A whirling *swastika* of rivers and a mountain on the move –
The transferred geography of Mt Meru-Kailash

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1. Introduction

Tibetan history is often viewed in relation to Tibet’s eastern and southern neighbours, China and India.

Little is known about the influences from Tibet’s western and northern neighbours.

While some efforts have been made to identify traces of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in Buddhism, a more prominent influence from the Iranian world (albeit via India) on the conceptualisation of political and sacral geography seems to have been overlooked.
2. The ‘four’ rivers of Mt Kailash

The Tibetan Kailash counts as source of four great rivers, flowing into the four directions,

East: Brahmaputra,

South: Gaṅgā (or rather the Karṇālī or Alakanandā),

West: Satlej,

North: Indus.
The Tibetan standard model
This template does not really fit the geography near the Kailash: Only three rivers take their source in its vicinity, and even if the Karṇālī is included, the rivers practically combine two-by-two and flow only in two directions: South-East and South-West.
Vitali (2015) and McKay (2015) thus conclude that this template has nothing to do with the real world, but is merely a projection of an idealised transcendent sphere.

I should like to show that it does have a real origin, down on earth, in the West, and that it is possible to explain how, and perhaps also why, it got transformed.
3. The world axis: Mt Meru

The geographic *maṇḍala* of Mt Kailash mirrors the Indian concept of Mt Meru (also भेरु, Sumeru सुभेरु, or Mahāmeru महाभेरु).

In the early Indian cosmological worldview, transmitted both in the Buddhist *Abhidharma* literature and in the Hindu *Purāṇas*, Meru is a gigantic mountain at the junction of four continents (or later of some kind of larger regions).
Meru functions as the watershed of four great rivers, that origin from a central lake (Anavatapta) and flow into the four cardinal directions, reaching the four ‘oceans’ of the cardinal directions.

This certainly looks like an idealised mythical conceptualisation of a world axis, but
this central and majestic mountain is located vaguely in the northwest of India.

Meru can thus be identified with the Great Pamir Knot, the original *Bam-i-Dunya* or ‘Roof of the World’, or with a prominent mountain therein, such as:

the Nanga Parbat (*Diamir*, i.e., the ‘mountain of gods’ or ‘the mountain who is a god’),

the Rakaposi, or

the Tirich Mir.
The Great Pamir Knot forms a gigantic X.

It hosts the sources of four great rivers between its branches, and these rivers flow approximatively in the four directions, each reaching a different ‘ocean’, or at least a larger salt water body:
– the Sītā/ Tarim to the East, reaching the Lob Nor – or even via an underground passage turning into the Yellow River and reaching the Yellow Sea in the East

– the Gilgit-Sindhu* to the South, reaching the Arabian Sea,

– the Vakṣu/ Oxus roughly to the West, reaching the Aral Sea in the North, but also the Caspian Sea in the West via the Uzboy channel,

– the Bhadrā/ Bhadrasomā/ Iaxartes to the North-West, reaching the Aral Sea further North.

*The West Tibetan upper part of the Indus was either unknown to the anciant geographers or it was taken to be too insignificant. It was the Gilgit river that counted as source river.
Reconstructed template, unfortunately not attested as such
In early Buddhist sources, beginning with the ca. 3rd CE *Abhidharmakośa*, the Gaṅgā appears in the East, pushing the Sītā to the north.

This testifies to a shift in political interests southward towards India, but it is also quite evident, that the Gaṅgā flows *east* only in relation to the Pamir region, not in relation to the (modern) Kailash and lake Mansarovar.

– **East**: Gaṅgā, elephant
– **South**: Sindhu, bull
– **West**: Vakṣu, horse
– **North**: Sītā, lion
Somewhat later than the Abhidharma literature, a different early Paurāṇic model testifies to an eastward shift of the ideal centre and to a further adaptation towards the political interest of regional forces in India.

While the same animals are associated with the four directions, the Gaṅgā replaces the Sindhu in the South:

- East: Sītā, elephant
- South: Gaṅgā, bull
- West: Vakṣu, horse
- North: Bhadrasomā, lion
Paurānic template

- North: Bhadrā (laxartes) - Lion
- East: Sītā (Tarim) - Elephant
- West: Pakṣu (Oxus) - Horse
- South: Gaṅgā - Bull
The Abhidharma template with the Sītā in the north and the Gaṅgā in the East is still attested in the 7th century description by Xuanzang.

- East: *King-kia* (*Jingjia*; Gaṅgā), bull (!), silver side
- South: *Sin-to* (*Sinduo*; Sindhu), elephant (!), golden side
- West: *Po-tsu* (*Bozu*; Vakṣu), horse, lapis-lazuli side
- North: *Si-to* (*Siduo*; Sītā), lion, crystal side
4. The Tibetan traditions

Pt 958, the Tunhuang version of the *Lokaprajñapti* (a cosmological Abhidharma text; see Macdonald 1962, Dietz 1988) gives a strangely inverted template of the four rivers, which is further associated with the template of the *Kings of the Four Quarters* (for which see in detail R.A. Stein 1959).

The four kings or kingdoms and their ‘jewels’ or symbols of prosperity are (according to a majority of the respective texts):
East: China/ Miñag, king of divinatory sciences/ men
South: India/ Kaśmīr, king of religion/ elephants
West: Iran/ Žaṅžuṅ > Greeks > Arabs, king of precious stones/ riches
North: (Khrom/Phrom) Gesar/ Yuechi/ Giṅ.šam>Turks, king of the armies/ horses

(In individual versions of this template, one will find a confusion of the western and eastern directions, so that Miñag may be located in the West or Žaṅžuṅ may be found in the East. – This is also something that we will encounter in the river templates.)
This template of kingdoms seems to be alluded to also in the badly damaged *Inscription at the tomb of Khri-lde Sroṅ.brtsan*, 815–817 (a23f., a29f., a39).

Richardson’s readings are not in all cases verifiable. Uncertain readings are thus in square brackets.


‘For the mighty king/ kingdom [of] the East, there appears to be China. ... For the mighty king/ kingdom of the South, there appears to be India. ... In the North, there appear to be the Turks.’
The four-river template of Pt 958 runs as follows:

*mtsho de.la chu-ni phyogs bžir [AM: bžiḥi] re.re ḥbab.ste*

From this lake [Anavatapta, *mtsho ma.dros.pa*] rivers descend in the four directions.

*šar.gyi chu.bo glaṅ.gi kha.nas ḥbyu[?]. žin hbab.bo ||
chuḥi [ts... rest del.] myiṅ-ni bhag[AM: bhaṅ].kša žes bgyi.ste ||
šar.phyogs phyogs.kyi yul.ḥdzin.dan [for -daṅ] myi rin.po.che.la mṅaḥ.dbāṅ.baḥi rgyal.po rgya.rje.la lta.ḥo ||

The river of the East comes down out of the mouth of an ox. As for the name of this river, it is *Bhag.kša [=Pakṣu]*, and it is directed (lit. looks) towards the king who seizes the eastern countries and possesses the ‘jewel’ of men, the ruler of China.
The river of the South comes down out of the mouth of an elephant. As for the name of the river, it is *Si.ta* [=Sindhu? or Kaśmīr Sītā?], and it is directed towards the king who possesses the southern country of Magadha and the ‘jewel’ of sciences and elephants, the king of India.
The river of the West comes down out of the mouth of a lion. As for the name of this river, it is Ḫgah.ḥgah (=Gaṅgā). It is directed towards the king of the western country of lions and the many traders, Ḫphrom Gesar.
The river of the North comes down out of the mouth of a horse, and as for the name of this river, it is called Si.to (=Sītā? or real upper Indus?). It is directed towards the hidden land of the North, that is, the king who possesses the ‘jewel’ of the horses, the owner of the many horses, swift and strong, the king(s) of Persia and the Turks, in the territory of the Ḥbug.cor.
– East: བོན་ཁྲ་ Bhan.kṣa or བྷག་ཀྵ་ Bhag.kṣa; Pakṣu !, bull’s mouth (ཤར་གྱི་ཆུ་བོ་གླང་གི་ཁ་ནས་), China, resources: people (ཟོ)
– South: ཀྲིང་ (S.i.ta, i.e., Sindhu or Kaśmir Sītā?), elephant’s mouth (ལྷོའི་ཆུ་བོ་བན་གླང་གི་ཁ་ནས་), India, resources: sciences and elephants (ཤར་བོ་བན་གླང་)
– West: བྷག་ Hga.hga, i.e., Gaṅgā !, lion’s (!) mouth (ནུབ་ཕྱོགས་ཀྱི་ཆུ་བོ་སེང་འགེའི་ཁ་ནས་), Hphrom-Gesar (!), resources: many traders (ཤར་བོ་བན་གླང་)
– North: ཀྲིང་ (S.i.to, i.e., Sītā ?), horse’s (!) mouth (བྱང་གི་ཆུ་བོ་རྟའི་ཁ་ནས་), Persia (ཏ་ཟིག་ !) and the Turks (དྲུ་གུ་), resources: swift and strong horses (ཤར་བོ་བན་གླང་)
It is possible that the association with particular ‘jewels’ or symbols in this template has led to a shift in position of the horse-related Pakṣu/Oxus. But one should also note the shift of Persia to the North, where one would usually find Gesar and Phrom, while the latter take the position of Persia or alternatively Žaṅžuṅ.

So definitely something went wrong.
Old Tibetan LOKAPRAJÑAPTI (Pt 958)
Another scheme with the Pakṣu in the East, identifiable as Brahmaputra, and thus quite realistic in relation to a centre in Tibet, is found in a ‘biography of Bon women’ (192-vol. Bon Canon, 2nd ed., vol. 189, fol. 200v5; Martin, n.d., no. 10).

A particular Bonpo feature is the peacock as southern animal. Buddhists authors may have a khyun (!) instead.

The Bonpo templates are often given in the left-turning order: east, north, west, south. But for better comparison they will be given here in the standard right-turning order.
- East: བཀྱུ (Bakṣu, i.e., Pakṣu), horse’s mouth, flows through Tibet (i.e., Brahmaputra)

- South: གང་ (Gaṅ.ṅa, i.e., Gaṅgā), peacock’s mouth, flows through India

- West: གི་ (Sidhi, i.e., Sindhu), bull’s mouth, flows through ‘Persia’ (Stag.gzig.yul, here most probably the Pamirian borderlands are meant)

- North: སེན (Señ.ge), lion’s mouth, flows through ཡུལ་ (Hor.yul)
Hor.yul could be Turkestan, if the Tarim is meant or Kazachstan/ Tajikistan/ Usbekistan if the Iaxartes is meant.

It is possible, though, that the (real) Upper Indus is meant. In the ŠEL.DKAR ME.LOŇ, Hor refers to the northwestern-most corner of the Indus, and thus possibly to the Gilgit region.

It should be noted, however, that the original Lion Mouth is a roaring gorge of the Oxus! (in Usbekistan) not too far away from the Aral Sea, also known as Camels Neck.
Lions Mouth or Camels Neck
Biography of Bonpo Women
Despite the early attestation of an adapted (or mirror-inverted) scheme, the ‘standard’ Abhidharma template with the Ganga in the East was taken over by Tibetan Buddhists and Bonpos alike.

Cf., e.g., the Bonpo text MDO.ḤDUS as cited in Martin (1995) and Namkhai Norbu (2013, with minor spelling variations) and the Buddhist BLON.PO BKAḤ.THAN (Dorje Rgyalpo 1986)
- East: རང་/ རང་ (Gaṅ.ka/ Gaṅ.gha), elephant’s mouth
- South: ཨིན་ (Sin.ḥdu,), bull’s mouth (ཁྱུ་མཆོག khyu.-mchog ‘best of a herd’)
- West: རང་ / རང་ (Pag.šu(d)), horse’s mouth
- North: ཨིན་ / ཨིན་ (Si(n).ta,), peacock’s mouth(!)

- East: རང་ (Gaṅ.ga,), elephant/bull’s mouth, silver sands
- South: ཨིན་ (Sin.dhu), khyuṅ’s mouth, baiḍūrya sands
- West: སྐྱུ (Pakṣu), horse’s mouth, crystal sands
- North: ཨིན (Si.ta, i.e., Sītā), lion’s mouth, gold sand
Mimaki (2015) claims that the peacock could be associated with any river, but in most templates it is associated with the southern river, either the Sindhu or the नैरञ्जनā, i.e., the नैरञ्जनā Nairaṅjanā. In a few cases, the Nairaṅjanā and its peacock are shifted to the East.

Only in one of the two MDO.ḤDUS variants is the peacock associated with the northern river, given there as सिता.

It is possible that this is due to a confusion between Sindhu and Sītā, both in the Chinese sources (Sin-to/Sinduo vs. Si-to/Siduo) and in the Old Tibetan Lokaprajñāpāṭi (Si.ta vs. Si.to), or due to a late interpolation at a time when the modern upper course of the Indus had become associated with the Sindhu, and thus with the peacock.
What makes the picture so confusing is that quite often the rivers of the East (Gaṅgā or also the Upper Yangtze/Brahmaputra) and of the West (Pakṣu) including, or in opposition to, their animals (elephant or bull vs. horse) appear mirror-inverted, that is, in the opposite directions, while the rivers in the South and North and their animals are much more stable.

In my opinion this may indicate that sketches for prints and paintings were circulating (or also oral or written descriptions of such sketches),* but that the respective authors were not always aware that they might have a mirror-inverted drawing at their hand, as prepared for a block print.
Some authors might have had both representations at hand; and it further seems that they may have had a mirror inverted representation only for either the rivers or the animals, cf. the following templates.

As East and West are swapped, the perceived ‘wrong’ location of the गंगा Gaṅ.gā in the east (wrong only according to the modern model, but correct according to the original Abhidharma scheme) is ‘repaired’ by the description of the river as starting in the East, but flowing into the opposite direction.

The गंगा Gaṅ.gā is thus identified with the Satlej.

The same applies to the truly wrong location of the ख्यिंग्स Khyim.šaṅ river in the west, by the description of the river as flowing to the east, where it is identified with the Brahmaputra.
East: རྟ་མཆོག་ཁ་འབབ་ *Rta.mchog Kha.ḥbab* (Horse-mouth spring) = རིན་གྲུང་ཁུལ།, (actually the *Jinsha Jiang*, Upper Yangtze; here, however, identified with the Brahmaputra), flowing through གཡས་རུ་ *G.yas.ru* (the ‘Right Horn’) and གྲོ་ཤོད་ *Gro.šod* (Western Tibet, north and south of the Brahmaputra, respectively)

South: རྣམ་བྱ་ཁ་འབབ་ *Rma.byahi Kha.ḥbab* (Peacock-mouth spring) = རྣ་རིག་ (Nairaṅjanā) flowing through ‘བུརོི’ *Pu.roṅ’ (Purang, the south-western edge of Ngari)

West: དྱང་ཆེན་ཁ་འབབ་ *Glaṅ.chen Kha.ḥbab* (Elephant-mouth spring) = གང་པོ་ (Gaṅgā) flowing west along བྲིད་པོ་ཁུལ། *Khyun.łuṅ Dṅul.mkhar* (the Silver Castle, i.e., the upper Satlej, in the western part of Ngari)

North: སེང་གེའི་ཁ་འབབ་ *Seṅ.gehi Kha.ḥbab* (Lion-mouth spring) = སེང་ང་པཀྵུ་ (Lion-Pakṣu, i.e., the modern Upper Indus) flowing north through Ladakh
– East: གང་གཱ (Gaṅ.gā), **from the eastern side** of lake མ་པང་ (Ma.paṅ), **flowing westwards** along དྭང་ལུང་དངུལ་མཁར་ (the Silver Castle, i.e., along the Upper Sutlej)

– South: ར་པར་འཇིག་ (Na.ra.dza.ra, i.e., Nairaṇjanā), reaches India

– West: གྱིམ་ཤང་འཁྱིལ་བ (Gyim.šaṅ ḥkhyil.ba, i.e., Jinsha Jiang, Upper Yangtze; but most likely thought to be the Brahmaputra), **flowing eastwards**

– North: སིང་ང་པཀྵུ་ (Siṅ.ṅa Pakṣu, Lion-Pakṣu, i.e., modern Upper Indus), flowing through Ruthok
The name of the (originally) eastern river actually corresponds to the Upper Yangtze, Chin. *Jinsha Jiang* (“Gold Sand River”).

This may point to a particular interest of some East Tibetan Bonpo authors to shift the central mountain further east, towards their own (new) homeland, while the identification of both Gyim.šan and Pakṣu with the Brahmaputra may be the result of a later reworking and the attempt to bring back the eastern river to Central Tibet.
Bonpo DKAR.CHAG

Sen.na Pakṣu (Lion river) = Upper Indus

Gyim.shaṅ (Upper Yangtze) (Horse) identified with Brahmaputra

Satlej (Elephant)

Na.ra.dza.ra (Nairaṅjanā) - Peacock
Likewise, in the Buddhist ŠEL.DKAR ME.LON (Huber & Tsepak Rigzin 1999), 2 mirror-inverted templates are found. Again in the second text, the original directions are ‘repaired’ by the assumption that the rivers cross the lake and appear in the opposite direction.

- East: བཀྵུ (Pakṣu), horse’s mouth, silver sand
- South: སིན་དྷུ (Sin.dhu), bull’s mouth, precious stones
- West: གང་གཱ (Gaṅ.gā), elephant’s mouth, golden sands
- North: སི་ཏཱ (Si.tā, i.e., Sītā), lion’s mouth, diamond sand
– East: ག_pkgu (Pakṣu) – flows from the west to the east, appears in a horse’s mouth at འཛིན་པོ་པ་གཡུང་དྲུང་ Gtsaṅ Bye.ma G.yuṅ.druṅ, flows through Tibet; i.e., the Brahmaputra

– South: ནིན་དྱུ (Sin.dhu) – flows southward from the north of the lake, appears in a peacock’s or bull’s mouth “in the upper valley of Lang-ka Pu-rang (!), from where it flows on cutting through Nepal (!) and the centre of India”

– West: གང་གི་ (Gaṅ.gā) – originally it flew east, but later crossed the lake and appeared through the elephant’s mouth in the high-lands of Guge (!); i.e., the Satlej

– North: མིན་ (Si.tā, i.e., Sītā) – flows from the south of the lake to its north, appears in a lion’s mouth, “in the Seng highlands of the ’Brong region behind [i.e., north of] Ti-se, and it flows on through countries which include Ladwags, Bhalt[stan] and Hor”, that is, the modern Upper Indus (!).
ŠEL.DKAR ME.LON 1 & 2 (Ḥbri.guñ)
Swami Pranavānanda (1949) gives a similar turn-around-pattern from a text that he calls “Tibetan Kailas Purana” or “Kangri Karchak”.

Additional geographical errors have crept into the text, as the Satlej is said to flow through Kāmarūpa, which is (presently) a region in Assam. The Lohita is one of the northeastern confluences of the Brahmaputra, and originally was the name of the lower Brahmaputra. This brings us likewise to Assam.

Quite apparently parts of a full description of the Brahmaputra underly the river flowing from the ‘East to the West’. However, since the identity between the Brahmaputra with the Lohita lower course was established only in the late 19th century, the text cannot be very old (or Swami Pranavānanda has mixed up the names).
East (!), originally westwards: “Tamchok khambab” (རྟ་མཆོག་ཁ་འབབ་, the Horse-mouth spring), flows from “Dulchu Gompa” to “Chhemo Ganga in Gyagar (India)” = “Pakshu/Vakshu” → Brahmaputra, sands of cat’s-eye

South, originally northwards (!): “Mapcha khambab” (རྨ་བྱ་ཁ་འབབ་, the Peacock-mouth spring), flows in the south from “Mapcha Chungo” in “Lankapur-ring” (!) and then westwards (!) to “Sindu-yul” = “Sindu” → Karṇālī, sands of silver

West (!), [originally eastwards]: “Langchen khambab” (གླང་ཆེན་ཁ་འབབ་, the Elephant-mouth spring), flows from “a mountain in Chema-yungdung” to “Chang (Tashi-Lhunpo) and thence to Kamarupa in India, where it is called Lohita” = “Ganga” → Satlej (Skr. Shatadru), sands of gold

North, originally southwards (!): “Senge khambab” (སེང་གེའི་ཁ་འབབ་, the Lion-mouth spring), “flows from a mountain called Senge” to “Baltichen and Changhor” = “Sita” → modern Upper Indus, sands of diamond
Swaps like these may have led to the idea that the rivers turn around the central lake, one time, three times or even seven times. The younger the text, the more often.
The first Japanese ‘world’ map of 1710 features the central lake and the four rivers turning clockwise in a spiral, each one a full circle, until they flow into their respective directions:
While the more recent Tibetan Buddhist authors tend to apply the name མི་ཏཱ་ to the (real) Upper Indus, in the Bonpo texts, it is the མཀུ་ which is shifted to the north and re-identified with the (real) Upper Indus. (This may result in a compound name, Señ.ña Pakṣu, in an apparent attempt of accommodation.)

The original Sindhu in the South is usually replaced by the Bonpo authors with the སྣ་ར་འཛ་ར་ Na.ra.dza.ra or Nairañjanā.

There are also mixed patterns with the Nairaṅjanā in the East and the Sindhu in the south, e.g., in the Bon.po RGYAL.RABS of Khyuṅ.po Blo.gros Rgyal.mtshan (ed. Khedup Gyatso 1974).
– East: གནོད་པར་ (Na. ra.dza.na, i.e., Nairaṇjanā)
– South: སི་ཏུ་སི་ཙམ་ (Si. ti Si. tu, i.e., Gilgit-Indus?, Kaśmīr Sītā?)
– West: དིམིགས་ཉིད་ (Gyim. šaṅ phyi. šaṅ, i.e., Upper Yangtze)
– North: དཔག་ཤུ་གཙང་པོ་ (Pag. šu gtsaṅ.po, i.e., Pakṣu, implicitly re-identified with the modern Upper Indus)

This is possibly derived from another passage in the MDO.ḤDUS as given by Martin (1995):

– East: ལུབ་པོར་ (Na. ra.ḥdza.ra, i.e., Nairaṇjanā)
– South: སི་ཏུ་སི་ཙམ་ (Si. ti Si. dhu, i.e., Sindhu ?)
– West: དིམིགས་ཉིད་ (Gyim. šaṅ phyi. naṅ; i.e., Upper Yangtze)
– North: དཔག་ཤུ་གཙང་པོ་ (Dpag. šu gtsaṅ.po, i.e., Pakṣu)
Almost the same template is given by Mimaki (2015) and by Vitali (2015). The river names differ only in spelling. But the animals in Mimaki’s template are clearly out of phase by one quarter of clockwise turn. The template presented by Vitali without animals is from a recent Bonpo source, called MGUL.RGYAN.

- **East (!):** ‘Nara’/ ‘Nara-dzara’ (i.e., Nairaṇjanā), lion
- **South:** སིན་དྷུ (Sin.dhu), elephant
- **West (!):** མིམ་སྐྱེས (Kyim.šān) / མིམ་བྲེ། (Gyim.šan), i.e., Jinsha Jiang, Upper Yangtze, (if one prefers = Brahmaputra), peacock
- **North (!):** སྲུ་ (Pakṣu), horse
Another scheme is given by Karmay (1975). Here the Gaṅgā is shifted to the West and identified with the Sutlej. The Nairaṅjanā thus finds its place again in the South. It is not clear which text Karmay is citing, but Mimaki (2015) thought it would be the same as the one just presented above.

- **East:** ཟིམ་ཤང་, horse’s mouth (*Kyim.šaṅ*, Jinsha Jiang, Upper Yangtze)
- **South:** ར་ར་ཛ་ (*Na.ra.dza*, Nairaṅjanā), peacock’s mouth
- **West (!):** གང་གཱ་ (*Gaṅ.gā*), elephant’s mouth (corresponding to the Satlej)
- **North (!):** བཀྲ་ (Pakṣu), lion’s mouth (corresponding to the modern Upper Indus)
Karmay

- Pakṣu (Lion)
- Kyim.shaň (Upper Yangtze) (Horse)
- Gaṅgā (Elephant)
- Na.ra.dza.ra (Nairaṅjanā) - Peacock

North

West

East

South
Martin (n.d.) further presents an 8-fold river scheme of Ḥol.mo luṅ.riṅs, where two different, but related templates are combined, possibly with a turn of 45 degrees.

- East (!): བློ་བྲོ། (Na.ra.dza.ra, i.e., Nairaṅjanā)
- East or South-East: གང་ (Gaṅ.ga, i.e., Gangā)
- South: སྒྲ(ྲ)ུ། (Si(n).du, i.e., Sindhu, Gilgit-Indus)
- South or South-West: སྒྲ(ྲ)ུ། (Si.eng, Kashmir Sītā ?)
- West (!): གྱི་ཤང་ (Gyi.śan !, Jinsha Jiang, Upper Yangtze)
- West or North-West: སྒྲ་ (Seŋ.gā, Lion)
- North (!): སྒྲུ། (Paksu)
- North-East: གསེར་ལྡན་ (Gser.İdan, Upper Yangtze ?)
Martin (n.d.) rivers of Ḥol.mo luṅ.riṅs
5. Conclusion

One can see that the Tibetan authors, whether Buddhist or Bonpo, attempt to adapt a transmitted pattern – including some transmitted errors – to quite an unsuitable geographical setting, compounding thus the confusion.
What I find particularly interesting is the introduction of the Nairaṅjanā as the southern or eastern river and the peacock as its symbol by Bonpo authors.

The Nairaṅjanā (now also known under the name Lilājan) is deeply associated with the life of the Buddha. To be more precise: with his enlightenment after six years of ascetic practice on the banks of this river.

(Likewise astonishing is the use of the khyun, an essentially Bonpo symbol, by Buddhist authors!)
Sanchi, East Gate, left pillar, front face, third panel: The miracle of the Buddha walking on the waters of the Nairaṅcanā – aniconic representations by his throne, first on the water, then on the shore.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miracle_of_the_Buddha_walking_on_a_River_-_East_Face_-_South_Pillar_-_East_Gateway_-_Stupa_1_-_Sanchi.jpg

If the Bonpos had been antagonists of the Buddhists from the very beginning, why would they have introduced or preserved this symbolic river?

Could it be that the early Bonpos were rather Krypto-Buddhists or more precisely: followers of a sect in the Iranian border lands that had been influenced or “compromitted” by Tantrism and Śaivism from Gandhāra and Swāt and further by Iranian religious ideas?

Could it be that their antagonism only developed when they reached Tibet and were confronted with a different (and more dominant) doctrine?
And could the shift of the central mountain to Tibet also have something to do with the migrations of these Bonpos or Krypto-Buddhists to the East and into Tibet?

Allen (1999) thinks of various migrations through the Iranian borderlands. Most importantly, the Hūṇa invasion in Gandhāra (ca. 500 CE) would have been “squeezing the Buddhist faithful in the Vale of Peshawar, leading to a wave of Buddhist migration northwards and eastwards into – and through – the Karakoram ranges and the western Himalayas.”
It is at least noteworthy that the Bonpos knew of a myth by which the tip of the Kailash was uprooted in Persia and thrown to its present place by Hanuman:

(Bonpo RGYAL.RABS, fol. 21f., cf. Laufer 1901: 26).

The myth of the translocation of Mt Kailash is mentioned also in the ṢDHAM.GLING by Bla.ma Btsan.po of 1820 (ed. Wylie 1962: 6).
The central mountain together with its rivers has also been shifted much further east.

Ultimately, as shown by Stein (1959: 308, n. 77), the whole geographical template of the lands to the north-west of India was transferred far to the east, that is, to Bengal, Assam, and even Yunnan, at an unknown time and for unknown reasons. E.g., Parthia (Nangxi), Gandhāra, and Campodia were relocated in Yunnan, the (Upper) Sutlej region was relocated under the names of (Mahā)-Cīna and Suvarṇabhūmi in Assam, and the Yavanas (Bactrians or Indo-Greeks) were relocated even in Laos and Vietnam.
In this process of transfer, Mt Kelasa has found its new location in Bilin Township, Thaton district, Mon state of Myanmar (cf. Moore 2004: 13).

Its exalted model, Mt Meru, made it even up to northern Thailand, Laos, and Campodia (McKay 2015: 26f.).
But nowhere do the rivers whirl around like in Tibet!
But nowhere do the rivers whirl around like in Tibet!
A whirling swastika of rivers
A whirling swastika of rivers
A whirling swastika of rivers
A whirling swastika of rivers