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Challenges and Achievements in the Life of a Tibetan Lama who became an Electrician: the Fifth Dragkar Lama

Nicola Schneider

Introduction

In the Tibetan world, the term lama or religious teacher (from Sanskrit *guru*) is complex, referring both to a way of designating a person who has the authority to confer initiation and to a hereditary title. * In this latter case, two possibilities exist: either the inheritance is rooted in family legacy, generally from father to son,¹ or it is identified within a spiritual lineage which is perpetuated by finding and recognizing the reincarnation, or *tülku* (ཐུལ་སྐྱེ), of an eminent lama recently deceased.² The institution of *tülku* is one of the main characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism in which reincarnated lamas are considered to be emanations of transcendent deities who are devoted, life after life, to the service of others. More specifically, they are reincarnations of buddhas or bodhisattvas whose main role is to ensure the continuity of religious institutions and the spiritual life within them.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the *tülku* receive specific treatment: often recognized at a young age by other religious adepts of high status, they inherit not only the name of their predecessor but also his personal property and in particular his monastic residence (ལྷོ་ཁང་), including the responsibility of its affiliated monasteries. These *tülku* generally receive a special education, supposed to enable them to fulfill as best as possible their role as teachers, to perform initiations, and to bestow blessings. For this education, in relation to their rank, they are entrusted to the best teachers available. But what happens when the transmission of religious knowledge and, no less significant, the sacred spaces and material legacies they contain, has not been possible as tradition has provided? The purpose of this article is to present the case of a contemporary lama—the fifth Dragkar Lama—who encountered such obstacles.

1. The Dragkar Lama lineage

A long winding path leads to the hill on which the monastic seat of the Dragkar Lama, Dragkar Phelgyé Ling (བཀའ་དཀར་འཕེལ་རྒྱལ་གླིང་), was built.³ Upon arrival, a panoramic view opens on the river, and then on the other side lies the city of Kandzé (དཀར་མངོས་), capital of the prefecture of the same name and located in Kham, now incorporated in the Chinese province of Sichuan. One hundred and thirty Tibetan nuns currently live there in small individual houses arranged around a main temple. It is one of the two large convents of the city belonging to the reformed school of Gélukpa (དགེ་ལུགས་པ་) whose monks and nuns theoretically all practice a strict celibacy, unlike other Tibetan Buddhist schools. When I visited this place for the first time on August 2013, the lama was absent. “He is at home in Lhasa,” the nuns replied. However, they also hastened to add that he would come to visit them soon. So I decided to come back a little later in the month to meet the one who is the present incarnation of a lineage that had aroused my interest a few years earlier when I studied the autobiographies of his predecessors, in

particular those of the first and third Dragkar Lama, included in the compilation of the latter's writings (གསུང་འབྲུག་) in twenty volumes.⁴

The Dragkar Lama lineage, which remains little known in the wider Tibetan world, plays a very important role in the existence of female monasticism in eastern Tibet. The first master of this lineage, Jampa Rapten (བྱམ་པ་རབ་བརྟན་ 1735–1819), most likely established female monasticism through the foundation of the original convent in the Kandzé region. After studying in Lhasa for several years, where he had met nuns, he returned to his regional birthplace and noted a total lack of nuns. He decided to remedy this situation. Not without difficulty, he first had to persuade the local population who saw little interest in having their wives and daughters leave the house to join a convent. He next had to face his fellow monks who threatened to destroy the creation of such an institution, fearing the loss of income if nuns also began to offer ritual services. The lama did not allow himself to be intimidated, however, and proceeded to found the first women's convent, although he forbade the nuns for the moment from participating in household rituals to avoid further unrest.

Little is known to us of the second Dragkar Lama, but the third left a relatively detailed autobiography, completed by his disciples. Lozang Palden (ལོ་བཟང་པདལ་ལྷན་ 1866–1929) was first of all a great scholar who received his education at the monastery of Drépfung (འབྲས་ལྷུང་མ་) and who acquired a reputation for having challenged and refuted one of the greatest intellectuals of his time, Ju Mipham (འབྲུ་མི་པམ་ 1846–1912) of the Nyingmapa (རྫོང་མ་པ་) school⁵, in the knowledge that a lama's worth and knowledge is also measured by how well he manages to challenge the ideas of others and succeeds in convincing them to accept his alternatives. But above all, what interests us within the framework of this article is that he perpetuated the support of female monasticism in his region by giving nuns regular teachings and by founding several convents which still exist. He introduced Buddhist study programs such as there were none elsewhere, it seems, and he also taught methods of making “precious pills” (རིན་ཆེན་རིལ་བྱུ་), highly valued in Tibetan medicine for their efficacy in the event of illness. He thus left strong imprints that local contemporary masters have not failed to emphasize.⁶ Upon his death, his incarnation was found in the person of Lozang Tupten Palden Özer (ལོ་བཟང་ཐུབ་པདལ་ལྷན་འོད་ཟེར་ 1929?–1950?) within a family of pastoral nomads near the Dzokchen monastery (རྫོགས་ཆེན་དགོན་པ་) in eastern Tibet. Like his predecessors, the fourth Dragkar Lama was sent to Lhasa to follow higher Buddhist studies at the Drépfung monastery. However, due to fragile health, he died there ten years later at a young age.

As is customary in Tibet, the entourage of the deceased then began to seek his successor and ended up finding him in the noble family (སྐར་པ་) of the Chapa (ཆ་པ་), residing in Lhasa. This choice was later confirmed by the fourteenth Dalai Lama in person.

2. An eventful life

The son of a lay civil servant of intermediate rank⁷ and of a mother descended from the famous Prime Minister Shatra Lönchen (བཤད་སྐྱུ་སློན་ཆེན་),⁸ the one we call the Dragkar Lama in the remainder of this article—who is in fact the fifth in his lineage—was born in 1950. His parents were from Shigatse (གཞིས་གཤེ་), the second largest city in Tibet located in the Tsang region (གཙང་); but at the time of this “son-in-law” marriage,⁹ they were given a new name,

Chapa, and they settled in the capital of Lhasa. They had a total of six children: three girls and three boys. The two older brothers were recognized one after the other as incarnations: one of a lama from a small monastery located in Kongpo (south of Tibet) and the other as that of the chief abbot of Ganden monastery (བླ་མ་ལྷན་པ་), who furthermore ran the Gélukpa school.¹⁰ It was not uncommon at the time for one or more sons of an aristocratic family to be recognized as *tülku*, thus ensuring a lasting link between the monasteries in question and the political elite of Lhasa who considered themselves for the most part as Gélukpa.¹¹

It was around the year 1954 that the Dragkar Lama or Tenzin Lozang Nyendrak (བླ་མ་ལྷན་པ་ལོ་མོ་ལྷན་པ་), the third son, was recognized as the embodiment of his predecessor, when he was only four years old. The same year, his enthronement began to be organized in Kham, in which the monastery thenceforward became considered his primary residence, Dragkar Phelgyé Ling.¹² All his family and their servants traveled to, and attended the ceremony, with great pomp. He and his mother were transported in a horse-drawn carriage, while his father was mounted on horse. According to the Dragkar Lama, between seventy and eighty people accompanied them from Lhasa, and an even larger reception committee, made up of Khampas and Tibetans of the east, awaited them in Chamdo (ཆམ་མདོ་), the border town between central Tibet and Kham. Upon arrival in Kandzé at the end of 1955, they were taken in charge by the monks and nuns of Dragkar Phelgyé Ling and then welcomed with all the honors due to their rank by the local population.

<Figure 2.1: The young, fifth Dragkar Lama (center of photo). Tashi Tsering collection.>

The Dragkar Lama recalls little of the proceedings of his intronization ceremony. He just remembers that his nurse, the nun Künzang, had to stand behind his throne and hold him steady to thus prevent him from moving or falling from above. Likewise, he knew that their stay in Kandzé was shortened considerably due to the political tensions (with the People's Republic of China) which began to be felt in this part of eastern Tibet. Indeed, in the spring of 1956, the first reforms were introduced in Kandzé, and the local population began to revolt.¹³ Many Khampa men consequently congregated in the mountains where they initiated a guerrilla movement.¹⁴ The Dragkar Lama and his entourage alternatively decided to return to Lhasa, where the policies pursued by the Chinese authorities were much less tense at the time.

Having returned to his hometown, the Dragkar Lama was sent, as anticipated by custom, to undergo his apprenticeship at the Drépong monastery, accompanied by his nun nursemaid, his steward (གསོལ་དཔོན་; responsible for the preparation of his meals), and the nun Ösel Lhamo of the Samtenling convent (also called Watak) of Dawu, one of the counties of the prefecture of Kandzé in eastern Tibet. Just as his predecessor, he joined the “residential unit” (ཁང་མཚན་ or ཁམས་ཚན་) of Téhor where all the monks of the Kandzé region were grouped; this regionalist tradition was intended to facilitate exchanges and hence, the transmission of teachings, the mutual understanding among the various Tibetan dialects being sometimes difficult. As he was too young, the Dragkar Lama did not yet have a regular teacher, who would eventually be chosen among one of his predecessor's disciples.

At the beginning of 1959, the political situation in Lhasa became equally tense, pushing the Tibetan population to rise in revolt. On March 10, 1959, when the Dalai Lama was expected to meet with Chinese officials without his personal guards, the Tibetan population, suspicious and fearful for their spiritual leader, blocked the exit of his palace to prevent him from

leaving.¹⁵ It not only began several days of rebellion which allowed the Dalai Lama to flee Tibet into exile but also resulted in a bloody repression launched by the Chinese authorities that lasted decades. On the front line of attack were the large monasteries whose monks were suspected of having participated in the uprising. Several of them were bombed, among which Dréping monastery, where the Dragkar Lama studied, was one of the most affected.¹⁶ Mass arrests followed, in particular of monks, but also of nobles and all people of other various socio-economic backgrounds who participated directly or indirectly in the revolts against the Chinese authorities. As far as the young monks were concerned, the Chinese authorities allowed them to rejoin their families, although there are testimonies of minors who were imprisoned and treated as adults responsible for their acts.¹⁷ Initially, the Chinese authorities were sensitive to the case of the young *tülku* and in November of 1963 founded for this purpose a “class for young *tülku*” (གཞན་ལུ་ལོ་རྒྱུད་སྐྱེ་འཛིན་གྲྭ་; also called ལྷ་མ་བཟ་) near the Néchung monastery (གནས་རྒྱུད་; located not far from the Dréping monastery in the suburbs of Lhasa). They specifically enrolled adolescents recognized as reincarnations such as those of the two ex-regents of Tibet, the sixth Reting Rinpoche (རུ་ལྷོང་འཛིན་པོ་ཆེ་ 1948–1997) and the fourth Taktra Rinpoche (སྐྱུ་བྲག་འཛིན་པོ་ཆེ་, born in 1954/1955), Drigung Könchok Tenzin (འི་གུང་དགོན་མཚོག་བསྟན་འཛིན་, born 1942), and Minyak Chökyi Gyeltsen (མི་གྲག་ཚོས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན་, born 1947); eleven children in total spent some time in this class.¹⁸ However, the school was closed shortly thereafter and did not reopen until 1985 due to the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).¹⁹

<Figure 2.2: Students of the “class for young *tülku*”, Lhasa, 1964. Minyak Chökyi Gyeltsen collection.>

As for the fifth Dragkar Lama, he was relegated to the group of young monks who returned to the family home during the first reprisals in March of 1959, without passing through any institution.

The years that followed were the darkest for the Tibetans and in particular for the religious. The monasteries gradually lost their inhabitants, as the authorities confiscated sacred ritual objects, all religious materials and personal possessions considered to be either financially or spiritually valuable, and much-needed furniture as well as destroyed premises. The Dragkar Lama still speaks with difficulty about what happened to his family, with the exception of sharing that his parents had to participate in many “self-criticism sessions”. As for himself, he mostly stayed at the house where he looked after the children of his older sisters, among other things. And when he reached working age, he replaced his parents when he could, who were sentenced to hard labor, to spare them from the worst of assignments. He then left Lhasa for Chamdo where he was employed to repair roads. Thereafter, he was sent to the Kongpo region, south-east of the capital, where he had to join the “lama labor camp”, infamous for the large number of deaths during the years of the “Great Leap Forward” which in Tibet took place shortly after the uprising and the mass arrests of former Tibetan and religious officials. There he met Keutsang Lama (ཀེའུ་ཚང་ལྷ་མ་, born in 1944) who testified to the horrors of that time, published later in his memoirs after he escaped into exile.²⁰ In 1973, the Dragkar Lama was permitted to travel to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, in order to undergo training as an electrician. The prospect of becoming a skilled worker was probably a very good solution to his status as a “class enemy”, based on his aristocratic past and religious status. In addition, this professional choice fell into the category of “fat” jobs when one had the chance to work for a government authority, not to mention the benefits in kind that it could

generate.²¹ Indeed, among the various projects of technological development envisaged, the electrification of the country had a very important political significance at that time, in connection with the ambition of modernization, despite its very relative success.²²

It should not be forgotten, however, that the introduction of electricity to Lhasa largely pre-dates China's annexation of the country. More precisely it dates back to the 1920s, when there was still no electricity in the Chinese countryside,²³ and it was one of the desired modernization projects introduced by the thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933). He sent four young Tibetan men of noble descent to England to receive a modern education.²⁴ One of these nobles, a man named Rindzin Dorjé Ringang (རིག་འཛིན་རྟོ་རྗེ་རིན་མཁེངས་), received training in electrical engineering.²⁵ Upon his return to the country, he built the first power plant in Lhasa and remained in charge of its smooth operation. However, it seems that it only illuminated the streets of the capital, as well as the summer palace of the Dalai Lama. As for the electrification of the country, and in particular of the countryside, it is still not a hundred percent complete as of the time of the publication of this article.²⁶

During his formative years in Sichuan, the Dragkar Lama met his future wife, originally from Xi'an. She herself was also born into a noble family on the side of her Han father, who married a Tibetan woman. After raising her in Xi'an, the parents moved to Lhasa, where her father worked for a time in a troupe of actors and dancers producing cultural performances for the Chinese army.

In 1977, the young couple formed by the Dragkar Lama and his fiancée decided to return to Lhasa to find work and settle down. They married in 1982. The Dragkar Lama says that his studies in Chengdu convinced him that becoming a monk and practicing celibacy was ultimately not his wish. "I changed my mind," according to his own words. It must be noted, however, that at the time, it was probably not even possible to consider a religious career.

Soon after their marriage, their first son was born in 1983, and two years later the second followed. Both sons continue to be close to their parents, the youngest having even decided to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming an electrician himself.

3. The reconnection with his role as the Dragkar Lama

The religious renewal in Kham began at the same time when the Dragkar Lama became a father. At Dragkar Phelgyé Ling, the now elderly nuns who had survived the dark years of the reforms and the Cultural Revolution were the first to rejoin the monastery and employed their combined energies to rebuild it.²⁷ There were also many local devotees who contributed to the reopening of the convent by helping in the reconstruction, some of whom were able to hide statues and texts which they then brought back to donate to the nuns and the lama. However, the Dragkar Lama was absent, which prompted his many disciples to send letters asking him to return; according to the Dragkar Lama, he received "Lots of letters." Then some nuns left for Lhasa on a pilgrimage, taking the opportunity to meet him and to plead his return to the monastery. However, the letters and visit of the nuns proved to be in vain, as the Dragkar Lama did not allow himself to be convinced, seeing his future close to his family.

<Figure 3.1: The pioneer nuns who participated in the reconstruction of Dragkar Phelgyé Ling in the 1980s. Photo exhibited in the temple of Dragkar Phelgyé Ling (2013).>

In 1985, when the Dragkar Lama became a father for the second time, the nuns quartered at his monastic seat sent monks as emissaries on their behalf to ask him again to return to Kham. He had no choice but to explain to them with an open heart that he wanted to give up his role as a lama, and furthermore, he was in a complicated situation because he willingly renounced his monastic vows in order to marry. According to his own words, he consequently felt no desire to return to the monastery and participate in the religious renewal. However, the emissary monks remained in Lhasa to continue to press him, saying that they would not leave Lhasa until they had persuaded him to return. They used one of the primary arguments, “You are our Rinpoché [another term of address term for *tülku*, more common in central Tibet]; it does not matter to us whether you are married. These days, even the Panchen Lama has.” They thus alluded to the second great spiritual leader of Tibet (in the ecclesial hierarchy, he is second after the Dalai Lama), who is also from the school of Gélukpa and necessarily a celibate religious figure. Remaining in the country and having benefited for a time from the trust that the Chinese authorities placed in him, the Panchen Lama was eventually condemned in turn, in 1964, for having drafted a petition in 70,000 Chinese characters denouncing the results of Chinese policy in Tibet.²⁸ After being detained for nearly ten years and then living under house arrest in Beijing for a few more years, the tenth Panchen Lama (1938-1989) decided to marry a woman of Han origin, Li Jie (or Dechen Wangmo བདེ་ཆེན་དབང་མོ་, her Tibetan name), the granddaughter of a general of the former nationalist government, despite the fact that his religious role theoretically requires celibacy. This decision of course caused great surprise among the Tibetan population and primarily, among his own parents. However, it also seems that this act of marriage could have been calculated in advance, with the decision having been taken by necessity in order to regain the trust of the Chinese authorities and thus to be able to continue work on behalf of the Tibetans, according to Arjia Rinpoche (མ་རྒྱ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་, born 1950), who worked closely with him in the years to follow.²⁹ The couple had a daughter, Yéshé Rinzin Wangmo (ཡེ་ཤེ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་དབང་མོ་), affectionately called “princess” (སྤུ་མོ་) by the Tibetans.³⁰

This argument helped to change the Dragkar Lama’s mind to a certain extent, but not because he considered himself as important as the Panchen Lama, he emphasized several times in our conversation, but because he began to perceive differently the stakes of his function as lama in this religious revitalization. Nevertheless, he still did not allow himself to be convinced.

Some time later, during the Panchen Lama's second visit to Kham in 1986,³¹ the nuns confided in him their wish to bring back the Dragkar Lama; they literally complained that *rinpoches* completely foreign to their lineage had come to visit their monastery, but still not their own master. These same *rinpoches* also visited him in Lhasa. In response to the nuns’ wishes, the Panchen Lama contacted the local government of Kandzé, asking for their support to convince the Dragkar Lama to return.

In 1987, he finally heard reason. He then returned to Kandzé for the first time since his enthronement, accompanied by a steward (གསོལ་དངོན་). In response to the question asked of his wife, if she had not been worried to see her husband leave for his original monastery and plunge back into his past, she replied with a smile on her lips that no, that she was far too busy to be concerned, as she had two young children to raise and her own work.

Upon arrival at Dragkar Phelgyé Ling, the lama discovered the monastery was in a seriously dilapidated condition. Not only did it lack water and electricity, but several nuns had to share

often rolled up), and the embroidered silk fabrics that decorate his private apartment at the Dragkar Phelgyé Ling monastery. After a rather general discussion, the Dragkar Lama takes me to see his private chapel, installed in an upstairs bedroom. Here we find his altar and several glass display cabinets in which he carefully preserves the few statues that the population of Kandzé was able to save from destruction during the Cultural Revolution, as well as a copy of the collected writings in twenty volumes written by the third Dragkar Lama. The Dragkar Lama explains to me that he has given himself the mission of republishing them in order to make known the history of his lineage, several of the volumes having already been released. The re-edition or even the digitization of ancient Buddhist or historical texts is an endeavor to which many intellectuals, religious, and lay alike have applied themselves since the 1980s. The goal, of course, is the preservation of heritage but also its dissemination to a wider audience. Thus, the collected writings of the third Dragkar Lama have been available for some time now on an American database at the Tibetan Buddhist Research Center, today called the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, which is freely accessible.³⁶

<Figure 4.1: The glass display cabinet in which the Dragkar Lama preserves his heritage: the collected writings of his predecessor and a statue of Śākyamuni Buddha. Photo: Nicola Schneider (2015).>

The residence of the Dragkar Lama somewhat reflects his character: an urban household head in discreet and modest conjunction with being an important religious figure as are so many men recognized as incarnations in the lineages of the Gélukpa school, in theory particularly focused on the study of texts and their vow of celibacy. His wife contributes greatly in playing her part well, busy around the guest that I am to pour welcome tea and to offer the typically served savory Tibetan *khabtse*-cookies. Nothing distinguishes their family from another, except that the servant is a nun. One of the sons is present; he continues to live with his parents, together with his wife and son, who is taken care of by the grandparents, having both retired at a young age.³⁷

Until recently, the Dragkar Lama still had to juggle two primary professional careers: on the one hand, his work as an electrician, and on the one hand, his work as a lama. Since the early 1990s, he has also been elected as one of the representatives of the municipal branch of the Lhasa Buddhist Association (ལྷ་ས་གོ་ནང་བསྟན་མཐུན་ཚོགས་པོད་ཡན་ལག་མཐུན་ཚོགས་), founded in 1956 and managed under the aegis of the state.³⁸ In Lhasa, there are currently a total of twenty representatives, including one nun from the Tsamkhung convent (མཚམས་ལྷང་ཨ་ནི་དགོན་པ་). Although this function is entirely voluntary and more “decorative” (རྒྱན་ཆ་) than active,³⁹ he noted that he devotes a considerable amount of time to his responsibilities.

In our conversations, the Dragkar Lama expresses the desire that his future successor be more qualified than him. Indeed, due to the combination of not having been able to receive the religious training which was due to him as the incarnate custodian of a spiritually sacred lineage and having to work at the same time in order to provide for the needs of the family he founded, he feels that he is not entirely able to live up to his role as spiritual master. Admittedly, he tried to make up for some of the loss of spiritual training during the dark years of political reform and then of the Cultural Revolution. In 1988, he joined the Chinese Academy for Higher Tibetan Buddhist studies (ལྷ་ས་གོ་བོད་བརྒྱུད་མཐོ་རིམ་ནང་བསྟན་སློབ་གླིང་), an institution in Beijing founded in 1987 by the tenth Panchen Lama with the support of the Buddhist Association at the national level. Located in the Yellow Temple (Tib. སེར་ཕོ་འདུ་ཁང་ or

མེ་ཅིང་ལྷུ་བུ་ཕྱོགས་དགོན་པ་མེར་པོ་རྒྱ་ཁང་; Chin. Xihuang Si 西黃寺) and originally built by the Qing emperor in the 17th century, it was opened with the aim of providing a classical and modern education specially intended for “young” incarnations who had not been able to follow their religious formation during the previous three decades.⁴⁰ From all over Tibet, the tenth Panchen Lama then invited masters from the five Tibetan Buddhist schools—Nyingmapa, Kagyupa (བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་པ་), Sakyapa (ས་སྐུ་པ་), Gélukpa, and Jonangpa (རྫོན་པ་)—as well as Bönpo (བོན་པོ་) masters to become teachers in his new institution.⁴¹ It was not easy given that a whole generation of masters had not been able to be trained (due to the previously mentioned decades of religious repression), and many had died in prison or fled the country to go into exile in India, Nepal, or Bhutan.⁴²

The curriculum of the academy was structured around two poles; on the one hand, they provided training on monastic formation, and on the other hand, they provided “conventional” university courses. Thus, the *tülkus* also learnt the “five traditional Buddhist sciences” (རིག་གནས་ཆེ་བ་ལྔ་) —art and techniques (བོ་རིག་པ་), medicine (གསོ་བ་རིག་པ་), grammar (སྐད་རིག་པ་), epistemology (ཚད་མ་རིག་པ་), esoteric or philosophical sciences (ནང་དོན་རིག་པ་)—as modern sciences, such as history, Chinese, and English.⁴³ A certain political ideology was also taught, as the agenda of the Chinese government was above all a question of producing patriotic lamas who cherish the unity of the country.⁴⁴

The Dragkar Lama was among the first graduates of some 40 students to join the academy in 1987. Their levels of Buddhist education differed widely, as did their family situations. While certain incarnated lamas such as Arjia Rinpoche (also born in 1950)⁴⁵ had remained celibate monks throughout the previous thirty years, even if nothing on the outside distinguished them from the laity until the early 1980s, other monks such as the Panchen Lama and the Dragkar Lama were married and had families. Regarding their respective religious knowledge, some *tülkus* had continued to follow the teachings in secret, while others like the Dragkar Lama had remained completely cut off from their monastery and especially from teachers capable of transmitting initiations and trainings in monastic formation and other religious practices.

The Dragkar Lama remained at the Chinese Academy for Higher Tibetan Buddhist studies for an entire year, from September 1987 until the summer of 1988.⁴⁶ It goes without saying that such a program of study spread over a single year, while elsewhere in exile nearly twenty years are necessary to assimilate a curriculum which appears the same at first glance, could not compensate for his lack of knowledge due to the period of religious repression.

<Figure 4.2: The first class of *tülku* students at the Chinese Academy for Higher Tibetan Buddhist studies in Beijing. Tsangtruk Topla collection.>

5. Life in the monasteries of the Dragkar Lama

While the Dragkar Lama goes about his business in Lhasa, his monasteries in Kham are run by the nuns themselves. Thus, it is the master of discipline (དགེ་སྐོས་) and the master of teachings (*slob dpon*) at Dragkar Phelgyé Ling, both aged around forty, who have taken responsibility for the ritual calendar and training of young nuns. They are proud of what they have managed to restore, even if they regret the absence of their lama; however, he occasionally comes to honor them with his presence.⁴⁷

<Figure 5.1: Photo taken during an audience with the Dragkar Lama in his apartment at Dragkar Phelgyé Ling; from left to right: his wife, his youngest son, a nun, and a disciple. Photo: Nicola Schneider (2013).>

Elsewhere at the Ngangang Convent (ངང་གཤང་མ་ནི་དགོན་པ་) near the city of Drango (བྲག་འགོ་), it is again the nuns who take care of daily affairs and rituals, while the teaching of the basics such as reading and Buddhist philosophy has been outsourced to a scholar monk (མཁན་པོ་). Furthermore, the community has succeeded in maintaining not only the religious services rendered to the local population but also the manufacture and marketing of “precious pills” (རིན་ཆེན་རིལ་བུ་) according to the traditional recipe invented by the third Dragkar Lama, Losang Palden. As during this past period when they were initially introduced, these pills are very sought after by the faithful to treat diseases related to the stomach (ཚོ་བ་), bile (མཁྲི་པ་), and other parts of the body, but they are also particularly valued for the treatment of “men’s diseases” (ཚོ་ནད་).

However, not everything looks as perfect as appearances lead one to believe. In March and the months to follow in the year of 2008, during the third great Tibetan uprising which stretched across the whole country, many nuns from the monasteries of the Dragkar Lama took part in the demonstrations in not only Kandzé but also in Drango.⁴⁸ Like other religious and lay people, they demanded the return of the Dalai Lama and the end of a religious re-education campaign, which had been in full swing since 2007.⁴⁹ One of the nuns explained in a letter left to a parent, “I cannot bear any longer the constant denunciation campaign against His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I cannot even concentrate on my prayers.”⁵⁰ As a result, many nuns were imprisoned, often aware of the fate that would befall them.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the remaining nuns yet again returned to demonstrate, specifically to demand the release of their incarcerated sisters.

These tensions between the monasteries and the local government continue to exist; some people, including nuns, were still detained during my fieldwork research, but they have little or no impact on the Dragkar Lama himself. The latter, on the contrary, has secured a network of support in particular with the local authorities of Lhasa and of Kandzé but also with the central government leaders, with whom he enjoys a good reputation, according to his own statements. This does not mean that he is one of those religious masters who tries to win their favors at all costs. He has never held a position of high responsibility in the Buddhist Association nor in any other administration, positions which could provoke controversy or attract mistrust from his fellow Tibetans. He also does not advertise himself or his monasteries on one of the many websites that some lamas in Tibet now use to promote themselves, in particular to attract Han disciples.⁵² He therefore lives very discreetly with his family and acts in parallel for the well-being of his religious community.

Conclusion

The life and activities of the fifth Dragkar Lama, born in the year directly following China’s invasion of Tibet, obviously constitute a special case, in that he had to make his own personal choices in the face of a new political situation which did not allow Tibetans to envisage the continuity of a centuries-old, cherished monastic tradition. Recognized as the incarnation of a deceased master shortly before the time when religion was in the crosshairs of the new authorities, he was forced to abandon his apprenticeship prematurely to look for another

future. It could be said that in this misfortune, he was lucky, since it was precisely his young age that allowed him to escape the worst of the abuses committed against many of the other monks and *tülkus*, who were imprisoned and forced to work in extreme conditions during the following twenty years, as reported by other witnesses. However, the little he tells of this period also suggests that he did not live well during this period or at least, that he is trying to forget it or feels compelled to do so. At the end of the Cultural Revolution and the time of the premise of religious liberalization in China, he had already made and followed his choice: to marry and found a family.

The Dragkar Lama is far from being the only one to have opted for this solution, as we have seen through the example of the tenth Panchen Lama, who is a fellow incarnation of the Gélukpa lineage. Many more lamas can be added to the list, to the point that criticism of their married status has arisen in Tibetan society. Although the exact extent to which the monks married remains unknown to this day, the attitude of another great lama of eastern Tibet strongly engaged in religious renewal, Khenpo Jikmé Phüntsook of the Nyingmapa school, theoretically more open to the status of monks as married religious specialists, is well known. According to Khenpo Jikmé Phüntsook, it was essential to purify and reform the ethics of Tibetan Buddhism to correct the many corruptions that had occurred in the previous thirty years.⁵³ Furthermore, the maintenance of monastic discipline—and therefore of celibacy—as well as the serious study of classical Buddhist texts were the *sine qua non* condition for re-establishing these traditional ethics.⁵⁴ However, judging from the popularity of many other married religious masters among Tibetans, there also seems to be some tolerance due to the fact, among others, that several Tibetan Buddhist schools accept the married religious in their midst.

The life and religious status of the Dragkar Lama raises the two primary questions of religious transmission and the continuity of the tradition today in Tibet after a long rupture due to restrictive measures of sometimes violent nature by an authoritarian regime. Although some masters like him no longer have all the intellectual knowledge related to their position, they have something inherent in their incarnated status that allows them to perpetuate the role of spiritual guide. The Dragkar Lama himself considers himself a ritual master (he refers here to the Chinese term *fashi* 法師) or “modern lama” (he refers here to the Tibetan term ལྷ་མ་དེང་དུས་), which seems to indicate that he is aware of the fact that he does not quite fulfill the functions required by his role according to tradition. Perhaps more important is the fact that by agreeing to resume his status as the fifth incarnation, he allows the lineage of the Dragkar Lama of Kandzé to continue. The concept of uninterrupted transmission, ideally going back to the historical Buddha, is indeed very important in Tibetan Buddhism; and this applies to both the teachings and the lineages of teachers, whether based on the principle of transmission from master to disciple or from incarnation to incarnation. It is in this sense that we must understand the Dragkar Lama when he expresses the desire that the *tülku* who will succeed him will have the possibility of better training: what is essential is that the lineage is perpetuated and that it will always be able to develop and improve thereafter.

Finally, this somewhat paradoxical situation did not prevent the monasteries under his tutelage from blossoming. About a thousand nuns and a number of monks unknown to me continue to perpetuate the religious teachings and practices introduced by the third Dragkar Lama in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the meantime during the month of August 2015 in Lhasa, the Dragkar Lama is preoccupied with the departure celebrations organized by the middle and well-to-do families of Lhasa for their children and grandchildren who will travel from Lhasa to China, where they will continue their studies in one of the boarding schools reserved in particular for minorities. As any other Tibetan father and grandfather, he is furthermore concerned about the preservation of their cultural heritage and traditions, especially as the children will spend years far away from their homes and communities in Tibet, but in the interviews, he has also revealed the singular concern of the duty that his lineage bears in fulfilling this responsibility.

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¹ The heritage of the name “lama” does not necessarily imply that one holds the office of a religious specialist. Thus, there are many families, especially in Nepal, who bear just the name “Lama”.

² I use the term *tülku* here as the translation of “reincarnation”. There are three kinds of *tülku* (see Tulku Thondup, 2011: 19-23): the emanations of the buddhas, the manifestations of highly accomplished adepts (bodhisattvas or siddhas), and the rebirths of deserving or virtuous masters (lamas). The last are those who will be discussed here; they are also referred to as *yangsi* (ཡང་སྤོང་), literally “rebirth” or “re-existence”, synonymous with *tülku*. On the tradition of *tülku*, see also Ray (1987) and Schwieger (2015: 1–50).

³ Dragkar (བླ་གཞུང་) literally means “white rock”, and it is the short name used to refer to the lama after the name of the monastery Dragkar Phelgyé Ling (བླ་གཞུང་འཕེལ་རྒྱུ་གླིང་) to which his lineage is attached, as is the case with many other lamas.

⁴ The collected writings of the third Dragkar Lama contain not only his own autobiography (see bLo bzang dpal ldan bstan ’dzin snyan grags, 2001, vol. 17 and 18) but also a short biography of the first Dragkar Lama (see bLo bzang dpal ldan bstan ’dzin snyan grags 2001, vol. 14: 746-780). For a study of these biographies, see my article, Schneider (2011).

⁵ Ju Mipham’s writings were the source of many controversies, but only a few seemed to him to have been worthy of response, including the questions posed by the third Dragkar Lama. See Smith (2001: 231) and Phuntsho (2005, chap. 5).

⁶ Khenpo Jikmé Phüntsook (མཁའན་པོ་འཇིགས་མེད་ཕུན་ཚོགས་ 1933–2004) of Serthar, one of the greatest masters of Kham who initiated religious renewal after the Cultural Revolution, mentioned his contributions in particular (Khenpo Sodarjey, 2001: 110), and his disciples continue this emphasis.

⁷ The Dragkar Lama's father, Kelzang Wangdü (སྐལ་བཟང་འབང་འདུས་), worked in the Ministry of Finance and ranked fourth (རིམ་བཞི་) out of a total of seven in the hierarchy of the Tibetan nobility.

⁸ She was the daughter of Shatra Lönchen Paljor Dorjé’s daughter.

⁹ A “son-in-law” (མཁའ་པོ་) marriage, that is to say when the husband joins the family of his wife, is very frequent in Tibet; moreover, in the context of a patrilineal society, it takes place in particular among the nobility, which thus ensures the continuity of its heritage. See Alice Travers (2007) on this subject.

¹⁰ Jampa Gyeltsen (བྱམས་པ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་) by name, he is the only one in the family to have gone into exile and emigrated to the United States with his wife. During his return to Tibet many years later to see family, he passed away.

¹¹ This was also the case in other aristocratic families such as the family of Lhalu Tséwang Dorjé (ལྷ་ལྷ་ཚོ་དབང་རྫོང་ཇེ་), minister and former governor of Kham; see the article by Lha klu Tshe dbang rdo rje (1995) on the recognition of his three sons as *tülku*. I warmly thank Tashi Tsering Josayma for this information.

¹² This monastery was founded by Dragkar Lozang Palden, the third in the lineage.

¹³ Unlike the territory of central Tibet, which was later named the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo were incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu. In these regions, the “democratic reforms” preparing for collectivization were implemented earlier, at the same time as in all the other Chinese provinces; see Sperling (2002).

¹⁴ Initially composed of small groups of villagers from Kham and Amdo opposed to the policies carried out by the Chinese authorities in their territory within eastern Tibet, they later united in 1958 under the direction of Gönpö Tashi Andruktsang (མགོན་པོ་བཟུ་ཤིས་མ་འབྲུག་ཚང་, 1905–1964), a trader from Lithang, to form a larger guerrilla movement called Chushi Gangdrug (ཚུ་བཞི་སྒང་དུག་), literally “Four rivers and six mountains”. It was this guerrilla movement that helped the Dalai Lama to flee in 1959. For more information on Chushi Gangdrug, see McGranahan (2010) and Norbu (1994). A detailed description of the political tensions in Kandzé is found in Adhe Tapongsang’s autobiography with Blakeslee (1997) and in Norbu (1986).

¹⁵ At the time, many lamas were reported missing after accepting similar invitations, particularly in the east of the country.

¹⁶ See Gyatso (1997) on the bombing of the Drépfung monastery.

¹⁷ For example, this was the case of Keutsang Trulku Jampel Yeshe (2001), born in 1944 and therefore only 15 years old at the time (16 years old, according to Tibetan calculation).

¹⁸ Personal communication from Minyak Chökyi Gyeltsen. See also “Krung go nang bstan mthun tshogs bod yan lag mthun tshogs kyi tshogs gtso rim byon gyi ngo sprod mdor bsdus” (2011: 10, 14).

¹⁹ gSang rgya bkrol ba (2016: 24). Known as the Néchung School (གནས་རྒྱུང་སྐོབ་གྲྭ་) or the Dharma School (ཚོས་ཚོགས་སྐོབ་གྲྭ་) when re-founded in 1985 by the authorities, it is one of the first of its kind since the invasion of Tibet by China to offer preparation for the diploma of *géshe* (དགེ་བཤེས་) in 10 years to monks (instead of the 25 to 30 years traditionally required for this curriculum).

²⁰ See Keutsang Trulku Jampel Yeshe (2001). Tubten Khétsun, also a former prisoner because of his aristocratic origins, describes in detail the functioning of this labor camp at Kongpo in his autobiography (2008).

²¹ Sun and Ling (2003: 171).

²² Wu (2009: 143). In China, as in Tibet, the electrification of the countryside did not begin until the 1980s and still continues in the 21st century. It would indeed be interesting to make a comparative anthropological study on electrification in China as proposed by Akhil Gupta in his article (2015).

²³ See Wu (2008)

²⁴ These four young men are also known by the name of the “Rugby boys”, coined from the name of the English university city where they were sent. For more information, see Macdonald (2005: 218–21); Shakabpa (1988: 249); Dhondup (1984); and Shakyia (1986).

²⁵ Byang ngos par rdo rje dngos grub (1986: 95–114).

²⁶ For example, see the online *Xinhua* article, “More people will have electricity in Tibet” (Ke and Liu, 2019).

²⁷ Originally founded for nuns, Dragkar Phelgyé Ling was subsequently converted into a monastery for men; after the Cultural Revolution, it became a convent for women again.

²⁸ After the departure of the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama not only became the highest religious authority in Tibet but also was promoted to vice-president of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a position equivalent to the rank of a national leader. For more information on the content of this petition, see *A Poisoned Arrow: The Secret Report of the 10th Panchen Lama* (1997).

²⁹ In his autobiography published in exile in the United States, Arjia Rinpoche (2010: 113–15) describes in detail the reasons that prompted the Panchen Lama to make this decision and the resulting arrangement.

³⁰ Yéshé Rinzin Wangmo later completed part of her studies in the United States and has continued to work for the benefit of Tibetan Buddhism to this day.

³¹ During these two visits (the first had taken place in 1982), the Panchen Lama not only inspected the monasteries and gave Buddhist teachings but also ascertained in general the state of working conditions in schools, factories, and farms as well as the well-being of Tibetan nomads. See Central Association for the H.H. The Panchen Lama (2009) and *Bainquen, the Great Master in the Tibetan Areas of Sichuan Province* (1989).

³² My field data from another monastery in eastern Tibet, Tashi Gönsar of the Minyak region, confirm this thesis: between the time when the founding lama died and the monastery’s recovery due to the efforts of the succeeding lama, the nuns were reduced to begging; see Schneider (2013, 131–38).

³³ Since then, several waves of restoration have taken place.

³⁴ His father, ex-minister Kelsang Wangdü, died in 2015.

³⁵ Remember that the first steward (གསོལ་དཔོན་) of Dragkar Lama, at the time when he joined the Drépfung monastery, was also from this convent.

³⁶ This database can be found at the following internet address: <https://www.tbrc.org> (access date February (2020)).

³⁷ When I first met the Dragkar Lama in 2013, he was still working part-time as an electrician; he subsequently retired.

³⁸ See dGe legs chos grags (1991) and “Krunq go nang bstan mthun tshogs bod yan lag mthun tshogs kyi tshogs gtso rim byon gyi ngo sprod mdor bsdu” (2011: 7–21) for the history of the presidents of this association in Lhasa.

³⁹ The cadres of the Tibetan minority-nationality are nicknamed “ornaments” (རྒྱན་ཆ་) by the Tibetans themselves because of their lack of real political power, even when they occupy high positions; see Barnett (2005: 296–97). As for the Lhasa Buddhist Association, the choice of important and locally venerated personalities for honorary posts serves to legitimize its existence.

⁴⁰ See for example Mi nyag chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1987); gTsang phrug stobs lags (2012: 219–27); Blondeau (2008: 173), and bSod nams rgya mtsho (1992). There are equivalent academies in Beijing for Han Buddhism and for Daoism.

⁴¹ The following lamas, among others, taught at the Chinese Academy for Higher Tibetan Buddhist Studies: Dungkar Lozang Trinlé (དུང་དཀར་ལོ་ལོ་བཟང་འཕྲིན་ལས་, 1927–1997), Sakya Khenchen Ludrup Gyatso (ས་སྐྱ་མཁན་ཆེན་ལུ་རུལ་གྱི་མཚོ་, 20th century), Khenpo Troru Tsénam (མཁན་པོ་འོ་ལྷོ་ལེ་མཚོ་, 1926/8–2005) and Bomi Jampa Lodrö (བོ་མཚོ་མི་བུ་མཁན་པོ་ལོ་དྲོ་, 1918–2002) of central Tibet; Khenpo Chödrak (མཁན་པོ་ཚོ་ས་གྲགས་, 1916–2005), Khenpo Jikmé Phüntsook, Khenpo Pétsé (མཁན་པོ་པེ་ཨ་ཚེ་, 1931–2001) and Tülku Karma Senggé (སྐལ་སྐྱ་ཀར་མཚོ་ལོ་, dates unknown); Shardong Lozang Shédруп Gyatso

(ཤར་གཏོང་ལོ་བཟང་བཤད་སྐབས་ཀྱི་མཚན་, 1922–2001), Shingza Kelzang Chökyi Gyeltsen (ཤིང་བཟང་སྐལ་བཟང་ཚས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན་, 1925–1998) and Sétsang Lozang Palden (བསེ་ཚང་ལོ་བཟང་པདལ་ལྷན་, born 1938) of Amdo. See gTsang phrug stobs lags (2012: 224) and bLo bzang chos rgyal (2001: 13–15).

⁴² The vast majority of Tibetan Buddhist school leaders, as well as great religious scholars, now live in exile.

⁴³ See the description given by Arjia Rinpoche (2010: 148–49).

⁴⁴ See Shakya (1999: 446) and Blondeau (2008: 173).

⁴⁵ See Arjia Rinpoche’s autobiography (2010). He is from the Kumbum Monastery located in the Amdo region of northeast Tibet, where religious policy appears to have been somewhat less severe than in Lhasa.

⁴⁶ The Academy offered one- to two-year courses at the time.

⁴⁷ The nuns who had worked on the reconstruction of the monastery in the 1980s have all since passed away.

⁴⁸ See for example the website of the International Campaign for Tibet (2008) and the online report provided by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (2008).

⁴⁹ Barnett (2009).

⁵⁰ See again the website of the International Campaign for Tibet (2008).

⁵¹ See the online article, “Tibetan Nuns Jailed, Detained” (Radio Free Asia, 2008).

⁵² These lamas are called “Chinese lama” or *gyala* (རྒྱ་ལྷ་), a pejorative term if one believes the many criticisms that are circulated on the internet.

⁵³ Germano (1999: 69).

⁵⁴ Germano (1999: 68–72.)

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