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Between Self-Expression and Convention: Tibetan Reflections on Autobiographical Writing

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Between Self-Expression and Convention: Tibetan Reflections on Autobiographical Writing

This paper addresses the issue of literary criticism within Tibetan autobiographical writing. It begins with a survey of traditional Tibetan forms of life writing and then zooms in on autobiographies and their specific features. Through an analysis of autobiographical prefaces, it filters out certain recurring themes and topics, such as the modes of apology and self-confidence, the debate whether one should write about one's previous lives or not, and the claim to truthfulness of the autobiographical account. Finally, it addresses the relationship between the autobiographical preface and the work itself by introducing two diametrically opposed types. It concludes that Tibetan autobiographies and their modes of self-presentation are situated between literary convention and personal expression, and each author balances these in individual ways. The choices made are related to parameters such as the time of composition, the purpose of the work, and—last but not least—the individual who is writing.

Keywords: Tibetan literature; autobiography; *namthar* (*rnam thar*)*; tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*); literary criticism; *kyerap* (*skyes rabs*, "reincarnation stories"); Drukpa Künlek ('Brug pa Kun legs); Fifth Dalai Lama; Taktsang Lotsawa (sTag tshang lo tsa ba); Künga Drölchok (Kun dga' grol mchog)

Much has been written on Tibetan *namthar* (*rnam thar*), which literally means "liberation [story]" and is usually rendered in English by terms such as "biography", "spiritual biography", or "hagiography". The genre comprises many hundreds of works, the majority of which are dedicated to the lives of Buddhist or Bonpo masters.[1] However, it would be reductionist to regard the genre as a purely religious one since, as demonstrated below, the range of works that bear *namthar* in their title is much broader than just "hagiography". Moreover, Tibetan life writing itself comprises a wider range of works than those which have the rubric of *namthar* and includes a variety of other genres. Two conferences at Oxford have tried to draw attention to the many aspects of Tibetan life writing: its variety of topics (religious and secular), styles (from straight

prose to ornate poetry to song), and sources (ranging from literary compositions to diaries to archival documents). The editors of the present volume must be thanked for bringing the fruits of these two conferences together in this book. Viewing Tibetan literature from the angle of "life writing" opens up new ways of interpreting and contextualising Tibetan life stories and viewing them in relationship to life writing in other parts of the world, thus understanding them as an integral part of world literature.

The present article, however, approaches the topic from a different direction. It does not try to view Tibetan life writing from the angle of Western literary studies, or world literature, but is interested in what Tibetan authors themselves have to say about the project of writing life stories. Autobiographical writing in particular poses very specific problems for its authors, and the present contribution will focus on these specific issues and the way they have been addressed and discussed by the Tibetan authors themselves. It will explore shared conventions and the deviations from them, as well as the individual reflections of Tibetan authors writing about their own lives.

1. Tibetan life writing in its literary context: autobiography, biography, and related genres

In modern academic literature one will often read that the Tibetan term for "autobiography" is *rang gi nampar tarpa* (*rang gi rnam par thar pa*), or its short form: *rangnam* (*rang rnam*), literally "one's own liberation [story]". A closer look at Tibetan autobiographical accounts, however, shows that the term *rangnam* is actually found more frequently in reference to another author's work than in the autobiographies themselves, and that the titles of most autobiographical works give preference to other terms.[2] In a number of cases, the work is called a *tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*) rather than *rangnam* or *namthar*, thus avoiding the idea of a spiritual "liberation story", and instead

referring to the day-to-day deeds and activities of the individual.[3] In Buddhist life writing, the title of the work does not always indicate that the work is autobiographical; some works are simply called *namthar* (biography/hagiography), thus steering clear of the awkward idea of the author writing about their own liberation. Moreover, authors use a plethora of more specific and more personal designations for their autobiographical accounts, for example a *dentam* (*bden gtam*, "truthful account"), a *rang gi logyü* (*rang gi lo rgyus*. "(hi)story about oneself"), or, slightly more poetic, a *nyongwa gyen gyi metok* (*myong ba rgyan gyi me tog*, "flower ornament of [my] experiences").[4] Modern Tibetan autobiographies, which became particularly popular in the aftermath of the Chinese annexation of Tibet as a way to preserve memories of traditional Tibet, bear titles such as *mi tse* (*mi'i tshe*, "an account of my human life" or "lifetime"), thus allowing the author to write about their personal life and experiences without implying any religious connotations. Context (social; religious or secular), date of composition, and authorial intention are parameters that would need to be explored and charted systematically before we can arrive at any comprehensive overview of work titles, and how they correspond to the content, style, and purpose of the works in question. The following pages can only provide a sketch and some selected examples of autobiographical writing, and Tibetan reflections on it. Before discussing these examples, however, we briefly need to consider the broader literary context of Tibetan autobiographies.

The distinction between autobiography and biography is not always very clear-cut. In the Tibetan context, the process of written composition often involves more than one person; for example, a Buddhist master may dictate the text to a student, who acts as the scribe, but would not be considered its author, even if he has a significant part in the editing of the work. In the case of (auto-)biography, such a collaboration between

teacher and student can result in a 1st person or a 3rd person life story, depending on whether the scribe-cum-editor preserves the "I" of the master's direct speech, or transforms the narrative into his own 3rd person account of the master's activities.[5] Narrative voice therefore does not always reveal whether the work in question is biographical or autobiographical, and a close reading of the introduction and the postscript and colophon of the work is required to determine the exact process of textual production. The life stories of some prominent figures in Tibetan history have a very complex background; to mention just one famous example, the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama is based on multiple sources and has gone through several hands before being published. Kurtis Schaffer (2010, 273) has aptly described the process as "a group effort in which diverse sources were extensively reworked by a team of scribes, editors, record keepers, and the Dalai Lama himself."

It is therefore advisable not to consider autobiography in isolation, but as part of the broader genre of biographical writing. In doing so, we must also keep in mind that biographies come in many forms, and under various genre categories. The most common designation is the above-mentioned *namthar*, "liberation [story]"; however, many other literary genres play a role in this context. From as early as the 12th century,[6] and with increasing frequency in subsequent centuries, biographies of the present life are preceded by accounts of previous incarnations of the individual or *kyerap* (*skyes rabs*), and some of them even include accounts of future lives. Moreover, numerous biographical prose accounts (*namthar*) are interspersed with *gur* (*mgur*), "spiritual songs", thus integrating narrative prose and reflective or instructional verse into a complex literary form. This alternation of prose narrative and *gur* allows for a skilful play with narrative voice, since the biographies present the hero's life in the 3rd person,

while the spiritual songs are formulated in the 1st person, representing the direct speech and personal expression of the individual.[7]

Hagiographic forms of life writing also correlate with two devotional literary genres: *söldep* (*gsol 'debs*, "supplication prayers"), and *töpa* (*bstod pa*, "verse eulogies"). Both of these often refer to life events of the subject and therefore intersect with life writing. Some authors have combined supplication prayer and biography into a joint "prayer to the life-of-liberation" type of composition.[8] Such prayers have also had long-term intertextual repercussions. For example, Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa, 1357–1419) composed a supplication prayer to the lineage of *lamrim* (*lam rim*, "stages of the path") teachers, known under its short title as *Lamchok Goje* (*Lam mchog sgo 'byed*). In 1787, the Gelukpa scholar Tse Chokling Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen (Tshe mchog gling yongs 'dzin Ye shes rgyal mtshan) published an extensive, two volume collection of biographies of the *lamrim* teachers. Conceived as a commentary on Tsongkhapa's supplication prayer, it follows the structure of the prayer and quotes the initial lines of its stanzas to introduce the life story of each individual teacher. The same supplication prayer has also been used by Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Peljor (Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor) as the basis for his history of Buddhism, the *Paksam Jönzang* (*Dpag bsam ljon bzang*, 1748).[9] Biography and supplication prayer therefore need to be understood in their intertextual relationships.

Without aiming at a comprehensive list, the spectrum of Tibetan "life stories written about someone else" (biography) would thus include

- Biography: "liberation story" (*namthar*) or story of the subject's activities (*tokjö*)
- Pre-incarnation stories (*kyerap*)
- Supplication prayers (*söldep*)

- Eulogies (*töpa*)
- Biographical prose narrative (3rd person), often combined with autobiographical spiritual song (*gur*) (1st person)

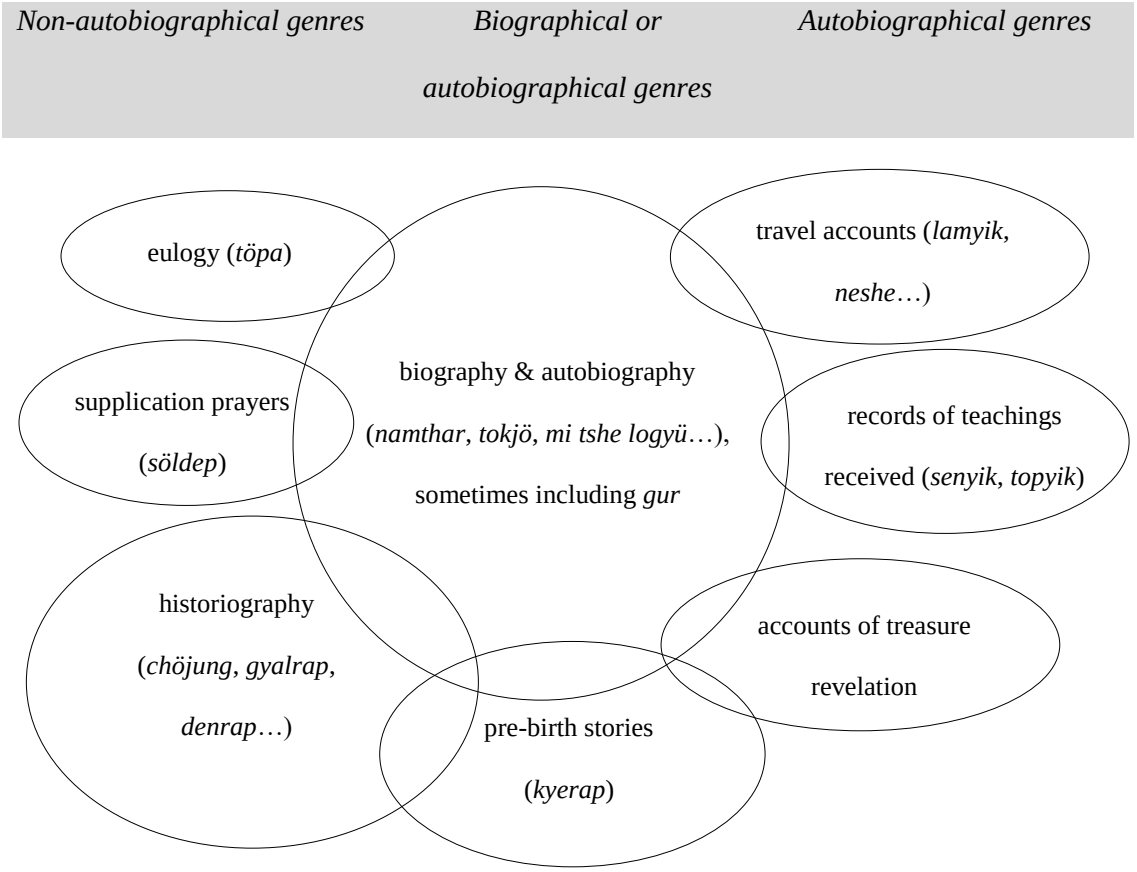
Tibetan *auto*biography, on the other hand, relates to a slightly different set of genres. Accounts of one's own life can appear under the above-mentioned designations of (*rang gi*) *namthar*, or *tokjö*, or any of the many variants of "life story" (*mi tshe logyü* etc.). Religious autobiographies can also include accounts of previous life-times (*kyerap*). In addition, autobiographical accounts include more specific text types, such as for example *lamyik* (*lam yig*, "travelogues"), and *senyik (gsan yig*) or *topyik* (*thob yig*, "records of teachings received", that record the scholarly training of the author). Autobiographical accounts can also be situated in specific pragmatic contexts, for instance in the *terma* (*gter ma*) tradition, when the author recounts the events in their life that led to the discovery of a certain *terma* ("treasure text").[10] Here, the autobiographical account underpins the authenticity of the *terma*. As in biographies, autobiographies also integrate *gur* ("spiritual songs"). In travelogues (*lamyik*), for example, *gur* give the author a chance to pause the narrative flow and reflect on certain events and experiences, often turning this reflection into a religious instruction.[11]

The spectrum of Tibetan autobiographical writing therefore includes

- (Spiritual) autobiography (*rangnam*), secular autobiography (for example *mi tshe logyü*), *tokjö* (secular or spiritual)
- Pre-incarnation stories (*kyerap*)
- Records of one's textual studies (*senyik, topyik*)
- Travel accounts (*lamyik*)
- Accounts of treasure revelation by *tertön* (*gter ston*, "treasure revealers")

- Biographical prose narrative and spiritual song (*gur*) (both 1st person).

The field of literary genres related to biography and autobiography and the intersections between these genres can be illustrated in the following way:[12]



As this overview shows—and as the two Oxford conferences on Tibetan life writing have amply demonstrated—Tibetan life writing comprises much more than just *namthar* and needs to be viewed within this wider literary context. This larger field of literary genres and their mutual relationships seems to reflect some themes and priorities that are characteristic of Tibetan literature. These genuinely Tibetan forms of literature include, in particular, stories of previous births as part of a life story; genres related to religious education and transmission lineages (such as the "records of teachings received"); and the literary relationship between devotional and narrative/historical genres, such as eulogies (*töpa*), prayers (*söldep*), and biography.

In terms of quantitative distribution, historiography and biography have been outstandingly prolific within the Tibetan literary corpus as a whole, which makes it distinctly different from the corpus of neighbouring literary cultures (such as India). In spite of the truism that the model of Buddhist life writing is the life story of Buddha Śākyamuni, we have to acknowledge that in reality Tibetan life writing has in many ways developed quite independently and created its own forms of expression and literary genres. Given this impressive range of literature, the question arises how Tibetan scholars and writers of the past understood these genres, and what standards and norms they set, and followed, in their own compositions. This brings us to the question of literary criticism in Tibetan life writing.

2. Literary criticism and modes of self-presentation

It has sometimes been stated that Tibet lacks an indigenous tradition of literary theory, since the discipline of *tsomrik* (*rtsom rig*, "literary studies") is a relatively recent development.[13] The traditional Buddhist five *rikne* (Tib. *rig gnas*, Skt. *vidyāsthāna*, "fields of knowledge" or sciences), adopted from India and expanded to a set of ten in Tibetan Buddhist scholarship, do include the study of verse, lexicography, and poetry and poetics, but these disciplines relate to Indian style *kāvya* ("ornate poetry") and were not introduced to suit indigenous Tibetan literary forms.[14] In that sense, there is indeed no well-established indigenous Tibetan discipline of literary criticism, and therefore no systematic critical tradition related specifically to biographical writing.

However, this in no way means that Tibetan scholars did not reflect on the topic of biographical literature, or comment on it in writing. As Kurtis Schaeffer (2010) has noted in an insightful article on the topic, reflection on the style and contents of the work—features that we might call its genre—are frequently embedded within these literary works themselves, usually in the introductory sections and in the postscripts and

colophons. Schaeffer has introduced three fascinating examples of authors who discuss the style and purposes of *namthar*, weigh the merits and disadvantages of different styles, and defend their respective choice of writing styles against critics. His article concerns both biography/hagiography and autobiography but does not aim to address the differences between the biographical and the autobiographical mode.

However, autobiography seems to deserve particular attention in this context since the need for self-reflection and commentary is particularly pertinent here.[15] Writing about one's own life creates the need for some comment on why and how the work has been written, an apology for embarking on a project that could be understood as self-promotion, and as such would contradict powerful social and religious norms. Therefore, authors of autobiographies tend to begin with an explanation of the nature of their work: why they are writing their life story, and why they have chosen this specific way of doing so. In her ground-breaking work on two autobiographical testimonies by the Tibetan master Jigme Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1729/30–1798), Janet Gyatso (2001, 105) describes this difference between biographies and autobiographies in the following words:

> The self-written life account, due to powerful constraints in Tibetan linguistic convention on how one should talk about oneself, typically exhibits a studied diffidence, whereas the life written by someone else typically exhibits an equally studied reverence. [...] Tibetan biographers often present the life of their master in glorified, idealized terms [...whereas] convention dictates that autobiographers portray themselves as ambivalent about the value of writing about their deluded life and sham of a religious career. [...] Even though Tibetan autobiographers usually end up portraying themselves positively, even self-aggrandizingly, they do so always in light of a tension that is missing in biography. The tension results from a pair of conflicting social norms: one requiring that persons refer to themselves with humility and the other that religious teachers present themselves as venerable exemplars.

The latter norm, i.e., the expectation for religious teachers to present themselves as venerable exemplars, worthy as models for emulation by their readership, is sometimes enhanced by another norm found in tantric Buddhism: the notion that tantric masters, yogis, or *siddha*s are expected to develop and display confidence and pride in their spiritual achievements. Already in early Buddhism, an enlightened being—a Buddha or an *arhat*—was said to experience four types of confidence (Pāli *vesārajja*, Skt. *vaiśāradya,* Tib. *mi 'jigs pa*). Tantric Buddhism adds an additional layer through the meditation technique of deity yoga, in which the meditator experiences the "divine pride" (*lha'i nga rgyal*) of the self-identification with the deity.

Such attitudes of confidence and pride are sometimes expressed in autobiographical texts too, as can be illustrated by an autobiographical song attributed to Ogyanpa Rinchen Pel (O rgyan pa Rin chen dpal, 1229/30–1309). The song, consisting of sixteen stanzas, outlines the stages of his journey to Ogyan (O rgyan), highlighting his superior qualities in each situation, and closing each time with the refrain: "Certainly, I am supreme among the crowd of renouncers!"[16] The song has been preserved and transmitted within several biographies of Ogyanpa, and its genesis is not entirely clear. For our purposes, however, it does not really matter whether the song was indeed composed by Ogyanpa himself, or by someone else, before it was included in his biographies. What matters is that it was acceptable, and to a degree even expected, that a yogi and tantric master would present himself in this way. The self-confidence expressed here is not regarded as an expression of personal self-conceit, but as a quality expected of a tantric Buddhist master: the firm trust in one's own abilities as an accomplished Buddhist practitioner. In this sense, it is just as much a convention as the apologetic openings that we find in the majority of autobiographical accounts.[17]

This other extreme: the stance of diffidence and apology is far more common in Tibetan autobiographies than the self-assertion expressed in Ogyanpa's song. Reading the introductions and post-scripts of Tibetan autobiographical works, one will observe a recurring rhetoric of apology and justification, which often includes the following tropes:

Unworthiness of the author:

- The life story is not worth being recorded
- The author's literary skills are limited

The autobiography was written for the benefit of others:

- The author has only written the autobiography because his disciples (friends, other Buddhist masters) urged him to do so
- It has been written for the benefit of the readers, in particular to inspire faith
- Life stories provide models of the Buddhist path and are useful didactic tools

It is in accordance with the Buddhist tradition:

- It follows the Buddhist tradition of biographical writing; the life story of the Buddha and previous lamas serve as a model.

Some of these apologetic tropes apply to Tibetan literary works more broadly, while others are specific to autobiography. For example, the apology for a lack of literary skill and the request to the reader to forgive any errors made in the work are found across different types of literature, since they concern the writer's abilities as an author rather than the issue of (auto-)biographical writing as such.[18] Similarly, the remark that the work was composed at the request of students is a fairly general statement that can be

found in works of various kinds. However, in autobiographical works it becomes crucial, to avoid the impression that the author is trying to promote himself. In some cases, the description of this process becomes very elaborate, with long lists of the names of the individuals who requested the autobiographical account, and with much detail about how the author first refused, or delayed the composition of the work, before finally giving in and writing the life story. The trope that the author's life is not worthy to be recorded is obviously specific to autobiography; it is sometimes expanded by providing examples of other, worthier, individuals before zooming in on the life of the author himself.

3. The autobiographical preface: between convention and self-expression

The above observations may give the impression that the modes of presentation are highly stereotypical and do not leave much scope for individual expression. If this were the case, it would hardly be worth exploring this material in any detail. However, a closer look reveals that the individual works are much more interesting than that. The length, the style, the mode of self-representation, and the argumentation in the introductory and concluding sections of autobiographical works are as varied as the accounts themselves, and as varied as the authors and contexts that produced them.

It is reasonable to assume that the conventions for writing autobiographies, and for the modes of self-presentation in the introductory sections and colophons, have developed over time. With the growth of biographical literature itself,[19] the introductions to these works also became more elaborate, and presumably more conventionalised. This article cannot provide a comprehensive investigation of this issue; however, the samples discussed below seem to indicate that the typical modes of self-presentation became more pronounced and more elaborate in works from around the 16th/17th centuries onwards, and from this period on the arguments put forward in

apology of the autobiographical project became more predictable and conventionalised. For example, the autobiography of the 2nd Dalai Lama Gendün Gyatso (dGe 'dun rgya mtsho, 1476–1542) is relatively brief (ca. 40–70 folios, depending on the edition). In the opening section it takes the author merely two lines to mention that the text was requested by others, and then he begins straight away with an outline of the life of his previous incarnation, Gendün Drup (dGe 'dun grub, 1391–1474). About 150 years later, with the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682), we encounter an extremely prolific author who has produced an extensive autobiographical account and displays the full gamut of apologetic opening, literary criticism, and reflection on the nature of his own work. It is obvious that by this time, a good amount of literary discussion had already taken place, since the Great Fifth can refer to other examples, and quotes those who had discussed forms and styles of life writing before him, as we will see below. Chronology and time period therefore seem to be parameters that play a role in the way an author approaches the project of autobiographical writing.

3.1 Humility and self-assertion

The assumption that the introductory sections, and the modes of self-representation of the authors, become more elaborate and conventionalised over time does not mean that they are strictly prescribed and do not leave scope for individual expression. The tone of the introduction usually matches the contents and purpose of the autobiographical account—whether it puts the emphasis on historical accuracy, or religious instruction, or personal experiences and impressions. The imperative of an apologetic opening is also handled in different ways by different authors. Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa (dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba, 1504–1564/66) composed a "brief account of his own situation" (*rang tshul mdor sdus pa*), and the account is just as unpretentious as the title. It is introduced by declaring that good and pure things can originate from flawed

conditions—the author uses the standard images of the elixir produced from poison, and the lotus born out of the mud. For this reason, one should avoid classifying notions of fault and virtue in the life story. This statement, combined with well-established metaphors, allows the author to steer elegantly around the problem of self-promotion in the autobiographical account (Dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba [n.d.], fols 1b–2b).

Some authors place their self-presentation in a slightly ambiguous middle ground between apology and self-assertion, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes implicitly. Shap Karwa (Zhabs dkar ba, 1781–1851) begins his famous autobiography with the usual apologetic opening. However, he puts so much praise into the mouths of those requesting the autobiography that the reader is left in no doubt about the distinguished position and abilities of the author:

> Oh you Protector in these degenerate times!
> If you composed your *namthar* of great wonder,
> how you first gave up the clinging to this life,
> how you then adhered to distinguished teachers,
> how you finally practised in solitude,
> and how full realisation has now been born in your mind—
> if you relate your *namthar*,
> it will be vastly beneficial for the beings of the future,
> just like the rays of the sun rising
> are beneficial for the whole world.
> Therefore, do not think it unimportant.
> Out of loving-kindness, please tell it by all means.[20]

The change of voice—the conventionalised apology for writing the work, combined with the praise expressed by his disciples—allows the author to resolve the tension between the two imperatives outlined by Janet Gyatso, the attitude of modesty and humility, and the ability to serve as an impeccable model for the Buddhist practitioner.

3.2 Talking about one's previous lives

The balance between the norms of humility and self-confidence can shift towards the latter when it comes to accounts of previous lives. The 3rd Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) opens his brief autobiographical account declaring that due to the obscurations of the time, he cannot remember much of his previous lives. Then, however, the initial tone of humility is abandoned. He goes on to relate his memories of previous lives, and his pre-incarnations include some of the most prominent figures of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. He declares that if he wrote down the magical feats he was able to do in the past, nobody would believe it.[21] Whether this outright self-confidence is due to the early date of composition, when the conventions for humble openings were perhaps not fully formed yet, or whether it is a conscious decision on the part of the writer, who belongs to the earliest known lineage in which reincarnation became the regular mode of succession, would require further investigation.

The issue of previous lives is addressed in a number of autobiographies,[22] and opinion on this issue is divided. Writing accounts of previous incarnations (*kyerap*) had become common relatively early on,[23] and perhaps for this reason some authors of autobiographies felt the need to comment on the question of memories from the past, and of writing them down. Karma Chakme (Karma chags med, 1613–1678) expresses some caution. However, he says, since others have spoken about their previous lives and this is beneficial for the audience, it is permissible to do so. He believes that he can remember some of his previous existences and writes about them "without pride" (*sprul pa yin snyam rlom sems med*) (Karma Chags med [n.d.], 1–2). Other authors strongly discourage claims to such memories of one's previous existences. For example, Jigme Lingpa (1729/30–1798) comments:

> Such people not only set out an account of the successive [incarnations] in *saṃsāra*, which is without beginning or end; some ignorant youngsters full of ideas also claim that they will explain their memories of their previous existences—I understand this to be a very severe karmic defilement.[24]

Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Peljor (1704–1788) has prefaced his autobiography with a lengthy introduction in which he displays the whole gamut of reflection on the project of writing one's own life story. In addition to the usual apologetic opening and the appeal to not exaggerate one's abilities and accomplishments, he also includes an extensive discussion in which he confirms the existence of rebirth and reincarnation, but also criticises in strong words those who falsely pretend to be reincarnate lamas.[25]

Jamgön Kongtrül ('Jam mgon Kong sprul, 1813–1899) achieves a masterpiece of rhetoric, explaining at length that he does not remember his previous lives; that he is not a very advanced person; that the lives of others are much worthier than his own; and anyway, the present life alone reveals enough about one's previous existences. However, he continues, in our degenerate times one needs to speak about things that used to be secret, and biographies are important tools to preserve the *dharma*, to inspire faith, and to demonstrate how even ordinary beings can make spiritual progress—which allows him to proceed straight away to the topic of his previous existences (Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas 1997, 3–6).

3.3 Impartiality and truthfulness

While the question of writing accounts of previous incarnations (*kyerap*) is controversial, the importance of truthfulness and avoidance of boastfulness are a shared theme across autobiographical literature.[26] Gungtang Könchok Tenpe Drönme (Gung thang dKon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762–1823) composed a short autobiography

written in verse that bears the title "Truthful account, a mirror clarifying reality" (*Bden gtam de nyid gsal ba'i me long*). It closes with the stanza:

> Just like a rosary of *rakṣa* beads, adorned with coral,
> these true words about [my] ordinary life, together with its few virtues,
> have been strung on the thread of true words without exaggeration or deprecation;
> may [these beads] be counted by the fingers of intelligent discrimination.[27]

This stanza by Könchok Tenpe Drönme contains two key words that are repeatedly mentioned in the introductions of autobiographies as being things to avoid: *dro* (*sgro*, "praise", "exaggeration") and *kur* (*skur*, "blame", "deprecation"). Taktsang Lotsawa Sherab Rinchen (sTag tshang lo tsa ba Shes rab rin chen, 15th cent.) composed an autobiography published under the title "Liberation story of the omniscient Sherab Rinchen Gyaltsen, the great translator" (*Lo chen thams cad mkhyen pa shes rab rin chen rgyal mtshan zhabs kyi rnam par thar pa*).[28] In the opening of this short autobiography, the author emphasizes that one should avoid praise (*sgro*) and blame (*skur*), as stipulated by the Buddha himself and by the Buddhist masters:

> Praising (*bstod*) oneself and denigrating (*smod*) others
> with a roar of pride in one's superiority
> is not the way of the noble ones.
> Publicly declaring one's qualities without exaggeration (*sgro*) or deprecation (*bskur*),
> that is the way of the Buddha(s).
> In particular, many faithful students
> who apply themselves to scholarship and meditation
> have declared univocally that if [a biography] is composed by others,
> flattery (*sgro 'dogs*) and accusations (*skur 'debs*), praise by those who don't know what is praiseworthy, and so on will make it flawed.
> Therefore, as in the biographies of the Lord of Dharma and his two disciples,
> one must compose [a biography] well, avoiding the mistakes of [praising the subject] too little or too much.
> That said, even though it is difficult to explain one's own character,
> I will speak a little bit about it, because I have urgently been asked to do so.[29]

The word pair "praise" (*sgro*) and "blame" (*skur*) is also used by Tāranātha (1575–1634) in the introduction to his biography, when he says: "Declaring the situation without exaggeration or deprecation, that's exactly it!"[30] The first stanza from the verses by Taktsang Lotsawa quoted above are also cited in the famous opening of the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama, to which we will return later. It seems that for these writers of the 15th–17th centuries the idea of a balanced and objective presentation had become a standard for autobiographical writing. The claim to truthfulness contained in these works is not only a claim to honesty, it also allows the author to strike a balance between diffidence and self-assertion, thus achieving the balancing act between the contradicting norms of autobiographical writing.

3.4 Literary style

The opening of a literary work is not only the place to set stylistic norms for the work itself, it is also the place where authors can display their literary skill. The 4th Shamarpa Chödrak Yeshe (Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes, 1453–1524) composed an autobiography in verse, and quite appropriately, this composition begins with a section in ornate poetry imitating Indian *yamaka*, a stylistic form in which words are repeated, but each time with different meanings (note that the first and the last word of the stanza correspond, thus closing the circle):

> *rgyal bas lung bstan bstan pa rgyas mdzad mdzad pa mtha' yas zhing / /*
> *zhing khams rgya mtshor rgya mtsho'i rdul snyed yang yang sprul par ston / /*
> *ston pa mchog de de bzhin gshegs dngos dngos grub kun stsol mkhas / /*
> *mkhas pa du mas ma smad sngags byed byed pos phyag byas rgyal / /*
>
> The one prophesied by the Victorious One, who makes the doctrine flourish, and whose deeds are limitless,
> exhibits in the ocean of world realms as many manifestations as the sand in the oceans.

> This excellent teacher, the true *tathāgata*, who is capable of bestowing all *siddhi*s, given supreme praise by many scholars, and offered homage by the author, may he be victorious!

The Shamarpa continues explaining that a skilful literary composition will illuminate the darkness of ignorance, pacify discord, and remove wrong views, thus highlighting the benefits of such a composition. Then he moves on to a brief apologetic opening, and to his own life story told in verse.

In contrast to this, other authors prefer a more straightforward style. A particularly original example is contained in the collected writings of Künga Drölchok (1507–1565), a remarkable Buddhist scholar who was born in Mustang, trained in the Sakya (Sa skya), Karma Kagyü (Karma bKa' brgyud), and Shangpa Kagyü (Shangs pa bKa' brgyud) traditions, and became throne holder of Jonang monastery in his later life. Preceding his multiple autobiographical accounts, the reader finds a brief text called "A Written Preface to All [my] Compositions" (*Brtsams chos ma lus pa'i sngon du 'gro ba'i yi ge*).[31] In the most straightforward manner possible, the text opens by introducing the author in the following way:

> Some [say]: "Who has produced these words?" "I." "I—who? What family? Born where? What name?" My answer is: "[My] family is Se Khyungnyak (Se Khyung gnyag). [My] birth place is Lowo Möntang (Glo bo smon thang). My name is the carefree free-ranging renunciant." "Who is your lama?" "In this life, it is Gyagom Lekpa Gyltsen (rGya sgom Legs pa rgyal mtshan) [...][32]

This gives the author the opportunity to move on to the topic that he really wants to expand on: his religious affiliation and practice. The remainder of the text is devoted to these topics, and the author concludes the introduction in the following playful manner:

> In short, my root lamas are all contained in Gyagom, and if they are not, whoever is not contained in him—shame on them! The highest ordinary attainments—from

> whomever they may have been requested, there will never be more than [what I received from him]! There is no [further] story to be told. What has happened has happened. This is certain. This memo has been written by the carefree free-ranging renunciant.[33]

As the examples above have shown, autobiographies have to negotiate the norms of humility and confidence, apology and self-assertion, and strike a balance between them. The self-reflection and the playful handling of existing norms often goes beyond the expected models, and there is much variation not only in the way the conventions are phrased, but also in the degree the conventions are accepted or discarded by an author.

4. The preface and the work itself

The length, style, and content of the introductory sections of autobiographical works are not random but relate to the works themselves. As we have seen, a verse biography, such as that of the 4th Shamarpa, may open with ornate poetry, while the account of the personal experiences or *nyongwa* (*myong ba*) of Künga Drölchok opens in the most direct way an author can possibly address the audience: a dialogue about who he is, presented in a short prose staccato.

Two final examples may illustrate the range of stylistic choices available to authors of autobiographies. Both examples are taken from fairly well-known works but will be presented again in this context because they are particularly suited to illustrate two different prototypes of self-presentation. They demonstrate how the self-reflection voiced by the authors relates to the works themselves, and that the authors are very aware of the stylistic choices they have made. The first example is the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama, and the second is the autobiography of the famous "crazy saint" Drukpa Künlek, one of the itinerant yogis of Tibet, who lived almost two centuries before the Great Fifth.

The 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682) (Figure 1) introduces his autobiography with a long preface.[34] He explains at length that he was at first reluctant to write his own life story, and he describes in much detail how scholars and religious masters urged him to do so. In the end, after many attempts to persuade him, even the Tibetan state oracle declared that he needed to write his autobiography. It took more than twenty years (1644–1667) until he finally consented to compose an autobiography. The Dalai Lama explains how the work was created, and that it was based not only on his memory, but also on the diary he used to keep. Moreover, the process of composition and redaction relied on a whole team of scholars who assisted him by comparing the dates of events against other sources (such as his *topyik*) and arranging everything in a chronological order. The 5th Dalai Lama also discusses the issue of writing style at some length, and in this context includes the stanza by Taktsang Lotsawa (15th cent.) quoted above to recommend an impartial style, avoiding both praise and deprecation.

He criticises specific hagiographies written by the disciples of certain Buddhist masters for exaggerating the master's good qualities. He also criticises autobiographies in which the authors depict themselves as the incarnations of important Buddhist masters of previous times and claim to have memories of their previous lives. In contrast to this, he declares his intention to write a truthful and straightforward account of his activities. He also ponders on the appropriate literary style of such an autobiography, and he considers Indian-style ornate poetry (*kāvya*) as inappropriate, and comments:

> Some biographies are written in too poetical a style, others have the sign of being too ordinary, as if they were the words of an old man looking after the yaks, and yet others are written in a straightforward manner, but try to pierce others like the arrow of Sidrub [the son of Indra, i.e., Arjuna] [...][35]

In contrast to such inappropriate styles, the Dalai Lama explains that he is intending to write a truthful, clear, and lucid account of his activities:

> So what one does is not hidden, but transparent to oneself. There is no need to prevaricate about it. [...] What one needs is to write that which is interesting to hear and understood by all, and not something just for passing the long days of spring.[36]

In short, the Dalai Lama declares that he has written an account of his life in chronological order, composed in a clear style, and presenting the events in a truthful way. For a major public figure and political leader like the Dalai Lama, this clear, chronological account was a chance to publicly clarify the historical constellations of his time and the intentions of his own activities. It also gives him a chance to distance himself from the more problematic aspects of the politics of his time (such as Gushri Khan's attack on Kham Beri and Tsang), and set the record straight on issues such as his recognition as an incarnation.[37] Due to the way it was created, the biography is situated between a personal account and a public record, but in spite of the "team effort" involved in bringing the material together, the Dalai Lama speaks with his own voice as an author, and uses the autobiography as a public record of his own thoughts and activities, presented in a structured and rational manner.

An entirely different attitude is expressed in the biography of Drupka Künlek (1455–1525) (Figure 2), one of the *nyönpa* (*smyon pa*, "crazy saints" or "holy madmen") of Tibet. The Tibetan *nyönpa* have a precursor in the Indian *mahāsiddha*s, a type of tantric masters who deliberately break social norms and act in seemingly "crazy" ways, demonstrating their mastery of esoteric teachings, their insight into the true nature of phenomena, and their super-human powers.

Tibet has a long-standing tradition of such "crazy saints". Several of the most prominent figures lived in the 15th century,[38] a period of increasing scholasticism, and a

time in which the monastic establishment became more and more involved with power and politics. The "crazy saints" have been interpreted as a counter-movement to these trends.[39] In line with this anti-institutional and counter-conventional stance, *nyönpa* biographies tend to be less interested in historical facts and events but express a personal experience that is beyond the norms of contemporary society, and they contain satirical and provocative as well as poetic and spiritual elements.

There is evidence that the account of Drukpa Künlek's life is not a straightforward autobiography in the sense of a coherent text produced by the subject of the life story himself. Already the editor of the first compilation of the work mentions that it was based on a multiplicity of materials; moreover, the text that has come down to us has had a long transmission history.[40] Leaving the complications of the origin and transmission of the text aside, what matters is that the work is presented as a 1st person narrative and is clearly intended to paint a lifelike picture of its hero, whatever the contribution of its compiler and editors may be. At the beginning of the work, Drukpa Künlek picks up the theme of "praise and blame" and expresses the purpose of this work in the following playful words:

> My life, which I have recorded here,
> if regarded closely, is not that of a distinguished person.
> But since others do not know about my virtues and my faults,
> I will narrate my life, hiding the virtues and pointing out the faults.[41]

In a later episode, the author comments on how biographies should or should not be composed:

> On one occasion, someone who wrote his biography [by enumerating] his deeds, deeds that he had done in such-and-such a year, in a chronological order, said to me: "In your life story, Master Künlek, there seems to be no order, and the events come up randomly!" I said: "You are right. When deeds are done, they are necessarily in a certain order. Also in the life of the Buddha, everything happens [in a sequence] following his descent from Tuṣita heaven. Also his doctrine has a

> certain order, since it has been preached in three stages.[42] Moreover, in the playfulness of dance, one does one turn after the other. My life story, however, is written in a random way, grabbing the nose and grabbing the hair.[43] It has not been written because the events happened on a special date. Each time I remembered something, I wrote it down.
>
> The biographies of lamas, which are arranged in a strict order, are like the notes of an accountant: in this year, this month, and on this day, I have given such and such an amount, and received such an amount of grain loads—writing this down is terribly narrow-minded. What use is it if a great lama writes that he was offered a horse, and a small lama that he was offered a piece of cloth for his hat and this number of measures (*bre*) [of grain]! Isn't it ridiculous to write down that one had this kind of food when the sun was standing high, or that one defecated in such-and-such a manner at sunset?"[44]

The haphazard manner of recording one's memories stipulated here contradicts the standards laid out so carefully in numerous works by Tibetan Buddhist masters, scholars, and dignitaries. But what is the intention of the author—is this a serious normative statement, or pure polemics? A closer look at Drukpa Künlek's autobiography shows that the statement is more serious than it may sound, since it is in full accordance with the style of the work itself. The autobiography does not provide a chronological narrative, but rather piles episode upon episode without much logical connection. It reads like a rendering of the stream of memories as they appear in the mind of the author, without a strict succession, and without a literary master plan. James Joyce might have appreciated the way it seems to render a stream-of-consciousness.

What could be the motivation? In the Tibetan context of this period, we can expect neither an interest in psychoanalysis as in Western modernist writers, nor an experiment with new literary forms. However, Buddhism provides a framework that comes close enough to a stream-of-consciousness in a Joycean sense. Within this Buddhist framework, the human mind has an inherent potential for awakening. In particular, the mind of an accomplished Buddhist master is considered pure and

unstained by the norms and views of society. All thoughts are equally valuable as expressions of the enlightened nature of the mind, and therefore equally worthy to be expressed and recorded. Drukpa Künlek's autobiography mirrors this idea in the way the story is told, without discrimination between the spiritual and the ordinary. This document of the spirituality of a "crazy saint" includes satire, obscenity, and provocation alongside religious songs and doctrinal and philosophical passages; in spite of its humorous and provocative stance, it teaches a serious religious lesson.

At the narrative level, the episodic character of Drukpa Künlek's life story also resonates with the popular narrative traditions of Tibet, and some of the more humorous and satirical episodes are reminiscent of the popular Tibetan trickster stories, such as Akhu Tönpa (A khu ston pa) or Nyichö Zangpo (Nyi chos bzang po). With this blend of typical indigenous Tibetan styles and topics, it exhibits a multiplicity of genuinely Tibetan views and voices, held together by the individual who is speaking, Drukpa Künlek himself.

However, we should not be naïve about this unconventional mode of presentation: being unconventional in itself represents a prototype, and in this sense a convention. The life and writing style of a *nyönpa* are based on pre-existing models, perhaps to a similar degree as the autobiography of a Buddhist monk scholar, or the well-structured chronological account of state affairs of a Dalai Lama. Thus, even an unconventional life story, like any other life story, is situated between pre-existing norms and individual creativity; it both follows and generates norms, even in negating some of them.

Conclusion

As the examples in this contribution have shown, Tibetan autobiographies and their modes of presentation are situated between literary conventions and personal

expression, and each of them balances the conventional and the personal in individual ways. Autobiographies (*rangnam* and the multiplicity of related genres) actually seem to leave more scope for variation and conscious choice than the biographies or hagiographies of Buddhist and Bonpo masters (*namthar*) which are expected to be written in a reverential tone, highlighting the good qualities and achievements of the master, and can hardly go against this basic imperative of hagiographic life-writing.

The style and the narrative strategies of Tibetan life-writing are closely interlinked with the life portrayed, as the examples of the 5th Dalai Lama and Drukpa Künlek have shown. The style of their biographies is partly determined by the public role of the protagonist (as monk-scholar and politician, or crazy yogi-saint) and the purpose of the work (providing one's personal historical record or giving a spiritual instruction in an unexpected and entertaining way). At the same time, it also leaves space for individual choices of register, and we are in the lucky position that some Tibetan authors have shared their thoughts on this topic with us by offering comments on their own writing style, and on appropriate writing styles more generally.

A more comprehensive survey would be needed to get a better sense of the parameters involved in Tibetan autobiographical literature, both external (such as the date of composition, and the religious school affiliation of the author) and internal (the relationships between the title of the work, its contents, and the authorial reflections presented in the introductions and conclusions). The present article has only tried to give some glimpses of this vast genre and to show both its conventions and its diversity.

While Tibetan autobiographies may share certain features with autobiographies from other parts of the world, some features seem quite specific to Buddhist literature, and/or to the Tibetan context: the integration of pre-birth stories; the playful boasting in autobiographical poems, related to spiritual pride and to Tibetan traditions of verbal

contest; the combination of prose and song, typical of Tibetan biographical narratives (as well as other Tibetan narrative forms, such as the Tibetan epic); and, finally, the wider literary context in which biographies and autobiographies are situated, with its specific Tibetan genres (see above, section 1). Thus, it seems justified to speak of a truly "Tibetan" tradition of life-writing, not confined in a narrow way to the genre of *namthar* ('liberation story') but expressed in a variety of literary forms and contexts. The authors of these works respond to a canon of literary conventions, but they do this in very individual ways, thus using, challenging, and shaping this canon itself.

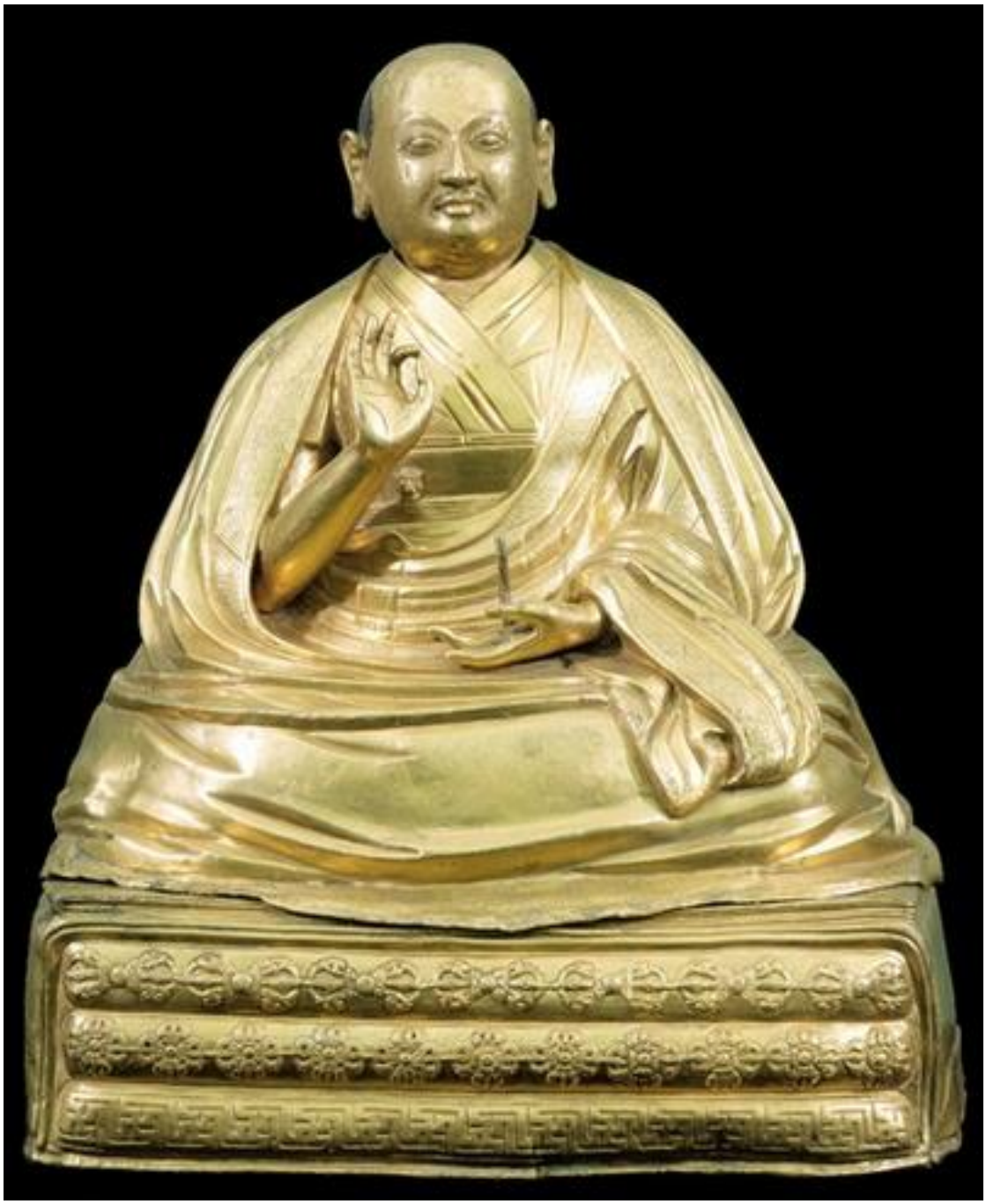


Figure 1. HAR item no. 65375. Statue of the 5th Dalai Lama, 18th cent., Rubin Museum of Art. The Dalai Lama is presented both as a monk-scholar, wearing the monk's robe, and as an important and powerful figure, sitting elevated on three layers of cushions.

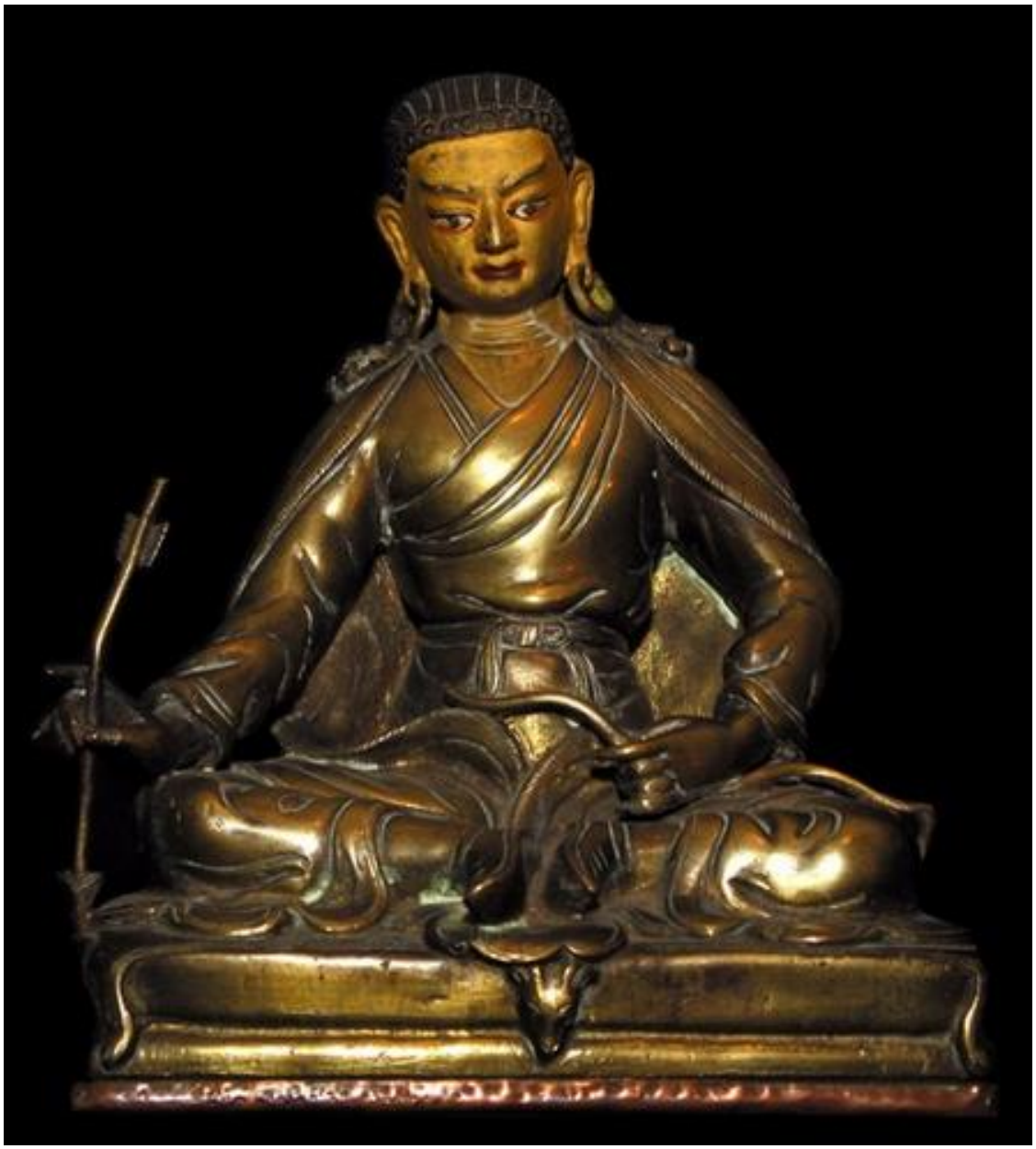


Figure 2. HAR item no. 73035. Drukpa Künlek is shown as a yogi sitting on an antelope skin.

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Zhabs dkar ba. n.d. *Zhabs dkar Rdo rje ’chang gi rnam thar rgyas pa bshad pa*, blockprint from Bla brang Bkra shis ’khyil (TBRC W8LS17574) [see also Ricard et al. 1994].

Online resources

HAR: www.himalayanart.org

TBRC: www.tbrc.org

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1. Among the 1225 biographical works from the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre / Buddhist Digital Resources Centre website (www.tbrc.org) investigated in his article on Tibetan Biography, Schaeffer (2010, 296) classifies only 23 biographies and 9 autobiographies as “secular”.
2. The majority of Tibetan work titles is composed of a descriptive and an ornamental part; the descriptive part is the one that is relevant for identifying “what the text is”, or the genre. The case is complicated by the fact that one work is often known under multiple titles, since the title on the front page of a book and the title given in the colophon of a work are not always identical. The colophon is more significant since it is likely to contain the title intended by the author, but even this is just a rule of thumb. Moreover, Tibetan works are often known popularly under short titles that are not found anywhere in the available

editions but have become the most common way of referring to the work. For a more detailed discussion see Almogi (2005).

3. *tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*) renders the Sanskrit term *avadāna,* which is used in Buddhist narrative literature to refer to stories about the deeds of a person in their previous life. Takamichi Fukita (2018) has recently suggested that the original meaning of the term was "illustration" or "precedent". In Tibetan life writing the term has been extended to stories about the present life. In particular, biographies of secular or political contents are often called *tokjö*, presumably putting the emphasis on the actual deeds and activities of the individual in question, rather than their spiritual accomplishments. Some famous examples are the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682), the autobiography of Dokharwa Tsering Wangyal (mDo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal, 1697–1763), known as the *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, and the famous biography of Pholhane (Pho lha nas), known as the *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*, by the same author. However, the term *tokjö* is not restricted to secular biographies; it also appears in the titles of the autobiographies of several Buddhist scholars, such as Jonang Tāranātha and Kongtrül Lodrö Taye (Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas).
4. For example, Gungtang Könchok Tenpe Drönme has composed a work called *Bden gtam de nyid gsal ba'i me long*, and Künga Drölchok has written an autobiographical account entitled *Myong ba rgyan gyi me tog*.
5. The latter, for example, has happened in the case of the travelogue of Chak Lotsawa Chöje Pel (Chag lo tsa ba Chos rje dpal), which was written in the 3rd person by his student Ju Chödar ('Ju Chos dar), based on the oral account of his teacher. Shap Karwa's autobiography, on the other hand, is written in the 1st person; however, it turns out to be a work of composite authorship, with part of the work written by himself, and part of it by a disciple, see Ricard et al. (1994, XVIII–XIX); Pang (2011, 39).
6. The tradition of recollections and records of previous lives seems to originate with Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192; see Hirshberg [2017]) and with the 1st Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110–1193). Another fascinating example is an account of the previous and the future incarnations of Karma Pakshi (1204–1283), attributed to a direct disciple. Charles Manson (Oxford) was given access to a manuscript of this hitherto unknown work by Karmapa Ogyen Tinley Dorje in 2010. These early examples indicate that records of previous incarnations of Tibetan lamas were produced from the onset of the system of reincarnation in Tibet. (See also van der Kuijp [2005, 29–31] for an overview of the *trülku* [*sprul sku*, 'reincarnate'] idea and a possibly earlier example in the Kadampa [bKa' gdams pa] tradition.)
7. This is a feature deeply embedded in Tibetan traditions of storytelling and shared, for example, with the Tibetan Gesar epic.

8. Such texts often bear the term *namthar söldep* in the descriptive part of the title; see the analysis of such a work in Sernesi (2014).
9. See Roesler (2014, 123–124).
10. Gyatso ([1998] 2001) provides a detailed analysis of autobiographical accounts in relation to "treasure" revelation.
11. Stag tshang ras pa's account of his travels to Oḍḍiyāna (*O rgyan mkha' 'gro'i gling gi lam yig thar lam bgrod pa'i them skas)* is a good example of this type.
12. At the conference *Beyond Biography: New Perspectives on Tibetan Life-Writing* in 2012, I used the Venn diagram presented here to illustrate the intersections of biography-related literature. Similar diagrams have since then been published in relation to pilgrimage literature (Ramble 2014, 180) and travel literature (Galli 2017, 38).
13. See Roesler (2015, 46–47) with further references
14. Tibetan Buddhist scholarship traditionally divides the fields of learning into five major disciplines (*rig gnas che ba)* adopted from India*:* Buddhism *(nang rig pa)*, logic and dialectics (*gtan tshigs rig pa),* linguistics and grammar (*sgra rig pa),* medicine (*gso ba'i rig pa),* handicrafts and art (*bzo rig pa),* and five minor disciplines (*rig gnas chung ba)* introduced by Sa skya Paṇḍita and his tradition: poetry and poetics *(snyan ngag),* metrics (*sdeb sbyor),* etymology and lexicography (*mngon brjod),* dance (*zlos gar),* astronomy and astrology (*skar rtsis).* An in-depth discussion of the relationship between the religious and the secular, including the secular sciences, is found in Seyfort Ruegg (1995). See also Roesler (2015, 36–37).
15. As mentioned above, the borderline between the two is not always clear-cut, and, in this sense, it may seem slightly artificial to insist on this distinction. However, what matters for our purpose here is that these works are *conceived and presented* as autobiographies, whatever their exact textual genesis may have been.
16. *pho zhen log can 'tshogs pa'i g.yang rtse lags //* The stanzas have been translated and analysed in detail in Li (2011, 146–228).
17. The self-confidence of the Buddhist tantric master expressed here resonates well with the indigenous Tibetan tradition of verbal contest. A nice example within *namthar* writing is the exchange of verbal challenge and mutual insult (*mchid*) between Milarepa and Nāro Bonchung as rendered in Tsangnyön Heruka's version of the life story of Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa'i rnam thar*). See Gtsang smyon Heruka (2004, 366–368).
18. While the declaration of one's own limited abilities as an author is the norm, here too we find exceptions to the rule, such as Sakya Paṇḍita's famous self-praise as a scholar (see Kapstein [2003, 777–778]; see also Jabb [2015, 19 with fn. 91]). We may add an example from Döndam Mawe Senge (Don dam smra ba'i seng ge)'s encyclopaedia, which closes with the following verses: "[This work] is for the benefit of knowledgeable individuals, it

is the entrance gate for the wise and intelligent—so, young people who possess understanding should study it! When some see this book, the fools do not recognise what is gold, and what is brass! When some see this book, they just accumulate mental obscurations by criticising it. When some see this book, the wise understand its excellent content and praise the outlook and reflections of its system. Those will become experts in everything, matchless, like the sun and moon in the sky." The praise of the work itself leaves the reader in no doubt about the abilities of the author. *'di ni gang zag mkhas pa rnams kyi don yin te // 'di ni shes rab blo ldan 'jug pa'i sgo yin ni // gzhon nu shes rig can rnams 'di la slab par bya // kha cig mig gis po ti 'di mthong na // blun pos gser dang ra gan ngo mi shes // kha cig mig gis po ti 'di mthong na // skyon 'dogs las sgrib kho na bsags par 'gyur // kha cig mig gis po ti 'di mthong na // mkhas pas de yi legs pa'i don rigs nas // lugs sde 'di la lta rtog legs par bstod // de ni rtsod med nam mkha'i nyi zla bzhin // 'gran zla dang bral kun la mkhas pa 'gyur //* Don dam smra ba'i seng ge (2016, 312–313).

19. Schaeffer 2010 observes a rapid growth of biographical literature both in number of works and in length during the 17th–19th centuries.

20. *e ma snyings dus 'gro ba'i mgon / / khyed kyis dang po tshe blos btang / / bar du mtshan ldan bla ma bsten / / tha ma dben par nyams su blangs / / da lta nyams rtogs thugs la 'khrungs / / mgon khyod rnam thahr ngo mtshar che / / nyi ma'i 'od zer shar tsa na / / 'dzam gling yongs la phan pa bzhin / / khyed kyi rnam thar gsung tsa na / / ma 'ongs bstan 'gro yongs la phan / / de phyir gal chung yin ma dgongs / / brtse bas cis kyang gsung du gsol / /* Zhabs dkar ba Tshogs drug rang grol (n.d., vol. ka, fol. 6a).

21. [...] *gzha n yang de'i dus su rdzu 'phrul dang nus pa sna tshogs pas 'gro ba'i don byed pa dang / 'ga' dang 'ga' zhig dran par 'dug ste / mang pos brjod pas yid ches par su zhig 'gyur /* Rang byung rdo rje (2006, vol. nga, fol. 2b).

22. For an interesting 20th-century case that includes some discussion of earlier material, see Willock (2017).

23. See n. 7 above.

24. *mtshan nyid de lta bus thog mtha' mi 'tshal ba'i 'khor ba la ji ltar brgyud pa'i rabs 'god du ga la zhig / sems dang bcas pa'i ma rig pa'i gzhon pa can dag gis sngon rabs dran pa'i lam nas brjod zer ba ni las kyi sgrib pa mchog tu lci ba'ang shes so /* 'Jigs med gling pa (1998, 4).

25. "By poising as the incarnation of a former scholar-adept, they claim to have formerly done this, and composed that. Thus, a chain of lies is spread by impious lamas, pretending to remember their former situations." *sngon 'das mkhas grub skye sprul yin brdzu yis / / ngas sngon 'di mdzad 'di brtsams zer sngon gnas / / dran khul mi chos bla ma'i rdzun phreng spel / /* Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (2001, 2). Rachael Griffiths (Oxford) is

currently writing her doctoral thesis on the autobiography of Sumpa Khenpo and will analyse this text in more detail.

26. Interestingly, Maria Turek has observed in her fieldwork on contemporary hagiographical accounts that certain types of "lying" about or embellishing the life story of a revered Buddhist master are common and are not considered problematic within the community, see Turek (2017). We must assume that similar forms of embellishment are at play in earlier literary biographical accounts. The discussion of the claim to truthfulness presented here does not imply that the account necessarily has to be truthful; what interests me here is merely the mode of self-presentation, not the actual accuracy of the account itself.
27. *byi ru'i rgyan ldan raksha'i phreng ba bzhin / / phal ba'i spyod tshul yon tan 'ga' zung bcas / / sgro skur spangs pa'i bden tshig srad bu la / / bstar 'di mkhyen dpyod sor mos bgrang bar mdzod / /* Gung thang Dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me (2003, 365).
28. A title presumably not created by the author himself but added by later editors of the work, not only because such a title would be in stark contrast to the attitude expressed in the work itself, but also because the author has not provided a title of the work in the colophon, which means that the missing title was presumably supplied by later editors
29. *rang nyid mchog tu rlom pa'i nga ro yis / / bdag bstod gzhan smod dam pa'i tshul min yang / / sgro bskur med par rang gi ngang tshul rnams / / 'khor du sgrogs pa sangs rgyas tshul lugs yin / / khyad par mkhas shing grub pa lhur len pa'i / / dad ldan slob ma mang pos mgrin gcig tu / / gzhan gyis sbyar la sgro 'dogs skur 'debs dang / / bstod mi shes kyis bstod sogs skyon 'byung bas / / chos rje yab sras gsum po'i rnam thar bzhin / / chad lhag nor bas dben zhing sbyar legs par / / rang gis ngang tshul rang gis brjod dka' yang / / nan gyis bskul ngor cung zad brjod par bya / /* Stag tshang lo tsa ba (2007, 1–2).
30. *gnas tshul sgro skur med par brjod na ko / /* Tāranātha (2008, 2). For a detailed study of Tāranātha's autobiography, see Templeman (2009).
31. Whether it was intended to be a preface specifically to the autobiographical accounts, or to his writings in general, is unclear to me and would require further investigation of the available editions.
32. *'ga' zhig gis smra ba 'di rnams sus byas / bdag gis so / / khyod su / rigs gang / skyes pa'i sa / ming ci / lan brjod pa / rigs se khyung gnyag / skyes pa'i sa glo bo smon thang / ming la bya btang yan pa blo bde'o / / khyod kyi bla ma su / tshe 'dir ni / rgya sgom legs pa rgyal mtshan te /* [...] Kun dga' grol mchog (2005a: 1).
33. *mdor na bdag gi rtsa ba'i bla ma rnams rgya sgom du 'dus na des chog / ma 'dus na gang ma 'dus pa de skur shog / mchog thun mong gi dngos grub su la'ang zhu sgo re lhag yod re kan / gla bo brjod bya med / ci byung byung yin / don der thag chod lags so / / bya btang yan pa blo bdbe'i brjed byang li khi taṃ / /* Kun dga' grol mchog (2005a: 15). The

Sanskrit form *likhitam* (“it has been written”) is used at the end of each subsection of this text, serving both as a paragraph marker and to show the erudition of the author.

34. A full translation of this passage is available in Karmay (2014, 17–21) and Ahmad (1970, 24–31). It has also been discussed in Schaeffer (2010, 273–276).
35. Quoted from Karmay (2014, 20). For a different rendering see (Ahmad 1970, 29). For the Tibetan text, see Ngag dbang blo bzbang rgya mtsho (2009, 13).
36. Quoted from Karmay (2014, 19). For a different rendering see Ahmad (1970, 28). For the Tibetan text, see Ngag dbang blo bzbang rgya mtsho (2009, 12).
37. See Karmay (2014, 4 and 147–162) on Gushri Khan’s campaign; Karmay (2014, 48 and 50) on the Dalai Lama’s scepticism regarding the memories of previous lives.
38. DiValerio (2011) investigates the relationship between the three most prominent “crazy saints” of the 15th century: Tsangnyön Heruka, Ünyön Künga Zangpo (dBus smyon Kun dga’ bzang po), and Drukpa Künlek.
39. The discussion of Tsangnyön Heruka by Gene Smith (1969) has become a classic on this topic. For a vivid description of Tsangnyön Heruka’s “crazy” behaviour, see Roberts (2010, 192): “During a period of time, early in his career, he coated his body in human ash, smeared himself in human blood and grease, tied human fingers that he had cut from charnel ground corpses into his hair, and wore human intestines as necklaces and earrings. Looking like this, he would often go into the market, alternately laughing and crying, and with his penis erect would chase women [...] This is how he earned part of his sobriquet Tsangnyon, “the lunatic from Tsang”. [...] However, he subsequently went to visit his mother, who did not approve of his appearance. He promised that he would desist from being so extreme, which he did, relatively speaking, though he still wore a human skin robe, human bone adornments, and the like [...]”
40. See the colophon at the end of vol. *ka* by the compiler, the “Mad Monk of Mön” (*Mon ban smyon pa*), who was himself regarded as the reincarnation of Drukpa Künlek. The biographical accounts have come down to us in the form of a fairly recent 4 volume blockprint edition produced in 1892; only the first is narrated in the 1st person and is considered to be the autobiography. The other three volumes are based on notes and records by disciples and patrons. See Monson (2015, 77–97).
41. *rang gi rnam thar rang gis bri{s} pa ’di / / tshur mthong skyes bu ya mtshan min na’ang / / gzhan gyis bdag gi skyon yon mi rtogs pas / / skyon bton yon tan sbed pa’i byung tshul bzhad / /* Stein (1973, 13 [fol. 2b]). The verse seems like an inversion of a theme found elsewhere: The biography of Tangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po, 1361/65–1480/86) ends with the lines: *de ltar gnubs ban rgan po rang nyid kyi / / skyon sbas yon tan sgro btags byung tshul ni / / nyi grags mchog sprul gsung gis yang yang du / / bskul ngor rang lo nga lnar brjod pa dge / /* “In this way, hiding the faults and proclaiming the virtues of

this old monk from Gnubs, I wrote it down in my fifty-fifth year because Nyidrak Choktrül asked me again and again. May it be beneficial." (Thang stong rgyal po 1976, 167, fol. 7a).

42. The Pāli *sutta* of "Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma" outlines three stages of the turning of the wheel of *dharma* in which the Buddha first explains the "four noble truths" (or "truths of the noble ones"), then says that the four truths had to be fully understood, and then declares that he has fully understood them. The image of the three "turnings of the wheel of the doctrine" was later applied to three main strands in the development of Buddhism, see for example Snellgrove (1987, chapter II, 4).

43. This expression seemed significant enough to be incorporated into the title of the biography: *Rnal 'byor pa'i ming can kun dga' legs pa'i rnam thar byung tshul lhug par smras pa zhib mo'i rtsing mo ha le ho le sna zin spu zin nas bkod pa*, "The liberation [story] of the so-called yogi Künga Lekpa, spoken naturally/casually/in prose, the crudest of the subtle, compiled randomly, grabbing the nose and grabbing the hair."

44. *yang skabs cig na / sgrigs rang mdzad nas lo 'di'i nang du mdzad pa 'di mdzad kyi rnam thar mdzad mkhan cig na re / chos rke kun legs pa'i rnam par thar pa 'di la / gang thod thod nas mdzad pa ma gtogs / go rim zhig med (31b) pa 'dra zer / ngas 'di skad byas / de thugs bden / byung na go rim dang bcas pa ces kyang dgos te / bcom ldan 'das gang mgzad kyang chog pa de la'ang / dang por dga' ldan lha'i yul nas byon pa dang / chos la'ang 'khor lo rim pa gsum dang bcas go rim 'dug / bro ba'i rtse mo 'dra ba la'ang sngon la 'di byed re 'dug ste / nga'i 'di / ha le ho le / sna zin nas spu zin nas byas bris pa yin / rnam thar ston rin chog nas bris pa min / sngo lo 'phyar 'phyar la / gang dran dran bris pa lags / lar gyis sgrigs dam rang drags pa'i bla ma'i rnam thar la / bu lon pa'i bcug yig bzhin / lo 'di dang zla ba 'di / tshes grangs 'di'i nyin mo gte ma 'di bcug nas / nas sran khal 'di blangs bris pa 'di yang gu dog drags / dgung lo 'di la gdul bya la phyin pas / bla chen yin na rta 'di phul dang / bla chung yin na zhwa phrug dang / bre grangs 'di byung rang bris nas dgos pa ci yod / de lta yin na nyi ma bro ran tsa na lto 'di bzas dang / dgongs kha brun 'di 'dras btang byung rang bris pa gad mo e 'tshor yin byas so / /* Stein (1973, 44–45, fols 31a–31b).