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International Workshop

WARRIOR GODS AND FIERCE PROTECTORS OF MONGOLS AND TIBETANS

REPRESENTATION, LOCALISATION AND MOBILITY

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ABSTRACTS

Valeria Gazizova (Heidelberg University)

Mobile Violence: Representations and Ritual Materiality of Palden Lhamo in Kalmykia

Belonging to the class of defenders of faith, the female wrathful deity Palden Lhamo (Tib. dPal ldan lha mo) is a personal protector the Dalai Lama lineage and a special guardian of Lhasa venerated by all Tibetan Buddhist schools. While already a complex figure in the Tibetan contexts, this deity has received further interpretations among Mongols, not least on the level of visual representation, popular mythology and worship, and ritual healing.

The talk traces the dynamics of the still evolving cult of the Tibetan goddess Palden Lhamo in the Buddhist society of Kalmykia (where she is also commonly known as Okon Tengri) through the lens of material culture and context specific ritual media associated with her worship. I shall introduce distinctive categories of objects, including military banners bearing her image, that have come to function as embodiments of this deity, constructing her simultaneously as a fount of military might, a source of political legitimation and a vessel of therapeutic powers. I shall also look at local religious specialists interacting with this wrathful cosmological being, focusing on their ritual materiality and healing techniques.

Yulia Savostina (University of Bern)

Protector of the Doctrine and Political Figure, Bad Spirit and Emanated Deity: Construction of Dorje Shugden's Image in Mongolian Nation-Building and Politics – online presentation

The controversial deity Dorje Shugden is believed to be of a violent – much more violent than many other popular protective deities – nature. He inflicts various kinds of punishment, even death, on everyone who mixes practices of different schools. In Mongolia, a person who worships Dorje Shugden is said to be likely to suffer from illnesses and misfortunes, have a bad rebirth, or even end up not being reborn at all, which is seen as the most severe punishment.

Why then some people choose to make such a violent and unconventional deity one of the elements used for the construction of national identity? Why do some worship this deity despite all the bad rumors surrounding him and the restriction imposed by the current Dalai Lama? The answer to this question can be found deep in the history of Mongolian relations with Tibet and the Dalai Lamas, and in the way Buddhism and Tibetan monks were and are perceived in Mongolia.

Isabelle Charleux (CNRS, GSRL, EPHE/PSL)

Personalized God or Archetypal War Deity? On the Problem of Identifying War Deities in Mongol Buddhist Painting and Contemporary Controversies in Mongolia

Equestrian war deities with a Central Asian background are the objects of popular cults aiming at ensuring health, wealth, happiness in life and success at war. They were easily adopted and recontextualized within the Mongol heroic culture as archetypes of ideals of valor, strength, and power. Walther Heissig, who studied smoke offering texts dedicated to them, highlighted the great confusion between different deities who embody the “war spirit” of the Mongols: they have composite characteristics and are especially prone to multiple narrative identities.

In present-day Mongolia, recently published thangkas modelled on the iconography of *dgra lha* (Mo. *dalha*) are the object of a controversy concerning their identification. Do they depict Geser Khan (Tib. Ge sar), as claim the monks of a monastery in central Mongolia who preserved rituals to Geser, or Chinggis Khan, as claims a Mongolian trained in Tibetan studies, proponent of the cult of a Buddhist Chinggis Khan? This paper highlights phenomena of superscriptions, conflation, and borrowings that complicate the work of modern art historians, and studies the different stakes involved in the promotion of Geser Khan or Chinggis Khan in a context of nationalism and revival of local identities.

Naljor Tsering (CRCAO, EPHE/PSL)

Many Stories of the God of Zhangzhung: Identity in Ritual, Narrative and Cultural Borders

Ge khod is believed to be a deity associated with the Zhangzhung kingdom in the western part of Tibet during the Tibetan Empire (7th to 9th centuries). Typically, in the Yungdrung Bon tradition, Ge khod is considered a term in the Zhangzhung language, meaning “subduer of demons” (*bdud 'dul* in Tibetan). However, many texts have different spellings for this deity, such as *dge rgod*, *rgya rgod*, *ke kod*, *gyer 'od*, *rgya 'od*, and more, which seem to indicate different etymological meanings. In the Yungdrung Bon tradition, Ge khod started appearing in treasure-texts (*gter ma*) from the 12th century. Over time, his dwelling place shifted from Ru thog in western Tibet to the sacred Mount Kailash, solidifying Ge khod's status as the primary deity of the Zhangzhung kingdom in western Tibet. Simultaneously, Buddhists transformed Ge khod from an early deity subdued by Padmasambhava into a supreme god worshiped in their tradition, especially as the ruler of 360 deities in the sacred mountain ranges of Zhangzhung. This presentation explores the origins of the deity Ge khod and the development of ritual texts within a non-Buddhist framework, considering Tibetan Bon, Buddhism, Naxi Dongba, and Hinduism-related themes. It underscores the importance of the mythological context in understanding Yungdrung Bon and the reimagining of the deity Ge khod as a significant symbol in Tibet's sacred geographical space, particularly following the spread of Buddhism.

Wang Yuewei (CRCAO, EPHE/PSL)

How Did the Mountain Deity Gnyan chen Thang lha Evolve into a Buddhist Protective Guardian? A Study of Textual and Social History

The mountain god Gnyan chen Thang lha is an ancient territorial god (*yul lha*) of Tibet. However, as Buddhism developed in Tibet, Thang lha underwent a significant identity transformation from being a *yul lha* and the protector of early kings to becoming the Dharma protector and treasure guardian of Buddhism. From the early (9th-14th century) Buddhist texts (such as *Dbal bzhe'd*, *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*, *Slob dpon pad ma'i rnam thar zangs gling ma bzhugs*, *Lde'u bhos byung*, and *Pad ma bka' thang*), we can see that Thang lha experienced his first identity transformation from a non-Buddhist, autochthonous divinity who was eventually subdued by the Indian Buddhist master Padmasambhava. After being subdued, he became the protector of the Buddhist Dharma. In the later, advanced Buddhist texts, especially Nyingmapa *Snga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* (abbr. *Byang gter*), Thang lha is regarded as the personal deity of the Tibetan Buddhist king (Dharma King) Khri Srong lde btsan, the *sku lha* or god of the king's body. After that, Thang lha is constructed as the treasure guardian of the Northern Treasures (Byang gter) of the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism. In the texts of other Buddhist sects, such as Kagyupa and Gelugpa, Thang lha is said to have a friendly relationship with religious masters and become their protective deity, such as the master Stag lung Thang pa bkra shis pa, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and the great translator Rwa lo tsā ba. The evolution of Thang lha, shifting from a territorial deity to a Dharma protector, reflects its process of Buddhicization. Simultaneously, it illustrates the methodology by which Buddhism assimilated Tibetan autochthonous deities into its own pantheon system.

Robert Mayer (University of Oxford)

***How Might Guru Chos dbang Have Understood his Treasure (gter) Protectors?* – online presentation**

The great Guru Chowang's 13th century analysis of 'Treasure' or *gter* remains the most influential such text in all of Tibetan Buddhism. Yet his work has greatly baffled Western scholars. We are accustomed to understanding *gter* as sacred texts and religious icons associated with Padmasambhava, and as a cult deriving historically from the ancient burial customs of the emperors. Yet Chowang understood *gter* first and foremost within a mundane framework, with barely a mention of Padmasambhava, and absolutely not a single word about ancient tombs. What is even more striking about Chowang's understanding of *gter* is its prominent and widespread continuing persistence, as evidenced in recent ethnographic data. In short, we can now see that Chowang was simultaneously referencing popular Indian and Tibetan terrestrial cosmologies, in a hybrid form that still thrives across many Tibetan cultural regions. By understanding this, we understand also how and why the *gter* protectors were so fierce and dangerous, a theme on which Chowang enlarged at great length.

Cathy Cantwell (Faculty of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford)

***Introducing the Phurpa Guardians: Imagery, History, and Role in the Vajrakīlaya Traditions* – online presentation**

The Phurpa Guardians are a group of protective deities assigned the role of protecting the Buddhist Vajrakīlaya traditions. Accounts of their taming by Guru Rinpoche abound in all the different Vajrakīlaya transmissions, both those from the transmitted sources (*bka' ma*), including the Sakya Phurpa tradition amongst others, and those of the many revelations (*gter ma*). The core group consists of twelve females, in three groups of four sister guardians, and in most traditions, they are joined by a number of brothers. This presentation introduces the varied imagery of the group, and explanations of their history and role in commentarial sources. It also provides a review of the ritual practices associated with them. I end with a few reflections on considerations of locality and patrilineal descent amongst communities of practitioners.

Anna Sehnalova (University of Oxford)

***Why to Procreate, Kill, Be Killed, or Voluntarily Die: Violence for Apotheosis* – online presentation**

In different cultures, characterising principles of rulership have been linked to wellbeing and fecundity, as well as to violence. The Golok clan historically ruling the eponymous region of East Tibet links its genealogy to the sacred Nyenpo Yutsé mountain range in their territory. The warrior and protector Nyenpo Yutsé territorial *zhidak* deity is perceived to inhabit the range and control and enhance the surrounding lands, and to have granted his divine daughter in marriage to the early ancestor of the to-be Golok clan. The clan therefore boasts the Nyenpo Yutsé deity and his retinue of *nyen* divinities as

their affines. The members of the Golok patriclan are born divine, and, moreover, can themselves upon passing become territorial *zhidak* deities inhabiting and controlling the land within Nyenpo Yutsé's retinue. The talk explores the different modes of violence needed for wellbeing and fecundity encompassed in the roles of the Golok clan rulers during their human lives, in their apothotic transition, and in their subsequent *zhidak* careers. It argues that the change of the mode of existence does not alter these roles, and that these roles epitomise the local environmental ancestor cosmology.