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Non-Western Art: The Art and Problems of Tibet

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**The Simulacrum of Srin-Mo:  
A Shared Tibetan Experience by Way of the Supine Demoness**

**Introduction:**

The Oxford dictionary defines simulacrum as “an image or representation of someone or something. An unsatisfactory imitation or substitute.”<sup>1</sup> To sum up theorist Jean Baudrillard’s definition of simulacrum; it is a copy of something that itself is not an original. In other words, it is a copy of a copy.<sup>2</sup>

The image of the Tibetan Srin-Mo (srin ma) map, aka the Supine Demoness, emerged in the 90s to a worldwide audience, intriguing academics with many questions. (Figs. 1, 2 & 3) Who is she? Is this map an accurate depiction of the landscape? What is the history behind this image? Where is the original? This paper argues that an original Srin-Mo map does not exist and that the images that we see today of this Supine Demoness are a simulacrum of an idea, dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that the idea of this Tibetan demoness has no definitive beginning and has since become a copy of a copy of an idea. While her roots lie in 7<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>1</sup> Lexico Dictionaries | English. “Simulacrum | Definition of Simulacrum by Lexico.” Accessed November 4, 2019. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/simulacrum>.

<sup>2</sup> “Simulacrum - Oxford Reference.” Accessed November 4, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100507502>.

oral histories, the image of the Supine Demoness continues to live and evolve in today's contemporary society as it has done for hundreds of years.

### **The "His" Story:**

It is widely accepted that Songsten Gampo (Srong-btsan sGam-po) was the first king of a united Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. The story of Gampo derives from the ancient Mani Kambum (Ma-ni bka'-'bum) (Mani Kabum) (ma ni bka' 'bum). Authorship of the Mani Kambum is typically attributed to Songsten Gampo himself, however it wasn't until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that three men "found" the text during the Tibetan Renaissance, revealing them slowly over a century's time. It is important to note that it would not have been in these men's favor to take credit for writing these texts. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, if a text was not directly linked to Buddhism of India or the Buddhist Imperium of Tibet (i.e., the days of Songsten Gampo), it was not given credence.<sup>3</sup> We must consider then the possibility that these men wrote the Mani Kambum themselves using known 12<sup>th</sup> century references to the story and oral histories passed on through Tibetan culture.

### **Why 13 Temples:**

According to the legends in the Mani Kambum, the Tibetan king Gampo fell in love with Chinese Princess Wencheng (Princess Kong-jo) in 640 AD. On her journey to Lhasa (lHa-sa) to marry the king, Wencheng's chariot wheel got stuck in the sand. In this troubled chariot held her dowry,

<sup>3</sup> "Mani Kambum." Accessed November 3, 2019.

<https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Ma%E1%B9%87i%20Kambum.html>.

which included her father's Chinese divination chart and the famous statue of the Sakyamuni Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama). According to an interpretation by author Michael Aris, Wencheng pulls out her father's divination chart and determines that:

“Tibet is like a demoness (srin-mo) fallen on her back. The Plain of Milk in lHa-sa is the palace of the king of the klu spirits and the lake in the Plain of Milk is the heart-blood of the demoness. Of the three peaks rising from the plain two of them are her breasts and the third is the vein of her life-force...She perceives that if a temple is built on the Plain of Milk the natural good qualities of Tibet would come forth and flourish.”<sup>4</sup>

In order to subdue this demoness, Princess Wencheng used her father's Chinese divination chart to determine that a total of thirteen temples must be built to restrain her. She concludes that this will allow the Buddhist religion to flourish. Twelve temples were built in three stages. (Figs. 4 & 5) The first four of those temples are built in central Tibet and come to be known as the “four horns” (Ru-gnon chen-po bzhi). The next four temples (mTha'-'dul) are built in the second stage in the outer areas and the last four temples (Yang-'dul) were built on the outlying areas of the country. The thirteenth temple, the Jokhang (Jo-kang) temple, was built last in the heart of the demoness, finalizing her crucifixion.<sup>5</sup>

Researching the thirteen temples and their locations became fairly cumbersome, with sources in different languages listing these temples under different names, spellings and

<sup>4</sup> Michael Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, Wiltshire, England, Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1979, 13.

<sup>5</sup> John Powers, *A Concise Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Ithaca, N.Y., Snow Lion Publications, 2008, 233.

locations. It became evident early on that for the scope of this class I would not be able to lock down all thirteen locations for precise mapping. To simplify my research, I began with the names and maps provided in Michael Aris's 1979 book *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*. I used this source as my foundation and then supplemented with online sources to help with contemporary spellings and map placements.<sup>6</sup> I first attempted to find Rlung-gnon (Kyerchu) and Khra-'brug (Trandruk) using the ARCGIS software. While I located what I believed to be the two temples, I found myself in a tizzy attempting to configure this demoness on a contemporary landscape of Tibet. I then took Aris' map and rubric and drew the demoness for myself to see how the image measured up so-to-speak. (Fig. 6) The findings left me with a demoness in more agony than anticipated. My image, didn't match that of other Srin-mo maps at all. With my version's arms and legs broken and twisted, I decided to focus on a location whose position had remained consistent—the demoness' heart.

### **Heart-Blood**

Some questions seem to naturally come to mind when reviewing the Srin-mo map. Were these temples really built during the life of Princess Wencheng? Was this arrangement actually her vision? Why was Lhasa seen as her heart?

We may never know if this depiction is truly what was imagined by Princess Wencheng or if it is a later creation as a representation of Tibetan pride or possibly a tool of propaganda.

<sup>6</sup> High Peaks Pure Earth. "The Senmo Map, or the Resurrection of the Demoness' By Woese," October 27, 2016. <https://highpeakspureearth.com/2016/the-senmo-map-or-the-resurrection-of-the-demoness-by-woeser/>.

We can however get an understanding of why Lhasa may have be viewed as the demoness's "Plain of Milk" when analyzing a contemporary map of Tibet. While Tibet overall is known for its harsh landscape, Lhasa sits at a point of convergence for rivers, providing a life source for its people, much like a mother's milk. With water, comes people, with people comes community and an energy source; much like that of a body.

### **The "Original":**

The writings in the Mani Kambum, whether they are 7<sup>th</sup> century or 13<sup>th</sup> century, don't mention a physical version of the map. I found myself asking where is the original map, when was it created and by whom? I don't believe that there are answers to these questions. According to the Tourism Development Committee of Tibet Autonomous Region, the Srin-mo map was "discovered" in 1991 in Norma Lingaa, a district in West Lhasa Tibet as part of a sacred thangka painting that was "hundreds of years old." <sup>7</sup> You can however find Srin-mo maps in many Tibetan Buddhist temples all across the region. I ask then, if we have no original map, and we have no original text from Gampo dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, are any of these stories, traditions or images real? What is real? Are the stories and images any less real than our own past experiences and memories?

<sup>7</sup> *Discovering Tibet: Mysterious Map*. Accessed November 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-bHCQMCBBU>.

## **Srin-Mo Lives On**

As Princess Wencheng's story has undoubtedly developed since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, so too does the body and the image of the Supine Demoness. The contemporaneity of her image and its ability to evolve is not so much the accurate reflection of her landscape as it is a symbol of Tibetan history and identity. While Srin-Mo's thirteen temples crucify her to the Tibetan landscape, the intention never seemed to be to end her life. Her permanent residency is a constant reminder to Tibetans of the looming threat to Buddhism. This idea continues to live on and evolve for modern academics and artists to analyze, interpret and further carry on the simulacrum of Srin-mo's existence. (Fig. 7)

**Figures:**



1.

Image taken from "Collection Highlight: The Demoness of Tibet | Rubin Museum of Art." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://rubinmuseum.org/blog/demoness-of-tibet-legend-painting-architecture>.



2.

Image taken from *Discovering Tibet: Mysterious Map*. Accessed November 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-bHCQMCBBU>.

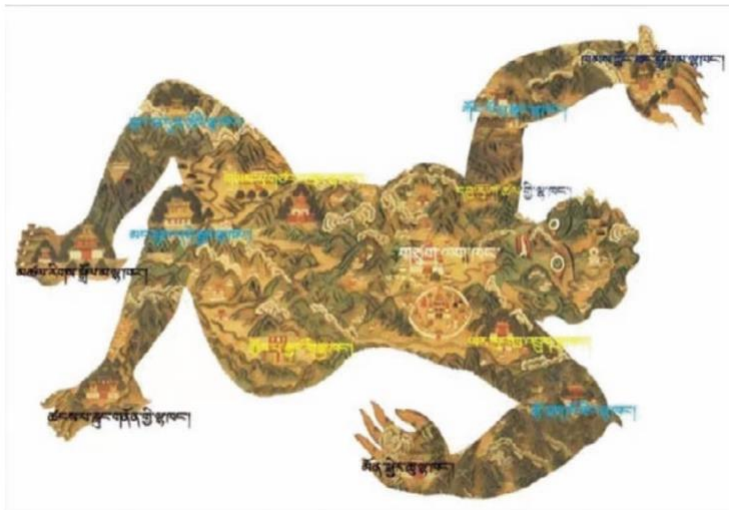
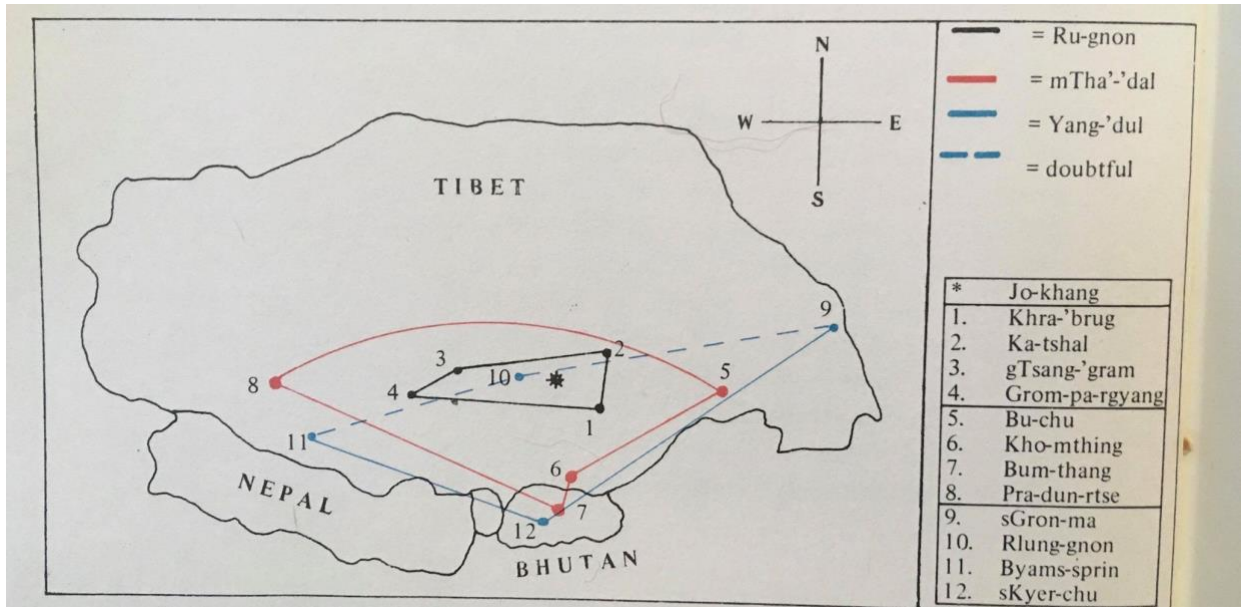


Figure 3: The srin mo Demoness Map, from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qvWkr77n7Q8y3RcgAI60>

3.

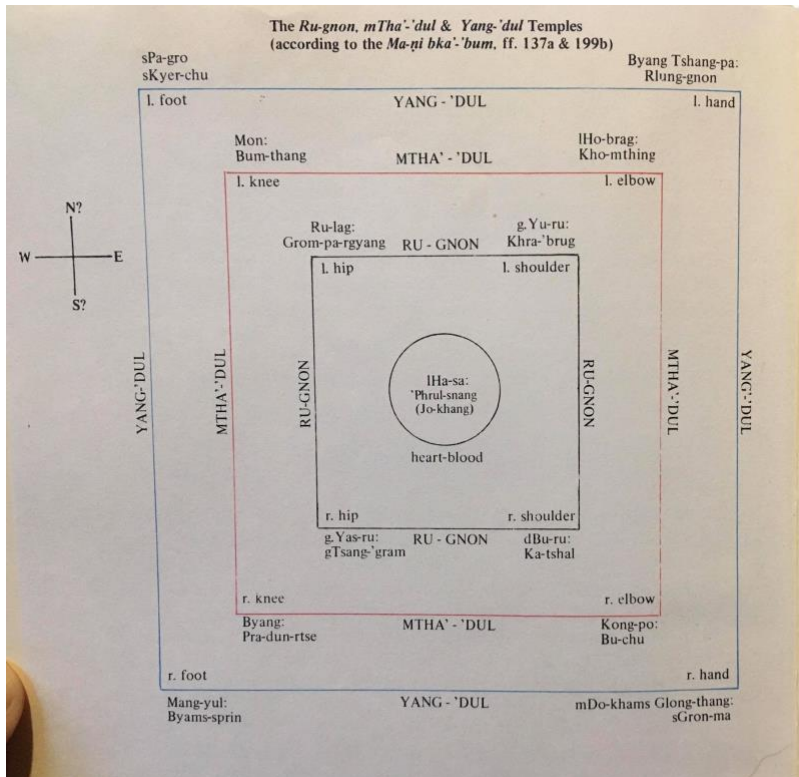
Image from Liu, Zhengli. "The Sacred Landscape of the Yading Nature Reserve." *Journal of World Heritage Studies* Special Issue 2018 (n.d.). <http://doi.org/10.15068/00153228>.





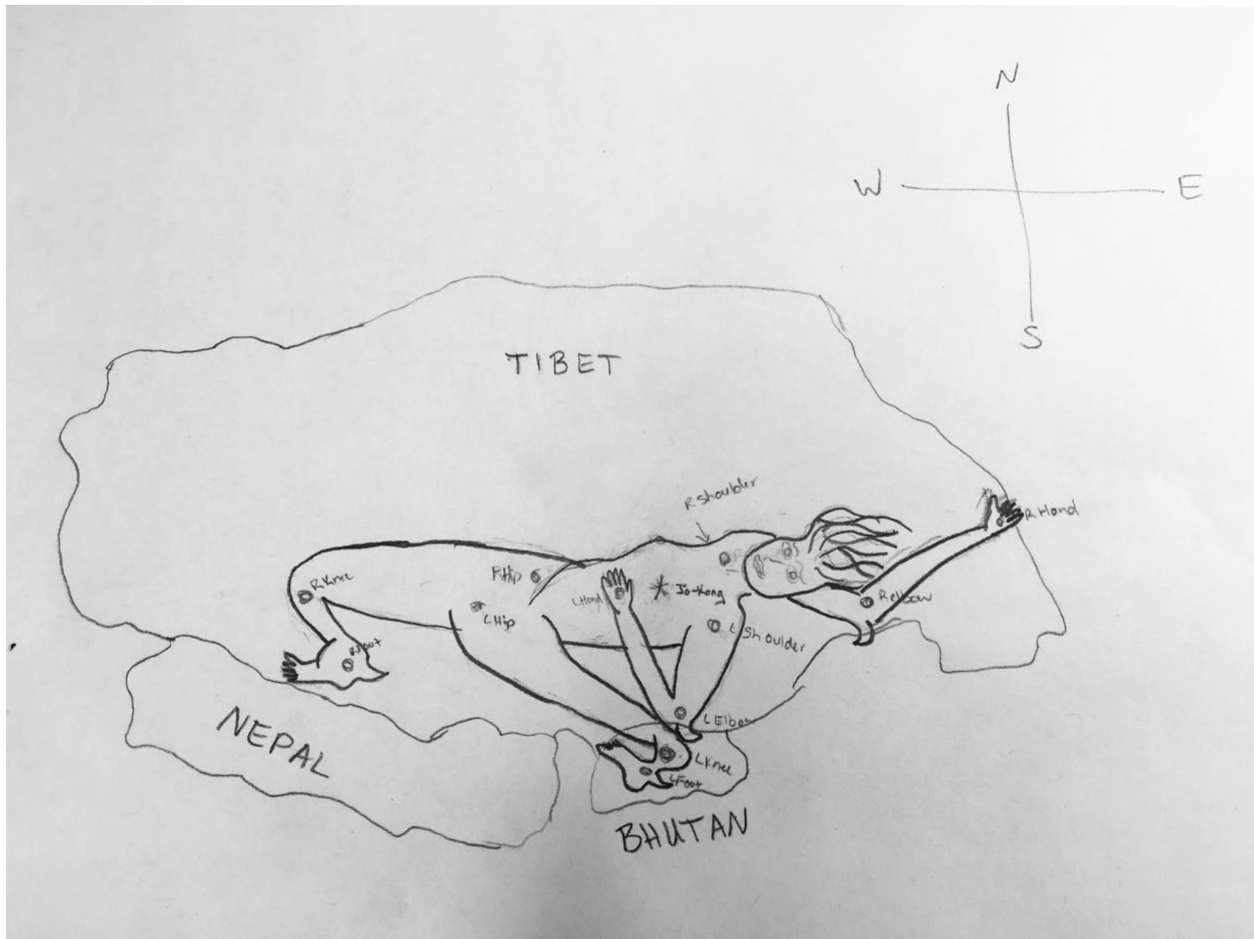
4.

Entire plan of the 13 Tibetan temples from Michael Aris' book *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, pg 16.



5.

The Ru-gnon, mTha-'dul & Yang-'dul Temples (according to the Ma-ni bka'-'bum) from Michael Aris' book *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, pg 16.



6.

Author's rendition of Srin-mo based off of the plan of the 13 Tibetan temples from Michael Aris' book *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, pg 16.



7.

Senmo tryptich by Penba Wangdu from Shigatse, Professor at the art institute of Tibet University, from the 2010 exhibition at the Songzhuan Art Centre in Beijing.

Image from High Peaks Pure Earth. "The Senmo Map, or the Resurrection of the Demoness' By Woesser," October 27, 2016. <https://highpeakspureearth.com/2016/the-senmo-map-or-the-resurrection-of-the-demoness-by-woesser/>.

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