The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön

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Chapter One

A Privileged Life

There is great hope for you. Will you lead many accomplished men and women to the Pure Land?

—Terdak Lingpa

In the year 1699 Mindröling Monastery was in its heyday. After nearly three decades of institutional development, Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasri had established a well-known and highly regarded center of learning in Ü. They had built their reputation as the educators of Lhasa’s aristocratic elite and purveyors of a new inclusive form of Nyingma religious training that made room for a range of practitioners. However, trouble was in the air. The brothers were close enough to the Gelukpa-led Ganden Podrang government that when the Fifth Dalai Lama died, in 1682, they participated in the thirteen-year cover-up of his death. The regionally stabilizing force of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s influence began to deteriorate after his passing, quickly fraying the inter-sectarian ties that he had made with institutions like Mindröling. The discovery of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s death not only left the Nyingma community without a champion in the Ganden Podrang; it also left the Ganden Podrang to fall into a state of barely controlled chaos that would continue throughout the life of the Sixth Dalai Lama. During this time political uncertainty and infighting increased both within and beyond the government leadership, with some factions coalescing around policies of pro-Geluk protectionism. At the same time, foreign leaders jockeyed for influence in Tibet. This led to widespread unrest and the rise of bias against non-Geluk institutions amid a complex and contentious ever-shifting political terrain. For people affiliated with non-Geluk religious communities (including Nyingmapas), this meant institutional instability and external persecution at the hands of powerful Geluk factions and their supporters. Active proponents of the Nyingma in central Tibet were
at times supported by the government in Lhasa, and in other years entire monastic complexes were destroyed. The cycle of oppression, destruction, and revival repeated itself several times over the course of the long eighteenth century. Scholar Trent Pomplun sums up the messy factionalism of central Tibetan religious leadership: “The tangled affairs of early eighteenth-century Tibetan politics are impossible to describe in a single chapter. The Geluk monastic order that dominated the central government was divided into several competing factions, each with complex and ever-shifting alliances with various Tibetan aristocrats, Manchu nobles, and Mongol chieftains. Between the regent Sangyé Gyatso and the secular ‘king’ Lhazang Khan in central Tibet—and the Manchu Empire and Züngharia beyond its borders—these factions bound Tibet to its increasingly unstable neighbors as they battled for control within the Lhasa government.”

For Mindröling the Geluk-dominant religious and political environment of Ü began with inter-sectarian support in the mid-seventeenth century but degenerated into persecution by the second decade of the eighteenth century. The situation reached its nadir with the 1717–18 civil war, when pro-Geluk Dzungar Mongols laid waste to non-Geluk institutions, including Mindröling. This was followed by a slow recovery and tentative collaboration between some members of each denomination, but relations remained uncertain and fractious until the early nineteenth century. The shifting political and institutional landscape of central Tibet in the long eighteenth century had a significant effect on Mingyur Peldrön and her prominent Nyingma family. The political and historical context of Mingyur Peldrön’s early years is largely Geluk-centered and Geluk-centric, and this background is reflected in *Dispeller.* This may in large part have been because it was a period of increasing Geluk dominance throughout central Tibet. As such, the political histories of non-Geluk organizations (such as Mindröling) were dictated by the historical arc of the dominant group, even as they became the target of inter-sectarian tension. The events of Mingyur Peldrön’s life must be viewed in this historical context, while the details of these events are based largely on hagiographic reports. Keeping in mind Patrick Geary’s caution against assuming that hagiography should be read as history, some details of *Dispeller* are best read alongside information gathered from historical sources. Rather than assume that these events necessarily occurred, this gives a sense of the narrative arc of Mingyur Peldrön’s *Life,* and it becomes easier to understand the narrative within its own literary context and to connect it with relevant historical context.
In the year 1699 the political and religious unrest of the early eighteenth century was still only brewing, and Mindröling remained an important center of learning for the Lhasa aristocracy. It is here that our story begins. On the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month of the Female Earth Hare year, a daughter was born to Phuntsok Peldzöm and Terdak Lingpa; she was the fourth of seven children. In *Dispeller* the child’s birth story is recounted with all the traditional fanfare of a Tibetan saint’s birth. Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī spent the days surrounding her arrival by performing rituals for the baby’s safety; meanwhile, several women attended Phuntsok Peldzöm in labor. Gyurmé Ösel references their account in *Dispeller*:

> Just like that, she came forth from her mother’s womb. She roared a little “HUM!” sound and went directly into a squat. Everyone in the room—mother, attendants, all—were able to conquer their fear. This was reported by the mother’s attendant Lhakyi Peldzöm, and the others who were fortunate enough to be present at the birth, including Gyurmé Chödron. Thus, I assume this is in keeping with visions of Dzogchen Trekchö. According to Gyurmé Ösel, this birth story is an oral history that was passed on to him by the women who themselves were present at the child’s birth. The account was relayed by women who were invested in a record of Mingyur Peldrön and her importance and who related the story to support the hagiographer’s efforts in recording the saint’s life. Including this firsthand account of her unusual birth lends weight to Gyurmé Ösel’s narrative, offering the gravity of eyewitness “proof” to the author’s larger argument about Mingyur Peldrön’s sacrality. The newborn’s first cry of “HUM!” replaces the cries of an infant with a sacred syllable, suggesting that she emerged from the womb already enlightened. Her sudden movement into an upright squat echoes the surprising mobility of Siddhartha Gautama (later called Shakyamuni Buddha), who was said to have taken seven steps upon his birth. The story reports that the women’s fears were quelled, but it is unclear what those fears actually were. Was it concern surrounding the liminal life-and-death event of childbirth? Or perhaps they found the child’s strange behavior particularly frightening? While these questions must go unanswered, it is clear that Mingyur Peldrön’s birth was reported in saintly terms and with a great deal of drama.
Gyurmé Ösel also makes sure to relate Mingyur Peldrön’s birth story to the institution into which she was born by connecting it with high-level Great Perfection practices. In the last sentence of the excerpt about her birth, he mentions “Dzogchen Trekcho.” This refers to the Great Perfection teachings called Trekchö (variously translated as “Cutting Through,” “Breakthrough,” or “Cutting Through Solidity”). The phrase would have brought to mind Trekchö and the subsequent Thögel (“Crossing the Crest” or “Leap Over”) teachings, two subcategories of the Nyingtik genre, in the “Instruction Class” (Menakdé) category of Great Perfection literature. Thus, in mentioning it, he correlates the unusual circumstances of her birth with high-level practices taught at Mindröling, drawing an overt connection between her and well-known practices that would indicate to the reader that Mingyur Peldrön’s abilities from birth were very advanced indeed. Here the moment of her birth foregrounds the emphasis on her role as a practitioner and purveyor of advanced teachings within Mindröling simultaneously.

The themes of a miraculous and saintly life—in keeping with the stylistic parameters of namtar—continue as the hagiography presents Mingyur Peldrön’s early life and the significant signs and portents that attended her at every turn. In several cases Gyurmé Ösel draws direct connections to her previous lives as well as to her familial and institutional lineages. According to Dispeller, as the infant grew into a toddler, the auspicious signs continued piling up:

Furthermore, right after her birth she began to grow quickly, even though she would only take a little of [her mother’s] milk each day. She naturally displayed a superior nature [and] good [qualities]. In particular, from previous lives she remembered the saints of her tradition, including The Great Master of Oddiyana [Padmasambhava], Kunkyen Drimé Özer, and Sangdak Trinlé Lhundrup. To them she showed one-pointed devotion. Going to each of their statues in turn and venerating them, she was able to recognize and identify them without any assistance. She made supplication to them as though this present life were founded on previous incarnations, with no difference between the two. It’s said that this predisposition is due to her having previously been a disciple of Kunkyen Longchen Rabjampa.

Here the narrative implies that it was Mingyur Peldrön’s profound compassion that led her to only take a little of her mother’s milk each day. In spite of
this, she managed to grow quickly (another sign of her unusual capabilities). Her ability to identify important religious leaders of old without anyone's help is meant to signify both her high level of realization and her connectedness with several religious institutions.

Each of the figures mentioned represent different nested communities. If we think of them in terms of Mindröling’s institutional positioning, they affirm three levels of Nyingma organizational connectivity. Padmasambhava (here the “Great Master of Oddiyana”) represents an early imperial connection with the Nyingma school, broadly defined, and also points to the treasure revelation tradition of her treasure revealer father. Mindröling was established with the dual institutions of treasure revelation and scholarly prowess, and treasure revealers have remained important throughout its history. “Kunkyen Drimé Özer” and “Kunkyen Longchen Rabjampa” are references to Longchenpa (1308–64), who represents the codification of the Nyingma denomination during the fourteenth century. He is mentioned twice in the excerpt, reinforcing Mingyur Peldrön’s connection to the Nyingma with the suggestion that this early behavior was an indicator that in a previous life she had been one of his students. Finally, Mingyur Peldrön’s grandfather, the Nyingma master Trinlé Lhundrup, represents a combined spiritual and genetic connection to the Nyö clan of Terdak Lingpa’s heritage. The depiction of the young girl recognizing these three statues on sight and toddling off to visit them on her own gives the reader the sense that she was born with an innate and extraordinary devotion to the Nyingma lineage holders, and in particular the Mindröling tradition, coupled with highly devout behavior for someone who was barely old enough to walk.

In childhood, although it was playtime, she was able to differentiate between samsāra and nirvana far beyond the reach of ordinary children. Sometimes she would sit cross-legged in meditation, maintaining a fixed gaze. Then there was that time with the cloth. When she was quite small, she had a green cloth that was used for polishing ornaments. To her nursemaid Gyurmé Chödron she said “You’re my closest disciple! When we two have to go out to the barbaric borderlands in the future, we can use this as our food pot.” She took very good care of the cloth. Thus, she was able to clearly see important future events, unobscured by samsāra. I learned this directly [from her]. Later, after the reverend father had departed for the Pure Land, when the Hong Taiji’s army had unspeakably destroyed some of the essential teachings, she had to go to Sikkim to protect her life and
In traditional namtar style, Mingyur Peldrön’s supposed supernatural abilities are centered in the discussion of her childhood, from an unusual penchant for contemplative practice (forsaking playtime to sit in meditation) to supernatural precognition and clairvoyance and other strange behaviors (fretting over and preparing for an exile years in the future). Here the young girl helps to prepare the adults around her for the strife that would eventually befall Mindröling, exhibiting an early concern for her family and their institutional tradition. It also foregrounds the deep impact that the events of the civil war would have on Mindröling. Reverberations of this impact would last well into the 1780s, when Gyurmé Ösel actually completed Dispeller. The anxieties surrounding the events are expressed throughout Mingyur Peldrön’s Life, pointing to this moment as a major juncture in her lived experience.

As a hagiography, in Dispeller Gyurmé Ösel uses moments of supernatural activity to paint Mingyur Peldrön as an enlightened being from her very birth. As such, his focus on her childhood is centered not on mundane events but on the miraculous. Ordinary activities are not mentioned, and in their place he reports accounts of her performative devotion, her astounding dedication to meditative practices, and gives the reader an image of a girl who emerged from the womb ready to fight for the dharma. Most notably, the girl was born into a familial context in which, according to her hagiography, she was immediately received as an important member and future contributor. There is no discussion of an unwanted girl-child in this part of the narrative, no disappointment on the part of the parents or the rest of the family. Rather, as the story is written, she is received as an enlightened future participant of the family. The signs and portents of this section of Dispeller then give way to a less miraculous discussion of her childhood and adult years.

At Mindröling, Mingyur Peldrön’s generation eventually grew to include seven children. Her eldest brothers were Gyurmé Pema Tenzin (1677–?) and Yizhin Lekdrup (1679–1718). Not much is mentioned about them in Dispeller, although we know that Yizhin Lekdrup did become a teacher at Mindröling and died in 1718 (presumably during the civil war). The next eldest brother was Pema Gyurmé Gyatso (1686–1717/18), who would become the second trichen of Mindröling, after their father died of illness in 1714. He was important for
Mindröling’s survival after their father’s death, and he passed on teachings to his younger siblings and had been expected to lead the monastery prior to his own untimely death in the civil war. In Dispeller he is described in his role as one of Mingyur Peldrön’s early teachers and in his position as trichen. Mingyur Peldrön was closest in age to her brother Rinchen Namgyel, who was five years her senior. The two would become co-leaders of Mindröling in their adulthood and frequently traded teachings with one another. His extant hagiography, The Namtar of the Bodhisattva Rinchen Namgyel, Dispeller of Longing for the Fortunate, is comparable in style and length to Dispeller and thus offers helpful information for comparing the upbringing, religious training, and activities of the two siblings.

The male children were all active participants in the family project of educating monastics, non-monastics and the sons of aristocratic families at Mindröling. In Dispeller Mingyur Peldrön’s elder brothers also educated her in the transmission lineages of their father’s treasure texts and multiple other systems of religious training, helping to prepare her for similar leadership positions. Depictions of Rinchen Namgyel in Dispeller include him receiving teachings from Mingyur Peldrön, and the two are shown as having a collaborative relationship in terms of religious education. They are depicted as equals, exchanging teachings to reinforce one another’s education. However, in his namtar the flow of education is unilateral, with him teaching Mingyur Peldrön and her remaining always in the role of student. He is described as having studied with many people in his childhood—far more than Mingyur Peldrön in fact—but they are all men, and renowned elder teachers, rather than anyone from his immediate age group. In Rinchen Namgyel’s namtar he is also depicted in his role as a religious teacher and political advisor to the military general Polhané Sönam Tobgyé (1689–1747). This pattern is mirrored in Dispeller, in which Mingyur Peldrön takes on the role of an advisor to and confidante of important political figures—often the very same people described as having received advice from her brother in his namtar. While the hagiographies of each of the two siblings represents their individual subjects as the sole political advisor, both texts corroborate that the sister and brother did work together in Mindröling’s leadership. These two namtars contain many parallels. For example, both works exhibit a focus on recounting how each sibling taught large groups of people. Likewise, they both report that Rinchen Namgyel did indeed share his education with Mingyur Peldrön by passing on teachings to her where he could (although in her telling, she repaid him in kind with teachings of her
own). The story of Mingyur Peldrön’s childhood is largely one of her education and is best understood in conversation with Rinchen Namgyel’s educational narrative, given their proximity in age and later co-leadership of the monastery in adulthood. Like Dispeller, his hagiography also includes a section describing his early education, and a comparison reveals significant similarities as well as important distinctions between the two.

Among these siblings Mingyur Peldrön also had two younger sisters, generally referred to as “Lady Peldzin” and “Lady Drung” in Dispeller. Lady Peldzin was born in or shortly after 1701 and is mentioned slightly more frequently than Lady Drung, who only makes passing appearances. While Lady Peldzin was recognized as an incarnation of her grandmother Yangchen Drölma, we have little information about whether or not she received a formal religious or secular education along the lines of Mingyur Peldrön or Rinchen Namgyel. Generally, the sisters are mentioned in Dispeller as accompanying Mingyur Peldrön and their mother on pilgrimages and also occasionally participating in religious ceremonies. According to the namtars of both Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel, the younger sisters attended a few large group teachings alongside Mingyur Peldrön in their youth. Likewise, in adulthood they were present for teachings from both their elder sister and brother. However, these younger sisters had no lengthy accounts written about their lives and appear only sporadically in their siblings’ namtars. We know little about their early years or education. Based on the brief moments where they are mentioned, it seems that they may have had access to religious teachers (especially those within their family), but no information suggests an education nearly as extensive as Mingyur Peldrön’s. Nor do we have much information about whether or not they were encouraged or allowed to engage in religious training as children. We know that Lady Peldzin remained a laywoman, although she accompanied Mingyur Peldrön on pilgrimage journeys and into exile in Sikkim. Lady Peldzin shows up in Dispeller and in Rinchen Namgyel’s namtar most prominently in brief accounts of her short-lived marriage to the king of Sikkim, which can also be found in Samten Gyatso’s History of Sikimese Monasteries. The absence of a discussion about these other daughters’ education is in stark contrast to the descriptions of the training bestowed on their elder siblings and as recounted in the namtars of Rinchen Namgyel and Mingyur Peldrön.

How Mingyur Peldrön came to inhabit the role of community leader and religious teacher while her sisters did not is an essential question. Her early instruction meant that later in life she could rely on her religious knowledge
to gain support in times of need, whereas Lady Peldzin and Lady Drung may have had to rely on their family connections alone. The best example of this incongruence is when the sisters and their mother fled into exile during the civil war. Upon arrival in Sikkim, Mingyur Peldrön was hailed by the Sikkimese royal family as a revered teacher who was able to share her training, bestowing teachings on the monastics at nearby Pemayangtsé Monastery and offering mass teachings for the Sikkimese laity. The discrepancy between Mingyur Peldrön’s experience in exile and that of Lady Peldzin is notable. While the elder sister was hailed as an important religious teacher, the younger was bound in a marriage alliance to the king of Sikkim for the duration of their time in the kingdom. It turns out that Lady Peldzin’s marriage did not last long, and the sisters and their mother would ultimately return to Ü together. The History of Sikkimese Monasteries also mentions a little about their mother, Phuntsok Peldzöm, including that she was generous with gifts, which she distributed widely.

Mingyur Peldrön’s religious training was one of the most important aspects of her upbringing and denotes a status of privilege. In the context of the twenty-first-century reader, one might be inclined to point to this as evidence of a dramatically pro-woman stance. However, it is not useful to impose a uniform sense of pro-woman education throughout the family, as we have little evidence that Mingyur Peldrön’s education mirrored that of her sisters. Rather, the literature suggests an uneven educational experience within the family itself. When comparing her education to that of her two closest siblings (Rinchen Namgyel and Lady Peldzin), inconsistencies arise. She received far more involved training than Lady Peldzin, but as we shall see, she was still excluded from some teachings that Rinchen Namgyel received. The impact of gender and the dynamics at play in the respective siblings’ access to religious training are obscured in Dispeller and raise the question of how gender and privilege were interconnected in Mingyur Peldrön’s case specifically and in the family more generally. Her education indicates access to religious training beyond that of her sister but not as extensive as what her brother enjoyed. This may have had to do with birth order, acumen, interest, or any number of other, unknown factors. Thinking specifically about her case, even with hierarchies in place within the family, in the wider scope of religious education of the time, she had relatively direct access to an array of teachings that were within her grasp because of her position of birth in the Mindröling family and parents and teachers who supported her education. Her training was not necessarily
accessible (or of interest) to all the girls in the family and may have been completely inaccessible to many other girls beyond this inner circle. It is notable that she had the fortitude to engage these trainings throughout her adulthood and would ultimately use them to her benefit in establishing her role as a leader. This raises a question about what her access to religious training says about her individual positionality and the power structures that informed privilege in her context.

The details of Mingyur Peldrön’s educational narrative in Dispeller largely center around her close relationship with her father, Terdak Lingpa. Accounts of the two suggest a warm and affectionate relationship focused on her religious education and preparation to take on a significant educator’s role in the family. To establish this connection, Gyurmé Ösel points to the fortunate karmic predispositions that he argues led to her high birth:

Furthermore, past prayers ripened at the right time, the result of which was that by her birth she formed a master-disciple connection with the Great Terton King, Tamer of All Beings Terdak Lingpa. Thus, she was born the child of her father’s pure and wondrous line of ancestral fathers and mothers. And so, she became the remedy, breather of life into the definitive Secret Vajragarbha. When she was young, she held the three vows without contradiction, she was protector and friend to all teachings and living beings, and received the highest scriptural transmissions.15

As predictable as it is for this genre, the karmic explanation of her origins highlights the single most important privilege she enjoyed: birth into a family that supported her religious education (even if the educational support among her generation was potentially uneven). In keeping with the concept of karmic retribution, birth into this family is described as the result of good karma from having engaged in devout activities in earlier lives. The mention of the Three Vows would also become relevant to Mingyur Peldrön’s later monastic position. Taking into consideration that Dispeller was composed long after her death, Gyurmé Ösel created an image of a baby who was immediately identified as an important figure for high-level practices in the Mindröling community and raised with the anticipation that she could become an eminently successful teacher. This teleological reading stands as his explanation for why she received an education directed by her father: from her very birth it was anticipated that she would step into a role of leadership.
In *Dispeller* Mingyur Peldrön’s relationship with her father is based entirely on her potential contributions to the family institution. Whereas other women escaped their households to pursue a religious life or faced off over marriage prospects, Terdak Lingpa’s primary concern for Mingyur Peldrön was apparently that she would become a teacher and liberator of suffering beings who was adept at the monastery’s Dzogchen teachings. The phrase *great hope* is repeated five times in the discussion of her education, and each time it is reportedly uttered by Terdak Lingpa.\(^\text{16}\) A few examples of the phrase’s occurrence will shed some light on its importance. The account of Mingyur Peldrön receiving her religious name from her father in 1710 goes like this:

Then, if I’m to give a true account about her name, [here it is]. It happened in her twelfth year—the iron tiger year—in the fifth month, on the tenth day ceremony for the Great Guru of Oddiyana, the Lake-Born Vajra [that is, Padmasambhava], at the time when the ḍākinīs assembled, in the Samantabhadra Palace that is the residence of the Great Orgyen Mindroling family. In the center of the immeasurable self-arisen vajra palace sat her own father—the master of the secret doctrine Dharmavajra—perched atop the indestructible throne in the guise of a human. That tamer of beings and knowledge-bearer, the Great Tertön Dharma King Terdak Lingpa, the Vajra-Holder of Oddiyana,\(^\text{17}\) conferred [her name] on her. He cut her hair with the razor of wisdom of the true nature of reality, and she took the name Mingyur Peldrön. At that moment flowers of consecration blew about. A rainbow stood like an arrow over the roof of Mindrölting. Then the Great Tertön himself showed minor signs of fatigue, and outside many rainbows stuck out like arrows. There was worried talk that maybe this was a sign that his lordship’s feet had become infirm [and that his life would be cut short]. At the same time, in the center of the Samantabhadra palace, the water in the vase in the arranged mandala of Lord Amitabha began to bubble a bit! The reverend father said, “Girl, what great hopes do I have for you? This is a sign that you have the right karmic connections to be a holder of the essential teachings. Now, quickly drink the water from the vase!” Additionally, in *The Revealed Treasure of the Empty Plain* it says, “The master and disciple remained inseparable.” It’s also said that flowers were scattered. From then on, she stayed close to her reverend father and attained spiritual maturity by the steam of the Four Empowerments in the mandala of the Profound Teaching of the Rigdzin Tuktik.\(^\text{18}\)
In this account of Mingyur Peldrön’s first refuge ceremony, it is clearly important to Gyurmé Ösel that the reader believes the account to be true in spite of (or because of) the signs and portents so typical of hagiography that proliferate and render the scene miraculous. What we can tell from the account is that in 1710, the eleven-year-old Mingyur Peldrön (twelve by Tibetan age calculations) took refuge with Terdak Lingpa at their home in Mindröling. In the refuge ceremony her father expressed his hope for her future engagement with religious training. The account makes heavy use of symbolism that renders the house and participants as Buddhist deities, existing in the ultimate reality of a Buddha-field. The family home becomes the palace of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, who is considered to be the progenitor of the Great Perfection. Her father is depicted as Dharma-vajra and Padmasambhava as they participate in the ceremony in which she will become officially linked to him for her religious training. In hagiographic fashion the rainbows standing like arrows outside the house, the flowers flying about in the air, and the water spontaneously bubbling in its vase, all cloak the narrative in a sense of the miraculous. Some signs are positive, while others are not. The rainbow arrows are interpreted alongside Terdak Lingpa’s slight fatigue to portend his early demise (he would die only a few years later). However, when the vase of water in the Amitabha mandala begins to bubble, this is considered a good sign. He exclaims that he has great hopes for Mingyur Peldrön and orders her to drink the bubbling water and thereby seal her karmic connection to the “essential teachings.” With the use of miraculous language, the moment establishes her as inextricably linked to Terdak Lingpa as his religious disciple, and to Mindröling and its teachings, lending weight to his declaration that he has great hopes for his daughter’s future. Practically speaking, the account also tells us that Mingyur Peldrön began studying in earnest with her father when she was eleven years old and had no other teachers until his death, that he held an expectation that she would be successful in her religious study and practice, and that this would position her optimally for a leadership role in the family’s religious institution. As a point of comparison, Rinchen Namgyel was reported to have begun his studies at the age of four and to have studied with a wide range of renowned teachers throughout his childhood, although he did also spend time studying with his father. Here the familial relationship of father and daughter is combined with teacher and student, bringing together the realms of religious and natal families, which in many parts of Tibetan history have been separated. For the family
at Mindröling, and especially for Mingyur Peldrön, these relationships were completely enmeshed.

Gyurmé Ösel reports that Mingyur Peldrön herself told him about her early education. He claims that she requested these initial empowerments and began with the preliminary practices, following Terdak Lingpa’s instruction diligently until she had signs of realization. Terdak Lingpa repeatedly expressed his goals for Mingyur Peldrön and the future of Mindröling as well as her own spiritual development. Accounts of the early years of her studies include repetition of this theme, with Terdak Lingpa patting her affectionately and saying things like “There is great hope for you. Will you lead many accomplished men and women to the Pure Lands?” Sometimes the phrase was uttered in commands to her, such as “Now, [you] must earnestly meditate on the Three Classes of the Great Perfection. In the future you must explain [it] to others. I have great hope for you!” These words solidified Mingyur Peldrön’s resolve to be diligent in her studies and reinforced for her and others the idea that she was brought up to be a Dzogchen teacher. Even if Mingyur Peldrön had had other ideas about what her future held, these specific expectations were established for her early on. At different moments the phrase a great hope acts as a positive reinforcement that buoys the young girl during her education, while in other places it is a reminder to fulfill the nonnegotiable expectations of her father. It seems this method worked. She was reportedly a diligent student, studying hard in each stage of her training. Mingyur Peldrön’s own hopes and desires, however, are never discussed. While she received strong support for her education and was urged to pursue elevated religious practice and become adept in it so as to be able to pass the practice on as a teacher, it is also possible that the weight of familial expectations had little to do with her own interests. There is never any inquiry in Dispeller about what Mingyur Peldrön herself wanted to do with her life or what she would be interested in. In addition to these anecdotes, her childhood and early youth are distilled down to senyik, or lists of teachings, initiations, and empowerments that she received from Terdak Lingpa and later from other important Mindröling figures, all of whom were men.

Dispeller reports that Mingyur Peldrön’s early years were occupied with religious study, and life at Mindröling continued somewhat uninterrupted until her father died in 1714, her fifteenth year. One can imagine that the death of her father would have been jarring and sad for her, both in terms of her personal relationship with her father and root teacher but also in that
it threw the monastic community into uncertainty at a time when she was still in her youth. After Terdak Lingpa died, she studied closely with her uncle Lochen Dharmaśrī, also receiving teachings from her elder brothers Pema Gyurmé Gyatso and Rinchen Namgyel. Pema Gyurmé Gyatso took up the role of trichen at this time. The interim between the beginning of Mingyur Peldrön’s study with Terdak Lingpa and the onset of the civil war is depicted through more long lists of the teachings she received from each of these men. These senyik are interspersed with a few brief vignettes that emphasize her close relationship with Terdak Lingpa. After his death Mingyur Peldrön’s educational program was directed by Lochen Dharmaśrī, with most training coming from him and a handful of teachings from her elder brothers.

Mingyur Peldrön’s religious training is the most prominent topic of her childhood discussed in Dispeller, and so the story of her youth becomes synonymous with that of her education. The narrative of this period is not given in prose. Rather, ages eleven to eighteen are depicted as chronological lists of the texts and teachings that made up her educational curriculum and the empowerments, initiation, and instructions that she received attendant with them, with a few vignettes interspersed throughout. This section of the hagiography models the style of senyik, the records of teachings received, mentioned previously. These lists appear frequently in Tibetan life writing and can range in length and detail. For example, the Institut für Indologie und Tibetologie’s collection of senyik for nine Sakya practitioners from the sixteenth century range in length from 5 to 81 folios. In comparison, the section of Mingyur Peldrön’s namtar that reads like a senyik covers 9 folios (18 folio sides) of the 236 folios sides (117.5 folios) that compose the namtar. This amounts to approximately 7.5 percent of the namtar.

The senyik section—while not terribly engaging as a narrative choice—conveys important information about the nature of Mingyur Peldrön’s education, including the weight of her religious credentials. These lists are impressive not only in their sheer length but also in the range and diversity of trainings they represent. They point to the importance of her religious training as fundamental to her depicted identity as well as for the larger narrative concerns of Gyurmé Ösel’s Dispeller. Including this record in the hagiography trains the reader’s attention on the broad scope of her religious education. The nearly (but not quite) exhaustive collection of teachings comprising her education suggests that she was sufficiently prepared for her future role of religious practitioner and educator for Mindröling. The
section establishes her religious authority by pointing out her comprehensive training in her father’s revealed treasure texts and in high-level Atiyoga (Highest Yoga) and Anuyoga (Subsequent Yoga) Great Perfection teachings. It also indicates a curriculum that overlaps with her brothers in some places, and diverges in significant ways. Terdak Lingpa gave her the reading transmissions, practical guidance, explanatory transmissions, and empowerments for a host of texts and teachings. According to Gyurmé Ösel, she received training in the works of the “famous treasure revealers” of the time. She studied The Heart Essence of Vimilamitra and Longchenpa’s commentary on it as well as Machik Labdrön’s Severance (Chôd) and teachings from the earlier and later Northern Treasure tradition (Jangter). Terdak Lingpa taught and transmitted to her all of his revealed treasure texts, including his ritual instructions on Dredging the Depths of Hell (for which Mingyur Peldrön would later compose an instruction manual). The concern was whether his corpus would continue to be passed down after he was gone, and passing the teachings to her along with her brothers meant that these works were that much more likely to be preserved. Finally, Mingyur Peldrön received an extensive education in an array of Great Perfection texts and teachings. These included teachings that originated in each of three divisions treating approaches to understanding the primordial state of existence, the Semdé (Mind Section), Longdé (Space Section), and Menakdé (Instruction Section).

Dzogchen transmissions are especially highlighted in the senyik. The list reflects a significant part of the collection of high-level Nyingma teachings, generally only accessible to those who have undergone significant training and received initiation into the practices and the empowerments to perform them from authorized teachers. Indeed, Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel were the only two in the younger group of siblings to receive transmission for Mindröling’s cycle of Atiyoga teachings, which heightened the significance of Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a religious teacher after the civil war. By receiving these teachings and transmissions, including the authorization to pass them on, Mingyur Peldrön established herself as a repository of knowledge from the prior generation and an important link in the transmission of the Mindröling to future generations. The extensive nature of these lists also reinforces the expectation that she would enthusiastically carry on the family tradition of being a public religious practitioner.

As the sibling closest in age to Mingyur Peldrön for whom we also have a namtar, her brother Rinchen Namgyel serves as the best comparison in
terms of access to education and treatment within the family during the years when they were children. Pema Gyurmé Gyatso and Yizhin Lekdrup were already young men by the time their younger siblings were born. While Mingyur Peldrön’s education is reported as having begun at age eleven, Rinchen Namgyel began school when he was a mere four years old. His education began much earlier than his sister’s and was more far-reaching in scope as well. Both siblings’ educations were directed by their father. However, the content of their training was different, and his was far more thorough. He received an extensive education in the five sciences (rikné), while she was barred from studying them. He studied with many well-known tutors and teachers, while she studied almost exclusively with senior male family members such as her father and later with her uncle and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso. Whereas Mingyur Peldrön’s education was centered on training that she could acquire at Mindröling, Rinchen Namgyel also received initiations from the Fifth Dalai Lama and leaders of the Drikung Kagyu and Sakya denominations. His formal education was such that he would have been familiar with a range of approaches to religious praxis, logic, and secular topics.

While the list of Mingyur Peldrön’s educational credentials is impressive and surprisingly extensive, there is one key training module that was omitted—that of Mindröling’s foundational rikné curriculum. Sometimes glossed as the five “arts and sciences” or “texts of the cultural sciences,” rikné consisted of five areas of study: plastic arts, medicine, language, logic, and “inner knowledge.” According to Buddhologists José Cabezón and Roger Jackson, “In modern parlance, the term rig gnas is frequently employed as the equivalent of the English word culture, referring in some instances to culture in general, in others to classical culture in particular. There is, however, a sense in which the term rig gnas means ‘cultural science,’ as in Sa skya Paṇḍita’s enumeration of the ten rig gnas that must be mastered by a ‘great pandit.’” Mindröling was well known for a curriculum bearing the same title. Rikné was not studied at the Geluk monasteries in and around Lhasa and had in fact been discouraged during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama but remained present at Mindröling. While Rinchen Namgyel studied rikné extensively in his childhood, Mingyur Peldrön was denied this training.

According to Dispeller, in 1712 Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī had a conversation about whether or not Mingyur Peldrön should train in rikné, in which Terdak Lingpa made it clear that he felt there was no need for her to do so. Two questions arise here. Why was she excluded from studying
rikné? Also, why does Gyurmé Ösel choose to discuss this decision in the hagiography? Dispeller asserts that Terdak Lingpa found rikné to be unworthy of Mingyur Peldröön’s time. He thought her to be a bright and intelligent student who learned quickly and for whom studying rikné would be unnecessary. Terdak Lingpa also suggests that since Rinchen Namgyel had already begun his study of rikné, he should continue it and use it for his future leadership. Meanwhile, Mingyur Peldröön could focus on other things. Gyurmé Ösel’s discussion of the matter in Dispeller suggests that he expected his readers to wonder why she had not trained in rikné. He sought to make clear that it was due to external reasons, such as dividing up the children’s expertise, not wasting Mingyur Peldröön’s time with unnecessary training (she had started her studies significantly later in life than her brother had), and so forth. Gyurmé Ösel makes it clear that her father explicitly decided she need not spend time in study that he considered redundant for both her educational program and the institution. Rinchen Namgyel would need rikné for his future role as trichen of Mindröling, and besides, he had begun studying it earlier in his life than his sister was when her studies began. If he focused on rikné, there was no institutional need for her to also occupy her time in this pursuit.

The focus in the decision to forgo rikné training for Mingyur Peldröön is notably twofold. Her educational needs are mentioned, but the needs of Mindröling as an institution take precedent. As a result of Terdak Lingpa’s decision, Mingyur Peldröön received high-level Great Perfection trainings (in fact, the highest teachings in her tradition) while being barred from an entry-level foundational set of teachings. Ultimately, she received less education than Rinchen Namgyel did. While it is not stated explicitly, it is possible that this was a case of gender exclusion. Dominique Townsend’s work on Terdak Lingpa and his correspondence with women has uncovered a complex relationship with women’s training. While he did maintain correspondence with female rulers, patrons, and practitioners, it seems that he tended to offer women less pragmatic, more idealistic advice for their religious pursuits. We cannot assume that his approach to his daughters’ education was uniform for all of them, nor can we assume that it was equal to that of his sons. Nevertheless, he is portrayed in Dispeller as having a clear concern that Mingyur Peldröön receive religious training. There is also the possibility that as he aged he was more concerned that the Great Perfection be transmitted to the next generation and so sought to make sure she was trained up in the teachings as soon as possible. In the hagiography Mingyur Peldröön’s education is
described as something intentionally crafted to situate her as an authorized purveyor of the Great Perfection and prepare her for the life of a religious educator. This is notable as it further emphasizes her position of high privilege in the household while simultaneously explaining why she was denied a basic foundation of the Mindroling education (that is, rikné).

There are important gender implications in the records of Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel’s educational histories and the absence of any such account for Lady Peldzin. It is unclear whether or not Lady Peldzin received any training—secular or religious—or what the nature of the training might have been. Since we have no namtar for her and she is little mentioned in other histories and narrative accounts, her educational experience has been largely lost to history. It is also worth noting that none of Mingyur Peldrön’s teachers were women. Both Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel studied exclusively with men during their childhood. This could suggest that either Gyurmé Ösel did not perceive her as having learned anything of significance from women or that she simply did not have any female teachers to work with. Given the emphasis that he applies to her role as a teacher of women during her late teenage years, it is likely that he was interested in accounting for women’s education and that he would have mentioned Mingyur Peldrön’s study with women if such events had occurred. This tells us that there were no female role models of institutional religious engagement from whom Mingyur Peldrön could learn during her early years at Mindroling. Thus, it seems likely that she was the first woman at the monastery to take on the roles she adopted. This is not at all unusual—the presence of a female teacher is the exception rather than the norm in this specific sociohistorical context. In this section of Dispeller Gyurmé Ösel draws on Mingyur Peldrön’s religious education to position her as a fully authorized religious teacher of Mindroling. Given his concern that she be recognized as an important religious teacher, it would have been especially important for Gyurmé Ösel to establish her educational background as a means of legitimating her role in the community. Another foundational aspect of Mingyur Peldrön’s identity as it is portrayed in Dispeller was her position as a nun.

Becoming a Nun

Unlike her sisters, Mingyur Peldrön was a nun, and that status defined her religious identity as much as her position as a daughter of Mindroling. The
theme of monasticism is persistent throughout Dispeller and is discussed from the earliest section of the text, among stories of her previous lives. The depictions of women’s previous incarnations in Tibetan life writing have served to create profound links between the main subject of a Life and inspirational women of the past. The importance of these pre-life narratives will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, but here it serves to show how the initial representations of Mingyur Peldrön’s previous lives foreshadow important themes for her story, including that of celibacy. Interestingly, her celibacy becomes intertwined with her persona as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel. For example, at one point in a description of Yeshé Tsogyel found in Dispeller, the iconic figure is described quite differently from how she is usually portrayed. In this hagiography she is a celibate woman who never married, never took a consort, and never had children. “I am a nun,” Yeshé Tsogyel declares in Dispeller, “unblemished by samsaric defects.” The theme of monasticism and celibacy is so strong in this text that famous consorts are made celibate in order to reinforce the image of Mingyur Peldrön as a staunchly celibate woman from her early years until her death. The emphasis on monasticism in these early stories of previous lives reverberates into the sections of the text that describe her own life as Mingyur Peldrön.

While Mingyur Peldrön lived her entire adult life as a nun, her namtar includes no account of her ordination, a noteworthy omission for a text that frequently reinforces her role as a nun in other ways. While her refuge ceremony with Terdak Lingpa is described in fine detail, any actual ordination that she may have had is relegated to a single brief phrase and a collection of strong hints scattered throughout the Life, including accounts of her vocal advocacy for monasticism. The only place in Dispeller where Mingyur Peldrön’s actual ordination is explicitly and unequivocally described is in the account of her fifteenth year:

There was a time between [the period] when the reverend father departed from life, when his form body was established in the expanse of peace, and [the time] when she fled the Hor soldiers. During that interim she was mostly in retreat. During that time she also received all kinds of [teachings] from Lochen Dharmaśrī. Having taken monastic vows, she then received the Precious Word Empowerment of the reverend father’s New Treasure—and along with instructional reading and clarification—from Lochen [Dharmaśrī] Rinpoche. This resulted in a thorough transmission of the texts.
This passage, which is followed by a senyik of the teachings that she received from Lochen Dharmaśrī, suggests either that Mingyur Peldrön had been ordained by Lochen Dharmaśrī or that, having been ordained by someone else, she was able to receive the listed initiations from him. This is the most concrete evidence of her ordination. Prior to this moment, there is also an important but brief discussion of how in her twelfth year she was established as both a nun and tantric practitioner. This is implied in the statement “As a youth, [she] concentrated on the Three Vows without contradiction, and so acted as protector and friend to the teachings and all beings, and received the highest transmissions.” This language is common in Three Vows literature and indicates that she was simultaneously a dedicated monastic and tantric practitioner. The statement is repeated in Mindröling’s collected Lives of the monastery’s lineage holders, The Lives of the Orgyen Mindröling Lineage Succession: A Festival of Victorious Conquerors. There it reads, “When she was the appropriate age [of twelve], she practiced the Three Vows without contradiction.” These moments simultaneously establish her as a nun and tantric practitioner and a Three Vows expert who was able to maintain her celibacy while taking up tantric praxis. This evidence of how she could continue practicing and disseminating high-level tantric teachings while remaining a nun offers the secondary implication (or perhaps assumption?) that she was in fact a nun, and thus maintained celibacy.

There is no discussion in Dispeller about whether or not Mingyur Peldrön had any agency in the decision to become a nun and study with Lochen Dharmaśrī or whether or not it was something that she actually wanted. Most other women’s Lives in this genre talk about a woman’s decision to become a nun and her reasons for doing so. While the early impetus for Mingyur Peldrön becoming a nun is unclear, throughout Dispeller she is portrayed as arguing truculently for the superiority of the monastic life, over and above that of the non-celibate path. This was a rhetorical stance that was at least partly political in nature and directly related to her affiliation with the Nyingma denomination in an age of Geluk ascendency. In Dispeller there are several dramatic scenes establishing her eventual rejection of the famous Fifth Lelung Jedrung Losang Trinlé (1697–1740), who proposed that they establish a tantric consort relationship. She rejected him on the grounds that earlier in life her father had told her she would have to remain celibate if she was to successfully train in higher Dzogchen practices.

The emphasis on Mingyur Peldrön’s position as a nun continues throughout Dispeller until her final days, when she supposedly expressed a desire to
be born a man in the next life and to become “fully ordained.” This is the first and only moment when her level of ordination is mentioned throughout the whole of the text. Dispeller frequently refers to her as a tsünma, which in the context of this text is best translated as “nun,” but this is a general term and does not designate her level of ordination. We will unpack the full meaning of Mingyur Peldrön’s statement in later chapters, but in the context of her position as a nun, it suggests that she was perhaps not fully ordained, in spite of having lived her entire life as a nun at a major religious center.

Women’s status in the Buddhist monastic community, their roles and their relationship to different levels of ordination, has been raised as a topic of discussion among scholars and practitioners in recent years. In academic circles, scholars of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions have begun addressing the nun-laywoman divide and the social and religious ramifications of this division. In place of this dyad, Buddhologist Jessica Starling has pointed to a “spectrum of ordination practices and an active negotiation of ritual authenticity” among female religious professionals that illuminates the range of possible ways that women could participate in religious life. Whether or not one was ordained would have different ramifications for woman’s access to religious practice depending on the time and place in which she lived. For those who sought to ordain as nuns, a host of causes and conditions were required for a woman to be allowed to take all the vows of her ordination lineage and be recognized as a bhikṣuṇī. This title would distinguish one from novice nuns and probationary postulants and within the monastic world would establish a woman in a different place in the social hierarchy. The details of ordination rules vary from one denomination to the next, and their rules (and significance) are as culturally embedded as any other aspect of Buddhist tradition. While there is recourse to the vinaya for grounding ordination rules in a legalistic framework, the interpretation of ordination rules has been historically and geographically rooted.

The complexity of how religious women are labeled according to vows and lifestyle pertains to Tibetan Buddhist religious contexts and the ways that women navigate their roles within the tradition. Tibetan Buddhism has valorized non-celibate paths, and these were frequently available to women seeking a serious religious practice. In Tibet the path of the non-celibate yogini (neljorma) was in many cases more readily available to women than was the male-dominated monastic realm. Historically, in Tibet the life of a
nun was not the sole choice for religious pursuit. However, nunhood was certainly an option, and conversations about ordination were present in Tibet long before the twentieth century. The status of ordination would not necessarily determine a woman’s access to religious training, nor were specifics of ordination status always obvious to the general population beyond the monastery walls. As Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik have explained, in Tibet and elsewhere in the Buddhist world, “terms for female renunciates in Tibet are employed loosely to refer to various lifestyles and levels of ordination, although there are few references to the fully ordained bhikṣunī (Tib. dge-slông-ma).” In some Tibetan contexts a woman’s level of ordination was not necessarily considered as important in the larger social world when compared with whether or not she was a nun. Public perspective on nuns does not seem to have been dependent on level of monastic ordination. Instead, the fact of living as a nun would have the most significant implications for a woman and the social perceptions about her and her gender, regardless of her ordination status. These gendered implications were based on a woman’s relationship to householder life. With that said, gendered perceptions of monastic men and women are highly variable depending on the historical and geographical context. Likewise, every aspect of ordination—from its symbolic and social importance to the ritual requirements for ordination to occur—was context dependent. While there is a trend within Tibetan history that social perceptions about women would shift depending on their engagement with the gendered and sexed expectations of being part of the family unit (for example, as a wife and/or mother), those perceptions might change depending on time and place. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik echo Charlene Makley in explaining that “the mere fact of leaving householder status and shaving one’s head is already enough to ‘perform’ most of the gender-bending that the taking of monastic vows accomplishes in public perception—a bending that has been used deliberately by individual women to escape their conventional gendered roles as wives and mothers.” While the relationship between gender identity and monastic identity continues to be a point of discussion, it is clear that women presenting as ordained (with shaved head and monastic robes) convey to the wider community a different social status than non-monastic women, regardless of their exact level of ordination.

This is not to elide the importance of full ordination for women who sought out the life of a nun and hoped to establish themselves within the larger religious institutional structure, for reasons soteriological, social, or
otherwise. There are hints that full ordination was possible for women in Tibetan history—at least in the eleventh, twelfth, and fifteenth centuries. Likewise, some nuns who were fully ordained rallied to ordain others and argued for the benefits of full ordination. We have no evidence that Mingyur Peldrön herself received full ordination, although we do know that she was a nun. There are no indications that her level of ordination had an impact on her religious education or social role, although before she died she is reported to have expressed a strong desire for full ordination (and birth as a man) in her next life. We can also understand the impact that becoming a nun had on her socioreligious position.\textsuperscript{56} Dispeller is written from the basic assumption that, if sufficiently supported, the nun’s life had the potential to allow her the freedom to focus on and develop her religious practice. This is borne out in other nuns’ contexts as well. For example, Chökyi Drönma was compelled to choose between either acting as a ruler, or becoming a nun and pursuing enlightenment.\textsuperscript{57} Her narrative arc echoes that of the \textit{Life of Shakyamuni} and includes her renunciation of the householder life after having married and had children. Chökyi Drönma was herself fully ordained and argued for the benefits of full ordination. While her context was different from Mingyur Peldrön’s in some ways, the potential that nunhood could be liberatory was emphasized for both, and the decision to become a nun while retaining a privileged status was as feasible and within reach.

Although the possibility would be raised in her adult life, Mingyur Peldrön did not take the path of the non-celibate yogini. And today she remains a woman of indeterminate ordination status who lived life as a nun. While Mingyur Peldrön’s level of ordination is not discussed in detail, her social position as a nun is frequently reiterated throughout Dispeller. Rather than inhabiting a liminal place on the spectrum of monasticism and lay life, she is depicted as fighting against suggestions that she (or anyone else) engage in consort relationships, arguing that her path was one of celibacy. While there is little discussion of her actual ordination, her dedication to the life of a solitary nun is made most prominent in Dispeller. Whatever the lived reality, in her story the rejection of the householder life is emphasized in her early adoption of monasticism before she was old enough to consider establishing her own household. Mingyur Peldrön’s expected path of supporting her family’s religious institution could potentially have been pursued in either the monastic or non-monastic setting. In her community marriage did not preclude involvement in religious leadership. As such, the status of full ordination may not have been as significant, given that she could access
the religious teachings of her community without becoming a fully ordained nun. While Mingyur Peldrön’s level of ordination is unclear, it makes sense to refer to her as a nun because that is how she referred to herself. Setting aside her level of ordination, what is significant is the practical impact of her choices to live life celibately, even to the extreme of causing tension between Mindröling and Lelung Monasteries, her frequent urgings that women take up ordination, and her own identity as a nun.

While becoming a nun was a goal for some women, in many cases the most well-known religious women in Tibetan history and myth have been non-monastic. Being a nun was actually somewhat unusual among the Tibetan women for whom we have Lives. Whereas Tāre Lhamo, Sera Khandro, and Sönam Peldren were all obliged to marry and Chökyi Drönma left her marriage to take monastic vows, Mingyur Peldrön’s celibate life was supported—if not actively urged—by her family. Like Mingyur Peldrön, Chökyi Drönma was literally born into a family of high privilege. She married in her youth but soon voiced a desire to take monastic vows. She had to go to extremes to be released from her marital duties, going so far as to tear out her hair in front of her in-laws, before her husband would grant her permission to end her marriage. For her the pursuit of religious life and the duties of marriage were mutually exclusive.

Among recent English-language scholarship, Orgyan Chökyi (1675–1829) and Shugsep Jetsün Rinpoche (19th–20th c.) are the only other Tibetan women who have Lives and who also became nuns without having ever married at all. While Orgyan Chökyi was in no way supported by her family in this endeavor, Shugsep Jetsün Rinpoche came from a family of little means, but her parents encouraged her to pursue a religious path. Of the three women, Mingyur Peldrön alone came from a family of high status both in terms of wealth and religious position. Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a nun sets her apart from many other exceptional women and suggests a different narrative arc for both her religious life and activities. Later chapters address how Mingyur Peldrön’s status as a nun influenced her social position and augmented her particular access to religious, institutional, and social authority.

Civil War and Exile in Sikkim

Mingyur Peldrön’s life was upended by the civil war that broke out in the winter of 1717–18. This event was the result of previously mentioned inter-sectarian tension that was exacerbated by instability in the Ganden Podrang
government after the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Two external competing factions sought inroads to political ascendency in central Tibet, and the region eventually broke into all-out warfare. Representing one interest was Lhazang Khan, a Qoshot Mongol supported by the Qing emperor Kangxi (r. 1662–1722). The second was the Dzungar Mongol leader Tsewang Rabten, who had assumed leadership of the powerful expansionist Dzungars between 1690 and 1697. These two men and the groups they represented vied for influence in the region, at times supported by different factions of the faltering Ganden Podrang and at times going so far as to assassinate members of the government leadership. Lhazang Khan took control of Lhasa in 1705 with the support of the Qing imperium. Following the death of the Sixth Dalai Lama in 1706, the different factions within and beyond the Ganden Podrang sought the installment of their preferred candidate for Seventh Dalai Lama.

In the midst of widespread unrest, there arose a pro-Geluk sentiment that was undergirded by antipathy toward all non-Geluk organizations (including Mindröling). Concerned about Lhazang Khan’s rulership and the increasing Qing influence in the region, Tsewang Rabten aligned himself and his Dzungar army with the pro-Geluk faction. In the winter of 1717–18, he sent a Dzungar army of six thousand troops to remove Lhazang Khan’s forces from power in Lhasa. In December 1717 growing sentiment against non-Geluk organizations and individuals reached a tipping point, and Dzungar troops began first arresting and then executing prominent non-Geluk religious leaders. Known for their opposition to the Fifth Dalai Lama’s relatively ecumenical relations, the Dzungars also destroyed many non-Geluk institutions in central Tibet. According to Petech, they acted like a raiding party as they moved through the region, laying waste to monasteries and villages and taking food and fuel, with little regard for the needs of local people.

Lhazang Khan and most of his ministerial cabinet were killed, and Tsering Döndrup issued summonses to all provinces, calling for them to pay homage to him. Whatever local popularity the Dzungars had established before the occupation, their behavior afterward led to a decline in enthusiasm for them. As time went on, the Dzungars failed to deliver a legitimate Dalai Lama to Lhasa, and the trust of their Geluk supporters waned. While this period was a nadir marked by unrest in the early eighteenth century, the occupation would last until 1720, and regional instability and inter-sectarian strife would continue throughout the 1720s.
Central Tibet’s political environment had a jarring impact on Mingyur Peldrön’s life, probably more so than the death of her father a few years earlier. The persecution of non-Gelukpa people and organizations was particularly marginalizing for Mindrölting, which had long been the recipient of Ganden Podrang patronage during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Mindröling’s inhabitants were the victims of significant sectarian violence against non-Gelukpa people and religious sites. The destruction of Mindröling during the civil war of 1717–18 was formative for their institutional narrative, as it forced a dramatic shift in the trajectory of the monastery and the lives of those who had been part of it. The Dzungar destruction would take center stage in the collective memory of the events of the eighteenth century.

When Terdak Lingpa died, in 1714, he left the leadership of Mindröling to Lochen Dharmāśrī and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso. The Dzungar army occupied Lhasa three years later, and the general Tsering Döndrup called for the arrest of non-Geluk leadership, including both men. On the day that Mingyur Peldrön’s uncle and brother were taken to Lhasa, it became clear that Mindrölting would not be spared from the sectarian violence.69 Fearing for her safety, the family decided that Mingyur Peldrön should flee the monastery that very night. She was pulled out of her retreat, exchanged her retreatant’s clothes for the disguise of a layperson, and ran up into the mountains behind the monastery with four attendants, intending to travel to Sikkim and take refuge there.70 At the same time, Rinchen Namgyel fled to Bhutan. Shortly after they left, the Dzungar army descended upon the monastery. Gyurmé Ösel recounts the event in Dispeller, mentioning the traumatic experiences of Mingyur Peldrön’s sisters at the hands of the Dzungars (who are here referred to as “Horpas” and “Sokpos”):

At that time both Lady Drung and Lady Peldzin tried to avoid being harassed by some of the lewd Horpas, and faced great hardship. Out of their mother’s mouth slipped [the words] “I have a daughter—Mingyur Peldrön—who acts just like a nun.” As a consequence of these words, just like the roll of thunder thrills the peacock’s heart, the Hor army halted all travel to and from Sikkim. When Terdak Lingpa’s daughter was mentioned in this way, it would be unacceptable if the logical consequence were borne out [and she were caught]. What would have happened? She would have been taken to Lhasa, and day and night she would have been harmed. Since the Western Sokpos brought down suppression in this place of violence, Depa Wangdu
offered beer to the Sokpos in order to skillfully confuse them, and the Lama herself was invited to leave by a rope through a window. Hoping to spot her, Zhunggyu Dumpo Tashi spent the entire night in Dranang, and went to her maternal uncle’s place. These days, we talk about the Hor Sokpos’ destruction on that day. The Zhabdrung Zhenpen Wangpo also skillfully confused the Hor Sokpos with beer, [and] drew them from Ngön Gé Zhelkar to Martak Shur. Then [the escapees] hid among the boulders in the rocky upper part of Lungring valley for two days and two nights. Four helpers dressed as householders by day, and went in disguise to Menji Monastery. In this way they took turns making food, and delivering it by night. Then the Sokpos came to the spot in that rocky part of the Lungring valley [where she hid], and wandered back and forth past the head of the master herself. She told me “That moment I thought ‘I am finished!’ and my heart became fevered with an awesome fear.” Due to the [Three] Jewels in general, and more specifically the compassion of the glorious master Padmasambhava, father and son, as well as the merit that the [escapees] had accumulated in their training as disciples, the Hor Sokpas were unable to see them, and having completely lost hope, the [Hor Sokpas] left. The group [of escapees] then proceeded to the learned yogini’s place at Menji. After rising the next morning, they went to Dol Khangpa Gye, where they hid in one of the wives’ kitchens.

At that time, the elder monks—Bumrap Jampa Orgyen Kelsang, Zhabdrung Gyurme Zhenpen Wangpo, Gelong Rabten, and others—were all consulting. Bumrap Jampa said, “Isn’t this girl the very essence of Terdak Lingpa? She mustn’t be squandered. Now, what to do? Which way to go?” Gelong Orgyen Rabten said, “You are all very wise and knowledgeable, so whichever way you think we should go, we will go. We must make an effort to establish a monastery. I will protect this girl from being spoiled, and once again she will give instructions to you all.” Talking thus, they came to a harmonious decision. The monk[s] said, “The Precious Lama will go to Khang Gyang.” As was predicted in the revered father’s prophecy, the next morning they crossed the mountains, and went to Sikkim by way of Yardrok and the Karo pass. Graced with a vision of Pakri, they went in that direction. Moreover, normally she went about with a slow gait, or rode a horse. But at this time, dressed as a beggar, she had to walk continuously day and night. She became weak and exhausted, and kept going.71

Mingyur Peldrön’s harrowing journey to safety was racked with danger and the threat of assault and death and was likely the most traumatic event
of the young woman’s life. Fear and urgency are palpable in this account, as are the conditions of uncertainty and the very real threat of physical violence and assault that Mingyur Peldrön and the other women in her community faced during this time. Here we get a sense of what today we would think of as the trauma that they experienced in the course of their exile into Sikkim. As Phuntsok Peldzöm and her other daughters are being harassed by the Dzungar troops, the mother accidentally alerts them to the existence of her other daughter. This sets in motion the lockdown and search for Mingyur Peldrön, erasing any hope for an easy escape. While the Dzungars are plied with beer until they are too drunk to function, Mingyur Peldrön escapes by climbing down out of a window. Given the danger she faced, it is no wonder that she made the grueling journey, hiding amid boulders and in the homes of friendly well-wishers as she made her exhausting walk to Sikkim. Her mother and sisters followed her there. Along the way she received word of her uncle’s and brother’s executions and the extent of the destruction of Mindröling. This news was of course terribly upsetting and also highlighted the necessity that her own escape and that of Rinchen Namgyel be successful. If the teachings were to be disseminated in the future, these two had to survive. At this time Mingyur Peldrön was eighteen years old. The *History of Sikkimese Monasteries* also recounts her escape to Sikkim:

In the year 1717—the [year of the] fire bird—during the time of the Sokpo Dzungar’s unrest, she reached her nineteenth winter. Having just come out of retreat, without having taken the time to cut away the long plaits that had grown (during her retreat), she donned a woolen dress. So, taking on the guise of a householder, she carried a small statue of her father on her back. The helpers Gyurmé Chödron and the kitchen maid Gyurmé Yangzom, the monks Tashi Wangchuk and Gendun Tsampel—five people altogether—carrying the bare necessities of provisions, fled in secret. Leaving through a secret door, they fled over the mountain behind the family home. The master came here, to Glorious Sikkim. She was welcomed with marvelous processions honoring her, and she settled at Sangnak Choeling Monastery. She dwelt there five years. The Dzogchenpa and the Dharma King [received] transmissions, and all the living beings of this land—high and low—were lucky to benefit from being near the *jetsünma* and receiving her advice.\(^{72}\)
In Sikkim, Mingyur Peldrön’s identity as a member of the Mindröling family meant that she received a warm reception. The Sikkimese royal family were supporters of Nyingma institutions, and some of the high-level teachers there had been trained at Mindröling, including Jikmé Dorjé, an expert in the Great Perfection. Thus, two generations of Mindröling women became guests at the royal palace at Rabdentsé. Generally speaking, foreigners were not allowed to teach the Sikkimese populace, but Mingyur Peldrön was granted a special royal dispensation to do so and began instructing everyone—royalty and commoner, layperson and monastic, alike. It was unprecedented to have a woman, and a non-Sikkimese woman at that, teach Buddhism in Sikkim. However, Terdak Lingpa was well known by monastic leaders in the kingdom, and it was considered a great opportunity to have one of his trained close disciples giving instruction.

Phuntsok Peldzöm and her other daughters arrived shortly after Mingyur Peldrön and began their own diplomatic engagements. As representatives of the Mindröling family, they had important roles to play. Phuntsok Peldzöm dispensed gifts widely throughout the realm, to royalty and commoners, developing a reputation for her generosity. During this time Mingyur Peldrön also brokered a marriage match between her sister Lady Peldzin and the King Gyurmé Namgyel (1707–33). The unhappy marriage only lasted until they returned to Mindröling but was politically important for cementing positive relations between the two houses, especially during their stay in Sikkim. It is significant that Mingyur Peldrön arranged the marriage. In terms of her apparent concern for political expediency, it shows that she was actively thinking about creating strong connections with their hosts. It also exemplifies that she had relative bodily autonomy in comparison with that of her sister, as she was able to determine her own autonomy but also the fate of her sister. It is noteworthy that as a woman, she was willing to do what was necessary to convince her sister to marry the king. Finally, this moment conveys her own authority in the larger context of political and religious exile. As a refugee, she sought important political relationships for her family and their religious institution. It was also during their time in Sikkim that Mingyur Peldrön began her own teaching career, disseminating the teachings that she had brought with her from Mindröling.

In Sikkim she exchanged teachings with several people and acted as a religious advisor to King Gyurme Namgyel. One person she regularly met to exchange teachings with was Jikmé Dorjé, who had studied with Terdak Lingpa at Mindröling in his youth. Their meetings during this period of
exile reinforced the connections between the Sikkimese Nyingma community and the monastery in Ü. Mingyur Peldrön was also invited to teach the community of monks at nearby Pemayangtsé Monastery. According to the traditional narrative of Pemayangtsé, Jikmé Dorjé invited her there and requested she ascend their highest throne and offer instruction for the assembly. But she refused to enter the gates of the monastery grounds, stating that because she was a woman, it would in fact be dangerous for the monks. To accommodate her, they built a stone throne for her just outside the gates of Pemayangtsé, where it remains today. It is noteworthy that after this first teaching, she was reported to have taught large crowds of monks from this spot and eventually also the laity. She initially resided nearby at Sangnak Choeling Monastery, where she also taught. Eventually, the young Mindröling representative would also establish her own residence near the modern-day village of Gyalshing. This site remains important to Mindröling, and since at least 2016 Mindrolling Monastery in India has been in the process of constructing a new center there, the Mingyur Dechen Leytroling. Not only was the time in Sikkim a respite from the horrors of civil war; it also became the location of Mingyur Peldrön's first large-scale teaching. This marks the moment when she began to engage the Mindröling-style mass dissemination of doctrine and establish her role as a full-fledged purveyor of the monastery's teachings. With the demise of the remaining first generation of religious leaders in the family, practitioners and politicians began to seek her out as a teacher and representative of the tradition.

Return to Tibet

In 1721 the women of Mindröling received word that it was safe to return home. Upon their arrival Mingyur Peldrön's first step was to begin reviving the monastery. Initially, this meant reconstructing the physical edifice of the monastery, which she oversaw for a short but highly productive time. By the time her brother Rinchen Namgyel returned from his own exile, she had done much of the major external reconstruction. However, once he returned, he promptly took the lead in overseeing all such projects, and it became clear that Mingyur Peldrön should turn her attention elsewhere.

At this point the narrative of Mindröling reconstruction projects and relations between the siblings becomes somewhat murky and is represented with what appears to be intentionally vague language in Dispeller. According
to the text, after her brother’s return, Mingyur Peldrön was sent to rural Kongpo, apparently at the behest of unnamed “virtuous ones” who were members of the Mindröling household. At their request the military general Polhané Sönam Tobgyé in Lhasa proclaimed that she should be sent away to Kongpo, arguing that many people there would benefit from her teachings. Urged by the unnamed members of the household, Polhané ordered her to Kongpo, and off she went. This moment in Dispeller suggests several things. First, it hints at potential strife between Mingyur Peldrön and other members of the Mindröling leadership, specifically her brother Rinchen Namgyel. It is possible that the people who requested her departure had really thought that her skills would be put to good use in such a remote region. Or they might have sought to remove her from the center of power and authority as her renown grew, adding a sarcastic undertone to the reference to their “virtue.” This moment also highlights Polhané’s influence and therefore the close alignment of at least one central Tibetan political leader with Mindröling. Mingyur Peldrön’s relationships with Polhané and the Seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso (1708–57), who had ascended the throne in 1720, are reinforced in the text. They were instrumental to her role as a sort of emissary for Mindröling. Throughout her adulthood Mingyur Peldrön would form relationships with other religious and political leaders, engaging across denominational lines to share teachings with Nyingma and Geluk practitioners and continuing relationships with multiple generations of the aristocracy in central Tibet and Sikkim. Many of these relationships, including other connections with less famous disciples, were forged through her teaching efforts.

After Rinchen Namgyel’s return to Mindröling, Mingyur Peldrön’s focus shifted to reinforcing the monastery’s teaching tradition. This meant traveling from place to place to give empowerments and initiations, visiting pilgrimage sites with an entourage that often included her mother and sisters, and participating wherever she could in the postwar revival of the Nyingma community. She also wrote multiple works over the course of her adulthood. She is credited with eighteen written pieces, ranging from prayers and lineage lists to liturgies and ritual instruction manuals. Most of these were focused on Dzogchen practice, and more than half centered on her father’s revealed treasure texts. She also gave teachings at Mindröling and at its associated nunnery, which is referred to in her hagiography as “Menji,” and at the Samten Tsé retreat center. The extent of her relationship with Menji and Samten Tsé is not fully fleshed out in Dispeller, but she visited one
or both sites at least once a year and often remained there for months at a time. Her solitary retreats were generally undertaken there, and they were also frequently her sites for hosting teachings.

There is not much discussion of her health in the work, although in 1720 she was afflicted with a tumor that caused her severe pain. In Dispeller the incident of her illness is not treated with the same detail as the illnesses of her family members. For example, Terdak Lingpa's own illness and death and her mother's illness in later years both receive much more attention than hers, which is mentioned only briefly. Each of these events received extensive description of her own experience witnessing her parents' illnesses, while her own struggle with a painful tumor is the subject of a few short phrases. The mention of her illness is described in terms of her teaching schedule, explaining that she was able to recover well enough to depart for a large teaching tour a few months later.83

In the intervening period between returning from Sikkim and leaving for Kongpo, she bestowed the gift of the holy doctrine throughout the four regions of Ütsang, Ngari, Lhomon, and Lhodrak. She also went to the three regions of Dakpo, and Upper and Lower Kham, as well as Uru and Yoru. In all these places, the hopes of many faithful men and women were gloriously and completely fulfilled.84

This focus on Mingyur Peldrön's teaching activities is a focal point throughout Dispeller. There are many accounts throughout the work that echo this one, with overjoyed people to whom her teachings finally brought hope after years of unrest.85 In Dispeller Gyurmé Ösel claims that Mingyur Peldrön taught thousands of people, ranging from monastics and ardent religious practitioners to the general population of laypeople. While the numbers and accounts of miraculous realization are almost certainly a case of devotional hyperbole, it is generally accepted that Mingyur Peldrön followed the inclusive ideology of her father and uncle and offered mass empowerments and made teachings accessible to the general public. Here Gyurmé Ösel is asserting that she had a significant impact on the central Tibetan religious community at large, or at least those who were interested in learning from Nyingmapa teachers. With each year of her adulthood, the story reports where she traveled in Ü, Tsang, and Kham to give teachings and where and when she exchanged teachings with other Nyingmapa leaders. According to Gyurmé Ösel, she met grateful faithful people wherever
she went and acted with humor and some fierce compassion in her relationships with her students and tended to argue for the monastic path over others.

As an active teacher with a significant following, Mingyur Peldrön continued the previous generation’s project of developing the Mindröling name and spreading the teachings widely. She exchanged teachings with other religious educators as well and had a tumultuous relationship with some of them, including the Fifth Lelung, Jedrung Rinpoche. Throughout all of these engagements she negotiated the shifting atmosphere of the eighteenth-century Nyingma community and that of central Tibet more broadly. She also wrote several works in her adulthood, including Dzogchen instruction manuals, prayers, and a collection of advice in response to questions posed by her disciples.

Mingyur Peldrön was a prolific author whose works were used by her religious community (and related Nyingma institutions) both during and after her lifetime. Her authorial reach was broad both in the material she produced and in the variety of communities in which her work was transmitted. She composed her first instruction manual at age fourteen and continued to write until the year of her death. She wrote eighteen pieces in all, which varied in genre and focus. While centered largely around Mindröling’s Dzogchen tradition and her father’s terma, they also addressed the monastery’s kama tradition. Two-thirds of her corpus are directly related to Terdak Lingpa’s treasure revelations and include related prayers, practical advice for how to engage the rituals therein, and guidance for proper meditative praxis. The majority of her works offer some kind of instruction along these lines.

Among her written works is an eighty-page instruction manual for how to properly perform the sādhanas (meditative and ritual practices) that are part of the kama text called the Churner of the Depths of Hell. The Churner of the Depths of Hell is a Vajrasattva ritual that was taught by Lochen Dharmarśi and would eventually come to be practiced elsewhere, most prominently at Katok Monastery in Kham. Mingyur Peldrön’s commentary describes which implements should be used in the ritual and how the sādhanas should be performed as well as what both master and disciple should be doing throughout the practice. Other instruction manuals give similar guidance on rituals and praxis for Highest Yoga Tantra (Atiyoga) practices of the Great Perfection. In this case they also correspond to Terdak Lingpa’s own treasure texts. These works focused on instruction and were
intended for anyone who had received the proper empowerments and initi-
ation to participate in the practices. Some of her writing was directed at an
elite group of religious practitioners who had received the proper teachings
and initiations to engage in advanced Atiyoga praxis.

Mingyur Peldrön also cultivated relationships with prominent political
and religious leaders in Lhasa throughout her adulthood. She ultimately
molded her approach to institutional development at Mindröling to accord
with the Geluk mores of the time. Her relationships with Polhané and to a
lesser extent the Seventh Dalai Lama will be of particular interest for under-
standing her relationship with the Geluk religiopolitical establishment dur-
ing her lifetime, particularly in the post–civil war era. Her relationship with
Polhané is emphasized in Dispeller and exemplifies both her position at Min-
dröling as well as the long-standing relationship between Mindröling and
the Ganden Podrang, to say nothing of her individual political savvy.

The details of her adulthood, including her teaching exchanges and
methods and her relationships with her students are attended to with more
depth in later chapters. Of particular interest are her apparent disapproval
of the non-monastic communities of her day, which were conveyed through
accounts of her visits to wayward groups; her admonitions against improper
behavior; and her recommendations that practitioners strive to become
monastics. In spite of a few bouts with bad health in her early adulthood,
Mingyur Peldrön lived to the age of seventy. According to her hagiography,
she taught right up until the time of her death in 1769. After her long teach-
ing career, she died a recognized leader of Mindröling. Her death, which
will be discussed at length in chapter 5, was as imbued with signs and por-
tents as her birth had been, including miraculous apparitions, spontaneous
rainbows, and unusual celestial phenomena.

The narrative arc of Mingyur Peldrön’s story establishes the basic significant
moments of her life and reveals her positionality with regard to her family,
her religious community, and the social and political world into which she
was born. Both privilege and lack of privilege influenced key moments of
her lived experience, springing from the conditions of her birth into an
influential family actively committed to her success as a lineage holder and
religious educator. By being born into an elite family, she benefited from a
high level of class status. As that family was also at the center of a commu-
nity of religious elites, merely carrying the family name and lineage (düngyüü)
would open doors. Moreover, her actual religious training meant an even
higher level of privilege: she received of a corpus of doctrinal knowledge that she was empowered to pass on where and how she saw fit. By carrying the initiations and education of Mindrüling, Mingyur Peldrönl attracted support from those who might not have otherwise acknowledged her extensive agency. Her relationship with the Sikkimese royal family and her special dispensation to bestow teachings on the monks of Pemayangtsé after her arrival in Sikkim are great examples, especially when compared with her sister Lady Peldzin’s plight of being sent by Mingyur Peldrönl into an unhappy marriage ostensibly for the sake of maintaining good relations between two families.

Access to privilege was varied among the children of her generation, though. For example, Mingyur Peldrönl’s position as a girl in her family likely led to a reduced education (especially when compared with her brother Rinchen Namgyel’s training). She missed the opportunity that he had had for formal rikné scholastic training, for which Mindrüling was so well known. Nevertheless, she was able to pursue the life of a celibate woman with full support from her family, an occurrence that speaks volumes to the level of combined privilege that she enjoyed, even in comparison with that of her sisters. The hagiographic tone of Dispeller makes it difficult to draw conclusions, but it seems that in many contexts Mingyur Peldrönl’s brilliance and ability overshadowed her gender in the eyes of her teachers so that she was allowed and encouraged to pursue a celibate religious life. This meant that she had a larger modicum of freedom, especially when compared with Lady Peldzin, who was compelled to marry for the benefit of the family.

For Mingyur Peldrönl privilege meant access to education and to high-level political figures as well as birth in a family that for whatever reason was not preoccupied with whether or not she should or would secure an appropriate marriage. She received an unusually extensive religious training in the sense that her father, uncle, and elder brothers passed teachings on to her at an early age. Yet we have little evidence that this level of education was extended to other girls and young women in the family. While her sister Lady Peldzin may have had some religious education, it is not described in any great detail in the histories or namtars of Mindrüling. Therefore, it is clear that access was not solely determined based upon birth into the family; there were likely other factors at play. It is possible that personal affect—including charisma, aptitude, and interest in religious study—also influenced who was allowed to take up the role of religious practitioner. Even with the uneven distribution of education in her generation, Mingyur
Peldrön’s birth into the family, combined with other factors, clearly paved the way for her education. In turn, this education empowered her with the authority and the means to pass Mindrōling teachings along to the next generation of practitioners, acting as a conduit for family tradition. Both the knowledge encompassed in this education and the authorization to act as a religious educator herself were the foundation of a privileged beginning. This made it significantly more likely for Mingyur Peldrön to become a publicly recognized Nyingma representative and a powerful religious practitioner in her adulthood. She was able to build on her privilege to cultivate relationships with Tibetan and Sikkimese political and religious leaders as well as her many disciples. The shifting institutional landscape had a powerful effect on Mingyur Peldrön’s experience as a member of a Nyingma family, in that it first put her in grave danger and later acted as a resource for her to develop her role as an influential nun in a largely male-dominated world.

Beginning with her position as a foreign guest and spiritual advisor of the Sikkimese royal family, Mingyur Peldrön cultivated teaching relationships with several elite families in Tibetan society. In many cases these relationships were mutually beneficial. Her adulthood was defined by such relationships as well as by her role as a representative of Mindrōling who engaged in dialogue with a variety of political and religious leaders. The markers of privilege that Mingyur Peldrön received as an educated member of the monastery and the daughter of a famous treasure revealer made it possible for her to navigate the challenging historical moment for political and institutional benefit, both for herself and for Mindrōling. It also made it easier for her to survive the regional political contestation of the period, and the attendant sectarian and intra-sectarian divisions, while pursuing a soteriological path that she apparently wanted to tread.

Mingyur Peldrön’s high privilege allowed her to negotiate a path in spite of—and in some cases because of—the great adversity that she met beyond the walls of Mindrōling. She was able to leverage her privilege to rise to a position of authority. The following chapters will continue to explore the question of her gendered positionality and how that influenced the arc of her life story. For her, privilege and gender acted as the foundation that both supported and impeded her progress as a religious practitioner and teacher in a complex web of potent social indicators. Privilege led to her access to authoritative positions, even as her association with Mindrōling sometimes resulted in persecution. Her gender contributed to her broad amalgamation
of markers of privilege and non-privilege, adding a complexity to her status in a way that was highly context dependent. Her gender was not such a detractor as to keep her from pursuing her spiritual goals or rising in institutional leadership, nor was it necessarily always a negative attribute. Her status as a woman is made more complex in Gyurmé Ösel’s representations of her when he seems to elevate her through expressions of positive femininity in a hagiography that we might understand as the creation of her public identity supported by a complex use of the themes of privilege, gender, and authority.