Modelling Good Fortune: The Tibetan Wind-Horse in Durable Media

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1. Introduction

I am very pleased to be able to contribute to the festschrift commemorating the 70th birthday of Guntram Hazod, one of the most prolific and innovative Tibetologists of our time. This offering, while modest in scope, examines two evocative Tibetan objects that I trust will be of some interest to Dr. Hazod and others.

The wind-horse (*rlung rta*) is one of Tibet's most famous mythological creatures.[1] It is depicted conventionally as a galloping horse, caparisoned and bearing a cluster of flaming jewels (*nor bu me 'bar*). The wind-horse is most commonly seen as the centerpiece of so-called prayer flags (*rlung dar*), pieces of cloth (or paper) printed with sacred inscriptions and other holy animals and objects, which are raised all over the Tibetan world and increasingly internationally too.[2] Prayer flags are attached to lines and poles erected on sacred hilltops, mountain passes, pilgrimage sites, rooftops, tents, built shrines (e.g. *lha tho*, *gsas khang*), cairns, and trees, etc., as part of rituals to ensure good fortune through the agency of the *rlung rta*,[3] a celestial force synonymous with the horse itself. Stein (1972: 223, 224) defines this energy as the

1 According to Namkhai Norbu (1995: 68–72), the original term was *klung* (all-pervading) as in the fundamental quality of space. This sense of the word is preserved in a Buddhist ritual text studied by Namkhai Norbu (*loc. cit.*), which provides a brief origin myth for the *klung rta* and its divine origins. *Klung* can also be glossed 'river' (Karmay 1998: 413; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 69).

2 The four corners of the prayer flag typically contain the names or images of fierce creatures, *dgra lha* (warrior spirits) of the four cardinal directions: *khyung* (horned eagle), tiger, dragon, and lion. This group of zoomorphic protectors is also called *rlung rta'i lha bzhi* and symbolizes crucial aspects of human beings in the Tibetan astrological tradition as well as the four elements. For further information, see Karmay 1998: 254, 255, 414, 418, 419; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 69; Tucci 1966: 192, 193; Stein 1972: 222, 223.

3 Tucci (1966: 192) reports that for the bellicose inhabitants of the Byang thang, colored pieces of cloth (*dar rgod*) were erected to ward off attacks. In addition to acquiring positive mundane conditions and religious merit, a major aim of Tibetan ritual activities is apotropaic in orientation.

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equivalent of the Indian *prāṇa* and Chinese *ch'i*, the air around us as well as a 'subtle fluid' coursing through the body. *Rlung rta* is closely associated with the *bla* (soul), *srog* (life-force) and *phywa* (basis of good fortune) of individuals, helping to protect and maintain these and other vital elements of human life and well-being.[4] The evocation of the *rlung rta* is often done through fumigation rituals *(lha bsang*), which call upon personal spirits such as the *pho lha* (god of the patriline) and *mo lha* (goddess of the matriline), territorial spirits (e.g. *yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*), and other elemental divinities (e.g., *btsan*, *gnyan*, *klu*).[5] Particularly among Tibetans-in-exile, fumigation rituals held when prayer flags are being hoisted invoke the higher, 'otherworldly' deities of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon, minimizing the role of the indigenous pantheon as pathways of *rlung rta* evocation. This modification of tradition is mirrored in prayer flags that are printed with the likeness of gods and goddesses instead of the wind-horse. Two major occasions when prayer flags are widely raised are Tibetan New Year (*lo gsar*) and World Universal Purification (*'dzam gling spyi bsang*). Traditionally, as they are believed to help bring about successful outcomes,[6] prayer flags were upraised before setting out to trade, embark on political missions, make war, or as a prelude to other important ventures.



Fig. 1 — A typical modern Tibetan prayer flag with the wind-horse in the center and various Buddhist mantras and prayers surrounding it. The sun, moon and constellations are also represented[7] *(photo: J. V. Bellezza, 2025).*

4 See also Namkhai Norbu 1995: 249 (n. 27).

5 For specific case studies, see Bellezza 1997: 141; Namkhai Norbu 1997: 27; Karmay 1998: 388, 389, 428–431, 460, 461. As Karmay (*ibid*.: 417) observes, the principal deity called upon during entreaties to preserve and augment *rlung rta* is the mountain god.

6 When the *rlung rta* of humans is ample, it ushers in fame and success (Tucci 1966: 192).

7 On the fundamental motifs of the prayer flag and manner in which they are hung, see Tucci 1966: fig. IX.



Fig. 2 — The four zoomorphic warrior spirits that often grace the corners of the prayer flag. Post card, artist unrecorded (photo: J. V. Belleza, 2025).



Fig. 3 — A wind-horse and other motifs carved in stone, Bkra ri gnam mtsho, Byang thang (J. V. Bellezza, 1998).

2. A wind-horse carved in stone

In 1998, the present author encountered a bas-relief carving of a *rlung rta* at a sacred site along the shores of Bkra ri gnam mtsho, a large salt lake on the Byang thang, in the old district of Phyogs bcu (now Mtsho chen county). This technique of carving is commonly employed in the production of so-called *ma ṇi* stones, a ubiquitous feature of the sacred geography of Tibet. Typically, Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon mantras are inscribed on flagstones or cobblestones and installed on walls (*man thang*) as meritorious additions to the landscape and as foci of religious undertakings. Prayers and figurative motifs such as deities and sacred symbols not infrequently grace *ma ṇi* stones; however, of the great number the author has personally inspected over the course of four decades, this is the only specimen to feature the *rlung rta* documented. The age of the quite heavily eroded plaque is unclear save to say that it is of premodern manufacture and may be several centuries old. Like on prayer flags, the wind-horse occupies a central position on the plaque. Near the four corners the names of the *dgra lha* of the cardinal directions were inscribed (from top left and going in a clockwise direction: *khyung*, *'brug*, *seng*, *stag*). Clouds, sunburst and what may signify a crescent moon are visible near the upper margin of the stone. This is where similarities with conventional prayer flags end. The remaining motifs constitute a landscape of sorts. It is clear that the wavey lines running across the bottom of the plaque symbolize water, a design known as *chu ris*. These transition into a series of spiked lines (water or subsidiary landforms) surmounted by a row of three mountains that stands just below the wind-horse. The body of the wind-horse is ornamented with crescentic lines and three circles, and resting on its back is the curvature of what appears to be a box, basket or saddle upon which rest three elongated jewels. To the left of the wind-horse there is a tree or other vegetation with a thick trunk or stem, its base or root extending below the entire length of the three mountains. To the right of the wind-horse is a flower whose long stalk is linked to the root-like motif described above.

Like *ma ṇi* stones more generally, the plaque with the window horse appears to have been made as a virtuous act, one that would exert a salubrious effect on the surrounding environment. This basic theme is quite literally expressed by the inclusion of a landscape centered around the wind-horse. Although the actual intentions of the carver of the wind-horse plaque and the mythological and religious ideas he drew upon cannot be known with any assurance, the scene architecture recalls both a bipartite and tripartite universe, cosmological beliefs that have long permeated Tibetan cultures. The manner in which the scene is structured replicates the three spheres of a popular Tibetan

cosmology called *srid gsum/srid pa gsum*,[8] which is comprised of the heavens or sky (*gnam*), aboveground or intermediate space (*bar*), and water or underworld (*'og*).[9] Each of the three spheres has its own characteristic elemental deity and color, the *lha* (white), *gnyan* (yellow/red) and *klu* (blue) respectively, which in aggregate are referred to as *srid pa'i lha* (divinities of existence). Versions of a vertically aligned, three-tiered cosmos are found throughout North Inner Asia,[10] suggesting that this basic scheme is of substantial antiquity. The widespread occurrence of the *srid pa gsum* in Tibetan folk traditions also indicates a deep-seated cultural phenomenon. The ancientness of concepts revolving around a three-tiered cosmos is captured in an origin myth (*cho rabs*) about lustral substances called *tshan* in the Yungdrung Bon Ge khod cycle of texts. As part of a prototypic ritual for purifying sullied deities, a divine youth named Khong ra khong chung sprinkles the *tshan* up in the sky, into intermediate zone, and on the earth, as well as in the four directions.[11] In a ritual text of propitiation through aromatic substances, the officiants must purify themselves and call upon the celebrated cosmogonic god Ye smon rgyal po, who is referred to as the forefather of all creatures and of the three worlds in which they reside (Tucci 1980: 201, 202). One of the oldest textual references to the three spheres of existence occurs in a funerary ritual text entitled, *Sha ru shul ston rabs*, which is best dated to ca. 850–1000 CE.[12]

One of the most remarkable features of the *rlung rta* plaque is the manner in which the two vegetative components spring up from between the row of three mountains and the water or subsidiary landforms below them. This recalls the heaven (*gnam*) and earth (*sa*) as binary agents of creation in Tibet cosmogonies. In folklore, paired mountains and lakes such as Gnam mtsho/Gnyan chen thang lha and Dang ra g.yu mtsho/Rta sgo serve as local manifestations of the male/celestial and female/chthonic principles that combine to engender existence.[13] Of course, father sky and mother earth figures occupy the my-

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8 This cosmological tradition should not be confused with an ontological system of variable states of being or with the Indian-inspired notion of the form, formless and desire realms, which are also called *srid pa gsum* in Tibetan Buddhism.

9 On this scheme, see Bellezza 1997: 34–36; 2014: 55; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 248 (n. 13). The metallic mirrors (*me long*) that spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet (Byang thang and Stod) customarily used to harbor divinities of the trance ceremony serve as models of the *srid pa gsum*. For operational examples, see Bellezza 2005: 72, 79, 125. See also Bellezza 2008: 553 (n. 716).

10 For cross-cultural examples, see Bellezza 1997: 70 (n. 27); 2005: 24, 33.

11 For this text, see Bellezza 2005: 450–452; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 115, 116.

12 See reference to the demonic agents of death called *dri* of the sky, earth and intermediate zone (Bellezza 2013: 185).

13 On related lore, see Bellezza 1997: 32, 97, 341; 2005: 16, 325–327, 415, 429; 2008: 317, 452; 2013: 44, 45; 2023: 28. An abbreviated origin myth for the creation of the sky and earth where the nexus of ritual practice was established is contained in a text

thology of indigenous peoples the world over. In Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon, this primitive father and mother was assimilated to the concept of *yab yum*, a paternal deity and his female consort.[14] In Tibetan records of a dualistic cosmos comprised of a male heaven and female earth they are distinguished by primary classes of deities called *lha* and *srin* [*mo*], which function as procreative spirits.[15] In their most fundamental and oldest cosmological declension, the *lha srin* are bipartite elemental forces of an ambivalent nature that were propitiated in religious traditions known as *lha bon* and *srin bon* (Bellezza 1997: 37). The ancient status of the *lha* and *srin* is acknowledged in Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon historical texts, where they act as demigod rulers of two prehistoric Tibetan states (Bellezza 2005: 428; 2020: 177). In lists of early Tibetan principalities (*rgyal phran*), the *yul lha* represents the celestial power of the country while the *yul srin* is its chthonic power (Haarh 1969: 240, 322), reflecting the elemental and dichotomous nature of the *lha* and *srin*. The oldest textual allusions to the cosmological and ancestral underpinnings of the *lha* and *srin* are part of proclamations of ritual origins (*smrang*) in Dunhuang funerary manuscripts. In these charter myths, archetypal funerary priests declare that they are the sons of the *lha* and [maternal] cousins to the *srin*, their uranic patriline and telluric matriline bringing them into correspondence with the sky and earth.[16] Whether the sky/earth and *lha*/*srin* traditions described above had any part in influencing the composition of the wind-horse plaque under discussion is debatable. However, the fact remains that the root of the vegetation portrayed on it straddles the middle of the stone and is sandwiched between water and the mountains with the heavens above.[17]

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of the Mu cho'i khrom 'dur cycle (Bellezza 2008: 438). In another text of the same collection, the cosmogonic god Ye yod dbang chen is depicted holding the circles (*'khor lo*) of sky and earth, signifying his sovereignty over all of existence. See Bellezza 2008: 438, 443, 446. The grasping of the two cosmological circles by a deity seems to be illustrated in an illuminated funerary ritual text dated to the 11th century CE (Bellezza 2013: 108, 109). A somewhat older reference to the sky and earth as the dual elements of creation is seen in *Sha ru shul ston rabs*, which in substantive ways reflects the content of the abbreviated origin myth referred to above. See *ibid*.: 108, 109, 197. For an origin myth about the sky and ocean as the primary generative forces in *Sha ru shul ston rabs*, see *ibid*.: 210.

14 Tucci (1980: 219) observes that Buddhist soteriological concepts of skillful means (*thabs*) and wisdom (*ye shes*) were overlaid on the father mountain and mother lake respectively.

15 Another binary set of spirits with cosmological elements is the *lha klu*, one of the earliest references of which is located in the Dunhuang manuscript ITJ 751: 'the *lha* [and] *klu* of the sky and earth' (*gnam sa'i lha klu*).

16 See Bellezza 2008: 384; 2013: 225, 231; 2020: 70.

17 In a ransom ritual (*glud*) in Dunhuang manuscript ITJ 734 (imperial period), nine mountains are connected to the *lha* (*lha dgu*), while their counterparts, the nine *srin* (*srin dgu*), are linked to terrestrial phenomena, *viz*. specific territories in most cases,



Fig. 4 — A pair of wind-horses ornamenting a copper-alloy object of the thog lcags *class (6 cm* x *2.5 cm). Private collection.*

3. A pair of wind-horses molded in metal

A pair of wind-horses with peculiar iconographic traits is adorned in high relief on an object made of a yellowish bronze (*li ser*).[18] This article is unusually heavy and has not corroded, suggesting that it may contain significant quantities of precious metals. The function of this small, solid object is unclear. There are no points for attachment on any of the faces, indicating that it did not serve as a pectoral, insignia or pendant, unless set inside a frame of some kind. The back of the object is flat and unembellished. Perhaps it was intended originally as a charm or good fortune attracting instrument (*g.yang*) and was carried on the person, stored inside a sack or chest, or deposited in a tomb as a ritual factor. Another possibility is that this ornamented lump of metal acted as a store of wealth in the form of bullion, the sacred and mundane interwoven, as they very often are in Tibetan material culture. The age of the object has not been ascertained. The observed quality of the bronze, advanced wear and deep, lustrous patina, along with the subject matter and style, intimate that it is at least several centuries old.

but also to the *'brog* (pastureland/wasteland) and *thang* (plain). For more information about the ritual and text, see Karmay 1998: 35–46; Bellezza 2020: 71–75. In the ritual one pair of *lha srin* are Yar lha sham po and Yar srin, which constituted complementary components of the local landscape and influenced subsequent Buddhist sacred geographic developments. See Tsering Gyalpo *et al*. 2000: 12, 213.

[18] This object is featured on the front cover of Bellezza 2013. Antique figurines of wind-horses cast in copper alloys and silver are known but none of those observed by the author exhibit special iconographic features.

The chief subject matter is two confronted wind-horses depicted pacing above a trio of mountains, each of which is comprised of three layers. The wind-horses suspended above peaks is reminiscent of the stone plaque examined above. The horse heads seem to be topped by both an ear and a larger roundish motif of unknown identity (the remnants of a pair of horns?). On the back of each wind-horse is a crescent-shaped motif (moon?) and above it what may be jewels or jewels surmounting a circular form (sun?). Heavy surface wear precludes a more accurate assessment of the horses' burden. That the object once had many more artistic details is seen in the finely scored manes of the horses, which due to their depressed placement were less susceptible to effacement. On either side of the horses' precious cargo are curving motifs with pointed ends (banners or clouds?). Above the forelegs of the two horses there is a sphere or ball of unrecognized significance. It seems plausible that this circular motif possessed cosmological and/or good fortune connotations but this cannot be confirmed.[19] Around the sides of the object are lobed motifs but they are too worn to know whether they reproduce water, foliage or clouds, or a combination thereof. In the top-center of the object, between the horse's heads, is a tripartite motif of enigmatic associations. One possibility is that it represents triple jewels.

4. Conclusion

That there are outstanding questions concerning the lineaments and import of the two fabricated renditions of wind-horses highlighted in this article are not surprising, in that older iconographic forms of many sacred forms in Tibet (e.g. deities, instruments, symbols) differ considerably from more recent and familiar variants. A good example are auspicious symbols in the rock art of Upper Tibet; they are often designed and presented in ways that deviate from those produced in more recent centuries (Bellezza 2023). As in cultures worldwide, artistic canons in Tibet evolved over time in tandem with the development of their ideological and symbolic underpinnings. The wind-horses of this study are a good case in point: they are structured in such a way and accompanied by a range of ancillary subjects that raise questions regarding their purpose and meaning.

[19] Although it is unlikely that there is a direct causal link, dragons in Chinese art sometimes grasp circles in their claws or these are positioned beside them. These so-called dragon balls may represent the moon or Mars and are associated with good luck and sanctity.

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