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General Foreword

Jean-Luc Achard
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The present volume is the third outcome of the ANR¹ project entitled “For a Critical History of the Northern Treasures” (FCHNT) directed by Stéphane Arguillère (IFRAE),² Jay Valentine (Troy Univ.), and Jean-Luc Achard (CNRS).³ Two special issues of the *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* have indeed preceded the present publication.⁴ This project was officially launched in February 2022 and is set to run for four years (until August 2026). It is essentially centered upon the translation of biographies of lineage holders of the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, with the aim of shedding new light on the religious and sometimes political role played by this tradition in the wider religious and historical scenes of Tibet. The main source for these biographies is a modern compilation entitled *A Religious History of Thubten Dorje Drak and the Northern Treasures* (*Byang gter thub bstan rdo rje brag gi chos ’byung*) authored by Khenpo Chöying.⁵

In the course of conducting this project, we have been, and still are, confronted with the fascinating challenges that any historian faces when analyzing hagiographical documents, such as how to pertinently evaluate a spiritual tradition expressed in an emic perspective without ever losing sight of the situation in which it began and evolved throughout centuries of contacts with other lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Such a concern is evidently not the object of any critical consideration from the author of *The Religious History* but it is central to ours.

The Northern Treasures system is one of the branches of the Nyingma School, with some uncommon and slightly archaic features, and represents a distinct religious order of its own that has survived over the last six centuries. Its fate has known what we can artificially

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³ Three research fellows complete the team: Cécile Ducher (postdoctoral fellow, IFRAE), Tenpa Tsering Batsang (CRCAO, research engineer, doctoral student at Inalco), and Simon Martin (CRCAO, research engineer).

⁴ Issue 62 (February 2022) and issue 68 (January 2024). A forthcoming issue is planned in February 2026.

⁵ mKhan po Chos dbyings (born 20th c.) 2015, *Byang gter thub bstan rdo rje brag gi chos ’byung rig ’dzin brgyud pa’i rtogs brjod ngo mtshar gdam gyi phreng ba* [*The Garland of Wondrous Tales*], vol. 62 of the *sNga ’gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*.

reconstruct as four main stages:

- an initial phase of spreading from Latö Jang, starting with the revelation of its earliest works in 1366, until the period of the 16th century;
- a revolution in the 16th century with Jangdak Tashi Tobgyal's exile and the foundation of Dorje Drak,¹ leading to a peak in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, with eminent figures such the 5th Dalai-Lama (1617–1682) and Rigdzin Pema Trinlé (1641–1717);
- a sudden and disastrous downfall at the time of the Dzungar invasion in 1717–1718; and
- a steady survival until the havoc of the Cultural Revolution (文革, 1966–1976).

1. Constructing Legitimacy

“Writing history often has to do with constructing legitimacy”² and this has never been truer than in the context of the various Tibetan religious traditions. Legitimacy is established through a very careful and intricate selection of past events and doctrinal representations, as well as through an often biased and sometimes sectarian emphasis on recreated narratives supporting precise agendas. The construction of this legitimacy primarily aims at connecting to a past state of affairs in order to justify a situation in the present. Thus, by connecting to the period of the Tibetan empire (7th–8th c.), the early masters of what was to become the Nyingma School legitimized their tradition by clearly distinguishing it from the newer lineages that had been introduced in Tibet since the late 10th and early 11th centuries.

They did this through two main lines of transmissions said to have originated in the teachings of the first patriarchs of these lineages in the 8th century, with figures such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Vairocana, to name the most famous of them. These two main lines are known as *Kama* (*bKa' ma*) and *Terma* (*gTer ma*).³ The first represents a lineage of teachings that defines itself as “uninterrupted”

¹ Tradition maintains that the monastery of Dorje Drak was founded in 1610 by Rigdzin Ngakgi Wangpo (1580–1639) in Lho kha, corresponding to the modern Shannan (山南) prefecture in southern Tibet. It soon became the main religious center for the Northern Treasures and had branches as far away as Dartsedo (Kangding 康定) at the Sino-Tibetan border in Kham.

² Arguillère 2022a, p. 6.

³ The *gter ma* phenomenon is also endemic in the Bon literature since, except for a few sets of works, most of the Bon canonical literature consists of hidden treasures.

since the 8th century down to the present day. The second one is styled as “interrupted” in the sense that it corresponds to texts that were hidden as treasures (*gter ma*) supposedly in the 8th century (essentially by the three masters mentioned above) and discovered later, from the late 10th century to the present day. A very complex narrative was thus constructed around connections to the golden age of the 8th century, shaping a collective memory and identity to which all branches of the Nyingma school can refer.

It is difficult for modern historians to fully appreciate the extent of what has merely been retroactively elaborated. One element that is unquestionable is that entire doctrinal systems, with their complex sets of teachings and their particular lexicon, do not arise out of nowhere. This is especially true for the tradition of the Great Perfection which plays a central role in the Northern Treasures. However, the legitimacy built on the basis of this narrative gave rise to a tradition that does not lack in actual links to this golden age that are both coherent and probable, but also abounds in records of “events” that are simply impossible to prove. Many examples of such narratives and discussions of how to approach these events can be found in our volumes.

To state the obvious, from the perspective of the tradition under discussion, history is in fact more than a mere record of validated events: it is a means aiming at establishing authority (in particular when it is lacking) and reinforcing it through quasi-epic episodes in order to validate the narrative upon which the tradition has implanted its roots. Hagiographies reign over such an approach.

In elaborating their glorious past, the Northern Treasures have left a rich and fascinating documentation spanning over more than six centuries. To generate comprehensive understanding of how this tradition developed in Tibetan history, one must meticulously analyze its sources, examining the teachings, biographies, and historical accounts of the lineage masters within their own tradition and through their inevitable contacts with other lines of transmissions (in both the Nyingma and the Sarma¹ schools). But as historians, we must not expect too much of this material: hagiographic as it is, it often lacks purely historical details and presents a repetitive picture focused upon stereotyped structures, often organized according to birth, clan affiliation, early education, meeting of the master, transmissions received, engaging in spreading the Dharma and eventually manifesting signs of spiritual realization at death. Hence, it is necessary to supplement these original sources, by cross-referencing historical data and providing additional context from an etic perspective.

Further developments are expected from a more thorough

¹ *gSar ma*, originating from the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

exploitation of the documents on which our research is based, but we could not go deeper within our limited framework and without running the risk of losing the reader in a forest of details.

2. Northern Treasures: from Trend to Institution

Following the main historical guidelines that we had decided to apply to our main source,¹ we have chosen for our project a work that embodies most issues related to the Northern Treasures, even though its role in historiography is rather limited since it is a modern compilation. However, it does not contain any of the critical approaches that would classify it as an academic outcome: rather, it perfectly reflects the literary tradition whose historical figures it intends to describe in an emic manner. In this perspective, it sheds a light on a number of inner lineages within the Northern Treasures that have never been discussed in modern academia until now.

Within the Nyingma tradition are several Treasure lineages such as the Eastern Treasures (mostly illustrated by the *Khandro Nyingthik* tradition) and the Southern Treasures with various branches organized around specific revelations.² The Northern Treasures are one of those lineages that—as we have seen above—claims like the entire Nyingma school to trace their origins back to the 8th century. The bulk of its contents therefore consists of “hidden treasures” (*gter ma*). It is worth noting here that the Bön tradition also has a “Northern Treasures” (*byang gter*) system that stems from the same region in Latö (La stod).³ At the

¹ Of course, the research project is by no means limited to this text. In fact, it is based on all the sources available in the *sNga 'gyur byang gter phyogs bsgrigs* (63 vols.) which is an unprecedented collection of works from the Northern Treasures, many of which were either hitherto unavailable or simply unknown.

² The Southern Treasures include, for example, the tradition of sMin sgrol gling, which revolves around the later revelations made by gTer bdag gling pa (1646–1714).

³ Although Rig 'dzin rGod ldem revealed a multitude of treasure cycles from Zang zang lha brag, a region located in the western part of Tibet, his treasure cycles are collectively designated as the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*). There are two views concerning the designation of these treasures as the Northern Treasures. The first view is based on these lines: *'di nas byang gi phyogs rol na | bkra shis yon tan ldan pa'i ri | lung dang mthun pa'i gnas der gshegs |*, from *'Dzeng rdo dkar po*, which say that the treasures are from the *byang* (north) in the sense that they were revealed at Zang zang lha brag, a place located to the north of Mang yul gung thang. The second view claims that the royal descendants of the kingdom of Tangut (Mi nyag) migrated to western Tibet and settled down in the Ngam ring region around the time of Genghis Khan's invasion of the kingdom in 1227. They

time the Sarma schools started to spread in Tibet, Nyingmapas and Bönpos became busy elaborating their own doctrinal corpus in order to compete with the newer branches of Buddhism introduced in Central Tibet *circa* 1000 AD. These attempts at constructing a canonical literature of their own are crucial to the terma phenomenon.

Historically, the Buddhist Northern Treasures appeared on the religious scene in 1366, with the discovery of a complex set of teachings by Rigdzin Gödem (1337–ca. 1401)¹ in a place known as Zangzang Lhadrak. Among these was a collection of Dzogchen texts that became the main and initial hallmark of the *Jangter*, the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra* (*Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*). With this corpus as a solid doctrinal foundation, and in combination with other sets of teachings, the Northern Treasures branch began to grow into an entire system of its own, with its specific liturgies, traditional curricula of practices, and so forth. It is of course difficult for us to make sure of what was most attractive for the 14th century Tibetans among Gödem’s revelations—this Dzogchen cycle, his very reputed Vajrakīla cycle, his large terma about the Eight Pronouncements, or something about his person?

Be that as it may, over the centuries, Rigdzin Gödem’s tradition has been increasingly enriched by newer discoveries made either by masters belonging to his direct line of incarnations, or by treasures-revealer connected to this lineage.

In its larger spectrum, the Northern Treasures also incorporates other Nyingma tantric systems—such as those of Nyangrel Nyima Özer (1124–1192) and Guru Chöwang (1212–1270)—that the lineage holders of Jangter have become not only custodians but specialists of. Nevertheless, these other systems, including for instance that of the famed Karma Lingpa (14th century) and his *Profound Teachings of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities’ Self-Liberated Contemplation* (*Zab chos zhi*

were called northerners (*byang pa*), because they came from the Mi nyag kingdom, which is geographically to the northeast of Yar lung region of the Central Tibet. Later, the term *byang* (north) precedes Ngam ring and thus collectively the region is called *Byang ngam ring*. The cultural traditions which sprung from this region such as the Northern Treasures, *Byang lugs* (one of the two lineages of Tibetan medicine that originated from Ngam ring), and so forth also carry *Byang* (north) as a trademark. For more about the concept of *byang* in the context of *Byang ngam ring*, see gTsang phrug sTob lags (b. 1979) 2020, *dBus gtsang lo rgyus chen mo*, pp. 3-5. (Note by Tenpa Tsering Batsang).

¹ Recent research by Tenpa Tsering Batsang (First International Conference on the Northern Treasures, Paris, October 2024, to be published in vol. 2 of the present research) provides good reasons to revise Rig ’dzin rGod ldem’s date of death.

khro dgongs pa rang grol), should not be regarded as belonging to the Northern Treasures *stricto sensu*. They are actually good examples of external cycles that enrich the specific lineage of Jangter due to their importance within the rest of the Nyingma tradition itself.

In 2015, a 63-volume collection of the most important texts of the Northern Treasures has been compiled on the basis of hitherto undocumented earlier ones, covering a period spreading from the late 10th century down to the early years of the 21st. These works, collected in the *Compilation of Teaching Cycles from the Northern Treasures of the Ancient Translation School* (sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs), are organized according to the following structure:¹

1. The revelations of Rigdzin Gödem (1337–ca. 1401)—vol. 1-15.
2. The cycle of *Vajrasattva's Heart Mirror* (*rDo rje sems dpa' thugs kyi me long*) of Garwang Dorje (1640–1685)—vol. 16.²
3. The cycle of *The Sow With a Profound Seal* (*Lung phag mo zab rgya*) by Tennyi Lingpa (1480–1535)—vol. 17.
4. The cycle of *Mañjuśrī Master of Life* (*'Jam dpal tshé bdag*), mostly (but not wholly) “invented” by Gya Zhangtrom (11th Century?)—vol. 18-27.
5. The cycle of Rāhula, *The Poisoned Razor*, “discovered” by Pema Ledreltsal (1291–1319)—vol. 28-29.
6. The cycle of Padmasambhava, *The Complete Gathering of the Knowledge-Holders* (*Rig 'dzin yongs 'dus*), revealed by Ngari Pañchen Pema Wanggyal (1487–1542)—vol. 30-32.
7. The revelations of Rigdzin Lekden Dorje (1452/1512?–1565): *Liberating Saṃsāra in the Dharmadhātu* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dbyings grol*) and the cycle of *Amṛtakunḍalī* (*Tshe sgrub bdud rtsi 'khyil pa*)—vol. 33.
8. *The Nine-Headed Wrathful One*, revealed either by Rigdzin Lekden Dorje or by Ngari Pañchen Pema Wangyal—vol. 34.
9. The revelations of Jangdak Tashi Tobgyal (1550?–1603): *Karma Guru* and *The Essential Meaning of the Mother-Tantras* (*Ma rgyud snying po don gsum*)—vol. 35.
10. The complete writings of Rigdzin Pema Trinlé (Gödem IV, 1641–1717)—vol. 36-50.³

¹ We have already presented this list (with annotations) in Arguillère 2022a, pp. 10-12, but it is undoubtedly useful to reiterate it here in a more synthetic manner

² On Gar dbang rdo rje, see Solmsdorf 2014 and Burroughs 2013. Several cycles associated with the revelations of this master are not included in the present collection. Their absence remains, so far, a mystery.

³ The number of volumes clearly attests to the importance of this master for the Northern Treasures.

11. The autobiography of Rigdzin Kalzang Pema Wangchuk (Gödem V, 1720–1771)—vol. 51.
12. The revelations of Rigdzin Kalzang Pema Wangchuk: *The Epitome of the Precepts (bKa' 'dus)*—vol. 52-53; the *Wrathful Padmasambhava*: vol. 54.
13. The Northern Treasures-related writings of Tulku Tsültrim Zangpo (1884–1957)—vol. 55-56.
14. Writings by Thekchok Tendzin (1878–1949)—vol. 57.
15. Writings by Künzang Tendzin (d. unknown)—vol. 58.
16. A collection of biographies of masters of the Northern Treasures—vol. 59.
17. Writings mostly by Bāḥné Choktrül Do-ngak Shedrub Gyaltzen (1888–1964)—vol. 60.
18. Common recitations / basic rituals of the Northern Treasures—vol. 61.
19. *A Religious History of Thubten Dorje Drak and the Northern Treasures*, by Khenpo Chöying—vol. 62.¹
20. Table of contents (*dkar chag*) [of previous editions] and “checklists of received teachings” (*gSan yig*) on the Northern Treasures—vol. 63.

Collectively, these volumes offer an invaluable corpus of primary materials, most of which have not yet been the focus of academic research. Upon analyzing the collection itself, we have noted that texts and cycles directly connected to the Northern Treasures have not found their way into the 63-volume compilation. This is, *inter alia*, the case with some of the most salient revelations discovered by Ngari Pañchen, starting with his famed *Profound Pearls known as the Natural Clarity of Absolute Space* or *Zabtik Chöying Rangsal (Zab tig chos dbyings rang gsal)*.² The reason for not including this material in the collection is still unclear but it may simply be due to a lack of actual copies available during the compilation process or, maybe, to the fact that these cycles are not actually practiced anymore in the present Dorjé Drak institution.

3. Reassessing Northern Treasures within the Nyingma School

As we have already established, the Northern Treasures is more than just one of the main lines of transmission within the Ancient School of Tibetan Buddhism. It has concretely evolved into an independent institution of its own, much like the Sarma lineages that have spread in

¹ Our main source for the ANR project.

² mNga' ris *gter ston* Gar dbang rdo rje 1979 (three available editions on BDRC: MW8880, MW1KG12624, MW30347).

Tibet since the 11th century. Thus, the masters of the Jangter consciously built up a sense of community, based on both practices and doctrinal coherence. Depending on where their teachings spread, they were able to benefit from local authority and thus established a tradition based on solid ground at least until the Dzungar invasion in 1717. Therefore, unlike what happened in most other terma lineages, the patriarchs of the Northern Treasures quickly developed a sense of self-identity that kept them concretely engaged in developing their own doctrinal and liturgical lore and customs.

However, this gradual evolution did not result in the formation of a sclerosed system since provincial institutions retained their own distinctive features, that were enriched with newer revelations connected to the main trunk of the tradition itself. This is typically the case with Khordong in the Golok Serta area, which became a branch of Dorjé Drak in the 18th century, but soon after welcomed a brand-new system of revelations by its own masters—which, however, were implemented according to the distinctive style of the Jangter liturgy and without dropping a faithful practice of the original Northern Treasures system.

Throughout their development, these inner branches of the Northern Treasures thus remained doctrinally consistent by cultivating a strong sense of coherence, regularly borrowing specific practices, liturgies, prayers, etc., from one another in an approach that definitely strengthened the backbone of the tradition. Perfectly organized around a body of consistent works, various local branches generated their own network of revelations, thereby contributing to the enrichment of the Jangter's canonical collections.

Despite these new productions of terma and exegetical literature, the Northern Treasures did not develop entirely in isolation, like an empire within an empire, without drawing on the soil of older Nyingma traditions or interacting with contemporary developments. For instance, some of their monastic institutions relied on the Kama tradition when it came to earlier Mahāyoga and Anuyoga, with teachings on the *Guhya garbha* and the *Do Gongdii*.¹ Dances associated with the revelations of Guru Chöwang were performed annually at Dorjé Drak for example. The same monastery followed the treasure teachings on Rāhula (gZa' rgod) from Pema Ledreltsal (1291–1319),² as well

¹ The *Guhya garbha* and the [*mDo*] *dGongs 'dus* are respectively the root-tantras of the Mahāyoga and the Anuyoga tradition. On the first, see Gyurme Dorje 2016 and on the second see Dalton 2002 and 2016.

² Included in volumes 28 and 29 of the *Byang gter phyogs bsgrigs*. Originally, these texts had no connection with the Northern Treasures since they were discovered approximately fifty years prior to the inception of the Jangter in 1366.

as ancient terms on Yamāntaka revealed by Gya Zhangtrom (11th c.).¹

Some of the material in the Northern Treasures is obviously a reworking of earlier works and cycles discovered in previous centuries. For instance, the system of the Eight Pronouncements (*bKa' brgyad*) as it appears in the Jangter owes much to the cycles revealed by Nyangral Nyima Özer and Guru Chöwang with their respective discoveries of the *Kagyé Deshek Düpa* and the *Kagyé Sangwa Yongdzok*. Even the most central cycle of the Jangter tradition—the *Künzang Gongpa Zangthal*—is clearly dependent on large sections of preceding *Heart Drops* (*sNying thig*) such as the *Bima Nyingthik* and the *Khandro Nyingthik*. Very often, these borrowings are not simply copies directly incorporated in the new corpus, but rather reworkings of older texts, sometimes altering the literary category they belong to,² either to conceal the borrowing or to integrate a newly processed version into a more or less coherent group of works. These newer texts are therefore placed in a context in which they do not have to rely on pre-existing lines of transmission: they are appropriated with the aim of bypassing such lines and being included in a newer lineage transmission that starts with the cycle in which they are integrated.

From this perspective, the Northern Treasures appears as a far more complex tradition than one might have imagined before the collection in 63 volumes became available. As can be seen from the texts included in vol. 61, it is abundantly clear that the lineage holders of this system had and still have a particular awareness of their self-referential canon. The latter is to be understood as an “open canon” in the sense that it is a body of texts and collections that still welcomes new contributions, in the form of revelations or compositions. The recent works of Bāḥné Choktrül (1888–1964) and those of Tulku Tsültrim Zangpo (1884–1957) are good examples of this. All in all, the convergence of these various writings in terms of their doctrinal contents, liturgical practices, and yogic techniques, as well as their official establishment in monastic institutions, are crucial elements that should be taken into account to accurately and precisely assess the Northern Treasures as a distinct religious phenomenon.



¹ These are included in volumes 18–20 of the *Byang gter phyogs bsgrigs*.

² Such as presenting a *man ngag* (*upadeśa*) as a *rgyud* (*tantra*).