


# The lion of Gung thang

## A historical-ethnographic note on Tshal Gung thang

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his is a brief note on Tshal Gung thang, on Gung thang Bla ma Zhang (1123–93), the founder of this famous monastic centre due east of Lhasa, and on Ngan lam, the old name of the district where Bla ma Zhang established his monastery and temple.<sup>1</sup> The background for this note was a day trip that I took together with colleagues from the “Tibetan Tumulus” project in May 2019.<sup>2</sup> The objective was to look for a stone lion in Gung thang, of which a Tibetan colleague had informed us, adding that it is very likely a figure from the imperial period. We also wanted to visit the rock carvings in the nearby side valley of Zhal, which became public a few years ago. This place is not far from two burial mound fields that we knew only from satellite photos and which it was planned to visit as part of the 2019 fieldwork campaign. These cemeteries belong to the total of six tumulus fields that today we register for the Tshal Gung thang/ Ngan lam district. One theory is that the stone lion and its now-vanished counterpart originally stood at one of these Ngan lam graves, from where they were moved to Gung thang on the initiative of the founder Bla ma Zhang himself. But there are also indications of the scenario of their much later relocation in connection with the renewal of the Gung thang Flower Offering festival (*Me tog mchod pa*) in the early phase of

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Martin, for whose *Festschrift* we have the honour to contribute this short note, was one of the first to work on Tshal pa, especially on the peculiarities of Bla ma Zhang, his teaching and practice (Martin 1992, 2001). Later works include the somewhat broader study on Tshal Gung thang, supplemented with ethnographic data, by Sørensen and Hazod (2007, hereinafter RCP) or the works by Yamamoto, with a particular focus on Zhang and his writings (Yamamoto 2009, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> “The Burial Mounds of Central Tibet” (hereinafter TTT) is a research project financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF P30393-G25), in whose framework the 2019 fieldwork was also carried out. I wish to thank the project team for their tireless efforts in the surveys and accompanying documentary work under not always easy on-site conditions: Hubert Feiglstorfer (architect), Martin Gamon (archaeologist), Theobald Hazod (geologist), and Georg Zotti (archaeo-astronomer). In addition, I would also like to thank Shawo Khacham, an archaeologist at the Tibet University, Lhasa, for his cooperation and exchange of data in connection with the TTT project.

the Lhasa Ganden Phodrang government.

### 1. The lions at the Gung thang temple complex

The monastic centre of Tshal Gung thang, which was expanded in different phases, goes back to the foundations by Gung thang Bla ma Zhang, a charismatic and at the same time controversial figure, whom later history classifies as one of the “Three jewels of Tibet”.<sup>3</sup>

The monastic complex basically consisted of two sections (approx. 1 km apart) in the area called Tshal; this refers to today’s Tshal Village and Gung thang Village, which together form the “Tshal Gung thang district” (*xiang*) of the Lhasa Municipality. In Tshal Village there is the founding monastery of Yang dgon, established by Bla ma Zhang in 1175, as well as a number of later, partly no longer existing or derelict religious foundations (Dbus gling monastery, the Rgyud smad grva tshang, Pe har Lha khang), and it was the place where the secular ruler of Tshal, the Tshal pa *khri dpon* had their residence in the 13th and 14th century – the *khri dpon khang* (no longer extant).<sup>4</sup> Gung thang Village is the location of the famous *vihāra*, which Bla ma Zhang founded in 1187. The main sanctuary, the great Jo bo Byang chub chen po (or Lha chen Dpal ’bar) statue, was installed two years later in the presence of important contemporaries – Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110-93), Gling chen Ras pa (1128-88) and Rgya ma Sangs rgyas dbon ston (1138-1210) (RCP: 259). Today only the main building of the temple complex remains, which in turn is the remainder of the renovations from the time when the temple (and Tshal as a whole) became part of the Dge lugs pa school and the Lhasa central government. Similar to the case of Tshal Yang dgon, the establishment of the *vihāra* was later followed by a series of buildings and institutions, above all the imposing Sku ’bum chen mo *stūpa*, during the construction of which, according to the tradition, Zhang died and which served as his grave monument.<sup>5</sup> Imme-

<sup>3</sup> *bod nor bu rnam gsum*, i.e. Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje Rgyal po (1110-70), Tsong kha pa Blo bzang Grags pa (1357-1419) and Bla ma Zhang – referring to the enormous influence of these spiritual fathers on the religious and political developments in early and later post-imperial Tibet (RCP: 379, et passim).

<sup>4</sup> RCP (Garden): 597.

<sup>5</sup> According to the textual tradition, the body was cremated on the half-finished *stūpa*, at the construction site, so to speak, and the ashes were later placed in the upper part of the *bum pa* (i.e. dome of the *stūpa*) – with the exception of the heart, tongue and eyes, which together with other relics were given into the ossuary called Bkra shis ’Od ’bar. For details see RCP: 270ff. The *stūpa* was not rebuilt after its destruction during the Cultural Revolution. A large hill of debris with a diameter of ca. 40m is now bordered by a circumambulation path. For photographs of the intact Sku ’bum chen mo see RCP: 315.

diately to the south there were further historical *stūpa*-s (today partially rebuilt), and finally the well-known “colleges” and “residences” – i.e. Chos 'khor gling and Chos khri grva tshang (aka Chos khri lho lcog) and the Sgom sde Gzims khang Shar ma and the Gzims phug nub ma alias Chos khri nub ma (Fig. 2). These institutions, which were built between the 13th and 15th centuries, have disappeared today or there are only some remains of the wall (RCP: 228-74). A special place was immediately west of the colleges, in the area of the “great sandy plain” (Bye thang chen mo – related to the Tshal thang Bye ma can of the written sources), which was once laid out as a garden where the inauguration ceremony of the Tshal pa ruler was traditionally held (RCP (Garden): 601).

A satellite image from 1966 provides a good impression of the architecture of the Gung thang temple district before its destruction in the late 1960s (Fig. 2). The buildings that we see here still intact can be easily brought in line with historical descriptions, especially those of the representative inventory text *Gung thang dkar chag* (written in 1782).<sup>6</sup> Despite the structural changes, especially in the last few decades, the basic streets have been preserved, even if the streets have partly been widened or narrowed due to renovations of the residential buildings. This fact is relevant to understanding the place of the stone lion that we visited in May 2019, following the information given to us by Shawo Khacham, an archaeologist at the Tibet University. The figure stands behind a walled partition between a residential building and an incense offering shrine (*bsangs khang*) right on the street, about 50m from the entrance to the courtyard of the Gung thang temple (Fig. 3). This shaft-like construction (internal dimension ca. 130x190cm), with a tiny, barred window facing the street, is likely to date from more recent times, built in connection with the construction of the house behind it.

The lion was half covered in garbage, its legs half buried in the ground. We had no official permit for an inspection, so the exposure had to be taken quickly. At least for a measurement and first photographic documentation, this somewhat bizarre clearing out action was sufficient – accompanied by the benevolent curiosity and partial help of the neighbours.

The stone lion is a sturdy figure of approx. 110cm (length), height: 100cm; width (distance between the front legs): 62cm. The massive head, which makes up almost a third of the body, measures 35cm (distance between the tips of the ears), eye distance 16cm.<sup>7</sup> The figure is

<sup>6</sup> I.e. the basic text of RCP (see RCP: 13ff.); an earlier translation is in Everding 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Measurements by Hubert Feiglstorfer, May 5 2019.

facing the street, and, as it appears, in a half-lying or crouching position. The mane is made differently, with a longitudinal mane on the forehead area and a curly mane on the back of the head. The tail has broken off; it may originally have pointed upwards from the body. There are remains of red colour on the sides of the body, there is also some blue. The massive overall composition of the stone figure, details such as the designs of the curly mane and the form of crouching posture are strongly reminiscent of the imperial grave lions of 'Chad kha (size 120x90cm), and like them the Gung thang lion is indeed impressive, but rather crudely carved.<sup>8</sup> We share the assessment of Shawo Khacham, who in 2016 was the first to inspect this stone sculpture and who has little doubt that it represents a product of the imperial era; he thinks the face and the front part of the mane, however, may be a later working.<sup>9</sup>

The village people and the monks of Gung thang call the stone figure the lion of Gung thang Bla ma Zhang, who used it as his mount, they say – possibly an allusion to one of the so-called “three offences” of Zhang, according to which he used to undertake his pilgrimages on the back of a snow lion.<sup>10</sup> But there were originally two lions, because on the opposite side of the road there was a second stone lion, the neighbours say, which has long since disappeared. This means that we have here the characteristic situation of a pair of stone lions, which usually act as guardians of prestige buildings, in one of the three positions – facing forward, facing each other (as in this case) or facing the monument.

The lion's present position indicates that it belonged to the entrance complex of the temple and not to the former Chos khri grva tshang situated behind the (left) lion, whose entrance was on the north side (Fig. 2). In Fig. 2 we see a widening of the street shortly before the entrance to the temple courtyard; this is the place where, during the fa-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hazod 2015. More recent discoveries of stone lions as guardians of imperial grave mounds relate to a pair of lions from the site 0242 (see TTT, site 0242) and a pair of lions that are kept in Shigatse (in the new Gzhis kha rtse *rdzong*, which has been set up as a museum) and allegedly came from one grave field in Bo dong (most likely related to the TTT site 0325). Both pairs have stylistic similarities, but differ from the 'Chad kha and Gung thang lions.

<sup>9</sup> Shawo Khacham, personal communication, December 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The “three offences” (or pretensions) of Gung thang Bla ma Zhang: 1) Contrary to the advice of the protector god Pe har, he did not build his monastery on the mountain, but (arrogantly) on the river (Skyid chu), a location reserved for the Jo khang. 2) Zhang did not make his pilgrimages on foot, but on a snow lion. 3) He only allowed *bla ma*-s from Lhasa (meaning the core of Central Tibet?) to be abbot of his religious site; see RCP (Garden): 615.

mous Gung thang Flower Offering festival (*Me tog mchod pa*), the divine couple Grib Rdzong btsan and the Gung thang Lha mo<sup>11</sup> used to meet for the first time and perform a dance before going to the temple to spend a night there together – a key scene in one of the most spectacular festivals of the traditional Lhasa year.<sup>12</sup> It appears that the lions once marked this small forecourt, although they are not mentioned in any of the temple descriptions known to us (including the reports by early western visitors such as those of H. Richardson in the 1940s). At the same time, it can be assumed that there were older relocations of the figures within Gung thang – but only if we think that their presence goes back to the founding days, when the architectural situation of the temple and forecourt was completely different.

If we pursue the assessment of an imperial-era origin of the stone figures, the question of where they came from arises, and when and under what circumstances they came to Gung thang.

## 2. In Ngan lam

### 2.1 Burial grounds and rock carvings in Zhal phu

Tshal (lit. grove, park, garden)<sup>13</sup> referred to a larger area in Bla ma Zhang's time, which included Gung thang and neighbouring settlements (such as Tsha ba gru, Zhang's birthplace at the foot of the Tsan dan ri; Fig. 1; cf. RCP (Garden): 600ff.), and Grib, the southern valley across from Lhasa, is also said to have been part of Tshal at that time.<sup>14</sup> And it has been argued that Tshal was probably a derivative of the imperial place name of Ngan lam Ts[h]al gsar ba, "new Tshal of Ngan lam", with the place name Ngan lam being associated with the imperial Ngan lam family of the same name. This family originally came

<sup>11</sup> I.e. the Lhasa protector Rdzong btsan of Grib and the protectress of Tshal Gung thang, Dpal ldan lha mo 'Dod khams dbang phyug ma, one of the three Dpal lha sisters of Lhasa. The statues of these deities are kept in their respective residences, in Grib Lha khang and in the Gung thang temple.

<sup>12</sup> This meeting reflects the union of the secular and religious throne of Tshal pa (cf. also below fn. 14); for details of the *Met tog mchod pa* (held at *sa ga zla ba* – middle of the fourth Tibetan lunar month) see RCP (Garden): 585-93.

<sup>13</sup> For other spellings ('Tshal, Mtshal) and their interpretations in the local tradition see RCP (Garden): 600-01.

<sup>14</sup> The territorial union of Tshal and Grib is reflected in the local account which says that the two areas were once covered by a huge snake (with its head lying in Grib). Zhang beat the monster and divided it into a northern and southern part, with the northern half representing the area of Tshal and Gung-thang and the southern half representing the area south of it, the zone of Sri, Zhal, etc. including Grib (RCP (Garden): 596). Behind this story is the union between the religious throne in Tshal and the house of the secular ruler represented by a branch of the Mgar family, which had an old relationship to Grib and the Grib Rdzong btsan (cf. RCP (Garden): 573ff.).

from 'Phan yul and had a branch in this part of the Lhasa valley from the late 7th century at the latest.<sup>15</sup> District catalogues related to the imperial period list the district (*yul sde*) of Ngan lam for the period from the middle of the 8th century (Hazod 2009: 204, 209), which probably refers to the Ngan lam in the Lhasa valley and not to that of 'Phan yul.<sup>16</sup> How far the district extended in the east and west is not so clear; in the early Tshal pa period, Ngan lam included Tshal and Gung thang as well as the two southern valleys of Zhal and Sri, which often appear as a compound (*sri zhal*), including the intermediate mountain ridge of Byang mkhar, best known as one of the central retreat sites of Gung thang Bla ma Zhang (RCP: 81, 86f.). Past Byang mkhar, over the upper Zhal and Sri and past the "Pleiades mountain" (Smin drug Rdza ri, one of the four holy mountains of the Lhasa valley), old roads lead to the south, to 'Phrang 'go and Sgrags, and southwest to Gsang, place of the Gsang phu Ne'u thog, which was closely linked to Gung thang and the Gung thang Chos 'khor gling college (RCP: 644, 689).

In the database of the "Tibetan tumulus" project (TTT), a long-term research on the burial mound fields in Central Tibet, mostly from the imperial period (above fn. 2), six grave fields are registered for the area of Ngan lam (i.e. the Ngam lam in the geographical delimitation of the Tshal pa time, Fig. 1). We have previously visited the tumulus sites of Sri and discussed them in more detail,<sup>17</sup> while those of Zhal (TTT 0408 and 0463) have so far only been known from satellite recordings. The cemetery 0408 in the lower Zhal is a smaller site with a dozen badly weathered, but otherwise little damaged oval-shaped mounds (M-1 approx. 16m). 0463 is located in Upper Zhal (Zhal phu), next to an alpine farm or *'brog pa* place, and consists of two step-shaped, stone grave monuments (with a square floor plan of approx. 12 m) as well as traces of other graves in the vicinity, which are not so clearly identifiable. It cannot be ruled out that the step-like structures are the remains of *stūpa* tombs, such as those found in the tumulus fields of neighbouring Sri (i.e. 0397, 0398).<sup>18</sup> Several traces of older buildings (such as foundation stones) bear witness to a possibly greater history of this

<sup>15</sup> See recently Hazod 2019: 92-94.

<sup>16</sup> In these catalogues, Ngan lam is listed between the *yul sde* (or *yul dpon tshan*) of Ba lam in the east and Brang in the west (i.e. in Lower Stod lung).

<sup>17</sup> Hazod 2019: 92-94. The site 0614 (marked on Fig. 1) was not yet registered at that time; it concerns a smaller cemetery with badly weathered mounds behind the village Rten dkar (var. Rten mkhar). On this section around Rten dkar see RCP (Garden): 599.

<sup>18</sup> See the graphic reconstruction of 0463 (M-1 and M-2) and of the *stūpa* mound of 0397 in Feiglstorfer 2018: 112, 127, 137 and Feiglstorfer 2019: 26-28. The site 0398 was not accessible during our visits (2015, 2019). Shawo Khacham (personal communication, December 2015) was able to visit the site in 2014 and documented the remains of a *stūpa* tomb.

place.

Clear indications of such a larger (religious) history can be found not far to the west, around the rock paintings of Zhal phu, which were discovered or made public in 2017 – one of the most important rock art discoveries in the central Tibetan area in recent decades, with an age estimate of ca. the 11th century.<sup>19</sup> The central part is a group of up to 4m high boulders, located in an idyllic spot on a western side stream of the Zhal phu river, with carvings of representatives of the Five Buddha Families (*rgyal ba rigs lnga*) and their retinue (partly with associated *dhāraṇī*-s and names of the deities in Tibetan script). In addition, there are depictions of Maitreya, Rnam thos sras and others. There is also a large representation of the “seven precious emblems of king-ship” (*rgyal srid rin chen sna bdun*), which differs stylistically from the other carvings and, in our opinion, is of a younger age.<sup>20</sup> In the middle of one of the figures the (scraped) contours of a red deer can also be found, which may indicate a much older use of the rock site. Only a detailed stylistic and (infrared) technical investigation of this extraordinary place can provide information about the site’s historical contexts. This also includes the immediate surroundings, which are littered with traces of an older religious site: remains of buildings, structural components with religious symbols carved on them, collapsed *stūpa*-s, remains of accommodation. According to the structural condition, the abandonment of this site may have an older history, i.e. to be dated before the destructions of the last century.

As far as identification is concerned, first it seems to be obvious to associate it with the hermitage complex of the above-mentioned Byang mkhar mountain. In addition to the central *ri khrod*, hermitage, visible from afar on the mountaintop of the Byang mkhar ri (Fig. 8), Bla ma Zhang’s writings and the locals mention a number of other, not precisely localised Byang mkhar retreats (Byang mkhar ’Brong bu, Chu bzang, Gongdang (\*Dgongs thang/lidang?), Gnam sgo, Stag tshang, Ding gi Dpal khungs, Brag rtse; cf. RCP: 86-88). Finally, there are two other sites in Zhang’s writings that are explicitly specified as places *in* Zhal. This is the Re’u chung dgon of Zhal (Zhal gyi Re’u chung dgon/gdong) as well as the religious site known as Gnam khang

<sup>19</sup> The discoveries were made by a collaborator of the Cultural Relics Bureau, Lhasa, in February 2017 – following advice from shepherds in Zhal phu. A first documentation can be found online at:

<http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0BwHFOX1nbpYNqW-x4VOKg;>

[http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/J1LjWPQFf5p-cOopxyIRAw.](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/J1LjWPQFf5p-cOopxyIRAw)

<sup>20</sup> At one point in his writings (RCP: 6), Zhang claims that the central *nāga* queen Gtsang chab *klu mo* offered him the entire Tibetan realm, filled with the cakravartin (universal ruler) specific *rgyal srid rin chen sna bdun*; it is quite possible that the representation in Zhal phu signals the presence of the Tshal pa founder or the beginning of the Tshal pa history of this place.

(\*Rnam [rgyal] Khang?), a place that obviously coincides with the much older religious settlement of Rnams Khang of Zhal (var. Bsnams Khang).<sup>21</sup> The founder was 'Bring Ye shes Yon tan, one of the central figures in the history of the new dissemination of the Teaching (*bstan pa phyi dar*) in Central Tibet in the early 11th century. His followers formed the 'Bring Community ('Bring *tsho*, named after his family (or lineage name), 'Bring), which was later divided geographically into upper, middle and lower 'Bring *tsho*. The Rnams Khang belonged to the middle 'Bring community ('Bring *tsho bar*). It is said that Ye shes Yon tan founded this site after the reopening and occupying the imperial Skar chung temple (in Ra ma sgang, not far west of Zhal). Starting from Zhal, several branches emerged, one of them in the immediate vicinity: the Sri'i Rgya phibs (Rgya phibs of Sri), known as the temple where the great teacher-reformer Atiśa (Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna, 980-1054) had stayed for two weeks on the way from Bsam yas to Lhasa (around the late 1040s).<sup>22</sup> It is quite possible that he also visited the idyllic place of the Rnams Khang in the upper Zhal. In any case, we can state that this early 11th century settlement of the 'Bring *tsho* is the best candidate for identifying the religious site around the Zhal phu rock art, which was later used by Bla ma Zhang and the early Tshal pa, i.e. the Gnam Khang of Zhal. The Re'u chung dgon could again refer to the religious site, which, as mentioned, we suspect to be behind the building remains next to the tumulus site of 0463.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 The tumulus situation in Sri

Returning to the question of the origin place of the Gung thang lions, we see it as not very likely that the lions come from the structural context of an early (pre-Tshal pa) temple like those of Zhal phu, and there are hardly any examples of this type of guardian lions known from that time. Rather, such figures are known from the burial-mound context of the imperial period, and in this context in a recent paper the author argued that the Gung thang lions, of whose existence we had first heard at that time, were originally from a grave mound. And we referred to the most important grave in the Tshal Gung thang district,

<sup>21</sup> RCP: 88, 163-64.

<sup>22</sup> See RCP: 663f. Rgya phibs is not precisely identified; possibly the site refers to ruins behind Rten dkar (Fig. 1; above fn. 17), which are associated with a temple of the Zhang teacher Rgva lo Gzhon nu dpal (1110/14-1198/1202) (RCP (Garden): 599).

<sup>23</sup> An earlier proposed identification of Re'u chung dgon refers to Ri chung, the name of the isolated rocky mountain at the entrance to Zhal and Sri, between Gung thang Village and Rten dkar Village (Fig. 1). In Zhang's writings there is also talk of a temple called Re'u rtsa'i gtsug lag Khang (RCP: 88), which may be identical with the Re'u chung dgon.



namely the tomb M-1 of 0157, which has been identified as the resting place of the top general and inner minister (and later chief minister) Ngan lam Stag sgra Klu khong (Hazod 2019: 94). The place gained greater prominence in literature some time ago, as it was identified as the place of origin of the famous Zhol stele of Lhasa, whose inscriptions are dedicated to the Ngan lam family and Stag sgra Klu khong in particular. Made during the lifetime of the Klu khong, the stele may originally have been located in the village area below the cemetery, but indications from the local tradition suggest that before being transported to Lhasa at the end of the 17th century it had stood by the grave (Hazod 2009: 181-83; Hazod 2010).

Yet we see a certain chronological problem in identifying the grave as the place of the Gung thang lions: Stag ra Klu khong was appointed chief minister around 782, the highest government post, which he held only briefly – together with his successor, Sna nam Zhang Rgyal mtshan lha snang, who acted alone as chief minister from 783 onwards (Dotson 2009: 153; Hazod 2019: 94f.). 783 was probably also the date of death of the Stag ra Klu khong. His grave, a monumental trapezoidal building of 65m at the front, was probably laid out during his lifetime, possibly before his appointment as chief minister.<sup>24</sup> If the stone lions decorated the grave from the beginning, then they would be the earliest example of the Central Tibetan grave lions, to be dated before the well-known pair of lions at the grave of Khri Srong lde brtsan (completed in approx. 800). Lions are a significant part of Buddhist iconography and from the beginning were used architecturally in various ways in the complex of imperial temples in Tibet, but the example of the grave guardians, we think, has a special status: it signals an image of power that we believe was not realised at a regional level, but was first initiated by the imperial side. In other words, the combination of grave and guardian lions, of which we know a number of examples today,<sup>25</sup> was an establishment from the Buddhist period, where the later regional examples quasi copied the situation at Khri Srong lde brtsan's tomb.<sup>26</sup>

In the tumulus landscape of Ngan lam there are at least two *stūpa*-shaped graves (in 0397 and 0398),<sup>27</sup> a form of tumulus burial that (from the late 8th century) was arguably reserved for Buddhist dignitaries, even if one grave account lists “the *mchod rten* replacing *bang so* (tumulus)” only as a resting place for (Buddhist) ladies from the imperial house (cf. Hazod 2018: 71). For Ngan lam it is quite possible that one

<sup>24</sup> For details of this argument see Hazod 2019: 24-25; 77; 92f.

<sup>25</sup> Related to the TTT sites 0105, 0242, 0339, 0329 (cf. fn. 8).

<sup>26</sup> Bialek recently expressed certain doubts about this conclusion (as given in Hazod 2015: 197; 2019: 72), in my eyes not very convincingly (Bialek, forthcoming: fn. 53).

<sup>27</sup> Above fn. 18.

of the *stūpa* mounds represents the resting place of Ngan lam Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs/skyong, the famous monk and Buddhist master of Bsam yas, who is mentioned in an Old Tibetan document as the younger brother of the Stag sgra Klu gong.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the Gung thang lions once decorated this *stūpa*-mound or one of the other Buddhist tumuli in Ngan Lam. Also conceivable is the scenario according to which the making of the lions and their placing at the tomb of the chief minister represent a later story – representing part of a new conceptualisation of the burial grounds of Ngan lam Sri, which started with the *stūpa* mound burial of this eminent Buddhist member of the Ngan lam family. However, in this case one would have to ask why at that time (end of the 12th century?) only the lions and not also the stele of Ngan lam Sri were brought to Gung thang?

### 3. The “wars” of Zhang, the “crazy beggar monk” of Ngan lam

Bla ma Zhang (birth name: Dar ma grags, ordination name: Brtson 'grus grags pa) came from Tsha ba gru, a place not far west of Gung thang Village (Fig. 1). On his father's side he was a descendant of the Sna nam, known as one of the noble *zhang* or heir-producing families of the imperial period, hence the form Zhang sna nam (or also Sna nam zhang). On his mother's side, too, he came from an old noble family (i.e. Shud phu). In one of the oldest references, his closer homeland is described as a place of noble families of the imperial period.<sup>29</sup> It is possible that this aristocratic background played a certain role in Zhang's self-image, but in principle it was the religious background combined with a special character that produced one of the most extraordinary

<sup>28</sup> Van Schaik and Doney 2007: 200, 209; but see Akester 2016: 330 for a different chronology of Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs. For Ngan lam Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs, the place of birth is given as the Ngan lam of 'Phan yul (see RCP (Garden): 606 and the sources given there); if this information is correct, one is inclined to assume that the older brother (Stag sgra Klu Khong) was also born there. The Ngan lam of 'Phan yul has two grave fields (situated opposite the ruins of Ngan po dgon) which do not seem to have any graves from the (imperial) Buddhist period and which give the overall impression of being older burial grounds (see TTT site 0216, 0217 for an initial documentation). The burial of the Ngan lam brothers in Skyid shod would reflect a situation according to which the “family cemeteries” were divided into two (Ngan lam) areas. It has been noted that the historical background of these two Ngan lam (in 'Phan yul and Skyid shod – an example of a “wandering toponym”) – was perhaps related to the inclusion of the Ngan lam family line in the circle of the *btsan 'bangs rus drug* (“six firm subject clans/ family lines”), a group that belonged to the closer entourage of the emperor and was responsible for his safeguarding during his stay in the Lhasa valley (i.e. Lo (= Lo mi) and Bran ka, Sba (= Dba's) and Ngan lam, Gshu rings and Phur pa; Hazod 2018: 16, 45f.).

<sup>29</sup> This refers to the name “Tsha ba gru of Btsan 'bangs sa” (RCP (Garden): 602), with Btsan 'bangs sa (“place of the *btsan 'bangs*”) apparently being related to the above-mentioned group of the *btsan 'bangs rus drug* (fn. 28).

figures of the religious and political scene in post-imperial Tibet. The founder of the Tshal pa Bka' brgyud pa school united in himself the identities of a yogi and an esoteric teacher, author of a comprehensive writings (including religious songs, *mgur*)<sup>30</sup> as well as that of a warlord and strategist, whose military activities laid the foundation for the later dominion of the Tshal pa in the Lhasa Valley and beyond in the 13th and 14th centuries. Zhang himself never tires of emphasising his uniqueness: nobody, he says in his autobiographical writings, is able to understand his qualities, and there is only him and nobody else in the world who can safeguard and uphold the Teaching of the Buddha etc. And he saw the "wars" that he waged as a means to salvation, not only for his student-soldiers, but also for the opponents; thus, he swore "that anyone killed would not be reborn in hell", rather such a killing will produce "miraculous signs like rainbows and relics" (RCP: 6). One study on Zhang summarises: "his ruthless recourse to martial means to fulfill his objectives were all covered by the cloak of active compassion – the whole, it seems, a form of mystic *mahāmudrā*-style battlefield philosophy and activism" (RCP: 12).

At the same time, he linked his martial demeanour with the image of the beggar monk; "I, this beggar monk Zhang" (*bdag rang zhang gi sprang ban 'dis*) is a common phrase, or also the "crazy (*smyon pa*) beggar monk Zhang", or in connection with his homeland simply the "beggar of Ngan lam" (*ngan lam pa'i sprang ban*). And the soldiers of his fighting force are also addressed as beggar monks.<sup>31</sup>

Even if it is not very clear how exactly we should imagine these wars of Zhang, their "philosophy" and extent etc.,<sup>32</sup> the political implications are quite clear: several of the "battlefields" mentioned in the sources (such as those of 'Phrang 'go, Zur mkhar, Grva, Dol, Lcang, Sgrags and Ldan) correspond with the territories of the later Tshal pa rule, represented by the Tshal pa *mi sde* (RCP: 153-183; 300). In this context, the sources speak of the procurement of materials that Zhang needed to build his monastic centre (cf. BA 714-15), or more specifically of the demolition of local religious establishments (temple, monastery, *stūpa*-s). In this connection we have referred to the example of Ldan, the later Tshal pa *mi sde*, the Mdan of the *Old Tibetan Annals*, situated next to Ba lam in central Skyid shod; here the local tradition tells of the violent appearance of Gung thang Bla ma Zhang and his group, who once tore down a *stūpa* at a place in Lower Ldan in order

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Yamamoto 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Yamamoto 2009: 45f. 98, 175f. 200, 368 et passim); for the many names and aliases of Zhang see also RCP: 37.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. here the statements in RCP (Garden): 617. See also Yamamoto's discussion of this topic (Yamamoto 2009: 253).

to use it to build the *vihāra* in Gung thang.<sup>33</sup>

In this context it is easy to imagine that the lions of Gung thang came to Tshal Gung thang as “souvenirs” during a similar action as in Ldan – in connection with the construction of the Gung thang temple.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned, we assume that they represent guardian figures at a grave mound from the (later) imperial period. There are numerous burial mound fields with large graves of the aristocratic elite<sup>35</sup> in the areas that later belonged to the patchwork-like structure of the Tshal pa dominion in Skyid shod and Ngam shod.<sup>36</sup> It is also conceivable that the lions belonged to a grave of the Sna nam Zhang, the paternal line of Bla ma Zhang, but such a “kinship criterion” in this context is rather speculative and the “Sna nam graves” identified so far (Hazod 2019) do not really fit in the proposed chronological framework of monuments after 800 CE.

#### 4. *The situation in Chos lung*

Even if a much larger area is theoretically possible for the identification of the origin place of the Gung thang lions, in our opinion the best candidate remains a grave from one of the imperial cemeteries in the immediate vicinity of Gung thang. In addition to the above-mentioned burial grounds of Zhal and Sri, one must also include Chos lung, the valley to the east of Sri (today under the district administration of Bsam grub gling), which is also registered as the location of a central Bla ma Zhang retreat (cf. RCP: 125) and was probably part of the Ngan lam *yul sde* (district) of the imperial period. Of the three grave fields of Chos lung (0150, 0405, 0406) the trapezoidal tombs of 0150 (with a size of up to 55m at the front) represent one of the remarkable elite mounds

<sup>33</sup> This seems to refer to the relic shrine of Rva lo *tsā ba* (who died in Lower Ldan) and was linked with the taking over of a specific tradition (here of Yamāntaka). On the other hand, the event shows clear parallels to a later story, when Rva lo’s relics were taken from Ldan to ‘Bras-spungs in the early 15th century. See RCP (Garden): 617; Hazod 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Such actions of relocating older monuments were apparently not so exceptional. In another context, we have speculated that the Karma pa Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110-93), an avowed critic of Zhang’s warlike activities (RCP: 35-36), may have been responsible for the relocation of the imperial stele of the Lcang bu Lha khang (at the entrance to the Tshur valley in Stod lung) to its present place in Mtshur phu dgon – brought there in connection with the foundation of this central Karma pa seat in 1187. It has also been speculated that at about the same time the famous “uncle-nephew pillar” (*zhang dbon rdo ring*) which documents the Tang China and Tibet agreement of 821/22 came from its (proposed) place of origin in Rgya ma to Lhasa. See for details Hazod 2014: 35-36.

<sup>35</sup> See RCP: 23, *et passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Kriz and Hazod 2020.

in the Lhasa valley. Due right (north) of the burial ground are the extensive remains of an abandoned settlement, including a ruined *stūpa* complex (not identified).<sup>37</sup>

It is worth mentioning a somewhat puzzling story from the local tradition, according to which the Gung thang Lha mo (see above) was born in Chos lung, in today's Chu lung Village; one shrine (a *bstan ma khang*) in this village refers to this birthplace. (The shrine is not far from the ruins of the Pe har House, itself an important station in the transfer history of the Bsam yas protector Rgyal po Pe har to Lhasa; RCP: 571ff.). The locals say that originally the meeting of the Gung thang Lha mo and her lover, Grib Rdzong btsan, took place once a year at this place in Chos lung, but every time the visitors became so drunk at this festival that people decided to move the meeting to the temple in Gung thang.

This story (recorded by the author in 2009) seems to be related to the history of the re-establishment of the Gung thang *Me tog mchod pa* in the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama or shortly afterwards, when the festival was incorporated in the ritual calendar of the Lhasa year.<sup>38</sup> The following scenario is conceivable:

1. The stone lions had been in Chu lung, namely at this site of the Gung thang Lha mo, where, in a manner similar to the later situation in Gung thang, they marked the place where the Lha mo and Grib Rdzong btsan met – in some (probably simpler) form of presentation at that time.

2. The lions were moved as it were together with this transfer of the festival (or part of the festival) to Gung thang – to the place in front of the temple, which we have identified as a separate architectural sector for this meeting of the divine couple.

3. The lions came from a grave in the immediate vicinity, presumably from the central mound M-1 of the opposite burial ground 0150, whose local-historical (and family-specific) context we do not know

<sup>37</sup> The burial ground consists of altogether 11 tombs, four of which are larger structures; see TTT site 0150 and especially Feiglstorfer 2019: 56-59 with a detailed reconstruction of the central mound M-1.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. RCP: 585. According to the local tradition of Gung thang, the beginnings of the festival go back to the time of Bla ma Zhang, which is rather unlikely. To our knowledge, it is mentioned for the first time in the sources for the year 1340 (RCP: 192-93).

exactly,<sup>39</sup> but which we assume represent a tomb of the later phase (after 800).<sup>40</sup> This is exactly the situation we find in the case of the 'Chad kha lions (0105) or also of 0242 (fn. 8), where the stone figures were brought from an elite grave to the next temple (in this case it is related to the ensemble of Pe har khang and Bstan ma shrine in Chu lung Village). The initiative here and there was probably not a grand gesture by a higher authority, as was the case, for example, with the transfer of the Zhol stele to Lhasa, a story that was immortalised in murals in the Potala (Hazod 2010, 2019); rather the initiative came from the locals themselves, and the later transfer from Chos lung to Gung thang was probably also a local issue.

To sum up:

- The Gung thang lions represent very likely former guardian figures of an imperial elite grave, most likely a tomb in a burial ground not far from the Gung thang temple. This refers to one of the tumulus sites in the Ngan lam district, including Chos lung.
- The statement by the locals which associates the lion(s) with Gung thang Bla ma Zhang is likely not to be seen as a historically reliable information. In the local tradition, the founder is held responsible for everything in the history (including later history) of the monastic centre,<sup>41</sup> and as far as we know, this association is not mentioned in any of the written sources either. We cannot entirely rule out that the lions' relocation to Gung thang was part of the founding history of the temple, in other words, they arrived there on the initiative of the founder Bla ma Zhang and/ or his immediate environment, but we see the scenario of a "smaller" regional history as more likely.
- We suspect a connection with the history of the Gung thang *Me tog mchod pa*, about whose beginnings in the Tshal pa period (fn. 38) and the older tradition (i.e. before the incorporation into the Lhasa year) we do not know very much, but which, or a central part of which, was apparently earlier stationed in Chos lung. As regards content, the lions themselves actually had nothing to do with the festival; they were taken from a nearby grave simply to decorate a local square, and when this stage was moved to Gung thang, arguably in the 17th or early 18th

<sup>39</sup> Aristocratic lineages from the imperial period which in a wider sense can be associated with this area are members of the *btsan 'bangs rus drug* mentioned above (fn. 28), perhaps also Shud bu and Gnon (mentioned in connection with the administration of the Lower Skyi thousand district).

<sup>40</sup> We are not just sticking to 0150: 0405 or 0406 are also possible candidates. 0406 refers to a single (trapezoidal) mound of approx. 30m at the front, which is not more than 600m from Chu lung Village away (Fig. 11).

<sup>41</sup> On this topic of Zhang and the "embodiment" of the fate of his temple and monastery cf. RCP (Garden): 571.

century, they were moved with it. In this sense, the lion probably has never had another place within the temple precinct of Gung thang than where we find it today.

It remains to be hoped that the stone lion, which the locals call the mount of the Gung thang Bla ma Zhang, soon emerges from the shed that currently hides it from the outside world, and is made visible, so that this historical testimony can become accessible for interested visitors and hopefully also for further investigations.

### Illustrations



Fig. 1 – The old district of Ngan lam, with the monastic centre of Tshal Gung thang and the ancient burial mound sites in this area (= yellow symbols; the numbers refer to the tumulus fields as listed in TTT). (Map based on satellite photograph 4.2016; map data: Google, Maxar Technologies 2021; modifications and additional data: G. Hazod 2021)



Fig. 2 – The temple area of Gung thang. (Photo: Corona Satellite, 22 January 1966; additional data by G. Hazod 2021)





Fig. 3 – The position of the stone lion in Gung thang. (Photos by the TTT team, plus satellite photo (1.2021), with additional data by G. Hazod 2021)



Fig. 4 – The stone lion of Gung thang.  
(Image-based model (IBM) by M. Gamon 2019)



*Fig. 5 – The stone construction of tomb M-1 of the TTT site 0463 in Upper Zhal.  
(Photo: H. Feiglstorfer 2019)*



*Fig. 6 – The rock carvings of Zhal phu (section). (Photo: G. Zotti 2019)*



Fig. 7. *Vairocana*, from the rock carving of *Zhal phu*. (Photo: G. Zotti 2019)



Fig. 7a. མཎིའུ་ཙཱ་མཎི། – *dhāraṇī* at the *Vairocana* image (Fig. 7).



*Fig. 8. A stūpa ruin next to the Zhal phu rock-art site. In the background the Byang mkhar mountain. (Photo: M. Gamon 2019)*



*Fig. 9. In Sri (Ngan lam Sri): the massive mound M-1 of the TTT site 0157 (backside) – the resting place of the general and minister Ngan lam Stag sgra Klu khong. (Photo: M. Gamon 2019)*



Fig. 10. The stūpa mound of the grave field 0397 in Sri (cf. Fig. 1). (Photo: H. Feiglstorfer 2015)

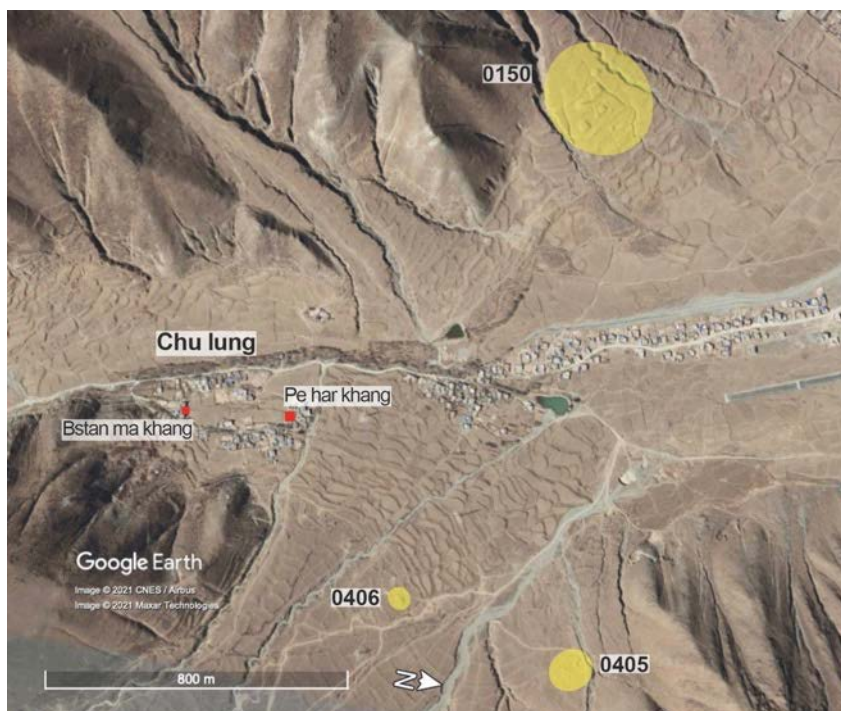


Fig. 11. In Chös lung, the valley directly to the east of Sri. (Map based on satellite photograph 11.2009; map data: Google, Maxar Technologies 2021; modifications and additional data: G. Hazod 2021)



*Fig. 12. The central mound of the tumulus site 0150 in Chos lung (cf. Fig. 11). (Photo: G. Hazod 2009)*



*Fig. 13. The ruins of the Pe har Rgyal po House in Chu lung Village (cf. Fig. 11). (Photo: G. Hazod 2009)*

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