

Relational Autonomy in the Life of a Contemporary Tibetan *Ḍākinī*

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Apon first meeting her, Khandro Rinpoche (b. 1954) appears to be a clear example of an autonomous female religious specialist active in Tibet today in the sense that she is unaffiliated with any major religious institution.¹ Usually accompanied by a few attendants, she travels widely in order to give teachings and perform rituals and meditation retreats in caves, mountain hermitages, and monasteries in the eastern Tibetan region. Nevertheless, observing her daily activities and listening to her life narrative underscores the importance of a dense network of relationships with other humans, deities, and sacred lands that make her position as an autonomous female religious specialist possible. This article therefore posits that her “autonomy” can best be understood as an example of what some feminist philosophers call “relational autonomy”, or “the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity”.² This article pays particular attention to how this constellation of relationships with others, namely Khandro’s family, main guru, fellow religious devotees, *ḍākinīs*, and disciples, as well as generative associations with particular sacred lands, catalysed her apotheosis from laywoman to *ḍākinī*.

Literally meaning “sky-going woman”, *khandromas* (*mkha’ ’gro ma*) are notoriously elusive and multivalent female figures with a long

¹ I would like to thank Khandro Rinpoche for her time and for allowing me to publish her story. Thanks also to Chogtul Rangrig Dorje for sharing his perspectives. Britt Marie-Alm helped me (re-)discover Khandro Rinpoche in Serta after our initial busride acquaintance, and Antonio Terrone made research at Vairotsana Cave much more feasible. Sincere thanks to Mona Schrempf, Nicola Schneider, and Toni Huber for inviting me to participate in the symposium “Women as Visionaries, Healers and Poisoners—Autonomous Female Religious Specialists in Tibet, the Himalayas and Inner Asia”, and for organising the publication of this collection of essays.

² MacKenzie & Stoljar 2000: 4. See also Westlund 2009.

history in South Asian religions who permeate the lines between human and divine, worldly and wise. In Tibet, they can be ethereal goddesses adorning frescos on temple walls, or they can materialise at key moments in Buddhist hagiographies to jar the protagonist into pristine awareness. They can also be human women who are consorts of prominent male gurus and/or gurus in their own right.³

The Khandro Rinpoche that is the subject of this article fits into both of these latter categories. She is not to be confused with the famous daughter of Mindroling Trichen (sMin grol gling khri chen) of the same name who has Buddhist Centres around the globe. She was born in 1954 to ordinary Tibetan householder parents, and raised in the pasturelands of Darlag (Dar lag) County, Golog (mGo log) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China (PRC). Even though her given childhood name was "Khandrokyi" (mKha' 'gro skyid), or "Happy Dākinī", which is a common girl's name in eastern Tibet, her rise to embodying the title "Khandro Rinpoche", meaning "Precious Teacher Dākinī", is unusual. She was not brought up in an openly religious environment, was married at a young age to a local government official, and had five children before she redirected her energies towards religious pursuits. Based on her narrated life story as she told it to me and also as it is written in her recently published biography, this article will explore the effects of the relationships integral to Khandro Rinpoche's lifestory. These concern not only her religious career, but also the ways in which we understand the roles of women in Tibetan Buddhism, the multivalent significance of *dākinīs*, and the interplay between state control and religious revitalisation in contemporary Tibet.

1. *Khandro Rinpoche and the Vairotsana Cave*

I first met Khandro Rinpoche by chance in the summer of 2004 when I was on a public bus en route westward toward Golog from the city of Barkham ('Bar khams) in the far eastern Tibetan region of Gyalrong (rGyal rong), which is part of the Ngawa (rNga ba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, PRC. The road west onto the Tibetan Plateau follows the deep gorge carved by the Somang River (So mang chu), which gradually connects the Gyalrong valleys with the expansive high-altitude pasturelands of Serta (gSer rta), Kandze (dKar mdzes) TAP, Sichuan. Not long after embarking on the journey, about 20 kilometres outside of Tugje Chenpo (Thugs rje chen

³ For a selection of scholarship on Buddhist *dākinīs*, see Willis 1987; Herrmann-Pfandt 1992 and 1992/1993; Klein 1995; Gyatso 1998; Simmer-Brown 2001.

po) Township, the bus careened around a Buddhist reliquary stupa and halted on the side of road by the riverbank. The Tibetan bus driver beckoned me to join the file of passengers walking up the steep hillside to a cave complex that I later learned was called Vairotsana Cave. Inside the cave, I briefly met a distinctive-looking middle-aged Tibetan woman dressed in a maroon cloak with long black hair. She offered blessings and short prayers to the bus passengers and other devotees lined up at her door. After this short but fascinating interlude, we all packed back onto the bus and headed for Serta.

Serendipitously, the following year I rediscovered Khandro Rinpoche in a shop in downtown Serta. I noticed her because of her distinctive composure and also because of the unusually beautiful and large coral and turquoise earrings and necklace she wore. She also remembered me from the bus ride encounter the previous year.



Fig. 1. Khandro Rinpoche in Serta, Kandze TAP. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2005.

Over the course of several years and on multiple occasions since that time in both Serta and Gyalrong, she spent many hours answering my long lists of questions about her life and her views on what being a *ḍākinī* means. She allowed me to record our conversations and later I asked Tibetans from Golog to transcribe them in Tibetan, which helped refine my understanding of her strong Golog-dialect Tibetan accent. She offered her own suggestions about what is most important to convey about her life as a *ḍākinī* and agreed to let me share her words in print.

My other primary source for the stories of Khandro Rinpoche's life is the 41-page Tibetan-language biography of her authored by Pema

Oesel Taye (Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas) in 2006 and published as a booklet for local distribution.⁴ The title of this work, "A Brief Introduction to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyelmo Tsawarong, Eastern Tibet",⁵ casts it more as a pilgrim's guidebook (*gnas yig*) about the sacred cave than as a person's biography. As such, Pema Oesel's choice to frame Khandro Rinpoche's importance as a *dākinī* through embedding her in a particular narrative about Tibetan history associated with the Vairotsana Cave highlights the agentic quality of sacred space, or the ways in which particular places both act upon their inhabitants and are shaped, modified, and revitalised by their inhabitants' practices.⁶

The particular history that Khandro Rinpoche's presence at the Vairotsana Cave invokes is linked to Tibet's golden age of imperial power and conversion to Buddhism during the seventh to ninth centuries. The namesake of the Vairotsana Cave was a renowned eighth-century Tibetan translator who traveled to India to import state-of-the-art Buddhist scriptures into Tibet. According to Pema Oesel's summary of Vairotsana's life, with which he begins Khandro Rinpoche's biography, Vairotsana was summoned by the Tibetan Emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri srong de'u btsan, eighth century) to Tibet's first monastery, Samye (bSam yas), to receive religious teachings from its founding monastic abbot Santarākṣita and the Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava. Nevertheless, King Tri Songdetsen's Tibetan queen and a faction of his ministers distrusted Vairotsana, heeding slander spread by Indian scholars jealous of his learning. Consequently, he departed for Gyalrong, visiting the area's 38 great holy places, one of which was the Vairotsana Cave that would later be inhabited by Khandro Rinpoche.

A second famous imperial Tibetan personage also distinguishes the history of Vairotsana Cave, namely Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje (Lha lung dpal kyi rdo rje). He was a ninth-century monk who allegedly murdered the Tibetan Emperor Lang Darma (Glang dar ma), whom Tibetan histories remember as one who persecuted Buddhism. Intending to reinstate royal sponsorship of Buddhism by ousting the heretic emperor, Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje fled the murder scene and, according to local lore, sought refuge at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong, where a stupa memorialises him.

These strong ties to Tibet's most powerful dynastic period are vitalised by Khandro Rinpoche's residence at the Vairotsana Cave. They sharply contrast with the austerities of her upbringing during the

⁴ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006.

⁵ *Mdo khams rgyal mo tsha ba rong gi bai ro'i sgrub phug ngo sprod mdor bsdu*; Gyelmo Tsawarong is a longer version of the toponym Gyalrong.

⁶ Vásquez 2011: 261.

1950s-1970s, during which time Tibet experienced extreme hardships along with other parts of the PRC, in particular as a result of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Around the time of her birth in 1954, the PRC formally established itself on the Golog grasslands, transforming her homeland from what had been a polity largely independent of both the Dalai Lama's Central Tibetan government and the Republic of China into the "Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" (Ch. Guoluo Zangzu Zizhizhou) comprising the southeastern corner of Qinghai Province.⁷ This change of leadership had disastrous and far-ranging effects for Golog pastoralists, including Khandro's family. By the late 1950s, over 50 percent of Golog's livestock had died, causing unprecedented and severe famine in Golog as a result of the mismanagement and unviable agricultural methods advocated by the Great Leap Forward campaign to modernise and industrialise the countryside.⁸ By the late 1960s when Khandro Rinpoche was in her early teens, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, entailing the collectivisation of Golog's pastoralists into communes and the destruction of all of the region's fifty-plus monasteries. Just as Khandro Rinpoche became physically and spiritually sick of her secular life, Deng Xiaoping initiated a new era of "reforms and opening" (Ch. *gaige kaifang*) that led to the softening of PRC policy against the practice of religion and the rehabilitation of Tibetan lamas who had formerly been imprisoned as enemies of the state, including the lama who would become her root guru, Khenpo Muensel (mKhan po Mun sel, 1916-1993). During the 1980s, as liberalisation policies supported the rebuilding of Tibet's destroyed network of monastic institutions, Khandro Rinpoche dedicated herself to the revitalisation effort wholeheartedly, beginning with helping her guru Khenpo Muensel rebuild his monastery in her home area in Golog. After that she took on the rebuilding of Sera Monastery in the Serta region of Kandze, and most recently the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong. Her story of becoming recognised by her community as a *ḍākinī* is thus inextricably linked to the history of Buddhism in Tibet, from the embers of its founding glory still perceptible in places like the Vairotsana Cave to the cycle of religious revival and repression that has characterised Tibet's recent history since the liberalisation policies of the 1980s. What follows are excerpts from Khandro's account of several different stages of this history, drawn from both her written biography and from my conversations with her, beginning with her youth and continuing with her recent projects at the Vairotsana Cave.

⁷ Don grub dbang rgyal & Nor sde 1992: 294. For a synoptic history of Golog, see Jacoby 2010.

⁸ Horlemann 2002: 248.

2. *Childhood, family life, and religious practice during Tibet's Cultural Revolution*

Halfway through Khandro Rinpoche's written biography, following Pema Oesel's account of Vairotsana and his activities at the cave, and after opening verses containing prophecies about Khandro Rinpoche's life and former incarnations, Pema Oesel begins his description of her early years as follows:

The supreme Khandro Rinpoche was born in the wood horse year of the sixteenth cycle (1954) in Chagmo Golog, eastern Tibet. Before long a foreign army came to the fore and instituted democratic reforms. Much agitation proliferated such as the Cultural Revolution and so forth, leading to religious figures' imprisonment. On account of the various disturbances of the times such as the need for manual labor, those who practised the holy dharma became as rare as stars in the daytime. Nevertheless, from the time she was small, she felt renunciation in the form of disgust for cyclic existence and had the altruistic intention to strive to benefit others. She was renown for possessing the complete characteristics of a female bodhisattva such as perceiving all that appears and exists as pure.⁹

In conversations with me, Khandro Rinpoche elaborated that she was born into a family of livestock herders. Her father was born in the late 1920s. She describes him as one who "did not exert himself very much in religious affairs", but who believed in Buddhism and always loved to recite Tibet's most popular mantra *Om mani peme hum* dedicated to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.¹⁰ Her mother "spent her entire lifetime engaged only in samsaric affairs", according to Khandro, meaning she worked in the household milking livestock, raising children, and cooking, etc. Nevertheless, Khandro qualifies that "My mother was religious; she was a good, kind person." Both her parents attended some degree of Tibetan school in their youth and could write in Tibetan.

Khandro Rinpoche's grandmother and uncle nurtured her religious aspirations, and her parents extolled the importance of having

⁹ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 24; all citations of this work are my translations of the Tibetan original.

¹⁰ All remaining quotations that are not otherwise footnoted are my English translations of Khandro Rinpoche's comments to me in several interviews taking place over the course of multiple years in both Gyalrong and Serta, eastern Tibet.

faith in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha), but otherwise she had few opportunities to practise Buddhism. Even so,

I had one hundred percent faith in the dharma in my mind, but when I was young, due to Chinese oppression, we were not allowed to hold a rosary in our hands. We were also not allowed to recite *maṇi*. Lamas and *tulkus* who had not committed any crime were put in prison. Then even if you thought you wanted to be a nun, there were no lamas or *tulkus* in the region.

Khandro Rinpoche attended school for about two years in Darlag County, where she studied both Tibetan and Chinese languages. She explained to me several times that

When I went to Chinese school, I held the workbook and pen in my hand and with my voice I had to recite the material. If I didn't, the Chinese teacher would definitely scold me. But while I was reciting with my mouth, in my mind I was reciting the refuge prayer.

Though her exposure to Buddhist culture and practice was extremely limited during her childhood, she remembers intensely yearning to practise religion, which she expresses primarily as “the belief that cause and effect are undeceiving”, and “giving to the poor and having compassion for others”. She insists, “Even at the risk of death, I did not abandon dharma. I yearned for dharma as a thirsty person desires water.” Khandro notes that a few others close to her during her childhood privately recognised her secret devotion to religion and sensed her future role as a *khandroma*. They included Gyalrong Lama Samdrub (rGyal rong bla ma bSam grub), who “recognised me as a *khandroma* when I was 13 years old. He said that I was an ‘awareness woman’ (*rig ma*), and that I should not fall into *samsāra* (i.e., become a married laywoman).”

Khandro's urge to devote herself to religious practice seems to directly contrast with the prevailing social and religious destruction she describes happening all around her during the Cultural Revolution. But if Khandro Rinpoche's early childhood reflections seem to pit Buddhist devotion against Chinese communist reform, the rest of her life story belies such an opposition. For one thing, she describes all of her six siblings as either “Chinese officials” (*rgya mi las byed pa*) or people married to them. The Tibetan word she used for this means roughly “white collar employee”, or more literally “government office

worker".¹¹ Khandro Rinpoche presents herself as the exception amidst her siblings, who are all placed highly in either local governmental and/or religious ranks:

Aside from me, all my siblings work. I did not want to do that. I did not listen to my parents; I left. I wandered around. Not listening to what my father said, not listening to what my mother said, I left. They said they would give me money. I said I did not want it and left. The others wanted the money!

Khandro described herself several times as "a wanderer", one who left home and refused the status that her family offered her. Nevertheless, aspects of her family's connections, particularly their multiple associations with local political officials and religious leaders, prefigured her own future successful navigations between these parties.

3. *Marriage and family life*

Khandro Rinpoche's biography by Pema Oesel presents her marriage as imposed upon her and as a cause of misery:

After she gradually grew up, she abundantly possessed all the good qualities of being a capable woman in terms of worldly affairs, so several households requested her as a wife. She replied, "Still I will look after my parents or my old grandmother. Later I will be able to take care of myself. I won't go as a bride." Even though she cried a lot, her parents did not give their permission [to stay home]. They dispatched her to be a bride for a good family that she had never met before who possessed wealth and power in the worldly sense. Though she had abundant worldly pleasures and wealth such as cotton, woolen clothing, and jewelry made of gold, silver, turquoise, and coral, she felt perpetually exhausted by the suffering of cyclic existence and her mind became shrouded in the darkness of misery. At that time during the Cultural Revolution, since it was forbidden to hold a rosary, when it was time to thrash the barley, she counted the grains

¹¹ Specifically, The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krang dbyi sun 1993, vol. 2: 2775) defines it as "1) A [Chinese] government official working within government offices, the armed forces, or the People's Congress, not including common soldiers and those doing minor work, 2) A leader in a position of responsibility or a supervisor, or 3) a worker." She seems to mean the word in either of the first two senses given that she further explained it using the Chinese words *shuji* meaning "chairmen" or "secretary" and *xianzhang*, "county chairman".

and accumulated *maṇi* [mantra recitations]. When it was time to milk [the livestock], she counted *maṇi* with sheep dung. Ultimately after doing it this way, she accumulated about 300 million *maṇi*.¹²

Khandro Rinpoche may have successfully evaded the obligations several of her sisters embraced by becoming wage earners or wives of Chinese officials, but she was not able to avoid her parents' plans for her to marry at the age of 19. She narrates,

I was young when I got married. My husband and I did not know each other; we had never met. Our parents arranged the marriage. For about a month I was depressed and got sick. I did not know him and there was a lot of work to do and I did not know anyone and the place was far away [from my parents' home]—because of these things I was extremely depressed.

The words Khandro Rinpoche uses for becoming a lay householder are *korwa zungwa* (*'khor ba bzung ba*), literally meaning “taking hold of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*)”, or in other words wasting one's life enmeshed in menial tasks that accumulate further negative karma instead of dedicating oneself to religious pursuits that lead to liberation. The primary mark of “entering *saṃsāra*” or “becoming a householder” is marriage because of the ensuing family responsibilities and economic imperatives entailed in fulfilling them. For a Tibetan laywoman such as Khandro Rinpoche, the relentless labor that followed marriage came in many forms, one of which was rearing five children. Khandro and her husband were pastoralists (*'brog pa*)—they kept a large herd of animals including yak/cow crossbreeds, sheep, and horses—necessitating Khandro to work late into the night milking and tending them. In addition, her husband held a position as a Chinese official in Darlag, which kept him busy working outside of the home and kept Khandro busy cooking and entertaining the Chinese officials he frequently brought home as guests. For a time her mother-in-law also lived with them, needing care at the same time as her five children did. Perhaps her recollection of the long days of endless housework coloured her response to a question I asked her about whether or not it is harder to practise dharma as a female than a male. She replied:

[Lay]women do not have the power to practise the dharma. They are controlled by others. They only work. Even if they want to do a dharma practice, they are powerless to go. I also do

¹² Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 24-25.

not have the full eighteen freedoms and advantages like an ordained monastic does...¹³ In the past the holy men who came before said this: If in the past you did not practise dharma, you will not be reborn in a central land. If you are, you will not have the power to practise the dharma. To explain the reason for this, cause and effect have been mixed up. For me, cause and effect have been mixed up a lot. Because of this, I took birth as a laywoman like this. Again I became a householder (*'khor ba bzung*). Then I cast it away. Then I again became a householder. The reason I did not practise the dharma is that in a past life I accumulated some bad [karma]. The fruition of that is this [female non-monastic] body.

Khandro Rinpoche's explanation for her rebirth as a laywoman as the effect of the ripening of negative karma from misdeeds in previous lifetimes is a common perspective in many Tibetan societies, and one with ample precedent in the eastern Tibetan highlands.¹⁴

However, if this karmic explanation for gender discrimination has a deterministic flavour, it also has a silver lining in Khandro Rinpoche's case. Judging from the frequency and detail with which she mentioned it, a highlight of her life is the recognition of her son Thubten Shedrub (Thub bstan bshad sgrub, b. 1977/78) as a *tulku* while he was still in utero. The first piece of information Khandro Rinpoche offered about her reincarnate son is that he is a disciple of Khenpo Muensel, who "introduced [him] to the view" (*lta ba ngo sprod*). According to Khandro Rinpoche, Thubten Shedrub is the incarnation of two great lamas of the past: Apang Terchen Pawo Choying Dorje (A pang gter chen dpa' bo Chos byings rdo rje, 1895-1945) and Wangchen Dode (dBang chen mdo sde, 1873-?). Apang Terchen

¹³ The eight freedoms and ten advantages include eight conditions that afford one with freedom to practise the dharma including not being born: 1) in the hells, 2) in the ghost (*preta*) realm, 3) as an animal, 4) as a long-lived god, 5) as a barbarian, 6) not having wrong views, 7) not being born where there is no Buddha, and 8) not being born deaf and mute. The ten advantages include five individual advantages: 1) being a human, 2) in a central place, 3) with all one's faculties, 4) without a conflicting lifestyle, and 5) with faith in the dharma and five circumstantial advantages relating to living in a place and time in which: 1) a Buddha has appeared, 2) he has preached the dharma, 3) his teachings still exist, 4) his teachings can be followed, and 5) there are those who are kind-hearted toward others, in particular a spiritual master who has accepted one as a disciple out of his/her extraordinary compassion. For an explanation of these freedoms and advantages, see Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 19-37.

¹⁴ See, for example, the way that Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje (Se ra mkha' 'gro bde ba'i rdo rje, 1892-1940) represented her female body, analysed in Jacoby 2009/2010. Reference to Sera Khandro is particularly salient because Khandro Rinpoche is widely believed in eastern Tibet to be one of her reincarnations.

was a prominent visionary, or “treasure revealer” (*gter ston*) whose main seat was Tsinda (Rtsis mda’) Monastery in Pema County, Golog.¹⁵ Wangchen Dode was a political leader of one of the three main parts of Golog named Wangchen Bum (dBang chen ’bum) and also a founding figure of Nyenmo Monastery on the outskirts of Dzugtrun Township (’Dzugs skrun zhang) on the banks of the Darchu River (Dar chu) in Darlag County, Qinghai.¹⁶

A few years before Thubten Shedrup was born, Khandro Rinpoche gave birth to her first child, a daughter. The daughter married a Tibetan man that Khandro described as a “high Chinese official”. Her third child, a son, is a bus driver.¹⁷ She elaborated more about her fourth child, another daughter, praising her scholastic and religious acumen: “She is a really good girl—she does not eat meat and she has completed her five accumulations.¹⁸ She is religious. She has received many teachings from lamas and has already received Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) teachings.” Khandro describes her as neither a householder (i.e., she is unmarried) nor a nun, but as someone who works in an office (*las byed pa*). Her youngest child is her third daughter, whose husband is also an office worker. While she stresses the virtue of only those children of hers who are directly connected to religious practice, in particular her reincarnate son, she describes her other children as either “office workers” or married to them, mirroring the various positions of her six siblings.

4. Crisis and religious transformation: meeting Khenpo Muensel

Khandro Rinpoche’s transformation from laywoman to *ḍākinī* began in earnest when she became ill in the midst of her busy householder life. According to her biography,

When she was 25 years old, on account of an illness, she became mute. In this degenerate time the great Paṇḍita Vimalamitra returned in the apparitional [form] of a virtuous teacher named Kangsar Khenpo Muensel, who held the treasury of instructions on clear light and who was the crown jewel of the non-sectarian

¹⁵ For a biography of him, see A bu dkar lo 2000: 203-214.

¹⁶ The full name of Nyenmo Monastery is Dar snyan mo ri rnam rgyal dge ldan dgon. For its history, see ’Phrin las 2008: 203-219.

¹⁷ Could he have been the bus driver who initially brought me to the Vairotsana Cave en route to Serta?

¹⁸ The five accumulations refer to the preliminary practices she has completed, including reciting 100,000 refuge prayers, *bodhicitta* prayers, Vajrasattva prayers, *maṅḍala* offerings, and Guru Yoga.

teachings. When he was released on parole from prison in Xining and came back to his homeland for a visit, she was brought before him to request a blessing. When she met the precious lama, she felt joy and sorrow mixed together and could only cry uncontrollably. After just this [meeting], her speech returned and she could move. Khandro offered all her belongings to the lama along with her respect. It seemed as if she could not bear to be separated from him. The lama also treated her dearly with great love and spoke many prayers and prophesied that they would meet again quickly. From that time onward, Khandroma said that her perception transformed into joy and clear rays of awareness. After that, the communist party's minority policy concluded and at the same time as the sun of the spreading of the [Buddhist] teachings newly arose in the sky of the merit of the land of snows, the precious lama was liberated from the fear of legal persecution and his golden face arrived home. Khandro Rinpoche used all sorts of strategies to obtain permission [for Khenpo Muensel] to re-open Tashi Choekhor Ling Monastery.¹⁹

Khenpo Muensel was a monastic hierarch of great learning from the same region as Khandro Rinpoche, Wangchen To (dBang chen stod) in Darlag, Golog. He was educated at Kathog Monastery in eastern Tibet and became particularly renowned for his mastery of the Nyingma contemplative teaching known as the Great Perfection.²⁰ In the late 1970s when Khandro Rinpoche first met him, he was on parole for a brief period in the midst of a 20-year prison sentence in the Xining region. Out of everything Khandro Rinpoche told me about her life, she appeared most enthusiastic that I record and retell the story of how she helped Khenpo Muensel rebuild his monastery called Poenkhör Thubten Shedrub Tashi Choekhor Ling (dPon skor thub bstan bshad sgrub bkra shis chos 'khor gling).²¹ She recounts that after the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution, Khenpo Muensel had only a few devoted disciples left. When he was released from prison and returned to his home area, he had no monastery and no monastics to teach as all had been destroyed during his long incarceration. Khandro Rinpoche's account of Khenpo Muensel's rebuilding effort highlights how she was able to help him transform from a political prisoner to a monastic abbot:

¹⁹ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 26-27.

²⁰ For a synoptic biography of him, see Nyoshul Khenpo 2005: 524-526.

²¹ For an account of the history of Poenkhör Monastery, see 'Phrin las 2008: 248-250; 254-255.

This is important history: since the lama had no monastery or summer retreat place, he was not pleased to stay in the region and prepared to go to another area. I said don't go. Let's find an opportunity here. We will go and ask the Chinese; they will listen to us. My husband was one of the highest officials in the [local] Chinese government... I went back to him and Chinese officials and begged them. I appealed to my husband on account of our relationship and I also gave other Chinese officials presents of my jewelry and they accepted my request to give the lama the land for his monastery.

Even though initially there were only a few monks and nomadic householders in that area, sure enough, Poenkhor Monastery expanded rapidly after two trucks full of monks arrived from Nangchen requesting ordination vows from Khenpo Muensel.²²

Because of Khandro Rinpoche's instrumental role in helping Khenpo Muensel re-establish Poenkhor Monastery, the two developed a close teacher-student relationship. She reflects, "Because of that [the help I gave him], the lama treated me with great love (*thugs brtse chen po*). Then he was happy because we spread the teachings of full ordination." Even while she remained enmeshed in householder life, Khandro records that "The lama introduced me to the view of the Great Perfection and while I exerted myself in samsaric work, I practised the view." She concluded her oral account of these early years of Buddhist revival in the post market-reform era of Tibet (the early 1980s) with the statement that, "After that, [Khenpo Muensel] built a new assembly hall and meditation centre and so forth and the lama's monastery became quite large. I was able to serve the lama in these ways."

5. Tension between religious and householder life

As Khandro Rinpoche's focus turned more and more toward religion, her manifold responsibilities as a wife and a mother of five children increasingly became obstacles to devoting herself completely to prac-

²² Traga Rinpoche (2002) recounts being one among the large group of the monks along with Garchen Rinpoche, both Kagyu lamas from Nangchen who went to see Khenpo Muensel to request monastic ordination vows in the early 1980s. He says that their group of 54 monks included monks from a Drugpa Kagyu Monastery headed by Khenchen Ade and those from Nangchen Monastery. They traveled for four days to seek ordination from Khenpo Muensel because Khenchen Ade, who had been in prison with Khenpo Muensel for several years, felt that he was a pure monk and had always kept his vows without any breakage.

tising the dharma Khenpo Muensel had taught her. The competing time demands of intensive religious practice and maintaining her household soon led to tensions in their marriage. When Khandro told me about how she thought only of practising the dharma after becoming Khenpo Muensel's disciple, I asked her about her husband's reaction to her newfound religious commitment. Khandro hesitated in responding to this, telling me initially "He gave me a little bit of permission [to practise dharma intensively] but not much. But it's okay. I shouldn't say this." Again she hedged when I asked if her husband was happy that she was meditating. She replied: "He was okay about it, but not very happy. It's not okay to say this [that you aren't happy someone is meditating]; it's embarrassing. But in his mind he was a bit displeased." She elaborated,

It wasn't [my husband's] fault—we had many children and still we had an elderly mother to care for. Not only that, I had to milk the livestock. Really I didn't have much time. For five days in a week, or for one month out of every three months, he would give me permission [to do religious retreats]. It was okay. He was a Chinese official... The work wouldn't be finished—I had to look after the children, milk the livestock, and we had many guests—many Chinese came.

Perhaps one reason for her hesitation to critique her husband for his mixed reaction to her initial devotion to Khenpo Muensel is that the two seem to maintain a civil relationship today, though they live separately. She describes him as "a very kind man. Now he has also become a very religious man." She indicated, however, that this camaraderie was not always the case. In particular, she mentions that he disliked her efforts to care for the local stray dogs in their neighborhood:

At night when I milked the livestock, I used to give the dogs milk when no one was looking. [My husband] quarreled with me for that. I gave the dogs a lot of meat. I had 75 dogs! The officials scolded me, saying I wasn't a good woman. I felt badly [for the dogs, thinking] "Pity—they don't have any food!" They [the Chinese officials] shot them all with a gun and they all died.

Reflecting on the larger tension between devoting oneself to religious practice or caring for one's family, she said:

It is difficult to have a family and practise dharma. Even if you think you want to go [on retreat], your husband won't send you.

If you have many children, you won't be able to go. If you go, [your husband] won't give you food and so forth and then you fight. A bodhisattva wouldn't need to be given food and even if she were verbally abused, she'd still be happy and wouldn't be angry. As for me, I am hard-headed and my husband and I opposed each other. Because of that, accomplishing the dharma was difficult. Being able to accomplish the dharma is as rare as stars in the daytime. It's not good to have a family.

Reasons having a family was "not good" according to Khandro Rinpoche not only pertained to finding time to practise religion. Another significant problem for Khandro with having many children was the suffering she experienced during the long separations from them that she endured for the sake of revitalising religion, which would characterise the next phase of her life.

6. The Sera Monastery years

Khandro Rinpoche spent more than a decade (ca. 1990-2003) away from her family helping to rebuild Sera Tegchen Choekhor Ling (Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling) Monastery in the Nyi (sNyi) Valley of Serta. Sera Monastery is not connected to the large Central Tibetan Gelug monastery also known as Sera, but is rather a small monastery founded in 1736 as a branch of Pelyul, the large Nyingma Monastery in Kham.²³ Khandro's written biography describes her reasons for settling at Sera:

On account of the power of aspiration prayers made in former lifetimes, she went to the Sera Monastery hermitage for the general purpose of benefitting the teachings and beings at Sera Monastery Tegchen Choekhor Ling in the Serta region of eastern Tibet and for the specific purpose of dispelling the obstacles to the longevity of Chogtul Jigme Gawe Dorje (mChog sprul 'jigs med dga' ba'i rdo rje).²⁴

In conversation with her, Khandro Rinpoche expanded on how she came to spend so many years at Sera and what it meant to dispel obstacles to the life of Chogtul Jigme Gawe Dorje, or Tulku Jigga for short. She explained that her long sojourn in Serta began when she was in her late 30s and went to request teachings from Khenpo Jigme

²³ For a history of Sera Monastery, see 'Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 356.

²⁴ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 30.

Phuntsog (mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004) at Larung Gar (bLa rung sgar), a massive religious encampment and scholastic centre established in 1980 by the charismatic Nyingma visionary Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog and populated at times by over 10,000 monastics.²⁵ The teaching that drew Khandro Rinpoche to Larung Gar was on Longchenpa's *Four-Volume Heart Essence* (*sNying thig ya bzhi*), a famous fourteenth-century compilation of Great Perfection teachings. At Larung Gar, Khandro was joined by a throng of lamas and monks who came to receive the important teachings. Already some among them recognised her extraordinary qualities:

When I was at Larung Gar, a Khenpo who was about 60 years old came to me. At that time, I said, "What is the meaning of your coming here? I am an ordinary woman (*bud med*), so please go." He said, "You are an incarnation of Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal (mKha' 'gro Ye shes mtsho rgyal). Until you give me a reading transmission of 'transference of consciousness' (*'pho lung*), I won't go back."²⁶

Initially Khandro thought she would stay in Serta only briefly for the teachings, but her plans transformed, leading her not to see her children for more than a decade so she could help rebuild the monastery and prolong the life of one of Sera Monastery's three main incarnate lamas, Tulku Jigga:

Then Jigga from Sera arrived. He was the sixth in an incarnation line; the others had all died by the age 33. Many lamas prophesied that I was the one who could sustain his longevity (*sku tshе brten ni red*). I said, "I won't stay, thank you. In my homeland, I have my lama [Khenpo Muensel] and also my children and family. I feel badly for them. I won't stay." But everyone cried and said Sera Yangtrul had gone to the Buddhafeld [i.e., passed away]. Sogen Tulku had gone to India. The Monastery was empty and falling apart. So I thought that I would stay with him for a little while. That was my reason for coming. I thought I'd request dharma for about a month and go back home. But then I stayed.²⁷

²⁵ See Germano 1998; Terrone 2013.

²⁶ "Transference of consciousness" (*'pho ba*) refers to a meditative practice of ejecting the consciousness of a dying person (or of oneself at the moment of death) out of the body into a Pure Land. For a description of this, see Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 351-356.

²⁷ The three incarnate lamas of Sera Monastery that Khandro mentions were Sera Yangtul Tsultrim Gyatso (Se ra yang sprul Tshul khirms rgya mtsho, 1925-1988),

Sera was once a sizable and prosperous monastery, well connected to and patronised by the Washul (dBal shul/Wa shul) family who controlled Serta prior to its incorporation into the PRC, but it was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. In 1982 the local Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture People's Government permitted Sera Monastery to be rebuilt with the support of the broader Serta community under the leadership of Sera Yangtrul. By the time Khandro Rinpoche arrived there with Tulku Jigga in about 1990,

The Monastery was falling apart and there were no lamas. I maintained it... You know how big that monastery is, right? Well aside from two or three people, it was empty. There was no meditation centre, no renunciants, no *tulkus*, and no *khenpos*... So I decided to stay for a while. Tulku [Jigga] didn't die. The monastery improved. Now there is a meditation centre, monastic college, more than 100 monks and *khenpos* etc. It is really good. I didn't do this for myself; it was for the benefit of others.

Khandro describes multiple ways in which she contributed to Sera Monastery's restoration. One of these was "sustaining the lama's longevity", which refers to her position as Tulku Jigga's consort. The association between longevity and having a consort relates to the curative potential of "channel and wind" (*rtsa rlung*) practices that sometimes involve visualised or actual heterosexual union. These practices aim at removing obstacles to the smooth circulation of vital essence (*thig le*) within the psycho-physical domain of the subtle body, thereby catalysing spiritual realisation, curing illness, and increasing lifespan.²⁸

Another way Khandro Rinpoche contributed to the restoration of Sera Monastery was helping to rebuild religious monuments and sponsoring the creation of new religious statues to replace those lost during the Cultural Revolution. During her Sera Monastery years she also began performing ritual functions for the surrounding lay community, in particular funerals in which she performed the "transference of consciousness" of the dead:

who had recently died when Khandro arrived at Sera (his incarnation is a young man currently living in Serta), Sogen Tulku Pema Lodoe (bSod rgan sprul sku Pad ma blo gros, b. 1964), who had gone to India and now resides in the United States, and Tulku Jigga, who was the only *tulku* remaining at Sera monastery when she went there.

²⁸ For further analysis of associations between Tibetan Buddhist consort practices, curing sickness, and longevity, see Jacoby 2014: 212-222.

When I was in Golog, lamas asked me to return [to Serta] and sustain their longevity (*sku tshé brten*) so I came. I abandoned my children and husband. I don't know if I sustained Tulku Jigga's longevity or not. After I arrived at Sera Monastery, for 12 years I built statues and performed funerals and built stupas.

In particular, Khandro elaborates that at Sera Monastery she restored the reliquaries built by a former incarnation of Sogen Tulku named Sotul Natsog Rangdrol (bSod sprul sna tshogs rang grol, 1865-1935) and Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje (Se ra mkha' 'gro bde ba'i rdo rje, 1892-1940).²⁹ She erected many types of stupas including a reliquary for Khenpo Muensel, who died in Darlag in 1993 during the time she was with Tulku Jigga. She also commissioned the carving of 100,000 stones etched with prayers (*rdo 'bum*).

Nevertheless, Khandro Rinpoche's sojourn at Sera was not problem-free, even if it greatly benefitted the monastery. One of the painful aspects of Khandro Rinpoche's years at Sera was her separation from her children. Mention of this appears in her written biography as a direct quotation from her: "During the time that we, mother and child, were separated, out of anguish, when we heard each other's voices on the phone line, mother and child both fainted."³⁰

Another painful aspect of her time at Sera appears cryptically in her written biography, in only one sentence:

On account of previous karma and various present circumstances, it became difficult to stay independently at the monastery. Even so, during the time that Khandro Rinpoche remained there, the two factions were cordial and well behaved.³¹

In conversation with me, Khandro clarified that the reason for quarreling toward the end of her tenure at Sera was Tulku Jigga's choice to bring another woman, younger than her, to the monastery as his new consort. Khandro explains,

After that, if he had two wives (*yum*), I wouldn't stay in the house. Then, I came back home and sold all my things and built statues. Maybe I was bad and this other *yum* is good. I don't know. The main thing is that if his *yum* can benefit the monks

²⁹ For more on these figures, see Jacoby 2014, and for a history of Sotul Natsog Rangdrol's abbotship at Sera, see 'Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 355-356.

³⁰ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 31.

and monastery, then “thanks for one hundred years”.³² That’s what I think.

She insists that being replaced by another *khandroma* did not make her angry:

The Tulku [Jigga] and I are disciples of the same lama. We have requested much dharma together. I thought that to be angry with him would be unacceptable and I prayed to my lama. I didn’t get angry. I didn’t need wealth. I said, “You two live together,” and I left. That is the truth. When I left, many people cried and begged me not to go. But I left with my father. Then I lived at home in Darlag County. [My father] came to get me and I left. By the kindness of my lama, I had enough food and without much to do, I was extremely happy.

Nevertheless, if not anger, she did seem to question what type of benefit this new *khandroma* could bring Sera Monastery, for she mentioned that the monastic population declined significantly after she left. Though Khandro left under strained conditions, she maintains close ties to many affiliated with Sera and remains invested in helping to make it a thriving religious centre. She says, “I love Sera Monastery and have a strong connection there [even though] I left like that.” These days she returns periodically to Sera to give “transference of consciousness” teachings to monastics and elderly laity in the area.

7. Life as the *ḍakinī* of Vairotsana Cave

The next phase of Khandro Rinpoche’s life took place at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong where I initially encountered her. The concluding paragraph of her biography chronicles her activities at the cave:

In 2003, she came east to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalmo Tsawarong and built a reliquary for the precious lama [Khenpo Muen-sel] made out of brass and gold, a statue of Guru Rinpoche, and many high quality “enlightenment stupas” made of earth and stone. She said, “During the time that the precious lama was alive, because he delighted in the monastic teachings, ransoming the lives [of animals], offering butter lamps, and so forth, [I did these things] to repay his kindness.” With this in mind, she

³² “Thanks for one hundred years” (*kha dro lo brgya*) is a Golog expression meaning “thank you very much.”

established a summer retreat at Siddhi Dechen Ling, rebuilt the monastery, and taught some devoted and fortunate disciples the instructions for the oral lineage of the Great Perfection and the explanation on the profound path of “transference of consciousness”. Furthermore, she practises meditation inseparably from ransoming [animals’] lives, offering butter lamps, and so forth. Her virtuous enlightened activities proliferate expansively, and she remains a refuge for the Buddhist teachings and all beings.³³

Khandro Rinpoche’s story of reviving religion at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong is not only rich with associations with Tibet’s golden age of imperial might and Buddhist efflorescence as discussed earlier in this essay, but also to a network of people active today in the eastern Tibetan religious scene with whom Khandro Rinpoche’s emerging identity as a *ḍākinī* continues to take shape. Important among them is Chogtul Rangrig Dorje (mChog sprul rang rig rdo rje, b. 1966), a *tulku* from Dungkar Sangngag Mindroling (Dung dkar gsang sngags smin sgrol gling) Monastery in Serta who spends time with her at the Vairotsana Cave and is the main sponsor for her building projects there.³⁴

Chogtul Rangrig Dorje described himself to me as the reincarnation of Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje, the monk who allegedly murdered the anti-Buddhist Tibetan Emperor Lang Darma before seeking refuge at the cave, thus providing a direct link between Tibet’s imperial past and his presence at the site. In his younger years, Chogtul Rinpoche was a fully ordained monk at Dungkar Monastery, but more recently he has become a non-celibate religious specialist (a *ngagpa*) and a “treasure revealer” who lives with Khandro Rinpoche as his consort. He told me that he first met her in the early 2000s at a Buddhist feast offering (Tib. *tshogs ’khor*, Skt. *ganacakra*) at Drongri (’Brong ri), or “Wild Yak Mountain”. Drongri is the most sacred mountain in Serta. Its sacrality derives from its dual credentials as the abode of the Bodhisattva of Compassion Avalokiteśvara and the Tibetan land deity (*gzhi bdag*) Drongri Mugpo (’Brong ri smug po), whom the Washul family that ruled Serta for centuries considers to be their paternal ancestor.³⁵ Chogtul Rinpoche met her again some time later at a sacred cave also located in Serta called Arinag (A ri nag) in the Do (rDo) Valley. Arinag is famous for being the meditation cave of important Nyingma lamas of the past including Patul Rinpoche (dPal sprul o rgyan ’jigs

³³ Padma ’od gsal mtha’ yas 2006: 35-36.

³⁴ For a brief history of Dungkar Monastery, see ’Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 328-331.

³⁵ For more on Drongri and its significance in Serta, see Jacoby 2014: 113-120. For a Tibetan account of the mountain, see *gTer gnas ’brong ri’i dkar chags* in dGung lo 1989: 4-53.

med chos kyi dbang po, 1808-1887) and Ju Mipam Rinpoche ('Ju mi pham 'jam dbyangs rnam rgyal rgya mtsho, 1846-1912). Chogtul Rinpoche recounts that after Khandro Rinpoche led a large feast offering at Arinag Cave, both of them stayed at the cave for a one-month meditation retreat. When I asked Chogtul Rinpoche how he knew that Khandro Rinpoche was a *khandroma* appropriate to be his consort, he replied that he had received prophecies indicating as much and that he knew that she was an authentic *khandroma* because "all the lamas said she was, so I thought so too". When I probed further about who "all the lamas" were, he specified that Khandro Rinpoche's root lama Khenpo Muensel was central among them.

When I asked Khandro Rinpoche why she came to Vairotsana Cave given that it is quite a distance from her homeland, Chogtul Rinpoche interjected with the short reply, "We came here because of a prophecy." Khandro elaborated, saying,

I first came here thinking only of my next life. I put the many teachings that my root lama gave me into practice for the purpose of my next life. I didn't listen to my parents' advice. I left my spouse and children and belongings behind and came to the Vairotsana Cave. I put my faith in Vairotsana and that is why I came here to do retreat.

Though I did not inquire, she also offered the following information, which seems to be her explanation for why she resides with Chogtul Rinpoche instead of alone at the cave:

When I came here earlier, I bothered only about my next life. For the purpose of repaying my lama's kindness, I wanted only to stay alone without any consort (*grog*s). I wanted to cut my long hair and be a nun. Lama Akhyab (A skyabs) and Lama Rindzin Nyima (Rig 'dzin nyi ma) told me not to be a nun. They said that if I stayed like that (not a nun), the benefit I would bring beings would be greater so I didn't cut a tuft of my hair.

One of the first projects Khandro Rinpoche embarked upon was building a stupa down by the riverbank below the cave complex. Another *khandroma* was instrumental in helping her "open the site" for the stupa, namely Khandro Choedroen (mKha' 'gro Chos sgron), wife of Tulku Tenpe Nyima (sPrul sku bsTan pa'i nyi ma), also from Serta. She and her husband, who is a descendant of the nineteenth-century visionary Dujom Lingpa (bDud 'joms gling pa), as well as Serta Tulku Dongag (gSer rta sprul sku mDo sngags) served as the main sponsors for the stupa project. Khandro explains that their general purpose in

erecting the stupa was so that “All sentient beings completely pervading space would be greatly benefitted by this.” In particular Khandro Rinpoche commented that the stupa possesses special healing powers:

We [she and Khandro Choedroen] thought that the stupa was an extraordinary one. To tell you how that was, it benefitted many insane and sick people. Then when the consecration time came, many good signs emerged such as rainbows shining in the sky and so forth. Not only that, from that time forth the local community (*tsho ba*) was without illness and amassed wealth, livestock, and food. The harvest was excellent as well. I think things such as these are good omens.

When I interviewed Khandro Rinpoche in Serta in 2005, she was in the midst of gathering resources to build a small monastery near the Vairotsana Cave. She told me of her aspirations in the following words:

In order to restore the Vairotsana Cave and the Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje stupa, I’m going to stay there. Also I have started a summer retreat there... Two or three years ago [in ca. 2003] I had about 20 old men and women ordained and founded a monastery. I am trying to build a small monastery there as a residence for them. Now there are many people inviting me to China. I don’t want to go, but I really want to build a monastery. In order to do that, I need money. When I stay [here in Tibet], I don’t get money. I think sometimes I’ll have to go to China. Also sometimes I’ll have to sell my things. If I can solicit donations from my family and my friends, I wonder if I can find a way not to go [to China]? I don’t want to build a big monastery; it would be too hard to build. Just a high quality small one. If I can build a community of pure monastics, I think it would be good.

Though she presented China as the land of golden opportunity for financing religious reconstruction projects, she also spoke of the China fundraising option with hesitance, alluding that cashing in on Chinese interest in Tibetan Buddhism also carried the risk of selling out on one’s intentions to practise the pure dharma devoid of the eight worldly concerns of gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and blame, pleasure and sorrow.



Fig. 2. Siddhi Dechen Ling Monastery at the Vairotsana Cave built by Khandro Rinpoche. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2007.

By 2007, Khandro's fund raising challenges were solved and her monastery Siddhi Dechen Ling (Siddhī bde chen gling) was complete, consecrated at the end of that summer. She never did have to make that China fund raising journey to build Siddhi Dechen Ling, because Chinese funds came to her. Khandro explains that Chogtul Rinpoche became the main sponsor for the project, and that he was able to fund this through the generosity of his main sponsor, a devout Chinese woman from Beijing. Khandro counts her as one of her disciples and speaks highly of her kindness.

Khandro spoke of her motivations for building Siddhi Dechen Ling, which were to further the ordained lineage of Buddhist monastics in Tibet, especially in memory of her many teachers who have either passed away or left Tibet:

When I was here doing retreat, the Gyalrong people didn't have wealth, food, or clothes, and they didn't have dharma. On account of this I had compassion for them and sold my jewelry and fixed up the cave. Then Lama Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog] went to the Buddhafield. We all cried a lot. I told [my disciples], "Don't cry. For the purpose of the Buddhist teachings, the lama lost his life force. It is for the purpose of the Buddhist teachings. Crying now will do nothing." Our root lama Khenpo Muensel also has passed away. Khenpo Choying Khyabdal (mKhan po Chos dbying khyab brdal) also has passed on. The Dalai Lama has gone to India. The Panchen Lama has

also gone to the Buddhafields. Have compassion for all the Tibetan people who rely on them. Now if we can preserve the monastic teachings, that is the aspiration of the lamas. This is the way to serve the Buddha's teaching. I came to this cave and we all spoke and founded a summer retreat. But we didn't have a building for our summer retreat. I told Tulku Rangrig that we needed a bit of money and he gave it to us. The Chinese also supplemented that a bit. Then we built this assembly hall.

This latest monastic revitalisation project is thus one along a continuing line of restoration projects Khandro Rinpoche has devoted herself to ever since 1978, when Khenpo Muensel cured her silence and the PRC initiated its liberalisation policies following the Cultural Revolution. First she contributed to securing Poenkhon Monastery building rights for Khenpo Muensel in the early 1980s, then she helped Tulku Jigga restore Sera Monastery in the 1990s. Now if the clusters of boys I have seen sitting on benches in front of Siddhi Dechen Ling learning how to read Tibetan scriptures in preparation for their ordination serve as any indication, her new Buddhist revitalisation project is flourishing. According to Khandro, she and Chogtul have "only a small number of Chinese disciples, and hence not much money", but the community is quickly growing.

8. *Khandro's activities at the Vairotsana Cave*

Observing Khandro Rinpoche's everyday life at the Vairotsana Cave and listening to stories about her, a series of functions connected to being a *khandroma* emerge:

Curing the sick

At Vairotsana Cave, I heard one reason why Khandro's presence at the cave has been so well received by the locals from Khandro Rinpoche's close attendant, who is a nun from a different part of Gyalrong. Khandro's attendant told me that in the early phase of Khandro's sojourn at the cave, the daughter of the local community's leader (*tsho dpon*) had a three month-old son who inexplicably became gravely ill. The Chinese doctors could do nothing to save him and he died. The leader's daughter was devastated and took her baby to Khandro Rinpoche to be blessed, only to have her bring the baby boy back to life! When I repeated this story back to Khandro Rinpoche, she did not deny it but said, "I was able to benefit their young son a bit.

His daughter's son didn't die. The Chinese couldn't cure him but I helped them a bit." Judging from the many Tibetan devotees I have witnessed hiking up the hill to receive blessings, divinations, and cures from Khandro, her reputation as a healer has spread beyond these rarefied cases. Khandro assented to this interpretation, saying, "Yes, many sick people and especially insane people come. In those situations, I turn my prayer wheel and pray for the sick to bring them a bit of benefit." Lest she appear too self-congratulatory about her curative powers, she followed this acknowledgement by saying, "I can't benefit sentient beings. Day and night I always have the intention to benefit beings, but I can't do it."

In any case, the stupa Khandro Rinpoche and Khandro Choedroen built below the Vairotsana Cave is also known for its special curative powers. In Chogtul Rinpoche's words: "Blessings reside here [at the Vairotsana Cave area]—if sick people come here and do prostrations and circumambulations, they are cured of disease." This connection between the cave and curing sickness predates Khandro Rinpoche's presence there according to Pema Oesel Taye's account of the eighth-century Vairotsana's promise to protect his devotees from illness if they offer prayers and prostrations at the site.³⁶ Currently Khandro's appeal as a healer and the cave's renown as a curative centre are working to reinforce each other.

Acting as a support for treasure revelation

On a more esoteric level, it became clear as I got to know Khandro Rinpoche better that she has gained recognition by some Tibetan visionaries known as "treasure revealers" (*gter ston*) as a consort endowed with the special capacity to aid in their revelation process, which is a power associated with being a *khandroma*.³⁷ The "treasure" (*gter ma*) tradition is a Tibetan system of revelation attributed to imperial Tibetan personages, central among them Padmasambhava, who hid sacred objects and scriptures for future discovery by specially designated treasure revealers. Treasures appear in the forms of "earth treasures" (*sa gter*), which are objects such as ritual implements or chests (*sgrom*) containing scriptures, and "mind treasures" (*dgongs gter*), which are visions appearing in treasure revealers' minds.³⁸ Specifically, *khandromas* can aid revelation because of their ability to arouse meditative bliss in the treasure revealer. In his work *Wonder Ocean: An Explanation of the Dharma Treasure Tradition*, the third

³⁶ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 16.

³⁷ For further explanation of this, see Gyatso 1998, ch. 6 and Jacoby 2014: 204-212.

³⁸ For more about treasure revelation, see Thondup 1986; Gyatso 1986, 1993.

Dodrubchen Jigme Tenpe Nyima (rDo grub chen 'jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1865-1926) of Dodrubchen Monastery in Golog explained,

Furthermore, in order to arouse the accomplishment from their depths, the teachings which have been concealed in the natural sphere of the luminous state (*A 'od gSal Gyi Khams*) [of their minds], it is also necessary to have the spontaneously arisen bliss (*Lhan sKyes Kyi dGa' Ba*) which can be produced by a special consort who has made the appropriate aspirations in the past, and who is to become the key to accomplishment. That is one of the reasons why all Tertons happen to have consorts.³⁹

Khandro Rinpoche was reticent to discuss this, or even to acknowledge that she played any role at all in helping treasure revealers discover their sacred missives. When I asked her if she was a "treasure revealer" herself, she denied it. However, Chogtul Rinpoche explains his transition from a celibate monastic *tulku* at Dungkar Monastery in Serta to a non-celibate treasure revealer at the Vairotsana Cave to be a result of his "reliance upon Khandro Rinpoche". He said he received prophecies indicating that she was his authentic consort and that as a result of his connection with her, he can produce revelations. He considers the written scriptures he reveals in reliance upon her to be theirs together: "Her treasures are the same as mine. They are one. Whatever appears to her appears to me."

Khandro Rinpoche also aided the Serta-based treasure revealer Rindzin Nyima in discovering at least one of his treasures. She narrates that at the conclusion of a one-month retreat at Drongri in Serta, she went to get water from a nearby river that was a site in which Sera Khandro had revealed treasures nearly a century ago. There, a snake serving as a "treasure protector" (*gter srung*) lead her to find a "treasure chest" (*gter sgrom*) in the form of a distinctive rock at the water's edge. She then offered the object to Lama Rindzin Nyima, who extracted a scripture from the chest. She showed me the actual handwritten scripture that Rindzin Nyima had dictated to his scribe after Khandro offered him the chest, which was written in printed Tibetan on notebook paper.

Teaching the dharma

One of Khandro Rinpoche's main functions as a *khandroma* is transmitting the lineage of her teacher Khenpo Muensel, called the *Long-*

³⁹ Thondup 1986: 107.

chen Nyingtig (*kLong chen snying thig*) or “Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse”, to select disciples. Khandro mentioned that she began teaching when she was about 40 during her time at Sera Monastery. Specifically, she says that the impetus came from the incarnation of one of Khenpo Muensel’s root lamas, Khenpo Ngagchung (Ngag chung), also called Khenpo Ngawang Palzang (Ngag dbang dpal bzang, 1879-1941). Khandro reported that his incarnation named Sangye Tsering (Sangs rgyas tshe ring) of Nyoshul Gar (sMyo shul sgar) encouraged her, saying that

I should exhort my disciples to complete the five accumulations and then that I must give them an introduction to the nature of mind and a reading transmission of transference of consciousness and so forth. Although I thought it best to just sit around reciting *mani* since I have no knowledge, I was unable to resist the lama’s command that I needed to teach.

Khandro Rinpoche told me that she begins teaching disciples by asking them to contemplate the “four reversals” (*blo ldog rnam bzhi*) that inspire renunciation from worldly concerns including contemplating the difficulty of being reborn with the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of *samsāra*, and the principle of cause and effect. According to the *Longchen Nyingtig* lineage, these contemplations take 100 days to complete. Following this, she instructs her disciples to complete the “five accumulations” (*bum lnga*), including reciting the Buddhist refuge prayer more than 100,000 times, followed by the *bodhicitta* prayer, Vajrasattva practice, *maṇḍala* offering, and guru yoga, which take approximately six months to complete (if practised full-time). Then, Khandro Rinpoche teaches “transference of consciousness” (*pho ba*), the contemplative practice preparing one for successfully navigating the process of death and transmigration to one’s subsequent rebirth. According to Khandro Rinpoche, “A real *ḍākinī* is able to transfer a person’s consciousness.” She gave the following examples to illustrate her point:

For example the wife of Marpa did transference of consciousness for her son Darma Dode and was able to direct him to the Pure Land; she was a real mother. Yeshe Tsogyal went [to India] in search of a consort and after seven days she revived the son of a king. When Yeshe Tsogyal performed transference of consciousness, she got a dead person to rise and walk away.

Likewise, Khandro Rinpoche has become particularly renowned for her skill in this practice, which she learned from Khenpo Muensel and

has taught since her residence at Sera Monastery. These days her instructions are in demand at Sera and beyond; in the first decade of the 2000s she gave several teachings on the transference of consciousness to monks at Dungkar Monastery and to disciples at Drongri, both in Serta County, as well as several in Gyalrong. After Khandro Rinpoche's disciples train in preliminary practices and transference of consciousness, she gives them an "introduction to the nature of mind", in which she "teaches them about the origin, abiding, and movement of mind". She summarises the dharma that she teaches to be mainly Great Perfection. She clarifies that, "After [my] disciples completely finish their five accumulations, whether they are monastics or householders, men or women, I teach them a bit of Great Perfection." The instructions Khandro Rinpoche received from Khenpo Muensel and her results from putting these into practice have earned her renown as a meditator and a teacher of this pinnacle contemplation on the nature of mind within the Nyingma School. Her comment that she teaches Great Perfection not just to monastics but also female and male householders resonates with the popularity she holds among laywomen that I have noticed particularly in the Serta area. Khandro acknowledges the special affinity she has with laywomen in both Golog and Gyalrong:

Women come to me crying. They have faith in me, but I don't have any power. I teach them transference of consciousness, how to write, and I give them blessings and so forth... I have also taught women in this neighborhood [Serta] a lot. Secretly, I give women many explanations. In Gyalrong I have taught them many explanations and they know [dharma]. In addition, at Dungkar Monastery I also have many disciples who are old ladies and nuns.

Among the many laywomen who count themselves as Khandro's disciples are a shop owner in downtown Serta as well as the mother of a prominent Sera Monastery *tulku*, who both spoke to me about Khandro with effusive praise.

Conclusion *Relational autonomy beyond binary oppositions*

The first impression one gets from seeing Khandro Rinpoche in action is that she is an autonomous religious leader, beholden neither to one particular religious institution nor one geographic space. Though she is firmly tied to one major religious lineage as the disciple of Khenpo

Muensel and a practitioner of Great Perfection, she is constantly on the move, traveling to Golog's sacred mountains and caves including Arinag, Dzongne (rDzong gnas), Drongri, Drakar Dreldzong (Brag dkar sprel rdzong), Sotog (bSo thog), and Amye Machen (A myes rma chen), where she performs frequently month-long retreats. Additionally, she travels to monasteries and hermitages around eastern Tibet, particularly Dungkar and Sera Monastery in Serta, among others, and of course to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong. At these religious centres she gives teachings, especially on transference of consciousness practices.

And yet, for all her activities as a solitary religious specialist traveling widely, meditating in caves, leading rituals, and bestowing blessings on devotees, her account of her life accentuates key relationships with others that have made her position as an autonomous religious specialist possible, such as her family connections to both local political offices and religious institutions, her close connection to her guru Khenpo Muensel, her important but challenging relationship with Tulku Jigga, and most recently her productive partnership with Tulku Rangrig Dorje, to name just a few. It is also important to note that many of these relationships took place in environments charged with strong religious and cultural significance, making these sacred sites more than backdrops for the human dramas unfolding on their terrains, and, in Khandro Rinpoche's case, integral parts of her formation as a *khandroma*. In particular, during the decade she spent at Sera Monastery, people began perceiving her as an incarnation of another *khandroma* who lived for many years at Sera Monastery, Sera Khandro. This association helped make sense of her position as Tulku Jigga's consort at the time and continues to augment her stature as a *khandroma* today. At Vairotsana Cave, Khandro Rinpoche's objectives to rebuild monastic Buddhism were reinforced by the cave's ties to imperial Tibetan personages involved in the early proliferation of Buddhism in Tibet, such as Vairotsana and Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje, whose physical presences live on in the cave's sacred architecture. Proximity to the contours of Vairotsana's body imprinted in the cave wall and the stupa honouring Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje not only inspires Khandro Rinpoche and Chogtul Rangrig Dorje to continue their work, but provides a culturally intelligible mold for others, importantly Khandro Rinpoche's biographer Pema Oesel Taye, to tell their story of propagating Tibetan Buddhism.

Khandro Rinpoche's account challenges key oppositions scholars often apply to the study of religion, such as monastic/lay and institutional/non-institutional religion. Visiting Khandro Rinpoche at the Vairotsana Cave provides a startling contrast to the more typical four-fold Buddhist social hierarchy, in which monks have the highest posi-

tion, followed by nuns, laymen, and laywomen, respectively.⁴⁰ Take, for example, figure 3, which is a common situation in which to find Khandro Rinpoche. I took this photo from the doorway to her room at the cave, where devotees enter to receive Khandro's blessing. She sits upraised on a low mattress in a position of prominence, while her partner Chogtul Rinpoche sits next to her, beneath her on a rug.



Fig. 3. Khandro Rinpoche seated in her room at the Vairotsana Cave, with Chogtul Rangrig Dorje. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2007.

On the one hand, this image reverses the far more common hierarchies of male teacher on upraised cushion and female devotee beneath, monastic above and lay patron below. Even so, her account does not flatten out distinctions between lay and monastic entirely, for she presents her life as an example of how difficult it is to negotiate being a wife and mother as well as being a dedicated practitioner of Great Perfection contemplative practices. But her narrative also demonstrates the ways in which she created space for both at different times in her life. Today Khandro Rinpoche is neither nun nor lay householder, in the sense that she has never taken monastic vows and also has renounced her lay status, given away much of her worldly possessions such as jewelry and fine clothes, and dedicated herself full-time to cultivating her own religious practices and performing rituals on behalf of her patrons.⁴¹ Her identity as a nonmonastic female religious specialist therefore demonstrates the inaccuracy of bi-

⁴⁰ For a study of the four-fold Buddhist *saṅgha* in early Indian Buddhism, see Skilling 2001.

⁴¹ In this sense of being neither nun nor laywoman, she follows in Sera Khandro's footsteps, who described herself in similar terms (*jo min nag min*). For a discussion of this, see Jacoby 2014, ch. 4.

nary opposites such as monastic/lay for understanding Buddhist social contexts.⁴² Applying such an interpretive scheme on Khandro Rinpoche's life story and activities reifies an opposition that is rarely present between monastic institutional Buddhism and nonmonastic autonomous religious specialists including many religious positions associated with women such as *khandromas*, "revenants" (*'das log*), and oracles/diviners.⁴³ Let alone endorsing such an opposition, Khandro Rinpoche's life's work is dedicated to rebuilding monastic institutions as a primary way to contribute to Buddhist flourishing, a mission she dedicates to the memory of her guru, the monastic abbot Khenpo Muensel.

Another binary often applied to the study of religion in Tibet that is belied by Khandro Rinpoche's life story is the opposition between PRC state control and Tibetan efforts to revitalise religion. The nearly complete state repression of religion during her youth as well as the efforts to which she went to help Khenpo Muensel procure a permit to rebuild Poenkhör Monastery underscore the power of various levels of the state to control religious affairs in Tibet. And yet, Khandro Rinpoche's story of the revival of Buddhism in Tibet in the post-market reform era from the early 1980s forward is not only a story of Chinese political control and Tibetan religious resistance.⁴⁴ For one thing, the "Chinese officials" (*rgya mi'i las byed pa*) she most often dealt with on the local county level in Golog were not always Chinese, but often Tibetans occupying positions within the Chinese state. Not only were they Tibetan, but according to Khandro Rinpoche one local prominent "Chinese official" who was instrumental in restoring Khenpo Muensel's monastery was her husband. Others who have supported her religious endeavours include her siblings, sister and brother-in-laws, children, and sons-and-daughter-in-laws. Khandro Rinpoche speaks about the extreme repression she and those close to her experienced during the difficult years of the 1950s until the 1970s, such as Khenpo Muensel's 20-year prison sentence, but her story also illustrates the complex ways in which religious and state authorities in contemporary Tibet coexist, interrelate, and at times even reinforce each other. Khandro Rinpoche's ability to navigate between state officials and religious institutions is a product of her status as neither life-long renunciate nor householder, embedded in familial and religious relationships that enable her to thrive as a *dākinī* in Tibet today.

⁴² For an insightful analysis of the shortcomings of such binaries, see Salgado 2013: 54-58.

⁴³ For further information about Tibetan women as "revenants" and oracles/diviners, see Pommaret 1989; Havnevik 2002; and Diemberger 2005.

⁴⁴ For more on the repression and revival of religion in Tibet since its incorporation into the PRC, see Goldstein & Kapstein 1998; Barnett & Akiner 1994.

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