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Published on H-Buddhism (November, 2023)

Commissioned by Lucia Galli

Tibetan literature is replete with namthar (*rnam thar*), auto/biographies and hagiographies that describe the lives of Buddhist masters in varying degrees of length and detail. Only a minority of these accounts deal with the lives of female masters, and it is to one of them that the present work is dedicated. Born into an important religious family at the very end of the seventeenth century, the nun Mingyur Peldrön (Mi ‘gyur dpal sgron, 1699-1769) became a revered Buddhist teacher in her own right. Daughter of the “treasure revealer,” or tertön (*gter ston*), Terdak Lingpa (gTer bdag gling pa, 1646-1714) and niece of Lochen Dharmaśri (Lo chen dharma sri, 1654-1717/18)—the founders of the famous Ny- ingma Mindröling Monastery in central Tibet—Mingyur Peldrön became a lineage holder of the monastery’s tradition as well as of the “treasure,” or terma (*gter ma*), teachings transmitted by her father. Being one of the few Tibetan women whose religious accomplishments are still recognized today, her namthar, or “life,” as the author has chosen to call it, is highly welcomed as it opens new perspectives on gender and religion in Tibet.

Alison Melnick Dyer’s book mainly draws on three versions of Mingyur Peldrön’s namthar, published under the full title of *rJe btsun mi gyur dpal gyo sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel* (“The life of Mingyur Peldrön: A dispeller of distress for the faithful,” hereafter referred to as “Dispeller”) and authored by her close male disciple Kyungpo Repa Gyurmé Ösel (Khyung po ras pa ‘gyur med ‘od gsal, b. 1715). Following the form and style of other Tibetan namthars, these texts present only minor variations and are best considered as belonging to the hagiographical genre.

Centering her literary analysis of Mingyur Peldrön’s namthar around four themes—privilege, authority, gender, and dialogue—Dyer never loses sight of the historical context, offering the reader a valuable study of the eighteenth century, a tumultuous sociopolitical time marred by civil war and changes of political powers. Although not an active participant in any of those momentous
events, Mingyur Peldrön was nevertheless significantly affected by them, to the extent of being forced to escape to Sikkim in the winter of 1717-18. Upon her return to Tibet in 1721, she initiated the reconstruction of her family's monastery before renewing ties with both her disciples and the new political elite.

The book is divided into five chapters preceded by an introduction. Dyer's approach to the namthar is chronological. The first chapter (“A Privileged Life”) thus describes Mingyur Peldrön’s upbringing in a family of high social-religious status. Following the hagiographical model, Mingyur Peldrön showed exceptional traits since her early years, starting from her birth, reported to have been accompanied by diverse miracles, and the many “supernatural abilities” she displayed in her childhood. She was therefore raised with the expectation of becoming “an eminently successful teacher” (p. 39). It was her father who directed her teachings up to his death in 1714 when this role was taken over by her uncle Lochen Dharmaśri. Mingyur Peldrön’s education was remarkably similar to that of her older brother and future throne holder, Rinchen Namgyel (Rin chen rnam rgyal, 1694-1758), apart from a few essential points. Contrary to her sibling, Mingyur Peldrön could study only with elder male members of the family and was prevented from attending the formal scholastic training in the five sciences (rig gnas), which were part of the usual curriculum. In “Dispeller,” her studies are presented in the form of a senyik (gsan yig, records of teachings received) and include teachings from the Great Perfection, Mindröling’s cycle of Atiyoga teachings, and her father’s numerous terma teachings. In 1701, at the age of eleven (twelve by Tibetan calculation), she took monastic vows and became a nun. Mingyur Peldrön’s early religious training is clearly the most prominent topic of the first section of the namthar, yet historical details seep in, connecting her trajectory to the major events of the eighteenth century. The outbreak of the civil war in the winter of 1717-18 upended her life, forcing her into exile. Even though her flight to Sikkim was a traumatic event, Mingyur Peldrön was treated with the respect due to a representative of Mindröling Monastery, and the royal family welcomed her warmly. Asked to share her religious knowledge, she was able to establish herself as a Buddhist master of her lineage’s teachings. Furthermore, she used her position at court to arrange the marriage of her younger sister Peldzin (dPal ’dzin, b. ca. 1701) to King Gyurmé Namgyel (Gyur med rnam rgyal, 1707-33) of Sikkim, a union that turned out to be short-lived. On her return to Tibet in 1721, she started the reconstruction of Mindröling Monastery, but after the arrival of her brother, Rinchen Namgyel, her focus shifted to reinforcing the teaching tradition. Encouraged by the then political leader Pholané (Pho lha nas, 1689-1747), she traveled to Ü, Tsang, and Kham, giving and exchanging teachings with other high-level religious masters. An active teacher and prolific writer, Mingyur Peldrön thus turned her early access to education into a means to establish herself as a renowned religious teacher.

In chapter 2 (“Authorizing the Saint”), Dyer analyzes how the author of “Dispeller,” Gyurmé Ösel, built his narrative to elevate and legitimate Mingyur Peldrön as a saint. Drawing on Max Weber’s typology of authority and adapting it to her case study, she points to three different types of authority: emanation authority, institutional authority, and educational authority. The first is the most interesting one due to the protagonist’s status as one of the rare women who figures in an incarnation lineage of exclusively female enlightened beings. The lineage counts ten female incarnations and foremost among them is the semi-mythical Yeshé Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal), who treasure literature credits to be the consort of Padmasambhava and a terma recorder. She appears frequently in the namthar as both a model of inspiration for Mingyur Peldrön and a clear reference to the Nyingma school and its treasure tradition. Dyer also compares Mingyur Peldrön’s incarnation lineage with those of other known em-
inent Tibetan women, namely, Sōnam Peldren (bSod nam dpal 'dren, 1268-1312), Chökyi Drönma (Chos kyi sgron ma, 1422-55/67), Sera Khandro (Se ra mkha’ 'gro, 1892-1940), and Tāre Lhamo (TA re lha mo, 1938–2002).[1] The chapter continues with a discussion on the biographer’s use of authorizing referents. The gendered language employed to describe Mingyur Peldrön suggests an overall positive perception of the female body. The instances in which her condition as a woman is a source of consternation are few and sparse and often remarked with mildly negative labels, such as that of “unwanted girl” (p. 96). More interesting still is the biographer’s gendered use of honorific appellations to elevate Mingyur Peldrön in key moments of her life, from the female titles of srémo (sras mo, “spiritual daughter,” “female spiritual heir”) and “ḍākinī queen” (dAki'i gtso mo) to the androgynous one of jé lama (rje bla ma, “master teacher,” “venerable master”), which Dyer explains in terms of an “elevated feminine language [that] deifies her while emphasizing her gender” (p. 100).

Chapter 3 (“Multivocal Lives”) deals with the delicate relationship integral to any hagiography, that between the author and the subject: in this case, how to locate Mingyur Peldrön’s female voice in a namthar written by a male author? Dyer starts to answer this vital question by convincingly demonstrating that there are multiple voices at play in the narrative and that the work was created in a cooperative dialogue that saw the protagonist being actively involved in the writing. Gyurmé Ösel made use of numerous quotations, which resemble in style her instruction manuals found in collections elsewhere. Mingyur Peldrön had strong opinions on access to religious education, the importance of monasticism, and the dangers of alcohol. She thus advised nuns, monks, laywomen, and laymen alike, but did so in different ways. She encouraged nuns to extend their influence by going out to teach, while she reprimanded monks who, instead of practicing assiduously, did not respect their vows. As Dyer aptly points out, “there is a gendered dimension to her advice to these different groups, which suggests that she was a proponent of educating women to be religious leaders” (p. 132).

The fourth chapter (“Mingyur Peldrön the Diplomat”) paints a broader picture of Mingyur Peldrön’s political and religious relationships. Besides her alliance with the Sikkimese royals, she worked closely with politicians and their aristocratic family members in Lhasa and elsewhere in Tibet. First and foremost was her relationship with the leader Polhané who not only financed the postwar reconstruction of Mindröling but also acted as an intermediary between her and the Seventh Dalai Lama. Dyer draws attention to the fact that her status as a celibate nun was largely benefiting the intersectarian relations with the Gelukpa school and with the Lhasan political leadership in those times of high tension. However, as Dyer carefully notes, hers were the actions of an unofficial diplomat lacking any precise title, as the term of address with which she was referred to—jetsünma—was the one used to address any female members of the Mindröling family, regardless of their spiritual and political achievements.

In the last and concluding chapter (“The Death of Mingyur Peldrön and the Making of a Saint”), Dyer assesses the end of the nun’s life, including dream accounts and miracles marking the moments of her passing away and her funerary rites. As for other saints, those wondrous events serve as an argument for Mingyur Peldrön’s sanctification. A short description of the three contemporary women from the Mindröling lineage currently living in exile—the nun Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche (rJe btsun mkha’ 'gro rin po che, b. 1967), the laywoman Jetsün Dechen Paldron (rJe bstun bde chen dpal sgron, b. 1969), and her daughter Jetsün Gautami Trinlé Choedron (rJe bt-sun gau ta mi 'phrin las chos sgron, b. 2012)—is also given.

Dyer’s book is a meticulous analysis of the namthar of an important woman and female saint.
of the eighteenth century. In particular, it draws many parallels with other famous women from Tibet and thus gives the reader a nuanced picture of what it meant to be an educated female religious practitioner from a privileged social and religious background. The author's research into the historical period of this tumultuous era from the unusual point of view of a community of Nyíningmapas is equally remarkable. More generally, her style is clear and fluid, and the chronology at the beginning of the book as well as the glossary and the index at the end support the reader's understanding of the general argument. The following comments are therefore meant not as a significant critique of what is an impressive work of scholarship but simply as a small contribution and invitation for further research.

Elisabeth A. Benard's research on the Sakya jetsünmas could have been used more extensively for comparison.[2] The Sakya family as well as the Mindröling family share many patterns about the upbringing and position of their respective daughters. Not only are they all addressed by the female honorific term jetsünma, but, in the Sakya family, they also receive a specific religious education starting from a young age. If Mingyur Peldrön's namthar does not mention anything in this sense, information might have been gathered through interviews with the current members of the Mindröling family.

While Dyer mentions three contemporary Mindröling jetsünmas in the concluding chapter, she has surprisingly overlooked her two current incarnations. The first is the nun Mumtsho (short for Mumé Yeshé Tsomo, Mu med ye shes mtsho mo, b. 1966), the niece of Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok ('Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004), the famous master who initiated the religious revival after the Cultural Revolution in his religious encampment of Larung Gar in Sethar, Kham. She was recognized, among others, by the Dalai Lama as the incarnation of Mingyur Peldrön, and several enthronement ceremonies were organized in her honor in India, as well as in Tibet.[3] Khandro Chöchen (mKa’ 'gro chos spyan, b. ca. 1961), a lay religious practitioner and “treasure revealer,” or tertönma, has also been identified as another emanation of Mingyur Peldrön.[4] During one night of intensive meditation, the renowned visionary Gajé Khamtul Rinpoché (sGa rje kham sprul rin po che, b. 1928) had an encounter with Yeshé Tsogyel, who on that occasion recited for him her incarnation lineage. After having it written down in the form of a poem, the Dalai Lama in person confirmed its authenticity. In Khandro Chöchen's incarnation lineage, Mingyur Peldrön is ranked twelfth out of a total of fourteen. Interestingly, most of the female figures of her previous lives do not correspond with those of Mingyur Peldrön, except for three (Samantabhadri, Yeshé Tsogyel, and Machik Labdrön). Moreover, both incarnation lineages are irregular insofar as they do not involve successive incarnations. This reminds me of what Anne Chayet had already noted: “Tibetan Buddhism, at least in its most orthodox aspects, does not seem to willingly accept the principle of female incarnate lineages.” Furthermore, “a woman has to reincarnate as a male previously to any attempt towards enlightenment.”[5] Indeed, as Dyer correctly quotes from the namthar, Mingyur Peldrön herself declared that in her next life she will be reborn as a monk, adding that “previously, in India and Tibet, it was necessary that I take up female births” (p. 133). Only further research can help us to understand all the intricacies of female incarnation lineages and Dyer's book on Mingyur Peldrön is a big step toward this goal.

To sum up, The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön is a must-read for Tibetologists and historians of religion with an interest in gender. Scholars of Tibetan studies having other areas of specialization should read it as well, for it balances out the image of Tibetan Buddhism as a predominantly male-dominated and male-centered religion. The
book is also written in a way that is comprehensible to students and scholars from other fields.

Notes


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