*Tsering Thar, Nangshig. A Tibetan Bonpo Monastery
and its Family in Amdo*

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- 1 For those actively involved in the study of the Tibetan Bon religion, Tsering Thar is a familiar name in the small roster of scholars who have contributed significantly to our understanding of the contemporary history and institutions (monastic and otherwise) of Bon. The author of this monograph is Professor at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing. He is a seasoned Tibetologist and has conducted field based research on Bon since the mid 1980s. In the course of these research trips, he has visited over 130 Bon sites (p. 4). He has contributed significantly to important landmark publications such as those from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka (Karmay & Nagano [eds] 2003 ; Martin *et al.* [eds] 2003). His own articles are perfect examples of what the reader will find in these pages (Thar 2000, 2008).
- 2 The present work is the culmination of fieldwork among the Bonpo communities in Amdo with The National Museum of Ethnology under the direction of Professor Yasuhiko Nagano. Its focus is the sNang zhig monastery (Nangshig), presently the largest Bon institution in the world. The latter appears in later years to have taken over the place that the sMan ri Monastery (Central Tibet) used to occupied as the most authoritative institution providing education to Bonpo monks and the laity.
- 3 The author has sought throughout to provide an exhaustive glimpse at this monastic institution and has divided the work by topics in sixteen relatively short chapters. He

has first chosen to introduce his understanding of the Bon tradition in the Amdo region at the onset of his work, including the circumstances which brought him to research Bon, his family background, and opportunities for research. When the author discourses on local traditions, Bon inputs and interaction with the landscape, its population, and other cultural imperatives, he provides sources, locations, and names of key characters, a format which he uses throughout this book and is illustrative of his past published research. His discourse covers: the history of the sNang zhig institution (Chapters 2, 3, and 12); its relationships with other Bon and Buddhist establishments in the region (Chap. 3); the monastic and non-monastic organisations (Chap. 4); hierarchy and lineages as well as the methods used to legitimate the succession of authority figures (heredity and reincarnation, Chapters 4, 5, 12, 15); its economy, resources, operations and holdings (Chap. 6); its main philosophical teachings (Chap. 7); meditative and ritual traditions transmitted (Chapters 8, 14); its pantheon of tutelary divinities and protectors (Chapters 9, 14); and the social functions it fulfils among the local population (Chapters 9, 11, 13).

- 4 This book is informative in such a manner as it gives researchers and scholars, key elements to enable them to forward their research using the data provided on historical characters, primary sources, locations, institutions, and references to primary sources. After reading it, one can almost draw a historical map which could illustrate the relationships between the various protagonists, the institutions and the communities they founded, and understand better the social dynamics of Tibetan Bon culture in the Amdo region. It becomes clear that the main characters highlighted in this work were representatives of groups of Bonpos, the tip of the iceberg so to speak, and that Tsering Thar understands very well that religious communities in Tibet are much more than just defined by creed but rather tied through kinship groups and associations.
- 5 The author appended a simple map taken from the *Survey* (p. xii) mentioned above, a few pictures (p. xi) supplied by Professor D. Berounsky in Prague, and a final table of lineages derived from five sources (Appendix 2) where dates and locations are unfortunately missing. The latter, although pregnant with potential data, is not very useful unless one reads it in conjunction with Chapter 12 devoted to the sNang zhig family lines. Dates are sorely missing with the exception of a few already well known characters and this will, no doubt, keep future researchers guessing in trying to establish a valid chronology. It is, unfortunately, a recurring problem when trying to identify characters and events related to Bon in general. Although, this book does provide tantalizing contextual material which could permit educated guesses, the author unfortunately did not indulge in this.
- 6 One could have benefited from a final index of names, places, and other keywords which is missing. However, the chapters are rather short and concise as to make a search of the whole work relatively easy.
- 7 This study is of enormous value to students, researchers and scholars in want of precise information on Amdo Bon traditions. Its brevity makes it introductory but will most likely help in starting in-depth research which will better analyse local elements relating to the sNang zhig tradition and its satellite institution throughout the Tibetan world. It will serve as a valuable map and guide in helping furthering our knowledge of the Bon traditions in North-Eastern Tibetan areas.
- 8 Montreal 11th May 2017

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