CHAPTER 8

Nyams mgur of Pha bong kha pa bDe chen snying po (1878–1941): An Analysis of His Poetic Techniques*

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The songs of spiritual realisation, known as nyams mgur or mgur, are personal, experiential expressions of religious insights. They are immediately recognizable by their structure, since each mgur has a fixed number of syllables per line that are arranged in a particular grouping of metric divisions and subdivisions. Most of the meters from which a songwriter chooses his preference for a mgur are also found in folksongs.1 mgur are sung mainly by recluses in solitude or for other hermit-disciples away from monasteries. Songwriters can use this genre to express criticism, often scathingly, of themselves, the clergy, and the evils of their homeland and village monastery. Because the songs show not only the highest levels that a saint attains but also the low points, bawdy humour, and inner struggles along the path, they provide roadmaps for others to follow that make enlightenment seem attainable by anyone who will renounce the world and do spiritual practices in solitude. Since mgur are simple songs of spiritual experience that are intended to appeal to the general public, they fill an essential role in Tibetan Buddhism.2 In various places on the Tibetan plateau they are still sung today in rituals that are part of daily life.3

These mgur of the phyi dar, or Later Period of the Diffusion of Buddhism, were highly influenced by the vajragīti songs (dohā and caryāgīti) of the siddhas in India, which themselves were adaptations of folksongs popular in

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* I would like to thank dGe bshes Tshul khrims chos ’phel of the Kurukulla Center in Malden, MA, United States, for helping me with some of the technical Buddhist terms in the mgur upon which this paper is based; and K.E. Duffin for having made numerous helpful suggestions for the translations of these songs and my analysis.
1 For an explanation of Tibetan metrics, see Sujata 2005: 112–38.
2 Sujata 2005: xii, 77, 84–85, 260, 264; Sujata 2008: 551–52; Sujata 2011: xi–xii (reused with the permission of the publisher); and Jackson 1996: 369–70.
3 In Reb gong mgur are sung when someone has died or is ill, and during certain parts of the planting season. See Sujata 2005: 247–57, 264; and Sujata forthcoming.
form, and designed to instruct and please the general public.⁴ Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros (11th century) may have brought this tradition to Tibet.⁵ *mgur* attributed to him seem to be the earliest among the *mgur* of the *phyi dar*. The main impact of this transfusion—whatever its details—was realised in the *mgur* of Mi la ras pa (ca. 1040–1123). We cannot know precisely what *mgur* Mi la ras pa wrote, but a compilation of *mgur* attributed to him was made and printed in the late fifteenth century,⁶ and the resulting *mgur* ‘bum was widely read by lamas and yogis alike. Based on the quality of Mi la ras pa’s *mgur* ‘bum, Mi la ras pa seems to have developed an amazingly strong style in a short time. One can marvel that he was able to assimilate a variety of influences into his *mgur* so soon after its crucial element—the conception of the vajragīti—had been introduced in Tibet and adapted to the Tibetan language.⁷ From then on, his *mgur* continued to be the main influence on the *mgur* of other songwriters, and the ultimate root of those *mgur* continued to be folksong.⁸

New influences emerged that led *mgur* to evolve as a genre in various ways, as songwriters blended in their own experimental features or ones borrowed from other types of verse. These new stylistic devices sometimes came to influence later *mgur* when they caught the fancy of other writers.⁹ But *mgur* did not develop homogenously. *mgur* even from the same period could differ stylistically because of their writers’ personal preferences, monastic education (or none), region, exposure to other *mgur*, and so on. Mi la ras pa’s *mgur* ‘bum was the springboard from which the genre of *mgur* evolved, and as it did, many sides of its potential were revealed.

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⁵ According to the biography of Mar pa, he received a transmission of the *dohās* in India. Nālandā Translation Committee 1995: 28; and Guenther 1993: 10. The biography of Mar pa was written by the “madman” from gTsang, gTsang smyon He ru ka (1452–1507) around 1505. On the other hand, Vajrapāṇi (born 1017) may have been the most important person in the vajragīti transmission to Tibet. For this, see Schaeffer 2000: 123, 125–26.
⁶ *mgur* attributed to Mi la ras pa was compiled by gTsang smyon He ru ka. See gTsang smyon He ru ka, comp. 1999, or many other editions.
⁸ Don grub rgyal 1997: 488.
⁹ A crucial development was the incorporation of influence from the sixth-century text of Indian poetics by Daṇḍin, the *Kāvyadārśa*, shortly after its translation into Tibetan in the thirteenth century. Since influence from this text does not appear in the *mgur* of Pha bong kha pa that I will be discussing, this development is beyond the scope of this paper. For a summary of poetic figures in *mgur* which show influence from the *Kāvyadārśa*, see Sujata 2005: 83–85, 162–84. For more, see Jackson 1996: 369–70.