


A Post-Incarnate Usurper? Inheritance at the Dawn of Catenate Reincarnation in Tibet

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 Prior to the earliest institutional reincarnates like the Karmapas, Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang (archaic: Myang) *ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–92) relied on the recollection of an unbroken sequence or catenate series of preincarnations as the karmic basis for his recovery of the treasures (*gter*). In contrast to the later treasure tradition, these were uniformly material texts and relics in twelfth-century Tibet.¹ As a scion of the ancient Nyang clan and the first documented claimant to the reincarnation of emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri Srong lde btsan, d. ca. 800), Nyangrel was heir to orally transmitted lineages of tantric praxis as well as those treasures that were only recently recovered. As the end of his life approached, he explicitly entrusted the continuity of both legacies to his son, Namkhapel (Nam mkha' dpal, d. 1235?), who subsequently passed them to his son, Ngadak Loden Sherab (Mnga' bdag blo ldan shes rabs, thirteenth century)² as had been done for generations of Nyang clan adepts.

And yet despite this clear line of transmission, Guru Chöwang (Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212–70) appears to have positioned himself as an heir to that inheritance. By declaring that he was none other than the reincarnation of Nyangrel himself, he challenged the singular authority of Nyangrel's descendants and instigated what may be the earliest confrontation between patrilineal and reincarnate inheritance in Tibet. This article considers the ways in which Guru Chöwang constructed his claim through the remembrance of his and Nyangrel's shared preincarnations, his displacement of Nyangrel in

¹ See Hirshberg 2016, chapter 3.

² For a short biography of Mnga' bdag blo ldan shes rabs, see "*Ngo mtshar grub thob kyi rnam thar*" in *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor* I (Dalhousie: Damchöe Sangpo, 1977), 89–94. This text contains short biographies for the eight successive abbots of Smra'o lcos after Nam mkha' dpal.

prophecies concerning the coming of an enlightened treasure revealer, and through devising a typology of *tulku* that reassured him of his rebirth as Nyangrel. In conclusion, I will attempt to discern the effects of Guru Chöwang's claim on the patrilineal inheritance of Nyang.

1. *Introducing a Series, and Molding It to Prophecy*

Guru Chöwang was an important disciple of Nyangrel's second son and chosen heir, Namkhapel, who likely died when Guru Chöwang was in his twenties. Perhaps not long after the death of Namkhapel, Guru Chöwang laid claim to a share of the Nyang clan's prestige by identifying himself as Nyangrel's reincarnation, which foremost relied upon his recollection of the precise sequence and details of their former lifetimes. In producing a series of short preincarnation narratives for the *Eight Pronouncements* (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*), Guru Chöwang filled in the details for the lives that appear to have been merely suggested, framed, or enumerated by Nyangrel. While Nyangrel repeatedly states that he remembered a finite sequence of fifteen or sixteen preincarnations in the biographies of his life, nowhere within them does he name or describe any except emperor Tri Songdetsen.³ Nyangrel was therefore among the first Tibetans to introduce catenate reincarnation and recall his past lives as a chronological series of incarnations in real historical time, but the actual narratives for those preincarnations were developed by Guru Chöwang and independently inserted into both of Nyangrel's biographies in later centuries.

Since Guru Chöwang's legitimacy rested on his status as Nyangrel's reincarnation, the narration of their shared preincarnations would indeed be compelling evidence in support of this claim,⁴ which leads to the main questions of this article: in this period just before catenate reincarnation gained greater prominence

³ Fifteen preincarnations are asserted throughout the *Stainless Proclamations*, whereas sixteen are asserted throughout the *Clear Mirror*. These tallies reflect the total number of preincarnation narratives that immediately precede the primary biographies of Nyangrel in each text. Given the unequivocal prophecy in all recensions of Nyangrel's *Copper Island* biography of Padmasambhava that the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen would be the enlightened treasure revealer, Nyangrel was equally unequivocal in his claim to sixteen preincarnations as counted in the *Clear Mirror*. The primary biography of the *Stainless Proclamations* was manipulated to correspond to the number of available preincarnation narratives in Guru Chöwang's *Eight Pronouncements*, which was the source for those narratives. See Hirshberg 2016, 64–70.

⁴ This introductory paragraph is adapted from Hirshberg 2016, 63.

in Tibet, what were Guru Chöwang's objectives in self-identifying as Nyangrel's reincarnation, and how did he support that claim? Guru Chöwang's biographical materials offer as validation a visionary encounter with Padmasambhava, the eighth-century tantrika invited by Tri Songdetsen to help establish Buddhism in Tibet, where their exchange functions as a mnemonic for the recollection of his past lives, and the authentication of his reincarnate status as well.

To begin the *Eight Pronouncements*, Guru Chöwang identifies himself in the first-person and proceeds to recount how he came to remember his preincarnations. When practicing in solitary retreat during the fire monkey year of 1236–37, Guru Chöwang beheld a magical appearance (*sprul snang*) of Padmasambhava surrounded by a retinue of maṇḍala deities.⁵ From the center of this wondrous display, Padmasambhava briefly describes Guru Chöwang's first four preincarnations but compels him to remember the rest on his own. Guru Chöwang then gazes into a white silver mirror and perceives an additional thirteen preincarnations that he initially describes with formulaic couplets that name little more than the preincarnation and his parents (as will be discussed in greater detail below, all are male).

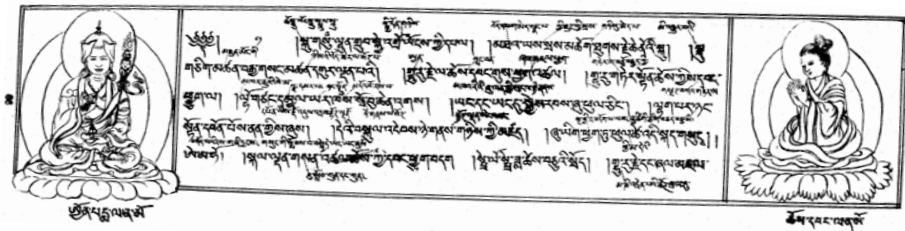


Figure 1 – Guru Chöwang (in *añjali*, at right) supplicating Padmasambhava on the first folio (*verso*) of the *Eight Pronouncements* (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 66).

After discerning these basic details in the mirror and thereby producing a slightly annotated list in the text, Guru Chöwang proceeds to dictate a short biography for each preincarnation just catoptrically divined. Emperor Tri Songdetsen is referenced only by his imperial title, *btsan po* in the initial series and *btsad po* in the narratives (hence the brackets in Table 1 below), but his activities and associates in the narrative definitively identify him as the renowned eighth-century emperor. Betraying the first of many issues in the textual transmission of this sequence, Tri Songdetsen is the first

⁵ *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 66.5 only includes the animal component of the year (*spre*), but *Skabs brgyad ma* includes the element as well (*me spre'u*, 30.5), thereby specifying that this vision occurred in the fire monkey year of 1236–37.

incarnation to be narrated but not the first to be enumerated: it is only after the first four incarnations in the initial series that enumeration begins. The “first” incarnation is actually the fifth to be named, and only those recollected by Guru Chöwang, which exclude Tri Songdetsen, are enumerated in the proceeding narratives, whereas those described by Padmasambhava are not counted in either set.

Incarnations and their Enumerations initiating *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*

	Initial Series	Proceeding Narratives
	┌ Brother in Magadha	Brother in Magadha
Dictated by Padmasambhava	Btsan po [Khri srong lde btsan] 'Od mtha' yas Ral pa can	Btsad po [Khri srong lde btsan]
	┌	
	1. Chos ldan So gar rigs byed mkhan U bhi mkhan po Dharma ra dza U dur pha la E snang 'od	1. Chos ldan 2. So la garba 3. U bhi sa 'dzin 4. Dharma ra dza 5. U dur pha la 6. E snang 'od
Divined by Guru Chos dbang while gazing into a mirror	Bsod nams rin 'byung A dha ri bhi Sho dha ra ka Dha ri ka sha Sing nga Rje rigs pu rna tri Nyi ma'i 'od zer Gu ru chos dbang	7. Bsod nams rin 'byung 8. Ya dha ri bhe 9. Sho dha ra ka 10. Dha ri mu ka/kha sha 11. Sing nga śri 12. Rje'u rigs pu rna kri 13. Nyi ma'i 'od zer 14. Gu ru chos dbang
	└	
	Tallied as 17 total (3+14)	

Table 1 – First lists of incarnations presented in Guru Chöwang's Eight Pronouncements

This idiosyncratic schema results in Guru Chöwang enumerating his fifth incarnation as the first, his sixth as the second, and so on, even though the final tally counts all but one of his preincarnations together. Thus excluded, the very first preincarnation, one of the three brothers from “Maguta” (Magadha) who built the Jarung Khashor stupa (*Mchod rten bya rung kha shor*) at what is now Boudhanath in the Kathmandu valley, appears to be the sole preincarnation to Guru Chöwang's preincarnations; although there are seventeen total preincarnations named in the initial series, only sixteen are tallied in the sum. This lifetime was most likely inserted later in order to align with what became the standard karmic pretext

for the preincarnations of Tri Songdetsen, Padmasambhava, and Śāntarakṣita,⁶ but his exclusion from the sum in the *Eight Pronouncements* may also represent an attempt to cohere with a crucial aspect of treasure prophecy. Forged by Nyangrel in what would become renowned as his *Copper Island Biography* of Padmasambhava (*Rnam thar zangs gling ma*), it states that the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen would be the enlightened treasure revealer.⁷ If the brother from Magadha is counted, Guru Chöwang would be the eighteenth incarnation, thereby forfeiting the prestige of the seventeenth to Nyangrel. This preincarnation to his preincarnations was apparently introduced later along the recensional process by someone unaware of this prophecy, as well as the critical importance of Guru Chöwang's adherence to its terms. As we shall see, Guru Chöwang himself seems to have been unaware of it as well, at least initially.

Well after Guru Chöwang's first dialogue with Padmasambhava in the *Eight Pronouncements*, his gazing into the mirror to discern the basic biodata of his preincarnations, and his subsequent first-person narration of them, there is another exchange where Padmasambhava enumerates the thirteen preincarnations that had been glimpsed by Guru Chöwang in the mirror previously. In this distinct section, Padmasambhava relies on formulaic couplets that repeatedly state, "When you were born as [name] in your [ordinal number] birth, I, Orgyen Padmasambhava, was [name/title/occupation]."⁸ Since the vision of Padmasambhava in the *Eight Pronouncements* is framed as a single encounter that occurred in 1236–37, this content is dissonant because Padmasambhava now tells Guru Chöwang about the very births he had previously compelled him to recall on his own. While this may function quite effectively as the corroboration of an enlightened witness, no reference to the original episode is made, and instead it appears redundant. The question and its reply occur in a narrative vacuum, unprecedented and distinct from any other content in the *Eight Pronouncements*. It thus appears to be a variant of

⁶ A later version of this narrative defines a fifteenth-century treasure, which is said to have been revealed in the thirteenth century (for a translation see Dowman 1973), but an ancestor of the karmic connection shared between these three individuals may be attested in the *Testimony of Ba (Dba' bzhed)*. Shortly after arriving in Tibet, Śāntarakṣita reminds Tri Songdetsen that they guarded a temple together in the time of a previous Buddha (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 45–46), which prefigures their construction of Samyé Monastery with the aid of Padmasambhava.

⁷ *Zangs gling ma* H, 79b2–4. *Zangs gling ma* A, 134 corresponds to the translation in Kunsang 1993, 136. Also, see *Me tog snying po* K, 352.1–5; M, 254.3.4–6.

⁸ *Bka' rgya bryad ma*, 113.5–114.7.

the same episode near the beginning of the text, but here Guru Chöwang does not recollect his preincarnations himself; it is Padmasambhava who fulfills his request to explain the connections they shared in previous lifetimes. When comparing these various sets of Guru Chöwang's preincarnations, there is a range of orthographical variants and some ordinal displacement for the incarnations, but here it appears quite definitive, having come from the mouth of the omniscient Padmasambhava himself, that Guru Chöwang had only thirteen preincarnations through Nyangrel. This being the case, Guru Chöwang is not the reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen, who is among those omitted, nor his prophesied seventeenth incarnation as the great treasure revealer.

In proceeding through the *Eight Pronouncements*, Guru Chöwang repeatedly asks Padmasambhava variations of the same question concerning his preincarnations, and yet he receives a diverse range of replies. While Padmasambhava answers that Guru Chöwang had as many as 47 preincarnations at one point in the text, and "countless" preincarnations in another, thirteen is the number that appears most consistently. Despite the initial episode listing seventeen preincarnations total, even the presumably authoritative tally in the colophon states that Guru Chöwang had only thirteen. Reviewing the discrepancies here, it becomes clear that Guru Chöwang (and/or his biographers) failed to accord with Nyangrel's treasure prophecies in their earliest claims. Likewise, given that Tri Songdetsen, the karmic foundation of Nyangrel's treasure prophecy and recoveries, is excluded from so many of Guru Chöwang's preincarnation series in the *Eight Pronouncements*,⁹ the emperor's eventual inclusion within it is revealed to be a strategic (and relatively late) amelioration of Guru Chöwang's claim to the reincarnation of Nyangrel.

Given the repetition of thirteen preincarnations, these sets must be among the earlier iterations of Guru Chöwang's preincarnations to be closed and normalized. The preincarnations of Tri Songdetsen, Ötayé ('Od mtha' yas), and Relpachen (Ral pa can) were added later to bump the sum and accord with Nyangrel's treasure prophecy, and the brother from Magadha was added even later by someone who remained in ignorance of it. The series and narratives that initiate the *Eight Pronouncements* are therefore the most manipulated sets of preincarnations within it; these are the latest and most refined

⁹ Elsewhere in the text Padmasambhava confides a few details from the life of "Dharmarāja Khri srong" in two sections devoid of other preincarnations (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 104.3–7 and 138.3–139.2); the latter focuses on the queens. Emperors Khri srong lde btsan and Ral pa can are both listed in yet another series, but there 'O mtha' yas is absent between them (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 115.6–7).

attempts to align Guru Chöwang's claim with Nyangrel's prophecies within this particular text, and it is this most refined series that eventually becomes integrated into both of Nyangrel's biographies. Perhaps this was accomplished posthumously by Guru Chöwang's disciples, who lived in close proximity to Nyangrel's familial and lineal descendants, likely received teachings from them, and left much evidence of their manipulation of Nyangrel's *Clear Mirror Biography* to explicitly promote Guru Chöwang's claim.¹⁰ In sum, these internal issues reflect the fragmentary nature of the *Autobiographies and Instructions of Guru Chöwang* (*Gu ru chos dbang gi rang nam dang zhal gdams*), where this compendium sometimes draws similar materials under a single title with little attempt at integration.

This being the case, Guru Chöwang's recurring queries to Padmasambhava about his preincarnations represent variant renditions of the same narrative at different stages of its development; these are not distinct scenarios but repetitions of the same episode. A more refined version now initiates the *Eight Pronouncements*: excluding the brother from Magadha, an even later contaminant,¹¹ this is the series that best accords with the *Copper Island* prophecy specifying the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen as the enlightened treasure revealer. With the integration of the preincarnation series and narratives into Nyangrel's biographies, their recensional journey continued. The *Clear Mirror* still inherited and preserved many of the same discrepancies, and likely introduced some new ones, but the editors of the *Stainless Proclamations* successfully resolved many of the more glaring inconsistencies highlighted above. For one, they finally smoothed the enumeration into a single continuous series from the first incarnation of Tri Songdetsen to the final one, Nyangrel.

2. Narrating the Details

En route to his last rebirth, Guru Chöwang's preincarnation narratives depict a series of persons, always male and almost always

¹⁰ These remain preserved in the biography as several interlinear notes that explicitly identify Guru Chöwang as the reincarnation of Nyangrel. See Hirshberg 2016, 70–82 and Phillips 2004, 166–68.

¹¹ Some of these questions concerning the transmission of Guru Chöwang's biographical materials and their manipulation might be answered by additional recensions, but only one version survives and we are fortunate to have even that. For a discussion of how this compendium became available, see Phillips 2013.

royalty, whose lives are defined by finding and propagating the Buddhist doctrine. Through the process of refinement described above, the first life becomes none other than the eighth-century emperor Tri Songdetsen, and the penultimate life is the great treasure revealer Nyangrel. In the lives between, the various bastions of Buddhist Asia predominantly serve as their former areas of activity: Bodh Gaya, Śrī Lanka, Zahor, Nepal, Khotan, and various regions of Tibet all serve as backdrops for prior training, though the narratives employ few cultural, environmental, or geographical details to distinguish these places by more than name alone.

With a range of guises, Padmasambhava appears to every single one of Tri Songdetsen's reincarnations, or Nyangrel and Guru Chōwang's preincarnations. His most common manifestation is as a yogin, but Padmasambhava also appears as a monk, a master illusionist, and like a Śaiva mendicant with dreadlocks wrapped around his head while holding a trident-*kaṭvaṅga*. The primary implication is that Tri Songdetsen, in various places with different names at distinct times, continued to receive and train in the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism under the tutelage of Padmasambhava, who repeatedly empowers him to fulfill his destiny as the great treasure revealer. Most important among these details is the lists of teachings and transmissions received, as they establish a connection to virtually every cycle Nyangrel recovered as treasure in his life, many of which were then found in new iterations by Guru Chōwang.

While emperors Tri Songdetsen and Relpachen are eminently historical, and Nyangrel himself died only two decades before Guru Chōwang's birth, there are few chronological markers to specify a time period within these narratives, but several recount that their protagonists studied with renowned historical gurus and thereby provide a general indication of their era. According to the *Eight Pronouncements*, Énang-ö (E snang 'od) is a disciple of the great translator from western Tibet, Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055).¹² Sönam Rinchung (Bsod nams rin 'byung) studies with Zurpoché Shakya Jungné (Zur po che Śākya 'byungs gnas, 1002–62), a patriarch of the imperial Zur clan.¹³ At Wu Tai Shan Shodharaka is a Chinese disciple of Vimalamitra (eighth–ninth centuries?), thus this preincarnation narrative borrows from Vimalamitra's biographical traditions that depict his travels to China, which some critics assert

¹² *Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 84.4; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 297.6; *Dri ma med pa*, 43.4.

¹³ *Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 85.7; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 308.1; *Dri ma med pa*, 59.2. In the last, it is Zur **bu** Śākya 'byung gnas, perhaps confusing Zur the elder with his son (*bu*). The personal name leaves no doubt as to his identity, however.

was the source of the Great Perfection teachings associated with him.¹⁴ Also, some sources attest that Vimalamitra never died, so this incarnation is not necessarily out of sequence chronologically. Dharimukasha studies Mahāmudrā with the famed Bengali siddha Nāropā (d. 1041–42?), who is among the most celebrated forefathers of the Kagyü lineages.¹⁵ Also, lest one mistake him for a somewhat homonymous and historically problematic figure, Sing nga śri is described as the king of Zahor, so there is no correlation intended between him and Śrīsimha, who is often featured among the earliest human masters of the Great Perfection.¹⁶

Finally, the only preincarnation narrative that appears in Guru Chōwang's *Eight Pronouncements* that is excluded from both of Nyangrel's biographies is, as would be expected, the *pre*-incarnation narrative describing the life of Nyangrel himself. This *précis* is discarded in Nyangrel's complete biographies for their extended accounts of his person and activities. Guru Chōwang's succinct overview of Nyangrel's life is on par with those of the other preincarnations in length, and it concurs with the more generic details of Nyangrel's primary biographies. Whereas the *Clear Mirror* and the *Stainless Proclamations* then progress into the biography of their protagonist, the final incarnation and prophesied treasure revealer, Nyangrel, the *Eight Pronouncements* displaces the prestige of that position for Guru Chōwang. The stories of Guru Chōwang's life are reserved under several distinct titles within the compendium. In the *Eight Pronouncements*, Nyangrel is merely the penultimate preincarnation of Guru Chōwang rather than the ultimate reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen. All evidence indicates that this was not how Nyangrel conceived of himself nor the transmission of his lineage, however, and that his legacy was hijacked to some degree by a post-incarnate usurper who relied on the very innovations that Nyangrel developed. The grandeur of this claim may not have been

¹⁴ *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 90.2 and 90.3; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 303.1 and 303.2. His name is spelled Bhi ma la mu tra and Bye ma la mu tra respectively, which are among several variants (for example, see Kapstein 2008, 280). For a recent problematization of Chan's alleged influence on the Great Perfection, see van Schaik 2012.

¹⁵ *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 91.2; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 310.1; *Dri ma med pa*, 62.5. For a translation of an eyewitness account of Naropa, as well as the controversy as to whether Marpa met him or not, see Davidson 2005, 141–46.

¹⁶ *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 93.5; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 304.4; *Dri ma med pa*, 47.3. Samten Karmay provides several conflicting depictions of this individual in Nyingma sources. To name a few, he is presented as an Indian guru of Vairocana, a Chinese guru of Vimalamitra, and a prince of Singhala. See Karmay 2007 [1988], 22n18.

lost on Guru Chöwang himself, and we find some instances where he doubts his self-designated status and seeks additional assurances.

3. *The Persistence of Doubt, and a Scathing Critique*

Despite the visionary replies of Padmasambhava and personal divination of his own preincarnations, the *Eight Pronouncements* presents Guru Chöwang as unsure that he is the authentic reincarnation of Nyangrel. Later in the text, this uncertainty compels Guru Chöwang to query Padmasambhava about the nature, definitions, and divisions of the three buddha bodies (*sku, kāya*). Padmasambhava subsequently divides these into a hierarchy descending in triplets from the dharmakāya of the dharmakāya, to the sambhogakāya of the dharmakāya, and so forth, all the way down until Padmasambhava reaches the ninth and lowest possible status, whereupon he finally declares to Guru Chöwang that “You are the *nirmāṇakāya* of the *nirmāṇakāya*” (“the tulku of the tulku”), or “the magically-emanated reincarnation of the magically-emanated reincarnation.”¹⁷ Given the hierarchy presented, this denotes a precise ontological status and function but may also just confirm Guru Chöwang’s claim to the reincarnation of Nyangrel. From the latter perspective, Padmasambhava simply states that Guru Chöwang is the magically-emanated reincarnation of another magically-emanated reincarnation, Nyangrel.

Despite Padmasambhava’s confirmation, Guru Chöwang retains some doubt since in reassessing his status with this new information, he decides to compare himself against the preeminent example of all tulkus, Śākyamuni Buddha, who was born with excellent physical features, from thousand-spoked wheels on the soles of his feet to a protrusion at the crown of his head. The *Stainless Proclamations* attests that Nyangrel was born with eight great marks on his body, two of which are shared with the Buddha, and thereby serve to confirm Nyangrel’s status as a magically-emanated reincarnation.¹⁸ Conversely, Guru Chöwang proceeds through a rather thorough accounting of his own physical features in search of any sign that he too is a tulku, but he seems to become increasingly discouraged in repeatedly discovering that each mark “does not appear on me,

¹⁷ *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 109.4.

¹⁸ *Dri ma med pa*, 87.1–88.2. Other than the protuberance on the crown of his head and dharmacakras on the soles of his feet, the rest of Nyangrel’s eight physical marks draw on tantric symbols unattested in the common exoteric tradition.

Chöwang.”¹⁹ Thus unconvinced for lack of evidence, Guru Chöwang once again asks Padmasambhava about his preincarnations in order to confirm that he really is the reincarnation of Nyangrel. The *Eight Pronouncements* thus presents Guru Chöwang as unsure of his own claims, but he was not his only skeptic.

It may be relevant to note that while Nyangrel was received with some skepticism in his life, Guru Chöwang became the target of scathing critique by some prominent contemporaries. As the treasure movement progressed from localized nascence to broader popularization, perhaps it provoked a more explicit counter-response, but this attempt at character assassination reflects a vehement rejection of Guru Chöwang, his claims, and his products. In one early, unvarnished example of anti-treasure rhetoric, Chak Lotsawa Chöjépel (Chag lo tsa ba chos rje dpal, 1197–1263/4) derides the treasures in general but singles out Guru Chöwang in particular. Having suggested that the true Padmasambhava was soon followed by an imposter who hid these so-called “treasures,” he writes:

After this, countless perverse doctrines spread. Having declared, “these are treasure texts,” the one called Guru Chöwang, who was cursed when a king demon entered his heart, bragged about countless perverse doctrines. When nāgas, māra demons and king-sorcerer demons gathered around the perverse doctrines that were fabricated by him, leprosy and psychosis and so forth arose [in him], which were taken to be signs of accomplishment. Such doctrines and so forth that were drawn from treasures are not authentic.²⁰

Chöjépel takes aim at the treasures and thus implicitly at Nyangrel’s legacy, but the harshest words are reserved for Guru Chöwang specifically—and personally. He calls out Guru Chöwang as a braggart, a demoniac, a fabricator of false doctrines, and a vector of disease. An excerpt attributed to Butön within the same text attests that Guru Chöwang died of leprosy,²¹ so this polemic karmically connects Guru Chöwang’s fatal illness to his severely negative actions, which were fomented by psychosis and possession. But why was Nyangrel spared more explicit inclusion here? Chöjépel was certainly aware of Nyangrel’s treasure doctrines and recoveries: his father, Chak Lotsawa Dratsom (1153–1216), presided over Nyangrel’s

¹⁹ *Bka’ rgya brgyad ma*, 109.5.

²⁰ *Snags log sun ’byin gyi skor*, 13.5-14.2. For other translations, see Martin 2001, 114 and Doctor 2005, 32.

²¹ Martin 2001, 114n18.

funeral at the request of Namkhapel, thus their lineages seem to have shared a close connection. Perhaps Chöjépel retained an affinity for the descendants of the Nyang clan and strove to insulate them against the claims of a competitor? Whatever his motivation, the contempt he held for his contemporary seems especially personal; Chöjépel condemns Guru Chöwang as a total fraud.

Whether Guru Chöwang's confessed doubts in the *Eight Pronouncements* are an implicit response to the disbelief of vitriolic critics, a kind of deferential literary device,²² or a genuine concern, Guru Chöwang questions his own status as Nyangrel's reincarnation, but he successfully appropriated at least the legitimacy of his line and legacy through relying on the very innovation that Nyangrel used to validate his own treasure recoveries, catenate reincarnation. This provided Guru Chöwang with an enhanced karmic foundation of reincarnate descent to pursue his own recoveries: subsequently recognized as the second of the "treasure-revealing kings" (*gter ston rgyal po lnga*), Guru Chöwang's legitimacy was predicated in part on the basis of his being the reincarnation of the very first of them, Nyangrel. He soon established himself at Nézhi Zhitro (Gnas gzhi zhi khro) temple just a few kilometers downstream from Mawochok (Smra'o lcogs), Nyangrel's hermitage, home, and lineal seat.

Perhaps an echo of competitive tension, there is a dissension implicit in Nyangrel's two primary biographies that may indicate their transmission through the hands of these two distinct but closely related communities. One accepted that Guru Chöwang was Nyangrel's reincarnation, and they supported this claim by emending the *Clear Mirror*, as evidenced by several interlinear notes within it. The other community consisted of Nyangrel's patrilineal descendants and their disciples at Mawochok, who appear to have ignored (if not rejected) Guru Chöwang's claim and preserved the *Stainless Proclamations*, which consistently and unequivocally presents Nyangrel as the final reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen. Regardless, it is clear that Guru Chöwang actively and successfully established his own lineage with significant reliance on his reincarnation claim, which was shaped over time to accord with Nyangrel's prophecies, but did he take these steps in an attempt to requisition the spiritual and/or material inheritance of Nyang?

²² For a discussion of the rhetoric and function of doubt for later treasure revealers, see Gyatso 1998, 161–62, 168–69.

4. Naming Heirs, Establishing Hierarchy

Nyangrel bequeathed his lineage and property to his second son and foremost heir, Namkhapel, which Namkhapel then passed to his son and “sole supreme heir,” Ngadak Loden Sherab. While Guru Chöwang is indeed listed among the main disciples of Namkhapel, he is counted as one of his four great heirs, who are ranked beneath Namkhapel’s one son, two cherished disciples, and three scholarly students in the descending hierarchy of his inheritance.²³ During Namkhapel’s lifetime, it thus appears that Guru Chöwang remained a humble disciple and did not attempt to exceed his position, but this may have changed not long after Namkhapel’s death. In contextualizing the recollection of his preincarnations, Guru Chöwang states that his encounter with Padmasambhava occurred in the fire monkey year of 1236–37.²⁴ If Namkhapel died in 1235–36, which admittedly is one of a few possibilities (his dates are contradictory across sources), this vision and its attendant recollection occurred a very short time thereafter. If this is the case, Guru Chöwang’s declaration may have been spectacularly coincidental if not opportunistic.²⁵ Moreover, his claim as Nyangrel’s reincarnation is absent from Namkhapel’s biography, perhaps suggesting that it was not made while his guru was alive. Instead, Namkhapel’s biography now concludes with an extended episode that ascribes a unique prominence to Guru Chöwang despite his earlier naming much further down the line of inheritance.

In this episode of Namkhapel’s biography, Guru Chöwang is in secluded retreat when a *ḍākinī* manifests to inform him of his master’s death. After performing devotional overtures and returning to Mawochok, Guru Chöwang is welcomed by Namkhapel’s son, Loden Sherab, who would have been his foremost competitor as the

²³ *Yid bzhin nor bu’i ’phreng ba*, 441–42.

²⁴ *Skabs brgyad ma*, 30.5–6.

²⁵ Both the *Clear Mirror* and Namkhapel’s biography, *Garland of Wish-fulfilling Jewels*, attest that he was born in a monkey year (most likely 1164–65), but the same biography also states that he was twenty-three when Nyangrel died in 1192, which would suggest a birth date in 1169–70. *Garland of Wish-fulfilling Jewels* reports that Namkhapel died in a wood monkey year (1224–25) at the age of sixty-six, but this conflicts with his aforementioned birth in the monkey year since his age is not divisible by twelve (*Yid bzhin nor bu’i ’phreng ba* A, 456.1; B, 235.7–236.1; C, 77.1). If we favor the other piece of data stating that Nyangrel died when Namkhapel was twenty-three, then Namkhapel was born in 1169–70 and died in 1235–36 at the age of sixty-six, just one year before Guru Chöwang declared himself the reincarnation of his father, Nyangrel. For a similar analysis with regard to establishing Nyangrel’s dates, see Hirshberg 2016, 204n357; for another with slightly different conclusions, cf. Sørensen et al. 2007, 473n117.

designated patrilineal heir to the Nyang transmissions. Loden Sherab and the elders say, "It is excellent that Chöwang has arrived," thus this episode promotes Guru Chöwang as the ideal deferential disciple, but this content and its inclusion here has the whiff of propaganda in that it contributes very little to the biography of Namkhapel and ultimately serves to elevate Guru Chöwang by injecting him into the narrative under a devoutly positive light.²⁶ Despite its inclusion in all available versions, the entire section stands out as a contaminant quite distinct from the rest of the narrative. It is the only section in which the focus shifts to someone other than its protagonist, Namkhapel, and the episode is strikingly incongruent with the rather minor status ascribed to Guru Chöwang previously. With this insertion here and the interlinear notes in the *Clear Mirror Biography* of Nyangrel, we begin to discern a pattern of literary embellishment in which Guru Chöwang and/or his supporters actively manipulated the biographies of Nyangrel and his descendants to enhance Guru Chöwang's claim. So what did he seek in making it, and what impact did it have on the patrilineal inheritance of Nyang?

If there was any conflict that arose from Guru Chöwang's claim as the reincarnation of Nyangrel, it is not recorded in Namkhapel's biography nor is it attested in that of his son, Loden Sherab, though the latter narrative is brief, uniformly laudatory, and addresses little more than his treasure recoveries and contributions to Mawochok. While I have yet to find any direct reaction to Guru Chöwang's claim among the patrilineal descendants of the Nyang clan, he appears to have oriented himself as *a* supreme heir of the lineage if not *the* supreme heir; after all, Namkhapel is Nyangrel's son, but Guru Chöwang *is* Nyangrel. This subordination is made explicit in a distinct visionary text where Padmasambhava reveals to Guru Chöwang that when he was Tri Songdetsen, Namkhapel served as his minister, Dorjé Nyingpo. Guru Chöwang's own guru is thus demoted to an inferior position in their past lives with the implication that it applied to their most recent ones as well.²⁷

When these various elements of Guru Chöwang's claim are assessed together, there first appears to be something of a multipronged assault on the patrilineal inheritance model of the Nyang clan. By virtue of claiming to recollect his preincarnations and especially his penultimate life as Nyangrel, Guru Chöwang undermines the very basis of his own guru's authority as the son and

²⁶ *Yid bzhin nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 463.2–3. For a translation of the entire episode, see Phillips 2004, 155–56.

²⁷ "Zhus lan bdun las 'di mnga' bdag gis zhus lan rin po che" in *The Autobiographies and Instructions of Guru Chos-kyi dbang-phyug II*, 498.3–7. Phillips 2004, 172–73.

designated heir of Nyangrel himself. Rather than kowtow to the mundane machinations of automatic patrilineal inheritance, Guru Chöwang stakes a new kind of claim in striving to supersede it. As the reincarnation of Nyangrel, we may assume that Guru Chöwang could have presented himself as the supreme heir to his lineage, which would indeed accord with how reincarnate inheritance functions in Tibetan lineages in the present, yet this does not appear to have been among Guru Chöwang's expectations or objectives. Rather than requisitioning the spiritual and material inheritance of Nyang, Guru Chöwang only appropriated the karmic narrative and prestige of his treasure-revealing predecessor, as well as the authority to recover new treasures by means of them. He thereby successfully usurped some of Nyangrel's prerogative for scriptural production, and deserves credit for the many collections he "revealed," but rather than lay claim to the abbacy of Mawochok and launch a direct challenge to patrilineal inheritance through a new primacy founded on reincarnation, Guru Chöwang was satisfied to establish his own temple just down the river. Mawochok remained under the abbacy of Nyangrel's descendants for generations. One interesting aside, however, is that Mawochok's current abbots claim to be patrilineal descendants of Guru Chöwang rather than the reincarnations of him (and Nyangrel), so while this material inheritance eventually passed to Guru Chöwang's line, patrilineage has remained the determining factor to the present.²⁸

5. Conclusion

Further research is required to elucidate the exact process of this ascension, but there is no doubt that the authentication gained through Guru Chöwang's status as Nyangrel's reincarnation empowered him to recover his own treasures and establish his own lineage. And yet he did not appear to use his reincarnate status to promote himself as a new kind of heir that could—or even should—supersede the patrilineal inheritance model of the Nyang clan. While reincarnate inheritance is definitive of many Tibetan Buddhist lineages today, Karmapa II Karma Pakshi (1204/6–83) had only been recognized as the reincarnation of Dusum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa) as late as 1226, just one decade before Guru Chöwang

²⁸ In his history and inventory of Mawochok, a late twentieth-century abbot claims to be a descendant of Guru Chöwang. See *Smra bo lcog kun bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho* 1994, 33.

reports his vision of Padmasambhava and stakes his claim.²⁹ Given that Nyangrel only professed his catenate reincarnation series about a century prior, which was neither forwarded nor established as an inheritance model in his time, Guru Chöwang may not have even considered the possibility of positioning himself as a reincarnate heir to Nyang's material and lineal inheritance. This may not have seemed even remotely viable given its lack of precedent.

Rather than a vertical attempt to ascend a hierarchy and usurp an inheritance, we might recognize in Guru Chöwang's claim a new and innovative version of a more common lateral. As occasionally occurs in Buddhist history to the present, when a charismatic underling begins to chafe at the monopolization of lineal authority, it forces a more creative route to transcend the limitations of their position and become a religious leader in their own right. As a disciple of Nyang-clan scions in the backwaters of Lhodrak, southern Tibet, Guru Chöwang persisted under a very local hegemony led by an exclusive patrilineage that had survived the collapse of the empire and persevered for centuries. Yet he injected himself into that line by claiming to be an heir—not in the ancient way of blood, bone, and clan—but in the emerging model of catenate reincarnation.

While Guru Chöwang's visionary validation of that claim alleges to be inspired by omniscience as the corroborative product of attainment, the variance of his preincarnations and their enumeration in the *Eight Pronouncements* indicates that his claim to Nyangrel's reincarnation was very much a work in progress. It was repeatedly reformulated to incorporate Nyangrel's own prophecies in the progressive refinement of Guru Chöwang's legitimation strategy, which was bolstered by manipulating the biographies of both Nyangrel and his son. Nevertheless, by innovating reincarnation theory to seize a position of religious and scriptural authority, Guru Chöwang was, in this way at least, an authentic heir of Nyangrel.

²⁹ Manson 2009, 31–32.

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