



Toward a Geographic Biography: Mi la ras pa in the Tibetan Landscape

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Abstract

Few Tibetan figures have left an impression on the Himalayan landscape, both literary and geographic, as indelibly as Mi la ras pa (ca. 1028–1111), whose career as meditator and poet was punctuated by travel across the borderlands of southern Tibet. This essay will begin to address the defining role of place in Tibetan biographical literature by examining the intersections of text and terrain in the recording of an individual's life. In particular, this study examines sites of transformation in Mi la ras pa's biographical narratives, arguing for what might be called a geographic biography by examining the dialogical relationship between a life story recorded on paper and a life imprinted on the ground. It first considers the broad paradigms for landscaping the environment witnessed in Tibetan literature. It then examines ways in which the yogin's early biographical tradition treated the category of sacred place, creating increasingly detailed maps of the yogin's life, and how those maps were understood and reinterpreted. The paper concludes by addressing two specific modes of transformation in the life story — contested place and re-imagined place — exploring new geographies of consecration, dominion, and praxis.

Keywords

Tibet, Tibetan literature, Mi la ras pa, biography, hagiography, sacred geography

Geographic Lives

Few Tibetan figures have left an impression on the Himalayan landscape, both literary and geographic, as indelibly as Mi la ras pa (ca. 1028–1111), whose career as meditator and poet was punctuated by travel among mountain retreats across the borderlands of southern Tibet. Stories of his converting disciples, taming wild places, and

subjugating local spirits carved out a terrain fertile for the spread of dharma, thereby defining the contours of a Buddhist topography on both sides of the Himalayan range. Early versions of the biography recorded dozens of locations connected to his life. It was only at the close of the fifteenth-century, however, that the yogin's illustrious biographer Gtsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507) — the so-called “Madman of Tsang” — codified the map of authentic Mi la sites along this borderland, much as he standardized previous written accounts of the yogin's activities that were closely associated with them.

The life of a saint, it has been suggested, is a “composition of places,” charting an itinerary of departures and returns that ultimately comes to define the life through the places it inhabits (Certeau 1988:281). Early scholars of Buddhism, including Alfred Foucher, noted the central role of place and pilgrimage in the development of the Buddha's biographical tradition.¹ Studies of East Asian traditions have explored the relationship between Buddhist lives and places.² Likewise, a general Tibetan tendency toward *topophilia* — to invoke Yi-fü Tuan's famous title — has been widely described, and the role of sacred landscape in the con-

¹ This thesis is succinctly laid out in Foucher (1963:7–9). Tradition ascribes the origins of Buddhist pilgrimage and its delineation of sacred space to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, an important work from the Pāli canon recounting the final days of the Buddha's life. In this narrative, the Buddha himself enumerates four sites to be visited and venerated by his disciples after his passing: “Here the Tathāgata was born. . . . Here the Tathāgata attained supreme enlightenment. . . . Here the Tathāgata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma. . . . Here the Tathāgata attained the Nibbāna-element without remainder” (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* 5.8; translation after Walshe [1987:263].) This passage famously describes these locations — later known as the *caturmahāprātihārya*, or the “four great wonders” — not with geographical place-names but in direct reference to the four central acts of the Buddha's life. Following Foucher's theory, Étienne Lamotte (1988:665) re-emphasized the relationship between text and terrain, noting that “It is not possible to separate the biography of the Buddha from the sacred topography of Buddhism.” In his view, one of the earliest extensive accounts of the Buddha's life, the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, appears in the form of an “enlarged . . . edition of several pilgrimage guide books placed end to end.”

² See, for example, Grapard (1982); Shinohara (2003). The latter forms part of a publication directly addressing the intersections of sacred place and biography manifesting in various religious traditions across East, South, and Southeast Asia (although Tibet is conspicuously absent). See Granoff and Shinohara (2003).

text of Himalayan pilgrimage and ritual traditions has become a sub-field in its own right.³ Austrian mountaineer (and companion of Heinrich Harrer) Peter Aufschnaiter was among the first to systematically document the sites associated with Mi la ras pa's life, based upon his explorations of the Skyid grong valley in southern Tibet.⁴ Yet little attention has been paid to the relationship between sacred geography and narrative in the context of Tibetan life writing. The present essay will thus begin to address this lacuna in contemporary scholarship, examining the defining role of place in Tibetan biographical literature by surveying the intersections of text and terrain in the recording of Mi la ras pa's life story.

In what follows, I will propose two interrelated points about the relationship between biographical narrative and the formulation of sacred geography in Tibet. First, I would like to suggest that the topography of Mi la ras pa's life constitutes an important (but frequently overlooked) form of life writing in its own right, what might be considered geographic biography. The places associated with a life, set forth in literature, can also be read on the ground as a kind of biographical text. The notion of a geographic biography is thus useful as a means for teasing out the relationship between Tibetan life writing and sacred geography while critically addressing received notions about the forms they inhabit.

Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition is valuable here because it forms such a rich intertextual archive, preserving materials that range from simple vitae to detailed compendia. The earliest examples, originating in the records of his direct disciples, grew increasingly complex, and culminate in the standard two-volume edition (the *Life* and *Collected Songs*) in 1488, nearly four centuries after the yogin's death. Together, these sources offer fertile soil for excavating layers of representation that, in cross-section, reveal the programmatic purposes that life writing served in Tibet (much as it did in Medieval Europe). As Mi la ras

³) Recent publications include Diemberger (1991, 1993); Ehrhard (1997, 1999a, 1999b); Huber (1999a, 1999b); and MacDonald (1997).

⁴) Aufschnaiter's observations first appeared in his posthumous publication "Lands and Places of Milarepa." See Aufschnaiter (1976). For an English translation of his journals, which make frequent mention of Mi la ras pa and the yogin's meditation sites, see Brauen (2002).

pa's followers coalesced into the Buddhist traditions known as the Bka' brgyud (literally, Oral Transmission), stories of the yogin's life thus became a powerful vehicle for promoting personal, institutional, or doctrinal considerations, including the claiming, demarcating, and mapping of sacred space.

The narrative tradition of Mi la ras pa's life is also relevant in this context because it foregrounds the role of place, even as it simultaneously deemphasizes the element of time. The life story records only the most general sense of time passing: Mi la's early childhood folds into his later years with very few external temporal markers. The Songs compress the element of time even further, serving as biographical networks largely synchronic in nature. Several Tibetan commentators have plotted general chronologies of Mi la ras pa's life, calculating the period he spent with Mar pa (1002/12–1097) and the length of his various retreats, yet even the most basic temporal facts of his biography — the dates of his birth and death — are hotly contested.⁵ Instead, the biographical tradition manifests largely in terms of place: regions through which Mi la traveled, caves in which he meditated, where he met disciples, tamed demons, sang his songs. Reading through the extensive biographies, we find long lists of the places in Mi la's life but have almost no idea when he visited them.

The second point I would like to argue is that the topography of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition was unstable, subject to both change and revision much like its literary cousin. As individual locations evolved over time, they appear to have served as powerful sites for remembering episodes of the yogin's life story and for re-recording how those stories were told. The sites of transformation in the geographic biography thus reveal a dialogical relationship between a life story recorded on paper and a life imprinted on the ground. Biographical narratives may landscape the terrain, but sacred sites in turn serve to re-imagine how those narratives can be written and read.

Recent studies in geography have begun to argue against notions of place as a static dimension, "devoid of effect or implications" (Massey 1994:3). Rather, place is unstable and changing, not unlike the bio-

⁵ For an extensive chronological analysis of Mi la ras pa's life, see Tshe dbang nor bu, SDN. Chos kyi dbang phyug, in his DTL, and Zhi byed ri pa, in NDO, also attempt to reconstruct chronologies of the yogin's life.

graphical tradition itself; each may transform, and be transformed, over time. In some cases, the ground itself is understood as having the potential to move: China maintains “floating” mountains; sacred peaks are said to have “flown” from India to Japan; the very earth of Tibet is described as being restrained by a series of “taming” temples to insure its receptivity to Buddhism.⁶ Sacred sites could be transported and transplanted, most famously illustrated by the Indian Mount Potalaka in the form of Lhasa’s Potala Palace, revered as the abode of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who is believed to manifest in the figure of the Dalai Lamas. Tibet imported India’s complex system of sacred lands (*pīṭha*) to reconstruct a native geography based upon tantric traditions of literature and practice. Sacred places could also move within Tibet’s own borders, as did the acclaimed mountain pilgrimage of Tsā ri, recreated in eastern Tibet as the retreat hermitage Rin chen brag called Tsa ’dra, literally “like Tsā ri.”⁷ Buddhist traditions therefore seem to have understood, at least implicitly, the dynamic and unfixed nature of sacred places.

Traditional geographic theory, often labeled “environmental determinism,” long held that “it is place that creates man and his culture as well as his character, rather than the other way round” (Smith 1987:30). Yet, as J. Z. Smith has proposed, “What if space were not the recipient but rather the creation of the human project? What if place were an active production of intellection rather than its passive receptacle?” (ibid. 26).

Such a position was not unknown to Tibetan commentators. A century and a half prior to Smith’s query, Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837), the famed nineteenth-century scholar from Brag dkar rta so in southern Tibet, argued for a similar case about the intersection of person and place. He noted two modes of interaction between people and places: sacred sites that are blessed by individuals and individuals who are blessed by sacred sites.⁸ This perhaps echoes the mainstream

⁶ On the flying mountains of Japan see Grapard (1982); flying mountains in Tibet, and references to Chinese hovering mountains, are described in Buffetrille (1996). On the taming of the Tibetan landscape in relation to the introduction of Buddhism, see Aris (1979) and Gyatso (1989).

⁷ On the geography of Tsa ’dra, see Ngawang Zangpo (2001).

⁸ Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL, 8b.

Buddhist belief that a sacred site may be transformed through a charismatic figure's consecration, just as visitors to that site at a later time are themselves transformed long after the original individual has gone. Following this lead, the present essay will consider sacred place not (or not only) as the passive product of a powerful master's blessing (*byin rlabs*) or auspicious connection (*rten 'brel*) as recorded in texts, but as playing a creative and dynamic role in the formation of his life story and biographical tradition. Though mountain caves served as Mi la's home for much of his life, their locations and their understanding within the tradition were not carved in stone; they were unstable, magma-like, continuing to transform even as the strata of his literary life story coalesced and solidified.

What implications does this then have for the kind of life writing in Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition? To a large degree, the recording of a life is an act of memory: memorializing the lives of others, crafting a memoir of one's own. Indeed, one of the yogin's earliest biographers, Ngan rdzong ras pa Byang chub rgyal po (b. eleventh century) was renowned for his mnemonic skills, and his colophons describe his motivation from fear that his guru's life story will be forgotten — a theme common to many Tibetan biographies.⁹ Pertinent to the present con-

⁹ Ngan rdzong ras pa's own biography opens with a verse praising his faculty of perfect memory:

I respectfully bow down at the feet of Ngan rdzong ston pa:
 Learned sovereign who first perfected study,
 Accomplished sovereign who then perfected meditation,
 The one named Bo[dhi] [Ra]ja, scholar-adept who attained an indelible memory.

See Dam pa ras chen, NDN, 2. (*dang por sbyangs pa mthar phyir <phyin> mkhas pa'i gtsol der rjes sgom pa mthar phyin grub pa'i gtsol mkhas grub mi rjed gzungs thob bo ji'i mtshant/ ngan rdzong ston pa'i zhabs la gus phyag 'tshal*) His biography then continues: "He brought appearances under his power and then performed inconceivable enlightened activity in taming disciples. He attained an indelible memory and then compiled the sayings of the great Rje btsun Mi la ras pa, thereby benefiting beings." (ibid. 15: *snang ba dbang du 'dus nas gdul nas gdul bya phrin las bsam gyi mi khyab pa mdzad/ mi rjed pa'i gzungs thob nas/ rje btsun chen po mi la ras pa'i gsung sgros bka'i bsdu ba mdzad pas sems can la phan btags*)

The term used to describe Ngan rdzong's abilities (*mi brjed pa'i gzung*), literally "the memory (or retention) that does not forget," is here rendered as "indelible memory." The Tibetan *gzung* — defined as "retaining the words and the meaning of dharma

text, however, Edward Casey has described a particularly close relationship between place and memory, arguing that “memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported . . . a place wherein the past can revive and survive”; memory, he notes, is “a place for places” (Casey 1987:186).¹⁰ And insofar as life writing serves as an exterior narrative

without forgetting them” (*chos kyi tshig don mi brjed par ’dzin pa*) — was also used by Tibetan translators to render the Sanskrit *dhāraṇī*. The word is frequently understood as referring to a kind of magic formula, ranging in length from a single syllable to the entire Sanskrit alphabet, and often devoid of any clear semantic meaning. In that context, a *dhāraṇī* is believed to capture and retain the essence of an element of the Buddhist teaching or a text describing it, a function illustrated by the term’s foundation in the verbal root “to hold” (*dhṛ*). *Dhāraṇīs* are also believed to serve as a form of protection, in which case they may be compared with the *paritta* of the Pāli canon, although they are most frequently discussed in relation to mantra, found in the literature of both the sūtras and the tantras. For a discussion of the literature pertaining to *dhāraṇī* and mantra, and the relationships between the two, see Gyatso (1992:198 n. 11). In a broader sense, however, the term *dhāraṇī* refers to a form of memory. According to the *Akṣayamatīrdeśa*,

Dhāraṇī is to keep, retain in memory and not forget, to truly retain by remembrance the eighty-four thousand multitudes of religion. . . . Again, *dhāraṇī* is that by which one retains the sayings of all the bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, śrāvakas and all living beings, that by which one retains all good sayings without remainder. (Quoted in Braarvig [1985:18])

The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* classifies four types of *dhāraṇī*: (1) dharma *dhāraṇī* (2) meaning *dhāraṇī* (*arthadhāraṇī*), (3) mantra *dhāraṇī*, and (4) forbearance *dhāraṇī* (*kṣāntidhāraṇī*) (ibid. 19–20). Of these, the first refers to the mnemonic ability to retain in memory the formulation of oral or written dharma, such as a sermon or a book, for an infinite period of time. The second category identifies the ability to retain the meaning of those teachings, and not just the syntactic formation of their words. Mantra *dhāraṇī* refers to the verbal formula employed by a bodhisattva for the benefit of beings; it is both the formula retained in mind and the efficacy retained by the formula. Forbearance *dhāraṇī* refers to the bodhisattva’s realization, gained through the use of a *dhāraṇī* formula, that the ultimate nature lies beyond verbal expressions. Thus, if in this context *dhāraṇī* might be translated as “the power of retaining in memory . . . through memory of extraordinary power,” the term describes both the faculty of memory and the remembrance itself.

¹⁰ In a subsequent publication, Casey further explores the philosophical implications of place, “its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, and tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are *not*)” (Casey 1993: xv).

of memory, it too seems to be naturally place oriented: a place where both the past and its places survive. In this sense, biography appears to preserve a form of what Casey has called “place memory,” the representation of the past in its own place. Here, place-memory describes the underlying narratives preserving an individual’s life as being both place oriented and place saturated.

Place memory also describes a quality of places themselves: the ability of place to serve as a “container of experiences,” holding narratives of the past in place (Casey 1987:187). In this case, it aptly designates the memory of an individual in a place and in reference to that place (*ibid.*). The relationship between life and landscape thus forms a dialogue in which biographical narrative creates and preserves the sacred space inhabited by an individual, while specific sites serve as a parallel means for remembering and re-imagining an individual’s life in those places. *Mi la ras pa’s* biographical tradition thus serves as the memory of his life firmly situated in the topography of his life story. Landscape forms the fundament upon which *Mi la ras pa’s* life might be written, but it also records and preserves the life story as if they were inscribed in the rocky cliffs and lush forests of the Himalayan borderlands. The conundrum of place, Casey has noted, is that it is unstable and changing, while persisting as memory. This essay will argue for an understanding of place as unstable, while persisting through the memory of individuals whose lives were spent there, and through which their lives were written.

Paradigms for Landscaping the Environment

Before turning to the details of *Mi la ras pa’s* biographical tradition, it will be useful to briefly review some of the paradigms through which Tibetan sacred geography has taken shape. Accounts of Buddhism’s early transplantation in the high plateau are grounded, literally, in the Tibetan soil. In turn, the Himalayan ground has largely been shaped through a process that will later be described as landscaping: the production and formulation of sacred space through a variety of means. Although literary, ritual, and other praxis-oriented traditions may form and reform landscape, in the present context it is the narrative traditions of *Mi la ras pa’s* life story that shape the land.

In Tibet's myth of origins for the Buddhist domination over its indigenous religion, the landscape is imagined as a great supine demoness (*srin mo*) spread across the earth, an obstructing force antithetical to the "civilizing" influences of the *Buddhadharma*. It is Tibet's great religious monarch and consolidator of its early empire Srong btsan sgam po (d. 649) who is said to have first subdued this demoness, paving the way for his empire's gradual conversion. To do so, he famously constructed a series of "taming temples," effectively pinning down the demoness at various points on her body and rendering her ineffective, but also inscribing a new hierarchy of Tibetan space imagined as radiating out toward an untamed frontier from the Jo khang temple in Lhasa resting upon her heart at the center.¹¹

But it is the extensive biographical tradition of Padmasambhava — the eighth-century tantric adept of India, the Precious Guru (Guru Rin po che), and Tibet's "Second Buddha" — and the literature attributed to him therein, that has served to shape much of Tibet's sacred landscape. This is evident most clearly in stories of the adept's own subjugation, several generations after the Tibetan king, of the hosts of malevolent non-human beings inimical to Buddhism believed to populate the countryside. Perhaps the clearest example of the early creation of Tibetan sacred space is in Padmasambhava's formulation of "hidden lands" (*sbas yul*) — sanctuaries for meditation practice and refuges from the harsh realities of war and social strife — ascribed to him in the form of revealed guidebooks and catalogues. Such natural enclaves mark the borders of Tibet, Nepal, India, and Bhutan, spanning both sides of the Himalayan slope.

Several centuries later, during the period of the subsequent dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet (*phyi dar*), and within several generations of Mi la ras pa's death, influential Bka' brgyud masters began to promote new — or at least newly imagined — conceptions of Tibetan sacred geography. These most famously crystallized through the visionary geography of recently translated Indian tantric literature, and served to support the nascent communities of yogic practitioners that began to spread. The organization of Tibetan sacred space and places reached a crescendo

¹¹ See Aris (1979), chapter 1, and Gyatso (1989).

about a century after Mi la's biographer Gtsang smyon Heruka's own literary endeavors as the fifteenth century drew to a close.

The early 1600s witnessed a resurgence of literature attempting to "revive, by way of new foundations or renovations of old structures," a sacred landscape dating from earlier periods of the Tibetan kingdom (Ehrhard 1999b:240). These writings largely belong to a Tibetan genre known as "treasure" (*gter ma*), texts believed originally to have been hidden by Padmasambhava in the eighth century, which were then recovered many centuries later by a special class of individuals known as "treasure revealers" (*gter ston*).¹² In many cases, the sites described in such texts were originally associated with charismatic figures in Tibetan history, possessing "special qualities because of the spiritual presence of Padmasambhava or the early yogins of the Bka' brgyud pa school"; foremost among the latter, of course, was Mi la ras pa himself (Ehrhard 1999b:240).¹³ Authors and commentators were then free to order and categorize these sites as part of their contemporary religious milieu.

It is against such a backdrop that this survey of Mi la ras pa's geographic biography should be viewed. This will begin with the broad representations of place in Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition, and

¹² For a brief overview of the treasure tradition in Tibet, see Doctor (2005). On the use of this system as a means of legitimating new forms of literature, see Gyatso (1993).

¹³ These schemes could take many forms. One influential system classified a series of sacred sites in relation to the attributes of Padmasambhava based, according to tradition, on his own prophecies. This system identified five "isolated sacred sites" (*dben gnas*) representing the master's body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities, to which three additional sites — including Spa gro Stag tshang, the "tiger's den" — are occasionally appended. See the list in Ricard (1994:272 n. 59). This categorization of sacred places occurred at least as early as the fourteenth century in Padmasambhava's famed biography *Padma bka' thang yig*, a treasure text discovered by O rgyan gling pa (b. 1323). See Ehrhard (1999b:249 n. 2.) A more recent system, based upon a treasure revelation by Mchog 'gyur Bde chen gling pa (1829–1870) in 1857, identifies twenty-five sacred sites describing locations blessed by Padmasambhava during the course of his life. On this tradition and its wider political context, see Gardner (2006); and Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, vol. 1:518; vol. 2:43 n. 558, 181). This network rose to prominence through the conjunction of powerful and charismatic figures aligned in the so-called nonsectarian movement (*ris med*) based in eastern Tibet, primarily Khams, and helped to define a broad sense of regional Khams pa identity.

how those representations changed over time from the earliest sources to the standard version produced some four centuries later. The following sections will discuss the dynamic interaction of life-texts and life-maps by identifying two sites of geographic formation and transformation: (1) contested place, in which layers of biographical writing appear in conflict or conversation about geographic locations visited first by Padmasambhava and then Mi la ras pa; and (2) re-imagined place, where new life-maps are superimposed upon a known landscape, such as those charting Mi la's progression in the practice of tantric yoga.

Mapping Mi la ras pa's Life

As suggested by a recent title on the study of life writing, one function of biography is the mapping of lives (France and St. Clair 2002). While the maps of that publication are symbolic of the “the functions which [biography] can serve and has served in different societies, its *uses*,” they need not only function metaphorically; life stories can also map — in a literal sense — the topography of an individual's life (ibid. 4). If biographical maps are not simply metaphors, neither are the maps of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition purely generic or theoretical, as the yogin's life story served to claim specific sites for followers in his tradition. The catalogue of places codified in the standard *Life* and *Songs* led to a thriving pilgrimage tradition among innumerable retreat sites and meditation caves.

The sites most clearly established in Gtsang smyon Heruka's texts became an important part of almost any trip through the southern border regions of Tibet and Nepal. This was true for individuals of all sectarian affiliations, from the 'Brug pa and 'Bri gung Bka' bgyud followers of Mi la ras pa who visited them in great numbers to Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor (b. 1760), the famed eighteenth-century Dge lugs statesman whose autobiography documents his great interest in Mi la ras pa and the places associated with his life.¹⁴ Many of these sites are located, perhaps unsurprisingly, on or near the traditional trade and pilgrimage routes between Tibet and Nepal, especially those in Mang

¹⁴ See Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, GZN.

yul, Skyid grong, and La phyi. Tibetans frequently visited these sites as part of a pilgrimage to Kathmandu. Modern-day yogins continue to visit and practice in Mi la's meditation caves. One site — the cave known as Hovering in Space (Nam mkha' lding) — has become an obligatory tourist destination for foreign visitors as they descend Tibet's high plateau for the lush valleys of Nepal.

To unfold the maps of Mi la ras pa's life, we turn first to the texts themselves. The earliest works in the biographical tradition are extremely conservative in their recording of biographical space. These texts tend to emphasize general setting (the mountains of Mang yul, or the forest of Sing ga la) over specifically named meditation sites, demarcating only a few keystone locations, such as Mi la's principal retreat known as White-rock Horse-tooth (Brag dkar rta so). The earliest known biographical works, such as those by Mi la ras pa's direct disciple Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153) and his contemporary Bla ma Zhang (1123–1193) record virtually no locations by name apart from general references to a few prominent locations such as La phyi and Brin.¹⁵ The next datable biography, by the 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud master Don mo ri pa (b. 1203) preserves several new locations, referred to as "caves," including Pigeon Cave (Phug ron phug), as well as "fortresses" (*rdzong*), such as Enlightenment Fortress (Byang chub rdzong).¹⁶ The ideal of the meditation fortress, witnessed here for the first time, will later come to dominate the landscape as an important geographical marker.

¹⁵ The authorship, and therefore the date, of some writings included in Sgam po pa's Collected Works have been called into question by both Tibetan historians and contemporary scholarship. See, for example, the comments in Jackson (1990:2).

¹⁶ The writings of Don mo ri pa are contained in a larger, and later, biographical collection by Rdo rje Mdzes 'od (active mid-fourteenth century): *Bka' brgyud kyi rnam thar chen mo rin po che'i gter mdzod dgos 'dod 'byung gnas* [*Great Biographies of the Kagyu: A Treasury of Jewels, the Source for All Wishes*] (Bir, India: D. Tsondu Senghe 1985). While this compilation appears to date from the mid-fourteenth century, all but the final few biographies were written perhaps a century earlier by Don mo ri pa (b. 1203) around 1245. These life stories are described as having been dictated by Don mo ri pa's guru, known as Ri khrod dbang phyug (1181–1225), who was himself a spiritual grandson (*yang slob*) of Phag mo gru pa; this would place the biography of Mi la ras pa only four teacher-student generations from the yogin himself. See Roberts (2007:9). A partial (and fairly loose) English translation of Rdo rje mdzes 'od's text was published in Gyaltzen and Huckenpahler (1990).

The first systematic mapping of the yogin's life appears late in the thirteenth century, in a text called *The King of Rje btsuns*. Its author, Rgyal thang pa Bde chen rdo rje (thirteenth century), draws upon earlier works to develop, perhaps for the first time, a new category of preeminent meditation sites: the six fortresses (*rdzong drug*).¹⁷ In his seventeenth chapter, the second of two verses describing the yogin's period of intense meditation and ascetic retreat, Rgyal thang pa enumerates these sites in the following way, naming only four of the six locations:¹⁸

1. Red Rock Fortress of Ling nga (Ling nga brag dmar gyi rdzong)
2. Shadow Fortress of Smin rgyud (Smin rgyud grib ma'i rdzong)
3. Celestial Fortress of Rkyang dpal (Rkyang dpal nam mkha'i rdzong)
4. Enlightenment Fortress of Rag ma (Rag ma byang chub kyi rdzong)

These are all situated in the Mang yul/Skyid grong valley near Mi la's principal retreat site at Brag dkar rta so, which is itself strangely absent from the list.

The twenty-fifth and penultimate chapter of Rgyal thang pa's work catalogues Mi la ras pa's geo-biography in even greater detail. This section first registers the locations he visited and then lists the disciples he trained. Gtsang smyon Heruka's own version of the life story closely follows Rgyal thang pa's framework here, possibly drawing on it as a conceptual model for his own penultimate chapter.¹⁹ Rgyal thang pa begins with the verse:

¹⁷ The text is found in a collection of Bka' brgyud biographies titled *Gser ri'i phreng ba'i rnam thar [The Garland Biographies of Golden Mountain]* published as *Dkar brgyud gser 'phreng: A Thirteenth Century Collection of Verse Hagiographies of the Succession of Eminent Masters of the 'Brug-pa dkar-brgyud-pa Tradition* (Tashijong, India: Sungrab Nyamso Gyunphel Parkhang 1973). Rgyal thang pa's dates have been discussed in Roberts (2007:11). Tiso (1989) also presents a study of this text.

¹⁸ Rgyal thang pa, JGM, 227.

¹⁹ Gtsang smyon Heruka was the first author to publish Mi la ras pa's Life and Songs as separate volumes. In doing so, he inserted into the biography a brief summary of events that occur in Songs; this constitutes much of the Life's eleventh chapter.

Thus, yogin Rje btsun Mid la
 Stayed not there [at rest] but [left] for Mnga' ris skor gsum,
 G.yas ru Byang, Gtsang, and places like that.
 I bow with devotion to his roaming 'round mountain retreats.²⁰

The prose commentary then describes the yogin's travel across Tibet, systematically enumerating sites as if marking points on the compass, laying survey stakes to define the sphere of Mi la ras pa's activity.²¹ Indeed, at each locale the chapter describes Mi la ras pa as having "planted the teachings of the practice lineage" (*sgrub brgyud kyi bstan pa gtsugs*). Unlike the six fortresses above, however, these locations lack the poetic names often associated with the yogin's retreat sites, and are instead structured almost entirely along political, administrative, and regional lines. The list begins in the region of far western Tibet called Stod Mnga' ris skor gsum, including Mt. Kailāsa and Lake Manasārowar, and then records Pu rang, Blo bo, Gung thang, and Mang yul.²² Although not stated explicitly in the text, together these locations encompass both upper and lower Mnga' ris (Mnga' ris stod and Mnga' ris smad) and thus the entire sweep of far western Tibet is placed under Mi la ras pa's feet.²³

²⁰ Rgyal thang pa, JGM, 255. *de ltā i rje btsun mid la rnal' byor pas// sa der ma bzhugs mnga' ris skor gsum dang// g.yas ru byang rtsang ga <gi> sa cha sog// ri khrod phyogs med 'grims la gus phyag' tshal//*.

²¹ Tiso's translation (1989:422) appears to miss Rgyal thang pa's conceptual layout of the geography.

²² Rgyal thang pa, JGM, 256. Although Sgam po pa and Bla ma Zhang both describe Mi la ras pa's cremation at Mt. Kailāsa, this may be the earliest reference to his activities in that location. This is one of the few versions known to refer to Pu rang, south of Kailāsa, near the border of western Nepal. Blo bo, a corruption of Glo bo, refers to modern day Mustang in northwestern region of Nepal formerly aligned with the kingdoms of Mnga' ris. Gung thang and Mang yul are the regions associated with Mi la ras pa's homeland and early meditation.

²³ General Tibetan conceptions of their landscape describe the terrain in the far west as geographically high in elevation and sloping downward to the east. The Tibetan designation *stod* (upper) usually refers to locations further west and higher, and *smad* (lower) to those further east and lower. See Aris (1979:18 ff.).

The chapter next describes Mi la's travels through southwestern Tibet, specifically designated in the text as La stod G.yas ru lho byang. This is a compound toponym that may be understood in the following way. The central Tibetan regions of Dbus and Gtsang were comprised of four military and administrative units (*ru*, literally "horns") established during Tibet's dynastic period in the seventh and eighth centuries: G.yas ru and Ru lag in Gtsang, G.yo ru and Dbu ru in Dbus.²⁴ G.yas ru thus comprises one-half of Gtsang.²⁵ La stod lho (southern La stod) and La stod byang (northern La stod) each form one of the thirteen administrative regions or "myriarchies" (*khri skor*) of central and western Tibet said to have been established by the Yuan court and placed under the direction of 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235–1280), the acclaimed thirteenth-century Sa skya hierarch.²⁶ (Refer to Map 1.) Here, the text describes how Mi la traveled through G.yas ru, first visiting Lha stod lho and then La stod byang, each of which is further demarcated by listing four distinct locations. This is most clearly depicted in outline form:²⁷

I. [G.yas ru] La stod lho:

1. Ding ri²⁸
2. Bong shod²⁹
3. Shri ri³⁰
4. Khrom³¹

²⁴ For an analysis of this system largely based upon early sources, see Uray (1960).

²⁵ The *Mkhas pa lde'u Chos 'byung*, a thirteen-century work whose author was likely a close contemporary of Rgyal thang pa, demarcates the boundaries of G.yas ru as follows: Srag [Brag] gi glang ma gur phub (east); Bye ma la dgu (west); Rmi sti chu nag (north); Snye nam g.yag po sna (south); Shangs kyi zhong tshal (center). See *Mkhas pa lde'u*, KDC, 272.

²⁶ On the formation of the *khri skor*, see Petech (1990:50 ff.). By the mid-fourteenth century, La stod byang was centered around the monastery of Byang Ngam rings and La stod lho around Shel dkar rdzong (ibid. 53) While the *khri skor* largely replaced the *ru bzhi* as a means of geo-political organization, later writers continued to use the system of "horns" as a broad territorial framework. See Uray (1960:34 n.9.).

²⁷ See Rgyal thang pa, JGM, 256–57.

²⁸ The well-known village and center of religious activities for individuals such as Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas and Ko brag pa.

²⁹ A location in the Rtsib ri region of southwest Tibet.

³⁰ An alternate, and ancient, name for the sacred mountain (*gnas ri*) Rtsib ri.

³¹ Unidentified, although a location called Rgyal khrom is mentioned in the *Shel dkar Chos 'byung*. See Wangdu and Diemberger (1996:46).

II. G.yas ru [La stod] byang:

1. Rgyal thang brgya[d] bcu'i brag³²
2. Shel lcag³³
3. Glu rgyal gling po³⁴
4. Mchog dkar gyi brag³⁵

Further study may clarify how each sub-location served to circumscribe the larger geo-political region. Rgyal thang pa's intent, however, seems clear: to demonstrate how Mi la ras pa's activities systematically claimed large areas of Tibet's southwest as part of the Bka' brgyud sectarian landscape. With the geographic biography in its infancy, the emphasis here is not on the creation of new space but rather the transfer into Mi la ras pa's dominion topographic features and administrative zones already on the map. In doing so, the author situates Mi la ras pa, anachronistically it seems, in a landscape that did not exist until the yogin had been dead for more than a century. But this is perhaps unsurprising since 'Phags pa, the author's contemporary, granted initiation to Qubilai Qan who, in 1264, reciprocated by presenting the Tibetan ruler with political control over Tibet in the form of the thirteen myriarchies. Here, Mi la ras pa's geographic biography (and by extension, the yogin's Bka' brgyud tradition) appears to push back against the newly emerging Sa skya hegemony. Indeed, the narrative concludes by affirming that "The one called Lord Mi la himself traveled among mountain retreats without partiality in order to plant the teachings of the practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) in every direction, and then carried out the limitless benefit of transmigrating beings."³⁶

This last line carries an unintended note of irony, however, since so many of these places were forgotten in the subsequent biographical

³²) Unidentified, although it clearly does not refer to the Rgyal thang of southern Khams in eastern Tibet, as asserted by Tiso. The *Shel dkar Chos 'byung* refers to Rgyal nor, established by village communities from Khams. See Wangdu and Diemberger (1996:34, 112). The TBRC database mentions a Rgyal thang dgon in Snye mo district.

³³) Unidentified.

³⁴) Unidentified.

³⁵) Unidentified.

³⁶) Ibid. 259. *rje mid la ces pa de nyid kyis/ phyogs thams cad du sgrub brgyud kyi bstan pa gtsugs pa'i phyir/ phyogs med kyi ri khrod du gshegs nas/ 'gro ba sems can pa'i don tshad med pa mdzad doll.*

tradition; some cannot be identified today. Later authors appear to have largely rejected Rgyal thang pa's early attempt at charting the yogin's life in terms of existing geo-political boundaries, turning instead toward increasingly symbolic topographic structures. The result is that the locations recorded in this work have literally been wiped off the map. We are left with a faint echo of their names even if we can no longer visit them. This seems to illustrate the deeply literary nature of sacred biography, with such places appearing like a tantalizing list of texts preserved in a historical source but which are no longer extant.

The process of cataloguing individual sites of Mi la's practice, in addition to naming new ones, matured within the next literary stratum, a number of extensive and comprehensive works produced in the centuries following Mi la ras pa's death.³⁷ In as many as seventy discrete chapters, these Collected Songs (and to a lesser extent, the Lives proper) form geographic atlases, much as they do song collections, preserving the names of individual locations together with brief anecdotes of the yogin's activities in them. In general, they show little evidence of Rgyal thang pa's concern with spatial arrangement or local geo-politics. Instead, they tend to foreground symbolic categories and classifications of space, illustrated here by a variant but more complete form of the six fortresses, identical in each of the major compendia:³⁸

1. Winning Enlightenment Fortress of Rag ma (Rag ma byang chub bsgrub pa'i rdzong)
2. Celestial Fortress of Spos ri spos mthon (Spos ri spos mthon nam mkha' rdzong)

³⁷ This refers principally to three comprehensive versions of the life story: (1) the so-called *Twelve Great Disciples* (*Bu chen bcu gnyis*), BC; (2) *The Black Treasury* (*Mdzod nag ma*), Rang byung rdo rje (attributed), DNM; and (3) *A River of Blessings* (*Byin rlabs kyi chu rgyun*), Anonymous, JLC. The considerable uncertainty surrounding the second source listed here has grown recently, with the acquisition of new manuscripts in my possession and with the publication of several new versions of the life story in Rang byung rdo rje's Collected Works. See Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje'i gsung 'bum, Vol. Ga (Ziling: Tshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis 2006).

³⁸ See BCN, 108a; DNM, 138a.6; JCGS, 302.8. Gtsang smyon Heruka imports this list in its entirety, although he changes the name of #5 to Stag phug senge rdzong, as part of a strategy to emphasize the latter location in Yol mo, Nepal. Cf. Gtsang smyon Heruka, NG, 523; Chang (1962:364). The English translations provided for many of these place names are provisional.

3. Agate Sanctuary Garuḍa Fortress of Brag dmar (Brag dmar mchongs gling khyung gi rdzong)
4. Cheerful Cave Sun Fortress of Mon (Mon gyi skyid phug nyi ma'i rdzong)
5. Crystal Cave Bamboo Fortress of Ka ti (Ka ti shel phug chu shing rdzong)
6. Central Channel Fortress of Brag dkar rta so (Brag dkar rta so dbu ma'i rdzong)

Here, we see the codification of a system joining poetic names for meditation retreats together with local toponyms. In this way, the text's biographical narrative could identify and claim new territory on its own terms, divorced from the restraints of previous geo-political boundaries while remaining connected to locations known on the ground. The geographic biography began to take shape.

Another fourteenth-century text, *The Illuminating Lamp* by G.yung ston Zhi byed ri pa (mid-fourteenth century) continued the process of systematizing groups of retreat sites, identifying a slightly different category of meditation caves.³⁹ This text refers to another set of six caves known as “the six lotus fortresses” (*padma rdzong drug*).⁴⁰

³⁹) Zhi byed ri pa, NDO. This text called *The Illuminating Lamp of Sun and Moon Beams*, completed in 1373, appears to have formed something of a landmark in the development of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition prior to Gtsang smyon's standard version. Its author, one G.yung ston Zhi byed ri pa, clearly draws upon earlier versions of the life story; he was famed for having seen 127 different versions. In this work, he has produced a composite survey of the entire biographical tradition, incorporating biographical narrative, historical analysis, chronological clarifications, literary criticism, question and answer records, an assessment of existing oral traditions, documentation of transmission lines, all mixed together with a good deal of autobiographical reflection. The text forms what in modern parlance might be called a “state of the field” survey of Mi la ras pa studies in the late fourteenth century. In the introduction of his English translation of *The Life of Milarepa*, Lhalungpa refers to Zhi byed ri pa as a contemporary of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1377–1451). He also notes, in agreement with Chos kyi dbang phyug, that Si tu Paṅ chen's autobiography refers to a manuscript version of the *Illuminating Lamp* preserved at Chu bar monastery. See Lhalungpa (1977, xxx). I am currently in the process of preparing a study of this text and its author.

⁴⁰) Zhi byed ri pa, NDO, 22. This passage records what appears to be the earliest mention of the name Stag phug seng ge rdzong (Tiger Cave Lion Fortress).

1. Celestial Cave of Rgya brag (Rgya brag nam mkha' rdzong)
2. Hidden Cave Demoness Fortress (Sbas phug ma mo rdzong)
3. Tiger Cave Lion Fortress (Stag phug seng ge rdzong)
4. Lotus Fortress of La phug (La phug padma rdzong)
5. Adamantine Fortress of Khro rgyal (Khro rgyal rdo rje rdzong)
6. Nāga Fortress of Glang sgo (Glang sgo klu'i rdzong)

These six sites, all located around the Dpal khud Lake in Spo rong, were named the “lotus fortresses,” Zhi byed ri pa informs us, because they were previously blessed by Padmasambhava — the “Lotus Born” — a point to which we shall return in the next section.⁴¹

Fifteenth-century historian Tshe dbang rgyal further synthesized these traditions in his important historical work *A Religious History of Lho Rong* (*Lho rong chos 'byung*), completed in 1451, establishing a paradigm that would find its way into the standard biography several decades later. In his description of Mi la ras pa's life, the author enumerates “eighteen well-known great fortresses” (*yongs su grags pa'i rdzong chen bco brgyad*), divided into three groups of six: (1) Mi la's six fortresses (*mi la'i rdzong drug*), (2) the six fortresses of Sku thang (*sku thang rdzong drug*), and (3) the six heroine fortresses (*dpa' mo rdzong drug*), with the addition of two smaller fortresses (*rdzong chung gnyis*).⁴² The first among these is a variation of the six fortresses recorded in the larger compendia, noted previously; the second seems to refer to locations in the Sku thang region of northern Nepal; the last division repeats Zhi byed ri pa's list under a different name. He also includes two small

⁴¹ The great lake is located in the plain called Dpal mo dpal thang that figures prominently in the life story. The lake's traditional Tibetan name is Lha mtsho srin mtsho.

⁴² Tshe dbang rgyal, LRC, 102. The *mi la'i rdzong drug* include: (1) Brag dmar li nga rdzong; (2) Rta so dbu ma rdzong; (3) Brag dkar spos mtho rdzong; (4) Rgyang 'phan nam mkha' rdzong; (5) Rag ma byang chub rdzong; (6) Smin khyug grib ma rdzong. The *sku thang rdzong drug* include: (1) Brag skya rdo rje rdzong; (2) Khra tshang srin po rdzong; (3) Skyid sa nyi ma rdzong; (4) Khu byug dbyen pa rdzong; (5) Shel phug nam mkha' rdzong; (6) Rtsig pa rkang mthil rdzong. The *dpa' mo rdzong drug* include: (1) Rgya brag nam mkha' rdzong; (2) Sbas phug ma mo rdzong; (3) La phug padma rdzong; (4) Khro rgyal rdo rje rdzong; (5) Glang mgo klu bdud rdzong. The sixth cave of this last group, which should be Stag phug seng ge rdzong, is strangely absent from the list. The *rdzong chung gnyis* include (1) Brag dmar spos mthon nam mkha' rdzong; and (2) Skyid phug nyi ma rdzong.

fortresses (*rdzong chung gnyis*) and several miscellaneous locations including Ti se (Kailāsa), Rtsib ri, and Spa gro stag tshang.

If these early versions of the life story display a significant degree of flexibility and gradual refinement in the mapping of Mi la ras pa's activities, Gtsang smyon Heruka imported wholesale much of this topography into his version of the *Life and Songs*, completed in 1488, where he then re-formulated the best-known structure of Mi la ras pa's geographical biography. Clearly drawing on the works of Rgyal thang pa and Tshe dbang rgyal as models, the *Life's* eleventh chapter presents a brief synopsis of the entire body of narratives recorded in the *Songs*, including a comprehensive catalogue of retreat locations. Through Mi la's voice, Gtsang smyon enumerates eighteen cave locations as in the *Religious History of Lho rong*, but he employs a more standardized Tibetan typology that would shape Mi la ras pa's geographical biography into a form more immediately recognizable to his Tibetan audience, and one fitting an already standardized interpretive system. This new classification of so-called "well-known outer fortresses," (*yongs su grags pa phyi'i rdzong*) "unknown inner fortresses," (*ma grags pa nang gi rdzong*) and "secret fortresses" (*gsang ba'i rdzong*) echoes the categories frequently found in Tibetan life writing: outer (*phyi ba*), inner (*nang ba*), and secret (*gsang ba*) biographies, which might respectively describe the subject's mundane affairs, his or her spiritual career, and finally a record of visions and inner yogic experiences.⁴³

As with previous models, Gtsang smyon Heruka's framework grouped together sites located in a single geographic area: Skyid grong, Rong shar, and Lake Dpal khud, respectively.⁴⁴ (Refer to Maps 2–5.) The last of these simply copies the lists of Zhi byed ri pa and Tshe dbang rgyal

⁴³ Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor similarly describes the three groups of retreat sites using this system when recording his travels through the region in 1789. See Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, GZN, 501.

⁴⁴ The correspondence of each group of six fortresses to these three geographic regions is not explicitly noted in the text. Maps 2–5 are based largely upon site surveys conducted between 1996–2007. In several instances (Brag skya rdo rje rdzong, Skyang phan nam mkha' rdzong), these data have been augmented by information provided by local informants. Three of the "unknown" sites (Be rtse 'dod yon rdzong, Rtsig pa rkang mthil rdzong, Khu byug dben pa rdzong) have been provisionally mapped based upon descriptions in Bstan 'dzin Chos kyi blo gros, LNY.

under yet another name to fit within his known/unknown/secret scheme. Gtsang smyon additionally lists four well-known large caves (*yongs su grags pa'i phug chen bzhi*), and four unknown caves (*ma grags pa'i bzhi*).

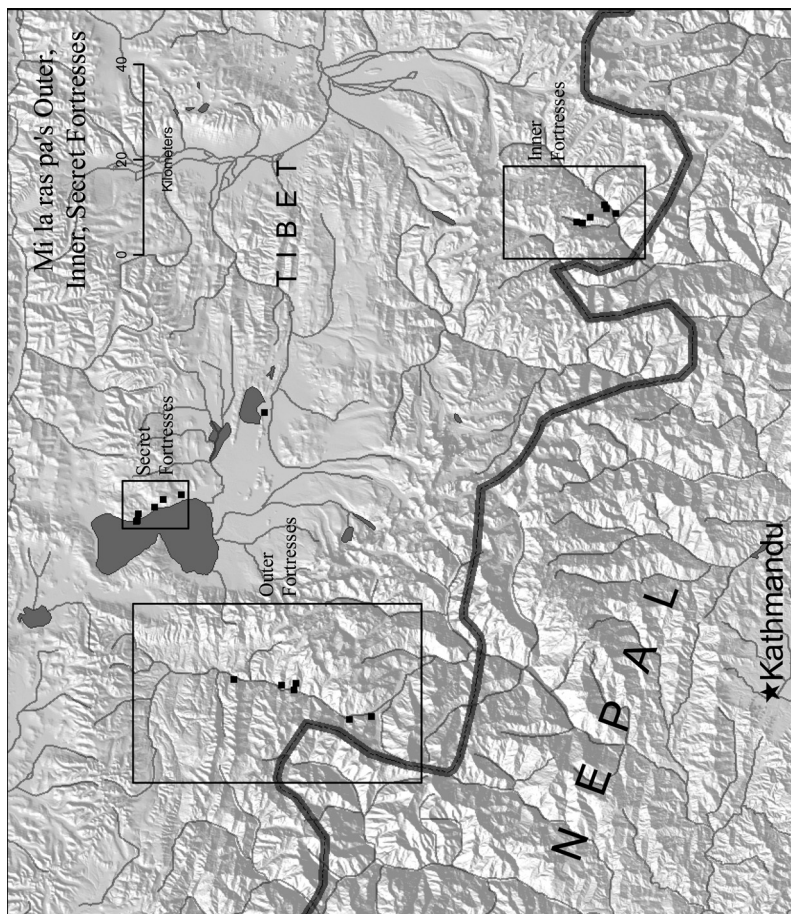
Altogether, some twenty-eight caves are enumerated under this scheme, not including several other important sites, constituting, in Mi la's words, "all of the sacred places I have ever stayed."⁴⁵ And much as he did for the text of the biography, Gtsang smyon Heruka, editor of the yogin's best-known biography, has Mi la ras pa empower the places associated with his life story, thus completing the landscaping process. The yogin states, "If you meditate in these places, favorable conditions will gather in your solitude. Since they have been infused with the blessings of my lineage, go and meditate [in them]."⁴⁶ The geographic biography here takes its most clearly articulated form, consecrated and authorized by the subject himself.

Landscaping the Map

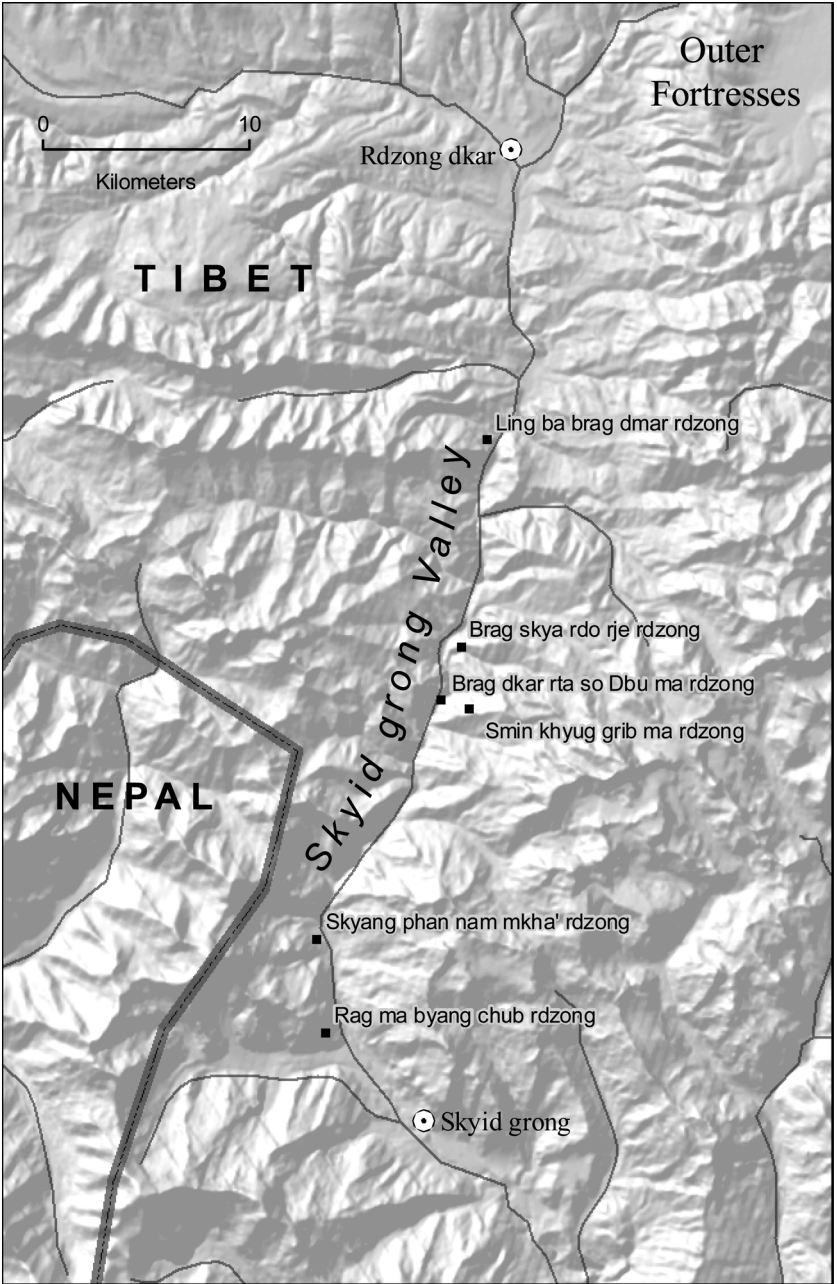
As Gtsang smyon Heruka standardized Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition, he not only re-mapped the geography of the yogin's life, but also re-arranged its terrain to fit his new biographical model. Thus, in addition to describing the lay of the land, the notion of "landscape" here retains its verbal sense of arranging geographic elements to intentionally form a particular setting. If "landscape refers to the shape — the material topography — of a piece of land," it also refers to its shaping (Cresswell 2004:11). Gtsang smyon may thus be understood as actively landscaping the environment, serving as an architect not only of literary narrative but also of biographical space. This process began, in part, with the renaming and categorizing of sites in the local terrain; once identified, Gtsang smyon further incorporated them into the biographical tradition through the use of prophetic narrative.

⁴⁵ For the list of these sites, see de Jong (1959:156.13); Lhalungpa (1977:146 ff.).

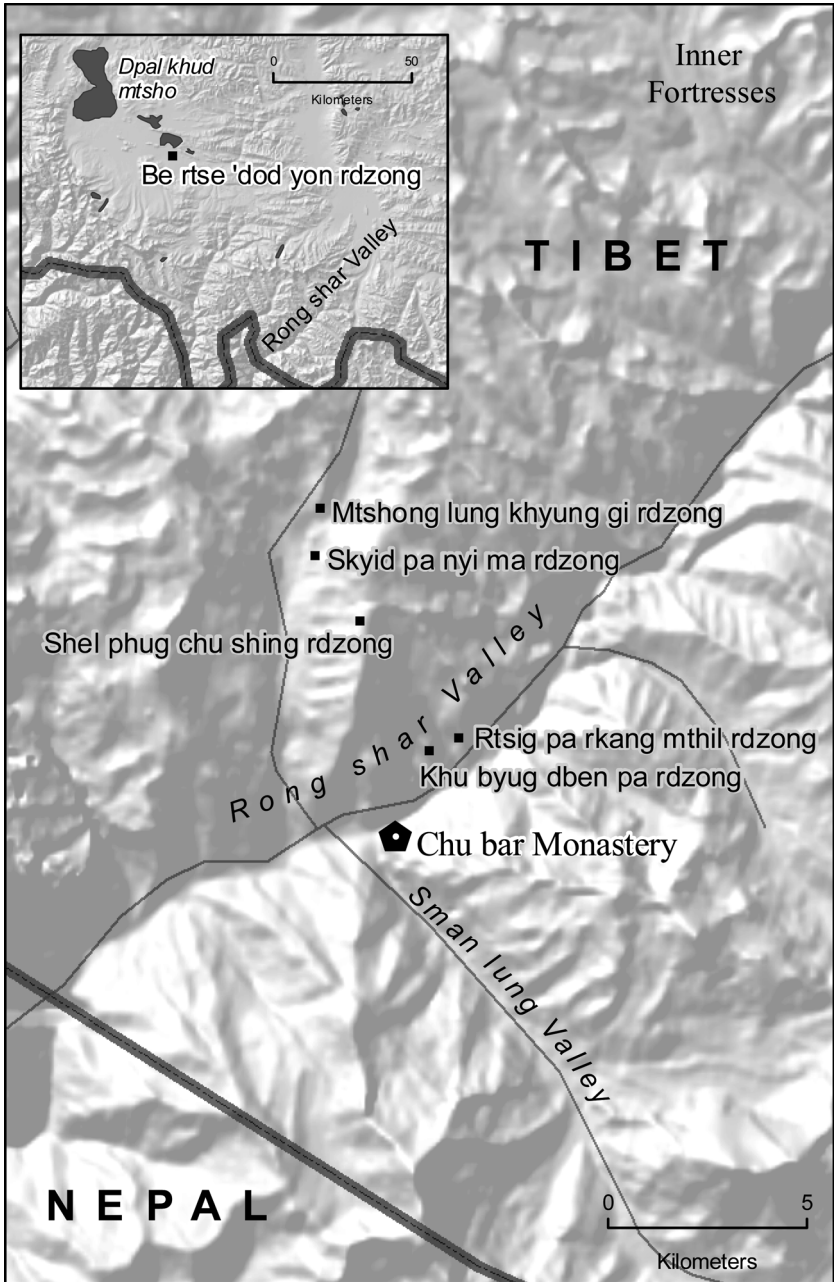
⁴⁶ de Jong (1959:157). Cf. Lhalungpa (1977:147). *de rnams su sgom pa byung na dben la mthun rkyen 'dzom pa yang yod cing/ brgyud pa'i byin rlabs 'jug pa yin pas sgoms shig gsungs pas/.*



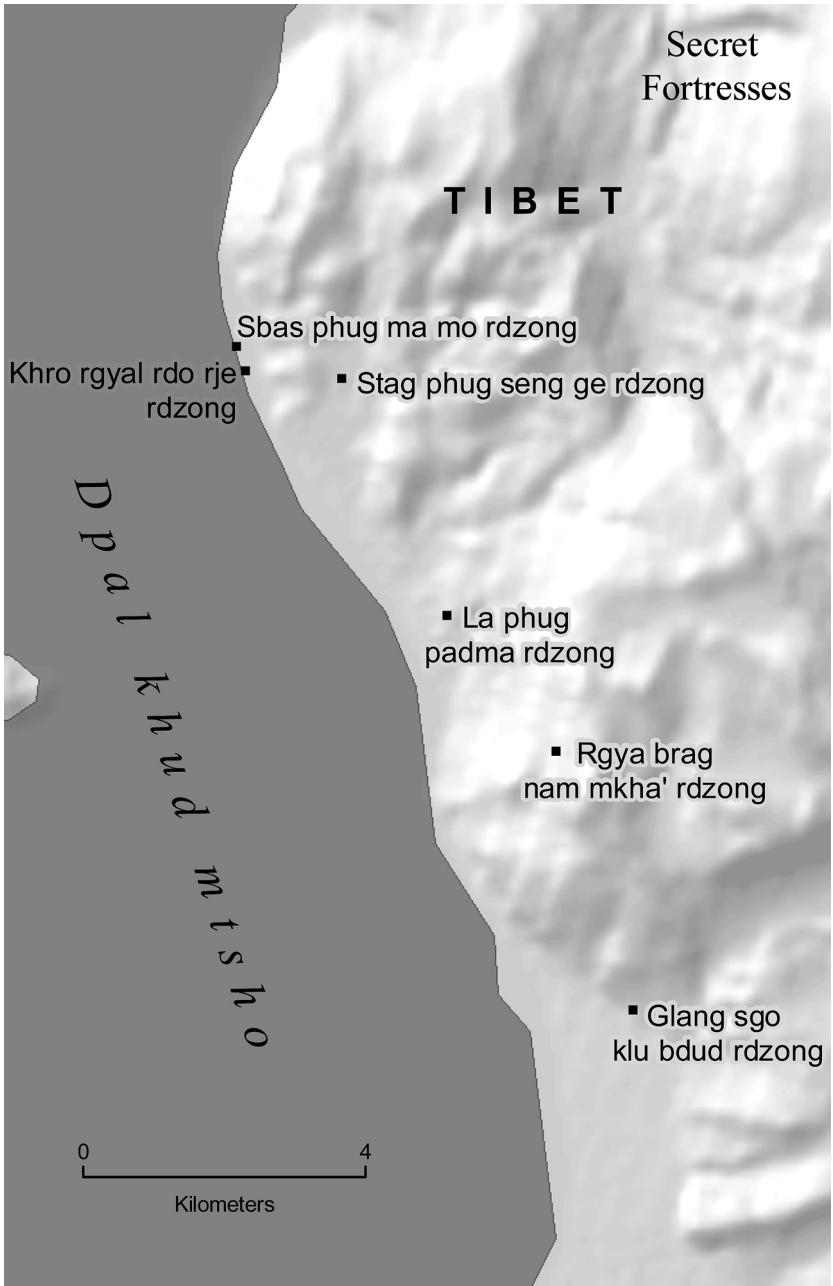
Map 2: Mi la ras pa's Outer, Inner, and Secret Fortresses.



Map 3: Mi la ras pa's Outer Fortresses.



Map 4: Mi la ras pa's Inner Fortresses.



Map 5: Mi la ras pa's Secret Fortresses.

As noted previously, the earliest biographical works record few locations by name. The subsequent compendia delineate a host of new places within the comprehensive cycles of their Collected Songs. It is Gtsang smyon Heruka, however, who most effectively — and systematically — landscapes the terrain. For the first time, retreat caves and hermitages with evocative names such as Cheerful Sun Fortress (Skyid pa nyi ma rdzong) and Crystal Cave Bamboo Fortress (Shel phug chu shing rdzong) were re-grouped, and in some cases perhaps re-named, to form a unique and recognizable geography within Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition. This new topography paralleled a literary classification familiar to Tibetan readers, and would endure as the canonical map of the yogin's life.

Naming is often asserted to be an expression of power, in Yi-fü Tuan's words, "[a] creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible" (Tuan 1991:688). Naming also serves as an expression of dominion over place, a process already visible in the early work of Rgyal thang pa. Here, Gtsang smyon Heruka's steady landscaping through naming and classification illustrates the production of place even as it lays claim to the places of Mi la ras pa's life. In Gtsang smyon's hands, the *Life* and *Songs* carved out a newly defined Buddhist terrain across southern Tibet, a terrain that would later serve to again re-imagine and re-map Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition, as will be discussed below.

The increasingly central use of the term "fortress" (*rdzong*) is revealing, indicating not only the delineation of space, but also its fortification. The fortification of sacred space in Mi la ras pa's biography began early on, and was subsequently expanded in the biographical compendia and in historical materials. Here the term began to serve as a metaphor for a place conducive to steady meditation — a mental fortification. In Gtsang smyon Heruka's formulation, the fortress provided a new framework for conceptualizing categories of sacred space. The later tradition then applied new layers of meaning to each of these categories, creating a new key for reading and interpreting the map of Mi la ras pa's life. In his history of Brag dkar rta so's retreat complex, itself founded upon several of the yogin's meditation sites, Chos kyi dbang phyug provides such a key by defining these three categories, with the addition of a fourth:

The name fortress (*rdzong*) is applied to practice places that are outer, inner, secret, and further fortresses. To use the example of a worldly king's fortress-castle, extremely sturdy so that an opposing enemy army could not damage it: an *outer fortress* (*phyi'i rdzong*) is called a fortress because it is a fortification of renunciation and revulsion, keeping at bay the countless activities of the saṃsāric world that appear in this life, and because the commotion and distraction of the eight worldly affairs are unable to assail the castle-master. An *inner fortress* (*nang gi rdzong*) is called a fortress because it is a fortification that generates the Vajrayāna path, a fortress that, by means of deep *samādhi*, an army of conceptuality — the three poisons, the five poisons, and so forth — is unable to trample. A *secret fortress* (*gsang ba'i rdzong*) is called a fortress because it is a fortification of the perfectly pure life force, the *dharmakāya* of bliss-emptiness coemergent wisdom, the view free from all fabrications that is unblemished by the enemy of grasping at the mental constructs of perceiver and perceived. A *further fortress* (*yang rdzong*) is given the name further fortress because, until the qualities of such experience and realization are perfected, it is necessary for their unabated river-like continuity, nurturing their increase, and for the attainment of steadfastness in them.⁴⁷

Designated as fortresses, these meditation sites became places of refuge, impenetrable by “the countless activities of the saṃsāric world,” and impervious to an “army of conceptuality.” If not quite interior castles, they serve as strongholds to support and protect the renunciate meditator following in Mi la ras pa's footsteps. They also became identifiable

⁴⁷) Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL, 4b. *de yang brag dkar rta so dbu ma rdzong/ zhes pa'i gnas kyi mtshan sgra bshad du smra nal gnas 'di i 'og gi sked pa nas brag dkar po dar dkar gyi yol ba rkyang pa lta bu zam ma chad pas dkris pa ltar yod pas brag dkar dang/ sgrub phug gi steng ngos brag dkar po rta yi so ltar rtsigs pa yod pas rta so dang/ rje btsun chen po nyid kyi rtsa bu ma'i mdud pa grol bas na dbu ma dang/ sgrub gnas phyi nang gsang ba yang rdzong dang bcas par rdzong zhes 'dogs par mdzad pa nil dper mtshon nal' jigs rten rgyal po'i mkhar rdzong shin du gtsan pa zhig la phar rol dgra sdè i dmag dpungs gi' tshè par mi nus pa bzhin' dir yang phyi' i rdzong nil tshè' di snang' jigs rten' khor ba'i bya bzhag mtha' dag rgyangs sring zhing nges' byung zhen log gi rdzong brtsan por dgra chos bryad la songs pa' du' dzi rnam dbyengs <g.yeng> gi dpung gis klags lta bar mi nus pas na rdzong zhes dang/ nang gi rdzong ni rdo rje theg [6a] pa'i lam gyi bskyed rdzong zab mo'i ting nge' dzin gyis rdzong la dgra dug gsum dug lnga la sogs pa rnam par rtog pa'i dpung gis rdzi bar mi nus pas rdzong zhes dang/ gsang ba'i rdzong nil/ bde stong lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes de kho na nyid chos sku spros pa thams cad dang bral ba lta ba rnam par dag pa'i srog rdzong la dgra ma rig bzung' dzin blos byas zhen' dzin gyi <gyis> ma gos pa'i phyir rdzong zhes dang/ yang rdzong nil/ de lta bu'i nyams rtogs yon tan thar phyin pa'i bar du chu bo'i rgyun bzhin mi chad cing gong' phel du skyongs ba dang brtan pa thob dgos pa'i phyir yang rdzong gi tha snyad du' jog pa' ol.*

structures, bastions for holders of the yogin's lineage; indeed some locations, such as Brag dkar rta so and Chu bar, did eventually become influential monastic institutions, serving as important outposts of Bka' brgyud religious and political influence.⁴⁸ In this context however — as with Padmasambhava's hidden lands — the natural environment, and the yogin's activities in it, have been claimed, ordered, and fortified without laying a single brick.

Having landscaped the terrain of Mi la ras pa's life story, Gtsang smyon authenticates his new sites and empowers them by incorporating their names into the biography through prophetic narrative. In his standard version of the *Life*, Mi la receives this final advice from his guru Mar pa before departing for his homeland:

Take refuge in the solitude of the barren mountains, the snows, and the forests. In the solitude the mountains there is Rgyal gyi Śrī of La stod, which has been blessed by the great adepts of India. Go there and meditate. There is Gangs Ti se [Mt. Kailāsa], which the Buddha spoke of as Himālaya (Ri bo gangs can) and which is the palace of the chosen deity Cakrasaṃvara. Go there and meditate. There is La phyi gangs ra, which is Godāvārī, one of the twenty-four sacred lands. Go there and meditate. There are Ri bo dpal 'bar of Mang yul and Yol mo gangs ra, the sacred sites prophesized in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. Go there and meditate. There is Chu bar of Brin, dwelling place of the ḍākinīs who protect the region. Go there and meditate.⁴⁹

Of particular interest is the identification of Kailāsa and La phyi with two of twenty-four sacred lands (T. *yul*, S. *pīṭha*) named in the literature of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* as geographic locations efficacious for Buddhist practice. Already by the time of the 'Bri gung master 'Jig rten mgon po (1143–1217), Bka' brgyud followers had established popular pilgrimage traditions to the three great sacred mountains at Kailāsa, La phyi, and Tsā ri, identifying them with Himālaya/Himavat, Godāvārī,

⁴⁸ The Chu bar monastery and retreat center began as a 'Bri gung institution that eventually passed through the stewardship of the sixth Zhwa dmar pa who likewise offered it to the tenth Karma pa. It was subsequently converted to a Dge lugs center under the fifth Dalai Lama. For a brief history and catalogue of its contents, see Bstan 'dzin Chos kyi blo gros, LNY, 35ff. A detailed history of the Brag dkar rta so complex, including a record of its abbatial lineage, is recorded in Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL.

⁴⁹ Adapted from Lhalungpa (1977:94). Cf. de Jong (1959:102–3).

and Cāritra/Devīkoṭa from the list of twenty-four sites, as well as with Cakrasaṃvara's body, speech, and mind.⁵⁰ Here, Gtsang smyon was aligning the life story with a tradition of sacred geography already several centuries old and firmly controlled by adherents of Mi la ras pa's Bka' brgyud tradition. He incorporates locations such as Rgyal gyi Śrī (contemporary Rtsib ri) prominent in the early biographical tradition. And as we shall see in the following section, the remaining sites (Ri bo dpal 'bar, Yol mo, and Chu bar) were formerly associated with another central figure in Tibet's religious history: Padmasambhava.⁵¹

In this passage, Gtsang smyon Heruka adds one final location, recorded in the life story for the first time: the border region of southern Tibet known as Tsā ri. In the centuries following Mi la ras pa's death, Tsā ri became an important pilgrimage location and retreat site, especially associated with followers of the yogin's Bka' brgyud lineage. Gtsang smyon himself is said to have spent three years in its vast wilderness tracts during which time he began to display the erratic behavior for which he was named (Madman of Gtsang). No record exists, however, that Mi la ras pa visited Tsā ri. It is therefore perhaps with a touch of self-reflective humor that Gtsang smyon adds this final note to the geography of Mi la ras pa's life, in the form of a prophecy delivered by the yogin's master Mar pa the Translator:

In the east lies the great sacred sites of Devīkoṭa and Tsā ri which are interconnected. It is not, at present, the time to open them. In the future your spiritual descendants will establish themselves there.⁵²

The spiritual descendants no doubt refer, among others, to Gtsang smyon Heruka himself.

⁵⁰ See Huber (1990, 1997); MacDonald (1990).

⁵¹ It is also worth noting the Gtsang smyon Heruka himself was sent by his guru Sha ra rab 'byams pa to travel to La phyi, Chu bar, and Kailāsa, as well as Mi la ras pa's six fortresses. See Rgod tshang ras pa, TNG, 25. In this way, he was also realigning Mi la ras pa's life story with the places central to his own early training.

⁵² de Jong (1959:103); Lhalungpa (1977:94). *shar phyogs na gnas chen de wi ko ṭa dang/ tsa ri 'brel nas yod del de da lta zhal byed ma ran/ ma 'ongs pa na khyod kyī bu rgyud kyis 'dzin pa zhig 'ong ba yin/.*

Contested Place: Mi la ras pa's Life on Hallowed Ground

Having broadly examined the maps of Mi la ras pa's life and their landscaping by his biographers, we turn now to a specific mode of transformation in text and terrain taking the form of what might be called "contested place." Social geographer Doreen Massey has noted that places "do not have single, unique 'identities,'" but are rather described as "full of internal conflicts" (Massey 1994:155). Indeed, one needs only to look at recent events in Jerusalem or India's Babri Mosque in Ayodhya to understand that a place is frequently defined through conflict, "conflict over what its past has been (the nature of its 'heritage'), conflict over what should be its present development, conflict over what should be its future" (ibid.). In the following discussion, however, the word *contested* may be too strong a term, since the process at work here refers to voices less in conflict than in conversation. The phenomenon of sacred sites established upon previously consecrated ground has been well documented in other contexts, and, indeed, sifting through the strata of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition we find that many of his sites were originally visited and blessed by the Indian *siddha* extraordinaire, Padmasambhava. How, then, does the phenomenon of contested space manifest in the context of Tibetan life writing? What are its forms, its effects?

As noted above, Padmasambhava's subjugation of local spirits inimical to Buddhism is a theme ubiquitous throughout his life stories, where he is credited with taming the fertile, if yet uncivilized, Tibetan soil. The acclaimed treasure revealer Nyang ral nyi ma'i 'od zer (1136–1204), writing in his twelfth-century religious history *Honey from the Center of the Flower* (*Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*), notes the following account of Padmasambhava's journey through the Tibetan borderland, describing his vanquishing of the hostile forces: "[Padmasambhava]... subjugated Bkra shis tshe ring ma (Lady of Auspicious Long Life), demoness of the border regions Brin and Chu dbar, and then bound her under oath."⁵³ Biographical accounts of Tibetan figures such as Padmasambhava and Mi la ras pa frequently describe episodes in which the non-human forces hostile to Buddhism are subjugated

⁵³ Nyang ral nyi ma'i 'od zer, CMN, 278. *brin chu dbar gyi so mtshams kyi lha srin bkra shis tshe ring ma btul nas dam la btags te... l.*

and forced to swear their allegiance to the dharma under penalty of death and to protect those who follow its teachings. This brief episode is just one among dozens underlying the origin myths of Buddhism in Tibet that continue to serve as powerful sites of historical and religious legitimation.

Interestingly, however, this event occurred in the region that would later serve as Mi la ras pa's heartland: repository of his numerous retreat caves, home to his many patrons, and the site of his death and cremation. And four of Mi la's earliest biographical narratives — the quartet of song cycles individually signed by Ngan rdzong ras pa, himself a close predecessor of Nyang ral — describe a similar meeting of Mi la ras pa and the same demoness, this time with Bkra shis tshe ring ma manifesting as five sisters, the Tshe ring mched lnga (Five Long Life Sisters), and identified not as demonic but *ḍākinīs*, tantric goddesses. Having first attempted to harm the yogin, the sisters repent their deeds and, in the third chapter, state their qualifications for receiving instructions thus:

When the *ācārya* Padmasambhava came to Tibet, we went to meet him in Kha la rong sgo intending to cause him harm, but we were overcome by the splendor of his mighty gestures and were compelled to become his followers. We straightforwardly offered him the core of our being. At that time we also received many teachings of the *sūtra* class on cause and effect.⁵⁴

The sisters, of course, go on to become Mi la ras pa's steadfast devotees, the chief among them serving as his consort in sexual yoga. These two passages raise questions of source material and literary chronology beyond the scope of this study. Yet they also clearly illustrate the instability of local space (whose dominion shifts from Padmasambhava to Mi la) even as the various strata of its religious affiliation are maintained through biographical memory. Justification for why a local spirit and its geographic abode require re-subjugation some three centuries later is found in another episode from Mi la ras pa's life.

During the yogin's stay at the site called Red Rock Fortress of Ling nga (Ling nga brag dmar rdzong) near Skyid grong, a demoness living

⁵⁴ The earliest form of this passage is found in the *Bu chen bcu gnyis* (BCN, 181a.5), and was preserved in nearly identical form by Gtsang smyon Heruka. See Gtsang smyon Heruka, NG, 503; Chang (1962:343).

in the rocky cave once again assails him. Eventually, she is moved to describe her dreadful situation in song, here referring to Padmasambhava by his secret name Thod phreng rtsal:

I am a follower of Thod phreng's lineage.
I've listened to a string of authentic dharma words.
I've heard the words but have great craving.

.....

My mind is kind hearted and my outlook pure, yet
My ugly body feels great hunger for nourishment.
Through evil karma, I roam the earth's settlements
Hungry for food in flesh and blood form.
I enter the mind of whomever I meet.
I incite the hearts of fair maidens.
I infect fine men with desire.

.....

For a home I dwell in Ling ba'i brag.
These are my types of activity.⁵⁵

In response, Mi la ras pa renews her vows of refuge and *bodhicitta*, sealed with a promise to aid future meditators. The demoness, and by extension the landscape itself, describes its own volatility: once converted but now relapsed through the power of karmic compulsion, like a novice unaccustomed to celibate life. She remains a follower of Padmasambhava's lineage, but has gone astray. And some three hundred years later, as new lord of this domain, Mi la ras pa is charged with refurbishing the land, converting it anew, even as he gains authority from the powerful traces of its previous occupant and master.

⁵⁵ This episode is recorded in the *Bu chen bcu gnyis* (BCN, 52a.4) and in nearly identical form in Gtsang smyon's standard version. See Gtsang smyon Heruka, NG, 234; Chang (1962:45). *nga padma thod phreng rgyud <brygyud> pa 'dzin/ /dam chos tshig gi phreng ba nyan/ /tshig thos pa yod kyang zhen pa chel /nga rnal' byor yongs kyi tshogs khang 'grim/ /las 'phro can rnams dge la 'god/ /skal ba can rnams don dang sprodl /sems bzang snang ba dkar lags kyang/ /lus ngan ma sos ltogs tshor chel /las ngan 'dzam gling grong khyer myul/ /zas su sha dang khrag la dga' /mi tsam po yongs kyi sems la 'jug/ /sman mchor mo kun la snying rlung slong/ /pho mchor po kun la mtshal ris ttab/ /mig gis kun la ltad mo btiast/ /sems kyis rgyal khams zhe la muan/ /lus kyis kun la g.yeng' degs byast/ /gnas ni ling pa' i brag la gnasl /de tsho nga yi spyod' gros yin/.*

The stratification of sacred space in Mi la's biographical tradition is perhaps most powerfully illustrated by the yogin's famed hermitage of Brag dkar rta so. Accounts of Padmasambhava's life describe his journey north from Nepal through the Tibetan borderlands of the Skyid grong and Mang yul valleys; his three months in the region, according to Chos kyi dbang phyug's history, included a stay at Brag dkar rta so itself. The spot was therefore already established as a sacred site by the time Mi la returned home to begin his yogic career when he sang, "I go now to meditate at White-rock Horse-tooth." It was Padmasambhava's consecrated ground that drew him there for the first time.⁵⁶

At this early stage in Mi la ras pa's life he is, in Chos kyi dbang phyug's terms, an "individual blessed by a sacred site." The story of his life is thus defined through yogic practice at a place sanctified by former masters, until the location transferred its principal affiliation to Mi la ras pa himself, thereby transforming into a "sacred site blessed by a (new) individual." And in Chos kyi dbang phyug's estimation, this same process occurred at many of the yogin's most famous retreats. He writes: "The places directly prophesied by Mar pa the Translator to Lord Mi la — Rtsa ri, Lho brag, Rgyal gyi shri, La phyi and Chu dbar, Dpal 'bar, Yol mo gangs ra, and so forth — were all previously renowned as Guru [Padmasambhava's] practice places."⁵⁷

Each one of these locations, with the exception of Tsā ri as noted above, then shifts during the course of Mi la's life (and the writing of his biographies) as he renews the vows of local spirits and re-consecrates their terrain. Chos kyi dbang phyug describes this pattern, beginning with the Tshe ring ma sisters: "It is also taught in the responses to questions how the five long life sisters met the *ācārya* [Padmasambhava] when he went to Kha la rong sgo, and were bound under oath."⁵⁸ He then continues to describe many of Mi la's major retreat sites:

⁵⁶ Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL, 8a. This line is appended to the end of each verse of Mi la's famed song of essencelessness (*snying po med pa'i mgur*), found or referred to in most early versions of the *rnam thar*. Gtsang smyon Heruka, however, was the first to specifically associate the song with Brag dkar rta so by name.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 9a. To this list we might add the six "secret fortresses" that, according to Zhi byed ri pa, were likewise originally blessed by Padmasambhava. *rje mi lar sgra sgyur mar pas/ rtsa ril lho brag/ rgyal gyi shri/ la phyi chu dbar/ dpal 'bar/ yol mo gangs ra sogs dngos su lung bstan pa de kun gu ru'i grub gnas su sngon nas grags zin pa... /.*

⁵⁸ Ibid. 9b. *tshé ring mched lngas kha la rong sgor slob dpon byon dus bsus shing dam la btags pa'i tshul zhus lan du gsung pa bzhin dangl.*

Likewise, for the local lord (*gnas bdag*) of Yol mo, the local protector (*gnas srung*) of Dpal 'bar, the *lha btsan* deities of Gangs Ti se, and so forth: the *Mahācārya* [Padmasambhava] bound them under oath. Then later on, they once again restored their oaths and vows of *bodhicitta* before Rje btsun [Mi la ras pa] himself, and having done so they were ordered to support the practice lineage.⁵⁹

Chos kyi dbang phyug likely had motives for emphasizing these two layers, forming a dialogue of sorts between the lives of founding figures esteemed by followers in both Rnying ma and Bka' brgyud traditions. Further research on the life of this important early-modern scholar may clarify this point. But these stories illustrate ways in which the ground has been consecrated and re-consecrated, transferring its religious affiliation while retaining the memory of its earlier biographical strata.

In the account from Mi la ras pa's encounter at Ling nga brag cited above, the yogin's assailant is described as a *brag srin mo*, the *srin mo* forming a class of indigenous and particularly fearsome female entities; a *brag srin mo* is such a being inhabiting rocky places (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956:280). As a *srin mo*, she is of the same "race" as the great supine demoness famously subdued by the Tibetan king, effectively taming the whole of the Tibetan landscape. And like her namesake, Mi la's attacker was not killed off during her initial encounter with Padmasambhava but was allowed to live on newly converted, in order to promote and protect the Buddhist teachings (see Gyatso 1989:42). It is in part through her continued presence, and through the presence of so many non-human spirits first tamed by Padmasambhava only to reappear in the stories of Mi la's life, that allow the yogin to reaffirm his presence — and his dominion — over the land.

Like the more prosaic soil, sacred space could be viewed as forming layers, independent strata preserving discrete narrative traditions from the lives of different masters. It is here that Casey's notion of place as a "container of experiences" seems particularly apt. In some cases these layers might be isolated from one another, separated by centuries of accretion. In others, such as those examined here, they might seem to converge through the literary activities of biographers and historians. The acclaimed master Kaḥ thog Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1775)

⁵⁹ Ibid. 9b. *yol mo'i gnas bdag/ dpal 'bar gyi gnas srung/ gangs ti se'i lha btsan sogs slob dpon chen pos dam la btags zin rjes slar yang rje btsun nyid kyi drung du dam tshig dang sems bskyed gsos te sgrub brgyud skyongs bar bka' bsgos pas.../.*

summarized the relationship formed between these layers and illustrates their shifting nature in his song of praise to Mi la ras pa's premier retreat site Brag dkar rta so (*gnas bstod kyi mgur*), where he writes:

Formerly, it was blessed by Guru [Padmasambhava].
 Later on, unrivaled Lord Mi la,
 Became pleased in this place,
 The great vajra ground of intrinsic reality.
 Therefore, understand the second Vajrāsana as inhabiting this site.⁶⁰

The ground has shifted once again, but is here elevated to a level transcending the purely local. Based upon its multiple levels of biographical correspondence, the abode first of Padmasambhava and then Mi la ras pa now equals the site of the Buddha's enlightenment itself: Bodhgayā, Vajrāsana, the adamant ground. The unstable landscape has, in the end, become immutable.

Re-Imagined Place: New Geographies of Praxis

If Gtsang smyon Heruka produced what would become Tibet's most widely recognized map of Mi la ras pa's life, he was not the only author to survey the land or to interpret it in new ways. As noted above, Rgyal thang pa described the yogin's life in largely geo-political terms, delimiting the boundaries of a Buddhist terrain aligned with the religious tradition of his followers. Biographers also re-imagined the places of Mi la ras pa's life story by superimposing new life-maps upon the known landscape, specifically charting the progress of his personal yogic practice. As we shall see below, the land itself could thus be read as a biographical text, narrating the yogin's progression through the four stages of Mahāmudrā meditation or the tantric purification of the five wheels (*cakras*) along the central channel from the base of his spine to the crown of his head. Although they do not appear in any of the larger biographical compendia, including the standard version itself, each of these re-imagined maps implicitly supports the notion of Mi la's libera-

⁶⁰ Quoted *ibid.* 8a. *sgon tshe ni gu rus byin gyis brlabs// bar du ni`gran bral mi la rjes // yang dag don rdo rje`i sa chen poll`gnas`di ru mnyes par gyur pas nal// rdo rje gdan gnyis pa gnas`dir khums//.*

tion in one lifetime and a single body, a trope that became a central motif in Gtsang smyon's work and a defining feature of the life story.

Indian Buddhist tantras and their commentarial literature describe elaborate systems of tantric geography referring both to locations in the external world and to sites within the yogin's own subtle body.⁶¹ The *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, for example, famously lists twenty-four such sacred sites, many of which were re-mapped onto the Tibetan landscape as translators carried such works back to their homeland and transmitted them among their followers.⁶² The Tibetan landscape was likewise imagined as literally embodying tantric deities, as was the case for the regions of Spo bo and Padma bkod in southern Tibet, home to some of Tibet's most acclaimed hidden lands (*sbas yul*). Different traditions of revealed literature variously describe these regions as surveying points on the body of the tantric deity Vajravārāhī, or as mapping the deity's subtle physiology by associating its five channel wheels with specific sites on the ground.⁶³

Authors in Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition, too, developed new systems for mapping the life story, specifically emphasizing the yogin's practice of tantric yoga and the development of his subtle yogic body. Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje (1309–1364), in his mid-fourteenth-century religious history *The Red Annals* (*Deb gter dmar po*), provides one such re-imagined map, produced more than a century prior to Gtsang smyon's standard version. His brief sketch of Mi la ras pa's life recounts how the yogin left Mar pa for his homeland and wandered among many isolated retreats including the six fortresses, La phyi, and Chu bar. For nine years he meditated one-pointedly, undergoing intense hardship but failed to gain any experience or realization whatsoever.⁶⁴ Then, during the span of half a month, his obstacles were dispelled and he made great progress as spiritual realization blazed forth all at once. The author

⁶¹ See, for example, Tsuda (1978:215–131). A more general overview is provided in Ngawang Zangpo (2001:50–74). Templeman (1999) discusses this inner and outer tantric geography in terms of Indian pilgrimage traditions recorded in Tibetan biographical sources.

⁶² On the Tibetan assimilation of Indian tantric sites, see Huber (1990).

⁶³ See Stein (1988:40–48) for examples from Tsā ri and Padma bkod. See also Ehrhard (1999a).

⁶⁴ Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje, RA, 79.

then describes Mi la's progressive attainment of the four stages of Mahāmudrā meditation called the "four yogas" (*rnal'byor bzhi*), each in a different location:

At 'Chong lung, during the time of the first demon horde [attack], he perfected the yoga of one-pointedness. At La phyi chu bzang, during the time of the second demon horde [attack], he perfected non-elaboration. At Chu bar, during the time of the third demon horde [attack], he perfected one taste. Then he bound under oath the five long life sisters. He fully realized the yoga of non-meditation and, by means of clairvoyance and numerous miracles, he tamed all of his human and non-human disciples.⁶⁵

According to Kun dga' rdo rje, Mi la ras pa's progression on the path — from his entrance to the bodhisattva levels to his attainment of buddhahood — therefore begins and ends within a narrowly circumscribed geographic space.⁶⁶

Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition also mapped the yogin's life in terms of his yogic practice and developing the subtle physiology of channels (S. *nāḍī*, T. *rtsa*), currents (S. *prāṇa*, T. *rlung*), and drops (S. *bindu*, T. *thig le*). Perhaps the most famous example is Mi la's renowned

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 'chong lung du 'dre dmag dang po'i dus su rtse gcig gi rnal'byor rdzogs/ la phyi chu bzang su 'dre dmag bar pa la spros bral rdzogs/ chu bar du 'dre dmag gsum pa la ro gcig rdzogs nas/ tshe rings ma spun lnga dam la thogs/ sgom med kyi rnam'byor la mngon du phyogs shing/ mngon shes rdzu 'phrul du mas gdul bya mi dang mi ma yin pa thams cad btull.

⁶⁶ Many Bka' brgyud traditions describe progress on the path of Mahāmudrā meditation practice in terms of four stages of yoga, a system codified in Tibet as early as the twelfth century by Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje: one-pointedness (*rtse gcig*), non-elaboration (*spros bral*), one taste (*ro gcig*), and non-meditation (*sgom med*). Although they formed an autonomous system, Bka' brgyud exegetes mapped elaborate concordances between the four yogas and the more widely described five paths (S. *pañcamārga*, T. *lam lnga*) and ten levels (S. *daśabhūmi*, T. *sa bcu*) of the bodhisattva. See, for example, the ninth Karma pa Dbang phyug rdo rje's presentation in his *Phyag chen nges don rgya mtsho* (n.d., Rumtek ed. 123b ff.) and a similar discussion in Dwags po Bkra shis rnam rgyal's (1512/13–1587) *Phyag chen zla ba'i 'od zer*, translated in Namgyal (1986:354 ff.). Although these concordances vary, they uniformly equate the beginning of the yoga of non-fabrication as the first bodhisattva level, the path of seeing (S. *darśanamārga*, T. *mtshong lam*), the fleeting initial experience of emptiness. Likewise, the yoga of non-meditation marks the end of the path as the fully awakened state of a buddha.

meditation spot at Brag dkar rta so called the Central Channel Fortress (Dbu ma rdzong), whose name is frequently explained in the following way:

To provide an etymology for the name of the sacred place called White-rock Horse-tooth Central Channel Fortress (brag dkar rta so dbu ma rdzong): it is called *white rock* (*brag dkar*) because there is a white rock in the middle of this site's lower part, like a drape of white silk spread out, wrapped around [the mountain] in an unbroken manner. It is called *horse tooth* (*rta so*) because there is a white rock, like a horse's tooth, erected in the upper part of the practice cave. It is called *central channel* (*dbu ma*) because the knots of the central channel of the great Rje btsun himself came unraveled [in this place].⁶⁷

Several centuries later, the acclaimed Bka' brgyud historian Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba (1504–1566) constructed a map of Mi la's yogic practice following Kun dga' rdo rje's model, with some variations. At Brag dkar rta so, he records, the yogin attained accomplishment (*siddhi*) and then at Ling ba brag, site of Mi la's encounter with the demoness discussed previously, "he drew the subtle current of fire into the lower

⁶⁷) Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL, 5b. *de yang brag dkar rta so dbu ma rdzong/ zhes pa'i gnas kyi mtshan sgra bshad du smra nal/ gnas 'di i 'og gi sked pa nas brag dkar po dar dkar gyi yol ba rkyang pa lta bu zam ma chad pas dkris pa ltar yod pas brag dkar dang/ sgrub phug gi steng ngos brag dkar po rta yi so ltar rtsigs pa yod pas rta so dang/ rje btsun chen po nyid kyi rtsa bu ma'i mdud pa grol bas na dbu ma dang/*

Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor glosses the name *dbu ma* by noting that it describes the cave in which the view of the Prāsāngika Madhyamaka, the "middle way consequence" philosophy, was born in Mi la's mind. (Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, GZN, 518). Chos kyi dbang phyug acknowledges this tradition although it is an etymology with which he — and most Bka' brgyud commentators — disagree:

Furthermore, it is, indeed, not contradictory to say the name *dbu ma* is given because it is the sacred place in which [Mi la] actualized an understanding of the profound abiding nature, the ultimate great middle way, free from all fabricated extremes. However, it is taught that it is called *dbu ma* because this is the place where the knots of the central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*) were loosened; this is certain.

(Ibid. *yang na dbu ma zhes pa zab mö'i gnas lugs chos kyi dbyings spros pa'i mtha' thams cad dang bral ba'i mthar thug dbu ma chen po'i dgongs pa mngon du gyur pa'i bsti gnas yin pa'i phyir dbu ma zhes btang kyang mi 'gal mod/ dir ni rtsa dbu ma'i mdud pa grol ba'i phyir dbu ma zhes gsung par nges sol/*).

central channel due to which the miracles of the rock demoness appeared; and at Sman lung Chu bar, he loosened the knot of the throat channel wheel due to which cycles on Tshe ring ma appeared.”⁶⁸

This theme was elaborated upon by the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud master Padma dkar po (1527–1592) several decades later in his *History of the 'Brug pa* ('*Brug pa'i chos 'byung*), where he also describes Mi la's meditation at Brag dkar rta so. For nine years the yogin practices with little result until, refreshed by good food and inspired by a scroll of yogic instructions imparted by his guru, “the channel-knot at his secret place came unraveled and he achieved the first and second bodhisattva levels; then, exerting himself for about a year the channel-knot at his navel came unraveled.”⁶⁹ Later, after his winter retreat in La phyi, “the channel-knot at his heart came unraveled and he attained the sixth bodhisattva level.”⁷⁰ After his meeting with the sisters of long life in the region of Chu bar, and after receiving the chief among them as his yogic consort, “the enjoyment channel-wheel at his throat was filled with vital energy (*dwangs ma*) whereby he attained the realization of the eighth bodhisattva level.”⁷¹ Finally, after Ras chung pa returned from India, filled with pride about the teachings and texts he had received, Mi la displays an array of miraculous performances. At this time, just before setting off for the Nepalese outpost of Bal po rdzong, “he revealed the process in which the channel-knot at his forehead came unraveled, whereby he became a bodhisattva of the tenth level,” a state, the text describes, undifferentiated from that of the Tathāgatas.⁷²

These two forms of life-map differ in content, one documenting Mi la's progress on the path of Mahāmudrā meditation, the other, the

⁶⁸ Gtsug lag phreng ba, KGT, 783. *ling pa'i brag tu dbu ma'i mar snar me rlung tshud ba'i rten 'brel brag srin mo'i cho 'phrul snang ba dang/ sman lung chu bar du mgrin pa'i rtsa mdud zbig pa'i rten 'brel tshe ring ma'i skor snang/*

⁶⁹ Pamda dkar po, DCJ, 367. *gsang gnas kyi rtsa mdud groll sa dang po dang gnyis pa non/ de nas lo tsam du brtson par mdzad pas lte ba'i rtsa mdud groll.*

⁷⁰ Ibid. 368. *de dus snying ka'i rtsa mdud groll sa drug pa non pa yin tel.*

⁷¹ Ibid. 370. *de'i dus mgrin pa longs spyod kyi 'khor lo dwangs mas gang bas sa brgyad kyi rtogs pa rnyed/*

⁷² Ibid. 371. *de'i skabs su dpral ba'i rtsa mdud grol bas sa bcu'i byang chub sems dpar gyur pa'i tshul bstan/* Chos kyi dbang phyug later copied this mapping of Mi la's yogic attainments, first in his history of Brag dkar rta so in 1816 and then again in his 1820 golden rosary collection of 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud biographies. See Chos kyi dbang phyug, DTL, 19a–21b; and DKS, 24a–25b.

development of his subtle yogic physiology. Yet they equally emphasize the trope of his liberation in one life and a single body by illustrating his progression along the five paths and ten levels, from first insight to full awakening. To this end, they support the division of his life into two broad periods: first, from his early life up to the first retreats at Brag dkar rta so, and second, his mature teaching career as a realized yogic master, an *ārya* being who had passed through the path of vision and entered the bodhisattva levels.

The early extensive biographies explicitly incorporated these divisions into their narrative structure. Although they lacked the detailed praxis-oriented maps described here, they demarcated an early period prior to yogic attainment and a later period once he had gained realization.⁷³ The briefer works discussed above achieved a similar aim by describing Mi la ras pa's activities at Brag dkar rta so, and those shortly thereafter, as fundamentally transformative, marking the moment in which he passes from ordinary individual to realized *siddha*. The topography in which these activities occur thereby map discrete advances to specific locations; the landscape thus becomes both the ground upon which the transformation occurs and the medium in which it is transcribed and recorded.

Reflections

As the genre of sacred biography aims to capture the arc of a saint's life over time, it also traces his or her acts in space. And the life of a saint, in one critic's view, overwhelmingly emphasizes the latter, so that "[h]agiography is marked by a predominance of precise indications of

⁷³ The *Bu chen bcu gnyis*, for example, divides the narrative into two broad sections: 1) the qualities of hardships he faced, which are related to his family (*rigs dang 'brel ba dka' ba sbyad pa'i yon tan*); and (2) the qualities of his experience, which are related to his meditation (*ting nge 'dzin dang 'brel ba nyams su myong ba'i yon tan*). Numerous early *rnam thar* of Bka' bgyud masters appear to follow this format, which may have served as an important literary structure in Tibet's nascent biographical tradition. Gtsang smyon Heruka organized his standard version of the life story of "twelve marvelous and amazing deeds" into three "ordinary worldly deeds" (*thun mong srid pa 'jig rten pa'i mdzad pa*) during the early part of the yogin's life and nine subsequent "deeds of supreme peace and nirvāṇa" (*mchog gyur zhi ba mya ngan las 'das pa'i mdzad pa*).

place over those of time” as the story itself becomes “translated into a course of places and changes of scene” ultimately defining a “geography of the sacred” (Certeau 1988:280). This essay has examined the topography of Mi la ras pa’s life to argue for what might be considered a geographic biography: the life story inscribed in the “course of places” revealing maps of the life inscribed as points on the ground. The earliest versions of the biographical tradition represented the yogin in skeletal form and likewise drew the maps of his life in only the broadest of strokes. As the life story matured and drew portraits with progressively finer attention to detail, it likewise produced maps on a larger scale, culminating in a comprehensive survey of places visited, converted, lived in, and tamed. With few explicit chronological signs, the Life is indeed marked by a predominance of place over time.

Mi la ras pa’s geographic biography, much like its literary partner, never fell to the level of mere received tradition. As authors of the biographical tradition laid greater emphasis on the places of Mi la ras pa’s life, they formulated new and creative means for landscaping the story by laying alternative ground lines and marking new territories. Wilderness retreat sites were named and fortified, and those places were then organized into recognizable categories. This process culminated in Gtsang smyon Heruka’s standard version in which this geography was reshaped and reclassified, with individual sites moved and, on occasion, removed.

This essay has likewise argued for a dialogical relationship between the writing of a life and the formation of sacred place. As dynamic phenomena, sacred places could shift and transform through the literary efforts of Mi la ras pa’s biographers; those new mappings then helped reframe the ways in which the life story was understood. This essay has shown how dominion over much of southern Tibet passed from Padmasambhava to Mi la ras pa as narratives seem to converse across different strata of place and biographical memory. It has also revealed new maps of Mi la ras pa’s life, emphasizing the trope of his liberation in one body and a single lifetime by connecting the stages of his yogic development to a series of specific locations on the ground.

As noted earlier, the maps of Mi la ras pa’s life were not merely conceptual diagrams creating meditation castles in the sand. They described a physical topography visited by generations of devotees, pilgrims, and

meditators. Some places remain relatively undeveloped and infrequently accessed. Others became prominent and powerful Bka' brgyud institutions, supporting the spread of Mi la ras pa's legacy. But the sacrality of such locations could also transform the land so that the physical earth itself was considered sacred. Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor records how, during his journey through southern Tibet in 1790, he collected earth, stones, and wood from the outer, inner, and secret fortresses, as well as the minor caves associated with Mi la ras pa's life. He then describes using these materials as geographic relics to consecrate statues of Mi la ras pa and his retinue.⁷⁴ Although dead nearly seven centuries, the yogin persisted in the local environment as the land itself had become a geographic relic. This constellation of retreat caves and meditation sites, formed from rock and dirt and imagined as impenetrable strongholds, consolidated Mi la ras pa's footing across large portions of the southern Himalaya. The resulting terrain marked what would eventually come to be known, according to one modern pilgrimage guide, as "Milarepa Country" (Chan 1994:924).

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JLC *Byin rlabs kyi chu rgyun*.

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JLCS Smith edition. Cover title: *Rje rnal sbyor gyi dbang phyug dpal bzhad pa i rdo rje'i 'gur 'tshogs tshad phyogs gcig du bsgrig pa lo rgyus kyi sba pa zhes bya ba bzhus so*. Unpublished *dbu med* manuscript.

⁷⁴ Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, GZN, 517. He further notes an old proverb stating that keeping a statue of Phag mo gru pa in the home will make you wealthy, constructing a statue of Mi la ras pa will make you poor. (*jig rten rgan rabs kyi kha rgyun la phag gru'i sku khyim do nyar na phyugs tu 'gro zhing/ rje btsun gyi sku nyar na dbul du phyin yong zer ba bcas ma bzhegs pa*).

Bstan 'dzin Chos kyi blo gros (1868–1906)

LNy *Gsang lam sgrub pa'i gnas chen nyer bzhi'i ya gyal gau da wa ri aml' brog la phyi gangs kyi ra ba'i sngon byung gi tshul las tsam pa'i gtam gyi rab tu phyed pa nyung ngu rnam gsal*. Gangtok: Sherab Gyaltzen 1983.

Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, Rdo ring (b. 1760)

GZN *Dga' bzhi ba'i rnam thar*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang 1988.

Chos kyi dbang phyug, Brag dkar rta so sprul sku (1775–1837)

DKS *Dpal ldan gzhung 'brug pa Bka' brgyud gser phreng*. Written 1820. Microfilm. Kathmandu, Nepal. NGMPP reel no. L381/1, 55 folios. *Dbu med* manuscript.

DTL *Grub pa'i gnas chen brag dkar rta so'i gnas dang gdan rabs bla ma brgyud pa'i lo rgyus mdo tsam brjed pa mos ldan dad pa'i gdung sel drang srong dga' ba'i dal gtam zhes bya ba bzhugs so*. Written in 1816. Microfilm. Kathmandu, Nepal. NGMPP reel no. 940/8, 52 folios. *Dbu med* manuscript.

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Gtsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507)

NG *Rnal' byor gyi dbang phyug chen po mi la ras pa'i rnam mgur*. Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1981; reprint ed. 1989.

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KGT *Chos' byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. 2 vols. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1986.

Mkhas pa lde'u (thirteenth century)

KDC *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1987.

Ngan rdzong ston pa Byang chub rgyal po (b. late eleventh century) et al.

BC *Bu chen bcu gnyis*

Editions:

BCN Newark edition. Cover title: *Rje btsun chen po mid la ras pa'i rnam thar zab mo*. n.p., n.d. 244 folios. *Dbu can* manuscript in the collection of the Newark Museum, microfilm master negative No. 0001, the *Tibetan Book Collection*, Folio 36.280, *Biography of Milarepa*, IIB R 16.

BCO Oxford edition: No cover title. No title page. n.p., n.d. *Dbu can* manuscript in the Bodlean Library Microfilm Reel No. SN 1207 ms. Tib. a. 11a.

Nyang ral Nyi ma'i 'od zer (1124/36–1192/1204)

CMN *Chos' byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*. Gang can rig mdzod series no. 5, Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang 1988.

Padma dkar po (1527–1592)

DCJ *'Brug pa'i chos' byung*. Gang-can rig-mdzod series no. 19. Lhasa: Bod-ljongs Bod-yig Dpe-rnying Dpe-skrun-khang 1992.

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Rgod tshang ras pa Sna tshogs rang grol (1495–1570)

TNG *Gtsang smyon her ru ka phyogs thams cad las rnam par rgyal ba'i rnam thar rdo rje theg pa'i gsal byed nyi ma'i snying po. The Life of the Saint of Gtsan.* (Śata pīṭaka Series Indo Asian Literatures 79.) Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi 1969.

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RA *Deb gter dmar po.* Mi rigs dpe skrun khang: Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1981.

Tshe dbang rgyal (ca. fifteenth century)

LRC *Dam pa'i chos kyi byung ba'i legs bshad lho rong chos 'byung ngam rta tshag chos 'byung zhes rtsom pa'i yul ming du chags pa'i ngo mtshar zhing dkon pa'i dpe khyed par chan.* Khangs can rig mdzod 26. Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang 1994.

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SDN *Mar mi dwags po jo bo rje yab sras sog dam pa 'ga' zhug gi rnam thar sa bon dus kyi nges pa brjod pa dag ldan nyung gsal.* In *Selected Writings of Kaḥ thog Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang Nor bu.* 6 vols. Darjeeling: Kargyu Sungrab Nyamso Khang 1973, vol. 1, pp. 669–705.

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