

Enlightenment in a Dance Song: A Study on the *Life and Songs of Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje* (1189-1258)*

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Introduction

The Tibetan literary genre, *Life and Songs* (*rnam mgur*), combines life stories (*rnam thar*) of Buddhist teachers with their songs of realization (*mgur*). These two aspects, the *Life* and the *Songs*, are closely related to each other. Their interdependent relationship is best described by Don grub rgyal in his remarks on one of the most influential works in the genre, *The Life of Milarepa*: "If one studies Mi la ras pa's *Life* without the *Songs*, one is unable to gain a deep understanding; and likewise, if one doesn't know about the *Life* while reading Mi la ras pa's *Songs*, one is unable to understand the background for the stories of the songs."¹ Traditionally, *mgur* is described as spontaneous poetic expressions of a highly accomplished yogi-adept's meditative experiences and realizations, which are often generated after the yogi engages in extensive meditation practices.² With growing studies on the innumerable Tibetan biographical works written in the genre of *Life and Songs*, scholars have underscored the rich autobiographical material contained in the songs and analyzed the strong connection between the life experiences of ascetic yogis and their poetic expressions.³ In this research, I hope to expand our understanding of the relationship between *Life* and *Songs* and seek to understand the literary effects of their combination.

* I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Janet Gyatso and Khenpo Kunga Tenzin for their guidance in reading and interpreting the biographical materials. I am also grateful to Professor Andrew Quintman for his constructive feedback on an early draft of this paper and his insightful commentary as the respondent to my talk at the Center for Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Tsinghua University. I further wish to thank Professor Shen Weirong, Director of the Center, for the opportunity to present my research.

¹ This translation is referenced from Quintman 2014, 141. The original Tibetan, as noted in Quintman's book, is: *gal te mi la ras pa'i «mam thar» la slob sbyong byed na «mgur 'bum» med tshe go ba zab mo zhig len mi thub pa dang/ de mtshungs mi la ras pa'i «mgur 'bum» klog skabs «mam thar» ma shes na'ang mgur de dag gi lo rgyus kyi rgyab ljongs zhes mi thub pa Ita bu'ol*. This quote is from "Bod kyi mgur glu byung 'phel gyi lo rgyus dang khyad chos bsdus par ston pa rig pa'i khye'u mam par rtsen pa'i skyed tshal." In *Dpal don grub rgyal gyi gsung 'bum*. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997 (6 vols.), vol. 3, 316-601.

² On the tradition of *mgur*, see for example: Jackson 1996; Larsson & Quintman 2015.

³ On the large number of studies on works in the genre of *Life and Songs*, see for example: Schaeffer 2005, Quintman 2013.

First, I study how *mgur* can function as a form of life writing with pedagogical purposes and interact with other forms of life writing. Then, I situate biographical accounts related to *mgur* in the broader context of artistic performances. By reviewing passages in biographical works describing the performance aspect of *mgur*, I analyze how narratives about *mgur* symbolize transcendental moments in the biography and contribute to constructing the protagonist's charisma.

Specifically, I focus on a compelling case example: the biographical corpus of Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje (1189-1258). Rgod tshang pa's biographies are some of the most popular works of *rnam thar* in Tibet, still in print and available in major bookstores in Lhasa. As a wandering yogi, Rgod tshang pa's life was characterized by adventurous pilgrimages, rigorous meditation practices, and an ascetic lifestyle. Considered an emanation of Mi la ras pa, Rgod tshang pa also taught the dharma through *mgur* to a broad range of audiences, from his close disciples, children, and local government officials to animals and non-human beings. What is idiosyncratic about Rgod tshang pa's life experiences is that he was a professional singer and dancer before he became a full-time Buddhist practitioner. In most biographies, it is recorded that Rgod tshang pa was talented in the performing arts from an early age, and he became a "*pag shi*,"⁴ a Chinese/Mongolian loan word meaning "a skilled person/artist",⁴ in his teenage years. Later on, as he became a Buddhist practitioner, he continued to have numerous experiences associated with artistic activities. Rgod tshang pa's unique relationship to artistic activities makes his biographies an ideal subject to study *mgur* not only as a form of Buddhist teachings but also as songs, a genre of artistic expression essential to Tibetan cultural life.

Besides Rgod tshang pa's unique artistic talent, there are other reasons why Rgod tshang pa's biographical corpus is important for the study of *Life and Songs*. Rgod tshang pa was one of the most influential early teachers of the so-called "Practice Lineage" (*sgrub [b]rgyud*), which is a title that later came to be most associated with the Bka' brgyud school, given its emphasis on meditation practice. Rgod tshang pa was the founder of the Upper 'Brug (*stod 'brug*) branch of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud school, which is one of the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that valorizes the ascetic yogi ideal and the benefit of meditation practices over intellectual scholarship to the greatest extent. As a teacher of the Practice Lineage, Rgod tshang pa emphasized that life writings about his spiritual path encompass all the necessary practical knowledge to attain enlightenment. Therefore, life writings take up a large proportion of Rgod tshang pa's teachings, and the number of biographies dedicated to him is remarkably high for the thirteenth century. Rgod tshang pa taught that life stories about how he practiced are the very content of his oral instructions (*gdams ngag*). Rgod tshang pa also taught *mgur* as a form of oral instruction, serving as "a primary signifier of the 'oral transmission' of esoteric instructions between teacher and disciple," echoed by other authors

⁴ van der Kuip 1995, 277.

in the Bka' brgyud school.⁵ In Rgod tshang pa's biographies, his disciples combined life stories and his *mgur*, producing some of the earliest works written in the style of *Life and Songs* in Tibet. His disciples also compiled some of the earliest works in the genre of "Golden Rosary" (*gser 'phreng*),⁶ which later became the major genre of Tibetan hagiographic collection that traces a lineage unbrokenly back to India. Generally speaking, Rgod tshang pa and his disciples were pivotal to the development of Tibetan hagiographic literature in the thirteenth century.

To begin with, I study Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* as a form of life writing. Firstly, I observe that in Rgod tshang pa's biographies, *mgur* is vividly described as the "biography of the mind" (*thugs kyi rnam thar*), which theorizes *mgur* as a form of life writing about his spiritual experiences. Then, I look at how biographical narratives are combined with and incorporated into his *mgur* and how they contribute to the efficacy of *mgur* as authentic oral instructions. Throughout Rgod tshang pa's collected works, *mgur* is always accompanied by some biographical information. Even the *Collected Songs* (*mgur 'bum*) is not a mere compilation of all his *mgur*, but it is a collection of *mgur* combined with and organized by Rgod tshang pa's life stories. The biographical narratives not only make the *mgur* more personal and embodied, but they also attest to the speaker's spiritual attainment, which legitimizes the virtue of these songs as oral instructions. Moreover, *mgur* serves as a highly condensed form of life writing about Rgod tshang pa's meditation experiences, which supplements the biographical narratives in prose when describing such experiences. In general, the combination of *life* and *songs* serves the purpose of drawing the reader's attention to the teachings taught in the *mgur* while emphasizing the necessity to understand *mgur* in the context of his life experiences that informed these teachings.

Next, I study *mgur* as a type of song from an artistic perspective, and I specifically situate *mgur* in the biographical narratives about a wide range of artistic activities throughout Rgod tshang pa's life. Overall, textual information on *mgur*'s performance is relatively lacking compared to our resources on studying the literary aspects of *mgur* as a written genre. The case of Rgod tshang pa brings forth unique perspectives for our understanding of *mgur* as an artistic expression thanks to his artistic talents and the great variety of his life experiences related to singing and dancing. Through synthesizing these life experiences, I seek to understand how his artistic talents contributed to his spiritual activities, with *mgur* being one of the ways he generated transformative experiences that enhanced spiritual progress. After surveying the biographical materials, I categorize episodes related to Rgod tshang pa's singing and dancing into three major themes: the first category includes his artistic performances as a professional artist; the second consists of songs and dances associated with tantric practices; and the last one is his *mgur*, the songs he sang to teach the dharma to benefit beings.

⁵ Quintman and Larsson 2015, 88.

⁶ Miller 2006, 19.

Through examining these life stories about songs, I argue that Rgod tshang pa's talent in singing and dancing is an important basis for the literary construction of his charismatic persona, and these artistic activities highlight moments of transcendence in the biographical narratives. I observe that Rgod tshang pa's biographers, on the one hand, attempt to interpret such artistic activities to accord with Buddhist worldviews on various levels, and on the other hand, they highlight the unique power of songs as an art form that inspires human connection.

Literature Review

There are twelve independent biographical works found in different versions of Rgod tshang pa's *Collected Works* (*gsung 'bum*).⁷ Eleven of these biographies were written by his immediate disciples. Such a large number of biographies dedicated to one teacher is rather rare in the thirteenth century. It reflects the significance placed on biographies as an essential form of teaching in Rgod tshang pa's lineage. Rgod tshang pa regarded his biographies as his unique, profound dharma, and he instructed his disciples to study and apply these teachings to their spiritual practices. Honoring Rgod tshang pa's philosophy, his disciples dictated these life stories Rgod tshang pa taught during his dharma teachings and arranged them into many works of biographies. These early biographies were written in the thirteenth century, which was the period when the genre of *Life and Songs* was beginning to develop.⁸ Many of these early works include Rgod tshang pa's *mgur*, either in full length or partially, and they also contain many passages related to Rgod tshang pa's songs and other artistic activities.

In this research, I mainly examine biographies that include relatively more content related to Rgod tshang pa's songs. Firstly, the following three biographies are among the longest biographies written by Rgod tshang pa's disciples, and they contain many passages related to his songs. They are *The Life Stories of Rgod tshang pa Written in Red Earth* (*rje rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar btsag bris ma*, hereby referred to as *Red Earth*) and *Opening the Gate of Good Qualities: The Life of Dharma Lord Rgod tshang pa* (*chos rje rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar yon tan sgo 'byed*, hereby referred to as *The Gate of Good Qualities*), both written by Rgod tshang pa's disciple, Byams sems sher gzhon; and *Treasury of Jewels: The Life of the Incomparable Lord Rgod tshang pa* (*mnyam med rgyal ba rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar rin chen gter mdzod*, hereby referred to as *Treasury*

⁷ There are several existing versions of Rgod tshang pa's *Collected Works*, in the forms of both traditional manuscripts and modern computer input. The manuscripts include the five-volume version printed by Sungrab Nyamso Gyunphel Parkhang (Pelampur, 1972); another five-volume version reproduced from rare manuscripts at Tango monastic community (Thimphu, 1981). The version I use in this paper is the four-volume modern computer input version published by Mtshur phu dgon gtsug lag dpe rnying dpe tshogs (Stod lung, 2019), which is the most complete and well-edited version.

⁸ Quintman (2014, p. 58-81) observed the earliest development of the genre in his study of the biographical corpus of Mi la ras pa.

of *Jewels*) written by another disciple, Dbang phyug rgyal mtshan. *Red Earth* is the longest among all the biographies, with a length of 556 folio pages. According to its colophon, the title *Red Earth* refers to the fact that its author, Byams sems sher gzhon, wrote most of these stories right when Rgod tshang pa told them, therefore sometimes needing to write with red ochre on the spot when the dictator did not have pen and paper. *Red Earth* is a collection of anachronistic, anecdotal short stories that best reflect how Rgod tshang pa actually told these stories, containing a large amount of autobiographical quotes. The other two biographies are mostly arranged in chronological order, with a major biographical narrative accompanied by some direct quotes.

Next, two of the early biographies are written in the style of *Life and Songs*. One is *The Life of Rgod tshang pa Adorned with Songs* (*rje rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar mgur chen 'gas brgyan ma*, hereby referred to as *Life Adorned with Songs*). This is one of the earliest Tibetan biographies written in the style of *Life and Songs*. Its author, Rgyal tshang pa Bde chen rdo rje was a direct disciple of Rgod tshang pa, who also wrote one of the earliest biographies of Mi la ras pa in the style of *Life and Songs*.⁹ In *Life Adorned with Songs*, Rgod tshang pa's life is divided into sixteen phases, with the *mgur* he sang during each phase included. There is also *The Sealed Teachings of Lord Rgod tshang pa's Secret Life* (*rje rgod tshang pa'i gsang ba'i rnam thar bka' rgya ma*, hereby referred to as the *Secret Life*) that offers very relevant material, which is a collection of his teachings imparted to a close group of disciples on his experiences practicing at various holy sites organized around a *mgur* with the same title. Besides these works, *The Collected Songs of the Glorious Incomparable Lord Rgod tshang pa* (*dpal mnyam med rgyal ba rgod tshang pa'i mgur 'bum chen mo*, hereby referred to as the *Collected Songs*), which was compiled by Rgod tshang pa's disciples, also demonstrates the style of *Life and Song*. Even though this work is not a biography, it contains many biographical narratives. And the editor organized Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* by the occasion when it was performed in chronological order.

Lastly, there is a later biography, which remains the most popular one up to this day, titled *Garland of Jewels Liberation Upon Sight: The Life of Lord Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje* (*rgyal ba rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje'i rnam thar mthong ba don ldan nor bu'i phreng ba*, hereby referred to as *Garland of Jewels*), written by Sangs rgyas dar po. He was a 16th-century yogi connected to Gtsang smyon Heruka and his disciples.¹⁰ In the colophon, Sangs rgyas dar po disclosed that the biography was proofread and edited by one of Gtsang smyon Heruka's chief disciples, Lo pan 'jam dpal chos lha, who edited many texts produced by the so-called "Gtsang smyon Heruka Literary School."¹¹ Gtsang smyon Heruka's main religious affiliation is the Upper 'Brug lineage founded by Rgod tshang pa. Therefore, Gtsang smyon Heruka paid great respect to Rgod tshang pa, making mental offerings to him and Mi la ras pa

⁹ Quintman 2014, 72.

¹⁰ Schaeffer 2011, 472.

¹¹ On the increasing literature on the "Gtsang smyon Heruka Literary School," see for example, Sernesi 2021.

continuously as recorded in Gtsang smyon's biography.¹² In Gtsang smyon's commentary on the tradition of *mgur*, titled *Opening the Eyes of Faith*, studied by Quintman and Larsson, Gtsang smyon places Rgod tshang pa in a lineage of Tibetan *mgur* singers that continued up to Gtsang smyon's own lama.¹³ Quintman and Larsson have noted in their study that "*Opening the Eyes of Faith* makes transparent some programmatic ways in which Gtsang smyon employed the song tradition to construct a distinctive religious identity."¹⁴ Through examining a wide range of stories related to songs in *Garland of Jewels*, I argue that stories related to singing and dancing are more thematized in *Garland of Jewels* than in previous works, and this literary attempt is likely influenced by Gtsang smyon's literary movement that "underscored the central role that spiritual songs of realization (*mgur*) played in the expression and transmission of Buddhism across the Tibetan cultural world."¹⁵

In this study, I cover materials in several biographies. While the study does not aim to provide a systematic study on the development of *Life and Songs* as a genre, it underscores the theory and practice of combining these two aspects as seen in a biographical corpus central to the popularization of this genre. While materials from early biographies reflect the formative stage of the genre of *Life and Songs*, *Garland of Jewels* demonstrates how a follower of the lineage undertook a literary project that revitalized the ascetic yogi ideal and celebrated the unique power of songs capable of conveying the entire Buddhist path in the 16th century. As I study passages from *Garland of Jewels*, I try to locate relevant passages in early biographies that Sangs rgyas dar po adopted in his writing. By comparing *Garland of Jewels* with the early biographies, the study unveils how a 16th-century follower of Rgod tshang pa's lineage inherited the literary legacy of the early biographers and conducted literary innovations in his new version of the *Life and Songs* of Rgod tshang pa.

Brief Summary of Rgod tshang pa's Life

Rgod tshang pa was born in Lho 'brag in 1189. As a child, he experienced many struggles in life. His mother abandoned him and his father and remarried a rich doctor when Rgod tshang pa was a mere three-year-old, leaving him and his father suffering from sickness and poverty. Nevertheless, he was very talented, attractive, and brilliant from a young age and soon made a decent living for himself and his father by getting paid by local villagers for reading Buddhist scriptures. Even more so, he had the ability to turn these scriptures into songs spontaneously, which delighted his audience. As he grew older, his good looks and his talents in singing and dancing ensured his success as he became a popular performing artist (*pag shi*). Meanwhile, he developed a keen desire to study Buddhism. At age 19, he finally left

¹² Larsson 2012, 70.

¹³ Quintman & Larsson 2015, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 89.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 87.

home and went to Ra lung monastery, where he met his root lama, Gtsang pa rgya ras (1161-1211), the founder of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud school. Gtsang pa rgya ras gave him the dharma name, Mgon po rdo rje, took him as a heart disciple, and granted him most of the oral instructions of the 'Brug pa school.

Rgod tshang pa stayed with Gtsang pa rgya ras at Ra lung for three years before he passed away. Then, at the age of 22, Rgod tshang pa decided to follow his lama's final instructions and left Ra lung to wander in the mountains. From then on, he spent three years at Lho 'brag mkhar chu, one of the four major retreat sites for the 'Brug pa school. Afterward, he embarked on his famous pilgrimage to Gangs Ti se and Jalandhara for a total of four years. It is noteworthy that Rgod tshang pa's travel accounts are the earliest among that of Tibetan pilgrims' intentional travels to tantric *pīṭhas* in India.¹⁶ At the age of 32, he returned to Ra lung monastery and stayed briefly with the nephew of Gtsang pa rgya ras, the second abbot of Ra lung, Dbon ras pa Dar ma seng+ge (1177-1237), from whom he took full ordination vows. After a short while, Rgod tshang pa felt the strong urge to go to the mountains again, so he went to Phom lha khab as Dbon ras pa suggested and practiced guru yoga there for three years. Then, he spent five years at RtsA ri. After that, he went to the region of Rtsib ri, and meditated at Rgod tshang for seven years, where he achieved the highest level of enlightenment. During the seven years he stayed at Rgod tshang, his reputation as an enlightened master attracted a great number of disciples. Thus, he became known by the title of "Rgod tshang pa."

Afterward, Rgod tshang pa continued to travel to various mountain hermitages, with a growing retinue following him. He also performed geomancy to explore new suitable areas to construct meditation retreats, where he and his disciples established retreat sites to practice. The major sites where he stayed in his later life include thirteen years at Steng 'gro, nine years at Bde mchog gling and Dga' ldan gling, one year at Seng+ge gling, and two years at Bar 'grog rdo rje gling. At age 70, he passed away at Steng 'gro in the earth male horse year (1258). His main disciples include Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal (1213-1258 or 1287), O rgyan pa Rin chen dpal (1229-1309), Ba ri ba, Ma bdun pa, etc. His teachings cover a wide range of 'Brug pa practices, especially on the practices of devotion (*mos gus*), equal taste (*ro snyoms*), dependent origination (*rten 'brel*), etc.

Mgur as Life Writing with Pedagogical Purposes

As a Buddhist teacher, Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* serves as important teachings about meditation practices, and it is included in many biographies. First, I analyze how Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* functions as a form of life writing with pedagogical purposes and relates to other forms of life writing. Rgod tshang pa repeatedly told his disciples that life writings about his liberation path

¹⁶ This has been noted by a number of scholars, see: Tucci 1940, Huber 2008, Shastri 2009.

are his dharma teachings. Rgod tshang pa directly pointed out to his close disciples in this way: "My oral instructions that are superior to others are my liberation stories (*rnam thar*) in a broad sense. All of my conducts and my liberation stories exist in my dharma teachings and oral instructions. My conducts and liberation stories **are** my profound dharma, which makes it very different from others' liberation stories."¹⁷ This statement is included in several biographies with slight variations. In this quote, Rgod tshang pa draws an equivalence between his liberation stories (*rnam thar*) and his dharma teachings, centered around oral instructions. In other words, the purpose of Rgod tshang pa teaching these life stories is to offer instruction for his disciples' spiritual practices.

While it is commonly understood that *mgur* serves as an important form of oral instruction, in Rgod tshang pa's biographies, it is specifically described that *mgur* is a form of life writing. In *Treasury of Jewels*, written by one of Rgod tshang pa's main disciples, Dbang phyug rgyal mtshan, the following statement best summarizes the relationship between *mgur* and *rnam thar*:

Furthermore, the profound Dharma that arose in the Lord of Dharma's own mind, which was inconceivable and ineffable in ordinary language to others, is in essence the mastery over the secret of speech. Thus, he was unhindered in simultaneously teaching the Dharma in the languages of the six realms, speaking to each according to their own tongue. All of this is clearly stated in his spiritual songs. Regarding the *biography of his mind*, the perfection of the two types of wisdom, this too is clearly described in his songs and oral teachings, just as it is.¹⁸

In this statement, Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* is framed as a manifestation of his "biography of the mind" (*thugs kyi rnam thar*). This description establishes *mgur* in the genre of *rnam thar*, while specifying that the content of his *mgur* is related to Rgod tshang pa's life experiences of the mind. It is traditionally interpreted that *mgur* is the spontaneous poetic expression of a mahāsid-dha's meditative experiences and realizations. With the term "biography of the mind," it is emphasized that the content of *mgur* is based on the mahāsid-dha's lived experiences. In this framing, writing about these experiences is considered a form of life writing.

Besides this theoretical statement about the relationship between *mgur*

¹⁷ Dbang phyug rgyal mtshan, *Treasury of Jewels*, p. 242: *gdams ngag zab mo gzhan las khyad par 'phags pa'i 'di ka rnam thar chen mo yin te/nga'i spyod lam rnam thar thams cad chos gdams ngag la yod pa yin/nga'i spyod lam rnam thar zab chos su yong ba 'di ka gzhan dang khyad par che ba'i rnam thar yin no/*.

¹⁸ Dbang phyug rgyal mtshan, *Treasury of Jewels*, p. 245: *yang chos rje rang gi thugs la 'khrungs chos zab mo gzhan la skad rang ma grags pa bsam gyis mi khyab ste/mdor na gsung gi gsang ba la mnga' brnyes pas/rigs drug dang rang rang gi skad du dus cig la khang la khang 'tsham du chos gsungs pa la thogs chags med pa'o/ 'di kun mgur na gsal por gsungs so/ thugs kyi rnam thar mkhyen pa gnyis mthar phyin pa yang/ de kho na bzhin du mgur dang gsung sgros rnam na gsal bar gsungs so/*.

and life writings, throughout the biographies, there are many examples showing how Rgod tshang pa taught his *mgur* as a form of life writing. Comprehending Rgod tshang pa's intention, his biographers, mostly his disciples, also deliberately emphasized this quality of his *mgur* and connected *mgur* with other forms of life writing. Specifically, on the one hand, life stories in prose provide context for the creation of *mgur*, which informs the readers that *mgur* is a result of certain life experiences, making the *mgur* personal, embodied, and authentic. On the other hand, *mgur* itself is a form of life writing that focuses on the life experiences of meditation practices, and it is referenced as a condensed, poetic form of expression that serves as a summary, an addition, or a moral takeaway of the major biographical narratives in prose. Lastly, *mgur* is, by nature, autobiographic, as the speaker is the mahāsiddha themselves, and the content is their personal meditative experiences. With the autobiographic voice, *mgur* provides an authentic account of the mahāsiddha's meditation experiences and realizations from their own perspectives.¹⁹

While there are numerous examples of these characteristics, here I analyze a few primary examples that cover these aspects. The first example is centered around a famous *mgur* Rgod tshang pa composed at one of the main mountain hermitages he established called "Steng 'gro." It still stands today in Shel dkar, Ding ri County in Tibet, with Rgod tshang pa's meditation caves and relics preserved there. This *mgur* was composed when Rgod tshang pa first heard about the place "Steng 'gro" and was planning to move there, after having spent seven years at Rgod tshang in the Shri ri/Rtsib ri region and achieved the ultimate level of realization. This *mgur* is a brilliant play of words on the place name "Steng 'gro," literally meaning "going upwards" or "ascending to higher grounds." Rgod tshang pa interpreted the name as an auspicious sign for achieving spiritual progress. In the *mgur*, he used his personal life experience of attaining enlightenment at Rgod tshang and ascending to a new height at Steng 'gro as the major narrative, to illustrate the metaphor of "steng 'gro" (ascending to a height). The *mgur* has nine stanzas in its body part, following the same pattern. I include a few of them here to explain:

I, vagabond of the area, Mgon po rdo rje,
Traveled and dwelled without attachment now and then,
Upholding the life examples of my spiritual forefathers.
I sing a song of ascending, not remaining.

Since I do not dwell in the swamp of attachment,
And I have truly purified wishes and desires,
The young vulture has fully completed non-grasping at the Vulture's Nest.

¹⁹ While *mgur* is commonly weaved into narratives in autobiographies and biographies, it is often atemporal, and it is to be distinguished from certain verses that serve more directly as narratives in autobiographies, such as those in 'Jigs med gling pa's autobiographies. See Gyatso 1998, 104.

I ascend to new heights after extinguishing desire.

Since I do not remain mistaken by wrong consciousness,
And I have truly purified the perfectly natural state,
The young vulture has completely developed self-awareness at the Vulture's Nest.

I ascend to a height where everything dawns as clear light.

Since I do not stay in ordinary afflicted emotions,
I have truly practiced non-duality.
The young vulture has completely developed wisdom at the Vulture's Nest.
I ascend to a height that is without rejection and acceptance.²⁰

The main metaphor of the *mgur* is "not remaining but ascending" (*mi sdod steng 'gro*). As we can see in the repeated structure of the body part of this *mgur*, the first line is about "not remaining" (*mi stod*) in a mental factor that causes suffering. The second line points out the result of the practice in the first line. The third and fourth lines paraphrase the contents of the first two lines, with Rgod tshang pa's biographical details combined in them. The third line talks about an aspect of his realization achieved at the "Vulture's Nest" (*rgod tshang*), which is also the antidote to the negative mental factors mentioned in the first line. Here, he refers to himself in the third person, as the "young vulture" (*rgod phrugs*). The final line is the level of spiritual attainment achieved as a result of the realization that happened at Rgod tshang, symbolized by the metaphor of "steng 'gro" (ascending to a height). Altogether, the *mgur* teaches the correct practices of purifying negative mental factors through meditation for achieving spiritual progress. Particularly, Rgod tshang pa gave this teaching by speaking about his personal experience of spiritual progress, clearly characterizing it as personal by mentioning his name and the geographical locations he stayed at. This autobiographical account is a concise and artistic expression of Rgod tshang pa's spiritual life experience, which serves as authentic and powerful teachings on meditation practices.

Besides the autobiographical content in the *mgur* itself, it is combined with biographical narratives in prose in works written in *Life and Songs*. Most evidently, in *Garland of Jewels*, the *mgur* is combined with a background story that goes like this:

Then, the dharma lord ended his retreat. At that time, many patrons from the local town, led by the couple named "'Od 'bar" from Byang nge, came to visit

²⁰ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 84: rgyal khams gyi sprang bo mgon rdo rang/ skabs su zhen med kyiis 'gro 'dus byed/ bla ma gong ma'i rnam thar 'dzin/ mi sdod steng 'gro'i glu zhiig len/ chags zhen 'dam la mi sdod par/ dgos 'dod dun la sbyangs lags las/ rgod tshang du 'dzin med rgod phrug 'tshar/ 'dod pa zad pas steng du 'gro/ log shes 'khrul par mi sdod par/ gnas lugs yang dag don la sbyangs/ rgod tshang du rig rgod phrug 'tshar/ gang shar 'od gsal gyi steng du 'gro/ nyon mongs rang gar mi sdod pas/ gnyis med don la sbyangs lags pas/ rgod tshang du ye shes rgod phrug 'tshar/ spang blang med pa'i steng du 'gro/.

the dharma lord. They pleaded: 'Since the dharma lord you realized dependent originations without limit, you have conquered all the humans and non-humans. We folks [had to] travel to this place where vultures, deer, and antelopes are not even able to pass, and where many people fell off the cliffs. Please come to our place where there is an amazing mountain retreat.' The dharma lord asked: 'What is the mountain retreat called?' They replied: 'It is called 'Steng 'gro'.' The dharma lord said: 'I will go to this place with great auspiciousness', and he sang this *mgur* of the Nine Ascendings.²¹

In this preceding biographical narrative, the concept of dependent origination (*rten 'brel*) is central to the story. Overall, accumulating auspicious dependent origination is crucial to the success of one's spiritual practices. In this case, the patrons' plea was an auspicious dependent origination, and the name of the mountain retreat itself is another one. This explanation establishes the motif of the following *mgur*, which emphasizes the auspiciousness of the place name's meaning, "ascending to heights." This exact story is not found in earlier biographies written by Rgod tshang pa's disciples, although skeletal narratives about the invitation of a patron couple named "'Od 'bar" exist in *Red Earth* and *The Gate of Good Qualities*. Also, in the *Collected Songs* and *Red Earth*, it is confirmed that this *mgur* was composed at Rgod tshang.²² Based on the biographical information in the early biographies and the biographical details in the *mgur*, the author of *Garland of Jewels*, Sangs rgyas dar po added this background story and combined it with the *mgur*. With this addition, the auspiciousness of the place's name is highlighted, helping the readers better comprehend and appreciate the wordplay. Moreover, in *Garland of Jewels*, this *mgur* serves as a brilliant transition in the narrative as Rgod tshang pa concludes his time at Rgod tshang and moves to a new location, starting a new period of his life. This is a good example of how *mgur* works as a form of life writing and correlates with other forms of life writing.

Another example shows how biographical narratives make the songs more efficacious by revealing the context of the song's composition. This story is recorded in *Red Earth*, a collection of short stories written down as Rgod tshang pa told them. It goes: "At that time, even when he was sick, he sang a few lines of songs in good spirit, and he taught *mgur*. 'Even when I am sick, my blissful awareness is still uninterrupted.' This *mgur* sang when

²¹ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 83: *de nas chos rje bas sku mtshams grol ba dang/ de'i dus su khrom gyi yon bdag la snga ba byang nge ba 'od 'bar bza' mis thog drangs mang pos mjal du 'ongs nas zhus pa/ chos rje bas rten 'brel chig chog ma gnang du chud pas/ mi dang mi ma yin pa thams cad dbang du 'du bas/ bya rgod dang ri dwags rna bas mi thar ba'i sa phyogs 'dir/ bdag cag pas mi mang po gyang la lhung bar da' bas/ bdag cag gi sa phyogs pha gi na ri khrod ngo mtshar can bdog pas 'byon pas zhu zhus pas/ chos rje'i zhal nas ri khrod ji skad bya ba yod gsungs pas/ steng 'gro bya ba yod lags zhus pas/ chos rje zhal nas rten 'brel bzang der 'gro ba yin no gsung nas/ steng 'gro dgu ma'i mgur gsungs pa/.*

²² Byams sems sher gzhon, *Red Earth*, p. 18: *khyung dkar dang rgod tshang du mgur sum cu so lnga gsungs/ de dus su byon pa re re gnyis la sna len gyis mgur mang du gsungs/ steng 'gror mi sdod steng 'gro'i glu cig len/ la sogs pa'i mgur bcu drug gsungs/ dgon pa byin 'bebs la sogs pa gsungs/ de man chad sgrub pa 'ba' zhig gi mgur lags/ de yan chad la mgur bcu bcu bzhugs sol.*

he said this had a great blessing. He told everyone to read it three times."²³ In this short section, it is described that Rgod tshang pa sang songs in good spirits even when he was sick, using a very colloquial expression of "glu rgyangs rtse le." In this case, Rgod tshang pa taught the dharma through *mgur* about his experience of sickness, demonstrating that even when adversities occurred, he remained in bliss uninterruptedly. Therefore, it is interpreted that the *mgur* contains more "blessings" because of this. This example shows how certain *mgur* is understood to have more soteriological value because of the context of its composition. It also shows us how Rgod tshang pa instructed his disciples to utilize *mgur* for their spiritual practices.

The final example further demonstrates how *mgur* functions as autobiographical writing on its own and how it supplements other forms of life writing in prose. One of the works written in the genre of *Life and Songs* is titled *The Sealed Teachings of The Secret Life* (*gsang ba'i rnam thar bka' rgya ma*). This work is a collection of Rgod tshang pa's esoteric teachings organized by a *mgur* with the same title: *Song of the Sealed Teachings of the Secret Life* (*gsang ba'i rnam thar bka' rgya ma'i mgur*). In this song, each stanza describes one period of Rgod tshang pa's life characterized by the holy site where he practiced in chronological order. Each stanza delineates the practices Rgod tshang pa engaged in at the site, as well as the result and attainment he achieved at this site. This work begins with the complete song, followed by a selection of Rgod tshang pa's autobiographical teachings about his experiences related to each stanza, serving as a commentary to the *mgur*. Here, I am including one of the most relevant stanzas for our current research, which involves stories related to singing and dancing. The stanza in the *mgur* goes:

"When I meditated at the charnel grounds at Kha che,²⁴
I danced on the palms of the *ḍākinīs*.
If you attain common siddhis, there are limits to your attainments.
I am a yogi who embraces the supreme siddhi."²⁵

This stanza describes the period in Rgod tshang pa's life when he famously went on pilgrimage to Jalandhara, a tantric holy site in present-day Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. Rgod tshang pa intended to make a pilgrimage to Jalandhara so that he could practice Equal Taste (*ro snyoms*) at the five major charnel grounds there. In this *mgur*, which is an esoteric teaching, phrases such as "dancing on the palms of the *ḍākinīs*" are coded, metaphorical language

²³ Byams sems sher gzhon, *Red Earth*, p. 25: *de'i dus su/ na yang glu rgyangs rtse le gyin mgur gsung/ nga na yang bde ba rgyun chad med/ ces pa'i dus kyi mgur 'di byin rlabs che/ kun la lan gsum klog gsung/*.

²⁴ The "Jalandhara" Rgod tshang pa visited is located in the present-day Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. In a few biographies, it is said that Jalandhara is in Kha che (Kashmir). While others say that it is in Rgya gar (the Indian subcontinent).

²⁵ Rgod tshang pa, *Secret Life*, p. 352: *nga kha che'i dur khrod du bsgoms tsa na/ mkha' 'gro ma lag pa'i mtshil na 'khrab/ thun mong bsgrub na 'grub tshod 'dug/ nga mchog la gril ba'i rnal 'byor lags/*.

that requires further explanation. In the prose section, the author included stories Rgod tshang pa told about his experiences at the charnel grounds in Jalandhara to elaborate on this. The stories are about him encountering groups of *ḍākinīs* in Jalandhara on various occasions. The lengthiest story is about him having a blissful meditative experience watching a group of *ḍākinīs* sing and dance in a chapel outside Jalandhara. During the performance, Rgod tshang pa had an intense tantric meditative experience visualizing the *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala*. He visualized the *ḍākinīs* as the sixteen goddesses making offerings to the main deities with singing and dancing, and he eventually beheld the visages of the yidams *Vajradhara* and *Vajrayoginī*. Besides this story, Rgod tshang pa also told other stories briefly about how he benefitted from interactions with *ḍākinīs* at Jalandhara, such as how *ḍākinīs* granted him any siddhi he wished for and how he realized the equality of the three times sitting amidst a group of beautiful women, etc.

With the help of these stories, the audience can better understand the metaphor of "dancing on the palms of the *ḍākinīs*" in the *mgur*. It describes poetically how Rgod tshang pa achieved supreme spiritual attainments at the *Cakrasaṃvara* holy site, Jalandhara, with the help of "female messengers" of the site.²⁶ The stories also provide concrete definitions of other terms in the stanza such as "the supreme *siddhi*," which refers to his realization of mahāmudrā through engaging in esoteric practices of the highest-level tantra, the *yoginītantra*. In turn, in this work of *Life and Songs*, the *mgur* serves as a structural organizer for the writings in prose, providing a chronological order for the biographical narratives in prose characterized by different phases of Rgod tshang pa's life. It also highlights the most important achievements of Rgod tshang pa's life in each period. In this way, the *mgur* functions as a mnemonic device for the followers to memorize Rgod tshang pa's life, his path of complete liberation. In sum, this work written in the genre of *Life and Songs* combines a *mgur* that highly condenses Rgod tshang pa's life experiences of practicing at different holy sites with more detailed biographical narratives in prose to expand on these stories. It utilizes *mgur* as a form of autobiographical account with unique literary qualities distinct from life accounts written in prose, which in this case serve as commentary to the verse. In this case, *mgur* is a concise, poetic form of autobiographical life writing that primarily focuses on the inner experiences of Rgod tshang pa but also includes his physical life experiences of pilgrimage. When combined with related biographical accounts in prose, they complement each other as *mgur* serves as a summary, a testimony, and a mnemonic device, while the prose functions as commentaries and provides contexts for the *mgur*.

Mgur as an Art Form

In the previous section, I have discussed how *mgur* functions as a form of

²⁶ Ngawang Zangpo 2001, 63.

life writing with pedagogical purposes, as well as its distinction from and connection with other forms of life writing. Next, I look at the artistic aspect of *mgur*, which is a type of poetic expression and artistic performance. The questions I put forward here are: why are the ineffable experiences of enlightenment expressed poetically? What are the unique qualities of *mgur* that make it such a powerful means to communicate from mind to mind? In order to study the artistic aspect of *mgur*, I look at the biographical narratives associated with *mgur*, which provide materials for us to understand the performance aspect of *mgur*, as well as its effect on the audience. In this regard, Rgod tshang pa's biographies are particularly valuable because they contain many accounts of his artistic performances. Ever since he was a child, Rgod tshang pa was talented in singing and dancing, and he became a professional performing artist as a teenager. After he became a Buddhist practitioner, he continued to engage in artistic activities in various ways on his path of liberation. I consider *mgur* in the cultural milieu of Rgod tshang pa's artistic activities. Specifically, I observe three categories of stories related to Rgod tshang pa's artistic activities in his biographies, namely his secular, tantric, and pedagogical artistic activities. Through a thorough examination of biographical accounts in these categories, I study how artistic activities are interpreted not only as conforming with the broader Buddhist worldviews but also as Rgod tshang pa's idiosyncratic means to enhance his spiritual practices and to teach the dharma.

While these stories all exist in early biographies written by Rgod tshang pa's direct disciples, they are more thematized and consolidated in *Garland of Jewels*, the most popular version of Rgod tshang pa's biographies written by the 16th-author, Sangs rgyas dar po. I argue that Sangs rgyas dar po intentionally accentuated Rgod tshang pa's artistic talent to construct his distinct charisma in *Garland of Jewel*. Specifically, I analyze a reoccurring phrase, "*glu gar 'bro gsum*", which is employed to describe his singing and dancing activities in vastly different contexts, creating an interconnected relationship between performing arts, tantric practices, and Rgod tshang pa's other enlightened activities. Through drawing connections between different types of artistic activities, Sangs rgyas dar po emphasizes the artistic nature of *mgur* and the transformative power of songs as manifested in various scenarios. He encouraged his readers to not only read the *mgur* as written literature but even more so to imagine themselves experiencing *mgur* as a powerful art form. As an author imagining the life of his religious idol three centuries after he passed away, Sangs rgyas dar po helps his readers experience Rgod tshang pa's life to their greatest capacities. Influenced by Gtsang smyon He ru ka, Sangs rgyas dar po's literary endeavors contributed to Gtsang smyon and his followers' broader literary movement to "disseminate the *mgur* traditions of Mar pa and Mi la ras pa to as broad an audience as possible."²⁷

Surveying the biographies, I specifically study stories in three categories,

²⁷ Quintman and Larsson 2015, 95.

covering several different stages in Rgod tshang pa's life. I primarily analyze the narratives in *Garland of Jewels*, while noting similar passages in the early biographies. The first category includes stories related to Rgod tshang pa's early life experiences as a street artist before he began to formally study the dharma. The narrative justifies these secular singing activities by emphasizing that the contents of these songs are related to the dharma and by interpreting Rgod tshang pa's artistic performances as bodhisattva activities, which transform sentient beings' worldly perceptions of phenomena and remove their sufferings. The second category is related to tantric practices. Scholars have suggested that one of the Indic origins of Tibetan songs of realization is songs performed at tantric feasts.²⁸ As mentioned above, when Rgod tshang pa traveled to the holy site Jalandhara in India, he gained first-hand experiences with vajra songs and dances associated with the *Cakrasamvara* practices at local tantric feasts. He later performed and taught these songs and dances in Tibet, taming non-humans and greatly benefiting his followers. Lastly, at the pinnacle of all these verses is his *mgur*. In the biographies, especially in *Garland of Jewels*, the selected *mgur* are artfully combined with biographical narratives about the various contexts of their performances. I analyze how these narratives are connected to stories about other forms of singing, which highlights Rgod tshang pa's outstanding ability to compose and perform songs throughout different stages of his life.

1. Songs of a *Pag shi*

Tibet's most famous indigenous *mgur* singer, Mi la ras pa, was aptly given the childhood name "Thos pa dga", which means "delightful to hear".²⁹ Considered an emanation of Mi la ras pa, Rgod tshang pa was also born with a beautiful voice. Even more so, in most biographies, he is described to have had an attractive appearance as well, which is a description relatively rare among Tibetan hagiographies. While Rgod tshang pa's natural physical qualities were ideal for the performing arts, he also demonstrated outstanding talent in the performing arts ever since he was a little boy. Eventually, in his teenage years, he became a professional performing artist, a "*pag shi*". In the first part of *Garland of Jewels* about Rgod tshang pa's "ordinary deeds" (*thon mong gi mdzad pa*), there are several stories related to songs and dances. These stories are mostly expansions based on accounts in one of the early biographies, *Life Adorned with Songs*, written by Rgod tshang pa's disciple, Rgyal thang pa Bde chen rdo rje, who also compiled a biography of Mi la ras pa. Both works are among the earliest Tibetan biographical works written in the genre of *Life and Songs*. Compared to other early biographies, Rgyal thang pa highlighted stories related to Rgod tshang pa's artistic talents. Sangs rgyas dar po not only included all of these stories in *Garland of Jewels* but also added more details to them. In these stories, even though Rgod

²⁸ Jackson 1996, 391

²⁹ Quintman 2010, 19.

tshang pa was a layperson at that time, his artistic performances were depicted with strong Buddhist themes, as bodhisattva activities to benefit sentient beings, which set the tone of his artistic activities for the rest of his life. These accounts also help establish Rgod tshang pa's unique charisma by depicting the transformative effect of Rgod tshang pa's artistic performances on the audience, which is relevant to his various artistic activities as a Buddhist practitioner later in life.

Firstly, the stories emphasize the transformative effect of Rgod tshang pa's performances on the audience. In *Life Adorned with Songs and Garland of Jewels*, we have: "Before he was three, he perfected singing and dancing (*glu gar dang bro dbyangs*), and while he performed, all sentient beings became fascinated and people said that he was a Devaputra³⁰ reborn as a human." Here, we can see that his performances have a universal appeal, as "all sentient beings" experience a celestial pleasure watching him perform. Particularly, other descriptions highlight the liberating effects achieved through various senses. In several early biographies, it is described that Rgod tshang pa was born with an attractive look and a strong physique, and he had a beautiful voice since he was born. These descriptions involve the senses of sight, sound, and touch. Later in the biographies, the perspective of sensual attraction is underscored again as he grows up to become a ravishing teenager. In *Garland of Jewels*, it goes like this:

"When Rinpoche turned 15 or 16, there was no one in disharmony with him among all people (of) high, average and low (qualities). Because his insight and knowledge were beyond measure, he respected his superiors, and he took care of his minors. And he had good relationships with people of the same level in a profound way. Furthermore, Rinpoche delighted in songs and dances from the beginning. **His body and look were attractive, and his mind was very pleasing. All his (senses of) seeing, hearing, remembering and touching were ravishing to the mind, and it came to be the case that he transformed all phenomena into artistic play. He became able to clear away the sufferings of all those who have pain through performing arts like songs and dances and such..... His melody of speech was good and soft, and he was endowed with a Brahmin-like voice.** He wrote plenty of verses for melodic folk songs. **Because his marvelous body was very attractive,** at the time when he made his appearance dancing, gods, men, and demons involuntarily gathered. Whatever place he arrived at, many crowds gathered. Some people abandoned their homes and followed him around as attendants. It came to be the case that all the sufferings and the pain of those who had them dissolved by themselves, and people went away then came again."³¹

³⁰ *Devaputra* (Tib: lha'i bu) means the "son of gods."

³¹ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 12: *rin po che nyid dgung lo bco lnga bcu drug bzhes pa'i dus na/ mi che 'bring chung gsum thams cad dang mi mthun pa med cing/ shes rig tshad las 'das pas gong ma rnams ni bkur/ 'og ma rnams ni skyong/ thad ka rnams dang 'grogs lam shin tu zab par mdzad cing/ de yang rin po che nyid dang po nas glu gar la dges pa/ sku blta na mdzes shing yid du 'ong pa/ mthong thos dran reg thams cad kyi yid 'phrog cing/ snang ba rol mor sgyur ba zhiḡ byung pas/ glu gar la sogs pa'i rol rtsed kyi mya ngan can rnams kyi sduḡ bsngal sel nus*

This paragraph repetitively emphasizes the naturally-endowed physical attractiveness of Rgod tshang pa from different angles, and we learn that he dispelled the suffering of all kinds of audiences through various senses. Moreover, it is stated that the liberating effect results from Rgod tshang pa's ability to transform people's perception of worldly phenomena, to "turn all phenomena into artistic play." Despite the secular setting for these performances, the transformative benefits of these artistic performances are portrayed in accordance with a Buddhist worldview. Specifically, it is specified that Rgod tshang pa's performances possess liberating powers to dispel sentient beings' sufferings. Moreover, his artistic performances covered a wide range of topics, as he was able to "transform all phenomena into artistic play." In doing so, his artistic performances demonstrate the empty nature of phenomena, like a magical display (*rol ba*).

Secondly, besides an interpretation of the effects of Rgod tshang pa's artistic performances from a Buddhist perspective, the stories directly point out Rgod tshang pa's motivation to learn and create songs, and the very content of his songs were related to the dharma. As shown in the following account in *Garland of Jewels*, from an early age, Rgod tshang pa enjoyed listening to the dharma, especially *mgur*, from any dharma practitioner he encountered:

He did anything that was virtuous. He performed many activities like building stone pyramids and such, and he only engaged in activities related to the dharma. He went after any lama, great meditators, or yogis who came near him and stayed close to them. He talked and talked about the dharma and sang *mgur*. When the teachers sang *mgur*, he was particularly delighted and listened with faith. At that time, he got a reputation for people saying that he had activated karmic tendencies for dharma and that he had had great accumulation.³²

While describing Rgod tshang pa's connection to the dharma, the narrative specifically underscores his attraction to *mgur*. This detail shows the popularity of the genre at that time. It also draws our attention to how songs play a unique role for Rgod tshang pa in his spiritual pursuit, as he was attracted to dharma taught in the form of songs. As Rgod tshang pa grew up, he began

par gyur tel/..../ gsung gdangs snyan la bzung zhing mnyen pa/ tshangs pa'i dbyangs dang ldan pa des/ glu dbyangs la sogs pa'i snyan ngag mang du mdzad/ sku mtshar la mdzes pa des byos gar la sogs pa'i rnam 'gyur mdzad pa'i dus su/ lha 'dre mi gsum rang dbang med par 'dus tel gang 'byon sar khrom mang po tshogs tel/ 'ga' zhiq yul spangs nas phyags phyi la 'byangs nas 'gro ba yang byung/ mya ngan can rnam ky'i mya ngan dang sdug bsngal thams cad rang sangs la song ba yang byung ba/.

³² Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 9: *spyod pa gang yang mdzad pa/ tho yor khri brtsigs pa la sogs pa slob dpon gyi bya ba chos bshad 'ba' zhiq mdzad pa zhiq yod cing/ sras de'i drung du bla ma'am/ sgom chen pa'am/ rnal 'byor ba la sogs pa gang byung yang de'i rting la gshegs shing rtsa ru bzhugs nas bag phebs pa/ de rnam la chos dang mgur ma gsung dang gsung zhiq/ chos sam mgur ma la sogs pa gsung tsa na shin tu mnyes shing dad pas gsam/ de'i dus su chos ky'i bag chags sad pa phun su tshogs ba zhiq 'dug go zer ba'i snyan grags kyang byung stel.*

to compose songs by himself, and the contents of the songs were Buddhist-themed. In *Garland of Jewels*, it says:"

Moreover, since his supreme mind is great, many accomplished continuums of mind along with sutras and tantras, and many treatises of historical figures³³ and bodhisattvas entered his heart. He wrote many beneficial verses of colloquial poems and such.³⁴

This paragraph is adapted from a similar passage in the early biography *Life Adorned with Songs*, which contains more details:

At that time, he had unlimited knowledge of the biographies of kings, ministers, and bodhisattvas, of *Mi chos gnad kyi 'phreng ba*, *Sa skya legs bshad*, and *Skye bo gso thig*,³⁵ and of many other treatises and poems. When he sang these contents, everyone was happy, and many young people left their comfortable homes and followed after Rinpoche.³⁶

Here, both authors explain the content of Rgod tshang pa's songs as Buddhist. The narratives suggest that Rgod tshang pa acquired abundant knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist literature, and he was able to compose folk songs based on these materials. Notably, in the paragraph in *Life Adorned with Songs*, there are three individual works mentioned as sources of Rgod tshang pa songs. Composed by three influential Buddhist teachers, these three works are all collections of didactic verses intended for lay audiences. This account reveals how these verses were disseminated among lay communities through performing arts. On the one hand, the wide range of Buddhist sources of Rgod tshang pa's early folk songs shows how flexible songs are as an artistic form for conveying Buddhist knowledge. Centuries later, Gtsang smyon He ru ka sought to revitalize such a central role of songs in the transmission of Buddhism, to "establish the various Buddhist song traditions (glu, glu dbyangs, dohā, mgur) as encompassing the entire field of experience of the Buddhist path."³⁷ On the other hand, these stories seek to present that Rgod tshang pa's early secular artistic activities were endowed with Buddhist significations and emphasize that these songs are beneficial

³³ Due to the unique history of Tibet, this could refer to royal members who contributed to Buddhist activities in Tibet.

³⁴ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 12: *de yang thugs rab che bas/ mdo rgyud kyi sgrub rgyud mang po dang/ rgyal blon byang chub sems dpa' rnams kyi bstan bcos mang po thugs la chud/ 'phrul gyi snyan ngag la sogs pa'i sdeb sbyor 'grigs po du ma yang mdzad/*

³⁵ *Mi chos gnad kyi 'phreng ba* is written by 'Brom ston pa Rgyal ba 'byung gnas (1004-1064). *Sa skya legs bshad* is composed by Sa skya pan di ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251). *Lugs kyi bstan bcos skye bo gso thig* (skt: *nitasastrajantuposanabindu*) is written by Nagārjuna.

³⁶ Bde chen rdo rje, *Life Adorned With Songs*, p. 187: *de dus blon po 'gos dang/ rgyal blon byang chub sems dpa' rnams kyi rnam thar dang/ mi chos gnad phreng/ sa skya legs bshad/ skye bo gso thigs/ bstan bcos dang/ snyan ngag la sogs pa tshad med pa thugs la mnga' bas/ de rnams gsungs pas mi thams cad dga' zhing/ mi gzhon mang po skyid cing dga' ba'i yul spangs nas/ rin po che pa'i phyi bzhin 'breng ba yang byung ngo/*

³⁷ Quintman & Larsson 2015, 100.

in terms of their Buddhist-themed content.

Lastly, in *Garland of Jewels*, there is another story that further demonstrates the virtue of his early artistic activities, which I could not locate in early biographies. This incident occurred after Rgod tshang pa officially became a "*pag shi*." As shown in the quotes above, he attracted many audiences everywhere he performed, and they became obsessed with him. As recorded in early biographies, his stage name was Don grub seng ge, and people said he was an artist who truly was a "wish-fulfilling lion," just like his name suggested. Early biographies also mentioned that *Pag shi* Don grub seng ge went on pilgrimage to Lhasa every year. However, only in *Garland of Jewels*, we see an extended account of his pilgrimage experiences in Lhasa. The story has it that once when he was in Lhasa, he offered a dance song (*bro dbyangs*) to the Jowo in Lhasa. In *Garland of Jewels*, this dance song is included in full, and it is the first complete song in the biography. Compared to the other verses in the biography, this song has a distinctively free form, with the meter varying greatly between lines, whereas Rgod tshang pa's *mgur* is almost entirely written in a 7-foot meter. The source for this song is not clear to me, for it does not appear in any other earlier biographies. Given the literary flourishes in biographical works inspired by Gtsang smyon He ru ka, it is entirely possible that this is an artistic creation of Sangs rgyas dar po. Perhaps Sangs rgyas dar po wrote a song suitable for the story using the style of a popular dance song at his time performed by street artists to make his work more entertaining for the audience.

In the song, *Pag shi* Don grub seng ge expressed his understanding of the dharma, and his intentions to practice the dharma in front of the Jowo. He also offered his precious belongings of a *Pag shi* such as his scepter and his ornaments to the Jowo. The first stanza goes like this:

People superior or inferior seek a home.
 I, the Pakshi, also seek a home.
 For a home, I seek a permanent, profound place.
 If I don't find a permanent, profound place,
 This life is but a fleeting moment.
 The "permanent place" called "next life",
 When you reach that "permanent place",
 Even if it was one's homeland, it is like a deceptive tale.
 I, the *Pag shi*, will not remain but go to the dharma.
 Don grub seng ge, will not remain but go to the dharma.
 I present offerings such as the fine charu³⁸ to the authentic teacher.
 I present offerings such as the deep red staff³⁹ to the authentic teacher.⁴⁰

³⁸ Charu (bya ru): A Charu is a head ornament that has two horns. In this context, it is a dramatic ornament Rgod tshang pa wore as a performing artist.

³⁹ Deep Red Staff (*yo dmar snum po*): This is also a part of Rgod tshang pa's dramatic attire as a performer. In the iconography of Rgod tshang pa, he is depicted wearing the charu and holding a red staff.

⁴⁰ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 13: *mi che med chung med yul zhig tshol/ pag shi nga yang yul zhig tshul/ yul du gnyug ma'i gtan yul tshol/ gnyug ma'i bstan yul mi tshol du/ tshe 'di*

Strikingly, the Jowo spoke back to him, which is a literary trope found elsewhere in Tibetan literature,⁴¹ and the Jowo discouraged him from making that offering. The Jowo's reply was also in verse, following a similar pattern as the song of the *pag shi*. The Jowo told the *Pag shi* that he should put on these adornments himself:

Master *pag shi* don't say this!

The wrathful deity dance is nothing other than (the very act) of benefitting sentient beings.

Put the fine charu on lord *Pag shi's* head.

Adorn the deep red staff on lord *Pag shi's* body.⁴²

To begin with, the song included here emphasizes *Pag shi* Don grub seng ge's strong determination to pursue the dharma. Next, using the literary trope to have these words spoken by the Buddha himself, the author reaffirms and celebrates the beneficial effect of artistic activities. This theme is essential in Sangs rgyas dar po's depiction of artistic activities throughout *Garland of Jewels*, as he highlights the connection between artistic activities and benefitting sentient beings. The brilliance of this story is that the main content is expressed through songs. By adding both the *Pag shi's* and the Jowo's songs, which are written in a folk style, Sangs rgyas dar po made his biography more accessible and appealing to a broader audience that goes beyond Buddhist communities. In a series of depictions of Rgod tshang pa's early artistic activities, Sangs rgyas dar po demonstrates that these activities are not only beneficial given their Buddhist content, but the very performances of artistic activities create transformative experiences that benefit the audience.

2. Song of the yogi

The second category includes stories about artistic activities in the context of Rgod tshang pa's tantric practices. Rgod tshang pa's lineage, the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud school, places great emphasis on the tantric practices transmitted by Ras chung pa, referred to as the "Ras chung Aural Transmission (*ras chung snyan brgyud*)."

Rgod tshang pa's lama, Gtsang pa rgya ras Ye shes rdo

dar tsam yud tsam yin/ phyi ma bya ba gtan gyi yul/ gtan yul de ru slebs tsa na/ skyes pa'i pha yul byas kyang slu slu 'dra/ pag shi nga ni mi sdod chos la 'gro/ don grub seng ge mi sdod chos la 'gro/ bya ru legs mo mtshan ldan bla ma'i phyag rten la 'bul/ yo dmar snum po mtshan ldan bla ma'i phyag rten la 'bul/

⁴¹ For example, in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in the story about the simple-minded fellow Kongpo Ben, Kongpo Ben left his shoes in the Jowo's custody. Later, as the caretaker was going to throw them out, the Jowo spoke and said: "Don't throw those boots away. Kongpo Ben has entrusted them to me!" O-rgyan-'jigs-med-chos-kyi-dbang-po 1994, 174.

⁴² Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 14: *dpon pag shi de skad ma gsung/ lha bro khro khro bas sems can 'gro don byas kyang logs na med/ bya ru legs mo dpon pag shi'i dbu la mdzes/ yo dmar snum po dpon pag shi'i sku la mdzes/*.

rje (1161-1211), who was the founder of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud school, not only received the full transmission of the Ras chung Aural Transmission but also discovered a treasure text (*gter ma*) on the practices of "equal taste" said to have been hidden by Ras chung pa himself. This aural transmission lineage is centered around practices of the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. As a practitioner in the lineage, Rgod tshang pa went on pilgrimage to many holy sites, which he identified as the outer holy sites described in the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. Most notably, Rgod tshang pa famously made a pilgrimage to Gangs Ti se and Jalandhara, which he recognized them respectively as the mythological "Himavat" and "Jalandhara" of the "twenty-four holy places" (*yul nyi shu rtsa bzhi*) mentioned in the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. Rgod tshang pa was one of the earliest Tibetan pilgrims who traveled intentionally to these external tantric holy sites in India, and his travelogues were some of the most extensive records of these early pilgrimages.⁴³

During these pilgrimages, he conducted rigorous tantric practices at the holy sites and participated in many tantric feasts and other tantric rituals. On several occasions, singing and dancing were involved in these practices for a variety of purposes, such as making offerings, showing magical emanations, and tantric meditation practices. In the biographies, there are many accounts of these experiences based on Rgod tshang pa's telling to his disciples. In these experiences, Rgod tshang pa was sometimes the audience and the performer at other times. In either case, it appears to be consistent that these artistic activities in tantric contexts always contributed to the transcendental experiences of both the performers and the audiences. In this section, I look at a few examples in the biographies and analyze how Rgod tshang pa reflected on these experiences.

Chronologically, the first mention of Rgod tshang pa's artistic experience in a tantric context occurred when he watched a group of young women singing and dancing in a chapel outside Jalandhara, which is the same story that appeared in the *Secret Life* mentioned above. According to *Garland of Jewels*, when Rgod tshang pa arrived in the region of Jalandhara, he first visited a chapel named Jwalamukhi, where both Buddhists and non-Buddhists made offerings.⁴⁴ While Rgod tshang pa visualized the deities on the *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala* as he participated in this ritual, the account does not imply that the ritual was an offering to *Cakrasaṃvara*, and it might not have been even Buddhist. In *Garland of Jewels*, the story goes like this:

At that night, there were about sixty, seventy young women, not defiled by sexual activities, beautiful and attractive like daughters of gods. They were wearing clothes made up of five colors, and many ornaments such as jeweled crowns. In their hands, some were holding flowers, some were holding incense, and all kinds of objects for offerings. The ladies were singing, and while they covered their heads with clothes and went inside the chapel, Rinpoche

⁴³ See Tucci 1940, Huber 2008, Shastri 2009.

⁴⁴ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 44: *ri bo de'i sna la dzwa la mu khe zhes bya ba'i gtsug lag khang chen po cig yod de/ de la phyi nang gnyis ka'i mchod pa 'bul zhing/*.

also went in. The gatekeeper stopped him with a stick due to his low status and didn't allow him to go. Without hesitation, Rinpoche opened the door and went in. (Shocked,) The doorkeeper was unable to hit him and could not keep him out. There, a nun said: "idhibhisha, idhaḍākinī." Meaning: "These are *ḍākinīs*!" Then, they sang songs. The ladies were like the sixteen consorts or the twenty goddesses. They made offerings with all kinds of objects such as flowers and incense. With their speech, they sang songs. With their hands, they performed dances. With their feet, they struck dance moves. As they were making people smile out of joy, Rinpoche thought that these were goddesses of the sense-pleasures making offerings to the chief of the *maṇḍala*, the sixth Buddha, the great *Vajradhara*. At that moment, he also thought that the venerable *Vajrayoginī* herself was there. At that time, he experienced joy. His cognition was blissful, his insight was clear, pure, and blissful, and his conceptual thoughts were pacified just as they were.⁴⁵

In this paragraph, Rgod tshang pa participated in a local tantric ritual coincidentally and practiced meditation there. Similar but shorter accounts of this experience appear in several early biographies, including the *Secret Life* as mentioned above. Given the esoteric content of the story, it was probably told to a few advanced disciples. During the ritual, the ladies made offerings with all kinds of objects and with their singing and dancing. Their beauty, as well as their artistic performances, brought sensual pleasure to the viewers. Rgod tshang pa, being among them, in his meditative experience, visualized them as "goddesses of the sense-pleasures", making offerings to the main yidam, the chief of the *maṇḍala*, *Vajradhara*. More importantly, he beheld the visage of *Vajrayoginī*, which is a particularly beneficial experience for a yogi's spiritual progress at a *Cakrasaṃvara* holy site. In this experience, since he was still at a relatively early stage of his spiritual advancement, he meditated from the perspective of an audience member. This changed later as his spiritual attainment progressed. Towards the end of his time at Jalandhara, he had another meditative experience at the same location, Jwalamukhi, with *ḍākinīs* singing and dancing. Only this time they were making offerings to him:

⁴⁵ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 45: *de'i nub mo grong pa'i chos kyis ma gos pa'i bu mo drug cu bdun cu tsam mdzes shing yid du 'ong ba/ lha'i bu mo 'dra ba dang tshon rnam pa lnga las byas pa'i na bza' gsol ba/ rin po che 'o dbu rgyan la sogs pa rgyan du mas brgyan bdug cing/ de thams cad kyi phyag na/ la la me tog/ la la bdug spos la sogs pa'i mchod rdzas rnam pa sna tshogs thogs pas/ bu mo rnam skad kyi sgyur lha khang gi nang du ras kyis mgo bo btums nas 'gro bzhiin 'dug/ der rin po che yang byon pas/ rigs ngan gyis sgo srung gi dbyug pa thogs nas 'byon du ma bcug pas/ der tsham tshom med par sgo phul nas nang du phyin pas/ kho rang byed nas rdeg ma nus par nang du byon pa dang/ jo mo zhig 'dug pa na re/ i d+hi b+hi sha/ i d+ha Ta ki ni zer/ 'di tsho mkha' 'gro yin bya bar 'dug/ der jo mo de glu skad sgyur ba dang/ sngar gyi bu mo tsho rig ma bcu drug gam lha mo nyi shu ltar du/ me tog dang bdug spos la sogs pa'i mchod rdzas sna tshogs kyis mchod cing/ ngag gis glu len/ phyag gis gar sgyur/ zhabs kyis bro rdung la sogs pa dges pa'i 'dzum mdangs mdzad pa'i dus su/ dkyil 'khor gyi gtso bo drug pa rdo/ rje 'chang chen po la 'dod yon gyi lha mos mchod pa 'bul ba yang 'di ka yin snyam pa byung/ de tsa na rje btsun rdo rje rnal 'byor ma yang logs na med/ 'di rang yin snyam pa byung bas/ de'i dus su nyams dga'/ rig pa bde/ shes pa gsal ba/ dwangs pa/ bde ba/ rnam rtog rang bzhiin gyis zhi ba zhig byung stel.*

Then, after going uphill for a while, he performed *gcod* at a place where there was a charnel ground called *Dwa la mu ge*. Around midnight, all the *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* who were dwelling at that holy site gathered. And they arranged a big *gaṇacakra* for Rinpoche. They all joined together in one voice and sang: "I am the sovereign of *ḍākinīs*, Vajradhara. The great *ḍāka*, the great brave one. I, along with the *ḍākinīs* of the three worlds, make offerings to the chief of the assembly."⁴⁶ And they were all fluttering, making the sound of "hrub, hrub." Rinpoche also had a meditative buzz. For a long while, his cognition went into a state that was without any fixed point of reference. In short, he was enthroned as the chief of the assembly of *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* at that holy site.⁴⁷

Comparing this experience with the previous one, Rgod tshang pa's role changed from a meditator in the audience to the chief of the assembly to whom the *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* make offerings. This reflects his spiritual progress resulting from engaging in tantric practices at Jalandhara. Sangs rgyas dar po's description of this scene is very vivid, engaging several senses, including mimicking the sound of the flying deities with onomatopoeic words. Later, in *Garland of Jewels*, we learn that Rgod tshang pa not only witnessed the *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* both sing and dance at Jalandhara, but he also demonstrated their dances to his disciples after he returned to Tibet. At this final stage, he had achieved the highest level of realization. He gained the *siddhi* to directly emanate these deities by himself:

[Rgod tshang pa] said to a few close disciples, such as attendant Rin rgyal: 'Today I will show you an imitation of how *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* at Jalandhara performed dancing.' The lord himself held a vajra and a bell and said: 'the *ḍākas* danced like this.' Then, having transformed vividly into Buddha *Cakrasaṃvara*, he performed the nine dances of all the wrathful deities and such. Then, he transformed vividly into *Vajrayoginī*, holding a *ḍamaru* and a *kapāla*, and said: 'the *ḍākinīs* danced like this.' Then he did the robust laughter of the meditative state of the wrathful *ḍākinī*. He also performed many other forms of dancing than the ones mentioned above. In short, everyone generated great amazement towards such dances and became filled with faith.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ This quote of the *ḍāka* is written in verse.

⁴⁷ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 47: *de nas yang re zhing dzwa la mu khi zhes pa na dus khrod gcig 'dug pa'i sa ru byon nas gcod mdzad pas/nam phred tsam na gnas de na dnas pa'i dpa' bo dang mkha' 'gro thams cad 'dus nas/ rin po che la tshogs kyi 'khor lo rgya chen po bshams tel/ thams cad mgrin gcig tu bsdebs nas/ nged mkha' 'gro'i dbang phyug rdo rje 'chang/ dpa' bo chen po dpa' rtags che/ nged gnas gsum mkha' 'gro'i tshogs bcas kyi/ tshogs kyi dpon po mdzad du gsol/ ces gsung zhing thams cad hrub hrub tu 'phag cing 'dug pas/ rin po che yang thugs 'ur tel/ yun rin po'i bar du rig pa gtad med du song ste/ mdor na gnas de nyid kyi dpa' bo mkha' 'gro'i tshogs kyi bdag por mnga' gsol ba yin gsung/.*

⁴⁸ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 72: *nye gnas rin rgyal la sogs pa 'ga' zhig drung du gnas pa la/ de ring khyed rnam la ngas gnas dza' lan daha rI dpa' bo dang mkha' 'gro rnam gar mdzad pa'i lad mo gcig bstan gyis gsung/ rje nyid kyi rdo rje dang dril bu bsnams shing/ dpa' bo rnam gar 'di ltar mdzad cing 'dug gsung nas/ bde mchog 'khor lor lam gyis bsgyur nas khro bo thams cad kyi gar dgu la sogs pa mdzad cing 'dug de nas rdo rje rnal 'byor mar lam gyis bsgyur cing/ da ma ru dang thod pa bsnams nas dpa' mo rnam gar 'di ltar mdzad cing 'dug gsung nas dpa' mo zhi ba'i nyams kyi gad rgyangs la sogs mdzad cing 'dug de la sogs te gar gyi mdzad tshul gzhan yang mdzad pa mang du yod cing/ mdor na 'di lta bu'i gar de thams cad ngo mtshar che ba*

It is important to note that "dance" is a problematic translation of the word "gar" here, as in this context, "gar" refers to the movements and poses of the tantric deities that originated in dancing yet are distinct from the secular performing arts as the word "dance" might imply. If we compare these three stories, Rgod tshang pa shifted from a spectator to an advanced yogi and eventually to a tantric lama. Throughout this spiritual journey, these accounts of his relationship with such songs and dances demonstrate the progress of his spiritual capacities. Eventually, he gained the ability to emanate Buddha *Cakrasaṃvara* as well as his female counterpart, *Vajrayoginī*, and it is emphasized that Rgod tshang pa's unique method of emanating these deities was through "dancing." In the first story, the young women's singing and dancing in Jalandhara provided favorable conditions for Rgod tshang pa's tantric meditation practices. Next, the offerings of singing and dancing of the *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* to Rgod tshang pa was a testament to his spiritual attainment. And lastly, Rgod tshang pa benefitted beings through emanating the divine beings in the deity assembly of *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala* through "dancing." In all three scenarios, artistic performances were crucial to creating transcendental experiences for both the audience and the performer. These life stories not only highlighted Rgod tshang pa's spiritual progress throughout his changing roles in these events, but they also accentuated the transforming power of these artistic activities in Rgod tshang pa's spiritual practices and enlightened activities.

In *Garland of Jewels*, following a chronological narrative about Rgod tshang pa's path to enlightenment, there is a chapter consisting entirely of Rgod tshang pa's conversations with his disciples in an anachronistic order. In early biographies, there are also many similar passages in the genre of "sayings (*gsung sgros*).\" In the beginning of the chapter, Sangs rgyas dar po explains that even though such contents are usually recorded in works of "oral instruction (*gdams ngag*)," in Rgod tshang pa's case, his oral instructions are all about his life experiences, therefore they should be included in the *rnam thar* as a form of life writing. In these conversations, Rgod tshang pa not only speaks about his experiences but also reflects on them, using these experiences as pedagogical material. In this following quote, Rgod tshang pa recollected another story about his artistic activities. In this case, he demonstrated his singing and dancing skills among other yogis at Tsa ri:

Again, the Dharma lord said, 'Great singer, you think that I don't know anything. But I know many songs, I am skillful with dances, and I know thirty-three different kinds of dance. In the supreme holy place of Tsari, through singing and dancing, I transformed the perceptions of all humans and non-humans, and I brought them all under my power. They said there was no one more skilled in dance than me. Everyone else could do twenty-one dances at most. A man called 'Dre sgom' said, 'I have never seen such a spectacle at

Tsari before.' After I changed my clothes, at first no one recognized me.'⁴⁹

It is necessary to understand this comment within the context of Rgod tshang pa's experiences at Tsa ri, which is narrated in the earlier chapters. Rgod tshang pa practiced at Tsa ri after he returned from Jalandhara. At Tsa ri, Rgod tshang pa practiced his spiritual vow of "carrying all beings on the crown of his head," providing service to all beings like they were his guru, as part of his practice of guru yoga. According to the biographies, he selflessly served all the meditators at the retreat, carrying all kinds of supplies for them up and down the mountains. The labor was so demanding that his back was swollen and bruised, and the pus on his feet bled all over his clothes. Therefore, at Tsa ri, he was known as the "yellow donkey." However, one day, all of a sudden, he revealed his level of spiritual accomplishment to the other yogis, as he performed the dances of *Cakrasamvara* in front of them, and emanated the deity in actuality. At once, all of the yogis realized their mistake and bowed before his feet.

Combining the background with this story told by Rgod tshang pa, we see that at this point, Rgod tshang pa's singing and dancing was his method of demonstrating his *siddhi* to emanate tantric deities. What is particularly noteworthy here is that it is not only the magical emanations that were so powerful, but the artistic performances themselves are compelling. Rgod tshang pa claimed that he was more skilled in singing and dancing than other people who were capable of performing these tantric dances. He even added the detail that he changed into special apparel as he sang and danced. One could imagine him transforming from a diminished ascetic yogi into a charming artistic performer. As readers, we are also reminded of the earlier passages about Rgod tshang pa's performances when he was a *Pag shi*, which is that he "transformed the perceptions of all humans and nonhumans." Once again, Rgod tshang pa's artistic performances created transformative experiences for the audience through various senses and altered the way they perceive phenomena. What is highlighted here is that compared to his earlier activities, Rgod tshang pa's spiritual attainment progressed. Thus, the effect of his artistic performances was strengthened due to his *siddhi* of emanating tantric deities. Yet his unique personal artistic talents distinguish him from other yogis' magical emanations, and his artistic talents contributed to the transformative power of his tantric emanations.

⁴⁹ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 161: yang chos rje'i zhal nas/ glu chen pa khyed kyi bsam pa la/ ngas ci yang mi shes bsam ste ngas glu skad mang po shes/ bro mkhas po shes/gar sna mi 'dra ba sum cu rtsa gsum shes/ gnas mchog tsa ri kun tu bro gar glu gsum gyis mi dang mi ma yin pa thams cad kyi snang ba bsgyur/ dbang du bdus/ gar nga las mkhas pa med zer ba kun kyis kyang nyi shu re tsam las mi thon par 'dug/ 'dre sgom bya ba na re/ tsa rir 'di 'dra'i ltad mo mthong ba sngar ma byung zer/ gos bsgyur pas dang po sus kyang mi shes bar 'dug gsung/.

3. Rethinking *mgur* as Arts

Let us now look at both categories together and analyze how they are associated with Rgod tshang pa's teachings through *mgur* singing. In the very beginning of *Garland of Jewels*, in the prologue, Sangs rgyas dar po quotes a verse from the *Vajrapañjara Tantra*:

Since the Buddha wants to protect the world,
The Buddha performs magical displays.
In the forms of rabbits, tigers, lions,
Elephants and so on,
With a compassionate, benefitting mind,
He comes into play through making mudrā.⁵⁰

Sangs rgyas dar po quotes this verse in order to explain that Rgod tshang pa was a bodhisattva who took rebirth in this very emanation body. The phrase "gar gyi rol ba" refers to the Buddha's appearance in magical forms, as if playing different roles on the stage of worldly existence. The first layer of meaning in Rgod tshang pa's bodhisattva activities accomplished through singing and dancing is that he was able to transform the worldly perception of phenomena by demonstrating the dream-like, empty nature of phenomena just as it is in artistic plays. As Martin thoughtfully compares, such understanding of the nature of worldly experiences exemplified through the metaphor of artistic plays is most beautifully encapsulated by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*⁵¹:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.....

In the case of *Pag shi* Don grub seng ge, his artistic performances directly transformed people's perception of phenomena. As it is adequately summarized in the title of the chapter in *Garland of Jewels*, it is "The way he turned phenomena into artistic play by means of songs, dances and step dances"⁵² (*glu gar 'bro gsum*) in accordance with perceptions of worldly minds, dispelling the sufferings of many miserable people as a *Pag shi*.⁵³ Here, we see an

⁵⁰ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 2: *sangs rgyas 'jig rten bskyab bzhed pas/ sangs rgyas gar gyi rol ba mdzad/ ro bong stag dang seng ge dang/ glang chen la sogs du ma ru/ snying rje'i phen pa'i sems kyis nil phyag rgya 'grub pas skyes bar 'gyur/*.

⁵¹ Martin, Dan. "Gotsangpa Gonpo Dorje", *The Treasury of Lives*, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Gotsangpa-Gonpo-Dorje/3759>.

The quote is from William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII.

⁵² I translate 'bro as "step dances" given its usage in one sentence that goes "rkang kyi 'bro mdzad", as well as its modern usage in the Tibetan circle dance "skor 'bro". But it is by no means a perfect translation since I cannot identify the exact type of dance it refers to.

⁵³ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 12: *'jig rten gyi snang ba dang mthun zhing glu gar*

elegant repetition of the word "snang ba", used first to refer to worldly people's perception, and secondly to refer to "phenomena." "Snang ba" here hints at the contrast between "snang tshul," meaning the way things appear to be, and "gnas tshul," the way things truly are. Rgod tshang pa reveals the "gnas tshul" through an artistic display, making it comprehensible for the worldly minds. In such language, Sangs rgyas dar po successfully depicted the first layer of meaning about how Rgod tshang pa's artistic activities were Bodhi-sattva activities that transformed ordinary people's minds.

The second layer is from the tantric perspective, and we can refer to another verse found also in the *Vajrapañjara Tantra* to help explain:

In order to gather sentient beings who are particularly attached to dances and songs,
The Buddha, the dancer, performed artistic plays.
The Buddha, the dancer, brings about enlightenment with the vajra,
In beings who have desires.⁵⁴

Here, "gar" refers to the dance poses and movements of the tantric deity, in this case, the Buddha *Hevajra*. This is a tantric interpretation of the motivation of artistic display, which is to attract and then transform beings with strong attachments to sensual pleasures produced by singing and dancing. In the tantric understanding of artistic activities, practitioners need not reject or abandon attachments to sensual pleasures that these activities bring about, but they can take the attachments onto their spiritual path and transform them through their meditation practices. As a tantric yogi, Rgod tshang pa first experienced watching the *ḍākinīs* making offerings to the *yidams* through singing and dancing that bring about sensual pleasures. Then, he became the chief of the assembly to whom the *ḍākinīs* make such offerings. Eventually, he was able to emanate the deities themselves, and he displayed the dance movements that the tantric deities perform for the purpose of transforming beings with strong attachments.

Despite the differences between the contexts, I argue that Sangs rgyas dar po attempted to draw connections between these various artistic activities in Rgod tshang pa's life in order to highlight Rgod tshang pa's unique charisma based on his artistic talents. I analyze the connections based on the repetition of a phrase used in the descriptions of these activities. The phrase is "glu gar 'bro gsum", with "glu" meaning songs, "gar" and "bro" referring to two types of dances. Since the usage of these words to describe different dances changes over time, it is difficult to know what these types of performances refer to exactly in the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, we see that they are

bro gsum kyi sgo nas snang ba rol mor bsgyur cing/ nya ngan can rnams kyi sdug bsnal bsal te pag shi mdzad tshul ni/.

⁵⁴ *gar dang glu la rab zhen pa'i/ sems can rnam ni bsdu ba'i phyir/ sangs rgyas gar mkhan rdo rje yis/ 'dod chags can gyi byang chub sgrub/.* In *'phags pa mkha' 'gro ma rdo rje gur zhes bya ba'i rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po'i brtag pa*, Bka' 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma) [rgyud 'bum], Vol 80, Zhong hua da zang jing gan zhu er (dui kan ben), Beijing: 2006-2009, pp. 123-237.

used separately as two distinct types of dances. "Glu gar bro gsum" appears at the beginning of *Garland of Jewels* in the chapter dedicated to Rgod tshang pa's early career in the performing arts as a *pag shi*. As mentioned earlier, this sentence, "he turned phenomena into artistic play by means of songs, dances and step dances (*glu gar 'bro gsum*) in accordance with perceptions of worldly minds," appears a few times. The second time the phrase appears is found in the story of him watching the *dākinīs* sing and dance in Jalamuge. In this paragraph, "*glu*", "*gar*" and "*bro*" are written in an extended version describing the *dākinīs*' performance: "With their speech, they sang songs (*glu*). With their hands, they performed dances (*gar*). With their feet, they struck dance moves (*'bro*)."⁵⁵ If we compare with the earlier biographies that also include both stories, they don't use the exact same phrasing to describe these two very different types of singing and dancing.

This same phrase appears once again in a direct quote in the chapter of Rgod tshang pa's sayings (*gsung sgros*), describing Rgod tshang pa's performance at Tsa ri, as mentioned before. Here we have: "Again, the Dharma lord said, 'You think that I don't know anything. But I know many songs (*glu*), I am skillful with dances (*bro*), and I know thirty-three different kinds of dance (*gar*).'" Once again, the consistent usage of the phrase "glu gar bro gsum" is not evident in the earlier biographies. I argue that Sangs rgyas dar po draws our attention to the underlying basis for these different activities, which is Rgod tshang pa's unique relationship to singing and dancing. It also emphasizes Rgod tshang pa's spiritual progress with the increasing transformative power of these same three artistic performances. In the beginning, he was able to transform the perception of worldly people's minds and dispel their sufferings, while later he perfected tantric visualizations, and eventually he emanated the deities and gained the ability to speak to all beings in the six realms, of all humans and nonhumans.

As seen in the examples above, artistic activities are strongly thematized in *Garland of Jewels* to a greater extent than in earlier biographies. I believe that this reflects "an increasing awareness of and interest in the forms and functions of songs" in the 16th century as Quintman and Larson suggested in their study on Gtsang smyon He ru ka's writing about *mgur*.⁵⁶ Other than the overall accentuated theme of artistic activities in *Garland of Jewels*, I include here an example that demonstrates how *mgur* is directly related to the folk arts of singing and dancing in *Red Earth*, which is one of the major sources for *Garland of Jewels*. To a certain extent, Sangs rgyas dar po's literary endeavors placing *mgur* in a broader context of artistic activities are inherited from early biographers. This example gives us a glimpse into how *mgur* was composed and performed:

"Namo Ratna Guru
It is sad to forget the kind guru.

⁵⁵ Sangs rgyas dar po, *Garland of Jewels*, p. 45: *ngag gis glu len/ phyag gis gar sgyur/ zhabs kyis bro rdung/*.

⁵⁶ Quintman and Larsson 2015, 95.

It is sad to be separated from the innate mahāmudrā.
 It is sad to experience the suffering of sentient beings in the six realms.
 It is sad to neglect to adopt virtue and abandon sin.
 It is sad to leave the hermitage and solitary retreat places."
 One day when he was taking a break out in a forest, he sang this song based on a melody for dancing.⁵⁷

This is a rare example of the connection between *mgur* and folk singing and dancing. It is specified here that this *mgur* was composed in the melody of a song that accompanies step dancing (*bro rdun gi dbyang rta*). It is particularly significant when we think about Rgod tshang pa's personal artistic talents, as he is equipped with outstanding expertise in such folk songs and dances. While we have no means to know the melody of the song, we see here that the meter in this song is different from most of Rgod tshang pa's *mgur*, which are composed in a seven-foot meter. In this song though, it is written in an 8-7-8-7-8 feet pattern. Combined with the information on the context of composing this song, the meter sounds even more "folksy" than the Rgod tshang pa's other *mgur*. Now, let us compare this song with another song that is specifically described as written in the style of a "dance melody" (*bro dbyangs*). It is the song of the *Pag shi* making offerings to the Jowo in Lhasa that appeared in *Garland of Jewels*. The song of the *pag shi* is also the only song included in *Garland of Jewels* that does not follow a strict seven-foot meter, but it begins with an eight-foot first line and switches to seven-foot in the second line, and then to longer lines again. This comparison is by no means to say that these two dance melodies (*bro dbyang*) are the same, but it shows that Rgod tshang pa indeed adopted artistic traits from folk songs when he composed his *mgur*. Even more so, in this example in *Red Earth*, he might have done that in a context that is similar to the times when people enjoy some casual singing and dancing—he was in a forest relaxing with his disciples. Elsewhere in *Red Earth*, *mgur* is also referred to as "melody of practice" (*sgrub dbyangs*), reflecting the musical aspect of *mgur*. Ultimately, singing *mgur* is interpreted as a method for the teacher to be in accordance with ordinary minds, to speak in a language that touches people's hearts directly. What is a better way than using folk songs that everyone enjoys to convey the profound dharma? From his immediate disciples to his admirers in the 16th century, Rgod tshang pa's biographers perceive *mgur* as Rgod tshang pa's unique skillful means to sing the ineffable experiences of enlightenment through an art form that holds a special place in the heart of the Tibetan people.

⁵⁷ Byams sems sher gzhon, *Red Earth*, p. 223: *drin can gyi bla ma brje du 'phangs/ gnyug ma phyag chen 'bral du 'phangs/ ma 'gro drug sems can sdud tu 'phangs/ dge sdig 'dor len shol du 'phangs/ gnas ri khrod dgon pa bzhaq du 'phangs/ nags khrod cig tu kham sgseng pa'i dus su/ bro rdung gi dbyangs rta cig la brten nas gsung so/*.

Conclusion

This paper examines the rich biographical materials about Rgod tshang pa to deepen our understanding of the complex roles Tibetan songs of realization play in the lives of the composers and their broad range of audiences. Fundamentally, like all other Buddhist teachings, *mgur* is one of the ways how enlightened beings teach the dharma to sentient beings. It is particularly suitable as a form of oral, pithy instruction that conveys practical knowledge of esoteric practices between teacher and disciple. Following a long tradition of teaching through personal experiences in the Practice Lineage, Rgod tshang pa particularly emphasized the significance of the embodiment of such knowledge and advocated for the potency of life writing in teaching the most esoteric experiences. Therefore, his *mgur* are more evidently personal and autobiographical, and they call for references from his own life experiences to fully comprehend. Rgod tshang pa deliberately adopted *mgur* as a method to teach the life experiences of his mind, which focuses on teaching his meditation experiences and realizations. But his *mgur* also functions as life writing in a broader sense, as it encompasses all of his conducts. Ultimately, his conduct was his very act of meditation, and life stories about them were taught as oral instructions.

While *mgur* are personal and embodied in terms of their contexts and contents, it is very idiosyncratic that the artistic form of *mgur* is aligned with Rgod tshang pa's personal talent as well. As a bodhisattva who spoke in the languages of the beings to be tamed, he adopted one of the languages most favored by his indigenous Tibetan audience. The intense, transformative experience inspired by his excellent art craft translates perfectly from his secular street shows to his teachings on the profound dharma. By the time of Gtsang smyon He ru ka and his followers, the innate value of songs that make them a distinctively powerful means to communicate the experiences of enlightenment was increasingly appreciated and discussed. Rgod tshang pa was one of the few exemplars who was not only capable of teaching the dharma in spontaneous verses but also a true artist of the craft, in the sense that he mastered the performance aspect of this artistic expression. His example is the perfect material for Gtsang smyon and his followers' projects in their attempt to construct a religious identity centered around the ideal of the ascetic yogin and their hallmark abilities to express the ineffable experiences of enlightenment through songs. Up to this day, Rgod tshang pa is still favored by many prominent Buddhist teachers, who teach Rgod tshang pa's life stories alongside his *mgur*. The long-lasting appeal of his *life and songs* is credited to the artful storytelling of Rgod tshang pa and his biographers, and perhaps also through apparitions of Rgod tshang pa's dazzling singing and dancing.

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