

48 Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel: *Sixteen I's* (ca. first half 17th Century)

Introduced and translated by Dagmar Schwerk

Introduction

Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel (Zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594–ca. 1651; hereafter Zhapdrung) was a charismatic Tibetan Buddhist master, who officially institutionalised the “Joint Twofold System of Governance” (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan/chos srid zung ’jug/chos kyi rgyal srid*) in Bhutan in 1625/26. Zhapdrung had found refuge in Bhutan, following an unresolved – and sometimes violent – dispute with the ruler of central Tibet, the Desi Tsangpa PhüntsoK Namgyel (Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, 1597–1619/1632).^I The Desi had refused to recognise him as the rightful incarnation of the head of the Drukpa Kagyü school, the fourth *Drukchen* Pema Karpo (Padma dkar po, 1527–92).^{II} As was common in the Tibetan cultural area generally, the Joint Twofold System of Governance in Bhutan combined a twofold religious and political structure under a Buddhist ruler as a unifying figure. In the following decades, Zhapdrung united large regions of what nowadays constitutes the nation state of Bhutan, establishing centralised rule and civil and military administration; he is revered as the founding father of Bhutan.

Zhapdrung wrote the proclamation of the *Sixteen I's* (*Nga bcu drug ma*) after the death of the Desi Tsangpa PhüntsoK Namgyel and his family, for which he was suspected of having been responsible, through use of the supernatural powers of a tantric Buddhist master. This marks Zhapdrung's victory in the incarnation dispute and ongoing wars with the Tibetan Desi. Consequently, Zhapdrung widely gained the epithet of a “great magician” (Tib. *mtshu chen*), who was able to defeat his enemies through both conventional and tantric magical warfare – as pointed out directly in the *Sixteen I's*. From then on, the *Sixteen I's* were communicated throughout Bhutan, in the form of a personal seal proclaiming Zhapdrung as an ideal and universal Buddhist ruler – a *cakravartin* – within the newly institutionalised Joint Twofold System

I For the different dates of Desi Tsangpa PhüntsoK Namgyel's death in Bhutanese and Tibetan historical sources, see for example Michael V. Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom* (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1979), 324n17.

II In the Tibetan cultural area, different forms of legitimisation and succession of Buddhist political and religious rule have, to this day, continued to exist in parallel – for example: incarnational, abbatial, hereditary, and meritocratic.

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of Governance. Zhapdrung thereby claimed the new territories by sealing, a common practice in the Tibetan cultural area.^{III}

In the *Sixteen I's*, Zhapdrung proclaimed and assertively expounded his own qualities that legitimised him as a rightful Buddhist ruler of the new territories of Bhutan, as a tantric Buddhist master, and as the rightful incarnation of the fourth Drukchen, Pema Karpo. In his *Sixteen I's*, he alluded – albeit with significant modifications in content and style – to the “Sixteen pure rules of human conduct” (Tib. *mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug*), a traditionally well-known set of Buddhist rules of conduct from earlier Tibetan law, ascribed to the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (d. 650).^{IV} Zhapdrung wrote the *Sixteen I's* in traditional Tibetan seven-syllable metric structure, and arranged the sixteen lines of the seal in eight pairs of two lines, each positioned diagonally. In the first line of each pair, he claimed the specific legitimising quality he possessed for ruling the religious or political societal spheres, and then provided an explanation or rhetorical question in the following verse line – emphasising his claim.

Emic religious and political terminologies, such as the “Sixteen pure rules of human conduct,” embodied moral epistemic structures in the Buddhist cosmological framework that strongly resonated within Tibetan Buddhist cultures, and determined how the societal spheres of religion, politics, and law were not only theoretically conceptualised, but also enacted in reality. Throughout Tibetan history, conceptual pairs such as the “Sixteen pure rules of human conduct” and the “Ten virtuous laws of gods” (Tib. *lha chos dge ba bcu*) were employed to explain the relationship between Buddhist rulers and actors in different societal areas, laid out in literary genres such as legal documents and codes and advisory literature for rulers. Consequently, by acting in agreement with those sets of conduct, a Buddhist ruler was considered capable of ensuring the material and spiritual well-being, as well as the security, of his subjects and the country. In Bhutan, those moral epistemic structures were, for example, laid out in detail in the first part of the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729*,^V and are still part of today’s understanding of ‘good governance’ as one of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan.

III For more details about the historical context of the *Sixteen I's*, see Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History*, 212–17, see also Karma Phuntsho, *History of Bhutan* (Noida: Random House, India, 2013), 217–24.

IV See also Per K. Sørensen, *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies. An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Chronicle rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 182–83; Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 347–49; and Ulrike Roesler, “16 Human Norms (*mi chos bcu drug*) – Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan,” in *The Illuminating Mirror: Tibetan Studies in Honor of Per K. Sørensen on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Olaf Czaja and Guntram Hazod (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015). For a list of the “Sixteen pure rules of human conduct,” see, for example, Śrīghoṣa’s *Sārasaṃgrahalekha*.

V For the translation of selected passages of the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729* (*Dpal 'brug pa rin po che mthu chen ngag gi dbang po'i bka' khrims phyogs thams cad las mnam par rgyal ba'i gnam*), see text no. 49.

Later, the *Sixteen I's* seal was used in the official foreign correspondence of the regents of Bhutan (Tib. *sde srid*), as a letter head or seal.^{VI} In 1907, when the absolute monarchy under the Buddhist Wangchuck dynasty was institutionalised, the *Sixteen I's* were used to symbolically seal the document of allegiance (Tib. *gan rgya*) at the coronation of the first king of Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuck (1862–1926; r. 1907–26). This legitimised the transformation of the Joint Twofold System of Governance under the new rule of a Buddhist king.^{VII} In 2008, the Joint Twofold System of Governance was then further transformed into a constitutional monarchy, with the fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (b. 1980, r. 2006–present), as head of state.

Finally, to document one curious result of Bhutan's encounters with colonial civil servants of the British Raj in the nineteenth century, Zhapdrung's *Sixteen I's* were also featured as the frontispiece in the journals of the British botanist Joseph D. Hooker, published in 1854 – not surprisingly, they were completely taken out of their original context here.^{VIII}

Bibliographical Information

Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel. "Nga bcu drug ma [1619–32]." In *Dpal 'brug pa rin po che mthu chen chos kyi rgyal po ngag dbang rnam rgyal gyi rnam thar rgya mtsho'i snying po*, 69th Chief Abbot of Bhutan Gendün Rinchen. N.p.: n.n., 1987 [BDR: WA1KG3173]; 80.5–81.3.

The translation follows the Tibetan text as documented in 69th Chief Abbot of Bhutan Gendün Rinchen's biography of Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The *Nga bcu drug ma* is commonly depicted as a seal in slightly varying versions.

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VI For depictions of the seal, see fig. 5; see also Phuntsho, *History of Bhutan*, 221; Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History*, 213; and Tib Shelf, *Sixteen Self-Assertions*. 2021. <https://www.tibshelf.org/sixteen-self-assertions/>. A description of the Buddhist symbolism of the seal is found in the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729*, see Michael V. Aris, *Sources for the History of Bhutan* (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1986), 139.

VII See Phuntsho, *History of Bhutan*, 520–22; and Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History*, 325n18. For a facsimile, see John Claude White. *Sikkim and Bhutan – Twenty-one Years on the North-East Frontier 1887–1908* (London: Edward Arnold, 1909), 226. In addition, Shirin Barakzai has recently pointed out to me that the *Sixteen I's* are found as a brass attached to the ceiling of the Marme Lhakang in Swayambhu, Kathmandu; for photographs of the seal, see Shirin Barakzai, *Buddhist Heritage Conservation Case Study: Reconstruction of Marme Lhakhang, Swayambhu WHS* (unpublished master's thesis, Lumbini College of Buddhism and Himalayan Studies, 2023). I thank her for this reference.

VIII Joseph D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals; Or, Notes of a Naturalist in Bengal, The Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas, The Khasia Mountains, &c.* (London: John Murray, 1854, 2 vol.).



Figure 5: Zhapdrung's *Sixteen I's* as letter seal in Bhutanese foreign correspondence. Courtesy of The British Library, Bowring Collection, Mss Eur G38/1, Item 33(i).

Translation by Dagmar Schwerk

The *cakravartin* of the twofold system [of political and religious governance] – I am;
 I am the wholesome refuge for everyone.
 The upholder of the teachings of the glorious Drukpa [Kagyü school] – I am;
 I am the destroyer of all those who disguise themselves as Drukpa.
 One accomplished in Sarasvatī's¹ composition – I am;
 I am the pure source [p. 80/81] of eloquent elucidation.
 The master of a view beyond [the four] extremes – I am;
 I am the one who refutes those with incorrect views.
 The powerful one in debates – I am;
 Who is the opponent not trembling in my presence?
 The hero who subdues the armies of demonic forces – I am;

¹ DS: Sarasvatī is considered to be the Hindu and Buddhist goddess of music, learning, and the arts.

Who is the great magician overturning my power?
 The lord of speech in [Dharma] exposition – I am;
 I am the one who is learned in all fields of knowledge.
 The incarnation predicted by the Supreme Ones^{II} – I am;
 I am the destroyer of various [false] incarnations.

II DS: In this context, the ‘Supreme Ones’ are earlier important heads of the Drukpa Kagyü school and past Buddhist masters and kings, whose prophecies are referenced as proof of Zhapdrung’s claim to being the rightful incarnation of the fourth Drukchen Pema Karpo (in contrast to the alternative and ‘wrong’ candidate Paksam Wangpo, who was recognised by the Desi Tsangpa Phüntsock Namgyel). The ‘Supreme Ones’ are listed in detail in the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729*, see Aris, *Sources of Bhutan*, 123–31.