

The Institution of Zhung Dratshang of Bhutan: Setting the Stage for Future Research and Lacunae in Buddhist Governance and Public Administration

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Abstract

Many non-Western countries are facing challenges whilst implementing public sector reforms as most of these reforms are designed to suit public administrative systems based on Western models of governance and public administration. Based on the experiences of the Zhung Dratshang, which functions as the central monastic body of Bhutan, this study provides a basis to develop a research agenda on the relatively understudied area of Buddhist governance and public administration. Established in the 1600s, the Zhung Dratshang played a central role in Bhutan's governance for close to four centuries. By examining its organisational structure and the career pathways, we suggest three main approaches towards enhancing knowledge in the field of public administration based on the institution of Zhung Dratshang in Bhutan. These three approaches are: Buddhist values-based, sangha-based and dharma-raja (or dhammaraja)-based approaches. Such an analysis will provide an insight into the relevance of Buddhist values and principles of organisation to the field of Non-Western Public Administration.

Introduction

There is an increasing recognition that Western models of governance, particularly in the area of public administration (PA), are inadequate to solve the problems in countries with strong historical and traditional cultures. In fact, Drechsler et al. (2019, 4) attribute the "sad state of PA reform in non-Western countries" to the fact that these countries were and are not allowed to develop their systems based on their own traditions. As many non-Western countries, such as Bhutan, seek to improve their public administrative systems, they are grappling with the implementation of public sector reforms that are primarily designed to suit public administrative systems based on Western models of PA. Historical traditions in state, politics, government and administration are important and influence current developments (Kickert 2011, 802). Towards this end, and in the field of PA, there is work that focuses on Confucius and Islamic PA, but not enough that focuses on other non-Western PA, such as Buddhist PA and Oceanic (including Australia and New Zealand) PA.

Our research focuses on the PA systems that are still practised in the *Zhung Dratshang*. We examine the structure and the positions of the *Zhung Dratshang* and we analyse the appointment and promotion systems. As a way to provide an insight into Buddhist governance and PA in Bhutan, we analyse the *Zhung Dratshang*'s organizational structure and the career pathways within this organizational set up. This paper will serve as the basis for providing a platform for future research in Buddhist Governance and PA. We suggest three main approaches towards enhancing knowledge in the field of PA based on the institution of *Zhung Dratshang* in Bhutan: Buddhist values-based, *sangha*-based and *dharma-raja* (or *dhammaraja*)-based approaches.. Although each of these three themes have in their own rights been extensively studied since the inception of Buddhism, their integration within PA is not as closely examined as other non-Western PA topics, such as Islamic and Confucius PA. There are only a handful of studies that have attempted to integrate elements of any of these three approaches in PA (e.g., the role of *dhammaraja* in Buddhist Economy by Drechsler (2019) and the relationship of the sangha in Buddhist governance and PA by San (2024)).

Established in 1620, the *Zhung Dratshang* played a prominent role not only in consolidating the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism in Bhutan but also in the unification of the country and the establishment of a dual system of governance. Principally, the *Zhung Dratshang* operates on the basis of meritocracy. Article Three of Bhutan's Constitution clearly specifies the appointment process of the Je Khenpo and the five *lopens*. The King of Bhutan makes the final appointment based on the recommendations of a committee a person who is learned and respected in accordance with the qualities of spiritual master and accomplished in *kye-rim dzogrim*, that is, stages of development (*kye-rim*) and completion (*dzogrim*) in Vajrayana practice. The identification of performers in the *Zhung Dratshang* is based on a combination of experience, seniority, qualifications and other qualities. For the post of *rabdey netens* and *shedra udzins*, a minimum qualification of an undergraduate degree in Buddhist philosophy is required and other qualities such as administrative and public relations competence are important, especially for *rabdey netens*. At a more practical level, findings from the study will offer suggestions to Bhutan's civil service in terms of how the appointment and the performance management systems can be tailored to suit Bhutan's context. And, in the wider context, this study will provide a greater insight into how Buddhist PA might be relevant to the field of PA.

Non-Western Public Administration

Research in PA has advanced with the prescription of characteristics based on various models and paradigms. The generally accepted paradigms in PA, such as traditional public administration (TPA) and new public management (NPM), are helpful in determining the dynamics of the field of PA's identity and the manner in which governments are shaped and function (Capano 2003, Henry 1975, Lovrich 1985). Each paradigm has been the dominant movement during a particular period, for example, the TPA during towards the end of the 19th and large part of the 20th centuries, and the NPM in two to three decades since the 1970s (Schedler et al. 2004). These experiences, mostly relevant to developed countries, have shaped the form and characteristics of public servants in their respective countries. Most of the Western developed countries, that is, from where these paradigms originated, were able to inculcate and implement public sector reform over a longer period of time. The

time lag allowed PA systems in these countries to shape and adjust their characteristics according to the dominant paradigm in a gradual and incremental manner. For developing countries, and most other non-Western countries, the transition in their public administrative systems occurred within a shorter span of time, that is mostly during the latter half of the 20th century. The implications of such dramatic changes are that, first, it did not give the developing countries sufficient time to try and test the different models and paradigms of PA. Second, there was little or no space provided within these new paradigms to incorporate more traditional and indigenous forms of PA. Traditional forms of PA are either ignored as non-existent or viewed negatively requiring change. In developing countries, many aspects of traditional systems steeped in strong historical and cultural influences are still prevalent and influence the way the PA operates (Ugyel 2014).

It is important to note that the extant debate on paradigms in the field of PA is mostly based on the Western world. However, there is an increasing number of researchers who argue that the Eastern world has its own set of paradigms. This discussion is important when we analyse the interaction of public sector reforms based on Western PA and applied in the Eastern world. Part of the reason for this hegemonic discussion, as Stout (2012, 391) explains, is that in the multiple ways of understanding reality modern Western culture is "marginalizing" others, leading to homogenization based on superficial attention to diversity. Drechsler (2013, 2), who has done extensive work on both Western and Eastern PA, also points out the assumption that "there is one good PA and that is global-Western PA," and that if countries do not adhere to or follow global-Western standards, then they are somehow remiss. He points out that there are two potential partners of global-Western PA as largely independent paradigms, Chinese and Islamic PA, and provides the following reasons for their selection: the large body of theoretical literature that is available, centuries of practice, strong relevance today, and a unique theory and governance background.

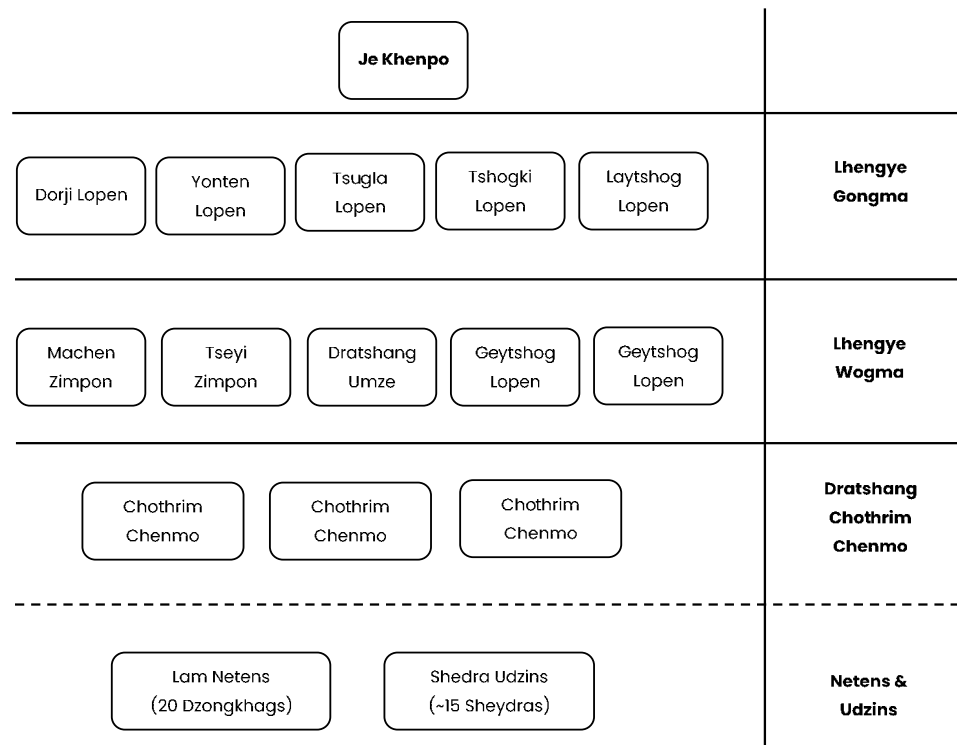
As such, there has been extensive work done on Islamic PA across various countries (see Drechsler et al. 2023). With Buddhist PA, there has not been any comprehensive study. Part of the reason, as Drechsler (2019) explains, could be attributed to the differences in form and complexity of the various denominations, countries and school of Buddhist teaching. In recent years, there has been increasing work focusing on specific countries with predominantly Buddhist populations. For instance, in Sri Lanka (e.g., Bandara et al. 2022), Thailand (e.g., Sutamchai et al. 2019) and a comparative study examining Cambodia and Nepal by San et al. (2023). However, there are no studies that examine Bhutan's PA in the context of Buddhism. Perhaps, a good starting point to examine the Buddhist PA system in Bhutan is through its Central Monastic Body, or the *Zhung Dratshang*, which was established in 1620 by *Zhabrdung* Nawang Namgyel. A Tibetan saint, who came to Bhutan in the early 1600s, *Zhabrdung* Nawang Namgyel established the dual system of the temporal and spiritual (*cho-sid*). This dual system was partially styled on Tibetan precedents of hereditary religious families (Phuntsho 2013). The *cho-sid* system played a predominant role in establishing Bhutan as a nation-state. For a large part of Bhutan's history, members of and people trained by the *Zhung Dratshang* were key players in both the *cho* and *sid* realms (Dorji 2015). Although the *sid* (temporal administration) changed considerably with the establishment of the monarchy in 1907, the *cho* (spiritual administration) has largely remained intact.

Zhung Dratshang and its Organization

The *Zhung Dratshang*, or the Central Monastic Body, was established in 1620 by *Zhabdrung* Nawang Namgyel. It functions as the main *sangha* (monastic community) in Bhutan. Normally, the monastic community in most Buddhist countries is governed by the *Vinaya Sutra* which enumerates the rules and procedures that govern the structure and functioning of the monastic community (Jayasuriya 2008). Initially, Cheri located in Thimphu served as the base for the sangha, and later in 1637, it was moved to Punakha. The state that *Zhabdrung* Nawang Namgyel built in Bhutan in the 1600s was inherently a religious state with the political and cultural ethos driven by strong Buddhist religious values, and almost all of the public officials were monks from the *Zhung Dratshang* (Phuntsho 2013). The office of the *Zhabdrung* was known as the *tse* and it was supported by the various branches of the inner ecclesiastical affairs and outer secular administration (Phuntsho 2013). After the passing away of *Zhabdrung* Nawang Namgyel, these administrative frameworks continued to exist and played a prominent role in the governance of the country, albeit with an almost absent or minimal role of future *Zhabdrungs*. Although the establishment of the monarchy in 1907 changed the dynamics of the secular administration of the country, the *Zhung Dratshang* continues its role as the main religious establishment in the country supported by state funds.

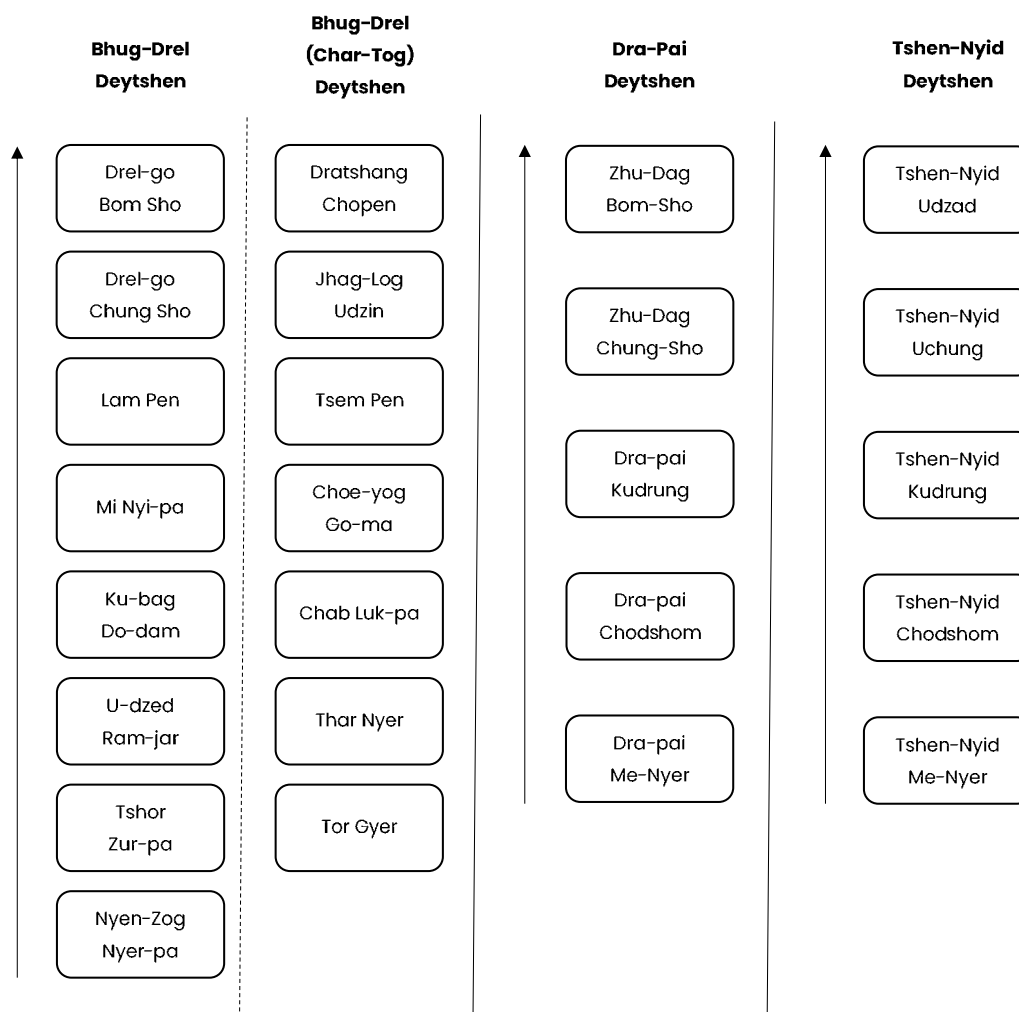
Figure 1 shows the present executive structure (*Zhung Dratshang Tey-wa*) of the *Zhung Dratshang*. At the top of the hierarchy is the *Je Khenpo*, a post that was established at the start of the *cho-sid* system in the 17th Century. Below him are the five *lopens* or masters of various disciplines. The *Je Khenpo* and the five *lopens* function as the executives within the *Zhung Dratshang* and are responsible for overseeing the responsibilities of the other posts. The *dorji lopen* heads the inner assemblage of the Sangha and oversees activities relating to the esoteric practices concerning the two Vajrayana stages of generation (*kye-rim*) and completion (*dzog-rim*). The *yonten lopen* is responsible for activities involving the practice and learning of all categories of Vajrayana rituals, mudras and sadhanas. The *tsugla lopen* is responsible for all activities pertaining to the study and contemplation of scriptural traditions along with the five sciences. The *tshogki lopen* handles the periodic religious services and ceremonies within and outside the dzongs pertaining to the welfare of both the living and deceased. The *laytshog lopen* is in charge of all of the sangha's service-related activities, including administration and development. These five *lopens* comprise the *Lhengye Gongma*. *Chakgon Tonpai Yodnang* published by the *Zhung Dratshang* in November 2023 describes the roles and responsibilities of the five *lopens* (accomplished master of meditation practice and study) and the monastic institutions under the purview of the *Zhung Dratshang* (Namgay 2023). Under the five *lopens* are the *Lhengye Wogmas* which includes the two *zimpons* (chamberlains), two *geytshog lopens* (masters of rites for accumulating merits) and *Dratshang umze chenmo* (the great chant master of the monk body). Below the *Lhengye Wogma* are the *Dratshang Chothrim Chenmo* (the great monastic laws of the monk body), which include the three *kudrungs* (disciplinarian) and *netens* and *udzins* based in the various dzongkhag *dratshangs*.

Figure 1: Zhung Dratshang Tewa Organisational Structure



In addition to the executive structure of the *Zhung Dratshang*, there are three main *deytshen* or divisions, the *bhug-drel*, *dra-pai* and *tshen-nyid* (refer to Figure 2). The *bhug-drel due-tsuen* is further sub-divided into two categories, the *bhug-drel* (which includes seven positions) and *bhug-drel char-tog* (which includes six positions). The *dra-pai* and *tshen-nyid* *deytshens* comprise five positions each.

Figure 2: Zhung Dratshang Deytshens



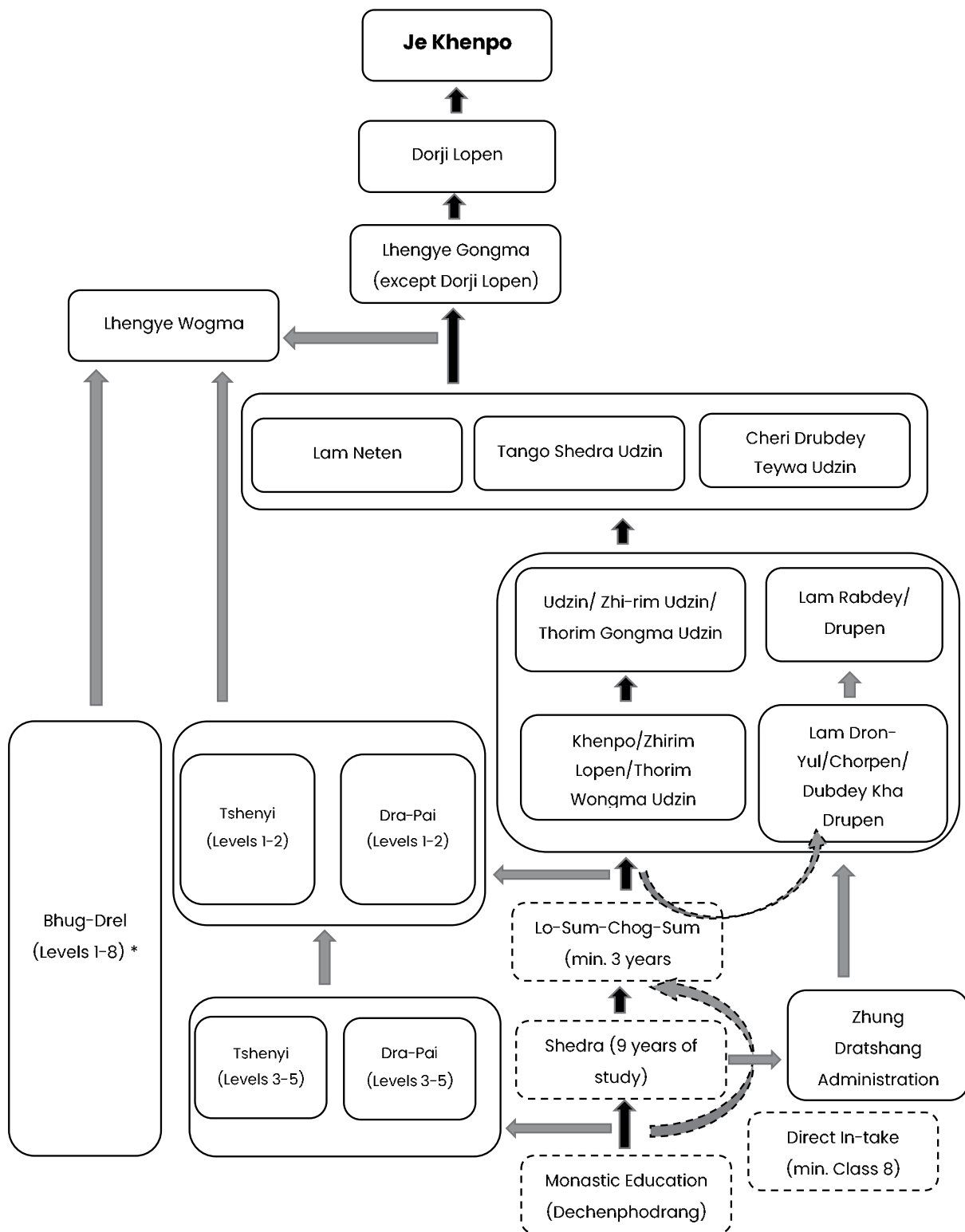
In each *dzongkhag*, the *rabdey* is headed by the *lam neten* with a series of positions (mentioned in hierarchical order): *udzad*, *kudrung*, *drelgo* and followed by various *lopens* (such as *torma*, *kilkhor*, *tsipai*, *dung*, *jaling*, *dratshang chodpen*, *cham*, *zung*). It will also be important to include in the *Zhung Dratshang*'s overall structure the monastic schools. Overall, the monastic education system can be categorized into three levels: *zhirim* (primary), *dringrim* (secondary) and *thorim* (college) (Dorji 2015). At the *zhirim* levels, monks learn basic reading, writing and memorization of the texts. Parts of their education also include learning vocational arts and craft skills. At the *dringrim* levels, monks are taught Buddhist philosophies and subjects such as poetry, dialectics and debate. The *thorim* levels provide a deeper analysis of these Buddhist philosophies and subjects.

PA System of the Zhung Dratshang

As of 2015, there were 7,373 monks, 275 nuns and 461 *gomchens* (lay-monks) registered with the *Zhung Dratshang* (Dorji 2015). The total number has increased to approximately 17,000 monks and nuns (Namgay 2023). The *Zhung Dratshang* functions according to the *Vinaya Sutra*

where administrative and other decisions are made unanimously and in accordance with the culture of harmony and righteousness. Unlike most other Tibetan Buddhist establishments where the tradition of reincarnations determines the senior leadership positions, Bhutan's *Zhung Dratshang* operates based on meritocracy (Dorji 2015). It will be this form of meritocracy that will be important to analyse to get a glimpse of the Buddhist PA aspects of the *Zhung Dratshang*.

Figure 3 shows the career pathways in the *Zhung Dratshang*. The main pathway towards becoming a *Je Khenpo* is indicated in Figure 3 by the black arrows. Upon completion of their monastic education, they enrol into the *shedra* to complete their Buddhist studies. Levels 5-7 at the *shedra* are equivalent to an undergraduate degree studies and levels 8-9 are equivalent to that of postgraduate studies. Thereafter, monks have to complete the *lo-sum-cho-sum* (i.e., the minimum 3-year retreat). Upon completion of the retreat, they can be appointed to either of these two starting positions: *khenpo/zhirim lopen/thorim gongma udzin* or *lam drong-yul/chorpen/drubdeykha drupen*. The former cohort can then move on to positions such as *udzin/zhirim udzin/thorim gongma udzin* and the latter to *lam rabdey/drupen*. The next higher group of positions are *lam neten/Tango sheydra udzin/Cheri drubdey teywa udzin*. The next appointment is to become a member of the *Lhengye Gongma*.



Not all monks rise to the level of *Lhengye Gongma*. As such, there exist multiple lateral career pathways in the *Zhung Dratshang* (indicated in grey arrows in Figure 3). The *Lhengye Wogma* serves as the highest position for various career pathways. The first is if they are not appointed in any of the positions at the *Lhengye Gongma* level after working their way through the main career pathway outlined earlier. The other pathway to the *Lhengye Wogma* positions is through the *bhugdrel*, *tshenyi* and *drapai deytshen*. The selection into the *bhugdrel deytshen* is normally performed by members of the *Lhengye Gongma* where they select the top students who complete their monastic education at Dechenphodrang. Before the establishment of the *shedra* at Tango in 1987, the best and most capable monks from Dechenphodrang were selected as the *bhug-drel due-tsuen*. However, with the introduction of the *shedra* at Tango, and as we saw earlier, to be appointed as a *Lhengye Gongma*, one needs to undertake *lo-sum-choe-sum* and complete their education at Tango *Shedra*. As such, there are some issues with what is considered the traditional system of working their way through the ranks of the *deytshens* vis-à-vis the new system of monks having to graduate from the *shedra* and also complete their *lo-sum-chog-sum* (Penjor 2013). Although the selection into the *tshenyi* and *drapai deytshens* at the three lower levels or positions are selected after completion of their monastic education, the two higher levels or positions can also be after monks have completed their *shedra* and *lo-sum-chog-sum* (see Figure 3). There also exists another career option for those who are at various stages of their studies at *sheydra* and decide to join the *Zhung Dratshang* administration office. If this option is chosen, these monks can be appointed as *lam dronyul/chorpen/drubdekhai drubpen* and then as *lam rabdey/drubpen*. The same pathway is also available for those monks who have completed their *lo-sum-chog-sum* without enrolling into the *shedra* (the dotted grey arrows).

Platform for Future Research on Buddhist Governance and Public Administration

Rather than continuously looking towards the experiences of other nations for examples of best practices, combinations of what constitutes a "good PA" can also be based on traditions and practices within the country. For instance, Bhutan's civil service has adopted numerous best practices in the implementation of its performance management system, particularly since the turn of this century. However, there are fundamental challenges that impede the implementation of these reforms and distinguishing performers from non-performers continues to remain a major issue (Ugyel 2021). The most recent performance-related reforms, that is, the Leadership Assessment Exercise conducted in January 2022 by the Royal Civil Service Commission is even more drastic. Out of the 62 senior executives in the government, 47 of them were "managed out," or in more explicit terms, "fired" for failing to meet the high expectations required of executives holding these positions (RCSC 2022). Whether or not, these recent reforms under the guidance of experts from Singapore and with strong resemblance to individualistic NPM-related reforms will work in the future remains to be seen. However, one of the main reasons is that Bhutan is by and large a collectivist culture (Ugyel 2021). It is within such an administrative context that implementing a performance management system based on private sector principles can be problematic. Perhaps, an alternative to all the global best practices that Bhutan is trying hard to replicate is to learn from the meritocratic system that has been in operation for centuries within one of Bhutan's

oldest organizations, the *Zhung Dratshang*. Although the paths are different, that is, the spiritual and the worldly paths, there can be some balance (Bumden 2013). The Buddhist tradition, and particularly the *Zhung Dratshang*, based on the *Vinaya Sutra* advocates for decisions to be made based on righteousness, consensus, harmony and fraternity. In many ways, the motivation for public service includes altruistic purposes, as opposed to the private sector, and not only just profit. Therefore, one main approach to enhancing knowledge and connecting Buddhist principles in the field of PA is examining relevant Buddhist values.

Unlike most other Tibetan Buddhist establishments where the tradition of reincarnations determines the senior leadership positions, Bhutan's *Zhung Dratshang* operates based on meritocracy. We saw earlier that the Constitution stipulates the appointment process of the *Je Khenpo* by the King of Bhutan. The Constitution also lays out the provision for the appointments of the five *lopens*, where the *Je Khenpo* on the recommendation of the Dratshang Lhenthso appoints monks with nine attributes of a learned person and accomplished in *ked-dzog*. The nine attributes of a learned person (*mkhas pa'i tshul dgu*), which are: (i) *khay-tsun-zang-sum* (*mkhas btsun bzang gsum*), which include learning (*mkhas*), discipline (*btsun*) and nobility (*bzang*); (ii) *chad-tsod-tsom-sum* (*'chad rtsod rtsom gsum*), which includes exposition (*chad*), debate (*rtsod*) and composition (*rtsom*); and (iii) *she-drub-lay-sum* (*bshad sgrub las gsum*), which are study (*bshad*), practice (*sgrub*) and activity (*las*) for the benefits of others.

These nine attributes of a learned person are acquired by the monks through their 8 years of monastic education followed by the 9 years of rigorous study of Buddhist philosophies in the *sheydra*. Another salient feature of the *Zhung Dratshang* is the requirement for monks to undertake the *lo-sum-chog-sum* (i.e., the 3-year solitary retreat). According to the *Drukpa Kargyupa* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism on which the *Zhung Dratshang* is premised, monks are trained in the six *Yogas* of Naropa (*naro chodru*): *tumo* (inner heat), *jale* (illusory body), *osel* (luminosity), *milam* (dream), *phowa* (ejection of consciousness) and *bardo* (intermediate state)). In addition, the monks are also trained in the meditation of the *mahamudra* (*chagja chenpo*). Monks of the *Zhung Dratshang* who complete the minimum *lo-sumochog-sum* are considered to possess the highest qualifications and given priority when it comes to appointments to senior positions (Bumden 2013). Upon fulfilling these minimum criteria in acquiring the Buddhist spiritual knowledge and values, other factors such as seniority, people skills (internal and external), performance history and capability are considered (Bumden 2013). Each of these Buddhist qualities deserve a deeper analysis which can then form the basis to develop a set of characteristics that will bridge the gap between Western PA and Buddhist PA.

The second and third approaches, that is, a *sangha*-based and *dharmaraja*-based approaches have been explored already by San (2024) and Drechsler (2019) to a certain extent. According to Drechsler (2019), some of the key characteristics of the role of a *dharmaraja* is that of a facilitator for the subjects to attain happiness, who as such, not only rules according to the *dhamma* but guides and enables their subjects to realize their *dhamma* (or roughly, the optimal goal of enlightenment). In fact, Drechsler (2019) discusses the role of *dharmaraja* in the context of Bhutan's leadership (in comparison to Thailand and Yogyakarta in Indonesia). Although not directly based on Bhutan, San (2024) discusses the integral roles that concepts of *sangha* and *dharmaraja* in shaping the social and political landscape in Cambodia. San

(2024) contends that the two concepts are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, and contributes to the establishment of just and compassionate governance based on Buddhist principles. As a research agenda, a *sangha*-based approach can include a comparison of Bhutan's *Zhung Dratshang* with the *sangha* in Cambodia (and of other Buddhist countries). And as a basis for comparison, focus could be on specific characteristics of the *sangha* community. For example, San (2024) highlights the decision-making process as a consensus-based approach, made collectively through open discussions, and where necessary, majority voting.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to set a stage for a comprehensive research agenda for the topic of Buddhist governance and PA within the wider topic of non-Western PA. The *Zhung Dratshang* played a prominent role in consolidating and establishing Bhutan as a nation-state. For over four centuries, *Zhung Dratshang* was at the centre of government administration until the establishment of the monarchy in the early 1900s. Although with some changes in its form, the *Zhung Dratshang* continues to exist as a key institution responsible for preserving Bhutan's rich cultural and religious heritage. As reported by Lamsang (2023), the *Zhung Dratshang* has 327 monasteries and religious centres that performed 9,037 total days of rituals throughout the year. The same report also highlights the assets owned by the *Zhung Dratshang* as one of the largest real estate and landowners in the country and holding shares in some of the major companies in Bhutan. Therefore, both as a historical and contemporary institution based on Buddhist religion and values, examining Bhutan's *Zhung Dratshang*'s organizational structure and the career pathways provides an opportunity to further the research agenda on Buddhist governance and PA.

Three broad areas of research areas have been identified in this paper where the experiences of the *Zhung Dratshang* can contribute. Some work has already been done on two of them, that is, the *sangha*- and *dhammaraja*-based approaches, there is potential to dig deeper and/or integrate these studies closely with Bhutan's *Zhung Dratshang*. The third one is in how Buddhist values can be made relevant and fit within the existing public administrative system. A key challenge for Bhutan's civil service is in identifying top performers and appointment of such people to senior positions. Bhutan's civil service has been constantly implementing numerous performance management system reforms since the turn of the decade, with some of the prominent ones being led by McKinsey & Company and a group of Singaporeans. Although the forms and processes of these performance management systems are becoming more sophisticated and comprehensive, whether or not actual performance is improving remains to be seen. An analysis of the key values that are likely to cut across and crossover between the *Zhung Dratshang* and the Bhutanese civil service as Bhutanese institutions that are layered over a set of culture and traditions that influence and shape the organization's characteristics will be important. Such an analysis will provide greater insight into the relevance of Buddhist values and principles of organization to the field of non-Western PA.

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