Where to Look For the Origins of Zhang zhung-related Scripts?[1]

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Summary: Zhang zhung-related Scripts

'Zhang zhung' Royal Seal of Lig myi rhya Bon sgo, Vol.8 (1995), p.55 (discussed below)

As stories go, in the good old days of Bon, larger or smaller parts of what we now call Tibet outshone the Yar lung dynasty. In the ancient, Western Tibetan kingdom of Zhang zhung, long-lived masters and scholars transmitted Bon lore in their own Zhang zhung languages. These were not only colloquial, but also literary languages, written in their native Zang zhung scripts, such as Smar chung and Smar chen. Documents supposedly were also extant in other varieties of scripts, called Spungs so chung ba and Spungs so che ba, which are said to derive—it is not clear how

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exactly—from a region called Ta zig, an area which generally is located somewhere in the far west, beyond the borders even of Western Tibet.[2]

Where did these scripts come from and when did they first evolve? Can we tell at all, or is this one of those many bonpo enigmas that we simply cannot yet solve with sufficient certainty, another incentive, no doubt, to devote more research to those fascinating Bon religious historical narratives? This article is mainly devoted to a preliminary examination of extant samples of the scripts. Most of these are surprisingly recent. Space does not allow us to present and discuss the various, interesting, traditional narratives on the matter (except when they are directly relevant to issues of dating)—these will have to await a separate publication.

Part I - Introduction

The Three Pillars of Bon

Bon historiography reveals a peculiar configuration. Especially when it comes to antecedents of Bon, we typically find relatively late narratives on 'incredibly' early origins, such as the purported birth of the founder of Bon, Ston pa Gshen rab, in the Indian Palaeolithic: 16,017 B.C.E—according to the 19th century bonpo scholar Mkhan chen Nyi ma bstan dzin. Other early referents in time and space, similarly, often are difficult to ascertain and remain elusive. For methodological reasons, we therefore have had to refocus, systematically, from the elusive content of historical narratives and their meaning to a more modest objective: sketching a history of the narratives themselves.

Religious historical narratives typically prioritise the expression of particular structures and potentials for meaning over historical and geographical fact. We therefore propose to disregard, for the time being, the narrated content of the story and its concrete references in time and space. Instead, we simply ask when a story is first told, how it develops over time, and under which circumstances. This exegetically

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[2] For some of the narratives see, e.g., work by Lopon Tenzin Namdak, such as his *Snga rabs bod kyi byung ba brjod pa'i 'bel gtam lung gi sning po* (Namdak 1983) or, for a brief account in English, see Nyima Dakpa 2005.

frugal approach yields quite surprising insights into the historiography of major Bon narratives and doctrines, and into what, for our program, we call the 'three pillars of bon' identity. Systematic application of this methodology often puts religious historical sensibilities, both Buddhist and Bon, upside down. Historicising historical narratives we typically look *at* the 'mirror' of history, rather than *in* it (see Blezer 2013c).

Tropes of Far Western Origins: 'Ol mo lung ring, 'Ta zig', and Zhang zhung

One of these 'pillars' concerns stories about far western origins of Bon from regions in Western Tibet and beyond. Bonpos usually locate their origins in far western Tibetan regions called 'Zhang zhung', and ultimately project their origins, even further west beyond those regions, into historically and geographically nebulous entities, such as 'Ta zig'[3] and the geographically even more obscure 'location' 'Ol mo lung ring. Cartographers are not the only ones who have trouble putting 'Ol mo lung ring on the map. Some bonpos regard 'Ol mo lung ring as beyond this world, not unlike Shambhala for some Buddhists. It is difficult to sift historically reliable data from the traditional narratives, particularly on the latter two.

According to Buddhist, Bon and also Chinese sources, Zhang zhung was a powerful kingdom in larger western Tibet, which in some more recent traditional accounts as well as according to some academic (often linguistic-based) speculations even is believed to include parts of India and Nepal. Zhang zhung presumably had a king or lineages of kings; Zhang zhung languages (including scripts); and religion: Bon. Zhang zhung is believed to have existed relatively independently from its nemesis, the better known 'Central Tibetan' Yar lung dynasty, until about the 7th (according to the Old Tibetan Annals and Chronicles) or, alternatively, until the 8th century C.E. (based on the *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs* narrative).[4]

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[3] Ta zig is a generic designation in Tibetan sources for people of Arab or Persian origin. Etymologically, the most tempting hypothesis has always been Tajik-i-stan. Most scholars, however, consider a location in the general environs ancient Persia—so, not necessarily the parts that presently are known as Tajikistan. But, for now, the case simply has to remain underdetermined.

[4] See further discussion of this problem and pertinent sources in Blezer 2010b.

In historiographical analyses, traditional accounts of western origins of Bon appear problematic. This is what I should like to call the 'paradox of the historiography of far western origins of Bon'. On the one hand, tropes of far-western origins of Bon in regions of Zhang zhung and 'Ta zig' appear to become thematic relatively late in Bon identity discourse: the grand narrative of western origins of Bon is demonstrably later than the historical beginnings of self-conscious Bon itself, in the early second diffusion or *phyi dar.* These western origins seem to become prominent only one or two generations after the inception of the first self-conscious Bon documents and have a notable and early appearance in the *Gling grags* cluster of historical narratives, which probably started to be compiled at around the late 11th or early 12th century C.E. Indeed, early self-consciously Bon narratives, such as we find in the *Mdo 'dus* and *Klu 'bum*, which probably were compiled starting the 10th–11th century C.E., almost completely ignore the names of Ta zig and Zhang zhung—names of near-mythic impact, which have become so intricately involved with later Bon identity—let alone develop the tropes of early origins of Bon in these areas. These earlier sources (*Mdo 'dus* and *Klu 'bum*) instead, are all about origins in 'Ol mo lung ring. (Blezer 2011c, 2012).

On the other hand, key narrative elements in the origin stories of Bon, such as the earliest traceable narrative elements for a founder and heartland of Bon that later Bon discourse engages in its narratives are, instead, traceable to areas that are located more centrally or even eastward in Tibet, such as, notably, several Skyi localities—some of which, in most intriguing ways, also are involved with tropes in Buddhist narratives or general Tibetan origin narratives—and which also are often involved with Rma clan names and narratives, in various ways (Blezer 2012, 2011c, and forthcoming).
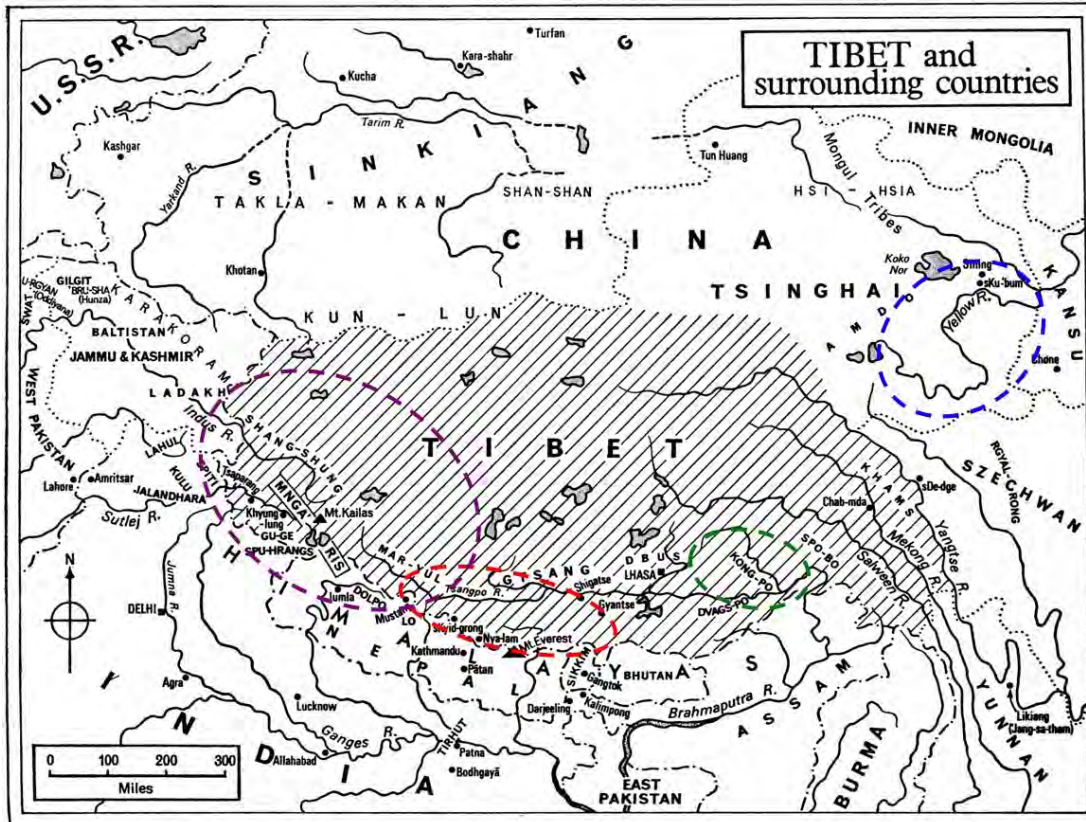
In the above map, which is adjusted from Snellgrove (1987), the traditionally conceived Zhang zhung heartland of Bon,[5] is approximately delineated in purple, while the circles to the right, in red, green and blue colours, indicate various areas where proto-narratives of Bon (such as in Dunhuang sources) and the earliest Bon narratives (in the *Mdo 'dus*) point to. While the precise location that these narrative elements point to, more often than not, remains underdetermined, so much is clear, however, they do to not point to western Tibet; some at best touch its eastern-most limits.

Part II - The Aural Transmission from Zhang zhung: *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud*

Cultural Translation from Zhang zhung and Ta zig

Implied in the grand narrative of western origins of Bon are ideas of cultural translation from Ta zig, from (and to) Zhang zhung, and eventually to Tibet. In this trope, the issue of a written language was also prone to come up, sooner or later. As said at the outset, this is not the right place exhaustively to trace the narratives, but as

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[5] So not the various proposals for its full extent.

far as I can see now, these tropes on written Zhang zhung typically appear to be relatively late extrapolations—and by 'late' I mean really late, 20th century C.E. or something close to that; such as in, Yongs 'dzin Rinpoche's *Snga rabs bod kyi byung ba brjod pa'i 'bel gtam lung gi sning po*. Early materials, such as parts of the *Aural Transmission from Zhang zhung*, the *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* (*ZZNG*), suggest that at the turn of the first millennium C.E. transmission and translation from Zhang zhung cultural areas still was an oral affair; but then, these are of course data from a lineage that self-advertises as an 'Aural' transmission. The *ZZNG* mainly contains tantric and Great Perfection teachings. It is notoriously difficult to put a handle on dates of lineage lamas of the *ZZNG* before its first known scribe, Yang ston chen po (late 11th century C.E.); for detailed annotation and references regarding this and the following summary see Blezer 2010a and 2011a.

Nye rgyud, The Near Transmission: Zhang zhung smar gyi grub chen drug

We will now only take a closer look at some later narrativisations of concrete Bon transmissions from Zhang zhung, the so-called 'near transmission' of the six great adepts from Zhang zhung smar. We should pay particular attention to the name Zhang zhung *smar*, for it appears to resonate with two names for presumed Zhang zhung scripts, the so-called Smar chung and Smar chen. The transmission from Zhang zhung smar is characterised as a 'near' transmission because the legendary Snang bzher lod po (placed in the 7th or 8th centuries C.E.) presumably received the teachings transmitted in this lineage 'directly', from the mythic Ta pi hri tsa, in visions, without intervening masters. This juncture is the point where the lineage, at its last Master, Dpon chen btsan po, is said to emerge from Zhang zhung into Tibetan cultural areas, around the 9 to 10th century C.E. It thus is said to mediate his heritage to later Masters. Snang bzher lod po is said to be the receptacle of all the previous teachings and to have recorded the *Bka' brgyud skor bzhi*, and therefore is the natural focal point and narrative centre of gravity of the *ZZNG*.

Dpon chen Btsan po is said to hail from the same Zhang zhung Gu rib/rub clan that Snang bzher lod po is also believed to be from. He forms an important link in the chain of transmission, with a special status, both as a focal point of group identity and as a lineage figure. He never gained the iconic status of Snang bzher lod po and he did not attract the mass of the latter's 'inner' hagiographical narration or the momentum of his many entanglements with major events in Bon religious history. Instead, Dpon

chen Btsan po's hagiography reads like a slightly more elaborate version of the usual, basic, saintly story paradigm. Although Dpon chen btsan po represents a key juncture in the lineage, where the teachings emerge from the Zhang zhung cultural sphere of the six adepts of Zhang zhung Smar into the Tibetan world. While this surely is a momentous event of a major Bon translator or lotsawa, his crucial position between Zhang zhung and Tibetan cultural spheres almost goes unnoticed and is only implicit in the biographies of his Tibetan students: Dpon chen Lhun grub mu thur, of the Khyung po clan from Ra ring country and Gu ge Shes rab blo ldan, of the Snyel clan from Gu ge Nang khongs in Western Tibet.

It is mainly on these grounds that bonpo scholars such as Lopon Tenzin Namdak, and their followers, such as John M. Reynolds, nowadays presume that with Dpon chen btsan po the language of the *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* shifted from Zhang zhung to Tibetan—whatever that Zhang zhung language may have been at the time: linguistically that is not yet clear at this point. Again, Dpon chen btsan po's own early biographies do not mention or even hint at that. In fact, as said, much of the narration on him appears in narratives regarding his students. Dpon chen btsan po is believed to have transmitted the oral and the experiential teachings separately: the oral ones via the Six Lamas of the Upper Transmission (*Bka' brgyud)* and the experiential ones via the Five Lamas of the Lower Transmission (*Snyan brgyud*); see Blezer 2010a and 2011a.

Tracing narratives and their framings back in time, for a bottom line for the inception of the foundational narratives and the re-construction of antecedents of Bon, the three pillars of Bon all converge at the turn of the first millennium C.E. or later. But all of them do indeed demonstrably recycle earlier materials, in revealing ways. It is thus our recurrent experience that antecedents in early self-consciously religious historical narratives appear construed, or at least 'emerge', with hindsight, at the turn of the first millennium C.E. We see them gradually emerge in the early *phyi dar*, apparently in response to developments among *Gsar ma* Buddhists and the subsequent coagulation of the *Rnying ma* folds as such (that is, as *rnying ma*, as opposed to *gsar ma*). This incidentally also provides some insight into the *manner* of construction of the narratives. For instance, a major and obvious historiographical strategy of Bon discourse is to claim and negotiate, in creative design, competing narratives, and earlier and more prestigious or mythically empowered dates for crucial events, than their Buddhist rivals can show.[6]

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[6] This strategy is of course not new, for the Indian cultural realm, cf. Randall Collins (1998: 211).

Part III - Takeuchi on Zhang zhung Languages

Takeuchi (2001 and 2009) distinguishes three main candidates for languages that might be referred to as Zhang zhung:[7]

1) Bon literary Zhang zhung, the language identified by the bonpos as the sacred tongue of their religion, which is primarily known from the bilingual edition of the *Srid pa'i mdzod phug*, but has been fragmentarily preserved elsewhere. He calls this 'New Zhang zhung'.

2) The language of five fragments written in Tibetan script found at Dunhuang Central Asian documents. Takeuchi calls this 'Old Zhang zhung'.

3) Spoken languages, dialects and 'surviving' lexicon western Tibet and neighbouring regions. Takeuchi cautions against including these linguistic data in 'Zhang zhung'.

The main source of data for 'New Zhang zhung', the sacred bonpo Zhang zhung language, is the bilingual Zhang zhung - Tibetan '*abhidharma*' text called *Srid pa'i mdzod phug* (see Martin 2000, 2010). In addition, there are titles, mantras and the like, and a large number of stray words, names and phrases that appear scattered in other Bon texts. The *Srid pa'i mdzod phug* and its commentary (traditionally dated to Dran pa Nam mkha', who is believed to have been active in the 8th century C.E.),[8] first appears into history as treasure texts (*gter ma*), in several finds, in the 11th century C.E., and—as usual—as a composition probably has to be dated to the time of its discovery.

The Bon or 'New' Zhang zhung does not convincingly look like a language: there seems to be too much lexicon and too little verbal system. Some, such as notably Rolf Stein (1971), have indeed doubted whether Bon Zhang zhung, in the form it is available to us now, represents a living, pre-10th century C.E. language, and argue that it is a mere lexicon, artificially cultivated by later bonpos, for ideological reasons, but that no doubt derives from earlier languages. Takeuchi moreover discovered that in Bon or 'New' Zhang zhung, relative to the Central Asian evidence, processes of Tibetanisation and Sanskritisation seem to have occurred in its lexicon: we see a gradual adaptation of words to languages better known in Tibet.

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[7] What follows mainly is a brief resume of major scholarly work by Takeuchi and his collaborators.

[8] Bonpos, in various narratives, distinguish several Dran pa Nam mkha'; they may be legendary figures.

The Central Asian documents are among the texts that were serendipitously discovered at the beginning of the 20th century (1907), and later were collected by Sir Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, and others in a remote, north-eastern corner of Tibet, in the so-called 'Library' Cave #17, in Dunhuang, Eastern Turkestan, in the western end of present-day Gansu province; somewhat off-centre to western Tibet. Five fragments of documents so far have been identified: three by F.W. Thomas, in the thirties of the previous century, and two more recently by Takeuchi. They may date to the late 8th or early 9th century C.E. They are written in Tibetan script but represent a different language. These texts seem to have medical or veterinarian content. Upon closer analysis, they appear to contain a colloquial language, which seems lexically related but not identical to Bon literary Zhang zhung. The Zhang zhung language of these documents appears to be a Tibeto-Burman language that is related to the Western Himalayan branch of languages, such as Kanauri, Rangpa, Bunan, and Byangsi. By all appearances this type of Zhang zhung is a dead language (but see the next point).

The spoken languages and dialects and also 'surviving' lexicon in the larger Western Tibetan area Takeuchi (2009) prefers not to call Zhang zhung. Yet, they play an important role in identifying Zhang zhung lexicon. According to Takeuchi, comparison with Eastern Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Gyarong, Minyag, and Newari, should also be considered. According to Lopon Tenzin Namdak several Tibetan dialects along the Tibet-Nepal border contain many Zhang zhung loan-words (cited in Takeuchi 2009).

Takeuchi's hypothesis is that the presumed medical lore from Zhang zhung that was recorded in Tibetan script on the above-mentioned documents ('Old' Zhang zhung) migrated with mercenaries from Zhang zhung areas. According to the Old Tibetan Annals, after the fall of Zhang zhung in the 7th century (633/34) C.E., these troops were recruited from their Zhang zhung homeland in 662/63 C.E. and taken to the Kokonor area by the Tibetan Great Minister, to fight the 'A zha (see Beckwith 1987: 29). These various Zhang zhung peoples may have stayed on in this North-Eastern corner of Tibet, and by the time that the Tibetan Empire occupied Dunhuang and the Gansu corridor (early 2nd half 8th century C.E.), they may have ended up in Dunhuang as well. There their Zhang zhung lore may have been recorded in Tibetan writing; as far as records go, perhaps for the first time in history. In that case it should be noted that these Zhang zhung people, at that time, i.e., shortly after the fall of Zhang zhung in the late 8th early 9th century C.E., apparently did not yet know how to write, let alone know how to write in a Zhang zhung script.

There is another hypothesis that seems more frugal and entirely plausible, and that is that the language of these documents in fact originates in Eastern Tibet. This theory still needs to be substantiated, from a linguistic point of view; this would not be the proper place to anticipate such an argument.[9]

Part IV - Zhang zhung-related Scripts: Writing in Zhang zhung and Ta zig

The scripts most often depicted in bonpo documents or inscribed on buildings and the like are of the Smar chung and Smar chen type; both scripts supposedly are from Zhang zhung; the Dpungs chung and Dpungs chen scripts are said to be from Ta zig; and Bru sha from Gilgit. But, occasionally, further scripts are mentioned as well, such as: Drag yig, Lha bab yi ge, Srin yig, several Gter yig, and others still. For many of these scripts it is uncertain when they appeared and whether they were ever used in written texts. So far, the samples that we actually have in hand for the first four mentioned scripts are no more than one or a few centuries old, and much of the data come from Tibetan equivalents of 'abecedaries' or *varṇamālā* (*ka 'phreng*) rather than from texts or inscriptions. The oldest sample of a *ka 'phreng* presently known to me appears in the Sde srid MS (on p.306, f.124r).[10] To my knowledge, only one sample of possibly early *in situ* use of any of these four scripts is known, and that is an undated seal, supposedly in Smar chen script, attributed to the last king of Zhang zhung, Lig myi rhya, and presently kept in the abbot's quarters in Menri, the Sman ri bla brang, in exile. The Drag yig script is mentioned relatively early, in the 12th century C.E. *Ma rgyud* commentary *sGom 'grel nyi ma'i snying po* (attributed to Gu ru rnon rtse, b. 1136 C.E.). The text was originally written in Drag yig, 'mixed' with Tibetan script. A sample is shown in Lopon Tenzin Namdak's *'Bel gtam gyi snying po*, on p.28, photo-mechanically reproduced from the commentary (cf. Martin 1994: 28ff). The text was 'copied' in 'pure' (Tibetan) script. The context suggests that no translation was involved, only transliteration.

Needless to say, all extant Zhang zhung-related scripts are phonologically based and, like the Brāhmī/Gupta and Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med* scripts, are typologically

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[9] For discussions on possible Eastern Tibetan connections of Zhangzhung-related languages, see Hummel (e.g. 1986), but also Nagano 2009 and Jacques 2009.

[10] See Christoph Cüppers, Leonard van der Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel 2012.

alphasyllabaries or rather syllabic alphabets, in Sanskrit terminology called *varṇamālā* (cf. Tibetan *ka 'phreng*).[11]

Part V - Zhang zhung Smar chung

As already indicated by Andrew West (*BabelStone*) and later again by Sam van Schaik (2011), Smar chung scripts are evidently informed by Tibetan *dbu can* (Table I); our work independently confirms this. In fact, the patterns of similarity and derivation for Smar chung, Smar chen, Spungs chung and Spungs chen are so obvious that it would seem superfluous to credit the discovery; apparently it is obvious to most observers.[12] The fact that Andrew West, Sam van Schaik, and members of our team, more or less independently (or in agreement), reached similar conclusions on the major lines of derivation underlines this. The utility of this exposé lies in a detailed discussion, contextualisation, and more elaborate presentation of the scripts in tables, not in reporting the discovery of these (and other) dependencies.

Smar chung, in its extant recent samples, typically frames Tibetan letters by means of a limited number of structures, above and/or to the right. Sometimes, small parts are omitted, in a stylised manner (e.g., KA and KHA—but cf. the Srin yig sample; cf. also Smar chen). To aid recognition, we have added extracts from Table I with graphical highlights in colour below.

The *tsheg* (or *shad*), the V-shaped hook to the right, seems to be unstable, sometimes it looks like it is included in the frame or letter. In some *ka 'phreng* this seems to results in additional, imaginatively rendered and often familiar-looking graphemes, which are usually super-scribed or added to the right of the letter. Especially the framing structures to the right therefore often are unstable. See, for example, the letter YA in the table below. The vertical lines to the right seem to

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[11] See Daniels 1996 and, for the term "syllabic alphabets" instead of "alphasyllabaries", see Houben & Rath 2012: 9, n.23.

[12] From the way things are phrased in Sam van Schaik's article, I am not sure whether at the moment of writing he was aware of Andrew West's earlier on-line publication of similar conclusions and of the discussion with West on the *Zhang zhung Studies Forum*, preceding that. I therefore tend to read this as two more independent witnesses.

multiply into a four-legged super-*ya*, while the initial curl, in what seem to be the oldest samples, invites a unique rendering as a *la* in the Beijing Smar chung. The oldest samples for the YA (van Manen, Everding, and Lokesh Chandra) indeed seem to suggest an Indic Gupta or even a later *devanāgarī*-like *ya* or even *tha* as a *Vorlage*. Based on the evidence we have, the best hypothesis would be that there apparently was confusion among calligraphers or among creators or copyist of *ka 'phreng* about the inclusion of the *tsheg* in the letter; but given the limited samples, this is not certain.

There is moreover a certain level of convergence detectable, both in parts and in whole, with known Tibetan, but occasionally also Indic scripts. Very frequent is a small compressed *nga*, which often emerges as an artifact in the framing, on top of the graphs (examples passim). With the unstable vertical connecter this also occasionally morphs into a *ra mgo* and even a *la mgo* (Beijing Dmar chung), in the 'Beijing' samples. But the latter samples tend to be somewhat atypical, particularly the Beijing Dmar chung.

The Beijing Dmar chung tends to move graphemes toward known or imaginary *dbu can* (e.g. NGA—l*nga*, CA—*rtsa*, CHA—**rcha*, JA—**rjha*, NYA—*lha*, TA—**t-ha*, DA—*dha*, MA—*kṣa* (sic!), TSA—*rtsa*, TSHA—*rtsha*, DZA—*rdzha*, 'A—*ba* (sic!), HA **ng-ha*) letter combinations that bear resemblance and even to letters from Indic scripts. The Dmar chung depicted in the *Cha tshad kyi bris dpe dpyod ldan yid gsos* MS,[13] initiated around 1687 by the *sde srid*, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705),[14] bears a strong family resemblance to the Beijing Dmar chung that has been included here in the tables.[15] The Sde srid MS Dmar chen looks more like a variety of Smar chung than like Smar chen, as does, in fact, the Beijing Dmar chen.[16] Since the Sde srid MS is the earliest we have, it might put a *post quem* date for Smar chen, as we know it from other sources; but it would be hazardous to argue for this late dating, based on a single MS sample, which moreover has been preserved in a Buddhist environment. The Sde srid MS and the Beijing Dmar chen and Dmar chung samples both seem to be closely related, to the point of being copies of each other, the Beijing samples then most likely being later renderings of those on the Sde srid MS; all four samples show the same, striking tendencies toward tibetanisation.

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[13] Christoph Cüppers, Leonard van der Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel 2012.

[14] Also involved were: Lho brag Sku skye Nor bu rgya mtsho, Rgyal rtse 'Jam dbyangs dbang po, and Ngam ring Sangs rgyas chos grags.

[15] We therefore have not included this additional sample. If the publication of the Sde Srid MS had appeared in print earlier, we would probably have opted for including these samples in the comparative tables rather than the Beijing ones.

[16] These so-called 'Dmar chen' varieties of Smar chung were not included in the tables.

Even a *ha btags* occasionally shows up, mostly in the Beijing samples, which generally appear somewhat deviating, especially in the somewhat eccentric Beijing Dmar chung; one time, it looks like a misreading of a curvy *dbu med*-style *da* suspended from its Smar chung framing (DA) as a HA (but it may appear on other grounds), more often apparently for other reasons (JA, NYA, TA, DZA ZHA).

Note the curious similarity of the graphemes SA and HA in the oldest samples (that is, the Van Manen, Everding, and Lokesh Chandra samples) and note the interesting X-like grapheme for 'A.

Extant occurrences of Smar chung in texts, more often than not, appear to be ornamental. It should be noted that they moreover usually transliterate Tibetan titles rather than Zhang zhung; see some samples with added transliteration in Table VI (the samples are from Dolanji MSs, reproduced in Everding 2001). Sometimes Smar chung letters also appears purely as manuscript illuminations and ornaments, without any apparent meaning. This appears rather frequently in the most recent editions of the Bon canon.

Table of Zhangzhung sMar chung scripts
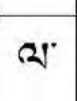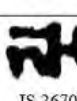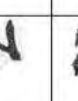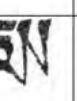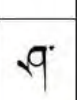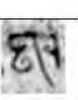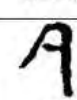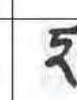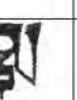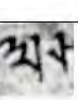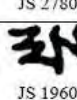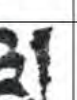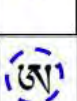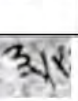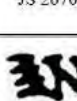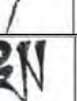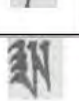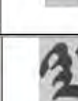
CONSONANTS

ROMAN	DBU MED	DBU CAN	VAN MANEN	EVERDING	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	SHERAB NYIMA (SRIN YIG)	BEIJING (SMAR CHUNG)	BEIJING (DMAR CHUNG)
KA				JS 2782						
KHA				JS 2745						
GA				JS 1960						
NGA				JS 2110						
CA				JS 2825						

CHA				JS 2825						
JA				JS 2858						
NYA				JS 2825						
TA				JS 2826						
THA				JS 2110a						
DA				JS 2670						

NA				JS 2670						
PA				JS 2858						
PHA				JS 2679						
BA				JS 2826						
MA				JS 2858						
TSA										

TSHA				JS 2656						
DZA				JS 2110a						
WA										
ZHA				JS 2858						
ZA				JS 2110						
'A				JS 2110						

YA				JS 2858						
RA				JS 2825						
LA				JS 2670						
SHA				JS 2780						
SA				JS 1960						
HA				JS 2670						
A				JS 2110						

Part VI - Zhang zhung Smar chen

As also indicated by West and van Schaik, Smar chen seems to be informed by Tibetan *dbu can* as well, but in somewhat more complex ways (see Table II). The letters and graphs look *g-yung drung*-ised *dbu can* script (see DBU, NYA, SA, and HA (only in Lokesh Chandra), but also KHA and DZA (e.g., Lokesh Chandra and Zhang zhung Dictionary).

For some letters the derivation is obvious, such as for KA, KHA, GA, and NGA; often one connecting line is missing, in a sort of stylised way, such as the right vertical one in the KHA (if one would remove the *ra mgo* framing and add the vertical connector one would have a regular Tibetan KHA). Note the framing headline above or to the right in all cases and the occasionally added elements, such as the hook below at GA and, incidentally, also at KHA (Zhang zhung Dictionary sample). Some are also less obvious, such as, CA, TA, DA, and NA, but are nonetheless fairly easy to relate to Tibetan *dbu can*, given the calligraphic conventions and constrictions (consider, for instance, the rendering of the CA grapheme).

Note the convergence of the upper framing parts to more familiar-looking *ra mgo*, at NGA, CHA, TSHA and, somewhat more incidentally, at several other graphs as well. The vertical connector being typically unstable in this *g-yung drung*-isation of Smar chen, the upper framing is also occasionally realised as a compressed *nga*-like structure, see for instance JA, SA, and HA; this design pattern we have encountered much more frequently in the Smar chung-type scripts. A vertically flipped *nga*, with the 'unstable' vertical connector moved toward the right side, also occurs (e.g., YA).

There seems to be a system to it all. Similar letters in one 'class', such as, CA, CHA, and JA, often are variants of each other. It will not be necessary to explain that in words, as it can easily be gleaned from the tables. The first in its class usually relates best to the Tibetan, while the others show slight variations of the previous, such as, inversions of parts or of the frame, or different linkage to the framing structures (e.g., TSA and TSHA, which frame the same identifying structure slightly differently. The related class TSA, TSHA and DZA, again, shows slight variations of CA, CHA, and JA. Similar patterns can be observed for other classes as well. This need not necessarily point to artifice. Note the unique convergence of BA and MA in Hummel's sample: the identifying element looks like a *ma*, in *dbu med*, rotated 90 degrees and flipped between BA and MA.

Sometimes, parts of Smar chen letters, in later convergence and dissimilation, appear close to known (also *dbu med*) Tibetan forms, also rotated and flipped (thus an

appended *ra* and *'a* appear at CHA and JA in Lokesh Chandra, Zhang zhung Dictionary and Beijing Smar chen). Occasionally, also a wholesale reframing of a known Tibetan *dbu can* letter is known to occur (see, for instance, the letter "A").

See also the similarity of CA, ZHA and RA, *and* TSA, TSHA, DZA and SHA; especially when the vertical connector line is moved (and, as said, that line indeed seems to be relatively 'unstable').

For this script we actually have a short piece of text, the aforementioned royal seal that is said to have belonged to a Lig myi rhya King. Considering that both Smar varieties are informed by Tibetan *dbu can*, one would expect the seal at least to postdate Tibetan *dbu can*.

The 'Zhang zhung' Royal Seal of Lig myi rhya (Smar chen)

The seal, depicted at the beginning of this article has most recently been discussed on the *Zhang zhung Studies Forum* and Andrew West later publicised his conclusions on his blogspot, *BabelStone*;[17] there you will also find a useful table with the readings and corrections by Lopon Tenzin Namdak and those suggested by Andrew West. A print of the seal was originally published by Lopon Tenzin Namdak (*'Bel gtam gyi snying po*, p.28) and was later again reprinted in *Bon sgo* (Vol.8 (1995), p.55) and elsewhere.

Interestingly, even though the readings are vastly different and only three out of seven or eight syllables are certain, both scholars arrive at the same translation … One might question the decision of Andrew West to emend the reading of the seal based on extant, late *ka 'phreng*. The seal might well be the oldest evidence we have, older and more authentic than the *ka 'phreng.* In any case, one would need to know more about the provenance of the seal and the source of Lopon Tenzin Namdak's reading and his reasons for 'translating' or emending the text the way he does.

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[17] See http://babelstone.blogspot.com/search/label/Zhang%20Zhung.

Reading Lopon Tenzin Namdak:

Zhang zhung:	KHA (THA?)-TSHAN PA-SHANG LIG-ZHI RA-TSA/
Tib.:	thams cad dbang bsgyur (dbang sdud) srid pa'i rgyal po
	The King of the World, Who Rules All

Reading Andrew West (*BabelStone*):

Zhang zhung:	KHA-M-N (KHA-MUN?) PA-SHANG LIG-CI WAR (WER)/
Tib.:	'dod khams dbang sdud srid pa'i rgyal po
	King of Life, Wielding Power over the World of Sensual Pleasures

Part VII - Ta zig: Spungs so chung ba, Spungs so che ba and Bru sha (Gilgit)

As also argued by Andrew West (*BabelStone*) and later again by Sam van Schaik (2011), Spungs chen seems to derive in a rather straightforward manner from Lan dza/Lan ts(h)a,[18] Spungs chung likewise from Wartu or Vartu scripts. This is again confirmed also by our independent comparisons: see for instance KA, KHA, GA, and CA, in Table III). The main distinguishing feature between these two main groups is a straight headline for Spungs chen and Lan tsha as opposed to a wavy one for the Spungs chung and Vartu varieties.

As can be seen in Table IV, Bru sha also seems to relate to Lan tsha; but note that the graphemes for KHA and GA seem to be reversed in the Alay Brusha MS, relative to Spungs chen. This Bru sha script shows no apparent connections to known Gilgit Sanskrit scripts (see some samples of Eastern Gupta in Table IV, from Dutta, 1939).[19]

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[18] While Lan tsha script is very familiar from ornamental titles to Buddhist manuscripts, also for those that were not translated from Indic languages, I am not familiar with its important role in treasure texts, as argued by van Schaik 2011: 67. On Lan tsha and Vartu see, e.g., Rath 2011: 198.

[19] Although the find spot (Gilgit) is in the North West, these MSs contain Eastern Gupta variety of scripts (5th–6th century C.E.). N.B., Śāradā is much later (8th century C.E.) and is of a Western Gupta variety.

The use of Lan tsha and Vartu scripts in Tibet probably is not to be dated earlier than 11th century C.E.; long after the relevant Zhang zhung period. The narrative in the MS publicized by Alay indicates that the scripts presented there were systematised by Kun grol grags pa (b. 1700), a well-known Gsar bon figure of Eastern Tibet (also cf. Alay 2010). They are said to originate with Gling gshen Mu la (thogs med) in Sku bla rmog mtho, by prophecy of Tshe dbang (rig 'dzin). Gling gshen Mu la is made a contemporary of the legendary Stong rgyung Mthu chen, so supposedly of the late Zhang zhung period (as said, bonpos believe the final days of Zhang zhung were in the 8th rather than in the 7th century C.E.). Stong rgyung Mthu chen is believed to have been involved in cultural translation of Bon—but note that this is long before Bon as we now know it arose, in the early *phyi dar*.

Could these conventions of using Zhang zhung scripts perhaps even be typically *gter gsar* and subsequent Gsar bon invented traditions or at least be traditions thoroughly reinterpreted by them? Perhaps we are looking at a convenient legitimising adjunct to their controversial *gter gsar* traditions: an effort at retraditionalising one of the, reputedly at least, least traditional systems within the Bon folds?

Part VIII - Indic Scripts

Inscriptions and manuscripts of Buddhist content, in Prakritic or Sanskrit language and in regional languages, and written in Siddhamātṛkā and in other Indic scripts, were produced not only in India but in a large area of Central Asia stretching from Gandhāra (to the north-west of India), to 'Eastern Turkestan' (Xinjiang, north of India) and Yunnan (to the north-east of India), for several centuries from the early centuries C.E. onwards (see for instance: Liebenthal 1947, Sander 1968, Salomon 1999). The intensive use and transportation of manuscripts in Indian scripts in this period is well-attested (van Gulik 1956, Rath 2006, 2011) and is continuous with an intensive manuscript culture in the Indian realm from the same early period onwards (Houben & Rath 2012). A detailed comparison between Zhang zhung and early north Indic scripts is therefore called for, whatever exact historical relationship they may have. It is found that both Tibetan script (in both the *dbu can* and *dbu med* variety) and varieties of Zhang zhung show considerable affinities with ancient scripts from north-east India (rather than those from the north-west). It is in this connection interesting to note that, as shown in Sander 1968, the use of scripts from north-east India extended in north-western

direction far into Central Asia. The chronology and mutual relationships of the Indic scripts are relatively well-established, and can be represented in the form of a tree-diagram (see Table Va). Against this background, Zhang zhung shows most affinity with the older Indic scripts from late eastern Gupta onwards. This says something about the *post quem* date and the regional orientation, but not about the *ante quem* date of origin of Zhang zhung scripts, as we have to take into account the possibility of an archaizing creation of a later period and as the influence of one script on another may have been mediated through another script. Referring to Table V, several systematic affinities between the characters of the north-eastern group of Indic scripts (including Lan tsha and Vartu), Tibetan and Zhang zhung can be noticed, for instance:

- The GA in column 2 and 3 (early and late Gupta), 4 and 5 (Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med*) is very similar to the Zhang zhung script in column 9 (van Manen Smar chung) and to the Oriya script, column 16. The van Manen Smar chung character looks like an angular form of the corresponding rounded Oriya character.
- The CA in columns 1, 2 and 3 (Brahmi, early and late Gupta) is very similar to 4 (Tibetan *dbu can*) and to the Zhang zhung script in Alay's MS column 6 (character without the right-hand vertical bar), and this one again to columns 11, 12, 14, 15 (Ranjana, Lan tsha, Bengali and Maithili); the curvy style variant in column 7 is similar to columns 13 and 16 (Vartu and Oriya).
- The HA in column 3 (late Gupta) is similar to the character in columns 4 and 5 (Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med*), Zhang zhung of Alay's MS in columns 6–7 and the eastern Indic scripts of columns 11–14 (Ranjana, Lan tsha, Vartu and Bengali).

Part IX - Some Preliminary Conclusions

There is no evidence that Zhang zhung scripts were ever used in the Zhang zhung period (that is, in the period up till the 7th or 8th century C.E.). No written texts or any other evidence for use of the scripts has turned up yet that can be dated with certainty to a time before the late 17th century C.E., but most samples probably are 19th century C.E. or later, the earliest datable evidence so far is a *ka 'phreng* on a MS from the Buddhist environment of the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, with a somewhat deviating Dmar chen and Dmar chung script, datable to around 1687 C.E. Our only

possibly early 'document' is the purportedly ancient seal that is of uncertain provenance and date and, as of yet, has to remain of uncertain content as well. The major obstacle in developing a solid argument is the lack of reliably early sources and *in situ* use of the scripts. Nearly every new find of an early sample could potentially change the landscape considerably; the following conclusions therefore have to remain very preliminary.

• Smar chung scripts are informed by Tibetan *dbu can* (they are simply reframed forms of Tibetan *dbu can* letters).

• Smar chen scripts usually add *g-yung drung* patterns, or merely framing (often looking like *nga mgo* or *ra mgo*) to familiar *dbu can* Tibetan forms and improvise variations for forming letters from the same or similar classes. The absence of the later more regular form of sMar chen from the Sde srid MS, may put an date *post quem* for Smar chen as we know it from other sources, as the Sde srid MS is the earliest dated evidence that we presently have; but it is hazardous to argue for this thesis based on a single sample, moreover preserved in a Buddhist environment.

• Spungs chen for Zhang zhung follows Buddhist conventions of using Lan tsha for Sanskrit mainly in ornamental titles. But this transpired long after the Zhang zhung period, in any case after the 11th century C.E.

• Spungs chung is similarly inspired on the Vartu variety of ornamental script.

• Bru sha, supposedly from eponymous Gilgit, also mainly follows the Lan tsha design; there are no apparent resonances with any known Gilgit Sanskrit and Prakrit scripts.

Multi-directional similarities with other scripts are apparent. These may likely have originated from misunderstandings through the intervention of calligraphers. Moreover, many convergences with Tibetan letters and stacks and Sanskrit ligatures and letters are apparent. When this occurs, calligraphers apparently recycle known letters, mostly from Tibetan, but occasionally also from Indic scripts. They preferably employ script specimens that were around in Tibet and that may have looked

somewhat unfamiliar to Tibetans; unknown indeed, they may have appeared like genuinely foreign scripts. There are many inconsistencies apparent in the policy of inclusion or exclusion in the design of the letter of the syllable marker, the *tsheg* (or perhaps the *shad*, but probably the former); we hypothesise that, over time, this may have led to all kinds of additions and changes to letters.

Based on the evidence that has surfaced so far, systematised Zhang zhung scripts look to be invented traditions, or at least thoroughly reinterpreted traditions, of no more than several centuries old: significantly later than the ancient Zhang zhung period and, of course, not later than our present sources, which probably have to be dated somewhere around the 19th century C.E., with one exception in the late 17th century C.E. Needless to say, an ad hoc design rather than a gradual, organic development, of a new script is well-known in the Tibetan and Central Asian world, see for instance the creation of the 'Phags pa script in the 13th century, under royal patronage; cf. also the Lepcha script in the early 18th century C.E. (van der Kuijp 1996: 436–40). Based on what little narrative historical evidence that we have (from the Alay MS), Zhang zhung scripts may even be a specific Gter gsar and later also Gsar bon-fueled re-traditionalisation, connected to Gter gsar-style Bon *gter ma* traditions.

In extant narratives, the Drag yig script is first described as if it were a type of Gter yig. Existing practices and conventions concerning Gter yig may well have been the raw materials for later systematisations of some so-called Zhang zhung scripts, such as of the Spungs chen script by Kun grol grags pa. One might therefore speculate that the design, use and systematisation of Zhang zhung-scripts was primarily a concern of *gter ston* figures, perhaps even starting in Gter gsar and Bon gsar circles, where it originally may have related to coding and decoding *gter ma* revelations and only later was engaged for the employment of those fantastic and captivating narratives about a remote Zhang zhung Golden Age. There are numerous family resemblances, particularly of Smar chung with various types of Gter yig and Mkha' 'gro brda yig. These still need to be charted out systematically. But that is a task that also has to await further research and cannot be covered in a preliminary survey such as this.

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