



“My Beautiful Face, the Enemy of Dharma Practice”

Variations in the Textual History of Nangsa Ohbum

This article explores the bibliographic history of Nangsa Ohbum (*snang sa 'od 'bum*), a Tibetan woman born in the eleventh century, whose hagiography has been translated into many languages and continues to be performed as a Tibetan opera (*a lce lha mo*) for ever-changing audiences. This article traces textual changes in her story over time and highlights the ways in which ideologically laden translations have affected the story's reception and interpretation. Utilizing English and Chinese language translations in comparison with Tibetan texts, this article calls attention to the importance of examining original source material when performing comparative or analytical work.

KEYWORDS: Tibet—Buddhism—performance—hagiography—Ache Lhamo—Nangsa Ohbum

On August 29, 2011 after a 6am bus trip to the Norbu Lingka (*nor bu gling kha*),¹ I experienced the story of Nangsa Ohbum (*snang sa 'od 'bum*, or *snang gsal 'od 'bum*, or *a lce snang gsal*, or *snang sa*, or *snang bza' 'od 'bum*) for the first time.² It was the first day of Lhasa's annual Shoton Festival (*zho ston dus chen*) (see Figure 1 below). For seven days, along with the elderly men and women surrounding me, I sat on plastic stools and slips of cardboard in a circle of audience members soaking in the stories of Tibetan opera (*a lce lha mo*). Small children wandered in and out of the crowd. Tourists and students stopped by to grab a photo, but a core group of fans sat through each eight-hour performance. On this first day of the festival, I constructed an understanding of the story playing out in front of me. Captivating an audience of 100 to 200 aficionados of Tibetan opera, Nangsa Ohbum came to life in another variation of her evocative tale.



Figure 1: Shoton Festival Lhamo performance at the Norbu Lingka, Tibet, August 2011. Photograph by author.



Figure 2: Location of Nangsa Ohbum's birth. July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.

The eleventh-century character Nangsa Ohbum is a popular figure of Tibetan opera, folklore, and foreign scholarship. Per the oldest extant Tibetan manuscript, Nangsa Ohbum was born in the Upper Nyangchu River Valley, Gyantse, Shigatse, Tibet (*gtsang myang [chu] stod rgyal rtse*) in the village of Jangpekur (*ljang 'phad 'kbur nang pa*, or *ljang phad kbur nang pa*, or *ljang phad khud nang pa*, or *phad khus nang pa*; see figure 2) on the auspicious 10th day of the Monkey (*sprel*)³ month of the Male Earth Horse year 1078 (Unknown author, mid-nineteenth century).⁴ She was born to mother Nyangsa Saldron (*myang sa gsal sgron*, or *myang tsha gsal sgron*) and father Kunsang Dechen (*kun bzang bde chen*). When Nangsa Ohbum matured to womanhood, Lord Drachen (*dpon po sgra chen pa*) of Rinang Tsochen (*rgyal rtse ri nang mtsho chen*)⁵ ordered Nangsa Ohbum to be betrothed to his son, Dragpa Samdrup (*grags pa bsam 'grub*, or *grags pa bsam grub*; see figures 3 & 4), with whom she bore a son, Lhawu Dharpo (*lha'u dar po*). Nangsa Ohbum experienced false accusations of infidelity; physical violence at the hands of her sister-in-law, father-in-law, and husband; death; and a return from the dead. Nangsa Ohbum turned to a religious life and became a student of a local master, Lama Shakya Gyalsten (*bla ma shakya rgyal mtshan*).⁶ Later Tibetan-language publications of the tale are outlined chronologically in the bibliography, but, with few exceptions, are remarkably similar to the earliest manuscript.⁷

Nangsa Ohbum's tale is most often identified as a *rnam thar*,⁸ one of the twelve divisions of the Buddha's teachings (*gsung rab yan lag bcu gnyis*).⁹ Although the term *rnam thar* is frequently translated as hagiography, I retain the original Tibetan term to distinguish *rnam thar* as a unique, Buddhist literary genre. The translation of Nangsa Ohbum's story into Chinese, French, English, Czech, etc., has made her tale accessible to audiences worldwide, also making possible a

wave of secondary research centering on her story. While increased propagation of Nangsa Ohbum's story via translation has had many positive effects, I argue that the earliest and most influential translations of Nangsa Ohbum into English and Chinese were imbued with Christian and Communist ideological influences, presenting considerable reinterpretations of the Tibetan-language work. Through what Venuti calls the "invisibility of the translator," these reinterpretations present themselves as simple reflections of the source text and significantly contribute to the pathologization of Tibetan women in secondary scholarship (Venuti 2008, 1–34). Translation may always be a violent and imperfect process, but if we accept that "meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence," there is value in perpetual reinterpretation (Venuti 2008, 13).

Although female Buddhist practitioners have been the topic of increased academic attention over the past thirty years,¹⁰ many of the few pre-modern works of the Tibetan women whose biographies are available have not been translated into European languages.¹¹ This, coupled with the relatively small number of scholars conducting fieldwork with Tibetan women, creates a vacuum in which a handful of literary translations become fodder for secondary scholarship. To demonstrate the significant influence of early translations of Nangsa Ohbum's story, I present contextualized examples of ideologically colored translations. I then outline second-wave scholarship on Nangsa Ohbum, which relies, both explicitly and implicitly, on the examined translations. I do this to demonstrate the futility of using female characters of Tibetan literature to conduct decontextualized interpretations of gender in Tibetan society, as well as to highlight the importance of utilizing primary sources when making literary analyses.

This work is part of a larger conversation on the overt sexualization or pathologization of Indian and Tibetan Buddhists, especially Tibetan women. This subfield might stake its origins in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978), from which a diverse discourse on religion and orientalism has emerged (King 1999). Scholars have analyzed the overt reformulations of Asian Buddhist traditions in scholarship, especially of Tantric Buddhism (Lopez Jr. 1999; Thapar 1999, 197–237; Urban 1999; 2003; 2006, 81–108; 2009; Wedemeyer 2013). Believing that all translation is of course an ideological process, one that enacts a "reconstruction of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that preexist it in the translating language and culture, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality," I do not suggest that attention to primary source materials will yield perfect translations or perfect interpretations (Venuti 2008, 196). Although there is no way to remedy the fact that "the past enters the present for reasons of the present," it is essential to identify how the present inflects the most contemporary interpretations of the past (Lincoln 1991, xvii). Calling attention to the creative deployment of this piece of literature throughout time, seeing both its oldest manuscripts, as well as its subsequent translations as contextualized productions, forces the scholar to specify the precise object of interpretation and avoid perpetuating pathologizing interpretations.

EARLY EUROPEAN TRANSLATIONS

While early European translations of the story of Nangsa Ohbum were truly pioneering works in the field of Tibetan studies and many of the translators themselves spent extensive time in Tibetan communities, they represent a British Colonial, Christian missionary worldview. The content of these translations makes it possible for contemporary scholars to claim that Nangsa Ohbum was married to both her husband and her father-in-law and that Nangsa Ohbum's ultimate liberation must be read as another subversion of power by a male character. For either of these claims to be made convincingly, the translations must situate Nangsa Ohbum within a world that is secondary to Christian, European society.

The first translation of Nangsa Ohbum's story was produced by Laurence Waddell (1854–1938) in 1895. Waddell was the son of a reverend and received his education in Chemistry and Pathology at Glasgow University. From 1885–1906, Waddell served in the British military throughout South East Asia, China, and the Himalayas. Although Waddell's translation itself is not inflected with Christian undertones, Waddell's short introduction and conclusion label Tibetan practices as "primitive" and the play to be of "inordinate length" (Waddell 1895, 553). Waddell displays a clear preference for Western culture and art, stating that "crude Tibetan plays point, in their own clumsy way, very much the same moral lessons as are taught by the Western Stage" (Waddell 1895, 565). This infusion of colonial rhetoric is not unique to Waddell's text.

The introduction to Nangsa Ohbum's story in H. I. Woolf's 1923 translation of Jacques Bacot's 1921 French text (Bacot 1921) calls Nangsa Ohbum's soliloquies "homilies" (Bacot 1923, 200) and equates Nangsa Ohbum's story with those in the "*Golden Legend*," a nineteenth-century compilation of Christian hagiographies (Bacot 1923, 203). Robert Cunningham's 1940 translation of Nangsa Ohbum includes similar parenthetical notes that mark the text with bias. He was a Christian missionary for the China Inland Mission during the early twentieth century. Cunningham evinces a clear love and romanticization for the Tibetan plateau and attempts to convince his readers of the positive values of Tibetans by equating Buddhist concepts with Christian qualities. He changes references to a particular deity to a capital-G God and translates terms like *ras pa*¹² as "friars" (61) or *lhamo*¹³ as "angel" (1940, 70). He writes,

Nangsal's religion will present no difficulties if we can understand and appreciate three sentences from the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (The fourth dimension, timeless, spaceless). "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." (Nangsal's parents and Drachen himself thought that the girl was crazy in refusing to consider such wealth and position). "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." *Goon-cho-tong*—to see God—is the rendering in the Tibetan New Testament.

(Cunningham 1940, 44)

It is only through their equivalence to Christianity that Tibetan Buddhism and Nangsa Ohbum's story gain authority. By repeated equations between the Buddhism of Nangsa Ohbum's story and Christianity, Cunningham clearly sets up a



Figure 3: Ruins at Naynying Monastery (*gnas rnying dgon*) contemporary site associated with Nangsa Ohbum's engagement, Tibet, July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.



Figure 4: Depiction of engagement. Murals in the main temple at Sertrag Drupde Monastery (*ser brag sgrub sde dgon*), Tibet, July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.

hierarchical opposition that ultimately degrades Buddhism. “When, however, we separate metaphysics from religion and devotion *goon-cho* is an obsession, a demand, a passion, which finally becomes an absorption, a consummation” (Cunningham 1940, 44). Cunningham’s “*goon-cho*” refers to *dkon mchog gsum*, meaning the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. While praising certain of Nangsa Ohbum’s pious activities and attitudes, Cunningham sees Tibetans’ reverence for Buddhist teachings to amount to obsessive mania.

Christian missionary Marion Duncan published a translation of Nangsa Ohbum, along with several other scripts of Tibetan opera, in 1955. Duncan was an American minister who lived in Tibet from 1921 to 1933, whose translation is more subtly connected to Christianity than Cunningham’s text. In a footnote explaining the term “spiritual son,” Duncan writes, “A conceiving by divinity—as the Christ, and here probably refers to Nangsa in the same sense as the generic term of man includes woman” (Duncan 1955, n. 22). In this section of the text, the term spiritual son (*thugs sras*) refers to Shakyas Gyaltzen and does not connote a divine birth. A spiritual son refers to an important disciple and does not indicate that the teacher was in any way responsible for the physical birth of Shakyas Gyaltzen. Duncan also reveals a Christian point of view by using terms such as “church” and “clergy” in reference to monasteries and monks. While it might be argued that the use of Christian terminology, coupled with derisive comments about the content and form of the story is simply a product of the time and a fashion of academic discourse, this terminology contributes to the pathologization of Nangsa Ohbum that comes through in the translations.

Anthropologist Robert Paul utilizes Duncan’s translation of Nangsa Ohbum’s story to make wild assertions about Nangsa Ohbum’s sexual life. He claims that Nangsa Ohbum was married to both her husband and father-in-law, that she sexually abused her son, and that she had sexual relations with mendicants (and maybe one monkey!) (Paul 1989, 209–20). Paul’s assertions about Nangsa Ohbum’s relationship with her father-in-law do not emerge out of thin air (nor out of an ill-fated love of psychotherapy in the 1980s). Bacot identifies three adult males in the story, Nangsa Ohbum’s husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. He writes, “The men, Nansal’s father and husband, always as in life, are nobodies, neither good nor bad. Alone, Nansal’s brother-in-law or son-in-law is brutal and coarse. On reading, one will see there is a confusion between these two personages with Rinag” (Bacot 1923, 201). Bacot immediately explains that the confusion must simply be the result of errors and elisions in the text. Cunningham, though, muses on the apparently polyandric practices of the male characters. “There is however one peculiar custom which they either wink at or condone, namely, *polyandry*. So Drachen and Semdrub in their long excursions into other parts of Lamaland may find attractions in other encampments and thus prolong their visit rather pleasantly” (Cunningham 1940, 46). Although the source text provides no evidence of Nangsa Ohbum’s husband or father-in-law partaking in polyandrous exploits in neighboring households, Cunningham assumes that this must be taking place.

Paul believes that the ambiguity in the text is a purposeful tool used by the author to convey a secret message of sexual competition between father and son.

“Now the name Sgra-chen-pa is a household name, and thus can apply to either father or son. There is therefore a constant ambiguity in the text as to which Sgra-chen-pa, father or son (or both), the woman is supposed to marry. I believe the ambiguity is intentional” (Paul 1989, 209). Paul goes on to quote sections of Duncan’s translation that he reads as indications of the sexual competition between father and son. While the sections of Duncan’s translations cited by Paul are not particularly convincing, Duncan’s text does contain certain questionably sexual interpretations of the Tibetan text. Duncan translates the Tibetan stanza:

མདུན་དུ་དགེས་པའི་པང་གདན་མདུན་ལེབས་འདི།
 ལྷ་ཚོས་པང་ལེན་ཡིན་ན་དགའ་བ་ལ།
 འདས་ལོག་བྱས་པའི་བྱ་མོ་རྣམས་ལ།
 ཚོས་བཤད་ལྷ་མ་ཡིན་ན་གྱིད་པ་ལ།

Like the apron covering the front that curves around the foreparts.
 To be pleasing as those who have the religious lap-sensual enthrallment;
 Like the maiden Nangsa, I, who have returned from the dead.
 To be happy as the priests declaring religion (Duncan 1955, 236)

My own translation of the text reads,

How wonderful if I could receive Buddhist teachings here in my lap,
 Instead of this apron [a piece of clothing worn only by married women]
 flapping in front of me.
 How happy I would be if this resurrected woman Nangsa
 Would become a teacher of the Dharma.

Although Duncan may not have been intentionally eroticizing the text, he is certainly reading the text in an overtly sexual manner. He takes the metaphor of the apron worn by married women (which Nangsa Ohbum wishes to transform into religious teachings) to indicate that religious practitioners experience sensual pleasure. Throughout the text, the use of terms such as “ecstasy,” “shivering,” and “tingling” in reference to religious devotion gives the text a sexual connotation in English that does not emerge in the Tibetan. Although Paul is certainly exaggerating the traces of sexualization found in the translations, it is apparent that he is influenced by the assessments made by these early translators.

The second problematic claim made in secondary scholarship is that Nangsa Ohbum is a Tibetan woman who, lacking agency, is objectified by domestic and religious men. Serinity Young presents Nangsa Ohbum as an example of the pervasive disregard for the agency of women in Tibet (Young 2004, chap. 10). While the suffering Nangsa Ohbum experiences in the domestic sphere is quite explicit in the text, scholars such as Young are unwilling to accept that Nangsa Ohbum is truly liberated from the chains of patriarchy when she enters the tutelage of Lama Shakya Gyaltzen. Using Nangsa Ohbum as an example of Tibetan women wishing to lead a religious life, Young writes, “when they finally escape the patriarchal exchange system of family life, this does not necessarily mean that they have escaped the patriarchal exchange system of religious life” (Young 2004, 170). Young employs two elements of the text to make her argument. The first are

admonitions made by the Rinang soldiers to Shakya Gyaltzen. The second are the honorific titles bestowed upon Nangsa Ohbum and Shakya Gyaltzen when they are finally recognized as enlightened beings.

Young utilizes translations by Duncan and Allione (Duncan 1955; Allione 1984), as well as the Tibetan text she believes to be Duncan's source text. Young quotes Allione's translation of the penultimate scene of the play, in which Nangsa Ohbum has shaved her head, removed all her adornments and begun practice of the *tsendura* mandala.¹⁴ The issue with Young's interpretation is not a matter of mistranslation, but of decontextualization. The soldiers, presented in the text as ignorant adversaries, accuse Shakya Gyaltzen of mistreating Nangsa Ohbum and of defiling her sexually. These accusations are made in direct parallel with false accusations made earlier in the text, which set up a climactic contrast between the suffering of domestic life and the true freedom of Buddhist practice.

Several scholars point to the praises that follow the army's conversion to Buddhism as further proof of Nangsa Ohbum's sexual (and therefore oppressive) relationship with Shakya Gyaltzen (Allione 1984; Paul 1989; Young 2004; Hulton-Baker 2008). Nangsa Ohbum and Lama Shakya Gyaltzen are referred to as the tantric beings Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi, as well as *yab yum gnyis*.¹⁵ Most scholars agree that Nangsa Ohbum practiced tantric yogic rituals; it would certainly be conceivable that she would practice tantric rituals as part of a monastic community.¹⁶ It is not their assumption that Nangsa Ohbum practiced tantric rites that is problematic, but the conclusion that these sexual practices preclude, rather than support, the ultimate liberation of Nangsa Ohbum as presented in the text. Sarah Jacoby's important work on Sera Khandro highlights the point that tantric practices, especially as they are presented in religious literature, cannot be used as proof for either "gynocentric celebrations of female spirituality or misogynist objectifications of women for men's gratification" (Jacoby 2014, 1).

I am certainly not the first to address the problem of biases toward Christianity and European culture and ultimate pathologization of characters in early translations of Tibetan literature (Makley 1997; Lopez Jr. 1999). These pathologizations, while somewhat subtle in early translations, often become exaggerated in secondary scholarship. In this particular instance, scholars' utilization of the text in translation has placed excessive importance on ambiguities in the names of Nangsa Ohbum's husband and father-in-law, as well as on the student-teacher relationship between Nangsa Ohbum and Shakya Gyaltzen. This emphasis has been employed to the detriment of other elements of the text, ignoring essential contextual features in an effort to use classical literature in translation to make anthropological arguments about Tibetan women. Although the point has made before, scholars continue to mine decontextualized translations for data on Tibetan women.

CHINESE TRANSLATIONS AND SCHOLARSHIP

While Christian and orientalist discourse, as well as psychotherapy and the language of early religious studies, infuses English and French translations, the earliest Chinese translations of Nangsa Ohbum are creatively edited (*jiāgōng*) to represent

Communist ideals.¹⁷ This phenomenon is certainly not unique to Nangsa Ohbum's text and, as Makley points out, the construction of Tibetan "radical otherness" is prevalent in Han literature on Tibet (Makley 1997, 6). To illustrate this point, I examine a translation of a Tibetan-language publication of Nangsa Ohbum originally published in 1958 and reprinted in 1978 (Unknown author 1958; *bod ljongs lha mo tshogs pa* 1978).¹⁸ Although two iterations of the text appeared in Chinese in 1958 and 1960 (Unknown author 1958, Cai Donghua 1960), it was Wang Yao's Chinese translation of this text in 1963, as well as an English translation in 1986, that became widely circulated. The 1978 Tibetan text was produced by the Tibet Autonomous Region Lhamo Association (*bod rang skyong ljongs kyi lha mo tshogs pa; xizang zizhiqu zangjutuan*),¹⁹ founded in Lhasa in late 1959 and early 1960 in close collaboration with the new Chinese Communist Party. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, the troupe ceased performing traditional opera scripts and created new operas (such as "Benevolence of the Liberation Army" [*jiefangjun de enqing*]) to conform with the ideology of the Party. After the 3rd Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (1978), the performance of traditional Tibetan operas was deemed permissible and Nangsa Ohbum was performed by the troupe in 1980 (*bod rang skyong ljongs kyi lha mo tshogs pa* 1980z).

An important figure in Chinese Tibetology of the period, Wang Yao, was born in Lianshui County of Jiangsu Province (*jiang su sheng lian shui xian*) in 1928. He studied Chinese Literature in Nanjing University and then underwent Tibetan language training at the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing. He studied with Gankar Rinpoche (*gan dkar rin po che*) and participated in international conferences and lectureships throughout Europe and America. From 2004 until his death in 2015, he was an Honorary Dean and Doctor Tutor of the Institute of Tibetology of Minzu University of China (Wang 1986).

Wang produced Chinese and English translations of the eight traditional scripts of Tibetan opera.²⁰ In the introduction to his English-language translation, Wang Yao clearly celebrates Nangsa Ohbum as a figure representing the hardships of feudal life in Tibet. He writes, "With or without the religious element at the end, the story as a whole exposes the darkness of the feudal society and the brutal and despotic behavior of the local lord in a direct and effective way" (Wang 1986, 22). Wang Yao's translation includes many embellishments to Nangsa Ohbum's story that confirm his thesis that Nangsa Ohbum represents the sufferings of pre-liberated Tibet. This line of scholarship on Nangsa Ohbum continues to this day and even permeates some Tibetan-language publications as well. Wang produces significant erasures, specifically toning down the religious nature of the text. While he does not denounce Buddhism or attempt to change religious figures to secular ministers, there is a distinct reduction in the role of religion in his translation.

Wang adds many descriptive adjectives not present in the original Tibetan text. He describes Nangsa Ohbum's parents as, "an ordinary family," and "law-abiding vegetarians" (160). He also transforms the religious dream of Nangsa Ohbum's mother into a "fantastic dream" (160). Wang walks a fine line between erasing religion from the text, without fully doing so. Although he mentions that Nangsa Ohbum's family is Buddhist, he seems to be searching for new ways to interpret

Nangsa Ohbum's devotion. One example occurs while Nangsa Ohbum is pleading with her parents not to force her to marry. Wang leaves out the many prayers that Nangsa Ohbum makes as a young person and her hatred of the idea of marriage (not only marriage to the evil Lord's son). Wang transforms Nangsa Ohbum's disgust with the idea of marriage and domestic life into a disgust of wealth. He writes,

朗萨听不进去，对母亲说：
聚会末了是离散，
我不愿与他家称婚配；
富贵末了是贫困，
我不爱他家的金银堆成山；
房屋末了是倒塌，
我不喜欢他家的高楼和大厦。(Yáo 1963, 128)

His own translation:

But the maiden was disgusted with her mother's words and said to her:
Separation will be the result of this meeting.
I am unwilling to marry into his family;
Poverty comes at the end of wealth and rank;
I do not like his family's gold and silver heaped into a mountain;
A house will crumble in the end,
I do not like his family's many-storied mansion. (Wang 1986, 168–69)

The original Tibetan text:

རྗོན་ཅན་རང་ལུས་སྐྱེས་པའི་ཡབ་ཡུམ་གཉིས།
བྱ་མོ་སྤྲོད་སའི་ཕྱོགས་ལ་རྒྱུར་གསོན་དང།
འདུས་མཐའ་བྲལ་མེད་པའི་གྲོགས་པོ་མཐོང་ཙ་ན།
གཤགས་པ་བསམ་གྲུབ་གཏན་གྲོགས་ང་མི་འདོད།
འདུ་བལ་མེད་པའི་དགོན་མཚོག་རྣམ་གསུམ་ལ།
བྱ་མོས་གཏན་གྲོགས་བཅོལ་ནས་ལྷ་ཚོས་བྱེད།
བསགས་མཐའ་ཟད་པའི་རྗོར་རྒྱས་མཐོང་ཙ་ན།
རི་ནང་དཔོན་པོའི་རྗོར་བདག་ང་མི་འདོད།
འཕེལ་འགྲིབ་མེད་པའི་འཕགས་རྗོར་བདུན་པོ་ལ།
བྱ་མོས་རྗོར་བདག་བཅོལ་ནས་ལྷ་ཚོས་བྱེད།
བརྗེགས་མཐའ་ཞིག་པའི་ཁང་པ་མཐོང་ཙ་ན།
རི་ནང་དཔོན་པོའི་བྱིམ་འཛིན་ང་མི་འདོད།
ཞིག་རལ་མེད་པའི་དབོན་པའི་བྲག་ཕྱག་ལ།
བྱ་མོའི་ཁང་བྱིམ་བྱས་ནས་ལྷ་ཚོས་བྱེད།
རྗོན་ཅན་རང་ལུས་སྐྱེས་པའི་ཡབ་ཡུམ་གཉིས།
ཅིས་ཀྱང་བྱ་མོ་ཚོས་ལ་གཏོང་བ་ལྟ།

My translation:

Benevolent father and mother who bore me,
Please listen to the girl Nangsa.
When I see that friends ultimately must part,
I have no desire for Drakpa Samten as a spouse

This girl will take the three jewels [Buddha, Dharma, Sangha] that cannot be made or unmade as her spouse,
And in this way, practice Buddhism.
When I see that all accumulated wealth is ultimately lost,
I have no desire for the Rinang Lord's wealth.
This girl will entrust in the unchanging seven noble treasures [generosity, discipline, learning, modesty, sense of shame, and insight]
And in this way, practice Buddhism.
When I see that all constructed houses ultimately fall apart,
I have no desire to be a holder of the Rinang Lord's household.
This girl will make a home in the unbreakable meditation cave,
And in this way, practice Buddhism.
Benevolent father and mother who bore me,
I request that you send this girl to practice Buddhism



Figure 5: Depiction of Rechungpa and Nangsa Ohbum's encounter. Murals at Sertrag Drupde Monastery, Tibet, July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.

It is clear from these opposing translations that, while the main idea of the passage remains consistent (Nangsa Ohbum does not wish to marry), Wang’s text modifies the original Tibetan to emphasize Nangsa Ohbum’s dislike of wealth and deemphasize her religious motivations for opposing marriage.

The ways in which Wang deemphasizes religion are continuous throughout his translation. When Rechungpa and his attendant come to beg alms from Nangsa Ohbum (see figure 5), Wang does not include the name of the important figure. He also translates the verb *phyag tshal ba*, meaning to prostrate, as “kow-tow” (Wang 1986, 173).²¹ Finally, Wang Yao deals with the final section of Nangsa Ohbum’s life story in only one page. He summarizes Nangsa Ohbum’s return to her parents’ home, the religious teachings she gives on her long journey, her escape into the monastery, her rejection by Lama Shakya Gyaltzen (performed in order to test her resolve), her acceptance as a student, her preliminary practices, the war between the Rinang family and the monastery, and her ultimate exposure as an enlightened woman all in one page. What would ordinarily take more than two hours in performance and would constitute the most interesting and cathartic elements of the plot, was summarized without any detail or emphasis. As Wang mentions in his introduction, the religious ending is superfluous to the greater message of the tale: Tibetan women can only find happiness by throwing off the chains of feudalism.

The legacy of Wang’s translations and scholarship are long ranging and far reaching. As students of Minority Literature departments in the PRC are encouraged to use Chinese-language sources and to produce Chinese-language dissertations and manuscripts, Wang’s work has been highly influential in the next generation of Chinese and Tibetan Tibetologists.²² Wang is one of very few Chinese scholars who published translations of the scripts of Tibetan opera. One example of Wang’s continued influence can be seen in the work of Tibetan singer and scholar, Lha Lungtso (*lha lung mtsho*). In an article originally published in 1999 and reprinted in 2006 in a volume on Tibetan feminism, Lha Lungtso posits that Nangsa Ohbum represents the hardships of Tibetan women before the “liberation” (*bcings ’grol*) of Tibet carried out by the People’s Republic of China (*lha lung mtsho* 2006, 891). She writes,

ཕྱི་ཚོགས་རྗེ་བར་མཚན་ན། བོད་རིགས་བྱང་མེད་གྱི་ཐོབ་ཐན་ཞེས་པ་དེ་སྐྱེད་ཐབས་བྲལ་བ་ཞིག་རེད། ཚིའི་
 ཕྱིར་ཞེན། <<སྐྱང་ས་འོད་འབྱམ་གྱི་རྣམ་ཐར་>> ལས་ "དབང་ཆེན་དཔོན་པོའི་བཀའ་ལ་མི་ཉེན་ན། ལྷ་
 མོ་སྐྱང་གུང་འཛོམས་ཀྱང་སྐྱེན་མ་རེད། ལྷ་མོ་ཚོས་འདོད་ཚོས་ལ་གཏོང་རྒྱ་མིན། ལྷ་མོ་གཞིས་ཚོད་གཞིས་ལ་
 འཛོག་རྒྱ་མིན།" ཞེས་པ་འདིས་སྐབས་དེའི་བོད་རིགས་བྱང་མེད་རྣམས་ལ་རང་ཉིད་གྱི་ཐོབ་ཐན་དང་མིའི་རང་
 དབང་རྩ་བ་ནས་མེད་པ་གསལ་བཤད་བྱས་འདུག།

[Taking old society as an example, we have no choice but to discuss the rights of Tibetan women. If you ask why, note this quote from *The Hagiography of Nangsa Ohbum*: “If she does not listen to the order by Lord Drachen, / No matter how intelligent this girl is, she is really a fool. / Though this girl wants to practice dharma, she cannot practice, / Though this girl wants to stay in the

village, she cannot remain.” The preceding clearly indicates that at that time Tibetan women did not have individual rights or human rights.] (lha lung mtsho 2006, 888)

Lha Lungtso goes on to indicate that the rights of Tibetan women have been protected under Chinese law since “liberation,” but that due to lack of education in rural communities, discrimination against women continues. She calls for further protections for women in Tibet today. It is fair to read Lha Lungtso’s article as a strategic way of levying feminist critiques against Tibetan society within the appropriate political framework in which she lives and writes. It is certainly not only Wang’s publications that reformulate traditional Tibetan culture within an acceptable Communistic framework, but it is clear that Wang’s painting of Nangsa Ohbum as an exemplar for the necessity of feudal reform continues to influence modern scholarship.



Figure 6: Statue of Nangsa Ohbum located at Sertrag Drupde Monastery. The statue is placed alongside a statue of Lama Shakya Gyaltsen and a depiction of Nangsa Ohbum’s son Lhawu Dharpo, Tibet, July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.

CONCLUSION

Scholars rightly point out that the continual popularity and circulation of Nangsa Ohbum's story is an indication of the perpetual relevance of its themes. Historian Dan Martin writes, "Her involuntary marriage, her thwarted desire to lead a life of religion, and the injustices she suffered at the hands of her in-laws reflect the experiences of many Tibetan women in history, which may largely explain her story's popularity" (Martin 2005, 56). Kim Gutschow (2004) also draws analogies between Nangsa Ohbum and Zangskari nuns of the 1990s:

What can this tale [Nangsa Ohbum] tell us about the conflict between renunciation and marriage in Tibetan Buddhist culture? For women, the decision to renounce is portrayed as selfish, unnatural, or unreasonable. In Tibet, as in Zangskar, daughters are expected to become wives and mothers. While Nangsa chooses the spiritual life, she cannot avoid being traded like chattel to a pestering suitor.

The story of Nangsa Ohbum is being perpetually reinterpreted to meet the aesthetic and religious needs of its viewership. In part due to the proliferation of translations, Tibetan opera enjoys a continually diversifying audience. Each generation rereads Nangsa Ohbum with a new set of contextually specific criteria, and continual artistic transformation is vital for the health of the opera.

In 2018, seven years after my first encounter with Nangsa Ohbum, I had the opportunity to visit a number of Nangsa Ohbum's modern-day pilgrimage



Figure 7: Altar located in Nangsa Ohbum's meditation cave on the mountainside above Sertrag Drupde Monastery, Tibet, July 10, 2018. Photograph by author.

sites (see Figures 6 and 7) and discovered that many of the location names in the text are now thought to be typos, mishearings of contemporary locations (*ser brag sgrub sde dgon*, for example, instead of the *se ra gya' lung* in the text). These obscure, rural pilgrimage sites are engaged in complicated processes of re-translation. Although local monks and devotees may not be reading English and Chinese versions of Nangsa Ohbum, they are invested in making Nangsa Ohbum's eleventh-century story meaningful to modern audiences. As we place Tibetan texts in conversation with English and Chinese literature, it is of paramount importance that we contextualize not only the original piece of writing, but also its subsequent translations. Taking into consideration the British orientalist mindset of Waddell and the evangelical Christianity of Cunningham and Duncan, we must keenly parse out how these important early translators may have colored interpretations of Nangsa Ohbum for future scholars. Understanding the later wave of psychoanalytical scholarship as a product of a fad, we can dig more deeply into source materials to see if the interpretations are at all justifiable. Finally, considering the climate in which early Chinese folklorists wrote about Tibetan culture, we must engage deeply with contemporary Tibetan-language scholarship.

NOTES

1. This article utilizes Wylie transcription as outlined by Turrell Wylie (1959). For the sake of readability, *snang sa 'od 'bum* will be rendered phonetically as Nangsa Ohbum.
2. This article emerged out of research for an MA thesis advised by Hugh Urban and read by Mark Bender, Udo Will, and Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy. This article would not have been possible without the tireless assistance of Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, Yeshe Jigme Gangne, Kunchhok Bumang, and Harvey Graff. I would like to thank Bryan Cuevas, for generously responding to my inquiries, and Lawrence Epstein, for going out of his way to provide scans of Ascetic Kunga Rangdrol's version of Nangsa Ohbum's tale. I would also like to thank The Ohio State University Graduate School and East Asian Studies Center for providing fellowships that enabled me to perform research for this article, as well as Chinese Oral and Performing Literature (*zhongguo yanchang wenyi yanjiu hui*) and the Transnational Asia/Pacific Section of the American Folklore Society for providing me with the opportunity to present iterations of this work. Finally, thank you to Tenpa Gyaltzen for eight years of patience and assistance on my quest for Nangsa Ohbum.
3. This month is alternatively translated as the 9th, 7th, and 5th month of the Tibetan calendar.
4. Although traditional sources do not use the Gregorian calendar, the Tibetan calendar runs on a sixty-year cycle, so her Male Earth Horse year birth could have theoretically been 1078 or 1138. Francoise Pommaret claims that because of Nangsa Ohbum's important encounter with Rechungpa (*ras chung pa*, or *ras chung rdo rje grags pa*) (1083–1161) and his attendant Rinchen Drag (also known as *ra sher snang*), “la seule année correspondante pendant cette période est 1138 [the only year that corresponds during that period is 1138]” (Pommaret 1989, 191). The ages of both Rechungpa and Nangsa Ohbum at the time of their meeting are unclear, and it is not stated in the text whether Nangsa Ohbum was older or younger than Rechungpa. Nevertheless, we do know that Rechungpa was on his way to Yarlung, where he was to meet his consort Lhachik Dembu (*lha cig ldem bu*). This union occurred between Rechungpa's journeys to India and Milarepa's death in 1123 (Roberts 2007). We also know that Nangsa Ohbum had been married at least seven years at the time of their meeting (her son was born after seven years of marriage). If Nangsa Ohbum was indeed born in 1138, even if she had married at the age of 12, she could not have met Rechungpa until 1157, well

after the death of Milarepa. This would mean that Rechungpa was already 74 years old, only four years away from death, at the time of their meeting. If Nangsa Ohbum was born in 1078 and met Rechungpa in her thirties, he would have been five years younger than Nangsa Ohbum. Although I have been unable to find an authoritative date for Rechungpa's union with Lhachik Dembu, it seems most likely that Nangsa Ohbum was born in the earlier year of 1078.

5. According to Dan Martin, this location is alternatively spelled *ri snang* (Martin 1982, 61).

6. According to the biography of Nangsa Ohbum, Lama Shakya Gyaltsen was the lama who predicted Milarepa would find his main teacher, Marpa (*mar pa chos kyi blo gros*) (Hulton-Baker 2008, 20). Milarepa's *rnam thar* (hagiography) cites a lama at a monastery in Rinang, Upper Nyang Valley. According to Dan Martin's summary of the relevant sources, Milarepa was sent to "Rong-ston (*or* 'Bre-ston) Lha-dga', a specialist in the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingma (*or* Bonpo?). Milarepa found him in Upper Nyang at a place called Ri-s nang" (Martin 1982, 61). Although the names of these two lamas do not match, the locations align. More in-depth research would be necessary to draw any certain connections, but it suffices to say that the author of Nangsa Ohbum's text was aware of Milarepa's connection with this Rinang lama and that the lama was a powerful and well-respected figure.

7. This article utilizes the oldest extant copy of Nangsa Ohbum's text as a foundation for the translations examined. This text is in the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) of the British Library and scanned as part of "EAP548: The narrative and ritual texts, narrative paintings and other performance related material belonging to the Buchen of Pin Valley, India." It is dated at an approximate age of 150 years old (mid-nineteenth century) by the project director, Patrick Sutherland of the University of the Arts, London. Near reproductions of EAP548 can be found published elsewhere, including: Unknown author 1958; Unknown author 1977; bod ljongs lha mo tshogs pa 1978; tsho dbang don grub 1979; don grub 1980; Unknown author 1984; 'phrin las chos grags 1989; Unknown author 1999; bod rang skyong ljongs mang tshogs rgyu rtsal khang 2010; 'phrin las chos grags, and phun tshogs don grub 2011; and Institute of Tibetan Classics 2012. Condensed or summarized versions of the story appear in synopses of Tibetan operas (bod rang skyong ljongs kyi lha mo tshogs pa 1980; skal bzang don grub 1997; padma theg lo 2011), children's materials (bod gzhung zlos gar 2003; tsho rdor 2005), and dictionary/encyclopedia entries (Khenpo Sangpo 1973; Zhang 1984; Kunsang 2003). Nangsa Ohbum's tale is included in a slightly modified form in a set of *'das log* manuscripts collected by Kunga Rangdrol (bya bral kun dga' rang grol 1888). This text condenses the portions of the *rnam thar* before and after Nangsa Ohbum's death, but closely mimics the *rnam thar*'s description of her experiences in the underworld.

8. Two definitions of the term *rnam thar* are outlined. The first: "*skyes bu dam pa'i mdzad spyod lo rgyus kyi gzhung*" (the story of the history of the works of a holy/virtuous person) or "*rtogs pa brjod pa'i bstan bcos*" (commentaries [on the communications of the teachings]). The second: "*rnam grol*," or complete liberation (Zhang 1984).

9. These are broken down into: (1) general discourses (*mdo'i sde*); (2) proclamations in song (*dbyangs kyi bsnyad pa'i sd*); (3) the Buddha's prophesies of the enlightenment of disciples (*lung du bstan pa'i sde*); (4) poetic proclamations in verse (*tshigs su bcad pa'i sde*); (5) aphorisms (*ched du brjod pa'i sde*); (6) declarations of rules of monastic discipline (*gleng gzhi'i sde*); (7) narratives of persons other than the Buddha (*rtogs pa brjod pa'i sde*); (8) parables (*de lta bu byung ba'i sde*); (9) stories of the Buddha's previous lives (*skyes pa'i rabs kyi sde*); (10) extensive sayings (*shin tu rgyas pa'i sde*); (11) descriptions of marvelous events that concern the Buddha or his disciples (*rmad du byung ba'i sde*); and (12) doctrines (*gtan la dbab pa'i sde*) (Kunsang 2003).

10. See Willis 1987b; Gutschow 2004; Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Makley 1997, 2007; and Schrempf and Schneider 2015.

11. For English-language resources on the lives of Tibetan women, see Nam mkha'i snying po 1983; Allione 1984; Dowman 1994; Edou 1996; Havnevik 1997, 1999; Lama Chönam and Sangye Khandro 1998; Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 2002; Schaeffer 2004; Diemberger 2007; Jacoby 2007, 2014; and Rossi 2008a, 2008b. For European-language

resources on Tibetan *'das log*, see Epstein 1982; Pommaret 1989; and Cuevas 2007, 2008. For summaries of the story of Nangsa Ohbum in European languages not otherwise mentioned in this article, see Daur and Jongchay Rinpoche 1971; Kolmas 1993; Ross 1995; Gutschow 2001; and Henrion-Dourcy 2004, 2017.

12. “*Repas* had few possessions and lived in caves and huts, dependent upon the limited patronage of villagers. They were dedicated to meditation practice and not scholarship. The term *repa* later fell into disuse, being replaced by ‘Naljorpa’ (*rnal-'byor-pa*), the Tibetan equivalent of ‘yogin’, to mean a non-monastic, non-householder practitioner. *Ras* means cotton, and *pa* is a substantiative. A *repa* is therefore ‘someone who wears cotton’, referring to someone who has mastered the practice of caṇḍālī (*gtum-mo*)” (Roberts 2007, 2).

13. Most closely associated with the Sanskrit term *dākinī* (*mkha' 'gro ma*), the term refers to a female goddess. Janice D. Willis defines the term as follows:

[...] we may say that the *outer dākinī* is those varied forms in which the *dākinī* appears, whether human or deific, benign or wrathful, beneficent or malevolent; the *inner dākinī* manifests when the advanced meditator successfully transforms him or herself into the great *dākinī* (usually Vajrayoginī, herself); and the *secret dākinī* is the formless power, energy, and pure bliss of Voidness (Willis 1987a, 68).

14. This mandala is *sin dbu ra* (མིན་དུ་ར་) in the Tibetan text. This term refers to red powder made of lead used in some mandala rituals, as well as to a particular mandala empowerment specific to the female Tantric deity Vajrayogini. The empowerment is still given in Sakya centers around the world. These practices are examples of some of the highest forms of tantric Buddhism. The meditation and practice involve a long series of generation and completion visualizations of deities in the Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini pantheon. The ultimate goal of these meditations is complete enlightenment achieved via understanding of non-duality.

15. This term is highly honorific and can be translated many ways, including mother and father, sexual consorts, husband and wife, masculine and feminine deities, or as titles of respect roughly equivalent to lord and lady. Although the exact translation of the term is ambiguous, it is clearly a title of respect and not a degrading address.

16. There is a thriving debate in tantric studies on the agency of women involved in tantric practices in India and Tibet; see for example Shaw 1995; Campbell 2001; Urban 2003, 2009; and Jacoby 2014.

17. The practice of creative editing (*jiāgōng*, 加工) was especially popular in Chinese translations of ethnic minority folklore in the 1950s to 1980s. For more on this editing process in the Naxi context, see Rees 2010, 130.

18. The only significant change in the 1978 text is in the title (bod ljongs lha mo tshogs pa 1978). Although Nangsa Ohbum may be classified as a *rnam thar* (religious biography), a *'das log* (reanimation tale), or a *'khrab gzhung* (performance script), her tale is hardly ever classified as a *sgrung* (story, fable, legend). The fact that the 1978 text is entitled *snang sa 'od 'bum gyi sgrung bzhugs so* (Here is written the story of Nangsa Ohbum), marks a significant shift away from religious to folk text, firmly placing the story within the realm of fiction. I have come across no other instance in which Nangsa Ohbum's tale is referred to as a *sgrung*. This reclassification might very well have been a purposeful attempt to remove religious and devotional connotations from the text.

19. The Tibet Autonomous Region Opera Association was involved in creatively edited versions of Nangsa Ohbum performed throughout China in the 1980s (Tunggar Losang Chinlai 1981; Mackerras 1988; Yè lín 1980; Yihe batu 1984). They are closely tied to more recent publications of print and media concerning Tibetan opera. These include, but are not limited to, the following book set, CD set, and DVD set connected with UNESCO China Intangible Cultural Heritage projects (*bod rang skyong ljongs mang tshogs rgyu rtsal khang* 2010; dpal ldan dbang phyug 2010; lha sa grong khyer khreng kun chus nyang bran dmangs khrod rgyu rtsal tshogs pa 2012).

20. These include the *rnam thar* of *rgya bza' bal bza'*, *snang sa 'od 'bum*, *dri med kun ldan*, *'gro ba bzang mo*, *gzugs kyi nyi ma*, *gcung po don yod dang don grub*, *chos rgyal nor bzang*,

and *pad ma 'od 'bar*. A smattering of other texts have been and are continuously performed, including the *rnam thar* of *dad pa brten pa*, *ras chung pa*, *thang stong rgyal po*, *mi la ras pa*, and others.

21. Although the verb kow-tow in English has a generally negative connotation, this translation may not be purposefully degrading. The origin of this particular translation is unknown, but it is not unique to descriptions of Tibetan prostration and bowing practices.

22. For more on the complex relationship between Tibetan authors, Chinese language, and the difficulties of expression and publication in post-1980 PRC, see Tsering Shakya 2001.

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