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**The Rise of the “Great Man”: Tibetan Secular Biography  
and the Advent of the Modernity**

**Abstract**

This paper proposes that the era of Pho-lha-nas (Mi-dbang Pho-lha) was one in which the possibility of a Tibetan modernity appeared on the horizon and that the massive biography of Pho-lha-nas, written in his lifetime and at his direction, symbolizes that potential. It was the apotheosis of a secular figure who ruled over Tibet, yet it appeared in the midst of the period of rule by the Dalai Lamas. The biography praises its subject for his military prowess and his place among the great figures of the Manchu-Mongol order within which he and Tibet existed. This was an era in which the modernizing force of globalization was making itself felt within the Manchu-Mongol world; Europeans and European goods were entering the area and the peripheries; the Qing realms, including Tibet, were being mapped using the most modern technology; and – in slightly less than a century – serious knowledge of the world beyond Asia would appear in a Tibetan text. Historical trends often move in fits and starts, so one may characterize this period in Tibet simply as one in which the nascent possibility of a Tibetan modernity appeared.

**Keywords:** Pho-lha-nas, *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod*, modernity, Qing Dynasty, Manchu-Mongol World, Mdo-mkhar Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, Dga’-ldan pho-brang, eighteenth century

The appearance of secular biographies by the lay writers Rdo-ring Bstan-’dzin dpal-’byor (1760/1761–?) and Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal (1697–1763) can properly be said to represent an innovation in eighteenth-century Tibetan historical writing, an innovation that reflected Tibet’s inclusion in the larger Manchu-Mongol order under the Qing, beginning in the seventeenth century. The basic contention of this paper is that the prevailing conditions in that order made the appearance of such works something more than just a literary development or an adjustment to a genre. They effectively made

them into a harbinger of a sort of nascent modernity in Tibet. This is not to say that this appearance subverted, let alone ended, the more traditional practice of biographical writing (indeed, this new genre is represented by a handful of texts), one that was overwhelmingly concerned with the deeds and accomplishments of spiritual masters. But it did signal something new, arising, as it did, against the background of what was happening elsewhere in the world. And the innovation it marked was not limited to the domain of literature.

None of the elements constituting this new context made for a Tibetan modernity on its own. But taken together they formed the backdrop for a sort of modernity that might have been, had history proceeded differently. The emergence of a modern order in Tibet would have been tied to the development of the modern order then emerging in the larger world around Tibet. The *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod*, the biography of Pho-lha-nas, the work which forms the core of this paper, reflects, in a Tibetan milieu, some of the larger processes going on in that larger world, processes ultimately leading to a recognizable modernity.

It is, of course, worth asking how one might define “modernity” in this context. Indeed, the periodization of Tibetan history as a whole is an issue on which there are questions and disagreements.<sup>1</sup> In Western formulations of Tibet’s history the question of a “medieval” period from which “modernity” emerges is itself poorly defined. Given the common linkage associated with the two as broad terms – the modern follows upon the medieval in the most mundane usages – some boundaries and definitions are necessary. The term medieval has been invested in general parlance with associations of backwardness, feudalism, superstition, etc., that might give one pause. Indeed, at times it is used with no real explanation.<sup>2</sup> This may be understandable, given such unwieldy assumptions about “medieval”. It is useful, therefore, to consider two things. One is that the “medieval” political, social and economic structures (especially those termed “feudal” in Medieval Europe) of one place, though intersecting with other societies at certain points, were not universal. The other is that the very term “medieval” most basically indicates a period that is intermediary or intervening. If we understand the term primarily in this way it allows for a more practical understanding of what “modernity” in Tibet might mean: the era emerging from the bridge that separates it from antiquity. It is indeed a broad and general term and as such we cannot skirt the fact that its use in different histories categorically requires further subdivisions relevant to those particular histories. To observe that it is broad and often seems to be applied to an unreasonably long chronological period is to take note of something that is not unique to formulations of Tibetan history: in many schemes for Western history the term “medieval” is applied to the approximately thousand years from the fall of the Western Roman Empire up

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<sup>1</sup> A very useful discussion of the different formulas for periodization and some of the problems inherent in the enterprise can be found in Brian Cuevas, “Some Reflections on the Periodization of Tibetan History”, *Revue d’Études Tibétaines* 10 (2006), pp. 44–55.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., as in the title of Michael Aris’s *Views of Medieval Bhutan* (London: Serindia, 1982), which deals with Bhutan in the eighteenth century.

until the time of the Colombian voyages (i.e., from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries).<sup>3</sup> This intervening medieval period is the bridge to subsequent modernities and ultimately to what we have seen in the last three centuries, a period in which cultural differences assuredly have existed, and yet one in which disparate peoples were inexorably coming into unprecedented contact.

Seen from this perspective, modernity is significantly different. The contacts and linkages across spatial divides that characterize the post-medieval period provided for a much different level of convergence than had been previously possible and this is what is at issue here. If we can provisionally refer to pre-modern Tibet as “medieval” up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then it is during those two centuries that one sees a slow process in which the conditions for modernity emerge. Of course, “modernity” is also a term that lends itself to various formulations. There is a wide range of measures by which different observers have qualified a country, society, or era, as modern. As concerns Tibet, some of the writings seem quite subjective, rooted perhaps in defensiveness about a Tibet that could not evince modernity being therefore considered “backward”.<sup>4</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to make a value judgement about modernity. This paper will simply point to a few global trends that are consonant with notions of modernity and which have their echoes in Tibet. This is certainly not to imply a resultant uninterrupted development of a Tibetan modernity. Such change inevitably moves in fits and starts; with signs or harbingers of momentous change as well as reactive steps back. With that in mind, this paper only constitutes a glance at something that might have developed other than it did had Tibet’s history not taken the trajectory it ultimately took. It posits that one may rightly view seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tibet through the lens of a dawning modernity, its beginnings visible in Tibetan polity and society. More to the point, one significant element in this is the rise of the “Great Man” – and here I refer not simply to the person and career of Mi-dbang Pho-lha Bsod-nams stobs-rgyas – but to the erection of a literary edifice around him, his justly renowned biography, the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod*.<sup>5</sup> The “Great Man” who is the subject of this monumental work ruled Tibet as a secular figure. In and of itself this is certainly not without precedent. But other factors indicate how significant his rule – and its portrayal – truly were.

The era of Mi-dbang Pho-lha followed in the wake of the triumph of the Dga’-ldan pho-brang regime, the government of the Dalai Lamas that served as the primary Tibetan ruling structure from the mid-seventeenth century until 1959. The consolidation of Dga’-

<sup>3</sup> N.b., Cuevas’s comment (*op. cit.*, p. 50) about the organization of the three-volume *History of Tibet*, edited by Alex McKay, in which the medieval Tibetan period endures from *circa* 850 until 1895.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolution* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. 247: “So we must qualify what we have come to call ‘modernity’ in the West as ‘materialistic’ or ‘outer’ modernity, and contrast it with a parallel but alternative Tibetan modernity qualified as ‘spiritualistic’ or ‘inner’ modernity”.

<sup>5</sup> Zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1981). On this work see Luciano Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), pp. 3–4.

Idan pho-brang rule created a more unified state, one with an administrative apparatus enjoying authority over a larger portion of the Tibetan world, than had been seen in centuries. This state at its inception was a Tibeto-Mongol entity, one rooted in the greater Manchu-Mongol world of the Qing. And that fact is of fundamental significance, since the Manchu-Mongol world, like everything around it, was in the midst of far-reaching change. Europeans – a trickle at first, but then a growing flow – were entering India, China – quite significantly for the Manchu-Mongol interface with the larger world – and the expanses of Siberia far to the north. Commercial strategies, often tied to military ventures, enabled diverse aspects of a global modernity to make inroads into these same areas. Thus, the spatial understanding of Tibet within the upper strata of the Manchu-Mongol world was given unprecedented depth.

Tibet could not be excluded from these currents. When the Kangxi Emperor became aware of the impressive detail of the maps possessed by the Russian side for the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), he was inspired to commission the mapping project that, in stages, would use Jesuit technology in service to the creation of a modern map of the Qing state and its surroundings. In its ultimate stage Tibet was mapped into the empire's purview.<sup>6</sup> This altered perspective – a modern spatial perspective – was one part of the growth of a new understanding of the world that developed in some quarters of the Qing world and even reached Tibet. Related phenomena include the appearance of the '*Dzam-gling brgyas-bshad*, written in Beijing in 1830.<sup>7</sup> Less well-known, though interesting in itself, is what was likely the first Western-style Tibetan-language map of much of Asia which appeared in the book meant for use in proselytizing that the Moravian missionaries produced in India in 1865, the *Sa chen-po gsal-ba'i me-long*.<sup>8</sup>

To restate the assertion made earlier, such innovation reflected Tibet's inclusion in the larger Manchu-Mongol order under the Qing, starting in the seventeenth century. It was an element in what I consider a nascent modernity in Tibet.

There were, of course secular biographies prior to this era: the *Si-tu bka'-chems* of Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan comes easily to mind in this regard. However, the new

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<sup>6</sup> See Laura Hostettler, "Early Modern Mapping at the Qing Court: Survey Maps from the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Reign Periods", in: Yongtao Du and Jeff Kyong McClain, eds., *Chinese History in Geographical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> For a very informative account of the background to and composition of the '*Dzam-gling rgyas-bshad*, see Lobsang Yongdan, "Tibet charts the world: the Btsan po No mon han's *Detailed Description of the World*, an early major scientific work in Tibet", in: Gray Tuttle, ed., *Mapping the Modern in Tibet* (Andiast, Switzerland: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH, 2011), pp. 73–134. The author also takes note of the Qing efforts at mapping Tibet. On the influence of the Polish scholar Józef Kowalewski on Btsan-po No-mon-han and his particular influence on the shaping of his work see Vladimir Uspensky, "Josef Kowalewski and Minjul Hutugtu (1789–1839)," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, LXII (2009), pp. 222–227, especially p. 224. I am most grateful to Dr. Agata Bareja-Starzyńska for directing my attention to this article.

<sup>8</sup> The title page notes the place of publication as Keylong (Kye-lang). The map trails off to the West with Europe marked simply as "Phyi-gling". The *Sa chen-po gsal-ba'i me-long* is held in the collection of the Field Museum, Chicago, and to the best of my knowledge has not been re-published since it was first brought out by the Moravians.

kind of secular biography was different in scale and scope and very much marked by the norms of the Manchu-Mongol order in which it formed. Pho-lha-nas’s life story recounts the military and political accomplishments of its subject and his recognition and inclusion in the Qing hierarchy of rank. I propose in this paper that there emerges out of this genre a real person, who is also a literary construct (albeit certainly not a figure from epic tales): ‘The Great Man’. Not a holy man or a saint, but a dominant political and military leader, someone very much reflecting the norms of an age of empire when world regions were increasingly in contact and state formation was moving those regions into new political structures and relationships. The focus of this paper is the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod*, the biography of Mi-dbang Pho-lha Bsod-nams stobs-rgyas, “the Man of Power”. In structure and content this biography is symptomatic of the encounter with modernity that Tibet was experiencing, a modernity that was very much connected with the revolutions in trade, economics and regional contacts that were taking shape as part of the Manchu-Mongol world order, an order of which Tibet was very much a part.

Let us start, if the reader will be indulgent, at the end: the end of the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod*, that is. Specifically, the colophon:

What is [contained herein is] called “The Tidings that Gladden all the World, the Life Story [of the Man of Power]”, a complete display of auspicious signs that fill the interior of the three realms [Tib. *srid-pa gsum*],<sup>9</sup> [the life of] Bsod-nams stobs-rgyas, which is the melodious name [given by] the *Vidyādhara*, Crown Jewel of All and Tamer of Beings, Gter-chen Chos-kyi rgyal-po, to the one who reverently worships the precious doctrine of the *Sugata*; the great one who holds the reins of power and leads living beings to a new golden age, even at the end point of [the time of] degeneration; the wish-granting tree that wondrously displays the sweet scent of renown and the flower of merit; the one who, with a body perfectly brave and heroic is victorious over all directions; who is praised by the deities who safeguard virtue and those of the Land of Snows with the name “The Man of Power”; the one who was successively praised by the Lord Emperor in the East with the *colo* [Tib. *cho-los* < Man. *colo*, i.e., “bestowed titles”] of *taiji beise* [Tib. *tha’i-ji bas-se*, i.e., “Royal Prince”] and *doroi beile* [Tib. *to-run pa’i-le*, i.e., “Prince of the Blood”]; the one who was given the name Mgon-skyabs rdo-rje by Sngags-chen Kyab-bdag bla-ma<sup>10</sup> while still in his mother’s womb.

[I]n accord with the exhortations of him upon whose head has fallen the crown of the lord of family and *maṇḍala*, the *vidyādhara*, Blo-bzang

<sup>9</sup> I.e., the realms below, on and above the earth, i.e., the realms of *nāga*, humans and animals, and deities.

<sup>10</sup> Identified as Sngags-chen Kyab-bdag bla-ma Dge-legs rab-rgyal from Bkra-shis lhun-po on p. 155 of this text.

'phrin-las dbang-po, the powerful one who is active on the ground<sup>11</sup> of the Thon clan, the *bka'-blon*.<sup>12</sup> when a little bit of the first part was done and I placed it before the gaze of the *mahāvīdyādhara* Myang-ston Rig-'dzin rgya-mtsho,<sup>13</sup> I obtained the kindness of receiving a long *kha-btags* from him indicating that it was well done and my happiness rose up. That stage of the life of the Lord of Men that was like a new flower, etc. [i.e., his youth], had very much become my work objective and in searching my notes I came to understand it.

Otherwise, as for sketching out a picture of his perfect deeds, if such a thing was exhausting for earlier generations, how could someone like me be up to it? But I determined to gather up what confidence I could muster. And using the poor thread of the language of villagers to string together a necklace with the priceless jewels that are the vast and extensive content of this most superior one's wisdom, would, I know, not be great as an ornament for beings. And so in accord with the manner of the aphorism of the *mahācārya* Gopadatta of Āryabhūmi, only in drawing on poetic language can one rejoice at the elegance that accumulates from mixing poetry and prose. Nevertheless, the Lord of Men said "If one draws only on the poetics of old terms and the use of clearly expressive synonyms, contemporary beings with dull minds will not enjoy it; so say things in a way that is easily understood!"

After shouldering this burden, how was I to compose this? Thus, for a long time I applied myself to completing the work. My quarters were in a small house next to the Great *Gandhola* of Lhasa [i.e., the Jo-khang], beautified by images of the *Sugata* and his disciples and a series of *pustaka* [i.e., books]. Sometimes I was disturbed by the clamor of many people; sometimes I was distracted by the slightest series of recitations; and sometimes I passed my time in the cycle of duties of a court official. But beyond that, whenever there was a little bit of time, I would add three or four lines, etc., and completed the first parts.

<sup>11</sup> I.e., *la-sa spyod-pa* in the modern book print of this text should be *sa-la-spyod-pa* as in the blockprint f. 394r (TBRC: WIKG1253). Blo-bzang 'phrin-las dbang-po'i sde is mentioned earlier, on p. 262 of the text as *rje-drung*, i.e., a monk official of aristocratic background. He is surely Sle-lung Bzhad-pa'i rdo-rje Blo-bzang 'phrin-las (1697-1740), whose autobiography includes important information on the Junyar occupation of Lhasa. See Elliot Sperling, "Concerning the Lingering Question of Sde-srid Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho's Paternity", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* LXVII (2014), p. 205. Cf. also the Rje-drung rin-po-che Blo-bzang 'phrin-las dbang-po'i sde, mentioned by Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung in Mdo-mkhar-ba Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *Bka'-lon rtogs-brjod* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1981), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> This must be the *bka'-blon* Thon Sri-gcod tshe-brtan who is mentioned in Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government 1728-1959* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1973), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> He is mentioned earlier in this text, p. 312, as a religious teacher to Pho-lha-nas (Tib. *mi'i bdag-po'i ti-shri...*) known also as Mnga'-bdag Brag-pa.



As for the continuation, the princes in Bhutan were exhausted by mutual hatreds and strife and in order to settle things I held the gold crown of the Lord of Men upon my head [i.e., Mdo-mkhar Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal was made Mi-dbang Pho-lha's representative] and the morning after I came to Rgyal-mkhar-rtse in Nyang, near the palace of the *dharmarāja* Rabbrtan Kun-bzang 'phags which contains images of deeds done for the Victorious Doctrine; by the banks where the cool, swirling stream of water descends from the snow mountain Gnod-sbyin gang-ba bzang-po; where rows of trees make everything beautiful; a region where the various new and different sounds of lovely birds, female cuckoos, nightingales, etc., interpose themselves in the mind: there in the dwelling wherein glorious sunlight hovers fully, the residence known as the “Cell of Repose” which in former times was made as the dwelling of the Karma-pa who is the thorough guide to the three times, I, Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, also called by the name Tshangs-sras Dgyes-pa'i blo-ldan, dwelling there and taking some delight in the exposition of conventional sciences due to the grace of the *mahāpañḍita* and *mahālotstshawa* of the Five Sciences, Dharmasrī, finished the work on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the Water-Female-Ox Year [= November 9, 1733]. May the arising of the most infinite virtue and understanding come to fill all the world! *Manggalam!*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *op. cit.*, pp. 857-860: *bde bar gshegs pa'i bstan pa rin po che gus pas mchod pa / snyigs ma'i mthar yang lus can rnams la rdzogs ldan gsar pa'i dga' ston* [858] *'dren pa'i shing rta chen po / grags pa'i dri bsung dang bsod nams kyi me tog mtshar du dgod pa'i dpag bsam 'dod 'jo'i ljon pa / dpa' zhing brtul phod pa'i mkho (kho) lag yongs su rdzogs pas phyogs thams cad las rnam par rgyal ba / dkar phyogs skyong ba'i lha rnams dang gang can pa rnams kyis mi'i dbang po'i mtshan gyi bsngags pa brjod cing / shar phyogs gong ma bdag pos tha'i ji bas se / tho run pa'i li zhes pa'i cho los rim par gzengs bstod pa / sngags chen khyab bdag bla mas yum gyi lhums su zhugs pa nyid nas mgon skyabs rdo rje'i mtshan gsol zhing / rig pa 'dzin pa kun gyi gtsug gi nor bu 'gro 'dul gter chen chos kyi rgyal pos bsod nams stobs rgyas zhes pa'i mtshan dbyangs srid pa gsum gyi khong pa 'gens pa'i dge mtshan 'du mdzad pa gang gi rtogs pa brjod pa 'jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i gnam zhes bya ba 'di yang / rigs dang dkyil 'khor kun gyi khyab bdag rig 'dzin blo bzang 'phrin las dbang po'i sde'i cod pan spyi bor lung zhing / thon rigs kyi la sa spyod pa'i dbang po bka'i dgung blon chen pos kyang bskul bar mdzad pa ltar / 'di'i stod cha nyung zad cig grub mtshams rig 'dzin chen po myang ston rig 'dzin rgya misho'i spyan lam du bstar ba na legs so'i lha rdzas srid du ring ba bka' drin du stsal ba thob pas kyang spro ba btegs par gyur to / mi'i bdag po sku'i na tshod me tog gsar pa dang mtshungs pa'i dus la sogs pa kho bos spyod yul du ma gyur pa rnams ni reg zig stsal ba dag las shes par byas shing / gzan dag yongs [859] *su rdzogs pa'i mdzad pa ri mo'i lam du 'dren pa la ni mes po'ang ngal ba 'dzin na bdag lta bus ji ltar nus / 'on kyang rang blos ji ltar spobs pa zhig sgrub par mos pa la / de yang dam pa'i yon tan brjod bya'i yul zab cing rgya che ba rin thang bral ba'i nor bu rnams grong pa'i tshig gis srad bu ngan pa la brgyus pa'i do shal ni skye bo rnams kyi rgyan du mi che bar shes nas / 'phags pa'i yul gyi slob dpon chen po sa 'shos byin gyis legs par bshad pa'i lugs bzhin du snyan tshig kho na'i lam nas drangs pa bcad lhug spel ma'i nyams ldan du bsdebs pa zhig bgyid la spro bar gyur kyang / mi'i bdag po'i bka' las / brda nying dang mngon par brjod pa'i ming gi rnam grangs dang ldan pa snyan tshig kho na'i lam nas drangs na deng dus kyi skye bo blo gros rtul ba dga gis longs spyod du mi 'gyur bas go bde bar smros shig / ces bka' stsal ba khur du bzod par byas nas ji ltar 'tshams par sbyar zhing / de yang dus ring mo zhig nas tshul 'di sgrub pa'i sbyor ba la zhugs te / lha ldan gyi gandho la chen po dang nye ba'i 'dabs rol rang nyid kyi bsti gnas khang bu chung ba bde bar gshegs**

There is something in this that we need to view as symptomatic of the onset of a certain modernity. But it is important that we underline the contingent and – to speak frankly – impressionistic sense of this. It is not a European modernity of the sort imagined when one conjures up specific developments in science, philosophy, etc., all heralded by secularism, the advance of technology and methods of production, etc., that are tied to ideas of the Enlightenment. This Europe-oriented view is a limited formulation, and leaves out certain forms which the growing linkage of the inhabited continents – and especially of the realms across the great Eurasian landmass – took on from the fifteenth century onwards. Manifestations of what has been characterized as the “Great Divergence” (i.e., between the European world and the rest) were still hardly evident:<sup>15</sup> the Manchu-Mongol world in eastern Eurasia was by no means a backward realm, nor was it necessarily viewed as such in Europe. The rise and domination of Mi-dbang Pho-lha was very much a part of a trajectory of unification – the unification of so much of Tibet that marked the rise of Dga’-ldan pho-brang, the fruit of the state-building work of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Note, though, that when I assert this I am not asserting an inevitable determined outgrowth. But I am asserting that this was a nascent sprout of something recognizably ‘modern.’

In contrast to the broad characterization of Tibet as a stateless society,<sup>16</sup> the Dga’-ldan pho-brang state was indeed a state and functioned as such. To make just one anecdotal

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*pa sras dang bcas pa'i snang brnyan dang / pusti ka'i phreng bas mdzes par byas pa der 'dug nas res 'ga' ni skye bo mang po'i ca co'i sgras gtses / res 'ga' ni kha ton gyi rim pa nyung zad tsam byed pas brel / res 'ga' ni rgyal khab chen po'i zham ring du bya ba'i las kyi 'khor los dus 'da' ba las / bar skabs kyi yun cung zad re la yi ge'i phreng star gsum dang bzhi la sogs pa bsags te [860] stod cha rnams grub cing / de'i 'phros su gyur pa rnams ni lho phyogs kyi nor 'dzin skyong ba 'brug ljongs kyi rje bo phan tshun 'khon cing rtsod pas nyam thag pa la dbyen bzlam pa'i slad du mi'i bdag po'i bka' lung gser gyi cod pan spyi bor bzung nas kho bo nyang ljongs rgyal mkhar rtser bskyod pa'i tsho / nangs kyi dus na rgyal ba'i bstan pa la bya ba byas pa'i phyag ris can chos kyi rgyal po rab brtan kun bzang 'phags kyi pho brang dang nye ba'i 'dabs / gnod sbyin gang ba bzang po'i gangs ri'i chu rgyun bsil ma gya gyur 'bab pa'i 'gram ngogs / ljon pa'i phreng ba tshar du dngar bas kun nas mdzes par byas pa / 'dab chags yid 'ong khu byug bu mo dang / 'jol mo la sogs pa'i skad kyi 'gyur ba sna tshogs pas yid dang bar byed pa'i sa phyogs / sngar dus gsum rnam par 'dren pa karma pa'i bsti gnas su bskrun pa'i khang bzang gzims spyil du grags pa'i gnas khang nyi ma'i 'od kyi dpal rnam par ldng ba la / gnas lnga rig pa'i pañdi ta chen po ma hā lo tstsha ba dharma shris bka' drin las gtsug lag gi rig pa smra ba la cung zad spro bar zhugs pa tsho ring dbang gi rgyal po'am ming gzhan tshangs sras dgyes pa'i blo ldan du 'bod pas chu mo glang gi lo smin drug zla ba'i dkar po'i phyogs kyi rgyal ba dang po la grub par sbyar ba ste / dge zhing shis pa'i snang ba rab tu 'byams klas pas 'jig rten khams kun khyab pa'i rgyur gyur cig / manggalam / / /*

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in spite of the accruing conditions that ultimately produced the massive developmental schism between the western and eastern ends of Eurasia, it was only in the nineteenth century that it became so overt and critical. See Kenneth Pomeranz. *The Great Divergence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Depending on the angles or levels at which a given society is viewed, observers of one and the same society may easily come to very different impressions. Geoffrey Samuel some time ago proposed viewing pre-mid-twentieth-century Tibet as a stateless, ‘shamanic’ society, an understandable impression, perhaps from his vantage point. See Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 33: “I find the description of premodern Tibet as a centralized state under the rule of a theocratic government at Lhasa unconvincing”. See too his “Tibet as a Stateless Society”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* XLI.2 (Feb., 1982), pp. 215–229. Nevertheless, this is not the impression one gains from dealing with texts such as the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* that do, in fact, reflect the milieu of the Dga’-ldan pho-brang state at a time that, as noted, may be construed as one of nascent modernity.



observation on the economic side, the Armenian merchant Hovhannes Joughayetsi, who reached Lhasa on the last day of September, 1686, noted the collection of import duties to which he was subjected just after his arrival.<sup>17</sup> And in less obvious ways perhaps, the economy of the larger world was increasingly present in Tibet, represented by the goods that were coming into Tibet via intermediaries such as Hovhannes. Although the appearance of European items in Tibet is sometimes attributed to the eighteenth century,<sup>18</sup> we already find evidence of European goods in Tibet in the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> So too, we must recognize the increase in silver in Tibet in the sixteenth century as a result of the influx of the metal from newly opened mines in the New World, traded by the Spanish through the Philippines.<sup>20</sup> The point of this is to underscore the obvious: Tibet was part of the world around it. Events in Inner Asia and further afield were not without effect in Tibet. Thus, Tibet's presence as part of the larger Mongol world, from approximately the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, made Tibet indeed party to an incipient modernity which was being felt in different ways in different parts of the world. The various elements comprising it might, in other circumstances, not necessarily be taken as indicative of the onset of the modern. But taken as a whole, I believe that this is precisely what we have.

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<sup>17</sup> See Levon Khachikian, "The Ledger of the Merchant Hovhannes Joughayetsi", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* VIII (1966), pp. 153–186. Hovhannes notes (p. 171) that his goods were cleared by the customs officials on October 3, 1686.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Luciano Petech, "The Missions of Bogle and Turner According to the Tibetan Texts", *T'oung Pao* XXXIX (1950), p. 334: "Through them [i.e., Indian merchants], some European produce began to find their way into Tibet. One of the presents offered by Ācārya Sukhadevagiri to the Tashi-Lama was a pair of European spectacles". Bogle himself noted that French broadcloth was strongly represented in the trade between Bhutan and Tibet. See Clements R. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* (London: Trübner and Company, 1876), p. 185. Bogle felt strongly that direct trade with Calcutta would allow English broadcloth to displace the French product in Tibet and noted (p. 125) that broadcloth was traded from Tibet to China as well. According to Bogle (p. 185) French broadcloth was greatly represented in the trade between Bhutan and Tibet. It is evident (p. 127) that this trade was especially lucrative at the time; elsewhere Bogle notes the Bhutanese prohibition on Kashmiris trading in it with Tibet, and states that it was doing much financial damage to the Kashmiris, who were very much invested in the commerce (p. 127). Kate Teltscher, "The Lama and the Scotsman. George Bogle in Bhutan and Tibet, 1774–1775", in: Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 163, notes that Bogle took to wearing Russian boots while at Bkra-shis lhun-po. But Bogle only listed "Bulgar hides" among the products carried to Tibet from Siberia, chiefly by merchants whom he calls "Kalmuks". See Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 125 (and note Markham's own confused note on that page identifying Kalmuks as "Manchurians" while differentiating them from Mongols). However, these Bulgar hides were otherwise known as Russian leather and originated in the Volga region (perhaps explaining the Kalmyk association). See Henry Yule and Arthur Coke Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: Being a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases and of Kindred Terms; Etymological, Historical, Geographical, and Discursive* (London: John Murray, 1886), p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Among the goods that Hovhannes Joughayetsi's ledger lists as being carried by him during the long trading voyage that included commerce in India, Nepal and Tibet are an English spyglass, a European pen and English broadcloth (Khachikian, *op. cit.*, pp. 164–165). The spyglass was confiscated by "the Raja in Kathmandu" (p. 171), an action indicative of its particular value.

<sup>20</sup> See Elliot Sperling, "Some Preliminary Remarks on the Influx of New World Silver into Tibet during China's 'Silver Century' (1550–1650)", *The Tibet Journal* XXXIV.3–4/XXXV.1–2 (2009/2010), pp. 299–311.

The appearance of a ‘Man of Power’ – the ‘Great Man’ – is evident in many other places and at many other times, and not uniquely as something indicative of the onset of modernity. But the circumstances under which it appears in Tibet, i.e., in the person of Pho-lha-nas and in the aftermath of the establishment of Dga’ldan pho-brang – the Government of the Dalai Lamas – makes this significant as just that very thing. This is to say that it presents us with something new: the appearance of strong, geographically extensive, rule by a secular figure. One might remember the exile of the Seventh Dalai Lama from Lhasa (1728–1735), in which Mi-dbang Pho-lha did play a role: the exile was the result of suspicions and assumptions stemming from the Dalai Lama’s father’s association with the coup attempt that took the life of Khang-chen-nas, the close ally of Pho-lha-nas.<sup>21</sup> This was an important step in the elevation of Pho-lha-nas authority.

This does not come out of nowhere. Tibet had Mongol kings in the persons of Gušri Qan and Lajang Qan, but none had as much unchallenged authority within Tibet. The tensions that ultimately arose between that kingship and the Government of the Dalai Lamas during the time of the regent Sang-rgyas rgya-mtsho are certainly well-known. The rule of Pho-lha-nas represented, in its own way, the attainment of a new level of effective rule for that idea of kingship; the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* makes very clear that the Pho-lha clan was loyal to Mongol rule in Tibet. The triumph of Pho-lha-nas in the struggle against the Junryars was the triumph of a loyalist regime (loyal to the deposed Qošot),<sup>22</sup> now under the clear aegis of the Man of Power who was a lay ruler: Mi-dbang Pho-lha Bsod-nams stobs-rgyas.

The *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* is very much Pho-lha-nas’s monument; in content it stands as his apotheosis. The author, Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, served Pho-lha-nas as a loyal follower and Mi-dbang Pho-lha was very much involved in the shaping of the image presented in this biography. As the colophon makes abundantly clear, he advised Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal on what he was writing and specified that he wanted the work to be widely accessible to ordinary people, not just literati. Relatedly, if one sees in this biography the possible makings of a Tibetan modernity, one cannot overlook the appearance of two other works from the hand of the same author: One, *Gzhon nu zla med*, is commonly considered Tibet’s first novel and, like Mi-dbang Pho-lha’s biography, a major literary achievement.<sup>23</sup> The other is Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung

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<sup>21</sup> Petech, *op. cit.*, (1972), pp. 151-155, notes that Pho-lha-nas was loath to have the Dalai Lama sent off from Lhasa in a manner that carried the appearance of deportation. That the Dalai Lama was in fact being removed from Lhasa for political reasons is nevertheless clear. In any event, the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* is somewhat apologetic about Pho-lha-nas’s role. Although Petech indicates that there was no Qing intention to send the Dalai Lama to China, the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* has Pho-lha-nas arguing against the plan of the *amban* to send the Dalai Lama to the Qing court in Beijing, thus portraying him sympathetically in the affair. With the Dalai Lama finally out of Lhasa and ultimately isolated in Eastern Tibet Pho-lha-nas was able, with Qing acquiescence, to consolidate his rule.

<sup>22</sup> See Elliot Sperling, “Pho-lha-nas, Khang-chen-nas, and the Last Era of Mongol Domination in Tibet” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* LXV (2012), p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *Gzhon-nu zla-med-kyi gtam-rgyud* (Lhasa: Bod-ljongs mi-dmangs dpe-skrun khang, 1979). This work has been translated into English: Beth Solomon, trans., *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal's short but similarly significant secular autobiography.<sup>24</sup> These added literary developments comport reasonably well with the concept of a nascent modernism in eighteenth-century Tibet. This is certainly not to say that all this was part of a conscious modernist movement – we are, after all, talking about the beginnings of something. It is only with hindsight that it can be seen as contributing to some of the earliest discernible stirrings of what might later be characterized as “modern”.

In a similar vein, it is important to qualify what is intended when reference is made to “greater secularism”. I do not mean to impute an anti-clerical mindset to those who are mentioned here. Mi-dbang Pho-lha, who was unquestionably religious, is presented as nothing less than devout. Indeed Buddhism, without disparagement, is very present in the *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* as it is in *Gzhon-nu zla-med*. However, an increased non-hierocratic element is a significant part of the political texture of the times *relative to what preceded it*. To reiterate very simply, Tibet, with a government unified under Pho-lha-nas, and with a strong Manchu-Mongol dominion whose presence was felt, both politically and culturally was not aloof to the emerging trends around it. Whereas Tibetan biography has been overwhelmingly dominated by the life stories of religious figures, biographies that emphasize religious activities and achievements, the massive biography of Pho-lha-nas, in its scope and prominence (i.e., as concerns the standing of its author as well as its subject) is a sort of marker. While one is quite accustomed to accounts of religious figures exhibiting spiritual precocity during their youths – demonstrating knowledge and understanding of letters, religious formulae, texts or concepts while still of tender years – Pho-lha-nas the child has other interests, interests that include martial games and weaponry:

Sometimes he would gather together those children with whom he had become playmates, and some would act the part of Kashmiri soldiers while some would take on the part of Mongol troops. In the end, fashioning artillery pieces from hollowed bamboo and playing at shooting them off, with the Kashmiri forces defeated and the Mongol group victorious, they passed entire days without thinking about food...<sup>25</sup>

The colophon too is quite clear with regard to the sort of honor to which the child just described would later aspire. He was, “successively praised by the Lord Emperor in the East with the “bestowed titles” of *taiji beise* [“Royal Prince”] and *doroi beile* [“Prince of the Blood”].”

<sup>24</sup> Mdo-mkhar-ba, Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *Bka'-blon rtogs-brjod* (Chengdu: Si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrun khang, 1981). On this work and its significance in the present context, see the article by Luran Hartley, “Self as a faithful public servant: The Autobiography of Mdo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal (1697–1763),” in Gray Tuttle, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–71.

<sup>25</sup> Zhabs-drung Tshe-ring dbang-rgyal, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–67: *skabs 'gar rang nyid kyi rtsed grogs su gyur pa'i byis pa rnam bsdus nas la las yul kasmi ra'i dmag gi tshul du byas / 'ga' zhig gis yul mong gol gyi dpung tshogs kyi tshul bzung / smyig ma'i sbubs la me'i 'khrul* [67] *'khor bzos te 'phang ba la sogs pa'i rnam 'gyur gyi mthar kasmi ra'i dpung bcom / mong gol gyi tshogs rgyal ba'i ngang tshul ston pa'i rtsed 'jos zas mi dran pa tsam du nyin zhag 'da' bar byed pa...*

But it is not just the specifics of the various titles Pho-lha nas received that is significant. Perhaps of greater import was his desire to see these recorded in his biography. Where the colophon tells us that Mi-dbang Pho-lha was the ‘Man of Power’ and that he ranked with princes of the larger Empire in the East, we must bear in mind his involvement in the composition of the biography. He intended that the great writer Mdo-mkhar Tshering dbang-rgyal produce a work that would allow for *even dullards* to comprehend his greatness.<sup>26</sup> Such was the literary edifice he wanted erected for himself.

It is only from an historical distance that we can detect the patterns that come to form an era. A specific trend may manifest itself at one point and then fade, only to reappear decades afterwards, or even at a longer remove, (or perhaps not to reappear at all). Certainly those who are engaged in the events of a given time often have little or no inkling of the larger historical processes in which they are engaged. There is an ebb and flow at work. In 1924 and 1925 a period of tension ensued between the emerging Tibetan military and other centers of power (including Tibet’s ‘National Assembly’ and the clergy) as the military strained against the idea of non-military control, seeking to assert its own independent authority. This reached a point where some felt that the governmental authority of the Dalai Lama himself was endangered.<sup>27</sup> In the end the Dalai Lama acted to demote or dismiss key military figures and in so doing ended the possibility of a militarized state in Tibet. There is no reason to think that the life of Pho-lha-nas provided any conscious inspiration for this move to elevate secular might (in the form of the armed forces) within the rulership. Rather, like the eighteenth-century events under discussion here, this was another example of larger surrounding trends having resonance in Tibet. Militarism, after all, was a mark of the modern in early twentieth-century East Asia, as witness the histories of China and Japan. But when speaking of the ebb and flow of those events that make for larger trends one cannot dismiss the fact that in the first half of the eighteenth century Tibet already had a “Great Man,” one “with a body perfectly brave and heroic... victorious over all directions” as a leader. From a long view one can see a harbinger; a nascent Tibetan sort of modernism showing itself in the early eighteenth century.

All of this arose out of the milieu formed through the Dga’ldan pho-brang triumph. Significant historical change is often produced fitfully: with precursors and seemingly failed experiments. Tibetan modernity might well have begun to grow steadily had not the step toward secular rulership represented by Mi-dbang Pho-lha turned out to have been an anomaly in its time: Mi-dbang Pho-lha’s son and successor, ‘Gyur-med rnam-rgyal, was murdered by the Manchu *amban* and the clerical structure of the Dga-lidan pho-brang state was renewed, albeit subject to ever-growing Qing domination and limitations.

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<sup>26</sup> As such, there is more than a little bit of irony in the fact that Luciano Petech, *op. cit.* (1972), p. 4, said of this crucial text: “In the first hundred or so pages, the work is written in a highly ornate and long-winded style, sometimes quite difficult to understand... As the tale goes on, the style becomes gradually easier, at times even colloquial...” Might this be related to Mdo-mkhar zhabs-drung Tshering dban-rgyal’s description of the circumstances of the composition of the first and later sections of the work?

<sup>27</sup> On the events in question, see Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: the Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 121–138.