

Materializing Dreams and Omens: The Autobiographical Subjectivity of the Tibetan Yoginī Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo (1585-1668)

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Drawing from a rare manuscript that I acquired in 'Dzam thang some years ago, this paper reflects on the autobiographical subjectivity of the seventeenth century Tibetan woman author and yoginī Rje btsun ma Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo (1585-1668).¹ She was a close disciple and secret consort (*gsang yum*) to Rje btsun Tāranātha (1575-1635), a lineage-holder of the Jonang order and key figure in the transmission of *gzhan stong* (zhentong) philosophy, and during the latter period of her life, was a mentor to the generation of masters who were instrumental in transplanting the Jonangpas from Gtsang in central Tibet to 'Dzam thang on the far eastern frontiers of the plateau after the confiscation of Rtag brtan Dam chos gling

¹ 'Phrin las dbang mo, *Rje btsun rdo rje* and subsequently published, 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013. On her dates, 1585-1668, these calculations are based on dated events in her autobiography and the *kha skongs* by Rnam snang rdo rje. Evidence suggests that she was ten years younger than Tāranātha who was born in 1575, making her birth year 1585. In the *kha skongs*, Rnam snang rdo rje verifies this by stating that in the *chu mo bya* year, which would have been 1633/1634, Tāranātha was fifty-nine (i.e. 58) years old and 'Phrin las dbang mo was forty-nine (i.e. 48) years old, "*chu mo bya'i lo la rje btsun dam pa dgong grangs lnga bcu nga dgu bzhes/ 'phrin las dbang mo zhe dgu yin.*" This dating is however confused elsewhere in the *kha skongs* where it states that she was born in a *sa mo bya* year, which would have been 1609. Based on the other evidence in both the autobiography and elsewhere in the *kha skongs*, this could very well be a scribal error that should read, *shing bya* rather than *sa mo bya*, which would make her birth year 1585, and would align with the other chronological evidence. Rnam snang rdo rje states that she lived to be eighty-four (i.e. 83) or eighty-five (i.e. 84) years old, which would make her death date 1668. See Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 215-217. For their feedback on earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank Annabella Pitkin and Holly Gayley, Cyrus Stearns for thinking through her dates with me, Janet Gyatso for inviting me to read excerpts with her class, and Khenpo Ngawang Dorje for pointing out key passages related to Kun dga' Lha mdzes.

Monastery by the Dga' ldan pho brang.²

As we begin to reconstruct a portrait of this seventeenth century Tibetan author and yoginī from her autobiography as well as writings that illustrate her life story, the profile of an extraordinary woman comes into focus. One of the earliest accounts by a woman writing about herself in Tibetan literature, 'Phrin las dbang mo's life story not only serves as an example of female authorship in early modern Tibet, her story provides insights into her historical moment, the roles she played, and the broader social milieu in which she participated. Throughout her life writing, she recounts critical moments in the intellectual history of the Jonang order of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the broader cultural history of Tibet during her lifetime, filling-in important episodes. Her narrative reads linearly through her life from her girlhood through her adulthood with Tāranātha in the remote Jo mo nang valley until she became an elder during the final days of the Jonangpa in Gtsang.

To introduce and situate 'Phrin las dbang mo's life story, this paper (a) discusses the provenance of the manuscript of her autobiography, the *Gsang ba'i ye shes* or *The Secret Gnosis*, and related source texts; (b) contextualizes her autobiography in the broader Tibetan literature written by and about women in Tibet; (c) presents her to be an author whose writing style captures her relationality within a given social context and ability to operate within juxtaposed lived worlds; and (d) to exemplify the literary modes that she effectuates as an author, reflects on select dreams in her autobiography that describe the oneiric consciousness that she pilots as a yoginī. To discern preliminary observations about the significance of the *Gsang ba'i ye shes*, I am concerned with the historicity of the person who was 'Phrin las dbang mo, the literary style of her writing, and particularly in her case, how she reflexively facilitates her subjectivity. I conclude with thoughts on how historical circumstance and religious virtuosity operated to construct her autobiographical subjectivity and how she navigates and negotiates her complex identity through her first-person writing.

² On *gsang yun*, see Gayley 2018, 6. Her tantric secret name (*gsang mtshan*) is Rin chen Rdo rje ma (*ratna badzri ŋi*), see Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 212. This includes 'Brog ge Kun dga' dpal bzang (1629-1686) who traveled from Amdo to the Jo mo nang valley after Tāranātha had passed to receive teachings from his disciples, especially 'Phrin las dbang mo, and returned home to establish 'Brog ge Monastery in Rnga ba, one of early major Jonang monasteries in Amdo. See Blo gros grags pa 1992, 77-78 and Stearns 2010, 77. See also below for discussion about Blo gros rnam rgyal who consulted with her before traveling to 'Dzam thang to establish Gtsang ba Monastery.

The Gsang ba'i ye shes Manuscript

In the summer of 2006, while staying in the 'Dzam thang valley in Amdo, Tulku Kun dga' Tshul khrim bzang po and I accrued a cache of rare Tibetan manuscripts. We were documenting each of the Jonang sites in the Tibet Autonomous Region and Amdo, and it was our habit at each monastery that we visited to inquire and generate conversation about the whereabouts of rare Jonang texts. About a week into our stay at 'Dzam thang, we met a monk who told us about a local lama who had recently passed away. The deceased monk's name was Lama Ngag dbang Phun tshogs, and while he had not formally been affiliated with a monastery since the Cultural Revolution, he was well-known throughout the local area for performing ceremonial death rites.³ He was a nomad monk who traveled throughout northern Kham and southern Amdo, going from village to encampment, as he was invited by families of the recently deceased to recite the *Bar do thos grol* and perform associated passing rites. When Lama Phun tshogs visited each family, he often stayed as a guest in their homes for days or weeks while he performed the rites. As our monk informant reported, at each home where Lama Phun tshogs made his temporary stay, he allegedly would query his host about their library or any texts that they might have for him to read. During the evening hours, after he had performed the rites for that day, Lama Phun tshogs would read the texts that the family had lent him, and when he discovered a rare manuscript of a text of particular personal interest, he would meticulously copy by hand the texts in cursive (*dbu med*). On other occasions, as a gift for his services, families would give the lama texts that he had expressed an interest in reading. Every few months, after making the rounds on his death ritual sojourns, Lama Phun tshogs would return to his mother's house in 'Dzam thang where he would pile-up the personal manuscript copies that he had acquired. This went on for years until Lama Phun tshogs unexpectedly died at a relatively young age, leaving his private collection of handwritten manuscripts stockpiled in his mother's house. Upon hearing this story, Tulku Tshul khrim bzang po and I informed Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje, the vajra-master at Jonang Gstang ba Monastery in 'Dzam thang. Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje had not heard this account but knew this local elderly woman, and vaguely recalled her son. Soon after, Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje and an entourage of monks arrived at Lama Phun tshogs mother's house. The elderly woman knew nothing about her son's books, in fact she

³ During the 1980's and 1990's in eastern Tibet, many of the texts that were hidden during the Cultural Revolution began to surface and were passed around via local circuits.

confessed to being illiterate, but she invited the monks to take the stockpiles of pechas that were wrapped in multicolor patchwork fabrics piled high in her deceased son's room. She gifted her son's entire library to Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje, and within hours of our conversation with the monk informant, we were in possession of a fantastically rich collection of rare Tibetan manuscripts.

The manuscript cache that we acquired from the late Lama Phun tshogs totals fifteen volumes and includes writings from Nyingma, Kagyu, and Jonang authors. Significant texts in this find include the biography and interlinear annotated commentary (*mchan 'grel*) on the *Kālacakra Tantra* and *Vimalaprabhā* by Mnga' ris pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1306-1386), one of Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan's (1292-1361) primary disciples; two volumes of miscellaneous writings (*gsung thor bu*) by the Kālacakra adept Ratna bha dra (1489-1563); two volumes of important writings by Kun dga' Grol mchog (1507-1565), including ritual and liturgical texts concerning Hevajra, Vajrayoginī and the special form of black Cakrasaṃvāra that is transmitted via the Jonangpa, instructions on the sixfold yoga of the Kālacakra, various poetic songs and praises, a guidebook to the sacred sites and nooks of Chos lung byang rtse Monastery, two works on Sakya Lam 'bras and his writing on *gzhan stong*;⁴ along with a handful of biographical writings by Tāranātha's closest disciples and their immediate Jonangpa successors in Amdo.⁵

Among the instances of biographical writing by Tāranātha's immediate disciples found in this collection was the autobiography of Rje btsun ma Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo. The full title of her life story in thirty-three folios is, *Rje btsun rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sprul pa skal ldan 'phrin las dbang mo'i rnam thar gsang ba'i ye shes*.⁶ Though there is

⁴ Among the places where these works were composed include Gser mdog can Monastery, Ri chos chen mo hermitage at Jo mo nang, and his own Chos lung byang rtse Monastery. Hence, the colophons of these writings give us a fuller picture of where Kun dga' Grol mchog lived and wrote. These manuscripts are being consulted as part of a project to recompile the writings by Kun dga' Grol mchog as well as by his primary Kālacakra teacher Ratna bha dra, and are currently under preparation for publication in the Jo nang dpe tshogs series by the Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing.

⁵ This version along with other extant versions of Phyogs las rnam rgyal's Kālacakra commentary were consulted in the production of the four volumes that were published as part of the Jo nang dpe tshogs series (vol. 17-20) by the Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing.

⁶ The manuscript is a *dbu med* cursive copy, and to my knowledge, is the only extant witness that we have available to-date. Her autobiography is not known by the elder Jonangpa scholars in Tibet with whom I consulted, suggesting that it was a manuscript that had minimal circulation in Jonang circles through the late twentieth century. The nineteenth century Jonangpa scholar Rnam snang rdo rje's supplemental works are the most extensive treatment that we have (see below), albeit we can infer

nothing to suggest that she titled her own work, and that the title was not added by later editors, the title makes her connection to Vajrayogīni explicit with the phrase, “*rdo rje rnal ’byor ma’i sprul pa,*” indicating that ‘Phrin las dbang mo is considered (or considered herself) an embodiment of the deity. Perhaps it is the latter part of the title that is however most revealing; here the phrase, “*Gsang ba’i ye shes*” which is the primary title of the work, suggests her relationship with and possible self-imaging of *guhyañāna dakīni*, a vermilion esoteric form of Vajrayogīni. This meditation deity (*yi dam*) is known by its full name, *Mkha’ ’gro ma gsang ba ye shes*, and is found in the *Yi dam rgya mtsho* collection of *sadhāna* compiled by Tāranātha.⁷ A few folios into her autobiography, ‘Phrin las dbang mo describes having received the empowerment for Cakrasaṃvāra at age fifteen. This initiation seemingly left a deep impression on her as a young woman, so much so that her writing regularly and seamlessly quotes stanzas from the Cakrasaṃvāra and Vajrayogīni literature, as reflected in the title of her own life story. For those familiar with Tāranātha’s praxis, the implicit linkage of her as Vajrayogīni will evoke the idyllic image of her in union with his yidam, Cakrasaṃvāra.

that Mkhan po Blo gros grags pa (1920-1975) drew information from it for his historical works. See Blo gros grags pa 1992 and Blo gros grags pa, *Rje tā ra nā tha’i sku ’das*.

⁷ See Tāranātha 1987a. During her lifetime, a form of *Mkha’ ’gro ma gsang ba ye shes* was also popularized through the *gter ma* revelations of Gter bdag Gling pa ’Gyur med rdo rje (1646-1714). Another cycle is that of the *Mkha’ ’gro gsang ba ye shes kyi chos skor* compiled by the Rnying ma and Dge lugs master Sle lung Bzhad pa’i rdo rje (1697-1740). See Bailey 2020. These writings are relevant also because Bzhad pa’i rdo rje authored several important works about women. In the extant versions of his *gsung ’bum*; this includes a short work written to verify Ye shes mtsho rgyal to be a “flesh and blood” woman (*mi’i sha*) – i.e. a historical person and not an ahistorical deification; an autobiographical account of his mystical unification experience with Ratna Tārā and retinue of female deities (*lha mo* and *mkha’ ’gro*) in the year 1730, and his numerous writings on *dākinī*, especially a praise recalling the kindness of the queen mother wisdom *dākinī*. See Bzhad pa’i rdo rje, *Ye shes mtsho rgyal* and *Mkha’ ’gro and Rgyal yum ye shes* and *Yid bzhin gyi nor bu*. Three other important works not in his extant *gsung ’bum* are: (1) his *Thabs lam zhal gdams* text on the subject of tantric sex, in which he details instructions on yogic postures and secretive practices, and states that it was composed to “study and take-up the bliss of the *dākinīs*”; (2) his commentary on the famous *’Dod pa’i bstan bcos*, the *Kāmasāstra*, attributed to the Vedic philosopher Vātsyāyana, translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan and included in the *Bstan ’gyur*, a work that has not yet come to light, though there are rumors that it is extant; and (3) his *Mkha’ ’gro rgya mtsho* or *Ocean of Dakinīs*, a several hundred page detailed autobiographical register of his consorts and female encounters. While conducting fieldwork during the summer 2015 in Tibet, after years of searching for this, a manuscript of the *Mkha’ ’gro rgya mtsho* surfaced. Future research on this work will likely reveal much about the diary practices of a Tibetan Buddhist author, written articulations of tantric sex, and socio-historical observations about sex and gender in Tibet, at least as found within this single ledger. The full title is, *Mkha’ ’gro rgya mtsho’i rtogs pa brjod cing rjes su bzung ba’i tshul gsal bar byed pa dwangs shel dkyil ’khor*.

A year after this find, in 2007, Tulku Tshul khrim bzang po and I digitized the *Collected Works* of the Jonangpa scholar from Swe Monastery in Rnga ba, Dpal ldan Rnam snang rdo rje (d. 1847). Within this collection, there is both a supplement (*kha skong*) that augments and comments on 'Phrin las dbang mo's autobiography as well as a supplication to her successive line of women re-embodiments (*skyes 'phreng gsol 'debs*).⁸ These two texts are critical sources for contextualizing and understanding 'Phrin las dbang mo's life writing and for situating her historically. Drawing from a variety of sources, some currently unavailable, Rnam snang rdo rje's supplement details missing or indefinite historical information in her autobiography, including dates, places, and key persons, as well as lineage transmission information.⁹ In addition, there are two brief works, if not others, that are dedicated to her: (1) one is a letter written to her by the 'Brug pa Kagyu master Mi pham Dge legs rnam rgyal (1618-1685) that was preserved among his miscellaneous official letters (*chab shog phyogs bsgrigs*), expressing his plea for her to pray for the rebirth of his recently deceased disciple; (2) the other is a personal instruction (*zhal gdams*) that was advised to her by Tāranātha.¹⁰ As for her own writings in addition to the autobiography, she also transcribed, arranged, and compiled a handbook of handwritten notes based on Tāranātha's oral explanations on the history and practice of the Jonang protector deity Trak shad.¹¹ Another important source for contextualizing her is Tāranātha's *Collected Works* wherein she is documented in colophons as being active as a scribe, commentator, requestor, and close disciple.¹²

In Context of Tibetan Literary Women

While the Tibetan literary canon is rich with documentation on the lives and practices of its most preeminent figures; documenting who they were, when and where they lived, with whom they forged interpersonal relationships, what they wrote, etc. – in comparison to writing by and about men, writings by and about women remain a small,

⁸ See Rnam snang rdo rje 2013 and Rnam snang rdo rje, 'Phrin las dbang mo'i rnam thar kha skongs and Rnam snang rdo rje, 'Phrin las dbang mo'i skyes 'phreng. A special thanks to Matthew Kapstein for encouraging us to search for this *gsung 'bum*.

⁹ For instance, the *kha skongs* cites the record of teachings received (*gsan yig*) of Rwa Ngag dbang 'phrin las for information on which lineages she transmitted. Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 213.

¹⁰ See Mi pham dge legs rnam rgyal, *Jo mo nang du rje bstun* and Tā ra nā tha 2008a.

¹¹ The colophon reads, "de ltar na dpal mgon trakshad kyi chos skor lo rgyus 'di ni rje btsun thams cad mkhyen pa'i gsung bzhin kun dga' 'phrin las dbang mos zin bris su bkod pa'i dge ba'i mthus stobs kyis." See Tā ra nā tha 2008b, 175. It is likely that she authored additional works, including liturgies and a work on the Kālacakra.

¹² For instance, see Tāranātha 1987b.

albeit significant fraction of this canon. In fact, it is estimated that historical Tibetan women were the authors or subjects of less than one percent (1%) of the thousands of biographies that were written in the Tibetan language.¹³ With this in mind, however, recent discoveries of Tibetan language source materials by and about women, including several important Tibetan language publications from inside Tibet have broadened the known horizon of Tibetan literary women. Over the past decade, numerous women personages have come to light in historical records, most eminently in the written record of auto/biography and hagiography, though in other notable genres as well.

As a heuristic exercise, in order to gauge an approximate data sampling to enable a sketch of the bibliographic scope of Tibetan literary women, I surveyed the extant literature to compile a list that includes 73 prominent historical women whom I have identified to be authors, *likely authors*, and/or subjects of writing in Tibet.¹⁴ These Tibetan women literati as well as women in literature were compiled from a variety of Tibetan textual sources, including known, newly published, and newfound or rediscovered rare materials. As recent scholarship has shown, from the seventh to ninth century with imperial period iconic women, we have writings attributed to and about women.¹⁵ This survey however is concerned only with religious literary Tibetan women from the twelfth century up to the twentieth, specifically those who died prior to 1959; this sampling does not include South Asian fore figures or modern and living Tibetan literary women. Of these 73 women identified and profiled in this survey, the breakdown by historical period was: the largest grouping of women lived or died during the nineteenth century (16 women); the second largest grouping was those who lived during the early twentieth century (10 women); the same number of women are identified from the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (7 women each cent.); there is the same sampling from the twelfth and eighteenth centuries (5 women per cent.).¹⁶ From the twelfth century onward, we have more stabilized contributions, with

¹³ See Schaeffer 2004, 4-5 and Jacoby 2014, 13.

¹⁴ First presented at the 2015 American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia in a paper titled, "The Bibliographic Scope of Buddhist Women Literati in Tibet." A precedent for this project is Tsering 1985. The primary source of person data for this research was the Buddhist Digital Resource Center.

¹⁵ See Uebach 2005.

¹⁶ Given that the majority of this literature is of the auto/biography and hagiography, that the largest grouping is during the nineteenth century and the second largest grouping during the early twentieth century aligns with the broader trend to mass produce biographical and hagiographical literature, starting during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Tibet. However, given this trend, that there are so few extant women auto/biographies from the eighteenth century is surprising. See Schaeffer 2011, 263 and 268.

the exception of the sixteenth century for which there is a drop to zero (0) women.¹⁷ We must also recognize that this sampling of currently available titles and extant works does not in any way constitute the total literary output of literary women in Tibet; works were certainly lost, and it is quite possible that more recent works are overrepresented.¹⁸ Out of this sampling, there are 18 women who are authors and 34 who are subjects of biographical or liturgical writings;¹⁹ 48 of these women have life writing about them, and 13 of these life writings are autobiographical while the other 35 are subjects of either a full-length biography or a brief biography in a history or lineage account. We can estimate that approximately one third (1/3) of this sampling has liturgical writings about these women in the form of long-life prayers (*zhabs brtan*) or supplications (*gsol 'debs*). Of the extant written record of female authored works, in addition to auto/biography, genres and subjects for which there are writings include lineage supplications, chöd (*gcod*), various terma (*gter ma*) rites, personal advice (*zhal gdams*), instruction manuals (*khrid yig*), and letters of correspondence (*chag shog*).

To further contextualize 'Phrin las dbang mo's autobiographical writing in this broader frame of literary women in Tibet, we might note that her work not only gives unique insights into her time, but is a prime example of female authorship in early modern Tibet. In fact, her work is among the earliest known autobiographical accounts by a woman writing in Tibet. Introducing the life writing of O rgyan Chos kyi (1675-1729), the nun from Dol po who authored one of the earliest autobiographies of a female in Tibet, Kurtis Schaeffer makes the point that however unusual it was for a woman to write her autobiography in Tibet, especially prior to the eighteenth century, it would be naïve to assume that women did not tell their stories.²⁰ With the case of 'Phrin las dbang mo, we have a woman who was born ninety years prior to O rgyan Chos kyi and whose autobiographical writing extends at least until the year 1665. This situates the authorship of 'Phrin las dbang mo's autobiography approximately sixty years earlier than O rgyan Chos kyi's and makes her writing an important contribution to the history of biography by women in Tibet. Earlier women for whom we have biographies include Bsod nams Dpal 'dren (1328-1372) and A lce

¹⁷ Not having a single woman represented for the sixteenth century is curious but may be due to the fact that dates for many women during this period have not yet been identified. There are 15 women in this sampling for which their dates are not yet known, several of which likely lived sometime during the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.

¹⁸ See Schaeffer 2011, 267.

¹⁹ Women authors who wrote autobiographies were both the author and the subject.

²⁰ See Schaeffer 2004, 4-5.

Rig stong rgyal mo (15th c.), and contemporaneous female authors in the seventeenth century for whom we have biographies include Lha 'dzin Dbyangs can sgrol ma, A kham Lha mo, Bu Bzhin brtse ba'i ma, and O rgyan Bu khrid.²¹

In addition to 'Phrin las dbang mo's work, recently emerging materials for female-authored Tibetan language auto/biographies are shedding new light on the lives and writings of Tibetan women, and prominent women in Tibetan literature are being studied for the first time. Notable examples include: seven new versions of the life of Tibet's most iconic woman, Ye shes mtsho rgyal (8th c.);²² a biography of Kun tu Bzang mo (15th c.), consort of the "Madman of Central Tibet," Gtsang smyon He ru ka sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan (1452-1507), who was a patron of Gtsang smyon He ru ka's enterprise to mass print the songs and biography of Mi la ras pa (1028/40-1111/23);²³ a biography by a male disciple of the female Nyingma hierarch Smin gling Rje btsun ma Mi 'gyur dpal sgron (1699-1769), who was the daughter of Gter bdag Gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje (1646-1714) and niece to the Nyingma master Lo chen Dharma shrī (1654-1718) – Lo chen Dharma shrī, it should be noted, composed a biography of his mother, Lha 'dzin Dbyangs can sgrol ma (17th c.);²⁴ and the autobiography by the early twentieth century woman Lo chen Chos dbyings bzang mo (1853-1951) who was a guru to many of the aristocrats in high society Lhasa and who converted Shug gseb hermitage into a nunnery.²⁵ There are also several Tibetan women masters connected with the life of the important Nyingma figure, Mdo Mkhyen brtse ye shes rdo rje (1800-1866) for whom we now have biographical materials. In particular, his daughter Mkha' dbyings Sgrol ma (1823-1854), his granddaughter Tshe 'dzin Dbang mo (1894-1953), and his great granddaughter Zla gsal Dbang mo (c. 1928) who authored works on the Gesar epic and history of the

²¹ Smin gling Mi 'gyur dpal sgron is the next woman for whom we have a biography. Though there is no extant biography of the yoginī Kun gsal dbang mo (17 c.), associated with the Smin gling lineage of Gter bdag gling pa, she is another candidate who likely lived during at least part of the seventeenth century. See also Jacoby 2009, fn 3.

²² See Bla rung 2013, 6, 5-331 and 7, 1-192 and Gyatso 2006.

²³ Kun tu Bzang mo is also the biographer of Mon rdzong Ras chen zla ba rgyal mtshan (1418-1506), with whom she was a consort, found in the *'Ba' ra bka brgyud gser 'phreng chen mo*. See DiVelario 2015, 43-44.

²⁴ Mi 'gyur dpal sgron composed seventeen works on different genres including prayers, letters, and advice to disciples. An aside, Mi 'gyur dpal sgron was reputedly propositioned by Sle lung Bzhad pa'i rdo rje, but she refused his request to be his consort on the grounds that she remain celibate. Lha 'dzin Dbyangs can sgrol ma was the mother to both Dharma shrī and Gter bdag Gling pa.

²⁵ Her autobiographical memoir is over five-hundred folio and is available in several versions, including xylographic print facsimiles from central Tibet.

Mdo tshang lineage.²⁶ The most important recent contribution to the study of Tibetan literary women is the 16-volume Tibetan language anthology, compiled and produced by nuns at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy in Kham, *Bod kyi skyes chen ma dag gi rnam thar*.²⁷ This anthology includes biographical sources that extend our current register of Tibetan literary women. Rare and previously unavailable biographies of premodern Tibetan women that have come to light via this anthology include: Jo mo Sman mo (1248-1283), Kun dga' 'Bum (15th c.), Jo jo Bong lha rje (d.u.), A ne Ye shes lha mtsho (b. 1900), Bu Bzhin brtse ba'i ma (17th c.), and O rgyan Bu khrid (17th c.).²⁸

The two most well-known women reincarnation lines are: (1) the twelve Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo tulkus from Bo dong Monastery near Yar 'brog Lake, in proximity to where 'Phrin las dbang mo was born and lived her childhood, and (2) the seven Gung ru Mkha' 'gro ma tulkus from Bla brang Brag dkar Monastery in Amdo.²⁹ Of these, there are biographical accounts of three of the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo tulkus, and Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo 09 Chos dbyings Bde chen mtsho mo (d. 1843) authored at least one text that survives in 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's (1813-1899) *Gdams ngag mdzod* anthology of contemplative instructions, though there are likely other writings by the Rdo rje phag mo tulkus.³⁰ There exists a biography of Gung ru Mkha' 'gro 05 Rig 'dzin dpal mo (1814-1891), written by the nineteenth century monk from Bla brang Monastery, Zhang Ston pa rgya mtsho (1825-1897) and a prayer for her succession of previous reincarnations

²⁶ See Thub bstan Chos dar 2008 and Zla gsal Dbang mo 2007.

²⁷ See Bla rung 2013. Five volumes are dedicated to Buddhist women drawn from the Vinaya and Mahāyāna sūtra literature, female deities, and foremother South Asian tantric adepts including Sukhasiddī, Niguma and Mekhālī – all of whose writings were translated into the Tibetan Buddhist canon. The remaining ten volumes include both known biographies of premodern women such as Ma gcig Lab sgron (1055-1149), Bsod nam Dpal 'dren (1328-1372); and modern women authors including Se ra Mkha' 'gro (1892-1940), Rta mgrin Lha mo (1923-1979) and Tā re Lha mo (1938-2002), aural fables (*gtam rgyud*) and operatic dramas. A catalogue is included, making it a total of 16 volumes, 15 of biographies.

²⁸ Brief biographies of Jo mo Sman mo and Kun dga' 'Bum have been available in the *Gter ston brgya rtsa'i rnam thar* collection compiled by 'Jam mgon Kong sprul (1813-1899). See Kong sprul 2007, 132-134 and 37-138. O rgyan Bu khrid was a disciple and consort of Gter ston Stag sham Nus ldan rdo rje (b. 1655).

²⁹ See Schneider 2015, 464.

³⁰ There are biographies of Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo 01 Chos kyi sgron ma (1422-1455/6), Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo 09 Chos dbyings Bde chen mtsho mo, and Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo 12 Bde chen Chos kyi sgron me (c. 1938). There is also a biography of Rdo rje Phag mo Bde skyong ye shes dbang mo (1886-1909). See Jacoby 2014, 340, n. 32. On Rdo rje phag mo 01, see Diemberger 2007. See also Chos dbyings bde chen mthos mo, *Snyan brgyud rde'u bcud len* and Bkra shis tshe ring 1993, 38-40 and Diemberger 2007, 290-315 and 325.

(*skyes rabs*) by Sde khri 03 'Jam dbyangs Thub bstan nyin ma (1779-1862).³¹ While the Rdo rje phag mo and Gung ru Mkha' 'gro tulku lineages were quasi-regular lineages, many female tulku lines did not continue to be successive rebirths of historical women but intermittently lapsed over the centuries.³² Among the irregular female reincarnation lines is that of the thirteenth century nomad woman, Bsod nam Dpal 'dren (1328-1372) who was the subject of an extensive biography by her husband Rin chen Dpal, and was later reincarnated as Mkha' 'gro Kun bzang who deceased in 2004.³³ We also find women tulku lines that occurred relatively early in Tibetan history, but fizzled out. One of these such lines is that of the reincarnation of Mkha' 'gro ma 'Gro ba bzang mo (d. 1259), the yoginī and consort of the thirteenth century 'Bri gung master Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje (1189-1258) whose reincarnation was 'Khrul zhig Kun ldan ras ma (14th cent.), a key female figure in the Kagyu aural transmission (*snyan brgyud*) of Ras chung pa (1084-1161).³⁴ Lo chen Chos dbyings bzang mo, the early twentieth century woman who converted Shug gseb into a nunnery was considered a reincarnation of the Nyingma luminary Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer (1308-1364) in addition to being associated with Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1143).³⁵

As is a common pattern among prominent female religious figures in Tibet—including Mi 'gyur Dpal sgron, Se ra Mkha' 'gro, and Mkha' 'gro Tā re lha mo—we find reference to both female deities and legendary Buddhist women in many accounts of their previous lives (*kh rung rabs*), and 'Phrin las dbang mo is no exception.³⁶ 'Phrin las dbang mo was considered to be a re-embodiment of the female deity Vajrayoginī and is associated with Sarasvatī, Niguma, and Ye shes mtsho rgyal.

³¹ There is a prayer for the long-life of Gung ru Mkha' 'gro 06. See Bstan pa rgya mtsho, *Gung ru* and *Bkra shis Tshe ring* 1994.

³² See Schneider 2015, 465.

³³ See Bessenger, 2016. Other notable women tulkus include, Rgyal yum O rgyan bu khrid, Ryal rtse Rgyang ro dpal sding rje bstun ma, and La stod pa'i Brag dkar rje bstun ma. See *Bkra shis tshe ring* 1994, 22. An example of a *'das log ma* succession of women tulkus are Sangs rgyas chos 'dzoms (19th c.) who was a reincarnation of Karma Dbang 'dzin (18th c.), both of whom have autobiographical writings. On modern examples of women tulkus, see Schneider 2015.

³⁴ Biographical and supplementary writings are extant for both 'Gro ba bzang mo and Kun ldan ras ma, including several versions of 'Gro ba bzang mo's life story that were adapted as an opera. 'Gro ba bzang mo is also featured in the biography of O rgyan Rin chen dpal (1229/30-1309), a disciple of Rgod tshang pa.

³⁵ Rje btsun Lo chen Rin po che from Shug gseb Nunnery recently indicated that she might reincarnate as a boy, see Schneider 2015, 465 and Havnevik 1999, 123.

³⁶ Most common include the female deities Tārā, Vajrayoginī, Vajravārāhī, Samantabhadrī and the historical women Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Ma gcig lab sgron, and the Indian nun, Dge slong ma dpal mo. See Schneider 2015, 464-465 and Melnick Dyer 2018, 215-223.

This is made explicit in the title of her autobiography, the supplication to her successive previous lives (*skyes 'phreng*), and elsewhere.³⁷ At the beginning of her autobiography, she writes about her previous incarnations in Nepal, India, and Tibet.³⁸ All of this situates 'Phrin las dbang mo not only as one of the few women authors in pre-1959 Tibet, but includes her among Tibetan Buddhist women who claimed prominent female figures among their past lives. This is however distinct from women who spawned tulku lines of succession with an established monastic seat, such as the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo and Gung ru Mkha' 'gro ma tulkus.³⁹

Her Historicity and Literary Style

'Phrin las dbang mo was born in the foothills on the southern shore of the turquoise lake Yar 'brog G.yum mtsho near the palace of the snow-peaked glacial Mount Gang bzang in Sna dkar rtse rdzong, south central Tibet.⁴⁰ She writes that she was "born into a royal family," and in his supplement, Rnam snang rdo rje elaborates on this phrase by explaining that she was the "*tsha mo*" of Khri dpon chen po Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur (d.u.), the principle myriarch of the Yar 'brog Stag lung khri skor area of Sna dkar rtse rdzong, making her a princess of royal descent.⁴¹ Here, the term "*tsha mo*" is ambiguous about whether she was the niece or granddaughter of Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur, since the term can refer to both relationships. An interlinear note inserted into the autobiography helps to clarify, but not define this relationship, which states that she was born into the familial care of Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur.⁴² Why this is historically important is that Khri lcam Kun dga' lha mdzes, the mother of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho

³⁷ Rnam snang rdo rje, *'Phrin las dbang mo'i skyes 'phreng*.

³⁸ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 180-181.

³⁹ The words *sprul pa* or *yang srid* are often used to designate these associations in comparison to a one-to-one line of *sprul sku* succession with an established monastic seat.

⁴⁰ 'Phrin las dbang mo writes that she was born in the foothills along the "*lha chen po gang ba bzang po'i pho brang*" which is likely, Gangs ri gnod sbyin gang bzang (7,919 m.). See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 181.

⁴¹ 'Phrin las dbang mo writes, "*rgyal po'i rigs su skyes*." See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 181 and Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 215. There were thirteen myriarchies (*khri skor*) that constituted the Yar 'brog Stag lung khri skor area of Sna dkar rtse rdzong, of which Yar 'brog Stag lung thar gling chos sde Monastery was the chief monastery. Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur was an established ruler by the time that Tāranātha was four years old because he mentions Khri dpon chen po Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur dbang gi rgyal po and his relationship with the royal family in his autobiography. See Tāranātha 2008d, 17.

⁴² The insertion reads, "... *khri dpon chen bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur dbang gi rgyal po'i ma mar bya la sku 'khrungs*." See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 181.

(1617-1682), was contemporaneously the daughter of the Yar 'brog Khri dpon in Sna dkar rtse rdzong, as suggested by her appellation, Khri lcam.⁴³ While dates for Kun dga' lha mdzes remain uncertain, it is well documented that she gave birth to Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho in the year 1617, making it probable that she was born in the 1590s, making her roughly a decade or so younger than 'Phrin las dbang mo. Given the known and probable dates, 'Phrin las dbang mo was likely not the granddaughter, but rather was the niece of Khri dpon chen po Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur and she lived in his royal household during her girlhood. That these women were relatives is made more probable by Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho's autobiographical description of his mother being from a Jonangpa family in Sna dkar rtse who were devoted to Kun dga' Grol mchog and then his tulku, Tāranātha.⁴⁴ If Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur was in fact the father of Kun dga' lha mdzes, which the current biographical sources suggest, and 'Phrin las dbang mo was his niece, this would make 'Phrin las dbang mo a cousin of the Fifth Dalai Lama's mother, Kun dga' lha mdzes.⁴⁵ This gives us not only a greater salience of the interpersonal relations among the social and kinship worlds of Tāranātha and the Fifth Dalai Lama, which become consequential for the religious history of Tibet, but this contact tracing compounds the psychological and emotional layers of this history.

Her life writing takes us linearly through her autobiographical narrative from the time when she first met Tāranātha as a young girl at the age of seven until she moved to the Jo mo nang valley when she was twenty-two, through her training as a yoginī and eventual lineageholder of the Jonangpa, to her days as an elder exemplar. She lived

⁴³ This is made clear by the kāvya tutor to the Fifth Dalai Lama, Smon 'gro ba Dbang rgyal rdo rje, in his early biography of the Fifth where he describes his mother to be, "yar 'brog khri skor du grags pa'i sa skyong ba'i rigs kyi sras mo kun dga' lha mdzes." See Smon 'gro ba, 58. This is the same Smon 'gro ba, that at least according to Si tu Pañ chen, is thought to have fueled animosities between the young Dalai Lama and Tāranātha. See Smith 2001, 95 and Sheehy 2009, 21.

⁴⁴ This is further evident in his mother's own name, "Kun dga'," Tāranātha's lineage name from Kun dga' Snying po, and in fact, Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho was named Kun dga' Mi 'gyur stobs rgyal dbang gi rgyal po by Tāranātha when he was a baby. See Smon 'gro ba, 58 and Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989, 41 and 43-44 and Karmay 2014, 38 and 40 and Karmay 1998, 506.

⁴⁵ The critical missing information is whether Kun dga' Grags pa, the name that Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho uses for his grandfather, the father of Kun dga' lha mdzes, is a previous or religious name of Khri dpon chen po Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur. In that same passage, Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho states that Tāranātha was consulted about the marriage of his mother, and that Tāranātha sent a painting of the five types of dhāraṇī, "thang ga zhig kyang bskyur bar mdzad." See Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989, 41 and Karmay 2014, 38. The other missing piece are the names of 'Phrin las dbang mo's mother and father.

within the inner circle of Tāranātha and his closest disciples during her entire adult life and was charged with compiling his *Collected Works* after his passing.⁴⁶ She was his consort (*pho nya mo*), and her intimacy with Tāranātha performs multiple roles, including that of assisting him as a female muse who becomes intrinsically entangled within his secret autobiographical experiences (*nyams*) and realizations (*rtogs*);⁴⁷ and by her close association with him, she gained greater agency and authority. She was also a formidable intellectual who is said to have taught *gzhan stong* philosophy “as it dawned spontaneously within her heart” and is listed in Jonang lineage records as a primary figure in the transmission of *gzhan stong* after Tāranātha.⁴⁸ She becomes an important human link in the transmission line of *gzhan stong* and other teachings from Tāranātha to Zur Kun bzang dbang po (d.u.) who was the teacher to Rig ‘dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698-1755), the torch-bearer who ignited the scholastic renaissance of Jonang teachings in eastern Tibet.⁴⁹

During her lifetime, ‘Phrin las dbang mo was witness to pivotal junctures in both the transplantation of the Jonang order as well as the broader cultural history of Tibet. She observed up-close not only the death of Tāranātha, but civil unrest in Gtsang, the fifteen year period after the death of Tāranātha in 1635 that led to the Dga’ ldan Pho brang takeover of Jonang headquarters at Rtag brtan Dam chos gling Monastery in 1650, its conversion into a Dge lugs establishment in 1658, and the subsequent migration of the Jonangpas to remote regions of Amdo on the margins of the Sino-Tibetan frontier. In fact, hers is one of the only known first-person accounts of this critical moment in Jonang history.⁵⁰ Her autobiography unveils her eye-witness account of these events, her memories of intimate encounters and conversations with Tāranātha, her relationships as a mentor to many of Tāranātha’s main disciples, and her role as an heiress to the Jonang order. For instance,

⁴⁶ Based on the account of Blo gsal Bstan skyong (b. 1804), after her compilation of the first fourteen volumes of the *gsung ’bum* that she arranged, the blocks were not immediately carved and the printing was delayed at the Rtag brtan gling par khang.

⁴⁷ That is, both in the technical sense associated with the practice during the third empowerment (*dbang*), i.e. the *pho nya’i lam*, as well as a person who is a source of inspiration. See Tāranātha 2008, *Rdo rje’i gnas pa bcu*.

⁴⁸ See Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 214 and ‘Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 184.

⁴⁹ Other lineages that Tshe dbang nor bu cites that were transmitted via ‘Phrin las dbang mo include, Rdzogs rim rlung sems dbyer med kyi man ngag and Thugs rje mnga’ bdag spyang ras gzigs dbang po. See Tshe dbang nor bu 2006a, 396 and Tshe dbang nor bu. 2006b, 477 and Stearns 2010, 78. She is also listed beside Tāranātha in lineage records for the transmission of ‘Phags mchog spyang ras gzigs dbang phyug gi sgrub thabs smar khrid and Thugs rje chen po’i smar khrid. See Chos kyi dbang phyug 2011, 538-540 and Rnam snang rdo rje 2013, 213-214 and Sheehy 2019, 352.

⁵⁰ See Sheehy 2009, 9-10.

during an encounter that she recounts in her autobiography, 'Phrin las dbang mo describes an intimate conversation that she had with Tāranātha during his final days about omens (*rten 'brel*) that he intuited about the future of the Jonangpa, and the volatile political climate that would ensue after his passing.⁵¹ During this conversation, Tāranātha revealed a series of omens that had recently transpired for him, and that he believed would lead him to be reborn to benefit the Gelukpa.⁵² As history tells, the child born in Mongolia that same year that Tāranātha died, Blo bzang Bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1635-1723)—known as 'Jam dbyangs Tulku—would soon be recognized by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho, First Pañchen Lama Blo bzang Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1567-1662), and the State Oracle of Tibet to be the rebirth Tāranātha, the First Khal kha Rje btsun dam pa.⁵³ Later in her autobiography, 'Phrin las dbang mo wrote that she rejoiced when she heard this news of Tāranātha's rebirth in Mongolia years later, which was likely after the official confirmation in 1642.

By the spring of 1657, in her seventy-second year of life, while residing at the Ri khrod chen mo hermitage in Jo mo nang valley, she was visited by Ngag dbang Blo gros rnam rgyal (1618-1683), a next generation Jonangpa lineage-holder who was regarded as a reincarnation of Tāranātha's mother.⁵⁴ Blo gros rnam rgyal had recently undergone a series of visions that communicated the need for him to travel eastward, on which he sought her advice.⁵⁵ 'Phrin las dbang mo encouraged him and contemplated whether to join him on his journey, but decided to stay at Jonang. In August of that year, after his expedition east, Blo gros rnam rgyal and his caravan would arrive in the valley of 'Dzam thang where he would found Gtsang ba Monastery, and re-establish the central monastic seat of the Jonangpa. Then in 1664, as one of the last living disciples of Tāranātha, she visited and met with the Fifth Dalai Lama.⁵⁶ In her brief description of this encounter, she recounts receiving several authorization initiations (*rjes gnang*) from the Dalai Lama including White Tārā and a guruyoga, and briefly meeting Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705). These historical episodes in her autobiography make it clear that certainly by the end of her life, 'Phrin las dbang mo was considered not only an elder of the Jonang order, but a mediator in the real politic of her time.

Oscillating between her recounts of historical time – including

⁵¹ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 199-200 and Blo gros grags pa 1992, 59 and Blo gros grags pa, *Rje tā ra nā tha'i sku 'das*, 134-135 and Sheehy 2009, 11-12.

⁵² See Sheehy 2009, 11-14 and Stearns 2010, 73-76.

⁵³ See Sheehy 2009, 17-21 and Karmay 2014, 9-10.

⁵⁴ See Sheehy 2009, 16.

⁵⁵ See Kun dga' 'phrin las, *Mtshungs med chos rje*, 11.

⁵⁶ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 210 and Sheehy 2009, 20.

conversations with Tāranātha, her real time observations of the political and social realities in which she was circumstanced – and the wondrous world of her contemplations and dreamtime visions, 'Phrin las dbang mo's writing exhibits as much a historical record of the Jo mo nang valley in the mid-seventeenth century as a sample of Tibetan visionary vernacular literature. With fluidity of composition, she seamlessly weaves her narrative of historical events that she witnessed with poetic descriptions of an interior life that are embellished with metaphors, signs, and allusions. In so doing, the literary modes of her autobiographical subjectivity operate at multiple registers that switch from reflections on candor to despondence to epiphanies to seeming nostalgia about her life circumstance to cryptic verses quoted from tantras. 'Phrin las dbang mo's writing is flowery yet not *kāvya*-influenced, but rather is distinctively written in the educated vernacular of her seventeenth century Gtsang dialect. Her autobiographical writing challenges conventions commonly associated with the auto/biographical (*rang rnam*, *rnam thar*) genre of Tibetan literature. In particular, her writing style does not conform to preconceived patterns of the outer, inner, and secret (*phyi*, *nang*, *gsang*) structure that came to frame Tibetan biographical writing. Throughout her autobiography, she presents the reader with her critical awareness, sentimentality, and testimonial in an unfiltered way that expresses the voice of her ongoing internal dialogue.

Her Autobiographical Oneiric Life

For 'Phrin las dbang mo dream is a powerful expressive domain to tell her story. Throughout her autobiographical writing, she juxtaposes her observations of waking-time circumstance with her dreamtime, intermingling and contrasting tensions inherent to her historical consciousness with her interior oneiric life. She creatively employs dream in her writing through a variety of literary modes and devices – including uses of temporality and liminality, alternating voices, visitations, and states of mind – that ultimately contribute to the telling of her life story in a way that reflect the continuities of her interior life paralleled to the discontinuities that she experienced as a woman author in seventeenth century Tibet. Reading her dream communications, we are confronted with the linguistic and literary features that she applies to encode, decode, and interpret the semiotics of her dream space.⁵⁷ 'Phrin las dbang mo's autobiographical subjectivity may be read through her usage of dream and dream interpretation as one of several literary devices that she employed to author her life story. Even more so, an emphasis on her

⁵⁷ See Shulman and Stroumsa 1999, 3.

dreams and oneiric life give readers insights into her autobiographical subjectivity and how she navigates her life as a yoginī – throughout both waking and dreaming. Moreover, because she writes about her dreams and provides dream reports in her autobiographical writing, she foregrounds and prioritizes the efficacy of oneiric consciousness and its influence to inform her interior narrative.

Writing about dream as a key mode of inquiry and knowledge is far from novel in Tibetan literature. Among the earliest Tibetan language manuscripts, from the caches of eighth century bundles that were unearthed at the Inner Asian cave complex at Dunhuang, we find pre-classical Tibetan texts that record and analyze the oneiric life.⁵⁸ Tibetans wrote prolifically about their interior world, and dream in particular finds a variety of usages within Tibetan writing: from medium states that prophesize, to devices that mobilize or alter a narrative, to metaphors for life, to portals into other worlds, to tactics for authenticating or authorizing, to means for accessing knowledge, to methods for personal yogic transformation.⁵⁹ One of the most well-known forms of Tibetan writing on dream is explanation about dream as a contemplative method, such as we find in dream yoga texts from the Niguma and Nāropa sixfold cycles of instructions, of which 'Phrin las dbang mo was a practitioner.⁶⁰ As we would expect, there is also a broad usage of dream found within Tibetan auto/biographical literature. In fact, this is so much the case that we might glean a better understanding of contemplative practice through a closer look at how dreams and other such interior narratives are utilized by Tibetan authors who wrote biography. Vice-versa, a better understanding of Tibetan auto/biography will profit from our reading contemplative writings about dream and dream practices. For the practice of writing down one's dream is integral to both self-reflection on the yogin's path as well as to the compilation and ultimate authorization of a life story. For some Tibetan writers, the two are not so separate.⁶¹

⁵⁸ For an example of “probably one of the most ancient witnesses of such ‘literature,’” dated to the late eighth century, see Crescenzi and Torricelli 1995, 8.

⁵⁹ Texts on how to examine dream can be found by Indian and Kashmiri authors, preserved in the tantra section of the Bstan 'gyur. There is a short text attributed to Padmasambhava that is framed as a dialogue with the Emperor Khri srong lde bstan, imparting the guru's advice to the ruler on how to interpret his dreams. See Padma 'byung gnas, *Dregs pa spyi gnad las zhus lan*.

⁶⁰ She was a practitioner of the Ni gu chos drug, specifically. See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 182.

⁶¹ One example of autobiographical writing on dreams is the dream diary by Gu ru Chos dbang (1212-1270), who utilized dream episodes as a means to access and describe his previous lives as well as to cultivate liturgical practice. See Chos kyi dbang phyug 1979.

The key to dreams however is not so much having them or even writing about them but interpreting them. For this, we find a micro-genre of Tibetan texts that explicate methods used to examine dream (*rmi lam brtag thabs*).⁶² Such texts are fine-tuned specifically to the analyses of signs within the life of a dream, both supporting the advancement of yogic praxis as well as contextualizing dreamtime within a storyline. What are critical in such texts are the methods described for deciphering and cracking the semiotic code of a dream.

In much Tibetan autobiographical writing on dreams, a recurrent motif is that the dream event is used to write about oneself in order to work with waking experiences, to test and blur the intra-subjective boundaries. To investigate 'Phrin las dbang mo's usage, we read a few select autobiographical dream reports that she wrote to look at some of the markers, tropes, and frames that she utilizes to mobilize her life story. 'Phrin las dbang mo writes,

In a dream one night on the twenty-fifth day, my sublime lama [Tāranātha] was giving a dharma talk to a crowded assembly. On the seating line in the monastic assembly, someone sitting there looked at me with a distressed expression and said, 'It's too hot! I can't stand it!' He got up and ran to the back of the line. Having dreamt this, I woke up. My mind was serenely blissful.

Writing a text, on the line of words that read, 'Imagine yourself in a pureland, amidst a mound of offering clouds, pristine wisdoms and so forth...' There at the end of that line, a girl whom I'd never seen before with the name of a goddess – Bde chen gsal sgron – arrived with red and yellow flowers. We ate a meal together.

By putting together both my dream last night and the waking signs, I see how these circumstances are different, yet similar. Even so, the meaning is difficult for common people to analyze. It's like a flower blooming in the rain and sun.⁶³

⁶² This micro-genre is part of a larger Tibetan genre on methods of analysis (*brtags thab*) that is devoted to the analysis of a variety of subjects, including gems, weapons, horses, etc. For a discussion of a *rmi lam brtag pa* texts on the examination of dreams from the Bstan 'gyur, see Young 1999, 29-31.

⁶³ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 187, "... nyer lnga'i nub gcig rmi lam du / bla ma dam pa'i [pas] 'khor mang tshad gcig la bka' chos gnang / chos gral de na bdag la mi dga' ba'i rnam 'gyur byed mi gcig 'dug pa de na re/ tsha zer mi bjod pa 'dug zer rgyab gral du bros song ba rmis/ gnyid sad pa na[s] sems bde cham me ba dang / de [dpe] cha gcig bris pa'i tshig gral la yang / rang snang zhing khams dang mchod pa'i sprin gyi phung po 'byung ba'i ye shes sogs zer ba'i mtshams der/ bde chen gsal sgron gyi me tog dmar ser dang / sngar 'dris med pa'i lha'i ming can zhig go zas 'brel byas/ mdang gi rmi lam dang dngos kyi ltas gnyis 'dzoms pas gnas skyabs tha dad 'dra ba zhig yod kyang don phal pas dpyad dka' stel char dang nyi ma la me tog rgyas pa bzhin no."

With this dream report, she presents a clear contrast between dreamtime and waking time. She explicitly records her dream about sitting in an assembly hall while Tāranātha is teaching and being spoken to by a disgruntled person. The first sign is the person saying that it is too hot.⁶⁴ The episode coupled with this dream is not a dream. 'Phrin las dbang mo is awake, sitting in her study writing a liturgy until suddenly she is interrupted by a young girl. The implicit suggestion here is that the serendipitous appearance of this girl – Bde chen gsal sgron, whose name is that of a goddess, bearing red and yellow flowers as offerings to her while she composes an offering text, is a sign – as surreal as a dream. 'Phrin las dbang mo comments that her dream and waking experiences, however different, have similarities. She sees these not as two disparate events that occurred in entirely distinct modes, but rather as markers in a symbolic universe that make-up a continuum, analogous to how rain and sun make up a flower. These are the two circumstances (*gnas skyabs gnyis*): (a) the dream (*rmi lam*) equals the rain (*char ba*) and (b) the waking signs (*dnegos ltas*) equal the sun (*nyi ma*). The two signs are the person in the assembly hall and the visitation of the young goddess-like girl. She interprets both to be positive. 'Phrin las dbang mo is problem solving. She states that such interpretations are difficult for common people to make, yet she enters into a dialogue with her oneiric consciousness, analyzing its meaning and import. By writing into her autobiography that the young goddess-like girl interrupts her while she is in the midst of writing a text, she uses this influence to be like a muse that serves as a creative force for her own literary composition. In this way, she uses dream events to serve as devices for her writing.

Whereas in the previous dream report she deciphers radical signs, in this next dream, her analysis of the dream is less determined. 'Phrin las dbang mo writes,

In another dream, a female messenger approached from the eastern direction and handed me a very sharply pointed knife. The next day, a low-caste woman handed me some food. A few days later, there was that same sharp knife from before. I cut open a belly sack and all kinds of inner organs spewed out. Some of them, I offered as tormas. Two women barbecued a few more over a fire. This was all in a dream. However suspicious, there is little that I can make of this.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Why it would be “too hot” to sit close to her is a subject of further interpretation.

⁶⁵ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 187, “*yang rmi lam du shar phyogs nas pho nya zhig gis gri rtse shin tu rno ba zhig sprad byung / sang nyin 'gar [mgar] mo zhig gi[s] zas byin/ yang zhag shas nas sngar gyi gri des grod pa zhig kha phye nang khrol sna tshogs kyis] nang khengs/ la la gtor ma la phul/ 'ga' zhig bud med gnyis kyis me btang nas 'tshos par rmis/ rtoḡ dpyad kyang cung zad byung.*”

Reflecting on her dream, 'Phrin las dbang mo states that she is suspicious (*rtog dpyad*), and that in fact, she can't derive meaning from these episodes. Reading her dream, it is not because the dream is devoid of symbols – the sharp knife and inner organs represent rich ciphers to decode – yet there is a residual ambiguity that remains a natural feature of dream, and she is forced to contend with this. Though she shows interest in decoding her own experience, and perhaps reconciling anxieties or ambiguities, 'Phrin las dbang mo points to how the dream is opaque, to such an extent that the dream does not communicate decipherable content. The reappearance of a sharp knife, inner organs as oblations; these do not make meaningful sense to her. She concludes that the dream has no message per se.⁶⁶ Reminiscent of features written into autobiography in modernity, we find her writing about life merely for the sake of it, yet giving it no particular meaning, makes it important. In this case, there is something mundane and thereby *more real* about the dream.

One night, before she embarks on a journey, 'Phrin las dbang mo writes,

In my dream, there appeared the head of a Brahmā on a bell, and yet in reality, there arose on the golden ground numerous appearances such as variegated images painted in black ink. Signs concerning the one who is most intimate with me [Tāranātha] were slightly reversed. Nevertheless, having carefully analyzed [the signs], no matter what the future holds, since I've arrived here, I know it will be beneficial.

Whatever the case, I must stay on the path uninterruptedly.

[On this occasion, while coming down from Dbus, Rje btsun dam pa's [i.e. Tāranātha's] mother walked with Rje btsun ma Rdo rje bu dga' [i.e. 'Phrin las dbang mo] to glorious Jonang.]⁶⁷

On the night that I reached Dge steng [Monastery],⁶⁸ I had a dream similar to before. Honoring that, an intuitive flash suggested that there would be a solution. I gradually arrived at the Jetavana Grove at Rtag brtan gling. I performed such activities as making donations and a community tea offering.

There are a variety of means for expressing the manifestations of a dream and actual signs. Conviction was born within me with respect to signs in a dream. Even thoughts of desire and hatred were purified, a

⁶⁶ See Shulman and Stroumsa 1999, 9. On ambivalence in Tibetan autobiographical writings, see Gyatso 1998, 233-235.

⁶⁷ This is an interlinear note (*mchan*) in a third-person voice, suggesting that it was inserted. See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 190. Explanation of this insertion does not appear in the *kha skongs*. Rdo rje bu dga' is abbreviated from her secret name, Ratna badzri ni.

⁶⁸ A small Sa skya Monastery in the vicinity.

little.⁶⁹

Albeit via a third-person narrator in the text, we again find this juxtaposition of dreamtime with real time. As 'Phrin las dbang mo is commenting on the metaphor of staying on the path, the comment is interjected that she is in fact walking with Tāranātha's mother along a path up to the hermitage in the Jo mo nang valley where they lived. Her narrative then shifts abruptly to visit Dge steng Monastery, and back to the grove at the base of Rtag brtan gling Monastery, exemplifying how she pivots across time, place, and agents in nonlinear ways.

She continues with a longer vignette,

Then, on one occasion, while performing a brief practice during a lunar eclipse, I analyzed [my dreams] a little. Increasingly, my dreams became mildly worse.

When I was writing my commentary on the visualization and maṇḍala of the Kālacakra, in a dream one night, there were hordes of people taking-up weapons and going into battle.⁷⁰ A young lady friend said to me, 'Get up right now! Put on this outfit!' She gave me five different types of gear to wear, and handed me a full armor. After a moment elapsed, I went into battle. When I woke-up my mind was filled with disturbing thoughts again. At that same time, in a dream, someone said to me, 'You must stay for six years.' There were many such complications to examine.⁷¹

Starting this episode with a remark about how interpreting her dreams makes them worse, she goes on to describe a dream that is rich with allusions derived from the epic found in the *Kālacakra Tantra* with a direct message about what to do. She writes further,

⁶⁹ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 190, "*rmi lam du dril bu'i tshangs mgo 'phrul pa dang / dngos su'ang gser gyi sa gzhi la/ snag tsha'i rim o bzo dbyibs sna tshogs shar ba sogs byung / rang dang sems nye bag cig la ltas cung zad log da dung legs par dpyad pas phug ci ltar yang / da res phyin pas phan thogs par shes/ gang la yang ma chags par lam du zhugs / di skabs dbus nas mar yong ba'i dus rje btsun dam pa'i ma yum rje btsun ma rdo rje bu dga' dang mnyam du dpal jo nang du phebs pa yin] dge steng du sleb pa'i nub yang sngar gyi rmi lam/ de dang cha 'dra ba la/ de la thabs 'dra yod gyu ba yul le ba zhig byung rim pas/ yar yong nas rtag brtan gyi rgyal byed tshul du slebs/ mang ja 'gyed sogs byas/ rmi lam dang dngos ltas rnam mngon du gyur pa'i brjod sgo sna tshogs shig 'dug pa/ rmi lam sogs ltas la nges shes skyes shing / chags sdang gi blo yang cung zad dtwangs."*

⁷⁰ To-date, her commentary (*Ti ka*) on the Kālacakra is not known to be extant.

⁷¹ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 192, "*de nas skabs shig las phran bu sgrub pa dang / zla ba gzas 'dzin dus 'dzoms pa rtog dpyad tsam dang / rim pas rmi lam 'tshub cha tsam las/ dus 'khor mngon dkyil gyi Ti ka 'bri ba'i nub cig rmi lam du/ mi mang po go mtshon thogs nas g.yul du 'gro ba/ zla bdag la bud med gzhon nu gcig na re 'phral du long / gos 'di gyon zer gos sna snga dang / go mtshon tshang ba bdag la gta'd/ de dag thogs te g.yul du 'gro ba dang / nyin par yang yid mi bde snyam pa byung / der rmi lam du khyod lo drug sdod zer ba sogs dpyad dka' ba mang du byung."*

On another occasion, while I was composing my commentary on the completion stages of the Kālacakra, a young lady appeared in my dream and said, 'Do you have someone that you can trust? Soon it will be time to send him in a different direction.' Ornamented with bones, she danced in zigzags. According to this dream, there is someone to send in the eastern direction.⁷²

Again, a dream interrupts her writing. This time it forecasts an event. Through reading the biography of her younger contemporary Ngag dbang Blo gros rnam rgyal, we discover that this prognosticates his journey to 'Dzam thang, as mentioned above.⁷³ Abruptly, she shifts to write,

Then, after a few months had passed, I was at the old tattered house. There was no warmth from the sun, the fire wouldn't ignite, there was no water, no firewood, no milk to be found, no friends around. A vulture landed on the roof. A raven came and snatched the torma. I lost my writing utensils to pen my compositions.

Like that, the meaning of these inimical signs manifested throughout the day and night. At the same time that they came about, their meaning was that of the first of the three oral instructions. Just like the sun sets and rises again, these omens will turn positive. That's how it's explained.⁷⁴

Noting these nine signs that occur consecutively, she stresses how deriving meaning from them is important. However negative each may appear to be, counter-intuitively they in fact signal optimism – like a setting sun signals its inevitable rise.

Reflections on Her Autobiographical Subjectivity

'Phrin las dbang mo's story is told both synchronously across historical time, geographical place, and persons as well as asynchronously across

⁷² See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 192, "*yang dus 'khor gyi rdzogs rim gyi Ti ka bri ba'i skabs rmi lam du bud med gzhon nu zhig na rel khrod la blo gtad pa'i mi yod na/ dar cig phyogs gzhan du gtong ba'i dus yin zer ba dang / keng rus sogs zar zer mang po 'khrab tu byung / rmi lam ltar de shar phyogs su btang bas.*"

⁷³ See Sheehy 2009, 14-17.

⁷⁴ See 'Phrin las dbang mo 2013, 192-193, "*de nas zla ba kha shas nas khang ba zur ral/ nyi ma la drod med me la mi gsos/ chu med shing bu med/ 'o ma ma rnyed/ mda' [zla] bo med/ bya rgod thog steng du bab[s]/ gtor [ma] ldeb bya rog gi[s] khyer gsung[s] rtsom 'bri ba'i [ma'i] smyu gu phon cig bor/ de 'dra ba'i ltas mi legs pa nyin zhag gcig mngon sum du [tu] byung ba'i don de ni zhor byung du bka' bab gsum gyi dang po de'i don rta bdun nub nas/ slar shar ba ltar rten 'brel gsos pa'i don yin/ 'dir smras pa ...*" The three oral instructions that she refers to here were taught to her by Tāranātha, and are written earlier in the autobiography.

dreamscapes and visionary landscapes in which she is active as a concomitant agent. She operates nonlinearly through her interior lifeworld of dreams, visions, and the construal of omens that shift times, places, and agencies. These dynamics work within her autobiography at different registers to form a selfhood that is not autonomous but is rather contingent and relational.⁷⁵ Co-creative with the contingencies of her lifeworld, albeit the temporal, spatial, and social worlds in which she relationally inhabits and is embedded, her autobiographical subjectivity is reciprocally shaped by these very contingencies. For instance, her relational selfhood operates through a plurality of voices that narrate her life story – whether it be via an intimate conversation with Tāranātha or her interpretation of the young goddess-like girl Bde chen gsal sgron with red and yellow flowers. Her autobiographical subjectivity is shaped by these presences and their messages, even if their voice is her own interpretation, as well as the ways in which she navigates her relationality with these myriad interlocutors. While she does not encounter all of these agents in her waking consciousness, she nonetheless gives her relationship with them equal ontological importance to any agent that she encounters in her waking life. By so doing, she elicits and invites multiple dimensions of conscious lived worlds into the formation of her narrative, further complexifying her autobiographical subjectivity. In these ways, the formation of her subjectivity, both as an author and subject, is utterly contingent on the intersubjective relational dynamics in which she lives and dreams within her lifeworld – dynamics with the characters, events, and places that are other than her autobiographical agency, and yet it is these very dynamics that co-create her subjective agency.

Born into a royal family, she occupied a social life of privilege that enabled her certain affordances, including her literacy and religious life, that further shaped her social positionality. Living through the first part of the seventeenth century in south central Tibet, in the social worlds that she inhabited, she inevitably was aware of other powerful religious women exemplars, for instance, the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo whose monastic seat at Bsams sdings Monastery was in the vicinity of her birthplace.⁷⁶ These factors are the kinds of affordances that enabled her to leverage her social positionality as well as historical circumstance, largely via the purview of her religious virtuosity, to represent herself – as an author, yoginī, consort, and tulku – identities that she draws from to shapeshift her autobiographical subjectivity.

Her historicity lends itself to questions about the authenticity of her account due to the historical reality that the Dga' ldan Pho brang

⁷⁵ See Jacoby 2014, 12-14.

⁷⁶ Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo 05 Ye shes mtsho mo was her contemporary.

systematically eradicated or confiscated writings by Jonangpa authors during her lifetime. This raises questions not only about how her intended audience, which was likely the immediate and next generation Jonangpa disciples, affected her autobiographical subjectivity; but also, if her account was scripted, edited, and/or rearranged to conform to a normative account of history. The episode in which she describes a conversation with Tāranātha in which he revealed a series of omens that he believed were signs that he would be reborn to benefit the Gelukpa raises these suspicions. Because this manuscript was recopied and passed down by hand over the centuries, and not committed to block print, there is the possibility that at least sections of her story were tampered with or rewritten to alter the telling of her story. However, while there is reason for such suspicion, her creative and elliptic writing style along with vernacular language leave little doubt that her authorial narrative voice is authentic. The stylistic coherence of her autobiography argues for a single author. As excerpts translated here attest, she wrote as much to work through the obscure riddles of dreams and omens as to record her historical circumstance, and a close read of her autobiography suggests that these cannot be dis-entangled.

In what seems to be very conscious choices, 'Phrin las dbang mo works constantly to solve the riddles that are presented in her dreams as well as omens. For instance, more than once throughout her autobiography, 'Phrin las dbang mo writes-down the phrase, "*rmi lam dang dngos ltas rnam mgnon du 'gyur*" – which may be rendered more literally, "The signs that manifest in both dream and reality." Though she persists on differentiating circumstances that are dream from waking reality, she remains intentionally enmeshed within this ambiguity. As she slips lucidly in and out of hypnagogic states, and oscillates seamlessly between these modes of awareness, she seeks to discern the tensions between the real and surreal while at the same time, she blurs such boundaries. As a yoginī, waking and dreaming realities are segues in a continuum of consciousness. As an author, she thrives on the thresholds of her historical consciousness. These liminal spaces enable her to use dreams and omens as media to communicate her concerns, fears, images, and hopes so that she can interpret them. She utilizes this liminality not only to balance her private interior world with an outer abstract reality, but as a literary device that infuses her with powers to express, pivot, and spell-out her life story.⁷⁷ Along this liminal

⁷⁷ Shulman and Stroumsa write, "By their very liminality, dreams are at the confluence of theology, cosmology, and anthropology. In a sense, they permit, where other media fail, a way of intracultural communication of great flexibility. In particular, dreams offer a constant balance between the private world of latent images, fears, and hopes, and outside reality, cosmic as well as social. Dreams present the means to reestablish the constantly shattered equilibrium between these two realms. They

continuum of waking and dream, she persistently remembers the markers that she witnesses, records new signs, decodes, and interprets. With each dream report more deeply enmeshed in the linearity of her written narrative, 'Phrin las dbang mo situates herself further in relation to a complex universe of cultural symbols and intuitions that co-create her universe from within.⁷⁸ Reality for her, in its multiple modalities, is codified, and she believes that code can be cracked. Her task, both as a yoginī as well as an author, is to definitively ascertain (*ngeś shes*) the signs (*ltas*).

Recognizing the expressivity of dreams, she employs this expressiveness to capture the themes, obsessions, and choices that she records in telling her life story. As she does so, and by providing prognostic clues to how she interprets the terrain of her dreams according to her own semi-otic maps, she navigates in ways that give her reader a fuller understanding of herself as a dreaming subject. In Tibetan autobiographical writing on dreams, a recurrent motif is that the dream event is used to write about oneself in order to work with waking experiences, to at once exercise authorial agency and test the permeability between dreaming and the waking real. As cited in her dream episodes translated here, there is a range of encoded dream communications, some she interprets on the spot while others remain opaque or are only made meaningful by events later in her autobiography. Though there are episodes that do, on some occasions, her dream reports do not showcase the miraculous such as her capacity to communicate with nonhuman interlocutors, including protective deities or *ḍākinīs*, but are rather mundane. Nonetheless, as we have seen, these episodes too serve to be important media for grounding her narrative.

'Phrin las dbang mo can however be read not only for the historical value or even import of the content of her life writing, but also for the literary modes and virtues that she employs as an author. As exemplified by instances chosen from her writing, she reflexively facilitates her autobiographical subjectivity through her writing in ways that test and blur the intra-subjective boundaries of dreamtime and historical time. Caught in the turbulent transition of the Jonangpa, at a moment of historical precarity, as authors do, 'Phrin las dbang mo writes to negotiate her experience. As she writes her dreams and omens, her dreams and omens help her to navigate her historical change. With this in mind, 'Phrin las dbang mo can be read not merely for the value of her content, but as a Tibetan *belletrist* by giving attention to the particular aesthetic qualities, literary modes and virtues that define her writing style, as well as to the particular literary features that compel her composition.

accomplish this essential task in different ways, always directly related to the individual religious cultures." See Shulman and Stroumsa 1999, 6.

⁷⁸ See Shulman and Stroumsa 1999, 3.

As an author and subject of her writing, she embodies her literary sensibilities, her sense of selfhood, and the boundaries that lie therein. It is her very own vision of herself that not only imbues her complex symbolic world with the intra-cultural meaning in which she participates as a dreamer, but that she communicates as an author. As she witnesses a dream, commits it via language to text, and interprets it, 'Phrin las dbang mo is participating in a universe of intra-cultural forms and Tibetan religious values. She is also however textualizing her dream, giving her intuition and imagination literary texturing. In so doing, she actively involves herself both as a yoginī in the interiority of her self-transformation as well as an author in the process of her self-representation. In this eternal dialectical loop – to herself, from herself – she lives in a regulated mode of reception that reiterates her visceral Buddhist sense of self – interpenetrated by non-self elements, not collective or metaphorical, ultimately dissolvable.⁷⁹ In such a way, her dreams speak not only to the composition of her autobiographical writing, but also to the composition of herself as a yoginī. For 'Phrin las dbang mo, the practice of authorship is transformative.

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⁷⁹ See Gyatso 1998, 229-231.

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