

The Making of a Myth

The Amazing Life and Death of the Sixth Dalai Lama

Research >
Central Asia



Considering that he died in 1706 and was reborn two years later, it is hard to imagine how the inhabitants of Alashan greeted Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the sixth Dalai Lama, upon his arrival there in 1716. What we do know is that the son of the man responsible for welcoming him to Alashan, Dar-rgyas Nomunqan had no doubts about the Lama's identity or narration.¹ Based on this narration, Dar-rgyas Nomunqan wrote what he purports to be Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's secret biography.²

By Simon Wickham-Smith

Whether or not the Lama's narrated claims were true, the relationship between the text and the life it describes is telling of the culture, ideas, and circumstances of the time. We have, in any case, precious little to confirm the facts of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's existence: his official dates (1683-1706) and a temple guide – of which he may have been the author. Nor is it by any means certain that the poems attributed to him are in fact his. What we do have is a series of possibilities that occasionally morph into probabilities, a set of 'myths' which, when framed in a certain way, take on the appearance of reality.

Our understanding of the life and work of the sixth Dalai Lama boils down to the following. Born in mTsho-na on 1 March 1683, his birth was accompanied by the kind of miraculous events that traditionally accompany the rebirth of a lama. As the death of the 'great' fifth Dalai Lama in 1682 had been hushed up, his recognition as the sixth Dalai Lama in 1685 was kept secret. It was only in 1695, when he was twelve, that his true identity was confirmed to him.³

That Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was formally recognised at twelve and enthroned at fourteen made his position extraordinary, even for a reincarnate lama, as they were generally recognised and enthroned at a very young age. In Tibet in the late seventeenth century, fourteen was, if not the age of majority, at least young adulthood.

His regent, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho, had been chief minister for the fifth Dalai Lama and was arguably the greatest all-rounder produced by the Tibetan monastic system. Having held the country in his grasp since the death of the fifth Dalai Lama, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho was fiercely reluctant to give up power. Again and again, as he moved towards majority, the sixth Dalai Lama requested, and was denied, the temporal power that rightfully accompanied his spiritual role.

This denial probably had as much to do with the Dalai Lama's own waywardness as with the regent's reluctance to hand over the reins. Despite being an outstanding scholar of subjects both sacred and profane, Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practising archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study.⁴ Nonetheless, the regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho emerges in the Lama's narrative as an extremely over-protective father-figure.

By the time Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho left Lhasa for Beijing and set up camp on the edge Kokonor in November 1706, his regent had been murdered.⁵ The sixth Dalai Lama was by this time much loved by his people. They tried, unsuccessfully, to dissuade him to journey to Beijing, correctly perceiving the Chinese-backed plot to entrap him.



Clay statue of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho at his mother's house in Ber-mkhar, Arunchal Pradesh

Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was held in high esteem for the beautiful and literary (love) songs that he composed from an early age, his relaxed style, and mistrust of authority. Over the past three centuries the sixth Dalai Lama has emerged as a Tibetan folk-hero, his poems passed down through the generations.

'Death' at Kokonor

In the context of myth making, it is the second part of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text which interests me most. It recounts the Lama's education and goes on to detail the events leading up to his 'death' at Kokonor on 14 November 1706. The Lama recounts how he arrived and camped at the lake with his entourage, where he received a letter from the Chinese Emperor Kangxi threatening his attendants with death upon their arrival in Beijing.⁶ To free his companions from their responsibility, the Lama decided to disappear – thus allowing them to believe, or at least pretend, that he had died.

What follows seems to be a classic example of a transformative narrative. Immediately on leaving his entourage, the Lama gets caught in a dust storm and encounters a young girl, dressed as a nomad, who leads him to safety. From this point until he arrives in Amdo ten years later, the Lama passes through a number of vignettes, meeting humans (including one with no head), yetis, zombies, *dakinis*, the *yi-dam* Mahakala and his consort and, finally, the gNas-chung oracle who, entranced, recognises him and breaks the spell of secrecy.

The narrative of these years contains characteristic elements. First, the story is framed by initiatory events: the dust storm is a chaotic situation marking a transition from one reality to another. The oracular trance at gNas-chung likewise symbolizes the linking of different realities. Both the girl and the Oracle are guides between the two realities – the one leading him into, the other out of, his secret identity.

Second, the mixture of events which are clearly of our world (children with smallpox, his friendship with Lo-brgya) – with dreams (the trampling of sacred texts on Gridhraku-

ta), religious figures (Mahakala and his consort, Vajrayoginis and other *dakinis*), otherworldly beings (sprinting yetis and dancing zombies), and with a headless man, who, in his humanity, seems to exist outside all contexts, even culturally conditioned ones – exemplifies how this section of the text exists outside quotidian reality and creates its own internal logic.

Finally, Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's commentary at the close of each section reminds us that this is the story of a holy man, a Dalai Lama, and needs to be thus understood to provide inspiration to fellow practitioners. As with all *nam-thar* (complete liberation), the secret biography is meant to be applied to our own lives, a text from which we can draw conclusions about the path which is Buddhist practice.

A man, his life and the text

Eighteenth-century Tibet and the contemporary Western world have very different standards of fact and fiction. In his otherwise excellent work on the secret biography, Michael Aris refuses to look beyond his liberal humanism to engage in the discourse as presented by Dar-rgyas Nomunqan. This is a pity. Far from being the cock-and-bull story that Aris claims it to be, it is a narrative of extraordinary mythic power. The creation of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho rests as much on the secret biography as on the 60 or so poems commonly ascribed to him. To regard the sixth Dalai Lama merely as a historical figure makes one oblivious to what he has come to mean in Tibetan cultural and religious perceptions. Many have believed – known – that the story is the true narrative of the sixth Dalai Lama's life, as told by him to Dar-rgyas Nomunqan.

Like any reincarnate lama, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in death, on a *thang-ka*, transcends time and space – he resides in his *mandala* in a different way than his physical body once did. We can see Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text as a kind of oral *thang-ka*, accessible to us on a number of levels, in a number of different dimensions, just as his songs (*mgu-glu*) can be seen as sung *thang-kas*.

Acknowledging this context has allowed me in my research to approach Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's secret biography in various ways. I have suggested a number of levels on which the more fantastical sections might be understood. To read the remainder of the story from both contextualized and decontextualized viewpoints may likewise prove instructive, to better understanding the mythology and mythmaking surrounding Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho. Not only would such a project render due appreciation to Dargyas Nomunqan and his text, it may allow us to see Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho – whomever he might be – as equally individual and exemplar. <

Simon Wickham-Smith is reading and translating texts surrounding Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the sixth Dalai Lama. His work can be accessed at: www.qamutiik.net/~6d/index.html. A longer version of this article is available at: www.qamutiik.net/IATS.pdf simon@qamutiik.net

Notes >

- 1 Dar-rgyas Nomunqan is the name commonly used to identify Ngag-dbang lHun-grub Dar-rgyas.
- 2 Only the 1981 editions of the Tibetan Peoples Publishing House, Lhasa, and the Peoples Publishing House, Beijing, use the term 'secret biography'. The original title uses the standard word for biography, *nam-par thar-pa*. Nonetheless, 'secret biography' is used in reference to this particular text and fits my purposes here.
- 3 Aris, Michael, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, London: Kegan Paul International (1989).
- 4 We cannot say whether his distaste for formal religious study found expression in his spiritual practice. Some have suggested – they may have special insight or be apologists for a louche playboy – that his drinking and womanizing were outward manifestations of Tantric practice. Indeed, one of his most famous poems seems to come from this tradition. It ends: 'If you drink...with pure intent / You'll never experience the lower states' (my translation).
- 5 This murder was committed at the order of one of the wives of Lhazang Qan, the new Mongolian ruler who attained the throne by murdering the previous occupant, his brother.
- 6 There is some uncertainty as to why Kangxi behaved in this way, but it is likely that Lhazang Qan had unilaterally invited the Dalai Lama to Beijing, which seemed to have put the Emperor's nose somewhat out of joint.



Thang-ka showing Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in the teaching mudra

Both photos by Aris, Michael, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, London: Kegan Paul International (1989).