

A CRUCIAL LINK IN 15th-CENTURY TIBETAN ART

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Some art objects trigger a feeling of sensation at first sight, connecting what one has seen before in unexpected ways. This was the case when I first encountered a frameless Tibetan scroll painting, a *thang ka*, in a private collection (Fig. 1).² Colourful against a dark blue, background, figures emerged that appeared strangely familiar, but not all of them belonged to the same place. The central deity with its retinue resonated with the paintings in the Hevajra Chapel (Kye rdor lha khang) at dGon dkar chos sde Monastery,³ while the surrounding lineage figures showed facial features familiar from a famous set of repoussée sculptures of teachers from the Path with the Fruit (*lam 'bras*) lineage today at sMin grol gling Monastery.⁴ But how do these fit together and what are the implications of their common occurrence on the same painting? This tribute to my dear colleague Elena De Rossi Filibeck, whom I first met as a student traveling with a group of professors to Tabo Monastery in the Spiti in 1991, is a first attempt to answer this question, but certainly not the ultimate one.

1 I am grateful for the generous hospitality of the private collectors owning the *thang ka* under discussion, as well as for the photographs shared by friends and colleagues, in particular Anne Breckenridge Dorsey, Lionel Fournier, and Rob Linrothe. Further, the PhD thesis of Jörg Heimbelt and the MA thesis of Mathias Fermer proved to be invaluable guides through relevant historical literature, and I am grateful to their authors for generously providing them.

2 The painting is also available on HAR: no. 61137.

3 For a detailed description of dGon dkar monastery and its different parts see Fermer 2009: 137-41. The murals of dGon dkar chos sde Monastery and its Hevajra Chapel (also referred to as Yi dam lha khang or gZhal yas khang) are introduced in Jackson 1996: chapter 4, and there is a Japanese publication on them, Masaki & Tachikawa 1997, that has not been accessible to me. I reference them, thus, largely through photographs I have taken myself or which have been provided by colleagues and friends. Photographs of the Yi dam Chapel are also provided on HAR under “Tibet: Gongkar Chode Monastery”.

4 Comprehensive accounts of the sMin grol gling sculptures are available in Von Schroeder 2001: 972-85, fig. XV-11 and pl. 236A-241F, and Lee-Kalisch 2006: 118-51. This study corrects some of the identifications suggested in Von Schroeder 2001 and followed by all subsequent authors consulted.

The *Thang ka*

Although damaged and worn, the colours of the painting are remarkably strong and fresh. In the upper left corner, a section that once contained three lineage figures is torn off. At places the painting surface further shows folding and water damages, but none of them distracts from the quality and strength of the painting. In fact, it is extremely fortunate that this painting was snatched off the table of a painting conservator, whose work likely would have obscured some of the details on which the discussion below is based.

The painting is dominated by a large depiction of the aspiration deity Hevajra in union with his consort Nairātmyā. Hevajra has eight heads, set against a green nimbus, sixteen arms, and four legs. While the heads are staggered at the sides in the traditional manner, his many arms are partially drawn towards the body in a manner attributed to mKhyen brtse chen mo, the alleged painter of much of the preserved Gong dkar chos sde murals. The white surfaces of the skull-cups (*kapāla*) held in the hands, at times tilting considerably, accentuate this movement of the arms and contrast with the dark blue bodies of the deities. Their content, animals and one human in the cups held in the right hands and gods in those held left, consistently face towards the right, the direction of the deities' movement. Trampling on supine figures, the couple dances on a double lotus with ornate, colourful petals and is surrounded on this level by the eight *ḍākinī* of their mandala assembly. Iconographically the deities and their entourage conform with standard depictions, the entourage of the *ḍākinī* beginning with dark blue Gauṛī in the east depicted immediately to the left of the main lotus's stem. The goddesses are thus placed in their respective directions around the lotus stem.⁵

Comparing the composition and details of the heads of the main deities in the *thang ka* (Fig. 2) and the Hevajra Chapel at Gong dkar (Fig. 3) the two representations are remarkably similar, and both share the rather peculiar reddish brown colour used for the top head. Similar conventions can be seen in the facial features, the jewelry, the way the hair piles up above all heads, and the distribution of arms. No doubt there are differences, too, the Gong dkar wall paintings excelling in their expressions and sensuality and the *thang ka* in variation and movement. Particularly noteworthy in the latter is how the curved knife (*karṭṛkā*) and skull-cup (*kapāla*) are held in the uppermost hands with the palm facing the viewer. Otherwise

5 There have been captions identifying the *ḍākinī* in the area of their legs, some of them appear to confirm their usual Sanskrit name, such as the red *tsau ri*, while others use their Tibetan translation. The latter is the case with the multi-colored Ḍombinī, who is identified as *g.yud mo* (for *g.yung mo*; the *nga* appears to be squeezed into the space between the letters posthumously, and thus appears as *da*). For yellow *be tā lī* the caption is written on the three central petals of her lotus and can easily be overlooked. Two further notations in red ink along the bottom edge of the canvas, I read them as *mar pa sgres* and *dbu rgyan zhwa*, appear to have no relationship to the painting. Further traces of writing along the bottom edge are largely illegible.

the engagement with the viewer is stronger with the mural, a wonderful detail being the cat in the uppermost cup looking out of the picture. Similar observations can be made from a comparison of the red Caurī Ḍākinī, dancing with a *damaru* and a piglet in her hands (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Conceptually the two are identical, but the *thang ka* version is considerably slimmer and her breasts are less apparent. In the wall painting the realism of the pig is striking, but a similar attempt is also apparent in the *thang ka* version, in which the pig is painted in gold. In part, this comparison certainly suffers under the differences in size, the *thang ka* version much smaller than the one in the mural. In addition, the backgrounds are strikingly different, as the *thang ka* shows no sign of a landscape.

Nevertheless, a notion of space is undeniable even for the *thang ka*. Both the deity couple and the surrounding *ḍākinī* are connected through the main lotus stem. Six of these *ḍākinī* are placed in the loops of a scroll in front of the main lotus, while the other two emerge at its back where the ornate orange edge of the flame mandorla appears. Thus, the composition invites to see a spatial layering with the six *ḍākinī* in front, a central lotus cushion supporting the main couple, two dancing *ḍākinī* behind the lotus cushion and a free standing mandorla in the back. The entire composition is set against a blue background making the deities dance in space.

Actually, the background is darkened behind the mandorla of the main deity forming a central panel separated by a fine line in gold. However, the painted details do not respect this composition line strictly making it almost imperceptible in the lower half of the canvas. The bright blue outer edge of the canvas is occupied by seated figures each of which is directed towards the deities, they thus can equally read as surrounding the deities in space.

Its Lineage

The figures along the outer edges of the *thang ka* represent the transmission lineage of Hevajra, who is particularly prominent in the Sakya School. The lineage begins in the top centre and jumps from left to right, first outwards along the top row and then down along the sides. The last two figures are represented in the top corners of the central panel, their seats partly covered by the mandorla. Originally all figures of the lineage were identified by short captions added in gold, only a part of them legible today. If legible, a reading of the captions is provided in the footnotes. At times there are also notes written on the edge of the canvas, these commonly support the identification in the main caption but may also independent of them.

As noted in the introduction, these lineage figures provide a striking comparison to the repoussée images of the Path with the Fruit (*lam 'bras*) transmission preserved at sMin grol gling Monastery, establishing that this painting and the figures stem from a common cultural background. Since in a Sa skya context the practice of Hevajra and the Path with the Fruit are intimately connected, we can assume their lineages to be identical. In this section only the most obvious of these comparisons

are presented, while a detailed discussion of their relationship is provided in the following section.

The lineage commences with Buddha Vajradhara in the top centre, holding vajra and bell in the arms crossed in front of the chest. With a pink cape covering the shoulders the deity looks surprisingly female. To his right is the dark blue Nairātmyā, brandishing a curved knife (*karṭṛkā*) in the raised left hand and a skull-cup (*kapāla*) in the left that also embraces a tantric staff (*khaṭvāṅga*). She sits on a flesh coloured and rather realistically painted corpse. With both deities a scarf loops in a wide bow behind the head and curls behind the bodies, the interrelation of these parts of the scarf obscured in the case of Nairātmyā.

The deities are followed by a group of three *mahāsiddha*. To the left of Vajradhara is a rather voluminous Virūpa with his gaze focused towards the main deity of the painting and performing the teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*). The following three teachers on the left side are lost. The one immediately to the left of Nairātmyā was Kṛṣṇapāda, also called Kanha. He is followed by Ḍamarūpa, to the right of Virūpa, kneeling on one leg he holds the name giving hand-drum (*ḍamaru*) in his right hand and a skull-cup (*kapāla*) in the left. Avadhūtipa, who was represented in the top left corner, is followed by Gayadhara in the top right corner. He is depicted as an Indian ascetic with a scholar's hat.

The Tibetan representatives of the lineage begin with 'Brog mi lo tsā ba Shākya Ye shes (992–1072) who is lost on the left side. He is followed by Se ston kun rig (1025–1113), who is dressed in lay garments and holds a skull-cup (*kapāla*).⁶ The following teacher on the left is shown as an ascetic with two prominent teeth visible between his lips and holding a garland of prayer beads in his left hand (Fig. 6). He is identified by caption as Zhang ston Chos 'bar (1053–1135).⁷ Although in a meditation posture there, his representation at sMin grol gling is undoubtedly related (Fig. 7), the face with the prominent teeth being identical, and the dress closely comparable, including the way the felt is wrapped around his legs.

At this point the lineage proceeds with the five Sa skya masters, the great Sa skya pa Kun dga' snying po (1092–1158),⁸ his sons bSod nams rtse mo (1142–1182),⁹ and Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216),¹⁰ as well as the two monks Sa skya paṅḍi ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251)¹¹ and 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235–1280).¹² Of these, bSod nams rtse mo is shown as a young man with full curly hair, while Grags pa rgyal mtshan is an elder man with fluffy white hair and beard (Fig. 9), just

6 The caption identifies him through his alternative name Se 'khar chung ba.

7 TBRC P4574. The caption reads: *zhang ston chos 'bar /*

8 He is simply identified as *sa chen*.

9 The caption reads: *rje rtsun bsod rtse /*

10 The caption reads: *rje rtsun grags_{pa} rgyal mtshan /*

11 His caption is largely lost but presumably read: *[rje] b[tsu]n sa paṅ /*

12 TBRC P1048. His caption reads: *[']gro mgon_{chos} rgyal 'pha[gs pa]*, the *chos* added as a correction underneath.

as it is the case in the sMin grol gling sculptures (Fig. 8). In the painting the two monks are singled out through their sitting posture with pendant legs and round red hats, Sa skya Paṇḍita's depiction directly referencing that of Mañjuśrī in dialog with Maitreya. 'Phags pa, however, has both his legs pendant and simply holds a blue lily at its stem. Consequently, their depiction does not conform to the sMin grol gling sculptures, which emphasize the Buddha nature of these two individuals, Sa skya Paṇḍita is shown teaching and has an *uṣṇīṣa*,¹³ while 'Phags pa is touching the earth as the Buddha does at the time of his awakening, neither of them wearing a headdress.¹⁴ The age and mood reflected in their respective faces, however, is comparable.

The lineage continues with a middle aged monk with partially bald head identified as Zhang dKon mchog dpal (1240-1307).¹⁵ He has his right hand in the gesture of fearlessness (*abhayamudrā*) and the left in the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*). The following elder monk holding a chain of prayer beads in both hands is Na bza' Brag phug pa bSod nams dpal (1277-1350; Fig. 10).¹⁶ His facial features with prominent folds around the mouth are very distinctive, and compare best with the sMin grol gling figure identified as 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba (Von Schroeder 2001, 241C), whose depiction is not preserved in the painting (Fig. 11). This identification is also supported by the position of the hands in the sMin grol gling figure, which clearly associates it with holding a chain of prayer beads. Above him is a small monastic figure, standing for another branch of the teaching transmission received by Brag phug pa from sNyan chen bSod nams brtan pa (1222-1370).¹⁷

On the next level, on the right side sits a young monk with his hands crossed in front of the chest as if holding vajra and bell but without attributes, he is Bla ma dam pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375),¹⁸ who is depicted in the same posture in a well known Vajrāvalī painting set but there also wears the crown of the tantric practitioner.¹⁹ He is followed by an elderly monk with long eyebrows and white hair seated in a posture with both hands on the knee. This is likely Lo chen Byang chub rtse mo (1302-1380),²⁰ a disciple of Bla ma dam pa, who was also known under the title Lo chen Byang rtse or Byang rtse Lo tsā ba.²¹ He has not been identified among the sMin grol gling sculptures, but Von Schroeder 2001, 241B-C is a very likely candidate, both for the facial features and the sitting posture, which are identical to those in the painting.

13 For depictions of Sa skya Paṇḍita, see Von Schroeder 2001: 240A and 240B.

14 For depictions of 'Phags pa, see Von Schroeder 2001: 240C, and Lee-Kalisch 2006: no. 10.

15 TBRC P10628. The caption reads: *zhang dkon mchog dpal* /

16 TBRC P3092. The caption reads: *nam bza'?* [*brag*] *phug pa* /

17 See Stearns 2006: 240 and n. 333. TBRC P3413. A caption underneath the figure identifies him as: *nyan chen bsod nams?*

18 TBRC P1226. His caption reads simply: *dpal ldan bla ma dam pa* /

19 See, for example, Heller 2004; Jackson 2010: 131–35.

20 TBRC P2388. The caption reads: *? byang rtse* /

21 For their relationship, see Stearns 2006: 249 and n. 380; Heimbels 2014: 108, 490-92.

The figure in the bottom left corner likely is Theg chen chos rje Kun dga' bkra shis (1349-1425),²² a nephew and disciple of Bla ma dam pa.²³ This teacher is seated in the posture of royal ease (*lalitāsana*) with the left leg pendant and wears an unusual red hat. His right hand rests on the leg, while the left is stretched towards the knee with the palm outwards as if blessing somebody. His gesture resonates with the elder monk on the opposite side, who shows the gesture of fearlessness (*abhayamudrā*) with the right hand and has the left on the lap. He is most likely Brag thog pa bSod nams bzang po,²⁴ who transmitted the *lam 'bras* teachings to Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal (1432-1496).²⁵

The final teachers are on the central panel to the sides of the mandorla of the main deities, and their captions are written on a black ground; traces of gold projecting from underneath the ground may indicate that these captions have been corrected. To the left is the just mentioned Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal²⁶ performing the gesture of argumentation (*vitarkamudrā*) and holding a lotus with a bell on top. The final figure is not in the usual monastic dress, but has the left shoulder bare and sits in mediation. He is identified as mKhan chen Chos grub seng ge.²⁷ One would be tempted to identify the last figure of the sMin grol gling lineage (Von Schroeder 2001, 241E-F) with him, as it also sits in meditation, but this is unlikely even if one considers that the head of this sculpture is a replacement.

The lineage presented above clearly places the *thang ka* painting in the wider context of Gong dkar chos sde Monastery. It remains unclear though, who the actual commissioner of the painting is. From the biography of Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal we know that mKhan chen Chos grub seng ge was one of his pupils. He went on to become “the lama of the great ruler (*gong ma mi'i dbang po*) and acted as the abbot of Tshogs dGe 'dun sgang” (Fermer 2009: 329). Could one of these contexts account for the existence of this painting? Fermer suggests that the ruler referred to is either dBang Kun dga' legs pa: 1433-1483 (tenure 1448-1480/81)²⁸ or Ngag gi dbang po (tenure 1481-1491), successive rulers of the Phag mo gru pa. If one of them was the commissioner of the painting, it would have been more likely the

22 TBRC P3565. His gold caption is erased, but there is another one in *dbu chen* on the edge of the canvas reading simply: *theg chen*.

23 See Heimbel 2014: 495.

24 Here, too, the caption has been erased and is illegible today. It also does not allow to decide which of the two would be more likely. On the edge of the canvas underneath the reading *brag 'og* appears possible, but cannot be considered certain. An inscribed bronze image of this teacher, recently been sold at auction in Hong Kong (<http://auction.artron.net/paimai-art5076850014/>, Lot 0014, accessed December 27, 2015), depicts a similarly aged teacher and could well be of the same time as the *thang ka* discussed here.

25 See Fermer 2009: 106–11, 179.

26 TBRC P3183. His caption reads: *//rje tsun kun dga' rna[m] rgyal /

27 TBRC P1439 contains practically no information about him. The caption reads: *// *mKhan chen chos ? grub seng ge /*

28 Fermer 2009: 356

latter, and the last two masters on the painting were still alive and active, which could account for their special position on the painting. A date in the last two decades of the 15th century would also be the earliest date possible for this painting. Of course, other scenarios are equally possible and they would attribute the painting into the early 16th century.

Given the stylistic comparisons cited above, it also appears safe to see the painting as representative of the identify the *mkhyen ris* tradition, and that it was produced from the workshop of mKhyen brtse chen mo or his immediate successors. Leaving aside any true landscape elements or colourful clouds and using a blue background strewn with gold blossoms, its approach is rather conservative, but the portrait-like lineage figures are an innovative element which, to my knowledge, is not found as such in the Gong dkar Monastery murals preserved.²⁹ It is this element that connects the lineage figures to the sMin grol gling sculptures, to which we turn now.

The Sculptures

The comparisons cited above, putting some of the identifications suggested earlier into question, invite a review of the sMin grol gling lineage in the light of the painted lineage on the *thang ka* and other circumstantial evidence. Comparing painting and sculpture is, of course, problematic as each medium has its inherent idiosyncrasies. In contrast to painting, sculptures are much less likely to have stretched out limbs, extreme postures, or floating scarfs, as is also evident from the comparisons mentioned so far. In addition, the possibility for variation is much larger in the case of paintings, as can be seen by the wider variation of postures. In terms of portraiture, hair can be rendered in many more ways in painting, resulting in some of the more obvious differences in the respective portraits of the teachers in both media. Finally, there are also differences resulting from the composition of the painting and original positioning of the sculptures, which will be reconstructed below as well.

The first figures in the lineage provide a good sample for the differences to be expected in this comparison. In the painting Nairātmyā stretches her left arm and her left right arm and a scarf loops behind her head, features not found in her representation at sMin grol gling. The compact depictions of Virūpa, in contrast, are directly comparable. Also in the sculpture Ḍamarūpa is shown with a stretched arm, but his sitting posture and movement are much less extreme than those found in the painting.

The first questionable identification among the sMin grol gling sculptures is that of the Indian lay master Gayadhara. The image identified as Gayadhara in the sMin grol gling set (Von Schroeder 2001, 238C) actually wears Tibetan monastic dress, and his identification appears solely based on the dark face which is the result of scratched off gilding. Indeed, a dark face is often a characteristic of his appearance,

²⁹ The closest comparisons in this regard is provided by the large scale lineage on the back wall of the assembly hall, but the portraits there are much less individualized.

but not in the painting at hand. It is the dress of a lay Indian yogin that distinguishes him most, and among the sMin grol gling figures only Von Schroeder 2001, 241E³⁰, hitherto identified as the last image in the lineage, is a possible option (Fig. 12). It is the yogic band underneath the added jewellery that gives away the identification of this sculpture. Note that the head of this figure does not belong to this sculpture but is a replacement. As the high hair-knot at the back of this sculpture and the forehead reveal, this was once the head of a Bodhisattva, making the sculpture taller than others in the set.

'Brog mi Lo tsā ba is the first Tibetan monk in the lineage. He is not preserved in the painting, but in inscribed Mustang sculptures of similar age he performs the gesture of argumentation (*vitarkamudrā*) with the right hand and holds a book in the left. Among the lineage figures on the painting, only Sa skya Paṇḍita holds a book, and among the sMin grol gling sculptures, Von Schroeder 2001: 240D (Fig. 14) has a writing board on his lap. However, from the comparisons cited above, I tend to identify Von Schroeder 2001, 241A as representing 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba (Fig. 13).³¹ He has a lotus bud on the palm of his left hand that could well have served as a support for a book lying on his hand. Other figures with *vitarkamudrā* are less likely to have held a book, but if the symmetry identified for this set below is not to be broken at this point, Von Schroeder 2001, 238C is to be identified as representing this great translator. Table 1, summarising the new identifications of the sMin grol gling sculptures in relation to the sculptures, contains both options.

With Se ston Kun rig we enter secure ground again. The depiction of this lay practitioner is damaged in the painting, but close observation reveals his long hair and supports the identification of the sMin grol gling sculpture.³² Inscribed bronzes of this teacher from Mustang do not show any of the features seen in these artworks from Southern dBus, putting the comparison used as a criteria above into question. The relationship of the depictions of the great Sa skya masters supports the impression gained so far that faces are better comparable than postures and gestures. While the hand positions of Sa chen and Gags pa rgyal mtshan are comparable to their sMin grol gling counterparts, bSod nams rtse mo holding a skull-cup in the painting does not compare at all. In his case, the sMin grol gling sculpture can be better understood if it is compared with his depiction in the Gong dkar wall paintings, in which he holds a lotus stem in his left hand. The depictions of Sa skya Paṇḍita and 'Phags pa have already been discussed above in relation to their depiction in the *thang ka*.

There is little we can go off to identify Zhang dKon mchog dpal among the sMin grol gling sculptures. The painting shows a middle aged man with a somewhat purged mouth and a semi-bold head performing gestures of communication. The closest

30 Note that in this publication, the full view of this sculpture is flipped horizontally, while the detail on the opposite page, 241E, is correct.

31 This figure has previously been identified as Bla ma dam pa.

32 See Heimbel 2014: 495.

match is Von Schroeder 2001, 238C, who shares these features with slight deviations, but this teacher could equally be represented by Von Schroeder 2001, 241A (Fig. 13). These are the same two sculptures that have been identified above as candidates for 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba. The latter identification has the advantage that the symmetry of the lineage figures is retained, but leaves the lotus bud on the palm of the teacher unexplained.

Brag phug pa has already been identified with Von Schroeder 2001, 238D-E above. Bla ma dam pa in contrast finds no close match at all, but mostly due to the full hair and serene expression, I tend to identify the sMin grol gling sculpture Von Schroeder 2001, 240E-F with him. This middle aged teacher is sitting in mediation. Lo chen Byang chub rtse mo has been identified above with Von Schroeder 2001, 241B-C.

While the painting has twenty-three lineage figures, there are only twenty-one figures in the sMin grol gling set. Among these, the last two sculptures may well be seen as complementary, literally forming a bracket at the outer edges of the set, as both have their outer foot projecting beyond the lotus pedestal (Fig. 13 and Fig. 15). The image I identify as Theg chen chos rje Kun dga' bkra shis, Von Schroeder 2001, 240D, has his right foot in front of the seat and a Chinese style writing board on his lap (Fig. 14). This board may well refer to the fact that he received his title "King of the Great Vehicle" (*theg chen chos kyi rgyal po*) from the Ming emperor Chengzu (1360-1424), who had invited him to China in 1412.³³ The final figure then is Von Schroeder 2001, 241D who sits in the posture of royal ease (*lalitāsana*) with the left foot pendant (Fig. 15). In contrast to the painting, which shows an aged teacher, the sculpture portrays a much younger scholar. He has his right hand perform the gesture of argumentation (*vitarkamudrā*), while the left lies palm up on the slightly raised knee. He is also the only figure shown wearing boots.

A curious feature of the sMin grol gling set is that the collars of the lower vest worn by the Tibetan teachers overlap in opposing directions. Thus, the last two figures are not only symmetrical in the position of the legs, but also in the way the collar overlaps, and the same is true for the securely identifiable pairs from Zhang ston chos 'bar to 'Phags pa (Von Schroeder 2001, 239B-240C). The latter group makes also clear that the collars not only are symmetrical, but they also alternate direction between pairs, directed inwards for the first pair, outwards for the next and so on. It is for this reason that it is probably more likely that it is not Von Schroeder 2001, 241A that is to be identified as 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba, but Von Schroeder 2001, 238C. It is, however, also possible that the symmetry of pairs is broken at times, as is the case in the painting.

The observation of the symmetry of the last two figures in relation to the entire set itself, and the alternation of collar direction from one sculpture to the next with a

33 See Fermer 2009: 178-79.

symmetry across pairs flanking the central Vajradhara not only prove the meticulous planning that underlies this sculptural set but also indicates that the set is complete as it is preserved. There are thus only twenty-one sculptures in this set and it is unlikely that the last figure represented can be Zhwa lu lo tsā ba Chos skyong bzang po (1441-1528) as has been proposed by Von Schroeder 2001 and widely accepted. Instead the last figure of the sMin grol gling set must have received the *lam 'bras* transmission from Theg chen chos rje and the historical context proposed for the set can thus not be upheld anymore.

Working Hypotheses

As reported (Von Schroeder 2001: 972), the sMin grol gling images have been moved there from Grwa thang Monastery around 1990,³⁴ which became a Sa skya seat in the late 15th century due to the activities of Zhwa lu lo tsā ba Chos skyong bzang po. Since it is assumed that the *lam 'bras* teachings were only taught at Grwa thang after Zhwa lu lo tsā ba took charge there in 1495, the set was thought to be commissioned by him after this date.³⁵ This scenario not only contradicts the identification of the teachers proposed but is also difficult to reconcile with the comparative details found in the *thang ka*.

The sMin grol gling sculpture set is two figures short of the lineage in the painting. In addition, the last figure in the sculpture set is shown considerably younger than his counterpart in the painting. Further, one may read the fact that he is the only teacher shown wearing boots as an indication that the depicted was still alive at the time of the sets commission. There is, thus, no doubt that the sculpture set precedes even the earliest possible date for the painting proposed above.

If we assume that the last figure in the sMin grol gling set is also Brag thog pa bSod nams bzang po, then it is difficult to imagine that it has not been commissioned at Gong dkar by rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal, who received the *lam 'bras* transmission and many other teachings from Brag thog pa, as is also confirmed by the *thang ka* painting.³⁶ The sculpture set must then be considerably earlier than previously thought, likely dating to the first decades after the foundation of Gong dkar chos sde Monastery in 1464.

34 Ulrich Von Schroeder 2001: 972, gives 1990 for the date of the move, while Henss 2014: 370, states that he has first seen them in sMin grol gling Monastery in 1989.

35 Accepting the proposed identifications Henss 2007 and Henss 2014: 370–72, citing stylistic comparisons, pushes the date even further into the 16th century than originally proposed, suggesting the death of Zhwa lu lo tsā ba Chos skyong bzang po as possible motivation for making this set. But Henss also links the set to the workmanship of mKhyen brtse chen mo, without considering that this is practically impossible at such a late date. At the same time, Henss 2014: 370–72, citing oral communication with David Jackson, also points out that Grwa thang has been a Sa skya before Zha lu Lo tsā ba's arrival there.

36 On the diverse teachings received from Brag thog pa, see Fermer 2009: chapter 6.

Reviewing Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1925) pilgrimage account of Gong dkar and Grwa thang respectively adds a further dimension to this hypothesis.³⁷ While Kaḥ thog Si tu describes the *lam 'bras* lineage of Gong dkar in great detail and remarks on the realism and lifelike quality of the sculptures,³⁸ he only lists those at Grwa thang without providing further detail. Could the sMin grol gling sculpture set, which distinguishes itself from other sets exactly by this lifelike quality, be identical with the one described for Gong dkar chos sde and ascribed to mKhyen brtse chen mo himself?

There are several issues with this hypothesis:

- As noted above, the Gong dkar murals do not show the distinctive facial features of the teachers as they are preserved in the sculpture set. The set would thus have to postdate the murals.
- There are two *lam 'bras* sets described by Kaḥ thog Si tu for Gong dkar, one set of arrow-size gilt copper images flanking Mañjuḥoṣa as the main image, and one approximately life size in the chapel on the very top. The gilt copper set is said to consist of twenty-three images including rDo rje gdan pa. No number of sculptures is given for the other set, but there they surround a *mchod rten* of rDo rje gdan pa, who is also identified as the last figure in the lineage. To paraphrase the text, Kaḥ thog describes them as "... certainly life size; with well carved-out thrones; outer brocade (garments); a brocade as a cape and made by the hand of mKhyen brtse chen mo able to captivate the mind and transform perception. Especially with Virupa, Sa chen, Grags pa (rgyal mtshan), Brag thog pa etc. appear as [if they would be] the real teachers, like raising from a well-polished mirror(?)." ³⁹ Elsewhere they are described as being made in relief (*'bur dod*).⁴⁰ Could this term also refer to repoussée images, and would the sMin grol gling images have been identified as such? It is actually hard to imagine that a space of sixteen pillars can be filled by relief sculptures.

The sMin grol gling sculptures would probably be large enough to be considered life size, and as their display in sMin grol gling proves they can command a large space. While it is, thus, tempting to brush these issues aside and identify the sMin grol gling set with the images that once were housed in the top chapel of Gong dkar Monastery, the sources available to me are not sufficient to be certain about it. I hope future work will be able to clarify this. It is sure, though, that the sMin grol gling sculptures must

37 Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho 1999: 113–17 and 123–25.

38 See also Jackson 1996: 140.

39 The full section reads: ... *mi tshad che nges / khri bkod brkos legs / gos chen 'bol / ber zla gam gos chen can nang mkhyen brtse chen mo 'i phyag bzos yid 'phrog nus shing snang ba 'gyur nus pa / khyad par birwa pa / sa chen / grags pa / brag thog pa sogs bla ma dngos yin snang skye ba / pra rtse legs po snum nas bton ma thag pa lta bu /* Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho 1999: 115.

40 See the summaries and quotations in Fermer 2009: 204-05.

at least be closely related to that set and bear the features described for it, especially their alleged ‘realism’.

Tibetan Hyperrealism

Both the sMin grol gling sculptures and most of the teachers in the *thang ka* painting are distinguished by the individual character of each image, regardless of when the person depicted has lived, and this feature is also shared with the *thang ka* painting. If we take, for example the depiction Zhang ston chos 'bar (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7), his appearance communicates the impression that this is a portrait taken from life. But neither do other images of this teacher share the depicted characteristics, nor is it possible that the true appearance of this yogin of the 11th century was known in the 15th century. The apparent realism of the images, thus, must have a reason and function beyond the actual appearance.

In this connection it may well be important that there existed a text authored by Kun dga' rnam rgyal under the descriptive title *Lam 'bras kyi gser sku bzhegs dus so so 'i mtshan byang kha skong* (see Fermer 2009: 204). It may well be possible that this text refers to the lineage in the uppermost chapel, and that this supplement (*kha skyong*) went beyond the mere “captions (*mtshan byang*) of the respective *lam 'bras* gold images at the time of their making”, as the title states. Its very existence may have been due to the innovative nature of the teacher depictions there as well as their thoughtful composition as apparent in the sMin grol gling set. Obviously, in the absence of the text itself this is just a speculation.

For the time being we have to interpret the distinctive features of the images on a visual basis alone. There is one feature all images share, an extremely focused gaze. Regardless where this gaze is directed towards and if the eyes are narrowed to slits or widely open, each of them is shown in a state of utmost concentration. This focus also defines the mouth, which despite the considerable range of variation always communicates benevolence. The individuality of the figures thus results from the direction and openness of the gaze, the respective individual facial features and, most importantly, their depicted age. Given how well conceived the set is as a whole, there is little doubt that also the facial features are based on some underlying logic. It is probably the range of ages and practitioner types that count, rather than their individuality.

The usage of individual features in the sMin grol gling set reminds of the so-called character-heads of the Bavarian born, Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (February 6, 1736 - August 19, 1783), but the driving force behind them is not an inner demon of pain, but the achievement of awakening. Not accidentally, standing in for Sa skya Paṇḍita (Figure 16), the Buddha is one of the characters depicted in the set. Only few of the other characters are as obvious; the representation of Lo chen Byang chub rtse mo, better recognisable in the painting (Fig. 17), refers to the Arhat, and Grags pa rgyal mtshan to the benevolent ruler. It

may even be possible to read these characters across pairs, as 'Phags pa's representation also communicates the nature of the Buddha and the meditating Bla ma dam pa may well also refer to arhatship. As in the last case, young and old are often juxtaposed, which is especially obvious in the painting.

Even if I am unable at this stage to decode the concept behind the set in its entirety, the collected evidence leaves little doubt about the sophistication of the depictions. The individuality or realism that we see in the faces of the teachers is a typological one. Of course, the attribution of these types to the respective individuals is not random, but a careful choice. As a result, the individuality represented in this portraits is larger than life, I thus propose to call these likeness-like, but typological representations hyper-realistic.

Kaḥ thog Si tu and others ascribe this achievement to mKhyen brtse chen mo himself, which appears quite possible, since he also had a more realistic approach to depicting deities and their attributes, such as the animals in Hevajra's cups (Fig. 3) and the pig in Chauri's hand (Fig. 5). In this case, it is likely that he has worked with Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal in terms of the typology of each of the teachers. But it remains open from where these masters received their inspiration for this hyper-realistic depictions of the *lam 'bras* teachers. We can only hope that future textual and art historical research will help to clarify this.

As in terms of the background, the *thang ka* painting which has been the point of departure for this study is more conservative than the sculpture set, as it does not use the Buddha-like depictions for Sa skya Paṇḍita and 'Phags pa. Given the strength of the individual features of the other teachers on the one hand, and the close comparison of the depiction of the deities to the Hevajra Chapel of Gong dkar chos sde on the other hand, it only supports the attribution of these hyper-realistic *lam 'bras* teachers to mKhyen brtse chen mo.

Note

Since the submission of this article two relevant publications have appeared. Luo Wenhua, 罗文华, and Gesang Qupei sKal bzang chos 'phel, eds. (2016), *dPal gong dkar chos sde'i ldebs ris: Bod brgyud nang bstan ri mo'i lo rgyus kyi lam tshad rdo ring / Gongga Qude si bi hua : Zang chuan fo jiao mei shu shi de li cheng bei / 贡嘎曲德寺壁画：藏传佛教美术史的里程碑*. Beijing: Gu gong chu ban she / Forbidden City Press, gives unprecedented access to the murals of dGon dkar chos sde monastery. Further, in Jackson, David P. 2016. *A Revolutionary Artist of Tibet: Khyentse Chenmo of Gongkar*. Masterworks of Tibetan Painting. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, the author re-attributes the sMin grol gling sculptures to Kyentse Chenmo and approximately the same time as is proposed in this study.

APPENDIX

Table 1: The Gong dkar Hevajra *thang ka* in relation to the sMin grol gling sculpture set.

No.	Thang ka lineage	sMin grol gling sculpture Identification in Von Schroeder	New identifications
1	Vajradhara	236A	
2	Nairātmyā	237A-B	
3	Virūpa	237C-D	
4	Kṛṣṇapāda/Kanha	237E	
5	Ḍamarūpa	237F	
6	Avadhūtipa	238A-B	
7	Gayadhara	238C	241F
8	'Brog mi Lo tsā ba Shākya ye shes (992-1072)	238D-E	241A / 238C ⁴¹
9	Se ston kun rig (1025-1113)	238F	
10	Zhang ston Chos 'bar (1053-1135)	239A-B	
11	Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158)	239C	
12	slob dpon bSod nams rtse mo (1142-1182)	239D	
13	rje btsun Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216)	239E-F	
14	Sa skya Paṅḍi ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251)	240A-B	
15	chos rgyal 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235-1280)	240C	
16	Zhang ston dKon mchog dpal (1240-1308)	240D	<u>238C / 241A</u>
17	Brag phug pa bSod nams dpal (1277-1350)	240E-F	238D-E
18	Bla ma dam pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375)	241A	240E-F
19	Lo chen Byang chub rtse mo (1302-1380)		241B-C
20	Theg chen Chos rje Kun dga' bkra shis (1349-1425)	241B-C 241D ⁴²	240D
21	Brag thog pa bSod nams bzang po		241F ⁴³
22	Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rnam rgyal (1432-1496)		
23	mKhan chen Chos grub seng ge	241E-F ⁴⁴	

41 While the first option appears more likely on iconographic grounds, the underlined option retains the symmetry of the set.

42 Not identified in Von Schroeder 2001: 984.

43 Or another pupil of Theg chen Chos rje Kun dga' bkra shis (1349-1425), depending on the historical scenario one assumes for the sMin grol gling set.

44 Identified as Zhwa lu lo tsā ba Chos skyong bzang po (1441-1528) in Von Schroeder 2001: 984.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Hevajra Thangka; Central Tibet (Southern dBus), late 15th century; pigments on cloth; private collection; Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0323).



Figure 2: Heads of Hevajra; detail of Figure 1;
Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0330).



Figure 3: Heads of Hevajra; Hevajra Chapel of Gong dkar chos sde Monastery;
Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century.
Credits: Anne Breckenridge Dorsey 2005.



Figure 4: Caurī Ḍākinī; detail of Fig. 1.
Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0385).

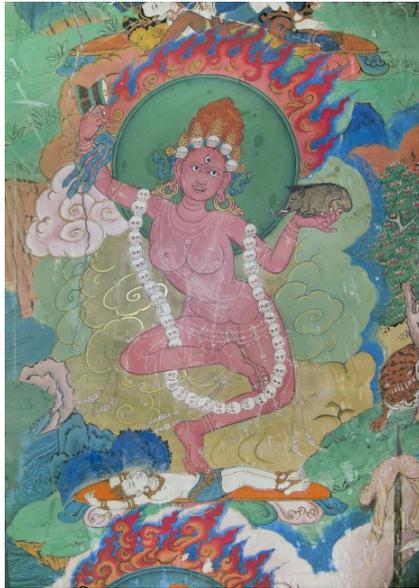


Figure 5: Caurī Ḍākinī; Hevajra Chapel of Gong dkar chos sde Monastery;
Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century.
Credits: Anne Breckenridge Dorsey 2005.



Figure 6: Zhang ston Chos 'bar (1053-1135); detail of Fig. 1.
Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0361).



Figure 7: Zhang ston Chos 'bar (1053-1135); Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; h. 93 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery (after Lee-Kalisch 2006: 141, Kat. 7).



Figure 8: Head of Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216); Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; sMin grol gling Monastery (after Lee-Kalisch 2006: 141, Kat. 7).



Figure 9: Head of Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216); detail of Fig. 1. Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0338).



Figure 10: Na bza' Brag phug pa bSod nams dpal (1277-1350); detail of Fig. 1.
Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0342).



Figure 11: Na bza' Brag phug pa bSod nams dpal (1277-1350); Central Tibet
(Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and
painted copper repoussée; h. 88 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery.
Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9407).



Figure 12: Indian yogin Gayadhara; Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; h. 111 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery. Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9409).



Figure 13: This sculpture of the sMin grol gling set either represents 'Brog mi lo tsā ba Shākya Ye shes (992-1072) or Zhang ston dKon mchog dpal (1240-1308); Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; h. 98 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery. Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9305).



Figure 14: Theg chen chos rje Kun dga' bkra shis; Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; h. 90 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery. Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9306).

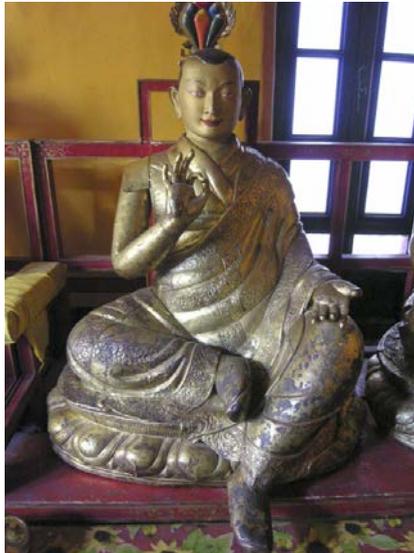


Figure 15: Last teacher of the sMin grol gling set; Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; h. 86 cm; sMin grol gling Monastery. Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9397).



Figure 16: Head of Sa skya Paṇḍita of the sMin grol gling set; Central Tibet (Southern dBus); second half of the 15th century; gilt and painted copper repoussée; sMin grol gling Monastery. Credits: C. Luczanits 2007 (D9397).

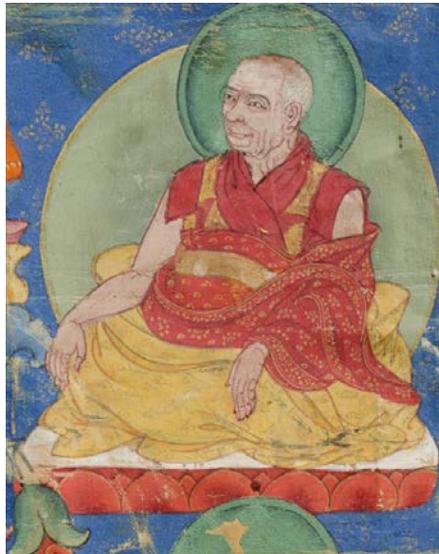


Figure 17: Lo chen Byang chub rtse mo (1302-1380); detail of Fig. 1. Credits: C. Luczanits 2015 (D0342).

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