

ON ZHANGZHUNG AND BON

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1 Zhangzhung and *Zhang zhung*

The earliest dated material on the country of Zhangzhung¹⁶³ is the brief account of Great Yang-t'ung in the *T'ung-tien*, a T'ang work and thus fairly close in time to the description itself. The text (*TT* 190: 5177f) says in part:

Great Yang-t'ung (Ta Yang-t'ung 大羊同) borders on Tibet in the east, Little Yang-t'ung (Hsiao Yang-t'ung 小羊同) in the west, and Khotan in the north. It is over 1,000 li from east to west and has eighty or ninety thousand warriors. (...) When their chief dies, they dig out his brain and fill [the skull] with pearls and jade; they remove his internal organs and replace them with gold; and they create a golden nose and silver teeth [for him]. They bury men (人 'humans') together with him. They divine for a lucky morning and conceal [the body] in a cave that no one else knows the location of. They kill many female cattle, sheep, and horses to complete the sacrifices. When the burial is finished, the clothes are removed. Their king is surnamed Chiang-ko (姜葛).¹⁶⁴ He has four great ministers among whom

¹⁶³ I have followed the strict transcription rules laid down for the PIATS volumes in this article, contrary to my usual transcriptional practice (q.v. Beckwith 1979), except for Anglicised Tibetan words and names. This article discusses the name of a country (and its language) that is now generally given in its Tibetanised form; as shown herein, this is not the 'native' name, but a foreign name, which is also known in Chinese and Persian transcriptions that represent the name quite differently. Nevertheless, as the default name of the country and its language I have retained the traditional Anglicised name, spelled 'Zhangzhung', and have used the disyllabic '*Zhang zhung*' to represent the Tibetan *transcription* of it. Similarly, I have used the Anglicised 'Bonpo' as the default, and the transcriptional form *Bon po* in my discussion of the Tibetan word, its etymology, etc.

¹⁶⁴ MChi [☆]kiaŋ-kar (Pul. 149, 106: [☆]kiaŋ-kat). On the false reconstruction of final *-t in Middle Chinese in general see Beckwith (2002b; 2007); on late Old Chinese and Early Middle Chinese transcriptions of Central Eurasian names see Beckwith (2005). Final [☆]r

control over the government is divided. From old they had never before come into contact [with China]. In the 15th year of the Chen-kuan reign period of the Great T'ang (February 15, 641 – February 4, 642) they sent an envoy to court.

The *Chiu T'ang shu* (CTS 3:60) includes Yang-t'ung in a list of countries that sent envoys to the T'ang court in the 21st year of Chen-kuan (February 10, 647–January 29, 648). The *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* (TCTC 202: 6396) mentions Yang-t'ung as a country that had been conquered by Tibet at some time before (perhaps many years or decades before) the events recounted, which took place in the seventh month of the first year of the Yung-lung reign period (July 31 – August 29, 680).¹⁶⁵

The Chinese transcription Yang-t'ung 羊同 corresponds to a theoretical Early Middle Chinese pronunciation $\star jian\delta w\eta$ according to the traditional reconstruction of Pulleyblank (1991: 360, 310). However, this is the reconstruction of Sui Dynasty Chinese reading pronunciations current in the vicinity of Loyang and other cities of the Central Plain. The person who wrote the original report undoubtedly lived far out on the western or northern frontier, where highly archaic dialects were spoken, as is now known from study of other foreign names transcribed at about the same time, including the name of Tibet (Beckwith 2005; cf. Beckwith 2007). The initial $\star j-$ of the first syllable derives regularly from Old Chinese initial $\star l-$ (Sagart 1999) in 'palatalised' syllables, as does the initial $\star d-$ of the second syllable in 'unpalatalised' syllables. Modifying the initials accordingly, the Chinese transcription thus represents an archaic Middle Chinese dialect pronunciation $\star lian\delta w\eta$ theoretically, but since Middle Chinese did not have an initial r , the transcription actually reflects either $\star lian\delta w\eta$ or $\star rian\delta w\eta$.¹⁶⁶

in Middle Chinese transcriptions can correspond to final r , l , t , d , or n in foreign words, so the second syllable could also reflect $\star kal$, $\star kat$, $\star kad$, or $\star kan$.

¹⁶⁵ There are probably additional references to Zhangzhung in these and other Chinese sources on the T'ang.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. the earlier change of the name—in fact, most probably of the *transcription* of the name—Lou-lan 樓蘭 'Krorain(a)' to Shan-shan 鄯善 (HS: 96a: 3875–3878), Middle

Old Tibetan *zh-* (or *ž*, i.e., [ʒ]) regularly derives from Tibeto-Burman *ly- [lʰ] or *ry- [rʰ]. For example, Old Tibetan *bzhi* [bzi] ‘four’ is from Common Tibeto-Burman *blî (via pre-Old Tibetan *blyi),¹⁶⁷ and Old Tibetan *zhag* ‘day [honorific]’ is from Common Tibeto-Burman *ryak ‘day’ (Benedict 1972: 206). The Old Tibetan transcription *Zhang zhung* thus represents a foreign or pre-Old Tibetan name *lyanglyung [lʰaŋlʰuŋ] or *ryangryung [rʰaŋrʰuŋ].

The *Hudûd al-‘Âlam*, an anonymous tenth century geographical text written in New Persian, describes the country of *r’ngrng*—read *Rângr(u)ng*¹⁶⁸—located between Tibet, India, and China. The people are described as shepherds living in tents, poor despite the rich gold mines in their extensive land, which was “a month’s journey long and as much across”. In an article on Arabic and Persian sources relating to the geography of Tibet (Beckwith 1989), it is argued that the reading *Rângrung* is an artifact of the Persian writing system, in which the letter *r* is the base for the letters *z* and *zh* (ž), the first produced by adding one dot on top, the second by adding three dots. In early Arabic and Persian texts the dots are often entirely missing, so the transcription could therefore represent *Rangrung*, *Zangzung*, or *Zhangzhung*.

However, although there is no doubt about the identification of the country *Rângrung* with the country known in Tibetan as *Zhang zhung*, the phonology of the Chinese transcription, as well as that of the Tibetan name, demands revision of the above conclusion about the reading of the Persian form

Chinese *Zhan-zhan* (Takata 1988: 366–369; Pulleyblank 1991: 275 Early Middle Chinese *dzian³-dzian³). Though the first syllable in the two names is problematic, it is likely that this reflects the same kind of change—i.e., of *r > ž [ʒ]—which must have taken place locally in that region on the northern frontier of Tibet.

¹⁶⁷ Benedict (1972: 203) has Proto-Tibeto-Burman “*b-liy* = *b-ləy*”, though the second possibility is contradicted by Tibetan. In Old Tibetan the vowel *i* obligatorily palatalises the preceding consonant; Pre-OTib *bli > *blʰi > OTib *bzhi* [bzi].

¹⁶⁸ In the Persian text (Sotoodeh 1983: 73) the second vowel is not indicated, but may be supplied from the Tibetan and Chinese.

of the name.¹⁶⁹ In view of the discussion of the Chinese and Tibetan transcriptions, it appears that the *Hudûd al-‘Âlam* transcription should be read conservatively as *Rângr(u)ng*, much as it was read by Minorsky.¹⁷⁰ The Persian transcription is therefore especially valuable, because while the noted possibility of confusion does exist in Persian texts, there is no possibility of confusing an Arabo-Persian script *l* with an *r*- (or a *z*- or a *zh*-). In short, the Persian transcription cannot possibly represent *langlung. That means the Chinese transcription can be narrowed down to *riaŋriũŋ, and the pronunciation heard by the Old Tibetan speaker (who could not pronounce [r^h-] or [l^h-]) must have been *ryangryung [r^hiaŋr^hiũŋ]. Since Old Tibetan has a phonemic distinction between /r/ and /l/, and both phonemes can occur in initial or final position in a syllable, it seems clear that the two syllables of the name could not have had the *simple* onset [r]. That is, the Tibetans did not hear a name *Rangrung, because they would have transcribed it exactly as *Rang rung*, not *Zhang zhung*. The *Hudûd al-‘Âlam* does not in general give very close transcriptions of foreign names, so although the transcription *Rângr(u)ng* is essentially correct as written, the reconstructed form *Ryangryung must be closer to the original. The *Hudûd al-‘Âlam* transcription *Rângrung* thus transcribes the same name heard by the T’ang person who wrote the report on Yang-t’ung, which is evidently the same pronunciation heard by the Old Tibetan speakers, who wrote it as *Zhang zhung* because they automatically pronounced any *ry- or *ly- as zh-. The palatalised Tibetan and Chinese forms reflect an underlying reconstruction *Ryangryung. Intermediary language speakers’ pronunciations could well be responsible for these differences, but if all three transcriptions are based directly on the native Zhang zhung pronunciation, they would seem to reflect an underlying *Rângrũng, with

¹⁶⁹ The explanation of the possible readings of the letter in question is correct, but in this case it is now clear that the text must be correct as written—that is, no identifying dots are missing.

¹⁷⁰ Beckwith (1989: 168), Minorsky (1970: 61, 92, 257); the latter proposes the reading “Râng-rong”.

palatalised vowels to account for the syllable onset palatalisation in the Tibetan and Chinese transcriptions.

The etymology of the name *Rängrüing is unknown, but the first syllable appears to correspond exactly to Zhangzhung *rang* ~ *rwang*, the well-attested word for ‘mountain’ (Martin 2007: 194), which is obviously an excellent word for part of a proper name. Unfortunately, the second syllable is more difficult to identify. Perhaps a connection with Zhangzhung *rlung* in *zur rlung* ‘([=Tibetan] *dbang po*) the [five] organs of sense; power, powerful, ruler’ (Martin 2007: 185) could be envisioned if the latter sense could be extended further from ‘ruler (i.e., king)’ to ‘realm (i.e., kingdom)’. In that case, the name would then mean ‘the Mountain Kingdom’ or the like. However, it must be emphasised that this is a *highly speculative* etymology. Further research must be done on this and related issues. If other place names in the region, or Zhangzhung personal names, or other words in the Zhangzhung language, or references in Old Tibetan sources are found, it may be possible to determine with more certainty the meaning of what seems to be the ‘native Zhangzhung’ form of the country name we know in its Old Tibetan form, *Zhang zhung*, but which was pronounced *Rängrüing or the like by the natives or their immediate neighbours.¹⁷¹

The actual historicity of Zhangzhung as a place—and as a polity, however poorly known—is solid and beyond question. The problem is its

¹⁷¹ Of course, Zhangzhung might have had an entirely different name *in the Zhangzhung language*. The name *Rängrüing might simply be the standard exonym for the country, just as *Tibet*, *Tubbat*, *T’u-fan*, etc., are exonyms for the country the natives call *Bod*—which name is unrelated to the names *Tibet*, *T’u-fan*, etc., q.v. Beckwith (2005). Note that the reading ‘T’u-po’ [tǔbō] of the standard Chinese transcription of the name, 吐蕃 T’u-fan, is a modern fabrication (Pulleyblank 1991: 19–20). Note further that there is no possible connection between the name *Zhang zhung* and the name *Khyung lung*, as some have suggested. The onset *khy-* cannot be connected to *zh-* in either Tibetan or Zhangzhung. That is, a *khyung could not have become *zhung* (or *zhang*) in Tibetan, nor could it have worked the other way around.

language and practically everything else about it. Linguistically, one thing that must be stressed is that Tibetan and Zhangzhung do not belong in the same branch of Tibeto-Burman, whatever kind of family tree one wants to make for that highly problematic language family (Beckwith 2006). Tibetan is closer even to Pyu, an ancient Tibeto-Burman language of Burma, than it is to Zhangzhung (Beckwith 2002^a).¹⁷² By contrast, Zhangzhung is very clearly related to several attested Western Himalayan languages, particularly Dharma (Martin 2007). Also, some specific phonological features of Old Tibetan (prenasalised voiced stops instead of simple nasals in words evidently borrowed from Chinese) establish that it was once spoken in the Amdo/Kansu *Sprachbund* area. Zhangzhung lacks exactly these features except in what seem to be Tibetan loanwords. It thus appears that Tibetan is an intrusive language from the northeast that arrived in south-central Tibet at some unknown period, probably in late Antiquity, as Chinese sources actually suggest (Beckwith 1993: 7f). In the Early Middle Ages the Tibetans moved into Central Tibet from their homeland in south-central Tibet. As their realm grew, they defeated the rulers of the shadowy Zhangzhung Empire and replaced them as the overlords of the Tibetan Plateau region. Zhangzhung shrank down to a small country in what was then the far western part of the Tibetan Empire (Beckwith 1993). Though *Zhang zhung* continued to be used to refer to a small part of western Tibet up to early modern times, the Zhangzhung language soon became extinct under the powerful cultural influence of Tibetan, perhaps not long after the fall of the Tibetan Empire, but at any rate before any significant texts could be recorded in it.¹⁷³

¹⁷² If Kanauri is to be linked to both of them, as some linguists believe, the whole construct is in doubt.

¹⁷³ The major exceptions are the *Mdzod phugs*, q.v. Martin (2001), at least the first part of which probably dates to the late tenth to eleventh centuries, and the Byams ma *Dhāraṇīs* from the same period (Dan Martin, p.c., 2007), both of which are thought to contain authentic Zhangzhung language material (Martin 2000). The texts found in Tun-huang that have been said to be in the ‘Old Zhangzhung’ language are so far

2 Tazig and Bon

A short unpublished essay, ‘On Bon’, written some thirty years ago, argues in support of the Bonpos’ claim that Bon came from Tazig.¹⁷⁴ This is the place mentioned in the Old Tibetan Annals as *Ta chig* (written *ta cig*), transcribing a foreign *Tačik*—and in the Bacot Document as *Ta zhig* (written *ta zhig*). If there were no truth behind the claim, which is unexpected at best, why should the Bonpos make it?

At the time of the Tibetan Empire, the Middle Persian word *T’cyk’*, read *Tāzīg*¹⁷⁵ ~ *Tāzīk*, *Tāčīk*,¹⁷⁶ or *Tāžīk*,¹⁷⁷ ‘Arab’, referred to Arabs and—in the usage of foreigners—everyone living within the boundaries of the Arab Empire, just as everyone living within the boundaries of the Tibetan Empire was ‘Tibetan’, following the early medieval world-view (Beckwith 1993). For Buddhist teachings to have come from the Arab Empire they must have come from the Central Asian parts of it which were in contact with the Tibetan Empire and perhaps had recently changed hands—from Arab to Tibetan, or vice versa. The Tibetans are historically known to have been the dominant

undeciphered and could be in a quite different Tibeto-Burman language. For preliminary work on these texts, see Takeuchi (2002); cf. the comments of Martin (2007: 246).

¹⁷⁴ See note 41. This is one of the Old Tibetan spellings of the name folk-etymologised in the *phyi dar* period as *Stag gzig* but nevertheless pronounced [tazik]. It appears that I was preceded in this by Snellgrove (1967: 15), who first put forth a Central Asian origin hypothesis. I am indebted to Henk Blezer (p.c., 2007) for this reference.

¹⁷⁵ Mackenzie (1971: 83). I would like to thank Anya King for helping me with the Middle Persian citations while I was in Tokyo.

¹⁷⁶ Nyberg (1974: 189) reads the name as *Tācīk*, i.e., *Tāčīk*.

¹⁷⁷ This form reflects the contemporaneous colloquial or dialect pronunciation, which was transcribed by the Chinese as Ta-shih 大食 Middle Chinese (dialect) *Tažik (cf. Pulleyblank 1991: 283). The name similarly occurs as *Ta zhig*, representing a foreign [tažik] ~ [tažig], in the Old Tibetan geographical text known as ‘the Bacot Document’, part of Pelliot tibétain 1283. It continues in the modern name Tajik.

power in the Pamirs and adjacent areas, and also for a time in eastern Tokharistan (Arabic spelling *Tukhâristân*), the area that is now eastern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, for two fairly long periods (Beckwith 1993). Both regions had been thoroughly Buddhist areas for centuries, and were still largely Buddhist at the time of the Arab and Tibetan entrance into the area. Though the local peoples long maintained their Buddhist beliefs and practices, around the middle of the eighth century some conversion to Islam took place, as shown by the conversion of the head of the great *Nava Vihāra* ‘New Vihāra’ (in Arabic, *Nawbahār*) at Balkh at the end of the Umayyad Dynasty period, and also by the partial destruction and occupation of the Buddhist *vihāra* at Adzhina Tēpa in Tajikistan (then part of Tokharistan) by Muslims at that time (Litvinsky and Zeimal, 1971).¹⁷⁸

The presence of pro-Buddhist Tibet in an area under Islamic pressure was surely of great interest to those Buddhists of Western Central Asia who did not want to convert to Islam. Thus, the Bonpo tradition is highly probable, at the very least. Since it would certainly be counter-intuitive for Tibetan Buddhists of the *phyi dar* period, of whatever sectarian persuasion, to claim that their tradition came from an area known to be solidly Muslim by that time, this particular Bonpo tradition would seem to constitute a very powerful argument that Bon came from Tazig, the Arab Empire, specifically from one of its Central Asian territories near Tibet.

Exactly where in Central Asia it would have come from, however, is most unclear. We have a well-known example of the introduction of Central Asian Buddhism to Tibet in the account of the Buddhist monks who fled T’ang persecution of Buddhism in East Turkistan and were received by the Tibetans

¹⁷⁸ The medieval *madrassa* and earlier *vihāra* are identical in architectural form, function, and institutional basis. The *madrassa*—which is simply an islamised *vihāra*, as argued by Barthold long before the excavation of Adzhina Tēpa—was transmitted to Western Europe as the *college* in the twelfth century (Makdisi 1981) along with many other cultural elements from the Islamic world that came from Buddhist Central Asia (Beckwith 2009: 154, 179–180).

during the rule of Khri lde gtsug brtsan ('Mes Ag tshoms') in the first half of the eighth century. It is not possible to believe that they had no disciples in Tibet, or even that they were totally expelled from Tibet, as the story goes. Otherwise, why did Khri srong lde brtsan have to face such a fierce rebellion by anti-Buddhists on the death of his father (Beckwith 1993)? Though there were also Tibetan Buddhists such as Sba [*Dbás] Sang shi who were schooled by Chinese, an East Turkistani (Eastern Central Asian) Buddhist tradition of one kind or another was undoubtedly already present in Tibet before the building of Samye. On the other hand, this presumed tradition would seem to have had nothing to do with Bon origins, if—assuming the Bonpo traditional claim is correct—they came from Tazig, the Arab Empire, which never ruled any part of East Turkistan.

Nevertheless, much doubt is cast on this Bonpo tradition because there is not a single verifiable reference to Bon or Bonpos datable to the Tibetan Empire period. In the most famous putative Imperial-period Bonpo text, Pelliot tibétain 1042, which was published by Lalou (1952) as "Rituel Bon-po des funérailles royales", the word *bon po* does occur, but the text is palaeographically and linguistically late—that is, it is clearly from the Tunhuang region, but long after the Tibetan Empire period—and is thus undoubtedly more or less contemporaneous with the 'transmitted' early Bon texts, in which the traditional names are in place. Although such 'early' Bon texts are generally thought to continue the putative Imperial traditions mentioned in this particular text and in a few other texts like it from Tunhuang,¹⁷⁹ which also appear to be late post-Imperial in origin, Blezer

¹⁷⁹ Blezer (2006^b: 2) refers to elements similar to those in Dunhuang sources "in later Bon sources [beginning in the 10th–11th centuries]", noting, however, "The emerging vector of identity [of Bon] is entirely new and is native to the period of construction of the master narratives. Dunhuang sources that have substantial content relevant to Bon conspicuously lack any significant vector of Bon identity. Yet, some of the early content still clearly resurfaces in later Bon sources, for instance, notably in death ritual".

(forthcoming: 14f) notes, “Significantly, in historical Dunhuang references to Zhang zhung or the castle [of *Khyung lung dngul mkhar*], specific narrative connections to personalised *gshen* or *bon po* are absent”, and “Zhang zhung and Ta zig, even though mentioned earlier in Tibetan sources (Dunhuang), in Bon literature appear to be later, recycled narrative constructs”.

Secondly, there are no references to sectarian Bon—as a form of Buddhism or any other religion—at the time of the Tibetan Empire because there are no references to sectarian anything at that time, at least in Old Tibetan inscriptions and other Tibetan narrative sources. Buddhism was essentially an undivided whole conceptually, despite the known presence of different views and understandings of many things. There were of course ‘schools of thought’, but only one or two of them, such as the *Cig car pa* (Zen) adherents, are explicitly mentioned.¹⁸⁰ At the time of the Tibetan Empire we can not even definitely distinguish Tibetan Buddhism from non-Tibetan Buddhism, not to speak of dividing it up into different sects. That means Tibetans who had received teachings from Central Asian teachers at that time would not have been distinguished by a sectarian label.

Thirdly, we obviously do not have references to any of the *later, specifically Tibetan* schools of Buddhism because they are all, by definition, later—that is, they do not appear until the period of the ‘Later Propagation of the Faith’, or *phyi dar*. This is not a trivial point. The earliest Bonpo canonical texts we know about appear in the *phyi dar* period and are already thoroughly Buddhist in nature—or at least not less Buddhist than some of the other texts recognised as ‘Buddhist’ (by non-Tibetan scholars) that appear at the same

¹⁸⁰ *Kanjur* colophon references to this or that translator belonging to this or that Indian Buddhist sect—such as the Sarvāstivādins—are interesting and should be studied. However, it may be that more or less every teacher-translator from northern India and Central Asia would have ‘graduated’ from a Sarvāstivādin-run establishment, regardless of the actual teachings he followed, because most of the monasteries there had been founded long before by Sarvāstivādins, and were still run by them.

time—despite minor differences from the texts of other sects, mainly in terminology and presentation, and also partly in focus.

Fourthly, the still-dominant idea that Bon started out as a native Tibetan form of ‘shamanism’ is impossible to support on the basis of the evidence. The Old Tibetan sources that clearly refer to non-Buddhist people or beliefs—e.g., the full-text version of the Samye inscription proclaiming the official support of Buddhism, which is preserved in the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*—mention *myi chos*, literally ‘folk religion’, but Bon is conspicuous by its complete absence. It is also not mentioned in connection with the Rebellion of 755, where a Bon-Chos conflict is said in late (*phyi dar*) histories to have been the issue.¹⁸¹ The fact is that we do not have evidence for any religious tradition called Bon in verifiable Imperial-period Old Tibetan texts. In such texts the word *bon* occurs, but it is a verb meaning ‘to call, name’, and seems not to occur in religious contexts; certainly it has nothing to do with *bon* in its known Bon sense or senses. The legendary accounts of ‘pre-Buddhist’ or ‘non-Buddhist’ Bonpo individuals in *phyi dar* texts are not reliable historical evidence for anything.¹⁸² In short, Bon was not the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.¹⁸³

That leaves the question of how Bon did come into being as a sect during the *bar dar* or ‘intermediate propagation [of the faith]’ period, between the Imperial period and the *phyi dar*. If the Bonpos’ story of their sect’s origins reflects genuine oral traditions, their teachings would have to derive from

¹⁸¹ See Beckwith (1983).

¹⁸² Blezer (2006^a: 1) also says, “The earliest Dunhuang sources contain no evidence that Gshen rab(s) was then considered the founder of a tradition called Bon and there are no convincing references to Bon as a self-conscious religious entity, except for a few ambiguous uses of *bon* (e.g., Karmay 1998: 157f). Thus the first and rather oblique references to a Gshen rab(s) character unfortunately appear off-centre. They were preserved, and partly may also have originated (Thomas 1957), in north eastern Buddhist Dunhuang, as opposed to a presumed western heartland of Bon”.

¹⁸³ For the actual pre-Buddhist religious tradition see Beckwith (forthcoming).

Buddhist traditions transmitted orally from the Central Asian Buddhist area west of the Tibetan Empire. Perhaps, unnoticed at the time of the Tibetan Empire except as Buddhists, in the *phyi dar* period the followers of the Western Central Asian tradition became distinguished from other Buddhists for unknown reasons, possibly for their inclusion of syncretic material in the lower ‘causal Vehicles’, particularly the *gto*-rites and *dpyad* of the Phywa-gshen Vehicle,¹⁸⁴ though the latter do not have any known Central Asian source. These Tibetans, who were distinguished for some reason from other Buddhists, became known as Bonpos. Another possibility, in view of the apparent lateness of the claim that Bon originated in Tazig, and the much greater likelihood that Bon arose in the area of northeastern Tibet and Tun-huang,¹⁸⁵ is that if there is any Imperial period continuation underlying the formation of the Bon sect, it should be found in the Buddhism from East Turkistan (Eastern Central Asia), Tun-huang, and neighbouring regions of Amdo. Tibetan cultural influence remained strong in this region well into the post-Imperial period, as is now well known, and the presence of Buddhists from East Turkistan in the Tibetan Empire is unquestionable, since much of the region was, for long periods, part of that realm. By the time historical Bon had begun to be attested in written texts, though, and early Bonpos were looking for their origins,¹⁸⁶ East Turkistan

¹⁸⁴ I am indebted to Dan Martin (p.c., 2007) for information leading to these comments. He is, however, in no way responsible for any errors I have made. For discussion of this and other related issues, see Martin (1994^a).

¹⁸⁵ Both points have been demonstrated by Blezer in several recent papers (2006^a, 2006^b, forthcoming); see, however, his caveats below.

¹⁸⁶ Blezer (2006^a: 1), referring to 10th–11th century Bonpo narratives, including the *Mdo ‘dus* and the *Gzer myig*, says, “This is the period of the early Buddhist *phyi dar*, in which Bon po-s needed to come up with a suitable founder of Bon that could outshine the historical Buddha of successfully emerging Buddhist sects”. I would only modify this to make it clear that Bon (however heterodox in the eyes of the other Buddhists) was one of those sects, and that like the others it necessarily cannot be traced back to a

itself had become largely (though not completely) Muslim—and conceivably, in the eyes of some of the Tibetans of that period, a land of the *Tazig* ‘Arabs’.

3 Etymologies of Bon and *bon*

A great deal of attention has been given to the problem of the origin and meaning of the name *Bon* and the word *bon*, but there are some important questions about it that do not seem to have been asked. Why should there be such a word? It could be a kind of back-formation from *Bon po*, perhaps implying ‘one who believes/preaches/practices/etc. *bon* or *Bon*’. If that were the case, the Bonpos would have been distinguished from other Buddhists of the *phyi dar* period in that they followed a teaching regarding *bon*. What is *bon*? According to the Bonpos, *bon* means essentially the same thing as *chos* or *dharma*, in the sense both of ‘little’ dharma—‘fundamental constituent(s) of existence’, ‘that which is created’, etc.—as well as ‘big’ Dharma, a body of religious beliefs or doctrine. Since Tibetan *chos* (the exact synonym of *bon* in these senses) appears to be etymologically derived from a verb meaning ‘to create’, the equivalence would seem clear. However, the only *known* and *genuine* Old Tibetan word like *bon*, the verb *bon-* ‘to call (someone a name)’, simply does not work at all for the meaning of the word in actual Bon texts.

If Bon’s putative Tazig origins implied a Central Asian Iranian linguistic background—specifically, the Middle Iranian literary language of Tokharistan at that time (now known as Bactrian)—then *bon* could perhaps be related to the Middle Iranian (Pahlavi) word *bwn*, usually vocalised as *bun*, meaning ‘base, foundation, bottom, original, primal, first’, which appears in Pahlavi *bundahišn* ‘primal creation’, the title of the famous Zoroastrian book known by that name.¹⁸⁷ Unfortunately, the semantic difference between *bwn*

snga dar sectarian origin because as far as we know there were no sectarian differences of that kind among Tibetan Buddhists during the Imperial period.

¹⁸⁷ I would like to thank Jamsheed Choksy (p.c., 2007) for the Iranian data. Phonetically there is no problem because Old Tibetan *o* generally represents a slightly higher vowel than in modern Tibetan. It usually corresponds to Old Turkic *u* and to the

and *dharmā* seems to be a little too wide to support this theory, and there are other serious problems with it. Furthermore, there are other possible foreign origins, including at least one possible area of origin—the region of northeastern Tibet, southeastern East Turkistan, and multinational Tun-huang—which has long been a region of cultural syncretism, as recently pointed out by Blezer, who remarks, “Because of its proximity and availability local cultures may have left a more significant stamp on the library [of Tun-huang—CIB] than stuff from other quarters of what was becoming Tibet. But I am not arguing that the heartland of Bon would be anywhere near Dunhuang. The fact that about the only early non-Buddhist sources that we have hail from the Dunhuang area and the fact that obviously much stuff of local relevance ended up in those caches, should not seduce us to conflate the two, and assume the haphazard preservation of references to non-Buddhist culture in an eccentric location recommends the eccentric location as the centre of that culture”.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, while there are also other possible places of origin within Tibet,¹⁸⁹ in the present writer’s view just such a regional origin (or, rather than an ‘origin’, a development out of earlier oral Buddhist-milieu teachings), in a

Middle Chinese vowel which is usually reconstructed as [ɔ] (close to the vowel in American English *raw*) but was actually closer to [u] (like the vowel in American English *book*). However, *bwn* is not used to translate *dharmā* in Bactrian, Sogdian, or any other Central Asian Iranian language. Moreover, Blezer has shown in several papers that the putative Arab Empire or Iranian origin of Bon seems to be a later invention.

¹⁸⁸ Henk Blezer (p.c., 2007), who however notes that I “assume that it is my [Blezer’s] thesis that the north-eastern quarter around Dunhuang is the area of origin for Bon. That is an interesting thesis in its own right, certainly in light of your reading of *Ta zig*, but it is not my thesis”. Cf. notes 24 and 27.

¹⁸⁹ “Through examination of narratives and by tracing individual narremes through various non-Buddhist Dunhuang and early Bon sources, I have been able to localise a heartland of Bon (if there ever was such an entity beyond its literary tropes) much closer to Central Tibet than is generally assumed” (Blezer, p.c., 2007).

period long after the fall of the Tibetan Empire, has several factors in its favor and should not be ruled out.

This brings us back to the problem of *bon*. Since the Bonpos use the word as the exact equivalent of *chos*, a *Tibetan internal* etymology of *Bon po* would necessarily be something like, ‘those who call dharmas or the Dharma *bon* rather than *chos*’, as suggested above. From what language, though does the word *bon* come from, if it does simply transcribe some foreign word meaning *dharmā*? There seem to be no viable candidates. Folk etymology, even when practiced by philologists, is still folk etymology, and speculation about origins among distant (and therefore romantic) Central Asian peoples is still speculation. The above approach to the origin of the name Bon must therefore be rejected.

4 The origin of the name *Bon*

The Chinese text of the west face of the Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription, erected in Lhasa in 823, regularly refers to the Tibetan Empire not as the expected, usual 吐蕃 *tǔ-fān*¹⁹⁰, but as 大蕃 *dà-fān* or *dâ-fān*. The latter name means ‘Great Tibet’, precisely parallel to the usual Chinese dynastic self-designation pattern—in the case of the T’ang dynasty, regularly 大唐 *dà-táng* ‘Great T’ang’, referring to the Chinese Empire of the time.¹⁹¹ The *Tibetans* are

¹⁹⁰ The usual modern reading of 蕃 is *fān*, but there are two Middle Chinese readings, [⊛]buan and [⊛]puan, the first giving NMan *fǎn* and the second NMan *fān*, according to Pulleyblank (1991: 19), but this may not be correct; it appears that in both the country name 吐蕃 and the monosyllabic ethnonym the Middle Chinese reading was actually [⊛]buan, which would give NMan *fǎn*. The Japanese reading of the character as *-ban* in the name *Toban* ‘Tibet’, alongside the history of this foreign, non-Tibetan name for Tibet, is decisive. For a detailed study of this name see Beckwith (2005).

¹⁹¹ For the text see Li and Coblin (1987: 77). In Beckwith (1993: 19–20, n. 23) I say that “the word Bon (the name of one of the two types of Tibetan Buddhism) is equally unrelated to the name ‘Tibet’ (especially in its Chinese transcription, T’u-fan)”. This comment must be corrected in light of the present article. Nevertheless, it must be

just 蕃 *fán*, contrasted with 漢 *hàn* ‘Chinese’. This is put in very plain language in the Chinese text: 蕃於蕃國受安漢亦漢國受樂 ‘When Tibetans (蕃 *fán*) have peace in the Tibetan country (蕃國 *fānguó*), and Chinese (漢 *hàn*) have happiness [in] the Chinese country (漢國 *hànguó*)...’.¹⁹² The word 蕃 *fán* thus comes to be used for Tibetans in local Chinese sources from the late T’ang dynasty to the Mongol Empire period at least, and afterward loosely (usually as 西蕃 *xīfán* ‘Westerners’) for any ‘western’ non-Chinese peoples from the Chinese frontier in Szechuan northward through Kansu.

The Middle Chinese pronunciation of 蕃 *fán* was [☆]*buan*.¹⁹³ The voiced onset [b] is confirmed by the Japanese *on* (T’ang) reading *ban* in the name 吐蕃 *tǔ-fán* as *Toban*. The vowel would seem to be problematic, but in fact, the Tsongkha dialect of Tibetan, the main dialect of the settled people of northeastern Amdo (the area of what is now northern Qinghai Province) and southern Kansu, the location of the oldest and largest Tibetan monasteries, does not have a vowel *o*, at least in closed syllables. For words in which the root syllable in standard Tibetan has *o*, the Tsongkha dialect has *wa*—for example, *lon* is pronounced *lwan*.¹⁹⁴ As already noted elsewhere, the word “*khuəʔ-lu* ‘wheel(s) of a car’”, in the pronunciation of the Chinese “Jin dialect of Ih Ju

stressed that Bon is not related etymologically to the name Bod ‘Tibet’, which is in turn not related to the name T’u-fan, q.v. Beckwith (2005).

¹⁹² Chinese text from Li and Coblin (1987: 77), who do not translate or comment on it. The expressions 蕃國 and 漢國 could also be translated as ‘the country of the Tibetans’ and ‘the country of the Chinese’ respectively. They are not preexisting terms for ‘Tibet’ and ‘China’ respectively, but have clearly been coined for the diplomatic purposes of the treaty. Normally 蕃國 would be understood as ‘foreign country (or countries)’.

¹⁹³ Pulleyblank (1991: 90).

¹⁹⁴ This is based on my analysis of the speech of Yongdrol Kangbu Tsongkha, a scholar who for several years in the 1990s was a Tibetan language teaching assistant at Indiana University.

League in the Ordos"¹⁹⁵ is a loanword into Chinese from the local Mongolian dialect, which borrowed it in turn from Tibetan *fikorlo* 'wheel(s)'.¹⁹⁶ The vowel *o* in closed syllables is thus pronounced [wə], [wa], etc., in the local dialects of Tibetan, Chinese, and other languages spoken in the region in question. But for anyone *writing* Tibetan, the spellings followed the pronunciation of the standard language, which was and is based on the Central Tibetan dialect. In other words, speakers of Tibetan from Tsongkha say [lwan], but when they write Tibetan they write *lon*. (Similarly, speakers of Australian English say [gdaj]—which sounds to speakers of American English like 'g(ood)-die'—but write it *good day*, in standard international English spelling.) This kind of pronunciation could have been an archaic feature retained by speakers of Tibetan dialects from Central Tibet, who are known to have emigrated to that region during the Tibetan Empire period; it could have been reintroduced by Tibetanised people who originally spoke Tibeto-Burman languages that had *wa* instead of *o*;¹⁹⁷ or, it could have been introduced by Chinese speakers in the region who shifted to Tibetan. The third possibility is by far the most likely.

Chinese was introduced at the beginning of the Common Era when the Later Han Dynasty expanded from Kansu into Tsongkha and founded military colonies to hold the territory. Chinese and T'u-yü-hun were apparently the dominant languages when the Tibetan Empire expanded there. Since that time

¹⁹⁵ Sagart (1999: 117); for *fikorlo* see Beckwith (2008).

¹⁹⁶ Beckwith (2008: 168 n. 22). The different fate of *o* in the second syllable is perhaps to be explained by the slightly different pronunciation of vowels in closed and open syllables in Tibetan, but this needs study.

¹⁹⁷ Purely internally in Tibetan, having *wa* instead of *o* should be not an innovation but an archaism, reflecting a pre-Old Tibetan pronunciation going back to Common Tibeto-Burman and well attested in Tibeto-Burman languages; Proto-Tibeto-Burman *aw and *wa correspond regularly to the vowel *o* in Old Tibetan (and in most modern dialects, which descend from it). Benedict (1972: 58 ff.) gives examples of PTB *aw corresponding to OTib *o*. His book was outstanding for the time when it was written (the 1940s), but has many errors and must be used very carefully.

the Tsongkha region has been multiethnic and multilingual, populated most heavily by Chinese and Tibetan speakers. Not surprisingly, the phonology of the Tsongkha dialect is strikingly similar to the phonology of the local highly creolised variety of Chinese, Silingke or ‘Hsiningese’.¹⁹⁸

The Tibetan Buddhists living in Kansu, Tsongkha, and other far northeastern regions of the Tibetan Empire were isolated from cultural developments in Central Tibet, including linguistic changes, after the collapse of the Tibetan Empire. During the period now referred to as the *bar dar* ‘intermediate [period of the] propagation [of the Buddhist faith]’,¹⁹⁹ they must have spoken Tibetan among themselves, using the local dialect, and developed their own traditions.

Those who based themselves largely on texts, whether translations from Indic or Chinese originals or newly composed, are clearly to be identified with the ancestors of what later came to be called the Rnyingma tradition.²⁰⁰

Those who based themselves largely on oral teachings left fewer literary records of themselves. But who were they? The following scenario suggests what happened.

As shown above, we know that Chinese speakers from the T’ang period on regularly referred to the Tibetans in the multiethnic, multilingual region of Kansu and Amdo as 蕃 ^{*}buan—which must have been pronounced in standard Tibetan as *bon (the local Tibetan dialect speakers would have pronounced it

¹⁹⁸ See note 32. The syllable *-ke* is Tibetan *skad* ‘language’.

¹⁹⁹ I.e., the period between the *snga dar* ‘earlier [period of the] propagation [of the Buddhist faith]’ and *phyi dar* ‘later [period of the] propagation [of the Buddhist faith]’. On the term *bar dar* and its contemporary usage see Beckwith (forthcoming).

²⁰⁰ My understanding of the early development of the Rnyingma school in the northeastern territories of the former Tibetan Empire a century or so after the fall of the imperium derive to a great extent from my understanding of some observations made by Robert Mayer in connection with his work on the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* manuscripts from Tun-huang. He is of course not responsible for any misinterpretations or other errors committed by me.

*bwan). It appears that this name was first applied by the Buddhists of the area to distinguish those Tibetan practitioners who followed a variant tradition unlike that of the ‘mainstream’ tradition followed by the Chinese, Sogdians, Uighurs, and the other Tibetans (those who developed the foundations of what eventually became the Rnyingma tradition), who based themselves on written translations. The Bon ‘Tibetan school’ practitioners clearly followed their own largely *oral* tradition in the Tibetan language. The name Bon was later taken over by these practitioners to clearly distinguish themselves from everyone else. Despite their local pronunciation of the word, they wrote it, following standard Tibetan orthographical practice, as *Bon*. When the school expanded outside the region along with the expansion of the other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, it became known throughout the Tibetan-speaking world as *Bon*, and the Tibetan adjective form *Bonpo* was coined for its followers.²⁰¹ The Chinese word for ‘Tibetan(s)’ thus appears to be the source of the name *Bon*, which must originally have meant ‘the specifically *Tibetan* tradition of Buddhist belief and practice’.²⁰²

The above proposal agrees with the data. Earlier speculations based on the later, legendary connection of Bon to the Central Asian realm of the Arab Empire during the Tibetan Empire period, including those of the present writer,²⁰³ must be rejected as not conforming to the data.

5 The translations and other Bonpo innovations

Despite the widespread belief that some early Bonpo canonical texts were translated into Tibetan from Zhangzhung, or even from a language of Tazig,

²⁰¹ The putatively ‘earliest’ Bon texts in Old Tibetan from Tun-huang are not clear about what exactly *Bon* refers to religiously, but the word certainly does refer to specifically *Tibetan* beliefs and practices.

²⁰² This is exactly parallel to the adoption of ‘Christian’—originally an outsiders’ name—by believers in the teachings of Jesus and his early disciples.

²⁰³ My earlier comments on this, long circulated in samizdat, go back to a one- or two-page sketch entitled ‘On Bon’ written in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

there is not a shred of evidence for the actual existence of any such translations from any language. As for the attested Bonpo literary texts, there is not a single genuine *translation* (the word must be emphasised) of any known text among them.²⁰⁴ If there had been any genuine translations the Bonpos would surely have managed to preserve at least one of them. Their nonexistence explains why the Bonpos had such a hard time explaining where Bon came from. Moreover, if Bon sources preserved any genuine Zhangzhung language texts, surely those texts would have given the ‘native’ Zhangzhung form *Ränggrüŋ somewhere. But, although Zhangzhung is frequently mentioned in Bon sources, its name occurs only in its specifically Tibetan form, *Zhang zhung*. Among many other things (of perhaps greater import) this suggests that the writers knew little or nothing about Zhangzhung (the historical kingdom, its actual history, its genuine language, etc.), and casts severe doubt on the entire ‘Western Origins’ narrative, which has been criticised for other reasons.²⁰⁵ The Bon tradition must therefore have been transmitted, in the beginning, strictly orally, in Tibetan, and (in view of early Bon writers’ evident lack of knowledge of Zhangzhung and its language) not in the vicinity of the geographical region of the former Zhangzhung kingdom. Instead, in justifying their existence to their rivals, the ‘*chos pa*’ Buddhists who were fixated upon the written word,²⁰⁶ the Bonpo Buddhists used their fertile imaginations to enrich their oral traditions and to come up with a better Buddhist origin story than the one the other Buddhists had, among other achievements. This is a *traditional Buddhist practice* found throughout the history of Buddhism, from the very earliest times on, wherever the religion has spread.

The Bon sect is certainly *different* from, for example, the Rnyingma sect, or the Saskya sect—which are markedly different from each other—but that should hardly be a reason for saying it is ‘non-Buddhist’. Zen Buddhism is

²⁰⁴ As always, the *Mdzod phugs*, or part of it, remains the one possible example.

²⁰⁵ Blezer (2006^a and 2006^b).

²⁰⁶ Whether or not ‘*chos pa*’ texts are ultimately any more ‘genuine’ than those of the Bonpos depends on belief and ideas about what is ‘genuine’ in religion.

radically different from Theravada Buddhism, both of which are in turn markedly different from Tantric Buddhism. Every known national form of Buddhism practiced today embodies innovative elements that are particular to it, and indeed, the same statement may be made about every major world religion.²⁰⁷ It is important to note that although the Bonpos are generally represented as heterodox, Tibetan literature does *not* say Bon is ‘non-Buddhist’ and is thus to be distinguished from the other Tibetan religious sects, which are, by contrast, ‘Buddhist’, as so many claim. Bonpos are accused by other Buddhists of violating Buddhist strictures against killing animals, among other things, but such accusations are to be expected in sectarian polemics. By contrast, Tibetans do regularly categorise non-Buddhists quite clearly as non-Buddhists. The category of ‘non-Buddhists’ includes Hindus (who are typically called *mu steg pa* ‘heretics’ or ‘infidels’), and, though rarely mentioned in Buddhist texts, Muslims, whose presence in Tibet goes back to the early eighth century at least (Beckwith 1993: 87f), the time of the Arab Empire, and is therefore almost as old as the Buddhist presence there; a mosque and Muslim residents in Lhasa are mentioned already in the *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam* (Beckwith 1989: 170).

In conclusion, the fact that Bon is different from other Tibetan Buddhist traditions is one of the things that makes it so interesting, but the idea that it existed before the *bar dar* and early *phyi dar* period is not supported by the data.

²⁰⁷ It may be pointed out here that Mormonism, which is formally known as ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’, is considered to be a Christian sect despite radical differences of every kind with most other forms of Christianity.

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