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Tibetan Medical Paintings illustrating the *Bshad rgyud* A comparison of the classical thangka set and murals in the Medical College in Labrang Monastery

KEYWORDS:

Labrang Monastery, Tibetan Medical Paintings, *Bshad rgyud*, *sdong 'grems* (unfolded tree), *Vaidūrya sngon po* (*Blue Beryl*), SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO, BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS.

Introduction

Tibetan medical paintings depicting the contents of the *Bshad rgyud*, which is also called “Tantra of Explanation“ and forms the second part of the *Rgyud bzhi* (“Four Tantras”), are mainly known through the illustrations that accompany the famous commentary on this treatise called “*Vaidūrya sngon po*” (“*Blue Beryl*”) compiled by the “Regent” (*sde srid*) SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO. Aside from these thangkas there is another visual representation of the *Bshad rgyud*, namely a set of murals depicting the structure of the text in the form of “unfolded trees” (*sdong 'grems*), which can be found in the Medical College at Labrang Monastery.¹ This paper will concentrate on the relationship between the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* and the two visual representations mentioned; the “*Blue Beryl*” thangkas on the one hand and the Labrang murals on the other.

A cursory examination shows that only about a third of the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* is illustrated by the “*Blue Beryl*” thangkas. Despite this remarkable briefness, in some cases the thangkas also go beyond the content of the *Bshad rgyud*. The chapters on anatomy (chapter four), omens of death (chapter seven), efficacy of medicinal substances (chapter twenty-one), and the physician himself (chapter thirty-one) depict aspects which are not contained in the original text. With the exception of the paintings on anatomy all thangkas depicting the *Bshad rgyud* show a linear sequence of medical topics with elaborated naturalistic details. In noticeable contrast to the thangkas, the murals in the Medical College at Labrang Monastery illustrate the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* by making use of the metaphor of an “unfolded tree” which is a more abstract way of

¹ An accurate comparison of the murals old and new inscriptions with the *Bshad rgyud* as well as with the contents depicted by the thangkas is part of the current research project supported by the Austrian Science Fond (No.: P 22965-G21) and will be published as a monograph in two volumes.

representing the contents. Due to the fact that this representation is much less naturalistic, a “reader” of the unfolded trees needs to be informed about its contents beforehand by a teacher or via his own study of the medical text. The murals are designed to help a reader remember information. Some of these trees have more than forty branches and several hundred leaves to illustrate a single chapter.

In the Labrang murals about two thirds of the contents of the *Bshad gyud* are shown in an exact and very detailed way while other passages are represented in a more cursory fashion; in a few cases there is a substantial divergence from the text of the *Bshad rgyud*. When comparing the representations in the thangkas and the murals, an interesting observation can be made: In many cases content missing in the murals is covered by the thangkas and vice versa. Given this, one could gain the impression that there is a complementary connection between these two didactic medias. Looking at the thangkas and the murals as a whole, the content of the *Bshad rgyud* is almost completely covered by these two pictorial renditions of the medical text. This leads one to the question of whether the divergence between the thangkas and murals’ representation is based on a regional feature of the Medical College in Labrang Monastery or whether these murals rely on yet another textual tradition in addition to the *Bshad rgyud* and its commentary, the *Vaidūrya sngon po*. This paper intends to show that the Labrang murals depend on a text written by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS (1638-1710 or 1712) who was a personal physician of the Fifth Dalai Lama and appointed teacher at the Chakpori (*lcags po ri*) Medical College in Lhasa. The intellectual pattern of the Labrang Murals must be seen in the light of the development of Tibetan Medicine in Lhasa in the late seventeenth century.

Tibetan medical paintings

The *Vaidūrya sngon po* (*Blue Beryl*), the most important commentary on the *Rgyud bzhi*, was compiled by SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO (1653-1705). The illustrations accompanying this commentary are in form of a set of thangkas and can be seen as the best known and most elaborate paintings on Tibetan Medicine. In his recently translated “*A Historical Introduction to Tibetan Medicine*” the Regent documented the exact sequence of all these thangkas,² which exist in three similar and so-called “complete” versions – one kept in Ulan Ude and two in Lhasa – although their origin and age remains unclear in every case.³ These sets have been published in various editions and languages.⁴ The

2 For details see: KILTY 2010: 338-344.

3 MEYER 1992: 7.

4 E.g.: PARFIONOVITCH et al. 1992 BYAMS PA 'PHRIN LAS 1994. Even a modern, unfortunately not so elaborated copy of the paintings appeared recently (see: WILLIAMSON et al. 2009).

differences between these classical thangka sets have been discussed in some detail.⁵ However, these differences are not significant when compared to the differences existing between the Blue Beryl thangkas and the Labrang murals, which form the topic of this paper. Surprisingly, none of the publications dealing with the Blue Beryl thangkas give a precise analysis of the inner coherence between what is depicted in the thangkas and what is found in the text of the *Rgyud bzhi*. For example, the thangka set preserved in Ulan Ude contains at least 76 thangkas of which 33 depict contents of the second tantra, the *Bshad rgyud*.⁶ But only about a third of the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* is illustrated by these 33 thangkas – two thirds of the text do not find any representation. The thangkas also vary widely in the extent to which they are devoted to certain aspects. Some chapters are depicted in a rather condensed form while other chapters – such as chapter seven, omen of death, or chapter thirty-one, the requirements of the healing physician – the thangka illustrations go beyond what can actually be found in the text. Although only a few articles on the origin of these thangkas have appeared in recent years⁷ there is still need for a closer examination of how these medical paintings were commissioned by the Regent in general.⁸

Some books on Tibetan medicine published in Mongolia⁹ present a number of illustrations which depict contents of the *Bshad rgyud* in a style different from the Blue Beryl thangkas; but these illustrations can hardly be compared with the Labrang murals, neither in terms of scope and content nor by the artistic magnificence of the murals in the Medical College at Labrang Monastery. Taking the materia medica as depicted in these illustrations from Mongolia as example, similarities to the materia medica in the thangkas can be observed in some cases, while others bear a closer resemblance to the illustrated materia medica written by 'JAM DPAL RDO RJE.¹⁰ However, the murals in the Medical College of Labrang Monastery show illustrations of the *Bshad rgyud* in a completely different way.

Let us take a look at some general characteristics of the *Bshad rgyud* and its importance for medical education. The second of the Four Tantras, comprising thirty-one chapters (or more precisely, a preceding summary called *sdoms tshig*

5 EMMERICK 1993: 56-81; MEYER 1996: 2-13, 1998: 21-31; BYAMS PA 'PHRIN LAS 2000a: 846-850; CAI JINGFENG 2000: 866-871; BOLSOKHOYEVA 2007, 1998.

6 That means, the thangkas presenting contents of the *Bshad rgyud* make nearly a half of the whole set although this part of the *rgyud bzhi* is not that long. According to the amount of pages the third part of the *rgyud bzhi*, the *man ngag rgyud* is about six times longer but only 16 thangkas summarise their content.

7 MEYER 1996: 2-13, 1998: 21-31; BYAMS PA 'PHRIN LAS 2000a: 846-850; CAI JINGFENG 2000: 866-871; BOLSOKHOYEVA 1998, 2007.

8 Cf. CZAJA in: BLEZER et al. 2007: 435.

9 GALBAABADRAA 2005; SÜKHBAT 2006.

10 Cf. 'JAM DPAL RDO RJE [of Mongolia]. 1971 [18 Jh.?].

plus thirty main chapters), should be learned by heart by the prospective physician. It contains the preclinical theory of Tibetan Medicine. The first section explains the “object of healing” implying, in modern terms, such areas as embryology, anatomy, and pathology. Three other sections deal with treatments, medical skills, and the mental and other requirements for a physician. Some important proponents of a medical school formed in the fifteenth century, well-known by the name of *zur lugs*, were always keen to emphasize the importance of a good knowledge of the *Bshad rgyud*. Writers such as BLO GROS RGYAL PO (1509-1579) and BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS (1638-1712?) complained that many physicians would neglect the study of the second tantra and practice medicine more on the basis of the fourth part of the *Rgyud bzhi*, the *Phyi ma rgyud* which mainly describes practical skills.¹¹ Hence, a need may have been felt for the creation of didactic tools suitable for learning the *Bshad rgyud* by heart.

The murals at Labrang

Labrang Monastery (*Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil*), located in Amdo on the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau in modern China's Gansu Province, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, was founded in 1709 by the first 'JAM DBYANGS BZHAD PA, NGAG DBANG BRTSON 'GRUS (1648-1721). This happened 300 years after the foundation of Gandan Monastery (*Dga' ldan dgon pa*) in Central Tibet and only four years after the death of the Regent SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO. The Medical College at Labrang was established seventy-five years after the founding of this Monastery, in 1784, by DKON MCHOG 'JIGS MED DBANG PO, the Second 'JAM DBYANGS BZHAD PA, who served as first “throne holder” of this college which is said to have been co-sponsored by the Mongol prince BSTAN 'DZIN DBANG PHYUG.¹² The college was modelled on the Medical College on the Chakpori hill in Lhasa.¹³ For this purpose the physician GTSANG SMAN YE SHES BZANG PO, himself well qualified as director of the Chakpori Medical College, was sent to Labrang¹⁴ where he taught the *Rtsa rgyud* and the *Bshad rgyud* with the help of “unfolded tree metaphor” showing a certain similarity to modern “mind mapping”. After GTSANG SMAN YE SHES BZANG PO arrived in Labrang in 1763, a medical class was initiated which formed part of the “College for the wheel of time” (*Dus 'khor grwa tshang*).¹⁵ Later, after the college was founded (1784), the Medical College became renowned for its high level of scholarship and for providing medical attendance to the community.¹⁶

11 Cf. SCHÄFFER 2003: 630 f.

12 NIETUPSKY 2011: 21, 130.

13 Cf.: MEYER 1997: 118.

14 THUPTEN TSERING 2005: 63.

15 BYAMS PA 'PHRIN LAS 2000: 363.

16 NIETUPSKY 2011: 21.

It is not known when the murals in the Medical College at Labrang were painted for the first time. What can be said for sure is that the whole site of Labrang was renovated in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century, which included the renovation of the inner courtyard and the murals of the Medical college. These were badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). We also know the name of the painter who carried out the repainting of the murals in the eighties: SNYING LCAGS BYAMS ZER whom I was able to meet personally in August 2011.¹⁷ As for the inner logic and shape of the mural paintings, it became clear on the basis of my research that the murals closely follow a text, which is even older than the Labrang Monastery itself. A comparison of the inscriptions elaborately added to the trees, trunks, and branches of the murals shows that the murals closely correspond to a late seventeenth-century work called *Unfolded Trees of the Explanatory Tantra* (full Tibetan title: *Bshad rgyud kyi sdong 'grems legs bshad gser gyi thur ma*) written by the eminent physician BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS, the personal physician of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682).¹⁸ This text must be considered as template of the Labrang murals. BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS was appointed director of the Chakpori Medical College in 1697. He was an associate of the First 'JAM DBYANGS BZHAD PA who was a political and religious official in Lhasa before he went back to his homeland of Amdo with the intent of establishing Labrang Monastery in the decade that followed. In politically turbulent times and already aged about seventy years, BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS was part of the entourage following him for that purpose.¹⁹ Unfortunately we do not find much information about the relationship between BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS and NGAG DBANG BRITSON 'GRUS in the biography of the first 'JAM DBYANGS BZHAD PA written by the second, DKON MCHOG 'JIGS MED DBANG PO.²⁰

In the inner courtyard of Labrang Medical College the visitor will find nineteen murals depicting the contents of the first two parts of the *Rgyud bzhi* using the visual aid of the “unfolded tree“. The structure of a tree consists of roots, trunks, branches, and leaves of different colours and shapes as well as blossoms and fruits in some cases. The first or “Root Tantra” (*Rtsa rgyud*) is illustrated by three murals and the *Bshad rgyud* by fourteen murals as can be seen in Figure one.

17 SNYING LCAGS BYAMS ZER also carried out another renovation made in 2007 resulting in the actual state of the murals as can be viewed today (see below). More on SNYING LCAGS BYAMS ZER and the history of the murals is topic of another paper I have prepared (SABERNIG 2013 [in press]).

18 BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS [DAR MO SMAN RAMS PA] 2005.

19 Cf.: BYAMS PA PHRIN LAS 2000: 317/4

20 The biography was translated into Russian by Nikolay TSYREMPILOV (2008). Many thanks go to him for giving his digital transliteration of the text at my disposal.

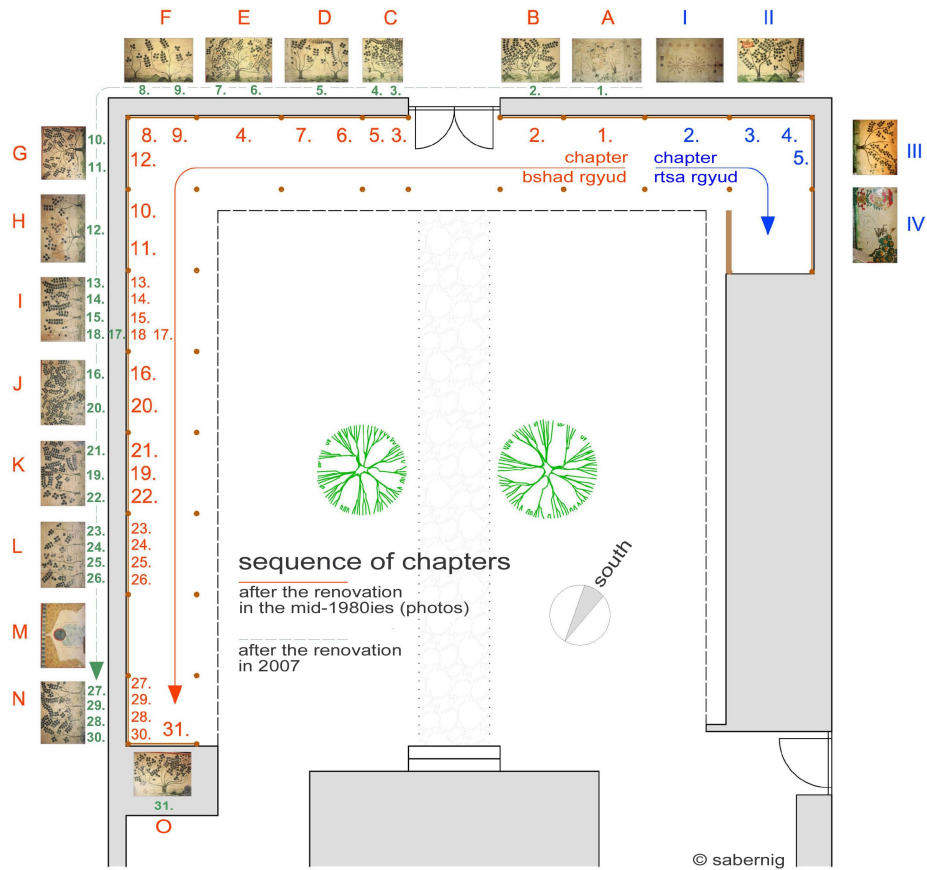


Figure 1: The sequence of the chapters in the courtyard of the Medical College at Labrang Monastery: Four chapters of the *rtsa rgyud* follow the blue line from left to right. All chapters of the *Bshad rgyud* follow the red line from right to left.

In the Labrang murals the *Rtsa rgyud* is described in a rather rudimentary way. Chapter one, which tells the framework story, a dialogue between *Manasija* (*Yid las skyes*) and the wise hermit *Vidyājñāna* (*Rig pa'i ye shes*), is not depicted at all. The first mural depicts chapter two of the *Rtsa rgyud*, which is a table of contents of the entire *Rgyud bzhi*. It is not depicted by a tree but symbolised by four diagrams representing *Rtsa rgyud*, *Bshad rgyud*, *Man ngag rgyud*, and *Phyi ma rgyud*. Chapters three to five of the *Rtsa rgyud* – the introductory chapters on human physiology and pathology, diagnostics, and therapy – are depicted as three “unfolded trees” which extend over two murals. Chapter six of the *Rtsa rgyud* which contains a metaphorical summary of chapters three to five is, again, not represented by a particular mural painting.

The following characteristics of the Labrang murals are typical for the trees depicting the *Rtsa rgyud* as well as the *Bshad rgyud*. According to structure and style the tree illustrations of the thangkas to the *Vaidūrya sngon po* show some differences: In Labrang the leaves do not have any inscriptions and do not reveal any meaning, while the thangka illustrations depict the information of every leaf with naturalistic details as well as with inscriptions. In the Medical College at Labrang Monastery an aspiring physician must know all the content by heart after textual study and learning with a teacher. The structure of a tree shows some difference, too: The branches in the murals are arranged in the natural growth of a tree while the order of the thangkas shows a linear sequence: One side of a trunk shows an ascending sequence of branches followed by a descending sequence on the other side of the trunk. Aside from a little structural difference between the respective trees of diagnostics, specifically their trunks of interrogation (*dri ba'i stong po*) which have the same total amount of leaves but the branches are distributed differently, there are no significant divergences in terms of the symbolised contents.

According to a passage in the Blue Beryl,²¹ SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSO makes the point that in the case of the *Bshad rgyud* there is no representation of the contents which would make use of the tree metaphor. But, as MEYER has already mentioned, there is reason to assume that the Regent had considered the drawing of a metaphorical description of this part of the Four Tantras but that he had doubts about it due to the complexity of the text. What is true is that the unfolded trees are not applied in the thangka illustrations in connection with the *Bshad rgyud*. At this point the Medical College at Labrang Monastery presents a totally different picture. We find no less than fourteen murals, which make use of the unfolded tree metaphor in order to depict all thirty-one chapters of this second part of the *Rgyud bzhi*. Here the murals show 34 roots,²² 78 trunks, 385 branches and thousands of leaves of different colour and shape all depicting the *Bshad rgyud* in great detail. Two murals, dealing with the first and last chapter, also show blossoms and fruits. The roots, trunks and branches all have inscriptions, while the leaves are not explicitly labelled in the murals, however concealed behind the leaves there is substantial information. The viewer is expected to “read” if he or she is able to do so. In order to accommodate the large amount of information contained in some parts of the text it was felt

21 MEYER 1996: 9: [*Vaidūrya sngon po* Vol.: nga: 244 b.]; *sdong 'grems la lo ma sogs la khyer so'i khyad tsam las khyad par sdu tsam med bas zhal lung dang yang sdong 'grems shin tu 'grig / rtsa rgyud de song phyin bshad rgyud la de nyid rgyus bshad las med pas sdong 'grems byas kyang ha tsang bris cha tshogs ches dogs rtsa thig las ma bkod cing/ 'grel pa dngos kyi cha khungs che ba brang ti dang*: SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSO<SDE SRID>1973 [1888-1892] Vol. IV: 488/1-3.

22 Four roots symbolise the fourfold structure of chapter one of the *bshad rgyud* and each of following 30 chapters is depicted by an individual tree.

necessary to make use of different kinds of leaves with different grades of implication. A single item is represented by a regular five-fingered green leaf. This would mean a symptom, an anatomical structure, a medical substance or the like. Ten items are represented by greyish lanceolate furry leaves as represented in the case of jewel medicines (see no.1 in fig. 2). A hundred items are indicated by colourless corrugated leaves, similar in shape to an oak leaf as depicted through the branch symbolising herbal medicines (see no.3 in fig. 2).

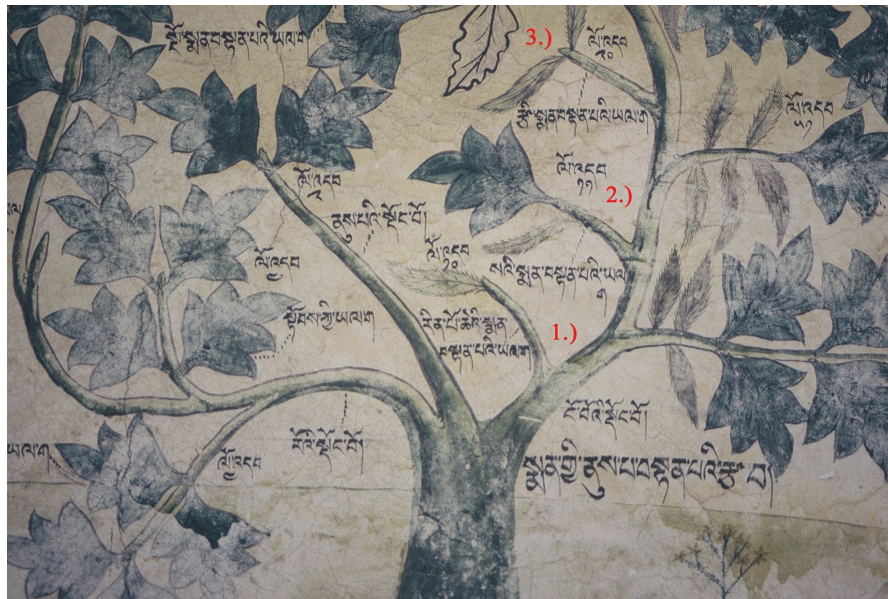


Figure 2: The tree depicting chapter twenty of the *Bshad rgyud* dealing with the effect of medicinal substances symbolised by certain leaves. For example, the branch of earth medicines has two kinds of leaves counting together for eleven substances (No. 2).

Only one exception can be found: The mural depicting the classification of the body (*lus kyi dbye ba*) shows one branch employing a set of leaves with seven fingers in different colours other than green. What is symbolised by this branch are aspects of the three body humours – wind (*rlung*), bile (*mkhris pa*), and phlegm (*bad kan*) – presented in some detail. The interesting point are the colours of these leaves as they perfectly correspond to the same colours employed in the Blue Beryl thangkas: blue indicates aspects of *rlung*, yellow stands for *mkhris pa*, white means *bad kan*. It should be noted here that neither the colour nor the shape of the leaves are explicitly explained in the text of *BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS*.

Some chapters contain an enormous amount of information. Unfolded trees showing more than forty branches are found within the following chapters:

anatomy, chapter four; nosology, chapter twelve; knowledge of nutrition, chapter sixteen; and position of the healing physician, chapter thirty-one. Given the fact that one leaf can stand for one, ten, or sometimes a hundred items, the medical issues symbolised by a single tree may run into the thousands. The paintings are intrinsically related to all chapters of the *Bshad rgyud*, although they show some divergences from the root text in some cases. The differences we find – considering both missing and added elements – raise questions about the reasoning behind the choice to remove or include information.



Figure 3: The tree depicting chapter thirty-one dealing with the preconditions to become a successful physician has forty four branches.

As it will be shown below many differences between the root text and its representation within the murals stand in a noticeable reciprocal correlation to what has been presented on the Blue Beryl thangkas. In 2004 I had the opportunity to document the Labrang murals photographically as they existed before being renovated in 2007. I also documented in writing all the inscriptions. This information was numbered and systematised. The data was rechecked during another research trip in 2005. At this time only two murals were in poor condition with parts of the inscriptions illegible, but most of them showed little damage or patina. In only a few cases had inscriptions been corrected or leaves slightly retouched. These changes are of particular interest because in the

murals' current state they are no longer visible. Due to problems with rainwater drainage the inner courtyard walls of the Medical College were renovated and the murals completely repainted by the skilled painter and physician SNYING LCAGS BYAMS ZER who, as has been indicated above, did the first renovations completed in the mid-eighties. The murals were again documented in 2011 – this is the most up-to-date picture that we have of their current state. The murals are similar but they are not identical to the pre 2007 versions; sometimes the chapters are arranged in a different sequence (see fig.1). No striking differences are found in terms of medical contents, the structure of the branches, and the inscriptions. However, the artistic approach with regard to trees, leaves, and their proportions appear to be less elaborated. Sadly, the colours of the renovated murals are already exfoliating in many cases. Notwithstanding these minor flaws, the paintings still follow the pattern as outlined by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS.

The text that forms the basis of the murals

At the beginning of my research it was not clear to me whether the information represented by the murals at Labrang was a regional contribution to Tibetan Medicine or if they bore a relationship with yet another textual tradition – apart from the root text, i. e. the *Rgyud bzhi*. This led me to examine medical texts which deal with the metaphor of the unfolded tree (*sdong 'grems*). A Tibetan publication by the scholar and physician MKHYEN RAB NOR BU²³ explains the whole *Rgyud bzhi* with the help of the tree metaphor. However, the work provides only rather short explanations in writing and some rough sketches of the contents of the *Rgyud bzhi*, especially of the third tantra (*man ngag rgyud*), without any artistic approach. In the case of the *Bshad rgyud* these sketches only correspond to a single mural at Labrang, illustrating only chapter one of the *Bshad rgyud*, the table of contents. Although the text contains some similarities to the murals, various differences in structure and content allow the conclusion that the text written by MKHYEN RAB NOR BU cannot be regarded as the basis of the Labrang murals even if there might have been some connection.²⁴ Thanks to the work of the Arura Group in Xining a new edition of the classical work *Bshad rgyud kyi sdong 'grems legs bshad gser gyi thur ma* written by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS²⁵ has been made accessible. It could be identified as the written template of the murals. I was informed by a member of the research group during my stay

23 MKHYEN RAB NORBU, BYAMS PA PHRIN LAS 1987.

24 Possibly MKHYEN RAB NORBU was in Labrang in the 1920ties and was influenced by the murals. MEYER got some unverified information that he went there for the purpose to complete the missing thangkas of the Lhasa set (1996: 7). If this information is correct it would imply that there existed a complete set of thangkas in Labrang.

25 BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS 2005. The original text was written in the end of the 17th century or the beginning of the 18th century (cf. CZAJA 2007: 351).

in Xining that the edition is based on a relatively modern (20th century) handwritten copy and that no blockprint existed, at least not in Derge (*sde dge*). Yet another, even older text dealing with unfolded trees in connection with the *Bshad rgyud* written by BLO GSAL DBANG PO PAD MA DKAR PO who lived in the sixteenth century exists, but the trunks, branches and leaves are described in a much reduced manner.²⁶ It is clear that this text cannot have been the template of the Labrang murals.

The text of BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS is entirely in prose without metric passages. Usually the content of the leaves are listed following the name of the branch, which has been introduced. In most cases a single leaf indicates one definite item such as a certain anatomical body part, a symptom, a disease, certain edibles, medicinal ingredients, or similar things as found in the root text. Sometimes a single leaf is meant to represent a certain amount of verses in the *Bshad rgyud*, which are summarised. We also find cases where a leaf stands for a short explanation, which cannot be identified in the *Bshad rgyud* itself but can only be retrieved in its commentaries, such as the *Vaidūrya sngon po* and the *Mes po'i zhal lung*. In his elaborated demonstration of human anatomy BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS seems to have introduced new contributions in Tibetan Medicine of his own.²⁷ We may regard such remarkable additions as a fruit of the productive period marked by the establishment of the Chakpori in Lhasa in which he played a vital role.

All substantial divergences between the Labrang murals and the text of the *Bshad rgyud* can be explained by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS' text. Apart from minor differences in phraseology – such as the use of genitive instead of the instrumental particle or vice versa – all 34 roots and 78 trunks in the murals can be found in the text written by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS. Out of the 385 branches painted in the murals, 384 can be fairly identified in the text. The same amount of striking consistency can be observed if we compare around 2000 green leaves of the murals with BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS' text. In few cases leaves on the murals seem to have been modified later, with one or the other leaf being either retouched or added. This holds true for the murals as painted in the mid-eighties, in the new version of the murals such changes were fully maintained with the effect, however, that these changes are not anymore recognisable as what they are, i.e. later modifications. In spite of these minor reservations, the evident conclusion can be drawn that the text written by BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS forms the template, or detailed instruction for conducting the murals. This has finally been confirmed to me by the painter SNYING LCAGS BYAMS ZER himself when I talked to him in 2011.

26 PAD MA DKAR PO [BLO GSAL DBANG PO] 2007. In the introduction the lifetime of the author is given as: 1527-1596 (p. 203-204).

27 cf. MEYER 2003: 110, GYATSO 2011.

Murals and thangkas in comparison

Let us take a short look at the broader medical and cultural context the Blue Beryl thangkas and the Labrang murals fit in. The thangkas were created by order of SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO whose aim was not only to support the development of medical education in Tibet but also to propagate medical achievements to the public.²⁸ Therefore the thangkas are not so much directed to the medical specialist or aspiring physicians but rather meant to impress or even, as one is sometimes inclined to believe, to amuse medical laymen with exciting illustrations.²⁹ In a clear contrast to the thangkas, the murals were designed by a physician for the task of medical education and examination of monk-physicians. Simplified to a certain extent, the thangkas are addressed to the general public while the murals are an aid for students of medicine.

With the exception of the anatomical charts, the thangkas illustrating the *Bshad rgyud* use a linear sequence in presenting the contents. The murals at Labrang make use of a ramifying visual structure in line with the shape of trees. The tree metaphor is indeed a very useful didactic tool to add a clear structure to an otherwise uniform text. The thangkas show many naturalistic details as well as symbolic features such as, for instance, a sick person in a body full of flames presenting a patient with fever. This vivid style of medical painting may be interesting for lay people, but the pictures hardly give any information beyond the text of the *Rgyud bzhi* which would be instructive for a specialist.³⁰ In all these points the unfolded trees of the Labrang murals show a different picture. There are no picturesque patterns as regards contents at all. The leaves symbolising a certain item look more or less the same. In order to understand their implication, the “reader” of the murals must know the underlying contents symbolised by a leaf in its particular place within the structure. They are meant as a mnemotechnical means to recap the text as it is studied or taught by the teacher. Although every leaf at a given position has a precise meaning, it is nearly impossible for ordinary people to understand what it will stand for. As soon as the shape of a tree is visualised, the student will find it easier to memorise the contents and keep the text well-structured in his mind. The teacher, on the other hand, has a useful tool at his disposal for explanation and examination as well.³¹ The two pictures on the next page illustrate chapter two of the *Bshad rgyud* which deals with embryology. They demonstrate the differences in style of the murals and thangkas:

28 MEYER 1992: 7, TAUBE 1981: 73, For details see: CZAJA 2007: 357, KILTY 2010: 488.

29 Cf. Gyatso 2009.

30 Cf. also MEYER 1992: 12.

31 Cf. GERL/ ASCHOFF 2005: 122, 128, 152.



Figure 4: Labrang Mural: Illustration of Chapter two: Development of the Embryo/Fetus.

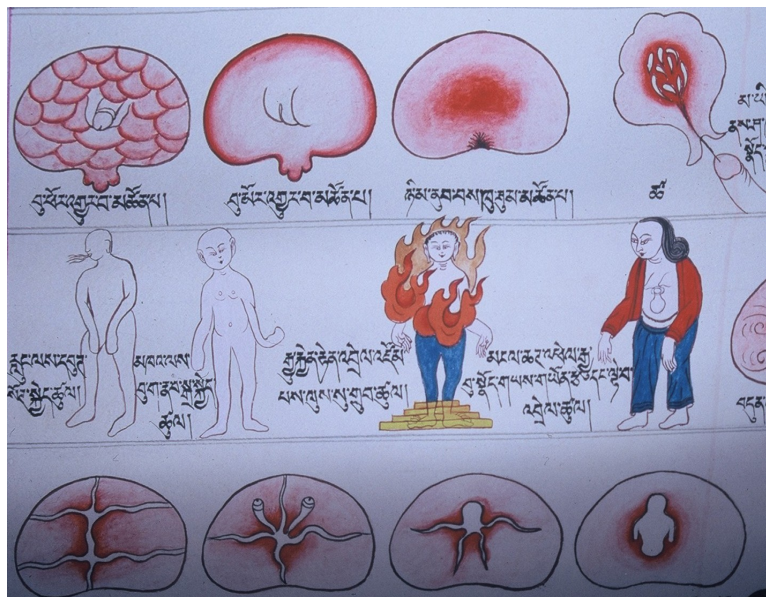


Figure 5: Part of thangka 5: Depictions of early stages of human Embryology from a modern copy stored in Kumbum-Monastery.

Figure four shows the complete abstract structure of Tibetan embryology through the tree metaphor. Three trunks depict the three major periods of pregnancy: conception (left), development of the embryo (middle) and perinatal period (right). The yellow accentuated structures are the only contents which can be found in the corresponding Blue Beryl thangka number six.³² In contrast to this figure five generates concrete and easily interpreted images of details in connection with the conception and early stages of the embryo's development in a linear sequence without a visible structure while various other aspects treated in this chapter remain unconsidered.

A tabular comparison of the depicted contents revealed that in remarkably many cases content missing in the murals is covered by the thangkas and vice versa. There is a systematic and complementary connection between the content of these two didactical medias. Looking at the thangkas and the murals together, the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* is almost covered completely.³³ In the following, some examples of this complementary connection will be discussed:



Figure 6: The left tree. Characteristics of the body.
The right tree: Models of the body.

32 The set stored in Ulan Ude [UU-TMP, PARFIONOVITCH et al. 1992] and the set stored in Lhasa [L-TMP, BYAMS PA 'PHRIN LAS et al. 1994]).

33 Interestingly only some details on “Digestion heat” (*me drod*), signs of disturbance (*khruks rtags*), Nutrition and pharmacodynamics are not covered by both media.

The large left tree in figure six represents the fifth chapter of the *Bshad rgyud*: the characteristics of the body (*lus kyi mtshan nyid*) with two trunks. It corresponds in every detail to BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS' text which covers almost every detail of the *Bshad rgyud*.³⁴ The fifteen leaves of the yellow accentuated branch symbolise the only topics of this chapter which are depicted in the illustrations of the *Blue Beryl*.³⁵ The thangkas only depict the five forms of the three *nyes pa* which are already illustrated within the well-known trunk of physiology as described in the third chapter of the *Rtsa rgyud*. All remaining aspects of the rather complex Tibetan physiology as described in the *Bshad rgyud* are symbolised by this tree on the Labrang mural but is neglected by the Blue Beryl thangka. However, with the help of BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS' text it is possible to identify all the leaves.

A reciprocal situation can be found in the illustrations of chapter three introducing models of the body (*lus kyi 'dra dpe*). The small tree on the right, which is the smallest tree featured in the murals, represents this chapter in a significantly reduced way, but all the details of this chapter can be found accurately in the elaborated illustrations of the Blue Beryl thangka set.³⁶ One can see that the seat of the king is a metaphor for the heart, or that a drip moulding symbolises the urethra. These concepts are interesting from a philosophical, cultural as well as historical point of view, but from a clinical point of view they are of less importance. However, in the case of chapters three and five, both didactic media taken together cover the contents of the *Bshad rgyud* completely. Another interesting example are the illustrations dealing with the chapters on pathology, a core subject of any medical system: Chapters eight to twelve of the *bshad rgyud*, which deal with aetiology, pathogenesis and the classification of diseases. In the Medical College at Labrang Monastery one can find three murals showing five trees depicting these five chapters whereas the illustrations of the *Blue Beryl* make use of just a single thangka to summarise all these five chapters. At least three chapters are depicted in a fashion, which indicates an obvious complementary connection between the thangkas and the murals with regards to content. For example chapter nine, which deals with trigger factors of diseases (*nad kyi rkyen*): The Labrang murals symbolise the first two thirds of this chapter in detail with the help of two trunks, seven branches and forty-nine leaves. This content is completely missing in the Blue Beryl thangka. On the other hand the last third of this chapter, dealing with particular trigger factors leading to the manifestation of a disease (*khyad par gyi slong rkyen*) is rather

34 The left trunk depicts some of the corresponding contents clearly but a little shortened as regards information of the digestive heat. The right trunk depicts the text accurately.

35 Cf. UU-TMP 16, No. 5-19, L-TMP 18, No 2-16.

36 Cf. UU-TMP 6, No. 3-37, L-TMP 8, No 1-31.

neglected by the Labrang murals as it makes use of a small branch with only three leaves to depict thirty verses in the *Bshad rgyud*.³⁷ In contrast, this part of the *Bshad rgyud* is the only part of chapter nine which is illustrated in the thangka and in terms of space makes up nearly half of the thangka which deals with Tibetan pathology.³⁸ A similar situation can be found in case of chapter ten which highlights the mode of entry of a disease. Here almost the entire chapter is depicted by the Labrang murals, whereas the thangka only deals with this information in a rudimentary way. The most remarkable situation can be found in the case of chapter twelve, which deals with nosology, the classification of diseases. In terms of space it takes up nearly half of the length of the five chapters on pathology, it is, however, seriously neglected by the thangka in that it utilises only a single register with some rudimentary basic topics.³⁹ In contrast to this, the Labrang murals represent the content of this large chapter in a mural of extraordinary beauty; presenting a tree with three trunks, forty-three branches and hundreds of leaves of various colour and shape. Each of the 404 diseases including single humoral, bi-humoral, complex humoral pathologies⁴⁰ as well as diseases of a specific location or type is depicted by a certain leaf. Even the stages of or the form of appearance of a disease is represented.⁴¹ The nosology is a rather complex issue, which might confuse lay people but it is essential for a clinical working physician. The illustration of its structure with the help of an unfolded tree is an extremely convenient way for studying pathology. Another example of the complementary character of the murals at Labrang and the thangkas are the three chapters on pharmacology; chapters 19 to 21 of the *Bshad rgyud*. Chapter 19 describes the pharmacokinetics of substances on the basis of the six tastes. Only a fraction of the first thangka within a series on pharmacology shows the theoretical connection between the tastes and the five elements.⁴² These contents are emblematised in the first branch of the respective Labrang tree. The thangka neglects all other aspects of this chapter such as their character (*ngo bo*), the groups of substances, which are associated with the tastes (*sde tshan*) or their activity (*las*) before and after “digestion” (*zhu rjes*). All these contents are depicted more or less accurately within the Labrang mural. Illustrations of chapter 20 (see figure two), which deals with the efficacy of substances (*sman gyi nus pa*) are especially interesting: Both sets of thangkas

37 Cf.: G.YU THOG YON TAN 1992: 36/17-37/15, chapter nine: verse 51-82.

38 Cf.: UU-TMP 19, No. 10-64, L-TMP 21, No 11-58.

39 Cf.: UU-TMP 19, No. 104-115, L-TMP 21, No 94-101.

40 The author is using the term “humoral pathology” not according to bycantinic medicine of GALEN but in a broader context which involves different medical systems dealing with balance and imbalance of different factors resulting in form of dyscrasia.

41 For this especially elaborated mural see: SABERNIG 2014 (in press).

42 Cf.: UU-TMP 23, No. 3-15, L-TMP 25, No 1-15.

employ eleven thangkas⁴³ to paint every single substance mentioned in the *Bshad rgyud*. In many cases this list is extended to include variations and substitutions but the introductory part of the chapter explaining further aspects of the tastes such as their “power” (*stobs*) or their seventeen qualities (*yon tan*) is missing. In BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS’ text a reciprocal situation can be found: In the case of the seventeen qualities he goes into details which can’t be found in either the *Bshad rgyud* or in the *Blue Beryl* but in the older commentary: *Zur lugs*: the *Mes po’i zhal lung*.⁴⁴ The seventeen qualities are put in direct relation to the twenty attributes (*mtshan nyid*) of diseases, which are listed at the end of chapter five. BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS explains in his text how each of these attributes can be treated with medicines of certain qualities but later on all individual substances depicted in the thangkas are just roughly summarised. He just mentions without any further comment the amount of substances in certain groups like jewel medicines, earth medicines, herbs and so on. In this case the restraint of the prominent proponent of the *zur lugs* is not surprising: Although SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO had the aim to unite the rivalling medical schools *zur lugs* and *byang lugs*, the pharmacological doctrine of the latter one gained influence. At the height of this dispute a public pamphlet by LHUN SDINGS RNAM RGYAL RDO RJE against the materia medica in the *Mes po’i zhal lung* was announced.⁴⁵

Chapter 21 of the *Explanatory Tantra* deals with methods of formulating/compounding medicines. There are also complementary aspects between these two illustrated media in regards to their representation of this chapter. At the beginning of this chapter seventeen groups of medicines according to their physiological effects are listed. Every substance connected with one of these groups is depicted in the *Blue Beryl* thangkas⁴⁶ but any further details in the chapter are missing. In contrast, the Labrang tree offers just the groups in the first trunk, and adds a second, much larger trunk assembling several branches to show *all* theoretically possible combinations of tastes and implies particular combinations of tastes and qualities in compounds for particularly prevalent conditions.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In many other cases the comparison between the Labrang Murals and the Tibetan medical thangkas illustrating the *Blue Beryl* show complementary aspects in terms of content and style. Looking at the murals and the thangkas

43 Cf.: UU-TMP 23-31, L-TMP 25-33.

44 Cf.: BLO GROS RGYAL PO 2005: 686/20-687/6.

45 Cf.: Meyer 1992: 6, Czaja 2007: 351 f.

46 UU-TMP: No.: 32 and 33, L-TMP: 34 and 35.

47 For more details see: SABERNIG *The Labrang Tree Murals*, forthcoming.

together, almost the entire content of the *Bshad rgyud* is covered. The visual implementation of BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS' text is only found in the Medical College at Labrang Monastery and the design of the murals must be regarded as a regional feature. The intellectual pattern, which the murals follow must be seen in light of the flourishing development of Tibetan Medicine during the late seventeenth century in Lhasa. The thangkas, as beautiful as they are, fail to cover essential medical content and instead concentrate more on philosophical and religious aspects as well as on Tibetan materia medica. With the establishment of the Medical College at the Iron Hill just opposite to the Potala palace medical education in Tibet became more institutionalised and it was the right time to respond the aim of SANGS RGYAS RGYA MTSHO to create the *Bshad rgyud* in the form of unfolded trees. With his text on *Unfolded Trees of the Explanatory Tantra* BLO BZANG CHOS GRAGS followed this idea in part. He designed elaborated trees to complete missing contents and smaller, even inchoate ones in cases, which are well represented by the thangkas. He also felt free to add content, which in his opinion was important but not described thoroughly enough in the *bshad rgyud*. This is most evidently the case in his annotations on anatomy, pathology as well as certain aspects of pharmacology.

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