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## ► To cite this version:

Cécile Ducher. Goldmine of Knowledge: the collections of the gNas bcu lha khang in 'Bras spungs Monastery. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 2020, pp.121-139. hal-03464660

**HAL Id: hal-03464660**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03464660>**

Submitted on 3 Dec 2021


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# Goldmine of Knowledge: The Collections of the Gnas bcu lha khang in 'Bras spungs Monastery

Cécile Ducher

(École Pratique des Hautes Études/ PSL)

n recent years, a massive amount of texts has been revealed in Tibet, treasures of our generation, published in collections made up of hundreds of volumes. Many of these texts were concealed at the time of upheaval in Central Tibet in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and revealed in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in the Sixteen Arhats Temple (Gnas bcu lha khang) within 'Bras spungs Monastery. Many historical, philosophical and doctrinal texts—sometimes never heard of, sometimes only rumoured to exist—became available and a new chapter in Tibet's historiography was open. Today, many scholars work with these texts, but their history, though crucial to understanding the context in which these volumes were written, remains mysterious. The aim of this article is to shed some light on the history of some of the specific collections discovered in 'Bras spungs, especially with regard to their origin and the way they may have been collected, how they were stored in the temple, and how they were revealed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most findings are only preliminary, but I hope that this article may represent a starting point for further inquiry.

## 1. *The Sixteen Arhats Temple's Library*

In 2004, a two-volume, 2483-page catalogue (henceforth '*Bras spungs Catalogue*') listing the titles of texts housed in five libraries of 'Bras spungs Monastery was published in China by the Paltsek Tibetan Rare Texts Research Centre (Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, henceforth Paltsek). The content of four of the five libraries corresponds to what we would expect of one of the most massive Dge lugs establishments to contain, i.e., writings of the authors of this school, canonical collections, etc. One of the five libraries, however, shelters thousands of volumes, apparently untouched since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. With the progressive publication of these volumes, many rare or seemingly lost texts have

Cécile Ducher, "Goldmine of Knowledge: The Collections of the Gnas bcu lha khang in 'Bras spungs Library", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. ??, month 2013, pp. WW-WW.

become available again, and the editors of the catalogue and of many of the ensuing collections therefore compare the importance of this discovery for the history of pre-17<sup>th</sup> century Tibet to that of the Dunhuang library-cave for pre-11<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Before entering into the history of this discovery, its scale can be measured by listing some of the published collections that contain texts from the Sixteen Arhats Temple:

- 2006, 2007, 2009, 2015: *Bka' gdams gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs* (120 vols). According to Karma bde legs,<sup>2</sup> 80% of the titles of the collection come from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.
- 2007: *Rngog chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* (10 vols): 100%.
- 2008: *Jo nang tā ra na tha'i gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs par blangs par ma* (10 vols) and other complete works of Jo nang masters (more than 100 volumes): 70% stem from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.
- 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015: *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs* (120 vols). According to Karma bde legs, these historical texts fill more than 500 volumes, and 40% come from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.
- According to Karma bde legs, 60% of the 400 volumes of *Bka' brgyud* material published recently come from the Sixteen Arhats Temple, including:
  - 2011: *Lho brag mar pa lo tsā'i gsung 'bum* (7 vols).
  - 2011: *Ras chung snyan brgyud skor* (19 vols).
  - 2011: *Rje btsun mi la ras pa'i gsung 'bum* (5 vols).
  - 2013: *Sgam po'i gdan rabs rim byon gyi gsung 'bum* (19 vols).
  - 2013: *Dpal rgyal dbang karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi gsung 'bum* (108 vols), etc.
- 2012, 2014: *Dus 'khor phyogs bsgrigs chen mo* (40 vols); 150 volumes in total, 70% are from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

Alongside these publications, many studies and translations of individual texts have been undertaken, and collections have been recompiled in numerous Tibetan publications. The origin of these

<sup>1</sup> 'Bras spungs Catalogue vol.1: 10.

<sup>2</sup> Karma bde legs 2019. Karma bde legs was one of the editors from Paltsek who took part in the work in the 'Bras spungs libraries in 2002–2003. 2002 was the year of the creation of the Paltsek Research Centre. For a list of their publications, see, for instance, the online Tibetan bookstore managed by Jörg Heimbel: <https://www.tibetanbookstore.org/book-list-dpal-brtsegs/>. Accessed April 8, 2019.

texts, however, has not been thoroughly described. Although the present article does not intend to be a complete assessment of the texts that were once stored in the Sixteen Arhats Temple, its aim is to open a door to that secret chamber, especially with regards to the Mar rngog Bka' brgyud texts that the author of the article has particularly studied.<sup>3</sup>

The sources used are the following:

- The introduction to the catalogue contained in the first volume of the 2004 publication (*'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 1–16). It describes the origin of the texts catalogued and the way they were sorted, together with some pictures.
- An article published online in 2019 by Karma bde legs who participated in the work leading to the publication of the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* and who is one of its main authors. This publication describes further the origin of the Sixteen Arhats Temple collection and aims at refuting the widespread rumour that texts from the Sixteen Arhats Temple were put under lock by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama out of partisanship. This article contains several pictures, and Karma bde legs posted more pictures on his Wechat account in September 2018. I had oral exchanges with him (via WeChat) in April 2019.
- Articles formerly published on the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC) blog by Michael Sheehy, Maho Iuchi, Kazuo Kano, and Jörg Heimbel, who worked on texts coming from the Sixteen Arhats Temple, as well as oral and written exchanges with these scholars.
- Oral information provided by 'Bri gung Che tshang Rin po che regarding a 'Bri gung collection not published by Paltsek but which nonetheless comes in large parts from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

## 2. The Origin of the Collection

1642 marked a turning point in Tibetan history. The Mongol tribes of Gushri Khan reached Central Tibet after having conquered the east of Tibet. They rode until Gtsang, where the ruler Karma bstan skyong

<sup>3</sup> See Ducher 2017. The Mar rngog Bka' brgyud lineage was initiated in Tibet by Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros (1000–1081) and his disciple Rngog Chos kyi rdo rje (1023–1090) and continued for several centuries as a family lineage before merging into the other Bka' brgyud lineages. Rngog was specialized in the Hevajra practice and considered the holder of Mar pa's commentarial lineage (*bshad brgyud*), as opposed to the practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) held by Mi la ras pa (1028?–1111?).

dbang po (1606–1642) was defeated at the foot of his Bsam grub rtse Palace in Gzhis ka rtse. Gushri Khan symbolically offered the 13 myriarchies of Tibet to his patron, the head of the Dge lugs pa order, the 5th Dalai Lama Blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682), who then became the new ruler of Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Before the construction of the Potala in 1649, the Dalai Lama, one of the incarnation lineages of 'Bras spungs Monastery, ruled from his residence within the monastery, called the Dga' ldan Palace (Dga' ldan pho brang), which gave the name to his new government.

'Bras spungs Monastery was founded in 1416 by 'Jam dbyang chos rje Bkra shis dpal ldan (1379–1449), one of Tsong kha pa's (1357–1419) main disciples, and it became an important monastery and a centre of monastic education of the Dge lugs pa school as well as the seat of the first Dalai Lamas. After the takeover of the 5th Dalai Lama, 'Bras spungs developed significantly; most importantly the Great Assembly Hall (Tshogs chen) was rebuilt and the Dga' ldan Palace enlarged. One of the temples built at that time was the chapel at the rooftop of the Great Assembly Hall, called the Temple of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas bcu lha khang). It was named after the sandalwood statues of the 16 disciples of Buddha Śākyamuni that were initially housed in the Karma Bka' brgyud monastery Rtse lha sgang in Kong po and brought to 'Bras spungs when their initial home was taken over by Dge lugs-led forces after 1642.

Although information about the statues had been black on white since 1744 in Phur bu lcog Ngag dbang byams pa's (1682–1762) survey of the main Dge lugs pa monasteries,<sup>5</sup> what became public with the publication of the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* in 2004 is that it was not only statues and a few books that were housed in the temple but a complete library of non-orthodox literature that was kept secret for centuries.

Somehow ironically, these thousands of volumes were spared from the destructions that hit many monasteries between the 18th and the 20th century. Several of the monastic libraries seized by Mongol

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Shakabpa 2010: 346–347.

<sup>5</sup> In his description of the content of the Sixteen Arhats Temple that is part of his depiction of 'Bras spungs's Monastery, Ngag dbang byams pa, an important 18th-century Dge lugs pa hierarch, describes the origin of the 16 clay statues: "The Ming Emperor [in fact Khubilai Khan] offered them to the Protector of Beings Chos rgyal 'phags pa (1235–1286), and they later became a practice support of the Rgyal ba Karma pa in his Rtse lha sgang [Monastery] in Kong po. Having been brought as a support of practice by the Victorious Great Fifth [Dalai Lama], they are now housed here [within the Gnas bcu lha khang]" (*tā ming rgyal pos 'gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags par phul ba/ rim gyis rgyal ba karma pa'i thugs dam rten du kong po rtse lha sgang du bzhugs pa/ rgyal dbang lnga pa chen po'i thugs dam rten du spyen drangs te 'dir bzhugs pa yin/*, see Phur bu lcog Ngag dbang byams pa: 96).

forces in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and moved to 'Bras spungs were later destroyed by the Dzungar invasions in 1717–1718. Monasteries in Lhasa and along the Gtsang po in particular, Smin grol gling for instance, were burned down in 1718.<sup>6</sup> Later, more radical, destructions took place when Chinese forces invaded Tibet in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although 40% of the monastic living quarters in 'Bras spung were destroyed, the main buildings remained, in particular the central assembly hall on top of which the Sixteen Arhat Temple is located.<sup>7</sup> Influential monks such as Rje Lam rim pa Ngag dbang phun tshogs (1922–1997) managed to stay onsite during the Cultural Revolution and safeguarded as many cultural heritages as they could.<sup>8</sup> During that time, in 1962 according to Karma bde legs, many of the texts from 'Bras spungs were brought to Beijing, and thus spared the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Some of them were later returned to Tibet (see below for details).

When China adopted more liberal policies in Tibet after the 11<sup>th</sup> Party Plenary Session of 1978,<sup>9</sup> religious practice progressively started again and monasteries regained some vitality. During the 1980s, there started to be some awareness of the presence of books in the Sixteen Arhats Temple, which eventually led to the cataloguing work of Paltsek that took place between July 2002 and January 2003.<sup>10</sup> The first phase of their work was the publication in 2004 of the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*, followed over the years by the reproduction of manuscripts and increasingly by the computerized reproductions of many of the literary treasures dormant in the library for centuries.

Despite Paltsek's wonderful and laudable efforts in making these texts available, the introduction of the catalogue, as the introduction of later collection, is quite vague about what happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in its description of the rediscovery in the 1980s. As shown by the article published by Karma bde legs in 2019, there remains a fair amount of uncertainty surrounding the collection, which fuels rumours about what exactly was found in the monastery. The *'Bras spungs Catalogue* for instance repeatedly refers to the place where the books were stored as "the private library of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai

<sup>6</sup> Shakabpa 2010: 420–421. Although Shakabpa does not mention the monasteries in the Gzhung valley, my own research shows that Spre'u zhing, the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud monastery located in that valley, was damaged at the time. See Ducher 2017: 357.

<sup>7</sup> Goldstein 1998: 25.

<sup>8</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 12.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein 1998: 10.

<sup>10</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 11.

Lama,"<sup>11</sup> and Karma bde legs insists that it was indeed a library, not a storeroom of books put under lock. The exact fact remains somehow murky, however, and a lot of questions understandably surround the collection.

One of the main rumours is that the office of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama sealed off those texts that it wished to suppress and stored them in sealed leather bags. According to Karma bde legs, none of the books in the Sixteen Arhats Temple were stored in such bags. What was kept in leather protective pouches was a Tshal pa Bstan 'gyur in 240 volumes commissioned by Tshal pa Drung chen Smon lam rdo rje (13<sup>th</sup> c.), and it is more likely that the leather was used in this case as a protection against rodents rather than as sealing. Still, however, many of the texts in the Sixteen Arhats Temple indeed came from schools (especially the Karma Bka' brgyud and Jo nang) that were seen as the opposition when the Dga' ldan pho brang came to office, and it cannot be denied that storing them in a library within a Dge lugs monastery corresponded to a *de facto* suppression of many of these texts. As will be shown below, many of the complete works of authors and coherent collections were disbanded and reorganized, which effectively concealed their origin and complicated their potential use, even more so as neither a catalogue nor a description of the collections was found within the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

Scholars sometimes lament the lack of precision on the exact location of the various manuscripts within the Dunhuang library-cave before it was opened. Had a precise archaeological survey of the library been redacted before volumes were dispatched around the globe, it is likely that research about the Dunhuang manuscripts would have been facilitated. In the case of the books coming from the Sixteen Arhats Temple, the situation is worse than in Dunhuang. Although a listing of some texts exists—the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*—it is neither complete nor detailed, and it does not provide any precise indication or explanation about the numbers and original locations of the texts within the storeroom. This article is therefore humbly offered to the community in order to start some reflection on the subject and create the necessary awareness that may lead to some clarity about the status of these important collections.

### 3. Collections Described in the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*

Despite these words of reserve, there is actually quite a lot that can be

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., *'bras spungs gnas bcu lha kang gi dpe mdzod ni rgyal dbang sku phreng lnga pa'i sku sger dpe mdzod du grags shing/ dpe mdzod 'di nyid kyang dus yun ring po'i nang bka' rgya mar song [...]* (*'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 7).

learned from the introduction of the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*. The two volumes provide a list of the contents of five libraries located within 'Bras spungs Monastery. The five libraries are the following:<sup>12</sup>

- The library of the Sixteen Arhats Temple on the second floor of the main assembly hall. This is the largest of the five libraries described;<sup>13</sup>
- The library of Rje lam rim pa Ngag dbang phun tshogs (1922–1997) in the 'Bras spungs Palace ('Bras spungs pho brang gzim chung gi rje lam rim pa'i dpe mdzod);<sup>14</sup>
- The library of Pho lha nas Bsod nams stobs rgyas (1689–1747) in the Dga' ldan Palace (Dga' ldan pho brang zim chung, also called Mi dbang lha khang):<sup>15</sup> it contained 18 Bka' 'gyur and Bstan 'gyur collections from various libraries.<sup>16</sup> This library was constituted during the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ruler (*mi dbang*) Pho lha nas and contains the Tshal pa Bstan 'gyur mentioned above.
- The library of 'Bras spungs Sgo mang Monastic College<sup>17</sup>, constituted in the 1930s and 1940s;<sup>18</sup>
- The library of 'Bras spungs Kun dga' rwa ba,<sup>19</sup> constituted recently but that previously contained old Indian manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> According to the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*, it housed 127 Indian manuscripts before the Cultural Revolution, and 16 afterwards.

Out of these five, it is the library of the Sixteen Arhats Temple that housed the greatest number of texts. The *'Bras spungs Catalogue* has 22.694 entries for this library, with 1.601 entries mistakenly given the same number,<sup>21</sup> thus totalling 24.295 texts. This is an inventory of

<sup>12</sup> See Akester 2016: 109–113 for a description of 'Bras spungs Monastery. Sources such as the *'Bras spungs chos 'byung* (Dge 'dun blo gros 1974) and *Cultural Monuments of Tibet* (Henss 2014 vol. 2: 218–228) do not contain any detailed explanation about the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

<sup>13</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 1–1958.

<sup>14</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 2: 1959–2179.

<sup>15</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 2: 2180–2197.

<sup>16</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 9.

<sup>17</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 2: 2198–2327.

<sup>18</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 10.

<sup>19</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 2: 2328–2475.

<sup>20</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 7; this may be Atiśa's manuscripts, which used to be in Rwa sgreng. See Kano 2015 for details on the search of these manuscripts.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Jörg Heimbels (personal conversation) for pointing out to me that at *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 1024 the counting drops from 11.600 to 10.000 and continues to count from the latter number.



only a small fraction of the original content, however, and the actual location of most volumes is now unknown. The *'Bras spungs Catalogue* gives some indication of the movements that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this is further elicited by Karma bde legs.<sup>22</sup> If one considers the numbers inscribed on the books of the Sixteen Arhats Temple (see below for details), originally there must have been between 40.000 and 50.000 titles in the library.

A first transfer occurred at the time of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1876–1933), when some of the volumes were relocated to the Potala. In 1962, eight trucks loaded with several thousands of volumes were sent to the Palace of Nationalities in Beijing. The exact amount of texts displaced is not known, but the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1938–1989) managed in the 1980s to have an estimated 6.000 volumes relocated to several locations in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Karma bde legs estimates that about 500 volumes each were sent to the three main Dge lugs monasteries (Se ra, 'Bras spungs, Dga' ldan), as well as to the monasteries of Zha lu, Bkra shis lhun po, and Sa skya. 1.000 volumes were deposited in the Nor bu gling kha and in the Tibet Library (Bod ljongs dpe mdzod khang), and close to 1.500 volumes were brought to the Tibet Museum of Historical Relics (Bod ljongs dngos mang bshams ston khang). In the process, many works collected by lamas were disbanded and the volumes deposited in the Museum are now unavailable for research. Karma bde legs thus estimates that out of more than 40.000 texts originally stored, only approximately 12.000 can be accounted for, which means that the whereabouts of more than 30.000 texts is still unknown.

The extent of the original materials is recorded in a comparative table of the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* (pp. 14–15). This table shows that, according to the numbers written on title pages, there used to be at least 4.416 bundles of texts in the library (5.700 in the 2019 article), out of which 1.819 were actually present at the time of cataloguing in 2002, that is to say less than 42% (32% of the total in 2019).<sup>23</sup> In the case of material related to Hevajra (marked *phyi ga*), for instance, only 56% of bundles (114 out of the 204) are described (pp. 315–397), and

<sup>22</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 12 and Karma bde legs 2019. The information provided here relies mainly on Karma bde legs's article that is more detailed.

<sup>23</sup> There is a big difference between the 2004 and 2019 numbers in the case of texts related to Kālacakra and Guhyasamāja. Karma bde legs does not specify whether the gap derives from omissions in the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* or the later discovery of texts. In the case of the Rngog collection, for instance, some of the texts reproduced in the 2011 computerized publication (Rngog Rin chen dpal bzang po's writings) are missing in both the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* and the 2010 edition but appear in the *Potala Catalogue*: 118–119, and may thus figure among the volumes that were moved to the Potala Palace at the time of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

54% (554 out of 1032) for Bka' brgyud cycles (*Bka' brgyud chos skor sogs sna tshogs*, marked *phyi ma*, pp. 573–1357).

#### 4. The Code Inscribed on Texts from the Sixteen Arhats Temple



Fig. 1 — Example of the code (phyi ra 13) on the title page of the Rngog family history, *Bod kyi lo rgyus rnam thar phyogs bsgrigs*, vol. 22, p. 1

Line A: *phyi / nang*  
 Line B: Tibetan letter corresponding to a topic  
 Line C: Bundle number  
 Line D: Title of the text

Although no listing or explanation regarding the texts is known to have been found within the Sixteen Arhats Temple,<sup>24</sup> the *'Bras spungs Catalogue* provides helpful clues for understanding the collection, the most important being the code illustrated above (Fig. 1) and inscribed on the title page of texts from this library (*ka rtags*). This code is present above the title on reproductions of manuscripts or xylographs found within the Sixteen Arhats Temple, for instance in some of the texts contained in the *Rngog chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, the *Bka' gdams gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs* and others, and thus represents an important information, one that is unfortunately missing in collections that have been published in a computerized format.<sup>25</sup>

On top of the code, the catalogue also provides:

- a sorting number (*tshan grangs*), 24.295 in total for the Sixteen Arhats Temple. This corresponds to the number of titles catalogued by Paltsek;
- the title of each section (*le tshan so so'i mtshan*). It is generally the title of an independent text, although sometimes there is no title;
- the author (*rtsom pa po*) when it is available (often mistaken);
- the type of writing (*yig gzugs*): xylograph, manuscript, type of

<sup>24</sup> *'Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 11.

<sup>25</sup> Although absence of proof is not proof of absence, to the best of my knowledge, this code does not appear on manuscripts coming from elsewhere than *'Bras spungs* and can therefore be considered a solid indication that a text having such a code comes from there.

- cursive handwriting;
- the number of folios (*ldeb grangs*);
- the size in centimetres (*ldeb tshad* cm).

As far as the code written on each work's title page is concerned, it has either the word *phyi* or *nang*, followed by a Tibetan letter and a number.

#### 4.1. Line A

Regarding the first indication, texts marked with *phyi*, "external" are those from the Sixteen Arhats Temple, and this indicates that they come from outside libraries. Texts marked with *nang*, "internal," come from one of the other four libraries of 'Bras spungs Monastery, thus they are inner resources. External books arrived during the period described above, when the Dga' ldan pho brang government took power with the military means of Gushri Khan's Khoshut armies, and seized several monasteries. The libraries contained in these non-Dge lugs pa monasteries were not destroyed, like it happened so often in other places and times, but moved to 'Bras spungs where they were reorganized and stored in the back of the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

#### 4.2. Line B

The second part of the code is a Tibetan letter that classifies texts according to their topic, in an order reminiscent of the Bka' 'gyur divisions.<sup>26</sup> For instance, texts with *ka* are said to be related to Kālacakra, those with *ma* to be Bka' brgyud cycles and those with *ra* (like the example given above), to historical writings. No explanation is provided for this system in the catalogue, which does not specify whether the editors figured out the sorting or whether the key was provided in the library. There is only one text with the letter *ta* and the editors do not provide a corresponding topic for it. This may indicate that they were the ones who tried to clarify the topic based on their analysis of each title having this letter. This thematic organization of the volumes suggests that the people in charge of rearranging the books and writing the code did intend to recreate some sort of library with the material seized, albeit not a public one, and Karma bde legs declares that many of the complete works were

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<sup>26</sup> 'Bras spungs Catalogue vol. 1: 14–15.

separated at this time.<sup>27</sup> These two facts may indicate that the aim of the sorting that took place when the library was created was to euphemize the origin of the texts (it is likely that at that time, like today, converting a monastery and seizing its assets may not have been considered completely virtuous in Buddhist terms) and to constitute a new library with a coherent content. This strategy is visible as well in the case of the statues of the 16 *arhats* which were brought from a Karma Bka' brgyud monastery and were re-appropriated in the creation of the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

#### 4.3. Line C

The last part of the code is a number that refers to groupings of texts. There are always several titles sharing the same number, sometimes only a few titles and sometimes a couple of dozens, thus forming completely identical codes. According to Karma bde legs, when the texts were catalogued, they were protected inside book covers and placed on shelves (hence forming some sort of library with sorting numbers). It is likely that each grouping of texts with an identical number formed one volume of several texts protected by a common cover. These groupings of texts with the same number thus provide a reflection of the volumes that used to be kept together in the shelves of the Sixteen Arhats Temple since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 5. The Mysteries of the Sixteen Arhats Temple

Now that the code is clarified, several questions can be raised, and first of all: why does all this matter? One could mostly give two reasons why anyone would like to make sense of all this: the first being historical, whether this may concern Tibetan history in general or the social and religious history of the groups who produced these texts in particular, and the second being philological. In historical terms, the collection of the Sixteen Arhats Temple questions the campaigns launched in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century by Gushri Khan and the motives behind the Dga' ldan pho brang's or the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's, or anyone else's sorting of these texts in the Sixteen Arhats Temple. Another question in terms of contemporary history is that of the circulation of books in the People's Republic of China. These questions far exceed the ambition of the present article and may be

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<sup>27</sup> This is obvious in the case of the Rngog texts which have many different numbers. Although it is possible that the texts came from several libraries, it is unlikely that there were so many different libraries that held Rngog texts but that all of the texts available today only come from the Sixteen Arhats Temple.

the object of future research.

The impetus for the research discussed in the present article were the ten volumes of disparate texts of the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud lineage that form the core of this author's doctoral dissertation. In order to understand the history of these texts, it was necessary to clarify where they may have been produced, how they circulated, the date and authorship of the manuscripts and of the texts they contained. As Sam van Schaik showed in his studies of the Dunhuang collection, it is important to understand the social framework of text production and to see texts as objects, not only as content.<sup>28</sup> To do this, it proved necessary to investigate the origin of the texts, tracing their source as early as possible.

Another important question is that of the moment when the code was inscribed on the texts. No information is provided on that in the *Bras spungs Catalogue*, and Karma bde legs maintains that there was no indication in the storeroom. Most scholars interviewed on the subject and Karma bde legs himself think that the code was written on the volumes when the texts were collected within the Sixteen Arhats Temple. Karma bde legs is adamant on the fact that Paltsek was not responsible for reordering the texts in this way at the time of cataloguing, and we can therefore conclude that the code was inscribed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> What is not clear, however, is whether the groups of texts were like they appear to be in the catalogue when they were brought inside the Sixteen Arhats Temple (that is to say that volumes were only opened, registered with the sorting number of the Sixteen Arhats Temple library, and packed again) or whether the original volumes were opened, separated into various sections, sorted with a code and packed in new bundles with that code. If we take as an example the texts now compiled in the Rngog collection,<sup>30</sup> it can be observed that each grouping contains texts of different sizes of paper and various styles of writing. Some groups are related by topic, but for some the link is not obvious. This might indicate that individual groups may not necessarily have been considered as forming a whole with the other texts with the same number and may have come from various libraries, and that texts from the same library could have been dispatched in many different groups and sections. A much more thorough examination of the various collections and collected works of authors would be necessary to clarify this question.

If we continue with our example, however, it is obvious that the various texts now compiled in the *Rngog chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* were

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., van Schaik 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Private conversation via WeChat, April 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang 2007.

grouped in many different volumes in the Sixteen Arhats Temple. They contain texts of different sizes and handwriting. It seems therefore likely that this collection is artificial and did not exist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. It most probably gathers texts coming from several libraries seized at the period, and Paltsek did an excellent work by gathering together pieces of the tradition that were separate until then. Even if the texts come from a single library, they probably did never constitute a single collection organized by an editor. My initial hypothesis was that by analysing groupings and their content it may be possible to guess where each particular volume may have come from, and hence to understand who were the people responsible for the copy of specific manuscripts, and on that basis one can clarify the history of the Rngog family of Spre'u zhing. If, however, volumes were disbanded upon arrival in the Sixteen Arhats Temple and do not reflect an earlier situation, this may prove difficult. What seems possible is to recreate collections by grouping texts with the same paper size, similar ductus, topic, etc. This too may be the object of future research.

Another question that is quite important and germane to the previous one is that of the identity of the libraries seized. Even though it is difficult for the moment to pinpoint the exact origin of a particular text, it is still useful to know which libraries were displaced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To continue with the Rngog example, several of the monasteries listed below were likely to contain these texts, which explains why some of the texts appear several times in the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*.

Although an extensive listing of the monasteries seized is not provided in the *'Bras spungs Catalogue*, it mentions three libraries contained in the Sixteen Arhats Temple, albeit without specifying its source for such claim. The three are the library of the Sne gdong Palace built by the Phag gru rulers (14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> c.), that of the Bsam grub rtse Palace built by the Gtsang pa rulers, and that of Rtse lha sgang, related to the Karma Bka' brgyud school and its head, the Karma pas. It is likely that the editors, like the present author, examined 17<sup>th</sup>-century history to define which monasteries were converted, hence which libraries may have fed the new book depository. Here again, further research on the conquest of Central Tibet by Gushri Khan's army in 1642 and of his dealing with the rebellions that took place in the following years may bring further information and the following is only an introduction to the topic.

The library of the Phag mo gru pa hierarchs in the Sne gdong Palace in Lho ka<sup>31</sup> may have been very rich as many famous masters

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<sup>31</sup> Akester 2016: 409–411.

and rich patrons were related to it between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>32</sup> As far as the Rngog transmission is concerned, the Phag mo gru pa hierarch Grags pa 'byung gnas (1414–1448) received several transmissions from Rngog Byang chub dpal (1360–1446) and was an important patron of Lo chen Bsod nams rgya mtsho (1424–1482) and his master, 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481). Both masters were instrumental in the transmission of the seven *maṇḍalas* of the Rngog to the 4<sup>th</sup> Zhwa dmar, who himself served as the Gdan sa mthil abbot for 12 years. It is therefore likely that the Sne'u gdong Palace, like the Gdan sa mthil Monastery which may have been seized as well, contained texts of the Rngog tradition, and in fact several of the manuscripts were copied in the region. This library is therefore most probably the main source of tantric exegetic texts related to the Rngog tradition found in the Sixteen Arhats Temple, although it is not clear at which time it was seized.<sup>33</sup>

The library of the Gtsang pa hierarchs in the Bsam grub rtse Palace, in Gzhis ka rtse, was seized when the regime was toppled in 1642.<sup>34</sup> As the regime was close to the Karma Bka' brgyud order, it may have contained many texts from this tradition.<sup>35</sup>

The Karma Bka' brgyud Library of Rtse lha sgang in Kong po housed a renowned library established by the 1<sup>st</sup> Karma pa (1110–1193). In it there was a treasure room called the “Black Treasury” (Mdzod nag ma), containing *inter alia* a large biography of Mi la ras pa.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that most Bka' brgyud collections published by Paltsek mentioned earlier come from Rtse lha sgang. As said, the name of 'Bras spungs' Sixteen Arhats Temple derives from the statues of the 16 *arhats* taken from Rtse lha sgang when the monastery was seized. The reason why this monastery in particular was targeted is that its landlord, Rtse lha sgang pa, spearheaded the rebellion against the Central Tibetan forces in 1643.<sup>37</sup> The battle was fierce and the Central Tibetan forces, assisted by Gushri Khan's army, annihilated the resistance, killing “some five or six thousand pro-

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Farmer 2017 and Ducher 2017.

<sup>33</sup> For more information on the history of that monastery, see Czaja 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Shakabpa 2010: 346–347.

<sup>35</sup> More information about the institutions of the Gtsang pa regime will be available when the dissertation of Jetsun Deleplanque (Divinity School, Chicago) is finished. See Deleplanque 2019 for a description of the court before it was destroyed.

<sup>36</sup> Quintman 2014: 105–107. Quintman indicates on p. 106 that the Black Treasury may have been intact until the Cultural Revolution, but it is likely that it was actually emptied in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For a description of the modern location, see Chan 1994: 749.

<sup>37</sup> Shakabpa 2010: 348–349.

Karma Kagyü troops from Kongpo.”<sup>38</sup> In all likelihood, the whole library, together with the statues, etc., were brought to ‘Bras spungs. The fate of the monastery after that date is not clear, but it definitely lost most of its assets.<sup>39</sup>

The monastery of Tāranātha, Rtag brtan phun tshogs gling, was seized by the government in 1650 and turned into a Dge lugs monastery in 1658.<sup>40</sup> It is most probably the origin of the many volumes of the Jo nang tradition held in the Sixteen Arhats Temple. Regarding the Rngog tradition, Tāranātha was, like the 4<sup>th</sup> Zhwa dmar, an important proponent and compiler, and his library too could have housed Rngog materials.

Another library that is not explicitly mentioned in the *‘Bras spungs Catalogue* and Karma bde legs’ article is that of ‘Bri gung thil. According to the information provided by the present Che tshang Rin po che, there were around 40 boxes of ‘Bri gung Bka’ brgyud texts in the Sixteen Arhats Temple. He personally heard about their presence within ‘Bras spungs in the 1980s and organized the reproduction of several volumes he was interested in by introducing a photocopy machine within the monastery’s compounds. The texts were retrieved before the start of the cataloguing process of the *‘Bras spungs Catalogue* and do not figure in it. A large part of what is now called the *‘Bri gung bka’ brgyud chos mdzod chen mo*<sup>41</sup> comes from there, although in an undiscernible form as this collection has been completely rewritten by hand. Some of the materials probably date back to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup> Zhwa dmar, who had close ties with the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> ‘Bri gung throne-holders, Kun dga’ rin chen and Bkra shis phun tshogs, and the collection contains key instructions of the Mar rngog tradition unavailable anywhere else.<sup>42</sup>

Although these five libraries surely had a very eclectic content and could contain the various holdings described in the *‘Bras spungs Catalogue*, it is also possible that other libraries were incorporated, as one finds many texts associated with the Zhi byed, Gcod yul, Shangs pa, Gya’ bzang, Mtshal pa, Smar tsang, and Snye mdo traditions, as well as works of Dge lugs pa lamas whose writings are now unavailable.<sup>43</sup> It is as well possible that the many Bka’ gdams pa texts, as well as the Indian manuscripts, may have come from Rwa sgren. This as well may be elucidated by further research.

<sup>38</sup> Shakabpa 2010: 346.

<sup>39</sup> Quintman 2014: 253n71.

<sup>40</sup> Stearns 1999: 70–71; Sheehy 2009: 227; Akester 2016: 623–628. The *‘Bras spungs Catalogue* does not name this library in particular, but Karma bde legs 2019 does.

<sup>41</sup> A mgon Rin po che 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Personal discussion with Che tshang Rin po che, June 2017.

<sup>43</sup> *‘Bras spungs Catalogue* vol. 1: 8; Shakabpa 2010: 349; Shamar 2012: 46.



## 6. Conclusion

Although many of the findings in this article are preliminary, my hope is that shedding some light on the collection of the Sixteen Arhats Temple may trigger further research and bring more clarity on the identity of the libraries seized, how they were incorporated in the new Sixteen Arhats Temple library and the whereabouts of the missing texts.

The descriptions of the state of the Sixteen Arhats Temple library in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century show that it may correspond to the idea we have of a library, that is to say a place that holds a collection of books whose content is coherently organized (here in the way of Tibetan canonical collections). Although in this case, the aim was clearly more to preserve—or maybe to avoid the destruction?—than to spread. Whatever the intention of the creator of the book depository might have been, the fact remains that, somehow ironically, the seizing and disbanding of libraries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century rescued many books from the destructions of the following centuries and, often, from oblivion. Most of the Rngog commentaries, for instance, are known only through copies conserved in the Sixteen Arhats Temple, and this is true as well for many Bka' gdams pa philosophical manuals, historical narratives and other Jo nang and Karma Bka' brgyud practice liturgies. In all likelihood, however, this is only the tip of the iceberg, and it is hoped that in the future many more treasures may appear that will enrich our knowledge of pre-17<sup>th</sup> century Tibet.

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