

The Iron-Bridge Man

Tangtong Gyalpo was the greatest engineer in Tibetan history, one of its most prolific architects, and an innovative artist. His many iron bridges, monasteries, and stupas have enriched Tibetan culture for over five hundred years. The extent to which he changed his country's spiritual topography through concrete activities based on mystical theory remains unparalleled in Tibetan history. *By Cyrus Stearns*

Tangtong Gyalpo built his first iron suspension bridge over the Kyichu River near Lhasa in Central Tibet in 1430. From that time he was famed throughout Tibet and the Himalayan regions as the "Iron-Bridge Man." In addition to iron bridges, he built many stupa monuments to tame hostile influences, prevent natural disasters, protect against disease, and avert invasion by Mongol armies. These stupas were constructed in Tibet and the borderlands according to geomantic principles, and were situated at strategic locations to serve as environmental focal-points. A number of Tangtong's monasteries and temples were placed according to the same theory.

Tangtong Gyalpo once had a vision of a large crowd of people crossing an expanse of water on iron bridges and ferries. He understood this to symbolize that he would be able to save all living beings from the four rivers of birth, old age, sickness, and death. Moreover, he would liberate them from the sufferings of the ocean of samsara by means of the ferries and bridges of skillful means and wisdom. He further emphasized this by referring to his bridges as "iron-bridge pathways to enlightenment." By the end of his life, Tangtong had constructed fifty-eight iron bridges, sixty wooden bridges, and 118 ferries.



Image of Tangtong Gyalpo holding a medicinal pill and longevity vase. Fifteenth-century image in the Potala collection.

Photo courtesy of Ulrich von Schroeder.

The first expedition Tangtong Gyalpo made in search of iron was motivated by an event at a ferry landing on the Kyichu River near Lhasa. He wanted to cross the river, but because of his ragged appearance the ferryman struck him on the head with an oar and threw him into the water. This impressed on Tangtong the plight of poor and disadvantaged people, and he vowed to build a bridge there so that everyone could easily cross the river. During the 1420s he traveled through the aboriginal areas in the extreme southeast of Tibet. He gathered a quantity of iron, returned to Central Tibet, and built the bridge

over the Kyichu River in 1430.

In 1433-34 Tangtong Gyalpo traveled south into Bhutan to gather iron for building bridges in western Tibet. During his stay in Bhutan, he built eight iron bridges, some of which still exist. He then traveled into western Tsang and as far as Kashmir, building more bridges. Returning toward Central Tibet, he arrived at his monastery of Riwoché in western Tibet and completed the construction of an iron bridge there in 1436.

The iron suspension bridge completed in 1444 at Chuwori in Central Tibet was Tangtong Gyalpo's most famous bridge, and the monastery on the southern banks of

the river came to be known as the “Iron-Bridge Monastery.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, the bridge was made of two double-chain cables composed of one-inch thick iron links that were each one foot long. It was about 150 yards in length, with the abutments on both banks built in the shape of stupas. The chains were fastened into the abutments and the rocks below them. Yak-hair ropes were suspended from the chains at about one-yard intervals, and boards lashed end to end in their loops. This bridge was finally destroyed in the 1960s during the Chinese “Cultural Revolution,” and all that remains is a pile of chains on an island that was previously its northern abutment.

In about 1445 Tangtong Gyalpo was approached by three young women who offered him a relic of the Buddha blazing with light and other precious substances. These dakinis asked him to make statues of the buddhas and bodhisattvas from the precious materials and place relics inside the images as their hearts. And they promised to help

construct such unprecedented images. Tangtong summoned about fifty sculptors the next day, but they said they were unable to make images from turquoise, coral, amber, conch shell, and similar substances. He slept in the courtyard of the Jokhang Temple that evening and received inspiration from



Photo by Maria Antonia Sironi. Courtesy of Hildegard Diemberger.

Above: The iron bridge over the Tsangpo River at Puntsok Ling. Below: Tangtong Gyalpo's great stupa at Chung Riwoché before recent repairs.

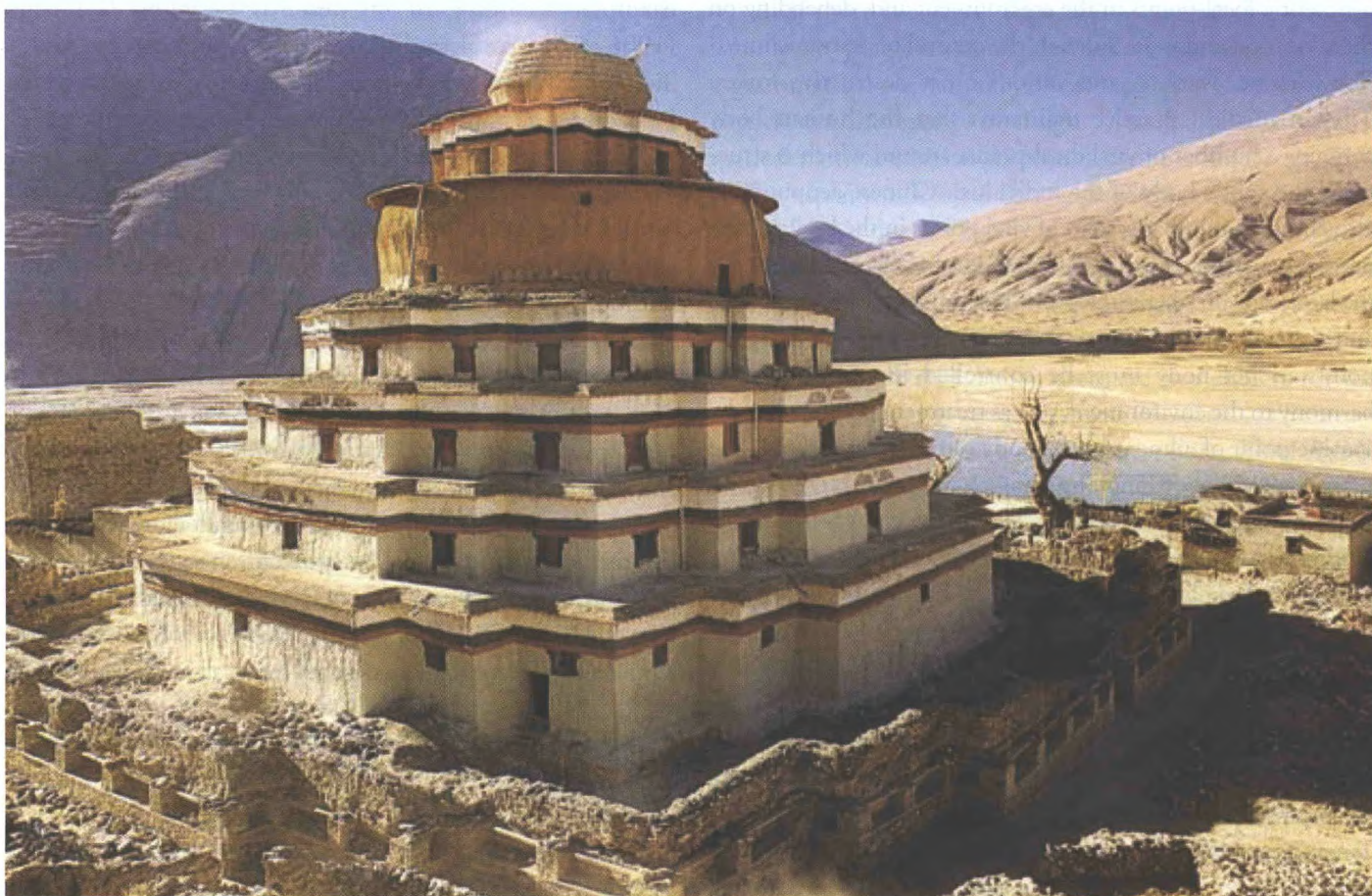


Photo: After Vitali (1980), plate 76.

Ancient legends say the landscape of Tibet is the prone body of a gigantic demoness, and the points on the earth corresponding to the vital focal-points in her body must be controlled in order to bring harmony to the environment, just as treatment is applied to the specific point of ailment in the body of a human patient.

a dakini who taught him how to make the unprecedented images. The next day he scolded the sculptors by reminding them that they knew how to make jewelry from the same materials. He told them to make the framework for an image of the buddha Vajradhara from unadulterated silver. Then he cut the turquoise himself and showed them how to correctly place and attach it to form the statue. They made many unusual images from coral, lapis lazuli, conch shell, amber, and turquoise. By the end of his life, Tangtong is said to have made many hundreds of large and small images from precious materials, five thousand large and small clay images, innumerable paintings, and to have built 120 assembly halls and temples.

Tangtong Gyalpo built a large number of stupas – symbolic representations of enlightened mind – in strategic locations throughout the Tibetan cultural regions. These stupas served as geomantic focal-points in the environment and, depending on their location and type, aided in the control of demonic intrusion, disease, warfare, and various other destructive forces. Tibetan medical practice maintains that the human body contains a number of vital focal-points around which is structured the subtle body of the individual. Chinese acupuncture also employs a similar system of vital points in the body, where needles are inserted for specific remedies. Ancient legends say the landscape of Tibet is the prone body of a gigantic demoness, and the points on the earth corresponding to the vital focal-points in her body must be controlled in order to bring harmony to the environment, just as treatment is applied to the specific point of ailment in the body of a human patient. The most magnificent of Tangtong Gyalpo's projects was the massive stupa at Riwoché in western Tsang, which was his main residence. Another large stupa was at Chuwori in Central Tibet. During his long life he built a total of 111 stupas.

Tangtong Gyalpo received many prophecies from his teachers and the deities that he should build stupas in Tibet. When he traveled to the island of Tamradvipa (Ceylon?), he visited an ancient stupa and had visionary meetings with legendary adepts who told him to construct a great stupa on a scorpion-shaped mountain in Tibet. After returning to Tibet, Tangtong saw just such a mountain on the northern shore of the Tsangpo River in western Tsang. He named it Pal Riwoché

(Glorious Great Mountain). From 1449 to 1456 a gigantic stupa was built at the base of the scorpion-shaped mountain to crush the forehead of the scorpion. The location of Tangtong's meditation hut was specifically selected to suppress this mountain and river that were believed to embody the spiritual energy of armies that were hostile to Tibet. The stupa and complex of temples below and on the mountain were built as a geomantic focal-point to counter any harm from the Mongols. Riwoché suffered severe damage in the 1960s during the Chinese "Cultural Revolution." However, the main structure of the stupa has survived intact. The iron suspension bridge was not singled out for destruction, and still spans the Tsangpo River.

Only some of Tangtong Gyalpo's most famous iron bridges, monasteries, and stupas have been briefly mentioned here. Others are attributed to him in the oral tradition. For example, according to my teacher, Dezhung Rinpoché (1906–87), a local tradition in east Tibet says that when Tangtong was ready to leave a place called Yilhung Shi, where he had been staying for some time, the people prayed for him to remain, and so he made a clay statue of himself that was a perfect likeness. In fact, it was so similar that the people could not tell them apart, because the statue was miraculously able to teach Dharma and travel about like a person. Everyone said there were two Tangtong Gyalpos. When Tangtong left the area, the figure he had made was used as the model for a huge one-story-high image. The smaller clay figure was then placed inside the large image to embody its primordial awareness. In the 1920s a band of thirty to forty bandits terrorized the town and burned down many homes and the temple. The large statue was destroyed, but the smaller original in its interior was unharmed. The spiritual energy of the image therefore remained intact. One of Dezhung Rinpoché's teachers, Gangkar Rinpoché Chökyi Sengé (1891–1957), rebuilt the temple and the large statue and placed the small image within it. ☸

Read more about Tangtong Gyalpo's extraordinary life as a civic engineer, as well as his contributions to Tibet's meditative traditions and his development of long-life techniques still practiced today in Tibet, in King of the Empty Plain, published by Snow Lion Publications. Cyrus Stearns has elucidated one of the most fascinating stories in Tibet's history with his compelling introduction and superb translation. www.snowlionpub.com