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# Men have titles, women have property. Note on the history of Wangdu Choling, Bumthang, Bhutan

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MEN HAVE TITLES, WOMEN HAVE PROPERTY. A  
NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF WANGDU CHOLING,  
BUMTHANG, BHUTAN

FRANÇOISE POMMARET

In March 1987, on the invitation of Dasho Rigzin Dorji from the Special Commission of Culture, Professor Per Kværne went to Bumthang to look at two buildings which could host the Semtokha Rigzhung School. One of these buildings was Wangdu Choling Dzong in the Choekhor Valley of Bumthang.<sup>1</sup> In memory of this trip, I would like to present a note on the history of the palace.<sup>2</sup>

Wangdu Choling (also written Wangducholing, Wangdicholing) is located in the “Plane of the Vase” (Bumthang). It was known locally as Wangdu Choling Dzong or simply Wangling and is often called Wangdu Choling Palace in English today.

Information about Wangdu Choling, written texts as well as oral lore, is scarce and scattered, and documenting its history is difficult because very little has been recorded and many court retainers have died. Lastly, there are no contemporary sources from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century documenting Wangdu Choling; all the written sources were compiled in the 1990s and 2000s from interviews.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as is often the case with oral tradition, the narratives vary according to each person’s memory and agenda, and my attempt here is subject to amendments.

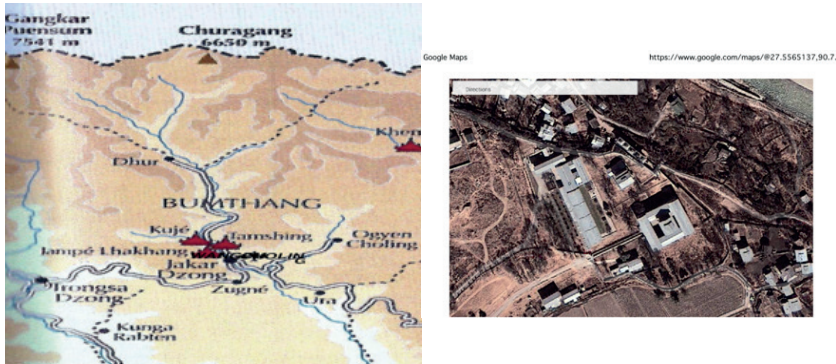
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<sup>1</sup> Here I use the romanised spelling generally employed in Bhutan, but a list of terms in Wylie transliteration is given at the end of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This article is an elaboration on one small part of the documentation report *Wangdu Choling Dzong/Palace* that I prepared in 2012–13 for the Bhutan Foundation, a project initiated by the Home and Culture Ministry.

I wish to thank the office of the Bhutan Foundation in Thimphu, and especially Ms Ugen Choden, as well as the Bumthang Dzongrab Sonam Tshering, the Cultural officer Kunzang Namgyal, Gup Doley, a long time retainer and the last manager of the estate owner, and Lam Khenpo Sonam Wangchuk from the Wangdu Choling monastic school for helping with the research and sharing information. The late Mr Karma Tobden from the Mountain Lodge facilitated my contacts. I am also grateful to my colleague Yannick Jooris for her superb photos and to Kunzang Choden, who lived in the palace, for her comments.

<sup>3</sup> See bibliography in Dzongkha.



The GPS data from Google Earth are  $27^{\circ}33'$  by  $90^{\circ}44'$  at an altitude of 2600 m. The structure is located one km to the north-east of Jakar Dzong in the dzongkhag (district) of Bumthang, in the valley of Choekhor. It is located in a slightly elevated plateau, on the right bank of the Chamkhar River, at a place formerly known as Shamkhar. The whole complex today consists of several structures: the palace itself, the Lingkana Temple, and the prayers-wheels, as well as smaller structures. The huge, long building occupying the north-west side, and visible on the satellite photo, is a luxury hotel, the Aman Resort, built in the late 1990s.

Although the layout is inspired by the Dzong (fortress), the structure is less imposing and a number of large windows make the palace a pleasant place to live in. A paved stone courtyard is enclosed on all sides by two-storey buildings, forming a rectangle in which there are living quarters and storerooms. This structure is called *shagkhor* (“enclosure of living quarters”). In the middle of the courtyard the central tower (*utse*) is located; it is four storeys and contains a store room, an apartment, which was the Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal (1825–81) and his wife Pema Choki’s residence, and two temples. The windows, very narrow at the bottom of the buildings, encompass the whole upper floors with light timber and lattices, a feature called *rabsel*.

The Lingkana Temple is an impressive building looking rather like a large house located 100 meters away on the north side of the palace. The foundation date of the temple is not clear; it might have been built at the time of Jigme Namgyal, but most probably at the time of Ugyen Wangchuck (1862–1926). It is said that Ugyen Wangchuck was

concerned about the people living near Wangdu Choling, because they were so poor that they could not hold rituals and prayers in their houses. So he told them to use this temple for their religious needs. The temple is surrounded by a row of prayer-wheels, and behind them there are beautifully engraved slates of deities and religious figures. Five water prayer-wheels (*chukhor mani*) stand below the Lingkana Temple. The first one, closest to the palace, is said to be as old as the palace, while the four others were built by Ashi Choki and her then husband Dasho Ugyen Wangdi in 1964/65.

The life of Jigme Namgyal has been the subject of several publications (Aris 1994; Tshewang 1994; Lundrup 2008). Suffice it to say here that Jigme Namgyal was the most important political figure in Bhutan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because he managed to reunify the country. He was the powerful Trongsa Penlop and paved the way for the monarchy, and his son, Ugyen Wangchuck, became the First King in 1907.

Jigme Namgyal became Trongsa Penlop in 1853, but there was an agreement with Tsonдру Gyeltshen, the previous Penlop Tshokye Dorji's son, that Jigme Namgyal would relinquish his post to him after three years. In early 1858, a fight broke out between the Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal and the Jakar Dzongpon Tsonдру Gyeltshen, who wanted to become Trongsa Penlop as promised after the three years had passed. The pretext for hostilities was that in 1857 the Zhongar Dzongpon in the East, who was close to Jigme Namgyal, had killed the Trongsa Chamberlain, a friend of Jakar Dzongpon Tsonдру Gyeltshen.

Local tradition has it that, to celebrate his victory after the 1857–58 war, Jigme Namgyal built the Wangdu Choling Dzong in 1858 on the plain of Shamkhar, below Jakar Dzong, where he had set up his camp. In fact, Jigme Namgyal did not win a decisive armed victory. It was the 31st Je Khenpo Yontan Gyeltshen (1851–58) who managed to broker peace between the two enemies. Jigme Namgyal kept Trongsa and Tsonдру Gyeltshen was promoted from Jakar Dzongpon to Jakar Penlop. At first glance it might appear odd that Jigme Namgyal would build a palace under the gaze of his old foe, but Je Yonten Gyeltshen's mediation seems to have been successful and the two enemies were completely reconciled.

Wangdu Choling now stands as the oldest of all the royal structures in Bhutan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pommaret 2010: 205–16.

The Seventh Peling Sungrul (Pemalingpa's speech incarnation) Ngawang Choki Lodoe (1819–42) had prophesied to the retired Trongsa Penlop Ugyen Phuntsho, who was from Tamshing in Bumthang and a descendent of Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), that if his daughter Pema Choki married a Penlop by the name of Namgyal, peace and prosperity would prevail in Bhutan. Jigme Namgyal had already met Pema Choki in 1847 (the date is probable but not confirmed) before he became Penlop in 1853, when he went for trade from Trongsa Dzong to Lhalung Monastery in Tibet. Pema Choki was staying in Lhalung with her brother, the Eighth Peling Sungrul Kunzang Tenpey Nyima (1843–91).<sup>5</sup>

Elaborate preparations were made at Wangdu Choling and Tamshing in Bumthang for the marriage of the Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal and Pema Choki. The exact date of the wedding is, however, not available, but probably took place around 1853–54. The bridal procession from Tamshing arrived at the Chamkhar Bridge, where it was received by the groom's party and taken to Wangdu Choling. The procession arrived by the eastern gate and was received by monks and dancers. I will come back to this event in the conclusion as it questions the 1858 standard date of the construction of Wangdu Choling Dzong. In 1862, Pema Choki gave birth in Wangdu Choling to the King's second child, who was named Ugyen Wangchuck and who would become the First King in 1907.

After the Duar War with the British concluded, Jigme Namgyal retired in 1866, passing on the seat of Trongsa Penlop to Dungkar Gyaltshen, his elder brother. During his brief retirement until 1869, he spent time at Wangdu Choling with his family, extending the Dzong. Then he resumed politics; he became the 51<sup>st</sup> temporal ruler of Bhutan from 1870 to 1873 and faced numerous internal conflicts in western Bhutan, but Wangdu Choling remained the family home.

The central tower (*utse*) was commissioned by Jigme Namgyal, but extensions were added by his son Ugyen Wangchuck, the First King of Bhutan. Both the First and Second Kings used Wangdu Choling Palace as their residence, although never permanently.

Although it had been the private residence of Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal, it became the Royal Palace when Ugyen Wangchuck was

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<sup>5</sup> A simplified genealogy of the figures in this article according to Bhutanese historiography and oral traditions (mid-19<sup>th</sup>– mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries) is given at the end of this article. Given the complexity of this genealogy, only figures mentioned in the article are represented and not their siblings or spouses, unless relevant.

proclaimed the First Monarch of Bhutan in 1907. It did not, however, technically belong to the First King because of inheritance and marital alliances.

When he became Trongsa Penlop in 1881, Ugyen Wangchuck continued his father's strategy of strengthening his political position through family ties and alliances. He married his first cousin Rinchen Pemo and appointed her elder brother Chimi Dorji as Jakar Dzongpon. He gave his own sister, Yeshe Chodron, in marriage to Chimi Dorji, thus consolidating his alliances through this double marital link.

Then, after the death of their mother Pema Choki in 1884, Ugyen Wangchuck followed the typical matrilocal Bumthang marriage custom and went to live at his wife's place in Lamey Gonpa above the Jakar Dzong while Wangdu Choling Dzong and its estate went to his sister Yeshe Chodron and her husband. An oral story in Bumthang says that the *shagkhor* (see above) of Wangdu Choling was built by Ashi Yeshe Chodron, and not by Jigme Namgyal. Wangdu Choling must also have been damaged by the great earthquake of 1897.

Ugyen Wangchuck lived modestly in Bumthang at Kunzang Choling, situated above Lamey Gonpa (Lam Pelri), and at Thinlay Rabten Manor, just above Jampa Lhakhang where the Second King was born.

Therefore Wangdu Choling belonged to the King's sister Ashi Yeshe Chodron, but it came to be the residence of the Second King by a twist of family history. When the second wife of King Ugyen Wangchuck, Ashi Tsonдру Lhamo, died in 1922, the King promised to offer ten thousand butter lamps and prayers at Kurje and Jampa Lhakhang. However, Ashi Peldron of Lamey Gonpa, who was the daughter of Ugyen Wangchuck's first wife Rinchen, had not been able to arrange items required for this grand offering, such as grain, butter, cheese and rice.

In fact Dorji Rabden, the son of Ugyen Wangchuck's sister Ashi Yeshe Chodron, had also been married briefly with his cousin Ashi Peldron and they had a son Tshering Penjor, but the marriage failed and Dorji Rabden was out of favour with the King. Nevertheless, Dorji Rabden, who was living at Wangdu Choling Dzong, offered to provide the essential materials for this offering ritual and any services required from the estate of Wangdu Choling. Thereafter, Dorji Rabden retrieved the First King's trust. Before the First King's death in 1926, due to misunderstandings, Paro Penlop Tshering Penjor, Dorji Rabden's son, had his hope of becoming the monarch dashed, and the relation between Dorji Rabden and his cousin Prince Jigme Wangchuck (1905–52) de-

teriorated further. These tensions became obvious when Dorji Rabden did not attend the King's coronation in Punakha on 14 March 1927. However, his son Tshering Penjor, who had been appointed Paro Penlop by the First King in 1923, decided to attend,<sup>6</sup> and the family was reconciled after the coronation. These good relations resulted in a double polygynous marriage.

Ashi Phuntsho Chodron, Ashi Yeshe Chodron's grand-daughter, married the King around 1924 and gave birth to the heir of the throne in Trongsa in 1928. A few years later, it is said that Ashi Yeshe Chodron suggested to her nephew King Jigme Wangchuck that he should marry her other grand-daughter Ashi Pema Dechen, the younger sister of Queen Ashi Phuntsho Chodron. Ashi Yeshe Chodron offered them Wangdu Choling, the family estate, which Ashi Pema Dechen was going to inherit from her. Therefore when in 1932, the King married Ashi Pema Dechen, he established his royal summer court there while winter was spent in Trongsa.

The Second King Jigme Wangchuck planned to reconstruct Wangdu Choling Dzong in 1950–51. To this effect, the king dispatched an order to the people of Mangde, Punakha, Haa, Kurtoe and Trongsa to come for reconstruction work. In response, about 300 people came and the Zhemgang Dzongpon Dasho Thinley Namgyal, the Queen's half-brother, was in charge. However, the Trongsa Abbot Dranglapa Dargye, who was close to the King, pleaded with him not to modify the central tower of the Dzong because it was the original work of Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal, but the rest of the complex was to be renovated. Dasho Shingkarlam, the Second King's attendant, related that the meadows of Wangdu Choling were covered with logs felled in the forests of Upper Choekhor, which had been floated on the river down to Wangdu Choling (Ura 1995: 185). An oral tradition from Bumthang says that the large windows (*rabsel*) of the central tower were rotten and Dasho Thinley Namgyal had them remade.

However the full reconstruction was never completed because the Second King passed away in Kunga Rabten Palace in Trongsa, his winter palace, in January 1952. The King's body was brought back, first to Domkhar Palace in Chume (Bumthang) where he lay in state from the second to the fifth Bhutanese month. Then he was briefly moved to Wangdu Choling where his room had been repainted before his cre-

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<sup>6</sup> Phuntsho 2013: 537–38.

mation in Kurje. After the double funeral rite of his father, the Second King, and his grandmother Ashi Yeshe Chodron, who died at Kurje a month after her son, the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck decided to move from Wangdu Choling in Bumthang to Ugyen Pelri Palace in Paro while waiting for the building of Dechencholing Palace in Thimphu to be completed.

Ashi Pema Dechen, Younger Queen Mother, decided to remain on her own property. The Third King gave the keys of the stores to Younger Queen Mother and did not want to take anything that was in the palace of Wangdu Choling, except for four boxes of swords and some guns. Ashi Pema Dechen resided at Wangdu Choling with her son Prince Namgyal Wangchuck (b.1943) and the three princesses Ashi Choki (b.1937), Ashi Deki (b.1944) and Ashi Pema (b.1949), who were the subsequent and ultimate dwellers and estate holders of the Dzong. The princesses resided in the Dzong until they left for the capital Thimphu in the early 1970s.

During the troubles in Tibet and the Indo-China war of 1962, the people of Bumthang feared that they might need to leave the place for safer zones. So then, Wangdu Choling's valuable objects were packed and other assets were auctioned at Lingapang, the archery field near the palace. Wangdu Choling became the Royal Government's property in 1996/1997.

This historical note might lead to a reconsideration of the date of the foundation of Wangdu Choling. If the wedding of Jigme Namgyal and Pema Choki was celebrated in 1853/1854 at Wangdu Choling, as Bhutanese historians claim,<sup>7</sup> and their first child Trinley Tobgay was born in 1856, there must have been some kind of house at Wangdu Choling before 1857, the "official date" of construction. This leads to another problem. Traditionally in Bhutan, it is explained that Wangdu Choling means the "religious place where the power is gathered". It is a fitting name to commemorate a victory (*wangdu*) and the religious part of the name (*choling*) is said to have been given to Jigme Namgyal by his lama Changchub Tsongru (1817–56) when the latter gave a religious discourse there.<sup>8</sup> However, the biography of the lama does not appear to note this particular event, and the last time the lama travelled to Bumthang was in 1853, when he came for the reconsecration of Ja-

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<sup>7</sup> National Library report on Wangdu Choling 2012 (?), unpublished.

<sup>8</sup> On this lama, see Pommaret 2004: 73–89. See also Phuntsho 2013: 432–38.



kar Dzong after a fire, before the conflict between Tsonдру Gyeltshen and Jigme Namgyal even started. Therefore several areas of uncertainty remain in the history of the palace.

Implicitly, the history of Wangdu Choling tells the story of the agrarian revolution initiated by the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. In the mid-1950s the socio-agricultural reforms of the Third King led to the dismembering of large estates held by the Bumthang noble families, including the royal family, and the freeing of serfs (*drap* and *zap*).<sup>9</sup> It became increasingly difficult for the owners to run such estates without their numerous servants and landless tenants, and without the taxes in kind from their “protected appanage families” (*sunma*).<sup>10</sup> Some families, unable to adapt to the new socio-economic structure, never recovered from their loss, and many estates could not be maintained because of lack of revenue and labour.

The history of Wangdu Choling also illustrates how, through a network of alliances, the matrilineal inheritance and cross-cousin marriage customs of the Bumthang region come to light. These customs reinforced the socio-economic and religious links between the dominant families,<sup>11</sup> but also demonstrate that if men had political power and titles, women had the property. Wangdu Choling, which is associated with the Kings by the Bhutanese, never belonged *de jure* to the First, Second and Third Kings, but to the female members of the royal family. This arrangement is common in Bhutan and might be one of the reasons why, even today in Bhutan, men are in positions of prestige while women have the real assets and are reluctant to enter politics.

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<sup>9</sup> I use this word with reluctance as the word “serf” implies a different socio-economic constellation. This is the reason why the Bhutanese terms are included. I intend to study this system in depth in a forthcoming work.

<sup>10</sup> Phuntsho 2013: 543–46.

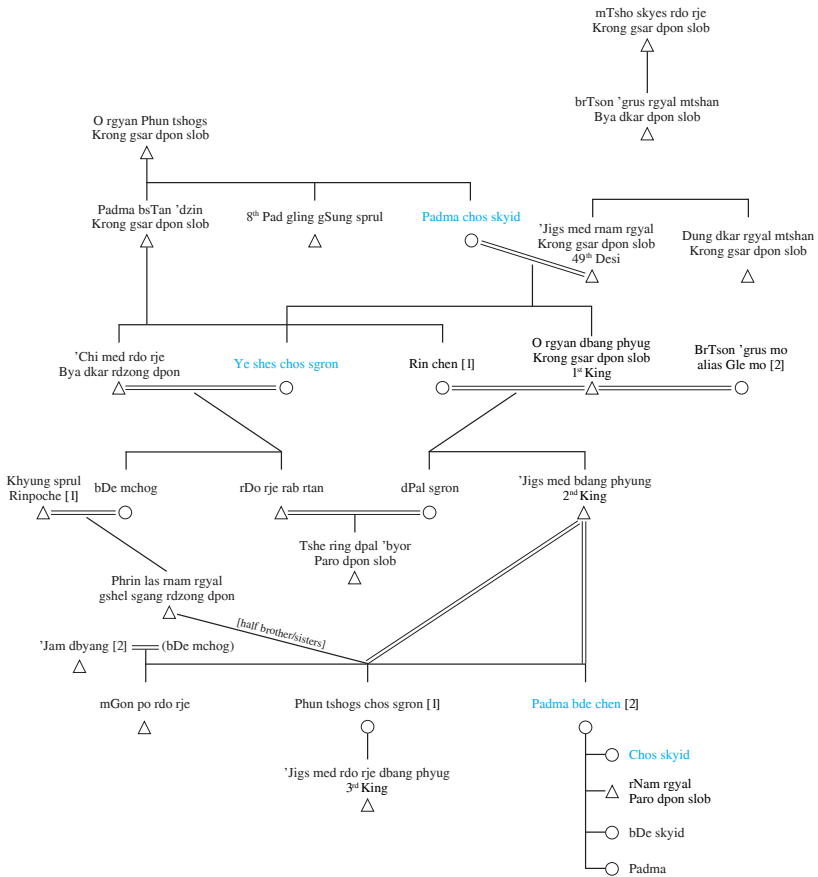
<sup>11</sup> Pommaret in press.

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Simplified and NON-EXHAUSTIVE genealogy of the figures in this article according to Bhutanese historiography and oral tradition (mid-19<sup>th</sup>–mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries)

Given the complexity of this genealogy, only figures mentioned in this article are represented and not their siblings or spouses if not relevant to this article.



*Symbols*

- = marriages
- collateral relatives and direct line
- Male Female
- 1, 2: number of spouses
- Blue: successive ladies, owners of Wangdu Choling
- reincarnations and titles*

## LIST OF TERMS AND NAMES WITH WYLIE transliteration

Ashi (A zhi / A lce): respectful title for ladies of the royal family  
 Bumthang (Bum thang)  
 Changchub Tsongru (Byang chub brtson 'grus)  
 Chamkar Chu (ICam mkhar chu)  
 Chime Dorji ('Chi med rdo rje)  
 Choekhor (Chos 'khor)  
 Choki (Chos skyid)  
*chukhor mani (chu 'khor ma ni)*  
 Chume (Chu smad)  
 Dasho (Drag shos): honorary title for men of the royal family  
 or title given by the King.  
 Dranglapa Dargye (Drang la pa Dar rgyas)  
 Domkhar (Dom mkhar)  
 Dorji Rabden (rDo rje rab brtan)  
*drap (grvap)*  
 Dunkar Gyeltshen (Dung dkar rgyal mtshan)  
*dzong (rdzong)*  
 Dzongpon (rDzong dpon) chief administrator of a district  
 Jakar (Bya dkar)  
 Jampa Lhakhang (Byams pa'i lha khang)  
 Je Khenpo (rJe mkhan po): head abbot of Bhutan  
 Jigme Namgyal ('Jigs med rnam rgyal)  
 Jigme Wangchuck ('Jigs med dbang 'phyug)  
 Kunga Rabten (Kun dga' rab brtan)  
 Kunzang Choling (Kun bzang chos gling)  
 Kunzang Tenpey Nyima (Kun bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma)  
 Kurje (sKu rjes)  
 Lamey Gonpa or Lam Pelri (Bla med dgon pa / Bla ma dpal ri)  
 Lingkana (gLing ka na)  
 Ngawang Choki Lodoe (Ngag dbang chos skyid blo gros)  
 Paro (sPa gro / Pa ro)  
 Peling Sungtrul (Pad gling gsung sprul)  
 Peldron (dPal sgron)  
 Pema Choki (Padma chos skyid)  
 Pemalingpa (Padma gling pa)  
 Pema Dechen (Padma bde chen)  
 Penlop (dPon slob): governor of a district  
 Phuntsho Chodron (Phun tshogs chos sgron)  
*rabsel (rab gsal)*  
 Rinchen Pemo (Rin chen dpal mo)  
*shagkhor (gshag 'khor)*  
 Shamkhar (gSham mkhar)  
 Shingkarlam (Shing mkhar bla ma)  
*sunma (srung ma)*

Tamshing (gTam zhing)  
 Thinley Namgyal ('Phrin las rnam rgyal)  
 Thinlay Rabten ('Phrin las rab brtan)  
 Trongsa (Krong gsar)  
 Tshering Penjor (Tshe ring dpal 'byor)  
 Tsondru Gyeltshen (brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan)  
 Tsondru Lhamo (brTson 'grus lha mo)  
 Tshokye Dorji (mTsho skyes rdo rje)  
 Ugyen Phuntsho (O rgyan phun tshogs)  
 Ugyen Wangdi (O rgyan dbang 'dus)  
 Ugyen Wangchuck (O rgyan dbang phyug)  
*utse (dbus rtse)*  
 Wangdu Choling (dBang 'dus chos gling)  
 Yeshe Chodron (Ye shes chos sgron)  
 Yonten Gyeltshen (Yon rtan rgyal mtshan)  
*zap (zap)*  
 Zhemgang (gZhal sgang)  
 Zhongar (gZhong sgar)



Wangdu Choling Place north and eastern sides and the Lingkana temple, the prayer wheels and the Jakar Dzong in the background © Yannick Jooris



Wangdu Choling Palace east side and the Lingkana temple in winter © Yannick Jooris



Wangdu Choling Palace north side © Yannick Jooris



Lingkana Temple and water prayer-wheels south side © Yannick Jooris



The Central tower (Utse) and window (*rabsel*) © Yannick Jooris