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Points of Transition. Ovoo and the Ritual Remaking of
Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner
Asia, followed by Varia

The first generation of dGe lugs evangelists in Amdo. The case of 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (1578-1663/65)

*La première génération d'évangélistes du dGe lugs à Amdo. Le cas de 'Dan ma
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The first generation of dGe lugs evangelists in Amdo. The case of 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (1578-1663/65)

La première génération d'évangélistes du dGe lugs à Amdo. Le cas de 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (1578-1663/65)

Brenton Sullivan

- 1 This article begins with a “manuscript” and some incredible claims. When living in Xining and at monasteries in the vicinity of Xining from 2010 to 2011, I heard of an “autobiography” of the figure known as 'Dan ma grub chen, “the Great Accomplished One from 'Dan ma” ('Dan ma grub chen). 'Dan ma is a town one valley to the west from Dgon lung byams pa gling, the important dGe lugs monastery in Amdo (A mdo) of the 17th and early 18th centuries that was at the centre of my research. This 'Dan ma grub chen had served as the eighth abbot of dGon lung. The manuscript turned out to be a photocopy of a manuscript held at a monastery that 'Dan ma had founded, Kan chen Monastery (in today's Huzhu County 互助县). The manuscript itself must have been in terrible condition, because the text was damaged and illegible in numerous places, particularly the right-hand edge of each page and most of the final four folios. Nonetheless, uncovering the text was exciting because of the bold claims made about 'Dan ma himself.
- 2 'Dan ma is sometimes referred to as a “Great Accomplished One” (*grub chen*) because of the decades he spent meditating in retreat and because of the esoteric transmissions he received from important Central Tibetan lamas. Synopses of his biography claim that he was “one of the four heart-sons of the Omniscient Pañchen, accomplished ones who realized emptiness” (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 683/26a.6). They further claim that he received from the Pañchen Lama (Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1570-1662) the transmission of the esoteric teachings on the dGe' ldan-bKa' brgyud Mahāmudrā (Great Seal), including the extraordinary “Miraculous Scripture”

that standard narratives usually say stopped with the Pañchen Lama or even earlier (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 24b.3-25a.2). One luminary of the early dGe lugs school in Amdo, Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho (1607-1677), referred to 'Dan ma alongside one other lama as “the sun and the moon” among the many practitioners of Amdo (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, p. 343). As if his meditative accomplishments were not enough, synopses of his life also claim that he was the first *lha rams pa dge bshes* (a monastic scholarly title) from dGon lung Monastery (Per Nyi ma 'dzin Ngag dbang legs bshad rgya mtsho, n.d., pp. 137-139)¹ and that he was the unexcelled debater at the first dGe lugs debates to be held at the Lhasa Great Prayer Festival (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 670/19b.5-671/20a.5).

- 3 The synopses of the life of 'Dan ma all date from a century or more after his time². This manuscript thus offered an opportunity to verify some of the claims made about this ostensibly important figure. More importantly, the manuscript promised to tell the story of a significant figure from the first generation of dGe lugs evangelists in Amdo³. Most of these expectations were met, even though the “autobiography” is actually a biography written by a disciple of 'Dan ma. Today, 'Dan ma is practically unknown outside of some narrow circles at dGon lung Monastery and a couple other monasteries in Amdo associated with 'Dan ma. Yet 'Dan ma was present for and participated in some key moments in the history of the dGe lugs school in the first half of the 17th century. The fact that he is unknown has to do both with the paucity of materials for the early history of the dGe lugs school in Amdo (a paucity that this manuscript helps to redress) and with the emphasis on retreat and esoteric practices – the less public face of Tibetan Buddhism – that distinguishes this early generation from later generations of dGe lugs “institution men”.
- 4 The manuscript biography of 'Dan ma helps focus our attention on some significant characteristics of the early dGe lugs school in Amdo that are surprising when considered from the perspective of the later, fully institutionalized dGe lugs school. Some of the most influential exponents of the dGe lugs school during this pivotal period of growth were ecumenical, explicitly challenging the reification of sectarian boundaries. At the same time, they were celebrated for their meditative accomplishments and years spent in isolated retreat. Similarly, they dedicated as much or even more attention to promoting the practice of tantra as they did philosophy or scholasticism. Finally, 'Dan ma's biography together with other sources from his time direct us to the importance of Central Tibetan lamas other than the Dalai Lamas for the early propagation of the dGe lugs school in Amdo, lamas such as the sKyid shod zhab drung (1593-1638), rGyal sras Don yod chos (kyi) gya mtsho (fl. 1603-1625), and the Fourth Pañchen Lama Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan.

The manuscript

- 5 The present manuscript is entitled *'Dan ma tshul khrims rgya mtsho'i rnam thar tsit+tar bcings pa* [The complete liberation of 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho: [words that are] bound to the mind; hereafter *Tsit+tar bcings ba*). As I explained above, I first saw the photocopy of this manuscript⁴ at Kan chen Monastery in 2011, where I was able to photograph it. The manuscript comprises 71 double-sided folios. Each side of the folios usually contains seven lines written in *dbu med* script, resulting in a text of over 22 200 words.

Figure 1. Title page and first page of the *Tsit+tar bcings ba*

© Brenton Sullivan, Kan chen Monastery, May 2011

Figure 2. Pages from the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* showing significant damage

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- 6 The text is significantly longer than any other extant biography of 'Dan ma. The biography in Thu'u bkwan III's *dGon lung gi dkar chag* [Chronicle of dGon lung Monastery] from 1775 runs to 4 200 words. In the *Mdo smad chos 'byung* [History of the

Dharma in Domé], or *Deb ther rgya mtsho* [Ocean annals], of 1865 it runs to approximately 1 470 words (Brag dgon zhabs drung Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 108.3-110.19; Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 668/18b. 1-684/26b.2). More importantly, the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* is much closer in time to the life of 'Dan ma, and it is the basis for these later, shorter biographies. The opening lines of the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* explain that,

this is a mere drop of the story of complete liberation – which is like the ocean – of my pure, glorious lama, the powerful lord of accomplishment. Those who heard it from the mouth of [the master] himself, fearing [we] would forget it, wrote it down. (p. 2a.1-2)

- 7 In addition, in the final part of the biography in which the death of 'Dan ma is recounted, the author refers to himself in the first person and writes himself into the biography of 'Dan ma – “I also went to dGon lung Hermitage and bound myself to long-term retreat” (pp. 58a.7-58b.1)⁵ – additional evidence that the text was composed by a direct disciple of 'Dan ma and that the text indeed dates from that period. Unfortunately, whatever colophon the text might have had is illegible.
- 8 Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737-1802), in his chronicle of dGon lung Monastery, refers several times to a biography (*rnam thar*) of 'Dan ma, and it is clear from comparing the two texts that the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* served as the basis for Thu'u bkwan III's account. Thu'u bkwan did not have kind words for the present text, however, writing:

I have not seen a manuscript of his life written by any qualified scholar-adept. There is a text on his sermons regarding meditation. It is written only in a village dialect and thus is not pleasing to the ears, and it is [only] with difficulty that one may find its content pleasing to the mind. Therefore, I have here written the most essential parts of his biography. (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 684/26b.1-2)
- 9 Thu'u bkwan III is remarking on the fact that the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* records in an Amdo dialect the conversations that 'Dan ma had⁶ and, more specifically, on the fact that the manuscript contains numerous grammatical and spelling errors⁷. The later synopsis of 'Dan ma's life found in the *Mdo smad chos 'byung* is based, in turn, on Thu'u bkwan III's account.
- 10 It is true that one can find “the most essential parts of his biography” presented in a clearer fashion in Thu'u bkwan III's retelling or in Mi nyag mgon po's *Gangs can mkhas dbang rim byon gyi rnam thar mdor bsdus* [Concise biographies of the succession of Tibetan scholars], which is said to be based on both Thu'u bkwan III's biography of 'Dan ma and the *mDo smad chos 'byung* version (Mi nyag mgon po & Ye shes rdo rje 1996, vol. 2, pp. 154-162. Nonetheless, the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* stands out for its details and for providing us with the only independent source for this early exponent of the dGe lugs school.

'Dan ma's early years

- 11 Later sources refer to 'Dan ma as 'Dan ma grub chen (Shes rab dar rgyas 1729, pp. 10a. 4-5; Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 8a.5, 699/29a.3, *passim*). The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* and other sources contemporary with it refer to him as Bsam blo ba Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (p. 18b.3-4) or Bsam blo Ldan ma (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2014, p. 62, 2009, p. 56). He was born in 1587 (Fire-Pig) in 'Dan ma

of the Haliqi Valley (Tib. Ha li ci), which corresponds to present-day Danma Township 丹麻乡 in the Halazhi Valley 哈拉直沟, Huzhu County 互助县, Qinghai Province 青海省 (Tsit+dar bcings ba, p. 2a.7).

Figure 3. Map of the Haliqi Valley and surrounding area

Projection: Beijing 1954/Gauss-Kruger CM 135E

Data sources: GMTED 2010 Dataset, USGS and Harvard Geospatial Library

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- 12 Although Thu'u bkwan III's later synopsis of 'Dan ma's life tells us that this was an estate (*mchod gzhi*) of dGon lung, at this earlier point in time it was a "divine community" (*lha sde*) owing allegiance to the lord of the Zi na "Encampment" (*sgar ba*) (p. 4a.6), who claimed descent from the ancient lDong clan (Ban Shinichiro 2016). 'Dan ma's father was a rNying ma pa named lDan ma Klu 'bum phyug and his mother was named dKar mo (p. 2b.2). The family's ethnicity is not specified, although it is very likely they were Monguors (Tib. Hor; Ch. Tumin 土民, Tuzu 土族) (Limusishiden 2010), a sedentary Mongolic people descended in part from Mongols who settled the area in the wake of Köden Khan's army in the 13th century.
- 13 'Dan ma was one of nine siblings and half-siblings, and early on he showed signs of being unique and religiously inclined. His dad did not wish for 'Dan ma to renounce, but 'Dan ma fled to the Zi na sgar ba, to whom 'Dan ma's father owed both political and religious allegiance. 'Dan ma thus succeeded in renouncing and took the name Tshul khriims rgya mtsho. He also took his full monastic ordination vows (p. 4b).
- 14 The second section of the *Tsit+tar bcings ba*⁸ is entitled "His virtues in listening, thinking, and meditating". 'Dan ma ultimately went to dGon lung Monastery at the time of its founding in 1604. His primary teacher became Master (*dpon slob*) Sum bu⁹, who would be designated the first abbot of dGon lung when the monastery's founder,

rGyal sras Don yod chos kyi rgya mtsho, returned to Central Tibet. The biography provides rare insight into the early days of the monastery. Discipline was said to be very strict, with no monks eating food after noon (p. 6b.5). At first there were only ten or so monk quarters (*gshegs chung*) at the monastery (p. 7a.2-3). rGyal sras Rin po che decided to give each monk a horse and other gifts, at which point boys and men turned out in droves (three hundred monks were added, we are told). All the monks reportedly stayed on after that (p. 7a.3-6). rGyal sras also established the practices and procedures for the study of philosophy (*'chad nyan*), including “recitation lessons” (*rtsi bzha*g), an introduction to logic and debate, and “dharma sessions” (*chos thogs*) (p. 7a-b).

- 15 Philosophical study and debate is said to have continually improved under Master Sum bu, who told the dGon lung congregation,

I have come here for the benefit of the many worthy disciples of the Precious Fifth Victor [i.e. the Dalai Lama]. How can we sit around our whole life for the benefit of only a few of us? If we by all means enact dharma classes [*chos grwa*], debate [*rig lung*], disciplinary rules and procedures [*'grig lam*], and good comportment [*kun spyod*] as the master¹⁰ has commanded, then we [cannot] but be protected by the compassion of the Knower of the Three Times and Knower of All, the Fifth Victor.

- 16 dGon lung's population at this time (ca. 1609-1612) is said to have grown to over five hundred monks.

Journey to Central Tibet

- 17 Some time after rGyal sras had departed (i.e. in 1609)¹¹, 'Dan ma decided that he wished to continue his studies in Central Tibet. Master Sum bu granted him leave (pp. 9b-10a). 'Dan ma decided he would not be able to faithfully maintain all the monastic vows on his journey, and so he returned them (pp. 10a-11a). His destination upon arriving in Central Tibet was 'Bras spungs Monastery's sGo mang College (p. 12b)¹². After securing the requisite gifts (tea) for his regional house teachers (*kham tshan gyi dge rgan tsho*), he settled in and applied himself to his studies. However, for three years he suffered from a lung illness, which kept him from attending all but the assemblies that pertained to scholasticism and debate, thus preventing him from partaking of the “mass teas” (*mang ja*) and “monastery teas” (*grwa ja*) that were disseminated to assist the hungry monks (pp. 13a.7-13b.1). The master (or “abbot”, *slob dpon*) of sGo mang, Gung ru Sangs rgyas bkra shis, gave him instructions for how to cure himself, which 'Dan ma succeeded in doing (pp. 13b-14a; see also p. 18b.6 and Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 2000, pp. 669/19a.4-5). This allowed him to return to sGo mang and partake of the mass teas and monastery teas available to the registered monks there.

The Dben sa teachings of Mahāmudrā and of the “Fortress of the Sixty”

- 18 The next episode in 'Dan ma's life is an important one for understanding the form of dGe lugs teachings that first spread into Amdo. The text is partially damaged here, but the general meaning can be deduced: the ritual of the “Fortress of the Sixty” (*drug cu pa'i mkhar thabs pa*) was performed. The text tells us that “prior to this, not even the name of the Fortress of the Sixty was known” (p. 15b.2-3), the implication being that this was a momentous occasion for the popularity of this ritual, a fact corroborated

elsewhere¹³. So what was this ritual? The Fortress of the Sixty, otherwise known as The Iron Fortress and Sixty Ritual Cake Offering to Vajrabhairava¹⁴, is associated with dBen sa rje drung Sang rgyas ye shes (1525-1591), although it was his disciple, the Fourth Pañchen Lama, who popularized it¹⁵. It was a particularly fearsome rite that was used to ensnare or defeat enemies¹⁶, and, significantly, it appears to have been an important component of the early dissemination of the dGe lugs school in Amdo¹⁷.

- 19 From the text we are able to discern the name Rab 'byams pa bSam nam grags pa, which allows us to tentatively date this episode in 'Dan ma's life to 1611¹⁸. According to the biography of the Fourth Dalai Lama, this Lab pa rab 'byams pa bSod nam grags pa (fl. early 17th century) was asked to orchestrate a massive collective ritual that included restoration offering rituals to protector deities and the Sixty Ritual Cake Offerings to Vajrabhairava (*drug cu ma*). This was done in behalf of the dGe lugs school in gTsang, which was suffering losses in its war with the King of gTsang and his allies¹⁹. It was requested by the Fourth Pañchen Lama, who, being based in gTsang and subject to whims of the King of gTsang, could not conduct the ritual himself.
- 20 Some expressed concern that such fierce rites resembled too much the “petitions to the gods of nomadic pastoralists” and that they were not proper dGe lugs rites (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2007, p. 308/42b.4). Upon completing the rites, however, all sorts of potent signs appeared, including thunder, lightning, and hail, and eventually several noxious “effigies” (*liṅga*) that the opposing camp had buried surfaced and were thus uncovered (p. 15b.2). It is not clear whether 'Dan ma himself participated in this collective ritual, although it would be unusual for his biography to mention an event in which he did not play a role.
- 21 This would not be 'Dan ma's last encounter with teachings of the dBen sa tradition and the Pañchen Lama. Several years later (after 1625), on one of 'Dan ma's many visits with the Pañchen Lama, the Rapjam Scholar of the Ten Subjects dGe 'dun rgyal mtshan (dates unknown) came to request teachings from the Pañchen Lama, after which the guru gave him “unique instructions not found in our dGe lugs pa and called the Mahāmudrā” (p. 44a)²⁰. 'Dan ma went to ask the Pañchen Lama about these extraordinary teachings. These were the bKa' brgyud-dGe lugs Mahāmudrā teachings that the Pañchen Lama either developed or popularized (Jackson 2001). Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*), literally “Great Seal”, refers to a system of radical meditative practices and to the goal of those practices, namely, the direct experience of the natural mind free of all distinctions and conceptualizations (Jackson 2001, pp. 155-156; Sujata 2005, p. 60ff.). The Pañchen Lama gave 'Dan ma the transmission of the root verses and auto-commentary on Mahāmudrā that he had composed²¹. 'Dan ma then explained that he also wished to practise these teachings, to which the Pañchen Lama replied, “you don't need to do that. There is nothing in the world that surpasses the view of Madhyamaka” (44a.7), suggesting that the philosophical insight into emptiness attained through 'Dan ma's studies and debate experience was sufficient. The Pañchen Lama was either being disingenuous or testing 'Dan ma's resolve, for Roger Jackson's research on Mahāmudrā has shown that the Pañchen Lama certainly considered the practice of “Tantric Mahāmudrā” to be essential to enlightenment. The Pañchen Lama later changed his mind, however, when he took the “Precious miraculous scripture”²², elsewhere described as being of the nature of clear light, and placed it on 'Dan ma's head, thereby blessing him.

- 22 The significance of this act, were it true, would be to disrupt the standard account of the transmission lineage of the dGe lugs Mahāmudrā teachings and the accompanying “Miraculous scripture”. According to one tradition, the last recipient of the Miraculous Scripture was the Pañchen Lama, who returned it to the patron deities of the dGe lugs school for safekeeping (Willis 1995, pp. 161-162, n. 114). Also, according to the standard account, the Pañchen Lama gave the Orally Transmitted (*snyan brgyud*) dBen sa teachings, of which the Mahāmudrā instructions were the most important part, to two of his major disciples: Blo bzang brtson 'grus rgyal mtshan (1567-1650) and the aforementioned dGe 'dun rgyal mtshan. From that point the tradition is said to have continued in two streams up until the 20th century when they were once again united (Jackson 2001, pp. 158-159). 'Dan ma's biography disrupts that narrative by making 'Dan grub chen a recipient of these Mahāmudrā teachings (in the form of the textual transmission of the Pañchen Lama's verses and auto-commentary) as well as the emanated volume of extraordinary instructions.
- 23 These dBen sa Mahāmudrā teachings and the Iron Fortress and Sixty Ritual Cake Offerings would eventually make their way to dGon lung and its neighboring monastery of Mchod rten thang. There the “Fortress of the Sixty” marked the apex of those monasteries' new year and year end ceremonies, respectively. Although 'Dan ma is not credited with instituting these traditions in Amdo (lCang skya II Ngag dbang chos ldan is; Brag dgon zhabs drung dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 59.3-8; lCang skya II Ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan 1713, pp. 8a.1-2), it is possible that he helped to introduce them or aspects of them. More importantly, these experiences of 'Dan ma contributed to his reputation as a spiritual adept, and they further draw our attention to the importance of such tantric traditions for the dGe lugs school in the early 17th century as it competed with its bKa' brgyud rivals and simultaneously sought to expand its influence farther away in Amdo.

'Dan ma's scholarly exploits

- 24 Back at sGo mang College, 'Dan ma progressed swiftly through the curriculum (p. 15b). During this time he also went to visit dGon lung Monastery's founder, rGyal sras Rin po che, at Dwags po College and entered the dharma classes there for a time (p. 17b). When he returned to sGo mang, the Pañchen Lama, who had served as abbot of 'Bras spungs since 1617, decided to establish formal debates at the new year's Great Prayer Festival in Lhasa. The year was 1625 (Pañchen Lama IV Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1969, pp. 134/67b-135/68a). The problem, according to 'Dan ma's biography, was that the event had to be kept secret lest the King of gTsang intervene and stop it (p. 17a). gTsang forces had invaded dBus in 1618, looted both 'Bras spungs and Se ra Monasteries, and confiscated the estates of the principal dGe lugs patron, the sKyid shod family. Three years later, Tümed Mongols from Kökenuur assisted the sKyid shod Governor bSod nams rgyal mtshan (1586-1636) in defeating the gTsang forces in Lhasa, although they failed to recover all the sKyid shod estates. Thus, in 1625 tensions still ran high, and 'Dan ma's biography tells us that utmost secrecy regarding the debates was maintained. The candidates were advised not to talk about the debates and to pretend they were instead studying for regular dharma classes (*chos grwa*) (p. 19b). They were also not permitted to go to monasteries other than 'Bras spungs for study retreats (*dpe mtshams*) lest they raise suspicions. The sGo mang master²³ selected Chu

bzang ba dKon mchog chos bzang (dates unknown) and 'Dan ma to participate in the debates. The master of 'Bras spungs' Blo gsal gling College²⁴ chose 'Brug ltag pa Ngag dbang dpal bzang²⁵ (dates unknown) and Do dam nyag pa bSod nams chos bzang (dates unknown)²⁶ (p. 18b).

- 25 rGyal sras Rin po che is said to have been present at the debates and to have remarked to 'Dan ma, "it is good that [one] from where I established philosophical teachings in [mDo] smad participate at the first Lhasa debates" (p. 21a.4-5). He is referring to the claims that these were the first dGe lugs formal debates held at the Great Prayer Festival in Lhasa. From that time forward, the biography explains, "the custom of the debate circuit of Lhasa flourished like this" (p. 23a.5). It is not clear who came out on top. Thu'u bkwan III would later write that 'Dan ma "debated amongst ten million scholars, and since he arose as the debater without peer, his renown spread around the world" (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 671/20a.4). The modern scholar Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las instead writes that "the fame of Dom [i.e. Do dam nyag pa] and 'Brug [ltag pa] grew without limit" after the debates²⁷. 'Dan ma's own biography is unclear due in part to damage to the text or modesty or both. The Fifth Dalai Lama simply recounts who participated, naming the four above (he refers to 'Dan ma as bSam blo lDan ma) and adding a fifth, Dwags po dka' bcu (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2014, p. 62, 2009, p. 56). The modern-day *sGo mang gi chos 'byung* [History of the dharma at sGo mang college] does the same (bsTan pa bstan 'dzin 2003, pp. 43-44)²⁸. In any case, it does appear that these were the first dGe lugs formal debates in Lhasa over which the Pañchen Lama presided²⁹. In addition, the Pañchen Lama writes that the event entailed a "great assembly of 5000" and that "everyone agreed it was done as if the past had come back to life" (Pañchen Lama IV Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1969, pp. 134/67b.5-6). Thus, sources contemporary with this momentous occasion assure us of 'Dan ma's high-level participation.

Ecumenism or religious conversion?

- 26 'Dan ma was not finished with his institutional life at sGo mang. He served as disciplinarian (*dge skos*) of sGo mang for six months (p. 24b)³⁰. However, this was all cut short due to a barrage of "magical displays" or paranormal activity (*cho 'phrul*) that would harm his physical and psychological health for years to come. This was precipitated by his involvement in a conflict that arose between two regional houses (*kham tshan* [sic]) at 'Bras spungs, which spiraled into a dBus-gTsang conflict. The dispute involved some monks and the house teacher (*dge rgan*) from the Bsam blo regional house, on the one hand, and the Har sdong ("Ha ldung") regional house, on the other hand. The treasurer of the Dalai Lamas, Dpon bSod nams chos 'phel (1595?-1657/58), was approached, and he ruled in favor of the Har sdong house³¹. The monks from the bSam blo house, with which 'Dan ma was affiliated³², approached 'Dan ma for assistance. Together they then went to the King of gTsang, who found that bSod nams rab brtan had been biased in his ruling and thus overturned it, ruling instead in favor of the bSam blo house (pp. 23b-24b)³³. bSod nams chos 'phel was fined, which meant that the wealth of 'Bras spungs was penalized³⁴. This troubled 'Dan ma (p. 24b. 6-7), and, more significantly, he angered the dGe lugs protector deity gNas chung, who launched a years-long campaign of spiritual attacks (usually in his dreams) against 'Dan ma.

- 27 These spiritual attacks motivated 'Dan ma's decision to leave 'Bras spungs and go into retreat³⁵. Much of his energy during the years that followed was focused on performing "Ego-Cutting" (*gcod*) meditation, and it was this practice that ultimately freed him from these debilitating attacks³⁶. Once, the attacks were so persistent and horrific that 'Dan ma became convinced that he would die and so traveled to the nomadic pastures of Byang to dispose of his own body "so that no one would see it" (p. 36b.6-7): "Taking a single bag of *tsampa*, I spent a few years in the uninhabited place, never encountering a person" (pp. 37b-37a).
- 28 'Dan ma describes himself as a bKa' brgyud-like ascetic during this period, roaming about aimlessly, with few provisions, with long, disheveled hair, and singing "herder songs"³⁷. Later in life he would sing "realization songs" (*mgur*) to his disciples, who failed, we are told, to record them all (p. 63b.1-6). A few verses made it into his biography, however:
- Though there are many young ones who know everything,
They cannot free themselves from the narrow path with a single obstacle.
[Here] pride in [one's] courage is meaningless.
Although I am one who does not know everything,
I liberate myself from the narrow path of the single obstacle.
On the good, bed of primordial emptiness
Oh, how happy he is, the sweetly sleeping yogin. (p. 63b.1-3)³⁸
- 29 Although 'Dan ma is himself a trained scholar, here and elsewhere he is clearly demoting knowledge acquired through pedantic, scholastic training in comparison with the insight of the genuine yogin (see also the following verses in the *Tsit+tar bcings ba*, p. 63b.4-6; Brag dgon zhabs drung Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 110.17-18).
- 30 In one story he encounters a yogin practicing the "fierce" or "inner heat" (*gtum mo*) meditative practice incorrectly. Upon showing him the correct way to practice it, the yogin exclaims, "Who is your lama? Of what religious school are you? Your clothes [are tattered?], your hair long. Are you not a [bKa' brgyud] realized yogin (*rtogs ldan*)?" After 'Dan ma gub chen explains that he is a dGe lugs pa, the other practitioner exclaims, "are there teachings such as this among the dGe lugs pa?" His faith (*dad pa*) in the dGe lugs pa is said to have grown tremendously (p. 37a.5-37b.3)³⁹.
- 31 On another occasion while staying at Yol dkar, he dreamed that a man gave him a book said to contain teachings on the Jo nang school's philosophical view. 'Dan ma thought this an extraordinary gift and wished to ask the Jo nang master Tāranātha (1575-1634/35) about it. However, after first asking the Pañchen Lama about this plan, the Pañchen Lama retorted that Tāranātha's view was "that of Hwa shang" (pp. 35b-36a).
- 32 These episodes suggest 'Dan ma possessed a tolerant and even ecumenical approach to Buddhist learning and practice. His performance of realization songs, of which only fragments are found in the *Tsit+tar bcings ba*, is comparable to that of his later disciple, Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho, and, of course, the saint Mi la ras pa (1028/40/52-1111/23) (Sujata 2005). He practised in remote places, explicitly identifying himself with the characteristics and practices of earlier bKa' brgyud masters, and purposefully visited places associated with other schools and traditions such as Yol dkar (said to be the place where the Zhi byed practitioner Pha rgod Kun bzang⁴⁰ realized emptiness) (p. 35a-b). This predilection for bKa' brgyud sites and practices is not surprising when we

consider the strength and influence of the bKa' brgyud pa at that time. In addition, his principal guru, the Pañchen Lama, is also recognized for his "syncretist" and "ecumenical" approach to Buddhist thought and practice (Jackson 2001, p. 182), notwithstanding the above statement regarding Tāranātha attributed to him. Finally, one must not forget that 'Dan ma's own father was a Rnying ma pa (p. 2b).

- 33 'Dan ma's decision and ability to embark upon and follow through on a life of radical retreat stands in stark contrast to his compatriot Lcang skya II Ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan. The latter was in Central Tibet in the years 1661-1683, and like 'Dan ma before him he studied some of the teachings of the dBen sa tradition (through one of the Pañchen Lama's disciples). However, when Lcang skya (along with two others, including 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa I) expressed his desire to emulate earlier holders of the teachings by going into retreat, another of the Pañchen Lama's disciples ridiculed him, saying, "are you going to throw away the teachings of the Victor Tsong kha pa? Are you able to independently go your own way? This is not fitting for great scholars who desire to maintain the correct [philosophical] viewpoint such as yourselves" (Brag dgon zhabs drung dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 59). Lcang skya (and the others) thereupon gave up on his ambition and instead embarked upon an institutional and political career.
- 34 To be sure, 'Dan ma would also have an institutional career of sorts (see below), but this was not to be so forcefully divorced from his spiritual pursuits. In this early period of the development of dGe lugs institutions in Amdo, tantric ritual and meditative practices garner equal respect and attention as do discipline and scholasticism. For example, the sKyid shod zhabs drung (on whom see more below) appears to have spent most of his time while evangelizing at Rong bo Monastery in Amdo giving "permission blessings" (*rjes gnan*) and empowerments (*dbang*) to monks there (Ban Shinichiro 2017, p. 6). Rong bo's principal lama, Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho, and his half-brother Rong bo chos rje (1581-1659) are also remembered as much for their spiritual exploits as for their roles in establishing philosophical teachings at Rong bo. Before dGe lugs institutions became larger and more complex (and thus more rigid and monopolistic) at the end of the 17th century and into the next century, there was as much value placed on "practice" as there was "explanation". There was also more tolerance of non-dGe lugs views and practices than in later centuries.
- 35 Notwithstanding the embrace of bKa' brgyud imagery and elements in 'Dan ma's biography, it is also important to recognize that the above story of his encounter with the yogin is framed by a defense of and even promotion of the qualities of the dGe lugs school. The faith of the yogin in the dGe lugs pa is said to have "grown tremendously". A similar story takes place in the biography of sKyid shod zhabs drung. He too is described as "without partiality for different religious tenets", and his profound and ecumenical teachings so impressed the anti-dGe lugs leader Tsogtu Taiji (d. 1637) that the latter's "faith [in him] grew" (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho, 1999b, p. 222). Moreover, sKyid shod's biographer (who, incidentally, is Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho) writes,
- the renunciants of the Sa skya, 'Brug pa, and Karma also came to have great faith [in sKyid shod zhabs drung]. In particular, the follower of the Karma pa called Zhwa dmar rab 'byams pa discreetly listened to profound teachings from this Lord, and he also presented [sKyid shod zhabs drung] with a Cornucopia of material offerings. (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho 1999b, p. 222)

- 36 In both of these cases, the dGe lugs lama is portrayed as the one with the more expansive and ecumenical approach to Buddhism, which paradoxically positions him to promote the uniqueness of the dGe lugs school.

'Dan ma's return to Amdo

- 37 'Dan ma's two principal lamas throughout his life were rGyal sras Rin po che Don yod chos (kyi) rgya mtsho and the Pañchen Lama Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan. The biography records numerous interactions with the Pañchen Lama while in Central Tibet⁴¹. 'Dan ma's interactions with rGyal sras are fewer, but he does go out of his way to pay his respects to rGyal sras before returning to Amdo. rGyal sras had passed away the year before, and a nunnery had taken as its share of his remains the skull of rGyal sras. 'Dan ma insisted that they give it to him to take back to Amdo, which they did (p. 45b). An exceedingly clear image of the ten-syllable mantra of the Buddha Kālacakra and his maṇḍala (*ṁam bcu dbang ldan*) is said to have appeared in relief on the skull (p. 45b.1-2). This relic would be the cause of much controversy back at dGon lung.
- 38 'Dan ma had hoped to travel first to Wutai shan, the Five-Peaked Mountain, but he reports encountering a serious famine and cannibalism while in a certain place called Yongs sha bo in Bar khams. Thus he turned back, visiting Li thang Monastery, Reb kong ("Re gong"), and other places along the way. In Reb kong he met "a retreatant called Rung bo chos pa who lived up to his name" and sKal ldan rgya mtsho (p. 46b.3-4). These figures are, of course, Rong bo chos pa Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1581-1659) and the latter's half-brother (the biography calls him a nephew, *tsha bo*), the First Shar Lama sKal ldan rgya mtsho (1607-1677), who together established Rong bo Monastery as a dGe lugs institution (it had previously been a Sa skya monastery) that would wield extraordinary power in Amdo.
- 39 In his 1652 *A mdo'i chos 'byung* (History of the dharma in Amdo), the earliest history of Amdo, sKal ldan rgya mtsho wrote about his half-brother and about 'Dan ma in the following way:
- Nowadays, there are many practitioners. However, among them all, like the sun and the moon, are the incomparable Dharma Lord [Chos pa] Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan and dGon lung's Dharma Lord, the Renouncer of All, 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho. (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, p. 343)
- 40 The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* explains that 'Dan ma gave these two siblings whatever teachings they required (p. 47b). 'Dan ma, moreover, transmitted teachings on the dGe lugs Mahāmudrā – the special, esoteric teachings he had received from the Pañchen Lama – to Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 184; Sujata 2005, p. 64, n. 21). Rong bo chos rje and sKal ldan rgya mtsho were also fellow disciples of the Pañchen Lama. Their meeting demonstrates the importance of 'Dan ma in the dGe lugs expansion into Amdo and how his role stretched beyond the confines of his home monastery of dGon lung.
- 41 The convergence of these three disciples of the Pañchen Lama also highlights the important influence of the latter in the geographical expansion of the dGe lugs school. Fifty years ago Gene Smith drew our attention to the important role of the Pañchen Lama: "he would remain the most prominent teacher of the great incarnations of Tibet and Mongolia for almost fifty years" (Smith 1969, p. 7, 2001, p. 127). We have only just begun to heed Smith's claim and fully comprehend the extent of the Pañchen Lama's

influence during this pivotal period in Tibetan history. sKyid shod zhabs drung, 'Dan ma, Rong bo chos pa, Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho, and Stong 'khor Mdo rgyud rgya mtsho (1621-1683) are just a few of his numerous disciples who fanned out across Amdo and Mongolia to establish the dGe lugs school in these new places.

Arguing over relics

- 42 Upon returning to dGon lung, 'Dan ma continued his meditation practice at the dGon lung Hermitage, also known as Byang chub gling, a few kilometres up the valley from dGon lung Monastery itself. This he did for “a few years” until he was asked to serve as dGon lung’s abbot. The most important event to occur during his abbacy (r. 1637-1639) was the visit of the Central Tibetan lama sKyid shod zhabs drung (the biography writes “sPyi shod zhabs drung”) of the powerful sKyid shod family in Lhasa.
- 43 sKyid shod zhabs drung was also a disciple of the Pañchen Lama who worked on behalf of the Pañchen Lama in spreading the dGe lugs school in Amdo (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho 1999b, p. 211; Ban Shinichiro 2017, pp. 7-8). Elsewhere I have discussed the importance of the connection between the sKyid shod family and dGon lung (Sullivan 2019). Monguors from dGon lung and the surrounding community appear to have played a significant role in establishing the relationship between the Dalai Lama’s dGe lugs school and the powerful Oirat Mongols who came to support the dGe lugs school in its bid for political and religious hegemony in Central Tibet. sKyid shod zhabs drung’s visit to dGon lung and, in particular, his death and enshrinement at the monastery, marked the monastery as a place of importance and a recipient of patronage for generations to come. sKyid shod zhabs drung’s brother, the powerful sKyid shod Governor Yid bzhin nor bu (1589-after 1647), came to dGon lung to pay his respects and made lavish donations (Rong po grub chen I sKal ldan rgya mtsho 1999b, p. 250). In addition, sKyid shod zhabs drung himself donated to dGon lung numerous estates that he had received from the Oirat Mongols. As Thu’u bkwan III writes in his chronicle of this monastery, “up until the time of the unrest [in 1723], [the monastery] would annually collect taxes from these divine communities (*lha sde*), and offerings and so forth would be given to the stūpa of sKyid shod at dGon lung” (Thu’u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 770/69b.4-770/69b.6).
- 44 sKyid shod zhabs drung passed away at dGon lung in 1638. As abbot, 'Dan ma was asked to oversee the construction of a silver reliquary for sKyid shod’s remains, one that was to be “like the stūpa of sKu 'bum Monastery” (p. 48b.6-7). The reliquary at sKu 'bum is understood to contain the miraculous tree that sprung forth from the blood from the umbilical cord of the founder of the dGe lugs school, Tsong khapa, when he was born, and the stūpa is one of the major attractions of pilgrims from as far away as Mongolia and the Caucasus (Karsten 1996, p. 80)⁴². 'Dan ma declined to take on the task, citing the need to first build a reliquary and shrine hall for the skull of rGyal sras Rin po che (pp. 48b.7-49a.2). According to 'Dan ma, the congregation of monks all understood and accepted this. However, a certain local ruler, Nang so dMar dmar, accused him of being remiss in his abbatial duties. He then added, “nowadays, who can tell if everyone who goes to Central Tibet and returns carrying bones, saying ‘this has divine writing on it,’ possesses human bones or dog bones?” (p. 49a.6-7) Clearly this was an attack on 'Dan ma and the authenticity of the relics he had carried back from Tibet.

- 45 The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* provides some background to the animosity exhibited by this local leader. The latter had previously invited people from all over dPa' ris (written "dPal ras") to come and receive a *Vajra Garland* (*rDo rje 'phreng ba*) empowerment and had asked sKyid shod zhabs drung to conduct the empowerment. sKyid shod declined, however, and so Nang so dMar dmar asked 'Dan ma to ask sKyid shod zhabs drung on his behalf. 'Dan ma declined to intervene (pp. 47b-48a). This angered the local leader and seems to be the pretext for the charges he later would make against 'Dan ma. Suspicion was ultimately sewn, and though there were monks who were "faithful and loyal" (49b.3), 'Dan ma was compelled to resign.
- 46 Some years later 'Dan ma was invited to serve as abbot of another major Amdo monastery of the 16th and 17th centuries, Thang ring Monastery. One of the acts he performed while abbot at Thang ring was to invite a young boy to the monastery in 1646. The boy was recognized as the rebirth of the late lCang skya Grags pa 'od zer (d. 1641), and he would grow up to be one of the most important Buddhist lamas in the history of Sino-Tibetan relations, the Second lCang skya Ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan (1642-1714).
- 47 Later, the issue of rGyal sras Rin po che's skull and reliquary resurfaced. While 'Dan ma was residing at rTa rdzong (elsewhere written "sTa rdzong"), a certain Kyi kya Me rgan chos rje⁴³ dispatched a messenger to ask 'Dan ma to return to dGon lung to oversee the construction of the reliquary. The text is damaged in several parts of this crucial episode, but it appears that some of the monks who had previously opposed 'Dan ma were punished (pp. 51a.7-51b; Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 683/26a.1). 'Dan ma agreed to return with the skull and began his journey to dGon lung. However, a faction of monks insisted that Me rgan chos rje take the skull from 'Dan ma and that 'Dan ma should not be permitted to return to the monastery. 'Dan ma refused to abide by these conditions and was on the verge of departing when Me rgan salvaged the deal by making offerings to 'Dan ma and spending the night with him, receiving transmissions and permission-blessings from 'Dan ma (pp. 51a-52a).
- 48 When bTsan po "The Stern" Don grub rgya mtsho (1613-1665) became abbot of dGon lung (r. 1648-1650), he also tried to make amends by reproaching the congregation of monks and insisting that they apologize (p. 52a.5-7). bTsan po further tried to assuage 'Dan ma's fears by explaining that all of the older monks who had led the attacks on 'Dan ma, apart from a certain Disciplinarian Hor dum⁴⁴, had passed away. 'Dan ma was skeptical and felt sure there was a conspiracy against him. Nonetheless, he trusted the abbot bTsan po's sincerity and went to dGon lung where construction of the reliquary began (pp. 52a-53b).
- 49 At this point in the story, however, 'Dan ma was invited by some local leaders⁴⁵ to help them found a new monastery. This was mChod rten thang, a large and important dGe lugs monastery on the northeastern fringe of the Tibetan Plateau. He then bequeathed this monastery to sTong 'khor zhabs drung mDo rgyud rgya mtsho, another important figure in the dGe lugs expansion into Amdo and beyond⁴⁶.
- 50 'Dan ma was then invited by two local leaders⁴⁷ to the area of BA za ("Pa tsha"; Ch. Bazha 巴扎). There, he thought, "it makes no difference where one resides. I cannot not make a place for rGyal sras Rin po che's skull to reside". He therefore accepted the invitation and quickly rushed to the spot in question: Kan chen (pp. 53b-54a)⁴⁸. This is where rGyal sras' relics would remain.

- 51 The attention that the biography gives to the relics of these deceased lamas, particularly those of rGyal sras Rin po che, and the infighting that erupts around them, point to the power and significance of relics and reliquaries during this period of dGe lugs expansion. The reliquary of sKyid shod zhabs drung was significant for the growth and influence of dGon lung Monastery. The reliquary of rGyal sras established at Kan chen might have served a similar function had it been established at a more centrally located institution (such as dGon lung) or had its reputation not been impugned by the local leader (who suggested the relics were fake). In any case, as important as scholasticism and philosophy would prove to be for dGe lugs institutions in Amdo, dGe lugs monasteries in the early years were equally or even more dependent upon the power of lamas and tantric adepts, dead and alive, for their protection and reputations⁴⁹.

'Dan ma, the institution man

- 52 Beginning in 1654 (a Horse Year; one of the few years given in the entire biography), 'Dan ma dedicated himself to building up the infrastructure of mChod rten thang (pp. 54b.5-55a.5)⁵⁰. Donations were provided by rGyal 'bum rtse of BA za ("Pa tsha rgyal 'bum rtse"), and 'Dan ma himself drew up the designs⁵¹. He also spent time establishing philosophical scholastic methods at nearby religious centres⁵². Eventually he returned to nearby Kan chen, where much fundraising and building had taken place, and, although he had not intended to found a monastery there, that is precisely what ended up happening.
- 53 The name 'Dan ma gave this monastery (*grwa tshang*) was Theg chen thar ba gling. Later, as scholasticism became established, it was called dGa' ldan legs bshad gling (p. 56b.5-6), although it is often referred to colloquially as Kan chen dgon. Its location is quite remote, and it never grew to enormous proportions, although it is said to have had around 100 resident monks at the end of the 17th century (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 1998, p. 342).

Figure 4. Kan chen Monastery

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- 54 'Dan ma's description of his institution-building there exemplifies the very hands-on instruction that was required to introduce dGe lugs monasticism to Amdo and from there into Mongolia. "I appointed disciplinarians, cantors, cooks, water-bearers⁵³, and so forth, and I explained to them 'this one has to do this'" (p. 52a.2-3). He gave particular attention to the manner in which the disciplinarians were to solicit "mass teas" (*mang ja*) from the laity: "The monks do not need to ask for mass tea offerings. The responsibility for [getting] the mass teas to drink for the monks is that of the disciplinarians and such officers" (p. 56a.5-7). This was a typical dGe lugs instruction for ensuring that the prerogative to interact with lay patrons was that of the institution (the monastery) rather than the monks (Jansen 2018, pp. 128-129).
- 55 Likewise, 'Dan ma established the liturgical program for Kan chen dgon, instructing the monks on the importance of reciting the evening obstacle-clearing ritual (*sku rim*), how to recite the prayer to Tārā (sGrol ma) and to repeatedly recite the *Heart Sutra*, how to prepare ritual cake offerings for the forms of the Glorious Goddess (lHa mo), with which he was associated (see pp. 43a-b), and penning a breviary (*chos spyod*) for the monastery. 'Dan ma is said to have held himself to the same standards as every other monk, attending the fortnightly confession of sins and attending the daily services, underscoring the idea that he was a genuine practitioner and that his monastery was disciplined and rigorous (pp. 56a-b).

Death and dating

- 56 The final part of the *Tsit+tar bcings ba* turns to problems with 'Dan ma's eyesight (*mig 'grib*), his disciples' requests for him to tell his life story, and his death. The voice changes here. The pronoun "I" (*nga*) is used for the first time to refer not to 'Dan ma (when he is quoted as speaking) but to the author (e.g. pp. 58a.7-58b.1, 65b.1). Likewise,

we see a greater frequency in the use of the phrases “he said” (*gsung*) and “he himself spoke” (*nyid kyi zhal nas*) in the last fifteen folios (pp. 57b-71a), indicating that the author now sees it necessary to more regularly distinguish what the master said from what he, the author, says. This is likely due to the fact that this last part of 'Dan ma's life was not recounted from the master but is being told here for the first time by our author.

- 57 At first 'Dan ma resisted the requests his disciples made for “supplication prayers” and “praises” describing his life and exploits. However, in his seventy-fifth year of life he relented, citing his old age and their fervent and persistent requests. Moreover, the previous *ad hoc* efforts by students to record and collect the verses he occasionally composed were said to have resulted in products that were insufficient and difficult to comprehend (pp. 58b.5-59a.6). 'Dan ma bound the disciples to secrecy, warning them of severe punishment for repeating his life story to others before he died. He also told them that, after he died, they must continue to treat his story with respect, transmitting it “as if a secret” to those who wanted to hear it (pp. 59a.6-59b.1). This may help to explain the paucity of materials regarding the life of 'Dan ma.
- 58 'Dan ma's decline began in the winter, the eleventh month of the year before his death, when he went to go to the bathroom and was unable to stand back up without assistance (p. 65a.3). In the first month of the following year, he had a cushion placed in the middle of his room and proclaimed that he needed to meditate. Shortly thereafter rumors spread that 'Dan ma had died in his sleep. The author of our biography rushed to his side in tears, exclaiming along with his fellow disciples, “we are blind men in the middle of a plain! Where have you gone?!” At that point 'Dan ma reemerged from his prolonged meditation session and replied, “you all really are blind men in the middle of a plain!” He then explained to them that there was no need for a lavish funeral ceremony on his behalf (*dge rtsa*) and that his remaining wealth should be used for mass tea offerings at the monastery (66b.4-5).
- 59 The disciples explained to 'Dan ma that he had been “as if asleep” for twenty-three days⁵⁴, which pleased 'Dan ma to learn (66a.4-67b.1). Free of any ailments (*skyon*), signs of his impending death began to appear, after which he “dissolved into the expanse of reality”. That was followed by a week of indications that he had attained the dharma-body of clear light, although he is also said to have constructed a perfect reward body (*long spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*) while in the Bardo (p. 67b.2-4). His body was cremated, and the Master of Offerings (*mchod dpon*) Blo gros rgya mtsho took responsibility for his remains and possessions (pp. 68a.7-68b.7).
- 60 'Dan ma's year of death is somewhat unclear. Mi nyag mgon po, in his important reference work *Gangs can mkhas dbang rim byon gyi rnam thar mdor bsdus* [Concise biographies of the succession of Tibetan scholars], says that 'Dan ma passed away early one morning in the Wood-Dragon year (1664). However, neither of the two sources that he cites provides a year of death for 'Dan ma (Mi nyag mgon po *et al.* 1996, p. 162). The present biography gives extremely few dates, although, significantly, it does give us his age at one point close to the end of his life. When his disciples are petitioning him to tell the story of his life, he concedes, citing his old age of 75 (p. 59a.5). That would be the year 1661 according to Tibetan and Monguor reckoning of age. The text then makes a few other significant references to dates (pp. 64a.6-7; 65a.2-3; and, 65b.3), culminating two years later “on the evening of the first day of the second month” when he passed away (pp. 67a.5-67b.2). This would place his death in 1663⁵⁵. However, a biography of

Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho records 'Dan ma's death as occurring in 1665 ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 184). More research is needed, although 1663 and 1665 appear to be the most likely candidates.

- 61 His disciples include mostly figures from the dPa' ris region in far northeastern Amdo. Dka'u (Dka' bcu?) dGe 'dun blo gros, also known as Sgom zhis grub chen dGe ba bzang po (b. 1631), would go on to found Stong shags bkra shis chos gling in neighboring Ledu County. Lu'u kya⁵⁶ chos rje Don yod chos grags served as the fifteenth abbot⁵⁷ of dGon lung (r. 1661-1665). A certain Offering Master Hor skyong (Hor skyong 'bul dpon) avoided 'Dan ma at first, as he was upset with 'Dan ma for having taken rGyal sras Rin po che's relics elsewhere. Later, however, while in Central Tibet, the Panchen Lama reprimanded him, after which Hor skyong sought out 'Dan ma and his teachings (pp. 59b-60a). Incidentally, Hor skyong 'bul dpon was also charged with greeting the Fifth Dalai Lama when the latter passed by dGon lung Monastery in 1653 (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 694/31b.2). Other, unidentified disciples include Li kyA rab 'byams pa, Lu'u gyA dka' bcu⁵⁸, and Thu'u gon Tshul khriims rin chen⁵⁹. Perhaps his most famous disciple is bTsan po ("The Stern") Don grub rgya mtsho, who studied under 'Dan ma at sGo mang College.

Conclusion

- 62 The spread of the dGe lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism from Central Tibet to the northeastern corner of the Tibetan Plateau – Kökenuur and Amdo – and from there on to Mongolia, usually begins with the famous meeting between the Third Dalai Lama and the leader of the Western Tümed Mongols Altan Khan in 1578 beside Lake Kökenuur⁶⁰. Often the narrative then jumps forward in time to the founding of Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil by the First 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa in 1709. Still precious little is known about the roles of other dGe lugs lamas and institutions in the dissemination of the dGe lugs school in Amdo in the intervening years.
- 63 Contemporary evidence for this crucial period in the growth of the dGe lugs school is not as abundant as it is for later centuries. One is often forced to rely upon biographies of eminent lamas from the period or Mongol-, Manchu-, or Chinese-language Qing imperial archives. Gray Tuttle and Leonard van der Kuijp have utilized biographical sources to reveal the active role played by the sixteenth abbot of sTag lung Monastery, Kun dga' bkra shis (1536-1605) in Tibetan-Mongol-Chinese relations in the late 16th century⁶¹. Tuttle has also published several articles in which he utilizes later sources to carefully describe some of the early dGe lugs institutions in Amdo or to construct a synoptic view of the development of dGe lugs institutions across time and space (see, for example, Tuttle 2016, 2012, 2010, and 2017). Ikejiri Yōko, utilizing Mongol-language archives from the early Qing, has recently shown how Thang ring Monastery⁶² (founded in 1619) along with Gro tshang dgon (better known by its Chinese name, Qutan si 瞿曇寺; founded in 1392 and lavishly supported by the Ming Dynasty) were networked with dGon lung Monastery and provided the latter with much of its first generation of administrative and scholastic leadership (IkejiriYōko 2018, pp. 55-56)⁶³. Recent scholarship on sKyid shod zhab drung has discussed the influence of this scion of the most important aristocratic family of dBus in promoting the dGe lugs school in Amdo (Ban Shinichiro 2017; Schwieger 2013; Sullivan 2019). And Victoria Sujata's study of the First Shar Lama sKal ldan rgya mtsho (2005) has demonstrated the

connections that sKal ldan rgya mtsho's meditative practices and enlightenment songs (*mgur*) had with Central Tibetan predecessors and how he was instrumental in the expansion of dGe lugs teachings and institutions in Amdo⁶⁴.

- 64 In this article I have examined the life of another important figure, the Great Accomplished One from 'Dan ma, Tshul khrims rgya mtsho. As we have seen, he was described in the earliest history of Amdo as one of the guiding lights or "celestial orbs" ("the sun and the moon") of dGe lugs Buddhism in Amdo. He was also closely associated with many of the known and important figures and institutions from this early period: rGyal sras Rin po che, Chos pa Rin po che and his brother Shar sKal ldan rgya mtsho, dGon lung Monastery, Thang ring Monastery, sKyid shod zhabs drung, and the Pañchen Lama.
- 65 More importantly, a review of 'Dan ma's life and the contextualization of his life alongside other early dGe lugs pa in Amdo demonstrate the unique characteristics of the dGe lugs school in this period. In descriptions of this time and these figures, considerable attention is given to apotropaic and fierce tantric rites during the dBus-gTsang war and as the dGe lugs pa founded new monasteries on the frontier between Tibet, Mongolia, and China. dGe lugs lamas, such as 'Dan ma and his guru, the Pañchen Lama, drew on the ideas and imagery of other schools (particularly the bKa' brgyud) in their spiritual practice. This together with a rhetoric of ecumenism lent these figures an air of superiority – of comprehensiveness and of rising above the fray – that was advantageous in Amdo, where other schools of Tibetan Buddhism and lay tantric traditions maintained institutions and traditions that were centuries old. Relics and reliquaries were fought over, and older, family-based religious institutions (such as the Zi na sgar ba) still exercised great influence, making demands upon dGe lugs lamas no matter the spiritual and scholastic credentials they professed.
- 66 The religious and political terrain of Amdo in this early period was an embattled one and was markedly different from the period after the Dalai Lama's Dga' ldan pho brang government was established. To be sure, 'Dan ma and other lamas from this early period appreciated and gave attention to those elements we have come to expect of dGe lugs monasticism: discipline, the institutionalization of roles, scholasticism. However, navigating and succeeding in that earlier terrain required them to acquire and retain a versatile skillset that could address the political and spiritual forces that still operated there and that threatened the expansion of the dGe lugs Buddhaddharma.

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NOTES

1. Research for this article was supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, the Fulbright Scholar Program, and Academia Sinica in Taiwan. Nyi ma 'dzin also lists the First lCang skya Grags pa 'od zer (d. 1641), although no dates are provided for his time in Central Tibet, which likely overlapped with 'Dan ma's. Also, *contra* Nyi ma 'dzin, other biographies of lCang skya say that he participated in the debate circuit at Ngam ring Monastery, not in Lhasa.
2. The earliest, as I explain below, is found in Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma's *dGon lung gi dkar chag* [Chronicle of dGon lung Monastery] from 1775.
3. Gray Tuttle has created a periodization of the dGe lugs school in Amdo that includes an earlier period from 1412-1459. While it is true that some important dGe lugs monasteries were founded during this period, particularly south and southwest of Lanzhou along the Sino-Tibetan frontier, these do not appear to reflect an intensive or widespread attempt to promote the dGe lugs school outside of Central Tibet. dGe lugs pa traveling to or from Amdo at the end of the 16th century and beginning of the 17th century may be understood as the first generation of dGe lugs evangelists if we assume the start of that dGe lugs expansion into Amdo and beyond to coincide with the Third Dalai Lama's peregrinations there in the 1570s and 1580s. This coincides with Tuttle's second period, "the Peak of Central Tibetan Influence" (Tuttle 2012).
4. I presume that the manuscript itself is stored away for safe keeping.
5. Another example is "*nged rnams la*", where the *nged rnams* (us) is referring to 'Dan ma's disciples (p. 65b.1).
6. E.g. the use of the question particle "i" (otherwise written as "e") (pp. 10b.2, 11b.5, *passim*).
7. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out, as an anonymous reviewer reminded me, that Thu'u bkwan's biography of 'Dan ma is longer than that for any of the other forty-three abbots discussed in his chronicle of dGon lung. Separately, the manuscript is not limited to "sermons on meditation", although, as I will discuss below, 'Dan ma's meditation practice and achievements do figure prominently in the story of his life.
8. The first is "the location of his birth".
9. This is Sum pa the Elder (*che ba*) Dam chos rgya mtsho (fl. 1604-1650).
10. Tib. *nyid*. This is likely a reference to rGyal sras.
11. The *Tsit-tar bcings ba* tells us that rGyal sras Rin po che only taught the dGon lung monks "for about two years" (p. 7b.4-5). However, Thu'u bkwan III tells us that rGyal sras remained there for six years and left in 1609 (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 650/9b.2-3).
12. The Fourth Dalai Lama was said to have been the abbot of both 'Bras spungs and Se ra Monasteries at the time (p. 12b.3-4).
13. See the biography of Lab pa rab 'byams pa bSod nams grags pa found in bsTan pa bstan 'dzin 2003, p. 570.
14. lCags mkhar; 'jigs byed grags po'i gtor chen drug cu ba; and, lCags mkhar gtor chen drug cu pa. For the latter, full name, see Cuevas 2017, pp. 13-14, n. 25.
15. Cuevas 2017, p. 13. The biography of the Fourth Dalai Lama also refers to the ritual practices of the Sixty Ritual Cakes as belonging to "the tradition of practices of bDen sa rje drung" (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2007, p. 310/43b.4).
16. This is the implication of the rhetorical remark regarding the rite found in biography of the Fourth Dalai Lama, "how can one catch the fish's head with that [i.e. with something other than the Fortress of the Sixty]?" (*nya mgo ci non*) (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2007, p. 309/43a.6). Cuevas (2017, p. 12) also suggests this.
17. It was introduced at dGon lung byams pa gling and mChod rten thang in far northeastern Amdo. Cuevas has also demonstrated how the identity of the Amdowa Brag dkar sngags rams pa Blo bzang bstan pa rab rgyas (ca. 1647-1727) was also closely tied to these tantric and fierce rites

associated with Vajrabhairava (Cuevas 2017). Brag dkar's date of death must be 1727 or later. See note in Sullivan 2021.

18. The year, 'gal byed, is given in the biography of the Fourth Dalai Lama, which itself is citing a work by mKhar nag Lo tsA ba (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2007, p. 309/43a.1).

19. Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2007, pp. 307/42a.6-308/42b.2. The Chinese translation of the Dalai Lama's biography is also very useful (Wu shi Dalai Lama Awangluosangjiacuo (Dalai Lama V) 2006, pp. 307-313).

20. The name and title of this individual are obscured in 'Dan ma's biography. Thu'u bkwan provides them in his chronicle of dGon lung (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 24b.3).

21. These are the dGe ldan bka' brgyud rin po che'i phyag chen rtsa ba rgyal ba'i gzhung lam and the dGe ldan bka' brgyud rin po che'i bka' srol phyag rgya chen po'i rtsa ba rgya par bshad pa yang gsal sgron me (Jackson 2001, p. 156. See also Jackson 2019).

22. *sprul pa'i glegs bam rin po che*.

23. Gung ru Sangs rgyas bkra shis, the twenty-third *dpon slob* of sGo mang College.

24. I have not identified who this was.

25. The Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography gives his title as 'Bur ltag pa.

26. The Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography gives his title as Dam bsnyag (Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2014, p. 62, 2009, p. 56).

27. He also says that Dom nyag pa was from sGo mang College and that Dom nyag pa and 'Brug ltag pa earned the *lha rams pa* degree, a title that would not be used until the next century (Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las 1997, p. 218).

28. The *sGo mang gi chos 'byung* could be drawing on the later *dGon lung gi dkar chag* by Thu'u bkwan, which, as I have explained above, is itself drawing on the biography of 'Dan ma. However, the *sGo mang gi chos 'byung* also provides additional details such as the year (1625) and the name of the *dpon slob* of sGo mang, suggesting that the author/editor of the *sGo mang gi chos 'byung* was either using an earlier source or drawing on multiple sources (such as the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama as well as Thu'u bkwan's text).

29. The Great Prayer Festival is not mentioned by the Pañchen Lama in his autobiography under any of the years from the time he took over as abbot of 'Bras spungs in 1617 to the events of 1624. It is mentioned for the first time under the year 1625 (Pañchen Lama IV Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1969 p. 134/67b.5-6).

30. The text merely states that he served as a "college's disciplinarian at 'Bras spungs", but we may surmise this to be sGo mang College.

31. My interpretation of this event is assisted by Thu'u bkwan's summary (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 671/20a.6-672/20b.1).

32. The Bsam blo *dge rgan rnams* gave him saffron cloth for his ordination robes, suggesting his affiliation with the regional house (p. 26b).

33. That the King of gTsang ruled in favour of the Bsam blo house is based on my reading of the following line: "*grus pa* ['grul pa?] *rnams nye rang* [i.e., *nye ring*] *med par bgos nas gcigtupagg la rdzun 'di 'dzin med na legs po byung*". Thu'u bkwan III also comes to this conclusion.

34. The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* merely states that "the common wealth was wasted" (*gzhung gis phyag sdzas pher chud gzan du bas*). The range of idiosyncratic and non-standard Tibetan is on full display here. Thu'u bkwan writes, "the [Ruler of] gTsang punished Dpon bsod nams chos 'phel and thereby wasted the common wealth [of the monastery]". "*gZhung*" can also refer to "the government", although it is also often used to refer to the that which is held in common, which would seem to be the meaning here.

35. 'Dan ma was again fully ordained before setting off, this time under the Pañchen Lama.

36. For one interested in the succession of attacks (*cho 'phrul*) and 'Dan ma's triumph over them, see pp. 25a, 28a, 30b-33a, and finally 37b-39a.
37. This period is one in which he moved about and "resided above dBen dgon, sNar thang Byang chen, and other such undetermined places" (p. 29a.2). He describes "residing alone in uninhabited secluded places (*dben gnas*). My previous clothes were wasting away, and I went about almost naked" (p. 37a.1-2). Chos 'phel in his entry for sNar thang Monastery mentions the ruins of a Byang chen gangs ri Monastery to the north of sNar thang (Chos 'phel 2010, pp. 161-2). It is interesting how the biography also shows 'Dan ma's recognition of the material benefits that come with having the marks and appearance of a genuine yogin (p. 41a).
38. This also appears in Brag dgon zhabs drung dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 110.14-17. These verses do not appear in Thu'u bkwan III's chronicle of dGon lung, however, which raises the possibility that the author of the mDo smad chos 'byung had access to the Tsit+tar bcings ba or to some other biography of 'Dan ma.
39. "Dad pa" is slightly obscured in the text but is provided by Thu'u bkwan (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 679/23a.6-680/23b.1).
40. This could be the Phar god Kun dga' bzang po of the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud, however, this identification is tenuous as the text is difficult to read here.
41. See especially pp. 27b, 38b, 29a, 39b-40a, 43b-44a, and 44a-b.
42. Joachim Karsten writes, "[thistupaa] is the centre of the whole monastic complex and the world of the dGe-lugs Order of Tibetan Buddhism, including Ch'ing Dynasty Mongolia, Manchuria and the northern part of East-Turkestan (Hsin-ching)" (1996, p. 81, n. 41).
43. He is described as "serving as the lama of the nine clans [*tsho*] of X", where "X" is unclear but may be 'Do' sad or something else altogether (51a.2).
44. This was un ang dGe skos, "Disciplinarian un ang", where un ang is also a local place name (sometimes spelled "Hor gdong").
45. "sDe un ang so" (more commonly spelled "bDe rgu" in other sources) in particular is mentioned.
46. Elsewhere it is said that the monastery was founded by sTong 'khor (also written as "sTong skor") where some of 'Dan ma's students were in retreat (Brag dgon zhabs drung dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 123.11).
47. Dpon grags pa and rGyal 'bum rtse.
48. He mentions the principal patrons of the area as "Pa tsha gzung 'bum rgyal and so on".
49. Part of the founding myth associated with dGon lung Monastery, for instance, recounts how Ba so sprul sku Bstan pa rgya mtsho was sent by the Fourth Dalai Lama to tame the earth spirits there (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 1998, p. 340). Thu'u bkwan III refers to this figure as rJe drung sprul sku bStan pa rgya mtsho, whose dates are 1560-1625 according to BDRC (P5465). Thu'u bkwan III writes, "shortly before that [i.e. before rGyal sras Rin po che arrived at the future site of dGon lung Monastery], rJe drung sprul sku bsTan pa rgya mtsho arrived at this place and erected a statue of the Lord of Secrets, Vajrapāṇi. The dreadful gods and spirits [of this place] were all tamed. In particular, in a black well beneath what [appeared] like the genitals of a Rock Ogress lived a pernicious serpent demon. A lightening bolt actually fell upon that well and caused a fire. Nowadays exorcisms are still performed in the lower part of the valley" (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, pp. 645/7a.3-5).
50. According to the mDo smad chos 'byung, this is also the year that 'Dan ma built the reliquary for rGyal sras' relics (Brag dgon zhabs drung dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 110.7).
51. Mention is also made of the Fifth Dalai Lama's passage through the area – although that would have been in 1652 or 1653 – at which point 'Dan ma's younger brother, bSam bstan, was fully ordained under the Dalai Lama.
52. 'Dan ma "resided at the seat of the sNgo kho (sNgo khos [*sic*] *sdad nas*) and introduced these methods and reforms". This line is literally "Sngo kho took the seat [of mChod rten thang?]".

However, I follow Thu'u bkwan III in seeing 'Dan ma as the agent here. Thu'u bkwan tells us that 'Dan ma travelled to various places "along the 'Ju lag River such as to BA za and sNgo kho" (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 682/25b.4). In either case, the sNgo kho lama lineage regularly appears in the *mDo smad chos 'byung* (*Deb ther rgya mtsho*) and is closely associated with mChod rten thang.

53. Tib. *chab ril*. Assistants to the disciplinarians.

54. The later *dGon lung dkar chag* says that it was sixteen days (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 2000, p. 683/26a.4). I do not know why this discrepancy exists.

55. The text is quite damaged throughout, and so one cannot rule out the possibility that a significant reference to a date (e.g. "the following year") has been excised from the present manuscript.

56. Or Lu'u kyA, Lu'u gyA, etc. The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* mistakenly has Li kyA.

57. The *Tsit+tar bcings ba* calls him the thirteenth *dpon slob*.

58. This figure is apparently to be distinguished from 'Dan ma's friend, Lu gyA dge slong dGe 'dun dar rgyas. Thu'u bkwan III changes Lu gyA bka' bcu's title to "Lin kya dka' bcu" (Thu'u bkwan III Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000, p. 683/26a.2).

59. Thu'u gon has a dream in which he is told to offer a long-life prayer (*brtan bzhu*) to 'Dan ma. He thus travels to see 'Dan ma and does so (62a).

60. The exact meeting spot is said to be Cabciyal Monastery, which corresponds to what is today Chab cha County (Ch. Gonghe xian 共和县) (Charleux 2006, p. 42, n. 133; Elverskog 2003, p. 160), and, more precisely, Jiala Village 加拉村 in Qiabuqia Township 恰卜恰乡 (Qin Yujiang 1995; my thanks to one of this article's anonymous reviewers for this reference).

61. A confusing typo was introduced into the title of their article, providing the dates for the life of Kun dga' bkra shis's disciple, Kun dga' snying po / Tāranātha, in place of those for Kun dga' snying po himself (Kuijp & Tuttle, 2015).

62. Its full name is Thang ring bshad grub gling or Thang ring dga' ldan bshad sgrub gling. Located in present-day Minhe County 民和县.

63. Kung Ling-wei also utilizes archival materials from the early Qing to offer some important and novel insights into the early dGe lugs school in Amdo (Kung 2015 and 2018).

64. Bryan Cuevas's study of the First Brag dkar sngags ram pa (2017) looks at a slightly later figure and his role in promoting the dGe lugs pa in Amdo.

ABSTRACTS

This article studies and contextualizes a recently discovered biography of one of the earliest dGe lugs evangelists in Amdo, 'Dan ma Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (1578-1663/65). The life of 'Dan ma exemplifies important aspects of the dGe lugs school during its period of contest with other Buddhist schools (particularly the Karma bKa' brgyud school) and before the establishment of the Dalai Lama's dGa' ldan pho brang government. In particular, it reflects a tendency among dGe lugs pas of this period toward ecumenism, retreat, and tantra, which stands in contrast to the mature dGe lugs school of large-scale institutions, discipline, and philosophy. It also demonstrates the importance of dGe lugs lamas other than the Fifth Dalai Lama (born only in 1617) for the spread of the dGe lugs school in Amdo and beyond.

Cet article étudie et contextualise une biographie récemment découverte de l'un des plus anciens évangélistes dGe lugs d'Amdo, 'Dan ma Tshul khribs rgya mtsho (1578-1663/65). La vie de Dan ma illustre des aspects importants de l'école de dGe lugs au cours de sa période de concours avec d'autres écoles bouddhistes (comme le Karma bKa' brgyud) et avant la fondation du gouvernement de dGa' ldan pho brang du Dalai Lama. En particulier, cela reflète une tendance chez les dGe lugs pas de cette période vers l'œcuménisme, la retraite et le tantra, ce qui contraste avec l'école mature de dGe lugs des institutions à grande échelle, de la discipline et de la philosophie. Cela démontre également l'importance des lamas autres que le cinquième dalaï-lama (né seulement en 1617) pour la diffusion de l'école dGe lugs à Amdo et au-delà.

INDEX

Keywords: Geluk, Amdo, Tibetan Buddhism, biography, ecumenism, non-sectarianism

Mots-clés: Gelug, Amdo, bouddhisme tibétain, biographie, œcuménisme, non-sectarisme

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