

# THU’U BKWAN’S LITERARY ADAPTATIONS OF THE LIFE OF DGONGS PA RAB GSAI

Nicole Willock

Old Dominion University

The story of Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal looms large in Tibetan historiography. In many Tibetan texts,<sup>1</sup> Dgongs pa rab gsal is revered for his pivotal role in preserving and then transmitting the *smad ’dul*, the “lowland” or *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, in eastern Tibet (mdo khams) during a period of religious repression in Dbus Gtsang. Dgongs pa rab gsal’s life story is interesting for many reasons: it bridges historical periods (the division between the Early Diffusion of Buddhism [*bstan pa snga dar*] and the Later Diffusion of Buddhism [*bstan pa phyi dar*]),<sup>2</sup> and geographical space (uniting eastern Tibet with Central Tibet through transmission lineages of the vinaya).<sup>3</sup> Yet, scholars still wrestle with many features of this historical era, sometimes referred to as “rekindling the flame” (*me ro ’bar*), including: a lack of congruence on the dates of ordination transmission of the eastern vinaya monks, locations of ordinations, the dates of Dgongs pa rab gsal’s life as well as other historical figures involved.<sup>4</sup> I do not attempt to

1 Heather Stoddard categorizes two main groups of historical sources according to the time of composition. The earlier group consists of Nyang ral Nyi ma ’Od zer (1124-1192)’s *Chos ’byung me tog snying po’i sbrang rtsi’i bcud*; *Mkhas pa lde’us mdzad pa’i rgya bod kyi chos ’byung rgyas pa* (later than 1261); and the *Lde’u chos ’byung*. The second group of historical sources covers the 14th to 20th century and includes diverse works as follows: *Bu ston chos ’byung* (1322); *Yar lung jo bo’i chos ’byung* (1376); *Deb ther sngon po* [=Blue Annals] (1476-1478); *Rgyal rabs gsal ba’i me long* (1368), trans. Per Sørensen. *The Mirror Illuminating Royal Genealogies* (Wiesbaden 1994); *Bod sog chos ’byung pad dkar phreng mdzas* (1992), by Shing bza’ skal bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan; *Ka thog Tshe dbang nor bu’s Yid kyi me long* (1745); *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston* by Dpa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba (ca. 1566); *Myang chos ’byung* by Tāranātha (1575-1634); *Dpag bsam ljon bzang* (1747) by Sum pa Ye shes dpal ’byor (1704-1788); *Mdo smad chos ’byung* by Brag dgon zhabs drung Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas (1801-1866); *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* [= *Bdud ’joms chos ’byung* by Bdud ’joms Jis bral ye shes rdo rje (1904-1987)] translated by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (2002); and *bZo gnas skra rtse’i chu thigs* (Beijing 1994) by dKon mchog bstan ’dzin (b. 1949); See Heather Stoddard, “Rekindling the Flame: A Note on Royal Patronage in Tenth Century Tibet. The Princely Descendants of Lang Dar Ma, the Six Sog Mo of Khams, the Ten Men of Dbus Gtsang and the Founding of Temples in Central Tibet in 10th and 11th C.,” in *The Relationship Between Religion and State (chos srid zung ’brel) in Traditional Tibet: Proceedings of a Seminar held in Lumbini, Nepal, March 2000*, ed. Christoph Cüpper (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2004), 49-104.

2 The collapse of the Tibetan empire is often pinpointed at Langdarma’s assassination in 842/846; there are also larger discrepancies in dating the birth of Langdarma; cf. Stoddard, *Rekindling the Flame*, 54; Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 85.

3 The beginning of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*) is often marked by the return of the “Ten Men” to Central Tibet, most notably Klu mes, in 978. According to many sources these men reestablished the Sangha or Buddhist community in ca. 978, approximately 64 years before the arrival of Atisha at Bsam yas in 1042; cf. Stoddard, *Rekindling the Flame*, 53-55; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 84-116.

4 Among western Tibetologists Hugh Richardson found it spurious, or in his words “pious fiction,” that Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal could have been both ordained by The Three Great Scholars in the mid-9th

solve this historical puzzle, but rather focus on Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma's (1737-1802) literary adaptations of the life story of Dgongs pa rab gsal. This author penned one of the few *rnam thar*<sup>5</sup> devoted to Bla chen—"the Great Guru". He also wrote on Dgongs pa rab gsal within the *rnam thar* on his teacher, Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje (1717-1786). This essay examines Thu'u bkwan's literary adaptations of a historical narrative on Bla chen. It is divided into three main parts. The first section is devoted to close textual analysis of select passages on the life of Dgongs pa rab gsal in three texts. While establishing *Deb ther sngon po*; hereafter, *The Blue Annals*, as one of the main sources for Thu'u bkwan's biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal, I analyze select biographical details from this text on Bla chen's life, in order to show Thu'u bkwan's adaptations of this historical narrative. In the second section of this essay, I look to the dates of composition of Thu'u bkwan's two texts on Bla chen and propose both were written contemporaneously. Finally, I bring these sections together to argue that although Thu'u bkwan's texts didn't provide new historical information on his proposed subject—Dgongs pa rab gsal, these texts nonetheless reflect a historical moment—that of the author's devotion to his teacher, Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje.

## I. Textual Analysis: Thu'u bkwan's Literary Adaptations

In order to illustrate Thu'u bkwan's adaptations of Bla chen's life story, I compare *Bla chen byang chub sems dpa' dgongs pa rab gsal gyi rnam thar mdo tsam gnam du brjod pa rin po che'i phreng mdzes*;<sup>6</sup> hereafter, *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, and the section on Dgongs pa rab gsal found in *Khyab bdag rdo rje sems dpa'i ngo bo dpal ldan bla ma dam pa ye shes bstan pa'i sgron me dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa mdo tsam brjod pa dge ldan bstan pa'i mdzes rgyan*;<sup>7</sup> hereafter, *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography*, with sections from one of

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century and also responsible for the ordination of the Ten Men from Dbus at the end of the tenth century; Hugh Richardson, "A Tibetan inscription from Rgyal lha-khang; and a Note on Tibetan Chronology from A.D. 841-A.D. 1042," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, 1957.

5 On the topic of Tibetan-language auto/biography, see Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 101-123.

6 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, "Bla chen byang chub sems dpa' dgongs pa rab gsal gyi rnam par thar pa mdo tsam du brjod pa rin po che'i phreng mdzes [=The beautiful bejeweled rosary: an exposition of a brief biography of the great guru, Bodhisattva Dgongs pa rab gsal]," in *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum* [Biographical writings recounting the lives of Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal, Bogdo chagan lama Bkra shis rgya mtsho, and Thu'u-bkwan Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho], vol.1 (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1983), 1-15. See also, Craig Earl Watson, "The Second Propagation of Buddhism from Eastern Tibet According to the *Short Biography of Dgongs-pa Rab-gsal* by the Third Thukvan bLo-bzang chos-kyi nyi-ma (1737-1802), *Central Asiatic Journal* 22, no. 3-4 (1978), 263-285.

7 Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed. *Collected Works of Thu'u-bkwan-blo-bzang-chos-kyi-nyi-ma*, vol. 1, with introduction by E. Gene Smith (New Delhi: Jayyed Press, January 1969), folio 23-33; see also E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 133 and 149-150 and Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje rnam thar* (Lanzhou: Kan s'u mi rigs dpe krun khang, 1989 [Reprint]).

Thu'u bkwan's main historical sources, *The Blue Annals*. I neither attempt to establish a textual genealogy nor do I argue that *The Blue Annals* is the sole Urtext, but rather I aim to prove that *The Blue Annals* was one of Thu'u bkwan's main historical sources for his own compositions. Then I selected two sections from Bla chen's life story for closer analysis: 1) Bla chen's conversion of *the'u rang* spirits at Dan tig and 2) Bla chen's place of death. By comparing these three texts, Thu'u bkwan's significant innovations in his retelling of Dgongs pa rab gsal's life story come into focus. Sometimes, Thu'u bkwan copies and paraphrases his source text; in other sections, he inserts new details elaborating upon the narrative in *The Blue Annals*. The other type of Thu'u bkwan's adaptations may be better described as one of innovation. The author deviates so widely from the historical narrative as to create a new ending for the life story for Dgongs pa rab gsal. In the final section of this essay, I propose some reasons for this creative adaptation.

In order to establish *The Blue Annals* as a blue print for Thu'u bkwan's works, I look both at the biographical details on Bla chen and the framing of the narrative. "Biographical details" refers to events reported to have happened during the life of the historical person, Dgongs pa rab gsal. "Framing of the narrative" constitutes how the biographical details are ordered, developed and presented in the text.<sup>8</sup> Fitting to *The Blue Annals* as a historical genre, the material on Bla chen's life story, in point of fact, does not start with data on Dgongs pa rab gsal, but rather his story is framed within the "roots" (*rtsa ba*) of the history of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism.

*The Blue Annals'* account begins with the Three Great Scholars: G.yo dge 'byung, Dmar Shakyamūni, and gTsang rab gsal, who carried scriptures with them when they fled from their meditation hermitage, Chu bo ri, in order to escape the wrath of the Glang dar ma, a king reported to have persecuted Buddhists in Central Tibet. So at first, Bla chen is not explicitly mentioned in *The Blue Annals*, rather the historical scene of the Later Diffusion of the Dharma is set with the following passage, which is also included in Thu'u bkwan's *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*. *The Blue Annals'* passage is as follows with the text that is also found in Thu'u bkwan's text printed in bold:

bstan pa phyi dar gyi rtsa ba nyid gang yin pa bshad par bya ste| **dar ma** 'U dum  
btsan gyis **bstan pa bsnuvs pa**'i dus su **dpal chu bo ri**'i **sgom grwa na**| g.yor  
stod kyi **dmar ban sha' kya mu ne** dang| drang chung mdo'i **g.yo dge 'byung**  
dang| rgya rab pa'i **gtsangs rab gsal dang**| **gsum gyis karma sha tam la sogs**  
**pa'i 'dul** mgnon gyi **dpe cha dgos rnam** spyen drang nas| dang por stod phyogs  
la bros tes<sup>9</sup>

8 This approach to literary-historical analysis is inspired by both Gerhard Theuerkeuf's approach to hermeneutics of medieval texts and Andrew Quintman's approach to interpretations of Milarepa's biographical corpus; see G. Theuerkauf, *Die Interpretation historischer Quellen: Schwerpunkt: Mittelalter* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991) and Andrew Quintman, *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

9 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. kha (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, Reprint from Kun bde gling bla brang gi par khang, 1974), folio 58; 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984 [Reprint]), 89. This history was composed between 1476-1478, see George Roerich, "Introduction" in *Blue Annals* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Ltd., 1996 [Reprint]), ii.

As to the roots of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism, it should be explained that when Emperor Dar ma 'U dum suppressed the Dharma, the monks of the glorious Chu bo ri: Dmar ban sha' kya mu ne of Upper G.yo; G.yo dge 'byung of Drang chung mdo; Gtsangs rab gsal of Rgya rab pa took the necessities—scriptures of the Vinaya and Abhidharma, such as the *Karmaśataka*, and fled, first of all, to Western Tibet.

The beginning of this historical time period is set with The Three Great Scholars fleeing Central Tibet. We know this is important to Bla chen's life story because Thu'u bkwan copied this section of *The Blue Annals* in his biography on Bla chen, but the framing of the narrative is different. The text from Thu'u bkwan's biography that overlaps with this part of the *The Blue Annals* is shown in bold:

dus de'i tshe na bod du rgyal po glang dar mas **bstan pa bsnubs pas| dpal chu bo ri'i sgom grwa na bzhugs pa dmar ban sha' kya mu ne| g.yo dge 'byung| gtsang rab gsal dang gsum gyis karma sha tam sogs 'dul ba'i dpe cha dgos rnam** bsnams nas...<sup>10</sup>

Thu'u bkwan clearly paraphrased and condensed this part of *The Blue Annals*' narrative in crafting this section of his *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*. With the exception of the first phrase, "At that time in Tibet, the King Glang dar ma," Thu'u bkwan uses the same words found in *The Blue Annals*. Besides minor variances in the name and title of Glang Dar ma/ Dar ma 'U dum, no striking differences stand out here. Clearly *The Blue Annals* is a blueprint for Thu'u bkwan's text. Despite this, the framing of the narratives vary significantly between the two texts. Unlike *The Blue Annals* which started the section on the Later Diffusion of the Dharma (and thus the historical information on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal) with the Three Great Scholars' departure from Central Tibet, Thu'u bkwan did not begin his biography of Bla chen with this information.

*A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* opens with a five stanza eulogy.<sup>11</sup> This praise poem uses epithets, such as the "Dharma-holder of Tibet" (*bod kyi bstan 'dzin*), and elaborate *kāvya* style verse to praise Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal for his deeds. This section, absent from *The Blue Annals*, then concludes with Thu'u bkwan's authorial intention:

bstan pa'i me ro mdo smad nas gsos te bod yul kun tu dar shing rgyas par mdzad pa'i bka' drin can bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal zhes grags pa'i sems dpa' chen po nyid kyi rnam par thar pa mdo tsam 'god par bya ste<sup>12</sup>

I shall compose this condensed biography of the Mahāsattva, famously known as Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal, whose benevolent deeds flamed the embers of the Dharma from Mdo smad to Bod.

10 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 4.

11 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 2-3.

12 Ibid., folio 3.

The author's homage to Bla chen emphasizes his achievements in rekindling the Buddhist doctrine in eastern Tibet and spreading the Dharma through his deeds as a "great being" to Central Tibet. This can be read metaphorically because there is no evidence that Bla chen travelled to Central Tibet to actually spread the Dharma—this was accomplished by his later disciples, but here in Thu'u bkwan's version this is attributed to Bla chen's deeds more directly. In contrast, *The Blue Annals* offers no panegyric in honor of Bla chen, nor does this history elaborate on Bla chen's achievements in terms of bringing the Dharma from eastern Tibet to Central Tibet.

*The Blue Annals'* narrative continues to follow the Three Great Scholars' journey until they finally settled in Mdo smad. Upon arrival in eastern Tibet, they meet a young boy who is considered the reincarnation of a prime minister called 'Bro stag snang khri gsum rje. Upon meeting the Three Great Scholars, the boy requests ordination, and he is given the name Dge ba gsal,<sup>13</sup> a name comprised from the syllables in the names of those who ordained him. After travelling extensively in order to receive various teachings, Dgong pa rab gsal contemplates going into retreat. Then he is invited to the mountain hermitage of Dan tig,<sup>14</sup> which is near his birth place. I now take a break from following the narrative in *The Blue Annals* to take a closer look at this particular passage in *The Blue Annals* as compared with Thu'u bkwan's *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*.

### I.1. Bla chen's Conversion of the *The 'u rang* Spirits at Dan tig<sup>15</sup>

Bla chen's invitation to the mountain hermitage of Dan tig from non-human spirits called *the 'u rang* is found in *The Blue Annals* as well as in Thu'u bkwan's two texts on Dgongs pa rab gsal. This episode tells how the Great Guru is able to teach non-humans about Buddhism, communicating to entities from a lower realm about the Dharma—an almost impossible feat, that serves to demonstrate Bla chen's spiritual power. The passage from *The Blue Annals* reads as follows, with the words also found in Thu'u bkwan's *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* in bold:

**ri dan tig dang nye ba na thi'u rang spun dgu zhes bya ba mi ma yin pa stobs  
dang ldan pa de rnam bla chen po mthong ba dang dad pa skyes te| bdag  
cag gi sa phyogs gang dang gang na dgon po chen po dngos grub brnyes pa  
mang du byung| rtsa ba dang 'bral bu la sogs pa rnyed sla ba der 'byon pa rtsi  
gnang| bdag cag gis kyang khyed kyi grogs dang dge bsnyen du yang byi'o  
zhes zhus pas| gnang nas dan tig du byon no**<sup>16</sup>

Near Mount Dan tig, powerful non-humans known as "the nine mighty th[e]'u rang relatives" saw Bla chen po and were filled with devotion. "Please

13 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984 [Reprint]), 90.

14 Ibid., 91.

15 On The 'u rang class of deities, see Réne De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (Varanasi: Book Faith India, 1996 [Reprint]), 282-283.

16 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal, *Op. cit.*, 91.

come to our region with its retreat hermitages all over, where it is easy to attain the roots and the fruits, and many have attained spiritual accomplishments! Let us be your friends and lay supporters!” Then they went to Dan tig.

As almost the entire Tibetan passage in bold print above indicates, Thu’u bkwan seems to have copied this passage verbatim from *The Blue Annals*. This can also be illustrated by turning to *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, with the words found in *The Blue Annals* in bold:

**[8] ri tan tig dang nye ba na the’u rang spun dgu zhes bya ba mi ma yin stobs  
dang ldan pa de rnams bla chen po mthong ba dang dad pa skyes te| bdag  
cag gis phyogs gang dang na dgon pa chen po dngos grub brnyes pa mang du  
byung| rtsa ba dang ’bras bu la sogs pa rnyed sla ba der ’byon par ci gngang|  
bdag cag gis kyang khyed kyi grogs dang dge bsnyen du yang bgyi’o zhes zhu  
bas| gngang nas dan tig tu byon no|<sup>17</sup>**

With the exception of the alternate spellings of Dan tig/ Tan tig and the spirits known as *thi’u rang/ the’u rang*, Thu’u bkwan copied this section of *The Blue Annals* word for word. This again proves *The Blue Annals* was an important textual source for Thu’u bkwan, but his copying of the text does not show how this polymath adapted the Bla chen story.

In order to see Thu’u bkwan’s adaptations, I turn to his other account of Bla chen included in *Lcang skya Rol pa’i rdo rje’s Biography*. In the section on *skyes rab*, “successive rebirths,” Thu’u bkwan sketches out fourteen previous lives of the Lcang skya lamas and includes Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal as the first in the incarnation lineage. This invention is not found in previous narrations of the successive lives of Lcang skya lamas.<sup>18</sup> From this list of fourteen previous incarnations, Thu’u bkwan wrote three detailed biographies on important previous lives. The first of the three is on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal;<sup>19</sup> the other two are Mar pa Chos kyis blo gros and Gtsang myon He ru ka Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, this section of *Lcang skya Rol pa’i rdo rje’s Biography* contains the above passage on Dan tig (found in both *The Blue Annals* and *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*),<sup>21</sup> but the biography of Lcang skya frames this section of the Bla chen story markedly different. After Thu’u bkwan briefly introduced the text as Lcang skya Rol pa’i rdo rje’s past life as Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal,<sup>22</sup> he began this narrative with Bla chen’s conversion of *the’u rang* spirits. This beginning is unlike *The Blue Annals* which was framed in the historical context of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism and dissimilar from *A Brief Biography of*

17 Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 8.

18 Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 145-146.

19 Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed. *Collected Works*, folio 23-33; and Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa’i rdo rje rnam thar* (Lanzhou: Kan s’u mi rigs dpe krun khang, 1989 [Reprint]), 19-24.

20 Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 135.

21 Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa’i rdo rje rnam thar* (1989), 20.

22 *Ibid.*, 15.

*Dgongs pa rab gsal* which began with a praise poem and authorial intentions. This section of *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography* starts off with:

bla chen tan tig tu bzhugs skabs the'u rang mang po la chos gsungs pas de rnams  
kyis dad pa thobs ste<sup>23</sup>

When Bla chen was residing at [D]an tig, many *the'u rang* listened to Dharma teachings and had faith.

This opening sentence succinctly sums up the more elaborate passage on Dan tig detailed above,<sup>24</sup> and then continues to focus on the connection between Dgongs pa rab gsal and his future incarnations:

ma 'ongs pa'i du su mdo smad kyi ljongs 'dir chos sde che chung du mar gtsug lag  
khang la gser thob g.yu thog 'gel| dge ba bshes gnyen mang pos mdo sngags kyi  
bshad nyan byed cing sang rgyas kyi bstan pa la bya ba byed par smon lam btab|  
the'u rang gcig ci byas kyang dad pa ma thob par de lta bu'i dus su rgyal phran  
zhig tu skyes nas gtsug lag khang rnam bsregs cing bshigs| dge 'dun rnams bskrad|  
dam pa du ma bkrong ba sogs bstan la gnod pa byed pa'i log pa'i smon lam btab|  
bla chen gyis de lta bu'i dus su dge ba'i bshes gnyen zhig tu gyur nas rgyal phran  
des bstan pa bsnuks pa slar yang gong 'phel du gtor ba'i thugs bskyed dang smon  
lam rgya chen po mdzad do| dus phyis rgya'i dmag dpon nyen gung gis mdo smad  
kyi dgon sde rnams bshigs pa rje bla ma ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho'i bka  
drin las gong ma chen pos slar yang gso bar mdzad na'ng<sup>25</sup>

At a time in the future, in the territory of Mdo smad, gold and turquoise roofs were placed on temples of small and large monastic communities. And prayer aspirations were made for many *geshe* to explain sutra and tantra and for the teachings of the Buddha to spread. One *the'u rang*, no matter what, would not have faith and made negative aspirations; and so was reborn in a kingdom, where he razed temples to the ground, expelled all the monks and destroyed the teachings, of whatever faithful were left standing. Then Bla chen made great prayer aspirations and mind-generations to become a *geshe* in that kingdom at that time and to reverse the growing destruction of the Dharma. In those days, the Chinese General Nyen Gung [< Chi. Nian Gengyao] destroyed many monasteries in Mdo smad. Then by dint of the emperor's kindness, even greater than that of [the Second Thu'u bkwan] Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho, the temples were once again repaired.

This passage, absent from *A Brief Biography on Dgongs pa rab gsal*, is an overt reference to the destruction of the author's own monastery, Dgon lung, in 1724, when Nyen Gung, that is the Chinese General Nian Gengyao mentioned above, led his troops in retaliation against local allegiances to the anti-Manchu, Khoshud Mongol leader, Lubsangdanjin (Tib. Bstan 'dzin

23 See also Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed. *Collected Works*, folio 23-24.

24 See above notes 16 and 17.

25 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje rnam thar*, 15-16; Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed. *Collected Works*, folio 23-24.

ching wang, 1692-1759).<sup>26</sup> Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho (1680 -1736) can be identified as the author's previous incarnation, the Second Thu'u bkwan. The emperor referred to here seems to be Yongzheng (reigned 1722-1735), because he reigned during the life time of Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho. In *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography*, Thu'u bkwan drew further connections between Bla chen and Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje, on one hand, and the wayward *the'u rang* and Nian Gengyao, on the other:

da lta'i bar thabs mkhas kyi mdzad pa rgya chen pos yun ring du bskyangs te chos srid gnyis char nas n.ya gro dha'i ljong pa bzhin du rgyas par byed pa po ni rje btsun bla ma dam pa 'di nyid yin pas na| log pa'i smon lam 'debs mkhan ni nyen gung dang gzhan rnam des bkrong ba'i bla ma 'ga' zhid dang bla chen ni rje btsun dam pa 'di nyid yin no zhes phyogs 'di'i bstan 'gro'i dpal mgon du gyur pa'i dam pa mang po zhid zhal mthun par gleng ba thos so<sup>27</sup>

Until this day, the act of *upaya*, skill in means, has been maintained for a very long time; the one, who propagated the combination of the secular and the religious like a grove of fig trees, is the honorable holy lama himself [i.e. Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje]. And because of this, it is so discussed and agreed upon that the person who planted perverted intentions is Nyen gung [=Nian Gengyao], and he is the one who killed lamas, etc.; and that Bla chen is this holy lama [Lcang skya] and as such he is protector of the teachings and all sentient beings.

Thu'u bkwan ascertained that the wayward *the'u rang* was reincarnated as the Qing general Nian Gengyao, the man responsible for the destruction of Dgon lung Monastery in 1724 and Bla chen's reincarnation is Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje, Thu'u bkwan's teacher and the subject of this biography. In creating this narrative, Thu'u bkwan added to the information in *The Blue Annals* and his own text, *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, which had the skeletal story of Bla chen's conversion of *the'u rang* siblings to protectors of Buddhism. It remains unclear whether Thu'u bkwan created this idea for this narrative or if these past life connections were based upon popular lore as he stated that these were "...discussed and agreed upon."

## I.2. Bla chen's Death

The second section that I selected for close textual analysis in order to show Thu'u bkwan's literary adaptations of the Bla chen narrative concerns the site of Bla chen's death. The narration of this important part of Bla chen's life story is found in *The Blue Annals* and Thu'u bkwan's two texts: the biography on Dgongs pa rab gsal and the passage on Bla chen within the Lcang skya biography. Before proceeding forward, I should mention that I will not analyze the section of

26 See Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 136; on the rebellion, see also Paul Nietupski, *Labrang Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709-1958* (Lanham: Lexington Books, a division of Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 9.

27 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje rnam thar*, 16; Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed. *Collected Works*, folio 24.



these texts that deal with Bla chen's role in the further transmission of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* ordination lineage as this has been the focus of other scholarship.<sup>28</sup> While deserving of further research, this is not the focus of this work. Here I have selected passages where Thu'u bkwan's adaptations of the Bla chen biography are evident. One of Thu'u bkwan's most interesting literary innovations concerns the location of Bla chen's death at Dmar gtsang.

In *The Blue Annals'* version, Bla chen passes away at Dan tig at the age of eighty-four in the wood-female-boar year [975/6 C.E.], after residing there for 35 years. Here I provide *The Blue Annals'* text with words highlighted in bold that are also found in *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*. *The Blue Annals* states:

**|'khor rnams** kyis zhus pa| **mdang** snang ba 'di lta bu **snang bas| bla chen po**  
de ni **nges par sprul pa lags sam zhus pas|** lan du| **sprul pa ma yin gyi| bdag**  
**ni theg pa chen po la zhugs pa'i sbyor ba'i lam pa snang ba thob pa la zhugs**  
**pa'i ban de dge ba gsal yin zhes gsungs so| yang skabs gzhan du| dang po bud**  
**med sog 'tshong ma| bar du stag sna khri sum rje| tha ma mu zu dge ba gsal|**  
**zhes** kyang gsung so| de lta bla chen pos lo bzhi bcu rtsa dgu la dan tig tu byon|  
lo gsum cu rtsa lnga dan tig tu bzhus **brgyad cu rtsa bzhi pa shing mo phag gi**  
**lo** la dga' ldan du gshegs| shing phag 'di bstan pa bsnubs pa'i lcags bya nas bdun  
cu rtsa lnga pa yin|<sup>29</sup>

His disciples asked, "Last night, did you manifest such an illumination? Bla chen, you really are an emanation, aren't you?"

He answered, "I am not an emanation; I am the *bande Dge ba gsal*, I have practiced The Culmination of Light (*snang ba thob pa*; [*< Skt. ālokapalabdhi*]),<sup>30</sup> the Path of Application in the Mahayana." On another occasion [he stated], "At first I was a female garlic seller, then I was Khri sum rje, and now I am Mu zu dge ba gsal." Bla chen was forty-nine years old when he went to Dan tig. He resided there thirty-five years and passed into Tushita Heaven when he was eighty-four in the female wood-boar year. This wood-boar year was the seventy-fifth year after the destruction of the Dharma in the iron-bird year [841/2 C.E.].

This passage from *The Blue Annals* provides evidence of Bla chen's spiritual achievements, demonstrates that Bla chen had a following of disciples, and places his death at Dan tig Monastery.

Thu'u bkwan's *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* follows this section of *The Blue Annals* in some aspects and simultaneously creates a new ending to Bla chen's life story. Thu'u bkwan paraphrased and condensed the content that concerns demonstrations of Bla chen's spiritual achievements, such as his extraordinary abilities to recall past lives and to manifest light. On the other hand, Thu'u bkwan deviated from the source text and inserted a lengthy passage on Bla chen's death at Dmar gtsang, not at Dan tig. He provided elaborate explanations

28 For example: Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*; Watson, "The Second Propagation," 264-265; Stoddard, "Rekindling the Flame;" Richardson, "Tibetan Inscription," all cited above.

29 'Gos lo gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, 93.

30 This seems to be the third stage in the tantric practice of the three stages of the illumination of light. See Jamgon Taye, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four: Systems of Buddhist Tantra* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2005); chapter 14, note 1, 486-487.

on Dmar gtsang Temple and other sites along the river valley, perhaps reiterating local legends, that are completely absent in *The Blue Annals*. The following is the corresponding passage in *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* with text the overlaps with *The Blue Annals* in bold:

[10]phyi nyin 'khor rnam kyis **mdang** ya mtshan pa'i **snang ba 'di lta bu** mthong bas **bla chen po nyid nges par sprul pa lags sam zhus pas| sprul pa ma yin gyi| bdag ni theg pa chen po la zhugs pa'i sbyor ba'i lam pa snang ba thob pa la zhugs pa'i bande dge ba gsal yin zhes gsung| yang skabs gzhan du| dang po bud med sgog 'tshong ma| bar du stag sna khri sum rje|da lta mu zu dge ba gsal zhes** bya ba'i skyes rabs kyang gsungs so|| mkhas pa mi gsum ni re zhig gi bar dan tig tu bzhugs nas sku tshe'i smad du dmar dang gtsang gynis tsong chu chen po'i 'gram gyi ri brag dmar po zhig la khang su brkos te bzhugs pa| ri de la dmar gtsang brag ces grags sang der chags pa'i grong ba'i ming la yang dmar gtsang zhes bod do| |g.yo dge 'byung de dad thag mi rang ba zhig tu bzhugs pas lung pa de la g.yo dge lung pa zhes grags ba deng sang zur chags pas dbyi dge lung pa zer ro| mthar gsum ka da lta'i zi ling mkhar yod pa'i gnas 'dir phebs nas sku mya ngan las 'das pa'i gdung la mchod rten bzhengs pa physis tu rgya mkhar gyi nang du tshud pas bsnyen bkur sogs ma byung bas sa 'bum tsam du gyur ba dus physis kyi bar du yod zer ro| bla chen kyang sku che'i smad du dmar gtsang du byon| [11] der gtsug lag khang dang rten mang du bzhengs| brag la brkos pa'i khang bu zhig tu bzhugs nas dgung **lo brgyad cu rtsa bzhi pa shing mo phag gyi lo** mya ngan las 'das so<sup>31</sup>

The next day, his disciples witnessed an amazing light like that of the night before and then asked, “Bla chen, you really are an emanation, aren't you?”

“I am not an emanation; I am the *bande Dge ba gsal*, I have practiced the Culmination of Light, the Path of Application in the Mahayana.” Furthermore on another occasion, he spoke about his series of past lives, “At first I was a female garlic seller, then I was Khri sum rje, and now I am Mu zu dge ba gsal.”

The Three Great Scholars resided at Dan tig for a while, and towards the end of their lives, Dmar and Gtsang stayed in a room carved out of the red sandstone cliff that was near the Greater Tsong River [*< Chi. Huangshuai River*]. This crag was called Dmar gtsang Cliff and today the villagers here carry the name “Dmar gtsang”. G.yo dge 'byung dwelled not too far from there; the name of this valley having been corrupted is [now] called Dbyi dge Valley.

In the end, all three went to a place in what is now called Zi ling, where they passed away and where a reliquary shrine (*sku gdung*) was erected. Later this was contained within the Chinese citadel, and it was not venerated, but then became a clay stupa (*sa 'bum*), which remains there today. Bla chen at the end of his life also went to Dmar gtsang and built a shrine room and many religious objects, and remained alone in the room carved out of the red cliff; he passed away when he was eighty-four in the female wood-boar year.

This account provides a rich description of some of the most famous Buddhist sites along the Huangshui River valley, which is inserted between passages on Bla chen's spiritual achievements

31 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 10-11.

and death taken from *The Blue Annals*. Despite this overlap with *The Blue Annals*, this section marks a considerable deviation from the source text which does not even mention Dmar gtsang Temple, much less this site as Bla chen's place of death.

Dmar gtsang Temple, named after two of the Three Great Scholars: Dmar Shakyamūni and Gtsang rab gsal, was a branch of Thu'u bkwan's Dgon lung Monastery for a period of time; it is known in Chinese as Baimasi (in today's Huzhu County, Qinghai Province).<sup>32</sup> In another section of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, Thu'u bkwan drew attention to the spiritual efficacy of Bla chen's reliquary statue housed there. This statue was said to contain the "pure remains" of Bla chen, as well as to speak and change colors according to the deeds of people at the time—black in times of war, and luminescent white in times of prosperity. "All of these miracles appear palpably today (thams cad khyab pa sogs kyi ya mtshan da lta'i bar du dngos su snang ngo)," wrote Thu'u bkwan.<sup>33</sup> Dmar gtsang as the site of Bla chen's death is an innovation that I couldn't find in any other texts on Dgongs pa rab gsal. Before presenting my hypotheses on the reasons for Thu'u bkwan's adaptation of Bla chen's life story, it is first important to establish the composition dates for Thu'u bkwan's two texts on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal.

## II. The Dating of Thu'u bkwan's texts on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal

In order to understand the possible reasons for Thu'u bkwan's adaptations and elaborations of the Bla chen narrative, it is important to look at the dates of composition for his texts. The composition date for *Bla chen byang chub sems dpa' dgongs pa rab gsal gyi rnam thar mdo tsam gnam du brjod pa rin po che'i phreng mdzes*; referred to as *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* above, remains unclear. Based on both internal textual evidence and external biographical details on Thu'u bkwan, the text was likely written after 1763 and likely before 1794.<sup>34</sup> This can be narrowed down further to two time periods either between 1768 and 1771 or between 1792 and 1794; the latter date is contemporaneous with his biography of Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje and I believe the most likely time period. This wide-range of possible composition dates is based on information in the colophon of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*:

rang gis kyang dad pas mtshams sbyar la brten nas 'jam dbyangs gong ma chen  
po'i lung gis jing zi'u chen zhi zhes nam dag bslab ldan bsam gtan slob dpon du  
bsngags pa sha' kya'i btsun pa blo bzang cho kyi nyi mas bshad sgrub bstan pa'i  
'byung gnas chos sde chen po dgon lung byams pa gling gi bla brang bkra shis

32 Pu Wencheng, *Gan Ging Zangchuan Fojiao Siyuan* (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1990), 78-79.

33 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 11-12.

34 Gene Smith remarked that *Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* was likely composed before Thu'u bkwan's biography of Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje which was composed between 1792 and 1794; *Among Tibetan Texts*, 133, 308, note 483. Yet he does not give reasons for this. The biography of Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje was composed between 1792 and 1794; *Among Tibetan Texts*, 133.

'od 'bar du sbyar ba'i yi ge pa ni Or du su dbyod ldan dge slong ngag dbang bstan 'phel gyis bgyis pa dge legs su gyur cig<sup>35</sup>

So be it that I, Buddhist monk, Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, extolled as “*jing zi'u chan zhi*” (< Chi. jingxiu chanshi 静修禅师)—a meditation master with pure practice—by means of a directive from the great Manjughosa Emperor, compose this with faith and that the monk, Ngag dbang bstan 'phel, copy this at Bla brang Bkra shis 'od bar of Dgon lung byam pa gling, the major teaching center, the origin of teachings of explanation and practice!

The Manjughosa Emperor refers to Emperor Qianlong (b. 1711), who passed away in 1799, which indicates that this biography was written during the reign of Qianlong (reigned, 1735-1798/9). Furthermore, Thu'u bkwan mentioned that Qianlong granted him the title “*jing zi'u chan zhi*.” I read this as the Tibetan transcription of the Chinese *jingxiu chanshi* (静修禅师), a title that had been awarded to the Second Thu'u bkwan Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho by Emperor Kangxi in 1720.<sup>36</sup> It remains unclear as to when this title was granted to the Third Thu'u bkwan because he could have inherited this from his predecessor upon recognition as the Third Thu'u bkwan or this title could have been reinstated to him by the Emperor Qianlong when he was older. In the biographies available to me, Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma was summoned to Beijing for the first time in 1763, where he was bestowed titles and resided at the Yellow Temple.<sup>37</sup> It seems likely that the titles of his predecessor could have been reinstated at this time. If that is the case, this text would have had to be written after 1763 and before 1799, the year of Emperor Qianlong's death. Finally, the colophon also states that the Third Thu'u bkwan completed *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* while at Dgon lung Monastery. As the Third Thu'u bkwan travelled to and from his home monastery at Dgon lung frequently, it is difficult to determine the exact time period that this text was written. However, he spent some time in retreat at Dgon lung over a three year period between 1768 and 1771 and then he returned again to Beijing. He travelled extensively over the next ten years, taking over as 35th abbot of Kumbum Monastery between 1789 and 1792/3.<sup>38</sup> The next extensive period at Dgon lung Monastery was when he wrote the biography of Lcang skya. In sum, the composition dates of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* remain unknown, but further comparison with the colophon of *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography* may shed some light on this.

35 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 15.

36 Pu Wencheng, *Qinghai fojiao shi* [=History of Buddhism in Qinghai] (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 2001), 251.

37 See Jackson, *Crystal Mirror*, 5; Pu, *Qinghai fojiaoshi*, 251; and Danzhu Anben, ed. *Zangzu dacidian* (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2003), 77.

38 Nor brang o rgyan, “Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma,” In Nor brang o rgyan gyi gsung rtsom phyogs bsdu (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang; Gansu Nationality Press Editorial Staff, 2006) 673-676; See also “Tshom pa po mtshams sbyor mdo bsdu” [A brief introduction to the author, Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma] in Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje rnam thar* (Lanzhou: Kan s'u mi rigs dpe krun khang, 1989), 1-2.

The dates of composition for *Khyab bdag rdo rje sems dpa'i ngo bo dpal ldan bla ma dam pa ye shes bstan pa'i sgron me dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa mdo tsam brjod pa dge ldan bstan pa'i mdzes rgyan*; that is *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography*, are clearly laid out in the colophon. The composition began in the summer of the male water-mouse year (1792/3)<sup>39</sup> at the requests of Har chin wang Ratnasiddhi and the abbot of Dgon lung, Wang zhabs drung rin po che Skal bzang ye shes dar rgyas.<sup>40</sup> The composition was delayed due to Thu'u bkwan's other engagements, but was completed in the male wood-tiger year (1794/5).<sup>41</sup> The names of several sponsors are provided in the colophon and it mentions that the humble student, Thu'u bkwan, was appointed to compose this work. Thu'u bkwan is styled with the same title as in the colophon of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*: 'Jam dbyangs gong ma'i lung gis jing zi'u chan zhi thu'u bkwan hu thog thu. Finally, the colophon states that it was written at Dgon lung Monastery's bla brang called Bkra shis 'od 'bar and the copyist (*drung yig*) was the monk, Ngag dbang bstan 'phel.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, according to the colophon of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, the copyist for this text was also named, Ngag dbang bstan 'phel.<sup>43</sup> Although Gene Smith remarked that *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* was likely composed before Thu'u bkwan's biography of *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje*,<sup>44</sup> the commonalities in Thu'u bkwan's titles, the names for the copyist and place of composition as well as content lead me to think that these two texts were composed roughly contemporaneously.

### III. Suppositions on Thu'u bkwan's Literary Adaptations

This essay has established that Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma adapted biographical details on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal found in *The Blue Annals* through copying, paraphrasing and adding new information in his composition of *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*. Thu'u bkwan also elaborated on ideas found in these two texts in his writing of the *skye rabs* in *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography*. In considering Thu'u bkwan's literary adaptations of the narrative on Bla chen Dgongs pa rab gsal, one striking innovation stands out—the establishment of a past life connection between Bla chen and Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje. In linking the life of Bla chen with that of Lcang skya, Thu'u bkwan brings the past to the time of writing. In doing so, the author can praise his teacher with accomplishments that are similar to those of Lcang skya's previous incarnation as Bla chen, especially in his ability to “rekindle the embers” of Buddhism and to spread Buddhist teachings far and wide. Ultimately, Thu'u bkwan's teacher, Lcang skya

39 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya'i rnam thar*, 772.

40 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya'i rnam thar*, 771; See also Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 133.

41 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya'i rnam thar*, 772.

42 Ibid., 773.

43 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 15.

44 Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 133, 308, note 483.

*hutuktu*, triumphed over the rogue *the'u rang*, General Nian Gengyao, who despite his egregious offenses against Buddhism did not succeed with his destructive plans. Dgon lung Monastery was rebuilt and the flames of the Dharma rekindled due to Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje's magnanimous spiritual power to overcome the *the'u rang*. This hyperbolic rhetoric serves to praise the author's teacher in the highest possible way.

Thu'u bkwan's other main literary innovation—Bla chen's death at Dmar gtsang—at first may seem unrelated to the theme of praising Lcang skya's ability to rekindle the Dharma; yet upon further examination, there is some textual evidence to support such an interpretation. As mentioned above, the reasons for Thu'u bkwan's innovation of Dmar gtsang as the site of Bla chen's death, at first, are not completely transparent. One possible interpretation is to satisfy his requesters. The colophon to *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* stated that Thu'u bkwan wrote this piece out of faith and that the requesters of this text included the local leader of Dmar gtsang, lamas and lay people, as well as the caretaker (*dkon gnyer*) of the reliquary statue at Dmar gtsang.<sup>45</sup> So perhaps, Thu'u bkwan emphasized Dmar gtsang as Bla chen's place of death for their benefit—to show the import of this site in Buddhist history or to honor them. Yet there may be another reason for the importance of Dmar gtsang. Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma's first reading teacher was likely from Dmar gtsang because his name was Dmar gtsang Dpon chung blo bzang chos 'dzin,<sup>46</sup> and as Thu'u bkwan's *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal* pointed out above the people living around Dmar gtsang Temple carry the name 'Dmar gtsang'.

I could not locate further biographical information on this teacher, but an interesting passage in *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography* likely refers to this person. In this text, Dmar gtsang nang so Dbon chung blo bzang chos 'dzin had pleaded to the young Lcang skya to ask for clemency for a few of the *nang so*<sup>47</sup> of the thirteen monastic establishments (Tib. *zi yon* < Chi. *si yuan* 寺院)<sup>48</sup> of Mdo smad, who had been imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1724 rebellion. Before leaving for Beijing, the young Lcang skya took it upon himself to raise this issue with the general (Tib. *cang jun* < Chi. *jiangjun* 将军) and he was able to secure their release before arriving in the capital.<sup>49</sup> This same Dmar gtsang Dbon chung blo bzang chos 'dzin could have been the Third Thu'u bkwan's first reading teacher, although he would have been elderly when appointed

45 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma wrote: *spyin bdag dmar gtsang dbon po ser skya rnams dang gzhan yang don gnyer pa mang pos yang yang bskul pa dangl rang gis kyang dad pas mtshams sbyar ba la*, in *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal sogs kyi rnam thar khag gsum*, folio 15.

46 Nor brang o rgyan, "Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma," 673; See also "Tshom pa po mtshams sbyor mdo bsdu" in Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje rnam thar*, 1.

47 See Gray Tuttle, "An Overview of Amdo (Northeastern Tibet) Historical Polities" *Tibetan Himalayan Library* as of January 6, 2015; See <http://www.thlib.org/places/polities/>

48 See also Elliot Sperling, "Notes on the Early History of Gro-tshang Rdo-rje-'chang and its Relations with the Ming Court" in *Lungta: Aspects of Tibetan History*, Vol. 14, R. Vitali ed. (Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, Spring 2001), 82.

49 Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Lcang skya'i rnam thar*, 86-87.

to this position.<sup>50</sup> This short passage in *Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje's Biography* describes a moment where Thu'u bkwan's two teachers met and where Lcang skya successfully gained the release of lamas, who had been imprisoned, thereby rekindling the embers of the Dharma—a quality that he shared with Bla chen. Although the reasons for Thu'u bkwan's innovative move to locate Bla chen's death at Dmar gtsang may have been his penning of local lore, this textual evidence supports the possible interpretation that Dmar gtsang is associated strongly with Thu'u bkwan's teacher and that magnanimous ability to support Buddhist teachings.

In sum, although Thu'u bkwan's writings did not succeed in providing new information on the historical figure of Dgongs pa rab gsal, close textual analysis of his texts brings to light Thu'u bkwan's literary adaptations of a historical narrative. Thu'u bkwan's innovative retelling of Bla chen's life, therefore, reflects an important historical moment, one in which he lauds his teacher's many accomplishments.

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50 Another possibility is that this “Dmar gtsang nang so” was the same as the requester, “Dmar gtsang dpon po,” but this doesn't seem likely due to the fact that this text was written a few years after Lcang skya's death, and thus possibly long after Dmar gtsang Dbon chung blo bzang chos 'dzin's passing (who must have been at least 15 years older than Lcang skya). Therefore, it seems improbable that the requester, Dmar gtsang dpon po mentioned in the colophon to *A Brief Biography of Dgongs pa rab gsal*, is the same as Dmar gtsang Dbon chung blo bzang chos 'dzin. Until further information comes to light, this can't be ruled out entirely because the colophon didn't state when this request was made.