A Myth on the Separation of the Dead from the Living in the Newly Found Ancient Manuscript from the Twin Stūpas (Gansu Province, PRC)

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Until a few years ago, Tibetologists were merely aware of the existence of imperial tombs in the Chongye Valley (ʻPhyong rgyas). However, Guntram Hazod, with his characteristic perseverance and courage in the face of a confusing array of evidence, has recently radically altered our understanding of the extent of this tradition. His identification of more than 500 burial mounds in central Tibet has fundamentally changed our perception of its scope (see Hazod and Kriz 2020). In this paper, I would like to pay tribute to his work by bringing to light an ancient Tibetan text containing an exemplary account of an ancient funeral ritual. This text was surprisingly found recently in a Chinese Buddhist stūpa and is included in a collection of Tibetan texts with which it seems to have no direct connection. These circumstances alone make it worthy of attention. Although the manuscript in question provides new information, it is also clearly woven into the tradition known from the Dunhuang funeral texts. Their common leitmotif, which this manuscript emphasizes, could be summarized in the following recurrent phrase: "The land of the living and the dead is not the same! (*gson gshin yul myi gcig go*)."

1. Newly discovered ancient manuscript of the Nyen Collection

In 2024, the unexpected discovery of an ancient Tibetan manuscript containing a series of some 10 myths was made known in the form of a Tibetan-language book published in China and entitled *Edition and Research on Newly Found Ancient Tibetan Text from the Old Ruins of the Twin-Stūpas* (*Mchod rten mtshe ma'i gna' shul nas gsar du rnyed pa'i bod yig gna' dpe dag sgrig dang de'i dpyad pa*). It is authored by two Tibetan scholars, Yungog Pema Wangyel (G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal) and Chukyā Wangchog Bum (Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum), together

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with their colleague Luo Zhicai (罗志才), director of the local museum where the manuscript was stored.[1] The book contains a facsimile and research on the old manuscript found in the Chinese Twin Stūpas located in Huachi county, Gansu province of China. It is a region far away from places inhabited by Tibetans at present.

The authors did not know about the existence of the large collection of myths called the Nyen Collection (Gnyan 'bum), which is included in the Bon Kangyur.[2] Thus they were not aware that the manuscript retrieved from the Buddhist stūpa is an early version of this text. The content of the manuscript is indeed clearly very closely related to the known versions of the Nyen Collection and thus represents the earliest known manuscript copy of it.[3]

The Nyen Collection of the Tibetan Bon Kangyur is the most extensive version of its kind.[4] This work consists exclusively of myths, most of which concern the *gnyan* spirits. Its style and vocabulary are striking, and several myths preserve an evidently archaic form of language. Despite its inclusion in the Bon Kangyur, the content is entirely devoid of the salvation-oriented doctrine and terminology of monastic Bon. Instead, it primarily presents ancient exemplary accounts serving as models (*dpe*) for ritual performance. The figure of Shenrab Miwo (Gshen rab mi bo) appears frequently, yet—as in certain Dunhuang documents and the Gathang Bumpa manuscripts—he functions as one ritual specialist among others, without the characteristics of the founder of monastic Bon. Notably, he is never referred to as *tönpa* (*ston pa*), the epithet of a Buddha. The text contains expressions which are presented both in a certain Nampa Dong (Nam pa ldong) language[5] and then in Tibetan (Spu rgyal bod). Given the fact that frequently the main character is named as "A son of Dong" (Ldong bu/Ldong sras) or "Son of Nam" (Nam bu/Nam bu Ldong chen), it becomes clear that the core of the text relates primarily to the

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1 See G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum and Luo Zhicai 2024.

2 Scholarly attention was first brought to this collection in a brief article by Samten G. Karmay (Karmay 2010), followed by several further studies (Berounský 2017, 2022, 2023).

3 It has been recognized by Jigje Tshering, a doctoral candidate at Lanzhou University, who recently published an interesting article in Tibetan on the Twin Stūpas manuscript (see 'Jigs byed tshe ring 2025).

4 *Gnyan 'bum*, full title *Rnam par dag pa'i 'bum bzhi las rin po che gnyan gyi 'bum* (Bon Kangyur, 1999 edition, text no. 6281, 325 pp.). For basic information see Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur (Martin, Kværne, Nagano 2003).

5 The language of Nam Dong is present also in two Dunhuang manuscripts (IOL Tib J 731 and 732). These were researched by F. Thomas resulting even in the publication of a vocabulary of the Nam language (Thomas 1948). But in the light of present knowledge the results of his research are doubtful.

Dong clan, particularly the Nam subclan. One longer myth also contains bilingual names given in Tangut (Mi nyag, also belonging to the larger Dong clan) and Tibetan in a similar manner.

Another version of the Nyen Collection was found among manuscripts collected in private households in the Minshan mountains, on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.[6] This shorter version contains similar myths, though differently worded, and again includes bilingual Nampa Dong (Nam pa ldong) and Tibetan (Spu rgyal bod) expressions. Yet another version is reportedly preserved in the Lanzhou Museum, although it is not possible to access it.[7]

It has become apparent that the stories largely represent lore associated with the Dong clan of Tibetans, which overlap with tribes rendered in Chinese chronicles as Qiang (羌). Although the Dong clan spread across the Tibetan Plateau, a process which started already during the time of the Tibetan Empire, there is enough evidence to consider the clan's original homeland to be the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau, the areas traditionally designated as Amdo and neighbouring parts of Kham to the south.

It is perhaps significant that the Bon chronicles narrate the collection's discovery as a "treasure" (*gter ma*) from western Tibet in the time predating the beginning of the 11th century, which accords well with the migration of members of the Dong clan.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the cult of *gnyan* spirits was strongly connected with the Dong clans originating in the northeastern Tibetan Plateau. Still puzzling are the circumstances under which these manuscripts were produced.

Coming back to the ancient manuscript found in the Twin Stūpas, it contains mostly myths concerning the *gnyan* spirits. The bilingual expressions in the Nam Dong language and Tibetan are likewise present in it.[8] Notably, it includes a long myth about the original conflict between the ancestors of the Dong clan and the *gnyan*, involving pay-

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6 *'Phan yul rgyas pa gnyan gyi 'bum*. Photographed in a household of 'Phan chu region of The bo County, 86 pp. Published in: Thar, Tsering, and Ngawang Gyatso, eds. *Gna' rabs bon gyi dpe dkon bris ma*. Vol. 3, Xining, Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2016.

7 Ngawang Gyatso, personal communication in summer 2018. A version entitled *Nye lam sde bzhi'i gnyan 'bum* with much stronger influence of the monastic Bon religion was revealed by Khyung rgod rtsal as a "treasure" in the 12th century.

8 These are present at the beginning of the third story and concern the names of the son and daughter of Dong. It states: "In the language of Nampa Dong it is in the Nam language Tiger and Yak. In the language of Pugyal Tibet they are called brother Son of Dong and sister Daughter of Dong (*nam pa ldong gi skad du na/ nam pa stag g.yag go/ spu rgyal bod gi skad du na/ dral ldong bu dang/ lcam ldong lcam gis byas bya/*)." It is obvious that this is not just a translation, but it seems to explain that in Tibetan their names were rendered differently for better understanding. See G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum and Luo Zhicai 2024, p. 120.

ment for killing a *gnyan* (*gnyan stong*). Many versions of this myth are known (besides the other two known editions of the Nyen Collections) from the Gathang Bumpa Stūpa, numerous Naxi sources, and elsewhere (see Berounský 2023). Some other myths closely parallel portions of the Nyen Collection, even sharing identical phrases (especially myths 9 and 10). The manuscript is fragmentary and contains approximately ten myths, not all of which are complete. One of the myths (no. 9, see below) seems to concern exclusively *klu* spirits; it also lists the regions of central Tibet and Kongpo (Rkong po). Another myth (no. 5) is devoid of any mention of either *klu* or *gnyan,* and is likely of different provenance. It deals with the separation of the living and the dead, and will be the primary focus of this paper.

The original codex contained folia stitched at the upper edge, but several of the leaves of paper were loosened due to damage and fell out. According to the order in the published book, the text starts with a fragmentary myth and ends without any colophon. The last page of the published facsimile appears abrupt. It is, in fact, one of the dislocated folia and belongs to the myth translated here. The true end of the collection is probably the penultimate folio in the published book. Altogether, 108 pages have survived, though some edges are damaged and certain lines are illegible or missing. The contents of the manuscript can be briefly outlined as follows:

1. Beginning of a myth on the origin of certain *gnyan* from a *gnyan* father and *klu* mother; incomplete and without title (pp. 1–2)
2. Story of Rongrong Rongkyije (Rong rong rongs kyi rje) and his conflict with the *gnyan*; without title (3–7)
3. Myth on the payment for killing a *gnyan* (*Gnyan gyi stong dri*), another version of the longer myth on the conflict between Dong ancestors and the *gnyan* (7–35)
4. On the origin of the payment for killing a *gnyan* (*Gnyan gyi stong chags la*); story of Tsugmyi Renpa (Gtsug myi ren pa), (35–59)
5. "Separation of temporal dwellings aside" (*Brang nga sna dbyes la*)—translated below (59–66, 108)
6. Another story on the separation of temporal dwellings (*Yang brang nga dbye rgya byung ngo*), in fact an abbreviated version of myth no. 3 (66–72)
7. Another myth on the payment for killing a *gnyan* (*Yang gnyan gyi stong dri la*), incomplete (72–74)
8. "A series of dividing myths" (*Bgo ba'i rabs*), concerning mostly *klu* spirits; the left edges of many pages are damaged, which makes understanding its content difficult (75–95). In

these brief stories regions of central Tibet and Kongpo are mentioned

9. Myth on the conflict between humans and the *gnyan*; without title (95–101)
10. "A chapter on *gnyan* spirits" (*Gnyan gyi le'u gcig la*), concerning Myi Nambu Dunchen (Myi nam bu dun chen, original son of the Nam subclan of Ldong) and the *gnyan*; one myth ends on page 107, and page 108 belongs to myth no. 5 (101–107).

2. Discovery of the manuscript

According to the account given in the book,[9] the Twin Stūpas manuscript was found under unusual circumstances. Around the year 2000, thieves robbed the neglected ruins of the so-called Twin Stūpas (Shuangta) in Huachi County, Gansu Province, at the confluence of the Shuantagou and Baozichuan rivers near Zhangcha Village.[10] These ruins were part of a Buddhist monastery originally built probably during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), and extensively expanded in the years 1156–1170. The Twin Stūpas also date to this later period. The site lay approximately where the borders of the Tangut kingdom were in the 11th–13th century. It was likewise a region annexed by the Tibetan Empire during the 8th century and formed part of its border zone.

The two stone-carved stūpas, containing numerous statues, survived the destruction of the monastery buildings caused by landslides after the Ming dynasty. The taller stūpa, with thirteen tiers, stood around 13 meters high; the slightly shorter one, with twelve tiers, almost 12 meters. The taller stūpa was almost destroyed by the thieves in 2000, though some items were later recovered from Taiwan, where they had been smuggled. The robbery drew attention to the site, and archaeological excavations began there in 2000. Manuscripts in Tangut and Tibetan were recovered from six tiers of the shorter stūpa, along with more than 140 other items (coins, textiles, rosaries, etc.), including the old Tibetan manuscript of the Nyen Collection. It is not known exactly what other manuscripts were deposited there, though the Huachi County Museum's website suggests that most were Buddhist texts.[11]

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[9] See G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum and Luo Zhicai 2024, pp. 3–10.

[10] Baozichuan, Zhangcha Village, Linzhen Township, Huachi County, Qingyang city, Gansu province (甘肃省庆阳市华池县林镇乡张岔村豹子川).

[11] See http://www.hcxmuseum.com/bbx/shenyun.html?id=22819&newsid=1183425 (accessed on November 13, 2025).

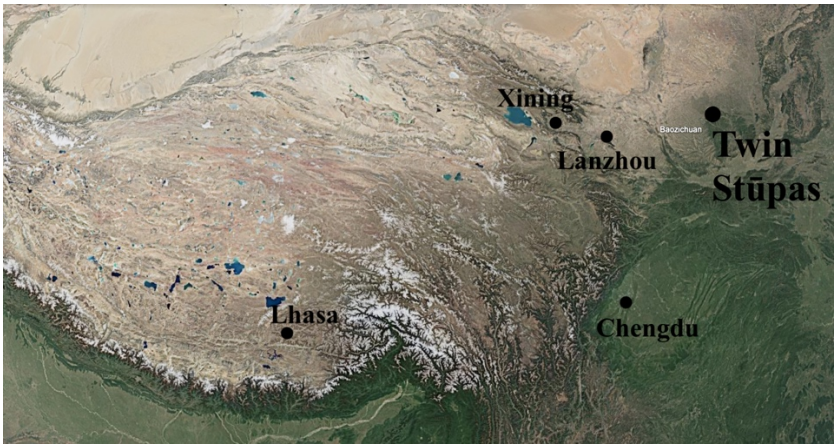


Fig. 1 – Location of the Twin Stūpas (by Daniel Berounský, based on Google Maps).

In 2001, a replica monastery was built in the Shuangta Forest Park, and the restored stūpas were moved there. As no museum staff could read Tibetan, the old Tibetan manuscript remained untouched for many years. Only in 2020 did Yungog Pema Wangyal and Chukyā Wangchog Bum notice it and begin their research. Restoration of the manuscript began in 2021, and the facsimile edition and study were published in 2024. Originally stitched along the top as a codex, the manuscript's folia were separated during restoration and glued on paper. It now consists of 108 folios.

The construction of the stūpas in the 12th century provides a *terminus ante quem* for the manuscript. However, its presence inside a Buddhist stūpa raises difficult questions. As mentioned, the region once fell within the Tibetan Empire's frontier during the late 8th century and stood in the proximity of the later Tangut kingdom (1038–1227). The Tanguts emerged as one of the tribes belonging to the broader Dong clan (*Ldong mi nyag*), and the Nyen Collection is associated with this clan, specifically its Nam subgroup. Because the Tanguts devised their own script in the 11th century, the manuscript's use of Tibetan script allows the hypothesis that it predates the Tangut kingdom. Yet this suggestion remains speculative, as hard data, such as laboratory dating of the manuscript's paper, which could move this dating to more solid ground remain elusive.

3. Introduction to the story on the separation of the dead from the living

The focus will narrow here on the fifth myth of the manuscript, which is exceptional. The other myths will be treated separately elsewhere in

the future. This fifth text from roughly the middle of the manuscript clearly stands out from the rest of this early version of the Nyen Collection. Firstly, it does not contain a single direct reference to the *gnyan* spirit or *klu*. It is also not found among any of the other existing versions of the Nyen Collection.[12]

Secondly, while most of the stories of the Nyen Collection could be reasonably associated with the Dong clan and its original place in what is nowadays the eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau, the countries named in this myth point to a different location.[13] Not only countries, but also the names of the story's main characters are known in several of the earliest Tibetan texts from Dunhuang. It is thus reasonable to assume that they represent some symbolic context of the story known to listeners of ancient times. Before approaching the content of the narrative, attention will be paid first to the names of the main protagonists and the countries mentioned in the story.

In the opening parts of the story two countries are mentioned as well as their respective lords. The first is a certain Gayul Jangnam (Rga yul byang rnam). This country is undoubtedly identical with the similar Gayul Jangnam (Dga' yul byang rnam) found in several Dunhunag documents, all dealing with funerary rituals. In P.T. 1136 this country is mentioned in the story of possibly twin brothers translated by Iwao Ishikawa (2021), who considers the country to be the "pure original paradise" ("Land of Joy", Dga' yul). Its lord, called Yabga Zinte Chedpo (Yab dga' zin te ched po), appears in another Dunhuang manuscript P.T. 1194 dedicated to animal sacrifice during the funeral ritual. His name is almost the same as the name of the lord mentioned in the story translated below—Yabga Zinte Chedpo (Yab rga zin te ched po). It might be that Jang (Byang) means "north" in this name and with some degree of likelihood could be a place in the "northern plains" Changthang (Byang thang). But Dunhuang manuscript P.T. 1134 makes clear that this is primarily a land of strongly symbolic nature. It

[12] Nevertheless, these other collections contain a section of myths dealing with separation (*dbye*). These cases concern myths on separating the offspring of spirits which were the results of improper mixing between spirits like the *gnyan* and *klu* with demonic spirits like the *srin*, *'dre*, etc. Thus, this myth might be regarded as adding to the stories dedicated to the spirits, with an example on primordial events concerning a human community requiring the separation of the living and the dead. Significantly, the following myth no. 6 is titled similarly (*Yang brang nga dbye*), but contains a brief version of myth no. 3, in which the original son of the *gnyan* spirits is killed by Son of Dong and this eventually led to payment for the killing (*stong*) and resolution of the conflict. Nevertheless, the title make sense. The myth is at the same time a narration on the way the *gnyan* spirits and the Ldong people became separated since they are of common origin (the mother of Son of Dong is a *gnyan* spirit).

[13] This is not valid for all the myths since in myth no. 9 the "ancient principalities" of central Tibet are listed.

is mentioned there in connection with a likely general name, which represents all possible individual names: Mi Mabu Chingyal (Myi rma bu mchin rgyal).[14] It is described as a country where people are not subjected to death. A tentative translation of this passage could read:[15]

> *Myi Mabu Chingyal,*
> *In the country Gayul Jangnam (Dga' yul Byang rnam),*
> *Where people do not die,*
> *A virile son has died.*
> *To the land devoid of any destruction,*
> *Lamo Chabkor (Surroundings of a River of Souls),*
> *He was offered, he was destroyed by death, and he is not anymore.*
> *When he was living, at the age of hundred years,*
> *It was like the passing melody of the bra nga,*[16]
> *His age of dying is 700 000,*
> *It is lasting like a ring of retainers,*[17]
> *[But] from now on,*
> *For weeping people onto whom disasters befall,*
> *The lands of the living and dead people are not the same,*
> *The dog's and pig's nests are not the same.*

This passage confirms that this country is associated with an image of a primordial paradise of the living untouched by death. It also announces a change which results in the need to travel to the land of the dead (*gshin yul*) and only after a long journey and guidance from mainly a psychopomp sheep (*skyib lug*) does the deceased arrive at his destination, which might resemble the original paradise in that it is also called "Land of Joy and Delight" (Dga' dang skyid pa'i yul). It is, however, not clear if this is seen as the same land as Gayul Jangnam (Dga' yul byang rnams). Despite the obscure details, it seems to be

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[14] See, for example, Stein 1971, 488, note 26, 506; Dotson 2013, 127.

[15] P.T. 1134, lines 161–6: *myi dang rta la bsnand/ pa'/ myi/ rma bu mchin rgyal/ 'di/ myil* (=*myi*) *myi grongs/ gi yul/ dga' yul/ byang rnamsna/ dpan gyi ni bu chig/ grongs bdag myi rlag gi yul/ brla mo/ chab kor na/ dbul/ gyi / pa chi rla gis/ myed/ gson/ che lo brgya' ni/ bra nga bsnyan la/ dengs/ grongs tshe/ bdu'n 'bum ni/ snam phyi gdub ltar/ 'gor / te'/ di ring slan chadu/ skyin dang bab/ gi 'og/ tu/ myi ngu/ myi/ gson/ gshin/ yul/ myi/ gchig/ khyi pag/ tsang myi gchig/*. For a slightly different rendering see Stein 1971: 497.

[16] *Bra nga* is often described as something related to *gtsos* antelope. In P.T. 1040 it is listed together with earrings: *gser gi sga mo gtshos gi bra nga snyan ca*, P.T. 1134 contains the phrase: *gtshos dgo bre nge breng/ sha rgyang ram ma rem/* (Chiru antelope and Tibetan gazelle—*bre nge breng*, deer and wild ass—*ram ma rem*).

[17] The meaning is uncertain. Takeuchi shows that *snam phyi ba* stands for "personal attendant", or retainer in a passage translated from Chinese (Takeuchi 1985, 139–40). Probably a specific ring (*gdub*) is mentioned and its lasting material meant. For a mention of the same passage see Dotson 2013, 334, note 22.

associated with an original place without death and the subsequent original ritual treatment of the first deceased humans.

The noble son from the original "Land of Joy" (Rga/Dga' yul byang rnams) bears the name Thritsen (Khri btsan), which strikingly resembles names from the long genealogy of Tibetan emperors (*btsan* [*po*]). It first appears in the seven names of the mythical "seven Thri of the sky" (*gnam gyi khri bdun*), and in later times figures in the names of many great historical emperors including Songtsen Gampo (alias Khri srong btsan).[18] No doubt, the name Thritsen is immediately associated with the lineage of Tibetan emperors.

The second place named in the story also appears rather frequently in the Dunhuang documents. In the text below it is mentioned as Kyirong Jang-ngon (Skyi rong ljang sngon) with its lord Kyije Mangpo (Skyi rje mang po). This certainly corresponds to similar sounding placenames (written as Skyi ro lchang/ljang/lngang sngon) and its lord Kyije Mangpo (Skyi rje rmang po) found in several Dunhuang documents.[19] In this case there is little doubt that it refers to the mythohistory of the Kyi (Skyi) region in Central Tibet south of Lhasa.[20] This name figures in various lists of "ancient principalities," in one case with the names of kings, a minister, a divinity, a horse, etc. (P.T. 1060) before the dawn of the Tibetan Empire. Despite the hazy setting in a time and place of the mythical past, it is likely that the locations mentioned in the myth could be imagined as taking place partly in central Tibet before the creation of the Tibetan Empire and in the original land of long age where people in the distant past started to be subjected to death for the first time.

The Lady of this land who was chosen as a bride is named Kyinam Nyagcigma (Skyi nam nyag gcig ma). She is the main character of a narrative contained in Dunhuang document P.T. 1068, which is a story once again dealing with a funeral ritual.[21] She is a daughter of a father with the same name as that found in the text translated below, a lord of Kyi (Skyi) named Kyije Mangpa (Skyi rje mang pa). The story in P.T. 1068 relates that her father took a new wife, and the new stepmother mistreats her and her brother. She must take care of pigs (clearly seen as a shameful activity), and her brother is sent to hunt deer and antelope in the north. This mistreatment results in her miserable death among the

[18] Besides him, the syllables *khri* and *btsan* appear in the names of other well-known emperors from the time of the Tibetan Empire: Meagtshom (Khri lde gtsug btsan), Thisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan), Sänaleg (Khri lde srong btsan) and Ralpachen (Khri btsug lde btsan).

[19] Cf. Skyi ro lngang sngon of P.T. 1060 Skyi ro lchang sngon of P.T. 1068 and 1285, Skyi ro ljang sngon of P.T. 1286 and IOL Tib J 734. The lord of this land is mentioned as Skyi rje rmang po.

[20] For identification of the place by Guntram Hazod, see Dotson and Hazod 2009, p. 172.

[21] See Stein 1971, pp. 521–4.

pig excrement. Her brother finds her and invites three ritualists: Shenrab Myiwo (Gshen rabs myi bo), Durshen Mada (Dur gshen rma da) and Shentsha Lungdra (Gshen tsha lung sgra). Then the text describes the funeral ritual performed on her behalf. Her name contains an expression "nyagcig" (*nyag gcig*) which means "alone, single," etc. This fits both the story in P.T. 1068 and the text translated below, where she remains "alone" following the death of her bridegroom Thritsen.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the two ritualists in the text translated below are a certain Pha Durshen (Pha dur gshen) and Shenrab Myiwo (Gshen rabs myi bo). The first is likely identical with the Durshen Mada (Dur gshen rma da) found in P.T. 1068 and other Dunhuang manuscripts (P.T. 1134, P.T. 1194, IOL Tib J 731) where he is mentioned frequently along with Shenrab Myiwo (Gshen rab/rabs myi bo) as a specialist on funerary ritual services. Both are associated with a visible tradition of funerary rituals among the Dunhuang documents. At the same time both are mentioned in the Dunhuang texts touching upon both localities (namely P.T. 1134 and 1136).

These introductory observations concerning the names that feature in the story could reveal something about the story's context of origin. These names were probably well known in a certain environment related to central Tibet and the names alone—serving as emblematic types—could add meaning to its contents. This story draws on a "pool of tradition" that is shared with several other texts from Dunhuang.

Approaching the plot of the myth, the title of this story could be rendered as "Separating the temporary dwellings aside" (*Brang nga sna dbyes la*). These "temporary dwellings" are apparently the places of the living and the dead. It is perhaps worthy of mention that the text's obvious and earnest attempt to separate the living from the dead using some poetic images and the phrase "The land of the living and the land of the dead are not the same" (*gson gshin yul myi gcig go*) resembles a phrase from P.T. 1134 mentioned above (*gson gshin yul myi gchig*), and also in a much later ritual text in the Drangsong collection from Mustang on "Separating the dead from the living."[22] This later anonymous text does not contain any myth, and it focuses solely on ritual proclamations. This ritual text is employed in cases when there are scary indications of the dead making their presence known among the living. It could be taken as a witness of a certain broader cultural pattern of emphasis on keeping anxiously the dead separated from living humans.

In the usual phrases the text introduces the two above mentioned lands, fathers, mothers and their offspring. The son Thritsen of Gayul Jangnam country is on the search for a wife and choses Kyinam

[22] *Gson po dang gshin po sor kha bstan phyed pa bzhugs s+ho*, Drangsong collection 155. I am indebted to Charles Ramble for drawing my attention to this text.

Nyagcigma of Kyirong Jang-ngon country as his bride. There follows an interesting brief part related to the wedding ceremony. The ceremony is described as an offering of male horses, female cross-bred cow and yak (*mdzo mo*), an arrow attached to the veil of the bride and gold to the "small divinity" (*lhe'u*).

The term "small divinity" (*lhe'u*) is mentioned as the single object of their offerings during the wedding ritual. While there could be some doubt about the meaning of this term, given the context it is highly likely that it indicates a divinity which brings children to people from the sky realm. A similar "small divinity" (*lhe'u*) figures in the rare, illuminated manuscript dealing with *teu* (*ste'u*) rites, which were recently reasonably interpreted by Toni Huber as focusing on bringing new children to people following the funeral ritual (Huber 2020, vol. II, 51–68, for the summary see pp. 67–8). The main sky divinity responsible for granting children is mentioned there specifically as the "small divinity" (*lhe'u*), and the main overall focus of the ritual is to ensure smooth passage to offspring descending from the "small divinity."[23]

This part thus reveals that one of the primary functions of the wedding ceremony was to create a strong bond between the couple and the divinity granting children, or the "small divinity." That the bond with divinities is to be established during the wedding ceremony is explicitly mentioned and emphasised in a rare manuscript containing a myth on the original wedding ceremony between a divine bride and an earthly bridegroom (*lha 'dogs pa*), which could be rendered as "binding (the couple) with gods."[24] In the present text, however, it is specified that the bond is made with the "small divinity" associated with bringing children.

The text then cuts the flow of the narrative with the sinister words: "But before taking her as a wife, the son (i.e. bridegroom) died."

This situation enables the reader to see what the implications are. The father of the deceased son proposes that his late son be "escorted to the gods" (*lha ru bskyel*). As will be seen later, this part of the ritual consists of joyfully dispatching the deceased, assisted by a psychopomp animal, on a journey to another country; the destination is not mentioned in this text, but several Dunhuang documents call it the "Land of Joy" (Dga' yul) or "Land of Joy and Delight" (Dga' dang skyid pa'i yul). But summoned ritualists disagree with it and suggest instead of it that he should be "separated to dead." Then, the father suggests in a rather generally formulated sentence that the bridegroom should die and accompany the deceased son.

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[23] It might be related to the term *le'u lha*, or "divinities of the fetus," but perhaps from a slightly different ritual context (see Berounsky 2025).

[24] See *Ming sring dpal bgos dang lha 'dogs*. See Karmay and Nagano 2002.

Despite the generic phrasing, this statement can still be understood as a reference to the sacrifice of a wife (or self-immolation). This is rather unique allusion. Despite some evidence of other people from the retinue of the Tibetan emperor dying during the funeral rituals (cf. Haarh 1969, pp. 341–8), it seems that there is so far no evidence for the self-immolation of wives or their sacrifice as a part of the funeral ritual.[25]

In this story, however, the ritualist opposes this suggestion and disagrees. His main argument is that since the wedding ritual was not completed, they should not be viewed as a couple:

> *Durshen said:*
> *"As for the two of them,*
> *the lord who died first,*
> *And the wife who should die then,*
> *It is useless to associate them as a couple!*
> *They are bound to their own surrounding.*
> *The land of the living and the dead are not the same!*
> *The land of the living and the dead should be separated.*
> *[And then only he] should be escorted to the gods!" So he said.*

This passage shows that the status of the couple changes significantly during the wedding ritual. If the wedding ceremony were completed, the wife would probably die and accompany her husband during the funeral ritual directly "to the gods" without any need to separate them.

These details could also provide an explanation on why widows were traditionally considered to be polluted with a specific kind of pollution called *yug* in some societies on the Tibetan Plateau. It is reported at some places that widows were seen as polluting, and as such, were banned from the community. In the light of the present text, it is probably due to the status of the couple. The special bond between the couple and the divinities granting children is likely what brings forth pollution of the divinities in the case of the husband's death.

The text reiterates two main phases of a ritual to be performed. The first part is certainly presented as a gloomy one and should result in the separation of the deceased from the living. It consists of an offering of jewellery to the deceased bridegroom from his bride-to-be. Then the animal sacrifice of a greyish goat and sheep follows as a part of the separation process said to "remove the grief[26] from people." The *sri* demons (associated with death) are then crushed in a horse skull on the crossroads amidst the ritual construction using firebrands intended to ward off demonic powers.

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[25] For similar interpretation see also G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum and Luo Zhicai 2024, p. 73.

[26] Tib. *byur*, it is also a class of demonic being.

What comes next are poetic exclamations calling for the separation of the dead from the living, which, besides other things, give purpose to the offerings of a cuckoo and a deer with yellow antlers mentioned earlier in the text among the items to be collected. Their role in the separation of the dead from the living is poetically alluded to:

> *When Spring merges with Summer,*
> *It is separated by the cuckoo, the lord of birds!*
>
> *When Autumn merges with Winter,*
> *It is separated by the voice of the deer!*

The second phase of the ritual is "escorting to the gods" (*lha ru bskyel ba*).[27] It is visibly marked by a change of atmosphere, suddenly becoming full of joy, along with songs and dances. The text itself mentions it in the following way:

> *Do not perform the customs of the dead in black!*
> *Customs of gods should be done in white!*

The heron and Goa antelope are mentioned, the blood of the later probably serves as a purificatory lustre (*tshan*). Just after that there appears an enigmatic sentence: "a king was appointed at the burial ground" (*bas su rgyal bskos so*). A very similar phrase appears in two Dunhuang documents, including P.T. 1068 dealing with Kyinam Nyagcigma's funeral (*bas la ni rgyal sgos*), as a part of the preparation of a ritual construction consisting of *se*, *gru bzhi* and *thag brgyad*. This phrase follows right after instructions to the psychopomp animal (*mdzo mo*) and it could be presumed that the deceased was "appointed king" just before he set off "riding" the psychopomp animal.[28]

Unfortunately, three lines are missing in this part due to damage to the manuscript. But it is clearly followed by a description of a "riding animal" (*chibs*) including its halter and bridle. It is likely that it pertains to a horse as a means of transportation to the gods along with a tent, bow and arrows.

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[27] Only from the photos of the original manuscript before the restoration it appeared that one of the fallen-out pages which is the last folio of the manuscript in the facsimile, belongs to this part. See Fig. 7.

[28] P.T. 1068, lines 113-115: *pyugs spo ma nye du khyed gyang chab gang laru mdzod cig yang ba rab du spogs 'tshalo / / zhes gsungsde bas la ni rgyal bsgos / 'brum du nI se btsugs / se 'brum bzhi bcas / / rgyal thag brgyad ni 'bres/*. It appears also in P.T. 1134, lines 119-120: *myi bon / lha'i bon / rgya bon brim tang gis / rgyal tag brgyad / ni / gnam las / bre se gru bzhi ni / sa la / bchas / bas la ni / rgyal / bsgos / lung na ni / se bchaste'*.

4. Separation of the temporary dwellings aside (translation)[29]

(59) May the temporary dwellings be separated aside!

In the Land of Ga Jangnam,[30]
The father is Great Ga Zinte,[31]
The mother is Lhatsun Gungmaron,
Their son is Son of Rga – Thritsen,
Their property and wealth is a sheep.
[The son] searched for wife and spouse.

In the Kyirong Jang-ngon,
From the mating of
the Lord of Skyi – Mangpo,
and Drongza Drugyag
(60) [their daughter] Kyinam Nyagcigma was born.

When taking her as wife and spouse,
swift horses with tails tied,
Mdzo mo of excellent breed,
And a sharp arrow with fine nock,
Which was attached to a textile veil covering the eyes [of the bride].
[Together with] fine treasure of gold,
These were established as a support for the "small divinity" (*lhe'u*).

But before taking her as wife,
The son [i.e. bridegroom] died.

Pha Durshen
And Shenrab were approached;
they performed (the ritual *gto*)[32] and then analysed the results,
(… half of the line missing).
(61) The father said:

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[29] I am indebted to friends joining the reading sessions of the PaganTibet project in January 2026. We read the text together, and the present translation benefited from their various comments and suggestions. This article and the reading sessions are part of the ERC-funded project "Reconstructing the Pagan Religion of Tibet" (PaganTibet), project 101097364. Views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

[30] Cf. Dga' yul byang rnam of P.T. 1136, cf. Ishikawa 2021. For the interpretation of Dga' yul byang rnam as a pure original paradise, see p. 156.

[31] Cf. Yab dga' zin te ched po of P.T. 1194 (Sacrifice of sheep during the funeral ritual).

[32] Though the text is missing here, it is clear that *gto* was there.

"The son should be escorted from people to divinities!"
The bon said:
"As he was still searching for his wife and spouse,
It is improper to escort him to the divinities."
The father said:
"If the lord died first,
the wife should die then."
Durshen said:
"As for the two of them,
the lord who died first,
And the wife who should die then,
It is useless to associate them as a couple of progenitors!
They are bound to their own surroundings.[33]
(62) The land of the living and the dead are not the same!
The lands of the living and the dead should be separated.
[And then only he] should be escorted to the gods!" So he said.

Then he ordered to search for the following:
The mother and son of the turquoise,
The greyish bird of misfortune (*byur*),[34]
The grey sheep of misfortune,
Dark goat of misfortune,
Bone-Lattice (*ru rtsang brang*) of misfortune,
Wicked firebrand of misfortune,
The bone from the lower part of the neck of misfortune and a bone from the back of the neck,[35]
The bird's lord cuckoo,
A deer with yellow antlers.
Then Kyinam Nyagcigma,
"Soul" (…text missing),
(63) Untied the gold from her head,
Untied the turquoise from her head,
Untied the mirror from her chest,
And offered it to the Lord (i.e. bridegroom) addressing his "soul" (*thugs*).

Then the wounded animals (*rman ma*) were covered by cloth,

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[33] This phrase repeats in a number of texts, revealing that it was a very well-known formula. It quite commonly appears in connection with relatives as *gnyen dang nye 'khor ba'i gshal thog ste*, meaning "being bound to accompanying relatives and close people." Here, apparently companions of the dead and those of the living are addressed.

[34] Misfortune, grief, or demons *byur*.

[35] Tib. *'jing rus=mjing rus*.

The greyish sheep,
The grey goat,
Removing the bad grief from the people.

The female progenitor's *sri* of past misfortune,
The male progenitor's *sri*—[36]
At the crossing where the three roads meet,
By the construction of firebrands *('gal bam*),
and the greyish horse-skull—were crushed down.

The sky and earth were (64) separated and split!
When Spring merges with Summer,
It is separated by the cuckoo, the lord of birds!

When Autumn merges with Winter,
It is separated by the voice of the deer!

When the sunny side of the mountain merges with the shady side,
It is separated by the current of the river!
They met in the ancient past;
They do not meet now!

Turquoise on the grassland,
Mother and son, the two,
They met in the ancient past;
They do not meet now!

Let it be done assiduously!

A snowcock, the bird of gods,
And a partridge,[37] the bird of *'dre* demons,
They met in the ancient past
They do not meet now!

(65) (…line missing)
They met in ancient times;
They do not meet in the present.
They are separated – sel la la!

When it happens that the first acacia tree (*seng ldeng*),

[36] The text contains *ste* and the meaning is uncertain. It is taken here as possibly related to *stangs* "male progenitor" (=*ste*).
[37] Tib. *srag pa*, =*sreg pa*.

And the later acacia tree (*speng ldeng*) is divided,[38]
The first one dissolves in the river,
And the second one spreads in the valley.

The Son of Rga – Thritsen,
And Kyinam Nyagcigma, the two,
Met in the ancient past,
And do not meet in the present time.

The divine path of the living ones was separated and divided,
From the dark portal of burying the dead ones,
Sel la la!

Do not perform the customs of the dead in black!
(108) Customs of gods should be done in white!

Do not weep for long!
Bring forth abundant music and dance!
For laughter returning to the faces,
The heron of high is offered verses,
Small white-rumped Goa antelope,[39]
By its blood the armpit is cleansed,
At the burial ground[40] the king is appointed,
In the valley the tent is pitched,
Good…

(…lines missing)
(66) (syllables missing…) *mthing chung ron pa skyes* (?),
From first acacia tree,
And later acacia tree,
Four sides are to be made in leather,
And attached as ornaments to the riding animal,
The halter and the bridle.

lbyam bu she'u rnal (?)
virile tools of arrow and bow,

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[38] It is not certain what is meant here. It could be the seeds, or two trunks oriented to opposite sides. But the text consistently writes *seng ldeng* at the first occurrence, and then *speng ldeng*. It appears similarly and consistently written with a different spelling at the conclusion of the text, where the acacia tree is mentioned again as a material for the bridle and halter of the psychopomp horse.

[39] Goa (*Procapra picticaudata*).

[40] Tib. *bas*. It could mean also some deserted place, but here the likely meaning would be "burial place."

white tent made of fine textile,
to the house of gods are sent,
are escorted from people to the gods.

5. Concluding remarks

The text presented above in translation and commented upon raises some questions. Firstly, it clearly demonstrates that it shares much with some other texts known from the Dunhuang Library. The locations and the names of the main protagonists are certainly drawn from a "pool of tradition" shared with other extant texts from Dunhuang. One can imagine that these would add to the perception of the story for people familiar with them. The names of people and lands alone could recall an image of the misfortunate lonely lady (Nyagcigma) from central Tibet in ancient times long before the Tibetan Empire had formed, or a high standing, probably the most noble man, whose ancestry was connected with origins without death, but who died prematurely (Khritsen) and whose funeral ritual was conducted by the most experienced and almost divine celebrities – funeral priests Durshen Mada and Shenrab Myiwo, who knew well the means of negotiation with the land of dead.

Yet this story appears buried within a group of texts drawing on a different "pool of tradition." The texts dealing with the *gnyan* spirits are concerned mostly with the uneasy relationship with these fierce, insidious and unpredictable spirits, who are also considered ancestors of the Dong people. The expression "spirits" is probably not correct in this context, because the text states: "Among the people, the Dong are the most numerous; among the gods, the *gnyan* are the highest!" (*myi la ldong mang / lha la thog gnyan no /*).[41] Clearly, the *gnyan* are viewed as the highest of the divinities. In this tradition, the origin of the Dong people is seen to be related to the *gnyan*, since the first Dongbu (Ldong bu) was the son of a *gnyan* mother. The Dong tradition is concerned with careful and prudent actions towards the *gnyan,* who are present almost everywhere—in the rocks, mountains, lakes, trees, and also in the sky. Making them angry would bring about disastrous consequences and diseases.

The text translated here, when seen as a part of the whole Nyen Collection, certainly marks a certain stage of convergence of such pools of traditions. Significantly, most of the texts originally from a Dong environment are rendered not in the original language, but in written

[41] Myth no. 6, see G.yu rngog Padma dbang rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang mchog 'bum and Luo Zhicai 2024, p. 184.

Tibetan. The bilingual names suggest that the translation was done as a way as to accommodate the reader of Tibetan, i.e. those from central Tibet. At the same time, this tradition is moving beyond the limited space of the Dong clan (not to mention their sub-clans). Characters appearing in both traditions are becoming more universal and can increasingly serve as symbols or emblems.

However, there is one figure in the texts from the Twin Stūpas who is present in both traditions, that of central Tibet and that of the Dong clan: the ritualist Shenrab Myiwo. Is this a sign that these still visibly different worlds had already begun to connect?

Original Tibetan text and its transliteration

Photographs of the manuscript were taken prior to its restoration (courtesy of Ngawang Gyatso). Individual pages are referenced according to the order of the published facsimiles of the manuscript pages that underwent restoration (see G.yu rngog Padma Dbang Rgyal, Chu kyā Dbang Mchog 'Bum and Luo Zhicai 2024, pp. 113–220).

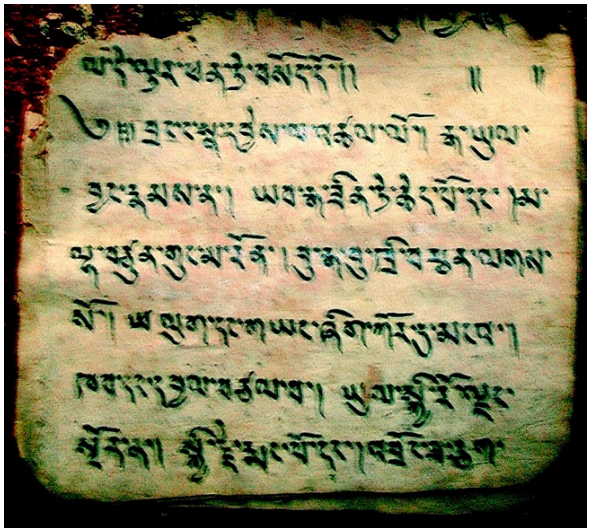


Fig. 2 – Page 59.

(p. 59) brang nga sna dbyes la 'tshal lo/ rga yul byang rnams na/ yab rga zin te ched po dang/ ma lha btsun gung ma ron/ bu rga bu khri brtsan lags so/ lug dang g.yang zhig kor du mnga'/ khab dang dbyal btsal ba/ yul skyi ro ljang sngon na/ skyi rje rmang po dang/ 'brong za rug

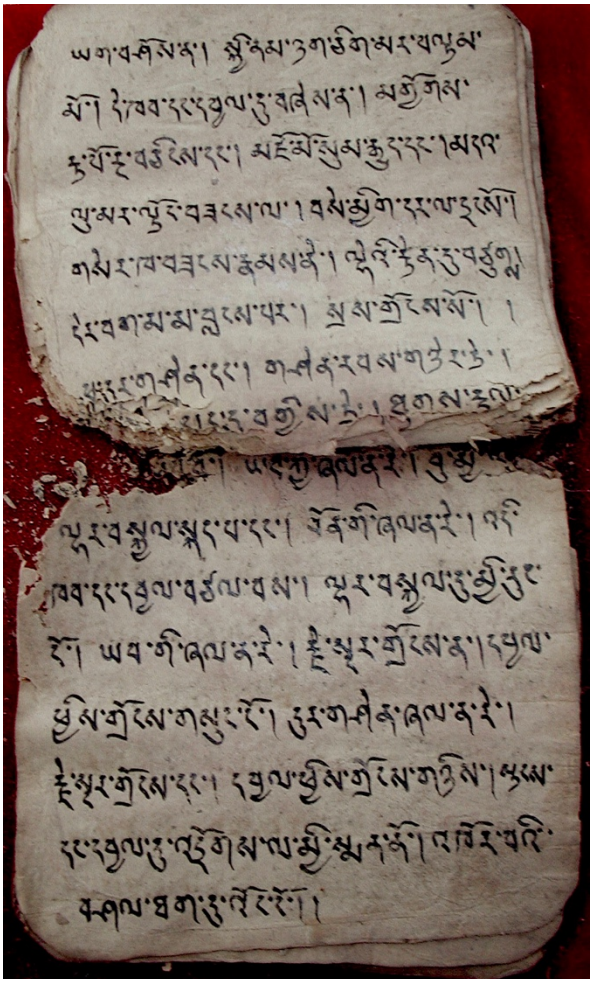


Fig. 3 – Pages 60–61.

(p. 60) yag bshos na/ skyi nam nyag cig mar bltam mo/ de khab dang dbyal du bzhes na/ mgyogs rta po rnga bcings dang/ mdzo mo sum rgyud dang/ mda' lu mar ltong bzangs la/ bse myig dar la drangs so/ gser kha bzangs rnams ne/ lhe'i rten du btsugs/ der bag ma ma blangs par/ sras grongs so/ pha dur gshen dang/ gshen rabs gnyer te/ (gto dang) dpyad du bgyis te/ thugs rngal (?)

(p. 61) (….) yab kyi zhal na re/ bu mya (=myi les) lhar bskyal skad pa dang/ bon gi zhal na re/ 'di khab dang dbyal btsal bas/ lhar bskyal du myi rung ngo/ yab gi zhal na re/ rje sngar grongs na/ dbyal phyis grongs gsung ngo/ dur gshen zhal na re/ rje sngar grongs dang/ dbyal phyis grongs gnyis/ stangs dang dbyal du 'drogs la myi sman no/ 'khor ba'i bshal thag du 'ong ngo//

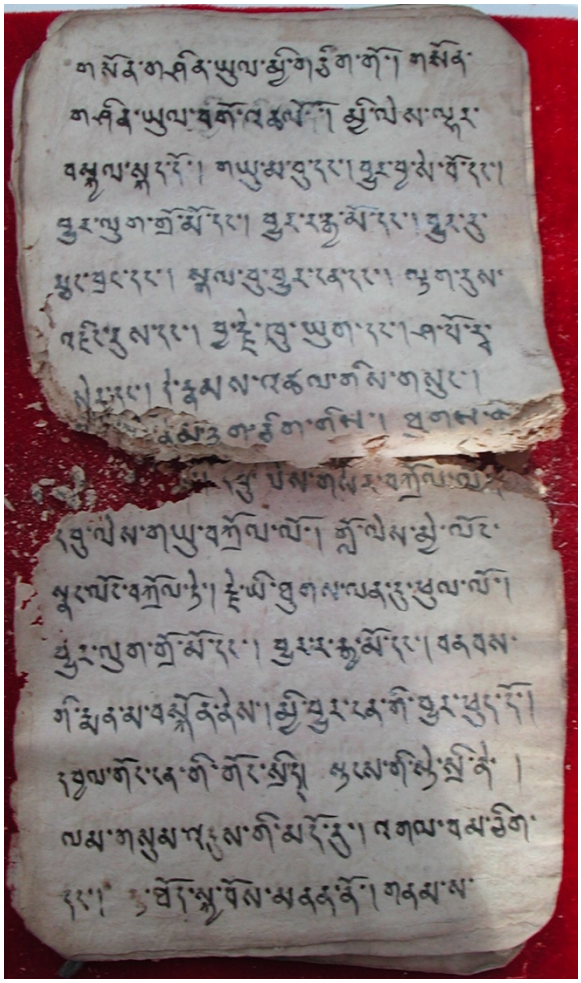


Fig. 4 – Pages 62–63.

(p. 62) gson gshin yul myi cig go/ gson gshin yul bgo 'tshal+o/ myi les lhar bskyal skad do/ g.yu ma bu dang/ byur bya se bo dang/ byur lug gro mo dang/ byur ra rgya mo dang/ byur ru rtsang brang dang/ sgal bu byur ngan dang/ ltag rus 'jing rus dang/ bya rje khu yug dang/ sha po rwa ser dang/ de rnams /tshal gis gsung/ (…skyi nam) nyag cig gis/ thugs m(…?)

(p. 63) dbu les gser bkrol lo/ dbu les g.yu bkrol lo/ glo les mye long snang long bkrol te/ rje yi thugs lan du phul lo/ byur lug gro mo dang/ byur ra rgya mo dang/ bnabs gi rman ma bskon nes/ myi byur ngan gi byur phud do/ dbyal ngong ngan gi gong sri dang/ stangs gi ste sri ne/ lam gsum 'dus gi mdo ru 'gal bam cig dang/ rta thod skya bos mnan no/ gnam sa

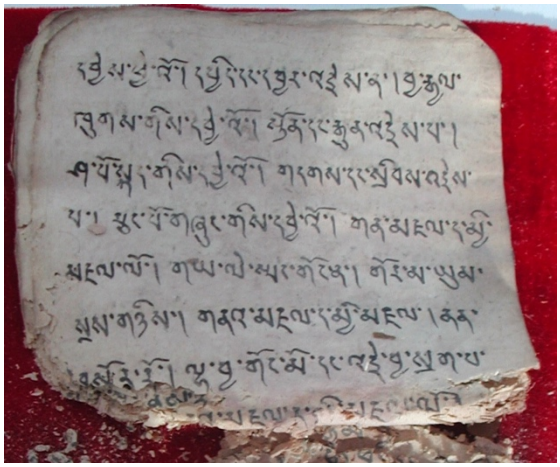


Fig. 5 – Page 64.

(p. 64) dbyes phye ’o/ dpyid dang dbyar ’dres na/ bya rgyal khugs (=khu yugs) gis dbye ’o/ ston dang rgun ’dres pa/ sha po skad gis dbye ’o/ gdags dang sribs /dres pa/ rtsang po gzhung gis dbye ’o/ gan (=gna’) mjal da myi mjal lo/ g.ya le spang gong na/ gor ma yum sras gnyis/ gna’ mjal da myi mjal/ nan bsor ro/ lha bya gong mo dang ’dre bya srag pa (…?) gna’ mjal da myi mjal lo/

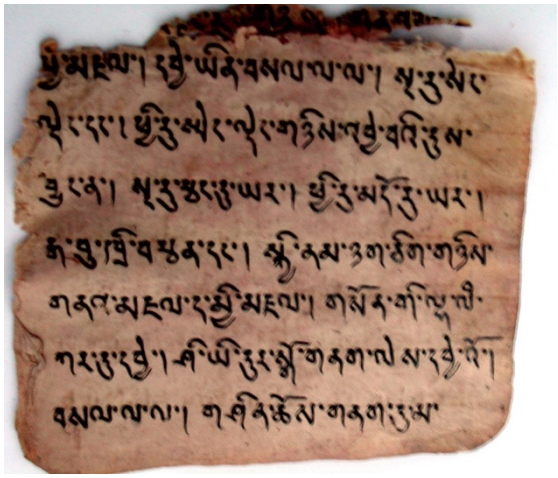


Fig. 6 – Page 65.

(p. 65) (….gna’ mjal) da myi mjal/ dbye yin bsal la la/ snga ru seng ldeng dang/ phyi ru speng ldeng gnyis ’bye ba’i dus byung na/ snga ru rtsang du yar/ phyi ru mdo ru yar/ rga bu khri brtsan dang/ skyi nam nyag cig gnyis gna’ mjal da myi mjal/ gson gi lha lam kar du dbye/ shi yi dur sgo gnag les dbye ’o/ bsal la la/ gshin chos gnag du ma

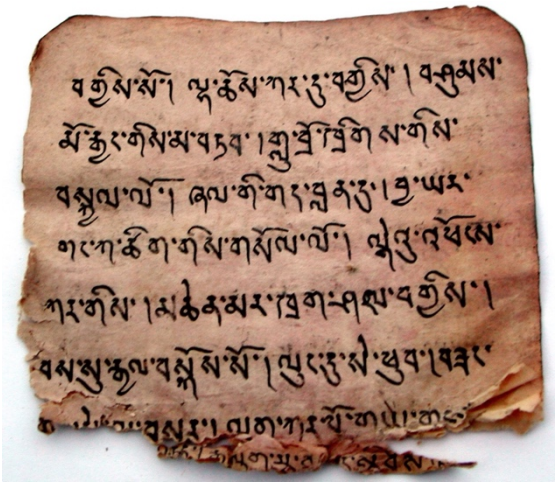


Fig. 7 – Page 108

(p. 108) bgyis so/ lha chos kar du bgyis/ bshums mo rgyang gis ma btab/ glu bro khrigs gis bskyal lo/ lge'u 'phongs kar gyis/ mchen mar khrag shal (=bshal) bgyis/ bas su rgyal bskos so/ lung du se phub/ bzang (…line missing)

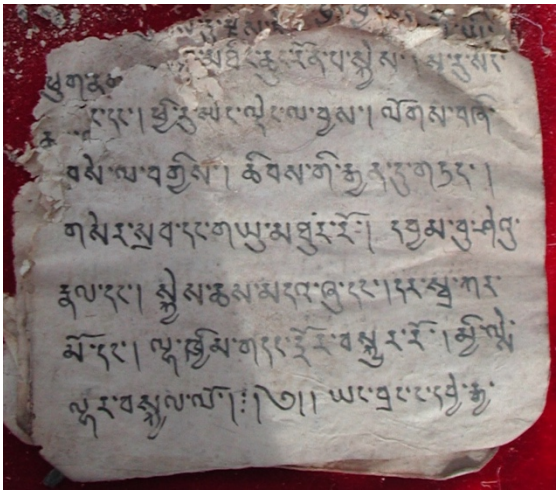


Fig. 8 – Page 66.

(p. 66) (line missing…….) mthing chung ron pa skyes/ snga ru sang (….ng: =seng ldeng) phyi ru speng ldeng la byas/ logs bzhi bse la bgyis/ chibs gi rgyan du gtad/ gser srab dang g.yu mthur ro/ dbyam bu she'u rnal dang skyes chas mda' zhu (=gzhu) dang/ dar sbra kar mo dang/ lha khyim gdang/ dror bskur ro/ myi les lhar bskyal lo/

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Abbreviations

IOL Tib J Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London (formerly in the India Office Library (IOL)).

P.T. Pelliot Collection of Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

Dunhuang manuscripts

IOL Tib J 734.
IOL Tib J 731.
IOL Tib J 732.
P.T. 1134.
P.T. 1136.
P.T. 1285.
P.T. 1194.
P.T. 1040
P.T. 1068

*An.

— *Gnyan 'bum*, full title *Rnam par dag pa'i 'bum bzhi las rin po che gnyan gyi 'bum* (Bön Kangyur, text no. 6281). In *Bka' 'gyur* (*Bon*), vol. 141, edited by Smon rgyal lha sras, 325 pp. Chengdu: Kun grol lha sras mi pham rnam rgyal, 1999.

— *Gson po dang gshin po sor kha bstan phyed pa bzhugs s+ho*, Drangsong collection from Mustang 155 (draft translation by Charles Ramble), unpublished manuscript, 4fols.

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