Focused on the period of time corresponding to the life of the eighth Dalai Lama (1758–1804), this chapter narrates events that largely do not concern him. Throughout his life, the eighth Dalai Lama evinced little interest in political matters, and he passed his time more concerned with his own education and spiritual practice. At the same time, however, momentous events swirled beyond his chamber doors in the Potala Palace, and Tibet’s place in the world would change dramatically as a consequence.

With the death of the seventh Dalai Lama, a new practice was initiated, whereby incarnated lamas called trülkus (sprul sku) were appointed to serve as regents during the Dalai Lamas’ minority. Denmo Trülku Ngawang Jampel Delek Gyatso was the first to serve in this fashion, and along with the Panchen Lama, he played a critical role in identifying the new incarnation of the Dalai Lama. Moreover, it was the regent who was primarily responsible for overseeing the education of the incarnation, formulating government policy in his name, and providing the inspirational focus for the Tibetan people until the Dalai Lama came of age.

The regent also authored a variety of government reforms and public works projects, including improvements in transportation. When Denmo Trülku died in 1777, the twenty-year-old Dalai Lama was asked to assume authority over the government; when he declined, Tsemo-Ngawang Tsültrim was recalled from Beijing, where he had been in the service of the emperor, and appointed as the new regent. In 1781, the Dalai Lama fleetingly assumed political power, but he continued to rely on his regent, and when international events became too complex, he withdrew from a public role once again. When Changkya Hotoktu Yeshé Tenpé Drönmé died in 1786, Regent Tsemo-Ngawang was recalled to Beijing to be the court’s lead religious teacher and “to advise all of the Buddhist monasteries in China.” One wonders whether the Chinese were not simply trying to get rid of a strong figure so they would have
a freer hand in Central Tibet. He was succeeded in the regency by his assistant, another trülku called Tatsak Jedrung Tenpé Gönpö.

All of these peregrinations by Tibetan lamas signified that Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799), the long-lived and long-ruling fifth sovereign of the Manchu Dynasty, hoped to build more substantial relations with the great Tibetan lamas. One result of this policy was that he was inspired to build monasteries in Zheho (Chengde), northeast of Beijing, that were modeled on both the Potala Palace and Trashi Lhünpo Monastery.

When they were complete, the emperor invited the Panchen Lama Lozang Pelden Yeshé (1737–1780) to visit China. He agreed to go, but only after much anguished deliberation. His fears of the prevalence of smallpox turned out to be justified, as he seems to have contracted the disease between Zheho and Beijing, where he died. Before expiring, however, the Panchen Lama was able to develop a close bond to the emperor, due to which he was given extensive offerings, a storehouse of wealth that was brought back to Tibet after his demise.

This period saw the expansion of international contacts between Tibet and her neighbors. Tibetans maintained their customary religious relationships with their Himalayan neighbors, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal, not to mention both Mongolia and China to the north and east. But Shakabpa also labors to assemble evidence that Tibetan leaders exercised political authority within traditional Tibetan territory and beyond. For example, he cites a case in which the Tibetan government was able to express its authority over Sangen, Kham in eastern Tibet in 1779–1780, suppressing lawlessness that threatened transportation routes. Shakabpa cites Tibet’s support for Sikkim in a war against Bhutan and its Gurkha supporters in 1775 as evidence for Tibet’s international role in the Himalayas.

It was also during this time that Tibetans had their first close contact with the ever more significant force in South Asia, the British, who were then elaborating a presence in India and across the map. Warren Hastings, the governor-general of India, sent his personal secretary, George Bogle, and Doctor Alexander Hamilton to Tibet when the Panchen Lama arranged for their visit to Trashi Lhünpo Monastery in Zheho, in Chengde, Hebei Province, was the summer capital of the Qing Court. The location is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. See “Mountain Resort and Its Outlying Temples, Chengde: UNESCO World Heritage Center,” http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/703, accessed January 30, 2009.