

Twice-Buried Treasures: Translation Project of Mongolian Treasure Literature by Prince Yunli (1697–1738)¹

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Abstract

In the early eighteenth century, Manchu Prince Yunli (1697–1738) commissioned the translation of over 600 rNying ma treasure texts (Tib. *gter ma*) into Mongolian—yet this massive corpus never circulated among its intended Mongol audience. This devout Buddhist prince oversaw systematic translations predominantly from the Northern Treasure (Tib. *byang gter*) tradition, including works attributed to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337–1401) and commentaries by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682).

Philological analysis of colophons, seals, and onomastic evidence reveals Prince Yunli's profound personal commitment to the Fifth Dalai Lama's Northern Treasure lineage. Political and institutional factors, however—including Qing court anxieties regarding rNying ma expansion and restrictions stemming from the Fifth Dalai Lama's era—blocked dissemination among Mongol communities. The translations, now preserved in institutions such as Inner Mongolia Normal University, remained treasure texts in a literal sense: buried treasures textually preserved but never ritually transmitted. This case illuminates the fraught relationship between textual production and religious transmission in Tibetan Buddhism's expansion beyond the Plateau, offering new perspectives on the understudied history of the rNying ma tradition in Mongolia.

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Introduction

The rNying ma School, the oldest lineage within Tibetan Buddhism, derives its name (Tib. *rnying ma*) from the Tibetan word meaning “ancient” or “old,” signifying its preservation of teachings transmitted during the “Early Dissemination” (Tib. *snga dar*) 4th-10th century of Tibetan Buddhism. The rNying ma tradition encompasses diverse transmission lineages, among which the treasure tradition constitutes a vital component, alongside the distant canonical transmission (Tib. *ring brgyud bka’ ma*) and the profound pure vision transmission (Tib. *dag snang*). Together, these form the three major transmission systems of the rNying ma School. Due to its unique revelation, discovery, and transcription processes, the authenticity of treasure literature has often been challenged by the New (Tib. *gsar ma*) traditions. Critics argue that the process for revealing the treasure lacks sufficient standardization, casting doubt on its legitimacy. Skepticism particularly surrounds the cryptic symbols (Tib. *brda yig*), the encoded scripts, and the qualifications of treasure-revealers. As the representative of the old tradition, the rNying ma School preserves esoteric practices—such as union (Tib. *sbyor*), subjugation (Tib. *sgrol*, “liberation”), medicinal alchemy (Tib. *sman sgrub*), and corpse rituals (Tib. *ro sgrub*)—transmitted from the Early Dissemination period. These practices, which diverge significantly from those of other schools’ doctrinal and ritual systems, have been a focal point of controversy. By the late 16th century, during the Second Dissemination Period (1578–present) of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia, the rNying ma tradition had spread there, along with other schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

1. The rNying ma School and Its Historical Links with Mongolia

The rNying ma School’s association with Mongolia dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Historical records indicate that prominent rNying ma masters such as Shākya ’od (fl. 13th century), G.yung ston Rdo rje dpal (1282–1365, during the reign of Güyük Khan), and Zur bZang po dpal (14th century, during the reign of Buyantu Khan) engaged with the Yuan imperial court through diplomatic channels.² Additionally, during the Mongol aristocracy’s military engagements in Tibet, contact were established with rNying ma masters, most notably Gu ru chos dbang (1212–1270)³ and Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624).⁴ These multifaceted interactions, spanning political and

² Tsering (1978).

³ Guangdian (2019).

⁴ Haschuluu (2015).

religious spheres, crucially facilitated the initial dissemination of rNying ma teachings in Mongolia.

Following the collapse of the Yuan dynasty, Buddhism in Mongolia entered a period of decline (1368–1578). However, the late 16th century marked a revival, particularly after 1578, when Tibetan Buddhism regained prominence under Mongol patronage. Between 1602 and 1607, a systematic effort to translate Tibetan Buddhist scriptures into Mongolian emerged, incorporating key rNying ma treasure texts such as *The Compiled Ma ṅi Scripture* (Tib. *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum chen mo*), *The Biography of Padmasambhava* (Tib. *Padma bka' thang yig*), and *Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State* (Tib. *Bar do thos grol chen mo*).⁵ Although these works had been well-established in Tibet, their Mongolian translations were printed later in Beijing under imperial supervision. Notably, *The Biography of Padmasambhava* underwent editorial revisions by the Third lCang skya Khutukhtu, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1716–1786), reflecting the Qing court's involvement in rNying ma Treasure texts.⁶

In this context, the Mongolian Treasure translation project initiated by Prince Yunli (1697–1738) represents a significant yet understudied chapter in this history. As a devout Buddhist, Prince Yunli organized the translation of numerous rNying ma treasure scriptures, creating a corpus that remains vital for understanding cross-cultural religious exchanges during the Qing period. This effort occurred against Gelug school's dominance, as the “Yellow school” (Mon. *šir-a-yin šašin*) consolidated its institutional power through alliances with the Qing court. In contrast, the rNying ma School—often pejoratively labeled the “Red School” (Mon. *ulayan-u šašin*) in Mongolian sources—faced marginalization, resulting in scant historical documentation of its activities.

Fortunately, recent scholarship has made significant strides in addressing this historiographical gap, particularly following the facsimile publication of the Treasure collection preserved at the Inner Mongolia Normal University Library.⁷ This collection, published in 2015, comprises 511 Treasure texts and 126 commentaries, ranking among the most extensive Mongolian Buddhist scripture translation projects outside the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*. In addition to these published facsimiles, the St. Petersburg State University Library holds notable collections. Vladimir Uspensky conducted an exceptionally meticulous study, as does the University of Marburg in Germany.⁸ Cambridge

⁵ Giigch (2022).

⁶ Kapstein (2005).

⁷ Inner Mongolian People Publishing House (2019).

⁸ For an introduction to the treasure texts held at Saint Petersburg University (Russia) and at the University of Marburg (Germany), see Uspensky (1997: 32).

University Library's Mongolian collections⁹ and the Scheut Mission Archives in Belgium¹⁰ also contain relevant materials, further exploration is required.



Fig. 1: Facsimile publication of the Treasure collection preserved at the Inner Mongolia Normal University Library

Preliminary analysis of these materials allows for their classification into three principal genres: ritual texts, commentaries, and biographies.

- The ritual texts constitute the largest category, predominantly featuring *sādhana*s.
- There are 123 treasure commentaries, including many on the Northern Treasure tradition composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama.
- Interestingly, in Yunli's collection, we also found the secret biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama, *Sealed Illusions Clarified: Liberation upon Seeing* (Mon. *Tamayatu-yin Vivangirid-i todadyaysan üjged tusatu orušiba*)¹¹ as well as biographies of two of his disciples: the biography of gTer bdag gling pa (1646–1714), the founder of sMin grol gling Monastery called *The Chariot of Faith: A story of the Dharma king of Treasures* (Mon. *Yeke sang-tu nom-un qayan-u tuyuji süsiüg-ün tergen kemekü orušiba*)¹² and the autobiography of Padma 'phrin las', the fourth incarnation of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem and abbot of rDo rje brag Monastery,

⁹ Bawden (1957). This catalogue includes several Mongolian-language Treasure texts from Prince Yunli's collection.

¹⁰ Heissig (1957: 167). The catalogue includes a Mongolian translation from Prince Yunli's collection entitled *Prayer to the Second Buddha Uṛchen Padmasambhava and His Retinue* (*Qoyaduyar burqan určan Padmasambhava šabinar-luṣa seltes-iin jalbaril*), which was composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

¹¹ Husel (2005). The Tibetan Title of the Fifth Dalai Lama's Secret Biography is *rGya can gyi 'khrul sang rnamgsal bar bkod pa mthong ba don ldan*. See Karmay (2000).

¹² Editorial Committee of *Union Catalogue of Ancient Mongolian Books in China*, (1999: 893), Text No. 04787.

called *The Crystal Mirror: Monk Padma 'phrin las's Autobiography* (Mon. *dGe slong padma 'prin las öber-iin domuy-yin ögü-legsen čayan bolur toli orušiba*).¹³

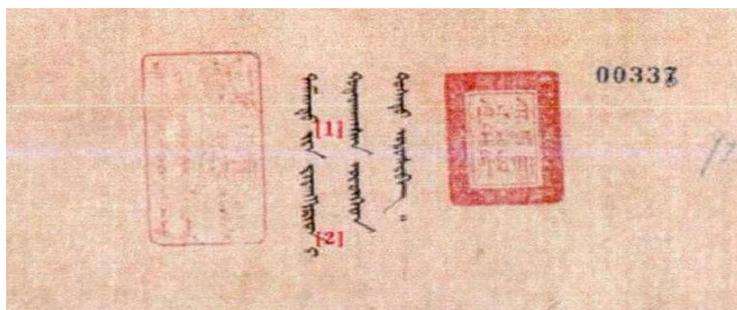


Fig.2 – Mongolian translation of the secret biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama

2. Translators and Collectors of Mongolian Treasure Literature

2.1 The Collector: Prince Yunli (1697–1738)

The Mongolian Treasure texts bear several seals identifying them as part of Prince Yunli's collection, including the "Seal of the Seventeenth Son of the Great Emperor Mañjuśrī, Prince Kengse" (Tib. *'Jam dbyang brtsa chen rgyal po'i sras bcu bdun keng se wang gi tham ka*), "The Seal of First Rank Prince Guo" (Tib. *Kheng se chin wang gi tham ka*), and that of the "Power of the Buddha Padmasambhava" (Tib. *Buddha guru rtsal*), etc. Some texts carry two or three seals, confirming their provenance from Prince Yunli's library.



Fig.3 Prince Yunli's seals on Mongolian treasure texts

Prince Yunli, the seventeenth son of Emperor Kangxi, held the title *Prince Guo* (Ch. 果 *guo* means "resolute and decisive") in Chinese sources, also rendered as "Prince Kengse" in Manchu and Mongolian.

¹³ Uspensky (1999: 274).

His Lay Buddhist name in Chinese was Zide Jushi (自得居士, “Layman of Self-Attainment”). In contrast, his secret initiation name was “Power of the Buddha Padmasambhava” (Tib. *Buddha Gu ru rtsal*, Mon. *Buddha Güriü rtsal*). Prince Yunli was a prominent statesman during the Yongzheng reign—aptly described by Vladimir Uspensky as a “Manchu statesman and Tibetan Buddhist,” balancing political duties with deep religious engagement.¹⁴ In 1723, at 26, he was promoted to “Second Rank Prince Guo” (多罗果郡王), and by 1729 ascended to the level of “First Rank Prince Guo” (和硕果亲王). As a Prince, he received an elite education, mastering Manchu, Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian. Scholars remain divided over Yunli’s stance toward the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Some researchers, citing his patronage of rNying ma treasure text translations, argue that he exclusively favored the rNying ma while marginalizing other schools. However, a wider range of Buddhist texts associated with Yunli demonstrates that his patronage in fact extended to the dGe lugs, Sa skya, and other traditions, reflecting a cross-school inclusiveness.¹⁵

As a Manchu prince, Yunli devoted significant efforts to collecting, publishing, and translating Mongolian Buddhist texts. His collection included over a thousand works, ranging from Yuan-era classics like *The Twelve Deeds of the Buddha* (Mon. *Burqan-u arban qoyar joki-yangyui*) to *Explanation of the Knowable* (Mon. *Medegdekiin-i belgetey-e geyigüügči šastir*, Tib. *Shes bya rab gsal*). He also funded Mongolian translations of Buddhist scriptures such as *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Qutvytu kkir ügei aldaršiyas-i uqayulqui neretü yeke kölgen sudur orušiba*) and *An Eulogy to Mañjuśrī* (*Mañjuśrī-yin Maytaya*) for publication. The rNying ma treasure collection thus represented only one facet of his broader Buddhist scripture collections.¹⁶

Vladimir Uspensky suggested that Yunli might have prepared to translate the Mongolian *Tengyur*. Unfortunately, he died before the project began. His efforts, however, might have laid the groundwork for later Mongolian *Tengyur* translation projects. Shortly after his death in 1738, the Qing court initiated the Mongolian translation project of the *Tengyur* (1742–1749), which was completed within eight years.

¹⁴ Uspensky (1999: 274)

¹⁵ Regarding Prince Yunli’s (1697–1738) life and deeds, multiple scholars have addressed this subject, including: Uspensky (1997); Sečenbilig (2019: 371-380); Narenchaogetu (2002); and Faxiang (2009).

¹⁶ Regarding Prince Yunli’s Mongolian Buddhist scripture career, See Giigch (2022).

2.2 Anonymous Translators

Despite 18th-century Mongolian literature's convention of documenting authorship, the treasure translations conspicuously omit the translators' names. Colophons typically state only: "Translated by order of Second Rank Prince Guo, the Seventeenth Son of the Mañjuśrī Emperor, power of Buddha Padmasambhava," which stands in sharp contrast to the Mongolian *Kangyur* (1717–1720) and *Tengyur* (1742–1749), which meticulously list all translators.

So why were the translators anonymized? This phenomenon may be related to the historical circumstances faced by the rNying ma school during that period. In the early Qing Dynasty, whether in Tibet or Beijing, the development of the rNying ma school encountered significant challenges. Primarily in Tibet, local authorities imposed restrictions on the dissemination of rNying ma teachings.¹⁷ The Fifth Dalai Lama, a significant leader of Tibetan Buddhism in the 17th century, also believed that the teachings of the rNying ma school should not be spread outside of Ü-Tsang and southern Khams. For instance, he mentioned several times in his biography, "The rNying ma teachings should not be propagated in regions such as Amdo in the north, Han China, and the Hor regions, but only in Ü-Tsang and southern Khams."¹⁸ In addition, Qing archival records note that in 1674, the Dalai Lama petitioned Emperor Kangxi to ban the teachings of Padmasambhava among Chinese monastics.¹⁹ Moreover, the rNying ma school suffered further blows in 1718 when the Dzungar Mongols destroyed its two main monasteries—rDo rje brag and sMin grol gling—and executed several masters.

Against this backdrop, Prince Yunli's sponsorship of Treasure translations constituted a quiet revival. The more than 600 texts represent only a part of the project; others remain scattered in many institutions. Intriguingly, Prince Yunli himself participated in translations, as evidenced by texts like *Offering Ritual to the Black Dharma Coal-Faced Dākinī* (Mon. *Qara nom-yin negüresün ökin tngri-diir baling ergükiü orošiba*)²⁰ and *The Lamp Accumulating Auspiciousness* (Mon. *Irügel öljei qutuy-un jula orošiba*).²¹

So who were the unnamed translators? It is possible that the contemporary translation group of dGe lugs pa monks translated the Mongolian *Kangyur* (1717–1720) and *Tengyur* (1742–1749) under impe-

¹⁷ Petech(1972: 106).

¹⁸ Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Paljor (2013: 573).

¹⁹ Zhonghua Publishing House (2012: 10).

²⁰ Uspensky (1999: 363).

²¹ Inner Mongolian People Publishing House (2019: 91-93).

rial patronage. Whether Prince Yunli's Treasure project enjoyed similar official support remains unclear—a historical enigma awaiting further research.

3. Mongolian Translations of Northern Treasure Literature

The Northern Treasure tradition represents a significant branch within the rNying ma School's treasure-revelation lineage, named for its association with the northern gTsang region. The great treasure revealer Rig 'dzin rgod ldem is identified in Tibetan sources as the systematizer of the Northern Treasure tradition.

During Prince Yunli's era, Northern Treasure texts were systematically translated into Mongolian alongside other rNying ma scriptures. Of the 636 identified Treasure texts currently available, only 179 contain colophons that document their revealers, providing valuable evidence for tracing their Tibetan origins. Notably, most of these attributed works derive from the Northern Treasure lineage holders like Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, the tradition's founder, who is credited with 99 texts. His name appears in various hybrid Sanskrit-Tibetan-Mongolian forms such as "Üqayan-i bariγči tas-un örbelgetü," "Ijaγur bariγči rgod kyi ldem pu can" and "Arvis bariγči tas örbelgetü." All these variants reflect his Tibetan name "Rig 'dzin rgod ldem dNgos grub rgyal mtshan" (Knowledge Holder with Vulture Feathers, Victory Banner of Siddhis/Accomplishments).

The colophons of the 126 commentaries on Treasure texts indicate that the vast majority were composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his disciples Padma 'phrin las and gTer bdag gling pa. Among these, twenty three were authored by the Fifth Dalai Lama, such as *The Jewel Garland: The Intermediate Ritual for Realizing Northern Treasure's Heart Sadhana* (Mon. Umar-a sang-un sedkil-iin bötügel-iin dumdadu ŋang üile erdeni-yin erike), *The Source of Benefit and Bliss, The Great Compassionate Activity of Universal Liberation from the Northern Treasure* (Mon. Umar-a-yin sang yeke nigülesügči qamuy amitan-i getülgegči-yin üiles temdeg tusa amuyulang yarqu-yin orun), *The White Light Dispelling Darkness: A Peaceful Fire Offering Unifying Three Phurba Traditions* (Mon. Umar-a sang-un yadasun yurban yosun-u alin-dur-ču nayirayulun bolqu amurlingyui yal mandal qarangyui-i arilyayči çayan gerel oruşıba).²² Interestingly, among these Treasure commentaries, we have found four commentaries translated or composed by Prince Yunli, such as *The Yoga of the Vajra Guru: A Condensed Text on Recollection and Prayer, Composed by the Fifth*

²² The Tibetan titles of these three Treasure texts are *Byang gter thugs sgrub 'bring po'i 'phrin las rin chen 'phreng ba*, *Byang gter thugs rje chen po 'gro ba kun grol gyi las byang phan bde'i 'byung gnas*, and *Byang gter phur pa lugs gsum gang la'ang sbyar chog pa'i zhi ba'i sbyin sreg mun sel 'od dkar*.

Dalai Lama (Mon. *Včir doγšin küčütü-yin lama yoga kiged duradγal jalbiral quriyangγui egün-i tabuduyar ilayuyusan jokiyaysan*). In its colophon, it is mentioned that Prince Yunli referenced the works of the Fifth Dalai Lama when composing this text:²³

The Vajra Guru Yoga, recitations, and prayers, among others, are extracted from various works by the Fifth Dalai Lama, authored by the “Power of the Buddha and Guru” (Mon. *Buddha gürii rtsal*).

Although Prince Yunli and the Fifth Dalai Lama had no direct interaction, a close examination of these Northern Treasure texts reveals Prince Yunli’s deep reverence for the Fifth Dalai Lama. No evidence has confirmed that Prince Yunli had any direct relation with Northern Treasure masters other than the Fifth Dalai-Lama. It is, in fact, likely that he received these transmissions from a lineage coming down from the Dalai Lama, but nothing more is known about this topic at this stage.

Furthermore, Prince Yunli’s secret initiation names reflect a possible connection to the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Northern Treasure tradition. The name “Power of the Buddha and Guru” (Mon. *Buddha gürii rtsal*) and “Power of the Wisdom and Vajra” (*Ye shes rdo rje rtsal*)—recorded in the colophons of the Mongolian translation of Treasure texts—were likely bestowed upon him by rNying ma masters associated with the Fifth Dalai Lama. Many Northern Treasure lineage holders, including the Fifth Dalai Lama, incorporated the syllable “*rtsal*” (power) in their secret names. For example, in the colophons of Mongolian Treasure translations, the Fifth Dalai Lama’s secret names appear in various forms, such as “Power of Vajra, the Unattached Mantrin of Zahor” (Mon. *Za hor-un tarniči toyin dörbel ügei küčütü včir*, Tib. *Za hor gyi sngags ’chang thog med rdo rje rtsal*), “Power of the Laughing Mad Yogin of Zahor Who Subdues with Majesty” (Mon. *Za hor-yin γaljayu tarniči süir-iyer daruyčiči iniyegčiči idetü*, Tib. *Za hor gyi sngags smyon zil gnon bzhad pa rtsal*). These parallels suggest a shared naming convention, reinforcing Prince Yunli’s indirect ties to the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Northern Treasure tradition.

Conclusion

The translation of rNying ma Treasure literature under Prince Yunli’s patronage represents a remarkable yet paradoxical chapter in the history of Tibetan Buddhism’s transmission to Mongolia. This ambitious

²³ Inner Mongolia People Publishing House (2019: 27-30).

18th century project produced an extensive corpus of Mongolian Buddhist texts, meticulously preserving essential Northern Treasure teachings and commentaries. However, as this study has demonstrated, textual translation alone proved insufficient for establishing a living tradition.

Three key factors contributed to this interrupted transmission: First, the absence of sustained lineage transmission and qualified masters to expound these teachings in Mongolia created a fundamental disconnection between text and practice. Second, the Qing court's institutional preference for Gelug School created an unfavorable environment for rNying ma's institutional development. Third, the inherently esoteric nature of Treasure literature—particularly its wrathful practices—required oral explanations and initiations that may never have materialized in the Mongolian context.

Future research may explore comparative cases of interrupted Treasure transmissions or investigate whether any elements of these translated treasure texts have indirectly influenced Mongolian Buddhist practice. The discovery of additional manuscripts in Russian and European collections could also shed new light on this little-known translation endeavor.

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