

46 Doring Tenzin Penjor: *The Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* (ca. 1806)

Translated and introduced by Franz Xaver Erhard

Introduction

The *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* comprises the voluminous discussion of the famous Doring family, from its beginning in the early eighteenth century, up to the early nineteenth century. It is an elaborate example of the genre of secular biographical writing, which emerged in the eighteenth century, and gives an intimate description of the life and dealings of a Tibetan noble family. The eighteenth century was a crucial period in Tibetan history, as it witnessed the demise of Mongol (that is, Dzungar and Kho-shot) influence, and the gradual integration of the Tibetan Ganden Phodrang state into the expanding Qing empire. At the same time, it was the formative period in the establishment of the Tibetan state, as it remained up until 1959, with its characteristic administrative and social system that comprised a double structure balancing clerical and secular spheres of influence (Tib. *chos srid zung 'brel*).

Doring Tenzin Penjor (Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor) was born in 1760, as the only heir to the influential estate of Doring Paṇḍita (1730–1792). In 1780, Tenzin Penjor, after a rapid rise in the Ganden Phodrang administration, was appointed minister of the council (Tib. *bka' shag*), replacing his grandfather Doring Paṇḍita. His minister-ship coincided with the conflict with the Gorkha kingdom of Nepal, which, in 1788, had invaded the Tibetan border regions. Tenzin Penjor was appointed as minister and general to lead the joint Tibetan and Qing troops to settle the dispute. A truce was negotiated in 1789, and Tibet was to pay yearly tribute to the Gorkha kingdom. This agreement was not well received in either Lhasa or the Qing court, and, consequently, the Tibetans failed to pay the second tribute. As a result, the Gorkha armies invaded Tibet for a second time. In 1791, Tenzin Penjor met with Gorkha representatives to renegotiate and offer tribute payment, but his party was raided by Gorkha troops, and taken to Kathmandu as hostages. Only a year later, he was freed by the Manchu general Fuk'anggan (1753–1796), who was sent by Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) with two armies to bring the conflict to an end, at the request of the Ganden Phodrang.

However, the Qing court was suspicious of Tenzin Penjor's involvement in the conflict, due to his complicated yet close family relations with the involved parties.¹

¹ For a description of these family relations, see Franz Xaver Erhard, “Illustrious Ancestry, Marriage Alliances, Incarnation, and Family Cohesion: The Making of the Tibetan Noble House of Rdo ring,” in

Accordingly, the Grand Secretariat in Beijing tried Tenzin Penjor, and found him guilty of cowardice – that is, of not having sacrificed his life in battle, but instead having given himself up to the enemy – though he was acquitted of the far more severe charge of treason. The fact that the family had offered five estates to the government in compensation for the Gorkhas' war expenses certainly influenced the decision. He lost all his titles and positions, and returned to Lhasa as an ordinary but free aristocrat. Back in Lhasa, he returned to work as a low-ranking government official. However, his far-reaching social network still enabled him to pull some strings in Lhasa politics. In 1805, he managed to install his son, Migyur Sönam (Mi 'gyur bsod nams dpal 'byor, 1784–1834), as minister of the council, though this caused a public outcry, and anonymous posters were found all over Lhasa denouncing Tenzin Penjor for corruption. This was an explosive scandal, and the emperor was forced to intervene, sending a special envoy to investigate the accusations. This envoy turned out to be an old acquaintance of Tenzin Penjor, allowing him to calm the scandal and settle affairs in the desired way. Once his son had finally received the position of council minister, Tenzin Penjor was fully content with his career, as he expresses in the last pages of his autobiography.^{II}

In Tibetan literature, biographical writing (Tib. *rnam thar*, *rtogs brjod*) is a popular genre, but is usually limited to religious subjects, and usually adheres to a very schematic presentation, often bordering on the hagiographical. The blueprint for this is the Buddha's life, as presented in a set of usually twelve deeds, and the declared objective is to produce a model life story that can inspire the reader to further pursue the path to liberation.^{III} Religious biography also constructs the religious authority and legitimisation of its subject, by listing accomplishments such as received religious teachings and empowerments, meditative visions, and monastic positions.

In the first passage below, which introduces the *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita*, Tenzin Penjor presents his life in reference to the Buddhist hagiographical genre, refer-

Crossing Boundaries: Tibetan Studies Unlimited, ed. Diana Lange, Jarmila Ptáčková, M. Wettstein, and Mareike Wulf (Prague: Academia, 2021), 137–66.

II For a brief account of Tenzin Penjor's life, see Franz Xaver Erhard, "Doring Tenzin Peljor," *Treasury of Lives*, 2020, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Doring-Tenzin-Peljor/5306>; for a detailed study of the political significance of the Doring family, see Li Ruohong, *A Tibetan Aristocratic Family in Eighteenth-century Tibet: A Study of Qing-Tibetan Contact* (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2002).

III For detailed discussions of the structural and functional outline of Tibetan religious life writing, see, for example, Lucia Galli and Franz Xaver Erhard, "The Selfless Ego I: Memory and Imagination in Tibetan Hagiographical Writing," *Life Writing* 17, no. 2 (2020): 153–59; Ulrike Roesler, "Between Self-Expression and Convention: Tibetan Reflections on Autobiographical Writing," *Life Writing* 17, no. 2 (2020): 163–86; Ulrike Roesler, "Operas, Novels, and Religious Instructions: Life-stories of Tibetan Buddhist Masters between Genre Classifications," in *Narrative Pattern and Genre in Hagiographic Life Writing: Comparative Perspectives from Asia to Europe*, ed. Stephan Conermann, and Jim Rheingans (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2014), 113–40.

ring to the various qualities of an accomplished person that he claims to be lacking. Consequently, he modestly compares the value of his life story to the autobiography of a dog. The second passage—the closing section of the life writing—then presents the conceptual framework within which Tenzin Penjor envisions his life as a secular yet devout donor (*sbyin bdag*) of the Buddhist doctrine, and a dedicated and successful servant of the Tibetan government. Since aristocratic status, social prestige, and economic wealth ultimately derive from the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama, government service and religious activities are ultimately subsumed under the concept of the donor who supports the religious domain and the combined spiritual worldly government of the Ganden Phodrang. Interestingly, Tenzin Penjor, without considering a theoretical exposition of the secular, outlines the primary sources of secular authority in the Tibetan world, in which legitimation and authority derive from legal titles and contracts, as well as from performance as a donor.

Bibliographical Information

Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor. *Rdo ring paṇḍi ta'i rnam thar* [*The Biography of Doring Paṇḍita = The History of the House of Gazhi, Music of Candid Speech*]. 2 vols. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1987; Vol. 1, 7–8; Vol. 2, 1297–1301.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

Translation by Franz Xaver Erhard

[*Rdo ring paṇḍi ta'i rnam thar*, Vol. 1]

What I, [Doring Tenzin Penjor], want to tell you now: That is to say, how could a man like me, bound with all his fetters, compose a life narrative based on his learning, discipline and nobility; his explanation, debate, and composition; his knowledge, reflection, and meditation; his wisdom, love, and strength, that would further the spiritual and temporal well-being of the teachings and all beings? If one writes about one's history of wandering in the *saṃsāra*, no doubt the lives of dogs and pigs, too, will likewise deserve a *namthar* volume; thus, this effort invested in a useless task is your own fatigue; as the Fifth Dalai Lama has explained, there is no recognisable necessity (*dgos tshogs yod par*) [to write such an autobiography], but, on the other hand, if you look at it another way, it is just as Tagtsang Lotsawa¹ wrote:

I FXE: Although the ultimate source certainly is the fifteenth-century Stag tshang lo tsā ba Shes rab rin chen (1405–1477), the verses here are a verbatim quote from the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography (Dalai Lama 05, Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, "Za hor gyi ban de ngag dbang blo bzang rgya

*Although a roar of self-supremacy
praising oneself and disparaging others is not the way of the noble,
[p. 7/8] One's own story, without embellishment and discredit,
Being told to your company, is the way of the enlightened.^{II}
[. . .]*

Accordingly, I will recount how my ancestors, from early times on, served the emperors and the Dalai Lamas as an aristocratic lineage and as a line of servants, and how the supreme lords, in their loving care, therefore awarded successive generations of my ancestors titles, land and property rights, and so forth. Where I could not recall some details, I collected them truthfully and as well as I can remember, from faultless sources, such as the words of my benevolent grandfather, the accomplished mind Gung Paṇḍita, and others. Finally, according to my supreme son, the Taiji's^{III} wish, I added my own story, whether excellent or wicked. The supreme jewel bears witness; I will genuinely narrate without exaggeration or concealment, so the noble learned shall not worry about it. However, in particular, I hope the line of my sons and grandsons, and other intelligent beings who run their eyes over this matter, will emulate my ancestors' good deeds. Moreover, I thought that carefully writing a work that distinguishes between good and evil qualities would alleviate the hopes and fears of becoming a person like me, who is neither religious nor spiritual. It is presently not without difficulty to tell and even put to writing such a story, so I shall narrate it briefly.

[*Rdo ring paṇḍi ta'i rnam thar*, Vol. 2]

. . . The main reason for composing the *History of the Gazhi* (Dga' bzhi) *Family, Music of Candid Speech*^{IV} in such great detail and in prosimetry was to record how, in the past, our noble (*bzang po*) ancestors had rendered self-sacrificing, praiseworthy service to the emperor and the Dalai Lama. How they thus, in recognition of these deeds, were awarded titles, land, and property by successive emperors and Dalai Lamas. And to show that the Doring house possesses significant orders and contracts, issued by Chinese and Tibetan officials and lamas.

mtsho'i 'di snang 'khrul pa'i rol rtseḍ rtogs brjod kyi tshul du bkod pa du kū la'i gos bzang las glegs bam dang po," in *Rgyal dbang lnga pa ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*. Vol. 5. Gangs can khyad nor dpe tshogs [Pe cin: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2009], 171–98, 12). The collected works of Stag tshang lo tsā ba differ slightly in wording, see Stag tshang lo tsā ba: 1.

II FXE: Samten Karmay renders this passage as "To roar praising oneself and criticizing others/ Is not the way of a holy man./ To tell about one's life to others without disparagement/ Is the way of the Buddha." (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682) Dalai Lama 05, *The Illusive Play: The Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, trans. Samten G. Karmay [Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2014], 19).

III FXE: This is Rdo ring Mi 'gyur bsod nams dpal 'byor (1784–1834), who was appointed Kalön in 1805.

IV FXE: This is the full title of Tenzin Penjor's autobiography; the name Gazhi is frequently found as the family's name, as an alternative to Doring.

Similarly, I recorded how they, in the first place, offered prayers for the emperor's and the Dalai Lama's longevity, and the well-being of the Buddhists of Tibet. In addition, I recounted how they, as donors, for the accumulation of merit and the purification of defilements, had built many receptacles of the victorious Buddha's body, speech, and mind, in the districts of Ü and Tsang. Moreover, how they offered service to the noble people of the place of refuge of the impartial doctrine headed by the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, [p. 1297/1298] and how they received profound teachings in return. I described how they respectfully offered tea and monetary distributions to the precious assemblies, foremost at the Lhasa Mönlam, and at Sera, Drepung, and Ganden in the near surroundings, and at some distant local monasteries. Moreover, I recorded how they renovated and made offerings to important religious sites.

Moreover, I reported how, until the composition of this narrative, I had not left any traces – neither in the religious nor the worldly sphere – and roamed the distant regions of Nepal and China like chaff chased by the wind, only to erase the traces of my ancestors' hands with my own feet.

Finally, I didn't include in this biography how two scions of my family, the two cleric incarnations who, like the two ascetics – the widely famed Indian champions Asaṅga and Nāgārjuna – after graduating in the diligent studies of hearing and contemplating from Sera and Drepung, became objects of refuge. I also put to writing how my two lay sons – like opposing lions and tigers, one helping the other – stumbled and got up again, and, by crushing their enemies and cherishing their friends, emerged in this life as leaders. I wrote down all this, minor or significant, good or bad, without embellishment by praising the good, or concealment by erasing the faults. Furthermore, my elder son, the Kalön Taiji's good and virtuous deeds [p. 1298/1299] have become, and are still becoming, evident to everyone. Supporting him, there is my younger son Döndrub Tsewang (Don grub tshe dbang, b. ca. 1791/1792), who, of course, is still young now. In his person, the incomparably benevolent Kalön Darkhan Gung Pandita Lord Gönpö Ngödrup Raptan (mGon po dngos grub rab brtan, 1721–1792) certainly took birth again in our house, considering us his own line. I am not saying so out of blind loyalty and selfishness, but because it became evident in the prophecies of some lamas and mediums, and made itself apparent in his early childhood, as karmic impressions of his past lives. To my greatest hope, not letting the water dry out in a hot place, he these days makes a great effort to study the Buddhist fields of knowledge (Skt. *vidyā-sthāna*) and arts (Skt. *kalā*).

Moreover, gradually, while growing up, he gave his older brother, the Kalön Taiji, a helping hand. My two sons supported both the left and the right leg of the new incarnation of [the Eighth Dalai Lama], the Supreme Protector Jampel Gyatso ('Jam dpal rgya mtsho, 1785–1804),^V served the Dalai Lama and the emperor, and cared for their

^V FXE: This is the Ninth Dalai Lama Lung rtogs rgya mtsho (1805–1815), enthroned in 1808. On the Ninth Dalai Lama, see Samten Chhoshpel, "The Ninth Dalai Lama, Lungtok Gyatso," *Treasury of Lives*,

subjects – striving to meet the people's expectations, and finding personal fulfilment in doing so. Hence, their awards and positions, such as the hereditary title of Gung, became ever higher and grander, and they maintained a worldly household. Moreover, I also did not include in this biography how my two incarnate sons successively furthered the well-being of the dharma and all beings, by their wisdom, compassion and ability, their learning, discipline, and nobility, their study, contemplation and meditation, and their explanation, debate, and composition.

[p. 1299/1300] Alas, when I was young, because I was the only child, I did not have the freedom to engage in religious practice. Now, even pretending to keep vows in old age is just as is written in the sūtras and tantras: “The people of Uttarakuru will never adhere to the monastic regulations and vows” – that is, though the words are disguised as dharma, no meaning becomes evident. Therefore, even though I have not obtained the fortune to enjoy the taste of Chinese tea, the *pratimokṣa* vows of individual liberation in this life, I did my best not to violate the Bodhisattva vow (*praṇidhāna*) and the tantric Samaya vows, while I drank the pure *chang*,^{VI} the ambrosia of the tantric Ḍākinīs. I sometimes stayed with my two sons, who are government officials, enjoying the momentary happiness of this life. Moreover, again occasionally, I visited my two incarnate sons' monastic seats, to achieve ultimate happiness in my next life. In this way, neither monk nor layman, I shall spend the rest of my life! As detailed above, I did not become a monk, and neither did I mentally practise religion.

Consequently, when I part to witness the next life, those who have not died should watch closely; because the best Yogins will take pleasure in death, and intermediate practitioners will not be afraid, and because the inferior will not regret, when I die, clinging to my earthly mother, explanations for my death will appear in various forms. Even when writing these down in the end, since *saṃsāra* is otherwise limitless, it is also difficult to restrain the content of a biography (*rnam thar*). [p. 1300/1301] Therefore, there is no meaning in penning down all this babble in one volume. The reason why this volume grew a bit longer is to show how I offered rituals to the field of refuge; more significantly, I put together this biography of my own ancestors to prevent those significant facts needed as proof of the family's legal status from getting lost among useless writing.

2011, accessed October 25, 2024, <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Ninth-Dalai-Lama-Lungtok-Gyatso/4469>; Derek F. Maher, “The Ninth Dalai Lama, Lungtok Gyatso,” in *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, ed. Martin Brauen (London: Serindia Publications, 2005), 129–31.

VI FxE: *Chang* is the traditional Tibetan home-made barley beer. It represents the lower, worldly or lay spheres, and stands in opposition to the higher, monastic spheres signified by Chinese or perhaps Indian (*rgya*) tea.