

The Life and Times of Mingyur Peldrön: Female Leadership in  
18<sup>th</sup> Century Tibetan Buddhism

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the life of the Tibetan nun Mingyur Peldrön (*mi 'gyur dpal sgron*, 1699-1769) through her hagiography, which was written by her disciple Gyurmé Ösel (*'gyur med 'od gsal*, b. 1715), and completed some thirteen years after her death. It is one of few hagiographies written about a Tibetan woman before the modern era, and offers insight into the lives of eighteenth century Central Tibetan religious women.

The work considers the relationship between members of the Mindröling community and the governing leadership in Lhasa, and offers an example of how hagiographic narrative can be interpreted historically. The questions driving the project are: Who was Mingyur Peldrön, and why did she warrant a 200-folio hagiography? What was her role in her religious community, and the wider Tibetan world? What do her hagiographer's literary decisions tell us about his own time and place, his goals in writing the hagiography, and the developing literary styles of the time? What do they tell us about religious practice during this period of Tibetan history, and the role of women within that history? How was Mingyur Peldrön remembered in terms of her engagement with the wider religious community, how was she perceived by her followers, and what impact did she have on religious practice for the next generation? Finally, how and where is it possible to "hear" Mingyur Peldrön's voice in this work?

This project engages several types of research methodology, including historiography, semiology, and methods for reading hagiography as history. It considers Mingyur Peldrön's life story as a frame for understanding the temporal "bridge" between the long seventeenth century and the nineteenth century rise of the Non-Sectarian (*Rimé*, *ris med*) Movement. The dissertation is organized to give the reader the perspective of moving increasingly closer to understanding Mingyur Peldrön through her own words. The work moves thematically from an external study of her hagiography, its authorship, and the content of its composition, to questions of how and where we are able to hear Mingyur Peldrön's own words. Throughout the study, questions of how we understand hagiographic narrative, and what it can tell us about actual historical events, are addressed from several perspectives. The dissertation argues that the lives of Tibetan religious women before the twentieth century were much more varied than previously thought. Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* offers an example of female leadership and empowerment that is unprecedented in Tibetan women's religious history.

"Chapter One: Reading the *Namtar* of Mingyur Peldrön," considers Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography as a literary work. This chapter discusses the organization of the text, literary references, stylistic choices made by Gyurmé Ösel, and how we can understand hagiographic, biographic, and autobiographic narrative systems in Tibetan *namtar* (*rnam thar*).

In "Chapter Two: The Life and Times of Mingyur Peldrön," I briefly summarize the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life, as it is presented in the larger context of the hagiography.

"Chapter Three: Incarnation and Identity" addresses representations of Mingyur Peldrön – her personality and previous lives – as they appear in the hagiography. In particular, this chapter considers the role of gender and public identity, notions of prestige, Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives, and eighteenth century representations of

feminine identity. In particular, Mingyur Peldrön was considered to be an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel, and Gyurmé Ösel's interpretation of this well-known Tibetan figure is crafted to fit the Mindröling context.

In "Chapter Four: Hearing Mingyur Peldrön's Voice," I return to the questions of voice and authorship in the hagiography, and present some of the moments in Gyurmé Ösel's work wherein Mingyur Peldrön is quoted directly. It is in these quotations that we begin to "hear" Mingyur Peldrön's voice. Chapter Four considers one woman's role in shaping and negotiating the doctrinal and social morés of the eighteenth century Central Tibetan Nyingma community.

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### **A Note About Linguistic Conventions**

At the first occurrence of a Tibetan name or term, the word or words will be given in phonetics, followed by transliterated Tibetan in parentheses. All phonetics, except where quoted from other sources, will be in accordance with the Tibetan and Himalayan Library's phonetic conversion scheme. Likewise, all Tibetan transliterations will adhere to the Wylie transliteration system. Tibetan proper nouns and text titles that have been translated into English by other sources will adhere to the initial English transliteration. I have included diacritical marks for Sanskrit terms.

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## Introduction

### Goals of the Study

As scholars continue to learn more about the lives of historical women, our views of religious history are continually shifted to include new narratives. When, in the spring of 2010, I learned that not only did the treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*, 1646-1714) have a daughter, but also that she had a nearly three hundred page life story, I immediately knew that my first project would be to study her life. The main goal of this dissertation is to bring the story of one woman's life into clearer focus by examining it as a historical and literary representation of eighteenth century women's lives and opportunities. In doing so I will outline the narrative of her life and, to some extent, her own voice, which will be studied through direct quotes and her own publications. The purpose of this is to expand our understanding of how women's lives were portrayed in this period of Tibetan religious literature, and also to know something of how women were actually functioning as members and leaders of religious communities. The community in question is Mindröling (*smin grol gling*) Monastery, located in Drachi, central Tibet, and one of the six major monasteries of the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) sect. The story of this particular woman's life is set in the early to mid eighteenth century.

The nun Mingyur Peldrön (*mi 'gyur dpal sgron*, 1699-1769) is one of the few women in this period of Tibetan history for whom we have an extant hagiography. Born

in Central Tibet at the turn of the eighteenth century at Mindröling Monastery, she was trained in Nyingma practices, taught widely, and according to her hagiographer, was considered an heiress of Mindröling. Today the living members of this community corroborate the hagiographer's assertions; as a result of her service to the community, she is believed to be the third most important figure in her.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, we have less information about women during this period of Tibetan history than we do about men. This is not unique to the Tibetan context. In a study of girls and girlhood in early China, Anne Kinney explains: "... because women did not attend state schools and academies or, apart from a limited number of appointments, occupy official positions in the bureaucracy, historians devote more space to men and less attention to women. Gender bias therefore militates against the strong presence of women in the histories of the period."<sup>2</sup> This also applies to the historical context of early eighteenth century Central Tibet, and speaks to the relative paucity of writing about women and girls in much of our historical past. But, Mingyur Peldrön is unusual in that we both have an extensive story of her life, and she was also trained in a central and well-known religious institution.

Mingyur Peldrön's story is important because it adds nuance to our understanding of women's lives in eighteenth century Tibet. Her story is that of a woman who held a leadership role in one of the most important Nyingma communities of the period, and an institution that has maintained its prominence from her time to the present day. As a literary work, Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography tells us how important women were written about in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. She is interesting because her story,

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<sup>1</sup> Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, personal communication, August 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kinney, *Representations*, 134.

the descriptions of her personality, and her role in Tibetan religious and political life, all present the image of a woman who was revered by thousands, respected by governing leaders, and who proved herself to be a resilient and opinionated teacher and religious authority.

### **Women in Tibetology**

While scholars of Tibetan religious history increasingly address the lacuna of information about the lives and roles of women in Tibetan history, there remain a relative handful of examples of female *Lives*, in comparison with examples of exemplary men. Rarer still is the case where a woman's *Life* depicts someone who, rather than living a marginalized existence in order to practice the dharma, is brought up with the expectation that she will inhabit the role of religious teacher to the masses and aristocracy.

In recent years, work by scholars such as Kurtis Schaeffer, Suzanne Bessenger, Sarah Jacoby, Hanna Havnevik, and others has brought forth more information about the lives of Tibetan women. In particular work of Suzanne Bessenger and Hildegard Diemberger has addressed the few cases of women whose lives are similar to the story of Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>3</sup> Beyond their work, almost no studies have specifically examined Tibetan women's hagiography. The other similarity is that Diemberger and Bessenger treat figures who were similar to Mingyur Peldrön in that they had prolific teaching careers. However, most of the studies have focused on the lives of women who were

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<sup>3</sup> While Ani Marilyn Silverstone is reported to have translated Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön, she is now late and the work appears to be unavailable. In following the trail of Silverstone's translation, I spoke with several scholars who had actually seen the work and had passed it along to someone else. Attempts to recover a copy have thus far been fruitless, although at one point it seems to have made its way to Shechen publishing house.

either solitary practitioners or non-celibate teachers, whereas Mingyur Peldrön's identity was wrapped up with celibacy and an extensive teaching career.

A few excellent studies – including those by Kurtis Schaeffer and Sarah Jacoby – have examined Tibetan women's autobiography (*rangnam*, *rang rnam*). While the narrative considered in this study is a hagiography, and Mingyur Peldrön herself did not compose a full autobiography, she is quoted extensively throughout the narrative, and I argue that the inclusion of her autobiographical song (*mgur*) acts as an example of how hagiography can also be autobiographical when it includes the author's voice.

Also, following the work of other scholars, I will analyze Mingyur Peldrön's biography in terms of common themes, the diversity of narrative voices, a consideration of gendered and non-gendered representations of women, and the ways in which devotional language and traditional literature are used to convey different types of significance. Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön gives us a unique opportunity to learn about the life of a centrally located, publicly active nun. Another goal of this study is to contribute to the slowly growing repository of accounts of women's lives translated from Tibetan.

Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography is one of only a few women's hagiographies for which we have definitive authorship. Khyungpo Repa Gyurmé Ösel (*khyung po ras pa 'gyur med 'od gsal*, b. 1715), Mingyur Peldrön's dedicated male disciple, authored her hagiography not in a vacuum, but in the midst of a community that was experiencing political and religious change. Otherwise unknown in the literary world, Gyurmé Ösel sought to memorialize his beloved teacher and so depicted her as the embodiment of the

ḍākinī (to be described below), and as a highly realized teacher of the most advanced practices of the Great Perfection system.

### **Questions Driving the Study and Methodology**

In examining the life of Mingyur Peldrön, I have asked the following questions: Who was Mingyur Peldrön, and why did she warrant a nearly three hundred page hagiography? What was her role in her religious community, and the wider Tibetan world? What do her hagiographer's literary decisions tell us about his own time and place, his goals in writing the hagiography, and the developing literary styles of the time? What do they tell us about religious practice during this period of Tibetan history, and the role of women within that history? When the hagiography was composed, how was Mingyur Peldrön remembered in terms of her engagement with the wider religious community, how was she perceived by her followers, and what impact did she have on religious practice for the next generation? Finally, how and where is it possible to "hear" Mingyur Peldrön's voice in this work? Where do the genres of autobiography and hagiography intersect, and how is this borne out in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography?

With these questions in mind, the study examines the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life as recorded by Gyurmé Ösel, and from this seeks to elucidate her own opinions regarding religious education and practice. Within this frame, I will examine questions of gender, voice, authority, doctrine, and praxis, as reported by Mingyur Peldrön's disciple Gyurmé Ösel in the later eighteenth century.

This project has engaged several types of research methodology, including historiography, literary analysis, semiology, and methods for reading hagiography as history. Questions of authority and authenticity exist at the core of this study, especially

in terms of how one woman's authority was legitimated in the eyes of her community, and continually created and reinforced in the body of her hagiography. Therefore, while legitimation of authority is part of the project, the narrative that is considered will not be reduced to questions of authority-making. Rather, the types of authority displayed in this work are understood as meaningful representations of how religious groups functioned, and how one woman's teaching career, and her institution, developed. Understanding institutional development is beneficial in part because it gives important context for the world in which religious practices were developed and employed. Ultimately, this study treats religion as an important social construct, best understood in concert with other aspects of human society.

One of the most sensitive aspects of this has been the question of how to engage with hagiography. Following Thomas Heffernan's approach to multivocal interpretations of hagiography, I have opted to approach my subject with as much awareness of the intricacies of life narrative as possible. By "hagiography," I here refer to life narratives that include miraculous accounts and soteriological assessments; I do not use the term in a pejorative sense. Throughout the course of this study, I will address hagiography as a whole, rather than attempting to distill biography from hagiography. I will, at different point throughout this study, treat as many aspects of the hagiography as possible, including the miraculous accounts. The goal of this approach is to avoid doing violence to the work as a whole, and to interpret as much of its original meaning as possible.

### **Historiography and Hagiography**

In line with the work of European Medievalists Caroline Walker Bynum, Thomas Heffernan, and others, this study will explore the benefits of understanding hagiography

in a historical context. Beyond learning something about the saint, hagiography shows us what themes and aspects of sainthood and religious praxis were important to the hagiographer and, possibly, the hagiographer's community.

Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us that hagiographers were following certain socially embedded stylistic themes,<sup>4</sup> which makes hagiography especially useful for learning about the socio-religious context of the author. Hagiography is also exemplary. That is, it describes how the audience should behave (in daily life and for soteriological benefit). By looking at these works, we can learn what authors thought was ideal behavior, and how they viewed the missteps and foibles of the intended audience.

According to Gail Ashton, hagiography is a field where we see writer, text, audience, and the community at large, participating in religious actions that reinforce culturally embedded concepts of saintliness. To the modern reader, these texts might appear stable, but in fact show signs of contestation and cultural change.<sup>5</sup> By examining how hagiographers posit new ideas, support already established community expectations, and argue for the value of both, hagiography reveals itself as a ground for cultural negotiation. John Coakley treats the author-saint relationship as potentially collaborative. In addition, he gives an excellent model for how to interpret historical religious life writing in terms of social context, gender dynamics, and issues of authority and divinity. As later chapters will show, Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography developed as a collaborative effort between her, Gyurmé Ösel, and several others.

Hagiography can also tell us something of the life of the saint. This informs our understanding of how and why specific women were memorialized, and also gives an

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<sup>4</sup> Bynum, *Holy*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Ashton, *Generation*, 2, 12.

example of what the intended audience was to understand as important about religious individuals. Because it reveals historically embedded ideals and proscriptions, and also gives examples of historical incidents, hagiography is a useful tool for the study of the history of religions.<sup>6</sup>

In both Tibetan and medieval Christian literature, hagiography is used as a form of veneration and authentication, and idealization of the subject is part of that process. Throughout different types of hagiography, the saint's divine qualities are emphasized. Also, issues of narratorial control are prevalent throughout life writing.

All of these factors occur in individually unique situations, with specific voices participating. Behind each voice is a collection of social, economic, and institutional factors, all of which influence a given actor's role in the hagiography's creation. In the rare cases where this information is available, I will include it in the study. Gender remains one of a series of important socio-cultural factors influencing the creation of hagiography, and there are gendered aspects of all collaborations, be they literary or otherwise, between or among women and men. Therefore, this study will take into account questions of gender, where appropriate. For example, Mingyur Peldrön's divine qualities can and do take on gendered tones in many cases.<sup>7</sup> The majority of previous incarnations that receive attention in the hagiography are of female lives, and she is repeatedly associated with Yeshé Tsogyel in particular.

In Tibetan studies, reading hagiography as history is one of the most fruitful means for understanding a specific Tibetan socio-historical context. Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön includes several accounts of historical events, the result

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<sup>6</sup> Ashton, *Generation*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Dietz, Review, 994-995.



of which is an intersection of history and hagiography wherein we see history through the eyes of those for whom it was recent memory. The occurrence of history within hagiography, and hagiography *as* history, speaks to the inseparability of these two genres. While Gyurmé Ösel's work is useful as an example of hagiography of the period, and contributes to our knowledge about hagiographies of women, it also tells us about the historical life of Mingyur Peldrön.

The challenge to the study of hagiography comes in how we address the genre's frequent magical and fantastic occurrences. To remove these from the narrative would not only do violence to the author's intent, but it would also dismiss important contextual data regarding his or their views of community history. However, to read these uncritically or as historical events would likewise be ineffective. This study will attempt to interpret the historical context off the narrative without jettisoning its literary context.

This study will also discuss how political clashes and social strife are woven into hagiographic narratives. In particular, Mingyur Peldrön's relationships with Sikkimese and Tibetan religious and political leaders, her experience during a period of political unrest, and her position within Mindröling, will all be considered. The hagiography offers a new, personal perspective on the social changes of the time, and gives an example of how the lives of individuals were affected by political change. Finally, we can learn something of what Gyurmé Ösel found to be important for his community's history; once again the reception becomes important as it helps us understand the Mindröling narrative.

### **Tibet at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century**

In order to set the stage for understanding Mingyur Peldrön's life through her hagiography, I will first give a brief history of Central Tibet, and Mingyur Peldrön's

birthplace of Mindröling Monastery, during the time shortly before her life. Much scholarship has been dedicated to the long seventeenth century, and the establishment and rise of the Ganden Podrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) governing body in Central Tibet. Likewise, a great deal of work has been done to study the rise of the Non-Sectarian (*rimé, ris med*) movement in nineteenth century Eastern Tibet. Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* falls between these two eras. By adding to the even more sparse accounts of eighteenth century women, her hagiography gives a new perspective of a relatively unstudied period of Tibetan history, its literary traditions, religious practices, institutional organization, social structure, and family life.

Seventeenth and eighteenth century Tibet was a time and place where political and religious concerns were closely interwoven. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw both religious and political strife across the Central Tibetan landscape. The Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682) had ceded political leadership to the Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sang gye rgya mtsho*, 1653-1705) in 1679. After the death of the "Great Fifth," something of a power vacuum developed. The result of keeping secret the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama was exacerbated argumentation and doubt about the validity of the recognized Sixth Dalai Lama, once he was revealed.<sup>8</sup> Political uncertainty and infighting were also exacerbated by the external influences that jockeyed for influence in Tibet.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Petech, *China*, 9-14.

<sup>9</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 422-23.

Among these influences were the Qoshot Mongol Lhazang Khan, who was supported by the Qing Emperor Kangxi (康熙 r. 1662-1722)<sup>10</sup> and who vied with the Dzungar leader Tsewang Rabten (*tshe dbang rab brtan*, n.d)<sup>11</sup> for influence in the region. Lhazang Khan was unhappy with the choice of Sixth Dalai Lama and the Desi's handling of the situation. He marched to Lhasa in 1705 and executed the Desi, but stopped short of dethroning the Sixth Dalai Lama, for fear of instigating unrest. The Sixth Dalai Lama would die (in all likelihood by assassination) on his way to Beijing the following year.<sup>12</sup> Lhazang Khan was allied with and acted on behalf of a Qing Manchu protectorate that sought to increase influence in Tibetan regions and to suppress the growing influence of the Dzungars.<sup>13</sup> According to several scholars, Qing rule was tied up with the empire's patronage of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>14</sup>

The Dzungars were a powerful expansionist subgroup of the larger Oyiroid federation, based in Ili, in modern day Turkestan.<sup>15</sup> Tsewang Rabten had assumed leadership of the Dzungar Mongols when he defeated his uncle Galdan and took control

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<sup>10</sup> I rely on Crossley for these dates, although it is unclear what her exact sources are for them. Crossley, *Translucent*, 296.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion see Crossley, *Translucent*, 319; Petech, *China*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Petech, *China*, 9-14.

<sup>13</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 9; Crossley, *Translucent*, 315.

<sup>14</sup> Köhle refers to the work of Crossley, Rawski, and Elliot as a "New Qing History," which asserts that Qing rule was achieved "through conscious and successful construction of a distinctive Manchu identity that allowed the Manchus to sustain their rule over a decidedly Inner Asian empire as a conquest regime" (Köhle, "Kangxi," 73). While scholars such as Elverskog disagree with this approach, all are in agreement that Mongolian and Buddhist influences were prominent in both Ming and Qing leadership circles (Köhle, "Kangxi," 74).

<sup>15</sup> Crossley, *Translucent*, 314, 320. I rely on Crossley's spelling of "Oyiroid." For a discussion of spelling variance and historical representation of the Oyiroid group, see Crossley, *Translucent*, 314 n. 55, and Crossley, *Empire*, 81. See also Petech, *China*, 9.

of his territories between 1690 and 1697<sup>16</sup>. An expansionist leader, Tsewang Rabten sought to increase his influence in Central Tibet. He ruled the Dzungars until 1727, during which time he also sought to influence the political atmospheres of western Mongolia and Turkestan.<sup>17</sup>

The Seventh Dalai Lama Kelsang Gyatso (*skal bzang rgya mtsho*, 1708-1757) was born in Litang in 1708. His recognition upset Lhazang Khan's plans to bestow the position on his son, Ngawang Yeshé Gyatso (*ngag dbang ye shes rgya mtsho*). To protect the Dalai Lama from Lhazang Khan, he was removed to Degé (*sde dge*) in 1714, and later escorted by emissaries of the Kangxi emperor to Kumbum, where he was enthroned. Thus, the emperor sought to support Lhazang Khan's rule in Lhasa without upsetting the Seventh Dalai Lama's title.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, a general's son named Sönam Topgyé (*bsod nams stobs rgyas*, 1689-1747), commonly referred to as Polhané (*po lha nas*, "the guy from Polha"), had proven himself in battle and aligned himself with Lhazang Khan in 1714.<sup>19</sup>

Tsewang Rabten was concerned about increasing Qing influence in the region, and sought to curry favor with the Central Tibetan leadership by promising the rightful return of the Seventh Dalai Lama to Lhasa.<sup>20</sup> In the winter of 1716-17, he sent a Dzungar army of about 6,000 troops, led by his brother, the military leader Tsering Döndrup (*tshe*

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<sup>16</sup> Different scholars name different dates for Tsewang Rabten's ascension to rule. See Crossley, *Translucent*, 318; Petech, *China*, 25. TBRC (P419) puts the date at 1698 (<http://tbrc.org/#!rid=P419>, accessed June 27, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Crossley, *Translucent*, 319.

<sup>18</sup> Kapstein, in Brauen, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 403. Polhané put down an attempted rebellion by the Hor chief Uicing Taiji around 1714, and played an important role in Lhazang Khan's war against Bhutan in 1714 (See also Petech, *China*, 22).

<sup>20</sup> Petech, *China*, 25.

*ring don grub*, n.d),<sup>21</sup> to remove power from Lhazang Khan's forces.<sup>22</sup> They swept through the region, laying waste to monasteries and villages along the way. Lhazang Khan had retreated to Lhasa by the following November.<sup>23</sup> The Dzungar army gained local support with the platform that their goal was to reinstate the rightful Dalai Lama, so they were therefore working in support of, rather than against, local Tibetans. However, their behavior in the region led to a sharp decline in popular support. The Dzungars acted like a raiding party as they traveled through Ü (*dbus*). They laid waste to the region and took food and fuel with no regard for the needs of the local people. During this time, the entire region was completely deforested, and was in a state of chaotic destruction.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the Dzungars destroyed most Nyingmapa institutions, and were known for their opposition to the close ties that had existed between the Fifth Dalai Lama and Nyingma teachers.<sup>25</sup> Mindröling was destroyed and many people were killed or scattered to the winds. As time went on, the Dzungars failed to deliver the Dalai Lama to Lhasa, and trust on the part of the Gelukpas waned.<sup>26</sup> In the meantime, the first Qing military outpost in Lhasa was destroyed and then reinstated in 1720.<sup>27</sup>

The Dzungar sack of Lhasa took place in November of 1717.<sup>28</sup> At this time, Lhazang Khan, who still considered his own son to be the rightful Dalai Lama, had retreated to Lhasa. He was deposed, and Tsering Döndrup issued summonses to all

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<sup>21</sup> Tsering Döndrup was the brother of the "Dzungar King", Tsewang Rabten (*tshe dbang rab brtan*), and leader of the Dzungar expedition into Central Tibet. See Petech, *China*, 27-29; and Shakabpa, *One*, 418.

<sup>22</sup> Petech, *China*, 27-29.

<sup>23</sup> Petech, *China*, 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Petech, *China*, 44-45.

<sup>25</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 374.

<sup>26</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 423; Petech, *China*, 42-45.

<sup>27</sup> Crossley, *Translucent*, 330.

<sup>28</sup> Petech, *China*, 38.

provinces, calling for them to pay homage to him. Shortly after the Dzungars arrived in Lhasa in the winter of 1717-18, the leaders of local opposition monasteries were rounded up, imprisoned, and eventually executed. Several Mindröling leaders, including Mingyur Peldrön's uncle Lochen Dharmaśrī (*lo chen d+harma shrI*, 1654-1717/8), were among them.<sup>29</sup> As a boy, Polhané had studied with Lochen Dharmaśrī at Mindröling, and also had close ties with the Panchen Lama.<sup>30</sup> During the Dzungar sack of Lhasa, Polhané hid at Drepung monastery. He was eventually discovered there, but a Dzungar friend intervened for him and, rather than being executed, he was put under house arrest at his estate.<sup>31</sup> The Dzungar occupation lasted until 1720. During this time Tibetans lost confidence in the army as life in the region continued to be unpleasant and the Seventh Dalai Lama failed to appear. Eventually, Polhané and the military leader Khangchenné (*khang chen nas*, d. 1727), aided by the support of the Qing army, put down the Dzungar invasion. In 1720, the Dzungars began their retreat back to Ili. The Panchen Lama officially recognized the Seventh Dalai Lama, who was installed in Lhasa in November 1720.<sup>32</sup> Around this time, the last remaining Dzungars were evicted from the Three Seats and Tashilhunpo.<sup>33</sup> By 1721, they had all left Tibet.<sup>34</sup>

A good example of Mingyur Peldrön's relationship to the religious and political strife of her lifetime is her connection with that the Qing Imperial Edict was issued in the seventh month of 1726, and reinforced the anti-Nyingma sentiment of the early 1710s and 1720s. Petech's full translation of the edict reads:

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<sup>29</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 420-421.

<sup>30</sup> Petech, *China*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Shakabpa, *One*, 422.

<sup>32</sup> Petech, *China*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Petech, *China*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Petech, *China*, 53; Shakabpa, *One*, 431.

Order of the emperor. May the Dalai-Lama realize the self-illumination in the ocean of divine texts of sūtra and mantra. The sMin-grol-gliñ-pa, who (*sic*) are the followers of the teaching of the essence of the old mantras, and the rDo-rje-brag-pa, may stay together in the temple of Zan-yyañ, or may follow as they wish their religious system (*siddhānta*), as it has been translated in Tibetan. But the followers of the religious system of the earlier translations (the rÑiñ-ma-pa), who dwell in their monasteries, not only their pride must be repressed, but it is inexpedient to allow them to practise irregularities and to attribute usefulness to their working for the welfare of the creatures by initiating converts, explaining the tantras, teaching the moral precepts etc. They shall not perform the repression of demons, the burnt offerings (*homa*), the throwing of magical weapons [for repelling the terrific deities], all of which are illicit exorcisms (*abhicāra*), without the evocation of the protecting deities and without lasting embodiment of the mystic with these deities. From now on, those who wish to become monks, shall not have it in their power *ad libitum*, but shall enter only the teaching community of the Yellow Bonnets.<sup>35</sup>

This was interpreted to mean that Nyingma teaching should be suppressed and, assumption is that, coming on the heels of the Dzungar occupation, this likely had a significant effect on the Nyingma community of Mingyur Peldrön's time, and different Nyingma groups and individuals responded to the threat of oppression in different ways. Petech suggests that Mindröling and Dorjé Drak were omitted from the edict "due to their sufferings at the hands of the Dsung-gars."<sup>36</sup> However, it is more likely that the exception was made as a result of these groups' long connection with the Ganden Podrang, particularly the Great Fifth. Apparently the edict was met with strong opposition throughout the Lhasa government, although Polhané spoke out actively against it, citing the Fifth Dalai Lama, as well as the Panchen Lama (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*) had studied Nyingma teachings, and that these had legitimate grounding in Indian traditions.

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<sup>35</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 92. All parenthetical notes and italics in original.

<sup>36</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 93.

Polhané's response to this edict, as presented in his hagiography,<sup>37</sup> corroborates Gyurmé Ösel's positive depiction of Polhané as a champion of Mingyur Peldrön and the Nyingma tradition in her hagiography. Polhané's hagiography, the *mi dbang rtogs brjod*, was written by Tsering Wangyel (*tshe ring dbang rgyal*, 1697-1763) of Dokhar (*mdo mkhar*), who had been a finance director and later a governing minister of Ü, and was Polhané's trusted collaborator. He had also been a student of Lochen Dharmaśrī. The *mi dbang rtogs brjod* was written in 1733, when Polhané was still alive and in power. Petech describes Polhané's encounter with Mingyur Peldrön:

P'o-lha-nas had gone to the warm springs of 'Ol-k'a sTag-rtse. While staying there, a princess of the family of Rig-ādsin gTer-c'en C'os-kyi-rgyal-po came there. As people were afraid of showing her due honour because of the stern edicts against the rÑiñ-ma-pa, P'o-lha-nas himself went as the first to offer her gifts and to hear her spiritual teaching. She prophesied the ruin of K'añ-c'en-nas because of his persecution of the rÑiñ-ma-pa, and tried to induce P'o-lha-nas to join her sect; of course he refused and reasserted his dGe-lug-pa faith.<sup>38</sup>

This account gives a sense of the continued religio-political strife between the Nyingmapas and Gelukpas, as well as the involvement of the Qing imperium in the dispute. Petech did not recognize Mingyur Peldrön because he did not recognize "*rig 'dzin gter chen chos kyi rgyal po*" as Terdak Lingpa, although this is a name that is used for the treasure revealer several times in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography.<sup>39</sup> Petech had

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<sup>37</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 3. Biography of Polhané, written by *tshe ring dbang rgyal* of *mdo mkhar*, who had been a finance director and was appointed by Polhané to be one of two of the governing ministers of *dbus* in 1728. Would be appointed to a council of 4 ministers in 1751, and died in 1763. The text was finished in 1733.

<sup>38</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 95-96. See Dokhar Tsering Namgyel, *mi dbang*, 224.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 23 a. Petech's footnote reads: "This rÑiñ-ma-pa saint is difficult to identify; he is not mentioned even in the list of the *gter ston* in the *Padma-bka'-t'añ*" (Petech, *China and Tibet*, 95 n.4).



clearly never heard of "his daughter, Jetsün Mingyur Peldrön."<sup>40</sup> Regarding Polhané's response to the imperial edict, we need to look at other Tibetan language accounts of the period if we are to fully understand it. Further studies of works from this period might help us understand the wider reaction to the edict, both in Lhasa and beyond.

The account of Mingyur Peldrön and Polhané's interaction as it is found in Polhané's hagiography gives a sense of why Gyurmé Ösel would have spoken so highly of Polhané. As a leader, Polhané stood up against a generally anti-Nyingma edict (even though it cited Mindröling as an exception), and directly supported Mingyur Peldrön's position as an eminent teacher. According to Gyurmé Ösel, he also supported Mingyur Peldrön's development efforts at Mindröling.

While this wider historical context only serves as a setting for the context of Gyurmé Ösel's literary work, it helps to keep in mind that that context was part of a larger international system, and involved religious and political actors from distant regions. The purpose of giving this historical background is to contextualize Mingyur Peldrön's life story in the wider Central and East Asian milieu. Beyond that, the historical religious context gives a sense of the active connections between Mindröling and the Gelukpas in Lhasa during Mingyur Peldrön's lifetime. The regional political contestation of the period, and their attendant sectarian and intra-sectarian divisions, appear several times and at length in her hagiography. Mingyur Peldrön's relations with the Seventh Dalai Lama, Polhané, and her near brush with the troops of Tsewang Rabten, are all discussed in the text. These events are depicted from her perspective, offering a rare personal

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<sup>40</sup> Dokharwa Tsering Namgyel, *mi dbang*, 224 b.1.

description of the widespread regional strife. Shortly after the edict was issued, a civil war broke out in Tibet that raged from 1727-28.

### **Literature and the Creation of Mindröling Monastery**

Before discussing the life of Mingyur Peldrön, I will give an overview of the rise of Mindröling Monastery and the role of literature there. As in the previous section, this overview is primarily based on secondary source research. During the years 1625-1642, three separate polities developed within a widely defined Tibetan cultural area, including the Drukzhung Choklé Namgyel (*'brug gzhung phyogs las rnam rgyal*) in Bhutan, the Ganden Podrang in Central Tibet, and the beginnings of a state government in Sikkim. John Ardussi describes the three developments in light of respective players' use of seemingly apolitical literary genres in the process of state-creation. The three polities used certain "moral or normative religious grounds" to justify their development, and incorporated biography, poetry, and religious history to support the governmental foundation of each.<sup>41</sup>

In the cases of Bhutan and Central Tibet, literary genres were employed to support each polity's assertion of spiritually sanctioned political power. They produced literary works that provided the established canonical foundation in which a political debate based in Buddhist legitimacy was asserted.<sup>42</sup> In this context, literature was a powerful tool for the assertion of doctrinal and historical (and, by extension, political and religious) ideals and statecraft. It was through literature that leaders such as the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Desi Sangyé Gyatso developed and conveyed ideas about society. At

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<sup>41</sup> Ardussi, "Formation," 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ardussi, "Formation," 11-12.

Mindröling, literature was likewise extremely important in institutional development during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Nyingma participation in seventeenth century religio-political developments took on what Jake Dalton describes as a uniquely Nyingma language. That is, political events were discussed in terms of "prophecy, black magic, and esoteric ritual forms."<sup>43</sup> In this way, a parallel Nyingma historical account of the period developed alongside that of the Ganden Podrang.<sup>44</sup>

It was within this context that in 1670 the treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa and his brother, the monk Lochen Dharmaśrī, founded and developed the institution of Mindröling Monastery, a prominent Nyingma institution in the Drachi area of Dranang (*grwa nang*), in Central Tibet. The patronage of religious institutions by both secular and religious political leaders could either make or break the future of a monastery, and they had the support of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

By the time Mindröling was founded, Terdak Lingpa had already discovered three of the four revealed treasure texts or *terma* (*gter ma*) of his treasure-revealing career, and would discover the last one before Mingyur Peldrön's birth in 1699. The two brothers were highly literate, and the monastery effectively served as an educational facility for the most important members of Central Tibetan religious and public life. Their unification of several traditions of religious literature, along with the making public of ritual practice and empowerments, made the Mindröling project unique among the Central Tibetan Nyingma traditions of the time, although these practices were in line with similar initiatives on the part of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Ganden Podrang. The

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<sup>43</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 164.

connection between Mindröling and the Ganden Podrang makes sense, considering the close relationship between the Mindröling leaders and the Fifth Dalai Lama. Sangyé Gyatso was also a supporter and disciple of Terdak Lingpa.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Mindröling acted as a center for aesthetic refinement for members of the aristocracy, and adhered to a generally high standard of aesthetic and material cultural production.<sup>46</sup>

Successful recognition as a treasure revealer, or *tertön* (*gter ston*), requires a charismatic nature, an understanding of the received religious institutions of the time, and the faith of one's followers. Terdak Lingpa had developed all three of these. When this was combined with Lochen Dharmasrī's monastic education, writing ability, and excellent book learning, the brothers set out to establish the monastery as a ritual educational center for the Nyingma tradition. Using their knowledge of the tradition's history, the brothers devised new rituals and teachings, which they presented to the general public at massive ritual festivals. Dalton succinctly describes their method as "public ritual as political strategy."<sup>47</sup> However, for some time there had been deep divisions within the Nyingma tradition. Across the Tsangpo (*gtsang po*) River from Mindröling was Dorjé Drak (*rdo rje brag*) Monastery, which is reported to have had a very different approach.<sup>48</sup> Dorjé Drak's leader Pema Trinlé (*pad+ma 'phrin las*, 1641-1717) was exclusive where Lochen Dharmasrī and Terdak Lingpa were intentionally inclusive, and sought to extend their influence to other parts of Central Tibet and Kham.

The Mindröling brothers sought to unite opposing Nyingma factions, and Lochen Dharmasrī's historical research was central to this goal. By harkening back to a shared

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<sup>45</sup> Townsend, *Materials*, 99.

<sup>46</sup> For more on this, see Townsend's *Materials*.

<sup>47</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 91-92.

<sup>48</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 205.

past, Lochen Dharmasrī took the focus off contemporary doctrinal disputes and initiated a Nyingma renaissance that would continue for two centuries.<sup>49</sup> Lochen Dharmasrī used historical knowledge to reframe ritual in a mutual historical foundation<sup>50</sup> and redefine the Nyingma tradition's ritual and historical methods. Dalton associates this method of institutional development with the contemporary activities of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Sangyé Gyatso, which he describes as a "controlled inclusiveness" that allowed for contestation of and participation in the religio-political infrastructure, so long as basic rules were followed.<sup>51</sup> The result of these efforts was a monastery accessible to a wide range of Nyingma practitioners and devotees that was known for its excellent educational program.

Mindröling's liturgical tradition was founded on the dual support of historical research and ritual performance,<sup>52</sup> which would define the new rhetoric of the period. Lochen Dharmasrī relied on historical research about the entire Nyingma tradition to inform how he granted ritual initiations.<sup>53</sup> By simplifying some ceremonies and making

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<sup>49</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 211-12. See also Hobsbawm on "invented tradition," Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1, as discussed in Cuevas and Schaeffer, pg. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 213.

<sup>51</sup> Dalton, *Uses*, 205-8. He explains it this way: "Everyone was guaranteed a place at the table, as long as they remained seated and followed the proper ceremonial procedures" (208)

<sup>52</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 93.

<sup>53</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 91-92. Dalton describes the brothers' approach as two-pronged, involving "in-depth historical research and the formulation of new large-scale public rituals, with the former supporting the latter," and describes the elaborately choreographed festivals that were created and held for large public audiences (Dalton, "Recreating," 93). Sutra Empowerment (*mdo dbang*) played a central role in this process, and Dalton explains that Lochen Dharmasrī focused on teaching *mdo dbang* and *bka' ma* in particular (Dalton, "Recreating," 93).

them accessible to the general public, he combined ritual performance and inclusive community participation to form a strong support system for the new monastery.<sup>54</sup>

The brothers' work greatly resembled the unifying efforts of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Desi Sangyé Gyatso.<sup>55</sup> For both pairs, literature was a powerful tool for the assertion of doctrinal and historical (and, by extension, political and religious) ideals and statecraft. Their models of governance, and means for conveying these to the general population with the use of *terma*, were in line with common archetypes of the period.<sup>56</sup> Terdak Lingpa was not celibate, and had at least one wife, who acted as his consort, during his lifetime. When the monastery was founded, he was designated its first acting *trichen* (*khri chen*)<sup>57</sup> or throne holder. Lochen Dharmaśrī, an ordained monk, became the *khenchen* (*mkhan chen*) or head vinaya holder at Mindröling, along the lines of an abbot. The *trichen* and *khenchen* lineages have been maintained since that time and persist today, ensuring a dual power base with foundations in both a non-celibate tantric tradition, as well as celibate vinaya teachings.

Dominique Townsend has found that Mindröling served as a highly regarded educational facility, and trained not only future religious leaders, but also members of the aristocracy who would go on to hold prominent leadership positions throughout the Tibetan world. According to her, this education was largely ritual and aesthetic in nature, and served a diverse, if relatively small, population.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 94-7.

<sup>55</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 92, Footnote 3. Dalton mentions that the Dalai Lama and Mindröling had a reciprocal relationship, citing Kohn 2001, 49-50.

<sup>56</sup> Ardussi, "Formation," pg. 15.

<sup>57</sup> Although his father was retroactively named *trichen*.

<sup>58</sup> According to Townsend, there were never more than 300 students at Mindröling at a given time. Townsend, *Materials*, 114-6. It is difficult to determine population statistics

Generally, scholars have focused on the development of the identity of the Nyingma school in the new monasteries in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Kham (*kham*).<sup>59</sup> However, if we are to believe Gyurmé Ösel's account, a significant portion of the school's identity formation and revival effort actually took place in Central Tibet in the mid-eighteenth Century, under the direction and influence of the children of Terdak Lingpa. At this point, Mingyur Peldrön was in her early twenties. This revival of Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasrī's efforts, steered by the next generation, began in 1721.

Although (or perhaps because) the rift of the war with the Dzungar Mongols separated Gyurmé Ösel from this halcyon period of Mindröling's history (he was a toddler during the "troubles"), his work sits as a continuation of these goals into the next generation. He drew from the cache of cultural identifiers available in this community to create Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography. As a lesser-known member of this grand tradition, Gyurmé Ösel exemplifies one possibility of how the hundreds of students to study at Mindröling might have been writing and considering his community's shared past.

### **The Women of Mindröling**

Mindröling is one of a few monastic institutions with a heritage of highly educated and revered female practitioners. Mingyur Peldrön is considered the first in

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for the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries from the secondary scholarship. We do know that, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Labrang remained small in comparison with its early 20<sup>th</sup> century population, although Nietupski does not give specific numbers (Nietupski, *Labrang*, 127). We know that Sakya Monastery fluctuated between four and six hundred monks throughout its existence, although Cassinelli and Ekvall give no specific information about this specific time period. In addition to the North and South Sakya monasteries, there were several other, smaller monasteries and nunneries throughout the principality, but these had no connection with the central Sakya government, and Cassinelli and Ekvall do not consider them relevant to a study of Sakya's political system, so their numbers are not discussed (Cassinelli and Ekvall, *Tibetan*, 289-90).

<sup>59</sup> Dalton, "Recreating," 100.

Mindröling's *jetsünma* (*rje btsun ma*) lineage, the third most important Mindröling line after the *trichens* and the *khenchens*.<sup>60</sup> Here I will briefly mention a few of the other women who appear in – or are otherwise relevant to – Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*.

During the time that Gyurmé Ösel was alive, there was at least one extant hagiography of a Mindröling woman. Lochen Dharmasrī wrote a hagiography of his mother, Lhadzin Yangchen Drölma (*lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgröl ma*), who was born in Yorpo (*g.yor po*) in 1624.<sup>61</sup> It is included in Lochen Dharmasrī's collected works (*sungbum*, *gsung bum*) in a section dedicated to Mindröling's history and hagiography. The grandmother's *Life* appears alongside those of Terdak Lingpa, the brothers' contemporaries Jagöpa Chökyong Gyeltsen (*bya rgod pa chos skyong rgyal mtshan*, 1648-1690)<sup>62</sup> and Dingri Lodrö Tenpa (*ding ri ba blo gros brtan pa*, 1632-1687),<sup>63</sup> a collection of the *Lives* of all those in Lochen Dharmasrī's vinaya transmission lineage, as well as Lochen Dharmasrī's autobiography. The texts in this section are all ordered chronologically according to when they were written. Although the end of Yangchen Drölma's hagiography is missing, based on its placement in the *sungbum*, we can surmise that it was probably written shortly after 1701, when Mingyur Peldrön was an infant. Mingyur Peldrön's younger sister, who is referred to in the text as Drung Peldzin (*drung dpal 'dzin*), was considered to be an incarnation of their paternal grandmother Yangchen Drölma.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Personal communication with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, September 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Dharmasrī, "yum," 2 b-3 a.

<sup>62</sup> This was written in 1699, the year of Mingyur Peldrön's birth. He was a student of Terdak Lingpa and a teacher of Lochen Dharmasrī.

<sup>63</sup> This was written in 1700.

<sup>64</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 96 b. Mingyur Peldrön, on the other hand, was considered to be an incarnation of several male members of previous Mindröling generations, including one



The brief *Life* of Yangchen Drölma is different from Mingyur Peldrön's long hagiography in several ways. Lochen Dharmasrī describes his mother in terms of her aristocratic background, her financial management abilities at Dargyé Chöling (*dar rgyas chos gling*, the family seat prior to Mindröling),<sup>65</sup> and her role as mother to seven children.<sup>66</sup> In it, he describes her as a member of royalty, descendent from the great dharma kings of Tibet, and a virtuous, brave, and noble woman.<sup>67</sup> However, there are no discussions of her previous lives and no descriptions of her ability as a practitioner. Although it is short, Lochen Dharmasrī's narrative of his mother's life conveys a deep respect for her and also suggests a generally female-friendly approach to family inclusion and institutional history.

We know that Mingyur Peldrön's mother Phuntsok Peldzöm (*phun tshogs dpal 'dzoms*) came from aristocratic stock and was relatively well educated. Although Phuntsok Peldzöm was considered an educated and respected practitioner in her own right, she does not seem (at least in Gyurmé Ösel's telling) to have had any influence on her daughter's education. That being said, we know that when Mingyur Peldrön was an adult, her mother and sister traveled with her.<sup>68</sup> Phuntsok Peldzöm, along with her two other daughters, followed Mingyur Peldrön to Sikkim,<sup>69</sup> where her sister married the still very young Sikkimese king Gyurmé Namgyel (*'gyur med rnam rgyal*, 1707-1733).

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of her grandfather's disciples. This brings up the question of how reincarnation and gender related during this period of Tibetan history.

<sup>65</sup> Dharmasrī, "yum," 9 b.

<sup>66</sup> Dharmasrī, "yum," 6 a- 7a.

<sup>67</sup> Dharmasrī, "yum," 2 b.

<sup>68</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 40 b.

<sup>69</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b.

Dominique Townsend has found that Terdak Lingpa's collected letters give evidence of an egalitarian approach to education for women and men. Terdak Lingpa maintained correspondence with female rulers, patrons, and practitioners, and maintained the same tone and educational philosophy with all of them, regardless of gender.<sup>70</sup> That being said, in Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography, it is unclear whether the egalitarianism conveyed in these letters was pragmatically borne out in his daughters' education.

Other women appear in the narrative, often as Mingyur Peldrön's students. In particular, she taught many groups of nuns, most frequently the nuns of Menji (*sman brjid*) Monastery, as well as yoginīs residing at Samten Tsé and other retreat places. The nuns of Menji appear frequently to receive teachings from Mingyur Peldrön, make offerings to her, and to support her when she is in need. At one point Mingyur Peldrön takes shelter with an unnamed "Female Siddha of Menji" while she is hiding from the Dzungar army.<sup>71</sup>

One other important woman in this story is Mingyur Peldrön's faithful nursemaid, Gyurmé Chödrön (*'gyur med chos sgron*), who leaves for Sikkim with Mingyur Peldrön and is tragically lost in a storm, only to resurface later. Although the men were dispersed during the Dzungar troubles, the women of Mindröling stuck together with relative success, with the exception of Gyurmé Chödrön's disappearance.<sup>72</sup> Throughout the work, she appears, always silent, but nevertheless part of the action, as she witnesses Mingyur

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<sup>70</sup> Townsend, *Materials*, 145, 153, 160-1.

<sup>71</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 42 a.

<sup>72</sup> Townsend (*Materials*, 128-34) also refers to an unnamed consort, who joined Terdak Lingpa at Mindröling in 1678 or 79 in order to help him continue revealing treasures. As far as I can tell, this person is not mentioned in Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, unless this is in fact a reference to the beginning of Phuntsok Peldzöm's marriage to Terdak Lingpa, which is quite possible.

Peldrön's birth, watches her grow, and travels with her to Sikkim. Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, unfortunately, is not a story of ordinary people, so we learn little of Gyurmé Chödrön beyond this. But, here and there we catch a glimpse of an ordinary person interacting with the not-so-ordinary people, like Mingyur Peldrön.

### **The Question of Leadership**

In this study, I assert that Mingyur Peldrön represents one ideal of female religious leadership present in one eighteenth century Central Tibetan community. Leadership in the context of this study refers to the act of widely dispersing religious education, which then results in the accumulation of a large number of disciples. Mingyur Peldrön had a teaching career that lasted almost fifty years, and she taught thousands of students during this time.

When I describe Mingyur Peldrön as a "leader," this is in reference in part to her widespread influence as a teacher. While she attempted developmental leadership by instigating the reconstruction of Mindröling in the early 1720s, her initial attempts were stymied by a period of exile in Kongpo. While she attempted institutional leadership, she ultimately resorted to extending her influence through her teachings, and spent much of her life teaching large groups, including government leaders, and asserting her ideals to her wide population of disciples. The connection between "teacher" and "leader" are also related in her role as religious advisor to disciples who were also prominent governors, and the sheer number of people she taught. She assertively led thousands of students in various teachings, had the power to empty out monasteries, and had close relations with the Ganden Podrang leadership in Lhasa, as well as with her father's former students. As a teacher, she brought religious education to those who were suffering from a lack of it, or worse, were being led astray by charlatans.

Mingyur Peldrön's form of leadership is distinct from that of government administrators. Neither did she lead armies, nor hold a specific throne. While she is considered to be the first of the female line of *jetsünmas* at Mindröling, this title can be granted to multiple women who are living at the same time, and does not denote specific succession responsibilities. On the other hand, her male relations were given specific hierarchical roles within the monastic community.<sup>73</sup>

As we will see in Chapter Two, her initial attempts to lead the reconstruction of Mindröling in the early 1720s were thwarted by jealous family members (possibly her brother, who was then the *trichen*). Upon her return from Sikkim, she was the first person to begin rebuilding the remnants of Mindröling. With the financial and political support of Polhané, she was able to complete one reconstruction project. Presumably, this support was combined with the fact that she was the only living Mindröling family member on the premises at the time. We can imagine that she was also very charismatic, according to the large crowds that she was already drawing to her teachings. Interestingly, this renovation project resulted in her exile to Kongpo at the hands of her own community members. The exile strongly suggests that her assertive behavior was threatening to others in the community.<sup>74</sup> In the hagiography it is suggested that this was initiated by her fellow community leaders at Mindröling, although Gyurmé Ösel is not specific about their motives or methods.

Mingyur Peldrön was a powerful teacher, and exercised power by widely distributing her teachings, in much the same way as her father and uncle in their own time. She used the methods available to her at the time to move the Mindröling

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<sup>73</sup> Communication with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, August 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 b- 53 a.

community in what she considered the appropriate direction. While this is clearly different from governmental or official leadership, it displays an active use of available resources to maneuver an institution. She was a leader in the sense that she was using her familial connections and education to assert unusual changes within her community. Not many accounts exist of women with this type of teaching career in eighteenth century Tibet. So, she is exercising leadership in the sense that she is influencing a significant portion of the community, including powerful religious and political leaders in a way that appears to have been unusual during her lifetime.

### **Chapter by Chapter Descriptions**

This study is organized to guide the reader through an incrementally close reading of the *Life* of Mingyur Peldrön. The dissertation moves thematically from an external study of her hagiography as a literary work to questions of how and where we are able to hear Mingyur Peldrön in it. After first exploring the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* as depicted by Gyurmé Ösel, I will turn to the literary and gendered themes that are the warp and weft of the narrative. Throughout the study, questions of how we understand "the literary," and what it can tell us about actual historical events will be addressed from the following perspectives.

"Chapter One: Reading the *Namtar* of Mingyur Peldrön," considers the nuts and bolts of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, and examines its content in light of Gyurmé Ösel's authorial goals. Here I will discuss the organization of the text, literary references, and Gyurmé Ösel's stylistic choices.

In "Chapter Two: The Life and Times of Mingyur Peldrön," I briefly summarize the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life, highlighting the more significant moments as they are highlighted in the hagiography.

"Chapter Three: Incarnation and Identity" addresses representations of Mingyur Peldrön – her personality and previous lives – as they are described at the beginning of the hagiography. In particular, this chapter considers the role of gender and public identity, notions of prestige, and eighteenth century representations of feminine identity.

In "Chapter Four: Hearing Mingyur Peldrön's Voice," I turn to the questions of voice and authorship the hagiography, and present some of the moments in Gyurmé Ösel's work wherein Mingyur Peldrön is quoted directly. It is in these quotations that we begin to "hear" Mingyur Peldrön's voice. But, how do we interpret what we hear? Chapter Four also addresses the doctrinal and social negotiations of the Nyingma community during the eighteenth century.

## Chapter One: Reading the *Namtar* of Mingyur Peldrön

### Introduction

This chapter will examine the hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön from the greatest distance, as a comprehensive literary work. In this chapter, the hagiography will be treated within the context of Tibetan life writing; I will also consider how Gyurmé Ösel used different textual references, literary content, mythology, and history, throughout the course of the narrative. Literary devices that are frequently found in Tibetan life writing support Mingyur Peldrön's life story. We will consider the narrative effects of how these are used by Gyurmé Ösel. This chapter will also introduce questions of authorship, and will consider the multi-author nature of the work.

Gyurmé Ösel uses several devices to present Mingyur Peldrön as an important actor in a particular socio-cultural, political, and religious context. As mentioned in the Introduction, by reading hagiography as a form of literary history, we can see how literary devices reflect, reinterpret, and reinforce socio-religious values of a particular time and place. Not only does his use of the hagiographic genre offer relevant information about public identity in eighteenth-century central Tibet, the hagiography serves as an example of life writing in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

This chapter will also examine representations of different religious traditions as portrayed in Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*. One goal of this study is to better understand eighteenth century religious developments. Gyurmé Ösel's use of references and his treatment of several practice lineages, and criticism of prominent practitioners, offer clues for understanding the mid and late eighteenth century use of *kama* (*bka' ma*), *terma* (*gter ma*), *Dzokchen* (*rdzogs chen*) or Great Perfection, and *Chöd* (*gcod*) or Severance

traditions, among others. The narrative reveals dissonance among and between several groups, including between Nyingmapa practitioners of the time, and Gyurmé Ösel's use of specifically Mindröling-associated practice traditions is telling.

Understanding the authorial use of common literary styles to form the foundation for how the reader understands Mingyur Peldrön is the first step to eventually "hearing" her voice. This chapter will examine the authorship statement at the end of the hagiography, and will consider the roles of Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön in its creation.

### ***The Genre of Namtar***

A brief discussion the Tibetan literary genre called "*namtar*" (*rnam thar*), and its role as a culturally specific instance of hagiographic life writing, will help to contextualize the creation and literary relevance of Mingyur Peldrön's life story. Generally speaking, "*namtar*" refers to the genre of life writing – hagiographic, biographic, or autobiographic texts – which provide much of our information about historical Tibetan figures. These works are particularly informative with regard to their presentation of socio-political developments in Tibetan history, as well as religious praxis, doctrine, and in some cases, institutional organization.

The term *namtar* literally means "complete liberation" (*rnam par thar pa*), while the genre refers broadly to narratives that offer soteriological advice through the expression of exemplary lives. Although biographical in nature, *namtar* contain accounts of the subject's miraculous and thaumaturgic activities, and often include accounts of previous lives, which tend to connect the subject to deities and, in some cases, earlier



historical figures.<sup>75</sup> *Namtar* is thus generically closer to hagiography than a post-European Enlightenment definition of "biography," as the lives of eminent Tibetans are generally portrayed in saintly terms. While there are biographic aspects to these works, and *namtar* is sometimes translated into English as "biography," throughout this study I will refer to it as Mingyur Peldrön's "*Life*," her "hagiography," or her "*namtar*." I should mention that this study will also examine the question of authorship. Thus, when I am referring to Gyurmé Ösel as the author of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, rather than Mingyur Peldrön as subject of the work, I might also refer to it as *his* hagiography.

Throughout much of Tibetan historical literature, worldly activities and the miraculous remain enmeshed. Miracles occur, deities and demons appear and interact with humans, and prophecy and revelation are par for the course. It is the same with the *namtar* genre; the ostensible purpose of these texts is to provide soteriological guidance by recounting the exemplary lives of saintly figures. Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar* generally focuses on recounting daily activities, teachings given and received, specific events, people met, and other public activities. Based on this, I assume that the hagiography was written for the general population of Mindröling, as well as for unaffiliated but interested readers. In other words, access to the hagiography was not restricted to those who had received certain initiations, or had specific relationships with Mindröling.

Andrew Quintman explains that "Although such accounts refer almost exclusively to the lives of religious figures, the Tibetan genre of *namtar* is neither homogeneous nor

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<sup>75</sup> In the tripartite taxonomy of *namtar* (that is outer, inner, and secret), Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* most resembles the ideal "outer" *namtar*, although it is not explicitly described as such. The tripartite taxonomy is as follows: outer biography (phyi'i rnam thar), inner biography (nang gi rnam thar), and secret biography (gsang ba'i rnam thar). At the time of this writing this, no inner or secret biographies have been discovered for Mingyur Peldrön. Quintman, *Yogin*, 8.

monolithic, and it allows for a wide range of literary structures and narrative content."<sup>76</sup> Like other cases of hagiography, Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar* often includes miraculous accounts, stories of spiritual realization, and the extreme hardship of the saint. Devotional language is frequent, as are references to dreams and visions. Following Buddhist notions of saṃsāra and reincarnation, *namtar* also include accounts of the subject's previous lives. While one might consider removing these extra-biographical trappings for the sake of creating a "real history" of an individual, to do so would elide the author's goals for writing the text. In doing so, we would also lose some of the most valuable clues for understanding the social role of the subject.

### **Organization of the Text**

The hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön is 119 folios (237 pages) long, with five lines of Tibetan per folio.<sup>77</sup> It begins with an invocation, followed by twenty lines of nine-syllable verse of homage to Mingyur Peldrön. Gyurmé Ösel then proceeds to tell the story of her previous lives, which consume a further 35 folios.

A narrative of the subject's previous lives is a common feature of Buddhist life writing. This introductory section establishes Mingyur Peldrön as an incarnation of the primordial mother Buddha Samantabhadrī, as well as Yeshé Tsogyel, Nangsa Obum, and others. Within the *namtar* of Mingyur Peldrön, the narrative of her life – that is, the period from her birth in 1699 to her death in 1769 – is prefaced by an extensive discussion of her previous incarnations. Before we read of her in terms more akin to western biography, we are introduced to her as a culmination of a group of female and

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<sup>76</sup> Quintman, *Yogin*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> The first two full pages after the title folio are three lines each.

male bodhisattvas, aristocrats, and religious adepts. This section quotes and interprets verse that primarily situates Mingyur Peldrön within a lineage of eminent figures. This lineage of well-known Bodhisattvas and historical Tibetan characters – many of them women – and their presentation in the *namtar*, will be discussed at length in Chapter Three. This section relies heavily on references to treasure texts (*terma*, *gter ma*) and canonical works. Brief references reinforce Mingyur Peldrön's previous births as numerous brave and well-known female humans and deities through prophetic writing, mostly extracted from life stories of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. These prophetic writings will be discussed in this chapter.

After the introduction, Gyurmé Ösel begins the story of Mingyur Peldrön's life *as* Mingyur Peldrön. He gives a chronological account from birth to death over the course of one hundred folios. Here prophetic references still appear, but they are mostly references to the four treasure texts of Mingyur Peldrön's father, Terdak Lingpa. Throughout this section, which is the longest by far, Gyurmé Ösel marks each year (or set of years) with brief commentary about what teachings Mingyur Peldrön gave, where she travelled, and whom she met. The narrative often tends towards lists of teachings given and people met, as well as pilgrimage places visited. However, Gyurmé Ösel also uses verse – attributed to Mingyur Peldrön and others – to highlight events and to reinforce claims about her level of realization and her abilities as a teacher.

The hagiography ends with a lengthy description of Mingyur Peldrön's death, reinforcing the notion that it is in the individual's death that she is identified as a saint. The hagiography concludes with a colophon, wherein Gyurmé Ösel describes the circumstances under which the hagiography was composed, and explains the twelve-year

delay in its production. Most sections are peppered with segments of seven- and nine-syllable verse of several types, conveying several goals. These will be discussed at length below.

### **Authorship and Composition**

In a historical study of any kind of literature, it is necessary to understand the context in which a work was created. Otherwise, there is no hope of understanding the author's goals in writing the work. A study of any piece of biographic literature necessitates an investigation of the author's motives. Without this context, there is no foundation for interpreting the text, and one is left with a reading devoid of nuanced understanding of the text's ultimate purpose. Nor can we understand the social and religious pressures experienced by the author. Without knowing something about the author's context, it is impossible to interpret the meaning of the text.

Gyurmé Ösel originally proposed the idea of writing Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar* in 1742,<sup>78</sup> although he would not complete it until thirteen years after her death, in 1782. At the end of the *namtar*, a brief colophon recounts the conditions under which the work was completed. It begins with:

Thus goes the hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön – lord of the hundred Buddha families and all-pervasive sovereign – called "That Which Dispels Longing Through Faith." First, the Tibetan Ruler Miwang Gyurmé Sönam Topgyé<sup>79</sup> and the Lhagyari Zhabdrung Chakdor Wangchen had supplicated at the feet of my excellent Lama. When a year had passed since she had departed to the great expanse of peace, I requested again and again that [the hagiography] be completed. I made the request about twelve times, and so planted the seed of the *Life*. It was said that, "because the disciple must write his master's *Life*, it should come from you." After such insistence, I began to compose it.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 78 b- 79 a.

<sup>79</sup> That is, Polhané.

<sup>80</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 117b-118a.

Thus the colophon begins with the title of the hagiography, and an acknowledgement of the two people who had originally petitioned Gyurmé Ösel to compose the work. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Miwang Gyurmé Sönam Topgyé (also known as Polhané) had participated in the defense against the Dzungar invasion, supported the leader Khangchenné, and eventually came to rule Central Tibet from 1728-1747. Although he had died years before Mingyur Peldrön, the colophon suggests that he had previously asked that her *namtar* be written. Polhané appears several times throughout the course of the hagiography, acting as Mingyur Peldrön's disciple and patron at several critical junctures, and protecting her from the sectarianism that ran rampant in Central Tibet during her lifetime. The Zhabdrung from Lhagyari, Chakdor Wangchen (*lha rgya ri zhabs drung phyag rdor dbang chen*), is not mentioned anywhere else in the hagiography, and it is unclear as to what the relationship was between him and Gyurmé Ösel. It is possible that he had a more central role in the actual production of the *namtar*, and may have still been living when the work was completed. His title suggests that he was a person of importance from Lhagyari, although his specific station remains unknown.

It seems that both men suggested that Gyurmé Ösel – a close disciple of Mingyur Peldrön's – author the work. The process of wealthy or notable people requesting the production of texts is common, not just in *namtar* composition, but also in the creation of other works as well. Also, for the composition of *namtar*, it is usual that a disciple would be asked to write about the master's life. As with any commissioned piece, it is certainly possible that the patron's own interests would influence the final tone of the work. The fact that Gyurmé Ösel cites Polhané as one of the patrons, even years after both the leader

and Mingyur Peldrön had died, suggests that Polhané's authority as a legitimating supporter of Mingyur Peldrön continued to be important even after his death. Gyurmé Ösel began issuing requests to write the *namtar* a year after Mingyur Peldrön had died, but it would not be until a dozen years later that he would actually complete the work.

The colophon continues with a discussion of this:

However, there were leftover demonic hindrances. The mendicant Gyurmé Chömpel, a disciple of Denden Dorjé in Yaru, Tsang, used ear-piercing talk to oppress [the completion of the *namtar*]. But I was urged on by news of the son of the lineage of the knowledge-bearer Pemalingpa, lord of all beings, renowned dharma master and conqueror incarnate, the knowledge-bearer called Pema Wangyel Dorjé the glorious. In particular, word of [the baby] aroused in me undivided, scorching faith to plant seeds of faith for the sake of distant future generations, so that they could hold this immutable illustration of Mingyur (Peldrön) in their minds; and so I obtained permission to complete it.<sup>81</sup>

Gyurmé Ösel attributes the thirteen-year delay in the *namtar*'s completion to unspecified "demonic hindrances" and a vague reference to the "ear-piercing talk" of one Gyurmé Chömpel, of Yaru, who was a disciple of Denden Dorjé. It is unclear who the oppressive Denden Dorjé was, or what the effects of this 'ear-piercing' talk were, beyond somehow delaying the publication of the *namtar*. Gyurmé Ösel was persistent, however, in seeing the *namtar* come to fruition, and his explicit naming of those who had stood in his way suggest that others were opposed to the continuation of Mingyur Peldrön's memory.

Gyurmé Ösel states that he wrote the hagiography for the sake of future generations, and mentions in particular the Sixth *Trichen* Gyurmé Pema Wangyel (*'gyur med pad+ma dbang rgyal*, d.u). Gyurmé Pema Wangyel was believed to be an incarnation of Terdak Lingpa, and was the newest member of the next generation at

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<sup>81</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 118a-118b.

Mindröling. The infant's father, the Fifth *Trichen*, Gyurmé Trinlé Namgyel (*'gyur med 'phrin las rnam rgyal*, 1765-1812), would have only been about sixteen or seventeen years old at the time, and this was his first child. Thus Gyurmé Ösel was working on publishing the hagiography in the context of the birth of a new generation of Mindröling leadership. He likewise cites this as a motivating factor for pushing for the hagiography's publication, thereby preserving the history of the lineage.

At this point in Mindröling's history, the community was regrouping after several generations of oppression and strife. Soon after the hagiography was finished, another important female would be born to the community, which might have played a later part in Mingyur Peldrön's promotion as an important ancestor. A few years later, Gyurmé Trinlé Namgyel's daughter, Trinlé Chödrön, would be born. In today's Mindröling Community in India, Trinlé Chödrön is considered to be the second most important female in the community's history, after Mingyur Peldrön herself. Like Mingyur Peldrön, Trinlé Chödrön is also considered to be a master of the Great Perfection.

The colophon ends with a reference to Mingyur Peldrön as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel, and a description of who helped in completing the work:

She is undoubtedly one and the same with Karchen,<sup>82</sup> the wife of Padma, king of the victorious ones, [she is] the Queen of the Bliss *Ḍākinīs*. With gratitude to the Great Master Herself, I bow at her feet so that she may turn the wheel of the Secret Great Perfection. Master, please bestow your blessings and empowerments! This old vagabond from Shang in Tö, this old cotton-clad vagabond from Khyungpo, the siddha called Gyurmé Ösel, has arrived at his sixty-eighth year. On the third day of the tenth month of the water tiger year [1782], on the Great Lama's commemoration day, the teacher Dratön Wangchuk [performed] a fire consecration at the Namkhö Yangtsé meditation house at Dranang. After that, the madman Karma Biza connected the verse and the dialogue, then edited and repaired it as

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<sup>82</sup> That is, Yeshé Tsogyel.

necessary. All of this was done so that [the *Life*] could be transmitted to all sentient beings. May the Master's blessings quickly proliferate!<sup>83</sup>

Here, "Padma, king of the victorious ones" is a reference to Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche, an apotheosized South Asian scholar who aided in the early proliferation of Buddhism in Tibet. Padmasambhava and his consort, Yeshé Tsogyel, are central figures in Tibetan Buddhism, and especially the Nyingma traditions, including Mindröling. Here "Karchen" refers to Yeshé Tsogyel, an apotheosized and iconic figure in her own right, and perhaps the most prominent female Buddhist practitioner in Tibetan mythology and history. As we will see, this comparison between Mingyur Peldrön and Yeshé Tsogyel is a theme that occurs frequently throughout the hagiography, and central to Gyurmé Ösel's presentation of his master's religious identity. Gyurmé Ösel frequently uses the sobriquet "Queen of the Bliss *Dākinīs*" to refer to his master, and here he connects the title directly with Yeshé Tsogyel. Here he is requesting that Mingyur-Peldrön-as-Yeshé-Tsogyel bless the text and the author.

At the end of the colophon the reader learns that two other people were involved in completing the *namtar*. One Dratön Wangchuk performed a fire consecration, ostensibly either to clear the path for the completion of the text, or to bless it upon completion. Then, the "madman"<sup>84</sup> Karma Biza edited the entire text, bringing together sections of verse and prose. This was a large editing job, considering both the length of the text and the frequency with which it vacillates between prose and verse. The mention of Karma Biza in this role shows that at least two hands were actively involved in the *namtar*'s composition.

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<sup>83</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 118 b.4 - 119 a.5.

<sup>84</sup> For an extensive discussion of the use of this term, see the work of David DiValerio.



As we can see, the creation of the hagiography was something of a group effort. While Gyurmé Ösel was responsible for producing the content, Karma Biza helped compile it. Dratön Wangchuk performed rituals for its successful production, which was likely considered an important job, especially after having the project stalled for so many years. Mingyur Peldrön's early years – her birth, childhood, youth, and exile in Sikkim – were reported to Gyurmé Ösel by several people, including the women who attended her birth. For these early years, Gyurmé Ösel sought oral narratives from those who had been present.

Also, and perhaps most importantly, Mingyur Peldrön herself dictated some of the narrative content to Gyurmé Ösel, and her direct speech is quoted throughout the *namtar*. The extent to which her own voice appears in the text raises the question of how we define the role of "author," especially in a biographic work that was initially conceived during the subject's lifetime and with her blessing. Mingyur Peldrön influenced the composition of the *namtar* in two ways. First, Gyurmé Ösel includes direct quotes from her. But he also mentions that Mingyur Peldrön occasionally directed what he should include in the narrative. For example, at a few points she commands Gyurmé Ösel to "Include this in the *namtar*!"<sup>85</sup> This suggests that in the course of their daily lives she probably also told him what *not* to include in the narrative, and how to portray what he did include. As we can see, the composition was the product of at least three individuals, and includes the input from several others. This question of "authorship" in terms of the dynamic between Mingyur Peldrön and Gyurmé Ösel will be considered in depth in

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<sup>85</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 28 b.

Chapter Four. However, just looking at the colophon gives us a sense of the many hands that were involved in writing the *namtar*.

It seems that, in describing the reasons for creating the *namtar*, Gyurmé Ösel is calling upon all forms of legitimacy associated with Mingyur Peldrön's life. He begins the colophon by noting that the work was produced with the support of governing leaders. Although Polhané had died by the time the work was completed, the mention of his name speaks to the continued power of his authority, even after his death. He cites Polhané, her association with Yeshé Tsogyel, and the future of the Mindröling tradition, as compelling reasons that contributed to the composition of the work.

Near the end of the colophon, Gyurmé Ösel mentions that the work was completed in 1782, some thirteen years after her passing. This late date of completion suggests disagreement, coming at least in part from Gyurmé Chömpel, and also potentially from other Mindröling community members, regarding whether or not the *namtar* should be written, or perhaps involving debate about what the *namtar* should include. Or, the delay might have been due to something as simple as financial restrictions, or other duties that Gyurmé Ösel was required to fulfill in that time. Until more research is done about the Mindröling community during this time, we can only speculate.

What does the colophon tell us about Gyurmé Ösel's goals in publishing the work? He sought to memorialize Mingyur Peldrön for the sake of future generations, and ostensibly because others were urging him to publish the work. It is also clear that he is concerned that his excellent lama be remembered – a concern that firmly establishes him

as a devout and dedicated disciple. Gyurmé Ösel uses several means for glorifying Mingyur Peldrön, and this is another reinforcing theme throughout the *namtar*.

Who was Gyurmé Ösel? What little we learn about Gyurmé Ösel's background we learn in the colophon, and at one other moment in the *namtar*. In the colophon we learn that he completed the *namtar* at age sixty-eight, placing his birth date around the year 1715. Both he and Mingyur Peldrön lived remarkably long lives (to sixty-eight and seventy, respectively). We also know that Gyurmé Ösel hailed from Shang, in the Tö region, and was enough of a devoted disciple to compose an extensive *namtar* of his master. Elsewhere in the narrative, we learn that he first met Mingyur Peldrön when he was eight years old and she was about twenty-four. At the time of their first meeting, she was on a pilgrimage and teaching tour, and her retinue passed by Gyurmé Ösel's home.

Here is how he describes their first meeting:

"At that time, they passed by and my grandmother meant to make prostrations to the Master, so went out to meet her. This was the first time that I, an eight year old, had seen the face of the Great Master, the Bliss Queen of the Ḍākinīs herself, and I thought myself very lucky indeed. Although I only had a brief glimpse of her youthful face, it was wondrous and overwhelmingly beautiful. As soon as I gazed upon her, I shed many tears. I went after her, hoping to ask if I could follow her, thus my faith involuntarily arose."<sup>86</sup>

The description of involuntary faith and tears streaming down the child's face conveys an ideal display of devotion, and one that would likely be considered unusual in an eight-year-old child. Shortly after this scene, Gyurmé Ösel reports that he convinced the adults to let him join Mingyur Peldrön's group, and so became her student and disciple. In later life he would act as her attendant, and remained by her side until her

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<sup>86</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55 a-b.

death. In addition to writing Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, Gyurmé Ösel acted as her scribe and attended many of her teachings. It is through Gyurmé Ösel's role as hagiographer and constant companion to Mingyur Peldrön that we learn about her life and their teacher-disciple relationship.<sup>87</sup> He frequently portrays himself as the clumsy student, which is cause for some humor in the narrative (as we will see in Chapter Four), but the reader also learns of the great benefits to be wrought from the strictly disciplined education exacted by Mingyur Peldrön on her students. Their relationship, as we will see, is woven into the narrative of the work. Gyurmé Ösel was not important enough in his community to warrant a hagiography. His date of death is unknown, and beyond the personal details we can glean from Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, we have no other information about his life.

Gyurmé Ösel describes Mingyur Peldrön as a charismatic figure and a compelling teacher, which he conveys in several ways. First, he describes her in miraculous tones, especially at critical junctures in her life. Second, he reviews the vast number and diversity of people whose lives she touched through teachings and blessings. He emphasizes the frequency of these encounters rather than their content, and the result is an image of a highly active teacher who interacted with people by the thousands. He also conveys her charisma in less congruous ways, including some wrathful imagery, humor, literary analogy, and portraying her as a compassionate but formidable teacher.

### **Literary Facets**

This section will consider the different types of writing, literary references, and themes that appear throughout Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography. The hagiography consists

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<sup>87</sup> For example, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 69b.3.

of two general literary forms – that is, prose and verse – and frequently returns to themes of hardship, saintliness, proper conduct and, occasionally, discussions of Mingyur Peldrön's femaleness. Throughout the *namtar*, the default literary style is classical Tibetan prose. While Gyurmé Ösel was not a particularly ornate or loquacious author, he clearly sought to convey the importance of his master's activities and position in her community.

### ***Prose***

Prose is the foundation of the narrative in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography. The majority of the work consists of prose, peppered with verse. Gyurmé Ösel faithfully records dates and the names of those who interacted with Mingyur Peldrön, the teachings she gave, and the places she visited. Gyurmé Ösel gives a straightforward chronology that, while tending towards monotony, is well-organized and relatively easy to follow as it moves from year to year. Throughout the narrative, Gyurmé Ösel offers some information for almost every year between 1713 and 1769.<sup>88</sup> As with any *Life*, some years are more eventful than others. Some years are glossed, and we only learn that Mingyur Peldrön was in retreat, or that she taught a few people,<sup>89</sup> while others are described in much more detail.

The narrative include accounts of dialogue between Mingyur Peldrön and other interlocutors, including the author Gyurmé Ösel, Mingyur Peldrön's father Terdak Lingpa, her uncle Lochen Dharmaśrī, and her students. Some historical events are also narrated; the most prominent of these is the Dzungar war of 1717/18, and the governmental strife that followed through much of the 1720s. Additionally, there is

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<sup>88</sup> Except for 1751-1766, which are glossed in a few lines. Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 91 a. See the appendices for a full chronology.

<sup>89</sup> The year 1743 is a good example of this. See Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 80 a-b.

extensive narrative about births and deaths – of Mingyur Peldrön as well as her family members. The result is a close chronological reading that, while grammatically choppy, successfully conveys Mingyur Peldrön's position of learning and power within Mindröling, as well as the extent of her educational reach.

While Gyurmé Ösel's account of Mingyur Peldrön's life is thorough, he omits the marriage of Mingyur Peldrön's younger sister to the Sikkimese king, even though according to Mullard the union reinforced Sikkim-Mindröling relations.<sup>90</sup> In general, the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's family life focuses on her education as a descendent of the founder of Mindröling, and her student-disciple relationships with her father and a few other family members. We hear little of Mingyur Peldrön's childhood activities beyond her displays of unusual behavior, which set her apart as most likely enlightened, and certainly important for the family's lineage. In the narrative of her adult life, there are allusions to family strife, descriptions of teachings and blessings given by her and her brother, and descriptions of her lengthy pilgrimage tours with her mother and sister. At one point Gyurmé Ösel gives an account of her daily schedule. All of these facets – which compose the body of the prose sections – will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

### *Verse*

Verse serves a few functions in the hagiography, and comes in several forms. First, it delineates different sections of the text. For example, in the transition between the introductory narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives, and her birth as Mingyur Peldrön, Gyurmé Ösel quotes a treasure text discovered by her father, Terdak Lingpa:

Finally, in a future aeon,

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<sup>90</sup> Mullard, *Opening*, 170.

The chief protector of the secret teaching,  
 The woman who is today [Yeshé] Tsogyel  
 [Will be born as] the activity emanation called "Drönma."  
 Born in the earth hare year,  
 The Lotus Holder Bliss Ḍākinī,  
 Fully trained in the three precious trainings,  
 Appearing as a renunciate, possessing yogic discipline,  
 Destined to have a large assembly of disciples,  
 In order to appear as a human,  
 Although in her natural state she is a Ḍākinī,  
 She will be born  
 In the direction of Drachi, in Yoru.<sup>91</sup>

After the quote he says, "This is the prophecy of how my own teacher, the Supreme Bliss Queen of the Ḍākinīs, would be born in her human form." The quote connects her, through prophecy, as a protector of the doctrine, and again describes her as one and the same with Yeshé Tsogyel. The prophecy indicates that this person will have "drön" in their name, and will be female. Presumably this, coupled with a description of the location and year of her birth, are the designating markers that insure Mingyur Peldrön's rightful identity. This quote also encompasses the most salient features of Mingyur Peldrön's life, according to Gyurmé Ösel's presentation. That is, she is extensively trained, lives as a renunciate, and draws a large number of disciples.

Prophetic verse is frequently referenced from revealed treasure texts (*terma*, *gter ma*), the Pema Katang (*pad+ma bka' thang*), and other works associated with Padmasambhava and the Tibetan Imperium. These are generally presented as incontrovertible evidence of Mingyur Peldrön's importance as a teaching of the Mindröling tradition. Beyond acting as a division between sections, this type of verse also appears throughout the narrative to reinforce Gyurmé Ösel's claims about Mingyur

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<sup>91</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje* 18 b - 19 a.

Peldrön's legitimacy. It is notable that he relies heavily on Terdak Lingpa's treasure texts, and hagiographies of Padmasambhava, thereby drawing from evidence within the Nyingma tradition.

### ***Words and Treasures***

In the Nyingma tradition, esoteric scriptures have been generally divided into two types, depending on their provenance. While texts falling in to these categories are not specific to the Nyingma, this division is particularly emphasized within Nyingma lineages. *Kama* refers to the texts and teachings that were transmitted from teacher to disciple throughout history. These texts are considered to be the "Buddha's word" (*buddhavacana*) and in theory can be linked from person to person back to a specific Buddha. In the Tibetan context, this refers to scriptures purportedly translated during the imperial period (seventh to mid ninth centuries CE), and passed down through direct transmission from master to disciple.

The second type of esoteric text began to appear in the tenth century and paved the way for further scriptural innovation and development. During the tenth to twelfth centuries, *terma* (*gter ma*) or "hidden treasure texts," became increasingly associated with the Nyingma tradition, although they also appeared in other traditions. It is believed that these treasure texts were hidden by Buddhas in ancient times so that they could be rediscovered at an appropriate time in the future, when they could be used to their highest potential.

Padmasambhava (with the help of Yeshé Tsogyel) was said to have frequently acted as enlightened middleman in these processes, concealing the treasures in the natural world. He often hid the teachings in the Tibetan landscape (mountains, for example), where they would remain safe until the appropriate time for their discovery. Then, when



the time was right, a suitable individual would, with the help of ḍākinīs (and often a tantric consort), reveal the text from its hiding place, translate it from ḍākinī language, and then present it to the people.

Ḍākinīs are enlightened, or sometimes semi-divine, female protectors of Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions. They act as guides for practitioners of all sorts, and can be wrathful or peaceful in nature. They always appear in some form to help treasure revealers (called *tertön*, *gter ton*) in the discovery of these treasures. In terms of what constitutes *terma*, treasure texts take many different forms, and cover a variety of subjects; it is an extremely wide literary genre. There are also many types of treasure, depending on where and in what form they are hidden. Treasure texts can be hidden a variety of places, from mountainsides to the mind of the practitioner.<sup>92</sup> These would then be brought forth from their hiding place by a *tertön*, or treasure revealer, often accompanied by a consort. Mingyur Peldrön's father Terdak Lingpa was a *tertön*, and conducted the rituals associated with revelation before large crowds. If the community accepted a *tertön* as authentic, the role gave the individual prestige and power.

The development of the treasure literature meant that provenance could be traced to celestial buddhas such as Samantabhadra, or any buddha at all for that matter, without the necessity of a chronological historical lineage connecting revealer and enlightened being. On a practical level, this meant that the tradition could continue to evolve, and new texts could be introduced without the necessity of a long history. Thus, treasure revealers held their own unique type of prestige. If the treasures they discovered were accepted as

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<sup>92</sup> Other types of *terma* include: incantation *terma* (*mthu gter*), mind *terma* (*thugs gter*) and medicine *terma* (*sman gter*): Davidson, *Renaissance*, 221.

legitimate scripture, they were widely revered. However, charlatanism was a concern, and not all treasures were accepted as legitimate. The texts were often discovered in extravagant public ceremonies, and tantric consorts accompanied the *tertöns*. The entire scene was generally instigated by visions, and the *tertöns* were considered to be protected by celestial *ḍākinīs*.

With the founding of Mindröling, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī made it a priority to include both *kama* and *terma* teachings among the monastery's traditions. Terdak Lingpa's own treasure revelations (*terma*) harkened back to and connected his tradition with the treasure revealers or *tertöns* of the renaissance period. All of this was also done in a spirit of inclusiveness. Terdak Lingpa was a prolific treasure revealer; his four treasure cycles were passed down through his children, including Mingyur Peldrön, and continue to be taught among the Mindröling community today. His brother Lochen Dharmaśrī was a prolific author, and had a monastic education. In a sense, the two brothers were representative two branches of the tradition, and subsequent generations of male family members were designated as *trichen* and a *khenchen* whenever possible. The *kama/terma* division is useful for understanding scriptural typology based on provenance and the general approach to texts at Mindröling.

In Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, rituals associated with *kama* appear among the lists of teachings given and received by Mingyur Peldrön. *Terma* also appear in these lists, and many textual references are to *terma*. Most *terma* references are to treasures discovered by Mindröling community members (especially Terdak Lingpa), and a few from outside the Mindröling tradition also appear. For example, *terma* are mentioned one

hundred times in the text, and those that were discovered by Terdak Lingpa comprise half of these.

Several systems, which David Germano has referred to as post-tantric, appear throughout the hagiography and are listed among the teachings received and then later given by Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>93</sup> By "post-tantra" I refer to freestanding systems of esoteric practice, such as Severance, the Great Perfection, and so forth.<sup>94</sup> Several post-tantra practice lineages are also mentioned as teachings received and later given by Mingyur Peldrön. Teachings from Machik Labdrön's (*ma gcig lab sgron*) *chöd*, Gelongma Palmo's *nyungné* practice (*dge slong ma dpal mo, smyung gnas*), and *sādhana*s and empowerments from other sources, including assorted *kama*, are all mentioned as teachings she gives and rituals in which she participates.

References to the Great Perfection or *Dzokchen* appear more frequently than any other type of teaching. If we are to take Gyurmé Ösel at face value, the most important practices of these post-tantric systems at Mindröling during Mingyur Peldrön's time were associated with the Great Perfection and, more specifically, the highest level of Great Perfection practices, called *Atiyoga*. Gyurmé Ösel was an *Atiyoga* practitioner, and given his relationship to Mingyur Peldrön, it is unsurprising that it is this aspect of her teaching career that he would highlight. While *Dzokchen* and *Atiyoga* can be used synonymously, in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography they represent a wider teaching tradition, and the most advanced practices within that tradition, respectively.

In the hagiography, *terma* is invoked as a verifiable support for Mingyur Peldrön's prophesied position within the community. She taught from her father's revelations

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<sup>93</sup> Germano, *Mysticism*, unpublished and not for circulation.

<sup>94</sup> Germano, *Mysticism*, unpublished and not for circulation.

frequently, and also wrote several treatises on practices related to them. She passed *terma* along to her disciples, and *terma* is referenced as prophetic evidence. On the other hand, post-tantric systems and specific practices appear only in lists of teachings, and are not quoted extensively. A few of these are teachings she received, but for the most part they are listed as teachings she gave to large groups.

### ***Mingyur Peldrön's Gur***

Mingyur Peldrön's own verse also appears in the *namtar*, giving the reader at once a sense of her own voice and a window to her creative abilities. In chapter four I will give a full translation of her song as it appears in the hagiography. Here I will give a brief excerpt and discuss how Mingyur Peldrön's verse fits in to the Tibetan poetic style called "*gur*" (*mgur*). The term "*gur*" refers to a specific style of Tibetan metered verse, which was meant to be sung; it has been translated into English as "poetical songs"<sup>95</sup>, "meditative songs,"<sup>96</sup> "enigmatic spiritual songs,"<sup>97</sup> "songs of realization,"<sup>98</sup> and "songs of experience."<sup>99</sup> *Gur* is meant to reflect the spiritual insights of the composer, and can be thematic or temporal, abstract or narrative, but generally conveys the personal experience of the singer. The mood of *gur* can vary widely: some are celebratory, others melancholy or mournful, but they will generally include dharma as the underlying subject. In some cases, including that of Mingyur Peldrön's *gur*, the work will convey an experience of sadness or dejection that is relieved upon calling to the guru, or deity, for help. According to Jackson, in Tibet *gur* developed over the earlier and later diffusions of Buddhism as

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<sup>95</sup> Jackson, "Poetry," 369.

<sup>96</sup> Gyatso, *Apparitions*, 101.

<sup>97</sup> Ardussi, "Beer," 115.

<sup>98</sup> Quintman, *Yogin*, 58.

<sup>99</sup> Jackson, "Poetry," 369, 381.

part of a larger movement toward poetic form influenced by classical Indian poetry.<sup>100</sup> By the time of the later diffusion of Buddhism (*phyi dar*), these verses came to refer to specifically religious experience, and included accounts of realization as well as instructions for the hearer.<sup>101</sup> In general, *gur* are known for providing accessibility to spiritual truths through song.

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<sup>100</sup> This was initially a sub-category of the genre *lu* (glu, "songs"), wherein the singer would boast about their or another's accomplishments. As the genre evolved, the nature of the boasted accomplishment was increasingly geared toward religious experience. Jackson, "Poetry," 368-9, 372.

<sup>101</sup> Jackson, "Poetry," 372. *Gur* was heavily influenced by late Indian Buddhist poetics, in particular the *dohā* tradition as it developed among Indian Buddhist *yogins*. Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 79. Gyatso describes *dohā*, and also *caryāgīti* as "coded metaphorical songs about esoteric yogic experience from late Indian tantric Buddhism." Gyatso, *Apparitions*, 104. Kvaerne mentions that *caryāgīti* were spiritual songs meant to convey spiritual truths in a commonly intelligible manner. Kvaerne, *Anthology*, 7-8. According to Sørensen, the *mgur* tradition in Tibet was especially influenced by Daṇḍin's *Kāvyādarśa*, which was translated in to Tibetan first by Sakya Paṇḍita (sa skya paN+Di ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251), and then more completely by Shonglo Dorjé Gyeltsen (shong lo rdo rje rgyal mtshan) in the 13th century. The introduction of this work had a pivotal effect on Tibetan poetry, as it introduced a refined set of rules associated with Indian *kāvya* and metrics (*chandaḥ*), which were adopted into the genre. See Sørensen, *Divinity*, 14. The genre benefited from both native Tibetan and also transplanted Indian influence during its early development. According to the Tibetan poet and scholar Döndrup Gyel (don grub rgyal), while these significant Indian influences helped affect the evolution of *mgur*, Tibetan folk song was really the foundation for the style. Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 84. The genre has been strongly influenced by *lu* (glu), but also by *nyenak* (snyan ngag, ornate poetry), and falls between the two on a poetic spectrum. In comparison to *lu*, or popular folk songs, *gur* had more specifically Buddhistic themes, and often a more formal poetic structure, but not so formal as *nyenak*. The spectrum correlates to sources of influence as well, insofar as *lu* represents the oral literary influence of popular Tibetan song, while *nyenak* represents the influence of written Indian classical literature. *Gur* verses will show varying quantities of influence from the two sources, but most include both Tibetan and Indian influences. Jackson, "Poetry," 368-72. Döndrup Gyel defines seven general goals for *gur* composition delineated as: 1) remembering the guru's kindness, 2) indicating the source of one's realizations, 3) inspiring the practice of Dharma, 4) giving instructions on how to practice, 5) answering disciples' questions, 6) urging the uprooting of evil, 7) serving as missives to gurus or disciples. See Jackson, "Poetry," 374.

In Tibet, *gur* became associated with yogins, who were generally thought of as living the lifestyle of the "great Tantric magician-saints (*siddhācārya*; Tib. *grub-thob*) of India."<sup>102</sup> However, *gur* were not only composed by yogins, but also by monastics and laypeople. *Gur* composition symbolized much more than literary prowess. The ability to spontaneously produce versified song was considered a sign of soteriological achievement, thus an implicit connection was made between spontaneous *gur* and advanced realization.<sup>103</sup>

The presentation of the song as a spontaneous production, generally as the result of an emotional upheaval (either positive or negative), adds to the mystique and veracity of the author's role as realized spiritual practitioner. The topic of realization is often present in analogical form in *gur*, which frequently connect contemplative practice, imagery, and understanding with mundane activities.<sup>104</sup>

The *gur* genre coalesced around the time of the yogin Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*). Exemplary lives and songs of realization have been closely connected since at least the twelfth century CE.<sup>105</sup> *Gur* are written in many meters, including lines of anywhere

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<sup>102</sup> Ardussi, "Formation," 115.

<sup>103</sup> Ardussi explains the connection thus: "Having gained control over their 'subtle physiology,' the *cakras* or mystical centers symbolically located along the axis of their bodies, and the 'winds' or forces which move along the mystical 'veins,' they are able to concentrate this force in the center located at their neck, usually identified with the *Sambhogakaya* (Tib. *longs-spyod-sku*) or 'Enjoyment Body' of the Buddha. The process is a meditative one, and the practitioner at this level is regarded as partaking of Buddhahood and becomes able to produce songs of the Absolute Truth spontaneously; they simply appear in his mind as mental experience (Tib. *nyams*) natural to one who has achieved the *longs-spyod* level of Buddhahood. Ardussi, "Formation," 117- he supports this with references to Guenther and Snellgrove.

<sup>104</sup> Ardussi, "Formation," 117.

<sup>105</sup> Quintman, *Yogin*, 59, 84; Jackson, "Poetry," 372-3.

between four and ten syllables per line, and also with varied syllables per line.<sup>106</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* consists of thirty-two lines of seven-syllable metered verse, which was the most popular seven-syllable format in the seventeenth century.<sup>107</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön was born into a period of literary efflorescence in Central Tibet. The Fifth Dalai Lama, the Desi Sangyé Gyatso, and her own family members had participated in the flourishing literary aesthetic movement that was briefly described above. During Mingyur Peldrön's lifetime, many people were writing *gur*.<sup>108</sup> At Mindröling, Mingyur Peldrön's uncle, Lochen Dharmasrī, wrote a treatise on traditional Indian poetic meter (*chandaḥ*).<sup>109</sup> Terdak Lingpa also wrote in *gur* verse, and even wrote letters to the Fifth Dalai Lama in this style.<sup>110</sup> Within the context of her extensive education, it is perfectly logical that Mingyur Peldrön would have developed the literary skill to compose *gur*. Mindröling as an institution was known as a hub of linguistic creativity, and as a producer of literary aesthetes,<sup>111</sup> and it was within this literary context that Mingyur Peldrön composed her *gur*. In Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, the presence of her own song of realization – and its soteriological and narrative roles – speaks to the connection between the genres.

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<sup>106</sup> Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 116.

<sup>107</sup> The form was used extensively by Sakya Pandita (sa skya paNDita) and Milarepa (mi la ras pa), as well as being the most common meter for the Gesar (ge sar) epic. Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 123-5. Sujata goes so far as to refer to it as "the meter of Mi la ras pa."

<sup>108</sup> Other well-known authors who lived during Mingyur Peldrön's lifetime include the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelsang Gyatso (bskal bzang rgya mtsho, 1708-1757) and Changkya Rölpé Dorjé (lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717-1786). Sørensen, *Divinity*, 16. and Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*.

<sup>109</sup> I refer here to his *sdeb sbyor rin chen 'byung gnas kyi 'grel pa don gsal me long*.

<sup>110</sup> Townsend, *Materials*, 125, 157.

<sup>111</sup> For details on this, see Townsend, *Materials*.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss Mingyur Peldrön's song in its entirety. Here I will offer a brief excerpt from the song to give a sense of how her verse adds to the overall composition of the *namtar*:

Home of [my] birth, that delightful garden of deity empowerment,  
 I have been cast from it, like so much snot, discarded with a dirty hook,  
 To this dense and fearsome forest,  
 I have come to the impassible canyon of despair  
 [This] illusory body, [this] heap  
 The flower of youth, [that] deceptive guide  
 Although I tried to escape [suffering], I could not get free  
 I have become like the hunted deer  
 The ultimate nature of the mind: I can not realize it on my own  
 With an inexhaustible load of suffering  
 I have lost heart; it is possible I will be destroyed.  
 Look at this army of [Yama's] messengers!  
 Alas! Will I be destroyed?<sup>112</sup>

Of all the verse that appears in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, her own *gur* is by far the most interesting because it brings forth her own voice, and conveys a complex set of emotions. Rather than a joyful account of enlightenment, Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* is a cry for help in a desperate situation. The song is placed at a moment in the narrative when Mingyur Peldrön has gone through the trial of escaping the destruction of Mindröling, only to learn that her father, brother, and many other members of the community have been killed. The poem actually marks the nadir of her life story, the moment at which she experiences the most suffering. The song is one of human suffering, marked by loss, frustration, and fear. In response to the spontaneous song, her father appears in rainbow

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<sup>112</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 45 a-b.



light in the sky before her. He is in the guise of Padmasambhava in union with Yeshé Tsogyel. When she sees them, her anguish is dispelled and all hindrances are cleared away.<sup>113</sup> She is able to move forward on her journey away from her destroyed home, and soon arrives to Sikkim, where she begins her teaching career.

Here we have an example where a *gur* motivated by sadness results in the lifting of the singer's spirits.<sup>114</sup> Sadness is the impetus for Mingyur Peldrön's spontaneous composition,<sup>115</sup> which ultimately leads to her relief from suffering.<sup>116</sup> After pouring out her sorrow to her root guru, Mingyur Peldrön has a vision etched in rainbow light, her fears are cleared away, and her spirits are lifted. She is then able to travel onward to arrive safely in Sikkim.

Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* brings forth her voice, and evokes the pain and suffering that she experienced in the turmoil of the period. These are emotions that Gyurmé Ösel, in his glorifying style, would never attribute to his beloved Master. So it is through this style of verse that we begin to really hear Mingyur Peldrön herself. Also, the song designates her as a literary aesthete, places her in the same camp as celebrated Tibetan authors, and gives us a sense of her humanity. The cumulative effect of this is that we learn that Mingyur Peldrön is 1) a learned woman, 2) a practitioner whose *gur* is worthy of reproduction; and that she 3) experienced firsthand the suffering that was inflicted on her community.

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<sup>113</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 a.

<sup>114</sup> Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 91-2.

<sup>115</sup> Sujata, *Tibetan Songs*, 91.

<sup>116</sup> Jackson, "Poetry," 383-4.

### Themes in the *Namtar*

Much of Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* consists of information that could be considered "biographical" in the modern, post-European enlightenment sense of the word. That is, Gyurmé Ösel describes her childhood education, meetings with important religious and political figures, her teaching schedule, travels, and her experience of the tumultuous 1720s. There is no significant delineation between these activities and miraculous occurrences; rather, the miraculous and the mundane appear side by side throughout the narrative. Four themes are touched on frequently throughout the hagiography. Generally, these are Saintliness, Hardship, Femaleness, and Conservatism.

### *Saintliness*

A hallmark of hagiography is that the primary subject is presented as a saint. In Mingyur Peldrön's case, the theme of saintliness is most often supported by miraculous occurrences in nature, and Mingyur Peldrön's own unusual behavior. Gyurmé Ösel includes several miraculous accounts in his narrative; the specific nature of each account can be divided into the following categories:

#### MIRACLES<sup>117</sup> (IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY)

Type of Miracle	No. of Occurrences
Rainbows and Rainbow Light <sup>118</sup>	11
Flowers Raining from the Sky <sup>119</sup>	8

<sup>117</sup> As Janet Spittler succinctly quoted Remus in a recent talk (January 24, 2014): "That which causes wonder -the extraordinary - is one essential element in miracle. The other is that the extraordinary phenomenon is inexplicable in terms of familiar, everyday causation and so is ascribed to a superhuman force or agency." Harold Remus, "Miracle, New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:857.

<sup>118</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 24 b, 38 b, 46 a, 47 b, 48 a, 58 b, 82 a, 82 b, 84 b.

<sup>119</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 24 b, 25 a, 48 a, 54 a, 55 a, 58 b, 85 a, 92 a.

Strange Animal Behavior <sup>120</sup>	4
Unusual Sounds <sup>121</sup>	3
Unusual Shapes formed in Smoke <sup>122</sup>	2
Unexplained Good Smells <sup>123</sup>	1
Comets <sup>124</sup>	1
Self-boiling Water <sup>125</sup>	1

The more extensive miraculous descriptions mark liminal moments in Mingyur Peldrön's life, such as her birth, first refuge ceremony, the first time she teaches, and her death. These incidents generally contain multiple miracles listed together. For example, when Mingyur Peldrön first arrives as an exile in Sikkim, she gives a teaching to a crowd of four thousand people.

More than 4,000 faithful, men and women, went to make offerings to her. She bestowed [on them] the Long-Life Empowerment of Deathless Essence Compendium from [Terdak Lingpa's] New Treasures. At this time, a five-colored rainbow appeared over where the master was, and infused her body. Having completed the long-life empowerment, before they left, in the sky above the master's head, thunder sounded and a vulture circled her head, keeping her on its right side, as if in circumambulation. Thus the seed of faith was planted [in the crowd]. They shouted her name in joy and prostrated before her. Furthermore, she distributed sacred substances, which, in accordance with the teachings, satisfied the desires of each person. The happy crowd broke into dance.<sup>126</sup>

This moment, which marks the beginning of her teaching career, includes rainbows, unexplained thunder, and unusual animal behavior. Shortly after this, flowers

<sup>120</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 b, 81 b, 85 a.

<sup>121</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 b, 47 b, 81 b.

<sup>122</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 84 b.

<sup>123</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 a.

<sup>124</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 b.

<sup>125</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 25 a.

<sup>126</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 b- 48 a.

rain from the sky and more rainbows appear. The liminal moment is set apart and marked with signs external to her own activity that reinforce her divinity, the importance of her teaching career, and the strong connection that was formed with the Sikkimese people.

The most frequent types of miraculous occurrences – the appearance of rainbows and rainbow-colored light, and flowers raining from the sky – also mark specific moments without disengaging from the flow of narrative. For example, when Mingyur Peldrön meets with the Seventh Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Gyurmé Ösel writes:

At that time Dajin Badu [who was then in power in Lhasa] only supported the Yellow Hats [i.e. Gelukpas] and had thoroughly destroyed the Nyingmapas. Because of this they were terrified that their Terma Tradition would be destroyed, so they disguised themselves as Yellow Hats in order to enter [the city safely].<sup>127</sup> The Taiji [Polhané] said "Don't worry about that, your own ways are fine." And so they changed into their own clothes. [Mingyur Peldrön] prostrated at the feet of the Supreme [Seventh Dalai Lama] Lozang Kalsang Gyatso and made offerings. He bestowed on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma, flowers fell from the heavens, and then they went to visit several places, including the Fifth Dalai Lama's tomb.<sup>128</sup>

There are several other similar moments in the text, where miracle is intertwined with non-miraculous narrative, but serves to mark the account as important in the general chronology of her life. Gyurmé Ösel uses quantity to show the importance of a given moment, listing more miracles for more important moments, and separating these accounts more distinctly from the narratorial flow. The miracles attending many these

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<sup>127</sup> According to Dr. Jampa Samten, at this time Dajin Badu was in power in Lhasa, supported Gelukpa sect, and sought to destroy the Nyingmapas, in part through expulsion. Additionally, at this point in the narrative Mingyur Peldrön and her entourage had just returned from Kongpo, which was also dominated by sectarian-minded Gelukpas. The cumulative result of this was that they were afraid to reveal their sectarian affiliation and sought to disguise themselves as Gelukpas. Here Polhané explains they need not worry because they are free to practice their own traditions. As a result they change out of their Gelukpa disguises and back to regular clothes. Personal communication with Jampa Samten, February 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 b- 54 a.

events convey Mingyur Peldrön's divine nature, and establish a main character protected by unseen forces, as well as powerful political friends. The influence of these literary choices on the presentation of Mingyur Peldrön's identity will be discussed in Chapter Three. In a converse manifestation of the natural world's response to human behavior, bad omens appear before the death of Terdak Lingpa and Mingyur Peldrön. Individuals occasionally have prophetic dreams, such as when Gyurmé Ösel dreams of Mingyur Peldrön's illness and death.<sup>129</sup>

The narrative surrounding Mingyur Peldrön's birth and early childhood, which will be given in full in the following chapter, highlights an unusual birth, and strange behavior in the infant. This is a common theme in Tibetan life writing: the saint, in her infancy and childhood, shows understanding of praxis and recognition of institutional leaders far beyond her years.

An extensive narrative of her death and funerary rites also supports her position as a saint; in the Tibetan Buddhist world, the possibility for sainthood was created in the events surrounding an individual's death. As Mingyur Peldrön is dying, she instructs her disciples to follow all the advice she had given them and explains that in her next birth she will be born as a male. After her death, her body is treated with all the reverence and ritual due to a saint, and an annual commemoration day is designated for proper remembrance in future years. The body is anointed and dressed appropriately, then cremated. During the cremation, miracles are witnessed, and afterwards relics are found.

Almost all of the frequent signs of saintly death that Dan Martin lists in his preliminary study appear in Mingyur Peldrön's death narrative; additionally, animals

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<sup>129</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 101 b.

behave with apparent devotion.<sup>130</sup> Animals exhibit strange behavior, and people come from hundreds of miles around to mourn her passing; among the throngs are religious leaders, government officials, and ordinary laypeople. From the beginning of the funerary account, the narrative heavily incorporates miraculous events. The word for relic that Gyurmé Ösel uses is *dung* (*gdung*) to refer to the corpse in all forms, from the moment of death, throughout the process of funerary rites, until the final interment in the stūpa. The term encompasses a wide range of materials, and beyond the physical body, it can refer to consecrated pellets, unburned body parts, images formed in the remains, *tsa tsas*, but also mantras, dhāranīs, scriptures, and scriptural commentaries interred in commemoration of an individual.

Mingyur Peldrön leaves behind sufficient remains to support her saintliness. In addition to miracles, Gyurmé Ösel is particularly concerned with describing the large numbers of people who arrived at Mindröling to pay their respects at Mingyur Peldrön's death. He lists all the people who arrive from throughout the region, from the most prominent patrons to lowly servants. Mourners come with reports that they witnessed miraculous things on the way to and from the services at Mindröling.<sup>131</sup> Beyond large groups of religious practitioners and assorted religious leaders, Gyurmé Ösel mentions political figures and patrons. For him, the presence of such a massive group is sufficient proof that his teacher was indeed an activity emanation of the wrathful form of Yeshé

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<sup>130</sup> Martin has described the various potential forms that relics and signs of saintliness present in Tibetan traditions, and the prevalence of relic cults throughout the Tibetan world. See especially Martin, "Pearls," 281-2.

<sup>131</sup> At the time of her cremation, miraculous events are reported from Chöding hermitage and at Kachö Dechen Ling.

Tsogyel and one in the same with the supreme bliss queen of the *ḍākinīs*.<sup>132</sup> It is in the funerary description, the final section of the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life, that her sainthood is fully established. The treatment of her body, the arrival of devotees, and the miracles that occur, are the literary trappings of sainthood.

A brief description of her annual commemoration rites appears in the Mindröling catalogue (*dkar chag*) and stands as a testament to her continued importance in the official memory of the institution.<sup>133</sup> For the five years after Mingyur Peldrön's death, huge annual festivals were held, and all the monastics in Drachi gathered to commemorate her.<sup>134</sup> After that, commemoration rites were held annually, beginning on the seventh day of the seventh month, and lasting for seven days. During this time, offerings were laid out in the great hall, culminating in a large feast on the last evening.<sup>135</sup>

These miracles, along with the funerary rites and interment of Mingyur Peldrön's remains speak to her saintliness, as does the inclusion of her commemoration day in the Mindröling catalogue. The arrival of important religious and political figures at the saint's funeral also contributed to the lasting community memory of the individual as religiously and socially important, as well as divine. Mingyur Peldrön's death narrative is described in the terms normally attributed to births and deaths of prominent Tibetan religious teachers, where the natural world responds to the arrival or departure of an enlightened being with a miraculous display of rainbows, music in the heavens, and flowers falling from the sky. The markers of saintliness, and the perpetuation of their memory through

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<sup>132</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 113 a- b.

<sup>133</sup> See Tenpé Drönmé, *gsang chen* and *'og min o rgyan sming grol gling gi gdan rabs* for descriptions of commemoration days.

<sup>134</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 115 b-116 a.

<sup>135</sup> Tenpé Drönmé, *gsang*, p. 205-207.

institutional records and commemoration days, were important factors in the establishment of a person as religiously significant. In the Tibetan Buddhist world, the possibility for sainthood was essentially created in the events surrounding an individual's death. Thus, Mingyur Peldrön's death narrative is a significant contributing factor in the image of Mingyur Peldrön as a saintly figure. Here I will discuss the thematic aspects of the death narrative, and in Chapter Two I will give the details of the narrative in the larger context of the *namtar*.<sup>136</sup>

### ***Hardship***

The theme of overcoming obstacles is frequently present in *namtar*. Mingyur Peldrön's escape from physical danger, illness, the death of most of her family members, and frustrations within the community, all contribute to the theme of hardship throughout her hagiography. Obstacles are overcome with the help of miraculous intervention or as the reward of accumulated merit. Omens appear as for events both good and bad, and predict things as varied as Mingyur Peldrön's role as a Mindröling lineage holder, and as a harbinger of her impending death.

For example, Gyurmé Ösel focuses on her escape from the invading Dzungar army more than he does on any other obstacle she faces. This is only one excerpt from the longer narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's evasion of the Dzungars, part of which is presented as Mingyur Peldrön's own words:

They hid among the boulders in the rocky upper part of the valley for two days and two nights. Each day, someone from Menji dressed in householder's clothes and cooked for those who were in hiding near the nunnery. Each night [the nuns] took turns delivering the food. Then the Mongolians arrived in that part of the valley, and passed right by the master. [She told me] "In my heart I feared, 'I am done for, completely finished.' [I was] absolutely terrified. Then, due to the compassion of the

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<sup>136</sup> That is, at the end.



glorious master Padmasambhava, father and son, and by the means of my own virtue and that of the other disciples, the Mongols passed by with a blind eye and did not discover me [hiding there]. Because of this, the Mongols' hope [of finding us] was finally cut off [and] they left. After that, [I] went to the Siddhess of Menji's place. At dawn the following morning we rose and went to the eight houses of Dol, where we hid in the kitchen of a wife there."<sup>137</sup>

In terms of sheer quantity and description, the emotional challenges of situations like this, as well as frustrations with her students, and other interpersonal clashes, are far more prominent throughout the hagiography than descriptions of physical illness. It is in these quotes that Mingyur Peldrön seems less like a saint and more like a human being.

Illness is also a common theme:

In the iron mouse year [1720],<sup>138</sup> her twenty-second, an evil spirit caused a tumor in her body, and she suffered horribly from it. A healing ceremony was conducted and finally pacified this physical obstacle. In particular, Doctor Lopel gave her many long-life pills and medicines, because of his wisdom from the distinguished techniques of Palden Zurkar, he offered many medical compounds and HRI pills of immortality and made offerings and because of the good merit accumulated, her body gradually grew healthy.<sup>139</sup>

This quote gives a brief explanation of what kind of illness she had, and how it was treated. In terms of detail, what could have been a protracted physical illness is glossed briefly. In comparison, her escape from the Dzungars takes some ten pages, includes how they evade the army at each turn, and includes vivid descriptions of her emotional experience and the divine intervention that protects her. The result of this is that we have little information about what might have been a debilitating factor throughout Mingyur Peldrön's life.

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<sup>137</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 41 b- 42 a.

<sup>138</sup> 1720- Iron Male Mouse

<sup>139</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 a-b.

### *Femaleness*

Mingyur Peldrön's status as a woman, and the complexities associated with this position, are discussed at a few points throughout her hagiography. This is a fundamental aspect of her identity as presented by both her and Gyurmé Ösel in the narrative. Not only does Gyurmé Ösel discuss his master's femaleness, but he also addresses the complications associated with her position, and how this affects her public identity. For example, they narrate a story of how, in her youth, her female status is identified as a sign of some mistakes made in previous lives. It is implied that this determined some of the scope of her educational opportunities, which, while extensive, still omitted some aspects of the traditional Mindröling education. In the final days before her death, Mingyur Peldrön explains that she had been born a woman in the past, but will be born, at least in her next life, in a male body. At other moments in the narrative, Mingyur Peldrön addresses her female disciples, and expresses an understanding of their position as women and as nuns.

We can learn something about Mingyur Peldrön's femaleness by assessing how Gyurmé Ösel uses gendered and androgynous titles to refer to her. She is most often described as the androgynous "master" (*rje bla ma*), although at important moments in the narrative, this is lengthened to the feminine "Venerable Master, Excellent Queen of the Dākinīs" (*rje bla ma dam pa dA ki'i gtso mo*). In interactions with her father Terdak Lingpa, she is the "girl" or "daughter" (*bu mo, sras mo*). Gyurmé Ösel's use of these, and their role in development of her identity in the narrative, will also be discussed in later chapters.

While femaleness and gender are recurring topics, it should be noted that this is emphasized relatively infrequently in the narrative. Both Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön were far more concerned with her identity as a Mindröling representative and as a Nyingmapa than they were with her identity as a woman. Different aspects of this topic of femaleness will appear again in the following chapters, as the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography unfolds.

### ***Conservatism***

The theme of conservatism also appears throughout the *namtar*. Proper monastic conduct is frequent cause for Mingyur Peldrön's concern, and those who do not adhere to her strict ideals of celibacy and proper conduct are described in anachronistic terms. Mingyur Peldrön often takes the role as a guide for easily misled disciples, and at least one other famous religious practitioner and teacher of the time is depicted in an extremely critical light, as a drunken fool and wayward Nyingmapa. Her lectures and cautionary tales against improper behavior (including drunkenness and indiscriminate sex) will be discussed in detail in later chapters, and are an example of intra-Nyingma conflict during her lifetime, as well as an overwhelming concern – both on her part and on the part of Gyurmé Ösel – about the direction of the Nyingma community.

### **Conclusion**

As a representation of eighteenth century Tibetan life writing, Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön adds to what we know about the ways life writing negotiated literary parameters and public identity. Life writing is a useful resource for understanding what an individual or group believed about a specific figure and the

communities associated with her;<sup>140</sup> hagiography helps to identify the values, ideals, and foci of the author. In this case, we can see what Gyurmé Ösel considered to be important for how Mingyur Peldrön should be remembered. To some extent, his authorial decisions reflect general ideas about what was considered important in the saint's life during the time the hagiography was composed. It is clear that, at least in his reckoning, public reverence was predicated on a combination of saintliness and proper conduct, and reinforced by connections with political and religious leaders.

Gyurmé Ösel uses literary content to normalize Mingyur Peldrön's saintliness in the context of the Mindröling tradition. The tone and style of his writing is not revolutionary, and his adherence to the hagiographic style provides a familiar foundation for his potential readers. Mingyur Peldrön's saintliness is reinforced with descriptions of her previous lives. She is depicted as nearly every important woman in the Tibetan historical and mythological memory; thus Gyurmé Ösel reinforces her importance while normalizing her gender. The inclusion of so many female figures, which leans towards overcompensation, will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

In the largest section of the work, Gyurmé Ösel's chronological approach firmly grounds the narrative in the author and readership's recent past. By then drawing on familiar texts for prophecy, as well as extensive quotes from the founders of Mindröling, Gyurmé Ösel argues for the importance of his teacher. These references come from texts specifically used in the Nyingma tradition, and many are from Terdak Lingpa himself. Thus, Mingyur Peldrön is legitimated within the context of her specific community.

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<sup>140</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred*, 65.

The themes of Saintliness, Hardship, Femaleness, and Conservatism convey her particular character while placing her story in a familiar format. The narrative is shot through with references to her teaching career, connections with religious and political figures, and her role in protecting and expanding the Mindröling community after it's brush with annihilation. Mingyur Peldrön is a simultaneously divine and mundane woman, at moments experiencing the suffering of the world, and at other moments transcending it. There are extensive descriptions of her divinity, and explanations for how her birth and activities on behalf of the dharma were prophesied. Her religious adherence and superior abilities as a practitioner are described, as is her teaching career. She is the beneficiary of a divine family tradition, and becomes a teacher in her own right. Her story is one of personal liberation and service as a teacher and revivalist for her tradition. Extensive quotations from the saint herself, including her *gur*, convey this to the reader.

The thematic emphases in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography also suggest that, during the late eighteenth century, members of Mindröling Monastery were particularly concerned with the propagation of Great Perfection teachings (and especially Atiyoga), as well as the continued relevance of Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations. The presence of both *kama* and *terma* in the hagiography convey the importance of both of these in the Mindröling community, while the focus on Dzokchen likely reflects its importance at Mindröling, and also for Gyurmé Ösel himself.

The concern with proper conduct, and frequent admonitions against alcohol use and contact with loose women, all suggest a conservative shift. Behaviorally, Gyurmé Ösel seems to have been opposed to anything approaching antinomianism, and vigorously condemns improper behavior. As we will see in the following chapters, these

concerns are as presented as coming from the mouth of Mingyur Peldrön herself, but reflect a potentially community-wide concern at the time of the hagiography's publication. If he were unconcerned with these aspects of his master's teachings, he very well might have focused more on other subjects, such as what she was doing during her retreats, what the interpersonal relations were between her and the other teachers at Mindröling, and so forth. This will be explored, especially in terms of the relationship between master and disciple, in Chapter Four.

Through quotations of Terdak Lingpa's own speech and his revealed treasure texts, Mingyur Peldrön is thoroughly established as a representative of him and of her community.<sup>141</sup> Gyurmé Ösel addresses this in several direct and indirect ways. The narrative itself establishes Mingyur Peldrön's connection to and position as foremost of the second generation of Mindröling leaders. However, there are other more subtle ways in which this is established, such as the various epithets used to refer to her. For example, Gyurmé Ösel refers to Mingyur Peldrön in her childhood not by her name, or as his master, but as Terdak Lingpa's daughter, in order to emphasize this connection. He reinforces this with long lists of the teachings she received from him.<sup>142</sup>

In the colophon of the hagiography, Gyurmé Ösel suggests that his intended audience was, at least in part, the next generation of Mindröling's leadership. His focus on Nyingma individuals and history shows that, regardless of intended readership, he sought to reinforce the collective memory of this difficult period of Central Tibetan history through the eyes of the Nyingmapas. It is certainly possible that he meant for the

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<sup>141</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 33 a.

<sup>142</sup> See Appendices.

inmates and proponents of Mindröling to read the *namtar*, and this is supported by his emphasis of Mingyur Peldrön as the ideal lineage holder for the tradition.

More than anything else, Gyurmé Ösel is clearly concerned that his readers believe in Mingyur Peldrön's authenticity as a lineage holder. His frequent references to Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations, as well as prophecies and miraculous events, attest to this. Gyurmé Ösel seems particularly concerned that his readers know that Mindröling had already withstood destruction, and had flourished after its revival, all in the first century of its existence. Mingyur Peldrön had died two years before the centenary anniversary of the founding of Mindröling.

Although the publication of the hagiography was delayed for more than a decade after her passing, the coincidence of Mingyur Peldrön's death and the monastery's anniversary suggests that Gyurmé Ösel's original intentions could very well have been to commemorate the monastery itself, along with his beloved teacher. In addition to reinforcing Mingyur Peldrön's authority as a teacher and representative of Mindröling, we cannot discount the possibility that Gyurmé Ösel himself sought to gain prestige through his connection with the Mindröling tradition, and through his relationship with Mingyur Peldrön in particular. If this is the case, it reveals Mingyur Peldrön's importance in the community, and sustained memory of her at Mindröling, since for the "halo effect" to be influential in the 1780s, she would have had to be at the forefront of community memory.

The *namtar* gives the perspective of Mingyur Peldrön as a formidable woman who influenced her religious community, as well as government leaders, and represented a conservative aspect of Nyingmapa religious education and practice. The hagiography,

as the medium through which this vision is ultimately conveyed, used traditional methods – such as a combination of prose, verse, miraculous accounts, and tales of hardships overcome – to present this prominent female teacher. Having considered the layout and most prominent themes that appear in the literary content of the *namtar*, we will now turn to the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life.



## Chapter Two: The Life and Times of Mingyur Peldrön

### Introduction

This chapter traces the general narrative arc of Mingyur Peldrön's biographic life as described in Gyurmé Ösel's *namtar*. Here I will address the biographic and historical aspects of Mingyur Peldrön's life story, and will mention the socio-political and religious context, where relevant, in order to contextualize her life story within the eighteenth century milieu. Although a highly significant figure in the Mindröling tradition, she has not previously been the subject of any extended scholarship. The goal in recounting this narrative is to locate the historical Mingyur Peldrön within the *Life* that was written by Gyurmé Ösel.

Here, I will narrate Mingyur Peldrön's life story as it appears in her *namtar*, but will focus more on those subjects that are favored in post-Enlightenment European "biography," while the hagiographic aspects of the narrative, such as those mentioned in Chapter One, will be discussed elsewhere. In general, medieval hagiography is closer in spirit to Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar*. While miracles – such as those discussed in Chapter One – might not fit the twenty-first century model of "history," these aspects of *namtar* are integral parts of their authors' narratives, and to completely remove them is to do violence to the narrative itself. This chapter will deemphasize miraculous occurrences, portents, and prophecy, and will emphasize instead the biographical narrative within Mingyur Peldrön's life story, as well as the historical context of her lifetime. The reason for this focus is to give the reader a sense of the Mingyur Peldrön's position within the historical eighteenth century Central Tibetan religious community, and to help the reader

understand how she navigated this world as a teacher and a female representative of Mindröling. In large part, this chapter gives the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life, as found in the *namtar*, with some analysis throughout.

### **Life at Mindröling**

Mingyur Peldrön was born at Mindröling Monastery in 1699. The daughter of the treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa, and his wife, Phuntsok Peldzöm, according to her *namtar* she had five siblings (four brothers and one sister), and at least one paternal and one maternal uncle who lived during her lifetime.<sup>143</sup> According to the hagiography, the siblings with whom she had the most contact were her sister Peldzin (*dpal 'dzin*, d.u) and her brother, Rinchen Namgyel (*rin chen rnam rgyal*, 1694-1758). While she also received teachings from her other brothers, none of them seem to have survived beyond 1718. During the reconstruction of Mindröling, Mingyur Peldrön, Rinchen Namgyel, and Peldzin were the only children of Terdak Lingpa who remained.

The account of Mingyur Peldrön's birth comes from oral reports of two women who were present in the labor room. Phuntsok Peldzöm's chambermaid Lhakyi Peldzöm (*lha skyid dpal 'dzom*), and Mingyur Peldrön's childhood nursemaid Gyurmé Chödrön, related her birth narrative, which eventually came down to Gyurmé Ösel.<sup>144</sup> In the narrative, it is said that Phuntsok Peldzöm had a vision, shortly before the baby is born, in which a yoginī told her that, of all her children, the fourth (that is, Mingyur Peldrön) would be the most important, and that:

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<sup>143</sup> See the family tree in the Appendices. Other sources, including modern oral tradition, suggest there were only four siblings in total. This needs to be examined more thoroughly.

<sup>144</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 b.

In the female earth hare year, on the twenty fifth night of the tenth month, at sunset, when the ḍākinīs assemble, at the Chökhör Lhunpo family estate at the extraordinary monastery of Mindröling, accompanied by miraculous and auspicious signs, for the sake of the teachings and all beings, I, the Excellent Bliss Queen of the Ḍākinīs, will be born [to you].<sup>145</sup>

This unnamed yoginī is most likely Vajrayoginī, who here serves as an expression of tantric realization in its highest female form.<sup>146</sup> Her appearance signals to Gyurmé Ösel's readership that the child will be unusual and important in some way. In preparation for the baby's arrival, Lochen Dharmaśrī and Terdak Lingpa perform wrathful purifications to protect the infant. Phuntsok Peldzöm gives birth in the family home at Mindröling. In the end, the girl is born on the evening of the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month of the Female Earth Hare year, around sunset, "at the time when the ḍākinīs gather." The hagiography asserts that extraordinary signs from the natural world accompanied her birth. According to the narrative, "Immediately after she was born, the sound 'HUM!' issued forth from the mother's womb and the baby jumped into a squatting position. The mother, the chamber maids, and so forth were all terrified."<sup>147</sup> There is a fearful element to Mingyur Peldrön's birth narrative. Gyurmé Ösel explains that: "Therefore, I assume that at the time of her birth she already had made extensive progress regarding Dzokchen realization."<sup>148</sup> The signs that occur at birth – from the mother's vision of Vajrayoginī to the child's wrathful squat – are, according to Gyurmé Ösel's interpretation, probably signs that the child was born with a high level of Dzokchen realization. According to the narrative, the day after she is born, Terdak Lingpa performs

<sup>145</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 a-b.

<sup>146</sup> For more on Vajrayoginī, see English, *Vajrayoginī*, and Shaw, *Buddhist*, 357-386.

<sup>147</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 b

<sup>148</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 b.5-22a.1

purifications and blessings to protect his new daughter, and declares her a future holder of his teachings,<sup>149</sup> and the infant continues to behave in strange ways.

Immediately after her birth she began to grow quickly, even though sometimes she refused [her mother's] milk. She displayed a superior nature [and] good [qualities]. In particular, from previous lives she remembered the saints of her tradition, including The Great Master of Oddiyana, Kunkyen Drimé Özer, and Sangdak Trinlé Lhundrup. To them she showed one-pointed devotion.<sup>150</sup>

This section is meant to highlight how from birth Mingyur Peldrön showed signs that she was no ordinary baby. After her birth, she begins to grow very quickly, even though some days, out of compassion for her mother, she refuses the breast. She immediately recognizes the statues of Padmasambhava (here "The Great Master of Oddiyana"), Longchenpa (*klong chen pa*, 1308-1364, here "Kunkyen Drimé Özer"), and her grandfather, the Nyingma master Trinlé Lhundrup (*phrin las lhun grub*, 1611-1662), all of which were housed at Mindröling.

This ability to identify important religious leaders of old without anyone's help is meant to convey both her high level of realization and her connectedness with the tradition. Each of these figures represents a different aspect this connectedness. If we think of them in terms of what they might have represented for the readers of the *namtar*, they seem to highlight three levels of the Mindröling tradition. Padmasambhava represents an early imperial connection with the Nyingma traditions, Longchenpa represents the codification of the Nyingma during the fourteenth century, and Mingyur Peldrön's grandfather Trinlé Lhundrup represents a connection to the Nyö (*gnyos*, *myos*) clan of Mindröling's heritage. Gyurmé Ösel explains that Mingyur Peldrön is able to

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<sup>149</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 a.5

<sup>150</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 22 a.1-22 b.1

recognize all of them on sight, and as soon as she can walk, toddles off to visit them on her own. This leads her to wonder aloud later in life whether perhaps she had been Longchenpa's disciple in a previous life. Thus, as a toddler she shows extraordinary devotion to Nyingma lineage holders and, in particular, the Mindröling tradition.

The narrative explains that, when she was a little older, she could differentiate between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and would practice sitting in meditation, demanding her elders to "Look at me!"<sup>151</sup> In the narrative, the child displays signs of realization in Dzokchen practice, exceptional behavior, clairvoyance, a general wisdom beyond her years, and is an unusually pious and discerning child. She plays at ritual and contemplative practice. Gyurmé Ösel explains that "From a young age, by unerringly involving herself with the three vows, she was a protector and friend to the teachings and all beings [and] understood the perfect scriptures."<sup>152</sup>

When discussing the protagonist's childhood, Gyurmé Ösel tends to highlight remarkable and miraculous incidents such as these. For the most part, he eschews accounts of daily life in the narrative. In these early examples the literal and the miraculous converge, intersect, and diverge throughout the narrative. Although this section of the narrative is distinctly miraculous, we also learn something about Mingyur Peldrön's early life. We learn the details of where and when she was born, and what she was like as a baby. We also learn that, within her family, she was considered to be very important from her early infancy. The protect activities of her father and uncle, and the reported vision of her mother, indicate that they thought her to be special, as well as significant for the Mindröling tradition itself.

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<sup>151</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 22b

<sup>152</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 23 b.

Unfortunately, there is little mention of interpersonal relations throughout the narrative of her childhood, and for the most part her childhood is described in terms of what she learned and who taught her. However, a few descriptions of familial affection suggest a warm and loving household. For example, when she was a toddler, Terdak Lingpa would pat her head and say "I have great hopes for you. You will lead many accomplished men and women to the Pure Land."<sup>153</sup> This quote stands out as one of the few views we have of Mingyur Peldrön's relationship with her father, beyond lists of teachings received. Moreover, Gyurmé Ösel writes little of what it might have been like to grow up in the home of prominent religious practitioners and leaders, beyond that it likely involved extensive religious training. The audience is regaled with accounts reinforcing the child's divinity and her role in the community, making these few glimpses even more significant. They suggest a supportive atmosphere for religious pursuits.

## Youth

Mingyur Peldrön's youth is also narrated in terms of the miraculous, but here Gyurmé Ösel emphasizes accounts of her education, rather than connections to her prior lives. From the day she is born until Terdak Lingpa's death in 1714, he is her primary teacher; he showers her with blessings and teachings. She takes formal refuge with him in 1710.<sup>154</sup>

Then, in her twelfth year – the iron tiger [1710] – on the tenth day of the fifth month – the memorial for the crowning of The Great Guru of Oddiyana, the Lake-Born Vajra – right at the time when the ḍākinīs assembled, in the Samantabhadra Palace Residence<sup>155</sup> of the Great Mindroling family, she received her name. Her own father, the lord of the

<sup>153</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 25 b.

<sup>154</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 24 a.3- 25 a.4 She received the four levels of initiation in her father's treasure teachings, and first received initiation in the *rig 'dzin thugs thig*.

<sup>155</sup> That is, Labrang.

secret doctrine, Vajrapāni in human form, subduer of beings and knowledge-bearer, the great treasure-revealer and dharma-king Terdak Lingpa, one and the same with Padmasambhava, sat upon the Vajra throne.<sup>156</sup> In accordance with the yogini dharma, he cut her hair with the razor of wisdom and bestowed on her the name Mingyur Peldrön. Flowers of consecration fell [from the sky]. A rainbow stood like an arrow over the roof of Mindröling. In that way, the Great Tertön showed minor signs of fatigue, and a rainbow was seen over Lapchi. There was concern about this and people discussed whether his life span would be cut short. At the same time, while [he sat] like the majestic Amitabha at the center of the Samantabhadra palace, the water in the vase he held boiled and overflowed, and the father said: "Daughter, what are the great expectations I have for you? Prepare to be the holder of the most essential teachings. There are auspicious marks that you will be the lineage holder of essential teachings. This is good. Quickly drink the water from the vase!" He said. From then on, master and disciple remained inseparable, and flowers were scattered.<sup>157</sup>

Again, a historical moment is imbued with the miraculous. During the ceremony, a rainbow shoots like an arrow straight up from the roof of Mindröling, flowers of consecration fall from the sky, and a vase of water spontaneously boils and overflows. On a mundane level, we learn that Terdak Lingpa expected his daughter to carry on his tradition, and urged her to prepare herself for this. The incident also foreshadows Terdak Lingpa's early death, and suggests that Mingyur Peldrön would be expected to take on an authoritative role for the sake of the monastery's stability. The narrative states that the two remained inseparable until Terdak Lingpa's death, suggesting once more the influence that he had over his daughter's education and the significance of her role in the family's institution.

The narrative includes a few discussions of Mingyur Peldrön's formal education. In 1712, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasrī are discussing whether or not the girl should be learning *rikné* (*rig gnas*). *Rikné* refers to the classification of five areas of study

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<sup>156</sup> Here, Terdak Lingpa is simultaneously Vajrapani and Guru Rinpoche.

<sup>157</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 24 b- 25 a.

included in many systems of traditional education in Tibet, often referred to in English as "the Five Sciences" or, more generally glossed as "arts and sciences". These five are: plastic arts, medicine, language,<sup>158</sup> logic, and inner knowledge.<sup>159</sup> Mindröling was known for its *rikné* curriculum.<sup>160</sup> In the narrative, Terdak Lingpa declares that *rikné* study is unnecessary for Mingyur Peldrön because the girl is so advanced in her understanding of the dharma – having received so many teachings in a wide range of religious studies – that she need not waste her time with the sciences. The narrative reads: "The Great Tertön [Terdak Lingpa] said to Lochen Dharmaśrī 'the girl is close to the dharma, she does not need to learn the sciences and so forth from the abbot.' The father made such declarations repeatedly to make his point."<sup>161</sup>

When Terdak Lingpa rejects Lochen Dharmaśrī's suggestion that Mingyur Peldrön study the Five Sciences, the reader gets a sense of Terdak Lingpa's unilateral authority over the girl's education, and one wonders why he thought the Five Sciences were unnecessary for her education, or why Lochen Dharmaśrī was pushing for this aspect of her education. There is here a strong suggestion that, for reasons unknown, Mingyur Peldrön was not ultimately permitted to study the sciences, in spite of her uncle's assertions that these are important for her education.

This is a curious moment in the recitation of Mingyur Peldrön's educational vitae, mostly because Gyurmé Ösel takes the time to emphasize her father's decision to not educate her in this basic – and, at Mindröling, very well-known – curriculum. It is

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<sup>158</sup> Or, more specifically, grammar.

<sup>159</sup> "bzo rig pa dang / gso ba rig pa/ sgra rig pa/ gtan tshigs rig pa/ nang don rig pa/ dzig, 2682

<sup>160</sup> Townsend, *Materials*, 89-90, and elsewhere.

<sup>161</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 33 b.4-5.



possible that studies in *rikné* had gone out of vogue throughout the region at the time of Gyurmé Ösel's writing, although this is unlikely. During the life of the Fifth Dalai Lama, these had not been studied in Gelukpa institutions in Lhasa, and were in fact discouraged, but remained permanent at Mindröling at least until the first quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>162</sup> It is more likely that Gyurmé Ösel is responding to unheard interlocutors who questioned Mingyur Peldrön's educational credentials due to her lack of grounding in Mindröling's well-known curriculum. This raises the question of why she would be denied such a foundational aspect of the Mindröling educational system. We can, on one hand, take Terdak Lingpa at his word and assume that he thought it unnecessary for the girl to waste her time. However, it is also quite possible that her gender, or other unknown factors, made him reticent to have her train in *rikné*, and further research will indicate whether her brothers all received *rikné* training. In general, Terdak Lingpa took a markedly egalitarian approach to the education of both women and men.<sup>163</sup> That being said, it is possible that what we see here is a vestige of gender inequality, or some other form of inequality that remains to be determined.

Gyurmé Ösel then assuages concern for the missing piece of *rikné* with a litany of what she did learn. The discussion of whether or not Mingyur Peldrön should study *rikné* is followed with a long list of all the teachings she *did* receive, including transmissions and empowerments for all of Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations, transmissions from the Northern Treasures, Machik Labdrön's Chöd, various peaceful and wrathful empowerments, the *Churner of the Depths of Hell* (*na rag dong sprugs*), and myriad

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<sup>162</sup> See Townsend, *Materials*, 90.

<sup>163</sup> Dominique Townsend addresses this in her dissertation.

others.<sup>164</sup> In particular, Gyurmé Ösel emphasizes Terdak Lingpa's concern that Mingyur Peldrön become adept in Dzokchen practice, and that he expected her to become an important teacher for Mindröling.<sup>165</sup>

As in her childhood, Mingyur Peldrön's youth is described exclusively in terms of her religious education. We hear nothing about how she was treated within the family or beyond the classroom. We have little vision of the girl within the context of her family, beyond their influence on her religious education.

Unlike many other female figures in Tibetan history, Mingyur Peldrön's religious aspirations were encouraged and nurtured by her family; she was given access to all the educational benefits that her tradition had to offer. Where the young Sera Khandro and Orgyan Chökyi had to escape the pressures of marriage in order to pursue their religious goals,<sup>166</sup> Mingyur Peldrön was pushed to study and carry on her family's tradition of religious knowledge and leadership. Her story shares similarities with the life of Chökyi Drönma, including her run-in with the Dzungars, her leadership role at Mindröling, and her identification with the ordained life. Also, the particular trials of the female form, and the suffering of life as a woman, are deemphasized in both Chökyi Drönma and Mingyur Peldrön's narratives.<sup>167</sup>

Rather than the stories of familial hardship that we find in many other *namtar*, or tales of youthful folly, we have a list of the teachings she received (as we will see, she faced significant challenges in her early adulthood). So, while we do not learn about daily life in the household, we do learn who taught her, what was being taught, and a little bit

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<sup>164</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 34 b.1-35 b.3.

<sup>165</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 35 b.1-3.

<sup>166</sup> See Jacoby and Schaeffer.

<sup>167</sup> Candler, *Unveiling*, 222-223; Diemberger, *When*, 4-6, 11-12, 20.

about the nature of the young woman's ability. In the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's childhood, Terdak Lingpa and, later, Lochen Dharmasrī, represent the entirety of her education.

The connection between Mingyur Peldrön and Terdak Lingpa is of particular interest to Gyurmé Ösel. As discussed elsewhere, throughout the *namtar* she is often referred to as the "girl" or "Terdak Lingpa's daughter." This form of reference is most concentrated in her youth. At one point, it is explained that she has been born as Terdak Lingpa's daughter as a result of her virtuous actions in previous lives, and as a fruition of her merit.

Having listed these many examples, the argument [for her divinity] is certain. Furthermore, previous aspirations fructified at the right time, and so she was born into a master-disciple relationship with the Great Tertön King, tamer of all beings Terdak Lingpa. Thus she was born as the child of her father's marvelous pure familial lineage.<sup>168</sup>

In addition to this, aforementioned moment of the boiling vase water during her refuge ceremony cements the relationship between daughter and father. It is understandable that this relationship would be emphasized in the hagiography. Indeed, Mingyur Peldrön's most pertinent claim to fame in this part of her life is that she is the second generation of the Mindröling family. We can presume that, since Mingyur Peldrön was Gyurmé Ösel's primary teacher, he had personal reasons (be they out of love for his master, or desire to position himself close to the center of Mindröling authority, or both) for promoting her importance throughout each stage of her life.

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<sup>168</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 23 a-b.

Gyurmé Ösel very briefly describes the three years between her father's death in 1714 and the arrival of the Dzungar army.<sup>169</sup> During this time Mingyur Peldrön was in retreat under the tutelage of Lochen Dharmaśrī. Mingyur Peldrön conducted her first yearlong retreat at the age of twelve. After Terdak Lingpa's death, in the three-year interim before the arrival of the Dzungars, Mingyur Peldrön also spent most of her time in retreat.<sup>170</sup> During this time she focused solely on the study of Dzokchen, and meditation on the instructions in one of Terdak Lingpa's revealed treasures, the *Doctrinal Cycle of the Great Compassionate One as The Universal Gathering of the Sugatas* (*thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun 'dus*).<sup>171</sup> At age fifteen, she took monastic vows with Lochen Dharmaśrī and received further clarifying teachings on the entirety of Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations, Machik Labdrön's *Severance* (*Chöd*), and the *Churner of the Depths of Hell* (on which she eventually wrote an instructional treatise).<sup>172</sup> During this time, she also received teachings from her elder brother, Pema Gyurmé Gyatso (*pad+ma 'gyur med rgya mtsho*, 1686-1718), who became the second *trichen* of Mindröling (*smin gling khri chen*). Again, these years of her life are mostly described in terms of what she learned from her elder relatives, although the narratorial emphasis is skewed in favor of her education, with Terdak Lingpa, and later Lochen Dharmaśrī and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso.

### The Dzungar Invasion

As Mingyur Peldrön reached the age of majority, the political unrest in the region reached a fever pitch. The Dzungar invasion, the resultant destruction of Mindröling, and

<sup>169</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 b.2-4.

<sup>170</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 b.2-3.

<sup>171</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 b. See Terdak Lingpa, *thugs rje*.

<sup>172</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 36 b. This is the "na rag dong sprugs kyi dbang gi cho ga mtshams sbyor gyis brgyan pa bde chen lam bzang."

the deaths of the first generation of Mindröling leadership, comprise the narrative through which we read her transition from childhood to adulthood. The story of her escape to Sikkim<sup>173</sup> is one of the longest accounts in the hagiography.<sup>174</sup> Only this and descriptions of her previous lives, her education with Terdak Lingpa, and the story of her death are as detailed as this account, and this account has far more descriptive narration.

### **Escape from Mindröling**

In the earth male dog year, an obstacle to the teachings arose just as it had been told in the prophesies of Padma[sambhava]. The army of the Mongol Taiji came to the Tibetan countryside and obliterated the essential Vajrayāna teachings. They destroyed the monasteries. The great holders of the teachings died. The sangha was lost.<sup>175</sup>

This quote opens the section in which the Dzungar invasion, and Mingyur Peldrön's escape from Mindröling, is described in detail. In Gyurmé Ösel's narrative of the destruction of Mindröling, religious texts are destroyed and buildings are razed. In addition to this many members of leadership are arrested and taken to their deaths in Lhasa. Lochen Dharmaśrī and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso are ordered by the military commander Tsering Döndrup to travel to Lhasa.<sup>176</sup> As they are departing, they urge Mingyur Peldrön to try and escape; this is the last she hears from them. In Lhasa, they are imprisoned with Polhané and other anti-Dzungar leaders of various sects.<sup>177</sup> That winter,

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<sup>173</sup> Where she stayed for three years at a Dzokchen monastery, probably Pemayangtsé (pad+ma yang rtse). See Mullard, *Opening*, 170.

<sup>174</sup> The story of Mingyur Peldrön's escape from the Dzungars covers 5% (12 folios out of 237) of the *namtar*.

<sup>175</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 b.4. This would occur in a 1718 (a male earth dog year).

<sup>176</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 39 b.3- 40 a.1. Gyurmé Ösel describes these events as having been correctly prophesied and clearly stated in the thog babs kyi pad ma'i lung byang.

<sup>177</sup> See Petech, *China and Tibet*, 48; Shakabpa, *One Hundred Thousand*, 420-421.

they lose their lives along the banks of the Kyichu River.<sup>178</sup> Gyurmé Ösel describes the prophesied obliteration of Mindröling in the winter of 1717-1718 as an attack on the institution's essential Vajrayāna teachings. As a child, Mingyur Peldrön had had a premonition of this moment:

One time she made a container out of green cloth and said to her nursemaid Gyurmé Chödrön "In the future you and I will be required to flee to a far-off place, when that happens we can use this as a container for our food." She kept the container with great care and could see [the future] clearly, without any obscurations of Saṃsāra.<sup>179</sup>

Instead of more mundane forms of imaginary play, the toddler sought to prepare for what would eventually be the most terrifying and formative episode of her life. Rather than being careless with her food container and leaving it about, she made sure to take care of it, in seeming preparation for the event. In this quote we also see that Gyurmé Chödrön was instructed to join in the play, suggesting a premonition of the role she would play in the event. Not only is Mingyur Peldrön able to see the future, even as a young child she is capable of preparing for it in practical ways. The Dzungar destruction, and her escape from Mindröling, would act as a formative moment in the young woman's life, and ultimately informed her zeal for spreading her community's teachings.

As a young adult, when Lochen Dharmaśrī and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso are ordered to depart for Lhasa, Mingyur Peldrön realizes they are in real danger. Her childhood

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<sup>178</sup> See Shakabpa, *One Hundred Thousand*, 421. Shakabpa describes Lochen Dharmaśrī's death as occurring before he is even decapitated: "As he was leaving his home, Lochen Rinpoche began to recite prayers and went without fear. When they got behind Jakpori Hill, he asked if they could stop for a moment so that he could offer prayers. It is said that he died at that moment, and that when he was being decapitated, he had already stopped breathing."

<sup>179</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, 22b-23a.

premonition comes to fruition, and they prepare for a hurried departure. She leaves with four others: her childhood nursemaid Gyurmé Chödrön, the cook, and two monks.<sup>180</sup>

All five of them, master and servants, donned the necessary [disguises] and went out the secret door, heading for Terdak's Peak, behind the monastery. By the time they reached Depa Wangdu's place in Tsenyül, The Mongol army had taken hold of the monastery.<sup>181</sup>

In this moment of high drama, the quintet disguises themselves in different clothing and escape through a back door to the mountain behind the monastery. At first the army is unaware that the group has fled. However, back at Mindröling, her sister Drung Peldzin is being harassed by Dzungar soldiers. As she is struggling against her potential attackers, their mother, in desperation, accidentally blurts out that she has another, more wondrous daughter. The soldiers are thrilled to hear this, "just as a peacock is thrilled to hear the sound of thunder;" and so they turn all their attention to hunting her down.<sup>182</sup> They are spurred on by the army general's threat that anyone who lets her slip through their fingers will be severely punished. "Terdak Lingpa's daughter must be hunted night and day. It is unacceptable for her to not be apprehended. If she does not arrive in Lhasa, any of you that I see will be thrown into the river!" He bellowed.<sup>183</sup> The Dzungar hunt for Mingyur Peldrön also suggests her importance to the tradition. The description here is of her wondrous nature, and while this could be

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<sup>180</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 40 a.

<sup>181</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 40 a.

<sup>182</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 40 b.4-5. see also 108 b, where Gyurmé Ösel mentions that Drung Peldzin is the younger of the two. This is according to the account given in the *rnam thar*. In other accounts, the tone of the scene has been revised. In the modern narrative, Phuntsok Peldzöm threatened the soldiers with her daughter's might, declaring: "Like a great dragon she will ensure that you are not successful in your evil actions." See Mindrolling History: Part VI, accessed September 12, 2012. ([http://lotusgardens.org/mindrollinghistory/part\\_6.cfm](http://lotusgardens.org/mindrollinghistory/part_6.cfm)).

<sup>183</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 41 a.1-2.

construed as physical beauty, it is more likely that she was Terdak Lingpa's offspring, and a known holder of the teachings, that she was being hunted. A less significant member of the tradition might have been allowed to escape, but the military focus on finding Mingyur Peldrön suggests that they considered her capture to be important for the successful demolition of the tradition.

Throughout the journey to Sikkim, the group is supported by friendly locals and guided by further visions. Depa Wangdu of Tsenyül cleverly deceives<sup>184</sup> the soldiers by plying them with alcohol to sedate and confuse them and helps the entourage escape through a back window of his home.<sup>185</sup> According to Petech, the Dzungars were believed to be easily plied with alcohol; he relates one story in which Khangchenné invites Tsering Döndrup and the Dzungars to a party in Ngari (*mnga ris*), gets them drunk, and greatly reduces their numbers.<sup>186</sup> This escape method is repeated several times in the hagiography: the soldiers are fed quantities of alcohol, and Mingyur Peldrön and her party escape down a rope through a back window of the house.

The party travels through the countryside by night, fearful that the soldiers will be hunting them by day. Miraculously, they are able to see in the dark, and eventually make it to the home of her maternal uncle. Although divinely guided, the young woman's fear is palpable and depicted in vivid terms. Once, she hides in a rocky part of the valley, as still and silent as possible, and sees the feet of the marching armies pass just yards from her hiding place. "I am finished," she thinks to herself, her heart completely consumed

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<sup>184</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 41 a.2- 41 b.1.

<sup>185</sup> Other rnam thar include back-window escapes. For example, a similar scene occurs in Sera Khandro's life, where she leaves through a third story window to escape an impending marriage and join the tantric community of her teacher and future consort. See Jacoby, *Consorts*.

<sup>186</sup> Petech, *China*, 52.



with terror. However, she is miraculously able to remain as still as a stone, and they do not see her a few feet away. Her successful escape in this close shave is due to the fact that she is indeed Terdak Lingpa's heir,<sup>187</sup> and also that, as a student, she studied with great diligence.<sup>188</sup> At this point they are only halfway through their journey.

At one point the childhood nursemaid Gyurmé Chödrön is lost in a storm, a tragic moment for Mingyur Peldrön. Luckily, Gyurmé Chödrön resurfaces later and arrives safely in Sikkim. Throughout the rest of the arduous trip to Sikkim, the small party miraculously escapes the hands of the Dzungars several more times in similar ways.<sup>189</sup>

Throughout the escape narrative, as well as during their time in exile, the group is occasionally guided by visions of Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyel, and Terdak Lingpa.<sup>190</sup> They appear to Mingyur Peldrön repeatedly in moments of abject terror and complete dejection; they offer literal guidance for the lost refugees, and, in moments of sorrow, they bring comfort. Here they assuage the fear that exacerbates the theme of hardship that appears throughout the narrative. Guided by these visions, and strengthened with cleverness and insight,<sup>191</sup> the group is able to escape. Through a combination of divine guidance from the protectors of her tradition, her own cleverness, and the karmic benefit of being Terdak Lingpa's rightful heir, Mingyur Peldrön is capable of repeatedly evading an army of violent soldiers with only a handful of dedicated people helping her, and a strong connection to her lineage. The frequent appearance of friendly locals reinforces the image of a wider community in support of the Nyingma tradition at a time

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<sup>187</sup> Here Gyurmé Ösel says "heart son" (bu slob), but is referring to her. The gendered use of language will be discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>188</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 41 b.5-42 a.2.

<sup>189</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 41 a.2- 44 b.4.

<sup>190</sup> For example, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 42 a-b, 59 a.

<sup>191</sup> Tib. thabs mkhas, thugs rig bkra ba. Or, in more Buddhist language, "skilful means."

when they were at risk of widespread ostracization. Gyurmé Ösel's portrait of the Tibetan people is one of support for the wrongfully pursued spiritual leaders. It is the Dzungars, and not the faction of Gelukpas who supported them, who are named as the destroyers of Mindröling. In this sense, Gyurmé Ösel presents a narrative of unity among the Tibetan people in a time of external oppression. At this moment of destruction, it is the Dzungar army, and not their Tibetan allies, who are held responsible, allowing for cohesion within and across sectarian boundaries in the Tibetan community.

All *namtar* include descriptions of practitioners overcoming obstacles, but Mingyur Peldrön's is a bit different from other women's narratives in terms of the types of obstacles she faces. In accounts of women such as Orgyan Chökyi and Sera Khandro, as well as Yeshé Tsogyel, we find that female practitioners often had to overcome opposition from their families in pursuing the religious life. Whereas in these narratives, ostracization, forced marriage, and other impediments to their desired paths come from within the family unit, Mingyur Peldrön sets out to protect her family's teachings from an army dead-set on destroying the entire tradition. In this way, her story is more similar to that of Chökyi Drönma, who also received an extensive religious education, and managed to evade the Dzungars. The destruction that it wrought on Mindröling becomes the foundation of Mingyur Peldrön's future as an avid teacher and proponent of the tradition, which is the legacy of the terrors associated with the Dzungar invasion.

Rather than conveying any weakness, the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's escape to Sikkim is an opportunity for her biographer to highlight her strength and legitimacy. She is shown to be adept at protecting herself and her fellow travelers, in spite of her own fear, thanks to her spiritual connection to the Mindröling lineage.

### Sikkim and the Beginning of a Teaching Career

At the end of her arduous journey to Sikkim, Mingyur Peldrön is distraught and miserable. She has just seen her family home and loved ones destroyed, and has experienced the terror of a harrowing escape. It is at the Sikkimese border that she learns of the death and destruction that has beset Mindröling. In a moment of grief and despair, she breaks in to song, bemoaning her losses and calling out for guidance in the Tibetan poetic style called *gur*. At that moment, a vision of Terdak Lingpa appears before her, and immediately her despair melts away and is replaced with hope and peace. The poetic aspects of this scene, and the song itself, will be discussed in Chapter Four. In the narrative, this is a pivotal moment marking her transition from avid postulant to bona fide teacher.

In Sikkim, the refugees receive a warm welcome from the Dzokchen master Jikmé Dorjé (*khrag 'thung dpa' bo 'jigs med rdo rjes*), who invites Mingyur Peldrön to take the highest throne in his monastery, and invites them to stay as long as is needed to recover from their trials.<sup>192</sup> At Mindröling, Jikmé Dorjé had been trained by Terdak Lingpa, so his subsequent decision to host Mingyur Peldrön and her entourage in Sikkim is not surprising. She builds on the capital of their institutional connection by proceeding to trade teachings with him and bestow teachings on the Sikkimese community.

More than 4,000 faithful, men and women alike, went to make offerings to her. She bestowed the Long-Life Empowerment of *Deathless Compendium* from [Terdak Lingpa's] *New Treasures* [on them]. At this time, a five-colored rainbow appeared over where the master was, and infused her body.<sup>193</sup> After completing the long-life empowerment, before they left, in the sky above the master's head, thunder sounded and a vulture circled her head as if circumambulating, thus the seed of faith was

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<sup>192</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 b.

<sup>193</sup> see orig for more notes/trans

planted in the audience. They shouted her name in joy and prostrated before her. She also distributed sacred substances, which, in accordance with the teachings, satisfied the desires of each person. The happy crowd broke into dance.<sup>194</sup>

In order for these teachings to occur, the king was said to have made a special proclamation allowing all members of Sikkimese society to seek blessings and teachings from her. As soon as the proclamation is made, more than 4,000 devotees, male and female alike, arrive with offerings for her. As described in Chapter One, her first act in Sikkim is to give a mass long-life empowerment to the crowd, at which moment a rainbow appears and engulfs her body in five-colored light. When the empowerment is complete, a clap of thunder sounds, and a vulture appears and circles her head, keeping her on his right side as though in circumambulation. From this moment, the seed of faith is planted in all those present. The Sikkimese people joyfully prostrate, begin chanting her name, and eventually break in to a celebratory dance.

Directly after blessing the jubilant crowd, she turns to the Sikkimese aristocracy, bestowing teachings to the king and a few others in a private audience. She bestows the complete treasure cycle of Terdak Lingpa, and, in a move that surprises everyone, she offers her own new interpretation of his Atiyoga instruction. Accordingly, four-petalled lotuses fall from the sky like a snow-shower, and the smell of incense pervades the air. She and Jikmé Dorjé exchange teachings, and she spends a great deal of time in retreat. At one point, she has an experience of realization while in seclusion there. While studying her father's Rindzin Tuktik (*rig 'dzin thugs thig*) treasure, she experiences

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<sup>194</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 a-b.

mastery and all sorts of signs of accomplishment arise. As a result she is filled with happiness, begins singing, dancing, and beating a drum, and experiences limitless bliss.<sup>195</sup>

Her mother and sister then arrive in Sikkim<sup>196</sup>, but unfortunately they bring bad news. The Mongol leaders in Lhasa have heard that the marvelous daughter of Terdak Lingpa, has escaped to Sikkim, and so they set out once more to capture her.<sup>197</sup> The Dzokchenpa asks her to block their path, but she declines, explaining that she cannot participate in wrathful activities. One Tashi Wangchuk (*bkra shis dbang phyug*) employs the treasure of Zhikpo Lingpa (*zhig po gling pa'i gter byon*, 1524-1583)<sup>198</sup> to send forth a "wrathful cyclone" to destroy her enemies. As a result, the hunting party fights among themselves and kill one another.

As mentioned above, after the arrival of her mother and sister, Mingyur Peldrön's sister is married to the young Sikkimese king Gyurmé Namgyel. Mullard argues that the Mingyur Peldrön's presence (and that of the rest of her entourage, including mother and sister) had significant impact on Sikkimese cultural history. In particular, he asserts that their influence (and the influence of Mindröling) caused the Sikkimese religious leadership to establish a new historical approach to their history. While this was based on the innovations of Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasrī, it was conveyed to the Sikkimese community by Mingyur Peldrön, her mother, and sister.<sup>199</sup> Mullard mentions that her sister's marriage to the Sikkimese king was particularly beneficial for continued relations between the Sikkimese government and Mindröling, even though the marriage

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<sup>195</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b.

<sup>196</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b.

<sup>197</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b.

<sup>198</sup> Apparently the Fifth Dalai Lama was not wild about him, but his treasures can be used to turn back foes.

<sup>199</sup> Mullard, *Opening*, 161.

alliance did not last.<sup>200</sup> She meets with Gyurmé Namgyel again in 1746, when he comes to receive teachings from her.<sup>201</sup> The women of Mindröling traveled extensively together throughout their lives, and all three are mentioned regularly throughout the *Life*. They remain close and, in 1738 or 39, Mingyur Peldrön weeps at the sight of her dying mother and then oversees her funeral services.<sup>202</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön's exile in Sikkim is a time of change for her. It is there, as a temporary exile, that she begins her teaching career in earnest, and also spends time in retreat. Several of Gyurmé Ösel's teaching scenes mark her teaching career as reminiscent of the populist worship instituted by Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī, which set their monastic project apart from other Nyingma institutions of the period. In particular, the moment of Mingyur Peldrön's first teaching echoes the method and style of her father and uncle, and the miraculous weather and devoted bird highlight Mingyur Peldrön's shift from student to teacher. That is not to say that she did not receive other teachings in adulthood, for she certainly did. Nor is she completely opposed to teaching small groups or individuals. In the moment after she engages a populist approach, she next distinguishes herself as a teacher sought out by the most powerful members of the aristocracy.

Surprisingly, Mingyur Peldrön's exile in Sikkim is marked not with sorrow but with joy and spiritual accomplishment on all sides. Not only do the general population and the aristocracy and leadership benefit, but Mingyur Peldrön herself also progresses in her own spiritual practices. She has further visions of Padmasambhava and Yeshé

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<sup>200</sup> Mullard, *Opening*, 170.

<sup>201</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 b.

<sup>202</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 73 b.

Tsogyel, and experiences joy from successful practice.<sup>203</sup> It is perhaps counter-intuitive; one would assume that an exiled young woman would continue to be filled with sorrow, but after her initial song of woe, this fades away, at least for a time, and she is described as reveling in her own spiritual accomplishment. However, there are also dark aspects to this period. She remains hunted by enemies, and the specter of her destroyed homeland remains with her.

### **Adulthood in Central Tibet**

In 1720, the Dzungar forces were disintegrating, and the Seventh Dalai Lama (*bskal bzang rgya mtsho*, 1708-1757) was finally installed in Lhasa and ordained by the Panchen Lama, Lozang Yeshé (*blo bzang ye shes*, 1663-1737). At this time, the Tibetan government was completely reorganized. Five nobles (three from Ü and two from Tsang), headed by Khangchenné, took over leadership of the Lhasa government.<sup>204</sup> The Qing government also installed two governors or Ambans (安辦) in Lhasa, ostensibly to assist Khangchenné. By 1721, the Dzungars had been completely evicted. Polhané would rule Tibet from 1728-1747,<sup>205</sup> and he would continue to be influential in Tibetan politics until at least 1751.<sup>206</sup> He was known for urging the government to assist in restoration of Nyingma monasteries that had been destroyed. While he was successful in convincing them to allow the revival effort to go on without interference, they refused to assist directly.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 59 a.

<sup>204</sup> Personal communication with Dr. Jampa Samten, April 19, 2012. The other four were nga phod, lum pa ba, sbyar ra ba, and pho lha nas (Kapstein, "Seventh," 108-109).

<sup>205</sup> Personal communication with Dr. Jampa Samten, April 19, 2012.

<sup>206</sup> Petech, *China*, 3.

<sup>207</sup> Petech, *China*, 71.

By 1721, it was considered safe for Mingyur Peldrön to return home.

In this way, she arrived from Sikkim. Before she went to Kongpo, her name spread throughout the four regions of Ütsang, Ngari, Lhomön, Lhodrag, through the three of Dagpo and Khams, and Tömé, and in Üru and Yoru. The hope of the faithful men and women of these areas, and the many dharma holders, was sustained in this way.<sup>208</sup>

According to the narrative, when she returned to Central Tibet it was as though she had returned from the intermediate *bardo* realm of Buddhist cosmology – that is, the terrifying limbo experienced between death and rebirth.<sup>209</sup> Throughout the journey, she gave teachings and blessings at each stop, greeted in every village by the welcoming masses.<sup>210</sup>

### **Influence and Institutional Development**

In the narrative, when the group finally arrives at Mindröling, they see the results of the Dzungar destruction, and their hearts are filled with woe.<sup>211</sup> Not to be disheartened, Mingyur Peldrön immediately begins reconstruction of the main assembly hall. This effort is supported by Polhané, who arrives with extensive donations for the reconstruction of the monastery, money to support the monastics, and offerings specifically for Mingyur Peldrön (among them, a crown, clothing, and a white stallion with an ornamented saddle).<sup>212</sup> After completing this reconstruction project, Mingyur Peldrön consecrates the building and then goes in to retreat for several months. It is not until after this project has been completed that her brothers return from their own periods

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<sup>208</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 a.

<sup>209</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 50 a-b.

<sup>210</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 50 b.

<sup>211</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 51 a.

<sup>212</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 51 b.



of exile in Kham. Thus, Polhané offers financial support for Mingyur Peldrön's efforts, which are the first parts of reconstruction at Mindröling. In her twenty-second year, she experiences her first difficult illness: the stomach tumor described in Chapter One.<sup>213</sup>

In the narrative, it is not until after she has begun reconstruction that Rinchen Namgyel returns from Kham.<sup>214</sup> According to the modern Mindrolling community's narrative, her tumorous illness occurred because she was working so hard to restore the Monastery.<sup>215</sup> Shortly after this, unnamed powerful family members, feeling threatened by Mingyur Peldrön's influence, plot to have her sent away from Mindröling.<sup>216</sup>

The unnamed family members convince Polhané that she should be sent to Kongpo in order to spread the teachings to those in need. A year goes by before Polhané realizes that Mingyur Peldrön, her faithful attendant Gyurmé Chödrön, and others have been spending their days tilling fields in Kongpo, and only teaching handfuls of students on the rare occasion that interested people pass through the area.<sup>217</sup> Polhané suddenly realizes that he has been deceived and unintentionally sentenced Mingyur Peldrön to hard labor in a remote place. He immediately seeks to remedy the situation by having her brought to Lhasa.

Her mission to Kongpo, after the return of her brothers, reveals internal strife at Mindröling during this period, and shows the extent of Mingyur Peldrön's potential influence. As a result of her immediate reconstruction efforts, and possibly her close connection to Polhané, she and her attendants are sent away to Kongpo. Although

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<sup>213</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 a.

<sup>214</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 a.

<sup>215</sup> [http://lotusgardens.org/mindrollinghistory/part\\_7.cfm](http://lotusgardens.org/mindrollinghistory/part_7.cfm), Accessed February 18, 2013

<sup>216</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 a.

<sup>217</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 a-b.

Polhané is the one to officially send her away, he is not held responsible in Gyurmé Ösel's narrative, and maintains the status of her financial and political backer. Based on the narrative it is unclear whether Mingyur Peldrön's connection to Polhané influenced the institutional machinations. However, it is clear that her reconstruction efforts were threatening to other members of the community.

On the way to Lhasa, Mingyur Peldrön and her attendants, terrified of the violence that had been directed at Nyingmapas, disguise themselves as Gelukpas before entering the city. When they arrive, Polhané reassures them that they are free to practice their own traditions without retribution, and urges them to change back in to their regular clothes.<sup>218</sup> Mingyur Peldrön has an audience with the Seventh Dalai Lama, who bestows on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma (*rje btsun shes rab sgron ma*). The monks of his monastery request that she compose a long-life prayer that they can recite for her.<sup>219</sup> After the meeting, Mingyur Peldrön once again returns home.

Gyurmé Ösel's descriptions of her first years at Mindröling, her second exile to Kongpo, and her arrival in Lhasa reflect divisions within the second generation of Mindröling, and the continued slow process of recovery after the inter-sectarian strife of the previous several years. Each time Mingyur Peldrön blesses a crowd on her return trip from Sikkim (that is, at every stop along the way), her role as a public figure and teacher of the masses is reinforced.<sup>220</sup> The section of the hagiography that focuses on her return to Mindröling is devoted to a description of her reconstruction of the Monastery and Mingyur Peldrön's connection to the government leaders – especially Polhané – in Lhasa.

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<sup>218</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 b. This detail does not appear in the modern Mindröling narrative.

<sup>219</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 b- 54 a.

<sup>220</sup> For example, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 50 b.

The group's visit to Lhasa is a poignant moment in the narrative. The group has already fled Nyingma-directed violence and destruction once, only to return and be exiled to Kongpo at the hands of their Mindröling brethren. Their mistrust and fear are potent reminders of how unstable relations were, among and within different groups, and the slow pace of recovery in the aftermath of inter-sectarian strife. Throughout these incidents, Polhané is depicted as the well-meaning and supportive (if gullible) leader. As mentioned in Chapter One, the meeting with the Seventh Dalai Lama is imbued with miraculous occurrences, like other important moments in the *namtar*. The meeting is said to heal tensions between Mindröling and the government in Lhasa.<sup>221</sup>

### **Teacher, Practitioner, Celibate**

It was shortly after the trip to Lhasa that the author, Gyurmé Ösel, would meet his master for the first time. This scene is described in Chapter One.<sup>222</sup> Upon seeing her, his eyes filled with tears, and he was moved with devotion. He would remain with her until her death in 1769, and was trained in her tradition of Atiyoga. From the time the two met, she would work and teach in Central Tibet for nearly fifty years.

Many of Mingyur Peldrön's adult years receive less attention than her early life. They are primarily described in brief chronologies of what she taught, and to whom, with anecdotes interspersed here and there. After initial attempts at participating in institutional development, the majority of her adulthood was spent either teaching, traveling on pilgrimage, or in retreat. In these ways, she worked towards Mindröling's full revival, passing on the teachings she had received from her father and uncle, performing rituals, and offering her own interpretation of these.

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<sup>221</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 54 a-b.

<sup>222</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55 a-b.

In addition to Polhané, the Seventh Dalai Lama, and the Sikkimese Royalty, Mingyur Peldrön taught several prominent secular and religious leaders from across the Tibetan cultural region, including her father's former students. She had reciprocal teacher-student relationships with several well-known individuals, including the Seventh Dalai Lama, and a difficult relationship with the Third Olga Jedrung of Lelung, Zhepé Dorjé (*'ol dga' rje drung sle lung bzhad pa'i rdo rje*, 1697-1740), that will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The story of Mingyur Peldrön's thirties and forties is largely that of meeting with prominent teachers, royalty, elite members of society, and also the masses, in order to bestow (and occasionally receive) teachings. Thus, her adulthood is described in terms of her teaching and practice career, with a few anecdotes interspersed, which reveal more about her dynamic character. Her name spread quickly throughout Tibet, and many men and women arrived to receive blessings from her. We know that she traveled extensively in Central Tibet, often accompanied by her mother and sister. Most frequently, they visited holy sites associated with Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyel, and the early Tibetan imperium, and gave teachings to large groups. She went on extensive pilgrimage with her mother and sister Peldzin,<sup>223</sup> during which she bestowed teachings (including Mahāmudra practices, Khandro Nyingtik, and others) on hundreds of people. As an adult, she received teachings from the Dzokchen master Jikmé Dorjé (*khrag 'thung 'jigs med rdo rje*), Gyurmé Zhenpen Wangpo (*'gyur med gzhan phan dbang po*, the Zhabdrung of Katok Monastery), and the Second Dzokchenpa Gyurmé Tekchok Tenzin (*'gyur med theg mchog bstan 'dzin*, the founder of the Library at *sde dge*, 1699-1758).

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<sup>223</sup> To regional pilgrimage sites, including Sha'uk Tago, Mon, Samyé (bsam yas), Chimpu ('chims pu), Emalung (g.ya' ma lung), and elsewhere. 59 b - 60 a.

While none of her own teachers were women, she spent significant time teaching nuns, especially those at Menji and Samten Tsé. She was known for her prowess in Atiyoga, knowledge of her father's revelatory treasure texts, and the *Churner of the Depths of Hell* (*na rak dong sprugs*). We know that she was strict with her students, but also had a sense of humor. Through her adult years, Mingyur Peldrön met with many religious leaders and dignitaries, but also spent at least sixteen years in retreat.

Mingyur Peldrön took a particularly conservative approach to issues of alcohol. While members of the Mindröling community did and still do use alcohol in ritual offerings, it is described as a wholly unhelpful substance in the hagiography. At several points in Gyurmé Ösel's narrative, Mingyur Peldrön admonishes her students for drinking beer and carrying on, and is mortified when others get drunk and dally with harlots.<sup>224</sup> The only time that alcohol is consumed in ritual situations, it is used incorrectly.<sup>225</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön is often described as living "like a nun," and her chastity is a frequent topic of discussion for Gyurmé Ösel. Interestingly, in the colophon of one of her own works, she describes herself as a layperson (*dge bsnyen*), a term which does not appear once in her hagiography.<sup>226</sup> However, in the hagiography she is quoted as referring to herself as a nun (*btsun ma*) in several places.<sup>227</sup> As we will see further in chapters three and four, Mingyur Peldrön is described as living a celibate life, and refusing the advances of Jedrung Rinpoché, who is described in the hagiography as something of a drunken fool. For example, in 1731, in the midst of an extensive pilgrimage, Mingyur Peldrön, along with her sister and mother, pass by Olga Lelung (*'ol*

<sup>224</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 83 b-84 a, 64 a.

<sup>225</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 61 b -62 a.

<sup>226</sup> Mingyur Peldrön, "na rag," colophon.

<sup>227</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 65 b.

*dga' sle lung*) Monastery, Jedrung Rinpoché's seat. He invites them to come for a visit, and when they arrive they find themselves in the midst of a bacchanal.<sup>228</sup> Monks and nuns are getting drunk on beer alongside laypeople, and although he offers it to Mingyur Peldrön and her family, they refuse and take only tea. The next day, they depart early and continue on their pilgrimage.<sup>229</sup>

The way Mingyur Peldrön engages with Jedrung Rinpoche bears further consideration, especially because Gyurmé Ösel presents him as a charlatan, with no redeeming factors and as someone from whom students must be saved. This categorically conservative perspective is, obviously, extreme. Jedrung Rinpoche was a respected treasure revealer and practitioner, and represents one aspect of the Nyingma school. Thus, Gyurmé Ösel's representation gives a sense of the divided nature of the Nyingma community, either at the time of the hagiography's composition, and/or during Mingyur Peldrön's lifetime.

Although Gyurmé Ösel describes her as very conservative in comparison with Jedrung Rinpoché, and frequently has to reign in students who have gone astray,<sup>230</sup> she also has a sense of humor. For example, in the midst of extensive one-on-one teachings with Gyurmé Ösel, she is not too serious to laugh about flatulence.<sup>231</sup> Mingyur Peldrön is

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<sup>228</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 60 a- 61 b.

<sup>229</sup> At which point they go to Yarlung (*yar klung*) and Shedrak (*shel brag*). See also Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 64 b- 67 a, for more on their difficult relationship. It seems that Mingyur Peldrön was somewhat conflicted about her relationship with Jedrung Rinpoche. This bears further consideration

<sup>230</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 84 a.

<sup>231</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 85 b- 88 a.

able to bring some levity to difficult moments, and at several points she's described as enjoying her travels, rather than taking things too seriously.<sup>232</sup>

### **Mingyur Peldrön's Death**

Toward the end of Mingyur Peldrön's life, she brings Gyurmé Ösel and a few others together and explains that she is a very old woman, and that they must clarify any misunderstandings they have or else the teachings will be jeopardized after her death.<sup>233</sup> Suddenly realizing the seriousness of the situation, her disciples request that she return to them in her next life. After a moment of silence, she explains:

From the Dargyé Chöding lineage, none has lived longer than me. I am the oldest, a very old nun. Previously, in India and Tibet, it was necessary that I take up female births. For a short while, this will be interrupted; and so in the next life I will be born as a monk. Moreover, because in a previous life I had the benefit of meeting a spiritual guide, I have the imprint that will allow me to keep working for the lineage of the most essential and secret teachings.<sup>234</sup>

In this statement, Mingyur Peldrön's incarnation lineage is simultaneously designated as primarily female, even as it is asserted that the next generation will be male. Both the designation and its interruption are interesting. The statement suggests a gender continuity across births, at least in Mingyur Peldrön's estimation, as well as some level of flexibility within the system. In the statement, she also aligns herself with Mindröling's more protected traditions, which intimates a high level of importance, simultaneously wrapped up with the female form.

After this speech, Mingyur Peldrön goes into a final retreat for three months. When she emerges, she learns that a large group of monastics from Drachi (*gra phyi*),

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<sup>232</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 b 60 b.

<sup>233</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 103 b.

<sup>234</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 104 b.

Mön (*mon*),<sup>235</sup> and Dagpo (*dwags po*) have arrived to pay reverence to her.<sup>236</sup> The entire group makes offerings and aspiration prayers to her, in response to which she expresses her pleasure in having successfully helped so many beings. She urges them to rely only on the teachings of the Great Perfection and, in particular, the *Definitive Secret Vajragarbha* (*nges gsang rdo rje snying po'i bstan*). After this, she stays at Namdröl Yangtsé (*rnam grol yang rtse*) for three days, where she gives detailed explanation of her last will and testament to the head monastics. She then goes to Dechen Ling.<sup>237</sup> In the fourth month of the earth ox year (1769), her winds reverse and she begins to show other signs that she will soon pass away. The community gathers and a new statue of her is created.<sup>238</sup> She bestows the Adon<sup>239</sup> instructions on one hundred and sixty people, including nuns from Samten Tsé (*bsam rtse*), Samten Chöling (*bsam gtan chos gling*) and Ardok Gönsar (*ar dog dgon gsar*), as well as monastics from other regions, along with Gyurmé Ösel.<sup>240</sup> After this, she explains her last will and testament to the crowd, and urges them to confess any transgressions immediately.

On the twelfth day of the fifth month, hundreds of devotees receive the entire cycle of Terdak Lingpa's treasure, the *Zaplam Deshek Kündü* (*zab lam bde gshegs kun 'dus*).<sup>241</sup> At this time, she is quite fatigued, so her disciples suggest that her nephew, the third *khenchen*,<sup>242</sup> could give the empowerment instead of her. In response to this, she explains that if she can no longer give teachings, she is in effect no better than a

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<sup>235</sup> This is probably a reference to Sikkim and other regions south and southwest of Tibet.

<sup>236</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 104 b.5- 105 a.

<sup>237</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 105 a-b.

<sup>238</sup> Unknown whether this still exists.

<sup>239</sup> A-syllable

<sup>240</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 106 b.

<sup>241</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 107 a.5- 107 b.

<sup>242</sup> mkhan chen o rgyan bstan 'dzin rdo rje, b. 1742



corpse.<sup>243</sup> She goes on to explain that she is the only one capable of properly passing on the teachings of Terdak Lingpa. In spite of her continually declining health, she rallies and gives the full teaching.<sup>244</sup> In the sixth month, although she is no longer able to sing or dance, she gives the blessing of the Shauk Lhachen (*sha 'ug lha chen gyi rjes gnang*) to the Peling Tulku (*pad gling sprul sku*),<sup>245</sup> and the Long-life Empowerment of the Composite Heart (*snying kun 'dus kyi tshe dbang*) and the Fierce Red Body, Speech, and Mind empowerments (*drag dmar sku gsung thugs dbang*) to the Dratsang official named Kunkyab (*kun khyab*). At the very end, she bestows teachings on numerous political and religious officials, from various sects, who have come from across Tibet.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the five aspects that are most prominent in Mingyur Peldrön's death narrative are the services performed, miracles witnessed, relics found, and people in attendance at her funerary services. In the narrative, Mingyur Peldrön passes away at Mindröling on the first day of the seventh month of 1769. At the time of Mingyur Peldrön's death, Gyurmé Ösel sees a vision of her in the sky, riding a glorious steed and in a youthful and beautiful form.<sup>246</sup> At this point, a host of wrathful blood-drinking *ḍākinīs* arrives, playing symbols and waving victory banners in celebration of her impending arrival in their realm.<sup>247</sup>

Her body is not moved for nine days, and Gyurmé Ösel and her nephews –the Fourth *trichen* Pema Tenzin Rinpoche (*khri chen rje pad+ma bstan 'dzin rin po che*, b. 1737) and the third *kenchen* Örgyen Tenzin Dorjé (*mkhan chen o rgyan bstan 'dzin rdo*

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<sup>243</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 107 b.

<sup>244</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 108 a.

<sup>245</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 108 b.

<sup>246</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 b.

<sup>247</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 110 b.

*rje*, b. 1742) – make offerings to the protector of Samyé (*bsam yas*) Tsiu Marpo, and perform *chöd* practice. By the tenth day after her passing, her body has regained its youthful form, and remained in an attitude of meditative equipoise. The body had no putrid smell, instead gives off a pleasant scent, and looked like a normal living body. The corpse is bathed in camphor, saffron, and other sweet smelling herbs, wrapped in heavily scented red and white cloth, then dressed in fine red silken robes. Gyurmé Ösel reports that, at this time, a large brilliant double rainbow appeared in the sky near Mindröling and throughout the region; lotus petals fell, animals behaved strangely, and many other wondrous sights inspired devotion in those present. For three weeks the community performed services for the deceased, and at the beginning of the next month, her body was cremated according to the fire ritual in Terdak Lingpa's treasure *Doctrinal Cycle of the Great Compassionate One as The Universal Gathering of the Sugatas (thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun 'dus)*.

In Gyurmé Ösel's narrative, people stream in from all over to venerate her, including wealthy and poor alike, monastics and members of the aristocracy, and family members. In particular, Gyurmé Ösel emphasizes the presence of eminent monastics and political figures.

They came from all the surrounding monasteries. All subjects great and small, as well as relatives, benefactors, and beggars, all offered food and drink together with eminent ones. [...] In particular, the most important patrons of Ü all came to perform funerary dedications and aspiration offerings. They came from all monasteries large and small without exception, some sent servants and many sent more exalted persons to make luxuriant offerings to the deceased. All members of the branch monasteries, all the relatives and domestic workers, all the assorted patrons of the faithful in Drachi, especially Gazhi Gung and Denden Drönma, the King of Gung, his excellency the commander of Yuthok, all leaders large and small came [to pay their respects]. This shows that she is

in fact the fierce tamer of evil, the activity emanation of the ḍākinī Yeshé Tsogyel, and the bliss queen of the ḍākinīs herself!<sup>248</sup>

The funerary account acts as a drawing-in of the extended Mindröling community. It reinforces her holiness based on the political power of association with important figures. By listing monastics, patrons, servants, and devotees, the far-flung places from which they hail, Gyurmé Ösel's narrative extends the reach of Mingyur Peldrön's influence. If we are to take him at his word, Mingyur Peldrön's funeral services speak to her immense influence throughout the region. By extension, this in turn suggests a strong Mindröling presence as well.

The location for the cremation is determined based on a ray of light that shone from her residence to guide the builders of the crematorium. Immediately after the funerary pyre is lit, white smoke floats up into the sky and forms conch shells and other auspicious symbols, which float off in a westerly direction.<sup>249</sup> Rainbows and rainbow-hued clouds, four-spoked wheels, clouds in the shape of horses, and four-petalled lotus flowers appear. All of these signs induce faith in those present.<sup>250</sup> The most shocking miracle occurs when Mingyur Peldrön's nephews are making butter lamp offerings to their aunt. While they are in the process of making offerings, several butter lamps explode with a loud bang, the roof falls in, and flames land in the young *khenchen's* lap. Animals and birds paid homage to Mingyur Peldrön alongside the humans. Flocks of ravens take flight and follow the smoke, and two weasels are seen circumambulating the area during the cremation.

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<sup>248</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 103 a-b.

<sup>249</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 113 b-114 b.

<sup>250</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 114 b-115 a.

After her Mingyur Peldrön's death, several types of treasures are found in her ashes. At the door of the crematorium they find her skull completely intact and unburned.<sup>251</sup> Her bones are inscribed with myriad divine images and syllables, and the corpse ash is miraculously pure, and precious substances are found in it.<sup>252</sup> After the cremation, a stūpa is erected to hold her remains, and members of the monastic community make *tsa tsas*<sup>253</sup> with the ash. There are mysterious sounds, and atmospheric phenomenon. The sudden caving in of the roof and exploding butter lamps are interpreted as signs of her spiritual attainment.

## Conclusion

Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar* offers an example of one privileged woman's upbringing and life at the center of eighteenth century Central Tibetan religious aristocracy. The narrative is simultaneously hagiographic and historically relevant. While we learn about Mingyur Peldrön's divine attributes and the ways that the world around her – animals, humans, and the elements – respond to these, we also learn about the tumultuous period in which she lived.

Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* gives evidence that, in spite of the Dzungar destruction, the monastery continued to develop and expand its influence throughout Tibet during the beginning and middle of the eighteenth century, and that the community had a rich internal life and a long educational reach. Here we see glimpses of the political uncertainty of the time, through the eyes of Nyingmapas who lived it. We are

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<sup>251</sup> This is slightly different from Martin's discussion of unburned body parts, but remains symbolically relevant in terms of miraculous occurrences. See Martin, "Pearls," 310.

<sup>252</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 115 b.

<sup>253</sup> Tsa tsas are small molded images, generally made from clay that contains cremains or other precious materials found in connection with the saint's death. They are molded in to images of Buddhas, stūpas, or the saint herself. See Martin, "Pearls," 278-9.

simultaneously exposed to Gyurmé Ösel's view of his recent past, and also have access to the narrative that he received from Mingyur Peldrön, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life is at turns tragic and miraculous, as she uses blessings and teachings, as well as interpersonal relations with government leaders, to protect and revive the Nyingma tradition in Central Tibet. In particular, Mingyur Peldrön's story provides a narrative that thematically different from other early Tibetan women of the period, and so suggests a broad spectrum of what kinds of educational and leadership opportunities were available. Her position within her family, her education, and the nature of the challenges she faced, are unusual in terms of what we have learned thus far about female Tibetan religious practitioners. More study is needed to understand how Mingyur Peldrön's life compared to those of other female leaders, but first those stories need to be located.

I have presented Gyurmé Ösel's narrative of Mingyur Peldrön, in part as a means of conveying his representation of her. In Gyurmé Ösel's narrative of his master's life, we see the devotion of a religious practitioner who, at the age of eight, went to live with and learn from Mingyur Peldrön, and remained with her until her death some four decades later. His presentation of her is idealized and devotional. However, there are moments when we are able to see Mingyur Peldrön as a more complex individual, with opinions and ideals that she actively sought to instill in her community. Gyurmé Ösel's *Life of Mingyur Peldrön* is the narrative of a disciple who is determined to have his master remembered in a glorious light. He describes her hardships and victories, miraculous abilities and mundane teaching skill, in order to establish her as one of the most important

figures in the Mindröling tradition. In the next chapter, I will discuss the various depictions of Mingyur Peldrön's identity as they are found throughout the hagiography. The introductory section of the work will be considered, as will the connectedness of gender, identity, and divinity.

## Chapter Three: Incarnation and Identity

### Introduction

Having addressed the themes most emphasized by Gyurmé Ösel in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, and offered a brief narrative of her life as it appears there, I will now turn to his presentation of Mingyur Peldrön's identity, and its connection to other Tibetan identities. As in most *namtar*, there are several thematic orientations at work that serve to present a public persona of the subject. Of particular interest for this study are the means and methods by which Mingyur Peldrön commanded authority within her community, how we understand this authority through Gyurmé Ösel's narrative of her life, and what this tells us about eighteenth century leadership in general, and more specifically, one woman's form of educational leadership. First and foremost, Mingyur Peldrön was a religious teacher. Her position within a tradition that was once again developing itself after a period of destruction has socio-political ramifications for our understanding of institutional religious development in eighteenth century Central Tibet.

In this chapter, we will see how both charismatic and traditional authority appear in Mingyur Peldrön's story, and how shifts in these types represent changes in her public persona. Weber delineates a tripartite theory of pure types of authority, that is, charismatic, traditional, and legal authority. While more than one pure type is usually active in any given system, charismatic authority is particularly important for the study of religion, because it is an avenue through which individuals can provide for the needs of others beyond everyday routine. Charismatic authority draws its power from extra-mundane, supernatural sources, and is legitimated publicly, usually by disciples. It is

often founded on supernatural power, and places the "supernatural" in dichotomy with "ordinary" forms of authority.<sup>254</sup> We can see the marriage of these types in the founding of Mindröling. Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations accorded him charismatic authority, while Lochen Dharmaśrī's book learning and monastic role imbued him with traditional authority. Also, the combination of family and initiation lineages at Mindröling represents another means by which multiple types of authority acted in concert for the institution.

This chapter will also focus on three separate themes that are woven together in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography and present her as a dynamic person. First, I will address the introductory section of the hagiography, in which Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives are discussed. This section, omitted from Chapter Two, is especially interesting in the gendered nature of its presentation. Second, I will revisit Townsend's excellent discussion of Mingyur Peldrön as a conservative representative of Mindröling. In particular, I will briefly revisit her affiliation with several religious leaders and practitioners, and will expand on the question of Mingyur Peldrön's stance toward celibacy. Finally, this chapter will address Gyurmé Ösel's presentation of Mingyur Peldrön as a charismatic leader/teacher, and explore the concept of leadership within the context of the "daughter of Mindröling." In the following chapter, these themes will be explained once more, through quotations attributed to Mingyur Peldrön in the hagiography.

### **The Many Lives of Mingyur Peldrön**

The first section of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography is dedicated to descriptions of her previous births. This recitation of previous lives is a common literary device in

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<sup>254</sup> Eisenstadt, *Max Weber*, xxxvii.



Tibetan life writing. In much the same way that *terma* revelations connect the present with Buddhist imperial and primordial pasts, descriptions of previous lives connect the identity of the primary biographical subject with buddhas, bodhisattvas, and mythic heroes. In the case of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, many of these would have been familiar to Gyurmé Ösel's readership. For comparison's sake, I will offer a brief example of a more famous *Life*.

At the beginning of Sangyé Gyatso's *Life* of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the author describes the "Great Fifth's" previous lives in extensive detail. Included are well-known accounts of famous leaders of the Tibetan Imperium, tales of primordial buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the lives of the previous Dalai Lamas, as well as a few stories of lesser-known honorable individuals.<sup>255</sup> At every turn, each incarnation is imbued with characteristics that Sangyé Gyatso sought to highlight in the Great Fifth's personality.<sup>256</sup> While there are certainly many other less famous examples of this literary device, the hagiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama likely served as a timely representative model for authors writing in the mid to late eighteenth century. While it is not certain that Gyurmé Ösel read this or other works, when we consider the proximity and importance of the connections between Mindröling and the Ganden Podrang in the period leading up to the publication of Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, it is likely that Gyurmé Ösel was at least familiar with Sangyé Gyatso's work.

As we will see in the discussion below, Gyurmé Ösel emphasized specific aspects of previous lives in order to highlight similarities with his subject's life through specific

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<sup>255</sup> See Ahmad, *Life*.

<sup>256</sup> Ahmad, *Life*, 226, 228, 241 (Dalai Lama as a reincarnation of Padmasambhava), 242 (Dalai Lama as a reincarnation of khri srong lde btsan).

accounts of experiences, personality traits, and presentation of enlightened states. This process resulted in a connectedness between the subject and historical people and deities who were well known at the time –an affiliation that elevated the subject through association with eminent figures of the past.

This connection with the past through previous lives is emphasized in Mingyur Peldrön's case. There were multiple types of succession present in Tibetan religious communities during the eighteenth century, and Mindröling took advantage of several of these. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, rebirth (*yang srid*) lineages had gradually gained importance over familial lines of descent in many Tibetan religious communities.<sup>257</sup> The two most relevant types were the familial succession or "bone lineage" (*dungyü, gdung rgyud*)<sup>258</sup> and the reincarnation lineage (*tulku, sprul sku*). In Mingyur Peldrön's case, she did not really fall in to either of these camps. She could not take up the gender-specific roles of *trichen* or *khenchen*, nor would she be recognized as (or become the progenitor of) a *tulku* lineage. However, she has been retroactively identified as the first in the line of the Mindröling *jetsünma* bone lineage.

Thus, in lieu of presenting her as part of a specific *tulku* line, Gyurmé Ösel focuses on several of her previous lives, giving detailed narratives of well-known Buddhist women. To talk about these previous lives, he uses variations of the Tibetan "*tul*" (*sprul*) or "emanation." The identities that receive the most attention are Samantabhadrī, Yeshé Tsogyel, Machik Labdrön, and Nangsa Öbum. Below is a list of all the lives mentioned in Gyurmé Ösel's introductory section:

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<sup>257</sup> Smith, *Among*, 81.

<sup>258</sup> Cuevas, *Hidden*, 100.

- Samantabhadrī (*kun tu bzang mo*)<sup>259</sup>  
 Tara (*ar+ya ta re, sgrol ma*)<sup>260</sup>  
 Yeshé Tsogyel (*ye shes mtsho rgyal*)<sup>261</sup>  
 Machik Labdrön (*ma gcig lab sgron*)<sup>262</sup>  
 Nangsa Öbum (*snang gsal 'od di 'bum*)<sup>263</sup>  
 Gelongma Palmo (*dge slong dpal mo, sic*)<sup>264</sup>  
 Palmo of the Water (*chu'i dpal mo*)<sup>265</sup>  
 Machik Jomo<sup>266</sup> (*ma gcig jo mo*)  
 Machik Zurmo (*ma gcig zur mo*)<sup>267</sup>  
 Zukyi Nyima (*gzugs kyi nyi ma*), a Brahmin woman<sup>268</sup>  
 The Kashmiri yoginī Sukhasiddhi (*su kha si d+hi*)<sup>269</sup>  
 Re Zhiwa Ö (*ras zhi ba 'od*), Milarepa's disciple<sup>270</sup>  
 Zhönu Sangyé (*gzhon nu sangs rgyas*) the disciple of Kunkhyen Drimé  
 Öser (*gun mkhyen dri med od zer*)<sup>271</sup>  
 Longyang Ösel (*klong yangs 'od gsal*), disciple of Sangdak Trinlé  
 Lhundrup (*gsang bdag 'phrin las lhun grub*)<sup>272</sup>  
 Kukuripa (*grub thob ku ku ri pa*), an Indian sage<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 2 b.

<sup>260</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 5 a, 7a.

<sup>261</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 5 b.

<sup>262</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 5 b.

<sup>263</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 5 b.

<sup>264</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 6 a. This is either a misspelling or an abbreviation of *dge slong ma dpal mo*.

<sup>265</sup> As distinct from Gelong Palmo, this refers to a female naga who brings relief from drought in India during the time of the Buddha Krakucchanda (*'khor ba 'jig*, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 12a-12b), aka goddess of the Ganga.

<sup>266</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 17 a.

<sup>267</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 5 b, 17 a. 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century woman associated with the Nyingma Kama tradition. Disciple of mkha' 'gro ma dpal gyi ye shes, teacher of (male) shAkya 'byung gnas. She is in the direct lineage ancestry for Terdak Lingpa. Thus connecting Terdak Lingpa's bka' ma lineage directly back to this woman.

<sup>268</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a.

<sup>269</sup> Here she is described as a *ḍākinī*. Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a. Also a principal teacher of khyung po rnal 'byor, the 11<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Shangpa Kagyu school (<http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm/73429.html>).

<sup>270</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a.

<sup>271</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 b.

<sup>272</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 b.

## Samantabhadrī

First, all phenomena abide in saṃsāra and nirvana. From the profound and peaceful the original mode of abiding, free from all construction, from the state of ultimate pure bliss, [she] arose in form of the space mistress Samantabhadrī, the wife of the spontaneous wisdom body Samantabhadra and primordial mother. As requested, she generally explained the various greater and lesser vehicles of the dharma. In particular, she [explained] the Marvelous Essence of the Secret Great Perfection.<sup>274</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön's series of previous incarnations begins with Samantabhadrī, the female aspect of a male-female consort pair with Samantabhadra. According to the translator Gyurmé Dorjé, Samantabhadra is the "primordial Buddha-body of reality" and considered the promulgator of Nyingma doctrine. Moreover, he is associated with Great Perfection teachings, and Atiyoga in particular.<sup>275</sup> While Samantabhadra is also prevalent in East Asian Buddhist traditions, and is associated with the Avataṃsaka Sūtra,<sup>276</sup> Samantabhadrī is unique to the Tibetan context, and most closely associated with the Nyingma school. In the above quote, Gyurmé Ösel describes his understanding of the context for Mingyur Peldrön's original form. She is the primordial mother and the

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<sup>273</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a.

<sup>274</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 3a-b.

<sup>275</sup> According to Gyurme Dorje, "The Nyingmapa hold that buddhahood is attained when intrinsic awareness is liberated just where it is through having recognised the nature of Samantabhadra, the primordially pure body of reality. This buddhahood is endowed with the pristine cognition of the expanse of reality (*chos-dbyings ye-shes*, Skt. *dharmadhātuḥñāna*), for it is free from all conceptual elaborations, and the pristine cognition of sameness (*mnyam-nyid ye-shes*, Skt. *samatāḥñāna*) which remains pure through the extent of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. "Dudjom, *Nyingma*, 11, 19. And According to Dudjom Rinpoche: "Samantabhadra is the teacher in whom both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are indivisible, the antecedent of all, who holds sway over existence and quiescence in their entirety, and who is the expanse of reality and the nucleus of the sugata." Dudjom, *Nyingma*, 115-6.

<sup>276</sup> Buswell and Lopez, *Dictionary*, 745.

mistress of the dharmadatu, brought to earth for the sake of teaching the dharma, but more specifically, for the purpose of teaching the Great Perfection.

In the hagiography, Samantabhadrī emanates as Yeshé Tsogyel, and then goes through several forms, all of which are associated back to Yeshé Tsogyel rather than Samantabhadrī. Gyurmé Ösel's description of Samantabhadrī becoming Yeshé Tsogyel is not unusual, as the two are often connected in this way.<sup>277</sup>

### **Yeshé Tsogyel**

The most significant mythological and literary association in the hagiography is that of Mingyur Peldrön with the iconic Yeshé Tsogyel. Throughout the section on incarnation, Gyurmé Ösel frequently returns to Mingyur Peldrön's status as an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel, who is arguably the most prominent enlightened female in the Tibetan cultural world, as she is the most widely known, and also very powerful. Later, Yeshé Tsogyel appears alongside representatives of Mindröling and the Nyingma tradition to give guidance to and inspire Mingyur Peldrön. Ultimately, Gyurmé Ösel is convinced of that his master is in fact an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel.

Originally a mortal woman, Yeshé Tsogyel became the student and then consort of the Indian teacher Padmasambhava (known in Tibet as Guru Rinpoché, *gu ru rin po che*) when he traveled and taught in Tibet. She attained enlightenment, became a teacher in her own right, and left her mark on the landscape of Tibet, mostly in the form "self-arisen" images of her, miraculous foot and other body prints said to have been left by her in solid rock, and meditation caves bearing her name. There are many such caves where she is said to have practiced, and these are treated as pilgrimage sites for the faithful. She

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<sup>277</sup> Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's*, 68.

is said to have aided Padmasambhava by hiding his teachings, so that they could be discovered later as *terma*.

In the hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön, Yeshé Tsogyel takes on some very specific characteristics. The initial description of her comes, according to Gyurmé Ösel, in the form of a quote from the *Pema Katang* (*pad+ma bka' thang*):

The woman Yeshé Tsogyel, Ema Ho! Adorned with many good qualities,  
was born from a lotus:

She appeared in Tibet, thirteen years passed,

Her father was called Sky Wisdom

Her mother One Thousand Virtues

In the female wood bird year Tsogyel was born.

In the female fire bird year she met with the Lord.

Required to be a student with unfailing memory

She served until she reached the age of eighty-five

She had no children whatsoever,

She was a nun,<sup>278</sup> unblemished by saṃsāric defects.<sup>279</sup>

The first detailed description of Yeshé Tsogyel, which Gyurmé Ösel attributes to the *Pema Katang*, describes her as a dharma student with an unfailing memory, who bore no children and lived as a nun. As soon as Padmasambhava has bestowed all of the Dzokchen teachings on Yeshé Tsogyel, he commands her to strive toward achieving spiritual accomplishment, and then he departs for India.<sup>280</sup> For twelve years she practices

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<sup>278</sup> *dge slong ma*

<sup>279</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 8 a-b.

<sup>280</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 8 b-10 b.

diligently, turns brigands to the dharma, and wanders in burial grounds, eventually becoming a wrathful subduer and tamer of beings.<sup>281</sup>

The Yeshé Tsogyel of the *namtar* is a solitary figure, the former student of Padmasambhava, but a practitioner in her own right. In the relationship between Yeshé Tsogyel and Padmasambhava, Gyurmé Ösel emphasizes the theme of teacher and student, and completely elides their consortship.

In order to understand Yeshé Tsogyel's importance in the Tibetan context, it helps to understand the prominence of Padmasambhava as well. Padmasambhava was particularly significant for Mindröling, a Nyingma community<sup>282</sup> whose founder (Terdak Lingpa) was considered his emanation. Given this precedent, it follows that his co-teacher and consort Yeshé Tsogyel would be an important female icon in the tradition as well.

According to tradition, Padmasambhava brought forth and protected the practices of the Nyingma tradition, and traveled bodily to Tibet in order to teach. According to Gyurmé Dorje and Matthew Kapstein, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel were foundational for Nyingma historical identity.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 10 b-12 b. While Gyurmé Ösel attributes a brief quote to the *Pema Katang* before giving an extensive description of her activities, it is unclear how these extrapolations are actually connected with actual depictions of Yeshé Tsogyel in the *Pema Katang*.

<sup>282</sup> He is most significant for the Nyingma tradition, wherein he is considered the "Second Buddha". The name, however, is misleading. In this context his importance is of ultimate primacy; he is more important than any other buddhas. Dowman, *Sky*, xii, 4.

<sup>283</sup> "While all schools of Tibetan Buddhism trace some of their roots back to the earlier period, the Nyingmapa distinguish themselves by their assertion that they alone represent the complete unadulterated teaching of Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, Santarakṣita and the other accomplished masters of India who, under the patronage of King Trhisong Detsen, transmitted the whole of their spiritual knowledge to Tibetan disciples of such

More specifically, within the context of the Mindröling community, Terdak Lingpa was considered to be an emanation of Padmasambhava, and Mingyur Peldrön an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel. Therefore, it makes sense that the consortship relationship would be played down and a teacher-disciple relationship emphasized in its place.

The first section of her hagiography describes her previous lives as well-known Buddhist women, but many of these women are not mentioned again in the work. However, throughout the text, Mingyur Peldrön is frequently referred to as an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel.<sup>284</sup> Likewise, Yeshé Tsogyel also serves as a guide and source of inspiration for Mingyur Peldrön, appearing to her in visions as a guide in moments of uncertainty and fear. Most prominent among these are during Mingyur Peldrön's escape from Dzungar invaders. Several times throughout this trial, Yeshé Tsogyel and Padmasambhava appear to guide the lost refugees. Later, when Mingyur Peldrön is reflecting on all that she has lost in the destruction, it is this pair, joined by her father, who comfort her. Towards the end of Mingyur Peldrön's life, Gyurmé Ösel dreams of his teacher, restored to her youthful form, adorned with born ornaments and long flowing black hair, riding a white lion with one hand in a threatening gesture and the other in a gesture of protection. Upon waking, Gyurmé Ösel realizes that his beloved teacher is in fact an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel, and that she will soon pass in to the Pure Land of Great Bliss.<sup>285</sup> Later, after she has died, ḍākinīs arrive, ostensibly in order to escort her there.

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remarkable caliber as Vairocana, Yeshe Tshogyel and the king himself." Gyurmé Dorje and Matthew Kapstein in Dudjom, *Nyingma*, 394.

<sup>284</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 113 a-b. See also 6 b- 7 a, 47 a, 103 a, 118 b.

<sup>285</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 b- 103 a.



In the context of the latter sections of the hagiography, Yeshé Tsogyel appears several times to encourage and protect Mingyur Peldrön, and to guide her through difficult situations. Terdak Lingpa was considered an emanation of Padmasambhava, and so, while it would be unacceptable to cast his daughter as Padmasambhava's consort, this apotheosized female protector is the clear choice for a prominent authoritative female. Throughout the hagiography, at every moment of Mingyur Peldrön's life that Gyurmé Ösel deems important –such as her birth, when she receives initiation in Atiyoga, when she teaches it for the first time, when she rebuffs advances from an unwanted love interest, and when she dies – Gyurmé Ösel refers to her as the "Queen of the Ḍākinīs," and one or another emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel.<sup>286</sup> In doing this, Gyurmé Ösel infuses Mingyur Peldrön with a mystique of knowledge and power. She is *the* female master of the tradition, as well as a renowned teacher and widely accepted enlightened woman. When he talks specifically about Yeshé Tsogyel, it is as a teacher and protector of Padmasambhava's teachings. This is unsurprising considering that, as her student, the legitimacy of her teaching ability would be of particular interest to him. He is especially keen to give long lists of all the places Mingyur Peldrön taught and teachings she bestowed. With Yeshé Tsogyel, the goal is clearly to establish her as an authoritative and iconic teacher of the tradition. Padmasambhava's consort represents a female lineage authority that is directly tied to the mythos of Mindröling.

### **Nangsa Öbum**

After that, she was the speech emanation Nangsa Öbum:  
 In the treasure prophecy of Sangyé Lingpa it says  
 Fly to the place called Nyangtön in the West!

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<sup>286</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 b- 103 a.4 b, 49 a and b, 50 a, 64 a, 116 b.

Tsogyel, as a speech emanation,  
 [You will be] called "100,000 lamps" [Öbum] born in Drakpa  
 Unborn Primordial Yogini"<sup>287</sup>

As a speech emanation<sup>288</sup> of Yeshé Tsogyel, the one who would be Mingyur Peldrön takes birth as Nangsa Öbum. Nangsa Öbum is best known for dying after a family dispute and then returning from the dead, which spurs her on to practice the dharma. She is a "delok"- that is, one who dies, has enlightening or instructive experiences in death, and then returns to life with ethical lessons for the community.

Gyurmé Ösel's is very brief. First, he tells the story of how Nangsa Öbum is forcibly abducted from a festival by her future father-in-law.<sup>289</sup> Nangsa Öbum is inspired by Milarepa's songs and returns from the dead with those in mind, then goes on to teach her family members, while weaving and singing, using the loom as a metaphor for dharmic realization. She later laments the suffering of saṃsāra and takes refuge with Shakya Gyelsten (*bla ma g.yung ston shA kya rgyal mtshan*).<sup>290</sup> When her husband sends an army to destroy Shakya Gyeltsen's religious community, she is able, through song, to instruct them and turn their minds towards the dharma.<sup>291</sup>

Deloks were frequently women who had little institutional power. In Nangsa Öbum's case, she experienced great suffering at the hands of her in-laws, and epitomized the struggles of an oppressed woman living the householder's life. Before dying and then returning to life, she is completely without agency, and is only able to pursue dharma practice after her return from the dead. For the most part, this folk hero is a far cry from

<sup>287</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 15 a-b.

<sup>288</sup> gsung sprul: speech emanation, Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 15 b.

<sup>289</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 15 b.

<sup>290</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 16 b.

<sup>291</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 16 b.

Mingyur Peldrön, who had been educated in her family's rich religious tradition basically since she could walk, was never forced into a relationship, and was fully supported by her family in seeking her desired spiritual path. Mingyur Peldrön is neither a delok, nor is she generally lacking in agency. So why does Gyurmé Ösel include an extensive narrative of a delok in the discussion of Mingyur Peldrön's past lives?

Every aspect of Mingyur Peldrön's life is connected to the past in one way or another, and her return from exile after three years in Sikkim is likened to Nangsa Öbum's return from the dead. When Mingyur Peldrön returns from Sikkim to see her home destroyed, she remembers her previous life as Nangsa Öbum. In the narrative, Mingyur Peldrön and her entourage have received word that they can safely return home to Mindröling. As they are joyfully traipsing over the last mountain pass between them and the monastery, they stop for their first look of home. Gyurmé Ösel writes:

What had formerly been a delightful pleasure grove of the gods, and the equal of any pilgrimage place had, with the exception of the Sangnak Podrang, been ruined. The residences, the stūpas, the walls, everything. Remembering the former power, wealth, and resources of her father and uncle, [she experienced] unbearable woeful suffering, and because of that, she had a flash of the memory of her previous life as Nangsa Öbum.<sup>292</sup>

She then promptly pulls herself together and sets about restoring the place, helped by the financial support of Polhané, then governing in Lhasa. This event clearly stuck with her, as later in life she would go on pilgrimage to Nangsa Öbum's birthplace.<sup>293</sup>

The return from death and the singing of songs of spiritual realization are combined here and connected with a popular female figure; it is probable that Gyurmé Ösel's audience had heard about Nangsa Öbum. For Gyurmé Ösel (and also for Mingyur

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<sup>292</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 51 b.

<sup>293</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 92 b.

Peldrön herself), Nangsa Öbum most likely represents defiance of death and the underlying struggle of this period of Mingyur Peldrön's life and, by extension, the life of her community. The three-year exile in Sikkim, while presented as a generally positive time for Mingyur Peldrön's teaching and practice, here is likened to a temporary death, and the return to Mindröling is as to the land of the living. It is the extreme sorrow of seeing her family's work destroyed that brings on the memory of this former life, and, strengthened by this, she displays fearlessness in the face of destruction, and gets to work rebuilding the family's institution. Additionally, shortly after her brother returns from his own exile, unnamed divisive parties<sup>294</sup> from within the labrang manage to have her carted off to a second exile, this time in Kongpo. Gyurmé Ösel cleverly avoids discussing this apparent family strife, but rather, focuses on the politically motivated religious strife between the Mindröling family and a foreign invader. However, we see that she loses agency during two separate periods of exile – once at the hands of an army, and once as the result of jealousy within the family.

### **Machik Labdrön and Gelongma Palmo**

Although Machik Labdrön and Gelongma Palmo are not mentioned throughout the text, they do appear in the introductory section, here described as emanations of Yeshé Tsogyel.<sup>295</sup> These two are mentioned because Mingyur Peldrön taught and transmitted practices associated with each woman. Although Machik's *chöd* practice is mentioned more frequently than *nyungné* (*smyung gnas*), both are listed as teachings

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<sup>294</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 a-b.

<sup>295</sup> Machik Labdrön is just described as an emanation (*sku sprul*), whereas Nangsa Öbum is more specifically a speech emanation (*gsung sprul*), Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 12 a.

given to and received by Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>296</sup> In his brief discussion of Machik Labdrön's life, Gyurmé Ösel mentions Machik's reception of the *chöd* teachings from Pa Dampa Sangyé, the birth of her three children, and her high realization as a *chöd* practitioner.<sup>297</sup>

There are interesting connections between the previous lives of Mingyur Peldrön and those of Orgyan Chokyi (1675-1729), some twenty-four years her senior.<sup>298</sup> For example, in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, we see some overlap in the list of previous female lives. For example, Nangsa Öbum, Machik Labdrön, and Gelongma Palmo are also present in Orgyan Chokyi's autobiography.<sup>299</sup> This reinforces the idea that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were a handful of known female practitioners in the available Tibetan mythology, and that all of these were drawn on in order to establish a living woman's position. It would be fruitful to consider the presence of these figures in the narratives of Chökyi Drönma; such a study could flesh out a sense of more general gendered ideals, and the presence of specific women in female narrative, during the eighteenth century.

### **The Question of Female Birth**

A frequent theme in Buddhist literature – and certainly Tibetan Buddhist autobiography – is that womanhood constitutes a lesser birth to that of a male human. Gendered hardship and its karmic implications have been frequent narrative foci for female Buddhist practitioners – a theme that revolves around the concept of the "lesser female birth." That women face additional trials and tribulations – and the connectedness

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<sup>296</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 35 a, 37 a.

<sup>297</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 13 a-b.

<sup>298</sup> Schaeffer, "Autobiography," 83.

<sup>299</sup> Schaeffer, *Himalayan*, 58.

of this undesirable saṃsāric state to one's karmic conditioning – is well known. In Gyurmé Ösel's narrative, Mingyur Peldrön's femaleness is not described as a cause of consternation for her family, nor does she suffer in her youth because of it. From her birth, she is treated with care and protection, and is understood to be a prophetically determined spiritual heir.

It is instructive to look briefly at the few moments in the text where Gyurmé Ösel does address the question of his master's female birth. In the most memorable of these, Lochen Dharmasrī and Terdak Lingpa discuss the concept. Mingyur Peldrön is having difficulty learning effective *yantras*, and asks her father and uncle why this is. Terdak Lingpa explains that this is a result of past karma and her female birth. However, this is presented more as an opportunity for Gyurmé Ösel to convey to the audience that, in spite of her sex, the gifted girl will hold and propitiate the family's traditions, and thus protect the future of Mindröling.<sup>300</sup> This is not the first time her role as lineage holder is addressed. Rather, the scene comes after several descriptions of how she clearly displays the acumen for practice and the karmic connection to the tradition over and above those of her siblings. This is the first of three times in the text when we hear of her gender described as disabling. In this moment, the founders of the tradition effectively repudiate the idea of her being somehow "less" due to her femaleness.

This is not to say that the lives of women are presented in a positivist way. Rather, both women and men suffer hardship in the narrative, and Mingyur Peldrön's hardships

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<sup>300</sup> During a practice session where Mingyur Peldrön and several other practitioners are learning to use powerful mudras and yantras, the chant mistress of Menji nunnery (which plays heavily into Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*), creates a wrathful yantra that breaks Mingyur Peldrön's. Upset, she goes to her father and uncle to ask why this has happened, and Terdak Lingpa explains that this is due in part to negative karma that she had accrued in a previous live. See Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 30 b.

are gendered. However, Gyurmé Ösel elides the common theme of the "lesser female birth" in favor of an emphasis on her role as teacher and active community leader, and draws on the contemporary literary caché of female identity to support his presentation of a charismatic leader.

### **Mingyur Peldrön's Male Births**

Interestingly, Mingyur Peldrön's series of previous incarnations are not all female, although Gyurmé Ösel pays notably more attention to her female lives. He lists four of her previous lives as having been male. In India she was born as Tilopa's teacher, the Indian Sage Kukuripa (*ku ku ri pa*). Further reinforcing a connection with the Kagyü tradition, she was also Milarepa's heart son, Zhiwa Ö (*zhi ba 'od*, twelfth century). As mentioned above, she was also considered to be the Dzokchen master Longchenpa's disciple Zhönnu Sangyé (*gzhon nu sangs rgyas*).<sup>301</sup> Finally, she was born as her paternal grandfather Trinlé Lhündrup's (*'phrin las lhun grub*, 1611-1662) disciple and Terdak Lingpa's teacher, Longyang Ösel.<sup>302</sup>

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Mingyur Peldrön's paternal grandmother was also the subject of a *namtar*, written by Lochen Dharmaśrī.<sup>303</sup> Lochen Dharmaśrī's brief biography of his mother Yangchen Drölma describes her as a financially and politically savvy woman who gave birth to seven children. She lived a short life, and never would have met her granddaughters. However, it is not Mingyur Peldrön, but her younger sister, who is considered to be Yangchen Drölma's incarnation. Why was Mingyur Peldrön not considered an incarnation of her? In Yangchen Drölma's *namtar*, she is depicted

<sup>301</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a-b.

<sup>302</sup> She also states that, during the life of her grandfather *gsang bdag 'phrin las lhun grub* she was *klong yangs 'od gsal*. Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 b.

<sup>303</sup> See dharma shrI, *yum*.

primarily as a mother and an industrious supporter of her sons' institutional endeavors. Yangchen Drölma is not depicted as a practitioner, and Gyurmé Ösel clearly sought to emphasize Mingyur Peldrön's role as teacher and practitioner, not as a mother or a secondary support system for institutional development. That Gyurmé Ösel would instead turn to the identity of Longyang Ösel, teacher of Terdak Lingpa and disciple of Trinlé Lhündrup, reveals a focus on institutional connectivity. It is of utmost importance that Mingyur Peldrön would have been a definite member of the family lineage in the recent past. Although Gyurmé Ösel does not go in to detail about this, the message passed to him by Mingyur Peldrön seems to be that it was more important, at least from her perspective, that she be connected to the teachings of the lineage, rather than the family itself, or to an all-female past. It is also possible that Yangchen Drölma lived beyond 34,<sup>304</sup> since her *namtar* was not written until 1699, the year Mingyur Peldrön was born. Either way, it is notable that Mingyur Peldrön was not associated more strongly with her grandmother in the *namtar*.

Gyurmé Ösel gives these male births cursory attention, and offers no textual "proof" – as he does with the female lives – to support the veracity of these claims. Interestingly, while her female births were prophesied, the veracity of these male births comes only from Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>305</sup> Is it that Mingyur Peldrön's word was enough to establish the truth of these former lives? Or, is Gyurmé Ösel uninterested in reinforcing the legitimacy of her previous male births by including prophetic proof for them? Although Gyurmé Ösel glosses over these, they offer their own questions about what kind of future rebirth Mingyur Peldrön might have desired for herself, and her view of

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<sup>304</sup> Schaeffer, *Himalayan*, 96.

<sup>305</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 18 a.



incarnation, authority, and gender. It seems it was not necessary, at least from Mingyur Peldrön's perspective, for one's future lives to be single-gendered. Furthermore, she found it necessary to explain to her disciple that she had had these four male births, two of which position her within the Kagyü tradition, the other two within the Nyingma tradition and what would become the Mindröling community.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when Mingyur Peldrön was nearing the end of her life, she explained to Gyurmé Ösel and a few other disciples that, although she had had female lives in the past, these would be interrupted in her next birth, when she would be born male, and adopt a monastic life.<sup>306</sup>

Taken alone, this claim might just reflect the common declaration of the preferred future male births on the part of women who are considered enlightened. It is possible that Mingyur Peldrön is here adhering to common literary turns of phrase, wherein a woman expresses a general desire to be born in the "better" body of a male. However, she describes her future male birth as a mere interruption in a primarily female incarnation lineage, and explains that future births will once more be female. It seems that Mingyur Peldrön is suggesting that, for her next birth, the male body will be more expedient, although she does not describe the reasons behind this. The dedication to a future female lineage reduces the implication that a male life would be generally preferable.

There is also the possibility that in this statement we are witnessing a desire on the part of Mingyur Peldrön to take rebirth as a man in the future, and that this is being glossed over by Gyurmé Ösel, who is concerned with his teacher's authority in her present embodiment. However, this is unlikely, especially considering that Gyurmé Ösel

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<sup>306</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 84 a-b.

did not complete the text for nearly a decade after her death. It is more likely that this reflects Gyurmé Ösel's own concerns about his master's lineage. What if there had been no girl born to become the second *jetsünma*? If a boy had been born in to the tradition, and the Mindröling leadership were interested in designating him the incarnation of Mingyur Peldrön, such a situation might occur. It could be that this is an explanation for a gap in the female birth lineage.

Gyurmé Ösel's focus on Mingyur Peldrön's previous female lives suggests that he viewed gender as a delimiting factor of reincarnation. This brings up the larger question of "what reincarnates when rebirth occurs?" and the male-or-female-ness of karmic proclivities. Gyurmé Ösel portrays Mingyur Peldrön as the ur-woman, the embodiment of all those enlightened women known in his context. Currently, Mingyur Peldrön is considered the first in the line of Mindröling *jetsünmas*, a specifically female bone and incarnation lineage. It seems that, at least in part, Gyurmé Ösel's female-oriented narrative supported this development.

Mingyur Peldrön's affiliation – through the concepts of emanation and reincarnation –with eminent figures of the Tibetan consciousness meant that she was presented as inherently imbued with spiritual advancement, teaching and leadership abilities, and the strength to overcome extreme adversity. All of these are presented to the reader with a hue of femaleness, so that Mingyur Peldrön's womanhood and authority are inherently intertwined. The only exception to this is in her identification as an incarnation of specific male members of the Mindröling community. However, this is in line with Gyurmé Ösel's assertion that Mingyur Peldrön's future birth would be male for one generation, in order to better serve the Mindröling cause. Gyurmé Ösel does not associate

Mingyur Peldrön with a specific *tulku* lineage, but he does employ the concepts of incarnation (*yang srid*) and emanation (*sprul*) to associate Mingyur Peldrön's activities, experiences, and enlightened state with well-known, primarily female, individuals from Tibetan history and myth.

### **Daughter, Master, *Ḍākinī***

Names used as delineators/markers of importance of the moment.

Throughout the course of the narrative, Gyurmé Ösel refers to Mingyur Peldrön in several ways, but all of these are honorific in tone. He describes her as a deity or a teacher, but never mentions her by name. Most often she is the "venerable master" (*rje bla ma*), an androgynous term that emphasizes her role as Gyurmé Ösel's teacher, rather than any aspect of her gender, or other aspect of her identity. The cumulative effect of frequent honorific references to her is that the overall portrait of Mingyur Peldrön is exemplary and glorified. In the most important places, these are lengthy gendered epithets, generally likening her to a *Ḍākinī*, while elsewhere she is just the androgynous "master."

*Ḍākinīs* can be fierce or friendly, pleasant or terrifying. They are a designation of female dharma protectors and translators of revealed treasure texts who guide treasure revealers and other practitioners in need. They appear in dreams and visions, the help stuck or confused practitioners. *Ḍākinīs* are generally referred to as enlightened, and are by far the most consistently positive expression of female power in Tibetan Buddhism. Their goal is often to help clarify the teachings (in whatever form) for confused

practitioners. They lead and protect men and women alike, and likewise protect the dharma from menacing influences.<sup>307</sup>

Gyurmé Ösel's own views of Mingyur Peldrön come through in his references to her. A brief consideration of the semiology of the pronouns used to refer to Mingyur Peldrön shows how he emphasized several identities according to context. Gyurmé Ösel has several modes for referring to his teacher. I will describe the most frequent usages here. The three most prominent referents used for Mingyur Peldrön are interesting because they position her differently within her family structure, community structure, and Buddhist cosmology. Throughout the hagiography, she is generally referred to either as "master," "*ḍākinī*" (and often "Queen of the *Ḍākinīs*"), or "daughter."<sup>308</sup>

Two of these phrases come from the same long title, although Gyurmé Ösel only uses this a few times in the text. That is, the "Excellent Master, Supreme Blissful *Ḍākinī* Queen."<sup>309</sup> They are likely a short form of a much longer title, that is: "venerable master, excellent queen of the *ḍākinīs* (*"rje bla ma dam pa dA ki'i gtso mo"*).<sup>310</sup> When Gyurmé Ösel wants to mark an occasion as particularly important, he uses a different short form of "*rje bla ma dam pa bde chen mkha' 'gro'i gtso mo*."<sup>311</sup> Rather than refer to Mingyur Peldrön as the "master," in these moments she becomes the Queen of the *Ḍākinīs*.<sup>312</sup>

In Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, "*Ḍākinī*" appears both in its Tibetan form

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<sup>307</sup> Judith Simmer-Brown asserts that they are second only to the guru in terms of their importance in the life of the practitioner. Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's*, 11.

<sup>308</sup> See the appendices for a table of references.

<sup>309</sup> *rje bla ma dam pa bde chen mkha' 'gro'i gtso mo*

<sup>310</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 49 49 a, see also 50 a.

<sup>311</sup> Sometimes he uses *dA ki'i* instead of *mkha' 'gro*. Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 b- 103 a.4 b, 49 a and b, 50 a, 64 a, 116 b.

<sup>312</sup> Or some variant thereof. Most frequently this is some form of "*bde chen mkha' 'gro'i gtso mo*"

(*mkha' 'gro* or *mkha' 'gro ma*) and a phoneticized Sanskrit (*dA ki*).<sup>313</sup> She is described in these terms only nine times. This long appellation designates important moments in the narrative. For example, Mingyur Peldrön is the "Great Bliss Queen of the Ḍākinīs," or some equally lengthy and florid description of "Ḍākinī Queen," in the following instances:

- 1) In the introductory section, where Gyurmé Ösel talks generally about Mingyur Peldrön as a protector of Atiyoga.<sup>314</sup>
- 2) At her birth.
- 3) When she receives complete Atiyoga instructions and initiations from her father.
- 4) When, having just arrived in Sikkim, she first bestows the Ati instructions on the Dzokchenpa and the Sikkimese King. This is the first time she herself gives such instruction (for which she would become renowned), and the teaching is accompanied by lotus petals falling from the sky, lovely scents pervading the air, and Mingyur Peldrön engulfed in rainbow light.<sup>315</sup>
- 5) When a messenger arrives in Sikkim with the good news that she, her mother, sister, and attendants can safely return, that the threat to the Nyingma tradition had passed.<sup>316</sup>
- 6) When she rebuffs the advances of Jedrung Rinpoché.<sup>317</sup>
- 7) Finally, after her death, at the end of a description of her tomb.<sup>318</sup>

When Mingyur Peldrön is engaged in a life-changing event, a moment in which her status is shifted (from disciple to teacher, for example), or when she is participating in something miraculous, she is the "supreme bliss queen of the Ḍākinīs." While there are

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<sup>313</sup> *dA ki'i/mkha' 'gro*, *dA ki'i >ni<* or *mkha' 'gro >ma<*. See Gyatso.

<sup>314</sup> "*bla ma dam pa bde chen Da k+ki'i gtso mo*," Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 4b.

<sup>315</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 a.

<sup>316</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 49 b.

<sup>317</sup> In this case, she is "*skyabs rje bla ma dam pa bde chen dA ki'i gtso mo*," Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 64 a.

<sup>318</sup> Again, in this case, there is a slight variation, as she's described as "*skyabs kyi mchog gyur rje bla ma dam pa bde chen DA ki'i gtso mo*," Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 116.

plenty of other moments the reader might find important (such as her education at Mindröling, her brief exile in Kongpo at the hands of other Mindröling community members), Gyurmé Ösel uses this language to point to specific types of importance: that is, his relationship with her, her role as an Atiyoga teacher, her birth, death, and so forth. Throughout the text, this long title is also split into several abbreviated forms, and Gyurmé Ösel chooses to use them at different thematic moments in the story.

More generally, Gyurmé Ösel uses some form of "master" to refer to Mingyur Peldrön throughout the hagiography. The narrative default is to refer to Mingyur Peldrön with titles such as "the master" (*rje nyid*), "venerable master" or "venerable guru" (*rje bla ma*), "my master" or "my guru" (*nga ba'i bla ma*), or "venerable supreme master" or "venerable supreme guru" (*rje bla ma mchog*). Here, "master" is used to convey the supreme authority held by one's teacher. It could likewise be translated as "teacher," although in modern English that might not hold the same powerful connotation that "master" does. I use "master," keeping in mind that this is not a perfect translation, and would perhaps be better rendered as something along the lines of "teacher-master," although this is too awkward for everyday usage. She is referred to with a variant of this more than fifty times. These titles are not unique to Mingyur Peldrön. Rather, they normalize her as a member of the Tibetan educational context, and establish her as a significant teacher and exemplary leader.

The second most frequent terms designate a parent-child relationship, which is important because it establishes Mingyur Peldrön within her familial context. These are used most often to show the relationship between Mingyur Peldrön and Terdak Lingpa, but also appear with regard to Mingyur Peldrön's relationship with her mother Puntsok

Peldzöm. In most of these phrases, one of the parents is being quoted, or a prophesied connection between daughter and father is being emphasized. These are most effective in terms of authorization because it directly connects her to her father. In scenes where these are used, she is her father's prize pupil, and her education is directed at optimizing her ability to carry on the Mindröling tradition.

There are three types of child-parent denotation that appear in the text, two of which are feminine ("girl" or *bu mo* and "daughter" or *sras mo*), and one of which is male ("son" *sras*). "Girl" (*bu mo*) appears some sixteen times, while "daughter" and "son" each appear about eight times. The term "*sras mo*" suggests more than "daughter" in its connotation. Rather, it suggests that she is a spiritual heir (that is, the religious heir of a practitioner), more than a biological child. Thus, when "*sras mo*" appears, it can be rendered more effectively as "spiritual daughter," or "(female) spiritual heir." This is often shortened to the male or androgynous "*sras*." Her position of 'child' within the Mindröling family is reinforced with this type of language thirty-two times. About three quarters of these are in the feminine form, and the rest are shortened. All of these come from the mouths of the previous generation of Mindröling teachers (usually Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī, but also occasionally from her mother).

Mingyur Peldrön is, for the most part, referred to as an androgynous religious authority throughout the text. For example, when describing her teaching activities, Gyurmé Ösel calls her "master" or "teacher," which in this context could also be a short form of the longer title. Other referents, as well as the entire introductory section of her previous lives, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The extensive section on Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives, as well as the use of specific terms to designate types

of authority, both offer specific literary benefits for the hagiography, which will be discussed in detail there.

These references place Mingyur Peldrön in different positions vis-à-vis her community. For example, she is generally represented at Gyurmé Ösel's teacher, but in particularly significant moments, she has a long queenly title. Then, in the moments where it is important to remind the reader of her relationship to the older generation of Mindröling leaders, she is described as the "daughter" or the "girl."

### **Nuns and Thaumaturgy**

As described in Chapters One and Two, Gyurmé Ösel uses lists of teachings, a few anecdotes, and glorifying language to establish Mingyur Peldrön as the most member of her generation at Mindröling. Townsend describes Mindröling as a place where both celibate and non-celibate students and practitioners were expected to remain "beyond reproach" by impeccably maintaining vows (including proper sexual conduct and avoidance of alcohol) and showing accomplishment in all the trappings of aesthetics and culture.<sup>319</sup> In addition to Mingyur Peldrön's refusal to participate in wrathful activity on behalf of her family, she is said to have lived as a nun, refused to participate in sexual activities, and reviled drunkenness and carousing.<sup>320</sup>

In her childhood, Mingyur Peldrön is not described as particularly adept at participating in the wrathful practices that were part of her education at Mindröling. In one memorable account, a young Mingyur Peldrön is training in the yantras associated with the Deshek Kundu. The chant mistress from Menji with whom she is training creates

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<sup>319</sup> I am grateful to Dominique Townsend, for extensive conversations on this topic. See Townsend, *Materials*, 178.

<sup>320</sup> For an excellent brief summary of these points, see also Townsend, *Materials*, 231-233.



a Vajravārahī *mudra* and *yantra*, and using those, pinches Mingyur Peldrön. No understanding why she could not stop it with her own *yantra*, Mingyur Peldrön runs sobbing to her uncle and father.<sup>321</sup> As an adult, she refuses to participate in wrathful magic, even to save herself from marauding Dzungars, or to please the Seventh Dalai Lama.<sup>322</sup> It is notable that, in all these cases, another Mindröling representative steps in to fulfill a request for magic to assuage a problem, and most often these are for the sake of the community's protection. While Mingyur Peldrön refuses to participate in magic, and suggests that this goes against "living like a nun," the community still seeks out results from such activity through different individuals. These moments suggest a discomfort with the use of thaumaturgy for community gains, and highlight some of the diversity extant within Mindröling at the time. Moreover, there is a distinction between the miraculous natural occurrences that surround Mingyur Peldrön and intentional rituals for the sake of turning back foes.

The question arises here as to whether or not it makes sense to refer to Mingyur Peldrön as a "nun." The concept of the "nun" in the west refers to a woman who has taken vows of chastity and abstention over and above those that would be expected of lay female practitioners and is, for the most part, relevant to several levels of vows adopted by women in Tibetan Buddhism. Additionally, in the Tibetan tradition, nuns' hair is shorn, and they don monastic robes – both trappings of the monastic life also adopted by monks. However, Mingyur Peldrön seems to cross the boundaries between lay and monastic – a situation that, while probably in keeping with the Vajrayāna tradition of Mindröling, is nevertheless unclear. Two brothers, one monk and one tantric lay

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<sup>321</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 30 b- 32 b.

<sup>322</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b- 49 b, 54 a- 54 b, 65 b, 90 a-b.

practitioner, founded Mindröling Monastery. However, to refer to the treasure revealer Terdak Lingpa as a mere "layperson" is misleading and incorrect. While he did not maintain monastic vows, his level of religious education, his stake in the development of the Nyingma institution, and the reverence accorded him by his followers and their descendents, do not reflect the mundane concept of the "layperson." Rather, as a non-celibate practitioner, Terdak Lingpa had access to the practices associated with successful treasure revelation, and was able to produce progeny who would carry on the tradition created by that he and his brother developed.

Mingyur Peldrön does not necessarily fit easily in to either side of the dichotomy. Although she is generally depicted with long, flowing hair, and non-monastic garb, in the text there is at least one reference to her wearing her hair shorn like that of a nun.<sup>323</sup> There are several references to her living "like a nun," and celibacy and proper chaste conduct are a central concern of hers.<sup>324</sup> Also, it seems that she did take monastic vows from Lochen Dharmaśrī.<sup>325</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön spent more than a decade of her life in retreat, many years of which were taken in one or two year periods, so that she was frequently in and out of retreat. At one point in her hagiography, Gyurmé Ösel outlines her daily schedule, in which gives a sense of just how dedicated she was to continual practice.<sup>326</sup> The extensive description of her schedule – coupled with themes of celibacy, teetotalism, and avoidance

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<sup>323</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 b.

<sup>324</sup> "btsun ma lta bu" and "btsun ma bzhin." For example, see Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 40 b, 44 a, 48 b, 84 b, 90 a- 91 a.

<sup>325</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 36 b.

<sup>326</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 76 a- 78 b.

of wrathful practice – combined to create a public persona of a woman who was in effect the ideal monastic practitioner and perfected representative of Mindröling.

### **Charismatic Identity**

As mentioned in Chapter One, several types of miracles pepper the hagiography. These events tend to happen around Mingyur Peldrön at important moments, and elicit devotion, and sometimes fear, in those who witness them. Miraculous occurrences significantly add to Mingyur Peldrön's charismatic representation.

For example, when she is born, the unusual signs from the natural world and also from the newborn, including loud "HUM!" sounding from the mother's womb,<sup>327</sup> the baby's leap into a fearful squatting position,<sup>328</sup> her fast growth and refusal of the breast,<sup>329</sup> are all cited as signs of her high level of realization in Great Perfection practices.<sup>330</sup> Her unusual nature is used in the literary context as a tool to reinforce her charisma.

There are many more examples of this type of charismatic reinforcement, all of which appear in Chapter One. All of these signs – be they from the natural world, animal behavior, or expressions of her own realization – support the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's sainthood. Several miracles engender faith in those around her, and so boost her charismatic nature.

Charismatic authority provides its own form of inherently unstable structure, and is most potent during periods of social instability.<sup>331</sup> In the case of Mindröling, we see this type of authority most active during Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī's

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<sup>327</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 a.

<sup>328</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21b.

<sup>329</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 22a.

<sup>330</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21b-22a.

<sup>331</sup> Weber, *Economy*, 1115-9.

foundation of the monastery. However, it was also used extensively during the post-Dzungar reconstruction and expansion efforts of Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel. When the period of change eventually reverts to a more stable state, charismatic authority must be likewise routinized if it is going to maintain potency.<sup>332</sup> As the second generation of Mindröling leaders came of age, it became necessary for the charismatic authority held by the first generation to first shift to the younger set, and then be transmuted into other forms of authority. We see Mingyur Peldrön imbued with charismatic authority in descriptions of miraculous events surrounding her activities, her idealized ascetic behavior, and her spiritual realization.

However, traditional authority was also necessary for the sustenance of both the daughter of Mindröling and Mindröling itself. Descriptions of Mingyur Peldrön as a teacher are woven heavily throughout the narrative of her adult life, and reinforce her traditional authority. These narratives describe her as an extremely active and widely known teacher. This theme is expressed on three levels, including Mingyur Peldrön as: 1) the teacher of the masses; 2) the teacher of well-known practitioners, royalty, and government leadership; 3) and the teacher of individual disciples, in this case exemplified by the relationship between Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön.

### **Teacher of the Masses**

As discussed in earlier chapters, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī used an inclusive approach to create the Mindröling name. Mingyur Peldrön applied this approach to her own teaching and ritual activities, allowing hundreds to attend public empowerments and lessons, and traveling and teaching extensively to crowds. By

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<sup>332</sup> Weber, *Economy*, 1122.

teaching all four segments of society,<sup>333</sup> the second generation of Mindröling leadership continued the founders' vision and propelled the Mindröling name to neighboring regions.

Mingyur Peldrön gave her first series of teachings in Sikkim. Upon her arrival there, the king overturned an injunction against unauthorized public teachings specifically so that she could give blessings to a crowd of 4,000 people from all walks of life. She bestowed on them the Long-Life Empowerment of the *Tersar Chimé Yangnying Kundu* (*gter gsar 'chi med yang snying kun 'dus kyi tshe dbang*), and the joyful audience responded with singing and dancing.<sup>334</sup> When traveling she was frequently met along the road by large crowds. For example, the eight-year-old Gyurmé Ösel met her for the first time when a crowd gathered to greet her as she was traveling past his grandmother's home.<sup>335</sup>

In 1738, Mingyur Peldrön spent ten weeks bestowing teachings to a crowd of 270 people. She bestowed on the crowd the empowerments and instructions for Terdak Lingpa's *Ati Zabdön Nyingpo* (*a ti zab don snying po*)<sup>336</sup>, a Vajrasattva Mind Sadhana (*rdor sems thug sgrub*), and the *Gathering of Sugatas* (*Deshek Kündu, bde gshegs kun 'dus*). She did not merely confer empowerments on the crowd, but gave detailed instructions on the proper practice of these.<sup>337</sup> In another case, she bestowed the *Tersar*

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<sup>333</sup> that is, laywomen, laymen, nuns, and monks.

<sup>334</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 a-48 b.

<sup>335</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55 a. For another example, see 59 b (The collection of many faithful living beings of the border regions and central Tibet.)

<sup>336</sup> 'gyur med rdo rje (Terdak Lingpa). *rDzogs pa chen po a ti zab don snying po'i chos skor*.

<sup>337</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 69 a-70 a.

*Adön* (*gter gsar a don*) and the heart essence of Machik's *Chöd*<sup>338</sup> on a large monastic group, including nuns from Menji (*sman brjid*), Shongga (*shong dga'*), and Samten Ling (*bstam gtan gling*) nunneries, and about three hundred other monks and nuns.<sup>339</sup>

Again, in 1740, she spent two months bestowing the empowerment and profound instruction of the *Seminal Heart, Mother and Son* (*gsang ba snying thig ma bu*) on a crowd of 560. Once more, rather than merely bestowing empowerments, she offered extensive detailed teachings to the group.<sup>340</sup> Then in 1744, on the road after completing long life prayers for Gongzhab Rinpoché, she bestowed the *Ati Heart Essence* on many "fortunate cotton-clad" people of Ü and Tsang. The result of this as described by Gyurmé Ösel was that "the hopes of each were completely fulfilled."<sup>341</sup> Finally, in 1767, two years before her death, she came out of retreat and bestowed the Profound Instruction of the *Heart Essence* (*thugs thig gi zab khrid*) on a monastic crowd of 147, including monks from Mindroling, nuns from Menji and Samten Chöling, and monastics from throughout Ü and Tsang.<sup>342</sup>

We can see from these examples that the massive crowds Mingyur Peldrön taught were sometimes solely composed of monastic communities, and sometimes included laypeople. Regardless, she was passing on the teachings she had received from Terdak Lingpa, all of which can be considered either *terma* or post-tantra-based systems.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> *thugs thig ma gcig gcod yul stan thog gcig ma bcas stsal*

<sup>339</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 71 a-b.

<sup>340</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 75 a. Directly after this, she bestows all of the *rdor sems thugs sgrub kyi bsnyen sgrub yan lag* and the *mchod sbyin bsil gtor* on Gyurmé Ösel and *mdo mkhar 'gyur med bstan 'dzin*.

<sup>341</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 b.

<sup>342</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 96 b.

<sup>343</sup> See Germano, *Mysticism*.

## Relations with Royalty and Religious Leadership

In addition to mass teachings, Mingyur Peldrön gave private teachings to religious leaders,<sup>344</sup> royalty, and members of the aristocracy. One prominent teacher-student connection that persists throughout Mingyur Peldrön's adult life is the reciprocal teaching relationship between her and the Dzokchen master Jikmé Dorjé. In the hagiography, Jikmé Dorjé is styled as the "Sikkimese Dzokchenpa,"<sup>345</sup> and occasionally the "Sikkimese Dzokchen Blood-drinking Hero Jikmé Dorjé."<sup>346</sup> According to Mullard, he was born in 1682, studied with Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī in his youth, and arrived in Sikkim around 1709, bringing with him the teachings of Mindröling. After his arrival, he transformed Pemayangtsé (*pad+ma yang rtse*) Monastery into "Sikkim's most important monastery."<sup>347</sup> He would, according to Gyurmé Ösel's account, play an instrumental role in supporting Mingyur Peldrön and her family during their exile, and maintaining relations between them and the Sikkimese royalty after her return to Central Tibet.

As mentioned in Chapter One, upon her arrival in Sikkim, Jikmé Dorjé immediately invited Mingyur Peldrön to ascend the throne in his monastery's main hall. She bestowed her first Atiyoga teaching on him, the Sikkimese king, and a handful of other nobles. He then reciprocated by offering her teachings on the Embodiment of the Precious Ones (*dkon mchog spyi 'dus*) – a treasure cycle revealed by Jatsön Nyingbo (*'ja' tshon snying po*, 1585-1656) – and the empowerment and transmission for the *Attainment*

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<sup>344</sup> Often these were given in multi-day sessions in which teachings were exchanged between Mingyur Peldrön and one or more teachers.

<sup>345</sup> For example, see Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 70 a, 82 b.

<sup>346</sup> *'bras ljongs rDzogs chen khrag 'thung 'jigs med rdo rje*, (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 a), also *rDzogs chen khrag 'thung dpa' bo 'jigs med rdo rje*, (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 b).

<sup>347</sup> Mullard, *Opening*, 161, 165- 166. In particular, he focused on *lha btsun chen po's* traditions.

of the *Vidyadhara Life* (*rig 'dzin srog sgrub kyi dbang lung*), a treasure text revealed by Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé (*lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med*, 1597-1650) in Sikkim.<sup>348</sup> Jikmé Dorjé would act as Mingyur Peldrön's host for the duration of her exile, and would later visit her in Tibet, during the Sikkimese Civil war.<sup>349</sup>

As mentioned briefly above, her first royal student was Gyurmé Namgyel, the young king of Sikkim, whom she taught during her three-year exile, and who would become her brother-in-law during that time. She would bestow her father's entire New Treasure cycle, as well as her own instruction on Atiyoga, on the king and a small group of government officers and attendants, including Jikmé Dorjé.<sup>350</sup> She would maintain connections with members of the Sikkimese royal family throughout her life, with individuals coming to receive teachings from her some twenty years after she had returned home. In particular, Gyurmé Namgyel would come to receive *Ḍākinī* empowerments and instructions from Terdak Lingpa's *Shauk* treasure, as well as Vajravārahī long-life empowerments.<sup>351</sup>

After returning home, Mingyur Peldrön maintained teaching relationships with members of the Tibetan aristocracy, including central Tibetan princes, the children of influential officials, and army generals.<sup>352</sup> In a few cases, these were former disciples of

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<sup>348</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 48 b.

<sup>349</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 70 a, see also Mullard, *Opening*, 174. The Sikkimese Civil war lasted from 1734-41.

<sup>350</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 b.

<sup>351</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 b, see also Mullard, pg. 170. 'gyur med rnam rgyal reigned from 1717-1733.

<sup>352</sup> In 1748 the prince of Dari in Gungtang became her disciple and received Wrathful Long-Life Empowerments and an explanation of the Six Syllable Chrnrezig Mantra (*tshe dbang drag dmar gyi dbang and sbyan ras gzigs yig ge drug pa'i lha khrid*, respectively), (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 82 a). In 1748, she met with Ngödrup Namgyel (*dngos grub rnam rgyal*), the son of the army general of Yuthok (in Ü), to whom she bestowed Wrathful



Terdak Lingpa, suggesting that Mingyur Peldrön was carrying on the family tradition by responding to the request of one of her father's former disciples.<sup>353</sup> One of these, the central Tibetan prince Depa Gyurmé Samten Chokdrup (*yang grong nas sde pa 'gyur med bsam gtan mchog grub*, d.u), requested that she compose her instruction manual for the Khandro Sangwa Yeshé (*mkha' 'gro gsang ba ye shes*)<sup>354</sup>. However, for the most part these dignitaries were not described as previous affiliates of Terdak Lingpa, but rather, interested parties seeking the instruction of the great *jetsünma*.<sup>355</sup>

### **Leadership Difficulties, Polhané, and the Ganden Podrang**

The Ganden Podrang government in Lhasa, and Mindröling in Drachi, were founded on either end of the mid-seventeenth century (1644 and 1676, respectively),<sup>356</sup> and reinforced each other's strength. Terdak Lingpa maintained a close relationship with the Fifth Dalai Lama from his youth, and later developed connections with Sangyé Gyatso as well.<sup>357</sup> As described by Townsend, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī strongly influenced the literary, ritual, and aesthetic decisions of the Fifth Dalai Lama's

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Empowerments and liturgy instructions from Terdak Lingpa's *New Treasures*, (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 82 b).

<sup>353</sup> Her father's disciples (*bya btang rnal 'byor gyi dbang phug 'gyur med rnam grol* and *'gyur med thar phyin*) come from Latö bearing offerings for her in 1732, (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 62 b).

<sup>354</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 63 a. The year was 1732.

<sup>355</sup> Other examples include the children of the official Tashi Namgyel (*bkra shis rnam rgyal*, d.u) of Samdrup Phodrang (*bsam 'grub pho brang*), who visited Mingyur Peldrön in 1766 and requestd Kama (*bka' ma*) teachings and the Chimé Yangnying Kundu (*'chi med yang snying kun 'dus kyi tshe dbang*) empowerments (Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 91 b-92 a).

<sup>356</sup> Bogin establishes the foundation of the *dga' ldan pho drang* in 1642, at which time the Fifth Dalai Lama received official dominion over Tibet from Gushri Khan. See Bogin, "Royal Blood," in Cuevas and Schaeffer, *Power*, pg. 7. Regarding the seven year variance in dates for the founding of Mindröling, see Townsend, *Materials*, 97.

<sup>357</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the letters exchanged between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama, see Townsend, *Materials*, 117-164.

Ganden Podrang.<sup>358</sup> The formation of the Ganden Podrang and its system of centralized governance marked the beginning of the early modern period, and the confluence of religious and worldly authority was supported at least in part by Mindröling's activities. Beyond that, Terdak Lingpa, Lochen Dharmaśrī, and the Fifth Dalai Lama shared a vision of authority that influenced the population through inclusive ritual practice. Mindröling had, before its destruction, been known as a religious and cultural center in the region. Thus, Mindröling acted as a center of religious and cultural education for much of the Ganden Podrang leadership throughout the early years of the Monastery. Terdak Lingpa and the "Great Fifth" maintained a close relationship of sharing teachings, and Mindröling was founded with the financial and institutional support of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the newly emerging Ganden Podrang government.

There are many moments in the hagiography where Mingyur Peldrön interacts directly with governing leaders, thereby participating in the religio-political complex of the period. After the Dzungar invasion of 1717-1718, she has contact with Polhané, the ostensible king of Tibet, in 1726, 1736, and after his death, with Polhané's daughter in the 1750s. Political figures make donations throughout her career, and several rulers and their families are in attendance at her funeral.

Polhané was, according to Petech, best known for financing the publication of the Nartang (*snar thang*) Kangyur and Tengyur (*bka' 'gyur, 'bstan 'gyur*).<sup>359</sup> Mingyur Peldrön's relationship with Polhané<sup>360</sup> takes on tones of the priest-patron (*mchod yon*) association insofar as she bestows teachings on him, and he responds in kind with

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<sup>358</sup> Thanks to Jake Dalton and Dominique Townsend for their extensive work on these subjects.

<sup>359</sup> Petech, *China and Tibet*, 78.

<sup>360</sup> For detailed information on his governing career and position, see Chapter One.

financial and political support for Mindröling's reconstruction and maintenance. Indeed, he is the most frequently mentioned secular patron in the hagiography. This relationship, and the relationship between Mingyur Peldrön and the Seventh Dalai Lama, represents strong connections with the central Tibetan governing body, the Ganden Podrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) in Lhasa. Before looking at Mingyur Peldrön's relationships with these two powerful men, it makes sense to consider the relationships between parties in the previous generation - that is, the founders of Mindröling and the Ganden Podrang. Mingyur Peldrön's relationships with the Seventh Dalai Lama and Polhané echo the initial connections between the two power centers, and were almost certainly important reminders for Gyurmé Ösel in his portrayal of Mingyur Peldrön as an important teacher.

Mingyur Peldrön would develop a teacher-donor relationship with Polhané, and would have one meeting with the Seventh Dalai Lama. After she returned from Sikkim to Mindröling, it is said that her name spread throughout Tibetan regions to Ngari in the far west, Lhomön and Lhodrak in the south, Dakpo in the south-east, Kham in the east, and Amdo in the northeast.<sup>361</sup> As a result of her spreading fame, unnamed members of the Mindröling house thought she was developing too much influence, and should be removed from the monastery. Thus, "unnamed parties" from within the family convinced Polhané to send her far away to a remote place, stating a need for the dharma to be spread in other regions. The result was that Mingyur Peldrön spent a year in a second sort of exile, this time tilling fields in Kongpo. Eventually Polhané learned that the ruse had been manufactured to get Mingyur Peldrön out of the way so that others could lead the redevelopment of the monastery. Polhané, mortified that he had been tricked into such a

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<sup>361</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 b. That is, *mnga' ris*, *lho mon*, *lho brag*, *dwags po*, *khams*, and *stod smad*.

thing, immediately sent for Mingyur Peldrön and her attendants, who were brought to Lhasa.

In Lhasa, her connections with Polhané were reestablished, and she was invited to meet with the Seventh Dalai Lama. Before the meeting (as mentioned in Chapter One), she was wary of the Gelukpa leadership, and arrived disguised as a Gelukpa so as to avoid any further Nyingma-directed persecution. Polhané assured her that her traditions would be fully respected, and urged her to change back in to her regular attire, which she promptly did.<sup>362</sup> In the meeting between Mingyur Peldrön and the Seventh Dalai Lama, she prostrated at his feet and offered him gifts. He bestowed on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma (*rje btsun shes rab sgron ma*) and flowers were strewn about. She went on to visit all the holy places in the city, including the tomb of the Great Fifth, and was asked by Geshé Ngawang Pemachen (*dge bshes ngag dbang pad+ma can*), of the Seventh Dalai Lama's monastery (Namgyel Dratsang) to compose a long-life prayer that the monks could recite for her. During the visit, at the home of Polhané, she also bestowed a series of teachings, although it is unclear whether the Seventh Dalai Lama was in attendance to receive these. During this time, several curses associated with her family were lifted.<sup>363</sup> At the time of her visit, Mingyur Peldrön would have been about twenty-three, and the Seventh Dalai Lama about fourteen years old. It is significant that they met in their youth - at this point the Dalai Lama would have held no tangible power, but was still slated to take up the position established by the Great Fifth. Moreover, during this time Polhané was one of five administrators in charge of governing Tibet at

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<sup>362</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 a-b.

<sup>363</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 b- 55 a.

the time.<sup>364</sup> While he would not take full control of Tibet's governance until 1728, at this time he held considerable power.

It is notable that it was Polhané who facilitated Mingyur Peldrön's return. This support was further reinforced by making an immediate connection, before returning to Mindröling itself, with the Seventh Dalai Lama. Thus the case of what is described as an accidental exile is transformed into a strengthened connection between Mingyur Peldrön and the Ganden Podrang. In the scope of governance and religious leadership, the meeting solidified the Ganden Phodrang's support of Mingyur Peldrön and, by extension, Mindröling.

The relationship with Polhané would continue, and he would also settle disputes between Gelukpa and Nyingmapa monastics on behalf of Mingyur Peldrön's brother, Rinchen Namgyel.<sup>365</sup> In his later years, Mingyur Peldrön would maintain connections with his whole family, including his daughter Denden Drölma (*bde ldan sgrol ma*), who would continue to come and make donations in exchange for teachings.<sup>366</sup>

In terms of discussing family relations, Gyurmé Ösel avoids describing conflict in the narrative. While it is clearly authoritative members of the Mindröling family whose machinations have her sent off into a second exile, they are not named outright in the hagiography. The suggestion here is that Gyurmé Ösel is not keen to alienate other members of the Mindröling community, or to retroactively sow the seeds of strife, which maybe have been thoroughly obfuscated by the time he finished the hagiography in 1782.

In the closing section of the hagiography, Gyurmé Ösel lists Polhané first among

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<sup>364</sup> Meeting with Dr. Jampa Samten, April 19, 2012.

<sup>365</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 63 a-b.

<sup>366</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 91 b, 92 a.

the influential leaders who had previously urged Mingyur Peldrön to record her life story.<sup>367</sup> These relationships echo that between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama in the previous generation. Like her father, Mingyur Peldrön would receive support from the central governing body in Lhasa (primarily from Polhané) for the initial reconstruction of the monastery. While Mingyur Peldrön only met one time with the Seventh Dalai Lama, the continued relationship with Polhané and his family suggests an extended connection to the governing seat. Also, the meeting was probably important for the institutional support and security of Mindröling.

As a teacher of religious and non-religious leaders, and therefore a guide to the Tibetan leadership, Mingyur Peldrön was in a sense a leader herself. By this I mean that, while official positions of leadership in the Mindröling community (i.e those of *trichen* and *khenchen*) were unavailable to her, she was in a position to influence the direction of the monastery and the Ganden Phodrang.

### **Master and Disciple**

The importance of the teacher in a student's education and practice is a pan-Buddhist phenomenon, although it is most strongly emphasized in Chan (J. Zen, K. Sön) and Tibetan traditions. In Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual teacher or guru is arguably the most important component on the path to enlightenment. This emphasis increases with the complexity and advancement of one's practice. According to Patrul Rinpoché (*dpal sprul o rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po*, 1808-1887), there is a multi-step process to finding a spiritual teacher, which should be taken up with great seriousness. Before choosing a spiritual teacher, one should, according to Patrul Rinpoché, closely examine

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<sup>367</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 87 b.

the potential teacher, looking for signs of purity, knowledge, generosity, and the credentials to teach. These details are especially important because, once chosen, the teacher should be followed with complete faith, her actions should be emulated, and she should be considered a buddha herself:

The extraordinary teacher who gives the pith instructions  
 Has received empowerments, kept samayas, and is peaceful;  
 Has mastered the meaning of the ground, path and result tantras;  
 Has all the signs of approach and accomplishment and is freed by realization;  
 Has limitless compassion and cares only for others;  
 Has few activities and thinks only, resolutely, of the Dharma;  
 Is weary of this world, and leads others to feel the same;  
 Is expert in methods and has the blessings of the lineage.  
 Follow such a teacher, and accomplishment comes swiftly.<sup>368</sup>

The most personal relationship described in Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* is that between her and her biographer and disciple, Gyurmé Ösel. While this emphasis is unsurprising, accounts of a relationship between a senior female teacher and a junior male disciple are extremely rare in Tibetan literature; thus the nature of their relationship bears consideration. Gyurmé Ösel's experience does not reflect the meticulous process of the hunt for the perfect teacher, as described above, nor can we assume that at the tender age of eight he had much say in whether he went to study with Mingyur Peldrön.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Gyurmé Ösel presents the moment when he meets his master as one in which spontaneous devotion is born, collapsing the process but maintaining the prerequisite of complete faith in order to follow a spiritual guide.

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<sup>368</sup> Patrul Rinpoche, *Words*, 139. For more on the role of the spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism, see also Lopez, "A Prayer to the Lama;" Germano, *Mysticism*; Pollack "Practices."

Gyurmé Ösel began his apprenticeship with her when he was only eight years old, and would not leave her side until she died. Upon first seeing her, he was moved to tears by his deep faith.<sup>369</sup> His accounts of lessons and interactions with his "master" are at turns didactic, poignant, and humorous. A few examples will give a sense of how Gyurmé Ösel portrays his relationship with his beloved master, and these will in turn inform some preliminary suggestions about one type of male-female relationship in eighteenth century Tibet.

First and foremost, Gyurmé Ösel describes Mingyur Peldrön in her role as a teacher of the masses, of the aristocracy, and of himself. Throughout the hagiography he refers to her fondly as "the master herself" (*rje nyid*), "the venerable lama" (*rje bla ma*), and "refuge master herself" (*skyabs rje bla ma*, also "Her Holiness the Lama").

Considering the tender age at which Gyurmé Ösel became attached to Mingyur Peldrön, and her relative position as a twenty-something emerging teacher, one might presuppose an overarching maternal air to the relationship. However, the themes that run throughout Gyurmé Ösel's narrative are of a teacher who is strict but humorous, and always compassionate. As a teacher of the dharma, Mingyur Peldrön is didactic and strict. As described above, she is frequently admonishing her students for drinking beer and carousing, and urging them to practice constantly, lest their precious human lives be wasted.

However, her seriousness and palpable concern with the lax attitude of some of her students is balanced with her levity in the face of socially awkward situations. The

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<sup>369</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55 a.



most obvious of these is when Gyurmé Ösel farts in her presence.<sup>370</sup> Here she shows that, if her students are working diligently at their practice, even something so undecorous as a fart will be easily forgiven. She occasionally jokes with Gyurmé Ösel, even in moments as poignant as when she is recounting her difficult transit to Sikkim.<sup>371</sup> She gives him teachings and advice at several moments throughout the narrative, and he is often included in her large-scale teachings.

Finally, there is a theme of poignance that runs throughout Gyurmé Ösel's narrative. As mentioned above, Gyurmé Ösel is moved to tears upon meeting Mingyur Peldrön for the first time. Likewise, many tears are shed in the anticipation of her death, and he is even beset by nightmares when she is ill.<sup>372</sup> In the following chapter we will discuss Mingyur Peldrön's instruction style and advice to her students, as well as other aspects of her "voice" and personality, as they are portrayed in Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography, and several other texts.

## Conclusion

So, what do these representations do for Gyurmé Ösel and his audience? In addition to providing the reader with a celibate female ideal for practice, discipline, and education, Gyurmé Ösel provides a heroic figure imbued with several identities and types of authority. If we take Michael Mann's four divisions of types of power (ideological, economic, military, and political),<sup>373</sup> the relationships described above indicate both ideological and political power. As a friend of political and religious leaders, Mingyur Peldrön wields political power through personal connections. By dispersing her education

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<sup>370</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 86 a-b.

<sup>371</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 46 a.

<sup>372</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 b- 103 a.

<sup>373</sup> Mann, *Sources*, 2.

to a large number of disciples, Mingyur Peldrön conveys ideological power. The narrative also contains several other aspects of ideological power.

Mingyur Peldrön holds the enlightened nature, divinity, and other aspects that come with being associated with Yeshé Tsogyel, one of the most important women in Tibetan mythology and history. She is the supreme woman in the religious mythos of Gyurmé Ösel's eighteenth century community, a heroic female protector of the dharma. Nangsa Öbum, on the other hand, represents the struggles of ordinary human women as imposed by the mundane world. Another well-known cultural icon, she is capable of navigating these challenges by transgressing the boundaries of life and death, and in the process becomes a bona fide teacher. In terms of death-defiance, opposition to oppression, and an ethical mission, Nangsa Öbum is clearly the best choice for iconic character. Each heroine represents something very different and conveys a specific aspect of Mingyur Peldrön's identity. Thus, Mingyur Peldrön is the embodiment of both traditional authority and transgressive power.

The gendered nature of incarnation, and the way it is presented in Mingyur Peldrön's case, poses an interesting set of questions about how gender and incarnation were treated in eighteenth century Central Tibet. Why does Gyurmé Ösel not emphasize Mingyur Peldrön's male lives? Why does he instead present her as female identities? It is clear that Gyurmé Ösel is trying to authenticate his teacher by situating her firmly in every possible powerful position of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In depicting Mingyur Peldrön as most available iconic female figures in Tibetan Buddhism, Gyurmé Ösel imbues her with all the power, authority, and ability to protect the dharma that are embodied in these identities. Implicit here is the assumption that these ladies *are* in fact

powerful. Even though she had been male in some of her previous births, Gyurmé Ösel appears to be concerned with a *specifically* female authority. This might be because he is working to establish her, in her current female form, as a legitimate heir to Mindröling. Regardless, it is clear that he finds female spiritual authority to be completely legitimate for his purposes. Furthermore, the hagiography exemplifies the very specific cache from which one could draw if one wanted to symbolize female authority in eighteenth century Central Tibet. Beyond the question of gender as it pertains to Mingyur Peldrön's previous rebirths, this section of the hagiography helps the reader understand some of Gyurmé Ösel's literary goals for how to present the public image of his teacher. Not only is she authoritative, but she also has experienced death-defying struggle.

Beyond what the accounts of Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives tell us of Gyurmé Ösel's concerns and intentions in composing his master's hagiography, they, quite simply, offer some insight in to the activities and potentially the personality of Mingyur Peldrön herself. This last is the least firm, given the reported nature of Mingyur Peldrön's words and deeds from the perspective of Gyurmé Ösel, although they are in effect his representations of her persona. Gyurmé Ösel is careful to point out that this enlightened female being's ultimate intention is to take birth *as* Mingyur Peldrön in order to bring the Dzokchen teachings to humanity.<sup>374</sup> As a result, she emanates as a series of well-known divine and semi-divine Buddhist teachers and practitioners, eventually taking birth as Mingyur Peldrön. The combination of personal and mass instruction as depicted by Gyurmé Ösel strongly echoes the approach used in the previous generation by Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī in forming their inclusivist Nyingma community. We see

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<sup>374</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 2 b- 4 b.

Mingyur Peldrön as a teacher on three levels- as the bringer of teachings to the masses, as the teacher of the most prominent non-religious and religious leaders of the time, and as the personal teacher, at turns strict and incredibly funny, depending on the need of the student in that moment. The description of the multitudes in attendance at Mingyur Peldrön's funerary rites, along with the miracles that occurred during that time, additionally speak to her public persona as a teacher, practitioner, and ultimately, a saint. The thematic orientations that were used to present Mingyur Peldrön's public persona carry threads of divinity, a teacher and practitioner ideal, and a celibacy-oriented representation of Mindröling. Forms of traditional and charismatic authority are represented by miracles, personal advancement in practice, and connections with external authorities- both religious and non-religious. As a result, Mingyur Peldrön is the embodiment of the queen of the *ḍākinīs*, as a highly realized teacher, and as a human woman, facing the same *saṃsāric* trials as everyone else.

Thus far, we have explored the variety of ways in which Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön offers both idealized and realistic views of women that were prevalent in the eighteenth century. While these chapters have explored the creation of Mingyur Peldrön's identity, as well as idealized notions of the feminine divine, in the next chapter I will discuss the question of how we might hear Mingyur Peldrön's "voice" in these pages. Chapter Four will begin with a discussion of the question of "voice," and how it can be understood through these types of devotional narrative, as well as implications for the dynamic of gender in these representations. I will discuss the question of how we interpret Mingyur Peldrön's voice through the hagiography of Gyurmé Ösel, and how works such as his express intermingled and negotiated voices,

both male and female, within the context of devotional rhetoric. Thus, we will now turn to the texts authored by Mingyur Peldrön and the moments, interspersed throughout Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography, where she is quoted extensively.

## Chapter Four: Hearing Mingyur Peldrön's Voice

### Introduction

This chapter considers the question of voice and its presentation in hagiography. Several European Medievalists have addressed voice and how we can and cannot understand the subject's identity as being effectively conveyed in hagiographic accounts. When thinking about the presence and role of voice (and voices) in life writing, we generally consider the role of the author first. In the case of Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar*, we can inquire about Gyurmé Ösel's goals in narrating his beloved teacher's life story and ways in which he has presented her. However, there are many points where Mingyur Peldrön is quoted directly, and even more where she is quoted indirectly, which all contribute to a general sense of her personality as a teacher, nun, and representative of Mindröling and the Nyingma school. This chapter, we will consider the specific places where Mingyur Peldrön is quoted in the text. More than any other part of the hagiography, these direct quotes represent her views, identity, and in short, her "voice," insofar as it is available to us in the text.

In this chapter, we will turn to several examples from the *namtar* that convey the breadth of what we hear from "the Master Herself," as a means for understanding how Mingyur Peldrön's personal agency is conveyed in the work, and what we can glean about her own personality, and her position within her community, from her own words.

Gail Ashton is concerned with liberating women's voices from a perceived silence in medieval European hagiography.<sup>375</sup> She draws from French feminist theory to locate female saints' voices in hagiographies that she describes as dominated by the voices of their male hagiographers. She uses modern concepts of gender distinction to dissect the author-saint relationship in the creation of medieval hagiography, and in her approach seeks to disrupt what she describes as a univocality of male discourse.<sup>376</sup> She argues that, when a male hagiographer presents an idealized female saint, he imposes his own, male-centered representation of *woman* (since the saint is female) and in so doing silences the saint's voice. For Ashton, the issue is one of gendered censorship and saving the autonomous selfhood of female saints so that their voices and authority are properly acknowledged.<sup>377</sup> Ashton depicts the medieval hagiography of female saints as a field where gendered voices contend for primacy within the genre (in particular, male voices attempting to forcibly unify views about women).<sup>378</sup>

However, Ashton presents the author-saint relationship as contentious; the emphasis in her work is a much-needed focus on the ways in which female voice was superseded by the goals of male authors, the result being a female voice that is difficult to hear through the interference of authorial intent. However, I will show how, in the case of Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön's voices, the potential cacophony of voices becomes harmonious, with author and subject speaking in concert. The result is that Mingyur Peldrön's identity is presented in richer tones as a result of the collaboration. While they present opposing viewpoints at different moments in the hagiography, this benefits the

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<sup>375</sup> That is, the *Lives* of Christian saints between 1200-1500 CE.

<sup>376</sup> Ashton, *Generation*, 103-4.

<sup>377</sup> Ashton, *Generation*, 4-5, 46.

<sup>378</sup> Ashton, *Generation*, 13-15.

narrative in such a way that makes Mingyur Peldrön simultaneously human and divine. This does not even necessarily require active, conscious collaboration. But, at least on the part of the author, where there is a goal of conveying the subject's ideas, opinions, and so forth, some aspect of collaboration exists. This is more in line with the approach taken by the scholar John Coakley,<sup>379</sup> who works from the assumption that life writing is less a means of control than a devotional act.

John Coakley's work is also concerned with what happened when medieval men acted as authors of female saints' life stories, although he focuses on the effects of the dynamics involved in the creation of multi-voiced hagiography. The complexities of the author-saint relationship are not just important in terms of understanding gender dynamics, but also in terms of the development of different types of authority, issues of reverence and control, and the literary process. We see the various cultural issues at play in the author-saint relationship and can interpret those through what we read in the hagiography itself. In the context of Mingyur Peldrön, her voice focuses on the problems she seems among her students and other practitioners. On the other hand, Gyurmé Ösel's focus is on Mingyur Peldrön as a divine being and an excellent teacher. While hagiographers act as intermediaries for female saints, there is an important collaborative aspect to be considered alongside other questions of power dynamics and devotional acts.

Catherine Mooney<sup>380</sup> also addresses gender as a negotiated dynamic among other aspects of the medieval religious world, and so questions of gender differentiation and maintenance of these ideals become part of a larger conversation about how medieval religious ideals are constructed and sustained through the creation of texts. This is

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<sup>379</sup> See Coakley, *Women*.

<sup>380</sup> See Mooney, *Gendered*.



relevant to the relationship between Gyurmé Ösel and Mingyur Peldrön, as negotiated on the page, because we hear different assertions regarding Mingyur Peldrön's relationship with her gender. Is this merely a case of self-effacement on the part of the subject, and elevation on the part of the starry-eyed disciple? The relationship is complicated by their gender difference, age difference, and the fact that, regardless of when the hagiography was started, it was finished long after she had died.

This chapter will treat two particularly interesting aspects of Mingyur Peldrön's personality, both of which are conveyed through her own quotations, and narratives of stories she tells to Gyurmé Ösel. The first of these is Mingyur Peldrön's fallible humanity, as seen in her *gur*. Here we see Mingyur Peldrön the human being; a young woman who is faced with profound loss experiences it like any other human might – that is, with sorrow. Even though she is described throughout the hagiography as showing signs of enlightenment from birth, she still experiences human emotions and responds to those emotions in very human ways.

We will also consider Mingyur Peldrön the teacher, as this identity is presented in her own words. In particular, we will consider her strict attitude toward religious practice, monastic vows, and injunctions against any deviation from a conservative adherence to these. There is a distinction between Gyurmé Ösel's presentation of her as divine and perfected (including his references to her teaching) and Mingyur Peldrön's didactic concern for her students.

### **Mingyur Peldrön in Quotations**

The sensory words used above here are meant to establish a narrative conceit for readers, but one that is effective for conveying the role of the subject in hagiography.

That is, Mingyur Peldrön's voice in the *namtar* is not actually being "heard" so much as quotations from her are being *read*. That being said, the notion of understanding Mingyur Peldrön's own perspective is more evocatively portrayed through an aural conceptualization, as it suggests an inherent agency regarding the words being conveyed. Additionally, these quotes were in fact spoken to Gyurmé Ösel, who then wrote them in to the hagiography. Mingyur Peldrön's quotes illustrate how she narrated her views and life story to Gyurmé Ösel. This is especially relevant in the first section that we will consider (in which, incidentally, Mingyur Peldrön was literary meant to be "heard"). Here we will examine Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* or "song of realization."

### **A Song of Mingyur Peldrön**

There are a few moments in the *namtar* where Mingyur Peldrön speaks in verse to her disciples. The most extended example where she uses verse is when she breaks into a song of realization, or *gur* (*mgur*). The *namtar* only contains one *gur*, and this is the only place in the hagiography where we witness an extended literary composition of her own. Thus, if we hope to "hear" her voice at any point in the text, this is the most valuable moment. The song is made all the more interesting by the nature of the emotions that are conveyed and the struggle that is the subject of the song.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the tone of *gur* can vary widely, relating both elation and despair on the part of the singer. Mingyur Peldrön's song relates on a personal level the trauma of persecution, and the fear associated with leaving home in the midst of war. Mingyur Peldrön was able to escape the Dzungar invasion, but the terror of that escape had a lasting effect on her. In Gyurmé Ösel's long description of the harrowing experience, several times she nearly becomes lost in the wilderness, and at other

moments she is perilously close to being found by the marching army. At what is presented as the nadir of her narrative, she has just had to abandon her childhood nursemaid on the trail, and is traversing a rocky wasteland in a blinding blizzard.

Just before they enter Sikkim, Mingyur Peldrön learns the fate of her uncle and brother, who were sent to Lhasa and killed. Thinking of the family she has lost, the home she has fled, and the danger that pursues her, she is overcome with grief and loses heart. Her despair is so potent that she breaks into song, calling, in verse, upon her late father to come to her aide. The scene is extremely potent: a young girl – behind her an army set to destroy her and her family, ahead the unknown – not knowing how to proceed, she is overcome with despair as she calls out to her dead father:

Homage to the Precious Master!  
 My own infallible refuge  
 Benevolent Indestructible Lotus  
 My one unrivalled father  
 Dharma King Terdak Lingpa.  
 If you are the expanse of unmanifest compassion  
 Consider [me] without obstruction  
 I pray to not wander through the round of existence  
 Look upon Mingyur Peldrön!

One father, lama of Oddiyana  
 The teaching of the quintessential instruction of Vajrayana  
 Although [once] as bright as the sun and moon in the sky,  
 Has become obstructed by dark clouds.

The essence of the practice lineage, the life-bearing [wind]

The manifestations of Lopan and his subjects<sup>381</sup>  
 Although they'd bloomed like midsummer flowers,  
 The late autumn frost has destroyed them.

Home of [my] birth, that delightful garden of deity empowerment,  
 I have been cast from it, like so much snot, discarded with a dirty hook,  
 To this dense and fearsome forest,  
 I have come to the impassible canyon of despair  
 [This] illusory body, [this] heap  
 The flower of youth, [that] deceptive guide  
 Although I tried to escape, I could not get free  
 I have become like the hunted deer  
 The ultimate nature of the mind, I can not realize it on my own  
 With an inexhaustible load of suffering  
 I have lost heart, it is possible I will be destroyed  
 Look at this army of [Yama's] messengers!  
 Alas! Will I be destroyed?  
 Only father, lama of Oddiyana,  
 Please think of me without obstruction,  
 Tamer of Beings Terdak Lingpa!<sup>382</sup>

In this moment we see a profoundly human side of Mingyur Peldrön. The loss of home and family, and her experience of terror and despair, represent a few of the myriad types of suffering that beings experience in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. As she laments these losses, she calls upon her father, here simultaneously presented as Padmasambhava, for protection and guidance. She recounts the fear felt during the escape, and describes the destruction of the community and her ejection from it.

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<sup>381</sup> That is, Tri Songdetsen and his twenty-four subjects, all twenty-five being disciples of Padmasambhava.

<sup>382</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 44 a - 45 b.

Although she does escape, she remains imprisoned in her fear, likening herself to the hunted deer.

Mindröling was a religious, cultural, and aesthetic hub during Mingyur Peldrön's lifetime. We know that Mingyur Peldrön had an extensive education and, while she was not trained in Rikné, it is likely that she had some exposure to poetics and verse as a child. Considering this, it is unsurprising that the daughter of the great literary scholar Terdak Lingpa (and the niece of Lochon Dharmaśrī) should burst into spontaneous song when met with the most difficult moment of her life. That being said, the despairing tone of her song is contradictory to Gyurmé Ösel's emphatic representation of his master as fully enlightened.

It is in this moment, in Mingyur Peldrön's own words, that we see her at her most vulnerable, her least assured. And, in this moment, she does what any ideal practitioner would do - she calls upon her root guru for guidance and protection. As a result they appear and advise her, she is comforted, and is able to move forward. The inspirational message appears to be quite simple and clear. The result of praying to her father, first in the form of her actual father Terdak Lingpa, and then as the iconic Padmasambhava, is that both Terdak Lingpa and Padmasambhava appear before her in a vision. They are also accompanied by Yeshé Tsogyel, and together the three lift Mingyur Peldrön's spirits. As mentioned in previous chapters, Mingyur Peldrön is closely associated with Yeshé Tsogyel throughout the *gur*, and so it makes sense that, although Mingyur Peldrön did not call upon Yeshé Tsogyel, she would appear alongside Padmasambhava.

In his discussion of Tibetan literary styles, Jackson describes *gur* as the Tibetan genre closest to western poetry, if for no other reason than its highly personal tone.<sup>383</sup> Thus, it is presumably one of the easiest Tibetan literary genres for Westerners to understand (insofar as anyone, regardless of cultural background, is able to "understand" poetry). *Gur* can appear independently and in biographical works. Frequently, *gur* appear when a protagonist experiences a sudden insight and breaks into song. It is hard not to think of these narratives in terms of the Broadway musical, or the European operatic tradition, wherein actors express the greatest emotion (and, the more mundane story progression) through song. So, although she responds in a human way, she does so to such effect that those whom she calls appear to her in a vision, and comfort and guide her.

This *gur* is revealing for its social relevance. In this context, the author readily states the circumstances that led her to compose the verse, which is presented as an involuntary cry for help. With Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* the message is clear: strive to work for the teachings, do not be daunted by terrible destruction, and if you call upon them for help, Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyel, and Terdak Lingpa will guide you. While Mingyur Peldrön does not experience a full apotheosis, when the *gur* is sung, the audience is presented with a situation where someone experiencing a moment of extreme crisis is uplifted by visions of her deified ancestors.

### **Admonitions: Monks and Nuns Behaving Badly<sup>384</sup>**

In many of the cases where Mingyur Peldrön is directly quoted, she speaks to the necessity for strict discipline and the avoidance of harmful activities and substances.

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<sup>383</sup> Jackson, "Poetry," 369.

<sup>384</sup> Thanks to Kurtis Schaeffer for suggesting this phrasing.

Several of her direct quotes include injunctions against alcohol consumption, carrying on with loose women, and carousing. The cumulative effect of this is that her quotes evoke a generally conservative approach to esoteric religious practice. Her approach to alcohol is a far cry from the use of "beer or alcoholic drink as a symbol for nectarous essence (Skt. *amṛta*; Tib. *bdud-rtsi*), the refined essential of teachings or contemplative experiences" that, according to Ardussi, "is common in Tibetan Buddhist writing."<sup>385</sup> Rather, for Mingyur Peldrön, any alcohol consumption can lead directly to carousing with prostitutes, wasting one's life, and a rebirth in one of the hells. This is interesting for several reasons. First, it conveys a highly conservative perspective, generated at a time when the larger Nyingma community was experiencing a great deal of change. Gyurmé Ösel's anachronistic approach to the use of transgressive substances and behaviors that might have been adopted into tantric practices suggests a conservative backlash against an unseen interlocutor. Also, the repeated mention of these admonitions suggests that these were also active topics of discussion within Mindröling.

One particularly interesting moment in the narrative is not presented in the first person, but Gyurmé Ösel assures the audience that he heard the story directly from Mingyur Peldrön. According to his narrative, this is what happened:

Remembering [this story] again, she burst into gales of laughter. A few days from the Olkha Hot Springs, she realized they were near the place of the famous Lelung Jedrung Rinpoché, Losang Trinlé, fully versed in Padmasambhava's Father-Mother Union, who had raised the hope of the Tibetan people and all beings and was becoming quite well-known. They went to request an invitation to spend a few days there. When they arrived, Jedrung Rinpoché greeted them with "Today the Wisdom *Ḍākinīs* gather, you must make offerings of ambrosia!" Saying this, he pressed upon them great quantities of beer, not really ambrosia at all. The ruffians were all

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<sup>385</sup> Ardussi, "Brewing," 118.

drunk on beer! Then Jedrung and a few princesses led the singing, and monks and nuns, laypeople and monastics, all began singing and dancing indiscriminately as men and women with one another, creating a scene. Having seen this, my Supreme Master herself told me "I took not one mouthful of this 'nectar,' but instead drank a substitute for the beer." She arranged for a huge bowl of tea, with a copper ladle, which she urgently began offering to everyone. Then the teacher Ūrab and the monk Trewang took bowls of ambrosia [instead of beer] and so were freed from suffering. In that way, their karma was erased, and they attained great accomplishments. When they spoke of this, others took notice of how well they were faring. Those who had drunk the beer fell at the feet of the lama. Regarding this senselessness, my unrivalled lama listened to their mistakes and said 'What's the use of giving you instruction in such a place of immorality?' Although she did eventually instruct them. One monk said "Jedrung Rinpoché is the head of this place, [and] today the Wisdom Ḍākinīs gather like a cloud. Isn't this a holy day? He said that if we do not take the ambrosia, then we will have bad rebirths." "Well then," she replied, "I guess you have to drink all that beer by yourself." And with that, Gyurmé Chödrön, Gyurmé Yangzom, the revered mother, sister Peldzin and so forth – all except for two of the nuns – left. The next morning, they continued on their pilgrimage.<sup>386</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön's response to the situation is interesting for several reasons. Initially, she tries to sober everyone up with tea, and the image of her rushing about suggests near-desperation in her concern for the "ruffians'" well-being. After that, however, her stance changes, and she expresses a hesitance to help when those who did not immediately change their ways begin to repent. "What's the use?" she wonders aloud, in what appears as an almost petulant tone, suggesting that they are beyond hope. Presumably she is questioning the seriousness of their repentance, and perhaps testing them to see if they are willing and ready for her very different form of guidance. It is also possible that she is questioning what effect her conservative approach could have, at that point, on Jedrung Rinpoché's followers. Either way, it is clear that she is no longer taking the soft approach, and has resorted to harsher methods for bringing them over from the

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<sup>386</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 60 b-62a.



dark side. This is all reinforced when one monk responds to her admonitions with a simple "But Jedrung Rinpoché said we must..." and her response is terse and maybe even sarcastic.

Interestingly, Mingyur Peldrön tells Gyurmé Ösel the story herself, and she recalls it with great humor. In hindsight she clearly found the episode to be amusing, and ultimately her methods were highly successful: all but two nuns end up leaving with her. Thus, Mingyur Peldrön successfully draws away Jedrung Rinpoche's disciples. The premise in the *namtar* is that this is for their own good. However, from another perspective, this could easily be depicted as an incident of one teacher poaching students from another, whose methods she disapproves of. Gyurmé Ösel's narrative, interpreted differently, could easily read as Mingyur Peldrön descending upon a lively religious community engaged in religious practice, disrupting them, and either scaring and/or threatening the practitioners into dispersing. What is presented here as a humorous tale of strayed drunkards represents significant dissent among the Nyingmapas.

I should also note that it is at this point that the pilgrimage becomes a teaching tour. Rather than just mentioning where the group traveled, Gyurmé Ösel begins to list which teachings she gave at each stop. The shift to mentioning her teaching at this moment suggests that, after recounting this tale, Gyurmé Ösel thought it important to mention that Mingyur Peldrön was not simply on pilgrimage, but spreading her teachings to the wider community.

In this story, we see the fall of Jedrung Rinpoché in Mingyur Peldrön's estimation. She thought it a good idea to go to his center, but what she and her companions found there is presented as a shock and an educational abomination, far from what they had

expected. It is also possible that the first phrases, indicating Jedrung Rinpoché's great reputation, are also sarcastic. Regardless, Mingyur Peldrön clearly decided that the pilgrims should visit the well-known teacher, and were shocked by what they found. After learning the truth about his behavior, she has no interest in hanging around, and tries to save as many people as possible before departing.

There are several further examples of Mingyur Peldrön's concern regarding alcohol and charlatans. In the late 1740s, she was having particular trouble with one hermitage, where inmates were "singing and dancing throughout the day and night with many harlots and low women. Sometimes fights would break out and it was very noisy." She went to them and said: "The elders themselves have left, the concept of the supremely great dharma itself is gone and I doubt [you] have any understanding of sincere renunciation. Are you finished [with this behavior]?" To which they replied "yes," and began practicing diligently, cutting off all ties with the harlots so as not to offend Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>387</sup> In this moment a simple phrase is enough to turn the group away from bad behavior and convince them to follow her as their new teacher.

I should note that the issue here is not necessarily dancing, and she herself participates in proper ritual dance at other points in the narrative.<sup>388</sup> Rather, the concern is improper conduct, in the form of alcohol consumption and dalliance with loose women.

Jedrung Rinpoché acts as a foil throughout the hagiography; he represents a tantric community gone wrong, sullied by excessive drink and carousing. The one who she thought was so accomplished in tantric practice is, in the best case, one who has been led astray by the demon of drink. In the worst case, he is a charlatan. It is quite possible

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<sup>387</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 83a-84a.

<sup>388</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 47 b.

that this representation of Jedrung Rinpoché stands for nothing more than a simple recollection of the man, not some grand symbol of all that is wrong in strayed tantric communities, or even as a foil for Mingyur Peldrön's correct and conservative behavior, and moralistic stance. Regardless, we see that she is staunchly anti-booze, and is immune to pressure from the famous man. Considering the frequency with which he is at the forefront of strayed communities throughout the narrative, it is probable that his role is indeed to serve as a foil and representative of all that could go wrong in religious communities.

This story has significant implications for how we understand the Nyingma community in the eighteenth century. The image presented is one of contention and disagreement between religious leaders. That is, Mingyur Peldrön and Jedrung Rinpoché have two clearly different sets of expectations for their disciples. Obviously, Gyurmé Ösel has specific allegiances in the debate of how one should interpret esoteric practice, and that likely colors his choice of narrative. In spite of this, the narrative mentions disciples who are so devoted to Jedrung Rinpoché, and concerned about not following their teacher's instructions when faced with opposing injunctions from an unknown person, that they balk at her initial attempts to sober them up. Ultimately, all but a few nuns follow Mingyur Peldrön. There is a struggle suggested here that plays out in Mingyur Peldrön's other admonitions to students, which appear throughout the hagiography. Further research will hopefully reveal more about the intra-Nyingma and inter-sectarian debates happening during Mingyur Peldrön's life, as well as at the time when Gyurmé Ösel was finishing the hagiography.

There are other moments where Mingyur Peldrön expresses a deeply-held teetotalism that do not include Jedrung Rinpoche, which suggests that, more than being a stage for countering him, she really was concerned about her students' alcohol consumption. Even from her deathbed, she admonishes Gyurmé Ösel:

When I was making the water offerings I was parched with thirst, and so drank some beer... I was later scolded by her holiness, who said "Today when you made water offerings you drank beer, you didn't use good reasoning. If you do this in the future, your students will go the way of bad behavior. So from this time forward, do not do it again!"<sup>389</sup>

Gyurmé Ösel's decision to drink beer during a water offering is ritually problematic, as the consumption of meat, alcohol, and even strong-tasting foods such as garlic offend the water nāga spirits to whom the offerings are made.<sup>390</sup> Mingyur Peldrön questions his reasoning, suggesting that because he was not thinking clearly, nothing terrible will come of the mistake this time. However, now that he knows better, if he does it again, he will experience severe repercussions. Other lectures follow similar topics:

I may be of inferior form [i.e a woman], but nowadays there are those who pretend to be realized. They drink a lot of beer, and their innate realization seems elevated, and they seem happy, but these [perceptions] are only lies. Drinking a lot of beer makes one unable to reason, and one becomes as lazy and slothful as a Mongol. One also naturally gives way to loose speech.<sup>391</sup>

This is a particularly interesting quote for several reasons. First, she gives reasons against alcohol consumption based on worldly concerns. One becomes lazy and loses control over what they say. However, this moment is also interesting because it suggests that at least some of her audience was concerned about her role as a woman. Mullard's research also shows that there was some concern among her fellow teachers regarding her

<sup>389</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 83 a-b.

<sup>390</sup> Personal communication with Khenpo Sherap Konchok, April 2012.

<sup>391</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 94a.

gender. He quotes Jikmé Pawo (the Sikkimese "Dzokchenpa" with whom Mingyur Peldrön traded teachings) as having said: "Although she is a woman, she is a very accomplished spiritual practitioner."<sup>392</sup>

According to Gyurmé Ösel, without concern for her students' fatigue, she continues on to explain that "If one does not meditate, and instead relaxes freely, having previously entered into the religious life, after a short time this will result in punishment from the *ḍākinīs*, and one risks falling into the three infernal hells[...] Moreover, evil and impure deeds will be decreased through unswerving faith and a good lama[...] Practice with great diligence!" Here we see that she is particularly concerned about those who have taken monastic vows. Monks and nuns seem to have been her primary audience during these speeches. She also gives them positive advice, directing their behavior in terms of what they *should* do, rather than just what they shouldn't: "Thoroughly examine your deeds. Supplicate the lama with unshakable devotion and in the end, one's own heart will be as one with the lama's."<sup>393</sup>

Mingyur Peldrön began instructing nuns at a very young age, having been placed in charge of a group of nuns, and their education, as a fifteen year old.<sup>394</sup> For the nuns she has some very specific advice, which she says she herself once heard from her own father.

You nuns, certainly take care of yourselves in accordance with the dharma, teaching the word thus, but also cut off karma; of course spread the teachings. You great and powerful nuns, having worked a little for your own benefit, [you] have the ability to teach and cultivate! I once said "Oh I am a vanquished queen" and things like that. And many still do, we know this. But all of you should think of the righteous dharma, think of

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<sup>392</sup> Mullard, *Opening*, 168.

<sup>393</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 94 a.

<sup>394</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 33 a.

those who are impoverished. Do nothing to contradict the vows and precepts and [maintain] devotion to one's lama.<sup>395</sup>

It is interesting here that she seeks to connect with them as one woman (and, more specifically, one nun) to the other. She appeals to their emotions, suggesting that they might at times feel dejected, but she attempts to buoy their spirits by sharing her own experience.

Several moments of dialogue between Mingyur Peldrön and Gyurmé Ösel have a humorous tone. For example, one time Gyurmé Ösel went to her for instruction: "She chuckled a little and said 'when I go near you, I smell sweet-smelling farts! The boy has given me a gift!'. 'Precious Lama,' I said, 'I am so sorry. I ate some of the nomad's yogurt and it has made me ill. I didn't think it would happen.'"<sup>396</sup> Gyurmé Ösel is understandably mortified, but she laughs and quickly moves to the teaching. This brief moment between teacher and student shows Gyurmé Ösel's general concern for proper conduct, and apparent assumption that his teacher will react to such mistakes wrathfully. However, it also shows that Mingyur Peldrön had a humorous side, as it conveys doctrinal and practical concerns of the Nyingma community during her lifetime.

## Hearing Voices

In the aforementioned quotes, Gyurmé Ösel narrates his teacher's instructions, and we are able to hear the voice of a stern but compassionate teacher. There are other moments in the *namtar* where the vocal agent is less distinct. For example, Gyurmé Ösel gives his readers a quote of what Mingyur Peldrön told him in a vision, shortly before her death. The entire quote is reproduced here:

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<sup>395</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 95 a-95 b.

<sup>396</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 86 a-b.

Just at that moment the master herself departed into the sky, [and] from Drakpoche to Samtsé, a five-colored rainbow could be seen stretched like a cloth across the sky. The face of the master in the prime of life appeared; her naked body was handsome and bright. She wore a red ribbon and was adorned with bone ornaments, her black hair hanging loose. She rode a white lion with her right hand in a wrathful gesture and her left in the mudra of protection, threatening demons and protecting other beings. In a wise, clear, and melodious voice, she said:

"Uncontrived mind, free from extremes,  
The face of Vajrasattva is my own mind,  
By clearly seeing the face of my actual adamant mind,  
I bless [you and] clear away your obscurities."<sup>397</sup>

This quote is interesting because, although it is said to come from the mouth of Mingyur Peldrön, it actually originates in Gyurmé Ösel's vision. The quote blends the voices of teacher and disciple. Ostensibly the words of the teacher, they come down to the reader as experienced in the disciple's vision. How do we, as readers, interpret such a quote? In one sense, this is Gyurmé Ösel's narrative; his perception of his master's blessing, as it occurred in his vision, is not necessarily synonymous with direct quotes from the solid form of Mingyur Peldrön. Rather, the quote suggests an interpretation on the part of the disciple, who conveys at once his belief in his master's power, as well as his own ability to perceive her ethereal communications. The quote blends the lines of speaker and hearer, at least for the modern reader.

### **Mingyur Peldrön's Publications**

In addition to conducting a wide-reaching and extensive teaching career that spanned more than half a century, Mingyur Peldrön also authored several works, a few of which are still extant. For example, she wrote an eighty page instruction manual for how to properly perform the sadhanas that are part of the *kama* text called the *Churner of the*

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<sup>397</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 102 a-b.

*Depths of Hell*. The *Churner of the Depths of Hell* is a Vajrasattva ritual that was taught by Lochen Dharmaśrī, and would eventually come to be practiced at Katok monastery in Kham.<sup>398</sup> Mingyur Peldrön's commentary describes which implements should be used in the ritual, how the sadhanas should be performed, as well as what both master and disciple should be doing throughout the ritual. It is notable that this is in fact for a text that is considered to be *kama*, rather than something associated with *terma* or the Great Perfection. However, this text was discussed in Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations, and the existence of her commentary speaks to the connection between *kama* and *terma* over the course of time at Mindröling. As mentioned above, in the colophon she refers to herself as a layperson (*dge bsnyen*), which seems an unusual choice when paired with the frequently reinforced descriptions of her as celibate and living like a nun.<sup>399</sup>

Also, in 1732 the Central Tibetan prince Gyurmé Samten Chokdrup (*'gyur med bsam gtan mchog grub*, d.u) from Depa Yangdrong (*sde pa yang grong*) asked Mingyur Peldrön to write a generation and completion stage instruction manual for an esoteric yogic practice, found among Terdak Lingpa's treasure revelations, which focuses on a wrathful and amorous form of Vajrayoginī.<sup>400</sup> Interestingly, this text made it into the collected works of Lelung Monastery, Jedrung Rinpoché's seat.<sup>401</sup> Again, this is an instruction manual, intended for practitioners' use. These two texts should be studied at length, but for now it is important to note that she was versed in both *terma* and *kama* systems, and important local leaders were asking her to write instruction manuals for their practice of both types.

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<sup>398</sup> Mingyur Peldrön, "na rag," 1 a; Dudjom, *Nyingma*, 731; Ronis, *Celibacy*, 233.

<sup>399</sup> Mingyur Peldrön, "na rag," 2 a- 2b and colophon.

<sup>400</sup> TBRC, T697; English, *Vajrayoginī*.

<sup>401</sup> Mingyur Peldrön, "rnal 'byor."



To these publications we can add other extant compositions, including Mingyur Peldrön's song, and a prayer for her long life, which she composed at the behest of the nuns of Menji Monastery:

From the sphere of Primordial Wisdom comes the dance of magical  
 illusion.  
 manifest as an emanation body in the ocean of suffering disciples,  
 Oh Blissful Mingyur, Happy Glory  
 Lamp which dispels the darkness, I pray that you steadfastly continue to  
 illuminate!<sup>402</sup>

This prayer is meant to entreat her to live a long life, and incorporates aspects of her name in a poetic style as part of the request. It is unknown whether other communities adopted this long-life prayer for her. However, we do know that the Seventh Dalai Lama's monastery requested that she compose a similar prayer, which they would have recited for her as well. Mingyur Peldrön's works were wholly student-centered. All of them are meant, in one way or another, to support her disciples' practice, and the majority of these are extremely practical in content.

## Conclusion

The result of the combined presentation of Mingyur Peldrön as perfected master and concerned teacher is that we see an active interplay in the construction of public identity that takes into account both the subject and narrator's intentions for the Mindröling audience. Rather than a wholly deified Mingyur Peldrön, the Mingyur Peldrön of Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography has strong opinions regarding the public religious establishment, and her role within it as a teacher and representative of conservative ideals. Her humanity is conveyed through her experiences with the political instability of

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<sup>402</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 33a-b.

the early 1720s, and her frustration with disciples who stray from her ideal path. In the relationship between Jedrung Rinpoche and Mingyur Peldrön, we can see that she was far from a meek or acquiescing woman, she disagreed openly with other Nyingma teachers (often male) regarding their methods, and refused to deviate from her ideals.

Issues of collaboration, contestation, and voice, as described in the work of several European Medievalists in this chapter's introduction, are clearly at play in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography. In this particular context, the author-subject collaboration is very active: the idea for writing the hagiography was developed with the permission of, and in collaboration with, the subject herself, and she is quoted extensively throughout the work.

Mingyur Peldrön's identity as teacher is strongly reinforced in the quotations that appear throughout the hagiography. However, we also see Mingyur Peldrön as mortal and flawed as a human. In contradistinction to her divine identities that were considered in Chapter Three, her *gur* expresses the depth of despair felt when one woman loses her home and family. Through this expression she is made more relatable to the average human reader (or hearer) of the song, and she simultaneously exemplifies proper conduct during such a moment of distress. The subtext: if one prays to one's root and lineage lamas for guidance, moments of deepest despair will be mitigated, and one can always find a way through.

It is most interesting that these quotations bring out a more human, certainly less divine, side of Mingyur Peldrön. Gyurmé Ösel's audience is able, through these quotations, to see Mingyur Peldrön's own struggles, and to get a sense of the battles she fought regarding monastic education in her time. It is unclear whether Central Tibet was,

in the mid-eighteenth century, rife with drunken and debauched monks and nuns. However, Mingyur Peldrön certainly had her share of run-ins with monks and nuns behaving badly. Through accounts of these interactions, we are able to see what she was like as a teacher, and also as a human being. Gyurmé Ösel suggests that he was indeed working with his subject to bring forth her story. It is through this collaboration that we are able to hear Mingyur Peldrön's "voice"- albeit mediated by his own choice of which quotations to include and how to integrate them into her story.

The aspect of collaboration was heightened by the requests made by her disciples to compose these works in the first place. These were the types of texts that Mingyur Peldrön's disciples sought from her - or at least those that they sought and she agreed to provide. Regarding the direct quotations that Gyurmé Ösel includes in the *namtar*, he participated in their coming down to us through his agreement to include them and, sometimes at his master's request, to highlight them in the narrative. Mingyur Peldrön's voice as heard in the *namtar* is therefore mediated by Gyurmé Ösel's literary decisions, and enhanced through accounts of their interactions.

## Conclusion

This study has had several goals. The first has been to bring forth the story of Mingyur Peldrön's life, as it is presented in the hagiography penned by Gyurmé Ösel. Also, I have sought to analyze the story of Mingyur Peldrön's life in order to understand what it can tell us about the lives of historical Tibetan women, and about the Mindröling community in the eighteenth century. While we cannot generalize based on the narrative of one woman, Mingyur Peldrön's case offers a counterpoint to more frequent accounts of overt gendered oppression, familial ostracization, and related struggles that were frequently faced by women seeking the life of the religious practitioner. Moreover, it offers a firsthand account of the religio-political disputes of the eighteenth century, and one conservative response to these.

The hagiography presents a unique account of historical female power, influence, and authority in a highly unstable and fraught religious environment. By drawing in most of Tibetan literature's most important religious women, Gyurmé Ösel seeks to represent Mingyur Peldrön as the *ür*-woman, and ideal in her authoritative and conservative leadership and teaching style.

The work is an unusually long example of a woman's life story. Because it for the most part adheres to a strict chronology and practical biographical accounts, the hagiography shows us more about what life was like for one privileged Tibetan woman, as well as some of the other women in her community. The miraculous aspects of the narrative are also informative, as they give a sense of how one mid-eighteenth century devotee sought to successfully glorify his master to the extent that she and her teachings would be remembered. As such, in a sense, one goal of this study was to begin to fill a

lacuna. While some great work has been done on female religious figures, we do not yet have enough information to make broad conjectures about active religious women and their educational, spiritual, and economic opportunities throughout Tibetan history. Looking at Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* brings us one step closer to that understanding, especially because it gives a different view of female lives in Tibetan history.

There are several reasons that Mingyur Peldrön warranted a three hundred page hagiography. First, Gyurmé Ösel sought to write a devotional homage to his beloved teacher after her passing. However, her life was interesting and full enough that it warranted a great deal of detail and discussion; this ranged from stories of her previous lives, youth, and teaching career, and simple chronologies of teachings given and received, and communities visited. He also sought to align her with a specific representation of Yeshé Tsogyel, emphasizing the teacher-student relationship between her and Padmasambhava, while eliding the sexual aspects of their relationship so as to align it more effectively with Mingyur Peldrön's situation. The result is that Gyurmé Ösel's Yeshé Tsogyel is a celibate woman and occasional solitary practitioner but, for the most part, a prominent teacher, authorized by Padmasambhava to teach in his absence.

Mingyur Peldrön's role in her religious community was that of eminent teacher, both of the masses and of individual members of the aristocracy. Her role as a religious educator – of the general population and of political and religious leaders – imbued her with an influence akin to leadership, which she exercised by asserting her ideals for proper conduct and dedication to the Great Perfection. Regarding issues of conduct, she disagreed heatedly with other active teachers. Gyurmé Ösel's hagiography of her is as much an exploration of the religious tensions of the mid eighteenth century as it is a

description of her life. He considered her to be a strict but compassionate teacher, and a strong proponent of conservatism among religious practitioners. His clearly biased representation of this perspective gives the sense that a debate regarding conduct and practice was raging at the time.

Gyurmé Ösel's representation of Mingyur Peldrön, and the places where her voice is expressed, are particularly interesting because they expand our understanding of how hagiography is composed, and the dialogue that occurs in this composition. His literary decisions offer a sense of Mingyur Peldrön's importance, not just to him, but also to the Mindröling community at large. His devotional views and her voice combine and create a simultaneously divine and human image of a woman who lived through a very difficult historical moment, and managed to benefit the world through her religious teachings. Gyurmé Ösel chose to include Mingyur Peldrön's *gur* in the hagiography, showing that at least one woman composed poetic songs of realization, and that the song was passed along to the next generation. The song itself is one of sorrow relieved with profound devotion, and marks a pivotal moment in Mingyur Peldrön's life.

As a "bridge" between two previously studied time periods (that is, the long seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries), Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography presents an interim in which many things were changing in the political, social, and religious landscapes. During the transition from the rise of the Ganden Podrang and the founding of Mindroling in the seventeenth century, to the development of the *rimé* movement in nineteenth century Kham, leaders continued to debate questions of proper conduct and the interpretation of doctrine.

Mingyur Peldrön's life spanned this transition in Tibet's history, and she herself contributed to the changes of the time. Her hagiography reflects clear disagreements regarding esoteric practice in the mid to late eighteenth century. In particular, it describes a disagreement, within the Nyingma community, regarding individual conduct, the interpretation of discipline, and the use of black magic for community benefit. As part of a changing world, Mingyur Peldrön participated in these debates in order to further her soteriological goals, and in a way that allowed for her practical survival.

She actively urged other community members to adhere to the rules of celibacy, and chastised those who consumed any amount of alcohol. Gyurmé Ösel's anachronistic representation of Jedrung Rinpoche suggests an extreme disagreement on these points within the community, to the point that an otherwise respected, if somewhat controversial, figure is presented as a charlatan and playboy in Mingyur Peldrön's *namtar*.

When approached to conduct black magic, either for her own sake or for that of the community's survival, Mingyur Peldrön refused to participate, on the grounds that this went against her position at Mindröling, and would compromise her status within both the wider community and the family lineage. Notably, she allowed others to participate in these activities, and did not speak out actively against them in general, only in terms of her personal involvement. If we compare the emphases on black magic and proper conduct, Mingyur Peldrön's concern is weighted much more to the topic of conduct than to the use of magic. Whether this was actually her position, or the position of Gyurmé Ösel, is unclear. However, it is likely that both contributors to the

hagiography were concerned with both of these issues, and they seem to have been actively discussed social questions of the period.

Born into a community invested in a centralized system of religious education, and afforded many of the tools to participate in the maintenance of attendant goals and traditions, Mingyur Peldrön published several ritual texts and used her important religious and aristocratic connections for the sake of her community and herself. Based on the current extant literary canon, these works stand out in that they are teaching texts authored by a woman, which was extremely unusual for this period. We have very few examples of female authorship, and the content of her teachings, as well as their dissemination, bear further examination if we are to understand the extent of her influence both during and after her lifetime. These texts are also evidence of her contribution to and effective support of Mindröling, and suggest an institutional influence that likely contributed to the continued support of female leadership in Mindröling's education.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Gyurmé Ösel's placement of Mingyur Peldrön within a larger historical context is significant for our understanding of her, but also adds to our historical understanding of the period in which she lived. By tying her to widespread socio-political events, Gyurmé Ösel gives a new perspective of the time period. By placing her at the forefront of the Nyingma struggle for survival, she, along with her family members, become symbols of the changing tradition itself.

Mingyur Peldrön's life story is a rare example of a privileged and highly educated woman in Tibetan history, who advocated for the survival of her tradition, and asserted conservative monastic ideals. Based on the hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön, we



can assume that socio-economic and cultural privilege determined one's access to religious education, in some cases more than gender, during this period of Tibetan history. However, one's ability to participate in institutional development, access systems of education, and so forth, were still influenced by gender. Moreover, it seems that sexual virtue (here in the form of chastity) and forceful leadership can indeed coexist within one personality.

When women are written about, women are remembered. Unfortunately, this study mostly informs our understanding of those who were important enough to make appearances in hagiographies. However, what it does tell us about common folk is still interesting. In it we learn that people like Gyurmé Ösel's grandmother would want their son to study with important teachers, that there were active communities of nuns during this time, that some of them taught nuns as well as monks and laypeople, and that the women of Mindröling tended to stick together.

### **Future Directions**

There are several directions for potential future scholarship of Mingyur Peldrön, women in religious history, Tibetan literature, Mindröling's history, and eighteenth century Tibet.

Mingyur Peldrön's own works, while mentioned briefly here, bear detailed study. The nature of their instruction,<sup>403</sup> as well as the reception of the manuals during her lifetime, would be useful for a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a practitioner at Mindröling during her time. Given Mingyur Peldrön's focus on conservative behavior,

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<sup>403</sup> For example, Mingyur Peldrön, "na rag" and "zab lam."

these texts should be examined in light of how they might or might not add to a monastic mission.

Mingyur Peldrön and Jedrung Rinpoché's relationship, and Jedrung Rinpoché's role as a religious practitioner and teacher, bear further consideration. In Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography, Jedrung Rinpoché appears mainly as a foil for Mingyur Peldrön, rather than a complex individual, and studying the many works by and about him would likely give a more nuanced sense of his life and activities.

Although Gyurmé Ösel paints a picture of total continuity between the original, pre-1717 Mindröling and the revived monastic community of Mingyur Peldrön's adulthood, we cannot assume that this was in fact the case. Other texts written during the mid-eighteenth century might offer some clues as to what changed. In terms of studies of eighteenth century Tibetan history, there are many works, in the Mindröling tradition and elsewhere, the study of which could extend our understanding of the period. Other *namtar*, letters, monastic histories, and instruction manuals have yet to be studied. Further studies of the relationship between *kama*, *terma*, and their connection to post-tantric systems would elucidate how we understand their use in Nyingma communities, past and present.

The lives (and *Lives*) of other Mindröling women certainly bear further attention. The relationship between Lochen Dharmaśrī and his mother, as well as her role in the Mindröling family before it was designated as such, could reveal important information about both the status aristocratic women in the seventeenth century, as well as Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī's attitudes towards women in their family.

It seems that Gyurmé Ösel wrote Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography with the next generation in mind. Several years after it was completed, another important *jetsünma* was born. The life of Trinlé Chödrön would be another clear next step for the study of Mindröling women's history. Trinlé Chödrön also wrote at least two instruction manuals, one on Anuyoga and one on the Minling Dorsem.<sup>404</sup>

Ethnographic studies of how the modern communities in India and Tibet understand the history of women in their communities would be another welcome avenue of scholarship. The lives of modern religious women throughout the Buddhist world would be comparatively easier to study. Generally speaking, this is an area ripe for studies that include ethnographic interviews, oral histories, and modern compositions. Also, studies of reception history and community memory among these groups could inform our historical understanding. Gyurmé Ösel's work reflects a sense of these women's importance that was ultimately cemented in the Mindröling community.

There is an active community of Mindröling descendents living today in Dehradun, India, and there are currently three living *jetsünmas* in this community. Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche and her sister Jetsün Dechen Paldrön, both adults, hold leadership positions at Mindrolling Monastery in India. Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche,<sup>405</sup> who is a nun, has an active teaching career that takes her on world tours each year, during which she spends significant time in India, Singapore, Eastern Europe, and North America. A

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<sup>404</sup> Trinlé Chödrön, "rdor" and "a nu yo ga."

<sup>405</sup> Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, who is a nun, was enthroned in 1976 at the age of nine, in Kalimpong. Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's*, 183. There was debate about whether she should be enthroned in the Mindröling (Nyingma) or Karma Kagyu Lineages. Ultimately she was enthroned thrice, which leads to further questions about sectarian differentiations, even in the present day. Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's*, 399.

charismatic teacher, she has been written about in several popular contexts.<sup>406</sup> Jetsün Dechen Paldron, a laywoman, is currently directing an extensive project collecting and distributing information about Mindröling's history, which has been cited a few times throughout the course of this study. Her daughter, Jetsün Gautami Thrinley Choedron, was born in the winter of 2012-13 and is currently the youngest living Mindröling *jetsünma*. All of these figures could be important sources for further ethnographic study, as could Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche and Jetsün Dechen Paldron's mother. So, was Gyurmé Ösel effective in solidifying her authenticity? If Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, her sister, niece, and the current roles of the *jetsünma* lineage of Mindröling are any indication, he was indeed effective in helping to cement women's importance in the tradition.

Meanwhile, the original Mindröling monastery in Tibet is currently in the process of renovation.<sup>407</sup> The monastery's physical structure could be studied, which would be an interesting project to follow as the renovations take place, as current developments could be juxtaposed with past moments of revival and renovation. A modern study could ask what is being revived, and why? Also, how do living community members understand this process? The architecture, art, and physical landscape of Mindröling have yet to be studied, as do extant literary works housed there. A collection of oral histories from both communities would certainly add to our understanding of modern notions of history. The reception history of early Mindröling developments, as perceived by members of both of these communities, would tell us about the effects that these hagiographies (and other texts) had on community identity over time. Modern oral histories of each community's past can tell us how groups perceive the arc of women within their own ranks. This is not

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<sup>406</sup> For example, see Haas, *Dakini*, and Chödrön, *Blossoms*.

<sup>407</sup> Personal communication with Karen Lang, December 2013.

only relevant to Mindröling's history, but to Tibetan religious history and the role of women in general.

In the past thirty years, the lives of Tibetans around the world have changed in dramatic ways. One aspect of this has been the perception of increasing accessibility of religious and secular education for several pockets of women. While more historical study is needed to determine the extent of modern developments, ethnographic studies of how education has changed in the past three decades, and how modern Buddhist women view their pasts, would continue the conversation in the present day.

As the fields of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies continue to pay more and more attention to the lives of women, it is important to continually return to the primary sources that we have about them, and ask what these tell us about the past. Historical studies of women have been most challenged by a lack of source material. With fewer sources to work with, we have to be creative with where and how we look for information about women's lives. The lives of eminent women throughout the Buddhist world, through whatever narratives are available, could help scholars draw parallels and distinctions between different Buddhist communities. The question of what ordinary women's lives were like continues to be a challenge in terms of what we can know through narrative literature. However, studies of monastic manuals have revealed information about the activities of ordinary monks, and searches for similar information about nuns might bear fruit.

For example, in the context of the eighteenth century, we can look at Polhané's decrees and letters,<sup>408</sup> the works and *namtar* of Jikmé Pawo.<sup>409</sup> Also, Mindröling's

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<sup>408</sup> Polhané, "jus," "lho ros," and "mi bang."

histories and Terdak Lingpa's collected works, not to mention Lochen Dharmaśrī's compositions, all bear closer examination.<sup>410</sup>

How do we interpret brief mentions of women where such discussion is sparse? This is a question that has to be answered in terms of each individual source. But, where long accounts of individuals' lives might be few and far between, we can extrapolate from the case of Mingyur Peldrön that such women existed, and eked out leadership methods of their own devising.

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<sup>409</sup> Jikmé Pawo, *rdzogs chen* and *rnam thar*.

<sup>410</sup> 'og min o rgyan sming grol gling gi gdan rabs; mnga' ris pa tshe dbang rig 'dzin, *lha babs mchod rten chen mo*.

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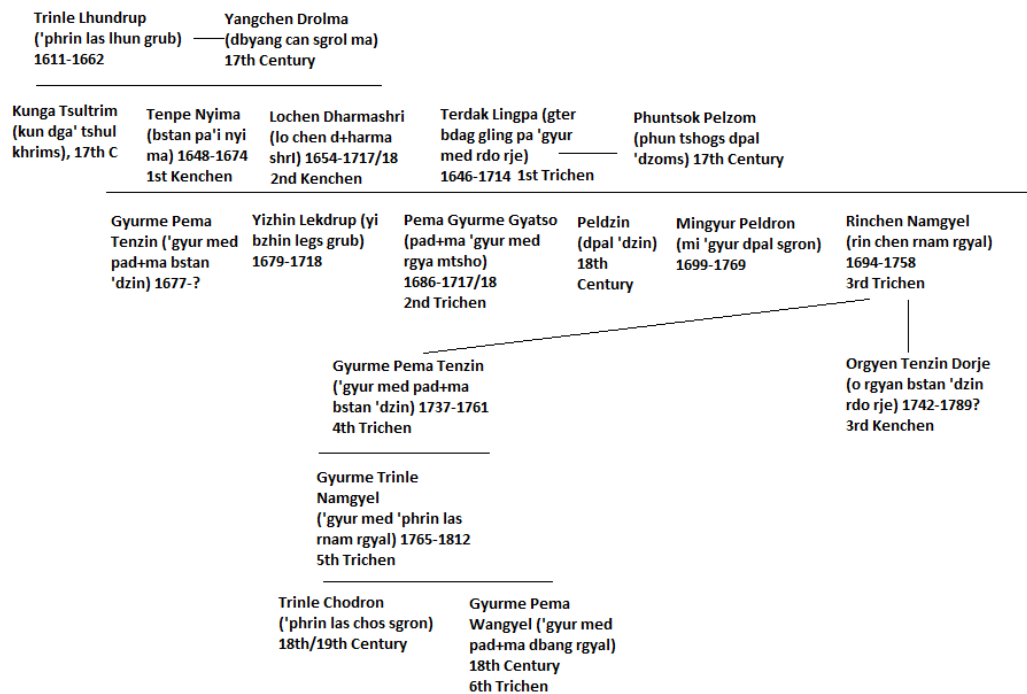


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## Appendix A: Mingyur Peldrön's Family Tree



## Appendix B: The Words of Mingyur Peldrön

The following is a comprehensive list of direct quotations from Mingyur Peldrön, as they are found in her hagiography. They are listed here in chronological order.

### Childhood

#### 22 b:

"These days I wonder if this predispositions reveal that, in a previous life, I was a disciple of Longchen Rabjampa."

[As a child,] sometimes she would sit cross-legged in meditation and say "Look at me!"

#### 22b-23a:

One time she made a container out of green cloth and said to her nurse-maid Gyurmé Chödron "In the future you and I will be required to flee to a far-off place, when that happens we can use this as a container for our food." She kept the container with great care and could see [the future] clearly, without any obscurations of Saṃsāra.

#### 23 b-24 a:

Furthermore, in recounting her life, the Master Herself said:

"The fruit of virtuous activities in previous lives,  
As a result of the ripening of the two accumulations [of merit and wisdom]  
Vajrasattva, the Great Treasure Revealer  
Grasped his child as incarnate [and so] made supplication."

and

"The embodiment of refuge, the Lama [who is the] Tamer of Beings [recognized]  
An impure mind with an iron constitution,  
Transformed to good through the alchemy of the three vows,  
He saw [his child's mind as] a profound repository, and so made supplication."

### Youth

#### 25 a- 25 b

When discussing her life, regarding her twelfth year, the master herself has said:  
" I arose to be conferred in the assembly  
Of Great Guru Padma's garland  
And so requested the four empowerments."<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> *bum dbang, gsang dbang, shes rab ye shes kyi dbang, tshig dbang*

**26 a-b**

"I strive to liberate all beings from cyclic existence, from the present until I am the only one left.' One must chant this with all the effort in one's heart. In particular, in the generation and completion stages, recite it earnestly. By hearing of this path, people will most definitely be liberated; they must meditate in earnest!" She said.

**26 b- 27 b**

Before telling the biography, [here are] the profound instruction on the key points of the two stages of liberation [that is, generation and completion stages]. She said:

"[It is] incomplete without bestowing the secret speech  
Upon hearing this path, you must meditate ceaselessly!  
With a sigh of relief, pray diligently."

"Moreover, regarding the generation stage, diligent meditation will result in success. Regarding the completion stage, [one might ask] 'If its essence is condensed into one moment, won't my good predispositions, developed through previous training, prove great [enough to achieve success in the completion stage]?' One cannot rely on this. One [must] consider the seed of the transmigrator, [and hear] this instruction, which came from the fearsome father. The generation stage is the logical foundation for the completion stage. One must seek out calm abiding in the completion stage. That which is called 'meditation' generates the union of special insight. This is in accordance with the root text explanation. Therefore, when seeking calm abiding, whatever is unclear in the words [of the] treasure [texts] and instruction manuals will be clarified by turning solely to the instruction of one's highest lama. Focus one-pointedly on the extraordinary [and] quintessential instruction that s/he bestows, as [one focuses] attention on a white drop on the tip of the nose. Focus the attention on the vajra recitations, in the space directly in front of the spot between one's eyes. Focus on a blue 'hUM' and a white letter 'A,' maintaining focus on the breath. Concentrate on the breath coming and going. Focus on the white drop at the tip of the nose coming and going. Focus on the four applications of the breath. Focus on the red drop at the tip of the nose coming and going. [Focus on] the distinction between these two [drops]." This is the profound instruction on the distinguishing features [of the generation and completion stages], the oral instruction of the Great Lama, the Queen of the Ḍākinīs, the unspoiled pith that is pure from the beginning. I have written it down just as she spoke.

**28 b**

"Furthermore, mention this [verse] in the *namtar*:

The essential practice of contemplating the generation and completion stages in a  
mountain retreat,  
Successfully sustains the highest spiritual power.  
The extraordinary marks of the hero cannot be attained  
Without prayer [and] returning again and again to firm concentration."

She said this, and then gave instructions for Leap-Over Practice.

### 29 a

In particular, when [studying] the Leap-Over Practice, she said she [experienced] a vision of Culminated Awareness. Her father said: "Girl, just as it is explained in the Prophetic Revelations, your current birth is due to a predisposition following from your past lives, you are indeed authentically qualified! So, at this time you should go into meditation retreat! You must meditate ardently for a few months!" After that, it was necessary to plant and ripen the *Instructions on Vajrasattva and the Profound Path, the Gathering of Sugatas*. She said "For nearly five months, I practiced ardently."

### 30 a

[S]he composed a detailed explanation on the root instructions for the Generation and Completion stages. After each of her father's sections, she gives a brief commentary with clarifications on key points and additional instruction. These are completely pure and clarify the pith of the meditation practice. She said "I wrote these to please the lama."

### 30 a-b

My lama was pleased with her accomplishments and said "I have done well."

A little while later, [the chant mistress of Menji Nunnery], who had a very wrathful disposition, quickly pinched the master's [Mingyur Peldrön] back. "Why didn't my training stop [the chant mistress] from [pinching me]?" She asked. Later on, she said "I will ask uncle why this this happened," and went to him for an explanation. Not understanding why it had happened, she went to her uncle, the treasurer Kunga Tsultrim Gyatso, with her question. He explained that "All of us, master and students, have taken birth due to our basic dispositions. He elaborated a little, saying ""You and your master both took birth in Drachi due to [your] basic dispositions." Together, he and the little nun went together to make offerings to the Great Precious One in the temple.

### 37 b

"Starting on that day, the father kindly [and] completely conferred the profound instruction, all of which I learned in five days," she said.

### 38 b

"In the three year interim before the fire-bird year, [my] 19<sup>th</sup>, I conducted highest activities and, primarily [studied] only the *Luminous Vajra Essence of the Profound Instruction, the Glorious Secret Heart Essence*, and I also and meditated [on] the *Embodiment of All Buddhas*<sup>412</sup>," she said.

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<sup>412</sup> That is, the main revelation of Terdak Lingpa.

## Adulthood

### 41 b - 42 a

[She told me] "In my heart I feared, 'I am done for, completely finished.' [I was] absolutely terrified. Then, due to the compassion of the glorious master Padmasambhava, father and son, and by the means of my own virtue and that of the other disciples, the Mongols passed by with a blind eye and did not discover me [hiding there]. Because of this, the Mongols' hope [of finding us] was finally cut off [and] they left. After that, [I] went to the Siddhess of Menji's place. At dawn the following morning we rose and went to the eight houses of Dol, where we hid in the kitchen of a wife there."

### 44a-45 b

"Homage to the Precious Master!  
 My own infallible refuge  
 Benevolent Indestructible Lotus  
 My one unrivalled father  
 Dharma King Terdak Lingpa.  
 If you are the expanse of unmanifest compassion  
 Consider [me] without obstruction  
 I pray to not wander through the round of existence  
 Look upon Mingyur Peldrön!

One father, lama of Oddiyana  
 The teaching of the quintessential instruction of Vajrayana  
 Although [once] as bright as the sun and moon in the sky,  
 Has become obstructed by dark clouds.

The essence of the practice lineage, the life-bearing [wind]  
 The manifestations of Lopan and his subjects<sup>413</sup>  
 Although they'd bloomed like midsummer flowers,  
 The late autumn frost has destroyed them.

Home of [my] birth, that delightful garden of deity empowerment,  
 I have been cast from it, like so much snot, discarded with a dirty hook,  
 To this dense and fearsome forest,  
 I have come to the impassible canyon of despair  
 [This] illusory body, [this] heap  
 The flower of youth, [that] deceptive guide  
 Although I tried to escape, I could not get free  
 I have become like the hunted deer  
 The ultimate nature of the mind, I can not realize it on my own  
 With an inexhaustible load of suffering  
 I have lost heart, it is possible I will be destroyed

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<sup>413</sup> That is, Tri Songdetsen and his twenty-four subjects, all twenty-five being disciples of Padmasambhava.

Look at this army of [Yama's] messengers!  
 Alas! Will I be destroyed?  
 Only father, lama of Oddiyana,  
 Please think of me without obstruction,  
 Tamer of Beings Terdak Lingpa!"

#### 46 a-b

"Moreover at that time I experienced a fierce wind illness, which I thought would cut off my life force with fever," she said. The monk Trawang was told, and the Dzogchen Blood Drinker Hero Jigme Dorje from the monastery in Sikkim respectfully invited her to ascend the highest throne, and offered immeasurable service. "I was really happy, and I recovered," she said. The next day, in the highest story of the palace, the monk Örgyan Rabten offered his services to wash and shave her hair, and again she regained her prior monastic appearance.

#### 49 a

In Lhasa, the leader had Tsering Dondrup learned that Terdak Lingpa's good-looking, nun-like daughter was in Sikkim. There was a rumor that he had sent ten horsemen with a guide. Because of this, Dzogchen Rinpoche said to the Great Master, Queen of the Dakinis: "The path is very narrow and difficult to pass, so why not use tricks and make black devils arise [to stop them]?" "I won't do that!" She said. "Oh! I would be cut off from the heart of my own father, Terdak Lingpa. Regarding these savage ghosts, you say I should create a tornado. Instead, the assistant preceptor, the monk Tashi Wangchuk should do it."

#### 59 a-b

She had a vision of Lord Padmasambhava and [Yeshe] Tsogyel and all of her lives up to that point, as well as those of her companions, which she described to them in detail. In this way, three years of retreat passed. After that she said To the fortunate ones I will again bestow the profound instruction of the embodiment of the sugatas, the Mahamudra heart essence, and the guide to the Khandro Nyingtik."

#### 60 b-62a

Remembering [this story] again, she burst into gales of laughter. A few days from the Olkha Hot Springs, she realized they were near the place of the famous Lelung Jedrung Rinpoché, Losang Trinlé, fully versed in Padmasambhava's Father-Mother Union, who had raised the hope of the Tibetan people and all beings and was becoming quite well-known. They went to request an invitation to spend a few days there. When they arrived, Jedrung Rinpoché greeted them with "Today the Wisdom Ḍākinīs gather, you must make offerings of ambrosia!" Saying this, he pressed upon them great quantities of beer, not really ambrosia at all. The ruffians were all drunk on beer! Then Jedrung and a few princesses led the singing, and monks and nuns, laypeople and monastics, all began

singing and dancing indiscriminately as men and women with one another, creating a scene. Having seen this, my Supreme Master herself told me "I took not one mouthful of this 'nectar,' but instead drank a substitute for the beer." She arranged for a huge bowl of tea, with a copper ladle, which she urgently began offering to everyone. Then the teacher Ürab and the monk Trewang took bowls of ambrosia and so were freed from suffering. In that way, their karma was erased, and they attained great accomplishments. When they spoke of this, others took notice of how well they were faring. Those who had drunk the beer fell at the feet of the lama. Regarding this senselessness, my unrivalled lama listened to their mistakes and said 'What's the use of giving you instruction in such a place of immorality?' Although she did eventually instruct them. One monk said "Jedrung Rinpoché is the head of this place, [and] today the Wisdom Ḍākinīs gather like a cloud. Isn't this a holy day? He said that if we do not take the ambrosia, then we will have bad rebirths." "Well then," she replied, "I guess you have to drink all that beer by yourself." And with that, Gyurmé Chödrön, Gyurmé Yangzom, the revered mother, sister Peldzin and so forth – all except for two of the nuns – left. The next morning, they continued on their pilgrimage.

#### **64 a-b**

Jedrung Rinpoche said "I must make a connection with Her Holiness the Sublime Master." But this would break her connection with the transmissions she had received from her guru. Jedrung asked, "Minling Jetsün Rinpoche, we two, you and I, in this life we have a connection, could we share a hearth? If we were unified, in five hundred years no army could destroy us." Then her holiness, the highest lama, queen of the Ḍākinīs, said "I cannot. The great Tertön himself told me, 'You must not take up with anyone else, or you will not be able to practice the Great Perfection. Male and female alike must meditate with total faith, they cannot be distracted by such fetters.' And so I have acted accordingly." To this, Jedrung Rinpoche replied "Oh, I must go to Dechen Ling," and they both left.

#### **64b-65 a**

At moment, more and more roosters came flew into the air, and suddenly a violent storm came down and lasted for two days. There was thunder and hail. After that, the Lama Queen of the Dakinis, master and servants met at the place of the six deities and retreatants. "When receiving teachings from Terdak Lingpa it was useful to live as a nun. Today I remain resolved [to live this way]!" She cried out, while beating her breast.

#### **69 a**

[Mingyur Peldrön] said to me: "You must act to lead, this is an order!"

#### **69 b**

[Mingyur Peldrön] said: "Wisdom and great diligence are the seeds you must cultivate!"



She asked me "Apart from [my?] teaching, did you study any thing else?" To which I replied: "Except for that, I have studied nothing else."

**70 b**

"You assembled here now, this is the main treasure of my father. Apart from this, study no other yantras, this should be the main teaching and should not be mixed with others." After she said this, at that time, I and a few others abandoned what was undesirable, in accordance with the Master's instructions.

**73 a**

In the garden, her sister Peldzin came to tell her that their revered mother was experiencing discomfort, and her unhappy body was giving off a smell. Peldzin requested [Mingyur Peldrön's] presence at the family home. That formal request was made, and so she said "I will come."

**81 a**

"One must not vainly waste the attainment of this one human life, but should generate great perseverance [with regard to practice]. Make a three three year retreat vow and attain blessings, and many [of you will] become once-returners."

**83a**

Later, the Great Yogin at Drepu had passed away, after which the hermitage was inundated with singing and dancing, and any hope of meditation was destroyed; this difficulty persisted. In the Earth Snake year [1749], her supreme holiness was in retreat. [I] went to her and told her how these lives were being wasted. She said "I should briefly go to Padmasambhava's Holy Place and remind them about their precepts." She said.

When I was making the water offerings I was parched with thirst, and so drank some beer... I was later scolded by her holiness, who said "Today when you made water offerings you drank beer, you didn't use good reasoning. If you do this in the future, your students will go the way of bad behavior. So from this time forward, do not do it again!"

**83 b-84 a**

Then, before the end of the Iron Sheep year [1751], they were singing and dancing throughout the day and night with many harlots and low women. Sometimes fights would break out and it was very noisy. The nun once more went to them and earnestly said: "The elders themselves have left, the concept of the supremely great dharma itself is gone and I doubt [you] have any understanding of sincere renunciation. Are you finished [with this behavior]?" To which they replied "yes."

**85 a**

I prostrated at her feet, and she said "My son, may you reach complete accomplishment. May the ḍākas and ḍākinīs illuminate the path." She said this with joy and love.

**86 a-b**

"Today, Gyurmé Ösel should come" she said. When I went to her she said "You arrived quickly," and asked after my meditation practice, to which I gave a detailed explanation. She chuckled a little and said "when I go near you, I smell sweet-smelling farts! This boy has given me a gift!" I replied "Precious teacher, I beg your pardon, the nomads gave me some yogurt and it made me ill." Then the feeling passed and it did not happen again.

**94 a**

I may be of inferior form [i.e a woman], but nowadays there are those who pretend to be realized. They drink a lot of beer, and their innate realization seems elevated, and they seem happy, but these [perceptions] are only lies. Drinking a lot of beer makes one unable to reason, and one becomes as lazy and slothful as a Mongol. One also naturally gives way to loose speech.

**95a-b**

You nuns, certainly take care of yourselves in accordance with the dharma, teaching the word thus, but also cut off karma; of course spread the teachings. You great and powerful nuns, having worked a little for your own benefit, [you] have the ability to teach and cultivate! I once said "Oh I am a vanquished queen" and things like that. And many still do, we know this. But all of you should think of the righteous dharma, think of those who are impoverished. Do nothing to contradict the vows and precepts and [maintain] devotion to one's lama.

**Time of Death****102 a-b**

Just at that moment the master herself departed into the sky, [and] from Drakpoche to Samtsé, a five-colored rainbow could be seen stretched like a cloth across the sky. The face of the master in the prime of life appeared; her naked body was handsome and bright. She wore a red ribbon and was adorned with bone ornaments, her black hair hanging loose. She rode a white lion with her right hand in a wrathful gesture and her left in the mudra of protection, threatening demons and protecting other beings. In a wise, clear, and melodious voice, she said:

"Uncontrived mind, free from extremes,  
The face of Vajrasattva is my own mind,  
By clearly seeing the face of my actual adamant mind,  
I bless [you and] clear away your obscurities."

**103 b**

"Today when you made water offerings you drank beer, your inner reasoning was not good. If you do this in the future, your students will go the way of bad behavior, in this way, from this time forward, do not do it again" she said.

**104 a**

The next day, the Monk Drawang, Doctor Yarpel, and myself were gathered all together. She said to us "I appoint you to continue my teachings, for that reason I should clarify any of your doubts. So if there are any, they should be eliminated now. I am an old woman, after I pass away, this teaching of the Great Perfection will go out like a lamp in a storm."

**104 b**

She remained silent for a moment, and then said:

"From the Dargye Chöding lineage, none has lived longer than me. I am the oldest, a very old nun. Previously, in India and Tibet, it was necessary that I take up female births. For a short while, this will be interrupted; In the next life I will be born as a monk. Moreover, because in a previous life I had the benefit of meeting a spiritual guide, regarding the Essence of the Secret Teachings, I have the imprint that will allow me to keep working for this lineage.

## Appendix C: Chronology of Mingyur Peldrön's Life

\* 1699 Mingyur Peldrön is born at Mindröling Monastery to Puntsok Pelzöm and Terdak Lingpa.<sup>414</sup>

\* 1710 Mingyur Peldrön receives her dharma name from Terdak Lingpa. After this she begins to receive initiations and empowerments from him. At this moment, she is also designated as an important member of the family lineage.<sup>415</sup> Shortly thereafter, she goes into strict retreat.<sup>416</sup>

\* 1711 Mingyur Peldrön is released from retreat begins receiving instruction in the Atiyoga tradition of Mindröling from Terdak Lingpa.<sup>417</sup>

\* 1712 Mingyur Peldrön continues to receive teachings from Terdak Lingpa.<sup>418</sup> Questions arise about her ability with magic, as well as about her gender.<sup>419</sup> In the end, she begins teaching the nuns at Menji, but is denied training in *Rikné*.<sup>420</sup> She continues learning from her father until age sixteen.<sup>421</sup>

\* 1713 In her fifteenth year, she receives transmissions in the *Shauk* treasure tradition from her elder brother, Pema Gyurmé Gyatso, shortly after he receives them from Terdak Lingpa.<sup>422</sup>

\* 1714 Terdak Lingpa dies.<sup>423</sup> Mingyur Peldrön takes monastic vows and begins to receive instruction from Lochen Dharmasrī.

\* 1714-1717 Mingyur Peldrön studies with Lochen Dharmasrī.

\* 1717 The Dzungar Invasion reaches Mindröling. Almost all of the monastery is destroyed, and Mingyur Peldrön's family members are either killed or dispersed. Mingyur Peldrön and a small group leave for Sikkim.

\* 1719 Mingyur Peldrön, her mother, sister, and attendants begin to make their way back to Mindröling. They return to Tibet by way of the Karola (*kha ro la*) pass near Pakri

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<sup>414</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 21 a.

<sup>415</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 24 a.

<sup>416</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 29 a.

<sup>417</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 29 a.

<sup>418</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 29 b.

<sup>419</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 31 a.

<sup>420</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 33 a-b.

<sup>421</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 34 b.

<sup>422</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 36 a-b.

<sup>423</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 38 a-b.

(*phag ri*), and visit her maternal uncle's home and her paternal ancestral home at Dargyé Chöding (*dar rgyas chos sdings*) along the way. They arrive at Mindröling and people come from around the Lhomön (*lho mon*) area to pay their respects. Polhané makes offerings to Mingyur Peldrön.<sup>424</sup> Mingyur Peldrön begins to repair Mindröling, with the support of Polhané, and Rinchen Namgyel returns from Kham.<sup>425</sup>

\* 1720 She suffers from a tumorous illness and receives treatment from Dr. Lopel. She recovers, and her name begins to spread throughout Ngari, Lhomön, Lhodrag, Dagpo and Khams, and Tömé, Üru and Yoru. As a result of her growing fame, someone in the Labrang becomes jealous and convinces Polhané to have her sent to Kongpo, ostensibly to teach, but in reality as a second exile. She is in exile in Kongpo for one year before he realizes his mistake and calls her to Lhasa.<sup>426</sup>

\* 1721 Mingyur Peldrön goes to Lhasa to meet with Polhané and the Seventh Dalai Lama. She also travels to surrounding areas, including Kyishö and Chölung (*skyid shod, chos lung*). At the behest of the monks of the Seventh Dalai Lama's monastery (Namgyel Dratsang), she composes a long-life prayer that they may recite for her.<sup>427</sup>

\* 1722 Mingyur Peldrön and Gyurmé Ösel meet for the first time. Mingyur Peldrön then goes with other leading monastics to Luding (*klu sdings*) where they spend one year in retreat, and she bestows Ati Instructions on them.<sup>428</sup>

\* 1726 Mingyur Peldrön conducts healing rituals for the ill, gives many teachings. During this time there is significant construction at Mindröling, including residences for Rinchen Namgyel and Phuntsok Pelzöm. In Lhasa, there is disagreement among the Kalons, and Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel are consulted.<sup>429</sup>

\* 1727-30 Mingyur Peldrön is in three-year retreat at her residence at Mindröling.<sup>430</sup>

\* 1731 She emerges from retreat and gives a teaching to one hundred people, then goes on retreat to Samye, Emalung, and Chimpu with her sister and mother. Visits Pehar and Yeshé Tsogyel places. They go from Samye to Densatil by way of Domda, then to Zangri Khangmar, and then to Ölkha, to visit Jedrung Rinpoche's place.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 51a -52 a.

<sup>425</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 50 a-b.

<sup>426</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 52 a-53b.

<sup>427</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 53 b- 54 b.

<sup>428</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55a-b.

<sup>429</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 55 b-58 a.

<sup>430</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 58b. For reference, during this time different factions were fighting for control of the government in Lhasa. Khangchenné was assassinated in 1727, a ceasefire reached 1728, and the Seventh Dalai Lama's entire family was exiled to Kham from 1730-35 . Shakabpa, 431-3.

<sup>431</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 59 b- 62 a .

- \* 1732-35 Terdak Lingpa's disciples and others come from Latö to see her and request instructions on the Shauk Treasure.
- \* 1736 Mingyur Peldrön meets with Polhané, Rinchen Namgyel, and Jedrung Rinpoche, refuses Jedrung Rinpoche's proposal.<sup>432</sup>
- \* 1737 Bestowal of several teachings and offerings at Shauk Taggo, Dratsé, and Menji, followed by a retreat.<sup>433</sup>
- \* 1738 Bestowal of Dzokchen Ati teachings on a group of two hundred and seventy students. The Sikkimese Dzogchenpa and others come to see her, after which she goes into retreat. She admonishes nuns and monks regarding proper behavior and maintenance of vows.<sup>434</sup>
- \* 1739 Mingyur Peldrön spends one year in retreat.<sup>435</sup>
- \* 1740 Gives teachings to a group of five hundred and sixty people, then to a smaller group, travel with sister and sister's family.<sup>436</sup>
- \* 1742 Mingyur Peldrön composes an instruction manual, and the idea for the *rnam thar* is conceived.<sup>437</sup>
- \* 1743 Mingyur Peldrön bestows teachings on her maternal uncle and others.<sup>438</sup>
- \* 1744-47 Brief pilgrimage followed by a three-year retreat.<sup>439</sup>
- \* 1747-48 Many teachings given, including to a prince of Gungtang, who becomes her disciple, an army general's son from Yuthok, and the Sikkimese Dzogchenpa.<sup>440</sup>
- \* 1749 Mingyur Peldrön is in retreat, also goes on pilgrimage to several places associated with Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava).<sup>441</sup>
- \* 1751 Mingyur Peldrön comes out of retreat in order to admonish a community gone awry. In the same year, the Seventh Dalai Lama assumes authority over the government in Lhasa.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 63 a- 67b.

<sup>433</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 67 b.

<sup>434</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 69 a- 73 b.

<sup>435</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 74 b.

<sup>436</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 74 b.

<sup>437</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 78 b.

<sup>438</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 80 a.

<sup>439</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 a.

<sup>440</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 81 b.

<sup>441</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 83 a.

\* 1754-1766 Mingyur Peldrön gives personal instruction to Gyurmé Ösel, and spends three years in retreat at Shauk Taggo. She goes on pilgrimage throughout Ütsang, and meets with dignitaries throughout the region.<sup>443</sup>

\* 1766 Several groups of people come to Mingyur Peldrön for teachings. She gives instruction and admonitions, including specific instructions for nuns.<sup>444</sup>

\* 1767 Mingyur Peldrön is in retreat until the eighth month. When she leaves retreat, one hundred and forty seven nuns gather from Menji, Samten Chöling, and other places in Ütsang.<sup>445</sup>

\* 1768 Mingyur Peldrön continues to bestow teachings, participate in brief retreats, and instructs individual *tulkus*.<sup>446</sup>

\* 1769 Gyurmé Ösel has a prophetic dream of Mingyur Peldrön's death, and other portents are described in detail.<sup>447</sup> Mingyur Peldrön appoints Gyurmé Ösel and two others as carriers of her lineage, and describes to them her plans for her future births. She goes into retreat for three months, and then gives her last will and testament, and urges them to live a life free of fault.<sup>448</sup> Gyurmé Ösel offers a thangka of her. Her winds begin to reverse, and in the fourth month one hundred and sixty monastics come from Samten Tsé, Samten Chöling, and Ardok to receive instruction from her.<sup>449</sup> As she is old and feeble, the suggestion is made that the *khenchen* should give teachings in her place, to which she replies that, if she is unable to teach, she is no better than a corpse.<sup>450</sup> On the first day of the seventh month, her disciples cease long-life rites, stop and she refuses a medical exam and healing ceremonies, shortly after which she passes away.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 83 b. See also Shakabpa, 433.

<sup>443</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 85 b-89b.

<sup>444</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 92 a- 95a.

<sup>445</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 96 a.

<sup>446</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 99 a.

<sup>447</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 101 a - 102 a.

<sup>448</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 105 a.

<sup>449</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 106 b.

<sup>450</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 107 a-b.

<sup>451</sup> Gyurmé Ösel, *rje*, 109 b.