

Materials of Buddhist Culture:  
Aesthetics and Cosmopolitanism at Mindroling Monastery

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## ABSTRACT

### Materials of Buddhist Culture: Aesthetics and Cosmopolitanism at Mindroling Monastery

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This dissertation investigates the relationships between Buddhism and culture as exemplified at Mindroling Monastery. Focusing on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, I argue that Mindroling was a seminal religio-cultural institution that played a key role in cultivating the ruling elite class during a critical moment of Tibet's history. This analysis demonstrates that the connections between Buddhism and high culture have been salient throughout the history of Buddhism, rendering the project relevant to a broad range of fields within Asian Studies and the Study of Religion. As the first extensive Western-language study of Mindroling, this project employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining historical, sociological, cultural and religious studies, and makes use of diverse Tibetan sources.

Mindroling was founded in 1676 with ties to Tibet's nobility and the Fifth Dalai Lama's newly centralized government. It was a center for elite education until the twentieth century, and in this regard it was comparable to a Western university where young members of the nobility spent two to four years training in the arts and sciences and being shaped for positions of authority. This comparison serves to highlight commonalities between distant and familiar educational models and undercuts the tendency to diminish Tibetan culture to an exoticized imagining of Buddhism as a purely ascetic, world renouncing tradition. Although Mindroling was in many regards an exemplary model of monasticism, rather than focusing solely on renunciation Mindroling's founders aimed to integrate a Buddhist doctrinal perspective with being in the world. The cultivation of aesthetics and practical ethics were as central to a

Mindroling education as composition, rhetoric and Buddhist doctrine. During the dissertation's period of focus, Mindroling alumni consistently went on to successful careers in a highly complex sociopolitical milieu that comprised Tibetan, Mongol and Qing elements.

In addition to its role as a school, the monastery was a center for literature and rituals that helped unify the Tibetan polity, a unification that was still underway and frequently contested. Buddhist rituals are inextricably tied to Buddhist aesthetics and material culture, making Mindroling a center for the arts as well. Mindroling was also known for esoteric meditative techniques, martial rituals, a marriage of classical Indic and innovative Tibetan styles, and the relative prominence of women teachers. In all aspects Mindroling crystallized an early modern zeitgeist that was both uniquely Tibetan and highly cosmopolitan. The monastery received the favor of Tibet's most influential patrons, but as a result of sectarian conflicts Mindroling was razed to the ground by Dzungar Mongols in 1717. A female Buddhist expert joined forces with a former Mindroling student who had gone on to become the highest ranking Tibetan leader to reestablish the monastery. Mindroling thrived and became known as the "mother monastery" to an extensive network of institutions across the vast Tibetan cultural region that based their ritual liturgies, art practices and curricula on the Mindroling model. Official institutional documents including the monastic history, constitution and curriculum are analyzed in conjunction with biographies and letters to construct a history of Mindroling's role in shaping the high culture and cosmopolitan aesthetic of early modern Tibet.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Catalogue A                    *O rgyan smin grol gling gi dkar chag*  
(Monastic catalogue containing 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century documents)
- Catalogue B                    *'Og min O rgyan smin grol gling gi dkar chag dran pa'i me long*  
(Monastic catalogue composed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century)
- TLOB                            *Gter chen chos gyi rgyal po'i rnam thar dad pa'i shing*  
(Terdak Lingpa's "outer" biography)
- DLCL                            *Rgya bod hor sog gi mchog dman bar pa rnams la 'phrin yig snyan  
ngag tu bkod pa rab snyan rgyud mang*  
(The Fifth Dalai Lama's collected letters)
- TLCL                            *Collected Religious Instructions and Letters of Gter-bdag-gling  
pa 'gyur med rdo rje*  
(Terdak Lingpa's collected letters)
- MPB                             *Rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal gyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung  
sel*  
(Mingyur Paldron's biography)

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION - A BUDDHIST SENSE OF BEAUTY

...we need see nothing wrong with the presence of objects, and even wealth, in religious practice. A small group of erudite monks within the Buddhist tradition has championed the idea that the highest spiritual goals can only be pursued in isolation from the material world. But *we* need not adopt this position. Nor did most Buddhists ever adopt a radical rejection of the material world.<sup>1</sup>

- John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*

*Chapter Overview*

This dissertation tells a story about a group of people who built a small, influential center for religion and culture. The main characters of the story—a Tibetan visionary known as Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*, 1646-1714), the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682) and their inner circle—lived during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Central Tibet, in and around the city of Lhasa. The institution they established is called Mindroling (*smin grol gling*), or the Isle of Ripening and Liberation. Still vibrant today, Mindroling is an institution with numerous distinct faces. Just as a painted or sculpted portrait would necessarily omit certain aspects of its subject, taking up this dissertation's particular perspective inevitably precludes the telling of other important stories about Mindroling. It is my hope that this perspective will be of value, not least of all because of its novelty relative to more usual perspectives on Buddhism and Tibet. This project cannot

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<sup>1</sup> John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 23.

possibly attend to all of Mindroling's areas of interest and I intend to pursue further topics related to Mindroling in the future.

To illustrate the multiplicity of Mindroling, today Buddhist nuns conducting long-life rituals at a remote nunnery in Eastern Tibet, a community of lay tantric experts practicing "black magic" rites in Qinghai, monks collecting offerings in a temple on the Barkor in Lhasa, Tibetan exile artists creating three dimensional mandalas in Santa Fe, American psychotherapists on meditation retreat in the hills of Virginia, and scholars and practitioners from all the Tibetan Buddhist sects including the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, all claim a longstanding and significant relationship with Mindroling. This diversity was also the case in Mindroling's early history. The Central Tibetan monastery has been a center for Tibetan ritual activities associated with the Tibetan government and population, a hotbed of arts and culture, and a Mecca for meditators since its earliest days in the early modern climate of late seventeenth century Tibet. Still known for the elegance and refinement of its ritual and artistic practices, Mindroling has survived periods of political chaos, violent persecution, the dawn of modernity, and radical geographical displacement. This dissertation focuses on the first three generations of Mindroling, looking in particular at the institution's role as a center for culture and aesthetics. Its many other faces speak out from the margins and help shape this account of Mindroling's history.

This introductory chapter presents the general scope of the project and poses the big picture questions that inspired it, as well as defining key terms and sketching out the theoretical lenses that have shaped the analysis. There are ways in which the story is highly particular and perhaps even unique to Mindroling's original time and place. And there are also ways in which nearly universal tendencies of people and societies are apparent. The aim throughout is to make the primary source Tibetan language materials accessible to a contemporary Western reader. To

that end the project focuses in equal measure on the ways that the Tibetan Buddhist situation at Mindroling is unique, and the ways it resembles and reflects upon more familiar contexts across time and place. In its general orientation, this dissertation approaches questions about religion, culture and power through the focused lens of this one highly influential Tibetan monastic institution. The cross cultural contexts invoked for comparison and analogy in the coming chapters include the modern university, Jesuit monasteries, museums, and various models of polity.

One of the strategies employed is to draw parallels between the Tibetan terms and concepts that are instrumental in the written work of Mindroling's founders and Western terms and concepts, in some cases applying Western theoretical frameworks. The aim is not to reduce what is unique about Mindroling to generic, universal or Western terms, but rather to make this written portrait of Mindroling meaningful to a broader audience than would otherwise have exposure to this type of project. Engaging a range of historical and literary documents as well as ritual manuals and artistic materials, including references to musical liturgies and various forms of visual and material culture, the core group of sources cited are culled from within the corpus of Mindroling itself. But again, this introductory chapter in part serves to situate the primary Tibetan language research in larger framework where the human and social forces at work in the example of Mindroling can be considered in a broader humanities based conversation. In order to do so, the latter part of this chapter surveys the main Western theoretical sources employed.

Throughout this work, it will be important to keep in mind and cannot be overstated that since Mindroling's initial foundation in 1676, its cultural production has included fine quality painting and sculpture, Indic inspired poetry and prose (some of which is characterized by erotic content, unusual in Tibetan literature), innovative philosophical tracts and ritual manuals

“discovered” in visions and dreams, new redactions of established ritual cycles perceived to have been previously corrupted, a distinctive brand of music and dance, monastic sartorial styles, and medicinal incense. In all aspects Mindroling stood as a pinnacle of Tibetan Buddhist culture; the monastery’s very name has an aura of prestige and elegance among Tibetan Buddhists.<sup>2</sup> It was especially renowned for the literary arts, and one of the main aims of this project is to explore how in its early modern heyday the monastery more generally became a center for high culture, elite education, and aesthetics.

Simultaneously, as the following chapters will reveal, Mindroling was also a paragon of classical Buddhist ethics and discipline. In this way Mindroling integrated the religious and worldly spheres.<sup>3</sup> This bridging of spheres is a familiar theme in writing on Tibet, especially

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<sup>2</sup> While this is the first extensive study of Mindroling in a Western language, several scholars have produced previous valuable work on aspects of Mindroling. I am indebted to the following in particular: Jacob Dalton, “The Uses of the Dgongs pa ’dus pa’i mdo in the Development of the Rnying-ma School of Tibetan Buddhism” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2002); idem, “Recreating the Rnyingma School: the Mdo dbang Tradition of Smin grol gling,” in *Power, Politics, and the Reinvention of Tradition: Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, *Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, ed. Bryan Cuevas and Kurtis Schaeffer, Oxford, 2003 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 91-101. Also, Bryan Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); idem, “Preliminary Remarks on the History of Mindroling: The Founding and Organization of a Tibetan Monastery in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Places of Practice: Monasteries and Monasticism in Asian Religions*, ed. James Benn, Lori Meeks, and James Robson (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, forthcoming). There are also several helpful references to Mindroling in Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 17, 18, 20, 230, 248, 330. Since Mindroling is known for its musical liturgy, ethnomusicologists have also attended to the Mindroling tradition. See footnotes on music below.

<sup>3</sup> The term “worldly” is meant to convey the Tibetan “srid” and should not be taken in a negative light. In some instances it might be best to translate the Tibetan term as “secular,” “civil,” “societal,” “political,” or “temporal.” These terms come to play in various contexts addressed below. In general “worldly” seems to be the best way to convey these related meanings. It also invokes one of this project’s main themes of cultivating a “worldview” or mentality linked to a particular aesthetic sensibility.

given the well known institution of the Dalai Lamas as Tibet's joint religious and political leader.<sup>4</sup> But although Mindroling had significant ties to the Dalai Lamas and the Lhasa based government, and further, although rulers from across the Tibetan world have consistently looked to Mindroling's lamas for guidance in the work of governing, this paper is less concerned with the joining of Buddhism and politics than with the closely related bridging of Buddhism and culture. In particular, the focus here is the arts, education, and the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities among the ruling class. This bridging entailed a number of paradoxes which became sites of productive tension in Mindroling's identity. The function of these tensions is a running theme through the following chapters. In a Buddhist framework they can be understood as reflecting the nonduality of samsara (life as we know it) and nirvana (a state of enlightenment), or what are known in Buddhism as "the two truths" of ultimate and conventional reality.

Bearing the theme of nonduality in mind, to say that Buddhist culture is the focus here is not to say that politics are not a crucial part of the story. In fact Mindroling played a key role in the Fifth Dalai Lama's vision of a centralized Tibetan polity and the negotiations and cooperations between the Tibetan political field of authority and the cultural field of authority is very close to the heart of this project.<sup>5</sup> As rich as the political history is, given the central focus on Mindroling's role in Tibetan high culture, the main point in looking at the politics of Mindroling's early history is to understand what was taking place culturally. The crux, unpacked

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<sup>4</sup> The Dalai Lamas have held varying levels of political power over the generations. The Fifth Dalai Lama and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama exercised considerably more political authority than other incarnations in their line. As a point of interest, recently the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso officially resigned as a political leader, ceding his position's authority to a democratically elected official.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard the work of Pierre Bourdieu plays a major role in the analysis presented in the following chapters. See *chap 4* in particular.

below, is that Mindroling's influence extended into the political realm primarily through its authority in the sphere of culture and aesthetic sensibilities. As Chapter Four shows in detail, this influence was extended in part through formal education of members of the ruling class, both lay and monastic.

To elaborate briefly here, in the field of education, until the mid twentieth century Mindroling was the main center of education for Central Tibetan government officials and other aristocrats from across the Tibetan Buddhist world. Teachers trained at Mindroling were also employed at Lhasa's most prestigious schools, where officials were prepared for bureaucratic careers. At the same time, Mindroling was less formally a hub for literary figures and artists whose work was shaped there. Through the education of lay people, monks and nuns in a wide range of subject, Mindroling's influence reached far beyond the scope of doctrinal Buddhist subjects, pervading worldly matters as well as religious ones. Mindroling was the place to go for the cultivation of good taste, high style, and cosmopolitan aesthetics among the Tibetan aristocracy. This joint religious-secular influence is one of the main sites of productive tension this project investigates. This aspect of Mindroling's history complicates commonly held preconceptions about the relationship between Buddhism and culture, and to some extent between religion and culture more generally.

To lay the groundwork for the following chapters, this introductory chapter will expand on the project's key terms, especially those not often associated with Tibetan Buddhism, namely aesthetics, high culture, and cosmopolitanism. En route to defining these terms, it will be helpful first to present the project's underlying questions. The principal background queries include: What is material culture's role in Buddhism? What is the role of beauty in Buddhism? How does the Buddhist fascination with the senses relate to the focus on renunciation? How does the

impulse to offer pleasing objects to deities and religious personages shape Buddhist material culture?<sup>6</sup> How have ties between Buddhist institutions and the ruling class, including royal courts, wealthy patrons, and modern governments affected the evolution of Buddhist aesthetics – as the concern with beauty, art, and taste, as well as the study of the senses more broadly? Beyond these themes, this project also asks, what are the secular, civil, or otherwise worldly applications of a Buddhist education? How does Buddhist training relate to ethics, political theory, and the development of regional or national identities? And what is the relationship between a cosmopolitan worldview and Buddhism’s facility for adapting to new cultural milieus? These far reaching questions, addressed though certainly not answered in the chapters that follow, all have bearing on Mindroling’s history. Posing them here opens the way for the following discussion of the project’s key terms.

### *Key Terms*

#### i. Aesthetics

For the purposes of this project, the standard academic usage of the term aesthetics to mean a developed theory of art and beauty, or the philosophy of art, is relevant, but overly narrow. On the other hand, in popular usage the term aesthetics is often negatively associated with a focus on the superficial, a lack of integrity, and an overvaluing of beauty at the expense of

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<sup>6</sup> While these questions are new to the field of Tibetan Studies, several scholars of Buddhism more generally have approached similar topics. John Kieschnick’s work on Chinese Buddhist material culture, for example, has helped fill in the backdrop of this study. See Kieschnick, 1-23 and 116-138. Another helpful study for comparison to the Tibetan case is Eiko Ikegami’s sociological work on Tokugawa Japan, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 286-359.

more profound and meaningful concerns. This connotation is a far cry from how this dissertation applies it to the history of Mindroling. Nor is this project particularly engaged with the realm of philosophical aesthetics. Instead, the term's most basic definition is evoked, laying aside limiting and negative associations in favor of a broader view. To start from the ground level, "aesthetic" is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as:

"A. Of or pertaining to things perceptible to the senses, things material" and further, "1. Of or pertaining to the sensuous perceptions, received by the senses. 2. Of or pertaining to the appreciation or criticism of the beautiful. 3. Having or showing an appreciation of the beautiful or pleasing; tasteful and refined of taste. Of things: In accordance with the principles of good taste (or what is conventionally regarded as such)."  
And "aesthetics" is defined as: "B. The science which treats the conditions of the sensuous perceptions."

Despite this benign dictionary entry, the term can elicit negative associations, and even more often gets lumped into a category of insignificance. Globally speaking, as applied in this project the term is most closely aligned with the usage presented by the Chinese scholar of aesthetics Li Zehou, whose work serves partly to summarize Chinese aesthetics and partly to compare its long history and evolution to that of aesthetics in the West. In brief, Li characterizes Chinese aesthetics by a "unity of sense and reason, nature and society," a unity which Li asserts to be based in early shamanistic Chinese culture and shaped by Confucianism. In analyzing the etymology of the Chinese character for beauty or beautiful, *mei*, which is the root of the Chinese term for aesthetics, *mei xue*, Li indicates that *mei* and by extension Chinese conceptions of beauty and aesthetics, are linked to the sensuous and natural, as well as to notions of goodness.<sup>7</sup> Therefore aesthetics concerns not only beauty but also the senses, nature, and ethics. These

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<sup>7</sup> Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 2.

connections are vital to the scope of aesthetics as it is treated in this study. As Li's translator Maija Bell Samei summarizes, "Chinese aesthetics goes beyond literature and art to encompass the 'art of living.' Right government, the ideal human being, the path to spiritual transcendence – all these fall into the province of aesthetic thought."<sup>8</sup> Taking a broad perspective on aesthetics similar to the one laid out by Li, this section of the chapter will reflect on aesthetics in Buddhism more generally, and then begin to demonstrate how it applies to Mindroling's history.

In cultural climates conditioned by puritanical, Marxist, and Buddhist ethics alike, the concept of aesthetics, whatever its particular boundaries, can strike at fears of the sensual, materialist and worldly. In the Tibetan case, considered in detail below, it does not fit easily in the rhetoric of Buddhist values. Perhaps by extension, there is no classical Tibetan term that neatly translates "aesthetics." There are, however, several modern ones. Since the 1980s a trend in Tibetan scholarship, in this case strongly influenced by a broader trend in Chinese scholarship, has yielded a new field of study related to Tibetan aesthetics. And in fact Li points out that in China, the period just after the Cultural Revolution was characterized by "aesthetics fever."<sup>9</sup> In the modern Tibetan scholarly context the terms used for "aesthetics" are "sgyu rtsal" (skill or capacity in magic or illusion), "mdzes rtsal" (skill or capacity in beauty, elegance, and power), or less commonly "mdzes chos rig pa" (knowledge of things of beauty, elegance, and power, sometimes also translated "fine arts"). The founders of Mindroling and their cohort in early modern Tibetan society used these terms as well, although not necessarily theorizing about something that would be explicitly categorized as a distinct field of aesthetics. Therefore the

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<sup>8</sup> Maija Bell Samei, Translators' introduction to *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), x.

<sup>9</sup> Zehou Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics, Towards a Global View*, trans. Jane Cauvel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 22.

thesis that their institution was a center for high culture and aesthetics relies on implicit and otherwise subtle evidence and does not suggest that Mindroling’s founders consciously set out to cultivate such a field. Various overlapping factors came together to make Mindroling an aesthetic center, without that being the deliberate goal. And as will be demonstrated below, tracing the trajectory from the seventeenth and eighteenth century usage to the contemporary usage of these Tibetan terms reveals underlying concerns with aesthetics writ large, as this project frames it.

Aesthetics here indicates an awareness of and attention to perception and the senses, the arts, taste, and the cultivation of a culture around which civilization coalesces. It is not limited strictly to a study of art or a theory of beauty, but it does reflect an interest in the arts and a concern with beauty as a meaningful organizing principle. To illustrate, in considering Buddhist art such as that produced at Mindroling, if an object is not deemed beautiful, i.e., pleasing to the senses, it will not be effective as an offering and will not accomplish its ritual purpose. This theme runs strong in writing on the arts by Mindroling’s founder Terdak Lingpa, and his brother the eminent artist and scholar Lochen Dharmashri (*lo chen d+harma shri*, 1654-1718). For instance, in a treatise on ritual music, Terdak Lingpa wrote that ritual music should be melodious, appealing, beautiful, and pleasant.<sup>10</sup> These terms were reiterated in his brother’s writing. Notably, these are the same Tibetan words used to describe a beautiful woman. These points will be expanded on below, but for now suffice it to say Mindroling’s founders were interested in the

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<sup>10</sup> The terms they used are “snyan pa” (pleasant or inspiring to hear), “yid ’phrog” (charming, alluring or ravishing to the mind), and “yid ’ong” (beautiful, charming, attractive). These helpful examples were brought to my attention by Michael Monhart, whose research on Tibetan ethnomusicology draws from the Mindroling tradition. See Michael Monhart, “Listening with the Gods: Offering, Beauty and Being in Tibetan Ritual Music,” term paper for the course “Sound: Sacred/Secular,” Columbia University, Fall 2010.

aesthetics of ritual music as well as its formal structure. Beauty mattered. And this language of beauty is common in their writing about other art forms as well. The crucial point is that if a work of art or ritual object lacked the quality of beauty, it would not do its desired ritual work.

Even putting aside the question of beauty, aesthetics, in its concerns with perception and the senses, is deeply related to Buddhism more broadly since the sense perceptions are and have always been central to Buddhist thought and practice. Given the broad treatment of the term in this dissertation, it should be clear that to assert that the practices that flowered at Mindroling fall under a rubric of aesthetics does not suggest that Mindroling's central activities were not meaningful, potent, or serious in nature. On the contrary, to restate a central point, aesthetics here draws together concerns related to the senses, taste, and the cultivation of a cohesive culture, including commonly held ethics and worldviews.

As this chapter begins to demonstrate and the following chapters prove, the underlying concern with aesthetics at work during Mindroling's early days helped the monastery to become a place where the tastes, skills, and sensibilities associated with Tibetan high culture were distilled and cultivated. To help explain what that looked like, it should be kept in mind that the institution was a monastery, but not all the students were monks. Some were lay people and some were women. Many of the students were prominent figures, be they the children of noble families, reincarnated lamas, or accomplished yogis. There were also students from less privileged backgrounds, the children from nearby villages or relatives of monks, for instance. But as is typically the case in written histories, the people whose life stories were recorded in connection with Mindroling were part of the social and religious elite, so it is not possible to say much about the other social classes represented, except that to be trained at Mindroling provided a significant pedigree, borne out in part by the fact that it became commonplace for people to

falsely claim to have studied there. To begin to make more clear Mindroling's role in forming the tastes and sensibilities of the Tibetan ruling class, this section also introduces the theme of the connection between aesthetics and authority in Buddhist cultures beyond Tibet.

While this topic will come up again in the section on cosmopolitanism, the main relevance here is that seventeenth and eighteenth century Lhasa had a vibrant aesthetics that had long been in conversation with some of the world's oldest and most sophisticated aesthetic traditions. It will be helpful to note, as is well known, that the arts and aesthetics of India, Nepal, Mongolia, and China have all played a direct role in the evolution of Tibetan aesthetics and culture more generally. It is less widely recognized that Tibet also influenced its neighbors through its literature, art practices, and material culture.<sup>11</sup> While it is often erroneously assumed that Tibet was always isolated from its neighbors and hermetically sealed off on the roof of the world, in fact the exchange of goods and information throughout the regions of East, South, and Central Asia was fluid for many centuries. From Buddhism's earliest days, travelers and traders on the Silk Route carried Buddhist ideas, languages, texts, sculptures, scroll paintings, and ritual objects from one cultural center to another. The steady exchange of teachings, concepts, art forms, aesthetics and worldviews helped shape Buddhist and other cultures across the region, and Tibet was an active player in the exchange.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For instance on the influence of the Tibetan language, see Christopher Beckwith, "The Tibetans in the Ordos and North China: Considerations on the Role of the Tibetan Empire in World History," in *Silver on Lapis*, ed. Christopher Beckwith (Bloomington: Tibet Society, 1987), 3-11. For an excellent related treatment of the arts and material culture, see Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> On the extensive trade networks of which Central Tibet was a part at this time, see Luce Boulnois, "Gold, Wool, and Musk: Trade in Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century," in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*, ed. Francoise Pommeret (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2003), 133-156.

To help construct a picture of the climate of exchange in which Tibet took part, it will be useful to return now to the line of questioning posed at the start of this chapter, and to reflect on the basic question, “what is Buddhist art?” Again, although this work is not solely concerned with aesthetics as the philosophy of art, this question is pertinent and will help clarify the dissertation’s key terms. The answer is not entirely obvious, if only due to preconceptions about Buddhism and the slippery nature of the term art, which varies drastically across cultures and historical timeframes. For the purposes of this work, Buddhist art refers to forms such as visual depictions of deities and lamas, mandalas, music, dance, and literary genres. All these forms have ritual functions and it might even be argued that Buddhist art is defined by, if not synonymous with, ritual. This relationship of art and ritual can be a stumbling block for Western audiences that tend to associate art with an extremely recent and narrow historical perspective that starkly separates art and ritual, just as it separates art and craft. According to this modern Western view, true art, with a capital A, must be “for art’s sake.” Otherwise it is relegated to the sphere of “craft,” and considered to serve a non-artistic function. The art practices and aesthetics centered at Mindroling are at high risk of falling into this category. The main danger is that this move also tends to reduce the perceived cultural value of the tradition or practice in question.

To avoid this pitfall, rather than moving directly towards the focal point of Mindroling’s specific traditions, it might be helpful first to pose the even more general question “what is art?” With no hope of answering this question definitively, or even addressing it very fully, a cursory reflection should make it clear that Mindroling’s traditions are more in keeping with the longstanding Western concept of art than the modern habit of distinguishing art and craft suggests. And moreover, it should start to become more apparent why this project categorizes

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Mindroling's various practices, whether viewed as "art" or "ritual," under the rubric of aesthetics. Briefly, according to the influential twentieth scholar of aesthetics and philosopher of art, Nelson Goodman, art and aesthetic experience are characterized by certain distinct symptoms and are not defined by such vague determinants as whether the maker is freely expressive of some individual sense of self.<sup>13</sup> Goodman's list of five symptoms of art can all shed light on the Tibetan case. Most relevant here is the symptom Goodman terms "relative repleteness." He identifies this characteristic of art and aesthetics as existing "where comparatively many aspects of a symbol are significant – for example, a single-line drawing of a mountain by Hokusai where every feature of shape, line, thickness, etc. counts, in contrast with perhaps the same line as a chart of daily stock market averages, where all that counts is the height of the line above the base."<sup>14</sup> So art and aesthetic symbols, as opposed to scientific ones for instance, are relatively replete.<sup>15</sup> And something is "the more replete according as proportionally more of its features are

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<sup>13</sup> Goodman is disinclined to address the problematic question "what is art?" and reframes it "when is art?" to highlight the significance of context. Without diminishing the value of this shift for his own line of reasoning, it is not as critical to the argument being made here. He provides five symptoms of the aesthetic. These are: syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, exemplification and multiple and complex reference. See in particular Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 57-70; idem, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), 252-255.

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> It would be useful to consider Goodman's categories of "exemplification" and "multiple and complex reference" here as well. And it should be noted that the approach this chapter takes runs the risk of reifying the category of "art." Such reification is not at all reflective of Goodman's aims, which take as their starting point the ultimate or "radical" relativity of perspectives on such questions, and which center around the question of translatability between worldviews. Context is of the essence for Goodman, so again, it would be a mistake to use his work to help fix a firm definition of "art." The aim here as well is to consider how these Tibetan categories can be meaningfully translated and understood from other perspectives.

functioning symbolically.”<sup>16</sup> By this reckoning, the stuff of art and aesthetics is by definition full of meaning; all the details matter. And by Goodman’s standards, Buddhist art, such as the visual images, music, dance, architecture and literature produced at Mindroling, certainly functions as art, and falls firmly within the sphere of aesthetic experience.

To explore the question of repleteness through an example particular to Tibetan art, consider the classic Tibetan scroll painting, called a *thangka*. Considering the arrangement, proportions, color, line quality, gestures, even the folds of the fabrics etc., as well as the materials used to make the painting, practically every element in the painting “counts” as Goodman puts it, making it relatively replete. As an object of veneration and a tool to support visualization, the details truly matter. At the same time, according to the general guidelines of Tibetan painting, the state of mind the painter is in when painting the *thangka* and the response it inspires in the viewer are also crucial.<sup>17</sup> A closely related concern, addressed in more detail below, is whether the *thangka* is pleasing to the person or deity to whom it is offered. These combined factors of adhering to norms and eliciting certain responses ultimately determine whether the *thangka* is “good.” How different these criteria really are from the criteria determining whether a portrait of Venus, for instance, is “good” are debatable; the two have more in common than might appear at first glance.

Adding the vexed question of beauty’s role in Buddhist art to the discussion, it is possible to assume that what is significant in a *thangka* is not the beauty of the image – even one whose

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 123.

<sup>17</sup> For an accessible overview of the guidelines for *thangka* paintings, see David Jackson and Janice Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods & Materials* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2006).

subject is a tantric pair in sexual embrace or a “goddess.” Since these images’ adherence to certain norms and criteria is so strictly prescribed, it might seem that correctness is more important than beauty. So while it is taken for granted that Botticelli’s Birth of Venus is meant to be beautiful, in a *thangka* of Vajrayoginī or even a portrait of a teacher such as Terdak Lingpa, beauty is not often presumed to be a major concern. This project draws that assumption into question and looks more closely at the role of aesthetic concerns in Buddhism. In regards to Mindroling in particular, whether in visual depictions such as *thangkas* or in literary accounts, the splendor, luminosity, and impressiveness of Terdak Lingpa’s appearance is a priority. This is very much in keeping with depictions of Śākyamuni, who is distinguished by distinctive signs. These signs of enlightenment further demonstrate a clear attention to and appreciation for aesthetics. It cannot be overstated though that recognizing Buddhist attention to aesthetics does not suggest that Buddhist concerns are *merely* aesthetic. It is simply to acknowledge that aesthetics play an important role. While on the most basic level, a *thangka*’s merits are based on its adherence to established standards of proportion and iconography, at the same time, in regards to the pleasing nature of the image and the quality of the representation, it is simply true that beauty matters in Buddhist art.

Beyond Nelson Goodman’s criteria, by many definitions, and for most of the history of art, the things we are talking about when we talk about the Buddhist arts are most certainly art. The fact that the main intention of all these artistic media is to affect the types of changes Buddhist doctrine and philosophy indicate to be beneficial, as well as more mundane goals such as overcoming enemies, gaining wealth, affecting the natural environment, and generally influencing circumstances in one’s favor, does not preclude their inclusion in the category of art or aesthetic experience overall. Furthermore, in regards to the link between aesthetics and ethics,

the more doctrinal and orthodox goals of Buddhist art are focused on cultivating a frame of mind and the habits and capacities demonstrated by buddhas and bodhisattvas. These qualities are typified by compassion, generosity, wisdom, etc. and ideally combine in a worldview that integrates wisdom and compassion in every aspect of one's way of being in the world. Given these connections between art, ritual, and Buddhism's ultimate transformative goals, Buddhist art is always purposeful. This is very closely related to general views of art in Western culture as well, where ideals of beauty have long been associated with cultivation of better people. In Buddhist cultures as elsewhere, different artistic media have been developed to serve various functions. And again, in Buddhist art, beauty plays a particular and major role. Whether painting, music, dance, or poetry, in addition to being in compliance with established norms, art must also be pleasing or beautiful in order to be effective. If somehow imbalanced or not in keeping with the established norms of the medium, the work's function will not be fulfilled. Likewise, attention to aesthetic concerns is discernible in regards to Christian icons, for instance those of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, as few would dispute. This discrepancy in perception raises the question of why the force of aesthetic concerns tends to be ignored or denied in relation to Buddhist cultures, most particularly that of Tibet, while being allowed for in relation to Christian cultures. This comparative question will be addressed again later in this chapter.

Continuing now with one of the questions posed above, "does beauty matter in Buddhism?" The intended sound of Tibetan Buddhist liturgical music, the accurate proportions of a Buddha image, the appropriate colors for a mandala, have meaning beyond how they look to the maker and the viewer, and the sense of whether the work is good and beautiful is closely related to whether it is correctly executed. In monastic music, for instance, hitting one wrong note pollutes

the efforts of all the musicians.<sup>18</sup> The wrong note does not simply sour the pleasure of the human audience; it also inhibits the effectiveness of the ritual since if it is not pleasant, it will not be pleasing to the deity to whom it is offered. Disharmony is perceived to thwart the work the music is meant to do. Likewise, a painting that does not adhere to prescribed specifications is not effective as a consecrated object of meditation and worship.

A related topic that will help develop this reflection on Buddhist aesthetics is that in addition to serving as tools for both sublime and mundane aims of Buddhist practitioners, the arts are also offerings. Ideally they are made as offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas who are the personifications of the qualities and characteristics aimed at by practitioners. They also serve as gifts to teachers, students, and people of social significance. And as scholars of Buddhism such as Robert Sharf and Chun-fang Yu have pointed out, Buddhist art has been a major vehicle for the spread of Buddhism through Asia, as valuable art objects are carried from one practitioner, patron, or seller to another. In regards to the transport of images throughout Buddhist Asia, Sharf wrote, “The spread of Buddhism throughout East Asia was, in short, coterminous with the spread of sacred icons; thus it is not surprising that the Chinese referred to Buddhism as the “religion of

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<sup>18</sup> Scholars of Tibetan monastic and ritual music have focused on Mindroling since it has long been well known as a major center for musical practices. See Daniel Scheidegger, “Tibetan Ritual Music: A General Survey with Special Reference to the Mindroling Tradition,” in *Opuscula Tibetana*, fasc. 19 (Rikon: Tibet Institute, 1988); Terry Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound,” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1979), and Michael Monhart, “Listening with the Gods.” They have all noted the centrality of aesthetic concerns in texts on music by Mindroling scholars. More recently the esteemed scholar of Tibetan music Mireille Helffer has turned her attention to Mindroling’s musical liturgy. Helffer, who has led the Western study of Tibetan music since the 1970s, has aptly demonstrated how Tibetans applied their own distinct aesthetics to the Buddhist Indic traditions they so enthusiastically imported. See Mireille Helffer, *Mchodrol: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994), 9. In direct reference to Mindroling, see Scheidegger and Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound.”

images.”<sup>19</sup>

Given the strong evidence that images, as works of visual art, were central in establishing and spreading Buddhism across Asia, and recognizing the major role images have played in shaping textual and practice traditions, as Chun-fang Yu’s work on the Chinese transformations of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in particular has made clear, then it becomes more apparent that the arts were a major site of influence throughout Buddhist history and across the Buddhist world.<sup>20</sup> This raises the important link between aesthetics and authority. If the quality of a work of art is determined in large part by whether it adheres to prescribed criteria, the people who determine those criteria have a particular relationship to art, and hold particular authority over what is considered good, graceful, beautiful and therefore what is powerful and effective.

It is widely accepted that there is scant individual freedom involved in deciding the basic form and proportion of images of Tibetan Buddhist deities. Portraits of living people that were meant to resemble the living subject, for instance the many purportedly realistic portraits in the Mindroling collections which are referred to in the monastic catalogues as “self-similar” (*nga ’dra ma*) were obviously more flexible in their prescribed criteria than images of deities, but in general proportions were based on the ideal models of buddhas. But again as stated above, the modern conception of the artist as a free spirit expressing individual experience is extremely new in the history of art so in this sense Tibet is not dissimilar from Western contexts.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Sharf, “Prolegomenon to the Study of Japanese Buddhist Icons,” in *Living Images, Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>20</sup> There are many studies on the adaptability of Buddhism to its diverse homes. A particularly useful one is Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

More specifically, in Tibet during the time this work is concerned with, unless an artist was extremely renowned, as was Terdak Lingpa's brother Lochen Dharmashri for instance, the identity of the artist was not a concern. This custom of anonymity of the artist relates in telling ways to contemporary research on aesthetics and community building, suggesting new ways to understand the impact Mindroling's artistic traditions might have impacted the shaping of the Tibetan polity, spearheaded at that time by Dalai Lama's new government.<sup>21</sup> For instance, as has been noted by the various contributors to *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* work on aesthetics and politics, a focus on collaborative creative practices, rather than on the individual artist, works to create "politically coherent communities."<sup>22</sup> By remaining anonymous, makers of art objects at Mindroling contributed to the aesthetic community cohering with the Dalai Lama's vision of a unified Tibetan polity. To elaborate, at Mindroling and in Tibetan art in general, (until the very recent development of Tibetan contemporary art practices) paintings and sculptures were not generally signed or otherwise marked with the identity of the artist. By extension, in monastic catalogues such as those kept at Mindroling to archive the material contents of the monastery, the number of specific items, their distinguishing features, size, and physical materials are described in detail, but the name of the artist is rarely mentioned. As already pointed out, the exception to this rule is the case where a significant lama or other important person was the maker. At Mindroling as elsewhere, a great artist was not only someone who could follow the rules exactly; he or she was also someone who had a particular quality or grace and the products of that grace had an influence on the community. Mindroling

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<sup>21</sup> Also relevant here is the influential work by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Beth Hinderleter, introduction to *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Beth Hinderleter et.al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 17.

scholars and artists were doubly authoritative since they also determined what was technically correct by writing manuals on painting, sculpture, grammar, making mandalas, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> At the same time they determined what was considered qualitatively “good” by training the sensibilities of aristocrats who would go on to be social and political leaders. Mindroling’s most notable area of aesthetic influence was the sphere of literature. But again, the monastery’s influence also extended into various other aesthetic spheres, including ritual music, dance and the making of mandalas, and even influencing sartorial styles and incense making. In short, Mindroling’s influence encompassed all the senses. It should be mentioned that in regards to the visual arts, Mindroling’s influence did not result in an immediately identifiable visual style, but was extended through manuals that described the correct procedures and techniques for making visual art objects.

Continuing to consider the relationship of aesthetics to the forming of communities, when Mindroling’s founders conceived of their new institution, ostensibly a small monastery in a quiet valley, their efforts were entwined with the Dalai Lama’s vision of a unified Tibetan polity under his centralized government. In becoming a center for ritual and art practices, and by extension aesthetics, Mindroling’s hierarchs shaped the tastes of the ruling class. Drawing the art and ritual technologies Mindroling was known for under the unifying rubric of aesthetics reveals imbrications across the interrelated spheres of religion, culture, and politics, governing both ethics and tastes. Rather than approaching aesthetics as a rarefied field or theory of art, by taking a broader view, this work approaches aesthetics as interdependent with politics and other aspects of social life and community building. This in turn allows a window into how those fields of

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<sup>23</sup> The Mindroling scholar and artist Lochen Dharmashri’s work was particularly influential in this area. His collected works (*gsung ’bum*) contains a large section on art practices and material culture.

authority can work together. Again drawing on *Communities of Sense*, “Aesthetics can be taken as the space in which the limits of the political itself are susceptible of being retraced or redrawn.”<sup>24</sup> This point is apt here given the role Mindroling played in regards to the Tibetan government and the greater Tibetan polity. And further, as Jacques Ranciere points out in his essay in that same volume, “A community of sense is a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility.”<sup>25</sup> As will be shown through this work, for a variety of reasons, in the Tibetan case the coherence of community created through aesthetics and played out through a shared worldview and sensibility was more binding and long lasting than the corresponding coherence on the political plane.

## ii. High Culture

This section considers the relationship between Buddhism, high culture and rulership across Asia throughout Buddhism’s history to help shape the context for this study. There are salient examples of this relationship from India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Mongolia, to name a few. And across its many homes, Buddhism’s tantric technologies for empowering and bolstering the perceived legitimacy and potency of rulers makes it especially appealing to the ruling class. In a connected turn, Buddhism has also persistently proved effective as a means of carrying the marks of high culture through literature, art, ethics and

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<sup>24</sup> Beth Hinderleter et al., *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Ranciere, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Beth Hinderleter et.al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 31.

aesthetics. This has occurred largely through the linkage of learning—in terms of writing and literacy, the arts, and sciences (especially astrology and medicine)—and Buddhism.<sup>26</sup>

Monasteries have long been the centers of learning in Buddhist cultures. They are also the physical sites where material wealth can be offered in order for Buddhists to accrue what is known as merit (*bsod nams*) according to the Buddhist view that ordained men and (to a lesser extent) ordained women are the “field of merit” for the laity in the Buddhist community. By extension monasteries have also been the centers of culture and aesthetics, as well as certain aspects of economics and commerce.<sup>27</sup> In Tibet in particular, the history of interconnection between Buddhism and high culture reaches back to the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, during Tibet’s imperial age in the seventh through ninth centuries.

Reflecting more generally on the intersections of religion, culture and rulership, the related issues of ideology or worldview, aesthetics, and authority arise. Part of the impetus for this project is that the relationships between these forces is demonstrated in a particular vivid way in the history of Mindroling. This is of interest beyond the frame of this work, since Buddhism is not by any means unique as a field in which worldviews, aesthetics, and authority interrelate; there are salient parallels with other religious and ideological systems including Christianity, Hinduism, and Communism, for instance. In all these systems the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities can be seen to relate to the cultivation of a particular worldview, and particular power structures. Fruitful comparisons with Buddhism can be found across the globe and

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Hallisey’s essay on Sinhalese poetics, for example, examines the connections between vernacular language, aesthetics, and politics. See Charles Hallisey, “Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 689-746.

<sup>27</sup> On the economic and business history of Buddhist monasticism in India, see Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

throughout history, for instance Christianity's role in the arts and governance of Europe, especially in regards to the culture of monasteries and royal or aristocratic patronage. Given the focus of this project, the politics of the connections between temporal leaders and the church is not as acutely relevant as the cultural ramifications, particularly in regards to the patronizing of the arts and developing educational systems through monasteries. These parallels between Buddhism and Christianity are drawn upon periodically throughout the following chapters.

Considering a parallel to the Tibetan case from within the world of Buddhism, Stanley Tambiah's work *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*,<sup>28</sup> on the historical connection between Buddhism and kingship, offers a good example. Tambiah suggests that Buddhism is a complex and integrated worldview that takes stock of the links between religion, politics, kingship, and society while also focusing on issues related to salvation.<sup>29</sup> In this regard Tambiah evokes Marcel Mauss's concept of totalization—"a total social fact"—to describe the Thais' integration of formulations and perspectives on the history of their culture and society. In keeping with Mauss's assertion that total social facts are "at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on,"<sup>30</sup> Tambiah is attentive to the function of apparent contradictions between doctrine and practice, myths and rites, in both canonical and post-canonical Buddhist literature, and stresses that these tensions continue to be active and productive in Thai Buddhist thought, even in the modern

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<sup>28</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-95.

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen and West, 1966), 76.

period.<sup>31</sup> A similar argument can be made for Buddhism in seventeenth-eighteenth century Tibet, where the Dalai Lama's central government worked in cooperation with local rulers and monastic estates like Mindroling, and this connection will be developed below.

But to continue to sketch out some comparative examples from the Buddhist world, before approaching the specifics of Mindroling, the relationship between Buddhism, rulership, and high culture is also well documented in the contexts of China and Japan. This is evident from countless scholarly studies such as Craig Clunas's *Art in China*,<sup>32</sup> and Patricia Berger's *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*,<sup>33</sup> as well as from indigenous works such the *Tale of Genji*, in which Buddhism is fluidly integrated with what might be considered more secular elements of high culture. Whether considering South or East Asian examples, in Buddhist settings, mastery of Buddhism qua Buddhism has been linked consistently to mastery of poetics and other art forms, such as painting. Turning towards the Tibetan context, this link manifests in the category of *rikné* (*rig gnas*) which is often translated as "arts and sciences" but which can also be translated as "culture." The link between Tibetan Buddhism and wider culture via *rikné* was a crucial element in establishing Mindroling's significance in regards to education of the ruling class, a topic addressed most directly in Chapter Four. Without pausing to focus in detail on *rikné* in this introduction, suffice it to say for now that this unified rubric explicitly includes the fields of knowledge that span artistic, scientific, and religious topics, thus demonstrating the connection between Buddhism, culture and aesthetics.

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<sup>31</sup> Tambiah, 515-530.

<sup>32</sup> Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997a).

<sup>33</sup> See Berger.

Still continuing in the comparative vein, looking not just at Tibet but across the Buddhist world, Buddhist literature has affected tastes and conventions, particularly in regards to poetics, widely perceived as the pinnacle of literary forms. An early and foundational example was the radical effect Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* had on the Sanskrit literature that followed after it. In sum, from studies that examine Buddhist high culture in China, Japan, and Sri Lanka, among others, it is clear that the materials of culture are a central priority in Buddhism. Emic Buddhist rhetoric on the ultimately illusory nature of reality, and the fundamentality of non-attachment and renunciation, directly relates to etic perceptions that Buddhist thought and therefore institutions are not concerned with material, but only with the "spiritual." To stress a point central to this project, Buddhist societies are in fact keenly concerned with the material world and its objects. Not only is there a focus on ritual and sacred or consecrated objects, but overlapping that aspect, there is also the usual human concern with wealth, the management of property and abundance. This entails the usual tendency for people to want to accumulate valuable objects, as well as systems to mitigate material desires and keep things in the right channels (i.e. in keeping with the values of Buddhism). And again, while asceticism is a vital strain in Buddhist culture, it does not preclude a concurrent attention to the correct accumulation and use of materials. This has been the case since Buddhism's earliest institutional roots were laid in India, evidenced by the work of Gregory Schopen and others.

Other scholars of Buddhism whose work bears useful light on this project include Ronald Davidson, particularly in regard to his political theory of tantra.<sup>34</sup> Also relevant is Craig Clunas's

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: Social History of the Tantric Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); idem, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

work on material culture and its central place in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> Charles Hallisey's study of poetic aesthetics already mentioned presents a model framework for approaching the broader connection between Buddhism and aesthetics, which in the scope of this project include overlapping theories on the senses, art, ritual, ethics, and taste. These expansive boundaries lead naturally to the relations between aesthetics and authority, a central underlying concern here.

Taking a long view of these questions in order to access a more meaningful perspective and looking back to the time of the historical Buddha, it is significant that Buddhist monasteries have always depended on the patronage of the laity for their maintenance and survival. This is reflective of the fundamental connection that binds together the limbs of the fourfold Buddhist community—the Sangha—the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Because Buddhist practitioners, like everyone else, require material support and sustenance to live, it is and has always been necessary for Buddhist ascetics and renunciates to pay at least peripheral attention to the interests and tastes of their sponsors. By extension, in all its diverse homes Buddhism has managed to appeal to different sectors of patrons and practitioners by cultivating diverse arts and media and by adapting to suit the particular needs of the society at hand. This will be particularly salient in considering the topic of Mindroling's connections to Tibet's ruling class. Since pragmatically the most desirable patrons are the wealthiest and most powerful, at Mindroling and across Buddhist cultures, there has been a connection between the textual and artistic production of monastic institutions and the tastes, concerns, and inclinations of the upper classes. This is not to say that appealing to patrons entirely dictates what Buddhist practitioners do or defines what kind of literary and artistic works they produce, but rather to stress that pleasing patrons and appealing to the upper classes is and has always been a necessary aspect of Buddhist institution

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<sup>35</sup> Clunas, *Art in China*.

building as well as individual practice. This is of course the case in contexts besides Buddhism, and is probably common to all cultures where the wealthy patronize artistic, religious, and other creative projects. How this age-old dynamic played out at Mindroling is a central concern of this project.

Accepting the overarching role of patronage in Buddhism, this dissertation will show that in regards to the particular seventeenth-eighteenth century Tibetan scene, it was not the case that the *merely* wealthy dictated how the arts and ritual practices associated with Buddhism developed. At Mindroling, equally important to material wealth were the closely connected factors of personal charisma and the other currencies of cultural capital that help determine social hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu's extensive work on topics related to taste, education, social standing, and authority plays a strong supporting role in analyzing these factors at Mindroling, and will be referred to throughout the following chapters.<sup>36</sup> In summary, at Mindroling diverse forms of capital converged in one institution; material wealth was only one of several defining factors. Others included the charisma of its founding family, historical precedent of positions of power in Lhasa society, high social standing in the contemporary milieu, reincarnation claims, and connections with other significant people past and present. As will be explained in detail in Chapter Two, the institution of Mindroling was based around one family, and at the time of its foundation was focused in particular on one charismatic individual, the visionary Terdak Lingpa already mentioned. The relationship of these prestige factors and currencies of cultural capital is crucial to the story of Mindroling and early modern Tibetan history more generally.

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<sup>36</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* with Jean-Claude Passeron (London: Sage, 1990); Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint Martin, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laretta Clough (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996).

Retaining the long view presented above, and considering Buddhism in general as opposed to Buddhism in Tibet particularly, the connection of wealth, power, religion and culture is well developed and well documented. In Buddhist settings such connections tend to be surprising given over-simplified conceptions of Buddhism as an exclusively ascetic tradition. As a hinge between religious, social, and political spheres, in Buddhism there is an abundance of ritual material grouped under the rubric of *abhisheka*. These rites of unction employ tropes related to kingship to “anoint,” “initiate,” and “empower” the individual practitioner. These empowering rituals, like all Buddhist practices in the ideal sense, are designed to conquer the Buddhist foes of negative emotions and ignorance. Anyone with permission from a Buddhist master can take part in these rites, regardless of any actual relationship to kingship, but when secular or political rulers receive empowerments from Buddhist masters, they can multiply serve to bolster the perceived legitimacy of the ruler in his or her mind and in the minds of others. Again, examples can be drawn from most Buddhist cultures, and they are rife in Tibet.

The hierarchs of Mindroling, with whom this project gradually will acquaint the reader, spent a great deal of their daily lives performing such rites for leaders from across the Tibetan world. Most important for the scope of this project, they regularly performed empowerments (and many other rituals and teachings) for the Dalai Lama, the Regents (*sde srid*) and their closest associates. It should be kept in mind, however, that the Mindroling lamas also had close ritual connections with powerful people from all Tibetan Buddhist sects and many distinct lineages.

Given the scope of this paper, the ongoing link between Mindroling lamas and the Dalai Lamas and their courts is the most salient example of this type of relationship, harking back to the Yuan when Sakya lamas took up the role of Imperial Preceptors (*ti shri*, Chinese: *di shi*) at

the Mongol court, and “empowered” Mongol rulers and their coterie, as well as guiding them in all manner of religious, ethical, and aesthetic concerns.<sup>37</sup> The relationship between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama was modeled on the Yuan dynasty connection between the Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan and the Sakya lama, Pakpa. This is made clear by the fact that the Dalai Lama bestowed the title Imperial Preceptor on Terdak Lingpa, just as Kublai bestowed it on Pakpa. Both cases are based on the Indian model of patron and priest, known in Tibetan as *chöyon* (*mchod yon*). This role was extremely significant and had strong ramifications in the interconnected political, religious, and cultural spheres, as this project will show.

Again looking beyond Tibet, the potency of Buddhist rituals has compelled rulers in India, China, Japan, and other Buddhist areas to lavishly support religious teachers and their institutions.<sup>38</sup> This common thread is foundational to the story of Mindroling. Just as the relationship between Buddhist asceticism and aesthetics is explored here with an eye towards fruitful tensions, to point out the ties between religious capital, political power, and institutional stability is not to discount ideals of renunciation as foundational features of Buddhist cultures. It is rather to point out how seemingly opposing paradigms— institutions devoted to spiritual

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<sup>37</sup> There are many illuminating studies of the relationship between Sakya hierarchs and the Yuan court. Useful references include Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983); Elliot Sperling’s work for instance “Part One: Historical Facts,” in *Authenticating Tibet: Answers to China’s 100 Questions*, ed. Anne-Marie Blondeau and Katia Buffetille (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 11-19; Jonathan C. Gold, *The Dharma’s Gatekeepers: Sakya Pandita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); and Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yuan Sa-Skya Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> For a well developed study of such rites and their social impact, see Riyuchi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kukai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

cultivation, a withdrawal from worldly engagements, and detailed training in ritual and philosophical frameworks on the one hand, and the need for material support and funding, a fascination with and concentration of treasured materials and objects, and a milieu where people have the time and leisure to study and create art—can productively coexist. In Tibet and elsewhere, the tension between these priorities in Buddhism is a powerfully creative force. And again, it is vividly manifest at the Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Mindroling, the central subject of this study. In a similar vein, this project looks at tensions between regional and national identities and cosmopolitan attitudes, and more generally between the old and the new. Broadening the scope still further, such fruitful paradoxes exist beyond Buddhism as well, and can be a rich area of cross-cultural comparison and reflection.

In Tibet, the history of rulership and the consolidation of diffuse authority is inextricable from the history of Buddhism's migration and assimilation. Buddhism's time tested technologies for empowering rulers, particularly in the Vajrayana or tantric sphere, and Buddhism's many media for carrying the marks of high culture, including literature, art, and aesthetics more generally have made it particularly well suited to the legitimating efforts of rulers. This was true when Buddhism first took root in Tibet, exemplified by the relationship between the King Tri Songdetsen and the tantric master Guru Rinpoche, and it was true in the time this dissertation focuses on, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The interdependent and multifaceted bond between the Dalai Lamas (especially but not exclusively the Fifth), and the hierarchs of Mindroling (again especially but not only its founder Terdak Lingpa), is an early modern example of the same productive dynamic, the antecedents for which reach back to the origins of Buddhism in India and span Buddhist cultures.

Like Christianity, Buddhism has been an engine for the arts and high culture since its earliest history. In many of the societies where Buddhism thrives, it has long been associated with the aristocracy and ruling class. It has bolstered the authority of rulers and provided for the development and spread of artistic forms and practices. And again like Christianity, Buddhist institutions throughout their long history have been centers of cultural production, from the literary arts to music and dance. The content of the artistic production of monasteries has not been limited by doctrinal prescriptions. At Mindroling and in many other cases, developments in areas not directly related to doctrine, such as erotic poetry and medical technologies, have taken place within the monastery's walls, since the monastery was the hub of learning in general. Likewise, proper deportment and a sense of what was "good" were cultivated there, similar to other monastic settings, and in keeping with the monastic code of the Vinaya. These Buddhist concerns are fundamentally linked to aesthetics.

### iii. Cosmopolitanism

Turning now to another of the project's central terms not commonly associated with Buddhism and Tibet, it will be helpful to clarify what is meant here by "cosmopolitanism" and to reflect on its suitability to a study of the seventeenth-eighteenth century Tibet, and the relevance to Mindroling in particular. First, applied to an early modern context the term cannot be understood in the same way it applies to a world made up of nation states. At the same, cosmopolitanism here does not suggest the absence of a strong sense of particular identity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A relevant study of cosmopolitanism and its complex relationship to nationalism is Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 24-26, 7-8, 13-14.

While this early modern moment in Tibet was also characterized by an urge towards solidifying and bolstering a nascent notion of a Tibetan polity rooted in Tibet's long past imperial age, more relevant to the purposes of this paper is a usage of cosmopolitanism that is not limited to a context of nation states or other polities, but rather a more broadly encompassing worldview or mentality.<sup>40</sup>

In the early modern Tibetan Buddhist context of Mindroling, cosmopolitanism arose as a far-reaching and actively cultivated broad mindedness in regards to regional, sectarian, cultural, linguistic, and even gender boundaries. In this sense cosmopolitanism, which I suggest was expressed by the founders of Mindroling in their persistent use of the term *chok rimé* (*phyogs ris med*) implies an integrated worldview that valorizes a boundarylessness in all spheres, social, cultural, religious and so forth. This Tibetan term, commonly abbreviated to *rimé* has come to be associated with the “nonsectarian movement” some Western scholars have identified as having begun in nineteenth century Eastern Tibet by figures such as Jamyang Khentsé Wangpo. Again, it is important to stress that the use of the term *rimé*, which this project proposes to align with a cosmopolitan sensibility, is not limited to one particular sphere, be it political, cultural, or in this case religious or sectarian. Without digressing here to analyze the applicability of the term *rimé* to the “nonsectarian movement” it is important to stress that this is not to suggest

“cosmopolitanism” as a translation of *rimé*. Rather, the suggestion is that *rimé* can be understood

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the relationship of Imperial Tibet to the development of a sense of Tibetan nation, see Georges Dreyfus, “Cherished Memories, Cherished Communities: Proto-nationalism in Tibet,” in *The History of Tibet: Volume 2 The Medieval Period: c. AD 850-1895, the Development of Buddhist Paramountcy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003b); idem, “Proto-nationalism in Tibet,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the international Association for Tibetan Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 205-218.

as a mentality or worldview that fits into a broad definition of cosmopolitanism.<sup>41</sup> Considering this usage in a wider Buddhist context, the Mahayana rhetoric of dedicating oneself to the well-being of others absolutely and without exception, can also be understood as a cosmopolitan philosophy. It calls for becoming a true “citizen of the world” embracing all beings equally. And so in this sense cosmopolitanism is very much in keeping with Buddhist ideals.<sup>42</sup>

Whereas *rimé* is at root a technical philosophical term from the Dzokchen (*rdzogs chen*) or “Great Perfection” tradition for which Mindroling was famous, it is often also used by Terdak Lingpa and his cohort in a more general sense, explored in Chapter Three. In a similar move, cosmopolitanism can be treated in a global sense, not limited to one limited sphere such as culture or politics. In short, cosmopolitanism in general and *rimé* in particular can be understood as “a mentality” or “worldview” of inclusiveness and expansiveness. The key point is that cosmopolitanism can be approached as a metaphor for a way of life and not as a completely literal model. This proposition is developed further in the coming chapters.

Returning to the theme of productive tensions mentioned above, here again we find a tension between a strongly particular identity developed at Mindroling and the openness of a *rimé*-style cosmopolitanism. In Lhasa and the Tibetan region more widely, a distinctive sense of Tibetanness was being cultivated through the centralizing of authority, the development of

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<sup>41</sup> A helpful meditation on the theme of “mentality” and its applications is Michel Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities*, trans. Eamon O’Flaherty (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990). In his introduction to this useful collection of essays Vovelle describes mentality as “visions of the world” a definition he attributes to Robert Mandrou, 5. In this study I use “worldview.”

<sup>42</sup> It will also be suggested below that “chos srid zung ’brel” can be understood as a “just moral state” that is in keeping with ideals of cosmopolitanism as well as Buddhist ideals.

commonly shared calendrical events and so forth.<sup>43</sup> This did not obviate an openness to influences from South, Central, and East Asia, as well as strains of influence from further afield, such as were introduced by the Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri.<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that the radical boundarylessness implied by the concept of *rimé* was achieved, either by Terdak Lingpa and his lineage at Mindroling, nor by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his government who sponsored Mindroling's founding. As an ideal of openness and limitlessness, *rimé* is just that, an ideal. However, if approached as a cosmopolitan worldview, as this project suggests it manifested at Mindroling, *rimé* proves to be feasible and even pragmatic. This possibility is explored at length in the following pages.

### *Tibet and Culture*

“Tibetan high culture” is a rare combination of words. Tibetan myths and folk stories as well as Buddhist histories depict a culture that blends a wild and even “barbaric” nature with a deep reverence for and inclination towards Buddhism. According to a common Tibetan narrative

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<sup>43</sup> The effort to develop a common sense of Tibetanness under a centralized government headed by the Dalai Lamas has been addressed by several scholars, including Janet Gyatso and Kurtis Schaeffer. One especially relevant article on the topic is Kurtis Schaeffer, “Ritual, Festival, and Authority under the Fifth Dalai Lama,” in *Power, Politics and the Reinvention of Tradition in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Tibet: Proceedings of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Xth Seminar*, Oxford University, ed. Bryan Cuevas and Kurtis Schaeffer (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006), 187-202.

<sup>44</sup> On the life and travels of this Italian monk, and for an introduction to the place of Jesuit influence in eighteenth century Lhasa life, see Ippolito Desideri, *Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri S.J.* trans. Michael Sweet, ed. Leonard Zwilling (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010); and Trent Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

theme, ever since Buddhism arrived in Tibet from India, Buddhist masters and their teachings have continually tempered the wild and rough tendencies of the Tibetan people and landscape. Since it is the quality of wildness that makes Tibet especially fertile ground for tantric Buddhism, that quality is highlighted rather than shied away from or diminished. If Tibet's inhabitants were completely tamed by Buddhism, and if the wildness and intensity sometimes depicted as barbarism and savagery were completely and permanently transformed, Tibet would no longer need Buddhism, since Buddhism's purpose would be complete. Instead, Tibet's essential wildness remains intact, according to the common Tibetan narrative, and can therefore continually interact with Buddhist teachings and practice, in a kind of ongoing cultural alchemy. This partly explains why the rhetoric of savagery appeals to Tibetan Buddhists, despite dovetailing with a certain anti-Tibetan bias. Chinese nationalists have picked up similar rhetoric to that of the Buddhist narratives, making claims of Tibetan barbarism, although in the Chinese nationalist version, it is China, not Buddhism, that must tame Tibet's nature. Given this overlap, in a sense Tibetans and Tibetophiles perpetuate a characterization that is linked to the dominating presence of the Chinese Communist government in Tibet.<sup>45</sup> This characterization is also a decisive factor in explaining why more attention has not been paid to high culture in Tibet.

Mindroling's origin myth also shares in the rhetoric of Tibet as savage and untamed. As the next Chapter describes in more detail, Terdak Lingpa's mythic family genealogy traces back to a god who came down from his heavenly realm to cavort with Tibetan herders, and who was unable to return to his home in the sky due to having been sullied by contact with the humans. He remained as a regal eccentric among the nomads. His descendants, known by the name Nyo

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<sup>45</sup> In a move similar to that elucidated in Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

(*gnyos* or *myos*), eventually established Mindroling.

Turning now to the specific context this project is concerned with, at the time of Mindroling's founding in 1676 Lhasa was the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist world, the center of a newly unified Tibetan polity, a cosmopolitan crossroads and a Mecca for East and Inner Asian Buddhist pilgrims. It was also a seductive attraction for aspiring missionaries, traders, explorers, and imperialists of various hues. The image many Westerners have of Tibet as extremely isolated is not accurate for this time period, and reflects later Qing restrictions on travel to India, as well as twentieth century attempts of some Tibetan rulers to resist imperialist influences through strategies of isolationism.<sup>46</sup> The institution of Mindroling, based at the small elite monastic seat in South Central Tibet, extended a religious and cultural influence far beyond its monastery walls, becoming a hub for ritual and art practices spanning what this project posits as the field of Tibetan aesthetics. For reasons already mentioned and further explored in the following chapters, Mindroling's special purview encompassed the materials of high culture. The institution embodied and imparted practices for being a cultured and powerful member of society.

Again, since aesthetics can carry the senses, the material world, the arts, and ethics in its basket, it is a primary domain of Buddhist interest, although it is rarely framed as such. Its connections to politics are also under-acknowledged, and crucial. Taking Mindroling as a particular example of a wider phenomenon, this project addresses these topics as interrelated and interdependent. By drawing together themes that are often segregated, namely Tibetan Buddhism, aesthetics, cosmopolitanism and high culture, the bounds of how we conceive of Tibetan culture

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<sup>46</sup> Toni Huber traces this closure to Qing imposed restrictions on travel, especially to India, following the Gorkha-Tibetan war in 1792. See Toni Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage & The Tibetan Reinvention of Tibetan Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 233.

can accommodate more of its actual aspects than fit in narrowly defined perspectives that strictly associate Tibetan culture with doctrinal Buddhism, ritual, and folk culture. By relating the Tibetan case to other contexts, Buddhist and otherwise, this framework calls for an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on the expertise of various related fields.

To continue with the overview of Mindroling begun above, this institution was not different from other monasteries in its basic components, focused as its founders were on creating an environment that was amenable to keeping vows, perfecting and codifying ritual techniques, and educating its pupils in the fields of Buddhist knowledge. One of the most important ways Mindroling was different from other monasteries was its particular relationship to the Central Tibetan government and the Fifth Dalai Lama's early modern vision of a unified Tibetan polity. By providing not only monastics, but also powerful lay leaders with Buddhist training and education, Mindroling played a distinct and crucial role in the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and broader culture, society, and the state. To illustrate this point in Tibetan terms, one of the great preoccupations of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his government was the concept of *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*), the merging of religion and worldly authority. Although Mindroling was situated at the periphery of the political sphere, in senses explored below, its ties to the Dalai Lama's government and its dominance in the fields of aesthetics and culture exemplify the urge to unify Dharma and worldly life.

Unlike scholarly studies of China and Japan and more recently South and Southeast Asia, which take for granted the presence of high culture in those societies, in studies of Tibet as well as in popular Western perceptions, the culture is rarely considered "high" at all. It might not be immediately obvious why this matters. The point is certainly not to valorize or reify high culture as a fixed phenomenon, or to imply that the practices associated with the term in various contexts

are more or less important than other “folk,” “popular,” or even “low” culture. This project takes for granted that these are categories are constructs which can help us think constructively about culture. The main point is to assert that Tibet exhibits qualities that fit in a general definition of high culture, and to suggest that if the same qualities were exhibited in another context, they would be more likely to be perceived as fitting into a category of high culture. The aim is in part to ask what are we missing by failing to see Tibetan culture in this light, and then to suggest some possible answers to that query.

Continuing in this vein, even scholars devoted to Tibetan topics tend to unconsciously adopt some tinge of the rhetoric that Tibetan culture is somewhat crude, “primitive” or unshaped, or even that Tibetan culture does not really exist at all, at least not beyond the boundaries of Buddhism.<sup>47</sup> This sometimes subtle, sometimes gross prejudice is reinforced from various directions, and has disastrous effects, if not on the global political level (which might well be the case) then certainly on the level of respect and funding Tibetan studies receives within the academy.

To begin to consider why this overly narrow perspective is so prominent, as this chapter has already addressed, Tibetan people have long self-identified, at least rhetorically, as “red-faced barbarians” and thus as the perfect objects for Vajrayana Buddhism’s transformative technologies. There is a high degree of pride in that conception. Holding to the view that intense, savage energy is the perfect fodder to nourish and sustain Vajrayana Buddhism, Tibet has a fundamentally ambivalent and highly dynamic self-identity. This is not a troublesome contradiction, but a highly productive paradox. Again, the land itself is characterized as both

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<sup>47</sup> A case in point: Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

wild and sacred, and the people as savage and devout.<sup>48</sup> In the life stories of Tibetan Buddhism's mythic tantric parents, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel, the narratives are fueled by the continually reiterated and reinforced sense that eighth century Tibetans and the land they occupied was out of control and required "taming." In short, the power and dynamism of the land and its people went hand and hand with being ripe for tantric training. Since the work of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism is not done until all sentient beings are enlightened, this relationship of Tibetan savagery and tantric potential is harmoniously unbroken as long as there teachers, teachings, and unenlightened beings.

So the characterization of Tibetans as wild does not end with the arrival of Padmasambhava and the enlightenment of his female partner, the Tibetan Yeshé Tsogyel. Taking a moment to reflect on their life stories will help illustrate the main point here. These two exemplars together with the Tibetan King Tri Songdetsen form a mythic triad (alongside the triad between Padmasambhava, Śāntarakṣita, and the King in their collaboration to build Samyé monastery). As the story goes, Tri Songdetsen freed his wife Yeshé Tsogyel from the bondage of their conventional marriage so she could practice as Padmasambhava's consort. In the same move, he provided Padmasambhava with two students (himself and Yeshé Tsogyel), as well as patronage, and the perfect partner for Padmasambhava's own tantric practice. This narrative reverberates throughout the life stories of countless men and women who practice Tibetan Buddhism, and further exemplifies the relationship between Tibet and Buddhism, via the ruling class. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the story of the Padmasambhava, Yeshé

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<sup>48</sup> On related topics see Janet Gyatso, "Down with the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet," *Tibet Journal* XXI.4 (1987): 34-46; and Jacob Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Tsogyel, and Tri Songdetsen is directly funneled into the foundation of Mindroling. One important example of the way this happened is that the Fifth Dalai Lama sent a consort to practice with Mindroling's founder, Terdak Lingpa, around the time Mindroling was founded. This complex event will be considered in detail in Chapter Three. For now, the central point is that the relationship between the wildness of Tibet and Tibetans and Buddhism is reiterated in Tibetan Buddhism's foundational narrative as well as Mindroling's.

To return now to the themes of aesthetics and cosmopolitanism addressed above, just as in other Buddhist cultures, throughout Tibetan Buddhist literature there is abundant evidence of the concern with the material world. Biographies and monastic catalogues, two major genres of Tibetan writing, take very different tacks in their recording of materials and valued objects. Biographies tend to weave them into the narrative, illustrating the significance of events with material exchanges, consecrations, and ritual events. Monastic catalogues, by contrast, weave narratives about the monastery they document into the lists and description of the materials the monastery comprised. Both examples of genres pay close attention to objects such as paintings and sculptures, temple and stupa architecture, cloth and clothing, ritual objects such as horns, drums, bells and vajras, relics from the cremated remains of previous teachers, monies donated, etc. Both genres take it for granted that material concerns are central to Buddhism. Far from precluding a concurrent focus on more "Buddhist" topics related to meditation and renunciation, they are parts of the same fabric of Buddhist culture. In fact, even solitary meditation is concerned with the senses and their objects, and so in some sense relates to the sphere of aesthetics.

To investigate more closely why symptoms of high culture are rarely recognized in the context of Tibet, discussions about Buddhism's role in Tibetan culture tend to focus on the ways

Buddhist doctrine jells with or contradicts Tibetan people's "actual" way of being. There is also a tendency to treat the question as if Tibetan culture is equatable to "Buddhism," no more, no less. While it is erroneous to imagine that all of Tibetan life and culture fits into a single category, it is a also mistake to approach the question as if religion were an isolated or isolatable phenomenon. In many contexts, and certainly in the Tibetan context, religion is a permeable and multivalent sphere of activities and ways of seeing that are intimately related to countless other spheres. So, while there is more to Tibetan culture than "Buddhism" *per se*, it is also true that Buddhism pervades Tibetan culture. The problem here has to do with an inclination to make clear distinctions in a foggy climate. Buddhism, and religion more generally, is a fluid, creative, synthetic system, ever changing as it moves and adapts to different environments and conditions. Tibetan culture and civilization is not purely "Buddhist" in any strict (doctrinal) sense of that term, but it is also true that few areas of Tibetan life are not in some sense inflected by Buddhism, whether touched by Buddhist themes or shaped by a Buddhist worldview.

On the other end of the spectrum, disillusioned perspectives on Tibetan culture seek to reveal the discrepancies and hypocrisies of Buddhism as lived by Tibetans. Tibetans Buddhists themselves have a long and colorful history of critiquing each other for hypocrisy and pointing out manipulations of religious authority. Today, some of the harshest critics are students of Buddhism whose fantasies have been disrupted by the realities of Tibetan culture, which are as nuanced and sometimes as unenlightened as any other human culture. Such critics find fault for instance with concerns about money and material among Tibetan Buddhists and their institutions, rather than seeing the attention to materials as a natural and necessary part of institution building. There are of course, many cases of corruption and hypocrisy in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. There have been and are dirty politics and power plays, in the midst of genuine endeavors for a

more enlightened state of being and a more humane culture. These tendencies are not mutually exclusive. Tibetans genuinely can valorize Buddhist ideals and even strive for enlightenment, and still accumulate wealth, struggle over power, and build institutions.

And again, given the aim of this project it should be stressed that although Buddhism ramifies most or all aspects of Tibetan society and culture, Tibetan civilization is not reducible to Buddhism by any common definition of the term. Tibetan culture is neither fully enlightened nor entirely devoid of enlightened aspects. The point here is that taking an interest in the world of objects, material phenomena, and wealth, does not guarantee corruption, and is not in itself a contradiction of Buddhist values. Renunciation is about non-attachment, not utter denial, and like all institutions everywhere, Buddhist institutions need to take stock of worldly concerns and necessities in order to function. To reiterate, this study seeks a fresh perspective on the relationship of Buddhism and culture in Tibet and posits that the long-standing relationship between Buddhism and high culture, already well documented in India, China, Japan and elsewhere, is exemplified by the Tibetan case as well. By making comparisons to nearby and distant contexts, from Thai Buddhism to medieval Christianity and Jesuit universities, this portrait of Mindroling also aims to speak to the relationships between religion and culture more broadly.

Recognizing that Tibetan Buddhism comprises a great deal more than doctrine, and Tibetan culture engages with Buddhism in ways that are creative and lead to growth in the arts and aesthetics as well as giving more diverse and effective expression to the purposes of “religion.” As the following chapters will illustrate, Buddhism and culture, whether “high” or “low,” are closely related in ways that do not fit comfortably into overly pious or rigidly cynical tendencies of Tibet’s admirers and critics. Buddhism, in all the settings where it thrives, is

marked by material concerns and aesthetic sensibilities as much as it concerns the related spheres of ethics and philosophy. Buddhism certainly shapes the “arts” of Tibet, but at the same time, the arts, and perhaps most particularly literature, express concerns, interests and tastes that go far beyond what is generally defined as “Buddhist.” This point needs to be stressed since noticing this relationship stretches the scope of our view of Buddhism, and raises the challenge of grappling with unexamined assumptions.

Moving now to the specific example of Mindroling and its role in Tibetan Buddhism and high culture, an analogy with the Western University model arises. How should we categorize an institution—a school and a monastery—that was a center for Great Perfection; the place for yogins and lamas from all over Tibet to acquire pedigrees to teach and practice; a school for aristocrats who would go on to be military generals, civil servants, and rulers; the training ground for the literati (often the same individuals) who wrote somewhat scandalous, sometimes erotic, and highly erudite works, as well as what is widely considered the first Tibetan novel and the first Tibetan secular autobiography? Simultaneously and inseparably, Mindroling was where the most renowned lamas came to study esoteric meditation techniques such as lucid dreaming, and to learn *rikné* (*rig gnas*) the fields of arts and sciences critical to the education of a layperson in a Tibetan Buddhist context. As Chapter Four shows, Mindroling was famous for *rikné*, and this focus is the primary factor in making Mindroling similar to a Western university, in a way somewhat distinct from other Buddhist monasteries where *rikné* were not a major focus. Leaving the details of *rikné* aside for now, the analogy to a university needs more attention here.

Established at a seminal moment of Tibetan history, Mindroling reflects many of the symptoms of the modern project in regards to cultivating a sense of national identity, in this case through its influence over aesthetics, and creating a centralized bureaucracy through educating

the ruling class. Until the 1950's high profile lay people went to Mindroling or Mindroling's satellite schools for training in all the arts and sciences as well as in deportment and taste. The students who held a Mindroling degree were primed for positions of power in the government and society. Artistically, the writing they produced after studying at Mindroling was of the most refined and erudite character, employing Indic tropes and complex grammar that could only be mastered with years of intensive training. The Mindroling education was in a very important sense Buddhist, and yet the content of alumni writing includes plentiful sex, power, warfare and intrigues. Is such writing a perversion of their Buddhist training? Rather, it stretches the bounds of Buddhism's concerns, and extends Buddhism's influence into spheres beyond the walls of the monastery and the pages of the doctrinal text. This stretching of boundaries is where some of the most valuable findings of this project arise. Being educated at Mindroling brought a prestige and mystique as well as the skills to stretch boundaries in this way. This topic will receive detailed attention later, especially in Chapter Four.

Now, to help lay the ground for Chapter Two on Mindroling's historical background, it should be pointed out that even during its most influential periods, Mindroling remained small. It was also elite and prestigious, similar to an Ivy League university on a small scale. The cultural forms that were crystallized in Mindroling texts and practices generally were not framed as innovations, but as revivifications of ancient teachings that had gradually been "corrupted." Examples include large-scale public rituals,<sup>49</sup> literary forms such as grammar and poetics, handbooks for making art, incense, and musical liturgies. The intention for the founders of

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, see Dalton, "The Uses of the Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo in the Development of the Rning-ma School of Tibetan Buddhism," idem, "Recreating the Rnyingma School."

Mindroling was that these reinvented traditions would be done more purely at Mindroling; to learn them at Mindroling was to learn them well.

### *Overview of the Theoretical Frame*

Michel Foucault's work on "heterotopia" is a useful lens through which to look at Mindroling's role in early modern Tibet.<sup>50</sup> While Foucault's concept of heterotopia is not the only important theory applied in this work, it is less well known than the other major theoretical influences. Therefore this section will pay it what might seem to be disproportionate attention.

In brief, according to Foucault, real "heterotopias" work in conjunction with imagined "utopias," unreal places that function on a conceptual level. He asserts:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.

Especially worthy of notice here is the phrase "effectively enacted utopia." In a sense all Buddhist monasteries share this aspect, and this dissertation will argue that Mindroling is an especially vivid example of a real, material space that effectively enacted an unreal, imagined

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, "Des Espace Autres" (Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias), trans Jay Miskowiec, in Paris: *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 1984. According to Foucault.info: "This article was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death." Accessed April 14, 2010.

utopia. In particular, as its very name suggests, Mindroling enacted the Buddha realm known as Akanishta. This point will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Further, heterotopias can serve different purposes at different historical moments, depending on the cultural climate; they are malleable and change with the passage of time. Especially relevant to this story about Mindroling, “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” As has already been mentioned numerous times, there is a prevalent theme of paradox and seeming incompatibilities in Mindroling’s history. Shifting to a specifically Buddhist framework, Mindroling reconciled incompatibilities in a way that is in keeping with the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths of ultimate and relative reality, the nonduality of samsara and nirvana, and the general Buddhist tolerance for paradox. This feature too will be a recurrent focus throughout the following chapters, since again, this section serves as just a brief introduction to the concept and its applications to Mindroling, reserving the more focused discussion for later.

Foucault’s comments on heterotopias resonate here since Mindroling was several spaces at once: noble estate, esoteric meditation retreat, martial ritual center, training ground for bureaucrats, intellectual haven, and center for the arts to name a few examples. The ritual, intellectual, and artistic functions of Mindroling involved training in dance, music, astrology, medicine, calligraphy, poetics, making incense and mandalas. At first glance, these practices are not incompatible with each other and are not difficult to reconcile with the religious purposes of the monastery since ritual is the keystone religious institutional activity and since the arts go hand in hand with ritual in Buddhism. A sense of incompatibility does arise though when it is noted that Mindroling and its satellite monasteries (discussed in Chapter Two) functioned as training grounds for the Tibetan literati who created works of poetry and prose out of keeping

with monastic norms, i.e., erotic poetry, and for political leaders whose practical training at Mindroling focused on handwriting and other formal writing skills but whose education also included a far wider range of esoteric topics. In this regard Mindroling exemplified Foucault's description of a heterotopia.

To expand on this point, perhaps the most striking examples of the incompatibility Foucault attributes to heterotopias found at Mindroling were the cultivation of visionary experiences through training in the "highest" Tibetan Buddhist technique of Great Perfection, and the development of the skills necessary for bureaucrats. Imagine a Buddhist teacher like Terdak Lingpa whose young pupil would move on to a career in politics, or whose adult disciple was the ruler of a large populace, giving the student instructions on cultivating awareness during sleep and seeing the practical realities of his administrative duties as empty of inherent existence, in the same breath that he encouraged fair treatment of different subjects and corrected the fine points of the student's grammar. Moreover, the teacher himself was both a famously charismatic visionary and the head of a complex monastic institution, with all the practical and material responsibilities of running a school or university. Another example is the simultaneous cultivation of martial ritual practices, for which Mindroling and its sister Nyingma monasteries such as Dorjé Drak (*rdo rje brag*) were famous, and the basic Buddhist ethic of non-violence. On the surface such instructions and practices appear to be incompatible. The fact that they were engaged in simultaneously at Mindroling again gives rise to insights on the relationship of Buddhist doctrine and culture, of Buddhist education and worldly engagements, and more basically of nirvana and samsara or ultimate and relative reality. This reconciling of opposites is in keeping with Foucault's definition of heterotopia.

Moving onto the subject of time, Foucault states, “The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.” In this regard, heterotopias are either characterized as being linked to the accumulation of time, for instance in the cases of libraries and museums, or being linked to the fleeting nature of time, in the case of festivals, for example. In its different roles, Mindroling experienced both these links to time. It functioned very much like a museum, as Chapter Two will show its *karchak* (*dkar chag*) or monastic catalogues to illustrate. In brief, Mindroling housed aesthetic (artistic and ritual) objects that embodied the history of the place and its inhabitants. Mindroling’s founders and their descendents kept close account of these materials in detailed archival records. In regards to Foucault’s second example, of the festival, during the large-scale rituals conducted at Mindroling, it functioned much like a temporary fairground as people would travel from across the Tibetan Buddhist regions to gather together, receive teachings and empowerments and, as Chapter Five will show, sometimes throw raucous parties very uncharacteristic of monastic norms.

Another relevant feature of Foucault’s concept is that heterotopias have a special relationship to opening and closure. In other words entry into a heterotopia is either exclusive, as in the case of a “sacred” space that requires ritual purifications, or compulsory, as in the case of a prison. While it does not seem to have been the case that all the students at Mindroling were members of Tibet’s highest social class, Mindroling’s ties to the Dalai Lama’s government, its reputation as a center for esoteric Great Perfection practice, the prestigious nature of the pedigree acquired at Mindroling, and the effort to keep the monastery small, created a definitively elite environment. As Chapter Four will show, students had to be screened and vetted since there simply was not space for an unregulated accumulation of monks as the monastery’s prestige

grew; there had to be a degree of exclusivity at work. And on the other hand, once engaged in studies at Mindroling, students were not permitted to leave without explicit permission.

The final point Foucault outlines in his work on heterotopias is that they have a special function that relates to the space beyond their boundaries, either as a “space of illusion” that shows the space beyond to be illusory as well, or a “perfect space” that contrasts the disorder of the space beyond the monastery walls. In regards to this quite subtle point, for now suffice it to say Mindroling demonstrated a decidedly special relationship to the greater Tibetan region referred to as *Böchen* (*bod chen*). This was particularly true in regards to what this work frames as Tibetan aesthetics and high culture, and more specifically, in regards to ritual, the arts, and the cultivation of taste and sensibilities. To restate a key claim, this role was not in opposition to or even separate from Mindroling’s role as a model example of a Tibetan Buddhist institution.

Having laid out Foucault’s main points, one important element of the concept that needs attention is that heterotopias are characterized as non-hegemonic. Given the argument that Mindroling was an authoritative center for Buddhism and culture, this may register as a false note. While this potential problem will be resolved in the next chapter, it will be helpful to reflect briefly here on Mindroling’s more mundane role to the central Tibetan government before turning to the next theoretical influence. It is significant here that Mindroling was part of the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism, which the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Regent Sangye Gyatso, and some other key figures supported, but which was not in favor with the dominant Geluk sect more generally, nor with its Mongol and Qing adherents. That said, Mindroling could not have gained prominence as swiftly as it did if it were not for a network of social, political, cultural and religious factors at play. These were largely related to the Fifth Dalai Lama’s efforts to (re)unify the greater Tibetan polity, in keeping with his vision inspired by Tibet’s imperial era in the

seventh through ninth centuries and supported by the power invested in him by the Qoshot Mongol leader Gushri Khan (1582-1655). Mindroling played a starring role in the Dalai Lama's vision, again as Chapter Three will show. The Dalai Lama's rhetoric around the founding of Mindroling make it clear that this was no small role, and yet it is important to recognize that Mindroling was extremely small in relation to the major Geluk monasteries in and around Lhasa. Moreover, its role was peripheral to the main current of political affairs, at least insofar as its presentation to the general public. Whether this qualifies Mindroling as exemplifying a non-hegemonic model in keeping with Foucault's concept of heterotopia will for now remain an open question.

Leaving Foucault aside for the time being, another important frame for this project is Pierre Bourdieu's work on education, class, and taste. Bourdieu's writing has been useful in thinking about what questions to ask of the sources related to Mindroling's story, since Mindroling served as an arbiter of taste for the Central Tibetan ruling class until the 1950's. In particular, his writing on *habitus* as related to the development of cultural tastes, and the work of education to reproduce tastes and social structures, has been helpful in thinking about similar themes at Mindroling. Also, Bourdieu's concept of the field, and his treatment of the political and educational/cultural poles within a given field has informed my perspective on Mindroling's position vis-à-vis the Tibetan polity. Bourdieu posits that in any given field of power, there are distinct but interactive and interdependent poles of political and cultural or educational authority. While the subject of Bourdieu's study was twentieth century France, a far cry in many regards from seventeenth and eighteenth century Tibet, Bourdieu's stated aim was to make a universal framework (similar in this regard to Foucault's work on heterotopia). Within limits, these theories can be helpful in analyzing Mindroling's history.

The third Western thinker whose work has strongly influenced this project is William Clark, an indirect disciple of Foucault. Clark's writing is especially relevant in regards to Mindroling's similarities to a university. Most notably, he wrote a study of the origins of the modern research university in the West, called *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*.<sup>51</sup> This book also offers insight into the formative history of the institution of Mindroling. For instance, Clark's material-historical study of the development of traditions such as the "chair" the "seminar table" and oral exams is relevant to Mindroling's development as an educational institution. As explored in Chapter Four, Clark's methodology is extremely useful in mining beyond the obvious historical factors and thinking about Buddhist monasteries' close parallels to Western universities.

### *Chapter Summary*

Chapter One, this Introduction, lays the groundwork for the portrait of Mindroling monastery that follows, and considers Buddhism's relationship to high culture and aesthetics, not just in Tibet, but across the history of Buddhism's spread through Asia. It also introduces the theoretical frames that help shape this study.

Chapter Two provides a brief history of the family group, the Nyo clan, that founded Mindroling, and details the events that led to the monastery's foundation and early blossoming. The main relationship at play in Chapter Two is between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama. The far reach of Mindroling's monastic network is also addressed.

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<sup>51</sup> William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Chapter Three focuses on the written correspondence of Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama. This chapter is distinct in that it focuses on one particular genre of Tibetan genre, the letter. The concepts and relationships at play in the foundation of Mindroling are exemplified in the letters its founders exchanged.

Chapter Four looks at the curriculum at Mindroling, highlighting the training of high powered nobles and other exceptional students. The aim in this chapter is to recognize the ways in which Mindroling's curriculum was unique and distinctly Nyingma in flavor, and also to take note of ways that its drafters bridged gaps with other monastic-scholastic traditions. The driving question here is what made Mindroling both the place for aristocrats to cultivate the manners, tastes, and skills of the ruling upper class, and a center for the most respected Buddhist arts and rituals.

Chapter Five, the Epilogue, presents some of the seminal social and political alliances that stabilized Mindroling in its early period and allowed for its reconstruction after a devastating attack by Dzungar Mongols in 1717. The central relationship in this Chapter is between Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron and the powerful ruler or "King" Miwang Polhané.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND AND THE FOUNDATION OF MINDROLING

#### *Chapter Overview: What is Mindroling?*

This chapter provides historical context for the foundation of Mindroling, reflecting on various of its aspects in light of this project's main themes. To begin, the chapter recounts the history of Mindroling's founding family, a branch of the Nyo clan (*gnyos* or *smyos rigs*), beginning with their myth of prehistoric origin, moving through their history of prominence in Tibetan society, and finally focusing on the late seventeenth century when members of the Nyo clan established Mindroling. In the process the chapter traces major trends, events, and relationships that led up to Mindroling's first flourishing. In particular, Mindroling's founding fathers' close connection to the Fifth Dalai Lama and his coterie is considered, as well as the impact of the related factors of charisma, cultural capital and social status. More broadly the chapter presents Mindroling's role as a center for ritual, the arts, high culture, and education, developing topics laid out in Chapter One. Related themes include the confluence of Buddhist expertise and other types of authority (i.e. political and cultural), the importance of clan genealogy and aristocracy in Tibetan history, the early modern trend of updating of the old through textual and other media innovation and redaction, and the signs of cosmopolitanism and high culture that emerged at Mindroling. All this reflects Mindroling's unique role, as well as wider shifts in the mentalities and worldviews that predominated in early modern Tibet.

The main Tibetan language sources for this chapter are two Mindroling monastic catalogues (*dkar chag*), one of which was composed by the monastery's founders in the late

seventeenth century, revised in the eighteenth century, and edited and published in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The other was composed by Mindroling scholars in India in the early 1960s and is unpublished.<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, throughout the project these sources are referred to as Catalogue A and Catalogue B, respectively. Equally important as a source for this chapter is the “outer” or general biography of Terdak Lingpa, composed by his younger brother Lochen Dharmashri.<sup>3</sup> This is the biography that deals primarily with Terdak Lingpa’s worldly engagements and career, as opposed to the “inner” biography, also composed by Lochen Dharmashri, which focuses on Terdak Lingpa’s religious or spiritual experiences.

The late seventeenth to eighteenth century was a period of indigenous early modernity in the Tibetan context. In and around the Central Tibetan capital city of Lhasa, the climate was marked by what contemporary scholars and Tibetans look back on as the beginnings of the effort to form a modern Tibetan nation state, exemplified by a move to create a centralized bureaucratic government, in contrast to the decentralized Pakmodru (*phag mo gru*) and Rinpungpa (*rin spungs pa*) periods that immediately preceded it. The period this project is concerned with was

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<sup>1</sup> Bstan pa’i sgron me, *O rgyan smin grol gling gi dkar chag* (Ziling: Krung go’i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1992) (Hereafter referred to as Catalogue A).

<sup>2</sup> Gdung Rin po che, *’Og min O rgyan smin grol gling gi dkar chag dran pa’i me long*. Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute shared this handwritten, unpublished manuscript with me. In an email correspondence date March 24, 2010, he told me he located it “in the office of the Religious Department of Central Tibetan Administration, Dharmasala, about 20 years ago.” Since the document was composed in a difficult to decipher cursive Tibetan, Tashi Tsering kindly transliterated it into an easily readable Tibetan U-chen script. (Hereafter referred to as Catalogue B).

<sup>3</sup> Lochen Dharmashri (1654-1717), "Gter chen chos gyi rgyal po’i rnam thar dad pa’i shing," In *Gsung ’bum*, TBRC W9140 (Dehradun: D.G. Khochen Tulku, 1999) 1-207 (Hereafter, TLOB). An additional useful source not referred to directly in this chapter is a history of the Nyingma sect written in 1731 by the Mindroling scholar Orgyen Chökyi Drakpa (*O rgyan chos kyi grags pa*, b. 1676) entitled *Chos ’byung bstan pa’i nyi ma*. This manuscript is available in the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC W21492).

also marked by a fascination with new technology, science, and empiricism, and developments shaping and affecting the “public” through the implementation of media such as regularly scheduled large-scale rituals and newly formed institutions.<sup>4</sup> As an offspring of this early modern moment and a principal agent in the Dalai Lama’s state and culture forming project, Mindroling came to function as a cultural pole for the new central government.

The overarching argument of this dissertation is that Mindroling became a center of Tibetan Buddhist high culture, bridging gaps between religion and culture and crystallizing aesthetics at a critical moment in Tibet’s history. This role lasted from the late 1600s until the 1950s, even through periods of sectarian persecution, multiple invasions, and violent conflict. A particular combination of historical, cultural, and political factors had to come together to create the conditions for Mindroling to serve this special role as a cultural nexus for Tibetan Buddhism. Again, this chapter addresses the question of how Mindroling became a bridge between Buddhism and broader culture by laying out Mindroling’s historical antecedents and providing an extended portrait of the family that forms the core of the Mindroling institution.

It will be helpful to preface the content of this chapter with a note on the role of clans and family connections in Tibetan networks of authority. From at least the eleventh century in Tibet, religious capital in the form of knowledge of esoteric rituals and philosophies and mastery of Indic languages (to read and translate Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan) became tantamount to

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<sup>4</sup> On aspects of early modernity in Tibet directly relevant to this study see Kurtis R. Schaeffer, “New Scholarship in Tibet 1650-1700,” 291-310; Janet Gyatso, “Experience, Empiricism, and the Fortunes of Authority: Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism on the Eve of Modernity,” 311- 335; and Matthew Kapstein, “Just Where on Jamduvipa Are We? New Geographical Knowledge and Old Cosmological Schemes in Eighteenth-century Tibet,” 336-364, in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet 1500-1800*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

material wealth in defining a clan's relative standing and authority. As will be made clear below, this was a crucial factor in the history of Mindroling.

But first, what is Mindroling? The name Mindroling refers to several overlapping communities, locations and phenomena, mapped out below. The main character in the story of Mindroling is Gyurmé Dorjé (*'gyur med rdo rje*, 1646- 1714), who would come to be known as Dharma King Terdak Lingpa (*chos rgyal gter bdag gling pa*). His name changed several times over the course of his life, as is the case with most Tibetan Buddhist practitioners who go through various stages of ordination and initiations and study under different teachers. For simplicity throughout this work he is referred to by his most common name, Terdak Lingpa. In one basic sense, Mindroling was simply the home of Terdak Lingpa and the center of his activities as a visionary and teacher. The monastery was founded in the Lhoka (*lho kha*) area, not far from Lhasa, in the 1670s.

Mindroling was strongly associated with a revival of Nyingma (*rnying ma*) or Old Translation School practices and teachings. It was a relatively small monastery, at its most populated it housed about three hundred monks in the main monastery, about forty nuns residing in an adjacent retreat center, and a small number of visiting lay students, lamas, and other individuals seeking training in Mindroling's art and ritual practices. Terdak Lingpa's family also resided at Mindroling.

The full name of the monastery is Okmin Orgyen Mindroling (*'Og min o rgyan smin grol gling*) meaning roughly "Akanishta Uddiyana Isle of Ripening and Liberation." This name reflects a prophecy predicting Mindroling's eventual foundation. The name also marks the monastery as the Buddhist heavenly realm, Akanishta, and as a haven for practices associated with Uddiyana, the home of mythic and historic figures important to the Mindroling identity,

namely Padmasambhava, the great hero of Tibetan tantric Buddhism, and Garap Dorjé (*dga' rab rdo rje*) the mythic originator of Great Perfection, a system of philosophy and practice described in more detail below. So this name assigned by Terdak Lingpa in concert with his sponsor and collaborator the Fifth Dalai Lama simultaneously reflected a link to the tantric master Padmasambhava, the highest heavenly realm of Akanishta, and the ideal Buddhist work of developing and liberating the minds of practitioners.

On a more worldly pragmatic level, from its conception Mindroling had strong institutional, ritual, and personal connections to the new central Tibetan government. To briefly summarize, the Fifth Dalai Lama's dominion over Tibet was consolidated in 1642 by the victory of the Khoshut Mongol Gushri Khan (1582-1685) over various competing groups in the wider region. The ongoing and shifting effort to consolidate power over the greater Tibetan area—a vast landmass that had long been governed by various locally centered power bases—took place on overlapping political, cultural, social, and religious fronts. Mindroling quickly became the most prestigious center for aristocratic higher education and a major center for ritual, the arts and high culture for the Tibetan Buddhist world.

### *Historic Background*

#### i. The Rise of the Nyo Clan

Moving back in time to set the stage, it will be helpful now to sketch out the myth and history of the Nyo clan, the extended family group at the center of the Mindroling institution. The Nyo clan has a long and illustrious history in Tibet that must be taken into account in order to understand the career of Terdak Lingpa and the foundation of Mindroling. The clan traces its

roots to a myth set in prehistoric times, possibly corresponding to actual events (i.e. a person arriving in Tibet from India) in the sixth century. According to oral tradition and as the story is recorded in the biographies of the Nyo clan members Terdak Lingpa and the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (*tshang byangs rgya mtsho*, 1683-1706), a god who was curious about some Tibetan nomads came down to earth from his divine home, known to Tibetans as the realm of luminous gods (*'od gsal gyi lha'i gnas*). His beauty and grace were very moving to the Tibetans who had never come across someone with such an elegant appearance. Terdak Lingpa's biography states, "In the Tibetan region of Kharak (*kha rag*) the people had never before seen such an attractive and handsome figure. With all his limbs fully extended, he was a pleasure to look at. His nose was high, his forehead broad, his eyebrows long, and his senses were clear.<sup>5</sup> As for his skin, like the jasmine blossom, it was white and smooth, making him nectar for the eyes."<sup>6</sup> Relevant to this project's central thesis, this passage overflows with Tibetan aesthetic terminology. In the wider context of Buddhist literary and visual culture, these terms for beauty and the other sense pleasures echo well-known and longstanding descriptions of the physical marks of Buddha. This focus on physical beauty would later be echoed in descriptions of Terdak Lingpa, whose students described him in equally glowing terms.

Considering the significance of this depiction of the Nyo ancestor it is important to note that his beauty and attractiveness are closely associated with his power. And in fact, the most common Tibetan word for beauty (*mdzes pa*) multiply suggests beauty, elegance, and power. Thus from its very origins the Nyo family group that founded Mindroling was associated with the relationship between aesthetics and authority, manifested in this unusually handsome figure.

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase (*dbang po gsal ba*) could also imply that his male organ was visible.

<sup>6</sup> TLOB, f. 20a.

To continue with the tale of the first generation of the Nyo clan, the story goes that the god was contaminated by his contact with humans and therefore unable to return to his heavenly realm. He had to assimilate as best he could to his new environment. The Tibetans called him “nyo” (*smyos*) which means “crazy” since interacting with humans had polluted him and made him act as though intoxicated.<sup>7</sup> As Terdak Lingpa’s biography says, “When the humans’ defilements intoxicated him, they called him ‘crazy’ and his family lineage was also known by that name.”<sup>8</sup> Apparently he never shed his otherworldly, eccentric ways and to this day the descendents of this handsome character carry the name Nyo.

By the seventeenth century when Mindroling was founded the multifaceted prestige of this “crazy” clan had helped its members rise to a high position of society, holding positions of religious, cultural and political power. Most significantly for this work, one branch of the clan founded Mindroling and became its hereditary hierarchs.<sup>9</sup> The genealogy below provides the names of the men and women in the Nyo clan whose descendents would go on to establish Mindroling.<sup>10</sup> As this project will demonstrate, they were endowed with special authority in the realm of aesthetics, encompassing ritual techniques and the arts.

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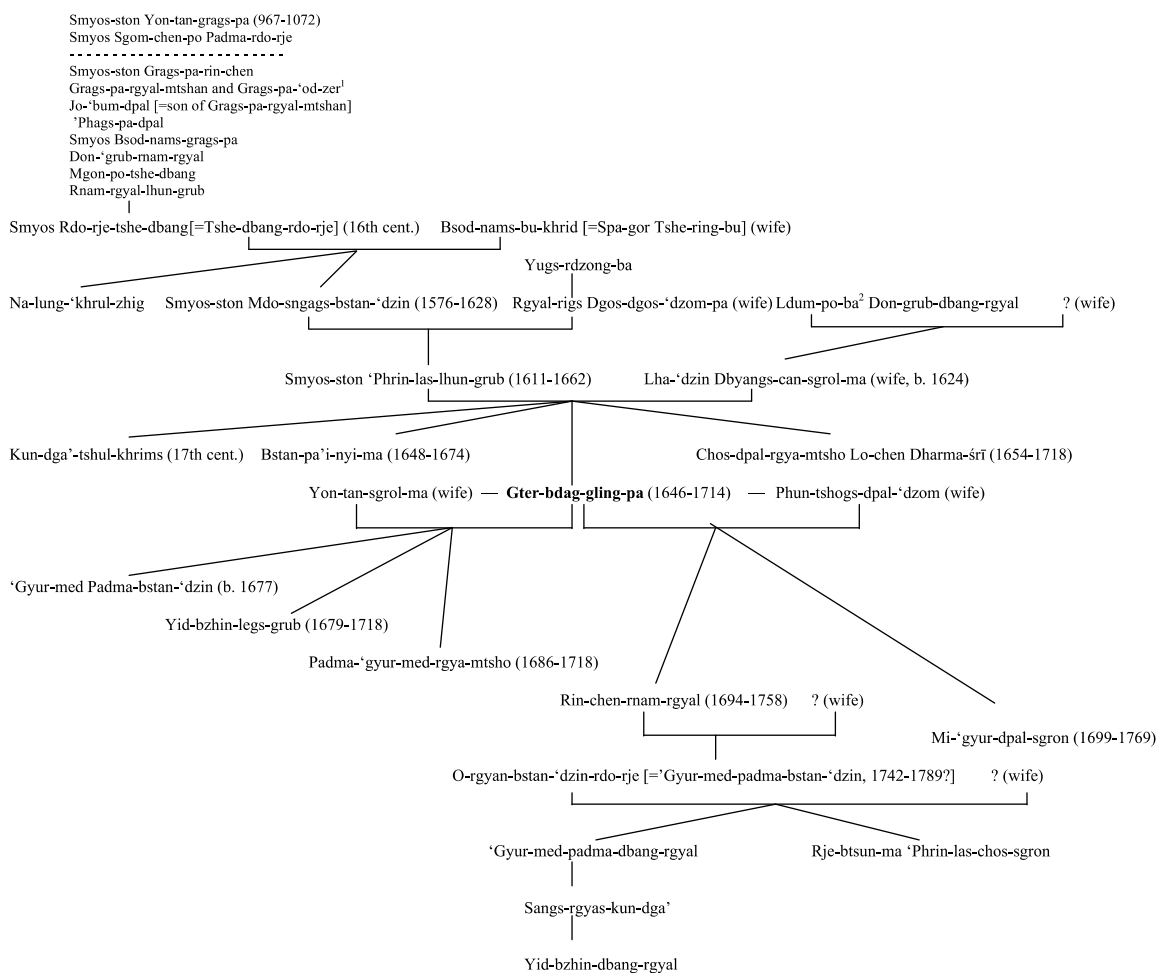
<sup>7</sup> Note that the more common spelling for the clan’s name became “gnyos” but the biography uses the alternative “smyos” in this origin story.

<sup>8</sup> TLOB, ff. 20a-20b.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief retelling of the tale, see TLOB, ff 19b-20b. According to Sorensen and Hazod, who recount the story in great detail, a much more elaborate version is told in the Sixth Dalai Lama’s biography, 106-107. See Per Sorensen and Guntram Hazod in cooperation with Tsering Gyalpo, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: A Study of Tshal Gung-thang* (Vienna: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 415.

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Cuevas compiled this useful resource on the history of the Nyo clan. It is genealogy of influential members of starting in the mid-tenth century. He was generous to share it with me and it is reproduced here with his permission.

Smin-grol-gling Genealogy (Dpal-ldan Smyos-rabs)  
Compiled by Bryan J. Cuevas (May 2005)



<sup>1</sup>In the time of Gter-bdag-gling-pa, the paternal line of Smyos Grags-pa-'od was situated in Yar-klung (biog, vol. 2, fol. 29.1-2).

<sup>2</sup>Ldum-po-ba was originally the seat of Lha-phyug-mkhar-ba Nyi-zla-'od (1135-1215), the fourth Tshal-gung-thang Khri-rabs.

This story marks Mindroling's family lineage holders as part of Tibet's highest social stratum. Like the Nyo, the other most prestigious clans of Tibet all traced their origins to deities who came down from the heavens to Tibet on ropes made of light. These families are known as divine clans (*lha rigs*) and are the main figures in many of Tibetan Buddhism's most powerful schools and lineages. Another example is the Khön family group (*'khon rigs*) of the Sakya (*sa*

*skya*) school, who share many traits with the family of Mindroling, one example that will be elaborated on below being the relative prominence of well known women figures.

Beyond Mindroling, the Nyo clan comprises numerous other nuclear families, many of whose members have also been highly influential in Tibetan history. Important examples whose significance will be considered include Pema Lingpa (*pad ma gling pa*, 1450-1521) a major figure in Bhutanese Buddhism, and the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (*tshang dbyangs rgya mtsho*, 1683-1706). Both of these Nyo clan connections were important in Mindroling's position vis-à-vis the central Tibetan government, and the connection to Pema Lingpa is a crucial link in the Great Perfection lineage for which Mindroling became so famous. Beyond these two striking examples, aristocratic members of the Nyo clan commonly supported each other's institutions and projects, further strengthening their mutual base. Mindroling's history cannot be disentangled from the history of the Nyo clan and the Tibetan aristocracy more generally, starting with this origin myth and developing over the subsequent generations.

Long before Mindroling was established, Tibet's major clans, including the Nyo clan, accumulated religious capital by educating their children in esoteric Buddhism and sending them to India and Nepal to study and retrieve texts and credentials. As those families became more prominent in the realm of Buddhism, religious capital and cultural capital began to overlap. As Pierre Bourdieu has extensively demonstrated, the defining links between high social standing, education, and cultural and political authority are nearly universal. Mindroling's history certainly supports Bourdieu's thesis in regard to Tibet. By the time Mindroling was founded, the Nyo clan was rich in various types of capital. And by extension, Mindroling would become a center for elite education. Over the centuries, the sons and sometimes daughters of Tibet's powerful clans and families were schooled there and the circumstances that kept those families at the top of

religious, cultural, social and political hierarchies were thereby reproduced. More particular to this work, and also in keeping with Bourdieu's assertions about education and *habitus*, the training aristocrats received at Mindroling would shape their tastes, deportment, sense of self, and worldview in such a way as to help guarantee their families' continued authority in overlapping domains.<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu's theories on education and symbolic violence will play a more prominent role in Chapter Four.

More to the point in regards to Mindroling's historical background, Bourdieu's concept of the "fields of power" can apply to Mindroling and its relationship to the early modern Tibetan government. To clarify, Bourdieu describes fields of power as having poles occupied by dominant agents each with its corresponding dominated agent.<sup>12</sup> According to this model, the dominant poles are typically the political or economic power base on one side and the intellectual or artistic power base on the other.<sup>13</sup> In brief, as will be explored below, the Fifth Dalai Lama's government and the founders of Mindroling made up the dominant poles of one field of power. In this case, the Lhasa based Geluk government occupied the dominant political pole, and Mindroling the intellectual and artistic pole (recalling that Mindroling was famous not only for literary arts but also ritual music and Buddhist visual arts and so forth). This frame will help illuminate the distribution of power and influence that took place around the founding of Mindroling as a distinctly Nyingma institution with immense cultural capital and crucial

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<sup>11</sup> See Bourdieu, *Distinction* and *Homo Academicus*; Bourdieu and Passeron; Bourdieu and de Saint Martin.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 264-272.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

connections to the Geluk establishment. Mindroling was not the only occupant of the cultural pole in its time and place, but it was one dominant agent in this field of power.

To return now to the particular history of Mindroling, the Nyo clan was one of several extremely powerful family groups whose authority undergirded Tibetan religious and political institutions alike. To illustrate how this worked in the Tibetan context it will be helpful to elaborate on the ongoing history of the Nyo clan and its rise to prominence in central Tibet. This development is well documented in Per Sorensen's essay "Control over the IHa-sa Mandala Zone: Geo-political Schemes, Notional Monuments, Flood Control Politics and Ideological Battlefield" in the book *Rulers of the Celestial Plan: Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: A Study of Tshal Gung-thang Vol 2*. The essay reflects extensive research on the Nyo clan and so it is worthwhile to spend some time reviewing his study here. On Tibetan clans in general Sorensen writes, "It was through sheer authority accruing from bygone prerogatives or from records of yore delineating the heydays of their glorious past that clans and aristocratic families in Tibet often later would advance their hegemonic claims in an attempt to underpin political authority."<sup>14</sup> Taking this general perspective Sorensen pays particular attention to the history of the Nyo clan's role in the Lhasa region.

Crucially, he suggests the Nyo clan was instrumental in shaping what would become the dominant model of Tibetan rulership, known as *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*), epitomized in the joint religious and temporal institution of the Dalai Lamas. In particular, Sorensen's reason for focusing on the Nyo clan is that he identifies its position of power as the immediate precursor to that of his main subject, Lama Zhang (*bla ma zhang*, 1123-1193) who is widely perceived as

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<sup>14</sup> Sorensen and Hazod, *Rulers on the Celestial Plains*, 381.

the formative example for the institutional relationship between religious authority (*chos*) and worldly, temporal, or secular power, usually glossed as “politics” (*srid*) in the Lhasa region.<sup>15</sup>

Keeping this background in mind, the Nyo clan’s history had a major bearing on the relationship of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa. The Dalai Lama and his inner circle, most importantly the regent Sangyé Gyatso (*sde sri sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1653-1705), looked to Terdak Lingpa for advice and guidance in applying the theory of *chösi zungdrel* as they formed their early modern central government.<sup>16</sup> Terdak Lingpa’s perceived expertise in how to govern well while being a good Buddhist, as a member of the Nyo clan and a visionary tantric master, was one of his most attractive attributes for disciples in positions of temporal power. The correct manner in which dharma and worldly life should be combined would become an essential part of the Mindroling tradition. And further, as will be demonstrated below, Terdak Lingpa’s well developed approach to *chösi zungdrel* was part of the cosmopolitan worldview that shaped Mindroling as an institution.

To ascertain the Nyo clan’s place in the development of the *chösi zungdrel* model more precisely, again according to Sorensen, the Nyo clan’s influence in the Lhasa region traces back to the translator known as Nyo Lotsawa Yonten Drak (*gnyos lo tsa wa yon tan grags*, eleventh century) a cohort and sometimes rival of the famed translator Marpa Lotsawa, who was the root

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 413. Sorensen suggests the first examples of the “chos srid” merger took place in Western Tibet, for instance in the kingdom of Gugé (*Gu ge*).

<sup>16</sup> The letters that are the focus of *chap 3* demonstrate that Terdak Lingpa played this role of advisor to many Tibetan leaders, both men and women. How to practically integrate dharma with worldly life is one of the most consistent topics of his discussions with persons in positions of power.

teacher of Tibet's most famous and beloved yogin, Milarepa.<sup>17</sup> The recorded history of the Nyo clan situates Nyo Lotsawa in the thirteenth generation of the clan's presence in Tibet, the first being that of the handsome fallen god. As a young man, in approximately 1028, Nyo Lotsawa traveled to India through Nepal for classical Buddhist training, receiving teachings in the Guhyasamāja, Krishna Yamāri, Cakrasaṃvara, Hevajra, Mahāmāyā, and Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti tantras under the teacher Nakpo Zhapchung (*nag po zhabs chung*).<sup>18</sup> After spending twenty years in India, he met up with Marpa in Nepal and returned to Tibet. And like Marpa, when Nyo Lotsawa returned home he became a charismatic teacher and sought after translator since, in addition to having received the esoteric initiations already mentioned, he was also well versed in Sanskrit. In the Lhasa region his Buddhist knowledge, particularly in regards to the Guhyasamāja and Yamantaka tantric cycles, was in high demand due to the rising interest in tantric Buddhism among the noble class. Three significant cycles were transmitted through Nyo Lotsawa, generally referred to as the Tantra Trilogy of Nyo (*gnyos kyi rgyud gsum*) or the Father Tantra Trilogy (*pha rgyud skor gsum*).<sup>19</sup> These would become an important part of the Mindroling tradition as well.

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<sup>17</sup> There are excellent English translations of Marpa and Milarepa's life stories. See Chogyam Trungpa trans., *The Life of Marpa the Translator: Seeing Accomplishes All* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1982) and Andrew Quintman trans., *The Life of Milarepa* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Sorensen and Hazod, 382.

<sup>19</sup> According to Sorensen's study, this trilogy comprised: Guhyasamāja in the Mañjuvajra form (*'jam rdor*), the Krishna Yamāri (*shin rje she nag*) commonly known as the Nyo luk lhaguma (*gnyos lugs lha dgu ma*), as well as the cycle of the Protector Trakshé Mahākāla known as the (*trag shad gnyos lugs*). Another important Nyo cycle was Saṃvara tantra system of Luyipa. *Ibid.*, 384-385.

In short, according to this narrative, in some periods expertise in Buddhist tantra was worth more than gold to Lhasa's ruling class. In an exchange later reproduced by the Fifth Dalai Lama's relationship with Terdak Lingpa, wealthy Lhasa figures donated large swathes of land and significant amounts of gold to Nyo Lotsawa. In regards to this model of exchange, Sorensen observes, "The acquisition of original Indian esoteric teachings (often in the form of original Indian manuscripts from authoritative Indian masters) and cycles dearly purchased and remunerated with gold in India often exceeded the value of the latter and promised the holder considerable income and prestige back in Tibet."<sup>20</sup> Due to Nyo Lotsawa's rise to fame, the Nyo clan became one of the most powerful in the Lhasa area. And again, elements of Mindroling's curriculum can be traced directly back to his legacy. Another major Nyo figure who helped lay the ground for Mindroling was Nyo Drakpa Pal (*gnyos drags pa dpal*, 1106-1165/1182) alluded to above, whom Sorensen refers to as "one of the first post-imperial rulers of Lhasa" and one of the "true precursors of the dual role characterizing the much later Dalai Lama institution."<sup>21</sup>

To stress the main point here, the story of Nyo Lotsawa's influence and Nyo Drakpa Pal's rise to power illustrates a crucial shift in authority that started during the eleventh century, the dawn of an era often referred to as the "second dissemination" of Buddhism in Tibet, when religious capital in the form of initiations and other modes of Buddhist knowledge came to equal and even surpass material wealth, social standing, and political alliances as the major factor determining authority.

Without lingering on additional examples, Nyo clan members continued to be prominent as Buddhist teachers, ritual experts, and local rulers. Most critically, the Nyo clan's lengthy

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 353.

history of influence came to a high point in the late seventeenth century, where this project takes its focus, when Terdak Lingpa joined forces with the Fifth Dalai Lama to found Mindroling.

While the place of clans in Tibetan history is too extensive a subject to address in greater detail here, the main point is that clans were a crucial organizing factor in Tibet's social and political hierarchies, and the Nyo clan formed the backbone of Mindroling.

To highlight a major related theme, the concept of *chösi zungdrel*, the merging of religious and worldly authority, was as central to the Fifth Dalai Lama's vision of the role Mindroling should play vis-à-vis Tibet as it was central to his vision of an ideal Tibetan government. In the case of Mindroling, the worldly element would not be overtly political, but cultural. Of course, just as in any other time and place, these spheres were not neatly isolated but overlapped, interacted and often conflicted in nuanced and complex ways. The protagonists of this story spent a great deal of effort designing institutions that might practically integrate them.

## ii. Mindroling's Institutional Precursor

In the sixteenth century Terdak Lingpa's ancestor Tulku Natsok Rangdrol (*sprul sku sna tshogs rang grol*, 1494-1570) founded Dargyé Chöling monastery (*dar rgyas chos gling*) in the Dranang (*gra nang*) valley of the Lhoka region. Dargyé Chöling was the major center for the esoteric philosophical and meditative system known as Great Perfection in Central and Southern Tibet until Mindroling took over that distinction in the late seventeenth century.<sup>22</sup> Because Great

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed history of the particular transmission of Great Perfection active at Dargyé Chöling and Mindroling, see Bryan J. Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 57-68.

Perfection would become so central to Mindroling's identity, it will be helpful to introduce and briefly contextualize it here.

In his historical study, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching*, Samten Gyaltzen Karmay summarizes the system as “essentially and necessarily a syncretism of the Mahayoga tantric teachings on the one hand, the theories of ‘Primal Spontaneity’ and ‘Primal Purity’ on the other.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, these concepts of “Primal Spontaneity” (*ye nas lhun gyis grub pa*) and “Primal Purity” (*gdod nas dag pa* or *ka dag*) were central to the worldview and expression of Mindroling masters such Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri and stood as an ideal for their many disciples. Bracketing these concepts for now, the crux is that Great Perfection is both a philosophical view and a system of practice that seeks to apply nondual philosophy to thoroughly transform the cognitive and emotional experience of the practitioner. Such a transformation ideally shapes every aspect of experience. The history of Great Perfection in Tibet is one of marginalization and suspicion on one hand, and extreme valorization on the other. It is widely viewed as a potent and important Tibetan Buddhist system, if controversial in some circles.

Superficially at least, part of the appeal of Great Perfection practice is its special status and mystique since many adherents of Tibetan Buddhism rank it as the most sophisticated and advanced system of Buddhist practice. It is particularly central to the Nyingma school, but Tibetan Buddhists from across all the major schools and schools have practiced Great Perfection and it is central to the Bön tradition as well. Furthermore, proponents claim that these esoteric practices are suitable for only the most capable and advanced practitioners, therefore Great

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<sup>23</sup> Samten Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), 11.

Perfection masters have a marked prestige. Mindroling's institutional precursor Dargyé Chöling was the major center for Great Perfection practice, and the home of Terdak Lingpa's branch of the Nyo clan until Mindroling was established and took up those roles.

As is common in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, the principal teachers at Dargyé Chöling were not fully ordained celibate monks, but ritual specialists and meditation experts. These practitioners could marry, have children and maintain their roles as head of the household, while teaching and acting as head of the monastery as well. Nyingma monastic communities therefore tended to be more diverse than the monasteries of schools like the Dalai Lama's Geluk (*dge lugs*) or Virtuous School, which was more keenly focused on full monastic ordination, with a strong focus on celibacy. In keeping with the Nyingma tradition, the lineage was transmitted through religious teachings and initiations as well as through familial relationships. In this confluence of monastic and aristocratic models, each family member played a role in the continuation of the bloodline as well as the Buddhist lineage. The monastic institution extended out from the central clan like a kingdom surrounding a royal family. The presence of householder lamas at Dargyé Chöling made it especially amenable to laypeople seeking to study Buddhist philosophy and practice the Great Perfection system.

In considering the contours of noble family-based Buddhist institutions like Dargyé Chöling (as opposed to lineages that pass from teacher to student or through reincarnation), it is significant that they appear to have been characterized by a relatively high level of women's education. This was likely because women were necessary for the basic perpetuation of the family and were therefore guaranteed a place in the lineage, even if that place was less authoritative than that of their male relations. And moreover, beyond religious lineages, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women of noble families more generally were much more

likely to be educated than other Tibetan women. The relatively high level of education among noblewomen is of course not unique to Tibet. It can also be seen in Chinese and Japanese cultures, for instance, where women of the ruling class have long had access to elite education. Directly related to higher levels of education, noble family lineages tend to have more women teachers and practitioners than other lineages.<sup>24</sup> Bracketing the details of women's role at Mindroling for the time being, suffice it to say the family-based model that was in place at Dargyé Chöling would continue at Mindroling, and women would indeed play a notable role there.

### *Terdak Lingpa's Family and Training*

#### i. Terdak Lingpa's Parents

A web of familial and incarnation ties helped form the foundation for Mindroling. Therefore the details of Terdak Lingpa's family lineage and related reincarnation lines are addressed here in some detail. To turn first to Terdak Lingpa's nuclear family, Terdak Lingpa's mother was Yangchen Dolma (*dbyangs can sgrol ma*, d.u.). Her family traced its genealogy directly to the Tibetan imperial family, a fact that contributed to their high social standing long after the fall of the Tibetan empire. She outlived Terdak Lingpa's father by many years and Terdak Lingpa's biography shows that she was a major presence well into his adult life. Her

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<sup>24</sup> There are three types of lineage in Tibetan Buddhism: 1) lineages that pass from teacher to student; 2) lineages based on identification of the reincarnation of the lineage head after his or her death and supposed rebirth; 3) family lineages. At different points, and in different capacities, all three models have been employed at Mindroling.

father was Dumpopa Dondrub Wangyel (*ldum po ba don grub dbang rgyal*, d.u.) an expert in mathematical astrology (*rtsis*) and prominent landholder, whose ancestors were also known for their mastery the Tibetan fields of learning known as *rikné* (*rig gnas*), which are discussed in detail below. This Dumpo family line was based at a large estate in the Dra (*gra*) valley, near Dargyé Chöling and the eventual location of Mindroling. During the Fifth Dalai Lama's reign, links to the Tibetan empire were valuable as cultural capital. Nearly all the main characters of the Dalai Lama's inner circle were identified with figures from imperial times, through reincarnation or other association. Therefore his mother's link to the Tibetan empire was an important element in Terdak Lingpa's pedigree since the Nyo clan, his father's side, did not play a major role until after the Tibetan imperial period.

More personally, his mother Yangchen Dolma was known for her Buddhist learning and advanced meditation practice. Her stature as a great practitioner of royal ancestry is attested to by the fact that she is the subject of a biography, a rarity among Tibetan women.<sup>25</sup> As the daughter of a scholar, she is recorded to have received a thorough education and studied with several great Buddhist masters. Her biography, composed by her son Lochen Dharmashri, indicates that she was recognized for her mastery of dream states (*rmi lam*), a method of meditation undertaken during sleep in order eventually to have control over one's state of mind in the moment of death

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<sup>25</sup> The only extant version of Yangchen Dolma's biography entitled *Yum chen lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgrol ma'i rnam thar* is published in Lochen Dharmashri's collected works. See Lochen Dharmashri, "Lo rgyus dang mam thar skor," 346-360. Unfortunately this copy of the biography is incomplete. It is clear that folios are missing, but it cannot be determined how many are missing since the original is not numbered. On women in the genre of Tibetan life writing more generally, see Kurtis Schaeffer, *Himalayn Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

(since dreams and death are considered similar transitional states of consciousness).<sup>26</sup> In Terdak Lingpa's own biographies as well, his mother is consistently referred to as a female yogic practitioner (*rnal byor ma*) and her influence played a formative role in Terdak Lingpa's early training and conditioning as a Nyingma master. She is not merely depicted in the typical terms of a nurturing mother, but as an authority in her own right, playing an integral role in Terdak Lingpa's intellectual and religious development. After Terdak Lingpa's father passed away, he and his mother traveled extensively. During their travels Terdak Lingpa studied, taught, and conducted rituals. She was generally present during the major events of his career such as when he rediscovered "treasures" or *terma* (*gter*) and she offered her opinion on significant occasions such as when Terdak Lingpa decided to take a consort, after much deliberation and prodding from the Fifth Dalai Lama. (The episode with the consort is attended to in the next chapter.)

The high profile and renown of women teachers would be one of Mindroling's marks of distinction, diversity, and by contemporary standards at least, progressiveness. Yangchen Dolma's high social status, education, prowess as a practitioner, authority in Terdak Lingpa's career, and the very existence of a written account of her life, which again was a rarity among Tibetan women, augured well for the role women would play at Mindroling. The relatively prominent role of women at Mindroling seems to have been shaped in part by Terdak Lingpa's mother's influence and Terdak Lingpa's close ties with and respect for her.

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<sup>26</sup> Lochen Dharmashri composed a short manual on dream yoga, based on Terdak Lingpa's oral instructions. See "rdor sems rmi khrid" in Lochen Dharmashri's *Gsung 'bum*. This text has been translated into English as well. See Gyatrul Rinpoche, *Meditation, Transformation and Dream Yoga*, trans., B. Alan Wallace and Sangyé Khandro (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2002), 75-92. Dream related practices have been a focus at Mindroling from its earliest period and Mindroling practitioners are well known for mastery of lucid dreaming techniques, even today.

Terdak Lingpa's father was Trinlé Lhundrub (*'phrin las lhun grub*, 1611-1662), whose ancestors were among the most influential members of the Nyo clan. Trinlé Lhundrub was born at Chagchubling monastery, founded by a disciple of Bhutan's famous visionary Pema Lingpa. Trinlé Lhundrub was recognized as the reincarnation of the ninth century master Nubchen Sangyé Yeshé (*gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes*, d.u.), who was an important link in the transmission of the Nyingma collected teachings known as the Kama (*bka' ma*).<sup>27</sup> In short, Terdak Lingpa's father was the powerful hierarch of Dargyé Chöling monastery, a leading member of the Nyo clan, a famous teacher of the prestigious Great Perfection philosophy, and a reincarnation of a historic Nyingma revitalizer. As his father's main disciple Terdak Lingpa would take up the mantle of leadership, charisma, and revitalization.

## ii. Terdak Lingpa's Childhood

Terdak Lingpa was born at Dargyé Chöling in 1646 to these two esteemed parents, both from noble families rich in cultural, religious and intellectual capital. He received an extraordinarily rigorous education and training, practically from birth. As is the case with nearly all highly revered lamas, his biography recounts an extraordinary childhood marked by miraculous occurrences, outstanding intellectual capacity, extraordinary visions, and many signs of a deeply compassionate and ethical person. His first major Buddhist initiation took place at the age of four. In both the "outer" and "inner" biographies of Terdak Lingpa, his biographer details numerous prophecies about his special birth and his position in a long line of extraordinary

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<sup>27</sup> These teachings emphasize Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga.

visionaries.<sup>28</sup> First and foremost, he was identified as the speech emanation of the great eighth century translator Vairocana. He was also identified with the visionaries Dorjé Lingpa (*rdo rje gling pa*, 1346-1405) and Ratna Lingpa (*rat na ling pa*, 1403-1478). These associations, examined below, shaped Terdak Lingpa's reputation as a great redactor, teacher and visionary.

Out of keeping with general Tibetan hagiographical norms, in regards to his childhood activities Terdak Lingpa's outer biography is not entirely flattering. In fact there are numerous instances in which the child is portrayed as quite spoiled and tempestuous. These episodes are striking since they reveal a familial affection and sense of humor on the part of the biographer, Terdak Lingpa's brother Lochen Dharmashri, even as he demonstrates the utmost reverence for his subject. But the biographer's message was not simply that Terdak Lingpa was a humorously naughty child. Rather the point is that due to Terdak Lingpa's positive karma from previous lives, his childish anger was not destructive. It worked, on the contrary, as a kind of playful demonstration of the illusory nature of reality. This is in keeping with characterizations of Terdak Lingpa later in life as a master of illusion, magic, or artfulness (*sgyu*).<sup>29</sup> In one example of an early exploit, while being carried piggy-back to a public teaching by a family friend the child became displeased for some reason and tugged at the friend's jewelry, angrily throwing a turquoise earring on the ground. The biographer notes that the turquoise was unharmed. In a

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<sup>28</sup> The "inner" biography is focused on Terdak Lingpa's visions and the spiritual events of his life. See Lochen Dharmashri, *Rje btsun bla ma dam pa gter chen chos kyi rgyal po'i nang gi rtogs pa yon tan mtha' yas rnam par bkod pa'i rol mo* (*Account of the Spiritual Experiences of the Dharma King Terdak Lingpa*) (Dehradun: Khochen Rinpoche, 1975).

<sup>29</sup> For example, the Fifth Dalai Lama uses the phrase *sgyu thabs* to describe Terdak Lingpa's activities in the consort letter. See Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617-1682), *Rgya bod hor sog gi mchog dman bar pa rnam la 'phrin yig snyan ngag tu bkod pa rab snyan rgyud mang zhes bya ba bzhugs* (Thimpu: Kunsang Tobgay, 1975), 509. (Hereafter referred to as DLCL.) This is closely related to one of the contemporary terms for aesthetics: *rgyu tsal*.

similar episode, when sitting in a monastic assembly the child became angry that the monk who was looking after him did not have his favorite teacup at hand. When the monk offered him another teacup, he threw the full cup down the stone steps in front of the assembly hall. Not only did the teacup not break but not a drop of tea was spilt. There are other similar stories in which he shows an unusual precocity, peppered with eccentricity.<sup>30</sup>

These jovial anecdotes, in which the biographer seems to enjoy reminiscing about Terdak Lingpa's fiery temper and magical flare, are exceptional and foretell his fame as a master of illusory reality. For the most part Terdak Lingpa's childhood is characterized in more a straightforward way, by a quickness to learn with reports of many unusual signs and visions. By age ten he is recorded to have achieved a high enough level of mastery of reading, writing, and ritual activities to act as regent for his father, the head of Dargyé Chöling monastery.

### iii. Terdak Lingpa's Brother Lochen Dharmashri

Given that Mindroling's central lineage would be transmitted primarily through family relationships, it will be useful to consider the roles of Terdak Lingpa's siblings as well. Central to the thesis of this work, Terdak Lingpa's brother Lochen Dharmashri did as much to generate Mindroling's renown as a center of Tibetan high culture as Terdak Lingpa's charisma did for the monastery's aura as a sacred site. There were two other brothers who were also significant figures at Mindroling.<sup>31</sup> But Ngawang Chöpal Gyatso (*ngag dbang chos dpal rgya mtsho*) who

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<sup>30</sup> TLOB, ff. 28b-29a.

<sup>31</sup> His other brothers were Tenpai Nyinma (*bstan pa'i nyi ma*, d.u.), Kunga Tsultrim (*kun dga' tshul khriims*, d.u.).

would later come to be known as Lochen Dharmashri (hereafter Dharmashri), was by far the most outstanding of Terdak Lingpa's brothers, as Mindroling's first great scholar and artist. Dharmashri was recognized as an emanation of Yudra Nyingpo (*g.yu sgra snying po*) a disciple of Padmasambhava and Vairocana in the eighth century. Like Terdak Lingpa, Dharmashri had a strong lifelong relationship with the Fifth Dalai Lama, from whom he received novice vows when he was fifteen and full monastic ordination vows when he was twenty. A telling example of the depth of this connection is that the Dalai Lama commissioned the young Dharmashri to paint an image of a fierce deity to use as a support for practice just before the Dalai Lama's death.<sup>32</sup>

The famously high caliber of Dharmashri's artistry, the quality of his intellect, and his mastery of subjects ranging from the three types of Tibetan Buddhist precepts (*sdom gsum*) and the Lower Lineage of the Vinaya (*smad 'dul*), to the full gamut of the fields of knowledge known as *rikné*, attracted many disciples, including those from Tibet's most prominent and powerful families, to Mindroling.

#### iv. Terdak Lingpa's Teachers

Terdak Lingpa's teachers included some of the most prestigious lamas of his day from across the Tibetan Buddhist schools. The list includes his father and the Dalai Lama first and foremost. His many major teachers from the Nyingma school included Pema Trinlé (*pad+ma 'phrin las*, 1641-1717) from Dorjé Drak, the other major Nyingma monastery in

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<sup>32</sup> Heather Stoddard, "The Style and Artistic Context," in *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama: The Gold Manuscript in the Fournier Collection Musee Guimet, Paris*, ed. Samten Karmay (London: Serindia Publications, 1991), 11.

central Tibet supported by the Fifth Dalai Lama, as well as Zurchen Ngawang Puntsok (*zur chen ngag dbang phun tshogs*, d.u.).<sup>33</sup> From beyond the Nyingma school, Terdak Lingpa's teachers also included major figures including: Sakya Trichen Ngawang Sonam Wangchuk (*sa skya khri chen 29 ngag dbang bsod nams dbang phyug*, 1638-1685), and the Kagyu master from Gampopa's monastery in Dakla Gampo, Zangpo Dorjé (*bzang po rdo rje*, 1636-d.u.).<sup>34</sup>

Given Terdak Lingpa's relationships with teachers from diverse schools, it is clear that sectarian affiliation was less important than other factors in determining who Terdak Lingpa's teachers would be. Likewise, later in his life his students would include men and women whose primary sectarian affiliation lay outside the Nyingma fold. And further, these students traveled from across the Tibetan Buddhist world to be in the presence of Terdak Lingpa at Mindroling. Regardless of religious school, the teachers and students listed in Terdak Lingpa's life stories and consolidated in his record of received teachings (*gsan yig*) are highly renowned and prestigious figures. This suggests that reputation and prestige overrode factors of sect and geography in determining Terdak Lingpa's teachers and students.

### *Early Career and Connections to the Fifth Dalai Lama*

To introduce Terdak Lingpa's early connection to the Fifth Dalai Lama, it is critical to point out here that the recontextualization of the old was a constant theme in their relationship, based in large part on assertions of past incarnations and connections. To illustrate, when Terdak

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<sup>33</sup> Also: Chogyal Tenzin (*chos rgyal bstan 'dzin*), Choying Rangdrol (*chos dbyings rang grol*), Tenzin Gyurmé Dorjé (*bstan 'dzin gyur med rdo rje*), and Tsultrim Dorjé (*pad gling gsung sprul 3 tshul khriims rdo rje*, 1598-1669), and Tsultrim Gyaltzen (*tshul khriims rgyal mtshan*, d.u.).

<sup>34</sup> Other major teachers include: Gonpo Sonam Chokdan (*mgon po bsod nams mchog ldan*, 1603-1659) and Zalu Kenchen Rinchen Sonam Chokdrub (*zhwa lu mkhan chen 22 rin chen bsod nams mchog grub*, 1602-1681).

Lingpa was eleven years old, he and his father went to Drepung Monastery, an important Central Tibetan institution of the Geluk school. (Drepung housed thousands of monks and in 1650 it became the seat of the Dalai Lama's central government.) During the visit, the Dalai Lama administered Terdak Lingpa's novice vows, ritually cutting a lock of the child's hair and giving him the name Ngawang Pema Tenzin (*ngag dbang pad me bstan dzin*). Crucially, this ordination rite corresponded with the delivery of a famous wooden statue of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, called the Kyirong Rangjung Pakba (*skyid grong rang byung 'phags pa*) which was believed to have been rediscovered as a *terma* by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo, one of the famous "Dharma kings." At the time of Terdak Lingpa's novice ordination, the precious statue was being shifted to Lhasa from the region of Kyirong, on Tibet's southeastern border, to keep it safe during a violent conflict with Nepal.<sup>35</sup> The Dalai Lama reportedly recognized this coincidence of Terdak Lingpa's visit and the statue's return as highly auspicious since the statue was directly associated with the glory of Tibet's imperial period.

Another important early meeting demonstrates the importance of visions and reincarnation claims in their relationship. This event took place when Terdak Lingpa was seventeen years old and he met the Dalai Lama at Samyé, Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, founded in the eighth century under the auspices of the tantric master Padmasambhava and the emperor Tri Songdetsen. In the vision the Dalai Lama appeared to Terdak Lingpa as Avalokiteśvara.<sup>36</sup> The identification of a lama with the bodhisattva of compassion was contested at the time, since several people were simultaneously identified with this figure who was so central to the Tibetan Buddhist

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<sup>35</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, trans. by Gyurme Dorje and edited by Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), fn.1119, 80.

<sup>36</sup> These two episodes are summarized by Dudjom Rinpoche. *Ibid.*, 826.

imagination. Terdak Lingpa's vision was important since it vetted the Dalai Lama as an authentic bearer of that identification.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that identifying rulers with enlightened beings bore great weight, as demonstrated by identifications of Yuan, Ming, and Qing emperors with Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Terdak Lingpa's vision at Samyé was the first of numerous visions the two men experienced involving one another over the course of their acquaintance. In short, although Terdak Lingpa was just a child when the Dalai Lama's government was coming into power, he had an early connection to the Dalai Lama that lasted all his life.

These examples show that long before Mindroling was founded, the Fifth Dalai Lama took a keen interest in the brothers Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri. To better understand why the Dalai Lama was drawn to the young Nyingma figures, it is necessary to keep in mind their family's association with Great Perfection practices and history of prominence, as well as the important factor of reincarnation claims. Without digressing into a close analysis of the many identifications mentioned in Terdak Lingpa's biographies, and further, the many visionary meetings he had with significant historical figures, the crucial point here is that identifications and visions like these served as credentials, along with clan prestige, charisma, and the visionary experiences and accomplishments that led the Dalai Lama (and many other influential contemporaries) to take such a strong interest in the brothers, and Terdak Lingpa in particular. Identifications and their accompanying prophecies signaled the prestige, honor, and capacity ascribed to Terdak Lingpa from birth. Great things were expected from him, as an extraordinary person born into an extraordinary family.

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<sup>37</sup> Ishihama Yumiko, "On the Dissemination of the Belief in the Dalai Lama as a Manifestation of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara," in *Acta Asiatica: Bulletin of the Institute of Eastern Culture*, vol. 64, Tokyo: The Toho Gakkai (1993): 38-56. In this article on the cult of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet, Yumiko Ishihama examines the development of the initially symbolically rooted authority of the Dalai Lama, arguing that public rituals were used to demonstrate the Dalai Lama's legitimacy.

### i. The Fifth Dalai Lama's Nyingma connections

In regards to the Fifth Dalai Lama's Nyingma connections, it should be mentioned that although his official position tied him to the Geluk school and its particular political investments, he had family affiliations and strong personal interests in Nyingma teachings and practices, and he had close relationships with several teachers from the Nyingma school, as well as Kagyu and Jonang connections. Over the course of his reign, the Dalai Lama studied esoteric philosophy, received ritual initiations, and took spiritual council with Nyingma lamas, sometimes prompting disapproval from his more orthodox Geluk colleagues. Another important role that Nyingma lamas played for the Fifth Dalai Lama's government was as casters of ritual spells that were designed to help the government overpower its military foes. The Dalai Lama's "secret" biography indicates that these rites caused him a high degree of anxiety since they radically challenged Buddhist ethics. That said, Nyingma lamas like the young Terdak Lingpa garnered a high level of influence despite being on the margins of the political center in other ways, particularly when it came to conflicts with Geluk fundamentalists.

### ii. Terdak Lingpa's Visionary Career

Although Terdak Lingpa's early connection to the Dalai Lama was shaped in part by visions, his career as a treasure rediscoverer (*gter ston*) began when he was eighteen years old in 1663. At his mother's urging, he traveled from Dargyé Chöling across the Tsangpo River to the valley of Yemalung where he revealed a text entitled *The Knowledge Holder's Profound Sphere* (*rig 'dzin thugs thigs*). Tradition has it that he pulled the *terma* text out of a crack he found in a

rock-face cliff. When word of this and future revelations spread, his fame as a visionary began to grow, as did his blossoming relationship with the Dalai Lama. While the focus of this project is not the revelatory career of Terdak Lingpa, it played a role in Mindroling's prestige and is a critical element in Mindroling's history. Without going into the details of all Terdak Lingpa's treasure rediscoveries, it should be noted that he discovered four major *terma*, the first when he was eighteen and the fourth when he was thirty five, a few years after the foundation of Mindroling.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate one of the ways Terdak Lingpa's career as a visionary intersected with his relationship to the Fifth Dalai Lama, there is the example of the *terma* he discovered in public in 1680 called the *Doctrinal Cycle of the Great Compassionate One as the Gathering of all the Sugatas* (*thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun dus kyi chos skor*), his fourth and last treasure rediscovery. This *terma* included thirteen scrolls of yellow paper which contained the details of a particular style of ritual dance.<sup>39</sup> The dance tradition developed at Mindroling, based on this *terma*, would become an important model for other monasteries, in yet another example of Mindroling's aesthetic influence. More to the point in regards to the Dalai Lama, the deity of focus in this ritual dance cycle is Avalokiteśvara, whom the Fifth Dalai Lama was identified as incarnating. Again, this reincarnation claim was also supported by Terdak Lingpa's vision at Samyé, mentioned above.

It is significant that the last of Terdak Lingpa's treasure rediscoveries took place in public, since this helps demonstrate the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's efforts to communicate a

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<sup>38</sup> His four treasure rediscoveries were: *rig 'dzin thugs thigs*, *gshin rje dregs 'joms*, *rdor sems ati skor*, and *thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun dus kyi chos skor*.

<sup>39</sup> See Richard J. Kohn, *Lord of Dance: The Mani Rimdu Festival in Tibet and Nepal* (New York: SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies, 2001), 49. For an overview of the Lord of Dance ritual's origins at Mindroling and the influence Mindroling exerted over monastic dance traditions more generally, see in particular, 49-55.

particular message about Mindroling to the Tibetan people. Likewise, throughout Terdak Lingpa's biography mention is made of public (*khrom*) instructions, audiences, and initiations. The public nature of Terdak Lingpa's visionary activities and teachings bears noting since it helped establish a name for Terdak Lingpa and Mindroling not just in the Lhasa region, but across the Tibetan Buddhist area. The public aspect of Terdak Lingpa's work helped him to strengthen his reputation and then build a platform on which to establish Mindroling, which had official ritual responsibilities to support the Tibetan government, as well as becoming a place ordinary people knew about and congregated at during public rituals.<sup>40</sup> According to Terdak Lingpa's outer biography, the audiences of his public appearances often comprised people from across Tibet, including the regions of Mon and Sikkim.

### iii. Terdak Lingpa's Career in the Dalai Lama's Court

The Fifth Dalai Lama made great efforts to include Terdak Lingpa in his court, likely due in part to the latter's links to the Tibetan imperial period. As will be demonstrated below, Tibet's imperial past was a strong focus for the Dalai Lama, who built upon and updated markers of the ancient past to fit his early modern project. Significantly, Terdak Lingpa acted as the Imperial Preceptor in the Dalai Lama's court. This official role, based on the relationship of the Mongol Khans and Sakya lamas, involved giving Buddhist ritual empowerments, teachings and initiations, as well as offering personal advice. Terdak Lingpa's outer biography suggests he

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<sup>40</sup> On the effort to make rituals accessible to a wider public audience at Mindroling, see Dalton, "Recreating the Rnying ma school."

spent much of his adult life teaching and conducting rituals for the Dalai Lama and his inner circle.

By the same token, over the remaining course of the Dalai Lama's life he would act as Terdak Lingpa's teacher, student, patron, and friend. This friendship would magnify Terdak Lingpa's fame as a visionary, legitimize the Dalai Lama's rule, shape the institution of Mindroling, and deeply ramify the future of Tibetan culture. It is noteworthy that a member of the Nyingma school would have such a close relationship with the main figurehead of the Geluk school. That said, there are many examples of sectarian strife in Tibetan Buddhism, but there are also many instances of rich inter-sectarian relations, support, and exchange. The founding of Mindroling was a key example of such a cooperation.

### *Bridging the Past and Approaching Mindroling's Foundation*

Before turning from the historic background presented above to the foundation of Mindroling, several key themes should be highlighted. Taken together these themes act as a bridge between Mindroling's historic antecedents and its foundation. In particular, this section looks at five concepts and tropes. First, this section investigates the concept of *rimé* (*ris med*) which again means "unbiased," "impartial," or "non-preferential" and resonates with ideals of cosmopolitanism. Second, the role of women in the Mindroling tradition is examined. Third, the rubric of *rikné* is introduced, as the Tibetan fields of arts and science. Fourth, the significance of Tibetan imperial tropes during the Fifth Dalai Lama's time are overviewed. And fifth, this section considers the strategic and rhetorical functions of reincarnation claims. These were some of the major organizing principles for the foundation of Mindroling, so it will be useful to abstract them briefly here.

To start with the concept of *rimé*, this term has become associated with what Western scholars have termed the “nonsectarian movement” that began in Eastern Tibet in the nineteenth century. Long before then, Terdak Lingpa’s biographer frequently used the term *rimé* to describe him. Further, Terdak Lingpa used it in his own writing to describe disciples who were accomplished in yoga and meditation. Beyond the scope of conventional treatments of the term, which also include “nondiscriminatory” and “boundaryless,” *rimé* suggests the cosmopolitan mentality and worldview propagated at Mindroling. This project’s approach to the term was introduced in Chapter One and will be elaborated on throughout the following chapters. In brief, as the juncture of an ideal state of mind achieved through meditative insight, and a social perspective that aspires to transcend boundaries and distinctions of all kinds, the *rimé* worldview is very much in keeping with perspectives formally identified as cosmopolitanism. And similar to the term cosmopolitanism, the term *rimé* has connotations in both philosophical and social contexts. It should be stressed here that this is an unprecedented interpretation that will be argued from different angles throughout this work.

Specifically, in Terdak Lingpa’s time, *rimé* referred to an ideal state of mind that was radically nondiscriminatory, rather than referring to a stance on the relationship between schools and sects, as it came to be understood later. That said, the leading figures of the “nonsectarian movement” expressly looked back in time to Mindroling’s founders for inspiration.<sup>41</sup> And while Terdak Lingpa’s biographer’s use of the term primarily suggests that Terdak Lingpa cultivated the open, inclusive frame of mind central to Great Perfection practice, it is also clear that he forged connections with teachers, disciples, and donors across sectarian and regional boundaries.

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<sup>41</sup> See for instance the statement attributed to Mipam Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso (*mi pham rnam rgyal rgya mtsho*) on Mindroling’s early days as a golden age for benefiting beings through the Buddhist Dharma. Dudjom Rinpoche, 879.

This demonstrates the philosophical and social senses of the term *rimé*. Whether it was a conscious intention of Mindroling's founders to reach out across sectarian boundaries for strategic purposes, or an expression of a "boundaryless" worldview is uncertain. What is sure is that Mindroling became a center for practitioners from across Tibetan Buddhist schools, while also maintaining a reputation as being a quintessentially Nyingma institution. This dual rhetorical aspect – as being for the benefit of all, and at the same time crystallizing Nyingma traditions – would at times serve Mindroling well, gaining it wealthy patrons and supporters from across the Tibetan Buddhist world. At other times it would make it prone to persecution, for instance when strident Geluk zealots sought to stamp out Nyingma institutions in 1717-1718, a period recounted in Chapter Five.

Further, this complex status was key to the role Mindroling came to play in early modern Tibet since it was both a place of prestige and high status, and on the margins. To elaborate here, members of the Nyingma school have long occupied a semi-marginal status in Tibetan Buddhism, at least rhetorically, that allowed them space to enact the most extreme versions of esoteric practice. For instance, after the fall of the Tibetan empire and the termination of imperially sponsored Buddhist institutions, family-based communities of practice continued as the centers of teaching and ritual, largely under a thin veil of secrecy. These were the places where Tibetan practitioners carried on the work of being Buddhist, assimilating practices and teachings imported from India and fitting them to Tibetan specifications. When Buddhism was revived after a period of supposed institutional quiet, Nyingma practitioners were criticized for having let wither the foundations of celibate, monastic Buddhism. At the same time, this marginality put them at the center of what it meant to be tantric. So while Mindroling was supported by the Dalai Lama and his government, at the center of political authority, it was also

at the fringe of the establishment due to its strong Nyingma characteristics. Again, this relates to the more social aspect of *rimé*, in regards to sectarian relations.

Another branch of the *rimé* theme relates to women's significant role at Mindroling. Terdak Lingpa's relatively egalitarian treatment of men and women disciples and donors, discussed more in the following chapters, can be seen as an extension of his *rimé* perspective. To contextualize this theme, women's role at Mindroling is demonstrated by both textual and art historical sources. Frescoes of "lineage trees" (depictions of the line of descent, much like family trees) at Mindroling and its satellite monasteries depict women as full-fledged transmitters of Mindroling's central teachings.<sup>42</sup> These images depict only the most renowned and integral teachers in the lineage. In addition to demonstrating the importance of women teachers visually, the major women teachers' names are also recited in contemporary Mindroling liturgies. Further, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri are recorded to have predicted that women, Mingyur Paldron in particular, would play an important role in the perpetuation of the Mindroling lineage.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as Chapter Five shows, she essentially saved it from eradication in its second generation. And as previously mentioned in this chapter, several Mindroling women are the subjects of biographies, or play a major role as teachers and masters in men's biographies. From the time period this work concerns, the biographies of Yangchen Dolma and Mingyur Paldron (Terdak Lingpa's mother and daughter) depict women studying, practicing, and teaching

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<sup>42</sup> The exact dating of these visual images are uncertain and will be a topic of future research.

<sup>43</sup> Contemporary members of the Mindroling lineage highlight the significance of these predictions in oral histories. The only direct reference I have located to these predictions are found in Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron's biography. *Khyung po ras pa 'gyur med 'od gsal, rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal gyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel* (Thimpu, Bhutan: National Library of Bhutan, 1984), 63. For more on this biography and the context of these predictions see *chap 5* of this work.

extensively. In addition, in his biography and through his letters (addressed in Chapter Three), Terdak Lingpa demonstrates openness to educating women, and thus seems to have opened the monastery up to other women students.

Because the role of women at Mindroling is a recurrent theme throughout this work, it will be helpful to reflect on it further here. Dorothy Ko's work on gender and class in China and in particular her study of elite women's culture in seventeenth century Jiangnan, has influenced the approach this project takes to analyzing women's role at Mindroling. In keeping with Ko's findings, the women of Terdak Lingpa's family played a formative role as teachers and students at Mindroling, and likewise, women of the ruling class had regular access to the teachings, rituals, and correspondence of Mindroling's main teachers.<sup>44</sup>

To reflect on potential explanations for women's prominent role at Mindroling, from within the Mindroling tradition, the interpretation might well be that Terdak Lingpa had an deeply nondiscriminatory, *rimé* worldview that prompted him to ensure a place for women students and teachers. From a more critical perspective, the reason might have been that he recognized that women necessarily played a part in the family lineage (*gdung rgyud*), as the bearers of children. Another factor, again closely related to Ko's analysis, was that women in high status families like the Nyo clan had access to more educational opportunities and social freedom than women of lower status families. According to this logic, an educated and cultured woman was a sign of a family's prestige, similar to the role of highly cultured women in China and Japan. From this perspective it is possible that the prominence of women at Mindroling was principally a result of the family's high social status. Women in other aristocratic families such

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<sup>44</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

as the Khön clan of the Sakya lineage were also gaining prominence at this time.<sup>45</sup> And it appears to have been the case that there was a more general societal shift allowing women more freedom in the early eighteenth century, demonstrated by the relative density of biographies about women composed during that period.<sup>46</sup> Considering these possibilities, the most compelling argument is that the prominence of women at Mindroling was due to the family's prestige. The status of Mindroling women reflected the high status of the Nyo clan more generally. So in addition to reflecting a *rimé* perspective and perpetuating the practices of the lineage, Mindroling's educated and influential women were mainly a crucial reflection of the elite lineage's social and philosophical sophistication.

The next theme addressed in this interim section is *rikné*. Given how important the arts and sciences would become for ordained and lay students alike in the educational system at Mindroling, the presence of *rikné* in the history of Terdak Lingpa's family stands out as a defining feature. As distinct from the study of religion, the other fields of *rikné* are sometimes referred to as the "conventional fields" of learning (*tha snyad kyi gnas*).<sup>47</sup> Close to the heart of this project, the conventional fields of learning, which are distinct from but interwoven with

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<sup>45</sup> For instance, the female Sakya teacher Jetsun Kunga Tenpé Nyima (*rje btsun kun dga bstan pa'i nyi ma*, 1704-1760). She was also the subject of a biography. See *sa skya'i bla ma 'ga' yi rnam thar phyogs bsgribs* (Collected Sakya Biographies) TBRC W1KG9245, accessed June 20, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> I refer here to the two Mindroling biographies already mentioned, and the biography of Orgyen Chokyi. See Schaeffer, *Himalayan Hermitess*, as well as the Sakya biography of Jetsun Kunga Tenpé Nyima referred to in note 43 and the "discovery" of Yeshé Tsogyel's biography, to name a few key examples. See nus ldan rdo rje, blo gros mtha' yas. "mkhar chen bza' mkha' 'gro ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi rnam thar," in *bka' thang dri ma med pa'i rgyan* (lha sa: bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2006), 154-191. TBRC W1PD83974.

<sup>47</sup> Both these terms are mentioned frequently in reference to Terdak Linpa's ancestors. For instance see TLOB, f. 21a.

Buddhist doctrine, are directly engaged with material culture and aesthetics. These fields will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, but for clarity here, the five major *rikné* are plastic arts (*bzo gnas rig pa*), medicine (*gso ba'i rig pa*), grammar (*sgra'i rig pa*), dialectics (*gtan tshigs kyi rig pa*), and religious doctrine (*nang gyi rig pa*).<sup>48</sup>

The convergence of expertise in the arts and sciences (note that this rubric also includes the study of Buddhism per se, but only as one of its five major fields) on the one hand, and esoteric meditative and philosophical practice on the other, would prove to be key in shaping the particular role and authority of Mindroling, where *rikné* took up a major role. Skill in the fields of knowledge or *rikné* was also highly valuable to laypeople who came to the monastery as temporary students.

Circumstances combined to make Mindroling the principal location for the Dalai Lama to support the cultivation of *rikné* in Central Tibet. As an important historical note, in general in the Central Tibetan region, these fields of study were not as highly valued by members of the Dalai Lama's Geluk school as they were by members of the Nyingma school. (This was not the case in Eastern Tibet, particularly Amdo.) And the main Geluk monasteries in Lhasa discouraged the study of *rikné* during the Fifth Dalai Lama's time. However the Fifth Dalai Lama himself, as a consummate renaissance man with strong family ties to the Nyingma school, clearly valued the study of *rikné*. This is made clear through the florid and erudite style of the Dalai Lama's writing, which reflects a deep and rigorous training in the literary fields of *rikné* with strong Indic influences. The Dalai Lama's new state building project necessarily involved developing and consolidating Tibetan culture as well. Therefore he needed to assure the preservation and dissemination of *rikné* even as he discouraged monks at the main Lhasa Geluk monasteries from

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<sup>48</sup> There are also five minor *rikné* and eighteen subsidiary *rikné*. See *Chap 4* for more detail.

studying the more secular, conventional and worldly topics of *rikné*. Crucially, Mindroling took up that role, sponsored by the Dalai Lama. As an aside, the Dalai Lama's main Geluk centers adopted certain art practices connected to *rikné* from Mindroling, for example the special form of monastic dance mentioned above.<sup>49</sup>

Continuing to reflect on defining themes before finally turning to Mindroling's foundation, this section will move back in time once again to help illustrate the complex interplay of past and present during the Fifth Dalai Lama's time. Certain Tibetan historical factors framed the climate in which Mindroling was founded, since the seventeenth-eighteenth century was marked by an effort to conjure and reshape the imperial past. It is important to stress here that Tibetan political power, social standing, and cultural clout have been linked to religious authority since at least the seventh century, as demonstrated by early Tibetan pillar inscriptions and documents such as the *Bazhé* (*sba bzhed* or *dba bzhed*), the narrative of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet.<sup>50</sup> These narrative accounts of the time of what are commonly referred to as the Dharma kings (*chos rgyal*) in the seventh to ninth centuries show that at least by the time the stories were recorded, there was a direct link between religious, political, and social standing. In early Tibetan documents, the Tibetan emperors and their cohort were portrayed as the purveyors and protectors of the Buddha's teachings, importing them from India and sometimes from China and Nepal, creating a script in which they could be written in Tibetan, and building institutions where they would be maintained and developed. The links between religion and temporal power have long been a central concern for Tibetan rulers, well before the arrival of Buddhism. Bön, commonly referred

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<sup>49</sup> Dalton, "Recreating the Rnying ma school," n.3, 93, quoting Kohn, 49-50.

<sup>50</sup> See Pasang Wangdu and Hildegard Diemberger, *dBa' bzhed: The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bridging of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet* (Vienna: Verlag de Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000).

to as Tibet's "pre-Buddhist religion" appears to have been primarily concerned with sacrificial and funereal rituals for the emperors, and for as long as Tibet has had a written history, religion has been a main arena for the ruling class. These factors were all active in the creation of Mindroling.

This linking of spheres became even more pronounced beginning in the eleventh century, as the previous account of the rise of the Nyo clan demonstrates. Again, in that formative period of Tibetan history known as the second dissemination of Buddhism, Buddhist knowledge began to equal or even outweigh material wealth in its social and cultural worth. In turn, having a reputation for Buddhist mastery and familiarity with texts and practices from Buddha's homeland in India became tantamount to noble status and political power, generating large amounts of material wealth. Through reproduction of these dynamics whereby Buddhist teachers were patronized by the wealthy and powerful, and thereby became wealthy and powerful themselves, family groups such as the Nyo clan grew rich as others paid for access to their knowledge and entrusted them with authority. This dynamic played out countless times in subsequent Tibetan history. The relationship between the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa demonstrates the standard model, with special features based on their particular stations and characteristics.

To further pursue Mindroling's antecedents, the earliest Tibetan records indicate that it was not until the time of Tri Songdetsen in the late eighth century that Buddhist rites were part of the daily life of Tibetan rulers. Even after that point, it is difficult to say to what degree the royal families engaged in formal Buddhist practices. Be that as it may, early documents do reveal that during the era of the so called Dharma Kings Songtsen Gampo, Tri Songdetsen, and Ralpachen, royal behavior was associated with a fervent interest in and support of the Buddhist Dharma. As

already asserted in Chapter One, this connection between Buddhism and kingship is prevalent across Buddhist cultures, not just in Tibet. But in Tibet it took on a particular aspect, the contours of which are of central concern in this project since they were reiterated and updated in the relationship at the center of Mindroling's founding, that of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa.

Continuing to look back in Tibetan history, when Buddhism began to compete with the pre-Buddhist Tibetan traditions glossed as Bön, Buddhism eventually filled in the role that Bön had played serving the ritual needs of the royal court. Since Buddhism had already been tested as an effective system for “empowering,” supporting and legitimating rulers in the many Asian cultures where it had previously take root, it was at an advantage. Further, Buddhism had the allure of the foreign and civilizing force from India, with its cultural clout and institutionalizing influence. This relates to Mindroling's foundation since Terdak Lingpa, as the tantric master to the Dalai Lama, directly equated to Padmasambhava in his relationship to Tri Songdetsen. By direct extension, Mindroling's early modern role paralleled Samyé's role during the Tibetan imperial period.

In sum, in early narratives of the relationship between Buddhism and Tibet's imperial rulers we find a focus on the importance of writing, an attention to marital unions, political maneuvering, the creation of institutions that perpetuated Buddhist teachings and developed the ritual arts, and patronage. These were the vividly clear motivations at Mindroling, where all these themes were renewed, largely through identifications within the framework of reincarnation. Examples included identifying Terdak Lingpa as Vairocana (and sometimes Padmasambhava), identifying Lochen Dharmashri as Yudra Nyingpo (one of the chief disciples of Vairocana and Padmasambhava), identifying the Fifth Dalai Lama as Tri Songdetsen (as well

as Songtsen Gampo), and identifying the Dalai Lama's regent Sangyé Gyatso as Mutik Tsenpo (a son of Tri Songdetsen).

As a final piece in the thematic bridge between the historic past and Mindroling's foundation, the functions of reincarnation claims will be highlighted here. It should be apparent by now that reincarnation claims helped shape the complex roles and personas of the Dalai Lama and Mindroling's founders. All the agents active in the founding of Mindroling were supported by claims of previous lives in which they had interacted with each other and laid the ground for their current religious, cultural and political projects. As has already been established, Terdak Lingpa was very young when he developed a connection with the Dalai Lama and that relationship helped shape his career as a visionary as well as an institution builder. Moreover, Terdak Lingpa's subsequent relationships with Regent Sangyé Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama, and seminal lay rulers such as Polhané were all mapped onto previous relationships in previous lifetimes. And in time, all these connections would affect Mindroling.

More generally, the very common Tibetan Buddhist practice of recognizing reincarnations of famous deceased persons can be distancing to the modern reader, and might be read as a mere eccentricity. It will therefore be helpful to consider this practice from the angle of its main function, which is to imbue a man or woman with the characteristics, charisma, power, and sometimes the material wealth of a great person from the past. The labels of "emanation" and "reincarnation" are often accompanied by an intensive education, training and conditioning of the individual who has been recognized. For instance, by asserting that Terdak Lingpa was the emanation and reincarnation of famous visionaries of the past, his community identified him as the right person to continue the visionary work of his predecessors, and further, the right person to found Mindroling. Moreover, relationships between major figures in history became the

templates on which his relationships were modeled and then presented.

Since reincarnation identifications were critical in establishing Terdak Lingpa's legacy, is worthwhile to briefly illustrate how overlaps in family genealogy and incarnation played a role in the history of Mindroling. The connection between Vairocana and Terdak Lingpa is a key example. In brief, Vairocana was ordained at Samyé monastery (*bsam ye*) as one of Tibet's first seven Buddhist monks in the eighth century. He is also recorded to have been one of the twenty-five main disciples of Padmasambhava. Crucially, Vairocana is traditionally credited with introducing Great Perfection teachings to Tibet from India, where he was sent to study after being ordained. His main hagiographical account, the *Vairodrabak* (*vai ro 'dra 'bag*, dated from the thirteenth century with later revisions) indicates that like Terdak Lingpa after him, his disciples came from across the spectrum of Tibetan Buddhist schools. Vairocana is also characterized as having practiced both Buddhism and Bön during the Tibetan imperial period, when Bön practitioners were marginalized and persecuted.<sup>51</sup> To identify Terdak Lingpa with Vairocana was to invoke all these characteristics, and indeed they would become salient features of Mindroling. Adding these factors to Terdak Lingpa's already weighty Nyo clan and imperial family connections helped lay the ground for Terdak Lingpa to disseminate Great Perfection teachings and further bolster Buddhist culture in Tibet.

Furthermore, Vairocana was also a key figure in the *terma* or "treasure rediscovery" tradition so important to Tibetan Buddhism. This was the main framework for the production of Tibetan Buddhist apocrypha, an important element in the migration of Buddhism across cultures. Over time, most Buddhist cultures have devised means to develop their canons of Buddhist literature while maintaining a link to previous, more "pure" Buddhist sources. This was generally

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<sup>51</sup> Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs Chen)*, 11.

achieved by framing new Buddhist literature to resemble the “original” Buddhist literature of India. In the particular Tibetan case, texts discovered as “treasures” by visionaries like Terdak Lingpa and his predecessors were framed as having been hidden long before by Padmasambhava, his tantric partner Yeshé Tsogyel, and their retinue of disciples, including Vairocana. Terdak Lingpa’s career as a visionary, which centered on his “rediscovery” of texts hidden by Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyel, and Vairocana, was credible to his contemporaries because of his identification with Vairocana. To illustrate this point with an example, in 1673, the Fifth Dalai Lama recorded having a vision of Vairocana, Padmasambhava, and Yeshé Tsogyel while Terdak Lingpa performed a long life ritual for him.<sup>52</sup>

In the more recent past, Dorjé Lingpa and Ratna Lingpa were important visionaries with key roles in the evolution of the treasure tradition. Again, Terdak Lingpa was primed to pick up where they left off, carrying their accumulated insight, experience, and prowess into his present moment. So the listing of Terdak Lingpa’s previous incarnations is not an empty gesture or a mere eccentricity of Tibetan hagiographical writing. Rather, it presents him as the recipient of a particular legacy and the carrier of a vital torch, mapping out the details of his illustrious career. Likewise, these identifications are relevant here because they set the stage for Terdak Lingpa’s manifestation of this legacy in the founding of Mindroling.

In closing this section, when Terdak Lingpa was born in 1646 the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso was in the complicated position of ruling a newly and ambiguously unified Tibet. The large geographical region that came within the Dalai Lama’s purview was home to a rich diversity of peoples all of whom shared an orientation to Vajrayana Buddhism, a single written script, and overlapping but variegated cultural practices. Each of these regions had

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<sup>52</sup> Samten Karmay. *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama: The Gold Manuscript in the Fournier Collection Musee Guimet, Paris* (London: Serindia’s Publications, 1991), 31.

a distinct identity, making the project of unifying them into a greater Tibetan populace a challenge to the new government in Lhasa. With the military aid and support of the powerful Khoshot Mongol Gushri Khan, the Fifth Dalai Lama had been in control of Central Tibet since 1642. There was no clear cultural hub within the new political entity, and creating such a heart was a principal concern. While the large Geluk monasteries in Lhasa were extremely important centers for philosophy and scholasticism, Mindroling would serve a distinct cultural function.

### *The Foundation of Mindroling*

This section presents Mindroling's foundation, addressing its prophetic origins, material site and contents, legal and economic status, social ties, and symbolic meanings. In particular, its role in regards the Dalai Lama's state building project, its place in material culture, and its extended institutional and cultural network will be presented.

Mindroling Monastery was founded when Terdak Lingpa was in his early thirties. The date is sometimes given as 1670, although more often it is fixed at 1676, when the major construction work was completed and Terdak Lingpa was formally enthroned as the first Senior Chair (*tri chen*) of Mindroling.<sup>53</sup> The Fifth Dalai Lama provided several large grants of money, land, and labor for the construction of the new monastery. According to Terdak Lingpa's biography, the Dalai Lama also reported several dreams and visions related to the physical construction, and performed divination rites to ascertain the most favorable dates for important steps in the process.

The exact location was chosen based on a prophecy attributed to Padmasambhava. Once established, Mindroling quickly took over Dargyé Chöling's role as the principal center for Great

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<sup>53</sup> *Trichen* (*khri chen*) is often translated "Throneholder" or "Great Chair."

Perfection practice, but its wider role would grow to be far more extensive than Dargyé Chöling's had been. Contemporary sources including Terdak Lingpa's biography and the Fifth Dalai Lama's letters (translated in Chapter Three) show that the Dalai Lama conceived of Mindroling as an institution that would serve as a place of protection, benefit, nurturing and cultivation for "greater Tibet" (*bod chen*). When the new monastery was nearly constructed and there was a question about the precise date when the work should be finished and what materials should be used, the Dalai Lama is recorded to have consulted, in a vision, a beautiful young woman and a "black giant" who oversaw the construction. The visionary woman told him the details and timing of the construction must be treated with care so that Mindroling would benefit "all of Tibet" (*spyi bod*). In more detail she said if all went well, "Tibet's enemies will be prevented from striking and . . . The well being of Tibet's subjects will increase." The giant reported that if certain statues and objects were placed in the main temple, "The kings of Tibet will live long lives, encounter few obstacles, and their dominion will expand."<sup>54</sup>

Closely related to this aspect of protecting and benefitting all of Tibet, and its rulers in particular, is Mindroling's role as an offering from the Fifth Dalai Lama to Terdak Lingpa. Catalogue A states, "In 1675, the Great Fifth graciously bestowed ownership and complete authority of the entire area of Drachi, where Tharpaling monastery was previously located, and entrusted all the families as religious servants" to Terdak Lingpa.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the site of Mindroling was a gift from the Dalai Lama to Terdak Lingpa, a gesture of the older lama and statesman's respect and enthusiasm for the young visionary, from whom he expected a great deal. Catalogue A further reports, "The Great Fifth Dalai Lama assigned permanently residing monks

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<sup>54</sup> TLOB, f. 94a.

<sup>55</sup> Catalogue A, 12.

as well as an endowment for their complete material support” to live at Mindroling.<sup>56</sup> This indicates that the first group of monks who went to live, study, and practice at the monastery were chosen and essentially donated by the Dalai Lama. And again, the monks came along with rights to the land, labor, and produce of the surrounding area.

The significance and ongoing nature of the Dalai Lama’s support and involvement is corroborated in other documents as well. For instance the *Yellow Beryl (Vaidurya Serpo)*, composed by the Dalai Lama’s regent, Sangyé Gyatso includes a census documenting the monasteries of early modern Tibet. In the section about Mindroling, the regent Sangyé Gyatso, who was also a disciple and supporter of Terdak Lingpa, provided a precise account of the grant Terdak Lingpa received to found Mindroling. To illustrate how detailed his records were, it is noteworthy that the regent even described a part of the overall grant allotted to Terdak Lingpa’s consort (*yum*) and her family. The woman, whose story comes up again in other chapters of this work, was granted: “twenty-two households along with their cultivated land and inhabitants, as well as five smaller households in and around the region of Dranang.” These households would have had to provide the consort and her relatives with food and ongoing support. The expected (probably yearly) income from these landholdings was “two-thousand nine-hundred and eighty-eight bushels of barley.”<sup>57</sup> This is a relatively minor grant from the perspective of the Dalai Lama’s overall offering, and its inclusion in the census demonstrates that the details mattered, at

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<sup>56</sup> In addition to the monks who lived at Mindroling in a permanent capacity, there were also monks and other students who came from branch or affiliate monasteries to study and practice at Mindroling for set periods of time. This explains why the monks assigned by the Dalai Lama are described here as “permanently residing.” The status of these monks as opposed to those who are staying at Mindroling temporarily for training is expanded on in Catalogue A, 155-159.

<sup>57</sup> Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705), *Vaidurya Serpo* (Ziling: Krung go bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1989), 468.

least to the regent. The census further demonstrates the ongoing nature of the grant offered to Mindroling's founders and their extended family.

As an aside to be returned to in the next chapter, it is significant that the consort mentioned by the regent was most likely Ngodrub Pelzom (*dngos grub dpal 'dzom*, d.u.), a relative of the Fifth Dalai Lama's mother who was sent to Mindroling around the time of Terdak Lingpa's official enthronement. This was ostensibly to fend off obstacles to Terdak Lingpa's career as a visionary. To explain briefly, the Tibetan tradition has it that "treasure revealers" like Terdak Lingpa must engage with tantric consorts in order to successfully accomplish their visionary work. There had been a string of deaths in Terdak Lingpa's extended family and community, and Terdak Lingpa's health was in decline. The Dalai Lama himself insisted that he find a consort and it is noteworthy that the woman selected was a relative of the Dalai Lama. This family connection parallels strategic marriage alliances between earlier Tibetan rulers. This point will be returned to in the following chapter, but bears mentioning in connection with the *Yellow Beryl's* account of this relatively small grant.

To further consider the sociological and material cultural aspects of the Dalai Lama's support for Mindroling, Terdak Lingpa's outer biography makes several mentions of gifts particularly intended to support the construction and maintenance of the monastery. For instance, several successive grants of land and inhabitants (in this case referred to as *lha 'bangs*, implying that they would become subjects of the monastic estate) from the government (*zhung*) to Terdak Lingpa are mentioned around the time of Terdak Lingpa's thirty-fifth birthday.<sup>58</sup> These are listed separately from the valuable items the Dalai Lama and his associates are recorded to have offered Terdak Lingpa in honor of his teachings, initiations, and empowerments. In other words,

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<sup>58</sup> TLOB, ff. 124a-125b.

these are different but related types of material offerings. On the one hand, there are grants for the establishment of Mindroling, which provide ongoing income and support for the monastery, its monks, and the family that governs it. These were instrumental to the Dalai Lama's grand vision of the purpose Mindroling would serve for Tibet. On the other hand, there were countless objects offered during the frequent ritual functions Terdak Lingpa performed. These more ordinary gifts generally included cloth, cymbals, statues, tea for the assembly of monks at Mindroling, horses and equestrian equipment, *thangka* paintings and so forth.

Drawing attention to such details is not to imply a lack of sincerity or integrity on the part of biographers or Buddhist teachers and disciples but simply to suggest that the attention to material culture is worth acknowledging as part of the study of Buddhism. To expand briefly on the distinction between the types of offering just mentioned it is a common Tibetan biographical convention to list the specific materials given and received alongside teachings given and received. In Terdak Lingpa's biography, as in many Tibetan biographies, many pages are devoted to these lists of materials. Like other instances where Buddhists pay attention to material culture, for instance the monastic catalogues (*dkar chag*) such as those referred to throughout this chapter, this might be seen as problematic or confusing since it seems to fly in the face of Buddhist ideals of asceticism and renunciation. After all, why do biographers dedicate pages and pages to listing material offerings if their sole concern is the transmission of Buddhist knowledge and insight? Again, it is clear that material culture has a role in Buddhism, even if it is a tense and complex one.

To begin to address the complexity, it will be helpful to look more closely at the grant given for Mindroling's founding. In Catalogue B (a twentieth century document referring to an

eighteenth century source) the description of the grant suggests a more extensive gift than that recounted in Catalogue A and expanded on in detail in the *Yellow Beryl*:

The supreme Great Fifth Dalai Lama bestowed an official government deed to assign land, tenants, and estates, confirming that the previous arrangement would continue as it was, and likewise, the three districts of upper Tibet, the four traditional regions of U and Tsang, the six ranges of Dokham, as well as the vast regions of Jar, Dakpo and Kongpo, together with Mon, Bhutan, Nepal, Khotan, Sikkim and so forth were offered. In short, it was said that from the stupa in Nepal, to Xining in Kokonor with the border of the stone pillar in Inner Mongolia as the upper most limit, the group of thirteen monastic centers and whatever sites are attached to those particular centers belong to Terdak Lingpa's father to son lineage. As for all the branches, they are too numerous to mention.<sup>59</sup>

This suggests that in the eyes of later Mindroling historians the Dalai Lama essentially offered all of Tibet to Mindroling, and by the same token bestowed Mindroling upon Tibet. The Dalai Lama could not literally have given this vast area to Mindroling's hereditary hierarchs. Rather he symbolically offered the entire Tibetan Buddhist world to the lineage of Mindroling, and literally granted them particular temples and sites scattered across this area. In reality the accumulation of sites took place over time, but here it is expressed as on grand bequeathal. This implicitly called upon Mindroling's lamas to complete the exchange by exerting their power of enrichment and protection for Tibet, as the Dalai Lama explicitly entreated Terdak Lingpa to do in the letters which are the focus of Chapter Three.

Returning to the theme of the donor/recipient relationship, making offerings to Buddhist teachers, masters, and institutions is a central part of Buddhist practice. Ideally the donor's intention is what matters. From that ideal perspective, anything given with pure devotion would be transformed into a precious offering, and a visualized offering would be as valuable as a

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<sup>59</sup> Catalogue B, 37.

material one. But in fact the many careful records of offerings given and received in the Tibetan Buddhist context show that the actual material of the offering mattered as well. This is especially true when the donors and recipients are powerful and well known, as in the case of the Dalai Lama and Mindroling. Biographies, letters, and monastic catalogues all provide careful records of objects the Dalai Lama and other major figures offered to Mindroling. In this way, the expression of generosity and devotion through offerings is interwoven with Buddhist concerns with aesthetics and material culture since the beauty, rarity, preciousness, or grandeur of a gift demonstrates the wealth and power of the donor as well as the worthiness of the donee. All of this is at stake in the offering described above. Like the visualized offerings practitioners give to buddhas and deities, this symbolic gift worked to demonstrate the devotion of the giver as well as the worthiness of the recipient. And in this case the power of the giver is also implied, since the extent of the offering seems to suggest the Dalai Lama had authority over all the regions named. It is important to note that some of the regions mentioned were definitively not controlled by the Dalai Lama's government at any time. But Mindroling did have branches and affiliates in nearly all the regions named above, suggesting that Mindroling's eventual influence was more far reaching than the Dalai Lama's political reach.

To relate this material to the central point, Mindroling had to be represented across the expanse of the Tibetan landscape in order to uphold the Dalai Lama's original aim of sponsoring the foundation Mindroling for the particular benefit of greater Tibet, the Tibetan people, and Tibetan rulers. Put another way, to be a principal authority in ritual, arts and *rikné* Mindroling had to have satellites following its ritual and artistic traditions in all the regions of greater Tibet.

More immediate to the founding of Mindroling's central location, when the Dalai Lama officially offered the area of Drachi to Terdak Lingpa, the people who lived there were

designated as part of the gift. This meant they and their descendents would be obliged to offer the produce of their fields and labor to Mindroling, as well as generally supporting the monks and other members of Terdak Lingpa's institution in perpetuity. Especially from a contemporary standpoint, this fact complicates the ethical and socio-economic dimensions of the exchange beyond its symbolic and religious significance. Without veering into a debate about feudalism in Tibetan history, it is interesting to note that the people of the Drachi valley were not entirely content with the arrangement. They are recorded to have lashed out against the institution of Mindroling on more than one historic occasion (namely, during the Dzungar occupation from 1717-1720, and again during the Cultural Revolution). This seems to reflect at least periodic disaffection for the arrangement established by the Dalai Lama's grant.<sup>60</sup> Keeping in mind that Terdak Lingpa's family was part of one of Tibet's most prestigious clans, with a long history as landowners and leaders in the Lhasa region, Mindroling-as-offering functioned on multiple levels; in addition to being a religious offering from the Dalai Lama as a Buddhist patron, it was also a grant from the government to a powerful family group. So the Dalai Lama's material support of Mindroling was both a religious offering, and an official government grant of land and human resources.

Moving on from the topic of offerings and continuing in the broader sketch of Mindroling's identity, the choice of geographical location was another important consideration, reflecting several of the themes outlined above, namely the concern with the imperial past and links to Padmasambhava. To explain, when Terdak Lingpa set out to establish his new monastery,

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<sup>60</sup> For example, Catalogue A reports that after Dzungar Mongols destroyed various temples and monuments at Mindroling, the local people picked up where the troops left off and did a great deal more damage. See Catalogue A, 6. This is also alluded to in Mingyur Paldron's biography, (80.1-80.3) which also asserts that Drachi valley became extremely barren after the local people join in the Dzungar attack on Mindroling, in a kind of natural retribution for their actions.

he chose Drachi valley, where a monastery called Tharpaling (*thar pa gling*) had been situated previously. Without regressing too far in history, it is worth mentioning that Tharpaling was established by Lumé Tsultrim Sherab (*klu mes tshul khrims shes rab*, d.u.), who is remembered as one of the “ten men from U and Tsang” (*dbu gtsang mi bcu*). These ten men are famous for having traveled to Eastern Tibet in the tenth century, received ordination and teachings on the Vinaya, and then returned to reestablish monastic Buddhism in central Tibet, where, according to the traditional Tibetan narrative, it had fallen into decline.<sup>61</sup> When Terdak Lingpa set his sights on Drachi valley, Tharpaling monastery had long since become dilapidated.<sup>62</sup>

The exact location was chosen based on the aforementioned prophecy attributed to Padmasambhava, which stated that a monastery would be established in place with the following characteristics:

Between Uru and Yoru, near the southern bank of Yoru’s Lohita river, at the birthplace of Minister Gar Tongtsen, is a place called Drachi, an extremely handsome location which blazes gloriously with positive qualities. In accordance with Padmasambhava’s prophesy the monastery is situated in that place.<sup>63</sup>

Note that the valley of Drachi was also remembered as the birthplace of the powerful imperial Tibetan minister Gar Tongtsen, a major figure in the court of the eighth century emperor Songtsen Gampo, who is credited with having established the first Tibetan code of law,

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<sup>61</sup> On this period, see for example Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*.

<sup>62</sup> Catalogue A, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Catalogue B, 1.

developing a written Tibetan script, and establishing Buddhism in Tibet.<sup>64</sup> Keeping in mind that it was also the site of Tharpaling, the three key points are that Mindroling's location was prophesied by Padmasambhava, associated with Tibet's imperial ministers, and connected with the tenth century revitalization of the Vinaya in Central Tibet. It is also noteworthy that the location was characterized as attractive and ablaze with good signs (whereas today it is quite barren). These various threads from the past augured Mindroling's roles in Tibetan culture and society.

Another aspect of Mindroling, directly related to the theme of material culture and aesthetics, concerns the physical plant itself, and in particular, the quality of the materials and craftsmanship of the monastery's various temples:

The main temple's upper and lower sections have one hundred twenty pillars combined. The assembly hall's innermost chamber, an U-Tsang style structure, has as its main image a three and a half stories high Buddha statue, extremely blessed and of the very best quality. He has a retinue of eight spiritual sons, each two stories high, and on either side there is a life-size statue of a gatekeeper. All this is in keeping [with the prophecy]. There is also a mural with a thousand Buddha images and wall-sized depictions of the two main disciples of Buddha, a Chinese bronze Buddha image with a golden color, a life-size statue of the goddess Tara, and a one-storey high stupa. In the sutra temple, there is a mural with a thousand images of the Buddha of Boundless Life painted in gold, a thangka depicting the one hundred acts of Buddha Gautama's life story, clay statues of the sixteen Arhats and one-storey high statues of the four guardian kings made of the highest quality material. To the right of the assembly hall, in the large shrine room the main image is a one-storey high Buddha of Boundless Life in gilded copper. There is also an image that the Great Tertön [Terdak Lingpa] made himself with a face similar to his own, a one-storey high statue of Padmasambhava, magnificent clay statues of his eight manifestations, each one storey high, and the one hundred and eight volumes of the Kangyur in especially fine quality calligraphy.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> On the history of the Gar (*mgar*) clan and its members' role as Imperial Tibetan ministers, see Hugh Richardson, *High Peaks, Rare Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture* (London: Serindia Publications, 2005), 57-73.

<sup>65</sup> Catalogue B, 1.

This passage, excerpted from Catalogue B, is characteristic of the document as a whole (and likewise characteristic of Catalogue A) and gives a sense of the focus on high quality and precious materials, craftsmanship, charisma, and grandeur at Mindroling. Throughout the catalogues terms related to quality and preciousness are reiterated. As an aside, of course there are other ways to read catalogues such as these, for instance from a more typical Buddhist studies perspective, by focusing more on the particular deities, rituals, and texts highlighted at Mindroling. That is doubtlessly a valuable approach. By focusing on aesthetics, the aim here is not to downplay the importance of other approaches or to elide related topics, but to draw attention to an aspect of Buddhist culture that is rarely attended to. Again, this sample passage represents documents that demonstrate the focus on aesthetics at Mindroling.

To turn from this discussion of materials to other aspects of Mindroling's identity, the phenomena of prophecy, dreams and visions arise as a related theme. These constitute a prevalent theme in Mindroling literature and a formative force in its history. While prophecy is an important element throughout Tibetan Buddhist traditions, insights gained through altered consciousness are especially central to Mindroling, as the home of a charismatic visionary (*gter ston*) whose lineage became famous for lucid dreaming among related practices.<sup>66</sup> In the catalogues and Terdak Lingpa's outer biography, immediately following references to Padmasambhava's prophecy, the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's visionary dreams are mentioned. The dreamlike accounts of the beautiful young woman and the black giant who oversaw Mindroling's construction and directed the details of its timing and completion are a

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<sup>66</sup> Many of Mindroling's lamas have been known for their mastery of practices related to lucid dreaming.

significant example.<sup>67</sup> This convergence of prophecy and dream in the story of Mindroling's founding is an indication of the perceived continuity between the insights of Padmasambhava and Terdak Lingpa, and it points out another crucial face of Mindroling—the materialization of revered Buddhist masters' insights, dreams, and visions.

Continuing to explore Mindroling's many faces, beyond the physical walls of the monastery, the name Mindroling refers to a lineage. In this context, a lineage is a continuous line of people who, over the generations, have received and in turn passed on a given collection of theories and ritual methods, which are conveyed through texts, oral teachings, or, according to some Buddhist traditions, through “mind to mind” transmissions. In the latter, a realized master psychically transfers a teaching to the disciple with no medium external to the mind. In Tibetan and Chan/Zen Buddhism in particular, lineage is a fundamental organizing and legitimating principle. Great weight is given to claiming an unbroken lineage that traces back to the Buddha; therefore teacher to student relations are a topic of careful account, and have often become the source of dispute, dissimulation, or highly creative reckonings.<sup>68</sup> At Mindroling this lineage of people is centered around a family, but extends to the many students and practitioners who receive teachings and initiations in the Mindroling tradition, whether at the main monastery or at one of the Mindroling branches or subsidiaries. Since Mindroling is primarily a family-based or “blood” lineage, meaning the primary positions of authority at the monastery pass from father to son and uncle to nephew, the history of the Buddhist lineage overlays the genealogy of the Nyo

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<sup>67</sup> These figures are mentioned in all the major Tibetan language sources referred to in this chapter. See for example Catalogue A, 12 and TLOB, f. 94a.

<sup>68</sup> On the what has been dubbed the “string of pearls fallacy,” and more generally the importance of lineage histories in the Chan context, see John McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

family group or clan, of which, as has already been mentioned, Mindroling's founders and their successors were members. Another of Mindroling's multiple aspects reflects these overlapping factors of lineage and clan history.

### *Mindroling as the Center of a Network*

Mindroling's identity is also shaped by its being known as a "mother monastery" (*ma dgon*). This means that beyond the main monastery, the name Mindroling can refer more loosely to many affiliated monasteries and other communities of practice, such as the village centers for professional lay practitioners called Ngakpas (*sngags pa*) that are common in Northeastern Tibet, and the many temples and monasteries that follow various of Mindroling's ritual or other aesthetic practices. Such branches and affiliated institutions, which approximate, follow, (or in some cases, merely claim to follow) in the Mindroling religious system (*chos lugs*) are found across the Tibetan Buddhist world. Some of these institutions, such as Lumora monastery (*klu mo ra*) in the Eastern Tibetan region of Nyarong (*nyag rong*) took Mindroling as a direct model and copied its monastic liturgies and curriculum. Lumora and the main Mindroling monastery have been intimately related since the eighteenth century. Other monasteries have much more tenuous ties to Mindroling, but claim affiliation on some count. This network of interrelated institutions across the Tibetan plateau, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, India, (and now the West), is also invoked by the name Mindroling. The officially recognized branch monasteries are listed in Catalogue A and reiterated and added to in a shorter list provided in Catalogue B. To understand Mindroling's particular high culture and aesthetic influence, it will be important in future research to parcel out how these branches and affiliates followed Mindroling's traditions, and

what they gained by doing so. While the focus of this project is limited to the period during which Mindroling was founded, these relationships between “mother monastery” and “son monasteries” (*bu dgon*) or branches (*dgon lag*) are discussed here in the present tense since the precedents set during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa have been maintained to a remarkable degree to the present day.

Monastic networks have long been a critical element in Tibetan culture. Through movement between monastic centers located across the Tibetan Buddhist area, language, sartorial conventions, artistic styles, economics, religion, political gossip and so forth have spread and developed. Mindroling’s particular monastic network took part in this broader phenomenon, and while it was small by the standards of the largest Geluk monasteries (the tradition of the Dalai Lamas), it had many significant branches and affiliates, as well as functioning as a Mecca for students seeking training in Mindroling’s specialties, including the arts and sciences and other marks of high culture education. (This is the main topic of Chapter Four.)

Taking a closer look at Mindroling’s monastic network, Catalogue A lists those places formally defined as “Minling branches” (*smin gling dgon lag*) followed by those places that follow the Mindroling system but are not branches per se (*chos lugs gcig pa’i dgon lag*). First, the list of proper branches includes: Dargyé Chöling (*gdan sa rnying pa dar rgyas chos gling*) which, as has already been pointed out, was Terdak Lingpa’s family seat and retreat site; Zangtso (*zangs mtsho*) a hermitage founded by the fifteenth century Ösal Longyang (*od gsal klong yangs*); Lodrak Ling (*lho brag gling bzhi dgon*) near where Milarepa and Marpa formed their famous student-teacher bond; Chak Jangjub Ling (*chag byang chub gling*), the birthplace of Terdak Lingpa’s father, founded by a disciple of Bhutan’s Buddhist hero Pema Lingpa; the retreat place

of Go Gonpa (*sgo dgon pa*); Chonggyé Mizhi Lhakang (*'phyongs rgyas mi bzhi lha khang*) near the birthplace of the Fifth Dalai Lama; Yarlung Négon (*yar lung gnas dgon*) the home of Tibet's imperial line; Kongpo Dechen Tengon (*kong po bde chen steng dgon*) and Monteb Tsegon (*mon theb rtse dgon*) both of which are situated in important border regions (to the southeast); and a site associated with the fourteenth century master Longchenpa called Shang kyī Zabū lung (*shangs kyī zab bu lung*).<sup>69</sup> This is a sampling of the list of proper branches of Mindroling provided in Catalogue A. These monasteries were under the religious and temporal (*chos srid*) authority of Mindroling. So in addition to following Mindroling's ritual cycles and curriculum, the administration of the branch monasteries was in every way governed by Mindroling's hierarchs. Moreover, when major events such as enthronement and consecration ceremonies or large-scale public rituals took place at the mother monastery, the branches were required to send representatives who delivered prescribed offerings.<sup>70</sup>

The second category of affiliates that follow the Mindroling system (*chos lugs*) is looser and longer since the defining features of a monastery that follows Mindroling's system is decidedly ambiguous. There are many ways to take part in the system, from monks' sartorial styles to ritual cycles, from the monastic curriculum to musical liturgies. In Catalogue A this list includes the important Eastern Tibetan monastery of Degé Shechen (*sde dge zhe chen dgon*); a

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<sup>69</sup> The list also includes: Nyendo (*snyen mdo*); Metok Kul Pema Gon (*me tog khul padma dgon*); Powo Dungkar Gon (*spo bo dung dkar dgon*); Tsona Khongkar Teng Gon (*mtsho sna khongs skar steng dgon*); Tashi Tongmon Gon (*bkra shis mthong smon dgon*); Jemo Gon (*bye mo dgon*); Lhuntse Kongjor (*lhun rtse khongs sbyor ra so rnying lha khang*); Drakpo Tselegon (*drags po rtse le dgon*); Tsang rong du ri lung buk (*gtsang rong du ri lung sbug*); Gojo tserong draknak gon (*go 'jo rtse rong brag nag dgon*); Gochen gon (*mgo chen dgon*); and Gongkar tsechu drubdé (*gong dkar tshes bcu sgrub sde*); Yartod Karmé Lhakhang (*yar stod dkar me lha khang*). Catalogue A, 153-154.

<sup>70</sup> Catalogue A, 154.

monastery in Yardrok, where Terdak Lingpa's consort and the Fifth Dalai Lama's mother were both from (*yar 'brog mgo sngags cho gling*); and of particular significance in regards to Mindroling's role vis-à-vis the Tibetan government, and the impact that role had on the relationship between Buddhism and temporal rule in Sikkim, the Sikkimese royal state monastery of Pemayangtsé (*'bras ljongs padma yang rtse*) is also mentioned as an affiliate.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to the monasteries mentioned here, Catalogue B mentions locations as branches and affiliates that are not referred to in Catalogue A, perhaps because it was composed at a later date when the network of monasteries had expanded somewhat, or perhaps reflecting a difference in the compilers' priorities. Examples of such different priorities might be the effort to draw attention to branches and affiliates in historically significant locations, politically strategic locations, or diverse regions covering a large landmass. In any case, the monasteries listed in

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<sup>71</sup> Other monasteries on the list include *'od yug gos sngon lha khang*; *rong O rgyan chos gter gling*; *rgyal rtse gling bu dgon*; *pa sna dpal ri dgon*; *stod rdza rong phu*. Given that the list represents just a small number of monasteries that fit within this category of affiliates, it is likely that these particular sites are significant since they were chosen as examples. More research is required to determine what these particular places tell us about Mindroling. In regards to Sikkim's Pemayangtsé monastery, see Saul Mullard's book *Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library Series (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), in which he argues that Mindroling played a formative role in the establishment of the Sikkimese state in the eighteenth century, and more directly helped secure Pemayangtsé's position as the national monastery of Sikkim, also influencing the particular ritual cycles that came to dominate Sikkim's official engagement with Buddhist monastic practice. This happened through Terdak Lingpa's relationship with Jikmé Pawo (*'jigs med dpa' bo*), who would become the head of Pemayangtsé monastery after studying at Mindroling. A further development that was equally significant was that, as will be discussed in more detail in *chap 5*, when Mindroling was sacked by the Dzungar Mongol army in 1717 Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron (*Mi 'gyur dpal sgron*, 1699-1769) and other family members including her mother and sister took refuge in Sikkim. Mingyur Paldron became an influential teacher, transmitting her father's teachings in the process. Her younger sister was also married into the Sikkimese royal family. As a side note, Saul Mullard gives Mingyur Paldron's dates in Sikkim as 1720-1722. See *Ibid.*, 168-170; Catalogue A gives the dates 1718-1720 (Catalogue A, 3-7). At this point the cause of the discrepancy is unknown and requires further inquiry.

Catalogue B, omitted from Catalogue A, include: Tsari Chözam Gon (*tsa ri chos zam dgon*),<sup>72</sup> near the central Tibetan pilgrimage mountain of Tsari, Amdo Rebkong Nyin Gon (*a mdo rep kong nyin dgon*) and Rebkong Sib Gon (*rep kong srib dgon*), two little known monasteries in the Amdo region of Rebkong.<sup>73</sup> While the contemporary equivalents of these last two sites are as yet unidentified, it is significant that in Rebkong, Mindroling practices are still dominant among communities of the ritual experts called ngakpas, in particular. Catalogue B further states that there are too many affiliated monasteries to possibly mention them all, giving as an example Lumora monastery and its own many “offspring” monasteries, the implication being that some of Mindroling’s branches are “mother monasteries” in their own right and that the accumulated institutional network is immeasurable.<sup>74</sup> The point here is that the branches and affiliates listed in both catalogues spread out over the entirety of the area of what was in the seventeenth century designated “greater Tibet” by writers such as the Fifth Dalai Lama and his regent, Sangyé Gyatso. There are also significant affiliates in Sikkim and Bhutan.

Since an important aspect of Mindroling’s far reaching and deep seated authority in Tibetan culture comprises these various sites, as its extended institutional network, it will be worthwhile to pause here to consider the characteristics of the list in general, and to point out some of the more significant places on the list. In regards to the area covered by the network sketched out above, the list includes temples in the southern region of Lhodrak, where, again, the

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<sup>72</sup> This might be *tswa ri* as opposed to *tsa ri*. If so I have not been able to locate the place referred to, and *tsa ri* seems more likely.

<sup>73</sup> It should be noted that I can find no other record of these sites in Rebkong. Catalogue B’s list also mentions: *gtsang chos sde gling*; *drod sa o rgyan rdzong*; *gu ru’i thugs kyi sgrub gnas gtsang zab phu lung*; *g.nyal sbyor ra dgon*; and *nyag bla’i gdan sa skal bzang dgon*. Catalogue B, 36-37.

<sup>74</sup> Catalogue B, 37.

famous yogin Milarepa studied with Marpa the translator. It also mentions locations near Samyé, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery and a model for the founding of Mindroling. Claiming a site in Chongyé is significant since that is where the Fifth Dalai Lama was born. Having a branch in the Yarlung valley, home of the Tibetan imperial family, signifies Mindroling's ties to notions of imperial authority. Other significant locations are the border regions of Kongpo and Mon. These locations are all significant and mentioning them in the catalogues is to some degree strategic. In sum, this network plants offshoots of Mindroling in border regions defining the perimeter of Tibet, in the valley associated with Tibet's imperial past, and in areas once ruled by strong local nobles, some of which were only recently overtaken by the Dalai Lama's government in the seventeenth century. Catalogue B shows that by the twentieth century this extended to Eastern and Northeastern Tibet, reflecting the reintegration of the Tibetan plateau by the nineteenth century. Family and other lineage connections also play a role in defining these locations.

The point in drawing attention to these various faces of Mindroling is to ground the central themes of aesthetics, high culture and cosmopolitanism in a multidimensional portrait that looks beyond Mindroling's functions as a center for ritual, philosophy, and meditation. This project's aim is not to suggest that "mere" aesthetics was all that mattered at Mindroling, but rather to show that Mindroling's many functions are drawn together through these themes.

### *Conclusion*

At the newly founded Mindroling Monastery, the members of the Nyo clan reinvigorated Nyingma ritual traditions as well as codifying poetic and grammatical traditions that they traced back to Buddhism's roots in India. In contrast to the large Geluk monasteries that were the official centers of government at the time, Mindroling's founders set out to build a small and

prestigious institution that would revitalize and preserve Tibetan Buddhist ritual and artistic practices. The monastery would never house more than three hundred students and it was common for the children of noble families to study at Mindroling before embarking on their careers in politics or becoming religious teachers.

Because it was ostensibly on the edge of the political center, Mindroling served a cultural purpose that none of the large Geluk monasteries could fulfill. Since its early years, Mindroling Monastery's primary function was that of a center of high culture and a hub for the ritual arts and aristocratic education. The combination of martial rituals (an important skill for Nyingma specialists), the arts, and high culture in an institution not overtly involved in politics resembles Western universities where weapons are developed in laboratories alongside of poetry seminars, historical debates, graduation ceremonies, astronomy lessons, medical trainings, and social functions. The development of technologies, be they for warfare, medicine, or the shaping of an ethical individual or cultured person, frequently happen within the same institutional walls. Mindroling, like Western universities, housed students of various disciplines. It was a place where laypeople, monks, nuns, and high lamas came to learn. Comparing Mindroling to similar institutions in the West, it is clear that the intention for an institution to serve such a purpose need not be overtly articulated. For instance when the colonial Massachusetts legislature founded Harvard College in 1636, its primary function was the education of the Puritan clergy, especially for the conversion of Native Americans. The institution's progress towards being widely perceived as "the best" happened through more gradual means and subtler rhetoric. At Mindroling, the attraction of the Nyo clan founders and the support of the Dalai Lama drew students from the most influential families, whose successes in the political, cultural, and social realms further strengthened Mindroling's status and appeal. It became a center of high art,

education, and aesthetics, not just in a rarified sphere of Buddhism or strict monasticism, but in Tibetan culture at large. Significantly, through the establishment of satellite institutions, Mindroling's influence extended beyond Central Tibet, across and beyond the regions the Dalai Lama's government was striving so hard to govern.

Due to the noble standing of its founding members, the support of the Dalai Lama, and a crystallization of ritual techniques and educational methods, Mindroling was established as an authoritative cultural center. In this regard Mindroling served a complimentary purpose to the large political Geluk monasteries of Lhasa. It was a small elite cultural center that exemplified the values and standards of the Nyingma school, while providing education and cultural resources for a diverse population. By maintaining a small, contained central community, it was assured that quality of the ritual and artistic practices at Mindroling could be controlled. The focus on esoteric, highly esteemed meditation practices contributed to Mindroling's air of being exceptional. Likewise, all the fundamental ritual elements and artistic forms crucial to Nyingma practices such as making mandalas, monastic music, and ritual dance were transmitted meticulously to small groups of students.

This chapter has mapped out the crucial factors that came together in the founding of Mindroling, including the role of clans in Tibet's social world, the importance of religious and cultural capital, the practical function of reincarnation, inter-sectarianism, and the role of women at the monastery. These diverse elements were integral to Mindroling's foundation and shaped its future role in Tibetan Buddhist culture. The following chapters look at the Mindroling institution in closer detail and explore the careers of its most famous and influential alumni.

CHAPTER THREE  
LETTERS IN THE MAKING OF MINDROLING

*Chapter Overview*

This chapter concerns letters composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa as an avenue towards understanding the nature of their relationship and further considering themes that were significant in the making of Mindroling. Relatively little has been written about Tibetan letters as a literary genre although many letters, particularly those composed by lamas addressed to students, have been preserved and published.<sup>1</sup> Letters prove an especially useful medium for the purposes of this project. Given the focus on high culture aesthetics and the cultivation of a cosmopolitan worldview among leading Tibetans of this period, the context, style and tone of the correspondence are as important as the content. These letters show the particular literary style and aesthetic sensibilities of the writers “in action” as they communicated to each other during significant periods, about events and topics they considered meaningful, and in a style they considered appropriate to the station of the recipient.

As has already begun to be established, during a pivotal moment of Tibet’s long seventeenth century, the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatso and Terdak Lingpa Gyurmé Dorjé engaged in a complex interaction as teacher and student, donor and recipient, fellow noblemen, visionaries, and creative and institutional collaborators. To recapitulate from the previous chapter, when Terdak Lingpa was a young boy, as the son of a well known Great

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is Dieter Schuh work about letters between Mongol rulers and Tibetan hierarchs in the fourteenth century. See Dieter Schuh, *Erlasse und Sendschreiben mongolischer Herrscher für tibetische Geistliche. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntniss der Urkunden des tibetischen Mittelalters und ihrer Diplomatie* (Monumenta Tibetica Historica. Abt III: Diplomata et Epistolae, Bd. 1.) xxvii, (St. Augustin: VGH, Wissenschaftsverlag, 1977).

Perfection master and a descendant of Tibet's imperial line, he forged a meaningful connection with the Dalai Lama, the newly established ruler of Tibet. The biographies, histories, and letters addressed throughout this work show that their relationship remained vibrant throughout their lives, shaping their experience as Buddhist practitioners and worldly authorities. Most central to the thesis of this work, the Dalai Lama sponsored Terdak Lingpa as the founder and first Senior Chair of Mindroling, an institution that came to occupy a distinct and crucial position in regards to Tibet's ruling class and high culture.

Thanks in part to the Dalai Lama's attention to Terdak Lingpa, many of seventeenth and eighteenth century Tibet's most prominent lamas and temporal rulers sought out Terdak Lingpa's advice and instruction. Many of his collected letters are addressed to such individuals and reflect ongoing dialogues. Mindroling's creation and longstanding role in Tibetan Buddhist high culture was based first and foremost on Terdak Lingpa's ties to the Dalai Lama. Therefore this chapter looks closely at letters from the Dalai Lama to Terdak Lingpa, and then looks more generally at the communication between Terdak Lingpa and other significant figures. To put the relationships at the core of Mindroling into context, the letters are analyzed in the light of two main themes: the first is mutually dependent relationships known in Buddhist terms as interdependence or *tendrel (rten 'brel)*, and the second is the application of a Buddhist worldview to practical reality.

Beyond those specific themes, the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's letters are a valuable font of information on a wide spectrum of topics. To help lay the ground for the following analysis and to make it clear why these particular letters were selected, it should be reiterated that Terdak Lingpa spent much of his adult life giving teachings, conferring empowerments, and providing advice for the Dalai Lama and his inner circle at the Potala palace in Lhasa. Terdak Lingpa's outer biography makes it abundantly apparent why later scholars such as Dudjom

Rinpoché characterized Terdak Lingpa as the Dalai Lama's Imperial Preceptor.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the biography gives the impression that he was at the Dalai Lama's court more often than he was at Mindroling. The weighty title of Imperial Preceptor has a long history in the Inner and East Asian religio-political sphere and Tibetan lamas with the title had been acting as religious teachers and guides to the emperor and the imperial court since before the Yuan. Beyond Terdak Lingpa's duties as a ritual expert and teacher, he was consulted on major decisions such as the selection of the Dalai Lama's regents and the selection of the Sixth Dalai Lama. For instance during the regent Sangyé Gyatso's appointment process, Terdak Lingpa drew the Fifth Dalai Lama's attention to a prophecy indicating the name of the new regent would be "Buddha" (which is "Sangyé" in Tibetan) indicating that Sangyé Gyatso was the right choice.<sup>3</sup> Even more striking, according to Sangyé Gyatso's later account of the period between the Fifth Dalai Lama's secret death and the enthronement of the Sixth Dalai Lama, Terdak Lingpa was one of the few people who advised and counseled the Regent through the strife ridden decisions involved in keeping the death secret.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Terdak Lingpa had such a major role at the Dalai Lama's court and was involved in such important decisions and historic events indicates his high level of authority. And by extension, his written correspondence can shed light on social, cultural and political factors beyond his expertise in Buddhist practice.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance see Dudjom Rinpoché, 830.

<sup>3</sup> TLOB, f. 116b.

<sup>4</sup> This fraught period is documented in Sangyé Gyatso's account of the period between the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the announcement of the Sixth Dalai Lama. See Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Sku lnga pa drug par 'phos pa'i gtam rna ba'i bcun len 'bring bsdud sgrogs sbyangs kyis gsang rgya khrom bsgrags gnang skor* (Lhasa: bod ljongs mis dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1989), 84-87.

The aim throughout this project is to broaden the scope in which institutions like Mindroling can be understood, and by extension to see more clearly the variations and nuances of Buddhist cultures. Institutions are where doctrine and practice merge or collide.<sup>5</sup> In particular, how Mindroling's defining characteristics, some of which seem incompatible and paradoxical, worked together is a central concern of this work. The Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's letters show that Mindroling played a vital role in the Dalai Lama's vision of a unified Tibetan polity. How Mindroling came to fulfill its unique function requires asking different questions of the sources than a reader strictly interested in Buddhist philosophy or practice might be inclined to ask. In particular, by asking questions related to material culture and aesthetics rather than focusing only on doctrine, aspects of Mindroling come into view that might otherwise be overlooked. This approach is not to suggest that the Mindroling lineage crystallized aesthetic traditions at the exclusion of other concerns essential to Buddhism such as the cultivation of compassion, insight and equanimity, but rather to consider how these diverse interests worked together.

Mindroling's diverse qualities fit under a rubric of aesthetics, broadly defined. And as stated in Chapter One, here aesthetics does not strictly refer to the philosophical field, or to the practice of theorizing on art and beauty, although those aspects are also relevant. More specifically, this project is concerned with the worldviews and ways of being that situated Buddhist theory and doctrine in living, material contexts. Similar to institutions but on a smaller scale, ritual and the arts are a principal point of convergence for theory and practice. Art objects

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Brook has addressed this aspect of Buddhist institutions. See Timothy Brook, "Institution," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald Lopez (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 143-161.

themselves are the material support (*rten*) for practice, and in Buddhist contexts when it comes to ritual and art objects, beauty is closely connected to effectiveness.

That said, the letters considered in this chapter are themselves material objects that communicate about a spectrum of concerns and interests of the authors.<sup>6</sup> The letters demonstrate the richness and complexity of the relationships at work in the foundation of Mindroling and they recount the events around Mindroling's early flourishing better than second hand accounts could do. Crucially, they are composed in the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's own particular writing styles and are at the same time suggestive of the dominant literary aesthetic of the Tibetan ruling class in their day. Therefore, again, the letters are an especially apt medium to consider the central questions of this project. When assessed in combination with documents such as monastic catalogues (*dkar chag*), as well as biographies (*rnam thar*) and records of teachings exchanged (*gsan yig*), these letters add a new dimension to the textual evidence used throughout this project.

Against that backdrop, this chapter seeks to shed light on the mutually supportive and defining relationships of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Terdak Lingpa and other charismatic and influential figures of their time. These relationships were the driving force in creating and sustaining Mindroling in its formative years and laid the ground for the role it played through the twentieth century. Taking these relationships into account leads to a fuller picture of the attitudes and interests of the main characters of this story, adding to a larger picture showing how the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's relationship crystallized at Mindroling and ramified the early modern Tibetan religious, cultural and political spheres.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that the original letters are not currently available. Much is lost (seals, calligraphy, quality of paper, etc) in the conversion to the printed book.

### *The Genre*

Before turning to the letters themselves, this section considers letters as a literary genre and raises some of the quandaries they pose to readers. The documents this essay refers to as the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's "letters" are categorized under the honorific Tibetan rubric of *chab shok* (*chab shog*) and sometimes called less formally *ting yig* (*springs yig*) or *trin yig* (*'phrin yig*). Whether these terms are translated as "epistle," "note," or "correspondence" they share enough characteristics with letter writing in Western literature to be appropriately called letters. That said, it is perhaps debatable whether letters in any language should be treated as a purely distinct genre since they overlap so intricately with other kinds of writing. In the Tibetan case, the overlaps are namely with poetry and biography. Without addressing in great detail all the extensions of this literary question now, suffice it to say Tibetan letters occupy a porous category that intersects various genres, and yet are distinct in certain regards that make them especially useful for this work.

Liz Stanley, a scholar of English Literature, addressed the question of whether letters are a distinct genre in her article, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences."<sup>7</sup> Usefully, Stanley identifies characteristics of letters that distinguish them from other genres while acknowledging their fluidity. Although she is writing about English literature, her observations bear consideration in regards to Tibetan literature as well. The most relevant observations Stanley makes are these: letters are dialogical, they are based in a particular moment, they signal the absence of the author from the recipient, and especially in the case of

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<sup>7</sup> Liz Stanley, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," in *Auto/Biography*, 12.3, 2004, 201-235.

open letters, they are often didactic, whether overtly or subtly. For the purposes of this chapter, concerned as it is with the collaborative relationship between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama first and foremost, all these points bear consideration, but the dialogical nature of letters is most relevant.

To expand on this point, letters imply an exchange; they are a materialization of a discussion, an embodiment of a relationship in a given moment in time. The Dalai Lama directly acknowledged the dialogical nature of his letters, using the term *tam* (*gtam*) which suggests a conversation or discussion, in the title of one of his letters to Terdak Lingpa. Both writers employed the convention of requesting a reply from the recipient, again signaling a dialogue. Even more explicitly, the Dalai Lama wrote: “Just as the progress of the sun and moon along the path of the twelve celestial houses is ceaseless, so should our discussion of the union of Dharma and worldly life continue, like the sweet string of the *tambura* being plucked again and again.”<sup>8</sup> These examples demonstrate the dialogical nature of the letters, in keeping with Stanley’s schema.

More particular to the topic of Tibetan letter writing than Stanley’s work, in the essay “Tibetan Epistolary Style,” Hannah Schneider describes the formal features of official letters, based on her study of Central Tibetan letter writing handbooks.<sup>9</sup> Although the Fifth Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa’s letters were composed before these handbooks were popularized in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, the conventions they prescribe were developed over many years and were already active when the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa were writing. In fact, given

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<sup>8</sup> Both letters are published in this volume of writings from the Fifth Dalai Lama to various leaders in China, Tibet and Mongolia. DLDL, 511. The *tambura* is a stringed instrument similar to a sitar.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Schneider, “Tibetan Epistolary Style,” In *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, ed. Martin Brauen (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2005), 258-262.

these writers' prominence, their formal letter writing likely influenced later manuals. (It should be noted however that Schneider's essay addresses how officials should compose letters to the Dalai Lama but not vice versa).<sup>10</sup> Schneider's essay is primarily concerned with the formal structure of official correspondence and does not address questions of content or literary style since the handbooks she writes about are concerned with the physical form and appearance of letters as material objects. The handbooks stipulate the exact placement of the address, the spacing of the content, the size of the handwriting, etc. Differences in the proportions used in laying out the document, the folding of the paper, and the arrangement of the writing on the page reflected the status of the recipient. In official circles, these formal details were carefully defined and regulated. As strict as the rules were and as formalized as letter writing between government officials and aristocrats was, there was enough flexibility for intimate communication and individual expression. And more to the point here, the specificity of the formal requirements further suggests Tibetan letters can be considered as a distinct genre. Since the letters this chapter focuses on are not original documents but later reprints, it is unfortunately not possible to check them against Schneider's account of form and structure. We can however use her findings to place the letters in a cultural context and to some extent infer what the material objects of the original letters looked like.

On the topic of literary form, many of Terdak Lingpa's published letters demonstrate a relaxed approach to form and structure, in contrast to the Dalai Lama's highly formal writing.

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<sup>10</sup> For another example from among the Fifth Dalai Lama's letters see: Chris Cuppers, "A Letter by the Fifth Dalai Lama to the King of Bhaktapur," ed. Fraz Steiner, JNRC (Nepal Research Centre Publications, 1977) 39-43. More particular to the Dalai Lama's letter writing style, see Yumiko Ishihama, "An Aspect of the Tibet, Mongol and China Relationship in the Late 17<sup>th</sup> Century from the View of Tibetan Letter Format - based on the Letters of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Regent Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho and the Mongolian Prince Galden," in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55 (1988): 165-189.

Terdak Lingpa's loosely structured compositions often end abruptly, almost as if he were interrupted. There are several letters, however, that show Terdak Lingpa was skilled in formal letter composition. When he chose to, he could adhere to the formal conventions and employ an equal scope of metaphor, allusion, and poetic device as the Dalai Lama. He also showed a marked playfulness with both language and form. Examples include letters composed in the "a-b-c" or acrostics form (*ka bshad*), letters in the Tibetan *gur* style (*mgur*) which was modeled on Indic *doha*, as well as examples of highly formal ornate poetry (*snyan ngag*).<sup>11</sup> Terdak Lingpa's range and the apparent enjoyment he took in playing with language and form makes it clear that although both authors were trained in formal letter writing, Terdak Lingpa did not always chose to follow literary norms.

In respect to the larger argument of this project, this choice to adhere or not adhere to high literary standards is a reflection of the relative freedom he had from social norms given his role as a charismatic visionary and illustrates one of the primary sites of apparent incongruity at Mindroling. Again, it was a site equally renowned for the "formless" Great Perfection meditation practices on the one hand and educating lay aristocrats in the skills necessary for bureaucrats, diplomats, and literati on the other. This is one of the driving productive tensions of the institution of Mindroling, and a central point of interest in this project.

In addition to the formal concerns, and related to the dialogical aspect already mentioned, another factor that distinguishes letters as a literary genres is that they are composed by a particular sender for a particular recipient. This makes them especially suited to communicating

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<sup>11</sup> On the influence of Indic literary aesthetics and poetics on Tibetan literary history, see Leonard van der Kuijp, Beth Newman, Roger Jackson in Jose Cabazon and Roger R. Jackson ed., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 368-421. Also relevant are Gyatso, "Experience, Empiricism, and the Fortunes of Authority," 311-335 and Kapstein.

about particular relationships such as those this chapter is concerned with, since the content of each letter is especially and sometimes exclusively relevant to the addressee. In other words, these letters demonstrate not only how the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa expressed themselves in general, but how they communicated and what they discussed with each other in particular. In contexts beyond the focus of this project, letters composed for a particular individual and delivered with the intention that the recipient is the primary, if not only, reader can offer a view into the more private side of life and relationships than writing that addresses a wider audience.<sup>12</sup> For this reason letters from famous personages are often highly prized as giving insight into their private lives. That said, the private nature of letters can be complicated in cases such as the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's. They were both prominent figures in their time and place. Therefore they might well have written letters with the assumption that people other than the recipient would read them, if only because they used scribes and employed messengers. This awareness of other readers is more readily apparent in the Dalai Lama's letters than Terdak Lingpa's, which again often appear quite spontaneous and sometimes informal. By contrast, the Dalai Lama's letters show signs of addressing a wider audience, for example praising Terdak Lingpa excessively and framing Mindroling as a place of rest and nourishment for all of Tibet. The Dalai Lama's use of Indic influenced metaphors and allusions also suggests an effort to impress. Moreover, continuing to reflect on the public and private nature of these lamas' letters, it is

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<sup>12</sup> Beyond the scope of the current work, it would be useful to determine exactly when the letters were first printed. It may be that the Fifth Dalai Lama's letters were never intended to be private. Exact timing of the original blockprints is challenging to determine, but it would help address the question of what kind of audience the authors expected their letters to have. In Terdak Lingpa's case, it is often noted that the original letter was composed on a wooden board meant for the recipient to erase and then compose a reply on. This suggests that even when he composed his letters in this essentially impermanent form, the intention was to document his correspondence, likely for later printing and distribution.

relevant that many Tibetan Buddhists treat the writings of revered Tibetan lamas as precious and sacred, akin to the words of the Buddha. In this sense, letters from figures like the Dalai Lama are always similar to open letters unless they are actually marked as secret and protected accordingly. All that said, and given that the letters examined in this essay are not marked as secret, and were block printed and eventually published, they cannot be read as strictly private.

From another perspective, there are ways in which the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's letters work to keep their meaning obscured, engendering a kind of self-secrecy even when available to a wide audience. In this way the letters do also show some signs of being a "private" correspondence, in the intimacy of their references and the esoteric nature of some allusions, for instance to tantric practice. Moreover, the difficulty of the language, the erudition of the writing, and the complexity of certain metaphors all contribute to the letters being to some extent "self-secret" in that only another reader sharing high literary training and exposure to tantric instructions would comprehend the full meaning of the letters. But again, despite these private elements, the letters are clearly the products of public figures. The Dalai Lama's in particular employ rhetorical strategies, formal language and allusions that were intended to impress and inform readers other than the addressee. So while it would be overly simplistic to label these letters as strictly public or private, it is useful to consider these factors since they affect how we understand the rhetoric employed, and what we can surmise about the nuanced intentions of the authors. The purpose of these reflections will become more clear in the following sections, which look directly at excerpts from the letters.

*The Dalai Lama's letters*

This section focuses on two letters composed by the Dalai Lama and addressed to the “Dharma King Terdak Lingpa.” By way of introduction to these documents, the first letter was composed on the occasion when Terdak Lingpa was enthroned as Senior Chair at the newly founded Mindroling, in 1677. This letter is entitled, “A genuine discussion of the prayer to the Second Ratna Lingpa.” (*Rat gling gnyis par gsol ba'i bden gtam*).<sup>13</sup> This letter celebrates Terdak Lingpa as the successor of Padmasambhava, Vairocana, and other important visionaries from Tibetan history, and situates Mindroling monastery as a special site of benefit and enrichment for the people of the Snowland (*gangs can*). It is noteworthy that by using this term he emphasizes Eastern and Western as well as Central Tibet, collectively referred to them in the letter as Greater Tibet (*bod chen*). This demonstrates Mindroling's significance throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world, not just among the Lhasa aristocracy or Central Tibet.<sup>14</sup>

The second letter excerpted below was composed when a female consort joined Terdak Lingpa at his residence at Mindroling, probably in 1678 or 1679.<sup>15</sup> This letter is entitled “The union which is a bouquet of benefit and happiness,” (*zung 'jug phan bde'i snye ma*). The Dalai Lama employs several terms for the young woman consort, including *cham* (*lcam*), *yum* (*yum*), and *dza namo* (*mdza' na mo*) but he does not state her name. Terdak Lingpa's outer biography

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<sup>13</sup> DLCL, 500-502. It should be noted that this was shortly before Terdak Lingpa successfully rediscovered his final *terma* mentioned in *chap 2*.

<sup>14</sup> According to Hugh Richardson, in a footnote to his translation of a decree given in 1679 appointing Sangyé Gyatso to the post of regent, “bod chen” or “Great Tibet” included “all of Tibet comprising the three *skor* of Mnga'-ris (west Tibet), the four *ru* of Dbus and Gtsang and the six *sgang* of Mdo-khams (east Tibet).” See Richardson, 458, n4.

<sup>15</sup> TLOB, f. 112 a.

supplies more details, providing her name as Ngodrub Pelzom (*Dngos grub dpal 'dzom*), and identifying her family as the local leaders of Yardrok (*yar 'brog*). These details and other factors about the consort's connection to the overarching arguments of this project are expanded on below. The apparent candor with which the Dalai Lama treats sexual aspects of tantric practice stands out in this letter.

The messenger sent to deliver both letters, arriving at Mindroling from Lhasa on horseback, was the renowned astrologer Lozang Yonten (*blo bzang yon tan*, d.u.). This appears to be the same Lozang Yonten who is referred to frequently as the choir master (*dbu mdzad*) in the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography. He was one of the Dalai Lama's closest attendants and was one of the few people (including Terdak Lingpa) who were informed of the Dalai Lama's passing before it was publicly announced. Without diverging too far from the subject of the letters, in order to highlight the importance of this messenger it will be helpful to explain that the Fifth Dalai Lama's powerful regent Sangyé Gyatso hid the Dalai Lama's death and concealed his reincarnation for thirteen years. Few people were informed, and the fact that both Terdak Lingpa and the messenger Lozang Yontan were among those aware of the death shows they were part of an elite inner circle attached to the Dalai Lama's court. The Regent's decision to conceal the death was apparently due to his anxiety about the political instability of the time.<sup>16</sup> To return to the messenger, Lozang Yontan was a prominent astrologer who was also the Dalai Lama's choir master. He regularly carried letters from the Dalai Lama's residence in Lhasa to Terdak

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<sup>16</sup> Sangyé Gyatso provided an account of this period in *Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, *Sku lnga pa drug par 'phos pa'i gtam rna ba'i bcun len 'bring bsdud sgrogs sbyangs kyis gsang rgya khrom bsgrags gnang skor*.

Lingpa.<sup>17</sup> The high status of the messenger further indicates how important Terdak Lingpa and Mindroling were to the Dalai Lama.

To introduce these letters more completely, they give the impression that the Dalai Lama was personally invested in the events of the enthronement and the consort's arrival at Mindroling. The letters also include celebratory verses and make mention of sizable donations of material objects, such as robes, bells and vajras, which the Dalai Lama sent with the missives. Writing as the principal patron of the newly established Mindroling, the Dalai Lama's letters are exultant while also displaying a marked gravitas, formality, and respect. As will become clear from the translations below, they have a rhetorical intensity and literary flare that verge on the grandiose in some passages, revealing a very specific literary sensibility. While this is partly a reflection of the high literary aesthetic of the time and the Dalai Lama's own florid style, the formality also suggests these occasions were major events.

Further, although these two letters fill only six Tibetan folios combined, they shed light on many topics of interest in this project and in Tibetan history and the study of Buddhism more generally; these include some fine points of tantric practice, Buddhist statecraft and the Tibetan concept of unified religious and worldly spheres (*chos srid zung 'brel*), Tibetan literary aesthetics, and "patron-priest" (*mchod yon*) dynamics, to name some of the most salient elements in the letters.<sup>18</sup> Of particular importance here is the exalted manner in which the Dalai Lama

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<sup>17</sup> For more on Lozang Yontan in his role as choir master, See Karmay, *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, 8 and 30)

<sup>18</sup> On this relationship see D. Seyfort Ruegg, "Mchod yon, yon mchod and mchod gnas/yon gnas: On the Historiography and Semantics of a Tibetan Religio-Social and Religio-Political Concept," in *Tibetan History and Language: Studies Dedicated to Uray Geza on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität, 1991)

portrays Terdak Lingpa and Mindroling, and the erudite manner in which he expresses himself. The sensibilities of Mindroling's founders and their successors and the role Mindroling came to play in Tibetan culture more broadly is a central concern of this project and therefore a major point of interest in the letters. So again, since the Dalai Lama and his close associates were arbiters of taste and style as well as holding political and religious authority, how these men expressed themselves to each other can reveal fine points about Tibet's high culture and literary aesthetic.

#### i. The Interdependent Relationships

Given the focus of this chapter on creative collaborations and relationships in the making of Mindroling, the Dalai Lama's treatment of the Buddhist concept of interdependence or *tendrel* bears close consideration here. This aspect of the letters illustrates the expression of a central Buddhist concept in the lives and communication of two major Buddhist masters. Indeed, the concept works as the armature of the Dalai Lama's compositions. In Tibetan *tendrel* is a rich and complex term that has active philosophical and colloquial meanings. This chapter will focus on the aspect of interdependence as mutually defining relationships. But *tendrel* can also refer to "coincidence,' 'circumstances,' also, 'omen,' a 'connection' with a particular teaching." The term can also mean a ceremony or auspicious event, such as Terdak Lingpa's enthronement ceremony.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on relationships and connections is closely related to the dialogical nature of letters mentioned previously. To expand on how this relates to the letters, the centrality of the concept of interdependence can be discerned in the Dalai Lama's attention to various of

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<sup>19</sup> See Dan Martin and Ivan Waldo's definitions of "rten 'brel" provided in the online THL dictionary, <http://ttt.thlib.org/org.thdl.tib.scanner.OnLineScannerFilter>

Terdak Lingpa's personal, historical, and metaphorical relationships and connections. Within the Dalai Lama's letters, Terdak Lingpa's mutually supportive relationships emerge as the organizing principle of Terdak Lingpa's person, and by extension those relationships are the foundation of Mindroling. In both of the Dalai Lama's letters, Terdak Lingpa's relationships—past, present, and future—are treated as the foundational material of his person. Again to a theme already presented, like all letters, the Dalai Lama's writing here is dialogical; his letters represent one half of a discussion and imply the other half.<sup>20</sup> Given that letters are a materialization of the relationship between sender and recipient, they make a particularly apt vehicle for the expression of the tenet of interdependence. This is true of Terdak Lingpa's letters as well, but it is more apparent in the Dalai Lama's letters due to his explicit attention to the concept of interdependent connections.

As will be shown in the excerpts translated below, the main interdependent relationships the Dalai Lama's letters attend to are those between Terdak Lingpa and the following phenomena or people: enlightenment, the Fifth Dalai Lama himself, Terdak Lingpa's previous incarnations, the new consort, and the people of Tibet. Rather than presenting a portrait of an important person with connections, the Dalai Lama's letters to Terdak Lingpa suggest that from his perspective, the important person *is* his connections. In other words *tendrel* are not only a reflection of greatness – they make up greatness. Each of these relationships of Terdak Lingpa's (with enlightenment, the Dalai Lama, his previous incarnations, his consort, and the people of Tibet) fulfills crucial aspects of Terdak Lingpa's person. In the context of this project the concept of *tendrel* is important since these relationships are the ligaments holding together the larger

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<sup>20</sup> Although some of Terdak Lingpa's correspondence from this time period is available, I have not located the letters he wrote in request of or response to these two letters from the Fifth Dalai Lama.

networks that undergirded Mindroling, including monastic and clan networks already addressed, and the Tibetan aristocracy.

Considering this topic from a broader Buddhist studies perspective, attention to interdependent connections is certainly not out of the ordinary in Buddhist literature. On the contrary, interdependence in its countless iterations is as fundamental to a Buddhist worldview as the truth of suffering, the law of cause and effect, or the possibility of enlightenment. However, the way in which some of the relationships are treated in the Dalai Lama's letters is unexpected. Briefly considering each relationship in turn, first, to equate a teacher like Terdak Lingpa with an enlightened Buddha is common in Tibetan Buddhist literature. Second, since Terdak Lingpa was a much younger beneficiary of the Dalai Lama's support and protection and the fledgling institution of Mindroling was a direct result of his connection with the Dalai Lama, "I made you what you are" would seem a natural tack for the Fifth Dalai Lama to take. Instead, his tone is extremely reverent, implying that it is he who is honored by the acquaintance. Third, tracing a lama's antecedents back through a line of previous masters to the eighth century tantric master Padmasambhava is commonplace in depicting visionary figures like Terdak Lingpa. In fact, identifying a lama with renowned historical figures and evoking Padmasambhava's prophecies is an almost ubiquitous element in descriptions of reincarnate lamas and visionaries. These interdependent relationships are not unusual in themselves. They are, however, evoked here in terms that are exceptionally grand.

The fourth and fifth relationships are more remarkable. To start, the Dalai Lama's treatment of the relationship between Terdak Lingpa and his new consort touches on themes not commonly addressed in Tibetan Buddhist writing. The very fact that the Dalai Lama took notice of the consort's arrival might be surprising to some readers, given the Dalai Lama's position as a

fully ordained celibate monastic leader of the Geluk school. This will be addressed in more detail below, but for now suffice it to say that the Fifth Dalai Lama was deeply involved Terdak Lingpa's tantric and visionary practice. The Dalai Lama's family connections to the Jonang and Nyingma schools, and his interest in a wide variety of practices led him to connect with teachers and practitioners beyond the Geluk school. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Dalai Lama need not have been scandalized by Terdak Lingpa engaging with an actual consort (as opposed to visualizing a consort) for tantric practice, since Terdak Lingpa's vows, unlike those of a monk, did not require that he remain celibate. On the contrary, as a visionary treasure revealer, Terdak Lingpa's relationship with the consort was vital to the success of his practice. Since the Dalai Lama was very much in favor of Terdak Lingpa's visionary activities, it is logical that he took an interest in Terdak Lingpa's relationship with this consort. His role in the consort's arrival at Mindroling becomes more complex and fascinating when the fact that the consort was a relative of the fifth Dalai Lama is considered. Continuing to reflect on the interdependent relationships at play in the letters, lastly, the relationship of Terdak Lingpa with the people of Tibet is also noteworthy. While it is by no means unprecedented to frame a lama's greatness within the context of Tibetans' collective merit, it is remarkable how centrally the Dalai Lama positions the relationship between the Tibetan people and Terdak Lingpa in his framing of Mindroling. Again in the grandest terms, the Dalai Lama states in both letters that Terdak Lingpa, and by extension Mindroling, had a special function in regards to the Tibetan people.<sup>21</sup> The Fifth Dalai Lama's efforts to consolidate a greater Tibetan polity relates directly to his vision of Mindroling as "a grove of wish fulfilling trees in the dark forest of Tibet." The Dalai Lama had great expectations for the role Terdak Lingpa and Mindroling would play.

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<sup>21</sup> The "Tibetan people" are referred to in the Dalai Lama's letters as "bod chen 'gro nams" "bod yul skye rgu" "gangs can skye rgu."

Throughout the Dalai Lama's letters, rich in allusion, elaborate grammar, and Indic inspired metaphor, he shows great esteem for the much younger lama, visionary, and founder of Mindroling. At the same time, he stakes a claim for Mindroling within his plan for Tibet. All these themes will be explored further below, but to summarize, virtually every element of the letters fits within the celebration or acknowledgement of *tendrel*.

## ii. The Enthronement Letter

To turn now to the letter composed on the occasion of Terdak Lingpa's enthronement at the newly constructed Mindroling monastery, which as Chapter Two has shown was funded primarily by the Fifth Dalai Lama, the basic outline of the letter includes: 1) the formal and highly effusive greeting, 2) a brief explanation of what the Dalai Lama has been doing recently (a retreat), 3) the enthronement itself and some comments on Terdak Lingpa's previous incarnations and historical antecedents, 4) words of advice, and 5) an entreaty for a letter from Terdak Lingpa in response. It should be noted that Terdak Lingpa was in his thirties at the time of the enthronement, while the Dalai Lama was in his sixties and had long been in a major position of power and despite the gap in age and station, these letters support that their relationship was nonetheless that of mutual master and student.

Considering each section of the letter in turn, the opening section is the Dalai Lama's greeting. He addresses Terdak Lingpa as a great teacher and tantric practitioner and further, in this introductory section he begins to stake out Terdak Lingpa's relationships to Padmasambhava (here called Padmakara), the state of enlightenment, and the people of Tibet (as those who live at the base of Jambudvīpa). As an extended and grand, "Dear sir," the Dalai Lama writes:

Now, at the center of the swirling convergence of the ocean of the Nine Vehicles; at the pistil of the fully blossomed thousand-petalled lotus of deity, mantra, and wisdom; the performer of the amazing signs and marks; the very embodiment of the Padmakara, the second victorious Buddha; the field of glorious blazing brilliant light of the virtuous actions of the people of the Snowland; completely dispelling the two obscurations, you accomplish development and liberation in the indestructible Unexcelled Yoga whose profound meaning consists of Creation, Perfection and Great Perfection; the eight major common siddhis and the activities of pacifying, increasing, magnetizing, and subjugating; renowned for engaging in whatever is suitable for the capacities and senses of your disciples, excellent or ordinary, the melody of your divine drum beautifies the hearing of all beings in general, and particularly those who live at the base of the great continent of Jambudvīpa. What else is there to say?<sup>22</sup>

The Dalai Lama's rhetorical query, "What else is there to say?" is apt since his praise of Terdak Lingpa could hardly be more extensive. There simply is not much more he could say in Terdak Lingpa's favor, within their particular context. Somewhat ironically the letter does not end there but goes on to say a great deal more about Terdak Lingpa's attributes, in equally grand terms.

In the second section of the letter, the Dalai Lama explains his own current situation, subtly bringing himself into the scope of Terdak Lingpa's defining relationships and relating his recent meditative experience to the enthronement event at Mindroling:

As for me, I gradually fulfilled the propitiation and service of the one with the five-knotted lock of hair, the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha, showing himself in the perception of others as merely King Brahma, the body-deity of the king who protects Tibet. I did not pass beyond the three doors for more than two weeks while focusing on a spacious sphere of experience.<sup>23</sup>

The very existence of the letter itself suggests that the Dalai Lama did not attend the enthronement, and this section of his letters explains why – he was in retreat doing a practice

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<sup>22</sup> DLCL, 500. 3-6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 500.6-501.2.

related to a deity who protects Tibet. This detail relates to Mindroling since, according to Terdak Lingpa's biography, the Dalai Lama also aspired that Mindroling would serve as a source of protection for Tibet, the monastery's very existence repelling enemies from its borders.<sup>24</sup>

Although it might appear strange that the Dalai Lama did not attend the ritual enthronement at Mindroling, in fact the event was treated in an understated way, barely warranting mention in Terdak Lingpa's biography, a running account that meticulously documents teachings given and received and material offerings exchanged. And although the Dalai Lama seems not to have attended, he was in retreat for a practice related to his vision of Mindroling's purpose as a place of ritual protection for Tibet.<sup>25</sup>

The next section of the letter turns to the actual occasion of the enthronement. Although absent, the Dalai Lama sent this letter along with gifts and verses he composed personally to be recited by the monastic assembly at Mindroling. In regards to the actual celebration of Terdak Lingpa's enthronement as the first Senior Chair of Mindroling, the letter states:

You, the great emanation-body family lineage holder, are firmly and permanently established on the vajra throne because you fulfilled your inheritance by implementing your profound treasure-discovering activities in keeping with the life story of the Buddha-heir, the Great Visionary Dharma King Ratna Lingpa.<sup>26</sup>

This brief mention of the main event of the letter is framed by the Dalai Lama's own retreat practice (just previously mentioned) and this allusion to Terdak Lingpa's career, which is

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<sup>24</sup> TLOB, f. 94a.

<sup>25</sup> While Mindroling's catalogues indicate that there was a special room reserved for the Dalai Lama should he visit, as is customary at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, I have not located any record of his having visited Mindroling.

<sup>26</sup> DLCL, 501.2-3.

presented here as a continuation of the life story of the visionary Ratna Lingpa (Rat+na gling pa, 1403-1478), who was the compiler of the Nyingma Gyübum (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*).<sup>27</sup> This is the only direct reference to the event of the enthronement. This mention of Ratna Lingpa begins the section that highlights Terdak Lingpa's relationships with previous masters and visionaries. Most fundamentally, in the next section, the letter establishes Terdak Lingpa as a direct manifestation of Padmasambhava's conscious intention (here referred to as the Great Master from Uddiyana):

The glorious Buddha of the three times, the Great Master from Uddiyana, willed with exceedingly loving kindness that the hundred thresholds of benefit and comfort for the beings in the future corrupt ages be opened. In the spontaneously accomplished auspicious connection, by the warm moist compassion of the three roots, the fruit of aspiration fully ripens.<sup>28</sup>

The inference here is that Terdak Lingpa's career as a visionary is a result of Padmasambhava's intention and subsequent visionaries' work. This leads to the other major relationships touched upon in the letter. These are: Vairocana, Padmasambhava's close disciple and the principal figure in the history of Great Perfection's migration from India to Tibet, and the famous visionary Dorjé Lingpa (*Rdo rje gling pa*, 1346-1405). Both these figures had Buddhist and Bön connections, and like Terdak Lingpa, in his own time Dorjé Lingpa was identified with Vairocana. In reference to these two figures, the Dalai Lama writes:

The great translator Vairocana and the Buddha heir Dorjé Lingpa and so forth, came in sequence as the kin of the people of Tibet, deliberately by the force of this wish.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> An earlier version of which was compiled by Vairocana.

<sup>28</sup> DLCL, 501.3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 501.5. When I consulted scholar of Tibetan literature Pema Bhum on this passage, he suggested it means "In your previous lives you made the wish to manifest so strongly, it's out of your control now."

The relationships between Terdak Lingpa and his previous incarnations (Vairocana, Ratna Lingpa, and Dorjé Lingpa) are portrayed as mutually containing and not only as a linear progression from past to present. Although there is a sense of moving forward from the past through deliberate reincarnation, it is also implied that Terdak Lingpa caused the arrival of these various figures, since he is directly identified with Padmasambhava, the first in the line and the most authoritative.

The next part of the letter draws more on Terdak Lingpa's defining connection with the people of Tibet, which is an essential feature in defining Mindroling's role in the unified Tibetan polity:

The principal significance of this miraculous playful manifestation is that, in the shade of the white parasol of the work of great billowing bodhisattva activities, in general the many beings who live in the era of corruption and in particular all those who live here in this country can happily take rest.<sup>30</sup>

Here the Dalai Lama treats Terdak Lingpa's current relationship to the Tibetan people as a combined result of his previous incarnations' activities and the good fortune of the Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama's statement that Terdak Lingpa's relationship with the Tibetan people is the "principal significance" of his present existence and his role at Mindroling is reiterated several times throughout the letter, in addition to this excerpt. It should also be noted that the Dalai Lama employs a standard Buddhist trope when he suggests that Terdak Lingpa benefits all sentient beings, honing in on Tibetans in particular. This again highlights his significance vis-à-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 501.6-502.1.

vis the greater Tibet that the Dalai Lama was striving to unify and rule. He then closes the letter formally:

Then please commit yourself, take this to heart, without merely pretending to dwell as the essence of Infinite Life. And respond unceasingly like the continuum of a river of auspicious chariots, I continually beseech you.<sup>31</sup>

The multiple *tendrel* mentioned in this letter overlap again and again, moving fluidly across time and through the Dalai Lama's multivalent allusions.<sup>32</sup> Everyone's intentions are intertwined, and the subjectivities are mutually constitutive, with Terdak Lingpa at the center of the "swirling convergence." This closing statement identifies Terdak Lingpa with the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus), an allusion to his mastery of rituals for extending lifespans and "ransoming" people from life threatening illnesses. His expertise in both are attested to in his biography, in which he is regularly reported to perform related rituals.

### iii. The Consort Letter

The second of the two letters composed by the Dalai Lama and addressed to Terdak Lingpa is entitled "The Union which is a bouquet of benefit and happiness," (*zung 'jug phan bde'i snye ma*).<sup>33</sup> It marks the occasion when one of Terdak Lingpa's consorts, Ngodrub Pelzom,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 502.1-2.

<sup>32</sup> While the focus here is on "rten 'brel" as relationships between people, it should be noted that the event of the enthronement is also referred to by this term, reflecting the wider definition of the term that includes both philosophical and colloquial senses.

<sup>33</sup> DLCL, 509-512.

came to live with him at Mindroling. To demonstrate the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa's appreciation for and training in Indic literary traditions and aesthetics, this letter is marked as belonging to a formal category of Sanskrit poetics.<sup>34</sup> The introductory titular note reads:

When in accordance with the prophetic treasure, Terdak Lingpa's consort from Yardrok approached the throne, a gift was sent out. The offering was made in the form of a letter called "The union which is a bouquet of benefit and happiness" delivered by Lozang Yonten, a master of Phulung astrology.<sup>35</sup>

Notably, the "union" of the letter's title doubly refers to the union of Terdak Lingpa and Ngodrub Pelzom, and the union of Dharma and worldly life. The main relationship addressed is that of Terdak Lingpa and the young woman arriving at Mindroling. Yet while her arrival and their great potential as a tantric pair is the primary focus, there is also a strong undercurrent of an ongoing dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa about the Tibetan ideal of uniting Buddhist Dharma (*chos*) and worldly life (*srid*). As previously explained, *chösi* was an extremely influential sociopolitical theory among the Dalai Lama's cohort, and it resonates throughout the writings of Terdak Lingpa and the Dalai Lama beyond these letters.<sup>36</sup> Curiously, as alluded to above, the woman harkened from the same family as the Dalai Lama's mother. And as Chapter Two recounted, according to Terdak Lingpa's biography, it was the Dalai Lama

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<sup>34</sup> The Tibetan term (provided in the letter's marginal notes) for this category of Sanskrit poetics is *sdeb sbyor mnyam ba'i bri tha las zlum po*.

<sup>35</sup> DLCL, 509.1.

<sup>36</sup> Although Terdak Lingpa generally uses the related term *khriims gnyis*, literally translating "two laws" or "two codes of ethics" and suggesting the same effort to bring together the law of Dharma and the temporal law. His use of this term in letters to temporal rulers is considered below.

himself who insisted Terdak Lingpa take a consort at this time.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the young woman who was chosen as Terdak Lingpa's consort was a relative of the Dalai Lama's mother suggests that this event was also a kind of marriage alliance between the Dalai Lama and Mindroling.<sup>38</sup> This helps explain why the Dalai Lama refers to the match as an example of *chösi zungdrel* in this case joining the Dharma of Mindroling and the worldly power of the Dalai Lama. This analysis is supported by the use of the term "take as a bride" (*khab tu 'zhes*) to describe the union in Terdak Lingpa's outer biography. Furthermore, the extensive attention this event received in the outer biography, which again focuses on Terdak Lingpa's worldly engagements and career as opposed to his "inner" religious and spiritual life, demonstrates that this was an official union as much as a tantric one.

The Dalai Lama's familiar treatment of the consort further reflects the probability that he knew her personally. And his direct references to the tantric practices Terdak Lingpa and the young Ngodrub Pelzom would ostensibly engage in as partners shows that the Dalai Lama was comfortable with and supportive of such practices, despite being a celibate monk himself. It also appears that he was eager to depict Terdak Lingpa and the woman as thoroughly qualified practitioners, beyond the need for austerities such as celibacy, and essentially on the level of an enlightened tantric pair in union. The Dalai Lama's exuberance and wholehearted support of this union are abundantly apparent. He sings their praises, in one passage even referring to himself as a "bird well versed in the five arts and sciences, who wears Brahma's thread" singing joyously

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<sup>37</sup> See TLOB, f. 110a-110b.

<sup>38</sup> The phrases *zhabs 'thuds* and *khab tu bsus* are also used to describe this event. These phrases suggest a wedding in a more conventional social sense, rather than a union framed strictly in terms of formal tantric practice. See Ibid., 110b and 112b.

about the match.<sup>39</sup> This somewhat obscure reference to the red thread worn by the Indian Brahmin class is one of these letters' many allusions to Indic culture. It is hard to discern exactly what it signifies here, but certainly one implication is that the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa, as writer and recipient of the letter, share a common education and sensibility based in the high culture of Classical India and reshaped by the Tibetan context. Since in the Indian tradition, the number of threads worn changes based on age and marital status, another implication is that taking a new consort is a rite of passage for Terdak Lingpa, and that by doing so he is "growing up." This possibility is further supported by the Dalai Lama's identification of Terdak Lingpa with the eighth century translator Vairocana's childhood name (*nag zag thang ta*), rather than his adult name, as he is commonly known.<sup>40</sup>

Looking more closely at the layers of meaning in this letter, equating the new human couple with an enlightened couple works to rhetorically defend Terdak Lingpa from those who the Dalai Lama refers to as the "childish ones" who might criticize Terdak Lingpa, presumably for engaging in sexual yoga practices, but perhaps also suggesting a more general mistrust of visionary practices within some sectors of the Tibetan Buddhist world.<sup>41</sup> To clarify, while the Dalai Lama was a celibate member of the monastic focused Geluk school, Terdak Lingpa's vows did not require that he remain celibate. On the contrary, engaging with an actual tantric partner was a crucial part of his practice, a point the Dalai Lama is recorded to have stressed when he suggested that a new consort was needed, again according to Terdak Lingpa's biography. In the same section, the biographer, Terdak Lingpa's brother Dharmashri, cites the Dalai Lama as

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<sup>39</sup> DLCL, 510.2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 511.3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 510.2.

asserting that major Tibetan historic figures had failed to achieve the visionary revelations they ought to have because they either refused to engage with an actual female consort due to being overly attached to vows of celibacy, or because they engaged with the wrong consort.<sup>42</sup> The implication being that if Terdak Lingpa failed to take a new consort, who was correctly qualified and with whom he had the proper connections, he would not fulfill his responsibilities as a visionary. In that case he would fail to live up to the aspirations ascribed to Padmasambhava and carried out by Vairocana, Dorjé Lingpa and Ratna Lingpa, the reincarnation connections mentioned in the letter sent on the occasion of the enthronement. Thus, in the Tibetan Buddhist context, the stakes for Terdak Lingpa and Ngodrub Pelzom were high since the Dalai Lama expected that their union would lead to the rediscovery of a new treasure.

Continuing to consider the Dalai Lama's treatment of the woman within the consort letter, when describing the new couple, the Dalai Lama strives to highlight their qualifications and mastery of the potentially scandalous tantric practices. He writes:

Capable of binding thoughts with lotus threads, free from suffering, disciplined like an elephant drunk on barley beer. By one single step of practice you progress to the level of Buddhahood. [You've] finished with the fatigue of extreme asceticism. In the expanse of *Ae*, the female draws forth the wisdom of the four joys. The *vam* syllable, communion of great joy! The mistress is unrivalled like the moon in the sky.<sup>43</sup>

So in this passage, in which he makes use of technical language associated with tantric practice (i.e. the syllables *ae* and *vam*), the Dalai Lama affirms his support for the new couple as qualified tantric partners. And again, he asserts that they are beyond the need for ascetic restrictions.

Certainly the implication is that celibacy is one of the restrictions the practitioners have

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 110a.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 510.4-5.

transcended, despite how important celibacy is to the Dalai Lama's own school and presumably to his own practice as a monk. Throughout the letter he also praises the woman Ngodrub Pelzom as an "unrivalled" practitioner, likening her to the Tibetan exemplar Yeshé Tsogyel, who was married to the "Dharma King" Tri Songdetsen and who became Padmasambhava's main tantric consort. The Dalai Lama played a key role in the decision to seek out a new consort, and he also had the final say in choosing Ngodrub Pelzom from among several possible candidates.<sup>44</sup>

Through the letter, the Dalai Lama confirms his connection with Ngodrub Pelzom who, as the daughter of the ruler of Yardrok and a relative of the Dalai Lama, was a member of the ruling class. This relates to the broader themes of this project since it dovetails with the relatively high level of respect women teachers and practitioners appear to have experienced at Mindroling. Illustrative examples being Terdak Lingpa's daughter, the great teacher and practitioner Mingyur Paldron, and the many women disciples with whom Terdak Lingpa corresponded (see the study of his letters later in this chapter). Women like these, of the highest social standing, seem to have had access to teachings and initiations on par with their male counterparts. This likely had more to do with the women's societal status than with the Buddhist ideal of ultimate equality. Still, the unusually balanced attitude towards women is apparent in several sources connected to Mindroling. In Terdak Lingpa's biography, for instance, when giving teachings at the Dalai Lama's court and at other noble households in Lhasa, women, most frequently referred to as the wives, mothers, and other female relatives of religious and temporal male rulers, are regularly present. Given Tibetan Buddhism's basic androcentrism it is remarkable that women disciples appear to have received relatively unbiased treatment from Terdak Lingpa, although they were not as numerous as his male disciples. Further, in passages of Terdak Lingpa's biography that

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<sup>44</sup> TLOB, f. 112a.

take place at Mindroling, his mother and other women relatives are also mentioned regularly. This is relevant here since the Dalai Lama's treatment of the consort seems to reflect an attitude of respect and relative equanimity in keeping with that of Terdak Lingpa and the institution of Mindroling more generally. Recognizing that he arranged the match further clarifies his perspective on the event.

To explain in more detail, as mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the Dalai Lama does not mention the consort by name, but uses a range of terms to refer to her. These include: *sang yum* (*gsang yum*), the standard term for tantric female consort; *zanomo* (*mdza' na mo*), a term that usually connotes a lover, beloved, or mistress in a conventional sense; and, in the letter's footnotes (whose author is not indicated), *cham* (*lcam*), which usually means sister, spouse or mistress.<sup>45</sup> Again, it is striking that the Dalai Lama uses terms that suggest a conventionally romantic relationship as well as a tantric one. The variation of these terms and the informality of some of them implies a degree of intimacy between the sender and recipient. It also reflects the Dalai Lama's training in Indian aesthetics and poetics, in which good, balanced writing necessarily includes an element of romantic feeling or *kama*.<sup>46</sup> The diversity of terms further implies a complex connection between the woman and Terdak Lingpa. Not only is she treated as his tantric partner, she is also his spouse and lover. By drawing on these practically intertwining but theoretically distinct aspects of the relationship, but treating it all the while as the object of veneration, the letter demonstrates the complexity of the match, as well as the

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<sup>45</sup> Other female terms used in the letter include *rig ma* (knowledge-consort) and *lha mo* (goddess) but in the context of the letter these refer to women actors in the consecration rite, not the consort herself. In Terdak Lingpa's outer biography, the consort is referred to as *rig ma*, which translates rather awkwardly to female knowledge holder, the point being that in theory she was an expert practitioner in her own right. See TLOB, f. 110a-112b.

<sup>46</sup> On the influence of Indian literary aesthetics on Tibetan literature, see: Cabezon, *Tibetan Literature*, 368-421.

nuances of what these gendered terms signify in the Tibetan context. The variety of terms also indicates the Dalai Lama's taste for poetic language, reflecting an aesthetic choice to avoid repetition.

As mentioned above, based in the belief held by some groups of Tibetan Buddhists that visionaries must perform tantric sexual practices in order to accomplish their revelatory work, the introduction of a new consort was intended to help ensure Terdak Lingpa's continued career as a visionary, an eventuality in which the Dalai Lama was very invested. The Dalai Lama is explicit about this in his letter, where he writes, "Internally, the connection liberates all the knots in the central channel. Externally, your personal lot is now to entirely open the door of profound treasure."<sup>47</sup>

Having praised and established the qualifications of Terdak Lingpa and Ngodrub Pelzom, the next section of the letter resembles a standard Buddhist consecration manual, moving through all the formal steps of blessing the "father and mother" (*yab yum*) as if the living couple were an object such as a painting or sculpture being prepared for its ritual use. This section begins:

On the arising of the communion of father and mother, the flowers smile in their direction. The Sugatas, having lifted up the precious vase, perform the anointment; the gathering of consorts sing the melodious song; all the bodhisattvas give the benediction; the fierce deities frighten away the demons; the goddesses spread out a cloud of offerings – how marvelous! As the master of the Akanishta realm, in the form of the five reliances, you are the nature of enlightenment.<sup>48</sup>

By consecrating the couple in this way, the letter again condones tantric sexual practices and celebrates these particular practitioners, having already stated outright that such accomplished practitioners need not engage in austerities, implying the austerity of celibacy. In this passage

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<sup>47</sup> DLCL, 510.6.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 511.1-2.

and throughout the letter, the Dalai Lama situates tantric practice at the center of Terdak Lingpa's identity as a visionary and implies that he would not be as beneficial to the Dalai Lama or Tibet without his complex relationship with this woman. This letter was most likely composed about 1678, some eighteen years after Terdak Lingpa is recorded to have revealed his first *terma*. Since his career as a visionary was already well established at that time, Ngodrub Pelzom's arrival was part of an effort to improve Terdak Lingpa's health and to aid him in further visionary activities. The letter continues to extol: "As the one who spreads and gathers an ocean of countless mandalas, you are the pervasive master of the hundred clans of limitless peaceful and fierce Buddhas."<sup>49</sup>

It should be clear by now that the consort Ngodrub Pelzom's arrival at Mindroling, which was on one level a conventional wedding, also marks an important moment in the life of a visionary whom the Dalai Lama calls the "womb born Urgyen Khenpo," thus directly identifying Terdak Lingpa with Padmasambhava, the eighth century hero of Buddhism's mythic advent in Tibet.<sup>50</sup> For the Dalai Lama and others invested in the Tibetan visionary "treasure" (*gter ma*) tradition, consecration of the couple takes on historic proportions. But also, given the Dalai Lama's family connection to the woman and his identification of the letter's subject with the union of Dharma and worldly existence, the fact that this union doubled as a kind of marriage alliance between the Dalai Lama and Mindroling should be clear.

Moving now to the theme of Terdak Lingpa's relationship to the Tibetan populace, similar to the enthronement letter, in this letter the Dalai Lama directly connects Terdak Lingpa's tantric practice with his consort to the well-being and enrichment of the Tibetan people. Having

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 510.6-511.1

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 510.2.

established the couple as a consecrated object worthy of veneration, he asserts that the union will benefit Tibet.

From the fierce spread of the sweet seed of bodhicitta, the two accumulations are piled atop the root, trunk and foliage. In an unprecedented piling up of fruitful deeds we take nourishment in you – a grove of wish-fulfilling trees, in the middle of the Snowland’s dense forest.<sup>51</sup>

Here the Dalai Lama suggests that Mindroling, as the home of Terdak Lingpa and his consort in union, will be a place of nourishment for Tibetans, a light in the darkness as it were. Continuing to consider the role of *tendrel* in the Dalai Lama’s compositions, one of the most important connections he identifies is, again, with Padmasambhava. As is extremely common in Tibetan literary depictions of tantric adepts, the Dalai Lama sets Terdak Lingpa and Ngodrub Pelzom on par with the prototypical Tibetan tantric couple, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. More remarkably here, the Dalai Lama seems to suggest that Padmasambhava actually came to Tibet from Uddiyana specifically to practice with Yeshé Tsogyel (referred to here as Lady Kharchen).

The mistress is unrivalled like the moon in the sky. Why else did Lady Kharchen’s partner come from Uddiyana?<sup>52</sup>

The elaborate parallel equates Terdak Lingpa with the foreign tantric expert, Padmasambhava, and the Dalai Lama’s relative Ngodrub Pelzom with the indigenous Yeshé Tsogyel. By the same stroke, the Dalai Lama situates tantric consort practice at the center of Buddhism existence in Tibet by hinting that Padmasambhava came to Tibet to be with his consort the Tibetan Queen

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 510.3-4. The “sweet seed of bodhicitta” might also imply the expectation that the union would lead to the birth of children, who would carry on Terdak Lingpa’s family lineage.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 510.5-6.

Yeshé Tsogyel, who due to his tantric instruction went on to be recognized as the first fully enlightened Tibetan. In this sense the letter offers a twist on the narrative of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet, which typically takes the perspective that Padmasambhava came to Tibet since the wild landscape and native population required his immense strength and prowess in order to be converted to Buddhism successfully. The familiar myth has it that monastic Buddhism was not forceful enough to tame and convert Tibet's spirit to the Dharma. Tibet met its match only with Padmasambhava. But here rather than focusing on Padmasambhava's efforts to safeguard the first Tibetan monastery, instead the letter highlights Yeshé Tsogyel's role in attracting Padmasambhava to Tibet. It is a subtle allusion, but one that quite radically positions practice with a tantric partner at the very center of Buddhism's firm footing in Tibet. In this way, Terdak Lingpa's interdependent connection with Ngodrub Pelzom takes on historic proportions.

The letter closes with the reference to the two lamas' ongoing discussion of *chösi zungdrel* and presents an implicit request for a response from Terdak Lingpa. It also mentions the messenger, who the letter's notes identify as Lozang Yontan, the astrologer.

Just as the progress of the sun and moon along the path of the twelve celestial houses is ceaseless, so is our discussion of Dharma and worldly life being joined in communion. The sweet string of the tambura is plucked again and again as an ornament for the ear. Wearing a white scarf as an additional indication, riding a horse, having arrived at the vast Mindroling, the messenger presents this letter to you by hand.<sup>53</sup>

These two letters from the Fifth Dalai Lama to Terdak Lingpa demonstrate how within the shared worldview of the Dalai Lama and Terdak Lingpa, cooperative interdependent relationships constitute the person. They also illustrate how the concept of interdependence or *tendrel* is integrated into the worldviews and relationships of highly influential figures in the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 511.5-512.1.

religious, social, political, and cultural spheres of early modern Tibet. More specifically, by focusing on the marriage alliance they demonstrate the intricacy of the relationships behind the founding of Mindroling.

Again, according to the letters, Terdak Lingpa is primarily constituted by relationships with Buddhahood, the Dalai Lama himself, past incarnations, a consort, and the Tibetan people. Through these relationships, Terdak Lingpa is portrayed as a fully enlightened Buddha, beyond the requirements of austere practice and discipline, utterly perfect in his ability to teach. As is widely documented in biographical and historical documents, his complex connection with the Dalai Lama was that of mutual teacher-student, donor-grantee, and fellow noblemen. The connections the Dalai Lama points out between Terdak Lingpa and Padmasambhava, Vairocana, Dorjé Lingpa, and Ratna Lingpa represent the fulfillment of great masters' previous endeavors and aspirations, so strong that the Dalai Lama implies Terdak Lingpa could not avoid them if he wished to. Through the strength of the interdependent connections, his own career was latent in their previous deeds just as their aspirations continue to bear fruit through his current activity. The Dalai Lama paints a scene of a powerful momentum moving through Tibetan history, causing each great personage to be moved to greatness in his time, each fulfilling the ever accumulating efforts of his predecessors.

The connection to Ngodrub Pelzom is the most extraordinary relationship conveyed in these two letters. Relationships between reincarnate lamas and Buddhahood, teacher and student, or consecutive incarnations are commonplace, but an intimate treatment of consort relations is rare. The consort letter also remarkably refers to an ongoing discussion of *chösi zungdrel* indicating the Dalai Lama's sense that the connection of Dharma and society is being played out in Terdak Lingpa's relationship with the consort as well as through his connection to the Dalai

Lama. Whereas the Dalai Lama might have referred to her throughout the letter with the honorific *sangyum* meaning “secret consort,” instead he employs an array of poetic and colorful terms that point to different aspects of a full, nuanced relationship. Finally, the connection to the people of greater Tibet situates Terdak Lingpa as an effect of Tibetans’ accumulated merit, as well as a cause of societal enrichment and positive transformation for all Tibetans, past, present and future. The Dalai Lama consistently frames Terdak Lingpa’s extraordinary characteristics as a famed visionary within the undulating context of his mutually dependent and defining connections. His greatness exists in and through his relationships.

At the same time that the letters contain elements that seem quite intimate and private, the message that Terdak Lingpa is an eminent, enlightened teacher, and that Mindroling is a vital center for all Tibetan Buddhists were directed beyond Terdak Lingpa and his community at Mindroling to a wider audience. Recognizing that the letters employ highly sophisticated and carefully wrought rhetoric and fall within a formal tradition of letter composition, ultimately they seem to be intended not only for Terdak Lingpa, but for a more general audience, for posterity. From this perspective, the letters function like public decrees of Terdak Lingpa’s greatness and Mindroling’s significance in regards to the Dalai Lama’s Tibetan dominion.<sup>54</sup>

To return to the aesthetic quality of these letters, the use of metaphors borrowed from Sanskrit literature, but shaped by the Tibetan usage and sensibility, is the most striking aesthetic feature. By modeling his writing on Indic literature, the Dalai Lama identifies with refinement and erudition, marking himself and Terdak Lingpa as part of the educated elite of Tibetan society. Importantly, because India was the birthplace of Buddha, Indic traditions are associated with

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<sup>54</sup> This question requires further research. In order to be more certain about whether the letters doubled as decrees, it would be necessary to determine exactly when the Fifth Dalai Lama’s letters were first made available to readers.

Buddhism and therefore garner more respect and reverence. The tendency to emulate Sanskrit literary style is an unmistakable aspect of the writing of the lay alumni of Mindroling, whose writing will be considered in Chapters Four and Five. This shows that Mindroling was a center for training in the highest literary aesthetic.

Most important for the thesis of this project, the creative tension between efforts to transcend worldly engagements and materiality and the attention to art and ritual practices and their material objects became a rich field of aesthetic activity. The complexity of Terdak Lingpa's significance is suggested by the Dalai Lama's statement that: "As the master of the Akanishta realm, in the form of the five reliances, you are the nature of enlightenment. Having tread upon the great stage of the thirteen vajras, [you have arrived] in Tibet, the grove of Sala trees even while you sleep, pure and impure are one and the same."<sup>55</sup> This characterization of Terdak Lingpa as effortlessly embodying "pure and impure" as nondual aspects underscores his mastery of Great Perfection philosophy and practice. And again, the tension of seemingly paradoxical characteristics is apparent throughout Mindroling's institutional identity.

### *Terdak Lingpa's Letters*

To consider how Terdak Lingpa's correspondence demonstrates the sensibilities and worldview crystallized at Mindroling, this section presents a broad view of his collected letters.<sup>56</sup> Terdak Lingpa's letters are treated in a less formal manner than the Dalai Lama's letters were treated above. This treatment in part reflects the fact that many of Terdak Lingpa's letters are

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<sup>55</sup> DLCL, 511.2-3.

<sup>56</sup> Gter bdag gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje (1646-1714), *Collected Religious Instructions and Letters of Gter-bdag-gling-pa 'gyur med rdo rje* (Dehradun, India: Khochen Tulku, 1977). (Hereafter abbreviated TLCL).

quite informal, resonating with the ideal of spontaneity (*lhun gyi*) espoused by Great Perfection philosophy.<sup>57</sup> The main aim here is to represent the general tone and style of his correspondence with influential contemporaries.<sup>58</sup> In particular, this section of the chapter concerns how his compositions treat Buddhist ideals of nonattachment, nondiscrimination and equanimity, in relation to the practical demands and ethical quandaries of life in the world.

The range of Terdak Lingpa's correspondents demonstrates how well connected Terdak Lingpa was across the Tibetan Buddhist world. To elaborate, he corresponded with the Fifth and Sixth Dalai Lamas, several Tibetan regents including Sangyé Gyatso, the young Polhané (who would become Tibet's secular ruler or "King" for much of the eighteenth century), and political leaders from diverse Tibetan cultural regions such as Degé, Chamdo and Kongpo, Amdo, and Dolpo. He also wrote to major teachers from all the Tibetan Buddhist schools including the head Sakya Lama, as well as Bön masters.<sup>59</sup> His less famous correspondents included meditators and practitioners who sought his advice on their practice. One notable example of a lengthy and detailed letter on the subject of meditative experiences is addressed to the young Sixth Dalai Lama.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, there were numerous women among Terdak Lingpa's correspondents. Like the men he wrote to, the women appear to have been donors, practitioners, and local rulers. To demonstrate Terdak Lingpa's practical application of Buddhist philosophy to daily life this

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<sup>57</sup> One example of spontaneous writing, labeled "gang shar" to suggest that Terdak Lingpa naturally wrote whatever came to mind is addressed to no one in particular. See *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>58</sup> In the future it would be valuable to fully translate a spectrum of examples of Terdak Lingpa's writing, from the relatively formless to the highly formal, in order to conduct an in depth study of his personal style and literary aesthetic.

<sup>59</sup> In particular, a letter to Sakya Dakchen (*sa skya bdag chen*) begins on TLCL, 413. An example of a letter to a Bön master begins on TLCL, 480.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 345-357.

section considers in particular his letters political rulers, meditators from various schools, and women. Specifically, such letters demonstrate the application of the concept of *chösi zungdrel*, as the union of Dharma and worldly life, and *rimé*, as a radically nondiscriminatory worldview.

Before addressing the style and content of the letters in more detail, it is worth noting that in Buddhism, as in all human systems, there are gaps between soteriology and ethics, between normative values and how people actually behave in complex social worlds. Navigating the gap between Buddhist theory and practical realities can lead to contradictory and ambiguous ethical territories, rife with the potential for hypocrisy. In day to day life the philosophical and practical gymnastics of applying Buddhist ethics requires creativity and ingenuity. A Buddhist teacher who aims to advise students on how to behave in complex “real life” situations is confronted with the conundrum of how to best safeguard the student’s well being from a soteriological perspective (meaning how to keep them on the path of virtue, and cultivating enlightenment) without making untenable demands from a practical worldly perspective. Otherwise the teacher’s advice might be inspiring but remain abstract and theoretical. In order to practically apply Buddhist philosophy to concrete situations, the relevant social, political, cultural, and ethical realities must be weighed in equal measure to theory. Terdak Lingpa’s letters show that he was highly alert to these problems. Furthermore, many of his disciples looked to him for advice on how to reckon with dilemmas between the ideal and the practical. This was especially true later in his life, likely due in part to his relations with the Dalai Lama and the prominence of Mindroling.

More generally, from a worldly perspective the results of applying Buddhist ideals to daily life can seem extreme or even absurd. Take for example the demonstration of the Buddhist “perfections” or *pāramitā* in the *Jātaka* tales, the Buddha’s previous life stories. These narratives

take the application of Buddhist ideals such as generosity and compassion to the furthest extremes, far beyond the realm of practicality. An example that might be viewed as absurd is found in *The Life of Shabkar, the autobiography of a Tibetan yogin*. In one episode, during a solitary retreat the yogin Shabkar thanks a thief for stealing his last morsels of food, since by doing so the thief undermined Shabkar's attachment and latent greed.<sup>61</sup> This scenario is not out of the realm of possibility, but again it takes the application of Buddhist ethics to an extreme that borders on the absurd. Keeping the broader Buddhist context in mind, this section of the chapter is concerned with the tastes, sensibilities, ethics, and worldview expressed in the collected letters of Terdak Lingpa. His letters informally and seemingly candidly comment on how to be both a good Buddhist practitioner (honoring doctrine and soteriology) and a good human being (fulfilling social responsibilities, coping with complex emotional experiences, dealing with the demands of life as a leader).

In keeping with those complex motivations, the content, style and rhetoric of his letters mirror the complex and sometimes seemingly incompatible aspects of Mindroling. Reiterated throughout this work, these aspects include its fame as a center for the Great Perfection system, its renown as a center for ritual and art, its reputation as the most elite educational institution for lay Tibetan leaders and aristocrats, and its complicated association with martial rituals used to overcome worldly enemies. In keeping with Foucault's observations in his work on heterotopia, discussed at length in the introductory chapter of this work and elaborated on in Chapter Four, Mindroling's apparently incompatible aspects combined to make it a space that served complex purposes, both actual and imaginary, in early modern Tibet.

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<sup>61</sup> Zabs-dkar Tshogs-drug-rang-grol (1781-1851), Richard Matthieu et al. trans., *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 59.

As described above, Terdak Lingpa's letters display a mastery of literary forms that he did not always choose to employ. Much of Terdak Lingpa's correspondence with his sponsors and students reflects an aesthetic of spontaneity, ease, and flexibility. The formal freedom and playfulness of many of his letters could easily belie his literary training and familiarity with Tibetan high culture. It is striking that although Mindroling is famous for its high literary culture and training in language arts, many of Terdak Lingpa's letters are rather informal notes, many of which end abruptly, as if the writer was interrupted or simply decided he had said enough. However, his more formal writing demonstrates a rigorous training in the literary arts. His formal work again includes the indigenous style of sung poetry known as *gur*, ornate poetry, and acrostics. The fact that Terdak Lingpa seems only occasionally to have composed such formal letters sheds light on his taste and style, and further reflects the complex sensibility of Mindroling.

There are also notable parallels between the form and content of his letters. For instance, many of the less formal letters that seem to have been composed spontaneously in direct response to a specific query tend to offer extremely pragmatic advice. This is in contrast to Terdak Lingpa's more formal letters, for instance those composed in ornate poetry, which tend to have more abstract Buddhist advice as opposed to practical messages. An example would be "Life is impermanent, therefore you should spend all your time and energy practicing dharma. Everything else is a complete waste."<sup>62</sup> This kind of advice from Tibetan lamas to students is commonplace. While it is certainly profound and from a Buddhist perspective, true, it remains theoretical and without a means for practical application. By contrast, in Terdak Lingpa's less formal letters, the messages tend to be practical and nuanced. They display the kind of tolerance

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<sup>62</sup> For two examples see: TLCL, 12, 86.

for complexity and ambiguity that is necessary in applying ideals to reality. Several examples are provided below.

The collected correspondence also shows that he was a knowledgeable historian. For example, his letters to the major intellectual and political figure, Regent Sangyé Gyatso address historical topics such as the history of the term for Tibetan Buddhist debate,<sup>63</sup> the codification of the Tibetan calendar and in particular the correct and timely celebration of Buddhist holidays,<sup>64</sup> and a Tibetan imperial effort to equalize the rich and poor during the Tibetan emperor Muné Tsenpo's reign in the eighth century.<sup>65</sup> He also corresponded about Sanskrit and Tibetan grammar and poetics,<sup>66</sup> medicine, politics and ethical statecraft as well as rituals for repelling enemy armies (*dmag zog*).<sup>67</sup> Terdak Lingpa's renown was based on his intellectual and scholarly capacities as well as his religious mastery.

To consider some examples of the letters Terdak Lingpa wrote to political authorities, the most central concerns can be summarized as *chösi zungdrel*, already discussed at length, and the related concept of *trim nyi (khrims gnyis)*, which can be translated as “two laws” or “two codes of ethics” implying an integration of Dharma and worldly systems. In his letters to temporal rulers and officials, the driving question for Terdak Lingpa is how to conduct oneself responsibly in an official capacity while maintaining one's practice, and acting in accordance with Buddhist

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 299-308.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 250-257.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 257. Terdak Lingpa quotes several sources including the Tibetan chronicle known as the *Bazhé (sba bzhed)*. I have not located other historical references to such an event.

<sup>66</sup> For instance see Ibid., 487.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 470.

values such as equanimity and compassion. From the frequency with which these themes arise in Terdak Lingpa's letters, it is clear that this was a central area of interest for him. This focus in turn shaped the worldview and pedagogy at Mindroling.

For instance, in one letter, a disciple who had been engaged in an elaborate daily ritual practice was honored with a high position in the government. In response to this official's query of how to balance his new commitments, Terdak Lingpa writes, "Because of your positive karma and the effects of your practice on your character, a higher official took notice of you."<sup>68</sup> To summarize, he goes on to say, "Now you've been promoted, you don't have enough time to do all the practices I instructed you to do, therefore amend your daily practice in the following way."<sup>69</sup> Terdak Lingpa provides extensive detail about how to abbreviate the specific practices. The thrust is that if he follows the new instructions, he can do his official worldly duty as well as fulfilling his religious commitments.

In another example of practical advice, in this case to the Fifth Dalai Lama's Regent Sangyé Gyatso, Terdak Lingpa avers (in sum): "You're a busy political leader, if you try to build a three dimensional Kālacakra maṇḍala, it will take a long time and require a huge physical space. The real value of the mandala depends on the quality of the practitioner's mind. Don't worry about building a physical mandala, visualize it instead, just visualize it well."<sup>70</sup> It seems the Regent had written to Terdak Lingpa with the intention of building a massive mandala. Rather than encouraging him to go to extremes for the sake of this Buddhist practice, he counsels the Regent to be more practical. In another letter, he writes, "By being balanced in how you treat

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 397.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 206-209.

people in your role as a leader, you are practicing the Dharma.”<sup>71</sup> And in a letter on dharma practice for royal figures or *gyalpo chöluk* (*rgyal po chos lugs*), he writes, “If in your official work you focus on the three jewels, and on benefitting others, you will avoid becoming small minded and petty in your concerns.” In the same letter, he also writes, as a leader “be reasonable, be egalitarian” and in meting out punishments, “be like a compassionate mother correcting her beloved child.”<sup>72</sup>

As has already been stated, another way that Terdak Lingpa’s application of Buddhist philosophy to his social engagements is apparent is in his relatively egalitarian engagement with women students. While Buddhist philosophy posits that gender is an empty construct and the categories of “male” and “female” ultimately are nondual, there are countless examples of inequalities between the sexes in the history of Buddhism, ranging from androcentrism to misogyny. Practically, in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, women cannot be fully ordained, so all nuns are novices, regardless of their level of training or accomplishment. And whereas life stories of male practitioners typically recount the decision to devote one’s life to the Dharma as a joyous and celebratory occasion, for women this decision is typically rife with struggle and resistance from family and society.

By contrast, Terdak Lingpa’s letters show an active engagement with many female disciples, who are addressed in equivalent terms to his male students. If the letters were not addressed by name and with female titles there would be no way to infer the gender of the recipient because the tone, vocabulary, and content of letters addressed to women does not differ in any discernable way from the letters to men. In addressing the letters, he uses titles for women

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 408.

that are equivalent to those used for his male disciples: “female Dharma practitioner-donor” (*chos mdzad ma*) (81), “female meditator and knowledge holder” (*sgom ma rig 'dzin*) (12), “female ruler” (*dpon mo*) (87, 123).

Again, this stands out in the Tibetan Buddhist context and the presence of recognized female masters in the Mindroling lineage seems in part to reflect Terdak Lingpa’s relatively gender neutral approach. While female teachers at Mindroling have been far fewer than male teachers, there are an unusual number of women represented in the lineage tree, and indeed the women are numbered among the most highly revered and celebrated masters in the lineage. Even today, in the Mindroling community in India and the West as well as the Mindroling community in Tibet, women teachers hold some of the highest positions of influence and authority. In this particular aspect, Terdak Lingpa’s unbiased tendencies have had a direct effect on the educational and career opportunities available to women in the wider Mindroling network.

Crucial to the thesis of this project, the content of Terdak Lingpa’s letters also show a keen interest in and expertise in regards to art, ritual practices and material culture. One of the central assertions of this work is that the formal ritual and art practices for which Mindroling became so famous can be usefully considered within a rubric of aesthetics. In many examples from among these letters Terdak Lingpa offers instruction and advice on how to make mandalas and statues, recipes for medicinal pills with specific instructions for gathering plants, and decorations and ornaments for use during Buddhist holidays and ceremonies.<sup>73</sup> His letters specify the material offerings that should be made upon the enthronement of a new Dalai Lama,<sup>74</sup> as well as the general guidelines for making material offerings. In one particularly striking example of

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<sup>73</sup> An extensive letter on making mandalas is found in *Ibid.*, 416-421.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

attention to material culture and the significance of aesthetics in Buddhism, Terdak Lingpa instructs his correspondent to view all material objects, whether intended for ritual purposes or quotidian use, as physical reminders of the nature of reality, and thereby as supports for Buddhist practice.<sup>75</sup> These topics also relate to Buddhist ethics in the sense that the ritual and art practices centered at Mindroling had ethical transformation and cultivation as their ideal purpose.

Granted, in Buddhist contexts in general, and at Mindroling in particular, ritual practices were not exclusively directed towards the loftiest Buddhist ideals. Such practices were regularly focused on worldly gains such as overcoming rivals or enemies, acquiring wealth, or otherwise influencing circumstances in one's favor. That said, it should be reiterated that the integration of Buddhist theories of ultimate nonduality with life in the relative world is necessarily complex, as is any effort to integrate ideals with reality. Such integration requires flexibility and a tolerance for compromise, paradox and shades of gray. An implicit message of Terdak Lingpa's letters is that if one is motivated mainly by a wish to adhere to ideals or to avoid contradiction, it is difficult if not impossible to bring together Buddhist philosophical ideals and the realities of life.

Both the diversity of Terdak Lingpa's correspondents and the practicality of much of his writing demonstrate an ecumenical worldview that sought to integrate Buddhist philosophy with daily life, allowing for the particular demands and commitments of his diverse students. Rather than being "nonsectarian" as the term *rimé* has often been rendered by Western scholars of Tibet, Terdak Lingpa's consistent use of *rimé* (and his biographer's use of the term to describe him) has a far more holistic sense of unbiased and nondiscriminatory in regards to all manner of philosophical and social distinctions. When this ideal is applied to real life situations, one of its manifestations is indeed an open engagement with members of other groups and schools. In this

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<sup>75</sup> See *Ibid.*, 210.

regard, the letters reveal the openness of Terdak Lingpa's stance on sectarian issues during a time of high stakes sectarian struggle. Not only does he correspond with luminary figures of various schools, but he makes frequent and knowledgeable reference to the writings of diverse historical masters such as Sakya Paṇḍita (the famed thirteenth century hierarch of the Sakya school) to Tsong Khapa (who was retroactively credited with founding the Geluk school). From this ecumenicalism it is clear that Terdak Lingpa's focus on the Buddhist value of impartiality directly shaped his style of engagement with teachers and practitioners of diverse groups, from across the wide Tibetan Buddhist cultural world.

When considered as a collection Terdak Lingpa's letters provide perspective on Terdak Lingpa as a teacher who both encouraged extremely rigorous Buddhist practice, honest self-reflection, and strict detail in conducting rituals, even if the rituals needed to be abbreviated. Keeping in mind that Mindroling was famous for the excellence and refinement of its ritual traditions, which are inseparable from the art practices and aesthetics at the heart of this project, Terdak Lingpa also made allowances so that disciples could practically integrate Buddhist practice into their daily lives.

Terdak Lingpa corresponded with many of the most powerful and influential Tibetans of his time. His connections spanned the vast terrain of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural area, from Ngari in the west to Kham and Amdo in the east. His letters reveal that men and women in the highest positions of government, society, and religious authority sought out his advice on philosophical, historical, ritual, and political subjects. Within the letters gathered in his published collected letters, his advice consistently reflects a concern with integrating Buddhist Dharma into being in the world, bridging potential gaps between soteriology and normative claims about good

Buddhist behavior with practical issues of daily life. He both demonstrates and prescribes an integration of Dharma and worldly life.

Whether this characteristic in his writing is a perfect reflection of how he actually behaved and whether the letters' recipients followed his advice is beyond the tenable scope of this work. But what we can learn about Terdak Lingpa's worldview and pedagogy from these letters makes it clear that he was part of a larger early modern Tibetan Buddhist discourse focused on how to practically join Dharma and worldly life, not in the limited political theory sense that the Tibetan term *chösi zungdrel* is often restricted to, but in the sense of fully integrating Buddhist philosophy with life in the world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

EDUCATION AT MINDROLING -  
BUDDHIST HIGHER LEARNING AND HIGH CULTURE

The original charismatic religious figure was the sorcerer, then later the priest and especially the prophet, the herald of a new cult. Regarding academia, part of academic charisma sprang from this topos—the teacher as spiritual or cultic leader. In the sphere of politics and economics, the original charismatic figure was the warrior, then later the general or king. Part of academic charisma sprang from this topos—the martial, agonistic, polemical cast of academic knowledge...

- William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*<sup>1</sup>

*Chapter Overview: Educating the Ruling Class*

For reasons explored in this chapter, Mindroling's aesthetic influence was inseparable from its role as the most prestigious educational institution for Tibet's ruling class, a role that lasted through the mid-twentieth century. To restate a key point, from its foundation in the late seventeenth century Mindroling was a center of Tibetan high culture. This was in addition to its prominence as a center for ritual and art practices that helped unify the early modern Tibetan polity, such as rites intended to ensure the long life and well being of the Dalai Lamas and large scale public rituals such as the *Sutra Empowerment (mdo dbang)* tradition.<sup>2</sup> As has already been established, Mindroling was also a famed center for esoteric meditation practices, a wealthy noble estate, and at times a hotbed of ritual warfare. Closely related to its educational functions, the artistic and cultural production of Mindroling included literature, music, and visual arts as well as the development of technologies related to astrology, medicine, and calendrical studies. It

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, 15.

<sup>2</sup> See Dalton, "Recreating the Rnyingma School," 91-101.

cannot be overemphasized that Mindroling's multivalent role spanned spheres of religion, statecraft, and culture and contributed to the crystallization of early modern Tibetan aesthetics. The spread of its traditions took various forms, and education of aristocrats was among the most significant and yet unexamined aspects of Mindroling's impact.

As an educational institution, unlike most Tibetan monasteries, Mindroling regularly served as a school for lay students in addition to training its ordained population; therefore the Mindroling curriculum was not limited to Buddhist doctrine but prepared students for a wide spectrum of careers. In this regard a fruitful comparison can be drawn between Mindroling and the Western university, as this chapter demonstrates. Mindroling's role as a center for higher education helped usher in Tibet's early modern consciousness, shaping the sensibilities and worldviews of the ruling class, with ramifications that are still discernible in Tibetan Buddhist culture today.

For lay pupils, a Mindroling education included writing, ethics, logic, aesthetics, ritual and art practices. The literary arts were paramount. Language arts were highly valued among Tibetan aristocrats since fine calligraphy and skillful composition of verse and prose were marks of high culture and society, and further prepared graduates for positions in the newly centralized Tibetan government.<sup>3</sup> Lay students tended to enroll at Mindroling in their teens after completing their basic education, this was unlike the monks who began their studies at Mindroling as early as age five, according to seventeenth and eighteenth century sources on Mindroling's curriculum. Lay pupils typically stayed for a period of two to four years, much like students attending university in the West. Whether they went on to careers in government, literature or high society,

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<sup>3</sup> Again, the Fifth Dalai Lama's government was formed under the auspices of the Mongol ruler Gushri Khan in 1642.

the men and, more rarely, women who studied at Mindroling were prepared for positions of prestige and authority, both practically and by pedigree.

In keeping with Mindroling's complex institutional identity, the charismatic teachers who held the position of Senior Chair of the monastery also played complex and in some senses paradoxical roles vis-à-vis the Tibetan polity and society.<sup>4</sup> Letters, biographies and other historical documents examined in this work show that they were influential across the Tibetan religious, scholastic, and political spheres. Beginning with the founder Terdak Lingpa, the Senior Chair's charisma held the monastery together in times of strife, drew sponsorship from aristocrats and the new government, and most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, attracted students to Mindroling.

While the comparison between Mindroling and a Western university explored in this chapter is illuminating, it is also true that the degree to which the monastery functioned like a university is circumscribed by the factors that make Tibetan Buddhist cultural history particular. Therefore this chapter explores certain key similarities while remaining alert to cultural specificities. Among the most edifying parallels between a Western university and Mindroling, the institutionalized charisma of its great teachers, which as William Clark points out in his study of the modern research university, merges spiritual and political topoi, stands out as a primary example. Other salient parallels addressed below include the relationship of higher education and civil society, the place of "good taste" and aesthetics in perpetuating class hierarchies and shaping dominant worldviews, the connection between elite education and political authority,

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<sup>4</sup> The Senior Chair is the head lama of the monastery. At Mindroling this position is passed to the son of the previous chair. If there is no living son, the Senior Chair's daughter can either transmit the necessary teachings or marry a qualified heir; this relates to the importance of family at Mindroling, and also touches on the relatively significant role women have played in the perpetuation of the Mindroling lineage.

and the seemingly incongruous but interwoven purposes that education can play in shaping members of any given society, again as suggested by Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia. More generally, this chapter proposes that examining the roots of Mindroling's curriculum, political engagements, and cultural products can shed light on Western scholarly disciplines and the dynamics of our academic associations as well.

### *Sources*

The main Tibetan language source for this chapter is the Mindroling monastic document referred to throughout this work as Catalogue A.<sup>5</sup> As a reminder, this is an edited collection of documents related to the history of Mindroling. It comprises documents composed by Mindroling's founders as well as later supplementary materials such as an overview of Mindroling's physical plant and material contents at various pivotal moments. In keeping with the Tibetan genre of monastic catalogues, this text, compiled and redacted over several generations, also contains a history of the monastery, a record of the succession of Senior Chairs, a list of branch monasteries, and description of the material contents of the monastery. Most relevant to the subject of education are Catalogue A's sections on the monastic constitution and formal curriculum, examined below.

In addition to the catalogue, this chapter also draws on one chapter from the *Biography of Miwang* (1733) composed by the prolific author and lifelong civil servant Dokharwa Tsering

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this project I make use of two Mindroling catalogues (*dkar chag*), both in Tibetan. This chapter refers exclusively to Catalogue A: Stan pa'i sgron mes, *O rgyan smin grol gling gi dkar chag*. (Ziling: Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1992). The Mindroling constitution (*bca' yig*) and curriculum are published in the same volume; therefore in citing these documents I refer to Catalogue A's pagination.

Wangyal (1697-1763).<sup>6</sup> Both the author (hereafter Dokharwa) and the biography's subject, Miwang Polhané (1689-1747), were Mindroling alumni who studied under Terdak Lingpa and his brother Lochen Dharmashri during Mindroling's first period of flourishing. It should be noted that Miwang Polhané (hereafter Polhané) achieved the highest position of authority in Tibet's central government and ruled from 1728-1747.<sup>7</sup> Dokharwa was also a significant figure in the government, as well as being on the cutting edge of early modern Tibet's literary scene. One section of the biography is dedicated to Polhané's training at Mindroling. The descriptions of what he studied there, and the account of his teachers' qualities and credentials, makes it a useful supplement to the official Mindroling curriculum in Catalogue A. This chapter also refers peripherally to the letters of advice and encouragement Terdak Lingpa composed to his disciples. These letters, which are more central to Chapter Three, are a window into Terdak Lingpa's pedagogical method, which also shaped the method of training pupils at Mindroling. The latter part of this chapter looks briefly at a Western scholar's assessment of the curriculum of one of Mindroling's affiliate monasteries (also mentioned in Chapter Two) Pemayangtsé (*padma yang rtse*), located in Sikkim and associated with the Buddhist royal family. By analyzing the distinct genres of institutional documents, life writing, and letters in conjunction, a rich and full picture of Mindroling's role as a center for higher education emerges.

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<sup>6</sup> Mdo mkhar zhabs drung tshe ring dbang rgyal, *Dpal mi'i dbang po'i rtogs pa brjod pa 'jig rten du dga' ba'i gtam zhes bya ba bzhugs so* (Chengdu: si khron Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2002). (Hereafter, Biography of Miwang). A note on my reading and translation from this text: I was fortunate to have the help of Gen Jamspal at Columbia University when first reading the chapter I refer to from this text. He and Pema Bhum of Latse Library checked and made invaluable suggestions on the passage translated below.

<sup>7</sup> The title "Miwang" (*mi dbang*) has often been translated "king." More generally "ruler" or "person of authority" can also be used. It applied to the person holding the highest position of temporal authority in the Tibetan government.

### *Why Mindroling?*

A question reiterated from different angles throughout this project is why did Mindroling take up its distinct and complex role? Since in this chapter the focus is its role as a center for education, the question is, among the many monastic institutions already existing in Tibet in the late seventeenth century, and among the various sparring schools and powerful family groups, why was Mindroling *the* place for higher education and “the best monastery school for aspiring lay officials?”<sup>8</sup> As the previous chapters have shown, the answer to the overarching question, “why Mindroling” is necessarily complex. The reasons interwove religious, economic, cultural, and political factors. To draw from earlier chapters in order to set the stage for the following discussion of education at Mindroling, it should be kept in mind that the Nyo clan that founded Mindroling had a history of high social and political status in the region, tracing back at least to the eleventh century.<sup>9</sup> Again, this family group held large amounts of land and positions of social and political influence, and its members included the Sixth Dalai Lama and Bhutan’s Buddhist hero Pema Lingpa, who helped establish the Bhutanese royal family’s dominance and was an important transmitter of the Great Perfection practices for which Mindroling would become famous. So, in brief Mindroling’s aura of prestige was based on a combination of the Nyo family group’s high social status, the combined religious and scholastic charisma of the founder Terdak Lingpa and his brother Lochen Dharmashri, the fame of their family’s previously existing institution of Dargye Chöling as a center of Great Perfection practice, support from the Fifth

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<sup>8</sup> This attitude about Mindroling is widely held, but in this particular instance I refer to Beth Newman’s introduction to *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince*, trans. Beth Newman (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), xv.

<sup>9</sup> *Chap 2* addresses the history of the Nyo clan (*gnyos rigs*) in the Lhasa region, beginning with the famed eleventh century translator Nyo Lotsawa.

Dalai Lama's new central Tibetan government, and ties to historic figures through claims of reincarnation. Moreover, Mindroling's association as a center for the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism tied the new monastery to Tibet's imperial era.<sup>10</sup> All these interconnected factors contributed to Mindroling's positioning at the pinnacle of high culture among the Tibetan nobility. For while they were tied to Tibet's ancient history, the founders of Mindroling took part in Tibet's avant-garde, spurring innovations even as they drew on the past for inspiration, legitimacy and privilege. Their mastery of old traditions and their vigorous efforts to make things new jointly contributed to Mindroling's role as a center for elite education. All these factors were active before the physical plant of the monastery was fully constructed in 1676.

i. Cultivating an exceptional field of merit

Mindroling was unusual among Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in several ways addressed throughout this work. Most relevant to the focus of this chapter is Mindroling's role as a training ground for elite lay people, such as the literati and statesmen Dokharwa and Polhané, mentioned above. Granted, it was not unheard of for the major Geluk monasteries in and around Lhasa to house lay students for brief periods. These laypeople were usually donors who wished to spend a brief period in intensive Buddhist practice. But lay students at Mindroling stayed longer and they engaged in studies beyond the scope of doctrinal Buddhism and ritual. Mindroling was especially attractive to lay students, for four main reasons, which are tied together by the themes of high culture aesthetics and a progressive cosmopolitan mentality. In its role as an educational

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<sup>10</sup> Nyingma (*rnying ma*) suggests "old" and this school's name is often translated "Old Translation School" differentiating the Nyingma school from the other major "new" (*gsar ma*) schools.

institution, the defining characteristics of Mindroling were as follows. First, Mindroling was founded under the direct auspices of the powerful Fifth Dalai Lama and had a special position in relation to his new central government, so students from Mindroling were well situated for positions of authority. Second, the Nyo clan whose members founded and ran Mindroling through a hereditary system of succession were an old and powerful family group with longstanding social and religious clout. In particular, they were known both as tantric masters and as experts in the arts and sciences. Third, the main hierarchs of Mindroling were not fully ordained, celibate monks, but tantric experts who could marry and have children; therefore lay people could hold them as direct exemplars without renouncing worldly engagements with family and livelihood. And fourth, the curriculum developed at Mindroling spanned religious and worldly subjects, the unifying thread being prestige and high quality, whether in terms of Great Perfection meditation practices or refined literary skills.<sup>11</sup> For all these reasons, Mindroling served as a school for aristocrats on their way to power and influence, directly influencing the tastes and cosmopolitan culture of early modern Tibet.

To expand on the distinction between Mindroling and other monasteries in regards to education, when laypeople studied alongside clerics at the large Geluk institutions that were the centers of the new Tibetan government in and around Lhasa, such lay pupils were usually financial donors who wished to spend a brief period engaged in intensive Buddhist practice and

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*) or the union of religion and worldly life (commonly translated as religion and politics) is one of various overlapping Tibetan categories related treated in David S. Ruegg, “The Preceptor-Donor (*Yon Mchod*) Relation in Thirteenth Century Tibetan Society and Polity, Its Inner Asian Precursors and Indian Models,” in *Tibetan Studies II: Proceedings of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995, Volume II*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 857-872. See in particular Ruegg’s treatment what he refers to as the “syzygy of Dharma and Regnum” 861.

their training was confined to Buddhist ritual.<sup>12</sup> The diverse Mindroling education was more globally useful to elite lay pupils, since it encompassed practical and aesthetic spheres as well as religious topics.

Although this was an important function, like all Buddhist monasteries, Mindroling was primarily a place where monks studied and practiced Buddhist rituals. To reflect on how these factors combined, since Buddhism's beginnings in India the laity has offered material support in exchange for monks' and nuns' dedication to the Buddhist ideal and ritual expertise. Since not everyone is suited to the ordained life, for most Buddhists, making offerings to a monastery is the next best thing. The essential point is that lay people benefit from the opportunity to donate food and material wealth to the monks and nuns, who function as a "field of merit" by allowing laypeople the chance to support them. But if the laity suspects monks and nuns of sullyng the monastic precepts, would-be sponsors withhold their support. Therefore, in addition to the threat of dire karmic consequences, monastic communities are compelled to uphold the monastic code of the *Vinaya* in order to oblige the lay community and ensure their material support.<sup>13</sup>

This basic model is active across the Buddhist world, but it is somewhat complicated in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist contexts such as Tibet.<sup>14</sup> The monastic code remains the

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<sup>12</sup> On lay donors receiving training at the Jé College of Sera Monastery, see Jose Cabezon, "The Regulations of a Monastery," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 346.

<sup>13</sup> The *Vinaya* is the collection of Buddhist monastic precepts. In Tibet, the system adhered to is the Mulasarvastavada *Vinaya*.

<sup>14</sup> There are three "vehicles" of Buddhism: Hinayana (a pejorative often used interchangeably with the term Theravada), Mahayana and Vajrayana. Tibetan Buddhism integrates all three vehicles, with a focus on Vajrayana.

same and there are many fully ordained monks and novice nuns.<sup>15</sup> However, in Tibet many of the most revered teachers and meditators are not monks or nuns at all, but ritual and tantric experts who are also householders.<sup>16</sup> Mindroling's visionary founder Terdak Lingpa was a prime example of the tantric householder exemplar, as were the line of charismatic teachers who succeeded him as Senior Chair. In its role as a center for ritual and a site where the laity could support the monastic community, Mindroling resembled other Buddhist monasteries. But it differed in its particular connection to the new Tibetan state, the role of charismatic tantric householders as teachers, and its function as an educational center for aristocrats.

Again, although Mindroling productively brought together and educated several distinct types of Buddhist practitioner, the majority of the community members were monks who observed the classic Buddhist ordination rules outlined in the *Vinaya*. In all segments of the population at Mindroling, women were represented in much smaller numbers than men, and generally spent their time outside the monastery walls at an adjacent retreat center. Every member of the community, whether lay or ordained, female or male, took vows relevant to his or her station. In Mindroling's formal literature, examined below, vows are one of the highest priorities, a theme reiterated throughout numerous institutional documents. As pointed out in Chapter One, this focus on vows was an important factor in assuring lay donors that Mindroling was worthy of support. It also worked to fend off criticism from the dominant Geluk school that might imply that the diverse population at Mindroling was lax in regards to monastic vows.

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<sup>15</sup> Full ordination is not available to Tibetan nuns due to a break in the historic lineage, so technically all nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition are novices. This gender discrepancy is a subject of heated debate in the Tibetan Buddhist community.

<sup>16</sup> For an Indian precedent for the role of householders as Buddhist teachers see Robert Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teachings of Vimalakirti* (University Park: The State University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

Continuing to consider the role of Buddhist vows in the training at Mindroling, the Fifth Dalai Lama reportedly encouraged Lochen Dharmashri, Mindroling's preeminent scholar and artist, to pay particular attention in his study of the Vinaya. Taking this advice to heart, Dharmashri composed a lengthy and influential commentary on the three types of Buddhist vows, which remains one of the two most significant works on the topic in Tibetan literature.<sup>17</sup> Given that Nyingma practitioners were sometimes stereotyped as being lackadaisical in regards to vows, and since in fact many of the most famous Nyingmapas are lay practitioners or tantric vow holders (not fully ordained monks or nuns) Dharmashri's expertise in matters of the Vinaya played a significant role in setting Mindroling's reputation as a serious monastic institution, drawing sponsors and students as well as helping to clarify the boundaries between various members of the Mindroling community.

ii. Wealthy sponsors and prestigious students

There was of course a close tie between attracting sponsors and attracting students. According to Catalogue A and Terdak Lingpa's collected letters, many of the patrons who made donations to Mindroling were highly influential members of the new central government, including successive Dalai Lamas and their political regents. Other prominent sponsors included high ranking lamas of other schools, celebrated noblewomen, and rulers from across the greater Tibetan area. These sponsors made sizeable donations of fine art and ritual objects that became important elements in Mindroling's material identity. Those donors were also often former

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<sup>17</sup> Terdak Lingpa's brother Lochen Dharmashri's writings on vows include: Dharmashri, "snga 'gyur sdom rgyun gyi mkhan brgyud kyi rnam thar nyung gsal sgron me," and "dul ba'i las chog," in *Gsung 'bum* (Dehradun: Khochen Tulku, 1999), 318-345; 551-636.

students of Mindroling and its affiliates, or the parents of youths who were sent there for education. In that way donors and students went hand in hand.

Pausing on the subject of the donations made by these wealthy patrons in connection to Mindroling's educational functions leads us to consider again the role of material culture, so closely tied to this project's focus on aesthetics. As already addressed in Chapter Two, careful accounts were kept of the donations made by significant donors and these objects became enshrined in Mindroling's various temples and recorded in its catalogues as well as in letters and biographies. More specific to education, it is noteworthy that the fetishizing of objects such as the teacher's chair, crown, books and ritual implements at Mindroling, as well as the attention paid to monastics' begging bowls and robes in Buddhism more generally, provide a rich comparison for the treatment of objects in the Western university such as the chair, the seminar table, and graduation caps and gowns.<sup>18</sup> As an aside, while less influential patrons generally were not mentioned by name, in Catalogue A Terdak Lingpa stresses the importance of accepting the generosity of poor patrons as appreciatively as donations from the rich and powerful, implying that there was a spectrum of socio-economic classes represented among the monastery's early sponsors.<sup>19</sup>

Again, many of the patrons who sponsored rituals at Mindroling were rulers from across the greater Tibetan area. The Mindroling monastic catalogues, Terdak Lingpa's collected letters

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<sup>18</sup> In his study of the modern research university, William Clark devotes a good deal of attention to related aspects of material history, such as the "chair" as "crystallized charisma." See Clark, 15, 17-18, 72, 286-287.

<sup>19</sup> Catalogue A, 286. Contemporary teachers in the Mindroling tradition claim that Terdak Lingpa was highly attentive to social and gender equality. While this is not explicit in his writing, throughout the documents of the catalogue he remarks on treating various social classes equally, whether in reference to donors, women visiting the monastery on pilgrimage, or poor monks who fall ill and need to be cared for; his letters also display a relatively egalitarian rapport with his women disciples, as is documented in more detail in *chap 3*.

and biographies indicate that the Fifth Dalai Lama, Polhané, and noblewomen such as the Sonam Pelzom (*dpon mo bsod nams dpal 'dzoms*) and in the next generation, the sons and daughters of Doring and Polhané, were regular patrons of rituals at Mindroling, making donations of material objects that remained important to the monastery up until the writing of the second catalogue, which was composed in the 1960s. Less influential patrons also commissioned rituals at Mindroling, which is attested to in the 1687 Mindroling constitution (*bca' yig*). While these less affluent patrons are not mentioned by name, Terdak Lingpa stresses the importance of accepting the generosity of poorer patrons as appreciatively as the donations of the rich and powerful, implying a spectrum of socio-economic classes represented in the monastery's early sponsors.

The same wealthy and powerful sponsors who paid for large-scale rituals and endowed the monastery often sent their sons and, sometimes daughters, to study there. The training conducted at Mindroling and its satellite monasteries across the Tibetan region and schools in Lhasa was restricted neither to the sphere of meditation nor to the skills of a bureaucrat. It was not strictly limited to a discrete sphere of “religion” nor “politics” nor “culture.” Rather, practical training in handwriting and composition came along with conditioning in the fine points of taste and instructions in the “right view” of reality as pure and dreamlike. As is the case at modern Western research universities, what might appear to be contradictory trainings happened together. These parallel trainings are made apparent in the details of the Mindroling curriculum, as well as in the biographies and writings of its graduates. One full chapter of the biography is dedicated to Polhané's training at Mindroling, offering a useful supplement to the official curriculum provided by the founders and examined below.

So, the same echelon of sponsors who funded Mindroling sent their sons and sometimes daughters to study there. During the monastery's first flourishing in Tibet's long seventeenth

century, the prominent families whose children studied at Mindroling included the Dokhar (*mdo khar*) and Polha (*po lha*) families already mentioned as well as the Doring (*rdo ring*) family. In keeping with the needs of these lay students, training in astrology came along with conditioning in deportment and taste, and calligraphy lessons were followed by instructions in the Buddhist view of reality as impermanent. It was as likely that a student would use his training to go on to be a savvy diplomat as it was that he would go on to be a pious Buddhist; and feasibly he would do both. To cultivate people who were skilled bureaucrats, refined aesthetes, and accomplished Buddhists, a gamut of subjects and trainings similar to the liberal arts were offered at Mindroling. This variegated education took place within the highly disciplined atmosphere of the ordained community. Just as the monks and nuns had to appear beyond reproach in upholding their vows, for the benefit of the lay pupils, the subjects taught at Mindroling had to bear the marks of high culture, prestige and sanctity, while also serving the students' practical needs, for instance in terms of writing skills.

Mindroling's unique place in the world of Tibetan education is partly reflected in the letters Terdak Lingpa wrote to his students and donors. As Chapter Three has shown, many of the recipients of his letters were political figures in Lhasa or local leaders from across Tibet. Such people's correspondence with Terdak Lingpa show that they looked to him for advice on how to bring together Buddhist practice with their practical work in the world. They consulted him on topics as varied as the etymology and history of the Tibetan terms for "debate," how to govern justly, how to cope with stress and illness due to overworking, what to do in times of mourning, and of course they asked him for instruction in Great Perfection practices, including ritual techniques and meditative practices. The letters show Terdak Lingpa's mastery of early Tibetan history as well as his attention to developments in other schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

All that is to say that his letters acted as a means for educating his disciples. Because they are less formal than the curriculum examined below, and because of the particular nature of letters as a genre that is both dialogical and to some extent particular to the relationship of sender and recipient, Terdak Lingpa's letters offer further insight into the pedagogy applied at Mindroling, since he was also the designer of the formal curriculum.

Part and parcel of serving the elite ruling class was keeping the main monastery of Mindroling small. Catalogue A indicates that the main temple of the monastery had space for three hundred monks, a tiny number compared to the major Geluk monasteries in Lhasa, which together housed tens of thousands in their heyday. The catalogue also notes that the center for nuns that Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron (1699-1769) established in the early eighteenth century was home to about forty nuns and other female practitioners. As has already been illustrated in Chapter Two, while the monastery was small, from its early days Mindroling had affiliates and branches across the greater Tibetan area (*bod chen*). Far reaching monastic networks such as that of Mindroling are a foundational element in Tibet's religious and cultural fabric. They affect trade routes, political liaisons, linguistic variations, and regional conflicts and are a crucial conduit for art practices and aesthetics. As described in Chapter Two, through this institutional network, beyond the small elite monastery near Lhasa, the institution of Mindroling writ large stretched across the Tibetan Buddhist sphere, spreading its influence through its religious tradition (*chos lugs*) including its formal liturgies and practices as well as its curriculum and more general sensibilities. The main role of the branches was to conduct rituals for the local populations (the most common task of tantric experts of the Nyingma school), but in regards to education and training, the branches also replicated Mindroling's curriculum and instituted its educational practices to varying degrees. Although Mindroling's branches were many, oral

accounts and biographies show that the most elite students from across Tibet sought to receive training at the main monastery, even if that required months of travel, due to its prestige and reputation for excellence. The fact that Mindroling became so widely influential despite the main monastery being so small attests to the significant cultural capital it controlled, largely through educating the ruling class.

Beyond the textual evidence of Mindroling's role in education for the laity visual depictions of Mindroling also attest to this facet. A key example is found in the wall paintings in the Lukhang (*klu khang*) temple located behind the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace in Lhasa.<sup>20</sup> The temple was built by the Sixth Dalai Lama for personal use and contains rare, detailed illustrations of Great Perfection practices and yogic exercises. These remarkable paintings show a diverse group of characters studying and practicing at Mindroling. This image of Mindroling is situated on the wall immediately next to a narrative depiction of Pema Lingpa, who conducted historic visionary and institution building activities in Bhutan. These paintings mark Mindroling as having a special relationship to the Tibetan government and ruling class, in addition to illustrating clan connections and lineage ties between Terdak Lingpa and his Nyo relatives, Pema Lingpa and the Sixth Dalai Lama. The detailed image of Mindroling also reveals it to be a place where people of various vocations congregate, study, and practice. Those present are not just monks and tantric masters, but also laypeople. The people shown in the Lukhang murals are not labeled. Rather, they are generic or anonymous examples of the different kinds of people who

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<sup>20</sup> These images have been photographed and reproduced and were displayed at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art in New York City in 2011, making the details far more accessible than they are in the original temple in Lhasa. See Ian Baker and Thomas Laird, *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

would gather to study and practice at Mindroling.<sup>21</sup> This visual depiction further illustrates Mindroling's diversity of purpose and its role as a place for lay education. It is also significant that Mindroling's visual presence in images in the Lukhang contributed to its prestige, since the Lukhang was designed for the personal use of the Dalai Lamas in their tantric practices. Such visual materials worked both to increase and to instantiate Mindroling's high status among the ruling class, continually drawing students and sponsors. But again it should be stressed that simultaneous to educating the children of Tibet's powerful families, Mindroling was like other monasteries in Tibet and throughout the Buddhist world in regards to its role as a center for ritual and a site where laity could support the monastic "field of merit." These factors were mutually reinforced and they were equally important to Mindroling's success.

To help explain who these lay students were it should be mentioned that during the time when Mindroling was founded, the Tibetan aristocracy was arranged into a hierarchy in which a few noble families occupied society's highest tiers.<sup>22</sup> The children of such families were candidates for positions of power in the government. How high they rose depended at least in

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<sup>21</sup> Janet Gyatso has noted the significance of "generic" images of people in Tibetan medical paintings produced during this period as well. Her observations drew my attention to the interesting factor of anonymity here. See Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: The Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> For more general information on the Tibetan aristocracy see Luciano Petech, "Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728-1959," in *Selected Papers on Tibetan History* *Seriale Orientale* Roma: vol 60. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988. And Tsering Yangdzom, *The Aristocratic Families in Tibetan History, 1900-1951* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2006). Although both these works focus on periods after Mindroling was founded they shed light on related issues. See also Peter Prince of Greece's work on this subject: Peter Prince of Greece, *The Aristocracy of Central Tibet: A Provisional List of the Names of the Noble Houses of U-Tsang* (Kalimpong: G. Tharchin, Melong Press, 1954) [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd\\_6981643\\_000/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd_6981643_000/) (accessed May 12, 2012).

part on their personal charisma and achievement, and whether they were in favor with higher-ups, be they Tibetan, Mongolian, or Manchu. Scant research has been done on the education of the aristocracy during this time period, but biographical accounts indicate that Central Tibetan lay aristocrats were schooled with tutors at home, at the official schools in Lhasa, and in some cases for brief periods with monk tutors in monasteries.<sup>23</sup> Notably, many of the teachers at the official Tsé Lobdra (*rtse slob grwa*) and Tsikhang (*rtsi khang*) schools in Lhasa where young aristocrats were trained for government service were from Mindroling.<sup>24</sup>

Biographical sources show that it was common for youths to study at home with tutors before pursuing studies at Mindroling. For instance, Dokharwa studied at home with his father before beginning his training at Mindroling at the age of thirteen.<sup>25</sup> And again, while Mindroling had a special status, it was not by any means the only monastery where laypeople went for Buddhist training. For example, the constitution (*bca' yig*) from Sera mentions donors who would stay in the monastery for a period of time to receive training and religious education. These particular donor-practitioners staying at a monastery were called *chözé* (*chos mdzad*). This

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<sup>23</sup> Ruohong Li mentions a short work on the education of Tibetan aristocrats written in Chinese. Qian'eba duojieouzhu and Zhuomatai, "Xizang SuguanXuexiao - Zikang Jianshu" (A Tibetan school for lay officials – a brief introduction to *rtsi khang*), *Zhongguo zangxue* (China Tibetology), 4 (1990): 90-92. See Ruohong Li, "A Tibetan Aristocratic Clan in Eighteenth-century Tibet: A Study of Qing-Tibetan Contact" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2002), 109.

<sup>24</sup> Gene Smith also made note of Mindroling's fame for higher learning and for the literary arts in particular, mentioning that Mindroling "provided poetry teachers to the official government schools in Lhasa." See Smith, 19. Smith likely referred to the Tsé Lobdra (*rtse slob grwa*) and the Tsikhang (*rtsi khang*). Li mentions the latter as "an official training school for young aristocrats before they entered government service." See Li, "A Tibetan Aristocratic Family in Eighteenth-century Tibet," 108. Mindroling's connection to Tsé Lobdra is supported in Dungkar Losang Khinley, *Dungkar Losang Khinley, Mkhas dbang dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las mchog gis mdzad pa'i bod rig pa'i tshig mdzod chen mo shes bya rab gsal zhes bya ba bzhugs so* (Dungkar Tibetological great dictionary), (Beijing: krung go'i bod rig p dpe skrun khang), 2002, 1681.

<sup>25</sup> Newman, xv.

custom is not surprising considering that monasteries were the main sites of intellectual, artistic, ritual, and philosophical production. If lay pupils studied among monks for a period of time, they could later return to their lay life. It is hard to say how widespread this practice was, but regardless of how common it was for donors to study at monasteries in general, Mindroling's relationship to elite lay students was exceptional. Since members of the Geluk school wielded the greatest political influence of the Tibetan Buddhist schools at the time of Mindroling's founding, one might expect that young aristocrats who trained at monasteries would have attended Geluk monasteries. Again, the fact that young men, whose high social position directed them towards powerful political careers, were sent to a Nyingma monastery rather than a Geluk institution reflects Mindroling's special reputation as a place of higher learning. It also raises questions about the network of class, education, sect, and socio-political power from the seventeenth century on in Central Tibet. Regionalism, linguistic and cultural capital, and the relationship between religious consecration and political legitimacy all figured into establishing Mindroling as a heterotopic space that was both on the margins, and at the center of Tibetan culture and society.

To develop a sense of why Mindroling came to serve this particular role, it is necessary to consider more generally what the children of aristocrats needed to learn or acquire from school in order to be prepared for positions in the government and then to consider how Mindroling addressed those needs. It is difficult to say with certainty the exact skills, markers or credentials that would have been most important in shaping the nobility. For an impressionistic answer, we can look to biographies, inscriptions, and portraits for descriptions of noble people that give a sense of what characteristics would have been considered valuable. Beyond the aesthetics of good breeding and culture that mark the "noble" ruling classes, technical skills like reading,

writing, and accounting, and an array of more subtly acquired characteristics would have helped boost an aristocrat's role in society and government. Further, like high-powered people in any society, Tibetans would have benefited from persuasiveness, diplomacy, self-confidence, articulateness, political savvy and military training. Biographies suggest a rudimentary knowledge of Tibetan medicine and astrology were also key, as were competitive sporting skills like archery and, perhaps above all else, language arts such as grammar and poetics. In any society, the characteristics that signal nobility are gained through a matrix of family life, schooling, and career experience. In early modern Tibet, Mindroling became a hub for this training.

Significant to cultivating all the characteristics just mentioned, Mindroling offered a curriculum focused on the Tibetan arts and sciences or fields of knowledge known as *rikné* (*rig gnas*), discussed in detail below. It also had an aura of nobility, and accompanying literary, linguistic, technical, and cultural capital that would have been of value to aristocrats and government officials. It is an open question whether studying at Mindroling gave the sons of the Dokhar, Doring and Polha families any particular advantage over other aristocrats. Their careers show that they certainly were at the apex of their social, cultural, and political milieu. The fact that the sons of these important families were not sent to one of the major Geluk monasteries, ostensibly much closer to the seat of political power and influence, is again a reflection of the complexity of Mindroling's relationship to the political center. It carried clout like that of an Ivy League, a training ground for future heads of state and arbiters of taste. Looking closer at Mindroling's curriculum and recognizing its reputation as a place of learning, particularly in regards to literacy and culture, it becomes clear why aristocrats studied there rather than at Lhasa's Geluk centers. This is where Pierre Bourdieu's theories on *habitus* and fields of power

are especially helpful, and where Michel Foucault's model of heterotopia can shed light on the situation of Mindroling.

*Mindroling as heterotopia*

In the Western liberal arts paradigm and at Mindroling alike, education is intended to transform the intellect as well as the character and sensibilities of the student. The ideal is not merely to produce knowledgeable graduates, but to cultivate well rounded human beings. Foucault's theory of heterotopias or "other spaces" aptly frames this complex function in both Western and Asian contexts.<sup>26</sup> As has already been described in Chapter One of this work, according to Foucault heterotopias exist as functioning places in all times and cultures, in contradistinction to imagined utopias. Heterotopias are real, but like utopias they are distinct from everyday environments and engagements. A confluence of seemingly incongruous functions is one of the core characteristics of the heterotopia. One of the primary examples Foucault evoked in illustrating this theory was the boarding school, as a place through which young people pass in order to be transformed from children into educated, cultured members of society. This process of transformation is not limited to the formal work of education, which takes place through sanctioned books, organized tuition and class time, but includes a range of trainings and experiences, some officially sanctioned and some implicitly condoned by the institutional culture but inconsistent with the ostensible work of the school. Examples include exposure to literary and artistic content outside the bounds of the curriculum, sexual encounters, subtle taste-forming experiences, intimate relationships with mentors, and hazing. In harmony

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, 1984, 46-49. Foucault's treatment of the concept of *heterotopia*, first presented in a 1967 lecture, is addressed in detail in *chap 1*.

with Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, the whole person is shaped and the position he or she occupies in the world is determined in the educational process.<sup>27</sup>

As is the case at Western research universities where war technologies are developed in laboratories next to poetry seminars and peace studies classes, students at Mindroling were exposed to seemingly contradictory subjects. The wide range of careers and the distinctive literature produced by Tibetan literati (Dokharwa being the prime example discussed in this study) who were trained in literary arts at Mindroling demonstrates that a rich range of trainings and experiences took place at the monastery, in keeping with Foucault's example of a school as heterotopia.<sup>28</sup> Especially illustrative of this point is the presence of erotic and romantic themes in the literature composed by students of Mindroling. In fact a blend of the erudite and erotic is a hallmark of some of the work of the best known writers associated with Mindroling's early days, in particular sections of Dokharwa's Indic inspired work, the writings of Lelung Zhepay Dorjé, and the poetry attributed Sixth Dalai Lama. This style of writing, which adheres to the highest formal literary standards and draws extensively on Indic models and aesthetics, stands out vividly in the scope of Tibetan literature, which tends to focus on Buddhist doctrine and rarely touches upon secular topics such as sex or romance, with the exception of "folk" genres. As is shown below, for a brief time aristocratic lay students like Dokharwa and Polhané left their careers, families and other worldly engagements to be transformed and shaped by the "other

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<sup>27</sup> See Bourdieu, *In Other Words*. Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and my analysis of connection to the school as *heterotopia* is developed in the latter part of this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Other examples of contemporaries who had Mindroling training and produced erotic literary content are the Sixth Dalai Lama and Lelung Zhepay Dorjé, who played an intriguing role in the biography of Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron. He proposed that she engage in tantric practice with him as his secret consort (*gsang yum*) and further scandalized her by throwing a raucous party at Mindroling.

space” of Mindroling. When they emerged, ideally they were more open minded,<sup>29</sup> ethical, informed, skilled, and ready to rule. Buddhism formed the basic framework, but the content of the education and the transformation it affected went far beyond the bounds of religious doctrine.

Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, distinct “other spaces” that exist in all times and cultures, in tension with a culture’s imaginary utopias, aptly frames Mindroling’s role as a training ground for the ruling class in early modern Tibet. The confluence of seemingly incongruous practices that took place there, particularly regarding education, makes it a fitting example of a heterotopia.

#### *Fields of Knowledge - A Rubric for the Arts, Sciences, and Culture*

Formal education at Mindroling was based on the rubric of the Tibetan term *rikné*, usually translated as “fields of knowledge,” “arts and sciences,” or sometimes “culture.” *Rikné*, related to the Sanskrit term *pañcavidyāsthāna* meaning “the five sciences” encapsulates the basics of education in Buddhist cultures beyond Tibet and long predating Tibetan Buddhism, but in Tibet they took on a distinctly Tibetan character. With some variation, these disciplines bear a strong resemblance to the trivium and quadrivium that made up the seven “liberal arts” of medieval Western universities.<sup>30</sup>

From at least the thirteenth century, thanks primarily to the efforts of the famed scholar Sakya Paṇḍita (*sa skya pan+di ta*, 1182-1251), the originally Indic system of Buddhist training

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<sup>29</sup> For example see Catalogue A, 287. Terdak Lingpa often uses this phrase *lo reng mi dro* (*blo reng mi 'gro*) “open minded” to describe a student who is making good progress.

<sup>30</sup> Notably *rikné* includes medicine, which is excluded from the Western liberal arts. On the *rikné* and their Indian antecedents see David S. Ruegg, “Ordre Spirituel and Ordre Temporal,” 132-138; and in its English summary, 153-155.

known in Tibetan as *rikné* was widely recognized among Tibetans as the basis of good education.<sup>31</sup> Sakya Paṇḍita quoted the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* in the opening to his great work commonly known as the *Gateway to Learning*:

Without becoming a scholar in the five sciences  
Not even the supreme sage can become omniscient.<sup>32</sup>

Bearing this weighty significance, by the time of Mindroling's founding in the late seventeenth century, these categories formally defined what a learned and cultured Tibetan person knew. Like all things Indian, the fields of knowledge mapped out as *rikné* carried the impenetrable aura of coming from the land of Buddha himself. The five major *rikné* are plastic arts (*bzo gnas rig pa*), medicine (*gso ba'i rig pa*), grammar (*sgra'i rig pa*), dialectics (*gtan tshigs kyi rig pa*), and religious doctrine (*nang gyi rig pa*). These are the fields generally invoked by the term but it also applies to a larger classification of ten fields of arts and sciences. These include the five already listed as well as poetics (*snyan ngag*), composition (*sdeb sbyor*), the study of synonyms (*mngon brjod*), drama (*zlos gar*), and astrology (*skar rtsis*). A further list of eighteen fields expands on related themes, which are of interest in painting the picture of what the fields of knowledge encompassed although they were not necessarily explicitly addressed in the training at Mindroling. There are six standard versions of the list of eighteen. To illustrate, the version attributed to the Abhidharmakośa (*chos mngon pa'i mdzod*) includes music (*rol mo*), intercourse (*'khrig thabs*), earning a livelihood (*'tsho tshis*), computation (*grangs can*), elocution (*sgra*), administering medicine (*gso dpyad*), traditions of Dharma (*chos lugs*), craftsmanship or

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<sup>31</sup> On Sakya Paṇḍita's significant influence on the intellectual history of Tibet, and in particular his treatment of the five sciences or *rikné* see Gold, 11-16, 20-24, 31, 139, 155-156.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

architecture (*bzo bo*), archery or the judging of archery (*'phong spyod*), logical argumentation (*gtan tshigs*), yoga (*rnal 'byor*) hearing (*thos pa*), remembering (*dran pa*), astrological analysis (*skar ma 'i dpyad*), calculation (*rtsis*), optical illusions (*mig 'phrul*), history (*sngon rabs*), and historiography (*sngon byung brjod*).<sup>33</sup> While not all these categories are addressed in Mindroling documents, the impression given by Terdak Lingpa's biography and the Mindroling curriculum is that a wide range of trainings were available at Mindroling, thanks largely to the fact that Terdak Lingpa's family, on both his father and mother's side, had long been known for expertise in *rikné*, which in the most general sense involves religious and secular topics.

Reflecting on the lists above, especially the five major fields (*rig gnas che ba lnga*) and five minor fields (*rig gnas chung ba lnga*), makes it clear that Buddhist education is largely concerned with language and literary arts. Notice that grammar, dialectics, poetics, composition, and the study of synonyms make up five of the ten primary *rikné*. And equally noteworthy, Buddhist doctrine per se is but a small fraction of the core subject matter of education in the Tibetan Buddhist context. This focus on language is evident in the formal curriculum at Mindroling, forming a bridge between two of Mindroling's seemingly incongruent functions – training in esoteric Buddhist practices (which require a specialized knowledge of language) and training in the skills necessary for a bureaucrat.

Remarkably, in regards to writing (as distinct from reading), the most powerful and conservative central Tibetan Geluk monasteries did not train most monks to write, starting in the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama when Mindroling was founded. For a variety of philosophical and political reasons, literary studies within the Lhasa Geluk monasteries focused on reading and

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<sup>33</sup> On these lists, and for more on the other versions attributed to the Kālacakra (*dus 'khor*), the Vinaya (*'dul ba lung*) and so forth as well as further breakdowns of the category of *rikné* (*rig gnas*) see: Dungkar Losang Khrinley, 1900-1901.

recitation.<sup>34</sup> That said, it should be noted that there was nonetheless a massive output of written materials from Geluk authors, most of whom originally came from, and were primarily trained in, Eastern Tibet before arriving in Central Tibet. It seems the curtailment of writing in Lhasa was partly to limit innovation and criticism through new writing, and partly to prevent monks from being drawn into political work. So students from the major Geluk monasteries associated with the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa regularly traveled to Mindroling for education in literary arts.

To provide more detail, in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, George Dreyfus corroborates that particularly talented scholars from the three main Geluk monasteries in Lhasa were regularly sent to Mindroling. Dreyfus explains that especially after the Fifth Dalai Lama discouraged the secular branches of learning at these monasteries, monks who required literary training went to Mindroling to study grammar, poetry, and other literary skills.<sup>35</sup> Therefore Mindroling's focus on *rikné* in general and on writing and the literary arts in particular was a precious commodity in the Lhasa region. This helps explain why an education at Mindroling was so highly valued.

By way of explanation Dreyfus indicates that until the 1950s Central Tibetan Geluk monks tended to downplay the relevance of written commentary and exegesis, stressing the completeness of their tradition's core teachings. His assessment, in keeping with other Western

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<sup>34</sup> On the place of writing in Tibetan monastic education, particularly in regards to training for careers in government and civil service, see George Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003a); and in regards to a later historical phase and particularly in regards to training for careers in government and civil service, see Melvyn Goldstein and Gelek Rimpoche, *A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 121.

scholars of Geluk philosophy such as Jose Cabezon, is that the energy that might have gone into training monks to write was directed into training them to debate instead.<sup>36</sup> By this logic there was nothing new worth writing in the sphere of Buddhist thought, so there was no need for monks to learn to write unless they were bound for administrative or governmental careers. This stands in marked contrast to the visionary “treasure” or *terma* (*gter ma*) tradition of Mindroling. The tension between the claim that there is no need to generate new writing at all and the practice of treasure revelation or rediscovery is illustrative of the different ethics and aesthetics of the Geluk versus Nyingma schools.

Further, in regards to power politics, monks at Lhasa’s major monasteries, so close to the heart of Central Tibet’s political scene, would have been more likely to be drawn into politics, and away from their religious practice, if they were skilled writers. By not training them to write, the monasteries were effectively shielding them from the danger of being qualified for political work. The result was that until the establishment of monasteries in exile in the late 1950s, monks at Ganden, Drepung, and Sera learned how to read, recite, debate, and perform monastic rituals, but in general none but the administrators learned how to write. Although this was not the case in Geluk monasteries outside Lhasa, for instance the large centers of learning in Amdo such as Labrang (*bla brang*), lamas from those monasteries were also reportedly sometimes sent to Mindroling. This implies that the reputation Mindroling gained, and the weight of its “diplomas” became valuable even for those trained in centers where writing skills were taught.

To extend the scope of the context in which we understand Mindroling’s role as a center of Tibetan literature and writing, and to consider the ramifications this had on Mindroling’s position of authority in Tibetan culture, it is useful to reflect on the work of some Western

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 120.

theorists who have investigated the relationship between writing and authority. For instance, Jacques Derrida's elaboration of Clause Lévi-Strauss's assertion that writing is fundamentally tied to power and more explicitly, that writing has always and everywhere developed with the basic purpose of enabling the powerful to dominate others. Derrida writes, "writing itself, in that first instance, seemed to be associated in any permanent way only with societies which were based on the exploitation of man by man."<sup>37</sup> Further considering the social and class implications, Roland Barthes has also commented on writing's basic relationship to the aggressive stratification of social classes.<sup>38</sup> Mindroling's place at the forefront of Tibetan aristocratic culture is certainly in keeping with Barthes's observations that writing's origins is based in class distinctions, since as has been established Mindroling's family lineage, members of the Nyo clan, were among Tibet's highest social echelon. Mindroling's central role as a site of education in the subjects known as *rikné* in general and its near monopoly on teaching writing skills in particular firmly situated it as a center of authority.

Mindroling's position of power was firm even while it remained at least rhetorically on the margins of the Geluk controlled political center. And even more notably, it remained strong even after Mindroling became a target of Geluk fanaticism and sectarianism, acted out in drastic violence as well as more subtle forms of persecution. For example, and without diverging too far from the focus on education, Mindroling was razed to the ground by Dzungar Mongols commanded by Geluk zealots in 1717-1718, described in detail in Chapter Five. And even after it was rebuilt by Terdak Linpga's daughter Mingyur Paldron and the Qing supported Polhané

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 119.

<sup>38</sup> Roland Barthes, "Zazie and Literature," in *Critical Essays*, ed. Roland Barthes (Evanston: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 119.

(whose biography is considered in this chapter), the Qing court expressed mistrust of the Nyingma School, and suggested official support for Nyingma institutions like Mindroling and its neighbor Dorjédrak (*rdo rje brag*) be curtailed and adherents be forced to convert.<sup>39</sup> The fact that Mindroling became so powerful and retained its power through major obstacles underscores how significant its role was. This can be attributed in part to its role in elite higher education.

The periodic antagonism and rancor expressed against Mindroling, displayed by the events just mentioned, help explain why the Mindroling constitution, examined below, is so thoroughgoing in its demands. Mindroling's founders anticipated censure from the various Manchu, Mongol and Tibetan forces vying for power at the time, and sought to preempt it.

### *The Mindroling Monastic Catalogue*

#### i. Mindroling's Constitution

The Mindroling founders composed a monastic constitution (*bca' yig*) to define Mindroling's complicated identity as a Nyingma institution. With ties to the new Geluk government, it was also a site of revamping and popularizing old traditions in updated forms, a haven for Great Perfection practices, a hotbed of ritual warfare and a center for the arts. And most crucial for this chapter, it was a place of elite education.<sup>40</sup> The constitution, as a normative

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<sup>39</sup> Polhané biography, 482. This detail was brought to my attention by Hanung Kim. The relevant passage is translated in his unpublished paper. See Hanung Kim, "Two Different Narratives on Early Eighteenth Century Tibet," (Unpublished paper, Columbia University, 2009) 9.

<sup>40</sup> See Bryan Cuevas, "Preliminary Remarks on the History of Mindroling." On the genre of monastic constitutions more generally see Ter Ellingson, "Tibetan Monastic Constitutions: The Bca' Yig," in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, ed. L.

document, lays out clear rules, regulations, schedules, and structures shaping the quotidian life of the monastery. It includes a curriculum for the standard course of study at Mindroling. At the same time that the constitution deals with daily life, its drafters also aimed to present Mindroling in a manner that would meet with approval from shifting political power bases. This effort had mixed success; on one hand, Mindroling attracted powerful patrons and students and exerted a great deal of authority, but on the other hand, the monastery and its leaders were violently persecuted and censured at times. This is one of the key areas of productive tension in Mindroling's identity, as the constitution demonstrates.

In 1689, Terdak Lingpa drafted a detailed constitution (forty-four pages in modern book format) outlining the regulations, curriculum, and yearly calendar for the monastery, with extensive attention to the rituals performed regularly in support of the government. The original constitution was posted on the monastery wall for all to see. Terdak Lingpa's text was revised in 1708 by his brother Lochen Dharmashri and the revised constitution was first block printed in 1717.<sup>41</sup> Terdak Lingpa did not explain his immediate motivation for writing the constitution but generally stated the need for clear rules and regulations. Perhaps he wanted to clarify his vision for the monastery's pedagogy and disciplinary guidelines. Perhaps he was not completely satisfied with the manner in which the monastery had been run previously and wanted to make corrections, or perhaps he was documenting the way things were so his successors could continue his project as he intended. The most ostensible purpose was to clarify the code of conduct best suited to monks at Mindroling, and to provide guidelines for how the Mindroling community should interface with the population beyond the monastery walls. In this sense the

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Epstein and R.F. Shelburne, *Studies in Asian Thought and Religion*, vol. 12 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> It was later published as part of the larger Catalogue A.

constitution served the dual purpose of governing the monastery from within and preventing the outside community from witnessing undisciplined behavior. There are also suggestions that Terdak Lingpa was motivated by a wish to fend off criticisms suggesting the monastery might be lax or anti-intellectual, based on stereotypes of his Nyingma school, and once again, to show that Mindroling's monks were vigorous in upholding their monastic vows.

Beyond the details of the curriculum, which is examined separately below, the constitution gives insight into the general culture and ethos of Mindroling and offers windows onto the concerns and conflicts that arose in the community. For instance, Terdak Lingpa explained how to help poor monks who fell ill and could not afford to pay for private medical care, how to determine which students were suited to undergo solitary meditation retreats and which students needed to remain within the structure of the monastic community. He also wrote about how to safeguard monks from breaking their vows of celibacy, and how to manage the monastery's wealth and archive the valuable art objects acquired through donations. He offered guidelines for minor mundane concerns such as which members of the population may pick fruit from the local orchards (novices and laymen are allowed, ordained monks may not) and how often pupils should get together for afternoon tea. The constitution also addresses more serious issues. For example it warns against coercing the families of new pupils to make unwilling donations to the monastery. It also restricts the duration of time that a pupil may spend away from the monastery, according to where the student's family lives. The fact that Terdak Lingpa provided a clause for those who lived more than one month's journey from Mindroling indicates the presence of pupils from very distant locales, again underscoring the wide scope of Mindroling's network of influence. Terdak Lingpa also generally warned against engaging in gossip, physical brawls, matchmaking, and sectarianism. These guidelines paint a vivid picture

of the culture of the community, subtly indicating problems and conflicts.<sup>42</sup> Some of the main points of tension seem to have been around protecting the monks vows of celibacy by limiting their contact with women, dealing with material donations, and mediating between the monastery's inhabitants and the local population.

Keeping the content and tone of the constitution in mind it will be helpful here to further develop the comparison of Mindroling and the Western university. To that end, the Harvard and Yale charters of 1650 and 1701, respectively, provide apt analogs for Mindroling's constitution. Considering these documents allows for deeper reflection on Mindroling's conception and the methodology of its founders. Composed around the same time in radically different milieus, the Harvard and Yale charters are shorter and less detailed than Mindroling's constitution. They focus on the corporations that manage the resources of the institutions and lay out general educational aims without providing numerous examples and detailed explanations.

In more detail, the Yale charter declares that the institution was founded "wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State."<sup>43</sup> And the Harvard charter states:

"Whereas, through the good hand of God, many well devoted persons have been, and daily are moved, and stirred up, to give and bestow, sundry gifts, legacies, lands, and revenues for the advancement of all good literature, arts, and sciences in Harvard College, in Cambridge in the County of Middlesex, and to the maintenance of the President and Fellows, and for all accommodations of buildings, and all other necessary provisions, that may conduce to the education of the English and Indian youth of this country, in knowledge and godliness."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Catalogue A, 279-284.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.yale.edu/about/history.html>

<sup>44</sup> <http://hul.harvard.edu/huarc/charter.html> The document is held in the Harvard Archive (UAI 15.100).

These examples of Ivy League charters reveal striking similarities between the intentions of their drafters and Mindroling's founders.

For instance, there are parallel concerns with managing wealth donated by sponsors since Terdak Lingpa addresses how offerings should be accepted and distributed, and who should be allowed to accept resources intended for the monastery. Likewise the effort to carry on a traditional style of education (the British system in the case of the charters, and the Indian Buddhist system in the case of Mindroling) in a new cultural context (the Colonies or the newly unified Tibetan polity). There is also a similar focus on studying arts and sciences under the umbrella of religion, and the aim to turn out well trained leaders of church and state. But by contrast, as charters rather than constitutions, the Ivy league documents are brief and focused on the make-up of the corporations that manage the resources donated to the institutions, rather than going into the quotidian details of students' behavior. In general Mindroling's constitution includes a wider range of concerns, and paints a picture of the ethos of the community, whereas the charters are mostly concerned with money and resources. Still, the Harvard and Yale charters show similarities to the underlying intent of Mindroling's founders.

Most importantly, in both the Western and Tibetan settings, the ideal is to integrate practical knowledge with ethical and religious training. In the Tibetan case this integration directly relates to the concept of *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*), discussed throughout this work. To reiterate, the phrase is usually translated "the union of religion and politics," but a greater significance can also be inferred, to suggest an integration of Buddhism with culture, society and government. Educating members of the ruling class in the arts and sciences within a

Buddhist framework, inculcating a fundamentally Buddhist worldview, exemplifies the extended definition of the concept.

Throughout the constitution Mindroling's founders consistently endeavored to show that his monks were vigorous in upholding the Vinaya and to demonstrate that the education at Mindroling was on par with the dominant Geluk monastic establishments, particularly in regards to vows and the formality of training. Given that documents such as this are normative in nature, it is also noteworthy that in many sections the tone of the constitution is casual and seemingly observational. In those sections it does not seem to be so much didactic as informational, whereas elsewhere it clearly lays down the law. This note is important since this variation in tone reflects the variation in Mindroling's aspects.

Despite the occasionally casual tone, the conduct prescribed for Mindroling monks is extremely strict. This is in strong contrast to the informal structure and tone Terdak Lingpa takes in his personal correspondence, discussed in Chapter Three, which is remarkably casual for the most part. As has been shown, his letters often trail off mid-topic and end abruptly without any formal closure. This is the case even in his letters to the highest government officials, such as the Fifth Dalai Lama's regent Sangyé Gyasto, with a few exceptions that reveal his highly formal literary training and skill. It appears from these letters that the formality Terdak Lingpa required of his monks was not required of him. Without digressing too far from the topic of education, it is worth pausing to note here that in the biographical details related to his family life as well, we find a very different example from that prescribed in the constitution. For example, there are unusually strident rules against the presence of women in many areas of the monastery. The constitution states that whether a woman be of high or low standing, and regardless of whether she has relatives living at the monastery, she is not allowed to visit any part of the monastery

beyond the main temple, and she can by no means stay the night. This detail, in contrast to the large number of women recorded to have been present at teachings, and addressed in his correspondence, demonstrates again that the rules Terdak Lingpa laid out for his monks did not apply to him. Terdak Lingpa, by contrast, had abundant contact with women, either as recipients of his Great Perfection meditation instructions, as sponsors of the monastery, as family members, or as tantric partners. Likewise, unlike the monks, he was very close with the female members of his family, especially his daughter Mingyur Paldron, to whom he passed on the full range of his teachings. This is pertinent to the discussion of the constitution since it helps fill out the lived context in which we can understand the contents of this document.

To elaborate, the contrast between Terdak Lingpa's interaction with women and the rules he made for his monks need not indicate hypocrisy. The monks were engaged in a radically different vocation than he was. As ordained Buddhist monks, they were obliged to uphold hundreds of vows regarding their physical, verbal, and mental conduct. The rules laid out in the constitution clearly consider all manner of situation in which the monks might be challenged in their vows, as prescribed in the Buddhist Vinaya. Terdak Lingpa, on the other hand, was a visionary, a tantric master, and the charismatic head of a powerful monastery and wider lineage of practitioners. He was bound by different vows from the monks and therefore was held to different standards. This helps explain why the particular differences and nuances of the different types of Buddhist vows were so important at Mindroling. It was necessary to keep the distinctions clear.

It appears that the strictness of the monastic rules at Mindroling is in part a reflection of what Terdak Lingpa perceived to be added challenges for the monks, given the heterogeneous community at Mindroling and given his own role as their exemplar in spirit but not in kind.

Likewise, his behavior as a householder and tantric practitioner might have raised eyebrows among the more ardent followers of the dominant Geluk school, whose members included powerful Mongols and Qing leaders as well as wealthy and influential Tibetans. Therefore there was all the more reason to ensure that the Mindroling monks were beyond reproach. And further, given the important role the monastery played in conducting rituals connected to the new Tibetan polity, as well as the general prestige of the Mindroling name, it was imperative that Mindroling's monks stand out as a flawless field of merit for donors and supporters.

## ii. Mindroling's Formal Curriculum

Mindroling's scholastic curriculum, contained within the constitution (both published in Catalogue A), addresses the course of study for monks. It does not distinguish courses of study for lay students or women, although we know from other sources considered in this work that diverse students were present. A striking feature of the curriculum is the attention Terdak Lingpa, the document's main author, paid to the particular requirements and capacities of the individual student. While the primary course of study is laid out in some detail, there is a continual reiteration that the guiding logic of every individual's education should be his or her own particular strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations. In the brief three page curriculum, Terdak Lingpa used a Tibetan phrase "*so so*" meaning "as appropriate to each" six times, and the term "*rang rang*" meaning "of the individual" three times.<sup>45</sup> This language suggests a flexible attitude in an atmosphere that catered to the individual. This is a notable juxtaposition to the strictness of the rules laid out in the previous section of the constitution. This type of language is also striking

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<sup>45</sup> For example: "*rang rang gi blo gros kyi 'jug sgo dang sbyar ba'i cho ga*" and "*so so 'i shes rab kyi babs dang sbyar ba'i nyin re 'i dpe rgyugs ji tsam zin pa.*" See Catalogue A, 287, 288.

in Terdak Lingpa's biography and letters. In keeping with the Buddhist ideal of skillful means or *upāya*, it appears Terdak Lingpa sought to provide each disciple and each student at Mindroling with the appropriate training, both in regards to the method and content. Furthermore, the curriculum uses language that reflects the Great Perfection ideals, encouraging a relaxed attitude and open state of mind (*blo reng mi 'gro*) while cultivating disciplined effort.<sup>46</sup> The language indicating a focus on the individual gives the impression of an environment that supported different types of practitioners, underscoring the presence of ordained monks, lay pupils, nuns, and diverse laypeople.

To help put this characteristic of Terdak Lingpa's teaching and Mindroling's curriculum in context, it should be mentioned again that Mindroling was not entirely unique in housing laypeople. And to some extent, a diversity of foci for a diversity of students was not uncommon at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, especially where the population of monks comprised scholars, meditators, administrators, disciplinarians, accountants, and custodians. This is contrary to popular assumptions that all Buddhist monks are meditators. At Mindroling and other monasteries alike, certain rituals and events demanded the presence of all the monks, but their daily lives could vary widely. However, as has already been stated, Mindroling was even more diverse than other monasteries, as a Nyingma monastery with a family lineage at the core of the institution. The focus on each individual's course of study reflected in the curriculum was particularly appropriate for a community whose students had different commitments and would go on to radically different careers. At Mindroling not only were there both monks and lay students, but among those two basic groups were bureaucrats, visionaries, painters, music experts,

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<sup>46</sup> Catalogue A, 287.

poets, future statesmen, novelists, and more.<sup>47</sup> Although the Mindroling curriculum does not mention the laity directly, it does reflect the diverse endeavors of the student body. In sum, it provides a basic format that addresses all the fields of knowledge, focusing on the art practices and ritual techniques most important to the Mindroling tradition, while sustaining Mindroling's intricate ritual connection to the Tibetan government and fostering a mentality in keeping with a distinct Buddhist worldview.

To turn now to the content of the curriculum, it begins with the assertion that study and reflection form the primary basis for the attainment of Buddhahood: “Chiefly, since the attainments of Buddha depend on study and reflection (*thos bsam*) as their primary cause...”<sup>48</sup> This causal relation between study and enlightenment appears to be quite straightforward but in fact it is layered and deserves attention. Even today members of the Nyingma school, in many ways epitomized by the institution of Mindroling, are commonly stereotyped as focusing on meditation rather than intellectual or scholarly pursuits. This stereotype, not entirely unfounded, traces back almost as far as Buddhism's advent in Tibet. It is an important aspect of the Nyingma methodology that meditation is more crucial than study since meditation and related practices

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Dokharwa, author of the Polhané biography and a student of Mindroling, is credited with authoring what is arguably the first Tibetan novel (1721), available in an English translation. See Mdo mkhar Tshe ring dbang rgyal, *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince*, trans. Beth Newman (New York: HaperCollins Publications, 1996). He also wrote what is widely considered the first Tibetan lay autobiography, *The Autobiography of a Cabinet Minister (bka' blon rtogs brjod*, 1762), which like the *Biography of Miwang*, has not been translated into English. See also Luran Hartley, “Self as a Faithful Public Servant: The Autobiography of Mdo khar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal (1697-1763)” in Gray Tuttle, ed., *Mapping the Modern in Tibet*, PIATS 2006: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (Andiast, Switzerland: International Association for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2011), 45-73. Further, Leonard van der Kuijp's brief but informative book review of the *Biography of Miwang* offers valuable details on these works by Dokharwa. See Leonard van der Kuijp, untitled review of *Mi-dbang rtogs-brjod* by Mdo-mkhar Tshe-ring by Zhuang Ting, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 105, no. 2 (April-June, 1985): 321-322.

<sup>48</sup> Catalogue A, 287.

deal with what Buddhism posits as the fundamental problem of existence (the unenlightened mind), not only in theory but in practice. Harking back to myths of how the eighth century cultural hero Guru Rinpoché tamed Tibet's pre-Buddhist culture through his tantric prowess, many Nyingma adherents take pride in focusing on the practical activities that are said to lead to enlightenment most rapidly. In some cases that has meant foregoing scholastic learning in favor of meditation or other forms of practice. Therefore it is especially significant that Terdak Lingpa prefaces his curriculum with the claim that study and reflection lead to full enlightenment.

Considering this point more closely, according to the curriculum, study must precede practice. In fact, sustained meditation practices are only prescribed for a small group of especially capable students. For instance only "individuals of the very highest caliber" are encouraged to engage in solitary meditation retreats.<sup>49</sup> That said, while study is the starting point, according to the logic of the curriculum meditation ultimately trumps scholarship because it is reserved for the elite few. Nonetheless study is presented as the main focus of the curriculum and the foundation of all other elements of the Mindroling education. Significantly, the progression from study for all to meditation for the few is in keeping with prescriptions tracing back to the fourteenth century associated with what would eventually become the Geluk school of the Dalai Lamas.<sup>50</sup> Again, this might reflect Terdak Lingpa's efforts to incorporate the scholastic approach of the Geluk monasteries that were the centers of the new Tibetan government with the Great Perfection practices his family lineage was known for. Terdak Lingpa might have hoped that following

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<sup>49</sup> Catalogue A, 289.

<sup>50</sup> Tsong Khapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzangs grags pa*, 1357-1419), retroactively credited with founding the Geluk School of the Dalai Lama, stressed the importance of developing a strong basis for meditative practice by engaging in study. See Robert Thurman, *The Speech of Gold: Reason and Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarindass Press, 1990).

some Geluk institutional trends would safeguard Mindroling against censure and persecution, since the Qing and Mongol rulers of the day were followers of the highly scholastic Geluk school.

Continuing to contextualize the curriculum's focus on study, because Terdak Lingpa laid out a direct relationship between study and enlightenment, again in keeping with Sakya Paṇḍita's assertions in the *Gateway to Learning* as well Geluk scholastic trends, the scholarly contents of the monastic curriculum took on a multifaceted significance. The inherent suggestion was that intellectual study and training in the arts and sciences would lead to enlightenment when cultivated in a setting such as Mindroling. Terdak Lingpa did not merely claim that study could be the root of good governance, or high social status, or noble culture; he associated it with enlightenment itself. And when extended to lay pupils bound for careers in politics, this model of enlightenment through education would be directly integrated back into worldly life. In this way the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment would ideally be joined with the relative goal of turning out cultured laypeople who could lead the new Tibetan polity.

Bracketing the goal of ultimate enlightenment for now, the general orientation of the Mindroling curriculum was geared towards training monks to conduct rituals and cultivating cultured people who were learned, skillful, and steeped in a Buddhist sensibility and worldview. To address the most mundane aspects of this goal, Terdak Lingpa provided introductory instructions on conscientious physical deportment. This point reveals an attention to what Bourdieu terms *habitus*. Students at Mindroling were trained to carry themselves with dignity, awareness, and self-control, as marks of nobility.<sup>51</sup> Not just the intellect, but the student's whole way of being in the world was under cultivation. It seems this training went a long way. Monks trained at Mindroling regularly went on to teach at the official schools in Lhasa, thereby

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<sup>51</sup> Catalogue A, 287.

spreading the Mindroling mentality and sensibility. And more striking still, lay pupils gained a great deal of cultural capital through their Mindroling training. This is reflected by the worldly achievements of Mindroling graduates such as Polhané, Dokharwa, and Doring. Their successful careers in an extremely complex and changing milieu required a high level of diplomacy and cosmopolitanism since the major players were not only Tibetans (already a diverse category) but included Mongol and Qing rulers as well.

To address the technical elements of the curriculum, training in language arts was the basic foundation and starting point for all pupils, as has already been repeatedly noted. Terdak Lingpa specified that students should study grammar and then practice exegesis of assigned texts from within the Mindroling tradition. The first stage of study included, rather perfunctorily, memorizing the words, receiving pointing out instructions, hearing commentaries, and attaining the intellectual goal. Likewise, all students were introduced to *rikné*, the fields of arts and sciences described above, and the fundamental techniques of Buddhist rituals. The curriculum also enumerates that all the monks should study Buddhist traditions of the sravaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva, as distinct from Vajrayana Buddhism. The monks were all thoroughly trained in the monastic vows and the bodhisattva vows. The curriculum also outlines developing a daily study practice, cultivating physical discipline, and generally not mistaking what should be done and avoided. This might appear to be an unremarkable account of basic Buddhist training. But the generic quality of the curriculum is offset by the focus on individual leanings and capacities and the flavor of the Great Perfection mentality. Further, the generic quality is complicated by the account of a lay student's studies provided in Polhané's biography and detailed below.

More closely related to this project's focus on material culture and aesthetics, Terdak

Lingpa listed courses such as musical notation, advanced grammar, special ritual offerings, constructing Buddhist mandalas, and ritual dancing as elective subjects. Since Mindroling became renowned for these practices and was widely associated with excellence in the arts and ritual, this element of the curriculum is of particular interest. It is noteworthy that these subjects were taught based on a student's inclinations and were not mandatory. This suggests the view that training students in keeping with their interests would lead to higher levels of accomplishment.

It is noteworthy that in contrast to these electives, in regards to religious studies the curriculum required basic training in Buddhist doctrine for all students. Overall this reflects a measured method of preparing all the students in basic arts and sciences, physical deportment, and basic Buddhism. This foundational education led to more particular studies of art and ritual and retreat practices according to the student's talents and interests. Again, the study of Vajrayana Buddhism was approached by gradual degrees. This rather conservative methodology undercuts stereotypes about Nyingma practitioners being corrupt, undisciplined and anti-intellectual. It is not possible to determine with certainty whether the curriculum perfectly represents the course of study at Mindroling, nor can we know precisely to what degree these characteristics of the curriculum were motivated by a wish to present Mindroling in a particular light, but considering the wider context, Mindroling's public appearance does seem to have been a concern.

To continue to analyze the details of the curriculum, the general course of study was divided into four seasonal units. Summer and winter sessions were devoted to the study of tantric texts. The main tantra employed in the early training of all students at Mindroling was the

Guyagharba.<sup>52</sup> Fall and spring sessions focused on different categories of vows as well as the textual commentaries, oral instructions, and recitation practices assigned to each individual. Studying and deeply comprehending all the Buddhist vows was given particular weight.<sup>53</sup> Daily lessons and practice sessions were mandatory except in cases of illness or necessary travel due to a death in the family. Over the first several years a student spent at Mindroling, there were three stages of examinations which all members of the monastic community were required to pass. If a student failed an exam, he was obliged to continue in his previous course of study. If he failed again, both teacher and student were punished (usually this involved offering a given number of butter lamps in the main temple or doing a set number of physical prostrations). In an interesting note, the curriculum states that if a student continually failed the exams, he was sent to another teacher who might direct him on a more appropriate course of study.

Reflecting on what these details tell us about the social culture and hierarchy of the monastery, it should be mentioned that the curriculum provided behavioral guidelines for teachers as well as students. In describing the hierarchy of the teaching staff, three groups were listed: individual tutors, class teachers, and administrator-teachers who oversaw the entire community. Terdak Lingpa encouraged all teachers to keep students engaged and interested and discouraged them from wooing promising students away from other instructors. He urged

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<sup>52</sup> For an extensive essay on the history of the Guyhagharba in Tibet, with attention to its connections to Mindroling, see Gyurme Dorje, *Guyhagharba Tantra: An Introduction* <http://www.wisdom-books.com/FocusDetail.asp?FocusRef=36>, accessed April 6, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Catalogue A, 289. Ordained monks and nuns take 253 or 364 vows respectively. These are known as the Pratimoksha or “individual liberation” vows. Lay practitioners can take the five most basic vows, adding an additional three for periods of more intensive practice. Bodhisattva vows, considered by Mahayana Buddhists to be more advanced and difficult to uphold, can be taken by lay or monastic practitioners. Mindroling also offered both monks and laypeople tantric vows.

teachers not to turn down a student eager for extra instruction, and to judge conflicts between pupils fairly. He instructed students not to form cliques around particularly charismatic mentors, suggesting that this was apt to happen.<sup>54</sup> The curriculum also detailed punishments for breaking specific rules, of which there were many. Similar to punishments for failing exams, punishments for rule breaking generally entailed offering butter lamps, performing strenuous physical exercises, and publicly confessing to the monastic community. In cases of the gravest infractions students were expelled from Mindroling. All this contributes to a sense of an ordered and carefully controlled environment characterized by a valorizing of openmindedness and a focus on individuals.

Throughout the curriculum, Terdak Lingpa made note of the effectiveness of education for curtailing laziness and haplessness, and developing a flexible, open mind that is guided not by rigidity but by clarity and discipline.<sup>55</sup> He further indicated the benefits of healthy teacher-student relationships and claimed that being part of a monastic community was helpful for individuals of “average or less than average caliber” and even warned against the negative possibility of lazy students going into retreat to avoid the discipline and structure of life in the monastery.<sup>56</sup> Seemingly as an afterthought, he mentioned time-pass activities such as making handicrafts as an appropriate way to occupy students who might otherwise engage in negative or unproductive behavior.

Towards the conclusion of the curriculum Terdak Lingpa gave instructions for advanced students who were engaged in meditation and solitary retreats, again based on the individual’s

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<sup>54</sup> Catalogue A, 282.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 289.

own inclinations and capacities. As in the previous sections, he gave several choices of specific texts to be taken up as the focus of meditation. The exact practice engaged in was to be selected based on the student's previous meditation experiences and in concert with the teacher's advice. It is made clear throughout that Terdak Lingpa intended for all the monastic members of the community to pass through the basic levels of training and examination, with the requisite discipline and vows, before beginning meditative practice or retreat. As previously mentioned, this stands in contrast to stereotypes about Nyingma practitioners jumping into advanced meditation practice without a sound intellectual and philosophical base. In closer detail, at the advanced level the curriculum outlines practices related to peaceful and wrathful deities, Avalokiteśvara (*thugs rje chen po*), the Magical Net (*sgyu 'phrul*), the Eight Sādhanā teaching (*bka' brgyad*), Vajrakīla (*phur pa*), and Yamāntaka (*gshin rje gshed*). Students at this phase were directed to choose a specific deity on which to focus their meditation, known as a yidam (*yi dam*), or tutelary deity, in consultation with their teachers and then engage in recitation for six months. The curriculum then mentions the twenty-eight samayas of Mahāyoga (*dam tshig nyer brgyad*). Further, at the next stage the two Heart Essence teachings (*snying thig rnam gnyis*), the Vajra Bridge teachings (*rdo rje zam pa*), and Terdak Lingpa's New Treasures (*gter gsar*) are indicated.<sup>57</sup> At this highest level of training, students were advise to engage in whichever instructions were suitable to their personal experience, choosing from among this list of texts and practices important to Mindroling.

In a few notable closing comments, Terdak Lingpa stated, "For the very best individuals, the assembly is the same as a solitary retreat. For high caliber individuals [as opposed to the best] practicing in retreat is beneficial." He then went on to describe those individuals who should not

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 289.

undertake retreats, including the lazy, bored, unfocused and generally undisciplined types who he suggested could not even manage to refrain from drinking beer at dinner. Instead, they were encouraged to take advantage of the support and structure of the monastic community and become disciplined in their studies and deportment. Finally, Terdak Lingpa reiterated that the point of engaging day and night in all the monastic practices mentioned, including study, contemplation, and meditation was for the monks to develop the qualities of knowledge, discipline, and nobility. With those qualities, he said, came the weighty responsibility of becoming a praiseworthy field of merit for sensible people.<sup>58</sup>

This curriculum represents a formal, normative version of what should be studied and taught at Mindroling. It is focused on the course of study for the monks, and again, does not mention the particulars of study for other students such as the lay aristocrats who studied there. While the content of the curriculum is distinctly Buddhist, overall the picture presented in the constitution in general and curriculum in particular is of a structured, hierarchical educational system with ordered classes and exams that bears a strong resemblance to a Western academic model. While training in arts and ritual practices associated with aesthetics are not highlighted over and above other trainings, they have a strong presence in the curriculum and the impression is that all students were trained in the basics and those who showed promise and talent were trained to specialize. As a normative document, the curriculum is of limited value in the project of understanding exactly what a Mindroling education entailed. Still, it provides an ideal from which we can begin to imagine the actual course of education at Mindroling. The goal in the following section is to employ other sources to piece together a sense of what was distinctive about education at Mindroling, and to ask in what ways was it useful for cultural elites and the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 289.

ruling class to study there. In particular, a guiding question is what did Mindroling offer its students that served them in their lives as influential thinkers and officials.

*A Layman's Account of Studying at Mindroling*

To turn now to an example of the lay aristocracy who studied at Mindroling, this section draws from the biography of Polhané composed by Dokharwa. These were two of Mindroling's most celebrated eighteenth century alumni. Polhané studied at Mindroling from age fifteen to eighteen. After completing his studies at the monastery he went on to become a commander in the Tibetan army and rose to the highest station of Tibetan political authority and the peak of Tibetan society, coming to be known as Miwang (*mi dbang*) commonly translated as "King." Based on strong diplomatic relations with influential Mongols and Qing leaders as well as his authority among Tibetans he held that position from 1728-1747, during the time of the Seventh Dalai Lama. As Chapter Five demonstrates, later in life Polhané became a major ally for Mindroling by collaborating with Mingyur Paldren (Terdak Linpga's daughter) to rebuild the monastery after it was destroyed by Dzungar Mongols in 1717-1718. Dokharwa composed the biography in the erudite and ornate style admired among the high literary society of their day. The chapter of the biography entitled "Studying *Rikné* at Mindroling" describes Polhané's education and the periods immediately preceding and following.<sup>59</sup> Since both author and subject of the biography studied literary arts at Mindroling, the style in which the biography is written reveals as much about education at Mindroling as the content. Reading this source in conjunction

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<sup>59</sup> In the original there were no chapter breaks, but the most recent edition of the text divides the otherwise flowing narrative for the convenience of the reader.

with the curriculum and constitution offers a fuller, if still complicated and perhaps idealized view of the training that took place at Mindroling.<sup>60</sup>

Surprisingly, much of the chapter on Mindroling deals with Polhané's parting from his family and loved ones on his way to the monastery. After saying farewell to his wife, whom he left behind "like a mouthful of spit,"<sup>61</sup> he had a more emotionally fraught experience leaving his favorite lover, with whom he spent one last passionate night making love and exchanging poetic love songs. Polhané's amorous played an important role throughout his biography, not only in the section on Mindroling. Broadly, the erotic elements of the biography shed light on Tibetan aristocratic values and tastes, the significance of virility in portraits of Tibetan cultural heroes, and the place of erotic literature in Tibetan high culture. More to the point here, they demonstrate the literary sensibilities inculcated in lay students at Mindroling. As mentioned above, several prominent authors who were affiliated with Mindroling during this period produced writing that was unusually frank in addressing sex and romance. This topic is examined more fully in Chapter Five, which considers the future of Mindroling and its cultural legacies. While the roots of the trend for Mindroling alumni to compose erotic literature are not explicit in the curriculum or the following account of Polhané's course of study, the literary aesthetic cultivated at Mindroling clearly allowed for and encouraged that style of writing.

But to continue now with the discussion of Polhané's training at Mindroling, the transition from the love scene (translated in Chapter Five) to Polhané's meeting with Terdak

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<sup>60</sup> In future research I will investigate whether other aristocrats wrote about their studies at Mindroling and look for accounts by women in particular, since women play an important role in the history of Mindroling.

<sup>61</sup> This is a direct reference to the second century account of the life of Buddha, *Buddhacharita*, by Aśvaghōṣa. Dokharwa has Polhané reenact Siddhartha's departure from his family, whom he also left behind "like a mouthful of spit."

Lingpa shows a remarkably smooth transition from amorous passion to religious passion since there is virtually no distinction drawn between Polhané's feelings for his lover and his adoration for the charismatic visionary. When Polhané arrived on horseback at Mindroling with his uncle and a large retinue of attendants, he was moved by his devotion for Terdak Lingpa. He keenly anticipated the meeting and showed the conventional Buddhist signs of faith including spontaneous tears and the hairs of his body standing on end.<sup>62</sup> Once in the presence of the teacher, his attention to Terdak Lingpa's luminous countenance and flowing white moustache and beard, quivering in the wind "like a fly whisk," was equal in passion to his appreciation of his lover's graceful neck and full breasts.<sup>63</sup> It is clear that Polhané did not go to Mindroling for a dry or rigid course of study but expected to be transformed in complex and profound ways.

Polhané studied under only the best teachers at the monastery. As a member of the aristocracy whose family made a sizeable donation of three hundred pieces of silver and other valuables to the monastery upon his arrival Polhané's main tutor was Lochen Dharmashri the great scholar and prolific author.<sup>64</sup> To paint the backdrop for Polhané's studies, Dokharwa first provided the teacher's credentials and specified what Polhané aspired to learn from him. In keeping with Buddhist literary conventions of praising Buddhist masters, the biography depicts Lochen Dharmashri's learning as extraordinary. His studies were said to cover all the Buddhist fields of knowledge, as well as the fine points of taste and aesthetics. He mastered ritual

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<sup>62</sup> Mdo mkhar zhabs drubg tshe ring dbang rgyal gyis brtsams, *Dpal mi'i dbang po'i rtogs pa brjod pa 'jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i gtam Zhes bya ba bzhugs so*, 93. For simplicity all further citations from this text will refer to *Biography of Miwang*. On the historical context and publication details of this document see van der Kuijp, 321-322.

<sup>63</sup> *Biography of Miwang*, 101. This is an interesting parallel to Ch'an and Zen anecdotes in which teachers often hold or strike students with fly whisks.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

technologies, fine arts, and medicine. He was trained to speak with elegance, expertly compose poetry, distinguish between grammatical tenses and nomenclature. He was a master of astrology, Buddhist tantra, ritual, logic, etymology, and the physical sciences. His formal aesthetic training, based in the Indic Buddhist tradition, gave him expertise in distinguishing between good and bad quality men, women, gemstones, cloth, horses and other materials associated with wealth.

Lochen Dharmashri was also said to have excelled in calendrical studies.<sup>65</sup> The final assessment was that Polhané's teacher had gradually achieved mastery of all subjects related to religion, aesthetics, exposition, philosophy, the sciences, and written composition.<sup>66</sup> While Polhané could not have hoped to attain such mastery in just three years of higher learning, this portrait of Lochen Dharmashri as an ideal scholar demonstrates the level of learning Mindroling was renowned for and reveals the expectations of its lay students.

After the credentials of the teacher have been established, the student Polhané's education under Lochen Dharmashri is described as challenging him "like a cripple who endeavors to climb the rocky precipice of a terrifying cliff."<sup>67</sup> The progression of his studies from that point shows that just as monks at Mindroling had to meet set scholarly standards through study and examinations before engaging in meditation, the lay students studied the arts and sciences before learning Buddhist topics. Again the focus on language arts is clear since, in particular, the biography claims that Polhané achieved the highest honors for his skills in writing and composition. Further, after he had mastered various scripts used to write the Tibetan language, he went on to study six different Indic scripts. This raises the question of what use

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<sup>65</sup> This played an important role in Mindroling's official role *vis-à-vis* the Tibetan government since organizing time was a central occupation of the early modern rulers.

<sup>66</sup> *Biography of Miwang*, 102.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Indic scripts would have served for a man like Polhané. Whereas good writing skills and beautiful handwriting in the Tibetan language were of clear practical value for him as a political ruler and diplomat, learning Indic scripts must have served a more symbolic purpose. Knowledge of this kind would have indicated an impressive level of elite learning and high culture since it was associated with the perceived grace and authority of Indian Buddhism. And again, only after Polhané had gained a firm basis in the “worldly” subjects of handwriting, poetics, and astrology did his training in Buddhist doctrine begin. The training Polhané received at Mindroling shaped who he was in the world, in keeping with Bourdieu’s model of *habitus*. The biography implies that he emerged from Mindroling well versed in *rikné* and ripe with an awareness of Buddhist ethics rooted in the practical skills necessary for a ruler.

In sum, the most salient features of Polhané’s training at Mindroling are that he mastered Indic scripts and that he learned to discern good and poor quality phenomena. The focus on writing reflects the centrality of writing as a qualification for Tibetan leaders in all spheres. The cultivation of a distinct sensibility and the development of aesthetic discernment shows that the training at Mindroling encompassed skills beyond Buddhist ritual and doctrine. While there are many examples of rulers being “empowered” through Abhisheka conducted by Buddhist lamas, the power of this cultural training exemplifies how Buddhist learning impacted society and culture more practically. Students at Mindroling were literally endowed with the authority of being cultured.

*Returning to Pierre Bourdieu's work on Education and a Branch of Mindroling*

As previously mentioned, Pierre Bourdieu's work on education and power aptly reflects some of the ways Mindroling bridged Tibetan Buddhism and culture. The curriculum and biography treated above in this chapter demonstrate the style and content of both monastic and lay education at Mindroling's main monastery near Lhasa. Recalling that Mindroling's influence extended beyond this central seat to its branches and affiliates, it will be helpful to assess how Mindroling's pedagogical method shaped its affiliates and branch monasteries in order to apply Bourdieu's theoretical frame to the wider institution of Mindroling beyond the main monastery. L. Austine Waddell's survey of Tibetan Buddhism, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* looks at the education system of Pemayangtsé monastery in Sikkim, providing an appropriate example. As a reminder, Chapter Two listed this monastery, closely associated with the Sikkimese royal family, as one of the significant monasteries in the Mindroling network. Waddell's book appears remarkably old fashioned now but nevertheless his treatment of education at Pemayangtsé is illustrative of Mindroling's influence, displaying the dissemination of the Mindroling aesthetic sensibility and worldview. The bond between the two monasteries was solidified when Terdak Lingpa's daughter Mingyur Paldron traveled to Pemayangtsé to escape the Zungar Mongol troops that ransacked Mindroling in 1717-1718.<sup>68</sup>

According to Waddell, the Pemayangtsé curriculum presents a basic training in Buddhist manners that reads like a manual on etiquette and good manners. Although this stodgy tone is probably partly attributable to Waddell's nineteenth century Western point of view, the overview of the curriculum does reflect the Mindroling model of education. And the type of behavioral

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<sup>68</sup> On the place of Pemayangtsé in Sikkimese history and its intricate ties to Mindroling through the activities of Jigmé Pabo (*'jigs med dpa' bo*), see Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*.

training Waddell describes, although not crucial to any technical qualifications, would doubtlessly have been valuable in shaping the *habitus* of the children who would go on to positions of power and influence. In particular, according to Waddell when a boy began schooling at Pemayangtsé, after a preliminary physical examination and the shearing of the boy's hair, he would take up with a tutor, usually assigned according to his family connections. The tutor would teach him the alphabet and then teach him to read and recite short Buddhist texts. Waddell then leaves aside the textual aspect of the curriculum to focus on the "golden maxims of a moral kind,"<sup>69</sup> which are particularly striking in light of Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and the reproduction of noble status through "noble" manners. While the list begins with a version of the golden rule, "Do unto others..." and moves on to the basic Buddhist value of prioritizing self over other, it also includes more specific injunctions related to speech, stressing the importance of tone, pithiness, and persuasive rhetoric. These rules all have roots in the Buddhist Vinaya. Waddell reports that young boys sent to monasteries as "probationers" would have their hair cut but otherwise would not go through any initial ritual initiation. They would continue to wear a layperson's clothes.<sup>70</sup> This was also the case at Mindroling itself, where young aristocrats bound for careers in politics and high culture stayed at the monastery as temporary lay pupils. Mindroling's influence at this Sikkimese Buddhist center was not shortlived: monks from Pemayangtsé monastery in Sikkim were regularly sent to Mindroling to study until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> The practice of sending monks to study abroad was not limited to the

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<sup>69</sup> L. Austine Waddell, *Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2003 [1894]), 175.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Mindroling tradition and created wide reaching networks of monks and nuns from distant regions who shared a common educational experience. And in addition, Nyingma monasteries all over the Tibetan Buddhist area based their curricula on the model of Mindroling.<sup>72</sup>

Considering these examples of Mindroling's educational model in light of Bourdieu's work on "reproduction through education" demonstrates that elite schools work in gross and subtle ways to ensure their graduates high status and advantage. And due to the various circumstances explored throughout this work, Mindroling had elite status that it could pass on to its graduates. Its high status reflected the prestigious legacy of Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri's relations with the Fifth Dalai lama and his associates. It is significant that the Fifth Dalai Lama discouraged the fields of arts and sciences of *rikné* at Lhasa's major Geluk monasteries at the same time he patronized the establishment of Mindroling, where *rikné* flourished.<sup>73</sup> Further, the Nyo clan's longstanding power in the Lhasa area, reincarnation heritages, as well as early modern impulses, all contributed to Mindroling's position of privilege and high standing. The coincidence of these factors helped establish Mindroling as a pedagogic authority, shaping the tastes and intellects as well as the religious practices of ruling class Tibetans.

It might seem that aristocratic families did not need to seek out pedigrees for their sons, since their elite position was secure. And yet if we follow Bourdieu's model, we see that systems of domination need constant support through various levels of reproduction, the "consecration"

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<sup>72</sup> Other examples can be found as far away as Nyarong (*nyag rong*), in the Khams region of Eastern Tibet, or Sichuan Province.

<sup>73</sup> Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 121.

given by the conferment of a degree from elite educational institutions being key among them.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, being cultured and literate were highly valued and distinguishing features sought out by the Tibetan nobility. Any record of having trained at Mindroling or to a lesser extent one of its branches or associated schools served as a consecration certificate, bringing a glint of Mindroling's aura to the man or woman who studied there, or in some cases to those who merely claimed to have studied there.

By Bourdieu's reckoning, the most privileged members of society require consecration through elite degrees in order to maintain their multivalent authority. In order to reproduce and maintain the system, those in positions of power need to carry the aura of mastery and excellence. The near continuous shifting of power in Tibet's history, at a high point of uncertainty during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, must have made the position of even the most prestigious families feel precarious, not *vis-à-vis* the less privileged classes but in relation to other noble families and religious lineages, in concert with Mongol and Qing allies.

Bourdieu's treatment of disposition or *habitus* bears light here since a pedagogic agency fit for aristocrats would have needed to inculcate the behaviors fitting to an aristocrat.<sup>75</sup> Being educated at Mindroling reconfirmed the Dokhar, Doring and Polha families' already strong aristocratic legacy, through the practical skills of being trained in literary arts and through the cultural skills connected to etiquette and "noble" bearing. Such skills included not only refined manners but a facility with Buddhist views, traditions and practices as well. In turn the success of former students, such as these three powerful leaders, boosted the prestige and symbolic capital

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<sup>74</sup> On what Bourdieu refers to as "consecration" in regards to class status and education, see Bourdieu and Passeron, 37-40, 42.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 31-32; Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 2-3.

of the institution. Children from the Dokhar and Polha families studied directly under the tutelage of Lochen Dharmashri.<sup>76</sup> They later went on to protect and patronize the monastery during times of trouble, as did generations of their descendents. In addition to bestowing an aura of honor and prestige, having studied there also led to a sense of allegiance that created a cohesive and lasting bond among the lay alumni of Mindroling, who frequently stood at the apex of society, politics, and culture. Likewise, monks and lamas trained at Mindroling carried a similar prestige into their careers as religious experts.

Directly related to cultivating a shared aesthetic and worldview, this community-building aspect of monastic education is important in creating bases of support and patronage for major monasteries. Small as the central monastery was, the aura of Mindroling was a consequential and far-reaching force in this multilayered network. While there are certainly internal divisions and strife within large monastic communities, assembling monks from different regions has the potential to create foundations for continuity of teachings and traditions and to join monastic communities separated by geography. It also facilitates communication between distant Tibetan Buddhist locales and helps spread the influence of the major monasteries' charismatic leaders. The networks of regionalism, sect, affiliation with a particular institution like Mindroling, family groups, pilgrimage and trade routes intersect and crisscross to create the base for the Tibetan Buddhist social world.

Further considering the basic connection between writing and authority, even beyond the obvious practicalities the ability to write and to teach others how to write is a highly valuable asset and a fundamental key to power. Mindroling's role as a place of elite education implies a significant concentration of power and influence. Bourdieu's observations on the authority

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<sup>76</sup> The significance of this detail is confirmed in Smith, 20.

wielded by schools and the reproduction of systems of power based on *habitus* is therefore directly relevant to Mindroling's role as a center for education. Taking Bourdieu's analysis further, it is also possible that the Fifth Dalai Lama's support of Mindroling and his government's curtailment of writing at Geluk institutions served to conceal the symbolic violence of Geluk rule by distributing power beyond the Geluk school. In this regard, Mindroling's marginal status as a small, Nyingma institution, no competition for the massive Geluk establishments, might have been one of its greatest strengths. Encouraging the skills needed for government and administration at his own school's monasteries might have created competition for him within the Geluk establishment. Since Mindroling was not an ostensibly political institution, the concentration of cultural capital there would have been less visibly connected to the Fifth Dalai Lama's dominance and would have lessened the potential for rivals to emerge from within the politically dominant school. Here again, Bourdieu's work on the concealment of symbolic violence resonates strongly.

Twentieth century sources that deal with the question of education in pre-modern Tibet assert that the most important practical aspect of aristocratic education was handwriting.<sup>77</sup> Assuming that this was the case during the eighteenth century as well Mindroling must have appealed to upper classes for its strength in the literary arts as well as for its prestige and reputation as an esteemed place of religious practice. The fact that administrator monks from Geluk monasteries, as well lay aristocrats, were sent to Mindroling specifically to learn to write tells us that writing was a crucial skill for administrators (ordained or lay) of the eighteenth century. Bourdieu insists that school authority requires a concealment of the connection between

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<sup>77</sup> Goldstein and Gelek Rinpoche, 7.

socio-economic and political powers and the school itself.<sup>78</sup> In the case of Mindroling, we find an institution that was newly founded, famous for astrology, music, literature and terma, and outside the direct purview of the Geluk establishment. All this suggests the concealment or “misrecognition” that is essential to reproduction through education.

According to Bourdieu, signs of good breeding among elite classes as opposed to the rough and tumble characteristics associated with lower classes are crucial to the reproduction of systems of dominance. These markers help solidify divides between the classes and lend to the impression that people belong where they are in the system. Aristocratic children need to learn to act like aristocrats, distinct from other children. While the children of aristocrats did not study statecraft per se at Mindroling, they were provided with subtle tools with which to perpetuate the powerful roles of their families. More particularly, they were steeped in the worldview that called for the joining of religion and worldly life. While Buddhist “manners” would have been inculcated at any monastery, Lhasa’s Geluk monasteries would not have offered the same combination of practical skills and cultural capital, since they did not stress writing. Just as a liberal arts education at Western elite institutions aim to cultivate a well-rounded way of being that prepares students for the achievement of high status positions, Mindroling offered a broad education, focusing on comportment and communication skills along with writing in addition to the Buddhist ritual arts. Dreyfus’s assessment of Geluk pedagogy versus Nyingma pedagogy supports an analogy of the Nyingma pedagogy represented at Mindroling with the Western liberal arts model. He stresses that the Geluk model tends to include a few orthodox texts, and highlights debate over commentary, whereas the Nyingma model incorporates a wide variety of texts and stresses the literary arts, which lend themselves to both religious and secular

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<sup>78</sup> Bourdieu and Passeron, 67.

purposes.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, its distance from the seat of Geluk power would have allowed Mindroling a more subtle position in the process of reproduction.

### *Conclusion*

During the tenure of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his last regent Sangyé Gyatso, the distribution of power in Central Tibet underwent a massive reorganization. Out of the near chaos of the preceding decades during which various parties vied for dominance in the Tibetan Buddhist region the Lhasa based Geluk establishment emerged as a centralized locus of political power. This centralization by no means did away with the competition for influence among other loci of power.

As has already been established, the Fifth Dalai Lama and Desi Sangyé Gyatso had close involvement with Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri and the Dalai Lama oversaw Mindroling's founding. Later secular rulers were educated there and remained closely involved in the monastery's reconstruction and preservation. Monk administrators and scholars from Lhasa's three major Geluk monasteries attended Mindroling when they needed to learn literary skills. And poetry teachers from Mindroling regularly taught at the government school in Lhasa. In addition to these connections with the Geluk dominants, Mindroling was a hub of Nyingma education and recognized as the site of the fundamental revamping and reinvigoration of Nyingma teachings after a long period of perceived decline. At the same time that Mindroling developed as a place of distinctly Nyingma teachings and practices, it took up a pedagogic role similar to that of a liberal arts university. This layering of characteristics would have contributed

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<sup>79</sup> Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 133.

to the concealment of Mindroling's involvement in the symbolic violence on which the Fifth Dalai Lama's government was based.

It is important to recall here that Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence extends to all situations where "arbitrary" meanings are inculcated in such a way that they seem natural. He is describing the basic dynamic of all relationships that involve power. Given his breadth of purpose it is crucial to remember that his assessment of power and reproduction is not a condemnation of the dominants nor the dominated, since by necessity neither party recognizes the violence at work upon them. Identifying Mindroling as a dominant within this field of power does not imply that the cultural capital concentrated there was not valuable or that the concealed nature of symbolic violence undoes the benefits of cross-sectarian connections or the revitalization of Nyingma teachings that Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri initiated. Nor does the application of Bourdieu's model imply that the Fifth Dalai Lama consciously strove to conceal the violence of Geluk dominance by patronizing Mindroling. What makes these dynamics possible is that they exist under the surface, and in conjunction with conscious efforts that are by no means overtly violent or sinister.

The education noblemen such as Polhané and Dokharwa received at Mindroling shaped them as Tibet's future leaders. As this chapter demonstrates, Mindroling alumni were conditioned for positions of power through a broad spectrum of trainings in the arts and sciences, aesthetics, ethics, and Buddhist doctrine. This training both instilled practical skills and bestowed prestige. These men's success in the complex sociopolitical milieu of the day was based on the fullness of their education at Mindroling. In particular, Polhané's rule, a focus of Chapter Five, marked a critical juncture in Tibet's modern history, beginning with the resolution of a bloody Tibetan civil war and leading to a sustained period of stability and prosperity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EPILOGUE – FUTURE GENERATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

#### *Chapter Overview*

This epilogue outlines the events surrounding of the second generation of Mindroling and reflects on themes presented in the previous chapters. In the process it presents avenues for future research.

To begin with an overview of Mindroling's long term legacy, Mindroling has remained a vital center for Great Perfection practice and is known even today for the visionary treasures of Terdak Lingpa and the scholarship of Lochen Dharmashri. It is recognized for the founders' work to clarify and consolidate the Nyingma school while diplomatically maintaining connections to all of Tibetan Buddhism's schools. Further, Mindroling is still known for rituals intended to support the long life of the Dalai Lama and the stability of Tibetan government, and for excellence in the fields of arts and sciences known in Tibetan as *rikné*. To some extent, the legacy of rituals focused on mundane goals has also proved long lasting. Through the generations, the relatively high number of extraordinary women masters at Mindroling has continued. And most central to this project, Mindroling's role as a center for high culture aesthetics and the education of the ruling class continued, at least until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> But despite these continuities in religious and cultural traditions, Mindroling's ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> After this project's period of focus, more research is required to determine how many and which noble families sent their children to Mindroling. Oral histories suggest this continued to be a common practice. Biographical sources document many renowned lamas and ordained people

history has not been without obstacles and the founders' familial and lineal descendents had to develop strategies for survival and success even as they carried on in the their ancestors' artfully designed traditions.

To consider in particular how Mindroling continued its role as a center for Tibetan Buddhist high culture and aesthetics, this chapter first addresses some of the obstacles and advantages Mindroling encountered early on. Further, the chapter looks at the connections and alliances that allowed for the rebuilding and stabilization of Mindroling after its first generation was ruptured by Dzungar Mongols in 1717-1718. The chapter then presents an overview of Mindroling's cultural legacy reiterating key themes examined throughout this project and relating them to the prevalent characteristics of Mindroling in its subsequent generations. To that end, the primary relationship considered here is between Mingyur Paldron, who was Terdak Lingpa's daughter and disciple, and Miwang Polhané, Tibet's temporal ruler from 1728-1747.

To set the stage for that next phase of Mindroling's history, it should be noted that the charismatic founder Terdak Lingpa passed away in 1714 at the age of fifty-nine. His younger brother Lochen Dharmashri was killed during the Dzungar led persecution of Mindroling in 1717. The Dzungar troops also killed Terdak Lingpa's successor as Senior Chair, his son Pema Gyurmé Gyatso (*pad+ma 'gyur med rgya mtsho*, 1686-1718). Following the deaths of Mindroling's founders, the destruction of the monastery, and a period of exile, Mingyur Paldron and her younger brother Rinchen Namgyal (*rin chen rnam rgyal*, 1694-1758) returned and remade Mindroling, effecting subtle and important shifts in its institutional persona. They laid

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to have studied there through the 1950s as well. Further, Mindroling's aesthetic influence was clearly maintained through institutional ties, extending to important eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centers of Tibetan intellectual and cultural production such as Derge in Kham and Rebkong in Amdo. But again, ascertaining the fine details of these connections calls for further research.

the foundation for the future of Mindroling, repairing both physical and psychic fractures and making efforts to create a more stable future for the tradition, with the particular help of Miwang Polhané.

### *The Dzungar Destruction*

The precise circumstances that led to the sacking of Mindroling by Dzungar Mongols are too elaborate to present in detail here. Suffice it to say that sectarianism, a radically shifting political climate in which various Tibetan, Mongol, and Qing forces vied for dominance, and a current of personal enmity between Mindroling's supporters and detractors, all contributed to the destruction of the monastery and the execution of its head figures. It should be mentioned that Dorjé Drak, the other Nyingma monastery favored by the Fifth Dalai Lama, was also targeted at that time.

In order to contextualize the relationship of Mingyur Paldron and Miwang Polhané and its effects on Mindroling, it will be helpful first to describe Mingyur Paldron's activities around the time of the destruction of the monastery. The bloodshed is recounted in broad strokes in Mindroling's monastic catalogues and Mingyur Paldron's biography.<sup>2</sup> The events are documented in more detail in a history of the Nyingma school composed by the Mindroling

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<sup>2</sup> Khyung po ras pa 'gyur med 'od gsal, *Rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal gyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel* (Thimpu, Bhutan: National Library of Bhutan, 1984) (Hereafter, MPB). I was aided in my initial and still cursory reading of Mingyur Paldron's biography by an unpublished and only partially edited translation by the late Marilyn Silverstone. My thanks to Hubert Decler and Julie Regan for sharing the translation with me. On the Dzungar sacking of Lhasa see Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972, 53-57).

abbot, Orgyan Chökyi Drakpa (*o rgyan chos kyi grags pa*, b. 1676).<sup>3</sup> These accounts tell us Mingyur Paldron and her younger siblings escaped thanks to the intervention of an army commander who had met with Terdak Lingpa shortly before the visionary's death in 1714. During that meeting, Terdak Lingpa prophesied that the army commander would have a chance to aid Mindroling in the future. He offered the man gifts of sacred objects and asked him not to forget their amicable meeting. When chaos erupted in Lhasa about three years later and the order came to sack Mindroling, Dorjé Drak and other Nyingma monasteries, the commander who had met with Terdak Lingpa secretly traded posts with the commander assigned to sack Mindroling. In this way Terdak Lingpa's admirer was able to go to Mindroling instead of the other officer. And when the troops approached Mindroling, instead of proceeding directly to the monastery, he set up camp for the night in the valley below the monastery and fired shots into the air as a warning to the inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Mingyur Paldron had been in a three year meditation retreat until that very day. Emerging, she and a small retinue including her sisters and mother escaped and headed towards Sikkim. Her two younger brothers made their way to Nyarong in the Kham region of Eastern Tibet. Both locations were home to important affiliates of Mindroling. When order was restored to the Lhasa region in a few years time, they would return to Mindroling and begin the process of rebuilding, highlighting the more conservative strains of the previous generation's charisma and aesthetic sensibility.

But in the meanwhile they helped secure the spread of Mindroling's traditions to the locales where they took refuge. Accounts of Mingyur Paldron's sojourn in Sikkim reveal the high degree of respect the Mindroling lineage received among Tibetan Buddhists well beyond

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<sup>3</sup> Orgyan Chokyi Drakpa, *Chos 'byung bstan pa'i nyi ma*. TBRC W21492.

<sup>4</sup> Catalogue A, 5. This story is also mentioned in MPB, 77-79.

their local region. Further, the events surrounding her exile illustrate the strength of ties between ruling class families and religious lineages. While in Sikkim she presided over large public teachings attended by thousands of people, drawn by the aura of Mindroling and the fame of her father and further encouraged by the royal family's official support of her. They are recorded to have extended an open invitation for the public to attend her teachings and receive blessings.<sup>5</sup> During this period she established her reputation as a Great Perfection teacher in her own right. Her renown is attested to in textual as well as visual materials. Visual culture examples include the group portraits called "lineage trees" depicting the most important masters of the Mindroling lineage which generally include Mingyur Paldron's image. The inclusion of women in this visual representation of the lineage is a rarity in Tibetan Buddhist art history. Also significant to this period, the institutional ties between Mindroling and Sikkim's Pemayangtsé monastery were solidified during her stay, a development described in detail in Saul Mullard's recent work *Opening the Hidden Land* and touched on in Chapter Four's treatment of the Pemayangtsé curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Mingyur Paldron's religious activities related to teaching and spreading Mindroling's ritual traditions, her stay in Sikkim also bolstered significant socio-political bonds. For instance her younger sister was joined in a marriage alliance with Sikkim's royal family. This was arranged by Mingyur Paldron's main contact in Sikkim, who formerly studied at

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<sup>5</sup> MPB, 93.

<sup>6</sup> This period is documented in detail in Saul Mullard's book. In particular Mullard points out the ramifications of Mingyur Paldron's stay in Sikkim in the establishing of Pemayangtsé monastery as the most important site for rituals associated with the Sikkimese royal government. See Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 161-188. Further, the list of Mindroling branches and affiliates in Catalogue A includes Pemayangtsé as well. See Catalogue A, 154.

Mindroling and was close with her father and uncle.<sup>7</sup> The arrangement bolstered the bond between Sikkim's leading family and Mindroling.<sup>8</sup> This marriage alliance echoes the Fifth Dalai Lama's involvement in Terdak Lingpa's relationship with the consort Ngodrub Pelzom, recounted in previous chapters of this project. These strategic marital unions highlight the interweaving of powerful Tibetan Buddhist family groups, political power, and Buddhist schools and lineages of practice.

*The Second Wave of Mindroling – Bringing Caution to Charisma*

Mingyur Paldron's return to Mindroling marked the beginning of the second wave of Mindroling. To assure the continuation of the Mindroling family lineage she passed her father's extensive teachings on to her youngest brother, Rinchen Namgyal, who became the third Senior Chair of the monastery. Terdak Lingpa had predicted her indispensable role in maintaining the lineage when she was a child, and Lochen Dharmashri is also quoted as stating it would be the female offspring of the lineage who would carry it into the next generation.<sup>9</sup> Mingyur Paldron and Rinchen Namgyal quickly began the work of repairing the damage caused to the buildings, temples, and many art and ritual objects. More subtly, Mingyur Paldron also worked to make the Mindroling tradition less vulnerable to censure from more conservative members of the reformed or new (*gsar ma*) schools, most especially members of the dominant Geluk school, who might disapprove of practices such as the taking of an actual (as opposed to visualized) tantric consort

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<sup>7</sup> Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 170.

<sup>8</sup> This marriage alliance is described in detail in *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> MPB, 63.

and the martial rituals for which Mindroling lamas were known. It should be noted that these efforts on her part did not diminish the prominence of these practices at Mindroling in the course of history, but her biography reflects an anxiety around these topics. This bears mentioning here given her major role in the continuation of the lineage.

To illustrate, Mingyur Paldron's biography recounts that after Mindroling had been rebuilt and was functioning again, she began to build on relationships with powerful ruling class families who sought her teachings and ritual expertise and made extensive offerings to her, including land and previously existing temples around Mindroling and extremely fine horses.<sup>10</sup> With Mindroling restored and her reputation established she was requested to conduct wrathful rituals between feuding authority figures, as her family had often been asked to do in the past. In a meeting with the Seventh Dalai Lama, Mingyur Paldron expressed resistance to conducting wrathful rituals on behalf of wealthy patrons against their rivals, indicating the Dalai Lama himself might ask this of her. The Dalai Lama reportedly assured her that as a nun, she would not be expected to engage in that kind of ritual. Notably, the biography mentions that the next day her brother the Senior Chair was invited to meet with the Dalai Lama, perhaps subtly signaling that he did not share his sister's resistance to the practices.<sup>11</sup> This story displays Mingyur Paldron's discomfort with Mindroling's involvement in ritual warfare, which might have been a significant source of patronage for the monastery. Mindroling's monastic catalogues take stock of many objects related to these rituals.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> MPB, 114. Horses appear to have been Polhané's most regular offering to Mingyur Paldron. On the collection of ornaments and equestrian equipment at Mindroling, including gold and silver saddles, see Catalogue B, 3.

<sup>11</sup> MPB, 179.

<sup>12</sup> Catalogue B, 16, 21.

Another example of her relatively conservative inclinations and her efforts to present Mindroling in a manner beyond reproach concern her dealings with the fascinating and controversial character Lelung Jedrung Zhepay Dorjé (*sle lung rje drung zhed pa'i rdo rje*, 1697-1740, hereafter Zhepay Dorjé). This lama, who radically blurred the lines between Geluk and Nyingma traditions, was both a Geshé (*dge bshes*), the Geluk school's highest scholastic degree, and a visionary "treasure revealer" (*gter gton*) like Terdak Lingpa. This was an extremely rare combination of qualifications. Further, he was extremely influential as a tutor of powerful rulers including the Khoshot Oirod Mongol Lhazang Khan (*lha bzang khan*, d. 1717) and Polhané.<sup>13</sup> His name will come up again in regards to the avant-garde literary output of figures associated with Mindroling, discussed below. The biography recounts several instances in which Mingyur Paldron was scandalized by what she perceived as Zhepay Dorjé's dalliance, drunkenness and generally untoward behavior as a religious teacher. In one instance, Polhané, essentially the king of Tibet at the time, urged Mingyur Paldron to receive Zhepay Dorjé at Mindroling. She was reluctant since she had recently visited Zhepay Dorjé's own monastery where a mixed group of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen all became drunk and sang and danced together. At that time, while Mingyur Paldron drank tea, some of the Mindroling monks traveling with her felt obliged to drink and were later harshly rebuked.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, out of diplomacy, Mingyur Paldron invited Zhepay Dorjé to Mindroling. He arrived with his consort and threw what the biography presents as a raucous party in the main temple of Mindroling attended by a large

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<sup>13</sup> Gene Smith encouraged me to explore Lelung Zhepay Dorjé's close connections to Mindroling. In particular he pointed out the common literary aesthetic apparent between Zhepay Dorjé and the Mindroling graduates focused on in this project. While Zhepay Dorjé was not educated at Mindroling in a formal sense, he was part of the same high social stratus and shared in the aesthetics and worldview cultivated at Mindroling.

<sup>14</sup> These events are described in MPB, 120-123.

crowd of men and women disciples, both lay and ordained. Zhepay Dorjé went on to suggest that Mingyur Paldron should engage in tantric sexual practices with him. The biography stresses that she refused and then left the main monastery for her nearby retreat place Samtentsé in order to avoid further contact with Zhepay Dorjé. It should be mentioned that all his activities were ostensibly framed as tantric practice, and these occasions likely looked very different when described from other perspectives, for instance in his own autobiography. The point here is not to discredit him but to demonstrate that he was portrayed as a foil for Mingyur Paldron, representing the types of behavior from which she wished to distance Mindroling.

Her ability to transmit her father's complete teachings as well as her efforts to appeal to powerful patrons like Polhané and his cohort made possible the institution's revival. Her biography shows her regularly conducting rituals and offering teachings to men and women of the ruling class, as her father had so often done in his time. But while she collaborated with those in political power to reestablish Mindroling as her father had collaborated with the Fifth Dalai Lama, she is not recorded to have given the same kind of highly pragmatic advice her father so often offered his students with careers in government, especially later in his life.<sup>15</sup> Instead the vantage of her biography portrays an extremely disciplined monastic person who encouraged the strictest discipline from others. Pointing out this contrast is not to imply that Terdak Lingpa discouraged disciplined practice, but rather to highlight Mingyur Paldron's somewhat more conservative persuasion and to consider what that meant for the future of Mindroling.

There are a number of explanations for this subtle shift in focus. Briefly, in addition to needing to protect Mindroling from anti-Nyingma antagonism, her reasons likely included gender and the particular details of her education. For instance her biography mentions she was

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<sup>15</sup> On this aspect of Terdak Lingpa's engagement with his disciples and sponsors, see *chap 3*.

not trained in *rikné*, in stark contrast to the standard Mindroling tradition, since her father wanted her to focus on absorbing his religious teachings.<sup>16</sup> In keeping with this omission in her training, her biography suggests that as an adult she was suspicious of the value of the “conventional” fields of arts and science, favoring a more intensive study of Buddhist doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Mingyur Paldron’s biography also shows a strong undercurrent of criticizing hypocrisy on the part of tantric practitioners who use the appearance of engaging in esoteric ritual as an excuse for debauchery and unethical behavior. For the purposes of this chapter, the important point is that the second generation of Mindroling leaders marked a shift towards the cautious and programmatic side of the tradition already established. In Mingyur Paldron’s time there was good reason to lean towards formality, since the monastery had just been destroyed by adherents of the Geluk school, the most staunchly monastic school of Tibetan Buddhism.

It is important to note that in reading these accounts it is impossible to separate the perspective of the biographer from that of the subject; it could be that the writer, a monk who was a devoted disciple of Mingyur Paldron and who studied Great Perfection practices with her, was more scandalized by these events than Mingyur Paldron was, even if she approved of the biography and shared its general perspective. But in any case the biography presents a portrait of Mingyur Paldron as a highly disciplined nun who disapproved of any hint of antinomian behavior such as wrathful rites, sexual yoga, or imbibing alcohol. Since the Mindroling tradition identifies her as the main character in the institution’s second generation, her persona as expressed in the biography represents a slight and it seems strategic shift in Mindroling’s institutional focus from the charisma of Terdak Lingpa to the more circumscribed and

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<sup>16</sup> MPB, 66.

<sup>17</sup> On Mingyur Paldron’s mistrust of studies beyond Buddhist doctrine, expressed as “conventional knowledge” (*tha snyad kyi rig*) see MPB, 167.

programmatic monasticism, which was already an aspect of the tradition as demonstrated by the monastic constitution. To determine how this shift played out in the following generations requires further research, but this shift of focus again draws our attention to the multiple and seemingly contradictory yet coherent sides of Mindroling. To reiterate from previous chapters, these include a focus on the religious and worldly, Great Perfection practices and the study of *rikné*, renunciation and attention to material culture and aesthetics among others.

To return now to the theme of aesthetics and material culture, in this second phase of Mindroling's history, the first step was to rebuild the physical location of the monastery as the material support for Mindroling's tradition of art and ritual practices, and the future site of offerings from donors engaged in merit generating activities. The importance of the physical monastery and the many art and ritual objects it contained, meticulously documented in the Mindroling catalogues, underscore the importance of material culture at Mindroling and in Buddhist culture more generally.

#### *Clans and Interdependent Connections – Tendrel in Mindroling's Future*

It has already been established that family groups and clan connections played a major role in the founding of Mindroling. More generally, clans are a significant and understudied element in Tibetan Buddhist institutions and networks.<sup>18</sup> In fact, well beyond the family-based lineage of Mindroling, family and clan ties undergird many of the institutional structures and alliances of monasteries and lineage successions. This is of course especially evident in cases where official authority is handed down through generations of a particular family, as in the

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<sup>18</sup> A panel organized by Per K. Sorensen and Guntram Hazod on the subject of clans at IATS in Vancouver in 2010 began to address this understudied area of Tibetan Studies.

cases of Mindroling and Sakya monasteries, but family connections can also more subtly ramify groups that are transmitted through reincarnation and teaching lineages. The tendency for authority, whether religious, cultural, or political, to be tied to powerful families is of course not unique to Tibet. Bourdieu's work on reproduction through education addresses this phenomenon at great lengths, and he asserts convincingly that the tendency is universal. That said, naturally, reincarnation claims that fall within powerful families are at risk of being interpreted as nepotistic and therefore corrupt. At Mindroling the maintaining of authority within the family group was systematic and therefore not vulnerable to this critique, but nonetheless there are striking examples of family connections beyond the immediate lineage affecting the shape and future of Mindroling. These include ties to Pema Lingpa, the Sixth Dalai Lama and important marriage alliances mentioned above. The fact that the clan connections at play Mindroling were overtly integrated into the tradition would make Mindroling a useful entry for considering how clan and family connections have affected other Tibetan lineages and traditions.

Closely related, as discussed in Chapter Two, since at least the eleventh century and likely before, knowledge of Buddhism has been valued as highly as material wealth and noble standing and has been instrumental in determining social status. Family groups like the Nyo clan had massive power in the Lhasa region even before they became known as Buddhist masters, but their authority increased magnificently when material wealth and Buddhist knowledge were combined. This combination of different types of authority and capital relates directly to Tibetan theories about the proper integration of Buddhist realization and worldly power, known as *chösi zungdrel* since in a Buddhist context an ideal leader is an enlightened leader.<sup>19</sup> Since

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<sup>19</sup> Sometimes referred to as “two laws” (*khriims gnyis*) the term more commonly used in the letters of Terdak Lingpa, or “the teachings and worldly life” (*bstan srid*). All these terms are

Mindroling's lamas had a long family history of simultaneously inhabiting multiple spheres of authority, it is not surprising that seventeenth and eighteenth century temporal rulers, themselves members of powerful family groups, looked to Mindroling for guidance in that regard. Likewise, Terdak Lingpa's ancestors' fame for expertise in *rikné* help explain why Mindroling was a hub for lay education. Connections between clan members and ties across eras based on reincarnation claims were some of the most significant interdependent relationships or *tendrel* in the founding and maintenance of Mindroling. It should be kept in mind that the concept of *tendrel* in the more colloquial sense employed in this project's source materials and evoked here does not only apply to relationships or coincidences but to the effort to forge those connections and sustain those relationships, for instance through ritual.

#### *Titles and Formalized Relationships in the Continuation of Mindroling*

A related model of relationship at work in the founding of Mindroling falls under the rubric commonly referred to as the patron-priest relationship (*mchod yon* or *mchod gnas*).<sup>20</sup> The relevance of this category at Mindroling lies in the fact that the Dalai Lama acted as the main donor for Terdak Lingpa's new monastery and regularly made substantial offerings to Mindroling, while Terdak Lingpa provided teachings and ritual support for the Dalai Lama and his court. The details of this type of relationship (discussed in detail in Chapter Three and addressed throughout the project) are more nuanced than this epilogue allows for but it is

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generally translated as religion and politics, which is apt in many contexts but too limited in scope in other contexts where the meaning extends beyond politics *per se*.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth examination of these terms in the Tibetan Buddhist context, see Ruegg, "Mchod-yon/yon-mchod and mchod-gnas/yon-gnas."

important to mention that such relationships operate on a personal level, between the religious expert and the donor, as well as financial and institutional levels. Of course in this case it is striking that both figures were major religious figures, breaking with the more commonplace model of a layperson acting as sponsor to a monk or other religious expert. And further, according to later Nyingma histories, the Dalai Lama named Terdak Lingpa his Imperial Preceptor.<sup>21</sup> This is corroborated in Terdak Lingpa's outer or general biography, which gives the impression that he spent most of his adult life offering teachings and empowerments to the Fifth Dalai Lama and his court, even administering the last rites just before the Dalai Lama's secret death.<sup>22</sup> Even if the title of imperial preceptor were only applied in retrospect, it is noteworthy that a title most famously applied to the relationship between Mongol or Chinese emperors and Tibetan lamas would be applied to the relationship between these two Tibetan figures, the implication being that the Dalai Lama was playing the part of the emperor in his relationship with Terdak Lingpa and his sponsorship of Mindroling. Conferring such a grand title would also serve to reflect and instantiate the grandeur of his position.

In sum, these titles serve a variety of rhetorical purposes. Here they signal a special religious, socio-political and economic tie between a politically dominant Geluk leader as the "patron" to a Nyingmapa "priest" already endowed with significant cultural capital based on his family history, his identification as a reincarnation of important historical figures, including Dorjé Lingpa, Ratna Lingpa, and most crucially Guru Rinpoche's disciple Vairocana. The latter rooted Terdak Lingpa's significance in the perceived golden moment of Imperial Tibet as the inspiration for the Dalai Lama's newly unified Tibetan polity. Whether and how these

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<sup>21</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche, 830.

<sup>22</sup> Karmay, *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, 11.

designations were used during their lifetimes are questions that require more research but in any case it is significant that their history is remembered in these terms, and the sources employed in this work certainly support the terms' applicability based on the nature of their relationship.

### *The Cultural Legacy of Lay Alumni*

As described in Chapter Four, the presence of lay students from Tibet's most powerful families was a significant factor during Mindroling's founding and in subsequent generations, as former students like Polhané took up positions of political and cultural authority, and at the same time became sponsors and champions of Mindroling. At any given time up until the mid-twentieth century, lay aristocratic students were in a small minority at Mindroling, but they made up an important element in Mindroling's support base and extended community, including the official schools in Lhasa where Mindroling supplied teachers for language arts, particularly poetry. Mindroling's role as a center for literary arts had a strong impact on Tibetan high culture. And in fact Mindroling's influence on writing, literary arts, and the education of the ruling class was as crucial in establishing Mindroling's authority in early modern aesthetics as the ritual cycles Mindroling monks regularly conducted were in establishing Mindroling's relationship to the early modern Tibetan polity of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

The institution of Mindroling writ large is an entity that stretches beyond the main monastery to numerous branches and affiliates, and further includes the countless individuals and families who associate themselves with Mindroling. The shaping of worldviews through aesthetics happens on the individual, monastic, and wider institutional levels. On the other hand, support from individuals and affiliated monasteries was indispensable to the building, rebuilding,

and safeguarding of Mindroling. As has been shown, the presence of famous laypeople as students or supporters of the monastery and the institution's prestige were mutually reinforced. The greater the number of influential people who were trained there, the more noble families were eager to send their offspring. Through this cycle, prestige grew for the people who studied there and for the monastery. (This was true for lamas and ordained monks and nuns drawn to study at Mindroling as well.)

Examples of writing composed by laypeople that might offer more insight into the education of a spectrum of Tibetan laity from this period are rare and understudied. This is largely a result of the fact that most printing took place within the purview of monasteries where Buddhism was the priority, and where the more worldly concerns of laypeople would rarely have been considered worth the arduous work of carving woodblocks and inking reproductions. Scattered examples of lay writing show that letters, poetry and songs were important overlapping genres among educated Tibetans in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as they are today. The existing examples we have of lay people's biographies make clear the centrality of poetry and lyrics among the upper class. Examples cited in this work include the Tibetan version of *campu* (mixed prose and verse) from the tradition of Indian Kāvya as well as the more strongly indigenous Tibetan form known as *gur* (which was traditionally sung, though often written down as well). This raises the point of the strong influence Indic literary aesthetics had on Tibetan aesthetics, confirmed in accounts of Mindroling's lay education, as well as exemplified in the erudite compositions of writers associated with Mindroling and introduced in this project.

In regards to Mindroling's place as a center for literary arts, the training offered at Mindroling went beyond the mechanical skills of writing, although those were certainly important for bureaucrats and poets alike. Rather, Mindroling cultivated writers highly skilled in

grammar, the science of metaphor, and all the essential components of poetics. The equal importance of worldly passions and religious engagements echoes the theme of integrating Buddhist Dharma with other aspects of life, a strong feature of the aesthetic or worldview inculcated through Mindroling's traditions.

Since Mindroling's hierarchs were not exclusively fully ordained, celibate monks, but householders and religious experts, Mindroling was a more amenable place for lay people to study than Geluk monasteries that were more strictly focused on monasticism and celibacy. As mentioned previously, there was a tradition of lay donor practitioners (*chos mdzad*) entering monasteries for brief periods, but at Geluk monasteries, lay practitioners and students would not have had the same degree of access to teachings and they had at Mindroling, where the population was by definition diverse. (Although monks were always in the majority compared to other types of practitioner.) As schools for aristocrats became better established in Lhasa, it might have become less common for lay pupils to study at Mindroling, since they received the Mindroling model of education at the most prestigious schools as well. But based on oral histories, there seems to have been a special mystique in studying at the monastery itself. For laypeople and monastics alike, the elite Mindroling "degree" or in some purported cases the mere claim to one, functioned like a consecration, providing graduates from Mindroling with a pedigree that bolstered their authority and connected them to others who shared their educational background. In turn, the educated nobility supported Mindroling by offering material and financial support, but also by continuing to seek out the consecration of the Mindroling degree, thereby augmenting the array of famous names associated with the tradition over the generations. In this regard it is easy to recognize the play of reproduction of class structures through education. However, the fact that prestige has played a part in Mindroling's story from the

beginning does not preclude the value of the practices and sensibilities reproduced there, which arguably constituted some of the pinnacles of early modern Tibetan religious and cultural production.

### *The Literary Aesthetic*

*The Biography of Miwang*, composed by Dokharwa Tsering Wangyal in 1733, demonstrates the style of a Mindroling educated lay person. It shows signs of interest in the past, and in particular in Indic aesthetics, as well as a vividly Tibetan flare. This, as discussed in Chapter Four, is the life story of Miwang Polhané, the aristocrat who after studying at Mindroling became an army general and then ruled Tibet from 1728-1747, overlapping the reign of the Seventh Dalai Lama, with the blessing of the Qing emperor. When various factions of Tibetans, Mongols, and Manchus were vying for power across greater Tibet Polhané managed to rule a relatively stable and unified polity. Polhané's biography is a font of historical material on Tibetan high society, culture, and government during the eighteenth century. Since most of the Tibetan literature that has been preserved and read by Western scholars is cast in distinctly Buddhist terms *The Biography of Miwang* offers a rare window into the life experience and values of a layman, still within a Buddhist worldview, but free to address subjects that would be taboo for a monk or other primarily religious figure. And therefore free to demonstrate the tastes of the ruling class uninhibited by strictly Buddhist forms.

The biography's author, Dokharwa Tsering Wangyal, was a politically and socially prominent figure in Central Tibet and a close friend, fellow student, and political advisor to

Polhané. He studied at Mindroling with Lochen Dharmashri from age thirteen to sixteen.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, he is credited with having written the first Tibetan “novel,” *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince*, and the first lay autobiography. He also compiled a Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionary. His writing adheres to classical Sanskrit Kāvya in its formal style as well as much of its imagery and use of metaphor. The influence of Sanskrit literature on Tibetan literature can be traced directly to the twelfth-thirteenth century Sakya Paṇḍita’s commentary on and partial translation of Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa*. This Indic influence is extremely clear in Dokharwa’s writing, to such an extent that it could well be mistaken for a translation of the mixed prose-poetry work of Dandin himself.<sup>24</sup>

Again, a main attraction for young aristocrats to study at Mindroling was its reputation as the most prestigious place to study *rikné* and in particular, literary arts which were crucial to the career of civil servants and the educated elite. As students, both Dokharwa and Polhané were steeped in the Tibetan literary tradition that developed under the influence of Indic literature. Terdak Lingpa, the Nyo clan hierarch and first Senior Chair of Mindroling, doubtlessly drew students with his charisma and famed visionary activities. But once students arrived at Mindroling their main teacher was the less famously charismatic but equally renowned Lochen Dharmashri. Given his influence on their intellectual and artistic development, his intellectual and aesthetic influence must be reflected to some degree in their work. This in turn tells us something more about the tastes of one of Mindroling’s founding figures.

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<sup>23</sup> van der Kuijp, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Some of Dokharwa’s imagery seems to have been borrowed from Daṇḍin’s *Daśakumāracarita*. See Isabelle Onians, trans., *What Ten Young Men Did* (New York: New York University Press, JJC Foundation, 2005).

To situate Polhané's biography in its literary context, it should be noted that biography is a major genre in Tibetan literature. Most well known biographies are the life stories of lamas and other religious adepts. By contrast, Polhané's biography is the story of a man who is famed not for his Buddhist accomplishments (although he is portrayed as showing extreme reverence for the Dharma and devotion for his teachers), but for his military and political prowess, and to a remarkable extent, for his many amorous encounters with women. Although the cultural and ethical framework of the biography is undeniably Buddhist, the amorous aspect of the biography stands out against what we perceive to be the norms of Tibetan literature. Taken together with similar works from the period, the romantic and erotic content of the biography suggests an unexpected flavor in the training both author and subject received at Mindroling. This hint of sophistication and ease with all manner of subject matter further connects the Mindroling aesthetic with a cosmopolitan worldview.

Dokharwa's writing spans the genres of biography, Buddhist literature, romance, and high art. Its subject is an aristocrat, a political and military leader, a Don Juan and an ardent student of Buddhism. Given what readers used to Buddhist literature have come to know about Tibetan writing, the erotic anecdotes are unexpected and provocative, prompting questions about the scope of Tibetan literature and in turn about Tibetan culture. In contrast, Tibetan "folk" literature, such as the Aku Tonpa stories (which have been traced back to the 13<sup>th</sup> C), integrates a wide range of social topics including romance and sex. These tales, which were apparently not written down until the twentieth century, as well as other popular media such as the Lhasa street songs, reflect a general ease with the subjects of romance and sex in Tibetan culture.<sup>25</sup> It should

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<sup>25</sup> See M. Goldstein, "Lhasa Street Songs: Political and Social Satire in Traditional Tibet," *The Tibet Journal* 7 (1982), 56-66.

be noted that these were primarily forms of oral literature, which in some cases were eventually recorded, seeming to indicate that, in popular culture, more racy subject matter could be sung but was rarely written. This highlights the distinction between these genres and Dokharwa's writing. Further, tantric literature addresses topics related to sex, although in a completely different and arguably wholly unrelated manner. Bracketing tantra, these are examples of love, longing, romance, and erotica in Tibetan literature that prompt scholars to reconsider expectations about Tibetan literature as purely "Buddhist" in a doctrinal sense. Some of Mindroling's most famous alumni, including Polhané and Dokharwa, as well as other major literary figures with ties to Mindroling, such as Lelung Zhepay Dorjé and the Sixth Dalai Lama, wrote literature that stands out not only for its erudition, but also for its treatment of subjects beyond the scope of most known Tibetan literature. This is a topic ripe for future research; to elaborate, there appears to have been a dense concentration of writing characterized by the erotic produced in this vibrant historical moment, particularly among this group of people with ties to Mindroling and the Nyo clan. To explore this uncharted area, it would be useful first to seek out antecedents of this type of writing in Tibetan literature. It would be necessary then to look for responses from other members of the Tibetan literati, as the presumed audience, as well as examples of later compositions of a similar ilk to determine how widespread this development was, and what its ramifications were on Tibetan literary production and aesthetics.

In order to demonstrate this trend, the selection below is drawn from the section of the biography devoted to Polhané's time at Mindroling.<sup>26</sup> It begins with Polhané's journey to Mindroling, recounts his dazzled impressions of Terdak Lingpa, then addresses his studies

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<sup>26</sup> As mentioned in *chap 4*, the original was not separated into sections but the modern reprint has been divided into chapters, one of which is focused on Polhané's studies at Mindroling.

(already discussed) and provides scattered accounts of daily life at the monastery. The conclusion of the chapter touches on the history of Polhané's connection to the Mindroling lineage and foretells the help he will offer Mindroling in its near future.

Remarkably, a third of the section on Mindroling is devoted to Polhané's departure from his favorite lover. This amorous exchange comes just after Polhané leaves his wife and children behind "like a mouthful of spit," taking Aśvaghōṣa's classic telling of Siddhartha's departure from his royal home and family as a literary model.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the apparent ease with which Polhané departs from his spouse, he and his sweetheart speak to each other at length about the pain of separation and sing in romantic verse about how to cope with their mutual longing. The woman chides Polhané for abandoning her and, in the erotically charged passage excerpted below, he encourages her to let her natural surroundings soothe her until his return.

She said such things, lamenting and singing, and as she wiped away the tears that moistened her face with her precious jeweled fingers and part of her undergarment, she implored him.

At that time, feeling the physical torment of separation and focusing his eyes intensely on her face without wavering, the excellent youth said...

Until [my return], when the river's flow is completely blocked by ice  
and the touch of winter's unbearable cold is oppressive,  
hold it in your mind that the massive snow mountain  
is my youthful body, full breasted woman.

When the long course of the sun spreading spring's glory  
exhausts your body and mind,  
perceive the melodious voice of the female cuckoo  
as my affectionate words, adorable woman.

When your body hair is aroused by the cool Southern breeze  
during the rise of autumn, in the time of plenty,  
consider the perfectly clear limitless sky  
to be my mind, lithe woman.

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<sup>27</sup> See Aśvaghōṣa, *Life of Buddha*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

When the virtuous signs of summer's queen are spreading out  
and you are wretched with the torment of missing me, your friend,  
wish for all the wondrous colors of the night blooming lotus  
to be me, your loving friend, slender woman.

I am the one who stays on top,  
lifted up from below by the beautiful woman  
who is just like a noble horse –  
direct your loving thoughts like this.

The gorgeous woman's hands  
clutch my handsome behind,  
just like a belt binds –  
our friendship must not loosen.

Your ravishing fingers  
clasp my pure white fingers  
like a whip and reins –  
this is how we engage with one another.

Again and again your mouth touches  
my smiling red lips  
as if they were your cup –  
view pleasure and longing like this.

The grasping and gentle touch of your body against  
your friend's handsome youthfulness  
is like being clothed in fine garments –  
this is what our love-making is like.

If the region's charming garden is secure,  
the cuckoo, Messenger of Spring, will return at the appropriate time.  
If the cool mountain does not shift,  
the Five Faced Lord, the lion, will always be your friend.

If the Water Treasure, the ocean, is not dried up by fire at the end of the age,  
the Swan King will again and again engage in pleasure and play.  
If the young girl is steadfast in her promises of friendship  
I, her affectionate friend, will rush to take care of her.  
Utterly reject the darkness of longing  
and enjoy the experiences of this good age, beloved.

This is the sort of thing he said to his lover. They exchanged words of unbearable torment and expressions of longing. When the whole day had passed in such a discussion, they played together, were joyous, and made love in the nighttime. In that way the whole

night passed in the festivities of pleasure. Finally the stars' radiance diminished and dawn's light pervaded the Eastern sky. When the loving couple heard the third cry of the innkeeper's rooster, the young woman's mood became extremely somber and she spoke at length.

There is very little distinction drawn between this episode and Polhané's first meeting with his spiritual teacher Terdak Lingpa, in which Polhané is repeatedly portrayed as being utterly entranced by the lama's physical beauty and luminosity. Likewise, throughout the section of the biography related to Mindroling, allusions to politics are similarly intertwined with descriptions of monastic training, as well as humorous anecdotes. This demonstrates an extended definition of the concept of *chösi zungdrel*. The lines between leaving his family (which again clearly echo the *Buddhacarita*), enjoying the affection of his passionate lover, meeting his teacher, and engaging in a course of study at the monastery are all treated with an equal hand and not compartmentalized. In a sense it seems as if the romantic unions act as metaphors for political unions and the political unions are supported by religious ties, in an interwoven network of relationships and connections.

With that in mind, a valuable avenue of future research would explore the relationship between this aspect of Polhané's biography and the erotic songs and poetry attributed to the Sixth Dalai Lama. Perhaps in some circles this kind of writing signaled a distinction from a certain type of monastic ruler, and the unbridled sexuality we find in this biography and in some of the Sixth Dalai Lama's writing might have come to represent a more virile, engaged model of ruler. On the other hand, the biography of Polhané was not blockprinted for some thirty years after it was written, just after the time of the author's death, by his friend and fellow Tibetan cabinet member.<sup>28</sup> The delay raises questions about the kind of welcome this work received in broader literary sphere, dominated by more doctrinal and monastic Buddhist genres. This

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<sup>28</sup> van der Kuijp, 322.

passage, as an example of the wider trend, prompts questions about the broader tastes and sensibilities of Dokharwa's readership. After comparing this with other similar examples of Tibetan literature, starting with the work of the Sixth Dalai Lama and Lelung Zhepay Dorjé, it would be fruitful to draw comparisons with the literature of cultures influenced by Buddhism beyond Tibet, such as Japan and China.

In considering the significance of the secular or worldly aspects of Polhané's biography, the tendency to impose limits on our objects of study based on our own interests and prejudices arises. One excellent critique of this tendency in scholarship is Jan Nattier's book *A Few Good Men*, in which she analyzes the Buddhist studies community's characterization of early Mahayana based on a limited and she suggests unrepresentative set of translations. We limit the subjects of our study by our own moral and ethical codes as well as our scope of vision and our expectations. A similar mischaracterization might be at play here. Beyond erotica, perhaps there were more "secular" concerns than we have tended to assume. Of course this imposition is natural and to a certain extent unavoidable, and characterizes not just scholarship but all human interaction and perception. Still, the more aware scholars are of the limits we impose, the clearer and broader our scope can be of the subjects of our study.

#### *Women's Ongoing Role at Mindroling and the Power of Rimé*

As this epilogue has shown, many of the characteristics discernable in the first generations continued to be markers of Mindroling. Another important point of continuity is the relatively strong presence of women teachers in the Mindroling lineage. For example, in the nineteenth century Mindroling Jetsun Trinlé Chödrön (*rje btsun phrin las chos sgron*, d.u.)

attracted fame as a teacher and her relationship with Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (*jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*, 1820-1892) in whose collected works is found a short biography of the female Mindroling master. Like Mingyur Paldron, Trinlé Chödrön is also depicted in Mindroling's lineage trees. Significantly, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo was also a member of the Nyo clan, on his father's side, again reiterating the force of family ties in Tibetan Buddhist networks.

In the twentieth century, as predicted at the time of Terdak Lingpa's death in 1714, his reincarnation was discovered in the Kham region of Nyarong, where his youngest son had sought refuge during the Dzungar led violence of 1717-1718. During that generation, there was no male heir to take over the Mindroling throne, so the reincarnation was brought to Mindroling in Central Tibet and married the previous Senior Chair's daughter, allowing the lineage to continue unbroken. Recognizing the strong patriarchal leanings of Tibetan Buddhism, it is important not to underestimate the importance of this seemingly slight concession to gender equality. The relatively enlightened approach to gender springs from the same source as the *rimé* current in the Mindroling history. It seems that there are both practical and philosophical motivations for paying (however limited) heed to the ultimate nonduality of gender, just as there are both practical and religious reasons to transcend sectarian biases.

Mindroling was a perfect heterotopia, or other space, extending infinitely, centrally rooted, and yet impossible to destroy by attacking that central root. Concurrent with the spread of Mindroling's aura across the Buddhist world, the central monastery undertook a very focused project to revive and transmit the central teachings of the Nyingma school. In this way the founders took up their place in a line of revivers and redactors that included Vairocana, Nub Sangyé Yeshé, Pema Lingpa, and Ratna Lingpa and Dorjé Lingpa. Their successors would in

turn include the rimé or “nonsectarian” champions of nineteenth and twentieth Century Eastern Tibet.

All these themes illustrate a basic productive tension that was always active at Mindroling. Most broadly this can be expressed as the tension between the “formless” and formal. Manifestations of this included the tension between the discipline of monasticism and the apparent freedom of esoteric practice, between renunciation and aesthetics, between Great Perfection and *rikné*, between a focus on crystallizing Nyingma practices and embodying a cosmopolitan worldview. These were all productive tensions in Mindroling’s identity from the beginning and continue to define its identity in the present.

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