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Bon Studies 2

The Bon deities depicted in the wall paintings in the Bon-brgya monastery

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Introduction

The Bon-brgya Monastery is located in Tongren prefecture (同仁県), Qinghai province (青海省). There is approximately a 120 kilometer distance between Xining (西宁), the capital of Qinghai, and Tongren (also called Rebkong in Tibetan). The Bon-brgya Monastery is built on the slope of a small hill about fifteen kilometers away from the center of Tongren [Plate 1]. More than one hundred monks live in the monastery, which is ranked as the largest Bon monastery in Tongren prefecture. The full name of the monastery is sMan-ri bshad-sgrub smin-grol-gling, which indicates that this monastery belongs to the sMan-ri monastic tradition founded by mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (1356-1415) in the fourteenth century.

The monastery consists of several buildings: 'du khang (assembly hall) [Plate 2], mchod khang (offering hall), mgon khang (reception), gzhims khang (dwelling house), gsol thabs (kitchen) and others. The 'du khang, the largest building in the monastery, has two floors and the second floor is called btsan khang (local deity hall). Most monks live in the more than thirty small houses around the monastery.

When I visited the monastery in August, 1998, about one hundred and ten monks were there and they were led by the abbot (dgon bdag) dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho, also called A-lag Bon-brgya Rin-po-che. At that time, he was sixty-three years old, but the other administrative monks were still in their thirties. This may be due to the fact that the monastery’s activities were suspended during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Most monks come from supporting families in the surrounding villages.

The history of the monastery is obscure and most of the buildings were rebuilt or refurbished in the last ten years after the previous buildings had been burnt down. The monastery financially depends on donations from the followers of Bon living in the villages. It counts more than 2,000 families in Tongren prefecture and about 1,000 in the neighboring prefectures. The monastery is responsible for their funeral ceremonies and the annual ceremonies, or religious activities such as curing diseases, protecting from misfortune, etc. Moreover, the monastery accepts financial support from the Chinese government, which enabled the recent
rebuilding and refurbishment.

1. The deities in the 'du khang

Seven sculptures and 16 paintings (thang ka), all of which have been produced recently, are placed on the first floor of the 'du khang, the main building of the Bon-brgya monastery. Figure 1 shows their locations and the names in simplified form. The entrance of the hall is on the south side and the staircase to the second floor is located at the south-east corner.

The five sculptures on the altar at the north side are made from clay and painted in gold. Their names and characteristics are as follows:

a rNam-mkhyen rGyal-ba gshen-rab [Plate 3]
This is the main deity of the 'du khang. He is sitting in paryatka posture, raising his right arm and placing left hand on his left thigh. He is decorated with a crown, necklace, bracelets, armlets etc. and showing a slightly wrathful appearance. Cf. Kvaerne (1995:66-9).

b Shes-rab smra-ba'i seng-ge [Plate 4]
He is sitting in paryatka posture, raising his right arm with a sword and keeping his left hand in front of his breast like abhaya-mudrā. His left hand also holds a lotus stalk with a sacred text on the lotus flower. He is iconographically similar to the Buddhist Bodhisattva, Mañjuśrī.

c rGyal-yum Byams-ma chen-mo [Plate 5]
This is a goddess, sitting in paryatka posture, possessing a medicine jar in her right hand and a lotus stalk in her left hand with a mirror on the flower. Cf. Kvaerne (1995:52-5).

d mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan [Plate 6]
The founder of the sMan-ri monastery. He is wearing a bla ma costume and a lotus hat (pad zhwa), sitting in paryatka posture, with both hands in front of his breast. Each hand holds a lotus stalk with a sacred text on the flower. He is iconographically similar to Tsong-kha-pa.

e dGon-bdag gYung-drung phun-tshogs [Plate 7]
I have no information about this monk. He is wearing a bla ma costume but with no hat, sitting in paryatka posture on the hide of an antelope (?), showing abhaya-mudrā with his right hand and keeping a sacred text by his left hand on his thigh.
The names and the detail of the sixteen paintings on the wall in the ‘du khang are as follows:

1. gNas-brtan bcu-drug (The Sixteen sthaviras) [Plate 9]
   sTon-pa gshen-rab in yellow color is in the center and the Sixteen monks are surrounding him. They probably correspond with the Buddhist Sixteen arhats.

2. sMan-lha bde-gshegs-brgyad (The Eight bDe-gshegs, who are Medicine gods) [Plate 10]
   The Eight bDe-gshegs are obscure. In the thang ka one large deity is in the center and seven smaller deities are around him. All of them have the earth touching hand posture (bhūmisparsaṃudrā) with their right hands and hold a medicine jar each in their left hands on the left thighs.

3. dGe-spyod Tshe-dpag med Byams-ldan bcas gsum [Plate 11]
   dGye spyod occupies the center and Tshe-dpag med is on the right and Byams-ldan is on the left of the central deity. dGye-spyod is in Buddha style and the two attendants are in Bodhisattva style. These three deities are included in the twelve deities of the ‘twelve rituals’ (cho ga bcu gnyis). As for the ‘twelve rituals’, see Denwood (1983) and Kvaerne (1995:36-7).

4. rJe-sku’i tshogs-zhing (The assembly tree of the body of the Lord) [Plate 12]
   The assembly tree is one of the unique styles of Tibetan religious paintings. In most cases, the founder of the sect occupies the center of the tree and a number of the deities and the historical bla ma in the lineage surround him. In this painting mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (= rJe) is depicted in the center.

5. Grub-chen brgyad-cu (The Eighty siddhas) [Plate 13]
   Unidentified deity in blue color is represented in the center and many siddhas are scattered around him. In spite of the title, we can count eighty-eight siddhas. These siddhas are also depicted on the ceiling of the Khyung-po temple mentioned later.

6. Bla-ma Tshe-dbang rig’-dzin [Plate 14]
   According the Lauf (1979:194), Tshe-dbang rig’-dzin is one of the disciples of Dran-pa nam-mkha’ (ca. 8 c). He is painted in dark brown and is accompanied with his consort. Six wrathful deities and four dākinīs? are depicted around them.

7. dBal-gsas [Plate 15]
dBal-gsas is one of the most popular Bonpo wrathful deities. He has nine faces (including six lion faces), eighteen arms and four legs. The two main arms embrace his consort holding a phur bu between both hands. Cf. Kvaerne (1995:77-80).

8 sTag-lha sPu-gri dmar-po [Plate 16]
sTag-lha sPu-gri dmar-po is a representative Bonpo protective deity and is also known by a different name, sTag-lha me-'bar. He is depicted in dark red (or brown). He possesses unique attributes: a weapon with cakra (right) and a weapon with nine crossed swords (left). See Lauf (1979:90), Kvaerne (1995:37-39) and Tanaka (1998:100).

9 Byams-ma, rNam-'jom, Sher-phyin [Plate 17]
Byams-ma is in the center and rNam-'jom and Sher-phyin are on the right and left of Byams-ma respectively. Byams-ma and Sher-phyin are depicted in yellow and they show a similar appearance. rNam-'jom is in wrathful style with a dark blue body color. These three deities are also included in the 'twelve rituals'.

10 rGyal-ba rgya-mtsho, Kun-dbyings, sMan-lha [Plate 18]
rGyal-ba rgya-mtsho, or Kun-bzang rgyal-ba rgya-mtsho, obviously imitates the Buddhist Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara with eleven faces and a thousand arms. Kun-dbyings (on the right of rGyal-ba rgya-mtsho) is white and sMan-lha (on the left) is blue. Both are sitting in paryāśka posture and decorated with various ornaments like a Bodhisattva. Cf. Kvaerne (1995:62).

11 Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa [Plate 19]
Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa has five faces and twelve arms with the two main arms holding a lunar disc with the 'a' syllable and a solar disc with the 'ma' syllable in the right and left hands respectively. The two lower arms are kept on the knees. The remaining eight arms possess the same attributes as rGyal-ba rgya-mtsho. Cf. Kvaerne (1995:59-61).

12 dBal-gsas [Plate 20]
see no. 7 (the attending deities differ).

13 Kun-rig, rNam-dag, Dus-'khor [Plate 21]
Kun-rig (center), rNam-dag (right) and Dus-'khor (left) are also included in the 'twelve rituals'. White Kun-rig holds a banner, blue rNam-dag possesses a banner and a mirror marked with the 'a' and 'ma' syllables, and green Dus-'khor has a phyag shing (or lcags shing) and a cakra.
Srid-rgyal dbu-brgya phyag-stong [Plate 22]
Srid-rgyal dbu-brgya phyag-stong is a popular Bonpo protective deity. Her name indicates that this deity has one hundred heads and one thousand arms. She also has ten legs. The two main arms hold a sword and a skull cup.

Brag-btsan [Plate 23]
Brag-btsan is also a protective deity. He is riding on a red horse and bearing a spear and a bird in his right and left hands respectively. He is also represented as a sculpture placed in the south west corner of the 'du khang [Plate 8, no. f in Figure 1] and is depicted on one thang ka on the second floor [Plate 35, no. 11 in Figure 2].

rTag-gzigs-zhing [Plate 24]
rTag-gzigs is an alternate for 'Ol-mo lung-ring, the legendary utopia of Bonpo. There is a white mountain and a town in the center of the thang ka surrounded by other mountains and buildings in several layers. Cf. Snellgrove (1967:pl. XXII).

On the second floor, the btsan khang, which has the structure of a corridor as shown in Figure 2, sixteen paintings are hung in the interior. The names and the brief descriptions of the deities depicted on them are as follows:

1 Byang-sman [Plate 25]
white color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a yak, Chinese costume, possessing a vase and a mirror
2 sTag-ri-rong [Plate 26]
black color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on 9 wolves?, possessing a sword and a bag
3 Yum-sras [Plate 27]
blue color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a crow, possessing a chain and a vase
4 Mi-drud (Mi-bdud?) [Plate 28]
red color, 3 face, 6 arms, riding on a lion?, possessing a phur bu, a skull cup, a sword, an ax, a khatvāṅga etc.
5 Dre'u dmar-mo [Plate 29]
dark blue color, 3 face, 6 arms, riding on a red mule, possessing a phur bu, a skull cup, a sword, an axe, a khatvāṅga etc.
6 Dre'u nag-mo [Plate 30]
black color, 3 face, 6 arms, riding on a black mule, possessing a phur bu, a skull cup, a sword, an axe, a banner etc.
7 gCan-lha [Plate 31]
black color, 1 face, 8 arms, riding on 9 dogs, possessing a sword, an arrow, a skull cup, a flag, a knife, a lotus? etc.

8 gShin-reative [Plate 32]
black color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a buffalo and a fish?, buffalo face, accompanied by a consort, possessing a sword and something square

9 rMa-rgyal (= rMa-chen spom-ra) [Plate 33]
white color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a lion, Chinese armor, possessing a banner and a jewel box

10 dMu-bud [Plate 34]
black color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a dog (or wolf?), possessing an ax and a chain

11 Brag-btsan [Plate 35]
red color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a red horse, as described in the first floor (no. 15 of Figure 1)

12 dMag-dpon [Plate 36]
red color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a red horse, Chinese armor, possessing a spear and a chain

13 gNam-lha [Plate 37]
blue color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a white horse, possessing a bow and an arrow, an instrument marked with a svastika

14 Dam-can [Plate 38]
blue color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a red yak, Chinese costume, possessing an ax and a bag

15 Shel-khrab-can (rGyal-po Shel-khrab-can) [Plate 39]
white color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a white horse, Chinese armor, possessing a spear and a jewel box

16 Nyi-pang-sad [Plate 40]
white color, 1 face, 2 arms, riding on a white horse, Chinese costume, possessing a spear and a jewel box

2. The Khyung-po temple

The Khyung-po temple (Khyung-dkar rig-'dzin smin-grol-gling) is a Bonpo temple located in the Khyung-po village north to Tongren city. This temple is relatively small but the interior space is well decorated with statues and thang ka [Plate 41]. Especially, the fine thang ka on the wall are reported to have been preserved through the Cultural Revolution. For a comparison with the Bon-brgya monastery, I shall introduce the main works in this monastery.

The Khyung-po temple also has an entrance on the south and the main altar is located opposite the entrance. There are five sculptures on the altar [Figure 3, a-e]
and some of them are identical to the statues in the Bon-brgya monastery. Except for the south side, there are balconies on the second floor and three huge thang ka are attached on each side of the balconies. Their names are indicated in the Figure 3, nos. 1-9, though two thang ka cannot be identified [Plates 42-50].

The ceiling of the monastery is divided into 144 small squares in a $12 \times 12$ grid [Figure 4]. The four central squares are decorated with 4 mapkadals of Bonpo style [Plates 51, 52]. Unfortunately, I cannot identify these mapkadals due to the lack of information. The five squares next to the mapkadals are occupied by Bonpo sages [Plates 51,52]. The latter four [Figure 4, b-e] are included in the ‘Nine sages of the thought transmission (dgongs brgyud)’ mentioned in Karmay (1998:11). Each of the eleven squares at the four corners have a lotus motif. In the remaining 91 squares, the figures of siddhas are well depicted [Plates 51-54]. The serial numbers and corresponding names of the siddhas are also indicated. As shown in plate 4, they are arranged from the center to the margins as a spiral is drawn.

In the ‘du khang’ of the Bon-brgya monastery, one thang ka depicting eighty siddhas is attached to the wall [Plate 13]. When comparing the iconographic features, they are found to be identical to those of the Khyung-po temple. As shown in Figure 5, the siddhas are in principle arranged from the left to right, and from top to bottom. The painter of this thang ka presumably used the same iconographic models of the siddhas arranged in the same order as the Khyung-po temple.

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Figure 1 First floor of the 'du khang of the Bon-rgya Monastery

a  rNam mkhyan rgyal ba gshen rab
b  Shes rab smra ba'i seng ge
c  rGyal yum Byams ma chen mo
d  rJe sku mNyam med
e  Gon bdag g'yung drung phun tshogs
  kyi 'dra sku
f  lBrag btsan

1  gNas btrtan bcu drug
2  sMan lha bde gshegs brgyad
3  dGi spyod Tshe dpag med Byams ldan
   bcas gsum
4  rJe sku'i tshogs zhung rgyan thang

5  Grub chen brgyad cu
6  Bla ma Tshe dbang rig 'dzin
7  dBal gsas
8  gTag lha sPu gri dmar po
9  Byams ma, rNam 'joms, Sher phyin
10 rGyal ba rgya mtsho, Kun dbyings, sMan lha
11 Kun bzang
12 dBal gsas
13 Kun rig, rNam dag, Dus 'khor
14 Srid rgyal dbu brgya phyag stong
15 Brag btsan
16 rTag gzigs zhing
Figure 2  The second floor, bstan khang, of the 'du khang

1. Byang sman  9. rMa rgyal
2. sTag ri rong 10. dMu bdud
3. Yum sras 11. Brag btsan
4. Mi drid 12. dMag dpon
5. Dre'u dmar mo 13. gNam lha
6. Dre'u nag mo 14. Dam can
7. gCen lha 15. Shes khrab can
8. gShin rje 16. Nyi bang sad
Figure 3 The Khyung-po monastery

a  rNam mkhyan rgyal ba gShen rab
b  rJe sku mNyang med
c  rGyal yum Byams ma chen mo
d  [unidentified wrathful deity]
e  dBal gSas

1  rJe sku'i tshogs zhi ng gYan thang
2  Sences from the life of gShen rab (1)
3  Sences from the life of gShen rab (2)
4  Bla ma tahe dbang rig 'dzin
5  rGyal ba rgya mtsho
6  dBal gSas
7  Kun bzang
8  [unidentified deity]
9  [unidentified deity]
Figure 4  The ceiling of the Khyung-po temple

| m | dkyil 'khor (mandala) |
| a | Kun tu bzang po |
| b | Tshad med 'od ldan |
| c | 'Phrul gshen snang ldan |
| d | bzang thar ring btsun |
| e | 'Chi med gtsug phud |

1～91  Siddhas (see next page)
The Bon deities depicted in the wall paintings in the Bon-brgya monastery

Names of the siddhas

1. gSang ba 'dus pa
2. sTag lha ma 'bar
3. rMa lo dgra boem pa
4. lHa bon yongs su dag pa
5. rGyal gshen mi lus bsam legs
6. Klu grub ye shes snying po
7. sNang ba mdog can
8. Mu khrí btsang po
9. Ha ra ci par
10. sTag za li wer
11. A nu 'phrag thag
12. Sad ne ga 'u
13. Zing pa mthu chen
14. Shad bu ra gug
15. sPe bon thog rtsé
16. sPe bon thog 'phrul
17. This dmar spungs pa
18. Sum pa dbu dkar
19. Giang chen mu thur
20. sTod rgyud mthu chen
21. Sha ri dbu chen
22. lTse tsha mkhar bu
23. Gyim tsha rma chung
24. dMu tsa tra he
25. Khrí thog bár tsha?
26. Ghu lú lu spar ya
27. lHa bdag sngags grol
28. Legs tshing mngag po
29. gSer tog loe 'byams
30. Tso mi gyer chen
31. Mar me 'dzon
32. Nam ra rtsé dgu
33. sPung rgyud mthu chen
34. Pan chen li shu stag ring
35. Khe ++++
36. Phu ri ya dor
37. sTag gzig za ring me 'bar
38. sDe ro nyam phel
39. rNal 'byor bru sha lha gsas dbang po
40. Rig 'dzin Tho le grags pa
41. Grub chen Nyi ma 'od gsal
42. Lo bon mu phu
43. Gyim bu lan tsha
44. Sum pa cho 'bar ba?
45. Khu bon mthong grags
46. Zhang zhung mu tsa 'bar ba

(+ indicates illegible letter)
47. Ba gor dord de rgyal ba
48. 'Jang tsha 'phan snang
49. rMa bon thugs dkar
50. sNang bzher 'od po
51. Li za stag ring
52. Ya gon ye shes rgyal ba
53. Bhe shod mgrin dkar
54. Do la gnas pa'i gur 'dzin ma
55. dMu stang g'yu 'dzin
56. Khrí zangs rgyal mo
57. Dod de rgyal lcam
58. rNal 'byor gar dpon
59. dBa mo sgron gsal
60. gTsang gshen snyan ngag pa
61. Yar gshen Idem bu
62. Thang gshen chab dkar
63. Khyung ye dkar po
64. Ma dha bhi sha
65. 'Dul byed snying po
66. 'Jar bon ye mkhyen
67. Ha shang rgyal po
68. ?
69. Khrí sde 'od po
70. dNgas pe yi rang
71. Gung renm gtsug phud
72. rDzu 'phrul ye shes
73. Ye shes tahul khrims
74. g'Yung drung tshul khrims
75. gTsug phud rgyal ba
76. Ya gong ye shes rgyal ba
77. Pham shì dpal gyi dbang phyug
78. slob dpon Dran pa nam mkha'
79. slob dpon Tabe dbang rig 'dzin
80. slob dpon Padsa mthong grol
81. gShen stong klu yi dbang po
82. Gyer mi nyi 'od
83. rMa stong srel 'dzin
84. g'Yu stod khyung rpod
85. Bru chen nam mkha' g'yung 'brung
86. rGyal sras zhu yas legs po
87. sPa stong dpal mchod rgyal ba
88. Me'u khas pa dpal chen
89. ++ ting 'khor lo
90. Khang dkar yongs pa
91. Ngo bo ye shes ++
(+ indicates illegible letter)
Figure 5  The *siddas* in the *thang ka*, 'Grub-chen brgyad-cu' in the Bonrgya monastery
(The numbers correspond with the names listed in the previous page)
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Plate 9  gNas-brtan bceu-drug (M. Mori, August 1998)

Plate 10  sMan-lha bde-gshegs brgyad (M. Mori, August 1998)
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Plate 12 rJe-sk'u'i tshogs-zhing rgyan-thang (M. Mori, August 1998)
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Plate 50  unidentified deity (M. Mori, August 1998)
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(two marčalas and nos. 6, 7, a-d in Figure 4) (M. Mori, August 1998)

Plate 52  The ceiling of the Khyung-po temple
(two marčalas and nos. 1-5 in Figure 4) (M. Mori, August 1998)
Plate 53  The ceiling of the Khyung-po temple
(nos. 8-11, 25-28 in Figure 4) (M. Mori, August 1998)

Plate 54  The ceiling of the Khyung-po temple
(nos. 16-19, 35-38 in Figure 4) (M. Mori, August 1998)