

*BAN-DE SKYA-MIN SER-MIN: TSHANGS-DBYANGS RGYA-MTSHO'S
COMPLEX, CONFUSED AND CONFUSING RELATIONSHIP WITH SDE-SRID SANGS-RGYAS
RGYA-MTSHO AS PORTRAYED IN THE
TSHANGS-DBYANGS RGYA-MTSHO'I MGU-GLU*

It is hard to know quite where to start. Whilst we know that the 6th Dalai Lama existed - at least between 1683 and 1706 - and whilst we have a temple guide which is almost certainly his work, the text for which he is most famous, the *Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i mGu-glu*, may not be by him at all, or it may - more likely - be a hotchpotch of poems from his pen and from the pens of those who would be his imitators.

But we have to start somewhere. And since we cannot be certain about the provenance of any of these poems, let us forget for a moment about historical truth. In its stead, we can look upon Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho as the myth which he has, subsequent to either or both of his bodily deaths, become, and in which his power lies. After all, he left no teachings, he left no prayers, he left no commentaries: his legacy is the interpenetration of the linear and the lateral - of history and mythopoësis: this is the moment at which the signified and the signifier - the physical form and the narrative - become one in the consciousness of the society through which he passed; again and again, he returns in a different (in this case, poetic) form, a manifestation through which perception is turned towards (or maybe into) the metaphysical and, thus, we experience not only the emotions - of love, of rejection, of dejection, of treachery, of being overwhelmed by responsibility, by the touch of life itself - which he himself felt but also we feel their resonance within ourselves.

So these are his teachings, perhaps, for us. And, although I don't here want to concentrate upon his religious and spiritual position, the towering and hopelessly, frustratingly complex figure of the regent is nonetheless centerstage, so it behoves us to acknowledge the multidimensional position which both the Dalai Lama and his regent held in the religio-political world of Central Asia at the turn of the seventeenth century.

It could be said, of course, that it is precisely the multidimensional nature of this relationship which lies at the heart of the *mgu-glu*. At least one commentator, the Chinese scholar Xiao Diyan, has seen the entire text as an exposition of the political triangle played out between Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho and the Lhazang Qan and, although his interpretation seems occasionally to be somewhat contrived, it's nonetheless clear that the text does indeed illustrate not only Tsang-dbyang rGya-mtsho's emotional response to, but also his profound and profoundly cynical understanding of, his political position.

Throughout the *mgu-glu*, both people and animals are portrayed as being untrustworthy, fickle, likely to spill the beans and tell that which should not be told. Throughout his life, Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was treated as a political pawn, a person to be manoeuvred through and around situations rather than one who might take these situations and affect them himself. His relationship with Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho hovered always on the knife-edge of apposite action: how much did he feel himself able to confide in the regent, the person who had raised him, who had taught him so much, but who seemed so reluctant to withdraw and allow him his rightful position as head of state? And it is clearly political, rather than spiritual, power with which the regent is concerned: after all, it was he who had found Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in Mön, it was he who had identified the child as the rebirth of the Great Fifth, his own beloved patron, lama and spiritual friend - there is no way in which the regent could doubt, either within his heart or within the hierarchy, the validity of the Dalai Lama's religious status or spiritual power.

Before looking at the poems, we should first consider precisely what it is we are doing. For, just as there is no clear indication in the *mgu-glu* of a single author, there are no clear pointers to aid identification of any other characters. As with any literary detective work, all we can do is guess at the author's meaning through contextualised analysis. And of course, contextualised

analysis for one person might be vague conjecture for another. In this context, though, we do know quite a bit about the Regent's personality and writings, from which we can elicit certain interpretations.

We can broadly divide the Regent's sphere of influence into its public and private aspects, although the two would undoubtedly have interlaced at certain points. To read the poems in this way might also help us to focus on the fact that they were probably written for Tsangsdbyangs rGya-mtsho's personal pleasure as much as for public consumption, with all its concomitant sociopolitical implications.

The way in which Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho conducted his life left him open to mockery. The title of this paper - *bande skya-min ser-min* - refers directly to his inability to decide whether he was layman or monk; in the *mgu-glu*, the couplet of which this is the first line refers to such a person as an enemy of the Buddha's teaching. This may be a serious accusation or it may be simply an affectionate prod in the ribs, but nonetheless it points out the Regent's arrogance, indecisiveness and infidelity.

This particular verse also points to the strength of the regent's power. The first couplet tells of the cloud, yellow outside and black within, as being a source for frost and hail. The three or four poems in this grouping tell about natural phenomena with dramatic effects: the rock and wind (the Qan and the Regent perhaps) attack the vulture's plumage, while the stallion is carelessly let loose upon slippery ground - all three poems suggest Tsangsdbyangs rGya-mtsho's frustration at the manipulative hands of the Regent. Indeed, the melting surface (*kha zhu*) clearly indicates the uncertainty of water, the way in which it distorts and transforms the appearance of things.

Just as the natural world is used as an analog for the Regent's negative qualities, it's also used to illustrate his positive qualities. One of the most poignant poems in the *mgu-glu* is one which can be interpreted both with public and private import. If, with Xiao Diyan, we understand the Regent as represented by the thousand-petalled hollyhock, then it's possible to read this poem as a request for protection, that the young Dalai Lama, the turquoise bee, be taken into the temple amidst the hollyhock's bloom.

This is particularly interesting because it illustrates perhaps how Tsangsdbyangs rGya-mtsho perceives himself in relation to his regent. He either feels himself to be truly inferior, or else simply so in the eyes of society: nonetheless, the fact that the beautiful turquoise bee feels the need to hide within the long blossoming hollyhock suggests maybe that the intellectual and social brilliance of the regent is both overwhelming and, occasionally, very useful to the young lama. There is similar evidence of the poet's shyness elsewhere in the text (for instance when he catches sight of a girl's brilliant smile at a party) and I tend to feel that he is presenting us with a slightly devious self-portrait - as someone who wants protection from himself or from the power which he wields. After all, again and again he comments on the power struggle between himself and the Regent and between the Qan and the Regent, but he never really acknowledges the fact that he is the Dalai Lama: from what we know of his wilful nature, this strikes me as rather a false humility - particularly when we read the poem in which he confidently describes himself as both *rig-'dzin* and *'chal-po*, Knowledge Holder and Letcher.

Already we are beginning to see another aspect, far deeper and more complex, to this relationship. In political terms, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho had effectively run Tibet since the Great Fifth died in 1682. One would imagine that, throughout his childhood and early adolescence, Tsangsdbyangs rGya-mtsho would have looked to the older man, not only for spiritual teaching and emotional succour but also to show the way in which he should conduct himself as Dalai Lama. It appears, from the Regent's own account of the child's upbringing, that an attempt was made to replicate the intellectual hothouse in which he himself had been schooled by his teacher, the Great Fifth, and one would assume that the idea of an unbroken lineage would have spurred the older man to put a considerable amount of pressure - not always benign - upon the younger. We can only wonder at how, as he grew to manhood, the Dalai Lama might have come to perceive his mentor: it seems most likely to me that he would have seen his Regent as that most irritating of people, someone he could neither live with nor without. And I would guess that the

Regent would have recognised these confusing and powerful emotions and used them to his own advantage.

For this reason, it should come as no surprise that Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho encouraged the relationship between his daughter and the Dalai Lama - a relationship which presumably either developed or became known following Tsang-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's disrobing in early 1702. Through his daughter, he perhaps hoped to control the young man's wilfulness and thereby bring some peace to the state as much as to himself .

This brings us to a term which is significant throughout the *mgu-glu*. *Chung 'dris* refers to a person whom one has known since childhood and it seems unlikely that a girl other than the Regent's daughter would fit such a rôle: in the secretive, monastic setting in which Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho had been raised, it would surely have been odd for another, random girl to have spent much time with this closeted monk.

So what are we to make of the poem in which prayer-flags are tied to a willow for the poet's sweetheart, his *chung 'dris byams pa*? Maybe the willow is the poet, the guardian of the willow the Regent. So the poet's request that the guardian shouldn't throw stones at the tree is very telling. Was the Regent in fact so determined to prejudice the relationship that he would damage it with such force, or is Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho misreading the situation? It could be, of course, that the Regent perceived that the situation warranted a circumspection which the lama was too unsubtle to grant, that it was still considered inappropriate for the Dalai Lama to behave like the layman he in fact was: this would suggest that, by throwing stones, by creating problems in the relationship, things might be hushed up.

If this is so, we're again seeing a pragmatic side to the Regent which a cursory reading of the poems might not reveal. This is the man, after all, who managed to conceal the Great Fifth's death for fifteen years, bribing and cajoling a hapless monk from the Namgyal Dratsang into impersonating the dead ruler and convincing all those who needed convincing that the Dalai Lama was in fact in an enclosed retreat. It is not then beyond possibility that, far from doing deliberate damage to Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho's relationship, the Regent was in fact trying to cover all his bases, to protect the relationship, to protect the authority of the Dalai Lama and to protect, maybe most of all, himself from criticism.

To read all the poems in which Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho is accused of being fickle and untrustworthy as a misunderstanding of a fallible man doing his best in a difficult situation, though, brings to my mind the parental line, "I'm only doing it for your own good". At worst, it's emotionally abusive, at best it's disrespectful and condescending; but, of course, the problem is that the parent frequently believes that he or she is in fact doing the best for the child and I get the impression, both that this is the case with the Regent and that Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho recognises this to be the case.

Many of the poems in the *mgu-glu* can be read along these lines. I agree with Per Sørensen's suggestion that the Regent can be read both as the Dharmapala rDo-rje Grags-Idan and the enemy of the Dharma against whom the Dharmapala is invoked. When the poet says to the Dharmapala, "if you possess magical power" (*mthu dang nus pa yod na*), his lack of conviction is palpable and the Regent's ultimate vulnerability is laid open to criticism. Maybe it is this very vulnerability which makes Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho an (unwitting) enemy of the Buddha's teaching, it's potentially a very powerful indictment of the Dalai Lama's entire political and personal situation and a scathing attack on the person of the Regent. But, if we do choose to read the poem as being more than a prayer to rDo-rje Grags-Idan, an identification of the Dharmapala with the Regent means that the Dalai Lama is using - maybe out of genuine respect as much as convention - honorific language to address him. And this honorific language - *bzhugs*, *skyong*, *sgrol* - conveys not only respect but also the implication of transcendence, as though the Regent's position, and therefore his actions, were somehow taking place outside quotidian reality.

So maybe this poem reveals a deeper understanding of the Regent's behavior than might at first seem possible. Elsewhere, after all, we might care to read him as a peacock, as a lover, as the sun (to the Qan's moon) and as an eternal friend. Moreover, given the deep affection which Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho and he evidently had for one another, it is unsurprising that, in cer-

tain specific circumstances, his tone of address rises into the spiritually charged honorific.

As we focus down upon the one-to-one emotional rawness of the relationship between these two men, we need to remember that the position in which they found themselves was not easily escapable. The image of the knotted snake presents us with a knot and with its self-effected unknotting, suggesting that a relationship (and here the market-girl, the *tshong 'dus bu-mo*, is linked with the Regent) can only properly be resolved from within. The three words spoken by the poet and the girl here indicate a firm declaration of love and of course this love might well be other than romantic: the implication is that nothing can come between the two people, that they are destined to work out their relationship in their own way. And for people who can't live with, or without, the other, this resolution is a painful and traumatic process.

The image of lovers as a parallel for the relationship between the Regent and the poet-lama is clearly highly potent. Lovers have an intimacy which covers the gamut of emotion, from anger and hatred to the closest and most private love. And, of course, the topos of romantic love conceals a certain amount of power play and infantilism: so many classic love-songs use the word "baby" (and I for one have translated the word *byams-pa* in this way from time to time), we most of us refer to our partners (at least when unmarried) as girl- or boyfriend and we often hear how someone has "stolen" someone else's lover.

It is possible throughout the *mgu-glu* to equate the lover - the *byams-pa* and the *chung-'dris* - with Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho although it should again be pointed out that this could refer to the Regent's daughter and, through her, to the Regent himself. That the lover is frequently described as fickle and inconsistent should come as no surprise, since the principal character trait of Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho appears to have been an inability as much to decide a path for himself as it to decide upon a mistress. In one poem, the lover is described as *gtan grogs*, an eternal friend: this is a frequent term of affection for a spouse, a particularly poignant image perhaps for this infuriating man to whom Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho owed so much and from whose grasp he could never be truly free. If we read the turquoise placed in the poet's hair as the poet himself, we can see that whereas Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho is simply a figurehead, kept silent and impotent out of the way, the Regent is free to act with impunity - brazen and unfaithful in the words of the text, *khrel dang ngo-tsha med* - and to do just as he wants.

We see a similar idea played out in another poem. The lover is lying on the poet's bed, her alluring body tender and soft: he asks her whether she's come to weave a web of lies and thus steal the young man's most valuable treasure. This is significant considering the position of the Dalai Lama - is this treasure the political power which Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho desires to such an extent that he is willing to spin deceit throughout the higher echelons of Lhasa society? Or maybe this is a reference to the attempted assassination of the Dalai Lama's closest friend and confidant, Thar-rgyas-nas, which cost the lama the ability fully to trust the Regent ever again.

Finally in this section, we should make mention of the literary theme which appears in a number of the poems, namely the references to Tshe-ring dBang-dus' contemporary verse drama *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*, based on the jataka story Sudhana.

Although we can never be completely certain, it seems clear to me that Tsang-sdbyangs rGya-mtsho reads himself as the hunter sPang-legs 'Dzin-pa, while Nor-bzang himself represents the Regent. That the goddess caught by the hunter but subsequently acquired by the prince should be called Yid-'phrog Lha-mo, the Mind-Stealing Goddess, is a stroke of ironic genius in the hands of the poet. After all, as Per Sørensen, points out, we can see this character as representing the dual power embodied in the *sprul-sku* of the Dalai Lama but wrested (or, rather, withheld) from him by the Regent. But this is a mind-stealing goddess, it deprives one of one's mind: the obsession which can accompany romantic (and, let's face it, erotic) love has a parallel in the obsession for temporal power - a binary which found its natural expression in the person of Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho.

But we could equally read the stolen mind as that of Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho. It wouldn't be unreasonable to see the portrayal of the Regent (and the Qan) in the *mgu-glu* as evidence of his obsession with fulfilling his perceived destiny at the head of the Tibetan people; the fact that the Regent did refuse to give up the reins of power means simply that the Dalai Lama never

practically took over government - nonetheless, he clearly had the support of his people and had considerable religious status in his society, so it could equally be claimed that he was the one who lost his mind to the goddess of power. This is an unusual reading, but one which I think restores balance to the situation - he was clearly quite bitter towards the Regent for many things but it seems adversely to have affected the mental and emotional balance of both men.

In conclusion, then, we can see that there is nothing in the text of the *Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i mGu-glu* which makes definitive reference to Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho. Indeed, the fact that we can't be sure whether this is the work of the sixth Dalai Lama means that all analysis has to be highly speculative and open to complete dismissal.

For this reason, however, the text is a blank slate. Xiao Diyan's rather tortured attempt to squeeze pretty much every poem into the triangular box of Regent, Qan and Lama proves how it is possible to read the poems as a commentary on any aspect of the political, religious, intellectual or societal situation at the turn of the seventeenth century.

I, no more than anyone else, can be certain neither of this text's provenance nor of its import. My choice is to suspend judgment and play with the possibilities. If we accept, for the moment, that this is the work of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, it would be unlikely that he would choose not to comment, in one way or another, on the situation which informed his life and his emotions. Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho was as close to him, if not closer, than his own family and gave him probably as much grief, if not more, than any member of our own families do. In Tibetan poetry, the nature of the *gzhas* form is to comment on the world without and within; the etymology of the word *gzhas* is almost certainly connected with *bzhad-pa*, the main verb concerned with smiling, laughing or amusement in general - so we can see, not only how such texts could point the finger of fun at temporal power but equally how they can turn the finger back on the poet himself.

The suggestions I have made regarding the Regent's place in the *mgu-glu* indicate to me the extent of ambiguity which characterised his relationship with the Dalai Lama. A meddlesome - though highly sexed and highly sexy - lover; the wind and rain which grinds down rocks and deprives birds of their plumage; the eponymous noble hero of a popular verse drama who uses his power to steal an alluring goddess from her lover: all these and more give us a confusing, and thus tantalising, glimpse of the politics and emotions at work in the newly-built Potala between the Dalai Lama's enthronement in 1697 and the death of the Regent in 1703.

It seems fair to allow Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho the final word. When reading the *mgu-glu* it's possible to misrepresent this flawed but brilliant character, to think of him simply as a wannabe monastic with a roving eye, as a political manipulator to rival Niccolò Machiavelli. But he clearly had genuine love for Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and I'll close with his description of his meeting with the Dalai Lama at *mNye-thang* just before the enthronement of 1697: "Those who were holding onto his mount said later that when Rin-po-che caught sight of me, he smiled through tear-soaked eyes. He looked shining and elegant, sitting there upon his horse and, having not seen him for some time, I became overcome with emotion and the tears coursed uncontrollably down my face."