

Information and analysis of developments in Tibet



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Anon. “*Nang khul gyi dus deb yin bas nyar chags bya rgyud do snang byed dgos*” in *Bod sjongs 'phrin deb* (“Tibet Information Book”), Volume 9, pp. 39ff., partially published in translation as “The Heroes of Ling: Elimination of a Sect” in *Background Papers on Tibet - September 1992*, Part 2, London: Tibet Information Network, 1992, pp. 30-33. Introduction is by TIN and the postscript is by John Hillary.

The Heroes of Ling: The Elimination of a Tibetan Sect

- Introduction -

In 1981, a religious sect was formed in Amdo county, a nomadic area 300 kilometres north of Lhasa. The sect seems to have flourished in the new and more liberal atmosphere which developed after Deng Xiaoping replaced Mao Tsetung as China's senior leader.

The Chinese authorities, fearing that it might spread, clamped down on the sect and stepped up propaganda against such movements, attacking those who “attempt to use religion to strengthen their authority and exploit blind faith”. This episode is a good example of the Chinese authorities' concern about religious movements which appear to exert influence beyond the reach of Party and government.

This sect, the Heroes of Ling, was founded in April 1981 by a Tibetan called Sonam Phuntsog, who claimed to be the legendary Gesar. Under his tutelage up to 36 members were inducted into rituals which allowed them to become possessed, to prophesy, and to exhibit other occult powers.

The Chinese accused them of deceiving the people, harming productivity and affecting the people's livelihood. They pointed to cases where death or damage had occurred because medical treatment had been interrupted by their magic practices or normal herding work prevented by threats. One initiate, Pentse, was held responsible because a large number of lambs died in his flock of sheep; the text even gives the percentage drop in productivity of his flock.

More seriously, other initiates are said to have referred to “China's harmful influences” and to “the evil deities of the dark forces”. “In this way”, the document claims, “they openly instigated rebellion...and attempted to destroy the friendship between the nationalities”.

The people were susceptible to this religious movement because, when agriculture was liberalised by the “responsibility system”, less time was devoted to political education and people spent their leisure time telling and listening to the Ling Gesar stories.

When the movement spread, the authorities became alarmed and despatched work teams to investigate. The “responsibility system”, which had given individuals much increased freedom, was tightened and the criminal law and legal punishments were widely publicised.

When interrogated, the Heroes of Ling allegedly broke down, publicly confessing that they had no supernatural powers, and the movement was banned. No details were given of the punishments handed out to the members of the sect, and although So-phun is identified as the leader of the sect, the investigators appear to have discovered no evidence against him apart from inducting Pentse as a medium.

The report is particularly interesting because it shows how quickly local religious revivalism - and in fact the process anthropologists call revitalisation - spread in Tibet as soon as the commune system begun to be relaxed. The movement spread to high levels of the community: the deputy leader of one commune and two members of the Communist Youth League joined or were influenced by the sect, so that action had to be taken at a higher, county level.

The “elimination” of the movement constitutes an early attempt by the Party to define the allowable areas of religious revivalism under the new dispensation of post-Maoist China. Although practices which could be defined as “Buddhist” were again to be tolerated in the 1980s, certain other practices which formed part of traditional Tibetan religious activity

were to remain illegal. The distinction between these areas of religion might have been relatively clear for the Chinese authorities, because they would have seen them in terms of traditional Chinese secret sects, supplemented by the Party's concerns about hindrances to production and threats to the state.

But the report indicates that the distinction may have been harder to apply in Tibet: "it was difficult for most people to differentiate between legally approved religious faith and the illegal form of authoritarian blind faith". What is described in the report is not entirely dissimilar from practices which are considered orthodox in Tibetan Buddhism, such as the spirit-possession practiced by the oracle at Nechung.

The report was widely distributed amongst other Party officials in 1982 through an internal journal, the *Bod sjongs 'phrin deb*. The importance of the case was emphasised by adding a preface from Yin Fatang, who was Party leader in Tibet until 1985. Yin's comments show that the incident was seen as symptomatic of a serious threat that could spread across the region, as it had apparently already done to the neighbouring county of Nagchu: "If timely and effective counter measures are not taken, trouble could spread". Yin emphasises the seriousness with which the outbreak was perceived by describing it as "splittist", although there is little evidence in the report to justify that term.

Incidents of spirit-possession continue to take place in Tibet, and Tibetans still seem uncertain about what reaction they are permitted to display. On 9th July 1992, during the celebration of the twelve year cycle at Nechung Monastery near Lhasa, a woman in her 50s, who "looked like a farmer" entered into a trance, apparently possessed by the "Drapchi Lhamo". The reports note that while in the trance she spoke in Chinese, and that a rainbow was seen over a nearby hill. She was taken away by police "but she went on speaking", said the report. "No-one dared to offer her ritual offerings and her fate is unknown".

The report is translated here from the version printed in Volume 9 of the "Tibet Information Book" [*Bod sjongs 'phrin deb*], which was issued on 2nd July 1982 (TIN Ref: Doc. 28(ZY) p39ff.). The 46 page journal was given a limited print run of 2,700 copies. The report on the Heroes of Ling is described as the "Speech on the illegal setting up and subsequent elimination in May 1981 of an organisation in Amdo County perpetuating feudal superstition".

The Heroes of Ling: Elimination of a Sect

On the formation and elimination of the illegal 'Heroes of Ling' movement in Amdo County.

[Nang khul gyi dus deb yin bas nyar chags bya rgyud [rgyur?] do snang byed dgos.]

We have to pay serious attention to the illegal formation of an organisation called 'Heroes of Ling' in the Kangnyi Commune [*rKang gnyis kung hre*], of Trasa District [*sKra sa chu*] in the county of Amdo.

This is an attempt to use religion to strengthen their authority and exploit blind faith by resorting to oracles, deceiving the public with rumours, expropriating public wealth and property through cunning, and undermining the unity of the nationalities, national productivity, peace, friendship, and social stability.

Comrade Yin Fatang [First Party Secretary, Tibet Autonomous Region], after seeing this document, remarked:

"The direction, policy, and approach of this work team [*Las don ru khag*] are basically correct. Matters which are not clear should be clarified and So-phun [*bSod Phun - Sonam Phuntsog*] must be punished so effectively that there will be no possibility of resurrection. If timely and effective counter measures are not taken, trouble could spread.

However, if effective measures are taken by strengthening the intellect and morals of the people through reason and resourceful campaigning, it will not be too difficult to achieve a pragmatic resolution of the problem through consolidating political power in a single authority.

The lessons of history are worth reflection. According to the views of the departments concerned, it appears that what has happened in Kangnyi Commune has occurred in few areas in Nagchu County as well, and therefore merits serious attention.

Communes and Unit [ru khag] areas that face problems of this nature should follow the lead of the Amdo County Committee. It has taken timely and effective countermeasures at the local level by setting up a work committee to take appropriate action for the elimination of untoward activities, according to the principles of Party policy and national law.

Grassroots-level development of the correct political education of the broad masses engaged in agriculture and nomadic work should be strengthened. The few anti-social elements should be dealt with through reason and resourcefulness. This will make the campaign self-sustaining.

We must be vigilant in order to detect the trend of counter-revolutionaries and reactionaries in our land, Tibet. These have been attempting to undermine friendship between the nationalities and the unity of the motherland. They have used religion to consolidate their power-base, conserving and expanding their energy to engage in acts of destruction and splittist activities.

All cadres, Party workers and Communist Youth League members therefore should be vigilant at all times and strive to become intelligent and resourceful Marxists. They must be imbued with the courage to make revolutionary change, to stamp out illegal activities, and promote friendship between nationalities. They must protect the unity of the motherland and ensure stability in order to create a socialist society characterised by unity, wealth and education."

The illegal organisation, 'Heroes of Ling', was founded in April 1981 at Kangnyi Commune of Trasa District in Amdo County. Its details are as follows:

In the early part of April 1981, Ta Choe of Commune Member [?'hre yin - Chinese: she yuan?] Two in Kangnyi Commune went to the Commune. A person called Tashi claimed to be Gyatsa [rgya tsha, literally, 'Chinese salt' but probably here a reference to a character or state of realisation referred to in the Ling Gesar epic] and sent a piece of cloth to Pentse [sPen tse] in Kangnyi Commune with the message that if he could finish eating the cloth and the salt within seven days, he would be able to realise rgya tsha.

Soon afterwards, Pentse went to see So-phun who claimed to be the legendary Gesar. He was in Serwa Me-me [Ser ba smed me] Commune of Serba District, in Tsonyi Denchoe Group [Tsho gnyis gdan gcod khru]. So-phun, holding Pentse's right hand, remarked:

"If you hold the spear in your right hand and point it upwards, the sky will turn, and if you point it downwards, the earth will tremble". He continued with prayers of this nature. Since then, it is claimed that Pentse had his 'primal veins' opened, or became possessed.

Immediately after returning to Kangnyi Commune, Pentse made water offerings to the altar in the chapel, pretended to be possessed by a deity and allowed people to see him in a trance. Some onlookers were so frightened that they trembled. When Pentse saw them trembling, he told them that they were ready to have their primal veins opened.

Then, using the 'primal vein opening' method, the Heroes of Ling movement was expanded. By the end of 1981, there were altogether 36 members. The group included two from the Youth Brigade [?'Communist Youth League] and six local

militia. The majority of the members were young and included two women. Their average age was 27. A matter for serious consideration is the fact that Dolcha [sDol cha], the Vice-Leader [ʔkru ra; Chinese: zhu ren?] of that Commune, had also joined the movement.

Ever since the emergence of the so-called Heroes of Ling movement, there have been widespread instances of people pretending to be possessed by deities and demons, spreading rumours to dupe the public and causing damage to people's productivity and livelihood.

In May 1981, Tsengoe [bTsan rgod] (who was co-opted into the Heroes of Ling by Pentse) went to Da-dol's [Zla sgröl] home and, becoming possessed, told the assembled gathering the following story:

"There will probably be hail this evening and you are advised to shift your tents. Otherwise, you risk death through lightning and floods."

Consequently, a considerable number of people shifted their tents, crying and leading their children away. In July that year, Dar Bar, the Accountant in the No. 4 Work Unit of that Commune, caught chicken-pox and was totally immobilised in bed. Although he was responding slightly to the treatment of the local barefoot doctor, one of his family invited Pentse and some of his colleagues to his home, where Pentse was possessed by a deity. He performed tantric rituals over the patient and arranged for the reading of the scriptures like Bum - the Buddha's teachings.

In particular, weird religious objects were required such as hair from the mane of the wild ass and antler from the wild yak [rkyang, rbrong]. Also needed were and a cutting [ʔgcod] [from] the right horn of a live wild yak, the right ear of a live fox, the feathers of a live Chag bird [ʔBya lcaḡ], grass from the

sunny side of a hundred mountains, and water from the lee side of a hundred small hills. So treatment to the patient was interrupted and consequently he died.

Last year, during the eleventh month of the Tibetan calendar, Pentse became possessed and alleged that Karmo [dKar mo], daughter of Commune Member Buchi, was a witch [dDon 'dre], and had hit her on the back so hard that she cried. Everyone was so frightened that they asked for protection cords and 'Jinten' [Byin rten] holy pills (made from a mixture of salt, spit and grains).

Pentse and his colleagues, saying they were possessed by deities, pretended to attend to the sick and extorted money and goods from the public. One day, when Commune Member Kunchok and his wife from Serwa Me-Ma Commune were planning to go to meet their relatives in Kangnyi Commune, Pentse warned them:

"There is serious likelihood of grave harm to you both on your journey. If you give me your carpet, the danger can be averted". So Kunchog was forced to part with his carpet. On another occasion, Pentse had said to Commune Member Rigten [Hre yai Rig bstan]: "If you keep your deceased wife's clothes, misfortune will visit you." He eventually took away a sheepskin-lined dress from Rigten.

Pentse and the others, exploiting the practice of invoking the deities, began to undermine the friendship between the nationalities. For example, in July 1961 [1981?], during an invocation of the deity, Tsengoe said to Nyima, "China's harmful influence will get far worse than it is now."

Again, on 28th July 1981, at Chalung Yaru, after invoking the deities, Pentse asked Kunchog "The rGya tsha, at present residing in the south in a deity, protects the pious and pure. Could it damage the Chinese?"

At this, Kunchog, pretending to be possessed, replied to Pentse, in front of a large gathering, "Now is the time for the deities of the pious and pure to hold aloft their heads while the evil deities of the dark forces are suffering reverses".

In this way they openly instigated rebellion against the revolutionary struggle and attempted to destroy the friendship between the nationalities.

These so-called Heroes were engaged in daily deceits to avoid any productive work. Instead, they spread rumours and nominated individuals at random as "Heroes" or declared mountains to be possessed by evil spirits and asked for them to be renamed according to their wishes. In this way they were responsible for undermining the productivity of the communes.

In the spring of 1981, Pentse was shepherding 500 sheep and 420 lambs were born. But only 90 lambs survived and over 100 sheep died, accounting for 78.6% and 20% death rates respectively.

When the son of Commune Member Logyal [Hre yin bLo rgyal] fell ill, Pentse told him, "Your son has been harmed by Mount Sumo. In future, you should neither camp nor graze your cattle there." Then, cunningly, he persuaded Logyal to have some religious rites performed.

One day in October, Tsengoe said "You are a popular leader of the Heroes, so your dwelling should be called Tratoe Namling Chingmo [Khra stoed gnam rling phying mo]. And you should not move from here for three years."

Moreover, he renamed the place Lungmo as Yolung Dargye Chumo [gYo lung dar gyes chu mo], and Sa-le was renamed

as Choelung Nomgyal Mego [Choes lung rnom rgyal me sgo]. He told Tsam from Sa-le not to shift camp for three years.

Last April, Tsengoe was contacting the deities at the home of Nompa. He said "Your wife is ill because there is an evil spirit at Chitsang [dByi tshang]".

In May again, when there was illness in Nompa's family, Tsengoe came to invoke the deities and said "There are four evil spirits in the poison mountain in whose fold you live. They cause the illness in the family."

Because of the sham invocations of the deities by these Heroes and their threat against people shifting camp, many people dared not move. They were so frightened that the young women and children dared not go out in the evenings. They had to take out their herds late for grazing and bring them back early for fear of the evil spirits. In this way they caused considerable loss to the productivity of the commune.

Since the establishment of this commune in 1970, productivity had never declined. But in 1981, there was a decrease of 15.5% compared to 1980.

One reason why the illegal Heroes of Ling movement had emerged in Kangnyi Commune is that the leaders of this Commune are scattered and powerless, lacking common convictions and unity of action.

Second, since the introduction of the "responsibility system" in production, there has been a lapse in the political education of the people. Instead of attending public education sessions, most evenings were spent in narrating and listening to the Ling Gesar stories.

As a result, people came to have a good deal of faith in King Gesar of Ling and his heroes. In this situation, when people

like Pentse pretended to be possessed by deities they had invoked it was difficult for most people to differentiate between legally approved religious faith and the illegal form of authoritarian blind faith. Distinguishing right from wrong became difficult and preventive sanctions became ineffectual.

After the emergence of the Heroes of Ling movement in Kangnyi Commune, this February, in accordance with the instructions of the higher authorities of Amdo County Committee [?Ud], work committees were despatched here to investigate the matter. At the same time, from among the local Party and local Production Brigade, a twelve member committee was formed to conduct a review of the area's work during the year.

This was designed to effect reforms in the local Party and in the Government department by conducting criticism and self-criticism sessions, pooling common experiences, and making decisions on matters arising from the introduction of the "responsibility system" for production (in accordance with the spirit and guidelines contained in People's Republic of China (81), Document No. 30; TAR 31, Document No. 56).

Public sessions and publicity campaigns were also launched to disseminate the basic contents and guidelines of the criminal law and guidelines on punishment to maintain peace and stability.

As a result of the Working Committee's support, the majority of the cadres and members of the public have begun to expect a speedy return to stability. Through the study of the said documents they have gained an awareness of what is and is not and their understanding of matters has improved.

After the pooling of common experiences, the true face of the so-called Heroes of Ling has been exposed. In fact, some members of the public said "Ever since the establishment of

Kangnyi Commune production never declined over the years. Last year's decline was caused solely by the Heroes of Ling who disturbed our mental peace as well as productivity and livelihood. We never experienced such con-men even in the old decadent society."

During the mass public meeting, some members pointed out "Now when these so-called Heroes of Ling are asked to reveal their supernatural powers in front of the Work Committees, they have completely lost their composure. Pentse, Tsengoe and others were crying in front of the public and confessed "We really have no supernatural powers. Whatever we did was done to deceive the public."

Venting their pent-up anger, many members of the public rose up one after another during the public meeting and said "We are sorry we fell for the deception put on by these so-called Heroes of Ling."

On the basis of the investigations by the Working Committee, the so-called Heroes of Ling movement was banned in public. In the light of overwhelming evidence against the accused, the County Investigation Bureau signed the document and in accordance with the rule of law, Pentse was arrested and searched. At the same time, the working Committee of the (Central) County Committee, in co-operation with the public, produced fresh guidelines for halting the forces of authoritarianism and blind faith in 1982. The guidelines were published everywhere.

Postscript: Note on Chinese Policies towards Sects in the 1980s

John Hilary

The tradition of sectarian religious activity in China, which had plagued imperial governments down the centuries, was officially pronounced dead in the first few years of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). During the campaigns against counter-revolutionaries which took place in the 1950s tens of thousands of sect leaders and "diehards" were executed by the Chinese authorities, a mortal blow from which no-one thought the tradition could recover. Thus, even though there are now signs that some sectarian activity and influence persisted through the 1960s and 1970s, the scale of the 1980s revival of sects has taken the CCP by surprise and promoted them to re-introduce harsher measures to cope with the threat which such groups pose to the state.

One internal circular published by the Ministry of Public Security in 1985 reported that "acts of disruption by sectarian groups had occurred "in every province and region of China with the exception of Tibet" (see note below). While the discovery of the document regarding the 'Heroes of Ling' movement in Amdo County disqualifies that exception, in China itself the incidence of recorded sectarian activities tripled even between 1980 and 1983, and has continued to rise since. Although the majority of cases have occurred in the countryside, especially in the less accessible regions which have traditionally been breeding grounds for such groups, sects have been active in the cities too, such as the powerful Yi Guan Dao (Way of Unity) in Tianjin, and the Jiu Gong Dao (Way of Nine Palaces) in Beijing. Furthermore there are numerous cases involving extensive networks of believers spanning villages, counties and even provinces, with membership figures running into thousands even for

individual sects. And worst of all, from the point of view of the CCP, the local authorities have themselves sometimes been co-opted, so that "in certain regions the basic-level organisation of society has fallen entirely under the control of the sects".

Officially sects fall into the bracket of 'feudal superstition' (fengjian mixin), a broad category which includes all forms of collective religious activity not covered by the avowed policy of freedom of religious belief. The distinction between sects and religions is one which is frequently spelt out in official reports, and revolves around the issue of state control. Thus the authorised 'patriotic' religious organisations and the institutions registered with them are tolerated insofar as they profess their allegiance to Party leadership and the socialist road, whereas sectarian groups (inherently unamenable to such control) are proscribed for poisoning people's minds, disrupting production and public order, and, in the worst instances, slandering the Communist Party itself.

Official reports focus particularly on the exploitative nature of sects in an attempt to deny them any genuine mass base, often using standard formulae to accuse sect leaders of extorting money from adherents and sexually taking advantage of women believers (zhapian qiancai, jianxu funu). In this respect the 'Heroes of Ling' report follows a well-established path, whereby all attention is paid to the corrupting influence of the main culprits and none to the motives of those they have 'led astray'.

This dual approach to sect leaders and adherents is reflected in the official strategy for dealing with sectarian groups. According to this strategy rank-and-file believers are to be "educated through persuasion", and it is the responsibility of local-level authorities to ensure that ideological and political education campaigns are maintained for the people's protection. Those who lead them astray but are adjudged to

have committed no crime are to be "educated through criticism", but in the majority of cases are to be punished in line with Article 165 of the 1979 Criminal Law, which provides for up to two or in serious cases seven years' imprisonment for those convicted of taking advantage of superstition "to spread rumour of swindle money or other property".

However, Article 90 of the Criminal Law refers to the more serious charge of organising sects for the purpose of engaging in counter-revolutionary activities, and in its original formulation provided for fixed-term imprisonment of a minimum of five years. This provision is of particular relevance because the Chinese sectarian tradition is infused with the millenarian doctrine that considers the present world irredeemably corrupt and unjust, thus leading many sect leaders to rail against the rule of the Communist Party, and, in some cases, to predict its imminent demise, as if it were like any other Chinese dynasty.

Such statements fall into the category of 'counter-revolutionary propaganda' and incur the full wrath of the Party-state. In September 1983 the National People's Congress Standing Committee approved an amendment to the Criminal Law which increased the maximum sentence for this offence to life imprisonment or execution. The amendment has been since invoked on several occasions: leaders of the Huang Ji Dao (Way of the Imperial Ultimate) in 1984, the Yi Guan Dao in 1985, and the Zhong Fang Dao (Way of the Middle Zone) in 1989 were all executed under this law.

In 1981, when the 'Heroes of Ling' movement was uncovered, the extent of the 'problem' of sectarian activity in the PRC was as yet scarcely appreciated. Certainly, the basic policies for dealing with sects were already in place, but it is only in the decade since then that the CCP has undertaken more concerted efforts to curb the spread of such organisations.

Nationwide these efforts usually occur as part of broader campaigns; thus the harsher climate of 1986 provoked a series of official injunctions to clamp down on feudal superstition in general, while the post-Tiananmen campaign against the 'five evils' was increased to 'six evils' in order to include feudal superstition.

At the regional level, however, provincial authorities have determined themselves when to take action against sectarian activity, such as the campaign undertaken in Jilin Province during the winter and spring of 1987/8. Nonetheless, even at a time when there was no particular emphasis on repressing sectarian activity, the potentially counter-revolutionary nature of sects has ensured that the Public Security organs concerned have reacted swiftly to disband or "crush" such groups as soon as they are discovered.

The methods which the Party has adopted to deal with sects are basically those employed by their imperial predecessors, and it is clear from the historical precedents that the authorities should exercise some caution lest they experience the same reaction to repression. Just as several of the sectarian uprisings during the Ming and Qing Dynasties have been ascribed to an explosion of frustration at official intolerance, so too there are signs that over-zealous attempts to stop illegal religious activity in the contemporary era have sometimes served to incite revolt. Thus even in 1980 several members of the Pu Ji Tang (Hall of Universal Succour) in Henan's Huaiyang County stormed their local brigade office in protest at the closure of their own sutra hall, and set up a makeshift temple in the office itself. In August 1988 a group of more than 1,000 villagers in Fujian's Shouning County destroyed the local Public Security Bureau in twelve hours of rioting caused by official attempts to stop their religious procession.

At a time when the state is facing unprecedented challenges to its authority in the countryside it has a difficult path to tread between suppressing illegal activities and inspiring more serious threats. Should official repression politicise sectarian groups to the extent that they symbolise and marshal resistance to an over-intrusive state the Chinese Communist Party could be faced with popular unrest on a still grander scale.

Note 1. Fandong huidaomen jianjie (An Introduction to Reactionary Sects and Secret Societies), by Bureau No.1 of the Ministry of Public Security, published in Chinese Sociology and Anthropology, 21.4, Summer 1989.

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