

# The Wives of Sroñ btsan sgam po

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Tibetan tradition attributes to Sroñ btsan sgam po many wives, the most famous among them being K'ri btsun and Mun c'añ, Koñ jo = Oñ co (f. i. PK.\*) p. 97, b) = Wen ch'eng.

The second one is said to be the daughter of the Emperor of China while she was in fact only a princess<sup>1</sup>. With the triumph of Buddhism the two princesses, who brought as dowry to Tibet the images of Akṣobhyavajra, Maitreya, Tārā of sandal wood, and Jo bo Śākyamuni respectively, are said to have founded the two most famous temples of Lhasa and are generally referred to as epiphanies of the two principal forms of Tārā, sGrol ma, the white Tārā and the green Tārā.

In T.H. pp. 12 and 29 there is the explicit mention of the Chinese wife and of her marriage. In this connection it should be noted that something must have happened since the princess could live with the husband after six years had elapsed from her arrival. She died in 680<sup>2</sup>.

The king died in 649 having cohabited with her for three years. There must have been some reason for that, though we cannot jump to the conclusion that there had been some understanding between her and the minister mGar sent to China to fetch her<sup>3</sup>.

The beginning of T.H. does not contain any date: it starts with the arrival of Mun c'añ, then it adds: three years passed away; again it writes: then six years passed away. After relating the death of Sroñ btsan sgam po it explains that the king had cohabited with the princess three years (649—9); 641 is therefore the year of the arrival of the princess i. e., *lcags glañ* as in the *Hulan Deb t'er*<sup>4</sup>.

In the chronicle of Grags pa rgyal mts'an 1147—1269, the Sa skya pa hierarch, there is no mention of the two princesses, the Nepalese and the Chinese; it is only recorded that Sroñ btsan sgam po had three wives of whom only the mother of Guñ sroñ btsan is mentioned: her name was Mo[n] bza' K'ri mo gñam = K'ri-mo mñen-ldoñ steñ of Moñ extraction of T.H. p. 88. This silence may perhaps be due to the fact that the other wives were childless and there was therefore no need to refer to them in a

\*) See page 126.

<sup>1</sup> P. DEMIEVILLE, *Concile de Lhasa*, Paris 1952, p. 6—7.

<sup>2</sup> P. DEMIEVILLE, *op. cit.* p. 188 n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> BACOT, *Le mariage de Sroñ btsan sgam po*. MCB III p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> On the *Hulan Debter* see G. TUCCI, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* p. 140. ROERICH, *Blue Annals*, p. VI. M. INABA, *Uran-shi Hulan no deb gter no chosaku nenji*, in *Otani Gakuho* vol. 40, n. 3, 1960, p. 13—26.

genealogical list. GR. attributes six wives to Sroñ btsan sgam po; K'ri gtsun from Nepal (p. 38) and rGya mo Koñ jo (p. 37, b, ff.). The same text adds that since the king had no children, neither from the Nepalese nor from the Chinese princess, he married successively Žaň žuň bza', Ru yoň bza', Mi ñag (xyl. Me ñag) bza'; but from these three too he had no child; then he married Maň (sic xyl. corr. Moň) bza' K'ri lcam the mother of Guñ sroñ guñ btsan (p. 66, b).

According to P.T. he married the Nepalese (p. 25, b ff.) and the Chinese (p. 28a, ff.) wives; then (p. 33, b) Žaň žuň bza' Li t'ig dman daughter of the king of Žaň žuň Li mig skya, Ru yoň bza' rGyal mo btsun daughter of the king of Mi ñag, K'ri lcam daughter of the žaň blon of Moň extraction, from sTod luñ. DM., p. 19 knows K'ri btsun daughter of 'Od zer go c'a (so also BUSTON, OBERMILLER, p. 184 and M. p. 197, b), i. e. Aṃśuvarman and Lha gcig 'Un siñ Koñ jo, the Chinese princess. DT. p. 49, 220, 218—9 refers only to the Chinese and Nepalese queens.

Thus, the Chronicles of Grags pa rgyal mts'an, the oldest after T.H., mention three wives, as we have seen, but give the name only of Moň bza' K'ri mo gñam, because she was the mother of Guñ sroñ guñ btsaň; GR. PT, VDL. besides the Chinese and Nepalese princesses record three wives: Žaň žuň bza', Moň bza' K'ri lcam, Ru yoň bza'.

The total number of the wives of Sroñ btsan sgam po is therefore generally supposed to be five. The Chinese wife is certain; so it is with Moň bza' k'ri mo mñen ldoň steň; both are mentioned in T.H. (p. 88), and in Grags pa rgyal mts'an the latter only. Now it should be noted that while the name of the Chinese princess has been preserved transliterated in Tibetan, the Nepalese wife is only called K'ri btsun, the royal wife, quite differently from the others whose clan is mentioned; of the third wife (Moň bza') the personal name is known (so also that of the Žaň žuň princess).

As to the father of the Nepalese queen, he is called in GR. De ba lha; i. e. Deva deva because *Iha* means god, Skr. deva; no mention is made of Aṃśuvarman (p. 37, b). Moreover while at 38, b Nepal is placed in the South, Lho bal, at p. 39, b we have the opposition Nepal, West and China, East. We must also add that the story of GR., namely that since the king had no children from the Chinese and the Nepalese wives, he married the other wives, the last one being the mother of Guñ sroñ guñ btsan, is contradicted by the facts. Wen ch'eng was his last wife who cohabited with him three years before his death, that is when he was already old, while the mother of Guñ sroñ guñ btsan had been married many years earlier; in fact her son was installed on the throne when he was 13, but he died when 18. Guñ sroñ guñ btsan therefore ruled five years, while his father was still alive and the latter at his son's death took over the kingdom once more.

Thus we must conclude that the traditional story recorded by later authors, that Sroñ btsan sgam po married other wives because he begot no children from the Nepalese and Chinese consorts is not confirmed by facts and seems therefore the result of a later elaboration. Something else

must be added; the beginning itself of T.H. gives the impression that chronological records begin with the year of the death of the great king; before that date there are only cumulative indications: three years, six years. From the *Hulan deb t'er* we may deduce that the year in which Wen ch'êng came to Tibet was indicated, but the real chronological regularity of the Chronicles, year by year, started with the disposal of the body of the king. That such confusion reigns concerning the events of the previous years may be confirmed by the vagueness in the details of traditional c'os 'byuñ concerning the age of the king when he married. Such an age is given by bSod nams grags pa as 16 when he married the Nepalese princess, and as 18 when he married the Chinese: which is contradicted by what we know concerning the Chinese princess at least. Anyhow these two numbers, sixteen and eighteen, are of course taken from the Indian speculation; sixteen being its perfect number, the age of Kumārī, and 18 the year of full accomplishment of youth, and it contradicts the rule of ancient Tibet which established the entrance of the prince into public life when he had reached 13 years of age and was able to ride.

In this regard I must add that I cannot accept the theory according to which Sroñ btsan sgam po died young at 33 years, being born in 629, and that the 81 years attributed to him by some sources, f.i. Buston, are due to the wish not to contradict the prophecy contained in the *Mañjuśrī-mūlatantra* (RÖERICH, *Blue Annals*, p. X, XI); it is not excluded that his real age was one of the points which gave weight in the minds of later historiographers to the theory that the passages of the same tantra were a prophecy referring to Tibet and not to Nepal, as it is in the Sanskrit text. Anyhow, even if we do not accept that he died when 81, it can hardly be said that he lived only 33 years. We must remember that according to the old Tibetan custom he was enthroned when 13; at that age the power was in the hands of some minister, most probably an uncle on the mother's side. Then we must allow a certain number of years for his marriage and begetting a son, i.e. Guñ sroñ guñ btsan. We know that the latter was enthroned when 13, then after 5 years of reign died when 18; in time to leave a son who was to succeed his father.

When Guñ sroñ guñ btsan passed away, Sroñ btsan sgam po came again to power. It is impossible to consider Guñ sroñ guñ btsan a fanciful insertion because he is already mentioned in TH. and in Grags pa rgyal mts'an's chronicles. But then we have: enthronement of Sroñ btsan sgam po at 13; we must allow three or four years at least for his marrying and begetting a child. When this child was 13 he was enthroned in his turn; (see G. TUCCI, "The Sacred Character of the Kings of Ancient Tibet", *East and West*, Year VI, no. 3, 1955). He too must be allowed some time to marry and to beget a child; probably this happened shortly before his death. In conclusion we have 13 years + a certain number of years for marriage and begetting a son, let us assume 3—4 years; then 13 years of his son, then 5 years of reign of the latter; this means a total of 31 or 32 years. No time is therefore left for his accomplishing the enterprises attributed to him,

and so eventful as to make of him the founder of the Tibetan empire. Therefore, the date of 629 (earth-ox) as his birth-date cannot be accepted. In the old chronicles there being no indication of the name of the elements but only of the animals of the twelve-animals cycle, his date of birth may be not only 569 (see L. PETECH, *A study of the Chronicles of Ladakh*, Calcutta 1939, p. 44) but also 581 (iron-ox).

Moreover there is no agreement at all among our sources. First of all while the name of Wen ch'eng is somehow preserved in Tibetan transliterations, the name of the Nepalese wife, as I stated above, is missing, though she would have played in the story of Sroñ btsan sgam po the same role as the Chinese one. It is true that in some sources the other wives are also recorded according to their clan only, but these wives are far from having the same importance which the Chinese and the Nepalese princess were given. It is also clear that there has been in the mind of those who elaborated this part of the biography of the king a desire for symmetry; the two epiphanies of sGrol ma, Tārā are symmetrically located: the one to the West (where Nepal is placed in GR. p. 27, b: but at p. 26, b in the South, Lho) and the other to the East; that is to the left and right of the Tibetan king, he being Avalokiteśvara, having Amitābha on top of his head, and sitting in the middle.

The stories of how the princesses were asked for and taken to Tibet follow in both cases the same scheme. We know that the stories of the two marriages, of the Nepalese and of the Chinese, are planned in the same way; but we know that the marriage of Wen ch'eng is certain, and that some details, such as the time which passed between the request and the arrival in China, and the hesitation of the Court before yielding to the demand of Sroñ btsan sgam po, though amplified by the legend, are true. We may therefore surmise that the marriage of the Chinese princess and the events which then occurred, became the pattern upon which the marriage with the Nepalese princess was modelled.

We must add that both stories are meant to trace back to the time of the two princesses the introduction into Tibet of some famous religious images or relics, first from Nepal and then from China. The temple of Ra mo c'e is said to have been built by the Chinese princess. But we know now that this introduction of Buddhism into Tibet at the time of Sroñ btsan sgam po is far from having had the extent that tradition wants us to believe. In the edict (*bka' tsigs*) of K'ri sroñ lde btsan, on the occasion of the building of bSam yas, preserved by PT. Ja p. 108, b there is mention of rGya Ra mo c'e (TTK. p. 46) viz. the Ra mo c'e of the Chinese. This may be an allusion to the Chinese princess, but it may only mean: Ra mo c'e of the Chinese, though according to the usual interpretation which I find in the records rGya is intended as rGya stag "the Chinese Tiger" (M. p. 221, b, GR. p. 63, b, PT. p. 41, b). In the inscription of Kar c'uñ only the Pehar of Lhasa is recorded as being the work of Sroñ btsan sgam po himself, TTK. p; 51—52. As regards the sPrul snañ temple, its origin is a matter of many legends: it was built by the king himself, after having controlled the nāgas, on the

levelled ground of the lake 'O t'an (Buston, Obermiller, p. 185): the king, by his miraculous emanations (*sprul*) built the lower storey of the sPrul snañ, while K'ri btsun erected the upper storey of the same (PT. 41 a, 41 b); the same attribution of the lower storey to the king and of the upper storey to K'ri btsun is found also in GR. 62, b, 63, b. Thus in the case of this temple we are confronted only with a myth which does not seem to have any foundation.

The name of the father of the Nepalese princess, as we have seen, is transmitted in two different ways: 'Od zer go c'a which is a translation of Aṃśuvarman and Deva Lha = Deva-deva (GR.) which is no name at all but a title in its Sanskrit form and in its Tibetan translation.

If the Chinese court at that time was favourably inclined to Buddhism, the inscriptions of Aṃśuvarman reflect a purely Hindu and especially Śaiva atmosphere: his inscriptions identify his palace with the Kailāsa, and so far none of his inscriptions contains any indication that Buddhism was the religion which he followed, and therefore, we are supposed to believe, his family with him.

We know now that the Bal po of T.H. chronicle is not only Nepal (lho Bal) but a country of Tibet where the Tibetan kings used to spend in particular the summer<sup>5</sup>: it was roughly placed to the West of Lhasa, and we cannot forget what we said before, namely, that in the GR. once Nepal is said to be to the South and another time to the West.

To conclude, I think that the story of the marriage of Sroñ btsan sgam po with a daughter of Aṃśuvarman is far from being certain; according to my opinion it was concocted when the legend had grown round Sroñ btsan sgam po and made of him an incarnation of sPyan ras gzigs: this legend in its core was prior to Grags pa rgyal mts'an, who speaks of him already as an incarnate of that god, but may have been developed between his time and Buston's.

Perhaps my views may appear to others as unconvincing as does to me the legend of the two Tārās incarnations. Anyhow it appears to me that we have so far accepted without due control some data of Tibetan tradition which are late and have undergone the impact of the new religious beliefs. It is certain that Sroñ btsan sgam po married a Chinese princess: it is equally certain that he married a wife belonging to the Moñ family. He may have married a Žañ žuñ princess. There is no proof that he married a Nepalese princess. And if he married a Bal mo, it is not sure that this Bal yul is Nepal and not the Bal yul in Tibet.

During and after the *p'yi dar*, the new introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, there has been, as we have previously stated, a tendency to emphasize far beyond the actual facts, the role of the founder of the Tibetan kingdom as an apostle of religion. This tendency increased, with the growing of the orthodoxy and the waning of the rNiñ mas pas and allied sects.

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<sup>5</sup> See G. Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts*, II, Roma, 1958 p. 34 ff.

The identification of Sroñ btsan sgam po with Avalokiteśvara brought as a consequence that he must have had the usual *paredras* of that Bodhisattva: one was there, she was the Chinese princess, but this one needed a counterpart and this counterpart was found in the daughter of Amśuvarman. In this way a connection was established from the times of the great king with the two countries which were to remain for some time after the introduction of Buddhism as the two main sources from which Buddhist teaching entered into Tibet.

This must have happened, when the transformation of Sroñ btsan sgam po from the founder of a dynasty into a propagator of the triumphant faith had already taken place. Just as Padmasambhava had his two wives Ye šes mts'o rgyal and Mandāravā, so also Sroñ btsan sgam po was identified with Avalokiteśvara assisted by the two Tārās. The disregard of the historical facts by the religious community, only eager to glorify him as a god, is testified also by the fact that he is not said to have died but to have disappeared into the self-originated image of *bCu gcig žal* after the Nepalese wife had disappeared into his right shoulder and the Chinese one into his left shoulder. The trilogy imposed on Sroñ btsan sgam po cannot be dissociated from his being identified with Khasarpana, one of the usual forms of Avalokiteśvara, which has his female companions Śyāmā Tārā, the Chinese princess, and Bhrkuṭī (K'ro gñer can), the Nepalese princess.

To conclude: if no document proves the contrary we must be very sceptical about this set of legends and maintain a critical view concerning the Nepalese wife. The only text which might decide if in older chronicles there was mention of K'ri btsun is the *Hulan deb t'er*. If this also is silent we must definitely conclude that the story of K'ry btsun has been concocted later on, on purely theological grounds. But even if she is mentioned therein, the fact remains that all the marriages of Sroñ btsan sgam po have been re-elaborated and that neither of the princesses played a great role. The real wife who must have had a role was the Moñ bza' because she was the mother of Guñ sroñ guñ btsan.

#### \* LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- PK. *Pad ma dkar po's Chronicles.*  
 T.H. J. BACOT, F. W. THOMAS, Ch. TOUSSAINT, *Documents de Touen-Houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet.* Paris 1940.  
 PT. *dPao gtsug lag's Chronicles.*  
 DM. *Deb t'er dmar po of bSod nams grags pa*  
 Buston (*History of Buddhism* transl. by OBERMILLER, Heidelberg 1931).  
 DT. *Deb t'er shon po* (ROENICH, *The blue annals.* Calcutta 1949—1953).  
 GR. *rGyal rabs gsäl bai me loñ.*  
 M. *Mañi bka' abum.*  
 TTK. G. TUCCI, *Tombs of the Tibetan Kings,* Roma, 1950.  
 VDL. *Chronicles of the Fifth Dalai Lama.*