

CHAPTER SIX

THE EARTH-OX AND THE SNOWLION

MONA SCHREMPF

The annual ritual dance (*'cham*) festivals of Bon po communities in A mdo often have several different performative traditions embedded within them. Two such traditions have attracted my attention due to their particular local symbolism and interpretations.¹ The first of these performances, known as the *sa glang* or "earth-ox", consists of a publicly staged astrological prediction concerning local weather and health conditions, which is made shortly after the Tibetan New Year. The second, and better known of the two, is the dance of the snowlion. In the Bon po context, the snowlion specifically represents the mount of the deity Rma gnyan spom ra, who dwells upon A myes rma chen, the most important regional mountain range in A mdo. The snowlion dance is also by far the most popular dance with the lay audience attending *'cham* festivals.

Both the earth-ox rite and the snowlion dance are performed today in the Bon po community of Shar khog, which is situated in the central and northern part of modern Songpan County (Zung chu rdzong), northwest Sichuan Province (see fig.9). The inhabitants of Shar khog—the Shar ba—strongly supported the revival of both these traditions after 1980, and consider them to

¹ I would like to thank Samten Karmay, Per Kværne, Alexander Macdonald, Axel Ström and Toni Huber for their valuable comments and various references regarding this article, and Katia Buffetrille, Toni Huber and Nigel Bond for illustrations. My 1996 field work in A mdo was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service and the dissertation fund of the Free University of Berlin (NaFöG). The research was enabled through my affiliation with the Xinan Minzu Xueyuan, Chengdu, and resulted in my dissertation on the subject of Tibetan ethnic and religious revival; see Schrempf (2001).

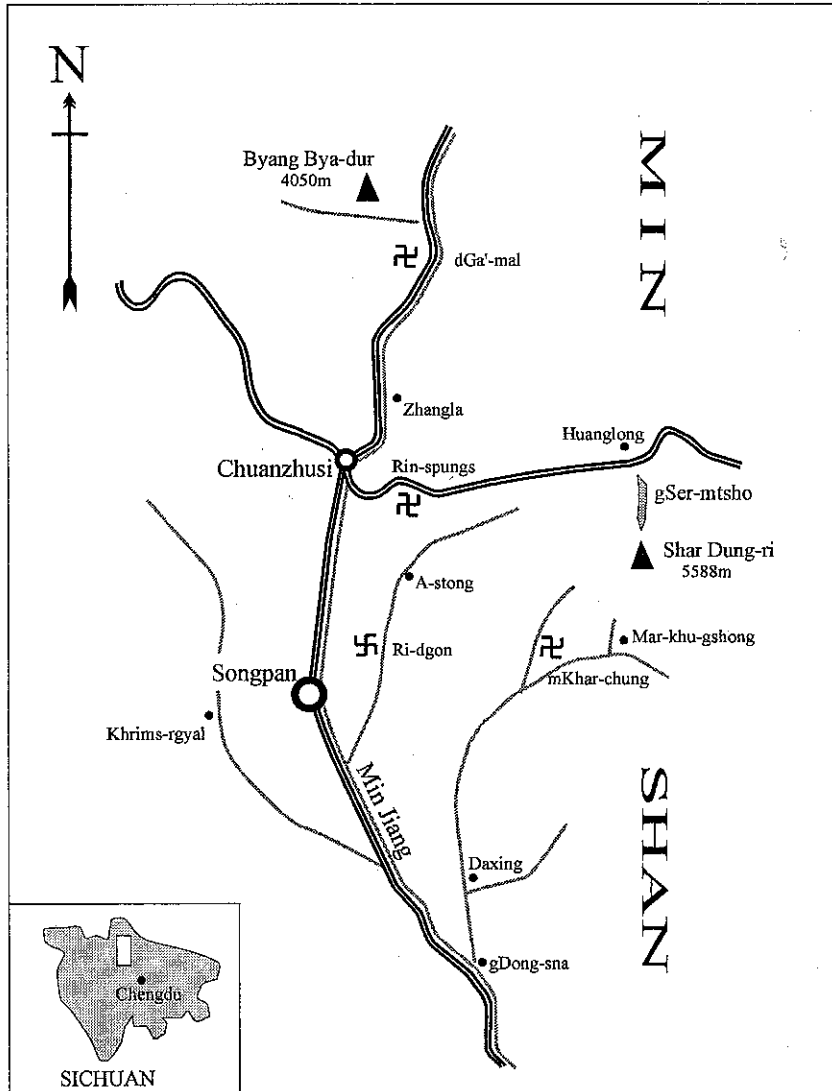


Figure 9: The Shar khog region (M. Schrempf and N. Bond).

be important aspects of their local Tibetan heritage. However, the local discourses concerning their origins are a contested field of meanings, opinions, and interpretations, oscillating between either distinctly Tibetan or alleged Chinese provenances. As I will argue, this cultural dichotomy constitutes a generally reoccurring feature of Tibetan discourse related to cross-cultural production in the history of A mdo as a Sino-Tibetan borderland, and also to the complex present-day socio-political reality of the region.

Since traditions in general are “multi-vocal” and “rich in possible meanings” (Otto & Pedersen, 2000:9), their performances are apt to provoke many things simultaneously. They enable participants to reconnect themselves with a highly valued past—whether it be reshaped (old symbols filled with new meanings and interpretations) or newly imagined—through their participation in the manipulation of powerful cultural and religious symbols. Also, they usually require collective organisation and participation by members of a local community, while at the same time allowing invited state representatives to deliver the framework of state authority. Whereas the ‘Tibetan past’, as it is portrayed in state discourse, is denigrated as ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’, hence negative and anti-progressive, Tibetan festivals—at least on the community level—can resist this discourse in the sense that they are an arena for distinctive forms of socio-cultural empowerment. They offer opportunities to recollect cultural memory, to sharpen the consciousness of having a distinct culture and tradition,² thereby helping to recreate collective identities (Assmann, 1997).

Among older Tibetans in Shar khog, the ‘past’, i.e. the time prior to the anti-communist rebellions of 1956 and the subsequent period of forced ‘reform’ and oppression, is still remembered as being one of political and social autonomy. This is so despite the fact of close socio-economic contacts and exchanges between the Shar ba and neighbouring Han and Hui populations in former times, and also despite close political relationships between certain local Tibetan “head men” (*go ba*, Chin. *tu si*), *bla mas* and Chinese state authorities. Since the past is also embodied in the performance of collective cultural traditions which evoke it, even

² A useful discussion of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ can be found in Otto & Pedersen (2000).

for many of the younger generation (as I was able to observe), the very participation in the public display of tradition has acquired an additional inherent social value, not only in spite of the state's discourse but maybe even because of it. Participation is an opportunity for visible cultural self-determination, ethnic pride and the enhancement of social status through public displays of—often very expensive—'traditional' clothing and jewellery, beautiful horses and impressive firearms, amongst other things. Thus, popular cultural performances, such as folk festivals and monastic ritual dances (*'cham*) are important arenas for Tibetans to experience and display their 'Tibetan-ness' to themselves, and to others, with much enthusiasm and like-minded appreciation, by socialising in a communal setting.³ In fact, such performances constitute an indelible mark in contemporary negotiations of Tibetan identities.

Perceptions of identity, origins and history among present-day A mdo Tibetans in farming areas like Shar khog or Reb gong, for example, seem to be considerably influenced by ideas about the region's former territorial significance as an ancient geo-political and ethnic frontier zone between the former Tibetan and Chinese empires. In modern times, this point was first emphasised by the A mdo scholar Dge 'dun chos 'phel (1903–51), who is without doubt one of the most highly venerated modern Tibetan culture heroes. Dge 'dun chos 'phel based his understanding of ancient Tibetan history in the area on the Old Tibetan documents discovered at Dunhuang,⁴ and in which today's Songpan township (Zung chu rdzong, the modern county capital of Shar khog) is mentioned as a Tibetan military outpost named Zong chu, which was established in the 7th or 8th century.⁵ According to a well-known local Dge lugs pa scholar, Dmu dge bsam gtan (1914–93), the old Tibetan name for Shar khog also indicated that the area was a border post:

In the upper part of Zung chu, in the past, there were three community divisions (*ru sde*) ... Those three were known as the "Three Khri skyong" (*khri skyong khag gsum*). In the past, at the time of the war

³ Meanings of such performances can change radically if public events are turned into 'culture shows' organised by state organs or tourist agencies, and staged mainly for the benefit of tourists; see, for example, Makley (1998).

⁴ Bacot et al. (1940:18,39).

⁵ Karmay (1994:116).

between Tibet and Tang China, the commander (*mgo dpon*) who directed the three ten thousand armies (*khri dmag*) which defended the border was given the name Khri skyong.⁶

Moreover, in local Tibetan discourse in Shar khog, as well as in Reb gong, people are—quite independently of one another, and without being prompted—eager to point out their common heritage as defenders of this important border, proudly and reassuringly stressing their 'original' (or 'authentic'?) central or western Tibetan roots, dating back to imperial times. There is also convincing evidence that some cultural performances in A mdo, such as the Klu rol in Reb gong, the Hwa shang '*cham* in Shar khog and, not least of all for our present purposes, the earth-ox (*sa glang*) of Shar khog, do celebrate and commemorate not only famous local Tibetan military leaders⁷ but also local *bla mas* (and hence their lineages) as important mediators for peace treaties between the two battling powers.⁸

Even though the territorial border between Chinese and Tibetan empires does not exist anymore, and A mdo Tibetans do live in a complex modern world of blurred socio-cultural boundaries, A mdo is still a place of ethnic border identities which stress cultural difference and ethnic authenticity, where 'Tibetan-ness' seems to be regularly played out against 'Chinese-ness'. Thus, revived inter-culturally fused performances which are characteristic for this borderland—and this seems to be the case much more so in A mdo than in central Tibet—offer a popular arena for identity negotiations among Tibetans.

The Earth-Ox Almanac

The rite colloquially known as *sa glang* ("earth-ox")—and referred to as *rgya nag glang rtsis* ("Chinese ox astrology")⁹ in

⁶ Dmu dge bsam gtan (1987:303f). Local Bon po monastic histories, however, interpret the name as Khri skyang "Throne of Skyang 'phags", deriving it from the famous lineage holder Skyang 'phags chen po, an important founder and propagator of Bon in the area; see Huber (1998:189,n.21).

⁷ Some of whom even became immortal local mountain gods in Reb gong; see Epstein & Wenbin (1998).

⁸ See Epstein & Wenbin (1998), and Schrempf (in press).

⁹ A manuscript entitled *Rgya nag sa glang brtag tshul legs bshad yongs 'du'i srid dbang* is classed as "Chinese divination" (*rgya rtsis*) in Schuh (1981:121). Since I was unable to attend the earth-ox performance myself in

written sources—is one such public performance. It is indeed extraordinary, since it appears to occur only in three Bon monasteries in A mdo each Tibetan New Year (*lo gsar*).¹⁰

The earth-ox is in fact an interesting Tibetan performative adaptation of a well-known Chinese farmers' tradition staged at the time of spring festival (*lichun*) in Chinese villages. In the Chinese version, a clay ox (*tu niu*) and a clay person (*gengren*) were originally used as part of a ritual to drive out the winter, and then for public divination.¹¹ In the Tibetan examples under study here, the earth-ox consists of a public astrological prediction about the weather and health conditions of the local community and the environment for the coming year. A monastic astrologer (*rtsis pa*), or his translator (*lo tsā ba*), proclaims his augury by interpreting a specially fabricated model ox, which is being lead by a herdsman (*rdzi bo*), both of which are constructed out of paper, cloth and bamboo. This farmers' almanac was revived in Shar khog during the early 1980s, and has since been staged along with the winter masked dance performance known as Smon lam during the first month of the Tibetan New Year, at Bya dur Dga' mal monastery.¹²

The Earth-Ox Rite at Bya dur Dga' mal

In the course of the post-1980 religious and cultural revival, and following explicit requests and support by some lay people from Shar khog, the performance of the almanac was reintroduced into

1996, the description here is based on the accounts of monastic and lay informants from Shar khog and from Mdzod dge.

¹⁰ For background information on the revival of Bon monasticism in Shar khog since the 1980s, see Schrempf (2000), and the monastic history in *Zing chu dkar chag* (1993:268–70), also a list with respective Chinese names in AZZ (1994:2569). In order to match Tibetan with Chinese place-names, see SXD (1983).

¹¹ During the Zhou dynasty, at the end of each winter, a masked dance ritual known as *Nuo* or *No* was performed to drive out the cold and also pestilence. Later, the winter itself appears to have been represented by the clay ox, which was then beaten and destroyed. For a detailed account of the complex historical changes of the Chinese spring festival, see Jian (1998), and cf. also, Bodde (1975:75ff,201ff) and Eberhard (1972:4ff).

¹² On this festival, see Schrempf (2001). On the history of the Dga' mal monastery, see Huber (1998). Bya dur Dga' mal (Chin. Gamisi or Chachasi) is situated in upper Shar khog (Chin. Shuijing *xiang*) and was founded in 1378 by the Bon *bla ma* Rin chen rgyal mtshan.

the Smon lam by the monks of Bya dur Dga' mal monastery in 1983. According to local informants, at the time of Smon lam it is of special importance that at least several people from each village in Shar khog—mostly elderly and experienced farmers—attend the performance of the earth-ox almanac at Dga' mal on the 17th day of the first Tibetan month. The earth-ox is staged in the early morning hours, before the commencement of the public masked dances (Smon lam '*cham*'), which are normally held over two consecutive days.

The Tibetan tradition of producing written almanacs (*lo tho*) is based on Tibetan star astrology (*skar rtsis*), Chinese astrology (*nag rtsis*) and divination (*mo*).¹³ The calculation of the earth-ox almanac is similar, and is intended for use by the local lay community after its preparation by a specialised monk astrologer (*rtsis pa*). The astrologer must calculate (*rtsis*) the status of the constellations of the eight planets, twenty-eight stars, the eight classes of worldly spirits (*lha srim sde brgyad*), the protectors of the ten directions and the thirty-three classes of *lha min*. In addition, various propitiatory offerings are made to the deities of the land (*sa bdag*), sky (*lha*) and water (*klu*).

The earth-ox almanac not only indicates the local weather conditions, but also gives predictions about the well-being or illnesses of different age and gender groups from the community over the coming year. It also includes predictions about the conditions of the environment, such as the fertility of the earth, rainfall and water supply, best sowing and harvesting times, as well as the growth of grass and grain. These conditions are not only proclaimed aloud in front of an assembled public audience, they are also visibly symbolised by the figures of the ox and his herder (see fig.10). Two Black Hat (*zhwa nag*) dancers carry these figures out from the inside of the assembly hall into the monastic courtyard for public display. Then, once everyone has gathered, the predictions are read aloud by the astrologer from an astrological manual. However, these specialised technical pronouncements are often less than intelligible to the lay audience. Therefore, a masked translator (*lo tsā ba*) interprets the text, by pointing to the specific colours, body parts and positions, and other attributes of the figures.

¹³ Astrological texts are also contained in the Bon po *Bka' gyur*.

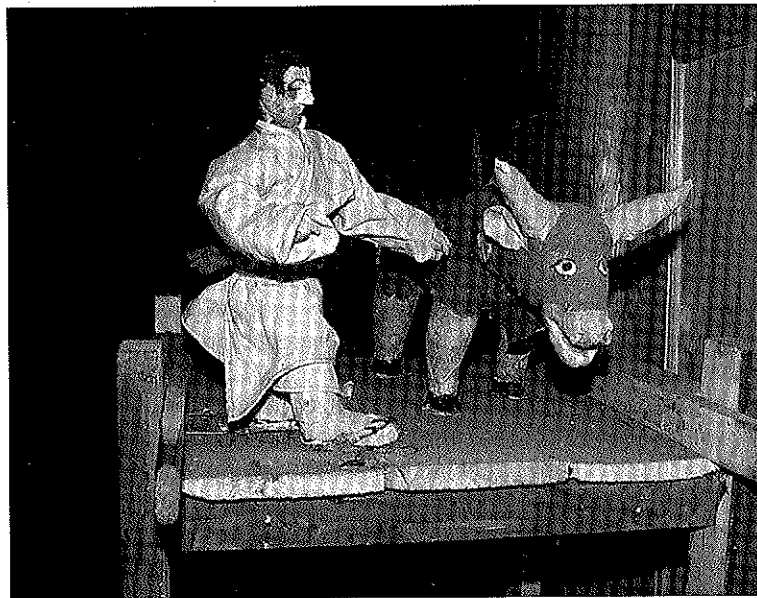


Figure 10: Earth-ox figures used at Dga' mal monastery.
(photo K. Buffetrille).

Elder Shar ba farmers know this symbolism well. For example, if the herder (*rdzi bo*) stands in front of the ox leading it, there will be plenty of fat grass that coming year, but if he stands behind him, it means that grass will be scarce. If the ox has white horns, there will be a lot of snow, and if ox and herder have no feet, rain will be plentiful (because their feet disappear into the mud). The state of the bridle of the ox and the clothes of his herder can also indicate the various weather and health conditions.

The Earth-Ox Rite at A khrid skyang tshang

To my knowledge, there are only two other Bon monasteries in which the earth-ox is performed as part of the monastic New Year rites. One is Rtogs ldan monastery in Rnga ba County, where it is staged together with the Hwa shang 'cham (see Schrempf, in press) at the day's end. The other is A khrid skyang tshang monastery, also called Bkra shis g.yung drung gling, which is situated in

'Phan chu, Mdzod dge County.¹⁴ At A khrid skyang tshang, on the 15th day of the first Tibetan month, the weather almanac is presented in quite an elaborate way following a series of the usual Bon ritual dances and after the Gshen rab dgu 'cham (locally called Bag mang 'cham)

First, there is a procession led by the assistant of the *dge bskos* (*dge g.yog*), followed by a *dung dkar* (conch shell) player, a flag bearer (*dar cha*), an officiant with barley flour offering (*mchod pa 'bul phye ma*). A monk then offers a rice *mañdala*, incense, and "white offerings" (*dkar mchod*, water mixed with milk, and flowers made of paper), as well as prayers to the local deities, including the earth lords (*sa bdag*), stars and planets (*gza' skar ma*), gods of the sky (*gnam lha*), sub aquatic serpent deities (*klu*), and the mountain gods (*gnyan*). During these offerings, the masked astrologer enters the dance ground followed by two assistants called *ha phrug*, who are probably the young attendants of Hwa shang, and who are adorned with peacock feathers.

The wooden figures of the earth-ox and his herder—who might be a child, a middle aged man or an old man depending upon the calculations—are led from the meditation chapel (*sgrub khang*) into the courtyard by being pulled along on a table. The astrologer starts to talk about his predictions, although, as at Dga' mal, no one can understand him since he uses technical astrological terms. Therefore, a masked translator appears and loudly translates the predictions into colloquial terms while giving a running commentary. As the models are led back into the assembly hall once again, offerings are made, followed by the procession returning back into the temple. After this, the very auspicious and highly venerated lion dance is performed, and the day ends with the final expulsion ritual (*gtor rgyag*).

Apart from certain details, we can conclude that the earth-ox almanac is performed in a very similar manner at both A khrid and Dga' mal monasteries. Interesting features of both perform-

¹⁴ There are now only about thirty monks in this monastery, so usually monks from neighbouring Bon monasteries come to participate in these annual monastic performances. Around 1986, the monastic dances were revived with the help of a former dance teacher (*'cham dpon*) who wrote down a dance manual from memory. Of the former two dance performances staged in the 1950s (on the 28th and 29th days of the 12th Tibetan month and on the 15th of the 1st), only the latter date has been reinstated.

ances are the fact that the almanac is included in the very popular monastic New Year dances, and also that a 'translator' is needed as a mediator to interpret the astrological prediction for the audience. In the following, I will outline a local Tibetan history concerning the origins of the earth-ox performance, and then compare it with Chinese traditions of farmers' almanacs and public astrological predictions.

Origins and History of the Earth-Ox

The history of the Bon monastery of Bya dur Dga' mal in Shar khog states that about one hundred years ago, official permission to perform the earth-ox rite was bestowed as an imperial award on the prominent Dga' mal *bla ma*-scholar Bstan 'dzin Ngag dbang rnam rgyal. Due to his extensive scholarship and writing, which included works on astrology, he was also known as Mkhars yags Mkhars pa or Paṇḍita Smra dbang Rang grol blo gros.¹⁵ The local Tibetan history also states that the then active Qing administrative head of the nearby garrison and trading town of Songpan (Zung phan hsien), who must have been impressed by the outstanding knowledge and astrological skills of this Tibetan *bla ma*, bestowed a seal and certificate upon him and his monastery for the performance of "Chinese ox astrology" (*rgya nag glang rtsis*). It is said that from then on, the earth-ox almanac was performed for the public at this monastery for the next fifty years, and that the imperial seal and certificate were issued three times.¹⁶ Given the fact that elderly pupils of this learned scholar are still alive and serve as religious teachers in Shar khog today, it is likely that this performance must have been introduced in the late 19th or early 20th century.

It remains unclear whether the earth-ox performance was then transmitted from Dga' mal monastery to A khrid skyang tshang in Mdzod dge, and also to Rtogs ldan in Rnga ba, or if these other sites began and maintained the tradition of their own accord. However, we do know that over the centuries there were various connections between the Bon monasteries of Shar khog and those

¹⁵ His exact dates are presently unknown, but according to local historical texts we can estimate that he was active in the late 19th and early 20th century; see Huber (1998).

¹⁶ *Zing chu dkar chag* (1993:166).

of neighbouring districts, particularly the exchange of monks for the purpose of studying with well-known scholars, such as the Mkhars yags Mkhars pa.¹⁷

The Tibetan earth-ox performance was certainly highly influenced by Chinese spring festival rites and the ancient cult of the winter bull. A report by Reverend J. Hutson, from the 'Tibetan foothills' of Sichuan at the beginning of the 20th century, describes the Chinese custom of "meeting the spring" (*ying ch'un*) as being an important form of fertility ritual in local rural communities (Hutson 1920:470f). Reverend Hutson mentions the annual procession of a Chinese magistrate, who would parade together with other officials in court costumes through town, being carried in a sedan chair to the east gate of the city and followed by farmers and townspeople. Outside the town walls, and in the local fields, the magistrate would walk behind an 'earthen spring ox' attached to a plough and a paper image of a man known as the ox-driver (*mang shen*). Then, the magistrate would repeat the same actions with a real ox and plough, returning to the town through the south or west gate.

Reverend Hutson's report affirms the day of the spring bull cult as being one of the popular "gala days" of the year, and as being sponsored by the magistrate, who could therefore publicly appear and be acknowledged and venerated in all his glory. The earthen ox was carefully sculptured out of clay and painted in specific colours indicating the outcomes for the coming year: yellow for a bumper harvest, green for plague, red for fire and

¹⁷ An educated monk explained another type of connection between the neighbouring Skyang tshang monastery in Shar khog and that of A khrid skyang tshang as follows: "Concerning our monastery; It is one of the seats (*gdan sa*) of the excellent protector of beings Skyang 'phags Nyi ma 'od zer, alias Skyang 'phags Nam mkha' g.yung drung, who was one of the three different 'Phags pa of Mdo smad. Concerning this monastic community of pure monks, it developed during the life of the excellent *bla ma* Rin chen rgyal mtshan who was a nephew (*dbon po*) of the Skyang tshang [clan?] born in the descent lineage (*gdung*) of Skyang 'phags chen po, and because that was in the 7th sixty-year calendrical cycle, it is explained that it is about 600 years since then up to now. Once again, it developed extensively during the life of the Skyang tshang *bla ma* Rgyal ba G.yung drung phun tshogs Rin po che, and it even had a few branch monasteries (*dgon lag*) established by him. There is a story that he brought about the establishment of Skyang tshang monastery in Zing chu (i.e. Shar khog). He lived during the 13th sixty-year calendrical cycle, and is mentioned in the *Mdo smad chos 'byung*".

calamities, and so forth. The clothing of the ox-driver and the girdle of the ox were further symbolic indicators of the time when spring would arrive, and so on. On the day following the procession, the earthen ox and paper ox-driver were taken to the Yamen courtyard, where the magistrate made offerings to the ox and then struck it with a stick, after which the audience finished it off, taking pieces of the ox back to their homes, while the paper image of the ox-driver was burnt. According to Hutson, "It is used in country towns with the idea that it will bring a full harvest for that year" (1920:480).

Bon po monks from Bya dur Dga' mal monastery claim that their earth-ox tradition originally came from Tibet, and was later transmitted to China by the founder of their religion, Ston pa Gshen rab mi bo. It was reintroduced or returned to the Tibetans of Shar khog in its present form by way of the Chinese custom, as an acknowledgement of the merits of the learned teacher Mkhar yags Mkhas pa and the Dga' mal monastery. Regardless of the interpretation, the conscious and desired Tibetan revival of this old farmer's tradition indicates the importance of its role for the local villagers and also its connection to the practices of local monasticism. The local monastery functions as the trusted repository and distributor of sought after, specialised cultural knowledge concerning the well-being of the community.

While this type of astrological performance used to be the only public method of weather prediction for the Shar ba farmers in the past, according to my informants printed regional versions in the form of small booklets (*lo tho*) are published by experienced lamas from all the different Tibetan religious schools. These booklets can be purchased in local bookshops and are written in Tibetan. Others can be seen occasionally in the form of charts (about 80 x 40 cm) with a central hand-drawn image of the ox and the herder, surrounded by explanations written in Tibetan script. Such Tibetan earth-ox charts are to be found posted, for the public to read, on the front doors of Tibetan monasteries in different parts of southern A mdo, for example at the large Dge lugs pa monastery of Rwa rgya in Rma chen County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (see fig.11). Interestingly, in the pre-communist period, this area had been partially settled by a small, displaced group of Chinese peasants who began to cultivate wasteland on a bend in the Yellow River near Rwa rgya. Thus, it is

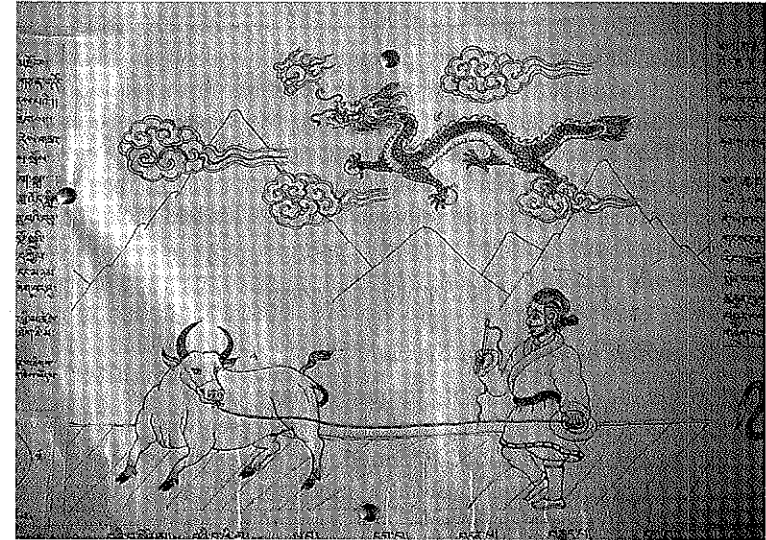


Figure 11: Tibetan earth-ox chart at Rwa rgya monastery, Rma chen County, Mgo log (photo T. Huber).



Figure 12: Chinese earth-ox chart, Songpan County town (photo T. Huber).

possible that they were a source of cultural influence for their Tibetan neighbours.

In Shar khog today, Chinese vendors still walk from house to house at Tibetan New Year in order to sell their own printed Chinese earth-ox almanac charts (see fig.12). My Shar ba informants told me that these vendors can become quite rude if one does not purchase an earth-ox chart from them to attach to the front door of the house, and the vendors threaten them with bad luck.

The Snowlion Dance

The Snowlion as a Tibetan Symbol

The white snowlion, with its turquoise mane (*seng dkar g.yu ral can*), is the famous Tibetan emblem representing the snowy ranges and glaciers of Tibet. It symbolises power and strength and has served as a unifying national symbol for Tibetans during the modern era. As such, it adorned the banknotes and coins of the pre-1959 Dga' ldan Pho brang Tibetan state, and also featured on the Tibetan flag which was designed by the progressive 13th Dalai Lama on the basis of old military banners. Nowadays, a pair of snowlions still feature in the centre of the national flag of the Tibetan exile community.¹⁸ Many Tibetan folk songs and proverbs mention the snowlion as inhabiting the highest mountains since he is the "king of beasts" (*ri dwags rgyal po*), towering over less powerful animals which are equated with the lower strata of the Tibetan landscape. Snowlions can also represent hermits and yogins, meditating in solitary caves high up in the mountains. Two of the most famous Tibetan culture heroes, Mi la ras pa and Ge sar, are said to have been raised by a white snowlioness, the queen of beasts, who also brings prosperity. The white lioness of the glaciers is also the mount of Ma ne ne, the celestial female advisor of Ge sar, and Vaiśravaṇa.¹⁹ Her milk is believed to be

¹⁸ According to Tibetan exile accounts collected by Axel Ström (1995:124), the snowlion "... represents *mi chō*, the religion of men; its different parts corresponding to all fields of traditional knowledge such as cosmology, genealogies, religious doctrines, etc. ... The pair of fearless snowlions [on the Tibetan national flag] ... symbolize the complete victory over all by the deeds of the combined spiritual and secular ruling government".

¹⁹ The latter himself rides on a lion as well, although not on a snowlion, and is the Indian Buddhist guardian king of the north. He also bestows wealth and

extremely potent, and is mentioned as a kind of long life elixir in folk tales and proverbs. One folk belief has it that the snowlioness' milk, together with the egg white of the khyung bird, and the blue dragon's spit are among the most powerful of substances.²⁰

In the words of the A mdo intellectual Dge 'dun chos 'phel, however, the "...snowlion is as non-existing as horns on the heads of rabbits" (2001:94). Like many other cherished Tibetan beliefs which he discussed, Dge 'dun chos 'phel criticised the idea of the snowlion as being a complete illusion, pointing out that lions are scientifically proven to be forest dwellers,²¹ who can now only be seen in Indian zoos or as symbols of royalty on Aśokan pillars or as free standing guardian figures of the Yar klungs dynasty tombs. He reaffirmed that the Tibetan *seng ge* is clearly a loan word from the Sanskrit term *siṃha*. Although the particular whiteness of the Tibetan snowlion icon is very likely an autochthonous contribution, linking it symbolically with the ancient royal status of snow mountains and of height,²² Dge 'dun chos 'phel traces its turquoise mane back to the iconographic influence of the Chinese lion, which is green (2001:94). Regarding the Tibetan snowlion dance, we will see that this is not the only influence coming from China.

Secular Snowlion Dances in Shar khog

Among the Shar ba, snowlion dances are very popular types of performances in both monastic and folk contexts, since they are considered to be *rten 'brel yag po*, very 'auspicious'. Additionally, specific animal dances, such as the *seng ge* and the *g.yag* dance, are also emblematic of certain Shar ba villages which are locally identified with them.²³ At Tibetan New Year, in the streets of

prosperity to his worshipers; Stein (1959:391).

²⁰ Information from the head of Bon religion in exile, Sman ri Khri 'dzin Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin ljongs dong.

²¹ Indeed, the Indian (or Persian) lion (*Panthera leo persica*) does still exist today, but as an endangered species in the North Indian Gur forest.

²² The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (1993:2933), has *gangs seng ge*, "snowlion", *seng dkar* as a short form for *seng ge dkar po*, "white lion", also *seng dkar g.yu ral can*, "white lion with turquoise mane (i.e. Tibetan snowlion)".

²³ According to Samten Karmay, in pre-1959 Shar khog there were sometimes competitions between village dance groups represented by different animal dances at the Tibetan New Year (personal communication). During the

Shar khog villages, one comes across young Shar ba boys clad in *g.yag* and *seng ge* costumes, dancing from house to house. People say they do this in order to collect money for the monasteries and for their own pockets to buy New Year presents. One of the two young lion dancers holds the lion's mask over his head while hidden under a white cloth with many colourful ribbons, the second one is ducked behind him under the same cover, thus forming the back of the animal, with a *g.yag* tail completing the outfit. The dancers perform a short *seng ge'i 'bro* in front of each house while family members come outside to watch them and give them a few Yuan. The two dancers, who jolt around, leaping up and down in their lion costume, are accompanied by two young musicians with a hand drum and a pair of cymbals (*sbug chal*). A fifth companion is wrapped in a sheepskin coat with the fleece turned outside, and wears a white fur mask. He resembles descriptions of the characteristic *'dre dkar* figures sometimes seen in Tibetan New Year rites.²⁴

Secular Snowlion Dances in the Tibetan Exile

Even in the Indian exile community, in the Bon po settlement of Dolanji (Himachal Pradesh) some of whose members come from A mdo,²⁵ the snowlion dances are very popular. There are at least two different snowlion performances, and one of them is specifically called the "A mdo lion", being danced by two young A mdo ba dressed in a snowlion mask and costume (see fig.13).

New Year of 1995/1996, there was a gathering of four different Shar ba villages in front of the Dga' mal monastic complex. Villagers assembled themselves in circles, performing their specific animal dances, among them a lion and a *g.yag* dance. In the Ge sar Epic, the lion is a clan emblem of the Gling community, and as one of the *rlung rta* animals, the lion also symbolises luck and strength; see Karmay (1998:419,421).

²⁴ See Stein (1959:391,444). Even more similar is another description by Rolf Stein referring to New Year dances in Darjeeling, where lion and *g.yag* dancers are accompanied by a little boy (*rdzi bu*) who is the guardian of the lion. Again, the lion is *rien 'brel bzang po*. He also became one of the nine auspicious symbolic animals for long life, not only representing the glaciers and mountains, but also being himself a kind of veneration to them as well; Stein (1959:445).

²⁵ This fact is significant, since the abbot of the revived Sman ri monastery, who is also a former monastic dance teacher (*'cham dpon*) from Shar khog, re-established the monastic dances in exile with the help of other monks.

On the evening of the fifth day of the first Tibetan month, at the end of the monastic celebration of Mnyam med 'dus chen,²⁶ the A mdo snowlion dancers are blessed at the statue of Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan and venerated by the abbot of Sman ri himself with a *kha brtags*. The dancers then leave the monastic courtyard in order to leap down to the village below, where they only visit the A mdo households, which are all arranged close together in a row of houses. An assistant then collects money for an annual picnic of the local A mdo exile families, as well as for certain communal prayers for the so-called A mdo society of Dolanji.²⁷

In Clementtown, another Tibetan exile community in India, A mdo monks perform a snowlion dance outside their monastery on the 4th day of the Tibetan New Year. A herald with a white mask and two small attendants perform an introductory dance for the snowlion, who then appears and cavorts and chases children, entertaining the crowd.²⁸ Although performed by monks, this is a purely secular event, set in the context of a communal celebration involving speeches by Government-in-Exile and local community representatives, as well as a large feast.

All these examples not only clearly demonstrate the popularity of the snowlion dance, particularly among A mdo ba, but also its meaning as a cherished symbol of A mdo collective identity which has been revived in both contexts, in exile and in post-Mao A mdo.

Chinese Lion Dances

As in the case of the earth-ox, we find a similar Chinese New Year custom comparable to that of the snowlion dance. Reverend Hutson, reporting the customs of Chinese farmers living in the 'Tibetan foothills' in the early 20th century, informs us of the "lantern festival" celebrated on the 15th day of the first Chinese lunar month. During this festival, two lion dancers first visit the local temples and then, guided by a priest, proceed to the village houses, where they are invited to drive out evil and pestilence

²⁶ This festival is celebrated among all Bon monasteries following the original Tibetan Sman ri tradition, since it commemorates the monastery's founder, Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1356-1415).

²⁷ See Cech (1987:211-13).

²⁸ See Ström (1995:124).

(Hutson, 1920.2:479). Nowadays, at the time of the Tibetan New Year, we can find traces of a kind of lantern festival in certain villages in Shar khog. Before *lo gsar*, lanterns are handmade in Tibetan houses and hung on balconies in the evenings. Some houses are also decorated with red and gold Chinese good luck wall posters. Over the New Year period, in the village of Skyang tshang, young girls dance a "flower dance" (*me tog 'bro*) while holding pairs of paper lanterns, which resemble flowers, although no lions are involved.²⁹

In China, lion dancers are already mentioned in a Tang dynasty source, which describes entertainment for military generals from the Sino-Tibetan border close to the Tang capital of Changan, and performed by lion dancers called "Hou" with reddish beards, who are probably Sogdians.³⁰ On the basis of Central Asian and Chinese sources, Rolf Stein convincingly traces the historical background of lion dances to a Persian custom, which must have travelled east along the Silk Road together with Persian merchants, i.e. via Samarkand and Chinese Turkistan. During the Persian New Year festival of Newruz, a lion dance used to be performed by young boys, some of them naked it seems, who were sprinkled with cold water. They were thus supposed to drive out evil forces and the cold of the winter. In this connection, regarding lions and the expulsion of evil forces, Stein also mentions that in the Ge sar Epic, on the peak of the most holy mountain of A mdo, A mnye rma chen, the snowlioness shakes her mane to drive away the evil bird of the Gru gu kingdom.³¹

Monastic Snowlion Dances in A mdo

An even more direct relationship between the famous A mnye rma chen mountain and the snowlion is found among Bon po monastic communities in A mdo. In the lion ritual dance (*seng ge'i 'cham*) performed by Bon po monks, the snowlion symbolises the mount of the most famous sacred mountain god of A mdo, Rma chen spom ra (also called Rma rgyal spom ra or Rma gnyan

²⁹ This dance is part of an annual village folk festival, which took place on the 6th day of the first Tibetan month in 1996.

³⁰ See Demieville (1952:206,n.2). I thank Per Kværne for the reference; see also Stein (1972:219).

³¹ See Stein (1959:445).

spom ra),³² who otherwise, in Buddhist depictions, is mounted on a horse.³³ This leading regional mountain god of A mdo is also one of the "guardian deities of Bon religion" (*bon skyong* or *bka' skyong*) and appears in many Bon po monastic dances in A mdo as part of the group of Bon protective deities (Gshen rab dgu 'cham).³⁴ The snowlion itself, however, enjoys a separate appearance in the dance cycle. Before he enters the monastic courtyard, propitiatory texts for Rma chen spom ra (*Pom ra cho ga*) are first recited.³⁵ Thus a clear ritual connection is established between the snowlion and the deity Rma chen spom ra. Typically, initially four young monks dressed in colourful costumes with pointed hats and many ribbons enter the courtyard, and dance around in an attempt to lure the snowlion out of the monastery doors. Finally, after much persuasion, he appears sporting a huge mask, which has a flexible lower jaw such that the mouth can open and close, and curiously following one of the young boys who holds a ball with a ribbon in his hand. Members of the Tibetan audience interpret this ball as being sweets, which the lion likes to eat.³⁶

³² Note that the element *spom* is often spelled simply *pom* in Bon sources. Rma stands for the Rma chu river (i.e. the upper Yellow River in A mdo), *gnyan* for the wild mountain sheep, or "fierce, wild one" which is an epithet of mountain territorial gods in A mdo, and [s]pom might be related, according to Bon po monks, to the Zhang zhung word for "snow".

³³ For a beautiful image of this "worldly protector" of Bon riding on a white lion, with a rather greenish looking mane, see the *thang ka* "Bon Machen Pomra" (nos.200025 and 200030) in the Rubin Collection on-line: <http://www.tibetart.com>.

³⁴ At the large Bon monastery of Snang zhig in Rnga ba County, at the time of the New Year Smon lam festival, the snowlion appears with four young guides or herders (*rdzi bo*), together with the mountain god (*yab*) Rma chen pom ra (the Bon spelling) and his consort (*yum*) Gong sman lha ri. They are both described as being wrathful wisdom deities and protectors of the Bon doctrine, and are heralded beforehand by an impressive procession of monks. The snowlion is explicitly mentioned as functioning as a symbol of Rma chen pom ra at Snang zhig; see Bya 'phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1994:69).

³⁵ Two Bon propitiatory texts (no date, place or author given) from the *Bka' skong* collection describe Rma chen pom ra lha'i sras as riding on a white lion (folio 471). I thank Samten Karmay for supplying these texts. On the other hand, one finds no mention of the lion mount of this deity in a Bon po guidebook, and oral sources for propitiating A mnye rma chen; see Buffetrille (2000:132-75).

³⁶ Eberhard (1972:50) mentions a Tang source in which the lion holds a "pearl" in his mouth, which according to a folk narrative is made out of iron in order to appease demonic forces. A ball is commonly featured in the mouths of

At Rin spungs monastery in Shar khog (see fig.9), the snowlion dance is especially elaborate and colourful (see fig.14). When the snowlion dances, lay people set off firecrackers or shoot off handguns and rifles, just as they normally do at the end of the entire ritual dance performance for the rite of expulsion of evil forces (*gtor rgyag*). Some informants say that the snowlion dance is performed in a 'Chinese' way at Rin spungs monastery, whereas in other Bon monasteries of Shar khog it would be performed in a 'Tibetan' manner. Certainly, the use of firecrackers in connection with the lion dance could be a Chinese tradition in any case. Other informants held the opinion that the dance might have been introduced here by Chinese carpenters (*shing bzo ba*), who were employed by Shar ba communities to rebuild most of the Tibetan monasteries in this area during the revival after 1980. These same Chinese carpenters are still attending the '*cham*' performances at the various Tibetan monasteries. Like their Chinese neighbours, many Shar ba favour the snowlion dance over all the other monastic dances which are performed in the '*cham*' ritual. In addition to the idea that the snowlion dance in Shar khog is Chinese, one monk claimed it to be a genuine Tibetan tradition, at least in three of the five main Bon monasteries in Shar khog. He claimed its origins are in an oral transmission introduced from Sman ri monastery in central Tibet by a high ranking *bla ma* named Dgra ston Shes rab gdongs rgyal. I was unable to confirm this claim, however.

In any case, we should consider these contradictory local claims of either Tibetan or Chinese origins for this performing tradition as new re-interpretations influenced by notions of cultural authenticity in the modern framework of Chinese colonialism. "Dancing in a Chinese way" is certainly not regarded as auspicious among A mdo ba. A little local tale might serve to illustrate this point. A *bla ma* who wanted to found his monastery nearby the town of Songpan, so it is said, danced a '*cham*' at the intended site. The Tibetan audience, however, criticised it as being "too Chinese". As a consequence the *bla ma* left the place and built his monastery further away from the (mainly Chinese) town in a side valley.

the lion sculptures that frequently grace Chinese imperial architecture.

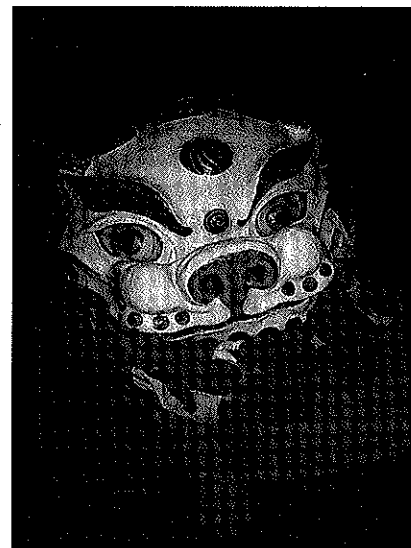


Figure 13: Bon po snowlion dance mask, Dolanji, India
(photo M. Schrempf).



Figure 14: Snowlion dancers at Rin spungs monastery, Shar khog
(photo T. Huber).

While the snowlion among Bon communities in A mdo certainly has a specific importance because of his symbolic power as mount of Rma chen spom ra, the mountain god himself is independently propitiated wherever A mdo inhabitants go or settle down, for example, by erecting a more solid presence for his worship. Outside the circuit of the famous Dga' ldan monastery of the Tibetan Buddhist Dge lugs pa school in central Tibet, for example, there is a mountain shrine (*la btsas*) dedicated to this deity, and it is said that it has been there since the time of Tsong kha pa—who was himself an A mdo ba. At the Bon monastery of G.yung drung gling in Gtsang, another *la btsas* is dedicated to this powerful A mdo mountain deity because its founder was also an A mdo ba from Shar khog.³⁷ The deity also has a separate shrine at the re-established Bon po monastery of Sman ri in Indian exile, since Rma chen spom ra is also one the four special protectors of the original Sman ri monastery in central Tibet.

In relation to the question of the origins of the snowlion dance in A mdo, there is an interesting note by Li An-che concerning its introduction at the large Dge lugs pa monastery of Bla brang Bkra shis 'khyil in eastern A mdo: "The costumes for the lions were given by a chieftain's wife of Someng, Sung-pan, Sze-chwan, to Hjam-dbyangs II. [i.e. the second 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa incarnation, 1728–91]".³⁸ Thus, some Tibetan traditions seem to indicate that the snowlion dance in A mdo is truly a Sino-Tibetan borderland cultural adaptation, perhaps even originally from the Songpan area where there has long been an established Chinese population living side by side with Tibetans.

Conclusion

When the lion is dwelling on the glacier he is a lion:
When the lion enters a city he is a wandering dog.³⁹

Even if both earth-ox and snowlion performances appear to have been modelled upon Chinese (and even originally Persian) popular rites, they still remain powerful symbols, which Tibetans associate with their own ancient and glorious past. Their present-day

³⁷ Information from Samten Karmay (personal communication).

³⁸ Li An-che (1994:225).

³⁹ A Tibetan proverb in Duncan (1961:212).

meanings are certainly flexible enough over time and space that they can accommodate the needs of Tibetan cultural, religious, regional and sometimes even national identities, not to mention New Age sensibilities.⁴⁰

A mdo is still a borderland, if not a territorial one anymore, certainly a complex cultural one. Far from being peripheral, it is a modern intra-national boundary space of ethnic identity negotiations among Tibetans in relation to other groups within China. Local debates about the 'authentic' origins of these cultural performances are part of the self-reflexive negotiation of local identities among A mdo Tibetans today, and these are closely linked to the history and territory of this Sino-Tibetan region. They also reflect on the traditional world of the past and the present-day transformations of every-day modern life in many possible, though often ambiguous, ways.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the "Sacred Music Dance Program" of 'Bras spungs monastery in exile at <http://www.mysticalartsoftibet.org/SMSD-Prg.htm> under "Seng-geh Gar-cham": "In Tibet the snow lion symbolized the fearless and elegant quality of the enlightened mind. When a healthy and harmonious environment is established by the creative activities of human beings, such as through the performance of sacred purification and healing music, all living beings, here represented by the snow lion, rejoice".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Assmann, Jan (1998). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.
- AZZ (1994). = *Aba Zhouzhi (Rnga ba khul sa gnas lo rgyus)*, 3. Chengdu: Minzu chubanshe.
- Bacot, Jacques, Frederick W. Thomas & Gustave-Charles Toussaint eds. (1940). *Documents de Touen-houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet*. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.
- Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (1993). Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Bodde, Derek (1975). *Festivals in Classical China. New Year and other annual observances during the Han Dynasty 206 B.C.–A.D.220*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Buffetrille, Katia (2000). *Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires. Sources orales et écrites sur les pèlerinages Tibétains*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien.
- Bya 'phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1994). *Snang zhig bkra shis gyung drung gling gi gdan rabs rdzogs ldan ngag gi rgyal rnga*. Oachghat (Solun, H.P.): Mu khri btsan zhang bod rig gzhung zhib 'jug khang.
- Cech, Krystyna (1987). *The Social and Religious Identity of the Tibetan Bonpos with Special Reference to a North-West Himalayan Settlement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oxford: Linacre College, Oxford University.
- Demieville, Paul (1952). *Le Concile de Lhasa. Une controverse sur le quietisme entre Bouddhistes de l'Inde et de la Chine au VIII^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale de France.
- Dmu dge bsam gtan (1987). *Bod kyi lo rgyus kun dga'i me long*, 2: *Rnga ba bod rigs chang rigs rang skyong khul gyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad yig bdams bsgrigs*. n.p.: Rnga ba bod rigs chang rigs rang skyong khul rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad yig zhib 'jug u yon khang.
- Donnan, Hastings, & Thomas M. Wilson (1999). *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. New York: Berg.
- Duncan, Marion H. (1961). *Love Songs and Proverbs of Tibet*. London: Mitre Press.
- Eberhard, Wolfram (1972). *Chinese Festivals*. Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service.
- Epstein, Lawrence, & Peng Wenbin (1998). "Ritual, Ethnicity, and Generational Identity", in Melvyn C. Goldstein & Matthew Kapstein eds., *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet. Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 20–138.
- Gendun Chopel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel) (2001). "Himalaya: A Note on 'Snowlion' translated by Thupten K. Rikey", *The Tibet Journal*, 26:2, 92–94.
- Huber, Toni (1998). "Contributions on the Bon Religion in A-mdo (1): The Monastic Tradition of Bya-dur dGa'-mal in Shar-khog", *Acta Orientalia*, 59, 179–227.
- Hutson, J. (1920). "Chinese Life on the Tibetan Foothills", *The New China Review*, II (4).
- Jian, Tao. (1998). *Strukturen, Funktionen und Symbole des chinesischen Festes Frühlingsanfang im historischen Wandel*. Berlin: Verlag Lang.

- Karmay, Samten G. (1998). "The Wind-horse and the Well-being of man", in Samten G. Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myth, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 413–23.
- Li An-che (1994). *History of Tibetan Religion. A Study in the Field*. Beijing: New World Press.
- Makley, Charlene (1998). "The Power of the Drunk: Humor and Resistance in China's Tibet", *Linguistic Form and Social Action, Michigan Discussions in Anthropology*, 13, 39–79.
- Otto, Ton, & Poul Pedersen (2000). "Tradition between Continuity and Invention: an Introduction", *Folk Journal of the Danish Ethnographic Society*, 42, 3–17.
- Schrempf, Mona (2000). "Victory banners, social prestige and religious identity—ritualized sponsorship and the revival of Bon monasticism in Amdo Shar-khog", in Samten G. Karmay & Yasuhiko Nagano eds., *New Horizons in Bon Studies*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology (*Bon Studies*, 4), 317–57.
- (2001). *Ethnisch-religiöse Revitalisierung und rituelle Praxis in einer osttibetischen Gemeinschaft im heutigen China*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Berlin: Freie Universität.
- (in press). "Hwa-shang at the border: ritual transformations and interpretations of Sino-Tibetan relationships in history and myth", in Anne-Marie Blondeau et al. eds., *Myth, Territoriality and Ritual in Tibetan Areas*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Schuh, Dieter (1981). *Tibetische Handschriften und Blockdrucke, Teil 8 (Sammlung Waddell der Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin)*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag (*Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, Band XI, 8).
- Stein, Rolf A. (1959). *Recherches sur L'Épopée et le Barde au Tibet*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- (1972). *Tibetan Civilization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ström, Axel (1995). *The Quest for Grace. Identification and Cultural Continuity in the Tibetan Diaspora*. Oslo: University of Oslo, Department and Museum of Anthropology (*Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology*, 24).
- SXD (1983). = *Sichuan sheng Aba Zangzu Zizhizhou Songpan xian diminglu (Si khron zhang chen rnga ba bod rigs rang skyong khul zung chu rdzong gi sa cha' ming btus)*. n.p.: Songpan xian diming lingdao xiaozu.
- Zing chu dkar chag* (1993). = A gling Bstan 'phel et al. eds. *Zing chu rdzong dgon pa so sogs dkar chag*. Zing chu.