

# JIABS

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## Eating letters in the Tibetan treasure tradition\*

Frances Garrett

Across hundreds of years of Tibetan literature on occult technologies, we find a small but consistent canon of writing on a practice known as “edible letters” (*za yig*). These texts describe the consumption of small rolls of paper inscribed with Tibetan graphemes. Written with ink prepared from blood, musk or other ingredients, and often stuffed with such materials as aconite or fingernails, these edible amulets are meant to serve a wide range of practical needs, from increasing one’s merit or wisdom or winning arguments, to protecting against thieves, contagious disease, spirit possession or dog bite. As we will see below, edible letter “recipes” may also prescribe Buddhist visualization practices.

The practice of edible letters is strangely unexplored in secondary scholarship. It appears not to have been reported upon in ethnographic literature on Tibet or the Himalayas, suggesting that the practice may nowadays be rare. In a journalistic autobiography by the nun Ani Pachen 2000, about her childhood as the daughter of a Khampa (*kham pa*) chief who later became a Tibetan resistance leader, Ani Pachen refers to her parents having eaten “Za yig, precious scriptures” in an effort to conceive a child.<sup>1</sup> In *Buddhist Monasteries of Himachal*, O. C. Hāṇḍā refers to “edible charms (*za yig*)” as a “tantra-based psychological therapy” for healing.<sup>2</sup> Wad-

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<sup>1</sup> Pachen/Donnelley 2000: 42.

<sup>2</sup> Hāṇḍā 1987: 127.

dell’s 1895 work, *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism, with its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and in its Relation to Indian Buddhism* notes that the “eating of the paper on which a charm has been written is an ordinary way of curing disease,” and he provides an image of such an “edible charm”<sup>3</sup> – an observation that was repeated in the respected medical resource, *Merck’s Archives*, in 1904.<sup>4</sup> Douglas’ catalog, *Tibetan Tantric Charms & Amulets*, contains a page of sixteen images of “edible charms,” which he understands to be used for the curing of disease, and which he claims to be “probably derived wholly from Indian sources,” although he offers no evidence for this (as I will discuss below, this appears not to be the case). He also observes the use of unusual scripts on some of the charms, which he calls “unpronounceable yet filled with potentiality.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this paucity of reporting outside Tibet, within certain pockets of Tibetan literature the practice is not at all uncommon. In this article, I will present the corpus of edible letters literature as a uniquely Tibetan nexus of contemplative, ritual, astrological and medical traditions, with intriguing connections to similar Chinese practices. I will consider the dietary, pharmacological, contemplative and astrological features of the practice, as described in texts, and in particular, address its perspective on the power of embodying the alphabet.

<sup>3</sup> Waddell 1934: 401.

<sup>4</sup> *Merck’s Archives* (Merck & Co., 1904), vol. 6, ii.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas 1978: plates 11–26.

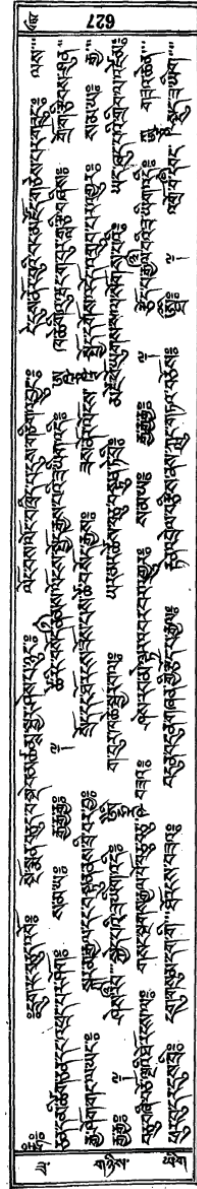


Figure 1. The letters to be used are stacked vertically; see lines 2, 4, and 5 for examples. From “Za yig nor bu’i bang mdzod.”

**A jeweled treasury of edible letters (*Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod*)**

I will begin by describing the late fourteenth-century “*Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod*,” by Rdo rje gling pa (1346–1405), the longest text devoted entirely to this topic that I have encountered.<sup>6</sup> After salutations to Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Rdo rje gling pa’s edible letters text begins with an impassioned justification for the usefulness of edible letter therapy. The remainder of the text is a catalog of edible letter spells or, as I will refer to them, recipes. The recipes address a range of needs. Some focus on enhancing religious practice, by for instance aiming at prolonging life, generating wisdom, or guarding against defilements or vow infringement. A number of recipes focus on repelling the evil intentions of external attackers: there are methods for subjugating all kinds of harmful spirits, sorcerers or roadside thieves, as well as evil spells, curses, weapons, ritual cakes and daggers. A third type of recipe addresses a variety of difficult-to-treat medical problems, including heart pressure (*snying rlung*), madness (*smyo 'bog*), possession by planetary spirits (*gza' nad*), and failure to conceive, as well as several serious epidemic conditions, such as malignant intestinal ulcers (*khong lhog*), contagious fevers (*rims*), dysentery (*rgyu gzer*), and smallpox (*shu thor*). A miscellaneous assortment of useful prescriptions serve to treat bad dreams, increase wealth, bring others under your control, and ensure that you win arguments.

The recipes in this text typically include several components. First, each comes with an interlinear drawing of the letters to be used on the talisman. The letters are stacked on top of each other vertically, and there may be a row of vertical columns (see Figure 1). Usually the letters are written in the block printing (*dbu can*) script, but in other texts, other scripts may also be used, as I will discuss further below. Next, the names of several plant, mineral or animal substances are listed, and in some cases it is explained that these should be mixed into a paste that is used as ink for writ-

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<sup>6</sup> Rdo rje gling pa, “*Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod ces bya ba bzhugs so*” in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* ed. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 67, 625–40.

ing the letters. Many different ingredients are named in the different recipes, some of them common organic substances, such as camphor, saffron, musk, turmeric, cinnamon, vulture meat, calcite, frankincense, aconite, crystal, wood, or pig fat, and some of them more esoteric materials, including human flesh, the bones of someone killed by lightning, the blood of someone killed with a knife, cemetery ash from a meritorious person's remains, a consecrated hair-braid, soot from an old house, or the excrement of a powerful person, to name just a few.

Then, recipes address the appropriate times for undertaking the different components of the practice. An astrologically recommended time may be given for writing the letters on a piece of thin, clean paper.<sup>7</sup> Certain days of the month may be specified for eating the preparation. Next are instructions for use: after writing the prescribed letters using the special ink, the paper should be rolled up; sometimes that paste of special ingredients is also stuffed inside the paper. The paper roll should be swallowed by the person wishing its effects, at certain times of day, without touching the teeth.<sup>8</sup> Eating more than one roll per day may be advised; in that case, the paper rolls should be stored in a clean jar. Sometimes one is advised to avoid the company of certain inauspicious persons, such as lepers or widows, or to avoid certain types of places, while undertaking an edible letters practice or treatment. Finally, many remedies also prescribe an accompanying visualization exercise, which may also include the recitation of mantras, as I will describe further below.

Edible letter remedies vary in length and detail, but the following are typical of Rdo rje gling pa's "Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod." Each description is accompanied by a glyph showing the letters to be written.

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<sup>7</sup> Other texts' recipes specify thin birch bark, yellow paper, or white paper; see, for example, Mi 'gyur rdo rje, *Gnam chos* 13 vols. (Paro Kyichu, Bhutan: Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, 1983), vol. 2, 341–42.

<sup>8</sup> See *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 198. Although it is most common to say that the charm should not touch the teeth, Mi 'gyur rdo rje elsewhere recommends first biting it, holding it for awhile in the mouth, or resting it on the palate behind the teeth before swallowing; see *Gnam chos*, v. 2, pp. 341–2.

These are the edible letters for generating wisdom. Write them with a paste of camphor and saffron on the tenth day of the waning moon. Avoid defilement that worsens in the presence of male lepers, widows, and so forth. At dawn of the fourteenth and fifteenth day [of the month], eat ten [each day while reciting] the secret imperial mantra. Your wisdom will blaze like fire.<sup>9</sup>

These are the edible letters for pacifying evil spells and curses. Mix saffron, musk and excrement which has been blessed, and write them when in harmony with the victory star. If you [put the paper with] a five-pronged *vajra* at your heart or eat it regularly at the two middle times [of midnight and noon, it will] cleanse you of possession by the otherworldly. Also, you will not be harmed in body, speech or mind by any spells or destructive charms.<sup>10</sup>

These are the edible letters for pacifying bad dreams. If you eat them when you wake up, all bad dreams will be pacified.<sup>11</sup>

These are the edible letters for protection against all kinds of weapons. Write them with a liquid of vermilion, saffron, musk, camphor, falcon blood and vulture meat. Roll it up and eat it like food. You will be free from the fear of weapons when you go to the battlefield. Eat seven each day, and it's best if you include mantras too.<sup>12</sup>

These are the edible letters for causing conception. At the time of the Victory Star, write them well with a *Gi'u wam* liquid. If a women who

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<sup>9</sup> *Shes rab skyed pa'i za yig 'di / [image] ga bur kha che sbyar ba la / yar mar tshes bcu bstun te bri / mdze pho yugs sal sogs pa'i / yang zhud pa'i grib la 'dzem / bcu bzhi bco lnga'i tho rangs la / gsang sngags rgyal po bcu bcu bza' / shes rab me ltar 'bar bar 'gyur. Rdo rje gling pa, "Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod ces bya ba bzhugs so,"* vol. 67, 627.

<sup>10</sup> *Gtad dang byad kha zhi ba'i za yig 'di / [image] nus pa byin rlabs ldan pa yi / dri chen gla rtsi gur gum sbyar / skar ma rgyal dang bstun te bri / snying gar rdo rje rtse lnga pa sam / gung gnyis dag tu zos gyur na / pha rol byad du bcug pa ni / gtad dang mnan pa gang gis kyang / lus ngag yid la tshugs mi 'gyur. Ibid.,* vol. 67, 628.

<sup>11</sup> *Rmi lam ngan pa zhi ba'i za yig 'di / [image] gnyid sad lto ru zos gyur na / rmi lam ngan pa thams cad zhi. Ibid.,* vol. 67, 630.

<sup>12</sup> *Mtshon rigs srung pa'i za yig 'di / [image] li khri gur gum gla rtsi dang / ga bur dag gi chu yis bri / khra yi khrag dang bya rgod shas / gril la zas su bza' bar bya / mtshon cha'i 'jigs pa kun dang bral / g.yul ngor 'gro dus bdun bdun bza' / rgyun du sngags khar chud na chog. Ibid.,* vol. 67, 630–31.



is devoted one-pointedly to her faith and vows eats them for a month, she will conceive a son quickly.<sup>13</sup>

These are the edible letters for rectifying vow infringements. Write them with your own excrement and musk, and if you eat them in the morning, all vow infringements will be rectified.<sup>14</sup>

These recipes are of average length and detail – many are much shorter, essentially providing no more than the required letter configuration and the recipe’s purpose. Others add to the sorts of detail just given by prescribing a contemplative or visualization practice that should accompany the eating of the rolled-up paper. Rdo rje gling pa’s “Za yig nor bu’i bang mdzod,” for example, has a companion text, the “Za yig nor bu’i bang mdzod kyi zhal shes,” which describes a simple mental exercise for each recipe. For example, commentary on some of the prescriptions above recommends,

With reference to [the edible letters for] pacifying evil spells and curses, eat them having generated thoughts of your lama or personal deity (*yi dam*), whatever is suitable; then contemplate how, due to the power of the recipe, specialists in black magic will be turned away.<sup>15</sup>

If you want to extend your life and merit, [picture] light-rays radiating from a clear physical image of Amitābha in front of you, and imagine [those light rays] gathering in the quintessence of the body, speech and mind of the Victor and his spiritual heirs as well as the longevity and merit of all living beings. Dissolve these into the body of Amitābha, allow his body to melt into light, and dissolve that into

<sup>13</sup> *Srid ’bebs za yig ’di / [image] skarma rgyal gyi dus tshod du / gi’u waM chu yis legs par bri / dad pa dam tshig ldan pa yi / rtse gcig gus pa’i bud med kyi / zla ba’i bar du zos gyur na / myur du bu dang ldan par gyur. Ibid., vol. 67, 632.*

<sup>14</sup> *Mna’i nyes pa zhi ba’i za yig ’di / [image] rang gi dri chen gla rtsis bri / nangs par zhogs pa ltor zos na / mna’ yi nyes pa thams cad zhi. Ibid., vol. 67, 634.*

<sup>15</sup> *Gtad dang byad kha zhi ba’i skabs / rang bla ma yi dam gang rung du bsgoms nas zos pas / sngags kyi mthus byad ma mkhan rang dbang med par phar zlog par bsgom. Rdo rje gling pa, “Za yig nor bu’i bang mdzod kyi zhal shes bzhugs so,” in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* ed. ’Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 67, 643.*

the edible letters. By eating them, your life and merit will expand. Meditate on that, and recite the mantra “Om vajra āyuṣe puṇye puṇye mahā puṇye svāhā” 100 times, or not less than 21 times.<sup>16</sup>

If you want to generate wisdom, [picture] those edible letters as a shining orange *dhīḥ* [syllable] from which light is radiating, and gather up the total quintessence of the Victor’s supreme wisdom [with those light rays]. Dissolve them into the *dhīḥ*, melt them into light, and merge [that light] into yourself. Imagine yourself as a wise and powerful Lord, and recite the mantra “Om vāgīśvari muṃ prajñā siddhi phala hūm” 100 times.<sup>17</sup>

### Revelations of edible letters continue

Within a century of Rdo rje gling pa’s recipe book, two important Nyingma (*rnying ma*) Treasure Revealers, Rat na gling pa (1404–1479) and Pad ma gling pa (1450–1521), discovered several texts on edible letters. One work by Rat na gling pa, for example, focuses on remedies for afflictions caused by malicious spirits called *Za* (*gza’*), which are associated with the planets (see Figure 2). Resembling what we might refer to as seizure disorder, stroke or a form of mental illness, in Tibetan medical and religious works *Za* diseases are considered contagious and often best treated by ritual means. Rat na gling pa’s text explains how to diagnose the particular type of *Za* disease by examining the patient’s urine, and it describes three different healing technologies: wearing circular charms (*’khor lo*), eating edible letters, or writing letters directly on the patient’s body.

<sup>16</sup> *Tshe dang bsod nams rgyas par ’dod na / mdun mkhar tshe dpag med spyi ltar gsal ba’i sku las ’od zer ’phros / rgyal ba sras dang bcas pa’i sku gsung thugs kyi bcud dang / skye ’gro’i bsod thams cad bsod / tshe dpag med pa’i sku la thim / sku ’od du zhu za yig la thim / de zos pas tshe dang bsod nams rgyas par bsam zhing / oM badzra AyuSe puNye puNye ma hA puNye swA hA / shes pa’i sngags ’di brgya ’am nyi shu rtsa gcig las mi nyung bar bzla’o. Ibid., vol. 67, 642.*

<sup>17</sup> *Shes rab skyed par ’dod na / za yig de [image] dmar ser ’od ’bar bar gyur pa las ’od ’phros rgyal ba’i mkhyen rab ma lus pa’i bcud bsod Dhi la thim / de ’od du zhu nas rang la thim / rang mkhas pa’i dbang phyug tu gyur par bsams la / oM wA gl swari muM phra dznyA siddhi pha la hUM / shes pa’i sngags ’di brgya rtsa sogs bzla’o. Ibid.*

Each edible letter recipe specifies ingredients to stuff inside or smear onto the paper on which the letters are written; for letters written directly on the body, these ingredients compose the ink that is used to write them.<sup>18</sup> As an example of a text that provides *little* instruction, by contrast, Rat na gling pa's "Phan byed za yig skor" is essentially an index of around thirty letter images, including a threesome of edible letters for protection, exorcism and killing, and recipes for various purposes, such as liberating yourself from possession by the eight classes of demons (*sde brgyad*), malevolent gnomes (*the'u rang*), or evil spells.<sup>19</sup>

Said to be the teaching of Vajrayoginī, Pad ma gling pa's "Sku gsung thugs kyi za yig" also recommends the consumption of letters for repelling malevolent spirits and other personal dangers.<sup>20</sup> Like other such texts, it offers drawings of the letters to be written, recommendations for type of paper, and the ingredients with which to make the ink. Visualization exercises are important in this work. For example, you should recite a particular mantra before eating the roll, imagining that

<sup>18</sup> Rat na gling pa, "Gza' srung ma bu dgu 'khams kyi 'khor lo lag len ma bu za yig za sman bdug sman lus yig btags thabs lo rgyus dang bcas pa bzhugs so," in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, ed. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 71, 525–35.

<sup>19</sup> Rat na gling pa, "Gu ru drag po'i chos skor las: Phan byed za yig gi skor rnams," in *Rat na gling pa'i gter chos* (Darjeeling: Taklung Tsetrul Pema Wangyal, 1977–1979), vol. 5, 655–64. Another text on edible letters by the same author may be found at Rat na gling pa, "Za yig them med" in *Rat na gling pa'i gter chos* (Darjeeling: Taklung Tsetrul Pema Wangyal, 1977–1979), vol. 9, 539–42.

<sup>20</sup> Pad ma gling pa, "Khros nag gi las mtha' sku gsung thugs kyi za yig log non las mtha' dang bcas pa" in *Rig 'dzin padma gliñ pa yi zab gter chos mdzod rin po che* (Thimphu: Kunsang Tobgay, 1975–1976), vol. 2, 653–62.

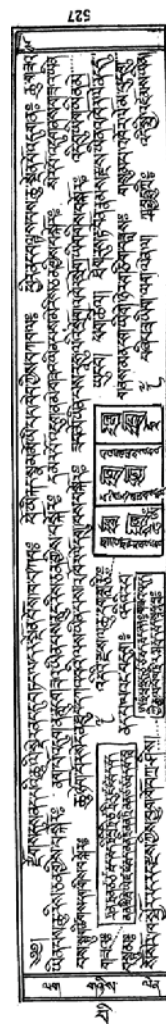


Figure 2: A page from Rat na gling pa's work on edible letters for Za (*gza'*) illness.

your body fills with light as the remedy is swallowed. As in Pad ma gling pa's "Phan byed za yig skor" and elsewhere, remedies here are categorized into those of body, of speech, and of mind. Consuming the letters of body, Pad ma gling pa explains, will protect you from earth spirits, *nāga* spirits, and demons, and from poisoned food. While undergoing this practice, you should imagine yourself as a red Hayagrīva holding a club in the right hand and a noose in the left, making a threatening hand gesture. Consuming the letters of speech will protect you from dream omens, vow infringements, warfare, weapons, disputes, illness and uncleanness, as well as from various malevolent spirits. In this case, you should picture yourself as a dark blue Vajrapāṇi, holding a nine-tipped *vajra* and a bell and grimacing aggressively. Consuming the letters of mind also addresses attack by various malevolent spirits. As you swallow this remedy, Pad ma gling pa instructs, you should imagine that your own body is filled with five lights, and that immeasurable light rays radiate outwards from a five-tipped *vajra* of gold within you; you will relax into a state of equanimity and bliss. For Pad ma gling pa, eating these letters is equivalent to eating the body, speech and mind of the deity in a process that actually purifies your own body, speech and mind, which in turn has the effect of exorcising malevolent spirits or protecting you from other sorts of harm.<sup>21</sup>

The seventeenth century brings us a number of edible letter texts with some new features, indicating, as we should expect, that the practice may have changed in orientation over time, or that there were different schools of practice. The very short "Gos sngon can gyi za yig," by Klong gsal snying po (1625–1692), has the unusual message that the practitioner need not use special ingredients to inscribe the paper, nor recite special mantras, because it is sufficient simply to eat the inscribed paper: "There is no need for ingredients

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<sup>21</sup> Although the digestive mechanics of swallowing letters is not made as explicit as we might like, it appears that for many authors, the letters themselves act as deities within the body to effect certain aims. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mi pham explained that after you eat the rolled-up paper, it will reach your heart, at which point you should imagine that "all sickness, evil influence, misdeeds and obscurations will be consumed by fire."

and mantras; the practice of only eating is sufficient,” he insists.<sup>22</sup> The text contains ten drawings of letters that are provided as protection against lightning, arrows or malevolent spirits, as well as drawings of the letters of body, speech and mind. If you eat the letters of body, speech and mind, he says, “at the three [times], dawn, daybreak and evening, you will reverse curses, evil spells, and malevolent *yantra*.”<sup>23</sup>

Another twist is found in the work of the master of occult technologies of this era, Mi 'gyur rdo rje (1645–1667), whose collected works in thirteen volumes contain numerous edible letter recipes, including some quite distinctive ones (about which I will say more below). His “Khyi smyon bcos pa'i thabs lag tu blang pa'i rim pa,” a text devoted to the problem of mad dogs (*khyi smyon*), begins,

Homage to Padmasambhava! In the degenerate age, the energies of the agitated *ma mo* [demoness], monk-demons (*rgyal 'gong*) and ghosts (*'byung po*) have become more active, and they have amplified their magical displays (*cho 'phrul*). At this time, mad dogs, mad people and mad donkeys increase their attacks on all beings. It is said that at the time of the male-fire-monkey year in particular, mad dogs greatly increased their harming [activities].<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Klong gsal snying po, “Ye shes rab 'bar las: Gos sngon can gyi za yig,” in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* ed. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 67, 653–54. This text is also found at Klong gsal snying po, “Ye shes rab 'bar las: Gos sngon can gyi za yig,” in *Klong gsal snying po'i zab gter gsung 'bum* ed. Pad ma rgyal mtshan (Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1997), vol. 6, 482–84.

<sup>23</sup> Klong gsal snying po, “Ye shes rab 'bar las: Gos sngon can gyi za yig,” vol. 67, 654.

<sup>24</sup> *Padma 'byung gnas sku la phyag 'tshal lo / snyigs dus ma mo 'khrugs pa'i kha rlangs dang / rgyal 'gong 'byung po kha dar cho 'phrul che / de dus khyi smyon mi smyon bong smyon gyis / 'gro ba kun la gnod 'tshes che ba dang / khyad par me pho sprel lo tshes pa'i tshes / khyi smyon gnod pa chen po dar bar gsungs.* Mi 'gyur rdo rje, “Khyi smyon bcos pa'i thabs lag tu blang pa'i rim pa bzhugs so,” in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, ed. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 73, 394. The fire-male-monkey year is 1556–7, assuming it is meant to be during his lifetime.

Mi 'gyur rdo rje has an answer to this problem. He recommends first that the practitioner-magician purify himself or herself by abandoning meat, garlic and onions, and by drinking pure water collected from a river. Unlike edible letter recipes of an earlier period, this text, like that of Klong gsal snying po, states that ingredients and special preparatory instructions for the paper are unnecessary: the key aspect of the remedy here is the visualization. To protect yourself from attack by mad dogs, Mi 'gyur rdo rje recommends that you recite a mantra, "Om̄ tog ge ya le hūm̄ phaṭ," while imagining yourself as Avalokiteśvara with white and red glowing light radiating out from your heart, and in this form you should bestow a blessing on all dogs. On behalf of someone who has been bitten by a mad dog, you should engage in a similar visualization, picturing a stream of ambrosia flowing from your body over that of the victim, thereby neutralizing the dog bite's poisonous effect. While he also offers edible letters to go with these remedies, Mi 'gyur rdo rje argues that while edible letters, protection cords or water *may* be used, the important activity is the visualization exercise.

In a work on veterinary remedies, "Rta phyugs kyi rigs la phan gdags pa'i man ngag nyer mkho bsdus pa," which he is said to have revealed at the age of thirteen, Mi 'gyur rdo rje recommends an edible letter remedy for the problem of contagious throat blockage (*yams nad ol 'gag*), which may refer to the possibly fatal infection in horses that we refer to as "strangles." For this, the prescribed letters should be written with a combination of pen ink and shellac that has been dipped into a paste of specified ingredients such as molasses, sal-ammoniac, nutmeg, clove, cardamon, saffron, bamboo pitch and (possibly) semen (*chos sman*). The practitioner should then recite a mantra 30,000 times while doing the protection-granting gesture (*skyabs sbyin phyag rgya*) with the right hand, holding a skull-cup in the left, and meditating on Avalokiteśvara. The edible letter preparation is dipped into purified water. A spell is recited, the "Master of contagious throat blockage" is invoked, the *tāntrika* shouts three times, and the edible letter preparation is fed to the afflicted patient, which in this case, apparently, is a horse.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Mi 'gyur rdo rje, "Rta phyugs kyi rigs la phan gdags pa'i man ngag nyer mkho bsdus pa bzhugs so," in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, ed. Jam

All the sources I have cited so far are Terma (*gter ma*), or Revealed Treasure texts of the Nyingma tradition. Edible letter recipes are found elsewhere too, however, particularly in medical works. A text by the major medical scholar De'u dmar bstan 'dzin phun tshogs (b. 1672), for example, recommends eating letters for the treatment of phlegm disorders. The work discusses a variety of phlegm disorders, beginning with instructions on the classification and identification of these conditions, followed by a range of treatments. De'u dmar begins with medicinal treatments – that is, the creation of pills, powders or decoctions – but he then describes three kinds of protection rituals: protective charms, mantra recitation, and edible letters. His sources for these therapies are the Revealed Treasures of earlier masters, specifically citing our friends above, Rdo rje gling pa and Mi 'gyur rdo rje. De'u dmar cites the work of Mi 'gyur rdo rje in particular for its expertise in edible letters that can heal phlegm diseases.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, we also encounter edible letters practice, or something rather like it, in biographical literature. The autobiography of the Treasure Revealer 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798), translated by Janet Gyatso, records the following story. A *ḍākinī* appeared before 'Jigs med gling pa and gave him a wooden box containing five rolls of yellowed paper and seven pea-sized crystals. When he unrolled one of the papers he smelled “an aromatic fragrance of camphor and other good medicines” and he found on the paper a *stūpa*-shaped outline filled with “secret *ḍākinī* sign-letters” that he could not read. As he started to roll it up, the letters suddenly transformed into Tibetan, revealing to 'Jigs med gling pa a Mahākaruṇika *sādhana* cycle. He unrolled another paper, which also turned out to contain an entire Tibetan text. At that moment a girl who looked like his mother came down from the sky and told him to eat the rolls of paper. Obediently he did so, swallowing them

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mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), vol. 71, 579–98.

<sup>26</sup> De'u dmar bstan 'dzin phun tshogs, “Bdud rtsi snying po man ngag gi rgyud las nye bar mkho ba'i gces par btus pa bad kan gyi bcos khol bur phyung ba man ngag bdud rtsi 'chi sos,” in *Gso rig gces btus rin chen phreng ba bzhugs so* (Zi ling: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1993), 165–75.

without chewing, whereupon, he reports, “all the words and their meanings were printed on my mind.”<sup>27</sup> While this story is given as an example of a “mind *terma*” (*dgongs gter*), a teaching that has been concealed in the Revealer’s own mind, the similarities to an edible letter roll are striking. If nothing else, this example serves to bring even closer the connections between the practice of edible letters and the Treasure tradition.

### Contexts and sources for edible letter practices

In the 111-volume *Rin chen gter mdzod*, which organizes hundreds of Revealed texts according to the threefold classification of tantric practice into Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, edible letter practices are considered Mahāyoga teachings for the achievement of mundane aims.<sup>28</sup> They are most commonly found in the context of rituals for protection; Rat na gling pa’s Za disease text, for example, is found within the *Rin chen gter mdzod*’s section on rites for the prevention of contagious diseases and plagues, which is itself found within the several volumes on protective rituals. As we have seen, however, in addition to these prophylactic or pacifying recipes there are many remedies aimed at enhancement or acquisition (*rgyas*), subjugation (*dbang*) and aggression (*drag*), following the standard fourfold classification of ritual activities (*las bzhi*).<sup>29</sup> With the exception of the few texts that are devoted exclusively to the topic, typically edible letter recipes are presented alongside descriptions of other technologies such as wearing amulets and talismans or the writing of letters on the body, and they are considered useful for a similar range of effects.

The recipes we have examined here were found in texts attributed to Treasure Revealers associated with Nyingma or Kagyü (*Bka’ rgyud*) lineages. The fourteenth-century Treasure Revealer Rdo rje

<sup>27</sup> Gyatso 1998: 57–58. This episode is also recorded at Khyentse/Padmakara Translation Group 1999: 7. See a similar story at Thondup 1986: 89.

<sup>28</sup> For a basic overview of the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, see Gyatso 1996: 147–69.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this classification of ritual see Cuevas forthcoming.



gling pa, for example, is renowned in both Nyingma and Bön traditions. He is an innovative and controversial writer on Nyingma and Bön Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen) teachings,<sup>30</sup> and he revealed numerous texts from the age of thirteen onwards, around Tibet and in Bhutan, on a wide range of topics, including medicine, astrology, rejuvenation alchemy (*bcud len*), and thread-cross (*mdos*) rituals.<sup>31</sup> The fifteenth-century Treasure Revealer Rat na gling pa is especially known for his compilation of a broad range of early texts now known as the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*, and his Treasures also cover various topics, including medicine empowerment rituals (*sman sgrub*) and recipes for special pills that bestow superpowers (*siddhi*). The Nyingma Treasure Revealer Pad ma gling pa is known as the national Treasure Revealer of Bhutan. Several figures important to the Kagyü tradition also wrote about edible letter practices, such as 'Bri gung rin chen phun tshogs (1509–1557), a well-known Kagyü master and Treasure Revealer who was the Abbot of 'Bri gung monastery for several years,<sup>32</sup> and 'Bri gung chos kyi grags pa (1595–1659), a renowned Kagyü master and also a physician.<sup>33</sup> De'u dmar bstan 'dzin phun tshogs, author of many works on topics such as medicine, religious practice, drama and art, and founder of a Kagyü monastery in Kham, is most famous as a medical scholar. In the works of all of these scholar-adepts we find edible letter practices to be at once contemplative, devotional, occult, medical, astrological, cryptological and dietetic, crossing

<sup>30</sup> Karmay 1988: 186. Also see his biography in Dargyay 1977: 139–43.

<sup>31</sup> Karmay 2000: 3. Karmay cites *gTer rabs rgya mtsho, sNgags 'chang pa rdo rje gling pas (pa'i) zab gter rnams dang mjal ba'i gter byang nam thar gter rabs rgya mtsho* (Cover title: *rDor rje gling pa'i zab gter rnams dang mjal ba'i rnam thar dang gsung thor bu*), *Texts of the rDo-rje gling-pa Tradition from Bhutan* (Thimphu: Kunsang Tobgeyl, Druk Sherig Press, 1984), Vol.21, 1–146.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, a single edible letter recipe said to be “from the terma of 'Bri gung chos rgyal rin chen phun tshogs,” in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, vol. 71, 518.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, 'Bri gung rig 'dzin chos kyi grags pa, “Drangs srong gza'i bsrin ba za yig bdud rtsi 'chi gso 'am gnam lcags rdo rje'i gter mdzod gza' yi gnyen po,” in *Collected works (gsung 'bum) of 'Bri-gung rig-dzin chos-kyi-grags-pa* (Bir, Distt. Kangra: D. Tsondu Senghe), 695–706.

academic and sectarian boundaries but remaining firmly rooted in the Treasure tradition.

But where does this practice come from? While edible letter recipes do address a wide range of needs, a significantly large number of them address the healing of illness. Some may wish, therefore, to identify these as a form of “tantric medicine” deriving from Indian tantras and *siddha* literature, Āyurveda, or even from the Atharvaveda, as indeed Nik Douglas has done. The category of tantric medicine, however, is ill-defined. It is well known that many Indian tantras, Hindu and Buddhist alike, describe methods of healing illness. For some who use the term, it simply refers to cases where a “ritual” or “magical” remedy, by which is often meant mantra, is applied to the healing of illness. Leaving aside the difficulty of determining precisely how “ritual” or “magical” remedies might differ from other sorts of remedies, this simple definition of tantric medicine is clearly unacceptable; healing remedies that use mantra are common even in early Indian Buddhist texts and, in any case, the necessary correlation between tantric Buddhism and mantra or *dhāraṇī* use has been widely discredited.<sup>34</sup> Some better developed definitions of “tantric medicine” add principles such as a particular understanding of the power of extracting the essence (*ṛsi* or *bcud*) of a medicinal substance, the requirement that the “doctor” be a tantric master, and the ability of consecrated medicinal substances to bestow not only health but also supernatural powers (*siddhi*).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it is true that many therapeutic techniques in Indian esoteric sources are both what some will call “medicinal,” in the sense of involving the prescription of organic and non-organic compounds in the form of pills, powders or decoctions, *and* what some will call “tantric,” in that they prescribe recitation of mantras, visualization exercises, participation of invoked deities, or empowerment or consecration of the medicinal substances to be consumed. Does the Tibetan practice of eating letters derive from this (ambiguously defined) area of Indian tradition?

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<sup>34</sup> For a summary of debates on this issue, see McBride 2005. Also see Davidson forthcoming.

<sup>35</sup> See Samuel forthcoming, Stablein 1976, Walter, 1980, Garrett forthcoming.

As it happens, there is *no* clear record of a South Asian practice of *eating* talismans – not in the Atharvaveda, not in the extant Indian tantras or *siddha* texts, not in Indian medical traditions. The practice of wrapping medicinal or otherwise special substances in textually-inscribed paper rolls to be eaten has not been found in these South Asian traditions. If edible letters are “tantric medicine,” in other words, they do not come to Tibet from India, at least not directly. Is this therefore an indigenous Tibetan tradition? While it certainly did develop over many hundreds of years in distinctively Tibetan ways, a look toward China suggests a surprising connection.

### **Sealing with script: a continuity of practice**

A chapter in Michel Strickmann’s *Chinese Magical Medicine* discusses “ensigillation,” a technology of exorcism and prophylaxis that was widespread across China by the ninth or tenth centuries. Centuries before that, the swallowing of talismans, or the drinking of water in which their ashes had been dissolved, appears to have been one of the primary modes of Daoist medical therapy. Strickmann argues that the practice of “sealing” is found first in the hands of early medieval occultists, then by the end of the sixth century it was codified by Daoist priests, and finally it was thoroughly incorporated into Chinese Buddhist circles as well, from which it was subsequently transmitted to Japan and to peoples on the borderlands of China alongside other tantric ritual practices.

According to Strickmann’s research, the earliest Daoist form of the practice, recorded in a Six Dynasties period (220–598 CE) text, involves a doctor’s stamping a square-shaped inked seal onto various parts of the patient’s body while reciting spells and engaging in a complex series of visualizations. After being “sealed” in this way, the patient was to swallow several talismans. The patient was advised to avoid certain foods before being sealed. A fifth-century text, the *Book of Consecration* (*Kuan-ting ching*, T. 1331) demonstrates a Buddhist adaptation of the practice: the Buddha recommends the use of a “seal” (*mudrā*) on a round piece of wood measuring seven inches by seven tenths of an inch. This seal should be held in the right hand while standing seven paces from the patient;

after performing a visualization exercise, the practitioner should approach the patient and press the seal onto his chest. Vapors of different colors enter the patient and neutralize the malevolent disease-causing forces, which then escape from the patient's navel in a cloud of smoke. The Buddha says, "By this *mudrā* all demons are crushed and annihilated," and "if you use it to seal any of the body's diseases, all will be cured."<sup>36</sup>

The sixth-century *Dhāraṇī Book of Āṭavaka, General of the Demons* (T. 1238) also recommends the carrying of seals. Strickmann summarizes,

Even if a monk has broken the rules for monks, he need only rub the seal with cow's bezoar (bezoars being concretions found in the stomachs of cows, oxen, tapirs, and certain other animals) and impress it on a bamboo-membrane. After he has swallowed a hundred thousand such sealed talismans, he will become a bodhisattva of the first or second stage (*bhūmi*) and all his transgressions will be obliterated.<sup>37</sup>

The text describes seals to be used either by pointing them in the direction of harm, or by imprinting them on paper which is then to be swallowed. Other seventh- and eighth-century texts recommend square seals made of wood that are to be either pressed upon the patient, or printed on paper that is swallowed by the patient. Strickmann also describes a seal collection attributed to Nāgārjuna, possibly written in North China in the sixth century, which gathers "talismans for treating diverse maladies and for prophylactic use against disease-demons, government officials, and other robbers" plus talismans for childbirth and restoring harmony; these include instructions for their consumption "according to a precise astrological schedule."<sup>38</sup> The practitioner should avoid meat and alcohol while engaging in the practice. Paper talismans may be printed using the seal and swallowed.

While we cannot be certain of whether Chinese Buddhist texts with such remedies had Sanskrit originals or whether they are apocryphal, the *absence* in any existing South Asian literature of

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<sup>36</sup> Strickmann 2002: 134–35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

the particular practice of eating talismans and its earlier *presence* in Chinese Daoist sources, suggests that this interpretation of the practice, at the very least, is Chinese.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of where these texts may have originated, however, similarities between the practices in Chinese and Tibetan sources should be obvious – the eating of talismans for a variety of exorcistic and prophylactic aims, the writing of those talismans on papers using vermillion and their treatment with herbal and other substances, the astrological, behavioral and contemplative recommendations – all of these, despite the differences, make it clear, I think, that we are dealing with a *continuity* of practice, and suggest to me that Tibetans were aware of this Chinese technology. The fact that such a practice does not exist in India makes it all the more evident that this is a case where Tibetans shared knowledge with their neighbors to the east rather than those to the south.



Figure 3: Unusually shaped (*stūpa* shaped?) edible letter design in a strange script, for protecting against epidemic disease (left) and poison (right) (*Gnam chos*, vol. 4, 511).

### Why are edible letters said to be effective?

Thus far I have outlined the key features of a typical edible letter prescription. But which of these components is said to account for the remedy's effectiveness? Of course, the answer to this question will vary by practitioner. We have seen, for example, that for Klong gsal snying po, the act of just eating the rolled-up paper is sufficient. Mi 'gyur rdo rje's text on mad dogs states, by contrast, that the important aspect of the remedy is the visualization. Elsewhere

<sup>39</sup> That is to say, if some of Strickmann's Buddhist sources did in fact have their origins in India, it could be that in the process of their transmission to China certain practices (if not entire texts) were adapted to suit Chinese traditions.

in his collected works, however, Mi 'gyur rdo rje comments that the important aspect of using edible letters is not the ingredients, recitation of *dhāraṇī*, nor the manner of rolling or folding the paper.<sup>40</sup> De'u dmar, who gives detailed recipes for medicines for phlegm disease elsewhere in the same text (and is therefore concerned with proper combination of medicinal ingredients in those cases), ignores completely the presence of potentially medicinal ingredients in edible letter recipes, only providing images of the letters and advising one to swallow them. Indeed, while the authors we have discussed here do offer recipes of varying detail, what is by far the most common is the inclusion of only the name of the ailment or desired aim, and an image of letters, without any real recipe at all. It seems clear overall that what is critical to the practice of edible letters is – and this may not be so surprising – the letters!

Let us look for a moment, then, at the letters. As we have seen, they are most typically, at least in the editions we have, written in the Tibetan block printing (*dbu can*) script; they are drawn in this way even when found within texts that are otherwise written in a cursive script. The letters are stacked vertically (Tibetan is not written vertically). They are not words – they have no linguistic meaning – and they are not mantras; that is to say, they are not called words or mantras in Tibetan, but simply “letters” (*yig*). While I have found not a single comment on *why* particular letters are used for particular aims, the letters are clearly important, given that we see many instances of identical letter arrangements transmitted across centuries of literature. Indeed, the letters appear to be what Tibetan scholars themselves find most interesting academically, not to mention therapeutically. Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), for example, who quotes in full edible letter recipes from various sources, has nothing to add himself to those sources' reci-

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<sup>40</sup> See *Gnam chos*, vol. 2, 537; *Gnam chos*, vol. 1, 94; *Gnam chos*, vol. 2, 328, where he writes that the choice of “ink, paper, or way of folding makes no difference” and that you should “eat it when you wish; ink and paper make no difference.” Also see *Gnam chos*, vol. 2, 537, where after a list of more than ten edible letter recipes, a concluding statement claims that there is no enumeration of mantras, nor do ingredients and manner of folding matter. The same sentiment is found in *Gnam chos*, vol. 3, 197 and 198.

pes. The only thing he *does* say by way of critically comparing or commenting on his sources is to discuss *how* the letters are written – that is, does a particular recipe have six letters or seven, is it a “ta” or a “na” that should be written on top, and so forth.<sup>41</sup> Mi ’gyur rdo rje, similarly, makes a point of emphasizing that the letters should be written very carefully, without any error.<sup>42</sup>

Although most edible letters are recorded in texts using *dbu can*, the script or cryptographic system used to write these letters is also a topic of interest for some Tibetan scholars. Making both functional and paleographic distinctions, Rat na gling pa classifies his remedies (which are not only of the edible letter sort) by letter type: mother letters, son letters, inner letters, Indian letters (*rgya yig*), ancient Zhang-zhung “Mar letters” (*smar yig*), wild letters (*rgod yig*), edible letters. Mi ’gyur rdo rje refers in passing to “illness letters” (*na yig*).<sup>43</sup> Rdo rje gling pa explicitly refers to his edible letters as “magical letters” (*phrul yig*).<sup>44</sup> The collection of edible letters by occult master Mi ’gyur rdo rje includes the use of various alternative scripts (see Figure 3, for example), with a series of cryptanalytic deciphering tables (such as in Figure 4) for those needing to read these ciphers. Edible letter recipes are in these contexts placed within a taxonomy

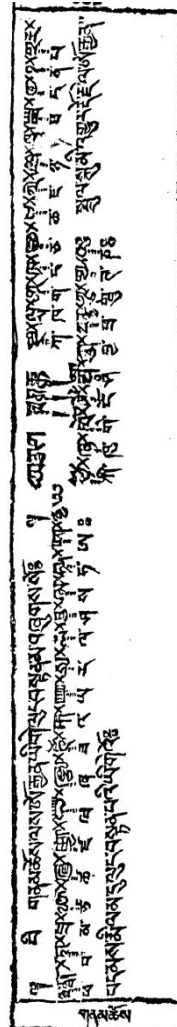


Figure 4: A substitution cipher table (*Gnam chos*, vol. 4, 520)

<sup>41</sup> For example, see Mi pham rgya mtsho, *Las sna tshogs pa'i sngags kyi be'u bum dgos 'dod kun 'byung gter gyi bum pa bzang bo* (Zi ling: Mtsho sngon Zhing chen Zhin hwa dpe khang gis bkram, 1999), 108 and 109.

<sup>42</sup> Mi ’gyur rdo rje, *Gnam chos* vol. 3, 479.

<sup>43</sup> This could be a scribal error; *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 436.

<sup>44</sup> *Phrul yig* is the term for writing that changes form magically when a Treasure Revealer reads it, as sometimes happens in the discovery of Treasure texts. Rdo rje gling pa, “Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod ces bya ba bzhuks so,” vol. 67, 637.

of *letters*, rather than one of conditions to be treated, aims to be achieved, or Buddhas to be visualized. It may be, therefore, that a fruitful context in which to understand the consumption of letters is that of a much broader embodied alchemy of the alphabet.

Of course, Buddhism in general has a long history of interest in syllabaries of various types, with elaborate traditions of use and interpretation of *dhāraṇī*, mantra, *bīja*, and so forth, which have been implicated in various sorts of “letter magic” (despite the many and varied critiques of the controversial term “magic”).<sup>45</sup> What we have in edible letters is something rather unusual, however, in that it is a *gastrosemantically* significant interaction with the power of letters, where internal reception of the written forms of letters themselves is what is efficacious – an alchemical cryptography, we might say, or a cryptological alchemy. In this case, we can see this practice in another sort of context. The therapeutic or otherwise extraordinary power of written letters in the body is important not only in technologies of the Mahāyoga sort, such as those that we have seen above, but it pervades much of Buddhist practice, all the way to the most esoteric and complex. Letters are linked to embodiment in prominent ways in a range of Buddhist tantric traditions. In various Tibetan religious, astrological and medical conceptions, key locations of the body are marked by syllables.<sup>46</sup> *Kālacakra* systems of astrology and contemplative practice are particularly rich in phonemic analytical schemes; commenting on the *Kālacakra tantra*, the *Vimalaprabhā* links the consonants and vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet with the joints of the body, for instance.<sup>47</sup> Tibetan Great Perfection writings explain that tiny letters pervade the body from the moment of conception: in the first week of gestation letters appear immediately inside the newly developed circulatory channels; these enduring letters are said to produce Buddha Bodies during contemplative visualization practices later in life.<sup>48</sup> David Germano

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<sup>45</sup> For example, see Gyatso 1992. For a recent critique of the use of the term “magic” in the context of mantras, see Burchett 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Gerke 2008: 155, 355–61.

<sup>47</sup> *The Kālacakratantra* 2004: 101.

<sup>48</sup> Garrett 2008.



has written about the contemplative use of letters in the Eastern Tibetan Peyü (*dpal yul*) sub-tradition in particular,<sup>49</sup> as well as a Great Perfection contemplative practice that is actually called “sealing” (*rgyas gdab pa*): in this practice the meditator imagines the form of a blue *hūṃ* syllable at the heart, which then comes out from the nose and pervades her surroundings such that everything in the external environment is sealed by, and in fact therefore becomes, the syllable *hūṃ*. This meditation is followed by an “internal sealing” by those letters, which reenter her through the pores of her skin and fill her entire body.<sup>50</sup>

Complicated and extensive, contemplative traditions such as these cannot be adequately addressed in this article. My intention here is simply to recommend that the internal reception of letters, in the case of edible letter remedies, not be seen in isolation from the internal presence or embodied activity of the alphabet, as taught in a wide range of Buddhist traditions in Tibet. For the users of edible letters, there may be a broad understanding that the special letters you eat may, quite *unexceptionally*, act efficaciously inside your body, as indeed letters are wont to do. By eating these letters, everyone, from the isolated Great Perfection yogin to the dogs and horses of the village lane, can partake of the alphabet’s power.

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<sup>49</sup> Germano 1997: 322.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 322–23. The multivalent uses of the model of the seal is worth pursuing. Strickmann discusses the use of seals for more than a thousand years in China, typically in the form of official “signature” seals, and the possible links of this to the therapeutic practice of ensigillation, both of which are aimed at controlling the spirit world (Strickmann 2002: 192). One feature therapeutic seals share with signature seals is the use of an “archaizing ‘seal script’ to whose secrets only officers and gentlemen, priests and administrators, scholars and commanders were privy” (Strickmann 2002: 156). In Tibet too, official seals are used; the seal alphabet was derived from the ‘Phags pa script created in the Yuan period (1280–1368 CE), itself based on the Tibetan alphabet but developed to more accurately represent Sanskrit, Mongolian and Chinese sounds. Note that it, like other seal scripts, is written not horizontally but vertically (like edible letters, that is); the first seal script noted in Tibetan histories, attributed to Sa skya paṅḍi ta Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan (1182–1252), was known as *Hor yig*, “Mongolian letters,” and was also written vertically. See Clauson 1959: 305.

## Conclusions

We have seen that despite the “Indian-ness” of presentation in edible letter texts, no South Asian precedent exists, and connections to similar Chinese practices are instead more likely. Some in Buddhist Studies have suggested a Chinese derivation to the Treasure tradition as a whole, and many have written specifically about connections between the Tibetan Great Perfection and Chinese Ch’an traditions.<sup>51</sup> While it is not conclusive, I might add the fact that all of the edible letter authors I have mentioned in this article are either from Eastern Tibet or spent large parts of their lives there (Eastern Tibet being, of course, the region of Tibet closest to China). Mi ’gyur rdo rje, the author whose collected works is most thoroughly pervaded by edible letters, is one of the most important scholars of the Nyingma Peyü tradition of Eastern Tibet. Indeed, eating letters may continue to the present day as such a regionally focused tradition, as I have recently been told about the use of edible letters by Eastern Tibetans.<sup>52</sup> Finding aspects of Tibetan Buddhism that are especially *Eastern* Tibetan is important, given the dominance of research on Central Tibet, and the inaccurate but common perception that Central Tibet is representative of Tibet as a whole. Finding connections to Chinese religious practice is also interesting to those who do Buddhist Studies with a focus on Tibet, given the near erasure of explicit Chinese voices in Tibetan literature. Despite apparent continuities with Chinese practices, however, as Revealed Treasures, edible letters are made entirely *Tibetan*, deriving extra authority from astral connections to *Indian* Buddhist masters such as Padmasambhava.

Entanglement with Chinese histories and practices is not the only pattern of exchange that I find interesting in the literary corpus on edible letters, however. Firmly rooted in the Treasure tradition,

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<sup>51</sup> Gyatso 1992: 153, Ueyama 1983: 327–50, Tucci 1958.

<sup>52</sup> Mona Schrempf has met tantrikas in Rebkong, Amdo, who use edible letters (personal communication, 2008). Dan Martin has described the Khampa Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche passing them out at a ritual in Boudha (personal communication, 2008). Recall too that the nun Ani Panchen, whose biography mentioned edible letters (cited above), grew up in Kham.

it is labeled a Mahāyoga teaching, though it plays a role in medical traditions too and is certainly quite centrally focused on the healing of illness. It is apparent here that distinguishing between what are often called “religious” and “medical” modes of healing is not so easy. The rubric of “tantric medicine,” moreover, is inadequate in its neglect of the contexts in which these remedies actually appear, not to mention its lack of clarity about what the components of the term mean. What we have in this practice is a remarkably cross-disciplinary practice that unites contemplative, devotional, occult, medical, astrological, cryptographic and dietetic realms of knowledge and practice. The patterns of exchange between these realms recommend new ways of reading across disciplines, and new ways of understanding how practices and discourses may wind their ways through and across geographic, sectarian, professional or doctrinal boundaries.

### **Tibetan sources, arranged chronologically**

Authorship uncertain

*Rims srung gi man ngag zab dgu phyogs gcig tu bsdus ba bzhugs so*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, A reproduction of the Stod-luñ Mtshur-phu redaction of 'Jam-mgon Koñ-sprul's great work on the unity of the gter-ma traditions of Tibet, 111 vols. (Paro, Bhutan: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976), Vol. 71, pp. 495–518. This collection will elsewhere be referred to as *Rin chen gter mdzod*.

*Gter kha sna tshogs las byung ba gtso bor gyur pa'i srung ba'i man ngag phan bde'i go cha zhes bya ba bzhugs so*, in *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Vol. 70.

*Slob dpon padma'i phyogs bcu'i za yig shin tu zab pa'i yig chung bzhugs so*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Vol. 67, pp. 647–651.

Rdo rje gling pa (1346–1405)

*Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod ces bya ba bzhugs so*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Vol. 67, pp. 625–640.

*Za yig nor bu'i bang mdzod kyi zhal shes bzhugs so*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Vol. 67, pp. 641–645.

Rat na gling pa (1403–1473)

*Gza' srung ma bu dgu 'khams kyi 'khor lo lag len ma bu za yig za sman bdug sman lus yig btags thabs lo rgyus dang bcas pa bzhugs so*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Vol. 71, pp. 525–535.

*Phan byed za yig skor*, In *Ratna gling pa'i gter chos*, *Collected rediscovered teachings of Ratna-glin-pa*, 19 vols. (Darjeeling: Taklung Tsetrul Pema Wangyal, 1977–1979), Vol. 5, pp. 639–647. This collection will elsewhere be referred to as *Ratna gling pa'i gter chos*.

*Za yig them med*, In *Ratna gling pa'i gter chos*, Vol. 9, pp. 539–542.

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