Chapter 30

LABRANG

A TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTERY AT THE CROSSROADS OF FOUR CIVILIZATIONS

Paul Nietupski

If there is no easily recognizable state apparatus in the northeast that we might readily compare with the Central Tibetan government, what was the political structure of Amdo? This essay by Paul Nietupski, a portion of his first book-length treatment of Labrang monastery, offers the beginnings of an answer. The book focuses on the surviving photographs taken by the Griebeno family, a Protestant missionary family active around Labrang in the early twentieth century. The photographs are an important source for this history in their own right, and bear detailed investigation. Here Nietupski offers an overview of Labrang as a political center. Just as the last essay's study of the Derge kingdom represented a typical pattern for the Kham region, this essay on Labrang represents a typical pattern for Amdo: there were few principalities or kingdoms, but many monasteries that held real political power. Labrang, for instance, controlled an area about the size of Switzerland, through a complicated network of estates, subordinate rulers and monasteries, and representative political envoys.

The multiethnic nature of the frontier in Amdo was especially important to Labrang's development. First, the Mongols who ruled Amdo until 1724 were key to the monastery's foundation and later continued their support. In fact, the main sponsor, the Khoshud Mongol Prince Erdeni Binong, known in Chinese as the "Henan Qirang," was the same man called Chagahan Damin in Kato Nidō's article above. His decision to forego participation in the 1723-24 uprising against the Qing meant that Labrang experienced growth at a time when most of the other major monasteries in Amdo had been destroyed and were trying to rebuild. Later, in the twentieth century,
cooperation with the Chinese was necessary as well, especially in the face of Muslim aggression.

Labrang monastery is located in the Amdo region of Tibet, more specifically in what Tibetans refer to as Khagya Tsodruk. Amdo occupies the northeast corner of the Tibetan Plateau, north of the steep valleys and high passes of Kham, and east of the high Northern Plains of Tibet. Most of Amdo, including the Labrang region, averages over 10,000 feet above sea level, and has the severe climate and unique vegetation, animal life, and ecosystem peculiar to high-altitude environments. The monastery itself is located at about 8,400 feet (2,820 meters) above sea level. The Labrang region of Amdo borders on China, Muslim territories and Mongolia. It is also near the Hexi corridor section of the ancient “Silk Road,” the main conduit for economic, military, and cultural exchanges between Asia and Europe.

The Griibenows and all foreign visitors marveled at the variety and numbers of animal and plant species in Amdo and Labrang. It was a wild, rugged land, in this respect analogous to the early North American “Wild West,” or Alaska. Untapped and seemingly unlimited resources in remote places with severe climates populated by tough, intensely territorial mountain people with a strange religious culture all gave an exotic image to the Labrang region of Amdo in the eyes of foreign visitors.

Labrang monastery’s natural setting is indeed striking. It is located in a high valley that descends from the 18,000-foot-high glacier-capped peaks that surround the Tibetan Plateau. The upper passes are narrow, but they widen into high plateaus with grassy plains suitable for livestock in the summer months. Valleys below the tree line separate into forests that teemed with wildlife in the first half of the twentieth century. Labrang monastery itself stands in a relatively narrow, winding valley amidst fields of barley and tall grasses once surrounded by evergreen forests. In the early twentieth century neighboring regions were accessible only by narrow trails along steep gorges; there were no roads to Labrang until 1940. The Labrang valley continues to twist down in elevation to the northeast, finally ending in the Yellow river lowlands in nearby China. Nearly all sources describe the descent along this valley as a place where the culture obviously changes from Tibetan to Chinese. This cultural geography confirms the comment that most Tibetans live on the Tibetan Plateau and the Chinese prefer the lower elevations, each choosing the environment more conducive to the maintenance of their cultures and lifestyles.

The Amdo region boasts many rivers, including the Drichu (Yangtze) and the Machu (Yellow) rivers. The Yellow river valley passes through the center of the Labrang region, from the Rgya monastery down to the confluence of the Yellow and Sangchu (Xiahe) rivers, not far from Labrang monastery and modern-day Lanzhou. This region contained the greatest number of monasteries in Amdo, including Labrang.

A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations

The monastery itself, by far the largest and most influential political and religious institution in Amdo in the first half of this century, is located on the Sangchu river, a tributary of the Yellow river, on the Xiahe or Kalawat plateau, just south of the Hui market town of Linxia. It is about 135 kilometers from Linxia, and about 285 kilometers west-southwest from Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu province. There were trails to the other border towns, Chone (Choni) and Songpan to the south, to the Tibetan highlands to the west and southwest, to Kumbum, other monasteries and Xining city to the northwest, to local towns east of Labrang, and to Lanzhou.

Few accurate population statistics exist for Labrang in the early twentieth century, much less for earlier times. Apa Alo, the local leader during the Griebenow mission, describing Amdo in the early twentieth century, gives some at least approximate data:

Amdo consists of about two million square kilometers of territory, is surrounded by mountains, notably the Amnye Machen mountains. According to estimates made in the 1930s there were about 600 ethnic groups in Amdo. The political structure can be roughly described as a regionally variable mixture of large estates or small kingdoms with inherited titles and powers, towns built up around major monasteries, and open, unsettled territories claimed by groups of nomads. There were altogether about one and a half million people in Amdo. Buddhism was the primary religion.

Labrang Monastery was an important Tibetan cultural center and an important trading center located at a strategic intersection of major ethnic groups.

LABRANG’S CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Tibetan Buddhists describe the Sangchu valley in poetic terms. The valley is visualized as more than just a valley; the eight auspicious signs and the seven attributes of royalty are implicit in the mountain peaks, and in the twisting, forested valleys, rivers, and high plains. Certainly this sense of inspiration from the environment is not misplaced, nor is the image of a jewel of Buddhist dharma in a remote high-altitude mountain valley, since Labrang monastery was a major center of Tibetan religious culture, with a rich and distinctive heritage. The enchanting image is reinforced by the predictions which the Tibetans find in classical Indian Buddhist literature about Buddhism coming to Labrang. These visions and predictions have been living for centuries in Amdo’s religious history and cultural imagination.

Long before Labrang monastery was founded, Amdo’s culture was diverse: Chinese Buddhism from the Tang dynasty courts had considerable influence in the region, the pre-Tibetan Bon religion was established throughout Amdo,
and in the ninth and tenth centuries new influences from central Tibet took root in Amdo. As Amdo developed political and trade links with the Chinese and the Mongols and when Labrang was founded in the early eighteenth century, it became a major conduit for Tibetan Buddhist culture to Mongolia. All of these diverse influences contributed to make Labrang monastery evolve into a dynamic cultural, religious, economic, and political environment.

The historical beginnings of Labrang are interesting because they evolve out of one of the most important periods of Tibetan civilization. The Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lozang Gyatso (1617–1682), is linked to Labrang through his 1653 meeting with the first Jamyang Zhepa (1648–1721), then a precocious five-year-old who was to become the founder of Labrang monastery. This meeting took place while the Dalai Lama was in Amdo en route to a diplomatic meeting with the Chinese.7 Years later, the Fifth Dalai Lama was to confer full ordination on Jamyang Zhepa in Lhasa, when the novice was twenty-seven years old.8

After receiving full ordination Jamyang Zhepa devoted some twenty-five years to the rigorous study of Buddhist scriptures, including the full range of Buddhist philosophies, psychologies, and mystical subjects. He mastered the ritual arts, ritual dance, and mandala science. He studied unflaggingly under the tutelage of numerous scholars and adepts in the major monastic establishments in central Tibet, concentrating on the Kadampa and Gelukpa teachings. It is said that he became very austere, thin and frail.9

Meanwhile, the capable Fifth Dalai Lama kept the Tibetan political world in a rather delicate balance. An astute political negotiator, the Fifth Dalai Lama visited China in 1651–53, keeping Tibet’s imperial eastern neighbor at bay through prudent diplomacy, and at the same time making use of Mongolian assistance to consolidate the central Tibetan realm and absorb western Tibet and Ladakh. The Fifth Dalai Lama’s death in 1682 upset the balance in central Tibet. His ministers decided to try to maintain equilibrium in the kingdom by concealing their leader’s passing. This deception lasted until 1697, during which time Jamyang Zhepa played a part in the central Tibetan government’s attempts to maintain stability. Jamyang Zhepa participated in the ordination ceremony of the Sixth Dalai Lama at Trashi lithu Monastery in Zhigatse in 1697, but with young Tsangyang Gyatso’s rejection of his monastic vows and his position as Sixth Dalai Lama, the subsequent occupation of Lhasa by the Zunghar Mongols in 1705, and the Sixth Dalai Lama’s flight in 1706, central Tibet was in turmoil. Jamyang Zhepa left an unstable political environment in Lhasa when he accepted the Mongolian invitation to found a monastery in remote Amdo.10

His 1695 meeting with the local Khoshud Mongol Prince Endi Jinong, known in Chinese as the “Henan Qinwang” (Prince of the Henan district)11 and in Tibetan as the “Sokpo Gyelpo,” and several local Tibetan families marks the original conception of Labrang. Though he had initially declined the request, in 1709 Jamyang Zhepa finally went to Amdo to establish a monastery.12 Thus it came to pass that the Amdo-born Khenpo Lozang Gyeltsen, or the first

Jamyang Zhepa, went back to his original home in Amdo from Drepung monastery’s Gomang college,13 and brought Labrang monastery from its humble beginnings in a tent to its development as a major community institution.

Part of the complex twentieth-century governance of Labrang originated and evolved from the thirteenth-century Mongols Chinggis and Qubilai Khan, who initiated the connection of Mongol khans to Tibetan lamas. This connection was continued by the seventeenth-century Mongol ruler Gushri Khan, who invaded Tibet to assist the Fifth Dalai Lama. Gushri Khan’s grandson was the locally influential Prince Erdeni Jinong, the “Henan Qinwang,” the highest-ranking nobleman of the Khoshud Mongols in Amdo.

The Mongol Henan Qinwang was the preeminent ruler in Amdo south of the Machu river.14 (In Chinese he means “river” and nan means “south.”) His descendant in power in the 1920s and 1930s was the “Mongolian Prince,” Kunga Peljor, one of the twenty-nine Mongol princes in Amdo.15 As the highest ranking Mongolian prince, his influence extended even over parts of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan, including the region around Lake Kokonor (Kokenuur). Kunga Peljor died in 1940 and his wife Lukho and daughter Trashi Tsering ruled16 until Trashi Tsering married Anggon, or Kelsang Dündrup, Apa Alo’s son and the nephew of Jamyang Zhepa.

By the early eighteenth century, the Mongol tribes had largely adopted Tibetan language, lifestyles, and religion. Of all the peoples present in the region the Mongols enjoyed the strongest sense of solidarity and peaceful coexistence with the Tibetans. This was doubtless the result of the Mongol sponsorship of the monastery and the Mongols’ faith in Tibetan Buddhism. The local Mongols, with a royal palace located at Labrang, were responsible for financing much of the original construction of Labrang monastery in the early eighteenth century and maintained significant but gradually declining political influence through the period of the Griebenow Mission. The approximately 15,000 Mongol subjects17 in the modern period lived primarily in the Labrang territories and recognized the religious and secular authority of Labrang monastery as endorsed by the Mongol prince.

The monastery’s formal name is Genden Shedrup Dargye Trashi Yesu Khylwé Ling, but it is most commonly known as Labrang Trashikhyil or simply Labrang. A labrang is actually a Tibetan teacher’s personal property. It may include religious books and materials as well as buildings, land, wealth, and even tax revenues. Labrang was the labrang of the lineage of the Jamyang Zhepas.18 After the death of the first Jamyang Zhepa, the second through fourth Jamyang Zhepas inherited, or more accurately, continued the lineage of Jamyang Zhepas in their office (i.e., their labrang) at Labrang. The Tibetans believed that these boys were enlightened or powerful beings, the living emanations of the first Jamyang Zhepa.

The actual date of the founding of Labrang monastery was planned to coincide with the 300th anniversary of Tsongkhapa’s founding of Gaden monastery.
in central Tibet. Its beginnings were modest—a large tent located on the site where the main assembly hall would be built, with a congregation of five monks. The hall was built in 1711 using that of Drepung Monastery in central Tibet as a model. The monastery grew over the years to include well over one hundred buildings, accommodating its population of between 3,000 and 5,000 monks, depending on the time of year. By the twentieth century there were six Sūtra Halls, forty-eight Buddha temples, thirty-one palaces for the Jamyang Zhepas and the senior Lamas, thirty mansions for the incarnate Lamas, eight government buildings, six big kitchens, one printing house, two main meeting halls, over five hundred prayer-wheel rooms, and more than five hundred common monks’ cells.

Over the years the monastery grew slowly not only in its physical size, but also in terms of its political mechanisms and its role in Amdo. The second Jamyang Zhepa (1728–1791) was installed as leader of Labrang only after overcoming disputes over his legitimate claim to the title. He prevailed, was ordained by the famous scholar Changkya Relpo Dorje, and made significant contributions to the monastery. The second Jamyang Zhepa enlarged Labrang’s existing structures and sponsored the construction of new buildings, among them the Kalacakra Temple (1763) and the Medical College (1784). He was also the first Jamyang Zhepa to hold the position of abbot of nearby Kumbum Monastery for one term, a practice that was followed by the later Jamyang Zhepas.

Like his predecessors, the third Jamyang Zhepa (1792–1856) was a native of the region. His identity was established early in his life, after which he began his monastic studies and training. He was ordained in Lhasa by the Panchen Lama in 1812. The third Jamyang Zhepa was known for his ascetic practices. He followed the vinaya rules strictly and exemplified the Buddhist teachings on humility and moral conduct. He always found time to help even novice monks in their studies and would assist them in the most menial tasks. He became famous for his ability to maintain a stable state of meditation, even while traveling on horseback. Though he did not undertake much new construction to the monastic complex at Labrang, he oversaw the completion of the Medical College begun by his predecessor.

The fourth Jamyang Zhepa (1856–1916), a native of Kham, was different from the other Jamyang Zhepas in that he traveled extensively to solicit funds for new structures at Labrang. He was educated at Labrang and in Lhasa. In 1881 he built a major religious structure at Labrang, the Hevajra Temple, and in 1898 made a historically important diplomatic visit to the Buddhist community at Wutai Shan in China.

The fifth Jamyang Zhepa, second son of Gönpo Döndrup of the locally significant Alo family, was born in 1916 and died on April 14, 1947. His full name was Lozang Jamyang Yeshe Tenpe Gyeltsen Pelzangpo (also known as Pelshil Nyima Pelzangpo in Chinese, Nyima Zhenzangpa). He was unique as a child and was identified as the reincarnation of the fourth Jamyang Zhepa in 1919 by the interregnal regent of Labrang, the ninth Panchen Lama. His family arrived at Labrang on August 6, 1919, and he was enthroned at age five.

The fifth Jamyang Zhepa’s older brother, Apa Alo, was the most important military figure in the area. He led the Tibetan militia and forged an independent claim to authority with the aid of Chinese military and political figures. His authority derived from his gradual rise to political power and was legitimated by his younger brother’s status as incarnate lama of Labrang monastery, who, at least according to the Tibetan tradition, was the final authority in religious and secular matters at Labrang monastery and in all of its territories.

The fifth Jamyang Zhepa’s 1919 entry into Labrang was a grand affair; the rinpoche (the “reverend”) and his entourage stopped en route at many regional monasteries and encampments, and were greeted in Labrang by about one thousand troops of the predominantly Hui Ninghai Army bearing gifts from the Qinghai authorities (Ninghai was the name given to the local Chinese Republican forces in the Ningxia-Qinghai area). Ngawang Tendar, the fifth Jamyang Zhepa’s uncle, accepted financial authority for Labrang from the Manager Li Zongzhe (Tibetan: Tsondru Gyatso), and Jamyang Zhepa’s father, Gönpo Döndrup, assumed political responsibility. The party was met with drums, bells, conches, shawls, and horns. The streets were full of people, all of the monastic officials were present, and “there were tears in the eyes of many.” The Alo family—Gönpo Döndrup, his spouse, Apa Alo, and the rest of his children—were very well received by the mongol prince. Further, Pei Zhenjun, the army general of Lanzhou, and Zhu Geliang, representing the Chinese Republican authorities in Lanzhou, came to honor the arrival of Jamyang Zhepa. Local rulers sent representatives as well.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Alo family was given special status as the protector and vessel of the incarnate precious one, the rinpoche, or in the local dialect, “slak.” When the family arrived at Labrang, its already dynamic history took yet another major turn with the gaining of religious and political prestige in Labrang. It was this family of authorities that allowed permanent residence to a foreign Christian mission and family, the Griebenows. Marion Griebenow was about twenty-two and Blanche about twenty-three when they started their mission at Labrang. Jamyang Zhepa entered the monastic system as successor to his inherited throne in 1919, and was about six years old when the Griebenows arrived.

The current sixth Jamyang Zhepa is Jetsün Lopzang Jigmé Tupten Chökyi Nyima Pelzangpo, identified after the Chinese took control of Amdo in 1950. The monastery and community were largely destroyed by officially sponsored vandalism in the 1950s and mid-1960s, and further damaged by fire in the 1980s. But these are later chapters in Labrang’s history.

Labrang’s governance has at various times been under the military and political control of the Mongol princes, the Hui militarists and regional Tibetan leaders. Until the Chinese Communist Party’s take-over in 1949.
Labrang was primarily in the hands of the Labrang Tibetans, regardless of the battles with the Qinghai troops and the claims of the Chinese. Its location and turbulent political history have created a mosaic of cultures, religions, and politics in Labrang and Amdo, aiming to provide an overview of the complex cultural identifications, changes, peaceful cooperation, and bloody conflicts that took place at Labrang between 1700 and 1950.28

NOTES

1. See Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu, eds., Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 11: “Chinese were by preference lowlanders.”
2. Editors’ note: About the size of Kansas, though this covers only part of what is now considered Amdo.
4. The eight auspicious symbols: Bkra shis rtogs brgyud: conch, umbrella, victory banner, fish, vase wheel, knot of infinity, and lotus.
5. Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, Brag dgon zhab sgrub, Yul mdo smad kyi liongs su thub bstan rin po che llitar dar ba’i tshul gyal bar brjod pa: Deb ther rgya mtho [The Ocean Annals of Amdo], Satabtaka Series, 226, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: Sharda Rani, 1977), 28.3.4: Rgyal srid rin chen sna sbun, the seven jewels of a king: cakra, the wheel [of law]; hasin, elephant; alma, horse; mani, jewels; mantrin, minister; senpa, general; strf, queen.
6. “In the northern part of a northern country the study and practice of the Prajñāpāramitā will flourish.” Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, The Ocean Annals of Amdo, 28.3–4. According to the Lha mo dri ma med pa’i od lung bstan pa, “the dharma will flourish in the land of the red-faced ones 2500 years after the enlightenment.” Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, The Ocean Annals of Amdo, 28.3-4.
10. The Dalai Lamas, the Jamyang Zhepas, and the large number of other “lineages of reborn Tibetan Buddhist lamas” are the institutionalization of the Buddhist belief that a spiritually advanced person can choose his or her birth in a succeeding lifetime. Hence, the Dalai Lama in the early twentieth century was the thirteenth and the Jamyang Zhepa the fifth incarnations in those particular lines. The procedure for identifying reborn Buddhist lamas has been discussed elsewhere in detail. See John Avedon, In Exile from the Land of Snows (New York: Knopf, 1934); Franz Michael, Rule by Incarnation: Tibetan Buddhism and Its Role in Society and State (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1982); and others.
11. Mongolian sources identify this person as Boshugtu Jinong, but Erdeni may be the title added to Jinong, “Viceroy.” Thanks to Christopher Atwood for information about the Mongols here and throughout, lexical suggestions, and clarification of key events in Chinese history.
14. Here we have yet another claim of sovereignty in this region, in addition to the Chinese, Muslim, and Tibetan claims.
15. The “twenty-nine” refers to the twenty-nine separate “banners” or principalities among the Mongols of Qinghai. Kunga Peljor (Gungga Baljur), the prince of the Khoshud South Leading Banner (the official name of his principality) was the highest ranking, but he did not directly rule over the other twenty-eight princes.
16. Hwang krin ching, Biography of Apo Alo, 142.
17. Li, Labrang, 27.
18. Compare the menhuan structure among Muslims in China. The ethnic minority identity and small-kingdom or semi-independent state situation functioned in similar ways in different cultures.
20. See Yon tan rgya mtho, Religious History of Labrang Monastery, 16.
21. Huang Zhengqing and Lun Shi, Huang Zhengqing and the Fifth Jamyang, 6.11; for detailed descriptions of the major structures in pre-Communist Labrang, see the Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, The Ocean Annals of Amdo; Bstan ‘dzin dpal ‘bar (Tenzin Palbar), Nga’i pa’i yul gyi ya nga ba’i lo rgya [The Tragedy of My Homeland] (Dharamsala: Narthang Publications, 1994); Heather Stoddard, Le Mendiant de l’Amdo [The Beggar from Amdo] (Paris: Société d’Ethnographie, 1986); Yon tan rgya mtho, Religious History of Labrang Monastery; Skal bzang dkon mchog rgya mtho, Rgya zhab drung tshang, Thub bstan snyigs su rdzogs pa’i mnga’ bdag kun gcigs ye shes kyi ngyi ma chen po ‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje ‘phreng lnga’i rnam par thar ba
PART VI. MODERN TIBET

mdor bedus su skod pa [Biography of the Fifth Jamyang Zhepa] (Nanjing: n.p., 1948);
Li, Labrang; Cao Ruigai, ed., Labuleng Si [Labrang Monastery] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989); and others.

23. Hwang krin ching, Biography of Apa Alo, 239. Regents were appointed to handle monastery affairs during the period after the death of an incarnate lama and before the discovery of his successor.
24. After the death of the fifth Jamyang Zhepa on April 14, 1947, the ninth Panchen Lama took over as regent once again, until the sixth Jamyang Zhepa was enthroned.
27. Hwang krin ching, Biography of Apa Alo, 32–33.