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Ganden Monastery and the ‘Monasticization’ of Tibetan Pilgrimage: The Unfinished Work of Michael Ium

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Abstract

This article reconstructs Michael Ium’s unfinished work on Ganden Monastery as a Gelukpa pilgrimage site in Tibet, based on his 2023 dissertation, XXth IABS Congress abstract, unpublished research proposals, and other sources shared by friends and colleagues. Drawing on pilgrimage guides to Ganden, Ium argued for a new approach that explores the “monasticization” of Tibetan pilgrimage as opposed to more thoroughly studied pilgrimage routes to mountains and lakes. This complicates long-standing narratives about not only the nature of pilgrimage in Tibet, but the traditional and scholarly portrayals of Geluk identity and history.

Introduction

This paper was originally written for the International Association of Buddhist Studies meeting in Leipzig, Germany, in August 2025. Michael and I co-organized a panel for this conference called “Surveying the Field of Tibetan Pilgrimage,” but after Michael’s tragic passing, we had to proceed without him. With the support of the IABS organizing team, we made the second half of the panel a memorial session where friends and colleagues could share memories. For my contribution, I wanted to ensure Michael’s work would be known and appreciated more widely in our field. I presented a reconstructed version of the paper I think he would have given for our panel based on the abstract he wrote, our conversations, his dissertation research, and materials shared with me by his friends and advisors. My goals in the reconstruction were to highlight Michael’s contributions in a more accessible form—his dissertation, like almost all dissertations, is extremely dense—and to place his work in the broader context he described in his other writings. When possible, I used his exact words or close paraphrases, and footnotes in particular are largely Michael’s words, but I also highlighted connections to Michael’s other work and future plans. This was written to be a talk rather than a journal article, and so those interested should consult Michael’s dissertation, which is much more detailed. Though my own scholarship is on pilgrimage, I am not an expert on his sources, and apologize for any errors of understanding that I introduce. My hope is that this reconstruction inspires people to appreciate the work Michael did and to make sure that it is remembered and transmitted to future generations of scholars.

The ‘Monasticization’ of Tibetan Pilgrimage: Ganden Monastery as a Case Study

It is difficult to fault scholars of religion for making sense of history through heuristics. These mental shortcuts help to organize the vast array of people, institutions, and events that are cross-referenced in our work. Often, such heuristics contain a lot of truth, and they may even comport with the way the tradition wants to see itself. However, scholars can run into trouble when they forget that these heuristics have been constructed—both by scholars and by the traditions we study—and become blind to evidence that complicates them.¹

One such dominant narrative shapes the study of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism: specifically, that it is the most rationalistic and scholastic of the Tibetan schools. This way of characterizing the Geluk satisfies both contemporary Buddhist modernists and traditionalist Geluk historians, and it makes for a neat story. However, it masks the fact that this narrative was actively constructed by Geluk scholars, and it may distort our understanding of the early Geluk tradition. My scholarship on the early Geluk shows that things were more complicated—Tsongkhapa was seen as a charismatic *mahasiddha* (great tantric adept), Lhodrak Drupchen’s prophecies and his status as an oracle were centrally important, and Ganden was constructed as a pilgrimage destination.² Because of the ways the Geluk are often portrayed as monastic and scholastic, these aspects of the tradition have been overlooked.

Another dominant narrative in Tibetan studies exists in the study of pilgrimage. To date, scholarship on pilgrimage in Tibet has largely fo-

¹ Michael Ium, “The Early History of Ganden Monastery and the Construction of the Geluk Tradition,” (PhD. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2023), 21.

² In what follows, “my” or “I” are reconstructed versions of Michael’s scholarly perspective.

cused on natural sites such as caves, lakes, and mountains. One influential theory advanced by Katia Buffetrille is an early period of “Buddhicization” in which Tibetan mountains (originally worshipped and propitiated by local lay communities as capricious “territorial gods”) were transformed into translocal Buddhist sacred mountains and transmundane deities, deities who then became objects of Buddhist forms of ritual such as circumambulation.³ In a similar vein, Toni Huber has proposed that a process of “mandalization” took place in which the “ordering principle of the maṇḍala was [. . .] projected onto and embodied within the specific topography of the new category of cult mountains,” leading to a state of affairs in which mountains became sites for tantric practice, for worship of dharma-protectors, and for local cults simultaneously.⁴ However, one drawback of these theories is the implicit assumption that Tibetan pilgrimage sites consist solely of natural environmental sites such as caves, mountains, or lakes, which has led to scholarly neglect of places like Ganden as pilgrimage sites.

In this article, I will challenge both dominant narratives by exploring how Ganden monastery, a key site for the Geluk school, was made into a pilgrimage site. I propose ‘monasticization’ as a parallel process to Huber’s ‘mandalization,’ whereby large Geluk monasteries such as Ganden were popularized as sites of pilgrimage, protector worship, and tantric practice. One way monasteries such as Ganden became pilgrimage sites was through promotion via pilgrimage guides that form the source base for this article. I suggest, further, that the popularization of Ganden monastery as a pilgrimage site significantly contributed to the growth of the Tsongkhapa devotional cult in Tibet, as well as the rise of the Geluk tradition. This argument supports and extends Brenton Sullivan’s observation

³ Katia Buffetrille, “Reflections on Pilgrimages to Sacred Mountains, Lakes and Caves,” in *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, ed. Alex McKay (Curzon Press, 1998), 21–23.

⁴ Toni Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 26–29.

that “what the Gelukpa did exceptionally well was to make the monastery the essence of Buddhism.”⁵ In addition, it sheds new light on the history of the Geluk tradition, which is often considered a clerical and monastic tradition (as opposed to shamanic and lay); rationalist (and not tantric); and a tradition based upon a routinized system of bureaucracy (rather than personal charisma).⁶ However, when we look more closely at its early history, we see that neglected and counterintuitive aspects of the tradition’s history, such as magical powers, prophecy, and pilgrimage, are deeply important to constructing the Geluk as a tradition. This paper thus complicates two easy narratives told about Tibet and enriches our understanding of both pilgrimage and Geluk traditions.

Pilgrimage Guides to Ganden

This paper is based on the following textual sources (arranged chronologically):

1) the first Jamyang Shepa’s (*’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson ’grus*, 1648–1721/2) *Catalog of the Great Monastery Ganden* (hereafter *Jamyang Shepa’s Catalog*) (ca. 1700–1707?);⁷

⁵ Brenton Sullivan, *Building a Religious Empire: Tibetan Buddhism, Bureaucracy, and the Rise of the Gelukpa* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 4.

⁶ These characterizations rely on Geoffrey Samuels’ analysis of religion in premodern Tibetan societies as either clerical or shamanic and on Max Weber’s opposition of charismatic and bureaucratic authority. Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 9; Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. R. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Hodge, 1947), 329.

⁷ *’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje*, “Chos sde chen po dga’ ldan gyi dkar chag,” in Kun mkhyen *’jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i gsung ’bum*, vol. 1, (*’Bras spungs bkra shis sgo mang dpe mdzod khang*, 2015), 19–37. This work is both undated and unfinished, leaving off ab-

2) the chapter on Ganden Monastery in the First Purchok Ngawang Jampa's (Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa, 1682-1762) *Garland of White Lotus: How the Four Great Monasteries, Gyutö, and Gyumé were Formed* (hereafter *Purchok's Garland*), 1744;⁸

3) Sera Mé Drakpa Khedrub's (Se ra smad grags pa mkhas grub, b. 18th century) *Ornament to Jampel Nyingpo's Intention: A History of Ganden Shartsé Tösam Norbuling College* (hereafter *Shartsé History I*), 1814;⁹

4) Dze Mé Losang Pelden Tenzin Yargyé's (Dze smad blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar rgyas, 1927-1996) *A Trimming of Jewels of Pure Threefold Analysis, Elegant Words to Beautify "Ornament to Jampel Nyingpo's Intention," History of the College of Ganden Shartse Norling* (hereafter *Shartsé History II*), 1975;¹⁰

5) *Annals of Ganden Monastery and Dragyerpa* (hereafter *Annals of Ganden*) 1994,¹¹

ruptly when describing some of the objects in Yangpachen Temple. My tentative dating to 1700-1707 is based on his tenure as abbot of Drepung Gomang Monastery, as this was a period when he composed numerous texts and would have had the stature and opportunity to visit Ganden and compose a catalog. The year 1707 also witnessed a serious schism between Purbuchok Ngawang Jampa and Desi Sangyé Gyatso, leading to Ngawang Jampa stepping down from the abbacy of Drepung Gomang, and perhaps explaining the unfinished work of this text.

⁸ Ngag dbang byams pa, *Grwa sa chen po bzhi dang rgyud pa stod smad chags tshul pad dkar 'phreng ba* (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1989).

⁹ Grags pa mkhas grub, *Dga' ldan shar rtse'i chos 'byung 'jam dpal snying po'i dgongs rgyan* (Dga' ldan shar rtse slob grwa, 2010).

¹⁰ Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar rgyas, "Dga' ldan shar rtse nor gling grwa tshang gi chos 'byung 'jam dpal snying po'i dgongs rgyan mdzes par byed pa'i legs bshad dpyad gsum rnam dag nor bu'i phra tshom," in *Dga' ldan shar rtse'i chos 'byung 'jam dpal snying po'i dgongs rgyan*, 127-172. This work is a sequel to *Shartsé History I*.

¹¹ *Dga' ldan dgon pa dang brag yer pa'i lo rgyus* (Grong khyer lha sa'i khul, 1994).

6) Ganden Ngawang Tenjung's (*Dga' ldan ngag dbang bstan 'byung*, b. 20th century) *An Abridged Guidebook to the Great Seat Ganden Nampar Gyelwé Ling* (hereafter *Abridged Guidebook*), 2011.¹²

These texts serve as important sources of information about Ganden, which was largely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and thus does not have much material evidence left to contribute to our early history of the site. One limitation of these sources is that they are late—they are largely written after the 18th century. However, they are the earliest textual sources we have, and are likely based on even earlier sources that have been lost. I strongly suspect that Ganden's elevation to pilgrimage destination took place largely during the rule of the Ganden Podrang government—that is, after the assumption of political power by the 5th Dalai Lama in 1642. However, it is difficult to know with certainty what was happening in the 17th century, given that the earliest textual evidence available is from about a century later, and even more difficult to know the status of Ganden in the 15th and 16th centuries.

These texts carry a variety of genre titles, including pilgrimage guide (*gnas yig*), catalogue (*dkar chag*), history (*chags tshul*, *chos 'byung*, *lo rgyus*), but they all fall under the broad genre of pilgrimage guide literature.¹³ They also follow the typical conventions for the genre: these texts all describe the ritual potency of the site, the powerful material objects there, the deities and masters who have dwelled there, and the benefits that will accrue to visitors. This is typical for pilgrimage guide literature, which tends to be structurally formulaic even as it describes very different

¹² *Dga' ldan ngag dbang bstan 'byung*, *Gdan sa chen po dga' ldan rnam par rgyal ba' i gling gi gnas yig mdor bsdus pa* (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2012).

¹³ For more on this literature and its characteristic features (which are demonstrated in the Ganden guidebook literature), see Catherine Hartmann, "How to See the Invisible: Attention, Landscape, and the Transformation of Vision in Tibetan Pilgrimage Guides," *History of Religions* 62, no. 4 (2023): 313–339.

sites. Nevertheless, how these texts do so is illustrative for understanding what is distinctive about Ganden for the early history of the Geluk school. Specifically, these pilgrimage guides construct Ganden as a sacred site by foregrounding the continuing presence, agency, and charisma of Tsongkhapa, who functions as both the central deity of Ganden and as the presiding lama. Furthermore, they construct Ganden as a specifically *Geluk* pilgrimage site—one that centers on a monastery rather than on natural features of the landscape and is monopolized by Geluk figures rather than by figures like Milarepa or Padmasambhava that are associated with other schools.

Constructing Ganden as a Sacred Place

One major concern for the Ganden pilgrimage guide authors is to establish the site of Ganden as especially holy. As has been discussed in the much more voluminous scholarship on pilgrimage to holy mountains,¹⁴ the importance of these holy mountains is often deeply layered—a mountain may have been the focus of pre-Buddhist mountain veneration, it is seen as the mandala of a tantric buddha, it is associated with special ritual sites described in certain tantric texts, it has auspicious geomantic qualities, it was “opened” by a legendary master who defeated the local spirits and attained a direct perception of the mandala, and then great deeds were performed there by later masters. In other words, Buddhist veneration of such sites likely co-opted and transformed pre-existing mountain veneration practices. By contrast, places like Ganden did not necessarily have

¹⁴ Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain*; Catherine Hartmann, “To See a Mountain: Writing, Place, and Vision in Tibetan Pilgrimage Literature” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2020); Buffetrille, “Reflections on Pilgrimages.”

pre-existing significance. Instead, guidebook authors had to actively *construct* Ganden as a sacred place, and did so through a variety of methods.

For instance, each of the guidebooks begin by enumerating various prophecies said to predict Tsongkhapa's founding of Ganden. One such important prophecy identifies the hill on which Ganden is located as the residence of the naga king Anavatapta, who offered the historical Buddha a white conch which was then placed by another of the Buddha's disciples at the site of Ganden, where it was eventually found by Tsongkhapa. Guides also describe how Tsongkhapa himself—in a previous birth—was among the Buddha's disciples when the Buddha predicted the founding of Ganden. These prophecies function to legitimate both Tsongkhapa and Ganden as preordained, and to connect them to the historical Buddha.

The guidebooks also detail the geomantic (*sa dpyad*, literally, analysis of the earth) analyses performed by Tsongkhapa to determine the ritual potency of the future site of Ganden. For example, Purchok writes, “when Tsongkhapa visited the site, all the examinations of the earth and sky (*sa dpyad gnam dpyad*) came out well for the flourishing of teaching, practice, and resources.”¹⁵ Such analysis generally examines the earth and surrounding topography for auspicious shapes and resemblances to animals in order to determine if it is suitable to practice. But guidebooks describe how Tsongkhapa's analysis went even beyond this, and included symbolic analyses of the names of nearby villages (*sa bkra'i ming gi mtshan ma*). All this not only frames the location of Ganden as being auspicious, but also that this auspiciousness was ascertained by Tsongkhapa himself.

Guides also describe many spontaneously arisen phenomena (*rang byon*) that exist around Ganden, and which attest to the auspiciousness of the site. These phenomena, which are attested at pilgrimage sites across Tibet, are said to arise without any human effort, and instead seem to

¹⁵ Ngag dbang byams pa, *Purchok's Garland*, 6.

emerge because of the active spiritual potency of the site. While human-made objects are considered valuable at Ganden and other places of pilgrimage, those that appear of their own accord are seen as especially miraculous. These are especially important on one of the circumambulation routes around Ganden, which according to one guide, is even called “‘Ganden’s Spontaneously Arisen Circumambulation Route’ (*dga’ldan rang byon skor*) because it has extraordinary spontaneously-arisen images that manifested spontaneously and in an unfabricated fashion (*ma bcos lhun gyis grub pa’i rang byon thun mong ma yin pa*).”¹⁶ Guides list as many as sixty-five spontaneously arisen forms on this route.¹⁷ Some of which are said to have arisen even before Ganden’s founding, some of which made connections between Ganden and other sacred sites such as Kailash, some of which honor important deities and mantras, and others which connect to important historical events that took place at Ganden. Guides often describe these spontaneously arisen phenomena at length, inviting pilgrims to see them and appreciate these connections.

Tsongkhapa’s Extended Charisma at Ganden

The land’s potency is also visible in the natural beauty of the flora and fauna surrounding Ganden, according to guidebooks. These guides describe the pleasantness of the surrounding area and the fragrant plants and happy animals that can be found there. One important plant highlighted by guidebooks is “ganden khenpa” (*dga’ldan ’khan pa*), which is described as “a shrub [used in] smoke-offerings which is renowned for being produced from the scattered hairs of the Great Lord himself—it grows in all directions [around Ganden].”¹⁸ According to legend, in order to combat

¹⁶ *Dga’ldan ngag dbang bstan ’byung*, *Abridged Guidebook*, 31.

¹⁷ Dze Mé Losang Pelden Tenzin Yargyé, *Shartsé History II*.

¹⁸ *Dga’ldan ngag dbang bstan ’byung*, *Abridged Guidebook*, 25–26.

a chicken pox outbreak, Tsongkhapa cut his hair and scattered the cuttings on the ground around Ganden, where they grew into a shrub said to yield fragrant smoke able to clean the air and dispel infection. Again, in highlighting the general natural beauty of the flora and fauna around Ganden, but also by pointing to the specific potency of plants like *ganden khenpa*, guides affirm the auspiciousness of the site of Ganden, and connect it to the ongoing potency of Tsongkhapa.

Tsongkhapa's engagement with the land also extends to defeating potentially troublesome spirits who dwelled there. Tibetan conceptions of landscape often include autochthonous non-human beings who are easily offended and can threaten humans who draw near. Such beings are particularly common at sacred sites, whose numinous power attracts both siddhas and spirits. Lest anyone wonder if Tsongkhapa, who is so often portrayed as the consummate monastic and philosopher, rather than as a siddha or tantric master,¹⁹ is up to the challenge posed by these spirits, guidebooks relate various stories of him taming such spirits and converting them to protectors of Buddhism. For example, guidebooks describe how Tsongkhapa defeated one particular demon with a "rain of iron hailstones."²⁰ The guides point out, as well, that these hailstones—now in the form of boulders alongside Ganden's circumambulation route—can still be seen by pilgrims to this day. Such landmarks are a living testimony to Tsongkhapa's role as both the founder of the monastic order at Ganden,

¹⁹ This characterization of Tsongkhapa exists in the pilgrimage tradition as well—he is the butt of the joke in popular stories about Tsari, which relate that Tsongkhapa was so particular about following rules that he refused to drink alcohol during a ritual at Tsari. Because of this mild disrespect to the mountain—Pema Karpo's guide to Tsari describes "retribution for his having discursive thoughts about beer at that great né"—he gets painful splinters. There is a clear implied contrast with Kagyu masters. See Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain*, 62–63.

²⁰ Dga' ldan ngag dbang bstan 'byung, *Abridged Guidebook*, 27.

but also as a tantric master powerful enough to secure the site from dangerous spirits.

One of the protector deities converted by Tsongkhapa is called Damchen Chogyal, and the pilgrimage guides are full of descriptions of Damchen Chogyal's ongoing activities at Ganden. Damchen Chogyal, a wrathful form of Manjusri who is considered a protector for the entire Geluk tradition, is especially associated with Tsongkhapa. He is even said to have taken human form during Tsongkhapa's lifetime so that he could serve Tsongkhapa as part of his retinue.²¹ At Ganden, guidebooks describe how he dissolved into and now resides in a self-arisen image contained in a Protector Temple dedicated to him. However, he is also known to leave the Protector Temple and wander around the grounds or to react to important events that affect the Geluk school.²² Guidebooks direct pilgrims' attention to images and objects associated with Damchen Chogyal, while also making it clear that he is an ongoing rather than past presence.

Another way that pilgrimage guides assert Tsongkhapa's ongoing presence is through descriptions of the *stupa* (burial mound) containing Tsongkhapa's material remains. Arguably, this *stupa* is the greatest attraction for pilgrims to Ganden, and guides accordingly devote much attention to describing it and telling the story of its formation. According to these accounts, upon his death in 1419, his disciples witnessed Tsongkhapa attaining complete enlightenment. At that same moment, his entire body became luminous, a self-arisen image of Tsongkhapa sponta-

²¹ As per Shartse History II: "According to the oral tradition from our elders, Damchen Chögyel resided in the form of a man in the retinue of Jé Lama and he actually dissolved into that very image and was commanded to protect the teachings." Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar rgyas and Grags pa mkhas grub, *Shartse History II*, 151. According to Khedrub Jé's Secret Biography of Tsongkhapa, "Both Yama Dharmarāja [i.e. Damchen] and the yakṣa-kṣetrapālas carried out Tsongkhapa's commands like servants." Dge legs dpal bzang, *Cluster of Precious Tales*, 193.

²² Dga' ldan ngag dbang bstan 'byung, *Abridged Guidebook*, 41.

neously appeared, and various "wondrous and inconceivable omens arose, such as a shower of flowers, a rainbow, the resounding of divine cymbals, and so forth."²³ Instead of cremating the body, the disciples chose to request that it remain fully intact so that it could continue to benefit beings. As such, the *stupa* is said to contain Tsongkhapa's imperishable remains, and the pilgrimage guides contain extensive descriptions of the material splendors of the stupa along with the honors paid to it by successive generations. Moreover, they describe the wondrous effects that the stupa has on pilgrims and visitors, and attribute miraculous events to it.

While the *stupa* is the central focal point, guides also describe the various other images and relics associated with Tsongkhapa that are to be seen at Ganden. For example, an image of Maitreya located in the Maitreya chapel is said to grant liberation on sight (*byams pa mthong grol ma*), and to have magically flown itself from India to Ganden,²⁴ emphasizing Ganden's connections with the holy land of the dharma. Notably, this is not the only image which magically flew itself to Ganden—another image of Vajrayogini is said to have flown from the Kagyu monastery of Drikung after telling the Drikung Chenga Chökyi Gyelpo, "I am going to be [Tsongkhapa's] personal support (*rten skal*)."²⁵ In other words, guides not so subtly assert that Tsongkhapa (rather than the Kagyu school) is the legitimate heir of teachings like the six *yogas* of Naropa. Likewise, guides describe further relics, images, and stupas associated with Tsongkhapa's close disciples, meaning that there are a variety of ways through which pilgrims can encounter the extended charisma of people and objects associated with Tsongkhapa.

²³ Ngag dbang byams pa, *Purchok's Garland*, 8.

²⁴ Dga' ldan ngag dbang bstan 'byung, *Abridged Guidebook*, 45.

²⁵ Ngag dbang byams pa, *Purchok's Garland*, 25.

One final way that pilgrimage guides construct Ganden as a holy site worthy of pilgrimage is using a common trope found in other pilgrimage guides of asserting the site has outer, inner, and secret aspects. In other words, the site appears one way externally, especially to those without pure perception, but this external appearance masks inner and secret realities of the site. In the case of Ganden, guides offer a couple of different formulations of this. All of them assert that Ganden is outwardly a secluded hermitage,²⁶ a pleasant place for dharma practice located away from bustling population centers. For those with extraordinary vision, however, who can see past external appearances into the deeper, inner reality of Ganden, guides claim that Ganden is actually a mandala palace of Guhyasamaja. This trope of claiming that a pilgrimage place is really a mandala is common in pilgrimage guide literature, although is more common for pilgrimage mountains,²⁷ which are often asserted to be Cakrasamvara mandalas. As such, these guides' assertion that Ganden is inwardly a Guhyasamaja mandala marks a departure from that more common type, and reflects the privileged place of the Guhyasamaja tantra within the Geluk school.

Beyond even that level of analysis, guides further claim that Ganden's secret aspect is Tsongkhapa's pure land,²⁸ the site of Tsongkhapa's enlightenment, or both.²⁹ This is striking because this identification of Ganden as Tsongkhapa's pure land is held to be even deeper than the identification of Ganden as the mandala of Guhyasamaja, highlighting once

²⁶ For documentation of each of the texts, see chart in Ium, "The Early History of Ganden Monastery," 196.

²⁷ Hartmann, "To See a Mountain."

²⁸ Tsongkhapa's pure land Arrays of Amazing Wonders. As noted earlier, this is the name of the Tsongkhapa's prophesied pure land within Tokden Jampel Gyatso's Very Secret Biography of Tsongkhapa.

²⁹ For documentation of each of the texts, see chart in Ium, "The Early History of Ganden Monastery," 196.

again the ways these guides center Tsongkhapa as the central deity of Ganden and as the presiding lama.

Conclusion

In all these ways, pilgrimage guides *construct* Ganden as a holy place worthy of pilgrimage—in effect, monasticizing pilgrimage. While scholarship on Tibetan pilgrimage largely focuses on pilgrimage to mountains and other features of the natural landscape, the case of Ganden shows how widespread tropes of pilgrimage literature were adapted to cast Ganden as a sacred site. It is difficult to know whether this elevation of Ganden as a pilgrimage site was intended to compete with mountain pilgrimage sites largely associated with the activities of figures like Milarepa and Padmasambhava. However, it is striking how these pilgrimage guides use tropes associated with those pilgrimage sites but feature exclusively Geluk-associated figures. And while scholarship on the Geluk school often focuses on monastic and clerical aspects of the tradition, when we see the importance of Ganden as a pilgrimage site, we see that there is much more to the story. Specifically, pilgrimage guides again and again foreground the continuing presence and agency of Tsongkhapa as a living, charismatic force at Ganden. They portray him as the central deity and presiding lama, and most of the highlighted features at Ganden connect back to him in some way.

Given that Ganden is, as some have said, “in some sense the spiritual home of the Geluk tradition,”³⁰ understanding how this site was actively constructed helps us better understand the historical development of the Geluk school, and complicates its dominant characterization as cler-

³⁰ José Ignacio Cabezón and Penpa Dorjee, *Sera Monastery* (Wisdom Publications, 2019), 192.

ical and scholastic. It is of course difficult to know with any degree of certainty, but the way the early Geluk made Ganden into a pilgrimage site centered on the ongoing charisma of Tsongkhapa may have played an important role in the success and growth of the tradition and of the Tsongkhapa devotional cult. More work remains to be done on this topic, including the comparison with other monastery-focused pilgrimage destinations, the status of Ganden before the Ganden Phodrang period, and into descriptions of pilgrimage to Ganden in other genres.

This paper has tried to shine a light on various aspects of Tibetan history that have gone understudied in part because they complicate simple constructed narratives that govern the study of Tibet: the predominant association of pilgrimage with natural destinations like mountains and the predominant characterization of the Geluk as scholastic, rational, and clerical. These tropes are not necessarily wrong—they do point to something real in the historical record. However, they can become problematic if they become so dominant that we as scholars cannot see counter-examples that complicate such broad stories. The Geluk had many charismatic, prophetic, and tantric elements, and pilgrimage took place to a variety of destinations, including monasteries. Elsewhere I have argued that the early Geluk portrayal of Tsongkhapa as a *mahasiddha* demonstrates the limitations of our scholarly tendencies to classify Geluks as scholarly and clerical.³¹ I have also shown how Lhodrak Drupchen's prophecies and status as an oracle played an important role shaping the early Geluk. In future work, I plan to expand this line of thought on prophecies as both a textual and ritual practice.³² My scholarship tries to push back against our scholarly tendency to accept convenient narratives as

³¹ Michael Ium, "Tsongkhapa as a mahāsiddha: A Reevaluation of the Patronage of the Gelukpa in Tibet," in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 45 (2022): 73–117.

³² Michael Ium, unpublished research statement submitted with job application.

given, and instead to draw our attention to the effortful ways traditions are constructed, both by those traditions and by scholarly depictions.

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