

On the Life and Oeuvre of the Jo nang pa Scholar Zhang ston Rgya bo Bsod nams grags pa (1292-1370)

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Ter nagedachtenis van Professor Wang Yao 王尧 (1928-2015)

The late Professor Wang Yao 王尧 to whose memory this very modest paper is dedicated, was one of the first Tibetologists from the People's Republic of China to have left an indelible mark on the international scene of Tibetan Studies. This was in large measure due to his ability to communicate in English and the inability of most non-Chinese Tibetologists effectively to use Chinese. Of course I am speaking of the 1980s and 1990s, and things have changed quite a bit in the meantime! There is no question that, through his publications, his students and grand-students, he was among the most influential scholars of modern Tibetology in China. In the autumn of his career, Wang Yao became more involved with Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist Studies, as can be gleaned from his later publications that include a biography of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pavi dpal (1357-1419), which he co-authored with Chu Junjie 褚俊杰. I was never his student, but I owe him my Chinese name Fan Dekang 范德康, and for that, for his scholarly legacy, and for various personal gestures of kindness, I remember him with great fondness.

Not all that long ago, in fact a little over one generation ago, we were still very much in the dark where the main contours and highlights of the development of the Jo nang tradition of Tibetan Buddhism were concerned. This situation is now rapidly changing and while it is obvious that a large number of details still remain to be investigated and clarified, there is a great deal that is now much better known

and understood than before. The progress that has been made in our general understanding of this tradition has been mainly due to the publication of Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa's (1920-1975) precious chronicle and its supplement, which he completed in 1967 under no doubt extremely trying circumstances, to which we can add the Chinese study of this tradition by Pu Wencheng 蒲文成 and Lamao zhaxi 拉毛扎西 [= Lha mo bkra shis], and the 1991 chronicle of Ngag dbang yon tan bzang po (1928-2002).¹ A substantial advance in our understanding of this school of thought was also made by the fact that we now at long last have access to several editions of the collected oeuvre of its key-exponent Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292-1361)² – M.T. Kapstein published the first of these, to several studies of his life and those of his precursors at Jo nang monastery, of the writings and biographies of some of his disciples, as well as to the four editions of the capacious oeuvre of Kun dgav snying po (1575-1634), alias Tāranātha.³ In this connection, special mention should also be made of the ongoing publication of important works by his disciples and other later exponents of this tradition in the valuable Jo nang dpe tshogs and Jo nang e vam shes rig dpe tshogs series, works the manuscripts of which are gradually being excavated from their places of hiding and published in these venues. Finally, we should draw attention to the publication of the collected writings of vBav mdav Thub bstan dge legs rgya mtsho (1844-1904) and the Jo nang mdo sngags rig pavi dpe tshogs collection in twenty-six volumes.⁴

¹See, respectively, his *Jo nang chos rbyung zla bavi sgron me*, ed. Btsan lha Ngag dbang tshul khri ms and Hre Wan kri [= She Wanzhi 余万志] (Beijing: Krung govi bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1992) [= *Collected Works* [xylograph], vol. 2 (vDzam thang, 199?)], their *Juenangpai tonglun* 觉囊派通论 (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1993), and his *Rje jo nang pa chen pavi chos rbyung gsal byed nor buvi me long*, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, ed. Brtse Bstan pavi rgyal mtshan et al. (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang), 113-234.

²For him, see M.T. Kapstein, *The vDzam-thang Edition of the Collected Works of Kun-mkhyen Dol-po-pa Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan: Introduction and Catalogue* (Delhi: Shedrup Book, 1992), C.R. Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo. A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), and the updated, expanded and partly corrected version in his *The Buddha from Dolpo. A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2010). See also my forthcoming "Reconsidering the dates of Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan's (1292-1361) *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho* and the *Bkav bsdu bzhi pavi don*."

³These can be conveniently accessed through tbrc.org, W22277, W1PD45495, W22276, and W1PD77570.

⁴See, respectively, *Collected Works* [manuscript], vols. 22 (vDzam thang, 199?), tbrc.org, W23899, and ed. Bkra shis et al. (Chengdu: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa/Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2009). For vBav Mdav, see M.T. Kapstein, "From Kun-mkhyen Dol-po-pa to vBav-mdav Dge-legs: Three Jo-nang-pa Masters on the Interpretation of the *Prajñāpāramitā*," *Reason's Traces. Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2001), 308-313.

What appears to be the most influential listing of Dol po pa's fourteen principal disciples is the one found in Rigs ldan Rgyal ba Jo nang Dpal bzang po's series of capsule biographies of these men,⁵ which was adapted by Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa, albeit with some important modifications. Because Rigs ldan affirms that he himself was a disciple of Gnyag phu ba Bsod nams bzang po (1341-1433),⁶ the subject of the last and fifteenth biographical sketch of his work, I have identified the *sa skyong* year, the year in which he completed his piece, as the year 1465. Rigs ldan himself was an erstwhile abbot of Jo nang monastery.

This short essay written in memory of Professor Wang Yao focuses on one of these fourteen major disciples, namely, Zhang ston Rgya bo Bsod nams grags pa (1292-1370) or Bsod nams grags pa, the Bearded Teacher of the Zhang clan.⁷ Both Rigs ldan and Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa state that Zhang ston was seventy-eight when he passed away, but, whereas it would appear that Rigs ldan had wrongly dated him *lcags pho vbrug* [1280] to *chu mo lug* [1343], Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa has *chu pho vbrug* [1292] to *lcags pho khyi* [1370]. The twelve-year difference between the years of his birth can be easily explained, for such differences are common when the years in duodenary cycle designations are recalculated into those in sexagenary ones, but I cannot explain the discrepancy in the years of his passing. Tbrc.org dated him 1280 to 1358, without any further explanation. I will briefly return to the problem of his dates below, albeit without fully resolving it. His father was a certain Chos rgyal dpal about whom Rigs ldan mentions nothing further. His

⁵ See his *Chos keyi rje kun mkhyen chen po yab sras bco lngavi nram thar nye bar bsod pa ngo mtshar rab gsal, Jo nang kun mkhyen chen povi gsung vbum*, vol. Ka [1] (vDzam thang blockprint, 1998), 471-541 [= *ibid.* in *Dpal ldan dus keyi vkhor lo jo nang pavi lugs keyi bla ma bgyud pavi nram thar*, ed. Bstan vdzin phun tshogs (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2004), 143-209]. For another version together with a Chinese translation, see vPhags mo rdo rje, ed. and tr., *Dpal ldan dus keyi vkhor lo jo nang pavi bgyud rim bla mavi nram thar/ Juenangpai lidai chuancheng shangshi luechuan* 觉囊派历代传承上师略传 (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014), 173-234, 376-428. While the xylograph is not free from "carvos", it must unfortunately be said that the retyped texts are also filled with typos and should not be used independent of the former.

⁶ See Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa, *Jo nang chos vbyung zla bavi sgron me*, 34, and Rigs ldan, *Chos keyi rje kun mkhyen chen po yab sras bco lngavi nram thar nye bar bsod pa ngo mtshar rab gsal*, 537-540 [= *Dpal ldan dus keyi vkhor lo jo nang pavi lugs keyi bla ma bgyud pavi nram thar*, 206-208]. Another survey of Gnyag phu b's life is given in Mang thos Klu sgrub rgya mtsho's (1523-1596) 1587 *Bstan rtsis gsal bavi nyin byed lhag bsam rab dkar*, ed. Nor brang O rgyan, Gangs can rig mdzod 4 (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1987), 190-193.

⁷ Brief biographies of Zhang ston are found in Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa, *Jo nang chos vbyung zla bavi sgron me*, 34, and Rigs ldan, *Chos keyi rje kun mkhyen chen po yab sras bco lngavi nram thar nye bar bsod pa ngo mtshar rab gsal*, 505-509 [= *ibid.* in *Dpal ldan dus keyi vkhor lo jo nang pavi lugs keyi bla ma bgyud pavi nram thar*, 175-178] and vPhags mo rdo rje, ed. and tr., *Dpal ldan dus keyi vkhor lo jo nang pavi bgyud rim bla mavi nram thar/ Juenangpai lidai chuancheng shangshi luechuan* 觉囊派历代传承上师略传, 203-205, 400-402.

mother Chos kyi sgron ma suffered from leprosy (*mdzæ nad*), but was truly miraculously cured upon conception after which circumstance she came to be of fine appearance (*lus mdzæ*) and, rather understandably, of cheerful disposition. She gave birth to him in Skyid shod, not far from Lhasa, on the fifteenth day of the *sa ga* month, May 2, of 1292. On that day there was a full moon. The day of his birth was indeed extremely auspicious, since this was the very same day on which, some seventeen hundred years or so prior, Siddhārtha had become the historical Buddha under the Bodhi tree and it was the very same day on which he passed away into nirvana at the age of eighty. Both days are celebrated in the Tibetan cultural area as two of “the four great holy days” (*dus chen bzhi*). Zhang ston’s date of birth was thus definitely a very good beginning; it was one that was fraught with destiny. At the age of five, he went to Yar po Gr[w]a thang and studied with a certain Rdo rje rgyal mtshan and after some two months it was clear that he was a very gifted child. He then went to Ri bo Dgav ldan where he received acclaim for his debating abilities that were unusually advanced for a boy of his age. In Lhasa, he began his novitiate after having been given his novice vows by Mkhan chen Gzhon nu dpal, who gave him the name Bsod nams grags pa dpal bzang po. The Mkhan chen no doubt belonged to one of the so-called four communities (*tshogs pa*) that had sprung from the *vinaya*–ordination transmissions that Śākyaśrībhadrā (1127-1225) had introduced in Tibet in the first decade of the thirteenth century, but he is absent from J. Heimbels’s rewarding article on the subject.⁸ Thereafter, he visited a host of other places such as Tshal Gung thang where he studied with Bkra shis seng ge and, aged thirteen, he shifted to Lcags po ri where a certain A tsa ra (< Ācārya) Nag po [*Kṛṣṇa] instructed him in the elements of Sanskrit, Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa*, Harṣa’s *Nāgānanda*, and *Pra vṛkṣa*, that is, doing prognostication through the use of mirrors.⁹ A wandering novice-student, he arrived in Sa skya monastery when he was twenty-one and it was there that he received his full ordination from vJigs med grags pa. He then embarked on a series of lecture tours. Engaged in “debating rounds” (*grwa skor*) in Gtsang and Dbus, he ended up in Mtshur phu where he heard Karma pa III Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339) speak of Dol po pa. The biography of Dol po pa that is attributed to Kun spangs pa Chos grags dpal bzang po (1283-

⁸See his “The Jo gdan tshogs sde bzhi: An Investigation into the History of the Four Monastic Communities in Śākyaśrībhadrā,” *Nepalica-Tibetica. Festgabe für Christoph Cüppers*, Band 1, ed. F.-K. Ehrhard and P. Maurer (Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH, 2013), 187-241.

⁹For this reflex of Sanskrit *pratisenā*/*prasenā*, see G. Orofino, “Mirror Divination, Observations on a Simile Found in the Kālacakra Literature,” *Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes*, 1992, vol. 2, ed. P. Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Studies, 1994), 612-628.

1357/1363)— it is certain that he did not write the entire work that is ascribed to him, if only because a host of later abbots of Jo nang and even the famous treasure-revealer (*gter ston*) Padma glingpa (1450-1521) are mentioned towards the end of this work - records but one single meeting between him and the Karma pa. Judging from its occurrence in the biography's chronology, the meeting allegedly took place some time between 1334 and 1336.¹⁰ This window of opportunity is narrowed in Tshal pa Kun dgav rdo rje's (1309-1364) survey of the Karma pa's life. For there it is related that the Karma pa had returned to Mtshur phu from the Mongol court in Yuan China sometime during the ninth lunar month [September 18-October 17] of 1335 and that he had left Mtshur phu once more for the court in the eighth lunar month [August 8-September 5] of 1336.¹¹ On the other hand, Si tu Pan chen Chos kyi vbyung gnas (1700-1774) offers the idea that the Karma pa had met Dol po pa sometime between the years 1320 and 1324 in Sa skya and that he had been quite favorably impressed by him.¹² Thus, when Rigs Idan observes that Zhang ston met Dol po pa at the age of thirty-four and that he attended on him until he was sixty-two, then, if Zhang ston were indeed born in 1292, he would have first met the master in 1326 where after he stayed with him until 1354. This is a more sensible scenario.

When Zhang ston reached the age sixty-two, a certain Mkhän chen Lha dbang offered him the hermitage of Dpal steng together with its estates for financial support and he immediately set out to construct a golden life-size statue of the master. Upon its completion, he requested Kun spangs pa Chos grags dpal bzang po, the most senior of Dol po pa's disciples, to consecrate it. This invitation was apparently given to Kun spangs pa when he was eighty years old. So, were we to take Rigs Idan's word that Kun spangs pa was born in 1283, then the consecration would have taken place in 1363 were it not for the fact that he was allegedly killed en route to Dpal steng by the elusive Byang pa Siddha.¹³ Zhang ston spent a total

¹⁰See *Chos kyi rgyal po thams cad mkeyen pavi skyes rabs khyad par du vphags pa*, *Gsung vbum dpe bsdur ma* [of Dol po pa], vol. 1, ed. Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib vjug khang (Beijing: Krung govi bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2011), 225. Padma gling pa is mentioned on p. 284.

¹¹This is found in the *Deb ther dmar po*, ed. Dung dkar Blo bzang vphrin las (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1981), 103.

¹²See his *History of the Karma Bkar-brgyud-pa Sect* [= *Sgrub brgyud karma kam tshang brgyud pa rin po chevi rnam par thar pa rab vbyams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi pbreng ba*], vol. 1 (New Delhi: D. Gyaltsan and Kesang Legshay, 1972), 208, which is also cited in Stearns, *The Buddha from Dölpo*, 49.

¹³See the sketches of his life in Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa, *Jo nang chos vbyung zla bavi sgron me*, 32-33, and Rigs Idan, *Chos kyi rje kun mkhyen chen po yab sras bco lngavi rnam thar nye bar bsdus pa ngo mtsbar rab gsal*, 478-485 [= *ibid.* in *Dpal ldan dus kyi vkbhor lo jo nang pavi lugs kyi bla ma brgyud pavi rnam thar*, 149-155] and vPhags mo rdo rje, ed. and tr., *Dpal ldan dus kyi vkbhor lo jo nang pavi brgyud rim bla mavi rnam thar/ Juenangpai lidai chuancheng shangshi luechuan* 觉囊派历代传承上师略传, 180-