

The present and future of 'Khor gdong Monastery in Brag 'go (Khams, Eastern Tibet) and Siliguri (West Bengal, India)

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Khor gdong is one of the 284 Byang gter monasteries in Tibet, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Generally speaking, the very origin of 'Khor gdong monastery is not known,¹ but it is understood that its founder was gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes (circa 832–942), a practitioner of Yamāntaka. He is said to have built a huge Yamāntaka mantra's prayer wheel on the monastery grounds from which the place took its name, 'Khor lo dong.² Since then, many sages lived in this place, including the tantric sage Rig sngags 'chang ba A mgon³ who settled there in the 12th century. Others who lived there over the centuries are the female practitioner *sras mo* Rin chen tshul rdor;⁴ *rJe dbon* Rin chen phun tshogs;⁵ *Yang dbon* lHa dbang mtshan 'chang;⁶ *dBon* Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin;⁷ *dBon* bkra lha dbang;⁸ *dPa' bo* bSod nams shes rab;⁹ Khams *sprul* Shes rab me 'bar (1752–1815), who built a small temple and placed in it a thangka with the eight bKa' bryad deities;^{10,11} Nus ldan rdo rje 'gro phan gling pa (1802–1864);¹² *gSang 'dzin* mGon po dbang rgyal (1845–1915);¹³ *sPrul sku* Tshul lo

¹ https://khordong-byangter.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_29.html.

² The full name of the monastery is Thub bstan E vam gsang sngag chos 'khor nram rgyal gling.

³ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 274.

⁴ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 276.

⁵ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 278.

⁶ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 280.

⁷ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 282.

⁸ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 284.

⁹ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 286.

¹⁰ Low 2013:139-140.

¹¹ Arguillère 2021.

¹² Arguillère 2018.

¹³ Arguillère 2023.

(1884–c.1957) and his brother *mChog sprul 'Gyur med rdo rje* (1887–1967);¹⁴ *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* (1922–2002),¹⁵ and many others.¹⁶

Brag 'go Town

'Khor gdong is situated in Tre hor, in the sNyi Yul district of Khams, nearby bDe ba village, in eastern Tibet. The nearest town is Brag 'go (Ch. Luhuo), a place of heightened tension between the Tibetan population and Chinese authorities. As per 2025, foreign visitors are tolerated in the town, unlike other places where foreigners are barred from accessing altogether, for example, Bla rung sgar in gSer thang county; Ya chen sgar south of dKar mdzes; Lung sngon monastery of the late *Rig 'dzin Hum dkar rDo rje* (1969–2025), as well as all the monasteries located in the mGo log counties of dGa' bde, Dar lag, and Padma; unopened areas in Chinese Qinghai (Huangyuan county in Xining; Huzhu county in Haidong; Guinan county in Hainan; Qilian county, Haiyan county, Menyuan county, Xihai county in Haibei; Delingha city, Huaya Dachaidan, Tianjun county, Mangnai city in Haixi),¹⁷ together with the vast majority of monasteries in central Tibet,¹⁸ as well as random crackdowns that restrict access to monasteries altogether.

The urbanisation in Brag 'go town is ongoing and rapidly accelerated with the original Tibetan character of the town largely lost and replaced by a typical Chinese cityscape (fig.1-6 Visual Appendix)¹⁹ with tall buildings, retail shops, restaurants, vendor stalls, and police stations and cubicles mushrooming at every corner. After the Covid crisis, tall buildings were erected in the centre of the town where there

¹⁴ Arguillère 2024.

¹⁵ Das 2021.

¹⁶ <https://khordong-byangter.blogspot.com/2016/07/a-brief-history-of-khordong-1.html>, <https://khordong-byangter.blogspot.com/2016/08/a-brief-history-of-khordong-2.html>

¹⁷ According to a document issued by the Immigration Bureau in Xining titled, "List of open and closed areas in Qinghai Province."

¹⁸ Although there has never been any official statement anywhere available (online or onsite) to reference, according to travel agents and eyewitnesses (including the author of this article who was refused entrance at the police check post in gSer thang twice in 2019 together with other travellers from Hong Kong), foreigners, as of 2025, are still barred from entering bLa rung sgar, and similarly entrance to Ya chen sgar is forbidden—brief pirate visits may be possible but staying is not. See for example <https://www.thelandofsnows.com/sertar/>. About the rest of the restricted areas in Khams and A mdo, see the website The Land of Snow, which keeps an updated list of restricted locations. For these restricted areas there is supposedly an official permit but this document is difficult to obtain.

¹⁹ The article comes with a Visual Appendix (VA) at <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/3718>. Unless otherwise stated, all photos are by Varvara Chatziasavva (2019–2025).

is now a big Chinese supermarket, a shopping mall (erected by *mKhan po bSod dar rgyas* of *Bla rung sgar*), more neon lights, and so on. The prayer wheels that used to be at the foot of the hill leading to *Brag 'go dGa' ldan rab brtan rnam rgyal gling* have been demolished and replaced with a tall wall behind which lies a new police station and government buildings blocking the view and sunshine from the Tibetan houses right behind them (fig.7-12 VA).

'Khor gdong Monastery

Considering the heightened surveillance and tight control everywhere in the region, it is never sure whether it is possible to visit *'Khor gdong* monastery at the planned day of visit, since several factors including the police, the Tibetan drivers, extreme weather phenomena, landslides and so forth, may prevent the trip. The three new surveillance cameras (installed in 2024) on the single stretch of road in the monastery (from the police station all the way to the entrance gate of the temple) also ensure that police staff may call anytime to enquire about the presence of any foreigner in the monastery if spotted on camera.

According to the description in the Chinese poster displayed on a glass board at the entrance of *'Khor gdong*, the monastery is 700 years old and is situated at an altitude of 4.150m. It counts 33 permanent residents (115 in total) and 24 permanent monks (200 in total).²⁰ The members of the temple administration include a township Party Committee Secretary, a Deputy Secretary of the township Party and United Front worker, a Party Committee director, two full-time cadres, a financial manager, and four accountants and treasurers—the staff is both Tibetan and Chinese. The head of the monastery and the most senior *sprul sku* are members of the People's Assembly and the Civil Affairs Congress. The temple counts six main halls, 123 monk rooms, but no large statues.

Religious Activities in 'Khor gdong

According to the Chinese notice board, the monastery hosts five Buddhist activities annually. Since these are not named, I provide the details:

1. The *bKa' brgyad dgu gtor* (from 22nd to 29th of the 12th Tibetan month), the traditional *dgu gtor pūjā* performed in many Tibetan

²⁰ These figures do not reflect clearly the exact number of Tibetan monastic and lay residents and Chinese monastics and employees stationed in the monastery.

Buddhist monasteries before the new year, here involving recitations related to the *bKa' brgyad* deities and a nine-stage ritual dance.

2. *O rgyen rin po che'i dus dran tshe bcu* (from 4th to 7th of the 4th Tibetan month). Gu ru rin po che Tse bcu with '*cham* dances based on Gu ru Chos dbang's (1212–1270) *gter ma Bla ma gsang ba 'dus pa*. On that occasion, the big thangka of Padmasambhava is unfurled on public display.
3. *Ge sar dus mchod* (from 1st to 10th of the 5th Tibetan month)—an opera performance narrating the life and deeds of King Ge sar.
4. *bSam lhun chos tshogs* (from 1st to 15th of the 1st Tibetan month), this is the *bSam pa lhun 'grub ma*, *The Prayer to Guru Rinpoche that Spontaneously Fulfils All Wishes*.
5. *Sa snying dung sgrub* (10–11th days of the 4th Tibetan month). This is community accumulation of 100 million mantras of Sa yi snying po.²¹

In fact, there are more observances not stated in this notice board, for example, the '*das mchod* of *mkhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs* (11th Tibetan month). According to the life-story of *sprul sku 'Chi med rgyal mtshan*,²² each year, to help restore the decline of the Dharma and beings, he gives the empowerment for the *bKa' brgyad drag po rang byung rang shar* and the *Rig 'dzin gdung sgrub* (both treasures of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem) as well as rGya zhang khrom's *gter ma 'Jam dpal tshe bdag*. Moreover, the summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*, which starts on the 15th of the 6th Tibetan month for one and a half months) is done according to the practice of the three bases of the Vinaya. The consecration ritual of *mChog sprul Tshul khrim bzang po* is based on the practice of Rig 'dzin rgo ldem's treasure *Thugs sgrub drag mthing* and the consecration ritual text *rGyud don rgya mtsho*. Furthermore, *sprul sku 'Chi med rgyal mtshan* offers the *Thugs chen 'gro ba kun grol sgrub mchod*; the Byang gter liturgy *lHa bsang rgyags brngan*; the *bKa' brgyad sman sgrub chen mo* according to the practice of *gSang 'dzin mGon po dbang rgyal*²³; the *Phur pa sgrub chen*; the *Gro lod sgrub chen* from the *gTer gsar*; and the *Zhi khro liturgy lTa ba klong yangs*. He also established the *bDe chen zhing sgrub*. He has maintained existing traditions such as the opera play called *Sras dpa' bo* (an opera play on the life of *mkhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs*) and created new ones like

²¹ This is bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, usually depicted as a Buddhist monk, primarily revered in East Asian Buddhism (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam) which rely on the Chinese Buddhist canon.

²² 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 477-481.

²³ Another name of mGon po dbang rgyal.

the opera on the life of King Ge sar and the opera called '*Dan sras zlos*. Regarding Northern Treasures rDzogs chen empowerments and transmissions like the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal* and the '*Khor gdong rdzog chen khrid mKha' 'gro gsang mdzod* from *gter chen* Nus ldan rdo rje's *gter chos*, it is unknown when these take place, if at all, and whether there are hurdles presented by officialdom since these teachings take months to complete and large public gatherings that spread over larger periods in monasteries are restricted by the authorities all over Greater Tibet. But there was indeed a teaching on '*Jigs med gling pa's Ye shes bla ma* in 2023 to a visiting group of Han people by one of the *bla ma* of the monastery.

The annual liturgical calendar of the monastery with the rituals of worship and meditation performed annually at '*Khor gdong* from the time of *Shes rab me 'bar* until *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* was twenty years old,²⁴ was revised after '*Chi med rig 'dzin* left '*Khor gdong* in 1939. The current calendar is not anywhere readily available online to help keep track with the monastery's teachings, as is the case with the vast majority of Tibetan monasteries in China, but it is said to be more aligned now with the calendar of *gSer thang Bla rung sgar* while it used to follow the system of *rDo rje brag*.

*Rules in the Monastery
and sPrul sku Recognition*

In 2024, two new Chinese boards were placed in the courtyard of the main temple together with two Chinese marble lion statues. One board is headlined "Keluodong Temple Publicity Board in Luhuo county" (written in Chinese) or "Propaganda Poster in '*Khor gdong Monastery in Brag 'go rDzong*" (written in Tibetan). It lists the "Twelve Musts" as framed during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China that seek to promote and improve "ethnic unity," safeguard national sovereignty, get all ethnic groups adapt to a modern socialist society in line with the leadership of the Party (fig. 13 VA).

The other board is headlined "Adhere to the direction of sinicization of religion in China and promote the healthy inheritance of Tibetan Buddhism" (fig. 13 VA) and dictates the process, regulations as well as the "historical customs and religious rituals to be followed by Living Buddha reincarnation" (ie., the standards of the Tibetan Buddhist *sprul sku* recognition system), using the Golden Urn lottery to recognize a *sprul sku* and having the result approved by the Central Government following the "29-Article of the Imperially-

²⁴ Low 2013:151-166.

Decreed Regulations for the Post-war Settlement in Tibet” promulgated in 1793 by Emperor Qianlong.^{25,26}

It is worth mentioning here that although Ritiman Das declares that “Chime Rigdzin once explained that because the Khordong Terchen Tulku had become a figure of considerable importance in the region, the Tibetan government in Lhasa mandated the use of the Golden Urn to select him, a method designed to remove influence of powerful families,”²⁷ it was in fact exceptional that *gter sprul* 'Chi med rig 'dzin was selected with the Golden Urn since no other 'Khor gdong *sprul sku* is known to have been selected that way. This issue therefore requires further inquiry as, albeit not unusual, this system is not the one used to select *sprul sku* neither in 'Khor gdong nor in the wider area. That said, *gter sprul* 'Chi med rig 'dzin was not coming from the 'Khor gdong bDe ba tshang family line,²⁸ to which all ancestral masters of 'Khor gdong traditionally belonged, including Khams *sprul* Shes rab me 'bar, 'Khor gdong *gter chen* Nus ldan rdo rje, *sprul sku* Tshul lo and his brother 'Gyur med rdo rje, as well as mGon po dbang rgyal who married Zhi wa 'tsho, the daughter of 'Khor gdong *gter chen*. In our times, the young *sprul sku* Padma bkra shis (b. 2006) also belongs to this family line.

Be that as it may, *gter sprul* 'Chi med rig 'dzin was recognized by several prominent lamas including the 13th Dalai Lama, the 10th sMin gling *khri chen*, and the 39th Sa skya *khri* 'dzin. He was one of the highest rNying ma *bla ma* of his time, given the close relationship with rDo rje brag, main monastery of the Northern Treasures, with the Dalai Lama's government (dGa' ldan pho brang) and his own connection with the Tibetan establishment. When 'Chi med rig 'dzin left 'Khor

²⁵ For a comprehensive analysis about how in 1995 the P.R.China resurrected the Qing-era law mandating that the *sprul sku* of prominent masters must be identified by drawing lots from a golden urn, hoping in this way to limit the ability of the 14th Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan government to independently identify reincarnations of the Dalai Lama, see Oidtmann 2018.

²⁶ On June 2, 2025 and before his 90th birthday, the 14th Dalai Lama announced his succession plan affirming that the 600-year-old institution will continue, adding that the dGa' ldan pho brang Trust would consult heads of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and other religious leaders to search and recognise a successor in accordance with past tradition without anyone else having the authority to interfere in this matter (Central Tibetan Administration 2025a). Swiftly rejecting the plan, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the succession of the Dalai Lama should be in accordance with the Chinese law and approved by the CCP (National Herald India, 2025).

²⁷ Das 2021.

²⁸ I would like to thank Stephane Arguillère for the insight and input. For the transformation of the Northern Treasure tradition from family-based and following the succession customs of the rNying ma pa into institutions headed by *sprul sku*, see Valentine 2013: 130.

gdong, he worked for a while in the administration of the 14th Dalai Lama in Lha sa, sorting out historical documents and organizing the library.²⁹ In addition, during the visit of Zhou Enlai in India in 1956-57, he was part of the delegation to welcome the Chinese Premier (fig. 1) who was awarded Visva-Bharati's highest accolade, the Desikottama, by Professor Satyendranath Bose.³⁰



Fig. 1 – gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during the latter's visit to India in 1956-57 (Photos: Left & Middle: courtesy of 'Khor gdong Monastery, Brag 'go, 2023; Right: Visva-Bharati website).

History of 'Khor gdong Monastery

In his *Collected Works*, gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin explains that 'Khor gdong monastery used to be the head of sixteen branch monasteries³¹ some of which were built by the thirteen companions of Khams sprul Shes rab me 'bar, and that it had 108 temples and one very big stūpa which took six years to build. 'Khor gdong was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The following pictures capture the image of the monastery since it was rebuilt and through to 2019 and up to 2024 (fig. 2). There doesn't seem to be any existing archive of pictures earlier than 1980s.

²⁹ Das 2021.

³⁰ <https://www.visvabharati.ac.in/snbosebirthanniversary.html>.

³¹ Thub bstan e vam gsang sngags zhug 'byung gling in mDo khog built by 'Jigs bral rgya mtsho; sTag rtse dgon in Nyar tri built by rNam grol rgya mtsho; gZhug chen dgon in gZhi 'khor built by Ye shes rgya mtsho; Ra krom dgon in sNyi smad built by Nus don bzang po; Ba lar dgon in Mi nyag built by Kung dga' nges don; Baḥ gnas dgon in Baḥ khog village built by Ye shes rdo rje; mDo rDo rje brag in Dar rtse mdo built by rNam sgrol rDo rje bzang po; Tri bu dgon in Baḥ village built by Kun dga' theg mchog bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan; Thub bstan e vam dga' mtshal near 'Khor dgon built by 'Phrin las lhun sgrub; gTso gnas dgon in gTso village built by U rgyan che mChog; 'Bro ri ri khrod hermitage in bSer khog built by Thog med bzang po; Gra lags dgon in Dza village built by Shes rab rgya mtsho; 'Gu tsha dgon in upper Zu village built by Shes rab bzang po; sNe lung dgon built by Shes rab bzang po; sPang le dgon built by Shes rab bzang po (Low 2013:140-141)

It was *dBon chen bSod nams 'od gsal* (1928–2001) who rebuilt the monastery in 1985 (fig. 3)³² and this temple was again restored in the 2010s by *sprul sku 'Chi med rgyal mtshan* (b. 1982) (fig. 4).^{33, 34}



Fig. 2 – 'Khor gdong monastery through time, from 1980s to 2024
(Photos: Left: Courtesy of 'Khor gdong Monastery, Brag 'go (2023).
Middle and Right: Varvara Chatzisavva 2018, 2024)

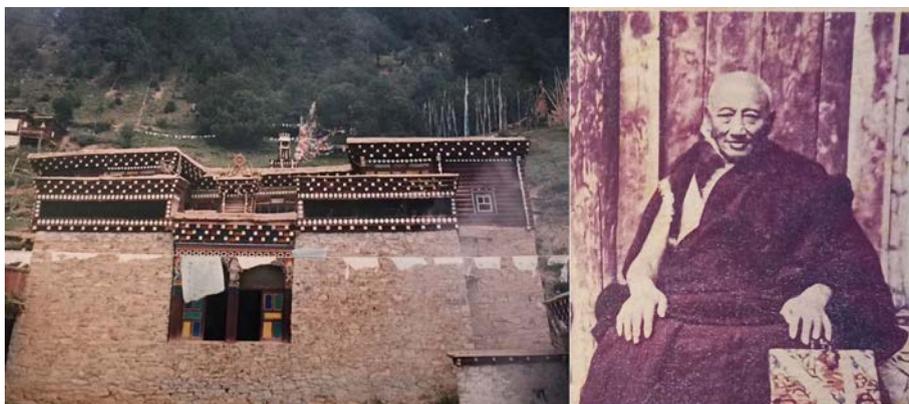


Fig. 3 – The main temple as rebuilt by *dBon chen bSod nams 'od gsal*
(Photos: Courtesy of 'Khor gdong Monastery, Brag 'go, 2023)



Fig. 4 – The main temple as restored by the current head of the monastery
sprul sku 'Chi med rgyal mtshan (Photos: Varvara Chatzisavva, 2024).

³² 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 306.

³³ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 477-481.

³⁴ Lefort 2010: 28:00 min.

At the time of the Cultural Revolution, *dBon chen* bSod nam s'od gsal saved the treasures now enshrined in the main temple by hiding them in the mountains around 'Khor gdong. In the main temple are enshrined several *sku gdung* (fig. 15 VA), or fragments of them, saved from destruction: that of *gTer chen* Nus ldan rdo rje (1802–1864), of *mKhan chen* Bya bral padma chos dbyings khyab brdal (1920–1997), of *mChog sprul* 'Gyur med rdo rje (1887–1967), and part of *gTer sprul* 'Chi med rig 'dzin (1922–2002).

Treasures kept in the Monastery

Among the many *gter ma* and other precious things in the treasury, there are the several *sgrom bu* revealed by *gter chen* Nus ldan rDo rje.³⁵ Among them, there is a stone chest with the handprints of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Mandāravā, Padmasambhava (fig. 16 VA); a *gter ma* casket containing sky iron, the title of a *gter ma* text scroll, and two *gter ma* statues (fig. 17 VA); the dagger of *rDo rje gro lod* that binds gods and demons to their oaths (fig. 18 VA); the seal that 'Chi med rig 'dzin used to bind by oath a ghost named sNyu rgyal—he put the seal on the ghost's forehead getting it to vow not to harm any humans or other beings—as well as the hat of 'Chi med rig 'dzin bearing his seal (fig. 19–20 VA); the hat that bDud 'joms rin po che (1903–1987) gifted to 'Chi med rig 'dzin (fig. 21 VA); a silver *dbang gtor ma* made by *dBon chen* bSod nam s'od gsal which is used during annual rituals (fig. 22 VA); a large thangka representing Padmasambhava (fig. 23 VA), the ceremonial hat that bDud 'joms 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje offered to 'Chi med rig 'dzin; the reading glasses of A khyug rin po che of Ya chen sgar; the orange robe of *mKhan chen* Chos dbyings kyab brdal (1920–1997) and so forth. Some of these *gter ma* were extracted by 'Khor gdong *gTer chen* Nus ldan rdo rje (1802–1864) in the sacred mountains near the monastery where his hermitage is located and where several self-manifesting mantras appear on the rocks together with the mantra *om āḥ hūṃ hrīḥ*, which Nus ldan rdo rje wrote with blood from his nose. His handprint on a rock could be clearly seen until its destruction by

³⁵ A brief description of these treasures revealed by Nus ldan rdo rje at mTsho sngon lake and other places, can be found in Low 2013:142, where seven *Gu ru mthong ba don ldan* statues are listed together with eleven stones called *rDo sgrom mthong ba don ldan* that bear the handprints and finger prints of Gu ru Rin po che and Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and twenty-seven other treasure stones, etc.

shooting during the Cultural Revolution.³⁶ The hoof-print of Nus ldan rDo rje's horse and a self-arising *nor bu*³⁷ are also visible on rocks.

Daily Life in the Monastery

There has been a renovation going on in the monastery for some time (fig. 24-26 VA). Construction work had already started in June 2023 and lasted for a couple of years—but as it usually happens with Tibetan monasteries within the jurisdiction of the P.R.C., construction work seems to be an ongoing and never-ending process, as is the paving of the roads. The funds for the construction work come from the *bla ma*, the local people, and partly from state funding. The latter is listed in the annual Financial Disclosure, a Chinese document pinned on the board for public announcements at the entrance of the monastery. For example, according to the Financial Disclosure in 2023, the monthly income of the temple was 3,427 RMB. In July 2023 the temple received 82,000 RMB (10,000 RMB for the temple and 3,000 RMB for each of the 24 monks), deposited to the salary of the Civil Affairs Commission, with an additional amount of 6,258 RMB deposited to the salary of the director of the Buddhist Association. All labour work is done mainly by local people living in the monastery but Chinese labourers are often involved. The initial plan in 2023 was to build a new kitchen hall, but in the process a new auditorium was built, as well as a new hall for the big prayer-wheels; rails were put in place for safety; a wall has been built around the temple for lay people; and yet another hall is about to be constructed near the new *shes grwa*. Also, a new treasury room is being prepared; the temple floors are getting floor-heating and so on. With the new gates in place, the monastery now looks like a fortress. Despite these developments, there is no tap water and water is carried in big jerricans from the spring. Toilets are organic and dried solid waste is used as fuel—there is no sewage system. But there is electricity, wifi, a police station, a small convenience shop, three surveillance cameras, and red lamp posts adorned with the Chinese flag.

In the new temple in the new *shes grwa* (fig. 31 VA)³⁸ on top of the mountain reside some Chinese nuns as well as Chinese devotees and

³⁶ Lefort 2010: 32:54 min, 52:36 min.

³⁷ This refers to a symbol of the Three Jewels which in its most simple form looks like three balls arranged in a triangular shape.

³⁸ Regarding the establishment of the new *shes sgrwa* and temple, following *sKyabs rje grub dbang* Karma chos 'phel bzang po's suggestion, there was a pure site on the upper part of 'Khor gdong Monastery to expand the monastic estate, divinations were done accordingly and starting from the 22nd day of the 1st Tibetan month of 2017, *mChog sprul* Lung rtogs bstan 'dzin bzang po, *mDo sngags* 'Od gsal chos kyi nyi ma, *rGyal sras* Nor bu dbang rgyal, *mKhan chen* Tshe ring dpal ldan, and others

visitors who come help out with the chores and cooking during events, receive teachings, do retreat, or simply for holiday. During certain *pūjā* days, the Chinese nuns are preparing the yellow and red “memorial tablets for the deceased”—a feature of Chinese Buddhism that has made its way into Tibetan Buddhist temples in Tibet and abroad.

The shop in the *shes grwa* is stocked with snacks, soft drinks and other necessities. Among these items there are few products (e.g., soaps, bottled mineral water) labelled with the Chinese brand name of the monastery shop QIMAIPULI³⁹ (fig. 28 VA)—these products are manufactured in Guangdong, China. The latest business launched by the monastery in 2025 is a hotel restaurant in Bra 'go (Fig. 27 VA). With the commercialisation and touristification of the Tibetan monasteries under the P.R.China and the urge towards self-sufficiency,⁴⁰ several monasteries have launched their own brands offering merchandise beyond traditionally sold items like incense, books and so forth. For example, in the Moksa café shop in rDzogs chen monastery, customers can buy all sorts of trademarked memorabilia and accessories from an extensive collection of items ranging from umbrellas, caps, earbuds, T-shirts, cups, hot-water bottles and even engraved pebbles (fig. 29-30 VA)—all items of Chinese manufacture.

Education in the Shes grwa

When it comes to the education received by the monks in the 'Khor gdong *shes grwa*, the daily schedule (fig. 32 VA) of classes taught is as follows in the chart below. Unlike what Lefort narrates in 2010 (30:52 min), novice monks do not learn English nor geography as they used to in the school that *sPrul sku* Shes rab nyi ma founded and inaugurated in 2005; they do all speak Chinese though. Needless to say, this weekly program is very different from the traditional Dharma education received by the 'Khor gdong monks at the time of 'Chi med rig 'dzin.⁴¹

were invited to perform the earth taming ceremony and blessed the site. *sPrul sku* Lung rtogs named it “sKu gsum Rig 'dzin gling.” The name of the *shes sgrwa* is “sNga 'gyur byang gter 'khor gdong bslab gsum nor bu 'byung gling.”

³⁹ QIMAIPULI where “Qimai” is the Chinese pinyin transliteration for the Tibetan name “Chime.” The Tibetan name is provided in a subheading: *'chi med kun phan spus legs tshong khang*.

⁴⁰ See Caple 2019: 38-93.

⁴¹ Low 2013: 146.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Laws & Regulations	Practice of Rituals	Writing	National Security Law	Grammar	<i>Tantra</i>
Inner Principles	Real-time Politics	Astrology	Practice of Rituals	Regulations on Religious Affairs	Inner Principles
<i>Tantra</i>	Epistemology	Tantra	Policy of benefiting temples and monks	Maths	Grammar
Lunch break					
Regulations on Religious Affairs	Poetics	<i>Abhidharma</i>	Calligraphy	<i>Abhidharma</i>	
<i>Prajñāpāramitā</i>	Grammar	Laws & Regulations	Inner Principles	Synonyms	
<i>Abhidharma</i>	Physical Education	Maths	Tantra	Law	

Some of these classes are taught by Chinese teachers residing in the monastery. All the classes and taught material must adhere to the overarching policy of sinicization as articulated in a Chinese document that is hanging on the wall in the *shes grwa* (fig. 33 VA). The translation of the Chinese text is as follows:

1. The Buddhist Canon study class supports the leadership of the Communist Party of China, loves the motherland, opposes national separatism, strictly abides by the national laws and regulations, adheres to discipline and diligent conduct, loves the country and loves Buddhism, and guides Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to the socialist society.
2. The Buddhist Canon study class guides the monks to adhere to the direction of sinicization of religion and to actively participate in the activities organized by Buddhist associations in prefectures and counties (cities), such as “Love the country,

- love religion, love the hometown," etc., and interprets the canons and the doctrines in line with the needs of our times.
3. The teachers of the Buddhist Canon study class must be ordained and hold a qualifying teaching certificate. The Temple Management Office, Buddhist Association, Religious Affairs Bureau, United Front Work Department, Public Security Bureau and other relevant departments will screen the existing Buddhist Canon teachers and remove the monks with unsatisfactory political performance.
 4. The study program must include courses such as politics, history, culture, law, as well as national, provincial and state affairs.
 5. The curriculum, textbook selection, and teaching process shall be strictly managed by the Temple Management Office, Buddhist Association, Religious Affairs Bureau, United Front, and other relevant departments.

Other Northern Treasures Monasteries in Khams

'Khor gdong monastery is affiliated with other Byang gter monasteries in the neighbouring areas, namely Shugs 'byung monastery (fig. 34-35 VA), Baḥ gnas monastery (fig. 36-37 VA), Ba smad monastery (fig. 38 VA), and it shares ties with the neighbouring "camps" of Bla rung sgar and Li mdo chos sgar in gSer thang (fig. 39-40 VA). Li mdo chos sgar was the seat of *mKhan chen Bya bral Padma chos dbyings khyab brdal*.

Both *mChog sprul Lung rtogs bstan 'dzin bzang po* (b.1955) of Ba smad monastery (commonly known as *sPrul sku Lung rtogs*), and *mDo sngags 'Od gsal chos kyi nyi ma* (b. 1954) of Baḥ gnas monastery (commonly known as *Chos kyi nyi ma rin po che*), highly revered *bla ma* in the areas of Bra 'go, rTa'u and gSer thang, are reincarnations of *sPrul sku Tshul lo* (1884–c.1957) who was the elder brother of 'Khor gdong 'Gyur med rdo rje (1887–1966). 'Khor gdong 'Gyur med rdo rje's only still living son, *rGyal sras sprul sku Nor bu dbang rgyal* (b.1950) or *sPrul sku Nor bu*, as he is commonly known,⁴² lives in 'Khor gdong monastery with his extended family.

gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin and his reincarnation

The people in 'Khor gdong monastery fondly remember *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* who lived away from the monastery since he was 18 years old in the 1940s only to return for the first time in 1985 since he

⁴² 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 300-302.

left—and second time in 1990.⁴³ He arrived on horseback as the old wooden bridge was not fit for cars.⁴⁴ The memory of *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* is kept alive in the “mother” 'Khor gdong monastery through a fragment of his *sku gdung*, a few small old photographs in the treasury room and on the altar as well as the lineage portrait pictures that local people keep in their homes. On the throne inside the new temple in the *shes grwa*, it is not the statue of *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin*⁴⁵ that is enthroned but often that of *mKhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs* (1933–2004) of *Bla rung sgar*,⁴⁶ perhaps because the previous incarnation of *mKhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs* was *gter chen Las rab gling pa* (1856–1926), whose main disciple was *sPrul sku Tshul lo*. In fact, still back in 2019, it was the statue of *dBon chen bSod nams 'od gsal*⁴⁷ that was installed on the throne in the old main temple, but later it was moved to the treasury room (fig. 41-43 VA) where it is still kept. It is worth mentioning here that during the revival of Buddhism in the 1980s, *dBon chen bSod nams 'od gsal* met with *mKhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs* who bestowed the empowerments of the Four Heart Essences (*snying thig ya bzhi*) at 'Khor gdong.⁴⁸

The *yang srid* of *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* (1922–2002) is Padma bkra shis, who, as of 2025, is pursuing his studies at Ba smad monastery. Padma bkra shis was born in 2006 on the auspicious day of Lha babs *dus chen* commemorating the descent of Buddha Śākyamuni from heaven. He is said to have been recognized in 2006 by many highly revered *bla ma*, including the great Byang gter master

⁴³ Das 2021 and <https://khordong-byangter.blogspot.com/p/ugen-chencho-of-khordong-byangter.html>.

⁴⁴ Lefort 2010: 27:35min. Since then, a lot of tar has been poured on that road and the bridge, but somehow—as it seems to be the case in the whole of Greater Tibet—the road is still not good enough and is needing regular paving.

⁴⁵ A sculptured statue of *gTer sprul 'Chi med rig 'dzin* is enshrined at the branch 'Khor dong monastery in Siliguri which he established in order to spread the lineage teachings in India and then in the West. The use of silicone flesh statues of deceased masters has become widespread in many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and India, replacing the previously sculptured ones (see also Brox 2022: 106). The cost of these silicone statues, as of 2024 in Chengdu, is around 50,000 RMB.

⁴⁶ The reasons and/or sociopolitical dynamics, other than solidarity, dictating why *mKhan chen 'Jigs med phun tshogs*, from all the eminent *bla ma*, should have such a prominently elevated position, often a divine status, in the monasteries around *Bla rung sgar* and beyond but also in the imagination of people (Tibetans and non-Tibetans), is the topic of another discussion. See also Germano 1998: 53-94; Sodargye 2025: 76.

⁴⁷ *dBon chen bSod nams 'od gsal* was the one who rebuilt the monastery after it was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and saved all the *gter ma* of the monastery from destruction by hiding them in nearby mountains.

⁴⁸ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 454.

Rig 'dzin rNam grol rgya mtsho and others, as the *yang sprul* of 'Chi med rig 'dzin and of sKye med Ye shes thig le rol pa rtsal. He was enthroned in a grand ceremony in 2020 in the presence of *sPrul sku* Lung rtogs, Chos kyi nyi ma rin po che, *sPrul sku* Nor bu, *mKhan chen* Zla ba, *sPrul sku* 'Chi med rgyal mtshan, *mKhan chen* Thub bsten nyi ma, *sPrul sku* Tshe ring nyi ma, *sPrul sku* Blo gros rgya mtsho, *sPrul sku* 'Chi med rdo rje, and others, amidst a big saṅgha gathering.⁴⁹ However, his recognition has not yet been ratified by Chinese authorities, the reasons behind this conspicuous delay being unknown. Ideally, *yang sprul* Padma bkra shis, once he properly completes his training, should be able to visit on a regular basis the branch of 'Khor gdong Monastery in Siliguri, West Bengal, India, which was founded by *gTer sprul* 'Chi med rig 'dzin after purchasing there a large piece of land together with his son *sprul sku* Ö rgyan che mchog,⁵⁰ who has been maintaining it since with the support of the Western students of the *gTer sprul* who in turn run several 'Khor gdong centers in Europe. However, as it happens with Tibetans and especially Tibetan monastics in the P.R.China, obtaining (and/or renewing) a passport to travel abroad, and especially to India, is not a straightforward safeguarded procedure and they are routinely refused their passports and freedom of movement. Similarly, *sprul sku* 'Chi med rgyal mtshan, who travelled three times to Poland in the past,⁵¹ also faces difficulties renewing his passport. Thus, with these two main *bla ma* linking the two monasteries in Tibet and India (and Europe) unable to travel freely back and forth, in order to bestow empowerments, offer teachings and ensure the continuation of the 'Khor gdong lineage and tradition outside of Tibet, and with the difficult communication between Tibetans in India and Tibet, the mother monastery and its branches are in danger of gradually growing apart and becoming disconnected.

Conclusion

In the documentary titled *Journey to the Source* filmed in 2010 and offering a remarkable insight into the tradition and life of 'Khor gdong monastery in Khams, the narrator, when watching the young monks receiving their education and training at the newly established *shes grwa* at 'Khor gdong—while earlier they had to depend on other

⁴⁹ 'Chi med nor bu 2023: 306.

⁵⁰ Das R. (2021) "The Third Khordong Tertrul, Chime Rigdzin," https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Chime-Rigdzin/TBRC_P1KG9680.

⁵¹ <https://khordongweb.wixsite.com/khordong-pl-eng/chhimed-gyaltserinpoche>.

institutes for their education—expressed his relief and confidence that the continuation of the lineage is maintained. The film is closing with the auspicious affirmation that the 'Khor gdong lineage is secure in India and the practice is thriving in Europe and ends with the aspiration that “we are all awaiting for the arrival of the fifth reincarnation. All is good.” This may be indeed true to some extent, and the fifth reincarnation is already here, but the future will tell whether this enthusiasm is realistic.

Tibetan monasteries in the P.R.China increasingly become monastic estates in government land enmeshed in the uneasy realities of the Chinese socialist society and its market economy, wherein they must adapt following an alien Chinese leadership that dictates, controls and restricts how they operate.⁵² High lamas are under tight surveillance (often under house arrest), isolated from the rest of the world and from their monasteries' branches in exile as well as from their wider international audience. Under such circumstances, it is not certain that the 'Khor gdong lineage will maintain continuity outside Tibet in the future.⁵³ With intensified regularization and sinicization campaigns and tighter crackdowns to tighten restrictions and increase enforcement, Tibetan monastic institutions, including 'Khor gdong monastery, cannot fulfil their potential as international educational, religious, and recreational destinations. Counterproductive as it is to cut off Tibetan *bla ma* from their international audience within the P.R.China and abroad, a more meaningful and fruitful implementation of opening up, cultural and academic exchange, and boosting of tourism—the designated pillar of Tibetan economy—would involve Western Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and scholars having unrestricted access to Tibetan monasteries and institutions in the P.R.C., and similarly Tibetan scholars and monastics having access to Western audiences within the P.R.C. and abroad.

⁵² Caple 2019; Goldstein 1998: 15-52; Cabezon 2008: 261-294.

⁵³ While masters from the Northern Treasures and gLong chen sNying thig lineages do offer empowerments in 'Gro phan gling in Poland, there are no 'Khor gdong *bla ma* who can offer the 'Khor gdong Dharma cycle and bestow the 'Khor gdong rDzogs chen empowerments and give transmissions and instructions in India, Europe, etc. (See here: <https://khordongweb.wixsite.com/khordong-pl-eng/program-2025>). Unlike monasteries in Tibet which do not publicly announce their events, Tibetan monasteries in exile maintain an online presence through their websites and social media keeping their audience updated about their activities and teaching, be them onsite or online.

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