The Making of a Myth
The Amazing Life and Death of the Sixth Dalai Lama

By Simon Wickham-Smith

Whether or not the Lama’s narrated claims were true, the relationship between the text and the life it describes is telling of the culture, ideas, and circumstances of the time. We have, in any case, precious little to confirm the facts of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho’s existence: his official dates (1683-1706) and a temple guide – of which he may have been the author. Nor is it by any means certain that the poems attributed to him are in fact his. What we do have is a series of possibilities that occasionally morph into probabilities, a set of ‘myth’ which, when framed in a certain way, takes on the appearance of reality.

Our understanding of the life and work of the sixth Dalai Lama boils down to the following. Born in TsWo-na on 1 March 1683, his birth was accompanied by the kind of miraculous events that traditionally accompany the rebirth of a lama. As the death of the ‘great’ fifth Dalai Lama in 1652 had been hushed up, his recognition as the sixth Dalai Lama in 1685 was kept secret. It was only in 1693, when he was twelve, that his true identity was confirmed to him.

That Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was formally recognised at twelve and enthroned at fourteen made his position extraordinary, even for a reincarnate lama, as they were generally recognised and enthroned at a very young age. In Tibet in the late seventeenth century, fourteen was, if not the age of majority, at least young adulthood.

His regent, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho, had been chief minister to the fifth Dalai Lama and was arguably the greatest all-rounder produced by the Tibetan monastic system. Having held the country in his grasp since the death of the fifth Dalai Lama, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho was fiercely reluctant to give up power. Again and again, as he moved towards majority, the sixth Dalai Lama requested, and was denied, the temporal power that rightfully accompanied his spiritual role.

This denial probably had as much to do with the Dalai Lama’s own waywardness as with the regent’s reluctance to hand over the reins. Despite being an outstanding scholar of subjects both sacred and profane, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recent concentrations.

Our understanding of the sixth Dalai Lama rests as much on the oral tradition as on the 60 or so poems common- ly attributed to him. What we do have is Dar-rgyas Nomunqan’s text as a Tibetan folk-hero, his poems passed down through the generations. The creation of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho rests as much on the secret biography as on the 60 or so poems commonly accredited to him. To regard the sixth Dalai Lama merely as a historical figure makes one oblivious to what he has come to mean in Tibetan cultural and religious perceptions. Many have believed – known – that the story is the true narrative of the sixth Dalai Lama’s life, as told by him to Dar-rgyas Nomunqan.

Like any reincarnate lama, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in death, on a thang-ka, transcends time and space – he resides in his mandala in a different way than his physical body once did. We can see Dar-rgyas Nomunqan’s text as a kind of oral thang-ka, an access point to a number of levels, in a number of different dimensions, just as his poems (ngag- gya) can be seen as sung thang-ka.

Acknowledging this context has allowed me in my research to approach Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho’s secret biography in various ways. I have suggested a number of levels on which the most fantastical sections might be understood. To read the remainder of the story from both the contextualized and decontextualized viewpoints may likewise prove instructive, to better understand the mythology and mythmaking surrounding Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho. Not only would such a perspective render due appreciation to Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and his text, it may allow us to see Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho – whoever he might be – as equally individual and exemplary.

The central theme of myth making, it is the second part of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan’s text which interests me most. It recounts the Lama’s education and goes on to detail the events leading up to his ‘death’ at Kokonor on 14 November 1706. The Lama recounts how he arrived and camped at the lake with his entourage, where he received a letter from the Chinese Emperor Kangxi threatening his attendants with death upon their arrival in Beijing.

From this point until he arrives in Amdo ten years later, the Lama passes through a number of vignettes, meeting humans (including one with no head), yetis, zombies, dakinis, the yidam Mahakala and his consort and, finally, the gnas-chung oracle who, entranced, recognises him and breaks the spell of secrecy.

The narrative of these various scenes is clear – the Lama gets caught in a dust storm and encounters a young girl, dressed as a nomad, who leads him to safety. From this storm until he arrives in Amdo ten years later, the Lama passes through a number of vignettes, meeting humans (including one with no head), yetis, zombies, dakinis, the yidam Mahakala and his consort and, finally, the gnas-chung oracle who, entranced, recognises him and breaks the spell of secrecy.

Considering that he died in 1706 and was reborn two years later, it is hard to imagine how the inhabitants of Alashan greeted Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the sixth Dalai Lama, upon his arrival there in 1716. What we do know is that the son of the man responsible for welcoming him to the place, Dar-rgyas Nomunqan had no doubts about the Lama’s identity or narration. Based on this narration, Dar-rgyas Nomunqan wrote what he purports to be Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho’s secret biography. The Making of a Myth

The Amazing Life and Death of the Sixth Dalai Lama

By Simon Wickham-Smith

Whether or not the Lama’s narrated claims were true, the relationship between the text and the life it describes is telling of the culture, ideas, and circumstances of the time. We have, in any case, precious little to confirm the facts of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho’s existence: his official dates (1683-1706) and a temple guide – of which he may have been the author. Nor is it by any means certain that the poems attributed to him are in fact his. What we do have is a series of possibilities that occasionally morph into probabilities, a set of ‘myth’ which, when framed in a certain way, takes on the appearance of reality.

Our understanding of the life and work of the sixth Dalai Lama boils down to the following. Born in TsWo-na on 1 March 1683, his birth was accompanied by the kind of miraculous events that traditionally accompany the rebirth of a lama. As the death of the ‘great’ fifth Dalai Lama in 1652 had been hushed up, his recognition as the sixth Dalai Lama in 1685 was kept secret. It was only in 1693, when he was twelve, that his true identity was confirmed to him.

That Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was formally recognised at twelve and enthroned at fourteen made his position extraordinary, even for a reincarnate lama, as they were generally recognised and enthroned at a very young age. In Tibet in the late seventeenth century, fourteen was, if not the age of majority, at least young adulthood.

His regent, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho, had been chief minister to the fifth Dalai Lama and was arguably the greatest all-rounder produced by the Tibetan monastic system. Having held the country in his grasp since the death of the fifth Dalai Lama, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho was fiercely reluctant to give up power. Again and again, as he moved towards majority, the sixth Dalai Lama requested, and was denied, the temporal power that rightfully accompanied his spiritual role.

This denial probably had as much to do with the Dalai Lama’s own waywardness as with the regent’s reluctance to hand over the reins. Despite being an outstanding scholar of subjects both sacred and profane, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study. Nonetheless, the regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study. Nonetheless, the regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study. Nonetheless, the regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study. Nonetheless, the regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho preferred writing poetry, practicing archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol behind the recently completed Potala to formal study.

By the time Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho left Lhasa for Beijing and set up camp on the edge Kokonor in November 1706, his regent had been murdered. The sixth Dalai Lama was by this time much loved by his people. They tried, unsuccessfully, to dissuade him to journey to Beijing, correctly perceiving the Chinese-backed plot to entrap him.