

COMING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN:  
TRANSFORMATIONS OF  
CONTEMPLATIVE CULTURE  
IN EASTERN TIBET

ELIZABETH A. McDOUGAL

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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
University of Sydney

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### Abstract

Since Tibet's abrupt meeting in the 1980s with the modernizing forces of capitalism, science and the Chinese government's socialist policies on religion, Buddhist culture in Eastern Tibet is shifting towards a valuing of scholastic knowledge over yogic, experiential knowledge. This is evident in contemporary Tibetan discussions where practitioners are criticized who do not marry their meditation and yogic practices with in-depth textual study. It is also evident in a move of monastics from retreat centres to study centres. The shift is particularly apparent in Nang chen (Ch. Nangqian), a former kingdom in Khams, Eastern Tibet, where oral lineages that engaged in tantric *sādhanā* and yogas without extensive dialectical study used to fill the region's many hermitages. This research takes Gad chags dGon pa<sup>1</sup> in Nang chen as an example of Tibet's earlier contemplative culture, and juxtaposes the nunnery's determination to preserve its original practice traditions with the shift towards scholasticism taking place elsewhere in the region. The research investigates factors and influences behind the trend for increased scholasticism, while considering future pathways for Tibetan yogic culture and questions for further research.

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer to use the Tibetan term *dgon pa* than its often translated 'monastery' at times in this paper. The term is broader and includes nunneries as well as some large hermitages, and therefore better describes the type of monastic community that was common in Nang chen, the particular setting of this research. In this case Gad chags dGon pa is a nunnery.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about a new trend of degree-oriented scholasticism in many Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa* that has emerged over the last decade. Over the same period of time and for some of the same reasons a new trend of ethnographical research has been emerging in Tibetan studies. Various political and logistical reasons precluded ethnographies from being a common method of foreign research on Tibetan Buddhism in China prior to the 1980s. Since Deng Xiaoping's liberalizing reforms granted freedom of religious belief for its citizens and opened China's market to tourism, a slowly growing body of fieldwork-based research has been investigating questions on the status of Tibetan religion and culture in modern China. This fieldwork-based research is adding a new dimension to the "ongoing war of representations concerning contemporary Tibetan religion in China" remarked on by Kapstein (Kapstein 2004: 230). Contrary to the earlier, prevailing perspective in Western countries that Tibetan Buddhism is being systematically eradicated in China by its Communist government<sup>2</sup>, these ethnographies have discovered that in many ways Tibetan Buddhism in China has revived and thrives.

As Yü points out, these ethnographies are a step away from the primarily textual basis that until recently has been the main informant of Tibetan studies focused on Khams and A mdo. They are also a step away from the common perception of Central Tibet as the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist world (Yü 2006: 6). The fieldwork research of Germano, Goldstein and Kapstein, Gaerrang, Gayley, Makley, Schrempf, Terrone, Turek and Yü and others has observed a Tibetan Buddhist revival taking place in China in which Eastern Tibet is the new cultural and religious centre. Han Chinese are now a considerable demographic participating in Tibetan Buddhism in China, and form a large part of the religion's wider social context today.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example John Powers *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 18.

Germano's 1998 'Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet' describes the recovery of institutional presence and the unearthing of sacred objects by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (mKhan po 'Jigs med Phun tshogs, 1933-2004) that reconstituted the rNying ma tradition in parts of Eastern Tibet after the Cultural Revolution (Germano 1998). I agree with Yü's assessment of Germano that while what was 'dismembered' of the body of Tibet is clear and almost universally understood<sup>3</sup>, what is being 're-membered' in the Tibetan Buddhist revival requires continued ethnographic and theoretical investigation that goes beyond its localized, physical setting (Yü 2006: 6-11). The present research is a part of further investigations on this and finds that Tibetan Buddhism in China is continuing to reformulate itself according to rapidly changing needs of a rapidly modernizing society. The overwhelming speed and spectrum of changes to life in Eastern Tibet over the last twenty-five years have resulted in a Tibetan religious revival that at some point braced itself. I see this expressed in the increase of scholarship in the practice lineages of Eastern Tibet that is the topic of this thesis. What started in Eastern Tibet between the 1980s and early 2000s as a revival of tantric practices and practice communities – as observed by Germano at gSer rta, Terrone in mGo log, Turek in Nang chen and others – has in my observations over the last ten years transformed into a movement of institutionally strengthening communities that emphasize degree-oriented study. Thus the monks and nuns of several of Gad chags's branch *dgon pa* who in the 1990s spent their days practising a curriculum of ritual and meditation based on Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho's commentary on a *gter ma* (concealed treasure), now spend at least half of each day studying classical texts of Mahāyāna philosophy. In the majority of other rNying ma and bKa' brgyud *dgon pa* in Nang chen the same shift to more scholastic activities has been occurring over the last decade.

Due in part to the relative scarcity of recent field research in Tibet and to the rapidly changing scene of the Tibetan Buddhist revival, the present research is the first to address this trend towards intensified scholasticism in Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa*.

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<sup>3</sup> Namely, the systematic demolition of Tibetan Buddhism and all religions in China from the 1950s to 1970s (including the Cultural Revolution), which is at times acknowledged even by Chinese statesmen (Yü 2006:7).

Scholarship and practice are both important components of all Tibetan Buddhist schools, which are based on the philosophical traditions of ancient India's Nalanda University and on the practice methods of Vajrayāna. The recent trend is significant in that it appears to diverge from earlier patterns of scholastic revival in Tibetan history, particularly in its attitudes of skepticism and in the materialism of its degree-orientation<sup>4</sup>. The new emphasis on scholasticism is especially visible in Nang chen, a former kingdom in northwest Khams and the particular setting of this research. Eighty-three per cent of the *dgon pa* in present-day Nang chen are sub-lineages of the bKa' brgyud and rNying ma schools<sup>5</sup> whose traditional emphasis was on liturgical, contemplative training and the oral instructions of a qualified guru<sup>6</sup> as the highest instructive principle.

In addressing the contemplative culture of Nang chen this research adds to discussions on the significance of Khams in the totality of Tibetan Buddhist culture and history<sup>7</sup>, which has often been overlooked by Tibetan studies relative to Central Tibetan perspectives. The research is also timely in that the contemplative traditions and tantric masters that characterized much of Eastern Tibetan culture and made it significant in Tibet's history are showing signs of waning in China over the last decade.

## Methodology

Set as they are in a complex web of forces and rapid social changes, my research questions have required a multi-faceted approach of participatory observation, interviews and theoretical analysis. My starting off point for this thesis was the participatory observations I made of a trend towards increased scholasticism in

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<sup>4</sup> I expect the same qualities are seen in the scholastic dGe lugs and Sa skya schools today as well, though I have not focused on these schools in this research.

<sup>5</sup> Karma Don-grub Phun-tshogs shows that 59% of Nang chen *dgon pa* are bKa' brgyud, 24% are rNying ma, 13% are Sa skya and 4% are dGe lugs (Karma 1999).

<sup>6</sup> i.e. 'lama' (*bla ma*) in Tibetan

<sup>7</sup> See discussions in Oldmeadow (2012), Samuel (1993, 2005), Smith (2012) and Turek (2013).



Tibetan practice lineages<sup>8</sup> over the last ten years on annual visits to Nang chen and Gad chags dGon pa. I observed a similar trend in India while living as a nun in Tibetan nunneries there between 2000 and 2014, though exiled Tibetan Buddhist communities are not the focus of this research. My observations included the marked physical changes I saw year by year in the development of towns, infrastructure, technology, religious structures and study programs in Nang chen<sup>9</sup>. They also included Tibetan conversations, debates and lectures that I heard and participated in, both first-hand and on the internet.

Along with participatory observation, my main source of data for my study of Gad chags dGon pa consists of interviews that I conducted and digitally recorded with Gad chags nuns and lamas in 2006 and 2013. In 2006 I began working for Gad chags dGon pa as its English secretary and as translator for the Gad chags lama most active in providing for the nuns' material needs. This allowed me two-month visits to Nang chen almost every year as a translator for Western visitors to the nunnery (usually sponsors and students of Gad chags lamas), and to engage in my own short meditation retreats at various hermitages in Nang chen. The 2006 interviews were conducted with the Gad chags nuns on my first visit to the nunnery that lasted one month. The interviews were done primarily for my own interest as a Buddhist nun, and recorded because I deemed them valuable for sharing with other Western Buddhists. In most interviews I was alone with an individual nun and focused my questions on how she viewed her Buddhist practices and life at Gad chags dGon pa.

The 2013 interviews were conducted for the sake of interested Western students and supporters of the Gad chags tradition. dBang drag Rinpoche, a senior Gad chags lama, was present at each interview coaxing the nuns to recall their stories for

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically sub-lineages of the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud schools that have traditionally emphasized a guru's oral instructions and practice experience as the most important learning principles.

<sup>9</sup> One example is that the last section of my journey to Gad chags dGon pa in 2006 was on horseback. A dirt road reached only halfway to the nunnery; after that we drove for several hours over fields and hills before saddling horses for the last section. By 2015 a paved road had been built nearly all the way to Gad chags dGon pa and the remaining 20km is a dirt road regularly travelled by local Tibetan families in their SUVs, transport trucks and constructions workers.

posterity of the nunnery and for the benefit of foreign Buddhists. I formulated the questions, along with two other Western Buddhist visitors, and posed them to the nuns. The main theme of our questions was the elderly Gad chags nuns who survived the Cultural Revolution and re-established the nunnery and its traditions from the early 1980s. We wanted to learn about these nuns who were responsible for the continuation of Gad chags's female lineage to the present, and to record their stories as no other documentation of their lives had ever been made. We were also interested to hear the interviewed Gad chags nuns' understanding of their Buddhist practices. When necessary during the interviews dBang drag Rinpoche translated the nuns' Nang chen dialect into the Central Tibetan dialect that I am competent in. I transcribed and translated the 2006 and 2013 interviews in 2007 and 2014. dBang drag Rinpoche helped again during those times, along with a Gad chags nun, to clarify phrases of the Nang chen dialect that I did not understand.

In 2015 during the year I composed this thesis I had further informal discussions with several Eastern Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople. These discussions provided me with local perspectives about Tibetan contemplative culture, about how it has been changing in the last few decades and possible causes of these changes.

I augmented and analysed the above-mentioned data using literature from various research fields. While these research fields are disparate, each one directly relates to the questions of my thesis. These research fields cover the following: Chinese studies on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) policies on religion; Buddhist historical studies on Buddhism's encounter with science and modernity in Sri Lanka, Burma and globally; orality and literacy studies; and Tibetan anthropological studies, especially fieldwork-based research on the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in post-Mao China. I have given more attention to the fieldwork of researchers who have spent extended periods of time in China over the last ten years. This is because the situation in Tibet is changing so rapidly since the 1980s that it requires sustained observation to understand the many factors at play in Tibetan Buddhist culture in China today.

## Literature review

The fieldwork-based studies of Gaerrang, Yü and Turek have provided the most relevant information for this research and have shaped my thesis considerably. Gaerrang<sup>10</sup> offers insights on the CCP's policies and perception of Tibetan nomads, and how its 'Develop the West' campaign is restructuring their lives and straining the material context of Tibetan cultural values (Gaerrang 2012). His study also reveals the self-perception of many Tibetan nomads today, and the tremendous influence of bLa rung sGar monk-scholars (and implicitly, Tibetan Buddhism) on the Eastern Tibetan laity via an animal slaughter renunciation movement and other aspects of ethical reforms. Gayley explores the same slaughter renunciation movement and the inherent tension in Tibetans' efforts to fulfil both Buddhist moral and cultural preservation, and the material demands of the modernizing economy (Gayley 2013).

Yü's research looks to the psychology of the Tibetan Buddhist revival and the recovery of human minds from the "destructive ideological consciousnesses" of the past century in China (Yü 2006: 10). Yü's exploration of the interface between Chinese and Tibetans in the Tibetan religious revival, and of the ideological history of modern China, provided valuable insights into the teaching style of Tibetan Buddhist teachers in China today.

Turek's synthesis of Tibetan historical literature on Nang chen and her analysis of the significance of yogins and their lineages in Nang chen and wider Khams society were invaluable for my research (Turek 2013, in press). Turek gives a detailed history of Nang chen's seminal yogin-kings of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud lineage, and that lineage's revival in the Ris med era and in a present-day instance of hermitic revival near sKyo brag monastery in Nang chen. Turek's theoretical analysis of religious revivals and the potential of Tibetan yogins to revitalize Tibetan cultural identity provided serious food for thought. Her research based on fieldwork from 2007 and

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<sup>10</sup> Gaerrang is a native Eastern Tibetan from Hongyuan County (Sichuan Province). He spent four years completing his PhD at University of Colorado and presently teaches at Sichuan University in Chengdu.

2008 lends credence to my emphasis on the significance of contemplative culture in pre-modern Eastern Tibetan society, though I have not observed since 2006 the ‘vast hermitic movement’ that Turek speaks of (Turek 2013: 100). A hermitic movement of Eastern Tibetan practice lineages was present in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Ris med era (as Turek shows), and must have been nascent in the first stages of the current Tibetan Buddhist revival – as observed also by Germano (1998) and Terrone (2009). Turek admits that tantric specialization is declining in Tibet in recent decades (Turek 2013: 8-9).

Kapstein’s research based on fieldwork from 1998 and 2000 looks at the monastic revival in Eastern Tibet and the cross-pollination of values taking place between Tibetan and Chinese participants in today’s Tibetan Buddhism (Kapstein 2004). Like Kolas and Thowsen (2005), Kapstein is informative on state school curricula taught to youth in Tibetan ethnic areas and how the expansion of secular education is revising the role of Tibetan monasteries, language and culture.

Further ethnographies of religious revival in Tibetan areas include Wellen’s study of the Premi people at the Yunnan-Sichuan border (Wellens 2010), and the works of both Makley and Schrempf that focus on ethno-religious movements and their correlative state-society relations in A mdo (Makley 2007, 2010; Schrempf 2002). As these areas have very different past and present backgrounds from Nang chen and do not have majority populations of bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma practice lineages, their studies only obliquely relate to the questions of my research.

Outside the field of Eastern Tibet, Cooke and Yang provide key information on the CCP’s religious policies and the political reality that now houses Tibetan Buddhism (Cooke 2005, 2009; Yang 2012). McMahan and Lopez both present a detailed background of Buddhist modernism and its East-West origins (McMahan 2008, 2012; Lopez 2002, 2009). Samuel’s discussions of pre-modern Tibetan societies and the uniquely Tibetan relationship between the ‘clerical’ and the ‘shamanic’ in Tibetan religion are an elevated point of reference for analysis (Samuel 1993, 2005). Cole and Cole gave me an introduction to the ideas of Goody and A.R. Luria (Cole & Cole

2006), and along with Ong present a stimulative discussion on the mental modes that accompany orally- and textually- transmitted knowledge (Ong 1986).

### **A note on terms and conventions**

In this paper I use the name ‘Eastern Tibet’ to refer to Tibetan ethnic regions outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) – traditionally Khams and A mdo, which comprise two thirds of the Tibetan Plateau<sup>11</sup>. In recent years these regions have had a markedly different socio-political atmosphere than the tightly controlled TAR and have been the general setting of my inquiries<sup>12</sup>. ‘Tibet’ will be used occasionally to refer to Tibetan regions of the PRC, not as an expression of political views but to avoid repetition of the long-winded ‘the TAR and Tibetan prefectures in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu’.

Typically in Tibetan texts the term ‘yogin’ (*rnal ’byor pa*) refers to an individual who has mastered the meditation and ‘yogas’ (*rnal ’byor*) of tantric Buddhism, which I discuss in more detail below in Chapter One. In this dissertation I use the term ‘yogin’ to refer to lay and ordained Tibetans who engage in prolonged periods of focused Vajrayāna practice at some stage in their lives, be they elite or novice. Thus ‘yogin’ in this dissertation refers to the type of person active in Tibet’s contemplative culture, particularly in bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma practice lineages. These yogic practice lineages populated the Nang chen region which is the focus of this research, and have traditionally emphasized oral instructions and practice over textual study. In the scholastic Geluk school where monks were generally discouraged from tantric practice until completing a decades-long curriculum of sūtra study<sup>13</sup>, yogins were a considerably smaller population.

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<sup>11</sup> Eastern Tibet is known in Tibetan as mDo Khams (comprising A mdo and Khams).

<sup>12</sup> One reason for the different socio-political atmosphere is that the TAR is effectively ruled by Beijing, whereas administration in Tibetan provinces outside the TAR is conducted mainly at county and prefecture levels, often with Tibetan civil servants participating. Religious and cultural matters therefore tend to reflect more local discretion in Eastern Tibet (Kapstein 2004: 249).

<sup>13</sup> Life in dGe lugs pa monasteries does entail a fair amount of tantric ritual in daily pujas, but serious yogic practice is typically pursued only by elite, senior monks.

I also use the term ‘contemplative’ interchangeably with ‘yogic’ (the adjectival form of ‘yoga’) in this dissertation. Both terms in the Tibetan context also imply ‘tantric’ as they refer to engagement of Vajrayāna tantric methods. The colloquial meaning of ‘contemplate’, or the Tibetan *bsam* as in *thos bsam sgom* (‘hearing, contemplating, meditating’), is to think or mentally reflect upon something. In this paper ‘contemplative’ instead accords with its religious sense of the mind in one-pointed prayer or meditation. A primary intent of Vajrayāna practice is for the mind to rest in, or cultivate the state of, nondual consciousness that transcends both subjectivity and objectivity. Tibetan contemplative practice is therefore different from the ratiocination of intellectual study, though the two processes traditionally complemented and informed each other in all Tibetan Buddhist schools. One way that Tibetan Buddhist schools differ is in the relative emphasis they put on each process.

All Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit words in this paper are transliterated, except for names and terms that have been assimilated into English, like lama, yoga, etc. Tibetan transliterations are written according to the Wylie scheme, and listed again with their translations in the glossary. Chinese transliterations are written in Pinyin without diacritics and preceded with ‘Ch.’ Sanskrit terms are transliterated with diacritics and preceded with ‘Skt.’

### **Outline of chapters**

Chapter One briefly explains the origins of Tibetan contemplative (or yogic) culture, and how it characterized Nang chen in Eastern Tibet before the 1950s in a high altitude society involving nomads, numerous monastic hermitages and a loose political structure run by Buddhist kings. A description of the practice culture and curriculum of Gad chags dGon pa acts as an example of Nang chen’s contemplative culture.

Chapter Two describes the setting of Tibetan contemplative culture in post-Mao China since the 1980s, particularly the position of Tibet’s traditional economy and

culture under the government's doctrine of scientific atheism and its forceful drive to modernize the Tibetan Plateau and its inhabitants. The chapter then turns to the central interest of this thesis: a recent and new emphasis on rationalized, degree-oriented study in Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa*, and how communities like Gad chags dGon pa who are retaining purely practice curricula are becoming a vestige of the past.

Chapter Three attempts to uncover the reasons behind the shift to rationalized study in Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa*. It considers government policies on religion; how conditions of colonialism under scientific-minded regimes may shape a scientific discourse in Buddhism; worldwide trends in modern Buddhism and their influence on Tibetan *dgon pa*; and the difference in mental modes associated with textually- and orally-transmitted knowledge. Also explored is how this difference in mental modes highlights the changing view in the minds of Eastern Tibetans as their religion is forced to modernize.

Chapter Four rounds off the considerations of Chapter Three by venturing suggestions for the future of Tibetan contemplative culture. It considers whether tantric Buddhism can survive under the authoritarian, atheist rule of the Chinese Communist Party; the social empowerment of Tibetan yogins and how they may continue within a counterculture of the future; and incentive for Tibetan yogins offered by Tibetan Buddhism expanding as an international religion.

The thesis' Conclusion connects the explorations of this research to recent statements made by Tibetan lamas about the future of Tibetan Buddhist contemplative culture. It overviews the results of the study and the methodological challenges faced therein, while identifying questions and avenues for further enquiry.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Going Up the Mountain: The Life of Contemplative Culture in Eastern Tibet

#### **The origins of Tibetan contemplative culture**

Buddhism is first a practical religion<sup>14</sup>, and Tibetan Buddhism – with its numberless mountain caves and its favouring of Vajrayāna – has for centuries specialized in contemplative experience. The import of Buddhism from India to Tibet began under Tibetan royal patronage in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a time that coincided with the last period of Buddhism in India when Vajrayāna (tantric Buddhism) was ascendant. It was thus Vajrayāna that came to Tibet, and with its practical methods for attaining direct experience of the philosophical truths of Mahayāna, found its long-term refuge at the rooftop of the world. In the wild and vast natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau, isolated by the mandate of a Buddhist government<sup>15</sup> and supported by a relatively simple herding and agricultural economy, dedicated Buddhist practitioners – yogins – spent years if not decades in mountain caves and hermitages. Tibetan yogins were lay and monastic, male and female, peasants and aristocrats, individual and collective. In many cases accomplished yogins were also prominent scholars who composed scriptures of authority that became central in the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>16</sup>.

A generic term for Vajrayāna methods is ‘yoga’, which comprises sophisticated methods for training the energetic mind-body complex of practitioners to expedite the realization of nondual wisdom (*ye she*). Vajrayāna yogic methods, along with

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<sup>14</sup> Pāli canonical literature presents the Buddha as a firm critic of metaphysical speculation who prioritized practice over theory. In the Aṭṭhakavagga of the Sutta-nipāta, the Buddha denies the ability of reason alone to comprehend ultimate truth (Sn 886; D I 16; Premasiri 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Though as Samuel (2005) has pointed out the isolation of Tibet tends to be exaggerated. The Lhasa government was perhaps more selective than exclusive of foreign visitors, and Tibetans were always in contact with the world outside.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of the ‘four main schools’ has crystallized since 1959 as Tibetans have had to organize their communities and monasteries in exile. Prior to this different enumerations were common, such as ‘Jam mgon Kong sprul’s presentation of the ‘eight practice lineages’ (*sgrub brgyud shing rta brgyad*) that include lineages not enumerated in the four main schools, like Zhi byed and rDo rje rNal ‘byor (Oldmeadow 2012: 72). Today, along with the four main schools Tibet’s Bon tradition is given equal status and rights as a religious tradition by the Central Tibetan Administration in exile.



their corollary Mahāmudrā (Phyag rgya Chen po) and Dzogchen (rDzogs chen; Skt. Mahāsandi or Maha-ati) meditation systems, are derived from Indian Buddhism. Throughout many centuries in Tibet they have developed a deep and sophisticated scholarly and textual expression. Their core, however, has always been the continuity of contemplative practice among a body of highly skilled and trained practitioners. The contemplative, or yogic, culture of Tibet has functioned to cultivate a population of practitioners who have developed far enough with their own practice to mediate the teachings effectively to the population as a whole and to assist them in a variety of other ways.

The four main Buddhist schools of Tibet – rNying ma, Sa skya, bKa’ brgyud and dGe lugs – have varying approaches to the Buddhist path<sup>17</sup>. Generally speaking, dGe lugs and Sa skya emphasize philosophical study in order to exhaust intellectual doubts about ultimate reality before meditation; while bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma emphasize meditation experience to understand ultimate reality as the nature of mind. Over the centuries these four lineages have been dispersed in different concentrations throughout the three traditional regions of Tibet: Central Tibet (dBus gTsang), A mdo and Khams<sup>18</sup>.

Since the Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet that began in the 1950s under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Tibetan regions have been included under the administration of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Central Tibet now roughly corresponds to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), while Khams<sup>19</sup> and A mdo cover large areas of Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces, and smaller parts of Gansu and Yunnan Provinces. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Fifth Dalai Lama unified Central Tibet with the backing of the Mongol king Gushri Khan, Central Tibet and A mdo have been majority dGe lugs regions, while Khams has had stronger concentrations of

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<sup>17</sup> Tibetan Buddhist lineages – for example the ‘Brug pa bKa’ brgyud, dPal yul rNying ma and ‘Khon lineage – are subsumed under one or more of these schools. Oldmeadow (2012: 18-19) points out that ‘schools’ in Tibetan Buddhism are a matter of monastic and institutional organization, whereas ‘lineage’ is a line of practice transmission from guru to disciples, like the Na ro Chos drug or Lam ‘bras.

<sup>18</sup> Prior to the Tibetan exile period, Tibet (Bod) was more regularly said to comprise five traditional regions: A mdo, Khams, mNga’ ri, dBus and gTsang.

<sup>19</sup> Some parts of western Khams are in the TAR, including Ri wo che and Chab mdo.

bKa' brgyud, Sa skya and rNying ma lineages. Though the Dalai Lamas and shrines of Lhasa were spiritual and cultural foci for Tibetans across the Plateau, the Central Tibetan government was not the political centre for many parts of A mdo and Khams. Rather, many parts of Eastern Tibet had more immediate political allegiances to local kings and chieftains with a high degree of autonomy under the Mongols, Manchus and Republicans (Kapstein 2004: 231-232). Kapstein notes that tribal and clan affiliations formed the fundamental organizational structures in Eastern Tibet, and society therefore enjoyed less rigidly hierarchical relations than did that of Central Tibet (Kapstein 2012: 232). Owing to this, practice lineages of the bKa' brgyud and rNying ma schools flourished in Khams around local traditions of religious and political authority, away from the centralized state power of Lhasa (Oldmeadow 2012; Samuel 1993; Turek 2013: 10).



'Eastern Tibet': Tibetan ethnic areas to the east of Central Tibet (traditionally Khams and A mdo).  
Credit: Kolas & Thowsen 2005: 2.

### **sGom sde Nang chen: ‘The Land of Meditators’**

Nang chen is situated in the southern part of Qinghai Province near the source of China’s three major rivers – the Yangtze, Yellow and Mekong – and is presently administered by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a county in Yushu Autonomous Prefecture. According to the Nang chen County office of Religious Affairs, Nang chen presently has 75 registered *dgon pa*. As was the case before the Cultural Revolution, Nang chen has highest relative population of monks and nuns in any ethnic Tibetan county of China<sup>20</sup> (Gruschke 2004: 249 n.3; Lobzang 2012).

Nang chen offers a convenient window on Tibetan contemplative culture as it is a region where lineages of yogic practice flourished under the patronage of successive Buddhist kings, some of whom were themselves renowned yogins (Turek 2013: 118; Tulku Urgyen 2005). An epithet traced to the 13<sup>th</sup> century calls Nang chen the ‘Land of Meditators’ (sGom sde Nang chen<sup>21</sup>) (’Jam dbyangs et al. 1995-1997, 2: 2-3) and its many hermitages have been a fertile source of Tibetan cultural production over the centuries, giving rise to famous yogins, *gter ston* (‘treasure revealer’) pilgrimage sites and incarnation lineages (*sprul sku*) (Turek 2013: 3).

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Nang chen was governed by a succession of eminent yogins of the ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud school, whose adeptness in *gtum mo* (yoga of psychic heat) earned them the title ‘Ras pa’ (‘Cotton-clad’) (Turek 2013: 115). Ras pa dKar po (1198-1262) and his ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud disciple-heirs consolidated religious and temporal power over Nang chen at their seat of sKu ’bum dGon pa through their patron-priest (*mchod yon*) union with the Mongol administration. Around this time Nang chen was divided into eighteen highland districts (*ri khag bco brgyad*), each

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<sup>20</sup> Lobzang estimates a population of 15,000 ordained saṅgha out of a total estimated Tibetan population of 70,000 in Nang chen (Lobzang 2012).

<sup>21</sup> The full epithet is ‘Family of Cotton-clad Ones, Land of Meditators’ (*Ras tshang sGom sde*). *Khamstod lo gyus* explains that the epithet is from the reign of the ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud masters in Nang chen from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, whose widespread activities influenced all men and women to be meditators (’Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 2-3). Cotton-clad meditators were followers of the early bKa’ brgyud lineage who were able to wear only a single cotton garment in both summer and winter because of the inner heat generated in their *gtum mo* practice. The epithet is also mentioned in Tshangs gsar 2005: 237-238; ’Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 81-82. and Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 13, 373 n. 16.

surrounding a principal monastery that in some cases shared administrative authority over their territories with the king. In 1300 Nang chen was legitimized as a kingdom by the Sa skya-Mongol diarchy when a son of the 'Bu Tre bo clan was enthroned as the first Nang chen king at Nang so Chen mo dGon pa ('Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 63).



**Image showing the general location of Nang chen and Gad chags dGon pa in Qinghai Province**

Turek, for her forthcoming ethno-history of Nang chen, reviewed recently published local sources and oral histories of Nang chen and observed in their narratives a common idealisation of the Nang chen kingship that evolved from the line of 'Bu Tre bo clan rulers. Turek finds in the narratives common legitimising strategies of the Nang chen kingship, such as society's belief system of tantric Buddhism and the power vested in kings through their prolonged periods of ritual retreat (Turek, in press). Turek notes the ardent interest in meditation retreats expressed by some of the Nang chen kings<sup>22</sup>, and that with its de-centralized political authority and its concentration of practice lineages Nang chen was an environment that encouraged the development of hermitages and numerous famous yogins over the centuries<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Turek notes that Tulku Urygen's *BLazing Splendor* and Karma 'Phrin las' *History of Nang chen* both extol the spiritual accomplishments of the Nang chen kings so much that they read like *rnam thar* hagiographies (Turek 2013: 118, n. 410).

<sup>23</sup> Examples of renowned Nang chen yogins: Ti shri Ras pa (12<sup>th</sup> century), Lus med rDo rje (13<sup>th</sup> century), SKyo brag Chos rje (14-15<sup>th</sup> centuries), Dung dkar ba (16<sup>th</sup> century), Grub dbang Tshogs gnyis

(Turek 2013: 118). With authority distributed among highland districts and their locally-run administrative and military units, Nang chen kings retained power not as active sovereigns, but to a large extent as ‘moral and social institutions’. The environment was one in which dedication to tantric practice was encouraged and highly valued (Gruschke 2004: 107; Turek 2013: 118).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Nang chen kingdom was given legitimacy by Gushri Khan, and then by the Qing dynasty ambans in Xining in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From the 1950s the CCP’s appropriation of Nang chen was carried out through a process of absorbing old power structures into CCP administration. Thus greater Nang chen was established in 1951 as ‘Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture’ with the incumbent Nang chen king as its head (Gruschke 2004: 33; ‘Jam-dyangs, et al. 1995-1997; Turek 2013: 119). Nang chen as indicated on present maps of the PRC is a fraction of the historical territory by the same name (Turek 2013: 120). With its large concentration of hermitages, and being nonaligned with the Central Tibetan political centre of the TAR, Nang chen has seen comparatively few Tibetan uprisings and until 2008 was little affected by CCP-imposed strictures and the presence of the state’s People’s Armed Police.

Nang chen is set at an average altitude of 3,645 metre (11,968 feet) and its predominant livelihood has been pastoralism, with many families tending herds of over a thousand yak and sheep<sup>24</sup>. Until the 1990s there were no phones or televisions and most transportation took place on foot, horseback and yak caravans. Most families had several children with at least one son or daughter in a local monastery or nunnery. Monks and nuns returned home during harvest seasons to collect food supplies that would last them for several months when shared amongst the members of their monastic community.

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and Tshangs dbyangs rGyam mtsho (19<sup>th</sup> century). gNam chos Mi ‘gyur, the *gter ston* of the gNam chos cycle, was also active in Nang chen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> Gruschke notes that less than one fifth of Nang chen’s pre-2008 population was involved in field cultivation (Gruschke 2008).

Most of Nang chen's *dgon pa* are located at 4000 metres (13,000 feet) or higher and were traditionally modelled as hermitages rather than monasteries, with a lifelong course of meditation, yoga and extended group *sāadhanā* cycles (*sgrub chen*) for their residents. Little meditation training is actually conducted in large Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, which are busy centres of clerical training in philosophy, arts and ritual. Instead meditation training is carried out in retreat centres annexed to a particular monastery, or in independent hermitages like many of Nang chen's *dgon pa*. As was the case in pre-Communist Tibet, at the time of writing nearly all bKa' brgyud and rNying ma monasteries in Nang chen (and Eastern Tibet) have a three-year retreat centre where monastics traditionally trained in Vajrayāna practices, including *gtum mo*<sup>25</sup>, for at least one intensive three-year period in their lives.

Broadly speaking, the course of training in a Tibetan Buddhist three-year retreat is as follows<sup>26</sup>: in the first year, completion of *sngon 'gro* preliminary practices along with development of *zhi gnas* (*śamatha*) and *lhag mthong* (*vipaśyanā*)<sup>27</sup> in tandem with guru yoga (*bla sgrub*) *sāadhanā*; in the second year, emphasis on guru yoga on the basis of *yi dam* (personal meditation deity) *sadhanā* and their mantra accumulations, along with cultivation of *lhag mthong* and Mahāmudrā and/or Dzogchen meditation; in the third year, subtle-body practices including *gtum mo*, dream yoga and transference of consciousness (as in the Six Yogas of Naropa of bKa' brgyud and dGe lugs lineages), along with refining awareness in Mahāmudrā and/or Dzogchen meditation. Until very recently, many Tibetan monks and nuns of bKa' brgyud and rNying ma lineages would stay two or more times in a three-year retreat. In Nang chen I am told that doing a three-year retreat was a principal aim for those who

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<sup>25</sup> *gtum mo* is an advanced tantric Buddhist yoga by which a practitioner's psychic energy-winds are dissolved in the central channel of the energetic mind-body complex, giving rise to an experience of co-emergent bliss and emptiness (*bde stong zung 'jug*). The increased body temperature that arises with advanced *gtum mo* practice is a byproduct of the yoga and not its purpose.

<sup>26</sup> The course of training on a three-year retreat varies considerably between lineages; this is a generalized example. See *Jamgon Kongtrul's Retreat Manual* for more details.

<sup>27</sup> *Vipaśyanā* (*lhag mthong*) in Tibetan Buddhism is practised differently than modern Thai-Burmese *vipassanā*. In Tibetan sūtra presentations (like the Lam rim Chen mo) *vipaśyanā* refers to a subtle analytical mind of discernment, based on some degree of *śamatha* cultivation, often analyzing emptiness or the Four Noble Truths. Dzogchen presentations describe *vipaśyanā* as self-reflexive wisdom that clearly sees the absolute nature of awareness itself (*rig pa*) (Khang-sar 2013).

ordained as monks and nuns, and almost all monastics stayed in a three-year retreat at least once in their lives. It was also common for individuals wishing to deepen their practice after one or more three-year retreats to move to cave hermitages connected with the monastery, or even further away to remote, unpopulated mountain valleys.

A typical example of this is the monastic community of Rigs gsum dGon pa in Nang chen, presently with a monastic population of about 250 and having annexed retreat centres for both monks and nuns. Fifteen to twenty nuns stay together in the nuns' three-year retreat centre, several of them participating in two or three retreats in a row. In the female retreat in progress in 2010 most of the nuns were in their late teens or early twenties. After a three-year retreat a handful of nuns wishing to deepen their practice of subtle-body yogas (particularly *gtum mo*) and meditation move to ancient cave hermitages overlooking the monastery where they continue their retreats independently. The yogin bSod nams Chos 'phel, from whom the nuns receive the crucial oral transmission and instructions for their retreat practices, is said to be living in a remote unmarked cave in the region nearby an elderly yogin who is his guru. The elderly yogin is famed for "swimming comfortably in freezing rivers and melting the winter snow around his cave" due to his mastery of the physical elements through *gtum mo* and Dzogchen realization (bSam gtan sGrol ma, personal communication, January 2010). As this example of the Rigs gsum community shows, the life of a yogin in Eastern Tibet moved up the mountain as he or she progressed over a lifetime of Buddhist practice.

In describing Nang chen, there is a rift between the above description and the present state of affairs. At the time of writing a rapid modernisation and radical restructuring of Tibetan society is taking place under the Communist leadership of the PRC, so that within the last two decades the above description of Nang chen is ceasing to hold true. Today a network of highways spans the Tibetan Plateau and the favoured vehicle on Nang chen roads is no longer the horse, but the motorcycle – literally 'motor horse' (*'phrul rta*) in Tibetan – or an SUV. Under direction from the government the majority of Nang chen's nomads have moved down the mountain to

newly built urban settlements in order to survive in the swiftly modernizing economy, leaving their yaks and mountain hermitages behind. Significant numbers of ordained saṅgha are also moving away from remote hermitages to pursue new, systematized study programs at monastic centres, leaving empty places in Nang chen's retreat centres.

### **The yogin as cultural hero in Eastern Tibet**

As Turek has discussed, despite the region's importance in Tibetan religious history Nang chen has received sparse attention in Western scholarship – apart from Turek's own 2013 compelling study of a contemporary hermitic revival at Nang chen's sKyo brag monastery. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's memoirs of 19<sup>th</sup> century Nang chen, *Blazing Splendor*, has become popular among Western Tibetan Buddhists since it was first published in 2005. Prior to this, however, Nang chen was little known to Western readers, except perhaps through the autobiographical writings of Nang chen lamas who settled in the West, like Chögyam Trungpa and Karma Thinley Rinpoches<sup>28</sup>.

The same can be said of Tibetan yogic culture in general. Despite its central role in Tibetan religion and biography, little Western scholarship has directly engaged with yogic practice, aside from descriptive accounts of tantric traditions and doctrine (like Tucci's *Religions of Tibet*) or biographical studies of famous yogins like Mi la ras pa (Turek 2013: 9-10)<sup>29</sup>. This is perhaps due to the secrecy of practices, the elusiveness of contemplative practitioners willing to participate in Western research, and the lack of a scientific framework capable of engaging with first-hand yogic experience. As Kamala Tiyanavich and Reginald Ray have both highlighted, Western scholarship's popular focus on doctrine, historical and textual work tends to reduce the intangible

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<sup>28</sup> Ato Rinpoche and Chime Rinpoche, both of whom arrived in England in the 1960s, are also from Nang chen. Karma Thinley published his history of Nang chen, *Important Events and Places in the History of Nang chen*, in 1965.

<sup>29</sup> Some early exceptions to this are Garma C.C. Chang's work on the Six Yogas, Guenther's *The Life and Teaching of Naropa*, Crook and Low's *The Yogins of Ladakh* and Goldstein and Tsarong's 1985 article on contemplative monasteries. Alexandra David-Neel and W.Y. Evans-Wentz's accounts also deserve mention.



individual details of yogins' lived experience to the periphery of Buddhist traditions (Ray 1994: 1-10; Tiyanavich 1997: 2). Regardless of this methodological bias in academia, yogins have been the paragon of religious culture in Tibet since at least the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century and Tibet's four major Buddhist schools and numerous sub-schools were each spawned from a master who had become realized through tantric practice<sup>30</sup>. To a great extent social distinction across the Tibetan Plateau was afforded to the degree of renunciation, and yogins were held in high esteem in both social and political spheres (Samuel 1993: 556-557; Turek 2013).

The wild landscape and nomadic lifestyle of the Eastern Tibetan highlands formed a tough, resilient spirit in its people that equipped them for survival. When channelled towards their Buddhist spirituality the same toughness created an ardent religious devotion and many highly accomplished yogins among the population. As Samuel and Turek have both discussed, it is mistaken to understand Khams as peripheral to Central Tibet, which has been a tendency in scholarship following textual and political portrayals relative to Central Tibetan perspectives<sup>31</sup>. Khams has hardly been peripheral in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Instead it is where practice lineages flourished under royal patronage of kingdoms like sDe dge and Nang chen and has therefore been the cradle for the perpetuation of Tibetan tantrism (Turek 2013: 10). Khams was also the birthplace of the 19<sup>th</sup> century non-sectarian Ris med ('Unbiased') movement, which continues to shape Tibetan Buddhism today both inside and outside of China with the legacy and teachings of its famous masters, *gter ston* and scriptural compilations.

### **The Ris med movement, and Gad chags dGon pa as an example of contemplative culture**

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<sup>30</sup> Examples: Tsong kha pa (founder of the dGe lugs), sGam po pa (Dwags po bKa' bryud), Yu mo Mi bskyod rDo rje (Jo Nang), Virupa (Sa skya), Ma gcig Lab sgron (gCod) and gTsang pa rGya ras ('Brug pa bKa' brgyud).

<sup>31</sup> As recently as 2004 Kapstein wrote that Lhasa was the "traditional center of Tibetan religion and politics" (Kapstein 2004: 255). Note also that Kolas and Thowsen title their 2005 study based on fieldwork in Tibetan ethnic areas outside the TAR (A mdo and Khams) *On the Margins of Tibet*.

In the decades prior to Gad chags dGon pa's founding in 1892, a series of developments nowadays referred to as the Ris med movement saw a great invigoration of non-sectarian thought and practice that strengthened and centred the cultural world of Khams<sup>32</sup>. Trends of the Ris med movement unfolded up until the 1950s, and continue to influence modern developments in Tibetan Buddhism today. The leaders 'Jam mgon Kong sprul (1813-1899), 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dByang po (1820-1892) and the *gter-ston* mChog gyur gLing pa (1829-1870) initiated a revival of minority lineages and philosophical views that were nearing extinction (partly owing to the Gelugpa domination of the time). These lamas and their associates initiated a synthesis of practices, doctrines, scriptural collections and hermitages<sup>33</sup> that especially bolstered practice lineages in Khams (Oldmeadow 2012; Turek 2012). Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā systems of practice-based philosophy, with their emphases on the unconstrained, all-pervading nature of mind, found directing roles in the non-sectarian Ris med ethos – although an openness to a variety of doctrinal positions is what characterized the movement (Oldmeadow 2012: 16; Turek 2012: 433). Indeed, *gter ma* revealed during the Ris med period, like the mChog gling gTer gSar ('New Treasures of Chokling'), were novel in being the first total presentations of all rNying ma and Dzogchen teaching series (*sde*) (Oldmeadow 2012: 84).

The movement originated in the sDe dge kingdom where the royal family had a long-established reputation for religious tolerance (Oldmeadow 2012: 49). Nang chen, as bDe dge's close cultural neighbour, was another important stage for Ris med developments<sup>34</sup> (Turek 2013: 36). Marginal groups of practitioners flourished in the Ris med atmosphere and it was at the height of the movement that Gad chags dGon

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<sup>32</sup> Several researchers have been careful to place Ris med developments in their wider context, and drawn attention to the mistaken reification of an essential 'Ris med movement', which was never defined as such by the leading masters of the time. See Gardner (2006), Oldmeadow (2012), Samuel (1993) and Turek (2012).

<sup>33</sup> Hermitages built at the 25 power places of Eastern Tibet (mDo Khams), mapped in a *gter ma* revealed by mChog gling, gave spatial referents to the movement and helped to mark Khams as a territory (Turek 2012: 436).

<sup>34</sup> mChog gyur gLing pa was born in Nang chen and had been a monk at the Nang chen king's monastery, Tshe bcu sGar. Another important impetus behind the Ris med movement was the establishment of the sDe dge printing press and its edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Oldmeadow 2012: 85: 49).

pa, a nunnery that would develop a unique lineage of female yogic practice following Dzogchen tenets, was established. Following the model of a Dharma encampment (*chos sgar*)<sup>35</sup>, Gad chags dGon pa began as a community of practitioners living in full-time retreat around their guru, the yogin Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho (1848-1909).

Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho and his guru, the first Grub dbang Tshogs gnyis (b. circa 1828), saw that women had equal potential as men for attaining enlightenment, yet with a virtual absence of nunneries in the region were denied opportunities for Dharma learning and practice. Females in Tibet were generally regarded as unfit vessels for advanced learning. Religious-minded girls and women who did ordain often continued living with their families and contributing to their household's domestic workload. After Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho's founding of Gad chags dGon pa women came from all parts of Eastern Tibet and various Tibetan Buddhist schools to join its intensive practice system. Along with the revived values of the Ris med era that formed a cultural backdrop for Gad chags's founding, this diversity gave the nunnery a non-sectarian character that remains to this day.

Gad chags is a convenient example of Nang chen's traditional contemplative culture in that its way of life has little changed from its pre-1950s existence, due to the nunnery's isolated setting and self-determination to preserve its original practice tradition. Gad chags is located in southern Nang chen in a remote valley at an altitude of 4,500 metres (14,700 feet) surrounded by hilltops that are said to reflect sacred feminine forms. Its curriculum entails a rigorous training in subtle-body yogas and meditation, with a specialization in *rtsa lung* (*nāḍī* and *prāṇa* yoga, the general practice category that includes *gtum mo*) as a support for their meditative insight. The Gad chags nuns uphold all religious leadership roles, from bursar and provost to Vajra Master (rDo rje sLob dpon) during ritual ceremonies, and wear brocade hats on special occasions that mark them as lineage holders. Apart from conducting tantric

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<sup>35</sup> *Chos sgar* were common in Eastern Tibet from the time of the fourth Karmapa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. *Chos sgar* are large communities of monastic and non-monastic practitioners (often male and female) usually centred around a charismatic realized master or *tertön*. Some famous *chos sgar* are present-day bLa rung sGar and Ya chen sGar, both in Garzé (dKar mdzes) Prefecture, and Shakya Shri's nineteenth century encampment at Khyi-puk.

empowerments (*dbang*), public formalities and fundraising, for which they rely on the nunnery's four male lamas, the senior nuns teach all components of Gad chags's practice tradition to the younger nuns, as well as to monks at branch *dgon pa*. Such an autonomous female monastic lineage was unprecedented in Tibetan Buddhist history.



Gad chags dGon pa at 4,500 metres in Nang chen, Eastern Tibet. Photographed by Jerome Raphalen, 2006.

### Gad chags's practice system

After fulfilling a one year obligation as nunnery yak-herder, a nun officially enters the nunnery and begins her 400,000 preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), which take roughly four months. These are followed by one hundred sets of *smyung gnas*, a two-day fasting practice of *Avalokiteśvara*, which may take up to a year to complete. Next is a mantra accumulation retreat of the guardian deity *Vajrakīlaya* (*Phur sgrub*) which lasts about seven months. Along with completing these preliminary retreats a new nun trains in ritual instruments, shrine preparation and liturgical chanting. Upon completing all of these, a Gad chags nun then begins her three-year, three-month retreat.

Generally, from the time of entering the nunnery all Gad chags nuns practice and sleep in meditation boxes (*sgrom khri*) about one square metre in size. During the three-year retreat approximately fifteen nuns live in meditation boxes lining the walls of the retreat room. They leave their boxes only for meal times, bathroom breaks and yoga sessions and do not exit the retreat house for the entire duration of the retreat. Upon completion of the three-year retreat a Gad chags nun enters one of sixteen retreat divisions (*sgrub khag*) where she continues practicing her *yi dam* meditation deity for the rest of her life. Along with daily sessions of *yi dam* practice and subtle-body yogas are nineteen extensive *sādhanā* ceremonies called *sgrub chen*, lasting about ten days each. These fall throughout the year and are performed by all the nuns together in the main temple.



Gad chags nuns in their meditation boxes in one of the sixteen retreat divisions (*sgrub khag*). Photographed by Jerome Raphalen, 2006.

In 2006 a middle-aged nun reported her experience of Gad chags's practice system:

My mind transformed while I was in [three-year] retreat. I didn't want to come out when the retreat was finished. Although the practices were hard physically, in my mind I was very joyful. Before I did my three-year retreat I had a lot of wild emotions and distractions. But during the retreat these emotions were pacified and transformed into the five wisdoms<sup>36</sup>.

Every morning from six until eight o'clock each retreat division holds a practice session of meditation and prayers. There is a big room downstairs in the retreat division building where all the nuns do their daily practices of *rtsa lung* and *'khrul 'khor* [supportive *haṭha* yoga]. We have to do these yogic practices everyday of our lives.

Gad chags dGon pa's practice specialty is *rtsa lung*, and it is practiced here according to the unique teachings of the first Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho. Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho wasn't a scholar, but wrote these practice commentaries from his pure vision and meditative realization.

*sGrub chen* are a defining component of Gad chags's practice culture, and indeed of the practice culture of rNying ma and bKa' brgyud *dgon pa* throughout pre-modern Eastern Tibet<sup>37</sup>. A *sgrub chen* was described by one participant as: "a form of intensive group ritual practice that epitomizes the depth, power and precision of Vajrayāna, drawing together the entire range of tantric methods – ritual, artistic and yogic – to create transcendent perception of the environment and its inhabitants as a pure field of the buddha" (Lun-Sin 2011). Usually lasting ten days, a *sgrub chen's* participants engage in twenty-four hour continuous *sāadhanā* practice of a particular buddha (i.e. *yi dam*) and its surrounding maṇḍala. The *sgrub chen* ceremony employs visualization, mantra, prayers and meditation and is styled with ritual music, mudras and costumed dance.

At Gad chags the nuns integrate periods of *rtsa lung* and meditation in the *sgrub chen* in order to experience non-conceptual consciousness by uniting mind with the psychic winds in the subtle-body's central channel. Examples of Gad chags's twenty

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<sup>36</sup> *Ye shes lnga* (five wisdoms): *chos dbyings ye she* (wisdom of *dharmadhātu*), *me long ye shes* (mirror-like wisdom), *mnyam nyid ye shes* (wisdom of equality), *so sor rtog pa'i ye shes* (wisdom of discernment) and *bya grub ye shes* (all-accomplishing wisdom).

<sup>37</sup> Being based on *sāadhanā* of a revealed *gter ma* cycle, *sgrub chen* are most commonly conducted in rNying ma and bKa' brgyud *dgon pa*. They are conducted with less frequency in Sa skya and dGe lugs *dgon pa* on various holy days throughout the year.

annual *sgrub chen* cycles are Hayagrīva (rTa mgrin), Tārā (sGrol ma) and Vajrabhairava (rDo rje 'jigs byed). *sGrub chen* are regarded as a powerful practice to remove negative forces in the world and to promote purification, harmony and spiritual potency.

In certain *sgrub chen* the Gad chags nuns produce *smān sgrub* (sacred medicine) composed of local herbs and infused with the mantra and prayers of the participants during the ten-day ceremony. During the *sgrub chen* the dried herbs are rolled into small pellets and consecrated as a sacred substance encapsulating the blessings and healing power of the Buddha. In the past, before allopathic medical clinics were introduced by the Chinese government in Tibetan areas, many Tibetans relied solely on *smān sgrub* as a cure for physical and mental sicknesses.

Two features distinguish Gad chags dGon pa's unique practice system: its sixteen retreat divisions (*sgrub khag*) each dedicated to a different *yi dam*, and the nuns' specialization in *rtsa lung*. While in most three-year retreat models of Tibetan Buddhism subtle-body yogas (including *rtsa lung*) are learned in the final year, at Gad chags dGon pa *rtsa lung* and '*khrol 'khor*<sup>38</sup> are learned from the outset of the three-year retreat and practiced daily as a yogic support for their meditative insight.

The nuns' specialization in *rtsa lung* is exhibited in the nunnery's annual Chu ras ('Wet sheet') ceremony which takes place on the full-moon day of the twelfth lunar month (January or February), with temperatures at around -25C (-13F). During the ceremony the nuns dry off wet sheets draped over their shoulders by the inner bodily heat generated as a by-product of their *rtsa lung* practice. The participating nuns prepare for the Chu ras ceremony on the eve of the full moon by bathing in their respective retreat divisions and then dressing in a short skirt-like undergarment (*ang rag*); no upper garments or socks are permitted until after the ceremony is finished the following morning. The participants then gather in Gad chags's

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<sup>38</sup> '*khrol 'khor* is series of rigorous breathing and physical postures that supports its corollary *rtsa lung* in pushing the mind, and thereby consciousness, beyond its conventional conceptual habits and constraints (Baker 2012). In Tibet *rtsa lung* and '*khrol 'khor* are practiced to prepare the energetic mind-body complex of the practitioner for Dzogchen or Mahāmudrā realization.

designated yoga hall and begin chanting devotional prayers, along with preliminary breath control and *haṭha* yoga (*'khrul 'khor*). By 9pm, as the fervour of their prayers and breathing practices develop into full-blown *gtum mo*, individual nuns begin to dry off wet sheets by their bodily heat. This continues throughout the night with supplication prayers and sequences of yoga interspersed with periods of meditative absorption. dBang drag Rinpoche, a present abbot of Gad chags nunnery, was present among the nuns in the yoga hall during the night of the Chu ras ceremony in 2010. Though he was not generating inner heat through *rtsa lung* practice himself, he described the temperature of the room as warm and humid and witnessed some of the nuns dry up to eight sheets during the night (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, January 2010).

The public Chu ras demonstration takes place at the break of dawn. The participants, who have not slept the previous night, exit the yoga hall in a solemn procession with wet sheets draped around their shoulders. Singing devotional prayers they proceed slowly around the entire nunnery complex, a walk that takes about an hour and crosses a slope where mountain winds blow freezing air. At each of the four directions a nun's sheet is re-soaked in cold water and placed again around her shoulders. From a distance observers of the ceremony can see vapour rising up from the nuns' procession. The nunnery's lamas who walk at the head of the procession report seeing some of the sheets fully dried before reaching the next corner. Only nuns accomplished at raising inner heat through *rtsa lung* yoga are capable of participating in the Chu ras demonstration; in 2010 this was 85 out of 360 nuns. No other *dgon pa* in present-day Tibet upholds such a regular, lifelong training in *rtsa lung*, nor an annual Chu ras ceremony. Several Nang chen *dgon pa*, like sKyo brag monastery, do however hold a Chu ras ceremony on completion of a three-year retreat, and the ceremony as a tradition dates back to the earliest bKa' brgyud communities following Mi la ras pa's *gtum mo* lineage<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> See Toni Huber (1999: 87-90) for a description of the Chu ras (or 'Rephu') ceremony performed by 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud yogins in the 1950s at Tsa ri Mountain in southeastern Tibet. Huber also notes an account of the ceremony in contemporary Ladakh in Crook's *The Yogins of Ladakh* (Huber 1999: 246, n.19).



In free time amidst the practice schedule described above, the nuns engage in short periods of darkness-retreat (*mun mtshams*), 'extracting the essence' (*bcud len*) and visionary *thod rgal* ('leap-over') practice of Dzogchen. Several nuns in their mid-forties explained to me that they do these extra practices (and all practices of their curriculum) of their own volition and no higher authorities encourage them: "No lamas make us do our practices, no disciplinarian. Each nun is motivated to practice out of devotion. We never waste any time for practice. That is how we live here" (47 year-old Gad chags nun, personal communication, September 2013).

### **To the present**

The second incarnation of Gad chags's founder (Chos grags rGya mtsho, b. 1911) was born as the son of the Nang chen king and thereby secured royal support and stature for the nunnery. With the help of this royal patronage and its prestigious Chu ras ceremony Gad chags had become renowned throughout the region for the nuns' yogic accomplishments, and by the 1950s there were over seven hundred nuns at Gad chags (rDo rje 1997). Gad chags had also become the mother nunnery to twenty-eight branch *dgon pa* following its practice system, twenty-three of them nunneries and four of them monasteries. Having branch monasteries was unprecedented for a nunnery in Tibet, where nunneries are usually annexed to a monastery.

The height of Gad chags's flourishing collided with the start of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976; Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution). This was a period referred to by the nuns as 'when time turned upside down' (*dus log sgang*). Based on a militant atheist interpretation of Marxist ideology, the efforts of the CCP during this radical period assumed that Tibetan religious culture was backwards and that the Tibetan majority was feudally enslaved to monastic estates. The Tibetan people were thus to be civilised and 'liberated' by submitting to advanced Han Communist leadership and ideology (Yang 2012). Tibetan monasteries and religious leaders were the primary targets of the CCP's efforts to liberate the Tibetans, and by the end of the Cultural Revolution only 4 of

722 monasteries in ethnic Tibetan areas of Qinghai Province remained intact (Turek 2013: 83). Gad chags dGon pa was among those ransacked and demolished by the Red Army and several of its lamas were executed. The nuns that survived the deprivations of the era, including a severe famine in Qinghai from 1960-1962, were assembled in communes or fled as individuals to Central Tibet where they worked as household servants.

When 'time began to turn upright again' (*dus tshod tshur bde yong dus*) in the late 1970s, nearly seventy Gad chags nuns returned to the original location of the nunnery and resumed their prayers and practices together in a yak-hair tent. Along with two surviving senior Gad chags lamas they slowly began rebuilding their temple and retreat divisions using locally gathered stones and mud-bricks. As the nuns' memories and practice spaces reassembled, it became apparent that all the major components of the Gad chags practice tradition had been preserved. Their entire scriptural collection<sup>40</sup> was intact, as well as nuns with embodied experience capable of transmitting instructions to new nuns on the subtle-body yogas, Dzogchen, liturgies, retreat styles and administrative protocols. To a great extent it was the nuns' courage and dedication that allowed for these to be preserved. One nun at the risk of her life carried the two sets of scriptures to Central Tibet and entrusted them to a poor farmer who buried them underground<sup>41</sup>. Another nun feigned disability for nearly ten years while she silently maintained her meditation instead of performing communal labour. The nuns' dedication notwithstanding, complete preservation was only possible because Gad chags was primarily an oral tradition that relied on few scriptures, and in the short history since Gad chags had been established there were only a few hand-written copies made of its major texts. To find that all the components of a lineage had survived the Cultural Revolution was unusual in Tibet. Most monasteries lost at least some of their texts in the destruction and/or teachers who embodied the only living knowledge of how to perform a certain practice. With the loss of texts and teachers, continuity of the particular knowledge was lost.

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<sup>40</sup> Gad chags's primary scriptural collection comprises Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho's sixteen volumes of commentary on Ratna gLing pa's *Thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa* (referred to at Gad chags as "*Pod sde bcu drug*"), and Ratna gLing pa's twenty-five root *gter ma* (*Zab gter nyi shu rtsa lnga*).

<sup>41</sup> Such stories were common during the Cultural Revolution. See Germano 1998, p. 177.

A Gad chags nun who joined as a young girl in the 1980s and was raised by the surviving elderly nuns explains how the Gad chags tradition was preserved:

**Question:** When the Communist invasion started, how did the late nun Tendron save [Gad chags's] texts? Did she carry them off on yaks? On horses? How did she do it?

**Nun:** I don't know how she did it! She valued the texts more than her life, that's how. By hiding some texts here, some there, she managed to preserve all of Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho's 16 Volumes and Ratna gLing pa's 25 volumes. She saved all of them. After the Cultural Revolution when nuns were gathering at Gad chags again, she returned with all the texts on a yak and offered them back to the lamas. That old nun Tendron saved all of our texts. The old ritual objects you see in the Kangyur Lhakang [nunnery temple] were preserved by the late Ngödrub Chomtso. She unearthed them after the Cultural Revolution. As bursar she did a lot of work to re-organize the Nunnery back then. The late nun Shakya was the ritual and chant-master; she taught all the rituals and prayers to the new nuns. The late nun Palmo remembered all the yogic practices, like *rtsa lung* and '*khrol 'khor*, and taught them to the new nuns. And the late Sherab Zangmo taught the view and meditation. She placed them in the hands of the new nuns. She passed the lineage to the new nuns. Those old nuns preserved the entire lineage – the lineage that Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho had first taught the nuns himself, from the basics of tormas-making and conch-blowing to the highest practices. It was his dying wish that the female lineage he established never be scattered. Those old nuns fulfilled that wish. They preserved his lineage entirely and passed it to a new generation of nuns.

Today there are 368 nuns at Gad chags dGon pa. The bulk of them are middle-aged women who joined the nunnery in the 1980s and were trained by the surviving elderly nuns in all aspects of Gad chags's practice tradition. According to these nuns' reports, one of the key reasons for the arrival of new nuns since the 1980s is the inspiring example of the elderly nuns who die with an attitude of cheerful confidence. Gad chags's nuns and lamas tell that many of the elderly nuns, having spent decades in intensive Buddhist practice, stay seated upright in *thugs dam* (post-death *samādhi*) after their vital signs have stopped, with warmth at the heart and no signs of bodily decay for up to ten days. One nun in September 2013 described the demeanour of the elderly nuns who raised her:

When the old nuns were ready to pass away, there wasn't a single one who didn't die a special death. When I first came I was too young to appreciate their qualities. Now looking back I really feel faith. Just by uttering "Phet!" the old nun Sangdron could scare all the kids hovering at the temple doors – they would fall over and run away! Looking back now I see they had that kind of force about them. They would always tell us we have to spend our whole lives at Gad chags, we have to fan the flames of practice here and not get scattered. When those old nuns died they didn't complain of any suffering. They'd say, "Look, today I'm dying. No point in fussing about it. I have no regrets! My body has disease but I am fine. I'm not suffering." Most of them talked like that when they were nearing death. There wasn't a single one who didn't die an impressive death.

Another Gad chags nun in September 2013 reported:

Last year one of the last elderly nuns, Tamke, passed away. ... Being summer, we thought after two days her body would smell. I expected to smell a corpse, but inside her retreat division it smelled like perfume – "the fragrance of morality". Stepping closer to her body, the fragrance became stronger. Then my eyes filled with tears. We were really amazed. The next morning when they brought her body to the hilltop they said her complexion hadn't faded, it was light and radiant.

Young girls are not forced to join the nunnery. Despite the harsh environment and famed rigour of Gad chags dGon pa's discipline, not to mention other educational opportunities and more comfortable nunneries for young girls in modern Tibet, several novice young nuns continue to join Gad chags each year. As to the elderly nuns who survived the Cultural Revolution, only two remain at Gad chags at the time of writing.

Gad chags dGon pa's extremely remote, high altitude location is surely a condition allowing the continuation of its intensive contemplative tradition. Until today the valley where Gad chags is situated has evaded the development of roads and electricity pylons pervading many other valleys of Eastern Tibet over the last twenty years. Significantly for this research – and likely due at least in part to the nunnery's seclusion – the senior nuns and lamas of Gad chags dGon pa report that their

practice curriculum is being maintained today as it was in the nunnery's early days<sup>42</sup>. I have heard Gad chags's lamas, nuns and associated monks repeatedly express their intention that the nunnery's annual practice system and *sgrub chen* schedule be preserved in its original forms and flourish without decline<sup>43</sup>. Many other *dgon pa* in Nang chen have, as we shall see, expanded their philosophical study programs and reduced their former retreat and *sgrub chen* schedules.



**A typical looking Khams pa nun with her prayer texts and tape recorder for listening to Buddhist teachings. Credit: Getty Images.**

As to the current material conditions of Gad chags dGon pa, the main temple and most of the retreat buildings were rebuilt between 2000 and 2015 (a second time since the Cultural Revolution, with more durable materials). The nunnery has so far refused offers from Chinese businessmen to install a nearby cell phone tower (though this was the lamas' decision and not the nuns'). At present the only source

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<sup>42</sup> While the curriculum is the same, a Gad chags nun in her fifties told me in 2013 that the nuns' dedication to practice has declined: "In my early days here we would get on with our practice whether tea was boiled or not. [...] These days, no way!"

<sup>43</sup> Often expressed in the phrase *mthong ba brgyud pa'i phyag len*: "to carry forward what we have seen".

of electricity are solar batteries that power lamps for reading and audio recorders used mainly to listen to Buddhist teachings.

## Conclusion

Thus communities of contemplative practitioners, along with society's valuing of tantric practice and yogins, have distinguished the socio-cultural world of Eastern Tibet, Nang chen in particular, until the recent present. Gad chags dGon pa may not be typical of Nang chen's earlier contemplative communities, being unique as a female lineage with an especially intensive focus on yogic practice. It does, however, exemplify the components of a typical practice lineage curriculum and the reverence given by Tibetan society to individuals and communities dedicated to cultivation of inner enlightened qualities. Eastern Tibet's contemplative culture was also characterized by predominantly earth-based livelihoods of nomads and agriculturalists. Nomads and farmers supported monasteries and retreat centres with material provisions, while depending on them for spiritual and social guidance. The earth-based Eastern Tibetan way of life also entailed a mental simplicity and experiential approach to understanding that allowed for easy access to attitudes of faith (*dad-pa*) and pure perception (*dag-srang*) that are essential to Vajrayāna practice<sup>44</sup>. With extreme alterations to Tibet's earth-based economy over the last two decades, along with a new political superstructure advocating a materialistic worldview, Tibet's traditional value system and contemplative culture are undergoing transformation in response to changing material and nonmaterial needs of the time.

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<sup>44</sup> Pure perception (*dag srang*) is to see everything as an expression of ultimate reality. It is the cardinal training in Vajrayāna that maintains a sacred bond between guru and disciples and opens the mind to unconditioned perception. Faith, or confidence (*dad pa*), is another important Vajrayāna cardinal principle that goes along with pure perception. Rather than faith in an external god or principle, in Vajrayāna faith is directed to Buddha nature as the ultimate reality of one's own being, and this is said to be within the sphere of direct experience through Buddhist practice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Coming Down the Mountain: From the Cave to the Classroom

#### **Post-Mao reforms from the 1980s: legalized religion in a Marxist state**

The death of Mao Zedong in September 1976 marked a monumental change in direction for China and its CCP leadership. In reaction to the crippled economy and society left behind by Mao Zedong's campaigns, boldly pragmatic new policies were established under the direction of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). These opened China to foreign investment, private ownership of small businesses and along with these a small measure of popular political participation<sup>45</sup>. These policies, self-styled as 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' (McCarthy 2010: 177), have transformed China from economic devastation into the world's second largest economy within thirty years<sup>46</sup>.

Millions of Chinese today have the kind of wealth that previous generations could only dream of. At the same time such sheer economic growth has been accompanied by drastic social upheaval – and with that, an explosion in the number of religious followers. Such a large religious demographic presents considerable political implications for state-society relations<sup>47</sup>. As a response, the CCP has adopted a pragmatic tolerance of religion that allows its existence as a resource to be managed towards social harmony. This is according to Mao's categorization of religion as a non-antagonistic contradiction that need not be eliminated, but can be united with a common socialist cause (Cooke 2009: 128; 146, n1). Individual religious belief is now considered beyond state intervention, with 'normal religious activities' granted

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<sup>45</sup> China officially endorsed a program of 'reform and openness' at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in December 1978 (Jefreys & Sigley 2009: 8).

<sup>46</sup> Hu Jintao, in his keynote speech to the Fortune Global Forum in May 2005, stated that between 1978 to 2004 China's GDP increased from US\$147.3 billion to \$1.6494 trillion with an average annual growth rate of 9.4 per cent. The number of rural poor dwindled from some 250 million to 26 million.

<sup>47</sup> In 2007 Shanghai's East China Normal University found a third of 4,500 people interviewed described themselves as religious. That extrapolates to 300 million of whole population (Yardley 2007 in Oakes & Sutton 2010: 8).

protection by Article 36 of the PRC Constitution<sup>48</sup>. This is so long as religious activities promote the state's socialist aims and economic development and do nothing to disrupt the state's educational system (Cooke 2009: 130; Yang 2012: 76).

Article 36 is backed by the tenets of the Party's 1982 circular 'Document 19', which allow religion as a provisional social phenomenon that should be carefully managed and harnessed for its rallying powers towards the state's socialist aims and its central task of economic construction (Yang 2012: 50). Buddhism is now one of five religions granted legal existence in China – along with Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. These are in contrast to religions that fall into the government's politically defined categories of superstition (Ch. *mixin*) and evil cult (Ch. *xiejiao*), and are therefore illegal (Gaerrang 2012: 113). Since Document 19 the Party's management of religion has nevertheless continued within a framework of Marxist ideology. The government regularly propagates atheism and a scientific outlook among the people, particularly among the youth, and its long-term goal remains the full realization of socialist ideals (Huang 2003: 9; Yang 2012).

Religion – as a type of social organization<sup>49</sup> – is now managed according to a newly articulated Marxism in which revolutionary vocabulary like 'communism' and 'class struggle' have been replaced with phrases like 'harmonious socialist society' and 'the advanced nature of the Chinese Communist Party' (Yü 2013: 92). Religions, particularly Buddhism with its rational and ethical tenors, are seen as potential civilizing agents towards the state's goal of a 'Socialist Spiritual Civilization' (Ch. *shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming*) to parallel the rampant 'material civilization' unfolding in the post-reform era<sup>50</sup> (Cooke 2009: 142, 146, n1).

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<sup>48</sup> Though according to Yang, what constitutes 'normal religious activities' is undefined and often decided by incumbent administrators (Yang 2012:75).

<sup>49</sup> In China religious organizations are registered as social organizations with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Cooke 2009: 138).

<sup>50</sup> For much of the post-Mao era the idea of 'two civilizations' (Ch. *liangge wenming*) – material and spiritual – has framed the CCP's narrative in promoting its goal of balanced economic and moral development (Dynon 2008: 84).



### **‘Develop the West’: forceful economic development of the Tibetan Plateau**

A forceful drive for economic development is the state’s first principle towards achieving a harmonious socialist society, and often seems to be the state’s sole solution for the various problems it faces (Gaerrang 2012: 59). This is evident in the outcomes of three major governmental forums relevant to Tibetan affairs in 2010 and 2011 that addressed political stability, economic disparity and ecological security respectively<sup>51</sup>. Though the issues addressed in the three forums were different and distinct, the solution determined by each forum was the same: intensified economic reforms in China’s western regions (Gaerrang 2012: 60). For Tibetans as an ethnic minority living in China’s West, this has meant assimilation along a course of rapid economic modernisation through China’s ‘Develop the West’ campaign (Ch. *xibu da kaifa*). The campaign was launched in 2000 to reduce a growing economic divide between China’s coastal and western regions, and has been propelled by the wealth of natural resources on the Tibetan Plateau and the transnational railway into Lhasa that was completed in 2006.

A large part of the Develop the West campaign has been the resettlement of Tibetan nomads in urban centres, as well as fencing in pastoral areas where Tibetan nomads remain (Gaerrang 2012; Harwood 2009: 70-71). In the eyes of the CCP’s modernist vision, Tibetan farmers and nomads with their stone and yak dung houses are backwards and pitiable. In 2005 the Party chief of the TAR, Zhang Qingli, toured the Tibetan Plateau and reported that the houses of local farmers and herdsmen had shocked him the most. “You can see the stars from inside many houses,” said Zhang. He dedicated himself to improving the lives of local people by intensifying resettlement initiatives that had begun in the 1990s. The nomadic lifestyle is generally deemed a threat to the environment and to the state’s plans for social and economic development. Resettlement policies were reinforced in March 2006 with the National People’s Congress’ plans to build a ‘New Socialist Countryside’ (Ch. *shehui zhuyi xin nong-cun jianshe*), a initiative of innovations in rural systems to

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<sup>51</sup> The Fifth Forum on Work in Tibet, January 2010; a forum on the Open up the West Campaign, July 2010; and the National Conference on Pastoral Regions, August 2011.

bring about a “rapid and significant change in the overall appearance of the countryside” (Jiabao 2006).

Reliable statistics on Tibet’s nomads are elusive and policies concerning them seem to vary between regions and levels of bureaucracy (Gaerrang, personal communication, July 2015). One independent researcher concluded that at least two million Tibetan nomads were resettled by 2014 (’Phrin las 2014). The same researcher states that in Qinghai Province, where pastoralism was the predominant traditional livelihood until the 1960s, up to ninety per cent of nomadic families had been resettled in permanent housing projects modelled according to precise government standards by 2014 (’Phrin las 2014). In Nang chen, each concrete house is eighty square feet and shares a water pump with several other houses in a row; most of the settlements are concentrated near village or town centres and have a primary school. The government’s overarching explanation for its resettlement policies is ‘helping Tibet’. Tibetans are promised better living conditions, education and cooperative healthcare in urbanizing settlements, as well as government support to make a rapid transition to China’s market economy (Gaerrang 2012).



**This billboard in Eastern Tibet promoting housing resettlements states: “Build a better home, enjoy a happy life”. Credit: Tsering Woeser, 2011.**

Since the 1980s the government has also consistently claimed environmental preservation as a reason for resettling nomads, arguing that over-grazing has degraded the grasslands. Though there is consensus among scientists that environmental degradation of the grasslands is increasing (Gruschke 2008: 8), some ecologists claim that depletion of the grasslands is due to the recent effects of climate change and fencing policies, and that pastoralism has in fact preserved the grasslands' health over the centuries (Miller & Sheehy 2008).

It is difficult to predict to what extent Tibetan pastoralism might survive in the long run. I have recently heard of Tibetan ex-nomads in Qinghai and Sichuan returning to nomadic life after finding itinerant construction work in towns more difficult, insecure and low-paying. At the same time, the CCP's National Conference on Pastoral Regions in 2011 decided that ecological stability of Western China's pastoral areas is to be achieved by transforming pastoral production into more intensified livestock industrialization, and pastoralists into urbanized market actors (Gaerrang 2012: 60). What is clear is that remaining an unwashed yak herder in unfixed areas of the Tibetan Plateau is not seen by the CCP as a viable future livelihood for Tibetans.



**A typical-looking Tibetan housing resettlement on the Tibetan Plateau. Credit: [www.rukor.org](http://www.rukor.org).**

### **The erosion of a high-altitude value system**

In a perfect example of James C. Scott's notion of high modernism, the CCP is using its state powers to reshape society in order to maximize production, confident that this will improve the human condition (Scott 1998). But this drastic transformation of the Tibetan economy – from high altitude pastures and sustainable agriculture to

reservation-style housing blocks in Sinicized townships – presents Tibetans with enormous challenges of adapting to a new economy and value system in a very short period of time. Without livestock, land and with little innovative flair for the capitalist marketplace, many resettled nomads now survive on the profits from trading *Cordyceps sinensis* (*dByar rtsa dGun 'bu*, 'Summer grass, Winter worm'). *Cordyceps* is a mountain-grown caterpillar fungus harvested by Tibetans in May and June and sold primarily to Chinese customers as an energy tonic. The high demand and price of *Cordyceps* fungus has made its trade a mainstay of rural Tibetan family incomes. For many Tibetan families in Qinghai province *Cordyceps* trade is the sole source of their yearly income (Winkler 2008; Traga, personal communication, July 2016).

The resettlement of Tibetan nomads undermines their traditional earth-based livelihoods that for millennia supported Tibet's contemplative, visionary culture<sup>52</sup>. The nomadic way of life has been a defining feature of Buddhist life in Eastern Tibet and allowed for the nomadic religious encampments (*chos sgar*) of great masters like rTogs Idan Shakya Shri and A khyug Rinpoche, and the high-altitude economy supporting yogic practitioners. Previously Tibetan nomads and farmers offered regular food supplies like roasted barley flour (*tsham pa*), meat and dairy products to monasteries and hermitages as a matter of religious devotion. These offerings made commitment to long term yogic practice a viable way of life with strong community support. Highland nomads and farmers were in turn sustained in their religious and mundane lives by the rituals, blessings and counsel of the practitioners<sup>53</sup>. Today, as the traditional food source is no longer forthcoming from Tibetan families, *dgon pa* are forced to form connections with towns and rely on alternative sources of support via the modern market. Head lamas and monks of Tibetan *dgon pa* now travel throughout China and abroad to fundraise for the needs of their monks and nuns. Gad chags dGon pa is one example of this: by the year 2000

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<sup>52</sup> Visions of mountain gods, spirits and deities were not uncommon among ordained and lay Tibetans (they are narrated in most *rnam thar*). Moreover, such visions were often taken seriously by Tibetan communities when reported.

<sup>53</sup> Religious practitioners contributed to social welfare through mental and physical healing, conflict resolution and guiding ethical conduct.

many nuns were no longer able to procure adequate food supplies from their parents or siblings on their seasonal alms rounds, and since then they have relied on one of their male lamas to fundraise for their daily meals.

Another thrust of the Develop the West campaign, and a salient factor behind transformations of Tibet's contemplative culture, is nationwide compulsory nine-year education for all school-age children (Harwood 2009: 71; Zhang & Zhao 2006: 262-63). Although the state was initially challenged to implement this educational system with unregistered Tibetan children living in hard-to-reach pastoral areas, today it has succeeded so that nearly ninety per cent of children in Nang chen County attend impressive primary and secondary school facilities in towns and villages (Kolas & Thowsen 2005: 120). Chinese is the main language of instruction in state schools and all subjects are secular. Tibetan language is a branch subject and there is very little instruction in Tibetan religious culture or history<sup>54</sup> (Goldstein & Kapstein 1998: 3). The core educational goal of the state curriculum is to consolidate Tibetans as an ethnic minority within a national unity of China, and to elevate them culturally through scientific, socialist values and economic development (Kolas & Thowsen 2005: 93). Thus the majority of Tibetan youth are now streamed in an education system that serves the state's development agenda: that of shaping Chinese citizens as rational market actors who prioritize material development and commodity production (Gaerrang 2012).

Whether or not, with the deeply ingrained Buddhist culture of their home lives, the current generation of children subscribe to the sentiments of state education, Tibetan language and religion is seen as having little practical use when it comes to surviving in the fast growing market economy of urban China. The momentum of the country's education system and industrial-strength development is steering young

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<sup>54</sup> Although there have been periodic efforts to strengthen Tibetan language in primary and secondary school curricula, they have not held up to the immense demand for Chinese as the language needed to succeed economically in today's China. In Kapstein's pre-2004 fieldwork he commonly heard Beijing officials express a devaluing of Tibetan language as being unsuited for the tasks of modern science, technology and business. He heard similar sentiments from Tibetans in the TAR (Kapstein 2004: 248).

Tibetans towards city life with all the technological trimmings that accompany modernity and distract the mind.

### **Tibetan Buddhist resurgence and domestic tourism**

Despite state regulation of religion, including a minimum age for monastic ordination<sup>55</sup> and limitations on the populations of monasteries, a Tibetan Buddhist revival has taken place in Eastern Tibet since the 1980s (Cabezon 2008). A surprisingly large number of ordained Tibetans are living in monastic centres throughout Khams and Amdo, resuming their position as the central pillar of Tibetan religious culture and literary production (McMahan 2012: 95) This revival has unfolded within an increasingly open cultural scene in China so that Tibetan-language publications, education and preservation of cultural relics have developed as part of it (Kapstein 2004: 242). Kapstein reported in 2004 that over one hundred thousand Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns had ordained in China, nearing the total Tibetan population in exile<sup>56</sup> (Kapstein 2004: 230).

To a great extent this revival is testimony to the resilience and devotion of the Tibetan people who have recovered their religious culture despite having lost nearly all of its physical representations and several generations of qualified lamas during the Maoist era. In the first two decades of post-Mao reforms many Tibetans contributed the lion's share of their income and labour to reconstruct their monasteries and temples. Nowadays the bulk of financial support for Tibetan religious structures in China come from Han Chinese (mainland and diasporic), a fast growing number of whom are participating in Tibetan Buddhism as students and patrons. With Chinese Mahāyāna's foremost principle of offering (Ch. *gongyang*) to

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<sup>55</sup> age 18

<sup>56</sup> Official figures on Buddhist monastic populations indicate that a monastic revival has occurred far more in Tibetan Buddhism than in Chinese Mahayāna and other Buddhist traditions in China (Kapstein 2004: 264, n.3). Kapstein also notes that monastic colleges like Śri Singha and rDzogs chen in Khams have offered classes in Chinese and mathematics to young monks whose families now value public education. As the traditional educators, monasteries picked up the slack until the new state school system reached all Tibetan areas (Kapstein 2004: 248-249). This explains some of the numbers of monks from the 1980s to early 2000s.

the saṅgha as a way of amassing wealth-creating merit (Ch. *fubao*), Chinese Buddhists are avid patrons of Tibetan lamas and *dgon pa*. In a way this plays out the age-old patron-preceptor relationship between China and Tibet that has existed since the Yuan dynasty – though now the patron is the population and not the government.



A typical-looking newly constructed monastic college in Eastern Tibet. Credit: Gui Ling Gan, 2015.

A significant number of mainland Chinese have ordained at major Tibetan monasteries, like bLa rung sGar and Ya chen sGar in Sichuan, while lay Chinese Buddhists regularly invite Tibetan lamas, doctors and artisans to China's coastal cities to share teachings and cultural practices. The Tibetan Buddhist revival is in fact part of a much broader resurgence of religious inclination throughout China. In anomalous ways this resurgence is invigorated by the state's promotion of domestic tourism as a source of revenue and as a way to assert its control over religious matters (Kolas 2008; Makley 2010; Oakes and Sutton 2010: 21). Colourfully ethnic nationalities (Ch. *minzu*)<sup>57</sup> are advertised in the interests of domestic tourism, and Tibet, with its sacred culture and pristine nature, is one of the most alluring destinations.

<sup>57</sup> Tibetans are one of fifty-six 'nationalities' (Ch. *minzu*) that constitute the multi-ethnic PRC.

Thousands of newly rich Han tourists from China's sprawling cities – many with Tibetan gurus – vacation to the Tibetan plateau in summer months for respite from the pollution and stresses of industrial city life. Tibet and its cultural paraphernalia are becoming commodified on the Chinese market, much in the same way that Indian yoga and Buddha statues are sold for therapeutic value in the West. A shop at the Chengdu airport in July 2015 called *Peace of Mind* and staffed by female Han clerks wearing Tibetan traditional dresses sells all things Tibetan – from thangkas and prayer-wheels to dried yak-meat. Tibetan mineral water 'bottled at the source' is marketed as holy spring water. Integrating religions into economic development is one of the state's main ways of managing religion as a contributing force towards CCP goals (Gaerrang 2013: 114). Commercialization of religions and ethnic cultures through the tourism industry brings very high returns: domestic spending on tourism in 2007 was more than 1.2 billion yuan (Oakes & Sutton 2010).

### **bLa rung sGar mkhan po and their movements for educational and ethical reforms**

In the last ten years the resurgence of Buddhism in Eastern Tibet is predominantly taking place through the medium of monastic colleges. A growing number of *dgon pa* are adopting more systemized scholastic curricula, many of them influenced by the monastic college of bLa rung sGar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy (bLa rung sGar lNga rig Nang bstan sLob gling, hereafter bLa rung sGar), located in gSer rta County of dKar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan Province (northern Khams)<sup>58</sup>. With a population of well over 10,000 monks and nuns<sup>59</sup>, bLa rung sGar is the largest Buddhist institution on the Tibetan plateau and the focal point of the Tibetan Buddhist revival. Its magnitude and high intellectual and ethical standards have

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<sup>58</sup> Another major monastic college re-established since the 1980s is bLa brang Monastery in A mdo (Gansu Province). Founded in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, bLa brang has been known as the greatest centre of dGe lugs pa learning and authority in northeastern Tibet. bLa brang has strongly figured in relations between Tibetan, Mongol and Chinese governments since the Qing dynasty (Kapstein 2004: 250).

<sup>59</sup> Reports of the population vary considerably. On 17 October 2015 the Sydney Morning Herald reported an estimated 50,000 monastics living at bLa rung sGar.



incredibly far-reaching influence on the minds of Tibetans across the Tibetan Plateau, from diet and livelihood to cultural identity.

bLa rung sGar was formally established in 1987 by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok with the assistance of the Tenth Panchen Lama, as part of their efforts to rehabilitate their religion after the corruptions undergone during the Maoist era, and with the vision that Tibetan Buddhism should spread to Han areas (Germano 1998; Osburg 2013). Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's lifelong emphasis on pure monastic discipline and his revelation of numerous *gter ma* played extremely important roles in inspiring Tibetans in the revitalization of their religion (Germano 1998; Sodargye 2015). Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok had evaded capture by Chinese authorities during the Cultural Revolution and spent that decade meditating and composing Buddhist commentaries in remote valleys of gSer rta. In 1980 bLa rung sGar first formed as a *chos sgar* – an informal community of disciples gathered around Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok for Vajrayāna teachings and contemplate practice. (The site had long been celebrated as the mountain hermitage of a 19<sup>th</sup> century *gter ston* and as a favoured retreat place for many yogins.) As the number of disciples residing at bLa rung sGar quickly swelled – by 1986 there were more than six thousand – Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok developed an intensive Buddhist curriculum of study, meditation and debate. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok was the first lama in modern Tibet to successfully establish a major centre of Tibetan Buddhist learning, and bLa rung sGar is celebrated as his monumental achievement (Terrone 2013). The role that bLa rung sGar has played in the Tibetan Buddhist revival cannot be overstated.

Today, besides being an ecumenical institute open to followers of all Tibetan Buddhist schools, bLa rung sGar is unusual in that half of its students are nuns studying the same curriculum as monks. While academic studies have been offered in nunneries of India and Nepal over the last three decades, these exiled nunneries have been exposed to modernity and to the feminist influence of participating Western and Taiwanese Buddhist women since the 1960s. bLa rung sGar was a trailblazer in Tibet by admitting women to its curriculum from the 1980s when Tibet's encounter with modernity was still nascent. It is also the first Buddhist

college in Tibetan history to systematically grant the title of *mkhan mo* (Buddhist nun-scholar) to nuns on completion of their studies. Another unusual element of bLa rung sGar is the large number of ethnic Han monks and nuns attending classes taught in Chinese language.



© Gael Michaud/Demotix/Corbis  
**bLa rung sGar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in dKar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan (Khams). Credit: Daily Mail, 19 April 2015.**

Further afield, tens of thousands of lay Chinese around the world study classical Tibetan Buddhist teachings via online courses taught in Chinese by bLa rung sGar's senior *mkhan po*<sup>60</sup>. In teaching Chinese laypeople the *mkhan po*'s emphasis is not on chanting sūtras and making offerings, but on study of classical Mahāyāna treatises like *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* and *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. Other popular themes in the *mkhan pos'* and other Tibetan lamas' teachings and activities with Chinese followers are vegetarianism, saving the lives of animals (*tshe thar*; Ch. *fang-sheng*) and ethical precepts. These themes accord with the values traditionally espoused in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, and in the past have not been as strongly emphasized in Buddhism among Tibetans. It is possible that an emphasis on these themes is

<sup>60</sup> See for example <http://www.zhifeiw.com/cn/>

necessary for Tibetan lamas to establish reputability and common ground with new Chinese audiences<sup>61</sup>.

At bLa rung sGar Academy the monastic curriculum comprises classic Buddhist texts of sūtra and tantra, specializing in commentaries of the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud schools, as well as secular subjects like grammar, medicine, arts and computer science (Sodargye 2015). To date bLa rung sGar has produced more than a thousand qualified *mkhan po* and *mkhan mo*, many of whom now teach at other monasteries and Dharma centres throughout Tibet, China, India and the West. (Though female teachers are generally less well received by wider Tibetan and Chinese society.) Perhaps the most well-known of bLa rung sGar's leading teachers today are Khenpo Sodargye (mKhan po bSod Dar rgyas) and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö (mKhan po Tshul khriims bLo gros). Besides having massive followings of Han Chinese students, these two teachers have both travelled to major universities in Asia, Europe, North America and Australia giving lectures on the importance of Buddhist study to worldwide audiences. Khenpo Sodargye's book *A Scientific Treatise on Buddhism* in Chinese language is a popular handbook of Chinese Buddhists, as is Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's *From Believers to Bodhisattvas*. Both of these books emphasize the close bonds that Buddhism shares with science and exhort the lay Buddhist community to become educated in Buddhist philosophy.

In Tibetan pastoral areas the influence of bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* is widespread through reform movements aiming to strengthen ethical conduct, education and purity of spoken Tibetan language (Gaerrang 2012). In 2000 Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok launched a movement against the slaughter of animals among East Tibetan pastoralists. This was in response to the mass slaughtering of Tibetan livestock that began after China's market opened to the commercial sale of Tibetan yak meat. This movement, now carried by other bLa rung sGar *mkhan po*, promotes the upholding of ten Buddhist precepts that prohibit selling livestock for slaughter, gambling,

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<sup>61</sup> One may wonder if Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's lifelong adherence to monastic vows, despite being a *gter ston*, was to aid his mission of spreading Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese. *gTer ma* revelations are usually said to require the assemblage of particular conditions, including the *gter ston*'s reliance on sexual yoga with a prophesized consort (Jacoby 2007: 85).

visiting prostitutes and other misconducts that spoil the integrity of the Tibetan character (Gaerrang 2012; Gayley 2013). Along with these precepts, which incidentally were newly formulated at bLa rung sGar, vegetarianism is strongly encouraged by the *mkhan po* and argued for on the basis of Buddhist scriptures. Whole towns and villages have joined this monastic-driven ethical movement and taken some or all of the ten precepts for a period of three years or longer (Gaerrang 2012: 4). Many pastoralists, however, find the tension between economic necessity and the Buddhist anti-slaughter precept irreconcilable and choose not to renew the precepts after a three-year period (Gaerrang 2012; Gayley 2013: 281).

Hand-in-hand with these ethical reforms is an illiteracy-eradication movement instigated by bLa rung sGar's *mkhan po*. Monk-teachers are dispatched to communities throughout Eastern Tibet to teach Tibetan language and Buddhism to school children and illiterate herders requesting their instruction (Gaerrang 2012). Education is recognized by bLa rung sGar's *mkhan po* as a top priority for the future of Tibetans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Tibetans are encouraged by them to avail the new educational and economic opportunities in developing urban centres. It is noteworthy that until the 1980s the only Tibetan education system existed in monasteries. The *mkhan po* are therefore concerned that the Tibetan laity are educated in their religious cultural heritage in order to assist in its preservation. At the same time the *mkhan po* are concerned that Tibetan youth are equipped for survival in a Chinese capitalist society that is modernizing at breakneck speed. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö has said "education is Tibetan Buddhism... a change that must be made in the Tibetan herders' means of making a living" (Gaerrang 2012: 248).

As leading spokespeople in Tibetan society on religious culture, Tibet's *mkhan po* and other teachers aim to steer their society through the current flux of drastic socioeconomic changes on a path that ensures material development is congruent with Buddhist values (Gayley 2013: 282). They are riding the bull of state-driven modernisation by presenting Tibetan Buddhism as an ethically exemplary, scientific

alternative to stringent ideological belief in Marxism and the rampant materialism that threatens Chinese society (Yü 2013: 139).

### **The influx of monastic colleges and the ‘new intellect’ (*rig gsar*) in Eastern Tibet**

Inside and outside of the monasteries a new ethos of literacy and critical thought is being advocated by young Tibetans who have access to formal, secularized education for the first time. This is especially pronounced in the number of lay Tibetans publishing books on politics, sociology and other secular themes, as well as writers’ groups, websites and blogs dedicated to sharing views and literary compositions. A radical example is a contemporary group of lay Tibetan intellectuals in China called the *New School of Thought* who write in Tibetan and Chinese language about the need for internal reform and change in Tibetan traditions. Perhaps the most extreme of these modern Tibetan intellectuals is Zhogs dung (a.k.a. bKra rgyal), who argued in a 1999 news forum that Tibetans should disassociate from traditional Buddhist learning in order to overcome their present colonised condition (Jamyang Kyi 2010; Yü 2013b; Zhogs dung 2001). The general mood among Tibetans sees the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an age of reason, and critical intelligence has been elevated to new prominence in the learning culture of contemporary Tibetan society, both in China and in exile. This is reflected by the new prevalence of words in colloquial Tibetan like ‘reasoned understanding’ (*rtogs sad*), which is sometimes juxtaposed with ‘blind faith’ (*rmongs dad*), and ‘new brain’ (*klad pa gsar pa*) which refers to educated, sceptical thinkers.

In monasteries and nunneries, the modern importance of rationality is seen in a strong advocacy to marry learning (*shes pa*) with practice (*sgrub pa*) at all times in Buddhist training. Leading masters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ris med movement, renowned as ‘lamas possessing knowledge and yogic realization’ (*shes sgrub gnyi ldan gyi bla ma*), are the direct inspiration for bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* and other lamas in Eastern Tibet today. Their study-with-practice ideal is being strongly advocated by teachers and by the general population of monks and nuns engaged in scholastic curricula. While this ideal is being voiced, the form it is taking under

numerous political and socio-economic influences is a population shift of monks and nuns from long-term retreat centres to classrooms.

Interestingly, several of today's most populated monastic centres, like bLa rung sGar and Ya chen sGar, had first established themselves as *chos sgar* ('Dharma encampment') in the late 1980s. *Chos sgar* were traditionally meditation communities rather than monastic institutions that sometimes migrated with the seasons or the movements of the community's guru. Turek and Terrone have asserted that an increase in *chos sgar* and *sgrub grwa* (retreat centres) in the post-1980s revival was because their less organized enrolment and curricular structure made them less susceptible to state intervention and scrutiny than monasteries (Terrone 2009: 81-84; Turek 2013: 89-90). While this was the case from the late 1980s to early 2000s, in the last ten years several of these communities have evolved into *bshad grwa* (monastic college) or study centres with large bases of Chinese followers and patrons. They no longer fit the traditional description of *chos sgar* and *sgrub grwa* as centres for meditation training. bLa rung sGar is an obvious example of this, as well as several of Gad chags's larger branch *dgon pa* in Nang chen like Ra ya and Brag nang. Ya chen sGar today remains primarily a centre for Dzogchen training and is a destination for monks and nuns of other *dgon pa* in Eastern Tibet to obtain meditation teachings on a seasonal basis (on top of its steady population of several thousand monastics). In the last few years at Ya chen, however, what used to be a sole curriculum of contemplative practice has developed a part-time study program taught by bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* and *mkhan mo* (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, July 2015).

Scholastic learning has always been a strong stream in Tibetan Buddhist training, which is in large part based on the philosophical scriptural traditions of Nālandā University. It is central in the dGe lugs school, where a *dge bshes* degree (nominally equivalent to *mkhan po* in the Sa skya, bKa' brgyud and rNying ma schools) entails at least fifteen years of dialectical study. The Sa skya lineage has also long been identified as a scholastic tradition with its illustrious scholars and historians, like Sa skya Pandita (1182-1251) and Go rams pa (1429-1489). rNying ma and bKa' brgyud

lineages have also had their fair share of master-scholars, notably during the Ris med era in figures like 'Jam dbyang mKyen brtse dBang po (1820-1892) and 'Ju Mi pham (1846-1912), and also in earlier times in masters like 'Brug chen Padma dKar po (1527-1592) and kLong chen pa (1308-1364).

Along with scholastic learning, scholastic revivals have also played defining and recurring roles in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Samuel has described the series of syntheses and reactions between what he terms 'clerical' and 'shamanic' approaches in Tibetan Buddhism (what I would loosely compare to scholastic and yogic approaches). Clerical developments such as aspects of the New Translation period (gSar bsgyur, 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the founding of the dGe lugs school attempted rationalized syntheses of the Buddha's teachings based on graduated monastic curricula (Samuel 1993: 504)<sup>62</sup>. The recent increase of monastic colleges in the *dgon pa* of Eastern Tibet (many of which traditionally favoured the shamanic approach) may resemble such earlier patterns of scholastic revival. However, beyond an increase of study programs some recent developments in the *dgon pa* of Eastern Tibet seem new and divergent. In particular, attitudes of scepticism and a more systematic, degree-oriented approach to study seem out of step with traditional Tibetan patterns of scholarship and its relation to practice.

In pre-Communist Eastern Tibet a *mkhan po* degree was rarely bestowed and was considerably more difficult to acquire than it is today<sup>63</sup>. The degree was not the end result of a standard curriculum, but was given to a monk who over decades had proven his deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, along with altruistic moral conduct and spiritual realization cultivated through extended periods of retreat.<sup>64</sup> *bShad grwa* (monastic colleges) were by no means the standard model of most

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<sup>62</sup> Samuel repeatedly points out that clerical patterns in Tibet also involved shamanic elements, as in the figure of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) whose academic works were inspired by visions of tantric deities (Samuel 1993: 499, 507).

<sup>63</sup> The title *mkhan po* traditionally referred to a preceptor who imparted monks' vows. Only monks highly accomplished in scholarship and conduct, i.e. *mkhan po*, would bestow Prātimokṣa vows to new monks.

<sup>64</sup> For examples, mKhan po gZhan dga' (1871-1927) and mKhan po Ngag ga (1879-1941). See also Khenpo Ngawang Palzang's autobiography, *Wondrous Dance of Illusion* (Ngawang 2013).

monasteries in pre-Communist Eastern Tibet. Famous *bshad grwa* like rDzong gsar and Śri Singha in sDe dge, Khams, established during the Ris med movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were few and far between and served as major scholastic centres for monks coming from all parts of the Tibetan Plateau. Outside of these *bshad grwa* most rNying ma and bKa' brgyud monks who engaged in studies did so in small groups around a teacher who specialized in a particular subject, sometimes for years. They would then proceed to another teacher or retreat area to deepen their knowledge<sup>65</sup> (rDo rDzong Rinpoche, personal communication, 2014).

Today a nine-year *bshad grwa* curriculum is standard in almost all bKa' brgyud, Sa skya and rNying ma monasteries in India and Nepal. A typical daily schedule of study in a *bshad grwa* starts with a morning class on the main text taught by a *mkhan po*, followed by a class on a branch subject of language or introductory topics. After lunch there is a revision class on the main text, and then debate in the evening (Pearcey 2015: 452). The main texts studied in a *bshad grwa* are Tibetan commentarial writings on the 'thirteen great texts' (*gzhung chen bcu gsum*), which are Indian *śāstra* commentaries on the subjects of Vinaya, Abhidharma and Madhyamaka (Pearcey 2015: 453)<sup>66</sup>. Throughout the curriculum monastic students are assessed in memorization, debate and written examination. Upon successful completion of the curriculum a monk or nun is given the degree of *slob dpon* (female: *slob dpon ma*; Skt. *ācārya*) or *mkhan po* (female: *mkhan mo*)<sup>67</sup>, depending on one's teaching experience and moral conduct.

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<sup>65</sup> Accounts are also common of Tibetan masters who having cleared karmic blockages in their psychic channels through yogic practice were able to write extensive commentaries on arcane Buddhist scriptures, with minimal formal study of them. This is said of the founder of Gad chags dGon pa, Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho, who composed large volumes of commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (*rGyud gSang ba sNying po*) and other tantric texts (rDo rje 1997). More recent examples are 'Khrol zhig A Ideu Rinpoche (1931-2007) and Khang sar bsTen pa'i dBang phyug (1938-2014).

<sup>66</sup> For a more detailed overview of non-dGe lugs *bshad grwa* curricula and their background, see Pearcey (2015).

<sup>67</sup> This is primarily the case for nun-scholars at bLa rung sGar in Eastern Tibet. In *bshad grwa* in India nuns may become *slob dpon ma*, but not *mkhan mo*. This is because Tibetan tradition so far does not offer *dge slong ma* (Skt. *bhikṣuṇī*) ordination for nuns, and without it one is technically not permitted to study the Vinaya. Without full study of Vinaya, administrators of *bshad grwa* in India consider that a *mkhan mo* degree cannot be issued.



Such a nine-year *bshad grwa* curriculum was devised in Tibetan monasteries in exile after 1960, perhaps shaped to some degree by the influences of secular education models in India and Nepal and the modern-world importance of degrees and certificates<sup>68</sup>. As a *chos sgar*, bLa rung sGar's study program did not initially entail a fixed number of years. Since 2011, however, bLa rung sGar has determined a fifteen year course of study for a *mkhan po* degree, perhaps shaped under similar influences in modern China (bLa rung sGar mkhan po Garab, personal communication, November 2015).

These standardized curricula have allowed hundreds, if not thousands, of rNying ma, Sa skya and bKa' brgyud *slob dpon* and *mkhan po* to graduate from Tibetan *bshad grwa* in China and in exile over the last two decades. An elderly Nang chen lama relayed how in the past monks who attained a *sgrub bla* ('lama of practice') title on completion of a three-year retreat were given the best opportunities for performing rituals and prayers in society, and therefore had better livelihoods. Today this has changed so that monks with scholarly titles are given more paid opportunities as teachers and tutors, and as a result many monks are pursuing study as their main training course (Lama dGa' ba, personal communication, January 2016). This shift towards degree-oriented systematic study (in Eastern Tibet as well as in India and Nepal) is accompanied by a shift for many monastics away from extended periods in contemplative retreat. The change is not lost on contemporary leading lamas like Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and Karmapa Thaye Dorje<sup>69</sup> who have strongly exhorted the Tibetan community to salvage their waning meditation traditions. Dzongsar Khyentse said in early 2015:

These days in Tibet the tradition of meditation is declining. [...] Before the lineage of our lamas was carried by Indian gurus like Dorje Chang, Tilopa, Virupa, Padmasambhava, Atisha, and Tibetans like Drakpa Gyaltsen, the great

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<sup>68</sup> The fact that *slob dpon* and *mkhan po* degrees are often compared to Master and Doctorate degrees alludes to this.

<sup>69</sup> I was told that Karmapa Thaye Dorje has repeatedly stressed the importance of preserving Tibetan Buddhist practice traditions as the religion spreads throughout the world. The yogic accomplishments of many Tibetan practitioners have inspired foreigners to practice Tibetan Buddhism (Lama dGa' ba, personal communication, January 2016).

Sakya master Kunga Nyingpo and so on. If we [Tibetans] continue not meditating and not practising like we are now, after twenty or thirty years our spiritual guides will be named 'Michelle' and 'David' because [Westerners] are the ones meditating. We need to be careful! (Dzongsar 2015)

Another symptom of modern views permeating Tibetan monasteries is that nowadays one may encounter Himālayan monks who do not believe in karma and rebirth. In 2014 I encountered this in several monks at Shes rab gLing's college in Himachal Pradesh, India, and have heard that such skepticism now exists (though rarely) in Eastern Tibetan monasteries (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, January 2015). In the past, even in the highly dialectical environment of dGe lugs pa monasteries, rigorous philosophical study was based on a secure union of faith and reason and the existence of the Three Jewels, karma and rebirth was rarely, if ever, questioned.<sup>70</sup> Such skepticism is of course more common in modern Western Buddhist circles where 'Secular Buddhism' has emerged as a field of its own and pragmatic Buddhism is argued for by scholars like Stephen Batchelor and David Kalupahana.

In Nang chen before the Cultural Revolution the only *bshad grwa* where monks engaged in continuous years of systematic study existed at Zur mang rNam rgyal rtse monastery (A 'phel, personal communication, July 2015). Local narratives also say that the last Nang chen king, whose seat was the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud monastery Tshes bcu sGar, prohibited extensive dialectical study at the monastery in order to encourage yogic realizations in his monks (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, July 2015). Today in Nang chen there are six *bshad grwa* and approximately twenty lower-level monastic colleges, making up thirty-five per cent of the total number of monasteries and nunneries in the region (Traga, personal communication, July 2015). Among Gad chags's branch *dgon pa* that have converted are Ra ya dGon pa (now a *bshad grwa*) and the second largest nunnery after Gad chags, bDe chen gLing Nunnery, that now has a full-time study program taught by a

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<sup>70</sup> For a sense of the dGe lugs pa intellectual atmosphere, see the Perfection of Wisdom sections of Pabongka Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* and Tsong kha pa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam rim Chen mo)*. See also Dreyfus' (2003) *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*.

resident *mkhan po* from bLa rung sGar. Gad chags remains one of a handful of *dgon pa* in Nang chen that has not developed a study program, and it is looked down upon for this reason by more progressive educated monks and nuns. A nun from sKyo brag Khang ne dGon pa in Nang chen told me:

These days all *dgon pa* in Nang chen have study and practice joined together. Many nun *mkhan mo* are graduating who know Buddhist logic, psychology and philosophy very well. Nowadays in society Dharma study is really improving. There are a few nunneries which have only practice and no study. But every monastery in Nang chen now has both *bshad grwa* and practice. We are better educated than before. Gad chags is one of the biggest of Nang chen's old *dgon pa*, but they have only practice, no study of language or philosophy. It is a remote *dgon pa* in a nomadic area; maybe that is the reason. Before Gad chags was considered an excellent *dgon pa*. Why aren't the lamas promoting study at Gad chags? Some people wonder this.

### **Gad chags dGon pa as a vestige of Nang chen's former contemplative culture**

What follows is an extract of a conversation between a Gad chags lama and a young *rtogs ldan* ('realized person', or yogin), at a remote hermitage in Nang chen in September 2013. The conversation happened in the presence of the elderly yogin, Padma rDo rje, who was respected as the most highly realized living lama of the Gad chags lineage, until his death three months after this conversation. Padma rDo rje had managed to avoid the labour camps of the Cultural Revolution and continued his practice in a remote cave, and was thus a rare embodiment of yogic accomplishment connected to the contemplative culture of pre-Communist era. The young *rtogs ldan* in this conversation is his disciple and a practitioner of the Gad chags lineage.

**Gad chags lama [GL]:** People say that Buddhism is getting cleaned up in this country, that nowadays there should be no faith without studying.

**rtogs ldan [T]:** What does it mean to practice? Discursive thought – is it outside, inside or invisible? What is the essence of our teachings? We have to understand the nature of the mind and then practice, with the guidance of the lama. What is the essence of meditation experience? From where does realization arise? We only find this out from the lama. Noble thoughts, negative thoughts... what is the difference? Our previous lineage lamas would guide us directly like this. Nowadays people learn Dharma mostly from books.

They don't understand the essential teaching of the lama, the *man ngag* [pith oral instructions; *upadeśa*]. These days practice is in trouble.

**GL:** Nowadays *sgrub chen* are criticized. People say it's more important to study texts. [...] Some *mkhan po* who study emptiness to an extreme tell the laypeople that doing circumambulations [*skor ba*] is useless. Circumambulations help the laypeople's minds because in their hearts they believe it is good. You make them doubt that, and then what do they have?

What do you think?

**T:** Really, what I think is that we need practice! Those who say ritual practice isn't necessary should look in [Gad chags's] scriptures, they can see that without inner practice and relying on a *yi dam*, it's impossible to take realization from the outside. I think we need practice - if it is tantra we're talking about. Whoever heard of tantra without practice? For method of the father tantras, wisdom of the mother tantras, the nondual lineage of essential meaning, the fortunate lineage of experience... for all levels of tantra I think you need practice. I've met a few people who say you don't need ritual practice, that the main thing is study. One monk said to me, "What kind of *dgon pa* do you have without study?" I turned it back on him, "You have study but no *dgon pa*!" . . . At Gad chags dGon pa practice is still good, with nuns like Jamtsen Chödrön<sup>71</sup>.

**GL:** All nearby branch *dgon pa* learn from Jamtsen Chödrön.

**T:** Yes, accomplished practitioners like Jamtsen Chödrön are the whole point of our tradition.

**GL:** These days this is the biggest challenge. [...] You do need learning and practice. But those who say the Gad chags nuns don't have learning are wrong. They learn from a direct lineage of oral teachings [*nye brgyud*], they practice the experiential instructions of pure awareness [*rig pa dmar khrid*]. People criticize them, say what's the use of doing meditation and ritual practice if you haven't studied?

It's true that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the age of reason and education is improving. But experiential practice is declining, isn't it. In many places it's declining. I've travelled around and heard folks saying how today there is a 'new intellect' [*rig gсар*], and it's the time for reason and no more blind faith. They say the new intellect is better than the old one. So now who is facing the challenge? We're facing the challenge. If you look throughout Nang chen, there is no better place than Gad chags dGon pa. How is it better? When it comes to yogic practice. Aside from that, logic, analytical reasoning, debate... they don't have these at

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<sup>71</sup> The name of a middle-aged Gad chags nun who holds the lineage (i.e. has mastery) of *rtsa lung* practice.

Gad chags, to be honest. But what they do have is strong faith and pure perception, and on the basis of these subtle channels are cleared and realizations arise.

This year there was a debate in Nang chen town about Buddhist women. The Gad chags nuns were there. Someone there said, “In the past Gad chags was renowned, but now it is not so good, because they have no study program. Those nuns enter three-year retreat not knowing anything. It’s a waste of time.” That kind of attitude is our greatest challenge. Otherwise, all the aspects of the practice lineage taught by Gad chags’s senior nuns - like *rtsa lung* and *'khrul 'khor* - are still being practised, not just for months but for their whole lives. The *rtsa lung* lineage was passed from the late nun Palmo to Jamtsen Chödrön, and she teaches at other branch *dgon pa*. Recently I asked the nuns if there are other nuns as capable of teaching as Jamtsen Chödrön. They answered that there are many Gad chags nuns with her level of accomplishment. I was so happy to hear this, I felt that the Gad chags lineage may be alright.



The elderly yogin, Padma rDo rje, at the time of the above conversation. In front of him a Gad chags nun is receiving instructions on the nature of mind. Photographed by Caterina De Re, 2013.

What is noteworthy in these recent criticisms of Gad chags dGon pa is that before the nunnery was renowned, and now it is criticized, yet little has changed in Gad chags’s daily life and practice curriculum. Instead the attitudes and priorities in Tibetan society outside of Gad chags dGon pa have changed. Not so long ago Gad chags was reputed as a high quality nunnery. One nun explains how she and her

parents decided she would join Gad chags in the late 1980s: “We discussed how there are many new nunneries around, but Gad chags dGon pa is the best of them with a long history and practice tradition. My parents stressed that I have to root myself at Gad chags for my whole life and not get distracted.”

In Karma Don grub Phun tshogs’ 1999 *A History of Gonpa in Kham Gom-de Nangchen*, Gad chags is the first of 69 *dgon pa* whose histories are compiled and its photos are featured at the front of the book. Gad chags is also praised by Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche in his 20<sup>th</sup> century memoirs *Blazing Splendor* in an entire chapter about Gad chags dGon pa titled ‘The Nunnery of Yoginis’. The Gad chags nuns’ dedication to their traditional practice system is a cause of their previous renown, and the Gad chags community therefore has reason to remain proud of it. As mentioned in Chapter One, I have repeatedly heard Gad chags’s nuns and lamas express their intention to preserve the original forms of the nunnery’s practice system without alteration. This conscious determination has emerged gradually over the last ten years, however, as Gad chags has been exposed to various outside influences urging the nunnery to restructure their curriculum and traditions.

Gad chags dGon pa presently has four reincarnate lamas (*sprul sku*) living near the nunnery and regularly involved in its ritual life and administrative affairs. All four lamas are male<sup>72</sup> and each was recognized as a Gad chags *sprul sku* after 1990. The two senior lamas are in their late forties (the average age of the majority of Gad chags’s nuns, who joined the nunnery in the 1980s), approximately twenty years older than the two younger lamas. By virtue of seniority the two older lamas have assumed leadership roles in many of the nunnery’s affairs, although decisions are often made in consultation with the nuns’ administrative committee<sup>73</sup>. The Gad

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<sup>72</sup> mTsho rgyal sPrul sku is the youngest of the four, and is considered the third reincarnation of mTsho rgyal sGrol ma, the Gad chags nun-lama mentioned below on page 64.

<sup>73</sup> It is common for groups of nuns to visit with the lamas in their rooms at Gad chags over cups of tea, informally discussing current events and issues related to spiritual realization. Many important decisions about the nunnery’s life are resolved in this setting. Besides this a formal administrative committee is composed of sixteen nuns (one representing each retreat division) and senior monks of Tshe chu sGar, the monastery of the erstwhile Nang chen king. Committee meetings are called when deemed necessary.

chags nuns are autonomous in their religious life and self-sufficient in transmitting practice instructions, but as is normal throughout Tibet they defer to male lamas in a wider social context, especially regarding the nunnery's mundane affairs.

When the two senior lamas began fundraising for Gad chags from the late 1990s both initially agreed to establish a school at the nunnery – which was in line with the general mood at the time that Tibetan *dgon pa* could be improved through education. Funds raised for Gad chags were first channelled to more urgent needs, however, like rebuilding the nunnery's retreat houses, temple and living quarters. In the years it took to accomplish these other buildings the lamas reassessed their intentions for the nunnery and changed their minds about building a school. In 2006 the nuns and lamas I spoke with sounded ardently dedicated to preserving Gad chags's practice curriculum. "I don't want to be anywhere else but here, spending my time practicing these unique teachings. I made a promise to the previous Ngag bsam Rinpoche<sup>74</sup> [...] that I will spend my entire life practising here at Gad chags dGon pa. To me this is a pure land," said a forty-six year-old Gad chags nun in 2006. Several middle-aged nuns I spoke with told me of their vow to die at Gad chags dGon pa.

Along with these sentiments, it is also significant that Gad chags dGon pa continues to cultivate a close relationship with Tshes bcu sGar, the royal monastery of the erstwhile Nang chen king. Several of the monastery's senior monks are included in the Gad chags's administrative committee and decision-making related to nunnery's organizational structure (see note 73). This relationship connects Gad chags to its earlier era of prestige and royal patronage, secured during the time of the second Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho (b. 1911) who was the son of the Nang chen king, as well as to wider dynamics of cultural identity in Nang chen.

In the early 2000s a *mkhan po* from bLa rung sGar was invited by the nuns and lamas to Gad chags dGon pa and spent several month-long periods teaching the nuns

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<sup>74</sup> One of Gad chags's four male *sprul sku*.

graduated path (*lam rim*) commentaries like dPal sprul Rinpoche's *Kun bzang bLa ma'i zhal lung* for two hours each morning. An interesting physical sign of the *mkhan po's* influence at Gad chags is that he encouraged the nuns to shave their heads. Along with this he encouraged them to focus more efforts on philosophical studies and stricter adherence to the rules of the Vinaya. Until the *mkhan po's* visits Gad chags nuns had worn their hair slightly grown out to about two inches, which marked them as Gad chags nuns when they travelled outside of the nunnery and identified them as tantric practitioners.



**An early 1990s photo of Gad chags nuns with the 'Brug pa 'Ka' brgyud master, A lde'u Rinpoche, and his nephew, Sa sprul Rinpoche, which shows the nuns' traditional short hair style. Credit: Gad chags dGon pa.**

According to a revered senior Gad chags nun, Shes rab bZang mo (who passed away at age 86 in 2008), this hair style was a tradition following the instructions of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Gad chags nun-lama named mTsho rgyal sGrol ma. mTsho rgyal sGrol ma was believed to be an emanation of Ye shes mTsho rgyal and took over leadership of the nunnery after the passing of the first Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho (Shes rab bZang mo, personal communication, July 2006). The bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* ceased teaching at Gad chags dGon pa after 2009<sup>75</sup>. According to one of the two senior lamas this cancellation was the lamas' decision and not the nuns', as Gad

<sup>75</sup> The nuns still continue to shave their heads, perhaps self-conscious when travelling outside of the nunnery in a new social atmosphere.



chags's younger nuns are more disposed to the peer pressure of other nunneries with improved study programs. They are more susceptible to the influence of visiting *mkhan po* and do not necessarily share the determination of the older lamas and nuns to preserve Gad chags's original traditions (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, January 2015).



A photo showing the Gad chags nuns' shaven heads after the *mkhan po*'s visits in the early 2000s. Photographed by Jerome Raphalen, 2006.

Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho, the nunnery's root guru and one of its two senior lamas, spoke in 2013 about his thoughts on preserving Gad chags's original practice traditions:

From 2003 until the present Gad chags dGon pa has developed with retreat houses, running water. . . With all the work that's been happening the nuns haven't had much time to study. Planning for the future, the main temple was rebuilt this year. [...] Gad chags dGon pa has 18 *sgrub chen* in winter and a *sman grub*<sup>76</sup> once every three years. There is also the 'Ja' dmar sMon lam for six days at 'Ja' dmar each year (that is a rNying ma prayer festival from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Tibetan month). In summer as well, one million *Om Mani* and *Benzra Guru* mantra accumulations are performed in the 10<sup>th</sup> [Tibetan] month. These extensive ritual traditions are maintained. I had been thinking to build a study centre at Gad chags. [...] I thought about this, and how the teaching tradition at Gad chags dGon pa is an oral lineage involving intensive

<sup>76</sup> A *sgrub chen* during which sacred medicine (*sman sgrub*) is produced.

*sgrub chen* and yogic practice. From the beginning, Gad chags dGon pa has had *bcud len* [‘taking the essence’], *mun mtshams* [‘dark retreat’] and many practice traditions that are still maintained. These are crucial to preserve. We have experienced nuns here. Among the nuns, about ten are highly accomplished in *’khrul ’khor* and yogic practice. The practices are preserved like water being fully passed from vessel to vessel – the lineage has been unbroken. This is most important, that Gad chags dGon pa preserves its unique practice lineage. There are others who build great colleges or study the texts in depth. But I’m not thinking much about those things. Who knows what the future will bring?

## Conclusion

In many ways tension between yogic and scholastic orientations is nothing new in Buddhism. It was present between forest meditators and settled monastics in early Indian Buddhism (Ray 1994), while friction between the scholastic dGe lugs school and bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma practice lineages has existed for centuries. In some ways such tension was a factor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ris med period (Oldmeadow 2012: 47-54; Samuel 1993: 525-543). As apparent in this chapter’s discussions, the pattern reappears today between scholastic and yogic approaches in Eastern Tibetan communities. Yet there are developments in Tibetan Buddhism since the 1980s that are redirecting the religion’s general orientation in unprecedented ways. In Nang chen the change in direction towards degree-oriented, rationalized study is obvious, for monks and nuns as well as for laypeople. Despite peer pressure to add a study program, Gad chags dGon pa is one of only a few communities choosing to maintain its original practice curriculum without alterations. Gad chags is supported in its determination to do so by the nunnery’s remote location, its renowned history and the leadership of its lamas. At lower altitude *dgon pa* where the influences of a rapidly changing social and economic environment cannot be evaded, an increase in scholastic learning is apparent.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Why the New Emphasis on Systematic Scholastic Study in the Practice Lineages of Eastern Tibet?

##### **Religion in a ‘Socialist Spiritual Civilization’: atheism, superstition and the survival of the rational**

The building of a ‘Socialist Spiritual Civilization’ (SSC; Ch. *shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming*) has been a doctrinal aim of the Party since it was first conceptualized by Deng Xiaoping in 1980. The SSC goal serves the Party’s need to redefine old ideals and assert new values in the reform-era. It also seeks to maintain social stability while tempering the negative moral traits arising with high-speed material development (Cooke 2009: 126-129). As the Party tendered its new tolerance of religion, necessary ideological adjustments were made to its Marxist doctrine. In Document 19, the Party’s post-reform edict on religion written in 1982, enlightenment atheism prevails over the militant atheism of Mao’s years. That means that religion is no longer considered a dangerous narcotic of the people to be controlled and eliminated, but a distorted consciousness of social reality that is provisionally allowed as a social phenomenon. Moreover, religion can now be harnessed in the interests of a SSC for its moralizing influence on the people (Yang 2012: 46, 48). Document 19 acknowledges the past mistakes of militant atheism, yet it clearly affirms that atheism must continually be propagated among the people (outside of religious venues). Religion is still regarded as a backward, unscientific outlook that will fade away as society evolves (Yang 2012: 50). As Jiang Zemin urged the Party in a statement to the United Front Work Department (UFWD) in 2003:

Along with the development of socialist material and spiritual civilizations, people will continually grasp the secret of the natural world and their destiny, and lean toward science and rational thinking for the understanding of the objective world, the motion of life, and the essence of religion. This will help religion walk to its final demise (UFWD 2003 cited in Yü 2006: 93).

Such a staunch atheist view is reaffirmed among Party members through mandatory training periods in CCP schools, and in circulars and periodic propaganda campaigns (Yang 2012: 58). Thus in China's Socialist Spiritual Civilization, where Buddhism has its role, the determining doctrine remains Marxist-Leninist atheism. Buddhism and other religions can survive under such conditions in China by subordinating themselves to state ideology and regulations of political authorities.

The highest CCP body in the management of religion is the United Front Work Department, established with the inception of the Communist Party in the 1920s as the agent to unify non-Party social resources. Since the 1980s it has been primarily concerned with economic development (Gaerrang 2013: 111). At the level of the central government (i.e. the state council) the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA, which replaced the Religious Affairs Bureau in 1998) supervises the operation of China's five officially sanctioned religions. At the local government level each religion is further managed through its state-financed Association (like the Chinese Buddhist Association), usually headed by a religious leader. Religious Associations function to link religious circles with state power through academic work and the development of religion, as well as to protect the interests of religious communities (Cooke 2009; Gaerrang 2013: 111-112). These administrative bodies are, in principle, primarily concerned with managing a religion's social expression and conduct so that it is adapted to socialist society. Their purview covers religious doctrine, texts, rituals, organizations, persons and places. One of the ten main functions of the SARA is to investigate religious doctrine and ensure that it promotes national and public interests. The government's right to intervene and calibrate religious doctrine and its expression was a major point in the adoption of the 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs (Cooke 2009: 130).

A stepping off point for the government's religious work is demarcating religion from superstition. "Religion" is regarded as having a logical system of thought oriented to the afterlife and based on scriptures, trained clergy and fixed sites of religious activity (Ashiwa 2009: 58). "Superstition", in contrast, includes beliefs and practices that lack a philosophical foundation and contradict scientific knowledge, and are

therefore considered harmful to society (Poon 2011: 31; Yang 2012). The CCP sees superstition as fundamentally antagonistic to its doctrine and as something that must be eradicated. Anti-superstition rhetoric has had a long and fervent history in China, dating in the modern period from the late Qing dynasty at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>77</sup>. The Chinese word for superstition, *mixin* ('deluded faith'), was introduced into Chinese language at that time as the state began suppressing 'superstitious' belief in favour of a secular, more enlightened society.<sup>78</sup> Following an edict by the Qing emperor in 1898 monasteries were converted into schools and the people's religious rituals were condemned as a major obstacle to the country's social health and evolution (Lopez 2002: xix; Poon 2011: 39). By the Republican era in the 1920s a growing population of intellectuals saw Buddhism (and all religions) as primitive superstition that impeded China's entry into the modern world (Lopez 2002: xix). In a popular publication by the Shanghai Commercial Press in 1931 superstition was defined as a residue of tradition left over from the pre-scientific era (Poon 2011: 31). During the Cultural Revolution from 1967 to 1977 there was a 'Brigade for the Termination of Religions' and the nation's mission to eradicate superstition was backed by research institutes and the highest mandate of the PRC.

Such a charged stigma of religion has evolved in the CCP's post-reform religious policies as a trenchant demarcation between superstition and permissible religion. This, along with the management apparatus mentioned above, must be exerting pressure on the self-consciousness of Tibetan Buddhists in public talks, publications, thought and conversations in China today. Dan Smyer Yü, based on his extensive fieldwork on the Tibetan Buddhist revival in China, argues that the readiness of Tibetan lamas to represent their religion as congruent with modern science is "a delayed contention with the antireligious ideology of the state" and "a sign of post-traumatic distress resulting from the attacks on Tibetan Buddhism" during the anti-religious drives of the Mao-era (Yü 2013a: 127). Based on his interactions with numerous Tibetan Buddhist teachers and their Han Chinese followers, Yü regards the

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<sup>77</sup> In imperial China priests and shamans were sometimes condemned by local officials for performing exorcisms and death rituals, and temples judged to be housing popular cults faced the threat of demolition (Lopez 2002: xix; Poon 2011: 32).

<sup>78</sup> The Chinese word *mixin* was borrowed from Japanese in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Poon 2011: 29).

rational tenor of modern Tibetan Buddhist discourses as a project “for rescuing religion from superstition”. Yü observes that in their frequent interactions with Han Chinese Buddhists, the leading figures of the Tibetan Buddhist revival are aware of the social condition in China and the misconstruing of Buddhism as pessimistic and superstitious (Yü 2013: 85-86). Yü also notes that many of the Tibetan teachers leading the Buddhist revival in Eastern Tibet (like Khenpos Sodargye and Tsultrim Lodrö) are fluent in Chinese and engaged with both Tibetan and Chinese audiences. They are acutely aware that their religious activities are closely regulated by the Chinese state and that the religious and shamanic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism are often perceived as superstitious. The crackdown against Falun Gong looms as an example and warning (Yü 2006: 84, 89).

La rung sGar Khenpo Sodargye in his Chinese language book *Scientific Treatise* discusses the Chinese-Marxist separation of material and ideal as being the original basis for the political category of ‘superstition’. He goes on to argue that to accuse Buddhism of being superstitious is “as ludicrous as the accusation of science as superstition” (Sodargye 2001 in Yü 2006: 86-87). With a similar apology for Buddhism’s rational side, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö in a talk at University of Sydney in 2015 introduced Tibetan Buddhism as “a path on which one need not have faith in any deity or religious principle; one only needs faith in the natural law of interdependence and emptiness” (Lodrö 2015). With its essential theme of guru devotion, however, Tibetan Buddhism is a consummate religion. It is in fact replete with heavily religious practices that could easily be categorized as superstition: *dbang* empowerments, *bsang* and *gsur* smoke offerings to land spirits and ghosts, *mo* divinations, *’pho ba* transference of consciousness and *yi dam* practices that visualize the human body as a deity. At least in these instances (and to note, the audience at University of Sydney was mainly Chinese), the Khenpos appear to be selectively portraying Tibetan Buddhism in a way that satisfies the government’s dictates on religious culture as well as the needs of the audience. Is this teaching style integral to maintaining their latitude of moral influence over hundreds of thousands of Han and Tibetan followers in China?

One question is why the Chinese government has issued passports to these two Khenpos to travel and speak at dozens of leading universities and radio programs worldwide. Human rights groups have highlighted the widespread denial of passports to Tibetans and Uighurs in China. Very few ever obtain one for foreign travel, and even within Tibetan areas the movements of Tibetans are restricted through a complicated registration system<sup>79</sup>. One might infer that the Chinese government is approving, even supportive, of the Khenpos' teaching style as appropriately contributing to the 'Socialist Spiritual Civilization' that is the Party's current goal. This is even more so when considering that several other Tibetan teachers have been restrained or imprisoned over the last ten years for the content of their public speech.



**Khenpo Sodargye teaching at Massey University. Note that the audience appears to be mainly Chinese. Credit: zhibeifw.org.**

One may further contrast the Khenpos' public teaching style with that of Tibetan lamas living in the West, like Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the late Chagdud Tulku who have emphasized religious aspects of devotion, deity-

<sup>79</sup> See <http://www.savetibet.org/policy-alienating-tibetans-denial-passports-tibetans-china-intensifies-control/#sthash.DF60LEPN.dpuf>

yoga and *sgrub chen* in their students' practice. Perhaps in China people subscribing to a rational doctrine that accords with science are less disruptive to the authoritarian, socialist government than those practicing the 'dark arts' (to use a Harry Potter reference) of superstition.

Looking to the adapted teaching styles of the first Tibetan lamas in the West in the 1960s and 70s, like Chögyam Trungpa and Tarthang Tulku, a possible comparison may be drawn with the Khenpos' and other lamas' teaching to contemporary audiences in China and abroad. Early English Tibetan Buddhist books, like Tarthang Tulku's *Time, Space, and Knowledge* and Chögyam Trungpa's *The Myth of Freedom*, show a renouncing of traditional doctrine and deity devotion for new-age discussions of reality and psychology. Fifty years of Tibetan Buddhism in the West later, with a foundation of basic understanding established, one sees a return to traditional presentations of Tibetan Buddhism by many lamas<sup>80</sup>. Where the Khenpos and other lamas are selectively portraying Buddhism to contemporary Chinese Buddhists, to what extent is their teaching style intended to establish communication and affinity with their new audience?

Gaerrang has pointed out that former dynasties until the Republican government have for centuries used Tibetan spiritual leaders to assert political affiliation with Tibetan society. Now, with full control over Tibet and closely supervising religions, the CCP continues to use Tibetan Buddhist leaders to achieve its goal of isolating separatists from religion (Gaerrang 2013: 117). In point of fact, in Tibetan populated areas the government has demonstrated less concern with circumscribing superstition and cults over the last few decades than with suppressing separatist sentiments connected to the Tibetan independence movement in exile. (The government's preoccupation with the material goals of development and the yields of religion in the domestic tourism industry also distracts from its campaigns against superstition.) Tibetan *dgon pa*, particularly monastic colleges, must diligently avoid

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<sup>80</sup> Thank you to Geoffrey Samuel for pointing this out. See for example the graduated teaching style and requirement of traditional practice commitments by Thrangu Rinpoche and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche.



all overt expressions of political rhetoric and activism in order to proceed with their Buddhist programs. Germano and Yü have both observed in their fieldwork that the post-Mao Buddhist revival expressing itself in the monastic colleges of Eastern Tibet (particularly in the rNying ma school) has avoided direct political responses to the authority of the CCP. Yet at the same time it is taking advantage of the CCP's liberalizing policies on religion to revitalize Buddhism wherever and however possible (Germano 1998: 71; Yü 2006: 7). Tibetan Buddhist teachers and thinkers must not only conform, but innovate, strategize and negotiate the contours of various restraints while giving expression to their religion.

### **The scientific discourse in Buddhism and parallel transformations in Burma and Sri Lanka**

In his 2008 study *The Making of Modern Buddhism* McMahan concludes that the survival of Buddhism depends on it resonating with the dominant culture of a society through selective interpretation and self-presentation (McMahan 2008: 15-16).

Lopez in his 2002 *A Modern Buddhist Bible* talks similarly of how 'modern' Buddhism has reformulated itself not simply by conforming to a new society, but by negotiating and reshaping itself in terms of the prevalent discourses of the society (Lopez 2002: vii-xi). In exploring the reasons and ways in which Tibetan Buddhism is reformulating itself in modern China, several parallels can be drawn in the restructuring of Buddhist life that occurred in Sri Lanka and Burma under European colonialism from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These parallels help to suggest possible purposes and achievements of the new expressions of Buddhism in Eastern Tibet today.

Unlike Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Burma that met with modernizing forces of science and industrialization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (and Buddhism of Japan, Thailand and other countries on different terms), Tibetan Buddhism has only begun its modernizing journey since the 1980s. The circumstances of Burma and Sri Lanka in colonial times differ from those of present-day Tibetans. However, several of the challenges to the survival of Buddhism in these countries are similar, namely the loss

of autonomy and of a Buddhist government, the monasteries' loss of their traditional position as educators and deprecation of Buddhism by the ruling authorities. In Sri Lanka and Burma the threat to Buddhism came from European colonial rule with its associated Christian proselytizing and Western hegemony (McMahan 2008). For Tibetan Buddhists in China the threat is from an atheist government with a Communist agenda and a growing population of intellectuals who were raised to reject superstition. Several of the ways in which the native Buddhists of these countries have responded to these challenges further parallel each other: the privileging of texts and academic qualifications, standardizing monastic curricula and an urgent call for ethics and education among the laity.



**A *mkhan po* giving a public teaching at a *bshad grwa*. Note the Buddhist flag. Credit: Guru Chödrön, 2015.**

Just as the Buddhist flag that the American, Henry Steel Olcott, helped to design is found in contemporary monasteries in Tibet<sup>81</sup>, so is the discourse of scientific Buddhism first articulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by native Buddhist modernizers and Western Buddhist promoters like Anagarika Dharmapala, Olcott, Paul Carus, Shaku

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<sup>81</sup> The Buddhist flag is seen in Tibet especially at teaching and scholastic events.

Sōen, D.T. Suzuki and Ledi Sayadaw. Under colonial rule Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Burma was regularly criticized by Christian missionaries for being superstitious, unscientific and nihilistic (and therefore ethically weak). The leading voices of what would become Buddhist reform movements had therefore to focus intently on explaining how Buddhism was in fact rational, scientific and ethically strong (Harris 2006; Lopez 2002; McMahan 2008).

The famous Panadura debate of 1873 in Ceylon between Gunananda and Reverend de Silva set the tone for Buddhism's representation as a technical doctrine and philosophy, rather than as the body of religious merit-making practices and views that constituted Buddhism for the bulk of its native followers (Lopez 2002: xi). Twenty years later while visiting the United States for the World's Parliament of Religions, Dharmapala addressed an audience at New York's Town Hall with the following:

The message of the Buddha that I bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilized Aryans of India twenty-five centuries ago a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmology which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and reality (Dharmapala 1965 cited in McMahan 2008: 96).

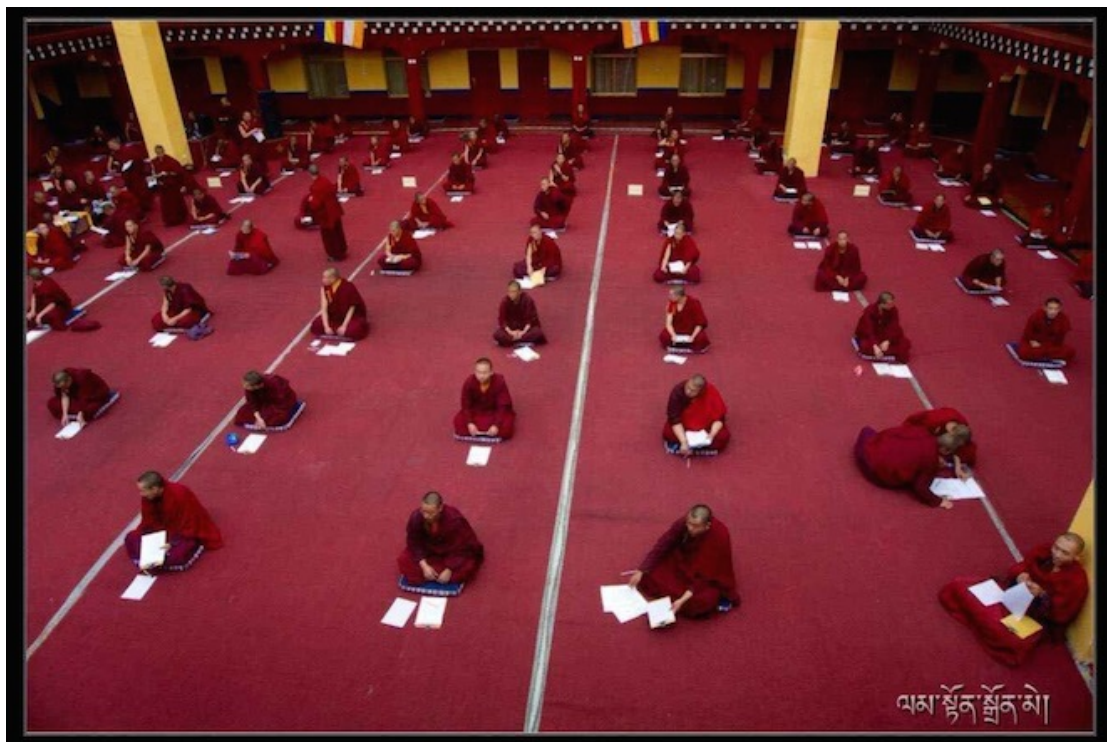
McMahan comments on Dharmapala's speech, "Even a cursory knowledge of Sinhalese Buddhism on the ground belies this portrayal of Buddhism as free from ritual, priests, ceremony, heavens, and hells; yet early apologists repeated this sentiment often" (McMahan 2008: 95). It appears here as well that Dharmapala was selectively portraying Buddhism in a way that resonated with the prevailing views of his Western audience, and by extension those of Sri Lanka's ruling British. Yet in doing so he succeeded in undermining the criticisms made by Christian and scientific-minded Westerners while remaining dedicated to a singularly Buddhist vision of the world.

Anne Blackburn (2001) explains how a century earlier in Sri Lanka the Siyam Nikāya had established itself as the dominant monastic order through an emphasis on Pāli textual learning and a newly standardized monastic curriculum. Blackburn argues that the Siyam Nikāya's identification with learning is what garnered its prestige and influence to attract patrons and larger societal respect, and to become the dominant monastic order in Sri Lanka that today administers such principal places of worship as the Temple of the Tooth Relic (*Daḷadā Māligāva*) and Adam's Peak (Blackburn 2001: 50-53; Malalgoda 1976).

The importance of textual learning as a means of gaining prestige, particularly when social status is desperately needed, is evident also in Ledi Sayadaw's efforts for Buddhism in Burma during its period under British colonialism. In *The Birth of Insight* Erik Braun explains how the Burmese movement to revive Buddhist meditation was successful largely because of Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923), who made it part of a larger educational project that expanded among the laity (Braun 2013). With Burma's Buddhist king deposed, Ledi assessed that responsibility for upholding Buddhism belonged to the lay population. In response to the political realities of the time, Ledi resorted not to political action but instead called for individual moral development and education (Braun 2013: 98). He determined that insight meditation must go hand-in-hand with doctrinal study, with study serving as the basis for meditation. Through his teaching style, use of print culture and organization of self-directed study groups, Ledi made Buddhist study accessible to the laity as it had never been before, focusing on education of Abhidhamma for its rational appeal to "scientific men of other religions" and the self-assurance it instilled in Buddhists who studied it (Braun 2013: 80-81). These reforms reinvigorated Buddhism and allowed it to survive in a form that continues to the present. Even today in Burma monastic teachers are expected to have a *dharmacariya* degree ('teacher of dhamma') as a minimum academic qualification to teach meditation (Patrick Kearney, personal communication, October 2014).

Though Burma may have taken a seemingly different direction towards reviving meditation practice, its vehicles of education, outreach to the laity and degree-

oriented study have salient parallels in Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC over the last few decades. Like Ledi Sayadaw many popular Tibetan Buddhist teachers in the PRC, most prominently bLa rung sGar's *mkhan po*, rely not on political activism but on spreading ethical and educational reforms. These reforms are directed not only in monasteries but among the Tibetan laity, and emphasize self-directed Buddhist study and understanding as an indispensable foundation for practice. The attainment of degrees like *mkhan po*, *rab 'byams* and *slob dpon* through monastic curricula has likewise taken on new importance in training a larger population of Buddhist teachers within a framework of systematized formal education. In Tibet *rab 'byams* and *slob dpon* degrees have only been systematically awarded to graduates since the 1990s, while as mentioned in Chapter Two *mkhan po* degrees were awarded to monks far more sparsely prior to the exile period. Another important similarity of both Burmese and Tibetan Buddhist reforms is that they have made extensive doctrinal study accessible to the wider lay population, including women, while it had previously been the purview of only a small coterie of monks (Braun 2013: 105).



Monks' class in a *bshad grwa* in Eastern Tibet (note the Buddhist flags hanging from the ceiling).  
Credit: Xinling Ganlu, 2015.

It may be said that the overall achievement of these reforms for Burmese and Tibetan Buddhists is a fortified version of their doctrinal traditions that can be upheld by a wider population of individuals and educational institutions, as well as credibility and prestige in the eyes of the dominating government and worldview. The reforms have enabled Buddhism in these societies to survive and flourish under radically new circumstances.

Another factor behind a new emphasis on rationalized textual study may be that when the preservation of a religious tradition is challenged, concrete texts and doctrine are more easily held and explained than intangible yogic experience. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, whose Khyentse Foundation invests in academic Buddhist studies at universities around the world, said in July 2014, “Academic Buddhist study is going to be the insurance for Buddhist study and practice in the future. Because if we follow sudden inspiration, temporary inspiration, that’s not going to last. We need the academic institution background. It’s so important” (Dzongsar 2014). Dzongsar Khyentse may have been referring to the transient inspirations of Westerners as they meet with Buddhism for the first time, but the point is not lost in circumstances where a tradition is challenged by a new social context. The written word, as posited by Walter Ong, “assures its endurance and potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a limitless number of living readers. The dead, thing-like text has potentials far outdistancing those of the simply spoken word” (Ong 1986:31).

### **Modernity in China and the globalizing influence of modern Buddhism**

Bruno Latour traces the concept of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*: “The adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time” (Latour 1993: 10). According to Latour, the unspoken constitution by which the concept of modernity operates guarantees a separation between humans and nature, between modern and ancient, with winners are on the modern side and losers are on the other (Latour 1993: 31-32). Rejection of the ‘old’ and a fear of lagging behind (into the chaos of China’s 19<sup>th</sup> century) have fuelled China’s drive for

drastic modernisation since the late Qing dynasty and the founding of the PRC (Saxer 2013: 235). Tibetan indigenous culture and livelihoods are targeted by such a outlook: every night on a government-sponsored 'Tibet TV' channel there are two minutes of advertising in which thanks is given for the 'new Tibet' and insults are given to the 'old Tibet', which is rejected as feudal and backwards (Woeser 2015). Tacit in China's high modernist dreams, wherein things are conceivable only when seen in terms of development, is the assumption that less materially developed societies are less intellectually developed (Gaerrang 2013: 2). Intellectual development is a hoop that Tibetans may feel pressured to jump through in order to maintain their self-esteem and assert themselves in a swiftly changing society.

Beyond the CCP's regulations on religion in China and its hyper-scientific creed, there is a globalization of modern trends in Buddhism that may be indirectly informing changes within Tibetan Buddhism. McMahan has remarked on modern Buddhism as an 'actual new form of Buddhism' that has been evolving not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century, as a reinterpretation created by interactions of the two (McMahan 2008: 9; 2012: 3). The first prolonged interactions between the two in the 19<sup>th</sup> century involved a West that was going through its own crisis with Judeo-Christian theology and a rupture between faith and reason, incited by the rise of modern science. Western Buddhist converts like Olcott were quick to reject Buddhism's apparently idolatrous devotional practices, even while embracing the religion (Lopez 2002: 17). For Carus, Olcott and other Western Buddhists of the time the magical elements of the religion were to be purified through reason and science, leaving behind the essential Buddhist truth. They understood the essential Buddhist truth to be congruent with science, and expressible in an evolved, rational form of the religion (Lopez 2002 :16; Verhoeven 2001: 77). Lopez remarks that Buddhism as a system of rational and ethical philosophy is a common characteristic of modern Buddhism around the world, away from seemingly superstitious practices like the veneration of relics and monks so common among Buddhist majorities in pre-modern times (Lopez 2002: xvii).

How such Western influences have reached the minds of Tibetans in China today is too complex a question to investigate here, but some channels are obvious, like the Dalai Lama who has openly stated that Buddhist doctrines contradicted by established scientific conclusions should be abandoned (McMahan 2008: 115). Along with increasing scholasticism, other salient features of modern Buddhism as highlighted by McMahan and Lopez are conspicuous in the *dgon pa* of Eastern Tibet today, especially gender equality, egalitarianism and scepticism. In Chapter Two I mentioned the inclusion of women in bLa rung sGar's study program and their right to attain the *mkhan mo* degree (the equivalent of the highest monks' degree). Skepticism is also asserting itself in a new trend of public debates (*bgro gleng*) that take place in monastic settings, town temples and in various forums on the Chinese-owned mobile messaging service, WeChat<sup>82</sup>. These debates involve monastics and laypeople, and revolve around contemporary issues seen as crucial to the preservation of Tibetan culture and identity, such as the Tibetan lexicon, women's rights and the tradition of reincarnation lineages (*sprul sku*). In a WeChat forum titled *Women's Society* the question of whether or not females can attain enlightenment has been debated by men and women (mostly monks and nuns) since the chat group began in 2013<sup>83</sup>. At bLa rung sGar a vociferous debate on whether or not to maintain the *sprul sku* tradition in Tibetan Buddhism reached its height in 2007 and spiraled out into *dgon pa* throughout China, Nepal, Tibet and the global diaspora of Tibetans.

Alongside these debates the democratic principle of egalitarianism is strongly pronounced at bLa rung sGar, and I have often heard it expressed when speaking with bLa rung sGar monks and nuns in phrases like "equality among all is the seed of compassion and love" and "even students and teachers are equal" (mChog dga' Rinpoche, personal communication, July 2015). A case in point is that last year the two younger of Gad chags's four reincarnate lamas, both educated at bLa rung sGar, argued for a rotation system whereby each of the four lamas takes a two-year term as the nunnery's head lama, with no single lama as supreme. Generally in Tibetan

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<sup>82</sup> WeChat is the main international social media platform accessible to Tibetans in China.

<sup>83</sup> Chat group at WeChat ID *Bud med mthun tshogs*, accessed on 19 September 2014.



tradition the head lama of a *dgon pa* is venerated by the monks or nuns of that community as the 'root guru' (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) and therefore as the highest-ranking lama<sup>84</sup>. The two younger lamas' request was put to Gad chags's administrative committee and decided against, with the root guru judiciously recommending that the issue be revisited in the future.

### **Knowledge passed through texts, knowledge passed orally**

In his study of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist reforms in Sri Lanka, George Bond describes modernisation as a "revolution in knowledge" brought about by rapid continual and exhaustive changes in science and technology and their consequences in human consciousness and culture (Bond 1992: 11-12). Robert Bellah posits that modernisation entails more rationalized systems of communication and understanding among humans and their organizations (Bellah 1965 cited in Bond 1992: 12). The wide-reaching field of orality and literacy studies takes the question of modernity along these lines to the level of human consciousness. Modernisation is seen not merely as material and social developments, but more pivotally as a sweeping transformation in cognitive processes and cultural thinking. Research by Goody & Watt, Luria, Ong and others looks to how the structure of language, technological advancements and the growth of literacy develop in tandem with transformations of mental activity (Goody & Watt 1963; Luria 1976; Ong 1986). Alexander Luria, based on research comparing the cognitive performances of literate/schooled and nonliterate Central Asian pastoralists, proposed that:

As the basic forms of activity change, as literacy is mastered, and a new stage of social and historical practice is reached, major shifts occur in human mental activity. These are not limited simply to an expanding of man's horizons, but radically affect the structure of cognitive processes" (Luria 1976: 161).

Luria summarized his interpretation of the observed changes as "a transition from the sensory to the rational," based on a shift from modes of thinking engaged with

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<sup>84</sup> An exception are the fixed-term positions of monastery head lamas in major dGe lugs monasteries, like the dGa' ldan Khri pa.

practical activity to theoretical, abstract modes of discursive thought (Luria 1976: 162-163). Walter Ong posits that writing enhances the separation between the knower and the known, and increases objectivity (Ong 1986: 36-37). Following the ideas of Jack Goody's *Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Ong remarks that "technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word" (Ong 1986: 36). Knowledge based on the reading and writing of texts allows "abstract context-free thought", according to Ong. The spoken word also objectifies through the naming function, but unlike textual speech it does so in a concrete situational context (Greenfield, Reich & Olver 1966: 288; Ong 1986: 37, 41). These ideas of orality and literacy studies, while not without their critical opponents, allow for a research context that questions how cognitive activity transforms as technology and knowledge modernize.

Prior to the arrival of the Chinese Communists in the 1950s Tibet was hardly a pre-literate society. Tibet's monasteries as the mainstays of literate education were responsible for a remarkable output of scholarly writings and philosophical sophistication. According to Andrew Fischer they produced a literacy level in Tibet that was comparable to most parts of pre-modern Eurasia (Fischer 2013: 47). Outside of the monasteries, though private education existed for some children – usually via a private tutor in aristocratic families or in a schoolroom established by a wealthy patron – formal education was generally not sought by the majority of the population whose spiritual needs were satisfied by the teachings of the saṅgha (Boyd 2004: 72). Most Tibetan farmers and nomads were partially literate at best. Those who could read were likely capable of reading daily prayers, liturgies or a life-story of a Buddhist saint, but unable to write or comprehend entire books across genres. Cultural history and Buddhist teachings were communicated to the nonliterate or partially literate population through oral methods like drama and dance performances, public lectures at the local *dgon pa* and sometimes by wandering saṅgha who told the life-stories of Buddhist saints (*rnam thar*) with the aid of scroll paintings (*thang ka*) (Boyd 2004: 72-73).

Tibetan society is not transitioning from pre-literacy to literacy, nor, one could easily argue, from being primitive to civilized (a categorical distinction that anthropology has long ago done away with) (Goody & Watt 1963: 344; Halverson 1992; Lévi Strauss 1962). What is taking place for Tibetan society, however, is a drastic change to the extent of literacy and to the content of what is being read and written. For state school-going children the literacy level has increased dramatically compared to that of pre-Communist Tibet. With that, the school system is redirecting knowledge content from a Buddhist worldview to a scientific, market-oriented one. In the *dgon pa*, as we have seen, a significant number of monks and nuns are increasing their textual studies of Buddhist philosophy, developing reading and writing skills they would not have had before this era.

On top of all the changes confronting the minds of Tibetans since the 1980s (as if they weren't enough), their period of assimilation in urban environments and secular education has coincided with the advent of digital communication and the internet, which intensify the pace of change. According to the findings of literacy studies, modernisation of a culture's material, social and literacy practices are accompanied by a shift in mental functioning: from "sensory" thought centred in practical activity to "rational" cognitive processes that are more abstract and context-free (Goody 1977: 109-110; Luria 1976: 163; Ong 1986). Such an explanation would account for, among many changes, the 'new intellect' (*rig-gsar*) being proclaimed by Tibetans; the new wave of independent, critical thinking; the growth of new literary genres like fiction, blogs and freestyle poetry; and the Tibetan Buddhist scholastic reforms outlined in this thesis.

The rapid, systematic changes that occur through modernisation present an exceptional problem for religion. Though religion eludes precise definition, Bellah offers a description of its function as identifying the cosmological context of the world and its ultimate reality, and guiding humanity to make sense of such a world in thought and action (Bellah 1965 in Bond 1992: 12). But when that context significantly changes, as it is changing for Tibetans in their new world order, traditional religious rituals and symbols cease to provide the same connection to

meaningful existence as they once did (Bond 1992: 12). As an example, Tibetans raised and educated in urban settlements may no longer require the same religious services of yogins to appease nature spirits and deities as their nomadic and farming parents did. A religion must offer a new interpretation of meaning and values if it is to adapt and continue thriving in a new, modernized context. Perhaps this is the work being carried out by the *mkhan po* and others like them who are using textual studies to bolster Buddhism in a way that relates to the modern views and motivations of people in the PRC today (and around the world). Communities like Gad chags dGon pa, however, who are choosing to evade scholastic education and maintain their traditions of ritual and yogic practice, must stand increasingly alone. Nang chen's old ways of high-altitude practice, surrounded by nomads who provided food and depended for their own livelihoods on the spiritual offerings of yogins, are becoming less viable in the monetised economy.

In the minds of new generations of Tibetans who are modern-educated, the old attitudes of unquestioning faith and devotion are becoming bygone. The criticisms voiced against the Gad chags nuns for not basing their practices on scholastic study assume that the nuns do not have the intellectual thought required to properly understand what they are doing. The incongruity may be once again pointed out that before the 1950s Gad chags dGon pa was praised throughout Nang chen society for the quality of its training, and today it is criticized, yet Gad chags has not changed its training curriculum. A faint echo is heard here of the CCP's rhetoric of backwards 'old' Tibet, and the old assumptions in anthropology that pre-modern, simple societies have inferior capacities for intellectual and rational thought (Goody 1977: 33).

The practice tradition of Gad chags dGon pa could not properly be called an oral tradition in that some texts are passed down as material supports of their tradition along with ritual objects, reliquaries, buildings and holy images. Gad chags's central texts comprise two scriptural collections: *The Collected Teachings of Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho* (in sixteen volumes), and *The Essential Collection of Ratna gLing*

*pa's gTer ma* (in twenty-five volumes)<sup>85</sup>. *The Collected Teachings of Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho* comprise his life-story and commentary on Ratna gLing pa's *Thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa*, the substance of which are instructions on five yogic practices in the context of guru yoga (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*)<sup>86</sup>. Along with shorter supplementary prayers and teachings these scriptures are the textual memory of the nuns' practice tradition, and as mentioned in Chapter One they are a crucial component for the preservation of Gad chags's lineage. The nuns indeed spend long hours each day reading *sāadhanā* texts in their retreats divisions and during ten-day long *sgrub chen*. A typical *sāadhanā* text in the sixteen retreat divisions is hundreds of pages long; the Hayagrīva *sāadhanā* for example is nearly 300 pages long, including supplication prayers to the nunnery's Dharma protectors (*gsol kha*) which are recited daily as part of the *sāadhanā*. To some extent the nuns have these texts memorized as they recite them each day, or in the case of *sgrub chen* for a ten-day period each year. The nuns read, or chant, these texts in what could be called religious states of mind: the words are intended to evoke faith, compassion, aspiration and the cardinal principle in Vajrayāna, pure perception (*dag snang*)<sup>87</sup>. The texts are not read discursively or critically, but rather as guidelines for visualisation and as reminders to intuitively engage with the presence of the guru as the Buddha nature of one's own mind.

Integral elements of the nuns' contemplative training (and of Vajrayāna in general) are ritual empowerments (*dbang*), verbal transmissions (*lung*), meditation instructions (*khrid kha*) that indicate the nondual Buddha nature of mind and personalized pith instructions (*man ngag*) from a guru. These are all conveyed by qualified Gad chags teachers. Empowerments and verbal transmissions are based on

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<sup>85</sup> *Khyab bdag bLa ma Khams gsum chos kyi rgyal po rdo rje 'chang Tshangs dByangs rGya mTsho'i gsung 'bum bdud rts'i rol mtsho bzhugs so: The Nectar Ocean of Enjoyment: The Collected Teachings of Tshangs dbyang rGya mtsho, Vajradhāra Dharma Sovereign of the Three Realms* (Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho 2010); and *Zab gter nyi shu rtsa lnga: The Twenty-Five Root gTer ma [of Ratna gLing pa]* (Ratna gLing pa [n.d.]).

<sup>86</sup> The five yogic practices are: *gtum mo* (psychic heat), *rmi lam* (dream yoga), *bar do* ('intermediate state'), *'od gsal* ('clear light'), *sgyu lus* ('illusory body'). The guru yoga intent behind these practices is to unite the practitioners body, speech and mind with that of Padmasambhava.

<sup>87</sup> For example, from a Gad chags prayerbook: *kun gyi gzhi ni 'dus ma byas; rang byung klong yangs brjod du med; 'khor 'das gnyis ka'i ming med do; de nyid rig na sangs rgyas te*: "The foundation of all is unconditioned; its vast, self-arising expanse is inexpressible; neither samsara nor nirvana have a name for it; when it is known, it is Buddhahood." (Kes Gad chags 2004: 155)

textual recitations, while pith instructions are spoken spontaneously, sometimes in charged periods of silence. The overall practical knowledge of how to apply the indications in the texts, such as ‘unite mind and *prāṇa*’ and ‘rest in the nature of mind’<sup>88</sup>, is embodied by the nuns and shared through formal teachings and casual conversations in their daily lives. Furthermore, instructions on ritual music, *mudrā* and visualisations of each *sādhanā* practised in the retreat divisions and *sgrub chen* are for the most part transmitted orally, as are instructions on the yogas and stages of Dzogchen meditation. In the whole of the nuns’ learning tradition, texts are therefore secondary to oral teachings. A forty-nine year-old Gad chags nun said in 2013:

Ours is an oral teaching tradition from our lamas. We have the teachings in our texts, of course. But through a personalised style of pith instructions our lamas established an oral lineage for us. They taught us that the authentic lineage we must preserve is this oral lineage. It is a very profound, excellent way of teaching.

Tibetan Buddhist manuals on yogic practices like *rtsa lung* are typically terse, allowing for oral instructions to fill in the gaps and carry the ‘live’ quality that constitutes hearing, or practice, lineages (*snyan brgyud*, *sgrub brgyud*) of Buddhist tantra. The texts serve as an accompanying material memory of the teachings and the history of their lineage. The senior nuns imparting oral instructions embody thousands of hours of experience practising the methods being taught, and were in turn guided by highly experienced practitioners whose instructions they have contemplated and understood. Gad chags’s nuns share first-person, verbal indications with each other of the pitfalls to avoid in practice, the signs of accomplishment, psychology and the nature of mind (*bde gshegs snying po*; Skt. *sugatagarbha*). Judging by the proportion of nuns who exhibit signs of realization at the time of death, the Gad chags system of training enables the nuns with a profound understanding of the practices they are continually engaged in. The direct face-to-face contact of oral transmission – its material sound, personalised

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<sup>88</sup> *rlung sems byer med du zhogs*’ (from a handwritten copy of Gad chags’s *gTum mo Aspiration Prayer*, *gTum mo’i gsol ’debs*); and ‘*sems rang bab du gnas*’ (from a handwritten copy of a Gad chags meditation instruction text, *Nyams len rgan pos mjug khrid bzhugs so*).

intonation and expression – has an effect on the content that is transmitted, allowing for a kind of knowledge that is qualitatively different from that gained through textual study (Goody & Watt 1963: 306).

Ong asserts that academic learning (Greek: *mathēsis* and *mathēma*) allows for the conveyance of organized and abstract thought structures that are independent of a practical context; while knowledge passed orally, without writing, is wisdom (Greek: *sophia*) that relates not to abstractions but to holistic engagement in the human life-world (Ong 1986 :41). Ong maintains that the effect of writing on thought is to separate being from time (Ong 1986: 43). In Tibetan Buddhism’s precarious situation of the last few decades it has needed organized conveyance of its views in order to ensure its survival as an institutionally formidable religion that has meaning and value in modern China and elsewhere. Perhaps this has been the intention of Eastern Tibetan lamas who are directing an increase in rationalized study programs in *dgon pa* throughout Eastern Tibet. Such conveyance is achieved through academic learning, as Ong asserts, which bolsters a tradition and confirms its knowledge in doctrinal and material forms (Halverson 1992: 314).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored causes and dynamics behind new expressions of Buddhism in the practice lineages of Eastern Tibet – or in other words, behind a shift from a high valuing of yogic practice (whether or not it is supported by scholastic study) to an emphasis on rational understanding of Buddhist doctrine and the need for prolonged textual study as a basis for yogic practice. The swiftly changing situation in Eastern Tibetan social and religious life is complicated, with factors exerting their influence in many directions. This chapter has considered some of the most conspicuous of these, and found that they offer explanations for new forms of Tibetan Buddhism in Eastern Tibet today. The analysis has revealed the achievements of these new scholastic forms in preserving the religion amidst formidable challenges to its survival. Further investigation of all the possibilities in this chapter, and more, could lead to deeper understanding of the changes taking

place. Among them, the insights of literacy studies point to an especially significant question on the mental modes of yogic practice. How do these mental modes and the oral traditions that inform them incorporate a different quality of knowledge than that of text-based scholastic study? This question of different qualities of knowledge highlights the focal interest of this research: how the *view* is changing in the minds of Tibetans in Nang chen and Eastern Tibet, and what this changing view might lead to in the future of their religion.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Yogin of the Future? Possible Future Pathways for Tibetan Contemplative Culture

#### **Tantric Buddhism as an extension of the state?**

Tibetans are striving to come to terms with a new identity as members of the Chinese nation, which is jarringly dissonant with Tibetan self-identity prior to the 1950s. Actual political history aside, until the PRC's appropriation of Tibetan areas in the 1950s Tibetan scholarship had regularly described China as distinct from itself as India, Africa and Europe (Cooke 2005: 126, 134 n30). In this distinct national identity religion was central in the worldview of Tibetans. Even before the import of Buddhism from India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century or earlier (Snellgrove 1987 in Cooke 2005: 120) the people of the Tibetan plateau conceived its power structures and territorial realm in the context of a religious worldview. As Susette Cooke has discussed, since the Tibetan empire of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries every major Tibetan polity has empowered itself to some extent through identifying with a religious worldview. From at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century, according to the *Book of Kadam* (a book of conversations attributed to Atiśa and Dromtönpa), Tibet was perceived as a realm of spiritual significance overseen by successive reincarnations of the Buddha of Compassion (sPyan ras gzigs) and dedicated to preservation of the Buddhadharma (Cooke 2005: 127). This continues to be the view of the exiled Central Tibetan Administration for whom recognition of the Dalai Lama as head of the Tibetan people (ratified by global Tibet sympathizers) continues to define its nationalism and political action in the present (Cooke 2005: 127).

In China today, as *minzu* minority members of modern China, Tibetans are forced to find their way where “religion is framed in patriotic terms from the first instance” (Cooke 2005: 124). Religion is codified by the Chinese constitution and CCP policies as a social force for supporting the state. Such administrative control of religious

activity is not, however, merely an outcome of China's modern state formation, but part of a much longer project of Chinese governmental authority over religious culture (Oakes & Sutton 2010: 14). A religious worldview framed civil and political life in China as well prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By affiliating with and co-opting a religious worldview, China's emperors as Sons of Heaven and their official assistants positioned their authority over all that existed "under Heaven" (Ch. *tianxia*) – including religion. State-approved religious traditions and institutions were allowed as long as they did not disturb social harmony or challenge state authority (Oakes & Sutton 2010: 14). From the Yuan dynasty in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Republican era, the imperial metaphor played out in the patron-preceptor relationship between Chinese emperors and Tibetan incarnate lamas. This relationship functioned to sanctify and extend the Chinese empire's political presence over Tibetan and Mongolian frontier populations and to bridge these areas with inland China<sup>89</sup> (Gaerrang 2013: 112).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Republican and subsequent Communist governments brought a stark discontinuity with its past religious affiliations, and set a stringent separation between religion and state political affairs. But for China, this was not so much a secularization of the state and public as it was a replacement of religion by state ideology (Yü 2010: 95). The CCP has created an administrative space for religion wherein the freedom of individual belief is granted, but in the hearts and minds of the people nationalism is proselytized by the state as its legitimizing force. In place of gods and divine right that sanctified state rule in the past, nationalism and state ideology are the government's new creed for China (Oakes & Sutton 2010: 15)<sup>90</sup>. Furthermore, as Gaerrang remarks, the CCP rules prohibiting *mixin* ('superstition')

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<sup>89</sup> This relationship also amounted to the lamas' successful assertion of Tibetan Buddhist political power in China's direction. Huber, Makley, Yü and others have pointed out the role of reincarnate lamas in the successful spread of Tibetan Buddhism across Inner Asia, reaching even China's imperial courts (Huber 1999; Makley 2010; Yü 2013a). As described by Makley, the Dalai Lama's dGe lugs school best exemplifies the full-scale polities that were built up through the figure of the *sprul sku*, whose tantric power over legions of protector deities and close alliances with lay leaders sought to "mandalize" Tibet as a region (Makley 2010: 130).

<sup>90</sup> Oakes & Sutton describe tourism as a main arena for this proselytizing: temples, gods and cultural presentations by ethnic groups are not in celebration of difference, but of the all-encompassing nature of the PRC (Oakes & Sutton 2010: 15).

and *xiejiao* ('evil cult') stagnate existing religions and hinder the development of mystical forms of expression and practice (Gaerrang 2013: 113-114).

Samuel in his *Civilized Shamans* employs the concepts of shamanic Buddhism and clerical Buddhism to better understand Tibetan society and religious culture. Samuel contrasts the different orientations of the two, where the shamanic involves direct contact with deities and transcendent modes of consciousness through Vajrayāna practice<sup>91</sup> (typical figure: the tantric lama); and the clerical takes a gradual approach to the inner source of enlightened authority through scholarship and ethical discipline (typical figure: the monk-scholar) (Samuel 1993: 5-10). Though the two are interwoven in cultural practice, one or the other is found to be predominant in different societies and associated with a certain political context. Typically, the clerical is at home under a strongly centralized state government as in Theravādin countries (for examples Thailand and Sri Lanka), while the shamanic is common in small-scale pre-literate societies, and for that reason, unusually in Tibet where there has been a sophisticated literate culture (Samuel 1993: 7-10). The dominant monastic schools of Central Tibet that held estates and political power over generations, like the dGe lugs since the 17<sup>th</sup> century or Sa skya of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, indeed had stronger leanings to the clerical with monasteries like Se ra and 'Bras spungs full of thousands of monk-scholars. But even these deferred to the shamanic in their hereditary tantric lamas who held temporal power, like the Dalai Lamas and Chos rgyal 'Phags pa. Tibet was also unusual in that its large nomadic population eluded domestication by a hierarchical state power, and formed a free-flowing social structure that in some ways allowed for Tibet's Vajrayāna culture (Samuel 1993: 572).

Looking beyond Lhasa and more broadly at the Buddhist culture of the Tibetan Plateau, Samuel sees the strong and autonomous role of the shamanic in Tibetan

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<sup>91</sup> Samuel uses 'shamanic' as a general term for a category of practices that may be described as "the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience" (Samuel 1993: 8). The same definition would loosely apply to the term 'yogic' in this dissertation.

Buddhism and attributes this largely to the limited nature of political control in Tibetan societies<sup>92</sup> prior to the 1950s (Samuel 1993: 10, 33). As Tibet's political structures were, they were dominated and constituted by religious orders. This is as true for the clerical dGe lugs school with its incarnate Dalai Lamas as it was for the former Nang chen kings, some of whom were bKa' brgyud pa yogins<sup>93</sup> (Turek 2003: 19). The opposite is the case in a country like Thailand, where since the establishment of its centralized Bangkok administration the saṅgha has been domesticated and kept firmly subordinate to state power, while the forest meditators have become marginalized<sup>94</sup> (Samuel 1993: 7; Tiyanavich 1997). The *siddhi* (Tib. *dngos grub*) attained through tantric practice makes an individual independent and charismatic, a power that can easily extend to the political sphere – as indeed so often happened in Tibet (Samuel 1993: 28). Looking, as Samuel does, at the constant theme in Buddhist countries where strong state control over the saṅgha purifies it of shamanic elements to form a state-supporting clerical Buddhist majority, it is easy to imagine a similar pathway for Tibetan Buddhism (with its nomads domesticated) as an extension of the authoritarian Chinese state (Samuel 1993: 28).

### **Counterculture of the future? The ritual and social power of the Nang chen yogin**

Yet such a conformist pathway would beg for a counterculture, and it is hard to imagine Tibetans not turning in the future to the inspiration of their past, filled as it is with celebrated *sgrub thob* (Skt. *siddha*) recalled in numerous *nam thar* hagiographies. Turek's 2013 dissertation on La phyi hermitage at sKyo brag

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<sup>92</sup> Samuel also makes clear that Tibet until the 1950s was not, contrary to much of earlier Western scholarship, a centralized state under a theocratic government at Lhasa, but rather a complex of societies across regions with disparate cultural characteristics and political allegiances (Samuel 1993: 139-154).

<sup>93</sup> That the state was an extension of religion in Tibet is epitomized and repeatedly invoked in the legendary account of the first meeting of King Khri srong lDe btsan and Guru Padmasambhava (who together established Tibet's first Buddhist monastery in the 8<sup>th</sup> century). It was the King who prostrated to the Guru and not vice versa (Samuel 1993: 35).

<sup>94</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mongkut's Thammayut nikai was the model chosen by Thailand's newly centralized government for its orthodox Buddhism. Mongkut's Thammayut nikai saw meditation as unnecessary mysticism for the saṅgha and espoused study of the Pāli canon with an emphasis on the Vinaya (Tiyanavich 1997: 6-8).

monastery in Nang chen – a hermitage of nuns surrounding a central yogic master, Tshul khrim mThar phyin, – highlights the social power and resolution of paradox achieved by Tibetans who invest in yogic practice at this time of collective identity crisis. According to Turek, the life of a contemporary Tibetan yogin, despite its apparent social inertia, performs a decidedly active role that embodies unique local identity while transcending the new social order being imposed (Turek 2013: 259). Turek remarks that the robes of a Tibetan yogin, while being tolerated by the Chinese authorities, are a clear marker of refusal, and she argues that monastic renunciation is one of the most effective ways that Tibetans are conveying resentment and rejection of the Communist occupation<sup>95</sup> (2013: 252). Turek looks specifically at the founding yogin of Nang chen's La phyi hermitage, Tshul khrim mThar phyin. She sees in his psychophysical transformation through yogic techniques like *gtum mo* the reconciliation of two contradictions: that of human suffering in general, and the specific dilemma of Tibetans in the current socio-political crisis (Turek 2013: II).

Turek cites Gavin Flood in arguing that the public performance of asceticism characterizes it as ritual, and thus motivated by a yearning for power. Flood writes:

Ascetic acts performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition. [...] Through performing asceticism the ascetic is performing tradition, and the performance of tradition is a public affair (Flood 2004 in Turek 2013: 258).

At La phyi Turek observed that the life of a yogin depends on “ritual and social empowerment”. Ritual empowerment comes from the monastery and lineage members who bestow the empowerments, transmissions and instructions (*dbang, lung, khrid ka*) necessary for practice. Social empowerment comes from the wider lay community who offer necessary material and moral provisions as sponsors, disciples and pilgrims (Turek 2013: 259-260). The yogin in turn empowers a

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<sup>95</sup> Turek sees a popular revolt in the large numbers of monks and nuns ordaining in the reviving monastic centres of Eastern Tibet. She recalls that during the crackdown of bLa rung sGar in 2001 the Chinese authorities referred to its residents as “the red-robed army” (Turek 2013: 252-253).

connection to tradition and ethnic identity by embodying yogic practice, which in interdependence with the wider community leads to the restoration of their traditional cultural value system (Turek 2013: 260). Thus, in spite of the detachment and isolation that defines the life of a yogin, his or her renunciation is a public performance that can successfully counteract the Tibetan identity crisis suffered both individually and collectively (Turek 2013: 230).

Turek acknowledges that La phyi hermitage has a significant setting in the socio-political history of Nang chen, which gives it an exceptional basis for such a yogic revival to take place (Turek 2013: 98, 104-106). La phyi's parent 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud monastery of sKyo brag is one of four semi-independent administrative districts (*be hu*)<sup>96</sup> presided over by a Nang chen king until the 1950s. It is thus connected to earlier revivals of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud (the founding school of the Nang chen kingdom) and the political history of Nang chen (Turek 2013: 118). Today, while La phyi hermitage on Chab sti mountain remains filled with nuns following Tshul khri mThar phyin in meditation training, sKyo brag monastery has established a *bshad grwa* (the first in its history) and numbers are dwindling in the monastery's two main retreat centres as monks turn their attention instead to studies (sKyo brag monk Ampel, personal communication, July 2015)<sup>97</sup>. Nevertheless, the ritual and social empowerment of the yogic pathway as highlighted by Turek is undoubtedly potent, and suggests compelling reasons for practice communities like Gad chags and La phyi to continue in the future. For that to happen a hermitage needs to exist outside of state control, as La phyi does on the most part today (Turek 2013: 258), and it remains to be seen whether or not the government will implement a post-2008 policy to station a CCP official monitor in each monastery throughout Tibetan areas<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> The other three were Lab dgon, rTa rna and Zur mang. As *be hu* these monastic estates had their own territories, serfs and privileges (Gruschke 2004: 31).

<sup>97</sup> Though as I write this thesis there is discussion among sKyo drag's saṅgha that their focus should return to yogic practice, which was the monastery's focus in pre-modern Tibet (sKyo brag monk Karma Orgyen, personal communication, December 2015). rNying ma pa monks in Nang chen told me that sKyo brag is now one of the strongest monk-communities in Nang chen for preserving its yogic traditions, which must have something to do with its socio-political background mentioned here.

<sup>98</sup> The policy, which was a result of widespread unrest in Tibetan areas in 2008, is titled "Complete Long-term Management Mechanism for Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries". Official documents describe

It has been my observation that in the current crisis period families are struggling to survive and adapt to the forceful new trajectory of modernisation, and this overwhelms the laity's ability to focus moral and financial attention on remote communities. But as time goes by and the dust settles, parts of Tibetan society may well turn to the cultural heroes of their past – the tantric yogins, *gter ston* and lineage patriarchs – as a way of connecting to and asserting their ethnoreligious identity. In some cases this could restore the moral and material sustenance needed by tantric practitioners and their communities to survive as countercultural centres of interest and as possible bases for Tibetan cultural revival.

### **Tibetan Buddhism on the Plateau as a touchstone for globalizing Tibetan Buddhism**

Another dimension worth considering for its potential to encourage Tibetan contemplative culture is the role of Tibetan yogins and tantric lamas in the international scheme of Tibetan Buddhism, which has been expanding as a global religion since the Tibetan exile period began in the 1960s. The character of the tantric yogin – like the famous *Mi la ras pa*, whose life-story was translated into English at the very outset of Tibetan lamas arriving in exile – embodies the promise of transcending suffering and the realization of human potential. Yogins are a source of inspiration to a growing number of people internationally who are searching for meaning in secular, money-driven societies (Turek 2013: 333).

Today there are dozens of retreat centres around the world where non-Himalayan participants engage in traditional Tibetan Vajrayāna ritual, meditation and yogic practice for three-year periods, and there are Tibetan Buddhist centres on most continents and in many cities throughout the world. In the wider Sydney/Blue Mountains area there are upwards of fifteen Tibetan Buddhist groups, most of them guided by a Tibetan lama at some stage in their establishment. Tantric Buddhism is

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its aims as “enhancing social management” and to “adapt Tibetan Buddhism to socialism”. According to the policy government offices are to provide cooperative monasteries with practical services like running water, electricity, roads and money (Human Rights Watch 2012).

based on lineage, and the growing number of Tibetan Vajrayāna followers around the world are looking to the Tibetan Plateau as a historical touchstone and for the inspiration of its lineage masters and practice culture. This is bringing more and more international Buddhist visitors to Eastern Tibet, which is nowadays generally accessible on a Chinese tourist visa.

Vincanne Adams' 'Karaoke as Modern Lhasa', Thomas Kauffmann's *The Agendas of Tibetan Refugees* and Donald Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-la* have each shown ways in which Tibetans carry out the cultural stereotypes and expectations projected on them by foreigners as a strategy for garnering moral and financial support. Salient examples given by these researchers are Tibetans' enacting of Western expectations in the Tibetan independence movement<sup>99</sup>, and exiled Tibetan lamas' invoking of the Shangri-la myth<sup>100</sup> (Adams 1996; Kauffmann 2015; Lopez 1999). Adams shows that within the polemic of Chinese and Western discourses on authentic Tibetanness at play in Tibet's modernisation, Tibetans' desire to be what Westerners want them to be – political and religious clients – is a strategy for obtaining the foreign support needed to fulfill their personal and political goals (Adams 1996). The same happens with Tibetans acting out the Chinese script for authentic Tibetanness. By performing their unique culture in the tourism arena as ethnic Tibetan 'other', and reformulating Tibetan Buddhism according to the government's directive to repackage religion, Tibetans earn the patronage of Chinese followers and the ability to flourish as a religion in modern China<sup>101</sup>.

The same strategy could work (may be working) for Tibetan contemplative culture, too. Turek explains that each year groups of Westerners and Asians visit La phyi hermitage, many of them bKa' brgyud pa Buddhists inspired by La phyi's lineage and following its practice tradition. Tshul khriims mThar phyin is an object of devotion for

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<sup>99</sup> i.e. that authentic Tibetans are religiously devout, and their resistance to Chinese colonialism is articulated in terms of religious devotion (Adams 1996:515).

<sup>100</sup> i.e. that Tibet was an unchanging, peaceful land ruled by a benevolent Dalai Lama, whose people were devoted to the Dharma, to the environment and egalitarian values.

<sup>101</sup> See Woesser's 7 June 2015 blog *From Demonization of "Serfs" to Shangri-la of the "Third Pole"* for the irony in the CCP's current full-fledged acts of orientalism in a recent CCTV documentary called "The Third Pole" (Woesser 2015).



many of these visitors, though at his discretion some are refused a meeting if their attitude is judged to be insincere (Turek 2013: 228). Gad chags dGon pa also has individuals and groups of Chinese and Western visitors each summer, most of whom make the difficult journey to the remote nunnery (with its grass-stuffed pillows and unappetizing diet) because they want to meet the yoginī nuns and see first-hand their way of life<sup>102</sup>. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Gad chags nuns' daily meals are sponsored by one of nunnery's lamas who fundraises amongst an international base of Chinese and Western Buddhists sympathetic to the Gad chags tradition. In addition, construction of a new main shrine-hall was recently completed at Gad chags – a USD million-plus project also made possible by international donors wishing to contribute to the preservation of Gad chags's contemplative culture. This kind of sponsorship and enthusiasm extended by international Tibetan Buddhists may buoy the pride of the Gad chags nuns and other yogic practitioners, and provide incentive for them to fulfil the projected expectations of their supporters. Of course repeated visits of foreigners may also pose hazards to the nuns' commitment to renunciation by exposing them to a richer material life, the lure of technology and broader life experience.

The growing number of Han Tibetan Buddhists in China is a more regular presence in the lives of Eastern Tibetans, and may be playing a more immediate hand in valuing Tibetan tantric practice. Many Han Chinese access Tibetan Buddhism through tourism and the marketplace and travel to the Plateau in summer for fresh air and inspiration of genuine spiritual culture, returning to their smoggy, materialistic cities feeling connected to a Buddhist heritage and a meaningful life. While it is Chinese money building up many post-Mao Tibetan monasteries and shrines, the Chinese tendency for faith and ready belief in magical powers of a spiritual master is underwriting Tibetan tantric lamas. Modern China's relationship with religion is couched in its rapid economic expansion, and oftentimes love of money and religious faith go hand-in-hand, with Han businesspeople paying lamas to perform

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<sup>102</sup> Gad chags's retreat buildings are off-limits to all foreign and Tibetan visitors, including the nuns' relatives, according to a rule laid down by the nunnery committee in the early 2000s when the number of visitors began increasing.

rituals in order to make the good karma necessary for more money. A wealthy Han businessman named Sun Kejia gave an interview to the BBC last year explaining his reliance on Tibetan lamas for his \$100m fortune and as a way to share good karma with his friends<sup>103</sup> (Sudworth 2015).

I have observed that Chinese in Shanghai and Beijing are more skeptical and scientific than their Singaporean counterparts in asking questions of new Buddhist teachers, yet once they are convinced of a lama's power go straight to requesting his magical abilities to remove obstacles to their business, health and family lives. John Osburg's 2013 book *Anxious Wealth*, based on his ethnography of Chengdu's newly rich, talks of competition among wealthy mainland Chinese over who patronizes the most powerful Tibetan monks. Osburg found that many Han perceive Tibetan Buddhism as more mysterious, powerful and efficacious than Chinese Buddhism<sup>104</sup>. This perception harks back to the 1920s when Taixu and his disciples incorporated esoteric Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism into the curricula of their new Buddhist schools, valuing the emphasis in these two traditions on practice and personal contact with a realized master (Tuttle 2005: 79-97). The Tibetan tantric lama may be at the forefront of the Tibetan Buddhist exchange with many modern Han Buddhists, but behind him is his training and *dgon pa* of monks, nuns and *sngags pa* (lay tantric yogins) that form his cultural backdrop, and these may reap some of the returns.

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<sup>103</sup> Sun Kejia's friend, a former CCP official and a devout Tibetan Buddhist, was also present at the interview.

<sup>104</sup> Osburg sees that Tibetan Buddhism's rise in China is clearly linked to its global rise in popularity. Many Chinese lay Buddhists read Chinese translations of popular English-language Tibetan Buddhist books, and turn to Buddhism – as Westerners do – as a cure for modernity's ills (Johnson 2014).

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced in this thesis, Tibetan Buddhism in China is not at risk of annihilation as has been the claim of some Westerners and Tibetan refugees (Kapstein 2004: 263, n. 1). On the contrary, since the 1980s it is flourishing in Eastern Tibet with high numbers of ordained saṅgha studying in monastic centres, more engagement with Buddhist studies among the laity and the considerable support of Han Chinese students and patrons. This is apparent in the development of bLa rung sGar over the last twenty years, and in numerous *dgon pa* throughout Eastern Tibet that have improved buildings and expanding study programs based on bLa rung sGar's example and/or the current trend of modern education and development. Such flourishing is an achievement of many participants, but particularly of Tibetan Buddhist leaders like bLa rung sGar's *mkhan po*. Their movements for educational and ethical reforms have been a strategic response to challenges to their religion posed by the CCP government and modernizing society.

Yet as livelihoods shift from dependence on nature towards a rationalized market, and modes of learning shift from an emphasis on contemplative experience towards programs of textual learning, the minds of Tibetans are changing, as are the ways in which they engage and derive meaning from their Buddhist religion. A practice-with-study ethic continues to be advocated by many Tibetan lamas and their followers, but the demands of a rapidly modernizing economy call for the attainment of academic degrees and an expounding of Buddhism that satisfies modern critical approaches to knowledge. The result has been a course of pure scholarship for many monastics that lacks a significant practice component.

This new orientation has led to emptying retreat centres on the mountains of Eastern Tibet and, at the level of consciousness, to a weakening of the attitudes of faith (*dad pa*) and pure perception of Buddha nature (*dag snang*) that are said to be essential to tantric accomplishment. The weakening of these attitudes that used to be customary for many Tibetans is at the crux of current transformations of

contemplative culture in Eastern Tibet. dBang drag Rinpoche, one of Gad chags's two senior lamas, voiced his concern in 2015 over the issue:

There is a danger in the future of Tibetan *dgon pa* becoming like the *dgon pa* in India where not a single Tibetan from the refugee settlements joins<sup>105</sup>; or Chinese Buddhist monasteries where monks study and study, but there are few yogic accomplishments; or like the fancy Buddhist temples for tourists with only five or six monks inside. Because Tibetans' faith (*dad pa*) and pure perception (*dag snang*) are disappearing, so is our culture of yogic accomplishments (dBang drag Rinpoche, personal communication, July 2015).

In a statement that comes full circle to bLa rung sGar's origins as a *chos sgar*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö expressed the following words of warning to a conference of leading Tibetan Buddhist teachers in Chengdu last October 2015:

Buddhist study – like the Five Major Subjects<sup>106</sup> – won't decline in a hundred years. I'm not concerned about that. What I'm concerned about is our practice tradition. If we continue as we are now, in twenty years our practice will be lost. [...] All schools of Tibetan Buddhism are facing the problem of decline in their practice. [...] In the past, a teacher in their kindness would train a tulku and put him on the right path. [...] Nowadays tulkus just build temples, stupas, statues – they are more like sponsors and supervisors, not like the gurus of the past. [...] In order to give empowerments [*dbang*] and instructions [*khrid ka*] a lama needs practice, having received them from another lama. Not anymore. Nowadays tulkus' activities are too involved with money. [...]

Today, due to the kindness of the old lamas who hold the living lineages of instruction and empowerments, we are okay. But when I think of the future I'm worried that the Dharma will degenerate. [...] Nowadays many lamas are capable of giving teachings, they have the *lung* transmissions of the texts. But in twenty years, where will the qualified lamas be who can give empowerments and practice instructions? [...] I am not worried about the material wellbeing of Tibet in the future. But our practice is declining. [...] These days many people are studying texts, it helps them to have a better livelihood. [...] But after twenty years if we continue on this

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<sup>105</sup> Nowadays very few Tibetan refugees educated in India are becoming monks and nuns. The majority of monks and nuns in *dgon pa* in India are from border regions like Nepal, Ladakh, Bhutan, Spiti and Kinnaur.

<sup>106</sup> The Five Major Subjects (*gZhung bKa' pod INga*) studied in a monastic college: *Pramāṇa* (logic and theory of perception); *Pāramitā* (the Mahāyāna sūtra teachings in general), *Madhyamaka* (*śūnyatā* philosophy as propounded by Nāgārjuna), *Vinaya* (the principles of monastic discipline) and *Abhidharma* (phenomenology according to the sūtras).

course, practice will disappear. [...] It is good to stay on a mountain in practice, but nowadays only 2 out of every 100 people are doing this.

Our older lamas are dying, and the younger monks don't know how to practice some of the old traditions – they are written in texts but the practical knowledge is lost. [...] There are two extremes – those living on the mountain doing ritual practice criticize the scholars, while the scholars criticize the practitioners. [...] If we agree about this, we need to quickly do something about it. [...] All schools need to make efforts to preserve our practice traditions. [...] For the future – whoever you are, monk or layperson – what is needed is dedicated practice (Lodrö 2015b).

These words may appear out of step with the same Khenpo's emphasis on scholarship and scientific reason that I relayed in Chapters Two and Three. Yet bLa rung sGar first originated as a traditional Eastern Tibetan *chos sgar* ('Dharma encampment') founded by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, who was an accomplished tantric master and *gter ston*. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö has become one of the most famous of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's early disciples, and his rNying ma school, as the oldest of the Tibetan Buddhist schools, has prioritized Vajrayāna practice since it originated in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Along with other bLa rung sGar *mkhan po*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö has presumably been trying to carry forward his guru's vision for bLa rung sGar as an integral centre for Tibetan Buddhist learning. The *mkhan po* have managed to navigate bLa rung sGar through a dangerous complexity of Chinese modernity over the last twenty years, including a 2001 eviction by the Chinese authorities of thousands of bLa rung sGar monastics. Perhaps promoting scholasticism and scientific reason has been a necessary tactic for them to work effectively with the state and to serve the needs of modern followers. The *mkhan po* have achieved world-renown for bLa rung sGar and a formidable religious presence that has withstood the turbulent passage into post-Mao China. Importantly, it appears that bLa rung sGar has skilfully secured the state's approval. With that secured, perhaps it is possible for the *mkhan po* and other Eastern Tibetan Buddhist leaders to return their focus on prolonged Vajrayāna practice among their ordained communities – as the Khenpo's remarks above suggest. If that happens, maybe it is possible that a yogic community like Gad chags dGon pa will again be supported by Tibetan society to survive in the future. Yet to

what extent would the state permit widespread cultivation of tantric practice in Tibet? Continued fieldwork research, including the opportunity to interview Tibet's leading *mkhan po*, is essential to observe new events as they unfold and to address these questions more fully.

Another strong statement by a prominent Tibetan lama on the importance of practice in Vajrayāna is by the 7<sup>th</sup> Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. In 2011 he left his role as the famous head of a global network of Buddhist meditation centres to live as a wandering yogin in northern India and Nepal for over four years. While such an extended retreat would have been common in the lives of many Tibetan lamas before the 1950s, it is unusual for most contemporary Tibetan lamas who are preoccupied with the business of sustaining their Tibetan, Himālayan and international groups of disciples and charitable projects. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's renunciation for retreat has made a strong impression on the international Tibetan Buddhist community, ringing as a familiar reminder of how it used to be<sup>107</sup> (Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, personal communication, January 2016).

The fact that concern about the urgency of recovering Tibetan practice traditions is being publically voiced by lamas across lineages hints that it is surfacing as a conscious concern within Tibetan society. Tibetan Buddhists and their leaders in China have exercised remarkable prowess and self-determination in fortifying their religion despite the state's ultra-modern socialist development agenda and the radical overhaul to life on the Tibetan Plateau it has entailed. Although the observations of this thesis regarding the survival of yogic traditions in Tibet may seem discouraging, it will be interesting to see where the self-awareness and self-determination of the Tibetan Buddhist community in China directs itself in the future. Prominent Tibetan Buddhist lamas have by now established guru-disciple relationships with many thousands of Chinese students, and with this the authority to direct the orientation of Tibetan Buddhism among their followers.

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<sup>107</sup> See <http://www.lionsroar.com/yongey-mingyur-rinpoche-returns-from-four-years-of-retreat/>



**bLa rung sGar Khenpo Sodargye (front centre) with his students in Hong Kong, January 2016. Credit: Fenyi Lu.**

Considering the spate of unprecedented changes occurring at all levels of life in Eastern Tibet since the 1980s – changing even in the year this thesis is written – one is reluctant to draw any conclusion at all on the situation of Tibetan religious culture. Along with the speed of change that blurs before the mind seeking to understand it, the inaccessibility of many Eastern Tibetan areas to foreigners until recently has limited the amount of ethnographic research conducted there. The fieldwork studies conducted over the last decade in Eastern Tibet have provided critical information to the field of contemporary Tibetan studies and have been instrumental in shaping this thesis. However the overall body of research on Eastern Tibetan Buddhism since the 1980s is relatively small, and research from only ten years ago does not always speak to the current situation<sup>108</sup>. Today the extension of paved highways to all corners of the Tibetan Plateau continues at a surprising (if not alarming) rate. With increased tourism and easier access for foreigners we will likely see a surge of research on Eastern Tibetan religious culture in the years ahead.

Another methodological challenge to my Master's research has been the time constraint that made a fieldwork component impracticable. The interviews and field observations used in this study were mostly gathered between 2006 and 2013

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<sup>108</sup> Like research by Germano (1998), Terrone (2009) and Turek (2013) that observed a revival of tantric Buddhist culture taking place in Eastern Tibet in the 1990s and early 2000s.

before honing the research questions of this thesis. Although the data provides illuminating insights into recent thought processes and discussions in Eastern Tibetan society, a more nuanced understanding may have been possible with the opportunity to research more of the *dgon pa* and characters participating in the Tibetan Buddhist revival – beyond the bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* and Gad chags dGon pa yoginīs. It would have been interesting, for example, to look at the current state of numerous rNying ma<sup>109</sup> *dgon pa* in Chab mdo – which was the site of the 1950 Battle of Chab mdo<sup>110</sup> and has been under the Beijing-administered TAR since 1965 – and see in what ways tighter political control of the area has influenced Tibetans' current valuing of yogic practice.

A further research question relevant to this thesis, perhaps obvious for its absence in my discussions of Gad chags dGon pa, is that of gender. Gad chags dGon pa is one of a handful of communities in Nang chen preserving its original yogic practice curriculum, and it is a female lineage. Is being a female lineage a factor in the community's propensity for evolving, and now preserving, a distinctive practice tradition that specializes in *gtum mo*? It is noteworthy that La phyi hermitage, the site of the post 1980s hermitic revival of Turek's research, is a community of nuns (albeit surrounding a male guru, as is Gad chags). In addition, the comment by the Khang ne dGon pa nun in Chapter Two notes that all monasteries in Nang chen now have both *bshad grwa* and practice components, while a few nunneries remain with only a practice component. What are the social, psychological and/or other reasons that some communities of nuns in Nang chen have been late to join the movement towards increased philosophical study? Are these nunneries choosing to adhere to purely practice curricula instead, as is Gad chags dGon pa, or are social disadvantages the prevailing reason? The scope of the present research did not allow for an exploration of these gender-related questions as they are broad and significant enough to merit a research project of their own. Over the last twenty-five years a rich field of literature has emerged on women's experiences in Tibetan/Himālayan Buddhist culture with the research of Gutschow (2004), Gyatso

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<sup>109</sup> Being rNying ma *dgon pa* they have traditionally followed practice lineages.

<sup>110</sup> a.k.a. Invasion of Tibet



and Havnevik (2005), van Ede (2000), Makley (2007) and others. Gleaning from this field of research, in tandem with further field work investigations of Gad chags dGon pa and its female practice traditions, would help to address many of these questions.

This thesis has brought into relief a recent trend in Tibetan Buddhism that will have a critical effect on the future of Tibetan religious culture. The central question of this research – what is becoming of Tibetan contemplative culture – remains an open question. We have seen how quickly values, orientations and the social context of Tibetan Buddhism have changed in a short period of time in post-Mao China, and also how quickly leading Tibetan lamas have woken up to the potential disappearance of Tibetan practice traditions on the current trajectory. The enforcement of state regulations on religion in China is the government's prerogative, and it remains to be seen whether increased freedom of religious thought and action is in the CCP's interest for the nation's future. The bottom line of a modern economy and the state's religious policies may determine how far the organizational forms of Tibetan Buddhism can flourish in China. But Tibetan Buddhism, as it has been practised for many centuries until today, has transformation at its core. It will be interesting to see the inner path that its followers determine for themselves in the future.

## Glossary of Tibetan and Chinese terms

### Tibetan terms

**'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud:** sub-school of the bKa' brgyud school

**bcud len:** 'extracting the essence', an ascetic practice of taking nourishment solely from herbal and mineral pills

**bla ma'i rnal 'byor:** 'guru yoga', integral practice in Tibetan Buddhism for uniting the Buddha mind of a practitioner with that of the guru

**bLa rung sGar** (bLa rung sgar lNga rig Nang bstan sLob gling): bLa rung sGar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in gSer rta County of dKar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan

**'Brug pa bKa' brgyud:** sub-school of the bKa' brgyud school

**bshad grwa:** monastic college for advanced scriptural studies

**chos sgar:** 'Dharma encampment', meditation community based around a guru

**Chu ras:** 'Wet sheet', a public ceremony in which practitioners demonstrate their accomplishment in *gtum mo* by drying off wet sheets with their raised body temperature

**dad pa:** faith, or confidence, corresponding to Skt. *śraddhā*

**dag snang:** pure perception

**dbang:** tantric empowerment

**dgon pa:** monastery, nunnery, hermitage or community shrine hall

**Gad chags dGon pa:** large nunnery of yoginīs in Nang chen; case study of this research

**Grub dbang Tshogs gnyis** (b. circa 1828): renowned master of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud and rNying ma traditions; root guru to the founder of Gad chags dGon pa

**gSar bsgyur:** 'New Translation'; traditions based on the various cycles of tantras, commentaries and practice texts that were translated into Tibetan from the late 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among many 'New Translation' traditions that developed are Sa skya, bKa' brgyud and dGe lugs schools.

**gter ma:** concealed sacred treasure

**gter ston:** revealer of sacred treasures

**gtum mo:** yoga of psychic heat

**'Jam mgon Kong sprul bLo gros mTha' yas** (1813-1899), prominent Buddhist master from Khams and a key figure in the Ris med movement

**'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dBang po** (1820-1892): prominent Buddhist master from Khams and a key figure in the Ris med movement

**'Ju Mi pham** (1846-1912): an important rNying ma master-scholar and leader in the Ris med movement

**Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok** (mKhan po 'Jigs med Phun tshogs, 1933-2004): important contemporary Vajrayāna master and *gter ston*, and founder of bLa rung sGar

**Khenpo Sodargye** (mKhan po bSod Dar rgyas, b. 1962): prominent bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* and international teacher, especially among Chinese Buddhists

**Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö** (mKhan po Thsul khrim bLo gros, b. 1962): prominent bLa rung sGar *mkhan po* and international teacher, especially among Chinese Buddhists

**khrid ka**: oral meditational instructions given by a qualified lama

**'khrul 'khor**: *haṭha* yoga practised in tandem with *rtsa lung*

**La phyi**: a hermitage of nuns surrounding the yogic master, Tshul khrim mThar phyin, near sKyo brag monastery in Nangchen; named after a retreat place of the 11<sup>th</sup> century yogin, Mi la ras pa

**lung**: oral transmission of Buddhist texts, important in maintaining a lineage

**man ngag**: pith oral practice instructions imparted by a qualified lama, corresponding to Skt. *upadeśa*

**mChog gyur gLing pa** (1829-1870): a treasure-revealer born in Nang chen and an important figure in the Ris med movement

**Mi la ras pa** (1040-1123): famous Tibetan yogin and poet whose practice teachings are central to the bKa' brgyud school

**mkhan mo**: 'female scholar', title of an accomplished nun-scholar in rNying ma, bKa' brgyud and Sa skya schools

**mkhan po**: 'male scholar', title of an accomplished monk-scholar in rNying ma, bKa' brgyud and Sa skya schools

**mun mtshams**: darkness retreat

**Nang chen** (Ch. Nangqian): former kingdom in Eastern Tibet, location of this study

**rab 'jams**: title of an undergraduate Buddhist scholar in contemporary Tibetan *bshad grwa*

**Pod sde bcu drug**: the sixteen volumes of Tsang's dbyangs rGya mtso's commentary on Ratna gLing pa's *gter ma*; the scriptural basis for Gad chags's practice tradition

**Ras pa**: 'Cotton-clad' epithet for practitioners of *gtum mo*

**Ratna gLing pa** (1403-1478): a prolific *gter ston* who first compiled the rNying ma rGyud 'bum collection of rNying ma tantras

**rDo rje 'jigs byed**: one of the 16 deities practiced in Gad chags's retreat divisions, corresponding to Skt. Vajrabhairava

**Ris med**: 'unbiased', the name given to a non-sectarian religious movement that began in Eastern Tibet in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

**rnam thar**: hagiography of a Tibetan Buddhist master

**rTa mgrin**: one of the 16 deities practiced in Gad chags's retreat divisions, corresponding to Skt. Hayagrīva

**rtogs ldan**: realized person, or yogin

**rtsa rlung**: *nāḍī* and *prāṇa* yoga; the general practice category that includes *gtum mo*

**sGrol ma**: green Tārā

- sgrub chen***: ‘great accomplishment’, a group *sāadhanā* ceremony lasting about ten days
- sgrub grwa***: retreat centre for prolonged Vajrayāna practice
- sgrub khag***: retreat division dedicated to lifelong practice of a particular *yi dam*; at Gad chags dGon pa there are sixteen *sgrub khag*
- sKyo brag**: historically important ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud monastery in Nang chen
- slob dpon***: title of a junior Buddhist scholar in rNying ma, bKa’ brgyud and Sa skya schools, corresponding to Skt. *ācārya*
- sman sgrub***: sacred medicine made of herbs and consecrated during a *sgrub chen*
- smyung gnas***: a two-day fasting practice of Avalokiteśvara
- sngon ’gro***: preliminary practices in Vajrayāna
- sprul sku***: reincarnate lama
- thod rgal***: ‘leap over’, method in Dzogchen meditation using vision and light
- Thugs sgrub Yang snying ’Dus pa** – an important *gter ma* in the collection of Ratna gLing pa’s 25 *gter ma*; the main *gter ma* practised at Gad chags dGon pa
- Tshangs dbyangs rGya mtsho** (1848-1909): the founder of Gad chags dGon pa; his third incarnation is the current head lama of the nunnery
- tshé thar*** (Ch. *fang-sheng*): saving the lives of animals due to be killed
- Ya chen sGar**: a large monastic community for Dzogchen training in Eastern Tibet, established in the 1980s by A khyug Rinpoche
- ye shes***: primordial wisdom awareness, corresponding to Skt. *jñāna*
- yi dam***: personal meditation deity
- Zab gter nyi shu rtsa lnga**: a collection of Ratna gLing pa’s *gter ma*

### Chinese terms

- fubao***: merit; karmic reward
- gongyang***: religious offering
- mixin***: superstition; deluded faith
- shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming**: ‘Socialist Spiritual Civilization’, since 1980 the promotional name for the CCP’s goal of ethical and social development in China
- xibu da kaifa**: the CCP’s ‘Develop the West’ campaign to economically develop China’s western regions, including much of the Tibetan Plateau
- xiejiao***: evil cult

**Appendix I**

**Article 36 of the People's Republic of China Constitution (taken from Chapter 2,  
'The Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens')  
(adopted on 4 December 1982)**

**Article 36. Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.** No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

– (People's Daily 1982)

**Appendix II**

sGrub khag bCu drug  
The Sixteen Retreat Divisions at Gad chags dGon pa

**rTa mgrin:** Hayagrīva

**gSang 'dus:** Guhyasamāja

**dGongs 'dus:** 'Embodiment of Realization' (an important Anuyoga *sāadhanā*)

**'Jigs byed:** Bhairava (a form of Yamāntaka)

**Khro ma:** wrathful black ḍākinī

**Tshe sgrub:** Ayuh Sāadhanā (longevity practice of Amitāyus)

**rDo sems:** Vajrasattva

**sGrol ma:** Green Tārā

**kLong gsal:** Tantra of the Brilliant Expanse (one of the 17 Dzogchen Tantras)

**Gu ru drag po:** wrathful Sambhogakāya form of Guru Padmasambhava

**Tsa gsum:** 'Three Roots' (Guru, Yidam, Ḍākinī [and Dharmapāla])

**Phur pa:** Vajrakīlaya

**sNgags gso:** ritual for expiation and purification of defects corresponding to Vajrayāna view and conduct (arranged by mChog gyur gLing pa [1829-1870])

**Thugs sgrub:** 'Mind Sāadhanā' (guru yoga practice)

**rDo rje gro lod:** wrathful emanation of Guru Rinpoche

**bKa' brgyad:** eight *sāadhanā* of chief Mahāyoga *yi dam* deities

**Zhi khro:** Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the *bar do*

### Appendix III

#### Gad chags dGon pa's schedule for the 19 sets of extended group *sāghanā* ceremonies, called *sgrub chen*

Each *sgrub chen* takes ten days and the dates are based on the Tibetan Lunar calendar. The yearly cycle begins on the 7th day of the 10th month in winter.

<b>Begin</b>	<b>End</b>	
10-07	10-13	Thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa (quintessential accomplishment of the Guru's mind)
10-15	10-21	Gu ru Drag po (wrathful Padmasambhava)
10-22	10-28	mGon po (Mahākala)
10-30	11-06	gSang ba 'Dus pa (Guhayasamāja)
11-07	11-13	Zhi khro (peaceful and wrathful deities)
11-15	11-21	sNgags gso (tantric mending and purification)
11-22	11-28	Phur sgrub (Vajrakīlaya)
11-30	12-06	Tshe sgrub rDo 'phreng (secret accomplishment of Amitāyus)
01-08	01-14	Thugs sgrub Bar chad Kun sel (accomplishment of Buddha mind, removing all obstacles)
01-15	01-21	Zhi khro (peaceful and wrathful deities)
01-24	01-30	Tshe sgrub rDo 'phreng (longevity practice)
02-08	02-14	rTa mgrin gSang 'dus (Hayagrīva Guhayasamāja)
02-16	02-22	sGrol ma (Green Tārā)
02-25	03-01	'Jig byed (Yamāntaka)
03-03	03-09	rDo rje 'Jig byed (Vajrabhairava)
03-11	03-17	Khro ma (wrathful <i>ḍākinī gCod</i> practice)
03-20	03-26	Seng ge gDong ma (Lion-faced Ḍākinī)
05-08	05-14	bKa' brgyad (the eight deity classes)
05-23	05-29	rDo sems (Vajrasattva from the sMin grol gling tradition)

#### The schedule for the annual religious ceremonies

<b>Begin</b>	<b>End</b>	
12-14	12-16	<b>Chu ras:</b> 'Wet sheet' ceremony in which the nuns publically demonstrate their accomplishment in <i>gtum mo</i> by drying off wet sheets with their raised body temperature
12-23	12-29	<b>dGu chen:</b> Traditional <i>sāghanā</i> ceremony of Mahākala, performed in the last week of the year to remove obstacles for the year ahead
05-19	05-21	<b>Ri bstod:</b> Purification ritual of making offerings to local mountain deities with an extensive smoke puja ( <i>bsang</i> )
06-01	06-30	<b>Dung sgrub:</b> Accumulation of one hundred million mantras of Padmasambhava and other deities

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