition thrived until its downfall in the mid-seventeenth century, little attention has yet been given to the survival of the Jonang transmissions in Tibet from rJe btsun Tārānātha (1575-1635) onwards.¹ In fact, until recently, the Jonangpa were thought by many to have vanished in the mid-seventeenth century as a consequence of their demise under the dGa' ldan Pho brang government headed by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho (Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso, 1617-1682). This is the narrative that has dominated publications about them, driven by both Tibetologists as well as by Tibetans who live outside the remote valleys of Amdo in far eastern Tibet where the Jonangpa have lived for centuries.

Passed orally through the generations as esoteric teachings (*lkog chos*) until the fourteenth century efflorescence of the Jonang tradition, there are two distinct streams of knowledge transmission that the Jonangpa identify with: 1) the sūtra *gZhan stong* (emptiness of other) transmissions of the Great Madhyamaka, and 2) the tantra *gZhan stong* transmissions associated with the Kālacakra-tantra. These two lines were transmitted simultaneously along parallel continuums from their Indian origins up to the Tibetan scholar Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen, 1292-1361). Synthesizing sūtra and tantra, Dolpopa brought these seemingly disparate systems of Indian Buddhist hermeneutical and exegetical thought together, intersecting the Kālacakra transmission lineage with the *gZhan stong* Great

¹ I thank Gene Smith for his revealing conversations about Tārānātha and for reading a draft of this article, Cyrus Stearns for comparing translations on key passages, and Leonard van der Kuijp for his constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this paper presented at the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, 2009.

Madhyamaka.² These transmissions then continued in succession from Dolpopa and later generations up to the time of the famed Jonangpa scholar, rJe btsun Tāranātha.

In the year 1650, fifteen years after Tāranātha's passing in 1635, the Fifth Dalai Lama, backed by the Mongol army, forcefully prohibited and censored the Jonang study curriculum throughout the dBu and gTsang regions of Central and Western Tibet. Consequently, a dGe lugs college (*bshad grwa*) was instituted at Tāranātha's fortress monastery, rTag brtan dam chos gling. By 1658, rTag brtan gling was officially converted into a dGe lugs establishment, sequestering the Jonangpa. However, as we discover through tracing this history, the transmissions associated with the Jonang lineage continued on from the time of Tāranātha's main disciples beyond the political and military influence of the central dGe ldan pa government in Lha sa.³

Reconsidering popular narratives that have come to dominate the legacy of the Jonangpa, this paper is concerned with how the life of the Jonang tradition was sustained immediately after Tāranātha, and its censorship by the dGa' ldan pa. In particular, I am interested in discussing the period of twenty-three years from the death of Tāranātha in 1635 to the takeover of rTag brtan gling in 1658. In doing so, I will draw from unpublished Tibetan life writings that have only recently become available, rare manuscripts that I collected a few years ago while in Amdo. These are life accounts of two of Tāranātha's principle disciples: the autobiography of rJe btsun ma Kun dga' Phrin las dbang mo (Jetsunma Kunga Trinle Wangmo, c.1585-c.1668) who was a major figure in the transmission lineage of *gZhan stong* as well as Tāranātha's consort, and the biography of Ngag dbang bLo gros rnam rgyal (1618-1683) who was regarded as the rebirth of Tāranātha's mother, which was composed by his disciple Kun dga' 'phrin las (Kunga Trinle, 1657-1723). I then present excerpts derived from the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the biography of the First Panchen Lama bLo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen, 1570-1662) in order to further contextualize some of the events that unfolded during this period.

Though an appraisal of the multiple social and political forces that led to the ultimate demise of the Jonangpa in dBu and gTsang during this timeframe is beyond the scope of this article, a reading of select passages from these auto/biographical sources brings attention to Jonangpa priorities and strategies for transmission. In fact, these life

² On the divisions of *gZhan stong* Madhyamka, see Sheehy (2007), 57-65.

³ On the history of the Jonangpa up to the present day, see Sheehy, 2009.

writings are among the very few literary accounts that we have from this critical period in Tibetan cultural history when the very survival of both Jonang monastic institutions and their lineage of esoteric knowledge were under threat.

Phrin las dbang mo's Appeal

According to the modern Jonang historian mKhan po bLo gros grags pa (Khenpo Lodrö Dragpa, 1920-1975), Tāranātha made several prophetic statements to his closest disciples about the future of his Jonang tradition and the volatile political climate that would transpire in Central Tibet after he died.⁴ One of these statements is retold by the female adept rJe btsun ma Phrin las dbang mo. In her autobiographical writings, she reveals an intimate conversation that she had with Tāranātha during his final days about omens that he intuited. Phrin las dbang mo describes Tāranātha as being weary and remorseful at that time, then she recounts,

Once [Tāranātha] came here [to the Ri khrod chen mo at Jo mo nang] alone from rTag brtan gling [Monastery] and he told me, ‘Earlier a monk from ’Bras’ spungs came by. He was followed by one of his own dharma protectors. He pleaded me to please act towards the benefit of the dGe ldan pa teachings. With intense and fervent devotion from my heart, I accepted that this is the only way.’ Then, as if to reiterate this, a day or so later, I received a letter of consultation from the officials at rTag brtan via my nephew. This is what it said: “Excluding the duration that the present precious embodiment is here, the master of this monastic seat must come down in the progeny of our own nephew.” In accord with both these earlier and later omens, the reality is that I cannot take rebirth in a place in order to protect the religion and governance of my family. However, its been conveyed how important it is for me to take rebirth in a place that will benefit the teachings of the ’Bras spungs pa for certain.⁵

⁴ See bLo grags (1992), 59.

⁵ See Phrin las dbang mo, 21a, “yang rtag brtan nas ’dir pheb pa gcig la / khar sang ’bras spung kyi grwa pa de ’dra byung / kho rang tsho’i chos skyongs yang rgyab na sleb ’dug / dge ldan pa’i bstan pa la phan pa’i spyir yong dgos zer / snying nas mos gus gdung shugs che bas / lam tsam khas blang yod / khyad par de’i sang gnang (s) gcig / rtag brtan gyi las tshan rnams kyi gros byas pa’i yi ge gcig dbon po la brgyud nas / nged la sprad byung / de’i don la / da lta’i sku skyes rin po che rang ’dir yod ring ma gtogs / de’i (s) rteng la gdan sa’i bla ma ring ri’i [>rang re’i] dbon rgyud la ’dzag pa dgos zer nan chags ’dug / rten ’brel snga phyi ’di gnyis ltar na / (r) dus kyi chos srid skyong par [>sar] skye ba mi len pa chos nyid kho [21b] na yin pas / da ni nges par ’bras spungs pa’i bstan pa la phan pa’i sar skye ba len dgos par ’dug gsung / de dus bdag gi spyir sems can thams cad dang dgos su dgon pa ’di tsam gyi ’gangs che ba dang / nges ston [>don] gyi bstan pa la dgongs pa’i sku tshe brtan pa dang / slar sku skyes yang ’di rang gi bstan pa la phan pa

These earlier and later omens (*rten 'brel*) are (a) the monk from 'Bras spungs who was accompanied by a dGe lugs pa protector, and (b) the letter from his nephew stating that his own monasteries' administrators would not allow Tāranātha's progeny to hold the monastic seat at rTag brtan gling after he passed away. While the earlier encounter suggests both a level of direct interaction between the dGe ldan pa administration with Tāranātha as well as a possible clue about the significant role that protectors may have played in this redistribution of religious and political power, the later omen is a specific reference to the strategy of transmitting authority via Tāranātha's bloodline.

In the letter that Tāranātha received, the 'precious embodiment' or 'sKu skyes Rin po che' is a reference to one of Tāranātha's close disciples Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (Sangye Gyamtso, d. 1635), whom Tāranātha appointed as successor to his monastic seat at Rtag brtan gling shortly before his own death.⁶ The nephew referred to in the letter is Tāranātha's nephew, Rwa'i dbon po Kun dga' bstan pa (Re Önpo Kunga Tenpa) who was appointed treasurer of rTag brtan gling by another one of Tāranātha's disciples, the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang at that time, Kar+ma Phun tshogs rnam rgyal (Karma Puntsok Namgyal, 1597-1632).⁷

As a descendent from the twelfth century translator, Rwa Lo tsā ba rDo rje grags (Ra Lotsawa Dorje drak, 1016-1128), Tāranātha was a member of an elite Tibetan family with strong alliances in gTsang. However, despite the content of the letter that he received from his nephew that "the master of this monastic seat must come down in the progeny of our own nephew", the successor to the monastic seat of rTag brtan gling following Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho did not go to his scion. In her autobiography, Phrin las dbang mo responds,

At that point I exclaimed, "You must have compassion for us, consider all sentient beings in general and in particular what is a priority for this monastery [rTag brtan gling]. You must remain steadfast in this lifetime and for the intent of the teachings of definitive meaning [*gZhan stong*]. Then in the future you must take rebirth in order to solely benefit our own [Jonang] teachings!"⁸

⁶ *gcig rang thugs rjes gzigs dgos zhus kyang bka' las.*" See also bLo gros grags pa (*Rje tā ra nā tha'i sku 'das*), 134-135.

⁷ See bLo grags (1992), 59.

⁷ See Phrin las dbang mo, 19b and bLo grags (1992), 59. On Kar+ma Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, see Byams pa thub bstan, 350-353.

⁸ See Phrin las dbang mo, 21b, "*de dus bdag gi spyir sems can thams cad dang dgos su dgon pa 'di tsam gyi 'gangs che ba dang / nges don gyi bstan pa la dgongs pa'i sku tshe brtan pa dang / slar sku skyes yang 'di rang gi bstan pa la phan pa gcig rang thugs rjes gzigs dgos zhus kyang bka' las.*"

Tāranātha replied to her,

Everything else aside, even within this entire upper and lower valley, each person has many different opinions. In fact, you are the only one whose mind is pure. Even so, there must be a single objective and a single aspiration in order for everything to be done in solidarity. If words remain merely praise, then nothing will be certain.

Now, I will be moved by the power of what has the most fervent devotion and what is in alignment with these omens. If you know how to change the direction of these omens, then it could be possible for me to benefit these [Jonang] teachings.⁹

According to Phrin las dbang mo's account, this was Tāranātha's final testimony to her about the future of his monastery, the Jonangpa, and his own projections concerning his rebirth. She understood that these concerns occupied his mind, and although her appeal to prioritize their holdings of rTag brtan gling, sustain the *gZhan stong* transmissions, and claim his rebirth were sentiments that she was adamant about, she was unable to persuade him. For it seems that during those dying days, Tāranātha was convinced that forces were set in motion in an irreversible direction.

Tāranātha passed away on March 28th, 1635.¹⁰ His successor Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho then immediately took the throne at rTag brtan gling Monastery. However, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho died unexpectedly not long after Tāranātha and another one of Tāranātha's disciples, Kun dga' Rin chen rgya mtsho (Kunga Rinchen Gyamtso) was appointed to the monastic seat. Rin chen rgya mtsho served as the throne-holder at rTag brtan gling for the next fifteen years. Recalling the uncertainty and fragmentation at that time, Phrin las dbang mo wrote,

Then, sKu skyes Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho Rin po che was appointed to hold the monastic seat at rTag brtan gling, and even though there were several competing agendas at that time, it was when he [Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho] passed away that our chief feeling of uncertainty set in. Generally speaking, even though it happened that way, those who were extremely open-minded and those who fell in alignment with popular opinion did not share their intentions with those from the upper echelons.¹¹

⁹ See Phrin las dbang mo, 21b, “gzhan phar (b) gztag phu mda’ ‘di kun rang na yang bsam blo mi gcig pa mang / khyod rang gcig bu sems dag pas de ltar yin kyang / thams cad gcig tu ‘dril nas blo rtse gcig pa’i gsol ba ‘debs pa gcig dgos te dga’ kha tsam la ninges pa med / da ni rten ‘brel gang ‘grigs dang gdung shugs gang che’i dbang du ‘gro / rten ‘brel bsgyur phyogs shes na da dung ‘di ‘i bstan pa la phan pa’ang srid gsung.”

¹⁰ The date given in both sources is, “shing mo phag lo’i nag pa zla ba’i nyer brgyad.”

See Kun dga’ phrin las, 7 and bLo grags (1992), 59.

¹¹ See Phrin las dbang mo, 20b.

She continued,

At this [rTag brtan gling] monastery, the damage had begun. It was said that we shared the same focus with the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang, despite the burden that was taken on at that time. Excluding that year [1635] when we were being led, permissions were not granted and we discussed whether to go or to stay. I certainly did not have any other sentiments.

Even for dharma teachings that following year, whatever permissions were necessarily requested, the response was that they were not granted. Accordingly, we wrote all kinds of petitions. Now, even though we took initiative in this way, we were simply not allowed a representative to make requests. I wondered how this could be advantageous and how we could remain there without doing anything whatsoever.¹²

These reflections raise critical questions about the local sources of authority and tensions at play in the Jo mo nang valley where Rtag brtan gling Monastery is situated just months after Tāranātha's and Sangs rgya rgya mtsho's deaths. From reading Phrin las dbang mo's autobiographical recount, it is evident that although the study curriculum continued at rTag brtan gling during this interlude, imposed restrictions and regulations were increasing. So much so that many, including Phrin las dbang mo her self, started to doubt whether it was worth living there.

bLo gros rnam rgyal's Mission

After Tāranātha passed away, many of his closest disciples including the young bLo gros rnam rgyal (Lodrö Namgyal), continued to receive teachings and empowerments from Rin chen rgya mtsho at rTag brtan gling.¹³ bLo gros rnam rgyal later travelled to bKra shis lhun po in order to meet with the First Pañchen Lama from whom he received several teachings and tantric initiations.¹⁴ According to his biography, after visiting the Pañchen Lama, bLo gros rnam rgyal travelled to Lhasa where he performed prostrations and made offerings to the Jo bo

¹² See Phrin las dbang mo, 20b-21a and bLo grags (1992), 59.

¹³ Here it mentions that he received some of these teachings with Kun dga' chos bsam who was a student of Rin chen rgya mtsho. Kun dga' 'phrin las, 7. In Kong sprul's gsan yig, see bKra shis chos 'phel, 1, 16.

¹⁴ Kun dga' 'phrin las writes that he received the empowerments (*dbang*) and explanations (*bka'*) for Nog's threefold cycle (*nog skor gsum*) including the gsang 'dus and dmag zor ma, as well as a few other teachings. Kun dga' 'phrin las, 7.

Śākyamuni statue before he made his way to visit the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho.¹⁵

During their visit together, his biography recounts that bLo gros rnam rgyal extensively questioned the Dalai Lama about his views on the Kālacakra and *gZhan stong* Madhyamaka, which they discussed in detail.¹⁶ After their conversation, he asked the Dalai Lama for a contribution towards the communal tea offerings at rTag brtan gling in order to increase his connection with the monastic community there. bLo gros rnam rgyal then gradually headed back to rTag brtan gling Monastery. At this point in the life story, the biographer Kun dga' 'phrin las interjects his own commentary, stating that even though this episode was ultimately detrimental, it was lived with an awareness on the part of bLo gros rnam rgyal that the Dalai Lama had an unspoken agenda, and that what was most important was for their meeting to be conducted without conflict. Kun dga' 'phrin las writes,

This [encounter] was not conducted in a way that was respectful. Even though it didn't take place without partiality nor did it happen with irreverence towards the dharma, still the intent of an altruistic mind was tinged by greed, obsession, and the sort. Nonetheless, it was simply conducted without conflict.¹⁷

bLo gro rnam rgyal's audience then initiates a series of private meetings between the Dalai Lama and Tāranātha's closest disciples during the course of the next fifteen years.

However, bLo gros rnam rgyal was not interested in negotiating with the Dalai Lama, but instead sought to move the Jonangpa beyond the sphere of the central dGa' ldan Pho brang government's political and military sphere of influence. In fact, it was not long after his conversation with the Dalai Lama in Lhasa that he began to seriously evaluate the long-term ramifications of staying at rTag brtan gling. Though he wrestled with these thoughts and weighed plausible alternative scenarios over the next few years, it was not until he received a series of visionary encounters that he took action. Describing one of these visions, Kun dga' 'phrin las writes in his biography,

¹⁵ Kun dga' 'phrin las does not indicate where they met, though it was most likely 'Bras spungs.

¹⁶ See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 8.

¹⁷ See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 8, "mi 'jom pa'i btsun de tshul chos ma lags sam / nye ring med pa ma byung nas / phan sems byed pa 'dod zhen yin / zhes sog s kyi don dang mi 'gal ba tsam byas."

One instant he thought, “Since there are an unimaginable amount of hungry ghosts who cannot see the flow of this stream over the course of the next hundred years, I must do something about all this anguish.”

In the next moment, he saw the form of white Tārā and she said to him, “Son, it’s said that there is a monastery for you: As you go foreword, there will be a mountain that is shaped like the body of the deity ’Dzam bha+la, and there will be a vivid and bright monastery there. Imagine how in the future you will go directly to this monastery that I’m pointing out, and that you will remain there in splendid ’Dzam thang without wavering.”¹⁸

Despite this encounter and his own escalating frustrations, bLo gros rnam rgyal remained in residence at Jonang where he undertook numerous retreats in the mKha’ spyod bde ldan meditation cave above the Great Stūpa as well as in other hermitages throughout the valley. It was during one of these retreat sessions that he had a similar experience, except this time it is described in his biography as a clear vision of Dol po pa who said to him, “Fortunate son, your karmic destiny lies in the eastern direction.”¹⁹ However, bLo gros rnam rgyal interpreted this experience not as an omen or an actual message from a pure vision of Dolpopa, but rather as a hallucination that manifested due to the trickery of multiple inhibiting forces (*gdon bgegs*) within his own mind.

Sometime in late 1656 or early 1657, bLo gros rnam rgyal had a third vision.²⁰ This time the protector Trak+shad is said to have clearly appeared to him and told him that he must travel to the Khams region of eastern Tibet.²¹ By May of 1657, he went to meet and consult with rJe btsun ma Phrin las dbang mo who was then living at the Ri khrod chen mo hermitage above the stūpa. As he discussed his travel plans with her, she contemplated whether to stay at Jonang or travel with him. After prostrating and making offerings at the Great Stūpa, bLo gro rnam rgyal departed. Curiously, his first stop was a return to the Pañchen Lama’s bKra shis lhun po Monastery. Once he then arrived in Lhasa, he went directly to ’Bras spungs where he encountered the mummified body of Rwa Lo tsā ba, Tāranātha’s ancestor. Kun dga’ ’phrin

¹⁸ See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 8.

¹⁹ See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 10.

²⁰ It is not specified in his biography when exactly this took place, except to place it before 1657. Before the passage on the vision, the text reads, “sa mo lug gi lo,” but that would have been the year 1619, which would not have been possible. I am inclined to think this is a misprint and is supposed to read, “shing lug,” making it 1655. See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 11.

²¹ See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 11.

las writes that being in the presence of this mummy was a good omen that pacified bLo gros rnam rgyal's obstacles and realigned him with his mission.²²

After spending the summer in Lhasa, bLo gros rnam rgyal and his caravan trekked across the vast terrain of the eastern Tibetan highlands and arrived in the valley of 'Dzam thang during August of 1657.²³ That winter, in January of 1658, the same year that rTag brtan gling was officially re-instituted by the dGe ldan pa authorities, bLo gros rnam rgyal performed a long-life ceremony associated with Hayagriva and an empowerment initiation for the Kālacakra as an inauguration at the newly founded gTsang ba Monastery in 'Dzam thang. Named after the province in Central Tibet where the Jonang tradition flourished until the historic moment when this new monastery was established, gTsang ba continues to serve as the central monastic seat for the Jonangpa.

'Jam dbyangs Sprul sku's Instigation

Seven years after Tāranātha's death in 1635, in the midst of a war torn Central Tibet that was devastated by famine and smallpox, the Fifth Dalai Lama was enthroned by the Mongol military alliance under the leadership of Gushri Khan. Having conquered the Tsang rulers and dismantled their infrastructure of monastic patronage, both the Jonang and Bka' brgyud institutions were imperiled under dGa' ldan pa order. This shift in power is perhaps no better exemplified than with the execution of the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang, Kar+ma bsTan skyong dbang po (Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, 1606-1642), a major patron of the Jonangpa who did not accept the Fifth Dalai Lama as successor and protested his enthronement.²⁴

In 1642, the same year that the Fifth Dalai Lama was appointed by the Mongol army and the ruler of gTsang was executed, the Mongolian

²² See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 12. Here, while he is in Lha sa, it states that he met with a Mongolian King at a place named, "sha bu'i sar" and that he encountered the "bo rod sku."

²³ It should be mentioned here that Ratnaśrī (1350-1435), a disciple of the early Jonang master Phyos las rnam rgyal (1306-1386) had established Chos rje Monastery in 'Dzam thang in the year 1425. Where bLo gros rnam rgyal founded gTsang ba monastery is adjacent to Chos rje. See Sheehy 2009, 227-228. 'Dzam thang was within Ming territory, and was thereby outside the political influence of the dGa' ldan Pho brang. See Sperling, 159-166.

²⁴ Kar+ma bstan skyong inherited the role of sde srid of gTsang in 1633, after his father who was the former sde srid of gTsang, Kar+ma Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, died. For a brief discussion on Kar+ma bstan skyong as patron, see Byams pa thub bstan, 353-355; Ruegg (1963), 82; Stearns (1999), 70; and Fendell (1997), 27-30.

child bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen, 1635-1723) was claimed by the First Panchen Lama, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and the State Oracle of Tibet to be the re-embodiment (*sprul sku*) of Tāraṇātha, the First Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa (Khalka Jetsun Dampa).²⁵ Interestingly enough, both Phrin las dbang mo's and bLo gros rnam rgyal's life writings recount hearing about this event as good news with the thought of extending prayers for the long lifeline of the boy.²⁶ However, as the Fifth Dalai Lama writes in his autobiography, it turns out that the fate of rTag brtan gling was to be determined by this young Khal kha.

According to his autobiography, the Fifth Dalai Lama writes that his censorship at rTag brtan gling was due to the imploring of the Khal kha who he refers to as 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku (Jamyang Tulku) throughout his autobiography and identifies as the son of the Mongol King Khal kha Thu shi ye thu (Khalka Tushi Yetu).²⁷ Commenting on his interaction with the First Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa about rTag brtan gling Monastery, and the resistance of the monks to converting rTag brtan gling into a dGe lugs establishment. The Dalai Lama writes,

'Jam dbyangs sprul sku implored me that it was imperative that a college (*bshad grwa*) at rTag brtan was established... In the year of the Iron Tiger (1650), the philosophical system was consequently converted. However, this was like coating brass with gold since the older [monks] did not change. Not only that, but even the newer [monks] reverted to the earlier [Jonang] teachings that were there. The local authorities expelled them and the older monks were banished to other satellite monasteries. In order to make rTag brtan genuinely dGe lugs, the place was purified, the [monastic] community

²⁵ In his biography of the rJe btsun dam pa Khal kha, Ye shes thabs mkhas writes and Lokesh Chandra translates, "On being asked, Panchen Lama Chos-kyi-rgyal-mtshan, the Fifth Dalai Lama, the State Oracle and others all acclaimed H.H. as the incarnation of rJe btsun Tāraṇātha." See Chandra, 15. I am working on a paper on this subject titled, "Identity Politics of Re-Embodiment: Lineage Formation in Tibetan and Mongolian Accounts of rJe btsun Tāra nā tha's (1575-1635) Death and the Birth of Khal kha bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1635-1723)."

²⁶ Phrin las dbang mo, 30a and bLo gros rnam rgyal, 17.

²⁷ Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho, 309. The Dalai Lama's autobiography here identifies 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku as, "khal kha thu she (i) ye thu rgyal po'i sras 'jam dbyangs sprul sku." He is identified in the biography of the First Panchen Lama, "'jam dbyangs sprul pa'i sku dpon slob dang thu sh'i thu yab sras." See Blo bzang ye shes, 250. Kun dga' phrin las also refers to him repeatedly as 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku throughout the biography of bLo gros rnam rgyal. See Kun dga' phrin las, 18-19. He was the son of the Mongol King Tu shi ye thu mGon po rdo rje and Queen mKha' gro rgya mtsho. His ordination name was Ye shes rdo rje or Jñānavajra. See also Stearns, 25.

was purified, and the name of the monastery was changed to dGa' Idan Phun tshogs gling.²⁸

Phrin las dbang mo confirms this in her autobiography, writing that in August of 1650, the philosophical studies curriculum at rTag brtan gling Monastery was revised by the dGa' Idan pa authorities.²⁹

A few weeks later, the First Pañchen Lama disembarked to rTag brtan gling Monastery and arrived on the third day of October. While at rTag brtan gling, the Pañchen Lama performed the four levels of Tantric empowerments (*dbang bzhi*) for Guhyasāmja, Cakrasamvara, and Yamāntaka along with various authorization rituals (*rjes gnang*) and reading transmissions (*lung*) for numerous dharma protectors. According to his biography, this occasion was marked by an extensive tea ceremony and the Pañchen Lama was greeted by eight hundred monks with traditional auspicious white scarves (*bkra shis kha btags*).³⁰ After visiting rTag brtan gling, the Pañchen Lama made his way up the Jo mo nang valley to the small nunnery on the mountainside adjacent to the Great Jonang Stūpa where the tea ceremonies resumed and he taught on guru yoga.³¹ It is understood that these two events were intended to establish the community of Jonangpa practitioners as correct (*dag pa*) and reset them anew (*gsar*).³²

However, as is evident in the Fifth Dalai Lama's account, this change was only superficial and the monks at rTag brtan gling and at the mountain hermitage at Jo mo nang continued to transmit the esoteric knowledge of *gZhan stong* and the religious practices of the

²⁸ Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho, 351. “’jam dbyangs sprul skus rtag brtan du bshad grwa ’dzugs dgos zhus pa... ltar sde pa zhal bzhugs skabs chos ’khor gling pa rnams lo gcig gnyis chos dbar [dpar?] la ’byon dgos tshul gnang ’dug pas gsang sgor phan khyad kyis ma ’gyangs par chos dpar ’degs su bcug / lcags stag grub mtha’ bsgyur song ba ra gan gser gsol gyi rnam pas rnying pa mi ’gyur bar ma zad gsar pa rnams kyang skyo ma snga btsan du ’gro yin yod ’dug gshis snye thang drung chen can btang ba’i grva rnying rnams dgon lag gzhan du dbiyung / rtag brtan du dge lugs kha zhe mtshungs pa’i sa gtsang sde gtsang bzos / dgon pa’i ming dga’ldan phun tshogs gling du btags.”

²⁹ See Phrin las dbang mo, 42b. Her phrase is “grub mtha bsgyur.”

³⁰ bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “rim gyis rtag brtan du slebs te zla ba bcu pa’i tshe gsum nas bzung / gsang bde ’jigs gsum gyi dbang bzhi yongs su rdzogs pa dang / mgon po chos rgyal lha mo sogs kyi rjes gnang dang chos skyong mang po’i lung khor yug tu stsal / der mang ja kha shas dang / grva pa brgyad brgya tsam la bkra shis kha btags re.”

³¹ bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “de nas jo mo nang du btsun ma rnams la yang bla ma’i rnal ’byor gyi chos ’brel dang mang ja sman tse’i kha ’gyed bcas pa byas.”

³² bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “de gnyis su ri khrod pa’i sde rnam par dag pa gsar du btsugs.”

Jonang tradition until the monastery was officially converted into a dGe lugs establishment, and its name was changed from rTag brtan Dam chos gling to dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling in 1658.³³ This continuity of the particular scholastic and contemplative training that had defined the Jonangpa at rTag brtan gling and the hermitage at the stūpa, then became reason for the dGa' ldan pa authorities to isolate and target *gZhan stong* as radical. Reflecting on the curriculum at the former dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling, and again making reference to 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku's influence, the Dalai Lama writes,

As is clear, not only is it enormously important for the [monastic] community, but the most worthwhile scholastic curriculum is extremely rare. According to the *sprul sku* of rTag brtan, there was a naïve conviction [at rTag brtan gling] that was reason for a partiality towards *gzhan stong*. By sewing tremendous blaspheme about the followers of the protector Nāgārjuna, many beings blinded themselves and were led to the lower realms where they are prevented from being saved.³⁴

With the conversion of the Jonang scholastic curriculum, the printing presses were closed and Tāranātha's silver reliquary was decimated.³⁵

Despite these drastic events during 1658, for at least the next decade, the channels of communication remained opened between the Fifth Dalai Lama and Tāranātha's closest living disciples. During January of 1664, Phrin las dbang mo visits the Fifth Dalai Lama in Lhasa and has a favorable exchange, receiving a ritual authorization for the practice of white Tārā and instructions on guru yoga. She also meets briefly sDe srid Sangs rgya rgya mtsho (Desi Sangye Gyatso, 1653-1705). Kun dga' phrin las writes that bLo gros rnam rgyal traveled to Lhasa in the year 1668 in order to meet with the Fifth Dalai Lama,

Having arrived in Lhasa during November, he sincerely presented offerings and prostrated to the Jo bo Śākyamuni, and then he exuberantly gave offerings to the omniscient Fifth rGyal dbang [Dalai Lama]. While there, he carefully presented a gift.³⁶

³³ Tā la'i bla ma, 521. It should be noted here that a theory about the Dalai Lama's mother being a consort of Tāranātha has also been suggested. See Smith (2001b), 120 and Karmay (2003), 67. Kong sprul gsan yig, 1, 13. It appears as though the passages on his mother in the autobiography were inserted after subsequent revisions were made.

³⁴ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 2, 22. This passage reads, "gong gsal gyi par tsho mkho che bar ma zad rin cen tog gi yig cha rnams shin tu dkon pa dang rtag brtan sprul skus gzhan stong gi phyogs 'dzin rgyu'i rmongs zhen gyis mgon po klu sgrub rjes 'brang la skur ba chen po btab nas rang gi zhar la skye rgu mang po ngan song du 'khrid pa'i sgo 'gog pa la phan nam snyam."

³⁵ See Smith (2001a), 95.

³⁶ Kun dga' phrin las, 16.

These interactions raise questions regarding to what extent Tāranātha's disciples had interactions and diplomatic relations with the Pañchen and Dalai Lama's after his death, even after negotiations were futile.

The Historicity of Transmission

Tāranātha's autobiographical writing ends in the year 1631. Though he describes that summer at the Ri khrod chen mo of Jo mo nang as a period defined by an excellent configuration of the stars and planets (*gza' skar bzang*), the next four years would seemingly convince Tāranātha that political and historical forces did not favor the transmission of his Jonang tradition at rTag brtan gling and its affiliated sites in Central Tibet.³⁷ If we are to rely on Phrin las dbang mo's account as Tāranātha's final testament, it appears as though he did not only intuit the dGa' Idan pa would expropriate his monastery and intercede with the appointment of his scion, but that his very rebirth would be appropriated for the cause. As the Fifth Dalai Lama's writings tell us, the prompting by the teenage Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa sets the perfect irony for this history to be set in motion.

We find scattered throughout Tāranātha's autobiography clues about how this complex history was taking crescendo. Among the vexing issues that Tāranātha recorded during his lifetime, there are two recurring themes that deserve particular attention in thinking through the escalation of this narrative. One of these issues is his repeated reflections on dissension with the dGa' Idan pa and in particular the authorities at 'Bras spungs Monastery. He writes about the persecution of the dGe lugs pa and the internal conflicts within Se ra and 'Bras spungs starting around the year 1618, and then returns to this theme throughout his life writings. Another issue is the attention that he gives in his autobiography to the sMon 'gro family and his quarrels with them over property and the acquisition of land estates in gTsang. This is particularly of interest because the elusive figure known as sMon 'gro Pan chen dBang rgyal rdo rje (Möndro Panchen Wangyal Dorje) would later serve as the Sanskrit tutor for the Fifth Dalai Lama and is thought to have fueled the young Dalai Lama's animosities towards Tāranātha.³⁸ Knowing that these rivals and tensions emerged over property ownership and political quarrels long before the appointment of the Fifth Dalai Lama, and that Tāranātha was well aware of the trajectory of these historical forces, we can begin to reconsider narratives popularized about the historicity of the Jonangpa.

³⁷ Tā ra nā tha, 647.

Keeping in mind the audience of these autobiographies, we can not only imagine how these writings were intended to represent historical personalities, but how these accounts might have been scripted, edited, and rearranged in retrospect in order to tell their story. In the case of Phrin las dbang mo, however unlikely it is that her writings were tampered with, it remains possible that excerpts were rewritten in order to reflect the concerns of the dGa' ldan pho brang. Due to the systematic eradication of writings by Jonang authors at that time, the auto/biographical works of both Phrin las dbang mo and bLo gros rnam rgyal have only come to surface in the form of hand-written manuscripts that were recopied over the centuries. However, its important to keep in mind that these texts were discovered in a cache of works by Jonang authors at an active Jonang monastery. So I am confident that their original content was preserved and that these accounts are original. This same degree of legitimization cannot be held for the Fifth Dalai Lama's writings. In fact, we can safely say that his autobiography was rewritten and reprinted several times for the purposes of revisionist history.

Though these biographical recounts do not attempt to address many of the interpersonal and political issues involved in the suppression of the Jonangpa in seventeenth century Tibet, as we start to piece together this larger puzzle of Jonangpa religious history, we can begin to identify certain themes and tropes for their transmission as well as tensions at work within their transmitters. What these various auto/biographical excerpts then begin to suggest is how a compelling narrative about the transmission of Buddhist knowledge emerged. In reading through these selected writings, we read fragments about how the employment of certain strategies of transmission interacted in order to both intervene with the transmission of knowledge as well as contribute to the distribution of knowledge over vast distances and populations for the sake of a religious tradition's identity. These various strategies include foretelling by omens, recognizing nonhuman forces as interlocutors in historical time, maintaining power via bloodline relations, identity politics of rebirth, interpretations of visionary encounters, the scapegoat, risks of acting diplomatically, and the cultural sway of Tantric rituals in Tibet. As these themes, tropes, and tensions are further revealed through the life writings of the individuals who lived through the sustaining of their tradition and the transmission of its knowledge, and oftentimes acted as conduits for it, we discover how these authors contributed to both interruptions and continuities in their own lineages and storylines.

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- bLo gros grags pa. 1992. *Jonang chos 'byung zla ba'i sgron me*. Qinghai: Nationalities Press.
- _____. *rJe Tāranātha'i sku 'das pa'i tshul gyi rnam par thar pa 'jam mgon dgyes pa'i kun bzang mchod sprin*, 12, 75-147. In *BLo gros grags pa'i Gsung 'bum*, 'Dzam thang.
- bKra shis chos 'phel. *Kong sprul gsan yig*. 2 vols. Carved from the Dpal spungs bLocks. Unpublished manuscript.
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