

Praise, Shame, Patronage, and Genre-Blurring: Revisiting Two Vajra Songs of Lama Zhang Tsalpa

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Abstract This paper looks at two *gur*, or “vajra songs,” of the controversial twelfth-century yogin, sorcerer, tantric adept, literary innovator, statesman, and military leader Lama Zhang Tsalpa (bla ma zhang tshal pa, 1122–1193). Without context the two songs are mysterious: they call themselves “praises” but are full of self-criticisms, insults, and shaming. The language is animated and rhetorically varied and shows an unusually acute self-awareness of the mechanics of language and literary genre, a self-awareness that manifests as parody, irony, and sarcasm. My approach is to view these songs along three axes: (1) the fact that both songs are characterized as requests from patrons, (2) the playful, almost taunting manner in which the songs use and then subvert the conventions of multiple literary genres—praise, autobiography, vajra song, and confession— and invent a hybrid genre of “self-shaming,” which plays into important Tibetan cultural themes of praise and shame, and (3) questions about the “textual economy” of songs such as this: Who wrote them? What were the circumstances under which they were composed? Who requested them and why? What does the phenomenon of patron-requested texts tell us about the relationships between patrons from powerful clans and the newly arising class of charismatic religious leaders in the later dissemination (*phyi dar*) period?

The two Lama Zhang Tsalpa (bla ma zhang tshal pa, 1122–1193) songs I would like to consider here have been favorites of mine since they were first introduced to the English-speaking world by Dan Martin in 1996—sadly, in a publication of somewhat limited circulation. Fortunately, Kurtis Schaeffer, Matthew Kapstein, and Gray Tuttle in their recent anthology *Sources of Tibetan Tradition* have picked up and republished Martin’s translation of excerpts from these two songs, under the English titles of “Chaktrichok” and “Astonished Verses of Praise to Myself.”¹

The content of both songs is lively and belligerent, and this is indeed what jumps out on first reading. Both songs bill themselves as hymns of self-praise—provocative in itself—but then launch into inventories of self-criticisms and complaints (possibly from the perspective of another person) in metered verse, punctuated by recurring refrains of ferocious self-denunciation, gathering increasing momentum until by the end the negative refrains have crowded out everything else. Even without context, they make for entertaining reads, with their vehement language, their

1. Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle 2013, 223–224.

extravagant rhetoric, and their tone of outraged grievance—all delivered with an offhandedness that feels improvised. And, indeed, these two texts are traditionally placed in the genre of *gur* (*mgur*), or “vajra songs,” a genre often associated with improvisation, spontaneity, and transgressive behavior.² Tempting as it is to begin by simply pulling out the show-stoppers and letting them take over the stage, there is a danger because these near-millennium-old songs resonate so strongly with certain modern sensibilities that their more subtle literary effects—which offer a sort of metalayer of humorous commentary accessible only to those conversant with the conventions of Tibetan literary genres—would be lost. And that would be a shame because alongside the obvious raucousness of Lama Zhang Tsalpa’s writings, we see as well a surprising refinement: his hyper-attentiveness to issues of style, rhetorical effect, and genre—and the playful attitude this allowed him—are key parts of his literary persona. That the refinement is often in the service of the raucousness only makes it all that much more interesting.

As we know, the titling of works from old Tibetan texts can be changeable and sometimes arbitrary, and I will, for reasons that should become clear in the course of this essay, use slightly different titles, much as I love Martin’s versions. Here are versions that can be found in one of the available Zhang *Collected Works*: the first song is titled *Phyag khri mchog gis zhus pa’i khrel ‘dod*—roughly, “Shaming Requested by Chaktrichok”—and the second *Gu rub re bo skyid kyis zhus pa’i khrel ‘ded ma*, or “Shaming Requested by Gurup Rewokyi.”³

A. Patronage and Commissioned Works

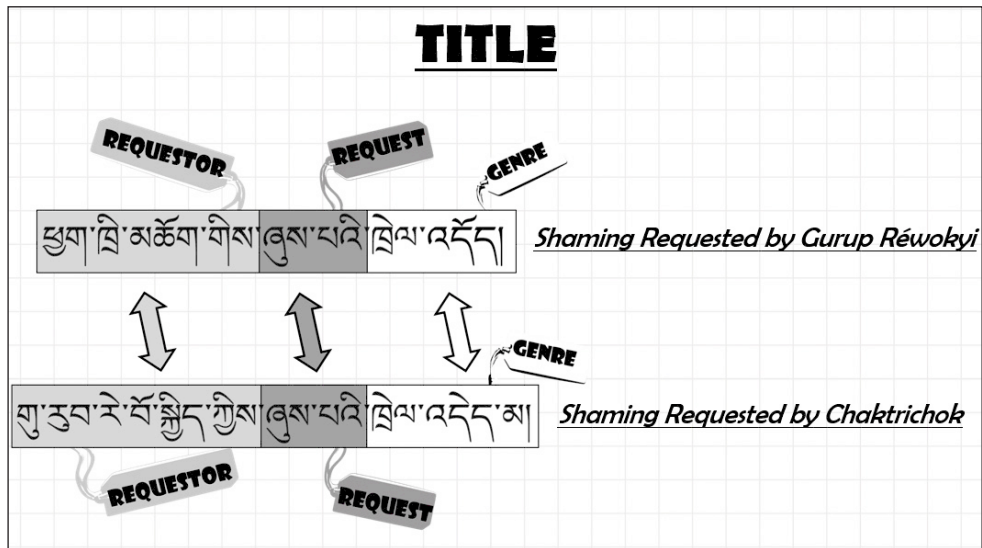
Immediately evident when the two titles are juxtaposed is their very precise parallel linguistic structure, a parallelism that reflects, I believe, a corresponding parallelism in the tone, structure, and rhetorical features of the two songs. Three distinct elements are picked out below—(1) a requestor, (2) a request, and (3) a genre designation—and a label is attached to each:

Two things stand out here: first of all, the genre designations *trel dö* (*‘khrel ‘dod*) and *trel dema* (*‘khrel ‘ded ma*)—both of which can be translated roughly as “criticism” or “shaming.” This will be treated more fully below, but for now let us simply note the ambiguity about genre introduced here: both works have been classed as “vajra songs,” but no mention of this genre appears, and we

2. For years while I was admiring them, their status as *gur* completely escaped me, and neither Martin’s original article nor the more recent *Sources of Tibetan Tradition* collection mentions this, though from the time of the earliest known catalogs of *Collected Works* this has been their classification.

3. *Gung thang bla ma Gyu grags pa’i gsung ‘bum*, in A gon Rin po che 2004, 553–560. There are several variations on these two titles in different collections. I have chosen these versions for the titles since they match up so well. This is the only use I will make of this collection.

have instead this puzzling nontraditional category of “shaming.” So in the background we have the question: what does this genre blurring mean?



The second thing that stands out is that the pivot on which each title turns is a request (*zhus pa*), and that this pivot is central because it offers an explicit statement of the occasion for the creation of works of this kind—a very uncomplicated answer to the very complicated question “Why write a song?” Here the answer is simply “Because someone asked for one.” But who requests songs? In the first case, the requestor is Chaktrichok, a man listed elsewhere as one of Zhang’s “great sons who perform enlightened activities,”⁴ meaning a close disciple. The requestor for the second song is named Gurup Rewokyī, who is described as a patron (*yon bdag*). The occasion for the request and composition is described in the first words of the colophon to the *Gurup Rewokyī* as follows:

A request for a self-praise was made
to the teacher Lama Zhang
by the patron from Ngenlam Changchi, Gurup Rewokyī.⁵

Though there is no corresponding passage in the *Chaktrichok*, the parallel forms of the titles suggest a similar set of circumstances.

4. “phrin las sgrub pa’i bu chen” *Deb ther mar po* 123; Tshal pa Kun dga’ rdo rje, *Rnam thar bdus pa*, Shedup VI.170 (the disciple’s name in the latter text is spelled *chag khri mchog*).
 5. ngan lam byang phyi’i yon bdag gu rub re bo skyid kyis/ bla ma zhang ston la/ khyed rang nyid kyis khyed rang nyid la bstod pa zhig zhu byas pas/. Shedup V.665.

The fact that the requestors were described as “patrons” or “disciples” (an overlapping group) is significant because patrons and disciples were a consistent theme throughout Lama Zhang’s lifetime—during his early years as a practitioner of destructive magic, at the time of his monastic ordination, during his *repa* (*ras pa*) period of solitary wandering and meditation, and finally when he was effectively ruler over the greater Lhasa area.

Zhang’s relationship with patrons was conflicted from the very beginning. Before taking his vows as a monk, when he was living in Kham in Eastern Tibet, he had been known as “The Great Magician of Central Tibet” (*dbus pa mthu chen*) because of his mastery of many forms of sorcery—much of it, like that of his hero Milarepa, employed for ethically suspect purposes.⁶ As a result, he was, at the time of his ordination, being courted by a number of patrons—aristocratic clan leaders who desired a powerful ritual specialist in their camp:

Patrons helped with my ordination gift and helped complete the offerings, but then fell into disagreement and argued. One said, “Be my lama!” Another said, “Be my lama!” And they could not agree.⁷

It is characteristic that even at this early stage—he was twenty-six at the time of his ordination—Zhang was vigorous in asserting his independence:

I said, “I won’t stay with any of you. If I want to go, I’ll go. If I want to stay, I’ll stay!”⁸

These early incidents reflect a basic tension between two models of religious practice becoming available to the early Kagyüpa—that of the hermit meditator and that of the publicly engaged lama. From early on, Zhang was unwavering as to his preference:

There is no one like me when it comes to wandering in the mountain retreats. I am like Milarepa, [wandering in] the snow for nine days and nine nights.⁹

One of the advantages of the life of the hermit was just this freedom from obligations toward patrons and disciples:

6. *Zin bris*, 9b.

7. de nas yon bdag po rnam kyis kyang nga’i phyag rten gyi grogs byas nas dbul ba tshar ba’i ‘grog la yon bdag pa rnam ma ‘cham par rtsod par gyur nas/ gcig na re nga’i mchod gnas byed zer/ gcig na re ‘di mchod gnas byed zer nas ma ‘cham pa la/. *Zin bris*, 13a.

8. nga khyed rnam kyi khri su mi zhugs/ ‘gro snying ‘dod na ‘gro sdod snying ‘dod na bsdod/. *Ibid.*

9. ri khrod ‘grim pa la nga dang ‘dra ba med/ mid la ras pa’i kha ba nyin dgu mtshan dgu dang ‘dra snyam/. *Ibid.* 36a.

I thought to myself, “What is the use of disciples and patrons? I need to [be able to] act without forethought!”¹⁰

He incurred the wrath of one of his root lamas for saying “Bless me that I not be distracted by a retinue and disciples,”¹¹ and that of another for saying “In this life, [I shall be] without disciples and patrons—I don’t need to be a spiritual teacher.”¹²

So it is deeply ironic that Zhang’s trip to Lhasa in 1160 to request from his lama Gomtsul (*sgom tshul*) permission to become a “directionless wanderer” (*phyogs med*)¹³ turned instead into the occasion for his induction into a lifetime of public service, never again to return to the solitary hermit life he loved so much. Gomtsul—nephew of the venerable Gampopa and early prototype of the engaged lama—had been called in to mediate conflicts among armed religious factions that had led to the burning of the city’s two most sacred Buddhist sites, the Ramoché temple and the Lhasa Trulnang, or Jokhang temple.¹⁴ Once a truce had been negotiated, Gomtsul placed Lama Zhang in charge of repairing the damaged Jokhang and restoring civil order to the area.

So having set out for Lhasa in search of freedom from worldly ties, Zhang now found himself drafted into the worldliest position imaginable for a hermit monk—arbitrator, construction foreman, police commissioner, commander-in-chief, and head of state. Reluctant though he was to enter public life, this was the beginning of what was to become the first significant post-imperial religious polity in the Lhasa area. After Lama Zhang’s death in 1193, the Tsalpa Kagyüpa order he founded would rule Central Tibet for the next hundred-plus years.¹⁵ He thus played a key role in what some have come to call the “Tibetan Renaissance,”¹⁶ a period during which the fragments of the “Time of Tibet in Pieces”¹⁷ that followed upon the collapse of the Tibetan empire were taken up and reassembled into a thoroughly Buddhist cultural configuration that would hold together surprisingly well, even after it became clear that the empire was not coming back. One of the adhesives of the new culture was a ritual-symbolic order at the center of which stood the grand figure of the lama, a new type of “dharma king”¹⁸ whose power rested, not on aristocratic or royal family ties, but on a thorough mastery of the esoteric rites and practices of Buddhist tantra and the charisma conferred thereby. The importance of Lama Zhang must be seen against the background

10. slob ma dang yon bdag gis ci byed rtsis med gcig bya dgos snyam/. *Ibid.* 42a.

11. ‘khor dang slob mas g.yeng ba mi ‘ong bar byin gyis brlab tu gsol zhus pa/. *Lho rong chos ‘byung*, 192.

12. tshe ‘di la slob ma dang yon bdag med pa/ dge bshes ci ma byung gcig bya dgos/. *Zin bris* 28b.

13. *Lho rong chos ‘byung*, 192.

14. *Bla ma dwags po sgom pa’i rnam thar*, Shedup I.173–77.

15. For an encyclopedic account of the rule of Lama Zhang and the Tsalpa Kagyüpa, see Sørensen and Hazod 2007.

16. Davidson 2005.

17. *Ibid.*, 61–83.

18. Yamamoto 2015b.

of this Buddhist revival, for it was Lama Zhang's skillful blend of spiritual and worldly power that would serve as a template for later rulers of Lhasa—most notably the Dalai Lamas—and initiate the transformation of Lhasa from a fairly provincial site with strong religious and imperial associations into a powerful locus of Tibetan religious and political life. It would, in fact, not be entirely inappropriate to think of Zhang as a sort of “proto-Dalai Lama.”¹⁹

It is important to keep in mind Zhang's strained history with patrons and disciples when considering these two vajra songs—which were, after all, commissioned by a disciple and a patron. The tension between the hermit lifestyle he preferred and the public life he ended up with clearly carried over into his career as ruler, and both the contradictions within his life and the stylistic eccentricities in his writings need to be understood against this backdrop.

B. Songs of Praise, Songs of Shame

1. Reading the “Subtitles”

So far we have considered only the titles of the two songs. But we find in them not only parallel titles, but also parallel descriptive passages that act as elaborations on the titles. The passage in the *Shaming Requested by Chaktrichok* is the colophon, which reads:

Praise to Lama Zhang from a standpoint of utter contempt,
[requested] by Chaktrichok of Drangda
at the Chökor Drathang [of Tsal].²⁰

The corresponding passage in the *Shaming Requested by Gurup Rewokyi* is not the terminal colophon, but something that I can only think to call a “subtitle”:

Praise to himself

19. During his lifetime, Zhang and his followers explicitly framed his activities as the acts of a “dharma king” (chos rgyal) sanctioned by King Songtsen Gampo and the Jowo Śākyamuni statue in the Lhasa Trulnang (‘phrul snang). Later, with the rise of the Dalai Lamas, a similar narrative strategy was employed inserting the imperial dharma kings into the lineage of the Dalai Lamas as predecessor incarnations. Furthermore, the writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama's regent, Desi Sangyé Gyatso (Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho), held both the Third Dalai Lama and the Fifth Dalai Lama to be incarnations of Lama Zhang and Zhang himself to be an incarnation of both Padmasaṃbhava and Songtsen Gampo. There thus fell into place a lineage narrative of Central Tibetan rulers stretching from the imperial dharma kings at one end to the Dalai Lamas at the other end, with Lama Zhang—appropriately enough—occupying almost the exact chronological midpoint between the two greatest of them, Songtsen Gampo and the Fifth Dalai Lama. See Yamamoto 2015b and Ahmad 1999, 186.

20. bla ma zhang la/ brang mda'i phyag khri mchog gis/ chos skor grwa thang du/ shin tu brnyas bcos kyi sgo nas bstod pa/. Shedup V. 603-604.

by the teacher Lama Zhang
 from a standpoint of utter wonder.²¹

Since these two phrases serve identical functions within their respective songs, for ease of reference I will take the liberty here of referring to them both as “subtitles.” Again, if we juxtapose these two subtitles and begin to label the parts, we see an isomorphism—more complicated, but no less striking.

"\$SUBTITLE"	
<p>གུ་རུབ་རེ་བོ་རྒྱུད་གྱིས་ལུས་པའི་ཁྲིལ་འདེབས།</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ལྷ་མ་ལའ་རྟོན་གྱིས།</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ལྷ་མ་ལའ་རྟོན་རང་ཉིད་ལ།</p> <p>ཤིན་ཏུ་ངོ་མཚར་བའི་སྐོར་ནས་བརྟོན་པ།</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Shaming Requested by Gurup Réwokyī</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENRE</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Praise to himself by the teacher Lama Zhang from a standpoint of utter wonder.</p>
<p>ཕྱག་ཁྲི་མཚོག་གིས་ལུས་པའི་ཁྲིལ་འདེབས།</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ལྷ་མ་ལའ་ལ།</p> <p>བྲང་མདའི་ཕྱག་ཁྲི་མཚོག་གིས།</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ཚོས་སྐོར་གྲ་བྲང་དུ།</p> <p>ཤིན་ཏུ་བརྟན་བཅོས་ཀྱི་སྐོར་ནས་བརྟོན་པ།</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Shaming Requested by Chaktrichok</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENRE</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Praise to Lama Zhang from a standpoint of utter contempt, [requested] by Chaktrichok of Drangda at the Chökor Drathang [of Tsal].</p>

We begin this time with the genre labels. Unlike the genre labels marked out earlier for the song titles, both “subtitles” here use the label “praise”—a term that not only increases the number of applicable genre categories, but also seems actively to contradict one of our earlier genre labels, “shaming” or “criticism.”

It is important to see that the Tibetan term translated here as “praise,” *bstod pa*, would have been familiar to any literate Tibetan of the twelfth century. Buddhist praise (*stotra* in Sanskrit) is an ancient and venerable genre with a long history and a standardized set of formulas guiding its writing and interpretation. Both of these vajra songs presuppose an audience familiar with the tradition, and Zhang uses this familiarity as a springboard for some of his own distinctive genre-bending acrobatics.

Traditionally, the most common object of a praise would be the Buddha or an important attribute of the Buddha, such as “his three bodies, his twelve deeds, his eight reliquary stūpas, [or] his

21. bla ma zhang ston gyis/ bla ma zhang ston rang nyid la shin tu ngo mtshar ba'i sgo nas bstod pa/. Shedup V.657.

powers to save beings from hell,”²² but also less tangible objects such as “emptiness, dependent arising, and the Buddha’s formless dimensions.”²³ Hymns can also be found praising a variety of bodhisattvas and tantric deities, as well as great teachers, realized saints, and other humans.

Here is an excerpt from a typical Indian praise to the Buddha attributed to the Mahāyāna saint Āryaśūra:

At the four city gates, you were shown the four kinds of sorrow,
And cut your own hair in front of the Viśuddha Stūpa;
On the banks of the Nairāñjanā you practised as an ascetic:
To you who are free from the faults of the two obscurations, I pay homage!

At Rājagṛha you tamed a rogue elephant,
In Vaiśālī the monkeys offered you honey;
In Magadha, O sage, you realized buddhahood:
To you in whom omniscient wisdom blossomed, I pay homage!

At Vārāṇasī you turned the wheel of Dharma,
And in the Jeta Grove you showed great miracles;
At Kuśinagara your wisdom mind passed into parinirvāṇa:
*To you whose mind is like the sky, I pay homage!*²⁴

Note the second-person form of address and the A-B stanza form: first, what might be called a “descriptor,” which offers identifying information about the object of praise, then a recurring one-line refrain, which offers praise. This is not the only form taken by Buddhist praises, but it is a common one.

As Indian Buddhism filtered into Tibet during the seventh through twelfth centuries—with major imperial translation projects initiated in the ninth—these praises were translated into Tibetan and eventually incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist canon as part of the Tengyur (*bstan gyur*), the “Translated Treatises”—the second part of the canon. In fact, the very first division of the Tengyur is labeled “the Praise Treatises” (*bstod pa’i bstan bcos*) and contains translations of 170 Sanskrit praises.²⁵ The translated scriptures, or Kangyur (*bka’ gyur*), while not possessing a separate praise collection, does contain, scattered throughout the sections on Buddhist tantra,

22. Schaeffer 2009. The version used here is the Tengyur from the collection at Degé Monastery in eastern Tibet.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Āryaśūra, *Short Praise of the Buddha’s Deeds*.

25. Schaeffer 2009.

individual praises to tantric deities.²⁶ Attention to praise verses written in Tibet during this period suggests that these canonical Sanskrit praises served as models for native Tibetan compositions. The eleventh-century founder of the Kadampa school, Dromtönpa, for example, wrote these verses to his Indian teacher Atiśa, or Dīpaṃkara:

In the sublime country of Bengal,
 you were born to the noble lineage of the royal family of Sahor,
 the very one that bodhisattva Shantarakshita was from;
O Dipamkara, to you I pray.

You knew how to honour your mother and father with respect;
 endowed with beauty, charm, wisdom and loving-kindness,
 you were level-headed, gentle, tactful and courageous;
*O Dipamkara, to you I pray.*²⁷

Zhang himself wrote at least fourteen conventional praises—most of them addressed to one or more of his many lineage teachers—and, as in the Tengyur, praises constitute the opening section of his *Collected Works* under the label “Supplications and Praises” (*gsol ‘debs bstod pa’i skor*). This example is taken from the work called *Supplication of the Command Lineage*:

Out of the power of great bliss, O Lord,
 You perfected the three bodies:
I bow down in homage to Vajradhara
And supplicate blessings for the fortunate ones!
 [...]

 Through the power of unbiased devotion,
 [You accomplished] a variety of austerities and blessings,
I bow down in homage to Nāroṇa
*And supplicate blessings for the fortunate ones!*²⁸

We see here again the A-B structure of descriptor capped by words of praise. In this case, the prais-

26. *Ibid.*

27. Office of H.H. Dalai Lama 1981.

28. bde ba chen po’i ngang shed nas/ sku gsum mthar phyin bcom ldan ‘das/ rdo rje ‘chang la phyag ‘tshal ‘dud/ skal ldan byin gyis brlab tu gsol/ [...] mos gus phyogs med ngang shed nas/ sna tshogs dka’ spyad byin rlabs dag/ nA ro pa la phyag ‘tshal ‘dud/ skal ldan byin gyis brlab tu gsol/. *Bka’ brgyud kyi gsol ‘debs*. Shedup I.56–57.

ing refrain is combined with a supplication for blessings—a practice very common in Tibetan praises, a fact acknowledged in the genre label “Supplications and Praises.”

From a formal standpoint, the *Chaktrichok and Gurup Rewokyi* roughly resemble these Indian-based praises, with their second-person narrations punctuated by praising refrains. Though the majority of Zhang’s vajra songs employ a seven-syllable trochaic meter,²⁹ these two are written for the most part in a nine-syllable meter.³⁰ For an English speaker, the first line of the “General Prologue” to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* might serve as a metric approximation:

/ / / / /
Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote³¹

Like Chaucer’s English line, a nine-syllable line of Tibetan verse generally takes five stresses, falling on the odd-numbered syllables.³² Rhyme rarely occurs in Tibetan verse.

2. Praise Turned Upside-Down

Formally, then, we see a nod to the established conventions of the Buddhist praise. However, when we turn to the actual content of the songs, there are some surprises. Rather than conform strictly to the standard forms, Zhang, in both of these vajra songs, toys mercilessly with the genre’s conventions—parodying, inverting, twisting, and reshaping familiar formulas—releasing thereby a wild energy not ordinarily felt in classical praises.³³

This is why a consideration of Tibetan Buddhist literary genres—though it may seem pedantic to those impatient for the “crazy wisdom” conveyed in vajra songs—is indispensable here. For one lacking a knowledge of the established conventions of Buddhist praise, the sophisticated bending of these conventions that animates these two texts would pass unnoticed. An analogy from a different cultural area might be useful here: a sympathetic listener to Mozart without at least an intuitive (not necessarily theoretical) familiarity with the principles of European tonality

29. See Yamamoto 2015a, 547.

30. On the popular seven- and nine-syllable trochaic verse forms, see Sørensen 1990, 13–16; Sujata 2005, 135–36.

31. Chaucer 2008, 23.

32. “[...] seven-syllable (*tshég bar bdun ma’i tshigs bcad*) and nine-syllable metre (*tshég bar dgu ma’i tshigs bcad*), consisted of three (resp. four) and a half feet. In other words, the quatrains were made up by three (resp. four) trochaic feet (*tshég bar cha gsum*) followed by a catalectic (often accented) half foot (*tshég bar ya gcig*).” Sørensen 1990, 13–14.

33. It should be noted at the outset that Indian praise is not the only possible influence on Tibetan praise. The native Tibetan tradition carries with it songs of praise that were practiced in the courts of the kings of the Tibetan Empire, as well as “folk” traditions of praise and insult, including boasting contests. Since the praises written by Lama Zhang tended to follow the traditional Indian Buddhist model, and because of constraints on space, I have chosen not to consider these indigenous traditions at this time.

and harmony will miss important details of a Mozart piece. For example, a listener from another planet might simply not hear dissonance, and so would miss out on the interplay between dissonance and its resolution so important to the dramatic effects created by Mozart. In the same way, a listener without some sensitivity to the norms of Buddhist praise might simply not hear a departure from those norms and therefore miss Zhang's skillful dissonance effects.

The opening lines of both songs set the tone for what follows by refusing the expected stance of joyous praise in favor of a distinctly critical voice. Here is the beginning of the *Chaktrichok*:

You were accepted as disciple by many supreme beings,
But having, from beginningless time, accumulated
great stores of bad karma from practicing great [destructive] magic,
under the power of laziness, deceit, ease, sloth, torpor,
you completely abandoned secret mantra and the profound path of means,
which are not separable for even a moment.³⁴

A classical Buddhist idea holds that, within a beginningless cycle of rebirths, a human birth is extremely rare and fortunate, and therefore not to be wasted, but rather to be spent pursuing the Dharma, or teachings of the Buddha. Here in the opening lines, we see this familiar theme invoked, the emphasis being on Lama Zhang's life as one full of precious opportunity—a human life, exposure to the Dharma, meetings with great teachers, a monastic ordination—which it would be an extraordinary misfortune to waste. But then the verse goes on to imply that this is in fact exactly what he has done:

Having not engaged in spiritual practices even for a moment,
spending all your time in sleep and idle chatter,
squandering [the lama's] advice and engaging in self-deception.
Wasting this human life pretending to be a religious practitioner [...]
Beggar-monk Zhang, carried away by the demon of laziness:
where is it taught that virtue is attained through laziness?
Look what bad results arise out of laziness!³⁵

34. skyes mchog du mas rjes su bzung gyur kyang/ thog med dus nas rang gis rab bsags pa'i/ las ngan tshan chen bsags pa'i mthu chen gyis/ le lo sgyu sla gnyid dang rmugs dbang gis/ skad cig tsam yang bral thabs med pa yi/ gsang sngags thabs lam zab mo lings kyis bor/. Shedup V.598.

35. dge sbyor skad cig tsam yang mi byed par/ gnyid dang bre mo gtam la nam zla skyel/ gdams pa chud zos rang la rang rdzun byed/ mi tshe stong skyel chos pa ltar 'chos [...]/ le lo bdud kyis khyer ba'i sprang ban zhang/ le los yon tan thob par ga nas bshad/ le los 'bras bu ngan pa 'byin la ltos/. Shedup V.599.

The opening of the *Gurup Rewokyi* plays off of this same standard Buddhist *topos* of the good fortune of a human birth thrown away through laziness and depravity:

You, incomparable Lama Zhang the meditator,
attained the human birth—so hard to find;
encountered the Dharma—so hard to encounter;
and completed the monastic ordination—so hard to do.
Then, in the presence of the most holy ones,
you swore yourself to the Buddha’s teachings.
But then you neglected to rely on the antidote
and [fell under] the power of negative karmic imprints.³⁶
Taking the vows of ethical conduct made you arrogant and proud.
Hearing [the Buddha’s teachings] and meditating on wisdom made you arrogant
and haughty.
Even [practicing] generosity, etc.,³⁷ and monastic discipline made you arrogant.
Pride and arrogance made you praise yourself and disparage others.
Self-regard made you scorn the religious life.
Small virtues became faults.
Fault upon fault like this: there is no Dharma.³⁸

The remainder of each song then goes on to catalog these faults in great detail, maintaining the second-person descriptive form and the harsh accusatory tone that have been established.

The *Gurup Rewokyi* tends to focus more on personal faults and moral failings, e.g., the aforementioned wasting of the opportunity and leisure afforded by a human rebirth:

Madman who has wasted this precious human life!³⁹

36. “Karmic imprints” are the traces within one’s mind-stream of past immoral conduct, which eventually come to fruition as states of suffering. The “antidote” is the cultivation of beneficial states of mind that offset the negative states in the same way an antidote does the effects of a poison.

37. “Generosity, etc.” is a shorthand for the “Six Perfections:” generosity, morality, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom.

38. dpe med kyi bla ma zhang sgom khyod/ rnyed dka’i mir skyes phrad dka’i chos dang phrad/ ‘byung dka’i rab byung dge slong bsnyen rdzogs nas/ dam pa’i sryan sngar chos par khas blangs te/ gnyan po mi bsten bag chags ngan pa’i dbang/ tshul khriims sdom pas khengs shing nga rgyal dbang/ thos dang shes rab sgom pas khengs shing dregs/ sbyin dang des dang dul ba nyid kyis khengs/ nga rgyal khengs pas bdag bstod gzhan la smod/ rang gis rang mthong chos byed khyad du gsod/ yon tan bag tsam de rnams skyon du song/ skyon la skyon chags de ‘dra chos na med/. Shedup V.657–58.

39. mi lus rin chen chud gson gti thug po. Shedup V.661.

He is also accused of a worldliness unbecoming in a monk:

You say, “I have abandoned the eight worldly dharmas,”
but every act of body, speech, or mind you perform is done for the sake of flat-
tery, wealth, fame, accomplishments, and gain,
for the sake of delight in arrogance, conceit, and self-righteousness.⁴⁰
[...]
In your heart, you think only of this life,
and don’t think of the moment of death.
Thus you do not think of the frightful suffering of future lives.⁴¹
[...]
Irreligious in your old age, because of bad karmic imprints,
you have thoughts of nothing but food, drink, clothing, and destruction.⁴²

He is accused of turning traditional Buddhist virtues into vices:

You practiced generosity, but only out of a desire for wealth and fame.
You guarded morality, but only out of a desire for wealth and fame.
You meditated on forbearance, but meditated only out of a desire for wealth and
fame.⁴³

He is accused of causing the Dharma to degenerate:

I will not entrust you with the decline of the Buddha’s teachings.
[...]
If your way of acting is not taught
in any of the scriptures, commentaries, or instructions,
or in any of the sayings of the holy lamas,
then who gave you permission to bring down the Buddha’s teachings?⁴⁴

40. nga ni ‘jig rten chos brgyad spong zer nas/ lus ngag yid gsum bya ba ci byed rnams/ gnam snyan khe grags sgrub dang rnyed pa’i phyir/ rang che rang mtho rang bzang bde skyid phyir/. Shedup V.659.

41. snying la tshe ‘di min pa mi dran cing/ ‘chi ba skad cig tsum yang ma bsams pas/ phyi ma’i sdug bsngal ‘tsher ba’i bsam pa med/. Shedup V.659–60.

42. rgas khar chos med bag chags ngan pa yis/ zas skom gos dang shig gi sems las med/. Shedup V.661.

43. sbyin pa gtong yang khe grags ‘dod pas gtong/ tshul khirms bsrungs yang khe grags ‘dod pas bsrungs/ bzod pa bsgom yang khe grags ‘dod pas bsgoms/. Shedup V.662–63.

44. sangs rgyas bstan pa nub tu ma bcol lo/ [...] bka’ lung bstan bcos man ngag thams cad dang/ bla ma dam pa’i gsung sgros thams cad las/ khyod kyi byed spyod de ‘dra ma bshad na/ sangs rgyas bstan pa bsnub tu su yis bcol/. Shedup V. 664.

He is accused of the vice of excessive fault-finding in others:

You blamed others when you yourself lacked the [correct] practices.
Oblivious to your own faults, you always discussed the faults of others.⁴⁵

Of corrupting others:

Who gave you permission to corrupt peoples' minds?
Who gave you permission to pervert the faith of others?
Who gave you permission to establish your followers and disciples in sin?⁴⁶

Of laziness and procrastination:

You think, "Though in general one of course needs [to practice] the Dharma,
there is still time; I will do it little by little,"
and so [preoccupied with] the food and clothing of this life, you put off until
later the work of preparation [for the next life] [...]
Though you [consider] a little spiritual practice,
you think, "I can put it off this morning—I'll do it tonight."
You think, "I can't do it tonight—I'll do it the day after tomorrow."
You think, "I can't do it the day after tomorrow—I'll do it later."
Today, tomorrow, next year, the year after the year after next,
The job never gets done and human life is wasted.⁴⁷

Of being an inept meditator:

Rather than calm abiding, your meditation [produces] acute suffering.
Rather than insight, your meditation [produces] harmful conceptual thought,
etc.⁴⁸

45. rang la lag len med par gzhan la 'phya/ rang mtshang ma tshor gzhan mtshang rtag tu gleng/. Shedup V.658.

46. 'gro ba'i sems sun 'byin du su yis bcol/ gzhan gyi dad pa bzlog tu su yis bcol/ 'khor slob sdig la dgod du su yis bcol/. Shedup V.664.

47. spyir ni chos shig dgos par cha yod kyang/ da rung long yod khad kyis bya snyam pas/ tshe 'di'i lto gos ci phyid shom las byed/ [...] dge sbyor bag tsam nyams su len pa yang/ da nangs shol cig do nub bya yis snyam/ do nub ma nus nangs par bya yis snyam/ nangs par ma nus phyi nas bya yis snyam/ de ring sang dang sang phod gzhes phod kyis/ bya ba ma grub mi tshe stong skyel byas/. Shedup V.662.

48. zhi gnas dod por sdug bsngal zug zer sgom/ lhag mthong dod por rtog ngan sna tshogs sgom/. Shedup V.661–62.

Of being motivated by evil:

You evil doer, motivated only by the fury of desire,
whose every act tends toward wickedness;
you demon-possessed confederate of Māra,
striving only for [the things of] this life;
you lunatic who, whatever you do, labors fruitlessly;
you fool, depraved smooth-talking savant.⁴⁹

Of unconventional behavior:

Sometimes you sing, sometimes dance, sometimes lament.
You act agitated, get angry, joke, cry—
engage in every sort of careless behavior [...]
Unrestrained in your mode of dress,
you engage in every sort of shameless misconduct.
All sorts of words come out of your mouth, but these are nothing more than
fabricated teachings [...]
Where does it say that a monk can dance and sing?
Whose tradition is it to speak with nothing coming out of your mouth?
Where is it taught that you can act however you please without forethought?
Is that the religious tradition of ordained monks?⁵⁰

And finally, just a hint of a reference to his contentious public life:

Who gave you—who are yourself wicked—permission to govern and protect
[others]?⁵¹

By contrast, the *Chaktrichok* homes in on the controversies that arose out of his public life, when, backed by an army of monks, he ruled a good part of Central Tibet:

49. 'dod pa'i rnam pa 'ba' zhig sems pa yis/ ci byas sdig tu song ba'i las ngan po/ tshe 'di 'ba' zhig don du gnyer byed pa'i/ ci byas bdud kyi grogs po'i 'dres khyer po/ ci byas don med ngal ba'i smyon pa khyod/ mi lus rin chen chud gson gti thug po/ mdo med kha spyang mkhas pa'i srad ma can/. Shedup V.661.

50. res 'ga' glu len bro rdung 'o dod 'bod/ rgod dang khro dang bzhad gad ngu ba dang/ bag med spyod pa rnam pa sna tshogs byed/ [...] lus kyi gos tshags tshul rnam ma bsdams par/ ngo tsha med pa'i spyod pa ci ngan byed/ kha nas mi smra dgu rdol chos min smra/ [...] dge slong glu len bro rdung gang nas bshad/ kha nas ci min smra ba su yi lugs/ 'dod pa bag med spyod pa gang nas gsungs/ rab tu byung ba'i chos lugs de yin nam/. Shedup V.663–64.

51. rang ngan gzhung skyob byed du su yis bcol/. Shedup V.664.

I don't see conduct in accord with the Dharma
in anything you yourself make, do, or see!
The stories of your crimes are beyond belief [...]
Great meditator who tears down forts,
who seizes whatever he wants, wherever he wants—
horses, armor, scriptures, etc.
Day and night you prepare for the battle—
[gathering] personnel, armor, weapons, troops, etc.
Great meditator, but also commander-in-chief? Whose custom is this?
The smoke from burning houses fills the atmosphere,
great tongues of fire blaze like the fire of the apocalypse,
and creatures inside the walls—worms, insects, etc.—cease to exist.⁵²

From a stylistic standpoint, where both of these songs depart from the conventions of the praise is in the absence of regular stanzas, though these can be found in Zhang's other praises. Aside from the consistent meter, there is very little in the way of macrostructure, most of the regularities being locally produced repetition effects such as anaphora or antistrophe as in this passage from the *Gurup Rewokyi*:

You swore yourself a religious practitioner, then engaged in all sorts of irreligious
acts.
You swore yourself a meditator, then cultivated every sort of distraction.
You swore yourself a mountain hermit, then bound yourself to the city.
You swore yourself a monk, then performed all sorts of contrary actions.
You swore off attachments, then accumulated possessions of every sort.⁵³
[...]
You hope that others will praise you.
You hope they'll say, "He is a great meditator."
You hope they'll proclaim, "He is in accord with the Dharma."
You hope they'll proclaim, "He is not a hypocrite."

52. chos dang mthun par byed pa ngas ma mthong/ khyod kyi sdig spyod rnam thar bsam mi khyab/ [...] sgom chen yul mkhar sgyel zhing rta khrab gsung rab sogs/ gang na dgos dgu gnad dgu 'phrog par byed/ skye bo go cha mtshon cha dmag dpung sogs/ nyin med mtshan med 'khrug pa'i shom las byed/ sgom chen 'khrug dpon byed pa su yi lugs/ khang khyim bsregs pa'i du ba bar snang 'khrigs/ me lce chen po bskal pa'i me ltar 'bar/ 'bu srin sbur pa 'byin cing thu lu sogs/ rtsig gseb srog chags rnam la ci ma byung/. Shedup V.601–602.

53. chos par khas blangs chos min sna tshogs byed/ sgom par khas blangs g.yeng ba ci 'phel byed/ ri par khas blangs grong khyer thags su 'thag/ btsun par khas blangs 'gal ba sna tshogs byed/ chags med khas blangs yo byad ci 'tshogs byed/. Shedup V.658–59

You hope they'll proclaim, "He has great wisdom."
You hope they'll say, "He has great knowledge of the Dharma."
You hope they'll say, "His instructions are learned."⁵⁴

Consistent with the song-like feel of the work, these local regularities suggest—or maybe imitate⁵⁵—a real-time performance rather than a recitation of uniform stanzas prepared in advance. These regularities recur throughout. This one uses both anaphora and antistrophe in each line:

Disenchanted with the lamas, you scorned their instructions.
Disenchanted with your spiritual brothers and sisters, you scorned your commitments.
Disenchanted with the Sugatas, you scorned the sūtras and tantras.
Disenchanted with the learned ones, you scorned the commentaries.⁵⁶

It would be intriguing to speculate whether or not these “vajra songs” were actually performed spontaneously—there are stories elsewhere in his works where Zhang is shown improvising inspired songs of realization—and if so, what might have been the occasion for such performances, but however this turns out, there is enough of the classical praise structure here to see that Zhang, by referencing the formal properties of the genre, was intentionally evoking a familiar set of expectations in the reader or listener, only to swat them down. And of course this was only possible because a backdrop of conventional forms and reading strategies had already been in place.

But perhaps the most striking departure from classical praises is the dramatic transformation, in both songs, of the “B” section of the standard A-B praise structure—that recurring refrain of praise that follows upon each second person “descriptor” passage. By the eighth line of the *Chaktrichok*, and the ninth line of the *Gurup Rewokyi*, violent refrains begin to erupt through the flat surface of declarative descriptor passages—refrains modeled on the stanza-capping refrains of traditional praises but deformed almost beyond recognition. Here is line eight of the *Chaktrichok*:

54. gzhan dag rnam ni bdag la bstod du re/ khong ni sgom chen bzang ngo zer du re/ khong ni chos dang mthun zhes sgrog tu re/ khong ni tshul 'chos med zhes sgrog tu re/ khong ni shes rab che zhes sgrog tu re/ khong ni chos rgyus che zhes zer du re/ khong gi man ngag mkhas zhes zer du re/. Shedup V.659.

55. As *gur* evolved into a self-consciously literary form, it came to include more formal written compositions that imitated song, employing the idea of spontaneity as a literary conceit. As a result, it is not always clear to what degree a “spontaneous song” was actually spontaneous or even sung.

56. bla ma sun 'byin gdams ngag khyad du gsod/ mched grogs sun 'byin dam tshig khyad du gsod/ bde gshegs sun 'byin mdo rgyud khyad du gsod/ mkhas pa sun 'byin bstan bcos khyad du gsod/. Shedup V.658.

On the use of anaphora and other rhetorical devices, see Sørensen 1990, 26–27.

*Day and night, spending all your time sleeping—shame on you!*⁵⁷

What we see here is the standard refrain of a traditional praise—“I praise you” or “I pay homage to you”—transformed into its opposite—“Shame on you!”—with just enough traditional structure left in place to make the genre reference recognizable. Then more of these lines appear, at irregular intervals:

*Scorning the [lama’s] instructions—shame on you!*⁵⁸ [...]
*You mendacious fraud—shame on you!*⁵⁹ [...]
*You smooth-talking savant—shame on you!*⁶⁰ [...]
*Religious practitioner—shame on you for the evil you’ve done!*⁶¹ [...]
*“Great meditator” who has everything he needs—shame on you!*⁶² [...]
*For all you haven’t done—shame on you!*⁶³

A similar strategy of generic derangement can be seen in the *Gurup Rewokyi*, which plays off of another common praise refrain. It begins at line nine:

*Hypocritical sage! I will not bow down to you!*⁶⁴

Here the standard refrain is “I bow down to you,” and its inversion becomes “I will not bow down to you!” Then, as in the *Chaktrichok*, further refrains recur irregularly throughout the piece:

*O wealthy and famous sage! I will not bow down to you!*⁶⁵ [...]
*O self-destroyer! I will not bow down to you!*⁶⁶ [...]
*O meeting-place for half-wits! I will not bow down to you!*⁶⁷ [...]
*O ocean of lust! I will not bow down to you!*⁶⁸ [...]

57. nyin mtshan gnyid la skyel ba’i zhe khrel lo/. Shedup V.598.

58. gdams pa khyad du gsod mdzad khyod la khrel/. *Ibid.*

59. bslu byed khram pa khyod la zhe re khrel/. Shedup V.599.

60. kha spyang mkhas po khyod la zhe re khrel/. Shedup V.598.

61. chos pa sdig pa’i las byed khyod la khrel/. Shedup V.601.

62. mi mkho dgu mkho’i sgom chen khyod la khrel/. *Ibid.*

63. ci min spyod byed khyod la zhe re khrel/. Shedup V.603.

64. tshul ‘chos mkhan po khyod la phyag mi ‘tshal/. Shedup V.659.

65. khe grags mkhan po khyod la phyag mi ‘tshal/. *Ibid.*

66. rang gis rang phung khyod la phyag mi ‘tshal/. Shedup V. 661.

67. glen pa’i thug sa khyod la phyag mi ‘tshal/. Shedup V. 662.

68. ‘dod pa’i rgya mtsho khyod la phyag mi ‘tshal/. Shedup V. 662.

O procrastinating sage! I will not bow down to you!⁶⁹ [...]
O great thieving liar! I will not bow down to you!⁷⁰ [...]
O foolish madman! I will not bow down to you!⁷¹ [...]
O nauseating to look at! I will not bow down to you!⁷² [...]

The climax of the *Gurup Rewokyi* comes near the end, where the descriptive passages drop out altogether and a string of seven uninterrupted refrains brings it all to a hysterical crescendo:

*With an unceasing heavy heart,
 To you—who has done every sort of thing without permission—
 I will not bow down!
 To you—who has weakened the commitments and brought the teachings down—I
 will not bow down!
 O perverted spiritual teacher! I will not bow down to you!
 O ill-mannered monk! I will not bow down to you!
 O tree of poison! I will not bow down to you!
 O white on the outside, black on the inside! I will not bow down to you!
 O disgrace to religious practitioners! I will not bow down to you!⁷³*

Bowing turns into not bowing, praising turns into shaming. This strategy—I want to call it “anti-praise”—is the mainspring of these two songs.

Finally, in the last lines before the colophon of the *Gurup Rewokyi*, we find one more nod to a classical praise formula—which is again turned on its head: the custom in a lama praise is to express the wish that one have the good fortune to encounter that lama again in future lifetimes. For instance, the nineteenth-century yogin Shabkar writes, in a praise to his lama:

Father whose kindness can never be repaid,
 May I, your son, meet you again and again [in future lives]
 Until I attain unsurpassable enlightenment.⁷⁴

69. *phyi shol mkhan po khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/*. *Ibid.*

70. *khram pa rkun chen khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/*. *Shedup V.* 663.

71. *srad can smyon pa khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/*. *Ibid.*

72. *mthong ba skyug log khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/*. *Shedup V.* 664.

73. *ma bcol sna tshogs byed pa khyod la ni/ rtag tu sun pa'i yid kiyis phyag mi 'tshal/ dam nyams bstan snub khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/ log pa'i bshes gnyen khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/ dge slong tho co mkhan la phyag mi 'tshal/ dug gi sdong po khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/ phyi dkar nang nag khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/ chos pa'i rkang 'dren khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/ dam nyams bstan snub khyod la phyag mi 'tshal/*. *Shedup V.* 664–65.

74. Ricard 1994, 128.

But Zhang takes the praise commonplace and again inverts it in a farcical manner:

May no one follow your example,
and may I, having separated from you, never meet with you again!⁷⁵ [...]
May I not meet with you in any future lives.⁷⁶

The glaring contradiction between the subtitle's characterization of the song as a self-praise and the self-critical content of the verse itself is replayed emphatically in the complete colophon—quoted in part earlier—which closes the piece:

A request for a self-praise was made
to the teacher Lama Zhang
by the patron from Ngenlam Jangchi, Gurup Rewokyi.
When the teacher Lama Zhang reflected upon himself,
utter wonder arose, and he composed a praise.
Disseminate this everywhere.
Listen and look!
The self-shaming is completed.⁷⁷

This contradiction is also evident in the aforementioned “subtitle”/colophon to the *Chaktrichok*:

“Wicked Death, Wicked Corpse”: praise to Lama Zhang from a standpoint of utter contempt, [requested] by Chaktrichok of Drangda, at the Chökor Drathang [of Tsal].⁷⁸

The choice to follow the classical praise form is clearly intentional, and it cannot be an accident that the form is used here for a purpose completely contrary to its traditional purpose: a *praise* is composed but is motivated by *contempt*, a patron's request for a *self-praise* is answered with a *self-shaming*. *Contempt* substituted for *praise*; *shame* substituted for *praise*: deliberate reversals of the expected.

75. 'gro rnam khyod kyi lad mo mi bzlos shing/ bdag kyang khyod dang bral nas mi 'phrad shog/ Shedup V.662.

76. skye ba kun tu khyod dang mi 'phrad shog/. Shedup V.665.

77. ngan lam byang phyi'i yon bdag gu rub re bo skyid kyis/ bla ma zhang ston la/ khyed rang nyid kyis khyed rang nyid la bstod pa zhig zhu byas pas/ bla ma zhang ston gyis rang nyid la bsams pas shin tu ngo mtshar skyes te bstod pa mdzad pa'o/ 'di ni kun la spel lo/ nyon cig ltos shig/ rang la rang gis khrel btab rdzogs so/. Shedup V.665.

78. bla ma zhang la brang mda'i [604] phyag khri mchog gis/ chos skor grwa thang du shin tu brnyas bcos kyi sgo nas bstod pa/shi ngan ro ngan zhes bya ba'o/. Shedup V.604–605.

3. Praise-Modifying Phrases

The “subtitle”/colophon to the *Chaktrichok* quoted above contains an interesting construction—one that it in fact shares with the “subtitle” to the *Gurup Rewokyi*. Thus:

Praise to Lama Zhang [...] *from a standpoint of* utter contempt⁷⁹

Praise to himself *from a standpoint of* utter wonder.⁸⁰

The Tibetan term translated in both passages as “from a standpoint of” is *goné* (*sgo nas*), which literally means “from the door of” or “through the gate of.” In both cases it modifies the name of a genre—praise. The modifying formula qualifies the genre by identifying the “gate” through which the praise will be approached, i.e., the point of view to be assumed or the manner of treatment to be employed. In English *goné* can be rendered in a variety of ways depending on the context: “by means of,” “in the form of,” “from the perspective of,” “in the manner of,” etc. Thus, for instance, Adele Tomlin, in a contemporary English translation of a text by Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, uses “via” to translate *goné*, so that the phrase *rtsa sngags kyi sgo nas bstod pa* is rendered as “Praise via Explanation of the Root Mantra.”⁸¹ This formula would become a commonplace of Tibetan religious praises. Lama Zhang wrote a number of praises in an Indian-influenced style, and of these, five employ this same convention—one in a self-characterization similar to the subtitle of the *Gurup Rewokyi*, “praise to you from the standpoint of faith,”⁸² and four in their titles: *Praise to the Glorious One in Terms of the Seven Branches*,⁸³ *Praise to the Venerable Yerpawa from the Standpoint of the Three Protectors*,⁸⁴ *Praise to the Glorious Coemergence from the Standpoint of the Abiding Nature [of Reality]*,⁸⁵ *Praise by Döchak Dorjé in the Form of a Biography*.⁸⁶

Numerous other examples of this formula can be found in later works of Tibetan praise. One of the most famous of these is Tsongkhapa’s (1357–1419) *Praise of the Supramundane Victor Buddha from the Approach of His Teaching the Profound Dependent-Arising, Essence of the Good Explanations*.⁸⁷ The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), in turn wrote a praise to Tsongkhapa titled *The Tambura Vina: Praise to the Dharma King Tsongkhapa the Great, Essence of All Victors of the Three*

79. bla ma zhang la [...] shin tu brnyas bcos kyi sgo nas bstod pa/. Shedup V.603-604.

80. rang nyid la shin tu ngo mtshar ba’i sgo nas bstod pa/. Shedup V.657.

81. Tomlin 2020.

82. khyod la dad pa’i sgo nas rab bstod pa/. *Dpal rgwa lo la bstod pa u dum wa ra*. Shedup I.72.

83. *Dpal la yan lag bdun gyi sgo nas bstod pa*/. Shedup I.83–86.

84. *Rje yer pa ba la rigs gsum mgon po’i sgo nas bstod pa*. Shedup I.86–87.

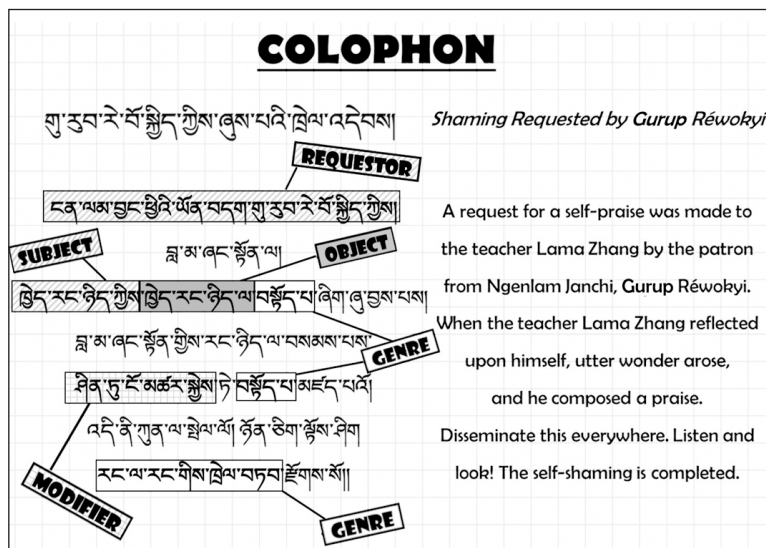
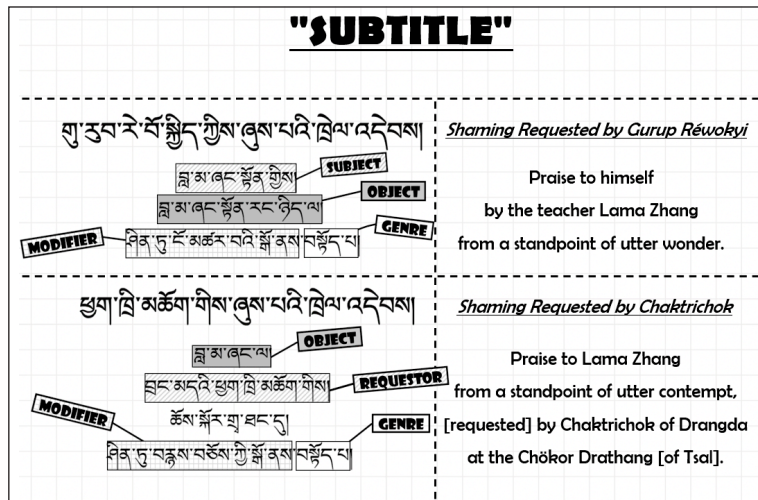
85. *Dpal ldan lhan cig skyes pa la gnas lugs kyi sgo nas bstod pa*. Shedup I.95–99.

86. *Rnal ’byor gyi dbang phyug chen po bde ba’i rdo rje la/ ’dod chags rdo rjes rnam thar gyi sgo nas bstod pa*/. Shedup I.108–111.

87. *Sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das la zab mo rten cing ’brel bar ’byung ba gsung ba’i sgo nas bstod pa legs bshad snying po*/. Hopkins 1983, 774.

*Times, in the Form of a Kashmiri “Magic Pattern” (kun ‘khor).*⁸⁸ Within the Kagyüpa tradition, Götsangpa Repa reports in his biography of Tsangnyön Heruka that Tsangnyön wrote an early biographical praise to Milarepa titled *Praise from the Standpoint of the Twelve Acts in the Life of Shepa Dorjé [Milarepa]*.⁸⁹

Now, with the *goné* phrase accounted for, a more complete mark-up of the subtitles and colophon is possible:



88. *Dus gsum rgyal ba thams cad kyi ngo bo chos kyi rgyal po btsong kha pa chen po la kas+mi ra'i kun 'khor gyi sgo nas bstod pa tam+bu ra'i rgyud mang!*. Rgyal dbang lnga pa ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho'i gsung " =bum, par gzhi dang po, vol. 18, 212–16.

89. *Rje btsun gzhad <bzhad> pa rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa la mdzad pa bcu gnyis kyi sgo nas bstod pa*. See Quintman 2013, 125–26 and 261.

C. Hanging Questions

Question 1. Why would a lama write a work of self-praise?

a. “Praising oneself”

While praise is a well-established Buddhist genre, anyone familiar with basic Mahāyāna Buddhist tenets would want to ask: why in the world would a prominent Tibetan lama compose a praise to *himself*? Might this not be seen as self-aggrandizement? Or boasting? All schools of Tibetan Buddhism subscribe to a basic vow not to commit what are called “the root downfalls of a Bodhisattva,” one of which is “praising oneself and belittling others.”⁹⁰ How, then, within the context of Tibetan Buddhism, do we make sense of a work of self-praise?

b. Textual Economy and Ritual Context

It is at this point that we are confronted with the limitations of a purely formal approach to literary works. What has been missing from the discussion of the genre of praise is a consideration of what I have elsewhere called the “textual economy” of literary works—their patterns of circulation through material, social, ritual, and symbolic spaces as artifacts that are produced, distributed, and consumed by textual communities.⁹¹ Without knowledge of what was actually done with praises, we will always be confronted with impasses such as this.

I believe this approach to genre is similar to that undertaken of late by rhetoricians of genre, who—working with a broadened conception that includes but is not limited to literary genre—likewise criticize an exclusively formal emphasis. As Amy Devitt writes:

[M]any genre scholars [...] look then not to patterns of form to define genre but to patterns of action. To understand those actions requires understanding the contexts within which they occur, contexts that in rhetorical scholarship have been called rhetorical situations.⁹²

What then do we know about the “textual economies” or “patterns of action” or “rhetorical situations” that have given sense to the Buddhist genre of praise?

If we return to the original Sanskrit praises, early sources indicate they were often sung or chanted as parts of larger collective rituals. The Chinese monk Yijing, who traveled extensively in India during the seventh century C.E., described the rituals of praise he observed there:

90. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye 2003, 176–179.

91. Yamamoto 2009, 147.

92. Devitt 2004, 12.

All the assembled priests come out of the gate of their monastery, and walk three times round a Stūpa, offering incense and flowers. They all kneel down, and one of them who sings well begins to chant hymns describing the virtues of the Great Teacher [i.e., the Buddha] with a melodious, pure, and sonorous voice [...] ⁹³

In large monasteries, where full assemblies were convened, variations were practiced:

There are eight halls and three hundred apartments in this monastery. The worship can only take place separately, as most convenient to each member. Thus, it is customary to send out, every day, one precentor to go round from place to place chanting hymns, being preceded by monastic lay servants and children carrying with them incense and flowers. He goes from one hall to another, and in each he chants the service, every time three or five *slokas* in a high tone, and the sound is heard all around. [...] In addition there are some who, sitting alone, facing the shrine (Gandhakuti), praise the Buddha in their heart. ⁹⁴

Without knowledge of the action contexts within which texts function, there is a danger we will default unwittingly to our own cultural contexts—e.g., reading Tibetan *gur* songs as “crazy wisdom” prototypes of the “spontaneous bop prosody”⁹⁵ of twentieth-century American “beat” poetry—or to questionable psychological explanations, both of which could leave us with somewhat misleading views of Tibetan praise songs.

A form of praise practice common in Tibet—based on the tantric form of Buddhism that took hold there—is a variation on the Indian devotional rituals where, rather than sitting before a buddha image or other consecrated object, one mentally visualizes a buddha in front of oneself, within one’s heart, or on top of one’s head, then recites the praise to that visualized

93. I-tsing 1896, 152.

94. *Ibid.*, 154–155.

95. Allen Ginsberg’s celebratory description of the writing style of Jack Kerouac. “Crazy wisdom” is a term coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoché. The first English version of a song by Lama Zhang Tsalpa I ever saw was in a translation of the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé’s collection of Kagyü vajra songs published in 1980 by students of Trungpa titled *The Rain of Wisdom, the Essence of the Ocean of True Meaning*. It should be noted that Allen Ginsberg was a student of Trungpa’s and that he, together with poet Ann Waldman, established, at Trungpa’s Naropa Institute, the “Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.” I call this “somewhat misleading” only in Harold Bloom’s sense, where “[a]ny strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts.” Bloom 1994, 7. I eagerly await the work of future scholars who will document this wonderful moment in the history of both American culture and Western scholarship on Tibetan literature—with the understanding that the present journal would not even exist had it not been for creative misreadings of this sort.

buddha. Here the act of praising is embedded within a context of offerings, prostrations, mantra recitations, prayers, and other ritual practices.⁹⁶ An especially popular form of this is a ritual called “guru yoga” (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*), the object of which is one's own teacher visualized as a buddha, either alone or together with past teachers, deities, and buddhas of the practitioner's lineage. Here, recited praises are often combined with supplications for blessings, which are visualized concretely as light, rain, or some other pure substance descending from the field of teachers to the meditator, clearing away obstructions to enlightenment. Here is an example sung by the great Tibetan saint Milarepa, of whom Zhang considered himself to be a third-generation disciple:

My Guru is Dorje-Chang, with the Wisdom-Body;
My Guru is Tilopa, with the Six Miraculous Powers;
My Guru is Naropa, with the Net of Myriad Spells;
My Guru is Marpa, to whom I owe the greatest debt.
They sit e'er upon my head as my glory.
If you have a pair of clear and sincere eyes
You will see them as real Buddhas.
If with sincerity and faith you pray to them,
The rain of grace will ever fall upon you.
If you offer practice and devotion,
The treasury of Accomplishments will be opened to you.⁹⁷

Attention to the textual economy of praise hymns opens up a perspective from which we are better able to approach the puzzle of works of self-praise, for we can now bear it in mind to look for devotional practices conjoined with which self-praising texts might not seem so anomalous.

Looking through the corpus of Zhang's writings, we find there are in fact two other works identified as self-praises. One of these is especially pertinent to us here because it is mentioned in other texts written by Zhang and his disciples, and in these mentions we find clues as to the circumstances of its composition. The work in question is called *The Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes [of All Sentient Beings]: A Self-Praise*.⁹⁸ Here, the self-praise takes the form of an autobiographical poem—in fact the colophon states this explicitly using

96. There are numerous examples of the use of praise within a ritual context in Bentor 1996.

97. Chang 1962, 379. For Lama Zhang's instructions on guru yoga, see Roberts 2011, 74–76, which translates Zhang's instructions on Mahāmudrā titled *The Ultimate Supreme Path of Mahāmudra* (*Phyag rgya chen po lam zab mthar thug zhang gi man ngag*), Shedup IV.78–149.

98. *Nyid la nyid kyis bstod pa dgos, dod re skong ma* (hereinafter, *Dgos, dod re skong ma*), Shedup I.108–111.

the familiar “from the door of” (*goné*) construction discussed above to unite two distinct literary genres:

A praise *in the form of* a biography [lit. “a praise from the door of biography”].⁹⁹

The work is divided into stanzas of varying length—usually four or seven lines—each stanza of which contains a description of a key life event followed by the praising exclamation “I pay homage to you!” For example:

You received the advice of Yerpawa and Ölkawa
and wandered the mountain retreats.

You did wind meditation and perfected the signs.

*O one who has fully achieved the attainments, I pay homage to you!*¹⁰⁰

The A-B stanza form discussed above, with its descriptor followed by a refrain, can be seen clearly throughout.

A fourteenth-century leader of the Tsalpa Kagyüpa order founded by Zhang, Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé (Tshal pa Kun dga’ rdo rje, 1309–1364)—best known for his work of religious history called “The Red Annals”¹⁰¹—wrote a biography of Lama Zhang that took the form of a commentary on the *Fulfillment of Needs, Wishes, and Hopes* self-praise verses. In it, he directly addresses our question of why a lama would write a work of self-praise:

You attained all of the ends of higher rebirth and liberation, and therefore you yourself wrote and offered these verses of supplication in the form of an autobiography in order to bestow fortune upon your disciples.

Someone might say it is improper to praise and make supplications to yourself, but this is indeed similar to what the Bhagavan [i.e., Buddha] also said:

Clasping your two hands together,
pray for personal liberation.
For the benefit of disciples, listen to me!

99. rnam thar gyi sgo nas bstod pa. *Dgos ‘dod re skong ma*, Shedup I.111.

100. yer pa ba dang ‘ol ka ba’i/ gdams ngag mnos nas ri khrod ‘grims/ rtsa rlung bsgoms pas rtags rnam rdzogs/ sgrub pa mthar phyin khyed la ‘dud/. *Ibid.*, Shedup I.109.

101. *Deb ther dmar po*.

If one supplicates in this manner, one becomes a devoted and most fortunate one, and therefore following the biography of the lama, body, speech, and mind are liberated inseparably.¹⁰²

The purpose, then, was not self-aggrandizement at all; the piece was written “for the benefit of disciples.” Without mentioning a specific ritual practice, Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé appears to be suggesting that the autobiography/self-praise was meant to be used as a means of supplicating for blessings—in other words, as the text of a devotional rite—and that this rite would put a disciple on the path to liberation. This is entirely consonant with the idea discussed above that some of the earliest uses of praise songs were for devotional rituals of praise and supplication directed to a visualized lama figure. In this case, the self-praise is a praise of Lama Zhang, but a praise written to be recited, not by himself, but by disciples, and for the purpose of attaining liberation.

There are two texts subsidiary to this one in Zhang’s Sealed Precepts (*bka’ rgya ma*) called, respectively, *The Story of “The Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes,”*¹⁰³ and *The Sādhana of “The Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes”*¹⁰⁴—which, taken together, support Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé’s interpretation, though the events described occur within a visionary narrative of dream revelation. In the first of these texts, *The Story*, Zhang receives a series of dream visitations from a group of wisdom *dākinīs* who teach him a special series of subtle body yogas, which they instruct him to practice until they return. After mastering the practices, Zhang awakens one morning and finds a “crown protrusion”—one of the thirty-two outward “signs” of a buddha—on his head. When the *dākinīs* return several days later, they acknowledge and praise his accomplishment in a song that follows exactly the A-B praise form we have already seen so often here:

The crown protrusion on the head radiates upward.
To the being possessed of the power of knowledge,
We offer praise!
[...]
O, fulfiller of the needs, wishes, and hopes [of sentient beings],
*We bow down to the master lama!*¹⁰⁵

102. mngon mtho nges legs kyi don thams cad ‘grub pas na/ gdul bya la de’i skal pa sbyin pa’i phyir nyid kyi rnam thar la gsol ba ‘debs pa’i tshigs su bcaid pa ‘di nyid kyis mdzad nas gnang ngo/ /nyid la nyid kyis bstod pa dang/ gsol ba gdab par mi rigs zhe na/ bcom ldan ‘das kyis kyang/ shAkya seng+ge de la yang/ /sor mo bcu yi thal sbyar te/ /so sor thar pa gdon par bya/ /gdul ba’i don du nga la nyon/ /zhes gsungs pa dang ‘dra mod/ de lta bu’i tshul gyis gsol ba btab na/ mos gus dang skal pa rab tu gyur pas bla ma’i rnam thar snyogs nas sku gsung thugs dbyer med du grol ba/. ‘*Gro mgon rin po che’i rnam thar bdus pa dgos ‘dod re skong ma’i ‘grel pa*, Shedup VI.180–181.

103. *Spyi khungs ma/ dgos ‘dod re skong ma’i lo rgyus* (hereafter *Dgos ‘dod re skong ma’i lo rgyus*), Shedup VII.440–46.

104. *Spyi khungs ma/ dgos ‘dod re skong ma’i sgrub thabs* (hereinafter, *Dgos ‘dod re skong ma’i sgrub thabs*), Shedup VII.446–47.

105. dbu’i gtsug tor gyen du ‘bar/ skyes bu rig pa’i stobs ldan la/ kho bo cag gis bstod par rigs/ [...] dgos ‘dod re ba skong mdzad

They then present him with a text—also in the traditional praise form—which turns out to be the biographical self-praise verses that comprise the main text, *The Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes*. They then explain to him how the text should be utilized:

This praise to you [is] a precious wish-granting jewel. O radiant one, if one recites this *Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes* and performs the deity [practice], one will attain buddhahood in this lifetime, in this body.¹⁰⁶

Though this account describes Lama Zhang's composition of the text in the language of supernatural beings and dream visions, it nevertheless lends support to Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé's claim that the text was meant to be a ritual manual. The "deity practice" they refer to here is almost certainly guru yoga, and the autobiography/self-praise text is intended to be recited by disciples while visualizing Lama Zhang himself.

And this is indeed confirmed again in the *sādhana*—or ritual instruction—the second text subsidiary to *The Fulfillment of Needs, Wishes, and Hopes*. Here the guru yoga rite is described in detail: briefly, a disciple visualizes Lama Zhang seated in the heart of the fierce female Buddha Vajrayoginī and while sustaining the visualization, recites the praises from the main text. Upon arriving at each capping refrain "I pay homage to you!" the praise-giver visualizes all manner of good things—food, wealth, and friends—descending like rain from above.

The *sādhana* ends with the promise of an end-result:

If you practice the *Fulfillment of the Needs, Wishes, and Hopes* secret *sādhana* in this way, you will, in this very life, achieve the supreme and ordinary attainments.¹⁰⁷

So in this case the perplexing question "Why would a tantric Buddhist master write a work of self-praise?" has a fairly straightforward answer: the self-praise is presented to his disciples to be used as the script for a familiar tantric devotional ritual. This is not to say that all Tibetan praises are ritual scripts, but at least we have a historically plausible scenario in which a work of self-praise makes sense, and we do not have to resort to the blanket "crazy wisdom" defense.

As it turns out, Lama Zhang's self-praises are not the only ones to be found in Tibetan literature; there are not very many, but they do exist. The Fifth Dalai Lama, for instance, included a work of self-praise in a collection of prayers that he wrote to Tsongkhapa, founder of his sect.

pa/ bla ma rje la phyag 'tshal lo/. *Dgos 'dod re skong ma'i lo rgyus*, Shedup VII. 444.

106. khyed kyi bstod pa 'di yid bzhin gyi nor bu rin po che/ 'od zer can dgos 'dod re skong ma 'di kha ton byas shing yi dam byas na/ tshe gcig lus gcig 'di la sangs rgya ba'i dgos pa yod do/ *Ibid.*, 444–45.

107. 'di ltar dgos 'dod re skong ma'i gsang sgrub 'di nyams su blang na/ mchog thun mong gi dngos grub rnams tshe 'di nyid la thob par gsungs so/. *Dgos 'dod re skong ma'i sgrub thabs*, Shedup VII.447.

The reason given by the Fifth Dalai Lama is that an important figure—presumably a disciple or patron—requested it:

Chöpa Badur, the ruler of Orö Yönrü, urged me to write a praise to myself, which I thought would bring great benefit, so I put together supplications to [...] Tsongkhapa [...] along with an auspicious prayer of praise to myself, exaggerating my nonexistent virtues.¹⁰⁸

Notice at the end the conventional note of modesty, denying that he is in fact worthy of praise—a way, perhaps, of offsetting the seeming egoism of a piece of self-praise.

If we return now to the *Gurup Rewokyi*, it begins to appear a little less quirky. As with the text by the Fifth Dalai Lama, the first half of the colophon describes a request made by a patron-disciple:

A request for a self-praise was made
to the teacher Lama Zhang
by the patron from Ngenlam Jangchi, Gurup Rewokyi.¹⁰⁹

If both Lama Zhang and the Fifth Dalai Lama received requests from patrons for works of self-praise, then maybe such requests were not the oddities they seem at first glance. Could it be that patrons would routinely request great masters to write hymns of self-praise in order that those masters' disciples would have ritual texts for devotional practices?

Question 2. Why would a request for a work of self-praise be answered with a work of self-shaming?

a. Praise and Shame

As noted above, a key difference between our two vajra songs and traditional praise songs is that the content of the vajra songs is anything but praising. If we look now to the second half of the *Gurup Rewokyi* colophon, we see that Zhang in fact characterizes the song as *both* a praise and a “self-shaming” (*rang la rang gis khrel btab*):

108. o rod gyon ru'i dpon po gcod pa bA dur gyis nged rang gi bstod pa zhig bskul ba la brten nas phan yon che bar bsams te [...] btsong kha pa [...] la gsol 'debs dang nged rang yon tan med bzhin du sgro btags kyi bstod pa smon lam shis brjod dang bcas te tshig gi sbyor ba byeld pa la [...] sbyar/. *Gsung 'bum ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho* 18:296–97.

109. ngan lam byang phyi'i yon bdag gu rub re bo skyid kyi/ bla ma zhang ston la/ khyed rang nyid kyi khyed rang nyid la bstod pa zhig zhu byas pas/. *Shedup* V.665.

When the teacher Lama Zhang reflected upon himself,
 utter wonder arose, and he composed a praise.
 Disseminate this everywhere.
 Listen and look!
 The self-shaming is completed.¹¹⁰

This term “self-shaming” echoes the refrain of the *Chaktrichok*—“Shame on you! (*khyod la khrel*)”—and pinpoints the fundamental sin seen to underlie all of the other sins Zhang is accused of: he is, above all else, *shameless* (*khrel med pa* or *ngo tsha med pa*). “You engage in every sort of shameless misconduct,”¹¹¹ accuses the *Gurup Rewokyi*, more or less summing up the prevailing sentiment of both works.

The key term here is the Tibetan word *trel* (*khrel*), meaning “shame,” which stands at the center of a semantic field of terms with deep resonance within Tibetan culture and gives focus to this strange contradictory hybrid of praise and blame, acclaim and denunciation. Other terms in this cluster include:¹¹² *treldep* (*khrel ‘debs*, “to recount/list/accuse sb. of faults or mistakes”); *treldong* (*khrel gdong*, “a look of embarrassment/shame”); *trelgö* (*khrel rgod*, “jeering, ridiculing, making fun of”); *trelmé* (*khrel med*, “shameless, immodest, brazen, contemptible”); *trelmé rangtö* (*khrel med rang bstod*, “shameless self-praise”); and *treldeñ* (*khrel ldan* “modest, decent”). Closely related in meaning to *trel* are the terms *ngotsa* (*ngo tsha*, “shame, embarrassment”—literally, “hot face”), and *gyü* (*gyud*, “regret, remorse”).

There is at least one other text in Zhang’s *Collected Works* that employs the terminology of shame in its title, *The Song of Remorse in the Mind*:¹¹³

Faithless,
 taking pleasure in sins,
 [facing] birth in the hells:
 at the moment of death, great remorse over this shame.

Much activity,
 great worry,
 bad attitude:
 great remorse over this pointless activity.

110. bla ma zhang ston gyis rang nyid la bsams pas shin tu ngo mtshar skyes te bstod pa mdzad pa’o/
 ‘di ni kun la spel lo/ nyon cig ltos shig/ rang la rang gis khrel btab rdzogs so/. *Ibid.*

111. ngo tsha med pa’i spyod pa ci ngan byed/. Shedup V.664.

112. The definitions that follow are all taken from Goldstein 2001.

113. *Gsang sngags lag len gyi mgur nyi shu/ bcu drug pa/ sems la ‘gyod pa’i glu*, Shedup V.539–41.

Arrogant because of learning,
taking pleasure in [mere] words,
no [lamas'] instructions:
great remorse over the appearance of this demon pride [...]

Small perseverance,
lazy brain,
great pretense:
great remorse over this lack of heart.

Attached to objects of sense,
great desire,
lacking self-power:
great remorse over corrupted vows.

Beggar-monk Zhang,
acquainted with people,
makes a declaration:
great remorse over being carried away by demons.

Compassion wrong,
[lamas'] instructions lost,
quarrelling with the ḍākinīs:
great remorse over coming punishment.

*Little song of remorse in the mind of the Beggar-monk Zhang.*¹¹⁴

We see here some of the same faults cataloged in the *Chaktrichok* and the *Gurup Rewokyi*: laziness, pride, improper meditation, attachment to worldly ends, evil acts, and superficial understanding of the Dharma. But compared to the vajra songs, this song is much more of a formal composition,

114. dad pa med/ sdig la dga'/ dmyal bar skye/ 'chi khar 'gyod pa 'di gyong re che/ bya brel
mang/ sems khral che/ kun slong ngan/ byas pa don med 'di gyong re che/ thos pas khengs/
tshig la dga'/ man ngag med/ rlom pa'i bdud langs pa 'di gyong re che/ [...] snying rus chung/
klad pa sla/ ngo srung che/ rang mdo med pa 'di gyong re che/ yul dang nye/ 'dod chags
che/ rang dbang med/ sdom pa nyams pa 'di gyong re che/ sprang ban zhang/ mi dang 'dris/
sgrog tu tshud/ bdud kyis khyer ba 'di gyong re che/ snying rje nor/ man ngag shor/ mkha' 'gro 'khrugs/ bka' chad 'ong
ba 'di gyong re che/ sprang ban zhang gi sems la 'gyod pa'i glu chung/. *Gsang sngags lag len gyi mgur nyi shu/ bcu drug pa*,
Shedup V.539–41.

with regular stanzas of equal length and none of the structuring devices suggestive of improvisation such as anaphora or antistrophe. The second person accusing persona is absent. But what is especially lacking is the wild mocking tone of both the *Chaktrichok* and the *Gurup Rewokyi*: the rhetorical playfulness, the exaggerated finger-pointing, the theatrical expressions of outrage and contempt, the air of parody. The refrains here are not self-conscious parodies of anything, least of all praising refrains; they simply express remorse. The tone is much more placid, almost pro forma, like the confessional set pieces employed in many Tibetan liturgies. Reading this confessional verse does, however, help us to appreciate just how *sui generis* our two vajra songs are.

b. Plausible Scenarios

Still, we have no satisfactory answer to the question of why a request for self-praise should be answered with a work of self-shaming, and it may well be that at this point it cannot be answered with any certainty. We cannot, for instance, use the answer that worked for the same question about works of self-praise—“Because someone requested the song”—because the patron Gurup Rewokyi did not request a work of self-shaming; he requested a work of self-praise. It is safe to assume that when the patron made his request to his teacher Zhang, he expected a text that would support a devotional guru ritual. But any attempt to fathom why in this case the not-so-unusual request elicited such an unusual reply must necessarily be somewhat speculative. Still, I think it can be useful to imagine plausible circumstances: textual economies or rhetorical contexts—possible worlds if you like—in which such an anomalous text might be at home.

Scenario 1: Contrition

There is something troubling about the language of the subtitle and colophon: in the subtitle we are told that the praise is written from a standpoint of “utter wonder,” and the colophon repeats this phrase, reporting that Zhang, when Gurup Rewokyi requested the praise, “reflected upon himself” and felt “utter wonder,” which impelled him to write the praise. What, consistent with the self-shaming content of the song, could be meant here by “utter wonder”? Martin, as mentioned above, first rendered the term as “astonishment,” and translated the subtitle as “Astonished Verses in Praise of Myself.” For several years, what this title said to me, as a late twentieth-century American reader, was something like: “I’m astonished at how good I am, and therefore I’ve written verses of praise to myself. I am the greatest!” as if Zhang were an MMA fighter or a hip-hop artist making extravagant boasts about his prowess. This, I suggest, is what gave that English rendering its kick: it tapped into a rhetorical context—our own folk- and pop-cultural traditions of bragging verse (and Tibetans have their own)—that seemed familiar to us. And it comported well with the image of the wild, boastful, convention-defying, “crazy wisdom” adept, also culturally attractive. But once we have read the text carefully and contextualized it in terms of the genre clues and rhetorical situation it suggests, it becomes harder to rest content with such an interpretation.

There is nothing boastful about the content. Suppose the song is not about how great he is, but rather about how, prompted for a self-praise, and reflecting upon his own virtues and vices, he suddenly finds himself unable to write a work of self-praise? Suppose the song truly is, as the title reports, an act of self-shaming?

Scenario 2: Mock Contrition

There is another possibility—also compatible with Zhang’s penchant for wordplay and irony—which is that the *Gurup Rewokyi* was written by Zhang as a sarcastic sham praise advanced as a gesture of scorn for patrons who may have been trying to rein in some of his more destructive or eccentric tendencies. We have already noted the deep suspicion with which Zhang viewed patrons and disciples from early on, and there is evidence that the conflictual relationship did not end when he assumed rulership over Lhasa. So the song might be interpreted as the product of a power struggle between patrons from powerful families and a headstrong, defiant, and charismatic lama. This sort of power struggle must have been common during the renaissance, or later dissemination (*phyi dar*) period, when revived monastic institutions replaced the emperor as the chief rival to the power of the old aristocratic clans. Thus, some commentators, for example, have interpreted the *Gurup Rewokyi* as Lama Zhang’s mocking reply to the *Chaktrichok*, which is in turn interpreted as a condemnation of Zhang written by a powerful layperson named Chaktrichok.¹¹⁵ This scenario would account for the wild extravagant tone: what is displayed would then be a sort of mock contrition, a parody of self-shaming meant to ridicule Chaktrichok and other of Zhang’s critics. This would also be a way of explaining the similarity of tone, diction, and rhetoric in the two works without suggesting—as I have been doing here—that this similarity supports the hypothesis that Zhang wrote both of the songs. This scenario is also supported by a note written in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s copy of Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé’s catalog of the first-known *Collected Works* of Zhang Tsalpa, which Dan Martin translates as

[The *Chaktrichok*] does not appear in the table of contents (*dkar chag*), and even though it is not the words [of Zhang Rin po che], still there is the tradition of giving reading authorizations.¹¹⁶

Still, there are facts that make me hesitate in the face of such an interpretation:

- (a) The colophon to the *Gurup Rewokyi* gives a clear description of the circumstances that led to its composition—a request made by a patron/disciple—but makes no reference to anyone named Chaktrichok and gives no intimation

115. Martin 1996; Schaeffer, in Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, 221–22; D. Jackson 1994, 65, n.149.

116. ‘Di dkar chag na mi snang zhing gsung min kyang lung mdzad srol ‘dug/. 5DL *Gsan yig*, II.94b; Martin 2012.

that the song was intended as a response to earlier criticisms.

- (b) Tsalpa Kunga Dorjé, both in *The Red Annals* history and in his biography of Zhang, lists Chaktrichok as one of the “great sons who perform enlightened activities,”¹¹⁷ which usually means an important disciple of Zhang, and it would be very unusual for a disciple to write such a scathing piece about his master—and even more so for that work to be saved as part of the master’s *Collected Works*.
- (c) The repeated use, in both songs, of parallel syntactic formulas expressive of “textual economy:” markers of the relationships between requestor, writer, requested work, genre, genre modifiers, time, place, circumstances of composition, etc.
- (d) Issues of literary style: the extraordinary stylistic self-awareness and self-control, the sudden shifts into rhetorical high gear, the subtle, ironic, and savvy playing with established genre conventions, the erratic rhythms of emotion and tone, the invention of unorthodox forms of expression, the rollercoaster of abuse, contrition, hysteria, declamation, and mock outrage, the charged language and over-the-top similes, the irony, parody, humor, and sarcasm: all of these considerations of style, rhetoric, and literary personae make it hard to imagine two contemporaries with such similar sensibilities, temperaments, and rhetorical repertoires facing off against each other in such a manner. The songs read more like a ventriloquist arguing with his dummy than a layman arguing with his lama.

What seems more likely to me is that Chaktrichok was a disciple and patron, and that, like Gurup Rewokyi, he requested a work of self-praise. This would make the two works exactly parallel: answers to requests from patrons for hymns of self-praise.

Even under this interpretation, however, it is still possible to frame Zhang’s reply—which delivered the exact opposite of what was requested—as an act of defiance toward his patrons. In that case, both the *Gurup Rewokyi* and the *Chaktrichok* could be seen as parodies of humility, works employing the language of shame and confession to flaunt his independence.

Scenario 3: Wonder and Shame

This last scenario is admittedly a long shot, and I initially hesitated to offer it since it is purely speculative. But on the assumption that later scholars will have much more information on hand, as well as all of the powerful resources (including AI) of the emerging field of digital humanities,

117. phrin las sgrub pa'i bu chen. *Deb ther mar po* 123; Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje, *Rnam thar bdus pa*, Shedup VI.170 (the disciple's name in the latter text is spelled *chag khri mchog*).

it seems worth considering—if for no other reason than the hope that it may be refuted by more knowledgeable researchers.

Looking more closely at this anomalous phrase “utter wonder,” an interesting detail comes to light: the Tibetan term Zhang uses in the *Gurup Rewokyi* for “wonder,” *ngo mtshar*, is actually a very near homonym for one of the terms for “shame,” *ngo tsha*—in everyday speech, they are virtually indistinguishable. Suppose, then, as an experiment, we try substituting one for the other to see what comes of the subtitle and colophon. First the subtitle:

Praise to himself by the teacher Lama Zhang from a standpoint of **utter shame*.

Then the colophon:

A request for a self-praise was made to the teacher Lama Zhang
by the patron from Ngenlam Jangchi, Gurup Rewokyi.
When the teacher Lama Zhang reflected upon himself, **utter shame* arose,
and he composed a “praise.”
Disseminate this everywhere. Listen and look!
The self-shaming is completed.¹¹⁸

To me this would make *Scenario 1* above more plausible: imagine Lama Zhang in retreat with his closest disciples when one of them requests a self-praise. Zhang has done this before, so he begins to improvise a song of self-praise. But on this particular occasion, reflection upon his life only fills him with shame, and so the song he ends up composing—though it retains the classical praise form—comes out as a self-shaming. When he calls the song a “praise,” he is referring to the song’s praise form, which is more or less preserved, but when he calls it a “self-shaming,” he is referring to its content, which is vehemently self-critical.

What would have to have happened to enable a reading like this? One of two things:

- (1) either the homonym “shame” would have to have been substituted for “wonder” somewhere in the transmission of the text—a not improbable occurrence given the vagaries of medieval Tibetan spelling; or
- (2) the term “wonder,” though correct, might have been used by Lama Zhang as a *pun*, the bragging tone of “utter wonder” being tempered by its association with “utter shame.”

118. ngan lam byang phyi'i yon bdag gu rub re bo skyid kyis/ bla ma zhang ston la/ khyed rang nyid kyis khyed rang nyid la bstod pa zhig zhu byas pas/ bla ma zhang ston gyis rang nyid la bsams pas shin tu ngo mtshar skyes te bstod pa mdzad pa'o/ 'di ni kun la spel lo/nyon cig ltos shig/ rang la rang gis khrel btap rdzogs so/. Shedup V.665.

Enhancing the plausibility of this latter possibility is Zhang's well-known penchant for wordplay and irony.

Question 3. What does the phenomenon of patron-commissioned works tell us about patron-lama relationships?

The question of requested texts opens up a whole nest of fruitful research questions about the politics of patron-lama relationships during this renaissance period, when the fabric of Tibetan society was being knit together in new ways, and relationships were no doubt shifting fast: When a powerful patron requests a song from a powerful lama, which one is considered dominant and which subordinate? Is a song request a humble petition from a lower- to a higher-status agent to aid him with his religious practice, or is it a demand from a superior political backer for obedience from a subordinate religious leader? What is the balance here between flattery and criticism, and how does this signal dominance and submission? For example, when a patron requests a song, is this perhaps a subtle form of flattery? A gesture of submission? A peace offering? Or is it a way that the real powers behind a charismatic religious frontman remind him who is really in charge? Why requests for self-criticism? Is this something like a "struggle session" (*thab 'zing*)—a ritual shaming that signals to an errant lama that he has become a public relations embarrassment? And finally, do blurry genre categories and literary innovations—especially the tensions between praise and shame—in some way mirror, or even influence, the shifting power relationships among the various social actors?

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