

Preface

This volume is the result of many years dedicated to the study of the textual corpus of the so-called “school of gTsang smyon Heruka,” that is to say, the literary output of the Madman of gTsang (1452–1507) and his disciples. During this time, studies on gTsang smyon Heruka have appeared, so this figure is much better known to scholarship than it was at the beginning of my research. In particular, these enquiries focus on aspects of his life story, and on the most dramatic episodes that made him renowned as a “holy madman,” or reconstruct the sources and the editorial history of his literary masterpiece, the *Life and Songs of Mi la ras pa*. The object of the present work is the complex social and cultural world in which gTsang smyon lived, the community that he gathered, and the legacy that he left behind. It reconstructs the detailed micro-history of the community of supporters and followers of gTsang smyon Heruka, retracing its composition and geographical extent from its beginnings during the master’s lifetime. It follows it after the demise of the Madman for a few generations, to reconstruct how it organised itself, expanded its reach, and continued to spread the master’s teachings. Thereby, I wish to investigate how it resulted in a movement of religious “reform,” which, in a time of political instability and dramatic changes in the Tibetan religious landscape, appropriated figures of the past to champion specific values and teachings that gradually gained a prominent place in the auto-representation of the bKa’ brgyud school.

In the last fifty years, a history of ideas marked by genius minds and strategic decisions, which focuses on the reconstruction of the psychological and intellectual lives of prominent individuals, has been gradually nuanced by a growing attention to shared representations, epistemological categories, and common beliefs of social groups.

[Historians of mentalities] now pose the problem in terms of articulations between intellectual choices and social position on the scale of well-defined segments of society or even on the scale of the individual. It is on this reduced scale, and probably only on this scale, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on one side, and social affiliations on another. (Chartier 1982: 32)

Focusing on gTsang smyon Heruka and on the community of his followers, I have investigated how it appropriated for itself specific systems of beliefs and represen-

tations, to make them the hallmark of their group identity. Transcending the distinction between cultural production and cultural consumption, and rather seeing the latter as “another production,” one can avoid the dichotomy between creativity and passivity that is traditionally attached to these concepts. Indeed, the fruition of cultural products is a form of production of new representations, making possible “reappropriation, misappropriation, defiance, or resistance” (*ibid.* 37). In this work, I will show how specific communicative modes (e.g. hagiographical narratives), a set of religious instructions (the Aural Transmission of Samvara), and a system of sacred geography were received, combined, enlarged, and re-framed to construct a specific cultural complex that defined the identity of the school of gTsang smyon. The access to and the selection of the segments of this symbolic discourse were determined by the social location of the master, his biographical trajectory, and his network of relationships. In particular, I argue that, coming from a peripheral position (both in terms of social status and geographical location), gTsang smyon Heruka adopted a religious set of values and a model of behaviour that enabled him to advance his position, navigate the conflictual political situation, and gain an influential voice in the contemporary intellectual debate. The holy madness he displayed conferred him enhanced charisma and authority in the relationship with secular powers, and granted him access to the financial resources needed for his major enterprises. After his demise, his disciples, in a fruitful synergy with the patrons and high hierarchs that had supported the Madman, fostered the work, by cultivating the memory of their teacher and aggrandising his figure, by spreading his oeuvre, and by expanding its reach through their own literary endeavours and initiatives. In particular, they constructed a sense of collective identity centred around the figure of their deceased master, which was modelled after Mi la ras pa, in a multiplication of references and parallels that are ubiquitous: all the world of the Madman is weaved as a tapestry that mirrors, expands, and appropriates the forefather’s world. The religious group coalesced around shared memories, shared narratives, and shared teachings. It succeeded in consolidating and expanding an institutional network of small monasteries and retreat places that would continue to be linked for centuries, passing on the legacy of the school. Authenticating referents from the past are evoked in order to lend their voice to the school’s members, to their contemporary concerns, values, and experiences. These, in turn, channel energies and resources in ever new, unforeseen courses, that run in rapidly changing religious and political landscapes.

This work is made of six chapters, four appendixes, and a Handlist of books printed by the school of gTsang smyon Heruka.

In the first chapter the main character of the narrative is introduced, and placed within his time and his contemporaries. At first, the turbulent political developments and the main military clashes of the 15th century are sketched, in order to understand their influence on the transformation of the religious landscape at the time. Then I highlight the main themes recurring in the school’s literary produc-

tion, and that will be traced over time in the present book, namely saintly madness, hagiographical writing, sacred landscape, and the Aural Transmission of Samvara.

In the following chapters the work moves more deeply into the subject matter. The second chapter focuses on the life story of gTsang smyon Heruka, presenting the available sources of the narrative. I do not dwell on the details of his life story, but a chronological reconstruction of the master's activities is presented in Appendix A for reference. Here, I focus on the issues that are central to the school's self-understanding, and to the narrative construction of its identity. Thus, I analyse the architecture and the principal themes of the life story as told by the Madman's disciples: namely the master's relationship with the figure of Mi la ras pa, his role in the lineage of the Aural Transmission, and the import of his major achievements. Moreover, I sketch the growth of the community of the Madman's followers during his life, identifying the major turning points in his career.

The following two chapters are devoted to mapping the school: its people, places, and works. Chapter three looks closely at a text composed by one of gTsang smyon Heruka's foremost disciples, a versified prayer called *Treasure Trove Granting Blessings*: this is a privileged starting point to explore the political and religious environment from which the master's patrons and disciples stemmed, and in which they evolved. I also analyse two other coeval documents—namely the register of donations for the renovation of the Svayambhūcaitya and a letter of safe passage—and survey the geographical range of the school, in order to understand how it was able to gain support and establish itself beyond the original kernel of places traditionally linked to Mi la ras pa. This was achieved by either multiplying such places, inserting new toponyms into the narrative fabric of the shared memory of the school, or by claiming new places by virtue of the Madman's own visionary experiences and personal relationships.

Chapter four focuses on the centre of gTsang smyon's activities, that is the south-western Tibetan regions of La stod lHo and Mang yul Gung thang, which are the areas that were historically associated to Mi la ras pa's life and deeds. This is also where many of the Madman's pupils stemmed from. This chapter looks in particular at the individuals who were most active in these regions during the 16th century, furthering their master's work after his death: the master's consort Kun tu bzang mo (1464–1549), and the disciples Lo paṇjān Jam dpal chos lha (1478–1550s?) and lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473–1557). These individuals considerably enlarged the school's literary corpus, and also initiated many printing projects. Among the latter are several new editions of the *Life and Songs of Mi la ras pa*, as well as life stories and instructions of other early bKa' brgyud masters. In the mid 16th century, the master Sangs rgyas dar po composed a local religious history called *A Heap of Jewels*, whose final section is devoted to the Aural Transmission lineage up to gTsang smyon Heruka and his closest disciples. This part, relevant to this study, is edited and translated in Appendix B.

Chapter five concentrates on one of the Madman's foremost disciples, namely rGod tshang ras pa sNa tshogs ming can (1482–1559). He is known as the compiler of gTsang smyon Heruka's most extensive and detailed life story, the *Heart of the Sun*, but his own biography has remained sketchy. His main seat was the hermitage of Ras chung phug in the Yar lungs valley, where he also printed many texts of the school. His textual production is analysed in detail, showing continuities and discontinuities with his master's work, and pointing out its pivotal role in the self-representation of the school. In particular, rGod tshang ras chen's best-known work is the life story of Ras chung pa titled *Radiance of Wisdom*: its first printed edition, issued in Ras chung phug in 1531 by the master himself, is closed by a lengthy colophon. This versified composition, that allows us a glimpse in the worldview of rGod tshang ras chen, is edited and translated in Appendix C.

Finally, chapter six sketches the later development of the school during the following two centuries, with a special attention to its propagation into the southern Himalayan valleys of present-day Nepal. It traces the history of the main centres of the school, namely Ras chung phug in the Yar lungs valley and Brag dkar rta so in Mang yul Gung thang, highlighting their ongoing contacts, until the 18th century. Appendix D provides the edition and translation of a section of the *Succession of Abbots of Brag dkar rta so*, in which Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837) narrates the history of the hermitage. One can observe the progressive influence of the Karma bKa' brgyud hierarchs in the governance of the two monasteries, a growing involvement with rNying ma teachers and treasure cycles, and the enduring preservation of their history and distinctive transmission lineages. Moreover, these two institutions became the hubs for the diffusion of the Madman's legacy and of the Aural Transmission to Yol mo, Dol po, and other neighbouring Himalayan areas.

This work is mainly based on the analysis of the copious literary production of the school of gTsang smyon, integrated by other textual sources and art-historical evidence when available. Indeed, this vast corpus comprises hagiographies of teachers of the past, that exemplify the core values and referents of the religious movement, life stories of gTsang smyon Heruka and of some of his most important disciples, that allow to trace the spread of the school, as well as doctrinal works, including Aural Transmission instructions, that illuminate the wider religious background of the community. The discourse constructed by the combination of these works reveals in its complexity the religious rhetoric of the movement, which sustained the school's proselytism. Moreover, starting from the Madman himself, the school made ample use of xylographic book production, a relatively new technology in Tibet, which promised an increased reproduction and circulation of the volumes. In particular, I was able to trace and describe eighty-two printed editions initiated at first by the teacher and later by his students. They are described in the Handlist, which thus constitutes an integral part of this work. The contents and the context of production of these books are discussed in the study, while in

the Handlist the reader can find bibliographical details of the editions, references to the available copies, and the transcription of the full colophons of the books, which must be regarded as precious historical sources to reconstruct the network of patrons and teachers of the school. Each edition is identified by a siglum which is employed in the study for easy reference. The titles of the printed works are included in the final index of proper names, toponyms, and text titles, associated with the corresponding Handlist siglum for location.

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