

# Book Production on a Historic Transhimalyan Route: the Deeds of the First Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo

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**Abstract:** This article looks at the production of manuscripts and prints along one of the most famous transhimalayan routes and highlights the role of prominent women who acted as patrons in book production. Most renowned among these is the princess Chos kyi sgron ma who became famous as the first of the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo. Following in the footsteps of important predecessors but taking her role to unprecedented levels of achievement and innovation, she became herself a powerful exemplar for later generations.

## **Introduction: An ancient link connecting the south and the north of the Himalaya**

Since time immemorial the valley of the Za rong gtsang po/Trisulī River has been an important corridor connecting the south and the north of the Himalaya (Fig. 4). The region of Mang yul Gung thang has been famous as a border region throughout Tibetan history and it is linked to the arrival of the Nepalese bride of King Srong btsan sgam po, the journeys of the Tang envoy Wang Xuance, as well as the travels and deeds of spiritual masters such as Padmasambhava, Atiśa, Mar pa, Mi la ras pa and many others. Crucially, linking the Tibetan Plateau to the lush southern Himalayan slopes and the urban centres in the land of origin of Buddhism, it has been a very important trading route with a multitude of people being connected through it. Not



Fig. 1 The biography of Chos kyi sgron ma (Photograph: Pasang Wangdu)

only Buddhist texts but also materials that were indispensable for book production travelled along it. Most important were wood and paper as well as paper making materials such as the bark of *Daphne* and *Edgeworthia* species (which could be combined with high-altitude paper plants, especially *Stellera*).<sup>1</sup> It is therefore not surprising that we have concrete evidence of the extensive production of paper manuscripts in this region since the early 11<sup>th</sup> century (and probably before).<sup>2</sup>

The kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang, emerged in this region after a splinter of the ancient Tibetan imperial dynasty established itself in the region and eventually created a polity with the support of the Saskya rulers in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The *Royal Genealogy of Gung thang* (*Gung thang rgyal rabs*), an 18<sup>th</sup> century history compiled by Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu on the basis of pre-existing documents, outlines the history of this kingdom and provides a very useful framework to explore a multitude of biographical and historical accounts that refer to events taking place in this region.

In this article I am looking at the way in which Mang yul Gung thang, provided an important hub for Tibetan book culture thanks to its particular position. In particular I am focusing on the Gung thang princess Chos kyi sgron ma (1422-1455) who later became famous

1 See Helman-Wazny, 2016.

2 The historian Kawa Sherab Sang po discovered a substantial collection of 11th century manuscripts from Phuri, an area at the boundary between the kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang and southern La stod (currently preserved in Library of Tibet University). A heap of loose folios found in a cave in the Putra mountain to the east of Phuri seems to go back to the same period and included a paper fragment (currently preserved in a private collection in Kathmandu) that was tested with C14 giving a date ranging from the late 10th to the early 11th century.

as the first of the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo, and the important role she played in promoting book production both in manuscript and printed form. My most important source for this is her biography (Fig.1), which was compiled by someone who shared her experiences and produced the biographical narrative just after her death.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Mang yul Gung thang kingdom and the princess Chos kyi sgron ma**

The Mang yul Gung thang kingdom developed as a significant regional power in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its kings were considered to be descendants of the ancient Tibetan imperial dynasty and cultivated this legacy through narratives and worship of the holy sites that bore (and still bear) witness to the importance of this area during the imperial period such as the Byams 'phrin Lha khang and the 'Phags pa wa ti bzang po Lha khang.

Chos kyi sgron ma was born in a tiger year (1422) in the main royal palace of the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom as a daughter of the king Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan (1404-1464) (Fig.2). It was a delicate historical moment: her father was born as an illegitimate son of her grandfather Khri rgyal bsod nams lde shortly after his death and he was the only surviving heir to the throne after the two legitimate sons of the king had been killed. Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan spent his childhood in Lha mdun monastery<sup>4</sup> in Nub ri, where his mother had taken him to be under the protection of the abbot who was her uncle. After ascending the throne around 1418/19 Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan married Chos kyi sgron ma's mother Mdo sde rgyal mo who gave him two daughters but no sons. According to the biography of Chos kyi sgron ma (which diverges slightly from the *Gung thang rgyal rabs*) when Chos kyi sgron ma was five years old (according to the Tibetan system, four according to the western reckoning system) he took another wife from Bong rdzogs and produced a son who became famous as the Gung thang king Khri rnam rgyal lde. According to this version of the events, Khri rnam rgyal lde was born around 1426 rather than 1422 as stated in the *Gung thang rgyal rabs*.

At a time in which marriage alliances were extremely important Chos kyi sgron ma married into the neighbouring polity, the principality of La stod Lho. Around 1440 she became the daughter in law of Lho bdag Lha btsan skyabs, the son of the famous ruler Si tu Chos kyi rin chen (died 1402), celebrated in the *Shel dkar chos 'byung*.<sup>5</sup> She thus spent a few years at

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3 For a discussion of the authorship, see Diemberger, 2007.

4 The ruin of what used to be Lha mdun monastery and printing house is located on the border between the TAR and Nepal (west of Rdzong kha and to the south-east of Rus and Snying villages) and is marked on some of the maps as Oglä Gon.

5 See Pasang Wang du and Diemberger, 1996.



Shel dkar, the capital of La stod Lho, retaining a close link to her native kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang and remaining involved in the difficult political setting of her homeland.

According to her biography she had spiritual aspirations already during her childhood and eventually decided to abandon her royal worldly life to become a nun and became a disciple of the polymath Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1376-1451) and later of the famous siddha Thang stong rgyal po (1385-1464 or 1361-1485). Around 1454 this latter sent her to south-eastern Tibet, where she took care of some of the operations involved in the production of iron-chains for the famous bridges, and died prematurely in 1455 (or early 1456). The last portion of her life, i.e. the journey to Tsari and her death, is missing from the biography and had to be reconstructed on the basis of other sources such as the *Biography of Thang stong rgyal po* by 'Gyur med bde chen and the *Bo dong chos 'byung*.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout her life she had strong spiritual aspirations and struggled to pursue them against the pressure to fulfil the expectations linked to her role of princess. Like several other female members of the royal family of Mang yul Gung thang she became involved in sponsoring a wide range of Buddhist deeds, including the production of books.<sup>7</sup> However, she also became an important spiritual figure in her own right and was eventually recognised as an emanation of the tantric deity Rdo rje Phag mo. She is also one of the few Tibetan women to have obtained full ordination as Dge slong ma, which was bestowed on her by Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal together with other spiritual masters of the time (Fig. 3).

### **Important precursors: Lha Rin chen mtsho and Gu ge ma Chos skyong rgyal mo**

Chos kyi sgron ma was not the first of the female members of this royal family to sponsor the production of sacred scriptures. Two precursors stand out as significant exemplars that may have inspired her as they were certainly well known in court narratives: Lha rin chen mtsho (13<sup>th</sup> century) and Gu ge ma Chos skyong rgyal mo (early 15<sup>th</sup> century).

According to the *Royal Genealogy of Gung thang (Gung thang rgyal rabs)*, Lha rin chen mtsho played a crucial role in forging the marriage alliance between the dynasty of the ruling house of the Mang yul Gung thang region and Sa skya, leading to the birth of 'Bum lde dgon in 1253.<sup>8</sup> This latter is often celebrated as the founder of the kingdom since he established it as an extensive polity organised according to an administrative system sanctioned and supported by

6 See Diemberger, 2007.

7 See Diemberger and Clemente, 2013:119-142; Erhard, 2000.

8 Everding, 2000: 61. On Lha Rin chen mtsho see also Shargan Wangdue 2015: 447ff.



Fig. 2 The palace of the kings of Mang yul Gung thang

the Sa skya government. Before that Lha rin chen mtsho who was the maternal aunt of 'Bum lde dgon became the leader of the Gung thang polity following the death of its ruler Khab pa Mgon po Lde, killed in the course of the Yartse invasion in the 1230s.<sup>9</sup> During her regency she performed a great deal of Buddhist deeds, establishing colleges and producing scriptures. In the *Royal Genealogy of Gung thang (Gung thang rgyal rabs)* it is specifically mentioned that she produced forty volumes of *Mdo mang* while residing at Gdung phug to the west of Rdzong kha. Both a nun and a skilful political leader, Lha rin chen mtsho presumably saw the performance of Buddhist deeds, which included the production of books, as a way of fulfilling both her spiritual and political aspirations. This was particularly important for her as she was politically vulnerable, ruling as a woman at a time of instability and political fragmentation.

Closer to the time of Chos kyi sgron ma was Gu ge ma Chos skyong rgyal mo, the wife of her grand-father Khri rgyal Bsod nams lde (1371-1404) who ruled as regent after this latter's

9 See also Mar lung nam thar, 127v; Everding, 2000: 386.

early death. According to the *Gung thang rgyal rabs* in the wake of her husband's passing she instigated the production of a full *Bka' 'gyur* written in gold on indigo paper as well as an equally beautiful *Bstan 'gyur* following the prophecy of Re (d) mda' ba Gzon nu blo gros (1349-1412), who had become her closest spiritual advisor.<sup>10</sup>

These powerful women are described as sponsors of book production in ways that are similar to that of male members of the royal lineage. In the narrative of the *Gung thang rgyal rabs* up to this point the books sponsored by the rulers of Mang yul Gung thang are always manuscripts. Printing is first mentioned in relation to the king who succeeded Gu ge ma Chos skyong rgyal mo on the throne of Mang yul Gung thang: Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan, the father of Chos kyi sgron ma.

### **Chos kyi sgron ma as patron of book production**

Chos kyi sgron ma was a devout disciple of the great polymath Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1376-1451). Whilst it was a well-established practise that after the death of a spiritual master his collected works and other sets of scriptures would be reproduced, it is remarkable that she, one of the few female disciples, led on this. According to her biography after the passing of her spiritual master in 1451 Chos skyi sgron ma took loving care of his religious seats, including the small and remote hermitages. They all enjoyed tranquillity thanks to the fact that law and order were guaranteed by her father, King Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan. At that time she thought: "An excellent offshoot from the basis of the Buddha's doctrine is the *Dpal de [kho na nyid] 'dus pa*. This should be reproduced as soon as possible in order to fulfil the wish of the glorious and sacred lama."<sup>11</sup>

Based initially in her hermitage of Rdzong sgo in the vicinity of the capital Rdzong kha, she set out to transform her aspiration into reality. In order to help in the raising of the necessary funding, she asked the scholar Bla ma Rin rgyal, who was particularly devoted to the god of wealth *Vaiśravaṇa*, to act as a messenger on her behalf to the god. She then explained to him:

"In order to fulfill the wish of our precious lama the *Dpal de kho na nyid ['dus pa]* has to be reproduced in writing. Therefore, as I am free of worldly concerns (*bya bral ba*) please get the materials from the Great King *Vaiśravaṇa*. Until the work on the *Dpal [de kho na nyid] 'dus pa* is completed please perform rituals, offer dough-figures

<sup>10</sup> Everding, 2000: 125.

<sup>11</sup> Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 89v-90r.



(*gtor ma*) and recite prayers. Don't think of anything else except for the completion of the [*Dpal de kho na nyid 'dus pa*]." He then carried out his tasks according to her instructions and, after he prepared the dough-figures, he dreamt of a horseman who gave him a big bundle of keys and said: "Please offer this to Dkon mchog rgyal mo" [i.e. Chos kyi sgron ma as referred to with her royal name].<sup>12</sup>

Having provided for ritual protection and support, she sent Bla ma Ring rgyal to Dpal mo chos sdings to get the original of the *Dpal de [kho na] nyid 'dus pa*. This monastery, located in Spo rong to the east of the Dpal khud lake was some distance from the capital of the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom and reaching it required two to three days on horseback, riding over a high pass (either the Gung thang la or one of the other passes crossing the same range) and crossing treacherous terrain:

On the way he ran into robbers from Glo bo. However, thanks to the great blessing of the Great Woman, he was able to return safely to the Rdzong sgo meditation place. There, they edited the original text and compiled the excellent contents list (*dkar chag*) of the precious *Dpal [de kho na nyid] 'dus pa* and ensured that the editors followed one system. Concerning this she said: "If I do not act in this way the deep meaning of this teaching will not be understood properly. This would damage myself and others."<sup>13</sup>

The biography of Chos kyi sgron ma states that the team consisting of the princess and the closest disciples of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal proof-read the work four times and explains:

First, the Queen of Knowledge (Kun mkhyen dbang mo), Bla ma dka' bcu ba Dpal 'chi med grub pa, Dbon po Ting 'dzin, the great siddha Byang chub kyi gzungs as well as the kitchen and the bed-chamber attendants of the Omniscient [i.e. Blo ldan and 'Od bzang] carried out the task. Then forty-two skilled scribes (*yig mkhan mkhas [pa]*) from Mnga' ris [smad] worked under the guidance of the writer of the great Vajradhara, the supreme pen-man, [Phyogs las rnam rgyal's] great secretary (*dpon yig chen po*), Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan. A suitable venue for the work with the texts

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12 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 90r,v.

13 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 90v.

was established in a locality called Gdong phub.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that the reproduction of the Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal's collected works were considered the 'speech' (*gsung*) component of a wider set of activities, involving the production of images and stupas, defined collectively as 'body', 'speech' and 'mind' (*sku gsung thungs rten*). The whole operation lasted four months and required a considerable investment.

The work started on the fourth sliver of the moon. Four months later, on the fourth sliver of the moon all the symbols of body, speech and mind were completed. [Chos kyi sgron ma] paid wages in barely. A great deal of food, drink and soup that was necessary was brought together. At the sign of a drum there was a general gathering. She ordered the arrangements for the writers. The rows of people organised in such a way made up a big gathering that resembled that of a big land-tenure.<sup>15</sup>

The biography seems to indicate that on this occasion they produced manuscripts rather than prints, which is consistent with the timeframe. The whole operation aimed at the production of a set of scriptures that was not only an improved reproduction of the collection kept in Dpal mo Chos sdings but also had the value of a sacred relic. In this respect the biography states that:

"They mixed the ink with which they wrote the [Dpal] de [kho na] nyid 'dus pa with the blood from the nose (*shangs 'tshal*) of the Omniscient and provided wooden covers (*glegs shing*), strings (*glegs thag*) and cloth (*nam bza'*) for all the books. With all the volumes being perfectly complete and especially accurate it was said that this edition of the [Dpal] de [kho na] nyid 'dus pa was of the highest standard."<sup>16</sup>

The use of blood as ink or mixed with ink is a well-known trope but it may well have been an actual ritual action carried out under the leadership of a princess who was extremely aware of the importance of relics and their distribution (in fact elsewhere in the biography it is highlighted that she chose to distribute the bones and the ashes of her master among all his disciples rather than keeping a single relic that people would fight about).

Once the operation was completed, books, images and *stupas* were taken to the capital

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14 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 91r. Gdong phub may be equivalent to Gdung phug, the locality in which Lha rin chen mtsho produced her manuscripts. Local scholars claim that this is the case. See also Shargan Wangdue 2015: 444.

15 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 91v.

16 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 92v.



and the transfer provided the occasion for a great celebration described very vividly in the biography:

Eventually they decided to place the symbols of body, speech and mind in the white building at the centre of the monastery of Rdzong kha chos sde that had been the residence of the Great Man [Bo dong Phyoga las rnam rgyal] and his spiritual children. They decorated the walls of the room where the precious lord used to sleep with beautiful paintings and thus made it beautiful [to be a suitable shrine]. When [the symbols of body, speech and mind] had to be taken from Gdong phub [to Rdzong kha] at the time of the consecration ceremony, at first the precious statue (*sku tshab rin po che*) and the wisdom stupa arrived in a carrying device.<sup>17</sup> A procession of monks brought the volumes of the precious Collected Works. Each monk carried a volume on his shoulders, after this had been placed on a suitable support. [Chos kyi sgron ma], the great *bhikṣuṇī*, *bodhisattva* and female *siddha* wearing the three pieces of the religious robe and holding incense led the procession. Dpal 'chi med grub pa and the other editors came carrying ritual offerings. All the scribes were playing with their hands wonderful music beyond any imagination.<sup>18</sup>

Chos kyi sgron ma is mentioned here as fully ordained nun, *bodhisattva* and female *siddha* and described as the leader of the procession. Her name is followed by that of Dpal 'chi med grub pa, one of the editors, who eventually played an important part in the continuation of the tradition and who may have been the author of the biography.<sup>19</sup> The narrative continues with the procession arriving at the monastery located within the walls of the royal palace where they were received by her father the king Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan, Dpal ldan sangs rgyas (1391-1455), who was one of the leading spiritual masters in Mang yul Gung thang and belonged to the Bo dong pa tradition, as well as a large crowd:

When this procession arrived at the monastery the monks led by the great scholar and meditator of the Tripiṭaka Dpal ldan Sang rgyas performed the *vajra* dance (*Rdo rje gar*). The monks led by Bla ma Rgyal seng performed the drum dance (*rnge 'cham*). All the [other] monks were standing in line to welcome the procession [that had arrived carrying the sacred items]. The King of the Dharma, the Great Son of the Gods (*lha sras chen po*), was watching from the top of the Dbu rtse palace. The place

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17 *ldo li* should be read as *lde li*, meaning a carrying device.

18 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 93r, v.

19 This would be consistent with the very vivid and detailed description of the scene as seen from someone who participated in it, for a discussion of the authorship of the biography see Diemberger 2007.



Fig. 3 Mural painting (16th or early 17th century) in Snye mo depicting Chos kyi sgron ma



Fig. 4 Skyid grong valley

was filled with a crowd of people who had come from all over the area to watch the event. At the sight of the precious statue (*sku tshab rin po che*) all the scholars were stricken with faith and wonder, like barely-ears shaking in the wind; in addition, all living beings, with tears in their eyes, felt as if they were facing the lama in person and uttered the sound "A la la la" in surprise. Blissfull and contented, the people were saying: "Such a heap of virtuous deeds has been achieved thanks to the grace of the Precious Lady Dkon mchog rgyal mo [i.e.Chos kyi sgron ma as referred to with her royal name]". Eventually [the sacred items] were placed in the chapel and were consecrated in the middle of a heap of donations resembling a cloud.<sup>20</sup>

The arrival of the sacred items provided an opportunity for the gathering of people from all over the area. It was also a powerful public presentation of the patrons according to rank and of all the people involved. The biography continues:

During the great feast the King Son of the Gods was seated as the first in the line. Then came the ocean of the monastic community led by scholars and meditators; they were the group of the great editors. There was Dpon mo bzang ring and others, who were the masters who had made the images. There was Slob dpon rin rgyal and others

<sup>20</sup> Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 93v-94r.

who were the painters (*lha ris ba*). There was the great secretary [Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan] leading the the group of the scribes (*yig mkhan tshogs pa*). In addition there were the carvers (*brkos mkhan*), that had been absolutely necessary on that occasion. Carpenters (*shing bzo*) and sculptors (*lha bzo*) as well as leading blacksmiths (*mgar ba mkhan po*) were among the innumerable representatives of the arts and crafts [that had gathered there]. The court of the king, including officials as well common people, and even all who had spontaneously gathered to watch made up an ocean of fortunate people. Everyone was offered all kinds of food, and all kinds of special drinks. [Chos kyi sgron ma] presented her father with a monastic robe and offered to the others whatever they needed. Excellent presents were given to the delight and satisfaction [of everyone] and thus the consecration ceremony was celebrated in the most excellent way.<sup>21</sup>

According to her biography, Chos kyi sgron ma played a part that was not only ceremonial but implied leadership in the management of the entire process.

"She appointed expert advisors to the various activities and had each worker paid for materials and animals, satisfying all expectations.[She] also distributed tools and materials according to each one's disposition, demanding just one fourth (*bzhi cha tsam re bkug*) of the estimate price of a honest trader, fulfilling everybody's wishes. Everybody felt that she was able to provide such a great enjoyment because at the beginning she was offered the keys of Vaiśravaṇa's treasure. Her father, the King, Son of the Gods, Grandmother (*a phyi*) Byang sems ma, the other relatives and all her followers had also offered [donations] with devotion.[In this way] she gathered an ocean of property that was outshining the bliss of all those involved in collecting alms. Thus the reproduction of the *Dpal de [kho na] nyid 'dus pa* and all the other virtuous deeds [was completed] according to the orders of the glorious *khecarī (dpal ldan mkha 'spyod ma)*."<sup>22</sup>

In managing the immense task Chos kyi sgron ma mobilised a wideranging patronage network which included her father and her grand-mother, i. e. the mother of the king, who had successfully managed to ensure that her illegitimate son ascended the throne.

In the day-to-day management Chos kyi sgron ma relied on her network of female relatives and nuns. Some of these figures can be identified in other sources of the time and

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21 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 94r-94v.

22 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 94v-95v.



became influential in their own right. The biography mentions them in some detail:

Her sister 'Dzam gling rgyal mo and her mother Mdo sde rgyal mo followed her instructions without hesitation and always in the best way. The Lady of Prosperity, extremely satisfied with the results said: "The sun of merits rose in my mind, but my mother and [sister] 'Dzam gling rgyal mo completed the actual work with their own hands." She was delighted indeed. Concerning the necessary assistance, tasks such as sending messages, grinding roasted grain [to make *tsam pa*] and making *chang* were managed by the chief nun (*dpon btsun ma*) Byang chub bzang mo, with great devotion to the lotus feet of the Lady of Prosperity. The nuns fulfilled all requests, following the instructions they received without hesitation. The novice Thar pa bzang mo, in particular, contributed to this work in a fundamental way. Since everything went so well, the thanksgiving ritual *dam can rgya mtsho* was celebrated.<sup>23</sup>

The reproduction in manuscript form of the collected works of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal was certainly a great deed. It followed an established practice of merit making in the wake of the demise of spiritual masters and Buddhist rulers. The description of the process and the timeframe suggest that this extensive collection was reproduced in manuscript form. It cannot be excluded that on this occasion some printing took place as carvers are mentioned among the craftsmen but there is no specific reference to the carving of blocks.

Earlier, however, Chos kyi sgron ma played a crucial role in the production of one (or more?) print edition at a time in which this practice was still in its early days in Central and Western Tibet. The biography of Chos kyi sgron ma gives a rare glimpse into the writing up, editing and printing of her master's teaching during a session of summer religious practice:

Then she suggested to her brother Gcen [Khri Rnam rgyal lde] that 'Jig bral, [Phyogs las rnam rgyal] and his monastic community should be invited for the summer session of religious practice (*dbyar gnas*). Her brother Gcen provided one third of the necessary support, Dge 'dun Sher pa provided one third and the Lady of Prosperity provided one third. [Phyogs las rnam rgyal] was invited to reside at Pan gnas dbu rtse temple where Sa skya Pandita held and won a debate against the heretic (*mu stegs byed*) ... the teachings of [the collection] 'Clarification of the hidden meanings' (*Sbas gdon gsal ba*) were learnt and rehearsed. The content of the teachings for the attending followers was checked, the teaching texts were written up, every textbook was edited for printing (*yig cha so so'i spar zhu dag*), images of the lord's tutelary

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23 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 95v-96r.

deity were printed (*rje'i thugs dam lha sku spar*) and every ritual item was looked after. [She] looked after all the activities that were performed to please the lama, providing all what was necessary for the celebration by the people assembled around the Omniscient; arranging all kinds of food and drinks such as *chang*, a *rag* and honey; as well as organising the serving for the King Son of the Gods, the royal uncles and nephews. She never looked tired and did everything without interruption and with great joy.<sup>24</sup>

The *Sbas don gsal ba* teaching that was written down and edited for printing on this occasion, is presumably the same text reported as actually printed with the support of Mnga' ris chos sde in the Biography of Bo dong Phyogs las nam rgyal written in 1453 by the ruler of Yar 'brog.<sup>25</sup> It is highly likely that the printing of the *Sbas don gsal ba* reflects the outcome of the religious gathering described in Chos kyi sgron ma's biography as happening in a summer of the second half of the 1440s – a period of intense Bo dong pa printing activities.

The *Royal Genealogy of Gung thang* (*Gung thang rgyal rabs*) and the Biography of Bo dong Phyogs las nam rgyal do not mention Chos kyi sgron ma as involved in the printing projects they describe. However, her biography seems to suggest that she was centrally involved in at least one of them and it is conceivable that she played an important part in others as well. Among the sources, the biography of Chos kyi sgron ma is the one that gives most detail, naming people and places and outlining the processes as seen by direct witnesses. Even though the narrative is certainly slanted towards enhancing her profile, it can be suggested that the biography of Chos kyi sgron ma provides a more accurate account of the social life surrounding book production than other sources. It also gives visibility to women as part of networks that enabled these deeds, who are usually omitted in standard historical accounts.

### **Chos kyi sgron ma, emanation of the Rdo rje Phag mo deity, as exemplar for later generations**

Towards the end of her life Chos kyi sgron ma started to be seen as an emanation of the deity Rdo rje phag mo. Statements to this effect were made by both her main spiritual masters Bo dong Phyogs las nam rgyal and Thang stong rygal po. After her death, a reincarnation was looked for and found in a girl who became famous as Kun dga' bzang mo - often considered to be the second of the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo reincarnation line. The biography refers

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24 Biography of Chos kyi sgron ma, folio 62r-63r.

25 Biography of Bo dong Phyogs las nam rgyal, 1990: 519.

to Chos kyi sgron ma as the third reincarnation, implying two Tibetan precursors: Bsod namd 'dren ma and Bsod namd dpal 'dren. However these seem to have been recongnized as part of the female reincarnation line in hindsight. This is also the case in genealogies that go back to the Indian precursor of Chos kyi sgron ma, the Mahāsiddha Lakṣmīnkārā.<sup>26</sup>

Kun dga' bzang mo was instrumental in establishing the tradition of the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo in the holy site of Bsam sdings, which she restored with the sponsorship of the rulers of Yar 'brog. In the earlier part of her life she was looked after by people close to Chos kyi sgron ma, especially the nun Bde legs chos 'dren and the spiritual master Dpal 'Chi med 'grub pa (born ca.1418, died before 1478). This latter had been involved in the editing process of the Collected Works of Bo dong Phogs las rnam rgyal in Mang yul Gung thang and in the celebrations that followed and like Bde legs chos 'dren had followed Chos kyi sgron ma in her final journey toTsari.

When Dpal 'Chi med 'grub pa died aged 59, Kun dga' bzang mo did for him what Chos kyi sgron ma had done after the death of her master. In 1478 she had the entire collection of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal's collected works, the *Dpal de kho na nyid 'dus pa*, edited and reproduced in manuscript form. The table of content has survived up to the present day and is preserved in the Potala palace. In this it is stated that:

This collection of books [the *De nyid 'dus pa*], a true heap of jewels, is the essence of the entire teaching tradition. This is the site of the essence of the whole depth and breadth of the oral instructions concerning the treatises of the sutra and the tantra. This was produced by the unique Dakinī Kun dga' bzang mo... in order to fulfil the wishes of the late 'Chi med grub, the Dharma king of the three worlds and the jewel of the crown of all living beings. [He was the one who] experienced the equal taste of samsara and nirvana, possessed the vastness of Buddha's teachings and was endowed with the compassion of all the Buddha's and the Buddha's spiritual sons. The instructions, the adequate conditions, the paper and so on were provided by many outstanding sponsors, including the great Hing du [i.e. the ruler of Yar 'brog], the excellent king who rules over the three thousand fold (*stong gsum*) universe together with his queen, the princes and ministers and so on. Lay-out, editing, amendments and so on were carried out properly, without embellishing additions or deformations, by many Tripiṭaka holding masters well-learned in the sutra and the tantra. Hundreds of skilled craftsmen like emanations of Viśwakarma produced it in a most excellent way within three months. Everything was blessed by the precious Dakinī. *E ma ho.*

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26 For a discussion of the genealogy see Diemberger, 2007.



The group of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal disciples involved in editing his collected works in Mang yul Gung thang had close connections to Yar 'brog. It is therefore likely that the version currently preserved in the Potala is a copy of the set produced in Mang yul Gung thang just after Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal's death. Kun dga' bzang mo re-enacted Cho kyi sgron ma's vision so that the princess from Mang yul Gung thang became a powerful exemplar whose fame reached far beyond her own homeland. Yar 'brog, where Kun dga' bzang mo's manuscript edition of Bo dong Phogs las rnam rgyal's collected works was produced, became also an important site for printing as is witnessed by a number of surviving 15<sup>th</sup> century prints of the Bo dong pa tradition.<sup>27</sup> Whilst book production in the kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang benefitted from the trading route along the Za rong Gtsang po/Trisuli River, in the Yar 'brog area it drew materials from the trading routes that linked it to the vegetation rich Lho brag and Bhutan.

## Conclusion

The location of the kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang along one of the most important routes of transhimalayan trade was an important factor in the development of this area as one of the hubs for the production of books both in manuscript and in printed form. The princess Chos kyi sgron ma, born as the daughter of King Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan used her position of power to promote the reproduction of scriptures both in manuscript and printed form. She also became a powerful source of inspiration for other women who followed in her footsteps in promoting the production and distribution of texts. Most prominent among these was Kun dga' bzang mo who re-enacted the legacy of the princess from Mang yul Gung thang in other regions of Tibet and contributed to the establishment of her tradition in the Yar 'brog area where the reincarnation line was eventually consolidated in Bsam sdings monastery. In doing so she also provided an important link between the book culture that had emerged in Mang yul Gung thang and the other hubs of book production that were developing at the same time across Tibet.

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<sup>27</sup> See Tsering Dawa, 2016.

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