

Nyingma Monasteries, Treasure and Territory in Kham: Geomantic Structure of Gonjo County

Karl Ryavec

(University of California, Merced)

Introduction

his study undertakes a geographical reconstruction of the sacred landscape of Gonjo County through an empirical survey of the mountains (*lha ri*) and springs (*chu gu gnas pa*) enumerated in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* (贡觉县志, 2010, *Gonjo County Gazetteer*), followed by an examination of the Buddhist monasteries, primarily of the Nyingma tradition, situated in close proximity to these sites (Figure 1). In many Tibetan areas of China, including Gonjo, the only readily available written sources for monasteries and sacred mountains are the modern Chinese-language county gazetteers and related official government surveys and documentations. While premodern Tibetan texts may allude to some of these sites, they seldom identify their locations with the clarity made possible by the systematic format of the gazetteers. Moreover, modern Tibetan-language publications containing comparable geographic information are difficult to locate in Western academic libraries, where acquisitions tend to favor the Chinese editions, and it is not always clear what may have been issued in Tibetan within China. It is nonetheless possible to reconstruct the probable Tibetan orthographies of place names from the Chinese phonetic transcriptions contained in these gazetteers, and although this method is not without uncertainty, it remains the only practical means for scholars outside Tibet, or even in other regions of China, to recover the historical forms and spatial distribution of such sites given travel to many of these areas may not be permitted, or if so would be too expensive.

Rather than beginning with premodern Tibetan texts or religious chronicles, this analysis proceeds in reverse: it first establishes the spatial system of sacred peaks and water sources as recorded in the gazetteer and visible in the contemporary terrain, and only subsequently will correlate these locations with historical Tibetan texts. But it remains possible that some of these sites are not attested in surviving

textual sources, a circumstance that underscores the value of reconstructing the sacred geography directly from spatial and environmental evidence. This approach allows the geography itself, the pattern of sites, their orientations, and their topographic settings, to define the framework within which historical and doctrinal interpretations can later be situated.

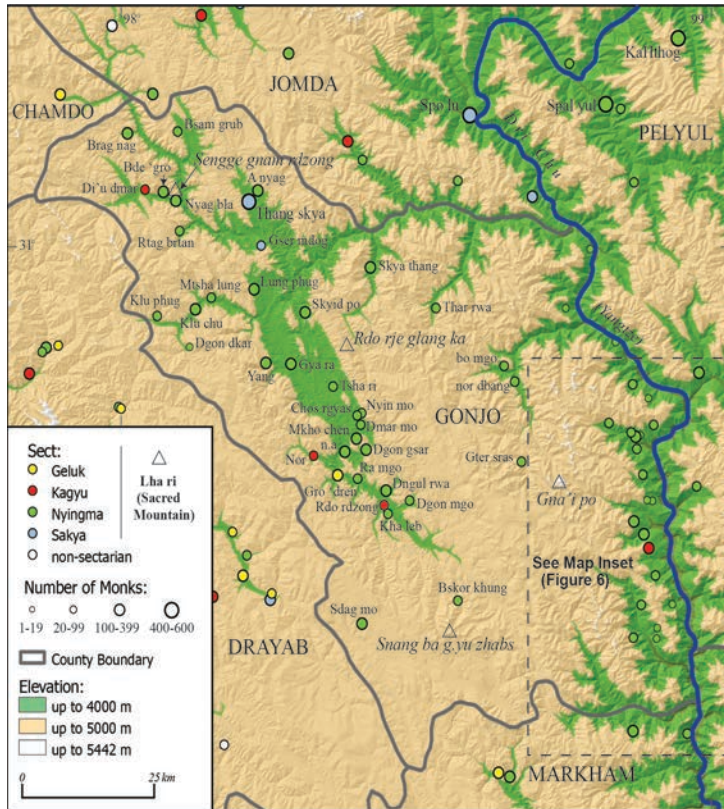


Figure 1. Monasteries (*dgon pa*) and Sacred Mountains (*Lha ri*) of Gonjo

In methodological terms, this project extends the long-standing sub-field of Tibetan studies devoted to sacred geography and mountain cults by introducing the tools of historical GIS and remote sensing. By combining gazetteer data, satellite imagery, and the geographic verification of visible peaks and monasteries, it constructs an independent spatial record of sacred sites prior to textual analysis. Such a procedure both complements and corrects traditional text-driven approaches, which tend to privilege literary or doctrinal representations while overlooking the geographical logic that structures the landscape itself.

By beginning with the physical distribution of sacred mountains, springs, and monasteries, this study foregrounds the spatial coherence of the sacred system as an object of inquiry in its own right, one that can later be correlated with historical sources to trace the evolution of Buddhist, particularly Nyingma, religious geography in eastern Tibet.

Conceptually, the study draws on Mayer's Rethinking Treasure essays (2019, 2022) that have redefined the *gter ma* tradition as a hybrid system linking Indian *nidhi* notions of hidden wealth with indigenous Tibetan cults of territorial deities (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*), thereby situating revelation within the physical and ecological environment. In this sense, the Tibetan *gter ma* tradition may be understood as a reworking of the Indian *nidhi* concept of material treasures guarded by landscape deities such as yakṣas and nāgas, transformed into a system of spiritual revelation integrated with Buddhist and indigenous Tibetan cosmologies. This perspective clarifies that sacred geography in Tibet cannot be reduced to textual origins: it is the material and spatial field through which revelation is enacted and perpetuated.

Within this framework, the four principal *lha ri* and four *chu gu gnas pa* recorded in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* delineate a ritual quadrilateral whose configuration corresponds closely to the pattern of nearby Nyingma monasteries. At the center of this sacred field rises *gnai po ri*, the "Primordial Mountain," around which the other peaks, *rdo rje glang ka ri*, *sa dge gnam rdzong*, and *snang ba g.yu zhabs ri*, define the cardinal periphery. The resulting landscape assumes the form of a mandala, with *gnai po ri* as its axial heart. These mountains are not conceived as inert landforms but as the thrones of tutelary deities (*yul lha*) whose vitality animates both the natural environment and the social order within the cosmographic body of Gonjo. Together the mountains, springs, and monasteries compose a coherent sacred ecology in which geomorphology, hydrology, and ritual infrastructure interlock within a single system of vitality.

The analysis that follows reconstructs this system through an integrated use of gazetteer data, satellite imagery, and geographic correlation. Each *lha ri* is presented with its reconstructed Tibetan name, an English translation of the gazetteer description, and geographic coordinates, while the *chu gu gnas pa* are introduced with their reconstructed names and descriptive translations. The locations and Tibetan orthography for the monasteries follow those listed and mapped in the *Gonjo Xianzhi*, whereas the positions and spellings of the *lha ri* and *chu gu gnas pa* were independently reconstructed from the gazetteer descriptions and verified through satellite imagery. Coordinates for the *lha ri* were determined by matching township-level locational data and the physical appearance of the mountains, as described in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* and corresponding county maps, with high-resolution satellite

imagery on Google Earth. In one case, the identification of a Nyingma monastery situated at the mountain's base, also recorded in the gazetteer, provided additional confirmation of its location. For each sacred peak, a representative photograph documents its visible form and situates it within the modern landscape. The accompanying notes explain the basis for the reconstructed Tibetan orthography, derived from the Chinese phonetic renderings and cross-referenced with relevant Tibetan literary and ritual terminology preserved in the gazetteer text. Where uncertainty remains, provisional readings are indicated and will be refined as Tibetan-script sources become available through monastery records, local inscriptions, or future fieldwork.

I. Sacred Mountains (*lha ri*)

1. **Gna'i po ri** (Naibo Shen Shan 乃波神山): "Primordial Mountain." It is regarded as the foremost of the four holy peaks and the central seat of Gonjo's yul lha, protector of herds and pastures. Summit: 30° 38' 51" E, 98° 45' 26" E.



Figure 2. Gna'i po ri. Viewed from the West looking East.

"Located in the summer pasture of Axiang Village, Shadong Township, bordering Awang and Luomai townships, at an elevation of 5,442 meters. The summit of Mount Naibo (乃波神山 Naibo shenshan) remains snow-covered throughout the year; its slopes are steep, and its form solemn and majestic. It is the highest peak within a hundred li (about 50 kilometers) and is regarded as the mountain deity (shanshen

山神) in the hearts of the people from the six townships of the Sanyan (三岩, Tib. Sa-ngan) area. Each year, on the 15th day of the fourth and sixth Tibetan lunar months, the people of Sanyan (三岩) go to the mountain to make ritual offerings (jībài 祭拜), burn juniper incense (wēi sāng 煨桑), and present ceremonial scarves (jìngxian hǎdá 敬献哈达).” Gonjo Xianzhi p. 756.

Note on source for Tibetan Name: The Chinese form Naibo Shenshan (乃波神山) combines a phonetic transcription (Naibo ≈ gna'i po) with a semantic translation (Shenshan = ri). Therefore, it likely corresponds to the Tibetan gna'i po ri — “Primordial Mountain” —however an authoritative textual form of the Tibetan orthography remains to be located.

2. **Rdo rje glang ka ri** (Duoji Langka Shen Shan 多吉郎卡神山): “Vajra Elephant Mountain”. Summit: 30° 49' 20" N, 98° 23' 28" E.



Figure 3. *Rdo rje glang ka ri*. Viewed from the West Looking East. The long running north-south ridge has a white colored conglomerate base, with a smaller white colored summit area. The modern county-seat town of Gonjo is the light-colored built-up urban area in this image's lower-left area.

“Located at Edi Village in Molu Township, bordering Zeba Township, at an elevation of 4,900 m. The mountain ridge of Dorje Langka extends several tens of kilometers north–south and is regarded as a mountain deity (shanshen 山神) by the people of six townships in Gonjo. In thangka paintings, this deity is depicted as a warrior dressed in white, riding a white horse, and holding a willow branch (liǔ zhī 柳枝). Each year, on the 15th day of the first and fifth Tibetan lunar months, the people of Gonjo go to the mountain to make offerings and worship.”

Gonjo Xianzhi p. 756.

Note on source for Tibetan name: The Chinese form Duoji Langka Shenshan (多吉郎卡神山) corresponds to the Tibetan *Rdo rje glang ka*, however an authoritative textual form of the Tibetan orthography remains to be located. While no published source that I know of gives both the title *Rdo rje glang ka ri* ("Vajra-Elephant Mountain") and the horse-mounted form explicitly, the broader typology of Tibetan mountain deities supports the interpretive model: tribal/royal *rgyal po* gods in equestrian form were often overlaid with Sanskritic/tantric motifs (e.g., the elephant/vajra of power). For example, Xie (2001) shows how mountain gods initially functioned as protectors of local kings before becoming iconographically syncretized. Similar transformations are also seen in cases like Nyenchen Tanglha, depicted riding a white horse.

3. **Seng ge gnam rdzong** (Duomei Eqiong Shengge Langzong (多麦恩弥生格郎宗): "Lion Sky-Fortress Mountain". Summit: 31° 04' 42" N, 98° 05' 18".



Figure 4. *Seng ge gnam rdzong*. View to the West, with Nyag bla gonpa visible behind the lower south-east running ridge in the shape of a lion lying with its head facing southeast.

"Also called the Langqing Jingri Sacred Mountain of the Kham region, meaning the Emei Mountain of Tibet and the Zhongka Sacred Mountain. It is located behind Niangla (Tib. Nyag bla) Monastery in Xiangpi Township, at an elevation of 3,900 meters. According to legend, it belongs to the Ox year. The Duomei Eqiong Shengge Langzong Sacred Mountain extends several dozen kilometers to the northwest, and its form resembles a male lion lying with its head facing southeast." Gonjo Xianzhi, p. 756.

Note on source for Tibetan name: The Gonjo Xianzhi provides only Chinese phonetic transcriptions for this mountain: Duomei Eqiong Shengge Liangzong Shenshan (多麦俄琼生格郎宗神山) and the alternate Langqing Jingri Shenshan (郎庆景日神山). These transcriptions correspond approximately to the Tibetan form *Seng ge glang rdzong ri*, which may reflect an earlier or textual variant meaning “Lion-Bull Fortress Mountain.” However, the mountain is locally known as *Seng ge gnam rdzong*, literally “Lion Sky-Fortress.” The shift from *glang* (“bull”) to *gnam* (“sky”) likely represents a regional or semantic adaptation emphasizing the mountain’s celestial aspect. Independent confirmation of this form appears in Emily T. Yeh’s account of a short-lived local environmental association named *mdo smad ahn chung seng ge gnam rdzong rang mos skye khams khor yug srung skyong mthun tshogs* (“Voluntary Association for the Protection of the Natural Environment of Domed Anchung Sengge Namdzong”), whose work centered on a sacred mountain in Gonjo with a twelve-year circumambulation ritual (Yeh 2014). This evidence strongly supports the local attestation of the name *Seng ge gnam rdzong* and its identification with the principal sacred peak described in the *Gonjo Xianzhi*.

4. **Snang ba g.yu zhabs ri** (Nongwa Youzhe Shenshan 弄洼优者神山):
 “Turquoise-Base Mountain of Auspicious Radiance.”
 Summit: 30° 25' 41" N, 98° 33' 16" E.

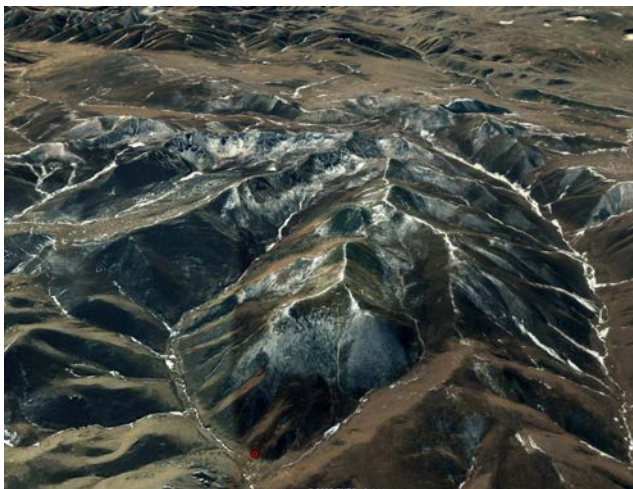


Figure 5. *Snang ba g.yu zhabs ri*. View to the South. Small red circle at northern base of mountain complex is the Nyingma monastery of *bskor khung*, whose name literally denotes a “circumambulatory hollow.” Rows of surrounding mountains correspond to the textual description of guardian *lha ri* arranged around the primary central peak.

“Located at the boundary between Awang Township and Lashou Township’s Zongba Village 位于阿旺乡与拉寿乡宗巴村交界处, elevation 5034 meters. According to legend, it belongs to the Dragon year. Nongwa Youzhe Sacred Mountain 弄洼优者神山 rises steep and majestic, standing in solemn dignity, and serves as the tutelary mountain for the people of nine villages in Awang and for Zongba Village. In front of this mountain there are also four sacred mountains arranged on either side.

Local people say on the right is the Monkey Youzhe Sacred Mountain (猴阿优者神山 *hou a youzhe shenshan*); on the left is the “Merchant” Sacred Mountain (冲本神山 *chongben shenshan*, likely denoting the Tibetan *tshong dpon* for merchant); and on the outermost sides stand the King (国王) and Queen (王后) Sacred Mountains as guardians. The five sacred mountains are tightly connected, forming a scene of great grandeur.” *Gonjo Xianzhi*, pp. 756–757.

Note on Source for Tibetan Names: The name “Nongwa Youzhe” (弄洼优者) recorded in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* represents a Chinese phonetic rendering of a Tibetan mountain deity title not given in Tibetan script; based on phonetic correspondence and the protective configuration described, Youzhe most plausibly reflects Tibetan *g.yu zhabs* (“turquoise-base/foot”). The semantic field of this epithet fits well with Karmay’s analysis of turquoise as the visible token of the *bla* (life-soul) and of mountain and local deities as guardians of territorial and ancestral power (Karmay, 1998a, pp. 318–20; 1998b, pp. 432–450). The first element may correspond to *snang ba* (“illumination, appearance”), though this remains provisional pending confirmation from local liturgical or inscriptional sources. The associated “Monkey Youzhe Sacred Mountain” (猴阿优者神山) likely preserves Tibetan *spre’u* (“monkey”), connected to lineage-guardian motifs; the “Merchant Sacred Mountain” (冲本神山) appears to render *tshong dpon* (“merchant-lord”), indicating a protector linked to regional trade routes; and the “King” and “Queen” correspond to a Tibetan royal-protector dyad, probably *rgyal po* and *btsun mo* types of territorial deities. Taken together, this five-mountain scheme reflects a coherent local sacred-geographic system centered on a turquoise-based main deity flanked by four directional protectors, consistent with well-attested cosmological patterns in eastern Tibet.

II. Sacred Springs (Chu gu gnas pa)

“The Ala (阿拉曲果泉 *Ala Quguo Quan*) and Shamaduilong (沙马堆龙曲果 *Shamaduilong Quguo*) Springs of Luome (罗麦乡) in the Sanyan (三岩)

region, together with the Maxi Spring of Xiongsong (雄松的玛希曲果 *Maxi Quguo*), and the Zhatong Spring of Muxie (木协的扎通曲果 *Zhatong Quguo*) are all revered by local people as divine springs. Historically, in these three townships of Gonjo's (贡觉) Sa-ngan (三岩) region, whenever mountain-worship ceremonies, village gatherings, or communal oath-swearing rituals were held, people would first proceed to these sacred springs to perform libations and purifications." *Gonjo Xianzhi*, p. 757.

Note on source for Tibetan names: The Chinese term 曲果 (*Quguo*) in each name reflects the Tibetan *chu gu*, meaning "spring" or "source of water." These four *chu gu* gnas pa, or sacred spring sites, are distributed across the valleys of San'an in the modern townships of Luome, Xiongsong, and Muxie (Figure 6). The possible Tibetan forms and meanings are as follows:

1. Ala Spring (阿拉曲果, *Ala Quguo*): *A la chu gu*, literally "Spring of A la." The name likely refers to a spring located near, or belonging to, the settlement of A la. The term *A la* also occurs widely in Tibet and the Himalaya, often associated with ancestral or protective deities such as the *A lha* or *A bla* (Ramble 1999). In the absence of direct ritual evidence, the name is best interpreted as a toponymic reference to the village, while the possibility of a secondary association with a tutelary *A lha* spirit remains open.
2. Shamaduilong Spring (沙马堆龙曲果, *Shamaduilong Quguo*): Possibly *Sha ma 'du'i lung chu gu* or *Sa mar to lung chu gu* ("Spring of Shama/Tsamar Village"). The name may derive from a nearby settlement rather than a descriptive phrase. While the element *'du'i lung* could mean "meeting valley" or "gathering of winds," this interpretation remains speculative; the more likely explanation is a toponymic reference to the village or locality known as Shama (or Samar).
3. Maxi Spring (玛希曲果, *Maxi Quguo*): *Ma gshi chu gu* or *Ma bzhi chu gu* (tentative reconstructions). The name most likely refers to a spring near the settlement of Ma xi, but the components *ma gshi* ("mother") and *ma bzhi* ("four mothers") are also familiar from Tibetan ritual and cosmological vocabulary, where "Four Mothers" can designate a group of protective or maternal deities (Sorensen 2007). In the absence of direct ritual or oral evidence from Gonjo, it is safest to treat *Ma xi* primarily as a place-name, while noting a possible secondary resonance with maternal or protective spirits.

4. Zhatong Spring (扎通曲果, Zhatong Quguo): Zha stong chu gu, literally “Spring of Zhatong.” The name most likely refers to a spring near the settlement of Zhatong. The element *stong* (“hundred,” “many”) can also signify abundance or plenitude, which may have encouraged the spring’s ritual esteem as a source of plentiful water. Although *Zha* occurs elsewhere as a clan or lineage name, there is no evidence that such an association applies here.

III. Nyingma Monasteries near the four Sacred Mountains of Gonjo

gNa’i po ri (Primordial Mountain): The nearby Nyingma monastery of *gTer sras* (“Heir of the Treasure”), about six kilometers northwest of the mountain’s summit, suggests a direct link between *gNai po ri* and the region’s treasure-revelation (*gter ma*) traditions (Figure 1). The name implies that the monastery was either founded by a disciple or reincarnation of a local *gter ston*, or that it served as a ritual center preserving the cycle of teachings revealed from the mountain itself, an example of the mountain–monastery revelation pairing characteristic of Kham. *gTer sras Gonpa* reportedly housed about 60 monks around 1950. Further northwest, roughly eighteen kilometers from the summit, lies *Nor dbang Gonpa* (“Wealth Empowerment Monastery”), a Nyingma site that once housed about 80 monks. Its name points to rites of prosperity and empowerment (*nor dbang*), often associated with deities such as Jambhala or Vaiśravaṇa. A third Nyingma monastery, *Bo mgo Gonpa*, situated about twenty-two kilometers northwest of the summit and formerly home to 25 monks, may also belong to the wider sacred field of *gNai po ri*, although its precise relation to the mountain and the origin of its name remain uncertain. None of these three monasteries have known founding dates, but from the terrain itself they appear to have been religious institutions positioned within human access and visual contact with *gNai po ri*, sites from which the mountain could actually be viewed or approached. Beyond the snow-class massif of *gNai po ri*, the terrain descends steeply, and these monasteries are strung along the main valley running northwestward. Considered together, they define both the outer ritual reach and the accessible human threshold of the mountain’s sacred landscape. While such correlations remain tentative, the pattern offers a valuable starting point for further textual and field-based investigation into how *gNai po ri* functioned as a spiritual and territorial center within this part of Gonjo.

rDo rje glang ka ri (Vajra Elephant Mountain): Extending roughly twenty-five kilometers along a north–south axis, *rDo rje glang ka ri*

(Vajra Elephant Mountain) forms one of the most striking ridges in this region and supports a small constellation of Nyingma monasteries and hermitages distributed along its western and southern slopes. Five such sites are recorded (*sKyid po Gonpa*, *Tsha ri Gonpa*, *Nyin mo ri khrod*, *Chos rgyas Gonpa*, and *dMar mo ri khrod*) all affiliated with the Nyingma tradition. Among them, only *sKyid po Gonpa* has a known founding date, established in 1687, and it was by far the largest, housing about 250 monks around 1950. The other monasteries were smaller: *Tsha ri Gonpa* housed roughly 60 monks, *Nyin mo ri khrod* about 80, *Chos rgyas Gonpa* around 50, and *dMar mo ri khrod* about 40, with no known surviving records of their founding periods. From the evidence of their distribution and nomenclature, these sites may have formed a coherent sacred cluster arrayed along the mountain's sun-facing slopes. Their names evoke a spectrum of meditative and tantric associations, peace (*sKyid po*), heat (*Tsha ri*), daylight (*Nyin mo*), flourishing doctrine (*Chos rgyas*), and red or wrathful energy (*dMar mo*). While these interpretations are speculative, the pattern suggests that *rDo rje glang ka ri* may have once served as a Nyingma ritual landscape organized around a hierarchy of monasteries and retreats situated along the ridge's accessible lower slopes, forming the human and symbolic threshold to the higher reaches of the mountain.

Seng ge gnam rdzong (Lion Sky-Fortress): At the base of *rDo rje glang ka ri* lies *Nyag bla Gonpa*, a Nyingma monastery that housed approximately 100 monks around 1950, though its founding date is unknown. Its name literally means 'the Life-Soul of the Nyag Valley (or Notch).' The term *bla* denotes both the vital essence of the land and its tutelary deity, suggesting that the monastery was established as the spiritual counterpart of the mountain itself. Its position marks the nexus between the divine body of the peak and the life-soul of the surrounding valley, exemplifying the integrated cosmology that linked sacred mountains, territorial deities, and monastic institutions throughout Kham.

Three km northwest of *Nyag bla Gonpa* is *bDe 'gro ri khrod*, a Nyingma retreat center whose name literally means "Hermitage of Blissful Beings". It housed roughly 140 monks around 1950, though its date of founding is unknown. The site appears to have served primarily as a place for extended meditation and retreat within the wider sacred landscape of the long ridge that forms *Seng ge gnam rdzong*.

About five kilometers northwest of *Nyag bla Gonpa* lies *Di'u dmar Gonpa*, a rare Kagyu establishment within this predominantly Nyingma landscape. Smaller than the neighboring Nyingma sites, it housed about 40 monks around 1950 and, likewise, has no known date

of founding. The name *Di'u dmar* may signify a “Red Spur” or “Red Peak,” referring to a subsidiary prominence or emanation-peak of *Seng ge gnam rdzong*. The monastery’s placement along the mountain’s long northwest–southeast ridge correspond to a wider pattern in which hermitages and retreat centers were established on major sacred mountains, serving as loci of protective and tantric rituals that complemented the visionary and oracular functions of adjacent Nyingma institutions.

sNang ba g.yu zhabs ri (Turquoise-Base Mountain of Auspicious Radiance): At the northern base of this mountain complex is the Nyingma monastery of *Bskor khung*, whose name literally denotes a “circumambulatory hollow,” and likely functioned as the ritual center for the mountain cult. *Bskor khung gonpa* housed about 50 monks around 1950, though its founding date is unknown. Its position within the sacred basin at the base of the mountain suggests that the monastic community oversaw the village pilgrimages around the mountain circuit, preserving one of the clearest integrations of Bon-derived sacred geography within a Buddhist institutional framework in Gonjo.

The linkage to Bon traditions is indicated by both the deity typology and spatial organization. In Kham, *g.yu zhabs* epithets (“Turquoise-Base”) are strongly associated with indigenous mountain and water deities central to Bon territorial cults, where turquoise embodies the vitality (*bla*) of land and lineage. The presence of the Nyingma monastery of *Bskor khung* (“circumambulatory hollow”) at the northern foot of the peak shows that Buddhist clerical authority was grafted directly onto an older Bon foundation: the monastery’s very name encodes the ritual act of encircling the mountain (*skor ra*), a core Bon practice of territorial renewal and propitiation of mountain lords. Here, the Buddhist institution effectively administered a traditional mountain circuit, integrating Bon-protective rites, appeasing local earth and sky deities, with Nyingma tantric ritual. The result is a syncretic sacred basin in which a pre-Buddhist geomantic system persists under Buddhist guardianship, making *Snang ba g.yu zhabs ri* one of the most explicit examples of Bon-derived sacred geography preserved within a monastery-centered ritual order that reinterprets indigenous cosmology through the idiom of Buddhist territorial protection (Huber 1994, 1998).

IV. Nyingma Temples and Monasteries near the Sacred Springs

The precise locations of the sacred springs (*chu gu gnas pa*) recorded in

the *Gonjo Xianzhi* cannot yet be established from satellite imagery, it is not possible to analyze their associated temples and monasteries in the same spatial detail as those around the sacred mountains (*lha ri*). The springs (*A la chu gu*, *Sha ma 'dui rlung chu gu*, *Ma gshi chu gu*, and *Zha stong chu gu*) may today be covered or rechanneled beneath modern bathhouse or spa structures, a pattern common in places where geothermal springs have been developed for local use. Alternatively, they may lie within wooded valleys where direct field observation or local knowledge would be required to confirm their positions. In this section, therefore, comparison rests not on mapping but on the language of local monastery names in the three townships listed where the springs are located (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Nyingma temples and monasteries in relation to townships (Ch. Xiang) near Sacred Springs (*Chu gu gnas pa*) in the Sa-ngan (Ch. 三岩) region. Refer also to the legend in Figure 1.

The toponyms of monasteries situated near the sacred mountains (*lha ri*) and sacred springs (*chu gu gnas pa*) appear to follow consistent, though still tentative, patterns of meaning within Gonjo's sacred landscape. The western part of the county, dominated by high terrain and containing most of the *lha ri*, includes monasteries such as *Gter sras*, *Nyag bla*, *Di'u dmar*, *Bde 'gro*, *Skyid po*, *Tsha ri*, *Nyin mo*, *Chos rgyas*, *Dmar mo*, and *Bskor khung*, whose names evoke qualities of being and spiritual vitality such as life, happiness, light, and Dharma. Several also feature emblematic animals such as the lion (*seng ge*) and elephant (*glang ka*), which seem to function not as natural species but as heraldic or divine attributes, symbols of voice, power, and stability embodied in the mountain itself. In contrast, the lower valley to the east, in what was historically known as the *Sa-ngan* region along the Dri chu, contains small monastic houses near the spring sites, perhaps better described as *lha khang*, these include *Le*, *Rna ri*, *Chos khri*, and *Rgyal mtshan*. Their names relate to the sensory and material world, based on sound and emblems of victory. The element *rna* means "ear," designating the faculty of hearing and may, in this place, evoke the immediacy of sound and resonance associated with flowing water and ritual recitation. *Rgyal mtshan*, "victory-banner," refers to a visual and tactile emblem raised to mark triumph and auspicious power; its presence in a place-name transforms the site into one of proclamation and vitality. *Khri*, meaning "throne," similarly belongs to the world of crafted material objects, denoting elevation, seat, and display. These terms may work to situate the springs within a field of sensory experience sites, grounding sacred meaning in perceptible form. These contrasts remain interpretive rather than proven, yet they indicate two complementary ways of conceiving sacred space in Gonjo: the mountains as elevated, personified presences and the springs as vital, animate sources of the landscape's generative force.

A further distinction lies in the scale and institutional character of the sites associated with these two sacred zones. Around the *lha ri*, even the smaller monasteries generally housed between 100 and 200 monks, with larger centers such as *Skyid po dgon pa* reaching about 250. These were substantial establishments, sustained by landed estates and organized around year-round ritual cycles that projected their influence across the surrounding valleys. Around the *chu gu gnas pa*, by contrast, the pattern shifts toward smaller centers with less than 100 monks, and also small *dgon pa* or *lha khang* with as few as 5 to 20 monks. This reduction in size reflects both the deeply incised terrain of the Dri chu valley, where narrow alluvial shelves constrain settlement, and the more localized ritual functions of the springs themselves: places of purification, oath-taking, and fertility rites rather than major scholastic or

administrative centers. The *chu gu* monasteries thus articulate a smaller domestic scale of sacred geography, complementing the monumental and territorial orientation of the *lha ri* complexes.

Conclusion: Geomantic Structure and Territorial Mandala

These four sacred springs lie directly below *gNai po ri*, in the remote *Sa-ngan* region, one of the *rong* of Kham, that forms the lower, eastern extension of its sacred field, where the descending waters of the mountain emerge as sources of fertility and vitality. The other three *lha ri* described in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* (*rDo rje glang ka ri*, *Phywa bzhi g.yu zhabs ri*, and *Sa dge glang rdzong ri*) lie farther afield in the higher western agropastoral zone of Gonjo proper, enclosing the northern, western, and southern horizons. Together they delineate the outer circuit of Gonjo's sacred geography, with *gNai po ri* standing as the axial peak that governs the flow of life between mountain, spring, and settlement.

Although none of the *lha ri* or *chu gu gnas pa* identified in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* are known from extant treasure catalogues or Nyingma hagiographies, their spatial organization and symbolic attributes clearly resonate with the wider logic of *gter* geography in eastern Tibet. The alignment of axial peaks, life-soul springs, and monastic foundations in Gonjo reflects the same geomantic grammar that underlies the mapping of canonical *gter gnas* across Kham, where the revelation of treasure is not limited to textual disclosure but extends to the recognition of terrain as an inherently sacred archive. In this sense, the Gonjo landscape embodies a latent treasure field (*gter sa*) in the Nyingma cosmological sense, its mountains and waters arranged as potential sites of revelation within a living territorial mandala. Germano (2005) observes that the treasure tradition was a visionary process that effectively renders Tibetan space itself, its mountains, caves, and regions, a continuing medium of scriptural disclosure and sacred memory. As he further notes, the treasure narratives of the Great Perfection portray revelation as a spatial process, in which scriptures are concealed in specific caches and re-excavated centuries later. This recursive relation of concealment and discovery transforms the Tibetan landscape into a repository of revelation, a terrain where history and sacred geography converge. As Achard (2024) notes, in traditional Nyingma and Bon perspectives, a *treasure sanctuary* (*gter gnas*) itself ensures the prosperity and good fortune of its surrounding region, linking the revelation site directly to the fertility and wellbeing of the land.

Beyond its immediate findings, this reconstruction underscores how little of Gonjo's sacred geography has yet entered the record of Tibetan studies. With the partial exception of a single *lha ri* name appearing in the title of a short-lived local association, and of course the

listings preserved in the *Gonjo Xianzhi* itself, none of the mountains or springs identified here have been documented in any other published research or standard inventories of Tibetan sacred sites. The significance of this absence is not that these places are minor, but that the means to recover them already lie within reach, embedded in the modern county gazetteers, satellite imagery, and the enduring visibility of the landscape itself. Rather than seeking further textual attestations of the few canonical mountains and pilgrimage centers long celebrated in the literature, this study demonstrates that a tentative yet coherent mapping of lesser-known sites is already possible through empirical spatial analysis. The implication is methodological as much as historical: the sacred geography of Tibet cannot be fully reconstituted by textual interpretation alone, but must be read as a living terrain whose patterns persist independently of textual revelation, awaiting rediscovery through the geography itself.

More broadly, the reconstruction presented here also forms part of the larger Tibetan Monastic Ritual Economy Model project and its associated Historical Atlas of Kham, a regional-scale historical GIS reconstruction of monasteries, sacred geography, ritual networks, and monastic settlement systems across eastern Tibet prior to the mid-twentieth century. The gazetteer-derived sacred sites, monastery locations, and reconstructed geographic data used in studies such as the present one will be made openly available through the forthcoming *Historical Atlas of Kham: A Cartographic Companion to the Tibetan Monastic Ritual Economy Model Database. Kham Edition, Version 1*, planned for release later this year through the University of California's eScholarship platform. By integrating local sacred landscapes such as Gonjo into a wider comparative spatial framework, this broader project seeks to provide an open-access geographic foundation for future historical and religious studies of eastern Tibet.

Literature Cited

Achard, Jean-Luc. 2024. "Nyingma Perspective on Obstacles to the Revelation of Treasures (gter ma)." *Histories of the Northern Treasures* (CRCAO, CNRS). Published March 2024. <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/2056>

Germano, David. 2005. "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen)". *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1:1-54.

Gonjo Xianzhi (贡觉县志) [*Gonjo County Gazetteer*]. 2010. Compiled by the Xizang Zizhiq Gongjue Xian Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (

西藏自治区贡觉县地方志编纂委员会). Chengdu: Bashu Shushe.

Huber, Toni. 1994. "When What You See is Not What You Get: Remarks on the Traditional Tibetan Presentation of Sacred Geography", pp. 39-52. In: G. Samuel, H. Gregor and E. Stutchbury (eds.), *Tantra and Popular Religion in Tibet*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

----. 1998. "History of a Tibetan Bon-po Monastery: The Bya-dur dGa'-mal Tradition of A-mdo Shar-khog". *Acta Orientalia* 59:179-227.

Karmay, Samten G. 1998a. "The Soul and the Turquoise: A Ritual for Recalling the bla." In *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, vol. 1, 311-328. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

Karmay, Samten G. 1998b. "The Cult of Mountain Deities and Its Political Significance." In *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, vol. 1, 432-450. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

Mayer, Robert. 2019. "Rethinking Treasure (part one)". *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 52:119-184.

----. 2022. "Indian *nidhi*, Tibetan *gter ma*, Guru Chos dbang, and a *Kriyātantra* on Treasure Doors: Rethinking Treasure (part two)". *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 64:368-446.

Ramble, Charles. 1999. "The Assimilation of Local Deities to the Buddhist Pantheon," in *Reflections of the Mountain*, pp. 143-158. A. Huber (ed.). Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Xie, Jisheng. 2001. "The Mythology of Tibetan Mountain Gods: An Overview. *Oral Tradition* 16(2): 343-363.

Yeh, Emily T. 2014. "The Rise and Fall of the Green Tibetan: Environmental Activism and the Struggle for the State," pp. 255-272. Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins (eds.), *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

