



BOOK REVIEW

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dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang
The History of Ladakh Monasteries

'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan ed.

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Upon getting a copy of *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* (the “Sun that Sheds Light on All Groups of Monasteries”) a reader may say: “Another book on the monasteries of La dwags!”. Yes indeed so, but this is a book with a difference. The virtues of this text amply compensate its *déjà vu* concept, and the brief notes of this review do little justice to an especially comprehensive volume.

dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang offers a view of the monastic panorama of the higher ranges of the Indus region (the religious institutions of La dwags, Zangs dkar, Pu rig, Nub ra and La dwags Byang thang) like few other books. Meant for a local readership and the community of scholars, for not everyone negotiates Tibetan, *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* is a good compilation of works penned by some of the most brilliant erudites of La dwags.

What a reader would wonder next is why this review appears some fifteen years after the book was released. The volume has been culpably neglected. I myself have contributed to this state of affairs, not so much for not reading it, which I did when it came out the same time my main work to date on sTod mNga' ris skor gsum saw the light of day, but for not stressing its importance earlier. The reason behind the absence of popularity among the concerned people may rest on the problems the volume has faced with distribution, even within Ladakh.

Books on the cultures of La dwags, besides a plethora of coffee-table publications, reflect the course that the studies of the region have taken since a pioneering effort was made in the early 20th century by foreign researchers with the support of local savants.

Leaving aside domains typical of Inji studies (anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, ecology or even development), two main lines of research have been pursued about La dwags: one is historiographical and the other art historical. The latter studies focus on monuments, the former ones on a single major text (the anonymous *La dwags rgyal rabs*), whose almost ubiquitous use has influenced





remarkably the direction this branch of Ladakhi studies has taken. Not much has changed since those early times. Works by local erudites and western specialists concerning the history of La dwags have been dominated by their focus on the *rgyal rabs* literary genre, all busy studying *La dwags rgyal rabs* after this important text was first brought to the attention of the international community of experts by A.H. Francke through the auspices of his advisor Yo seb dGe rgan. Being a *rgyal rabs*, this text focuses on rulers and their accomplishments in the field of religion and secularism with a few idiosyncracies that pertain to an emphasis on the political activities of the later centuries and a minimum on information about the religious sphere, mainly monastic foundations.

It is difficult to step out of this limitation for want of sources: the paucity of other historiographical material on the regions of La dwags, Pu rig, Zangs dkar and Nub ra is surprising. Little is available pertaining to the other major literary genres that impinge on historiography. It is conspicuous that very little else historical—such as *rnam thar*, *gdung rabs*, *gdan rabs* or *dkar chag*—is available for study, and I wonder about the reasons for the absence of sources in a region that has not suffered recent massive destruction of its religious institutions, unless unrecorded damage in the past has emptied the libraries of the region's monasteries.

I, for one, have written along the same *rgyal rabs* lines, although I think that *La dwags rgyal rabs* has not yet been read critically and that other historiographical hints—although very few—should receive the attention they deserve, besides those found in this source. That is what I have tried to do in the past and plan to have some more work on the history of La dwags out in the near future.

The other line of research concerns the study of the monuments of the region and their art. Again several works dedicated to these themes have appeared in the course of the 20th century and these topics continue to be a major concern to the scholars, with issues on major monasteries remaining unsolved.

Given matters as they are at present, there is need of sources that widen the perspective of the Ladakhi studies. Hence any big or small progress in shedding some new light on any topic linked with the traditions of La dwags is a great gift to the community of scholars.

As for what is available at present, two books have been especially useful to my work on La dwags:

- One goes back to the pioneering efforts of the early generations of scholars studying the cultures of the region. *La dwags rgyal rabs 'chi med gter* by Yo seb dGe rgan is a milestone for the understanding of the history of La dwags and neighbouring territories, although not enough consulted.
- The other is the relatively recent *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* I talk about here, a volume compiled in the second half of the 1990s by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal





mtshan as editor. I have benefited from both, and they are highly recommended. *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang*, a survey of the monasteries and temples of La dwags stod and La dwags gsham, Pu rig, Zangs dkar, Nub ra and La dwags Byang thang, is not, as I have said, a major novelty, but contributes material which should not be neglected. *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* is remarkably wider ranging than other volumes conceived in a similar manner. Its completeness makes a difference.¹

The distinguished Ladakhi authors who have contributed pieces on the various major monasteries have been chosen for their expertise concerning the *dgon pa*-s they write about, for they are, in most cases, important religious masters affiliated to them.

Each chapter dedicated to a major monastery first deals with its various temples and other buildings, focusing on the description of their contents together with limited historical information, when available. Each treatment of these monasteries makes a point to mention the calendar of ceremonies held in their premises. It continues with an outline of the concerned main monastic institution's *dgon lag*-s (the "network of branch monasteries") and records what is locally known about them. The book is a small treasure of brief texts on the branch monasteries of the principal ones.

The assessments of all monasteries incorporates a great deal of local accounts—mainly oral lore put into written form—some of them remarkably unusual. This is an area of great interest but not particularly reliable, especially when the local lore relates to events going back to considerable antiquity. While double-checking is relatively practicable in the case of major monasteries, hardly anything is known about several minor ones. Assessing the reliability of some of these oral accounts is a vexed question since some of these monasteries are so little known to the literature that are not mentioned elsewhere. Hence in the latter case, the only possible criterion to validate treatments contained in *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* is local inspection, for what it is worth given its limitations.

Besides being a source of information about religious buildings that hardly appear elsewhere, their grouping into a network of "children" institutions that depend on their "mother" institution (*dgon pa ma bu*) permits an analysis of the genesis and evolution of the respective monastic network. This is a study on the monasteries of La dwags and neighbouring lands not attempted at all up to now, which leads one into an area of historical studies that steps out of the *rgyal rabs* genre but, at the same time, still tackles monuments, the other foremost scholarly concern.

1 I add here an aesthetical note. I find the layout of the book typographically appealing: flipping through its pages communicates a pleasant feeling. Its illustrations, although unfortunately not too many, are beautiful and descriptive, and thus well chosen.





A treatment of the various networks of branch monasteries also offers the possibility to attempt a historical assessment of the location and extension of the territory controlled by these major religious institutions and to outline trends in the territorial deployment of the religious schools to which they belong.

One case in point, for instance, is A lci and its branch monasteries (barring the conspicuous absence of Tsa tsa pu ri), dealt with by Thub bstan dpal ldan, the well known erudite from Sa phud. The conception of the network of the branch monasteries of A lci seems to follow a criterion of proximity, for its *dgon lag-s* are mainly found in its surrounding area. Proximity is again the main criterion for the attribution of *dgon lag-s* to dPe thub, again tackled by Sa phud Thub bstan dpal ldan who belongs to this monastery. Among them are the Brag khung kha bo che caves (also see a brief treatment of them in my *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.hrang*),² and several monastic institutions attributed to lHa dbang blo gros, the 15th century “second founder” of dPe thub, besides the latter.

A commendable work is the one dedicated to Mang spro in that it reveals the existence of close links with the creation of Leh as a major centre of the region and the capital of king Grags pa ’bum lde in the early 15th century. Like Phyang, Mang spro stands out from the other monasteries, for there are few *dgon lag-s* included in the chapter dedicated to it. This is also the case of Khrig se, in whose chapter no *dgon lag-s* are mentioned. Whereas Mang spro remained a rather isolated Sa skya pa phenomenon in La dwags, and thus with few branch monasteries, Khrig se should have been at least connected in the book with its twin temple, sTag/ITag mo lHa khang gSer po, the other religious institution founded by sTod Sher bzang and his family in the same area.

The organisation of the network of branch monasteries under He mi is remarkably different. The territorial extension of its *dgon lag-s* reflect the authority exercised by the rNam rgyal dynasty in La dwags, which supported the ’Brug pa and consequently He mi. Its branch monasteries are situated in a good number of areas across the territories of La dwags, irrespective of a geographical criterion. One is then confronted with the task of detecting the secular and religious implications surrounding the passage of many a religious institutions

2 It is somewhat discouraging to notice that my text, despite the relative popularity of *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.hrang* owing to a limited distribution and my overall treatment of difficult accessibility, has given a tiny amount of notoriety to these caves outside the local circles more than the works by Thub bstan dpal ldan. This is not only due to the fact that not everyone reads Tibetan. It is a pity that Thub bstan dpal ldan’s books have not enjoyed a much bigger recognition, including his chapters in *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* owing to the above mentioned lack of distribution in La dwags and neighbouring regions.





under He mi. This is not an easy task, but only attempts at research may say whether it is a mission impossible.

When the book crosses into other lands of the wider region of the Indus, it adopts a more traditional organisation. Consequently, the monasteries of Zangs dkar and La dwags Byang thang are studied together, without religious or historical discrimination, a simple geographical criterion taking the upper hand.

I conclude these few lines with a list of the main religious institutions tackled in *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang* together with the authors who wrote about them. To cite all the *dgon lag* of each head monastery would be too long for the limited space of this review. It is hoped to see future studies making use of *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang*.

Brag thog dgon — by sTag lung rtse sprul rin po che
 Theg chog bde chen gling — by 'Jam dbyangs gyal mtshan
 He mi dgon — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 Khri rtse — by dka' chen Blo bzang bzod pa
 lDum ra sDe skyid — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 sTag sna dgon — by sTag sna sprul sku Ngag dbang don yod
 Byang thang *dgon*-s and those of Zangs dkar — by dge bKra shis rdo rje
 Mang spro dgon Thub bstan sha gling chos skor — by Ngor Klu dkyil mkhan po
 'Jam dbyangs bstan pa'i nyi ma
 Gle Jo khang — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 dPe thub dGa' ldan dar rgyas gling — by dge Thub bstan dpal ldan
 dGang sdong dgon bKra shis chos rdzong — by dge dKon mchog nam rgyal
 g.Yung drung Thar pa gling — by dge dKon mchog bkra shis
 Sha wam dgon — by dge rTogs grol
 Shar chu khul Phun tshogs chos gling — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 Klu 'kyil dgon pa dGa' ldan dar rgyas gling — by Ngag dbang rgya mtsho
 Rang gdum bShad sgrub 'Dzam gling rgyan — by Tshe ring bkra shis
 sTong sde dGa' ldam legs bshad gling — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 dKar sha dGa' ldan Byams pa gling — by 'Jam dbyangs rgya l mtshan
 Phug dal dGa' ldan bzang po gling — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 Mu ne Dga' ldan bde skyid gling — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 Lings rnyed dgon pa bKra shis 'od 'bar — by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan
 Ri rdzong dgon pa bShad sgrub gling — by sKyabs rje sras rin po che Thu bstan
 nyi ma
 bSam gtang gling dgon — by sKyabs rje sras rin po che Thu bstan nyi ma
 and few other minor ones, all of them worthy of being discovered by a
 discerning reader.

