



TIBET  
HISTORY AND CULTURE

# The Ninth Panchen Lama

## A Biography

Han Jingshan / Shesrab Nyima  
Translated by Jeffrey Yao et al.



China Intercontinental Press





# THE NINTH PANCHEN LAMA A BIOGRAPHY

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Translated by Jeffrey Yao et al.

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**PART I The 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama:  
Four Decades in Tibet (1883-1923)**

**T**raversing in the desolate grass-covered Tibetan Plateau, accompanied by his entourage, he was tempered by the strong winds and heavy snow on the long and exhausting journey.

For months, they had been travelling along the precipitous Tanggula Mountains, narrowly escaping from a picked troop of hundreds of soldiers sent by the governing council of Tibet.

In Yushu of Qinghai, on the pass through which Princess Wencheng (628–680) entered Tibet for marriage in the Tang Dynasty, he stopped and took a lingering gaze at the hills and waters of Tibet.

Having just turned 40, an age alleged by Confucius as when one is no longer vexed by earthly affairs, he was still haunted by too many worries and anxieties of life. He was looking back at his snowy homeland probably because he somehow felt that he might no longer be able to return here, back to the high throne in the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, preaching the everlasting Buddha truth to the believers who trusted, loved, and respected him...

On horseback, the living Buddha arrived on the Central Plain.

He was the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama<sup>[1]</sup> of Tibet, Thubten Choekyi Nyima.

# CHAPTER I

## A Son of an Ordinary Family "Entering" the Golden Urn – the Beginning of a Challenging Life Journey

**I**nitially living outside the Forbidden City, Zaitian (1871–1908) was chosen in 1875 to succeed the throne as the 11<sup>th</sup> emperor of the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), known as Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908). Little did he know about the lurking crisis of the country he was to govern.

He was then no more than 4 years old.

In 1883, the ninth year of Emperor Guangxu's reign, a baby named Lhundrup Gyatso was born to a mute woman in the Gyaca County located on the border between the old Kham and U-Tsang, two traditional provinces of Tibet (now part of the Tibet Autonomous Region). The largest challenge for Emperor Guangxu that year was the conflict between China and France over Vietnam, which eventually led to the Sino-French War (1883–1885).

Lhundrup Gyatso was younger than Emperor Guangxu by twelve years, exactly one cycle of the Chinese zodiac. Both of them were born in the Year of the Goat.

# **A Freak of Fate – Identified as the Soul Boy of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama**

On the twelfth night of the first Tibetan lunar month of 1883, Dangchung Tsono was lying in total exhaustion in her shabby room, listening to the cheer and laughter from her employer's family drinking and celebrating the new year. Without her husband by her side, she was overwhelmed with bitter loneliness until, all of a sudden, extreme labour pains struck her...

In the small hours of the night, this shepherdess gave birth to a square-face, good-looking baby all by herself. It had never occurred to her that this little boy would one day become the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama of Tibet.



A portrait of the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama's mother

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Strange enough, when her neighbours heard the baby's cries and came to take a look, Dangchung Tsono found herself without the ability to speak.

It was said years later that the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama's mother used to be very talkative, and often meddled with the political and religious affairs in the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, which "resulted in many problems". The 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama tried every available means to persuade his mother out of the habit, but to no avail. In the end, he could only pray that the mother of his reincarnation might speak less, which explained why the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama's mother "became mute immediately after delivery".

Lhundrup Gyatso's mother was up to her ears already as a servant looking after livestock for an aristocratic family. Hardly could she spare time to take care of the newly born. Therefore, after careful consideration, she decided to leave Lhundrup Gyatso at his grandfather Chimed Wangpo's place, leaving him to his own devices.

In 1887, the Fire-Pig year of the 15<sup>th</sup> Tibetan rabjung cycle, the location of the reincarnated 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama was revealed to the twelve-year-old 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as he conducted divine practices in front of the statue of Palden Lhamo in the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

Several search teams were then sent by the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in secret to look for the reincarnation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama who died at the young age of twenty-seven.

The Tashi Lhunpo Monastery was among the four major Gelugpa monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism, boasting a range of tall and well-decorated buildings located on a hill in the center of the city.

Three candidates, all outstandingly intelligent, were identified through traditional religious rituals and historical conventions. Then, a large white fungus was found on one of the pillars in the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama's stupa in the monastery, indicating that his reincarnation should come from the village of Kasha in Dagpo District (now located in Gyaca County and Nang County of the Tibet Autonomous Region). Moreover, among the candidates identified in the district, only Lhundrup Gyatso could repeatedly and accurately recognize the belongings of the late Panchen Lama. Therefore, this poor family's son was selected as one of the three final candidates of the reincarnated Panchen Lama.



# **An Imperial Decree from the Forbidden City**

Wenshuo, the Amban in Tibet at the time, submitted a memorial to the Qing court reporting that "three candidates who are incredibly smart and spiritually connected to the deceased Panchen Lama have been found..." Emperor Guangxu wrote an imperial edict in response on 23 December 1887: "It has been five years since the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama passed away...I am so pleased and reassured to hear the news from you. Make sure that the three candidates' names be put into a golden urn and the established Golden Urn Ritual be meticulously observed..." The Emperor's order was clear – the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama must be selected through the process of the "Golden Urn".

On receiving the emperor's order, Wenshuo, who was caught up in the complicated and intractable disputes with the British invaders, immediately assumed his duty, urging the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery to send the three candidates to Lhasa for the Golden Urn Ritual.

Thus, the three candidates, each escorted by a large procession, marched respectively towards Lhasa from Shigatse, Topgyel and Dagpo.

The Golden Urn Ritual was finally carried out in front of the imperial memorial tablet housed in the Potala Palace in Lhasa on the fifteenth day of the first Chinese lunar month, or 26 February 1888, after 72 days of meticulous preparation. It was the fifth time that such a ritual had been practised since its official creation in 1792 by Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799, who ruled from 1735 to 1796).

It was truly a blessed day for Lhasa. The gentle breeze whispered soft

tunes and the weather was mild and warm, all indicating that everything would go smoothly.

In the Sasum Namgyal Hall of the Potala Palace, a tablet was erected in front of the thangka portraying Emperor Qianlong, with "May My Emperor Live and Reign Forever" engraved in Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan scripts. As the Buddhist chants resonated around the hall, the ritual began. Amid the solemn chanting came in the three most prominent figures in Tibet, namely, the regent Demo Khutukhtu, the Ganden Tripa,<sup>[2]</sup> and the Jasak<sup>[3]</sup> Lama from the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery.

## **The Golden Urn Ritual Hosted by Amban Wenshuo**

When the chanting was over, Wenshuo inscribed the three candidates' names in Chinese, Manchu and Tibetan scripts onto the ivory tablets. Then, under the witness of everyone present, he put the tablets into the golden urn with solemnity.

As the sacred religious ritual came to an end, the moment of truth came.

Wenshuo carefully drew out an ivory tablet from the urn, which revealed that Lhundrup Gyatso, the son of Dangchung Tsomo from Gyaca County, was the reincarnation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama.

A few hours later in the Sunlight Hall of the Potala Palace, the reincarnated soul boy of the Panchen Lama met the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso for the first time, who skillfully shaved the soul boy's head and gave him the dharma name of Choekyi Nyima.

That year, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was 12 years old and the reincarnation was 5.

After the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama presented the reincarnation with his handwritten copies of the *Ode to Epithets of the Buddha*, *Sutra on Longevity*, and *Blessing Verses*, celebration banquets were respectively held in the Sunlight Hall of the Potala Palace and the main hall of Kashag.

Kashag was the administrative council of the Tibetan government. Typically comprised of three senior lay officials and one senior monk official, its collegiate panel exercised legislative, executive and judiciary powers, and followed the orders of the Amban in Tibet and the Dalai Lama.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama treated the representatives from the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery to exquisite pastries and amulets, and conducted an Abhisheka (initiation) ritual to offer his blessings.

Two months later, when the message that Choekyi Nyima was identified as the reincarnated Panchen Lama reached the ears of the newly wed Emperor Guangxu, the 17-year-old emperor was so pleased that he thoughtfully ordered special imperial gifts to be sent along with his congratulatory edict: a large piece of *khata* silk, a string of coral beads, and a jade *ruyi* sceptre for the reincarnation of the late 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, and for the regent Demo Khutukhtu, a piece of *khata* and a *ruyi* sceptre inlaid with jade.

In the final lines of his edict, Emperor Guangxu demanded the Amban in Tibet to forward his imperial message to the Tibetan regent: be sure to take good care of the future 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama "to not let down my sincere hope for the invigoration of the Gelugpa sect".

# **The Enthronement Ceremony Hosted by Amban Shengtai**

Four years later, on the third day of Chinese Lunar New Year of 1892, the enthronement ceremony, an event of paramount significance to any Grand Living Buddha, was held for the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama.

The preparation for the ceremony was an extraordinarily complicated task. During the four years preceding the enthronement, the then Amban in Tibet, Shengtai, submitted one memorial after another to the imperial court, requesting that the date of enthronement be decided, the imperial attestation with the golden seal be granted, and royal gifts bestowed. By a decree from the emperor requiring "local governors along the way to arrange proper escort", the royal gifts were convoyed from Beijing across provinces to Tibet prior to the ceremony. All monks at the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery were summoned to prepare for the grand event. Shengtai was designated to host the event at the Monastery, and, on behalf of the Qing government, present 10,000 taels of silver to the new Panchen Lama.



A string of amber beads (left) and a silver-plated mandala (right) sent by the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama as tribute to Empress Dowager Cixi

The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, then only 16 years old, had not yet undergone the upasampada ritual to actually become a fully ordained monk, and was therefore not entitled to ordain the newly enthroned Panchen Lama "according to Buddhist monastic codes". As a substitute, the regent Demo Khutukhtu was ordered by Emperor Guangxu to ordain the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama.

Immediately after his enthronement at the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama sent one of his abbots, Lobzang Rondin, as a special envoy to Beijing to express his profound gratitude to Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) and Emperor Guangxu. However, unaccustomed to the climate, the abbot died in the capital city on 2 October 1895. For the passing of Lobzang Rondin, the emperor sent his condolences along with "100 taels of silver and a piece of *khata*", a gesture that deeply warmed the heart of the 12-year-old Panchen Lama.

In the same year, another two envoy teams were sent by the young Panchen Lama to the Qing court, one dispatched on 15 September to present Tenshyuk, a special memorial to the throne expressing wishes for the longevity of the emperor, and the other on 29 September to "pay homage at the royal mausoleums".

## CHAPTER II

# A Budding Hero: Fifteen Years as a Religious Leader

**D**ecades before Choekyi Nyima was born, the British had taken control over Bhutan and began to hasten their plot to break into Tibet. In 1855, the year of the birth of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama Tenpai Wangchuk (1855–1882), fuelled and militarily supported by the British, the Gurkha Kingdom (present-day Nepal) waged an aggressive war against Tibet, which lasted for two years and left an enduring scar on the land of Tibet. The war ended in the first unequal treaty signed by the Tibetan authority, under the approval of the Qing government, with a foreign power. A sharpened sword was placed to hang over the heads of Tibetans by the British plotting behind the scenes.

In 1888, when the reincarnation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama was determined through the Golden Urn Ritual at the Potala Palace, the British presented a special "gift" by advancing "the troops of the Queen" to the Tibetan border shortly after Sikkim fell to its hands. The Tibetan authority, well-prepared, soon massed its troops into defensive lines, vowing not to lose any piece of land to the invaders. The heavily fortified Mount Lungthur was the first barrier against the advance of the British troops north up to Tibet.

In order for their plot to succeed, the British had to make sure that the nearly impregnable defensive line of Mount Lungthur be eliminated, and the fierce passion of all Tibetans to repel the British trespassers completely

dissolved. Unexpectedly, both of these challenging aims came to be realized with the "help" from the Forbidden City.

## **1887: A Conspiracy Shattering Peace in Tibet**

In 1887, a sudden message came from the southwestern borderline of the Qing Empire that Sikkim had fallen under British yoke. This was soon followed by the expulsion of the local Tibetan forces in 1888. The fact that the Tibetan presence was completely wiped out from Sikkim in a short 15-year span shocked entire Tibet.

Faced with the imminent threat of invasion, monks from the Drepung, Ganden, Sera and Tashi Lhunpo Monasteries submitted a petition, jointly with local officials, to the Amban Wenshuo, calling for "vengeance as the only proper response and resolution to fight to the last man and woman against the British. The oath was taken by all Tibetans, monks and laymen alike, with unbending determination".

Deeply moved, the Amban decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Tibetans against the oncoming invaders, and not to cede even an inch of land to possibly stain the glory of the Empire.

However, thousands of miles away in the Forbidden City, the imperial court had its own reasons and considerations.

The painful failure of the First Opium War 45 years ago was such a blow to the self-esteem of the vast and wealthy Empire that its once haughty and arrogant rulers gradually became submissive and even servile. The last



stroke of the signature on the Treaty of Nanking [Nanjing] between the Qing government and Britain opened a Pandora's box of misfortune, as the Qing officials became accustomed to conceding to Westerners.

At the time, however, Wenshuo was still hoping that the emperor could, as inscribed on the plaque hanging above the Dragon Throne in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, "forge a great empire and pacify the whole territory", by answering the tearful calls of the Tibetans and supporting local resistance against the invaders, instead of cowering before foreign threats. He waited anxiously for the decree from the Forbidden City.

## **Message from the Imperial Edict**

Wenshuo waited and waited, until finally the imperial edict came to him with a chilling demand to "accept all the terms proposed by the British, and withdraw Tibetan troops from Mount Lungthur..."

While the Amban fell on his knees to receive the edict, his hands were shaking uncontrollably and eventually he collapsed onto the ground; he kept wondering how he could possibly forward such an irrevocably ruthless edict to all the Tibetans.

He was clearly aware of what it would mean to the Empire if the fortifications on Mount Lungthur built on the blood and bones of the Tibetan soldiers were torn down – the gateway to Tibet and Chinese inland would lie wide open to the invaders.

Wenshuo had a vague fear that this issue, if not handled well, could lead to the first fissure between the Tibetan authority and the central regime. He dared not think further.

As he expected, when the imperial edict was heard around the golden roofed monasteries, the city of Lhasa and the remote borders, everyone, from the local aristocrats to the lords of manors, and from the officials to the serfs, was perplexed.

What steps would Wenshuo take?

Influenced by the Confucian teaching that "one should ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth, and secure the livelihood for the people", the Amban made his first bold and daring move in his life. Indeed, he was concerned with how the Forbidden City would perceive his act, but he cared more about its reception among the Tibetans. He even had the idea that it might not have been the emperor's real intention to issue the imperial edict.

Finally, he made a decision – to stand shoulder to shoulder alongside Tibetan officials and soldiers against the British invaders, even if it could mean to die in hails of gunfire and bomb raids on Mount Lungthur.

## **A More Urgent Matter in the Decree on the Golden Urn Ritual**

To provide commentary on a more urgent matter, more than three times the length of Emperor Guangxu's affirmative reply on the Golden Urn Ritual was given in his decree on 23 December 1887.

Three points were highlighted:

Firstly, no fortresses were allowed to be established on the Tibetan border, a sign of the Qing government's acquiescence to the British entering Mount Lungthur;

Secondly, the Tibetans' barriers along the border were impeding the imperial court's ongoing negotiation with the British on opening the border for trade;

Thirdly, the Tibetans should have had some sense of obedience to the imperial court when even the British were seeking negotiation and ready to make compromises.

The unusual phrasing of this decree implicated that the Tibetan government and the Amban Wenshuo in Tibet should be fully responsible for all the consequences up to then, while indicating that the imperial court would not provide protection for anyone who stubbornly persisted with resistance.

Wenshuo's reply to the emperor's instruction to "withdraw the troops on the border without delay" was probably the toughest job he had done in his lifetime:

Since our troops are defending at Mount Lungthur without border trespassing, the withdrawal is hardly justifiable.

The words "*hardly justifiable*" were in fact a direct refusal to comply with the emperor's order. This was probably his last desperate resort.

Wenshuo emotionally reflected on how fast his 32 years of political career, which started in 1856 at the Qing imperial Ministry of Revenue, had gone by.

When the celebration was being held for the reincarnation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama at the Potala Palace, British cannons began to thunder from the southern foothills of the Himalayas. Tibet's first anti-British battle had broken out, which came to be known as the Battle of Mount Lungthur.

Two weeks after the Golden Urn Ritual, an urgent message was sent to Wenshuo by the Grand Council in charge of military affairs under the order of Emperor Guangxu, instructing him to head back to Beijing without delay after his successor Shengtai took office.

A week after this message was delivered, the emperor put an ultimate end to Wenshuo's political career with an order that he was "dismissed right away due to his overbold actions, incompetence, and neglect of the imperial affairs".

The emperor's order that he was "*dismissed right away due to his overbold actions*" was no doubt a heavy blow to Wenshuo, who could not help shuddering and thinking of how he had shed sweat on the Tibetan land during his tenure as Amban in Tibet: in particular the two major issues he had addressed in his post – selecting the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama through the Golden Urn Ritual and firmly supporting the Tibetan laymen and monks' combat against the British invaders. At the thought of the ending of his political career, and his heartfelt loyalty to the Emperor and to the Tibetan authority, he could not control his tears.

Well aware of how Wenshuo had been dismissed, the succeeding Amban Shengtai learned a lesson and strictly followed the imperial court's policy of concession. This, however, turned out to be the root cause for future conflicts between the Tibetan authority and the Qing government. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, disappointed at the dismissal of Wenshuo and the choice of Amban by the imperial court, came to realize that the Qing court could not be relied on, and started to consider seeking a Tibetan-Russian ally.

**Unity Brought by Gunfire – a**

# **Thousand Tibetan and Han Soldiers Killed in the Battle of Mount Lungthur**

Located 20 kilometres northeast of Rheinoek, Mount Lungthur, among the undulating Himalayan foothills covered by thick forests, lush grass and gurgling streams, was a strategically important entrance to Tibet from the Indian border town Darjeeling.

Apart from the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's Tibetan troops, fighting monks were sent by the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama to join the battle defending the border. The best hundred Tibetan soldiers at the frontline were as skilled in tactics as those trained by Han Chinese military officers.

Yet, without the support from the central government, it was no easy task for the Tibetans, who were only armed with broadswords, spears, bows and arrows, matchlocks, and even more primitive weapons like stone whips, to fight against their "deceitful, cunning and unpredictable" enemy – the British troops well equipped with advanced weapons.

This was the first battle against British invasion in Tibet's history.

The defence line at Mount Lungthur, first set up in 1866, had since been patrolled by guards sent by the Tibetan government, aristocrats and monasteries. To win the battle in 1888, fighting monks from several monasteries were trained to serve in the troops and stone blockhouses were secretly built in the mountain's shady woods.

In 1888, the Tibetan government and the Abbot Assembly of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery joined forces for the impending battle against the British invasion. They sent skilled stonemasons, carpenters and more labourers for

the construction of new blockhouses, and deployed cavalries and troops from across Tibet, all armed to teeth against the cunning British invaders. It is recorded that some Han soldiers also joined the battle.

Unfortunately, the fierce battle ended up with Tibet's crushing defeat by the British forces.

Changgeng, the then Amban in Tibet, faced quite a conundrum – he had to obey the orders of the Qing government while taking into consideration the sentiments of local monks and lay residents. To balance this difficult situation, he treaded a very fine line when talking and working, thinking over every single decision to avoid any blunders. Unsatisfied with his overcautious performance, the Qing government dismissed him without hesitation, blaming him for Tibet's defeat in the Battle of Mount Lungthur as an excuse.

## **Two Ambans, Two Ways of Handling Tibet**

In Renqinggang Village on the border of Tibet, Shengtai, a member of the Plain Yellow Banner of Mongolia, was like a cat on a hot tin roof. Despite his previous experience in the negotiations between Russia and the Qing government on setting the Altai Mountains as a boundary line, he was anxious about this upcoming round of negotiations.

However, upon their presence at the negotiations, Shengtai and his delegation were rejected by Charles Alfred Bell, a British negotiator, who claimed that Tibetan representatives should be excluded from the bargaining table.