…And Beyond
THE BAR DO THOS GROL:
TIBETAN CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM
OR TIBETANISATION OF BUDDHISM?*

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In 1959, the Dalai Lama XIV escaped to India, followed by roughly a hundred thousand Tibetan refugees who brought with them numerous texts that had been previously inaccessible outside of Tibet. They thereby made it possible for foreign students of Tibet, for the first time, to gain direct access to tens of thousands of titles and, what was most important, to direct oral commentary from learned Tibetan scholars. Since then, Tibetan studies have witnessed dramatic progress, accelerated in recent years by new textual discoveries within Tibet itself. Despite these developments, however, most aspects of Tibetan Buddhist literature remain poorly known outside of restricted circles of scholars, researchers, and serious students of Tibetan religion. Until quite recently, indeed, only the biography and songs of Mi la ras pa and the Bar do thos grol—the fourteenth-century revelation of Karma gling pa that is better known today as the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’—could be counted as widely diffused works of Tibetan literature in the West.¹

The translation of the Bar do thos grol under the title of The Tibetan Book of the Dead, or the After-Death Experiences of the Bar-do Plane, was first published in 1927. French and German translations

* The present article is derived from a previously unpublished communication written in French in 1991. In its essence, my view remains unchanged. Nonetheless, with the kind help of Prof. M. Kapstein, co-editor of this volume, I have attempted, in the notes, to take stock of the chief contributions bearing upon the present subject-matter that have appeared since that time.

¹ Both the biography of Mi la ras pa and the ‘Book of the Dead’, of course, were first introduced and popularized during the late 1920s through the EVANS-WENTZ (1927, 1928) editions of the translations of the Sikkimese Kazi Dawa-Samdup. The collected songs of the Rje btsun mgur 'bum became available to Western readers only much later, through the English version of CHANG (1962) and the French translation of LAMOTHE (1986-93).