

**Reassembling Religion:  
Sino-Tibetan Encounters in Serta**

by

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I hope one day to produce a Chinese-language version of this dissertation. My parents will then be able to read this work themselves, rather than hearing about it from my wife, who accompanied me over these many years, and through whose eyes I was lucky enough, sometimes, to see Larung and the world.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines a Buddhist revitalization movement in the Tibetan county of Serta, in Sichuan Province in the PRC. It explores this revitalization movement as reassembled from associations of humans and nonhumans. Serta's religious landscape was torn apart in the chaotic Maoist era. Revival in this context was precisely an act of reassembly. This research shows that the revitalization process consisted of numerous occasions in which humans, texts, landscapes, and material objects all made a difference, occasions that extended this revitalization movement into Han Chinese cities. This study is intended as a contribution to the growing literature on assemblage in anthropology, to cross-disciplinary studies of religious revival, and to anthropology of religion where issues of situating religion in materiality, relationships, and encounters have been the central focus of inquiry.

More specifically in this dissertation, I explain a series of Sino-Tibetan encounters in Serta over the second half of the twentieth century. In 1952, Chinese work teams took over the region. Upon their arrival, work team cadres made great efforts to document Serta. Archival records of the time give evidence to the dramatic effects of Chinese policies on the traditional system of Serta, especially on its monastic groups. This early encounter calls attention to prophetic texts that prevailed in Serta. For at least one century, Serta had been envisioned as a mandala prone to the attack of demons. In this area, large numbers of prophecies described that when demon armies invaded Serta, wrathful gods would appear to tame the demons. Interpreting the "demon armies" as the Chinese troops, monks and nomads in Serta launched an armed resistance for taming. In the revival period of the 1980s, a new charismatic lama, Jigme Phuntsok, again deployed prophecies, this time to reassemble

religion in networks of humans and nonhumans. By creatively interpreting prophecies, Jigme Phuntsok identified new religious sites, retrieved treasures, sanctified the teachings he revealed as transmitted from old saints, and constructed himself as a bodhisattva prophesied to emerge when demons are rampant. In 1987, encouraged by a few prophecies, Jigme Phuntsok began to spread Buddhism in China, still as an effort to tame demons, but through the dharma rather than weapons. In the following decades, a Buddhist network that articulated Tibetan monks and urban Chinese groups emerged from Serta. This network involved massive flows of donations, pilgrims, and Buddhist works, and it brought enormous changes to the relationship of religion and politics in this region.

This project touches upon Buddhist philosophy as it explores those traditions that feature prophecies. Due to Buddhist doctrine, what violence, history, temporality, text, language, landscape, materiality, ethics, and human beings mean to monks are different from the conventional notions of the words. Thus this study of religion is a broad account of these themes in the ontological turn of anthropology. In this dissertation, I further investigate how Buddhist views intersect with the views of other groups, such as Tibetan nomads, Chinese officials, and Chinese laypeople.

## **CHAPTER 1**

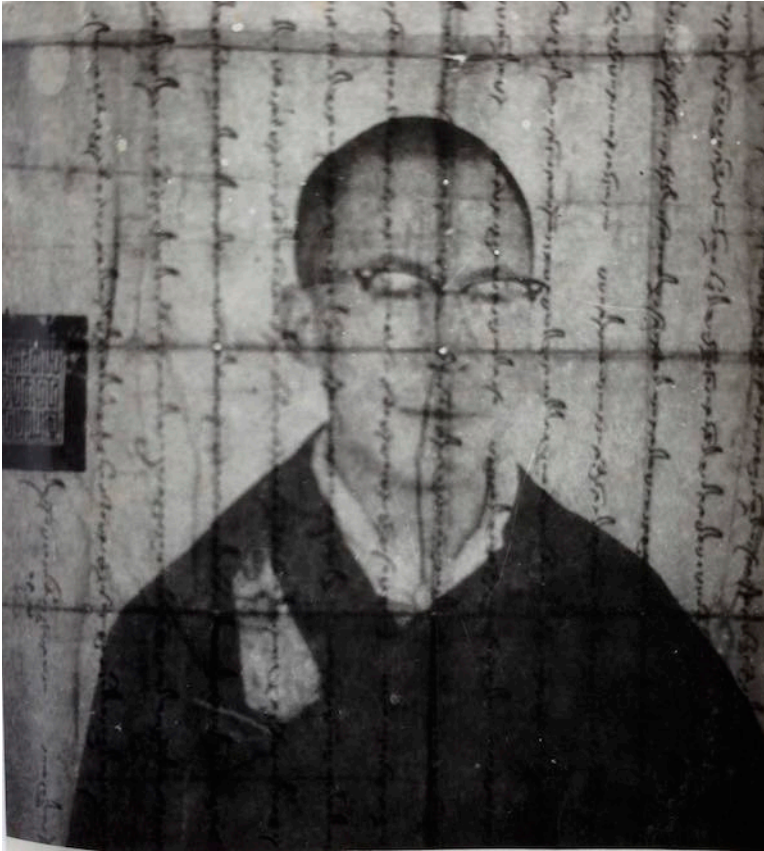
### **Introduction**

In 1960, one year after the Dalai Lama's exile, a particular photograph of him became very popular in Tibetan areas in Sichuan. The photograph is a double exposure in which written text is superimposed on the Dalai Lama's image so that the text seems to be coming out of his mouth (figure 1). At the beginning, the text asserts that Tibet has been an independent country since the Tibetan kings' introduction of Buddhism in the eighth century. It then switches to a 1933 speech by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who warned of communism as a growing threat to Buddhism. After that, the text condemns the Seventeen-Point Agreement, which the Chinese government coerced from Tibet after invading Tibet's borders in 1951. And it accuses the Chinese government of violating the Agreement in 1956 with its implementation of socialist reform in Tibetan areas in Sichuan. From that year to 1959, Khampas fought forcefully against Chinese armies, only to find that they could not rescue their monasteries from damages caused by reform and war. The text concludes by telling Khampas that the Dalai Lama has left, but will regain Tibet by appealing to the global world.

More than half a century later, this account has become standardized as the way to narrate how Tibetans and Chinese Communists encountered each other in the 1950s. After this period, Buddhist monasteries in Tibet experienced a dark time. In the Khampa areas of Sichuan, monasteries were not revived until the 1980s. In the meanwhile, the Dalai Lama never stopped pursuing his goal. His exile and his struggle to return to Tibet echo the situations of many Khampa monasteries over the second half of the twentieth century.



Fighting to survive in the shadow of the Chinese state, Buddhist monasteries have continued their role as the emblem of Tibetan history, culture, and identity.



**Figure 1: The Dalai Lama's portrait.** Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo

This dissertation examines the cultural history of the Sino-Tibetan encounter by calling attention to crucial moments shaped by Buddhist thoughts. These Buddhist ways of thoughts are hidden in the speech that is inscribed in the above photo. The reason why these thoughts are not made explicit will gradually be revealed in the following chapters. At that point, readers will better understand the task I set for myself in this dissertation. The Buddhist story I relate, I think, should not be juxtaposed with other representations of this period based on other viewpoints or foci, although readers may actually find in this work an interesting cultural history that can enrich or even challenge some of our basic understandings of the Sino-Tibetan encounter since the 1950s. My approach has to do with Buddhism. As soon as we use Buddhism as aperture to look at this encounter, the idea that history is a cluster of

complementary or contestable narratives that reflect its various aspects must be discarded. In Buddhism, pluralities reside not in representations but in “ontologies.” To explain what this means, let us look at another photograph of the Dalai Lama that was circulated in 1956 and 1957.

In this second photo (figure 2), the Dalai Lama stands on Earth, facing the Śākyamuni Buddha. The way in which the photo was made can only be guessed: most likely, the maker had a photograph of the Dalai Lama that was a full-length portrait of him at the beginning, upon which he painted the planet and the Buddha. After this step, he photographed the product again, so that the image could be replicated massively. After the photograph became very popular, the central authority of the PRC requested work teams in Kham to file reports about it to Beijing.



**Figure 2: The Dalai Lama and Śākyamuni.** Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo

According to these reports, the picture was taken in 1956. The Indian government invited the Dalai Lama to travel to India and take part in the Buddha Jayanti, an annual holiday held on the day of the Buddha's passage into nirvana. The celebrations that year were particularly special because they marked the 2500th year since the Buddha's death. During this trip, the idea of going into exile continued to haunt the young Dalai Lama. The Premier of the PRC, Zhou Enlai, made two urgent trips to India to ask him to return to Tibet. Yet the medium of Nechung, Tibet's state oracle, asked the Dalai Lama to stay in India. A group of relatives and officials also expressed different opinions about the exile.<sup>1</sup> In these reports, the photograph was said to be made when a foreign photographer was taking a picture of the Dalai Lama standing on a stone: "The Dalai Lama conjured the Śākyamuni Buddha with magic (*zuo fa*), and he transformed the stone under his feet into Earth on film." In Kham, Chinese work teams found the photograph to be enshrined in monasteries and distributed with numerous "rumors." Some said that the Buddha was asking the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet; some said that the Buddha was asking him not to pass into nirvana. Some said that the Buddha was foretelling that the Dalai Lama later would become a global leader; and some said that the prophecy being told was that the world would soon convert to Buddhism.

As we know intuitively, the image in figure 2 cannot be produced with a camera, as it is not a scene in the real world. The photograph can only be a misrepresentation. The remaining question concerns the photographer's true purpose and the work's true referent: whether it was the photographic moment, the historical event that might have sent the Dalai Lama into exile three years earlier, or something else that we do not know. However, according to Clare Harris, Tibetans used photography to depict a reincarnate lama soon after they encountered this modern technology, as they believed that a camera's precision surpassed a painter's ability to draw the correct body proportion of a reincarnation lama with

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<sup>1</sup> For this event, see Goldstein 2013: 411-12.

iconometric measurements and grids (Harris 2001: 187-89). Harris's observation points out how much Tibetans appreciated photography's objectivity. Khampas who revered the photo certainly could tell that the image was different from what a camera could produce normally. Indeed, from the Buddhist point of view, this difference explains why photography is more reliable. Buddhist philosophies systematically explain how and why the mental images of ordinary humans prevent them perceiving the true reality of the world as composed by buddhas and buddha fields. In this Buddhist system, the photograph is not a misrepresentation but a representation that touches the truth. It allows later spectators to experience the photographic moment in which the Dalai Lama, as a fully enlightened being who comes back to teach ordinary sentient beings, displayed his enlightening power by showing how ordinary perception is wrong.

This dissertation explores how Tibetan lamas and monks make Buddhist representations, through speech, written texts, images, photographs, material objects, or even landscapes. As the following chapters explore these topics, they show how the epistemological questions around these Buddhist representations have tremendously shaped histories, ethics, and politics in the Sino-Tibetan encounter. Ultimately, this dissertation asks what the encounter might have meant in a world for which the ontological underpinning is Buddhist. However, precisely because every ordinary human is deluded, and because the true image of the world that was inscribed in the Dalai Lama's photo, as well as his true intention, still recedes from our view, we can only investigate the heteroglossic space around the lacuna, giving attention, for example, to how Khampas interpreted the photo. As soon as we look at Buddhist representations directly, we can only make speculations about them, from our own points of view. We will soon find that these Buddhist representations are designed as heuristic devices that direct human attention against itself. For this reason, the cultural history

I present in this work can be nothing more than my own speculation. I take this as a lesson in why anthropology needs the Buddha's eyes.

### **The Subjugation of Demons**

It seems to me that the photograph in figure 2 might have related to an important Buddhist theme: the taming of demons. In what Buddhism calls the “sensuous realm (kāmadhātu),” the lowest of the three realms of existence, sentient beings experience life, death, and rebirth in six realms: they can become denizens of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and divinities. The goal of Buddhist teachings is to liberate these beings from this circle of death and rebirth, as Buddhism asserts that this circle is the source of sufferings. Buddhist demon, Māra (meaning the “maker of death”), is a powerful deity in this sensuous realm. Māra prevents beings from achieving liberation and thus conquering death.

Early Buddhist texts offer a variety of descriptions of Māra. Most crucially, “to subjugate Māra” is one of the eight episodes commonly highlighted in the biographies of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. This episode occurred before the Buddha was enlightened. Both to prevent this enlightenment and to keep the Buddha from teaching enlightenment methods to others, Māra attempted to impede the Buddha in various ways. Most famously, he tried to dissuade the Buddha from his quest under the Bodhi Tree. He also sent his daughters to seduce the Buddha. On all occasions, the Buddha evaded Māra's traps. Yet Māra could also tempt others, Buddhist disciples and non-Buddhists alike, to work against the Buddha. Indeed, the Buddha could have lived much longer, had one of his students, Ānanda, requested this. Yet Māra caused Ānanda to miss the opportunity. The historical Buddha then passed into nirvāṇa.

In tantric Buddhism, a parallel story is that of Vajrapāṇi's subjugation of Rudra. Rudra may actually be the Hindu deity Śiva, whom early Buddhist tantrists incorporated to explain why Buddhism needs tantras. Buddhist tantras are focused on the visualization of a mandala to which a tantric deity is invited to enter. After this step, the tantric performer channels the magical power of the deity towards a mundane or a supramundane purpose. For mundane purposes, there are four categories: pacification of difficulties (conflicts, disease, hindrance, etc.), augmentation of auspicious elements (wealth, life span, merit, etc.), control of opponents (nonbelievers, enemies, gods, etc.), and subjugation (killing, destruction, etc.). The myth of Rudra embodies all these four categories, but by invoking the image of Vajrapāṇi---a wrathful tantric deity who ultimately kills Rudra---it highlights the third and fourth, control and subjugation of opponents. Rudra represents “our nature as embodied humans who are constitutionally disposed to lust and self-protection, to arrogance and rage.” (Kapstein 2000: 176). In order to fight those strong obstacles, inside and outside, a Buddhist practitioner will visualize wrathful tantric deities to destroy them or use violent methods akin to those of Vajrapāṇi to deal with them.

For many centuries, Buddhists in Tibet have used the Rudra myth to describe foreign invaders, who, they believe, are possessed by demons. Interestingly, one can find a number of similarities between the history of the PRC and the myth of Rudra set in the land of Lanka. For example, after Rudra became a leader of beasts and demons, he first challenged the demon-king of the time. This king, foreseeing Rudra's defeat by Vajrapāṇi, simply asked his subjects to surrender to Rudra. This recalls how Chinese Communists expelled Chiang kai-shek's Nationalist government to Taiwan. After that, gods and Śrāvaka monks could not sustain the test of Rudra, and they all surrendered to him. This recalls how the government of the PRC utilized Buddhism as pawns in its diplomatic achievements in South and Southeast Asia (Welch 1972). In the myth, when Rudra threatened the survival of Buddhist teachings,

buddha families first sent an emanation of Śākyamuni to divert him. After this failed, they sent another representative, an emanation of Hayagrīva, to tame Rudra. This Hayagrīva seemed to fail, but he transformed himself into a candy, tempting the demon to swallow him and escaping. Through this step, the Hayagrīva aggravated Rudra. This actually paved the way for Vajrapāṇi's final subjugation, during which the Hayagrīva watched the subjugation from a distance and empowered it.<sup>2</sup> It is here that we are brought back to the photograph in question.

In Tibet, the Dalai Lama is known as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Could the Dalai Lama's exile, then, evoke the strategic action of Hayagrīva in the myth of Rudra, given that Hayagrīva is the wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara? Note how, in the photo, Śākyamuni and the Dalai Lama appear together, each positioned beyond the Earth. Was Vajrapāṇi the photo's tacit call? It is worth recalling that, according to Harris, when Khampa guerrillas carried photographs of the Dalai Lama to their battles with the Chinese, the photo acted as material indices of Hayagrīva, the being who made the defeat of Rudra possible (Harris 2001: 188). The link suggests an explanation for the myth's role: Khampa fighters saw themselves in the role of Vajrapāṇi, the subjugator of demons. This will be more clearly shown in the later chapters.

In an interesting article, Carole McGranahan discusses how Tibetans imagine Mao and give him various Buddhist guises. In two of McGranahan's examples, the Tibetan artist Karma Phuntsok depicts Mao "in the pose of the Buddhist deity Mañjuśrī, hovering over the beaten body of a Tibetan woman, with a sash of grenades around his neck, and the Dalai Lama's Potala palace and monastery in the background" (McGranahan 2012: 233, figure 3 and 4). Mañjuśrī is the bodhisattva of wisdom. Since the Yuan Dynasty, Tibetans have related this deity to imperial Chinese emperors. Yet the Buddhist guise assigned to Mao in

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<sup>2</sup> In his elaborate explanation of the myth of Rudra, Jacob Dalton (2011) points out that Śākyamuni, Hayagrīva, and Vajrapāṇi correspond to the four categories of mundane purposes that we mentioned: Śākyamuni represents pacification, and Hayagrīva enhancement. Vajrapāṇi represents the third and the fourth categories: control and subjugation.



these two paintings is not Mañjuśrī. At the most, we may say that Mao appears as a fake Mañjuśrī, with only his legs resembling the deity's traditional iconography (figure 5). In Buddhist painting, Mañjuśrī brandishes the sword of wisdom in his right hand and the Sutra of Perfect Wisdom in his left. Here, Mao lets his right hand droop around his waist, and he holds human skin, a cell phone, a thermos, and a musket rifle whose shape recalls *dung chen* or a long trumpet used in Buddhist ceremonies. In these two paintings, Mao's appearance actually reflects demons, which have different kinds and colors. The backdrops of these two paintings well display how these evil beings goad foreign armies to destroy Buddhist centers, and how they entrap sentient beings in desire, hatred, and ignorance, the so-called "three poisons" in Buddhism.

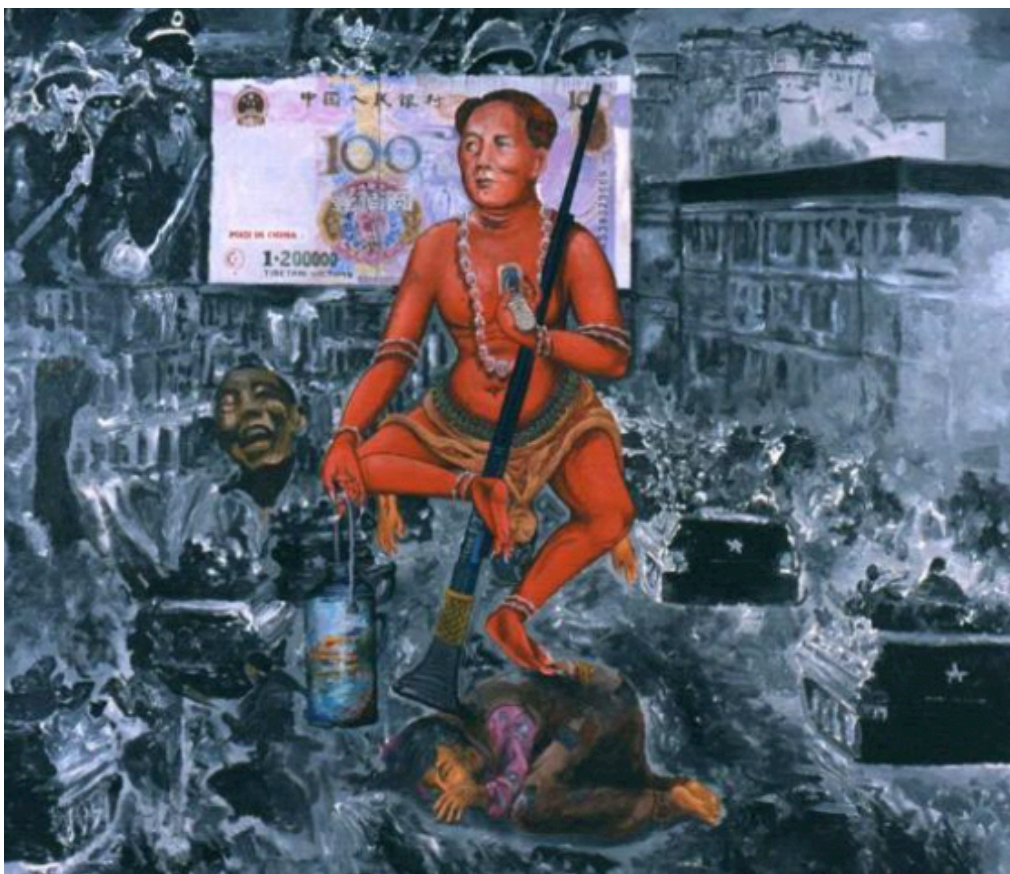


Figure 3: Karma Phuntsok's *The Thermos Bearer*, reproduced in Mcgranahan 2012



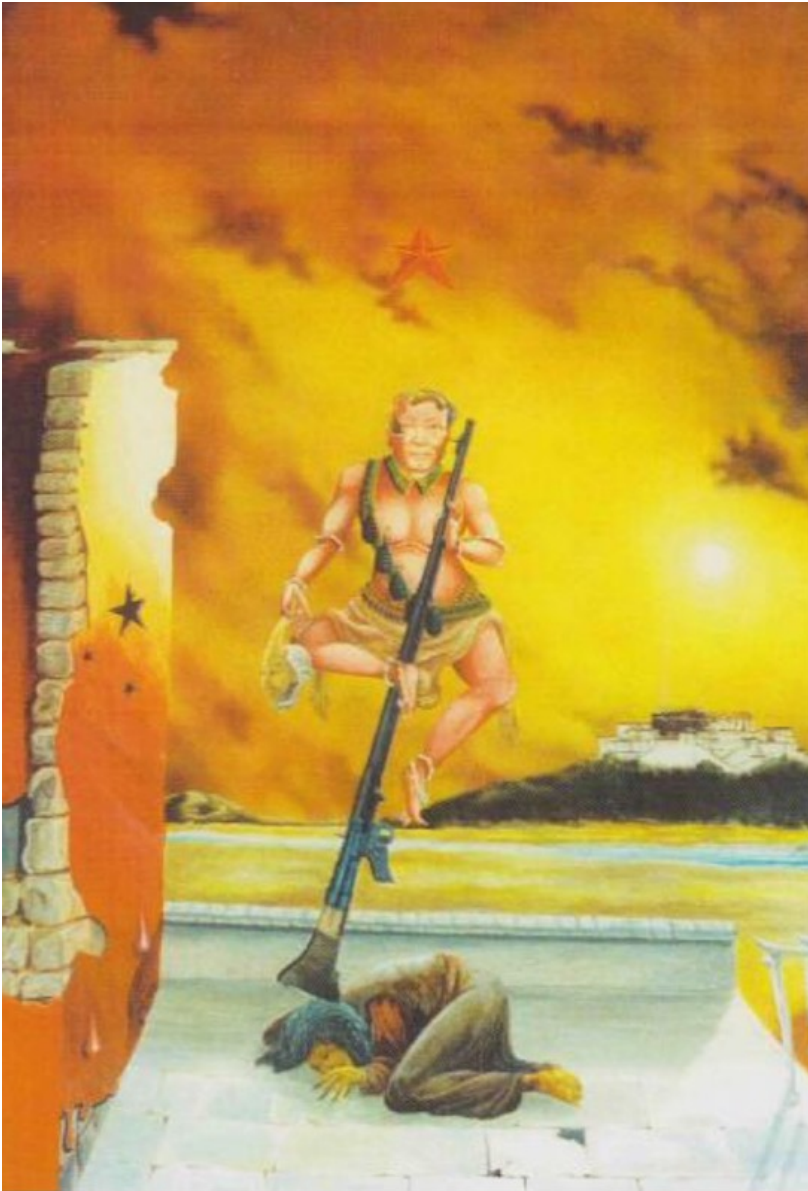


Figure 4: Karma Phuntsok's *Chairman Mao in Tibet*, reproduced in Mcgranahan 2012

The best proof of this interpretation is the Tibetan woman lying on the ground in both paintings. It is said that Rudra was born at a funeral site, and her mother died during childbirth. To survive, Rudra devoured the corpse of her mother and the many other corpses in the cemetery and grew into a powerful demon. It is important to note that the woman on the ground is a Tibetan. That the artist depicts Mao as emerging from the matrix of Tibet recalls how Rudra's earlier lifetimes are described in his myth. At the beginning, in a different aeon, the future Rudra was a prince. He and his servant, Denpak, were both the students of a Buddhist monk. Rudra and Denpak had divergent interpretations of their

teacher's words. Believing that his own interpretation was correct, Rudra exiled Denpak and his teacher. Following these interpretations, he spent "the rest of his days wearing human skins and eating human flesh, living in charnel grounds, conducting orgies, and performing terrible asceticism" (Dalton 2011: 19). After his death, Rudra had a series of terrible rebirths until he found himself in the lowest level of hell. He wondered, in a brief moment of clarity, what had brought him there. The bodhisattva Vajrasattva appeared to him and told him that he had only his karma to blame. Yet Rudra continued to make errors, and he eventually became the demon king in this world. Meanwhile, his old servant, Denpak, was reincarnated as Vajrapāṇi. In sum, it was through a misunderstanding of Buddhist teaching that Rudra became Rudra. As is shown here and as many Buddhist stories explain, Karma Phuntsok is depicting Mao as a former Buddhist follower who committed horrible mistakes because of a misreading of Buddhist teacher.

In April 1957, in Nyitso Monastery (Nyi mtsho dgon) in Dawu, when the photograph in figure 2 was massively distributed in individual households, Chinese work teams also found the circulation of a written prophecy. The prophecy was about "seven disasters" which occurred annually from "the Year of Dragon to the Year of Pig." As the work team noted, Tibetans in Dawu identified this period as falling between 1952 (the year of water dragon) and 1959 (the year of earth pig). By 1957, when the report was filed, four of the seven disasters had been experienced: "the emergence of evil beings in heaven," "flood and starvation," "the decrease of religion," and "the arrival of wars and misfortune." In that year, readers were asked to "eat less meat." The two disasters that would occur in 1958 and 1959 would be "the emergence of various beasts" and "the loss of all rights," after which "bodhisattvas will take the lead." "They will," the prophecy stated, "descend from celestial abodes and shake the world everywhere."



Figure 5: Mañjuśrī, <http://buddhajourney.net/whos-who-in-buddhism-manjusri-bodhisattva/>

Like so many prophecies I will examine, this particular prophecy was narrating a tale of demons: evil beings who emerged in heaven, devastated religion, and injured living beings---but who would, eventually, be subjugated by wrathful deities. As I will also show, the prophecy implied that the readers should kill demons. In this particular case, the prophecy concludes by urging Tibetans to share the text with others: “Whoever doubt [and thus fails to circulate] the text will fall ill and die, and he will be burned and pierced by nails in his later lifetimes.” Obviously, these tortures allude to a rebirth in hell. Readers in Dawu must have found themselves in a difficult situation. If they did not respond to the prophetic message, they would experience a rebirth in hell; if they misunderstood the meaning of “killing

demons”---this violence, actually, could be taken in many different ways---they would likewise end up in hell. Epistemologically and ethically, deciphering Buddhist representations became a crucial but fraught task. Indeed, as is shown in the myth of Rudra, the appearance of Mao as a demon in Tibet implies that the Land of Snows had already been a place that was as gloomy as a cemetery, and occupied by demons. It goes without saying that the Tibetans would misread prophetic messages. This understanding pertains to some ancient traditions in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

### **Padmasambhava, Treasure, and Jigme Phuntsok**

Jigme Phuntsok was born in 1933. After the end of the Maoist era, he became the most renowned Buddhist lama in Kham. Jigme Phuntsok’s monastery, Larung, is located in Serta County, in Sichuan Province. Larung now has become the most influential Nyingma monastery in eastern Tibet, the largest Buddhist complex in the world, with a population of 10,000-20,000 people. Among the monastery’s residents are more than one thousand Chinese monks, nuns, and laypeople. Jigme Phuntsok’s first contact with Chinese Buddhist groups occurred in 1987. After that, he and his students began a massive, and ultimately extremely effective, campaign to gain Chinese converts. In the ensuing years, many other monasteries emulated Jigme Phuntsok’s Chinese-focused proselytizing, and today, Khampa monasteries and monks are a prominent feature of China’s religious landscape.

Despite its prominent status in Kham’s Buddhist revival, Larung is a monastery that was newly established in 1980, right after the Chinese government allowed monasteries to be re-opened in this region. In many respects, it was Jigme Phuntsok’s personal aura that contributed to the success of Larung. This was true especially in the early development of the monastery. Scholarly writings describe Jigme Phuntsok as the scion of an impressive



reincarnation lineage, a self-disciplined monk, a resolute reformist, and most crucially, a *gter ston* or “treasure revealer.” It is not an exaggeration to say that much of Jigme Phuntsok’s reputation derived from his revelations of *gter ma* or “treasure texts” in the Nyingma.



**Figure 6:** Larung in Serta County, photo by the author

In April 1994, Jigme Phuntsok left Serta, travelling north to Golok in Qinghai, where he made his way to Nyanpo Yurtse (Gnyan po g’yu rtse), a sacred mountain with a lake at its foot. At that time, the lake could not have been much different from what I saw during a research tour in 2015. The lake is an important pilgrimage site in this region, and people go there to burn juniper branches and toss written prayers into the air. No other activities are allowed. On the day I visited, I stood where Jigme Phuntsok had stood. I put my hand into the water. Fishes swam toward me, biting my finger. Peering into the water, I saw numerous religious items thrown there by pilgrims. In 1994, when Jigme Phuntsok stood here, he

watched the lake for a while, and stepped into it. Under the gaze of his retinues, he reached into the water, removed a treasure chest and brought it back to Larung.

Later, using this chest as medium, Jigme Phuntsok revealed from his consciousness a tantric teaching of Vajrasattva. This Vajrasattva is the same bodhisattva who appeared to Rudra and revealed to him the workings of karma. As Jigme Phuntsok asserted, this particular teaching would be very useful in purifying Chinese people of their karmic sin. He explained this to be the instruction of Padmasambhava, an eighth-century Indian master whom the Nyingma reveres as the “Second Buddha.” Beginning in 1994, Jigme Phuntsok’s students began to pass this Vajrasattva teaching along to Han Chinese people. In doing so, Jigme Phuntsok was invoking the notion that treasure teachings were left by Padmasambhava, who commissioned the later reincarnations of his twenty-five students to retrieve them. Dorje Dudjom (Rdo rje bdud ’joms), one of these students, is the person to whom Jigme Phuntsok traced back his reincarnation lineages, and he had revealed many other treasures to prove this reincarnation connection.

This invocation of the treasure tradition connects the Buddhist revitalization after the Maoist era to another renaissance period that occurred much earlier in Tibetan history. During this earlier period stretching from the tenth to the thirteenth century, Buddhist groups were revived from the political chaos caused by the collapse of the Tibetan empire. Their revival ultimately raised Tibet from a periphery to a central place in the Buddhist world. In the process, various cultural flows and interactions among Tibet’s indigenous movements and neighboring Buddhist countries gave shape to Buddhist schools in Tibet. While some groups chose to introduce new religious texts and thought from India and other regions, those old traditions existing prior to the imperial collapse were brought together to constitute the Nyingma (meaning “ancient”).

What also emerged during this time was a standard historical periodization that divides Tibetan history in Buddhist terms. In one way, the religious history of Tibet occurs in four stages. In the first stage, Tibet is a pre-Buddhist, barbarian land occupied by evil beings. In the second stage, from the seventh to the mid-ninth centuries, Buddhism is introduced as a civilizing force under the rule of the great Buddhist kings, inaugurated by the emperor Songtsen Gampo. The third stage is a chaotic period beginning with the persecution of Buddhism by the emperor Langdarma and the collapse of imperial authority, which last for more than one century. Then the fourth stage begins in the late tenth century with the Buddhist renaissance, as already described. This fourfold scheme sometimes is made into a two-stage periodization. The first part, known as “the early spread of Buddhist teaching (*bstan pa snga dar*),” begins with the miraculous landing of Buddhist texts and objects on the palace roof at Yumbu Lagang during the reign of Lha Totori Nyentsen (b. c. 460), and it continues until the reigns of the great Buddhist kings. The second part, the later spread of Buddhist teachings (*bstan pa phyi dar*), begins with the new wave of Buddhist translations led by Drokmi Lotsawa (992-1074). These two stages sometimes include a middle, interim period (*bar dar*) as well (Cuevas 2013: 52-53).

In these and later centuries, a new cult focused on Padmasambhava emerged, mostly in the Nyingma. According to this cult, without Padmasambhava’s efforts to tame evil beings in pre-Buddhist Tibet, the Tibetan kings could not have converted Tibet to Buddhism. Tradition claims that during his sojourn in Tibet, Padmasambhava foresaw the later collapse of the empire and the rise of Langdarma. He buried numerous treasure texts, to be revealed by future generations at appropriate times. This notion allowed the Nyingma to confront new scriptures translated by the new school. As Buddhist scholars have noted, this creative strategy had to do with the existence of imperial remains: the artifacts and hoards of precious materials kept underground after the imperial collapse and rediscovered as treasures

(Davidson, 2005: 213). Yet in the later development of the tradition, the Nyingma increasingly stressed the role of enlightened beings as concealers of treasures. Explanations for concealments also changed: while early narratives have these activities as a way of protecting religious items from adverse conditions, more and more prophecies later are used to explain how treasures are hidden for the purpose of being discovered at specific times and putting towards particular uses (Gyatso 1996). Since the thirteenth century, when Buddhism experienced decline and revival, prophecies emerged and claimed that former enlightened beings had foretold the scenes and left their solutions for readers to decipher and follow. This often happened during and after foreign conquests.

In Serta, Jigme Phuntsok's students designated the revival era after the 1980s as *bstan pa yang dar*, the "next spread of Buddhist teachings." borrowed the traditional periodization and applied its logic to contemporary events and people. Thus Mao becomes juxtaposed with Langdarma, the socialist experience is folded into the imperial legacy, and the revival period is described as another renaissance.. By conjuring old saints, monks like Jigme Phuntsok found ways to sanctify their agenda, teachings, and even religious inventions. It is important to note that many other elements were also involved during the revelation of a treasure, not only teachings or religious items thought to be treasures. A treasure revelation could, for example, be accompanied by the re-discovery of a religious site that Padmasambhava or other enlightened beings once visited. These sites might then become sites for pilgrimage and temple-building. Most importantly, by retrieving treasures, Tibetans confirmed that they were able to retrieve the intentions of enlightened beings from within their very surroundings. The land of Tibet was not hollow. It was infused with hidden plans and meanings.



## Media, Intention, and Recursivity

A material treasure (known as *sa gter*, “earth treasure”) could be a statue, a jewel, a bone, a petrified conch, or a ritual implement from which a teaching is revealed. These objects all look durable, which contributes to the idea that a treasure endures a long time of concealment before being revealed from the landscape, which likewise conveys a sense of firmness and permanence. For most people, the physical materiality of these treasures confirms the reliability and authenticity of teachings drawn from them. Here, Buddhist traditions may seem to lend themselves to anthropological approaches to materiality and media. To consider how this may prevent a deep understanding of Buddhism and the Buddhist world, let us look at Anya Bernstein’s ethnographic report from Buryatia, Russia.

In 2005, in order to determine the proper sites of constructions in a valley of some new monasteries, Khambo Lama asked local people whether there were any auspicious places or events in this region. He heard from them that ten years ago some hunters had found in the pine forest above the village a *tsa tsa*, a traditional pyramid-shaped Buddhist figuring which is often used in Tibet to fill out a stupa. Khambo Lama immediately headed to the spot with some other people, but they could not find any more treasures. On their return from the site, Khambo Lama sat down under a tree and entered a deep state of meditation. When he opened his eyes, he saw the face of the goddess Yangchenma that appeared on a large stone right in front of him. Khambo Lama told the accompanying monks that there was a Buddha sitting there, and they saw what he saw---a big stone covered with multi-colored mineral stains, which could vaguely resemble a deity. Everyone then understood that Soodoi Lama, a former saint in the region, actually arrived here and left the pyramid-shaped figurine for future use, because the self-arisen Yangchenma is the main meditational deity of Soodoi Lama. By regaining his treasure, Buryat Buddhists can connect with this famous prophet and the other previous incarnations of his lineage (Bernstein, 2011: 645-46).

Before this point, Bernstein uses Alfred Gell’s “distributed personhood” to explain treasures. “Given that treasures are believed to be objects with a certain kind of agency, defined here in its primary philosophical sense as the capacity to act in the world, Buddhists approach these objects as potential expressions of past intentions, such as those of previous lamas.

Translating these emic beliefs into the language of anthropological theory, one can say that treasure objects possesses what [Alfred] Gell called ‘distributed personhood’, where the object is viewed as an extension of a person...an example of a second-class agency...in a texture of social relationship” (2011: 626). Following this logic, Bernstein uses the episode quoted above to explain how material treasure, here the pyramid-shaped figurine, helps connect humans through time.



**Figure 7: Treasures revealed by Jigme Phuntsok, from his 2001 biography**

Many interesting details are overlooked in Bernstein’s analysis. First, notions like “distributed personhood” fail to seize how much the intention of the enlightened being in this case was not visible until a series of performances brought together numerous humans and things. The recognition of the treasure was the result of these performances in which the bonding of objects to human subjects and social ties was transitory before they vanish from view. After they each perform a function---local people who give the news, a fruitless search, tree, stone, etc.---all recede into the background where they themselves become embedded in their usual appearances. Aggregates then are reduced into the notion of “distributed personhood,” a reduction that focuses attention only on one treasure and two saints. As Latour notices, this tautological way to see any social assembly as emerging out of what has already been assembled misconstrues material objects as “intermediaries” rather than “mediators.” By differentiating the two terms, Latour highlights the importance of unraveling

the assembly to bring to the foreground potential uncertainties carried through encounters. An object is a mediator, as he notes, which, far from an intermediary that transports meaning or force without transformation, has to be viewed as a channel of force whose input cannot predict its output, or as a vehicle of meaning whose specificity has to be taken into account every time. The most important mediator in this story, the stone, deserves a special consideration.

What does it mean to say that while Khambo Lama saw a deity, his students only saw a stone whose pattern resembled the deity? Most readers will assume that what Khambo Lama referred to here was the pattern. Yet Buddhist readers can detect that the scenario actually suggests that the stone is the deity. They may even feel that the people who first gave the news were the emanations of the deity. At that moment in which the figurine as a treasure was revealed to the students, Khambo Lama was teaching them to purify their illusory thought to approach the truth of the stone. The story is suggesting that this wisdom rather than the figurine is the true treasure. This hidden meaning is how an enlightened being's intention is embodied in the Buddhist world. An ethnographer needs to ask what makes a Buddhist treasure different from a landmine, and an enlightened being's intention different from a soldier's intention in Gell's case.

Nirmāṇakāya, or the "emanation body" of a buddha, states that buddhas appear in various forms in order for sentient beings to perceive them. At Larung, monks talk about how a vulture may actually be a *ḍākinī*, a cloud a buddha, and a beggar a bodhisattva who appears in this form to test one's compassion. In particular, this dissertation shows how landscapes are embodied as buddha fields, as mandalas. To show what this means and how this pertains to Bernstein's case, let me introduce a treasure site that has much to do with Jigme Phuntsok.

In Shanglam Shipa (Shang lam gshis pa) in Nyarong, a white granite boulder pierces the sky like a sword (figure 6). It is a Tibetan belief that the place was once visited by

miraculous enlightened beings and saints: Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, Variocana, Yeshe Tsogyal, Marpa, and Milarepa. Buddhist monks relate the boulder's formation to the magical activities of Padmasambhava, who is known to have consecrated twenty-five Khampa mountains by subjugating their original residents: evil beings and demons. At Shanglam Shipa, Padmasambhava used a ritual dagger to pin down a demon on earth, right through its heart. After that, the demon's heart was manifest as a cave, and the ritual dagger as the white boulder. Therefore, the boulder's true reality, in its interior, is a crystal mandala of Vajrakīlaya. More fundamentally, the mountain partakes of the dharma nature of Vajrakīlaya, who embodies the enlightened activity of a buddha manifesting in an intensively wrathful yet compassionate form to subjugate the delusion and negativity that can arise as obstacles to Buddhist teachings and practices.

This set of notions might not have existed until Nyakla Pema Dudul (1816-1872) made the boulder into a treasure site and eventually into his monastic seat. The construction of his monastery, Kalzang Monastery (Bskal bzang dgon), began in 1860, after Pema Dudul consecrated a plot of land to the south of the boulder, in accordance with several prophecies. During the consecration, the sky was filled with lays of light and rainbow. Aromatic scents and melodious sound wafted from every direction. Pema Dudul had a vision in which one thousand buddhas and bodhisattvas dissolved into the site. Devotees from Shanglam Shipa donated funds and building materials. Five years later, this monastery was erected as an important Nyingma center. Pema Dudul's most famous disciples included Lerab Lingpa, who also revealed the treasure at the boulder. Lerab Lingpa is Jigme Phuntsok's previous reincarnation.



**Figure 8: Jigme Phuntsok before the white boulder at Kalzang Monastery, courtesy of Larung**

In this milieu, in 1984, the abbot of Kalzang Monastery invited Jigme Phuntsok to visit his monastery, hosting him for a few weeks in Lerab Lingpa's old hermitage, which was next to the white mountain, the mandala of Vajrakīlaya. In this way, Jigme Phuntsok would be able to retrieve the Vajrakīlaya teachings of Lerab Lingpa from the mountain. In 1910, together with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Lerab Lingpa once performed wrathful tantric teachings to expel British and imperial Chinese armies. That is to say, the abbot of Kalzang Monastery was hoping Jigme Phuntsok to tame Chinese Communists.

As this dissertation uses anthropological theories to explore Buddhist traditions, it accepts that a successful anthropological discussion must find ways to rework these theories with respect to the philosophy of Buddhism. This is because the rationale behind these traditions is this philosophy. Only by following this philosophy can we explain why these traditions are legitimate to monks. In Serta, monks often rebuke other ways of seeing as

“ignorance,” a term they use to describe other groups as misunderstanding the nature of reality. Tensions in ethical or political terms sometimes emerge from different truth assumptions. This is so especially when we look at conflicts between monks and government officials. For these reasons, a theoretical focus is what anthropologists recently call “multiple ontologies,” and I propose that many encounters in Serta are about different truth assumptions and their interactions.

As Buddhism asserts, ordinary humans cannot really perceive the nature of reality. Therefore, the true intention of an enlightened being and its connection with material media evokes not so much “distributed personhood” but “captivation,” another concept from Gell (1998: 21-23). Gell uses this word to refer to the situation of not being able to track through a work to retrieve the original intention and bodily engagement of its author. In discussing how Johannes Vermeer’s *The Lacemaker* captivates his eyes, Gell describes the situation as follows:

I am left suspended between two worlds; the world in which I ordinarily live, in which objects have rational explanations and knowable origins, and the world adumbrated in the picture, which defeats explanation. Between these worlds, I am trapped in a logical band; I must accept that Vermeer’s painting is part of ‘my’ world—for here it is, physically before me—while at the same time it cannot belong to this world because I only know this world through my experience of being an agent within it, and I cannot achieve the necessary congruence between my experience of agency and the agency (Vermeer’s) which originated the painting” (Gell 1998: 69).

Yet Buddhism has a set of heuristics to explain the truth correctly. In using these heuristic devices, Buddhist lamas often draw on a large number of humans and nonhumans to help spectators recognize the truth. Khambo Lama, Jigme Phuntsok, and the abbot of Kalzang Monastery all carefully thought of sites and arranged time. It was after a series of performance that the final meaning of the events---meanings that teach Buddhist truth---was made visible. As this dissertation shows, if we want to make clear how Nyingma monks deal

with things in making of their Buddhist assembly, we have to first make sure that, as Latour teaches us, “every entity has been reshuffled, redistributed, unraveled, and ‘de-socialized’ so that the task of gathering them again can be made.” (2005: 221) And we need to do this in radical ways. Eventually, this dissertation shows that what violence, history, temporality, language, landscape, materiality, ethics, and human beings mean to Buddhist monks are different from the conventional notions of these words.

### **Reassembling Religion**

From February 2014 to August 2016, I conducted a total of eighteenth months of ethnographic and archival research on Serta. Before this fieldwork, I had made periodic visits to the field between 2001 and 2014, as a traveler, amateur photographer, and college student. I still remember the day I encountered Larung for the first time. During that trip, my original plan was to make a visit to Aba. But following a Tibetan monk and his Chinese student, I eventually made a tour to Larung. We arrived very late that day. The bus driver dropped us at the village of Nupzur, ten miles away from the county seat of Serta. From the village, a mountain path led travelers into the valley of Larung. A tractor driver gave us a ride. It was evening by then, and I remember sitting on the trailer with a group of herders as we slowly entered the monastic seat—which, I discovered, consisted of tens of thousands of wooden huts, all built on the slopes of the nearby mountains. The huts, with lamps lit inside, shone through the darkness like stars above our heads. I felt I was traversing the Milky Way. Happiness streaked through me like a comet.

When I woke up the next morning, I saw the monastery more clearly. Although it still seemed solemn and crowded, a large portion of the monastic complex had fallen into ruins. I walked into a dharma assembly hall. In front of me, a group of monks were waiting for two

Chinese soldiers to register them as legal residents of the monastery. By that time, Larung had been subject to a government crackdown for almost two years. International media had given close attention to the Chinese government's decision to brutally demolish the monastery and force more than ten thousand monks to leave. Unaware of this news and standing already close to the soldiers, I began to take photos, an act that surely signaled an astonishing degree of defiance. Quickly enough, the soldiers grabbed my camera and pushed me toward a room to meet their leaders. After it became clear that I was simply a college student who had come to Larung on vacation, they asked me to turn over all the films I had, and urged me to leave Larung immediately.

Since this initial encounter, I have taken state violence to be a focus of inquiry as I conduct research on Serta. In order to understand this violence that has confronted Tibetans since the 1950s, I made several visits to the Prefectural Archive of Ganzi and the County Archive of Serta from 2005 to 2008. At that time, all archival records in these two institutions were open to scholars. After 2008, researchers were no longer able to use records compiled during the Republican period or records written in Tibetan. Yet all records compiled after 1950 were still open to the public. These records are classified according to work units. The records I examined were compiled in two government sectors: the Party Committee of the Prefecture of Ganzi (*ganzi zhou zhouwei*) and the People's Committee of the County of Serta (*seda xian renwei*).

These records are precious documents of Chinese political and military campaigns during the 1950s. Yet the most useful information they tell us are Tibetan viewpoints as seen through the eyes of Chinese cadres. Although these cadres had limited knowledge of the Buddhist tradition of demons, of prophecies, and of the complex philosophical accounts of the issues, they still made efforts to report these issues, because of a fear that such mysterious Buddhist traditions would undermine their rule. The records thus allowed me to piece



together a chain of events that shows how prophecies led to the start of the guerrilla war, which Tibetans imagined as a defensive effort against demons. Finally, by juxtaposing these archival records with other evidence, such as prophecies that still exist in Serta, I encountered a history of violence, where Chinese Communists, Tibetan nomads, and Buddhist monks became entangled by their various, often conflicting interpretations of demons.

The earlier 1950s history offers background on Jigme Phuntsok's use of prophecies to revive religion, which I explore through a study of the lama's hagiographies, memoirs, religious works, photographs, and interviews. In conducting these interviews, I consulted individuals both in and outside the monastery. Eventually, I came face-to-face with a shifting Buddhist world composed of holy mountains, rituals, lamas, monasteries, relics, architecture, pilgrimage guides, folklore, and, most importantly, diverse imaginaries of deities and demons. I emphasize that this world was in motion: in the 1950s, due to the arrival of Chinese Communists, even those aspects that seemed most enduring were made to change. Eventually, during the revival period of the 1980s and the 1990s, monastic groups in Serta responded to the earlier violence by seeking to forge a new path for Buddhism. The contemporary Buddhist network that brings together Tibetan and Chinese Buddhists was first stitched together from this local Buddhist world.

When scholars talk about religious revival, they often understand it as a "reversal." According to this logic, religion first experiences a decline and becomes confined in the private sector; when it comes back into the public domain, the process of reversal is a "revival." Using this "reversal" logic to explain the religious revival in the PRC calls attention to the role of the state. In the Maoist era, official campaigns caused religion to disappear from the public sphere; in the reform era, a more lenient religious policy allowed religion to emerge again. The existence of a strong state offers some purchase for producing theory from the context of the PRC, but such theory should aim to challenge the reversal

logic rather than to complement it. In Serta, when Buddhist monasteries were rebuilt in the 1980s, state violence had subjected an entire generation of monks to exile, death, and damaged vows. In sum, rather than asking how religion might have been reproduced, and thus to some extent preserved, in a “secret” private sector, the more compelling and important question is how revival took place in spite of such covert reproduction—how, in short, it emerged out of utter disjuncture and ruins.

When state violence has torn apart the religious landscape, revival is precisely an act of re-assembly. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour argues that social theories should not posit and build themselves on a preexisting domain of the social. Instead, he proposes tracing the social as cobbled together from associations of humans and nonhumans. By understanding religious revival as a reassemblage, I take a similar strategy: rather than assuming a preexisting domain of religion that came into contact with other domains, such as the state, I examine the processes by which encounters amongst humans and things continually put “religion” together.

In this assemblage, “Serta” is to be found in prophecies, in pilgrimages to holy sites, in visualizations of buddhas and gods, and in invocations of Buddhist stories and tropes. It is only by understanding Serta in these terms that the work of Jigme Phuntsok and his students becomes legible: they were reassembling a place for themselves, and they drew on deep Buddhist tradition to do so. The earlier ties between Tibet and China in this tradition certainly played a role in bringing these Tibetans to China. Yet we need to track how this happened. Indeed, the more precisely we explore the issue, the more clearly we see the necessity of understanding this Buddhist network as assembled from encounters among humans and things.

## Summary of Chapters

Chapter 2 examines the early encounters between Serta and Communists. In Serta, when cadres were brought face to face with the Tibetan society, their perceptions were the raw materials of archival representation. As they organized these perceptions to inscribe them on paper, they fashioned the representations in line with political agenda to fulfill their role as state agents. Among those Han Chinese cadres, in particular, the distress of living in this tough nomadic region strengthened their conviction that their work was important to the nation. Those occasions on which they represented Serta with tools at their disposal—for the most parts pens and notebooks—were where they thought about what their work meant to the state, where they disciplined their sight and hearing, and where the state's vision of Kham had itself anchored in glimpses and observations based on the encounters of bodies. In Serta, as these archival activities appropriating the gaze of the state revealed the local society to prefectural and provincial officials, they also played an important role in the governance that was more and more enforced from the above as from a single-point perspective. The best example of this, a set of correspondences between local and provincial officials after the end of Khampa's guerrilla wars, explains how local cadres took on the imaginary vision of the state with the maps they created in situ. In order for the modernist projects of the state to be enforced more efficiently, they requested a transformation of the irregular territory of Serta in favor of geometric rules, which caused the local relationships of nomadic groups and monasteries to be radically altered with the physical dismemberment of the geography. It is as though one can penetrate the eyes of the cadres to find a personified sovereign agent with domineering, exploitative and voyeuristic eyes behind.

Serta's initial encounter with the Chinese state was embedded in many different associations of humans and things, but prophetic texts played a crucial role. In the earlier two

centuries, Serta was under the influence of three parties: a monastic community centered on prominent tantric lineages and families, a nomadic society centered on its chiefly family, and foreign invaders who appeared periodically. During these two centuries, the region became a new Buddhist center, described among monastic groups as a mandala prone to the attack of demons. As an expression of this cosmology, large numbers of prophecies also circulated in this area and asked readers to kill demons. In the 1950s, a number of complex interactions confirmed to Tibetans that the prophecies were about the Chinese troops. My research shows that the interrelations of texts and events were not fixed. Buddhist prophecies are ambiguous. Actors came upon these prophecies, made conjectures, debated about them, and created meaning in encounters. Later, in the revival period of the 1980s, the local lama Jigme Phuntsok re-interpreted the “demon armies” as referring to the Tibetan guerrillas. This new interpretation explained demons to be ignorance and hatred, and ascribed the region’s collapse to its people’s barbarism and karmic force. In a number of ethic reforms launched by his monastery, Jigme Phuntsok urged Tibetans to follow Buddhist values, including non-violence. Chapter 3, “Interpreting Demons,” will discuss this 1950s encounter between Tibetans and Chinese.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the revitalization movement showed itself to be a re-assembly that occurred in the networks of humans, texts, landscapes, and material objects. It consisted of numerous linked occasions in which all these heterogeneous elements, not only humans, made a difference. The work of re-assembly was oriented around several Buddhist traditions. In Jigme Phuntsok’s interpretation, several prophecies identified him as a treasure revealer, who had power to recall teachings some enlightened beings had sealed in his mind. Using these newly revealed teachings, Jigme Phuntsok was able to recruit students after the interruptions caused by the Maoist era. Jigme Phuntsok also used prophecies to identify new religious sites and reveal material treasures. Most crucially, he identified the valley where he

built his monastery as a treasure. The prophecies he used stated that this holy site, once identified, would become the center of the Buddhist revival. In 1987, encouraged by a few prophecies, Jigme Phuntsok travelled to Mount Wutai to reveal treasures. This marked the beginning of his visits to Han Chinese regions, which was still an effort to tame demons, but through the dharma rather than weapons. Thanks largely to Jigme Phuntsok's growing relationship with Han Chinese, huge amounts of donations flowed from China to his monastery in the last two decades, an enormous support for the revitalization of Buddhism in this region.

In this assemblage, Buddhist monks also make their own representations, using their own points of view to explain how Buddhism was revived in Serta. When this happens, my task is to make my representation of the assemblage a proper translation of theirs. For Jigme Phuntsok's students, the lama was an emanation of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. These students believe that Jigme Phuntsok already proved this, and in fulfilling certain prophecies confirmed the ontological assumptions of Buddhist teachings. Recently, some anthropologists take seriously the insight that the object of a sign does not exist independently from the subject interpreting that sign. As they point out, if representation constitutes its object and makes claims about it at the same time, this circularity raises the question of how a faithful representation of any ethnographic object can be possible. The epistemology of anthropology could be reformulated therefore—and might, I suggest, be put fruitfully into conversation with Tibetan monks' approach to the issue, for Buddhist philosophy offers a similar critique of representation. Chapter 4, "Representing a buddha," this chapter examines the representative strategies that monks deployed in their compilation of Jigme Phuntsok's biographies, and the new light these strategies can give to contemporary anthropology.

In this assemblage, I devote as much attention to nomads, Chinese officials, and Chinese laypeople as I do to Jigme Phuntsok and his students. These non-monastic groups

also produced their own interpretations of the lama, prophecies, treasures, and Buddhist landscapes. In Serta, monks often rebuke these other ways of seeing as “ignorance,” a term used to describe people’s false apprehensions of reality. Indeed, Buddhist ontological assumptions and heuristics are fully capable of appropriating or erasing difference, and imposing their own hegemonic order. The last chapter, “Ontologies of the Mountain,” pays close attention to these conflicting interpretations. This chapter focuses on a local mountain in Serta. While officials took it to be a mountain, the mountain was an ancestral god to nomads, a mandala to monks, and a treasure site to Jigme Phuntsok. Both nomads and officials thwarted Jigme Phuntsok’s efforts to reveal treasures at the mountain, and stimulated a political protest among the monks. This chapter examines how tensions in ethical or political terms emerged from different truth assumptions, which further articulate topics like landscape, materiality, and semiotics.

## Chapter 2

### Formations of the Gaze

In March 1950, after the liberation of Xikang Province,<sup>3</sup> Chinese Communists set out to take control of the Tibetan regions west to Dartsedo (Ch. Kangding). Although the old Republican government of Xikang claimed to exercise sovereignty over the Khampa polities from Dartsedo to the east side of the Upper Yangtze River, most of these polities were independent during the Republican era, ruled by chiefs of their own. Over the next few months, these polities virtually all surrendered to the new Communist government, and they constituted the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Xikang. In the following few years, instead of pushing for an execution of Maoist populism, Chinese Communists invited the chiefs, headmen and lamas to join prefectural and county governments. In this prefecture, the only polity that remained independent was Serta.

Not until two years later, in September 1952, did Serta come into contact with the Chinese government. The chief of Serta sent a delegation of twenty-three people to Dartsedo, for the annual session of the prefecture's People's Congress.<sup>4</sup> Among the delegates, only one of them, the head of the delegation, was a major headman from Serta's chiefly lineage, and the headman's motivation in coming seemed more to do with evading a feud in his village.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Xikang comprised most of the traditional Tibetan province of Kham, in addition to a few Han Chinese and Yi regions. Before it was established as a province of the Republic of China in 1939, it was known as *Chuanbian*. In 1950, Chinese Communists took over Xikang. They revoked the province in 1955, and incorporated it into Sichuan. The capital of the province was Dartsedo from 1939 to 1951, and Ya'an from 1951 to 1955.

<sup>4</sup> GAD 26-1-117, document 3

<sup>5</sup> This record is drawn from the archival collection of the Party Committee of Serta, Serta Archives, Serta (hereafter SAS), 1954-1-2, pp.36

Yet the delegation still captured the headlines. This was the first time that the nomads had ceded some of their autonomy to a state authority. In Chinese newspaper articles, the achievement was trumpeted as proof of the unanimous support of all Khampa people for the new socialist nation.<sup>6</sup> History would soon suggest otherwise, however. In February 1956, the chief of Serta staged a revolt against the impending socialist reform and the rule of China, the first of the grand-scale armed resistance movements mounted in many Tibetan regions in the next three years. In March 1959, this chaos led to the exile of the Dalai Lama.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter focuses on a particular aspect of this history. In that decade, Chinese work teams produced numerous reports, now preserved in the Prefectural Archives of Ganzi and the County Archive of Serta. In this chapter, I examine these materials in two ways. As primary sources, these reports cast light on how Khampas and Chinese encountered each other in Kham and Serta, and I pay particular attention to how Chinese cadres encountered monastic groups in this process. But my attention to these issues is focused on the archival activities themselves. As one can imagine, Chinese cadres believed that their work was of great importance to higher officials and the new socialist nation. This conviction protected them from a sense of being swallowed up by the alien land of Kham, and they organized their perceptions in line with this conviction as they made reports. Thus the records tell us how these cadres perceived Khampa groups, how they created representations of their encounters with Khampas, and what political consequences arose from this.

As an example, look at a group photo taken by a cadre on the first day that top-ranking officials met with the delegation (figure 9). This photograph is the first visual record of Serta ever made by Communist cadres. Note that a nomad on the left side of the back row elevates his prayer beads, as though asking the camera to record how much he likes the object.

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<sup>6</sup> Xikang Ribao, “Minzu zhengce de guanghui zhaoyao seda caoyuan,” December 11, 1953

<sup>7</sup> This resistance persisted in other parts of Tibetan worlds, such as in Mustang, until 1974. See McGranahan 2012 and Audley 2002, Chapter 2. For more comprehensive discussions of the Tibetan history in the 1950s, Goldstein 2009, 2013 and Shakya 2000 have become standard reference works.



Other nomads' connections with religious objects less easily seen: in the front row, three men use their hands to move prayer wheels and beads. Whether the photographer might actually have been stunned or attracted by these hand movements, exposing a way of life different to his, he ensured that the camera's shutter speed was fast enough to freeze them. Clearly, as a state agent, the photographer wanted to represent the meeting as the opening of a new era for Serta. Even an amateur photographer can tell what he did to convey this. He used a landscape format and a small aperture to make the background clear. Then, he rearranged the height of the photo, removing all the other background objects and leaving the government building only. This highlighted the building's "connection" with the Tibetan figures and stressed their integration into the nation. In this way, the photo seems situational and documentary, but it transformed what the photographer perceived into what he thought the state expected him to make.<sup>8</sup> As we will see in this chapter, this transformation was a key step in many archival activities done by cadres. It substituted a more distant gaze for the eyes that met Tibetans in real time and space.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 9: Serta's first visiting team to The Prefecture Committee of Dartsedo.** Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo.

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<sup>8</sup> If the aim of making archival records was to produce historical knowledge, using photographs to represent the official rhetoric of rule could be considered in light of what Alan Trachtenberg (1985: 1) calls "historicism-by-photography:" "historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability."

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Christopher Pinney remarks that photographs taken by a colonial authority often reflect the "temporal and spatial correlations that encode [its] colonial rationality." (2003: 203).

When I came across this visual record in archive, it had been re-organized and inserted into a dossier of photographs that were all about various Tibetan delegations in that decade. This was like the later fate of Serta: after a series of changes the region was integrated into projects that were conceived on a broader scale. In 1956, the Chinese government launched socialist reform in Kham as they did in Han Chinese regions. When local variations no longer mattered, an increasing number of records that were created simply repeated what propaganda machines were promoting in every corner of the country. These monotonous representations showed that Khampa counties were treated homogeneous and interchangeable entities. To explain how this viewpoint helped shape Serta, I call attention its cadres' cartographic practices. After maps were created, Chinese officials noticed the irregular boundary of the region, and they took it to be a factor that constrained an efficient completion of their various projects. To get a more "optimum" layout, prefectural and provincial officials dismembered Serta's village networks, treating them as pieces that could be freely adjusted in accordance with geometric rules. In short, with various examples, this chapter shows how the gaze of the state was conjured at local levels and how this bore upon the region. I call attention to local cadres' archival activities and their representations—in the forms of reports, photographs, and maps—because the domineering state must relied on them to impose its diverse administrative activities, its sometimes violent military operations, and ultimately its will on Khampa polities.

### **Kham: An Overview**

After the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the ninth century, Central Tibet became a stateless society. This state of affairs began with a few centuries of chaos and fragmentation, followed by an age of monastic hegemony characterized by competitions and replacements among

different religious orders and patrons, during which no alliance or stronghold stood long enough to create a centralized state. This lack of central authority undermined Central Tibet's capacity to integrate its rich and diverse frontier regions, such as Kham.<sup>10</sup> The situation lasted until the sixteenth century, when the Geluk order rose to power. In 1571, to enlist external support for protection of Ü against the Tsang governors, the Third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso (1543-1588) traveled outside Central Tibet at the request of Altan Khan of the Tumed Mongol. The connection he thereby forged with the Mongols gave the Geluk a strong ally. Later on, this alliance caused Central Tibet to be unified around the Geluk and exert a consistent influence over Kham. But it also put Kham within the scope of imperial China, whose Manchu rulers competed with the Mongols for control of Inner Asia.

This broad change began in 1601. In that year, after the death of the Third Dalai Lama, a great grandson of Altan Khan was installed as the Fourth Dalai Lama (Yonten Gyatso, 1589-1617). This appointment solidified the Geluk-Mongol alliance. Later in this century, after Gushri Khan from the Koshots replaced the Tumed descendants as Mongol leader, he helped the Fifth Dalai Lama (Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, 1617-1682) crush opponents and ultimately made him the ruler of all Tibet.<sup>11</sup> This Dalai Lama was the first of his reincarnation lineage to accept an invitation from a Chinese emperor to visit Beijing.<sup>12</sup> After his death, Central Tibet was embroiled in a violent competition between Zunghar Mongols and Qing for the control of Inner Asia.<sup>13</sup> This encounter transformed the fate of Kham, since the caravan routes from Dartsedo to Lhasa were of strategic importance for the Qing's

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<sup>10</sup> Petech (1988) mentions that we know little about the Khampa societies before the 1640s. But Petech points out that Yuan Dynasty penetrated deeper in Kham than in Amdo, mainly through the route from Dartsedo to Lithang. The Sakya order also had estates in central Kham.

<sup>11</sup> For a sketch of this Dalai Lama's life and works, see Schaeffer 2005

<sup>12</sup> Tuttle 2006

<sup>13</sup> Petech 1972; Schaik 2011: Chapter 6

military expeditions against the Zunghar Mongols.<sup>14</sup> The first Chinese invasion of Kham occurred in 1701, when Emperor Kangxi ordered Yue Shenglong to seize Dartsedo. Kangxi and his successor, Yongzheng, both sent armies through Kham to Lhasa to counter the Zunghar threat. The next emperor, Qianlong, was more resolved to fight long, exhausting wars in the frontier regions. He sent four expeditions to Kham and Central Tibet, two against Gyarong and two against the Gurkhas.<sup>15</sup> After these military campaigns, the Qing claimed dominance over Kham. As part of this, the court granted imperial titles to native chieftains and set up outposts and logistical stations along the caravan routes. Under the patronage of the Qing, Geluk lamas also built monasteries in large market towns along the routes.<sup>16</sup> However, most of the small polities, independent villages and nomadic communities in Kham remained self-governing over the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Indeed, some of them were brave enough to defy both Central Tibet and the Qing.<sup>17</sup>

In this process, Sichuan became an important frontier province. In the early twentieth century, Francis Younghusband's expedition to Lhasa strained the nerves of officials in Sichuan. These officials determined to tighten control of Kham and provided for the inland regions of China a cushion against colonial expansion. Efforts again were centered on a transfer of power from local elites to state officials. In 1905, several Khampa polities mounted armed resistance.<sup>18</sup> This led to the escalation of Chinese military actions in this region and another expedition to Central Tibet, under the command of Zhao Erfeng. Both this and the earlier British invasions forced the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Thubten Gyatso, 1876-1933) to stay in exile for years. During this period, the Dalai Lama grew into a determined

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<sup>14</sup> Dai 2009

<sup>15</sup> Greatrex 2003; Martin 1990;

<sup>16</sup> Schaik 2011: 160-164

<sup>17</sup> For an example from Nyarong, Tsomu 2015; Tsering 1985

<sup>18</sup> Wang 2011

reformer. Yet his ideal and his later effort to build Tibet into a modernist nation-state would come into conflict with the vision of Chinese Nationalists. Many in the Nationalist government maintained that Kham and Central Tibet, as a legacy that the Republic of China inherited from the Qing, should be Chinese territories.<sup>19</sup> From the 1910s to the 1940s, the border between Tibetan and Chinese governments moved several times.<sup>20</sup> The furthest county controlled by the Lhasa government was Garze. On the other side, the Nationalist government created the Province of Xikang, making Kham into a province independent of Sichuan. This adjustment aimed to enhance Chinese control of Kham. Yet the reform was barely successful. Sometimes the Nationalist government had to rely on ritualized methods to express its governance, inviting prominent Tibetan lamas to perform Buddhist rituals for the nation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, at the beginning, even the Communist government must rely on Khampa elites to take over the region.

As their own records make clear, even after the liberation of Xikang, Chinese Communists still thought they were “at a disadvantage.”<sup>22</sup> Nobody doubted China’s clear military superiority and its capacity to defeat any Tibetan uprising, but a smooth transition would be a key step toward China’s ultimate goal: to liberate Central Tibet by peaceful means. In Dartsedo, a military control commission (Ch. *jun guan hui*) was created to process Kham’s affairs. The commission sent work teams along two caravan routes—one north, and one south—to Garze and Lithang, from which these work teams went on to take over Republican governments in each county. As a draft work plan admitted in 1951, the commission had no clear agenda and had no idea about what would happen after the work

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<sup>19</sup> Lin 2006; Leibold 2007

<sup>20</sup> Goldstein 1989

<sup>21</sup> Tuttle 2005

<sup>22</sup> GAD 26-1-48, document 1, pp11

teams arrived in those counties.<sup>23</sup> Most of the work team cadres were seasoned veterans in twenties or early thirties, having their revolutionary experiences learned from Han Chinese regions. In the new Tibetan environment, the immediate task for these people was to prepare for a possible war in Central Tibet. To complete this mission, these cadres needed the aid of Khampa elites. These local leaders could help organize yaks and porters for road construction, secure food supplies, and offer their knowledge of the local societies. For all these reasons, Mao called upon a gradualist policy. As several early documents explained to the work teams, certain socialist principles should be compromised to reduce ethnic hostilities:

When we solve issues facing Kham and Tibet, our first concern should be with ethnic solidarity. At the early stage of fostering this solidarity (this stage will last a long time), we should befriend ruling groups—lamas, chieftains, and headmen—and ensure that these people will not turn against us. Then we push forward our agenda in the general public. This [method] fulfills the goal of socialist revolution in the long term. We must be strategic and flexible (we need to make compromises with feudal lords and slavers when necessary). We must not pursue class struggle at the cost of ethnic solidarity when members of the public do not have such consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Friction among Khampa groups provided the Chinese work teams an opportunity to win some Khampa leaders. One example was in the Kingdom of Dergé. In late 1949, Jagö Tobden (Bya rgod stobs ldan), a major headman of Dergé, together with several other Khampa leaders, wrote a letter asking Mao to send armies to liberate Xikang. Jagö Tobden was based in Yilhung (Yid lhung), the convenient location of which gave him influence over several polities on and around the north caravan route. Using this influence, Jagö Tobden helped Chinese armies to recruit yaks and porters on their way to liberating Central Tibet. Jagö Tobden's decision was largely due to a fear of being attacked by his biggest rivals, the Dergé queen Jamyang Palmo ('Jam dbyang dpal mo) and her family members who ruled the

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<sup>23</sup> GAD 26-1-1, document 1, pp.1

<sup>24</sup> GAD 26-1-1, document 1, pp.2. In contrast, in Han Chinese provinces, local elites were rarely assimilated into the new proletarian political structure in rural villages. In these villages, traditional elites were replaced by three kinds of people: young political activists, poor farmers, and veteran revolutionists from the outside. For example, see reports from Hinton 1966; Siu 1989: 135-140; Madsen 1984.

Kingdom of Nangchen. Helping the Chinese authorities allowed Jagö Tobden gain the upper hand, since both the queen and her allies stood right in the way of the Chinese expedition.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, at this early stage, Chinese work teams found little resistance in most Khampa counties, not even in those where sizable Geluk monasteries existed. As the government guaranteed Khampa leaders that it would build a number of “minority autonomous regions” (*minzu zizhi quyu*) led by joint government, it seemed that these leaders could remain independent or at least keep some control of their former dominions. In this circumstance, an open revolt was simply too risky.



**Figure 10: County governors and deputy county governors in 1951.** Most of these people are chiefs, headmen, and lamas from Khampa polities. Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo

<sup>25</sup> On Jagö Tobden's biography and his antagonism with Jamyang Palmo, see GAD 26-1-13, document 4; GAD 26-1-89, document 1. In this competition, these two factions both wanted to use the government to gain advantage over each other. See GAD 26-1-51, document 1 and GAD 26-1-91, document 4. See also Goldstein 2014: 117

However, unlike their strategy in Han Chinese regions, Chinese Communists did not use the competitions and conflicts among Khampa groups to provoke class struggle.<sup>26</sup> When inviting Khampa elites to join the government, the work teams were very careful to ensure that each elite was given a position that was appropriate to his original status in the local society and ensure that these positions were evenly distributed among competing factions. This marked a break from the old Chinese tactics of “ruling by division” (*fen er zhi zhi*) or “using barbarians to govern barbarians” (*yi yi zhi yi*), which entailed granting titles to certain factions instead of the whole. With this new strategy, the Communists ascribed the disunity in Kham to the “reactionary governance” of former Chinese regimes, and emphasized their own policies as benefiting all Khampa people. In 1951, when the Tibetan Communist Sanggye Yeshe addressed the People’s Assembly of Xikang, he urged Khampa polities to put aside their historical disputes: “Ethnic solidarity now means a different thing,” he said. “When [Kham fell] under the rule of the reactionaries, it was more about conflicts between nationalities [i.e. between Tibetans and Chinese] than it is now. At the current time, solidarity within each minority group should be the focus.”<sup>27</sup> As it stood, when the Chinese state stopped using the fissures of the Khampa society to secure its rule, it also reduced the chance that certain Khampa leaders could manipulate this power to their own advantage in their competition against other Khampa leaders. In short, the new state authority required all Khampa polities to be submissive.

In several counties, work teams heard complaints about Serta. A headman from Garze used Serta to refute the discourse of solidarity: “Unless the government can punish these

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<sup>26</sup> As Vogel (1969: 65, 89) discusses, a characteristic approach used by Chinese Communists in social mobilization was to avoid attacking a local society as a whole. Cadres isolated some selected targets and assured others that they had nothing to fear. In doing so, they could eliminate leading rivalries without activating local unity, and the rest would be intimidated and comply with the imposed control.

<sup>27</sup> This conference speech is drawn from Sichuan Archives in Chengdu (hereafter SAC), Jiankang 007-48



people, there is no way to talk about this solidarity.”<sup>28</sup> Chinese reports of how Serta plundered other counties could be found as early as in the Republican period.<sup>29</sup> Western travelers also gave words to this dangerous region. Writing in 1860, Évariste Régis Huc noted that inhabitants of Serta “have their retreat in gorges of the mountains defended by roaring torrents and frightful precipices...and they never issue from these fastness but for purposes of pillage and devastation.” (1851: 116). The French explorer Andre Guibaut recalled that there was no way to travel empty-handed in Serta, “where all the natives, even the monks, are armed to the teeth.” (1947: 98) His friend Louis Liotard was killed as they tried to pass through Serta. A few years later, a former U.S. Army intelligence officer claimed that a Lhasa hierarchy once issued a decree to behead all pilgrims from Serta, since these people kept robbing other villages during their pilgrimage (Clark 1954: 143). In the following section, I will turn to this riotous, ungoverned region that had encountered other Chinese regimes in the earlier periods.

### **Traditional Serta: A Place of Not Being Governed**

During the imperial and Republican eras, Chinese language sources used “wild barbarians” (*ye fan*) to describe Serta. The nomads in Serta were known as “Serta barbarians (*seda yefan*)” or “Ngolok barbarians (*eluo yefan*).” The name “Ngolok” (Tib. Ngo log; Ch. E luo), referring here to Serta, was confused often with the name of another nomadic region north to Serta and in today’s Qinghai Province, which was the more famous “Golok” (Ch. Guoluo; Tib. Mgo log) that belonged to Amdo.<sup>30</sup> Some argue that Serta should also be counted an Amdo

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<sup>28</sup> GAD 26-1-49, document 8, pp.110; See also GAD 26-1-117, document 4, pp.24-25.

<sup>29</sup> *Sichuan yuebao*, Vol.10, No.3 and 5, 1937.

<sup>30</sup> This account is based on several Chinese and Tibetan sources: *Sichuan Yuebao*, Vol.10, No. 3, 5 and 6, 1937; *Chuanbian jikan*, Vol.1, No. 2, 1935; *Xinan bianjiang*, Vol.13, September 1941. Fu 1968: 37; Gser rta tshul khriims, 2006: 34-37, and GAD 26-1-242, document 1.

instead of a Khampa county, since the leading lineages in Serta were from Golok and spoke the Amdo dialect, and since the location of Serta was far from the caravan route in the south that connected other Khampa counties.<sup>31</sup> Yet most Tibetans agreed that the boundary between Golok and Serta divided Amdo and Kham. Serta was well connected with Kham through its widespread kin network and influential tantric lineages, and through an extensive trade system that connected Amdo and Kham. The notion that Serta was an enclave of barbarism, as anthropologists of China have found in other cases, reflected the typical Chinese civilizing ideologies that used it to represent areas that were unassimilated into the state machine.<sup>32</sup> Both Golok and Serta had a long autonomous history: in Tibetan, “Golok” means “trouble” or “disturbance,” and “Ngolok” “rebellion” or “rebels.” The literal meanings of the terms better reveal their images as ungoverned nomads: “Golok” means someone who turns head (go or *mgo*) away; “Ngolok” means someone who turns face (ngo or *ngo*) away.

The earliest encounter between Serta and Chinese regime took place in 1729, as a result of the Khoshot uprising in 1723. In Amdo and Kham, Emperor Yongzheng sent several armies to quell the insurrection. One of the armies under the command of Zhou Ying was sent from Songpan (Tib. Zungchu) to Chamdo, and charged with fixing the border between Central Tibet and Qing China. Zhou’s army implemented reform on its way to Chamdo. It replaced native chieftains with the regular system of administration that was used in the Chinese interior. At Drango, Zhou summoned Serta to surrender.<sup>33</sup> A gazetteer compiled in 1733 by Huang Tinggui claimed that a letter of appointment was sent to the chief of Serta, ratifying his rule under the governance of the Sub-prefecture of Dartsedo (Dajianlu ting) with

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<sup>31</sup> Gser rta tshul khriims 2006: 97-100

<sup>32</sup> Diamond 1995; Litzinger 1995: 127, 132; Citing a paper from Pamela Crossley, Stevan Harrell (1995: 19) also mentions that herders were generally thought as more savage than agriculturalists in imperial China.

<sup>33</sup> *Seda xianzhi* 1997: 38

an annual tribute of thirty fox hides or fifteen taels of silver.<sup>34</sup> This edict had no real effect, however. There was no further contact between the two sides until the early twentieth century.

Beginning in 1905, Zhao Erfeng enacted his radical campaign in Kham. In 1911, he was appointed as the new governor of Sichuan. For his successor in Kham, Zhao recommended Fu Songmu, an ardent supporter of his proposition that there should be a province that was formally set up in Kham. Zhao and Fu worried that the central government's attitude toward their agenda would become unpredictable after Zhao's departure. They hastened the timetable for replacing native chieftains. On May 13, Fu ordered Serta to surrender in ten days. Receiving no reply, he sent another two notices. This time the chief convened a gathering of headmen. In his humble response in mid-June, the chief agreed to pay an annual tribute of 3000 yuan, but he asked for an exemption from garrison, land tax, and corvée labor. Fu lost his patience: "How dare you show no gratitude after Governor Zhao and I exonerated you from the accusation [of disregarding the law]." As he explained, what was expected of Serta "was not its tribute payment but its acceptance of Chinese law and officials." "If you were meant to surrender, you should have come to our place with a group of sensible delegates at our behest."<sup>35</sup> In late July, a team of Chinese soldiers marched from Dawu to Serta. These soldiers spent five days surveying the region, making a sketch-map of Serta, and counting households and livestock for their record. Zhao and Fu planned to further annex Golok and create a new county named Dawei. The name of the county extolled the reach of the imperial power even in these two extremely remote regions. Yet this expansionist campaign ended with the fall of the Qing.<sup>36</sup>

During the Republic, Serta and Golok faced more threats. In 1920-21, fighting over the control of gold mines, the Qinghai warlord Ma Qi attacked Golok from the north. His son

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<sup>34</sup> Huang 1733, Vol.19, 74b.

<sup>35</sup> For Fu's description of this event, see Fu 1968: 71-73. The relevant letters and documents in this event were compiled in Liu 1960: 41-47

<sup>36</sup> Liu 1960: 47. Elsewhere, Fu (1968: 37) wrote that Serta and Golok would be two separate counties.

Ma Bufang mounted several other expeditions over the 1930s, with one directly targeting Serta. Although Ma's soldiers were stopped after winter came, a county gazetteer reports that the villages of Serta sent him an envelope of broken needles, using it to express that they would smash their opponents.<sup>37</sup> Also in that decade, the Chinese Tibetologist Ren Naiqiang, in a monograph published in 1933, suggested that the Republican government should take over Serta. Through such a conquest, Ren argued, Xikang could recuperate the northern border of Kham (1933: 198). On the other side, in its negotiation of border issues with the Chinese envoy Huang Musong in 1923, the Lhasa government claimed its control of Serta and Golok. Yet when the escort of the Panchen Lama travelled through Golok to Jyekundo in 1925, rulers in Golok refused to offer supplies and porters and pillaged the escort instead.<sup>38</sup> In 1935, when the Long March of the Chinese Red Army carried Chinese Communists east through Serta to Aba, the Second and Fourth Front Armies raided a monastery for food before they left.<sup>39</sup> Despite these threats, a British consular remarked that Golok and Serta remained "one of the least known parts of Asia." "[They] appear to recognize the temporal authority of Lhasa Tibetans as little as they do that of the Chinese." (Teichman 1922: 77) It is said that after meeting with a Golok delegate in Beijing in 1951, Mao could not find the name of the region on a map. He used his finger to trace the caravan routes that enclosed these two regions, circled the middle blank part with a red pen, and declared that he would liberate these unknown regions as soon as possible.<sup>40</sup>

Some sources assert that there were more than fifty or even more than eighty villages in Serta during its heyday. At the time of liberation, however, only forty-nine villages were

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<sup>37</sup> *Seda xianzhi*, 1997: 113

<sup>38</sup> Zhuang 1941: 22-23, in *Xinan bianjiang*, Vol.13, *Xinan bianjiang yuekanshe*

<sup>39</sup> *Seda xianzhi*, 1997: 2-3, 38-41; GAD 26-1-155, document 7, pp.46

<sup>40</sup> Fu Yujing 1992: 114

under the control of the chief, who gave order to about 23,000 people.<sup>41</sup> At that time, Serta was divided into three parts, along its major rivers. The Nyi River (Tib. Nyi chu; Ch. Niqu he) ran through a strip of alpine meadows, flowing south through the western fringe of Serta toward Drango. The northern part of the meadows was Upper Serta, and the remaining southern part, together with valleys along the Ser River (Tib. Gser chu; Ch. Sequ he)—a river parallel to the Nyi River to its east—was Middle Serta. Nomadic herders occupied Upper and Middle Serta. The remaining agricultural area was Lower Serta. It included a portion of farmland traversed by the Ser River, downstream of Middle Serta, and the basin of the Do River (Tib. Rdo chu; Ch. Duoke he). At that time, this Do River flowed through the border areas of three Chinese provinces: Xikang, Qinghai and Sichuan.

The villages occupying Middle Serta included those composed by the patrilineal lineage of the chiefly family. The lineage's name was Washul (Dbal shul). According to the lineage, the chieftainship in Serta dated back to the early seventeenth century, lasting for eight generations up to the 1950s. But this system might actually have come into being in the mid-nineteenth century, when an ancestor of the chiefly family, Sönam Topgyé (Bsod rnam stobs rgyas), conquered nearby villages and extended the region's boundary to its later location. In the time of Sönam Topgyé, Washul already formed today's structure of "Three Washul" (Dbal shul gsum). This referred to three major branches of the lineage, which were each split into two and developed into six villages. Among these six villages, the two on Gold Plain (Gser thang), Upper and Lower Shötel (Shos thal stod smad), were directly under the rule of the chiefly family. Each chief was required to resolve conflicts, arbitrate in disputes, punish misbehaviors, and organize ritual events. When military threat required a collective defense of the region, or when groups surrendering from the outside were large enough to require Serta to redistribute its pasturelands, he was also required to host headman gatherings.

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<sup>41</sup> GAD 26-2-117, document 4, pp.32. For the different accounts, see GAD 26-1-422, document 5, pp.79, and *Seda xianzhi* 1997: 41.

In peaceful times, the power of the chief was quite weak. In the 1930s and the 1940s, more than one hundred households simply left against the will of the chiefly family and joined other polities.<sup>42</sup> Yet in wartimes, all the villages were expected to respect and unite around the chiefly family.

The last chief was Rigdzin dōndrup (Rig 'dzin don grub), who succeeded to the chieftainship in 1949, after the death of his father. In Garze, Chinese Communists established a working committee (*gong wei*) to administer the north caravan route. This committee contacted Rigdzin dōndrup in May 1951, inviting him to visit Dartsedo for a meeting with prefectural officials. The chief made no reply, but he felt a great anxiety and asked a Buddhist lama to offer guidance through divination. At the end of the divination ritual, a yellow scarf was drawn from among several other items, which the lama explained as a sign to accept a conditioned surrender. If the Chinese government sent doctors and traders, Serta should allow them to come, but if the coming Chinese were armed soldiers, Serta should put up resistance.<sup>43</sup> In the spring of 1952, local nomads built a defense after they found Chinese soldiers approaching the border.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, the working committee sent several envoys to meet the chief. These envoys were either the chief's relatives in other counties or Buddhist lamas who worked for the government. Finally, Rigdzin dōndrup asked the prefectural government to make a written promise. He demanded that the autonomous status of the region be maintained after liberation, that the government protect the traditional customs and systems of Serta, and that laborers and yaks, when enlisted, be well paid based on agreement between the both sides. In addition, all cadres would have to live in tents after their arrival. They would not be allowed to stay in monasteries or to build houses.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Seda xianzhi* 1997: pp.112

<sup>43</sup> GAD 26-1-117, document 4, pp.22

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> GAD 26-1-117-3

The prefectural government agreed to these demands. In late August, it sent to Serta a work team of seventy-eight Tibetans and nineteen Chinese. The work team included some Tibetan elites that could help them to settle into the new environment. Before they came, the work team sent public letters to Serta's most famous dignitaries to introduce China's Tibet policy. The early reports that the work team compiled were mostly about their initial impressions of these Serta leaders. The next section will discuss this early encounter. As one can tell from the following folk song recorded in the early 1950s by a Tibetan scholar, the villages in Serta would not bend to the government easily:

When we Ngolok enter the order of monks, we turn away from Tibet,  
 The teachings of the dharma king of Tibet are false.  
 When we Ngolok surrender, we face the heaven.  
 In the blue sky the Ngolok take refuge.  
 When we Ngolok return to the lives of laypeople, we turn away from China,  
 The rule of China is wrong  
 When we Ngolok crush laws, our tribes do it.  
 In the basin of Ma and Dza, we crush enemies' rule  
 When we Ngolok go outside, we turn away from the Mongols,  
 The unrivaled Mongol cavalries are wrong  
 We Ngolok are demons and we love meat.  
 Even the lives of women and children the Ngolok do not protect<sup>46</sup>

### **The Arrival of Communist Troops**

After the Chinese work team arrived in Serta, it undertook an extensive investigation of the region: of its secular and religious leaders, village organization and network, monasteries, folklore, economic conditions, and its boundary disputes with the neighboring counties. Administrative records were compiled every ten days. After these documents were sent to the working committee in Garze, they were delivered to prefectural officials in Dartsedo, who reviewed them and decided whether to report to the provinces of Xikang or Sichuan. These

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<sup>46</sup> Nam mkha'i nor bu 1983: 26-27. *Nged ngo log yar log bod la log/ bod chos kyi rgyal po'i bka' bo log/ nged ngo log mgo gtad gnam la gtad/ dgung sngon bo ngo log mgo gtad yin/ nged ngo log mar log rgya la log/ rgya nag po'i srid pa'i khrims bo log/ nged ngo log khrims gnon tsho pas gnon/ rma rdza thang sha ba'i khrims gnon yin/ nged ngo log phar log hor la log/ hor ya med bu rta'i dmag bo log/ nged ngo log sha dga' sha la dga'/ dga' zhig lu ngo log skyobs ma yin/*

documents allowed state officials to look at Serta from different levels, to formulate policies, and to coordinate the gradual establishment of governance in this area. If earlier travelers and missionaries often recounted how hard it was to get access to this ungoverned region, as the first official record proved, state officials then were able to directly perceive the region:

We arrived in Serta on Aug 22, camping at Lalong Wangduo [Tib. Lha lung bang mdo]. This area was under the control of Chuzong [Tib. Mchog tshang, a Serta village]. [We] see only 200-300 livestock. Most households have moved and hidden their camps in mountain valleys. Obviously, these nomads ~~did not know who we are~~ feared us.<sup>47</sup>

This was a responsible cadre. He walked with watchful eyes. I was struck by the change in the last line, where the reporter substituted a new interpretation for his original one. As Ann Stoler (2009) reminds us, content is not the only thing of value when we use colonial records to explore colonial rule. Stains, “mistakes,” marginalia, traces of review, and even colors of ink: all of these things gesture to contexts and reflections. Relying on these material signs, we can begin to trace the social epistemologies that guided the perception and practice of a recording colonial agent; we can observe, sometimes, how he responded in real time to his own acts of recording (by crossing out, as in this case); and ultimately we may find ways to appreciate how these acts of recording contributed to the constitution and maintenance of colonial governance.

Let us look at the last line: at first, the cadre did not regard the appearance of the work team as ushering in an unpleasant experience, although he sensed tension. That he made the change proves him to be a sincere recorder. For him and his colleagues, making an accurate account was an important matter, since higher-ranking officials would have to rely on their reports to design policies. By itself, the correction suggests that on other occasions a cadre might not be able to notice his prejudice when his own group was the only one to make

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<sup>47</sup> GAD 26-1-155, document 8, pp.49



records. The present example indeed dramatically indicates this since there were no other groups in this scene. In other words, this example reminds us that many other records that were compiled by the work team were also based on the perceptions and inferences of this group. They only tell us truths that were seen from the position of these officials and from their points of view.

The next task for us is to determine what forces might have acted on the recorder to result in this revision. There must have been some reason pushing him to pay this extra attention. The Chinese government commonly asserted that Tibetan people would enjoy joining the PRC after they saw how different the new government was from the previous ones. By cross-referencing the excerpt with other reports in the same dossier, we are able to ascertain that prefectural officials repeatedly stressed this point to the work team before they sent it to Serta.<sup>48</sup> This connection might explain why the reporter originally wrote the deleted line. The later change might also have to do with this. In these letters, prefectural officials advised the work team to prepare for “three possible results.” Between “refusal to meet” and “warm reception,” “passive resistance,” they said, would be the most likely:

Rulers of the region take liberation to be a humiliating surrender (Ordinary nomads who lean toward this view are more numerous than those who do not). These rulers could use passive resistance as a strategy to preserve their honor and show ordinary herders that the liberation has been imposed against their [the rulers’] will.<sup>49</sup>

This excerpt calls attention to two official assumptions. The first was a view that treated Tibetan elites as opponents. As is shown in this case, even after these people accepted liberation, the excerpt still asserted that they would not easily give in. On the other hand, the excerpt put ordinary Tibetans in a separate category from their leaders; its use of parentheses was an indication of this distinction. The reasoning behind this distinction is easy to

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<sup>48</sup> GAD 26-1-155, document 10, pp.74

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp.75

understand, since popular support could make Communist rule seem legitimate. However, the clear boundary between the two categories becomes blurred when the excerpt mentions ordinary people's voices of dissent. Prefectural officials were implying that the work team should attend to this issue when they mentioned it in parentheses. In this context, we may better appreciate why the reporter re-interprets his inference about the absent nomads. That is, his changed version corresponds to the parentheses, moving from the assumption that ordinary nomads must support the Communist rule (as long as they come to know "who we are") to the inference that these nomads were actually fearful. Whether or not this consistency was a coincidence, it shows that officials at the prefectural and the county levels shared the same set of political categories, and that they gave equal attention when these categories fell in the context of Serta. In light of this attention, the excerpt reveals that such an official record, more usually and more likely, was a potentially distorted representation organized around one or another rhetoric of rule.

State rhetoric shaped the way a cadre organized his perception. When the central government instructed Chinese cadres to work with Tibetan elites, it put these cadres in a relationship that was unfamiliar to their old Communist way of thinking. The initial contact with Rigdzin dōndrup was a fiasco. At that time, a village in Serta was fighting with an outside village over a young monk who had recently been enthroned as a reincarnate lama in Serta. Ignoring the Chinese demand that this be left for the government to handle, Rigdzin dōndrup did not even wait for the meeting to finish before he left to resolve the dispute.<sup>50</sup> Even under such adverse conditions, the state rhetoric could still be maintained. After one cadre, Liu Naifa, directed his anger toward one of the intermediaries in the negotiations, accusing him of turning the negotiations to the advantage of the chief for the kinship connection between the two, Liu was required to make self-criticism (*jiantao*). Liu's self-

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<sup>50</sup> GAD 26-1-155, document 8 and 9

critique took on the state view of Kham: “I will think more about Kham’s peculiarity, avoid placing unrealistic demands on the Tibetan upper class, and criticize the Han Chauvinist ideas within me.”<sup>51</sup> During the period, such educational sessions were held intensively among cadres to help them adapt to the new environment.<sup>52</sup> These arrangements produced and harnessed those sentiments that would make sense of state rhetoric and made it work.

The work team did its best to take the central authority’s instructions. On many occasions, they made concessions to Khampa rulers. A large number of official records prove this. If these records were meant to report these conflicts and concessions to higher officials, stressing them actually revealed an anxious state of not knowing whether state policies were being favorably followed for the state control of Kham. The cadres’ epistemic anxieties did not gesture to their awareness of the immense lack of fit between the representations they were making and the people and worlds they were encountering. It was rather because there was an inconsistency between what these cadres were required to do in this context and what their colleagues were doing otherwise in Han Chinese regions that the encounters brought anxieties. In the context of Kham, the cadres used their political language and categories in ways that were new to them. Specifically, as they followed the state order to compromise with Khampa elites, they all agreed that these elites posed most of the obstacles to their enactments of various state projects. In short, the epistemic anxieties for these cadres were more about how to make their perceptions, representations and judgments correctly as they were expected to do as state agents.

A later change casts more light on this issue. In 1954, the provincial government of Xikang asked each county to evaluate and create a biography for each of its influential minority figures. These evaluations were called *pai dui*, “to line up,” which included the step

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<sup>51</sup> GAD 26-1-169, document 22

<sup>52</sup> GAD 26-2-192, document 11, pp.153-54. Prefectural officials asked educational sessions to be held every three days, see GAD 26-1-155, document 7, pp.79

of assigning each a label, from “reactionary” to “backward” to “neutral” to “progressive.”<sup>53</sup> This new order gave a way for local cadres to relieve their epistemic anxiety, since unruly elites then could be put at the negative end of political spectrum. Indeed, as provincial officials later found out, the observations used to determine these labels were so arbitrarily made that they had to be re-made to be convincing. As these officials stated, “some biographic stories had to be more specific and cohere with the labels.”<sup>54</sup> Clearly, given a set of more proper categories that conform to their presumptions, local cadres allowed these categories to inform their archival representations more casually. Along this line, the next section will explore how Chinese work teams encountered monastic groups in the Khampa society. Some of the 1950s records compiled from Serta and other counties illustrate how officials’ attempts to categorize Buddhist monasteries continually failed. After monasteries could not be well placed in the positions that the government gave to them, they eventually became understood as rivals in need of elimination.

### **Three Ways of Understanding Monasteries**

Before Tibetans in Serta met the Chinese work team, they already knew that these Communists were against religion. Chinese Communist ideology pursues secularism and modernism in an extreme way. For its early thinkers and ordinary cadres, religion is a thing that is fundamentally backward. Yet the Communist government has a complex set of discourses about religion in practice. It accepts that religion is a long-term phenomenon that cannot be wiped out by force. As the Chinese government often reminds its officials, suppressing religion too forcefully may risk the popular support of the Party. Therefore, Chinese Communists claim to respect religion, which includes the five official religions as

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<sup>53</sup> GAD 26-1-154, document 1 and 2

<sup>54</sup> GAD 26-1-71, document 2

well as those popular beliefs that they sometimes label as “superstitions.” They also claim to respect the principle of religious freedom. That is, every citizen has freedom to believe in religion or disbelieve. However, on their way to winning the country, what brought Chinese Communists into conflict with various religious groups was their violent socialist reform, which sought to recast economic structure by transferring property from members of the so-called exploiting class to those of the exploited. A class struggle campaign could have religious organizations among its targets, since most of these organizations and their religious service, whether permanent or temporary, relied on the material surplus of a community. In Han Chinese regions, land reform campaigns confiscated land and property from temples, churches, and lineage halls, and then redistributed them for other uses. It disbanded the clergy and persecuted the clergy members.<sup>55</sup> Mao once explained how such cases fell outside the policy of religious freedom. In his view, the purpose of class struggle was to “struggle against the landlords in charge of the cults more than against the cults themselves.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, during the Communist period, religious groups sometimes were defined as “reactionary.” This happened when certain religious activities or discourses seemed to threaten the government and the security of the nation. In this last circumstance, even a farmer or a worker could be accused of using religion as a guise for political sabotage and espionage. The principle of religious freedom was certainly not applied to this last case.

In Tibetan society, a considerable amount of land was in the hands of Buddhist monasteries and reincarnate lamas. In Central Tibet, this amount ranged between 37 and 50 percent of the total arable land (Goldstein 1998: 19). In Kham, the number estimated by the

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<sup>55</sup> In a land reform campaign, each household was assigned its class status. Then, poor peasants were mobilized to struggle against landlords through various methods, during which they were organized to accept socialist ideologies. For most parts of China, similar political movements allowed state power to penetrate into villages (Siu 1989: 117-142). Needless to say, although economic exploitation existed, the inequality between landlords and farmers could be quite weak when they were sought in the religious domain (Selden 1982: 61-67).

<sup>56</sup> Cite from Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 142

prefectural government was 40 percent.<sup>57</sup> The government point of view was that these monasteries, 384 in total, which were occupied by more than 18,000 monks, were exploiting the labor of others to live.<sup>58</sup> Each monastery usually rented out most of its land to landless peasants. Obligated to work on these estates without wages, a peasant family paid their monastery an agreed amount of grains and cash as rent when their land contract ended. The rent income was often used as collective property rather than an allocable fund for monks' stipends. Many large monasteries were very rich, with extra grains and funds accumulated over a long period of time—resources that could be further used as loans to generate income from interest payments. Other goods, tools and seeds were also loaned when they were needed. Chinese Communists believed that this economic condition determined the other duties that a monastery might assign to its tenants: from the responsibility of providing corvée labor and payments for various monastic projects and activities to the responsibility of fighting for monks. They considered this an exploitative and oppressive system: “essentially feudal, with certain slavery elements.”<sup>59</sup> The prefectural government alleged that the coercion of tenants should not be confused with religious faith that one freely chose: “Only a small portion of monastic property comes from voluntary donations.”<sup>60</sup> Yet there was not an open discussion of these points until 1955-1956. Before that, as the central government explained in June 1951, Chinese officials were asked to treat Buddhism in Tibet and Inner Mongolia not as a religious but as an ethnic question. China's religious discourse would have to be adjusted in the Khampa context:

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<sup>57</sup> GAD 26-2-51, document 1, pp.36

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp.31

<sup>59</sup> GAD 26-2-46, document 1, pp.1

<sup>60</sup> GAD 26-2-51, document 1, pp.36

Like Islam, Lamaism should be considered in light of minority issues, indeed as part of those issues. Buddhism in Han Chinese regions, however, can be seen as an issue that is purely religious.<sup>61</sup>

From here, the administrative order goes on to explain the transformative role of socialist reform in re-organizing formerly Buddhist monastic groups in Han Chinese regions. The purpose of the above portion, therefore, is to express that Kham did not need such a reform, and the suspension was made for the aim of pleasing Tibetan people.

Within Upper, Middle and Lower Serta, there were approximately 3,300 monks, in twenty-three monasteries.<sup>62</sup> Each major village had at least one monastery to provide ritual service. Death rituals were most common. Rituals that bestowed health, wealth, knowledge and longevity to individuals and communities or prevented them from epidemics, envy, family discord, misfortune, and combat casualties were also offered. Village heads were asked to consult oracles when they had problems that could not be solved by other means. Indeed, a Tibetan monk once told the work team that as long as lamas could say good words about the government in their oracles, liberating Serta would be very easy.<sup>63</sup> Thus the work team got the order that nobody, after he arrived in Serta, should be permitted to sleep in monasteries, argue with monks, and shoot at holy mountains or other religious sites.<sup>64</sup> The work team also brought generous gifts to monastic leaders and was charged with the task of finding one monastery to fund.<sup>65</sup> Dungkar Monastery (Dung dkar dgon), near Upper and Lower Shötöl, the villages of the chiefly family, was chosen. This monastery was founded as a branch of the Palyul Lineage in 1686. Since then, it had become a rule that the title of the monastery's great lama should be passed to a brother or nephew of a Serta chief. This

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<sup>61</sup> GAD 26-1-71, document 1, pp. 13-14

<sup>62</sup> GAD 26-5-159, document 5

<sup>63</sup> GAD 26-1-155, document 12, pp.88

<sup>64</sup> GAD 26-1-117, document 3, pp.14; GAD 26-1-155, document 10, pp.79

<sup>65</sup> GAD 26-2-292, document 11, pp.154-155

connection with the chiefly family was a favored factor. Moreover, as the Red Army passed across Serta in 1935, it once ravaged Dungkar Monastery. For all these reasons, the work team offered the monastery a donation as the government's apology.<sup>66</sup>

Given the hegemonic roles of monasteries in the Khampa society, it was not surprising that they were in direct competition with the Chinese government. The tolerant religious policies did not reduce tensions. As official records demonstrate, in the government's first economic project to reclaim wasteland, monasteries were viewed as obstacles in most counties. Monks asked peasants not to disturb unused areas, since many of them were inhabited by gods. They also taught that hurting creatures in the soil was demeritorious for the plougher.<sup>67</sup> Some monasteries wanted to keep land that was collectively reclaimed as monastic-estate land to support rituals performed for the whole village.<sup>68</sup> Cadres also found that after they offered seeds to peasants, some peasants planted the seeds on monastic estates.<sup>69</sup> From the government's point of view, monasteries did not want their tenants to have other sources of livelihood and to lose control of them. Whether it was true or not, most monasteries were in financial decline in that decade. Before the 1950s, importing British Indian goods from Central Tibet and selling them in Kham's markets was a major business of large Khampa monasteries. But after the Chinese government banned foreign goods and monopolized the supply of household products, monasteries were squeezed out of local markets.<sup>70</sup> Even when some of their business remained alive, the government imposed

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<sup>66</sup> GAD 26-2-292, document 12, pp.258; GAD 26-1-359, document 11, pp.95-96

<sup>67</sup> For a few examples, see GAD 26-1-49, document 12; CAD 26-1-48, document 2, pp.22. See Chapter 3 for an important event around this issue in Serta.

<sup>68</sup> GAD 26-1-58, document 1, particularly pp.22; GAD 26-1-54, document 1, pp.76

<sup>69</sup> GAD 26-1-122, document 4, pp.75-76

<sup>70</sup> GAD 26-1-357, document 1; GAD 26-2-89, document 1.



tax on its incomes.<sup>71</sup> In the meanwhile, low-interest government loans triggered a rapid decline in profits that monasteries used to produce by lending money to peasants.<sup>72</sup> In various contexts, Chinese work teams noticed that monastic groups complained about these conditions and demanded compensation from the government.<sup>73</sup>

After these changes, the monastic control of the society might have been weakening. As work teams documented from various counties, after monasteries penalized monks who tried to leave the order, some monks sought help from cadres.<sup>74</sup> After the government imposed new tax, some tenants sold grains that should have been paid as rent to monasteries. When this happened, monastic groups were afraid of forcing anyone, since they knew that the government would support the tenants.<sup>75</sup> Traditionally, monasteries secured their annual funds for prayer assemblies by lending out money to elite Khampa families. Using these funds to pursue their own investments, the families would then use profits from these investments to cover food expenses incurred by monks during the prayer assemblies. However, after the influx of Chinese immigrants pushed up grain prices, the costs of feeding a big gathering might outstrip investment profits considerably. The result was that more and more patrons were reluctant to take this role.<sup>76</sup> Local cadres of course wanted to inform their superiors when different interests seemed to exist between monasteries and ordinary Tibetans. Clearly, the bulk of records of this kind are best understood as the result of this tendency.

Interestingly enough, until early 1955, cadres rarely used “class” to discuss these conflicts, since the state did not allow them to talk about the “exploitation” aspect of Tibetan

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<sup>71</sup> In 1954, in Garthar, Dawu, Drango and Ganzi, several large monasteries refused to pay this tax, see GAD 26-2-89, documents 1-4.

<sup>72</sup> GAD 26-1-54, document 1, pp.76; GAD 26-1-288, document 5.

<sup>73</sup> GAD 26-1-357, document 1; GAD 26-1-514, document 2, pp.23;

<sup>74</sup> In Dawu, “hundreds of monks” returned to secular life from Nyitso Monastery, which originally had about 1900 members, see GAD 26-3-429, document 1, pp. 3; See also GAD 26-1-362, document 2, pp.16; GAD 26-1-514, document 2, pp.23.

<sup>75</sup> For example, see GAD 26-1-357, document 1; GAD 26-1-362, document 2; GAD 26-4-163, document 1; GAD 26-4-205, document 1;

<sup>76</sup> GAD 26-1-288, document 5, pp.51.

monasteries. In Serta, a cadre once used “religious freedom” to explain to an abbot: “Just as the government respects Buddhist vows and never forces monks to labor, monasteries should also permit other people to open up wasteland, since everyone has the right not to believe in religion.”<sup>77</sup> As the cadre suggested, if monastic groups wanted the government to protect religion and religious freedom, they also had to give freedom to others. At least for some officials, this was a problem that potentially undermined their confidence to have work done in ways that completely complied with the requirements of the state. In a legal case in Denko, for example, under the order of another chief that was closer to them, four villages stopped paying a chief the tax he collected for Derge Gonchen (Sde dge dgon chen), the royal monastery in Derge. In their reports, local officials admitted that they did not know what to do with the case. “We had to agree with the tax,” they wrote, since maintaining old monastic property was a state policy. Yet “we feel that ordinary Tibetans must be willing to give [their money] for monks to pray.”<sup>78</sup> At the moment, the cadres found themselves in a dilemma—whether to protect the privileges of monasteries and how to avoid making this question an obstacle to the state’s other instructions on how to deal with religion. I already explained this epistemic anxiety, one surrounding the issue of how to best serve the country. As we see, after the Communist discourses of religion were adjusted in the Tibetan context, these cadres found that certain components of the discourses seemed no longer coordinated with each other.

After showing restraint, permitting elite Khampa groups to keep their land and power, and feeling frustrated at not being able to destroy this system that they saw as anachronistic and exploitative, local cadres enacted their own political principles. On July 31, 1955, Xikang was incorporated into Sichuan, as a prefecture, changing its name to *Ganzi*. On the same day, at a conference in Beijing, Mao told provincial Party leaders that all Chinese provinces

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<sup>77</sup> SAS 1958, March 12 to May 21, *Qucang gongzuodui guanyu duibu huiyi de jilu deng*.

<sup>78</sup> GAD 26-1-70, document 4

needed a faster step to eliminate private elements from the rural economy, and he wanted collective cooperatives to be built more rapidly even in minority regions. When Sichuan officials went home, they conducted a small survey of rents and debt interest payments in the region of Dartsedo, from which they inferred that the overall “exploitation amount” (*boxue liang*) in Kham came close to exceeding the prefecture’s total agricultural output. “Many families thus left their descendants a debt that could never be paid off.”<sup>79</sup> This time, the government did not hold to its earlier view that ethnic unity was built on making concession for the exploitation by Khampa elites. It rather made the opposite claim that concessions had prevented this unity being ultimately achieved. As Sonam (Ch. Sha na), a high-ranking Tibetan cadre remarked at the People’s Congress in December, “peasants often ran away to survive exploitation...when feudal lords competed with each other for peasants, frictions and disputes ensued inevitably.”<sup>80</sup> The government determined to move against this “feudalism and serfdom” with what it called “democratic reform” (*minzhu gaige*). This was a reform that confiscate land from elite groups and redistributed it to farmers.

The government wanted the reform to be peaceful. In its original design, the reform had three steps, starting from counties that were closer to Dartsedo to those that were further. It would take two years to complete the reform. The category of “landlords” included chiefs, headmen, schools, and Catholic churches that had been in Kham for more than half a century. Although Buddhist monasteries were also in this category, the government made it explicit that they were not targets, unless the mass pursued such a reform; the logic here was that in this latter case, the majority would agree that there was no violation of the rule of religious freedom. However, if the monasteries could not grow crops on their estates, they must allow the government to intervene. Moreover, the government used its own funds to clear debts that peasants owed to monasteries. After this, monasteries were not allowed to offer additional

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<sup>79</sup> GAD 26-2-46, document 1, pp.2; GAD 26-2-51, document 1, pp.37

<sup>80</sup> GAD 26-2-46, document, pp.2

loans, impose new tax, or issue orders to Khampa people.<sup>81</sup> From the government point of view, these changes all had exploitation rather than religion as their targets, and the reform policy was already lenient since it allowed monasteries to keep land and capital. Yet in such a plan, unless monks broke their vows to labor, they would lose monastic estates anyway, and unless monasteries could make a substantial reduction in expenditure, they would use up their funds sooner or later.<sup>82</sup> For Khampas, there was no way to talk about keeping individual faith alive without a prosperous monastic group. As word of democratic reforms spread, a revolt took place in Serta on 25 February. Within a few weeks, violent uprisings erupted one after another throughout the prefecture.

Some large monasteries were leaders of the rebellion: in Lithang there was Lithang Monastery, in Chaktreng, Sampeling Monastery; in Garze, Dargye Monastery, in Dawu, Nyitso Monastery, in Drango, Drango Monastery; and in Serta, there was Dongkar Monastery. From 1956 to 1959, about 164 monasteries were involved in the rebellion.<sup>83</sup> In Serta, all of the twenty-three monasteries took up arms. Among the two hundred lamas registered as “upper class,” 170 of them left their monasteries.<sup>84</sup> Some monasteries became battlefields bombarded by Chinese armies. To protect monasteries from being destroyed, Khampa fighters withdrew into mountain areas. They demanded that any truce or negotiation should be on the condition of the government’s promise that there would be no further reform of monasteries. “All issues manifested as religious issues,” claimed a report in 1957.<sup>85</sup> In the meanwhile, monastic groups provided food and weapons to guerrillas. The government believed that these monasteries were using the war as leverage. Eventually, the central

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<sup>81</sup> GAD 26-3-345, document 3;

<sup>82</sup> GAD 26-3-224, document 2, pp.4; GAD 26-3-429, document 1;

<sup>83</sup> GAD 26-4-78, document 6, pp.92

<sup>84</sup> GAD 26-8-814, document 1, pp.1

<sup>85</sup> GAD 26-4-336, document 1, pp.7

government lost patience. In 1958, local officials were advised to “positively understand” reform policies. That is, they must “work actively to create conditions for a later reform of monasteries.”<sup>86</sup>

At this point, the Communist government more urgently faced the problem of how to justify an attack on monasteries. In Serta alone, more than 4,000 people, or 16 percent of the region’s population, were killed as insurgents.<sup>87</sup> The real number of guerrillas must have been larger, since half of Serta’s population does not appear in census data in this period.<sup>88</sup> In this context of mass rebellion, the government needed a way other than “exploitation” to justify attacking monasteries, since any explanation that called attention to economic or power relationships was not enough when the Tibetan people, obviously, were not coerced to rebel. In this circumstance, this alternative rhetoric had to also allow the government to assert that protecting religious freedom was still an official policy. As was evident during the four-anti campaign in 1959, which accused monasteries of four crimes: rebellion, the violation of laws, privilege, and exploitation, “privilege” and “exploitation” were mentioned least, which means that monasteries were considered less culpable in those ways.<sup>89</sup> Giving more weight in the first two labels was a view of religion as “reactionary,” a discourse I mentioned at the beginning of the section. In this campaign, local cadres finally did what they did in Han Chinese regions, appropriating monastic assets, persecuting monks, and closing most monasteries. By claiming that these monasteries were abusing the faith of ordinary Tibetan people, the government maintained that the faith was not a problem in itself. In this way, the epistemic anxiety of the cadres could be dispelled. Local officials had finally found a strategy

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<sup>86</sup> GAD 26-4-78, document 6, Pp.94

<sup>87</sup> *Seda xianzhi* 1997: 10

<sup>88</sup> For census data, see *Seda xianzhi* 1997: 94

<sup>89</sup> GAD 26-5-217, document 1.

to map the official category of religion onto the Tibetan world in ways that were familiar to them.

For Chinese Communists, nomadic groups represented a backward form of economy. Before democratic reform was made in these nomadic regions, it should first be completed in agricultural counties. In Serta, the reform was initiated in early 1959. But two years earlier, when everything was in the planning stage, the government had already proposed a combination of the reform with the construction of collective cooperatives (*hezuo she*). The idea was that by combining these two phases into one, Serta's socialist transformation could be speeded to catch up with the timetables of reforms in Kham's agricultural counties and in China's other nomadic regions, such as Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, where the democratic reform had been carried out earlier.<sup>90</sup> To eliminate the temporal gaps was to eliminate regional variations in the construction of socialism. If any project might be envisioned within such a spatial paradigm, the vision could only be made from the position of the state. The next section will explore this vision by calling attention to another archival activity, the making of maps, by Serta's work teams. Maps provide us the best way to illustrate what happened after cadres made Serta into an archival object. Officials at various levels used maps to look at Serta in similar ways. By organizing these visual lines, maps, like many other records, helped the authority to transform Serta in line with their goals.

### **Mapping Serta: The Gaze of the State**

As the latest county exposed to Chinese rule, Serta was the county that the Chinese knew least. The map depicted in Figure 11, which was created in October 1955, is perhaps the earliest map of Serta. In this map, the region is drawn in a roughly square shape. In addition

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<sup>90</sup> GAD 26-5-116, document 1.

to river networks, an important high mountain, major monasteries and a giant stupa, villages are drawn with a blue pen. Then, colored lines are used to mark out the boundaries among villages. On what was perhaps a separate pass, the household numbers of these villages, the routes that connect them, and the names of headmen were added. This time the tool was a red pen. Finally, somebody used a different pen to add a few missed monasteries and villages, including Dongkar Monastery that later led the rebellion. We do not know who contributed to this map and under what conditions, but the government must have been trying to learn more about the region. It seems that a more specific survey had already begun in Lower Serta, the far right-hand side of the map, where the delineation of smaller villages and bridges makes this area less blank than Middle and Upper Serta. A few months later, when the armed resistance began, several Chinese brigades came from this direction, and they pushed guerrilla teams west and north toward those lesser known regions.

As Chinese armies quickly discovered, the resistance forces had no real center of operation. Because of the proliferation of guns in Khampa households, the boundary between guerrillas and civilians was quite vague. It was easy for people to move between participation in resistance group and everyday, non-martial activities. Each lineage and village organized its own guerrilla teams along with Rigdzin döndrup's troops, yet these locally organized forces were extraordinarily fluid, and they rarely used villages or monasteries as their base. These nomad teams were scattered, mobile, and—because of the lack of existing Chinese geographic knowledge of the area—almost untraceable. The Communists needed to consult local people about the interior geography. Yet as Chinese telegrams and reports mentioned where guerrillas were hidden, sometimes they mentioned non-existent meadows and valleys; other times the same sites were transcribed in various inexact ways. Obviously, even when these officials had a place name from native people, without a map that helped them identify the site, any name was merely a sound in a foreign tongue to them. That the armed resistance

could subsist for three years was largely due to this. In 1958 and 1959, many guerrillas who were defeated in other counties escaped to Serta to continue their resistance.

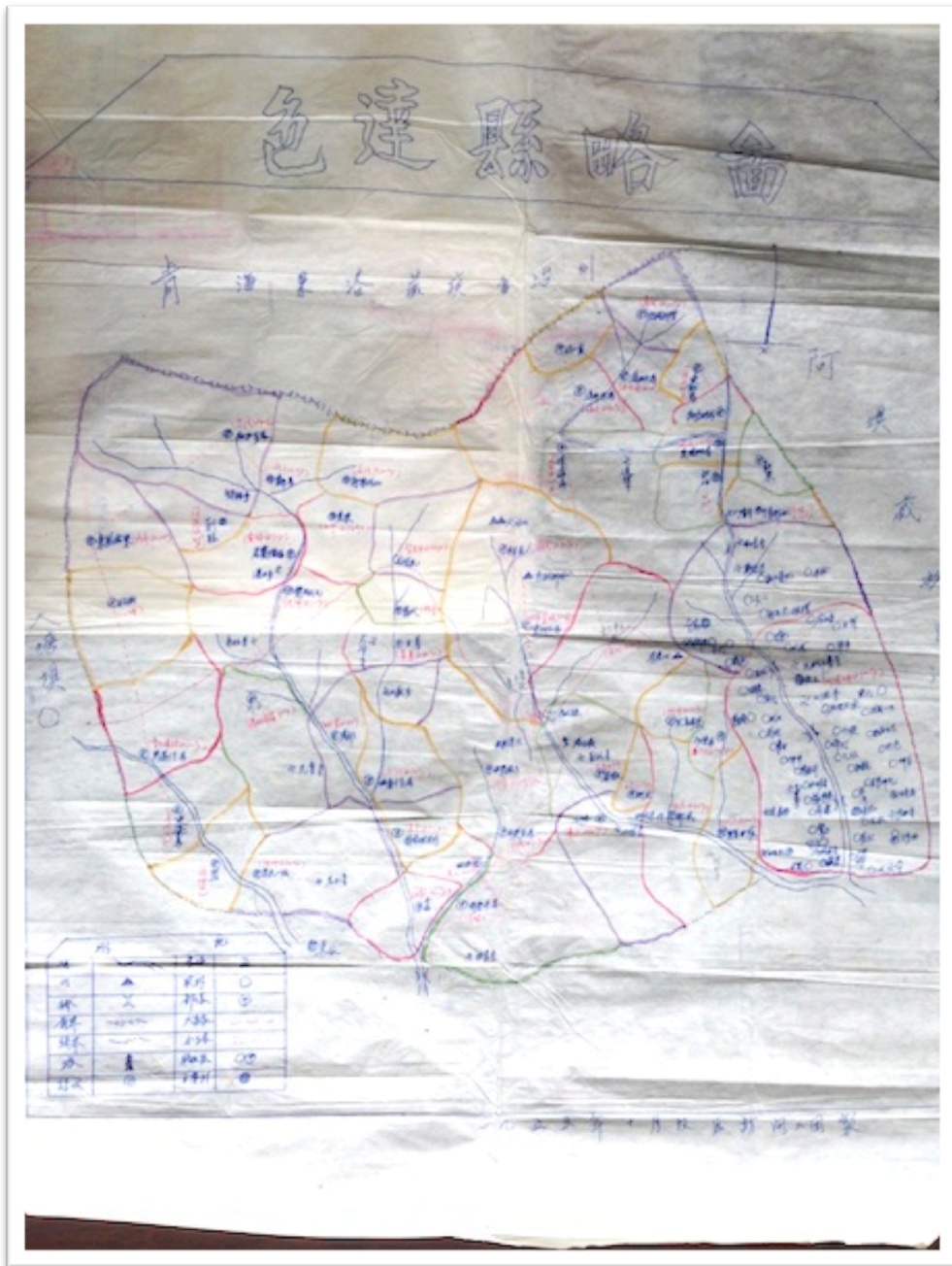


Figure 11: Map of Serta 1. Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo

While the Chinese armies desired detailed maps to learn about Serta, this geography for nomads was a home place that they walked through with their own bodies. The following quote is taken from a 1959 record. A local Khampa explains how villages and monasteries were articulated with twelve routes in Middle Serta:



[Regarding the third route], from the Valley of Three Lakes (Ch. Cuo song duo; Tib. Mtsho sum mdo), walk east through the Valley of Upper Yo [Ch. Yue geng ma gou; Tib. Yo gong ma mdo] to the Valley of God Face (Ch. Ha long gou; Tib. Lha lung mdo). Then, keep walking east through the Valley of God Face to Yarlung Monastery (Ch. Ya long si; Tib. Yar lung dgon). At the end of the valley is Lower Chökor (Ch. Xia qiu guo; Tib. Chos skor smad). Turning left there and passing across Dongkar Monastery, [you] will arrive at the county seat. The length of the route is 120 li. Road conditions are good. There is no mountain pass to cross on the way.<sup>91</sup>

Besides villages, most of the landmarks in this narrative were Buddhist sites, either monasteries or holy mountains and lakes. For native nomads, this was the most natural way to give directions to others. One of the most common reasons that draw them to move beyond the pastureland of his village is to make pilgrimage to these religious sites. On their own maps (figure 11 and 12), Chinese cadres also assign monasteries and villages as the defining and constitutive features of the space, but this bears little resemblance to the choice of the nomad. The difference is not only about why these sites are important: as sites that are noteworthy for religious or for military and administrative purposes. The comparison more importantly reveals two different ways of seeing. As the informant used “turn left” to express a direction, he was thinking through a body that was traversing the landscape. The narrator did not detach his viewpoint, and his presence, from the environs. Yet a number of villages, monasteries, and valleys have been circled with a red pencil on figure 3, all along Serta’s north border. Whoever once gave attention to this map, he was spreading the map on table, musing over it, and preparing to alter Serta in crucial ways.

As is shown in figure 12, the grid used to make the map has not been erased. Much has been made of this cartographic method: “the distances between points in space are set out on a grid or similar graticule and then their dimensions are reduced geometrically,” as Barbara Mundy (1996: xiii) puts it. The most profound reflections on this geometric view of geography remain those of Edward Casey (1997). Examining the works of early modern

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<sup>91</sup> GAD 26-8-814, document 1, pp.60

thinkers from Newton to Leibniz, Casey describes the birth of a modern conception that treats space as essentially undifferentiated, continuous, and equivalent with a series of connected points. In the late 1950s and 1960, this conception lay at the core of some land transfer projects that fundamentally changed Serta. In these projects, the production of maps visualized Serta and invited the gaze to fix on some irregular parts on the border of the region. As a result, land transfer happened twice between Serta and a county east to it, Dzamthang (’Dzam thang), which belonged to the Tibetan Prefecture of Aba.

Leaving one polity and joining another could happen in any village and at any scale for nomadic groups in this region. Usually when an entire village changed its affiliation, most of the village’s neighbors were still part of the old polity. Accumulating over a long period of time, such changes led to what Chinese officials called *chahua*: a kind of mixed state with borders carved into jagged shapes. Chinese cartographic practices revealed that Serta was in such a case. In more than one area, officials found protruding tracts of land that indented the borders of other counties. Such protrusions caused no problem for villages concerned only about their own land. But this irregularity created problems of inefficiency for a government that organized the region. In 1958, Serta ceded its largest protruding area, Dokhok (Tib. Rdo khog; Ch. Duo ke), to Dzamthang, since armies actually travelled a shorter distance from Dzamthang to Dokhok than they did from the county seat of Serta. This adjustment also saved Dzamthang from making significant detours as it built county roads (see figure 4). When they made the decision, the government of Serta was imagining how higher officials would think about the issues from a purely geometric point of view. “Whichever governed was the same,” wrote a report, “[but] it was more convenient and more economical for Dzamthang to do it.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> GAD 26-7-362, document 1, pp.15

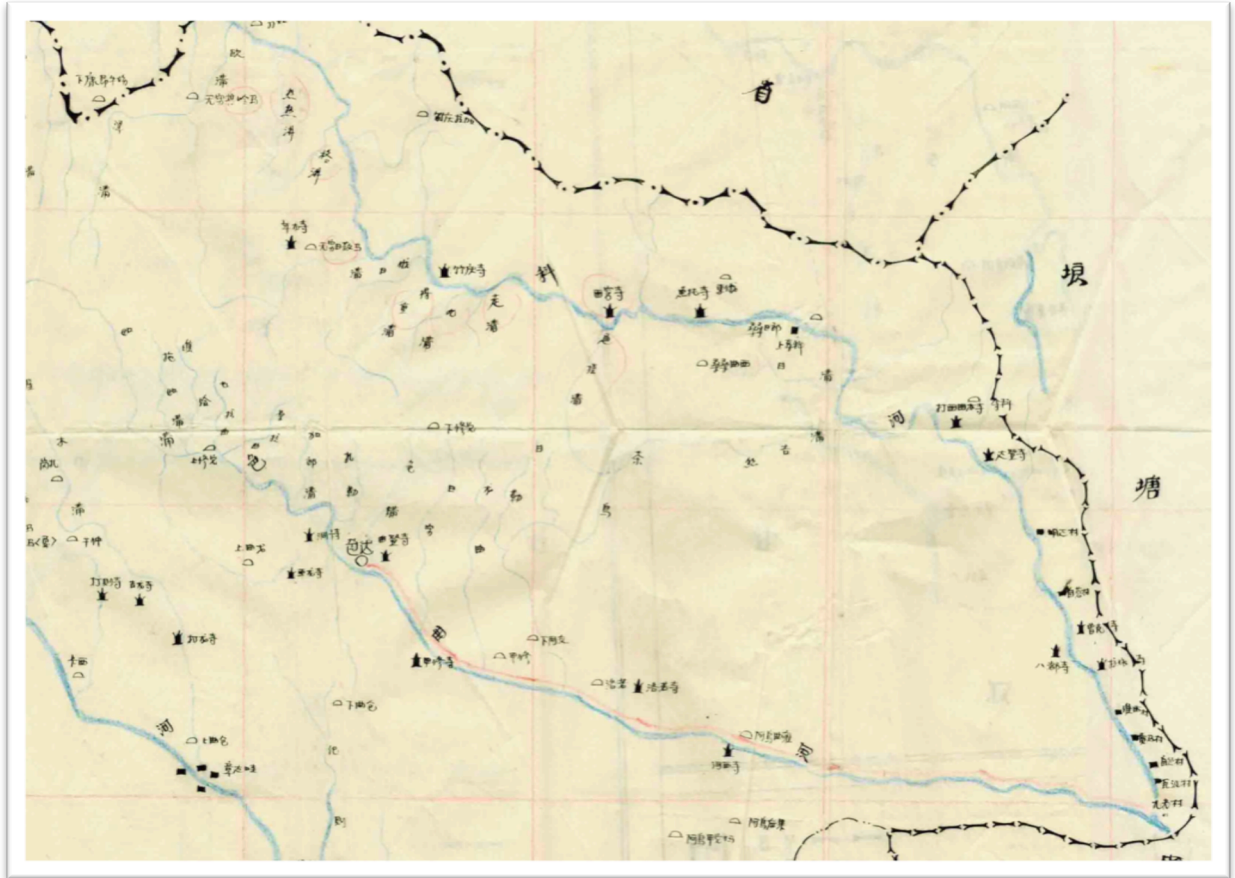
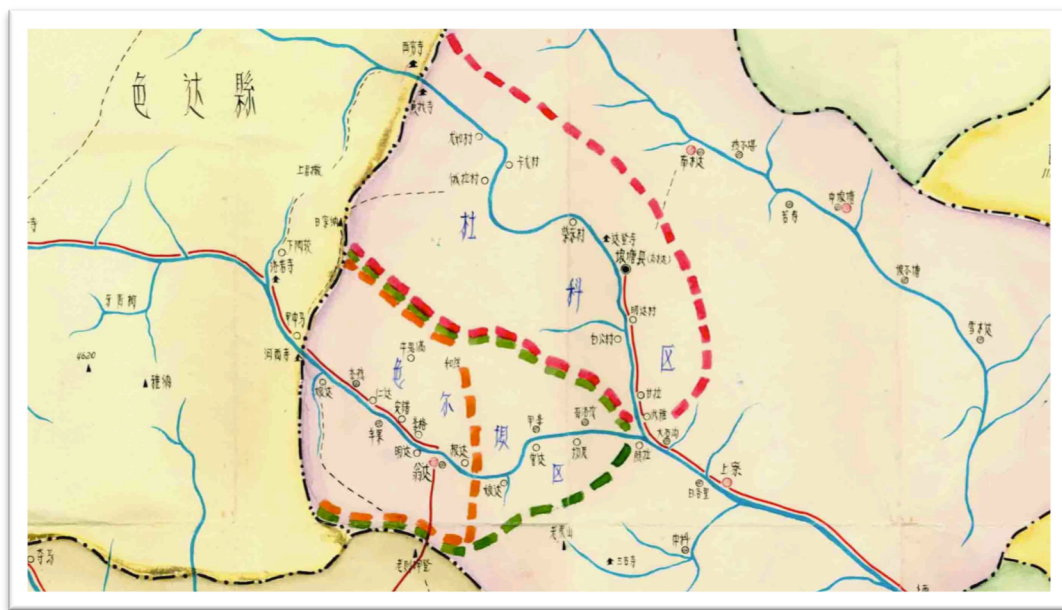


Figure 12: Map of Serta 2. Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo.

After the war ended, Serta wanted to retrieve Dokhok. In 1960, Ganzi and Aba asked the provincial government to adjudicate a land transfer plan they worked out together on behalf of the two counties. They came up with three possible solutions. The first was to return Dokhok to Serta. Yet this would squander all the earlier efforts that Dzamthang officials had invested there. The other two plans brought an area south to Dokhok, Serba (Gser ba) as part of the transfer. In these two plans, Dzamthang gave either part or all of Serba to Serta and kept Dokhok in exchange. As is shown in figure 13, the transfer of all of Serba to Serta would have created a new jagged zone on the border. As Aba stressed and as provincial officials agreed, this should be avoided. Yet the provincial government still insisted on executing a full transfer. As it explained, Dokhok and Serba were two agricultural areas of about the same size. A direct exchange of the two allowed the two counties to

maintain their original levels of grain production and the province not to change its food supply plan in the two prefectures. An optimal layout again was calculated from the geometric point of view. The difference between choosing a tidy border or not depended on how this optimum was defined at different positions within the bureaucratic system, in accordance with different grids and scales. But in these instances, the gazes that treated Tibetan regions as spaces that were empty of histories and lives, as interchangeable entities that could be dismembered and regrouped, and as objects of governance, were all the same.<sup>93</sup>



**Figure 13: Exchange plans between Serta and Dzamthang,** Courtesy of Ganzizhou Archive, Dartsedo.

The land transfer projects relied on maps to take shape. These maps were created in Serta, at the local level, but they were used far away at different bureaucratic levels. Ultimately, the most domineering gaze fixed on these maps was made at the highest level of the system, in Beijing. For a few centuries, pushed by surrounding powers to occupy a remote border region between Amdo and Kham, Serta had become a special location by the time of liberation. The county’s eastern border divided Aba and Ganzi (formerly Xikang), and its north border divided Sichuan and Qinghai. In 1952, Serta chose to join Xikang rather

<sup>93</sup> GAD 26-7-362, document 1

than Qinghai or Sichuan (join Aba). But after democratic reform first took place in Sichuan, Rigdzin dōndrup once contacted the government of Qinghai, attempting to lead Serta to join them. In this context, although boundary disputes between Serta and its neighbors occurred at the village level, they had to be reported to different prefectures and different provinces and needed the State Council to arbitrate. The gaze of the state was erected in this way. Chapter 5 will continue to explore these disputes, some of which influenced Jigme Phuntsok and his search for treasures in the 1990s.

## **Conclusion**

After the liberation of Kham, local cadres made sincere efforts to explore, record, and represent Khampa society. As this chapter demonstrates with archival evidence compiled in this period, these productions cast light on the impacts of state discourses on these cadres. At the beginning, no matter how tightly these cadres stuck to the official rhetoric of rule, how hard they used this rhetoric to organize perceptions, and how strongly other institutional forces shaped them in this way, we can locate immense epistemic anxiety in the documentary practices of these cadres. This was because the gradualist policy disturbed some of the natural ways that these cadres used political categories in Khampa societies. After 1956, when the reform in Kham was much the same as those in the other parts of the PRC, the archival domain also changed. Mimeographed newsletters replaced hand-written reports; empty words drowned out local voices; and unreflective uses of political categories brought the former epistemic uncertainties to an end. Both before and after the changes, archival production was foundational to the establishment of state power in the Khampa societies. It not only guided local cadres to take on the state vision of Kham. With cadres using pens, notebooks, cameras

and survey tools to make records, archival production more importantly brought Kham to the views of officials at different levels, and under the gaze of the sovereign state.

Rebellious and belligerent, the nomadic groups in Serta had once been the most autonomous polity in the Khampa society. They evaded imperial and Republican authorities, as well as strong neighbors and ruthless warlords, only to surrender this autonomy to Communist authority. As is shown in democratic reform and the land transfer plan with Dzamthang, the Chinese archival activities were transformative. Not only did they transcribe the stories of local lives in archives, mapping the local landscape on paper, they further showed how representations could use their own referents to replace the real, and eventually help change the real. In 1960, the local government established new administrative districts within the region. After three adjustments in the following few years, the roughly horizontal layers of Upper, Middle and Lower Serta were made into four vertical districts from west to east: Niqu, Sequ, Setang, and Se Erba (figure 5). The villages of the chief family were torn apart. Upper Shötel was divided into two communes: Jiefang (“liberation”) and Xingfu (“happiness”). Lower Shötel was displaced and reinstalled as a commune in Nyenlung (Tib. Snyan lung; Ch. Nian long). In August 1962, villagers from Lower Shötel violently disobeyed the order to move back to their original residence. Five people were shot to death in this event, eleven injured. Nothing better illustrates the impact of state power than the fact that it has physically changed what it means to be “Serta.”

Yet like the Communist cadres, Khampas have their own perspectives to perceive the world, and they too use these perceptions to make representations and invite others to read. In my attempt to retrieve the views and voices of nomads in Serta, I have only relied on the representations produced by Chinese cadres. Indeed, some of these Chinese representations lay bare a particular kind of Tibetan representation that was important to understanding this encounter: Buddhist prophecies that foretold the arrival of demon armies. These prophecies

shaped how the encounter was understood in Buddhist terms. Chapter 3, “Interpreting Demons,” examines these texts and the old tantric notion of killing demons. It argued that the guerrilla war starting from Serta and spread in other Khampa regions was seen as killing the armies of demons. What the Serta people found in the eyes of Chinese cadres was the gaze of the state but also that of demons goading extremely deluded people to destroy Buddhist teachings. Tracking this story can better explain why Chinese work teams considered monastic groups to be “reactionary.” Revealing more than a violent aspect of Buddhism, this story can push our analysis to move from political categories and rhetoric to semiosis in a broad range of things: from texts to landscapes, architecture, material objects, and to natural phenomena. We will soon find that these factors all led Tibetans and Chinese to the brink of war in that decade. Eventually, by exploring how prophecies had been read in Serta, the chapter will show readers how the ordinary sense of reading becomes problematic in this Buddhist world.

## CHAPTER 3

### Interpreting Demons

In 1951, the central government of the PRC promised not to impose any socialist reform in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), in order to persuade the Lhasa Government to surrender. Yet outside the TAR, in Tibetan areas in Sichuan, an armed resistance eventually erupted among Khampas in 1956, when socialist reform was about to start there.<sup>94</sup> This resistance resulted in the exile of the Dalai Lama. In a recent work, Carole McGranahan (2010) reveals that even former guerrillas are not willing to talk about this resistance, as most Tibetans regard it as a breach of the Buddhist ethics of non-violence, which the Dalai Lama requires the Tibetan independence movement to follow (see also Ardley 2002). Yet Buddhist monastic groups were also implicated in the armed resistance in the 1950s. A more complex account should tell us how Tibetan monastics could build their hegemonic value of non-violence on this earlier history of violence.

My account of this history calls attention to Buddhist prophecies. For one example, consider the final testament of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso. In this statement, Thubten Gyatso foretold the arrival of Communist armies, and he made it clear that violence would be essential to maintaining monastic system in Tibet:

In order to subdue the foreigners, troops...should receive extensive and expert military training, so that they can definitively suppress any adversaries. Furthermore, nowadays manifestations of the five impurities are spreading

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<sup>94</sup> See Goldstein 2009, 2013; Shakya 2000; and McGranahan 2012 for this history.



everywhere. In particular the red system is greatly on the rise...In the future this practice certainly will come, from within or without, here too, to our Tibetan nation...If we are unable to protect our land...the rights and properties of the monastic estates and of all Buddhist teachers, practitioners, and monks will be annihilated...Tortured and terrified, all beings will suffer endlessly, day and night. Such a time will certainly come... (quoted in Dalton 2011: 156)

All Buddhist cultures share a tradition of using prophecy to warn about collapse (Nattier 1991: 119-142). According to Buddhist doctrine, the teachings of the historical Buddha are fated to disappear after a long period of decline. Our time is the last stage of this deterioration, “the age of degeneration” (Tib. *dus snyigs ma*), which is characterized by the “five impurities” mentioned in this speech.<sup>95</sup> Thubten Gyatso gave this prophecy in 1932, at Reting Monastery. By that time, the Mongolian People's Republic had destroyed its monastic groups under the order of Stalin. Aware of the Soviet Union and its socialist allies, Thubten Gyatso reminded Tibetans that this “red system” would also threaten Tibet.

According to the speech, the right thing to do was to suppress the invaders. Jacob Dalton has shown that Tibetans understand this suppression as most fundamentally against demons (*bdud*). As Thubten Gyatso urged Tibetans to protect Tibet, his implication was that their land was a maṇḍala, the cosmic pattern of Buddhism that has been used as a spatial diagram in many Asian countries. In anthropology, the most famous discussion of this remains that of Stanley Tambiah (1984), in his discussion of “galactic polities.” As Tambiah observes, a maṇḍala has a center, and often a set of concentric circles that surround the center, usually three in number. In Tibet, when a maṇḍala is used to represent a divine space—this could be a country, a mountain, a temple, a ritual ground, or the body of a tantrist—Tibetans believe that demons live in the periphery of the maṇḍala and tend to attack it. When this invasion happens, a violent subjugation needs to be done (Dalton 2011, in particular 156).

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<sup>95</sup> Buddhists have different opinions on the length of the age of degeneration, ranging from five hundred years to twelve thousand years. The “five impurities” are the short span of human life, the prevalence of wrong views, the increase of afflictions, the degeneration of sentient beings, and the deterioration of the world and environment.



**Figure 14: The Thirteenth Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso,** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th\\_Dalai\\_Lama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_Dalai_Lama)

Two decades later, when guerrillas in Sichuan sent public letters to Yunnan, they described China as a “nation of demons...the sign of the age of degeneration.”<sup>96</sup> In an agreement signed by hundreds of villages and monasteries in Lithang, China again was represented as a “nation of demons.”<sup>97</sup> Guerrillas threatened to kill all “subordinates of demons,” even when they were Tibetans.<sup>98</sup> In Bathang, twenty-five monasteries summoned their tributary villages to attack the government: “Now all Khampa monasteries join to pray and fight against the red enemies of the teachings [i.e. demons]...Fight to the last man...otherwise [we] will vanish as Thubten Gyatso prophesied.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, in a government meeting in 1951, the Tibetan Communist Sanggye Yeshe (Sangs rgyas ye shes) already

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<sup>96</sup> The letter was sent to all Tibetan polities in Yunnan. The relevant record is preserved in the Prefectural Archive of Ganzi, Dartsedo (hereafter, GAD) 26-4-156, document 4, pp.146-147

<sup>97</sup> GAD 26-4-156, document 4, pp.152.

<sup>98</sup> See GAD, 26-6-198, document 1, pp.17. The army was Ngari Shingkham, whose soldiers came from Lithang, Bathang, Gyalthag, and Chandreng, see Goldstein 2013: pp.104 and chapter 4.

<sup>99</sup> GAD 26-4-156, document 4, pp. 131

mentioned Thubten Gyatso's prophecy to his Chinese colleagues. He suggested not building the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association in Khampa counties, for this would present Chinese Communists as demon armies.<sup>100</sup> Yet Chinese work teams soon found numerous prophecies that narrated ghastly spectacles brought by demon armies. They simply could not avoid being linked to demons.<sup>101</sup>

This encounter brings into focus the remote Tibetan county of Serta, where the guerrilla war first broke out. For at least a century, Serta had been envisioned as a maṇḍala prone to the attack of demons. Prophecies from the region often foretold the arrival of demon armies and urged readers to tame them. However, the notions of “demons,” “demon armies,” and “subjugation” actually can be interpreted in many different ways. In this ambiguity, after prophecies were used to justify armed resistance in the 1950s in Serta, this violence became a special legacy from which the new generation of monks could reorganize the region around the ethics of non-violence, as was shown in the 1980s. Other people's ideas of the evil are windows onto their theories of human nature: in David Parkin's terms, “its internal constitution and external boundaries; how much it is part of and how much separable from surrounding forces and influences; and how self-determining it is.” (Parkin 1985: 6) After a laborious effort to trace what “demons” mean in Serta, I will eventually touch upon the way Buddhism interprets self and world in this chapter.

### **Tantric Violence, Maṇḍala, and Demon Narrative**

The significance of violence in maintaining a maṇḍala from the invasion of demons calls attention to wrathful tantric rituals. These rituals are known as having the ability to kill a

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<sup>100</sup> Sanggye Yeshe was the chair of the Prefecture Committee of Dartsedo. This description is drawn from a handwritten minute of a plenary session on November 13, 1951. GAD 26-1-47, document 2, pp.18, 23 and 27.

<sup>101</sup> This connection is mentioned in passing in Schwartz 1995: 229 and Cantwell 1997: 110. Caroline Humphrey (1983: 421) reports an example from another socialist context.

demon. These rituals involve visualizing a maṇḍala circumscribed by a clear boundary. The tantrist then invites a tantric deity to enter the maṇḍala, and uses an effigy to trap the demons he intends to liberate. The ritual includes the act of stabbing the effigy with a ritual dagger, at the time of which the magical power of the tantric deity is channeled to destroy the demons and lead them to rebirth in a buddha land.<sup>102</sup> In this description, violence is justified as a way of converting evil people. A common notion is that after this subjugation, some converted demons could further use their ferocious power to protect the maṇḍala.

In Tibetan monasteries, when a real space is consecrated as a maṇḍala, monks use wrathful rituals to tame threats. As Richard Kohn (2001: 93-96) observes in a Buddhist monastery in Nepal, when the courtyard of the monastery is prepared as a maṇḍala to perform an annual ritual dance event, monks dig a triangular pit in the courtyard. They put into the pit a *linga*, and use the *linga* to assemble evil spirits that originally occupied the site. Then, they chant wrathful tantras, convening legions of deities to tame and harness the assembled demons. After this step, a flagstone is used to cover the pit, as though the visualized maṇḍala and the courtyard maṇḍala can both put their weights on the demons that are pressed beneath them. As in the above case, some of the tamed beings become guardian deities that prevent demons from returning. The statues of these gods are installed as the boundary of the courtyard, to which offerings are made. As is shown here, during the erection of a maṇḍala, demons occupy two positions: beneath the maṇḍala and on its peripheries.<sup>103</sup>

Now we can move to the image of Tibet as a maṇḍala. In this last case, demons occupy the same ambiguous positions. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, as Tibetan pilgrims studied and translated tantric teachings from India, they learned about the maṇḍala

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<sup>102</sup> This violence is among the four mundane purposes of tantras: pacification of difficulties (conflicts, disease, hindrance, etc.), augmentation of auspicious elements (wealth, life span, merit, etc.), control of opponents (nonbelievers, enemies, gods, etc.), and subjugation (killing, destruction, etc.).

<sup>103</sup> Dalton 2011, chapter 5; Cantwell 1997: 108-109; Huber 1999

diagram.<sup>104</sup> Coming from the peripheral regions of India, Tibetan students found themselves to live in the regions of demons, when India, the great Buddhist center, was the maṇḍala. Over the next two centuries, tantric teachings became extremely popular in Tibet, especially wrathful tantras. This reinforced the image of pre-Buddhist Tibet as a land of demons, as these wrathful tantric teachings were thought as helpful for taming the land. One famous legend, for example, explains that in order to build Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, Samye, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (c. 742-800) invited the Indian tantrist Padmasambhava to subjugate the spirits that originally occupied Tibet. This echoes the above case where the demons that originally occupy the courtyard are also tamed. The view of this subjugation as essential for the land of demons to be erected as a maṇḍala is especially manifest in another legend, in which the landscape of pre-Buddhist Tibet is described as a supine demoness (*srimo*). In this legend, in order to install a precious statue of the historical Buddha in Lhasa, thirteen taming temples were built on the demoness's body as in the diagram of maṇḍala: the central monastery was in Lhasa; the other twelve divided the map of Tibet into a set of three concentric squares that were the inner realm, the borders, and the borders beyond. Not only these temples but also their vertical components—pillars, chapels, altars, etc.—repeated the function of ritual daggers in wrathful rituals. They served to hold down the demoness, impaling her joints and body parts.

As scholars have pointed out, the evil spirits mentioned in these legends reflect how monastic groups understand the non-Buddhist aspect of Tibetan culture: as aggressive, ruthless, and uncivilized.<sup>105</sup> As subdued demons became tutelary gods, the pugnacious qualities of Tibetans can also be harnessed to protect the dharma. Military strength became a grave problem after the collapse of the Tibetan empire. In the thirteenth century, after

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<sup>104</sup> Huber 2008, chapter 2

<sup>105</sup> Gyatso, 1987; Dalton, 2011, chapter 5; Kapstein 2011

Muslim depredations caused the demise of Buddhism in India, Tibetans found themselves to be the new Buddhist center, a maṇḍala. But from the case of India, Tibetans also learned how easily foreign armies could destroy such a center. In that century, for example, Tibetans viewed Mongol invaders as demon armies arriving from the peripheries of their maṇḍala. All the foreign invaders that have appeared since then--the Mongols, Nepalese, Manchus, British, Muslims, and Chinese—have been described as demon armies among Tibetan groups.<sup>106</sup>



**Figure 15: The demoness of Tibet.** The body of the demoness had to be pinned to the earth by these twelve outlying temples. Norbulingka Palace, Lhasa.

In the 1950s, many prophecies that emerged in Khampa regions were about demon armies. Chinese reports of the topic were filed from most of the Khampa regions where armed resistance took place.<sup>107</sup> In their reports, Chinese officials made clear that these texts were *yu yan*, or “prophecies.” Sometimes they also called these texts *tian shu* or “heaven books,” a Chinese word used to describe mysterious religious works. One text title, *mao weng luo de*, is transcribed from the Tibetan expression of *ma 'ongs lung bstan*, or

<sup>106</sup> Dalton 2011, chapter 6; Martin 1994; Gentry 2010.

<sup>107</sup> These regions are Dawu, Draggo, Nyarong, Dégé, Palyul, Dzachukha, Lithang, Chaktreng, Dêrong, and Serta. However, the limited number of the records suggests that linguistic barriers prevented this popular phenomenon from being fully recorded.

“prophecies of the future.” On most occasions, fragmentary excerpts rather than the entire body of a prophecy are rendered. The translations were probably either works of bilingual cadres or collaboration between Chinese cadres and Tibetan interpreters. For the most part, these translations cannot tell us exactly how a prophecy uses Buddhist doctrine, terminology, or imagery, but the general issue at stake is still perceptible. Below is an example collected in March 1953 by a Tibetan cadre in a monastery in Troshül Gapma, a village in the east of Dzachukha:

Now there are two demons, one black, and one red. Their troops are everywhere... Demons always say they are good. In the next three years they will be good to ordinary people and religion. In six years, they will raid every person and monastery; and in eight or nine years, they will poison [people] to death. Survivors will surrender themselves to demons... Monks and laypeople will be conscripted into military service, and all livestock killed to feed soldiers... Since [your belongings] will be plundered anyway, offer them to monasteries... Receive an ordination if you already give things [to demons]... [In the future] Tibet will be full of soldiers, of disease and starvation, of weapons... Dead persons and livestock will pile up like mountains. Pray and make offerings [to monasteries] when you still can...  
... When bandits and soldiers destroy the teachings, bodhisattvas will get angry. This will lead to disasters and battles, and to the emergence of persons and things that no one ever sees. Buddhas will find the solution [to demons]...<sup>108</sup>

After the Chinese came, many Tibetans believed that a socialist reform movement would be instituted sooner or later. This prescient fear is stunningly expressed in the above quote. Yet the prophecy more importantly implied the use of violence to protect religion. The excerpt borrowed its narrative from a standard tantric myth. This myth has long been used to explain the origin of wrathful tantric rituals and to sanctify violence as consistent with Buddhist virtues. In its various versions, the myth describes demons enticing other beings to do evil. These demons threatened the survival of Buddhist teachings and the welfare of the world. Once all alternative solutions had been exhausted, buddha families sent wrathful gods to kill

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<sup>108</sup> The prophecy is attributed to “Khyentse Rinpoche in Dzongsar Monastery.” This could be Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820-1892) or his reincarnation, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1893-1959), who left Kham for India in 1955. The whole prophecy is rendered in Chinese. GAD 26-1-338, document 3.

the demons.<sup>109</sup> Here, if the two forms of demons were identified with Tibetan and Chinese cadres, the prophecy may have seemed a tacit call for armed resistance. Indeed this must be why the Tibetan cadre collected, translated, and archived the text for his colleagues.

Yet do not forget those demons inside the maṇḍala, who are emblematic of the aggressive qualities of Tibetan people. Indeed, in a Buddhist text, a list of demons may actually refer to a list of spiritual obstructions, while expressions like “craving” or “confusion” might be used to name real spirits (Byod 1975: 104-106). As a tantric text instructs one to “kill demons,” it may actually refer to the use of meditative methods to purify inner obstacles that are visualized in the practitioner’s mind as demons. Knowledgeable Khampas might thus have read this prophecy as foretelling an exacerbation of inner defilements among Tibetan and Chinese groups. In this case, the demon armies that the prophecy was warning against might have included Tibetan people themselves. In hindsight, Khampa guerrillas might have considered the prophecy as a warning against their armed resistance. Indeed, this ambiguity is more apparent if we look at the context of Serta.

## **Texts and History**

In my fieldwork in Serta, I collected extant prophecies in an effort to reconstruct the context of the 1950s. Fortunately, some local people had already done this before me. I obtained a book from a monk at Larung.<sup>110</sup> In the book’s preface, the editors wrote that whenever they heard someone had a prophecy, they requested a copy. Few of the texts in this book overlap with the prophecies that were noted in official records in the 1950s, a sign that a much larger

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<sup>109</sup> The most famous version of this is Vajrapani’s subjugation of Rudra, the king of demons. Dalton 2011; Davidson 1991; Snellgrove 1987: 136-141; Mayer 1998

<sup>110</sup> The book is titled *The Pilgrimage Guides and Prophecies of the District (Rdzong gi gnas yig dang lung bstan*, hereafter *lung bstan*). No publication information is available for this book. The editors do a poor job when they put together these prophecies in the form of a modern book. Some texts do not have a colophon or title. Sometimes whether certain passages



pool of prophecies might have existed in that decade. Yet prophecies in both domains focus on the demon narratives. Very likely, demon armies must also be a significant topic in texts that have been lost since the 1950s.

Buddhist doctrine claims that enlightened beings have full knowledge of the past, present and future. In Tibetan Buddhism, prestigious reincarnate lamas are known as the manifestations of these enlightened beings. All extant prophecies in Serta are attributed to such lamas. We can thus estimate dates for these texts based on the lifetimes of these lamas. Although a prophecy might not really be created by the author to whom it is attributed, it also cannot be created before the attributed author. The earliest master to whom an extant prophecy is attributed is Jigme Trinle Özer (1745-1821), the founder of the Dodrupchen lineage, who was also the first Serta lama to gain a pan-Tibetan reputation. We can safely argue that prophetic writing could not have become a prominent tradition in Serta before the lifetime of Jigme Trinle Özer, that is, before the early or the mid-nineteenth century.

Monastic groups grew dramatically in the period of time in which prophecies might have been mostly produced. In this period, some Buddhist masters in Serta were renowned for their visionary talents and ritual prowess. In 1791, Jigme Trinle Özer performed wrathful rituals for Lhasa, when Nepalese armies invaded Central Tibet. One generation later, in Dartsedo, the second Dodrupchen Jigme Phuntsok Jungne (1824-1863), together with Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje (1800-1866), halted an imperial Chinese troop with rituals. In the early twentieth century, Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926) spent his last years in Serta. In the face of the British and Qing expeditions to Lhasa, this Nyarong lama performed wrathful tantrtras together with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Another important group in this field was Dudjom Linpa (1835-1904) and his Dudjom family. These Buddhist masters exemplified the growth

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should be connected together as one prophecy or separated as different works is open to question. I can only speculate on the overall number of these prophecies: twenty to thirty.

of Serta as a new religious center, whose landscape was gradually envisioned as a maṇḍala among local monastics.



Figure 16: The First Dodrupchen Jigme Trinle Özer, <http://treasuryoflives.org/>

According to Buddhist teaching, at the center of the cosmic maṇḍala is Mount Meru, a cosmic mountain that sits on a gold disc. Likewise, at the center of the maṇḍala of Serta is a local holy mountain, Drongri Mukpo (’Brong ri smug po), which is situated on Gold Plain (Gser thang). Several miles away is the inner realm of the maṇḍala, whose edge is marked by another mountain, Damchen (Dam can). This mountain is the tantric deity Damchen Dorje Legpa, who protects the maṇḍala. Further outside is an old battlefield, Horshul (Hor shul), or “the remains of Hor.” Two explanations make clear that this area, which is the boundary of the maṇḍala, is where invaders come as demon armies. One explanation connects Serta to the legendary kingdom of Ling, and Horshul to where King Gesar of Ling defeated Hor, a kingdom of demons in the legend. The second explanation states that Serta’s ancestors once

defeated Mongol invaders (also *hor*, traditionally known as demon armies) at Horshul.<sup>111</sup> Several place names at Horshul—“Gyelbo-comes-upward (Rgyal pos yar yong),” “Plain-where-the-gyelbo-spread (Rgyal pos dar thang),”—convey an anxiety about outside invaders. Originally meaning “king” or “chieftain,” Gyelbo refers here to a special class of demons in association with illness or insanity.<sup>112</sup> This recalls the military threats that never ceased to appear in Serta in the past few centuries: Zhou Ying’s Qing troops in 1729, Gönpo Namgyel’s Nyarong soldiers in the 1850s, Zhao Erfeng’s armies in 1905, Republican forces in the 1910s-1930s, and Ma Bufang’s Muslim cavalries in 1942.<sup>113</sup>

Yet the threats of demons were also inside. Damchen is the key to understanding this. Maroon in color, this protective deity has one face, three eyes, a gaping mouth and bared teeth. It brandishes a nine-pointed vajra of meteoric iron, crushing with it the heads of the enemies of Buddhism. As one of the four treasure guards in the Nyingma, Damchen protects the yellow treasure of gold (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993: 154-159). This recalls the chiefly family of Serta that lived on Gold Plain. In iconography, Damchen sometimes is drawn as riding on a light-brown billy goat. The early ancestor of the chiefly family, Purpatar (Phur pa tar), had the epithet “a hunchback layperson with the voice of a goat” (Mi nag gug gug ra skad can). Bearing some resemblance to Damchen, the nomads of Serta were protectors of their monastic community.

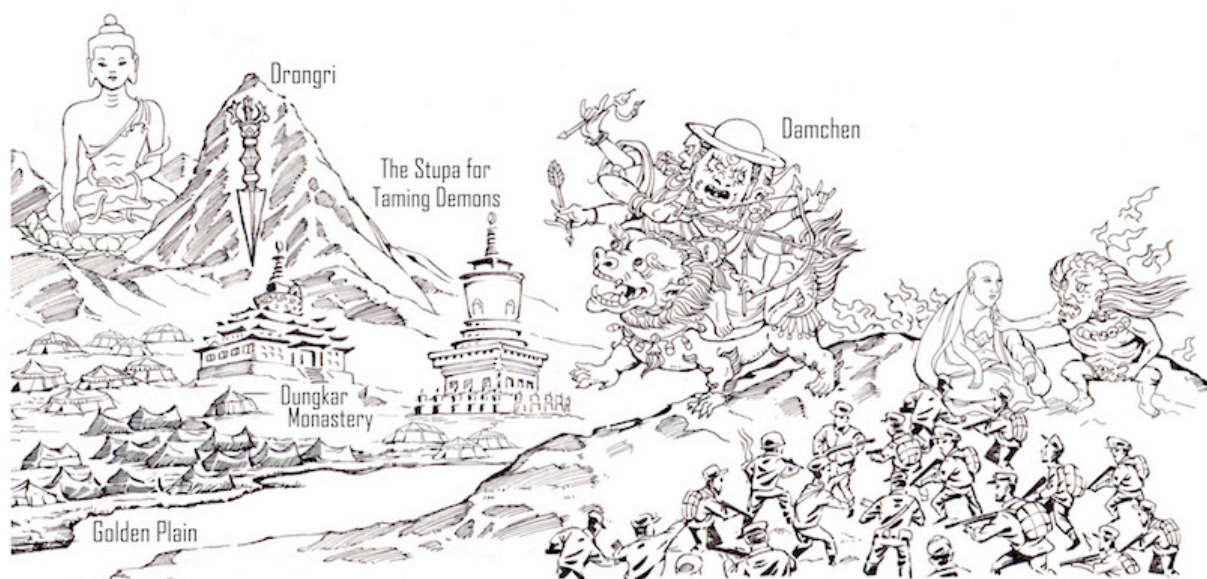
Yet Damchen originally was a demon. In legend, it was tamed by Padmasambhava and became a protective deity. Indeed, the name of “Purpatar,” or “freeing the ritual dagger,” indicates a subjugation story. Until the 1950s, Serta was still known as the most unruly area in Kham. The nomads there were notorious for fighting, looting, and animal killing. They

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<sup>111</sup> The most possible attack against this region from Mongols took place in 1640, when Gūshi Khan invaded the state of Beri as the ally of Geluk School. Yet Khoshut Mongol is known as *sog po* instead of *hor*. If this local interpretation has historical validity, the “Mongols” may refer to the state of Hor, a nearby chiefdom known as the descendants of the Khoshut Mongols.

<sup>112</sup> Serta nomads called Mao *gyelbo*, GAD 26-1-364-7

were less clustered around authorities. The emergence of the landscape of Serta as a maṇḍala points to the capacity of local monastics to suppress and convert these nomads. Tibetans sometimes understand holy mountains as “earth daggers” (*sa yi phur ba*).<sup>114</sup> The center of the maṇḍala, Drongri, is equivalent to a ritual dagger. It represents a continuous suppression of the barbarian qualities of the nomads. Yet the subdued demons were still alive. Local village heads did not always show respect to lamas.<sup>115</sup> As the chiefly family expanded Serta by acquiring the surrender of other villages, it also put Serta into territorial disputes with almost every polity around it. The power of the nomads could be used to protect Serta from demon armies, but there was a danger that these nomads might become demon armies themselves.



**Figure 17: The mandala of Serta**, illustration by Li Na.

As signs of collapse emerged inside and outside, local monastic groups must have lamented a future where the flourishing of demons overshadowed and threatened the dharma.

<sup>113</sup> The County Gazetteer of Serta (hereafter CGS), Sichuan Renmin Press, 1997, pp. 35-40

<sup>114</sup> Stein 1972: 204, quoted in Gyatso 1987

<sup>115</sup> Dudjom Linpa was forced to leave his hermitage site where Jigme Phuntsok later established Larung, for example. The second Dordrupchen was forced to move his monastery to Qinghai and later exiled in Dartsedo with Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje.

These anxieties must have found their ways into prophetic writings. The issue of ambiguity emerges at this point. In the 1950s, which group should be recognized as the prophecy's referent, Chinese invaders or themselves? Should nomads fight against the Communists or not? Had monastic groups followed the prophecy to deploy violent tantras, which group should have been targeted as associated with demons? Or should the monks have targeted their own inner obstacles?

### **Encounters in Serta**

In 1913, the chiefly family erected a gigantic stūpa on Gold Plain, called “the Stūpa for Taming Demons (Bdud ’dul mchod rten).” After this, they remained vigilant about the arrival of strangers. In 1940, these nomads ambushed the French explorers Louis Victor Liotard and Andre Guibaut, whose team was trying to travel through Gold Plain to Golok. Guibaut later recollected how things went wrong as they reached the stūpa: “it was as though this monument had released some malevolent spell, for from the moment of our first seeing it all the vague threats which surrounded us began to take human shape” (1947: 95). The ambush was not for robbery. “It was our lives they were after” (121).

In September 1952, the first Communist work team arrived in Serta. They passed across Damchen, moving toward Gold Plain. This evokes the image of breaking through the protective deity of the maṇḍala to enter its realm. The Chinese work team first set up around the stūpa, before they were asked by Rigdzin Döndrup, the chief, to move.<sup>116</sup> Rumors had it that the stūpa failed to preempt the arrival of the demon army.<sup>117</sup> A few months later, a

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<sup>116</sup> GAD 26-1-298, document 2, pp.124

<sup>117</sup> GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.42

Tibetan cadre, Khenrap, noted that “a number of so-called prophecies have become our chief obstacles.” Specifically, his report to Dartsedo mentioned the following prophecy:

On Gold Plain an iron bird falls  
On the top of Damchen a black flag flies<sup>118</sup>

As Sam van Schiak explains elsewhere, “iron bird” as a prophetic trope has to do with Langdarma, who caused the collapse of Buddhism to occur for the first time in Tibet in an iron bird year. Tibetans in the modern era often interpret this trope as aircraft (van Schaik 2016), however. Following the prophecy, Rigdzin Döndrup demanded that no airstrip be built in Serta. Regarding the second verse, Damchen’s mother is known as riding a demon horse and carrying a demon banner made of black silk (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993: 157). “The black flag is the sign of evil people and deeds,” explained Khenrap. Although the verse could be used to describe both nomads and invaders, “local Tibetans think we cadres are *tama* [Tib. *mtha’ dmag*, literally “border army,” the common term for foreign invaders], the troops [of demons] that harm sentient beings in Buddhist scriptures.” Elsewhere, cadres heard that they were *duma*, a transliteration of “demon army” (Tib. *’dud dmag*) in Tibetan.<sup>119</sup>

As is shown here and in other prophecies that still exist in Serta, prophecies are written in figurative language. Later I will explain why Buddhists do this. Now we need to point out how this affects prophetic texts that endure in time. On the one hand, the abundant imagery and the diverse interpretations it allows increases the ways prophecies enter history. After an original use, a prophecy can still be consulted as prophecy in a new setting. It draws new causalities into its orbit. Yet when figurative language is dislocated from its original context, this often causes the problem of obscurity and the loss of its original meaning as the author intended. To decipher prophecies, Tibetans had to consider whether things or events

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<sup>118</sup> GAD, 26-1-292, document 12, pp.159.

<sup>119</sup> GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.42

were omens. Doing this, they actually created new meaning for prophecies,<sup>120</sup> and these creations even did not need to comply with the real, as prophecies could be about a time later than the time of reading. This must have been the case of many prophecies circulating in Serta, as we can tell from the below case noted by Khenrap in 1953:

In the Water Dragon Year it roars like a thunderbolt  
In the Water Snake Year it slithers like a snake  
In the Wood Horse Year it vanishes like a rainbow<sup>121</sup>

“Thunderbolt” is a common metaphor for wrathful tantras in Buddhism. “Snake” here should refer to klu, a serpent deity that destroys harmony with the natural world and needs to be tamed. A vanished rainbow seems to evoke the death of a Nyingma practitioner who gets liberation at the moment. In any case, the work team arrived in 1952 (a water dragon year). When the news of the Korean War was spread in Serta, Tibetans began to assert that the work team came “like a thunderbolt,” but the officials would crawl away “like a snake” in 1953 (a water snake year) and disappear “like a rainbow” in 1954 (a wood horse year). “There is no way to mobilize ordinary Tibetans when they expect us to leave,” as Khenrap reported to the Prefectural Committee of Dartsedo, who forwarded the report to provincial officials in Sichuan. Later, Sichuan officials used this case as illustration to educate all Khampa counties: “Now the lower and middle classes are getting close to us...[but] the general public is susceptible to reactionary rumors, especially when these rumors are made as prophecies written by lamas.”<sup>122</sup>

This attention caused monastic groups to become vulnerable. As officials found in Serta, Buddhist prophecies were all attributed to lamas. These prophecies “circulated in

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<sup>120</sup> As such, the dialectics is closer to Richard Parmentier’s discussion (1987) of “signs of history” and “signs in history:” after the struggle against demons is materialized time and again in prophecies as interpretive scheme, it was retrieved in the new historical context.

<sup>121</sup> GAD 26-1-292, document 12, pp.159-160

<sup>122</sup> GAD 26-1-292, document 12, pp.145

monasteries” and they “used religious myths, dreams, and deities to justify themselves.”<sup>123</sup>

In 1953 and 1954, these observations led officials to suspect several monastic leaders: “Tulku Dordra used to give prophecies every year. But he stopped [doing that] after we came. He has been observing [how things change] since then.”<sup>124</sup> Several other records make mention of Ngédön Gyatso (Nges don rgya mtsho), speaking of him as a “sly and pernicious” lama who “creates a lot of rumors [i.e. prophecies].” This lama had close connection with Rigdzin Döndrup. As Chinese cadres noted, Ngédön Gyatso told the chief that the Chinese work team would leave “in three years.” But “another demon army would come to Tibet, very likely Americans. And the world would be thrown into great sufferings”<sup>125</sup>

Chinese cadres took pains to persuade Rigdzin Döndrup to visit Dartsedo or Chengdu to attend government conferences. In 1953, Ngédön Gyatso gave Rigdzin Döndrup a divination, asking him to take a one-year retreat at Drongri, as the chief lost his son. The cadres believed that this long retreat was a trick that prevented Rigdzin Döndrup leaving Serta. In 1954, Rigdzin Döndrup’s uncle fell sick during a trip organized by the government for Tibetan leaders to observe Chinese cities’ industrial achievements. In Serta, people believed that he “was possessed by demons, a Han disease [*han bing*].” The headman went to Drongri for a cleansing pilgrimage. After that, he asked for exorcism from a lama.<sup>126</sup> On other occasions, government officials noted how monks threatened to stop performing rituals for those who worked for them.<sup>127</sup> “These monks said that anyone who received our

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<sup>123</sup> GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.41

<sup>124</sup> Dorjé Drakdü (Rdo rje drag ’dul) or Tulku Dordra (1892-1959) was the eighth son of Dudjom Lingpa. He was the owner of Dartsang Monastery. This record is drawn from the archival collection of the Party Committee of Serta, Serta Archives, Serta (hereafter SAS), 1954-1-2, pp.50

<sup>125</sup> GAD 26-1-298, document 2, pp.128; see also GAD 26-1-359, document 11; GAD 26-1-292, document 11. pp.152 and document 12, pp.159-160

<sup>126</sup> SAS, 1955-1-1, pp.97-98

<sup>127</sup> GAD 26-2-54, document 8, pp.100



payments, alms and medicines would be bound with us in later lifetimes.”<sup>128</sup> “They do not allow Tibetans to take our things. But could these monks find any of their items not shipped from Chinese areas?”<sup>129</sup>



**Figure 18: The Stupa for Taming Demons.** The highest stupa in Tibetan areas in Sichuan, this stupa was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt in 1980, photo by the author.

As cadres took monastics to be responsible for prophecies that sabotaged their rule, their hostility toward monasteries and monks stiffened Tibetan impressions of them as possessed by demons. The nomads thus slid more closely toward violence. Guerrilla warfare resulted from different conjectures, inferences, and engagements with texts and events by these different parties. In June 1953, after reading a prophecy recounting the coming of war, Rigdzin Döndrup summoned all his subordinate villages to pray at Drongri.<sup>130</sup> In 1955, “[religious] rumors became especially plentiful.”<sup>131</sup> Soon after, the nomads heard of the

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<sup>128</sup> GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.42

<sup>129</sup> SAS, 1954-1-2, pp.52

<sup>130</sup> This prophecy was attributed to a “Dodrupchen rinpochen.” This could be Jigme Trinle Özer, Jigme Phuntsok Jungné (1824-1863), or Jigme Tenpé Nyima (1865-1926). SAS 1955-1-1: pp.133

<sup>131</sup> SAS, 1955-1-1, pp.97-98

incoming socialist transformation. In early 1956, using the slogan “Expel Han Chinese, protect religion, and maintain traditional chieftainship,” Rigdzin Döndrup spearheaded an attack on the county seat.<sup>132</sup>

In 1959, Chinese troops dealt a fatal blow to the guerrillas. The chief was shot to death. Over the next few years, the county government abolished the chieftainship, defrocked monks, and closed monasteries in this region. The last vestiges of Buddhism were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, with religious practices forbidden in the public domain. This tragedy prompted reflection on the armed resistance. Enlightened beings’ prophecies are meant to prevent tragedy. Yet if the armed resistance ended in dreadful results, it showed that the guerrilla war was wrong, that the nomads must have been dominated by hatred rather than compassion, and that the demon armies that were prophesied must have also included these nomads.

To further our discussion, we need now to look at the Dreyfus’s discussion of the Buddhist view of ethics:

In Buddhist epistemology, morality is described as ‘thoroughly hidden’ (*atyantaparoksa*, *shin tu lkog gyur*), a domain of reality that is inaccessible to direct experience or to reason. In Buddhism as in most Indian traditions, good and bad are understood in terms of the consequences of one’s karma---that is, in relation to action. An action is bad if, and only if, it leads to negative karmic results. But the only way to understand that an action such as killing will lead in the future to being killed or reborn in painful circumstances is to rely on some authority, whether the instructions of a person or the exegesis of a text. (Dreyfus 2003: 115)

The rationale for this view will be explained below. Now we just need to see that how prophecies in Serta had provided the instruction that was needed. In one prophecy attributed to the late 19th century Serta lama Sönam Norbu (Bsod nams nor bu), for instance, the author writes: “without purpose, bandits and thieves cause harm to sentient beings; this is the basis

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<sup>132</sup> Seda Xianzhi 1997: 6

of the present unhappiness of the region.”<sup>133</sup> The verse uses “the present” (*da lta*) as its time marker. While this prophecy could have been produced in any of the chaotic contexts since the lifetime of Sonom Norbu, this time marker allows it to bear upon the 1950s as well. As we shall see, the prophet simultaneously implies two kinds of harm: the present unhappiness of the region, and the harm that previous generations had caused, and Sönam Norbu, again as in tradition, urges readers to use violence to tame harms (here to perform Vajrakīlaya rituals to kill demons). The ambiguity now makes clear to us one of its sociological consequences: once the Tibetans could not rely on violence to solve their immediate problems, their casuistry would turn to their error in neglecting the warnings against their barbarism.

In his travelogue, the explorer Guibaut explains how the chiefly family’s ambush took the life of his friend Liotard. He also recollects a Buddhist lama who appeared on that day to urge them to take another route. In hindsight, Guibaut believes that the lama knew of the ambush. His remorse over their dismissal of the lama recalls the Buddhist view of karma: “If an unrelenting law of causality was to lead us there, it was not for him [i.e. the lama] to interfere between cause and effect. Nevertheless he had indulged himself to the extent of offering us fate’s warning.” (Guibaut 1947: 113) A reflection like this may be the best result for Buddhist monasteries. Yet what was role of Buddhist monasteries in the guerrilla war? Shouldn’t they use violent tantras to tame demons? What was the sociological consequence that the failed armed resistance had brought to monastics?

### **The Demonization of Monastic Groups**

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<sup>133</sup> For the present prophecy attributed to the late 19th century Serta lama Sönam Norbu (Bsod nams nor bu), see *lung bstan*, pp.201

In 1952, upon their arrival, Chinese work teams heard that they were “cursed by black magic [*hei jing*].”<sup>134</sup> After the start of the armed resistance, every time before their attack on the county government, the rebels gathered together at Drongri, praying together with monks from virtually all monasteries in Serta. One official record mentions monks’ performance of Sitātapatrā rituals. Sitātapatrā is a female deity that has a thousand heads, a thousand arms, and a thousand feet. This deity is regarded as capable of destroying armies, overcoming disasters, and cutting asunder all malignant demons, the spells of others, and dangers and hatred. On another occasion, monks were reported to “use exorcism to curse [we] Communist Party. They asserted that bodhisattvas would protect the nomads to destroy [we] Chinese army.”<sup>135</sup> In one monastery, after Chinese soldiers burst into a monastery, they found effigies made of Chinese costumes.<sup>136</sup>

In an example of Buddhist exorcism given by Lopez, to overcome the obstacles faced by a patron, the officiant organizes the ritual setting as a maṇḍala: the figure of the Buddha is put at the center, surrounded by dough figurines of demons in the four cardinal directions. Then the officiant recites prayers, turns around the figurines, and dispels the demons that harm his patron. As Lopez remarks, demons are “undetected but for the harm they inflict” (1996: 222). Yet what was the correct harm for every ritual performer to detect in 1950s Serta? After a tantric deity was invited in a visualized maṇḍala, should the magical power of the deity be directed toward Chinese armies who surrounded Serta that is a maṇḍala, or toward the very body of each Tibetan and Chinese soldier that is also a maṇḍala? Should the sympathetic effect of the ritual be used to kill a man physically, or purify his innate obstacles mentally? Should the ritual be used to purify Tibetan’s hatred to avoid the violence, or simply to ensure that the violence was compassionate enough to avoid karmic force?

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<sup>134</sup> GAD 26-1-155, document 9, pp.32-33;

<sup>135</sup> GAD 26-5-324, document 2, pp.92

<sup>136</sup> SAS 1959, “donggasi he qita simiao cailiao,” 81-83.

Different views must have existed at the time. A pamphlet was nailed to the front door of Lithang Monastery: “Kill Han Chinese. There is no danger of being reborn in hell. Beat Han Chinese. There is no need to ask for a monk to purify your sin. Think of Han Chinese as evil. A doctor will not be needed.”<sup>137</sup> The pamphlet might be read either as a sign of monastics’ support of violence (if it was posed by a monk to tell his thought) or a sign of disapproval (if the pamphlet, for example, was posed by someone who did not agree with this disapproval). In another popular notion, Tibetan cadres were described as reincarnated from those who had fought against Zhao Erfeng who ravaged Kham in 1905. If former protectors were reborn as corrupt cadres, contemporary Tibetans should refrain from armed fight.<sup>138</sup> The real history might have been full of epistemic and moral tensions. Among all the fragmentary evidence, I have found one Tibetan lama to reveal his target as he conducted wrathful rituals.

Shéráp Özer was a Nyingma lama from Nyarong, and he served in the Prefectural Government in Dartsedo. In 1959, several chiefs who also served in the government asked him to perform wrathful tantras, telling him that other lamas were doing that. Shéráp Özer asked these chiefs to persevere. He said that a few prophecies suggested that the Chinese army would withdraw in the horse year (i.e. 1966). Later, during a consecration ceremony for a stūpa that he performed together with another lama, the two buried bullets under the stūpa, suggesting subjugation, and they performed wrathful Buddhist rituals together. “I do not know what he [the other lama] intended at the time,” an official record noted down how Shéráp Özer later confessed, “but I had the Communist Party in my mind.”<sup>139</sup> Shéráp Özer’s son died after the ritual. The lama felt a pang of regret over his choice, and he took the loss to

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<sup>137</sup> This is drawn from a speech on October 10, 1957 in an education session for 169 new cadres, including 104 Tibetans. GAD 26-4-319, document 1, pp.25.

<sup>138</sup> GAD 26-6-635, document 1, No.52, pp.32

<sup>139</sup> GAD 26-6-635-1, document 1 and 2

be karmic retribution. It occurred to Shéráp Özer that he had received title and payment from the prefectural government of Ganzi. The lama believed that having connections to those who harmed the dharma, as tradition explains, had damaged his tantric vows.<sup>140</sup>

Several things are made clear in this case. First, a practitioner of tantric violence needs to be assured of his ability to liberate a victim to a buddha field. There is anxiety and self-doubt when no signal confirms the result. Second, in the performance of wrathful tantric rituals, the practice of keeping visualized objects undisclosed to others makes it very hard for any outsider or a later researcher to ascertain the objects. Finally, as Dreyfus has reminded us, Tibetan Buddhists consider morality to be inaccessible to direct experience and inference. In this strict Buddhist sense, as Shéráp Özer refused to admit that he knew the intention of his colleague, the stance was suggesting that the spectator did not know his true intention either, no matter what he said and revealed before the public.

Yet as long as monastic groups performed wrathful tantras in that decade, had either of the two groups, Chinese and Tibetan soldiers, been denounced as demon armies, the monks would have been accused of not being able to subdue them. Ultimately, the only target that could be counted as correct during performance of wrathful Buddhist rituals was monastics' own obstructions. This means that none of these monastic practitioners could claim a power to liberate real demons, since they still needed to purify their own obstacles. This resembles what Charlene Makley (2007) finds in another Tibetan Buddhist center compared to a maṇḍala, Labrang in Gansu, where the violent clash between Chinese Communists and Tibetans led to an “emasculating secularization” of reincarnate enlightened lamas. In the maṇḍala of Serta, the collapse must be traced back to its center as well, to monastic groups who failed to perform wrathful Buddhist rituals as prophecies foretold, and to those who seemed not to deserve faith anymore after they actually conducted such rituals.

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<sup>140</sup> See also GAD 26-3-429, document 1.

In ambiguities and complexities, and in the Buddhist idea that morality is inaccessible, one sociological consequence was clear. Subjugation would be left to new monks outside the original group.

### **The Reestablishment of Monastics**

In Serta, a glimmer of hope came with the advent of Jigme Phuntsok (1933-2004), who led a Buddhist revitalization movement in the 1980s.<sup>141</sup> His biography asserts that none of his 1950s-70s experiences jeopardized his tantric vows. In the early 1950s, Jigme Phuntsok was too young to be assigned a role in government service. In the early 1960s, he remained in retreat. From then until the late 1970s, he gave teachings to a small group of students in several remote places around Nupzur, a town in Serta. None of his troubles with local cadres was severe enough to put him in danger of being consigned to manual labor or being forced to criticize the three jewels or his teachers and fellows.<sup>142</sup> Before the 1980s, no official record or register mentions the monk.

Jigme Phuntsok felt grief for those guerrillas who died in battle. In his view, no matter how much the resistance might seem necessary and selfless, these Tibetans wasted their precious human lives, spending little time in Buddhist teachings and producing karma in ways they might not see. In 1985, Jigme Phuntsok told a group of nomads that the animals they hunted and slaughtered included the reincarnations of the dead guerrillas. Feeling attached to their communities they had tried so hard to protect, these dead people had no other place to go for rebirth than the animals around their former villages and families, and

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<sup>141</sup> For scholarly discussions of the monk and his monastery, see Germano 1998; Gayley 2011; Gayley and Pematso, 2016; Yu, 2011, Terrone 2009.

<sup>142</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991: pp.40-42, 46. See also Sodajie 2001: 39-43, 49-50

their descendants and former neighbors and friends now killed them.<sup>143</sup> Similar to the Dalai Lama's view of the guerrilla war as an unacceptable departure from the more general Buddhist ethics of non-violence, Jigme Phuntsok also advised Khampa Tibetans to avoid all kinds of killing. Since then, a variety of ethical campaigns led by his monastery have exhorted nomadic people not to hunt, to sell yaks for slaughter, to fight with weapons, to wear pelts and furs, or to engage in violent contentious politics.<sup>144</sup> These campaigns continue the nineteenth and early twentieth century focus of monastic groups on the supposed barbarism of the region.

However, Jigme Phuntsok did not recommend wrathful rituals or praise it as a way against this barbarism. He even attempted to curb these rituals in Serta. As he stressed to his students, wrathful tantric rituals were too "cruel" (*bka' gnyan*).<sup>145</sup> Only an extremely small group of tantric masters can perform them without error. Jigme Phuntsok admired the ethos of the "later spread" (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism, a revival period in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries that was distinguished by moral rigor, when some Tibetan kings and monastic leaders prohibited wrathful rituals.<sup>146</sup> Jigme Phuntsok insisted that reestablished religious communities should also pursue an educational and clerical path, a remarkable change among the Nyingma groups of Serta, who had been most famous for tantric violence.

It is worthy to note that in this non-violent path, Jigme Phuntsok did not deny the value of violence, especially ritual violence. He just suggested that this should be left to correct persons. The lama has a set of photographs, in which he holds with both hands the ritual dagger used to tame demons (figure 2). What demon armies are tamed here? Which meaning of demons is implied in his case? Monks from Larung never explain these issues as

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<sup>143</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.70-71

<sup>144</sup> For these movements, see Gayley 2013, and Gayley and Pematsho, 2016; see also Yeh 2013

<sup>145</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.53

<sup>146</sup> Karmay 1980: 150-160; Dalton 2011:95-109



they distribute the photos. In 1987, Jigme Phuntsok selected a group of young Tibetan monks to translate Buddhist texts into Chinese, invited Chinese monks and laypeople to study in his monastery, and spread Buddhist teachings in Han Chinese cities. In subsequent decades, some Khampa monasteries became remarkably influential on the religious landscape of contemporary China. Chinese disciples brought to Tibetan monasteries a sizable donation, supporting their revival. This new strategy contrasts starkly with the previous armed resistance. It allows Tibetan monastic groups to show vigor and leverage in the face of the repressive Chinese state. In the next chapter, we will see that the answer to these photos is hidden in Jigme Phuntsok's China journey. If Buddhism justifies violence as a way of converting demons, when the conversion occurred through peaceful methods, did this mean a dissociation of the Chinese from demons?



**Figure 19: Jigme Phuntsok holding a ritual dagger, courtesy of Larung**

Jigme Phuntsok once commented on this. To explain his stance, we need to go back to Dreyfus's comment that ethics is a thoroughly hidden thing in the Buddhist world. This time I want to bring up Buddhist ontology to explain why. As Bryan Cuevas puts it:

As an extension of the core Buddhist teaching of “non-self” (Skt. *anātman*, Tib. *bdag med*)—meaning no intrinsic self-existence, no essence—the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Tib. *stong pa nyid*) asserts that neither self nor phenomena exist as substantial, independent, permanent realities, despite how they appear to ordinary deluded minds. This is not to say that persons and things do not exist at all, but rather they do not exist as ordinary beings perceive them to exist—that is, as stable, solid, and concrete. From this it also follows that objects perceived in the phenomenal world and the subject perceiving them are equally empty of inherent existence and thus ultimately identical, inseparable... When such wisdom is combined within compassionate skillful means in the case of the bodhisattva's apparent violent actions, there is in reality no violence committed since there is no real victim of the act and no real agent of the action. (Cuevas 2015: xxvi-xxxvii)

As Cuevas explains, there is in reality no demon or subjugator when Buddhism explains violence, “since there is no real victim of the act and no real agent of the action.” No humans or mental obstacles ultimately exist as demons for an ordinary being to subjugate, except for his mental construction that misconceive these entities as targets for him to subjugate. Jigme Phuntsok explains this in the following way:

[I]n fact, the real demon [king] is our ignorance and confusion... The supreme antidote that dispels this daily harm is to realize the nature of all phenomena [as empty]. (Phuntsok 2014: 3)

“Ignorance” and “confusion” are two important concepts in Buddhist doctrine. In the present context they are interchangeable, both referring to mentalities that misconceive the nature of reality as empty. What Jigme Phuntsok suggests is that whenever a perception of demons as external entities occurs, it betrays ignorance, for the perceiver fails to realize emptiness. No matter what demons he thinks exactly, the only actual “demon” for him is ignorance. The doctrine claims that subject and object are inseparable and identical. In line with this, a

perceiver should not draw a line between himself as subjugator and others as demon armies.<sup>147</sup>

No ambiguity remains when the multiple meanings of “demons” are reduced to this single concept of ignorance. Prophetic descriptions of “demons” and “demon armies” should now be read as describing ignorance and ignorant people, who essentially are all ordinary beings. Once other interpretations are given to these prophecies, this very act betrays that the interpreters are possessed by ignorance. On such occasions, the prophecies actually guide the readers to turn attention to their own minds. They are asking these readers to purify ignorance so as to kill the demons. In this shift, no matter how one interprets these prophecies, the prophecies serve not so much as representations but as heuristic tools that urge the audience to convert to Buddhism for the healing doctrine of emptiness.

In his work on Buddhist and shamanic rites in a Nepalese community, Stan Mumford (1989) argues that violence in Buddhist exorcism is an “ethical transmutation of the terror” shown in the rituals of Gyurung shamans. As Mumford stresses, as Buddhist exorcism mentions violence, it is metaphoric and symbolic. Buddhist monks visualize the killing in mind, rather than give “an outer performance” as in blood sacrifice in shamanic rituals. However, as Mumford admits, sometimes demons are described as being really killed in Buddhism, and sometimes Buddhist lamas have to perform rituals to become “most implicated” in the life in the world. Yet he insists that a Buddhist lama does not have intent to kill as a shaman explicitly admits to doing at the discursive level. When a lama does violence, “his personal extrication from the world is still ensured.” (Mumford 1989: 146-149) Mumford faithfully represents what Buddhist monks say about their violence. Yet what makes his differentiation of Buddhists and shamans seemingly vague, and what makes him to take pains to prove it, are the ambiguities that seem to exist in the Buddhist notions of demons. What Mumford could have done is to rethink the categories he uses: the symbolic,

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<sup>147</sup> For a doctrinal discussion of this nonduality between tamer and tamed, see Mayer 1998, Kapstein 2000, chapter 9

the metaphoric, the inner, the outer, and the real. More fundamentally and more crucially, Buddhist monks are teaching us to rethink these categories.

### **Rethinking Prophecies**

This chapter looks at the intersections of histories, the religious imaginary, and textual artifacts. In Serta, monastic communities thrived in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when invaders and nomads kept posing threats to the peace of the region. In this context, Tibetans began to conceive Serta as a maṇḍala and believed that demon armies one day would come to destroy it. Prophetic texts that inscribed these beliefs accrued until they shaped the Sino-Tibetan encounter. The question of who were demons, whether Chinese work teams, nomads, or two generations of monastics, was articulated around prophecies. The interpretive uncertainties around the issue were never resolved, although many had used the prophecies to justify Khampa resistance. The failed guerrilla war, however, pushed history toward a definitive course: the condemnation of the old monastic groups as demon armies and the appearance of new monastic leaders whose non-violent discourses proclaimed an era of revitalization.

But is there a more precise account of the story? If a prophecy produced in one chaotic context could be repeatedly used in another, can we know which context produces which text and how a re-appropriation is done? Prophetic texts are a special kind of records of history. When a prophecy is a forgery, a fabricator retrospectively writes something that already happens and places it in the mouth of a previous lama. A prophecy contains information of the contexts in which it has been used, since this connection is why it has the chance to be used and to survive. In this last section, I will explain how this hint to history is obscured from view by the figurative language of prophecies. The aim is to show that this

means a set of different questions to monks than they do to us. The ambiguous language may actually be a heuristic device.

To explain how figurative language prevents re-contextualizing a prophecy, I begin with a rare case in which the context is disclosed to the audience. The author in this case, an imprisoned Nyarong lama, confessed creating prophecies “since the Chinese [Communists] came.” A short passage of his works was translated in an official record of the early 1960s:

Through the fruits of three and four  
The dual system of religion and politics is destroyed  
A red tiger from the east  
Swallows iron mountain (*tie shan*)  
Exhaling fierily poisonous breath  
The god that destroys the world is reincarnated  
As a person who has “Mao” in his name<sup>148</sup>

As the lama explained, “‘three’ and ‘four’ refer to Three-anti and Four-anti Campaigns,” two socialist campaigns launched after the exile of the Dalai Lama. Like the democratic reform in Kham, these two campaigns brought an end to the monastic estate system, corvée labor, and the political prestige of monastics in Central Tibet. “The red tiger [line 3] refers to Chinese Communists,” wrote the report. No explanation is given to “iron mountain” (in line 4), but the original Tibetan word should be *Lcags po ri*, the mountain near the Potala Palace, which is the old residence of all Dalai Lamas. In general, the 1959 collapse of the religio-political system of Central Tibet is the topic.

If this information is unknown to readers, they have to decipher the prophecy to re-contextualize it. Readers’ interpretations of the key words—“three,” “four,” “red tiger,” and “iron mountain”—may not follow the intended ones. These figurative expressions are open to interpretation. The word “three,” for example, can mean a variety of things: “March,” “three demons,” or what Buddhism calls “three poisons.” Compared with the Three-anti

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<sup>148</sup> GAD 26-11-344, document 3, page 53-58.

Movement, none of these are necessarily wrong, not even when the excerpt has an unmistakable context marker: “Mao.” Actually, figurative language often causes such markers to lose their referential capacity. Let me use one example to explain.

This example is attributed to Jigme Trinle Özer. Like other extant prophecies in Serta, this one also extorts readers to persist in Buddhist practices until the time comes for a subjugation of demons. The prophecy relates a variety of disasters along the border of Qinghai and Sichuan. As it discusses Golok, the narrative is as follows:

Due to a “black vulture” (*thang nag*) who is an emanation of a bönpo  
A great lama, and red ornament (*dmar rgyan*)  
Whose reincarnation is an administrator that has great power  
And the female lord that comes from demoness’s family  
These three cause Golok [to become] a sparrow (*khra*)<sup>149</sup>

The context markers are some historical figures. In Golok, one polity, Akyong pönmo, was famous for being led by females. The first chieftainess was the late-nineteenth-century Tsekyi Drölma, whose daughter, mentioned as Lu De in Chinese sources, was married to a prince of the Kingdom of Akyong (A skyong). The husband betrayed Lu De. In revenge, Lu De surrendered herself to the Muslim warlord Ma Qi, became Ma’s brother’s concubine, and invited the warlord to attack Akyong in 1927.<sup>150</sup> Is this Lu De the “female lord” in line 4? If so, the “black vulture” in line 1 might refer to Lu De’s rival, the Akyong King Tenzin Gyatso. “Akyong” derives from the name of the first ancestor of the royal family, A kyung, who lived around a mountain shaped like a garuda (*kyung*). In the 1930s and the 1940s, Tenzin Gyatso tolerated Muslim’s slaughters in Buddhist monasteries, and turned to Chinese Communists to defeat Ma.<sup>151</sup> He was the reincarnation of a Jonang master. The first line might speak to this

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<sup>149</sup> This is extracted from a very elusive treasure text. See *lung bstan*, pp.87. *thang nag bon po’i sprul pa yis/ bla chen gcig dang dmar rgyan gi/ sprul pa dbang chen mi dpon zhig/ bud med dbang chen bsen mo’i rigs/ gsum gyi rkyen byas mgo log khra/*

<sup>150</sup> Kang 1963; E 1982: 105-114; Zhang 1989

<sup>151</sup> Sheng 1988: 122; Guo and Dan 2014

status and criticizes the king as a bonpo, an anti-Buddhist practitioner of local Tibetan belief. But what line 2 and 3 mean in this reasoning? A Tibetan queen in the Yarlung Dynasty, “Red-ornament,” in legend, poisoned Vairocana, a translator exiled to eastern Tibet for his introduction of the central teachings of the Nyingma. Depending on what is stressed, femininity or red color, the queen could refer to Tsekyi Drölma or the Chinese Red Army’s 1936 visit to Golok. There are even more ways to interpret the “great lama:” the Ninth Panchen Lama who asked the Golok to fight against the Red Army in 1936;<sup>152</sup> The Thirteenth Dalai Lama whose delegation asked Golok to join Central Tibet in 1928;<sup>153</sup> and a local lama in the Palyul Monastery, who, after helping Ma to imprison the Akyong king’s mother, was called “a reincarnation of demon” (*bdud sprul*).<sup>154</sup> As it stands, the ways for interpreting these context markers are not settled.

*Khra*, when translated as “mottled” or “many-colored,” may allude to various groups coming to Golok. The other interpretation of *khra*, “sparrow,” echoes the avian image in line 1. The relationship of Serta to the prophesied forces is compared to that of prey to predators. As such, the prophecy could be dated to some point between the 1930s and the 1950s. Besides the specific meaning of each context marker, the main problem with the date is that the prophesied demon armies could be either Muslim or Communist armies.

One could even put the prophecy in an entirely different context. In the early 1950s, the most important Khampa figure was Jagö Tobden, who also had “vulture” (Jagö) in his name (line 1). This Dege headman looked as much like a bönpo as the Akyong king, as he also ran afoul of the interests of monastic groups and helped Chinese armies. In that decade, Jagö Tobden was one of the two vice chairmen who were Tibetan in the prefectural government of Ganzi. The other such man, Ngagwang Gyatso, was a scholar-monk from Sera

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<sup>152</sup> Chen 1980: 40

<sup>153</sup> Zhang 1989: 67

<sup>154</sup> Kang 1963: 3

Monastery (line 2). In this reasoning, “Red-ornament” may refer to a high-ranking Chinese official (line 3), and line 4 reminds me of “the Gang of Four” led by Mao’s concubine. When different interpretations can be given to a single prophecy, the prophecy actually loses its context markers. Indeed, provided that figurative expression can afford a broad range of referential possibilities, losing one’s original reference is inevitable for most prophecies. In the flow of time, other things that happen later add channels to connect new interpretations.

But why are prophecies written in such ambiguous ways? This offers an interesting insight into circular reasoning. As I bring up the two scenarios, I understand *thang nag*, in line 1, as the abbreviation of *bya rgod thang nag*, or “black vulture.” But the word can mean something else, such as “black thangka.” I opt for black vulture because I see how this fits the scenes of the Akyong king and Jagö Tobden. As I ask whether the prophecy is a representation of the two scenarios, I already assign the relevant meanings to it. In other words, the originally equivocal language more apparently reveals that the interpretation constitutes its objects, and that the multilayered possibilities of history and, by extension, the objective world in general actually are not independent from the reader. In Serta, a few prophecies’ titles compare the texts to mirrors and rubies. It is as though what is brought to the fore when one’s eyes encounter the texts is the place from which the vision emanates, the very body that now manifests as a reflection and loses its intrinsic nature.

We may use what Erik Mueggler calls the “archival regime” to explain these prophetic texts. Like the Dongba texts explored by Mueggler, these texts too are fragments of large collections that no longer exist. They “came together in focused historical periods,” mediating the chaos of the periods in various ways. In Mueggler’s formula, each archival regime has its “ideologies that decide how perceptions are transferred to paper” (Mueggler 2012: 44). As Buddhist authors use ambiguous words to describe events, these events are not seen as independent of their perceivers. What readers are expected to find in this case is not



the same as what anthropologists imagine about “prophecies” usually. Nancy Munn once offered us a way of conceptualizing prophecy. As Munn remarked, “a prophecy may focus on the future, but futures are projected out of construals made of or in relation to the present; and these construals...cannot be detached from the ways pasts are felt to be in or excluded from the present.” (1992: 115)

Despite all these heuristic purposes, prophecies could still be guides to history. At Larung, as I consulted with monks about how they felt about the contents of extant prophecies as records of history, I was told that these texts are left by enlightened beings, whose intentions are known only by other enlightened ones. These monks were referring to Jigme Phuntsok’s use of a few prophecies to assert himself as a bodhisattva who will attain enlightenment after five lifetimes. Here, the proof of the lama’s capacity to read these texts is embedded within them. Then, how might this be proved to be a different case? What kind of reading is free from ignorance? Exploring these questions will bring to focus a series of events in the 1980s, events that gave Jigme Phuntsok his later reputation in Kham and China. The lama’s mysterious performances in these events were his translation of the prophecies for his students. As intersections where the prophetic messages bore upon the time, these events will require us to further engage the heuristic issues this chapter touches upon.

## CHAPTER 4

### Representing a Buddha

As some scholars have recently argued, when fieldwork leads anthropologists to encounter other views of truth (e.g. a mountain is a maṇḍala or god), these different truth assumptions should not be seen as culturally interpretable but naturally false (e.g. a mountain, after all, is a mountain). This old analytic grounds anthropological epistemology in cultural relativism, and it postulates what anthropologists assume to be true. Yet the notion of truth with which anthropology has been concerned is parochial. Martin Holbraad, following a number of other anthropologists, points out that this view of truth, which is built on a divide between representation and reality, remains “a matter of representing the world as it actually is.” (Holbraad 2012: 18) Holbraad and several other scholars contend that the objective world should be seen as equivocal (Viveiros 1998, 2004; Henare et al. 2007). Their discussion implies that the object of a representation does not exist independently from the subject who represents it.

Thus the epistemology of anthropology could be reformulated in two ways. One way is to understand ethnographical representation as a translation (Hanks and Severi 2015). A translation constitutes its object and makes claims about it at the same time, but it allows mutual understanding to be established from the equivocal. It is in this sense that we say an ethnography can “represent” its subject to readers. Holbraad’s approach, on the contrary, is “anti-representationist.” Understood in his terms, the first method already admits that ethnographic encounter includes an “alterity” that cannot be represented, as a translation always suggests an unabsorbable “gap of mutual independence.” For Holbraad, the task of

turning this gap into a “relation of mutual dependence” requires anthropologists to transform their assumptions. The result is that ethnography should lead to the generation of new concepts, by virtue of which anthropologists are brought about as “new persons.” Holbraad calls this “self-trumping” the “recursive analysis” of anthropology (2012: xvi-xix, 45-46, 222).

My stance toward these two approaches is that they are actually combinable. The intersection is a question of how to make a perfect translation of anti-representationism. In his own ethnography of Ifá divination in Cuba, Holbraad leaves unanswered the right ethnographic form for recursive anthropology. If ethnography seems always to be a text that represents something, how can ethnographic representation be formulated in an anti-representationist way? This chapter calls attention to Buddhist monks, who also take seriously the insight that the objective world does not have an intrinsic nature independent of the perceiving subject. The representative strategies of Buddhist monks may teach us how to create a recursive ethnography.

I explore the biography of Jigme Phuntsok,<sup>155</sup> the greatest Buddhist leader in eastern Tibet after the Cultural Revolution. After 1980, China’s reform created the condition for Tibetans to recreate their monastic community from the ruins of the Maoist era. On the border of China’s Qinghai and Sichuan, Jigme Phuntsok recruited students from his birthplace of Serta. This is also where he built his monastery, Larung. During the following decade, Larung became the largest Tibetan monastery, providing refuge for 10,000-20,000 monks, and earned Jigme Phuntsok a reputation for being the leader of Tibet’s Buddhist revival. In 1987, Jigme Phuntsok’s first visit to China ended in a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai in Shanxi Province. This trip marked the beginning of the lama’s efforts to convert Chinese

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<sup>155</sup> The biography I explore in this chapter is Jigme Phuntsok’s first biography, written in 1991 by three of his students, in Tibetan. This biography has some repetitions with the lama’s second biography authored in Chinese by Sodargye in 2001. The second biography includes events that occurred in the 1990s, but the Tibetan biography has a richer account of the earlier period.

people. Most of the Tibetan lamas later successful in Han Chinese regions were Jigme Phuntsok's students.

The biography provides an important account of the history. Specifically, it represents this revival story as connected with a prophecy foretelling a future Buddha's appearance to tame demons. The biography identifies Jigme Phuntsok as the prophesied Buddha. Three of the lama's students wrote the biography. The task they faced has crucial similarities to anthropologists' attempts to reformulate—through ethnographic writing—the epistemology of their discipline. Buddhism claims that ordinary perception is mediated by the mental images of a deluded mind. An ordinary person may not be able to recognize another being as a buddha nor a demon. This poses a question of how to represent the inconceivable and ineffable reality of a lama, given that the authors can only write about what they perceive. As I will show, the biography is written in layers: layers delicately constituted to beckon readers ever further into the text, while reminding them that all that readers “take” from the biography are their own perceptions of the perceptions of the authors; they can but recursively follow the layers, until their minds are trumped. The biography could be understood as a textual installation, occupying a space in front of the readers and de-centers their views. In this installation, words can ultimately be compared like photos, and the relationship of representation to reality is not referential but indexical. In a nutshell, the biography serves as a perfect translation of anti-representationism.

### **From Words to the World**

Explained as a nineteenth-century text left behind by the First Dodrupchen, the pertinent prophecy is rendered by David Germano as follows:

In the la valley by the ser-nga-dam deity,  
There will be an emanation of the glorious Padmasambhava named “Jigme”;  
He will make the exoteric and tantric teachings as radiant as the sun  
For a collection of Bodhisattvas of the fourfold entourage,  
While with perfect stability he reaches the summit of living beings' welfare,  
Thus pervading the ten directions with the disciples in his pure retinue  
And placing all connected to him in the place of great bliss (Germano 1998: 156)

As a first step, this section explains how the stories of the biography correspond to each line of the prophecy. It is interesting to note that the biography does not make explicit this connection, except for the first line of the prophecy, although the meanings of the other lines have been taught at Larung on many other occasions. The reason monks do this will become clear below, after I explore their representative strategy in a series of steps. In any case, the first line is about the construction of Larung, in 1980. A series of abbreviations are used in this line. The “la valley” is the valley of Larung. “Ser” (gser) is Serta (Gser rta). “Nga” (rnga) is Nga la tak tsé (Rnga la stag rtse), a holy mountain in Horshul, close to Nupzur. “Dam” is another holy mountain, Dam chen (Dam chen; see Chapter 3 for the religious meaning of the mountain). This mountain, and Nga la tak tsé, had Larung in between. On the back side of Larung is the meadow of Dzi chen (’Dzi chen), where a river meanders around the valley of the monastery. A tree goddess is believed to live there in a thicket of bush, which is the “deity” (*lha*) in this line.<sup>156</sup>

We only know that someone gave Jigme Phuntsok this prophecy in 1981, after he founded Larung and fulfilled its first line. This conformed to the tradition of hiding a prophecy until the time comes to reveal it. Readers may want to know whether we are dealing with a forgery. The valley in question had been an old religious site of Dudjom Lingpa, a famous master who was compelled to leave it due to a conflict with the nearby nomads. This interruption at least explains why the figure prophesied is an emanation of Padmasambhava, as the prophecy originally might have referred to the taming of these nomads by a tantrist.

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<sup>156</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.13-14

Additionally, the prophecy is attributed to the First Dodrupchen. The next two reincarnations in this lineage both had “Jigme” in their names. The Second Dodrupchen actually shared the same name as Jigme Phuntsok.<sup>157</sup> Some other prophecies of the valley also existed in Serta (see Chapter 5), which is the best evidence that the prophecy is not a fabrication by Jigme Phuntsok. In any case, it makes more sense to focus on the original interpretation that Jigme Phuntsok gives to some of the prophecy’s vocabulary. It is these interpretations that prove the prophesied status of Jigme Phuntsok and make the prophecy seem authentic.

After the biography relates the building of Larung, it announces that the deeds praised by the vajra words (*rdo rje'i gsungs*) of the omniscient enlightened beings were about to be fulfilled.<sup>158</sup> After this assertion, one can tell that the following pages where the biography continues to tell about the revival period, roughly in chronological order, allude to each of the rest of the lines of the prophecy. For instance, in this page, the biography mentions that after the Maoist era, Tibet had become a barbarian region (*klo klo'i yul*). Although Buddhist monasteries were reopened, Buddhism existed in name only. Monastic leaders had either been exiled or died during the Maoist era, and the new generation did not even know about the teachings.<sup>159</sup> This recalls the time of Padmasambhava, when Tibet was also a barbarian region. Right here, the biography states that Jigme Phuntsok rekindled the cinders of the teachings. Some nonhumans (*mi ma yin rnams*), such as ghosts and spirits, came to the lama’s lectures in the disguise of humans. The empowerment rites offered by Jigme Phuntsok attracted thousands of people. Students increased like “the ocean in summer” (*dbyar gyi chu*

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<sup>157</sup> Tulku Pema Dorje (1867-1934), the second son of Dudjom Lingpa, gave Jigme Phuntsok the name of the Second Dodrupchen (1825?-1860?), whose next reincarnation was Pema Dorje’s elder brother, the Third Dodrupchen Jigme Tenpai Nyima (1865-1926). Additionally, Jigme Phuntsok’s previous reincarnation, Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926), was Jigme Tenpai Nyingma’s student, and he died in a village not far from the valley. These complex connections further suggest that the prophecy might have existed quite long. It is possible that Pema Dorje gave Jigme Phuntsok the name in the hope of having the prophecy fulfilled at a later time.

<sup>158</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.50

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, pp.49-50

gter).<sup>160</sup> Just as Padmasambhava used tantric rituals to tame Tibet's indigenous spirits and helped recruit Tibet's earliest monastic order in the eighth century, Jigme Phuntsok used similar acts to prove that he was an emanation of the master. These descriptions closely resonate with the second line of the prophecy.

In his monastery, newly recruited monks studied canonical treatises on Buddhist philosophy, tantras, and sādhanas. They also received special instructions (*man ngag*) on the Great Perfection. After the disjuncture in the socialist revolution, impurities (*rnyog ma can*) had emerged in the canon. In 1985, at a gathering of more than 3000 monks, Jigme Phuntsok adjudicated these disputes, removed discrepancies, and helped decide what should and should not be included in certain Buddhist texts. In a public letter, he advocated restoring monastic disciplines to a high level. Jigme Phuntsok exhorted other monasteries to expel non-celibate and illiterate monks, and withheld tantric teachings from those who had severely broken their monastic and tantric vows.<sup>161</sup> A chorus of reproaches was directed at him, but the biography cites a speech of the lama to defend him: "In this era of degeneration, the five impurities are rampant, and the rays of the sun of the dharma are fading. For this solitary sun, if there was a way to allow the pure teachings to exist in the world...even I had to adjudicate the words of the Buddha, I felt no shame."<sup>162</sup> In this way, Jigme Phuntsok made the third line of the prophecy, "he will make the exoteric and tantric teachings as radiant as the sun," come true.

Regarding the fourth line, "the fourfold entourage" is the key word. Traditionally this word refers to monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen; here it was taken to mean that the students of Jigme Phuntsok were composed by laypeople, nuns, Han Chinese, and Tibetan monks. In 1986, Jigme Phuntsok made pilgrimage to five mountains to reveal treasures (see below and Chapter 5). During these trips, he established contact with seventy-three

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<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*, pp.51-52

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 53-54

<sup>162</sup> *Snyigs ma lnga ches bdo bas rgyal bstan nyi zhur tsam du gyur pa 'i dus kyi tha ma 'dir/ nyi ma gcig tsam la'ang bstan pa rnam dag 'di gnas thabs shig byung na...mchog gsum dpang por byas na'ang ngo gnong cung zad kyang med pa*, *ibid.*, pp.55

monasteries, including some from the Geluk and Sakya sects.<sup>163</sup> Wherever he went, Jigme Phuntsok taught Buddhist virtues and doctrines to laypeople,<sup>164</sup> and advised monks to concentrate in teaching and learning and protect disciplines and vows. In particular, Jigme Phuntsok asked Khampa monasteries to avert schism, among schools as well as among monasteries that had been hostile to each other. He asked Tibetan people to pay equal attention to all monasteries, even those small ones.<sup>165</sup> We see in this part that two of the “fourfold entourage,” laypeople and monks, were brought into being.

In the lama's 1987 trip to China, after visits to several Buddhist sites in Sichuan and Beijing, Jigme Phuntsok came to Mount Wutai. For a few centuries, Chinese emperors had hosted monks from Tibet and Mongolia at the mountain. Tibetan sources claim that 10,000 Tibetans from Amdo and Kham came to join the lama there.<sup>166</sup> This large Tibetan assemblage stayed at Mount Wutai for three months. They gave lectures, performed rituals, and renovated Tibetan monasteries that had been ruined in the socialist revolution. By the time of Jigme Phuntsok's return, he had succeeded in bringing a small group of Han Chinese to study at Larung, including a few Chinese nuns. The *bhikṣuṇī* lineage was historically missing in Tibet. Rather than take the full vows of a *bhikṣuṇī*, a Tibetan female took the novice vows when she became a nun. With the Chinese nuns, Larung was able to recruit fully ordained Buddhist nuns from women in the surrounding regions. In this way, the prophecy of the “fourfold entourage” was complete.

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Sodargye, one of the three authors of the biography used the common rubric of the “five perfections” (*phun sum tshogs pa lnga*) to explain the prophecy. As he explained, the first four lines of the prophecy address the

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<sup>163</sup> *ibid.* 69

<sup>164</sup> *ibid.* 69-70

<sup>165</sup> *ibid.* 71-72

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.* 73



perfections of place (Larung), teacher (Jigme Phuntsok), teaching (the exoteric and tantric teachings), and retinue (the four entourage), respectively, each line a topic. The remaining three lines pertain to the last perfection, that of time, after which a buddha came about to offer his teachings. This explanation casts light on a ritual moment at Mount Wutai.<sup>167</sup>

### **From Reality to Imaginary**

A white pagoda is in the central valley of Mount Wutai. Tradition claims that originally at this spot was a stūpa of Aśoka that held the relic of the Buddha. The remaining lines of the prophecy pertain to the site. On that day, sitting around the pagoda, Jigme Phuntsok asked his entourage to chant the *Bhadracāripraṇidhāna* or *The Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, a prayer that is well known in both Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism. The prayer is extracted from the longest chapter of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, known as the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. This chapter tells of an Indian boy's visit to fifty-three sages in his pursuit of enlightenment. Each of these sages taught the boy, Sudhana, one aspect of the ultimate reality, and each, after raising his new query about the topic, told him the next sage to visit. These sages included gods, goddesses, kings, monks, bankers, householders, hermits, laypeople, boys, and maidens. Among them, the first was Mañjuśrī, and he met Sudhana once again as the second to the last at the end of the journey. The second meeting occurred at Mañjuśrī's abode, where he told Sudhana to visit Samantabhadra, the last sage. From there Sudhana was immediately brought into the mundanely imperceptible realm of reality, where Samantabhadra, waiting in front of

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<sup>167</sup> This is drawn from an oral instruction given by Sodargye in 2011, right before the beginning of the annual Bliss Dharma Assembly that year. The instruction was about the distribution of a visual record of the empowerment rite offered by Jigme Phuntsok at the same dharma assembly in 1999. Suo da ji 2011

the Buddha and an assembly of bodhisattvas and gods, granted Sudhana all wisdom and *The Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*.<sup>168</sup>



**Figure 20: The white pagoda.** This is where Jigme Phuntsok and his students chanted *The Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tayuan\\_Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tayuan_Temple)

Jigme Phuntsok was a reincarnation of Sudhana.<sup>169</sup> This status calls attention to the reputation of Mount Wutai as *wenshu daochang*, or “the place of practice for Mañjuśrī.” The white pagoda is in an area where three adjoining temples constitute a monastic complex to hold a famous statue known as inscribing the true image (*zhen rong*) of Mañjuśrī. Tradition claims that the artisan asked to cast the statue was not able to finish it until Mañjuśrī appeared on the back of a lion and showed the artisan what he looked like. Due to the statue, the surrounding area, Pusa Ding (“Bodhisattva’s Peak”), is known as where Mañjuśrī most often comes to show his presence. In this setting, when Jigme Phuntsok asked his students to recite

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<sup>168</sup> These vows are ten in number, and they are, according to Mahayana Buddhists, fundamental principles for the achievement of enlightenment. These ten vows are: to pay homage to all the buddhas; to praise the tathāgatas; to make unlimited offerings; to repent for one’s transgressions in order to remove karmic hindrances; to delight in others’ merit; to request the buddhas to turn the wheel of dharma; to request the buddhas to continue living in the world; always to follow the teachings of the Buddha; always to comply with the needs of sentient beings, and to transfer all merit to sentient beings for their spiritual edification.

<sup>169</sup> This is mentioned only in Jigme Phuntsok’s Chinese biography (Suo da ji. 2001: 133, 135).

*The Vows*, the moment re-enacted the last scene in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Here, the reincarnation of Sudhana (Jigme Phuntsok), again at the abode of Mañjuśrī (Mount Wutai) and in the presence of the deity (the statue), took the vows of Samantabhadra in front of the Buddha (that is, the body relic of the Buddha in the pagoda). In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, this moment was where Sudhana perfected in himself the qualities of Samantabhadra. This corresponds to the fifth line of the prophecy: “while with perfect stability he reaches the summit of living beings' welfare.”

Later on, Jigme Phuntsok described the moment as follows:

As my left foot stepped on the path to the dharma seat, [the students were] chanting “may I traverse all my lives in the world; free from karma, afflictions and the acts of demons.” Right as I sat on the seat, [they were] finishing “just as the lotus blossom is undisturbed by the water’s wave; just as the sun and moon move unhindered through the sky.” Therefore, at this moment, the condition came together [for me to] bring about the welfare of sentient beings and Buddhist activities as unhindered sun and moon in the sky in this era of degeneration.”<sup>170</sup>

In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Samantabhadra told Sudhana that after the meeting, Sudhana would destroy unfortunate destinies, avert evil friends, overcome afflictions, and tame heretics. At the point of death, he would find himself to be reborn in the middle of a lotus in the land of bliss, the pure land of Amitābha Buddha, where he would become a bodhisattva traveling in ten directions and liberating other sentient beings to the same buddha land. In the above quote, the two verses condense these descriptions. Jigme Phuntsok was saying that after this ritual moment, the rest of his life would be freed from karma, affliction, and the acts of demons, and that his rebirth in the land of bliss would be “unhindered” even in this age of degeneration. His movement and the act of sitting on the dharma seat indicated the formation of a future buddha. For Jigme Phuntsok’s students, from then on their teacher became the

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<sup>170</sup> *Rkang pa gyon pa khri'i rtsar 'jog dus/ las dang nyon mongs bdud kyi las rnams las/ grol zhing 'jig rten 'gro ba rnams su yang/ gsungs pa dang/ khri thog thon pa dang mnyam dus/ ji ltar pad ma chus mi chags pa bzhin/ nyi zla nam mkha' thogs pa med ltar spyad/ gsungs pa dang khrigs khrigs thug yod khi/ des na snyigs ma'i dus 'di yang 'gro don dang 'phrin las nyi zla nam mkha' la thogs pa med pa bzhin du yong ba'i rten 'brel kyang phun sum tshogs pa de nas 'grigs ni yin/ Jigme Phuntsok gave this speech in April 1993 at the Bliss Dharma Assembly that year, cite from Ye shes phun tshogs, n.d. pp.4. My translation.*

“lord of the dharma.” (*chos rje*) It follows that the last two lines of the prophecy, which state that Jigme Phuntsok would pervade “the ten directions with the disciples in his pure retinue” and liberate “all connected to him in the place of great bliss,” would be true.

In April, Jigme Phuntsok moved to the Sudhana Cave (Ch. Shancai dong; Tib. Nor bzang sgrub phug) at the other side of the mountain, where he ordered his students to erect a statue of Mañjuśrī flanked by himself and Sudhana. Below I will return to the retreat and Jigme Phuntsok’s visionary encounter with Mañjuśrī at the cave. Now we shift attention to another set of teacher-student relationships that are relevant to the cave. Jigme Phuntsok claimed that the burial place behind the cave was where Vimalamitra met Śrī Siṃha, both of whom were important figures in the early transmission of the highest teachings of the Nyingma. Born in western India in the eighth century, Vimalamitra had in a visionary encounter with Vajrasattva, in which he learned that he had been a great scholar for five hundred lifetimes. If he aspired to reach buddhahood in this lifetime, he must go to the charnel ground at Mount Wutai to study with Śrī Siṃha.<sup>171</sup> Vimalamitra later played a role in spreading tantric teachings in Tibet, and spent time together with Padmasambhava when the latter was also in Tibet. He died at Mount Wutai, and promised to return to Tibet once every century through his later emanations. Indeed, before he visited China, Jigme Phuntsok announced a visionary encounter in which Vimalamitra invited him from Mount Wutai. Not coincidentally, Penor Rinpoche (1932-2009), a contemporary reincarnation of Vimalamitra, came to join Jigme Phuntsok at the mountain (figure 22). In this arrangement the equivalence of Jigme Phuntsok to Padmasambhava was further conveyed.

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<sup>171</sup> In a more famous version of the story, Vimalamitra was asked to find Śrī Siṃha at the Bodhi Tree Temple in China (Dudjom 1991: 497-501). The version according to which Jigme Phuntsok identified the burial place explains the meeting place to be “Cooling Charnel Ground” (Tib. Dur khrod chen po bsil sbyin; Ch. Qing liang shi lin). This was where Śrī Siṃha meditated at Mount Wutai, whose epithet is Qingliang shan or “Cooling Mountain.” The Nyingma tradition equates this burial place with the famous cemetery located northeast of Bodhi Gaya, one of the eight great cemeteries in India. According to Chou wen-shing, this view may develop through the convergence of two separate traditions: the Mongol’s penchant for being buried at Mount Wutai, and the assertion of cemeteries as places for early Nyingma masters’ meditation practices (Chou 2018: 205, n.22)



**Figure 21: Jigme Phuntsok and Penor Rinpoche, courtesy of Larung.**

As noted earlier, not until Padmasambhava ritually subdued Tibet’s indigenous evil spirits did Tibetans find ways to build their Buddhist monasteries. At Mount Wutai, Jigme Phuntsok asked his students to put up as many statues of Padmasambhava as possible, in order to “allow tantras to become popular in China.”<sup>172</sup> This request implied a view of socialist China as occupied by demons. Among the statues erected in more than fifty temples, the one at Pusa Ding is compared to the Jowo Śākyamuni in Lhasa. The most renowned aspect of the Jowo, its reported blessing by Śākyamuni or the historical Buddha himself, echoes Jigme Phuntsok’s consecration of the Pusa Ding statue by hiding in it another statuette of Padmasambhava revealed by his previous reincarnation, Lerab Lingpa, as a treasure. Thus using the Jowo to extol the Pusa Ding statue is to praise Jigme Phuntsok, again, as Padmasambhava, whom Tibetans know as “Second Buddha.” From this, the lama’s

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<sup>172</sup> A chief student of Jigme Phuntsok, Sherab Zangpo, recalled the instruction as he brought his own Chinese students to visit Mount Wutai in July, 2012 (see [www.ptz.cc/plus/view.php?aid=453000](http://www.ptz.cc/plus/view.php?aid=453000), accessed May 7, 2015). See also Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.74; Suo da ji 2001: 69

students can infer that their journey to China was as much as a subjugation as Padmasambhava's journey to Tibet, which allowed Buddhism to begin its establishment in post-socialist Chinese society. Indeed, some elderly monks once asked Jigme Phuntsok not to make the trip: "Don't go. You may not be able to come back from the country of demons." Jigme Phuntsok's reply was that the trip was made for the purpose of converting Chinese people. This conversation occurred as he gave his lecture on *Bodhicaryāvatāra* or *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.<sup>173</sup> From the growing Han Chinese believers that later appeared at Larung, many Tibetans must have recognized the great power of a bodhisattva whose profound compassion had changed this dark corner of the world.

As it stands, more than a historical account of the rise of Larung, the biography communicates the religious picture in terms of which Jigme Phuntsok directed his students to understand the revitalization history: most of all the emergence of a future buddha preceded by his subjugation of demons. To make the trope visible and plausible, laborious and creative efforts were made. Through his assemblages of humans and things, and through his assignment of new meaning to some common vocabulary, Jigme Phuntsok made it possible to correlate the prophetic words with the realities. A number of discussions of divinatory practices in anthropology are useful.<sup>174</sup> We may say, for example, that these monks used the prophecy to authorize themselves, legitimize their pragmatic and political agenda, teach tropes, get over the traumatic socialist experience, sanctify their resistance, moralize their conversion project, and to recreate their life world. Neither of these comprehensions, however, provides a satisfactory response to the analytical challenges these monks pose. What does it mean to say that a reincarnation lama is an emanation of a deity or a mountain the abode of such a deity, for example? What epistemology is implied here? We are now

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<sup>173</sup> Cite from a Sodargye's lecture noted in Chou 2018: 168, 205, n.11

<sup>174</sup> Jackson 1978; Werbner 1989; Stroeken 2010; Winkelman and Peek 2004; Devisch 1985, Parkin 1991, to name a few.

moving to the second and the third layers of the biography. The focus of inquiry will be put on the Buddhist view of the world as inhabited by buddhas and demons.

### **Looking, Attending, and Self-trumping**

In the mid-1980s, Sodargye completed a rigorous curriculum, passed a special defense, and earned the title of khenpo. Together with a group of colleagues, he would serve in the teacher team at Larung. These newly selected khenpos all shared a genuine faith in Jigme Phuntsok, their root teacher. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, these promising young men travelled together with Jigme Phuntsok, who planned to foster them as later monastic leaders. On August 24, 2015, I observed Sodargye holding his routine meeting with laypeople. On that day, Sodargye was asked to offer some explanations about Dodrupchen's prophecy to a group of Chinese pilgrims. In his response, Sodargye emphasized the ontological aspect of the issue:

At the beginning, I did not believe in the prophecy either, when I was young and tended to be led by my conceptual construction [*fenbie nian*; Tib. *rnam rtog*]... Yet as many things have proved to us, an aspiration [*yuan li*; Tib. *smon lam*] of an enlightened being must have occurred somewhere [as the condition] that led the Buddhist revival to take place [around Larung]. The location of this aspiration is invisible and inaudible, and it is beyond our conception."<sup>175</sup>

Before he delivered the speech, Sodargye introduced the creation of Larung, the fourfold entourage, and the revitalization movement led by Jigme Phuntsok. He stressed that an enlightened being's aspiration must have existed somewhere to allow these to occur. Yet he stated that this causality is beyond the comprehension of an ordinary mind. According to Buddhist teachings, ordinary beings tend to use what Sodargye calls *rnam rtog* in Tibetan, a term that encompasses everything from "analysis" "thought" to "misconception," here

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<sup>175</sup> My fieldwork note, August 23, 2014

meaning something like “conceptual construction,” the mental activity that either falsely conceives an object or conceives an object that is not existent, to misconceive the real. Sodargye hardly avoided such ignorance, as he admitted, but “many things” pointed out his error. What were the “things” referred to here as the accurate objects to be perceived from the aforementioned revival history?

Sodargye is one of the three authors of the biography. Indeed, the way that he and the other two authors write the biography brings to light their “conceptual constructions.” These authors make clear that the truth lies beyond the reach of their conception. The biography only records their perceptions of the years they had spent together with Jigme Phuntsok. These authors choose only to document those “qualities established as commonly appearing to everyone, oneself and others” (*rang gzhan kun la mthun snang du grub pa'i yon tan*). In order for readers to correctly retrieve what they saw and heard, the biography uses “natural expressions that accord with facts” (*don mthun rang bzhin brjod pa*), “untainted by words of exaggeration and deprecation” (*sgro skur tshig gis ma bslad pa*). In short, the documented “facts” are the perceptions collectively shared by those who accompanied Jigme Phuntsok in all his journeys. To read the biography is to read through the eyes and minds of the student spectators.

As noted above, for the documented history to proceed as a series of differentially efficacious but causally contingent events that further match each line of the prophecy, much labor was done. This section looks more closely at how Jigme Phuntsok constructed this order of events through a scrutiny of the coming together of favorable circumstances (*rten 'brel bsgrigs pa*). Such an arrangement typically was done at an important time or place and began with a prayer or offering to deities. Then, from auspicious signs that followed, Jigme Phuntsok decided what to do for the next step. For this reason, these occasions were crucial moments for understanding how Jigme Phuntsok’s agenda appeared to his students as



sacred and prophesied. These auspicious signs could be public entities like the emergence of certain individuals or material artifacts that are encountered by both teacher and students. But they could also be some inner experiences of the lama like his visionary encounters and dreams, which Jigme Phuntsok further explained to his students. Indeed, without visions and dreams to push forward his life course, Jigme Phuntsok would not have seemed to be the prophesied buddha. This can cause the doubt that he was using unfalsifiable evidence to make use of the beliefs of his followers, to be sure. Yet it is more crucial to ask why Buddhist monks did little to divide inner experiences and public entities as they interpreted auspicious signs, an “alterity,” to use Holbraad’s words, that contrasts the usual material way anthropologists define “signs.” The answer will become clear as I move to the third layer of the biography in the next section. Here I first call attention to a number of very arbitrary interpretations that Jigme Phuntsok made during his 1986 sojourn at the mountain of Sodok (Bso thog), in Ganzi, a watershed event that propelled these Tibetans to visit Mount Wutai. The accurate objects that Sodargye asked the audience to find in the intersections of history and prophecy are hidden in the arbitrariness of the interpretations.

Sodok was among the five holy mountains Jigme Phuntsok visited that winter to reveal treasures. The main peak of Sodok is known as an abode of Mañjuśrī. Auspicious signs emerged right after the team settled in a nearby monastery. Most of the entourage heard melodious sounds during the night. The next day, Jigme Phuntsok walked with a group of students to a cave, where he asked the retinue to make a ritual-feast offering to Mañjuśrī. The cave is known as the Meditation Cave of Yamāntaka (Gshin rje’i sgrub phug), who is a wrathful form of Mañjuśrī. Jigme Phuntsok performed ritual ablutions, burned incense, and walked into the cave alone. There, he heard a voice: “Is there a twelve-year-old girl?” He came out to ask his disciples to check, but they only found an eleven-year-old girl among the audience.

After the offering, the team climbed up along the mountain path. At that time, a monk came to Jigme Phuntsok with a guidebook to Mount Wutai, which he wanted to give to Jigme Phuntsok, as he heard that the lama was planning a pilgrimage to the mountain. The guidebook was written in ancient Chinese and modern Tibetan. Jigme Phuntsok said that this was a treasure. As the entourage looked for the monk, he already disappeared. Jigme Phuntsok asked the students to check the guidebook. It turned out that the text missed one page. The girl found earlier was one year younger than the demand heard in the voice. “The conditions did not quite come together (*rten ’brel cung ’phyugs pa*),” said Jigme Phuntsok.<sup>176</sup>

This recalls some similar accounts in earlier records of Mount Wutai. In *The Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Victorious Crown*, a miraculous encounter is recorded between an India monk named Buddhapālita and an elderly man he came across at the Vajra Cave on Mount Wutai. The elder praised Buddhapālita for enduring hardship to pay homage to Mañjuśrī, but said that the monk would not achieve his goal this time. Before he disappeared, the elderly instructed Buddhapālita to return to India and bring back a copy of *The Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Victorious Crown*. As he said, after using the scripture to rectify Chinese people’s sinful acts, Buddhapālita would be shown where to find Mañjuśrī.<sup>177</sup> The old man was Mañjuśrī in disguise. In a similar account in *Blue Annals*, Mañjuśrī manifested as a monk. This time, he asked the Indian monk Padampa Sangye to return to Bodh Gaya and obtained a dhāraṇī of Vajaya. Using the dhāraṇī to pacify the epidemics of China, Padampa Sangye finally met Mañjuśrī.<sup>178</sup> In both legends, the successful pilgrimages to Mount Wutai depended on the monk pilgrim’s procurements of authentic tantric teachings to aid the Chinese people. In the following few months, Jigme Phuntsok made visits to the rest four mountains to reveal treasures, the absent teachings in the above scene, until the time came for

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<sup>176</sup> Tshul khriims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.61-62

<sup>177</sup> Copp 2014: 159-164; Lin 2014: 117-118; Lopez 2017: 208-209; Birnbaum 129-130

<sup>178</sup> Debreczeny 2011: 13-16

him to visit Mount Wutai. Obviously, the idea that is conveyed is the benefit of the lama's teachings to Chinese people.

As Chou wen-shing noted, Jigme Phuntsok also revealed treasures at Mount Wutai. These activities, Chou remarked, added a new dimension to the mountain's rich textual and material history (2018: 169-170). Provided that the Tibetan king who invited Padmasambhava to Tibet, Trisong Detsen, was an emanation of Mañjuśrī, Germano argued for a more close connection of the mountain with treasure tradition (1998: 84). Indeed, the present scene echoed the dynastic past neatly, as Jigme Phuntsok was an emanation of Padmasambhava. Yet even a master trope gains legitimacy in encounter. As Keane points out, for any qualisign or sensuous quality of an object to play a privileged role in a larger system of value, it "cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities." He calls this co-presence "bundling." Qualisigns bundled together "will shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts." (Keane 2013: 414) In our guidebook, the use of two writing systems testified to the earlier interactions between Tibetans and Chinese around Mount Wutai. When this quality stimulated the view of the book as a treasure, Jigme Phuntsok might suggest that it recalled the prototypical form of a treasure text as written in *dākinī* letters, which needed to be further decoded into Tibetan. A quality that was inevitably bundled into the book as it was produced to introduce the Chinese mountain to Tibetan readers was damageability. As this latent quality became salient, the trope of meeting Mañjuśrī was evoked, to the extent that the legitimacy of disseminating Jigme Phuntsok's treasure teachings was connected together with the other esoteric teachings that had been spread in China before.

Jigme Phuntsok's role in this event was indispensable. When he chose Sodok, chose the cave, and asked his students to make ritual offerings to Mañjuśrī, the lama already guided the students' thoughts to Mount Wutai. Yet he did not know about his later encounter with

the guidebook. Nor was he able to decide the result of his students' search for the twelve-year old girl. Whether he might have had other plans in mind as he asked for the girl remains a question; he might really hear the question in vision or the sound might actually emanate from the audience outside the cave. In any case, without the interpretations he gave later, this earlier event would not have seemed a prelude to the teaching of Mañjuśrī. Yet improvisation must be very creative and even arbitrary to make the unexpected into the familiar trope. It is quite unusual to assert a Chinese text to be a treasure. For his students, this peculiarity harks back to the earlier comment by Sodargye. After they beheld their teacher using mysterious and arbitrary interpretations to revive religion and convert Chinese, this must have raised the uncanny feeling that what one ordinarily and conventionally feels as true may really be some illusory mental projection.

In other words, had these students thought of their journey to China as a subjugation of demons, they should have done what Holbraad calls "self-trumping," as these scholar-monks comprehended very well that the ostensible subjugation might be a mental construction of their own. In that way, the demons that were prophesied for Jigme Phuntsok to avert and to conquer would, first of all, be this ignorance. As Sodargye recalled, Jigme Phuntsok expressly stated that another goal of his visit to Mount Wutai, in addition to the one of converting Han Chinese, was to edify these young khenpos as later Buddhist teachers.<sup>179</sup> For these students, from the interpretations their teacher gave to guidebook and monk at Sodok, they should have recognized the true object: a way of approaching truth by not clinging to what one assumed them to be. The teacher's external play calls attention to his inner scrutiny. It taught that these retinuees should take on the same way of seeing to find the truth of the scene, in order to gain a real perception of the arrival of Mañjuśrī. This introspection was starkly different from the itinerary gaze conceptualized by David Arnold in

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<sup>179</sup> For the source of this, see Chou 2018: 168, 205, n.11

a different context. In Arnold's formula, gaze is "the prelude to possession in more material and institutional forms, as travel is more about imposing upon, than learning from, the landscape subject to the itinerant gaze." (Arnold 2006: 209) The itinerant gaze of the monks was a prelude to self-trumping, by which they creatively learned from encounters rather than to impose upon them. In their journey, the assemblages of humans and nonhumans still transformed the religious landscape materially and institutionally, but the monks were continuously exposed to the theme of "disassembling the self."<sup>180</sup> (Rabinow 1997)

### **Teacher and Students**

To this point, I have identified two layers from the biography. At one level, the biography is a representation of the revival history and the prophecy is its organizing rubric. Yet readers are taught that the representation is made from the authors' perceptions, which are subject to ignorance, as is true for all ordinary perceptions. This second layer indicates that what one thinks as reading from the first, whether he believes it or not, may also be his own mental projection. One cannot reach the truth unless he takes on a recursive path to approach it. This section looks at the third layer. In this layer, the biography implies that all appearances are maṇḍalas of buddhas and all humans buddhas. In particular, it leads the spectator to realize that he himself ultimately is a buddha.

To reveal this layer, we need to begin with a statement the biography gives at the beginning. As the three authors claim, having abided in the dharma realm of the primordial buddha Samantabhadra, Mañjuśrī dances and plays (*rol gar bsgyur pa*) in an infinite number of realms to liberate sentient beings. And they believe that Jigme Phuntsok is a semblance of

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<sup>180</sup> What Paul Rabinow (1997) calls "disassembling the self" (see also Foucault 1990) is a continual self-bricolage, or swerve (Lévi-Strauss 1966), which is a form-giving practice that operates with and upon heterogeneous parts and forms available at a certain moment. The notion of self-bricolage calls attention to how human subjectivities are formed and reformed through people's interaction with the world.

Mañjuśrī.<sup>181</sup> This calls attention to all moments where Jigme Phuntsok encountered Mañjuśrī, not only the one noted above. Somehow self-contradictory, these moments connote that all spectators in this story, Jigme Phuntsok's students and readers, are manifestations of Mañjuśrī.

The first of such encounters occurred when Jigme Phuntsok was six-year old and began to learn to read. He had trouble memorizing Tibetan letters at the beginning. One day, Jigme Phuntsok came across a crumpled piece of paper at a pile of maṇi stones. Curious about the letters on the paper, he asked a man to read them for him. It turned out that this was a short treatise that teaches one to enhance reading and writing skills through visualization of Mañjuśrī.<sup>182</sup> The author of the treatise is Jamgön Mipham Gyatso (1846-1912, hereafter Mipham), one of the most erudite Nyingma masters in history. The treatise explains that the recorded liturgy was once taught to an illiterate Brahman, when he was ninety-nine. Too old to learn to read, the Brahman did not want to continue his life without being able to read Buddhist texts. He prepared a sword. If the liturgy showed no effect, he would commit suicide with the sword.

After he performed the ritual, Mañjuśrī appeared and used the wisdom sword in his right hand to slice through the old man's ignorance. Becoming proficient in reading and writing, the Brahman felt rejuvenated as an eight-year-old child. In the teachings of the Nyingma, the analogy of childhood is employed frequently to evoke enlightenment, but the notion of an eight-year-old child has a specific origin in the cult of Mañjuśrī. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, Mañjuśrī spoke of a dragon girl who achieved instant enlightenment at the age of eight. Provided the iconographic tradition of portraying the bodhisattva himself as an eight-year old

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<sup>181</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.4

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 19-20

child,<sup>183</sup> the story suggests that the Brahman partakes of the nature of Mañjuśrī. The biography writes that Jigme Phuntsok conducted the same tantric ritual and gained the ability of understanding classical texts without obstacles, thus implying that Jigme Phuntsok was also a manifestation of Mañjuśrī. Indeed, the man who read the text for him might actually be the deity.

At the age of nine, Jigme Phuntsok lost his father. One night in a dream, Padmasambhava appeared and told him not to be defeated by sorrow. Padmasambhava told Jigme Phuntsok that he would later become a great religious leader, with Mipham as his teacher, although the master had been dead for almost three decades.<sup>184</sup> Becoming an extraordinary devotee of Mipham, Jigme Phuntsok undertook an intensive retreat at the age of fifteen, an emulation of Mipham's famous retreat at the same age, during which Mipham gained the ability to know every Buddhist work without learning. In his retreat, Jigme Phuntsok read Mipham's *Pointing to the Nature of Awareness* ten thousand times, at each intermediate stage of which he chanted one hundred times a particular prayer to Mipham and finished it one million times in total. It was said that in this way he attained an unshaken realization of the nature of mind.<sup>185</sup>

It was in this retreat that Jigme Phuntsok had a visionary encounter with Mañjuśrī, who appeared in the form of Mipham and accepted Jigme Phuntsok as a student. Such an event occurred more than once in Jigme Phuntsok's biography. At the age of eighteen, Jigme Phuntsok was studying in a monastery in Dzachuka. Sakya Pandita (1182-1251), who is commonly revered in Tibet as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, emerged in his dream and helped

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<sup>183</sup> Debreczeny 2011: 87

<sup>184</sup> Suo da ji, 2001: pp.19-20

<sup>185</sup> Tshul khriims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.22; Suo da ji 2001: 24-25; For a translation and introduction of Mipham's *Pointing to the Nature of Awareness*, see Duckworth 2017

clarify several difficult texts for him.<sup>186</sup> In 1984 and 1986, the other two Tibetan figures who are compared to Mañjuśrī, Longchenpa (1308-1364) and Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), also gave Jigme Phuntsok instructions in his dream.<sup>187</sup> On March 18, 1986, Mañjuśrī appeared again in his dream. Talking to the lama who was facing criticism due to his ethical reform, the deity said: “Noble son, you do not need to feel disheartened. In *The Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī*, the Buddha already gave a prophecy of your ability to do [right] things to the dharma. The dharma and all beings will be benefited [from you] without question.”<sup>188</sup> The next day, Jigme Phuntsok asked several students to check the text. They found a place talking about an emergent enlightened being whose name has the letter *a*. Excited since his Sanskrit name contains the letter, Jigme Phuntsok announced his bodhisattva vows to his students at a dharma assembly a few months later. He promised to place all sentient beings in Jambudvīpa (i.e. the human world) on the path of liberation. At the very least, he promised to save all Tibetan people and rescue them from suffering and hardship. The day was June 4, the anniversary of the Buddha’s first teaching in the world.

The scenario is not suggesting how inner experiences influenced Jigme Phuntsok’s behavior and decisions in the real world. A correct understanding of the events needs an inference, strictly, from the claim that Jigme Phuntsok is also a manifestation of Mañjuśrī. If the lama is equivalent with the masters he encountered in private visions, his acts and speeches that are perceived and recorded by his students should be seen as no different from those of the masters that appeared in his visions and dreams. In Buddhism, the physical, external world could be as the same as mental image. This truth assumption is the key to understanding the following event in the summer of 1986, an empowerment ritual during

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<sup>186</sup> Tshul khriims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.24-25

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 53 and 60

<sup>188</sup> *Rigs kyi bu/ khyed sems zhum mi dgos/ khyod khyis bstan pa la bya ba byed nus par ston pa nyid khyis 'jam dpal rtsa rgyud na 'di ltar lung bstan yod pas bstan 'gro'i don 'ong nges gsungs/ ibid, 59*



which Jigme Phuntsok announced to more than six thousand monks that Mañjuśrī had instructed him to visit Mount Wutai.

An empowerment ritual often has a modular structure, beginning with the preparation of the ritual site. Tantric rituals are performed to take over a site from the local deity who originally controls it. Then, drawn on cloth or using colored powders as materials, a physical maṇḍala is created as the basis for the generation of a visualized maṇḍala, which the tantric teacher invites the actual deity of the maṇḍala to enter. After making offerings to the deity, reciting praises, and ritually preparing the students for the empowerment, the teacher channels the power of the deity to bestow empowerment to the disciples, before he ends the ritual. The main purpose of this empowerment is to initiate a student into a tantric practice. The teaching cycle taught on that day was the Magical Net of Mañjuśrī (*'jam dpal sgyu 'phrul drwa ba*). When the recitation of liturgy reached the step of inviting Mañjuśrī, Jigme Phuntsok jumped up from his seat. He sat back to the seat as though the deity was falling down from the sky.<sup>189</sup> Jigme Phuntsok declared that Mañjuśrī just asked him to visit Mount Wutai. But the lama who made the announcement was also Mañjuśrī.

A similar event was recorded in a temple at Mount Wutai. In this temple, a limestone enshrined as a precious object borrowed from the dragon king by Mañjuśrī is used to explain the cool climate of the mountain, for the stone has a cold surface. It is said that Mañjuśrī occasionally visits the temple and uses the stone as his bed. On June 10, the anniversary of the birth of Padmasambhava, Jigme Phuntsok made a ritual offering to Mañjuśrī. During the ritual, ten rays of light emerged in the sky, taken by the audience to be the deity's presence.<sup>190</sup> In another event recorded at the Sudhana Cave on the anniversary of the passing of Mipham, Mañjuśrī appeared exactly at the time when a praise poem was retrieved from the

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 72; Suo da ji: 2001: 67

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 77. The monastery is known as Qingliangshi si ("The Clear and Cool Rock Monastery," Tib. Dwangs bsil rdo yi gling). One epithet of Mount Wutai is Qingliang shan, literally "The Clear and Cool Mountain." For light rays as a traditional sign of Mañjuśrī's presence at Mount Wutai, see Birnbaum 2004

lama's consciousness after a three-week retreat, which was dedicated to the deity.<sup>191</sup> In both events, the students were placed at a receptive position resembling that of the teacher in relation to the deity. In the first, students and teacher made the same ritual offering. In the second, the lama explained that anyone who has a bodhisattva vow and reads the poem in the cave has his merit merged into the unbounded merits of Mañjuśrī. The poem was engraved on the wall of the cave in Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian. In another episode, seven Chinese children appeared and kneeled before Jigme Phuntsok on his way to the Sudhana Cave.<sup>192</sup> Recalling the notion that Mañjuśrī has eight young attendants, this scene again suggests that Jigme Phuntsok was both a student and an emanation of Mañjuśrī.



Figure 22: An empowerment rite at Larung in the 1990s, courtesy of Larung

As noted earlier, in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Sudhana consulted fifty-three sages, travelling from one place to another. According to Fontein (1967: 21), the scripture's description of Mañjuśrī as appearing in both the first and the penultimate of the list indicates the deity's

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 74.

sustaining influence over the journey. In numerous forms, Mañjuśrī led Jigme Phuntsok (i.e. Sudhana) toward his prophesied status as a future Buddha. Before they embarked on their China journey, Jigme Phuntsok asked each member of the retinue to recite the Mañjuśrī mantra hundreds of thousands times, and he told them that the deity could appear in any form to offer guidance. “We had to respect everyone we met on the way as Mañjuśrī,” recalled Sodargye.<sup>193</sup> Yet the person to whom these students paid the most attention was Jigme Phuntsok (i.e. Mañjuśrī). It is important to note that these students were not unlike Sudhana, travelling from one place to another and chanting *The Vows of Bodhisattva Samandabhadra* at the prophetic moment at Mount Wutai. At this third layer, the biography suggests that each of the students ultimately could also become the protagonist of the prophecy.



**Figure 23: Jigme Phuntsok was in retreat at the Sudhana Cave, courtesy of Larung**

<sup>193</sup> For this source, see Chou 2018: 168, 205, n.11



**Figure 24: Seven Chinese children and Jigme Phuntsok**, courtesy of Larung

The Tibetans' China journey reached its climax at the Nārāyaṇa Cave (Ch. Na lu o yan ku), where Jigme Phuntsok experienced “uninterrupted visions of radiant light day and night” and other powerful contemplative experiences and visions as he conducted a two-week retreat.<sup>194</sup> This Nārāyaṇa Cave, dark and narrow, about six meters deep, has a cone-shaped entrance. According to a twelfth-century record, since pilgrims cannot go beyond the entrance area, “they often feel inside with their hands, or they hold a candle to illumine it. There is a single hole that points northwest and slightly upwards, but it is so deep that it cannot be fathomed.” (Birnbaum 1989: 133). Tradition claims that this hole leads to secret passageways that further connect the mountain's other parts, particularly the Vajra Cave. Above I mentioned that Buddhapālita met Mañjuśrī at the Vajra Cave. Built on this lore are legends and records that describe the cave as a treasure trove for sacred musical instruments and Buddhist texts. It is also said that deep inside the cave is a complex of palace and temple buildings where Buddhapālita and ten thousand other bodhisattvas dwell together with Mañjuśrī, through the guidance of whom one can further reach the land of bliss (ibid). Yet the original monastic site of the Vajra Cave has been bombarded and occupied for

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<sup>194</sup> Tshul khrims blo gros, ed. 1991, pp.75-76



government use since the Cultural Revolution. Thus when Jigme Phuntsok performed retreat at the Nārāyaṇa Cave, revealed treasure teachings and vajra songs, and imparted them to the audience, he was known as retrieving the secret passage to the interior of the mountain, a splendid maṇḍala of deities and treasures.

This scene echoes the Nyingma view of all Buddhist scriptures, treasure teachings in particular, as formulated in the original ground of Samantabhadra, the primordial buddha in the Nyingma. It is in this mythical domain that Samantabhadra spreads his teachings to other bodhisattvas, through whom the teachings were given to early Nyingma masters and to Tibetan teachers in the eighth century and afterwards (Gyatso 1986). Therefore, the biography's description of the Nārāyaṇa Cave recalls how it asserts that Mañjuśrī abides in the realm of Samantabhadra at the beginning. At that moment, the audience who were sitting outside, cross-legged, could imagine the ground beneath them as the same realm as they received Jigme Phuntsok's treasure teachings. The Tibetan claim of the number of the pilgrims as ten thousand is because Mañjuśrī is staying with the same number of bodhisattvas inside the Vajra Cave. At this third layer, one does not need to transform his assumption to approach the real. As long as the audience firmly believed that Jigme Phuntsok is Mañjuśrī, they could deduce that they were all bodhisattvas listening to the teachings of Samantabhadra in the latter's dharma realm, the true picture of what occurred at the Nārāyaṇa Cave.

### **Words as Photographs**

Anthropologists use “language ideology” to characterize a given set of beliefs about language that a group of users holds toward perceived language use.<sup>195</sup> In our story, as the prophecy's true referents require one to recursively approach them, we may say that the prophetic words

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<sup>195</sup> Silverstein 1979 and Irvine 1989, for example.

bear resemblance to photographs. Roland Barthes's two contrastive concepts, *studium* and *punctum*, which he uses to explain photography's expressive ability, can further clarify this.

The *studium* of a photograph produces an "average" interest in the photo, according to Barthes. As a communicable element, *studium* is built on a repertoire of accrued knowledge, contextualized meanings, and learned tastes. Through *studium*, a spectator experiences in reverse the photographer's intension and the moment in which he took the photo. The *punctum* of a photograph lacks such communicability. A *punctum* is not a design on the end of photographer. Nor is it an element that is appreciable to all spectators and existent in all photos. A *punctum* "stings," says Barthes. It is a "subtle beyond," as "what I can name cannot really prick me." (Barthes 1980: 51, 59) Barthes even hesitates to generalize about the concept. He discusses it through a group of idiosyncratic examples, each casting a unique light. Indeed, in several examples, Barthes clarifies not so much what a *punctum* is but what it is not.

In one of these examples, captioned "Savorgnan de Brazza," the *punctum* is a sailor's bizarrely crossed arms. It is not enough to call the act "aberrant," says Barthes. The way it is done is unaccountable. Viewers can never know what caused the posture at the moment. This "incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" that characterizes *punctum*, a "little hole" that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [a sovereign consciousness]." (Barthes 1980: 26-27, 51) Barthes's comment evokes Christian Metz's (1985: 83) attitude to photography. As Metz remarks, to the extent that light physically travels through shutter and makes an imprint upon film, "a photograph remains closer to the pure index, stubbornly pointing to the print of what was but no longer is." (Metz 1985: 83) A photograph testifies to the "absolute particular," "the sovereign Contingency" that can never be an object of human mind (Barthes 1980: 4). A photograph essentially is anti-representationist. In the same way as we have explained about prophecy and biography,

photography makes it more evident that a spectator mentally constructs an object as he interprets the referent of a photo. Indeed, Barthes himself also uses a Buddhist term to describe photograph: “tathātā” or “thusness.” (ibid)

Yet a prophecy is different from a photo in one aspect. A photograph regards a past moment. Yet when the case is a prophecy, the task is to decipher which moment at the present is foretold. We may say that a prophetic word is a photograph of something yet to happen. Thus following an enlightened being to recognize that scene, ordinary readers can coexist with it and even become the figures depicted in that scene. As some anthropologists have noted, reading is an act of recontextualizing entextualized discourse (Silverstein and Urban 1996). The recontextualization in our story is quite literal. Over time and space, monks used their acts, dialogues, and movements to flesh out the content of the prophecy.

On September 10, 2015, when Chinese people celebrated Teachers’ Day on social media, Sodargye posted a photograph in commemoration of Jigme Phuntsok, who had died in 2004. The photograph depicted a trail of footprints in the sand, which led off to the feet leaving the tracks. Sodargye explained the image to be a dream scene. He told a story. A Buddhist student saw the scene many times in his dreams after he lost his teacher. One night, the teacher appeared and said that he had remained with the student since he died. “But why I saw myself walking alone in the dust,” asked the student. “The footprints were not yours but mine,” answered the teacher, “I was carrying you on my shoulder as I walked.”

Here, what a student conceived had no truth, as in the biography. Revealing the true appearance of the scene, the Buddhist teacher transformed the student’s presumption and the way he looked at the scene. Written at a time when the teacher had gone, Sodargye’s story reminds me of the moment in *The Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Victorious Crown*, when Buddhapālita reached Mount Wutai and shed tears at the mountain. Buddhapālita lamented that he was living in an era where all enlightened beings had hidden since the death of the

Buddha. Only at the mountain did Mañjuśrī still appear to guide beings. Prostrating himself upon the earth, Buddhapālita implored: “Long have I wandered the flowing sands to pay respect...I beseech the all-encompassing great kindness and compassion [of Mañjuśrī] to allow me to gaze on his venerable form.”<sup>196</sup> The subsequent event was mentioned earlier. Disguised as an old man, Mañjuśrī told Buddhapālita to spread a tantric scripture in China, and he would appear after that. The story ended with Buddhapālita’s translation of the scripture into Chinese and his liberation in the Vajra Cave. The absence of enlightened beings is not true. After one undertakes the bodhisattva way to spread Buddhist teachings, to purify ignorance, and to attain enlightenment in a buddha land, he can find that buddhas and bodhisattvas are never gone.



**Figure 25: The photograph posed by Sodargye on the Teacher’s Day, from Weibo**

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<sup>196</sup> Copp 2014: 160



After the death of Jigme Phuntsok, the task of offering annual tantric rites was left to his niece. Other chief students continued to spread Buddhist teachings among Tibetans and Chinese. Buddhist texts were systematically translated into Chinese year after year. Jigme Phuntsok urged his disciples not to search for his reincarnation or commemorate him with any stupa. He would rather remain with them “in other ways.”<sup>197</sup> The hills behind Larung have five peaks, resembling the petals of a lotus (see the next chapter). When he was alive, the lama consecrated the monastic seat as a surrogate for Mount Wutai (“Wutai” means “five peaks” or “five terraces.”). Physically separate from each other, the two places are connected through Mañjuśrī’s magical activities, in the sense that the deity visited Larung through Jigme Phuntsok’s visions and dreams, but also in the sense that the lama’s acts and speeches were those of Mañjuśrī. But more crucially, the lama left his teachings to cultivate students’ minds. In 2015, a collection of Jigme Phuntsok’s oral teachings was published in Chinese and English, entitled *Always Present* (Ch. *Bu li*). As a khenpo explained: “If someone asks you to make a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai for Mañjuśrī, you can tell him that there is no need for this, since Mañjuśrī is in everyone’s consciousness.”<sup>198</sup> As is shown, to the extent that the teacher fundamentally is the mind that touches the world, the embodiment of Jigme Phuntsok, as of all buddhas, can be found in every phenomenon.

At Larung, each teacher decides what to recite before and after his class. Almost always, *The Vow of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* is used to end a meeting. For the monastic valley is Mount Wutai, each of these recitations is a repetition of the mythical moment in which Sudhana met Samantabhadra. Monks also recite prayers to Mañjuśrī, Mipham, and Jigme Phuntsok routinely before a lecture. In this educational setting, every Buddhist class is an analogy to Sudhana’s journey led by Mañjuśrī. At each step of his tour, Sudhana learned

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<sup>197</sup> Dan zeng jia cuo. 2004

<sup>198</sup> My fieldwork note on October 23, 2014. The quote is drawn from Yeshe Phuntsok’s lecture on Jigme Phuntsok’s *Theg pa bzhi las ’phros pa’i gtam khu byug bu mo gsar du bzhad pa’i glu dbyangs*, or “The speech emanating from four vehicles: the refreshing song of a female cuckoo,” see Jigme Phuntsok’s collected works, Vol.3 pp. 354-358)

of a given aspect of the truth from a sage. At each attention given to Buddhist text in class, a student gets the same kind of experience and knowledge. In the biography, the Indian youth's journey is unfolded as real steps and scenarios used to prove the prophecy, now it is folded back into every line and page of Buddhist texts, which attest to the aspirations of all enlightened beings.



**Figure 26: Larung as a surrogate for Mount Wutai.** The valley of Larung has five terraces, photo by the author.

### **Text as Installation**

The biography uses a unique form to express its language ideology. It makes clear at the beginning that Jigme Phuntsok is Mañjuśrī, who abides in the realm of Samantabhadra. Then, after a brief summary of the lama's reincarnation history, the biography starts from his birth, childhood, early education, the Communist era, and moves all the way to the revival period. The narrative seems a generative account of how the mythical is unfolded as the historical in a chronological order. Yet the lama's final destination, Mount Wutai, is the dharma realm of Samantabhadra, from which Mañjuśrī emanates as Jigme Phuntsok. As these students read the biography, they should recognize a circularly recursive structure, as their attention is

retracing those footsteps that actually run toward the original and the true state of their consciousness. The biography's deep structure is a moebius strip, in which the true meaning of the text is both there and not visible at the beginning.

We may understand such a text as an installation. Indeed, any text is positioned in a space as a reader pores over it, and it could be compared to an installation if it is immersive. As art historians have pointed out, the integration of the spectator into the completion of the work is an essential feature that distinguishes installation art from painting and sculpture (Reiss 1999). Two aspects are most notable in this participation. The first is the goal of "activating" the viewing subject, and the second is that of "decentering" (Bishop 2005: 11). The biography produces the same effect as it pushes readers to move through its layers. At the first layer, the text presents a revival history that proves the prophecy. At the second, it highlights recursivity. Though not a piece that is large enough for a spectator to enter or walk around it and observe it from different angles, the biography exerts a decentering effect by reminding readers that what one perceives from it is a mental construction of their own, one leaving untouched the truth. Absorbed into the scenarios, the reader is imbricated in the same moebius strip.

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that Buddhist prophecy uses ambiguity for heuristic aim. When an expression is ambiguous, it is easier for one to see that his interpretation contains circularity. That is, for an event to be recognized as the referent of the expression, one must first use the event to assign the ambiguous words a meaning. This heuristic device aims to show that one's mental construction constitutes its object and shrouds the true appearance of the latter. This chapter further demonstrates that even the literal can create the figurative effect in this Buddhist context. The biography uses literal language, but it weaves several layers and makes plain that what is ambiguous is not at the level of representation but that of reality. The layered structure illustrates how a hagiography

unfolds the heuristic device carried by a prophetic work, to which the hagiography is a supplemental material.

Buddhist monks rely on their teacher to settle the ambiguous, a stark contrast to Christian evangelists as described in Birgit Meyer's *Translating the Devil*. In Meyer's work, the Pietists too use figurative expressions for heuristic purpose. As they use allegorical texts and paintings and interpret them according to passages from the Bible, their goal is to show that the Biblical truth is the key to understanding what remains equivocal. As Meyer remarks, this distrust of "the human capacity to express truth and reveal essential things by its own means" (Meyer 1999: 38) is a principle on which the Pietists distinguish themselves from the pagans, whose acts and speeches are prone to Satan in their views. In our Buddhist story, however, one's vision and thought are the means by which one conquers the demon. This can happen at any of the three layers of the biography. Whether one mythically understands Jigme Phuntsok as a future Buddha who travelled to China to tame demons, or understands the demons as ignorance, or from the extraordinary belief that both the teacher and himself are buddhas, he already allows himself to be put on the path of liberation. The lama is an emanation of Padmasambhava, because the viewing subject is the demon.

But no viewing subject can go beyond his ordinary mindset until he achieves enlightenment. It is impossible to really perceive the teacher's true nature, his visions and dreams, and the true meaning of the prophecy until that moment. During his journeys, Jigme Phuntsok always walked into the caves alone. Only an enlightened being can have his vision penetrating a cave wall. On those occasions, the visual lines of the entourage converged on a location to which they had no access. In this lacuna of vision, being hidden, Jigme Phuntsok was both there and inconceivable. In these acts of hiding he actually revealed something for his students. The lesson was that none of their perceptions of the teacher could evade their own assumptions, not even for those occasions where the teacher seemed fully perceptible.

Concealment is a remarkable theme throughout the biography. Jigme Phuntsok rarely explained what he meant as he talked and acted. Nor did he explain why he made certain decisions than others. Sometimes he did not reveal a dream or a vision until a long time later. The biography says little about what to know about the prophecy, except for the first line, and it makes no effort to reveal its layered structure, although one needs special Buddhist knowledge to detect it. It seems that these Buddhist monks are not worried about being misunderstood by others. This seems unusual, as the biography's primary aim is to legitimize Jigme Phuntsok. And these monks also hold the belief that the fundamental way to liberate sentient beings is to teach them Buddhist wisdom. Perhaps leaving those hidden layers unuttered is a profound means for teaching the wisdom. Discovering these layers, a perspicacious reader can apprehend that communication leads to recursivity. And since the real truth is incommunicable, being implicit is a delicate and accurate way to convey it.

No matter how the audience understands Jigme Phuntsok's stories, regarding them as visionary, miraculous, creative and strategic, manipulative, benefiting from coincidence, ideologically fashioned, or even dubious and deceitful, Buddhist monks can claim that these are conceptions of their own. Refraining from explicit communication shows a stance to guide variance toward the Buddhist course, as eventually one has the chance to note the right message, if not at the present. As much as a planted seed ripens at a future time, Buddhist monks can claim that Jigme Phuntsok already places all people on the course of being liberated.

I end my discussion of the biography with a photograph, in which Jigme Phuntsok stands in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, with the Gate of Heavenly Peace in the background. The camera reveals the great lama's intention: His slightly elevated hands indicate an exertion to keep the upright posture, as though the lama is swallowing the giant picture of Mao hung on the Gate. This reminds me of the myth of Rudra, mentioned in the previous

chapter as a prototype of prophetic narratives in Kham's 1950s resistance. In this myth, Rudra, the king of all demons, lives in a fortress shaped like a reversed maṇḍala. As the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi approaches his abode to tame him, Rudra uses his supramundane power to become bigger and bigger. The bodhisattva outstrips the demon, swallows and purifies him in his stomach, and liberates the demon into emptiness with a mantra. After this liberation, both Rudra and his demonic hordes convert to Buddhism. They dwell at the periphery of a maṇḍala, bound by oath to protect it. This is the future that Jigme Phuntsok envisioned as he began his adventure as the earliest Tibetan master to convert neighboring Chinese in the post-Socialist era. Buddhist monks from eastern Tibet now have been a rigorous force in the religious landscape of contemporary China. The next chapter will show how this newly converted Chinese population contributes to the maintenance of Buddhist teachings in Tibet, Serta, or the valley of Larung, all being religious centers and manifestations of maṇḍala.

This Tiananmen photo has not been published anywhere. Very likely, it was produced in the lama's 1987 trip to China.<sup>199</sup> If so, could this be the most secret layer of the journey? As the biography's layered structure inspires the viewing subject to convert and to conquer demons, this unrevealed photograph implies that the master had some ferocious tantric means to directly convert the demons (see the next chapter). Yet a photograph ultimately is uninterpretable, as mentioned above. If the biography is a textual installation that makes words function as photos, this last photograph is its *punctum*. Indeed, it is because this is unknowable that it is possible. And this possibility of liberating the most inconvertible makes

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<sup>199</sup> I came across the photo during my fieldwork, as I obtained from the Circulation Office of Larung the digital copies of more than one hundred photographs of Jigme Phuntsok. In addition to pure portraits, these photographs all suggest some religious meaning, capturing either a meeting between Jigme Phuntsok and another great lama or disciples, or a ritual event in which he made a decision or a miraculous performance, or a Buddhist monument or site to which he paid a visit. Seen from this, the Tiananmen photo is hardly an ordinary tourist photo. Most crucially, it was put together in a digital folder with photographs that have been published in the lama's Chinese biography. In that biography, one section that has no illustration describes Jigme Phuntsok performing wrathful tantras, during a period of tension with the Chinese government from the late 1990s to 2001 (see the next chapter). Whether the photo might have been prepared for the illustration use, Jigme Phuntsok looks much younger in this photo than he was in the late 1990s, very similar to his countenance in other 1987 photos.

indubitable the prophetic claim that Jigme Phuntsok would liberate all connected to him to the land of bliss.



Figure 27: Jigme Phuntsok on the Tiananmen Square, courtesy of Larung

## Conclusion

Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* heralded some of the later critiques in the ontological turn of anthropology. As Fabian noted, anthropology has an "epistemological sore," the

denial of coevalness of ethnographical other with representing subject. This distancing device, “allochronism” in Fabian’s words, inheres in the way anthropologists extract knowledge from local interlocutors in their fieldwork. This extraction essentially is a communication process. Yet as Fabian noted, as anthropologists apprehend it as a transfer of message from sender to receiver, from one pole to another, they display a “persistent and systematic tendency to place the referents of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse,” as implied in the act of “transfer.” (Fabian 1983: 31-33) One way for anthropology to recreate co-presence with its research subject is to recognize ethnographic object as undivided from the representing anthropologist. At least two recent changes in anthropology, one understanding the epistemology of anthropology as translational and one as recursive, have manifested this view. This chapter suggests that the two approaches have intersections. In their effort to represent Jigme Phuntsok through their own views, Buddhist monks show that text can function as installation, words as photographs, and signs as indexes to the utmost. In this way, they reveal how a perfect translation of anti-representationism could be.

Similar to allochronism but along an opposite direction, the Nyingma tradition denies the coevalness of an ordinary student with an enlightened teacher who gives prophetic message. In the previous chapter, we saw that whether or not a prophecy experiences a stage of concealment, a prophecy by definition disconnects a later reader from the moment in which it was authored, and it reminds readers that their interpretation of the text is subject to their own mental work. This is not unlike the way the biography does in this chapter with its heuristic device. In both cases, another kind of coevalness is brought into the view, grounded in the mind of the spectator and centered on it. This is what Fabian noted for anthropologist: “either he submits to the condition of coevalness and produces ethnographic knowledge, or he deludes himself into temporal distance and misses the object of his search.” (Fabian 1983:



32). Whether all anthropological work should follow the former way is beyond the scope of the chapter, but if we decide to do it, we should guide readers to see that they actually have no access to any of the moments in the field that are represented in ethnography. What they read and feel as true are the visualizations of their own.

Of special relevance here is Michael Lempert's book studying Buddhist interaction rituals like debate in India's Sera Monastery. According to Lempert, an essential strategy that Tibetan exile leaders take to elicit global sympathy for their nationalist cause is to make their western allies feel assured that the Tibetan's aspirations converge with their own. In doing so, these Tibetan leaders, the Dalai Lama in particular, make strenuous efforts to prove that the Buddhist subject as embodied in debate is harmonious with the liberal subject. This labor is akin to sympathetic magic that uses mimetic logic to affect target, notes Lempert. The Zulu "may be seen chewing a piece of wood, in order, by this symbolic act, to soften the heart of the man he wants to buy oxen from." (Tylor 1913: 118, cite from Lempert 2012: 10). Yet isn't this mimetic and instrumental dimension of sympathy found in the expressive capacity of ethnography as well? For example, as Lempert tracks how the sympathetic magic of the Tibetan leaders is achieved through their making of affinities across scales—from face-to-face interaction on debate court to competition between monastic colleges and beyond—isn't the ethnography's capacity to represent these scales and guide readers to jump through them also reliant on its evocation of analogous scenes that are familiar to readers, such as dialogue between self and other?

Sympathy is "the spectator-centered capacity to imagine and feel as one's own the state of another." (ibid: 10) This chapter aims to reveal the other side of the coin, by calling attention to how Buddhism also calls into question the sympathetic capacity. This occurs when the perceptive scheme that allows affinity to be recognized to ground sympathy is charged as mediated by deluded thought. Lempert uses a metaphor to explain how

sympathetic ritual is done through affinities: “[A]s the pattern repeats, each tends to appear more natural, like two mirrors that face each other, from which there is no escape.” (ibid. 43) In our story, the escape takes the pain of peeling back the layers of oneself, and the spectator is positioned not as a third-party that observes the two mirrors but as one of them. In his choice of converting Chinese people, Jigme Phuntsok complemented the liberal-democratic path chosen by the Dalai Lama for the Geluk school. As his story is recorded in the biography, these Nyingma monks push the audience not to jump scales but to move recursively as through a spiral line. In doing so, they display the logic of contagious magic, constructing an inaccessible point where all sentient beings are connected with an enlightened being and his bodhisattva vows.

In 1991, the Dalai Lama and Jigme Phuntsok came together, in Dharamsala. This meeting recalls one that had occurred earlier. In their previous meeting, Jigme Phuntsok, then Lerab Lingpa, performed a tantric ritual together with the previous Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso to expel an imperial Chinese army occupying central Tibet. Situated in the context of the meeting, the next chapter will show that the textual installation discussed in this chapter is replicated in landscape as well. Several mountain valleys in Serta are created as the same kind of device that casts light on the vows of former enlightened beings. This process was hardly smooth and actually unsuccessful. After his meeting with the Dalai Lama, Jigme Phuntsok was no longer a politically reliable lama for local and higher-level officials, and his project with one of the mountains harmed the interest of Serta’s chiefly lineage. At the same time, the lama’s health deteriorated badly. The next chapter will say more about Jigme Phuntsok’s inner state: his joy and sorrow, and despondency and hope. These affects, following this chapter’s logic, were some external displays seen from the position of the audience. This time, I will shift the way I look at the lama. Instead of showing how Mañjuśrī

teaches the audience that Mañjuśrī dwell within them, I, an ordinary human being, will express what I feel about Jigme Phuntsok taught about being a human.

## CHAPTER 5

### Ontologies of the Mountain

Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926) was born in a wealthy Khampa family in the royal lineage of Nyarong. After his first revelation of a treasure from a local holy mountain in 1880, he became an accredited treasure revealer. In 1888, Lerab Lingpa recovered a treasure relating to Avalokiteśvara, the incarnation of which in Tibet is each Dalai Lama. Soon, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso issued several requests for him to visit Lhasa. Over the rest course of his life, Lerab Lingpa formed a collaborative relationship with Thubten Gyatso, who became his most important disciple and patron. They performed rituals together and exchanged teachings. Thubten Gyatso created conditions for Lerab Lingpa to reveal treasures at sacred sites in Central Tibet. Most of these treasure teachings were about wrathful Buddhist rituals of various kinds. Lerab Lingpa used these rituals to pacify threats, ensure the health and longevity of Thubten Gyatso, and destroy obstacles when the Tibetan government was in crisis.

In 1988, a century later after Lerab Lingpa's initial connection with Thubten Gyatso, Jigme Phuntsok offered an empowerment rite in Central Tibet. By that time, this Tibetan lama, who was also a treasure revealer and an expert in wrathful Buddhist rituals, had been known as a reincarnation of Lerab Lingpa. The empowerment rite went very well on that day. Spontaneously, the following verses arose in Jigme Phuntsok's mind:

When thunder cracks the air  
Peacocks dances on the ground  
May you become the rain that relays great news  
May tree leaves sprout and fruits appear

Jigme Phuntsok wrote down the verses in a letter and requested a lama from Dharamsala to present it to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Not long after, the Dalai Lama responded to this signal of reconnecting, asking the Penor Rinpoche to invite Jigme Phuntsok to India. On May 24, 1990, the two lamas met in Dharamsala, in Namgyal Monastery. Jigme Phuntsok created a *zhabs brtan* prayer for the Dalai Lama, a kind of prayers used to beseech a spiritual master to prolong his life for the benefits of sentient beings. The Dalai Lama brought out a silver coin and a gold maṇḍala that belonged to Thubten Gyatsok, using them to ask for an empowerment rite of Vajrakīlaya from Jigme Phuntsok. A new treasure teaching was retrieved from Jigme Phuntsok's consciousness as he performed the ritual. The Dalai Lama personally wrote down the teaching, a part of which he could recite, as though the two had worked on the same teaching before in their previous lifetime. The next day's dharma assembly was based on the liturgy of a Vajrakīlaya teaching of Lerab Lingpa and was presided over by the two lamas. At the request of Jigme Phuntsok, the Dalai Lama offered him the treasure teachings of the Fifth Dalai Lama. In one of his previous reincarnations, Jigme Phuntsok was Rigdzin Pema Trinle (Rigs 'dzin padma 'phrin las), the chief ritual officiator of the Fifth Dalai Lama, taking charge of national ceremonies such as the consecration of the Potala Palace and longevity rites for the Sixth Dalai Lama. In these complex ceremonial exchanges and reincarnation connections, Jigme Phuntsok showed that he also had a duty to the Tibetan state in his own era.

This chapter examines Jigme Phuntsok's aspiration to reveal some ferocious tantric teachings buried inside a mountain in Serta, teachings taken to be able to defeat the Chinese state. The Dalai Lama's active response was surely a motivating force for Jigme Phuntsok to do it. A common metaphor for wrathful tantric teachings is thunder. In a highly relevant source, peacock is explained as Dzogchen, the highest teaching of the Nyingma. Akin to the path of self-liberation in Dzogchen, peacock owes its beauty to its direct consumption of

poisonous plants and snakes.<sup>200</sup> In this vein, Jigme Phuntsok’s message—“when thunder cracks the air, peacock dances on the ground”—extols violent tantras as essential for the Nyingma to thrive on the dark period. In Dharamsala, protective deities appeared in his vision and told Jigme Phuntsok to be confident about his role as the manifestation of Padmasambhava. At Nechung Monastery, Vajrapani appeared in his vision, exhorting him to subdue demons and heretics with Lerab Lingpa’s teachings. Indeed, Lerab Lingpa had tried twice to rescue Tibet from foreign enemies with his revealed teachings. The first was in 1904, unsuccessful. Francis Younghusband's British expedition slaughtered disorganized Tibetan militia and caused Thubten Gyatso to hide in the north and east. Lerab Lingpa also fled back to Kham. In 1909, an imperial Chinese army’s short-lived invasion provoked another round of performance of wrathful tantras among Tibetan monastics. As we will see below, the Chinese army’s retreat was ascribed to a Vajrakīlaya ritual undertaken by Lerab Lingpa.



**Figure 28: Lerab Lingpa**, from Jigme Phuntsok’s biography

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<sup>200</sup> Sogyal 1990: 71. Sogyal Rinpoche is another reincarnation of Lerab Linpa. He explains how Dodjom Rinpoche uses peacock to explain Dzogchen as the fruition and essence of the “nine vehicles” of Buddhist teaching. This scheme of nine vehicles will be shown below.

## **The Political Turmoil in the Late 1980s**

Jigme Phuntsok's second biography contains a paragraph that describes the Chinese invasion of Lhasa in 1909. It uses two of the city's landmarks to communicate a heightened sense of danger and crisis. The first of these is the Potala Palace on the Red Hill, the traditional residence of each Dalai Lama and the seat of the Tibetan government. The second is the Jokhang Temple encircled by the Barkhor Street, the location of the Jowo Śākyamuni statue and Tibet's religious center:

In that year, the border armies of demons invaded Tibet. This was the ninth time they came to destroy the dharma. The Tibetan government could not withstand the attacks. Other lamas requested the great tertön [i.e. Lerab Lingpa] to tame the demons. The master used a stone to trap the enemy commander's soul and bound the stone to a tree. The soul tried to escape...Catching it from behind with an iron lasso, the master stroke a ritual dagger into the stone. Blood spurted from it. This occurred at the time the Potala Palace was under siege and the invaders were breaking into the Jokhang. The enemy commander suddenly fell and died on the ground. Blood seeped from his nose and mouth.

Tibetans in the late 1980s would find their experience to be echoed in the passage. In 1987-1989, the Chinese authority chose an excessive display of force at Lhasa's landmark sites, especially the Jokhang Temple, as Tibetans also staged protests at these sites. According to Ronald Schwartz (1994), the first demonstration occurred in September 1987. In that month, the Dalai Lama made a trip to the U.S. for meetings with congressional leaders. Many Tibetans made donations to monasteries around Lhasa and requested them to pray for the visit. In this circumstance, some monks from Drepung Monastery decided to act more openly. They came to the crowded Barkhor Street, shouting Tibetan independence slogans and joined by lay Tibetans. On October 7, a crowd of 2000-3000 protesters attempted to occupy a police station at the southwest corner of the Jokhang Square. The anxious police officers opened fires on them.

In March 1988, monks from Ganden, Drepung, and Sera Monasteries decided to embarrass the Chinese government by boycotting the Monlam Prayer Festival, a New Year celebration held at the Jokhang Temple. The festival needed the monks to offer prayers and a debate contest, which traditionally was how the highest scholastic degree in the Geluk, *geshe lharampa*, was offered each year. As a condition of their support, the three monasteries required the government to release all protesters that had been arrested. Officials in TAR found a way to coerce the monasteries to comply, but what awaited them was a deadly riot. On March 5, after the ceremony was ended, angry monks pushed the government representatives to hide themselves in an office room in the Jokhang Temple. They walked onto the Barkhor Street to protest, throwing stones to the coming police and bolting the huge door of the temple to stop them. The police responded with tear gas. They burst into the temple, starting beating monks inside. This scene resembled very much the time of Lerab Lingpa and the old attacks by demon armies. Indeed, in traditional Tibet, the New Year celebration had much to do with exorcism, which included an aim to send evil beings away from the Dalai Lama and Lhasa.<sup>201</sup> As Schwartz noted, when Chinese restaurants and shops were vandalized by Tibetans, there were debates about whether ordinary Chinese should be seen as “human beings.” (1994: 83)

After the riot, the tension over the intense presence of armed Chinese soldiers at the Jokhang Square left little room for other options. From the point of view of dissidents, all they would have to do was to express their contentions at the holy site. Over the rest time of the year until February 1989, Tibetan monks, nuns, workers, farmers, pilgrims, and students organized various protests at the Jokhang Temple. The possibility of staging demonstrations elsewhere was never considered. In March 1959, the political situation in Lhasa was aggravated suddenly. The State Council imposed the martial law in Lhasa on March 7. Two

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<sup>201</sup> Richardson 1993: 61-71; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 508-511



thousand People's Liberation Army soldiers from Sichuan replaced armed policemen to control the situation. Chinese soldiers set up checkpoints at every alleyway around the Barkhor Street. Two days later, forty military trucks were positioned around the Jokhang Temple and the Potala Palace, with their equipped machine-guns and rocket launchers pointed at the two architectures.

In the climate of growing tension and hostility, other worries loomed large on the horizon. Schwartz reported an emotive prayer that was distributed in Lhasa in September 1989, a prayer connoting the theme of taming demons. Right at the beginning, the anonymous author described the Chinese soldiers to be the instruments of demons, and he asked whether the protective deities in Tibet had remained power in this dark era. The stanzas that followed kept using the same format to beg the deities: "Look with your eye of wisdom." As the author implored, Buddhism was becoming a world religion, but Tibet had become "the corpse of a dead lion." The great monasteries had been closed in ruins; the caves of tantric practitioners had been left for animal's use; and Buddhist teachings had lost their status as gems. In this breakdown, the "warm blood of our heroes and heroines is flowing in the streets of Lhasa." Even the "blades of grass sing a sad song." From this sorrowful muse, the author besought the deities to bring back the Dalai Lama: whether it was "time now for the forces of power to rise up?" The final stanza affirmed to readers that the deities would break the deadlock in the near future: "Though the ripening of our sin is relentless, there must be an end... There is no doubt we will soon be victorious." (Schwartz 1994: 244-246, appendix C)

Reminiscent of the prophecies in 1950s Kham, the prayer reflected the wary ambivalence that some Tibetans felt toward peaceful protest and its efficacy. At about the same time as the prayer was distributed, the Dalai Lama won the Nobel peace prize for his insistence on not relying on violence to solve the Tibet issue. In Lhasa, celebrators swarmed

to the Jokhang Temple, throwing roasted barley flour into the air to express their joy. Yet hatred toward the Chinese continued. In March 1992, two days after the United Nations Human Rights Commission voted against a resolution that would impose sanctions on China for its violation of human rights in Tibet, a Tibetan youth association explicitly urged Tibetans to reconsider the role of violence and sabotage in their struggle:

The UN liberated Kuwait within 48 days. We have been fighting for 40 years to get free from the rule of the Red Chinese. The world bodies are taking a keen interest in Yugoslavia, Burma, Palestine and Africa. Thousands of human lives have been lost in the struggle in these countries through acts of sabotage and violence. Hijacking and sabotage are tactics used by Palestinians, and still world bodies support them. Now we feel that if these acts of aggression bring results, why should we not do the same? The world believes in these acts. Therefore, if no action is taken against the Chinese promptly by the UN, we will not hesitate to go ahead with modern destructive measures (Schwartz 1994: 224)

From 1988 to 1990, Jigme Phuntsok travelled frequently in Central Tibet. He must have beheld how Tibetans resented the Chinese crackdowns. In Kham in the 1950s, the same circumstance had thrown Tibetans and Chinese into battles. The task left for Jigme Phuntsok to complete as an emanation of Padmasambhava, and as the reincarnation of Lerab Lingpa, was his pacification of demons that deluded human minds. A more ambitious project in relation to this, in his mind, was to reveal some tantric teachings for this task from a mountain yet to be consecrated. Several prophecies explain that this mountain, once identified, would eventually become as important as Tsa ri, a pilgrimage site situated on the border of Tibet and Assam and known as one of the quintessential sites in the sacred geography of tantric Buddhism. In 1992, after he returned from Dharamsala, Jigme Phuntsok identified this prophesied mountain to be Drongri, the central mountain of Serta, and claimed himself to be the revealer. The following sections will explore the chaotic events related to this decision.

## The Origin Myth

In 1980, as the Buddhist revival took place in Serta, the other aspects of traditional Tibetan culture also experienced a revival. Outside monasteries, various editing projects, government-sponsored or not, compiled materials to introduce the folklore and the history of the region. Among these projects, a remarkable example was the publication of the genealogy book of Washul Serta, the chiefly lineage in Serta.<sup>202</sup> The core of the book is an origin myth that explains how the mountain of Drongri, actually a god, blessed the ancestors of the chiefly lineage, until the god was combined into it to become an ancestor of the chiefly family.



**Figure 29: Drongri**, photo by the author

Four ancestors are featured in this myth. The first of them, Purpatar (Phur pa tar) or Purpakyap (Phur pa skyabs), was born in Kokonor in Qinghai. Purpatar's grandfather was a sonless headman. To help the family get an heir to preserve their title, a bonpo lama, Trashi

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<sup>202</sup> The complete myth is in *Dbal shul gser thar gyi lo rgyus gsar bsgrigs*, pp.54-85. For a Chinese translation, see Jianbai Pingcuo, 1990.

Zangpo (Bkra shis bzang po), asked the family to hold a blazing water rite of Hayagrīva (*rta mgrin dbal chu*). Hayagrīva is an Indian horse-head deity commonly conceived as an incarnation of Viṣṇu by Hindus. Incorporated into Buddhism and known as a wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara, Hayagrīva however is also an important deity in the Bon tradition of Tibet, in the case of which the deity is considered to be an emanation of Tonpa Shenrap (Ston pa gshen rab), the founder of Bon. A ritual of Hayagrīva is deployed often when a patron asks a bonpo to ritually purify obstacles, such as health problems. And when such a ritual is performed, the basic structure of the ritual bears resemblance to that of a wrathful tantric Buddhist ritual in which the deity is summoned for similar purposes. Yet Hayagrīva rituals in Bon sometimes have their unique displays. In one ethnographic report from Nyarong, a bonpo used his hands to hold stones that had been heated to red while reciting mantras, and put these stones into a cauldron of liquids that was already boiling. After this, he further used the liquid to purify the surrounding space and the bodies of the patrons (des Jardins 2010).

In the blazing water ritual that is specifically invoked here, a cauldron of boiling water is put on the central altar of the ritual. Then, a piece of butter shaped like a Garuda is thrown into the cauldron. The performer takes out the butter with bare hands. If the butter is not melted, he can proclaim that the ritual is successful, and he sprinkles the water at the corners of the household to spare the family. In particular, this kind of ritual is used to help control the disasters that fall upon a family due to illegitimate birth (Orofino 2015). As we see in the origin myth, after the ritual, Purpater's father, Wachukyap (Dbal chu skyabs, "the protecting blazing water") or Wasekyap (Wa se skyabs), was born. Obviously, Washul Serta's lineage name, "Washul" (Dbal shul), was derived from the name of the blazing water rite, "wachu (*dbal chu*)."

We can infer that the succession of the chiefly title might have caused split somehow.

Wachukyap had several sons. Trashi Zangpo excavated a ritual dagger (*phur pa*), and he advised Phurpatar to inherit the title. When his clan waged a war against the clan of Dru ('Bru). Purpatar received a nine-pointed sword from Amne Machin, a holy mountain in Golok, and he used the sword to defeat the invaders. At his death, Purpatar asked Trashi Zangpo to build a stūpa to hide the sword. Purpatar had one son, but four grandsons. The family wanted to know which grandson should inherit the stūpa. Trashi Zangpo urged them to inherit the stūpa together, but he asked them to move toward the direction of the sunset and build the stūpa at a place called Saktu (Sag tu). According to the bonpo, the upper part of the region looked like a silver helmet on meadow; the middle part like a wild yak's heart in plate; and the lower part like a white yak's tail on tailbone. As the myth clarifies and as local readers can immediately understand, the description refers to the three holy mountains in Serta: Drongri, Damchen, and Ngala taktsé (for these mountains, see Chapter 3 and 4). It was in this generation that the lineage of Washul came to Serta.

The myth may convey some historical verity here. In this region, as the central mountain of Serta that is superior to Damchen and Ngala taktsé, Drongri is further worshipped in a larger pilgrimage system after two greater mountains north in Qinghai's Golok: Amne Machin and Nyenpo Gyutsé (*gnyan po g.yu rtse*). Hence the notion of receiving a sword from Amne Machin and the construction of the stūpa to conceal it reflects the history in which Washul Serta was subdivided from the nomadic groups in Golok. Also, Wachukyap was born during the reign of Altan Khan (1507-1582). In this and the next centuries, Bon was very popular in Southern Ambo and northern Kham, characterized by their blood sacrifice. Eventually, these Bon groups were compelled to move to more remote areas after the rise of the Gelug sect. (Karmay 2013)

After Purpatar, the myth gives a long list of the different branches of Washul Serta and their residence, without explaining any of them. The second carefully accounted ancestor

is Shakyatar (Shākya thar), who was the first ancestor of the chiefly family of Serta and was selected as Serta's first chief in the early seventeenth century. In Shakyatar's story, he competed for leadership with his two brothers. At that time, the founder of Palyul Lineage, Kunzang Sherab (Kun bzang shes rab, 1638-1698), came to visit Serta. He asked the three brothers to make a visit to Drongri. On that day, the three brothers decided to have a horse racing from Ngala taktsé to Drugri, and they agreed that the winner would lead the region.

Here we have a detailed account of the horse racing. As it started, a group of Mongol hunters were cooking at the foot of Drongri, in the storehouse of Amne. Among them, an old hunter had a dream the night before, in which he saw a musk deer that had a spiral horn. These hunters really shot a deer like that in the morning. To celebrate, they put the spiral horn and tailbone in a gold plate, piled their saddles as a throne, and invited the old hunter to sit on it. When sunlight was illuminating the summit of Drongri, Shakyatar arrived at the mountain. This occurred at the same time the food was presented to the old man. Thinking that their foes were coming, the hunters all fled. Shakyatar took the seat of the old hunter, and he shared the food with the two brothers who came after. They prayed to Drongri together. At that time, Shakyatar heard a voice from Drongri: "you and the next seven generations of your descendants would be the chiefly family of Serta. Nothing can lower your heads. No wall can stop your hands. And no one can possibly injure you." The god further told Shakyatar that the chieftainship would last for six generations. Under one of the saddles, Sakyatar found a white jacket and he kept it for himself. He gave the horn and the plate to his two brothers.

Shakyatar's village, Shötél, became the village of the chiefly family of Washul Serta. This village and the villages of Shakyatar's two brothers came to be known as Three Washul.

In the story of Purpatar, Drongri is described as a "silver helmet;" Damchen a "yak's heart;" and Ngala taktsé "a tail on tailbone." Thus the landscape shares a homology with the feast eaten by Shakyatar. The three holy mountains are in a parallel relationship, standing

there as permanent, external things. The feast has the items superposed one by one, a temporary structure to be consumed inside. In addition, the moving horses pass across the mountains separately and in sequence, while the feast is presented at one and the same time before the motionless throne of saddles. Anthropologists should easily tell a set of dichotomies in this homology, the binary traces that Claude Levi-Strauss pursues in myth:

Horizontal : vertical  
parallel : superposed  
permanence : impermanence  
externally : internally  
moving : motionless  
sequence : simultaneity  
separate : altogether

The story of Shakyatar is an expression of how authority emerged in Serta. This emergence is best shown in the homology between landscape and feast, as though the territory of the region is put in a plate and offered altogether to the new chief. In these binary oppositions, the words in the right column all represent the qualities of chieftainship. The story shows that the horizontal, diffused, and egalitarian nomadic society was transformed into a hierarchical but perhaps unstable whole.

In the nineteenth century, the succession of chieftainship was passed to Wangchen (Dbang chen). This ancestor was sonless. A Nyingma lama, Dorjé Lhündrup, took him to pray to Drongri for a son. The two came across a pair of turquoise stones on the way. Dorjé Lhündrup tied one stone to a bowl, which he offered to Drongri, and he tied the other stone to an arrow, which Wangchen offered to the god. In this heirless context, arrow and bowl symbolize phallus and womb, obviously, as the stones bound to them originally were paired. Several months later, when Wangchen was away from Serta, his wife got pregnant. The chiefly family took the son's father to be Drongri. This son was the mid-nineteenth century chief Sönam Topgyé, who conquered the nearby regions and extended Serta's boundary to its

furthest point. Sönam Topgyé's military campaign made him known as the godly son of Drongri. It was in this way that the mountain god became the ancestor of the chiefly family.

We should note that by the time of Sönam Topgyé, the original three villages known as "Three Washul" had been divided into six, each into two. The chiefly village of Shötel was divided into Upper and Lower Shötel, for example. These divisions might not be a coincidence, since they provide a way to ensure the succession of the chieftainship. We can piece together the picture with limited information: Sönam Topgyé was from Lower Shötel. His successor, Kelzanggön (skal bzang mgon), was from Upper Shötel. In the 1940s, territorial dispute took place between Serta and Datangpa (Zla thang pa), a polity in Garze. At that time, Kelzanggön's cousin, Sönam Nyendrak (Bsod nams snyan grags), replaced Kelzanggön as Serta's leader. He summoned more than ten thousand people to repossess lost land from Datangpa. To do that, Sönam Nyendrak was adopted as a "son" of Kelzanggön's father from Lower Shötel into Upper Shötel. To transmit a family title, adoption is quite common in this region. Yet the case suggests that the adoption might occur for other reasons. We do not know why Kelzanggön was replaced. We only know that he was a reincarnate treasure revealer. The substitution might have religious reason, such as meditative retreat. But one thing was clear. Kelzanggön's son, Rigdzin Döndrup, the one who later encountered the Communists, was too young to handle the crisis. It was because Sönam Nyendrak also died soon that Rigdzin Döndrup became the leader. A nomadic polity needs an effective leader to handle threats. Age, vigor, merit, experience, courage, wisdom, and negotiation skills may all cause substitution to happen. In light of this, we may think through E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of regicide in the Shulluk in Sudan. Wangchen's replacement by Drongri may actually be a mystification of Evans-Pritchard's famous comment on divine kingship: "though kings may perish the kingship...endures." (1948: 19)



In this origin myth, Purpatar, Shakyatar, and Wangchen all received divinations from Buddhist (or bonpo) lamas. Each of these lamas used their instructions to help solve problems, pushing forward the narrative of the origin myth. This recalls the role of Manjusri and Jigme Phuntsok in the previous chapter, a kind of “bodhisattva ex machine.” (van der Kuijp, 2005: 21) Indeed, the origin myth also contains some hidden layers to suggest the hegemony of Buddhism in the traditional milieus of Serta. As Jigme Phuntsok’s biography, it also relates a story of taming demons as fundamental to understanding the meaning of Drongri.

### **The Origin Myth Revisited**

Phurpatar’s name means “freeing the ritual dagger;” Shakyatar’s name “freeing Shakya;” and Wangchen’s name “great empowerment.” These names already imply the deeper layer of the story, a doxographic rubric in the Nyingma that divides all the Buddhist teachings into three categories and nine levels (Cabezón 2013). More specifically, Purpatar's story represents tantra, Shakyatar's sutra, and Wangchen's mundane knowledge. In other words, the three ancestors are fictitious, and they are used to bring to light the various paths to achieve liberation. From this we can speculate that the origin myth is a Buddhist appropriation of the mountain cult. The myth uses the chiefly lineage’s development to teach that the history of Serta was subject to some underlying Buddhist principles.

The Nine Vehicles	Ancestors	Stories
Three Inner Tantras		
atiyoga		
anuyoga		
mahāyoga	Purpa-tar	Dagger ritual against invaders
Three Outer Tantras		

yogatantra		
caryātantra		
kriyātantra		
Sutras		
bodhisattva	Shakya-tar	The Middle Way
pratyekabuddha		
śrāvaka		
Mundane Knowledge	Wangchen (Ser-tar)	Dagger ritual against deluded nomads

**Table 1: the origin myth of Washul Serta, 1989**

Let us begin with the blazing water ritual from which the lineage was originated. In many respects, this bonpo ritual recalls violent tantric Buddhist rituals. The bonpo ritual invites *dbal* (blazing) deities to subjugate the evil. *Dbal* means “burning,” “cutting,” “special ferocious power,” and “the point of ritual dagger.” (Orofino, 2015) It calls to mind the Buddhist tantric rites in which performer holds ritual dagger to invite Buddhist deities to kill demons. It has been known that in these subjugation rituals, the pantheon of bonpo gods and Buddhist gods share similarities. Indeed, the dagger ritual tradition in Bon is developed from a more antique Buddhist tradition of the same kind (Karmay 1975). For all these reasons, we may say that Wachukyap, the first ancestor of Serta, was given birth by wrathful tantras. Like demons converted to become deity-like protectors that way, Purpathar used the sword offered by Anye Machen to defeat Dru. The nine-pointed sword evokes a nine-pointed vajra. In this nine vehicles system, it may represent the highest atiyoga, the Nyingma teachings of Dzogchen.

Trashhi Zangpo asked Purpathar’s descendants to move to Serta (“Saktu” in his prophecy), and to build a stūpa there to hide the sword. In Chapter 3, I discussed how the landscape of Serta is a maṇḍala, and how this maṇḍala, as a set of concentric circles, has its layout delineated by the mountains divined by Trashhi Zangpo. The bonpo’s words indicate that this concentric mandalic pattern could be further understood in a three-dimensional way,

as a three-tiered architecture whose center, also the highest point, processes toward periphery as from high to low. Thus the stūpa used to conceal the sword is actually the geographic maṇḍala, which resembles a three-tiered stūpa. It follows that the highest tantric teachings are hidden in Drongri, the center and the top of the maṇḍala. We will return to this point later.

Shakyatar represents sutras. This is manifest in his name but more crucially in his story. The meaning of “Shakyatar,” “freeing Shakya,” calls to mind the Shakya clan in which the historical Buddha was born, who is known as the creator of all sutras. Trashi Zangpo urged Purpatar’s descendants to inherit the sword collectively, which complies with the view of tantras as teaching indivisibility. The sutric teachings focus on the Middle Way, a gesture of not falling onto any extreme. Therefore, the binary oppositions we have found as in Levi-Strauss’s formula are used to refer to these extremes. As Shakyatar rode all the way to Drongri, he was displaying the Middle way, piercing through some dichotomies to get at the center of the maṇḍala, as a Buddhist purifies all extremes to reach the final destination of enlightenment.

At this destination, Shakyatar became a Buddha. A number of emblems are alluding to this. The sunlight that cast light on the top of Drongri; the feat that resembled a maṇḍala, which Shakyatar digested in his stomach; and the pattern of the deer horn, white conch that is traditionally used to express the fearlessness of the Buddha. What the mountain god announced to Shakyatar is also akin to the description of the Buddha, who is always victorious over obstacles. The other two brothers who also reached Drongri, but not as fast as Shakyatar, represent pratyekabuddha and śrāvaka. If the horse racing stands for the spiritual journey of getting enlightened, this journey, as I explained in the previous chapter, is a recursive tour that also returns to one’s original state. We should note that “the Mongol hunters” and “the storehouse of Amne” both convey this sense of going back to origin, as the Mongol areas of Qinghai and Amne Machen were where the Washul lineage came from.

Additionally, the old hunter used his mental thought to conceive the arrival of enemies, something that did not exist in fact. He, due to this delusion, could not possess the position of a buddha. At this hidden layer, we could say that the chieftainship represents the status of the Buddha. Where the myth seems to describe Serta as a more differentiated and more hierarchical society, it actually points to the difference between an enlightened being and a deluded man, or, to use a more appropriate Buddhist way to frame it, the distinction between tamer and tamed.

Wangchen represents correct mundane knowledge. In particular, he represents the traditional political value of Tibet that requires a secular leader to revere monks and monasteries, which exemplifies the lay Buddhist ethics that centers on the accumulation of good merits. Wangchen got the godly son, Sönam Topgyé, after he followed the lama's instruction. In this scenario, the son is ascribed to the chief's respect for the lama and his religious service, and more deeply to the invisible karmic force that was generated from this, rather than to the mountain god. As an extension of its political power, Washul Serta has contributed several religious figures to Dongkar Monastery. Sönam Topgyé's son, Sönam Norbu, for example, was the abbot of the monastery, whose prophecy we mentioned earlier.<sup>203</sup> In light of this combination of secular and religious powers, the sign of sexual union in Wangchen's story also represents how the chiefly family did well in both secular and religious realms.

### **What is Serta?**

Nomadic and monastic groups shared a long history of mutual assimilations in Serta. The origin myth obviously is a Buddhist re-formulation of some folkloric materials among the

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<sup>203</sup> In the story of Shakyatar, Kunzang Sherab may actually represent the origin of Dongkar Monastery, as the monastery also belongs to the Palyul Lineage founded by Kunzang Sherab.

nomads. And the myth must have been formulated during or after the rule of Sönam Topgyé. Military conquest allowed Sönam Topgyé to be known as the godly son of Drongri. In his time, Serta formed its territorial boundary and identity. Inside, the region's political structure was portrayed through a mandalic scheme, as "one tent, four cords." The central "tent" was Washul Serta, divided by three branches, six villages, and centered on the chiefly family. The "four cords," which were lineages and villages that were more influential than the other smaller ones, were the six villages of Upper Bumshül, the seven villages of Sangsang, the seven villages of Choktsang, and the four villages of Buchung.<sup>204</sup> Outside, these nomads were known as protected by Drongri. It is unclear how the original authors of the origin myth might have been affiliated with the chiefly lineage, as the ideological purpose of the myth is ambiguous: the myth extols the chiefly family but foretells its decline more deeply.

After a reader detects the nine vehicles scheme from the stories of the three ancestors, he can further understand that the myth is representing Sönam Topgyé as a great Buddhist king. The combination of secular and religious realms as shown in the scenario of Wangchen has a more ancient origin. The most famous model of this is Cakravartin (i.e. dharma-wheel king), a mythical Indian king who conquers the world with a golden wheel. Tibetans think that an ideal king rises to rule on a golden foundation (Walter 2009: 289-291). As I mentioned in Chapter 3, in traditional Serta, the chiefly family lived on Gold Plain, where the Gold River (Gser chu) carries sand gold to flow through. In line with "Purpatar" and "Shakyatar," we can reformulate the name "Wangchen" to reveal how this fictitious ancestor actually conveys a view of Serta as a golden land ruled by ideal kings. If we note that the myth keeps spelling Serta as "Sertar" (Gser thar, "freeing gold"), and that "*wang chen*" is an abbreviation of Dbang chen gser gyi sa gzhi, or the golden disc at the foot of Mount Meru. The word play is as follows:

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<sup>204</sup> SDXZ 1997: 35

Dbang chen	Dbang chen gser gyi sa gzhi	Gser thar	Gser ta
(Wangchen)	(The golden disc)	(Freeing gold)	(Serta)

In the myth of Padmasambhava, the Tibetan king offered gold to invite Padmasambhava to Tibet, who in turn transformed Tibet into a land of gold. This turns our attention to the origin myth's second purpose. We should note that the word "Wangchen" has two meanings: "great force" in the physical sense or a "great empowerment rite (i.e. a tantric initiation rite)" that transforms a Buddhist student spiritually. Remember that the sword that had been used by Purpathar had been concealed in Drongri. Therefore, just as the Dalai Lama's offering of a gold maṇḍala to Jigme Phuntsok for his empowerment, Wangchen's offering of arrow, bowl, and the paired turquoise stones to Drongri more deeply represented the standard act of offering precious items, such as money, to a tantrist for an empowerment rite. In particular, the four items offered composed the image of a maṇḍala occupied by a tantric deity and his consort. In other words, the scenario alludes to a tantric empowerment, and to the fact that Sönam Topgyé's military activities must have been combined with Serta lamas' tantric rituals. It means that the chief's conquest of the surrounding regions conformed to Buddhist virtues, to the extent that it resembled a subjugation of demons inhabiting the periphery of a maṇḍala. In short, it is through tantric empowerment that Serta came to be formed as a land of gold.

From this, we can find an even deeper layer from Wangchen. Note that when his wife got pregnant, Wangchen was out of Serta, falling in the peripheral region of demons. Wangchen exposes the tendency of a layperson to fall in the hands of demons. This is a silent warning against the chiefly family, whose military conquest might one day lead them to go too far to lose their virtues. Wangchen's replacement by Drongri---this we explained above in terms of Evans Pritchard's study of regicide and divine kingship---actually implies a tantric killing of demons, a forceful re-installment of Buddhist order. That Wangchen would one day

die without his real son indicates the termination of his karmic force, as the victim of a subjugation ritual is directly liberated to a Buddha land. Secretly, the origin myth connects the chiefly family with demons, and it reveals that the mountain of Drongri, or the mountain deity of Serta, is a mandalic center equivalent with a ritual dagger. Buddhist monasteries in Serta had kept using wrathful tantras to protect the nomadic groups.

However, the most remarkable point of the myth occurred as Drongri announced Shakyatar to be Serta's first chief. At that time, the god also foretold that the chiefly family would last for seven generations. How should we understand the coincidence, as the chieftainship was really ended in the hand of the seventh chief, Rigdzin Döndrup, in his encounter with Chinese Communists? The editors of the genealogy book explained that in their compilation, they consulted the works of several prestigious lamas surviving the Communist era, some from the chiefly family and some not. One way to understand the coincidence is that the prophecy of Drongri was actually added by these lamas, who used it to explain the end of the chieftainship. Yet this cannot change the fact that the origin myth already implies this as its end. In the Buddhist myth of Cakravartin, the golden wheel with which the king conquered the world gradually sank (Strong 1984: 51-52). As the origin myth describes Serta as ruled by ideal Buddhist kings, it already communicates the concern that one day a chief would not live up to Buddhist standard and bring about the degradation of the golden world.

From Purpatar to Shakyatar to Wangchen, each ancestor "failed" to repeat what the previous one had done. Shakyatar "failed" to remain undivided with his brothers as Purpatar's grandchildren had been. Wangchen "failed" to remain in the maṇḍala as the horse racing had done. As the manifestations of the nine vehicles of Buddhist teachings, these failures or different "skillful means," as Buddhist monks would say, are displayed to teach the various ways by which sentient beings can converge on the same end. For all the earlier

ancestors, this common destination is Drongri. Another spelling for Serta, “Sertel” (Gser thal), is interesting to note. Nomadic people in this region use “tel” (*thal*) to describe where a given group lives or dwells.<sup>205</sup> If “Sertar” could be “Sertel,” which expresses that the people in Serta are living in the land of gold (ser), “Purpatar” and “Shakyatar” might actually have been “Purpatel” and “Shakyatel,” which means that the land of Serta is also a land of tantra or sutra. It follows that the ontology of Serta is multiple. For tantrist, Serta is a maṇḍala; For sutrists, it is where they practice the Middle Way; for lay people, Serta is where material goods are offered to monasteries in exchange for merits; for Cakravartins, it is where they wage wars in accordance with Buddhist virtues (i.e. compassionate violence). From this, we see the most secret layer of the origin myth as a prophecy. What remains unsaid is that monastics in Serta one day would “fail” to tame the demons, to rescue the chiefly family from delusion. One day the golden land would fall. At that time, people in Serta must re-consecrate Drongri to rebuild the order.

### **Ontologies of the Mountain**

Due to the multifaceted notions of Drongri, the mountain eventually became the focal point for us to look at again the 1950s history. Schooled in the danger of demons for more than a century, the chiefly family had developed their own way of handling the threat. These nomads believe that the mountain would empower them if one day they should fight against demon armies. Yet they did not hold this empowerment to be saturated with Buddhist virtues, but understood the mountain to be a personified ancestral god. In 1940, at the foot of Drongri, the chiefly family ambushed the French explorers Louis Victor Liotard and Andre Guibaut, as they were travelling through Gold Plain to Golok. As Guibaut later recollected, the

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<sup>205</sup> Serta Tsultrim, 2006, pp.20-21



ambush was not for robbery. “It was our lives they were after” (121). More than a decade later, in 1952, a Tibetan abbot explained the ambush to the secretary of the Prefecture Committee of Dartsedo, Miao Fengshu, who consulted him about the plan of sending work teams to Serta. As the abbot said: “the nomads felt that the mountain deity was irritated.”<sup>206</sup>

The Chinese work teams paid attention to Drongri from the beginning: “We arrived on a bright day...the nomads thought that the deity was giving them a good sign.”<sup>207</sup> For these cadres, the existence of a protective deity symbolized a resistance, and they used it to explain why their initial contacts with Rigdzin Döndrup drew no response.<sup>208</sup> More importantly, the cadres felt that the deification of the chief family as the offspring of a protective god bound it closely to other nomads, and this prevented their mobilization of socialist relationship.

In Serta, the Chinese work teams undertook an investigation of the mountain cult. What they found provides us an alternative way for understanding the story of Wangchen. According to one report, the notion of “the godly son” actually reflected an adultery scandal. “On that day, when the old chief left, a stranger entered his tent and got his wife pregnant. The chiefly family asserted the man to be the emanation of the mountain god... The cult reflected the sexually promiscuous lifestyle of the barbarians”<sup>209</sup> While this description might have actually been a representation of something else, such as a visionary encounter, the cadres believed that the chiefly family used the mystification to “control and coerce ordinary people.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> GAD 26-1-124, document 3, pp.19

<sup>207</sup> GAD 26-1-124, document 3, pp.19; GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.41

<sup>208</sup> GAD-17-203, document 3, pp.20; see also GAD 26-1-92, document 2, pp.78

<sup>209</sup> GAD 26-2-117, document 4, pp. 42

<sup>210</sup> GAD 26-2-117, document 4, pp.42

As the work team further investigated Drongri, some fragmentary evidence brought them to the Buddhist view of mountain. As they heard, the previous chief of Serta came across an iron casket at Drongri. After consulting a lama, he knew that this “treasure” (*baobei*) would protect Serta against all enemies.<sup>211</sup> Obviously, the statement reflects how monastics in Serta understood Drongri to be a tantric mountain from which treasure teachings could be retrieved to tame the demons. Some further evidence recalls the origin myth more closely. One source told the cadres that the treasure was a jacket, “with which the chief is unwounded even by bullet.”<sup>212</sup> This jacket should be the one found by Shakyatar, and it obviously alluded to the merits of a monk robe. Another source said that the treasure was a hat: “Taking out the hat from the casket can expel the invaders.”<sup>213</sup> Here, the hat may have to do with the notion that Padmasambhava put the evil spirits he tamed in his hat. And we should note that Drongri in the origin myth is described as a silver helmet. With these discoveries, Chinese officials believed that the monastics created the mountain cult.<sup>214</sup>

To the officials, the difference between a mountain and a deity was manifestly obvious, and they felt that this difference should also be clear to Tibetans, were there not an intervention by monastic groups. In October 1954, a conflict revolving around a few villagers who searched on Drongri for the medical herb *beimu* (Tib.  *snyi ba*) reinforced this view. Rigdzin Döndrup criticized the state-operated cooperative for its purchase of the herb used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat inflammation. The chief insisted that subsistence activities had been strictly forbidden on all the holy mountains in Serta.<sup>215</sup> “It was to kill us,” he was furious. He recalled that his father, the old chief Kelzanggön, “who was always

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<sup>211</sup> GAD 26-1-92, document 2, pp.78

<sup>212</sup> GAD 26-2-117, document 4, pp.34

<sup>213</sup> GAD 26-17-185, document 1, pp.41

<sup>214</sup> A rich scholarly discussion has explained this syncretism as proof of a conversion process in which the non-Buddhist mountain cult of Tibetans became combined with Buddhist themes. Here are a few examples that discuss the phenomenon from slightly different perspectives: Karmay 1996; Ramble 1996; Buffetrille 1997.

<sup>215</sup> There are more than one hundred holy mountains in Serta. Bsod nams dar rgyas 2006, pp.103-104

compassionate to others,” once beat two people to death for this reason. To excavate medical herbs from the mountain was to “harm the body of our ancestor.” Yet this event showed officials that the economic interests of Serta people were strong enough for disillusion with the mountain cult. They noted how people from other villages complained: “the god is Washul’s but not ours.”<sup>216</sup>

In this context, the reactions of monastic groups arrested the attentions of cadres. One lama ordered laypeople not to sell herbs but to donate money for exorcism.<sup>217</sup> Another lama explained that all medical herbs on holy mountains are the hearts of the deities that inhabit the maṇḍala.<sup>218</sup> In 1954, an uncle of the chief fell sick during his visit to several Chinese cities as part of a delegation invited by the central authority of China to observe the country’s achievements in modernization and industrialization. When he went home, people thought that the man “was possessed by demons, a Han disease [*han bing*].” He went to Drongri for a cleansing pilgrimage and asked a lama to give him an exorcism.<sup>219</sup> With these examples, cadres inferred that what had supported the chiefly family in the mountain cult were Buddhist lamas, whose ideological weapons were more difficult for Tibetans to counter. They considered the monastic groups rather than the nomads to be their primary opponents.

Several incompatible ways of seeing converged in the mountain. This recalls what Keane (2014) conceptualizes elsewhere in a Christian community. In his case, clerics, commissars, and peasants encounter each other in a single community, dealing with the same material things, and they assume how the sensuous presence of these things is shared by the other parities. However, each group employs different “semiotic ideologies” as they understand these things, a term referring to how signs are counted, interpreted and used (see

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<sup>216</sup> GAD 26-1-564, document 3, pp.23-42; GAD 26-1-591, document 2, pp.48-49.

<sup>217</sup> GAD 26-4-84, document 3, pp.35

<sup>218</sup> For an example, see GAD 26-10-519, document 2; see also 26-1-298, document 1, pp.54

<sup>219</sup> SAS, 1955-1-1, pp.97-98

also Keane 2008). Interactions lead to speculations about other agents and other viewpoints in terms of superstition or delusion. In particular, such speculations led all the parties to be evaluated in ethical and political terms.

Perhaps on the first day the Chinese work team arrived at the Gold Plain, they already actualized the hidden image of the origin myth. The work team pitched tents beside Gold River, around The Stūpa that Tame Demons, being “too close to the stūpa.” Rigdzin Döndrup urged them to move. “These nomads fear that we will extract their treasure (*bao bei*) and destroy geomancy (*feng shui*),” wrote a cadre. Folklore explains that the location of the stūpa is a propitious site, where a bulk of gold was found in the past in the shape of a horse, according to which Serta was named “Gser rta” or “golden horse.” The Chinese word “*bao bei*” refers to things and persons of great value. It is hard to tell whether the reporter was referring to items and scriptures concealed in the stūpa, the gold in the folklore, a Buddhist treasure, or some geomantic idea in general. Yet the event reveals how the chiefly family might have been worrying about the collapse of the golden land. In Serta, a Buddhist lama named Péma Rölwa Tsel (Pad ma rol ba brtsal) once left a prophecy talking about the disasters of earth, water, fire and wind caused by the arrival of demons:

Because gold [*sa snying*, literally “the essence of the earth”] was extracted [below],  
The fertility of the earth degenerated above  
An age of famine emerged little by little<sup>220</sup>

Before it narrates the disasters, the prophecy describes how demons descend from heaven, defeat all the protective deities of the region, shoot poison arrow from mountain tops, and destroy sentient beings’ merits and their chance of getting good rebirth. In harmony with the origin myth, the quote suggests how demons will put the golden place to fall from the bottom: first through a possession of humans, and then the impoverishment of land. In Buddhism, earth, water, fire, and wind are the four basic components of the physical world. It is a well-

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<sup>220</sup> *Sa snying bton pas sa bcud sa bla nyams/ mu ge’i bskal pa khol bur khol bur ’byung/ See rdzong gi gnas yig dang lung bstan*, pp.177

known idea that the collapse of the four elements occurs when a dying body begins to decompose. After a deluded person dies, the karmic force will lead him to have a rebirth, perhaps a worse one, and to experience suffering and death again and again. This is a circle in which Serta and people in Serta will suffer without an end. “Death,” or “dying,” was a strong metaphor by which monks in Serta imagined about their culture and land. But wasn’t this also thought to be the fate of Tibet, the golden land of which Serta was an epitome? We should pause here to go back to the anonymous author whose voice circulated around the Jokhang Temple. Tibet had become “the corpse of a dead lion,” he said. In this Buddhist view, Tibetans had been uprooted due to their mistakes, exiled too long and too far away from the golden land in which they had dwelled. Fallen but remaining alive, the nation was accruing its negative karma, collectively and without an end. This would continue until the wrathful deities would look with their wisdom eyes.

Rigdzin Döndrup was shot to death in early 1959, in his last battle against the PLA soldiers. His corpse was brought back to the county seat, handed out to his village for funeral. But county officials still used the chief’s death to educate other Tibetans. A few records noted down how the corpse was discussed among Tibetans: “The chiefs said that the god was invincible, and their bodies were impenetrable to bullets. Now we see that this was a lie.” Later sources assert that the heirloom of the chiefly family, that jacket, was lost during the Cultural Revolution. A few months before he took up arms, a lightning bolt struck a flagpole in the courtyard of the county government, which Rigdzin Döndrup took to be the sign of the fury of Drongri.<sup>221</sup> For monasteries that joined him and monks who recited tantras at Drongri, the thunderbolt reflects not so much the wrath of a mountain god but that of a compassionate tantric deity. Yet as Péma Rölwa Tsel asserted in his prophecy, the demons would control all people, nomads but also monks. The collapse of Serta must be ascribed to the fall of its center,

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<sup>221</sup> GAD 26-2-117, document 4, pp.41-42

as I explained earlier and as the origin myth indicates as well. To revive this golden land, a tantrist must re-consecrate Drongri once again. This consecration, as Jigme Phuntsok explained in 1992, would be the beginning of the consecration of another twelve treasure sites. “After that, the Land of Snows will free from demons,” he said.

### **Consecrating Drongri**

In Serta, a large set of texts asserted that the region hid a mountain. After identified in the future, this mountain would become the “Tsari in Kham” (Khams kyi tsa ri). The mountain Tsari is a pitha (Tib. gnas, “abode”) located in southern Tibet (Huber 1999). Indian tantrists first established the network of pitha throughout the subcontinent. As a series of geographic locations in the external world, this network also refers to the subtle locations in the body of a tantric practitioner, who channels inner energy through these points. In the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, Tibetans borrowed the system along with their translation of tantras from India. At the beginning, they redefined the list to add some Tibetan mountains, and they gradually made more replicas to make the cult a Tibetan thing.<sup>222</sup> Tibetan tantrists extol the benefits of visiting a pitha. In pilgrimage, a tantrist visualizes a pitha as a maṇḍala, and articulates it with his subtle body, another maṇḍala, through a complex set of meditative techniques.

Serta’s appropriation of Tsari, again, reflected how Serta emerged as a religious center from its former remote location. In tantric Buddhism, each pitha is a maṇḍala built upon the dismembered body of Rudra, the king of demons. In regard to the Tsari in Kham, the earliest root text is attributed to the First Dodrupchen. Whether this is the real case, Lerab Lingpa redacted the root text in 1915, in a much more lucid way. Hence the original text

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<sup>222</sup> Huber (2008) discusses the borrowing of the Pitha cult in Kham in the nineteenth century, pp. 85-121.

should have existed prior to this date.<sup>223</sup> In Serta, a group of prophecies use Dodrupchen's text as their basis, onto which they add different appendages, sometimes with one appendage affixed to another. And these appendages are mostly about the arrival of demons armies and various apocalyptic scenes. This is a sign that the root text must have been recast more than once on separate occasions in history. On these occasions local monastic groups made some similar efforts to create Serta as a tantric center in a kind of chaotic environment, and to elevate it as an important node in the larger Buddhist network. In these serial efforts, the root text was deployed again and again to create new prophecies, a reproduction that eventually caused some of the related texts and the trope of the mountain to survive the time.

In 1991, Jigme Phuntsok identified this prophesied mountain to be Drongri, although he had earlier explained it to be another mountain where he secretly taught students in the Communist period. According to a prophecy, the way for revealing the mountain is as follows:

The door of the place had not been opened on its own,  
In the future by the means of iron horse and sheep,  
The door of the place will be certainly opened  
And this will bring benefits and bliss to all that are affiliated

To open the door of a holy land is to establish the pilgrimage path by which other people can circumambulate the mountain. Explaining the "iron horse" to be automobile, Jigme Phuntsok suggested building a road toward the mountain. After that, he would reveal treasures there in 1991, which was the Year of Iron Sheep. In this way, the conditions that had been prophesied would come together. Yet the chiefly family objected this plan vehemently. The son of Rigdzin Döndrup, Tsédrupgön (Tshe sgrub mgon), proposed that the mountain was the ancestor of Washul Serta. To construct a motor road there would destroy the skin of the

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<sup>223</sup> The version published by Minzu Press in Beijing, titled *Gnas mchog khams kyi tsa ri tra rigs lnga'i rdzong chen gyi bkod pa*, in *Mdo khams gnas yig phyogs bsgrigs dad bskul lha dbang rnga sgra*, pp.200-223, already includes a few appendages. For the redaction titled *Rdzong gi gnas yig snying po bsdu pa*, see lung bstan, pp. 32-41, see also the book for different prophecies regarding the mountain.

ancestral god. As the owner of the mountain, Upper Shötel and the chiefly lineage blocked the way toward Drongri. They also summoned other people and other villages from the chiefly lineage to resist Jigme Phuntsok, though most of the other villages tired not to be involved in the conflict. It is said that some lamas from Dongkar Monastery used tantras to curse Jigme Phuntsok. As the abbot of Dongkar Monastery, Gendün Gyatso, announced before the public, Washul Serta was from Golok, which, in today's Qinghai province, belongs to Amdo. For this reason, Serta should also belong to Amdo. It thus was impossible for Drongri to be "Tsari in Kham," as a mountain in Kham could not be located in Amdo.

Himself occupying a position in the county government of Serta, Tsédрупгөн demanded other officials to punish Jigme Phuntsok. He even threatened to lead the chiefly lineage to attack Larung. Hearing about the news, those who had studied at Larung came back to protect it. This became a serious problem after 30-40 truckloads of monks arrived in Serta from other counties. During their investigation, prefectural and county officials requested Jigme Phuntsok to show the prophecy to prove his words. A prophecy should not be revealed before the prophesied time. But to persuade government officials to support him, Jigme Phuntsok took out the prophecy.

After a long time of investigation and negotiation, the Chinese government criticized the both sides. In their report, they required Tsédрупгөн and Jigme Phuntsok to realize that Drongri was not a private property that belonged to either of them. As land property, it was the government that could decide what it was used for. From the government point of view, the lawsuit reflected that the old feudal and religious elements had been revived to the extent that they tried to compete with the government to control the local society. Yet officials still approved the construction project, on the condition that Jigme Phuntsok submitted a written document to admit his blunder that had caused the great trouble. Yet the remaining time was already insufficient for the road to be completed. Shedding tears before the public, Jigme



Phuntsok lamented that demonic hindrance was so strong that the precious chance for sentient beings had been missed. The project must be delayed until twelve year later, when another sheep year came.

In the document he finally submitted to the county government, Jigme Phuntsok accused himself as the person who failed the project. In retrospect, he felt that he was riveted by the idea of consecrating the mountain, and mistakenly revealed the prophecy as the government officials required him to do it. It was this act that destroyed the condition of bringing about the project.



**Figure 30: Jigme Phuntsok wept tears before the public, courtesy of Larung**

### **The Late Years**

Today, Buddhist believes have grown very fast in Chinese cities. A Buddhist network that involves massive flows of donations, pilgrims, and Buddhist works has emerged from Serta. In the 1950s, Tibetan people were compelled to launch resistance when the socialist reform eradicated the economic foundation of their monasteries. In contemporary eastern Tibet,

Buddhist monasteries are receiving enormous amount of donations from Han Chinese regions after prosperous urban Chinese groups convert to Buddhism.

Here, we touch upon some key issues of Tibetan monasticism. Larung's huge population conforms to what Melvyn Goldstein (1998) calls mass monasticism, a phenomenon unique to traditional Tibet when monks comprised about 10 to 15 percent of its male population. When a prestigious monastery grew to this large scale, traditionally there was no way for them to finance their monks. Monks had to finance themselves. As a result, the majority of monks in traditional Tibet were engaged in revenue-generating activities, such as trading. Rituals were some other occasions by which individual monks received alms and donations from patrons. This was why monasteries in the past used a substantial portion of the avenues they obtained from estates, manpower, capital funds, loans, trades and government subsidies to support annual ritual assemblies. And In this system of mass monasticism, scholar-monks were usually much outnumbered by monks who earned money, because diligent study disallowed them to fully engage in economic activities. Their living was often a problem unless they had personal patrons.

In his study of Drepung monastery, Goldstein explain why this mass monasticism could not continue after monasteries were revived in Tibet after the Cultural Revolution. This is because under Chinese law, monasteries need to be self-sufficient, but now they are not allowed to do business outside themselves. As Drepung shifted from tradition to provide financial support for their monks, feeding them and letting them engage in full-time study, and still use rituals as the channel by which Drepung monks can get alms and donations from patrons beyond the stipends they now received from the monastery, they had a formidable challenge. In this new system, only 437 monks could be supported, barely, instead of the previous population equivalent with that of Larung. On another occasion, Matthew Kapstein (2004) believes that contemporary monasteries in Tibet have turned to the opposite view of

“small is beautiful.” Then, how can Larung continue this traditional ideal of mass monasticism in the post-socialist context, after Tibetan monasteries have lost their former estates, moneylending operations, state support and loan, and when they can only run business within themselves? To be sure, no monastery is rich enough to feed ten thousand people by itself. Not even Larung. It needs a massive influx of donations every year, still through rituals. At Larung, the annual circle of the four largest ritual assemblies are the occasions by which they got enough funds from Chinese cities.

Theoretically, all the donations should not be used for other purpose. Within the seven days of the ritual assembly, all donations must be distributed to all the monks who take part in the ritual, in the form of payments in kind and cash. But the Chinese monks at Larung have found a way of using these donations in a more institutional way. By the late 1990s, there had been about two hundred Chinese living in the monastery. Unlike Tibetans, these Chinese had little supports from their families (because of a different tradition in Han Chinese buddhist circles). Jigme Phuntsok allowed them to open a grocery store in the monastery. The profits could be used as their stipends. However, this has become a different story when enormous donations now are available.

At Larung, each of the four ritual assemblies is taken charge by one of the four different sectors of the monastery: Tibetan laity, Tibetan nuns, Tibetan monks and Han Chinese. When Chinese monks do the ritual, they purchase everything through their own store. By doing so, they get a huge amount of profits from these donations every year. And these incomes allow them to provide stipends for about 1000 to 2000 Chinese residents at Larung, including monks, nuns and laypersons. This is a remarkable change in Tibetan monasticism. It conforms to current Chinese laws, and it supports a large monastic group. At Larung, the operations of the four sectors—Tibetan laity, Tibetan nuns, Tibetan monks and Han Chinese—are independent from each other. Now, all the other three Tibetan sectors have

opened grocery stores, and they purchase articles through them when they sponsor their own ritual assembly. They hence accumulate great capitals. This is evident in the rapid increase of monastic buildings and their untidy layout, where buildings of the same function are repeated by different sectors. At Larung, a Chinese monk typically is highly scholastic, with the rest hours dedicated to co-opt work. A monk obtains stipend, free food, and medical care. Some collective dorms now begin to be built. These changes are still ongoing. Serta has become the center of a Buddhist network that involves massive flows of donations, pilgrims, and Buddhist works—a network that now extends into environmentalism, vegetarianism, philanthropy, public health, and social activism.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation traces Serta's involvement in profound changes of the twentieth century. At the start of the century, Serta was an autonomous nomadic region with little experience of control by outside authorities. The region's independence continued until 1952. In that year, after Serta's nomadic groups surrendered to the Chinese Communist Party, China gained full control of Kham. In 1956, the first shots of Khampa resistance were fired in Serta. In the fighting and bloodshed that followed, its monastic world was devastated. Later, in the 1980s, Jigme Phuntsok emerged as the most important leader in the revival movement of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery he founded has been the largest Nyingma institution since then. In 1987, Jigme Phuntsok spread Buddhism in China. Two decades after his death, Serta has become an important Buddhist center in contemporary Kham and beyond: it increasingly exists as a center in a Buddhist network extending beyond Tibetan lands and into Chinese cities.

My exploration of these events calls attention to several Buddhist traditions that feature prophecies. For at least a century, Serta had been envisioned as a mandala prone to the attack of demons. Prophecies from the region foretold that when demon armies invaded Serta, wrathful gods would appear to tame the demons. Interpreting the "demon armies" as the Chinese troops, monks and nomads in Serta launched an armed resistance that ultimately failed to tame the invaders. In the revival period of the 1980s, Jigme Phuntsok deployed prophecies once again, this time in an effort to reassemble religion from networks of humans and nonhumans. Through his creative interpretations of prophecies, Jigme Phuntsok

identified new religious sites, retrieved treasures, sanctified his teachings and reincarnate lineages, and constructed himself as a bodhisattva who had been prophesied to emerge at a time when demons were rampant. Jigme Phuntsok used prophecies to justify spreading Buddhism in China—still in an attempt to tame demons, but through the dharma rather than with weapons. It was prophecies that allowed the remote nomadic region of Serta to eventually occupy a central position in the Sino-Tibetan encounter in the second half of the twentieth century.

Theoretically, I show that this new, boundary-traversing network of Buddhism grew out of a traceable process that was continuously open to other possibilities. Theories of assemblage provide the most precise description of this process. The notion of assemblage asks us to track associations and appreciate contingencies. Readings of prophecies were disputable; treasure hunts were unpredictable; and Jigme Phuntsok's choices were made step-by-step, each step dependent upon many unexpected encounters. At the same time, Jigme Phuntsok performed his strategic choices in ways that called attention to the choices' divine ratification through the prophecies of enlightened beings. Because such performances did not afford the audience a coeval position—in the temporal, spatial, or intellectual sense—with the enlightened beings, the resulting abduction evokes Gell's notion of "captivation." In this Buddhist case, then, it is through assemblage that the basic structure of captivation becomes visible.

According to the PRC's religious policy, monasteries should accept monks and nuns from their own regions only. In the 1950s, this rule was enforced in Chinese regions to increase the state's control of Buddhist monasteries that had a tradition of hosting wandering monks. Yet in practice, whether a monastery needed to comply with this rule varied according to time and circumstance. In Tibetan regions, the Chinese government often invoked this policy to prevent a monastery's population increasing too fast and posing a

threat to political security. From 1999 to 2001, the central authority used this method to evict thousands of monks from Larung.

In 2017, Larung hit the headlines again after the Chinese government announced the demolition of thousands of its monastic quarters. Indeed, it was already an alarming sign of the crackdown that the CCTV, the predominant state television broadcaster in China, reported a massive fire that erupted in Larung on January 31, 2014. Caused by a nun who offered butter lamps in her own room, the fire destroyed more than one hundred houses. According to another notion that circulated in 2016, some monks who once studied at Larung were involved in an arrest that took place in Central Tibet. By the time I left in June 2016, monks and nuns from Central Tibet were no longer allowed to stay at Larung, though many believed that this ban would not affect people from other regions. At the time, officials also required a list of Chinese monks and nuns that were living in Larung. The monastery asked Chinese residents to make their own choices in providing their names, as it was unclear what the government would do with the information. As Sodargye explained during a meeting, it was possible that people who reported their names would be acknowledged as legal residents of Larung. Yet it was also possible that the authorities would use the list to initiate an eviction plan.

Eventually, the second possibility came true. Using over-population, unregistered residency, fire hazards, and poor safety measures as a pretext, the central authority ordered that no residents outside Sichuan would be allowed to study at Larung. Rumor had it that the goal of the demolition was to reduce Larung to about 5,000 residents. It is said that around 5,000 monks and nuns were expelled in the following months for that purpose. Most of the Chinese residents were forced to leave, without the financial compensation that sometimes was given to their Tibetan colleagues. They were forced to sign a document stating that they would continue to love nation and religion after they left, and that they would not return to

Larung, except to participate in important ritual events such as annual dharma assemblies occasionally.

Meanwhile, the local government began to build a tourist village at Nupzur, the town at the foot of Larung. International media and human rights campaigns criticized this plan as a tool for the county government to gain revenue from the growth of travelers and pilgrims to this area. More deeply, they worried that the systematic efforts to open Larung to tourism would undermine the future of Larung as a great Buddhist center representing Tibetans' efforts to revive their religion. Yet monastic leaders at Larung were not worried about the tourist village, and they actually agreed to sell land for the tourist village to the county government. While this exchange might have included the motive of appeasing greedy officials, we should also pay attention to its religious meaning as well.

This evokes the monastic landscape I saw in my earlier research trips to Larung. From 2001 to 2008, it was possible to find two modern buildings that were made of concrete among Buddhist monk's wooden huts. One building was at the center of the monastic complex, inhabited by Chinese officials who carried out surveillance of the monastery. One was a guesthouse located at the top of the valley. This guesthouse, burned in a fire in 2008, had subsequently been rebuilt as a hotel owned by Larung. Within this layout, the two buildings that were specially associated with the Chinese occupied two important positions, along horizontal and vertical axes. If we think through the state-society relationship of the PRC, the Chinese are actually divided into two in this Buddhist story. On the one hand, Chinese Buddhists have played an important role in supporting Tibetan monasteries. On the other hand, as with the 2017 crackdown, Chinese officials continue to repress Tibetan monasteries. When Larung sold the land of Nupzur to county officials, they put the officials at the exact position of demons that are suppressed beneath a mandala. And the tourist village, as it accommodates Chinese pilgrims and travellers, echoes the idea that demons could be



transformed into Buddhist protectors. In this Buddhist ontology, the presence of official buildings and the crackdown actually brings into completion the very structure of the mandala.

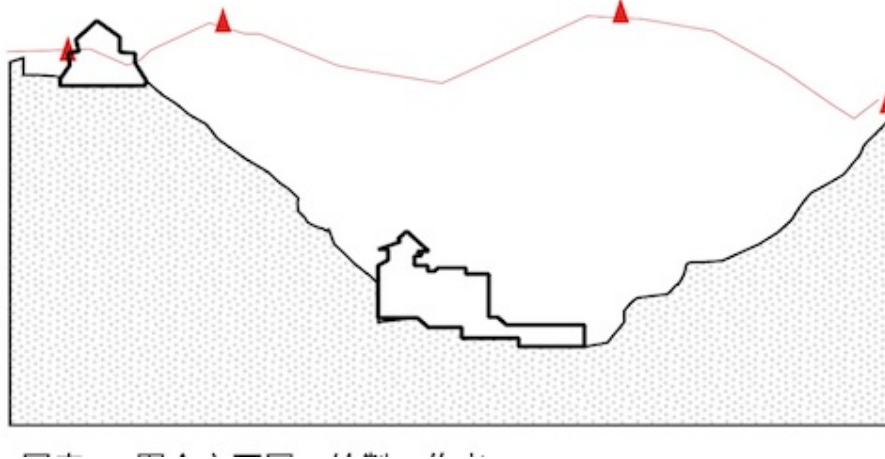


Figure 31: Larung as a mandala, illustration by Huang ruiguo

This religious imaginary is shown in a public letter written by a Larung monk during the crackdown. As he put it:

The devils, stretching the hands of sorcery, have taken away the year and months of the nights. The dark dreams were the ruins of demolished houses... These tiny hermitages, built from the foundation with money that our parents accumulated, and with the blood and tears of our friends, were where we received transmissions and meditated. They can only accommodate our scriptures and bags of tsampa. As digging machines and people demolish the residences of nuns, the shadow of dust blocks the sun...

Take this as an example of the teachings of the great ones... We have drunk together the endless nectar of Buddha dharma. We have learned, contemplated and meditated shoulder to shoulder, and received teachings, debated and composed without fear. Dharma brothers and sisters; let us not allow them to break down the sacred knots of our bond; let us not allow them to melt down the essence of our heartfelt pledge; let us not allow them to burn away the pillar of our life; let us not allow them to cut off the golden rays of our aspirations; and let us not allow them to stifle the life of our three trainings. Let us keep the sacred instructions of our lamas in our hearts; let us practice the teachings we received to accumulate great merits. Our dharma brothers and sisters, who are forcefully kicked out, please do not be sad. Those of us who are allowed to remain will stay strong. Truth is on our side. (Ö sel nyi ma 2017)

In the meanwhile, Sodargye posted an excerpt from Jigme Phuntsok's teachings in 1999, when the Chinese government demolished Larung for the first time. As the excerpt makes clear, the collapse of the mandala is not true. Quite on the contrary, it is in precariousness and impermanence that the Buddhist truth is revealed to its audience:

The congenial siblings, with whom [I] laugh together at the time of happiness and cry together at the time of suffering, please do not feel sorrow in your thoughts. No matter what happens to us, please be happy. If you think of the golden wire of tantric vows that connects us to each other, and of our mutual affection like milk and water mixed together, [you will find that] the articulation of karmic connections will make us the inseparable teacher and students forever, no matter what we experience momentarily as joy or sorrow. Keep the elder brother's [i.e. Mañjuśrī's] secret teaching in mind. Let's be a part of the show in this world of illusory appearances, and aspire for the good age in which we freely wander from one place to another.

This quotation actually restates what I have tried to convey in this dissertation. Ultimately, this project is an account of how monks rebuilt their home in Serta. My task is to articulate what "home" means in this Buddhist world. When the Chinese authorities demolished his monastery, Jigme Phuntsok told his students that their desire for shelter, their fear or anger about losing it, and even their attachment to an idea of home were ignorance, a result of not knowing reality to be impermanent and empty. Dark periods, in short, may still offer an impetus to religion. Pain may tell people more about the workings of karma; loss may make plain what should be valued; grief may reveal the apparitional nature of life as a dream before it is sunk into memory like a stone. When Tibetan monks used prophecies to rebuild Serta, their sense of home was not merely about the places immediate to the sensorium. They found the answer in the words of old saints, in pilgrimages to holy sites, in visualizations of buddhas and gods, and in invocations of Buddhist stories and tropes. I have tried to track how this happened. The more precisely I explore the issue, the more clearly I see that in this Buddhist story, the theme of assemblage harmonizes with the theme of home.

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