

Beyond Fact and Fiction: Towards a Multifaceted Understanding of Tibetan Autobiography

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Abstract: Autobiography was, and still is, a popular historical and literary genre in Tibet, providing invaluable insights into the lives and times they describe. Although scholarship on Tibetan autobiographical writing has increased considerably over the last two decades, there remains a tension between historicity and narratology embellishment. As such, Tibetologists have generally approached autobiography as historiography or hagiography, overlooking the complex and sometimes conflicting elements at play within a text.

A recent collection of essays on Tibetan life writing titled *The Selfless Ego: Configurations of Identity in Tibetan Life Writing* acknowledges the heterogeneity of autobiography, proposing innovative approaches that move beyond the antinomy of fact and fiction, to open new avenues of multidisciplinary investigation and analysis. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate the potential of such an approach through analysing the identification process of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, 1704–1788), as detailed in his autobiography. Through redirecting attention away from literary conventions typical of a Tibetan autobiography, such as auspicious incidences and recollections of previous lives, and focusing instead on the individuals involved in the process, this paper explores the significance of this narrative in shining light on the social, institutional, and political networks of Amdo (northeastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century and, in turn, upholding the author's self-expression in a cultural and religious context.

Keywords: life writing, Tibetan literature, eighteenth-century, networks

Introduction

An autobiography is the truest of all books; for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth is there, between the lines. (Twain 373)

Since emerging as a field in the 1960s, autobiographical studies has been concerned with truth and fiction. Traditionally, truthfulness was interpreted as consistency with biographical and historical facts, which could be verified through other sources. “Second-wave critics” understood truth to be a more complex and problematic phenomenon (Smith and Watson 122–135). Influential writers such as Barthes, Derrida, and de Man moved beyond traditional interpretations of autobiography to reflect on epistemological difficulties, recasting issues of genre, referentiality, subjectivity, and fictionality. Postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers have probed the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, analysing the relationship between life and text, and the narrator and historical personage of the author. While centred in literary studies, other disciplines have also contributed to discussions of reality and truth, encompassing – to name a few examples – memory and meaning-making in neuroscience, individuality and social construction in anthropology, and the performativity of gender in gender

studies.¹ This not only demonstrates its continued relevance and prevalence, but also draws attention to how autobiography sits on the borderlines between many fields of study, adding further levels and complexity to questions on genre, truth, authenticity, and the perspectives of the author.

Similar themes can be observed within Tibetan studies, where scholarship on autobiographical writing has increased considerably over the last two decades.² The overlap between Tibetan biography (*rnam thar*) and autobiography (*rang rnam*), for example, where disciples have edited and perhaps even finished the autobiography of a teacher, raises questions on embellishment and credibility (Yamamoto 149–154). Moreover, the term *rnam thar* translates as ‘complete liberation’, referencing the deep-rooted religious nature of these texts. Tibetan autobiographies often repeat idealised patterns modelled on the hagiographies of the Buddha and other Buddhist saints and include common themes such as miraculous signs, predictions, advanced learning abilities, and the workings of cause and effect (Ramble 299–300; Roesler 119–132), thus blurring the lines between literature, religious text, and historical testimony.

Tibetologists have generally approached autobiography as historiography or hagiography, sifting for verifiable facts and details of Buddhist doctrine and ritual and/or used the texts to reconstruct a historical actor’s activities, motivations, and intentions, discarding the rest. Gyatso and Roesler have both made convincing arguments against such simplistic categorisations, noting that they do a disservice to the texts themselves by reducing them to a single formation, a historical source or didactic model (Gyatso, “Apparitions of the Self” 103–109; Roesler 116–119). Janet Gyatso refers to this as the “functionalist fallacy: the idea that something is created intentionally to serve a rational, if not instrumental, social agenda” (“Turning Personal” 230). This blinkered approach ignores the complex and sometimes conflicting elements at play within an autobiographical text, overlooking, for example, the relationship between self and social context, and the rhetorical and narrative devices employed.

A recent collection of essays on Tibetan life writing titled *The Selfless Ego: Configurations of Identity in Tibetan Life Writing* acknowledges the heterogeneity of autobiography, proposing innovative approaches that move beyond the antinomy of fact and fiction, to open new avenues of multidisciplinary investigation and analysis. The distinction made by Arnaud Schmitt between “emersion” and “immersion” in the readerly experience of autobiography offers useful considerations here (99–104). Although Schmitt’s focus is on readerly empathy and the need to hold back immersion to keep in mind the person behind the text, the idea of emersion also offers a reading practice that recognises the dynamic and multi-generic nature of autobiography. Through “a process of defocusing, of remaining at the surface of a text” (126), the blinkers are removed, acknowledging the world outside the text, the world in which the subject’s experiences occurred, and in which the subject exists beyond the text. This approach enables more flexible reading, enriching how we examine and understand Tibetan autobiographies.

In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate the potential of such an approach through analysing aspects of the identification process of the celebrated lama, Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, 1704–1788),³ as detailed in his autobiography. It is a retrospective account, penned some 60 years after the events took place, which combines memories and stories he claims to have heard from others. As such, these recollections can be seen as cultural and collective, rather than simply individual. They shed light on the religious and political networks of Amdo (northeastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century, whilst also revealing something of the position of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor within society. In describing the key players in his identification, we glimpse what Susan Friedman calls the “geographics” of subjectivity, the spatial

mapping of identities (19), in which Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor can be seen as a product of, and actor within, multiple networks and locations.

Writing about these experiences also enables him to structure and shape his own narrative, explaining the adult self that he becomes. His recollections of early teachers, who served as role models and influenced his outlook, lay the groundwork for understanding his life course and reactions to events later in life. These stories, then, are more than simply childhood accounts. They also serve to represent and/or consolidate the identity of the author in adulthood.

Biography of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor

Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor, who will henceforth be referred to as Sumpa Khenpo, was a renowned Gélukpa (dGe lugs pa) scholar from Amdo, a region at the crossroads of Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian cultures. By the time Sumpa Khenpo was born, the Gélukpa school was a multi-ethnic tradition that dominated Tibetan politics and religion. They enjoyed the patronage of many Mongol nobles in Amdo and Mongolia, as well as the Manchu emperors of the Qing Empire (1644–1911), further consolidating their influence.

He was born in Toli (Tho li), a predominantly Mongolian region, in 1704. According to his autobiography, his family were Mongols, although he was educated in Tibetan. At the age of seven, he was recognised as the rebirth (*sprul sku*) of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Sum pa zhabs drung blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, d. 1702). He was escorted to Gönlung monastery (dGon lung byams pa gling, founded in 1604), the seat of the Sumpa lineage, where he was educated for over a decade. In 1723, he travelled to Central Tibet, where he studied and received his full monastic ordination from the Fifth Pañchen Lama, Lozang Yéshé (Blo bzang ye shes, 1663–1737). He returned to Amdo in 1731, where he was based for the remainder of his life, serving as abbot of Gönlung monastery on three separate occasions. Yet his scholarly and administrative career took him on journeys across Amdo, Mongolia, and twice to the Qing court at the Qianlong Emperor's (1711–1799) invitation. He is renowned, both in Tibet and Mongolia, as a prolific writer, composing works on history, geography, poetics, and medicine, alongside his extensive autobiography.

Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, *A Description of the Activities of the Excellent Pañdita Sumpa Yéshé Penjor*, [which is like] *Nectar for the Ear* (Pañdi ta sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor mchog gi spyod tshul brjod pa sgra 'dzin bcud len), can be found in volume eight of his *Collected Works* and spans 294 folios in total. The colophon of the autobiography states that it was composed in 1776 ("Pañdi ta sum pa" 957; folio 292(b)),⁴ however Sumpa Khenpo passed away before its completion, resulting in two of his disciples penning the remainder in 1794 ("Pañdi ta sum pa" 668; folio 258(b)). Standard Tibetan Buddhist tropes and accounts of his religious deeds and achievements evidently inform the narrative, however, it also includes details of networks that underpinned religious and patronage practices, developments in the Gélukpa tradition in Amdo and Mongolia, and the individuals and events that had a profound impact on his life.

Networks, Community, and Self

Sumpa Khenpo's account of his identification as the rebirth of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen spans 14 folios in length ("Pañdi ta sum pa" 28–37; folio 11(b)–18(b)). Alongside conventional tales of visions and miracles, and reports of his dedication to spiritual aspirations, Sumpa Khenpo's account provides details of the processes and individuals involved in his recognition. The people concerned were not

just the subject of his writing; they were also an essential component of his identity – as a person, community member, and influential Gélukpa figure – providing legitimacy and embedding himself within the wider religious community.

The Sumpa lineage was relatively new, having been established during the zenith of new Gélukpa incarnations in Amdo (Tuttle 44), and was deeply connected to the formation of Gönlung monastery, where the lineage was based. The first Sumpa, Damchö Gyeltsen (Dam chos rgyal mtshan) was the seventh abbot of Gönlung monastery and related to the first abbot of Gönlung, Sumpa Damchö Gyatso (Sum pa dam chos rgya mtsho). The second Sumpa, Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, was closely associated with Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden (lCang skya ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan, 1642–1714), another important incarnation lineage tied to Gönlung monastery, accompanying him to Beijing to visit the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) in 1693 and 1701 (Kim 134–135; Sullivan 140, 142).

As a recently established lineage, recognising an incarnation would require confirmation from multiple sources to bolster the claim. Within Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, I have found three forms of recognition: the advocacy of prominent and respected Gélukpa figures, political support, and the backing of the local religious community. Tracing the individuals involved in conferring this recognition is valuable for exploring interpersonal relations, institutional alliances, patterns of patronage, and the crucial interplay of these diverse sources of legitimation within society, which were not only spiritual in nature, but played a role in consolidating political and economic influence and power. Moreover, in narrating this process, Sumpa Khenpo locates himself within these religious, political, and personal networks, shaping his identity and paving the way for later events and experiences.

Gélukpa Networks

Sumpa Khenpo opens by describing the catalyst for his identification. In 1710, Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden met with Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa'i rdo rje, 1648–1722), another celebrated lama from Amdo and a former student of Changkya, at Gönlung monastery. They discussed, among other things, locating the reincarnation of the second Sumpa:

When he (i.e., Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé) went to meet with Changkya Rinpoché,⁵ one day Changkya Rinpoché gave him a beautiful *khatak* (*kha btags*, ceremonial scarf) and said, “My friend who accompanied me to China called Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, a Kadampa (bKa gdams pa) géshe,⁶ has died. I entrust you to look for his reincarnation.” Jamyang Zhépé [Dorjé] replied, “I will find him.” (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 29; folio 12(a))

Immediately Sumpa Khenpo reaffirms the close relationship between the Changkya and Sumpa lineages, with Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden acting as the driving force in locating the incarnation of “a great teacher.” His autobiography suggests that this relationship deepens throughout his life. He recalls regularly meeting with the third Changkya, Rölpe Dorjé (Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717–1786), who appears to be an inspiring and significant figure in his life. For example, during Sumpa Khenpo's first term as abbot of Gönlung monastery (1746–1749), Changkya Rölpe Dorjé successfully sways him to expand the curriculum beyond exoteric Buddhist studies (*mtshan nyid*) to include Sanskrit grammar, medicine, and astrology (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 278; folio 106(b)–107(a)). This nods to a complex generational network of incarnate lamas serving as each other's teachers and disciples, which deepened affiliations and strengthened influence through mutual recognition. In the case of Sumpa and Changkya, this monastery-based network would also help sustain Gönlung's estates and regional authority through maintaining a sense of unity and continuity.

Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden was based mainly at the Qing court in Beijing, and so it is unsurprising that he tasked his close friend and disciple with locating Sumpa's reincarnation. The partnership between Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden and Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé played a significant role in the spread and development of Gélukpa institutional life in Amdo, including the establishment of Gönlung's tantric college (Sullivan 224–228) and Labrang monastery (Bla brang), another major Gélukpa institution in Amdo. Against this backdrop, the role of these two religious elites in the identification process not only asserts the importance of the Sumpa lineage, but also implies the support of their associated networks and firmly situates Sumpa Khenpo within them. It also identifies and places him within a pro-Qing contingent of Gélukpa lamas, who saw cooperation with the Qing network of Manchus and Mongols as key to the future of the Gélukpa tradition. This appears to have affected his outlook and life course, as Sumpa Khenpo spends his later life establishing and deepening networks across the Qing Empire.

Political Networks

Sumpa Khenpo claims that Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé enlisted the help of a local Mongol leader, Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap (Er ti ni tha'i ji tshang ba skyabs),⁷ the great-grandson of Gūshri Khan (1582–1655):

Due to his previous good fortune, the son of Berotsana (Bai ro tsa na), the great-grandson of Gūshri Tendzin Chögyel (Gu shri bstan dzin chos rgyal), and lord of the Baatud (Pā thud) clan, called Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was born into a marvellous lineage and clan. Despite these [origins] and being respected by many chiefs, he did not possess any qualities of arrogance and haughtiness. He had charismatic power, great confidence, courage, bravery, and wisdom.

He was articulate and his depth was unfathomable. He spoke sincerely, having abandoned dishonest and crude speech, and possessed strong intentions and awareness without deception. His mental stream was acquainted with the dharma and nurtured (lit. moistened) by kindness and compassion. He was steadfastly benevolent to those without refuge, protection, and relatives. Everything he did was motivated by the triple gem and he devoted himself solely to promoting the excellent tradition of the yellow hat (the Gélukpa school). He would frequently study Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419) teachings on the lamrim path and became an exceptional student of Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé.

He went to the residence of my chief and asked, "Who is there amongst your clan that believes to be an incarnation?" The chief promptly dispatched a messenger to search in all directions. Because my parents said [to the messenger], "We have a seven-year-old son with the good propensity of a monk," that messenger went to report to the chief and lama. ("Paṅḍi ta sum pa" 30–31; folio 12(a)–(b))

The role of Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap, although minor in this account, is significant. As a relative of Gūshri Khan, who is celebrated for his role in advancing and promoting Gélukpa hegemony throughout most of Tibet (Karmay 71–73), his reputation would have been intrinsically linked to the protection and promotion of the Gélukpa tradition. After all, it ran in the family: Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's grandfather, Dorje Dalai Baatur, was close to the Fifth Dalai Lama and is listed as one of his disciples (Schwieger 128–129; Ujeed 265–266). Moreover, his uncle, Ganden Tséwang Pelzang (dGa' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang), was a general to the Fifth Dalai Lama, leading troops from Lhasa in the Ladakhi war of 1679–1684 (Venturi, 41–46).

It is also worth noting that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's family were connected to Gönlung monastery, reinforcing his significance in locating Sumpa. Gūshri Khan is said to have enhanced Gönlung's estates through donating large portions of land (Sullivan

87–91). Dorje Dalai Baatur was also a notable patron of the monastery. So much so that Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden visited him on his deathbed and performed rituals on his behalf (Sullivan 135). And so, the support of a powerful Gönlung patron can be seen as a crucial step in legitimising and strengthening the authority of Sumpa Khenpo. Of course, this relationship worked both ways, with the role of Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap in the identification process reinforcing his own reputation as a potent and active benefactor. This reputation is further bolstered by Sumpa Khenpo's description of his religious disposition, which is linked to the qualities of an effective and benevolent ruler. Parallels can be drawn here with praises of other Mongol nobility found in his autobiography, who are often applauded for their intelligence, religious devotion, and mastery of speech; favourable qualities in a leader (Griffiths 141–145). Sumpa Khenpo also notes that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was a student of Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé, which is attested in the latter's biography ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa dkon mchog 'jigs med dbang po 206–207). This exemplifies the close connection between high-ranking Gélukpa lamas in Amdo and Mongol nobility, which was based on geographic, political, and religious ties.

Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's link to Sumpa Khenpo extends beyond his family's reputation and connection to Gönlung. Sumpa Khenpo documents that Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap was the lord of the Baatud, one of the four Oirad Mongol groups. Interestingly, when describing his paternal lineage earlier in his autobiography, he notes that his father was a Taiji within the Baatud, thus implying he was from Mongolian nobility. The close relationship between the Gélukpa hierarchy and Mongolian nobility is nothing new,⁸ but in drawing attention to Erdeni Taiji Tsangwa Kyap's association with the Baatud, Sumpa Khenpo distinguishes himself as a member of Erdeni Taiji's community. This suggests that this facet of his identity was important to him and his sense of self, as exemplified in his reference to the Tibetan proverb, "if you don't know your [patri]lineage, you are no better than a monkey in a forest. If you don't know your maternal lineage, you are like a fake turquoise dragon" ("Paṅḍi ta sum pa" 23; folio 9(b)). This assertion may also be an act of resistance against the decline of the Baatud in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, following campaigns against them (Natsagdorj and Ochir 524). By the time of Sumpa Khenpo, the majority of the Baatud had been absorbed by other Mongol groups in the region, and so this could also be an attempt to enshrine a fading community.

Personal Networks

The parties introduced so far, aside from Changkya Ngakwang Lozang Chöden, are connected only loosely to the Sumpa lineage. This is not an attempt to downplay their role, but it acknowledges an added, and I believe important, component to the recognition process, an emotional and historical connection. This deeper connection establishes authenticity in a different way, through a personal and private association that, theoretically, cannot be forged. This point becomes more salient later in the eighteenth-century with growing claims of corruption within the incarnation system, culminating in the Qianlong Emperor reforming the selection process for reincarnations of prominent lamas in 1792 (Oidtmann 61–75). Sumpa Khenpo also addresses institutional corruption throughout his autobiography, noting his concerns regarding deception and false lamas (Griffiths 203–217).

This final form of recognition, then, in which an individual recognises their deceased teacher, or friend, acts as the last stamp of approval, giving the final nod that the individual in question possesses the extraordinary qualities of his previous incarnation. This process is definitive, a statement of affiliation that immediately invests the identified

lama with the authority to continue the lineage. In the case of Sumpa Khenpo, he recounts two tales of moving reunions: one with a friend and another with a former attendant. He acknowledges that he heard similar stories, but no longer remembers them (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 45; folio 18(a)), suggesting, perhaps, that these two tales had particular significance for him.

The first he hears from Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé (Ngag dbang 'phrin las, 1661–1726) and Sertri (gSer khri) Rinpoché, who recount the circumstances of the meeting to Sumpa Khenpo later in life:

“The day before then, when I (i.e., Sertri Rinpoché) met with the child (i.e., Sumpa Khenpo), I asked him, ‘Who are you?’ And he replied, ‘I am Lama Sempa (Sems pa).’

I asked him, ‘Where have you come from?’ He said, ‘I came from China.’

I asked, ‘Did you come on horse or by foot?’ He replied, ‘None of those. It appears I have come in a different way.’ Because he had come through the bardo stages,⁹ I said, ‘Yes, that is true,’ and prodded him with my finger.

Then I asked, ‘If you are a lama, why are you wearing sheep’s skin?’ He answered back, ‘Well, in that case, why are you wearing a fur cloak?’ I was speechless. Again, I asked, ‘If you are a lama, teach the dharma.’ He replied, ‘Can’t one forget?’ For the third time, I was speechless. Because of this, I said, ‘As you have boxed me in (i.e., defeated me), in the future you will be a wise one. A tsa!’ And patted him on the head.

Then I asked, ‘From among those in the tent, who do you recognise?’ Looking at Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé, he said, ‘I recognise that one.’ I said [to Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé], ‘Tonight, stay with this boy in your lodgings and ask him questions.’

So he did, and he asked the boy, ‘If you recognise me, what is my name?’ The boy replied, ‘You are Trinlé.’ Géshé [Ngakwang Trinlé] teared up.” (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 31–32; folio 12(b)–13(a))

The story continues; when Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé was asked if he knew of anyone called Sempa, he described his friend Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, who was timid and easily defeated when it came to public debating, but an unbeatable force when debating in private. Sumpa Khenpo’s ability to recognise Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé, alongside his remarkable debating skills, present even at a young age, secured his recognition as the rebirth of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen.

Interestingly, Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé and Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé were also acquaintances – the latter had observed Géshé Ngakwang Trinlé debating and was impressed with his ability (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, “Paṅḍi ta sum pa”, 35; folio 14(a)), later inviting him to Labrang monastery (bsTan pa bstan 'dzin, vol. 1 619–620). This is significant as it once again highlights the intricate web of networks in early eighteenth-century Amdo that contributed to the maintenance and development of the Gélukpa school.

The second meeting took place after Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and Sertri Rinpoché formally identified Sumpa Khenpo. Lozang Raptén (Blo bzang rab brtan) was sent by Sumpa Chöjé Püntsock Namgyel (Sum pa chos rje phun tshogs nam rgyal, d. 1740), a former attendant of Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, for further authentication. As is customary when authenticating a rebirth, the young Sumpa Khenpo was identified by Lozang Raptén due to his ability to recognise objects belonging to his predecessor. Lozang Raptén presented him with books, a rosary (*phreng ba*), a water canteen (*chab ril*), and a small collection of prayers, all belonging to Sumpa Zhapdrung Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen, alongside unrelated objects:

One morning, that monk (i.e., Lozang Raptén) arrived at the home of the young boy (i.e., Sumpa Khenpo), and the child claimed, “Today, someone will bring my books.” [Lobsang

Rapten] had just arrived, and [the young boy] came to welcome him, clutching robes. Tears and rejoicing competed within him. When [the monk] showed him books and so forth, the child took the old ones and said, “These are mine.” The lama asked, “What is your house like?” And it is said the boy babbled, “It is a red house with many trees in front of it.” (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 44–45; folio 17(b))

Sumpa Khenpo ends the story by suggesting that the red house he had mentioned as a child was most likely Gönlung hermitage (dGon lung ri khrod) – a hermitage near Gönlung monastery that was closely affiliated with the Sumpa lineage (Sullivan 39–40) – further supporting his status as a reincarnated lama and his association with Gönlung monastery. It is unclear who Lozang Rapten was or the nature of his relationship with the Sumpa lineage, indicating that he was not as renowned as the other figures discussed. Nevertheless, even minor local players, who do not have a significant historical presence, were involved in the process, pointing to the diversity of individuals involved. It also implies that local communities impacted on, and invested in, monastic activities, including the identification process.

In (re)framing the focus on the processes at play, Sumpa Khenpo’s account of his identification offers us a valuable source of information concerning the vast and complex connections between monasteries, patrons, lamas, and the community, as well as his position within them. The temporal relations he describes are not formed in empty spaces or time; they are situated within, and shaped by, historically shifting power dynamics. As such, Sumpa Khenpo should be seen as a product of his environment, shedding light on social structures, norms, identities, changes etc. At the same time, it draws attention to his identity as a configuration of constituent parts, which includes belonging to a pro-Qing contingent of the Gélukpa school, Baatud nobility, the community of Gönlung, and the Sumpa lineage. Recognising and acknowledging these inherent aspects of his identity lays the foundation for understanding Sumpa Khenpo and the context of his life. The following section explores this further, examining the role of his teachers and mentors in his formative years in developing his sense of self, written from a vantage point that allows the overall significance of these encounters to emerge.

Blurring Conformity and Self-Expression

Autobiographical narrators are at the centre of the historical pictures they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, conditions, or events for their own stories. When describing the events surrounding his identification, Sumpa Khenpo also reflects on an indebtedness to a past that suggests a continuing value for him at the time of composing his autobiography. In particular, he talks about his teachers, who were a formative part of his youth and shaped his maturation. Although praises of teachers are commonplace in Tibetan autobiographical and biographical writings, I believe they have a wider significance. These tributes also unearth the compost from within which Sumpa Khenpo was formed; they shed light on the when, how, and from whom he acquired his norms. These narratives capture his formative years, the individuals involved, and their lasting impression on Sumpa Khenpo.

Once Sumpa Khenpo was identified, he was sent to study with Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso (Thar shul chos skyong rgya mtsho), another Amdo lama. Similar to many of the other individuals introduced, Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso was connected to Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé. Both were at Drépfung monastery ('Bras spungs) in Central Tibet at the same time, and it is said that Jamyang Zhépé was greatly impressed by Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso (Blo bzang bstan pa rgya mtsho and dGe 'dun bstan pa dar rgyas 6–9). This suggests that Sumpa Khenpo was surrounded and educated by Gélukpa teachers who

were carefully selected by Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and/or Changkya Ngakwang Lozang, perhaps for their competencies and as transmitters of particular teachings.

Both Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé and Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso are listed among Sumpa Khenpo's 33 teachers, credited as two of the four teachers who engaged him in the Buddha's teachings ("Paṅḍi ta sum pa" 678; folio 262(b)).¹⁰ The choice of teacher(s) is also significant as it embeds Sumpa Khenpo within a particular religious network. One that is connected to Jamyang Zhépé Dorjé, Changkya Ngakwang Lozang, and other Gélukpa figures in Amdo with links to Mongol and Qing patrons. This undoubtedly impacted and moulded Sumpa Khenpo's scholarly and administrative career, which anchored him to Amdo and further laid the groundwork for him becoming an intermediary among Tibetan, Mongolian, and Manchu contingents of the wider Gélukpa network.

In his recollections of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, Sumpa Khenpo employs standard Buddhist imagery and analogies to describe his experiences. Following convention not only exhibits his literary skills, for which he is renowned, but is also helpful in conveying ideas through imagery set within the same culture as the audience it aims to address:

When I arrived in his presence, although he seemed to be old, [he appeared] like the light of dawn striking the golden mountains of the Jambu river (Dzam bu chu bo),¹¹ sprinkled with saffron. Having just met him, faith and devotion clearly resided [within me], akin to sunlight meeting dried moss through a magnifying glass, causing a fire. A meeting of internal joy and an external smile and folded hands. It was as if I had planned this.

By day, he would remain in meditation without the slightest distraction. By night, as I would sleep in his presence, often when I looked at him in the light of the butter lamp, he would be sitting cross-legged, with his hat on. He remained in meditation until around midnight, resting slightly backwards. Other than [when on] that cushion, he would not sleep. At lunch, [he ate nothing] apart from curd, milk, wheat, cheese (*thud*), and *tsampa* (*risam pa*, roasted barley flour); I had never seen him take meat. And so, all these things couldn't help but increase my tremendous admiration and respect [for him]. ("Paṅḍi ta sum pa" 36; folio 14(b))

Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso appears to serve as a positive resource in Sumpa Khenpo's childhood. He records several examples of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso's influence: bestowing on him the name Lozang Chökyong after taking the vows of the upāsaka (*yong rdzogs dge bsnyen*), motivating his commitment to his vows, and inspiring diligence in his scholarly pursuits. Moreover, his descriptions of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso can be read as a lyrical tribute. He appears not only as a figure to admire, but as an example of an honest, committed, and remarkable figure. This contrasts heavily with themes of corruption and deceit, which are present throughout Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography (Griffiths 213–215). And so, he implies an appreciation for the character and role of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, a person he would like to develop into himself. In fact, Sumpa Khenpo presents his life as a continuation of the behaviour and skills of his teacher(s), drawing on his own moral conduct as a rhetorical antidote to the immoral behaviour shown by others.

Sumpa Khenpo notes that the decision to write a detailed account of Tarshül Chökyong Gyatso, among other teachers, is due to the gratitude he felt for these formative experiences:

I follow the way of Tsongkhapa, who, in his autobiography *Entryway to Faith* (*rNam thar dad pa'i 'jug ngogs*), gives an account of Cakrasaṃvara (dPa' bo rdo rje) alongside his own life. [Moreover] I was thinking how they were my first teachers and that they led me to the rare to find doctrine of the Buddha. Its refuge and protection [like] the cool shade of a white parasol lifted [over] my head, [decorated] with fragments of their wisdom and vast knowledge, many splendid spokes, and trimmings of compassion. As for this intelligence,

the bestowal of kindness, the king of empowerments, the seeds of welfare, prosperity, and bliss on my limbs, it is due solely to the deeds of those [lamas] and not any others such as kings, ministers, parents, relatives, and so on. Even if I offered to completely fill the entire universe with heaps of precious jewels, it would never be enough. Thinking [about it], I rejoice! (“Paṅḍi ta sum pa” 37; folio 15(b))

In citing Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gélukpa school, as his inspiration for discussing his teachers, Sumpa Khenpo once again establishes himself as an ardent Gélukpa scholar who was very much influenced by the actions and legacy of the tradition’s founder. This passage also reflects the clear impression his early teachers had on his young mind, and it appears to have stayed with him well into adulthood.

However, the autobiography also sheds light on the events and processes which shaped his ability to move within and beyond the lives of his teachers and networks. For example, the above sets the scene for his response to the destruction of Gönlung monastery in 1723, which had a marked impact on his life. The place he viewed as home was raised to the ground, the community he valued and cherished was fractured, and one of his most treasured teachers was killed. This event has traditionally been seen as the inflection point of his life (Griffiths 66, 188–203), from which he dedicated his life to Gönlung monastery, its rebuilding, expansion, and promotion, as well as fostering networks of cooperation more broadly across the Qing Empire. However, through examining these aspects of his formative years, we can see the seeds of these trends and values were planted and cultivated long before this traumatic experience. It is through an emersive reading of these early years in Sumpa Khenpo’s autobiography that we can clearly see the blending of fact and fiction, experience and tradition, conformity and self-expression.

Conclusion

In this way, we return to the opening quotation and the argument that autobiography can open up the possibility of better understanding lives and the contexts in which those lives are lived, revealing glimpses of “the remorseless truth.” Texts inevitably tell us a kind of truth about the lives and times they describe. This narrative truth, which can’t always be authenticated by other sources, offers insight into the thoughts, motivations, everyday actions, and the individual’s perceived place in society. Incorporating new approaches that move beyond fact and fiction and turn our attention towards the layers that make up autobiography, such as sites, patterns of emplotments, and modes of self-inquiry, can enrich the way we understand the lives we read and expose new or lesser-known traits of Tibetan literature, history, and culture.

In this paper, I have employed this approach to re-examine the prominence and description of his teachers and identifiers in his autobiography. This has led to two main strands of insight. The first is the benchmarks and norms set by these individuals and how they pressed upon him the importance of being a sincere Gélukpa practitioner and upholder of the dharma, qualities that he espouses throughout his autobiography and wider teachings. The second is the importance of these individuals in establishing his place in the world and his identity both as a Gélukpa and an actor within a wider community connecting Mongol and Qing patrons. In his writing, he continues to emphasise his place geographically, ethnically, and socially. The identifiers that he mentions are hallmarks of this, from his paternal lineage to the high-ranking Gélukpa figures who were instrumental in his identification, to the teachers and lamas with whom he learnt and practised, to his membership of the Gönlung community. These two strands weave together to go beyond a simple picture of his childhood experience to create a multifaceted impression of his values and his understanding of the world around

him, through which we can see more clearly the confluence of religious, political, and personal networks within his self-expression and better understand how these shaped his actions and reactions later in life.

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Notes

- ¹This barely scratches the surface of the diverse range of interdisciplinary methods used to inform the study of autobiography. For more on research methods, theoretical approaches, and autobiography criticism, see Douglas and Barnwell; Smith and Watson 111–163; Wagner-Egelhaaf vol.1.
- ²For studies of Tibetan autobiographies, see Bogin; Gamble; Gyatso; Jacoby; Schaeffer; and Yamamoto.
- ³Tibetan names and terms are given in transliterated form using the Tibetan and Himalayan Library's Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan system, developed by David Germano and Nicolas Tournade. Romanised Tibetan spellings are provided in brackets.
- ⁴When referring to Sumpa Khenpo's autobiography, I have chosen to reference both a modern typeset publication from 2001 and a facsimile reproduction of a blockprint version by Lokesh Chandra. Both editions have their difficulties – the modern edition is missing small sections of text and Chandra's reproduction is difficult to read in places – and I have found it helpful to consult both during my research.
- ⁵Rinpoché is an honorific title meaning 'precious one'.
- ⁶Lit. spiritual friend. Géshé is a Buddhist academic title and often denotes a teacher.
- ⁷Erdeni and Taiji are both Mongolian titles. Erdeni translates as 'treasure' or 'precious', and Taiji was a title for nobles.
- ⁸See Ahmad 172, 174, 181; Oidtmann 45–60.
- ⁹The intermediate state between an individual's death and rebirth. The period between death and rebirth lasts 49 days.
- ¹⁰The other two teachers listed are the Fifth Pañchen Lama and Chuzang Lozang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Chu bzang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1652–1723). The latter was abbot of Gönlung monastery when Sumpa Khenpo first joined. He was closely affiliated with local Mongols; Dorje Dalai Baatur, among others, was his patron. In 1723 he was assassinated during the uprising of the Mongol prince Lozang Tendzin (Blo bzang btsan 'dzin). This event had a long-lasting effect on Sumpa Khenpo.
- ¹¹A mythical river. It is said the river is surrounded by gold sand.

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