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Creating Dependency by Means of its Overcoming: A Case Study from the Rise of Tibetan Buddhism

1 Introduction

Tibet's imperial period (*ca.* 600–850 CE) holds a central position in many traditional Tibetan histories, especially those that include depictions of the establishment of Buddhism in that "land of snows" (*gangs can yul*) by emperors who invited Dharma practitioners from surrounding states to take on spiritual authority in society. These narratives emphasise the religious developments in the period while downplaying the comparatively mundane aspects of the empire, i.e., the conquests and the international diplomacy that made Tibet a dominant force in Central Asia from the seventh to the early ninth century. In these later religious histories, various forms of control operate simultaneously to ensure both the dependency and superior status of certain groups of imperial subjects. In this literature, certain religious masters are afforded the ability to control the Tibetan emperor. The result is the legitimization of a religious system in which many Tibetan subjects were dependent on the clergy. In many cases, this control also extended over the ownership of land that was passed down through generations and asymmetrically favoured the clergy, though it was not a *strongly* asymmetrical system of dependency.

This chapter will address the (earlier) historiographical and (later) biographical sources on one of the Tibetan emperors, Khri Srong lde brtsan (reigned 756–*ca.* 800). It will treat these texts as narratives and thus use theories from narratology in order to offer some insights into the changing values of Tibetan society from the imperial period into the time of the "second dissemination" (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism (tenth–twelfth century). When we delve more deeply into these sources, we can see the importance of odysseys and exile stories, particularly in the way they describe Buddhist masters at the court of Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan. This literature appears after the fall of the empire and matures up until the twelfth century. Early Tibetan Buddhist literature of

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this type often contains accounts of (almost exclusively male) characters either being abandoned in the wilderness as children or being exiled from a kingdom (or renouncing it) in youth or early adulthood.

By identifying similarities between the abandonment / exile / renunciation *topoi* (literary motifs) in early Tibetan historiography, it is possible to show how these literary markers signify the power of the person victimized by these acts over that of their perpetrator. Investigating the broader theme of exile and return to power in Central Eurasian state formation mythologies, and reflecting on Indic narratives about the renunciation of the throne in favour of the spiritual life, also help clarify the processes involved in introducing both of these important *topoi* into early Tibetan historiography. Furthermore, identifying the divergences between the Central Eurasian and Indic heritage of these Tibetan tales allows for a preliminary analysis of the changing relationship between religious and royal figures in early Tibetan biographical narratives. Finally, grounding these changes in theoretical discussions of types of fiction, mythology, and historiography can uncover some of the mechanisms that enabled a shift away from a model in which status was based on kinship, military prowess, and fealty to the emperor as the highest ranking member of Tibetan society to one that codified an expanded role for religious status and drew on idealized Indic social structures. Such a shift opened the possibility that a subject of the emperor could (at least rhetorically) outshine an instantiation of indigenous divine kingship. I hope thereby to show how Buddhist clerics could come to be seen as superior to the royalty on whom they were formerly dependent and so create a social situation that undergirded the dependency of the Tibetan people on their clergy (as the dominant class) for permission to use their land in exchange for taxation.

According to Matthew T. Kapstein, during the dGa' ldan Pho brang period of Tibetan history (mid-seventeenth to mid-twentieth century), 'the people were not the legal owners of the land upon which their livelihoods depended [which] was the property of the ruler, and in those regions under the sway of Lhasa, this meant the Dalai Lama.'[1] Land could also be held by a monastery or a noble, e.g., one of the three major classes of landlords (*mnga' bdag chen po gsum*). Revenue gained from those of lower status who worked the land (or made some other more specialized contribution to the economy) would, in part, be expended for the representatives of the religious establishment, i.e., monks, nuns, and various types of lama (*bla ma*).[2] Kapstein notes that this system was neither timeless nor immutable, though it was sometimes assumed to be. Moreover, although the relationship between these groups was not

1 Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, Peoples of Asia Series (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006): 176. Yet, on the same page Kapstein stresses that landowners 'had no recognized power [. . .] to expropriate the peasants who lived and worked on the estate, so long as the latter fulfilled their obligations, [and that] the entitlements of the tax-paying commoners, at least, were generally considered inalienable.'

2 Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 176–78.

strongly asymmetrical, the 'ecclesiastical hierarchy was clearly the dominant class', which 'amounted to a broad disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy.'[3]

The gradual establishment of ecclesiastical power over the land of the Tibetan Plateau erased the memory of the complex power dynamics of the imperial period's Yar lung Dynasty, which directly or indirectly ruled over an even greater territory than that which most scholars describe as "cultural Tibet" today. The dynasty's rulers stood in a position of ultimate power and land ownership. Yet, this image of the emperor as the zenith of imperial Tibetan society (at least from the rhetorical perspective) largely disappeared. Although historiographic narratives continued to idealize them, the literature emphasized their religious rather than martial characteristics. For example, emperors such as Khri Srong lde brtsan and Khri gTsug lde brtsan AKA Ral pa can (reigned 815–841) were increasingly described as inferior in position to the religious masters at their courts.

Peter Schwieger has shown how Buddhism gradually became the dominant source of ethical values in Tibetan historiography by the fourteenth century.[4] He states that Tibetan histories, which narrativize the remembered past, play a mythic role inasmuch as they confer constructed meaning on Tibetan culture, determine cultural self-interpretation to some extent and provide a source for normative claims concerning sociocultural interrelationships that hold true in the histories' "present".[5] This chapter complements his analysis of the shift from a royal to a religious centre of society,[6] by bringing theoretical insights from the field of narratology to bear on Tibetan historiography's depiction of the emperors and their introduction of Buddhism to the Tibetan Plateau.

2 Dependency in the Eighth-Century Tibetan Empire

The geographical extent of what constituted "Tibet" (Bod) varied considerably as the Tibetan empire expanded and contracted at its various borders between the seventh and ninth centuries before ultimately collapsing and leaving a power vacuum and even more

3 Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 180. The same is affirmed by Alice Travers, "How Should We Define Social Status? The Study of 'Intermediate Groups' in Central Tibet (1895–1959)," in *Tibetans that Escaped the Historian's Net: Studies in the Social History of Tibetan Societies*, eds. Charles Ramble, Peter Schwieger, and Alice Travers (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2013): 142, n. 2.

4 See Peter Schwieger, "Geschichte als Mythos: Zur Aneignung von Vergangenheit in der tibetischen Kultur. Ein kulturwissenschaftlicher Essay," *Asiatische Studien: Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft* 54, no. 4 (2000): 945–73; translated as Peter Schwieger, "History as Myth: On the Appropriation of the Past in Tibetan Culture," in *The Tibetan History Reader*, eds. Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaeffer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013): 64–85.

5 Schwieger, "Geschichte als Mythos": 947; Schwieger, "History as Myth": 65–66.

6 Schwieger, "Geschichte als Mythos": 947–49 and 962–64; Schwieger, "History as Myth": 66–67 and 72–74.

uncertain borders in its wake. The empire of the Yar lung Dynasty, the hereditary rulership originating in and based around the Yar lung valley in the southern part of the Tibetan Plateau, expanded from its geographic power base in all directions (excluding the direct south, where the Himalayas prevented substantial expansion). The land to which Arabic sources of the period refer as "Tubbat" was situated west of China, north of India, south of the Uyghur Turks, and east of the eastern marches of the Khurasan.[7]

The expansion of the Tibetan empire meant the gradual takeover of other kingdoms, city-states, and regions either by alliance or force before ruling them as zones of an empire with an emperor (*btsan po*) at its head. Fealty to the emperor paid by regions incorporated into the empire appears, at least in a few cases, to have been mutually beneficial.[8] Thus, in some regions, recognition of the superior status of the Tibetan emperor allowed certain vassal states meaningful autonomy. At the same time, it also created space in which the empire could continue to grow. The emperor thus sat at both the centre and zenith of imperial Tibetan society, at least according to the imperial self-representation of court documents and positive depictions in texts from regions incorporated into the empire (which are virtually our only source of written information for this period).[9] From the official perspective of the court and its dependents, the Yar lung Dynasty held a position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan Plateau.

In contrast, on a local level, the emperors maintained a somewhat nomadic base of operations, travelling around Central Tibet. Each generation enthroned a male to act as head of the Yar lung Dynasty, and a *primus inter pares* emperor. Loyal ministers, drawn from the families who had first supported the Yar lung house and principalities newly encompassed by the empire, served these rulers and their sons. These ministers and their ennobled families benefited by receiving land taken from disloyal or rival kings. Kapstein's description of land ownership in later centuries also seems to apply to the imperial period. He writes: 'Though aristocratic estates were usually hereditary, the nobles held their estates as grants, not as personal property, and the government could and did resume them when circumstances were perceived to warrant this.'[10]

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7 Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese During the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 163, n. 127; for more on this period from a foreign policy perspective, see most recently Lewis Doney, "Tibet," in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans (Leeds: Arc Humanities, 2020): 191–223.

8 See Doney, "Tibet": 198–200.

9 Brandon Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History, With an Annotated Cartographical Documentation by Guntram Hazod*, Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 381; Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie 12 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009): 11.

10 Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 180.

As Max Weber has noted of the Indian social system: 'the caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordinative.'[11] Although it was not a caste society, something similar took place in imperial Tibet between ethnic groups like the Central Tibetans and the states they conquered. An increase in the verticalization of social relationships also took place between the Yar lung family, now a dynasty, and the other noble families in Central Tibet. Wherever the empire *directly* controlled an area, order was maintained not only through military and / or civilian administration but also via the implementation of law codes sent out from the centre. The legal system of compensation and punishment also provides evidence of a highly stratified society that privileged those of higher status and kept lower-status members dependent on the system.[12] Punishments could be both corporal and capital; they could also include banishment either alone or with one's family to a nearby or distant region.[13] It is this form of control, backed by a hierarchized society that, according to the prevailing rhetoric, has an emperor at its pinnacle, which is re-evaluated in later Tibetan histories to valorize the ones to whom this punishment is meted out (in part due to the influence of idealized Indic models of religiopolitical hierarchy).

The *primus inter pares* form of rulership appears to have been deeply unstable.[14] It needed to be constantly reinforced as the emperor moved his mobile court of administrators, judiciary, priests, and guards in a semi-nomadic fashion around the lands of his loyal aristocracy.[15] In fact, the entire duration of the imperial period, like its beginnings, was marked by internal power struggles, marital alliances, and territorial disputes among and within the Yar lung Dynasty and other local polities and eminent families of Central Tibet.[16] The emperors did not always hold meaningful power, which sometimes resided with their queens, and the mGar family maintained a brief

11 Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and eds. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Classic Reprint Series (1948; repr., London: Routledge,1991): 189.

12 See, for example, Brandon Dotson, "Introducing Early Tibetan Law: Codes and Cases," in *Secular Law and Order in the Tibetan Highland: Contributions to a Workshop Organized by the Tibet Institute in Andiast (Switzerland) on the Occasion of the 65th Birthday of Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Dieter Schuh, Series Monumenta Tibetica Historica, Abteilung 3: Diplomata et Epistolae 13 (Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2015): 269–79.

13 Dotson, "Introducing Early Tibetan Law": 276–78 and 283.

14 Charles Ramble, "Sacral Kings and Divine Sovereigns: Principles of Tibetan Monarchy in Theory and Practice," in *States of Mind: Power, Place and the Subject in Inner Asia*, ed. David Sneath, Studies on East Asia 27 (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 2006): 129–33.

15 Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*: 43–46; Guntram Hazod, "Imperial Central Tibet: An Annotated Cartographical Survey of Its Territorial Divisions and Key Political Sites," in *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History*, ed. Brandon Dotson, Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 381; Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie 12 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009): 161–232.

16 Guntram Hazod, "Tribal Mobility and Religious Fixation: Remarks on Territorial Transformation, Social Integration and Identity in Imperial and Early Post-Imperial Tibet," in *Visions of Community in*

ministerial "shogunate" in the late seventh century.[17] Yet, when the system was most stable, and acquiescence to it was ensured by the spoils of continued expansion of the empire, the Tibetan aristocracy, with the emperors at their head, benefitted from periods of great wealth and cosmopolitanism.

The Tibetan empire reached its greatest extent during the reign of Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan. In the northwest, it threatened the territory of the fourth and fifth Abbasid caliphs, Al-Mansur (714–775) and Harun al-Rashid (763 / 766–809), on the banks of the Oxus. In the east, the Tibetan army even briefly sacked the Chinese capital Chang'an in 763.[18] Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan also presided over the growing institutionalization of Buddhism as a state religion in Tibet. His religious patronage was epitomized by his construction of bSam yas Monastery, a new institution in Tibet which shows signs of influence from the older Buddhist cultures that surrounded the empire at that time – most notably South Asia and China.

The emperor invited Buddhist masters to court during his reign, perhaps including the shadowy tantric master Padmasambhava, who will become a central figure in the latter half of this article. Michael Walter suggests that Khri Srong lde brtsan invited Padmasambhava from Oḍḍiyāna in today's Swat Valley, at that time a part of the Tibetan Empire.[19] However, other scholars have questioned the historicity of his traditionally-attributed presence at the Tibetan court.[20] Nevertheless, Walter's observation is interesting because it most likely reflects the actual status of religious figures at the court of Khri Srong lde brtsan:

> Assuming the historicity of this event, the political reality of the situation was that [. . .] Padmasambhava appeared before him as one of his subjects. If his fame was as great as later tradition maintains, he was likely commanded to appear, or physically brought to court, at the Btsan-po's [i.e., emperor's] order.[21]

We can thus add religious masters to the list of groups amenable to Weber's analysis given above. The 'vertical social system of super- and subordinative elements' probably also included indigenous priests and augurs, as well as foreign Buddhist abbots and lay tantric adepts (along with their converts at the Tibetan court), who tended to lack land but offered services to society, the state, or the emperor himself.[22] It is fair

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the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100, eds. Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012): 49–55.

17 See Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*: 18–19.

18 See Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire*: 143–57.

19 Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 13 and 50–51, n. 26.

20 See Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, "Representations of Padmasambhava in Early Post-Imperial Tibet," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 45 (2016): 41–76.

21 Walter, *Buddhism and Empire*: 50–51, n. 26.

22 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 182.

to assume that such groups engaged in divergent discourses of superiority and inferiority that operated in tension with one another rather than as a synchronic fact accepted by all.[23] Indeed, it is most likely that these individuals and / or groups at court ferociously or subtly vied for the favour of the emperor though with various levels of success. We shall see below that the relationship between the religious and the royal figures in this social system is depicted very differently in later narratives.

The ascendancy of the empire allowed Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan to confer high status, patronage and support on the Buddhist order of monks.[24] The ministers that favoured this newly established state religion reciprocally pledged to protect not only Buddhism but also the Yar lung Dynasty. Additionally, they supported the imperially-sponsored construction of large temple structures (which were probably as much their financial burden as the emperors'), centralized the generally itinerant power base of the empire around the two "capitals", Ra sa (later to be named Lhasa) and Brag dmar (further southeast where bSam yas stands). The circular *maṇḍala* symbolism inherent in the design of bSam yas Monastery reflects the ideal empire, with the emperor identified with the powerful cosmic buddha (Vairocana) at its centre – as at other imperially sponsored Buddhist sites in East Asia more generally during this period.[25]

The idea that the court had the power to spread Buddhism throughout the empire, whether rhetorical or real, was disseminated as much for the positive way it reflected the Yar lung Dynasty as for the sake of Buddhism itself. The court's embrace of Buddhism thus supported the dynasty's self-presentation of its position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan Plateau.

At the end of the imperial period, Yar lung dynastic power was briefly divided between two rival factions and eventually disintegrated into what later histories call the "time of fragmentation" (*sil bu'i dus*).[26] Although Tibet's glory days of empire were behind it, their wake was still felt, and some later kingdoms and Buddhist traditions continued to trace their lineage back to the golden age of the Yar lung Dynasty and its emperors – recast as emanations of wise and compassionate bodhisattvas, actings as kings (rather than emperors) in order to establish Buddhist laws in Tibet.[27]

23 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 193.

24 See Doney, "Tibet": 209–11.

25 See Lewis Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja, Bodhisattva? Inscriptions from the Reign of Khri Srong lde brtsan," *Journal of Research Institute, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies* 51 (2013): here 71, on Ra sa and Brag dmar. On the identification of Vairocana with the Tibetan emperor, see Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation*: 60–65; Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 71–72.

26 See Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 81–85.

27 Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja": 44–47; Lewis Doney, "Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet: The Case of Tri Sondétsen," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 24 (2015): 29–47.

3 The Right to Rule in Tibetan Literature

The legitimacy of the Yar lung dynasty was presented in diverse ways in early Tibetan historiography. The authentically Old Tibetan (i.e. late imperial or early post-imperial) "texts" available to us use certain words and phrases specifically for the emperors and no one else (e.g., the term for emperor, *btsan po*, itself). The inscriptions describe the emperors as possessing divine power and wisdom corresponding to their pre-eminent status.[28] For example, in the ninth-century *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, Emperor Khri 'Dus srong (reigned 686–704) displays his mastery over wild animals as a child and goes on in later life to regain control over Central Tibet from the powerful mGar clan.[29] Jan C. Heesterman describes the importance of such a *topos* in South Asian *royal* narratives and rituals, wherein survival in the wilderness proves one's right to rule.[30] Some documents also relate how the first rulers came down from heaven to rule over their "black-headed" subjects.[31]

These stories float in time within early Tibetan historiography, so the date of their "original" creation remains unclear. Importantly though, they all draw on either broader Central Eurasian narrative traditions of exile and return to power in state formation mythology, or Indic narratives of renouncing the throne in favour of the spiritual life. Christopher I. Beckwith identifies the general features of this 'state formation' mythology, which he also calls 'state foundation' mythology or the 'First Story,' as widespread in Central Eurasia.[32] Of course, the goal here is not to claim that all older hero narratives necessarily concern kings. In fact, the application of some of the heroic *topoi* covered in this chapter to religious figures such as Moses and Jesus may be a fruitful source of comparison with specific processes for which I argue in this chapter.[33] Specifically, similarly mythic or legendary accounts from farther west in Eurasia depict these two great founders of Abrahamic religions suffering abandon-

28 Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja": 72–78.

29 See Brandon Dotson, "The Princess and the Yak: The Hunt as Narrative Trope and Historical Reality," in *Scribes, Texts, and Rituals in Early Tibet and Dunhuang: Proceedings of the Third Old Tibetan Studies Panel Held at the Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Vancouver 2010*, eds. Brandon Dotson, Kazushi Iwao, and Tsuguhito Takeuchi (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013): 78–79.

30 Jan C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 29–44.

31 Nathan W. Hill, "'Come as Lord of the Black-Headed' – An Old Tibetan Mythic Formula," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 45 (2016): 203–16. Hill argues that, in this context, "black-headed" approximates to 'a poetic term for mankind as a totality, created by the gods and kept in safe pastures by the kings' (Hill, "'Come as Lord of the Black-Headed'": 214).

32 Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009): 1–12.

33 See, for example, Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings*, ed. Philip Freund (1932; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1959): 15–18 and 50–56 respectively; this is also suggested in Brandon Dotson, "Theorising the King: Implicit and Explicit Sources for the Study of Tibetan Sacred Kingship," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 21 (2011): 95–96, n. 43.

ment and exile, respectively, under the same threat of death by mass infanticide, but eventually proving themselves to be superior to their royal antagonists, the Pharaohs and Herod.

The heroes that Beckwith identifies are almost always male, although a Khotanese narrative containing similar *topoi* of exile and return but concerning a female protagonist is also found in the Tibetan canon, titled the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā*.[34] Khotan lay to the northwest of Tibet and was first conquered by the Tibetans around 670.[35] In the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā*, Vimalaprabhā is a bodhisattva who incarnates as the daughter of King Vijayakīrti of Khotan, named *Praniyata (*rab nges*), and later imperial Tibet is responsible for her exile. When the Tibetans and Supīya (*sum pa*) attack Khotan, the king is killed, and his daughter is forced to flee. She travels with her husband to Suvarṇagotra, a land of gold, where she faces many hardships in her attempt to raise the money to pay off the Tibetans. In this tale, Tibet is one of the aggressors causing the protagonist to flee from her homeland.

These protagonists' strange births and / or difficult childhoods give them a special status in society that strengthens their claims to re-join and rule the societies they left or found new societies of which they are the (sometimes spiritual) exemplars. A similar narrative *topos* will be seen when we turn to the twelfth-century *Zangs gling ma* account of Padmasambhava, whose dangerous personality and power are the very things that raise him above the status of mundane or secular figures, including kings.

The beginnings of the shift towards Buddhist values and norms can be identified even in imperial sources from the reign of Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan. For instance, some Old Tibetan inscriptions describe time and space according to Buddhist ideas rather than asserting that they are grounded in the body of the emperor (as in the *Old Tibetan Annals* mentioned above).[36] In early post-imperial sources, Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan remains a positive figure, even becoming idealized for his work on behalf of Buddhism. However, he *himself* is recast according to Buddhist values rather than being represented in purely imperial terms. For instance, his martial art, valorized in the inscriptions, is underplayed or ignored in these documents.[37] Thus, these descriptions of the emperor correspond to Schwieger's analysis of the growing emphasis on Buddhist ethics rather than imperial values.[38]

34 *Dri ma med pa'i 'od kyis zhus pa* (e.g., Peking *bKa' 'gyur* text no. 835), catalogued as part of the "Resources for Kanjur & Tanjur Studies" project at the University of Vienna, n.d., http://www.rkts.org/cat.php?id=168&typ=1 [accessed 10.08.2024], most recently studied by Sam van Schaik, "Red Faced Barbarians, Benign Despots and Drunken Masters: Khotan as a Mirror of Tibet," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 36 (2016): 48–52.

35 Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire*: 30–34; Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*: 18.

36 See Doney, "Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet": 37–39.

37 Doney, "Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet": 39–46.

38 Schwieger, "Geschichte als Mythos"; Schwieger, "History as Myth."

At first, Khri Srong lde brtsan remains the primary focus of the documents that describe him, but religious masters gradually replace him at the centre of the stage. Eventually, religious masters upstage the emperor, who is increasingly called a king, *rgyal po*, perhaps due to the influence of Indic literature on Buddhist kingship. One of the mechanisms by which the superior spiritual status and later social status of the religious master was expressed in historical and biographical narratives (and partially thereby effected in society) is the renunciation of, or exile from, the centre of royal power.[39] The use of *topoi* of both exile and renunciation found in the wider and earlier set of narratives discussed above appear to have established a connection between a period of distance from the ruler's power centre and a hero's time in the wilderness before a return to claim his right to rule.

4 New Dependencies in a Twelfth-Century Hagiography

4.1 The Indic Master

Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's (1124–1192) *Zangs gling ma* hagiography, the earliest extant full-length life-story of Padmasambhava,[40] contains many narratives on the early contributors to the spread of the Dharma in Tibet.[41] This (auto)biography purports to be authored by Padmasambhava himself. It thus claims to have been composed shortly after the eighth-century events it describes, then buried like treasure to be discovered by a reincarnation of a disciple of the "author". Nyang ral was one of the first and most famous "treasure discoverers" (*gter ston*), who retrieved not only ritual works, prayers, holy relics, and objects bestowed on him in his previous incarnation as Khri Srong lde brtsan, the royal disciple of Padmasambhava, but also the master's biogra-

39 I go into much more detail on the stages of this process in Doney, "The Degraded Emperor": 25–39.

40 See Lewis Doney, *The Zangs gling ma: The First Padmasambhava Biography. Two Exemplars of the Earliest Attested Recension*, Series Monumenta Tibetica Historica, Abteilung 2: Vitae 3 (Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2014) on this work, and Cantwell and Mayer, "Representations of Padmasambhava" on the earlier Tibetan narratives concerning this Indic master. No Indic-language textual evidence for his life exists.

41 I quote here from the *Zangs gling ma* exemplar *ZL*h (Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 101–223) since it is one of the most complete and error-free exemplars of the earliest attested recension of the *Zangs gling ma*. The version of the *Zangs gling ma* contained in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* and translated in Erik P. Kunsang, *The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava Composed by Yeshe Tsogyal, Revealed by Nyang Ral Nyima Öser* (London: Shambhala, 1999) appears to represent a later recension, including a number of interpolated episodes. For more details, see Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 23–42. The basic narrative of the *Zangs gling ma* can still be followed in the Kunsang translation.

phy itself.[42] He thus did not claim to have written the *Zangs gling ma* but to have been present at the events described in it.

This new form of revelation enabled Nyang ral to place himself into the history of Tibet at a pivotal moment in the introduction of Buddhism there. Furthermore, within the text, Padmasambhava lends his seal of authority to Nyang ral's credentials as a Buddhist master and legitimizes his twelfth-century ritual corpus by practising it in India and transmitting it to Tibet in the eighth century. The processes that this new form of revelation involved and the power it entailed in twelfth-century southern Tibetan society have yet to be fully unpacked, but its benefits should have been evident to Nyang ral.

Most of the religious figures in this hagiography are deferential to the Tibetan king, Khri Srong lde brtsan. In contrast, the Indic tantric master Padmasambhava sets fire to the king's robes, causing the ruler to prostrate to him. In narrative terms, Padmasambhava's life before coming to Tibet may act as a precedent that grants him the status needed to treat the Tibetan king with disdain. The Indic master is identified as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, bodhisattva of compassion and patron deity of Tibet, in this work and other contemporaneous Tibetan Buddhist literature. At a very young age, he spends time in the wilderness but is then brought up as part of a royal family (*ZL*h 5a3–4). Eventually, he renounces his role as prince and orchestrates his own exile in order to follow the Dharma. Specifically, he kills a minister's son in an "accident", and although the ministers ask the king to execute capital punishment, the king commutes the sentence to banishment (*spyug*; *ZL*h 7a5–8a3).

Padmasambhava goes on to practise higher tantric yoga in charnel grounds all over India. Padmasambhava thereby exiles himself from courtly social mores and has become a master of both spiritual and wrathful powers, rejecting and thus transcending social status. We may recall Weber's notion of the stratified society discussed above and note how he describes the tendency of new status groups to demonstrate their social rank through apparel, accoutrements, taking up certain activities, refraining from others, and paying for services related to the purification of sin.[43] Indeed, the narrative choice to have Padmasambhava (self-)exiled as punishment for killing a minister's son (rather than simply renouncing the court) also underscores his dangerous characteristics. This role is like that of the Hocartian dynamic of kingship in which rituals that act to segregate the king from society magically rejuvenate the kingdom he controls.[44] In this role, Padmasambhava becomes similar to a "magician-king", separate from society but possessing the power to control and unify it.

Furthermore, he also undergoes trials on the journey towards enlightenment and submits himself to discipline by other powerful religious masters. As he attains each

42 See Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 10–19.

43 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 190–91.

44 Lucien Scubla, "Sacred King, Sacrificial Victim, Surrogate Victim *or* Frazer, Hocart, Girard," in *The Character of Kingship*, ed. Declan Quigley (Oxford: Berg, 2005): 50.

new stage on this path, he is renamed – some of these forming the basis of the famous "eight names" (*mtshan brgyad*) by which he is worshipped in Tibet until today.[45] Though he is exiled from courtly society, these stages and the corresponding names bestowed upon him also mark a rise in his status within the social group of Indic religious adepts.

Padmasambhava's status as a spiritual adept – both powerful and dangerous – also gives him power over three characters in the hagiography who are born kings, specifically, the king of Sahor named gTsug lag' dzin (*ZL*h 13a2–14b4), his own father Indrabhūti in Uḍḍiyāṇa (*ZL*h 15a2–16b2), and Khri Srong lde brtsan in Tibet (*ZL*h 29a1–30b2). Padmasambhava is renamed several times in the early part of the *Zangs gling ma* at each momentous event. The reader should remember that renaming the hero is often an essential part of his return from exile and ascension to power at the end of a heroic narrative, coupled with *anagnorisis*.

The final demonstration of Padmasambhava's power over kings takes place in central Tibet, where, drawing on earlier imperial motifs, King Khri Srong lde brtsan is represented as the personification of Tibet. Nevertheless, Tibet is no longer an empire; it is merely a kingdom. King Khri Srong lde brtsan is also an emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjuśrī, but he incarnates through his parents' sexual union and is born naturally – albeit with signs that mark him out as a marvellous child. He is not abandoned or exiled. Rather, he ascends to power upon the death of his father (*ZL*h 19b3–21b3). Thus, he is not set up as the hero of this narrative. Instead, when Padmasambhava arrives in Tibet, he disparages the status of the Tibetan ruler before relegating him to the subordinate but important position of a disciple. Khri Srong lde brtsan's conversion to tantric Buddhism is meant to symbolize the conversion of Tibet.

When Padmasambhava meets Khri Srong lde brtsan, he shows his disdain for the king's worldly status as he had with the previous two kings.[46] Padmasambhava humorously humbles Khri Srong lde brtsan: he bows to his robes of office and sets them on fire. The king then prostrates contritely to his spiritual superior (*ZL*h 30b1–2). This work gives no hint that the ruler of Tibet may have a right to social superiority since religious values are paramount in this portrayal. Moreover, from this Buddhist perspective, the king is found wanting due to his perceived social status *itself*. Although he is an emanation of Mañjuśrī, in this incarnation, Khri Srong lde brtsan is deluded

45 Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 95, col. i. My thanks go to Brandon Dotson for suggesting the connections between Padmasambhava's various names and the wider mythic importance of renaming.

46 For more on the context of this meeting, see Lewis Doney, "Narrative Transformations: The Spiritual Friends of Khri Srong lde brtsan," in *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia: Processes of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity*, eds. Eva Allinger, Frantz Grenet, Christian Jahoda, Maria-Katharina Lang, and Anne Vergati, Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 495; Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie 22 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017): 316–18.

by his position as ruler of Tibet. Padmasambhava, as fully enlightened, realizes this and upstages him by setting the symbol of his royalty aflame. The religious figure accomplishes his goal by using the magical abilities by which he proved his higher status to the other two kings, including his own father.

Such tales of overcoming mundane social hierarchies recall the literary analyst Northrop Frye's description of the "comic" narrative genre (as distinct from, say, the "tragic").[47] Frye states:

> In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognises that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallise around the hero, and the moment when this crystallisation occurs is the point of resolution in the act, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognito*.[48]

Frye goes on to note that, in general, "tragedy" refers to narratives in which the hero becomes isolated from their society. Alternatively, "comedy" describes those stories in which the hero is incorporated into it.[49] From this perspective, we can see this part of Padmasambhava's biography as one in which his search for tantric accomplishments (*vidyādhāra*s) beyond his home and society leads him to return to both with a changed status. He has transformed from a boy into a man. Moreover, he has gained accomplishments through trials in the wilderness of India (each step marked by a new renaming as described above, a form of *anagnorisis*) and reached the heights of enlightenment.[50] These accomplishments give him the power to religiously overcome his society while also renewing and redirecting it towards tantric Buddhism. In this way, Padmasambhava takes on the role of a state founder, but his new state and status are religious in nature. Both episodes appear to borrow Indic Buddhist vignettes and apply them to

47 I say "comic" as distinct from "tragic" rather than as opposed to it. Although the tragic and the comic do tend to stand at two ends of a spectrum, it should be clear that there are many more types of narrative than these two. As actually pointed out by Northup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; 1st paperback ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971): 13: 'The very word "genre" sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is. [. . .] Thanks to the Greeks, we can distinguish tragedy from comedy in drama, and so we still tend to assume that each is the half of drama that is not the other half. When we come to deal with such forms as the masque, opera, movie, ballet, puppet-play, mystery-play, morality, commedia dell'arte, and Zauberspiel, we find ourselves in the position of the Renaissance doctors who refused to treat syphilis because Galen said nothing about it.'

48 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*: 163.

49 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*: 35.

50 Among his five modes of comedy, Frye's mythic form (rather than the romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, or ironic) appears most suitable to this narrative. He describes it as 'Apollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods. In Classical literature the theme of acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury, and other deities who had a probation to go through, and in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation.' (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*: 43).

Padmasambhava, thereby partaking in a broader genre of the "comic" narrative to useful effect.

A kindred pattern is repeated concerning another foreign Buddhist master, Vimalamitra, whose biography is similar to that of Padmasambhava. Both figures spend their early life in Indic regions, have divine and royal parentage, are abandoned / exiled, and return to their home society. Despite his more established position as abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery, Vimalamitra also bows to the king (against the latter's wishes), causing Khri Srong lde brtsan's robes to catch fire once again. Subsequently, the king prostrates before Vimalamitra and, during a lavish ceremony, places him on a high throne (*ZL*h 64a5–64b4).[51] In this Buddhist context, the *topos* of the abandoned / exiled hero has also become mixed with that of renunciation, perhaps ultimately pointing to the emulation of the Buddha. This theme adds higher status to the Buddhist master, at once victimized by and renouncing the world, in contrast to the king, who symbolizes society and mundane power.

4.2 The Royal Disciple

The less-than-flattering portrayals of the king contained in the *Zangs gling ma* can be seen as a positive move within the soteriology of Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, it has significant consequences for the emperor's representation in later histories. It breaks with the trajectory of the growing aggrandizement of Khri Srong lde brtsan, evident from the imperial inscriptions and early post-imperial documents. In this twelfth-century narrative, Khri Srong lde brtsan is undoubtedly a representative of the Tibetan society that Padmasambhava is entering and hoping to convert to Buddhism. However, Khri Srong lde brtsan is not immediately obvious as one of Frye's 'obstructing characters', whom the audience would recognize as 'usurpers.' Frye perceptively notes that all characters tend to be redeemed in the comic narrative.[52] However, Khri Srong lde brtsan appears to play a more pivotal and positive role in the *Zangs gling ma* than Frye's representation suggests, which points toward the problem of mixed messages in the narrative.

Padmasambhava temporarily wrestles control of Khri Srong lde brtsan's power from him, but then returns it to the Tibetan ruler. The master-disciple relationship between Padmasambhava and Khri Srong lde btsan is long and fruitful in the *Zangs*

51 Far more detail on these parallels is found in Doney, "The Degraded Emperor": 46–51.

52 Frye's statement on the resolution of the newly transformed, comic "society" runs as follows: 'The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking [i.e., obstructing] characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy.' (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*: 166; square brackets are mine).

gling ma. Padmasambhava's arrival in Tibet is followed by a long round of textual translations and journeys by translators to transmit the Dharma from its homeland in the Indian subcontinent. The king's continued power over Tibet is shown by the fact that, after being upstaged by Padmasambhava, he brings the four horns of Tibet under his control and instigates a Buddhist law throughout the country (albeit one that privileges religious practitioners; *ZL*h 55b4–60b4). From this perspective, Khri Srong lde brtsan is not the antagonist but is somehow a protagonist who undergoes degradation at the hand of Buddhist masters acting as helpers. The king's abasement was part of his own heroic journey and the conversion and purification of Tibet into a Buddhist land. Frye himself has noted the use of ritual humiliation in Central Eurasian royal ceremonies:

> Even when those kings were strong and successful, they would have to go through certain ritual ceremonies in which they assumed the opposite role. We are told that in Babylon, at the time of the New Year festival, a king, such as Nebuchadnezzar, would go through a ceremony of ritual humiliation, have his face slapped by the priest and that sort of thing, and then his title would be renewed for another year. Nebuchadnezzar was a strong and successful monarch; but if this ceremony were omitted, it might provoke the jealousy of his tutelary deity.[53]

In the *Zangs gling ma*, the ruler is a secondary type of hero rather than merely the antagonist of the main hero. The degradation of Khri Srong lde brtsan (in a similar way to Nebuchadnezzar), and his relegation in mundane status from the supreme ruler into a tantric disciple, transform Tibet into a Buddhist country and rejuvenates both the kingdom and Khri Srong lde brtsan himself.

Nonetheless, his depiction as an inferior ruler of Tibet upstaged by religious masters stands in contrast to early descriptions of the Tibetan emperors. The documents surviving from the eighth to tenth centuries depict Khri Srong lde brtsan as the pinnacle of imperial and religious greatness.[54] In the *Zangs gling ma*, Khri Srong lde brtsan is shown up. His royal status is made comic by the burning of his official robes. Padmasambhava does not become king of Tibet but instead displaces the king as the central protagonist or hero, worthy of being given a birth story that retains the formal elements of older mythic hero narratives from Central Eurasia and elsewhere.

The act of upstaging, degrading, and humiliating Khri Srong lde brtsan aligns the king with a new Buddhist trajectory, allowing him to construct bSam yas Monastery,

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53 Northrup Frye, "A Personal View by Northrop Frye: The Bible and Literature. Program 13, the Metaphor of Kingship," originally published 1982, available online 2013, https://collections.library.utoronto.ca/explore/northrop-frye/frye-program-introduction/program-13 [accessed 10.08.2024]. Frye goes on to talk of King David's necessary humiliation at his greatest moment, the time when he was brought the Ark of the Covenant.

54 See Sam van Schaik and Lewis Doney, "The Prayer, the Priest and the Tsenpo: An Early Buddhist Narrative from Dunhuang," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 30, no. 1–2 (2007): 175–218 on these early documents and their varied but wholly positive images of Khri Srong lde brtsan.

pass Buddhist laws, invite other masters, find his tantric tutelary deity, take initiation in it, and eventually be reborn and enlightened as Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer.[55] Thus, within the narrative, the humiliation is real, the superior position of Padmasambhava is real, and the consequent reduction in the importance of Khri Srong lde brtsan is real. However, in the *Zangs gling ma*, at the moment of his degradation, Khri Srong lde brtsan is not the antagonist or unjust king but takes on some of that role as a necessary aspect of his conversion. Despite the internal logic of this narrative turn, in the wider history of representing kings in Tibetan biographical literature, Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan of the Yar lung Dynasty has been relegated to a status below Padmasambhava ever since.

5 Conclusion

During the Tibetan imperial period, towards the end of the first millennium, the court maintained a self-representation in which the emperor rightfully occupied the highest position in society, as well as power and land ownership over his dependents throughout the empire. The growing popularity of Buddhism among Tibetans by the second dissemination period a few centuries later seems to have necessitated a literary overthrow of this old order (which had already collapsed in reality). The idealized emperor at this point appears to have become subtly tinged with pre-Buddhist impurity, which required symbolic destruction. The twelfth-century *Zangs gling ma* explicitly narrates Padmasambhava (and Vimalamitra) as bringing "comic" transformation to Tibetan society. As a semi-royal emanation who gives up his kingdom in order to become a wandering *siddha*, Padmasambhava eventually acts as a spiritual goad for King Khri Srong lde brtsan. The above process marks the rise in status of Buddhist masters more generally in Tibetan literature, a process that Schwieger has already described well in society at large.[56]

As indicated above, the Indic rhetorical practice of identifying some religious groups as naturally superior, which Weber sees as belied by reality,[57] became something else in Tibet. Tibetans may have taken up the Indic rhetoric of the superiority of Brahmins and yogic adepts, which might not have been a historical reality, and put it into practice as a literary motif that then allowed new forms of asymmetrical dependency on tantric adepts to take root in actual Tibetan societies. In doing so, they supplanted the imperial hierarchy that placed the emperor at the top with a new social structure that gave religious figures pre-eminence. They were no doubt supported in their efforts by the fact that the fall of the empire had led to a power vacuum in cen-

55 For more on twelfth-century context of this text, see Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 8–22.
56 See Schwieger, "Geschichte als Mythos"; Schwieger, "History as Myth."
57 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 193.

tral Tibet. This transformation was expressed, or perhaps even brought about, by narratives of separate, special, otherworldly religious adepts who disregarded social mores, criticized society, and as a result, showed their superiority to kings and, by extension, also attested to their usefulness as instigators of the rejuvenation of the power of kings. These religious masters, their lineages, and institutions attained high status in Tibet; gradually, they also gained property that, although rhetorically disparaged, acted as proof of their status and the stability of the system that privileged them – think of Weber's remark: 'Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity.'[58] However, this process was not to be a leading factor in the changes that large-scale monasticism wrought in Tibetan society. In the introduction to this chapter, I quoted Kapstein's remarks on the dominance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the consequential disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy. He goes on:

> At the same time the subjection of the nobles to church rule was mitigated to the extent that the sons of aristocratic families became ranking hierarchs or monk-officials, and thus shared in church power. [. . .] Within the broader ruling class, therefore, there was a marked degree of concurrence among its lay and monastic facets. The church, however, was generally chary of lay interference and so more or less systematically limited the opportunities of noble households to exercise any appreciable degree of control over it.[59]

The limitation of lay power probably began during the lifetime of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, the creator of the *Zangs gling ma*, entailing the overreach of monastic power, which he evidently considered a threat to his position.[60] That being said, Schwieger rightly points out that Tibetan culture was not in general plagued by social upheaval or a wider threat to the Buddhist worldview – what Weber calls '[the] technological repercussion and economic transformation [that] threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground.'[61] Therefore, although different religious groups held power, the status of religious figures, in general, did not change significantly from their establishment until the twentieth century. This status allowed for a religious system in which many Tibetan subjects were dependent on the clergy or lay tantric adepts – sometimes in both religious and economic terms.

Perhaps this overthrow of the previous value and status of the emperor had already been forgotten in the sixteenth century.[62] To borrow the terminology of Weber, the pre-eminent status of the Tibetan emperor, which was conveyed in the Old Tibetan manuscripts and imperial inscriptions, is no longer 'distinctly recognisable'. In contrast, the superior status of religious masters is taken as 'an absolutely given fact to be ac-

58 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 187.
59 Kapstein, *The Tibetans*: 181.
60 See Doney, *The Zangs gling ma*: 8–15.
61 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 194.
62 See Doney, "The Degraded Emperor": 57.

cepted' within his society.[63] This reversal of earlier historical representations of Khri Srong lde brtsan and Padmasambhava also influenced interactions between living religious adepts and those in mundane authority in Tibet.[64] Consequently, it was not merely confined to the pages of Tibetan literature. These are just some of the effects on Tibetan notions of social status brought about by the growing power of Buddhism and Buddhist masters, whose narratives drew so successfully on older state formation mythology and the *topoi* of exile and abandonment to valorize their protagonists.

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63 Weber, *From Max Weber*: 184.

64 See Doney, "Narrative Transformations": 318.

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