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## **Bya rog prog zhu, The Raven Crest**

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## Summary

### *Introduction*

This research suggests that in present-day eastern Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China a number of Tibetan rNying ma leaders are employing charisma-based authority to promote the growth of rNying ma Buddhist centers of ritual and meditative instruction. In revitalizing traditional religious practices such as visionary and Treasure revelation activities, they are galvanizing some of the most significant religious movements in selected areas of Khams and mGo log in eastern Tibet.

In this dissertation I examine the Treasure revelation movement and, more specifically, I explore the role of some Treasure revealers in the religious world of today's Tibet. I focus on a case study of the life and activities of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje (b. 1921), who is a well-known Buddhist master, visionary, and Treasure revealer currently living in Shar mda' in Nang chen county in the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP).

### *Research Questions*

Despite the fact that there have been a number of studies devoted to Buddhism in contemporary Tibet, no book-length investigation of the phenomenon of Treasure revelation in present-day Tibetan regions of the PRC has been published to date. This dissertation fills this lacuna in research on modern Tibet. Within that, the present study has two main aims. The first is to explore how currently active Treasure revealers have revived and reinvented their Treasure revelation practices in the face of major social and political changes that have taken place in the PRC. Through an analysis of contemporary Sino-Tibetan politics and the role of religion therein, this study answers the following questions: why and how have religion, and the Treasure revelation tradition in particular, enjoyed a resurgence under Chinese rule? What does the Treasure tradition offer today to Tibetans and an impressive number of ethnic Chinese as well?

The second aim of this work is to investigate the question of why and how do people become Treasure revealers in Tibet today? I will do this by focusing on the life and religious activities of one such contemporary Treasure revealer, gTer chen bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje. Years of fieldwork using participant observation methods living with bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje

and members of his community provide important data that help us understand the dynamics of these religious congregations and the roles they play in their teachers' revelations and doctrinal compositions.

### *Outline of the Chapters*

In Chapter One, I open this study with an introduction to the major features of the Treasure tradition as it is represented in some popular Tibetan religious literary works on the subject. The chapter demonstrates a central thesis of this study: just as Treasure ideologies originally came into being as a response to religious and political pressures in eleventh-century Tibet, likewise in the present context some Tibetan religious leaders employ Treasure revelation as a successful means to respond to the political pressures of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Tibet under Chinese rule.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the social and political impact of decades of the Chinese government's religious policies in eastern Tibet. I argue that the Chinese government's political strategies relating to the large-scale economic development of the country as applied to Tibetan areas have caused a weakening of the religious authority of many monastic institutions by debilitating their economic power, incapacitating their political influence, limiting their educational authority, and perhaps most crucially diminishing their once large monastic population. After years of administrative control, the historical role of monasteries as exclusive guarantors of religious authority and scholastic legitimacy and as institutional centers of traditional instruction has drastically decreased. Nevertheless, a number of alternative forms of religious authority have emerged in eastern Tibet that reflect the often eclectic nature of the rNying ma community such as visionary activities, Treasure revelation, and the formation of large and innovative religious communities as centers of practice and cultural production.

Within this socio-religious background, Chapter Three claims that visionary revelations seem to be particularly effective means of reestablishing ritual authority, codifying new identities, and promoting ancient religious narratives. In this chapter, I discuss some of the features that characterize Treasure activities in modern Tibet through introducing a number of contemporary visionaries who mostly live and operate in northern and central areas of Kham. I explore the charismatic aspect of their leadership, the different facets of their revelations, the communities that surround them, and the appearance of several Websites dedicated to Buddhist

visionaries and Treasure revealers as a response to the increasing demand to propagate Buddhist teachings among the Han Chinese.

Chapter Four introduces the life of one such present-day Treasure revealer, bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje through a study of his autobiography as well as years of interviews I conducted with him. Born in 1921 to a nomadic family in sKye rgu mdo county (Yushu TAP), bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje is a non-celibate Tantric practitioner who largely modeled himself on many Treasure revealers of the past, in particular his two major teachers Grub dbang bde chen rdo rje and Nyag bla byang chub rdo rje. By looking at bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje's life we have the opportunity to explore in detail the paradigms that are enacted in the process of the recognition of a Treasure revealer.

Chapter Five opens with a description and analysis of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje's collection of Treasure cycles and offers brief outlines and explanations of his writings. In this chapter I elaborate on some of the features of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje's teachings by looking at his Treasure cycles. I argue that one of the central themes of his revelations is to provide legitimacy and status to the class of non-celibate Tantric professionals called the white-robed and matted-haired group (*gos dkar lcang lo'i sde*). Particularly important for this is the *rTsol med*, a Treasure teaching attributed to Padmasambhava that is an initiation ritual for Tantric adepts. Interestingly, this text lists a number of regalia (*rgyan*) that provide the adept with the appropriate signs of his rank. I argue that that this a ritual scripture is not only intended to provide legitimacy to the class of non-celibate adepts, but also attempts to provide a distinctive identity to the lineage initiated by bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje.

In conclusion, by exploring the life and activities of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje we can see that there is a great continuity between present-day Treasure revealers and those of the eleventh century. The essential ideals underlying the tradition are the same, namely, the retrieval of supposedly ancient manuscripts in a ritual context that can authenticate and at the same time legitimate contemporary religious practices and spiritual traditions. In the case of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje, his involvement in the Treasure revelation tradition has enabled him to gain recognition and authority in the religious world and, therefore, to establish himself as a Buddhist teacher and to open hermitages and communities of monastics and non-celibates following his lineage. From his religious position, bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje has been able to revive many previously forbidden practices belonging to Tibetan culture such as worshipping local deities,

performing ritual pilgrimage, constructing reliquary *stūpas*, practicing apotropaic rituals, and transmitting *gter ma* liturgical materials. Additionally, he acts as a spiritual guide for the laity thus reconnecting the people with aspects of their cultural patrimony. Therefore, bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje acts as a link between Tibet's past and the current need to safeguard a Tibetan sense of religious identity. As such, he is an ideological force behind the contemporary renaissance of Buddhism in his land.