
A Communist Perspective on the Emergence of the A khu bsTan pa Tales

From the introductory chapter "Bod rigs dmangs khrod kyi rtsom rig gi me tog ngo mtshar ba zhig" (A Wonderful Flower of Tibetan Folk Literature) in the work *A khu bstan pa'i gtam rgyud* we can get an idea of the communist perspective on the emergence of the A khu bsTan pa tales.

There we are told that the broad Tibetan laboring masses experienced for a long time the immense exploitation and oppression of the serf owners, the feudal aristocracy, and the reactionary high level Lamas. All their apparent resistance was sadly suppressed and under this situation they composed (*brtsams*) the figure A khu bsTan pa as an image of a vivid hero. By using the figure A khu bsTan pa as a powerful weapon employed in their struggle against their oppressors, the Tibetan laboring masses were able to express their own wishes and desires (the resistance to the evil serf system and the fierce struggle against the ruling class) by means of mockery and sarcasm.¹

As an evidence for the communist perspective we are presented the following story told by a young Tibetan from a village in Ser shul County in the dKar mdzes Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province:

"In the past while [we] were working as servants [we] suffered under the immense oppression and exploitation of a nomad lord. In [our] minds [we] thought [we should] resist [against him], but [we] had no power. Consequently [we] discussed the crimes of [our] nomad lord together with the other servants while [we] were resting and tried to calm [our] anger. Later on his bad actions and misbehaviours were composed as tales and [it] is told that [their] composer was A khu bsTan pa."²

In a similar way it is told that when the nomad lord heard the stories he was unable to do anything. This paragraph is summarized by the statement that the A khu bsTan pa tales became widespread from a longstanding class struggle like this kind.

The chapter continues with the presentation of some characteristics of the figure A khu bsTan pa. He is revered and loved immensely by the Tibetan people. His name "A khu bsTan pa" is an honorific one. The term "a khu" means "paternal relative" (*pha'i spun mched*)³ and is also

¹ See GTAM RGYUD (1980: 2.).

² See GTAM RGYUD (1980: 2-3).

³ See GOLDSTEIN (2001), s.v. *a khu*: "paternal uncle, any paternal male relative of the first ascending generation."

an honorific term of address. The term "bstan pa" is not only a name but also has the meaning of "teacher of [skilful] means" (*thabs ston pa*). He is a capable person who knows and understands almost everything. He is familiar with handicraft (*lag rtsal*) and technology (*sgyu rtsal*) and is experienced in all kinds of work. He has been to all Tibetan areas and is one who performs his deeds among the Tibetan laboring masses. He is one who knows what the Tibetan people love and hate and one who is familiar with their happiness, suffering, and wishes. As a result of that, all of his actions and deeds, whatever they were, were only aimed at the benefit of the laboring masses and the spearhead of his severe denouncing and criticizing was directed towards the fierce ruling class. Due to that the ruling class hated A khu bsTan pa from the bottom of their heart. By making use of various methods they humiliated the image of A khu bsTan pa and prevented the A khu bsTan pa tales from spreading everywhere. They also did not permit the telling of and listening to the A khu bsTan pa stories. Moreover by instigating some writers that were conscripted by the government from under their officials the A khu bsTan pa tales were distorted, misrepresented and falsified. By mixing the real with the fake ones, they planned to deceive the common people like in the saying "faking brass as gold" (*rag an gser du brdzu*)⁴. Furthermore, they defamed A khu bsTan pa by saying that he was a swindler and a teacher of con man and that he was one who only tried to get something to eat and drink. Actually, the reason why A khu bsTan pa needed to trick those bad people is because they scolded him without any limit. So he had no choice but to take hold of this kind of means to defend himself. To say it in short, even though the ruling class harmed and restricted the A khu bsTan pa tales in many different ways, they could not harm the glorious and magnificent image of A khu bsTan pa in even the slightest way. Moreover, contrary to that, it really shows from the opposite side the ideological character and the combative nature of the A khu bsTan pa tales. The Tibetan people gained mental strength from within the A khu bsTan pa tales and through that were able to engage in various ways in their resistance struggle against the ruling class. They also composed many A khu bsTan pa tales in the sequence of their struggle.⁵

Two pages later we are told something about the value of the A khu bsTan pa tales and the aim of editing the whole book. When we speak about the value of the A khu bsTan pa tales it goes without saying that their militant/combative ideological content is most important. The reason for that is based on the argument that the contradiction between the ruling class and the

⁴ For this term see GOLDSTEIN (2000), s.v. *ra gan gser brdzus*: "acting/ pretending sth. is good when it is bad; ... [Lit. faking brass as gold]". See also BOD RGYA TSHIG MDZOD CHEN MO (1993), s.v. *ra gan gser brdzus* | *bzang ngan dang legs nyes kyi dbye ba shes kyang ma shes pa'i khul byas pa'i dpe*].

⁵ See GTAM RGYUD (1980: 3-5).

Tibetan laboring masses, that experienced exploitation and oppression, was the main social contradiction at that time. Depending on the main subject of the tales, the ideas of the tales and their militant/combatative nature are manifested in the different means employed in them, of whatever nature they are: means to express the people's fighting power, means to create awareness for the people's different social classes, means for trying to expose the dark and rotten crimes of the ruling class, and means for trying to resist against the ruling class by instigating the masses. Consequently our aim in editing this book is to present just that and nothing else. If we take the 48 tales that are recorded in this book as an example, most likely they all only deal with the class struggle.⁶

Commentary

From these lines it becomes more than clear that nothing is safe from being abused by Chinese communist propaganda, not even the Tibetan folk tale hero A khu bsTan pa. The editors of this book made a communist hero out of him who fights for the Tibetan laboring masses against their exploiting ruling class. Interesting to note is that by applying this weird interpretation the editors did exactly that for what they accused the "ruling class", namely that they distorted, misrepresented and falsified the A khu bsTan pa tales.

Up to now I did not get the time to take a detailed look in the stories collected in this book. But I would not be surprised if during the process of arranging and editing the different stories they were filled with communist content and vocabulary. Another different point I want to mention is that though the editors speak about A khu bsTan pa tales (*gtam rgyud*) they do not mention that the stories are an oral tradition. In connection with the emergence of the tales they use a couple of times the Tibetan verb *rtsom pa* and give their introductory chapter the title: "A Wonderful Flower of Tibetan Folk Literature" (*bod rigs dmangs khrod kyi rtsom rig gi me tog ngo mtshar ba zhig*).

The Book's Genesis

This book was published in 1980 in Tibetan translation based on an earlier edition in Chinese from 1966; the introductory chapter was already written in 1963. The primary work on the book was begun in 1961 and it was printed in Chinese in 1966. But due to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) "it never reached the hands of the readers". It seems that parallel to the Tibetan Translation in 1980 also a new edition in Chinese was published. In 1983 a reprint of

⁶ See GTAM RGYUD (1980: 7).

the Tibetan translation was published in India that surprisingly included exactly the same introductory chapter without making the slightest comment on it.

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GTAM RGYUD

SI KHRON ZHING CHEN DMANGS KHROD RIG RTSAL BRTAG DPYAD TSHOGS
PA and SI KHRON MI RIGS DPE SKRUN KHANG

1980 *A khu bstan pa'i gtam rgyud*. Khreng tu'u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 276 p. Reprinted in India by Sonam Gyaltzen Bonpo Monastic Centre, Dolanji, H.P., 1983.