


What did the Chinese Warlord Liu Wenhui want from Pha bong kha

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oday, the Dge lugs pa scholar Pha bong kha Bde chen snying po alias Byams pa bstan 'dzin 'phrin las rgya mtsho (1878–1941) is in particular known for two things: First, for his public teaching on the Stages of the Path (*lam rim*) in 1921, the transcripts of which were later edited by his disciple, the Third *khri byang rin po che* Blo bzang ye shes bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (1901–1981), the younger tutor of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Second, for his promotion of the cult of Rdo rje Shugs ldan, a deity especially charged with protecting the purity of the Dge lugs teachings and nowadays associated with a dispute and schism within the Dge lugs order.

A few years ago, Joona Repo plausibly argued, based on Pha bong kha's collected works, that while Pha bong kha indeed propagated the cult of Rdo rje Shugs ldan during his lifetime, other cults apparently are more prominent in his *Collected Works* and the Rdo rje Shugs ldan one actually became popular only after his death, promoted in no small part by the efforts of his disciple *khri byang rin po che*.¹ However, that does not mean that Pha bong kha did not actively spread the cult of Rdo rje Shugs ldan, especially during his stay in East Tibet. In fact, he was not the first who introduced the worship of Rdo rje Shugs ldan in that area. The Sa skyia scholar and Khang gсар abbot Ngag dbang mkhyen rab 'jam dpal snying po (1868–1949) had already in the 1890s, together with his uncle *mkhan chen* Ngag dbang blo gros snying po, established the cult in many East Tibetan monasteries, without, however, combining it with any sectarian activities.² This further step was left to Pha bong kha and his disciples. During his stay in East Tibet, Pha bong kha was deeply engaged in the issue nowadays generally associated with Rdo rje Shugs ldan, i.e., fighting against other Buddhist schools, including the Bon and the non-sectarian movement (*ris med*) in East Tibet, whose offer of religious practices across school boundaries was seen as a threat to the purity, supremacy

¹ Reepo 2015: 6–7, 38–41.

² Jackson 2001: 93.

and hegemony of the Dge lugs school.³ Pha bong kha's writings as well as his biography, composed by Ldan ma Blo bzang rdo rje (1908–1975),⁴ offer sufficient evidence that this was of great concern to him. Interesting documents in this regard are also Pha bong kha's letters sent to the Chinese warlord Liu Wenhui (劉文輝, 1895–1976) and his wife, which are preserved in Pha bong kha's *Collected Works* (*gsung 'bum*). Therefore, they have already occasionally aroused the interest of some scholars. However, the perspective and interests of the letters' recipient were always completely overlooked.

The Communication between Pha bong kha and Liu Wenhui

Pha bong kha and Liu Wenhui were in contact with each other from 1935 to 1940. Whether they ever met face to face as stated by Sam van Schaik,⁵ I am not able to verify. At least Liu had sent Pha bong kha an insistent invitation already in 1935 when the latter was staying in Chab mdo in East Tibet, followed by another invitation in 1936.⁶

To my knowledge, the first scholar mentioning one of Pha bong kha's letters was Gdong thog *sprul sku* Bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, followed by David Jackson.⁷ Both only vaguely describe the recipient as "Lui Chuntrang, an illegal Chinese-governor in Kham province of Tibet" or simply as "a Kuomintang governor ("Lu'u Cun-krang")." Later, Sam van Schaik identified Lu'u Cun-krang with Liu Wenhui.⁸ He characterizes the letters as sermons to the warlord and his wife. Altogether he speaks of three such letters to be found in Pha bong kha's *Collected Works*,⁹ apparently missing a fourth one, contained in the same section.¹⁰ A few years ago, another scholar translated an excerpt from Pha bong kha's letters to Liu Wenhui.¹¹ However, he notes that he was unable to identify the recipient. Therefore, the figure appears in his study merely as some Chinese official and Buddhist disciple, thus concealing the political dimension.

According to van Schaik, it was Pha bong kha who "struck up a relationship" with Liu.¹² Consequently, the central question that rose for van Schaik in view of the letters was: "What did Pabongka want from the warlord?" And he immediately offers a plausible answer to

³ Dreyfus 1998: 252–253, 267.

⁴ Ldan ma Blo bzang rdo rje 1981.

⁵ van Schaik 2011: 202.

⁶ Ldan ma Blo bzang rdo rje 1981: vol. II, 462, 297–298.

⁷ Gdong thog 1979: 116–117; Dhongthog 1996: 20; Jackson 2001: 97.

⁸ van Schaik 2011: 202.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 286n48.

¹⁰ *dris lan*, 35a–38b.

¹¹ Pearcey 2018: 172–173.

¹² *Ibid.*

this question:

It seems that, unlike the Dalai Lama, but like many other Tibetan monks, he was still basing his activities on the old patron-priest model. He hoped that this Chinese warlord would be a patron for the Gelug school, finally ensuring its success in Kham. The idea of a Tibetan nation state with clearly defined borders was of little interest to him.¹³

However, believing the biography, the initiative to establish this contact came from the warlord's side. He was the one, who sent his messengers to Pha bong kha. Therefore, another question should arise first: What did Liu Wenhui want from Pha bong kha?

To answer the question of Liu's motives for contacting Pha bong kha, we need to briefly recall some basics of his career and agenda, especially during the period under consideration. Towards the end of the third decade of the 20th century Liu, at that time commander of the 24th Nationalist Army, was the most powerful agent in the border area of Sichuan Province and East Tibet. Early on, he pursued an ambitious plan to merge this borderland into a new province that would be more than just an administrative unit.¹⁴ Thus, already in 1929, he established in Dar rtse mdo, that is, Kangding (康定), a preparation committee. Especially, after Liu's power and influence in Sichuan had been restricted by his nephew Liu Xiang (劉湘, 1890–1938), he enforced his efforts to construct a new province as his personal power base. It was to take another four years before this plan was finally implemented. During these years Liu had to subdue Tibetan resistance with his military force, in particular various movements striving for a self-rule of the Khams pa. The last one had started still in 1939 by the late Panchen Lama's retinue—in the same year that the new Xikang (西康) Province had been formally established by the Kuo min tang government. Kangding was its administrative center and Liu Wenhui the chairman of its government. The province would exist until 1955.¹⁵

Influenced by the ideas of the Chinese ethnologist Ren Naiqiang (任乃强, 1894–1989), Liu advocated in the territory under his control a policy of assimilation called *tonghua* 同化.¹⁶ It seems that the term did not reflect a consistent theory. What exactly was meant by *tonghua* was nowhere precisely defined. At that time, it apparently did not imply a complete destruction of Tibetan culture in East Tibet and a total Han-

¹³ van Schaik 2011: 202.

¹⁴ Lawson 2011: 3–4.

¹⁵ Gros 2019: 29–31; Lawson 2011: 22, 157–159; Coleman 2014: 445; Frank 2020: 48–52.

¹⁶ Tsomo 2013: 328–337; Mortensen 2019: 425.

ization of its population.¹⁷ Instead, Liu had in mind to reconcile Tibetan and Han culture. Therefore, he tried to win over the people of Khams by integrating Tibetan Buddhism and prominent Buddhist clerics into his political and educational agenda. A personal sympathy for Tibetan Buddhism may well have played a role. The visible result of these efforts was the establishment of the so-called “Five Sciences Buddhist Institutes” (*Wuming Foxueyuan* 五明佛學院). Starting from 1938, several of these schools were established in Xikang Province, the largest in Kangding. Monks from Tibetan monasteries in Khams were given grants to study in these schools. Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist masters functioned as teachers.¹⁸ The founding of these schools has been described as an act of specifically patronizing the Dge lugs pa in East Tibet.¹⁹ In doing so, Liu opposed other ideas that explicitly advocated the destruction of Tibetan Buddhist culture in Est Tibet and thereby particularly focused on the Dge lugs pa as the cause of insufficient population growth and as a source for the spread of superstition.²⁰

The term *wuming* is known as the Chinese translation of Sanskrit *pañcavidyā* or Tibetan *rig gnas lnga*, denoting the classical Indian five domains of knowledge: grammar, medicine, arts and crafts, logic, and inner knowledge or spirituality. Thus, the name given to the newly founded Buddhist schools in Xikang emphasizes the intention to provide them with a rather broad curriculum, which would not be limited to higher Buddhist studies.

Liu apparently had been pursuing the idea of founding such schools already since 1928.²¹ During the years of preparation, he was also in contact with lamas in Chab mdo.²² After Pha bong kha had come to Chab mdo in 1935, he was apparently among those to whom Liu had sent his messengers. Shortly before, Liu had signed the contract with the Dga' ldan pho brang government for the demilitarization of the Dge lugs pa monastery Dar rgyas located in Dkar mdzes area.²³ As far as I can see, the biography of Pha bong kha mentions the reception of Liu's messengers for the years 1935, 1936,

¹⁷ But by 1948, the prevailing view in the administration of Xikang appears to have been otherwise. That year, the Assistant Pacification Commander of Xikang told the American journalist A. Doak Barnett (1921–1999): “In fifteen or twenty years we will have educated them so that people will even forget the names of the minority groups” (Barnett 1948, 11).

¹⁸ Lawson 2011: 124, 243–248; Tuttle 2005: 213; Ning Zhang, Yinghui Yang 2020: 324–327.

¹⁹ Frank 2020: 172.

²⁰ Ibid.: 92–93.

²¹ Ning Zhang, Yinghui Yang 2020: 326.

²² Ibid.: 327.

²³ Kobayashi 2018: 164.

1939 and 1940. Pha bong kha's preserved letters sent to Liu Wenhui are dated 1938, 1939 and 1940. The one sent to Liu's wife is undated.

For the time being, we are not in the possession of any letters sent by Liu to Pha bong kha or his wife. We must therefore mainly rely on Pha bong kha's letters to find out more about Liu's motivation for contacting him. Another limitation is that Pha bong kha's letters have not come down to us either in the original or in a complete transcript. Missing are the heading, the usual formula of respect, and the entire introductory part, as well as the ending part and the place and precise date of issue.²⁴ This makes it clear that when the collected works were compiled, the context in which the letters originated was no longer of particular interest. The actual content of the letters remains within the traditional thought patterns of a Dge lugs pa scholar. Especially, they neither reveal any interest in or more detailed knowledge of the political ambitions that the recipient of the letters was pursuing at the time, nor do they even hint at the struggle for control of Dge lugs pa monasteries in Kham between the Dga' ldan pho brang and Liu.²⁵ However, considering Pha bong kha's long stay in East Tibet and his role in Reting's efforts to enable the Panchen Lama's return to Central Tibet,²⁶ Pha bong kha must have been fully aware of the tense political situation and Liu's military actions in the East Tibetan border region. But the letters do not even touch on all this. What shapes their content instead is the polemic with which the positions of other Buddhist schools are attacked as an inferior choice and the Dge lugs teachings are praised as the only pure Buddhist tradition. This polemic is—as Adam Scott Pearcey comments when translating two relevant excerpts from the letters²⁷—unusually harsh and direct, even by Tibetan Buddhist standards. Pha bong kha did not leave it at blanket denigrations of competing Buddhist schools. As his last letter reveals, he also directly criticized the teaching, editing and printing activities of the Sa skya pa scholars in Derge (Sde dge), which at that time was a place belonging to Liu's new province Xikang. But Pha bong kha's criticism is not limited to competing Buddhist schools. It also explicitly opposes Hinduism and Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism and Bon since they would not offer a path to liberation. In 1938 he wrote to Liu:

On this earth many traditions flourish, such as the non-Buddhist Indian traditions (Skt. *tīrthika*), Christianity, Islam, Confucianism and Bon. They each tout their own tradition as

²⁴ See Schneider 2003: 122.

²⁵ See Kobayashi 2018.

²⁶ Goldstein 1989: 288–298.

²⁷ Pearcey 2018: 172–174.

the most outstanding. Nevertheless, apart from the doctrine of the Buddha alone, all others have no path to liberation. They do not have the capacity to eliminate even a single affliction. Even if one practices (them) by enduring severe hardship over a long time, one will not be able to achieve any good result beside opening the door to the lower realms (of rebirth). (They) are just words of deception, which display something which is not a path as a path.²⁸

The following year Pha bong kha repeated his criticism in harsher terms in another letter sent to Liu:

In general, there are many different religions in this world and all of them believe themselves to be the best. However, if you examine them honestly and thoroughly, Christianity and Islam are the very worst religions of the barbarians. There is no worse religion than these (two). Systems such as (the Sāṃkhya-system) of the non-Buddhist Kapila (in India) are slightly better than those, but they do not have a path to liberation. Even if they do great ascetic practices like burning the body in fire or jumping on the trident, they do not have a path to liberation. They (merely) open the door to the lower rebirths. As far as the so-called Bon po are concerned, there is no difference between them and the systems of the non-Buddhists (in India). How could there be liberation? They (merely) open the door to lower rebirths. Also, Confucianism is no Buddhism. Therefore, they only have means for attaining temporary happiness; there is no liberation.²⁹

With his letters, Pha bong kha clearly intended to discriminate against all other religions and Buddhist schools in the eyes of the recipient, to secure the recipient's sole support for the Dge lugs pa, and to incite

²⁸ *Dris lan*, 31b.5–32a.1: *sa steng 'di na mu stegs/ ye shu/ mu sul man/ kong tse/ bon sogs lugs mang po dar ba rang rang gi lugs de mchog tu brloms kyang/ sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa kho na ma gtogs gzhan tshang mar thar pa'i lam med/ nyon mongs sna gcig kyang spong ba'i nus pa med/ dus yun ring por dka' thub drag pos [32r] nyams su blangs kyang ngan song gi sgo 'byed pa las 'bras bu bzang po ci yang thob mi nus/ lam ma yin pa lam du ston pa'i bslu ba'i tshig kho na yin/*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32b.3–33a.2: *'dzam gling phyi nang gi grub mtha' spyi'i gnas tshul drang por brjod pa bzhugs/ spyir 'dzam bu'i gling 'dir rang rang chos lugs mi 'dra ba mang zhing/ rang rang gi lugs de mchog yin snyam pa thams cad la yod kyang/ blo drang pos legs par brtag na/ ye shu dang mu sul man gyi lugs ni kla klo zhes lugs shin tu tha chad red/ chos lugs 'di las r[ā]lugs pa med/ phyi rol pa mu stegs ser skya sogs kyi lugs ni de las cung bzang yang thar pa'i lam med/ lus me la bsreg pa dang/ mdung rtse gsum gyi steng du mchong ba sogs dka' las chen po byed kyang thar pa'i lam med/ ngan song gyi sgo [33r] 'byed pa red/ bon po zhes pa 'di yang phyi rol mu stegs pa'i lugs dang khyad med/ thar pa ga la yod de ngan song gi sgo 'byed pa yin/ kong tse'i lugs kyang sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa ma yin pas gnas skabs kyi bde thabs tsam las thar pa med/*

him to an intolerant attitude toward all other religions and Buddhist schools within his sphere of influence. Moreover, Pha bong kha's fierce polemics seem to reflect the general combative mood he developed during his time in East Tibet, where he had to realize that not only the other Buddhist schools were very active and popular, but from China representatives of other religions increasingly tried to gain followers.

If we leave aside the acrimonious polemics of Pha bong kha's letters, another statement is remarkable: Liu and his wife are not only addressed as devout Buddhists, but explicitly as followers of Tsong kha pa's (1357–1419) teachings, the dGe lugs version of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1938, Pha bong kha wrote to him:

In this time, you, the great lord, venerate through the strong power of your former aspiration and your merits exclusively the heart of the Buddha's doctrine, the system of the great 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa, as the crown of your head. Holding it in the center of your heart, (you) take care to spread it throughout in numerous large areas like your own country. Therefore, by establishing through the stainless doctrine the seed of liberation in the (mind) stream of yourself and many tens of thousands of other living beings, (you) have widened the path to complete liberation. By thinking again and again about this excellent deed, I receive happiness and immeasurable joy like waves of the ocean swelling to the sky. For this I am very grateful.³⁰

And in the undated letter which Pha bong kha had sent to Liu's wife he wrote:

Our great lord Liu Wenhui became a Buddhist. And he even has entered the heart of the Buddhist doctrine, the teaching of 'Jam dpal dbyangs (Mañjuśrīghoṣa) Tsong kha pa. Therefore, also (you), the great mistress, have met with the teaching of 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 31b.3–5: *dus 'dir/ dpon po chen po khyod nyid ni sngon gyi smon lam dang bsod nams kyi mthu dpung btsan pos sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa'i snying po 'jam mgon tsong kha pa chen po'i ring lugs kho na spyi bo'i gtsug tu bkur/ thugs kyi mthil du bzung ste rang gi yul sogs zhing chen du mar khyab gdal du dar bar mdzad pas rang gzhan skye 'gro khri phrag nas khri phrag mang po'i rgyud la bstan pa dri ma med pas thar pa'i sa bon bskrun te rnam grol gyi lam yangs por mdzad pa'i mdzad pa bzang po 'di la kho bos bsam bzhin bsam bzhin d[ga]' spro dang yi rang dpag tu med pa rgya mtsho'i rba rlabs mkha' la 'phyur ba ltar thob pa bka' drin shin tu che/*

³¹ Ibid., 31a.2f: *rang re'i dpon po chen po li'u cun krang 'di nyid chos lugs nang pa sangs rgyas pa la zhugs/ de'i nang nas kyang bstan pa'i snying po 'jam dpal dbyangs tsong kha pa'i bstan pa la zhugs par mdzad bas/ dpon mo chen mo nyid kyang 'jam mgon tsong kha pa'i bstan pa dang mjal/*

Whether this impression conveyed by Pha bong kha's letters corresponded to the recipient's inner conviction at the time or was merely part of his strategic considerations is difficult to say. On the surface, it suggests nothing more than Liu's desire for a spiritual teacher-disciple relationship as a motive for his contact with Pha bong kha. However, this impression becomes more differentiated when we include Pha bong kha's last letter in our analysis.

Pha bong kha's last letter to Liu Wenhui

Among all the preserved letters sent by Pha bong kha to Liu Wenhui the last one written in 1940 is by far the most informative, because it is more than one of his usual sermons. Explicitly, it refers to a specific question posed by Liu beforehand. Without giving an exact date, Pha bong kha's biography mentions for the period between the second and the sixth month of that year that "he had answered many petitions, which had been delivered to him by various travelers who had come from China. Especially, Liu had orally conveyed a few important questions about religion, which he then answered in detail."³² Pha bong kha's reply letter reveals that Liu's questions concerned the establishment of the so-called "Five Sciences Buddhist Institutes" and that Pha bong kha had told him rather bluntly that he considered such a broad undertaking pointless in view of the actual goal of Buddhist practice. However, in answering Liu's question, he again gave the most space to his polemics against all other Tibetan Buddhist schools. Much of this is consistent with the content of his previous letter sent to Liu in 1939. Obviously, this was his greatest concern. To show how he linked the answer to the question with his personal struggle against the other Buddhist schools, here is a complete translation of the letter:

That which was granted to the governor-general of Xikang,
the great lord Liu Wenhui, in the Iron Dragon year (1940):

Thinking of your loving mind and your kindness out of faith
and veneration, (here) the essence of my brief answer to your
sincere questions about the new foundation of a teaching
monastery:

I am very grateful that you are going to newly establish a
school of knowledge there as a basis for the (Buddhist)
doctrine. In general the so-called five greater fields of
knowledge are grammar, medicine, handicrafts, logic, and

³² Ldan ma Blo bzang rdo rje 1981: vol. II, 407: *rgya yul nas 'ongs pa sogs phyogs 'grul khag nas zhu yig mang du phul ba'i gsung lan dang/ lhag par lu'u cun krang gis chos lugs skor gyi dri ba gal can 'ga' ngag 'phrin gyi thog nas zhus pa sogs kyi dris lan zhib rgyas dang/*

spirituality (inner development). The five smaller fields of knowledge are poetics, prosody, drama, synonymics, and astrology. Among these ten fields of knowledge, apart from spirituality, all others are outer or inner ordinary fields of knowledge. Therefore, no matter how widespread grammar and poetry, for example, are, they are only word constructions: they are not able to pull living beings out of the bad existences and lead them to the door of liberation and omniscience. They do not have the slightest benefit for the doctrine of the Buddha. Spirituality is that which emerged from the words of the *jina* and the commentaries of their intended meaning, (i.e.) the standard major philosophical texts of the Indian *paṇḍitas* and *siddhas*. Concerning the way the intended meaning of these (words) was adopted, there exist in India and Tibet, in both (countries), different ways of understanding: those that arrive at the key point and those that do not. In India, there are the followers of the four tenet systems: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, and Madhyamaka. They are known as the four exponents of tenets. For the Cittamātrin, there are the Cittamātrin following the scriptures and the Cittamātrin following reasoning. For the Madhyamika, there are the Svātāntrika and the Prasaṅgika. Of these, only the good system of the Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka of the good tradition of the glorious protector Nāgārjuna, as it was excellently elucidated by the glorious Candrakīrti, are the stainless thoughts of the *jina*, in which there is not even the slightest mistake concerning *sūtra* and *mantra*, view and meditation, whatever.

Although here in Tibet, the land of snow, individual designations for four similar tenet systems have not spread, various other ways of upholding one's own tradition of the philosophical view, meditation and actions have spread, like the distinct tenet systems of the old school of secret mantra (Rnying ma) and of the new schools Sa skya, Bka' brgyud, Shangs pa bka' brgyud, Bo dong, Jo nang, Zhwa lu and Dge ldan pa (Dge lugs pa). They all arrogantly pretend to be the good tradition of the Indian Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka. Solely the sources of the river of the (Buddhist) teaching, like the master of the early translations Padmasambhava together with his disciples, the great Sa kya (*bla ma*) Kun dga' snying po (1092–1158), Mar pa (1012–1097) and Mī la ras pa (1140–1123) of the Bka brgyud, teacher and student, and Jo bo rje (Atīśa, 982–1054), found the correct view of the Prasaṅgika. Thereafter, all lineages of disciples were wrong about the philosophical view. They state many different ways of determining (the correct view), but when they practice the essence (of their teaching), they (only) rest without being preoccupied with anything in the mind. They only give

thought to the bad views of Hwashang Mahāyana (Heshang Moheyan 和尚摩訶衍, the antagonist of the Indian monk Kamalaśīla in the so-called bSam yas debate of the eighth century). Because in that way the understanding of the philosophical view does not get to the key point, they confuse in their own schools the hardly bearable nihilistic view, which claims there is no such thing as *karma* and fruit, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, bondage and liberation at all, with emptiness. It has been said in (Nāgārjuna's) *Ratnāvalī*: "Some other fools who think themselves to be wise do not understand it properly, and therefore fall head down into the hell of Avīci, being ruined by their criticism against the perfect doctrine."³³ Accordingly, they practice for their whole life, confusing the bad view, which opens the door to the hell of Avīci, with the path. Without understanding even a little of the emptiness of ultimate reality, some (other) people confuse conventional phenomena with ultimate (reality) and cultivate their whole life the view of eternalism. Thus (both kind of people) confuse the abyss of eternalism or nihilism with the profound path. That which in this situation does not have in the least the stains of error regarding philosophical view, meditation and actions is solely the tradition of 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa.

What has to be said about the so-called thirteen major scriptures of Sde dge: These are (indeed) indisputable Indian scriptures such as the (five) books of Maitreya, the (five) collections of Madhyamaka reasoning (of Nāgārjuna) and (Śāntideva's) *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. But as for the explanation, the meaning of those great scriptures is explained incorrectly. As their own tradition (the scholars in Sde dge) hold on to the previous Tibetan view, (i.e.) the bad view of Hwashang Mahāyana, which has been refuted by the great 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa through many statements and reasonings in his *Lam rim chen mo* as an overly broad (identification of the) object to be negated³⁴ and which is the unbearable view of nihilism as I have just explicated above. Accordingly, earlier Go bo rab 'byams pa (Bsod nams seng ge alias Go rams pa, 1429–1489)—intoxicated by the poisonous waters of jealousy of the great 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa's biography—rejected the great 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa and spoke much ill of him. Thereafter, the two excellent scholars *rje btsun* Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1469–1544) in *Se ra* and 'Jam dbyangs dga' ba'i blo gros (1429–1503) in 'Bras spungs completed replies (to Go rams pa's) criticism as books and thus put an end (to the

³³ See Hahn 1982: vol. I, 46,17-20 and 47,17-20; Tucci 1934, 307-325; Tucci 1936, 243,6-9.

³⁴ The full term is *dgag bya ngos 'dzin ha cang khyab ches pa*. See Tsong-kha-pa 2002: vol. III, 127-134.

criticism) as without reference.³⁵ Their replies of the criticism were carved in wood-blocks. (Nowadays the prints) are popular in Se ra, 'Bras spungs, Dga' ldan, etc. The compositions of Go rams pa, his heap of faulty explanations, his thirteen or so books, were all collected by the Great Fifth Supreme Victorious One (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682) and sealed to the point of invisibility. Although their distribution was not allowed thereafter, later (Sga ba) *bla ma* 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (alias 'Jam rgyal rin po che, 1870–1940) from Sde dge has assiduously collected the original manuscripts and carved them into woodblocks.³⁶ Without there being a continuous reading transmission, he gave a reading transmission. Without there being a continuous teaching transmission, he gave a teaching transmission. Carrying Go rams pa's faulty explanations on the back, he does as much as he can to spread distrust, wrong ideas and slander regarding 'Jam mgon Tsong kha pa. To such a bad custom he holds as the principle. Once something like this is established, the only result will be that the stream of bad views will flourish and the door to the lower rebirths will be opened. Therefore, it is a hundred times better that such customs are not established than that they are established. This being so, the meaning of the great Indian scriptures has (already) been correctly elucidated. Especially, the view of profound Madhyamaka, (which is) the final intent of the Buddha Bhagavat, (i.e) the stainless system of the Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka of the good tradition of the glorious protector Nāgārjuna as it was excellently elucidated by the glorious Candrakīrti, was really revealed to the great *rje btsun* Tsong kha pa by the protector Mañjuśrīghoṣa. Acting as his spiritual teacher, he instructed him on all the difficult points of the *sūtra* and *tantra*, like a father instructs his son. He granted him the oral transmission together with the (magically) emanated books.³⁷ This good tradition alone unifies the eighty-four thousand *dharma* teachings into one single gradual path without the slightest mistake from the point of view of *sūtra* and *tantra*. It is the only entirely complete essence of the doctrine that can be put into practice. Therefore, concerning (your question about) a school for the fields of knowledge: If you would be able to establish a school for debating Buddhist dialectics for example regarding the *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Pramāṇavārttika of Dharmakīrti)*, the *Perfection (of Wisdom) (Prajñāpāramitā)*, and the Middle Way (Madhyamaka), similar to the continuity of teaching in the three great monastic centers Se

³⁵ See Cabézon and Dargyay 2007, 30; Viehbeck, 17n115, 22f.

³⁶ See Percey 2018: 36–38; Jackson 2003: 58.

³⁷ See Reepo 2015: 36–37.

ra, 'Bras spungs and Dga' ldan, it will definitely be the cause for immense teaching activities as long as the teachings of the *jina* exist, for the highest status and the definite goodness of many living beings, for their liberation and omniscience. There is therefore no doubt that also for the founder (of such a school) the great ultimate goal will be achieved.

I have not formulated this (letter) with a bias for the Dge ldan pa (i.e. Dge lugs pa), but I have formulated it solely from an honest heart out of overwhelming compassion for the many living beings who have lost their way on wrong paths. For this, not only the buddhas of the ten directions are willing to act as witnesses. I can also offer authentic sources, which support the scriptures and arguments, and which are completed as books. Here, however, I do not have the time to write it (all). Therefore, it is important to ask *dge shes rin po che* for the details.

Please rest in the profound mind of the gods!

This *dge bshes rin po che* seems to be *dge bshes rin po che* Ngag dbang rnam rgyal who is mentioned in an undated letter of Pha bong kha sent to a lay follower (*dge bsnyen*) in China named Nya'u tshal mo krang. There, Pha bong kha writes about the *dge bshes* that he has established Tsong kha pa's tradition in the area of that disciple.³⁸ As the above letter reveals, he was also in contact with Liu. Incidentally, his letter to the Chinese lay follower is also characterized by the same bitter polemic as the other letters.

Conclusion

Apparently, Liu Wenhui hoped to enlist Pha bong kha as an advisor and supporter for his efforts to establish a center of scholarship far from Central Tibet that would exist independent of the traditional institutions of monastic education near Lhasa. Without the need for long-term studies in Central Tibet, the traditional ties of East Tibet to Lhasa would be weakened and the prospects for Xikang province as an independent cultural and political entity on the border between Tibet and China would be strengthened. However, this seems to have been only one aspect of his plan. He also envisioned a much broader and less elitist monastic education than that provided by the traditional Dge lugs pa curriculum of the great monastic institutions near Lhasa. Even though Liu seemed to have much sympathy for the Dge lugs teachings, he wanted a curriculum that included socially

³⁸ *Dris lan*, 30a.3–30b.5: de khul du dge bshes rin po che ngag dbang rnam rgyal nas 'jam mgon ring lugs dri ma med pa'i srol bzang btsugs pa/

relevant areas of knowledge and not just higher Buddhist philosophical studies. Moreover, as a politician with a precarious power base in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic area he was ill-advised to follow Pha bong kha in his rigorous opposition to all other religions and Buddhist schools, should his province building project have any chance of success.

Liu's correspondent Pha bong kha, however, was indeed "still basing his activities on the old patron-priest model." Such an attitude had primarily in view the old competition of the various Tibetan Buddhist schools to win powerful patrons. Moreover, his forthright rejection of all the various traditional fields of knowledge except one as ultimately useless, shows that he obviously not only lacked any understanding for Liu's motivation and the difficult political challenge he had to master. In its strict focus on the extra-societal goal of supreme enlightenment, he likewise ignores and devalues all the late Thirteenth Dalai Lama's approaches to establish Tibet as a modern state with precisely marked boundaries.

Because at that time Tibetan Buddhist society was already on the eve of its destruction and Liu himself would nine years later completely switch sides to Mao Zedong's communist ideology, the blind zeal with which Pha bong kha fought the old intra-Buddhist battles seems bizarre and anachronistic. Reading his letters from this perspective, they appear as just another example for the blindness with which at that time still "many environmental events were ignored as presumably irrelevant to the system "Tibetan Buddhist society," and which contributed to the downfall of the Dga' ldan pho brang rule in Tibet.³⁹

Appendix: Pha bong kha's letter from 1940

Dris lan, 35b.1: yang lcags 'brug lor shi khang spyi khyab dpon chen lu'u cun krang la 'bul gnang mdzad pa/ gang nyid kyi thugs pa rtse dang dad gus kyi bka' drin dran pas bstan pa dgon pa gsar 'dzugs kyi skor la lhag bsam zol med kyi zhu lan mdo tsam 'bul snying/ der rig pa'i slob grwa gsar 'dzugs mdzad rgyu bstan pa'i gzhi mar shin tu bka' drin chen mod/ spyir rig gnas che ba lnga zhes sgra rig pa/ gso ba rig pa/ bzo ba rig pa/ gtan tshigs rig pa/ nang don gyi rig pa bcas lnga yin/ rig pa'i chung ba lnga snyan ngag/ sdeb sbyor/ zlos gar/ mngon brjod/ dkar rtsis bcas lnga yin/ rig pa'i bcu po 'di las nang don gyi rig pa ma gtogs gzhan rnam phyi nang thun mong ba'i rig gnas yin pas/ sgra dang snyan ngag sogs ji tsam dar yang tshig gi spros pa tsam las 'gro ba rnam ngan song las drangs te thar pa dang thams cad mkhyen pa'i sgor bkri bar mi nus shing/ sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa la'ang phan pa cung zad kyang mi 'byung/ nang don gyi rig pa ni rgyal ba'i bka' dang de'i

³⁹ Schwieger 2021, 237–238.

dgongs 'grel 'phags yul paN grub kyi gzhung chen tshad ldan dag las byung
 ba rnam yin zhing/ de dag gi dgongs pa len lugs 'phags bod gnyis kar go ba
 gnad du song ma song ci rigs yod pa las/ rgya gar 'phags yul du grub mtha'
 bye brag smra ba/ mdo sde pa/ sems [36a] tsam pa/ dbu ma pa dang bzhi la
 grub mtha' smra ba bzahir grags/ sems tsam pa la'ang lung gi rjes 'brang gyi
 sems tsam pa dang/ rigs pa'i rjes 'brang gi sems tsam pa gnyis/ dbu ma pa
 la'ang rang rgyud pa dang thal 'gyur ba gnyis bcas yod pa las/ mdo sngags/
 lta sgom gang gi thad la'ang 'khrul pa cung zad kyang med pa'i rgyal ba'i
 dgongs pa dri ma med pa ni dpal mgon klu sgrub kyi lugs bzang dpal ldan zla
 ba grags pa'i legs par srol phyas pa'i dbu ma thal 'gyur ba'i lugs bzang kho
 na yin la/ bod gangs can gyi ljongs 'dir yang de 'dra'i grub mtha' smra ba
 bzhi'i so so'i tha snyad ma dar kyang grub mtha' tha dad pa gsang sngags
 rnying ma/ gsar ma sa skya/ bka' brgyud/ shangs pa bka' brgyud/ bo dong/ jo
 nang/ zhwa lu/ dge ldan pa sogs lta sgom spyod gsum gyi rang lugs 'dzin
 tshul mi 'dra ba sna tshogs shig dar zhing/ de dag kun kyang 'phags yul dbu
 ma thal 'gyur ba'i lugs bzang yin khul du rlom zhing khas 'che yang/ snga
 'gyur slob dpon chen po padma 'byung gnas dngos slob dang bcas pa dang/
 sa chen kun dga' snying po/ bka' brgyud kyi mar mi yab sras/ bka' gdams kyi
 jo bo rje yab sras sogs bstan pa'i chu 'go rnam thal 'gyur ba'i lta ba 'khrul ba
 med pa rnyed pa sha stag yin kyang/ rjes su slob brgyud mtha' dag lta ba nor
 te gtan la 'bebs lugs mi 'dra ba sna tshogs smra yang/ snying po bsgom pa na
 ci yang yid la mi [36b] byed par 'jog pa hwa shang mahā yana[i] lta ngan
 nyid rtse gcig tu sems par byed la/ de ltar lta ba'i go ba gnad du ma song bas
 rang lugs la las 'bras dang/ 'khor 'das bcings grol sogs gang yang med par
 smra ba'i chad lta mi bzad pa la stong pa nyid du 'khrul te/ ji skad du dbu ma
 rin chen phreng ba las/ gzhan yang 'di ni log bzung na// blun po mkhas pa'i
 nga rgyal can// spong bas ma rungs bdag nyid can// mnar med par ni spyi'u
 tshugs 'gro// zhes gsungs pa ltar dnyal ba mnar med gyi sgo 'byed pa'i lta
 ngan lam du 'khrul nas mi tshe hril por sgom par byed cing/ 'ga' zhig don
 dam stong nyid kyi phyogs tsam yang ma go bar kun rdzob kyi dmigs rnam
 la don dam du 'khrul nas mi tshe hril por rtag lta sgom par byed pa sogs rtag
 chad kyi g.yang sa kho na zab lam du 'khrul ba 'di lta'i skabs 'dir/ lta sgom
 spyod gsum gang gi thad la'ang 'khrul pa'i dri ma cung zad tsam yang med
 pa ni 'jam mgon tsong kha pa'i ring lugs 'di kho na yin la/ sde dge'i gzhung
 chen bcu gsum zhes pa'i bshad pa 'di yang bshad rgyu byams chos dang/ dbu
 ma rigs tshogs/ spyod 'jug sogs rgya gzhung rtsod med rnam yin kyang/
 bshad lugs gzhung chen de dag gi dgongs pa phyin [ci] log tu bkral nas bod
 snga rabs pa'i lta ba/ 'jam mgon tsong kha pa chen pos lam rim chen mor dgag
 bya khyab ches pa zhes lung rigs du mas dgag par mdzad pa'i hwa shang gi
 lta ngan chad lta mi bzad pa gong du smras pa ma thag pa de [37a] bzhin
 rang lugs su 'dzin/ phyogs mtshungs sngar go bo rab 'byams pa zhes 'jam
 mgon tsong kha pa chen po'i mdzad pa rnam thar la phrag dog gi dug chus
 myos te 'jam mgon tsong kha pa chen por dgag pa dang ngan smras mang du
 byas pa/ de rjes se rar je btsun chos kyi rgyal mtshan dang/ 'bras spungs 'jam

dbyangs dga' ba'i blo gros zhes pa'i mkhas mchog rnam gnyis kyis dgag lan po tir longs pa mdzad de dmigs med du tshar bcad/ dgag lan rnams spar du brkos te se 'bras dga' gsum sogs su dar zhing rgyas par yod mus dang/ go rams pa'i ngag rtsom nyes bshad kyi phung po po ti bcu gsum tsam longs pa rnams rgyal mchog lnga pa chen pos gang yod bsdus te dmigs med du rgyas btabs mdzad cing/ phyin chad dar mi chog pa mdzad kyang/ phyis su sde dge'i bla ma 'jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan zhes pas ma dpe rtsol bas bsdus te spar du brkos/ lung rgyun med bzhin du lung byas/ khrid rgyun med bzhin du khrid byas/ go rams pa'i nyes bshad rgyab tu khyer te 'jam mgon tsong kha pa la ma dad/ log rtog/ skur 'debs spel gang thub byed pa de 'dra'i lugs ngan gtso bor 'dzin pa bcas 'di dag btsugs na lta ngan gyi rgyun 'phel te ngan song gi sgo 'byed pa kho nar 'gyur bas de dag gi srol ka btsugs pa las ma btsugs pa brgya 'gyur gyis legs/ des na rgya gzhung chen mo rnams kyis dgongs pa phyin ci ma log par bkral zhing/ lhag par zab mo dbu ma'i lta ba sangs rgyas [37b] bcom ldan 'das kyis dgongs pa mthar thug/ mgon po klu sgrub kyis lugs bzang dpal ldan zla bas legs par srol phyed bar mdzad pa'i dbu ma thal 'gyur ba'i lugs dri ma med pa rje btsun tsong kha pa chen por mgon po 'jam dpal dbyangs kyis dngos su zhal bstan/ bla ma mdzad nas mdo snags kyis dka' gnad mtha' dag pha yis bur bzhin 'doms par mdzad/ snyan brgyud sprul pa'i glegs bam dang bcas pa stsal ba'i lugs bzang 'di kho na mdo snags gang gi thad nas kyang 'khrul pa'i dri ma cung zad kyang med par chos phung brgyad khri bzhi stong lam gyi rim pa gcig tu bsdus te nyams len du 'khyer shes pa'i bstan pa yongs rdzogs kyis snying po gcig pu yin pas/ des na de dag rig gnas slob grwa yang grwa sa chen po se 'bras dga' gsum gyi slob rgyun ltar gyi tshad ma rnam 'grel/ phar phyin/ dbu ma sogs mtshan nyid kyis rtsod grwa zhid 'dzugs gnang mdzad thub na bstan pa'i bya ba rlabs po che ji srid rgyal bstan nam gnas bar skye 'gro mang po'i mngon mtho dang/ nges legs thar pa dang thams cad mkhyen pa'i rgyur 'gro nges kyis 'dzugs pa po la'ang gtan gyi 'dun ma rlabs po che 'grub par gdon mi za/ di dag ngos kyis dge ldan pa'i phyogs lhung phyogs zhen byas te smras pa min par 'gro ba mang po lam log lam gol du shor ba la snying brtse bzod med kyis rang bzhin drang po kho nar smras pa phyogs bcu'i sangs rgyas rnams dpang por bzhugs chog pa ma zad/ lung rigs kyis rgyab rten gyi khungs pu tir longs pa zhu rgyu yod kyang [38a] 'dir 'brir ma lang pas/ zhib par dge shes rin po cher bka' 'dri mdzad gnang gnad che ba bcas de lugs lha dgongs zab mor bsti ba mkhyen//

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