Gendun Chopel: Grains of Gold—Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveller (Tibet, 1941)

Introduction

Unlike so many Asian nations, Tibet escaped the most direct impact of imperialism and colonialism between 1860 and 1940. It was ten years later, in 1950, that troops of the People’s Liberation Army invaded Tibet. Nine years later, in March 1959, the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled into exile to India, where he continues to reside. What was once Tibet has been absorbed into the People’s Republic of China. Its vast region has been apportioned among the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, and the newly created Tibet Autonomous Region.

Although Tibet did not become absorbed into an empire until the last half of the twentieth century, it had vexed relations with two empires in the previous century. The Manchu rulers of China had held firm control over Tibetan foreign relations during much of the eighteenth century. During the late nineteenth century the Qing Dynasty moved toward its demise; the infant emperor Puyi would abdicate in 1912. During this period, Chinese influence over Tibet grew progressively weaker. During this same period, the British, long established in India, came to regard Tibet to the north as a buffer state between their Raj and Russia. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had become concerned about possible Russian influence in Tibet. Among the advisors of the thirteenth Dalai Lama was Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938), a monk from the ethnically Mongol region of Buryatia near Lake Baikal. In 1898, Czar Nicholas II had presented him with a watch in recognition of the intelligence he had gathered during his time in Tibet.

Alarmed that Tibet might fall under Russian influence, the British demanded greater trade relations with Tibet. When these demands were refused, British troops under the command of Colonel Francis Younghusband crossed into Tibet in December 1903. Over the next six months they marched on Lhasa, encountering along the way Tibetan forces armed with matchlock rifles, swords, and spears. In a series of skirmishes and battles, some three thousand Tibetans were killed. By the time they reached Lhasa, the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia. Negotiating with the senior monk of the Geluk sect, they
extracted a trade agreement that allowed the British to establish stations in two Tibetan towns, but not in the capital of Lhasa.

In 1903, the year of the British invasion, Gendun Chopel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel) was born in the Reb gong region of Amdo in the far northeast corner of the Tibetan cultural domain. He would become one of the most important Tibetan intellectuals of the twentieth century, renowned as a scholar, translator, historian, essayist, poet, and painter. The son of a respected lama of the Nyingma (Rnying ma) sect of Tibetan Buddhism, at the age of five, he was recognised as the incarnation of the abbot of the famous Nyingma monastery of Dorje Drak (Rdo rje brag). Following his father’s untimely death, Gendun Chopel entered a local monastery of the Geluk (Dge lugs) sect before moving to the major Geluk monastery of the region, called Labrang (Bla brang). There he gained particular notoriety as a debater, able to uphold unorthodox positions on points of Buddhist doctrine. In 1928 he left Amdo for Lhasa, where he entered Drepung ('Bras spungs) monastery, the largest monastery in the world, with over ten thousand monks. There, he resumed his studies, again gaining a reputation as a skilled debater and controversial figure.

In 1934, the Indian scholar and nationalist Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963) arrived in Lhasa in search of Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in Tibet. He enlisted Gendun Chopel as his guide, just as he was completing the final examinations of the Geluk geshe, the highest academic degree in the monastic curriculum of that sect. After their bibliographic tour of southern Tibet was concluded, Rahul Sankrityayan invited Gendun Chopel to return with him to India. Over the next decade, he would travel extensively, and often alone, across India, also making a long visit to Sri Lanka. During his time abroad, he learned Sanskrit, Pāli, several Indian vernaculars, as well as English. He assisted the Russian Tibetologist, George Roerich, in the translation of an important fifteenth-century history of Tibetan Buddhism that would be published in 1949 as The Blue Annals. Some years earlier, in Kalimpong, he assisted the French scholar Jacques Bacot in the translation of several Dunhuang manuscripts from the Tibetan dynastic period. He visited and made studies of many of the important Buddhist archaeological sites and pilgrimage places in India, writing Rgya gar gyi gnas chen khag la 'grod pa'i lam yig (Guidebook for Travel to the Holy Places of India),¹ a work that is still used by Tibetan pilgrims. He also studied Sanskrit erotica and frequented Calcutta brothels, producing his famous sex manual,

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