



## Imperial stooge or emissary to the Gelug throne? Rethinking the biographies of Chankya Rolpa'i Dorje

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The life of Chankya Rolpa'i Dorje (Tib: lchang skya rol pa'i rdo rje), the famed 18th-century Gelug lama from eastern Amdo, has been a subject of interest in Tibetological and Buddhological circles for some time and is gaining increased attention in New Qing Studies/Manchu Studies circles. To date, however, scholars from these disparate disciplinary backgrounds have tended to portray Chankya as a mouthpiece of Manchu interests, an imperial stooge who facilitated Qing expansion in Mongolia and Tibet. This commonplace, I argue, is reductive and methodologically problematic. Chankya's biographers undoubtedly show him cooperating with the Manchu throne but they also devote considerable space to illustrate the complex and manifold ways that he co-opted Manchu sponsorship and openly resisted Manchu imperialism to further his own agenda: consolidating a pan-Gelug empire crowned by the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. In short, Chankya's two primary biographies (Tib: rnam thar) depict Chankya as an active agent of history, rather than a passive imperial mouthpiece.

The glaring disparity in traditional and academic representations of Chankya's life draws, in part, from a modern scholarly tendency to conceive of political, military and bureaucratic power as "real" and "religious" power as cross cut with false consciousness. Employing a positivist and "secularist" reading of history, many Western-trained academics have been quick to write off the indigenous organization of Tibetan biographies, as well as the historical narratives they construct, as didactic and devotional fabrications of "hagiographers" inhabiting a fictitious cosmology beset with "supernatural" and "magical" imaginaries. While such readings of Tibetan historiographic texts may tell us a great deal about ourselves, as Western-trained academics, and the cultural legacies to which we are heir, they doom us to failure in the task of reconstructing the concerns – cosmological, soteriological and epistemological – which shaped the lives of Tibetan(ized) historical protagonists.

In this paper, I will attempt a different reading of Chankya's biographies, one that approaches them as counter-narrative inscriptions that self-consciously attempted to deflect Manchu imperialism by inscribing Chankya as a paradigmatic agent of a pan-Gelug will to power. This reading is methodologically indebted to the work of cultural historians James Hevia and Angela Zito. In their respective studies of Chinese imperial Guest Ritual (Ch: bin li) during the Qing, Hevia and Zito have shown that imperial rituals were not symbolic expressions of other kinds of power or attempts to mime an idealized but unattainable social order through the charade of posing the Emperor as a semi-divine Son of Heaven. Rather, they argue, imperial rituals were the crucial venue through which the imperial body instantiated its power by encompassing a host of others and thereby successfully embodied the cosmic axis from which to ritually mediate between Heaven and Earth. As Hevia points out,

"The overwhelming emphasis in Chinese ritual texts on the position and disposition of bodies in ceremonial space meant that ritual actions constituted a cosmo-political order in highly consequential ways."

"... relations were contingent and provisional, requiring continuous renegotiation and refashioning as conditions in the world changed. In a political situation in which lords vied with each other for supremacy, any claim that the emperor might make to supreme lordship was predicated on his dexterous management of relations with other lords; he must include their strength without diluting it so that he could, if necessary, command them to assist him in the ordering of the world."

Put another way, the successful instantiation of imperial power was stipulated not on forcing others to submit to the throne but on assimilating them within its own projects of rulership.

In this paper, I argue that Chankya's biographers were keenly aware that imperial power was constituted – and could be contested – through the performance of ritualized audience sequences and the narrative inscription of those encounters. Such a reading would explain why Chankya's biographers took pains to recount the minute ways ritual protocol was maneuvered during imperial audiences to accord unorthodox honors to Chankya and other high lamas in his retinue..

With this methodology in mind, the paper will examine how Chankya's biographers used the act of inscription, with its self-conscious ordering of bodies in social space, to instantiate Gelug protagonists in a dominant subject position vis-à-vis the hegemonizing power of the Manchu imperial machine. Specifically, it will examine how Chankya's biographies accomplish this task by 1) organizing the events of his life around the discursive logic of lama-patron (Tib: mchod yon) "joint-rulership" which depicted lama and emperor as co-equal sovereigns over their respective supra-worldly and worldly domains,

and by 2) repeatedly producing Chankya in the dominant (Ch: yang) subject position in his ritualized encounters with the Qing Emperor Qianlong and senior officials at the Manchu court.