

Chasing Tibetan Demons  
By Christopher Bell

I've been to Tibet only once before. It was two years ago and it was under the auspices of a summer language program organized by Columbia University, the University of Virginia, and Tibet University in Lhasa. The program was great, but the intense schedule did not afford me the kind of travel flexibility and freedom that I was granted this summer thanks to the Julian Paull Green Memorial Fellowship. Here I was able to focus almost exclusively on my own interests: chasing demons. That's a bit dramatic. My goal this summer was to cull more data pertaining to Tibetan protector deities, those hybrid demonic gods that are ubiquitous within the Tibetan religious landscape. My travel plan for this venture was to go from Xining, Qinghai to Lhasa, Tibet and explore a few notable sites along the way. As happens so often with travel, plans did not go quite accordingly; I couldn't visit a few intended sites and I had to change some schedules, but in turn I was able to see a number of unintended sites and gather information I didn't otherwise anticipate.

There are few things worse than being sick in a foreign country. The flu is infinitely better than stomach problems, and both tend to fade from memory the moment you leave. In retrospect, they're just part of the small price you pay for an incredible experience (along with the numerous communication barriers, day-long treks through airports, and, of course, squat toilets). My arrival in Xining was unfortunately punctuated by a series of brief illnesses; jet lag and altitude sickness can do a number on your immune system. Furthermore, my contacts in Xining proved to be a little unreliable with regards to my initial plans. Nonetheless, these snafus afforded me time to acquaint myself with the city of Xining and its Tibetan areas. There are some decent Tibetan bookstores near the bus station and I made sure to peruse them often. I even found a copy of a Tibetan text that deals exclusively with protector deities. This is the second edition I have of this work, and I plan on writing up a critical edition of it. In the evenings, I kept productive by writing up an index for a digital copy I have of a seventeenth-century history of Samyé Monastery, a key site of interest for my research, and a place I will have come to visit twice during my time in Tibet this summer.

Beyond the ill but easy days and nights during my first two weeks, I had one memorable trek up the north mountains of Xining. There's a Tibetan reliquary (Tib. *mchod rten*; Skt. *stūpa*) on top of one of the nearby peaks, not even a two-hour walk away. I went with a friend of mine named Deborah Kuhn, who was an intern for the NGO I worked for, the Ngak Mang Institute. It was a nice walk; it took us away from the bustle of the city, though the white noise of cars and buses and countless people never completely faded during our climb. Beyond this afternoon foray, my time in Xining was spent getting healthy again and planning my trip to Lhasa, which would require a transit permit as well as a plane ticket. My initial plans in Northeast Tibet (Amdo) would have to wait until I returned again to Xining after my time in Lhasa. The train to Lhasa was sold out two weeks beyond the time I needed to leave. My schedule was flexible for all but one of my trips; I needed to be at Samyé Monastery by June 30th.



Me above the Great Enlightenment Reliquary of Auspicious Park (Tib. *bkra shis gling ka'i byang chub mchod rten chen mo*) overlooking the city of Xining. (Photo by Deborah Kuhn)

Fortunately, I reached Lhasa two days before the 30th, which fell on a Saturday this year. With the help of my Lhasa travel agent, I made it to Samyé by noon of the 30th. This confluence was important because June 30th happened to be the 15th day of the fifth month of the Tibetan calendar this year. This date is an important Tibetan holiday and its significance is greatest at Samyé Monastery, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. The holiday is called “World Incense Day” (Tib. *'dzam gling spyi bsangs*), and it commemorates when the eighth-century tantric exorcist Padmasambhava subjugated all the gods and demons of Mount Hepo—which sits next to Samyé, looming over it—and converted them to Buddhism. Given my focus on Tibetan demons, this holiday and this location were essential for my research.



Mount Hepo (Tib. *has po ri*), which lies just outside the east gate of Samyé Monastery.

The holiday is called “World Incense Day” because incense (usually juniper) is burned to please the gods and demons and to purify the world. There are incense houses (Tib. *bsangs khang*) all around Samyé Monastery, and indeed in front of most of the monasteries and temples in Lhasa. So much incense is burned at Samyé that a great fog of it covers the monastery; the scent was inescapable even as I made my way up Mount Hepo. Before climbing the mountain, however, I immediately took an hour or two to observe and video-record a portion of the sacred dance (Tib. *'chams*) that was taking place in front of the monastery’s central temple (Tib. *dbu rtse*). The dancers in this ceremony dressed up as various divine and demonic characters and jumped and turned all around the temple courtyard. It was an incredible sight to see, as I had read a good deal on Tibetan sacred dance but had not yet seen one.





Tibetan sacred dancers performing a dance ceremony in front of the Samyé central temple.

Sacred dances that take place on a holiday usually commemorate and reenact the subjugation of the wild demons who were initially opposed to the adoption and propagation of Buddhism in Tibet. Being a holiday, the monastery was packed with pilgrims and foreigners alike, and the sacred dance went on for hours. Once I had my fill of the crowd, I worked my way outside the monastery walls and within thirty minutes I was beginning my climb up Mount Hepo, the very center of this holiday. It's a small mountain, but the difficulty of the climb was compounded by the high altitude of central Tibet, to which I was still adjusting. Mount Hepo has several minor peaks, the smallest of which is an ancient reliquary; the others have mountain cairns covered in prayer flags, and on the topmost peak there is a small one-room temple cared for by a monk that lives on the mountain. This temple was closed by the time I made it to the top of Mount Hepo, but I would have the opportunity to peer inside it weeks later.



The temple at the peak of Mount Hepo. Incense is being burned in front of it for the holiday.

In the seventeenth-century Tibetan text for which I was writing an index, this temple was briefly discussed and was said to have been built by the eighth-century Tibetan Buddhist king Trisong Deutsen (Tib. *khri srong lde'u btsan*) himself. My guide on this trip informed me, however, that this was a reconstruction, as the original was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (I would wager that it had at least fallen into disrepair well before that).

When I returned to the monastery, I discovered that most of the temples of Samyé were closed. It was late afternoon, and my guide had told me that the best time to circumambulate the monastery and visit the temples was in the morning. This was fine, as I had another full day to spend at Samyé before returning to Lhasa. However, the one temple I was most interested in

happened to be still open: the Pehar Treasury (Tib. *pe har dkor mdzod gling*). This temple is historically the monastery treasury, where both the spoils of conquest and translated texts were housed during the eighth and later centuries. It is named after the foreign god Pehar, who was defeated by Padmasambhava and bound to Samyé as its main protector. It was this temple, in the northeast quadrant of the monastic complex, where Pehar resided and watched over the treasures of Samyé. According to oral tradition, Pehar fled from Samyé in the sixteenth century. He eventually took up residence near Drepung Monastery, on the outskirts of Lhasa, where another monastery (called Nechung) was built for his emanation—a god named Nechung Dorjé Drakden (Tib. *nas chung rdo rje grags ldan*). This emanation began to possess a line of monks shortly thereafter, and that medium became the state-sanctioned oracle of the Fifth Dalai Lama's new government in the seventeenth century. Another god, named Tsiu Marpo (Tib. *tsi'u dmar po*), took over as the central protector of Samyé in Pehar's absence. The Pehar Treasury became Tsiu Marpo's residence, though today both gods are equally worshipped at Samyé as the monastery's principal protectors.

On visiting the Pehar Treasury, I made three important discoveries, which equally satisfied my curiosity and contributed to my research. First, the central statue in the main deity chapel on the second floor of the temple had changed. When I visited Samyé two years ago, the central statue was a life-size figure of Tsiu Marpo. Now there is a case housing two smaller statues of Pehar and Tsiu Marpo, and protected by glass.





Tsiu Marpo, the central image at the Pehar Treasury (2005).



Pehar (left) and Tsiu Marpo (right), the central images at the Pehar Treasury (2007).

Second, there is a third floor, or rather an additional structure at the top of this temple. This structure is two storeys high and the first-floor double door is always locked. However, the second floor—or rather, the fourth floor of the entire temple—often appears open. What's interesting is that its door is on the side and is only reached via a ladder. When I saw it two years ago, it immediately intrigued me and my imagination had since conjured up innumerable possibilities for what the room contained. Was it another chapel? Is that where certain relics were kept? Was it the real residence of the deity? I never paused to think that its use was something far more banal.





The Pehar Treasury courtyard, with a higher two-storey structure atop the central chapel.



The open door of the fourth floor of the Pehar Treasury.

It took me almost two hours to work up the courage to climb up to the fourth floor of the Pehar Treasury. This anxiety was due to my fear that I and my intentions would be discovered at any moment as I slowly worked my way across the temple roofs, and that I would then be told to get down, this despite the fact that the door was open. I didn't anticipate getting into any real trouble. During my time in Tibet, I discovered a kind of mild immunity that I prefer to call foreigner-clemency, of which I have occasionally taken advantage. Foreigner-clemency, in my personal experience, refers to circumstances wherein my exotic habits and/or ignorance of local customs, as far as the local populace is aware, can, at times, excuse my behavior. Under foreigner-clemency, my rule of thumb has become 'if it's open, it's open to exploration.'

This is most efficacious in matters of propriety, for if I enter a place I'm perhaps not supposed to, I can chalk it up to ignorance, apologize, smile, and walk away without any real harm done. However, given the strong grip of curiosity in which this secret floor held me, I was intent on seeing it and not being dissuaded. Nonetheless, I would not be rude and ignore social

propriety. So if I had been told to come down, I would have agreed, although I would have been severely disappointed for the lost opportunity.

Fortunately, I did make it up the ladder and into the fourth floor of the temple. However, I was greeted not with a room full of sacred statues and deity paraphernalia, but with a pitch black floor with bare walls, and nondescript pillars, empty but for a pile of small clay images (Tib. *tsa tsa*) of one of Padmasambhava's wrathful aspects. But the mystery was solved, and for that I was satisfied. Furthermore, there was within this room another ladder heading to the rooftop, where an excellent view of the monastery awaited me.



Inside the fourth floor of the Pehar Treasury.

My third and final discovery was hiding in plain view within the second-floor deity chapel—plain view, though not labeled like so many statues and items have conveniently come to be. Among his discussion of the myths concerning the conversion of Tibetan gods and demons to Buddhism, scholar and author René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz also discusses a demonic mask in his most famous of works, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. This mask, called the ‘small dark leather mask’ (Tib. *bse 'bag smug chung*), was among the spoils of war brought to Samyé in the eighth century during the conquest of the northern region of Bhatahor by King Trisong Deutsen's army. It was when this army, led by Padmasambhava, laid siege to a meditation school in Bhatahor that the god Pehar was captured and brought to central Tibet, along with a number of fetish objects. The ‘small dark leather mask’ was among those objects, and it is said to be endowed with demonic powers. According to de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, who was writing in the early 1950s, the mask still exists, though it was likely a replica of the original. I wanted to



know if the mask still existed today, so I asked one of the monks in the deity chapel about it. He simply pointed up.



The demonic 'small dark leather mask.'

Hanging at the head of an ornate pillar, encased and unlabeled, was the fabled demonic mask. I went back to this chapel a number of other times and confirmed the identity of this mask with several other monks, all agreeing that it was indeed the 'small dark leather mask.' Given its fresh appearance, I am inclined to believe that it must be a replica of the mythic original, and that perhaps it was only a few decades old, with the replica de Nebesky-Wojkowitz discussed possibly having been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, this was the object that was presented as the relic, and for that I was excited to see it.

My second day at Samyé proved to be equally informative and exciting. Having traveled there with my friend and colleague, Michelle Bryan, we got up early on Sunday to make an offering in front of the Padmasambhava statue on the first floor of the central temple. Neither of us are Buddhist, but our mutual friends and colleagues Lindsay McCune and Arnoud Sekrève

happened to be getting married that weekend in Texas, and since Arnoud was Buddhist, Michelle and I thought an auspicious offering for them would be a nice gesture. While at the central temple, we noticed a great deal of activity was taking place in commencement of the holiday weekend. There were two life-size effigies near the Padmasambhava statue to which we had made offerings, and they interested me in particular.



Effigies of the gods Pehar (left) and Tsiu Marpo (right).

These two faceless figures represented the principal protector gods of Samyé Monastery, Pehar and Tsiu Marpo. They were dressed in full iconographic regalia, endowed with crowns, ornate wardrobe, chest shields, and covered in prayer scarves (Tib. *kha btags*). The tables in front of them were also overflowing with various kinds of offerings. We were surrounded by monks dressing for the sacred dance that would continue that morning and last again through the day. The masks of various demons were laid out, ready to be donned, and there was a certain energy in the air. Michelle and I felt that perhaps we were encroaching on the preparations, but the monks smiled at us and went on with their business.





Samyé monks dressing for the sacred dance, and taking a moment to pose for me.

As we walked out of the central temple, a crowd was gathering and the monks began stripping the effigies of Pehar and Tsiu Marpo. The monks brought these sacred iconic accoutrements belonging to the gods out into the inner courtyard of the central temple and held them high so that pilgrims and devotees could place their heads beneath them as a blessing. Another troupe of monks came out with various musical instruments, and once they started playing, the monks holding the sacred items and others holding the effigies themselves trotted out into the courtyard in front of the temple complex. The thrones of the gods were brought out and arranged first, and then the effigies were settled onto the thrones and dressed in their full regalia. Their offering table was brought and reassembled next to the gods, along with the array of offering bowls and items atop it. The entire affair was enacted with a seasoned air of reverence and sacred intent. The monks completed the ceremony by wrapping the shoulders of the gods with prayer scarves. Once this was complete, a massive line of devotees formed out of the surrounding crowd and one by one each person offered up a prayer scarf to the gods.





Images embodying the principal protector deities of Samyé Monastery, Pehar and Tsiu Marpo, brought out and adorned in front of the central temple.

I wanted to stay and watch the procession's completion, but chose instead to explore the monastery grounds. When I returned a few hours later, however, a sacred dance was taking place, and in front of the enthroned deities as if it were being performed for their entertainment—this was likely the purpose, actually. A very common motif found in Asian devotion is that statues or images that act as embodiments of a deity are often treated like royalty.

It was evening by the time I was finished exploring the monastery and taking notes. When I met up with my guide, I found that he had somehow procured for me an interview with the head of the monastery, who belonged to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. During our drive to Samyé, I had talked to my guide about my interests and research focus, and he had apparently done some searching for me, which was incredibly considerate of him. I talked with the monastery head for about thirty minutes, video-recording most of the conversation, and having my guide clear up any confusion whenever my limited language skills became a barrier. It was an excellent discussion, concerning Pehar, Tsiu Marpo, and Padmasambhava, and I made sure to record especially important details in my field notes beyond the general exposition caught by my camera.

Our return to Lhasa early the next morning was a slow one, but I was exhilarated by the information I had gained in just the span of two days. What's more, I was back on a flexible schedule, now that the holiday was past. When I was back in Lhasa, I got settled into my hostel, and immediately began reacquainting myself with the city I had lived in two summers ago. I

spent the days exploring familiar and new monasteries and temples, taking notes, and talking with the locals. I also spent time with Michelle, who had been living in Lhasa for the past nine months and was thus able to show me sites I would have otherwise missed. My evenings were once again taken up with my Samyé history index or enjoying the Lhasa nightlife.



The iconic Potala palace at the center of Lhasa city.



Iron Mountain (Tib. *lcags po ri*) in Lhasa, one of the four sacred mountains of central Tibet (Mount Hepo, discussed above, is another one).





The Jokhang, central temple of Lhasa. (Photo by Lindsay McCune)

My time in Lhasa was made all the more enjoyable with the arrival of Lindsay and Arnoud. After their wedding, they briefly honeymooned in Thailand and then came straight over to Lhasa on July 11th. The newlyweds spent about two weeks in Lhasa, spending time with Michelle and me, and enjoying the sites of Lhasa and surrounding areas. I continued my research, but immensely enjoyed my time with my friends. It was something of a dream come true to have all of us in Lhasa, since we had all been graduate students in Tibetan studies together at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

In the midst of our time together, the four of us were able to have lunch one afternoon with David Germano, professor of Tibetan Studies at the University of Virginia. Lindsay and Arnoud are moving to Charlottesville, and Lindsay will begin classes at UVA this fall. Furthermore, all of us had taken the Tibetan Summer Language course at UVA at some point during our graduate studies, so it was a nice reunion before David's departure for East Tibet (Kham). We had a good time and a good talk, despite the mild stomach bug I was getting over.



Lindsay, Arnoud, Michelle, and I walking through the Barkhor, the famous bazaar around the Jokhang.  
(Photo by Lindsay McCune)

Aside from exploring Lhasa, the four of us went as a group to various monasteries and temples, and I made sure to take plenty of notes regarding their deity chapels and murals. Such sacred sites included the monasteries of Drepung (Tib. *'bras spungs*) and Nechung (Tib. *gnas chung*), belonging to the Geluk sect; Kündeling (Tib. *kun bde gling*) Monastery, belonging to the Sakya sect; the Tengyeling (Tib. *bstan rgyas gling*) temple, belonging to the Nyingma sect; and the temple of Meru Nyingpa (Tib. *rme ru snying pa*), which is rather ecumenical, among others. Tengyeling was especially important for my work, as it is a satellite temple of Samyé Monastery and the central image of its deity chapel is Tsiu Marpo. Meru Nyingpa is also significant since it is the satellite temple of Nechung Monastery. Meru Nyingpa was once the Lhasa residence of the Nechung oracle and its walls are covered in murals of the five emanations of the god Pehar. As discussed above, it's an emanation of Pehar—named Nechung Dorjé Drakden—that possesses the Nechung oracle, who is still active today in India.

During our time together in Lhasa, Michelle, Lindsay, Arnoud, and I also visited the Jewel Park (Tib. *nor bu gling kha*) of the Dalai Lamas, which was interesting and beautiful in parts, but the zoo there was especially depressing as the living conditions of the animals were very poor.





The four of us at the Jewel Park. From left to right: me, Lindsay, Arnoud, and Michelle. (Photo by Kathleen Cummings)

Our day at the Jewel Park ended well, however, as Arnoud and I ended up showing off for a number of Tibetans on the jungle gym. Then I proved to be a bad example and climbed into a fenced-in playground because a giant trampoline therein looked very inviting. A few Tibetans joined in and we jumped around until we were kicked out of the area (but not the Jewel Park); it was all in good fun. Before leaving, Arnoud and I played a few rounds of pool with our new local friends. We had a full day.





A few Tibetans and I sneaking into a sealed-off trampoline. (Photo by Lindsay McCune)



Playing pool at the Jewel Park. Just two kuai a game! (Photo by Lindsay McCune)

Beyond these numerous local expeditions, Lindsay and Arnoud wanted to travel outside of Lhasa as well, and Michelle and I were happy to oblige them with a travel schedule. The weekend before they were to return to the States, the three of us made a trip to Samyé Monastery (Michelle didn't want to go again). As it was their first time in Tibet, the couple naturally wanted to see the oldest Buddhist monastery, and I certainly did not mind a second trip to Samyé to fill in more gaps in my knowledge and in my notebook. However, this trip would first make a short detour to the oldest fortress in Tibet, the Yumbulhakhar (Tib. *yum bu lha mkhar*).





The Yumbulhakhar, oldest fortress in Tibet. (Photo by Lindsay McCune)

The Yumbulhakhar was first built perhaps around the second century C.E., and was the residence of Tibet's first king, Nyatri Tsenpo (Tib. *gnya' khri btsan po*). Despite its antiquity, the fortress has been destroyed and rebuilt over the centuries, and currently houses images of famous Tibetan kings, especially Nyatri Tsenpo.

Once we arrived at Samyé, I stressed the necessity of climbing Mount Hepo to Lindsay and Arnoud, and with little convincing necessary we made our way up the mountain. When we reached the temple at its peak, I found to my pleasant surprise that it was open this time, and the monk living there was happy to perform a brief offering ritual as we looked around. The inner decor of the temple was sparse but for a few statues, the central one being of Padmasambhava with King Trisong Deutsen next to him. There was another smaller statue of Padmasambhava in one of his wrathful forms, and next to that was the only statue in the temple of a protector deity; it was of Tsiu Marpo.





A statue of Tsiu Marpo within the temple at the peak of Mount Hepo.



Lindsay and Arnoud in front of the Samyé central temple.

We only spent one night at Samyé, but we used our time well. Since we got there our first day in the mid-afternoon, we only really had time for Mount Hepo; everything was closed once we returned to the monastery hotel in the evening. We woke up early the next day, however, and spent the entire morning exploring the monastery grounds before leaving at noon. I was able to gather more information I had missed last time, the most significant of which was finding out what was in the locked third floor of the Pehar Treasury. Although I wasn't allowed in it, I discussed the room with a monk within the Treasury's deity chapel and he informed me that the regalia for the sacred dances, such as the costumes and masks, are kept in there. I also took some pictures of murals within the central temple that depict Samyé in its original construction, which included a surrounding wall that was originally zigzagged rather than oval. There were some images and bits of information I was unable to find or procure, and they continue to elude me; such is the nature of research.





A mural depicting Samyé's initial structure, which included a zigzagging surrounding wall.

When we returned to Lhasa, we immediately had another trip outside the city to look forward to. This was just a morning trip to one of central Tibet's most famous divine lakes called Yamdrok Lake (Tib. *yar 'brog g.yu mtsho*), which is just two or three hours southwest of Lhasa. We left early the morning of July 21st, and were crossing the high mountain pass on the way to Yamdrok Lake just an hour later. The moment we passed the peak of the mountain, a grand view of the lake unfolded before us.





Yamdrok Lake, southeast of Lhasa.

Mainly for my own purposes, but also so that we had a goal and a point of return, I suggested we travel along the coast of Yamdrok Lake up to a small village called Peti (Tib. *dpal ti*). This village was another important area for my research goals. In *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, de Nebesky-Wojkowitz briefly mentions Peti and explains that seven demon houses (Tib. *btsan khang*) lie on the edge of the village. These demon houses were dedicated to Tsiu Marpo and the six demonic horsemen who comprise his immediate retinue. Given my specific focus on Tsiu Marpo in the past, I was curious to see if these specialized chapels still existed. If so, I wanted to explore them in detail.



The small village of Peti, on the banks of Yamdrok Lake.

Our time in Peti was brief. We found the one monastery in town, called the Auspicious Omnibenevolent Dharma Center of Peti (Tib. *dpal ti bkra shis kun bzang chos gling*), and our guide was able to find an old nun who was willing to talk to me about the demon houses. After some questions, she told me what I had feared was the case: that they were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (Tib. *rig gnas gsar brje*); at least I know for certain now. I still explored the small monastery and took notes on its deity chapel configuration before she took me to the only temple in town, where I took more notes. We were back in Lhasa shortly after noon and spent the rest of the weekend relaxing, but all that traveling and wandering around Lhasa does make you tired.



Michelle and I. Tired. (Photo by Lindsay McCune)

Lindsay and Arnoud had to return to the States that following Monday, and I would leave just days later to return to Xining. I enjoyed my time in Lhasa, and I felt that I procured a great deal of new information. As I took notes, I began to focus on the raw data of the names and configurations of deities within the chapels of the numerous monasteries and temples I had visited. I started to notice that the order in which the deities were arrayed, especially in relation to the central deity, suggested a layered relationship not unlike kinship relations or, perhaps more aptly, the connections between allied clans. This kind of symbolism, overt and at times redundant, fits in nicely within the Tibetan cultural landscape, overwrought as it is with clans and pantheons alike.

Also during my time in Lhasa, I had an ongoing pet project, which I had started during my first visit there in 2005. There is a modern ritual visible on a daily basis on the streets of Lhasa, one with ancient—even pre-Buddhist—roots. This ritual is called the “ransom offering” (Tib. *glud gtor*), and its basic premise is that when the family member of a household suffers from disease or ailment—which is believed to be caused by afflictive or demonic influences—that influence must be removed from the vicinity of the household. To do this, a small dough effigy of the afflicted individual is constructed as a ransom by a local Buddhist monk, taken outside of the home, and destroyed, preferably at a crossroads. The belief is that the demonic presence is tricked and drawn away from the actual individual by the effigy. Once the effigy is destroyed, the presence attached to it is likewise destroyed and dispersed to the four cardinal directions so that it cannot find its way back to the previously afflicted household. This is also



practiced when a family has suffered a death; the ritual is required to rid the house of the cause so that it doesn't linger and bring about further suffering.

Several extra elements are added to the effigy to initially attract and trap the demon and ensure its definite shift in attention. These supplementary objects include small dough cakes (Tib. *gtor ma*), thread crosses (Tib. *mdos*), and small money offerings (Ch. *jiao*). In its modern derivation, the effigy and these supplementary objects are arranged in a box, which is then placed in a road far from the home of the afflicted. The destruction of this box, which is the "ransom offering" in full, is achieved when a passing vehicle runs it over. It is a fascinating object to behold along the streets of Lhasa, and I was able to observe and photograph many this summer, as well as to interview locals about its significance. I haven't worked alone on this little project, as it was first brought to my attention by Robert Barnett, Lecturer in Modern Tibet at Columbia University, whom I befriended two summers ago. Robbie was in Lhasa this summer but I was only able to see him briefly. However, I did have lunch with Ron Schwartz, a Modern Tibet scholar and colleague of Robbie's, as he had also been working on this project and was eager to discuss it with me. We had a good meeting at the Makyé Amé restaurant in the Barkhor one afternoon. Ron is very enthusiastic about this material, and his attitude quickly became infectious. He told me of a few ritual texts related to the "ransom offering" ritual, and after we parted I quickly took advantage of my time in the Barkhor and procured copies for myself. One of these texts is quite short, and having typed it up while still in Lhasa, I plan to translate it.



A “ransom offering” on the intersection of Beijing East Road and Zangyiyuan Road in Lhasa. Elements in this ritual object include a thread cross attached to the top of the box, a prayer scarf wrapped around it, two effigies—the afflicting demon and the afflicted family member—and a pile of small dough cake offerings.



Another “ransom offering” on Beijing East Road in Lhasa. This one includes a small thread cross, an effigy of the family’s mother (as I discovered by conversing with a member of the family responsible for this offering), a candle, and some small offering cakes.

When I returned to Xining, I had a week and a half left to do the research I had intended to conduct when I first arrived a month before. To my further disappointment, my contacts in Xining continued to be unreliable. I was reminded this summer just how unpredictable and precarious plans can become in China, and I decided to take matters into my own hands. I was able to get to the small city of Malho with the help of some friends of mine in Xining. With my friend Deborah and my limited knowledge of the northeastern Tibetan dialect (Tib. *a mdo skad*), I took a taxi out from Malho to various sites of interest.

There was really only one place I was interested in seeing, and it was the main reason I decided to fly into Tibet via Xining. I was told by the co-founder of the Ngak Mang Institute, Nida Chenagtsang, that there was a village not far from Malho called Yambajabdün, and that it was surrounded by seven great hills that signified Tsiu Marpo and his six demon riders. When Nida first mentioned it, my interest was immediately piqued, because the very name of this place



was clearly a northeastern variant on the term *yawa kyadün* (Tib. *ya ba rkyā bdun*), which is one of the common appellations given to this troupe of deities. Considering that mountain and deity cults have been intimately tied together in Tibetan worship and pilgrimage since before the advent of Buddhism, seeing an actual mountain or hill dedicated to these gods was one of the central goals of my trip. To my pleasant surprise, Yambajabdün was less than an hour's drive outside of Malho, and even on the way to Labrang, as I would come to find.

My first planned trip to Yambajabdün took place on July 29th. Deborah and I got up at a reasonable time in the morning and hailed a taxi. My plan was to attempt to ask the driver, who was Tibetan, if he knew of this place. Despite my limited knowledge of the dialect, the driver understood me and was happy to take us both to Yambajabdün. When we arrived a short time later, I discovered that, rather than a village, which is what I was expecting, Yambajabdün was simply a line of seven large hills along the road. Apparently, there had been some miscommunication with Nida. Indeed, this particular area did not appear to be inhabited at all. The hills loomed high on one side of the road and a stream and an expansive field rested on the other side, ending only in more green hills that made up the horizon. There was a small structure in the field, though it didn't appear to be inhabited; it stood out in marked contrast against the vastness of the field, empty but for high green grass and colorful flowers.

So much for interviewing anyone. I was not the least bit disappointed, however. It was exhilarating to see the hills with my own eyes, and Nida had explained to me before that the people that live in the area don't actively worship Tsiu Marpo anymore anyway.



Yambajabdün, the seven hills—only six of which are in full view in this photo—dedicated to Tsiu Marpo and his demon horsemen. The central hill, flanked by two larger broad-faced hills, might represent Tsiu Marpo.

The hills were small and accessible enough to be readily explored, and so Deborah and I had our driver stop so that we could climb along them. Aside from being beautiful to look at—an endless sea of rolling hills and small valleys of exotic flowers along their tops—the mountains were relatively nondescript. I attempted to ask our driver which mountain was associated with Tsiu Marpo but was unsuccessful at getting my intentions across. Perhaps it is a somewhat naive question, as I'm sure the chain of hills in its entirety is associated with Tsiu Marpo and his troupe by a more fluid and amorphous scheme. Nonetheless, I speculate that it is the central hill that is associated with this key protector of Samyé. A number of observations work in favor of this theory, I believe. First, it is most common for the leader to be centered in Indo-Tibetan iconographic arrays of deities and religious leaders alike, flanked by lesser deities or disciples. Second, the central hill has a mysterious wall that climbs like a spine up its center and continues high along the back hills. I couldn't venture a guess as to what this wall was for, but at the very least it distinguishes the central hill among all the others. Finally, there is a small pool that exists only at the base of this central mountain. In a Tibetan context, this is very significant because a body of water, usually a lake, is a very rich and ancient symbol associated with the life-blood of an important figure, deity, or clan. Mountains and lakes together form a powerful dual symbol of great indigenous importance in Tibet. With this understanding in mind, one could easily interpret this pool as representing the life-blood of the central deity in this configuration.



The central hill of Yambajabdün seen from above. This hill had a small rock wall that snaked up along its center.





A small pool found at the base of the central hill.

After about an hour, in which Deborah and I walked along the hilltops and enjoyed the splendid view before us, we began climbing down to return to the taxi. The weather, being quite capricious in Tibet, had suddenly declined, and before we were even halfway down it began to hail. It became very cold and the hail became larger and started to pelt us with even greater ferocity. Surprisingly, the moment we got off the hills and were back on the pavement of the road, the hail immediately stopped and the stormy weather abated. Some would consider such an act of nature an omen of some kind, considering our surroundings. My goal having been achieved, we returned to the taxi and our patient driver and returned to Malho, enjoying the sights of nomad tents and yaks along the roadside.





Hailing on Yambajabdün; you can actually see it!



Nomad tents and yaks along the road.

When we returned from Yambajabdün, our taxi driver invited us back to his house in Malho. We met his wife and child, the former of whom was dicing up big blocks of yak meat on the floor of their one-room house. The driver gave Deborah and me a bowl of tsampa—parched barley mixed with butter tea—and a cup of Tibetan butter tea. It was incredibly hospitable, and the tsampa was tasty if a little filling. Even the butter tea was delectable; butter tea is usually something of an acquired taste. After we finished, the driver gave us his card and told us to contact him for future travel plans, so the next morning we did just that.

Given the short amount of time we had left to travel around Malho, Deborah and I left again the next day to visit the monastery of Labrang. This wasn't in my original plans, but during a conversation with some Tibetans in Xining, I was informed that Tsiu Marpo was the main protector of one of Labrang's monastic colleges, so of course I had to look into it. That Labrang was only a few hours away from Malho made the prospect of a trip all the more feasible.

On our way to Labrang, we passed Yambajabdün again and I decided to take a few more pictures before continuing on our way. We arrived at Labrang in the afternoon and decided to have lunch first. We passed the large monastery of Labrang and came upon a small town right next to it. I had expected Labrang to be nothing more than the monastery, perhaps with a few accompanying restaurants and shops, but the one-street town next to it was surprisingly modern and very tourist-friendly, even more than Malho. There were a number of hotels with signs and services in English, as well as internet cafés, and there were numerous restaurants, all with English menus. There was even a western-cuisine restaurant, which happened to make the best and most authentic American pizza I have ever eaten in China. There were many western-

oriented restaurants in Lhasa, but this place was surprisingly better than all of them, at least where pizza was concerned.



The bustling one-street town of Labrang.

During lunch, Deborah, our driver, and I discussed staying longer at Labrang. Our original plan was to come, explore the monastery for about two hours, then return to Malho. However, given the terrible conditions of the road and how much time we took up with eating, we felt that the trip was in danger of becoming a total wash. Our choices were to pay our driver the full cost of travel and have him just drive back to Malho without us or pay him a little extra to stay the night with us and drive us back in the morning. We opted for the latter, as we preferred the security of a known driver over the uncertainty and possibly greater expense of another driver. Therefore, we went to rent a hostel room after lunch and spent the remaining hours of the day walking around Labrang.





Labrang Monastery.

When we got to the monastery, we had to buy a ticket of entry and also had to follow along a tour group. The last English-language tour of the monastery for the day had apparently finished an hour before we arrived, so our tour was in Chinese, much to our chagrin. Fortunately, I struck up a conversation with our guide in Tibetan and he was able to inform me of the important details during our tour. Furthermore, I explained my interests and focus and he was very kind to show me statues and items that would appeal to me most. One room was particularly intriguing as it was filled with large butter sculptures of various deities and religious figures important to the Geluk sect—Labrang being a Geluk monastery.



A butter sculpture of Tsiu Marpo at Labrang.





A butter sculpture of Pehar at Labrang.

While the monk guiding the tour gave his spiels in Chinese, I wandered around the vicinity and asked monks nearby further questions about various buildings and statues. Once the tour ended, Deborah and I decided to explore the monastery grounds on our own. I especially wanted to find the college for which Tsiu Marpo is the main protector. It is called the Hevajra College (Tib. *kyai rdor grwa tshang*), and after a little asking around, I was able to find it. One of the monks I asked was kind enough to talk with me further and show me around. He pointed out not only the college but also the protector chapel next to it, where Tsiu Marpo resided. This chapel was within a smaller open yard behind a closed wooden door, and this monk vouched for me with its caretaker, giving me permission to enter the chapel yard.





The Hevajra College at Labrang Monastery.



The protector deity chapel of the Hevajra College, presided over by Tsiu Marpo.

Unfortunately, the deity chapel was closed, so I wasn't allowed to explore it. I got the strong impression that it was opened only on rare occasions, not unlike the third floor of the Pehar Treasury at Samyé. Nonetheless, I was thrilled to see it and grateful for the monk's help. Overall, I have found in my travels that being able to communicate with those in the know has provided me with more data and greater access to areas otherwise closed off to foreigners. Language alone has proven to be a powerful key to otherwise locked venues of information.

After we were done exploring, Deborah and I were again treated to Tibetan hospitality by the helpful monk, who invited us back to his home. He served us tea and revealed to us that he spoke a little English; certainly his English was as good as my Tibetan, which is by no means fluent but good enough to serve the purposes of communication. After tea and talk, we traded email addresses and Deborah and I returned to the town area. We walked around the town for the rest of the evening, going into shops, talking with locals, and even haggling a little.

The next morning, Deborah, the driver, and I woke early and left Labrang Monastery. I had the driver stop once more outside the monastery for a brief moment while I attempted one last time to enter the deity chapel of Hevajra College, hoping that I would fare better in the morning, but, unfortunately, it was still sealed. During our drive back, I explained to our driver our broader intention of now returning to Xining by way of Rebkong, and he explained that there was actually a road straight from Labrang to Rebkong, and that a longer trip through Malho was unnecessary. By adding a little extra to our total fee, our driver took us straight to Rebkong, cutting our travel time nearly in half. The road was a great deal bumpier, though.

I had been in contact with my friend and colleague at UVA, Ben Deitle, through email and phone during my time in Malho. Having finished his Chinese summer language program in Shanghai, he was spending a few days traveling around the Qinghai-Gansu area. In our communications, we realized we were going to be in Rebkong around the same period of time, so we decided to meet up before Deborah and I returned to Xining. Also, Nida had told me in past conversations that Tsiu Marpo is the main protector of a monk named Alak Gönpö at Gönlakha Monastery near Rebkong. My contacts in Xining were originally going to set up an interview between Alak Gönpö before I left Xining at the start of my trip, but that had fallen through. I didn't think my chances were good if I tried to meet him on my own, since he apparently travels between Xining and Rebkong a lot, but I thought I would attempt it.

When Deborah and I arrived in Rebkong, we paid our driver, bid him farewell, and ate lunch at the Rongwo Monastery restaurant. Ben called me and a few minutes later we met up in front of the monastery. After exchanging greetings and introductions, I told him my desire to visit Gönlakha Monastery, so long as it was close, as Deborah and I wanted to be back in Xining by sundown. Ben was game, and we set about asking taxis about the monastery. Unfortunately, before long we discovered that not only was the monastery almost an hour away, but that the roads were in very bad condition, especially since it had just been raining, and very few taxis were willing to go. That pretty much put an end to my plans. However, Ben told me that the Laru Festival—a major harvest festival in this region—was in full swing, and since it was right on the outskirts of Rebkong, it would have been silly not to take advantage of the fortuitous timing and observe some of the festival firsthand. Ben had already seen some of the festivities the previous day, including a local medium falling into a deity-possessed trance. I was somewhat familiar with the Laru Festival, as it was the focus of two papers I had read by Kevin Stuart, an ethnographer who lived in Xining and who I had indirectly worked with in the past. Given the strong indigenous elements of the festival, as well as its central focus on local gods, my eagerness at this turn of events far outweighed whatever mild disappointment I may have felt at being unable to meet with Alak Gönpö.





The city of Rebkong.

Our destination for the festival was the mountain west of the city. It wasn't far, and not even halfway up there was the offering temple (Tib. *mchod khang*), wherein the sacred dances would take place. Deborah and I explored the inner chapel briefly, noting the great heterogeneous pile of offerings set down in front of the large statues by devotees. Ben, having already seen the chapel the day before, found a spot to sit and watch the dance.



The start of the Laru Festival afternoon dance performance.





Offerings set in front of statues of the local gods (Tib. *gzhi bdag*) within the temple chapel.

We joined Ben shortly after and enjoyed some of the dance before deciding to walk further up the mountain. During a brief conversation with the monks in the chapel, they informed me that, though the place where we were was the deity chapel (Tib. *lha khang*), the protector chapel (Tib. *mgon khang*) was a little further up the mountain. This I definitely wanted to see. The protector chapel here is not what one usually finds in monasteries or temples. Rather than a small building or room full of statues and images of fierce protector deities, what greeted us further up the mountain was something far more abstract. The protector shrine, which it more closely resembled, consisted of two large and detailed mountain cairns. Each cairn was a hollow stone square with a wooden support at its center. Within this support, two-storey-high poles stuck out in a great thick pile. These poles were dressed up to resemble giant spears and arrows, and were further ornamented with prayer flags. Finally, this ensemble was wreathed in tree branches and more prayer flags. These two identical cairns were spaced about a hundred yards apart and connected by a wall of stone and prayer flags. The entire structure was incredible to behold, both from afar and up close.





The two mountain cairns representing the deity chapel.

In his articles on the Laru Festival, Kevin Stuart describes these cairns in great detail and explains their significance as sacred sites in which the worldly and the divine converge. Given my previous exposure to these structures in writing, to see such indigenous symbols in reality was quite exhilarating.



Ben next to the lower shrine.

We circumambulated and examined the shrines a little more before walking back down the mountain to rejoin the festival dance. At this time I was able to see the trance medium briefly during what was clearly a comic moment of the performance; he was pouring yoghurt on the faces of other performers, to the obvious amusement of the crowd. Also, Ben met up with a friend of his that he spent time with while he was in Nepal a couple years ago. His friend's name was Galen Murton, and he and I had a brief talk about the murals along the walls of the temple and the various deities worshipped or recognized in this village. Since it was getting late in the afternoon by this point, Deborah and I had to leave if we wanted to get back to Xining before too late. Ben was happy to walk with us back into the city, and so we walked further down the mountain after saying goodbye to Galen. As we walked and talked, Ben revealed to me that Galen was a close friend of both Julian Green and his family, and I suddenly wished I had spent more time talking to him before leaving.

Deborah and I found a cab that would take us back to Xining shortly after we parted ways with Ben. At this point in the day we were pretty tired, but we only dozed a little on the drive

back, which felt a lot longer than it had a few days ago. We returned to Xining and were pleased to see familiar sights again. I for one was looking forward to my old hotel room. This trip out into the country was my last major excursion, as I was scheduled to return to the States in a few days. I took the little time I had left to catch up on some reading, do some translating, and enjoy Xining while I could. Of course, it's the little reminders of home that make leaving not too terribly difficult.



One of three Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants in Xining. The fries were really good.

On one of my last full days in Xining, I actually got to meet with Kevin Stuart. He has lived in Xining for the last two decades, and after a brief email correspondence, he was happy to have me over for lunch. It was great to meet him and talk about the Laru Festival, as well as anthropology in general. A fan more of data than of theory, he showed me a series of texts he is compiling, autobiographies written by his Tibetan students that detail their upbringing. It was a fascinating enterprise and it further piqued my interest in folk beliefs and ground-level personal experiences in Tibetan Buddhism, as I have grown somewhat weary of the seemingly constant philosophical focus found in Tibetan Buddhist studies; I thrive more in realms of anthropology, mythology, and history. Kevin was very open to sharing what he knew, and our conversation moved fluidly through Tibetan studies to ethnography and even into American politics over the two hours or so that I visited. After our long lunch, I thanked him for his hospitality and said goodbye for the moment, as I was sure we would continue to talk over email.

I was glad to leave Xining, but I liked it overall. Despite its severely limited Tibetan elements, it was a fun city with an abundance of fashion stores, medicine shops, and bad yet



addictive western-style restaurants. The one exception was the restaurant found in the only five-star hotel in Xining, the Yin Long Bin Guan; their buffet was incredible.

Moreover, my time in both Xining and Lhasa was exceptionally grand. I discovered that plans, especially in this part of the world, can be very inconsistent, but despite some of the opportunities I may have lost, I gained so much more. That was most surprising above all else; a few doors may have closed during this trip, but several hallways opened up. By the time I left China, I had a journal full of field notes, observations, and raw data, gigabytes' worth of digital pictures, and several more emails to add to my list of contacts in Tibet. My language skills improved a considerable amount as well. During my forays into the Barkhor and bookstores throughout Lhasa and Xining, I was able to ask for exactly the kinds of texts I wanted. This made for more discriminating spending on my part, as I had to budget well. I ended up shipping about a quarter of the amount of books I mailed back home two summers ago, but their content was much more connected to my research interests. In short, experientially and materially, I feel like I gained a wealth of knowledge this summer, and in just two months.

My journey began as a desire to survey a broad panoply of Tibetan gods and demons. The raw data I collected in numerous monasteries satisfied this goal, as it consists of lists upon lists of deities, their order in the chapel arrangement, and their monastic affiliation. Nonetheless, my focus continued to be directed mainly at Tsiu Marpo and Pehar. In my anthropological meanderings, I found nothing on some of the other deities I had discussed in my proposal for this trip, such as Trashi Öbar (Tib. *bkra shis 'od 'bar*) and Yamshü Marpo (Tib. *yam shud dmar po*), and I now suspect that the worship of these deities is diminished these days if not entirely dead. If I wish to explore them, I imagine I will have to stick to manuscripts. I'm not disappointed that my focus remained on Pehar and Tsiu Marpo; certainly they were the focus of research I conducted for my Master's thesis, and I continue to be interested in their particular myths, cults, and histories to the point of obsession. I had intended them to be a springboard to a grander exploration of Tibetan deities and their cults, and while that was successful in some regards, I see now that with material this rich and untouched, it will take more time and more research before I even begin to understand the greater relationships among deities in the convoluted pantheon of Tibet. Regardless, my travels this summer answered many questions and asked many more, and I am thankful for the opportunity to approach my area of interest from more nuanced perspectives.

For this, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the trustees of the Julian Paull Green Memorial Fellowship for their generosity. I would also like to thank David Germano for bringing this fellowship to the attention of his students. Finally, I thank everyone mentioned in this travelogue, for their guidance, friendship, and help during this summer of intense learning and unforgettable experiences. I appreciate enormously the opportunity I was given to return to the culture I love to study and for the chance to continue chasing Tibetan demons.

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