

Article

A Case of Geluk Growth: The Career of Scholar and Yogin Shar Kalden Gyatso (1607–1677) and His Role in Propagating the Geluk School in Rebgong, Amdo

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Abstract: This paper explores the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso with a focus on his contributions to the seventeenth-century development of Geluk influence in the northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo. Not only did he adopt the role of a monastic leader in founding and bolstering scholastic traditions in his home region in Amdo, but he was also an accomplished practitioner. In addition to his role as the founder of scholastic and retreat institutions in Rebgong, his close relationship with local rulers in Amdo and his non-sectarian stance toward other religious traditions fueled his charisma and increased his base of followers. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to explore all these themes as they illustrate the career of Shar Kalden Gyatso as a central figure in the religious history of Amdo in general and the development of Geluk influence in Rebgong in particular. Meanwhile, I provide an appropriate reassessment of the sectarian conversion of Rongwo Monastery, also reconsidering the importance of Shar Kalden Gyatso's role in institutional foundations, his network of patronage, and his religious ecumenical thought to particularly characterize his outstanding career.

Keywords: Shar Kalden Gyatso; Rongwo Monastery; Geluk School; Rebgong; Amdo

1. Introduction

Since the Geluk–Mongol alliance was cemented in the late sixteenth century, Amdo was home to the burgeoning Geluk movement fostered by strong influence from the Central Tibetan Geluk patriarchs and Mongol patronage. During this period, the foundation of a few major Geluk monasteries in the region was closely associated with Geluk patriarchs, especially the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama lineage.¹ As the patron and priest relationship deepened between the Geluk School and their Mongol proponents, there was an increasing number of Amdo native monks active in the region to fuel further growth of the Geluk School. Thanks to the combined efforts of these driving factors, the power of the Geluk School continued its growth, and in fact reached its peak, with Geluk monastic

¹ In the *Brief History of How Buddhism Grew in Amdo* (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, A mdor bstan pa dar tshul gyi lo rgyus, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, pp. 341–55; henceforth *Brief Religious History of Amdo*), Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho lists a number of major figures including Amdo native monks instrumental in fueling the growth of the Dge lugs School in Amdo—and (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas s1987, p. 29) cites a verse directly from this short work on a few figures. This very short work comes in two parts spanning 15 pages. The first one is a chronological list of monasteries and retreat sites of the Dge lugs school since the time of the third Ta lai bla ma, with special attention to foundation of scholastic colleges and their founders. The second is a chronological list of monasteries and a few major retreat sites in Amdo, irrespective of their sectarian lineages. Although this historical account also concludes with Dge lugs dominance in the religious history of Amdo, it gives appropriate attention to the multi-religious past of Amdo with references to the Sa skya, Bka gdams, and Bka' brgyud schools. It should probably be honored with the title of being the earliest religious history of Amdo. The colophon indicates that Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho planned a future project involving the composition of an extended version of the religious history of Amdo, which, however, never came to fruition.

institutions dotting the religious terrain of Amdo in the seventeenth century. This infrastructure included numerous institutions that were not newly founded Geluk monasteries but were rather converted to the Geluk School.² Rongwo Monastery is a prime example of the success story of Geluk conversion during this period. It is, therefore, important to trace central moments in the lives of eminent figures contributing to major religious and political developments in Rebgong, including Geluk conversion.

This paper explores the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso in detail, focusing on his contributions to the development of Geluk influence in seventeenth-century Amdo. The dual roles of scholar and siddha successfully assumed in the religious career of Shar Kalden Gyatso create a template for combining scholastic and practice-oriented traditions within the Geluk School.³ However, due to space constraints in the article, I only pay close attention to historical circumstances and factors contributing to the formation of his role as a major Geluk leader in building monasticism, scholastic programs, and retreat networks in Rebgong and beyond. Throughout this study, I will also explore other various forces at work mainly in terms of patronage networks and religious non-partisanship contributing to a favorable condition where Shar Kalden Gyatso was able to flourish as a central figure of the Geluk School in the religious history of Rebgong.

As stated above, this paper is a detailed study of the history of Geluk Buddhism which took root and then flourished in the border region of Rebgong in Amdo, northeastern Tibet, far from the center of the school in Central Tibet, against the backdrop of a complexity of religious politics in the region. Hence, this study is conducted with the basic framework of Buddhism at the center and development of its variants at the periphery, culminating in the construction of the periphery as a center with its strong vitality. Through this conceptual scheme, my discussions of the Geluk School during the period show that Rebgong is a nexus of political, economic, religious powers commanded by religious masters, institutions, clans, and patrons. Further, a more coherent picture of the local tradition is provided by placing the narrative in a local multi-religious and politically charged context as well as in the larger historical setting specific to seventeenth-century Amdo. As it is focused on the seventeenth century when Qing influence was non-existent in Rebgong—at least, according to the available sources—this paper presents a case study of the Geluk School's development in a local setting heavily dominated by Tibetan and Mongolian political forces at the margin of the late Ming and early Qing empires.⁴

At present, there is considerable scholarship on Shar Kalden Gyatso and the religious history of Rebgong. Victoria Sujata, for example, examined the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso; however, her account provided very limited context for her close study of the corpus of Shar Kalden Gyatso's songs, with her attention mainly devoted to discussions of poetic styles of verse in the songs. This is also partly due to Sujata's treatment of songs as the main source of biographical information on Shar Kalden Gyatso, supported by her limited use of other biographical and historical sources.⁵ In general, the four themes, i.e., the scholastic program, retreat institution, patronage network, and multi-religious climate, mentioned above as the focus of the present study in relation to the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso are not treated adequately. Hence, this study deems it important and attempts to explore and reconstruct a more coherent study of the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso. The rich historical account of the seventeenth-century Rebgong, built on details from a wide range of sources revealed in the present work, establishes an intimate context for better understanding Shar Kalden Gyatso's religious

² Tuttle (2012) gives a brief survey sketching a periodized chronology of the Dge lugs School's growth in A mdo.

³ Elsewhere (in a forthcoming paper) I will present discussions of the way Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho integrates seemingly divergent strands of both scholasticism and practice and approaches them as two different, but equally important phases of a successful Buddhist career toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

⁴ For a historical study of Bla brang Monastery as the center of sacred and secular powers encompassing the greater Bla brang community vis-à-vis the Qing empire, see (Nietupski 2011b). The many elements of the main arguments regarding the role of Bla brang Monastery in A mdo society and its relationships with the Qing court expressed in Nietupski are revised with the use of a large corpus of Mongolian and Manchu language sources in Oidtmann (2014). Oidtmann reconstructs a history of the evolution of a multi-legal order in A mdo culminating in the Qing supremacy during the second half of the dynasty.

⁵ See (Sujata 2005, pp. 1–44, 56–59, 370–75).

career and his central role in the history of Geluk developments in Rebgong and beyond. There are numerous other publications on the religious history of Rebgong that, however, barely deal with the seventeenth-century Rebgong, the period of focus in the present work.⁶ They are, instead, concerned with post-seventeenth-century Rebgong, with significant attention devoted to the Nyingma history of the region. This deficiency in relation to the topic of my focus has to do with paucity of historical sources on the seventeenth century. Before I delve deeper into examining each of the four themes mentioned above, I offer a brief note on the main sources used in this study.

2. The Main Sources

The lack of historical and biographical sources for studying generations of leaders instrumental in sustaining and leading Rongwo Monastery as a thriving community is significant. There were six different biographies of Shar Kalden Gyatso written by six different disciples, plus one by Bipa Ngakwang Mipam Dawa (*bis pa ngag dbang mi pham zla ba*, 1767–1807).⁷ Out of all these early biographies, only the one written by Ngawang Sonam (*ngag dbang bsod nams*, 1646–1716)⁸ has survived and is used as the main source in this paper.⁹

The life of Shar Kalden Gyatso is examined primarily on the basis of the biography by Ngawang Sonam. I have also consulted a modern edition of a biography of Shar Kalden Gyatso composed by contemporary scholar Jikmed Damchö Gyatso (*'jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho*, 1898–1946) to supplement the portrayal of Shar Kalden Gyatso.¹⁰ A valid argument for consulting this modern biography is that the latter biography does not conflict with critical data in the early biography, and more importantly, Jikmed Damchö Gyatso may have had multiple biographical sources of Shar Kalden Gyatso at his disposal as he actually lists and briefly compares them in few instances in his writing of the biography¹¹—a point which stresses the importance of consulting this modern biography. While nearly everything in the biography by Ngawang Sonam is repeated in the modern biography by Jikmed Damchö Gyatso, certain important historical details are only available in this modern biography. The life of Shar Kalden Gyatso as portrayed in his two biographies reveals details in terms of the foundation of his scholastic program and hermitages as well as the perceived tension between scholasticism and meditation, and further, these works discuss his creativity expressed through a successful model of integrating two strands of Buddhism in the Geluk School.

In addition to the two versions of the biography of Shar Kalden Gyatso, the short biography of his half-brother and teacher Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen (*blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan*, 1581–1659),¹² the *Brief Amdo History*,¹³ the *Collection of Songs*,¹⁴ and the *Manual for Offerings for Cleansing to Shakyung*

⁶ For examples, see (Stoddard 2013; Dhondup 2011, 2013).

⁷ For a very short biographical account of Bis pa ngag dbang mi pham zla ba, see (*'Jigs med theg mchog* 1988, pp. 228–33); See also (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987 [1982], p. 319).

⁸ (Mkhas btsun bzang po 1973, pp. 650–51). Ngag dbangs bsod nams is commonly known as Byang chub mi la.

⁹ The biography of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho composed by Ngag dbang bsod nams is included in the collection of works by Shar skal ldan rgya mtso, now available in both block and modern print (Ngag dbang bsod nams, 1999, *Grub chen shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i rnam thar yid bzhin dbang gi rgyal po*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, pp. 1–99; Ngag dbang bsod nams, n.d., *Grub chen shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i rnam thar yid bzhin dbang gi rgyal po*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, Rebgong: Rong bo dgon chen, ff. 1–60).

¹⁰ (*'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho*, 1997, *Sku phreng dang po grub dbang skal ldan rgya mtsho*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i skyes rabs rnam thar*, pp. 107–261).

¹¹ (*'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho* 1997, pp. 129, 183).

¹² (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1999d, *Rje btsun blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i rnam thar dad pa'i 'dren byed*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, pp. 100–33). The biography is actually two short accounts compiled together. The first account is entirely composed in verse, whereas the second shorter account is mostly prose with few verse lines. Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan was quoted as saying toward the end of his life. Only in the colophon to the second account, Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho indicates that it was written when he had nearly turned 60. Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan is commonly known as Chos pa rin po che.

¹³ See footnote 1 on p. 1 in the present work.

¹⁴ For information on the four different versions of his corpus of songs, see (Sujata 2005, Appendix D, pp. 380–83). The present work uses the 1994 edition published in Amdo (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i mgur 'bum*, Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang). While the collection of works by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho in block print is available

(*bya khyung bsang mchod 'bul tshul*; henceforth *Offering for Cleansing*)¹⁵ contained in the collection of works by Shar Kalden Gyatso provide important information regarding Shar Kalden Gyatso's sectarian outlook. These works also greatly assist our understanding of the patronage he enjoyed as well as the ideals he envisioned for a religious career. Due to a paucity of sources, his works listed above are the only major contemporary sources available for studying the religious history of Rebgong in general and the Geluk history of the region in particular. This study also relies upon two major later sources: the *Religious History of Rebgong: the History of the Three Seats (reb gong chos 'byung gdan sag sum gyi gdan rabs*; henceforth *the Religious History of Rebgong*)¹⁶ and *Ocean Annals: the Illuminating Chronicle of the Growth of the Jewel Dharma in the Lowland (yul mdo smad kyi ljongs su thub bstan rin po che ji ltar dar ba'i tshul gsal por brjod par brjod pa deb ther rgya mtsho*; henceforth *Ocean Annals*).¹⁷

Lastly, Sherap Tashi (*shes rab bkra shis*, 1647–1716), Jamyang Lodro (*'jam dbyang blo gros*, 1651–1733), and Lozang Tenpa Rabgye (*blo bzang bstan pa rab rgyas*, 1647–1726) are disciples of Shar Kalden Gyatso, and each of these three disciples is the subject of a biography. The biography of Sherap Tashi written by the second Shar Ngakwang Trinle Gyatso (*shar ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho*, 1678–1739), the reincarnation of Shar Kalden Gyatso, is quite brief and not very informative.¹⁸ Biographical information on Shar Kalden Gyatso is also rather lacking in the two remaining biographies.¹⁹ However, the few details they provide are crucial in our understanding of the role of Shar Kalden Gyatso in the transmission of tantric teachings received by the subjects of the two biographies, which I will discuss in more detail later.

3. Establishing the Geluk Scholastic Tradition in Rebgong

This section is mainly concerned with the career of Shar Kalden Gyatso as marked by the scholastic foundation of Rongwo Monastery. The section comprises three sub-sections. Firstly, I will examine the scholarly lineage and credentials of Shar Kalden Gyatso as well as his active teaching roles in Rebgong and beyond (prior to his intense retreat life). However, emphasis is placed upon the network of masters and institutions proving their crucial roles in building up the Geluk influence in Rebgong. Secondly, I

in four volumes with the exclusion of the corpus of his songs (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, n.d., Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i mgur 'bum, 4 vols., Reb gong: Rong bo dgon chen), the modern edition expands to include the corpus of songs as well as the entire collection of works by his reincarnation, Shar ngag dbang dge 'dun rgya mtsho in its fourth volume (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1999, *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho gsung 'bum*, 4 vols., Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang). For the translation of the entire corpus, see (Sujata 2019). Previous translations of select songs are dispersed throughout (Sujata 2005), selected to facilitate her discussions of historical information in relation to the life of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho and the poetic style adopted in his corpus of songs. The translations of songs included in the present work are my own.

¹⁵ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999c, Dkar phyogs skyong ba'i yul lha gnyan chen po se ku bya khyung la bsang mchod 'bul tshul, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 3, pp. 232–33). Bya khyung is the main local deity representing the entire Reb gong area.

¹⁶ ('Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, *Reb gong chos 'byung gdan sa gsum gyi gdan rabs*, Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang). The work is available to us in a modern print version published in Beijing in 2010. The publisher's note states the modern print is based on a handwritten manuscript with the last few pages missing, and hence there is no colophon indicating the date of composition. 'Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho himself lived between 1804 and 1859, and in this very work he lists himself as the 31st abbot of the monastery. His work is concluded with a biographical account of the 36th abbot Dge 'dun legs bshad rgya mtsho (u.d.), which means the work is composed years after his serving in the abbot office. Hence, it is safe to say the work is dated to the middle of the nineteenth century (toward the end of his life).

¹⁷ With revision, the work in its final form is dated to 1865 (Tuttle 2011b, 136fn3). For a study of this work, see *ibid*.

¹⁸ This short biography is available to us in 16 pages (Ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho 1999, Rje btsun dam pa shes rab bkra shis pa'i rnam par thar pa lhag bsam sprin gyi sgra dbyangs rna ba'i dga' ston byin rlabs myur 'jug, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 4, Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, pp. 181–97). For the block print version, see (Ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho, n.d., Rje btsun dam pa shes rab bkra shis pa'i rnam par thar pa lhag bsam sprin gyi sgra dbyangs rna ba'i dga' ston byin rlabs myur 'jug, Reb gong: Rong bo dgon chen).

¹⁹ (Blo bzang shes rab 1991, 'Jam dbyangs blo gros is dpal ldan bla ma dam pa ngag gi dbang phyug 'jam dbyangs blo gros dpal bzang po'i rtogs brjod byin rlabs 'dod 'jo, in *Bis mdo dgon chen bkra shis thos bsam chos 'khor gling gi gdan rabs dad pa'i chiu bo gzhul ba'i 'bab stegs*, pp. 119–281.) It is written by the famed painter Blo bzang shes rab (u.d.), more commonly known as Sga ru pN+Ti ta, from Reb gong. However, he is one of the least known figures in Reb gong history. (Blo bzang rgya mtsho 1990, Grub pa'i dbang phyug brag dkar rin po che'i rnam thar bla ma nyid kyi gsung sgras dad ldan gdul bya'i dad pa'i gso byed bdud rtsi'i zags ma, in *Blo bzang bstan pa rab rgyas kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, ff. 31–52.) This short work spans 11 folios and is written by the future 14th abbot of Rong bo Monastery, Blo bzang rgya mtsho (Cuevas 2017, pp. 6–7).

briefly explore the clan and reincarnation lineage as potential factors in buttressing religious authority and, by extension, the legitimacy of Shar Kalden Gyatso's leadership at Rongwo Monastery. Lastly, I assess the role of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen in contributing to the Geluk growth initiated by Shar Kalden Gyatso in the region.

3.1. Looking Closely at the Scholastic Foundation of Rongwo Monastery

Shar Kalden Gyatso was a key figure in establishing the philosophical tradition of Geluk Buddhism in Rebgong. Before his rise as a scholar and monastic leader, he undertook nearly ten years of training, followed by a final debate examination on the ten main treatises or scholarly subjects. Shar Kalden Gyatso successfully achieved the Kachu (*bk'a bcu*) degree²⁰ at Sangpu Neutok (*gsang phu ne'u thog*).²¹ He had extensive knowledge of scholarly subjects, especially the Perfection of Wisdom and the Middle-Way philosophy. Back in Amdo, even after the completion of his curricular training in Central Tibet, he continued deepening his mastery of Buddhist knowledge with a focus on Buddhist philosophy: the Middle-Way philosophy and the Perfection of Wisdom literature.

In 1630, a few years after his return from Central Tibet, he began teaching by fostering a Geluk curriculum system following the intellectual lineage of the Shangtse College of Gaden Monastery. I am unsure of how wide-ranging or comprehensive the exoteric subjects that were studied were during the time of Shar Kalden Gyatso. However, one could also doubt that the curriculum was as rigorous as it later became, given the role of Khenchen Gedun Gyatso in the later period of building up the monastic education system during his abbatial office.²²

Shar Kalden Gyatso's major teachings were later transcribed and compiled into four volumes of works covering both exoteric and esoteric teachings.²³ They were studied and transmitted among his lineage of followers up to the present day. Though his works were not regarded as official text manuals or supplements, the *Versified Summary of Collection of Topics* (*bsdus grwa'i rtsa tshig*) was intended for pedagogical purposes, especially for the cohort of his students in the same year when the scholastic college was founded in 1630.²⁴ The transmission of Shar Kalden Gyatso's teachings was highly valued in the larger Geluk community, with his corpus of songs being especially elevated even among the non-Geluk Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.²⁵ The collection of works by Shar Kalden Gyatso can be roughly assorted under the rubrics of the Middle-Way and Perfection of Wisdom philosophy, teachings on stages of path, and tantric practices on visualization. Each of them accounts for a third of the entire collection, hence signifying a blend of scholarly and siddhi values in his religious career.²⁶

As a renowned scholar, what circumstances and factors inspired Shar Kalden Gyatso to build the scholastic program at Rongwo Monastery that flourished as a learning center in the region? In his article surveying the pattern and growth of Geluk influence in Amdo, Gray Tuttle claims that the influence of Central Tibetan masters, either directing or inspiring the foundation or conversion of monasteries, is a driving force behind the rise of the Geluk School in Amdo. Here, I share his view and

²⁰ This degree is awarded to monks after passing debate examinations on ten specified major exoteric treatises. For a discussion of monastic degrees, see (Dreyfus 2003, pp. 144–45). For a brief description of monastic degrees at Bla brang, see (Dkon mchog 'jigs med dbang po 1971).

²¹ See Rin chen chos ldan and Kun dga' 'byung gnas (n.d.) for a short history of Gsang phu ne'u thog. For more on the monastery, see (Onodo 1990 and Van der Kuijp 1987).

²² See (Ngag dbang 'jam dbyangs dpal ldan, n.d. [repr. 1764], Dpal ldan bla ma dam pa mkhan chen dge 'dun rgya mtsho dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar ba phyogs tsam brjod pa 'dod 'gu'i 'byung gnas, n.p., p. 212).

²³ See footnote 12 on p.3 in the present work.

²⁴ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999b, Bsdus grwa'i rtsa tshig, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 3, pp. 95–101; 'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 203).

²⁵ His corpus of songs was among the favorite works of that genre in Tibet Buddhism cutting across sectarian boundaries. Besides his corpus of songs, his transmission of *Irion Castle* is highly regarded as can be seen in the life of his disciple Blo bzang bstan pa rab rgyas. See pp. 16–17 in the present work.

²⁶ See (Sujata 2005, p. 77). For a catalogue of collected works written by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, see (Sujata 2005, Appendix E, pp. 384–426).

utilize his methods in identifying important roles these Central Tibetan masters played in the lives of Amdo monks and the institutional history of the Geluk School in the region.²⁷

It has been nearly two centuries since the foundation of the premier learning institutes of Geluk Buddhism in Central Tibet when Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen first visited those learning centers and underwent a few years of mostly esoteric training there. During his second visit, in 1617, he brought his younger half-brother, Shar Kalden Gyatso, to enroll at Shangtse College of Ganden Monastery, with the latter eventually completing the highest monastic degree of Kachu within a decade. In general, Geluk followers from Amdo looked to Central Tibet as the source of high ideals of Geluk Buddhist learning and practice represented by its premium learning institutes. There were also influential Central Tibetan Geluk masters as well as Central Tibet-trained Geluk masters who were Amdo natives, such as the two brothers' teachers who were active players in Geluk proselytization that resulted in an exponential emergence of new monasteries and retreat sites in seventeenth-century Amdo. It is safe to assume that Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen and Kalden Gyatso, the leading religious figures in Rebgong, were easily carried away by the currents of the sweeping Geluk influence in Amdo with nearly exclusive support of the Mongols on the Geluk side.²⁸

It is probably the case that both brothers believed that a systematic education program was crucial if the Geluk School was to flourish in Amdo as in Central Tibet.²⁹ Since Gonlung (*dgon lung*)³⁰ was equipped with a philosophical college, the first of its kind in Amdo, the brothers did not even have to look to Central Tibet, given the relative proximity of Gonlung as a model to replicate in a college of scholastic learning at Rongwo Monastery. Besides because the scholastic center was founded by none other than Gyalse Donyo Chokyi Gyatso in 1604, who briefly taught Shar Kalden Gyatso while the latter was in Central Tibet, Gyalse Donyo Chokyi Gyatso could very well inspire his foundation of the college at Rongwo. Given Gonlung's claim to be the first monastery to establish a philosophical college in Amdo,³¹ it can be concluded that the curriculum system for Geluk Buddhist teachings was still in its nascent form in the region.

While in Central Tibet, Shar Kalden Gyatso's teachers were arguably important in the formative years of his intellectual life. However, his relationships with the teachers he met in Amdo during his life after Central Tibet exerted a greater influence. In his biographies as well as his semi-biographical songs, a select few Geluk teachers are listed as playing a crucial role in developing the Geluk School in Amdo.³² Although he received initiations from the fifth Dalai Lama Ngakwang Lozang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617–1682), ten years his junior, his contact with the Geluk patriarch was held to a minimum. However, the influence of the first Panchen Lama Lozang Chokyi Gyaltzen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 1567–1662) looms large in his religious career. This religious personality is arguably one of the most learned scholars and bearers of the transmissions of major Geluk teachings: he taught all of Shar Kalden Gyatso's most important teachers. Further, Shar Kalden Gyatso personally received full ordination precepts from the Panchen Lama before the central image of Buddha at the Jokhang Temple.³³

From the list of teachers, in addition to Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, whom I will discuss in more detail later, the other main teachers whom Shar Kalden Gyatso revered and continued to draw inspiration from throughout his life are Dewa Choje Tendzin Lozang Gyatso (*sde ba chos rje blo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya*

²⁷ (Tuttle 2012).

²⁸ The Mongols in the Kokonor Region committed full allegiance to Dge lugs School, except for Tsogtu Taiji, who persecuted the school between 1634 and 1637 (Tuttle 2012, p. 134, 136). See also (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 31–32; Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990, pp. 65–66; Sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor 1982, pp. 8–13).

²⁹ At least, the creation of a scholastic college at Sku 'bum Monastery is considered as a historic point marking its growth. See p. 11 in the present work.

³⁰ For a study of Dgon lung Monastery, see (Sullivan 2013).

³¹ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 76; Sullivan 2013, p. 17).

³² In all of his songs and biographies, it is indicated that he studied under a long list of masters, but they are unidentified except for the few select masters I have singled out here in this paper.

³³ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 8).

mtsho, 1593–1638),³⁴ Gyalse Lozang Tendzin (*rgal sras blo bzang bstan 'dzin*, b. seventeenth century),³⁵ and Kowa Chokyi Gyatso (*ko'u ba cos kyi rgya mtsho*, 1571–1635).³⁶ Nearly all were eminent scholars and institutional leaders exercising great influence in the larger Geluk community. It is important to note that these Geluk masters significantly contributed to the growth of the Geluk School in Amdo.³⁷ Shar Kalden Gyatso's relationships with these masters must have had an important influence on his later role as the leader of a regional religious community in the same region where those same masters were instrumental in catalyzing the growth of the Geluk tradition.

Shar Kalden Gyatso was very well aware of the status of the Geluk School in Amdo, as he was author to the *Brief Amdo History*. He composed this short yet important work in 1652 after seeing off the fifth Dalai Lama during his stopover in Amdo on his journey to the Qing court.³⁸ This work clearly demonstrates Shar Kalden Gyatso's intimate knowledge of both Central Tibetan and Amdo masters playing central roles in helping the Geluk School grow to its dominant position in Amdo. In it, he lists the third through fifth Dalai Lamas and other major Geluk masters, including his own teacher, Dewa Choje Lozang Tendzin. He paid close attention to the founding of monasteries and retreat centers with the founding dates and founders given in chronological order. The foundation of scholastic programs at these monasteries, also listed in chronological order, was another central theme he followed in his *Brief Amdo History*. He rightly considered the presence of the Dalai Lamas and other Geluk leaders in Amdo as a watershed moment for the rise of the Geluk School in this frontier.³⁹ He also identified himself as part of this Geluk campaign and saw himself playing a due role in the crucial development of the Geluk School in Amdo.⁴⁰ He contrasted Central Tibet and Amdo as the center and border of the Dharma, respectively, and eventually celebrates the spread of Dharma from the northern land (Central Tibet) to the farther northern land (Amdo) where it flourished.⁴¹

Shar Kalden Gyatso led a very active teaching career in Rebgong and beyond. In addition to Rongwo Monastery, Ngawang Sonam notes that Shar Kalden Gyatso also assumed the role of the main teacher (head of monastic community) at Gengya (*rgan rgya*) Monastery and thus managed two monasteries simultaneously.⁴² However, Jikmed Damchoe Gyatso mentions that Shar Kalden Gyatso was in charge of Dobi (*rdo sbis*) Monastery, instead of Gengya Monastery, as its main teacher for a number of years.⁴³ Jikmed Damchoe Gyatso writes that it was the same year as the founding of the philosophical college at his own seat, Rongwo Monastery, when Shar Kalden Gyatso visited Dobi Monastery and gave extensive teachings. Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen was previously responsible for the crafting of a large Maitreya image at Dobi Monastery, so it seems the monastery was strongly associated

³⁴ For a biography of Sde ba chos rje blo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, see (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1999f, *Sde pa chos rje bstan 'dzin blo bzang rgya mtsho'i nam thar dad pa'i sgo 'byed*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, pp. 180–255). See also (Sullivan 2013, pp. 91–115).

³⁵ For biographical information on Rgal sras blo bzang bstan 'dzin, see (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 41–47, 54–55, 59–61; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 56–57).

³⁶ For a biography of Ko'u ba cos kyi rgya mtsho, see (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1999e, *Rje btsun chos kyi rgya mtsho dpal bzang bo'i nam thar*, in *Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, pp. 134–48).

³⁷ The biography of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, and especially his corpus of songs, are littered with references to his respect of and homage to the teachers most influential in his religious career.

³⁸ (Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 162). For a detailed study of the fifth Ta lai bla ma's journey and its political significance, see (Tuttle 2003).

³⁹ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, p. 341).

⁴⁰ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, pp. 342, 352; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 204, 277, 290–91).

⁴¹ In his corpus of songs, Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho makes numerous references to the contrast between Central Tibet and Amdo, speaking of the eventual rise of the school in the latter region in laudatory terms (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 117, 127, 220–221, 290–291, 325, 330, 334, 341). However, it is only implicit in the *Brief Religious History of Amdo*.

⁴² (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 17–18).

⁴³ (Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 139). Bstam gtan rin chen is an influential leader who founded a network of monasteries in Rebgong. (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgya 1987, p. 304). Among them are Rong bo, Shing le ka bkra shis chos rdzong, and Rdo sbis monasteries (Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, pp. 76, 139). In Rdo sbis proper, again there are numerous monasteries. According to the *Ocean Annals*, Rdo sbis Monastery is the central monastic center created by Bsam gtan rin chen. Except for Lcang shar Monastery, all the rest are branches of the mother monastery of Rdo sbis Monastery. Rdo sbis Monastery also retains the vast area of Rdo sbis and Smad pa supporting its network of monasteries (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p.354). For an extended history of Rdo sbis Monastery, see (Phun tshogs 1998, pp. 37–73, 131–320).

with Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen, and reasonably enough, his half-brother and disciple Shar Kalden Gyatso who quickly established him as a famed scholar would teach at and lead the monastery.⁴⁴ This conclusion is even more likely when we consider the fact that Dobi Monastery was founded by Samten Rinchen, a member of the ruling clan of Rongwo which settled in Rebgong two generations earlier to control the region as another outpost of the Sakya influence.⁴⁵ As a member of the Rongwo *Nangso* family and the towering religious figure in his native region, as well as the reincarnation of the monastery's founder Samten Rinchen, who was better than Shar Kalden Gyatso to lead Dobi Monastery as its main teacher?⁴⁶ The great prayer festival at Rongwo Monastery was instituted in 1732 with the participation of eighteen monasteries to form and consolidate the place of Rongwo Monastery as the center of the network of Geluk institutions in Rebgong during the time of the second Shar Ngagwang Trinle Gyatso (*ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho*, 1678–1739).⁴⁷ That said, it is important to note that Shar Kalden Gyatso had already laid out the foundation for its rise in standing within a network of institutions leading to the grand Geluk ritual ceremony in memoriam of its founder. In 1662, the year the first Panchen Lama Lozang Chokyi Gyaltsen passed away, Shar Kalden Gyatso held an elaborate funeral service lasting for several days. On that occasion, according to Ngawang Sonam, under the auspice of Shar Kalden Gyatso, the funeral service was conducted by a large gathering of monks hailing from all over Rebgong led by the monastic community of Rongwo and Tashi Khyil.⁴⁸ Shar Kalden Gyatso was subsequently active at some other monasteries, leading mass recitation rituals devoted to the mantra of Avalokiteśvara.⁴⁹

Against the backdrop of the Geluk–Mongol alliance, with a strong presence of Mongol supporters of the school in Amdo, which will be discussed in detail in the latter half of this study, Rebgong is destined to be brought into the fold of the Geluk movement to serve as an important monastic center of the school in the region. The Geluk growth in the area is further supported by missionary activities undertaken on a large scale by the generations of Central Tibetan and native Amdo Geluk masters in collaboration. Later, in Rebgong, as the scion of the Rongwo Clan, Shar Kalden Gyatso's illustrious career as a scholar, and more importantly, his institutional authority as a monastic leader are buttressed by his clan itself ruling the Rebgong area as well as keeping custody of the monastic centers in the area created by the clan ancestors in the first place. Further, Shar Kalden Gyatso's reincarnation lineage identity and Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen's role in the expansion of the Geluk institutional influence are also worth studying in detail as below to illuminate a host of factors at work in the creation of Geluk stronghold in Rebgong.

3.2. Shar Kalen Gyatso's Reincarnation Identity and Clan Influence

Shar Kalden Gyatso's reincarnation lineage identity, as well as his vision of promoting monasticism and scholastic programs, also played a role in building the religious authority of Shar Kalden Gyatso. While Shar Kalden Gyatso was alive, Gyalse Lozang Tendzin and several other Geluk masters including certain eminent disciples of Shar Kalden Gyatso were invested in identifying early lives of Shar Kalden

⁴⁴ ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 139). In contrast to all other main sources in the present work, in the *Ocean Annals*, Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas (1987, pp. 353–54) identifies the site of these active roles/activities as Lchang shar Monastery. It is most likely an error on the part of the major historian Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas to mix Chang shar Monastery with Rdo sbis Monastery.

⁴⁵ ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 76). At this point, (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 346) identifies three nephews of Bsam gtan rin chen as assuming the title of Rong bo *Nang so* simultaneously, ruling Yar nang, Mar nang, and Rdo sbi areas, respectively, forming the entire domain of Rebgong.

⁴⁶ When we came to the time of Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan and Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, it is indicated in the *Ocean Annals* that Rong bo *Nang so* controlling Mar nang area later went onto to rule Yar nang as its *nang so*. It seems the clan appoints its three members as rulers of its three domains in rotation (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 346).

⁴⁷ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 308). The set of these eighteen monasteries is comprised of both monasteries and hermitages. However, they are referred to as the eighteen retreat sites/communities (*sgrub bsde bco brgyad*) in the local and other relevant Buddhist literature. For the list of these eighteen monasteries, see (*ibid.*, pp. 341–42).

⁴⁸ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 37).

⁴⁹ (*ibid.*, p. 39). These include Spen dkar thang, Gyer thang dgon gsar, and Bis mdo monasteries.

Gyatso.⁵⁰ His close disciple and Rebgong native Chumar Lozang Gyatso (*chu dmar blo bzang rgya mtsho*, b. seventeenth century), who travelled to Central Tibet seeking a secret biography of Shar Kalden Gyatso from Gyalse Lozang Tendzin, claims that Shar Kalden Gyatso was the reincarnation of Samten Rinchen (*bsam gtan rin chen*, b. fourteenth century), the founder of Rongwo Monastery, and disciple of Choje Dondrup Rinchen (*chos rje don grub rin chen*, b. fourteenth century).⁵¹ According to Chumar Lozang Gyatso, Samten Rinchen reincarnated as Samdrup Rinchen (*bsam 'grub rin chen*, b. sixteenth century), the immediate predecessor of Shar Kalden Gyatso, whose verity Lozang Tenpa Rapgye (*blo bzang bstan pa dar rgyas*, b. sixteenth century) acknowledges.⁵² A descendant of the Rongwo Clan, Samdrup Rinchen was an important leader of Rongwo Monastery who administered the preliminary vow to his young kin Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen. The identification of Shar Kalden Gyatso with the abovementioned three masters informs us that the founder of Rongwo Monastery as a Sakya monastery, the founder's reincarnation, and the Rongwo leader who lived one generation before Shar Kalden Gyatso are none other than Shar Kalden Gyatso himself. Shar Kalden Gyatso was thus the rightful religious heir to continue as the head of the monastery.

In addition to being within the same reincarnation lineage, Shar Kalden Gyatso was also a member of the Rongwo *Nangso* family, members of whom were custodians of the monastery.⁵³ His family background thus strengthened his religious authority in the area as head of the monastery. However, according to Ngawang Sonam, since his lineage identity was known within the inner circles of Shar Kalden Gyatso (his masters and disciples),⁵⁴ it had limited effect in contributing to his religious stature in the eyes of the wider monastic and lay community. Nevertheless, given the fact of Shar Kalden Gyatso's self-identification with at least Milarepa, the lineage could have significantly impacted how Shar Kalden Gyatso envisioned his religious career in building Buddhist retreat tradition in the region.⁵⁵

3.3. Assessment of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's Role in Building Rongwo Monastery

In the secondary literature, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen is a rather neglected figure in the institutional history of the Geluk School in Rebgong. To date, it is Victoria Sujata who first mentions his influence on Shar Kalden Gyatso to establish scholastic and retreat centers, respectively. Yet there is much that deserves to be explored in relation to major issues such as Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's impact on Shar Kalden Gyatso in shaping the latter's non-sectarian outlook and the origin of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's inspiration to create institutional centers in Rebgong in the first place. The latter is a key area to explore for the dependent framework of Geluk influence in Amdo is driven by the Central Tibet Geluk lineage

⁵⁰ ('Jig med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, pp. 21–106) provides a long lineage list, including Buddha's disciple Shariputra, of those who were identified as early lives of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho. Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho himself was also involved in identifying his early lives, as were his disciples and other Dge lugs masters (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 59–64; 'Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, pp. 23, 25).

⁵¹ On many occasions, Rgyal sras blo bzang bstan 'dzin identified certain predecessors in Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho's reincarnation lineage including 'Brom ston and Phu chung. He states that two early lives of Shar Skal ldan rgya mtsho were associated with Rong bo, but he does not identify them. He also foretold that Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho would reincarnate at Rong bo (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 59–61, 63–64). Nying thang sprul sku also claims that one of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho's early existences was Bsam gtan rin chen (see Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 306).

⁵² (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 62; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 319–20).

⁵³ Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho's background as a member of the Rong bo *Nang so* family was an important factor influencing his enrollment in the Byang rtse College. ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 118): *khyed kyi dbon chung 'di min yang grwa pa rnyed 'ong ste/ rong bo tshang stobs 'byor shogs che bas byang rtse'i grub rgyaun gyi phan thogs la bsams p yin/ de bzang*. Here, interestingly, Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho is referred to as young nephew (*dbon chung*) rather than younger brother (*spun chung*). The secondary literature touching on the relationship between the Shar lineage and Rongwo *Nangso* uncritically states that the entire Shar lineage reincarnates within the family of Rong bo *Nang so*. In fact, only the first two in the reincarnate line were born within the ruling family. For a discussion of the title *nang so*, see (Dhondup 2011, pp. 38–42; Dangzengji 2011, 67–70; Suonanwangjie 2017, pp. 53–57; Gao 2015, pp. 114–48). Since *nang so* is a rare subject dealt with in our sources, we do not know much about people who assumed the office of *nang so*. As our limited sources permit, whenever appropriate, I will discuss them with attention placed on their role in the institutional growth of Dge lugs institutions in Rebgong.

⁵⁴ Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 58–64.

⁵⁵ In Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 40, his lineage starts with Shariputra (*shA ri'i bu*). It is also important to note that Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan was widely recognized as the reincarnation of Mi la ras pa (see Sujata 2005, pp. 48–55).

masters, highlighting the influence of Central Tibetan Geluk patriarchs either instructing or inspiring the foundation of Geluk monastic sites in Amdo.

While we attribute the foundation of the scholastic system at Rongwo almost entirely to Shar Kalden Gyatso in all secondary literature,⁵⁶ we must assess the roles that he and his teacher Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen played in more adequate terms. Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen was actually the mastermind behind the plan to implement two major institution-building projects in Rebgong, making it the future center of a hermitage network in the area: the foundation of a scholastic college at Rongwo and a retreat community at Tashi Khyil (*bkra shis 'khyil*). More precisely, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen led Rongwo Monastery after his return from Central Tibet in 1608. This was his first extended stay there and occurred one year after the birth of Shar Kalden Gyatso. Shar Kalden Gyatso credits Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen with propagating the ritual tradition, especially the death anniversary of the Geluk founder, Tsongkhapa, and instituting strict monastic rules,⁵⁷ during the period between his two visits to Central Tibet.⁵⁸ During his second visit to Central Tibet in 1616, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen brought along young Shar Kalden Gyatso to enroll in Shangtse College for extensive training. Right before and after his second visit to Central Tibet, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen was also already meditating at various places with Tashi Khyil and Gonrong Drakya Dzong (*dgon rong brag skya rdzong*)⁵⁹ as his two main retreat sites,⁶⁰ thus contributing to later developments of scholastic and practical lineages initiated by Shar Kalden Gyatso. Like Shar Kalden Gyatso, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen was also deeply involved in building monastic institutions and finding ways to sustain them. Besides directing Shar Kalden Gyatso to set up the education system and retreat community center, he was also involved in temple building and was solely responsible for building a large Mañjuśrī temple (*'jam dbayngs lha khang*).⁶¹ However, the assembly hall at Rongwo, the Maitreya temple and the assembly hall at Tashi Khyil were joint building projects undertaken by both Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen and Shar Kalden Gyatso. Nowhere was Rongwo *Nangso* mentioned as playing a role in these two building projects. The relevant literature also records that Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen also gave funds toward the crafting of a giant Maitreya image at Dobi Monastery where Kalden Gyatso later served as the main teacher. Not only did Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen make efforts to fund these institutions and build structures, but he was also concerned with the sustainability and maintenance of these institutions. As recorded by Shar Kalden Gyatso, on one occasion, during a tour of his in agricultural and herding communities in Rebgong, the butter offerings he received were set aside for the lamps set before the central image at the Maitreya temple in Tashi Khyil. Most offerings he received during his visits to Khagya (*kha gya*)⁶² and Taklung (*stag lung*)⁶³ were brought for use as general funds at Rongwo Monastery.⁶⁴ During his tour in the herding community of Takring (*stag ring*),⁶⁵ he received many offerings including pieces of felt for seating in the assembly hall at Rongwo Monastery, and horses were set aside as part of the support for the painting project for the assembly hall and Jatsul (*ja tshul*).⁶⁶ During his visit to Trika (*khri ka*), all offerings he received from herding and farming areas were again earmarked for general support for Rongwo Monastery.⁶⁷ Therefore, in addition to his reputation as a dedicated hermit, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen also provided

⁵⁶ For examples, see (Tuttle 2012, p. 136). See also chapters 1 and 2 in (Sujata 2005).

⁵⁷ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 105).

⁵⁸ In 1603, on his first trip to Central Tibet, he escorted the fourth Ta lai bla ma Yon tan rgya mtsho. During this trip, he undertook an extended training until his departure in 1608. In 1616, he made his second brief trip to Central Tibet when he also took along Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho to enroll in the Sgo mang College of 'Bras spungs Monastery (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, pp. 101, 104–105).

⁵⁹ Located in Khri ka, an area to the north of Reb gong.

⁶⁰ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 305).

⁶¹ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 108; 'Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, p. 16).

⁶² The name for a clan/a group of six clans with Kha gya being one of the six. See (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 547).

⁶³ The location is unclear, but it was likely situated in the neighboring region of Reb gong to the south.

⁶⁴ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 114).

⁶⁵ Stag ring and Stag lung are probably spelling variants of the same place name.

⁶⁶ This term may refer to offerings made to the monastery involving tea.

⁶⁷ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 116).

major contributions for Geluk Buddhist development in Rebgong. Although I have not found mention of Shar Kalden Gyatso pledging resources for these institutions, there is no question that he was equally concerned with operating these religious institutions, as he led them successfully.

Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen's greater role in the expansion of Rongwo Monastery and its scholastic program might also have been inspired by the fourth Dalai Lama Yonten Gyatso (*yon tan rgya mtsho*, 1589–1616)⁶⁸ and Gyalse Donyo Chokyi Gyatso (*rgyal sras don yod chos kyi rgya mtsho*, b. sixteenth century). In 1603, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen was on an escort team of the young fourth Dalai Lama during the latter's first visit to Central Tibet.⁶⁹ Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen stayed on to study mostly tantric teachings in Central Tibet for the next few years. The following year, the fourth Dalai Lama sent Gyalse Donyo Chokyi Gyatso to Amdo to establish Gonlung Monastery with a scholastic program, the first of its kind in Amdo and a role model for the scholastic tradition in Amdo for Geluk devotees.⁷⁰

Regarding Kumbum Monastery (*sku 'bum dgon pa*), Gray Tuttle writes, "Sku 'bum was not said to be a proper Dge lugs pa monastery until 1612, when the forth Ta lai bla ma directed that a philosophical school (*mtshan nyid grwa tshang*) be established there."⁷¹ Thus, as the later literature acknowledges, the creation of a scholastic college is considered as the turning point in growth of Kumbum Monastery.⁷² Besides Kumbum Monastery, in 1599, Zhakhyung Monastery (*bya khyung dgon pa*) was converted from a Kadam to a Geluk school, and in 1623, a scholastic college was established there.⁷³ As leader of Rongwo Monastery, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen also meditated at places such as the hermitages at Gonlung, Zhyakyung, and Kumbum. He also received teachings from Dewa Choje and Kowa Chokyi Gyatso, with the latter serving as the abbot of Kumbum Monastery (1617–1624).⁷⁴ Hence, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen must have been clearly aware of these Geluk institutional developments at these major monasteries as well as activities of these Geluka patriarchs, which would influence Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen himself to follow suit and set up a scholastic system modelled after these major institutions.

It is also possible that Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen was partly directed and inspired by a Central Tibetan master, the third Demo Lhawang Zhokle NamGyal (*de mo lha dbang phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1551/1557–1573/1579), to build the scholastic institution at Rongwo. According to Shar Kalden Gyatso, during Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen's second visit, Ngakwang Zhokle NamGyal asked him to found a *dratshang* (*grwa tshang*) in his homeland, which probably led to the eventual creation of a scholastic college at Rongwo which he later managed.⁷⁵ *Dratshang* is a generic term for a monastery or monastic college, but in this particular context, it might refer to a scholastic college.⁷⁶ Therefore, it is possible that Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen understood setting up a Geluk scholastic college as a way to build up the monastery, a major task that he relegated to his brother, Shar Kalden Gyatso, who had received advanced training in Central Tibet.

Establishing a scholastic program typifies large Geluk monasteries and is indispensable in the Geluk scholastic tradition as revealed in the comment cited by Gray Tuttle with regards to the birth

⁶⁸ Despite being a teenager himself, the fourth Ta lai bla ma is seen as a major source of inspiration and symbolic presence of supreme authority among the Dge lugs followers. For a very brief biography of Yon tan rgya mtsho, see (Kollmar-Paulenz 2005).

⁶⁹ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 304–305).

⁷⁰ (Ibid., pp. 55–56, 76).

⁷¹ (Tuttle 2012, p. 134).

⁷² (Kun mkhyen 'jigs med dbang po 2019, pp. 471–72).

⁷³ (Ibid., p. 134; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a).

⁷⁴ (Mgon po dbang rgyal 2000, p. 549).

⁷⁵ (Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, p. 16). However, Lha dbang phyogs las rnam rgyal directing Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan to establish *grwa tshang* is not mentioned in the biography of Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho.

⁷⁶ At least in two instances, Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho uses *grwa tshang* to refer to the scholastic college. See (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 200; Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 137). In the *Brief Religious History of Amdo*, Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho is consistent in using the term *grwa tshang* simply as an equivalent of scholastic college. In his short history of Sku 'bum Monastery, when addressing the origin of the scholastic college, 'Jigs med dbang po uses the term '*chad nyan gyi grwa tshang* once, but then he simply uses *grwa tshang* to refer to the scholastic college in every instance (Kun mkhyen 'jigs med dbang po 2019, pp. 471–73).

of scholastic college at Kumbum.⁷⁷ In general, Central Tibetan masters are sources of inspiration for native Amdo scholars and monks to found monasteries, as mentioned earlier. Likewise, when Ngakwang Zhokle Namgyal declared Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's tutelary deity to be Mañjuśrī, the latter immediately constructed a Mañjuśrī temple at Rongwo Monastery upon his return from Central Tibet.⁷⁸ With Mañjuśrī being his tutelary deity, he also made three failed attempts to visit Mt. Wutai (*ri bo rtse lnga*), the terrestrial abode of Mañjuśrī in China.⁷⁹ Therefore, the role of Central Tibetan masters in inspiring native Amdo monks to contribute to the growth of Geluk Buddhism must not be underestimated, as Gray Tuttle emphasizes in his survey of Amdo's major Geluk monasteries.⁸⁰

My reading of relevant sources brings me to conclude that despite his two stays in Central Tibet, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen did not stay long enough to complete the Geluk curriculum and achieve the highest degree expected of a scholar.⁸¹ Instead, Shar Kalden Gyatso received the prestigious Kachu degree at the famed monastery of Sangpu Neutok, which helps us make sense of his persistent request to Shar Kalden Gyatso to found and lead the scholastic program. Considering the success of Shar Kalden Gyatso as a highly learned scholar and then being a member of the ruling clan of Rebong, the request was predictable, which in no way reduces the influential role Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen played in building Geluk institutions in Rebong.

4. Instituting Geluk Retreat Lineage in Rebong and Beyond

In the section below, I provide a rich history of Shar Kalden Gyatso's retreat life based on the accumulation of details from a wide range of sources neither touched upon nor carefully examined in earlier scholarship. At the same time, I explore not only the scholastic versus retreat traditions, but also retreat practices in solitary versus community/institutional settings as reflected in the religious career of Shar Kalden Gyatso. His connection to Milarepa is also examined in much more detail than before.⁸² Finally, I also take note of the legacy of Shar Kalden Gyatso's retreat lineage in the creation of sacred geography in Rebong and beyond as a key area to explore in relation to his ever-evolving personae as well as his connection with Nyingma School.

Due to his increasing religious authority, in addition to the scholastic center at Rongwo, Shar Kalden Gyatso was able to create and consolidate a network of retreat centers. As opposed to the rosy imagery of solitary practices ensconced in the depths of the mountains totally withdrawn from society, which has been wishful thinking for Shar Kalden Gyatso, the scholarly and retreat lineages that he spearheaded are profoundly embedded in an institutional context. The main retreat center of Tashi Khyil accommodates a large community of hermits. In fact, Tashi Khyil was once home to more than two hundred hermits. It is also where, after renouncing his obligations at Rongwo toward the end of his life, while in retreat, Shar Kalden Gyatso confined himself to give many teachings. Hence, the majority of his teachings were scribed and compiled there. Most of his songs were also sung or composed while in retreat at various sites with Tashi Khyil as his main seat.⁸³

Biographer Ngawang Sonam reports on Shar Kalden Gyatso's childhood so as to portray him as an extraordinary child destined to become a great meditator. Once during his childhood, when

⁷⁷ (Tuttle 2012, p. 134).

⁷⁸ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 107; Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, p. 16).

⁷⁹ For the importance of Mt. Wutai within the Tibetan Buddhist community, see (Tuttle 2011a; Nietupski 2011a; Schaeffer 2011).

⁸⁰ (Tuttle 2012).

⁸¹ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 304–305; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d). Although Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan is frequently addressed as a great siddha and is also included in a long line of illustrious lineage, there is not much substantial evidence to prove such based on our current available sources. Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho perhaps plays a significant role in shaping our impression of Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan as such.

⁸² However, ideals espoused by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho do not sit comfortably with the yogic personae of Mi la ras pa, which will be dealt with in a forthcoming paper.

⁸³ (Sujata 2005, p. 89) writes, "The locations of seventy-two *mgur* are identified. Of these, twenty-five were sung at the mountain hermitage of Bkra shis 'khyil, which became Skal ldan rgya mtsho's base from about age sixty-four onward." This, to some extent, suggests the eventual rise of its standing among the retreat sites in Rebong and the surrounding area.

his mother took him to the field, he only experienced the vision of a god's realm (*lha'i yul*). Later, at the age of seven, he received lay precepts from Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen and performed recitation practice (*bsnyen sgrub*) of several transcendent deities (*lhag pa'i lha*). He was able to view all the cycles of existence as an expanse of blazing fire and hence acquired a firm aversion to the cycle of life.⁸⁴

For the first few years of post-Central Tibet life, his life alternated between receiving teachings and undertaking retreats during which he began composing and singing spiritual songs.⁸⁵ However, his retreat life was disrupted by responsibilities imposed by Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen to found and run the philosophical college, preventing him from undertaking retreats as a full-time practitioner. Jikmed Damchoe Gyatso elaborated on Shar Kalden Gyatso's resistance against such requests by Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen as a way to place a particular emphasis on the practice-oriented life of Shar Kalden Gyatso.⁸⁶ When Shar Kalden Gyatso did not accept a request from Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, a demi-human appeared and instructed him to found the scholastic college. If he were to do otherwise, the being threatened to destroy the Mañjuśrī temple. During this vision, he was asked thrice about his thoughts. Shar Kalden Gyatso kept quiet, refusing to give a 'yes' answer. Later, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, also probably aware of the vision, insisted, "You must set up a college at all costs. If you do not set up a college, gods and demons' magical performances may damage the Mañjuśrī temple, which is very undesirable. It took many years for me to build it."⁸⁷ Only then was Shar Kalden Gyatso convinced to found the philosophical college.

Shar Kalden Gyatso had to manage the monastery with his presence or by his appointees whenever he was in retreat. Earlier in his career, a series of things (such as village conflicts) he witnessed and the death of his teachers created an aversion toward worldly life and pushed him toward the life of a retreatant. However, his presence was constantly required to lead the monastery. Reminiscing about the lives of great meditators including Milarepa, he decided to fully commit to meditation practice.⁸⁸ However, at that time, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen intervened: "You should lead the scholastic college. There is no need for hermits. Later, in the woods of Tashi Khyil, there will be a time when rows of fully ordained monks will go back and forth".⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Shar Kalden Gyatso left for retreat. Later, after an extended period of retreat, he visited Rongwo Monastery and saw the monastery as a sign of impermanence and sang a song to that effect. Without a second thought about his responsibility of leading the monastery, he left for retreat immediately after that visit. Thanks to Shar Kalden Gyatso's immersion in retreat practices, the responsibility fell on the shoulders of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, who managed the monastic community until the return from Central Tibet of the first disciples initially trained at Rongwo.⁹⁰

Shar Kalden Gyatso's inclination toward a retreat-oriented life plays a large role in his resistance to leading the scholastic institution. We should also note the burdens imposed on monastic leaders, especially abbots, to seek wealth and other resources that large monastic institutions required may, to some extent, help explain Shar Kalden Gyatso's reluctance in leading the monastery. Although we do not see much description of the material need that burdened monastic leaders with fundraising trips in most biographical accounts, including the biography of Shar Kalden Gyatso, Khenchen Gedun

⁸⁴ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 3).

⁸⁵ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 15–16).

⁸⁶ However, Ngag dbang bsod nams simply records that Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho accepted the task of founding and running the philosophical college immediately after Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan suggested it (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 16).

⁸⁷ 'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 137: *khod kyis cis kyang grwa tshang tshugs/ma btsugs na lha 'dre'i cho 'phrul gyis 'jam dbyangs kun gzigs khang 'di la gnod pa byung na mi rung/ ngas lo man por 'di la dka' las byas nas bzhengs pa yin.*

⁸⁸ For a biographical study of Mi la ras pa, see (Quintman 2014). For a translation of the life of Mi la ras pa by Gtsang smyon he ru ka, see (Tsangnyön Heruka 2010).

⁸⁹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 22): *khyod kyis mtshan nyid kyi grwa tshang skyongs dang ri khrod pas lag mi thogs phyis su bkra shis 'khyil gyi nags 'di tsho'i nang na dge slong chos gos gyon pa mang pos ser phreng byas nas phar 'byon tshur 'byon byed pa'i dus shig yong.*

⁹⁰ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 22). See also (Sujata 2005, p. 27).

Gyatso's (*mkhen chen dge 'dun rgya mtsho*, 1679–1765) biography is an exception. The responsibilities of the abbots and their constant efforts to support the monastic institutions and population during his era figure prominently.

Only when the monastic community was in good hands, and only when a stable scholastic system was achieved at Rongwo, did Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen resign himself to Shar Kalden Gyatso's determination to live a life of retreat. Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen instructed Shar Kalden Gyatso to build Tashi Khyil as the main retreat center, which was realized in 1648. He suggested to Shar Kalden Gyatso, "You shall make efforts to install a community of four monks here. You should first attract them by material benefits. Only afterwards, should you instruct them in the Dharma and your wish will come true."⁹¹ Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen encouraged his brother by saying it was possible that the community could grow to over a hundred members. The retreat community actually grew to over two hundred members, who, as Ngawang Sonam specified, were fully ordained with three trainings (*bslab pa gsum ldan dge slong*).⁹² Shar Kalden Gyatso introduced a set of community rules and a strong regiment of practices: year-long and month-long retreats, and verbal silence while in retreat. He was able to attract many students from as far as Pari (*dpa' ris*)⁹³ in the north and as far south as Dzoge (*mdzod dge*).⁹⁴ However, prior to the founding of the retreat community hall, Shar Kalden Gyatso internally resisted the building project. He thought, "What is the point of all the work done for [building] this place? Who will look after the place after me? This place will become a place where nearby villagers tether their donkeys when they come to collect wood."⁹⁵ However, his doubts were cleared in a vision. It is likely Kalden Gyatso previously intended his life to be one of retreat practice, rather than founding and leading a retreat community center. As with the founding of a philosophical college, he was probably aware of the demands related to teaching and managing the retreat center and its network of hermitages. Although he successfully managed the retreat center, there are plenty of hints especially in his corpus of songs that the ideal of spiritual practice he aspired to was one of intensive solitary retreat.⁹⁶ It is thus no surprise that he resisted building an assembly hall and running retreat practices on an institutional basis.

With Tashi Khyil founded in 1648, Shar Kalden Gyatso was still responsible for teaching and leading Rongwo Monastery. However, from 1669 onwards, he was fully committed to retreat practice, residing at Tashi Khyil for the most part until passing away at the age of 71 in 1677.⁹⁷ Thus, the career of Shar Kalden Gyatso has been marked by the tension between scholastic and practice-oriented strands of Buddhism. We witness a shift from an intensive scholarly life to that of retreat in his post-Central Tibet life. However, his commitment to the retreat life was, however, nothing more than wishful thinking as he was constantly required as a teacher leading the scholastic community created by himself. His deep aspiration to undertake solitary retreat is evident in a number of instances where he tried in vain to resist the high demands of running a scholastic center. Unable to fulfill his commitment to solitary practice, Shar Kalden Gyatso nonetheless successfully instituted a community center for practitioners, which is a trade-off between the seemingly polarized ends of scholasticism

⁹¹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 23).

⁹² (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 24). See also (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 309). Three trainings are concerned with cultivation of morality (*tshul khrims*), concentration (*ting nge 'dzin*), and wisdom (*shes rab*).

⁹³ The term refers to the far northern end of A mdo. Most of the historical Dpa' ris area is now under present-day Dpa' ris County in Gansu Province and Gro tshang County in Qinghai Province.

⁹⁴ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 24). Mdzod dge largely corresponds to the present-day Mdzod dge County in Sichuan Province, and a large portion of the traditional Mdzod dge area also falls in present-day The bo County in Gansu Province. However, there is also a support community of Bla brang Monastery known as Mdzod dge.

⁹⁵ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 25): *khang ba 'di la dka' las byas nas ci byed/ nga'i ring ma gtogs 'di la bdag byed mkhan su yod/ khang ba 'di rjes nas nye 'khor gyi grong pa tsho'i nags kyi shing 'thu tsho yong nas bong bu sogs 'dogs sa byed pa yin mod snyam*. The wording changes slightly in 'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 160: *'di la dka' las byas nas ci byed/ nga'i ring ma gtogs 'di la bdag byed mkhan su yod/ khang ba 'di rjes nas nye 'khor gyi grong pa tsho nags su shing 'thu la 'ongs nas bong bu sogs 'dogs sa byed rgyu yin mod snyam*.

⁹⁶ For examples, see (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 13, 80, 144, 169, 229, 245, 247). See also (Sujata 2005, pp. 29–30, 38–39).

⁹⁷ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 50–51).

and practice. There are clues to suggest that his time is divided between running the two institutional centers. His obligation to teach at Rongwo is greatly eased by the succession of master initially trained under him there. Only toward the end of his life, he was fully committed to a life of retreat. However, considering the sheer number of retreat sites associated with his practice, he stands out rather as a siddha. However, his creation of a large retreat community embeds and consolidates his retreat lineage in an institutional context.

While in retreat at Tashi Khyil, he gave extensive teachings to the retreat community. Many of his teachings, dealing with a variety of topics, were recorded by his disciples in four volumes with the exclusion of his corpus of songs which circulates as an independent work.⁹⁸ The brevity of most of his teachings during retreats frustrated his disciple and biographer Ngawang Sonam.⁹⁹ Shar Kalden Gyatso responded, “Well, for each of these instructions on contemplation, I can cite more quotations and use more reasoning in an extended form, and I know how to do so. [However,] they are not useful for most people. They will understand more slowly by relying on brief ones.”¹⁰⁰ The brevity of philosophical details, but special attention to graded paths in meditation practices, much neglected in the contemporary Geluk community, further demonstrate the rare quality of retreat orientation in Shar Kalden Gyatso’s religious career later in his life.

The year he passed away, he instituted rules for the retreat community at Tashi Khyil requiring that all the retreatants undertake retreat for three months a year. He specifically gave instructions to practice strict verbal silence and not to disclose any external or internal signs of their practice.¹⁰¹ He appointed Shadrang Rinpoche (*sha brang rin po che*, b. seventeenth century) as the head of the retreat community. Due to the size of this community, Shar Kalden Gyatso felt it necessary to appoint his disciple, Losang Gyatso (*blo bsang rgya mtsho*, b. seventeenth century),¹⁰² as disciplinarian (*grig dpon*). Another retreat community of hermits known as Drakar Puntshok Ling (*brag dkar phun tshogs gling*) was also established nearby.¹⁰³ Further, there were a number of retreat communities of modest size being created by Shar Kalden Gyatso in Rebgong and its surrounding region while numerous other sites were either identified mainly in terms of Shar Kalden Gyatso’s association with them or with him as a central figure sanctioning the sites. Most of these sites were later managed by his lineage followers.¹⁰⁴ Thus, his institutional legacy of retreat lineage continued.

There are also bits and pieces of information we can glean from the lives of two major disciples of Shar Kalden Gyatso demonstrating the master’s impact on the tantric/retreat direction of their religious careers. According to the biography of the famed tantric master Jamyang Lodro, the young master was being trained under Shar Kalden Gyatso for a period of five years,¹⁰⁵ which turns out to have caused a significant influence in shaping the former’s future tantric- and retreat-oriented career in Central Tibet and later in Amdo.¹⁰⁶ The same could be said about the generations of future Buddhist masters based in Rebgong and beyond who continued the tantric and retreat lineage of Shar Kalden Gyatso. In the biography of Lozang Tenpa Rabgye, the biographer Lozang Gyatso briefly states that after training under Shar Kalden Gyatso at Tashi Khyil, Lozang Tenpa Rabgye was sent to study at Lower Tantric College in Lhasa for an extended period. Soon after undertaking his tantric education, the fifth Dalai Lama’s regent Sanggye Gyatso (1653–1705) was looking for a potential tantric master

⁹⁸ See footnote 12 on p. 3 in the present work.

⁹⁹ (‘Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 214): *nyams khrid ‘di tsho ha cang bsodus drags pas ‘di las rgyas pa zhig gnanng na yag rgyu red snyam*.

¹⁰⁰ (‘Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 214): *‘o dmigs skor re re la yang lung dang rigs mang ba bkod nas rgyas pa byas na ngas bshad shes te mi mang la phan mi thogs/nyung nyung la brten nas rim gyis mang po yang go yong ba yin*.

¹⁰¹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 88).

¹⁰² I have yet to verify whether this person is the same as Sha sbrang rin po che or Chu dmar blo bzang rgya mtsho.

¹⁰³ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 348).

¹⁰⁴ For retreat sites established by him, see (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 579). For other retreat sites associated with him, see (*ibid.*, pp. 328, 332, 335, 339, 342, 354, 559, 574, 712–13).

¹⁰⁵ (Blo bzang shes rab 1991, p. 139).

¹⁰⁶ (*ibid.*, pp. 141–42).

to perform tantric magic against the Drukpa (*'brug pa*) followers, and Lozang Tenpa Rabgye was the one chosen for the task at hand thanks to the skills he achieved in the ritual tradition of *Iron Castle* (*lcags mkhar*), precisely for which he was trained under Shar Kalden Gyatso. He publicly displays his pride in being a recipient of the ritual transmission, along with that of *Magic Wheel* (*'khrul 'khorI*), from Shar Kalden Gyatso.¹⁰⁷ Later in his life, when an evil spirit (*srin ngan*) plagued the abbots of Shakyung Monastery, his expertise was again called upon to perform the tantric ritual of *Iron Castle*, which successfully dispelled the evil force.¹⁰⁸ Due to these two remarkable tantric feats, he was widely known in the larger Geluk community for his unrivalled tantric skills, in particular being a keeper of an authoritative transmission of this very ritual which, we already know, he obtained from Shar Kalden Gyatso.

As an institutional leader in establishing scholastic and retreat traditions in Rebgong, ironically Shar Kalden Gyatso demonstrated that he was a successful yogin, and thus not attached to material possessions. Just prior to his death, he returned all the books he had borrowed from others. Robes and implements previously offered to him were returned to the givers and all his own books were given to the retreat community. He even went to an extreme by ordering that all his belongings be given away and not a single item should be left behind. Shar Kalden Gyatso said, "I am satisfied when people say that nothing is left behind after the death of Kachuwa (*the bearer of the Kachu degree*) of Rongwo to use for a monastic feast."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, there was nothing left to use for his funeral at Tashi Khyil, and consequently members of the retreat community had to make individual contributions to conduct an elaborate funeral on his behalf. At Rongwo, another elaborate funeral was conducted, most likely through monastic donations as well. Thus, the biographer argues that Shar Kalden Gyatso behaved appropriately for a true yogin who abandons all (*kun spangs mdzad*).¹¹⁰

A major source of his inspiration to undertake his life of retreat is the persona of Milarepa, the Tibetan Buddhist yogin par excellence.¹¹¹ As shown throughout his collected songs, his success in retreat practice conforming to the ideals set by the role model of Milarepa was also evidently given recognition in the fact that Gyalse Lozang Tendzin addresses him as the second Mila in a written letter.¹¹² His previous life being identified as Milarepa might have significantly impacted his identity as a retreat practitioner and influenced his living a life that in some ways reflected the life of Milarepa.

Shar Kalden Gyatso even self-identified as Milarepa: for example, during his visit to Nyagong Drakar (*gnya' gong brag dkar*),¹¹³ when his disciple and personal attendant Ngawang Sonam wondered about the previous lives of his master. As if reading his mind, Shar Kalden Gyatso sang, "In case you don't know me, I am Mila,¹¹⁴ the great cotton-clad."¹¹⁵ This was quoted nearly verbatim or with little change from the songs of Milarepa who, on two occasions, sang in conversations with his audience.¹¹⁶ Shar Kalden Gyatso experienced many visions including of Milarepa and Marpa (*mar pa*)¹¹⁷ while there. Later, he built a retreat community at Nyagong Drakar and appointed his disciple Tsheten Gyatso (*tshé brtan rgya mtsho*, b. seventeenth century) as the leader of the retreat community and urged his patrons in the area to support the retreat center.¹¹⁸ It is important to note that his teacher, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltsen, was widely recognized as the reincarnation of Milarepa. This was, in turn, largely

¹⁰⁷ (Blo bzang rgya mtsho 1990, 3a.2 through 3b.1).

¹⁰⁸ (Ibid., 5b.4 through 7a.4; Cuevas 2017, 15–16).

¹⁰⁹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 89): *mi tshos rong bo bka' bcu ba 'das song ba'i shul na mang ja zhig skol rgyu yang mi 'dug zer ba zhig byung na nga'i blo kha rdzogs pa yin.*

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Sujata makes a bare mention of the identification (Sujata 2005, pp. 56–57).

¹¹² (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 54).

¹¹³ The name refers to a historic retreat site in Rgan gya.

¹¹⁴ The name for Mi la ras pa's family clan. Mi la is also the short form for Mi la ras pa.

¹¹⁵ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 40): *mi nga ngo khyod kyis ma shes na/ nga ni mi la ras chen yin.*

¹¹⁶ (Gtsang smyon he ru ka 1999, pp. 209, 324).

¹¹⁷ On the life of Mar pa, see (Davidson 2005, pp. 141–48).

¹¹⁸ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 41). For a brief history of the site, see (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, pp. 430–31).

thanks to Shar Kalden Gyatso's earnest cultivation of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's image as Milarepa in his writing of the latter's biography as well as his corpus of songs.¹¹⁹

Shar Kalden Gyatso's retreat life is also characterized by his singing practice, as is common in the lives of many retreat masters in Tibet. He also sang songs composed by his lineage masters.¹²⁰ It was not just songs of Milarepa that single-handedly inspired his own singing during retreat life. Biographies and songs of his own Geluk lineage masters were also instrumental in his singing practice during retreats.¹²¹ As mentioned previously, in his corpus of work, there is a huge collection of songs. Impressed with his feat as an established yogin, Jamyang Zhepa Ngakwang Tsondu (*'jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson 'grus*, 1648–1722; henceforth Jamyang Zhepa), the founder of Amdo's premier Geluk learning institute, Labrang Monastery, and main author of the new Gomang text manuals, highly praised his songs as important instructions in retreat practice.¹²²

Shar Kalden Gyatso was a highly accomplished yogin. Besides his success in instituting retreat centers, his own retreat practices at many sites cover a vast terrain of northeastern Tibet. His feat of considerable meditation practice was dwarfed only by Milarepa and Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (*zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol*, 1781–1851), the saints of the Kagyud and Nyingma schools, respectively.¹²³ Many of the sites Shar Kalden Gyatso visited to undertake extensive retreats were already sacred retreat places reputedly sanctified by blessings from highly accomplished Buddhist masters, first and foremost the Nyingma School's central figure, Padmasambhava. Later, many of these sites included Shar Kalden Gyatso as an important figure in their spiritual pedigree. Thus, the symbolic authority of Shar Kalden Gyatso over many of these sacred sites was established due to the correlation between his meditation feats and the sanctity and power of these potent sites previously blessed by generations of Buddhist saints. Andrew Quintman's presentation of a dialectic relationship between sacred site and saint as well as institutions associated with one's lineage is apt here, as Shar Kalden Gyatso not only appropriated the prestige accruing from his affiliation with the sacred sites blessed by previous saints of historical importance,¹²⁴ but with his increasing popularity and prestige, some new sites were created following his meditation retreats. The opening and/or 're-opening' of these sites certainly helped transfer their principal affiliation to him as he was playing a role similar to that of Padmasambhava in the creation of the sacred geography of Amdo. Many of these retreat sites were identified in his biographies and songs as well as the *Ocean Annals*.¹²⁵ However, as his primary personal seat, Tashi Kyil was made the center of network of an increasing number of retreat sites,¹²⁶ some of which later grew into independent lineage centers or monastic centers and benefited from affiliation with the famed lineage of Shar Kalden Gyatso.¹²⁷ Lastly, I also want to entertain the possibility that the sheer number of retreat sites associated with Shar Kalden Gyatso is a reminder of his commitment to intense

¹¹⁹ For some instances, see (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 11–12, 226–27). For extensive discussions of Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan's identification with Mi la ras pa, see (Sujata 2005, pp. 48–55). She also discusses Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho's connection with Mi la ras pa. Her discussion is, however, inadequate (Sujata 2005, pp. 56–59).

¹²⁰ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 66): *bka' brgyud kyi bla ma rnams kyi gsung mgur mang po yang rje rang nyid kyi mgur rta la bskyon nas 'then pa dang gzhan la'ang 'then du 'jug pa gnan*.

¹²¹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 68): *khyad par du rje btsun tsong kha ba yab sras kyi gsung rab rnams dang/ bka' gdams brgyud kyi bla ma rnams kyi rnam thar dang mgur ma sogs la dpe gzig rgyun du gnan*.

¹²² (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 56–57): 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa commented, "rgya gar chu bo gang+gA tshun na mkhas pa dang grub pa gnyis ka 'dzoms pa bla ma 'di pa lta bu med byas na'ang chog pas khong gi gsung mgur 'di tsho na bza' bzang bos dril te nga rang gi sngas mgo na bzhas nas skabs skabs la blta gin yod/ mi tsho la g.yar bo byed kyin yang med/ khyed tsho yang bla ma 'di'i gdams ngag 'di tsho nyams su longs dang des chog par 'dugagadams ngag 'di lta bu yod bzhin du nyams su mi len par gzhan du chos 'tshol ba ni/ rje sa paN gyis/ 'gro mgon sangs rgyas bzhugs bzhin du/ ston pa gzhan la gus byed pa/ yan lag brgyad ldan chu 'gram du/ ba tshwa'i khron pa rko ba yin/ zhes gsungs pa ltar 'gyur ba yin.

¹²³ For a biographical study of Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, see (Pang 2014, 2011).

¹²⁴ (Quintman 2008).

¹²⁵ See (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 328, 332, 339, 348, 335, 579). In his corpus of songs, there are many sites identified in his colophon notes to numerous songs. See also ('Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 201).

¹²⁶ The central place of Bkra shis 'khyil is also supported by the frequency of Bkra shis 'khyil being identified as the site for the composition of his songs. In one of his songs, he makes explicit his preference of Bkra shis 'khyil over other retreat sites. See (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1988, p. 198): *ngas dben pa brgya bsten stong bsten las/ gnas bkra shis 'khyil 'di dga' ba byung*.

¹²⁷ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 72–74). See also (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 307).

solitary practice by way of itinerant life in the mountains, avoiding worldly entanglements of his patrons and even his disciples demanding teachings from him and hence being disruptive of his regimented retreat.¹²⁸

Shar Kalden Gyatso's life as discussed extensively above is a rare window into the retreat life of the Geluk Buddhist community in seventeenth century Amdo. Given the conventional view of the Geluk School as a scholastic tradition, it may be tempting to consider the life of Shar Palden Gyatso and his retreat lineage as an anomaly. However, my scrutiny of biographies of some major Geluk masters especially that of Yeshe Gyaltzen and Longdol Lama presents an image of intensely practice-oriented life drastically different from what was traditionally assumed in the previous scholarship.¹²⁹ At the moment, I am working on a preliminary research on these two major figures in connection with religious values and ideals represented by lives of two major great siddhas Milrepa and Shar Kalden Gyatso. However, it is important to note that the retreat community within the Geluk school is a rather small population.

5. Relationship between Patron and Priest

The Geluk School was a latecomer on the religious landscape of Tibet with the foundation of its first major monasteries occurring only in the early fifteenth century. The Geluk School owes its meteoric rise and prominent position in Tibet to support from the Mongols.¹³⁰ The first historic Mongol–Geluk relationship can be traced to the late sixteenth century when the third Dalai Lama and Altan Khan met in Amdo.¹³¹ Afterwards, due to the strong presence of the Mongols in Amdo, the Geluk School had great success in quickly influencing the region dominated by Ordos and Tumed Mongols.¹³²

Among the many religious centers of the school that arose in Amdo, Rongwo is a prime example of Geluk's success in riding the currents of political patronage, especially its Mongol allies. In exploring the genealogies of Mongol patronage committed to Rongwo, in the section below, I argue that while the scholastic foundation at Rongwo with its Mongol ties marks a key moment in the institutional history of Rongwo and, by extension, the local Geluk history, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that a whole set of institutional developments were previously being initiated at Rongwo. However limited the new details the wide range of sources at my disposal provide are, they are significant enough to drastically improve our understanding of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries leading to the era of Shar Kalden Gyatso taking helm at Rongwo Monastery. In fact, my analysis in fact points to much Geluk activity at Rongwo prior to the year 1630 as hitherto considered as a historic point in Geluk history of Rebgong. In fact, my findings indicate that there was burst of Geluk growth paving the way for the scholastic foundation by Shar Kalden Gyatso. The scrutiny of the earlier Mongol patronage also helps us make an overdue reassessment of the Geluk conversion of Rongwo. Further, in contrast to the early scholarship which does not ever mention the *nangso* and its relationship with Rongwo, specific to the seventeenth century Rebgong, but simply paints a static/generic representation of the local *nangso* institution entertaining a time standing (from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries) relationship with the Lhasa and Beijing powers. At least, within their restricted limits, my sources provide few important details that shed light on the *nangso* institution playing rather a very limited role. That said, as discussed earlier, the clan identity of Shar Kalden Gyatso probably proved its significance in building his religious authority and legitimacy for his leadership role and career at Rongwo. Below are my discussions of these themes in more detail as the sources permit.

¹²⁸ During his early life, the famed Dge lugs master Ye shes rgyal mtshan (1713–1793) traveled from one retreat site to the next hoping to avoid being sought after by his patrons and especially disciples ('Jam dpal rgya mtsho 2009, pp. 67–74). This could be the case in the retreat life of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, as he visits a great many sites to undertake his retreat practices.

¹²⁹ On the lives of Ye shes rgyal mtshan and Klong rdol bla ma, see 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho 2009 and Ye shes blo bzang bstan pa'i mgon po 2016.

¹³⁰ (Tuttle 2012; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 28–34).

¹³¹ On the close ties between the third Ta lai bla ma and Altan Khan, see (Hidehiro 1992).

¹³² Ibid.

5.1. A Network of Tibetan Buddhist Masters and Mongol Patrons

At the turn of the seventeenth century, much patronage from Daching Chukhur (*da'i ching chu khur*, d. seventeenth century), a Mongol leader based in Amdo and committed to Rongwo Monastery, marked the monastery's crucial moment of growth as a Geluk institution. Subsequently, when Shar Kalden Gyatso was leading Rongwo Monastery, he had a relationship with the leader of Tumed Mongols, Tumed Qolochi, whom I will discuss in more detail below. However, the principal Mongol patron of Shar Kalden Gyatso and Rongwo Monastery was Dargyal Pohoktu (*dar gyal po hog thu*, b. seventeenth century),¹³³ the most powerful contemporary Mongol ruler based to the south of Rebgong.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, thanks to the strong Mongol patronage, a series of major events took place at Rongwo Monastery marking a historic moment in the Geluk history of Rebgong. The *Religious History of Rebgong* and the *Ocean Annals* (the latter uses the former as a source) provide few, yet very important details of the first Mongol–Rongwo relationship, which has implications for our understanding of the patronage and sectarian conversion of Rongwo Monastery. According to these sources, Nangso Guru (*gu ru*, u.d.) established a close relationship with the Mongol leader Deching Chukhur (*Te'i 'chang chu khur*, u.d.), who commissioned in gold lettering the collection of teachings designated as the word of the Buddha (*kagyur, bka' 'gyur*). In 1605, a new assembly hall was also set up under the supervision of Yerwa Choje (*yer ba chos rje*, u.d.). In the same year, Deching Chukhur tasked Arik Choje (*a rig chos rje*, u.d.) with recruiting monks from throughout Rebgong. A series of rebuilding projects also took place, including crafting of the Buddhas of the Three Times (*dus gsum sangs rgyas*), a stupa, and more importantly, a thousand images of Tsongkhapa drawn in gold lettering (*gser thang stong sku*).¹³⁴ Therefore, it is highly likely that Geluk influence had already reached Rongwo Monastery, whose continued growth was heavily dependent on the support of their Mongol patron. I was unable to locate any source that would help directly identify this Mongol patron. However, this Mongol patron was probably the same Chokhur (*cho khur*) of the Khalkha (*hal ha*) Mongol who supported the Geluk School and fought against the Tsang Army in 1617, the year before the fifth Dalai Lama was born.¹³⁵ That the Mongols based in Amdo fully committed to supporting the Geluk School by the 1630s is probably a major factor causing the Geluk conversion of Rongwo Monastery. This conclusion is probably obvious if the monastery leaders voluntarily chose the Geluk School in the face of Geluk influence sweeping across Amdo under the auspices of the Mongols. Further, Yerwa Choje is a generic name, but most likely an abbot of Yerwa Monastery near the famed Chone Monastery (*co ne dgon chen*). The *Ocean Annals* indicates that since the time of the third Dalai Lama, Geluk masters were active at Chone and Yerwa monasteries, with a scholastic foundation created at the latter in the later period, and in the surrounding area. In the *Ocean Annals*, Sonam Yeshe Wangpo (*bsod nams ye shes dang po*, u.d.), a

¹³³ The Mongol lord who moved his Qoshud (*kho sho*) Mongol subjects to settle in his future domain, to the south of Rebgong, whose adjacent area was already inhabited by Tumed (*thu med*) Mongols (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 249).

¹³⁴ ('Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, pp. 7–8). Some surveys in Chinese secondary literature indicate the year 1605 as a historic point for monastic expansion at Rongbo (Laxianjia 2016, p. 84; Ran 1994, p. 47). ('Jigs med bsam 'grub 2013, p. 320) also references this monastic growth by reporting nearly verbatim from the *Religious History of Rebgong*. When addressing the sectarian conversion, the year 1605 is rather insignificant. It vaguely suggests and situates the Dge lugs conversion in the wide time frame of the early seventeenth century. With exception, (Pu 2006, p. 694) simply indicates 1605 as the year of Dge lugs conversion with the installment of a Tsong kha pa image. However, his survey does not explore details of the historical context surrounding sectarian conversion. In the *Religious History of Rebgong* and *Ocean Annals*, the Bka' gdams master Don drup rin chen is identified as a teacher who transmits a host of teachings to Bsam gtan rin chen ('Jigs med lung rigs rgya mtsho 2010, p. 4; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 303–304). This likely explains why certain secondary Tibetan-language surveys entertain the possibility that Rongbo Monastery is a Bka' gdams institution, or one that follows a hybrid of Bka' gdams and Sa skya/Dge lugs lineages before its complete conversion to the Dge lugs school ('Jigs med bsam 'grub pp 2013, pp. 315, 218, 321; 'Jigs med theg mchog 1988, pp. 91, 94).

¹³⁵ (Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 1997, p. 575). His military assistance was provided when the Dge lugs patron and ruler of Lha sa Valley Skyid shod sde pa bsod nams rnam gyal had previously promised him the most cherished image of Lokeshvara (*lo ke sha ra*). However, it seems he won the war that year but was defeated the following year when the Gtsang Army attacked in full force (Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 1997, p. 574; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 30). The same Khalkha Mongol patron's name is alternatively spelled Chos khur (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 30).

contemporary of the third Dalai Lama, is among Geluk masters active in the area.¹³⁶ The presence of these Geluk masters probably suggests a Geluk conversion of the Sakya institution of Yerwa around or prior to this period. In his *Brief Amdo History*, Shar Kalden Gyatso, without providing any context, simply identifies Sonam Yeshe Wangpo as one playing a crucial role in paving the way for the Geluk dominance in Amdo during this period.¹³⁷ Regarding the sectarian identity of Chone Monastery, the institution converted to the Geluk School in 1459.¹³⁸ And in 1600, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen received the full ordination precept from one abbot of Chone Monastery known as Sanggye Gyaltsen (*sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan*, u.d.) without identifying the site for bestowing the vow.¹³⁹ Based on the above anecdotal accounts, it is probably safe to assume that Rongwo was already a Geluk institution by then.

Finally, it is also important to note that Samdrup Rinchen, the master who administered the novice precept to Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen and predecessor of Shar Kalden Gyatso in his reincarnation line, had a close connection with the third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso during the latter's historic meeting with Altan Khan in Amdo in 1578. On that occasion, Sandrup Rinchen received a series of teachings from the Dalai Lama.¹⁴⁰ The scenario involving the Geluk patriarch and the leader at Rongwo further enhances the case that Rongwo was part of the burst of Geluk growth characterized by the foundation and conversion of numerous monasteries which eventually became major centers of the school.¹⁴¹

I have been careful with using 'conversion' in the context of the Geluk development of the scholastic tradition as initiated by Shar Kalden Gyatso. However, the Geluk conversion of Rongwo Monastery has been solely attributed to Shar Kalden Gyatso with the foundation of his scholastic program in modern scholarship on Buddhist monastic history in Amdo.¹⁴² Western scholarship has some sense of reservation about such claims—and we read careful statements that Shar Kalden Gyatso's establishment of the scholastic center marks the 'definitive conversion' of Rongwo Monastery, or "With Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho as its head, Rong bo monastery became firmly established in the Dge lugs tradition."¹⁴³ This claim implies that Rongwo Monastery was already partially integrated into the Geluk School prior to the foundation of the scholastic program.

According to modern scholars Dorje Gyal (*rdo rje rgyal*) and Jikmed Samdrup (*'jigs med bsam 'grub*), the Geluk conversion was, however, attributed to the successful propagation of Geluk teachings, especially the institution of the ritual tradition in memory of the passing away of Geluk founder, Tsongkhapa, and a strict monastic regulatory system put in place by Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen in 1608, the same year he returned to Rebgong from five years of training in Central Tibet. Both scholars interpret relevant vague verses in the biography of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen as the latter establishing anew the ritual tradition.¹⁴⁴ However, it remains to be understood if Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen was establishing or simply reviving the monastery's liturgical system. It must be noted, however, that the assumption of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's success in instituting a ritual system does not necessarily amount to the Geluk conversion of the monastery.

¹³⁶ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 667).

¹³⁷ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, p. 341).

¹³⁸ It is indicated as a Rnying ma monastery prior to its Dge lugs conversion in a survey study (Tuttle 2012, 130). However, Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas identifies its prior existence as a Sa skya institution (1982, p. 646). It is probably a lapse on the part of modern scholarship when citing the source.

¹³⁹ It seems common to refer to abbots of Co ne Monastery by the title chos rje (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, 1982, pp. 651–55).

¹⁴⁰ (*'jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho* 1997, pp. 93–94).

¹⁴¹ See (Tuttle 2012, p. 134).

¹⁴² (Rin chen sgrol ma 2018, p. 88).

¹⁴³ Footnote 2 on p.136 in (Tuttle 1992; Dhondup 2011, p. 44). See also "The First Rongpo Drubchen, Shar Kelden Gyatso," *The Treasure of Lives*, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Shar-Kelden-Gyatso/9753>, accessed on March 25, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ (Rdo rje rgyal 2011, p. 133; *'jigs med bsam 'grub* 2013, p. 315; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 105). *'jigs med bsam 'grub* somehow dates 1607 as the year of Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan's return to Reb gong which is surely an error made when calculating and converting the traditional Tibetan calendar year to the common era year (*'jigs med bsam 'grub* 2013, p. 315).

The biographies of Shar Kalden Gyatso and Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen and the two major local histories (*Religious History of Rebgong* and *Ocean Annals*) mentioned above do not claim that the foundation of the scholastic program meant the conversion of Rongwo Monastery in any sense of the word. In fact, they are silent on the sectarian transition from the Sakya to the Geluk School, but not probably because they are deliberately avoiding mention of the transition of sectarian identity. It is secondary literature that makes the claim or suggests that the leadership role of Shar Kalden Gyatso, or Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen at Rongwo Monastery, marked its conversion. Consequently, I argue that Rongwo Monastery was more likely already a thoroughly Geluk Monastery because: (1) The Mongol patron who committed resources to rebuilding and expanding Rongwo Monastery was a major proponent of the Geluk School; (2) The Mongols based in Amdo fully supported the Geluk School from 1578 onwards, with the exception of the period between 1634 and 1637;¹⁴⁵ (3) A thousand images of Tsongkhapa, the founder of Geluk Buddhism, were crafted in gold; (4) The early resources never mention any sort of conversion Rongwo Monastery experienced during the life of Shar Kalden Gyatso; and (5) It is only modern scholarship that makes the first assertion that Shar Kalden Gyatso's formulation of the scholastic program ushers in the Geluk conversion of Rongwo Monastery, a claim that secondary literature in English conforms to and repeats without further scrutiny of such statements on the basis of comparison of early and modern sources.

Shar Kalden Gyatso was a great scholar and yogin, but this does not preclude him from enacting multiple roles such as institution builder or priest giving teachings and performing rituals to secular rulers. Immediately after the completion of his Kachu degree, Shar Kalden Gyatso was ready to leave his monastery in Central Tibet for Amdo. Early on with the dominance of Tibet by the Mongols after the formation of the patron–priest relationship between the third Dalai Lama and Altan Khan, there was a high demand among the Mongols for highly-achieved Geluk monks as their priests to give initiations and perform rituals. This was especially so for Lhasa-trained Amdo scholars upon their return to their homeland characterized by a strong presence of Mongol princes, especially in the Kokonor area. According to Jikmed Damchöe Gyatso, serving as a private priest for a Mongol local ruler kept a charismatic scholar and leader from better rendering service to the growth of Dharma in northeastern Tibet far from the center of the Geluk School in Central Tibet. For that matter, right before Shar Kalden Gyatso's departure from Central Tibet, his teacher, Gyalrong Tenpa Dargye (*rgyal rong bstan pa dar rgyas*, u.d.), instructed him three times, “Don't go to the Mongol region, go to your own monastery.”¹⁴⁶

Ngawang Sonam would record that Shar Kalden Gyatso left directly for Rebgong. However, Jikmed Damchöe's biography adds a twist related to his departure and return to Rebgong to found the philosophical college at Rongwo Monastery. His teacher's advice fell to the wind, at least for a time. Shar Kalden Gyatso was active in the Upper Mongolia (*stod sog*)¹⁴⁷ area and won popularity among his Mongol followers. However, Shar Kalden Gyatso left for Rebgong after a short stay because of previous advice from his teacher and Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen's insistence.¹⁴⁸

Starting with Shar Kalden Gyatso's role as founder and main teacher of the scholastic college at Rongwo Monastery, he began very close relationships with many of the most influential Geluk teachers active in Amdo. With his increasingly high stature, Shar Kalden Gyatso was also priest to a number of

¹⁴⁵ (Tuttle 2012, pp. 134, 136; Sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor 1982, pp. 9, 11–13).

¹⁴⁶ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 10). However, according to (Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 131), the teacher is quoted as saying: *khyed sog yul du ma 'gro bar rang gi dgon par song*. The same attitude toward Mongols was also insinuated and conveyed to Kun mkhyen ngag dbang brtson 'grus by the then-abbot of Byang tse College of Dga' ldan Monastery when Henan *Qingwang* sent for the former to return to Amdo and found the future Bla brang Monastery (Kun mkhyen 'jigs med dbang po 1987, p. 139).

¹⁴⁷ Refers to the Kokonor region inhabited by the Mongols (Bod rang ljongs srid gros lo rgyus rig gnas dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha u yon lhan khang 1998, p. 318).

¹⁴⁸ (Bod rang ljongs srid gros lo rgyus rig gnas dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha u yon lhan khang 1998, p. 132).

Tibetan and Mongol leaders in Amdo. Two prominent Mongol lords—Qolochi (*kho li chi*, u.d.) and Dargye Pohoktu (*dar rgyas po shog thu*, u.d.)—appear in his life.

In the biography of Shar Kalden Gyatso written by Ngawang Sonam, there were three meetings between Shar Kalden Gyatso and Qolochi. However, the biography limits us to very few details and tells us little about anything else. During the first meeting, Shar Kalden Gyatso was offered ten gold coins. The biographer quotes the Mongol lord on that occasion as saying, “I wholeheartedly repent that I didn’t revere you as a lama before and that I made you feel irritated or upset,”¹⁴⁹ which suggests the occasion is the beginning of the patronage from the Mongol lord after reparation of his relationship, characterized by antagonism, with Shar Kalden Gyatso. Their second meeting took place on the occasion of the *Junang* inviting Rgyal sras bstan ‘dzin blo bzang from the Kokonor region. Shar Kalden Gyatso’s primary goal on this trip was to visit Gyalse Lozang Tendzin, who would give him important teachings on Geluk Mahamudra (*dge lugs phyag chen*).¹⁵⁰ Their final meeting was when both Dargyal Pohoktu and Qolochi invited him to their domain. The nature of this visit is unknown.¹⁵¹

The Tumed Mongols led by Qolochi dominated the Kokonor region.¹⁵² After defeat by Tsogtu Taiji (*chog thu the ji*), they settled in Damkhok (*‘dam khog*)¹⁵³ and continued communicating with the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. They then moved and occupied the Dzoge Lindul (*mdzod dge gling ‘dul*) area in Amdo. After the arrival of Dargye Pohoktu, in the neighboring area of Tsebal (*rtse ‘bal*), Qolochi’s subjects seem to be dispersed into many groups.¹⁵⁴ Despite his prominent role in the decades preceding the short-lived rule of the Kokonor area by Tsogtu Taiji, Tumed Qolochi then preserved very limited power in later times such that his status as a Mongol lord was inconsequential to the growth of Rongwo Monastery, at least according to sources now available.

A grandson of Gushi Khan, Dargyal Pohoktu, was the most important Mongol ruler supporting Shar Kalden Gyatso and Rongwo Monastery. After moving to his future domain, he quickly controlled a greater portion of Amdo, including all of Rebgong.¹⁵⁵ He consolidated his base by inheriting power from his own brother, Kadro Lozang Tenkyong (*mkha’ ‘gro blo bzang bstan skyong*, u.d.), who was once the most powerful Mongol ruler in Kham. While based in Dzchu Kha (*rdza chu kha*) in Kham, Khadro Lozang Tenkyong (*mkha’ ‘gro blo bzang bstan skyong*) converted to the Nyingma School. As a result, the Mongol princes in the Kokonor Region who were staunch defenders of the Geluk School attacked and killed him. His brother Dargyal Pohoktu then took over his domain. During the war between Bhutan and the Ganden government during the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama, Dargyal Pohoktu provided military assistance and was thus given much recognition by the Geluk patriarch.¹⁵⁶ Baso Jedrung Ngakwang Konchok Nyima¹⁵⁷ (*ba so rje drung ngag dbang dkon mchog nyi ma*, 1653–1707) was sent to Dargyal Pohoktu’s domain as a priest representing the fifth Dalai Lama.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, as a staunch defender of the Geluk School, when Shar Kalden Gyatso launched a series of efforts to build Geluk institutions, the Mongol ruler was close at hand to support him and his monastic community. According to Ngawang Sonam, during the funeral service of the deceased mother of the Mongol ruler,

¹⁴⁹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 28): *bdag gis sngon chad khyed bla mar ma bzung ba dang/bka’ bcag thugs dkrugs pa snying nas bshag*.

¹⁵⁰ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 42).

¹⁵¹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 46).

¹⁵² (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 31; Sum pa ye shes dpal ‘byor 1982, p. 6, 1002; Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990, p. 65).

¹⁵³ A Mongol-inhabited area in Nag chu kha region in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

¹⁵⁴ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 249). Sujata has reservations about the idea that Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho’s Mongol patron, Qolochi, and this important ruler of the Kokonor region might be the same person (Sujata 2005, p. 374n31). However, Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas seems to identify them as being the same person (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, pp. 31, 249).

¹⁵⁵ (Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990, pp. 71–72).

¹⁵⁶ He was given the title Dga’ ldan Aer ng+hi bo shog thu ju nang from the fifth Ta lai bla ma (Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1982, p. 73).

¹⁵⁷ An eminent monk active at the Qing court as well as in Mongol communities in Amdo (Mi nyag mgon po et al. 1996).

¹⁵⁸ (Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1982, p. 73).

Shar Kalden Gyatso administered the primary vow to a hundred monk candidates offered by the Mongol ruler.¹⁵⁹ However, modern biographer Jikmed Damchoe Gyatso writes that among his major contributions to Rongwo Monastery, “The great *wang* offered several hundred boys to become monks at Rongwo Monastery all together. He also pledged grain tax from farming areas towards the funds for ritual services.”¹⁶⁰

Given such benefits bestowed on Shar Kalden Gyatso and his monastery, I doubt the validity of Sujata’s general assertion that Shar Kalden Gyatso did not view the Mongols favorably.¹⁶¹ Her statement needs to be examined in context. It is true that his songs contain verses expressing his distrust of and frustration with the Mongols, but he is probably not critical of the Mongols in general. Instead, he was most likely targeting certain Mongol groups. I make this claim because, according to Konchok Tenpa Rapgye, after the defeat of Qolochi by Choktsu, some Mongol taijis including Phag thar Qolochi moved to the south of Yellow River and looted Tibetan farming communities.¹⁶² As such, victims of these Mongols probably included supporting communities of Rongwo Monastery, or Tibetans in the neighboring region. This circumstance is most likely one of the reasons for his mixed feelings about the Mongols. It is highly likely that the target of his criticism was a particular group of Mongols looting Tibetans. His verbal attacks might, therefore, not be directed at his most generous Mongol patron or the Mongols per se. In addition to the funeral service he presided over, Shar Kalden Gyatso also performed the typical role of a priest—for instance performing rituals and giving initiations as requested by the Mongol ruler. His frustration with his Mongol patrons was also probably due to much ritual demand placed on him that may have interrupted his own regime of religious practice,¹⁶³ just as his responsibility to lead Rongwo Monastery and its scholastic college had. However, it is also important to note that in two instances in his corpus of songs, Shar Kalden Gyatso also implies that a toll was placed on the social and religious status quo of the region by political turmoil instigated by the incessant Mongol rivalry.¹⁶⁴

Thanks to his rise as the most important Mongol ruler in Amdo, Dargyal Pohoktu was eventually promoted to the rank of *qinwang* (*qin wang*) from *junwang* (*jun wang*).¹⁶⁵ However, Shar Kalden Gyatso’s biographer was not consistent in addressing this powerful Mongol patron. For the most part, he was addressed as *junang* (*ju nang*),¹⁶⁶ but he was occasionally referred to as *qinwang*. His son Tshewang Tendzin (*tshe dbang bstan ‘dzin*)¹⁶⁷ also received the title *qinwang*, demonstrating his success in retaining a steady and strong power base inherited from his father, largely due to his submission to the Qing.¹⁶⁸ Rongwo retained close relationships with his successor, *Qinwang* Tendzin, who was the principal Mongol lord who supported the founding of the future Labrang monastery by Jamyang Zhepa.

5.2. A Note on the Role of the Nangso Institution in Relation to the Geluk Growth in Rebgong

The *nangso* family first founded Rongwo as a Sakya Monastery and has since supposedly been the engine behind the whole program of institutional development at Rongwo. However, during the time of Shar Kalden Gyatso, at least according to our available sources, Rongwo *Nangso* doesn’t

¹⁵⁹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 50).

¹⁶⁰ (‘Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho 1997, p. 202): *wang chen mo ‘dis snga phyir rong bor grwa rgyun brgya phrag mang po dang/rong phyogs kyi nas khral rnams chos thog gi ‘theb tu sbyar ba sogs*.

¹⁶¹ Cf. (Sujata 2005, pp. 2–5).

¹⁶² (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 31).

¹⁶³ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 123, 158, 239, 268). For another example of bustle and hustle surrounding the patron–priest or social relationship being a hindrance to solitary religious life, see (Schaeffer 2004, pp. 31–33).

¹⁶⁴ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 123, 265).

¹⁶⁵ *Qinwang* is a Chinese term for the highest rank of office bestowed on the leaders of Mongols in the Kokonor region. *Junwang* is a Chinese term for a political office one rank lower than *qinwang* (Sujata 2005, p. 374n32).

¹⁶⁶ *Junang* is the Tibetan phonetic rendition of the Chinese term *junwang* (ibid.).

¹⁶⁷ His alternative name is Tsha gan bstan ‘dzin. Oidtmann confuses this person with his father Dar rgyal po shog thu (Oidtmann 2014, p. 288). Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas clearly identifies Tshe dbang bstan ‘dzin as one of the many sons of Dar rgyal po shog thu (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 248).

¹⁶⁸ (Oidtmann 2014, p. 278).

appear prominently in the institutional history of the Geluk School. The only instance where Rongwo *Nangso* is mentioned is the bare fact that he was named Jamyang (*'jam dbyangs*), and at Rongwo he commissioned a twelve-volume set of the Perfection of Wisdom sutra written in gold. Along with one monk superintendent, Rongwo *Nangso* was put in charge of overseeing the building project of the new assembly hall at Rongwo initiated by Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen.¹⁶⁹

With increasing fame in Amdo as the towering religious figure in the region with the ideal roles of scholar and yogin combined in one person, Shar Kalden Gyatso cemented his close relationships with Mongol patrons and courted relationships with several other local supporters. Shar Kalden Gyatso served as a ritual priest to Zhingkyong (*zhing skyong*) *Nangso*, performing rituals on his behalf. Zhingkyong *Nangso* provided major support to Kumbum Monastery from its inception.¹⁷⁰ This may also partly explain the series of teachings he gave to the assembly of monks at Kumbum Monastery.¹⁷¹ However, his whole teaching tour and his association with Zhingkyong *Nangso* are probably due to his intimate relationship with his teacher, Kowa Chokyi Gyatso, the second abbot of Kumbum and a very influential Geluk master in Amdo. He was also relatively active in Arik (*a rig*)¹⁷² and Khagya areas, as well as in the Muslim town of Kacu (*ka cu*, Lingxia).¹⁷³ The biography simply states that he was sponsored by local lay patrons during his trips to the abovementioned areas when he performed ritual services.

6. Promoting a Non-Sectarian Ethos in the Multi-Religious World

Shar Kalden Gyatso's religious authority and his ever-evolving personae as a preeminent Buddhist leader depend on many factors as extensively discussed throughout this study. In addition, religious ecumenism is a standout phenomenon helping carve out a much-respected niche for Shar Kalden Gyatso favored by followers of non-Geluk religious traditions in Rebgong. This helps explain a great deal about the Geluk growth in a region like Rebgong characterized by its pluralism of religious institutions and communities. Our sources sufficiently indicate a complete embrace of non-Geluk Buddhist traditions by Shar Kalden Gyatso. However, slightly critical of the previous scholarship, I have come to realize that his impartial approach toward non-Geluk traditions is of a much narrow scope, with his non-sectarian outlook confined only to his fellow Buddhist schools. There are clues to suggest that at least he ascribes an inferior status to the teachings of the Bon religion.

Prior to the founding of a scholastic college at Rongwo Monastery, it is likely that there was not a single Geluk School learning institute operating on a systematic basis in the Rebgong area. It is also probably the case that the Nyingma and Bon schools existed alongside each other without an institutional basis. Rather, they likely operated in the form of hermitic traditions until much later in their direct encounter with the Geluk institutions in the region as suggested in our earliest written sources contained in the collection of works by Shar Kalden Gyatso, which deal tangentially with the history of hermitic Nyingma and Bon religious traditions.¹⁷⁴ The existence of the earliest Bon

¹⁶⁹ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, pp. 18–19). Dhondup's brief addressing of *nang so* is a static representation of *nangso* as a local ruler entertaining a long standing relationship with the Lhasa and Beijing powers where exchange of titles and gifts take place. She simply lists a number of *nang so* and then makes a generic statement, based on modern sources, intended to exemplify the authority of *nang so* over the long course of time from the Ming until the nineteenth century in Rebgong. In her work, *nang so* is not mentioned at all for the period of the seventeenth century in connection to Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho (Dhondup 2011, pp. 41–42).

¹⁷⁰ The name for a major clan supporting Sku 'bum Monastery. For details on the supporting clans of the monastery, see (Ao 1991).

¹⁷¹ For a study of Sku 'bum Monastery, see (Karsten 1996).

¹⁷² A *rig* is a Tibetan clan with its subdivisions dispersed in few areas. However, they are mainly concentrated in the area between the Mongol domain of Henan *Qinwang* and the Mgo log region, and the area adjacent to the Mdo la mountain range to the north of Qinghai Lake. For details, see (Zhouta 2011, pp. 105–18).

¹⁷³ A historic Muslim trading town bordering Bla brang area in Amdo.

¹⁷⁴ At this point, historical sources directly dealing with the non-Dge lugs traditions in Rebgong in the seventeenth century and prior period are non-existent. Hence, we can only turn to our available Dge lugs sources which unintendedly suggest such a scenario of early religious life in Rebgong. This is, however, at best an educated guess. With the rise of the Dge lugs School

monastery is recorded in the *Ocean Annals* which does not identify it by its name, but specify it was a monastery of modest size located close to Musel (*dmu gsal*) Monastery of the Nyingma School with the latter being founded in 1823.¹⁷⁵ This is the only Bon monastery in Rebgong ever mentioned in the *Ocean Annals*, whose final written form was complete in 1865. Therefore, by that point, we are assured that Bon was already growing in a monastic context.¹⁷⁶ Our available historical sources suggest that the Nyingma School emerged as an important religious force to be reckoned with during the time of Rigdzin Palden Tashi (*rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis*, 1688–1742/3), the active proselytizer of the Nyingma School in Rebgong and adjacent areas.¹⁷⁷ However, the institutional influence of the Nyingma School reached its peak at the very beginning of the nineteenth century only when the charismatic leader Palchen Namkha Jikmed (*dpal chen nam mkha' jigs med*, 1757–1821) brought Nyingma communities together as a self-conscious movement vis-à-vis the exponential growth of the Geluk School in the form of an expansion of its network of monasteries and inter-community rituals.¹⁷⁸

Against the multi-religious background of Rebgong, which is still little understood, Shar Kalden Gyatso was locally well known for his religious ecumenism. According to Sujata, there are two aspects of his religious career—one in relation to his strong association with famed siddhas in the Kagyud retreat lineage and the other the reverence he has shown for the first Karmapa Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (*karmapa dus gsum mkhyen pa*, 1110–1193)—that identify him as a non-sectarian figure. She believes that Shar Kalden Gyatso and other Geluk masters considering Milarepa as inspirational in their retreat lives (with the extreme of the Kagyud master being identified as the previous existence of a few select Geluk masters), to some extent, represent that these elite Geluk Buddhists were non-sectarian in religious outlook, and even more so considering the conflict between the Geluk and its supporters on the one hand, and Kagyud and its allies on the other.¹⁷⁹ However, since Milarepa is considered as a role model for yogic practices in all Tibetan Buddhist schools regardless of their sectarian affiliation, the example of Geluk monks, including Shar Kalden Gyatso and Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, following the model of Milarepa may be insufficient evidence to defend them as holding a non-sectarian approach toward the school's longtime foe—the Kagyud School. Yet Sujata's statement is not without any truthful basis, as Gyalse Tenzin Gyatso and Shar Kalden Gyatso were also heavily invested in the reincarnation identity of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen,¹⁸⁰ who was henceforth recognized as the rebirth of a few select Drukpa Kagyud (*'brug pa bkra brgyud*) masters, in the wake of an eruption of tension

in Rebgong by the turn of the seventeenth century, the Sa skya School completely vanished in the area with the lingering tradition in the Rong bo monastic complex of worshiping the image of Panyjara-natha (*gur mgon*) originally bestowed as a gift from the Sakya patriarch 'Gro mgon 'phags pa (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 303). Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas references the introduction of 'Bri gung bka' brgyud School in Rebgong dating to the twelfth century (Ibid, pp. 342–43). However, no mention is ever made of 'Bri gung School in Rebgong in the primary sources of this study.

¹⁷⁵ (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 332).

¹⁷⁶ However, contemporary research on the Bon history of the region has failed to take note of this important tidbit of information and typically places the beginning of monastic Bon religion in the early twentieth century during the time of Bon brgya g.yang drung phun tshogs (1874–?), the predecessor of Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho (1936–2018), who was leading Bon brgya (*bon brgya*) Monastery until his death. However, it seems the monastic Bon tradition was probably in decline during the same time frame, and Bon brgya gyang drung phun tshogs was making every effort to initiate a revival of Bon monasticism (G.yang drung phun tshogs, n.p., p. 126). On the negligence of the prior existence of Bon brgya Monastery, see (Thar 2008, p. 285; Cairangtai and Dunzhulajie 2015, p. 385). For an autobiography of Bon brgya g.yang drung phun tshogs, see G.yang drung phun tshogs, n.p. Bon brgya g.yang drung phun tshogs' works are compiled in a collection of ten volumes reprinted for the third time in Lanzhou (Dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, 2014 [2013, 2009], Mkhas dbang bon brgya rin po che'i gsung rtsom phyogs bsgrigs, 10 vols., Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang). Although the inside page of the front cover for the latest reprint of his collection indicates there are a total of 11 volumes, only the first ten volumes are actually printed with volume 11 being excluded. His autobiography, which is still an ongoing writing project at the time of the writing of this paper, is planned as the purported volume 11.

¹⁷⁷ For a short autobiography, see (Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis 2002). This autobiography compiled and published in Xining is comprised of three short accounts spanning 31 pages in total.

¹⁷⁸ Toward the end of his life, we witness a tremendous growth of Rnying ma monasticism marked by the founding of four Rnying ma monastic centers and the unusual conversion of the Dge lugs monastery of G.ya' ma bkra shis 'khyil. See (Dhondup 2013, pp.118–21). For a study of Dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med, see (Dhondup 2013, pp. 118–21).

¹⁷⁹ (Sujata 2005, pp. xiii, 47, 61–63).

¹⁸⁰ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 11–12, 226–27).

between the schools in Central Tibet when Shar Kalden Gyatso's teacher Dewa Choje's family estates were confiscated, his brother was imprisoned, and he himself was forced into exile in Amdo.¹⁸¹

According to Shar Kalden Gyatso, one of the previous existences of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen is the acclaimed Drupa master Gonpo Dorje (1189–1258), who seems to have made a significant impact on Shar Kalden Gyatso. Not only did Shar Kalden Gyatso make the claim of this very master being an early existence of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen.¹⁸² According to Ngawang Sonam, Shar Kalden Gyatso also instituted rules for the hermitage of Tashi Khyil to consciously follow a precedent set by this very master as it is recorded in the biography that his stipulation of rules are based on that of the Drukpa Kagyud master.¹⁸³ In general, the Kagyud School is probably most famous for producing a batch of well-known Kagyud masters with Milarepa at the forefront for espousing the siddha ideals in the practice-oriented strand of Tibetan Buddhism. A number of them go by the title *repa* (*ras pa*, the cotton-clad one) as part of their names, indicating their siddha identity and feats in tantric practices. Among them is Gonpo Dorje, commonly known by his epithet Godtsang Repa (*rgod tshang ras pa*). Hence, we can easily see that Shar Kalden Gyatso finds himself identified with these early Kagyud practitioners who are the masters of retreat lineages par excellence, as he himself also adopts the same title, and hence he is also known as Kalden Repa. Though the generations of Geluk masters practiced Great Seal teachings, mainly associated with the Kagyud School, yet Sujata rightly pointed out that they followed their practices in a Geluk framework.¹⁸⁴ However, she makes a valid statement that Shar Kalden Gyatso's homage to the first Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa in his collection of songs substantiates his friendly approach toward the Kagyu School.¹⁸⁵

Due to the lack of sources, it is very challenging to reconstruct the sectarian history of seventeenth-century Rebgong. I apologize if my discussions below may seem as a presentation of the Geluk School at the expense of other traditions. However, at least in the context of the seventeenth century Rebgong or the life and career of Shar Kalden Gyatso, we can turn to his songs, biography, historical work, and offering ritual manual in his collected works for more evidence, unknown in the existing secondary scholarship, that undeniably present him as impartial in his view of other Buddhist traditions.

In the collection of his songs, there are three episodes of songs that we can treat as good evidence for his non-sectarian approach toward non-Geluk Buddhist schools. He makes generically positive comments about these Buddhist traditions.¹⁸⁶

It is worth quoting the following verse in one of these songs for my discussion below. Shar Kalden Gyatso sings:

It is best if I feel inspired.

By the diverse forms of other schools and religions.

If not, I shall cultivate pure perception.

And I vow not to slander meaninglessly.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ (Sullivan 2013, pp. 95, 105–107, 109).

¹⁸² (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 11–12).

¹⁸³ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 24).

¹⁸⁴ Tsong kha pa initiates the transmission of *Great Seal* teachings in the Dge lugs School. For a translation of the root text for the Dge lugs form of *Great Seal* composed by the first Pan chen bla ma Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan and its commentary by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, see (Lozang and Dhargyey 1976). See also (Sujata 2005, pp. 60–63).

¹⁸⁵ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 288–89); See (Sujata 2005, p. 47).

¹⁸⁶ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 258–59): *dpal dus gsum mkhyen pa u rgyan gyi chos kun gyi rgyal po rdzogs pa che/rje mi la ras pa yab sras kyidus rgyun ma'i thugs dan mthil gyi mchog/lam phyag rgya chen po'i nyams khrid kyang/ming bsgyur tsam ma gtogs lta ba'i khrid/bu mkhas mkhas shes rab che che kun/lam lta ba 'di la sgro 'dogs chod/kha nang du bltas nas sems steng skor/dpe phyi ru lto la nang du sgoms*. Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 289: *mchog sangs rgyas 'thob pa'i thabs dam pa/sa dge ldan gsar rnying kun la yod/ gzhan ma smod dag snang kun la sbyongs/gtam 'di las byung ba'i dge ba'i tshogs/dpal dus gsum mkhyen pa'i rnam thar ltar chos zab mo nyams su blangs pas mchog sangs rgyas 'thob pa'i rgyu ru sngo*.

¹⁸⁷ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 125): *gzhan grub mtha' chos lugs sna tshogs la/ yid g.yo ba'i dad pa skyes na rab/ de min na'ang dag snang sbyong ba dang/don med par mi smod dam bca' yin*.

This is the only verse from a song, that demonstrates the influence of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen on his sectarian orientation. In the colophon to this song, Shar Kalden Gyatso says, “I pledge before Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen”¹⁸⁸ to treat all religions and lineages impartially. In the biography of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen by Shar Kalden Gyatso himself, there was a scant mention of Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen commissioning an image of Padmasambhava, the central figure of the Nyingma School, without giving us much contextual detail surrounding the image.¹⁸⁹ Anyway, Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen’s embrace of the Nyingma School could have also had a significant effect on Shar Kalden Gyatso’s view of the Nyingma School.

In the biographies of Shar Kalden Gyatso written by Ngawang Sonam and Jikmed Damchoe Gyatso, respectively, we can also detect his favorable outlook toward the Nyingma School as evident in his retreat life at many of the retreat sites associated with the Nyingma School. The fact that Shar Kalden Gyatso proudly includes the Nyingma pedigree of spiritual lineages at these important power places in his presentation of Geluk history (in his songs and *Brief Religious History of Amdo*) is already ample evidence proving, to some extent, his acceptance of the Nyingma School.¹⁹⁰ For him, the previous identification of the sites of the Nyingma School was not to be avoided, but rather celebrated in order to demonstrate the spiritual power of these potent sites to be inherited by the Geluk lineages. The arrival of the Geluk School in the region was never a rupture or breakaway from the Buddhist history of the region from earlier on, although different Buddhist lineages emerged aspiring to the same salvational goal. It is the non-sectarian apotheosis of Shar Kalden Gyatso whereby a favorable condition was created for the Geluk School to take off in a new domain already inhabited by non-Geluk followers. There is no doubt that his friendly interaction with non-Geluk religious communities and his efforts to envision and galvanize a religious world with a non-sectarian outlook formed a major impetus behind the widespread acceptance of the Geluk School and its later exponential growth in the region. We are also assured that Shar Kalden Gyatso looked to the places blessed by Padmasambhava and other Nyingma masters as sources of inspiration in his own retreat practice.¹⁹¹ In one song, while encouraging his Amdo native disciples to embark on monastic education in his alma mater Sangphu Monastery in Central Tibet, he also exhorts them to stop by en route to visit monasteries belonging to schools of both new and early translation traditions so as to receive blessings from worshipping sacred images and objects held in these religious edifices.¹⁹² In another song spanning less than three pages in modern print format, he narrates the life of the fifth Dalai Lama, yet within this very limited

¹⁸⁸ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 125): *Blo bzang bstan pa’i rgyal mtshan’i mdun du rang gis dam bcas pa*.

¹⁸⁹ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999d, p. 122).

¹⁹⁰ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, pp. 345, 347–48; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 228, 250–51). In the *Ocean Annals*, Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas cites verses of Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho in reference to the role of Padmasambhava in sacralizing the vast land of Amdo (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 342–46). Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho acknowledges the high stature and role of Rnying ma School’s central figure Padmasambhava in the religious history of Reb gong prior to the inception of the Dge lugs School in the area. Further, he identifies a few individual places as retreat sites of potent power and then also makes a bare mention of a list of the eight retreat sites (*grub gnas brgyad*) as the main network of retreat lineage in Reb gong. However, although Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho does not identify each of the eight retreat sites individually, we can gather that those few places of sacred power he mentions as located in Reb gong are among the eight retreat sites as confirmed by the *Ocean Annals* which relied on a major unidentified work by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho’s contemporary A’gron mkhas btsun rgya mtsho which is now unavailable to us (see Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, pp. 342, 344–45). It is only in the *Ocean Annals*, for the first time, that Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas lists each of these retreat sites (*Ibid.*, pp. 342–46). In the *Ocean Annals*, one of these sites was associated with Dran pa nam mkha’ of Bon (*Ibid.*, p. 345). Dran pa nam mkha’ is a major Rnying ma master from the imperial period, recognized as a major disciple of Padmasambhava. However, he also enjoys an illustrious career in Bon literature. Because of the explicit marker Bon, one would readily treat it as a Bon site. And Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas concludes his presentation of the eight retreat sites by also listing a number of other Rnying ma and Bon retreat masters once active in the area (*Ibid.*, p. 346). Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas even adds one more retreat site to make it an alternative network of nine retreat sites (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 345), a cause for varying lists of the eight retreat sites of Reb gong in modern scholarship. See (Stoddard 2013, Appendix 1, pp. 110–12).

¹⁹¹ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999a, pp. 345, 347–48; Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 228, 250–51).

¹⁹² (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 51): *lam skabs gsar rnying gi chos sde na/ ya mtshan rang byon gyi rten mang bzhuigs/ phyag bskor gsol ’debs kyi gser snod du/byin rlabs ’dod ’jo yi ba mos ’jos*.

space, he allows for a reference to the Dalai Lama's deep immersion in Nyingma teachings,¹⁹³ a sign of his acknowledgement of the Geluk patriarch's strong association with the Nyingma School. And in composing a verse on reincarnation lineage history of his disciple the fourth Tongkhor Dogyu Gyatso (*stong 'khor mdo rgyud rgya mtsho*, 1640–1683), Shar Kalden Gyatso includes Padmasambhava's disciple Yudra Nyingpo (*g.yu sgra snyin gpo*) as one in the line and specifies that Dogyu Gyatso was previously born as Yudra Nyingpo to propagate the *Great Perfection* teachings.¹⁹⁴

Lastly, his *Manual for Offerings for Cleansing* is most revealing in his complete embrace of Padmasambhava. Unlike many supplication verses, the one in question begins with a short sadhana or deity yoga on Padmasambhava after reciting verses on generation of mind from Taking Refuge.¹⁹⁵

Blessed by OM A:hUM,
 seated on the mattress of sun and moon on the crown, the abode of OM,
 is Father Guru Awareness-holder Padmasambhava,
 holding vajra skull cups in both the left and right hand,
 sitting cross-legged in blazing resplendence.
 When the body of deity—Guru—radiates,
 all receptacles turn into inestimable mansions;
 all contents turn into gods and goddesses;
 In particular, I myself become Padmasambhava.¹⁹⁶

Shar Kalden Gyatso's acceptance, rather than mere respect, of the Nyingma School's central figure is evidently clear from the above verse. He prescribes a sadhana on Padmasambhava before supplicating the region's major protector deity as most of the "pre-Buddhist" deities were bound under oath by Padmasambhava. His non-sectarian stance was also celebrated by and put forward as a role model to follow for his Geluk lineage followers in the subsequent centuries, with Nyingma followers increasingly facing the dominant presence of the Geluk School and its sectarian partisanship.¹⁹⁷

According to Jikmed Damchog Gyatso, among his many learned disciples is Adron Khetsun Gyatso (*a 'gron mkhas btsun rgya mtsho*, u.d.), a major Nyingma teacher who was initially trained in the Geluk teachings.¹⁹⁸ The reference to this teacher–student relationship probably means that Adron Khetsun Gyatso received a few teachings from Shar Kalden Gyatso as a token of the former's respect for the latter. As the brief biography of Adron Khetsun never mentions Shar Kalden Gyatso as a teacher and his life is instead portrayed as one of leading a very active Nyingma teaching career,¹⁹⁹ his label as a student of Geluk master Shar Kalden Gyatso, according to Ngawang Sonam, perhaps simply indicates the cordial relationship between the two local dignitaries, despite their sectarian differences.²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹³ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, pp. 309–11).

¹⁹⁴ (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 14).

¹⁹⁵ *skyabs 'gro sems bskyed*. In general, in Tibetan Buddhism, the recitation of the verse goes hand in hand with the contemplation on generation of the mind.

¹⁹⁶ (Skal ldan rgya mtsho 1999c, pp. 441–42): *oM A:hUM gis byin gyis brlabs/oM gnas spyi gtsug nyi zla'i gdan steng du/pha bla ma rig 'dzin pad+ma 'byung/phyag g.yas g.yon rdo rje thod phor bsnams/zhal dkyil krung gzi brjid 'bar bar bzhugs/lha bla ma'i sku las 'od 'phros pas/snod thams cad gzhal yas khang pa dang/bcud thams cad lha dang lha mo dang/sgos rang yang pad+ma sam+b+har gyur*. Its full title in Tibetan is *dkar phyogs skyong ba'i yul lha gnyan chen po se ku bya khyung la bsang mchod 'bul tshul bzhugs so*.

¹⁹⁷ Both Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis and Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol admired Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho as a role model to follow for his non-sectarian religious principles (Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis 2002, pp. 92, 263, 270; Pang 2014, p. 8).

¹⁹⁸ (Lce ngag tshang hUM chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma 2004, p. 57). For a brief biography of A 'gron mkhas btsun rgya mtsho, see (ibid., pp. 56–64).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. Besides Dge lugs education, A 'gron mkhas btsun is also trained under the famed Jo nang master TA ra nA tha (ibid., pp. 57–58).

²⁰⁰ (Ngag dbang bsod nams 1999, p. 74; Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1987, p. 306). At some point, he, together with Shar skal ldan rgya mtso, received teachings from Ko'u ba chos kyi rgya mtso (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982, p. 306; Lce ngag tshang hUM chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma 2004, p. 57).

fact that Adron Khetsun is actively giving teachings at a number of Geluk monasteries suggest his status as an established teacher of both Geluk and Nyingma teachings and his extraordinary skill in dispensing teachings in both traditions in a Buddhist ecumenical context spearheaded by Shar Kalden Gyatso and his constantly evolving personae.²⁰¹

Although Shar Kalden Gyatso's view of other religious traditions is considerably impartial, I have come across a single instance in his collected songs where Shar Kalden Gyatso's non-sectarian approach seems to be only confined to his fellow Buddhist schools. The following verse reveals to us that despite his widely acclaimed religious ecumenism, he does not view Bon in an equally positive light.²⁰²

Shar Kalden Gyatso's success of creating scholastic and retreat lineages on an institutional basis forming a large network made sure the Geluk School and his institutional legacy grew drastically. My discussions above in some sense critique the current scholarship on the issue of Shar Kalden Gyatso's non-partisanship in a multi-religious history of Rebgong. The religious non-sectarianism espoused by Shar Kalden Gyatso is given recognition by the famed masters of Nyingma School in the later period, which to some extent inspires growth of his religious personae in the later period. It is now revealed that Shar Kalden Gyatso displays his Geluk chauvinism in his treatment of the Bon religion which has a significant population of followers in the region. Hence, my portrait of Shar Kalden Gyatso presented in the study is not one representing ideals of non-partisanship as assumed previously in the field. That said, Shar Kalden Gyatso indeed deserves much praise for his friendliness and openness in relation to his fellow Buddhists following non-Geluk schools, which helps in significant ways to form a much friendly environment of 'co-existence' for religious pluralism.

7. Conclusions

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Amdo witnessed a major transformation of its religious landscape. Mongol patronage, Central Tibetan influence, and the active roles of Amdo native monks were major factors contributing to this reconfiguration of religious life in the region. This study demonstrates that the Rebgong Geluk community as represented by its major Geluk center—Rongwo Monastery—was a great case study fleshing out political, religious, and economic factors at work in building up the school and fueling its growth in an institutional context. In this narrative of Geluk growth in Rebgong, Shar Kalden Gyatso was considered the school's most active and influential proponent. He was credited with founding a philosophical college at Rongwo Monastery and building it up as the major Geluk institutional center in the area. Besides setting up the Geluk education system at the monastery, he had an even better reputation for leading a life of retreat and instituting a network of hermitages. His success in joining together scholastic and practice-based traditions of Tibetan Buddhism is a rarity in Geluk history, as the tradition is defined by its focus on philosophical training. Thus, his unrivalled career won him a huge base of followers and made him the central figure around whom a thriving Geluk community was formed.

Great Indian and Tibetan Buddhist masters were identified as the early lives of Shar Kalden Gyatso, which made him part of a long and prestigious reincarnation lineage. However, due to recognition of his larger contribution to the Geluk School in Rebgong and beyond, plus his charisma and the wide network of his intellectual and practice-oriented lineages in the region, a new reincarnation line with great significance in the local history of the Geluk School started, with Shar Kalden Gyatso being the first in this reincarnation line, the most important in the area—although he was already included in a still-hazy, yet much longer lineage tracing back to the time of Buddha.

²⁰¹ See (Lce ngag tshang hUM chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma 2004, pp. 59, 61, 63).

²⁰² (Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho 1994, p. 82): *rje sangs rgyas bka' la mo btab pas/spyir sems can yongs la mo mi bzang/sgos rnal 'byor bdag la mo mi bzang/mo ngan pa'i zlog thabs 'di ltar gyis/blo bla ma dkon mchog gsum la gtod/chos kha ton bzlas brjod nyin bzhin sgrubs/nang sems kyi me long yang yang ltos/de byas na mo ngan nges par zlog/khong sangs rgyas kyi mo ngan zlog thub na/bon zhang zhung gi mo la su zhig 'jigs/khyed gshen rab dang sangs rgyas ma brjes par/gros bka' la dris la lha chos gyis.*

As can be seen in the preceding sections, Shar Kalden Gyatso's teachers certainly asserted a major influence, greatly shaping the direction of his religious career. As all these teachers played major roles in the development of the Geluk School in the region, Shar Kalden Gyatso was sure to emulate them in galvanizing Geluk institutions. However, he stood out for being a highly accomplished retreat master in addition to his intellectual feats. His retreat life cuts a wide swath in Amdo. He undertook retreat at many sites including the eight retreat places of Rebgong and beyond in Amdo. In boasting about his master's extensive retreats, Ngawang Sonam would claim an estimate of over one hundred meditation sites where Shar Kalden Gyatso meditated.²⁰³

In addition to the local persona of Shar Kalden Gyatso representing ideals of both scholar and yogin, his intimate relationships with local patrons, especially the Mongol rulers, were great sources of wealth that significantly assisted in the building process of Geluk institutions and monasticism in the region. With the support of the local elites, his considerably non-sectarian approach made even more acceptable and adaptive his Geluk lineage to inhabitants of the valley and beyond, a home to followers of non-Geluk traditions of Bon and the Nyingma School.

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