

A Final Review of the ANR-funded project “For a Critical History of the Northern Treasures”

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he ANR-funded project (ANR-21-CE27-0031, 2022–2026) “For a Critical History of the Northern Treasures” (FCHNT) was launched by a group of three—Jean-Luc Achard, Stéphane Arguillère, and Jay Valentine—with Stéphane Arguillère as “scientific coordinator,” based on Jay Valentine’s initiative of setting up a specific Byang gter panel at the IATS 2019 in Paris. The ANR (French National Research Agency) funded it with a 416 615 € grant. The largest part of this grant was devoted to salaries paid to the partners of the project: Cécile Ducher (postdoctoral fellow, IFRAE), Tenpa Tsering Batsang (research engineer, CRCAO, and doctoral student, Inalco) and Simon Martin (research engineer, CRCAO). It was initially meant to be concluded on 2026/02/01, but was extended, without additional financing, to 2026/08/31.

1. The Original Aim, To What Extent it was Achieved and What Remains to be Done

The original idea of the FCHNT project was to complete within these four years an annotated translation of a chronicle of the Northern Treasures tradition by a contemporary author, *mKhan po* Chos dbyings (2015). This extensive text (800 pages or so), included in the 2015 *Compilation of the Northern Treasures*, is a thoughtful compilation and synthesis of available sources. It covers the history of the Byang gter from the origins (including a narrative about Padmasambhava, the concealment of the *gter ma*, and sNa nam rDor je bdud 'joms) to the beginning of the 21st century. However, as it stands, this source does not qualify as a scientific publication since it generally follows the standards of Tibetan religious historiography. The main defect of this traditional approach, from a researcher’s point of view, is its “tubular” character—its tendency to reduce historiography to a series of biographies, with more or less only one individual per generation, without defining the social context of each individual. This is, of course, consistent with the aim of this historiography: to be a *catena aurea* of the transmission

of the holy teachings from masters to disciples. The first step in conducting academic research on Tibetan biographies is therefore to pull all the available threads and compile all available information in order to reconstruct some of the concrete, historical flesh omitted by traditional hagiographies, which sometimes offer no more than a chronological skeleton.

This implied the necessity of adding a significant number of annotations and commentaries, as well as figures not documented in *mKhan po Chos dbyings'* text, in order to provide context. The author indeed discarded people who were important in their time but not identified as links in the main transmission lineage. This approach was coherent with his agenda but not with ours. This led us to add biographies and developments on individuals or groups that he ignored. Eventually, our research ended up far exceeding the scope of the original project and we currently envision seven volumes instead of four.

The first of these volumes, edited by Stéphane Arguillère, has been completed and released in January 2026.¹ Initially, most of its planned content was intended as an introduction to, or supplement for, the first volume, originally thought of as containing the materials relevant to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's life and his direct disciples. Volume 1 as it finally stands begins with translations of *mKhan po Chos dbyings'* biographies of Padmasambhava and sNa nam rDo rje bdud 'joms by Tenpa Tsering Batsang, followed by their commentaries by Jay Valentine. *mKhan po Chos dbyings'* chronicle has then a large gap between sNa nam rDo rje bdud 'joms (8th century) and the immediate predecessor of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (1337–ca. 1401), bZang po grags pa (d.u.). We felt it was necessary to fill this gap because an account of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's life would make little sense without sufficient historical background, which was largely unavailable in published research.

Moreover, over the centuries, the Northern Treasures became a complete system of Buddhism in the rNying ma style, especially from the 16th century onward, gradually adding new material to the original core Northern Treasures. It could have been possible to describe these traditions at the point in history when they are first mentioned. We decided, however, that organizing them chronologically would be more helpful for readers. In some cases, it is known, or at least very likely, that Rig 'dzin rGod ldem was trained in these traditions, even when the present-day Northern Treasures mainstream lineage (*rDo rje brag lugs*) does not claim lineages featuring their founding master as a link. Therefore, we have chosen to include in this first volume the

¹ *Northern Treasures Histories, vol. 1: Before Rigdzin Gödem*, in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 80, January 2026, https://d11jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_80.pdf.

materials that are relevant in these two ways—as elements of background for Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's life and as a history of what got later compiled in the rDo rje brag system. However, this section, written by Stéphane Arguillère and Cécile Ducher with additions by Jean-Luc Achard regarding the Bon aspect ascribed to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, grew so large that it was decided, contrary to the original plan, to end the first volume before bZang po grags pa.

The second volume, edited by Jay Valentine and Jean-Luc Achard, is now close to completion. It is entirely devoted to Rig 'dzin rGod ldem and his immediate environment. As with the first volume, extensive research was conducted on what could be learned about Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, his masters or predecessors, the Gung thang kings who were his patrons, and his adventures in search of concealed lands. The research also includes an overview of his nine cycles of revelations, many of which had not been studied well or at all, and anything else contributing to a better understanding of his perception of himself and the world, and his role in it.

Before the project officially concludes at the end of August, another volume by Jean-Luc Achard will be released, bearing the number six in the series. It will contain a series of annotated biographies of Northern Treasures masters from central Tibet documenting the period from the 1717–18 Dzungar invasion to the present day, as recorded by *mKhan po* Chos dbyings. It has been decided in that case not to overload the volume with additional biographies. In fact, few documents provide better information about this obscure period of the Northern Treasures than what *mKhan po* Chos dbyings compiled, since the Northern Treasures tradition in central Tibet indeed never fully recovered from the Dzungar invasion.

This means that much of our original, overambitious agenda (to cover the whole Byang gter history) was not completed within the four-year ANR grant period and must be finished in the coming years. Volume 3 (mostly by Jay Valentine, with important contributions by Cécile Ducher) is already quite advanced and will focus solely on the direct and indirect disciples of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, specifically those from the 15th century.

However, since this was a crucial century in rNying ma history, we would also like to provide sufficient background information, particularly by discussing Ratna gling pa (1403–1479), a prominent figure in the rNying ma tradition not associated with Byang gter. He was the initial compiler of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* and appears to have been the one who achieved the full union of the *bka' ma* (uninterrupted oral transmission) and *gter ma* (hidden treasures) traditions as complementary aspects of the rNying ma lineage. To ignore Ratna gling pa would be to miss an important element of the context crucial to the identity

of the Byang gter. The heirs of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem were not closely associated with Ratna gling pa. His heritage, collected in the 17th century at sMin grol gling rather than at rDo rje brag, shaped in large ways the rNying ma pa's later sense of identity. Therefore, the awkwardness that many present-day rNying ma practitioners feel about Byang gter may stem from its isolation from Ratna gling pa's innovations in the 15th century. Understanding this will require extensive research in Ratna gling pa's hagiographies, which will take time.

Volumes 4 (16th century) and 5 (17th century) will also necessitate extensive additional research, since they will as they will concentrate on the ascent of the Northern Treasures and their golden age during the reign of the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682). Vol. 4 will cover the 16th century and feature figures such as the “mNga' ris brothers,” mNga' ris paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–ca. 1542) and Legs ldan rDo rje bdud 'joms (ca. 1512–ca. 1565), as well as *Byang bdag* bKra shis stobs rgyal (or bKra shis stobs rgyas, 1550–1602). These figures are well-documented in Tibetan sources and have already been the subject of substantial research. However, time is needed to fully reassess them in context, including exploring their lesser-known writings and revelations.

The Fifth Dalai Lama's reign is rich with well-documented yet under-researched materials. The team has decided to propose a complementary project to the ANR titled “The rNying ma pas around the 5th Dalai Lama.” If accepted, this project would enable us to conduct the necessary research, including some focused on non-Byang gter masters (or masters who did not primarily identify as Byang gter), and then extract what would be relevant to the present project. This would allow us to write our fifth volume.

2. *The Three Byang gter Special Issues of the RET*

Another achievement of the FCHNT project that was not originally planned is the publication of three special issues of the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* dedicated to the Byang gter. This is the third and final issue in the series.

The first volume² (305 pages) was released in February 2022. It includes articles by Jean-Luc Achard, Elizabeth Angowski, Stéphane Arguillère, Christopher Bell, Dylan Esler, Kanako Shinga, and Alexandra Sukhanova. These articles demonstrate that the FCHNT project has attracted contributions from beyond its core team.

² No. 62, edited by Jay Valentine, Stéphane Arguillère, and Jean-Luc Achard. https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_61.pdf.

The same is true of the second volume³ (522 pages), which features the same contributors, as well as new ones, including Tenpa Tsering Batsang, Amanda Brown, Cécile Ducher, Simon Martin, Katarina Turpeinen, and Yuewei Wang. We were especially honored to also receive contributions from distinguished senior colleagues such as Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Roberto Vitali.

For this third “Byang gter special issue” of the *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* (568 pages), the group of authors has been further extended to include John Bellezza, Martin Boord, Varvara Chatzisavva, Zsóka Gelle, Giigch Borjigin (Gegeqi), Alexander Schiller, and the Tibetan historian Tsangtruk Topla.

While this extensive body of research is in large part the fruit of the Northern Treasures conference that was held in Paris in October 2024, much of it is by colleagues unconnected to our project. It offers new, independent perspectives on the subject matter, as well as invaluable supplementary scholarship and insights. What was originally understood as a focused project by a small, dedicated team also became a framework for incorporating other perspectives. This research could contribute to making the Northern Treasures a more central subfield of Tibetan religious history research. For more details on the topics presented in the conference and their place in the larger Byang gter history, see the introduction below.

3. Two Books

Two forthcoming books, both to be released by Wandel Verlag/ Edition Khordong (Berlin), will illustrate the outcomes of our research on the Northern Treasures’ history and thought.

First is Jay Valentine’s complete translation of *The Clarifying Ray of Sunlight*, the oldest and most authoritative biography of Rig ’dzin rGod ldem, written by his immediate disciple, Se ston Nyi ma bzang po. While it was not possible to include the entire text in the above-described Vol. 2 of *Northern Treasures Histories*, having this complete translation will provide much-needed background information, since most of what was said about the founder of the Northern Treasures in subsequent centuries comes from this text alone. According to Valentine’s careful philological investigations, it is likely that this text is a collage of autobiographical accounts by Rig ’dzin rGod ldem compiled by this disciple of his later years, Nyi ma bzang po. Ever since it was composed, *The Clarifying Ray of Sunlight* has been an object of piety in Byang gter circles and can be regarded as a monument of the rNying

³ No. 68 (January 2024), edited by Stéphane Arguillère, Jean-Luc Achard, and Cécile Ducher. https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_68.pdf.

ma tradition. This text has been awaiting a complete and accurate translation, which will be appreciated by a broader audience beyond academic research circles.

The second book is Stéphane Arguillère's English translation of *sPrul sku* Tshul lo (Tshul khrims bzang po, 1884–ca. 1957)'s practice manual for the *dGongs pa zang thal*, under the title: *Fulfilling the Aspirations of the Predestined*.⁴ This book is an enhanced adaptation of Arguillère's 2016 French version of this manual and includes an edition of the Tibetan text as its second volume. The translated text is important for the specialized study of the *dGongs pa zang thal* proper, and of rDzogs chen more broadly. The publication may also be useful from a critical standpoint, as in the footnotes, the translator deconstructs the text, showing that it is largely a patchwork of copied or slightly paraphrased sources. This analysis was done already to a large extent in the French version but is further developed in the English version. It also incorporates a complete semi-critical edition of the Tibetan text, based on the five available editions, plus a systematic comparison with its sources (*dGongs pa zang thal*, Klong chen pa, quoted tantras...). Some of these sources are expected, such as the *dGongs pa zang thal* itself, while others are much less so, such as Klong chen pa's *Zab don rgya mtsho'i sprin*, the practice manual for the *mKha' 'gro yang tig*. The translator draws from this full dissection of the text to make considerations that extend beyond the Northern Treasures, contributing to a better understanding of Tibetan books in general and what it means to be a writer in Tibet.

4. *The October 2024 Conference at the Inalco*

The FCHNT organized the *First International Conference on the Northern Treasures* at Inalco (Maison de la Recherche) in Paris, from the 17th to the 19th of October 2024. The present volume of the *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* includes most of the presentations given during this conference. Some of the papers presented then, especially the ones by members of the team (Stéphane Arguillère, Cécile Ducher, Jay Valentine, and Tenpa Tsering Batsang) are not featured in this special issue as they became parts of volume 2 of our *Northern Treasures Histories*.

⁴ Arguillère 2016, *Le Manuel de la Transparution Immédiate*, Paris: Le Cerf.



Fig. 1 – The twenty speakers of the two days of the conference held in Paris on October 17-18, 2024. Katarina Turpeinen and Jean-Luc Achard presented their research online the next morning.

The conference hosted twenty-two presentations, twenty of which were delivered in person and two were delivered online. It gathered many attendees both onsite and online. Two participants came all the way from China, three from India, one from Japan and three from the United States, while others came from several European countries. This international gathering was a great occasion to discuss the Northern Treasures in their various perspectives and bring to a further level the scholarship about this emerging subfield of Tibetan Studies.



Fig. 9 – Stéphane Arguillère introducing Khenpo Ju Tenkyong, our Keynote lecturer

An overview of this conference has been published on our “Carnet d’Hypothèse” blog, with some photos,⁵ and it also includes the complete program.⁶

5. *The Blog “Carnets d’Hypothèses:” Northern Treasures Histories*

Any description of the outcome of the FCHNT project would be incomplete without mentioning the research notes published by team members on this *Northern Treasures Histories* blog (<https://fchnt.hypotheses.org>). The blog contains 33 articles and 22 pages documenting the project’s history, including call for papers, conferences, and publications, and many pieces of unpublished scholarship. Some of these articles are drafts that were further elaborated upon in more polished pieces. Some contain alternative or complementary material that were included in published articles and books but present an interest for either understanding better these publications, or function as a foundation for later research. Others are short pieces concerned with related topics that were not directly used in the published volumes but constitute important themes.

Here are a few recent examples of these: Jay Valentine’s (2025) [A Parallel Edition of The Clarifying Ray of Sunlight](#) and [A Parallel Edition of The Prayer of the Eighteen Great Omens](#); Jean-Luc Achard’s (2024) philosophical notes on [The Five Repositories of the Zangzang Lhadrak Discovery and Further Conditions of Revelation](#) and (2025) readings on [The History of the Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra as Portrayed in Jamyang Sönam Gyeltsen’s Garland of Jewels — Part I — The Contemplative Transmission of the Buddhas](#) and [The History of the Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra as Portrayed in Jamyang Sönam Gyeltsen’s Garland of Jewels — Part II — The Symbolic Transmission of the Knowledge-Holders](#); Stéphane Arguillère’s biographical notes about (2026) [Sangs rgyas gling pa](#) or (2025) [rDo rje gling pa](#).



⁵ <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/2758>.

⁶ <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/2554>.