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The Political Success of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung During the Time of Political Unrest (1713–1762) in Central Tibet

Abstract

Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung Tshe ring dbang rgyal is well known among modern Tibetologists thanks to two biographies authored by him: the biography of his chief Pho lha Bsod nams stobs rgyas alias Pho lha nas called *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* (*The Biography of the Lord*) and his own autobiography, called *Bka' blon rtogs brjod* (*the Biography of the Minister*). At the beginning of the eighteenth century different political factions in Central Tibet, backed by Mongols and the Qing Manchu, continued their decades-long rivalry. Thus the political situation in the area was unstable and the livelihood of the ordinary people was far from satisfactory. Yet, surprisingly enough, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung was able to maintain a political career regardless of the regime which came into power in Central Tibet. He was neither punished nor removed from his office as retribution for taking sides during the struggle of the various political factions. This article, by close study of his autobiography and related materials, will investigate the possible reasons for the author's successful career other than those explained in his autobiography. In the year 1713, when Lha bzang khan came to power, he was an eighteen years old young man and held a Tibetan government post for the first time. In 1717, when the Dzungars held power, he continued to hold his district governor position. In 1720, when Qing Manchu army approached Lhasa under the guise of escorting the 7th Dalai Lama, and established the first Amban office in Lhasa, he was able to maintain the government job as an accountant even though the power dynamic had shifted. In the end of 1720s, when the



rivalry between Gtsang and Dbus political factions was at its height, he joined the military campaign of Dbus lead by three bka' blon [minister] against Gtsang pa political faction led by Pho lha nas. The conflict between the two ended with the victory of Pho lha nas of Gtsang who subsequently held power in Lhasa. Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, despite his allegiance to the opposition party, was not sentenced for his earlier behaviour and was instead assigned to the post of bka' blon in 1729.

Keywords: descendent, success, conflict, faction, punishment, rival, tribute, gratitude

Introduction¹

There is no question that Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung Tshe ring dbang rgyal alias Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung (1697–1763) from Stag lung is one of the best-known Tibetan lay scholars of the eighteenth century. The word “*Mdo mkhar*” is a name of the place and “*zhabs drung*” indicates that he is a close relative of the high Tibetan lama.

Among his works on Tibetan literature,² there are two biographies; his own autobiography and the biography of Pho lha nas. They can be considered the two most valuable biographical works produced in eighteenth century Tibet. His fame among the Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholars, both inside and outside of Tibet, is due to two above mentioned biographies rather than his political career.

The biography of Pho lha nas was composed in 1733 after Pho lha nas had taken over power in the Tibetan government in 1728. This was a year and half after the carving of the first block print of Kanjur canon (*bka' 'gyur*) which Pho lha nas had designed and sponsored at Shel dkar, Tibet.³ His own autobiography was composed in 1762, just a year before his death in 1763.⁴ There are two varying accounts concerning Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's death. In the autobiography of Rdo ring Btan 'dzin dpal 'byor,⁵ it is said that when he passed away Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor and his mother, a daughter of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, were at Rag shag house looking after his sick grandfather Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung and he died of natural causes.⁶ Furthermore, Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor stated that after passing away grandfather remained in meditation (*thugs dam*)

¹ All the Tibetan words are transliterated according to the Wylie Tibetan transliteration system.

² His other works mentioned at the introduction of *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* (p. 8), are; *Gzhon nu zla med kyi rtogs brjod* (*Life Story of An Incomparable Young Men*) 1718, *Sangs rgyas kyi skyes rabs* (*Successive Life Stories of Buddha*) bilingual, *Nyer mkho'i brda' sprod gsal byed ka li'i 'phreng ba* (*A Requisite Grammar Commentary, Called "A Garland of Ka li"*), bilingual.

³ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*, Chengdu 1981, pp. 739–745.

⁴ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC W22715), p. 42, l.10.

⁵ Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor was a nephew of Mdo mkhar zhabs drung.

⁶ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 20. In 1726, arranged by Pho lha nas, Justice Bon grong and Bag gro from Spro bde khang gsar he married to the daughters of Dol 'jo rab brtan and also received the Rag shag House property.

for a week.⁷ On the other hand, contrary to above statement, a descendent of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, Tsha rong Dbyang can sgrol dkar, claimed that he was assassinated.⁸

Despite Pho lha nas' power in the Tibetan government up until his death in 1747, and the fact that Mdo khar zhabs drung worked under him as minister (*bka' blon*), we do not have a complete account of the Pho lha nas' later life. Is it possible that both Pho lha nas and Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung did not see any importance in recording the entirety of Pho lha nas' political career? Though his biography does not cover his entire life it is a sociopolitical testimony of Tibet and Tibetans of that time. It encompasses the broad sweep of Tibetan life in that era from ordinary people to aristocrats and chieftains and is, in itself, an excellent example of the richness of Tibetan literature. It is worth quoting a text fragment from the preface of Phi lha nas' biography written by the twentieth century Tibetan scholar Dung dkar Lobsang 'phrin las (1927–1997). He said:

“Though the main subject is the life of Pho lha, it describes the related society of that time, people's livelihood, the livelihood of different strata of society and a close oneness of the relationship between the Qing emperor of imperial China and the regional government of Tibet. In brief, it explains politics, economy, sciences, military power, the extent of religion and even physical exercises, publishing and traditional customs such as weddings, in detail.”⁹

It is worth noting that these themes are not the only ones discussed in the biography. Dung dkar also praised Mdo mkhar zhabs drung's skill in the writing of traditional Tibetan poetry. He said that Mdo mkhar had studied the prosody used in early Tibetan translation such as the 'Dul ba lung sde bzhi (*The Four Classes of Vinaya Sutra*) and in the 'Rtogs brjod rgya pa (*A Hundred Life Stories*) that were translated in the time of King Khri song sde btsan. He had then used the best of these styles in his own traditional Tibetan poetry.

The two biographies are not only a significant contribution to Tibetan literature. They also provide an important insight into the socio-political situation and the unfolding of the history of Tibet in the beginning of the eighteenth century. From the history of Tibet composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1643, until the beginning of the nineteenth century there were no Tibetan historical works written by Tibetan masters. There were the biographical works of Tibetan elites such as the two authored by Mdo mkhar zhabs

⁷ Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gam gyi rol mo*, Lhasa 1988, 1988, pp. 96–97.

⁸ Tsha rong Dbyangs can sgrol dkar, 2006, p. 27, l.1.

⁹ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 9, l.15. *Nang don gtso bo Pho lha'i lo rgyus yin rung/ de dang 'brel ba yod pa'i skabs de'i spyi tshogs gnas tshul dang/ dmangs tshogs kyi 'tsho ba spyod stangs/ gral rim khag so so'i 'tsho ba'i gnas tshul/ skabs de'i ching rgyal rabs krung dbyang gong ma'i srid gzhung dang bod sa gnas srid gzhung bar gcig gyur gyi 'brel ba dam po yod tshul bcas/ mdo na chab srid dang/ dpal 'byor/ rig gnas/ dmag don/ chos lugs sogs kyi khyab khongs dang/ tha na lus rtal dang/ par bskrun/ yul gyi srol rgyun/ gnyen sgrig gnas tshul sogs kyi thad du'ang rgya che zhing zhib mor bris yod stabs/*

drung, the autobiography of Zur khang Sri gcod tshe brtan mentioned by Erhard,¹⁰ the biographies of the seventh Dalai Lama and Panchen Lamas of the eighteenth century and a brief history work by Ra stod rin po che. The above mentioned reality is confirmed in a Tibetan history account written in 1822 by Rag ra Ngag dbang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan. It says:

*'di nyid brtsams pa'i dgos ched ni / deb ther dpyid rgyal du sngon byon
rnams dang sa skya phag gru'i rabs rgyas mod / gong sa nyid phyin
rnam thar rnams ma gtogs phyogs sdebs med pa dang / bar skabs snyan
ngag tshigs bcad mang zhing blo dman rnams kyis rtogs dka' ba dang /
rwa stod rin po che'i bka' 'bum na nyung ngu zhid 'dug kyang cung
bsdus skyon dang sa bcad go rim 'khrug pa bcas/ 'di nyid bsgrigs pa'i
ngal ba bgyis la'*¹¹

(The purpose of compiling this work is that in the annals “*The Queen of Spring (Dpyid rgyal)*” the ancient royal dynasties, Sa skya and Phag gru are discussed in detail. Yet, after the Dalai Lama, except for biographies there are not any compiled [historical] works. In recent years there have been many poems but these are difficult for ordinary people to understand. There is a short [work] by Ra stod Rinpoche included in his collected works, but it is bit too short and not in proper order. So I took the difficult task of compiling this work.)

The political state of the Tibetan government in the eighteenth century was complicated and problematic. And livelihood of people is saddening.¹² A well-known Tibetologist Petech has claimed that the political game played in those days shaped the future status of Tibet for more than two centuries.¹³ In fact, the present-day political struggle of Tibetans to restore the freedom of their home land, and the challenges faced by Tibetans are, in a way, a consequence of the weakness of Tibetan elites and of the political repression on Tibetans by the Qing and the Mongols in that period. Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung concluded his autobiographical work with the note that the effort he had made to compose his life story is for the sake of his descendants and for others to make proper decisions in the future while understanding the past.

¹⁰ Franz Xaver Erhard, ‘Aspect of Social Status in the Biography of Doring Paṇḍita’, *Revue d’Etudes Tibetaines* 49 (2019), p. 93, ft. 2.

¹¹ Rag ra Ngag dbang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, in: *Gangs can rig mdzod*, Vol. IX., 1990, p. 391.

¹² The seventh Dalai Lama Skal bzang rgya mthso: in *'Phags bstod phan bde'i char 'bebs*, “*Stobs dang ldan rnams rang 'dod lhur len phan tshun rtsod cing dma' la 'tshe// dman pa rnams ni rtag tu 'khol zhing gyi na'i zas kyang rnyed par dka'//* (Authorities are focused on self-desire, quarrel between and harms ordinary people. Lower ones are always work [like] slave and difficult to find even a poor quality food). In the prayer book, *Nyer mkho'i zhal 'don kun phan nyi ma*, Dharamsala 2004, p. 89.

¹³ Luciano Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early XVIII Century. History of the Establishment of Chinese Protectorate in Tibet*, Leiden 1972, p. 1.

The aim of this article is to provide a broader understanding of how Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung was able to hold his government post given the context, in his time, of the constantly changing ruling elites from different political factions. Due to the way his autobiography is narrated one might think that how Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung was very successful in retaining his government post in every power clash that took place at the beginning of the eighteenth century. To my knowledge, there is currently no research particularly concentrated on the Mdo mkhar's political career, except for the lengthy and detailed article on Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung and his autobiography by Hartley, published in 2011.¹⁴ Therefore, I have endeavored to search in his autobiography for any factors, other than his knowledge on the Tibetan literature and his family background, which could have affected his political success.

Family origins

At the beginning of his autobiography Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung Tshe ring dbang rgyal emphasizes the importance of knowing one's ancestral background and quotes a phrase from the *Rlabs gyi pu ti se ru*¹⁵ which says: "In general, one who does not know her or his ancestral story is similar to a forest monkey. A person who does not know the origin of one's mother is similar to a fake turquoise dragon. One who does not know the story of his or her father and forefather is similar to a stranger boy from the plains (*mon*)."¹⁶ However, he did not explain his ancestral history in detail apart from stating that they were from the Ga zi clan.

Regarding the primary sources for the Stag lung Ga zi clan De R. Filibeck, in her article on the genealogy of Stag lung pa, mentioned the following works: *Dpal stag lung ga zi'i gdung rabs zam ma chad par byon pa'i rnam thar ngo mtshar nor bu'i do shal skye dgu'i yid phrog* by Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma chos kyi byung gnas 'phrin las, the 28th throne holder (*gdan rabs*) of Byang stag lung and a biography of Stag lung Thang chen po by Ngag dbang rnam rgyal.¹⁷ De R. Filibeck stated these mentioned works are kept at the Is.M.E.O library in Rome and in the Rnying ma pa monastery in Delhi. There are two more works on the Ga zi family described in the autobiography of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung; the political career of Ma sangs Tshe dbang grags pa and the history of Ga zi family by Mdo mkhar's father Ngag gi dbang phyug tshangs pa.

¹⁴ Lauran R. Hartley, 'Self as a Faithful Public servant, The Autobiography of MDO MKHAR BA TSHE RING DBANG RGYAL (1697–1763)', in: *Mapping the Modern in Tibet*, Andiast 2011.

¹⁵ Most common spelling variation of the word "Rlabs kyi pu ti se ru" is, "Rlangs gyi pu ti se ru".

¹⁶ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 3. *lar skyes pa'i mis rang gi skyes rgyud ma shes na nags kyi spre'u dang 'dra// mi rang gi cho 'brang ma shes na g.yu 'brug zol ma dang 'dra// yab mes kyi yi ge'i tshang ma shes na mon phrug yul bor dang 'dra//*

¹⁷ Ngag dbang rnam rgyal could be the 20th? throne holder, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, of the Stag lung monastery.

Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain the two works mentioned by Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung and it is uncertain whether they are at all preserved and available at any library today. Nonetheless, a manuscript on the Ga zi clan, called *Dpal stag lung pa'i chos srid byung tshul zur tsam brjod pa ngo mtshar kun gsal me long* by Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma,¹⁸ which was composed in the Iron Tiger year of the fourteenth Rab 'byung cycle, 1830,¹⁹ is kept at the Buddhist Digital Research Centre (here after, BDRC). It is accessible therefore I had a chance to study the work in detail. At the end of the work, we find a note by the scribe that the manuscript was copied true to the original text without any orthographical corrections.²⁰ Both texts, one mentioned by De R. Filibeck and the text found in BDRC, are recorded in the book by Martin.²¹ Also the biography of Stag lung thang pa chen po by Ngag dbang rnam rgyal and the history of the later Stag lung Ya thang throne holders by Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyin ma are recorded in the catalogue of the historical works at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala.²²

The author Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma claimed that there were not many biographies on the lay descendants of the Ga zi clan. Among the mentioned works on the Ga zi clan, the one explained by Filibeck and the one found in BDRC vary though the initial parts of the author's names are identical and the year of composition seems to be the same. According to the author Ngag bstan pa'i nyi ma, the author of the text found in BDRC, his secondary names are Ngag dbang chos kyi dpal 'byor and Bkra shis chos kyi rgyal mtshan, but was never called Chos kyi byung gnas 'phrin las as the name of the author given by Filibeck in the article.²³ Moreover, the size of the two works differs; the manuscript found in the BDRC contains 54 pages while, according to De R. Filibeck, the manuscript kept at the Is.M.E.O library contains 442 folios.

The work, *Dpal stag lung pa'i chos srid byung tshul zur tsam brjod pa ngo mtshar kun gsal me long* is in Dbu chen manuscript and is copied from the original work. The author's main focus in the text is the history of the Stag lung Ya thang monastery throne holders. He classified them into three groups; the throne holders of early propagation (*snga dar*) who were from Khams, the throne holders of middle propagation (*bar dar*) who were from Dbus and the later propagations (*phyi dar*) concerning the incarnate throne holders. The manuscript begins with the explanation of the origin of the Ga zi clan, particularly about Stag lung Thang pa bkra shis dpal's father and grandfather. The dates of birth and death of the Stag lung throne holders and some of the religious activities related to the monastery are given precisely with their Rab 'byung cycle, animal signs (*lo rtags*) and elements (*lo khams*) of the year.

¹⁸ A throne holder of the Stag lung Ya thang monastery at the beginning of the 19th century.

¹⁹ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC; W22715), p. 46, l.13.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 44, l.8.

²¹ Dan Martin, *Tibetan Histories. A Bibliography of Tibetan-Language Historical Works*, London 1997, pp. 156–157.

²² Shastri Jampa Samten, *Catalogue of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (manuscript section)*, *Historical Works*. Vol. I, Dharamsala 1983, pp. 356–357.

²³ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC; W22715), p. 53, l.9.

Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma also discusses briefly the life and the political career of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, his sons and grandsons. At the end of the manuscript the author describes the incarnate Stag lung throne holders, including himself. Traditionally the Stag lung Ya thang throne was held by the descendants of Ga zi family for generations. This was unlike the general Tibetan monastic practice of ascending to the throne by reincarnation of the previous lama. However, after the death of Ga zi 'Od 'jo ba Bkra shis chos rgyal of the Stag lung in 1690 the throne of Stag lung Ya thang was held by the reincarnations of Ga zi 'Od 'jo ba Bkra shis chos rgyal with the author, Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, being one of them. The reason for the changes in the tradition of throne holding was a conflict between a Ga zi uncle and his nephew (*khu dbon*). For about forty-two years, between the Earth Sheep year of the 11th cycle, 1679 till the Iron Mouse year of 12th cycle, 1720, the abbots of Stag lung Ya thang were assigned by the Tibetan government.²⁴ Before that, for seventeen years from 1640 to 1657, also as a result of the Ga zi family conflict, the Stag lung Ya thang throne remained without a throne holder (*khri pa*) and the monastery was administered by Mi dbang Dge legs rgya mtsho and Sde pa Bstan srung.²⁵

Byang stag lung pa were followers of the Bka' brgyud tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is one of the eight minor branches of the Bka' brgyud tradition.²⁶ The founder of the Stag lung bka' brgyud was Stag lung Thang pa bkra shis dpal of the Ga zi clan (1142–1210). He was a disciple of Rje Phag mo grub pa Rdo rje rgyal po (1110–1170) and an ancestor of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung from Khams. The Ga zi clan is a descendant of the Dbra clan. This is one of the six clans of ancient Tibet²⁷ mentioned in Tibetan history accounts. Thang pa Bkra shis dpal was a son of Dgra mig pa 'debs alias Ga zi 'bar bo, the third son of Ga zi Yon chen bzang po. His mother was Brab shi gza' dge gsum khro mo from Khams. He had three brothers – Mgo yag, Mgo rgyal and Zla 'od from his stepmother and many cousins from his two uncles. The descendants of the Ga zi clan in Central Tibet begin with Yon bdag Ye shes rin chen, a son of G.yung drung skyabs, who moved to Central Tibet and settled in 'Phen po.²⁸

The practice lineage of Thang pa bkra shis dpal was called Stag lung Bka' brgyud, owing to the name of the place called Stag lung where the tradition was first established at north of Lhasa, and the monastery was called Stag lung Ya thang. The second most prominent site of Stag lung bka' rgyud is called Stag lung ma thang Ri bo che monastery,

²⁴ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC; W22715), pp. 38–40.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 35, l.11.

²⁶ The eight branches of Bka' brgyud school are; Stag lung bka' brgyud, 'Bri gung bka' brgyud, 'Brug pa bka' brgyud, Yel pa bka' brgyud, G.ya' bzang bka' brgyud, Khro phu bka' brgyud, Shug gseb bka' brgyud, Mar pa bka' brgyud.

²⁷ Known as six races (Mi'u gdung drug) of Tibet are; bSe, rMu, lDong, sTong, dBra and 'Bru. Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, 2009: Vol. II, p. 1452, The names of six Mi'u gdung drung in Dung dkar is different, they are; Bod mi'u gdung drung- 'Bri gung Skyu ru'i gdung, Stag lung Ga zi'i gdung, Sa skya 'Khon gyi gdung, Khyung po Bya'i gdung, 'Od gsal lha'i gdung, Sne'u gdong gong ma lha'i gdung.

²⁸ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC; W22715), p. 16, l.2.

established in 1276²⁹ in Khams. The monastery was established by Sangs rgyas dbon, the younger nephew of the 3rd throne holder of Stag lung Ya thang Sangs rgyas yar byon.

The author Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma states that earlier, when Stag lung bka' rgyud was flourishing in Central Tibet, the descendants of the Ga zi clan lived in different places such as Dar yul, Lhun rdzong, Rin brag, Phod mdo etc.³⁰ From this we can understand the power and prosperity of the Ga zi families. They were influential chieftains (*sde dpon*) in those areas till the estates of Stag lung pa were taken over by the Tibetan government in Earth Sheep year of 11th Rab 'byung, 1679.³¹ The reason for losing these estates was a conflict between an uncle and a nephew (*khu dbon*), that was briefly discussed earlier. It was between Ga zi Zhabs drung Rnam rgyal legs grub and Ga zi Bkra shis chos rgyal, the throne holders of Stag lung monastery at the second half of the seventeenth century.³² The author also pointed out that the conflict between the Stag lung pa uncle and nephew was to some degree instigated by the Stag lung Ya thang monks while Zhabs drung Rnam rgyal legs grub was on the throne.³³ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung in his autobiography comments on this incident as well, claiming it to be a result of a conflict between leaders (*gtso bo rnams*) created by a few agitators having demonic motivation (*phra men gyi rig pa 'dzin pa*) and evil mouths (*bdud kyi kha drod can*).³⁴

According to Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Mdo mkhar estate and Rag shag House in Lhasa were granted to Sde pa Bstan srung, the father of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, by Pho lha nas for his contribution in the military campaign against Bhutan in the Wood Horse year, 1714.³⁵ However, from the autobiography of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung we learn that the name of his father is Ngag gi dbang phyug tshangs pa, not Sde pa bstan srung. Further, Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma himself said, in his work, that between 1640 and 1657 Stag lung Ya thang monastery was administrated by Sde pa bstan srung along with Mi dbang Dge legs rgya mtsho.³⁶ Thus, Sde pa Bstan srung could be the grandfather or a granduncle of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, not the father. Therefore, the granting of Rag shag House and Mdo mkhar estate to Sde ba bstan srung as explained by Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma is misleading. Also, in *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* by Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung it is clearly said that his father took part in the military campaign against Bhutan in 1714 along with two other compatriots, Ba' ring Thai ji and Lha rigs Sa skyong ba, and marched toward the eastern part of Bhutan.³⁷

²⁹ According to the article by De R. Filibeck it was because of a conflict over the succession of Ya thang throne. Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma comment on this incident (p. 13, 1.9) that was because of the karma of the disciples of Khams ri bo che has that been ripened (*gdul bya dus babs*) and established the monastery.

³⁰ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC, W22715), p. 45.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 40, 1.9; Mdo mkhar zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rjogs brjod*, Chengdu 1981, p. 2, 1.9.

³² Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC, W22715), p. 38.

³³ Ibidem, p. 38.

³⁴ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 2, 1.4.

³⁵ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC, W22715), p. 44, 1.9.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 35, 1.11.

³⁷ Mdo mkhar Zabs drung, *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*, p. 231, 1.15.

There are other more obvious variations in information about Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung in the work of Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma to those to be found in the autobiography. Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma explained that Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung held a minister (*bka' blon*) post for thirty-seven years instead of the thirty-five years that Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung stated in his autobiography. The author also said that Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung was adorned with the title “bka' blon (minister)” in the government decree (*she bam*) granted by the 7th Dalai Lama.³⁸ However, Mdo khar zhabs drung explicitly stated that the word “bka' blon” written in the draft (*bam 'bri*) of the government decree prepared by him was erased and replaced by the word “Byang stag lung pa” by the 7th Dalai Lama.³⁹ Does this mean that Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma did not gain access to the autobiography of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung or is it an error of editing work?

Political career

The political career of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung in the Tibetan government was successful and long. It was not however without its twists and turns. He first started his political career by taking a post of secretary (*drung 'khor*), later he became the governor of the Bsam grub rtse [*gzhis ka rtse*] district and ending his political career as the longest serving Tibetan minister (*bka' blon*) of that time. He concludes the autobiography by saying that the government posts he obtained are all by the order and decision of his highness priest and patron (*gong ma mchod yon*) and thanks to his honesty in fulfilling his duties.⁴⁰ In the main part of the autobiography the author consistently underlined his unwavering faith and loyalty to His Holiness the 7th Dalai Lama, his fairness to the people and to government properties. Perhaps, the author's self-presentation in the autobiography is the reason why R. Hartley named the article on Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's autobiography, ‘Self as a Faithful Public Servant, The Autobiography of MDO MKHAR BA TSHE RING DBANG RGYAL (1697–1763)’. A summary of his political career from 1713 till his last days in his ministerial post is given at the end of his autobiography.⁴¹ Petech briefly describes the career of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung in his book about the aristocracy of Tibet and we can find there some information that is not mentioned in the autobiography of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung.⁴² To give a clear picture of the progress of his political career; when and under which power he was appointed and when promoted to a post, I present below a chronological list of all the posts he held.

³⁸ Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma, (BDRC, W22715), p. 42, l.4; p. 48, l.7; p. 44, l.8.

³⁹ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, pp. 126–127.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 127–128.

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 117–121.

⁴² Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet, 1728–1959*, Rome 1973, p. 70.

Lhasang khan's period (1707–1717)

In the Water Snake year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1713; at the age of 18 his father Ngag dbang tshangs pa introduces him to Lhasang Khan.⁴³ Khan recruits him as one of the government secretaries (*drung 'khor*) in Lhasa.

In the Fire Monkey year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1716; at the age of 21 he is appointed as the tax collector of Bsam grub rtse district, present day Gzhis ka rtse.

In the Fire Bird year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1717; at the age of 22 he is appointed district governor of Bsam grub rtse.

Dzungars period (1717–1720)

In the Fire Bird year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1717; while he is in Bsam grub rtse, Lhasang Khan is killed by the Dzungars who proclaim victory. Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung immediately returns to Lhasa to pay homage to the Jungarian army chiefs. He returns to Bsam grub rtse and continues as district governor. However, when a Jungarian army chief visits Bsam grub rtse they put him in detention for a night. Later the situation is clarified and he remains in his post.

In the Earth Dog year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1718; at the age of 23 for his own safety he resigns his post as the district governor of Bsam grub rtse district and is transferred to the post of governor of Lcags rtse Gri gu rdzong.

In the year 1718/1719 he has an audience with the old regent appointed by the Dzungars, Stag rtse sde srid Lha rgyal rab brtan, at the Bsam yas monastery. Soon after that event he takes over the chamberlain and the secretary post of Stag rtse sde srid that had been previously held by his father.

Qing Manchu period

Khang chen nas Bsod nams rgyal po alias Daiching bhadur (1720–1727)

In the Iron Mouse year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1720; under the cover of escorting the 7th Dalai Lama Skal bzang rgya mtsho from Sku 'bum the Qing Manchu army along with the Mongols from Kokonor area march to Lhasa and take power in Tibet from the Dzungars. In the following year the regent Stag rtse sde srid and people closely related to the Dzungars are assassinated or punished. However, by the intervention of Pho lha nas Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung and his father Ngag dbang tshangs pa is spared from the punishment.

In the Water Tiger year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1722; he returns to Lhasa and becomes an ordinary secretary.

In the Water Rabbit year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1723; he is appointed a tax collector for Gzhis chen Gong ri dkar po.

⁴³ 18 years old according to the Tibetan age accounting tradition.

In the Wood Dragon year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1724; in absence of Pho lha nas he takes over responsibility as the head accountant (*rtsis dpon*) of the Tibetan government.

In the Fire Sheep year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1727; around this time, under the order of khang chen nas he marches with other companions toward the northern grassland [Gnam mtsho] area to repel the Mongol intruders. Later he takes a short break from his post and stays in Gzhis ka rtse.

Pho lha nas' period

In the Earth Monkey year of the twelfth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1728; he is appointed as the first rank officer (*Za sag rim pa dang po*) and holds the post of chief justice and the post of minister at the same time. It is unclear how long he holds both posts. He holds the bka' blon post till the death of Pho lha nas.

'Gyur med rnam rgyal's period

In the Fire Rabbit year of the thirteenth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1747; after the death of Pho lha nas his son Gyur med rnam rgyal resumes power and in 1750 Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung holds the post of ordinary secretary (*drung 'khor*).⁴⁴

Dga' gzhi ba Dgon po dngos grub rab brtan's period

In the Iron Sheep year of the thirteenth cycle (*rab 'byung*), 1751; After 'Gyur med rnam rgyal's assassination by Ambans Dga' gzhi Paṇḍita Dgon po dngos grub rab brtan⁴⁵ becomes the head of the ministerial cabinet of the Tibetan government and Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung is again appointed to the post of minister and remains in that position until his retirement.

Success in spite of political unrest

After the collapse of the Tibetan empire and the disintegration of the Tibetan nation in the ninth century, the second most unfortunate political downfall of Tibet starts at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The conflict between Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho and Lhasan Khan, a grandnephew of Gushri Bstan 'dzin chos rgyal of the Mongols, opened the door for outside political forces to step into the Tibetan way of life. When Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung wrote his autobiography in 1763, at the very end of his life,

⁴⁴ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 62, l.15.

⁴⁵ Alias Gung Paṇḍita and Rdo ring Paṇḍita.

the presence of the Qing power in the Tibetan politics was prominent and its influence is obvious in the narration of his autobiography.

Because of that the readers of his works should take into consideration the circumstances, the socio-political pressure and the influence of the ruling elites which all may have affected the composition of the two biographies. Assumptions could be made, but the evaluation of information found in the work is beyond the competence of the researchers. While reading the autobiography one may be under the impression that he was an intelligent politician who did not miss any opportunity to further his well-being, no matter to which political faction he belonged.

As already discussed earlier, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung twice gives reasons for his selection as a government official. The first at the beginning of this autobiography when he is appointed as a secretary by Lhasang khan, and the second at the end where he writes a summary of his political career. When he was appointed secretary, he said that he was chosen for the post due to his family background and literary talent⁴⁶ and says later that all the posts he held had been given to him by the order of the leaders and his truthfulness for the government. However, through a careful reading of his autobiography we learn that besides his literary talent and his family background, there are other essential factors involved in his political success such as connections with the elites and the tributes while he was active in the government.

To start from the beginning, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's first step into Tibetan government service was through his father who introduced him to Lhasang khan. His father Ngag dbang tshangs pa was a military official under the rule of Lhasang khan and took part in the military campaign against Bhutan in 1714. Therefore, it is certain that his father was well acquainted with Lhasang khan, but was definitely not in good terms with Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, the opponent of Lhasang khan, whose government confiscated Stag lung pa's properties. From the above fact we learn that the family ties i.e. nepotism, was normal in Tibetan politics.

In general bribery is present in every political sphere, in the past as well as today. Tibet and Tibetan politics were not an exception in this regard. In Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's autobiography we encounter text fragments that reveal the tributes, which he calls 'not small ones' (*mod mi dma' ba*), that are given to leading Tibetan officials. He performed various religious activities and judging by the circumstances of the offerings he made it could be seen as bribes in the guise of donations.⁴⁷ For example, in 1718 he made an offering to Sde srid Stag rtse ba Lha rgyal rab brtan at the Bsam yas monastery. Soon after that he becomes the secretary and the chamberlain of the Sde srid. In 1722 he offers a long-life prayer with abundant tributes to His Holiness the 7th Dalai Lama and his father, as well as to Pho lha nas and other ministers. Though earlier he has been a member of the Jungarian faction, he is granted the post of an ordinary secretary.

⁴⁶ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 117, l.9.

⁴⁷ Luciano Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early XVIII Century*, p. 21.

In 1735 when His Holiness the 7th Dalai Lama returned from Khams Mgar mtha he offered a long-life prayer to the 7th Dalai Lama and made an abundant offering to Pho lha nas. It seems the offering was made to prove that he was loyal and obedient to both leaders. In 1751, after the assassination of Wang 'Gyur med rnam rgyal in 1750, he also offered a long-life prayer with enormous offerings to His Holiness.⁴⁸ When we look thoroughly, all those tributes and offerings were made at the time of important political maneuvering and of power shifts in the Tibetan government.

Interestingly, we do not find a single word in Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's autobiography about offering tributes to or taking presents from the Amban and the Qing emperors. Could it be true that Tibetan politicians did not or need not present gifts to the Amban for their posts and promotions? According to the autobiography of Rdo ring Btsan 'dzin dpal 'byor, the tradition of presenting a gift to the Ambans and receiving presents from the emperor existed.⁴⁹ In the same autobiography there is also an interesting story about the an Amban⁵⁰ trying to get a gilded copper (*gser zangs*) Maitriya Buddha statue from the Rong byams chen monastery by using his position and also about lamas and Ambans who were taking precious religious objects of Tibet to China.⁵¹

A crucial factor in his political success at the time of Qing Manchu era was his relationship with Pho lha nas. Under the protection of Pho lha nas, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung was spared from punishment twice even though he had been a member of a rival faction.⁵² There were two politically disadvantageous situations for Mdo mkhar Zhabs drungs; the first was when the Dzungars fell to the Qing Manchu and Pho lha nas mediated the case of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung to the Qing official explaining that he was young and innocent and not responsible for the deeds carried on by the Dzungars. The second was the time of the Ddus and Gtsang conflict when he was on the losing side. He was spared from the punishment that his other Dbus colleagues⁵³ went through after the triumph of Gtsang army, led by Pho lha nas, over the Dbus political faction.⁵⁴ It is beyond doubt that without his strong ties to Pho lha nas, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung would not have been able to survive and retain his government positions.

In the latter part of his political career, after the death of Pho lha nas, his family ties with two key leaders of Tibetan politics certainly secured his position; in 1748, at the time of Wang 'Gur med rnam rgyal, the successor and a son of Pho lha nas, and secondly in 1751, at the time of Dga' gzhi Paṇḍita Mgon po dngos grub rab brtan who took the leading role in the Tibetan cabinet after the assassination of Wang 'Gyur med

⁴⁸ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, pp. 11–12, 14–15, 42, 72.

⁴⁹ Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gam gyi rol mo*, pp. 1060–1061. Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet*, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Warren W. Smith, Jr., *Tibetan Nation – A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations*, New Delhi 1997, p. 126.

⁵¹ Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gam gyi rol mo*, pp. 385–390.

⁵² Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 14, 25.

⁵³ The Ddus political faction was led by three ministers, Nga phod, Lum pa and Sbyar ra nas.

⁵⁴ Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa, *Bod kyi srid don rgyal rabs*, Kalimpong 1976, Vol. 1, p. 539.

nam rgyal. The family relation of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drungs with the two leaders, that is to say the two daughters of Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, Bde ldan sgrol ma and Rin chen skyid 'dzoms who were married to Wang 'Gyur med nam rgyal and Dpal bzang tshe ring, a son of Dga' gzhi Paṇḍita Mgon po dngos grub rab brtan, respectively. Despite being a father-in-law of 'Gyur med nam rgyal the relations between two were strained when 'Gyur med nam rgyal held the power.⁵⁵ It would therefore seem that the above-mentioned circumstances and actions, not just his competence, promoted and secured his government post and political career for many years.

A few critical text fragments from the autobiography

In this part I would like to touch upon fragments of text found in the autobiography, not those concerning his political success, but ones which draw our attention to his attitude towards the rulers and the aggression of the Qing and the Mongol armies. It has been more than two hundred years since he wrote the autobiography and based solely on the text, and we cannot determine his general attitude whether he was or was not a patriotic or merely a self-serving politician. When we look at his work, he often glorifies the Qing emperor, using the honorific title "*Gong ma bdag po chen po* (Emperor-the Great Owner)" and expresses his gratitude to the emperor for granting him golden letters (*gser yig*) of nomination to the post of minister (*bka' blon*). Therefore, at the first glance, many readers, including myself, could have an impression that he was a wholehearted supporter of the Qing Manchu. Yet looking more closely at the text there are indications this was not the case.

Gratitude

His autobiography describes his life achievements from the age of eighteen until his retirement. Yet in the conclusion it is only the Tibetan government that receives credit. He is grateful to and acknowledges the kindness of the Tibetan government and does not mention or offer his gratitude to any other institution or person. Here follows the relevant text fragment, with a translation provided below:

*'On kyang rang blo rang la lkog tu ma gyur pa'i snang tshul la / rang
nyid gzhung sa'i thugs rje'i 'tsho ba'i mnga' 'bangs 'di phyi gtan gyi legs
tshogs thams cad gzhung sa rin po che kho na la brten nas byung ba yin
gshis gzhung don lar rgya'i skor la blo dang nus pa / shed shugs gang
thon gyi sgo nas zhabs 'degsh lag bsam rnam dag kho na bsgrub pa las* ⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, pp. 60–66.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 122, l.2.

(However, your mind is not a hidden phenomenon to yourself and with that understanding I am a subject who survives by the grace of the government. And all the positive things in my life, this life and for the purposes of future, were achieved solely because of the precious government. Therefore, truthfully and by all means of my intelligence and potential, I put my maximum effort to contribute to the government works).

Furthermore, it says:

Rnam pa kun tu gzhung sa rin po che'i thugs rje'i gzi byin kho na la rten nas lar rgya'i legs tshogs thams cad 'grub pa yin gshis gzhung don gtso bor bzung nas rang don shugs la 'byung ba'i blo rtse gtod rigs kyang ⁵⁷

(All the prosperity, fame and wealth and whatever I have accomplished were just because of the magnificent kindness of the precious government. Therefore, one should concentrate to put the government work in the first place and then personal benefits will come alongside it naturally).

Interestingly in the dedication part of the acknowledgement there is no mention of the Qing Empire. The omission of the institution he intensely appreciated does not necessary mean he did not have any sense of gratitude towards the Qing Emperor personally. Nevertheless, the omission is striking.

Resentment

His dissension and dissatisfaction with the behavior of leaders, the Qing army and the Mongols, is not absent in the autobiography. It is suggested by the text fragment quoted below that the Qing and Mongol army were extremely violent. In his metaphoric poetry he advised the ruling elites and the nobles that they should understand the situation well and not allow things that break loyalty. Otherwise, consequences might be dire as it would be like hitting one's hand on the edge of a sword, banging one's forehead on a rock or trying to cut wood using an intellectual saw. In my view it is clear who represents the edge of a sword, the rock and the wood and it is certainly himself and people like him who represent the hand, the head and the intellectual saw. The text says as follow;

Rang nyid kyi ji ltar spobs pa'i drang tshugs bzung ste rgyal ba yab sras kyi zhabs 'deg's dang gong ma'i bka' la bag zon gyi bya ba yin lugs su spyod pa las gzhan dag la 'di ltar 'doms pa la ni blo gros dang brtul zhugs dman pas / che drag dang bcas pa rnams kyis go bas blangs te

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 129, l.16.

*la rgya'i stor shing du mi 'gro ba zhig blur ma bcag na ral gri'i kha
la khur tshur brdeg pa dang / ri la spyi bos brdung ba lta bu'i ngang
tshul lam yid kyi sog le shing la mi 'gro ba'i dpe ltar btsan po rnams
ni/ rang rang so so bag yang ci dgar spyod pa la bya thabs dben pa
shes ldan kyi gzigs pas gsal ba ltar la /⁵⁸*

(With honesty, as much as I am able to be, I served and carried out actions accordingly to the victorious father and son and also I was vigilant for the emperor's orders (*gong ma*). With my ordinary wisdom and manner, in this way, I cannot advise others. Therefore, great and noble [people] should understand properly and keep in mind that it won't become a wooden cleaner (*stor shing*) of loyalty. Otherwise, [circumstances] are like "boxing on the edge of sword" and "hitting forehead on a rock" or as in proverb, "intellectual saw do not cut a wood" powerful ones behave carelessly and do everything they wish, yet [we are] helpless as you all reasonable people see it very clearly).

Furthermore, it says:

*Gong ma'i mi dpon khag rnams btsan brjid che zhing shugs drags pa /
jun gar ba rnams kyang gyong po sog le lta bu'i sems 'chang ba'i
rlang⁵⁹ spyod dang bcas / gcan gzan dang ri dwags mnyam du 'tshogs
pa lta bu'i rigs mi mthun pa / don phra mo re la'ang rtsod pa can du
byed pa sogs gang ci nas bya dka' ba'i gzhir 'gyur pa sha stag gis rang
nyid la'ang mtho 'tshams bar chad ma 'tshal snyam du sems kyang /⁶⁰*

(The officials of the emperor were aggressive and forceful. The Dzungars were very rude as having a saw heart with a bull behavior. Two completely different characters are like meeting wild beasts and prey. They quarrel about minor matters and things of little importance. Because of all that, they put [us] in a difficult situation, and sometimes even felt that one may experience trouble and be harmed).

Later he continued to say:

*Slar yang rgya spyong rnams lha sa nas phyir ldog skabs nag chu'i bar
du skyel mar dong ba bcas la / stobs po che dbang phyug btsan po /
phan tshun gcig la gcig mi mthun pa'i mig gis blta zhing rtsub mo'i*

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 124.

⁵⁹ Probably it should be spelled "glang".

⁶⁰ Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung, *Bka' blon rtogs brjod*, p. 51, l.14.

*tshig sbyor gyis snying la tsher ma'i cho ga sgrub pa rnams kyi bar du bya dka' / byed gtad kyi rnam pa ci yang 'ong rigs su mchis kyang / de rigs med mar bde 'jags 'khon rtsod bral bar dga' bzhin spro bzhin rang rang gnas su bskyod...*⁶¹

(Again I went up to Nagchu to see off the Chinese army returning back to China. Those powerful oppressors stare at each other in an offensive manner and use harsh words like a thorn piercing into the heart. Between them one may face any kind of trouble at any time, yet it did not happen and without any quarrelling all returned to their own place joyfully).

Conclusion

To summarize: Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung's two biographical works are immensely valuable in helping us to understand the socio-political situation of Tibetan people of the eighteenth century. Though it is not a historical work its context is that of historical fact. A reader of biographies might feel that the elite politicians of Tibet in those days lacked patriotic sentiment. On the other hand, Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung said "an intellectual saw does not cut wood" and standing against the aggressive Qing and Mongol army was a threat to one's life. Hence, it seems, he and people like him were in a helpless position as it was effectively impossible for the Tibetan politicians to defeat or overthrow foreign forces who were more advanced militarily and numerically superior. And it seems Wang 'Gyur med rnam rgyal was a victim of such Tibetan national sentiment. He attempted to rule independently for a few years of his reign and in consequence was executed by the Qing Ambans. As Mdo mkhar Zhabs drung said in the autobiography that learn from the past for the benefit of future, he composed the autobiography so that future generations of Tibetan politicians could avoid repeating those past mistakes. Present day as well, we must similarly study the past history from which we can also learn important lessons for our future.

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⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 59, l.9.

