

Yudru Tsomu, *The Rise of Gönpo Namgyel in Kham: The Blind Warrior of Nyarong*

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Early-nineteenth-century Kham, situated between Tibet and China, was a decentralized frontier zone comprising more than three dozen autonomous polities, many consisting of only a few hundred tribesmen under a local chieftain. One such petty chieftain was Gönpo Namgyel who, during the period of 1836–61, unified the tribes of the Nyarong region of central Kham and expanded his power over the neighboring states to the point where he challenged the authority of both Lhasa and Peking. He is remembered today as something of a Robin Hood figure, a charismatic leader whose memory lives on in local mythology. That memory is contested in China today, where official discourse situates him as a revolutionary war hero leading the serfs' struggle against the exploiter class, while for many in Kham he remains a champion of Kham nationalism.

Drawing primarily on a wide range of Chinese, Tibetan, and European sources, this monograph, a pioneering exploration of the life and times of Gönpo Namgyel, provides a superbly nuanced and original examination of the notoriously complex history of the Kham region. Indeed, as well as narrating the life-story of this charismatic figure, it serves as the best available account yet of the historical complexities of nineteenth-century Kham. Its roots in a Harvard doctoral dissertation are well hidden; the dissertation is not even cited in the bibliography and the work benefits from many years of subsequent research and reflection.

After a valuable introduction to the political and cultural history of the region, the author demonstrates that while existing theories of rebellion in the Ching empire identify Han immigration, excessive taxation, famine, and religious issues as primary causation factors, in this case endogenous cultural factors were behind the rise of Gönpo Namgyel. He represented the strong local identity in Kham. While Buddhist, it was primarily a warrior culture, a land of shifting allegiances and alliances, where blood feuds, banditry, and constant violence were endemic, as the author illustrates in the introductory chapters. The narrative section commences with a discussion of Gönpo Namgyel in historical memory. Even as a child he demonstrated strength and cruelty but also generosity and powers of leadership. An early injury to one eye earned him his nickname “the blind man of Nyarong” and apparently inspired him to reject the then-common punishment of bodily mutilation. That may have been the only manifestation of his compassion, however, for he and his supporters slaughtered thousands in the course of his rule. He encouraged looting, even of monasteries that opposed him, and rewarded his followers for heads and other body parts they brought as proof of killing the enemy. Such expressions of the regional culture of violence stand in stark contrast to popular images of both Tibetans and their Buddhist faith.

Gönpo Namgyel's early successes, detailed in chapter 5, were, the author concludes, largely motivated by a desire for revenge on his enemies. She describes how he followed the model of the Central Asian warrior leader, who shared the proceeds of his raids with a socially cohesive group of followers bound to him by marriage alliances, tax obligations, and oaths of loyalty. Gönpo Namgyel ensured his men were better trained and equipped than his opponents, and he was a highly skilled tactician, firstly

attacking minor chiefs in a region and slowly subverting the power of stronger leaders before attacking them. Under his leadership, the small principality of Nyarong became an essentially predatory polity that filled the power vacuum on the frontier in a period when both China and Tibet were weakened by endemic internal fractures and external threats.

By 1862, as chapter 6 describes, Gönpo Namgyel's conquests had given him control over the main trade route between China and Tibet, threatening not only the supply of Tibet's staple beverage, tea, but also China's position in Tibet. Chinese officials were unable to reach Lhasa, and their garrison there could receive neither pay nor provisions. As the author demonstrates in chapter 7, that means that the Nyarong strongman could no longer be ignored by his powerful neighbors, and with defeated Kham chieftains appealing to both Lhasa and Peking for assistance, Lhasa, with Chinese support and probably manpower, dispatched troops to eliminate the problem. Ultimately Gönpo Namgyel's cruelties meant that he lacked popular support in the regions he had conquered. Local officials who had fled to Lhasa guided the Tibetan troops into Kham, where they eventually cornered Gönpo Namgyel in his palace and it was set on fire. That his body was never found only enhanced his legend, with oral sources claiming he escaped with family and died later.

As the concluding chapters demonstrate, Gönpo Namgyel largely escapes classification within the contemporary Tibet-China issue. He was ultimately a standard-bearer for neither power. He defeated Chinese forces on a number of occasions and executed Qing office bearers. He was thus, in their eyes, in rebellion. But he also accepted a Chinese title and his aggression was more frequently directed at Lhasa's authority and even ideology. It is well known that Chinese used the *tusi* (indigenous leader) institution, "using barbarians to rule barbarians," as a means of indirect rule over peripheral territory that was not economically or strategically significant. But as Gönpo Namgyel's case demonstrates, the granting of a Chinese title was usually recognition of established power rather than an aid to gaining power. Seen by the Chinese as submission to their authority, such titles were, in the eyes of the receiver, recognition only of a relationship, one that did not guarantee loyalty. Only through the study of local sources such as those used by the author can such evidence emerge to challenge the idea of the Qing as a multiethnic empire led by the Manchu court, the picture that emerges from studies relying on Qing sources.

Ironically, the ultimate effect of Gönpo Namgyel's rise was to bring Kham under the authority of Lhasa, which, under a Qing directive, appointed a High Commissioner to rule over the restive region in 1866 (224). Although there were numerous subsequent revolts against Lhasa's misrule, its influence expanded over the region from this time. This assertion of authority was not, however, to China's long-term advantage, and the final chapter describes how China overcame Lhasa's power in the late Qing and Republican period.

Ultimately the author identifies Gönpo Namgyel not as a Kham nationalist or a class hero but as a charismatic bandit and "a born warrior" (xxii). In a nuanced discussion she demonstrates that he was in many ways a typical nomadic leader, one who acted in accord with Kham tribal norms rather than in pursuit of a wider vision or political cause. To outsiders a ruthless murdering thug, his shifting images point, she concludes, to a general need for cultural and class heroes whose history is malleable enough to associate with different tendencies. Despite controversy over his willingness

to sack monasteries and murder or drive out their inhabitants, he has even found a place in the Buddhist pantheon, as a protective deity of Sakya monastery.

Such a character will doubtless attract other biographers, and there are Lhasa sources inaccessible to this author, but this work is a superb example of historical reconstruction based on mastery of the primary sources, which adds considerably to our knowledge of the region and its history. Much of the work is military history, the story of a series of campaigns with all their complexities, but the narrative is clear throughout and the theoretical insights demand to be taken account of. The extensive bibliographies of Chinese, Tibetan, and Western sources, along with widely spaced appendices of place and personal names (in three languages) as well as Tibetan terms, occupy, with the index, more than one hundred pages in what is an attractively produced and substantial volume.

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