The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön
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Chapter Four

Mingyur Peldrön the Diplomat

[Mingyur Peldrön] prostrated at the feet of the Supreme [Seventh Dalai Lama] Losang Kalsang Gyatso and made offerings. He bestowed on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma, flowers fell from the heavens, and then they went to visit several places, including the Fifth Dalai Lama’s tomb.

—Gyurmé Ösel

Being born a woman meant that Mingyur Peldrön did not have an official role in the succession of Mindröling, as this inheritance was passed on intergenerationally only through the men in the community. The roles of trichen and khenchen had been established by Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī and were bestowed on the men of her generation, a tradition that has continued up to the present day. Having not been considered for an official position as a result of her female birth, she was situated differently from her brothers along gender lines. While she retained a cachet of some types of privilege and authority, her role within the community was not as formally established as those of her brothers. The only title she carried was that of jetsünma, a general term used for all the women in the family. Jetsünma is not an official title like trichen or khenchen but, rather, an honorific title that designates a woman as important through her high birth or as a recognition of her involvement in religious life. For Mindröling it is applied to all female family members, regardless of their responsibilities within the community. Jetsünma indicates someone’s position and responsibility only insofar as she is a female member of the elite religious family. Any expectations that the term might carry with it are highly varied. A successful jetsünma might be a wife and mother (like Mingyur Peldrön’s mother, Phuntsok Peldzöm), a director of the household (as her grandmother Yangchen Drölma had been), or she might be a religious teacher and dedicated celibate practitioner, as
Mingyur Peldrön was. Without a more specific title, there was more ambiguity surrounding long-term expectations for her role in the family. However, this lack of official position did not stop her from being deeply involved in the workings of the monastery, nor did it keep her from achieving public recognition as a powerful woman. Her lack of official status meant that the possibilities for her involvement at Mindröling were less clearly defined than the expectations for her brothers. The terms for her role as a teacher and lineage holder were not predetermined in the same ways. Arguably, this meant there was space for her position within the institutional structure to change without notice. It may have left room for Mingyur Peldrön to potentially make her own decisions about her activities at Mindröling. Although such individual agency was never a foregone conclusion, in her case multiple types of privileged status, including her education and her position as a nun of well-known family, allowed her significant autonomy.

In light of this positioning, it is useful to consider how she is represented in Dispeller with regard to her monastic institution and the political and religious worlds beyond. Mingyur Peldrön’s depiction in the namtar is of a woman who regularly met with religious and political figures, forging relationships for Mindröling—and herself—through these meetings. Her interactions with leadership beyond the purview of Mindröling offer us another way of assessing her role within her family and religious community and the wider political concerns of the period. Gyurmé Ösel writes Mingyur Peldrön as engaging with an array of important actors across sectarian boundaries. When considered in conjunction with her focus on monasticism, an image begins to emerge of her as something of a diplomatic actor working against the religious and political tensions of the period.

**The Nun at Mindröling**

There was no hard-and-fast rule requiring Tibetan women to become nuns if they wanted to practice Buddhism seriously in the eighteenth century. It is true that in other times and contexts celibacy and the monastic life were considered the most expedient means to attaining enlightenment.¹ These modes of engagement have had different implications for Buddhist practitioners based on the time and place in which they lived. Taking into account the regional and doctrinal variations of Tibetan Buddhism, a person of means could theoretically seek out monastic or non-monastic instruction. And in some places (like Mindröling) multiple paths were available. What is more,
there is evidence that in the preceding and following centuries, women were engaging in serious religious practice without taking monastic ordination. Especially in Nyingma communities, both women and men could become non-celibate practitioners. In eighteenth-century Tibet the ability to access religious practice and the promise of soteriological gains were not necessarily precluded by one’s monastic status (although this depended in part on the denominations that one could engage with). More simply put, it was not necessary to be a monk or a nun if you wanted to pursue enlightenment or participate in religious community in some form. Mindröling embraced the non-celibate praxis that included pairing up with a sexual consort as an expedient to faster enlightenment and other religious benefits (such as aiding in the revelation of treasure texts). The most obvious example of this is Mingyur Peldrön’s own father, Terdak Lingpa, the cofounder of Mindröling. Likewise, non-monastic women have made their mark as practitioners and teachers in Tibetan history. Celibacy and non-celibacy, monasticism and lay practice, were all viable paths.

There were certainly men who were non-celibate religious specialists and prominent teachers at Mindröling, including Mingyur Peldrön’s father and some of her brothers. They engaged and excelled in religious life without taking monastic vows. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Nyingma communities, non-monastic religious specialists were accepted as legitimate contributors to the larger religious culture of the time; indeed, their contributions were significant. While there were non-celibate women who studied the dharma and women in the family whose roles were imperative to its functioning, we have no examples of non-celibate women in the role of teaching or engaging in public leadership. One might imagine that non-celibate women could become religious specialists at Mindröling. While this very well may have been the case, we have no evidence of this in Mingyur Peldrön’s lifetime. Instead, we have evidence of three generations of women who were centrally important for the functioning of the households of Mindröling. These include her grandmother Yangchen Drölma; her mother, Phuntsok Peldzöm; and her sisters. While gendered difficulties continued to be mitigated by privilege for the women of Mindröling, their experiences with this mitigation were still varied.

Given Mingyur Peldrön’s focus on religious practice and her adamant stance on remaining a celibate nun, it is possible that for her the life of the nun held promise for pursuing her particular goals. Celibacy is profoundly significant for understanding her positionality within Mindröling and in
the world at large. Her outright rejection of Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche, and her reasoning that Terdak Lingpa himself had directed her away from such liaisons if she wanted to practice dharma seriously, suggests that she saw intimate partnership and soteriological pursuits as mutually exclusive, at least in her specific case and in her advice to disciples. As discussed in earlier chapters, *Dispeller* mentions nuns who had anxieties about how they would be supported in their practice, and she advised her fellow nuns to stick to their path in spite of these additional challenges. Mingyur Peldrön considered it the swiftest and clearest path to enlightenment. Beyond the soteriological benefits she argued for, celibacy gave her a certain level of bodily autonomy while benefiting the intersectarian relationship with Gelukpa political leadership in Lhasa.

It is clear that Mingyur Peldrön benefited personally from pursuing a celibate existence. It meant she could follow her own religious path and still rise to a position of importance within the family. This possibility was certainly reinforced by the set of privileges she held. But there are wider implications for her decision. It also situated her in a uniquely beneficial position to act as a sort of diplomat on behalf of her community. Here I refer specifically to her position as a celibate Nyingmapa in a period of Geluk ascendancy and the intersectarian diplomacy that she was able to affect. She was well situated to work on behalf of the Nyingma community in conversation with the Gelukpa leadership of the time.

**Political and Religious Tensions in the Mid- to Late Eighteenth Century**

It would be impossible to sum up the political atmosphere of eighteenth-century central Tibet in one chapter and still do justice to the shifts in government stability and the political intrigue of the period. With that said, some discussion of the political dynamics of this time and the impact that these dynamics had on religious institutions—especially for a Nyingma center such as Mindröling—can help make sense of how Gyurmé Ösel presented Mingyur Peldrön’s involvement in political and religious leadership in *Dispeller*. Instability and infighting continued intermittently after the 1717–18 civil war came to an end and lasted for the next several decades, with some periods of relative peace interspersed throughout. The Dzungars were quelled in 1721, and the young Seventh Dalai Lama was enthroned in Lhasa. However, it would be decades before he took control of the government, and
there were splits within Geluk leadership in the meantime. At this point a cabinet of five advisors was established to run the Ganden Podrang. The cabinet was first occupied by two men from Tsang, Khangchenné Sönam Gyelpo and Polhané, and three men from Ü, Pesé Ngapö, Gung Lumpawa, and Jara Taiji. The council quickly split into regional factions, eventually leading to the bloody assassination of Khangchenné in 1727. After the death of his compatriot, Polhané understood that his life was in danger and went into hiding. He then regrouped with a more substantial army, and the two sides went to war in Gyantse. Polhané prevailed, and there was a cease-fire in 1728, at which time he began to establish his authority as the political leader of central Tibet. Although he was close with the Panchen Lama, Polhané had a strained relationship with the Seventh Dalai Lama, whose father was suspected of supporting the losing faction from Ü. The Seventh Dalai Lama's family were exiled to Kham from 1730 to 1735. As Polhané amassed his power, he gained the support of the Qing emperor Yongzheng. This ushered in more than a decade of relative stability, until Polhané's death in 1747.

In the wake of Polhané's demise, there was further unrest. Gyurmé Namgyel, Polhané's son, took over his position and attempted to revive relations with the Dzungars. He was quickly assassinated, and his death gave way to a situation in which his supporters and the Qing representatives in Lhasa began killing one another. The Ambans (Qing representatives) subsequently tightened their control of the region, imprisoning Gyurmé Namgyel's coconspirators and reestablishing a political role for the Seventh Dalai Lama. The moment marked the beginning of strengthened Qing authority in Lhasa. Since the beginning of Polhané's rule, the Dalai Lama had maintained a religious role but continued to be excluded from political engagement. In 1751 he finally adopted a role of political leadership.

This period of unrest was driven by tensions that existed largely within the Geluk community and members of the aristocratic ruling class who supported them. The focal point of unrest during this time was not between Gelukpas and Nyingmapas; rather, it occurred between different Geluk factions. While their points of disagreement did not fall along specifically Geluk-Nyingma lines, the different factions had more and less friendly views of non-Geluk organizations. Polhané (who had been educated at Mindröling) and his faction fell on the more Nyingma-friendly side of the divide. Which is to say, members of this group either supported or at least did not actively destroy religious communities that were not Geluk. Gyurmé Namgyel's attempted revival of Dzungar connections seems to have also revived
sectarian hostilities that had been suppressed a mere two decades earlier and certainly raised alarm among those who had so recently been harmed by their armies. The continued destabilization of political leadership in the region likely affected sectarian relations between Geluk and Nyingma religious communities, sparking tensions that would remain intact well into the next century.

These political and religious tensions bear some resemblance to the ways that Nyingma religious practitioners responded to and engaged the texts and practices associated with Gelukpas in this period. In particular, Nyingma approaches to monasticism suggest a range of intersectarian engagements. Monasticism was not extensively developed in Nyingma communities until the nineteenth century. Prior to this period, the wider community focused more on contemplative practice and ritual centered around tantric texts. The eighteenth-century masters of Mindröling foregrounded the nonsectarian developments of nineteenth-century Kham. And indeed, Rinchen Namgyel’s namtar speaks extensively to his role as an early proponent of a non-sectarian approach. In 1697 Terdak Lingpa had composed a monastic code of conduct, or chayik, a constitutional document that outlined the monastic curriculum for Mindröling’s monastic community. Attention to Mindröling’s general approach to monasticism has involved analysis of the monastic curriculum found in Terdak Lingpa’s chayik. According to Buddhist studies scholar Dominique Townsend, his chayik “harmoniously balances potentially contradictory Buddhist values and pursuits, some of which were being contested sharply among the Tibetan Buddhist schools of the time. These include celibacy and lay practice, renunciation and worldly learning, religion and politics, and scholasticism and esoteric meditation.” It seems that Terdak Lingpa wrote the monastery’s code with an eye toward flexibility, allowing space for individuals to excel in the areas they found most compelling. The result was an enduring document that could work for monastic and non-monastic adherents alike. While supplemented with additional documents addressing modern questions and concerns, Terdak Lingpa’s chayik remains important for the governance at Mindrolling Monastery in India today.

Meanwhile, Lochen Dharmāṣṭī and other eighteenth-century Nyingma practitioners were dedicated to proliferating monastic ordination. According to Dudjom Rinpoche, Lochen Dharmāṣṭī fully ordained some 447 monks in his lifetime and gave novice vows to 1,298 people. He also composed a forty-three-folio monastic ordination manual outlining rules for monks and
a brief two-page set of instructions. Similar ordination efforts are attributed to a contemporary polymath, the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche, Situ Penchen (1700–1774) as an early development of a more substantial monastic engagement on the part of the Nyingma community in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham. During Mingyur Peldrön’s lifetime, Situ Penchen was rapidly ordaining hundreds of Nyingma monastics in the region of Kham. This ordination fervor seems to have created something of a cascade effect among Khampa Nyingma institutions. Once he had ordained the lamas of Katok and Pelyül, they were then able to begin ordaining in their own right. While not directly related to Mingyur Peldrön’s activities in central Tibet, there are important connections between the two monastics. In particular, Situ Penchen received training from Mingyur Peldrön’s brothers Rinchen Namgyel and Pema Gyurmé Gyatso. There is also evidence suggesting tensions between monastic and non-monastic communities during this period. Rigdzin Pelden Tashi was an ordained monk who studied in Geluk and Nyingma institutions and visited Mindröling and other Nyingma monasteries in central Tibet. In a 1732 text Rigdzin Pelden Tashi calls for peace between nakpas and monastics in the wider Nyingma community. The suggestion here is that disagreement—and potentially even violence—was in danger of erupting between the two.

Study of the nineteenth-century thinker Mipam (1846–1912) has revealed the spectrum of ways that Nyingma scholars negotiated tensions between their doctrinal interpretations and that of contemporary Geluk exegetes in the nineteenth century. In this slightly later historical context, Nyingma scholars responded to the Geluk hegemony of the time by formulating a variety of responses to their interlocutors. The Tibetan Buddhism scholar Douglas Duckworth outlines some of the different Nyingma exegetical responses, which ranged from “a more submissive attitude . . . such as found in the Dodrup tradition” to “a more hostile attitude . . . such as found in the works of Gorampa.” These are illustrative of the range of Nyingma modes for responding to Geluk dominance in the doctrinal context in the subsequent century, and the range of responses is valuable for understanding Mingyur Peldrön’s responses to that same dominance (or at least Gyurmé Ösel’s presentation of her response). According to Duckworth, Mipam “forges an alternative response to Geluk dominance by selectively appropriating certain features of the Geluk tradition while contesting others. It is this response that has become the formula for the enduring legacy of non-Geluk monastic colleges.” Although recorded in the century after Mingyur
Peldrön’s life, this depiction has resonance with Mingyur Peldrön’s pro-
monastic stance found in her arguments for the superiority of celibate
monasticism. It also speaks to an abiding tension between the sects and the
diversity of approaches that Nyingmapa practitioners took in responding to
Geluk dominance. While these exegetical discussions do not necessarily map
on to historical actions, they suggest room for different modes of engage-
ment on the part of individual scholars vis-à-vis Nyingma-Geluk relations.
In *Dispeller* the representation of Mingyur Peldrön arguing for the superior-
ity of celibacy can be read as her engaging in a wise political move.

In *Dispeller* Mingyur Peldrön is presented as a proponent of monasticism
who also spent time working closely with politicians and their aristocratic
family members. There was an important distinction between how the
Nyingma and Geluk communities treated ordination. Monasticism was
important at Mindröling from its inception, and Terdak Lingpa and Lochen
Dharmaśrī sought to establish clear but flexible guidelines for the monas-
tery. However, it was far from necessary for those seeking to engage in reli-
gious practice. Later, during Mingyur Peldrön’s adulthood in postwar Ü,
the difference in Nyingma and Geluk approaches to monasticism was likely
highlighted by their political differences as well. The dynamics of Geluk
ascendancy—and their de rigueur monasticism—meant that her focus
could be politically beneficial. Institutional and individual relationships could
have informed and been informed by her stance toward her own monastic
institution. The monasticism found in *Dispeller* is in line with a trend that
developed transregionally beginning in the eighteenth century and con-
tinuing into the nineteenth.

Thinking in terms of interdenominational relations in the postwar
period, it makes sense that monasticism would also be a concern for Min-
gyur Peldrön, although the tenor of her approach is different from that of
her forebears. In particular, she eschewed the non-monastic nakpa path
that made religious praxis available to her in the first place (as the daughter
of a nakpa), arguing instead that monasticism was superior to other forms
of religious engagement. Gyurmé Ösel’s representation of Mingyur Peldrön
certainly suggests that she was actively engaged in conversations about the
centrality of monasticism and that these issues remained salient into the
later eighteenth century, when he was writing. Mingyur Peldrön’s concern
for monastic discipline and wholehearted engagement was preceded by
her father and uncle’s considerations for how to engage both monastic and
non-monastic paths and their inclusive approach to the two options. Her
approach was decidedly less flexible. In her arguments highlighting the benefits of monastic life, she engaged in a project dedicated to celibacy while existing within the context of an institution that allowed for a variety of approaches to religious pursuit. Aligning herself with the Geluk norms of celibacy was likely to improve relations with them at a time when the Nyingma were emerging from a period of persecution. While most dominant in *Dispeller*, the vision of her as preoccupied with monasticism has endured among twenty-first-century residents of Pemayangtsé Monastery in Sikkim, who understand her concern for celibacy and monastic etiquette to have been a significant focus for her. This emphasis on monasticism over and above non-monasticism may well have reflected her own historically bound anxieties, which developed as the result of being part of a community that had been violently attacked in her early years. Her fervent focus on monasticism seems to be connected to perceptions of monastic life as acceptable to the dominant religious group of the period.

Being a nun was a key component of Mingyur Peldrön's personality and positionality. It seems that Gyurmé Ösel emphasized her status as a nun for both soteriological and political reasons. Likewise, her stance on monasticism and other matters as well as her position at Mindröling during her lifetime offer a new perspective of an authoritative nun. While she likely could have pursued a similar path as a non-celibate practitioner, her choice had lasting implications for herself and her community. It is possible—if not likely—that her monastic inclinations would have had an ameliorating effect on her relationships with non-Nyingma figures. And whether or not representations of her in *Dispeller* are an accurate portrayal of her actual doctrinal focus, it is clear that someone behind the writing of *Dispeller* was focused on monasticism (that is, her or Gyurmé Ösel). Taken in tandem with mentions of political leaders, this may have been informed by a more general concern that one might refer to as “getting along nicely with Gelukpas.” By aligning herself with Geluk norms, Mingyur Peldrön raised the likelihood of being perceived in a positive light by Gelukpa practitioners with whom she had contact. In turn, this alliance could potentially benefit relations between Mindröling and Geluk institutions in central Tibet. It could have had a range of practical benefits for a Nyingmapa woman whose organization had been destroyed by anti-Nyingma violence. As with the later Nyingma responses to the Geluk doctrinal deliberations mentioned earlier, it seems as though either Mingyur Peldrön or her hagiographer (or
both) were responding to the intersectarian and political tensions of the eighteenth century. This is one example of how religious concerns beyond the purview of Mindröling impacted the nun and literary representations of her. To more effectively assess these relationships and their significance, some examples of her interactions with politically prominent figures and their families will be illustrative. These involve the royal house of Sikkim, the Ganden Podrang government, and Lelung.

Engagements with Political and Religious Leaders beyond Mindröling

Gyurmé Ösel chose to represent Mingyur Peldrön as being actively involved in conversations with regional political leaders, many of them aligned with Geluk interests. In Dispeller he discusses her interactions with politicians and members of the aristocracy. These accounts are positioned alongside mentions of the teachings she gave to monastics. An image emerges of her as a teacher of the political aristocracy whose influence extended beyond Mindröling. In the modern day we talk of the “soft power” of cultural exchange, by which international communities can influence one another. Beyond sharing ideas and cultivating learning, education can serve to communicate cultural norms between groups and act as a mode of soft power. Keeping in mind that Mingyur Peldrön was an avid educator, the bulk of her impact likely came from the teachings and empowerments she bestowed.

Mingyur Peldrön also met and engaged with important religious and political leaders in ways that suggest that she played a diplomatic role for the community. It is unclear whether this role was in spite of her lack of an official title (such as trichen or khenchen) or, in fact, because she did not hold such a position. Regardless, her engagements took numerous forms. Mingyur Peldrön cultivated important connections between Mindröling and the Sikkimese aristocracy during her time as an exiled refugee in Sikkim. She visited with and bestowed teachings on the royal family, met with religious leaders at Pemayangtsé Monastery and Sangnak Choeling Monastery, and established her own retreat center nearby. These connections are an example of how she participated in overt institutional diplomacy. She acted as religious advisor to the royal family, remained closely engaged with them during her years there, and also brokered her sister’s marriage to the prince, forming a matrimonial alliance between her house and the royal house of
Sikkim. While they were geographically distant from Mindröling, the royal family and the community of Pemayangtsé Monastery nearby had all been significantly influenced by Mindröling's particular approach to Nyingma organization and teachings. Although there is not much detail about these interactions beyond *Dispeller*, Mingyur Peldröön's beneficial presence in Sikkim is also discussed in Samten Gyatso's *History of Sikkimese Monasteries*. In particular, he cites the exchange of teachings with the third Lhatsun Chenpo Dzogchen Jigmé Pawo (referenced in *Dispeller* as an expert in the Great Perfection), visits to the royal palace, and the fact that the Sikkimese people were largely considered to be blessed by her presence. While her gender does not seem to have been a deterrent in these relations, it was apparently worth noting. In Jigmé Pawo's brief account of Mingyur Peldröön's time in Sikkim, he refers to her as a “jetsün of high family” and then goes on to explain that “although she has the body of a woman, her way of giving commentaries, explanations and so forth are identical to the Great Tertön [Terdak Lingpa] himself, [they] similarly [instill] complete faith.” Thus, Jigmé Pawo overrides any concern about Mingyur Peldröön's gender with the reminder that she was close to her father in behavior and teaching ability. He reports that “she gave a rainbow of teachings, including empowerments and instruction . . . and accordingly scattered scriptural instructions hither and thither.” Mingyur Peldröön's relationship with Jigmé Pawo's lineage continued after she returned home; in 1748 his reincarnation traveled to Ü to receive teachings from her.

Of all of Mingyur Peldröön's interactions with political officials and their families, her relationship with the leader Polhané is mentioned most extensively throughout *Dispeller*. He also shows up frequently in Rinchen Namgyel's namtar as a similarly important figure for Mindröling in the eighteenth century. As a boy, Polhané had studied with Lochen Dharmaśrī at Mindröling and remained a great friend of the monastery throughout his tenure as de facto ruler of Tibet. His reign lasted from 1728 until his death in 1747. Prior to that, he had been actively involved in the military and political events of the early eighteenth century, aligning himself with Lhazang Khan in 1714 and working together with the military leader Khangchenné and the Qing army to put down the Dzungar invasion and subsequent civil war. He was one of five members of the governing cabinet of the Ganden Podrang from 1721 to 1726. As a result of these efforts, he became known as an effective military officer and anti-Dzungar political actor. It is notable that he frequently came down on the side opposed to suppression of non-Geluk
organizations, and acted against sectarian interests. For example, the Qing Imperial Edict issued in 1726 reinforced the pro-Geluk sentiment of the early eighteenth century. Although it was unpopular among most of the Ganden Podrang government leadership, few were willing to speak out against it, but Polhané was one such person.\(^29\) He is mentioned in *Dispeller* as a financier of Mindröling’s postwar reconstruction, as an intermediary between Mingyur Peldrön and the Seventh Dalai Lama, and as one who repeatedly sought out both Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel for their ritual and instructional prowess. Unlike the similar discussions found in Rinchen Namgyel’s namtar, Mingyur Peldrön’s relationship with Polhané is presented as particularly important in *Dispeller*. For example, immediately upon her return from Sikkim, she oversaw the initial extensive repairs to the monastery, before Rinchen Namgyel had returned from his own exile in Kham. This much is generally accepted.\(^30\) However, *Dispeller* goes one step further and cites Polhané as the source of financial support for her reconstruction efforts. The claim is that he also made offerings to Mingyur Peldrön, including a crown and a white stallion with ornamented saddle.\(^31\) By financing the reconstruction of Mindröling and other non-Geluk monasteries that had been destroyed in the civil war, Polhané was in a sense making a public declaration of the legitimacy of Mindröling in the postwar period. *Dispeller* connects these activities directly to Mingyur Peldrön herself. He remained involved in the workings of Mindröling throughout his lifetime. One particular episode in her *Life* portrays the extent of his influence at the monastery and the real-world effects that it had on her lived experience.

As Gyurmé Ösel tells the story, Polhané sent Mingyur Peldrön and her attendants to Kongpo at the urging of unnamed members of the Mindröling family, shortly after Rinchen Namgyel returned from his exile in Kham:

> In this way, some “virtuous ones” of the labrang approached the Taiji [Polhané] and made a request. Then, [they heard] from the Taiji that [Mingyur Peldrön] must briefly go to Kongpo Dechen Teng to teach. And so she went, and more than a year passed. The teacher [and] monk Orgyan Rabten, and the monk Tashi Wangchuk, went as messengers to the Taiji’s place at Doring. There, the Taiji asked them if the jetsün—the knowledge bearer—was doing great dharmic activities to benefit beings. Gelong Rabten said, “Except for students who come from Tö and those regions, [she] is not benefitting anyone with the dharma. Gyurmé Chödron is her attendant. As for Gyurmé
Yangzom and the monk Drakpa and the others, they’re out working in the fields.” To that the Taiji said, “What a terrible pity! I have been meaninglessly deceived by these people! A lama such as this, who only abides by the essential truth, shouldn’t reside there in that weary way. This malevolence must be remedied immediately!” And so she traveled from Kongpo to Lhasa.33

According to this account, after more than a year had passed, Polhané learned from a few monks that Mingyur Peldrön’s work in Kongpo was proving to be of little benefit, that she was reaching few students, and that her attendants had been put to work in the fields. His discovery that she was languishing in obscurity was received as unwelcome news indeed. It is never made clear why she was sent to Kongpo. As the story goes, when Rinchen Namgyel returned, he was very pleased with the renovations and the state in which he found the monastery.34 There is no prior suggestion of tension between the siblings, and they continued to teach together during their adult years. It might be that Mingyur Peldrön’s brother—or someone else at Mindrölöng—genuinely believed that she would do good work in Kongpo. She had also been dangerously ill just before this, and it might be that a period of convalescence was in order. There is the possibility that she sought a rest in the wake of her illness. However, this is not mentioned in conjunction with her trip. In Dispeller Polhané responds to the discovery of Mingyur Peldrön’s situation as though he had been tricked into sending her away and that she had somehow been wronged in this decision and was suffering as a result of it. It is possible that the “virtuous ones” of Mindrölöng had sought to remove the young woman so that her brother could take up his position of leadership after his late return from Kham back to a monastery that she had already begun reviving to great effect.35 Or it might be that they sought to expand their network in Kongpo. Regardless, Polhané’s tenor suggests deceit and tension within the Mindrölöng community. It is no wonder that she and her compatriots were worried as they were summoned to Lhasa.

Having been called back from Kongpo, Mingyur Peldrön proceeded directly to Lhasa to meet with Polhané. On the way she and her attendants disguised themselves as Gelukpas before entering the city. According to Dispeller, she was worried about traveling to Lhasa, which had until recently been controlled by Gelukpas who were not terribly friendly toward Nyingmapas. It is likely that she and her attendants were terrified of the violence that had previously been directed at their fellows. It seems she was the first
Mindröl Ling community member to enter Lhasa since the murder of her uncle and brother there in 1717:

At that time, Dajin Badur only supported the Yellow Hats [i.e., Gelukpas], the Nyingmapas had been destroyed. As a result, any others moving about were really worried, because even though they were virtuous they might be stopped. They were terrified that their terma tradition would be destroyed, so they disguised themselves as Yellow Hats in order to enter [the city safely]. The Taiji [Polhané] said, “Don’t worry about that—your own ways are fine.” And so they changed into their own clothes. [Mingyur Peldrön] prostrated at the feet of the Supreme [Seventh Dalai Lama] Losang Kalsang Gyatso and made offerings. He bestowed on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma, flowers fell from the heavens, and then they went to visit several places, including the Fifth Dalai Lama’s tomb.

The group’s concern about walking openly as Nyingma practitioners in the city where her uncle and brother had been executed some years earlier illustrates just how unsettled Geluk-Nyingma relations remained at this time. While it is unclear what clothing choices or other social cues would have made the group identifiable as Nyingmapas, in Polhané’s reassurances that she need not go about in disguise, we see a political actor trying to assuage the very real fear of a recently ostracized religious practitioner. He successfully urged the visitors to change back into their regular clothes and arranged for Mingyur Peldrön to have an audience with the Seventh Dalai Lama, who bestowed on her the name Jetsün Sherab Drönma. They exchanged teachings, after which she visited Polhané’s home in the city and saw important pilgrimage sites. The monks of the Dalai Lama’s monastery also requested that she compose a long-life prayer that they could recite. In spite of the factionalist environment, it seems that her well-founded worries were not ultimately borne out in any ill treatment. However, the situation they feared was indeed experienced by others. Shakabpa explains that during this time, anyone who was not aligned with one of the two cabinet factions was considered to be unprotected in a politically unstable moment: “They were afflicted with terrible difficulties in terms of taxation and transportation obligations. There are many stories that monks from Namdra Pendé Leksheling Monastery moved to Tsetang, pretending to be monks from Sera, Drepung, or the tantric colleges.” It seems it was not uncommon for people to “disguise” themselves in some way or another while in
Lhasa in order to appear in alignment with one or another faction and so avoid dangerous confrontation.

Beyond suggesting some strife within the household and postwar tensions regarding the monastery’s reconstruction, this event led to Mingyur Peldrön developing closer ties with Polhané. While uneasy in the presence of both him and the Dalai Lama, it is notable that Mingyur Peldrön was able to forge an alliance with them. It is likely that she and many other non-Gelukpa practitioners in the region were concerned about continued negative sentiment against non-Gelukpas. Cultivating a positive relationship with leaders outside the Nyingma community was important for individual and institutional self-preservation. When we take into consideration the potential tension within the newly established second generation of Mindröling leadership, Mingyur Peldrön’s relations with Polhané and the Seventh Dalai Lama were especially important if she was to survive in the post–civil war era. It is noteworthy that it is these relationships, and not others within Mindröling or even within the Nyingma community, that are highlighted in Dispeller. Their inclusion in the text, and the detail with which they are addressed, suggests that Gyurmé Ösel found these moments to be especially important for his readership. The idea of a strong friendship between Dalai Lamas and members of Mindröling might be one reason that the Dalai Lama is mentioned in Dispeller. In addition to his importance as eventual head of state, the incident reminds the reader of the relationship between the Fifth Dalai Lama and the founders of Mindröling.

The unrest of 1726–27 is also mentioned in Dispeller and is related to Mingyur Peldrön’s personal experience. After the assassination of Khangchenné, Polhané went into hiding and likewise sent his wife and daughter into hiding for protection. 38 Both his wife and their daughter were ill during this period. At the beginning of Dispeller’s account of this episode, Mingyur Peldrön had been in retreat for a year at Luding but emerged to help with the situation. In summarizing events, Gyurmé Ösel takes care to mention that Rinchen Namgyel went to support Polhané in the midst of the upheaval and that Mingyur Peldrön herself related what happened next. She reported that her brother had been important for Polhané’s survival during this time and explained that Polhané had prevailed upon Mingyur Peldrön, Rinchen Namgyel, and others to perform rituals for his ailing family members. The Mindröling representatives even traveled to Polhané’s home, which was especially dangerous at that time, given the circumstances. There they spent six weeks performing rituals alongside Gelukpa monks for the recovery of
his wife and daughter. Directly after this mention of saying prayers for his family in a time of great danger, Dispeller mentions a new round of repairs that were completed at Mindröling, with an influx of offerings. As a result of these activities, Polhané made donations that went to the further reconstruction of the monastery, with the result that everything that had been destroyed by the Dzungars—with the exception of a couple of stūpas (reliquary shrines)—was finally repaired. This construction included a separate abode for Mingyur Peldrön herself. After the construction was completed, Mingyur Peldrön, Rinchen Namgyel, and learned monks from Geluk monasteries all performed pacification rituals together:

The throne-holder Ratna Biza [Rinchen Namgyel] and the Great Precious Lama [Mingyur Peldrön] performed pacification liturgies from the New Treasures with some geshes from Ü monasteries. At that time flowers fell from the clear sky, there was a rainbow halo around the sun, and likewise other marks of virtue appeared. Then, due to the actions of the monastic assembly, along with the relatives, warring serfs and devoted patrons made extensive offerings. Then, for the next three years [Mingyur Peldrön] stayed in immovable retreat, performing the actions of the three buddha bodies.

This passage brings together several important threads that run throughout Dispeller in terms of its presentation of Mingyur Peldrön as friendly toward the Gelukpa community and the material, political, and religious concerns that may have been driving these relationships. Here Gyurmé Ösel is claiming that they are engaging in intra-sectarian ritual practice for the purpose of pacifying the larger population. As with the prayers and rituals for the good health and safety of Polhané’s family, the practical result of these efforts was the receipt of further donations from him. These went to the reconstruction of Mindröling as the other donations had, but it is noteworthy that they also included a house for Mingyur Peldrön. In fact, the most concrete result of her interactions with central Tibetan political leaders (and Polhané in particular) was financial support for the reconstruction of Mindröling after its decimation by the Dzungars. The moment is also marked with miraculous events, as shortly thereafter we see the use of the name “Great Ḍākinī Queen” used for Mingyur Peldrön. Statements about miraculous events and the use of the sobriquet Great Ḍākinī Queen are regularly applied in Dispeller to refer to Mingyur Peldrön in important moments. While receiving offerings from devoted patrons and quelling social unrest
through liturgical prayer, this moment also represents an attempt at unity with Geluk religious leadership. If we think of her fraught encounters with the Fifth Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche, and compare those events with this brief mention, it seems that her interests are aligned with the Geluk. Most concretely, after every interaction with Polhané, repairs were completed for the monastery. Whether friend to Gelukpas or no, this connection with Polhané drove the monastery’s most basic foundation for revival: its physical structure.

One account in the namtar exemplifies how Gyurmé Ösel used historical events as backdrops to narrate Mingyur Peldrön's life. He takes the documented event of Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche brokering peace between feuding Geluk factions as the starting point for a discussion about Mingyur Peldrön’s relationship with Lelung. In this context Lelung’s role adjudicating political tensions for the Ganden Podrang becomes a discussion about whether or not he and Mingyur Peldrön would begin a consort relationship:

In the fire dragon year [1736], while receiving teachings from [her] brother Ratna Biza [Rinchen Namgyel], Miwang Gyurmé Sönam Tobgyé [Polhané] said, “This Olkha Jedrung is helpful, and although he’s a Gelukpa, why not invite him?” To this, the brother said, “Fears have arisen that the monastery will be spoiled. But okay, I’ll invite him.” Just as soon as [Jedrung] went to the monastery, they began preparations; in the intervening three months he and the Heart Son met with a procession of respected invited lamas. In the Chökhor Lhünpo apartment of the Samantabhadra Palace, on marvelous thrones that had been arranged, Jedrung was invited to sit with his consort. The Precious Brother Ratna Biza led a procession with ceremonial scarves of reparation, together with benefactors from smaller subsidiaries in Ü and all the lamas and monastics, and reverently venerated [him] and offered ambrosial nectar. Then, [Jedrung] and his disciples, lay and monastic, women and men all together—all told about sixty people or so—threw a party. Their singing filled the monastery. At that time, Her Holiness the Master Queen of theḌākinīs [Mingyur Peldrön] came out of retreat in order to meet with Gegen Rabten Gyau, the Gelong Trewang, the Gelong Drakpa, the Zimpön Gyurmé Chödron, and Gyurmé Yangzom, to dispel their misconceptions. Then Jedrung Rinpoche said, “I must make a spiritual connection with Her Holiness the Sublime Master [Mingyur Peldrön],” with the goal of also bestowing the oral transmission of Guru Yoga in detail. Jedrung said, “Minling Jetsün Rinpoche, in this lifetime we two should
make a connection and unify our wisdom and method. If that were all right, then for five hundred years all foreign invaders would be deterred. This has certainly been prophesied." Then Her Holiness, the Highest Lama, Queen of the Ḍākinīs, said, "I cannot do that! The Great Tertön [Terdak Lingpa] himself said, ‘You will not join with another. In order to be able to perform sacred incantations, bear in your heart the Great Perfection practice. By meditating, lead faithful sentient beings—men and women—to the sublime dharma.’ And so this correct aspiration arose [in me]." Saying this, she held her body erect. Jedrung said, “Okay, well, I have to go to Decheng Ling.” Likewise, the Great Lama [Mingyur Peldrön] left in another direction.\footnote{It is generally understood that Mingyur Peldrön and Lelung Jedrung Rinpoche exchanged teachings with one another and that Lelung maintained a connection with Mindröling that he had begun as a young man studying with Pema Gyurmé Gyatso. But in this segment of the text Gyurmé Ösel takes the relationship between Lelung and Mingyur Peldrön a step further, suggesting that Lelung propositioned her by requesting a consort relationship between the two of them. The language is only thinly veiled here, suggesting that a “union” (zung ’jug) of their “method and wisdom” (thabs shes) would be a good thing. In his proposition he points to the spiritual goals of sexual consort relationships and the elements of enlightenment that are joined through such pairings. As far as spiritual pickup lines go, it is a pretty good one. And here we might read Lelung as earnest in his goals for their relationship. However, Mingyur Peldrön was determined to stick to her monastic practice, citing her father’s instructions as reason enough to reject the proposal. In order for her to be a successful Dzogchen teacher, Terdak Lingpa instructed his daughter to remain celibate.}

It is important to keep in mind that right around this time, Lelung had been working to bring peace to warring factions within the Ganden Podrang government. Given the precarity of Nyingma institutions during this moment in central Tibetan history as well as Mindröling’s relationship with the Ganden Podrang, it is likely that a relationship with Lelung would have been helpful for the monastery’s survival and that agreeing to a sexual relationship might have improved relations for the institution. Thinking back to the unhappy marriage between Lady Peldzin and the young Sikkimese king Gyurmé Namgyel, we have precedent for the women of Mindröling engaging in such relationships and, in so doing, benefiting the family. Gyurmé Ösel depicts Mingyur Peldrön and Lelung’s relationship as a difficult one,
centered on diverging views of acceptable religious engagement. Depictions of him as a besotted suitor and her as a woman fending off unwanted attention creates a narrative that presents Lelung as a foil for Mingyur Peldrön to assert her focus on celibacy and the monastic path. After all, she only came out of retreat to attend to her disciples, not to engage with Lelung and his entourage. Her rejection of him here suggests that she had more authority in this moment than Lady Peldzin did later on in Sikkim (which makes sense, given the differences in their positions in the family) and that she felt able to maintain her monastic dedication. But this exchange also shows us that, according to Gyurmé Ösel, the concerns of the Geluk community had affected Mindröling in this period and that the sectarian divisions that had developed in the eighteenth century were considered problematic, at least by him.

In addition to these relationships and interactions with prominent political actors, Dispeller emphasizes Mingyur Peldrön’s ability to perform magic for practical purposes and suggests that she was called upon to engage these abilities to benefit political leaders. Her use of sorcery, including turning back enemies of the tradition, began in earnest during their flight to Sikkim. Shortly after arriving there, she and her entourage learned that they had been followed by the Dzungar troops. She conjured a snowstorm to stop them and so was able to remain safely in Sikkim. Later, in 1751, she reportedly performed pacification rituals to heal the bad feelings between the political successors of Lhazang Khan and the political enemies they had made during the civil war. This use of sorcery was not unusual among political actors of the day, and a perception that she could use it to beneficial effect to turn back opposition armies would likely have been considered an important skill.

Mingyur Peldrön’s involvement in political events has been corroborated outside of Dispeller, but only in a few places. Rather than taking her participation as historical fact, it bears considering why Gyurmé Ösel would see fit to emphasize her political connections in these moments. This suggests he is fashioning a heroine who was actively involved in supporting the political leaders of the day by asserting mutual concern between herself and Polhané, stimulating Polhané’s involvement in the Mindröling project, and reinforcing her support of his family in moments of crisis. In all of her engagements with Polhané, Gyurmé Ösel presents a woman who overcame the traumas of sectarian violence and sought reconciliation with the ruling
leadership. It is clear that Dispeller is asserting Polhané’s involvement in the revival project at Mindröling. But this goes beyond his support of Mindröling to also suggest a mutual support between the two of them in the midst of persistent tension within the Geluk political leadership and between the sects.

Mingyur Peldrön continued to interact with Polhané’s family after his death. In 1747 Polhané’s son Gyurmé Namgyel received empowerments from her and instruction in some of Terdak Lingpa’s treasure texts, alongside a Sikkimese monk named Gyurmé Zangpo. Gyurmé Namgyel took on his father’s position the same year. He was apparently concerned with Qing interference, and according to Shakabpa, “in 1748, he pushed through reforms that shifted to Beijing the burden of paying for the upkeep of Manchu representatives in Tibet.” He is also known for attempting to rekindle the relationship between the Ganden Podrang and the Dzungars. This led to his assassination in 1750 and subsequently the widespread murder of Han Chinese people living in Lhasa. He was at least somewhat concerned with continuing the family connection with Mingyur Peldrön and likely also concerned with maintaining relations with Mindröling. In 1751, the year after Gyurmé Namgyel's assassination, Polhané's daughter Deden Drölma (d. 1773) visited Mingyur Peldrön with her husband and children, in order to make donations for empowerments and teachings. Given the continued family connection and the fact that Petech refers to her as “a pious patron of the clergy and of the monasteries,” it is likely that a relationship existed between the two women. She and others in Polhané’s family continued to cultivate a relationship with Mingyur Peldrön until the end of her life, participating in and supporting the rituals and observances surrounding her death.

Gyurmé Samten Chogdrup, the central Tibetan prince who requested that Mingyur Peldrön write the Secret Wisdom Ḍākinī Instruction Manual in 1732, represents a larger pattern of local and regional political leaders arriving throughout the narrative to receive empowerments and teachings from her. A few other examples include the members of the aristocracy who traveled to meet Mingyur Peldrön in 1748. These included a royal prince of Gungthang in Ngari and his wife, who visited to receive a Red Wrathful Longevity empowerment and an explanation of the six-syllable Chenrezi mantra. In the same year she also bestowed detailed instructions in wrathful empowerments from both kama and terma streams to one Ngödrup Namgyel, the son of an army general in Yuthok. These brief encounters are not expounded on,
but they serve to remind the reader of Mingyur Peldrön as a figure who was supposedly sought out by military families and the aristocracy.

Sources beyond *Dispeller* make it clear that Mingyur Peldrön was generally considered a prolific and respected teacher. Gyurmé Ösel also presents her as actively engaged with the political and religious developments of the period, primarily through the relationships she had with prominent figures in Geluk and Nyingma communities. He goes so far as to cast her as an unofficial diplomat for Mindröling. While this was secondary to her role as a teacher, it also did the work of spreading awareness about Mindröling by extending her relationships to important political and religious actors beyond the monastery. Her ritual engagements had reverberations beyond her role as a pedagogue. In spite of (or perhaps because of) not having an official title, combined with her position as a celibate monastic, she was able to have relationships with political and religious leaders who were external to Mindröling yet potentially very important for its survival. Her continued relationships with political figures and their families throughout her adulthood reinforce this image of her as something of a diplomatic figure. Moreover, these relationships have interesting implications for her gendered positionality at Mindröling, as overt diplomatic work was not being done by other women then or earlier in the monastery’s history. It seems that her unique position as a trained teacher, lineage holder, and celibate nun supported the possibility for these diplomatic engagements.

These relationships would have been beneficial for Mindröling’s revival, for both the financial support they could offer and also in re legitimizing a previously ostracized group after a period of persecution. In the recovery after the civil war, to have someone like Polhané closely involved in the monastery’s affairs was financially, socially, and politically beneficial for the successful reconstruction of the monastery. The narrative of these relationships also offers a rare perspective of how the political machinations of the time and continued regional strife influenced personal experience and livelihood. Polhané in particular would continue to impact Mingyur Peldrön’s social and religious position significantly. He was an important connection to powerful political and religious leadership outside of her own institution, making it potentially easier for her to act as an independent agent of change. These introductions in turn made it more likely for her status to be less dictated by the Mindröling leadership (now in the hands of her brother), giving her the space to be viewed as an important and powerful teacher *in her own*
right. The importance of this legitimation from a non-Mindröling entity cannot be overstated. The historical religious context includes active connections between the monastery and the Gelukpas in Lhasa during Mingyur Peldrön’s lifetime. It seems there was extensive communication between these groups, with continued mutual influence across multiple generations. Gyurmé Ösel presented his master as someone who had relationships with important political figures, indicating that she engaged with them directly while maintaining her monasticism and her dedication to teaching and retreat. The question arises of what literary work these representations might be doing for Gyurmé Ösel. How did presenting Mingyur Peldrön as connected to political leaders outside of Mindröling and the Nyingma community reinforce his presentation—and his readers’ views—of her as a saint and as a character in her own life story?