

***Ban-de skya-min ser-min: Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's
complex, confused and confusing relationship with sde-srid
sang-srgyas rgya-mtsho as portrayed in the Tsangs-dbyangs
rGya-mtsho'i mGu-glu***

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There is almost nothing in the life and work of Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the Sixth Dalai Lama, of which we can be certain. The events surrounding his death are so hazy that scholars are still not sure, either that he did indeed die in 1706, or that the “secret” biography, written in the 1740s by the Mongolian monk Dar-rgyas Nom-un Qan, is in fact an elaborate hoax; at the other end of his life, moreover, the account of his first eighteen years, written by *sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho*, is a work of such hagiography that it's impossible to tell what is true and what is blinkered devotion. Even the provenance of his most famous work, the *mgu-glu*, is uncertain maybe they are his songs, more likely the text is a *mélange* of popular song, fabrications and secondhand recensions.

Even though the *Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i mGu-glu* presents us with a corpus of songs which, in reality, may very well not be by Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, nonetheless, so strongly is the text associated with this most fantastical of real-life characters, that we have at least to read it in parallel with the biographical “facts” of the young man's life, looking for connections, indications and subtexts – for pointers, on the one hand, towards the external world of history and society and political intrigue inhabited by the Dalai Lama as temporal and spiritual leader, and, on the other hand, towards the psychospiritual, emotional and intellectual world inhabited by the poet, the Nying-ma tantricist, the maverick popular hero Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho.

We do, however, know a great deal about his regent, the flawed diamond Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho. His writings reveal a brilliant mind with a profound breadth of learning – but we also have the *thang-ka* of him as Manjushri, we have his many mistresses (in series and in parallel) and we have his inability to decide whether he is a layman or a monk. As spiritual disciple and political deputy of the Great Fifth, his loyalty and devotion is clear; as regent to the Sixth, however, his selflessness is less obvious and he lacks clarity. His machinations lead eventually to his own death and the subsequent demise of his beloved, wayward charge.

My intention in this paper is to investigate the relationship between Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and his regent as presented (ostensibly by the Sixth) in the *Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i*

mGu-glu. In many ways, it shows us the relationship between a father and his son: after all, the younger man was raised largely by the older and it could be argued that the *sde-srid* acted towards the teenage Dalai Lama as a powerful, controlling and devoted parent, endlessly exasperated by behavior which he considered inappropriate or perilous, trying (inexpertly) to define boundaries – and, finally, propelled by a genuine sense of love and loyalty, seeking to protect and form the young man’s brilliant yet defiant character.

The text itself presents us with a number of poems about the lover and his beloved, and it is these which will form the backbone of my analysis. Several scholars, notably Xiao Diyan, interpret these as relating – at least in part – to the relationship between the *sDe-srid* and the Dalai Lama and, while this is clearly not the only way in which they can be understood, it’s nonetheless an approach which allows us to examine this relationship in some depth.

What I hope most of all to achieve with this paper is to examine the effect of mythopoësis, both on the text and on the characters themselves. After all, as I have said, Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho exists in a very uncertain set of circumstances and, through his position in the canon of Tibetan literature and folk myth, he has transcended his identity as the Sixth Dalai Lama; Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho managed to forge for himself a supramundane identity, he mythologised himself as a Tibetan version of Henry VIII – scholar, theologian, politician, sportsman and stud.

As for the text, simply the fact that we cannot be sure whether any or all of these poems is truly by Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho is enough to mythologise them: they become incantatory, more than the sum of their words; as with folksong throughout the world – and lovesongs in particular they take us beyond the confines of our own existence, beyond the world of the poet, into the realm of eloquent parrots, secret trysts and the unwritten language of the heart. In looking at the ways in which the Sixth Dalai Lama (re)presented his Regent, his (substitute) father, I hope to show how the poems have themselves created versions of both men which, whether they be truthful or not, help us somehow to analyse their relationship and thereby better understand the literary, historical and political context in which their relationship takes place.