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## Leading Scholar Dies, Cultural Criticism Stepped Up

One of the leading cultural and intellectual figures of modern Tibet, recognised by China as a "national treasure", has died.

Dungkar Lobsang Trinley, who died from cancer on 21st July in a Los Angeles hospital, was noted as an outstanding Buddhist scholar, a Marxist historian, an expert on traditional poetics and a campaigner for modern Tibetan education and cultural development.

The 71-year old scholar was widely admired among Tibetan intellectuals, but in the days before his death the Chinese authorities launched an ideological drive against his views and may have already stripped him of his privileges.

On 11th July the main Tibet newspaper published a high-level attack on unnamed Tibetan history researchers at the University of Tibet, where Dungkar Rinpoche was Professor of History.

"Some say that college teaching material will be void of substance if religion is not included," said Chen Kuiyuan, Tibet's Party Secretary, according to the newspaper. "Comrades who are engaged in research on Tibetan culture should be indignant at such statements," Chen said, slamming the use of religious material in education. Statements made by "some people claiming to be authorities" in support of including religion in Tibetan studies were similar to separatist attempts "to use the spoken language and culture to cause disputes and antagonism between nationalities," said Chen.

Dungkar Rinpoche was made a national-level scholar in 1987, one of only four from Central Tibet given the title, but there are unofficial reports that last year the award was withdrawn from him and another Tibetan scholar, the medical expert Jampa Trinley. Two years ago Dungkar had failed to speak out against the Dalai Lama in the dispute over the reincarnation of the next Panchen Lama, and last year he declined to take part in a major political re-education campaign.

His later works were not authorised for publication and there are no reports yet of his death being announced in Tibet, another indicator that he may have been downgraded.

The head of education in Tibet, Yang Chaoji, who died aged 65 on 23rd June, was given a front page obituary in the Tibet Daily two days after his death. Yang, a hard-line secretary of the Tibet regional Party's Education Work Committee, head of the regional Education Committee and like Dungkar Rinpoche a former Vice-Principal of Tibet University, is believed to have fronted recent criticisms on the Tibetan historians and researchers at the University.

## **"Hold onto Language"**

Dungkar Rinpoche first appears to have come under suspicion in 1992 when China's then leader Deng Xiaoping signalled an end to the "special characteristics" privilege which had allowed Tibetans to argue for a significant degree of cultural and economic autonomy. Dungkar Rinpoche saw the new policy as aiming at full assimilation of Tibet's economy and culture with China, and as jeopardising the brilliantly successful cultural reconstruction achieved during the previous 15 years by Tibetan educationalists and moderate Chinese to repair the damage of the Cultural Revolution.

"Educational method, direction and purity depend only on holding onto the language and writing appropriate to the nationality," he had written in the December 1993 edition of the Journal of Tibet University, hinting at the risks presented by the new policy. "If a nationality is separated from its language and writing, and another nationality's language and writing becomes the basis for its education, difficulties will result."

In his spoken statements he was more direct. "We have reached a dangerous point. The number of people in Tibet today who are literate in Tibetan is diminishing, in spite of the avowed aim of the nationalities policy implemented in Tibet over the last 40 years," he said in a talk given in 1992. "In spite of Tibetan being declared the first official language to be used in all government offices and meetings and in official correspondence, Chinese is used everywhere as the working language, and since the level of Tibetan is so low our people are being led by the nose and have no power over their own destiny."

He regarded the establishment of educational institutes which could promote Tibetan, as well as teach fluency in Chinese, as the priority. "This is without any question the most important area in which foreign aid can help us," he said in the 1992 talk. "All hope in our future, all other developments, cultural identity, and protection of our heritage depends on this. Without educated people in all fields, expressing themselves in their own language, Tibetans are in danger of being assimilated. We have reached a crucial point," he said.

In October 1995 Chen Kuiyuan, Tibet's Party Secretary, declared at an internal meeting that the pro-independence movement had been found to be based on Tibetan religion, which was linked in turn to Tibetan culture. The theory, still not announced publicly, indicated the end of Party support for the advancement of Tibetan language and cultural studies. In the following months the experimental project in Tibetan-language secondary education was abandoned, several Tibetan-language courses at the University of Tibet were cancelled, new students in Tibetan studies were rejected, and university staff were ordered to rewrite text books for Tibetan-related courses and to reduce their religious content.

That year Dungkar Rinpoche resigned from the Committee for Tibetan Language, responsible for implementing language policy in the region; the Committee was downgraded some six months later from provincial to county level and may have been disbanded. Earlier, in 1995, almost unique amongst religious leaders and scholars in Tibet, he had avoided making a statement supporting the Chinese position concerning the selection of the Panchen Lama. In 1996, arguing ill health, he declined a formal request to join the patriotic education team that was sent to lecture monks at the monasteries of Drepung and Sera.

Although he was already suffering from advanced cancer, that refusal led to the withdrawal of the normal privileges of his position as a state-level scholar, and when he was moved to Beijing for treatment a hospital room was procured for him by friends only with difficulty.

The 71 year old scholar was allowed to travel to the United States three months ago, but was already too ill to respond to treatment by the time he arrived.

## **Marxism and Tradition**

Born in Kongpo Nyingtri in Southern Tibet in 1927, Dungkar Lobsang Trinley had been recognised under the old regime as a trulku or incarnate lama at the age of four. Five years later he joined Sera monastery in Lhasa, where he studied under Trijiang Rinpoche, tutor to the Dalai Lama. By the age of 30 he had gained the Geshe Lharampa degree, the highest academic qualification in the Tibetan monastic system.

When still in his twenties he had been appointed to the position of gekoe or disciplinarian at Gyume, the Lower Tantric College in Lhasa. He was already renowned for his knowledge of the five sciences of traditional Tibetan culture, which included Buddhist philosophy, logic, literature and grammar, astrology and poetics. His capacity for memorisation was legendary, and each night before going to sleep he is said to have learnt by heart as many pages of text as could be pierced by a single needle.

Even before the Chinese took full control of Tibet in 1959 Dungkar Rinpoche had been sent by the Tibetan administration to teach at the nascent Nationalities Institute in Beijing. There he absorbed the modern and specifically Marxist approaches to study introduced by the new regime. In the years after the Cultural Revolution he went on to occupy all the leading positions available to Tibetan academics - Vice-Principal and Professor of Tibet University, Honorary President of the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, Professor at the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing, and Vice-President of the Chinese Institute of Tibetology in Beijing.

His political rewards included membership of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and of the council of the Chinese Buddhist Association. His intellectual skills were recognised officially in 1987 when he was awarded the title of "state-level expert with outstanding contributions to science".

His major publications included *The Merging of Religious and Secular Rule in Tibet*, *The Annotated Red Annals*, *A List of Rare Tibetan Books*, *An Introduction to the History of the Potala and the Jokhang*, *A Dictionary of Han-Tibetan History*, and *The History of*

Struggles Among Various Religious Sects in Tibet, as well as important works on Tibetan poetics and on modern education.

He was regarded among Tibetologists outside China and Tibet as the outstanding academic figure in contemporary Tibet, and was elected by acclamation to the council of the International Association of Tibetan Scholars in 1992. The honour, although unsought, led the Chinese authorities to commence an investigation into his political reliability and to reassess his writings.

## **Last of "the Three Great Scholars"**

His death means that all three of the trio widely regarded by Tibetans as the greatest scholars in post-Cultural Revolution Tibet - Tsetan Shabdrung, Muge Samten and Dungkar Rinpoche - have now died. Of the three, only Dungkar excelled in modern as well as traditional studies.

By attempting to cross-fertilise Tibetan Buddhist thought and Marxist analytical method, and by campaigning for social and educational development, he was able to play a vital role in the reconstruction of Tibetan as a modern language and culture following the Cultural Revolution.

He was prominent amongst those intellectuals who saw modern education in Tibetan as the key to development and who campaigned for the establishment of the University in Tibet, set up in Lhasa in 1985 to provide tertiary-level education in Tibetan medium in both modern and traditional studies. "The development of the Tibetan language is an essential aspect of the economic development of Tibet," he said in 1995. The University still offers no Tibetan-language courses in any modern subject.

His greatest influence as an educator emerged in the late 1970s when he moved to the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing, combining his formative studies on Dunhuang manuscripts - later published by other scholars without attribution, it was famously alleged - with teaching to a new generation of young Tibetans. Among those students in Beijing was the young Eastern Tibetan writer Dondrup Gyal, who wrote the famous ode to Tibetan youth "The Blue Lake" and led the Tibetan literary revival of the early 1980s.

Other students included Jigme Ngapo, son of a former Governor of Tibet and now head of the Washington-based Tibetan language service of Radio Free Asia. "Dungkar Rinpoche was one of the few people of his generation who had a mission to carry on his culture, and to pass it down to the younger generation," said Jigme Ngapo. "Under the circumstances he did his best to do this," he added.

Tseten Wangchuk, now a prominent journalist with the Tibetan section of the US broadcasting station Voice of America, also studied under Dungkar Rinpoche during the early 1980s. "He had a very unique role in the more educated Tibetan circle, particularly since 1978," he said. "Under his teaching both in Beijing and in Lhasa a whole generation of young Tibetan intellectuals grew up, people who play a very important role in Tibet," he added.

Dungkar Rinpoche's classes in the 1980s, often crowded out by other teachers as well as students, focussed on traditional Tibetan studies: classical literature, religious philosophy, astrology, Tibetan poetry and grammar. When he returned to Lhasa in 1984 to take up the chair of Professor of History in Tibet University he gave public teachings on rare occasions, irked by personal clashes with the University authorities, but he nurtured a wide range of students and fellow scholars through individual tutorials, often giving private lectures to a single student and even exchanging teachings with the famous religious scholars Bomi Rinpoche and the late Yeshe Wangchuk.

On his return to Lhasa he became more active in the attempt to develop and sustain Tibetan culture and society, and was deeply involved in projects to promote Tibetan-medium education at all levels, to develop a curriculum and standard set of text books in Tibetan, and - in another project with deeply political undertones - to develop a standard Tibetan language for common use that would unite the dialects of central Tibet, Kham and Amdo by removing the divisions of regional speech. His approach always remained pragmatic: he argued, in a talk at the University of London in 1995, that Tibetan children should be taught Chinese as well as Tibetan from the first year of school, so as to be better equipped for modern life. That policy is now being implemented.

By the mid-1980s his public statements had become more radical, and included open criticisms of scholars who used what he called a Chinese or materialist approach to Tibetan studies. Tseten Wangchuk remembers him at a meeting in 1984 calling for Tibetan literature to be studied in terms of a "Tibetan way of thinking" even if this meant accepting mystical claims at face value, a view apparently contradicting the Marxist method of his earlier work. "He made other speeches of this kind in Lhasa, and after a while people became afraid to invite him to speak," Tseten Wangchuk recalls.

20 years earlier Dungkar Rinpoche had been seen as a collaborator. "He was well-disposed towards the Chinese, so none of us who are from the same class would trust him," recalled one Tibetan, another former dignitary, who worked for nine years in the same forced labour gang based in Toelung, near Lhasa, where they dug drains and constructed small power plants.

"During class struggle sessions he would say that he had done good deeds for the Party and would blame others, even though he was the same class as us, the landlord class", said the Tibetan, who now lives in India.

He was still widely distrusted in the late 1970s, when Tseten Wangchuk recalls watching Lhasa people go into the main bookshop to buy copies of his history "The Merging of Religious and Secular Rule in Tibet", a Marxist critique of the monastic influence on politics, so that they could tear the copies up in the street afterwards. Ten years later the same book was re-published by the Tibetan exile Government, which by then regarded it as a valuable historical study.

Ten days before Dungkar Rinpoche died, the famous religious teacher Geshe Yeshe Wangchuk was killed in a car accident in Kongpo. The 69-year old Geshe - the Tibetan title equivalent to a Doctor of Divinity - was vice chairman of the Tibetan branch of the Chinese Buddhist Association. Originally from a Tibetan area of north Yunnan, he joined

Sera monastery at the age of 16, one year before the Chinese invasion, and later spent a year in prison. In 1986 he became the first person to be awarded the degree of Geshe Lharampa since 1959, and was regarded as one of the key remaining religious leaders in Tibet. He visited India in 1982 and was reportedly persuaded to return to continue his teachings in Tibet by the Dalai Lama.

Last February one of Tibet's most highly ranked lamas died at the age of 49. Tenzin Jigme, the 6th Retring Rinpoche, was a lama of the "inner hutoktu" rank and was thus one of the few eligible in traditional Tibet to serve as a regent during the childhood of a Dalai Lama. He was awarded a number of honorary positions by the Chinese authorities and often required to give public statements on their behalf, but never recovered fully from a mental illness which developed shortly after the end of Cultural Revolution. He was in the same forced labour team as Dungkar Rinpoche, but unlike the rest of the team had to undergo nearly eight weeks of struggle sessions because of his status and his links with the then disgraced Panchen Lama.

"For one or two months he was detained during the day and class struggled against during the night time. I remember him lying unconscious on the floor and them using drainage water to throw on his body so that he would recover consciousness", said the former member of the labour team. "He confessed that he had acted mistakenly in the old days and that he had committed crimes against the people, but he never criticised other people," she said. Retring Rinpoche, at that time 16 years old, was then sent to prison for three years and was rehabilitated only in 1977.

"He used to say he was no longer a Rinpoche because he had been married, but he was still very much loved," said one Tibetan who knew him. "Many Lhasa citizens quietly worshipped him and although he took on a political role, he remained a deeply spiritual figure," he said. His death leaves the Chinese authorities with a dilemma about how to authorise or confirm any search for his reincarnation without recourse to the Dalai Lama.

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