

# Early Book Production and Printing in Bhutan\*

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## 1 Introduction

This paper presents an account of early book production and printing in Bhutan. Though nobody has done research yet, many written histories and biographies of eminent teachers suggest that mass book production has been done in Bhutan since 14th century. Many treasure discoverers such as Gu ru Chos dbang, rDo rje Gling pa and Padma gling pa were popular and thus their treasure teachings have been produced in various places in Bhutan.

From the 16th century, many *bKa' gyur* and other canonical corpuses have been produced across the country. This is confirmed by the digital library of the Shejun Agency<sup>1</sup> that contains books from 37 monasteries and private libraries in Bhutan. The collection contains tens of thousands of miscellaneous titles and some 28 canonical corpuses including eight *bKa' gyurs*, seven '*Bums*, six *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, three *dGongs 'dus*, and two *bKa' brgyad* collections of manuscripts. According to the evidence we have, most of them were produced between the 16th and 18th centuries although in some cases it is not known when they were created.

By the 17th century, the tradition of carving woodblocks was practised widely in the country and every major temple had started to carve woodblocks to meet its own needs. One good example for this is the collection of *dhāraṇī*. There were four woodblocks for *dhāraṇī* collections in Bhutan. Most of the temples carved woodblocks of the *Diamond Sutra* as Bhutanese used it to

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1 This is an Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research, founded by Dr Karma Phuntsho. I am very privileged to have had the opportunity to work for such an organization under a great scholar like him.

learn how to read. Some of the temples had also carved blocks for alphabets. Woodblocks for prayer flags and images are also common in Bhutan. Almost every village temple has them.

The traditions of printing and book production in Bhutan are generally associated with Buddhism and not so much with the archaic animistic beliefs and practices Bhutanese call Bon. Therefore, firstly, this paper presents a brief history of Buddhism in Bhutan, and then the history of book production, followed by a history of printing based on the books that were printed from the earliest woodblocks in Bhutan. These books are from the collection of digital books created by Shejun Agency from the temple archives in Bhutan, with the support of the Endangered Archive Programme of the British Library and UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council through Cambridge University.

## 2 Buddhism in Bhutan

According to Bhutanese historians, Buddhism was introduced in Bhutan by the Tibetan emperor Srong btsan sGam po in the 7th century. The emperor built Byams pa lHa khang in Bumthang and sKyer chu lHa khang in Paro as border and frontier taming temples while he was building Ra sa 'Phrul snang or the Jo khang temple in Lhasa. With the building of these temples, the belief in the Triple Gem, which is the principle tenet of Buddhism, was introduced in the country.<sup>2</sup>

According to Bhutanese tradition, in the 8th century, Padmasambhava visited Bumthang before he visited Tibet upon invitation of King Sindhu of Bumthang lCags mkhar. Padmasambhava gave 'refuge vows' and empowerments to the king and his subjects, making them followers of Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> Later, Padmasambhava visited Bhutan from Tibet several times. He is said to have visited the entire country without leaving untouched any piece of land, not even the size of the imprint of a horse's hoof. He hid treasures in the earth, boulders, lakes and cliffs. Thus Padmasambhava blessed and converted the country into a hidden land.<sup>4</sup> Padmasambhava also founded many meditation centres in

2 dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 144; Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 23; Phun tshogs dBang 'dus 2007, 59; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 90; and Slob dpon gNag mdog 1986, 59. For detailed discussion, see Karma Phuntsho 2013, 77–84.

3 Dri med Gling pa n.d.; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, p. 140–143; and dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 91. For a discussion on Dri med Gling pa's identity, see Karma Phuntsho 2013, 91–101.

4 dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 148–151; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 92; and Slob dpon gNag mdog 1986, 59.

Bhutan including sTag tshangs in Paro and Sengge rDzong in Lhuntse, where Rlangs chen dPal gyi Seng ge and Ye shes mTsho rgyal meditated respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Later, in the 11th Century, many treasure discoverers such as Bon po Brag tshal and Raksha Chos 'bar visited Paro and Bumthang. They revealed treasure teachings and spread the teachings.<sup>6</sup> In the following centuries, other great teachers, such as Lo ras pa, Lha nang pa and Klong chen Rab 'byams (1308–1364) from both the rNying ma or old school and gSar ma or new schools also travelled to Bhutan.<sup>7</sup> Some of them established monastic institutions and gave instruction so that the Buddhist doctrine spread in the country.

### 3 Book Culture in Bhutan

According to an oral account, the golden manuscript of the 8000 verses of *Prajñapāramitā* currently preserved at Chal temple in sTangs as a sacred relic belonged to the prince Khyi kha Ra thod, who settled in mKhan pa lJongs after his father king Khri srong lDe btsan banished him from Tibet. The story goes that the prince Khyi kha Ra thod resettled in Chos 'khor valley in Bumthang towards the end of his life and the relic was placed in his personal temple. Later, the temple was gutted by fire, when the book of 8000 verses of *Prajñapāramitā* is believed to have flown away and landed on a rock in a field in Gong mkhar village in Bumthang. Then it was found by the group of people from sTangs when they were travelling to Chos 'khor and they took it to Chal temple where it is currently preserved.<sup>8</sup> If this oral account has any historical basis, the culture of the book had already spread in Bhutan by the 8th century.

The treasure texts also hint that book culture existed in the country from the 8th century. According to the treasure text of Ratna Gling pa and Padma gling pa, the cycle of Vajrakīla and *Klong gsal gsang ba snying bcud* teachings were

5 Padma gling pa 1975, vol. Zha, p. 697; Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' yas 1976, vol. 1, 331–335; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 92; Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 46; and Kun bzang Nges don Klong yangs 1976, 50. Gu ru bKra shis also recounts the story of Rlangs chen dpal gyi sengge meditated at sTag tshang in Paro (Gu ru bKra shis 1998, 170).

6 Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' yas 1976, vol. 1, 369–416; Kun bzang Nges don Klong yangs 1976, 134–184; and dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 156–162. For a list of treasure discoverers who were active in Bhutan in the 11th to 20th century, see Karma Phuntsho 2013, 152–153.

7 dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 163–164; Chos grags bZang po 1994, 193; mChog grub dPal 'bar 1984, f. 22r; and bSod nams Chos grub 1994, 122–123.

8 The oral history has recounted by Padma Tshe dbang in his work *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i sgron me* (1994, 40–41). For detailed information on mKhan pa lJongs and Khyi kha Ra thod, see Padma gling pa (1975, vol. Tsa, 499–511) and Karma Phuntsho (2013, 103–107).

written by Ye shes mTsho rgyal at Sengge rDzong in Lhuntse before it was hidden as treasure by Padmasambhava.<sup>9</sup> *The Prophecy called Clear Mirror*, a treasure teaching of Dri med Gling pa, narrates a story of how the translator lDan mang rTse mang wrote all the teachings of *rDzogs chen gsal ba'i me long* including the prophecy under the command of Padmasambhava in the lCags mkhar palace at Bumthang.<sup>10</sup> Some Bhutanese historians even believe that the translator lDan mang rTse mang invented the Bhutanese script, during that time, which is currently used as the official script of Bhutan.<sup>11</sup> These treasure texts and hagiographies, however, appeared only from the 12th century, nearly four centuries after the events they report. Although later reports and ancient oral accounts indicate that the production and use of books had spread by the 8th century, we do not have strong textual evidence from that time showing that book culture was thriving then.

By the 12th century, book culture was widespread in Bhutan. As I mentioned earlier, many treasure discoverers (*gter ston*) such as Bon po Brag tshal, Raksha Chos 'bar, Nyang ral Nyi ma 'Od zer (1124–1192) and Ku sa sMan pa visited Bhutan and discovered treasure teachings from Paro and Bumthang.<sup>12</sup> In 1194 AD, gZi brjid dPal (1164–1224), a master from 'Bri gung bKa' rgyud order who was popularly known as Lha nang pa after he founded a monastery at Lha nang in Tibet, visited Bhutan and settled at Cal kha in Paro.<sup>13</sup> While he was at Cal kha, he gave teachings on *Chakrasaṃvara* to more than 1700 students.<sup>14</sup> He also composed many commentaries at Cal kha including *bSlab gsum lam gyi them skas rin po che'i bang mdzod* which is his only surviving work.<sup>15</sup> The biog-

9 Ratna Gling pa (1984–1985, vol. 1, p. 89): *Kho mo bdag 'dra ye shes mtsho rgyal gyis: mon kha ne ring seng ge rdzong gsum du: snying po'i yang zhun dpe tshar gsum du bkod: gnam skas can dang dang lung khra mo'i brag: padma'i rdzong gsang gsum du gter du sbas: de rnams nang nas gser gyi yang zhun ltar: kho mo'i thugs bcud 'di nyid man re skan*. Padma gling pa (1975, vol. Ca, p. 9.) Most of the *vajrakīla* teachings, including *bKa' ma* texts, agree that Ye shes mTsho rgyal meditated on *Vajrakīla* at Seng ge rDzong.

10 Dri med Gling pa n.d., f. 2v.

11 Slob dpon gNag mdog 1986, 29.

12 Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' yas 1976, vol. 1, 369–416; Kun bzang Nges don Klong yangs 1976, 134–184; and dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 156–62. Except Nyang ral Nyi ma 'Od zer, the exact date of when they appeared is not known but dGe 'dun Rin chen dates them to the 1st and 2nd cycle of Rab 'byung.

13 Jana Vajra 2004, 119–121; Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 73; and Karma Phuntsho 2013, 139. Karma Phuntsho and Padma Tshe dbang noted Lha nang pa visited Bhutan in 1193–4 respectively.

14 Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 73: *Cal khar bzhugs dus mkhan po gzad pa sogs ri la byon lhag tshogs pa stong bdun brgya nyer lnga'i tshul shing bzhes/ra li/bde mchog/'dus brgyad/'jigs byed/phyag chen lnga ldan/na ro chos drug sogs bshad sgrub kyi bstan pa dar bar mdzad/*

15 Jana vajra 2004, 133: *sPyal dkar bka' bstan bcos thams cad kyi snying po bslab gsum lam gyi them skas rin po che'i bang mdzod le'u nyi shu pa/rigs can gsum la thun mong du dgongs*

raphy mentions a patron of his from Cang who offered him *bka' rgyas 'bring bsdus gsum* which refers to the 100,000 verses, 20,000 verses and 8000 verses of *Prajnapāramitā* teachings.<sup>16</sup> The biography also mentions that he introduced the tradition of reading and writing *Dharma* books at Cal kha.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, a lady called 'Od gsal 'bum and her son bSod nams Grags pa, who were disciples of Zhang g.Yu brag pa (1123–1193), visited Bhutan and founded sPang ka gShong temple in Dbang 'dus pho brang as prophesied by their teacher. Sometime later, Zhang g.Yu brag pa also visited sPang ka gShong through eastern Bhutan upon the invitation of 'Od gsal 'bum and bSod nams Grags pa. On the way, he is said to have composed a eulogy to sPang ka gShong from a place called bSam gtan sgang. He stayed at sPang ka gShong for six months, giving empowerments and teachings to the disciples, before he left for Gung thang mchod pa in Tibet.<sup>18</sup>

Later, in the 13th century, Lo ras pa (1187–1250), a master of upper 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud tradition, also visited Bumthang and founded Thar pa gling temple.<sup>19</sup> When he was at Bumthang he had more than 2800 monk students.<sup>20</sup> At

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*nas jo sras lho brag pas zhus nas mdzad/ sngags mtshan nyid thams cad kyi don gsal bar bya ba'i phyir/ ston 'jam gyis zhus nas ye shes sgron ma mdzad/ bye 'u stod nag mas 'bu mang po zos pa zgigs nas bsam mi khyab bcu pa mdzad/ gzhan yang rigs gsum mgon po'i bstod pa la sogs pa mang du mdzad nas gda'.*

- 16 Jana Vajra 2004, 133: *gZhan yang spyal ka na bzhugs pa'i dus su/ rkyang po bas rgya ba'i slob dpon du bltas nas/ gcung po byang chub dpal bkyigs pa'i dus su/ nga 'dir bsdad pa la khyed mi dges na/ gzhan du phyin pas chog rgya rkyang po grang chung gsum la nye ring med/ btsun pa de 'khyig na yang 'khyigs gsungs nas gshegs par byung bas/ rkyang po bas gcung po spyan sngar phul/ ja ting chen po byas/ bka' rgyas 'bring bsdus gsum dang / rta bzang po gcig la sogs pa la rgyal chen po mdzad/ de'i dus na rkyang po bas zhabs spyi bor blangs te/ rgya ba dang khyad med par mdzad skad.* It is not clear what *rgyal chen po* meant. But I think it probably could be *'bul ba rgya chen po*. However, it is clear that a person from Cang had done something with *bka' rgyas 'bring bsdus gsum*.
- 17 Jana Vajra 2004, 121: *Sa phyogs de na mi shi'i dge rtsa dud 'gro bsad nas byed pa de rgyun bcad nas/ bla ma'i zhabs tog dge 'dun gyi snyen bkur/ chos kyi 'bri klog bla ma la sems bskyed dang dbang bskur zhu ba'i srol gtod do/ .*
- 18 According to Sangs rgyas rDo rje, the story is written in the biography of Dakini 'Od gsal 'bum which is currently preserved at sPangs ka gShong dGon pa as a sacred relic. See Sangs rgyas rDo rje 1999, 196–197.
- 19 sNa tshogs Rang grol 1993, 375–76; and Karma Phuntsho 2013, 145–146. The exact date of his visit to Bhutan is not known.
- 20 sNa tshogs Rang grol 1993, 368: *De nas lho mon la byon/ mon bum thang du phyags phebs pa'i dus su grwa pa nyis stong brgyad brgya tsam 'tshogs/ mtha' 'khob chos ma dar ba'i sems can dud 'gro dang 'dra ba namas la las rgyu 'bras/ skyabs 'gro sems bskyed/ bsnyen gnas ma Ni sdiq spong dge bsgrub kyi dam bca' sogs dkar po'i las 'grel gzhaq cing sems can mang po smin grol mdzad/.*

the same time, Pha jo 'Brug sgom Zhig po arrived in western Bhutan and gave teachings of *Ma ni bka' 'bum* and *Mahāmudrā*<sup>21</sup> at rDo gdan na in Thimphu probably based on the books given to him by his teacher Dharma Sengge (1178–1237) when he left Tibet for Bhutan.<sup>22</sup> He was also a treasure discoverer and had discovered treasure teachings of the deity Hayagriva.<sup>23</sup> So, he must have taught this treasure text too.

In 1289 AD, a master called bDe mchog (1179–1265), who was a son of lHa nang pa, visited Bumthang and founded Sum 'phrang temple.<sup>24</sup> He was a yogi following the Vajrakīlaya practice and the text on Vajrakīlaya, which local people believe was written by him, is still preserved in Sum 'phrang temple as sacred relic.<sup>25</sup> So, all these accounts prove that the book culture was widespread in Bhutan from the 12th century.

According to a treasure text of Ratna Gling pa, a previous incarnation of Ratna Gling pa was born in Bumthang and became an expert in *tantra*. He is said to have become disciple of treasure discoverer rGya zhang Khrom pa. His next incarnation was also born in Chos 'khor village of Bumthang and was said to have taught *dharma* such as recitation of *Ma ni* and other prayers in his homeland.<sup>26</sup> The chronicled history of rNying ma School by Gu ru bKra shis suggests rGya zhang Khrom pa might have appeared one generation earlier

21 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d., f. 57r.

22 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d., ff. 17r–21; Karma Phuntsho 2013, 142–145; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 207–217; and Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 80–87. Karma Phuntsho and dGe 'dun Rin chen noted that Pha jo's date as 1184–1251 and arrived in Bhutan in 1222. While Padma Tshe dbang noted Pha jo's date as 1179–1246 and arrived in Bhutan in 1218.

23 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d., f. 16v.

24 gSang sngags 1983, 107; and Karma Phuntsho 2013, 140–141. sMyos ston bDe mchog alias 'Khrul zhig Chos rje settled in Bhutan in the year of 1228.

25 The text is a commentary on the root *tantra* of *vajrakīlaya* called *rDo rje phur pa gsang ba'i rgyud*. It seems that the text was composed by sMyos ston bDe mchog himself because the title of the text reads as *'dPal gsang rgyud kyi 'grel pa sMyos ston bdag gi khyad chos lags*, which means the text is a special feature of sMyos ston bDe mchog. The text is not found anywhere else even in the collection of *vajrakīlaya* teachings published by Bod kyi shes rig zhib 'jug khang in Khrengtu'u, China.

26 Ratna Gling pa n.d., f. 5v: *De nas bum thang byams pa gling du pha rgyal po dar dang: ma sri thar lcams kyi bur skyes te: tshul khrims rdo rje zhes bya ba lo bcu gsum nas sngags la mkhas par 'gyur ro: snubs sangs rgyas ye shes skye ba rgya zhang khrom gyis man ngag mang du byin nas: nus pa dang ldan pa la jo bo lha dbang bya ba mngon gyis las dbang gis zas kyis sbyor bas nyer gcig la tshe'i dus byas nas: slar yang bum thang chos 'khor du pha sangs rgyas bstan grags: ma ma gcig bzang rgyal ma'i bur skyes te: lo brgyad la rta mgrin lha dgu'i zhal mthong: mngon shes mang du shar nas: thams cad kyi byin rlabs mngon shes can du grags: sems can gyi srog skyob pa dang: ma Ni thun bskul sogs 'gro don cher bskul kyang:*

than *Mi la ras pa* (1052–1135).<sup>27</sup> It shows that the book culture was existent in Bhutan, perhaps earlier than the 11th century.

#### 4 Printing Culture in Bhutan

As we discussed earlier, treasure teachings of many *gter ston* have flourished in Bhutan throughout the second millennium. Most of the treasure teachings contain illustrations and diagrams for protection often used as amulets, and *za yig* or mantra for eating.<sup>28</sup> So we can assume that there was widespread custom of using amulets and *za yig* during those times in the society. The autobiography of Padma gling pa also indicates that the tradition of erecting prayer flags was existent during the time of Padma gling pa. It writes that when Padma gling pa was in his youth, he would show interest in religious activities such as building temples, writing scripts, and erecting prayer flags etc.<sup>29</sup> Through such customs, we can infer that there was probably a printing system to mass produce those images in order to meet the public demand. Even today we find piles of blocks of illustrations and diagrams to be used as amulets or mandala, and images of mantras for prayer flags in many temples.

Although we do not have record of a full printing technology being in use in Bhutan before the 15th century, a seal carved on a piece of wood and kept as a sacred relic is found in mKho chung temple<sup>30</sup> in Lhuntse. On the seal, the word Padma gling pa is engraved and so the people of mKho chung believe that the seal belonged to Padma gling pa. If the seal belonged to Padma gling pa, then we can confirm that the art of wood carving existed since the 15th century. However, printing technology was certainly in use in many parts of the country by the end of the 15th century. To substantiate this, I shall present four texts printed from wood blocks in Bhutan.

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*rgya nag tu skyes dus kyis rten 'brel nyes pas: yang nyer gcig la tshe'i dus byas rtags khyad par can yang byung bar 'gyur ro:*

27 Gu ru bKra shis n.d., 369.

28 Padma gling pa 1974, vol. Kha, p. 473; and Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' yas 1976, vol. 67, pp. 183–654.

29 Padma gling pa n.d.1, f. 27.

30 It was founded by Padma gling pa's son Kun dga' dBang po around 1530. Photograph of the seal was given in the Sangs rgyas rDo rje's work. See Sangay Dorji 2012, p. 39.

## 5 Biography and Works of 'Ba' ra ba

The first woodblocks I shall present are the woodblocks for the autobiography and spiritual songs of 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dPal bzang (1310–1391). I do not have the text printed from the blocks, but the biography of Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan confirms that a set of woodblocks for the biography and the spiritual songs of 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dPal bzang were carved at Paro 'Brang rgyas kha in Bhutan.<sup>31</sup>

The biography says:

Then, when autumn arrived, [Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan] travelled to 'Brang rgyas kha. While, the woodblocks for the biography and spiritual songs of the precious Supreme Being ['Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dPal bzang] were being carved, due to the cruelty of evil spirits, a big earthquake hit the region. Although the lama's residence was in poor shape, the lord was sitting in meditation in the posture of yogic gaze and because of his compassion there were no casualties among either humans or cattle. At that time, all the patrons marvelled and said: "All good mansions of others have collapsed and killed many people and cattle, but in the lama's residence, which is in poor shape, there are no casualties of either humans or cattle. This must be due to the blessings of the bKa' brgyud hierarchs, the compassion of the lord himself and the power of *dākinī* and *dharma* protectors." Then, after completion of the woodblocks, [Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan] returned to 'Ba' ra with the woodblocks. When they arrived, resident priests of the establishment pleased him with great offerings and honour. He entered in to a strict retreat in 'Bar chung byang.<sup>32</sup>

31 'Brang rgyas dGon pa was founded by rGyal mtshan dPal bzang perhaps in the year 1354. Though none of following sources mention the date of rGyal mtshan dPal bzang's visit of Bhutan and its foundation, the autobiography of rGyal mtshan dPal bzang merely mentions (211) that his first visit to Bhutan occurred in the same year as the assassination of rGyal ba bZang po, the 20th ruler of Sa skya. According to rTa tshag Tshe dbang rGyal mtshan (1994, 379) and Blo bzang rGya mtsho (1997, 322–333), rGyal ba bZang po was assassinated around 1352. rGyal mtshan dPal bzang spent about a month in Paro during his first visit and then returned to Tibet. But he again visited Paro in the next year. During that time he laid the foundation of 'Brang rgyas dGon pa at the behest of his patrons Khro rgyal rDo rje. For more details see Padma Tshe dbang (1994), pp. 91–95 and Karma Phuntsho (2013), pp. 182–185.

32 *Chos kyi Grags pa* (n.d), ff. 18v–19r: *De nas nam zla ston du gyur pa dang / 'brang rgyas khar phebs/ skyes mchog rin po che'i nam thar mgur 'bum dang bcas pa'i par bzhengs pa'i dus su/ nag phyogs kyi mi ma yin nams kyi gdug rtsub las lung pa der sa g.yos chen po byung*



Another version of Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan's biography discussed by Franz-Karl Ehrhard (2000: 55–65) also recounts the event.<sup>33</sup> Both the biographies clearly mention that Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan initiated carving the woodblocks for the biography and spiritual songs of rGyal mtshan dPal bzang at Paro 'Brang rgyas kha. But no detailed information is given about when it was carved and how many people were involved.

Nevertheless, the account confirms that the woodblocks were carved towards the end of 15th century. According to the biographies, Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan (1475–1530) entered into retreat for nine months when he was around 15 years old. While he was in retreat, he heard the news that his parents had arranged a bride for him. Because of that he ran away from the retreat to Jag and then to Zab phu. He spent a month at Zab phu receiving teachings from Kun dga' Nyi ma (1412–1509). By then, followers from 'Ba' ra reached there and requested him to return to 'Ba' ra. Therefore he had to return, but he refused to go to 'Ba' ra and stayed at Chab phu until the marriage arrangement was cancelled. He went to 'Ba' ra after the father of the girl agreed to cancel the marriage with compensation. Then, he built a small hut at 'Bar chung rDo rje brag and entered into strict retreat. While he was in retreat, his father passed away in Bhutan. Thus, he visited Bhutan first time for his father's funeral. After

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*bas/ bla brang zoms par yod 'dug na'ang / rje 'di nyid thugs dam ting nge 'dzin gyi ngang nas spyan lta stangs su bzhugs 'dug cing / de lta bu'i thugs rjes mi phyugs gang la'ang gnod pa med par gyur/ de'i tshé sbyin bdag rnams na re/ mi gzhan ma rnams kyi mkhar bzang po tsho 'gyel/ mi phyugs thams cad 'chi lugs la/ bla brang zoms po 'dir mi nor gang la'ang skyon med pa 'di/ bka' brgyud gong ma dang / rje rang gi thugs rje/ mkha' 'gro chos skyong gi nus mthu yin zer kun ngo mtshar du byed do/ de nas par rnams legs par grub nas/ par gdan drangs 'ba' rar phebs pa'i tshé/ gzhi bzhugs sgom chen rnams kyis rnyed pa dang bkur sti rgya chen pos mnyes par mdzad cing / 'bar chung byang du sku mtshams shin tu dam pa la bzhugs/.*

- 33 Kunga Peljor 1970, 450–452: *De nas skyes mchog rin po che'i rnam thar mgur 'bum sogs par du bsgrubs/ lan cig 'brang rgyas kyi bla brang de zoms po yod rtsor bzhugs pa'i dus/ sa g.yos shin du che ba cig byung / klungs tshor/ mi phyugs mang po la god che ba byung na'ang / rje nyid/ rdo rje lta bu'i ting nge 'dzin la/ g.yo ba med pa'i byin brlabs kyis/ gzims khang de nyid shin tu groms pa yod kyang / nyim pa gang yang ma byung bas/ sbyin bdag rnams kyang bsnyen bkur rgya chen po khur te byung nas/ mda' mtshor pe'u bzang po tsho yang zhig nas nyes pa chen po byung 'dug pa la/ 'dir gzims khang thoms sho la nyes gyong gang yang med pa 'di/ la la dkon mchog gi bka' drin yin zer/ la la tshé ring mas bskyabs pa yin zer/ la la rin po che'i byin brlabs yin zer/ rje nyid kyi dgongs pa la kha rtsang gin 'di dang / da lan gyi sa g.yos 'di par bzhengs 'di'i rmgur yin par 'dug/ god kha mi yong ba de dkon mchog gi bka' drin yin snyam pa byung gsung / de nas par bzhengs rnams grub/ lho pa rnams la chos dang / spyi dpon so so la zang zing gi gnang sbyin gyis tshim par mdzad/ lo bcu gnyis kyi bar du 'khrug pa mi 'ong ba'i dam bca' bskyar lcag dang gan rgya bzhes/.*

completing the funeral, he returned to Tibet, making a promise to visit Bhutan again in three years. He also made people swear an oath not to cause conflict for three years. Later he received a messenger who was sent by patrons from Paro to invite him. The messenger reported to him that people of Paro were about to break out in conflict. Thus he visited Bhutan a second time and at this time, he initiated the carving of the blocks.<sup>34</sup>

From the above accounts, his father seems to have passed away in the year 1493 when he was around 17 years old and the woodblocks seem to have been carved in the year 1496 when he was at the age of 21. If this calculation is correct, then the woodblocks would be the earliest of the four sets of woodblocks discussed in this paper. Unfortunately, we do not have a single page of the text printed from the woodblocks, even at 'Brang rgyas kha where the blocks were created.

As discussed earlier, the woodblocks were taken to 'Ba' ra in Tibet immediately after the carving was completed.<sup>35</sup> When Nam mkha' rDo rje was initiating the carving of the blocks for the collected works of 'Ba' ra ba at rDzong dkar in Tibet, in the year 1540 (the colophon is given in Ehrhard 2000, 130–140), the block prints printed from the blocks of 'Brang rgyas kha were used as an exemplar for the autobiography and spiritual songs. The colophon of the autobiography and spiritual songs contained in the collected works of 'Ba' ra ba printed from the blocks of rDzong dkar says the following:

Up to this point is the biography and spiritual songs  
Of the accomplished master 'Ba ra ba rGyal mtshan dPal bzang,  
According to the inexhaustible prints made  
By the reincarnate master Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan.  
Except for [differences in] small portions of spellings and grammar  
In its upper part, the exemplar is produced as it is  
By the monk holding three vows, Nam mkha' rDo rje  
In the year of Mouse in mNga' ris rDzong dkar.<sup>36</sup>

34 See Chos rgyal Lhun grub (1970, 615–618) for the information about carving the blocks.

35 Chos kyi Grags pa n.d., f. 19r: *De nas par rnams legs par grub nas/ par gdan drangs 'ba' rar phebs pa'i tshe/ gzhi bzhugs sgom chen rnams kyis rnyed pa dang bkur sti rgya chen pos mnyes par mdzad cing / 'bar chung byang du sku mtshams shin tu dam pa la bzhugs/.*

36 Namkha Dorji n.d., f. 193r: *'Di yan grub pa'i skyes mchog 'ba' ra ba/ /rgyal mtshan dpal bzang dag gi nram mgur ni/ /sprul pa'i sku mchog nam mkha' rgyal mtshan gyis/ /mi zad par du spel bar mdzad bzhin la/ /stod phyogs phyi mo dang gtugs brda phrad kyi/ /cha shas phra mo ma gtogs ji lta bar/ /sum ldan dge slong nam mkha' rdo rje yis/ /byi lo mnga' ris rdzong dkar par du sgrubs/.*

According to the colophon, the woodblocks of 'Brang rgyas kha were only for the autobiography and spiritual songs. In the woodblocks of rDzong dkar, three more titles were added such as the secret biography, a guidebook for practicing dharma and questions and answers. However, it is not known whether any of the block prints and blocks of 'Brang rgyas kha still exist.

## 6 Biography and Collected Writings of Padma gling pa

The second set of woodblocks for our study is that of the woodblocks of the autobiography and collected writings of Padma gling pa. These were preserved at Kun bzang Brag until the Division of Conservation under the Department of Culture brought it to Thimphu for repair and fumigation. As the woodblocks have been badly damaged by insects, it is unlikely that any copy can be printed from them now.

Nonetheless, the block prints of the autobiography and collected writings of Padma gling pa printed from the woodblocks mentioned above were popular in Bhutan and almost all temples that have a library have a copy. Some temples such as Dung dkar sNag tshang have more than 10 copies printed from these woodblocks. Karma Phuntsho has written about the woodblocks as follows:

Although the autobiography itself does not have any colophon or record to help us date exactly when the woodblocks were carved, we know from records in other volumes of the same collection that the blocks were carved for the entire set of Padma gling pa's writings (*Pad gling bka' 'bum*) under the supervision of Zla ba rGyal mtshan. Locals in the area believe that the woodblocks or at least some of them were personally carved by Padma gling pa himself. So, they treasure them as cultural relics. Although it is very unlikely that the blocks for the biography were carved in Padma gling pa's lifetime, there is very little doubt that they were produced in the generation after him.<sup>37</sup>

As Karma Phuntsho mentions, although the autobiography does not have a colophon, there is no doubt that it was carved together with the woodblocks for the collected writings of Padma gling pa. To prove this, I have examined the block prints printed from the two blocks. As a result, I found that there are several different layouts and calligraphical styles used in both the *Pad gling bka' 'bum* and the autobiography. For example, some blockprints have the

37 Karma Phuntsho 2013, vi–vii.

layout, which has thin and double lines on the margins and others have the layout with a bold line on the margins and a thin line on top and at the bottom of the text as a border. Both types of layout are used in the block prints of the *Pad gling bka' 'bum* and the autobiography. Calligraphical styles in the block prints with these different layouts are also exactly same. It is thus highly plausible that the *Pad gling bka' 'bum* and the autobiography were carved by the same scribes and carvers.

The woodblocks of the collected writings of Padma gling pa were carved at Kun bzang brag in Bhutan under the supervision of Thugs sras Zla ba rGyal mtshan (1499–1586) who was a prominent son of Padma gling pa. The colophon has the following:

The marvellous supreme Bodhisattva Zla ba,  
Who is the embodiment of all Buddhas of three times,  
Supreme guide to liberation who appeared for the sake of sentient beings,  
Foremost representative of two treasure discoverers,  
The supreme precious son of Padma gling pa,

The emanation of Avalokiteshvara, a pride of the world,  
The true embodiment of glorious Hayagriva, the lord of power,  
And supreme refuge of all gods and men in the world  
Created the excellent woodblocks in the supreme hermitage Kun bzang brag

As an inexhaustible treasury for spreading dharma,  
In order to return the kindness and fulfil the wish of supreme father  
Padma gling pa,  
And in order to benefit the Buddha's teachings and sentient beings.<sup>38</sup>

38 Padma gling pa n.d.2, sect. pha, f. 13: *Kyai/ dus gsum sangs rgyas kun gyi ngo bo nyid/ /gro ba'i don byon thar pa'i lam ston mchog /gter ston rin chen rnam gnyis rgyal tshab rje/ /pad gling dngos kyi sras mchog rin po che/ /thugs rje chen po'i rnam sprul 'gro ba'i dpal/ /dpal chen rta mgrin sku dngos dbang gi rgyal/ /'jig rten lha mi kun gyi skyabs gnas mchog /ngo 'tshar mchog gi rgyal sras zla ba yis/ /yab kyi rgyal po pha mchog pad gling gi /sku drin bsabs cing thugs dgongs rdzogs phyir dang / /sangs rgyas bstan dang 'gro la phan phyir du/ /chos sbyin mi zad gter chen par mchog 'di/ /sgrub pa'i gnas mchog kun bzang brag tu bsgrubs/ /de yi mthu dang bden pa'i byin brlabs kyis/ /bdud rigs stongs shing dgra gegs kun zhi nas/ /rgyal ba'i bstan pa yun du gnas gyur cig /.*

The dedication prayer for carvers and scribes etc. is also written right before the above colophon:

Through the merit of producing the blocks for the collected writings  
By incomparable Zla ba, the great son of the Victorious One  
May he fulfil all the wishes in the present life  
And live long and his enlightened activities flourish.

May the male and female disciples and patrons from all the directions,  
Who have engaged with their body, speech and mind  
And given food and wealth for carving the blocks,  
Fully obtain enlightenment just like Padma gling pa

The scribes, carvers, carpenters and the task-bearers,  
The supervisors and those who went through difficulties of body and  
speech,  
And those who spent the resources of wealth, articles for food,  
May they fully obtain the good qualities of the Buddha.<sup>39</sup>

Despite several stanzas of colophon and dedication prayers, the colophon does not mention the names of the carvers, scribes or the year of carving, making it impossible for us to exactly date it. Yet, it is possible that the production of the woodblocks happened immediately after Padma gling pa passed away as it was undertaken as a project of *dgongs rdzogs* which could imply a funerary rite. If that were the case, the production may be dated to the 1520s although we can confirm this only through further research.

However, it is clear that there are two different versions of the woodblocks of *Pad gling bka' 'bum* which were produced in separate print editions. The version of the blocks for *Pad gling bka' 'bum*, which I consider to be later, has image illustrations on the side panel of Samantabhadra, Amitābha, Śākyamuni, Padmasambhava, Padma gling pa and Zla ba rGyal mtshan in the first three folios. A section of dedication prayer is also added in the end which is not

39 Padma gling pa n.d., sec. pha. ff. 12v–13r: *rGyal sras chen po mtshungs med zla ba yis/ / gsung 'bum par du bsgrubs pa'i yon tan gyis/ / tshe 'dir dgos pa'i don kun 'grub pa dang / / sku tshe brtan zhing 'phrin las rgyas par shog /phyogs med bu slob yon mchod pho mo yis/ /par 'di'i phyir du lus ngag yid gsum dang / /zas nor longs spyod bzang ngan 'brel tshad mams/ /pad gling khyed dang dbyer med sangs rgyas shog /yig mkhan brkos mkhan shing zo las byed rigs/ /lus ngag dka' ba spyad dang do dam mkhan/ /nor dang dngos po za ma'i rgyu song mams/ /sangs rgyas yon tan rab tu rdzogs par shog/ /.*

contained in the other version. Except for these additions, the main body of the two block prints is exactly the same, including the calligraphical styles and layouts. In the dedication, there are some lines that appear to be have been composed by Zla ba rGyal mtshan.<sup>40</sup> These indicate that the additions may have been made later as part of efforts at improving an earlier version. Thus, the version without these additions, which I consider the earlier version, was perhaps created soon after Padma gling pa's death and the later version with improvements produced at least some years after that but in the life of Zla ba rGyal mtshan.

## 7 Autobiography and Collected Works of Blo gros Rab yangs

The 3rd set of woodblocks for our study is that of the woodblocks of the autobiography and writings of Blo gros Rab yangs. We have two block prints of the autobiography and writings of Blo gros Rab yangs: one from dGra med rtse and another from sPyi zhing dGon pa, but both of them are printed from the same blocks. These are the only text of Blo gros Rab yangs' works we have found while we were digitizing more than 34 archives of monasteries and private libraries across the country. Blo gros Rab yangs aka sKal ldan Rab yangs<sup>41</sup> (1474–1570?) was the founder of main Sa skya monastery in Bhutan, sPyi zhing bSam gtan Chos gling,<sup>42</sup> located in the southeast of Thimphu. According to the

40 See Padma gling pa n.d.2 and Padma gling pa n.d.3.

41 He was a disciple of numerous well-known Sa skya scholars such as Go rams pa (1429–1489), dBang phyug Grub pa (1443–?) and Sangs rgyas Rin chen (1450–1524). He served as the 4th abbot of rTa nag Thub bstan rNam rgyal in 1521 to 1531 as successor of 3rd abbot Chos grags rGya mtsho. rTa nag Thub bstan rNam rgyal was founded by Go rams pa in 1474. See Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.1; Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.2; Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.3; 'Jam dbyangs Blo gter dBang po 2007, vol. 34, 127; Mus po 2002, 76; and Mi pham Ngag gi dBang phyug n.d., 13.

42 dGe 'dun Rin chen noted that sPyi zhing bSam gtan chos gling was founded in the 8th Rab 'byung cycle by a disciple of Ngor chen Kun dga' bZang po (1382–1456) named Phrin las Rab yangs. See dGe 'dun Rin chen (2004, 200–201). However, 'Phrin las Rab yangs is not found in any other sources. Instead of Phrin las Rab yangs, Blo gros Rab yangs is mentioned in the *bKa' 'gyur* catalogue and the prayers to the lineage holders of Lam 'bras teachings of sPyi zhing temple. See Lhag bsam bTan pa n.d., f. 5: *Gangs chen shAkya'i bstan 'dzin kun gyi mchog /lha babs 'khon rigs 'jam pa'i dbyangs kyi gdung / /sa skya'i rje btsun gong ma lnga yi bstan/ /bla nas blar spel dpal ldan e wang pa/ /rgyal bas lung bstan dge slong rdo rje 'chang / /gro kun dga' ba'i 'phrin las bzang po'i rgyun/ /lho phyogs nags ma'i gling 'dir rgyas mdzad pa/ /pad+ma'i zlos gar DA ki'i dbang phyug gang / /shes bya'i blo gros mkha' ltar yangs pa de/ /bsam bzhin sprul pa'i sku ru yang byon pa/ /gsar rnying bstan pa*

colophon of his writings, the woodblocks of the block prints were carved at sPyi zhing temple. The colophon says:

*Emā ho!* Homage to guru, *yi dam* and *ḍākinī*.

What follows is the account of carving the woodblock for  
The extensive and brief biographies of outer, inner and secret life,  
Spiritual songs and praises of the eminent reincarnate Blo gros Rab yangs,  
Who is rebirth of great translator rGyal ba mChog dbyangs,  
The speech emanation of great deity Avalokiteśvara.

In the centre of deep hidden southern slopes,  
Is this valley called Wang region,  
Where varieties of trees and cereals grow  
And where many earthly pleasures abound because ten virtues are  
present.  
All patrons who live in the valley,  
Have great faith and interest in *dharma*.

It is victorious from enemies because wealth and people abounds.  
In the supreme place called sPyi zhing kha,  
Which is surrounded by such patrons,  
A place prophesied by the enlightened ancestors  
And blessed by noble scholars and meditators,  
The supreme incarnate figure Nam mkha' rGyal mtshan  
And other great disciples have provided limitless resources.

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*'dzin pa'i dbang po yis/ /spyi sgos bstan dang mi zad 'gro ba 'dir/ /phan bde nyin mor byed la thugs bskyed nas/ /gtsug lag rten gsum sngar gyi nyams gso dang / /gsar bzhengs du mas tshogs gnyis gong du spel/ /Tshul khriṃs rNam rgyal (n.d), f. 3: Gang na blo gros rab yangs sprul pa'i sku/ /lung rtogs yon tan kun ldan chos kyi rje/ /mnyam med ngag dbang bstan 'dzin dbang po yis/ /sa lam rim pa mangs po mngon bgrod kyang / /da dung tshogs gnyis rgya mtsho bsgrub la brtson/ /bdag gzhan dge tshogs rgya mtshor spel ba'i phyir/ /rgyal gsung bod du 'gyur ro cog ma lus/ /'dir yang dkar 'jam shog bu'i ngos yangs por/ /thon m'i yi ge'i gzugs su rdzogs par bzhengs/ / and bSod nams rGyal mtshan (ed) n.d., f. 6: sKu gsum mngon gyur o rgyan rin po che/ /nyams rtogs mthar phyin rgyal ba mchog dbyangs zhabs/ /mkha' gro'i rjes bzung skal ldan rab yangs la/ /gsol ba =, Blo gros Rab yangs is mentioned even in the other sources such as biographies of Lam 'bras lineage teachers. See 'Jam dbyangs Blo gter dBang po (ed) 2007, vol. 034, 035, and 037.*

The youngest disciple bsTan pa Rab gsal<sup>43</sup>  
 And supreme heart son Thar pa'i rGyal mtshan,<sup>44</sup>  
 Along with all the *vajra* brothers and sisters who live here,  
 Offered their efforts of body, speech and mind for this work.

All faithful and wealthy patrons  
 Spent their valuable things for this work without any hesitation  
 To fulfil the wishes of supreme incarnate figure  
 And to gain the essence of illusive wealth.<sup>45</sup>

The colophon also provides the names of people involved in the project. Following are excerpts from the colophon which contain the names of scribes, carvers and editors.

The scribe is the learned Nam mkha' bSam grub  
 From the supreme place called dPal ri,  
 The editors are the spiritual master  
 'Od zer rGyal mtshan from gTsang rong Byams chen,  
 And the great accomplished one Blo gros rGya mtsho,  
 From rTa nag of the upper gTsang.  
 The one who did the carving  
 Is the learned dPal ldan mChog grub from mNga' ris,

43 He seems to be main supervisor for carving the blocks, because among many disciples mentioned in the above colophon, only his name is mentioned in the dedication prayer. See Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.4, f. 64v: *Chos med ban chung bsTan pa Rab gsal la/ /blo gtad bcol sa gzhan ni su la'ang med/ /bdag dang bdag la ltos pa'i sems can rnams/ /yang dag sangs rgyas sa la sbyar du gsol/ /.*

44 He is mentioned in the colophon of the secret biography as *skul ba po*. See Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.3, f. 54r.

45 Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.4, f. 162b: *E ma hoH bla ma yi dam mkha' 'gro gsum la gus pas phyag 'tshal lo/ /lha mchog thugs rje chen po'i gsung sprul mchog/lo chen rgyal ba mchog dbyangs skye ba'i mtha'/ /sprul pa'i skyes mchog blo gros rab yangs kyi/ /phyi nang gsang gsum rnam thar rgyas bsdu dang / /mgur 'bum dang ni bstod pa la sogs pa/ /mi zad par du bzhangs tshul 'di ltar ro/ /lho phyogs lho rong sbas yul zab mo'i dbus/ /wang gi yul zhes grags pa'i lung pa 'di/ /ljon shing dang ni 'bru sna sna tshogs skye/ /dge bcu tshang bas 'dod yon mang du 'dzom/ /yul der gnas pa'i yon bdag thams cad ni/ /dad pa che zhing chos kyi phyogs la mos/ /mi nor 'dzom pas phas rgol dgra las rgyal/ /de lta'i yon bdag kun gyi bskor ba'i gnas/ /rgyal ba gong ma rnams kyi lung bstan zhing / /mkhas grub dam pa rnams kyi byin brlabs pa'i/ /spyi zhing kha zhes grags pa'i gnas mchog tu/ /sprul pa'i skyes mchog namakha' rgyal mtshan sogs/ /bu chen rnams kyi mthun rkyen tshad med bsgrubs/ /.*



Who is equal to celestial craftsman Viśvakarmā.  
 Among others who did the carving  
 Are wise and intelligent Rang grol dPal 'bar  
 From Dar rgyas Chos gling in dBus  
 And bSam gtan bZang po from Gur yang of upper gTsang,  
 Their legacy is clear in the individual's works.<sup>46</sup>

Looking at the colophon, all the people who were involved in this work were Tibetan and especially, most of them were from gTsang. rTa nag is north of the dPal khud Lake and was closely connected to Gung thang, dPal ri is a variant of Sri ri alias rTsib ri. This may suggest that the art of wood carving in Bhutan is linked to the printing tradition in the gTsang region, perhaps even to some of the schools of craftsmanship that were active at the time of gTsang smyon, who was promoting printing in Tibet.

Although no date is given in the colophon, as we observed above, it is likely that Blo gros Rab yangs was alive when the blocks were carved because nowhere in the colophon is there a mention of his death. The prayers for dedication in the colophon repeatedly dedicate their merit for fulfilling wishes of Blo gros Rab yangs, but that is not a sufficient reason to infer that he was dead by then. On the other hand, there are indications that he was alive when the blocks were carved. The block prints of biography and collected writings of Blo gros Rab yangs have a section of supplications to Blo gros Rab yangs composed by dPal ldan mChog grub, who was a main carver of the blocks. The blocks for the supplications were also carved by dPal ldan mChog grub himself as *spar phud* or offering blocks, probably in preparation of carving the blocks for the biography and writings of Blo gros Rab yangs. The colophon of the supplication says the blocks were offered as *spar phud* but does not mention to whom they were offered. According to the supplications, dPal ldan mChog grub was a disciple of Blo gros Rab yangs, so it is likely that he offered it to Blo gros Rab yangs. The supplication is composed in the biographical style and it gives an

46 Blo gros Rab yangs n.d.4, f. 164r: *sPar yig pa ni gnas mchog dpal ri ba/ /namakha' bsam 'grub zhes bya'i mkhas pas bris/ /zhu dag mkhan ni gtsang rong byams chen pa/ /dge ba'i bshes gnyen 'od zer rgyal mtshan dang/ /gtsang bstod rta nag phyogs su 'khrungs pa yi/ /sgrub chen blo gros rgya mtsho gnyis kyi bgyis/ /rkos kyi 'du byed sprul pa'i bzo bo ni/ /bl shwa karma dang mtshungs mnga' ris pa/ /dpal ldan mchog grub zhes bya'i mkhas pa dang/ /gzhan yang dbus phyogs dar rgyas chos gling pa/ /rnam spyod bshes ldan rang grol dpal 'bar dang/ /gtsang bstod mgur yangs gnas su 'khrungs pa yi/ /bsam gtan bzang po rnams kiyis legs par rkos/ /rang rang phyag rjes chos mtshan so sor gsal/ /.*

account of Blo gros Rab yang's life in brief but it does not mention his death, which suggests that Blo gros Rab yang was alive when the blocks were carved.

According to the secret biography of Blo gros Rab yang, which seems to have been composed seven years after he resigned from his office in the year 1531, he had met a *yogi* called Thos pa Rang grol who prophesied that he would go to Lho rong or southern region, where he would have wide-ranging benefits for the sentient beings. His spiritual teacher rJe btsun ma<sup>47</sup> and his disciple Zhabs drung<sup>48</sup> are also said to have predicted that he would live until he was 97 years old.<sup>49</sup> Based on these accounts, he seems to have visited Bhutan in early 1540s and lived until 1570 if he visited Bhutan immediately after he received the prophecy and lived in accordance with the prophecy. The blocks for the autobiography and collected writings of Blo gros Rab yang seems to have been carved almost immediately after he arrived in Bhutan.<sup>50</sup> If that is the case, the year of carving the blocks may fall around 1540, although thorough research is needed to confirm this.

Whatever the case, the biography and writings of Blo gros Rab yang which were printed from these blocks are rare in Bhutan and nobody knows what happened to the woodblocks. They are now most likely lost.

## 8 Biography of Pha jo 'Brug sgom Zhig po

The 4th and final xylographic print for our study is the woodblock of the biography of Pha jo 'Brug sgom Zhig po who brought the Middle 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud tradition to western Bhutan. As a result of our study, we have found that there were two blocks for the biography of Pha jo. Among them, the wood-

47 She was a main teacher of Blo gros Rab yang and her name was Chos skyong rGyal mo. She was also known Shangs phu'i mTsho rgyal or Zhang dKon mchog sGrol ma. See Blo gros Rab yang n.d.3, f. 9r.

48 He was a main disciple of Blo gros Rab yang. His name was rDo rJe Tshe brtan Chos kyi dBang phyug. He was also known as Zhabs drung sku skyes or sDe pa sgar pa'i sku skyes. See Blo gros Rab yang n.d.2, f. 13v.

49 Blo gros Rab yang n.d.3, ff. 52r–53r.

50 Among the works of Blo gros Rab yang, the secret biography and collection of spiritual songs are latest. The secret biography records events only a few years after he resigned from his office. The documents such as biographies for the masters of Lam 'bras teachings also contain records of him when he was at rTa nag. After he resigned from rTa nag, no information is recorded in Tibetan sources, probably because he visited Bhutan immediately after he received the prophesy. The woodblocks were carved immediately after he arrived in Bhutan.

blocks which we consider to be the older woodblocks were carved at rTa mgo under the command of Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin (1522–1590),<sup>51</sup> son of 'Brug pa Kun legs (1455–1529) and grandfather of bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas (1638–1696), the 4th sDe srid of Bhutan.

According to the colophon, woodblocks for many other texts were also carved along with Pha jo's biography.

Holding the monks, disciples and future beneficiaries with love more than 110 woodblocks of sutra *Byang chub ltung bshags* and of the prayer *Mos gus dkar po gcig thub* and 75 other blocks were carved, meditation centres were established and such other extensive virtuous activities were carried out.<sup>52</sup>

Although the colophon says it was carved when Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin was 50 years old,<sup>53</sup> the exact year is not known. According to the biography of Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin<sup>54</sup> and bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas,<sup>55</sup> Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin founded rTa mgo at the age of 50. After that, he had a daughter before Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin was born in 1574. Inferring from this, the year of the production of

51 The year of his birth and death are not mentioned anywhere but the year of the birth and death of *Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin* is confirmed by biography of Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin ('Jam dbyangs dPal ldan rGya mtsho 1974) and biography of bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas (Ngag dbang lHun grub 2005). He has born in 1574 and passed away at the age of 70, in the year 1643. Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin passed away when Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin was 17 years old. The colophon of Pha jo's biography and the biography of Tshe dbang bsTan 'dzin confirm that Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin founded rTa mgo at the age of 50, or before the monkey year, corresponding to 1572. Based on these, we can confirm that Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin was born in 1522 and died in 1590.

52 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d.1, f. 74v: *Grwa bu slob dang ma 'ongs pa'i gdul bya rnams la rtse bas gzigs/ spar shing bcu phras bdun dang lnga / gzhan yang byang chub ltung bshags kyi mdo/ mos gus dkar po chig thub kyi gsol btab sogs dril bas spar shing brgya bcu lhag tsam spar shing la 'phrul chen yi ger 'khor bar mdzad pa dang / sgrub sde gsar 'dzugs sogs mnam dkar gyi mdzad pa sogs rgya che lags/.*

53 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d.1, f. 74r: *Sras gar ston nyid kyis nyi ma lho phyogs kyi gdul bya rnams dang khyad par zhal ngo bu rgyud la dgongs thed thim bu sa mtshams stod pa lung pa'i sa'i cha bkra shis rgyas pa phral sna zhes bya ba'i yul du yab mda' 'dzin chen po'i sras su 'khrungs nas zhi bcu zhe dgu'i bar sbas pa'i tshul bzung bcu phrag lnga'i lo gnas chen rdo gdan la sku mtshams se ba mdzad thugs dam la bzhugs pa'i tshe/ mkha' gros gter 'don pa'i dus bab par lung bstan pa ltar gnas thugs rje brag la gsang thabs su byon gter 'don par brtsams pas ri shig ma mnyed pa'i tshe/ yus kyi rnams pa pha jo la gsol ba 'di btab bo/ /*

54 'Jam dbyangs dPal ldan rGya mtsho 1974, ff. 7v–22v.

55 Ngag dbang lHun grub 2005, 5–9.

the woodblocks could be 1570. They were carved under the supervision of Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin's cousin bsTan 'dzin Grags pa, but the scribes and craftsmen were Tibetan.

The main responsibility for carving the woodblocks was taken by cousin bsTan 'dzin Grags pa, under the command of lord *drung*. Craftsmen were pleased by offerings of *mamsa* meat and varieties of alcohol. Besides, Rin chen Bu 'gron, a faithful one from Tsha gling, sponsored the craftsmen for two months and offered food, meat and alcohol with dedication. May the patrons who provided resources be guided by Avalokiteśvara on their path. The blocks were carved by sPrul sku Thabs gzhi bKra shis from Bya yul. The writing was done by the great scholar sMra bai Seng ge from Shar kha.<sup>56</sup>

The blocks were lost to fire. According to the biography of Pha jo, they were carved at dBang 'dus rtse, using as exemplar a print from the woodblocks lost to fire. The dBang 'dus rtse block prints are referred in the rTa mgo block prints as Tibetan blocks.<sup>57</sup> This might be because the craftsmen and scribes were Tibetan. The woodblocks of the latter version are still in Pha jo sdings temple.

## 9 Conclusion

We have seen a brief account of how early book production and printing happened in Bhutan. From the 17th century, Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal,

56 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d.1, f. 75r: *sPar shing 'di nyid phul du bzhengs pa'i 'thun rkyen gtso cher chos rje'i drung gi bka' gnang ba bzhin dbon po bstan 'dzin grags pas phyang len btat/ maM sa'i bye brag krum sha/ ma da na bdud rtsi chang gi bye brag sogs yon gyis gzo rig mkhan rnams mnyes par byas/ gzhan yang nya ma dad pa can tsha ling nas rin chen bu 'gron gyis spar mkhan zla ba gnyis steg za ma sha chang sogs lhag bsam dag pas legs par sgrubs/ 'thun rkyen sgrub pa'i sbyin bdag rnams mgon po spyen ras gzigs kyis lam sna 'dren par shog/ spar mkhan mkhas pa bya yul ba sprul sku thabs gzhi bkra shis kyis bskos/ yi ge'i 'du byed shar kha rab 'byams smra ba'i seng ge'i sug las su byung ba'o/.*

57 Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin n.d.2, f. 43v: *Yi ge'i 'du byed shar kha rab 'byams smra ba'i seng ge'i sug las su byung ba'o/ //zhes pa 'di yan sngon bod spar brkos pa glegs baM thung ngu zhig 'dug pas me la 'jig song bas slar gsar du bsgrubs pa 'di ltar/ pha jo 'brug sgom zhig po'i nmam thar 'di/ 'yig ger bris shing 'dzin 'chang kun chub sogs/ /bkur bsti tshul bzhin bgyis pa'i nmam dkar gyis/ /rje btsun bla ma'i thugs dgongs rdzogs pa dang / /bstan pa tshul bzhin 'dzin pa'i skeyes bu rnams/ /zhabs kyi pad+mo srid mthar brtan pa'i mthus/ /mar gyur 'gro rnams mam mkhyen thob gyur cig/ /.*

the founder of modern Bhutan, and his successors produced substantial numbers of manuscripts as well as woodblocks. For example, by the command of Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal, numerous blocks such as the ones on medical tantras and writings of Padma dKar po were carved at different places.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the 3rd and 4th sDe srid of Bhutan, Mi 'gyur brTan pa and bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas, also initiated projects of carving various blocks. The vast number of woodblocks carved in the 18th century were woodblocks of the collected works of Padma dKar po and five books on Maitreya.<sup>59</sup> The 20th sDe srid, 'Brug rNam rgyal, also carved substantial numbers of blocks.<sup>60</sup> Except the five books on Maitreya, all of these woodblocks are said to have been lost when the library of the monastic body of Bhutan called bSod nams dGa' tshal was razed to the ground by fire.

Until the end of 20th century, the tradition of book production and wood carving was practiced continuously across the country. The National Library and Archives of Bhutan has established a section for wood carving to keep alive the tradition. Due to the introduction of modern technology, the tradition of book production and printing from the woodblocks using traditional methods has come to an abrupt end almost everywhere. Today, most temples have already lost their blocks due to lack of usage or poor care. Whatever is left is also likely to disappear soon. Shejun has therefore recently sponsored the production of a shelf for wooden blocks at Pha jo sdings, which is the only library containing a huge amount of woodblocks from the 18th century. I hope it will significantly contribute to the conservation of the blocks.

58 Blocks for the four medical *tantras* and important works of Padma dKar po have carved under the patronage of Zhabs drung. See Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal (ed) n.d.1, sec. Ga, f. 210r. Ngag dbang rNam rgyal (ed) n.d.2, ff. 53v–54r. Ngag dbang rNam rgyal (ed) n.d.3, f. 189r.

59 The blocks for entire works of Padma dKar po were carved twice under the patronage of 18th sDe srid 'Jigs med Seng ge and 22nd sDe srid bSod nams rGyal mtshan. See Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 378, 390. The block prints printed from later blocks still exist in Bhutan, while the block prints printed from former blocks are not known whether they still exist or not. According to 'Jam dbyangs rGyal mtshan, the 18th rJe mKhan po of Bhutan, the project for the carving woodblocks was initiated jointly by the 21st sDe srid 'Brug rNam rgyal and the 22nd sDe srid, bSod nams rGyal mtshan, during the reign of 'Brug rNam rgyal. See 'Jam dbyangs rGyal mtshan (ed) n.d., vol. ka, f. 9r.

60 The list of the woodblocks that were carved under his patronage is given in Padma Tshe dbang's work. See Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 388–389.

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