

The sGang steng-b rNying ma'i rGyud 'Bum manuscript from Bhutan

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The rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum

The *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* — the "Ancient Tantra Collection" — is a large corpus of Tantric scriptures that has a special canonical status for the rNying ma school which is traditionally associated with the earliest transmission of Buddhism into Tibet that took place during the Tibetan Imperial period (7th to 9th centuries CE). As a typical Tibetan canonical collection, a *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* collection looks much like a Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*) collection, which is the main orthodox Tibetan scriptural canon shared by all the schools. It uses the same methods of physical reproduction. Also like the Kanjur, the texts it contains are all considered to be *bka'* or buddhavacana - the transmitted teachings of the Buddhas and other enlightened beings. However, it differs from the Kanjur in that its texts are exclusively Vajrayāna: it does not contain exoteric Sūtrayāna texts.

Moreover, its texts are all those of the three classes of Inner Tantras as classified by the rNying ma pa: Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga (*rnal 'byor chen po; rjes su rnal 'byor; rdzogs pa chen po shin tu rnal 'byor*). These are the highest three categories within the rNying ma pa enumeration of the Nine Yānas; the three lower tantras of Kriyā (*bya ba'i rgyud*), Ubhaya (*upa'i rgyud*) or Caryā (*spyod pa'i rgyud*), and Yogatantra (*rnal 'byor gyi rgyud*), are thus not included in the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, not to mention the three non-tantric vehicles of Śrāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddhayāna and Bodhisattvayāna.

Some sections of the texts within the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* also circulate as independent smaller collections: for example, many rDzogs chen texts of the Sems sde category circulate separately in a collection called the *Bairo rgyud 'bum*; and separate collections of the Seventeen Tantras of rDzogs chen's Man ngag sde class (*rGyud bcu bdun*) also circulate separately. There is furthermore a separate collection called the *rNying ma bka' ma* which contains some materials related to the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, but which is much more varied, since it also contains numerous commentarial literatures.

A small proportion of *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* texts are also shared with the Kanjur. A very few, like the Guhyasamāja and Mañjuśrīnāmasaṅgīti, occur in the main body of the Kanjur, while a slightly larger number, including the Guhyagarbha, occur only in special *rNying rgyud* sections of the Kanjurs, which vary in their extent according to how sympathetic the particular Kanjur editors were to the inclusion of rNying ma tantras. The sDe dge Kanjur has quite a large *rNying rgyud* section, as do some of the Peking editions, and the Tawang Kanjurs from Arunachal Pradesh (as described by Jampa Samten) are something of a curiosity, since they have so many *rNying rgyud* texts that they are almost a hybrid between a Kanjur and a rNying ma collection. Nevertheless, the majority of *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* texts were excluded by the compilers of the Kanjur, on the basis that no Sanskrit originals for them were ever found. This was one of the main reasons why the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* had to be compiled as a separate collection.

Introductory

In 1981, a photo-offset litho reproduction of a famous manuscript version of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* from mTshams brag monastery in Bhutan, was produced in Delhi under the auspices of the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and the National Library of Bhutan. At the time, given the appalling destruction of so many religious books in Tibet during the period following the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet, there were only three other *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* editions available, two of which were not particularly reliable, and there was widespread concern that the textual transmission of this most important of all early Tibetan tantric scriptural collections might be reduced to a very slender thread indeed. The publication of the mTshams brag edition was therefore widely greeted as a very positive development, and once scholars had become aware of its size and quality, it quickly became one of the most popular of the few surviving versions of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*. Since its first publication, it has now also been further reproduced in several different formats, including microfiche, western-style bound volumes, and as electronic scans. A version reprinted in Chengdu has also spread very widely within Tibet and China.

In the mid 1980's, we began to use this mTshams brag version as a key witness for our work in critically editing *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* texts. One of the highlights of the reproduction edition was a learned preface by the well-known Bhutanese scholar, Lupon Pemala, who held a senior post at the national Library of Bhutan and played a major role in producing the reproduction edition. His preface contained much valuable information. Among other things, Lupon Pemala (1981: 4) described a specifically Bhutanese tradition of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, and also named two further locations where extant Bhutanese *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* manuscripts still existed: sGang steng monastery, and sBra me'i rtse monastery. Naturally, we became interested in procuring copies of these further Bhutanese witnesses to complement our readings in the mTshams brag edition. From the late 1990's, we began several attempts to get access to these manuscripts, but for various reasons, it was not until 2003 that we were able to procure funds from the Arts and Humanities Research Board of the UK for Karma Phuntsho to photograph the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* manuscript located at sGang steng monastery. Our paper today is a report on what we can now know about the sGang steng *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, based on the photographic images of it made by Karma Phuntsho; or more precisely, on the images of *one* of the sGang steng *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*'s, because in the process of photographing what we had initially thought was the only *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* at sGang steng, Karma Phuntsho also found that another, less deluxe version was also stored there, alongside it. We have not yet had access to photographs of this second sGang steng NGB, which we will designate sGang steng-a, so in today's talk we will only discuss the first one, which we will call sGang steng-b. We adopt this nomenclature because, as we will explain below, we believe the finer and more expensive manuscript we photographed first and which is presented here was made later than the simpler more cheaply produced one we one discovered later. Since the photography of sGang steng-a was completed by Karma Phuntsho in 2004, we have now catalogued the collection, and it has also used it in

making critical editions of two full-length texts. So we now know enough to give a reasonable preliminary account of what this sGang steng-a *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* version has to offer.

Basic structure

The basic structure of the sGang steng-b NGB is identical to that of mTshams brag. We already had a hint this would be the case from Lopon Pemala's preface to the mTshams brag reproduction, but in the process of cataloguing the sGang steng-b NGB, we have been able to confirm that in fact the two editions are, structurally speaking, identical twins. Like mTshams brag, sGang steng-b has 46 large volumes containing a total of around 1000 texts.¹ Note that since *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* collections are sometimes quite amorphous, in the sense that it is often difficult to decide whether a specific piece of writing is an independent text or a sub-section of another text, small differences in enumeration are inevitable. Moreover, throughout its entire length and through every individual volume, the text sequence in sGang steng-a is identical with mTshams brag.

Doxography

This also implies of course that sGang steng-a shares an identical doxography with mTshams brag, which is indeed the case. We find the same strangely rough and ready ordering of texts that we are already familiar with from mTshams brag.² While it would be quite untrue to say the texts are thrown together at random, since groups of texts that belong together are grouped together, nevertheless the overall effect is certainly one of being unfinished or loose in organisation, when compared to the other *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* editions. This Bhutanese edition also contains many more texts than any of the other editions. Among the additional materials are many *gter ma* texts (or "Treasure" revelations), including, for example, some from rDo rje gling pa's *Pha rgyud lta ba klong yangs* cycle that are normally classified as lung or man ngag. There are also some *gter ma* texts from the Byang gter tradition. At the same time, important *gter ma* texts included in other editions are omitted from this Bhutanese edition, but its criteria for inclusion or exclusion still eludes us.

Textual affiliations

While the general structure of a collection, and its doxography, can be examined through studying its outer contours, textual affiliations can only

¹ According to the enumerations within the Taipei Tibetan Tripi_aka (which re-issues the mTshams brag *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* within its volumes 54 to 63), mTshams brag has exactly 1,001 texts. The University of Virginia's catalogue of mTshams brag gives a slightly different figure of 939 texts.

² We discuss this in Cantwell, Mayer and Fischer 2002:
<http://ngb.csac.anthropology.ac.uk/csac/NGB/Doc/DistinctiveFeaturesWeb.xml>.

be discerned through a detailed text-critical analysis of the internal contents of each text individually. We have had time to subject two texts contained in the sGang steng-b *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* to such analysis, so it will be useful to give a brief outline report on these findings here.

From a general viewpoint, one of the most repeatedly confirmed results of our work on the textual criticism of the surviving *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* texts over the last few years has been the identification of three distinctive textual traditions within the extant *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* transmission. Since these three traditions have always appeared so far to have a distinctively regional basis, we have decided to give them regional names: hence we now speak of the Southern Central Tibetan tradition, the Eastern Tibetan tradition represented by the conflated single witness sDe dge xylograph, and the Bhutanese tradition. The four surviving versions of the Southern Central tradition can also sometimes be internally sub-divided, but that need not concern us here.

In the texts we have looked at so far, the Bhutanese witnesses, mTshams brag and sGang steng-b are clearly very closely related. From their distinctive patterns of shared errors, shared punctuation, and shared readings of every other sort, there is never any doubt whatsoever that they share a particular line of textual descent distinct and separate from those of all other available *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* versions; or, to say the same thing in other words, there can be no doubt at all that they both descend from a common hyparchetype which is not also the ancestor of the other extant *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* versions we have been able to look at so far. Following Lupon Pemala's description, we might reasonably anticipate that the sGang steng-a and sBra me'i rtse manuscripts will in due course turn out to share this affiliation as well, but of course we cannot be at all certain until we have examined them, and we still await the opportunity to do so. While they have much in common, the two texts we have looked at so far also differ in a highly significant respect: while the shorter of the two texts demonstrates a textual affiliation clearly closer to the Southern Central grouping than to sDe dge, the longer of our two texts shows a textual affiliation that has no specific relationship to either sDe dge or the Southern Central grouping. Hence the stemma of our first text is bifid, splitting into two at the archetype, with one branch generating the main ancestors of the sDe dge edition, and the other branch generating the ancestors of the Bhutanese and Southern Central groupings alike. But the stemma of the second text is tripartite, splitting into three apparently separate groupings from the archetype.

History of the Bhutanese NGB's

The Bhutanese transmission of the NGB still needs to be researched further. The earliest transmission of the NGB in Bhutan is said by Ehrhard to stem from the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa³ master, bSod nams rGyal mtshan (1466-

³ The lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa school were an offshoot of the East Tibetan Kaḥ thog pa school who expanded into Bhutan and Sikkim in the late 15th century. The first major

1540). bSod nams rGyal mtshan describes in his autobiography how he gave a transmission of the NGB at sPa gro sTag tshang in the first decade of the 16th century, an auspicious event accompanied by a rain of flowers and other such marvels.⁴ It is interesting that he passed on an NGB transmission he received from dMus ston chen po Kun bzang dpal in gTsang, rather than one from his own lineage of Kaḥ thog (Ehrhard 2003:19). This transmission comprised 35 volumes, a detailed contents list of which can be found in bSod nams rGyal mtshan's autobiography. Later, bSod nams rGyal mtshan gave a second NGB transmission, once again at sPa gro sTag tshang, and on this occasion, he received as an offering a 35-volume set of the NGB from a noble lady disciple, a member of the ruling house of rGyang rtse with the title dPon sa bDag mo drung (Ehrhard 2003: 20). It would be wonderful if a surviving version of this obviously old NGB edition in 35 volumes turns up somewhere in Bhutan.

However, as yet we know very little about the origins of the 46 volume edition of the extant Bhutanese copies we are aware of today. A possible ancestry of this tradition is mentioned in the rNying ma history by Guru bKra shis, written in the early nineteenth century (between 1807 and 1813): he points to the Padma gling pa centre of lHo brag lHa lung as a source (653.4-664.4). There were two important incarnation lines at this monastery: the Pad gling gsung sprul, and the Pad gling thugs sras; and Guru bKra shis writes that the third Pad gling gsung sprul, Tshul khriims rdo rje (1598-1669), received in the early seventeenth century a reading transmission of the NGB at the family seat of the famous treasure text revealer (*qter ston*), Rat na gling pa, and moreover also had an NGB copy produced. The same source tells us that the fourth Pad gling gsung sprul, Ngag dbang Kun bzang rdo rje (1680-1723), constructed an edition of the NGB in 46 volumes when hiding from Dzungar marauders in the secluded areas of the southern borderlands.

Lopon Pemala independently confirms the third Pad gling gsung sprul, whom he calls Kun mkhyen Tshul khriims, as a key figure in the origins of the modern Bhutanese 46 volume NGB tradition. Yet further confirmation comes from the current sGang steng Rin po che (verbal communication to Dr. Karma Phuntsho), who says that at least one of the NGB versions now in sGang steng was prepared by the third Pad gling gsung sprul, Kun mkhyen tshul khriims rdo rje, as a funerary tribute to his master, the first sGang steng sprul sku, Padma 'phrin las. Padma 'phrin las is believed to have been a natural son of Padma gling pa's eldest son (b.1499) and a foster son of the second Pad gling gsung sprul, bsTan 'dzin grags pa. Padma 'phrin las had a long-standing wish to create a copy of the NGB and receive its transmission, but it was only after his death that his wish was fulfilled by his disciple, the third Pad gling gsung sprul. If this account is correct, then one of the NGB sets at sGang steng must have been written

Kaḥ thog scholar to arrive in the Himalayan borders was bZhang bla ma Ye shes 'bum pa (Ehrhard 2003:12).

⁴ According to Lopon Pemala, another important NGB transmission for the Bhutanese was the one bestowed by Ratna gling pa in person in two years before his death (suggesting the date of 1476), upon rGyal dbang chos rje kun dga' dpal 'byor. Although earlier than the transmissions described here, presumably this one was not performed on Bhutanese soil.

sometime between 1640-1650. In other words, the edition in 46 volumes must go back at least as far as the third Pad gling gSung sprul, not merely to the fourth. Unfortunately, we are not quite sure which witnesses Tshul khriims rdo rje used as his exemplars.

The actual writing of at least one of the sGang steng NGBs is supposed to have taken place in lHa lung with paper taken from Bhutan. However, there is also an oral account among the lamas in sGang steng that the NGB was written in Me ri dkar po, a temple above Nor bu lding across the pass from sGang steng, which is now lying in ruins. It may be plausible that one of the two sets of NGB manuscripts in sGang steng was written in lHa lung in Tibet, and the other in Me ri dkar po. The two sets today are read alternately once each year in the sixth month of Bhutanese calendar as part of the annual rituals in sGang steng, and stored in the central library of sGang steng monastery.

Is sGang steng-a the parent of mTshams brag?

Lopon Pemala mentions (1981:4) that the mTshams brag manuscript itself was made at the order of mTshams brag sprul sku Ngag dbang 'brug pa from a Punakha original. Its dating would thus have been between circa 1728 and 1748 (mTshams brag sprul sku Ngag dbang 'brug pa's dates are 1682-1748). However, the notes to the 2005 release of the TBRC hard-drive electronic edition of the mTshams brag NGB suggest that, mTshams brag was copied from a sGang steng manuscript: "The Tsamdrag manuscript ... seems to have been copied at the order of Tsamdrag Lama Ngagwang Drugpa (1682-1748) on the basis of a manuscript from Gangteng" (TBRC 2005, hard-drive electronic edition of the mTshams brag NGB, 'List of Contents of External Hard Drive 1). This need not be surprising in any way because sGang steng and mTshams brag had close historical links around the time the two NGBs were written, especially since mTshams brag sprul sku Ngag dbang Grub pa, who is credited with the production of the mTshams brag NGB, was a close disciple of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub and visited sGang steng on numerous occasions.

Quite often, textual criticism can produce internal evidence capable of affirming or refuting such propositions regarding textual descent. In this particular case, it is slightly difficult to come to an absolutely certain conclusion because there are so few variations between the two texts, but, judging solely from the evidence yielded by the two full-length texts we have so far analysed, it seems a bit unlikely that in these two cases the mTshams brag manuscript was copied from sGang steng-b. This is because there are some unique errors in sGang steng-b not reproduced in mTshams brag; and although it remains a possibility that these can be attributed to plain coincidence, or to the intervention of some clever scribe who repaired these errors as he went along, when one looks at the broader general context of the state of the two texts, this actually seems slightly unlikely. So too is the possibility that sGang steng-b was copied from mTshams brag. For the two texts we have looked at, it is more probable that mTshams brag was not copied directly from sGang steng-b, but rather that both were copied from the same exemplar. However, it remains to be explored whether mTshams brag and Gang steng-b were both copied from sGang steng-a, as is the

possibility that some other texts within the huge Bhutanese NGB collections might in fact show a direct descent from sGang steng-b to mTshams brag. Note that we do not yet know for certain which of the two sGang steng NGB's is the earliest, although it is more likely that the finer one presented here is later, since it is the more expensively made of the two.

Is it a 'good edition'?

People often ask whether a particular *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* edition or version is a 'good' one, meaning, it seems, if it has an accurately copied text that is reliable for them to use. In fact, with due reflection, this can appear to be a slightly naive question. Firstly, there need be no consistency regarding individual texts within any such large collection; secondly, scribal accuracy within any specific act of copying has no relation to the quality of what is copied. With the small sample of sGang steng-b that we have so far analysed — two texts comprising seventy-four folios⁵ — we can see that the scribes involved in its production, as in the production of mTshams brag, were consistently of the very highest calibre: there are only around one hundred and seventy-five places within the longest of the two texts where sGang steng-b and mTshams brag diverge at all. Clearly, these scribes were virtuoso copyists. But if one asks about the orthographical regularity and general readability of what they had available before them to copy, then the picture becomes more mixed. The shorter of our two texts is pretty good - not as regularised as the famous sDe dge edition, but substantially easier on the reader than anything from the four versions of the Southern Central tradition. With the other, longer text, the situation is quite different. Here, apart from some folio misplacements and loss in the Southern Central tradition, the sGang steng-b and mTshams brag versions give us probably the most difficult NGB text we have so far encountered anywhere – albeit manifestly preserving within the chaos a great number of very old and valuable readings that might have been edited out elsewhere. All this goes to show how correct Helmut Eimer has been to insist that we look at each separate text individually, rather than placing our faith in the reputations of entire editions. It also of course raises the issue of what we mean by a 'good edition': is it one that preserves old readings but which might well be incoherent and incomprehensible? Or is it one that has been regularised and rendered readable by Tibetan editorial teams?

Codicological features

The sGang steng-a NGB has no miniatures, unlike most of the versions from the Southern Central tradition. Nonetheless, as is generally the case with a major textual collection, the first numbered folio (gcig) of each volume is a laminated page with decorative embellishments, and these are especially

⁵ These texts are the *Mya ngan las 'das pa'i rgyud chen po*, in Volume Chi, as in mTshams brag, running from folio 102v to 153r, and the *rDo rje khros pa phur pa rTsa ba'i rgyud*, in Volume Ji, from folio 165v to 185v.

elaborate in the first volume, Ka. Apart from the first volume, there is a standard layout and design for these first folios.

The recto side has gold ink on black lacquer, with a wide border around the black page, generally blue-black in colour, but coloured mid-blue in the case of sixteen of the volumes.⁶ All we find on this side of the folio are the double gold ruled lines which mark out the page and the two margins at the right and left of the page, along with the volume identification and pagination given in the left margin. There is nothing, however, to alert us that this is a *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* collection,⁷ although no doubt the social context in which such significant sets of manuscripts are kept would seem to preclude any uncertainty ever arising.

The upper sheet of the verso side of the folio has a rectangular curtained window cut out for the text, outlined with a red painted frame. The material cover appears to consist of a single light piece of dyed silk.⁸ The outer border of the page is black with a matt finish, while the central window for the text is enclosed within a decorated border. Against the black background, a single band of mid-blue stretches above and below the text page, while to the right and left of the page, it forms a symmetrical interlocking design. The black lacquered text area has three lines of gold ink lettering, and two vertical strips run down its right and left sides, with a regular textile pattern of gold lines on the black lacquered background. This is an upside-down version of the same gold on black pattern found bordering the writing area in a number of the Rig 'dzin edition's first folios to Volumes Ma, Tsa, La, and Ha, and also in two inner sheets within Volume Pha and 'A, where it is executed in black ink. It consists of a series of a number of curved lines on top of each other, going in alternating directions, creating a wave design. Unlike the Rig 'dzin edition, however, where we have identified six alternative patterns for these decorative strips across the volumes of the collection⁹ in this case, the single pattern is used consistently in all forty-six volumes.

The first page of the first volume follows the standard layout to some extent, but makes it rather more ornate. The folio appears to be thicker than those of the other volumes, and it has thick crossed stitches attaching the sheets together, one in each corner and two further stitches along both the top and the lower edges.¹⁰ In other respects, the layout of the recto side is identical to those of the first folios of the sixteen volumes which have a mid-blue coloured outer border to the page. Like all the standard first folios, it simply gives the volume identification and pagination in gold ink.

⁶ Volumes Ka, Pa, Ra, Ha to Ki, Gi, Ci, Chi, Nyi, Thi, Ni, Pi, Bi, and Mi

⁷ This is unlike the Rig 'dzin edition, where the word, "rgyud" is written on each recto side alongside the volume name and pagination, and the sets of index leaves (where they survive) are also marked as such.

⁸ In the case of Volume Kha, the left section of the sheet seems to have been torn off.

⁹ See <http://ngb.csac.anthropology.ac.uk/csac/NGB/Doc/GeneralInformation.xml>.

¹⁰ The first folio of Volume Zha is similarly stitched together with eight thick crossed stitches, although none of the other volumes have such stitching.

The upper sheet of the verso side of the folio also has a rectangular curtained window cut out for the text, outlined with a red painted frame, but in this case, there would appear to be greater depth to the window frame. There is a dark blue border around the outside of the page, through which the stitches are sewn, and within this, there is a slightly larger decorated border than those found in the regular volumes. It consists of wide bands of mid-blue, outlined with gold lines, which intertwine with bands of green and bands of the blue-black background, such that they form an interlocking key design. Rather than a single piece of silk, in this case there is a multi-layered fitted covering for the writing area, presumably of silk brocade. The greater part of the black lacquered text area is filled with a single yig mgo, together with the phrase opening the text,¹¹ executed in embossed ornamental gold lettering. As in the other volumes, we find the two vertical strips to the right and left sides, also with the same gold on black wave design.

The size of the pages are 65cm by 16.5cm. The text is beautifully written, entirely clear and well-preserved throughout. The paper appears to be in excellent condition, lacking holes, tears or fraying edges. It may be that it is not dissimilar in these respect to the mTshams brag text, but since we only have the microfiche of the modern reproduction for mTshams brag, we are unable to judge the condition of the original manuscript in this case. As in the mTshams brag copy, the standard sheets have seven faintly ruled lines of black ink writing. There are double red ruled vertical lines to the sides of the writing. Volume and folio numbering is given in words written sideways in black ink, to the left of the writing on each recto side. Double yig mgo are found in the upper left corner of the recto sides.

The regular paper sheets begin with the second folio. As is usual in such collections, the first few folios have larger writing and less lines on the page, and the lines are framed within double red lined rectangular boxes and margins. The standard layout, which is found in all volumes apart from the first, is that the recto side of the second folio has four lines of writing within both an outer and an additional inner double red ruled rectangular box. Its verso side has five lines and the third recto side has six lines, while the third verso side begins the usual layout for the ordinary text pages of seven lines with no framing box. The verso side of the first folio and the recto sides of the next two folios begin with triple rather than double yig mgo in the upper left-hand side. The consistency with which these page settings are conformed to across the volumes is another indication of the care taken in the production of the set. In the Rig 'dzin edition, there is similarly a pattern of increasing the number of lines per page over the first few folios, but there is some variation between volumes in exactly how many lines each page has.¹²

¹¹ It reads, "rgya gar skad du", "In the Indian language...".

¹² For instance, Volume Pha of the Rig 'dzin edition has four lines on folios 2r to 3r, five lines on 3v to 4v, and six lines on 5r to 6r (although 5r lacks the red framing box to the writing). On the other hand, we find in Volume Nya four lines on folios 2r to 3r, five lines on 3v to 5v, and six lines on 6r.

In line with the greater attention paid to the opening volume of the collection, and the fact that its first folio begins with a single line, Volume Ka has just three lines on the recto side of the second folio and the subsequent sides increase the line count up to the standard seven which begin on the fourth verso side. It has four lines on the second verso and the third recto sides (and these three pages all have an outer and inner framing box as we find for only the second recto side of the other volumes). There are five lines on the third verso side, six lines on the fourth recto side and the standard seven lines begin on its verso side. As one might expect, all the recto sides with the framing boxes and reduced number of lines have triple yig mgo in the upper left-hand side.

The final side of each volume also has its text within a red ruled rectangular box, but in this case, the writing is not generally larger and there may be up to seven lines used.

Stylistically, in the texts we have most closely studied to date, the nyis tsheg shad is used fairly consistently after the first syllable of the line, while the rin chen spungs shad is used after some single mantra syllables. Not only is the textual content close to the mTshams brag manuscript, but even the use and placement of punctuation marks is often parallel down to the smallest detail to that in mTshams brag. We invariably find the tsheg after nga, before a shad. Abbreviations occur rarely but are more frequent than in the mTshams brag copy for the two texts we have looked at.

Advantages of colour reproduction

Before the sGang steng-a presented here was photographed to produce this digital edition, only six other NGB collections were generally available to international scholars: the sDe dge xylograph, and the manuscript collections of mTshams brag, gTing skyes dgon pa byang, Rig 'dzin, Kathmandu, and Nubri.

However, the sDe dge xylograph is only available in traditional pressings from the original xylograph in red ink, which are frequently very difficult to read since the red ink can become very faint. Moreover, in parts it appears that the blocks may have worn or been damaged, since the same letters may be uncertain in more than one copy, thus exacerbating the problem of the faint ink. The mTshams brag and gTing skyes manuscripts have been reproduced in modern photo-offset litho editions, which are easy to read, but which can introduce distortions to the text. We understand that the first part of the photo-offset litho edition of the gTing skyes, for example, has been heavily emended to make its readings agree with those of sDe dge,¹³ yet these emendations were done silently, and the modern reader might have no idea that they only took place at the time of producing the modern reproduction. Both these photo-offset litho editions have since been further reproduced in microform, and yet again as various types of digital data, unfortunately incorporating whatever distortions might have arisen through the original photo-offset process.

¹³ Personal communications, Gene Smith and Matthieu Ricard.

The Rig 'dzin, Kathmandu, and Nubri editions are all available in microform editions based on direct photography of the original manuscripts, which avoids the distortion associated with photo-offset litho, but which are notoriously difficult for textual scholars to use, since the quality of reproduction, always in monochrome, can often be quite poor, sometimes resulting in a considerable level of data loss. For example, the numerous red ink corrections in Volume Sa of the Rig 'dzin edition are often either invisible in microfilm or visible yet indistinguishable from the black lettering. By contrast, the present edition is in the form of full-colour good quality digital images. It was the first ever *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* edition to use this medium, but surely not the last. There is no doubt at all that it is the most convenient and the clearest system for international scholars to use.

In fact, the growing capacity to make very high quality colour digital images at very little expense should revolutionise the way we produce and acquire Tibetan textual materials. With the plunging costs of digital cameras, flash memory, and DVD blanks, at the time of writing this it is now increasingly easy to set one's digital camera to take 12mb tif files and load a standard 2mb memory card with 170 images containing over 500 folio sides in quite astonishing detail. One can already do this with a surprisingly small equipment budget; and it is becoming cheaper every day. Nowadays, even comparatively impecunious monasteries and individuals can undertake digitising and distributing major textual collections quite independently - something unimaginable only a few years ago. When compared to monochrome microform, digital colour is not merely a revolution in quality, but also should initiate a revolution in accessibility, at every level.

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