

Holly Gayley, *Love Letters from Golok: A Tantric Couple in Modern Tibet*

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Holly Gayley's book deals with the personal life stories of "a tantric couple," Khandro Tāre Lhamo (1938–2002) and Namtrul Jigme Phuntsok (Namtrul Rinpoche, 1944–2011). Both were well-known Buddhist masters in their native region of Golok in northeastern Tibet. However, it is their feelings of love and shared destiny, giving direction and meaning to their lives, as described and analyzed by Gayley, which makes both them and this book exceptional. It deals with a dramatic epoch in modern Tibetan history, highlighting the dynamics of the post-Cultural Revolution religious revival in Tibet, as well as issues of gender and religion in the case of Tāre Lhamo.

Gayley uses a range of sources, most significantly her own extensive fieldwork in the Golok area, as well as the biographies of the couple, written by one of their disciples and published in 1997. However, the author makes it clear that, "Rather than endeavoring to present a more complete account of their lives, my interest lies in understanding strategies of representation, specifically the difference between the idealized account of their hagiographic construction and the more complex and decidedly human terms of their correspondence in their own voices" (30).

The Cultural Revolution came soon after a major uprising in north-eastern Tibet (Amdo) in 1958 against the Chinese invasion in 1949–1950 and subsequent attempts by the Chinese government at introducing radical social change along Communist lines. The uprising failed, being put down with great severity. With the advent of the policy of "liberalization" in the 1970s, religion made a remarkably rapid comeback, probably to the surprise of the Chinese authorities themselves. Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche played an important role in this connection. Based on the couples' biographies and her personal familiarity with the region and its religious history, Gayley outlines their constructive reaction to the great hardship both suffered during the Cultural Revolution: "Instead of documenting the destruction of the Maoist period in testimonial fashion, Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche reached into the depths of Tibetan history to restore a sense of continuity with the past" (168). For them and for their followers, the Maoist period became a mere episode in the long process of implanting, expanding, and restoring Buddhism in Tibet. This was achieved not only by teaching and performing rituals, but also by causing the tangible, concrete presence of the past to become evident in the present, especially in the form of what in Tibetan is called "treasures," *terma*. Tibetan Buddhists believe these texts to have been hidden in the eighth century C.E. by the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava and his wives

and associates in order to be rediscovered in the future by privileged individuals when the Buddhist doctrine is threatened by destructive forces. Both tantric masters were “treasure discoverers” (*tertön*), disseminating religious texts they themselves had “discovered.” Tāre Lhamo in particular enjoyed great prestige in this regard, coming as she did from a family of famous “treasure discoverers.” However, both were also regarded (also by themselves) as reincarnations of earlier Buddhist personages, right back to Padmasambhava and his circle, manifesting the past in the present in this way too.

In the first two chapters, Gayley presents an account of the first part of Tāre Lhamo’s life, up to and including the Cultural Revolution. She was already a highly respected spiritual master in her own right at that time, which was a rare but not unique phenomenon in her own region and in the wider Tibetan cultural area. The uniqueness of her career began with her meeting Namtrul Rinpoche and their falling in love, a relationship indissoluble from their unshakable conviction of having the duty of disseminating Buddhism. This eventually led to their ceaseless engagement in teaching and performing rituals in public as a “tantric couple,” sharing the same throne at such occasions, having created “a shared narrative as a tantric couple across lifetimes” (25). Gayley refers to Charlene Makley’s term “mandalization process,” which, in the context of the revitalization of Tibetan culture from the 1980s onwards, “repositions the reincarnate lama, and by extension Buddhist institutions, at the apex of social value and the center of public life” (21). However, she points out that while this process, according to Makley, implies the “reassertion of Tibetan masculinities, both lay and monastic since the 1980s” (23), the case of Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche is “a prominent exception to the rule” as in the former’s biography she is identified with a *dākinī*, “a category of female tantric deities,” and is positioned at the center of the mandala together with the male lama, Namtrul Rinpoche (23).

In the context of Tibetan literature, the exchange of letters between Namtrul Rinpoche and Tāre Lhamo is probably unique. Although written entirely in verse, these letters—a unique phenomenon, at least in published form, in Tibetan literature—reflect the couple’s deep mutual affection and conviction of a shared destiny in restoring Buddhism and reconnecting Tibetans with their religious history. Attempting to define the nature of the emotional relationship they reflect, Gayley argues that “Where the bond between Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche differs from romantic love is the way they distinguish their own affection and longing from emotional attachment, which has a negative connotation in Buddhist doctrine” (152).

The poetry conforms to Tibetan conventions, Namtrul Rinpoche tending to display his mastery of the learned, ornate tradition of Tibetan poetry, while Tāre Lhamo, who lacked her companion’s monastic training, writes poems modelled on Tibetan popular poetry, such as folk songs and the epic accounts of the legendary King Gesar. Significantly for the development of their relationship, “In her preference for oral folk genres, Tāre Lhamo gradually induces Namtrul Rinpoche to eschew the erudite poetics of his monastic training for the exuberance of folk songs” (25).

While Gayley’s book is aimed at appealing to a wide audience, one cannot, as a Tibetologist, fail to regret that the poems quoted in translation are not accompanied by the original Tibetan text. In the space of a few pages, this would have added a useful feature to her study.

In general, Namtrul Rinpoche and Tāre Lhamo invoke *karma*, morally significant individual action, as the underlying force which, over a series of lifetimes, has brought

them together and defined their mission at a crucial time in Tibet's history. However, their Tibetan biography also refers to "collective karma" to explain the underlying cause of the ravages of the Maoist period. Gayley remarks that, "While it may seem odd for a Buddhist author to attribute the events of history to the collective people to the events of an indeterminate past, this choice can be regarded as part of a literary strategy to reclaim agency on behalf of Tibetans" (19). While this may perhaps be true, the idea of "collective karma" is not so unique as Gyley seems to suggest. In a chronological survey of the history of the Bön religion, written by a Bön scholar, Tenzin Nyima, in 1842, the consolidation of Buddhism in Tibet in the reign of King Trisong Detsen in the eighth century C.E. is described as a disaster not only for the Bön religion, but for Tibet as a nation as well, due partly to the activities of the Buddhist monks, but also according to the aforementioned Bön scholar, to the "merit of the realm of Tibet being low."

Gayley has written a book which gives a unique glimpse into the personal world of a remarkable couple and the historical and social context in which they lived. She writes with precision and sympathy, always as a scholar but with a deep sense of the human reality of the protagonists.

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