

# ON SOCIAL DEATH: THE SPANG MDA' TSANG FAMILY AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TIBETAN HISTORY\*

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“That family is no more.” Tibetans in exile say this frequently about the Pangdatsang family. However, the Pangdatsangs were not just any family, but one important enough that their presence and power was temporally noted by other Tibetans: they were a dominant force in Tibetan society, and then they were “no more.” In the span of one generation in the first half of the twentieth century, the Pangdatsangs grew from an important trading family in eastern Tibet to the wealthiest family in all of Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Wealthy traders, Sakya sponsors, Gelukpa monastery backers, government officials, renegade politicians, local chieftains, Kuomintang sympathizers, anti-colonial Anglophiles, the Pangdatsang family should have left a deep mark on Tibetan history. Instead, their inconvenient histories have faded into obscurity for a range of reasons, some obvious and some not. What does it mean to proclaim the social death of a family? How is that categorization lived, felt, narrated? In researching the history of this family, I was told not to turn the Pangdatsangs into heroes; that is, not to resurrect their story as a redemptive counter-narrative to the standard Dharamsala narrative of what happened and who mattered in the decades surrounding the 1950s loss of Tibet.

To resurrect something is to bring it back to life after death, specifically the reanimation of an individual soul once thought dead. It is a concept indelibly steeped in Christianity. Resurrection doesn't exactly work in a Tibetan context. And yet, Tibetans know a thing or two about life after death. Reincarnation is a foundation of Tibetan society. All sentient beings are reincarnated. All are in one stage of reincarnation or the other. But this is not to come to back to life after death. Instead, reincarnation is the coming into a new life; the movement of a *sems*—one's heart-mind, which is not the same as a Christian meaning of a soul—into its next life. It is not a coming back, but a coming to.

In writing the history of the Pangdatsang family, I think about what it means to bring back to life something once thought dead. Is this a resurrection of a history or is it more of a reincarnation, that is, a new version of an earlier presence? What lies caught between Christian and Buddhist senses of life and being in these two ways of understanding histories “once dead?”

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1 On the family's initial rise to power, see McGranahan 2002.

## The Pangda Brothers

In the present, when people refer to the Pangdatsang family, they usually mean the three brothers Yamphel, Rapga, and Tobgyal. Yamphel, the eldest brother, head of the family, governor of a strategic border region, and Trade Agent for all of Tibet. Rapga, the middle brother, the intellectual, the dreamer, and the political thinker scheming with both Chinese and Indian nationalists to try to envision a modern Tibet. And, Tobgyal, the youngest brother, the one who stayed at the family estate in Kham, chief of the region, swashbuckling rebel, and regional power figure. The family was so powerful that a common saying during their heyday was *sa Spang mda' gnam Spang mda'*, or “The earth is Pangda’s, the sky is Pangda’s.” Tibetans repeatedly quote this to me, often in relation to the trickle-down effect of the power of the Pangdatsang family. As more than one person has told me over the years, the full story went something like this: one of the Pangdatsang’s muleherders was caught relieving himself on the side of the trail rather than going further off-trail as was considered appropriate. Someone scolded him, and he said in return, “I am one of Pangda’s muleherders. The earth is Pangda’s, the sky is Pangda’s. Still I shit wherever I want to.” With power and with money often comes such vicarious entitlement.

In the 1940s, the Pangdatsang brothers were regrouping following both the death of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in 1933, and an armed revolt Tobgyal and Rapga had led against what they considered to be a corrupt Tibetan government in the absence of the Dalai Lama. By November 1940, they reconciled with the interim Tibetan government and Pangda Yamphel was given the rank of *rim bzhi*, or fourth level aristocratic ranking, which carried further entry privileges into aristocratic society. Gossip in the streets and parlors of Lhasa held that Pangda obtained this rank through the *ltag sgo*, or the back door, with liberal donations of gold to members of the Kashag, the National Assembly, and the Foreign Ministers. His appointment to Rimshi included the post of Tibetan Trade Agent in Yatung, and the title of *Dromo Chikyab*.<sup>2</sup> This post, equivalent to Governor of the Chumbi Valley, was one that Yamphel specifically requested, and which allowed him to fully control trade between India and Tibet, levying and collecting taxes, and creating and lifting various trade restrictions. Like his father Pangda Nyigyal, Yamphel kept close relations with the Sakya family; for those not familiar with Tibetan Buddhism, the Sakya sect is one of the four main sects, so to be close with the Sakya family was an important relationship. Yamphel was named responsible for the general upkeep of the Sakya monastery, and in 1945 was asked to restore the main hall that “was in danger of collapsing.”<sup>3</sup> In 1948, he was a member of the four-

2 In this post, Pangda was the first Tibetan government official that foreigners would meet. Lowell Thomas Jr. (1950: 77) writes about his meeting with “the Tromo Trochi of Dhomu” and states that he was an “impressive man” (Thomas 1950: 77). Ilya Tolstoy and Brooke Dolan, on an undercover U.S. Government mission to Tibet, also met with Pangda Yamphel in Dromo, and are said to have been “charmed” by him (Knaus 1999: 7).

3 “Sakya,” *Bod gyi rig gnas lo rgyus*, Volume 6, p.177. An account of Pangda’s involvement in local Sakya disputes is vividly given by Kyandra Norzang in an article titled “About the Disruption between Sakya Center and Kyamo Dratsang” in *Bod gyi rig gnas lo rgyus*, Volume 12. In this article, Kyandra Norzang accuses Pangda of interfering in Sakya business, and messing it up like a pig pen—*phag tshang dkrug*. He particularly points his finger at Pangda’s Dromo representative Dorje Gyalpo, who oversaw all of the restoration work, including the control of all monastery finances except for general ritual expenses.

person Tibetan Trade Mission on their way to the United States, and the mission appears to have been his idea.<sup>4</sup> This Mission was Tibet's attempt to strengthen their economy, and also to bolster political relations with the United States and England, especially as the political situation in China continued to deteriorate. Pangda Yamphel's goals were to import American goods, ensure that Tibetan wool had a market in the United States, and to acquire gold both for himself and for the Tibetan Government.

In the United States, Yamphel opened a bank account for himself (depositing dollars gained in part through Tobgyal's money-changing services for missionaries stationed in Dartsendo), marveled at sandwich vending machines, commented on the speed with which votes were tallied in the Truman election, and did indeed buy lots of gold. He saw a Joe Lewis fight, learned the word "martini," and brought a slinky back for his daughter. Consumer and trade interests aside, however, Yamphel does not appear to have been swayed by American politics nor the potential for U.S. political commitment to Tibet. In 1951, when the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa to Dromo, Yamphel was involved in Tibetan-American negotiations about what the Dalai Lama should do in response to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The Americans were pressing hard for the Dalai Lama and his retinue, including the Pangdatsang family, to be relocated to the United States. Yamphel was staunchly against this plan, believing that it was important for the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet.

Yamphel was not the only Pangdatsang involved in political events of the day. Following his 1946 deportation from India for trumped up charges of political intrigue,<sup>5</sup> the middle brother Rapga had been living in Shanghai and Nanjing, working in the family trade business, and meeting with Chinese and Tibetan leaders, including Gyalo Thondup, the older brother of the Dalai Lama, who was twenty-six years his junior. The Pangdatsang family had close relations with the Dalai Lama's family, who were referred to as the "yabshi" (*yab gzhis*) family. In Kalimpong, for example, the best room in the Pangdatsang house was reserved for the Gyalum Chenmo, the Dalai Lama's mother. Pangda Yamphel was the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's personal courier, bringing the young boy toys, apples, and Lhasa Apso dogs among other gifts from India and throughout Tibet.<sup>6</sup> He also paid the school expenses in India for the Dalai Lama's siblings, and

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4 The Ambassador in India (Grady) to the Secretary of State, No. 353, November 21, 1947. "Mr. Hopkinson has confirmed information previously given an officer of the Embassy to the effect that the mission appears to be primarily the brainchild of Rimshi Pangda Tsang who is understood to be the richest trader in Tibet. Hopkinson says Pangda Tsang told him about a year and a half ago that he wanted to visit the United States and the United Kingdom, and it seems likely that the trade mission is an outgrowth of this desire." FRUS 1947, Volume VII, pp. 602-3. citing Based on an interview with Tsipon Shakabpa, leader of the mission, Melvyn Goldstein states that the idea for the mission came from the heads of the Trapchi Mint, who were Shakabpa, Tsarong Dzasa, and Trunyichemmo Cawtang (1989: 570-1).

5 On Rapga Pangdatsang, see McGranahan 2005, 2007.

6 Interviews, Wangmo Yuthok Pangda, Seattle, June 2000; Manang Sonam Tobgyal, Luzern, July 2000. See also the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's autobiography *Freedom in Exile*, where he writes "I was very fortunate in that I had quite a good collection of toys. When I was very young, there was an official at Dromo, a village at the border with India, who used to send up imported toys to me, along with boxes of apples when they were available" (T. Gyatso 1990: 25). The unnamed "official at Dromo" is Pangda Yamphel.

in China, Rapga arranged and paid for “*yab gzhis sras*” Gyalo Thondup’s lodging.<sup>7</sup> Rapga was distressed by the Communist victory in China, and returned to Kham to be with Tobgyal at the family home to see if he could encourage Chinese officials to proceed slowly in Tibet. His efforts were in vain.

The Chinese invasion of Tibet affected the brothers in different ways. The Chinese communist government gave Tobgyal and Rapga minor posts in Chamdo, but Rapga soon left Tibet for India. He was involved in initial plans for Tibetan resistance to the Chinese from India, offering Pangdatsang family troops and a plan for the resistance to operate out of India’s Northeast Frontier.<sup>8</sup> Yamphel continued in his post as Tibetan Trade Agent, returning from India to Lhasa in 1955 for his daughter’s wedding. In November 1956, he was awarded *dza sag*, third aristocratic rank, even further increasing the family’s social standing. In the mid 1950s, Tobgyal made the decision that he had a responsibility to stay in Tibet.<sup>9</sup> In 1956, he was publicly working with the Chinese leaders in eastern Tibet, proclaiming the standard line that Tibet was an inalienable part of China and that Khampa rebels would be violently suppressed if they disturbed the friendship between the two countries. Secretly, however, he was having political meetings with Khampas in the area.<sup>10</sup> Yamphel felt out the situation in Lhasa, deciding in late 1958 to escape to India. By this time, his movements were closely watched by the Chinese. So he told the Chinese that he had to make a trip to Sakya to check on the monastery restoration, and headed off with a very small group so as not to arouse suspicion. Upon reaching Sakya, he then borrowed mules from the Sakya leaders and headed for India via Bhutan just ahead of the Dalai Lama’s flight in March 1959.<sup>11</sup>

The stories of the three brothers after 1959 is sad and incomplete. Rapga, the consummate political intellectual, did not see any of his dreams come to fruition. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 1962, he went for a stroll down Kalimpong’s main street, stopping in the popular Eng Son Shoe store to buy a pair of shoes. A young Tibetan came into the store, pulled a pistol from within his clothes and fired. Luckily for Rapga, the man was a bad shot or was nervous or both. He missed Rapga, and hit instead the Chinese shopkeeper on her foot.

During the Cultural Revolution, Tobgyal was arrested, tortured, and struggled against. He was dressed as the Sakya *‘bag mo*—the witch who was one of the family’s protector deities—

7 Diary of Rapga Pangdatsang, December 13, 1948 entry.

8 Interviews, George Patterson, San Diego, January 5-6, 1999; Gyato Kelsang, New York, June 24, 1998; Jagod Se Dhonyod, Bir, March 12-13, 1999.

9 Interview, Wangmo Yuthok Pangda, Seattle, June 2-3, 2000.

10 Phupa Tsering Tobgyal writes that Tobgyal was in secret contact with his father, the Phupa dPon of Markham. Tobgyal concocted a plan whereby Phupa would go to the Pangda dzong, take all the weapons and ammunition, and make it look like they had broken in and raided the place. The plan was never carried through as a result of the chaos of the time, and in the end, all the weapons of the people under Pangda were turned over to the Chinese (Phupatsang 1998: 80-1); but, see L. Tsering 1998: 249 which states that Tobgyal tried to get some Markhampas affiliated with Chushi Gangdruk to return stolen weapons.

11 Interviews with Phurpu Tsering, Kalimpong, June 29, 1999; and Gyato Kelsang, New York, June 24, 1998. See also Kyamdra Norzang *ibid*.

and paraded in the streets. Yamphel, like several other important Tibetans, was not struggled against under orders of Zhou Enlai,<sup>12</sup> but was made to watch his brother being tortured.<sup>13</sup> Both brothers died in Lhasa, during the Cultural Revolution (in roughly 1972-3),<sup>14</sup> Tobgyal of a stroke, and Yamphel of a heart attack. In Kalimpong, Rapga lived out his days quietly, and aware of his brothers' deaths and struggles, is said to have lost his spirit. He died on February 26, 1976. This family, which had risen so high in such a short period of time, was finished. To be sure, children and grandchildren of these three are still alive, but that is another story, and not one that approximates the era of *sa Spang mda' gnam Spang mda'*, when the earth was Pangda's and the sky was Pangda's.

## Conclusion

The story of the Pangdatsang family offers unique commentary on 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan history. Despite, or perhaps because of this, they are left out of this history almost entirely, their family story landing instead in the realm of political name-calling and controversy. In conducting this research, some Tibetans I spoke with did not understand why I was writing about the Pangdatsang family. The Pangdatsang family, they would assert, as did a one man in Dharamsala, "didn't do anything for Tibet." Continuing, they would explain how Pangdatsang efforts for reform were not successful, or were not aligned with the dominant political figures in the early days of exile, or, worst of all, how the Pangdatsang family were Chinese Communist sympathizers. As a man in Kathmandu said to me, "Pangdatsang? They're not very important." Such arguments were built on particular and dominant interpretations of Tibetan politics, including the hegemonic politics of what and who are deemed to be historically important. These interpretations serve to mostly silence those who agree that the Pangdatsang family was an important one (including, but not only, Pangda family members in exile) or who would dare to suggest that there might have been other ways for post-1959 history to unfold in exile.

Telling histories of the Pangdatsang family in exile is a political undertaking.<sup>15</sup> In exile, placing individuals in history is often reduced to the option of two categories: patriot or traitor, pro-Tibet or pro-China. Subtleties and nuances in the categorization, especially when they involve dissenting opinions on how to be pro-Tibet, are not widely accepted. The importance assigned to persons, events, and places derives from these categories. Another Tibetan in Kathmandu claimed, "People are now trying to say that these people—Pangda, Ngabö, Baba Phuntsok Wangyal—are heroes. That's b.s." Yet, what for this man was the impossibility of

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12 *ibid.*

13 In exile, his daughter was also "struggled against" in Darjeeling and Dharamsala in 1965 for being a Pangdatsang. *Thamzing*, the Tibetan term used for Cultural Revolution struggle sessions, is the same term used for impromptu struggle sessions in the exile community.

14 Interview, Brian Tisdall, January 1999, London.

15 Telling history at all in exile is a political undertaking. In terms of Tibetan history in relation to Chinese history, Elliot Sperling's work is paramount (see Sperling 2004, 2008, 2009).

conversion from traitor to hero is itself a construct historically contingent on changing political configurations. While fifty years of exile has produced fairly rigid sociopolitical frameworks for history, these frameworks are not as stable as they may appear; one reason is that history as a politics of knowledge is a disruptive endeavor. Knowledge creation is rarely polite, and in that sense Pangdatsang history comes up against Tibetan history in almost stereotypical form: the brash Khampa versus the suave Lhasa aristocrat, straight-talk versus smooth-talk, rude and uncouth versus polite and well-mannered.

Telling and writing history is to submit the desires and intrigues of one era to evaluation by the reconfigured social and historical ideals of later eras. The past is judged through the truths and passions of the present. In the case of the Tibetan refugee community, people—individuals and families—are judged by the contemporary mantra: *what they have done for Tibet*. In my in-progress book on the Pangdatsang family, I explore these politics and histories, asking why the history of this family remains obscured, either dismissed or marginalized, within histories of twentieth century Tibet. Given the family's rise from obscurity at the turn of the century to the wealthiest family in Tibet at mid-century, their historical dismissal needs to be investigated and explained. What threat did these brothers—tycoon, revolutionary, and Khampa chief—present such that their family history has been treated as trivial and thus not of real importance? And to follow, do I tell the story as a resurrected history or a reincarnate one? Can history ever be a coming back or is it always a coming to?

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