

# The Multiple Identities of gNyan chen Thang lha in Byang gter

Yuewei, Wang

(Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social  
Sciences (TIAS), Tsinghua University, Beijing)

 In my previous study on gNyan chen Thang lha,<sup>1</sup> through an analysis of sixteen ritual texts dedicated to this deity in the volume 15 of CNT 2015 (see Appendix), I delineated three core Buddhist identities constructed through his tripartite vows in front of Padmasambhava:

- 1) With his first vow taken in Byang lam bar ba, Thang lha offered his life essence (*srog snying*) to the Master Padmasambhava. He then became a protector (*srung ma, bstan bsrung*) of Buddhism and got a secret name, rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal<sup>2</sup>.
- 2) With the second vow taken on Mount Has po ri of bSam yas monastery, Thang lha was designated by Padmasambhava as the body god (*sku lha*) and life force god (*srog gi lha*) of the Dharma King Khri srong lde btsan.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) With the last vow taken at the top of Mount bKra bzang, Thang lha received a *sādhana* cycle (*sgrub skor*) from Padmasambhava and became the treasure guardian (*gter bdag, gter bsrung*) of the Copper Red Treasury (*Zangs mdzod dmar po*) in Zang zang lha drag, the holy place where Rig 'dzin rgod ldem discovered his five treasures (*mdzod lnga*). As the Copper Red Treasury is one of the five treasures, this vow signifies that Thang lha officially became with it the protector of Byang gter itself.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wang 2024. And for the current article, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Stéphane Arguillère and Dr. Cécile Ducher for their invaluable guidance and advice throughout the writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup> CNT 2015 vol. 15, no.5, p. 370, l.1-p. 372, l.2 ; no.7, p. 534, l.3-p. 535: l.1.

<sup>3</sup> CNT 2015 vol. 15, no.1, p. 322: l.1-p. 324, l.3; no.3, p. 336: l.2-p. 338, l.1; no.14, p. 653, l.3-p. 655, l.2; no.7, p. 535, l.1-p. 537, l.5.

<sup>4</sup> CNT 2015 vol. 15, no. 2, p. 331, l.4-p. 332, l.3; no. 4, p. 536, l.5; no. 10, p. 562, l.4-p. 563, l.2; no. 11, p. 592, l.2-l.3; no. 12, p. 635, l.3-l.4.

Having thus encountered Padmasambhava three times, Thang lha gradually acquired his triple identity as a Buddhist protector, the body god and life force god of the Dharma King, and the treasure guardian of Byang gter. In my 2024 article, I argued that this evolving triple identity can be understood as a symbol of the gradual Buddhicization of a mountain god under the Buddhist developing process of Tibet.

Beyond this tripartite framework, the Byang gter texts further elaborate on other auxiliary identities that collectively delineate Thang lha's multidimensional role in Byang gter cycles:

- 1) First of all, Thang lha is the antidote (*gnyen po*) and executioner (*gshed ma*) of vow-breakers and various demons.
- 2) He is the ancestral male god (*pho lha*) of marvelous men and the protector of wealth.
- 3) Akin to the role of *pho lha*, he is also portrayed as the guardian of property, the wealth god.
- 4) Thang lha is the territorial god (*yul lha*) to the four regions of Tibet
- 5) Thang lha is given a transcendent nature, he is renowned for having "one nature and six names", meaning that he is the incarnation of Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha and has six titles.
- 6) As for the body images, Thang lha possesses various manifestations in Byang gter texts, including animal manifestations.
- 7) Finally, the Byang gter texts also introduce Thang lha's family and retinue.

This multilayered identity system not only codifies Thang lha's transition from mountain god to fully-integrated Buddhist entity, but also epitomizes the Nyingma strategies for incorporating autochthonous deities into Vajrayāna frameworks after the 14th century.

In addition, the ritual texts analyzed here originate from the *Byang gter* tradition, systematized by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337–1408?) in the 14th century. While Rig 'dzin rgod ldem is credited with revealing the core *gter ma* cycles, many subsidiary texts in Volume 15 were composed by later lineage holders. Chief among these authors is Sngags 'chang yol mo ba (the first Yol mo *sprul sku*, b. 15th century), a key systematizer of the Thang lha cult. Sngags 'chang Yol mo ba explicitly authored the "offering manual for physical supports" (*phyi rten 'bul thabs*, no. 13) and the eulogy *lHa chen 'bar ba rtsal gyi mnga' gsol* (no. 6). In the colophon of no. 13, he recounts composing it during a journey to Chu glang 'on phu stag tshang, where a visionary encounter with a white yak—interpreted as a direct emanation of

Thang lha—confirmed the ritual's efficacy and sanctified the text's authority. Other texts bear attributions to key figures: no. 12 was composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682). However, most texts lack explicit authorship, reflecting the Byang gter tradition's emphasis on revelatory continuity over individual credit. Notably, Yol mo ba's works bridge Rig 'dzin rgod ldem's revealed liturgies and later commentaries, establishing the foundational ritual structure for Thang lha practices. The corpus spans over three centuries: from early *terma* revelations by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (14th c.), through ritual formalization by figures like the First Yol mo ba (15th c.), to later institutional systematizations such as that by the Fifth Dalai Lama (17th c.). This layered authorship illustrates the Byang gter's evolution from revealed liturgy to elaborated ritual exegesis, with Yol mo ba playing a pivotal role in transforming Thang lha's identities into a cohesive *sādhana* system, situating the deity's multifaceted roles within the dynamic historical framework of textual production and lineage adaptation.

*The antidote and executioner of vow-breakers and various demons*

Thang lha can treat vow-breakers in the most wrathful way. In Byang gter, he is described as the antidote (*gnyen po*) of samaya-damaging ones (no.12, 613:l.3); the life force taker (*srog bdud*) of all vow-polluters; the executioner (*gshed ma*) of all vow-breakers (no.12, 613:l.3); and the one suppressing pollutions (*grib*), *rgyal po* and '*gong po* demons, and vow-violators (no.12, 613:l.4). These similar identities all appear in the context of Thang lha's second meeting with Padmasambhava when he made the second vow. In that context, he appears as a wrathful white yak that kills vow-breakers and various hostile demons (no.1, 323: 1.3-324: 1.1):

Thang lha said, and continued to say: "O, great master Padmasambhava, the reason why this morning I came in a body of anger and rage, is that 1) I shall crush down the pollution of the life-cutting demons who have broken vows, 2) I am the killer of demons who have broken vows, and 3) I will crush down pollution and the inferior *gnyan* from lower class, and since 4) I am the antidote for the demons causing madness and the *rgyal 'gong* demons, as soon as I saw all of them [on my way here], anger spontaneously arose in me and I became angry and enraged! I acquire the luminosity of the butter-lamp's light shine [to destroy the demons] all at once!" He said this.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 323, 1.3-p. 324, 1.1. (323: 1.3): *zhes zhus so/ yang zhus pa/ kyee slob dpon chen po lags/ da nang gung gi snga dro bdag khro zhing gtum pa'i gzugs su byas*

In text no. 5, there is an invocation that praises Thang lha's identities as the punisher of vow-breakers, the subjugator of demons that cause madness, and the executioner of avenging enemies:

You are the god for all vow-holders, the killer for all vow-breakers, the subduer for all vow-polluters, the glory of all yogis, and the friend of supreme practitioners! To offer the fortune of your virtuous deeds, you should subdue the demons who cause madness and cut off the life of hate-filled enemies!<sup>6</sup>

As for Thang lha's identity as the watcher and executioner of all Buddhist vow takers, Nebesky-Wojkowitz offered a translated paragraph in *Oracles and Demons in Tibet*, but didn't point out the provenance of this paragraph:

According to the various religious tasks which gNyan chen thang lha is supposed to carry out he is addressed as the "lha of all the dam can" (also "lha of all the pious"), "executioner of all spirits who refuse to become *dharmapālāh*"; this passage might, however, also mean: "executioner of all monks who became unfaithful to their religious vows", "bdud of all oath breakers", "the one who let fall the stroke of fate destined by the karma", and "yul lha of dBus gtsang ru bzhi" (the territorial god of the four regions of Tibet).<sup>7</sup>

Although the source of this paragraph is not given, we can find similar information in the Byang gter text no.1 (no. 1, 323: l. 3–324: l. 1), and in no. 5 quoted above.

Thang lha's identity as the god of vow-keepers and executioner of vow-breakers is reminiscent of the ancient Āryan deity Varuna, who was described as the supreme sky god, the mystical ruler, and the universal king. Varuna was responsible for supervising men to fulfill their oaths by binding them with ropes in his hand. Varuna was known as the deity who "binds."<sup>8</sup>

---

*nas 'ong ba ni/ (l.4) bdag dam tshig nyams pa'i srog bdud/ dam tshig nyams pa'i gshed mal grib gyon ma rabs kyi gnyan gnon/ smyo 'dre rgyal 'gong gi gnyen po lags pas/ de rnams mthong ba dang rang bzhin gyis (324: l.1) bdag la zhe sdang skyes te gtum zhing khro bo lags so/ lan gcig mar me'i mdangs gsal zhus/ zhes zhus so.*

<sup>6</sup> Translated from no.5, p. 372, l.6-p. 373, l.1. (372: l.6): *dam can kun gyi lha/ dam med kun gyi gshed/ mna' zan kun gyi bdud/ rnal 'byor (373: l. 1) kun gyi dpal/ sgrub mchog bdag gi grogs/ phrin las skal phog pa/ smyo ba'i 'dre 'dul zhing/ sdang pa'i dgra srog gcod.*

<sup>7</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, p. 207

<sup>8</sup> Eliade 1996, p. 69.

*The ancestral male god and the protector of land and people*

Like text no. 12, in which Thang lha is the protector (*srung ma*) of the noble people with merits (no. 12, 613: l. 3), in text no. 1, when Thang lha explains why he is willing to cover and protect the Dharma King Khri Srong lde btsan, he gives four reasons, two of which are that he is the ancestral male god (*pho lha*) and friend (*grogs pa*) of men who have good karma and merits:

Because I am the *pho lha* for males who are not shameless and since the secret law of the king is great, we are connected through good karma and deeds. Because I am a friend to virtuous rulers, we are connected through our great united merits!<sup>9</sup>

Thang lha's identity as male god emphasizes his character as the deity of excellent males, as the word *pho* (male) suggests. *Pho lha* is an ancient term that refers to the ancestral deity or clan god in the patrilineal context. In Thang lha's case, as a *pho lha*, he protects excellent males. However, in broader contexts, *pho lha* as an ancestral god protects all community members who are his descendants.

In most cases, *pho lha* is identified as an ancestral deity or clan leader who has led clan members to settle in a specific area. The *pho lha* then often transformed into a *yul lha* (territorial god) dwelling on the mountain of the clan's land, with *pho lha*, *yul lha*, and mountain god often being considered synonymous. However, with the introduction of Buddhism, the *pho lha* acquired new identities such as *chos skyong* and *bstan srung*, becoming a protector of religion. For example, the divinity Pho lha lHa btsan sgang dmar transformed from *pho lha* to *yul lha* and then to *chos skyong*, as recounted by Hildegard Diemberger.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Guntram Hazod records the example of the *pho lha* of

<sup>9</sup> Translated from no. 1, p. 323, l. 2-1.3. (323: l.2): *bdag skye bo ngo tsha can gyi pho lha lags pas/ rgyal po gsang khrims che bas las dang spyod pas 'brel lo/ bdag sde pa bsod nams can gyi grogs la dga' (l. 3) bas/ che mnyam bsod nams kyis 'brel ba lags so/ zhes zhus so.*

<sup>10</sup> Diemberger 1998, pp. 44-55, tells the story of a mountain god called lHa btsan Sgang dmar, who is appearing as a horseman in red residing on a small peak close to Ding ri Glang skor in the area traditionally called La stod lho, and identified as a protecting territorial deity as well as an ancestral god. He is a protector for multiple beings: local communities, ancient lords of La stod lho, one of the kings of Gung thang born in Ding ri, the monastery of Shel dkar and the traditional military camp of Ding ri. The origin of lHa btsan Sgang dmar is as the ancestral deity of a clan and the protector of the lords of La stod, but with Buddhism's introduction in Tibet, he gradually became the protector of doctrine (*chos skyong*, *dharmapāla*) and the protector of monastery of Shel dkar. He is worshiped as *pho lha*, *yul lha* and *chos skyong*, but the offerings of blood-sacrifices that he received were the basis of a conflict between his identity as the *pho lha/ yul lha* and his Buddhist identity as a *chos skyong*.

Phoksumdo, where the ancestral clan leader's *pho lha* transformed into the *yul lha* of the locals.<sup>11</sup> The gender of a *pho lha* is not always male. Charles Ramble notes that in the village of Kag, in Mustang (Nepal), the *pho lha* is regarded as a female divinity on a high mountain, with a male spouse standing beside the water. This example contrasts with the better-known gendered roles of "male mountains" and "female bodies of water."<sup>12</sup>

In text no. 4, Thang lha's protection extends to various types of people and objects. Firstly, he is the "secret life force god" (*srog gi lha*) of dharma kings and also serves as their dharma protector (*chos skyong*). Secondly, he is the protector of the lives and possessions of ritual practitioners, as well as the people around them and their descendants. Thirdly, he is the protector of noble ranks, virtuous lineages and families, and the faithful. Fourthly, he is the protector of the gTsang region of Tibet. Lastly, Thang lha is the protector of ritual practitioners, kings with great power, and all lords:

Since there is the awesome commitment to worship the god as the secret life force god and as the dharma protector, the texts and letters should only be transmitted to others, even not in the direction of breathing, and should not be shown to many. Secrecy is essential. If you act accordingly, your life, possessions and retinue all will increase, and all your successors will receive covering and protection by this god. Finally, this god will cause you to attain the fruit of the supreme status of an unsurpassable *vidyādhara*. Since this god is the god of noble ranks, of lineages of good character, of great attributes, and of faithfulness, and especially since he is the god of the gTsang region, and particularly a god with great compassion, so you should worship him with the good grains of the torma consisting of the three white and three sweet, and you should avoid polluting and breaking of samayas. In the location where you worship him, you should not

<sup>11</sup> Hazod 1996, pp. 92-111, describes that in Phoksumdo (Northwestern Nepal), the local *yul lha gsol* ritual of Mtsho yul reveals the worship and memorialisation of their first clan leader (*pho lha*) who led the ancestors of the local community from Tibet to Phoksumdo; the *pho lha* of the first clan was then transformed into a *yul lha* in the later folk tales and his power expanded as he became the *yul lha* of all clans.

<sup>12</sup> Ramble 1996, p 150: "Numerous authors have drawn attention to the association that is found in Tibet (as indeed in a number of other cultures) between male mountains and female bodies of water—usually lakes, but also rivers. Tibetan geographical literature itself makes frequent reference to such combinations. Te's triad conforms agreeably to this model. The three divinities of Kag do not. First, Pho lha is regarded (at least, by the people whom I questioned on the matter) as being a female divinity; Jo bo Chos rgyal, in spite of the fact that he stands near the water, is male. The Pho lha sde lnga is their offspring".

propitiate other worldly gods of the dark side as your *pho lha*. Particularly, in the time of degeneration, if people worship the protector of ritual practitioners, of the king with great power, and of all lords, then the practitioners will all be auspicious and endowed with great power.<sup>13</sup>

In no. 4, the text warns ritual performers that “In the location where you worship him, you should not propitiate other worldly gods of the dark side as your *pho lha*.” In text no. 1, Padmasambhava asks Thang lha why he covers and befriends the Dharma King Khri Srong lde btsan, and Thang lha provides four reasons, one of which is “Because I am the *pho lha* of the males who are not shameless, and since the secret law of the king is great, so we are connected through good karma and deeds” (no. 1, 323: l. 2). Therefore, we can see that Thang lha himself is a sacred *pho lha* who protects marvelous men.

Hence, out of respect for Thang lha, the performers of the ritual should not worship the worldly gods from the dark side as their *pho lha*, as it would contaminate Thang lha. This requirement in the ritual regarding the *pho lha* reflects the Tibetan concept of purity.

#### *Wealth God, Guardian of Property*

Thang lha is also portrayed as the guardian of property, a wealth god (*nor lha*). This can be seen in text no. 12. In its invocation, the prayer to Thang lha is:

I am the one who fulfill my part of the [sacred] contract that binds us: please perform the deeds that I entrust to you! Through these offerings and rituals of expiation, please protect and defend me and other patrons of sacred places! I ask you to accomplish the Buddha activity you promised, and protect those who practice and who teach. *Bswo, bswo! lHa rgyal lo!* By virtue of offering yak and sheep, please avoid our losing of property (*nor la god kha med pa*), and act as the owner of horses on the upper land, as the owner of sheep on the lower land, and as the owner of yaks and oxen!

<sup>13</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 366, l. 3-1. 6. (366: l. 3): *shin tu gab sbas gsang te/ gsang srog gi lha dang chos skyong du brten pa dam tshig lag(s) pas/ rang las gzhan du dpe dang yi ger lung (rlung) phyogs tsam du'ang mi bstan/ sba ba gnad/ de yis tshe dang [l. 4] longs spyod 'khor g.yog rnam s rgyas pa dang/ tshe rabs kun du 'go zhing skyobs la/ tha ma bla na med pa'i rig 'dzin gyi 'bras bu la sbyor bar mdzad do/ 'di ni rigs mtho/ gzhung bzang/ rtags mtshan che/ [l. 5] snying nye/ khyad par gtsang ris kyi lha/ lhag par rnying rje dang ldan pa zhig yin pas/ gtor ma dkar gsum mngar gsum 'bras bu bzang po la brten zhing/ grib dang dam sel la 'dzems/ 'di brten pa'i sar [l.6] nag phyogs kyi lha 'dre gzhan pho lhar mi brten/ khyad par snying (snyigs) dus kyi sgrubs pa po dang/ rgyal po stobs dang ldan pa dang/ rje dpon rnam s kyi srungs mar brten na/ kun las bkra shis shing mthu rtsal che ste.*

For property, please bring increase in wealth; please perform spontaneously-appearing virtuous deeds! *Bswo, bswo! lHa rgyal lo!*<sup>14</sup>

*Territorial God of dBus gtsang ru bzhi*

The identity of Thang lha mentioned in text no. 12 as “the territorial god of the four regions of Tibet” (*dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i yul lha*) (no. 12, 613: l. 3) is an identity that comes up frequently in Byang gter texts. In text no. 1, when Thang lha explains why he covers and protects Khri Srong lde btsan, the first reason he gives is that he is the territorial god (*yul lha*) of the four regions of central Tibet:

Because I am the territorial god for the four regions of Tibet and since King Khri Srong lde btsan is the king of Tibet, we are connected by our great united force.<sup>15</sup>

Thang lha's *yul lha* status is praised in the invocation text of no.5:

Bear your commitment in mind in the future; it is time for you to act—you are the ruler of the obstructive demons. Perform the virtuous deeds that have been apportioned to you. You are the territorial god of the four regions of Tibet! You are the body god of Khri Srong lde btsan, the divine son, the protector of the Dharma!<sup>16</sup>

In the requests made to Thang lha in texts no. 3 and no. 9, the god is asked to perform his deeds as the *yul lha* of the four regions of Tibet:

He protects the subjects of the dharma king as if protecting his own children, he performs deeds as the territorial god of the four regions of Tibet, and he is the war god of all leaders. I praise you,

<sup>14</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 639, pp. l. 2-l. 4. (639: l. 2): *khyed kyi thugs dam bdag gis bskang/ bdag gis bcol ba'i 'phrin las mdzod/ de ltar mchod cing bskang ba yis/ bdag sogs dgon gnas rgyu sbyor gyi/ mgon skyabs dpung gnyen khyed kyi mdzod/[l. 3] bcol pa'i 'phrin las bsgrub pa dang/ bsgrubs shing bstan pa bsrung du gsol/ bswo bswo lha rgyal lo/ g.yag lug phul bas yon tan gyis/ nor la god kha med pa dang/ gling stod rta ra'i bdag po [l.4] mdzod | | | gling smad lug ra'i bdag po mdzod/ g.yag dang mdzo yi bdag po mdzod/ nor la 'phel kha khyed kyi thongs/ ci bsam 'grub pa'i 'phrin las mdzod/ bswo bswo lha rgyal lo.*

<sup>15</sup> Translated from no.1, p. 323, p. l.1. (323: l.1): *bdag dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i yul lha lags pas/ rgyal po khri srong lde'u btsan bod kyi rgal po lags te/ che mnyam dpung gis 'brel lo.*

<sup>16</sup> Translated from no.5, p. 373, p. l.3. (373: l.3): *dam tshig rje su dran par gyis/ las la babs so bgegs kyi rgyal/ bcol ba'i 'phrin las bsgrub par mdzod/ dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i yul lha khyod/ chos skyong rgyal po lha yi sras/ khri srong lde'u btsan sku lha yin.*

rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, who are the lord of all great gods!<sup>17</sup>

In the exhortation section of text no. 11, Thang lha's identity as "great territorial god" (*yul lha chen po*) is addressed:

*Hūṃ, hūṃ, hūṃ!* In your dwelling place of 'Dam shod, you stand as Ya zhur gnyan po! By the power of the sacred lake's companionship, you stand as gNyan chen thang lha! On the peak of your awesome white rock, you stand up as the king of *gāndharva*! On the peak of your high snowy mountain, you stand as the great territorial god! Among the clouds and fogs, you stand up as The One with Five Topknots! You stand as the tamer of hostile enemies! You stand as the destroyer of *yakṣās*! You stand as the destroyer of gods that cause madness! You stand up as the magical displays! Your magical display is a divine white yak...<sup>18</sup>

Many scholars, such as Rolf Stein, Toni Huber, George Combe, and Samten Karmay agree that the *yul lha* is identical with the mountain divinity of a sacred mountain.<sup>19</sup> We shall review some earlier scholars' explanations about the terminologies such as *yul lha*, and *gzhi bdag*. For example, Pascale Dollfus notes:

*Yul lha* signifies literally 'god of the land,' in the various meanings subsumed under this term 'land' in European languages: nation-state, province, region or village, and territory inhabited by a collectivity and constituting a defined geographic reality.<sup>20</sup>

Writing at an earlier time, George A. Combe points out that mountain spirits are called *yul lha*, while the bad *yul lha* are called *gzhi bdag*, and

<sup>17</sup> Translated from no.3, p. 344, p. 1. 4: *chos rgyal mnga' ris bu bzhin skyongs/ dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i yul lha mdzod/ rje dpon yongs kyi dgra lhar gyur/ rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal la bstod/ lha chen yongs kyi rje bo bstod*, and no.9, p. 557, l. 3: *chos rgyal mnga' ris bu bzhin skyongs/ dbus gtsang ru bzhi'i yul lha mdzod/ rje dpon yongs kyi dgra lhar 'gyur/ rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal la bstod/ lha chen yongs kyi rje bor bstod*.

<sup>18</sup> Translated from no.11, p. 590, pp. 1.1-1.4: *hūṃ hūṃ hūṃ / bzhugs yul (1.2) bdam shod snar mo nas/ ya zhur gnyen (gnyan) po sku bzhengs shig/ bla mtsho 'khyil ba'i nang shed nas/ gnyan chen thang lha sku bzhengs shig/ brag dkar gnyen (gnyan) po'i rtse mo nas/ dri za'i rgyal po sku=/ gangs dkar mihon (1.3) po'i rtse mo nas/ yul lha chen po=/ sprin dang na bun gseb shod nas/ zur phud lnga pa=/ sdang ba'i dgra 'dul sku=/ gnod pa'i bgegs 'dul sku=/ smyo bas 'dre 'dul sku=/ sprul pa'i tshul du sku=/ sprul pa 'jig pa'i lus (1.4) po de/ lha g.yag dkar po zhig.*

<sup>19</sup> Dollfus 1996, pp. 3-4. Pascale Dollfus illustrates this idea and reviews different scholars' identification of *yul lha* and *gzhi bdag* and their relationship with mountain gods and divine mountains.

<sup>20</sup> Dollfus 1996, p. 4.

the good *yul lha* are called *gnas* or *gnas ri*.<sup>21</sup> After that, Rolf Stein identifies that the *yul lha* is the “god of the land,” and the sacred mountains are usually “the god of land” (*yul lha*) or “the master of location” (*gzhi bdag, sa bdag*):

The sacred mountains are the gods of the land (*yul lha*) or the masters of the location (*gzhi bdag, sa bdag*). (...) They are so intimately linked to the founder of the clan lineage that they are venerated under the name of ancestor (*a myes*). (...) Each community inhabiting a given site thus identifies itself with its ancestor and its sacred place.<sup>22</sup>

Samten Karmay also says that in Tibetan popular traditions, mountain deities are known as “owner of the base” (*gzhi bdag*) or “deity of the local territory” (*yul lha*)<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, it is clear that in Tibetan tradition, there is a close relationship between the mountain god/sacred mountain and the territorial god (*yul lha*), with both often being considered the same entity. In the case of gNyan chen thang lha, he is referred to as the *yul lha* of the four regions of Tibet and also as a mountain god, taking the form of a snow mountain located next to the gNam mtsho lake.

#### *One nature/body and six names*

Text no. 12 states that Thang lha is renowned for having “one nature and six names.” We can find this exact title, *don gcig la mtshan drug*, in no. 12 (613: 1.4), and a variant with the same meaning, *sku gcig la mtshan drug* (“one body and six names”), in no. 16 (675: 1. 3) and no. 7 (534: 1. 3).

In text no. 12, after a passage that describes the one nature (*ngo bo*) and the six names (*mtshan drug*) of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, it is stated that Thang lha is renowned for having one nature and six names:

In essence, he is a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha. He is the chief of the gods of pure lineage, the god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal. As such (the manifestation of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal), Thang lha has six names: 1) Oath-bound White Scepter; 2) White Sky God; 3) Sky God Bodhisattva; 4) Brahman

<sup>21</sup> Combe 1975, pp. 56-57.

<sup>22</sup> “Les montagnes sacrées sont les dieux du pays (*yul lha*) ou les maîtres du lieu (*gzhi bdag, sa bdag*). (...) Elles sont si intimement liées à l’initiateur de la lignée du clan qu’on les vénère sous le nom d’aïeul (*a myes*). (...) Chaque communauté habitant un site donné se reconnaît ainsi dans son ancêtre et dans son lieu saint.” Stein 1981, pp. 177-185.

<sup>23</sup> Karmay 1996, p. 59.

king with Conch-Shell Colored Topknots; 5) King of Gāndharvas with Five Topknots; 6) and Viṣṇu, king of the Lake gNam mtsho.<sup>24</sup>

This paragraph is also present in text no. 16 (668: l. 2-1. 4) and appears after a description of Thang lha's one nature and six names. However, that text declares (675: l. 3) that Thang lha has "one body and six names" (*sku gcig la mtshan drug*) instead of "one nature and six names" (*don gcig la mtshan drug*). Similarly, text no. 7 describes Thang lha as the incarnation of Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha and lists his six names. It then directly concludes that this characterizes Thang lha as having "one body and six names," just as in text no. 16:

He is Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha and is renowned as having one body and six names: 1) Oath-bound White Scepter who is the antidote of all noxious spirits, gods, spirits, and hateful beings; 2) White Sky God; 3) Sky god Bodhisattva; 4) Brahman king with Conch-Shell Colored Topknots; 5) King of Gāndharvas with Five Topknots; 6) and Viṣṇu, king of Lake gNam mtsho.<sup>25</sup>

From above, we see that *don* ("nature") and *sku* ("body") both signify that Thang lha is the incarnation of Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha. *The Guardian Deities of Tibet* by Ladrang Kalsang states that "The deity known as gNyan chen Thang lha, one of the Nine Gods of the World (*srid pa chags pa'i lha dgu*), is said to be a wrathful manifestation of Bodhisattva Namkha Nyingpo".<sup>26</sup> Although this book does not point out the origin of this identification, it is likely to be from the Byang gter sources under consideration here.

Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha is a realized being, and Thang lha's identification with this realized being is evidence that in the Nyingma rNying ma tradition, Thang lha was considered a divine deity with a natural transcendental identity rather than solely a wild deity subdued by Padmasambhava and artificially transformed into a Buddhist protector.

In the beginning of text no. 4, the introduction narrates that, during

<sup>24</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 603, l. 3-1. 4: *ngo bo byang chub sems dpa' nam mkha'i snying po'i rnam par sprul pa tshangs ris kyi lha'i gtso bo mtshan drug rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal lam/ dam can shel geng dkar po/ lha gnam the dkar po/ gnam lha byang chub (l.4) sems dpa'/ tshangs pa'i rgyal po dung gi thor tshugs can/ dri za zur phud lnga pa/ khyab 'jug gnam mtsho'i rgyal po zhes bya bas rung ma chen mo/ lha chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog.*

<sup>25</sup> Translated from no. 7, 534, l. 1-1. 3: *byang chub sems dpa' nam mkha'i snying po yin pa la rgyal bsen sogs lha srin ma rungs pa rnams kyi gnyen pos dam can shel gong dkar po/ lha gnam the dkar po/ gnam lha byang chub sems dpa'/ tshangs pa'i rgyal po dung gi thor tshugs can/ dri za zur phud lnga pa/ khyab 'jug gnam mtsho'i rgyal po ste.*

<sup>26</sup> Kalsang 2007, p. 92.

the time of degeneration, the King of gods Pe dkar brought diseases and troubles to Tibet. To alleviate these problems, Padmasambhava introduced the *sādhana* cycle of the great god Thang lha. This text then goes on to describe the god's one nature and six names:

In this regard, the emanation of Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha is called 1) Oath-bound White Scepter; 2) White Sky God; 3) Sky God Bodhisattva; 4) Brahman King with Conch-Shell Colored Topknots; 5) King of Gāndharvas with Five Topknots; 6) and Viṣṇu, King of Lake gNam mtsho. By the attributes of this deity's names, dwelling places, and many emanations, the Buddha's teachings are protected.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the portrayal of *rgyal po* Pe har / Pe dkar as a malevolent force subjugated by Thang lha invites broader consideration of the ambiguous status of Pe har / Pe dkar within the Byang gter tradition. While later rNying ma systems—particularly those influenced by the Fifth Dalai Lama—often integrated Pe har as a protector, the Byang gter texts examined here consistently depict Pe har as a source of disease and disorder requiring ritual suppression. This divergence may reflect deeper doctrinal or sociological fault lines within Tibetan religious history: whereas Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1136-1204)'s earlier *gter ma* traditions accommodated Pe har as a legitimate though dangerous protector, the Byang gter cycle systematized by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem appears more cautious, aligning with certain conservative Buddhist critiques and even Bon perspectives that view *rgyal po* spirits as deceptive or harmful. Such a perspective is further corroborated by later Byang gter authorities such as 'Khor gdong gter chen (Nus ldan rdo rje 'gro phan gling pa, b. 1802), who maintained a critical stance toward Pe har worship.

This tension underscores that the “Buddhicization” of local deities was neither uniform nor teleological; rather, it was a dynamic process contingent upon lineage-specific interpretations, ritual pragmatics, and broader socio-religious negotiations over orthodoxy and authority, often involving complex interactions with Bon traditions. As demonstrated by Christopher Bell in his analysis of the Nechung Oracle, the institutionalization of protector deities like Pe har was far from a mere phenomenon of religious assimilation but rather a highly politicized act of construction. Bell argues that figures such as the Fifth

<sup>27</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 348, l. 2-1. 3: *de yang byang chub sems dpa' nam mkha'i snying po'i rnam par 'phrul pa dam can shel ging dkar mo'i/ gnam the dkar po'o/ gnam lha byang chub sems dpa'/ tshangs pa'i rgyal po dung gi thor tshugs (l.3) can nam/ dri za zur phud lnga pa'am/ khyab 'jug gnam mtsho'i rgyal po sogs/ ming dang brten gnas dang/ sku du mar sprul nas sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa skyong zhing.*

Dalai Lama instrumentalized these entities for consolidating power and ideological integration, consciously transforming their potentially dangerous characteristics into a controlled force within official frameworks. However, as Bell astutely observes, this process of institutionalization did not eliminate profound disagreements among different sects and groups regarding the nature of “protector deities.” Even within the Gelug school, worship of Pe har and oracles like gNas chung was accompanied by doubts and debates, with some viewing them as transcendent wisdom protectors and others insisting on their mundane and dangerous nature, manageable only through ritual restraint. This tension finds resonance beyond the Gelug sect, echoing the critical stance of the Byang gter tradition and the Bon classification of Pe har as a deceptive spirit<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, Bell’s research underscores that the diverse manifestations of Tibetan protector deity beliefs—including their rejection or cautious acceptance in certain traditions—often mirror deeper currents of doctrinal competition, political strategizing, and social memory. The so-called “Buddhicization” was not a monolithic or linear progression but a continually negotiated outcome, shaped by various actors—monastic institutions, political leaders, treasure revealers—within specific historical contexts, based on their respective authority claims, ritual transmissions, and social visions.

### *Different body manifestations*

In text no.12, Thang lha is “renowned for one body and nine manifestations” (*sku gcig la rnam 'gyur dgu*, no.12, 613: 1.4). In Byang gter texts, there are multiple descriptions of Thang lha’s human manifestations. They can be grouped into three general categories, within which there is a variety of minute differences.

#### *1. The peaceful white man with five topknots*

When Thang lha appears as a peaceful or respectful image, he is depicted as a young white man with five topknots, known as the king of Gāndharvas (*dri za'i rgyal po*) Zur phud lnga pa. In text no.1, Thang lha first appears as a white yak in front of Padmasambhava and Khri Srong lde btsan, but after meeting them, he transforms into a humble young man with five topknots, making prostrations to the master and the king and displaying his peaceful and respectful nature:

---

<sup>28</sup> Bell, 2021, 2020,

This white yak saw Dharma king Khri Srong lde btsan, and he transformed from the magical emanation of a white yak into a man with a handsome face, white like the color of a conch shell, and the head decorated with five turquoise-blue topknots. Having transformed into this form, he paid homage and prostrated to the king.<sup>29</sup>

In text no.3, there is a section dedicated to performing a benediction (*mnga gsol*) for Thang lha's five topknots and its ornaments:

To the ornament of your topknots, this is the benediction! The top of your head is high with long hair bound with five topknots, as smooth as bee nectar, and the auspicious pattern on the five topknots is very variegated. For the stainless white silk on your head, this is the benediction!<sup>30</sup>

The libation text no. 8 states that the god Thang lha is the king of Gāndharvas who has five topknots on the head and is followed by an entourage of 360:

In brief, I pray that all four auspicious deeds may be spontaneously achieved! Dri za'i rgyal po who has five topknots on the head and is the god Thang lha, together with your entourage of 360, please come and receive this offering tormā! Please receive the sacred item which is the nectar tormā!<sup>31</sup>

In text no. 11, Thang lha is depicted as the king of Gāndharvas with the topknots of wisdom:

I praise the manifestation of the king of Gāndharvas who stands in the country surrounded by eight divine mountains, within the palace decorated with precious jewels, above a lotus, sun and moon and with the nine moods of dance. By the moonbeam melting on the crystal Mt. Meru, you clasp the arrogant gods with

<sup>29</sup> Translated from no. 1, p. 322, l. 2-1. 3: *chos skyong ba'i rgyal po khri srong lde btsan mthong ba dang g.yag dkar po rdzus pa'i rdzu 'phrul bshig (nas)/ skyes bu bzhin bzang dkar po dung gi mdog can/ g.yu'i zur phud lnga 'is brgyan pa zhis tu byas nas/ rgyal po la zhe sa dang phyag phul lo.*

<sup>30</sup> Translated from no.6, p. 526, l.1-1.2: *rgyal ba'i rab sngags g.yas su 'khyil ba'i dung/ /thor tshugs mdzes pa'i rgyan du mnga'/ rtse mor zur phud lngar bcings ral pa'i khyon/ bung bas tang zil mig sman ltar snum pa'i/ /rtsa chings bkra shis ri mos rnam bkra ba'i/ /dar dkar dri med lwa bas mnga'.*

<sup>31</sup> Translated from no. 8, p. 546, l. 3-547: l. 1: *mdor na 'phrin las rnam bzhi lhun gyis grub par mdzad du gsol/ dri za'i rgyal po zur phud lnga pa can/ thang lha mched 'khor sum brgya drug cur bcas/ 'dir gshegs mdos kyi mchod gtor 'di bzhes shig/ dam rdzas (547) bdud rtsi'i gtor ma 'dis bzhes shig.*

your body and deprive them [of their belongings]. Your hair of wisdom has topknots; I praise your honor and duty as the wish-fulfilling king.<sup>32</sup>

In text no. 4, Thang lha appears as a young man with five topknots said to be the image of the great god [rDo rje] gZhon nu:

Furthermore, if you, the practitioner, wish to expand your political power and your lineage, you should visualize yourself in the form of the great god gZhon nu who has five topknots on his head, with in front his consort, the queen gNam mtsho rDo rje g.yu sgron ma. She is adorned with gold and turquoises. She wears a big beautiful silken cloth, and is surrounded by hundreds of thousands of beautiful ladies. Imagine that from yourself, white and red bodhicitta light rays radiate, like a crystal rosary. Think that by melting into the consort's [secret] place, they provide an experience of bliss, and you obtain it yourself.<sup>33</sup>

*2. The reddish-yellow blazing man wearing  
a black snake and tiger skin*

In text no. 4, Thang lha as rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal is described as a reddish-yellow man sitting in the midst of fire, holding a sword and a golden wheel, and wearing a black snake and tiger skin:<sup>34</sup>

If you want your fame to pervade the ten directions and to accomplish the four activities without exception, you should visualize yourself as the manifestation of Padma Heruka. In front is the great god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, who takes the form of the great Brahman king with conch-shell topknots on his head. He is reddish-yellow, with three eyes, teeth bared, a goatee and thick eyebrows, and the body blazing. His hair is vermilion colored,

<sup>32</sup> Translated from no. 11, p. 584, l. 2-1. 3: *lha brgyad gangs ri'i phreng bas bskor ba'i ljongs/ rin chen rgyan gyis mdzes pa'i pho brang dbus/ padma nyi zla'i steng na gar dgu yi/ rnam rol dri za'i rgyal po khyod la bstod/ shel dkar zhun ma'i lhun po zla zer gyis/ 'khyud 'dra'i gzugs skus lha yi khengs pa 'phrog/ rnam dpyod dbu skra ral pa'i thor tshugs rtser/ yid bzhin dbang gi rgyal pos mtshan la bstod.*

<sup>33</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 355, l. 3-1. 5: *yang srid dang rigs brgyud 'phel bar 'dod na/ rang nyid lha chen gzhon nu zur phud lnga dang ldan pa'i mdun du/ yum gnam mtsho yi rgyal mo rdo rje g.yu sgron ma gser g.yu rin po che'i rgyan dang dar gos chen mdzes shing yid du 'ong ba/ sman btsun mdzes ma bye ba 'bum gyis bskor ba cig bsam la/ rang las byang chub kyi sems dkar la dmar ba'i 'od zer shel gyi 'phreng ba lta bur 'phros pas/ yum gyi gnas su thim pas bde ba'i nyams dang ldan pa de rang gis gzung bar bsam la.*

<sup>34</sup> In terms of the four activities (*zhi rgyas dbang drag*), this reddish-yellow blazing male form of Thang lha refers to his "dbang" aspect, which is meant at magnetizing and increasing one's power and fame, rather than at "destroying" harmful enemies (the *drag* aspect).

decorated by white topknots on top of his head. The topknots are adorned by three white conch-shells curling to the right and ornamented with shining wish-fulfilling jewels. His right hand holds a sword of wisdom raised to the sky and his left waves a golden wheel with a thousand spokes pointing downward. He wears a full robe of purple silk and wears precious boots. He wears a shining necklace of lotus and jewels, decorated by a black snake and a tiger skin. His two feet stand immovably on top of the throne of lotus-sun-moon, enemies and obstacles. He has the shining brightness of hundreds of thousands of suns. He dwells in the space of the blazing fire of the world age, and as his retainers, there are the kings of pure lineages, the thirty chiefs of the haughty ones (*dregs pa*), and ten million of assemblies of *brtan ma* goddesses of the eight classes.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. *The crystal horseman sitting in the royal ease posture*

In several texts of the Byang gter tradition, the most common image of Thang lha is not the peaceful Zur phud lnga pa or the wrathful rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal, but a crystal-colored man riding a white horse and sitting in the posture of royal ease in the center of a crystal palace. In both text no. 3 and no. 9, rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal is described as dwelling in a crystal palace situated within an ocean of nectar and reaching the high sky, surrounded by sky gods and blue-green grass. The image of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal is that of a shining crystal man riding on a swan-white horse, with three eyes and bared teeth, wearing a topknot and a wish-fulfilling jewel on his head, and the syllable A at the center of a moon disk in his heart. He holds a vajra horse-whip and a crystal garland, wears a full robe, sits in the posture of royal ease, and is accompanied by an entourage of three-hundred sixty and hundreds of thousands of troops:

Then, you should give orders to the divinities to let them do the

<sup>35</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 357, l. 4-p. 358, l. 2: *snyan grags phyogs bcur khyab pa dang/ 'phrin las rnam bzhi ma lus pa sgrub par 'dod na/ rang nyid padma he ru kar gsal ba'i mdun du/ lha chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal/ tshangs pa'i rgyal po chen po dung gi thor tshugs can gyi ngo bo/ sku mdog dmar ser spyang gsum mche ba gtsigs pa ag tshom dang smin mag log stong 'bar ba/ dbu skra li khri'i mdog can thor tshugs can gyi rtse mor/ dung dkar po g.yas su 'khyil ba gsum tshoms kyi thor tshugs byas pa'i tog la nor bu 'bar bas mtshan pa/ phyag g.yas ye shes kyi ral gri 'bar ba nam mkhar 'phyar zhing/ g.yon pa gser gyi 'khor lo rtsibs stong thur du gdengs pa/ zab chen sngo dmar gyi (358) 'jol ber dang rin po che'i chil lhvam can/ pad+ma dang nor bu rin po che 'od 'bar ba du ma'i do shal dang/ sbrul nag dang stag lpags kyis brgyan pa/ zhabs gnyis padma nyi zla dgra bgegs kyi steng na drang tshugs su bzhangs pa/ nyi ma 'bum gyi gzi brjid can/ bskal me 'bar ba'i klong na bzhugs pa/ de'i 'khor du gtsang rigs kyi lha chen po rnam dang dregs pa'i sde dpon sum cu/ sde brgyad brtan ma'i tshogs bye ba mang po bsam zhing.*

work. So, in front of yourself, you should set an *accomplishment* *torma* and visualize it as a crystal palace brightly shining with its doors and turrets and with a great variety of precious things. The base [of the palace] is surrounded by a brimming ocean of nectar. On its waist is pitched a tent of rainbow light fog. On its peak is a shining precious rain produced by white clouds. On its ground is a blue-green land filled with blooming flowers. The eight sky gods surround it as snow mountains surrounding a crystal. In the center, on a seat of lotus, moon and sun, on top of a swan-white horse with a beautiful saddle decorated by various precious jewels, sits the great god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal. His body color is like a glorious crystal mountain. He smiles in a way that slightly bares his fangs. He has three shining eyes, and his topknots of hair are bound with a white silken scarf. His right hand holds a whip marked by a fived-pronged vajra raising upwards to the sky, and his left hand pulls a crystal rosary. He wears a large cloak of white, red and blue. Above his head is a wish-fulfilling jewel, with various precious jewels as decoration. His youthful body abides in the posture of royal ease. Around him is his entourage of three-hundred sixty, and hundreds of thousands of myriads as his army, which is arranged in four divisions and has frightening strength and looks heroic. Above and in the intermediate directions are the magically manifested conch-shell white falcons, male and female conch-shell wolves, and many wild yaks with thick fur, gliding and powerful. At the heart of the god, on a moon disc, is the syllable *Ā* surrounded by the mantra *om badzra thang ka ra mun nyid khu sha li swA hA* like a conch-like white garland of letters.<sup>36</sup>

Here, we can see that Thang lha is described as having an entourage

<sup>36</sup> Translated from no. 3, p. 341, l. 2-p. 342, l. 3; no. 9, p. 551, l. 3-p. 552, l. 6: *de nas lha las la 'khol ba yin nol de nas rang gi mdun du sgrub gtor shel gyi khang bzang rin po che sna tshogs kyi sgo lcogs 'od 'bar ba/ rtsa bar bdud rtsi'i rgya mtshor 'phyur ba/ sked par 'ja' 'od na bun gyi gur phub pa/ rtse mor sprin dkar rin po che'i zil char 'bebs pa/ sa gzhi ljang sngon la me tog sna tshogs rgyas pa/ 'khor yug tu gnam lha brgyad kyis gangs ris shel gyi mchod rten ltar bskor ba/ de'i dbus su nyi zla padma'i gdan la/ stobs ldan rta mchog ngang dkar rin po che'i sga rgyan du mas mdzes pa'i steng na/ lha chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog shel gyi ri bo ltar brjid pa/ zhal 'dzum zhing mche ba cung zad gtsig pa/ spyang gsum rab tu bkra ba/ dbu skra'i thor tshugs dar dkar pos bcings pa/ phyag g.yas rdo rje rtse lngas mthsan pa'i spa lcag nam mkha' la 'phyar ba/ g.yon pa shel dkar gyi phreng ba 'dren pa/ zab chen dkar dmar mthing gsum gyi ber gsol ba/ spyi bor nor bu 'bar ba'i tog dang/ rin po (342) che'i rgyan sna tshogs dang bcas pa/ sku gzhon zhing mdzes pa/ rgyal po rol pa'i cha lugs su bzhugs pa/ de'i 'khor yug du mched 'khor sum brgya drug cu/ dmag tshogs bye ba 'bum sde thams cad kyang dpung tshogs yan lag bzhi ba'i cha lugs su 'jigs shing dpa' ba/ steng dang phyogs mtshams kun nas/ sprul pa'i dung khra dkar po dang/ dung spyang pho mo dang/ 'brong g.yag zhol chen mang po lding zhing ngar ba/ de'i thugs kar zla ba'i dkyil 'khor gyi steng du ā dkar po'i mthar/ om badzra thang ka ra mun nyid khu sha li swA hA / zhes pa dung gi 'phreng ba lta bus bskor ba.*

of 360, which is not uncommon for deities in Tibetan religious texts. For example, the dharma protector rDo rje legs pa manifests with his 360 brothers, and the god Ge khod manifests with a retinue of 360 deities;<sup>37</sup> Tucci associates this number with the 360 days of the lunar year in astrology<sup>38</sup>.

This image of rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal seated in the posture of royal ease also appears in texts no. 12 and no. 16:

By calling his names proper, the great god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal appears. His body color is like the crystal mountain and his face like the white and shining moon, he smiles and slightly bares his fangs. His three eyes are extremely bright. His shining black hair topknots are tied with white silk, and on top of them, it is ornamented by jewels. His right hand holds an iron whip decorated by a five-pronged vajra raised up to the sky, and his left hand pulls a white crystal rosary towards his heart. He wears a big silk cloak of white, red and deep blue. Inside his cloak are two inner garments, and his waist is bound by many precious ornamented golden [belts], and the turquoise-blue jewel-stones of precious golden lotus decorates his head, his ears, and his neck. He is decorated with various ornaments like gold, necklace, garlands, and rings. His ears are adorned with *utpala* buds and his head wears a silk turban. His body is young and handsome. His two feet wear jeweled boots, and he sits in the posture of royal ease. To his left is his consort, the lady who arouses bliss and possesses pleasant radiance, the queen gNam mtsho, also called rDo rje g.yu sgron ma, whose body color is sky-blue. She has one face, two arms and two eyes. Her right hand holds a victory banner, her left hand holds a mirror. She has a topknot and the rest of her hair hangs down. She is the chief of the beautiful ladies with an attractive appearance, and she mounts a turquoise dragon that shows homage to her.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Karmay 2009, p. 404, about the purification of Ge khod's pollution (*ge khod mnol bsang*): "Line 60: May the three hundred and sixty emanations of Ge-khod be purified! May the gods of the family ancestors be purified! May the solemn gods of the masters be purified! May Ti-se, the white mountain of the soul, be purified! May Ma-pang, the blue lake of the soul, be purified!"

<sup>38</sup> Karmay 2009, p. 395; Tucci 1949, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Translated from no.12, p. 603, 1.4-604: 1.4: *lha chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog shel gyi ri bo la ston mtshan zla bas byugs pa ltar dkar la brjid pa/ zhal 'dzum zhing mche ba'i myu gu cung zad gtsigs pa/ spyan gsum rab tu bkra ba/ dbu skra gnag snum gyi thor tshugs dar dkar pos bcings pa'i rtse mor nor bu 'bar bas spras pa/ phyag g.yas rdo rje rtse lngas mtshan pa'i sba cag nam mkha' la 'phyar zhing g.yon shel dkar gyi phreng ba thugs ka'i thad du 'dren pa/ zab chen dkar dmar mthing gsum gyi rtse ber dang yug gyen gsol ba/(604) ber nang ma gnyis la rin po che sna tshogs kyis spud pa'i gser sked bcings shing/ rin po che'i gsar pad la g.yu'i phra gyis mdzes pa'i dbu rgyan/ snyan rgyan/ mgul rgyan/*

According to Robert Beer, the horse-whip decorated with a vajra on top held in Thang lha's right hand is a common symbol found among "many horse-mounted warriors or protective deities, such as Gesar, Vaiśravaṇa, and Nyenchen Thanglha. The horse-whip of these divinities is fashioned from gold (*gser kyi rta lcag*) and is usually crowned at the end of its staff with a jewel or vajra, from which emanate the long rope strands of the whip in the form of a curving rainbow".<sup>40</sup>

In text no. 5, Thang lha's posture of royal ease is called "resting in the attitude of meditation:"

What do you wear on your body? You wear white silk and white cotton clothes. What are you riding, if you are mounted? You ride a divine horse with white heels. You travel through the three worlds, and your white color is of a radiating brilliance. With your right hand you lift a whip that orders the seven *ma mo* to act. With your left hand you count the beads of a crystal rosary. You rest in the attitude of meditation! Which emanations are you sending forth? Hundreds of thousands of riders. Together with your servants and your train, come today to this place and carry out your work!<sup>41</sup>

This form of gNyan chen Thang lha was adopted in the dGe lugs tradition probably through the Fifth Dalai Lama's heritage. In the biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama, it is stated that Thang lha appeared to him in a vision as a smiling man mounted on a white horse.

#### 4. Thang lha's four body colors and four activities

In addition to the three general humanoid images above, the Byang

---

*gser gal/ se mo do/ do shal/ gdu bu sogs rgyan sna tshogs kyis brgyan pa/ snyan gong au+ta+pa+la'i chun po dang dar dpyang can/ sku gzhon zhing mdzes pa/ zhabs gnyis nor bu'i mchil lham gyon nas rgyal po rol pa'i 'dug stangs kyis bzhugs pa/ g.yon bde ba skyong ba'i dbang mo yid 'ong mdangs ldan gyi yum gnam mtsho'i rgyal mo rdo rje g.yu sgron ma sku mdog snogo bsangs zhal gcig phyag gnyis ma spyen gsum dang ldan pa/ g.yas rgyal mtshan dang g.yon me long 'dzin cing/ dbu skra thor tshugs lhag ma'i zar bu thur du 'phyar <'phyang> ba/ sman btsun mdzes ma yid du 'ong ba'i cha byad kyis gtso bo la 'dud pa'i rnam pa can g.yu 'brug bcibs pa. See also no.16, p. 668, 1.4-p. 669, 1.4.*

<sup>40</sup> Beer 1999, p. 303

<sup>41</sup> Translated from no.5, p. 372, 1.4-1.6: *sku la ci gsol na/ dar dkar ral ka gsol/ chibs su ci chibs na/ lha rta ngang pa cibs/ khams gsum kun tu rgyu/ mdog dkar 'od zer 'phro/ g.yas pa sba lcags 'phyar/ ma bdun las la 'gyed/ g.yon na shel phreng 'dren/ thugs dam dbyings su bzla/ sprul pa ci 'gyed/ na/ rta dmag 'bum sde 'gyed/ bran g.yog 'khor dang bcas/ 'dir byon 'phrin las mdzod.*

gter texts records that Thang lha has four different body colors and figures when performing the four activities: *zhi* (pacifying), *rgyas* (enriching), *dbang* (controlling), and *drag* (subjugating). These characteristics are described in texts no.12 (p. 605: l. 2-p. 607: l. 1) and no. 16 (p. 670: l. 1 -p. 671: l. 2).

*a) Thang lha's white form while performing pacifying activity:*

To the east is the divine immeasurable mansion made from white lapis with pagoda roof and precious squared courtyard surrounding it. Inside are innumerable medical flowers, grains and sprouts for destroying the hundred diseases. In the center, on a lotus and moon, is rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal who performs the pacifying activity, whose body is white. In his right hand he holds a medicinal tree at his heart, and in his left a pot filled with nectar above his knee. He sits in the cross-legged bodhisattva posture and is surrounded by hosts of yakṣas and wealth deities.<sup>42</sup>

*b) Thang lha's yellow form while performing enriching activities:*

To the south is an ornamented mansion made of pure gold from the Jambu river and various jewels, with a pagoda-like roof. The mansion is surrounded by a square yard made of jewels, within which are the seven royal possessions, the eight auspicious symbols, the mountain of jewels, the vanquishing treasure-mongoose, the wish-granting cow, the grain that needs no toil and so on, and a gathering of all the wealth of gods and humans. In the middle, on a throne made up of lotus, moon, and a red-yellow mongoose, is the yellow god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal performing enriching activities. He has one face and two arms. In his right hand, he holds a blazing jewel at the heart. In his left hand, he holds a small vessel above his knee. He sits in the cross-legged bodhisattva posture, surrounded by hosts of yakṣas and wealth deities.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 605, l. 2-1.4; no. 16, p. 670, l. 1-1. 3: *shar du be Du+rya dkar po las grub pa'i lha'i gzhal med khang rgya phibs can rin po che'i ra ba gru bzhi pas bskor ba'i nang du nad brgya 'joms pa'i sman gyi me tog lo 'bras myu gu grangs med pas yongs su gtams pa'i dbus su pad zla'i steng na zhi mdzad rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog dkar po g.yas sman gyi ljon shing thugs ka dang/ g.yon bdud rtsis gtams pa'i bum pa brla steng na 'dzin cing/ zhabs gnyis sems dpa'i skyil krung gis bzhugs pa sman lha drang srong gi tshogs kyis bskor ba.*

<sup>43</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 605, l. 4-p. 606, l. 1: *lhor 'dzam bu chu bo'i gser sbyangs la rin po che'i sna tshogs kyis spras pa'i khang bzang rgya phibs can/ rin po che'i ra ba gru bzhi pas 'khor yug tu bskor ba'i nang du rgyal srid sna bdun/ bkra shis rtags brgyad/ rin po che'i ri yongs 'dul sa rdol 'dod 'jo'i ba/ ma rmos pa'i lo tog sogs lha mi'i dpal 'byor phun sum tshogs pas yongs su gang ba'i dbus na pad zla dang nee'u <ne'u> le dmar ser gyi gdan*

c) *Thang lha's red form while performing overpowering activities:*

To the west is a lotus ruby mansion with the pagoda-like roof and surrounded by a yard with excellent vases filled with nectar of immortality and medical substances coming from lakes, springs, pools, fountains and essence-extraction. In the center, on a lotus and moon seat, is the deity rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal who performs overpowering activities. His body color is red, he has one face and two hands in meditative equipoise holding a long-life vase made up of ruby. He is adorned with precious ornaments in vajra shape. His sits with his legs in the vajra-posture and is surrounded by hosts of great gods, vidyadhara and sages.<sup>44</sup>

d) *Thang lha's black form while performing subjugating activities:*

To the north is a wrathful place with a blazing iron castle and a pagoda-like roof. It is surrounded by a yard inside which is a net linked by various weapons. In the center, on a seat made up of lotus, sun, and interlaced male and female hostile demons is the god rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal who performs wrathful activities. His body is black in color, he has angry eyes with red veins and bares his fangs. His orange hair lifts upwards. He is adorned by shining jewels and poisonous snakes. He wears a dark red cloak and, inside it, he wears gold on his neck. In his right hand, he holds a red spear, and in his left hand, he grasps an iron bow and arrow. Wearing Mongol boots, he rides a superior horse of a dark-yellow color as powerful as the wind. In the center of a fierce whirlwind of fire, he sits as a lord with the chiefs of haughty ones encircling him.<sup>45</sup>

---

*la rgyas byed kyi rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal ser po zhal gcig phyag gnyis pa/ g.yas nor bu 'bar ba'i thugs ka dang/ g.yon rin po che'i sgrom bu (606) pus steng na 'dzin pa/ zhabs sems dpa'i skyil mo krung gis bzhugs par gnod sbyin nor lha'i tshogs kyis bskor ba. See also no. 16, p. 670, l. 3-1. 4.*

<sup>44</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 606, l. 1-1. 4: *nub tu padma ra ga'i khang bzang rgya phibs can khor yug dang bcas pa'i ra bar 'chi med bdud rtsis gtams pa'i bum bzang/ mtsho rdzing/ lteng ka/ lu ma/ chu mig dang bcud len snying por gyur pa'i rdzas sman gyis yongs su khyab pa'i dbus na pad zla'i gdan la dbang gi lha rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog dmar po zhal gcig phyag gnyis mnyam bzhag gi steng na padma ra ga'i tshe bum 'dzin pa/ rin po che'i rgyan rdo rje'i dbyibs can/ zhabs rdo rje skyil krung gi bzhugs pa che'i lha dang rig 'dzin drang srong gi tshogs kyis bskor. See also no. 16, p. 670, l. 4-1. 6.*

<sup>45</sup> Translated from no. 12, p. 606, l. 4-p. 607, l. 1: *byang du drag po gnas lcags 'bar ba'i mkhar steng du rgya phibs dang khor yug ra bas bskor ba'i nang mtshon cha sna tshogs kyi dra bas sbrel ba'i dbus su pad ma nyi ma dgra bgegs pho mo bsnol ba'i gdan la ka+rma las kyi khro bo rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal sku mdog nag la khros pa mig rtsa dmar zhing mche ba gtsigs pa/ ral pa dmar ser gyen du brjis shing rin po che'i rgyan rnam dang dug sbrul gyis brgyan pa rtse ber dmar nag brtsigs pa'i nang ma gser sked can g.yas mdung dmar dang*

5. *Animal manifestations of Thang lha while taming rgyal po Pe dkar*

Thang lha is not limited to humanoid manifestations, but also takes the form of divine animals. These include the white yak, which is his most frequent form, as well as the conch-shell falcon, the black scorpion, the white snake, and the nine-headed garuḍa. These animal forms correspond to Thang lha's various titles and identities.

Text no. 4 recounts a story to the effect that in the time of degeneration (*snyigs ma'i dus su*) the *rgyal po* Pe dkar brought and sustained all diseases and the illness of the eight classes of demi-gods. To combat this, Padmasambhava revealed this *sādhana* cycle (*sgrub skor*) of Thang lha, and concealed it as the text of the protector of the copper treasury (*zangs mdzod dbang gi srung mar sbas*). The ritual practitioner should receive the authorization (*rjes gnang*)<sup>46</sup> and perform the ritual of approaching (*gong bsnyen*)<sup>47</sup> in front of the magical manifestation of Thang lha (no. 4, 348: l. 3-p. 349: l. 4). After this accomplishment comes the session of subjugating the eight classes of demi-gods, the gods that cause madness, and the *rgyal po* gods. In the following sections, the text describes how the practitioner should imagine himself as the three animal manifestations of Thang lha: the white yak, the conch-shell falcon, and the black scorpion. The three visualization methods are the antidotes for taming the *rgyal po* spirit Pe dkar (no. 4, p. 351: l. 2).

a) *The wild white yak*

First, in order to tame Pe dkar, in text no. 2-4, the practitioner visualizes himself as the most representative and frequent image of Thang lha, the wild white yak:

Then, as for subjugating the eight classes of [gods and

---

*g.yon lcags kyi mda' gzhu 'dzin pa rin po che'i hor lham gyon nas rta mchog bra nag rlung shugs can la bcibs shing me rlung 'khrug pa'i klong na bzhuks par mnga' (607) bdag dregs pa'i sde dpon rnams kyis bskor ba. See also no. 16, p. 670, l. 6-p. 671, l. 2.*

<sup>46</sup> A *rjes sgnang* is an authorization of practice or empowerment normally given as an appendix after (*rjes*) the main empowerment (*dbang*). In this context, that would be the empowerment of the form of Hayagrīva that is central to the *rTen 'brel chos bdun*, of which the gNyan chen Thang lha cycle is regarded as a section in modern editions.

<sup>47</sup> In this context, the ritual mainly consists of reciting a given number of the deity's mantras. More broadly, *bsnyen pa* (approaching) and *sgrub pa* (accomplishing) are the two primary stages of tantric practice. The approaching ritual is the preliminary stage focused on fostering proximity to the deity through recitation, offerings, and visualization to receive blessings and attain initial attainments (*siddhi*).

demons], the gods that cause madness and the *rgyal po* gods, assume the identity of the great god [Thang lha], and visualize your form as a wild white yak whose size is that of a mountain, with two horns like sharp fir trees rising up. The vapor of your breathing is like the mist, and your roaring is like the thundering of a dragon. The thunder is like a blazing flame, which terrifies the king who is the Lord of Property [*dkor bdag rgyal po*, that is, Pe dkar], who is like a little gray man, or a monkey, or a very thin little child trampled upon. The deity crushes this figure, making his inside organs burst out to show a red color. When licked by his tongue, his skin and flesh are completely separated, his bones are exposed pure white, and in the end he is completely scorched. *Om̐ āḥ hūm̐ hrīḥ badzra 'bar ba rtsal vignan rajā maraya phaḥ!* Recite this. Furthermore, you should perform this visualization wherever his representation or abode may be. Moreover, if a demon has caused harm to sick people, if you do perform this visualization you will unquestionably destroy the demon.<sup>48</sup>

Here, this image of the white wild yak is similar to Thang lha's white yak avatar in text no. 1, but more specifically, this white yak taming Pe dkar stomps on little people and scoops out their guts, symbolizing the destruction of the demonic followers of Pe dkar.

The ritual taming of Pe dkar is also described in text no. 14. When he is being exhorted to action, Thang lha should be visualized as three animals, starting with the white yak:

In essence it is the great god Thang lha with the aspect of the wild yak with white long, thick fur. His body is like the highest mountain, his two horns like two sharp trees rising up, his breath like the cloudy mist, and his sound like thunder rumbling. Thunder and lightning are like a burning flame, causing fear and trepidation.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 349, l. 4-p. 350, l. 4: *de nas sde brgyad dang smyo 'dre rgyal po 'dul ba ni/ rang (350) nyid lha chen gyi ngo bo la/ rnam pa 'brong g.yag zhol chen dkar po ri bo tsam pa/ rwa gnyis thang shing rgyangs pa tsam rno ba/ kha rlangs na bum ltar 'thibs shing ngur sgra 'brug ltar sgrog pa/ gnam lcags kyi tshel po me ltar 'bar bam thong ba 'jigs pa gcig gi dkar bdag rgyal po de/ mi rang skya bo 'am/ spre'u 'am/ bu chung gi rnam pa shin tu rid pa gcig 'dug pa/ de'i steng du 'khrab kyin brdzis pa/ nang khrol thams cad phyir dmar rdzir rdzir 'don cing/ lce glog dmar lta bu des ldag pas sha lpags kun zul zul zhu nas rus pa dkar lhag lhag byung zhing/ mthar gzhob thul thul tshig par bsam zhing/ om̐ āḥ hūm̐ hrīḥ / badzra 'bar ba rtsal bi gnan rad zā ma ra ya phaḥ/ zhes pa bzlas la/ yang na kho rang gi rten dang gnas yod par de bzhin sgom/ nad pa la gnod na yang gong bzhin byas pas nges par thul lo.*

<sup>49</sup> Translated from no. 14, p. 657, l. 1-1. 2: *lha chen thang lha'i ngo bo la/ rnam pa 'brong g.yag zhol chen dkar | lus ni ri rab rwa gnyis ni/ thang shing brgyang tsam shin tu rno/ kha rlang na bun ltar 'thib cing/ ngur sgra 'brug ltar sgrog pa/ gnam lcags 'chol po me*

The image of a white yak to represent a mountain god is quite widespread in Tibetan folk tales, such as the story of the famous mountain deities of Ti se and Sham po: “Ge khod, the mountain deity of Ti se in the Bonpo tradition, is said to have come to earth in the form of a wild white yak which then dissolved itself into the mountain”<sup>50</sup>. “Yar lha Sham po in the form of a great white yak as big as a mountain tried to block the way of the Indian master (Padmasambhava)”<sup>51</sup>.

*b) The conch-shell falcon*

In text no. 4, the visualization procedure involves imagining oneself as another incarnation of Thang lha, the conch-shell falcon (*dung khra dkar po*), while imagining the *rgyal po* god Pe dkar as a small white bird. The visualization involves the falcon capturing and eating the bird:

Furthermore, you meditate yourself as being in essence the great god with the aspect of a white conch-shell falcon gliding in space, hunting for food while flying in the spacious sky. The *rgyal po* Pe dkar is a white little bird like a pigeon. The falcon grasps it with its claw, plucks his feathers, blinds it and eats it. Recite the mantra as before, and the demon will certainly be subjugated.<sup>52</sup>

In text no.14, the second animal representing Thang lha is also falcon:

There is also the following visualization: the tormo is in essence the great god Thang lha with the aspect of a conch-shell falcon hovering in the sky. In the expanse of the sky, he hunts a prey. The *rgyal po* [spirit] is a white bird, like a pigeon. The falcon seizes the bird, and plucks out its feathers. Thus the bird is killed by the conch-shell falcon.<sup>53</sup>

In Bon texts, Thang lha is also described as falcon or an eagle. As Karmay points out: “gNyan chen Thang lha, too, is described as a huge

---

*ltar 'bar/ 'jigs shing ya nga'i skur gyur pa.*

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from *Ti se dkar chag*, ff. 29a3-30a7. See Karmay 1996, p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> From the *lHa 'dre bka' thang*, citing Blondeau 1971, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Translated from no.4, p. 350, 1.4-1.6: *yang rang ngo bo lha chen la rnam pa dung khra dkar po mkha' lding tsam du sgom la/ de nam mkha'i dbyings nas zan la bshur ba bzhin byung la/ rgyal po de bya dkar chung phug ron 'dra ba cig tu 'dug pa de tsher gyis bzung nas spu long longs btogs nas dung khras zos par sgom zhing/ sngags gong ltar bzlas pas thul nges so.*

<sup>53</sup> Translated from no.14, p. 658, 1.1-1.2: *yang dmigs pa ni/ gtor ma ngo bo lha chen thang lha la/ rnam pa dung khra mkha' lding tsam/ nam mkha'i dbyings nas gzan la 'jug/ rgyal po bya dkar phug ron 'dra/ tshir gyis bzung nas spu btog go/ dung khras bsad nas zos par bsgom.*

and fearsome eagle which came down from heaven in search of a mountain as its dwelling place"<sup>54</sup>.

c) *The black iron scorpion*

In text no. 4, the third visualization is of a black iron scorpion (*lcags kyi sdig pa nag po*), that catches Pe dkar in its net of light, takes out Pe dkar's heart, and bites off half of his body:

Furthermore, you visualize your own body as a black iron scorpion, its body pervading the earth, its belly and tail lifting up to the sky, and spreading rays of light like an iron net from its mouth. The Property Guardian is taken in the net. You draw this net towards you and then take his heart out with your scorpion's fangs, then eat half of the god's body.<sup>55</sup>

In text no.14, the third animal representing Thang lha is also a scorpion:

Furthermore, as for the *gtor ma* of the meteoric iron scorpion, its black body pervades the earth, its horns and tail lift up to the sky, and rays of light spread from its mouth like an iron net. It spreads out, then the *dkor bdag* god is put into it.<sup>56</sup>

The image of the scorpion is also an important motif in the Bon tradition. According to the 16th-century *Ya ngal gdung rabs*, which records the story of the first Tibetan sacred king, gNya' khri btsan po, the king first manifests as a crystal scorpion. The scorpion then transforms into a crystal man with turquoise hair and a white robe. He wears a white turban that protrudes the length of an arrow and holds a white scepter in his hand<sup>57</sup>. It is noteworthy that this image of gNya' khri btsan po is similar to Thang lha's image of a crystal horseman described above.

In summary, Thang lha's three animal emanations—the white wild yak, the conch-shell falcon, and the black scorpion—represent his

<sup>54</sup> Karmay 1996, p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Translated from no.4, p. 350, l.6-p. 351, l.1: *yang na rang lus lcags kyi sdig pa nag por lus kyis sa gzhi khyab cing lto dang mjug ma nam mkhar gdengs pa gcig gis kha nas 'od zer (351) lcags kyi dra ba lta bu 'phros pas/ dkor bdag de'i nang du tshud pa de tshur 'ub kyis drangs nas snying dkar nag mtshams su lcags kyi mche ba btab nas lus kyi phyed yan khong par tshud par sgom zhing.*

<sup>56</sup> Translated from no. 14, p. 658, l. 3-l. 4: *yang gtor ma gnam lcags sdig pa ni/ nag po lus kyis sa gzhi khyab/ rwa dang mjug ma nam mkhar gdengs/ kha nas 'od zer lcags drwa ltar/ 'phros pas dkor bdag de nang tshud.*

<sup>57</sup> Ramble 2013, p. 85

three identities of *gnyan*, *lha*, and *klu*. The yak represents the *gnyan* identity and lives on the land, the falcon represents the *lha* identity and flies in the sky, and the scorpion represents the *klu* identity and lives underground. Thang lha has a triple identity of *lha*, *gnyan*, and *klu*, and these three animals symbolize his purification of the harms caused by *rgyal po* Pe dkar in the vertical spaces of sky, land, and underground.

#### d) *Nine-headed garuḍa*

In text no.4, Thang lha is also envisioned as a nine-headed *garuḍa* (*khyung nag mgo dgu pa*) capable of eating all the *sa bdag* (earth-owner spirits) and all its enemies; its large wings cover the whole earth like a shining razor:

You are in essence the great god with the form of a *garuḍa* with nine black heads who devours all the earth-owner spirits, roar with the thunder calls of the *ki kang*, and with a burning beak and claws, and with the wings made of iron razors covering all earth-owner spirits.<sup>58</sup>

The black *garuḍa* in the rNying ma tradition is “the enlightened deity for removing afflictions caused by nagas and earth spirits.”<sup>59</sup> The *sa bdag* is the earth-owner spirits, and *ki kang* is a puzzling non-Indic foreign word that appears very common in Yamāntaka literature. As mentioned above, the mountain spirits are called *yul lha*, while the harmful and dangerous *yul lha* are called *gzhi bdag* or *sa bdag*, and the good, sanctified *yul lha* are called *gnas* or *gnas ri*.

The image of Thang lha as a nine-headed *garuḍa* in text no. 4 symbolizes his enlightened and transcendental identity. This identity is revealed through his *don gcig* or one nature, as mentioned earlier, which is that of the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha.

#### 6. *Animal images in signs of accomplishment*

In text no. 2, there is a passage that describes the signs of successful accomplishment of the *sādhana* ceremony. These signs are indicated by the appearance of particular animals:

The signs of accomplishment are: In your meditation place you hear thunder; there is light glowing or the earth trembling; [you

<sup>58</sup> Translated from no. 4, p. 356, l. 3: *rang lha chen gyi ngo bo rnam pa khyung nag mgo dgu pa sa bdag kun za zhing ki kang gi sgra sgrog pa gnam lcags me'i mchu sder can/ sa lcags spu gri'i gshog pa can gyis sa bdag de bkab par bsam zhing.*

<sup>59</sup> Jeff Watt, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/616>.

have a vision of] a white horse and a young man with turquoise hair-knots; of a white yak with conch-shell horns reaching upwards to the sky; of a white conch-shell falcon flying around, of a white conch-shell wolf roaming around; of a pale snow mountain shimmering, or of a turquoise-blue lake in fire, and so forth.<sup>60</sup>

These visions indicating signs of accomplishment of one's practice—the white yak, the falcon, and the wolf—are emanations of Thang lha. For example, when Rig 'dzin yol mo pa finished writing the text *Thang lha'i phyi rten 'bul thabs* (see text no.13) during his journey to Chu glang 'on phu stag tshang, he met a little white yak who was an auspicious emanation of Thang lha. This was a sign of the success of Yol mo pa's meditation:

This text was written during my journey to Chu glang 'on phu stag tshang. At that time, while meditating, I met a white yak that was a manifestation of Thang lha. When we were riding along the road on our horses and chatting with the nomads, a little white yak endowed with the compassion of Thang lha was playing his horns in front of the road, so we tried to find his owners. Then we learned the name of the owner of the home where we were supposed to stay that night: he was called rDo rje, which was very coincidental and spontaneous. We returned the little yak to his owner with faith and respect, and immediately set the offering substances on the offering stage for the *sku lha* (Thang lha). This offering verse is written according to the sādhana by Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las in 'Bra sgang rig 'dzin pho brang, the seat of the Great Vidyadhara from mNga' ris.<sup>61</sup>

The white yak's appearance—explicitly deemed an “auspicious sign”

<sup>60</sup> Translated from no.2, p. 327, 1.2-1.4: *grub pa'i rtags/ gnas khang du thug choms dang/ 'od dang sa gzhi 'gul ba 'ong/ rta dkar po dang khye'u g.yu'i zur phud can dang/ g.yag dkar po dung ru gnam du zang nge ba dang/ dung khra dkar po lding ba dang/ dung spyang dkar po 'dur ba dang/ gangs ri skya ye re ba dang/ g.yu tsho sngon mo mer re rnams/ rab mngon sum du 'ong.*

<sup>61</sup> Translated from no. 13, p. 650, 1. 3-1. 5: *ces pa 'di yang chu glang 'on phu stag tshang mjal bar phyin skabs thang lha'i rten g.yag dkar po zhig byung na snyams tel lam bar rta thog tu 'brog pa rnams dang 'phros gleng zhig yongs <yong> bas lha chen nyid kyi thugs rjes bkun pa'i g.yag phrug shin tu dkar ba zhig lam gyi mdun ngos nas rwa 'khyer dang bcas khrab cing 'dug pa'i bdag po rtsad bcad pas/ deng nub 'dug pa'i sbyin bdag de kha yin 'dug pa'i ming la yang rdo rje zer 'dug pa'i rten 'brel shugs 'byung du 'grigs par go nas ster dgos tshul smras pas dad gus dang bcas byin byung bas de 'phral lha bsangs thog tu sku lha'i sger gsol dang bcas 'dzugs pa'i mchod 'bul tshig tu dge slong padma 'phrin las kyi sgrub thabs dang mthun par rig 'dzin mnga' ris chen po'i gdan sa 'bra sgang rig 'dzin pho brang du de 'phral du bris pa'o.*

(*rten 'brel*) and imbued with “compassion” (*thugs rje*)—serves to authenticate Yol mo ba’s ritual text. By framing the encounter as a sign of meditation success, it bridges personal experience and textual authority, a hallmark *gter ma* traditions where divine endorsement supersedes human authorship. The host’s name *rDo rje* (Vajra) directly echoes Thang lha’s secret name *rDo rje 'bar ba rtsal*.

Moreover, Yol mo ba’s attribution of the ritual’s source to *Rig 'dzin Padma 'phrin las* (recognized as *rGod ldem*’s 4<sup>th</sup> reincarnation, 1641–1717) anchors innovation within received tradition. Such gestures reinforce *Byang gter*’s ethos: new revelations must be embedded in a genealogical chain extending from Padmasambhava to contemporary masters.

### *Thang lha’s family and retinue*

Text no. 5 introduces the image of Thang lha’s consort, *gNam mtsho*, a sky-blue colored lady holding a victory banner and mirror, riding a turquoise dragon as well as his father and mother:

Hūṃ. If we were to name the father of the Body God, it is 'Od de gung rgyal. If we were to name the mother of the Body God, it is G.yu bya gshog gcig. If we were the name the Body God himself, it is Yar zhur gnyan gyi lha. And to give the name of his domain, it is 'Dam shod snar mo!<sup>62</sup>

Here, the names of Thang lha’s father and mother evoke the myth recounted in the *Stod lha rabs* of the early Bon tradition, which records that Thang lha yar bzbur is one of the *lha dgu*, the nine worldly gods whose common father is the sky god 'O de gung rgyal from the Phywa clan; he generated numerous divine sons in the air, the midair and on the land. “In the land of Srin yul, the son he produced with Srin bza’ sbyar lcam ma is Thang la yar bzbur.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The *Byang gter* tradition emerged in the 14th century as a mature phase within the *rNying ma* school’s *gter ma* systems, following the full development of the Upper Treasure (*stod gter*) tradition in the 12th century. The earliest textual descriptions of Thang lha’s transformation into a protective deity first appeared in the 12th

<sup>62</sup> Translated from no. 5, p. 372, l. 2-1. 3: *hūṃ sku lha'i yab smos pa/ 'o de gung rgyal lags/ sku lha'i yum smos pa/ g.yu bya zhog gcig lags/ sku lha nyid smos pa/ yar zhud gnyan gyi lha/ bzhuks yul mtshan gsol ba/ 'dam shod snar mo lags.*

<sup>63</sup> Lde'u jo sras 1987, p. 230.

century in Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's *gter ma* about Padmasambhava's life-story, the *Zangs gling ma*, and in his historical account called *Me tog snying po*. Subsequent accounts in the 13th-century *Lde'u chos 'byung* and the 14th-century *Padma bka' thang yig* maintained a similarly straightforward narrative structure. These early texts uniformly present a standardized account of Padmasambhava's subjugation of the mountain deity: the master's arrival, Thang lha's initial defiance, ritual combat culminating in the deity's defeat, oath-binding through Buddhist precepts, and final conversion into a dharma protector.<sup>64</sup> This narrative simplicity characteristic of 12th-century Upper Treasure literature underwent substantial elaboration in the Northern Treasure tradition from the 14th century onward.

This study examines the Byang gter tradition's sophisticated reconstruction of Thang lha's Buddhist conversion process. The Northern Treasure texts introduced significant innovations, particularly the concept of "threefold vow-taking" that transformed Thang lha from a conventional dharma protector into the Body God of the Dharma king and ultimately into a treasure guardian. This narrative strategy demonstrates both continuity with the Upper Treasure literary conventions as well as creative doctrinal development.

The Byang gter tradition's innovation extends beyond oath ritualization to construct a comprehensive Buddhist identity for Thang lha. The deity is reconceptualized as the antidote (*gnyen po*) and executioner (*gshed ma*) of oath-breakers and demonic forces, the ancestral protector (*pho lha*) of exceptional individuals, the wealth guardian and property protector, the territorial deity (*yu l lha*) governing Tibet's four regions, and a transcendent manifestation of Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha. Furthermore, the Northern Treasure cycle elaborates intricate iconographic descriptions and meditation rituals, establishing Thang lha as a crucial protector within Vajrayāna practice. Philological and sociological analyses reveal this systematic textual development as a hallmark of literary maturation within Tibetan Buddhist literature during the post-14th century period. The Byang gter tradition thus exemplifies the dynamic interplay between doctrinal preservation and innovative exegesis characteristic of Tibet's later terma traditions.

---

<sup>64</sup> Nyang ral 1989, pp. 43-44; Meisezahl 1985, pp. 301v6-306r1; Nyang ral 1988, pp. 281-282; Lde'u jo sras 1987, pp. 342-343; O rgyan gling pa 1987, pp. 363-364. See Wang 2023.

### Appendix

In my prior publication, I systematically catalogued and numerically indexed sixteen Thang lha-related texts from volume 15 of the *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* (CNT 2015).<sup>65</sup> Building upon this foundation, the present study advances the analytical framework by adopting ritual typology as a taxonomic criterion to reorganize and examine these sixteen Thang lha texts.

The categories of these Thang lha texts in *Byang gter* are quite diverse: texts no. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are *sādhanas*; texts number no. 5, 9, and 13 are *mchod* (offering); no. 7 is a *srog gtad* (life force entrustment), no. 14 a *bka' gtad* (entrustment ritual), no. 6 a *mnga' gsol* (benediction), no. 8 a *gser skyems* (libation ritual), no. 11 a *bstod bskul* (praise and exhortation), and no. 16 a *mdos* (cross-thread ritual).

Ritual category	Text numbers
<i>sgrub</i> ( <i>sādhana</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No.1. <i>gNyan chen thang lha'i phyi nang gsang gsum gyi sgrub pa las lo rgyus</i>, pp. 321-324.</li> <li>No.2. <i>lHa chen thang lha'i phyi sgrub</i>, pp. 325-333.</li> <li>No.3. <i>lHa chen thang lha'i gsang sgrub</i>, pp. 335-345.</li> <li>No.4. <i>lHa chen thang lha'i las tshogs gsang sgrub shog dril</i>, pp. 347-367.</li> </ul>
<i>mchod</i> (offering)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No.5. <i>Gnyan chen thang lha'i mchod phreng las bzhi lhun grub ces bya ba</i>, pp. 369-374.</li> <li>No.9. <i>Zangs mdzod gter bsrung rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi mchod sprin yid bzhin sprin phung</i>. 549-560.</li> <li>No.13. <i>Thang lha'i phyi rten 'bul thabs</i>, pp. 647-650.</li> </ul>

<sup>65</sup> Wang 2024, pp. 454-456.

<p><i>srog gtad</i> (life force entrustment) <i>bka' gtad</i> (entrustment ritual)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.7. <i>Rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi srog gtad kyi rjes gnang mu ti la'i 'phreng ba</i>, pp. 531-543.</li> <li>• No.14. <i>Thang lha'i bka' gtad smyo 'dre rgod kyi 'grim shul</i>, pp. 651-660.</li> </ul>
<p><i>mnga' gsol</i> (benediction)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.6. <i>Sngags 'chang yol mo bas mdzad pa'i lha chen 'bar ba rtsal gyi mnga' gsol yid bzhin rgyal mtshan</i>, pp. 525-529.</li> </ul>
<p><i>gser skyems</i> (libation ritual)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.8. <i>lHa chen rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi gser skyems sogs</i>, pp. 545-547.</li> </ul>
<p><i>bstod bskul</i> (praise and exhortation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.11. <i>Gnyan chen thang lha'i bstod bskul mu tig phreng ba bzhugs pa'i dbu phyogs lags mdzad byang med pa</i>, pp. 583-595.</li> </ul>
<p><i>mdos</i> (cross-thread ritual)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.16. <i>Rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi rten mdos bzlog mdos kyi rim pa rgya 'bag mig gi rnam 'phrul</i> pp. 663-696.</li> </ul>
<p><i>rten 'dzugs kyi rim pa</i> (steps of veneration)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.10. <i>Rdo rje 'bar ba rtsal gyi rten 'dzugs kyi rim pa gsal bar byed pa dwangs shel me long</i>, pp. 561-581.</li> </ul>
<p><i>phrin las</i> (activity ritual)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.12. <i>Rgyal dbang lnga pa rin po ches mdzad pa'i lha mchog 'bar ba rtsal gyi phrin las brgya phrag nyi ngos 'dzin pa'i snang gsal</i>, pp. 597-645.</li> </ul>
<p><i>rgyun khyer</i> (daily practice)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.15. <i>Dam can 'bar ba rtsal gyi rgyun khyer</i>, pp. 661-662.</li> </ul>

## *Bibliography*

### *Primary Tibetan Language Sources*

lDe'u jo sras,

— 1987, *Mkhas pa lde'u mdzad pa'i rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa*. Lhasa: Bod rang skyong ljongs spyi tshogs tshan rig khang, bod yig dpe skrun khang.

Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer,

— 1988, *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dbang dpe bskrun khang.

— 1989, *Slob dpon padma'i rnam thar zangs gling ma bzhugs*. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

O rgyan gling pa

— 1987, *Padma bka' thang*. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Byang gter dpe sgrig tshogs chung

— 2015, *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* (abbr. CNT 2015), <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW2PD17457>.

### *Secondary English and Other Language Sources*

Beer, Robert, 1999, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. Boston: Shambala Publications.

Bell, Christopher, 2021, *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— 2020, "Tibetan Deity Cults as Political Barometers," <https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Tibetan%20Deity%20Cults%20as%20Political%20Barometers.html>.

Combe, George A., 1975 [1926], *A Tibetan on Tibet*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Blondeau, Anne-Marie, 1971, "Le lHa-'dre bka'-thang" in A. Macdonald (éd.), *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*. Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 29-126.

Dollfus, Pascale, 1996, "No Sacred Mountains in Central Ladakh?" In: A.-M. Blonde and E. Steinkellner (eds.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft, 3-22.

Diemberger, Hildegard, 1998, "The Horseman in Red: On Sacred Mountains of La stod lho (Southern Tibet)." In: A.-M. Blondeau

- (ed.), *Tibetan Mountain Deities: Their Cults and Representations*. Wien: Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, pp. 44-55.
- Eliade, Mircea, 1996, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Translation by R. Sheed. Sheed & Ward, Inc. Place, editor.
- Karmay, Samten, 1996, "The Tibetan Cult of Mountain Deities and its Political Significance." In: Blondeau and Steinkellner (eds.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Wien: Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, pp. 59-76.
- \_\_\_ 2009 [1997], *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Place: Mandala Book Point.
- Kalsang, L. (1996) 2007, *The Guardian Deities of Tibet*. Translated from Tibetan to English by P. Thinley. Place: Winsome Books India.
- Meisezahl, R.O., 1985, *Die große Geschichte des tibetischen Buddhismus nach alter Tradition: rñin ma'i chos 'byun chen mo*. Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschafts-verlag.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de. 1996 [1956], *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Place: Book Faith India.
- Ramble, Charles, 1996, "Patterns of Places." In: Blondeau, A.-M. and Steinkellner, E. (eds.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Wien: Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, pp. 141-153.
- \_\_\_ 2013. "Both Fish and Fowl? Preliminary Reflections on Some Representations of a Tibetan Mirror World." In F.-K. Ehrhard & P. Maurer (eds.), *Nepalica-Tibetica Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers* (Band 2). International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH.
- Stein, Rolf A. [1961]1981, *La Civilisation tibétaine*. Paris: L'Asiathèque-Le Sycomore.
- Tucci, Giuseppe, 1949, *Tibetan Patinted Scrolls*. La Libreria della Stato.
- Yuewei, Wang, 2023, Ph.D. thesis, "The cult of the mountain god gNyan chen Thang lha in Tibet," Paris: École pratique des Hautes Études-PSL.
- \_\_\_ 2024, "gNyan chen Thang lha and His Three Vows in Byang gter," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no.68, pp. 454-490.

