

# A Miscarriage of History: Wencheng Gongzhu and Sino-Tibetan Historiography

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine how Wencheng Gongzhu, the Chinese consort to the first Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo, served as a contentious rhetorical site for Tibetan and Chinese historiographers for over 1,000 years. I argue present exile Tibetan and Chinese propaganda on such topics as Tibetan political, cultural, and hereditary independence from China is at least analogous and possibly influenced by historiographic traditions found in texts such as the *Tang Annals* and post-imperial Tibetan Buddhist works like the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*. However, as Central Tibetan and Chinese historians used Wencheng to index the complex relationship between Tibet and China, Eastern Tibetan historians preserved lesser-known, potentially subversive narratives of Wencheng's travels, especially regarding her possible love-affair with the Tibetan minister Gar Tongtsen and their illegitimate child. After briefly reviewing Central Tibetan and Chinese metanarratives, I focus on Eastern Tibetan narratives, including the apparently lost *Secret Autobiography of Wencheng Gongzhu*, which I argue point to the former political autonomy and cultural hybridity of areas of Eastern Tibet, especially Minyak and Powo. My investigation into Wencheng narratives from Eastern Tibet demonstrates that her journey from China to Tibet should not be thought of as a mere liminal period of her life, but rather central to debates among Tibetans and Chinese regarding the politics of national unity (*minzu tuanjie*) and constructions of pan-Tibetan identity.

**Keywords:** Wencheng, Tibet, China, historiography, hybridity

Recent scholarship on Tibetan history and historiography has identified two competing narratives regarding Tibetan history, one Tibetan in origin, the other Chinese. These two narratives are thought to be dichotomous, co-constructive, and inherently false. Both have roots in the Yarlung-Tang era (seventh–ninth centuries AD) and continue to play dominant roles in the contemporary construction of Tibetan history. In recent times, these two dominant narratives have been pred-

icated upon the assumption that Tibetans share a common descent (Powers 2004). While much of this argument is valid, this description of Tibetan historiographic traditions is biased towards certain recent perspectives (late 1970s–present) and is not representative of the complexity of Tibetan or Chinese historiographic traditions at any point in time, not even in the period since the loss of *de facto* Tibetan independence (1950s–present).<sup>1</sup> It also does not account for the evolution and complexity of Tibetan self-identity.

I propose that we test a crucial piece of the Tibetan and Chinese narratives, the role of the Chinese ‘Princess’ Wencheng Gongzhu (628–680/2) in Sino-Tibetan politics and the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Wencheng Gongzhu is one of two Chinese women sent to be the consort to a Tibetan emperor, an example of the ancient Chinese practice of *heqin* [peace-marriage], in which Chinese princesses or women of court were sent into enemy territory to be consorts to non-Chinese political rivals as a means to secure China’s borders and pacify ‘barbarians’. Later generations of Chinese leaders have used these marriages to argue their claims of sovereignty over their contemporary descendants, who now comprise some of the prominent national minorities in China, such as Tibetans, Mongolians, Uighurs and Yi (Bulag 2002: 65). I will begin with a brief overview of the image of Wencheng in competing Tibetan and Chinese narratives of Tibetan history. I will then dispel the notion of a true dichotomy through analysing a few examples of the local legends of Wencheng among the peoples of Eastern Tibet. These legends not only challenge Central Tibetan and Chinese narratives of Tibetan history, but also the assertion that Tibetans share a notion of a common descent, drawn from myths and legends, which defines them, in part, as an unified nationality (Tib. *mi rigs*, Ch. *minzu*), different from the Han. Some of the details of the veneration of Wencheng in Eastern Tibet suggest that the political and cultural complexity and hybridity of those polities is reflected directly in her special connection to those places. Through the example of Wencheng, we see that Central Tibetan, Chinese, and Eastern Tibetan historiography reflect the political and cultural conditions of their origin.

Since the two dominant versions of the Wencheng story in circulation today are adequately summarised in Powers (2004), I will begin with views of Wencheng in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) which have served the Communist narratives of Sino-Tibetan history, as well as an influential example of exile Tibetan historiography. I will then investigate apparent analogies in pre-modern Tibetan and Chinese narratives of Tibetan history (eighth–fourteenth centuries AD), since occasionally present-day historians mine these sources for their arguments. Finally, I will proceed through examples of local veneration of Wencheng in Eastern Tibet. One of my aims is to avoid presenting Tibetan historical writing, within any time period, as monolithic. Both Tibetan and Chinese authors in the PRC have participated in reconstructing Wencheng in accordance with changes in Communist ideology and historiography before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution (officially 1966–1976, with a later but indeterminate *terminus ad quem* for Tibetan areas).<sup>3</sup> Tibetan imperial narratives range from

presenting Wencheng as a sophisticated expert of Chinese geomancy and farming, more loyal to Tibetans than her own family, to no more than an extension of the Tibetan emperor's own actions. Eastern Tibetans have preserved a perspective of Wencheng which reflects their peripheral status, trapped geographically and historiographically between two great Asian empires: Central Tibet and China. I propose that, if we take a closer look at historiographic traditions of Tibetanised peoples living in present-day Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces, those provinces which are outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, we will gain a much-needed contextualised picture of the complex nature of Sino-Tibetan history; this complexity ought to be researched and understood in order to get past a dichotomous view of Tibetan history, but also to disabuse ourselves of any notion that these narratives have always been so clearly articulated, purposefully used, or responsibly represent the historiographic diversity of all of China or all of the Tibetan plateau.

My primary concern is the smaller narratives important to Eastern Tibetans, which are often left on the editing-room floor when recent Tibetan and Chinese elites choose to frame Tibet. Concomitant with this perspective on historical writing is an understanding that Central Tibetan and Chinese historians deliberately read or inserted supposedly inherent meanings into the past events of their respective empires through discerning the permanent structures and forces at work within them (Sahlins 1985), namely Avalokiteśvara for Tibetan Buddhists and historical materialism for Chinese Communists.

## WENCHENG IN CHINESE COMMUNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

In contemporary China, Wencheng's trip from the Chinese capital of Chang'an across Eastern Tibet to Lhasa has increasingly become a richer and more detailed story of adventure and love. Her journey is retold in folk songs, operas and, recently, books, DVDs and television soap operas.

Late twentieth-century and recent Chinese historiography on Tibet has emphasised that, even before Tibet became an integral part of a multi-ethnic Chinese state, Tibetans were dependent on China for economic and cultural development. For twentieth-century Chinese historiography in English, Powers drew on Wang Furen and Suo Wenqing's *Highlights of Tibetan History* (1984) and Wei Jing's *100 Questions about Tibet* (1989).<sup>4</sup> Since Powers (2004: 31–6) has already summarised and analysed their discursive strategies in regards to Wencheng's role in Tibetan history, for the sake of brevity and in order to gain new insights I propose we follow a different trajectory and quickly trace Communist historiography through the manipulation of pop-culture discourses and Tibetan-language historical research in the PRC in order to provide some context for thinking through some Wencheng-related discourse among contemporary Eastern Tibetans.

Soon after the failed Tibetan uprising of 1959 and the Dalai Lama's flight into

exile, the Chinese Communist Party targeted popular culture as an effective means for challenging the Tibetan Exile-Government's portrayal of Sino-Tibetan history. In 1959, in the midst of Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward, Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), Communist China's first premier, ordered Tian Han (1898–1968) to write a play based on Wencheng. At the time, Tian Han was a famous playwright and composer in China who had penned numerous works, including the PRC national anthem, *March of the Volunteer Army*. In the period between when the People's Liberation Army first occupied Tibetan areas in 1949 and when the Dalai Lama fled in 1959, the Communist government began land reforms in Eastern Tibetan areas, which led to a large-scale Tibetan revolt and widespread famine. Tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees fled to Central Tibet, where land reforms had been delayed. Originally, Tian Han wrote his play *Princess Wencheng* around a Maoist ideology of class-warfare, in which Wencheng intervened in an incident of a Tibetan feudal lord mistreating his serfs. Immediately after the Dalai Lama fled to India in March 1959, the PRC began land reforms in Central Tibet as well. Upon seeing the stage play, Zhou Enlai ordered Tian Han to play down class warfare and emphasise Wencheng as a symbol of a long friendship between unequal partners – Tibetans dependent upon China for economic and technological development (Tian Han 1961).<sup>5</sup> Here I find Uradyn Bulag's thorough investigation of the politics of *minzu tuanjie* [politics of national unity/amity among nationalities] in relation to Mongolian citizens of China to be germane (Bulag 2002). As he has already pointed out (2002: 88–9), after the Tibetan Uprising on 10 March 1959, much of contemporary Chinese discourse on Tibetan history utilised Wencheng to emphasise *minzu tuanjie* as well as the economic and technological assistance granted to Tibetans.

The Chinese government has repeatedly attempted to use Tian Han's drama to influence Tibetan perceptions of China through the image of Wencheng. For example, in 1959, the Chinese government selected a group of Tibetan students to attend the Shanghai Drama Institute in a special Tibetan class. After graduating in 1962, they performed a Tibetan translation of Tian Han's *Princess Wencheng* in Beijing, Xi'an, Lhasa, and other places. They were the first group to perform modern spoken dramas in the Tibetan language (Mackerras 1992: 20). And in 1978, China's main troupe for performing song opera and dance drama, the China Opera and Dance Theatre, arranged a *Princess Wencheng* dance drama, which it performed frequently in the 1980s (Mackerras 1992: 21). Throughout many later retellings of Tian Han's play, Wencheng's supposed efforts to bring civilisation and development to backward barbarian Tibetans is an even greater part of Chinese government propaganda now than ever. Examples include recent Chinese Opera performances and Cai Xiaoqing's 20-part made-for-CCTV serialised drama about Wencheng Gongzhu, which was dubbed into Tibetan as *Wencheng Gongzhu: A Serialized Movie in the Tibetan Language* ('*On shing kong jo: Bod skad kyi brnyan thag*) (1999). In his version, Cai Xiaoqing focuses on Wencheng in order to put a sympathetic human face on an otherwise paternalistic portrayal of a mission to civilise Tibetans. More recently, on 9 May 2006,

*Xinhua* reported that two senior Chinese leaders, Jia Qinglin, the fourth-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CPC, and Li Changchun, the fifth-ranked member of the Politburo Standing Committee, attended a performance of the classical Tibetan opera rendition of *Princess Wencheng*, performed for the first time by a combined Tibetan and Chinese opera. Again, during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the National Peking Opera Theater and the Tibetan Opera Troupe put on joint performances of a *Princess Wencheng* drama at the Mei Lanfang Grand Theater. On 12 August 2008, *Xinhua* reported, ‘the hybrid drama combined the two opera styles’ most notable aspects in music, song, and costume’.

Using Wencheng as a theme of friendship and unity between Tibetans and Chinese is not solely the purview of Chinese writers. Tibetans in the PRC with socialist interests and investment in the Communist Party have responded to the idea. Cangcan Sonam Gyalpo (Lcang can bsod nams rgyal po) (b. 1898?), a twentieth-century Tibetan poet, advocated *fraternity* among nationalities through the symbol of Wencheng (Maconi 2002: 171 *et seq.*). However, due to the hegemonic nature of *minzu tuanjie* and the government-approved version of the Wencheng story, research into the history of Wencheng’s travels and sojourn in areas of Eastern Tibet ceased among Tibetan authors in the mid-1990s. In 1988, Sangyé Rinchen (Sangs rgyas rin chen) published ‘A Preliminary Investigation into the History of the Chinese Princess’ Journey to Tibet’ (*Rgya bza’kong jo bod la phebs pa’i lo rgyus la che long tsam dpyad pa*) in *Mtsho sngon slob gso*, a Tibetan literary journal. In his article, Sangyé Rinchen attempted, in his words, to ‘analyze scientifically’ Wencheng’s actual route, by grouping information into three categories and putting aside oral history, which he reported arose from the Tibetan people’s deep love for Wencheng Gongzhu. Shortly thereafter, another author, Chabcha Dorjé Tsering (Chab ’gag rdo rje tshe ring) (1991), also attempted ‘to dispel the various oral traditions and fabulous tales made up by the common people which were established on top of the history of Rgya bza’ Wencheng Gongzhu’, at least from the point of view of Marxist historiography, and determine the actual route Wencheng took from the Chinese capital to Lhasa in his article, ‘An Investigation into Part of the Historical Context Connected to the Chinese Princess Wencheng Gongzhu’ (*Rgya ’bza wun khrin kong jo dang ’brel ba’i lo rgyus kyi gnas tshul ’gar dpyad pa*) in Tibet’s leading research journal, *Bod ljong zhib ’jug*.

Both of these articles disparaged local veneration of Wencheng in Eastern Tibet, often in Buddhist forms, as false accretions on top of actual events. The authors stated their intended goal in researching Wencheng was to clarify her actual route from China to Tibet, but along the way employed heavy-handed language to argue for her impact on Tibetan material prosperity. For example, Chabcha Dorjé Tsering (1991: 22) made a point of engaging other, unnamed, Tibetan authors on controversial questions such as the relationship between culture and material production, and the level of material development in Tibet in the seventh century AD before the arrival of Wencheng. As Robert Barnett first

noted (2006), Chabcha Dorjé Tsering's article was poorly received in China. Though he followed a strict materialist interpretation of Wencheng, it was thought that he did not give Wencheng enough credit for three contributions to Tibetan culture: farming, animal husbandry, and manufacturing (Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2010).<sup>6</sup> It follows, then, that if Tibetans love Wencheng for all of the economic changes she brought to Tibet in the seventh century AD, they ought to also love the Communist Party for its recent economic development projects in Tibetan areas of China.

#### WENCHENG IN TIBETAN EXILES' HISTORIOGRAPHY

Tsepon Wangchuk Deden Shakabpa's *One Hundred Thousand Moons: An advanced political history of Tibet* (2009) is probably the most influential history of Tibet written by an Tibetan exile. As Matthew Kapstein notes in his foreword to Derek Maher's translation, 'It must be stressed, in this regard, that the work translated here has had singularly profound and far-reaching repercussions upon the manner in which, among Tibetans, Tibetan history is now written'. According to Shakabpa, Wencheng is only one of a number of consorts to Songtsen Gampo, the first emperor of a growing Tibetan empire. These consorts came from neighbouring territories, which had either been forcibly incorporated into Songtsen's growing empire, such as Zhangzhung and Minyak, were a vassal state, in the case of Nepal, or a marriage alliance intended to quell a border dispute, as in the case of Wencheng coming from China. The onus for the union fell on Songtsen Gampo, who forced the king of China to comply with his will through defeating the Chinese royal forces in battle. Songtsen Gampo and his army met Wencheng at the Tibetan–Chinese border and escorted her back to Lhasa. Wencheng's retinue is not mentioned, only her dowry, which consisted of objects of wealth, the Jowo Śākyamuni (a Buddhist statue), and votive items. Like the other imperial consorts, Wencheng is briefly credited with building a temple. More importantly, she is remembered for having used her knowledge of geomancy to assist the Nepalese consort in constructing her temple, the Rasa Trülñang Tsuglagkhang, which later became akin to a national cathedral for Tibetans. Counter to the Communist portrayal of Wencheng, Shakabpa made no note of Wencheng's knowledge of economics, agriculture, architecture, medicine or other sciences. However, Shakabpa's account and the Communist narrative agree that Songtsen must have met Wencheng at the border. In doing so, Shakabpa retained the Central Tibetan emphasis on Songtsen Gampo as the primary protagonist in the narrative of their relationship, and omitted any reference to her sojourn in areas of Eastern Tibet, the numerous sacred sites or events celebrated by those peoples (Shakabpa 2009: 118–19).

## WENCHENG IN CENTRAL TIBETAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Around 635, the first Tibetan emperor, Songtsen Gampo, requested a consort from Taizong, the emperor of Tang China, but the marriage alliance was at first rejected. In response, Songtsen Gampo defeated the buffer state of the 'Azha and proceeded to invade China in 638. Eventually, Taizong acquiesced and, on 11 December 640, Songtsen Gampo's minister, Gar Tongtsen (Mgar Stong rtsan), began the negotiations for the bride. On 2 March 641, Gar Tongtsen escorted Wencheng Gongzhu, a daughter of an enfeoffed prince of the Chinese imperial court, on the long journey to Lhasa to become a Tibetan imperial consort (Beckwith 1987: 22–6): or at least that is what a judicious and neutral observation of the most contemporaneous sources would lead us to conclude. Despite the large number of sites on the Tibetan plateau related to Wencheng and the number of ancient and contemporary sources which mention her in Tibetan and Chinese, little or no research has been conducted on her history and significance outside of her role in seventh-century Sino-Tibetan relations (Bacot 1934; Feng 1957; Richardson 1997; Yamaguchi 1969; 1970).

Which texts should be considered to constitute a premodern metanarrative for Central Tibet is a question that to my knowledge has not been sufficiently explored, especially as it would pertain to Wencheng, and is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I have chosen a representative sample of a broad range of historical material: *Pronouncement of Ba*, *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, and the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*.<sup>7</sup> My justification for choosing these sources is multifaceted. Together they represent a long chronological period. They contain very different narratives, though they exhibit some intertextuality. All three texts were well known to Tibetan authors and depict Wencheng in different ways. For the sake of brevity, I have excluded two other texts, *Mañi Kabum* and *Elixir of Honey Which is the Essence of a Flower*. The history section of the *Mañi Kabum* is largely drawn from the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, and the *Elixir* is drawn from the *Mañi Kabum*. The three Tibetan historical texts I will use represent the historiographic concerns of ecclesiastic elites in Central Tibet.

Over time, the union of Wencheng Gongzhu to Songtsen Gampo took on escalating religious significance in Tibetan Buddhist historiography. According to the *Pronouncement of Ba*, Wencheng Gongzhu brought a Buddhist statue, the Jowo Śākyamuni, to Tibet around 640 as part of her dowry for marrying Songtsen Gampo. Wencheng built a temple to house the Jowo, and also resided there (Wangdu & Diemberger 2002: 31). There is some justification for crediting Wencheng with the Tibetan conversion to Buddhism in the *Pronouncement of Ba*. In at least one redaction of the *Pronouncement of Ba*, Wencheng's betrothal to Songtsen Gampo was more of a diplomatic matter arranged to settle border disputes between Tibet and China. In a sense, China gave Wencheng to Songtsen Gampo as war reparations:

Wencheng Gongzhu together with 300 members of her court were sent to the upper areas and 30 imperial nieces were offered to Gar Tongtsen as consorts. The

TABLE 1. Early sources for Tibetan historiography of Wencheng Gongzhu.

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author/Redactor</i>	<i>Terminus a quo/ ad quem</i>	<i>Relation to Wencheng</i>
<i>Pronouncement of Ba</i> <sup>a</sup>	attrib. Ba Salnang	late 8th/ late 11th century	earliest source
<i>Tibetan Annals (PT1228 and S0750)</i> <sup>b</sup>	anonymous	mid-9th century	only three lines long
<i>Vase-shaped Pillar Testament</i>	attrib. Songtsen Gampo	9th century or later/ after 1169 <sup>c</sup>	earliest complete narrative
<i>Elixir of Honey Which is the Essence of a Flower</i>	attrib. Nyangral Nyima Özer (1136–1204)	12th century	follows closely <i>Vase-shaped Pillar Testament</i>
<i>Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies</i>	attrib. Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltsen (1312–75)	mid-14th century	drew from all earlier sources and previously undocumented material

## Notes

a. Based on three extant versions of the *Pronouncement of Ba* (Dba/Sba bzhed), Sørensen (2000: xiv) theorised that the latest date for the compilation of the text, minus the appendix (*zhabs btags ma*), must be the 11th century AD. Recently a portion of the same text was discovered among fragments collected in the area of the Dunhuang Caves, which introduces the possibility of a late 8th-century origin (van Schaik & Kazushi 2008).

b. *Choix de documents tibétains conservés à la Bibliothèque nationale*, ed. Imaeda & Takeuchi (1990): vol III, PT 1288, 1.0010, 1.0014–15, *bstan po khri srong brtsan dgun du gshogs so/ btsan mo kong co dang dgun lo gsum gshos so/*; PT 0750, 1.0034, *dgun btsan mo mun cang kong co'i mdad btang bar/*.

c. The 1989 edition, most elaborate of the four extant redactions, mentions Dakpo Gomtsül (1116–69). On 11th- and 12th-century Kagyupa and Kadampa masters with Nyingma leanings mentioned in the colophon of the 1989 edition, cf. Bsod nams rgyal mthan & Sørensen (1994: 639–40); Sørensen, Hazod & Gyalbo (2005: 28); Davidson (2005: 226 and 418, n73).

Emperor of China instructed his daughter, ‘Consider the Emperor of Tibet and the Emperor of China as equals.’ Then an oath was taken. Wencheng Gongzhu was entrusted to Gar Tongtsen and once she arrived in the land of Tibet, she was offered as wife to the emperor. Afterwards, the emperor used to reside in the palace of Lhankar [Lhan dkar ta mo ra]], while Gongzhu used to reside in the palace of Lhasa Ramoché. From China, Gongzhu brought the Golden God Śākyamuni, which was carried on the lap of a horseman, and placed it in the Ramoché. That is roughly what the ancestor Songtsen Gampo did to introduce the practice of the holy doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Though the drama of Wencheng’s trip and the theology of Songtsen Gampo are not elaborated in this text, we can detect the beginnings of a connection between Songtsen Gampo’s marriage to Wencheng and the Tibetan conversion to Buddhism.

Later the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* emphasised Wencheng’s true identity as one of the Tibetan saviours, the goddess Śyāmā Tārā, not only in name but also in deed. In a Robin Hood-like scene in which a member of the wealthy class steals from the wealthy to give to the poor, she surreptitiously carried red turnip seeds to Tibet, presumably to benefit Tibetan farmers. And when Songtsen Gampo’s emissary, Gar Tongtsen, negotiated with the Chinese emperor for Wencheng, he emphasised the cosmic significance of their predestined relation-

ship (*Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* 1989: 153–4). The historical Songtsen Gampo is thought to have had little interest in Buddhism, but the historical Wencheng Gongzhu is thought to have played a significant role in the establishment of Buddhist institutions in Central and Eastern Tibet. However, in the narrative arch of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, the redactors of the ‘autobiography’ have enhanced Songtsen Gampo’s identity through giving him credit for his consort’s historical acts of building temples (Sørensen, Hazod & Gyalbo 2005) and bringing a Buddhist icon to Tibet because Wencheng, as the goddess Śyāmā Tārā, arose from his tears for Tibetans. Therefore, because Songtsen Gampo brought Wencheng Gongzhu to Tibet for the benefit of Tibetans, and because she was absorbed into his statue at their mutual death (Tucci 1962), in a sense, Wencheng Gongzhu is Songtsen Gampo and her actions are his.

In the accounts of Wencheng’s trip to Tibet in the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* and especially in the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, Tibetan inferiority and Chinese superiority are emphasised. Tibetan texts describe Tibetans and their country as ‘wicked’, ‘barbarous’, ‘unclean’ and even ‘evil’. For example, in the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, Wencheng complains at length, to anyone who will listen, about being sent to Tibet:

Then, at the time the Princess Wencheng went to Tibet, she said this to her father the king, ‘O Father King, listen with your ear and grant me the words of my dear Father! Grant me the words of my dear Mother! Dear Brother and Sister, have you lost the ability to speak?!? Alas, I cannot believe it! O Father, King, listen to me! If I go to the land of Tibet, in the direction of the Land of Snows, it is cold and freezing with big rocks, many poisonous gods, (*nāga-s*, *dré*, *rakṣasas*), where the mountains resemble the tusk of a beast of prey, the rocks resemble the horns of a wild yak, unhappy, depressed, a remote place (*dgon*) of famine, where no grain [can] grow, the lowliest outcastes [from] the lineage of beasts of burden who [are like] lice, rude barbarians, who act like demons (*dron po*) who eat their brothers, a borderland never trodden by the Teacher, a low-caste country without the four-fold retinue [of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen], lacking sacred places and any basis for worship, completely without fields for cultivating merit. So if I am to go there, give me a sanctuary, the tutelary deity of my Father, Śākyamuni. The Land of Snows is a starving country. Grant me a treasury of precious gems. The Land of Snows is a cold country. Grant me clothing for my whole life. The people of Tibet are impudent, carelessly practising coarse doctrines, [therefore] grant me 500 female servants. The people of Tibet are unclean with unclean hearths, [so] grant me a clean handmaiden. If they do not respect me, I will not die in that place. [Now] I will go to Tibet.’ The Princess Wencheng said this in the great garden of the Queen.<sup>9</sup>

In this Tibetan text, Wencheng criticises Tibetan geography, Tibetan native spirits, the lack of Buddhist institutions, and the people of Tibet, who for her are crude, barbarous, unclean and demonic. In other sections of the same text, Chinese culture is described in opposite terms. However, the differences between

the two cultures should not be read as a Tibetan admission of cultural inferiority, but as a justification for the conversion to Buddhism as seen here from Wencheng's insistence on bringing Buddhist material culture with her to Tibet to ameliorate the difficulty of living there. In recounting the symbolism of Wencheng's trip to Tibet, Tibetan authors often emphasised how she signified the sophistication of Chinese culture through her knowledge of Chinese medicine and geomancy.<sup>10</sup> Of course, in the Buddhist world of the text, the difference between the Chinese and Tibetan empires highlights both the Tibetan need for Buddhism and Wencheng's ability to assist them in their access to the new religion.

Wencheng's lament for the inferiority of Tibet is immediately followed by a rebuttal from her father 'the King of China', who praises Tibet as superior to other countries owing to its abundant natural resources (mountains, lake, forests, precious metals). The King of China informs his daughter that Tibet is ruled by a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara (Songtsen Gampo) and that he is both wealthy and powerful. However, he does agree with her overall assessment that she will need to bring Buddhist material culture with her to support her religious practices and therefore grants her the famous image of the Buddha, the Jowo Śākyamuni. And in effect, he also agrees that, culturally, Tibet is inferior to China, through giving Wencheng divination charts, architectural manuals, medical treatises, etc. Both speeches can be found in other redactions of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* and the *Maṇi Kabum* (Bsod nams rgyal mthan & Sørensen 1994: 230–31). Taken together, Tibetan historians carefully compared the relative superiority and inferiority of Tibet and China of their day. Contemporary Chinese historians and politicians did not invent Tibetan cultural inferiority to serve their present political needs. Tibetan and Chinese authors have compared the relative superiority and inferiority of their cultures since the Tibetan empire. When Tibetan authors echoed the sentiment that Tibet was once inferior, it appears to have been a justification for Tibet to convert to Buddhism. Likewise, ancient Tibetan authors agree with the image of Tibet as the great 'Western Treasure House' so often found in contemporary Chinese discourse and pilloried by those concerned about neo-colonialism within the PRC, but again for different purposes. Tibetans had genuine pride in the natural resources of their homeland.

Among Tibetan Buddhist historiography, the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* and the *Maṇi Kabum* in particular de-emphasise Wencheng's own agency to the point of subsuming much of it under Songtsen Gampo's actions. Not only does this body of literature highlight Songtsen Gampo as a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara and Wencheng as a manifestation of Tārā produced from Avalokiteśvara's tear, but many explicit actions attributed to other figures, such as the minister Gar Tongtsen, are credited to Songtsen Gampo in these texts. When taken as a whole, Wencheng's actions in these texts appear as another manner by which the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo protected and guided Tibetans on the path to Buddhahood; Wencheng is the *deus ex machina* and

does not signify Tibetan dependence on imperial China for religious or material development.

Sometime around the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the narrative of Wencheng found in the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* was dramatised into a classical Tibetan opera, the *Historical Drama of King Songtsen Gampo*. The opera recounts how Songtsen Gampo sent his minister Gar Tongtsen to the Chinese capital Chang'an to retrieve Wencheng Gongzhu. After he arrives, Gar competes in a series of rigged contests with representatives of other kingdoms who want to obtain Wencheng. Due to Songtsen Gampo's clairvoyance and omniscience, Gar wins each contest and defeats the devious emperor of China. In this version of the narrative of Wencheng, there is a parallel to the first historical example of *heqin*, when the Xiongnu shanyu Modun requested a Chinese consort from Han Gaodi in 200 BC. When Modun forced Han Gaodi to give him a bribe and pay an enormous tribute, it was a humiliation for the Han. However, later Han historians justified it as a Han stratagem to make Modun's descendents subjects of the Han through kinship (Bulag 2002: 67). One of eventually eight classical Tibetan operas, the *Historical Drama of Songtsen Gampo*, featuring Wencheng Gongzhu was performed yearly in Lhasa as part of the Yogurt Festival (*zho ston*) in August.

Ancient Chinese historiography preserved a starkly variant picture of the significance of Wencheng and Songtsen Gampo's betrothal than we find in Central Tibetan historiography. For example, in 945, *The Old Tang History (Jiu Tang shu)* preserved a typically Sino-centric perspective of Wencheng's arrival in Lhasa to marry Songtsen Gampo. The sophistication of the Chinese delegation so overwhelmed Songtsen Gampo that he looked down in shame while saying:

My ancestors were unable to join in marriage with the superior country. Now, I have received the honour of a princess of the Great Tang and this truly is my great joy. We will undertake to build a fortified palace for the princess to proclaim this happiness to future generations. (*Jiu Tang shu* 1975: 196a, 5221–2)

The same quotation in *The Institutional History of the Tang (Tang Huiyao)* from 961 and similar passages in related historical works put a strong emphasis on how much Songtsen Gampo began to adopt Chinese customs and frown upon his own culture.

If, after we have read Central Tibet, Chinese, exile Tibetan and Communist narratives of Wencheng's role in Tibetan history and development, we stop our investigation, then we are left with two dichotomous, and in the contemporary period co-constructive, diametrically opposed views. The terms of the debate focus on the degree of Tibetan political independence from, cultural dependence upon, and hereditary affinity with China. I argue, however, that in so doing we fall victim to misunderstanding in what ways Tibetan and Chinese writers have circumscribed the debate over Wencheng. Eastern Tibetan narratives of Wencheng challenge our facile assumptions regarding these historiographic traditions and the place of *minzu tuanjie* propaganda among Tibetans. In the

narratives of Eastern Tibet, the story of Wencheng is not about the union of the imperial families of two competing empires or the complicated relationship between their countries, but about the experiences of a Chinese woman travelling across Eastern Tibet, falling in love with its people and geography to such an extent she literally becomes a celebrated part of the landscape and mother to some of their dearest sacred traditions for over a thousand years.

## WENCHENG IN EASTERN TIBETAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the wake of Wencheng's journey across Eastern Tibet, a number of local legends arose regarding her route and her activities. The details and the significance of those events to local people differ from the perspectives on Wencheng examined here thus far. In fact, there are too many examples of Wencheng veneration among the peoples of Eastern Tibet to cover them all here. These sites can be placed in two groups forming a northern route through Qinghai Province into the Tibetan Autonomous Region and a southern route through Sichuan Province into the Tibetan Autonomous Region. These myths include a hyper-local focus and a geographical logic because of the emphasis placed upon Wencheng's influence in the border region between Central Tibet and China, rather than the reasons she became Songtsen Gampo's consort or her missionary activity in Lhasa.

In local myths that support the hypothetical northern route, Songtsen Gampo travelled to the border of Tibet and China and met his Chinese consort Wencheng. According to one hypothesis Chabcha Dorjé Tsering recorded from the *A mdo Chos 'byung* (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas & Yon tan rgya mtsho 1974: 511), they met at Sun and Moon Mountain (Tib. Nyi zla ri bo, Ch. Riyue), about 25 km southwest of Xining in Huangyuan County. This mountain range, overlooking Lake Qinghai to the west, marked the border to Tibet and China and the beginning of the 'Tibetan government road'. The government has constructed a tourist site to mark the spot. There are two little Chinese-style pavilions, one on each 'mountain' (which are really just small hills). The sun pavilion contains a series of tile murals depicting Wencheng's journey and a bi-lingual carved stone pillar, *Wencheng Gongzhu's Trip to Tibet Memorial Pillar*, erected on 1 September 1986 and standing on the back of a carved stone turtle. The pillar explains how experts in Buddhism, poetry, medicine and architecture accompanied her to Tibet as members of her retinue. Wencheng ushered in a period of cultural harmony between Tibet and China, who became like relatives. Next to the pillar is Wencheng's stone hearth. There is a comparable Wencheng hearth in the Tandruk Temple (Khra 'brug), the imperial temple in the Yarlung Valley in south-central Tibet. Aside from the hearth, the theme of the site seems to be focused again on Wencheng's border-crossing journey rather than her time in that area. When I visited in 2010, someone had left posters of the Jowo Śākyamuni of the Lhasa Temple, which is attributed to be Wencheng's dowry statue. On the western side of the hill, presumably the 'Tibetan side' in the Tang era, there is a

depressing collection of neglected tourist shops clustered around a small temple built in 2003 and dedicated to Wencheng, called the ‘Chinese Princess Memorial Museum’ (Rgya bza’ kong jo rjes dran khang). It looked nearly abandoned, with shuttered, unmaintained shrines, tall weeds in the courtyard and no caretaker to be found. One shrine contained unlabelled, gold-coloured icons, including Tsongkhapa, possibly a portrait from life of the 10th Panchen Lama, Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng. Peering through the window, I did not detect any images of Songtsen Gampo’s Nepalese consort, as would be typically found alongside Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng in Central Tibetan shrines. Next to the gold icons, a smaller, multi-coloured clay image with a turban, moustache and long flowing hair presumably depicts Songtsen’s chief minister, Gar Tongtsen. Between the groups of buildings, set into the hillside, is a large stone mural and large stone statue of a stern and stoic Wencheng, intended to depict her sadness at leaving her ‘home town’ to marry Songtsen Gampo. Bai Yu and Zheng Yufeng (1994: 4) argued for another beginning point for the northern route. According to them, Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng Gongzhu met at the Baihai Nuptial Palace between the Tsaring and Ngoring Nor Lakes, southeast of Lake Qinghai in Maduo County. Then he personally escorted her back to Lhasa.

Whereas Central Tibetans wrote that Wencheng served as a means for Songtsen Gampo to establish Buddhism in Tibet, Eastern Tibetans crafted an image of Wencheng as an independent Buddhist missionary to their lands.<sup>11</sup> For example, in Qinghai, Kumbum (Sku ’bum byams pa gling/Ch. Ta’er Si), the ‘Monastery of One Hundred Thousand Maitreya Buddhas’ sheltered a huge statue of Maitreya, rumored to be 80 m high, and 100,000 smaller moulded images of Maitreya. Local history records that Wencheng might have constructed the massive Maitreya Buddha on her way to marry Songtsen Gampo (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas & Yon tan rgya mtsho 1974: vol 1, 311–17). Alternatively, Chabcha Dorjé Tsering argued that Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng Gongzhu might have met at Tsonag (Mtsho nag), a salt lake in Dergé Dzong (Tib. Sde dge rdzong, Ch. Dege Xian). My point in enumerating the many places where Songtsen Gampo might have met Wencheng Gongzhu, if they did meet at all in Eastern Tibet, is to demonstrate that, instead of attempting to determine the ‘actual’ route, we should be concerned with the proliferation of these sites as well as their features. In short, why would so many areas of Eastern Tibet claim to be the meeting place of Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng Gongzhu? Or from another perspective, how does it serve the Communist narrative of Tibetan history to favour the northern route? Obviously, Communist authors prefer a narrative where Songtsen Gampo travelled hundreds of miles to meet his Chinese consort, rather than waiting for her in Lhasa, since his trip symbolises his lower status; whereas in the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, due to his minister Gar’s machinations, Songtsen Gampo waited a month after Wencheng arrived in Lhasa before he even met with her. Consequently, she complained aloud of being treated like a dog (Bsod nams rgyal mthan & Sørensen 1994: 247).

There are far too many Wencheng sites in Eastern Tibet, let alone along one

route, to account for them in this article. In particular, I would like to draw attention to two sites along the southern route from Xi'an/Chang'an to Lhasa, in part because authorities have chosen officially to sanction the northern route as Wencheng's actual historical path and to discount sites along the southern route as later pious fiction (Bai yu & Zheng Yufeng 1994). Government efforts to designate an official Wencheng route support economic development and tourism, but could also be read as a means to support a Communist narrative of Tibetan history through the oft-repeated phrase of separating 'fact from fiction.'

In the Eastern Tibetan area traditionally called Minyak, but now Kardzé (Tib. Dkar mdze, Ch. Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), northwest of Dartsendo (Tib. Dar rtse mdo, Ch. Kangding), there is a locally famous Sakyapa temple called 'Bā Lhagang' (Ch. Tagong Si), which, according to local tradition, Wencheng and the Buddhist statue in her dowry, the Jowo Śākyamuni, visited together on their way to Lhasa. The Bā Lhagang temple was famous for its Bā Lhagang Jowo statue, which was known locally as 'the Jowo who once said, "I will not go [to Lhasa]!"' Bā Lhagang devotees believe that, when Wencheng arrived from Chang'an, the Jowo statue in her dowry liked Bā Lhagang so much, he refused to go to Lhasa and a substitute Śākyamuni statue had to be sent instead. This feature is a common motif in living image stories. On 1 December 2009 at the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center in New York, I interviewed the *tulku* (reincarnating lama) of Bā Lhagang, Alak Zenkar Rinpoche Tudeng Nima, regarding previously undocumented oral histories of his temple, the local Jowo and Wencheng Gongzhu. According to Tudeng Nima, the local Jowo was a clay *sambhogakāya* image of the Buddha, which manifested miraculously (*rang 'byon*) from a pile of stones and dirt after herdsman prayed there. By the mid-twentieth century, the Jowo had fallen into disrepair, due in part to rodents. It was then fully refurbished. During the Cultural Revolution, the Bā Lhagang temple suffered heavy damage and the previous Jowo was destroyed. The present temple now houses a new Jowo. Recently, officials at Dzogchen Monastery have constructed a Jowo Śākyamuni replica at the Pema Tung Retreat Center, which according to them contains within it a small Buddhist statue, rumoured to be the actual image Wencheng brought with her to Bā Lhagang. In private conversations with me in August 2010, lamas at Dzogchen said that, according to their understanding, Wencheng's dowry image had been encased within the clay image at Bā Lhagang. After the clay image was destroyed, a businessman rescued the smaller image from the rubble and sold it to a *tulku*, who then gave it as a gift to Dzogchen, where it was once again placed inside a larger clay Jowo during its construction. In my interviews, local historians and ecclesiastical officials at Bā Lhagang appeared to be unaware of the situation at Dzogchen, which could be due to the hyper-local nature of Wencheng veneration in Eastern Tibet or might indicate a silent rivalry. These incongruous narratives are further evidence for a theme of movement commonly found in statue cults worldwide. Statues seem to exhibit agency through their ability to locate and relocate themselves near devotees of their choosing.

In the *Bā Lhagang Eulogy*,<sup>12</sup> a recovered Tibetan text, all of the qualities of its *true Jowo* (at least for the people of Minyak), the ‘I Will Not Go Jowo’, as well as Wencheng Gongzhu, are praised along with the history and wonderful attributes of the site of Bā Lhagang.<sup>13</sup>

*The Glorious Lhagang Entirely Joyful Temple*

*Praising Hallowed Bā Lhagang*

The nature of the Empress, the magical emanation of the three secrets<sup>14</sup> of the Mother, the Venerable Tārā of the Teakwood Forest was the queen, Wencheng Gongzhu.

Through the force of her prayers in a former life, she presented for enthronement three types of statues of the Buddha when she arrived in Tibet, which she granted [to the people of Minyak] as a farewell present for when she departed for Tibet.

Then, she arrived in the upper regions. From the six ranges of Eastern Tibet (Dokham)<sup>15</sup>

In the Eastern direction, Wencheng went to Lhagang of Bā in Minyak. From China, she fell in love with the minister.<sup>16</sup> In accordance with a prophecy of the Buddha, at the appropriate time through prayer and the power of residual karma from practice in a previous life

She is the one who transformed the region of Eastern Tibet (Domé) into a field for accumulating merit.

[3b] Through her magical power she produced the Joy of the Gods at the foot of the heavenly mountain of the Three Protectors,<sup>17</sup> the source of bodhicitta, the reliquary of the four activities,<sup>18</sup> and the 108 *stūpas*. The Meaningful to Behold Jowo himself

Performed an auspicious prayer for this site to be a supportive place. Spontaneously an assembly of local deities established this place as the essence of the foundation and a Pure Land, having tossed flowers from their hands in the sky as a blessing.

The [Jowo] said, ‘I Will Not Go’ to the Ramoché and so [the other] Śākyamuni [statue] was lead to the Marpori Mountain [in Lhasa].<sup>19</sup>

Combining the local legend of the switch of the two dowry statues with references to eleventh–thirteenth-century Central Tibetan Buddhist historiography, the text places Wencheng’s bond with Minyak squarely in the middle of the Central Tibetan narrative of Wencheng, including references to the unique geography of Eastern Tibet. However, unlike the Central Tibetan narrative, Wencheng’s activities in Minyak are remembered as her own, and not actions

which should be ultimately attributed to her husband. *Contra* the Central Tibetan narrative, according to the eulogy, the most important item in Wencheng's dowry, the real Jowo statue, stayed in Minyak at the Bā Lhagang temple and a replica went to Lhasa. This implies that Wencheng cared more for the people of Eastern Tibet and accomplished more for the establishment of Buddhism there, than she cared for Central Tibetans.

In one line of the eulogy it says, 'she fell in love with the minister'. Just as Eastern Tibetans lived in a culturally hybridised zone, they imagined that the minister Gar Tongtsen and the princess Wencheng Gongzhu, a Tibetan man and a Chinese woman, fell in love in their territory. Traces of Wencheng and Gar's love affair connect multiple local traditions along the southern route from China to Tibet. In one Moses-like version of the tale, after Wencheng gave birth to Gar's baby, she sent the illegitimate child downstream in a basket of reeds. The name of the valley, Kongjorawa (Kong jo ra ba), means the 'Pleasure Garden of the Chinese Princess', and celebrates Wencheng's activities there.<sup>20</sup> In other versions of the legend, Wencheng might have miscarried or gave birth to a stillborn child.

As I stated earlier, in some versions of Central Tibetan post-imperial historical writing, such as in the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, Songtsen Gampo's emissary Gar Tongtsen travelled with Wencheng back to Lhasa (Bsod nams rgyal mthan & Sørensen 1994: 215).<sup>21</sup> The ubiquity of Wencheng pilgrimage sites exemplifies Tibetan adoration for her and testifies to her significance throughout Tibet, but especially Eastern Tibet. In preserving local legends of Wencheng's trip through their lands, Eastern Tibetans carved out of the dominant nationalistic metanarratives of Central Tibet and China a place for themselves, and preserved a sense of local identity.

Early Tibetan Buddhist historiography has little information to offer on how these legends began. In the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, there is the kernel of a romance between Gar and Wencheng, which later became popularised through classical Tibetan opera:

At a later time, from the point of view of those impure sentient beings, as a small sign of the reluctant and ashamed woman who arrived in Tibet, Princess Wencheng gave birth to the son of Minister Gar.<sup>22</sup> Since there was water on the road (*lam chu zos pas*), and the Princess' body had become really feeble ...

'Water on the road' could be a reference to Wencheng's amniotic fluid, and later Eastern Tibetans maintain multiple traditions regarding where Wencheng miscarried or gave birth to a stillborn baby. For example, Tudeng Nima related to me that, in the upper floor of Bā Lhagang in the Golden Chapel (*gser khang*), a statue is said to contain the relics of Wencheng and Gar's child. Local historians told me the remains of the child (*gdung rus*) had been contained in a small reliquary shrine (*stūpa*) on the second floor of the temple and were rescued during the Cultural Revolution after the destruction of Wencheng's memorial shrine (*kong jo'i mchod rten*). And in another example of this legend, Wencheng buried her dead baby at Bakha (Sba kha, Rba kha). This is a curious passage of the *Vase-*

*shaped Pillar Testament*, since in most of Tibetan Buddhist historiography Wencheng exhibited deep Buddhist piety and none other than Songtsen Gampocum-Avalokiteśvara identified her as an emanation of the saviour Tārā. The text introduces this short passage with a reference to the perspective of impure sentient beings. It could be that the Central Tibetan authors and redactors intended to discount this legend from Eastern Tibet as spurious talk from people who did not understand Wencheng's true identity. It also indicates that the legend of Wencheng's miscarriage is at least as old as the eleventh century.

The title of Bakha monastery in the Powo (Spo bo) region of Eastern Tibet is derived directly from the belief that Wencheng and Gar Tongtsen hid their deceased baby at the spot where the monastery was later built. Also known as the Powo Dzong (Spo bo rdzong) or the Bakha Island of Secret Mantra (Rba kha Gsang ngags chos gling dgon), Bakha monastery served as the pre-eminent seat of monastic and political power in Powo.<sup>23</sup> Powo is one of the three main regions in Southeastern Tibet, along with Kongpo (Kong po) and Dakpo (Dwags po). Chatri (Bya khri) the son of Drigung Tsenpo (Dri gum btsan po) settled the area in the imperial period (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: vol. 1, 972; vol. 2, 99; Lazcano 2005: 42). The kingdom of Powo was established in the thirteenth century and ruled by the Kanam Gyelpo, a descendent of Chatri. Until the early twentieth century, Powo maintained an exceptionally high degree of independence from other Tibetan polities and China. In 1729, the King of Powo would only allow his local people to have access to the sacred lands of Pema Kō (Padma mkod) and specifically barred Central Tibetans from going on pilgrimage to those places (Ehrhard 1999: 237; Lazcano 2005: 48). In 1834, the regent of Tibet, Tsémonling (Tshe smon gling), sent the Tibetan army to invade Powo to force it to pay its taxes to the Lhasa government (Lazcano 2005: 50). In 1910–11, Zhao Erfeng, High Commissioner for Tibet, sent an expeditionary force from Lhasa to Powo to bring it under Chinese control, but gave up at the end of 1911 after numerous battles lost to the Powo guerillas: 'The sPo ba did not consider themselves as subjects of either Lhasa or China' (Lazcano 2005: 57). Again in the 1920s, a conflict arose between the rulers of Powo and the Lhasa government over the taxes Lhasa tried to impose upon Powo. Since Lhasa already had exercised jurisdiction over Potō (Spo bstod), or Upper Powo, it tried to bring Pomé (Spo smad), 'Lower Powo', under control as well. War broke out after the Kanam Dépa fled to Assam. Central Tibet defeated Pomé in 1931 (Gruschke 2004, 128). Further research into Powo historiography might show that their independent self-identity is linked to local Wencheng legends (O rgyan 1988). For example, from the *History of Bakha Ngag Chöling* (*Sba kha sngags chos gling gi lo rgyus*):

The primordial meaning of Bakha (Sba kha), according to an oral tradition going back to Pulung Sangyé Rinpoche,<sup>24</sup> is as follows.

In earlier times, when (Kongjo) 'the Chinese Bride' was on her way to Tibet, she had to rely on the people of Powo. Minister Gar had been leading her through the (Lungkyong Gangsa) [area called] 'Filled With Crooked Valleys' and as they had

been lingering on the way for a number of years, it happened that she united with the minister and a child was born. But the child did not live long and as she was looking for a place to hide its remains, she thought that the spot at present occupied by the Monastery of Bakha was just the right place. It became the place (*sa*) where the body of the royal child was hidden (*ba*). Over time the name ‘Ba sa’ [Hiding Place] was transformed into Bakha (Sba kha). She built the Bakha Monastery with her own hands and up to the present day the incarnation lineage [of the illegitimate prince has continued and] is reckoned now to be in its tenth generation.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than being a source of shame, later reincarnated lamas of the Bakha Monastery understood themselves to be the reincarnations of Gar and Wencheng’s deceased infant, since in Tibetan embryology the soul enters at the moment of conception and all beings are subject to reincarnation even if one dies in the womb or at birth.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the reincarnated lamas of Bakha justified their power through a hybridisation of hereditary and karmic descent. The rulers of Powo might have understood themselves in part to be descendents of both the Tibetan imperial milieu and the Tang royal family, and therefore did not owe allegiance to either capital.

#### THE SECRET AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF WENCHENG GONGZHU

In private interviews across Eastern Tibet in the summer of 2010 among informants who asked to remain anonymous, I heard references to a text called *Secret Autobiography of Wencheng Gongzhu* (*Wun khrun kong gru’u yi gsang ba’i rnam thar*).<sup>27</sup> Some of my informants even claimed to have read it themselves. This text was once in the possession of a now deceased *tulku* affiliated with the Wencheng Gongzhu Temple (Rgya bza’ Kong jo Lha khang) in Jyekundo (Ch. Yushu) in Qinghai Province. The text was not hand-written, but a printed book. I was told that a copy of the text had made its way through the hands of a number of well-known Tibetan scholars of the previous generation in the PRC: Phuntsok Tashi (Phun tshogs bkra shis), Alak Dungkar Rinpoche (Dung dkar Blo bzang ’phrin las), Tsétan Zhabdrung Rinpoche (Tshe tan zhabs drung), and Alak Mugé (Dmu dge Bsam gtan rgya mtsho) (1914–93) from Ngaba (Ch. Aba) Prefecture in Sichuan Province. I have not read the text. According to my informants, the government officials in Beijing ordered at least one copy to be destroyed in order to suppress further spread of the rumors of Wencheng’s infidelity and preserve her image as a role model for *minzu tuanjie*. From my conversations, a rough outline of the contents of the text emerged. The *Secret Autobiography of Wencheng Gongzhu* attempts to reconcile inconsistencies between some of the Central Tibetan historical texts reviewed above, including the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* and the *Elixir of Honey Which is the Essence of a Flower*, and to connect those narrative traditions to some of the themes found in Eastern Tibetan ones.

The *Secret Autobiography of Wencheng Gongzhu* contained numerous passages related to the alleged love affair between Wencheng Gongzhu and Songtsen Gampo's chief minister, Gar Tongtsen. For example, according to one informant, the text connects the frame story for the recovery of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* to the love-story of Wencheng Gongzhu and Gar Tongtsen. The redaction of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* quoted above begins with a frame-story in which a crazy, naked Lhasa woman, understood to be a later reincarnation of Wencheng Gongzhu, appears to Atiṣa before he recovers the scrolls that formed the basis of the majority of the text. Somehow the state of Wencheng's incarnation in the late eleventh century was related to her alleged relationship with Gar Tongtsen, though my informants were unable to remember distinctly how the text dealt with the temporal, romantic and theological issues involved. In another passage, Songtsen Gampo reprimands Gar Tongtsen for taking so long to return from the Chinese capital with Wencheng, going so far as to ask, 'Where have you been with my consort?'. Gar Tongtsen's answer, echoed in Central Tibetan historiography, involves a combination of explaining how he was detained in Chang'an after Wencheng's departure and the fact that Songtsen Gampo did not immediately greet Wencheng face-to-face upon her arrival in Lhasa. Of course, it is the inconsistencies between the various accounts of Wencheng's journey, both en route and the length of time, which provide for speculation regarding her *nal bu*, her illegitimate child. After questioning Gar Tongtsen, Songtsen Gampo decides to punish Wencheng and sends her to live in Gyantsé. The text ends without mention of Songtsen Gampo's death, an important scene in the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* for the theogony of Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng as the deities Avalokiteśvara and Tārā.

My informants were cautious in their assessment of the historical value of the *Secret Autobiography of Wencheng Gongzhu*. They were well aware that, for nearly 20 years, Wencheng has been a heavily censored topic within Tibetan language discourse in the PRC. None of them considered the text to be more authoritative than other sources. Instead, I left with the sense that the text has grown in importance in the period since its destruction, especially to the kind of scholar attracted to minutiae and the rare. The Eastern Tibetans I spoke to who cared about such historical details and wanted to share them with me did not express a desire to counter other discourses about Wencheng, but rather a keen interest in preserving what they saw as rapidly disappearing local cultural traditions.

The narratives of Wencheng from Eastern Tibet elaborated here reflect the political and cultural hybridity of the places of their origin, such as Minyak and Powo. If '[n]ational unity is most vulnerable precisely at the borderlands' (Bulag 2002: 20) for a state like the PRC, then the same is certainly true for the unity of the Tibetan nationality in China. The official designation of the Tibetan nationality (Tib. *bod mig rigs*, Ch. *zangzu minzu*) did not end debates in China over which groups really were Tibetan (Upton 2000). 'Hybrids at the geopolitical borderlands are people upon whose bodies and consciousness national states map

their power, often in contradictory or antagonistic ways' (Bulag 2002: 20). In attempting to preserve local Wencheng traditions, Eastern Tibetan people might not be consciously resisting metanarratives from Central Tibet, Dharamsala or Beijing, so much as simply trying to remain free of the categories of identity and historical significance which outsiders have constructed.

## CONCLUSION

To my knowledge, the Bakha Tulku is the only reincarnated lama who is recognised as a descendant of a possible miscarriage or stillborn baby. Though it is plausible within the realms of Tibetan Buddhist embryology, it is still striking because hagiographic literature commonly records a series of miracles, which occur at the birth of each reincarnated master. Never have I read an account of the birth of a *tulku*, which from the point of view of the mother must be considered a tragedy. Obviously we do not possess the resources to prove Gar impregnated Wencheng, but if we take the notion seriously, then at the heart of this local tradition stands Wencheng, a devout Buddhist, lost in a foreign country, sent as an emissary to marry a man she has never met, and along the way she suffered a terrible loss. This extreme form of suffering, known to anyone who has lost a child, would not have happened to any of the male envoys travelling back and forth between India, Tibet, and China. It was a common practice for these empires to create political alliances with rivals through exchanging brides, but rarely do we know enough about the women who had to bear this burden, especially the gendered suffering they must have endured.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, we must remember that all of the sites of Wencheng's journey across Eastern Tibet became celebrated, sacred places. From the outset, Tibetan and Chinese historiographers attempted to interpret the significance of Wencheng's journey to Tibet in a manner supportive of their own historical-political ideology. Lost between these two nationalistic metanarratives, defined in mutually opposed, dualistic perspectives of cultural superiority and military strength, is the history of the peoples of Eastern Tibet. Just as they lived in a culturally hybridised zone, they imagined that Gar and Wencheng, a Tibetan man and a Chinese woman, fell in love in their territory.

Ending on the possibility that narratives of Wencheng comment on the notion of a common ethnic descent for Tibetans and Chinese people, we see that there are multiple choices available in the narratives presented here. Some myths of Tibetan descent can be read in a nationalistic manner where Tibetans share no common ancestry with Chinese people, such as the Buddhist myth of Tibetans descending from the mating of a monkey and an ogress. Alternatively, Wang Furen and Suo Wenqing point to Songtsen Gampo and Wencheng's betrothal as a matrimonial alliance *into* the Tang imperial house, implying the Tibetan imperial family became a branch of the Tang (Wang Furen & Suo Wenqing 1984: 18), such as in the case of the first *heqin*. However, they completely omit any refer-

ence to Songtsen Gampo's four other wives, three Tibetan and one Nepali, and say nothing about the ethnicity of his actual descendants, none of whom came from Wencheng. Gar and Wencheng's baby did not survive, but in the legend we can read an understanding among Eastern Tibetans of their potentially hybrid status, in terms of both culture and ethnicity. Instead of white and black, Tibetan and Chinese, local veneration of Wencheng in Eastern Tibet acknowledges shades of grey or even a mosaic of peoples.

Tibetan and Chinese authors have definitely utilised Wencheng to further their own visions of Sino-Tibetan history. All of these historiographic traditions draw on a rich and varied corpus of Wencheng legends. However, some Tibetan and Chinese authors conveniently forget or ignore material that does not suit their preconceived theses as they focussed on the interactions between Wencheng and Tibetans in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. In between these two cultural zones and along the former border of the empires that spawned them, Eastern Tibetans preserved local Wencheng traditions, which serve to highlight her activities in their region and celebrate her as a primordial mother of their ethnic and cultural hybridity.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For one example of the rapid changes in Chinese historiography of non-Han peoples of China, see Baranovitch's (2010) recent analysis of Chinese history textbooks.

<sup>2</sup> Wencheng's dates have not been established definitely. According to the *Tang Annals*, she died in 680, but according to the *Old Tibetan Annals*, she was cremated in the sheep year 682. Though the Tibetans idolise Wencheng as a daughter of the emperor, according to Chinese records she was not. See Bacot *et al.* 1940: 13–14; Demiéville 1952: 6–7; Yamaguchi 1969; 1970; Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 30, n37.

<sup>3</sup> For other examples of changes in Chinese historiography since the beginning of the PRC, see, e.g., Baranovitch 2010 and references therein.

<sup>4</sup> For a point-by-point response from western Tibetologists, see Blondeau & Buffetrille 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Tian Han's play might have been based partly on contemporary sources such as Wan Shengnan 1960 and earlier historical dramas about Wencheng, such as Lin Gangbai 1948.

<sup>6</sup> Barnett (2006) reported that Chabcha Dorjé Tsering was demoted from his position at the Chinese Tibetology Center for not accepting that Wencheng brought agriculture to Tibet, which is partly correct. In the version reprinted in the *Collected Articles of Chabcha Dorjé Tséring (Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring gi rtsom phyogs sgrig)*, Chabcha Dorjé Tsering

penned a 29-page response to the controversy in which it is clear that any attempt to offer a scholarly opinion on Wencheng that deviates from Party orthodoxy, regardless of the conclusion, would have been rejected (2010: 78–106).

<sup>7</sup> Each of these texts exists in multiple redactions. Certain passages of the redactions of the *Pronouncement of Ba* and the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* vary dramatically, whereas the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* does not. For the purposes of this article, I cite the oldest complete version of the *Pronouncement of Ba*. In the case of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, the redactions vary more in terms of their succinctness than narrative content. I cite here the most elaborate version.

<sup>8</sup> Translation adapted from Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 31–2. Diemberger and Wangdu translated the last sentence as: ‘This is all the ancestor Songtsen Gampo did to introduce the practice of the holy doctrine,’ but this sentence could also be read in a less provocative manner. A more neutral translation of *de tsam* at the beginning of that sentence would be ‘That is roughly what ...’ In many respects, their admirable translation of this version of the *Pronouncement of Ba* filled a troublesome hole in our knowledge of early Tibetan Buddhist historical writing.

<sup>9</sup> *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* (1989 edition): 171–3: *de nas lha cig ong cong de bod du 'gro ba 'i rtsis byed pa 'i dus su/ yab rgyal po la 'di skad ces zhus so/ kye ma yab cig rgyal po snyan gson dang / a pha yab kyi bka' byung ang / a ma yum gyi bka' byung ang / jo bo ming ba 'i tshig shor ram/ e ma ming srong ngo mtshar che/ kye ma yab cig rgyal po bdag la gson/ bod kyi yul du bdag 'gro na/ kha ba can gyi yul phyogs de/ grang la bsil bas bser ba bag che/ lha klu 'dre srin gdug pa mang / gangs ri gcan gzan mche ba 'dra/ brag ri 'brong bo 'i rwa co 'dra/ nyams mi dga' zhing bag mi dro/ 'bru chen mi 'khrungs mu ge 'i dgon/ gdol pa shig zan byol song rigs/ spyod pa rtsing la kla klo 'i mi/ mi [mi mched cig] spyod sron po 'i spyod dang mtshungs/ mtha' 'khob ston pas zhabs ma bcags/ 'khor bzhi med cing rigs ngan yul/ chos med ma rig mun pa 'i gling / mchod pa 'i rten dang gnas med pas/ bsod nams bsog pa 'i zhing ma mchis/ de lta bur ni bdag 'gro na/ yab kyi mchod gnas yi dam lha/ shükya mu ne bdag la zhu/ kha ba can ni bkres pa 'i yul/ rin chen bang mdzod bdag la zhu/ kha ba can ni grang ba 'i yul/ tshé gang thub pa 'i gos zhig zhu/ bod kyi mi ni mi bsrin te/ rtsing chos mang la spyod bag med/ g.yog mo lnga brgya bdag la zhu/ bod ni mi gtsang gtsang rtsog med/ g.yog ma phyag tshang bdag la zhu/ de rnam nga la mi bskur na/ bdag ni 'di ru mi gum ri/ bod yul dbus su 'gro ri kan/ zhes zhus shing/ lha cig ong cong gis rgyal mo 'i tshal rabs chen mo yang dus 'dir mdzad do.*

<sup>10</sup> According to Powers' (2004: 32) summary of Wencheng's role in the metanarratives, only Chinese writers viewed her as a cultural emissary. He must be completely unaware of the numerous Tibetan sources that support this image of Wencheng, for he goes so far as incorrectly to assume ‘The notion that a successful military commander would be so overwhelmed by the cultural superiority of enemies he had defeated in battle that he would renounce further expansion and strive to emulate them is, of course, highly implausible’.

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars have doubted whether Wencheng could even be considered to have been Buddhist: cf. Demiéville 1952, 185–8; Karmay 1998, 61.

<sup>12</sup> I want to thank Hubert Decler for giving me a copy of the *Bā Lhagang Eulogy* (*Bā lha sgang gnas bstod*).

<sup>13</sup> Not only did the Bā Lhagang and Lhasa Jowos share parts of their origin legends; Tibetans venerated them in similar ways. For example, similar to the practice of taking monastic ordination before the Lhasa Jowo, in 1956 the Sakya lama Dezhung Rinpoche ordained almost a thousand monks in front of the Lhagang Jowo during breaks in the *Path with Its Fruit* teachings. See Jackson 2003: 204.

<sup>14</sup> The secrets are of the body, speech and mind.

<sup>15</sup> This is the middle and southern parts of Eastern Tibet defined by six mountain ranges: Skya ra sgang, Rab sgang, Spo 'bor sgang, Dmar khams sgang, Tsha sgang and Zal mo sgang.

<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to Wencheng falling in love with Gar Tongtsen, the Tibetan minister who obtained the marriage alliance for Songtsen Gampo and escorted her from China to Tibet.

<sup>17</sup> The *rigs gsum mgon po*: Mañjuśrī, Vajrapāni and Avalokiteśvara.

<sup>18</sup> The four activities (*las bzhi*) are pacification (*zhi*), enrichment (*rgyas*), subjugation (*dbang*) and wrath (*drag po*).

<sup>19</sup> *Bā Lhagang Eulogy*: 1a(31)–3b3(36); 9a4(47)–9b6 (48).

<sup>20</sup> The rushing water of the Driчу ('Bri chu)/Upper Yangtse river carved the area of Kongjorawa in Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Tib. Bde chen, Ch. Deqin Xian), north of Zhongdian, present-day Shangrila, Yunnan Province.

<sup>21</sup> Songtsen Gampo instructed Gar to pray to Tārā because Buddhist Tibetans believe Wencheng Gongzhu was an emanation of the goddess Śyāmā Tārā [Blue Tārā]. Cf. Benard 2000: 159.

<sup>22</sup> *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* (1989 edition): 185: *sems can ma dag pa rnams kyi snang ba la phyi rabs kyi dus su bod yul du bud med khrel la 'dzem pa nyung bar 'ongs pa 'i rtags su/ lha cig ong cong la blon po mgar gyi bu cig chags nas lam du chu zos pas/ lha cig sku lus nong bar gyur nas ...*

<sup>23</sup> The monastery is located at Spra rmog chus, also called Khrab rmog chus in Powo.

<sup>24</sup> Only a smattering of information is currently available on this important figure in the religious history of Powo. He was student of Smyo shul Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma (1829–1901/2) and a teacher of Bdud 'joms 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje (1904–88).

<sup>25</sup> Translation adapted from Hubert Decler's personal notes to: *Sba kha sprul sku Pad ma bstan 'dzin* [*Sba kha sngags chos gling gi lo rgyus*]: 103. *sba kha zhes ming thogs don ni/ phu lung sangs rgyas rin po che 'i zhal rgyun la/ sngon rgya bza 'kong jo bod la byon skabs phebs lam spo bo brgyud khel zhing blon po mgar gyis lung kyog gang sar khrid nas lo grangs lam du 'gor ba 'i mthar blon po dang 'brel ba byung ba 'i sras shig 'khrungs pa sku tshe ma brtan pas sku phung sba sa 'i sa gzigs skabs/ da lta sba kha 'i dgon sa 'di gnas bzang po khyad par can du dgongs nas sras kyi sku phung sba sa 'i sa yin pas na sba sa la rba kha zhes ming cung 'gyur ba yin gsungs/ rba kha dgon pa phyag btab nas da lta bar sprul sku skye phreng bcu yi mi rabs brtsi rgyu yod cing. Sba kha sprul sku Pad ma bstan 'dzin is also known as Rba kha sprul sku Pad ma bstan 'dzin 'phrin las nam rgyal.*

<sup>26</sup> The present Bakha Tulku resides in New Mexico and is currently busy building a demon-subduing *stūpa* on Zuni Mountain. He was born at Gdugs bskor in Spo bstod. Jamyang Khyentsé Chokyi Lodro recognised him as an incarnation of Pema Lingpa. He also claims to be an incarnation of Dorje Lingpa and an emanation of Vairotsana, one of the first seven monks in Tibet. None of his websites mention him being descended from Wencheng and Gar Tongsten. There is still a close connection between the Bakha Tulkus and the royal family of Bhutan (Pommaret 2003: 95–6; Lazcano 2005: 56).

<sup>27</sup> This spelling of title of the text is based on the pronunciation of my informants from Eastern Tibet and not intended to indicate exactly how Wencheng's name was spelled in the actual document.

<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the majority of the Tibetan embryological tradition ignored women's bodies and women's experiences during pregnancy (Garrett 2008: 83).

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