

POWERFUL WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF DEGÉ:
REASSESSING THE EVENTFUL REIGN OF THE DOWAGER QUEEN
TSEWANG LHAMO (D. 1812)*

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From the earliest recorded times, individual Tibetan women have occasionally wielded great political and social power, and have even bore feminised versions of the highest royal titles in the land. For instance, during the Imperial Period more than one woman in the royal family was called a sitting empress, *tsemmo* (*btsan mo*), and several others are immortalised in documents from Dunhuang for their important roles in government, maintenance of the royal family, and patronage of religion.¹ Tantalizing, albeit disappointingly brief, snippets of narratives and official documents are all that remain in the historical record for most of the powerful women in Tibetan history, unfortunately. Not a single free-standing biographical work of a Tibetan ruling lady authored during the pre-modern period has ever come to light and, generally speaking, the best scholars can hope for are passing remarks about a given woman in two or three contemporaneous works. This paper explores the life and contested representations of one of the few relatively well-documented Tibetan female political leaders of the pre- and early-modern periods. Tsewang Lhamo (Tshe dbang lha mo, d. 1812) ruled the powerful Tibetan kingdom of Degé (Sde dge) for nearly two decades at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, before the full range of Tibetan sources now available had been published, biased profiles of Tsewang Lhamo in influential Western-language writings made this queen one of the most notorious women in the European and American narrative of Tibetan history. With the recent availability of more contemporaneous materials on her life and times, there is an opportunity to reconsider the received

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¹ Uebach 2005.

wisdom regarding this remarkable woman, as well as craft a fuller and more balanced portrayal of her deeds and demise.

The first of the unflattering—and incorrect—representations of Tsewang Lhamo in Western scholarship is the oft-cited 1947 article by Li An-Che, “Dege: A Study of Tibetan Population.”² In the passage about Tsewang Lhamo and her relationship with her son, Professor Li confidently proclaimed, “[I]t is apparent that *she deprived him of his prerogative* for a long time before he was given full power to rule the order and the laymen. It required *an insurrection* on the part of her subordinates *to force her to give up the reins of government*. This foreshadows a series of internal conflicts in the family in future generations which caused it to diminish in strength [Emphasis added].”³ Although this article claimed to base itself on Tibetan language sources its pronounced value judgments may actually reflect Confucian-inflected imperial Chinese records as much, if not more than, the writings of Tibetans. The genealogy of this discourse about Tsewang Lhamo leading up to Li’s work, however, is beyond the purview of the present work. Pertinent here is the influence on later scholars of this portrayal of Tsewang Lhamo as someone who illegally clung to power and thereby provoked a rebellion against her rule.

Twenty years later, in 1968, the Czech scholar Josef Kolmaš echoed Li’s judgments, yet with one important addition. Kolmaš too described Tsewang Lhamo as a usurper, though he identified sectarian conflict as the impetus behind her claimed ouster and not a restoration campaign to install the rightful heir to the throne. Kolmaš wrote, “[As the crown prince was only four years old when his father died,] spiritual and secular power in Derge *was seized by his mother*, the young widow, Tshe-dbang-lha-mo ... It is apparent that certain strata of the lay and monk populations of Derge disliked her openly. The increasing favour which after her husband’s death she bestowed upon the monks of the Rñiñ-ma [Nyingma] sect ... led to *open hostility* to her amongst the ministers of the late [king] ... Finally, Tshe-dbang-lha-mo *was forced, in 1798, to give up the powers she had usurped and was confined* in Dbon-stod [Wöntö] where *she soon died* ... [Emphasis added].”⁴ Kolmaš published another historical document pertaining to Degé in 1988 and in its introduction recapitulated his understanding of Tsewang Lhamo’s reign. In this later article Kolmaš wrote, “Tshe-dbang-lha-mo, the 10th abbess of Lhun-grub-steng [Lhundrupténg, the royal temple], preferred the Rñing-ma-pa sect which led to open hostility to her (in 1798 she was forced to resign).”⁵

In 1969, a year after the appearance of Kolmaš’s first piece, the late, great E. Gene Smith wrote an influential piece about the

² Li 1947.

³ *Ibid.*: 282.

⁴ Kolmaš 1968: 42.

⁵ Kolmaš 1988: 131.

Nyingma sect in Degé in which he augmented Kolmaš's narrative with new details: "The sudden honours bestowed on the Rnying ma pa could not help but arouse the jealousy of the [Sakya] Ngor pa lamas and their patrons among the aristocracy ... [d]uring her *brief eight-year regency*. In 1798 this favouritism led to an *open civil rebellion* in which the *Rnying ma pa faction was defeated*. The queen and Rdo ba Grub chen [Do Drupchen], who was reputed to be her lover, were first imprisoned and later exiled. A number of the *Rnying ma pa partisans were executed* or forced to flee [Emphasis added]."⁶ Li, Kolmaš, and Smith's portrayals have been adopted uncritically by successive scholars, especially with regards to the reputed violent backlash that ensued from Tsewang Lhamo's patronage of her favoured lamas and sect. In 1984 the late Leslie Kawamura published an essay on esoteric Buddhism in which he included a paragraph that, by its own admission, simply summarised Smith's passage quoted above, including the claims about "her brief eight-year regency" and the sectarian "open civil warfare in 1798."⁷ Ten years later Anne Chayet included a short profile of Tsewang Lhamo in her *La femme au temps des Dalai-lamas*. While Chayet did not portray Tsewang Lhamo in the same harsh tones of Li and Kolmaš, she amplified the intensity of the supposed persecution against the Nyingma sect.⁸

In his 2006 dissertation Alexander Gardner expressed scepticism about the supposed sectarian unrest and pointed out that his survey of contemporaneous and later Tibetan-authored histories uncovered no mention of an uprising or persecution associated with Tsewang Lhamo. Gardner astutely declared, "This incident awaits a detailed analysis"⁹ and this essay represents the first attempt at such. It begins with several introductory notes on sources, Degé history, the social status of elite women in the kingdom, and sectarian relations at the royal court. This paper then proceeds to cover the life of Tsewang Lhamo, utilizing biographical writings, official histories, and memorials of her various religious projects. Over the course of the essay, Tsewang Lhamo's life will emerge with more humanity and quotidian detail than presented before, and the above quoted caricatures of her reign and its aftermath will be refuted on nearly every point.

Sources

Both Li and Kolmaš explicitly based their analyses on the *Royal Genealogies of Degé*. This is a court history of Degé completed in 1828

⁶ Smith 2001: 24–25. This essay appeared as the Preface to *The Autobiographical Reminiscences of Ngag-dbang-dpal-bzang, Late Abbot of Kah-thog Monastery*. Sonam T. Kazi: Gangtok, 1969, 1–20; reprinted in Smith 2001: 13–32.

⁷ Kawamura 1984: 364.

⁸ Chayet 1993: 238–239.

⁹ Gardner 2006: 131.

by Tsewang Lhamo's only son—Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin (Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin, b. 1786)—and printed the same year at the Degé Printing House (Sde dge par khang).¹⁰ Kolmaš made the entire text of the *Royal Genealogies* available to the international community through his 1968 edition of the text in Roman transcription accompanied by his detailed introduction to the political content of the work.¹¹ Smith mentioned the *Royal Genealogies* in his 1969 piece that covered Tsewang Lhamo and had already been familiar with the work for several years as Kolmaš thanked Smith in his work for lending him a photocopy of the *Royal Genealogies* in 1964.¹² Most pertinent to this essay are the sections of the *Royal Genealogies* that narrated the lives and Tsewang Lhamo's husband, Tsewang Lhamo herself, and her son, the author of the text. At the time when Li, Kolmaš, and Smith composed their works this was likely the only contemporaneous Tibetan work about her which they had access to. Since the release of their seminal essays several more relevant primary sources have been published in China and the Tibetan diaspora. The first of these is the magisterial tome *Guru Trashi's History* (*Gu bkra'i chos 'byung*), composed in 1808 by a lama from Degé. It was completed four years before Tsewang Lhamo's death and the author belonged to the sect that she patronised most liberally, the Nyingma. *Guru Trashi's History* was distributed widely for the first time in 1979 with the publication of a retracing of a rare manuscript copy of the work from a library in Bhutan.¹³

Arguably the most important sources for Tsewang Lhamo's life are found in the writings of her long-serving personal chaplain Getsé Mahāpaṇḍita Gyurmé Tsewang Chokdrup (Dge rtse Mahāpaṇḍita 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub, 1761–1829; hereafter Getsé). In 1797 Getsé composed a catalogue to a major publication sponsored by Tsewang Lhamo that included a hagiographical profile of her and was commercially published in India between 1973–1975.¹⁴ Getsé's ten-volume *Collected Works*, including his detailed *Autobiography* and several other memorial catalogues of her religious projects, became widely available only in the year 2000.¹⁵

¹⁰ The title page title of this work is *Dpal sa skyong sde dge chos kyi rgyal po rim byon gyi rnam thar dge legs nor bu'i phreng ba 'dod dgu rab 'phel*. The edition cited herein is the recent paperback edition in moveable Tibetan type, edited and published in Sichuan; Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990. The work is written in verse with interlinear notes in prose.

¹¹ Kolmaš 1968.

¹² *Ibid.*: 8.

¹³ Ngag dbang blo gros 1979. Since 1979, at least two more editions have been published, including a moveable type version and it is the latter version that is cited herein: Ngag dbang blo gros 1990. For more on the provenances of the various editions see Martin 1991.

¹⁴ *Rñin ma'i rgyud 'bum* 1973–1975. Getsé's two-volume catalogue comprises all of the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth volumes.

¹⁵ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001a.

The remainder of the paper will utilize these materials, as well as revisit the *Royal Genealogies*.

Women in Degé Politics

The family that came to establish and rule Degé emigrated from the south of Tibet to Kham (*Khams*; Eastern Tibet) in the thirteenth century though for hundreds of years they were merely a locally important family with claims to an illustrious distant past.¹⁶ In the late 1630s a band of six Degé princes conquered many of their neighbours and became the dominant power in the region. In 1639, their territorial acquisitions were augmented by a large land grant from the Guśri Khan Tenzin Chögyel (Bstan 'dzin chos rgyal, 1582–1655), the Fifth Dalai Lama's (1617–1682) Mongolian patron and military backer.¹⁷ The Degé royal family not only retained its power for almost three centuries—eventually doubling in size—but also achieved world renown for its publishing house, numerous large monasteries, and many local lamas who made towering contributions to all fields of Tibetan culture.

The titular founder of the kingdom was Jampa Püntsoḳ (Byams pa phun tshogs, d. ca. 1660), who was a victorious army commander and monk. Initially in Degé politics and religion (*chos srid*) were united in the office of monk-kings who were simultaneously kings and abbots of the state temple. Early in the monarchy the leaders of Degé adopted the designation *sakyong* (*sa skyong*), meaning protector (*skyong*) of the land (*sa*). The fifth *sakyong* Tenpa Tsering (Bstan pa tshe ring, 1678–1738) was the most culturally and politically significant king in Degé's history, and the first lay king. Two of his chief accomplishments were earning a high status for the royal family in the expanding hegemony of the Qing Empire (1644–1912)¹⁸ and patronising the publication of a new edition of the *Kangyur* (*Bka' 'gyur*) in 103 volumes, the first half of the Tibetan Buddhist canon.¹⁹ The two sons who succeeded Tenpa Tsering on the throne were monks, thereby reviving the old tradition of monk-kings. Tsewang Lhamo married Tenpa Tsering's grandson Sawang Zangpo (*Sa dbang bzang po*).

Although the majority of the monarchs, or *sakyong*, of Degé prior to Tsewang Lhamo's reign were monks, royal women in Degé

¹⁶ In this paper all basic historical information about Degé and the royal family is drawn from the *Royal Genealogies of Degé*. For an excellent discussion of the identity and early history of the family that came to rule Degé see van der Kuijp 1988.

¹⁷ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 24–25.

¹⁸ The two titles bestowed by the Qing on Tenpa Tsering were "Pacification Commissioner of Degé" (*anfusi*; in 1728) and "Tranquilization Commissioner of Degé" (*xuantweisi*; in 1733). The best recent account of the award of these titles is Scheier-Dolberg 2005.

¹⁹ On the creation of the Degé edition of the canon see Schaeffer 2009: chapter five.

occasionally attained high political positions in the kingdom, even if only for short tenures. For instance, prior to the reign of Tsewang Lhamo at least one princess had served as regent during a long interregnum. Tsewang Lhamo's father-in-law—king Lodrö Gyatso (Blo gros rgya mtsho, 1724–1772),²⁰—died when her future husband Sawang Zangpo was seven years old. As the orphaned crown prince was too young to rule, his aunt, nun Yangchen Drölma (Dbyangs can sgröl ma), served as his regent for approximately ten years. The *Royal Genealogies* contains a detailed portrayal of her religious patronage while on the throne:

The regent of the king (i.e., Yangchen Drölma) assumed responsibility for the seat of political power (*gdan sa*) and safeguarded and cared for the subjects without deviating from precedent. She supported the doctrine and the communities of monks—the essential concern of the ancestors—with conducive conditions[...]. For the purpose of (his) immediate and everlasting happiness she kindly nurtured prince Sawang Zangpo with customary and heartfelt varieties of consolation. Having (conducted her regency) in this way, she passed away during the Saka Dawa month of the fire horse year (1786). All of the funerary rites were performed perfectly by my kind father (Sawang Zangpo).²¹

The range of meanings signified by the phrase “without deviating from precedent” can be understood to include that her religious allegiances were firmly with the dominant Sakya sect, and this will be used later in the essay as a point of contrast with Tsewang Lhamo's patterns of patronage. As a side note, it is probable other princesses—ordained or otherwise—served as regents during prior interregna but their histories were not recorded. Most likely, Yangchen Drölma's story is known simply because of her temporal proximity to the authors whose works are still extant and under consideration herein.²²

²⁰ Lodrö Gyatso was ordained as a child and began his reign as a monk. Several years into his time on the throne he was compelled to take a wife in order to produce an heir in a drastic attempt to insure the very survival of the family line. The marriage was also an occasion to strengthen Degé's political connections with the Dalai Lama's Ganden Palace government as Lodrö Gyatso married a niece of the Seventh Dalai Lama named Trashi Wangmo (Bkra shis dbang mo); Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 87.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 89–90; *Mi rje* [...] *gyi rgyal tshab kyi* [correct to *kyis*] *gdan sa'i khur bzhes mnga' ris skyong bran la/ snga rgyun 'phyugs med yab mes bzhed pa'i snying/ bstan pa dge 'dun sde bcas mthun rkyen gyis/ zhabs 'degs* [...] *rgyal sras sa dbang bzang po'i drung gang la'ang/ 'phral phugs 'di phyir dge ba'i dbu 'don rigs/ tshul ldan nyams ldan skyong sogs bka' drin che/ de mus me rta sa ga zla ba la/ zhi bar gshegs shing dgongs rdzogs bya ba kun/ yab rje bka' drin can des yang dag mdzad.*

²² This discussion of women and political power in Degé leads one to ask, was it possible for women to also attain positions of authority within the *religious* institutions in Degé during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? This paper proposes women in Degé had more opportunities for achieving positions

Considering that Kolmaš and Smith claimed Tsewang Lhamo triggered a sectarian revolt against her, before commencing with the main portion of the essay a few words about sectarian relations in Degé are in order. Two of Tibet's four main sectarian traditions hold strong relevance to this paper: the Sakya (*Sa skya*) and the Nyingma (*Rnying ma*). Kapstein observed of the Sakya subsects, "The most successful of them was the Ngorpa (founded by Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, 1382–1456), which enjoyed an extensive following, above all in far Eastern Tibet, where it became effectively the state religion of the important principalities of Dergé and Nangchen."²³ Nevertheless, from early on the Degé family also patronised Nyingma lamas and incorporated Nyingma traditions into the royal cult. For example, Nyingma treasure texts (*gter ma*) were cited to confirm the religious sanctity of some of the early kings and a Nyingma court chaplain discovered the actual royal seal among a cache of revealed icons and texts.²⁴ The received wisdom about Tsewang Lhamo asserts that because she primarily supported the Nyingma sect, and not the "state religion" of the Sakya sect, a Sakya persecution of her and her Nyingma associates resulted. The veracity of this claim will be explored below.

Tsewang Lhamo the Dharma-queen

The orphaned and brotherless teenage crown prince Sawang Zangpo was chronically ill in the 1780s. The hierarch of the Sakya sect understood the prince would not live long and ordered him to quickly marry a woman who hailed from Degé²⁵ and in 1783 the sixteen year-old Sawang Zangpo wed Tsewang Lhamo.²⁶ She belonged to a prominent family in the Nyingma stronghold of Garje (*Sga rje*) in the far south of Degé and was likely to be about the same age as her husband.²⁷ In 1786 the young royals gave birth to a son and the following year they gave birth to a daughter, both of whom survived. They also lost two infants, one boy and one girl.²⁸

of power in politics than in religion. Thus, in the entire *Royal Genealogies* not a single female lama is mentioned. The royal court lavished support on its chaplains, but none of them were female. Furthermore, the text does not report the kings or other royals ever supported the founding of a nunnery.

²³ Kapstein 2007: 263. For comments on the Ngor founder's efforts to purge Nyingma "accretions" from the Sakya see Davidson 1981: 91–92.

²⁴ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 44.

²⁵ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001b, vol. 8: 260.7.

²⁶ The only source for the date of their wedding is 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 190.6.

²⁷ For more on Garje see Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche 2009; which is a translation of *Sga rje Khams dbus dgon gyi sprul ming 'dzin pa 'Jam dbyangs don grub ces pa'i mi tshé'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus su bkod pa bzhugs so*. Unfortunately, neither of these works has been consulted for this article.

²⁸ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 94.

In 1788, just one year after the birth of their second child, the Degé royal couple travelled to Central Tibet on a pilgrimage-cum-diplomatic mission to present themselves to the leaders of the Dalai Lama's government and the Sakya headquarters.²⁹ One of the lamas they visited on their journey was Jikmé Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1729–1798), the most influential Nyingma master of the second half of the eighteenth century.³⁰ Janet Gyatso noted, "This royal couple had been in correspondence with [Jikmé Lingpa] for several years, influenced by reports of his virtues from fellow countrymen."³¹ Tsewang Lhamo maintained relations with this lama and his disciples throughout her life.

Sawang Zangpo became seriously ill and passed away in 1790.³² As the prince Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin was only four years old at this time the throne passed to the dowager queen, Tsewang Lhamo. This transfer of power was strikingly reminiscent of the aforementioned regency of Yangchen Drölma. Needless to say, the fact that Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin was only four years old when his father passed discredits the claim by some twentieth century scholars that Tsewang Lhamo "usurped" power. Tsewang Lhamo simply was the only person in the royal family qualified to lead the government.

The statements by Kolmaš and Smith about Tsewang Lhamo's ardent support of the Nyingma were true, nevertheless, in so far as she did patronise a number of Nyingma lamas, printing projects, and icon constructions. One of her first major donations to the Nyingma tradition in Degé occurred in 1791, the year after the death of her husband. At this time, the two most powerful Nyingma lamas in Degé were Getsé, of Katok Monastery (KaHthog) and the head of Dzokchen Monastery (Rdzogs chen), Ati Tenpé Gyentsen (A ti bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1759–1792); both of whom were elite reincarnated lamas in their early thirties. At a spring gathering with the queen, the two lamas conferred and decided to collaborate on the introduction to their respective monasteries of an entire corpus of Nyingma rituals and exegetical traditions from Mindröling Monastery (Smin grol gling) in Southern Tibet called the *Kama* (*Bka' ma*).³³ Introducing the *Kama* to Katok and Dzokchen Monasteries required inviting a troupe of teachers from a great distance, the acquisition of costly materials for the *Kama* rituals, and sponsorship

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁰ Jikmé Lingpa's main treasure cycle the *Longchen Nyingtik* (*Klong chen snying thig*) is still the most widespread contemplative tradition in the Nyingma and his scholastic writings are central to the curricula of many Nyingma seminaries to this day.

³¹ Gyatso 1997: 371.

³² Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 99; and 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 215.4.

³³ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 216. On this version of the *Kama* see Dalton 2006. For many centuries Katok was best known for its own sophisticated scholastic and liturgical elaborations on the *Kama* though they were in decline by the mid-seventeenth century.

for the students receiving the training. The royal court donated the needed resources and the Mindrölling lamas arrived that same year.³⁴ Ati Tenpé Gyentsen died several months later in 1792, making Getsé the leading Nyingma lama in Degé.³⁵

The year 1794 saw the advent of another significant Nyingma project sponsored by the court when the queen commissioned the publication of a new edition of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* (*Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*).³⁶ When the Degé edition of the *Kangyur* was compiled and printed earlier in the century the editor, Situ Penchen (Si tu paṅ chen, 1700–1774), omitted many tantras considered canonical by the Nyingma due to concerns that they might be counterfeit scriptures.³⁷ The *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* is composed in large measure by these spurned tantras and Getsé was the chief editor of the Degé edition of this collection. The project took five years to complete and the finished product was twenty-six volumes long and to this day remains the only xylographic edition of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma*. Rémi Chaix has carefully compared the expense of this publication to the previous two canons published in Degé and concludes that page-by-page, volume-by-volume, the production costs of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* were equal to those of the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* (*Bstan 'gyur*).³⁸ Thus, Tsewang Lhamo was able to give this Nyingma collection the same treatment previously given only to the universally accepted canonical collections.

According to Getsé's *Autobiography*, it appears the first few years of Tsewang Lhamo's reign, which began in 1790, were relatively peaceful, within and without. In contrast, 1796 was a challenging year for Tsewang Lhamo and followers of the Nyingma in Degé. Early in the year a high-ranking lama from the Degé-sponsored Pelpung Monastery (Dpal spungs) was sent to Ling (Gling), Degé's neighbour to the north and constant adversary, to negotiate a peace deal between the two powers.³⁹ The lama was unable to bring peace between Degé and Ling and the ensuing military activity was so disruptive to the region that Qing forces became irritated with Degé

³⁴ The introduction of the *Kama* to Degé made a lasting mark on regional Nyingma monasteries and marked the migration of the intellectual vitality of the Nyingma sect from Central Tibet to Degé; see Ronis 2009.

³⁵ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 215.4–215.5. Getsé does not report the cause of death though earlier in his *Autobiography* observed that Dzokchen Rinpoché had been sick.

³⁶ Cf. Achard 2003.

³⁷ Imaeda 1981; See also Mayer 1997.

³⁸ Chaix's data was presented in a talk titled "Réflexions préliminaires concernant l'histoire économique de sDe dge au 18^e siècle" at the Milieux, Sociétés et Cultures en Himalaya laboratory of the CNRS on May 29, 2009; cf. Chaix 2011. Naturally, the overall cost of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* was less than the other two canons because of its smaller size.

³⁹ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 229.2. The lama was the Pelpung Wöntrül (Dpal spung dbon sprul; d.u.), the reincarnation of the brother of the Situ Penchen (d. 1774), the founder of the monastery.

and intervened to put an end to the conflict. Getsé reported, “Degé and Ling battled. This was likely one of the first major military affairs of Tsewang Lhamo’s reign, and it became a debacle. Tenzin Bum [king of Ling?] escaped. After he arrived in Chinese territory many Chinese travellers also came (with further intelligence of the troubles). Several high Chinese officials went to Hor (Kardzé [Dkar mdzes], close to Degé,) and there was a risk that they would come to Degé... Because (the Qing authorities in the region) were very irritated with Degé my disciples and I convened (an assembly at which we performed) an enemy-suppressing liturgy based on the deity Gompo.”⁴⁰ At the conclusion of the rituals Getsé gave Tsewang Lhamo many initiations and blessings.

The second troublesome event of 1796 concerned social relations in the capital. The relevant passage in Getsé’s *Autobiography* reads, “The dark side (always) looks for an opportunity (to obstruct those who) serve the Nyingma teachings. A court clerk was struck with an illness, none of the medical treatments or healing rituals helped, and he got worse. I gave him numerous initiations yet he abandoned the thrust of his lifespan.”⁴¹ This passage may be read in at least two ways. On the one hand, this unnamed court clerk may simply have been a devotee of the Nyingma who caught a serious illness and died. However, a cynical reading is that the court clerk was poisoned or “cursed” for his support of the Nyingma, and this latter opinion is the most convincing. The temporal placement of the passage gives credence to this suggestion because sectarian bigotry in Tibet frequently becomes acute when broader difficulties flare up, such as the contemporaneous war with Ling.

Nevertheless, in line with this essay’s general reconsideration of Tsewang Lhamo’s reign, it is unwise to read too much into Getsé’s documentation by seeing this one incident as indicating that an “insurrection” or “open civil war” was underway at the time. It is highly possible a number of lamas and aristocrats were strongly displeased with Tsewang Lhamo and may have used violence at times to challenge her supporters. Tibetan history is rife with many instances of assassinations and foul play that have a sectarian valence, yet not all such instances develop into large-scale conflicts. Admittedly, the historical record here is limited to just one mention by Getsé, but it does not appear anyone important was killed or that more than one person was targeted. Thus, this murder—if indeed that is what it was—does not rise to the level of a persecution. Furthermore it can be noted that not a single recent Tibetan-authored history of Degé or the Nyingma consulted for this paper

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 229.6; *Sde gling 'khrugs shing bstan 'dzin 'bum bros song/ rgya yul sleb nas rgya 'grul mang 'byor zhing/ rgya dpon che khag hor du phebs pa dang/ sde dger 'ong nyes [...]* *bdag nyid dpon slob kyis/ mgon po'i dgra chos tshugs [...]*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 229.4; *Rnying bstan zhabs tog sgrub la nag phyogs kyis/ skabs btsal drung yig de nyid snyun gyis thabs/ sman bcos rim gro ci byas phan med du/ rim lcir gyur pa bdag gis dbang grangs mang/ phul yang sku tshe'i 'phen pa btang bar gyur.*

stated there was a persecution of Degé-based Nyingma lamas and institutions during this period of history.⁴² Until positive evidence of a sectarian uprising like that claimed by Kolmaš, Smith, and others is presented this claim must remain discredited.

In 1797, Getsé completed the editing of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* and composed its *Catalogue (dkar chag)*.⁴³ The latter work advanced an explicit and pointed polemical agenda in which Getsé devoted over fifty folia sides to a spirited defence of the Nyingma tradition that responded to a wide range of criticisms that have been made against them, particularly by Sakya scholars. Thus, in the heart of the Degé Printing House—the preeminent arbiter of orthodoxy in Degé—Tsewang Lhamo opened up a prominent forum in which Getsé not only printed but also justified Nyingma scriptures.⁴⁴ In addition to defending the Nyingma, another major aim of the *Catalogue to the Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* was to eulogise the queen. All catalogues of this variety contain chapters on the family history and personal virtues of their patrons; as is the case with the catalogs of the Degé editions of the Kangyur and Tengyur. In the *Catalogue* Getsé exalted the queen as a great monarch and bodhisattva.⁴⁵ It recounts that the thirteenth Karmapa, Dündül Dorjé (Karma pa Bdud 'dul rdo rje, 1733–1797), had a visionary experience in which he learned from an apparitional Brahmin that Tsewang Lhamo was an emanation of the female Buddha Tārā, particularly the form of Tārā called Trashi Döndrup (Sgrol ma bkra shis don grub). Additionally, the *Catalogue* reported that Jikmé Lingpa identified her as an emanation of Ngangtsul Changchub Gyelmo (Ngang tshul byang chub rgyal mo), a Tibetan queen and disciple of Padmasambhava. The colophon to the *Catalogue* recognised Tsewang Lhamo by equally exalted political titles, calling her “the *sakyong*, Queen of Men” (*mi'i dbang mo sa skyong pa*).⁴⁶

Thus within a few years of her ascension to the throne as a regent for her son, Tsewang Lhamo wrote herself into the official histories as a veritable *dharmarāja*, or queen of state and religion. She patronized a publication of Buddhist scriptures and allowed herself to be represented as a leader of the highest rank. The nun who preceded her as a regent during the childhood of her late husband remained as just a regent; a patient and restrained steward of the government while her charge came of age. Tsewang Lhamo asserted

⁴² These include, in chronological order: Karma rgyal mtshan 1994; Blo gros phun tshogs *et al.* 1995; Skal ldan tsho ring 2000; Thub bstan chos dar 2000; Dudjom Rinpoche *et al.* 2002; Bstan 'dzin lung rtogs nyi ma 2004; Thub bstan phun tshogs 2007; and Lha lung 'chi med rdo rje and Zla g.yang 2009.

⁴³ See note 15.

⁴⁴ Prior to this only one small collection of Nyingma texts had been published at the Degé Printing House, namely, the *Collected Works of Longchenpa (Klong chen bka' 'bum)*; see Sde dge par khang and Dkar mdzes khul rtsom sgyur cus 1994.

⁴⁵ 'Gyur med tsho dbang mchog grub 2001b, vol. 8: 260–261.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 393.1.

herself much more and utilized the institutions and resources of the state to become a genuine *sakyong* of Degé.

Resilient at the turn of the nineteenth century

Kolmaš, Smith, and those who followed them claimed that 1798 was the terminus of Tsewang Lhamo's quote-unquote brief reign, but a reevaluation of the evidence—including a text that was available to them in the mid-twentieth century—will strongly contest this thesis. It is argued here that the reason for the fixation on this date must be due to a misreading of a passage in the *Royal Genealogies* about a ceremony for the crown prince, Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin, which was performed in 1798. At the time he was 13 years old and the ceremony was an investiture or installation (*mnga' gsol*). The first person account in the *Royal Genealogies* reads: "In the earth male-tiger year I arrived at Lhundrupténg (Lhun grub steng) and was placed on the throne of the succession of the *dharmarājas*. The kind lord of Thartsé (Thar rtse)⁴⁷ transformed into the (Buddha) Immortal Protector and kindly ministered (to me by officiating) over the investiture and benedictions."⁴⁸ In isolation one could reasonably interpret these lines as signifying that this event was a true coronation and represents the prince's transition to full kingship. By Tibetan counting the prince was thirteen years old this year and therefore this passage is redolent of the well-known myths of the first Tibetan kings in which princes succeeded their fathers on the throne at age thirteen, the age at which ancient Tibetans learned to ride horses.⁴⁹ However, this custom was not practiced in Degé and the next sentences in this passage give the date of Tsewang Dorje Rindzin's enthronement as the ninth monarch of Degé.

Following the passage excerpted above, the *Royal Genealogies* immediately continued, "In the wood-mouse year (1804) the Chinese emperor (*dbang phyogs rgyal po*) bestowed on me the authorization and insignia to rule. The present mode of upholding the duties of the twin systems (politics and religion) of statecraft began in the fire tiger (*me stag*, 1806) and earth dragon (*sa 'brug*, 1808) years."⁵⁰ Thus, by his own admission, and in a text that

⁴⁷ The Thartsé lama (1765–1820) belonged to the Sakya sect and was the prince's root lama and chaplain. His full name was Jampa Namkha Chimé (Byams pa nam mkha' 'chi med) and he was the forty-fourth abbot of Ngor (Ngor) Monastery in Central Tibet.

⁴⁸ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 103; *Sa pho rta la lhun grub steng du slebs / chos rgyal gong ma rim byon bzhugs khrir 'khod / drin can thar rtse rje de 'chi med mgon / skur bzhengs mnga' gsol shis brjod bka' drin skyong*.

⁴⁹ Stein 1972: 48.

⁵⁰ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 103; *Shing byir dbang phyogs rgyal po'i [read pas] lung rtags bstal / me stag sa 'brug nas bzung rgyal khab kyi/ lugs zung khur len 'dzin tshul 'di 'dzin*. This quote might be corrupt as the dates it gives, 1806 and 1808, are not continuous. Or perhaps Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin meant his assumption

Kolmaš so skillfully edited and summarized, Tsewang Lhamo's son clearly states that he did not take over the government until 1806 or 1808, at least eight years after the supposedly fateful 1798 ouster of the queen. This clarification of the chronology of the transfer of power from mother to son raises questions about the nature of the investiture ritual and Tsewang Lhamo's status and activities subsequent to the ceremony. The remainder of this section will explore the events between 1798 and Tsewang Lhamo's death in 1812 by putting the *Royal Genealogies* in conversation with the newly published materials that concern Tsewang Lhamo.

Getsé's *Autobiography* is completely silent regarding Tsewang Dorje Rindzin's reputed enthronement. Perhaps Getsé's silence is meant to express disapproval or rejection of the ritual. In fact, Getsé does not only omit any mention of the event from his life story, he was physically absent from Degé when it occurred. Soon after Getsé finished editing the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* in 1797, he petitioned the royal court for permission to leave Degé and go on a long pilgrimage and fundraising trip in southern Kham. It was granted and he stayed away for over a year, from late 1797 into early 1799.⁵¹ Getsé's lengthy trip abroad might be taken at face value as a much-needed escape from the capital after several years managing a complicated printing project. However, a cynical reading would suggest Getsé was unwelcome at the event, or did not wish to participate, and made himself scarce for a relatively long time. Alternatively, Getsé's silence may be simply a consequence of the inconsequentiality of the ritual, whether by design or effect. According to the *Autobiography*, when Getsé finally returned from his long pilgrimage he went directly to the royal palace for a joint audience with Tsewang Lhamo and Tsewang Dorje Rindzin, which suggests the two were on good terms.⁵²

The misinterpretation—or over-interpretation—of the passage in the *Royal Genealogies* about Tsewang Dorje Rindzin's investiture might have been avoided if the *Royal Genealogies* recorded more dates than it does, especially those concerning the chief events of Tsewang Lhamo's life. For instance the *Royal Genealogies* failed to mention even Tsewang Lhamo's death date. Fortunately Getsé's *Collected Works* supply the dates crucial to an accurate understanding of her reign, and Getsé's chronicles of the post-1798 era overturned what has until now had been the consensus view. For example, Getsé's *Autobiography* was clear that in 1801 Tsewang Lhamo still wielded power over the state and religion. That year she built a large Guru Rinpoché statue to be placed in the Yudruk (G.yu 'brug) chapel of the Lhundrupténg temple. It was a high-profile act

of power occurred over a three-year period of time beginning in 1806 and concluding in 1808. Regardless, it goes without saying this quote renders ridiculous the thesis that Tsewang Lhamo lost power in 1798.

⁵¹ Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 234.3–243.5.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 243.6.

and in the *Royal Genealogies* it is one of the few specific deeds by which she is remembered, though without the attribution of a date.⁵³ Getsé composed a long account of the construction of the statue that contained a customary passage about the patrons of the icon which stated that the statue had four patrons: king Jikdrel Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin, the princess and nun Tamdrin Trinlé Wangmo, queen (i.e., wife of the king) Namsé Pendzom Drönma, and the powerful female *sakyong* Tsewang Lhamo.⁵⁴ In this passage Getsé honored his patron Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin by calling him king (*rgyal po*). Nevertheless, Tsewang Lhamo bore the most impressive title among those listed and was repeatedly called the “powerful female *sakyong*” (*sa skyong dbang mo*) on several occasions in the text. Furthermore, if the family was rigidly divided at this time along sectarian lines then the “king” and his new wife would not have contributed to this project, nor have permitted Getsé to represent them as patrons of a Nyingma statue.

1801 also saw the arrival in the capital of Do Drupchen Jikmé Trinlé Özer (Rdo grub chen 'jigs med phrin las 'od zer, 1745–1821), who would remain a presence in Degé for the next several years.⁵⁵ Do Drupchen was one of the chief students of Jikmé Lingpa, the guru of both Sawang Zangpo and Tsewang Lhamo, who died two years earlier in 1799. Smith claimed that Tsewang Lhamo was rumoured to have been romantically linked to Do Drupchen with the suggestion that this was emblematic of what so infuriated the Sakya partisans at court about her.⁵⁶ Getsé recounted that Do Drupchen made a spectacular arrival in Degé, blessing all the temples in the capital and giving initiations to many aristocrats. At Do Drupchen's urging, Tsewang Lhamo ordered the Degé Printing House to publish the *Collected Works of Jikmé Lingpa* in nine volumes and a very esoteric set of Nyingma revealed treasures called the *Nyingtik Yapshi* (*Snying thig ya bzhi*) in two volumes.⁵⁷ In 1806 Getsé and Do Drupchen even went on a long diplomatic mission on behalf of the kingdom.⁵⁸

⁵³ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 100. This chapel was built to house king Sawang Zangpo's reliquary *stüpa*.

⁵⁴ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001d: 72.1; *Rgyal po 'jigs bral tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin, lcam dge tshul rta mgrin phrin las dbang mo bitsun mo rnam sras dpal 'dzom sgron ma sa skyong dbang mo tshe dbang lha mo*. Cf. 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 249.3; *Ston ka sa skyong dbang mos slob dpon rje gtso 'khor sku brnyen gser zangs las bzhengs pa'il gzungs 'bul rab gnas bgyid par bka' bzhin bteg*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 249.4.

⁵⁶ It is not impossible that their relationship became sexual—either out of mutual attraction or in order to engage in the sexual yogas of the higher tantras—yet, this cannot be established for certain.

⁵⁷ Detailed indices of both collections are found in Sde dge par khang and Dkar mdzes khul rtsom sgyur cus 1994.

⁵⁸ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 258.2

The Kharnang Incident and the end of Tsewang Lhamo's Reign

Beginning in 1806, Degé's trans-regional relations deteriorated significantly, with the most acute problem occurring in the upper reaches of the kingdom. For decades Degé had been expanding northward and, following precedent, Tsewang Lhamo attempted to bolster Degé's influence in present day Yushü (Yus hru'u or Yul shul) Prefecture, Qinghai province.⁵⁹ These efforts in the north can be registered in terms of temple construction and the *Royal Genealogies* reported the only new religious edifice built by Tsewang Lhamo was a monastery in the northern territory: Dzatö Lung Monastery (Rdza stod lung).⁶⁰

Getsé's *Autobiography* noted that in the spring of 1806 tribes from the independent nomadic area of Golok (Mgo log) attacked areas in northern Degé and the upper Dza river valley, the location of Dzatö Lung Monastery.⁶¹ The Yushü-based nomadic tribe named the Kharnang Tsowa (Mkhar nang tsho ba) made a significant contribution to repelling the invading Golok forces, thereby benefitting Degé.⁶² For its defence of the region the head representative of the Qing in Qinghai and the kings of Degé and Nangchen (Nang chen) bestowed titles and favours on the leaders of the Kharnang Tsowa. Nevertheless, sometime in late 1807 or early 1808—Getsé did not register the beginning of 1808 in the *Autobiography* and it is unclear when precisely the following occurred—Degé's relations with the Kharnang Tsowa broke down and eventually the Chinese intervened. Getsé wrote, "(The Chinese commander) Ma Talo captured the Kharnang and (during the battle) various miserable conditions came to pass in the royal encampment. I heard that the prime-minister Guru Trashi suffered injuries and died subsequently."⁶³ Writing in the first person, the author of the *Royal Genealogies* Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin confirmed the royal camp suffered during this event. He recalled, "(The relationship between) the excellent mother and the ministers and chiefs of Kharnang was

⁵⁹ The primary sources do not indicate whether she was merely trying to retain her grasp on areas into which Degé had already expanded, or whether she was pushing the boundaries into previously unconquered territory.

⁶⁰ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1990: 99. More research is required to determine the location and current state of this monastery.

⁶¹ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 258.2.

⁶² The Kharnang were based in what is present day Trindu (Khri 'du) county of Yuhü (Yus hru'u) Prefecture, Qinghai. The source for this and the following sentences is a recent gazetteer of the county: Pad+ma kun dga: 374; see the section on the Kharnang Tsowa, p. 373–377.

⁶³ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 272.4. *Rma ta lo yis mkhar nang bzung 'ching sogs/ sgar thog tu yang mi bde sna tshogs byung/ gnyer chen gur bkra rmas zer zhag shas nas/ 'das pa'i skad cha thos [...]*. This minister is not the same person as the author of Guru Trashi's History. Befitting the work of a lama, Getsé devotes more lines to the funeral of Guru Trashi and the omens regarding his rebirth than on the military incident itself.

(initially) good but in the end turned bad. Due to various disturbances many beings, myself included, suffered greatly.”⁶⁴

The coincidence of both authors depicting the Kharnang incident in grave terms suggests that if indeed Tsewang Lhamo suffered a pivotal downfall at the end of her reign this was it. At least one recent Tibetan scholar also saw this event as representing Tsewang Lhamo’s undoing. Deshung Rinpoché (Sde gzhungs rin po che, 1906–1987) stated in his 1964 *Continuation of the Royal Genealogies of Degé* (*Chos ldan sa skyong rgyal po sde dge’i gdung rabs kyi mtshan phreng rin chen phreng ba*), “Falling under the power of interferences, discord broke out between the excellent mother and the chiefs and ministers of Kharnang. During the resulting disturbances she died.”⁶⁵ In fact, Tsewang Lhamo died several years later but the general idea of the passage is still compelling. Note this account does not reduce her downfall to a sectarian dispute.

For most of 1808 Getsé was on a diplomatic mission related to the regional unrest. When he returned at the end of the year he first went to the capital, where he stuffed and consecrated a sandalwood *stūpa* commissioned by the queen.⁶⁶ He then travelled to the Dzamtok palace (Dzam thog *pho brang*) and stayed there with Tsewang Lhamo for several months, into the following year of 1809. Getsé did not mention in his account of this episode that Tsewang Lhamo was sick and in need of his religio-medical interventions, thus the primary reason he spent such an unusually long period of time with the queen was likely to offer his moral support in the wake of the personal problems created by the Kharnang incident. Tsewang Lhamo eventually moved to Wöntö (Dbon stod), a palace somewhat to the north of the capital.⁶⁷ The *Royal Genealogies* devoted several lines to Tsewang Lhamo’s final years in which its author, the king, emphasized his close relations to his mother and even proclaimed where she was reborn. Tsewang Dorjé Rindzin wrote, “I invited the sublime mother many times and received her audiences. I did whatever I could to make her happy such as fulfilling her wishes, furthering the good, and confessing my faults. After going to Wöntö she met with her chaplains and others and passed her time

⁶⁴ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig ’dzin 1990: 100; *Yum mchog gang dang mkhar nang dpon blon zung/ bzang mthar ngan ’gyur bde gzar sna tshogs kyis/ bdag sogs skye ’gro du ma shin tu mnar*. Although Getsé credits Ma Talo alone with quelling the conflict, Tsewang Lhamo’s son claimed that on his mother’s orders he played a major role in the defeat of the Kharnang. He wrote, “Seeing that there were many exigencies, chief among them satisfying the wishes of the excellent mother, and in order to cut the stream of sin, I utilized furious compassion and engaged in ferocious actions thereby smashing the Kharnang (chiefs) and their armies” (*ibid.*: 101; *Yum mchog gi/ bzhed skong gis gtsos dgos pa mang mthong nas/ sdig rgyun bcad phyir snying rje khros pa yis/ drag shul bya bas mkhar nang dpung bcas gtor*.)

⁶⁵ Kolmaš 1988: 141; *On kyang bar chad rkyen dbang lta bus yum mchog dang/ mkhar nang dpon blon nang ma mthun pas sde gzar sna tshogs mur/ sku gshegs*.

⁶⁶ ’Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 279.3.

⁶⁷ Tshe dbang rdo rje rig ’dzin 1990: 101.

pursuing virtuous activities. Ultimately she passed on (to become) the chief of the assembly of *dākinīs* in Cāmaradvīpa (Padmasambhava's paradise)."⁶⁸

In 1812 Tsewang Lhamo became ill and at the insistence of the royal court Getsé travelled to Wöntö to minister to her.⁶⁹ He stayed one month to perform healing rituals and bestow initiations on the queen after which he returned to Katok and entered into a strict retreat. Getsé wrote, "About a month after binding myself into a recitation retreat (the queen herself or the royal court) declared that I must come to take care of chieftainess Tsewang Lhamo. However, as I had already meticulously performed initiations and so forth (in order to heal her), at this time it was beyond my power to interrupt the recitation retreat and I sent my regrets. While at the retreat I endeavoured to perform the funerary rituals."⁷⁰ Readers may be surprised Getsé did not break his retreat and return to his generous patron's bedside. Furthermore, there is no mention in the *Autobiography* of a service for her in the capital or the construction of a reliquary *stūpa* in her memory. Perhaps the literary conventions of monastic autobiographies dictate against dwelling on the passing of one's patron, especially female patrons. Alternatively, perhaps Tsewang Lhamo's standing in Degé society at this time was so low Getsé felt compelled to distance himself from her even before her death. The position of this paper is the former option for if Getsé had indeed wished to disentangle his reputation from hers then she would appear far less frequently than she does in his *Autobiography*.

Conclusion

This essay has utilized recently published materials to reappraise the life of a queen whose reputation had been badly—though not intentionally—misrepresented by scholars working in Europe and the United States. Among the inaccuracies and questionable interpretations of the articles by Li, Kolmaš, and Smith, and others are that 1) Tsewang Lhamo was a usurper, 2) she lost power in 1798, 3) her downfall was due to sectarian conflict, and 4) religious persecution and violence accompanied her loss of power. It has been conclusively shown herein that she became a regent for her four year-old son following a recent precedent and thus was not a usurper. The very acts that Kolmaš and Smith cited as the excesses that led to her supposed demise in 1798—such as relations with Do

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Yum mchog spyang drangs yang yang zhu mjal dang/ bzhed skong legs spel nongs bshags gang dgyes zhus/ dbon stod byon nas dbu bla rnams sogs dang/ mjal 'dzom dge ba'i bya bas dus 'da' mur / rnga yab gling du DAK+ki'i tshogs dpon gshegs /.

⁶⁹ 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub 2001c: 290.7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 291.1; Bshyen mtshams bsdoms nas zla gcig tsam song rjes/ dpon mo tshe dbang lha mo sku ma 'tshol 'ong dgos gsungs kyang snga sor dbang bka' sogs/ zhib cha grub pas 'di skabs bshyen mtshams la/ bar chad ma nus dgongs pa zhu bar btang/.

Drupchen—occurred long after that year. If indeed her reign ended somewhat ignominiously the cause must have been the Kharnang incident, which was not a religious conflict. Lastly, there is no evidence of a persecution of the Nyingma perpetrated by Sakya-aligned enemies of Tsewang Lhamo. The point of this essay has not been to whitewash her bold and enterprising reign, as clearly there were several missteps and problems, but it was nothing like the one-sided caricatures that some have portrayed.

This work has demonstrated that in Degé at the turn of the nineteenth century a well-connected and ambitious woman could attain the same political titles as a man and spearhead cultural projects as grand as those of her male counterparts. In fact, Tsewang Lhamo went against the entrenched patterns of court patronage to give unprecedented support to a minority tradition and did so for almost two decades, contributing greatly to the religious culture of Degé and the Nyingma sect. Although the fragmentary historical record does not provide many insights into Tsewang Lhamo's personality or points of view, it is now full enough to secure her place within the Tibetological pantheon of remarkable women.

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