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# Global Lives and Local Perspectives

New Approaches to  
Tibetan Life Writing



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ABSTRACTS

(list of speakers in alphabetical order)

**The Wander that was India**

Lewis Doney (British Museum, London)

Tibet has never been as closed off to the rest of the world as it exists in the Western imagination. During the seventh century, Chinese ambassadors passed through a Central Tibet ruled by the Tibetan empire. In the eighth century, artisans from Nepal and China were present at court and helped establish Tibetan Buddhist material culture. Leaving aside the north and east for reasons of time, in the south around Lho brag, the trade routes continued to provide access to India after the fall of the empire. In the West, the Mongol Kingdom traced its heritage back to Central Tibet but also maintained strong ties to the south. With the second dissemination of Buddhism, more Tibetans travelled to South Asia in search of Buddhist teachings and texts, writing of their peregrinations and advising future travellers of the roads that they would face. The journeys of Indian masters to Tibet are also recorded, though more usually in the third person.

These experiences, and the genre(s) of literature they helped create, were also reflected in more imaginative works that remembered the cosmopolitan Tibetan world of the imperial period and the Indian Buddhist land of the first-millennium subcontinent, through the biographies of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century tantric master. In his twelfth-century *Zangs gling ma* biography, Guru Rinpoché is exiled from his adopted home of Uddiyāna (which may or may not have corresponded to today's Swat valley) and travels around the Gangetic plain before embarking on the dangerous journey to Tibet. In later accounts, he travels even further afield, reflecting an expansion in the Tibetan historiographical worldview in the interim. Reciprocally, this biographical tradition also relates the travels of eighth-century Tibetan masters to India, for example the famous Pagor Vairocana. The journeys of both masters, in both directions, have antecedents in the *Testimony of Ba*. Even older narratives, such as Pelliot tibétain 44, relate the former's journey from Nepal to India and back, and the presence of the latter among his primary disciples. This raises some interesting questions: To what extent did these stories draw on first-hand experiences of the places described, either as people saw them at the time of these works' compilation and / or during the imperial period itself? Is there anything in the depiction of the flow of people between India and Tibet that links the self-representation of the emperor to the self-styled autobiography of the contemporaneous Padmasambhava?

This presentation will compare and contrast the personal literature of the travelogue with the creation of the personality of Padmasambhava in his treasure-text *vitās*. It will attempt thereby to uncover changes in not only the aesthetics of a description of place and of journey, but also the values of the different genres of life writing, with the aim of showing the cultural influence of how the perspective and social status of the traveller (real or imagined) is affected by the experience recounted in these works.



**Memoires or Autobiography. The Biography of Rdo ring Paṇḍita and Emergence of Secular Life Writing in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Tibet**

Franz Xaver Erhard (Oxford)

Life writing occupies a central place in Tibetan literature. Molded on Indic *avadāna* literature, the genre was quickly assimilated and formed the indigenous Tibetan genre of *rtogs brjod* or *rnam thar*. Even though generally regarded as historiography in Tibet, international scholarship often speaks of hagiography as the genre was mainly reserved for the narration of accomplished life stories of spiritual masters. Such hagiographies represent a narrative genre largely inspired by Indian epics and *jātakas*, the life stories of Buddha's pre-existences, and describe the development of a Buddhist saint or master as a role model for religious activity, good living or the ideal path to liberation (*rnam par thar pa*). The tradition thus presents us with a highly elaborate and formalized genre of spiritual life stories varying only on account of the type of life described.

Nevertheless, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a few examples of life writing departing from such schematic conventions of the genre. I will introduce *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gtam gyi rol mo*, generally referred to as *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita*, perhaps the most detailed account of not only Tibet's ruling elite, but also its culture and society in the 18th century. In describing the basic structural differences to more conventional Tibetan life writing I attempt to show how this text represents a secular, new, and perhaps even modern approach to life writing, as it developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**A Truthful Recollection of Events: Factual and Fictional in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb***

Lucia Galli (University of Oxford)

It is a truism that self and life writing are closely connected, yet we still know little about the nature of this relationship, especially when it comes to Tibetan auto/biographical narratives. Recent studies in the literary field have marked the emergence of a hybrid form of life writing, in which the factual and the fictional merge, mix, and intertwine; facts are constantly subject to manipulation through processes of narrativisation, selection, expansion, and omission that all together contribute to the coming into play of fiction. In consideration of this, the application of narratological tools to auto/biographical writings proves particularly advantageous, since it allows for the identification of any social, traditional, and religious schema influencing, directly or indirectly, textual utterances produced within a certain cultural milieu. By taking life stories as a metaphor for phenomena of human life, mind, and action, auto/biographical narratives become a necessary method of “doing living”, *i.e.* a way to understand the meaning of life while acting, thinking, and living it.

The Tibetan literary corpus accounts for an impressive variety of life writing, and in my contribution I will focus on but one instance of such as wide array of auto/biographical texts. In the course of my presentation, I

will use narratological tools to analyse the personal account of Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Khams pa trader, who recorded his impressions and experiences while journeying from his native land in Khams to central and western Tibet and to India and Nepal between 1944 and 1956. In doing so, I will reflect in particular upon the dual structural core of the autobiographical first-person pronoun – as self that is both “narrating” and “narrated” – extending the discussion to the way in which traditional structures and institutions of self-representation are actively engaged and reinterpreted throughout the *nyin deb*.

### **Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor's Account of the 1727-1728 Civil War**

Rachael Griffiths (University of Oxford)

The 1727-1728 civil war, which took place between two competing factions of Tibetan aristocrats, was a turbulent and significant event in Tibetan history, and an important period with regards to politics and religion in the eighteenth century. Amongst the conflict was Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704-1788), a prodigious writer, historian, and powerful religious figure. This paper will examine Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor's account of the 1727-1728 civil war in his autobiography (*PaN+Dita Sum pa Ye shes dpal 'byor gi spyod tshul brjod pa sgra 'dzin bcu len*), written towards the end of his life. This description of events includes various areas of interest including a speech given by Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor during a discussion at Gomang college (*sGo mang grwa tshang*) regarding monks taking up arms, in which noblemen, monks, and officials were present. I will explore his role as a mediator, focusing on his role as a religious leader participating in worldly affairs.

Sources such as this allow us to form a fuller image of the situation in Tibet during this period, and give us an insight into the hierocratic religio-political system of the early eighteenth century.

### **A Singular Account of the “Turnaround of Times,” an Exemplary Testimony: The Receptions of a Best-selling Amdo Tibetan Autobiography, *Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid sdug* (2007)**

Xénia de Heering (Centre d'études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine, EHESS; ASIEs, INALCO, Paris)

This paper examines one recent case of lay narrative autobiographical writing, *Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid sdug* (Joys and Sorrows of the Naktsang Boy). A detailed account of Nags tshang nus blo's early years and experience, as a ten-year-old child, of the cataclysmic “turnaround of times” (*dus log, dus 'gyur*) that struck Amdo in 1958, the book was published in Xining in 2007. It immediately enjoyed great success with readers: the aggregate print run of the book (including counterfeit copies) is said to number in tens of thousands of copies.

The relationship between this account of one child's experience of 1958 and “society” is studied through an ethnography of the text's receptions among Tibetan readers, mainly Amdo Tibetans. The relevance of dedicating a case study to *Joys and Sorrows* stems in part from the possibility of direct investigation of

readers' practices and reading experiences. Fieldwork, carried out in Xining and rural areas of Qinghai and Gansu (2008-2012), was combined with the analysis of the many texts published about *Joys and Sorrows* in journals and online.

*Joys and Sorrows of the Naktsang Boy* contrasts in many ways with familiar traditions of biographical literature in Tibet. It is neither a Buddhist hagiography, nor an account by a former government official, such as Mdo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal's (1697-1763) *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, or a retrospective narrative of successful thought transformation in the PRC, as the autobiographies published in *Wenshi ziliao*. Neither is it a testimony written primarily for a foreign audience, like *Ama Adhe*'s autobiography, co-written with the American writer Joy Blakeslee. Each of these narratives articulates particular claims to exemplarity and manifests relationships to religious, political or moral authorities. *Joys and Sorrows*, in contrast, gives rise to a process in which exemplarity is recognised by the public, rather than prescribed by predefined criteria of authority and legitimacy. Before publishing his testimony, Naktsang Nülo was not a famous writer or official. Does his book manifest new forms and usages of life-writing in the Tibetan context? When *Joys and Sorrows* is seen as having "the capacity to represent (*mtshon*) the real historical situation of those times in the whole of Tibet," as readers have written to Nülo, what grounds the collective significance given to this singular narrative? Elements to answer these questions are to be sought both inside and outside the text, in the articulations between its evaluations and local definitions of the particular political and historical context in which it is received.

### **Translanguaging and Life Writing among Deaf Tibetans in Contemporary Lhasa**

Theresia Hofer (University of Oxford)

Wechat and other social media outlets can be seen as a new wave of life writing among Tibetans as well as a form of translanguaging. Translanguaging has been defined as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy, Garcia and Reid 2015: 283). Such media and communication provide intimate lenses into people's lives through their own, sometimes poetic and literary writings as well as visual perceptions and creations. Social media as a form of communication are of heightened relevance to deaf Tibetans in contemporary Lhasa, who have developed it as a particularly hybrid medium - going beyond the grammar of any one single language, whether linguistically or visually defined. Daily photographs and videos of personal and professional activities, signed messages, visual snapshots of the environment for the purpose of navigation, Chinese and Tibetan writings, *emojis*, stickers, artworks, and yet more photographs and videos leave traces of personal biographies. What do these traces tell of life in contemporary Lhasa? What are some features of this form of communication specific to deaf Tibetans? How are these expressions affected by state vigilance of social media and other relevant policies? The paper will explore these questions and will end with some reflections on how such new forms compare to more

conventional Tibetan life writings, and the extent to which deaf Tibetans experience differences in the narrative possibilities that these entail.

### **The Hagiography Categorisation of Karma Chags-med**

Miroslav Hrdina (Bonn University)

Karma Chags-med (1608-1678) was one of the foremost figure of the Karma bka'-brgyud sect in the turbulent times of the 17th century Tibet. Most of his scholarly works enjoyed a remarkable reception especially in the bka'-brgyud and rnying-ma schools, but there is still no in-depth study of his life and his hagiographies.

My ongoing PhD research in Bonn University focuses on the extensive hagiographical corpus contained in his lately published collected works and aims at mapping the life of Karma Chagsmed as well as shedding more light on the abundant *nam-thar* material attributed to Chagsmed. The author proved to be not only a meticulous biographer of his teachers and forefathers, but also portrayed his own life with a rarely seen accuracy and structure. Moreover, besides narrating about his life, Chags-med also commented on the nature of the *nam-thar* genre, applied these definitions in his own writings and coins several novel terms. On top of numerous outer (*phyi*), inner (*nang*), secret (*gsang*) and very secret (*yang gsang*) hagiographies, he composed for example a *tathatā* (*de kho na nyid kyi nam thar*) hagiography presenting his development of spiritual realisation or a hagiography of the intermediate state (*bar do'i nam thar*), commenting generally on the topic of composing such a text as well as narrating his contribution. These texts use the general *nam-thar* framework and fill it with an original and unusual content. Furthermore, Chags-med elaborates on justification of his hagiographical writing in a remarkable literary style – he playfully surveys all the possible arguments against composing such texts category by category and then disproves them all, one by one. Karma Chags-med's hagiographical corpus *per se* provides an exciting insight into the genre of Tibetan life-writing of 17th century through the lens of a master hagiographer's mind. My presentation will generally introduce the corpus and discuss its various literary features. My aim is to show how Chags-med comprehended life-writing, what are the features connecting or separating individual *nam-thar* categories and how his life-writing developed in time. I will also shortly touch on the differences between his own auto-hagiographies and those he composed about his teachers.

### **The Autobiography of Hor-btsun bsTan-'dzin Blo-gros rGya-mtsho (1889-1975) – a Bönpo Scholar from Amdo Sharkhog**

Per Kværne (University of Oslo)

This paper will present the autobiography (*rang nam*) of the Bönpo monk-scholar Hor-btsun bsTan-'dzin Blo-gros rGya-mtsho (1889-1975), published in Chengtu in 2011. Hor-btsun was a native of Shar-khog, a

district in the north-western part of the province of Sichuan, culturally linked with Amdo. Shar-khog still has a considerable Bönpo population and several Bön monasteries. Hor-btsun's biography is of interest from several points of view: its colloquial style, incorporating many words from his native Shar-khog dialect, the extensive travels of the author in many parts of Tibet, and the light it throws on certain doctrinal controversies in which he became involved (much against his own wishes) but which reflect conflicts in the Bön community, conflicts which have so far not been the topic of serious research.

### **Snapshots of Dubay's Life in Proverbs**

Lama Jabb (University of Oxford)

བདུད་རྟེ་ Dubay, an immensely influential and highly esteemed Tibetan singer, passed away on 27 February 2016 at the age of forty-nine. On account of his melodious voice and extraordinary capacity to use it to 'sing Tibet' he is affectionately known as གངས་ལྗངས་ཀྱི་བྱ་ཕྱོད་མོ། (The Blue Cuckoo of the Snowland). In his *Dunglen*, Tibetan guitar songs, Dubay infuses his unique voice with poetic eloquence, political consciousness and assertive defiance. Many Tibetans are enthralled by Dubay's voice and would recognise it instantly. Yet, far fewer are familiar with his life story and the forces that forged him into a unifying and revered Tibetan national hero. As yet no one has written a biography of him or given a verbal account of his life in a single comprehensive format. His life story can be found scattered in narrative fragments such as vignettes, anecdotes, gossip, songs, conversations, eulogies, reminiscences, jokes, impressions, private and public statements.

My paper will present one such item, a short proverb-laden recitation that contains significant biographical material. This eloquent recitation began circulating on Tibetan social media as Dubay lay emaciated on his deathbed. With solemn force, it taps into listeners' anxious concern and seeks to protect Dubay's reputation and privacy. My presentation will demonstrate how the speech conveys truths about Dubay's life as it makes a passionate appeal for the public to pray for and respect him. It will show how someone's life story can be related in small fragments, with a single tiny piece disclosing potentially substantial information about a broader life. In the process, I will reflect upon issues of authorship, audience, censorship and problems of biography.



**“Mom, Can I Become a Han Officer?”**

**Childhood Memories, Politics, Emancipation and Intimacy in the Chinese-Written Autobiographical Essays of a Khampa Woman (1930s-1940s)**

Lara Maconi (CNRS & INALCO)

Lodrö Chötso (1909/1910-1949) grew up in a very influent and powerful ruling Khampa family, the Gyari tsang from Upper Nyarong, amidst family vendettas, intestine wars and anti-Chinese resistance combats.

Illiterate in Tibetan, she began to learn oral and written

Chinese only at the age of twenty, after marrying Ren Naiqiang (1894-1989), the “father” of Chinese Tibetology, and a man of fieldwork who extensively explored the Kham region during the 1930s and 1940s. Extremely intelligent, dynamic and determined, Lodrö Chötso quickly established herself as an exceptional cultural actor in the Sino-Tibetan intellectual circle that revolved around Ren Naiqiang and the magazine *Kham Studies Monthly* which the couple co-launched and edited.

Based on three Chinese-written autobiographical essays and a long biographical essay written by Lodrö Chötso’s husband, this paper explores issues of cultural and gender identity, education and emancipation, politics, power, legitimacy and intimacy as seen through a Khampa woman’s eyes in the 1930s and 1940s. Written in a simple, modern

and disarmingly sincere and touching style, Lodrö Chötso’s essays reveal to the reader her intimate preoccupations and political commitments, her aspirations, projects and fears. They particularly reveal her clairvoyant look at the complexities and contradictions of a changing world in an era of transition.

**Brief Lives: Tibetan Archives as Biographical Fragments**

Charles Ramble (CNRS&EPHE, Paris)

Most Western-language biographies of Tibetans are translations or paraphrases of biographical accounts - *rnam thar* or *rtogs brjod* - of the individuals in question. Exceptions to this rule are largely limited to figures from the recent past, where interviews with descendants and acquaintances of the protagonists, as well as the protagonists themselves, have either supplemented or constituted the main source material. Contrary to the case of the lives of most Europeans of the past, there are no biographies of Tibetans that are based on letters, documents, comments of their contemporaries and other such writings. The reason for this is simple: such materials are largely lacking in Tibet. However, even in the case of certain eminent Europeans, a dearth of documentation has not prevented a substantial body of biographical writing. A much-cited example of this is the case of William Shakespeare, where the documentary legacy is so meagre that his many biographers have had to have recourse to extrapolation from his own (fictional) works, passing mentions in legal documents and sheer speculation. Of these three sources, it is only the documents that contain “facts”, sparse as these may be. In the case of Tibet, might legal documents not likewise be considered a form of life writing? The



scope of life-writing is constrained by the availability of factual information, and all biographies are therefore necessarily partial lives. Since there is no conventional lower limit to the amount of information that should be available to constitute a biography, it follows that even one or two documents featuring an individual might qualify as an adequate source, insofar as the texts open a window onto the life of that person. Using examples from the archives of a Tibetan enclave in Nepal, this presentation will suggest that a shift in the reader's perspective on many of these documents can transform them from being records of impersonal processes to valuable spotlights onto the lives of ordinary people.

### **Itinerarium and Exempla: Themes, Time, and Narrative Structure in Tibetan Hagiographies**

Marta Sernesi (SOAS, University of London)

The Buddha's life has been styled a "*itinerarium mentis* offered to all men of good will," to underscore its value as a model to every devotee. In the original context of the formulation of this definition, Taddei (1999) intends to contrast the representation of the life in *storied* form, as a *spiritual biography*, against a conception of the life as a collection of "exemplary scenes, we may say *exempla* or *práxeis*, that can be included in any edifying context." Investigating further this distinction, the present paper will reflect on the structure of some Tibetan hagiographies, in order to show different treatments of the subject matter. In particular, it will look at the adoption of a chronological versus a thematic ordering of the events, at the rationale put forward for the story telling, and at the possible association of these narrative features with different genres of life writing.

### **Literary Imposter or Borrowed Feathers. *Faking a Royal Biography in Tibet***

Per K. Sørensen (University of Leipzig)

In ancient cultures it is not uncommon to write in the name of a celebrated person, yet often neither for concealment nor with any intention of deliberate deceit. Rather we are dealing with cases of pious or sacred plagiarism. In Tibet, it is an oft-quoted truism that when it comes to merit-building, the act of grapholatry by far outnumbers that of idolatry. Illustrative cases of what we shall call pseudonymity abound in Tibet too, where a number of additional idiosyncratic presuppositions surely were at play.

Imposture therefore is not unknown to the history and development of Tibetan literature, both in indigenous, whether in secular, religious or even in canonical writings. The present paper will highlight a celebrated case of pseudepigraphy: The forging of a "royal biography". "The impostor is a noted ruler, and head of a local religio-political entity in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Tibet, Yasangpa Chöki Mönlam (1169-1233). The gestation of the biographical testament of his known as *Kachem Thotingma* or the „Azur-blue Testament" comprises the elements, such as „treasure-text or „mythopoetics," prophecies, borrowed identity or indeed a case of blatant impersonation, all ingredients of trite occurrence in Tibetan religious life. The document was in wide

circles accepted as genuine. Surprisingly, this resourceful forgery represents an early case of what in certain circles later was denigrated or stigmatized as “homemade fabrication” or “self-concoction” (*rang bzo*).

### **Mad Scholar-Yogin of 20th Century Tibet. Gedun Chopel (1903-1951): From Dialectician & Renegade to National Hero**

Heather Stoddard (Professor Emerita INALCO, Paris, France. Visiting Academic Oriental Institute & Wolfson College, Oxford, UK)

Gedun Chopel passed away in Lhasa, in his top-floor flat near the Jokhang, on the 14th day of the 8th hor-zla month of the Iron Hare year, that is on 13th October 1951. Born in 1903 in Amdo, his life spans with heroic precision the first half of the 20th CE from the Younghusband 'expedition' to the Chinese Communist 'peaceful liberation' of Tibet led by the PLA. So far, including the most recent publication in 2014, around seventeen life stories (*rnam thar*) have been written or published in Tibetan, and five in other languages, English, French, German, Chinese and Japanese. In the long history of life writing in Tibet this is remarkable. It is not so much the quantity but the intensity of attention that was and still is being focused on one individual, producing what appears to be the largest number of life narratives in the shortest space of time. This paper will explore the approaches of the various authors, as well as the evolving image of Gedun Chopel through the narratives, together with the historic, political and media contexts that gave rise to this phenomenon.

### **The *rnam thars* in the *Thob yig gsal ba'i me long*: The Mirror of Lineages**

Sangseraima Ujeed (University of Oxford)

The *Thob yig gsal ba'i me long* was written by Dza-ya Paṇḍita Blo-bzang 'phrin-las (1642-1715) between 1698-1702. Although structurally modelled on, and likely designed to supplement the *Gsan yig gang+ga'i chu rgyun* of his root teacher the Fifth Dalai Lama, the *Thob yig gsal ba'i me long* has many defining characteristics which makes this work truly unique. One of these is the huge number of *rnam thars* totalling 227 found in this work. To a large extent, these life stories form the structural backbone of the eleven chapters of the *thob yig*. Majority of the longer *rnam thars* are found in chapters 8 and 9 which concern the lineages of the Bka'-gdams-pa and the Dge-lugs-pa traditions. Not only are these *rnam thars* capable of standing alone as biographies of the respective Buddhist masters, they are also reminiscent of the links in a chain, or the beads of a rosary. Strung together, these individual life stories form a larger lineage life story, reflected within them is the history, identity and chronology of the Dge-lugs-pas as interpreted by the author and his tradition during the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> c and beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. This talk will demonstrate how the author achieves this through a selection of *rnam thars* he composed for his own masters such as the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Sde-srid Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho, the First Jebtsundamba and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panchen lama which

are all found in chapter 9 of the *thob yig*. These *rnam thars*, as well as providing the examples of the interconnected nature of the life stories from the *thob yig*, also show glimpses of the reflection of the person and life of the author Dza-ya Paṇḍita.