

FEMALE AUTHORITY AND PRIVILEGED *LIVES*: THE HAGIOGRAPHY OF MINGYUR PELDRÖN

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Of the growing collection of Tibetan Buddhist women for whom we have extant life stories,² Mingyur Peldrön (Mi 'gyur dpal sgron, 1699–1769) had a unique relationship to the religious institution for which she would ultimately become a powerful teacher. Other historical women, such as Chokyi Dronma (Chos kyi sgron ma) and Sera Khandro (Se ra Mkha' 'gro), came from aristocratic families, although their religious pursuits were often at odds with their family's expectations for them.³ Although daughters of privileged families, their paths to religious realization more often than not meant a divergence from that very source of privilege. Their life stories are shot through with traditional Buddhist depictions of the suffering of human existence, especially that of a life lived in a female body (Schaeffer 2004: 69, 91–96). Mingyur Peldrön, on the other hand, was literally born in the religious institution in which she would rise to prominence, Mindröling Monastery (Smin sgrol gling), located in modern day Dranang (Grwa nang rdzong), Central Tibet. Empowered from within Mindröling, she would ultimately be known as an advanced practitioner and teacher of the monastery's teachings, simultaneously pursuing a religious path and perpetuating her family's legacy. This highly privileged religious position – coupled with her family's support of her religious aspirations – makes Mingyur Peldrön distinctive, and her life story worthy of close

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² There are approximately two thousand extant hagiographies of Tibetan Buddhist saints, and only about one percent of these are dedicated to the lives of women. Mingyur Peldrön's is one of these. The calculation is taken from Bessenger 2016: 129, who is citing Schaeffer 2004: 4, and Jacoby 2014: 13.

³ Regarding Chokyi Dronma's aristocratic heritage, see Diemberger 2007: 116. Regarding Sera Khandro's heritage, see Jacoby 2014.

examination. Her proximity to a religious and educational center – and the high level of social privilege that came with that proximity – will inform my analysis of the claims to her authority that are presented in her life story. As with most hagiographies, Mingyur Peldrön’s *Life* is in part an argument in favor of her authoritative position at Mindröling – an argument that uses several forms of authority to establish her legitimacy. I will argue for three significant threads of authentication woven throughout the *Life*. In unpacking these, I use Weberian definitions of authority, and the modern notion of privilege, to point to the dynamic connection between public persona, gender, and religious authority as presented in the 18th century hagiography of a Buddhist nun. But first, I offer a brief introduction to Mingyur Peldrön, and her *Life*.

Who was Mingyur Peldrön?

Mingyur Peldrön was born, educated, and later taught, at Mindröling Monastery, a Buddhist monastic and tantric community in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition. Her father Terdak Lingpa (Gter bdag gling pa, 1646–1714) and her uncle Lochen Dharmaśrī (Lo chen Dharma shrī, 1654–1717/8) had founded Mindröling – one of the six “Mother Monasteries” of the Nyingma tradition – in 1676. Born to Phuntsok Pelzöm (Phun tshogs dpal ’dzoms, 17th–18th CE) and Terdak Lingpa, she had one sister and four brothers, the closest in age being her brother Rinchen Namgyal (Rin chen rnam rgyal, 1694–1768).⁴ As a daughter of Mindröling’s founding family, she received an unprecedented religious education, which began early on in her childhood. Terdak Lingpa, and later Lochen Dharmaśrī, oversaw her education until their respective deaths. Empowered with an encyclopedic collection of teachings, she was raised with the expectation that she would – alongside her brothers – inhabit the role of religious teacher, and carry on the new populist reframing of the Nyingma tradition that her father and uncle had established.

The entire family moved among the most respected members of the central Tibetan religious and governing institutions.⁵ Both of her parents

⁴ For additional details on her life, see Melnick 2015.

⁵ The most significant of these is the relationship between Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama.

were from aristocratic stock, and her sister would eventually marry into the Sikkimese royal family, reportedly at the urging of Mingyur Peldrön herself.⁶ During the Dzungar Mongol invasion and destruction of Nyingma and Kagyu institutions beginning in 1717, she narrowly escaped arrest and fled to safety in Sikkim, followed shortly thereafter by her mother Phuntsok Pelzöm, and her sister. For several years, Mingyur Peldrön was a religious advisor to Sikkimese royalty, as well as the public at large, and formed ties with Pemayangtsé (Tib. Padma yangs rtse) Monastery in West Sikkim (near Rabdentsé, the Sikkimese capital of the time). Through the brokered marriage between her sister and the young Sikkimese king Gyurmé Namgyel ('Gyur med nam rgyal, 1707–1733), she established an alliance with the royal family, solidifying her role as a purveyor of Mindröling teachings to the extent that today she is remembered in Sikkim as an important representative of Mindröling.⁷ While her sister's marriage was short-lived, it speaks to the high level of social prestige shared within the family, as well as a certain resourcefulness of the part of Mingyur Peldrön, her sister, and their mother, during a time when their institution was in danger of destruction. While it is unclear how much agency Mingyur Peldrön's sister had in determining her marriage to Gyurmé Namgyel, Mingyur Peldrön herself assisted in forming the match.

Around the age of twenty-one, Mingyur Peldrön returned to Central Tibet and oversaw the initial post-war reconstruction of Mindröling's grounds. She worked to stabilize the monastery and retain its primacy following the Dzungar attack, and then spent a year in Kongpo, before being recalled to Central Tibet by the political leader Polhané Sönam Topgyé (Pho lha nas Bsod nams stobs rgyas, 1689–1747).⁸ She cultivated a teaching relationship with him and other important political and religious leaders, such as the Seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso (Skal bzang rgya

⁶ Personal communications with Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia (November 2015) and Khenpo Wangyal Dorjee (17 May 2016).

⁷ Personal communications with Khenpo Wangyal Dorjee and Lopon Tshering Thendup (15–16 May 2016). See also Saul Mullard 2011: 170.

⁸ Polhané put down an attempted rebellion by the Hor chief Uicing Taiji around 1714 and played an important role in Lhazang Khan's war against Bhutan in 1714. For more on this, see Petech 1950: 22 and Shakabpa 2010: 403.

mtsho, 1708–1757).⁹ Later in life, she focused her energies on religious education, and taught until her death at age seventy. She was especially concerned with the education of nuns, although she also continued to teach monks, important members of the laity, and large assemblies of mixed audiences. Her hagiography claims that, as an adult, she taught thousands of disciples. Her significance is evidenced by the myriad mourners who attended her funeral in 1769.¹⁰

Reading a *Life of Privilege*

The role of privilege, and its connection to authority, has not been examined in a sustained way in the context of Tibetan religious history. Although questions of class and social status appear in discussions of the lives of prominent religious leaders, a more sustained focus on the phenomenon of privilege might provide a more nuanced understanding of the multivalent social influences on individuals whose lives appear in the historical record. In tracing connections between privilege, gender identity, and religious authority, I argue that privilege is a salient means for understanding the role of religion in historical social contexts. Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography provides a clear example of this, in that she was born into extreme religious and social privilege, which bolstered her role as a leading figure within her various milieux. This is not to say that her hagiography is dedicated solely to her legitimation. Rather, her *Life* provides details of an important historical moment (and her role in it), includes her religious instructions to disciples, and offers insight into the lived experience of female Buddhist practitioners of her time. However, this article will focus on the relationship between privilege and legitimation in her life story. This is not to reduce her hagiography to the question of privilege alone, but due to constraints of space and scope, other important details of her hagiography will have to be addressed elsewhere.

⁹ Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 53a–54b, 92a, 102b–103a.

¹⁰ The accounts of her death and funerary services are especially telling of her significance in the wider Central Tibetan community, although they will not be addressed in detail here. See especially Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 111b–113b.

In order to understand the influence of privilege in Mingyur Peldrön's life, I draw on Weber's tripartite theory of "pure types of authority" (Weber 1978: 215–216). Specifically, I will discuss how privilege and authority function in Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography to imbue her with gendered legitimacy. The Weberian pure types of authority (charismatic, legal, and traditional) do not map directly on to the forms as seen in the Tibetan literary context. As such, I have reconfigured the three types to better reflect sources of legitimation specific to the context of eighteenth century Nyingma monastic communities, based on the ideas that (1) there are different types of authority active in the legitimation of any person or institution, which will overlap in the reality of the lived social context, and that (2) these can be distinguished by the indicators that they draw on to establish authority.

I point to three modes of authentication, which are as follows: (1) emanation¹¹ authority, by which the subject's authority is asserted through descriptions of her previous lives; (2) institutional authority, which draws on institutional connections to establish legitimacy; and (3) educational authority, which points to the individual's religious training. The similarities and differences with Weber's pure types will be discussed alongside each mode of authentication. In accordance with Weber's delineation, multiple "pure types" would have been simultaneously active in any given system, but I will look at each of them separately here, in order to parse out how Mingyur Peldrön's authority was constructed, and to show where privilege influenced her position, and how gender was presented in each context. The three modes of authentication that I put forth here prove helpful in analyzing how Gyurmé Ösel constructed a public identity of Mingyur Peldrön by invoking systems of authority extant in Tibetan society during her lifetime (that is, the authority derived from identification as an emanation or incarnation, connection with reputable religious institutions, and training as a religious practitioner and teacher). These forms of legitimation are common throughout Tibetan hagiographies, and many *Lives* draw on the same socially reinforced modes of authentication. The fact

¹¹ This term is here used to include both emanation (e.g. of a bodhisattva) and incarnation (of an individual), two ways of identification of a living person as the embodiment of another being that can lend weight to their individual authority (religious, political, or otherwise).

that Mingyur Peldrön's hagiographer engages in this form of argumentation is not unique; rather, her *Life* serves as an example of some frequent tropes that hagiographers employed in the process of legitimation and, more specifically, the ways these methods could be implemented for the sake of women's legitimacy. The three types of authentication are presented here in the order in which they first appear in her hagiography, so as to convey the relative literary emphasis placed upon each form. To illustrate each one, I discuss how it pertains to Mingyur Peldrön's specific context, and the places where her hagiographer engages with her unique identity.

The primary source informing this study is the 237-folio hagiography of Mingyur Peldrön, written by her disciple Gyurmé Ösel ('Gyur med 'od gsal, b. 1715), and published some thirteen years after her death. This document, entitled *The Life of Mingyur Peldrön: A Dispeller of Distress for the Faithful*,¹² is one of a handful of available hagiographies of Tibetan Buddhist women (see n. 2 above). The text falls into the literary genre of *namtar* (Tib. *rnam thar*), a ubiquitous form of Tibetan life writing that includes a variety of narrative styles, all of which offer soteriological advice through the expression of exemplary lives. *Namtar* – which literally translates as “complete liberation” (Tib. *rnam par thar pa*) – portrays the lives of historical and semi-historical figures, often in saintly and miraculous terms, and including accounts of spiritual realization, visions, and thaumaturgy. These are woven together with worldly activities and the historical accounts of mundane life. As such, these texts provide a complicated source of information for understanding historical (and imagined) Tibetan figures through literary means. The very aspects that make *namtar* challenging historical sources also mean that they are compelling literary works, as well as expressions of the religious context in which the hagiographer (and often their subject) was functioning that can tell us something of the religious attitudes and conventions of the time. By understanding the symbolic, doctrinal, and culturally bound significance of these literary productions, the reader can learn about the intellectual and religious environment of the period beyond mere historical dates and facts.

¹² Tib. *Rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal gyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*. Hereafter referred to as Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*. Thanks to Ulrike Roesler for discussing the translation of this title.

Much has been written on the Tibetan genre of *namtar* and its relationship to hagiography, modern Western biography, and spiritual instruction manuals. The relationship between the Tibetan genre and its potential English equivalents is complex, and significant work has been done to highlight the ways in which *namtar* intersects with and diverges from the various Western, English-language concepts. Scholars have variously translated *namtar* as “biography,” “hagiography,” and “*Life*,” or chosen to use the Tibetan rather than hazard a translation. In this article I refer to Mingyur Peldrön’s *namtar* as a hagiography – not to simplify the genre, but rather to emphasize the author’s visible effort to assert the sanctity of his subject, especially as it relates to her spiritual authority. I will also occasionally use the more neutral term “*Life*” when discussing Mingyur Peldrön’s life story.¹³

Emanation Authority: Past Lives

The first type of authority attributed to Mingyur Peldrön in her *Life* is that which comes from her recognition as the emanation of enlightened beings.¹⁴ A bodhisattva – no longer fettered by the bonds of karmic accumulation – could theoretically direct her rebirth in order to help mundane beings escape suffering and attain enlightenment. It is common for Tibetan *namtar* to begin with a discussion of the subject’s previous lives, evoking both their enlightened status and subsequent ability to emanate wherever they are most needed, and also positioning them within a tradition of mythically and historically important personages as a means to contemporary legitimation.¹⁵ In Tibetan *namtar* the primary subject is associated with the illustrious figures of the community’s past through the institution of rebirth, and with enlightenment through their identification as emanations of buddhas. For example, at the beginning of Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography, her previous lives and incarnations are listed, and include

¹³ For a discussion of the genre, see Bessenger 2016: 3; Diemberger 2007:17; Quintman 2014: 7; Roberts 2010: 4; Schaeffer 2004: 5; Willis 1985: 304, and elsewhere.

¹⁴ Gyurmé Ösel uses variations of the Tibetan *sprul* (“emanated”).

¹⁵ Bessenger has examined this in her recent article, “‘I am a god, I am a god, I am definitely a god:’ Deity Emanation and the Legitimation of Sönam Peldren” (Bessenger 2017).

references to buddhas, the well-known life stories of historical figures,¹⁶ and tales of legendary heroes and heroines. Emanation authority bears a strong resemblance to Weber's routinized charismatic authority, especially in the sense that prophecy and revelation are used to establish the divinity of the individual.¹⁷ This type of association would provide Mingyur Peldrön with significant social prestige, unrelated to familial connections, or her education.

Gyurmé Ösel follows this traditional narrative arc by beginning Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* with descriptions of her previous incarnations.¹⁸ What is most notable about this section is the large number of female figures with which he identifies Mingyur Peldrön. In listing ten important female figures, he draws on nearly every female deity or folk heroine available in the Tibetan Buddhist literature of the time. Some of the figures mentioned are historical figures, others heroines of the mythic Buddhist past, but all of them were recognizable to readers and listeners of the mid-late eighteenth century, and would have been familiar to Gyurmé Ösel's audience. Throughout the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön's life, Gyurmé Ösel returns to these figures at important moments, by way of highlighting and explaining the foundation of her own significance. A brief discussion of three

¹⁶ For example, Sangyé Gyatso's *Life* of the Fifth Dalai Lama begins with a detailed description of the subject's previous lives, see Ahmad 1999: 43–126 (with a summary on 126). Although the tradition goes much further back, the hagiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama likely served as a timely representative model for authors writing in the mid to late eighteenth century, and it is likely that Gyurmé Ösel was at least familiar with Sangyé Gyatso's work.

¹⁷ Weber 1978: 241 and 247. It is worth noting that, when Weber discusses routinized charisma, he points to the incarnation lineage of the Dalai Lamas – the most famous of the *tulku* lines.

¹⁸ Gyurmé Ösel lists ten figures as Mingyur Peldrön's previous "emanations" (*sprul pa*). The stories occur in the *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel* from pages 3b–18a:

Samantabhadrī (Tib. Kun tu bzang mo),
 Tara (Tib. Ar+ya ta re, Sgrol ma),
 Yeshé Tsogyel (Tib. Ye shes mtsho rgyal),
 Machik Labdrön (Tib. Ma gcig lab sgron),
 Nangsa Öbum (Tib. Snang gsal 'od di 'bum),
 Gelongma Palmo (Tib. Dge slong dpal mo, *sic*),
 Machik Jomo (Tib. Ma gcig jo mo),
 Machik Zurmo (Tib. Ma gcig zur mo),
 Zukyi Nyima (Tib. Bram ze ma Gzugs kyi nyi ma),
 The Kashmiri *yoginī* Sukhasiddhi (Tib. Su kha si d+hi).

very different examples will show the range of legitimacy that Gyurmé Ösel conveys through the emanation model, and how each of these emanations does something different for Mingyur Peldrön's authority.

The list of Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives and emanations begins with Samantabhadrī, a female deity often paired with the male counterpart Samantabhadra, to form the primordial tantric couple who are considered to be the co-progenitors of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen, Tib. *rdzogs chen*) teachings and the Nyingma school.¹⁹ At the beginning of the *Life*, Gyurmé Ösel writes:

From the natural state of ultimate pure bliss, the natural state of all phenomena in *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, profound, peaceful, and free from all construction, which is suchness itself, arose the glorious Lord Samantabhadra in form of the spontaneous wisdom body. She [i.e. Mingyur Peldron] appeared as his self-manifested consort, Space Mistress Samantabhadrī, and she requested [him] to create the various greater and lesser vehicles of the *dharma*, and in particular the essence of the marvelous teaching of the secret instructions of The Great Perfection... (Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 3a–b).²⁰

As one and the same with this deity, Mingyur Peldrön becomes the progenitor of the Great Perfection and is thus made integral to the creation

¹⁹ Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje Dudjom 1991: 11. Regarding Samantabhadra, Gyurmé Dorje further explains that: “The Nyingmapa hold that buddhahood is attained when intrinsic awareness is liberated just where it is through having recognised the nature of Samantabhadra, the primordially pure body of reality. This buddhahood is endowed with the pristine cognition of the expanse of reality (*chos-dbyings ye-shes*, Skt. *dharmadhātujñāna*), for it is free from all conceptual elaborations, and the pristine cognition of sameness (*mnyam-nyid ye-shes*, Skt. *samatājñāna*) which remains pure through the extent of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*” (Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje Dudjom 1991: 19). Moreover, “Samantabhadra is the teacher in whom both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are indivisible, the antecedent of all, who holds sway over existence and quiescence in their entirety, and who is the expanse of reality and the nucleus of the *sugata*” (Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje Dudjom 1991: 115–6). Samantabhadrī only appears in Tibetan contexts, whereas Samantabhadra is also prevalent in several East Asian Buddhist traditions, see Buswell and Lopez 2014: 745.

²⁰ *dang po ni | 'khor 'das kyi chos thams cad gnas lugs zab zhi spros pa thams cad dang bral ba ka dag bde ba chen po de kho na nyid kyi ngang las bcom ldan 'das dpal kun tu bzang po lhun grub ye shes kyi skur bzhengs te rang snang gi yum dbyings phyug ma kun tu bzang mos spyir bstan pa'i chos thegs pa che chung sna tshogs pa dang | khyad par bka' gsang rdzogs pa chen po rmad byung bstan pa'i snying po 'di nyid 'byung bar gsol ba btap pa las [...]*

and dissemination of all instructions associated with it. Great Perfection teachings were central to the establishment of Mindröling, and Mingyur Peldrön taught from them throughout her life. In this case, however, her authenticity comes not from her own religious education, or her affiliation with the monastery. With this opening Gyurmé Ösel establishes Mingyur Peldrön with primordial female authority.

The second example of emanation authority occurs in one brief and poignant moment in the narrative, where Mingyur Peldrön is depicted as the fifteenth century folk heroine and *delok* (Tib. 'das log) Nangsa Öbum (Snang gsal 'od 'bum).²¹ A *delok* is someone who is thought to have died, traveled to less pleasant realms, had enlightening or instructive experiences there, and then revived, with ethical lessons to dispense to the community.²² Most *deloks* had little institutional power prior to their perceived return from the dead, and their authority would be derived solely from their experiences in the netherworld and the information they brought back for the living. The legitimization of each *delok* depends on their community's response to their claims of travel in the afterlife. At first glance, the *delok* Nangsa Öbum has little in common with Mingyur Peldrön, who had been educated in her family's rich religious tradition and was fully supported by her family in seeking her desired spiritual path. For example, Nangsa Öbum was a woman who experienced great suffering at the hands of her husband's family, epitomizing the narrative of the oppressed woman who manages to escape the householder's life only in death. Her return from death imbued her with power in her community, making it possible for her to pursue religious practice and avoid further torment at the hands of her in-laws.

While at first their stories seem divergent, there is one moment in the *Life* when the reader is reminded of Mingyur Peldrön's previous existence as Nangsa Öbum – during her return from exile in Sikkim. During the Dzungar attack of 1717–18, much of Mindröling had been razed and the community's leaders were scattered or killed. Mingyur Peldrön had reportedly waited out the war in Sikkim, accompanied by her mother, sister, and

²¹ Gyurmé Ösel furthermore specifies that Nangsa Öbum was a speech emanation (Tib. *gsung sprul*) of Yeshé Tsogyel, Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 15 b.

²² Further information on *delok* can be found in Cuevas 2008 and Pommaret 2012.

a small entourage, until they were able to safely return home, around 1721. Gyurmé Ösel describes their experience as they are joyfully traipsing over the last mountain pass and stop for their first view of home:

What had formerly been a place equal to the delightful pleasure groves of the gods had, with the exception of the Sangnak Podrang, been ruined. The residences, the *stūpas*, the walls, everything [had been destroyed]. The empty buildings sat like corpses. Remembering the former wealth and prosperity of her father and uncle, she was tormented by woeful suffering. She said that because of that, a flash of memory arose, of her suffering in her previous life as Nangsa Öbum (Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 51 a).²³

This initial view of the destroyed monastery, the embodiment of her family legacy and her natal home – fills her with extreme sorrow. In this moment of mourning, she suddenly remembers her previous life as Nangsa Öbum, and the suffering of exile is likened to the treacherous odyssey of the *delok*. In this moment, the traumatic experience of loss is compared to the *delok's* journey into the hell realms. Whether Mingyur Peldrön felt a connection with Nangsa Öbum in this moment, or whether her hagiographer sought to draw the connection himself for the benefit of the narrative – the newly resolved Mingyur Peldrön, strengthened by the memory of Nangsa Öbum's struggle, is able to immediately get to work rebuilding Mindröling.

The connection with Nangsa Öbum makes Mingyur Peldrön accessible and human. Her sorrow at seeing her home destroyed changes the otherwise privileged young woman into one who experiences the suffering of mundane loss. By connecting her with the female *delok*, Mingyur Peldrön's humanity is highlighted, and her struggles become a source of legitimation for her. Although her *Life* is for the most part completely different from Nangsa Öbum's, the two characters become similar in this one moment, where the author points to a woman whose narrative of hellish experience authenticates her role as a newly emerging religious leader.

²³ *sngar lha'i dga' tshal dang mnyam pa'i gnas de gsang sngags pho brang tsam ma gtogs bla brang zung dang mchod rten grwa gshags gi tshon gyang stong du ro nger 'dug pas / sngar yab rje dang khu dbon rnams kyi stobs 'byor longs spyod rnams dran te bzod brlag med pa'i sdug bsngal gyis mnar zhing / de'i rkyen las sngar snang gsal 'od de 'bum gyi skye ba'i du kha yang lam lam dran pa zhig byung gsungs //*

Gender is very important in this moment. It is worth noting that Mingyur Peldrön's return to Mindröling is a moment in which her authority might have been questioned, and her femininity viewed as a detriment. Instead, the human loss of the woman Nangsa Öbum – and her subsequent empowerment through her experience of the journey to hell – suggests that Mingyur Peldrön's exile and traumatic experience upon her return has imbued her with a similar authority. While her feminine connection to Nangsa Öbum is important here, Mingyur Peldrön's own privileged status is not mentioned. In fact, it is the lack of privilege that authenticates this moment. Gyurmé Ösel draws on Nangsa Öbum's charisma-driven legitimacy to argue for Mingyur Peldrön's revival of Mindröling. In this moment, there is no mention of the support Mingyur Peldrön received from the Ganden Phodrang in her reconstruction efforts, or her years of training in the Mindröling teachings, which would have made her an important actor in revival efforts. Neither does he lament Mingyur Peldrön's birth into a female body, citing this as a reason for her suffering. While privileged sources of authority are replaced here with the sudden past life memory of the *delok*, the legitimating link remains female. For a moment, the privileged woman is empowered by a past-life connection to the *delok* who returns from hell to become an asset to her community.

Beyond the case of Nangsa Öbum, the hardships Mingyur Peldrön faces throughout the *Life* are not otherwise connected with her past emanations. Rather, her connection to female emanations is generally presented as a source of positive authentication, while moments of suffering are connected with the mundane world in which she lived. Thus, Mingyur Peldrön's associations with femininity remain strictly positive. Just as Weber's charismatic authority emphasizes the empowering traits of an individual, Mingyur Peldrön's past lives associate her experiences with those of strong female figures, highlighting her female gender as a source of divine power.

Of Mingyur Peldrön's eleven incarnations, the most frequently mentioned throughout the course of the *Life* is Yeshé Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal). A semi-mythical figure, Yeshé Tsogyel is arguably the best known female religious practitioner in Tibetan literary and oral tradition. Meditation caves throughout the Buddhist Himalaya bear her name; these pilgrimage sites are often marked with imprints of her hands and feet, left

in rock as a sign of her spiritual accomplishment and power. Together, Yeshé Tsogyel and her consort Padmasambhava (*Gu ru Rin po che*) are thought to have hidden Buddhist teachings, so that they could be discovered later as revealed treasure texts (*gter ma*). The pair are foundational for Nyingma historical identity, and Mingyur Peldrön's father Terdak Lingpa was both considered an emanation of Padmasambhava,²⁴ and credited with discovering Padmasambhava's hidden texts.

In order to support the claim that Mingyur Peldrön is an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel, Gyurmé Ösel points to prophetic texts²⁵ and Mingyur Peldrön's visions of her in which she appears to Mingyur Peldrön and others at critical moments to advise and guide her. When Gyurmé Ösel talks specifically about Yeshé Tsogyel, it is as a teacher and protector of Padmasambhava's teachings. As an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel, Mingyur Peldrön would become such a protector as well. It is quite common that Yeshé Tsogyel appears in women's *Lives* in one way or another (sometimes as a pre-birth, sometimes as an inspirational model), with the general goal of establishing the primary subject as an authoritative and iconic teacher of the tradition, worthy of the same reverence as Yeshé Tsogyel.²⁶

However, the way(s) in which Yeshé Tsogyel is usually narrated do not appear in Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, which offers a different presentation. Like Mingyur Peldrön, Yeshé Tsogyel was also born into an aristocratic household. In most narratives, Yeshé Tsogyel flees a forced marriage to seek out religious training, and becomes Padmasambhava's consort. In Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, Yeshé Tsogyel appears as a solitary teacher. Her consortship with Padmasambhava is downplayed, while his transmission of teachings to her is emphasized. These authorial choices seem to resonate better with the unique position in which Mingyur Peldrön found herself, as a disciple with immediate access to her community's teachings, and robust familial support for her religious education.

²⁴ For further discussion, see Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje Dudjom 1991: 394 and Dowman 1984: 4.

²⁵ For example, he quotes prophesies which he attributes to the *Padma bka' thang* (a biography of Padmasambhava) and Terdak Lingpa's revealed treasure texts.

²⁶ See Bessenger 2016:163, Jacoby 2014: 316, and Schaeffer 2004: 40.

In the *Life*, Yeshé Tsogyel's story shifts to corroborate Mingyur Peldrön's narrative. Throughout the entire text, from Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives to the dramatic scenes surrounding her death, Gyurmé Ösel uses these references to establish her as an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel. As a central female figure in the Tibetan tradition, Yeshé Tsogyel provides the strongest and most constant source of emanation authority of all the women listed in Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives. By presenting Mingyur Peldrön as an incarnation of her, the hagiography draws on a popular narrative to affiliate her with ideas of enlightened, powerful female Buddhahood, and a form of authority specifically associated with Nyingma imagery. As an emanation, she embodies Yeshé Tsogyel's authority, and so being a woman is not presented as a hindrance to religious authority, but instead becomes partial evidence of her religious significance.

In each of these three examples, Mingyur Peldrön is identified as the emanation of a well-known, female, enlightened being, and through this connection takes on the religious authority of that figure. As an emanation, Mingyur Peldrön comes to embody one or more of each figure's characteristics, and gains authority through these connections. These three examples show how the recognition as an emanation of powerful females could reinforce one's practical religious authority in eighteenth century Central Tibet. With these previous lives, Mingyur Peldrön becomes an emanation grounded in authoritative femininity, while in each example, this authentication takes a different form. Emanation authority itself is more obviously correlated to an inherent, imbued, female authority, whereas privilege becomes more prominent in the remaining two forms of authority, to be discussed next.

In the discussion of previous lives, Gyurmé Ösel emphasizes the legitimating potential of female incarnation. In presenting a robust line of previous female lives, he asserts the potential for a specifically female authority couched in the socially accepted terms of *namtar*. In part, Gyurmé Ösel is arguing that authoritative women need not embody culturally masculine traits to be powerful. In emphasizing the female buddhas and heroines whom he identifies as Mingyur Peldrön's previous incarnations, Gyurmé Ösel is also participating in and reinforcing a normative gender binary. It appears that for him, authority can be legitimated solely along female lines. His references to Mingyur Peldrön's previous lives act as

authoritative markers that draw on specifically female sources of power. He uses imagery that would have been familiar to his audience. However, he asserts a specifically feminine narrative to the figures involved, and in so doing reinforces her authority with female identity. This is in parallel with a model that had most frequently been used for men, but here Gyurmé Ösel supports it with solely female evidence. In doing so, Gyurmé Ösel puts forth an idealized vision of female authority.

Institutional Authority: Family Connections

Mingyur Peldrön's institutional connections are where privilege most obviously impacts her position as an authoritative religious figure. I use the term "institutional authority" to refer to the authority derived from her proximity to the central leadership of Mindröling Monastery. Her father Terdak Lingpa and her uncle Lochen Dharmaśrī were the cofounders of Mindröling, and her family remained at its institutional center for generations. Institutional authority is here most obviously correlated with Weber's traditional authority, in that both are transmitted according to communally held belief in an institution's enduring legitimacy, rather than individual charisma. Weber explains that traditional authority is based "on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Weber 1978: 215). I separate discussion of institutional privilege from the importance of Mingyur Peldrön's own religious education, which will be discussed below. Mingyur Peldrön inherited multi-generational financial and religious privilege and as a result had access to institutional traditions that instilled her with an inherent authority beyond that of the average person with similar educational training. This institutional privilege would have a significant impact on the relationships that she forged with powerful figures throughout her adulthood.

Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī had themselves been raised in a family that was religiously engaged, well-to-do, and highly respected. Their father, Trinlé Lhundrup ('Phrin las lhun grub, 1611–1662), was a descendent of the Nyö (Gnyos, Myos) clan, and himself a religious teacher. His wife Yangchen Drölma (Dbyang can sgröl ma, b. 1624), born in Yorpo (G.yor po), was said to have been the daughter of a noble

family.²⁷ According to Lochen Dharmaśrī's brief hagiography of her, she was the financial manager of Dargyé Chöling (Dar rgyas chos gling), the family seat prior to Mindröling's founding.²⁸ Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī began from a position of significantly high privilege that likely enabled them to establish Mindröling and draw patronage from other aristocratic families and institutions. By the time Mingyur Peldrön was born, Mindröling had been functioning for nearly three decades and was well established as a center of learning for the most important families in the Central Tibetan religious and political world.

Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī had established Mindröling as a dominant religious Nyingma institution in Central Tibet. The brothers enhanced the monastery's prestige and influence with support from the Fifth Dalai Lama's Ganden Phodrang government. They moved in elite religious circles and were deeply engaged with the religious leadership of the time. Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama had a relationship of religious exchange, and their mutual influence can be seen in the similar methods that they used to develop their institutions. Jake Dalton analyzes the Mindröling brothers' approach, noting a combination of "in-depth historical research, the systematization of the Spoken Teachings canon, and the creation of new, large-scale public rituals," which "helped to establish Mindröling at the heart of the Nyingma School."²⁹ Their inclusivist approach to ritual and praxis mirrored the innovations spearheaded by the Fifth Dalai Lama and Desi Sangyé Gyatso around the same time (Dalton 2016: 100). Mingyur Peldrön would perpetuate this method of institutional development in later years through mass teachings and empowerments. She began using this method during her time in Sikkim, and continued it throughout her adulthood.

These religio-political and familial connections in turn made Mingyur Peldrön's childhood education possible in the first place, and certainly influenced her relationships with political and religious leaders in her adulthood. Beginning in her early twenties, and continuing throughout her adult life, she maintained contact with secular leaders such as Polhané

²⁷ Dharma shrī, *Lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgrol ma'i rnam thar*, 2b–3a.

²⁸ Dharma shrī, *Lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgrol ma'i rnam thar*, 9b.

²⁹ Dalton 2016: 99. This also relates to Bryan Cuevas and Kurtis Schaeffer's discussion of Eric Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" (Cuevas and Schaeffer 2006: 1).

Sönam Topgyé and religious leaders of the Ganden Phodrang, including the Seventh Dalai Lama. These connections were especially important as Mingyur Peldrön and her brother were reconstructing Mindröling after the destruction of 1717–18.

This form of institutional privilege goes beyond that of simple wealth or social status. While there are cases of other female religious practitioners who were born into privileged homes, the impact of social status on a woman's religious pursuits was not necessarily consistent in that social privilege did not always mean greater ease of institutional access. For example, Sera Khandro – a high-born Central Tibetan woman who sought inclusion in a tantric religious community in Eastern Tibet – faced ridicule regarding her natal origins (Jacoby 2014: 41–52). Women for whom we have *Lives* often struggled for recognition at the margins of the communities they sought to join, regardless of whether or not they were born into aristocratic families. In these records, institutional access was the first and most significant hurdle to be overcome, and femaleness could be an impediment. Institutional inaccessibility formed the basis of the narrative of struggle for spiritual pursuits, and later religious recognition.

Mingyur Peldrön's story is different in that, beyond membership in the social elite, she also benefited by being born into a family that sought institutional expansion, and valued her influence in that project. Unlike Sera Khandro, she did not need to leave home and defy her aristocratic parents in order to pursue a religious vocation. Instead, she was designated as a recipient of the empowerments of the lineage shortly after her birth. She was accordingly educated from early childhood, and raised in a context where her religious pursuits (including an interest in celibacy) were considered beneficial for the family as a whole. Thus, her privilege was beyond that of a wealthy girl with a supportive family. It was the privilege of a child born into a religious dynasty, whose interests were cultivated in support of the institution itself.

Her relationship to political and religious leaders placed her in a category separate from the majority of female Tibetan practitioners, and meant that she was granted external support that would have been nonexistent for people born outside of Mindröling, regardless of gender. For example, during the anti-Nyingma campaign of 1717–18, Mingyur Peldrön was welcomed with open arms into the Sikkimese court. As a recognized teacher

of Mindröling, she was one of few non-Sikkimese people invited to give public teachings in the kingdom. Her invitation to Pemayangtsé Monastery, the teachings she gave there, and the permission to establish a mountaintop retreat center nearby, would have been unlikely had she not held Mindröling empowerments. According to modern lore, she refused to enter the walls of Pemayangtsé, out of concern that her sex would be a distraction to the monks studying there. Exhorted by the leaders there to teach, she agreed to give a series of teachings at the foot of the monastery grounds, and a stone throne was erected for her there, which still stands today.³⁰ At Pemayangtsé, concern was with receiving religious teachings and reinforcing institutional connections, all of which superseded concerns about femaleness.

As a child of Mindröling, Mingyur Peldrön had unprecedented access to the monastic complex, and therefore a position of privilege that resulted in a much smoother experience in acquiring authority than that described in the *Lives* of other religious women. Rather than struggling for recognition within the institution, she was acknowledged as an important potential transmitter of empowerments – and thus a significant conduit for the tradition – from the time of her birth. In her hagiography, she is not particularly daunted by either institutional exclusion or her gender, but instead elevated through family connections.

In emphasizing Mingyur Peldrön's direct access to institutional authority, Gyurmé Ösel's telling of the *Life* shows how different forms of privilege can shift the ways in which narratives are told.³¹ According to him, his teacher's institutional affiliation meant that she did not face the traditional obstacles so readily present in other women's *Lives*, making gender far less important than her family connections. While there is a narrative of hardship in her *Life*, it is not tied to overcoming institutional exclusion, or to her gender identity. However, the privilege of institutional authority could only propel her so far. Her highly privileged status meant that she had unprecedented access to the knowledge that would ultimately help her establish her role as a significant religious teacher.

³⁰ Thanks to Amy Homes-Tagchungdarpa for drawing my attention to this edifice, and Tshering Bhutia for discussing it with me.

³¹ The only comparison that I have found in the Tibetan tradition is with the Samding Dorje Phagmo, as found in Diemberger 2007.

Educational Authority: Empowerment and Religious Training

Along with the two types of authority discussed above, Mingyur Peldrön's training meant that she was also imbued with educational authority. I define educational authority as the authorization of an individual to transmit teachings based upon their religious training. I understand this as a wide-ranging Buddhist education – beyond intellectual education – that includes religious transmissions, empowerments and other forms of training. Like the other modes of authority mentioned in this study, this was not unique to Mingyur Peldrön, although its expression in her hagiography is unusual insofar as she was a woman trained by her own family, within the institution where she was born. In Mingyur Peldrön's case, her educational authority meant that she was authorized through official channels to pass on teachings held to be important at Mindröling, and in other Nyingma communities during her lifetime. That is, through the process of religious education, she was empowered to pass on Mindröling's corpus. Lineage systems are important in this process, and Mingyur Peldrön was primed to receive the teachings associated with her family's monastery.

Educational authority could be loosely correlated with Weber's legal authority, although there are significant differences between the two. According to Weber, legal authority is based upon "a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (Weber 1978: 215). Like Weber's legal authority, educational authority adheres to norms that are passed down institutionally. These are rule-bound and authorized by institutions. However, this does not indicate a one-to-one correlation with Weber's pure type of legal authority where, as Weber explains, "obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office" (Weber 1978: 215–6). Educational authority, on the other hand, draws on the individual's aptitude for learning, as well as personal charisma, to transmit teachings. If the individual cannot develop a following based upon recognition and trust from the larger community, they will not be sought out to pass on the teachings they hold. Like charismatic authority, educational authority requires the confidence of the recipients in order to function.

In Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, her educational authority is first established through long lists of the teachings she received in her youth. According to the text, Terdak Lingpa directed Mingyur Peldrön's education from her early childhood until his death in 1714, at which point Lochen Dharmaśrī became her primary teacher.³² In place of a detailed narrative of her childhood activities, Gyurmé Ösel chose to include the lists of teachings she received from these two men. Rather than a narrative of youthful clashes with family expectations, or hardships and suffering overcome, the reader sees an eight-folio list of the teachings received by the young woman that, in its placement, authorizes her educational authorization. The list includes Terdak Lingpa's entire corpus of revealed treasure texts (*gter ma*), his ritual instructions on *Dredging the Depths of Hell* (for which Mingyur Peldrön would later compose an instruction manual),³³ teachings from the Northern Treasure (*byang gter*) tradition, Machik's Severance (*gcod*), and many others.³⁴ Most attention is given to the Mindröling-specific teachings, especially the treasure texts of Terdak Lingpa. As with Gyurmé Ösel's long list of Mingyur Peldrön's previous female incarnations, the sheer volume of teachings that are listed impresses the idea of her broad and high-level training on the reader.

Gyurmé Ösel establishes Mingyur Peldrön's educational authority using this list of teachings received, interspersed with vignettes of interactions with her father during her early education. In these, her father frequently expresses his wish that she will become a transmitter of Mindröling's teachings. For example, as he is bestowing an initiation on her, a ceremonial vase miraculously boils over, and Terdak Lingpa exclaims "Daughter! Because your aspirations are high, this an auspicious omen [means] that you will be a holder of the essential teachings,"³⁵ and urges her to drink the water from the vase. In hagiographic fashion, this moment is shot

³² On Lochen Dharmaśrī's education of Mingyur Peldrön, see Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 36b.

³³ Gyurmé Dorje, *Na rag dung sprugs kyi cho ga 'khor ba kun sgröl*; Mi 'gyur dpal sgron, *Na rag dong sprugs kyi dbang gi cho ga mtshams sbyor gyis brgyan pa bde chen lam bzang*.

³⁴ Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 29a–37a.

³⁵ *bu mo khyod la re chen po yod bas snying po'i bstan pa 'dzin pa'i rten 'brel gyi la nye bzang* / Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 25a.

through with the usual signs and portents found in a saint's *Life*. Flowers miraculously fall from the sky, and a rainbow stands "like an arrow" over the roof of Mindröling.³⁶ Later that year, after watching her progress, he repeats his goals for her, stating "You have great aspirations, you will lead many male and female practitioners to the celestial realms."³⁷ In at least some modern oral narratives of this time, it is thought that Terdak Lingpa had the ability to foresee the troubles of the civil war of 1717–1718, and bestowed teachings on Mingyur Peldrön so that the family legacy would remain intact.³⁸ Mingyur Peldrön's education was thus itself a safeguard for Mindröling at a time when chaos threatened to overwhelm the community, and its knowledge-bearers were being dispersed and murdered. Ultimately, her educational authority was employed to be of religious benefit for her community. Later, after returning home from Sikkim, Mingyur Peldrön was greeted as one of the few surviving lineage holders of Mindröling.

As with the forms of authority discussed above, Mingyur Peldrön's educational authority intersected with issues of gender and privilege as she navigated the religious environment of her time. In exile her education meant that she was able to pass on Mindröling teachings, even if – as the story is popularly told – she was unwilling to enter the gates of Pemayangtsé, out of respect for the monks' celibacy. After her return home, these religious empowerments supported her role as an institutional player during the reconstitution of the monastery of Mindröling. During her adulthood she would teach at Mindröling and elsewhere, often bestowing empowerments to large groups. It seems she was the only woman at Mindröling to adopt such a position during her lifetime, and her education ultimately cemented this role.

In Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, her institutional and educational sources of authority were contiguous, with her educational authority being central to her legitimacy as a Mindröling teacher. She benefitted directly from her superordinate social position, and her family encouraged her religious

³⁶ Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 24 b.

³⁷ *khyod la re ba chen po yod de grub pa pho mo mang po mkha' spyod du 'khrid pa yod pas...*, Gyurmé Ösel, *Rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*, 25 b.

³⁸ Conversation with Tenzin at Mingyur Dechen Leydroling in Gyalshing, Sikkim, India (19 May 2016).

aspirations. The long lists of teachings received, and anecdotes from her interactions with her father, uncle, and religious leaders, all remind the reader that she was entrusted with, and expected to disseminate, her family's teachings. The author's approach suggests that for a woman to become a religious leader in the eighteenth century, she would have to be educated and empowered in religious teachings – and the more the better. Educational authority did for Mingyur Peldrön what the other two types could not – it instilled legitimacy in her own religious accomplishments. Rather than her previous lives or her family's clout, her religious training and her ability to engage with and pass teachings on to large groups of people was what ultimately solidified her authority.

Privilege, Authority, and Gender in the *Life* of Mingyur Peldrön

In the organization and substance of Mingyur Peldrön's *Life*, Gyurmé Ösel exhibits the intersectional nature of authority, and the role of privilege and gender in the legitimation of an eighteenth century Tibetan teacher and religious leader. I have analyzed the hagiography through the lens of three types of authority to show how he argues for her position as an important representative of Mindröling. It is notable that female examples are used wherever possible in these cases. By first presenting her through the lens of emanation authority, he establishes that her *Life* will adhere to the normative traits of the Tibetan *namtar* genre. He presents Mingyur Peldrön as an emanation of an overwhelming number of feminine heroines and buddhas, and in so doing reminds the reader of the preponderance of important female practitioners present in Buddhist narrative. By refusing to cross the gender divide, Gyurmé Ösel asserts that the forms of authority so prevalent in men's *Lives* can be easily translated to the context of a female teacher. Yeshé Tsogyel is the most important emanation in the *Life*, and Gyurmé Ösel bookends the entire text with references to her, ostensibly arguing that Mingyur Peldrön was a verified emanation of her. He presents a feminized version of the more frequently male literary *Lives*, replacing what might in other narratives be presented as the downfall of being born feminine with an emphasis on positive female representations.

How do we make sense of a woman's *Life* where gender dynamics are actively present, but not necessarily dominant? It is significant that, for Gyurmé Ösel, Mingyur Peldrön's femininity was not the defining aspect of her personality. Rather, her role as a highly trained individual, and her position as the daughter of Terdak Lingpa, became most important in his exposition of her *Life*. In his discussions of her institutional and educational authority, Gyurmé Ösel highlighted privilege and access, particularly that of being born into the inner circle of a prominent religious institution. In describing her as a daughter of the tradition, he emphasized her educational and institutional authority by signaling her privilege, and ultimately argued for her legitimacy as a leader of the second generation of Mindröling. However, he does this within the boundaries of a female context, always drawing on feminine identities to reinforce Mingyur Peldrön's own status as a legitimate teacher in her tradition.

Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* highlights the accessibility of religious education and her role – as the daughter of a famous treasure revealer, and a teacher in her own right – among the highest echelons of the privileged religious elite. For Mingyur Peldrön, to be an authoritative woman meant being a teacher respected by the aristocracy and available to the masses. It also meant having the ear of governing leaders. It meant having the education of an elite religious center, and becoming a lineage holder,³⁹ and therefore indispensable to the tradition. In eighteenth century Tibet, as in other times and places, women's accessibility to roles in leadership, and to education in general, were as varied as individual social privilege. In her case, family connections, wealth, and other markers of privilege were equally (if not more) important than one's gender in determining access to religious education. As a woman, Mingyur Peldrön's proximity to and relationship with a doctrinally and geographically central religious institution was highly unusual, and privilege informed her viability as a leader, arguably over and above her gender.

³⁹ I define this term according to Dan Martin: "'Lineage holder' is here defined not only as a person who holds the main teachings (secret precepts and the like) from a particular teacher, but one who also passed them on in a lineage significant for posterity" (Martin 2005: 62–63).

As we continue to investigate gender dynamics at different moments of Tibetan Buddhist history, Gyurmé Ösel's exposition of Mingyur Peldrön's life reveals how important it is to look at the variety of types of authority available to an individual – including and also always beyond – gender, especially in specific historical and religious contexts. Dividing her authority into the three types proposed in this article, and examining each separately, reveals how accessibility to authority is largely grounded in the privilege of her family background, which then made it easier for her to receive a high profile training, and build up her charisma as a Buddhist teacher. This contradicts much of the narrative of the disadvantages of being reborn in a female body sometimes found in Buddhist literature, without jettisoning her gender. If – in Buddhist contexts as elsewhere – authority is wrapped up with specific cultural signifiers. For her, these included positive gendered references, education level, and markers of privilege such as wealth, institutional affiliation, proximity to centers of authority, and political connections. Each of these were shot through with context-dependent privilege – in this case, a privilege that contained an amalgamation of class-based and educational markers. Privilege laid the foundation for Mingyur Peldrön's Buddhist education, her rise to prominence, and ultimately, her authority.

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of a larger project examining the life of the Tibetan Buddhist nun Mingyur Peldrön (Mi 'gyur dpal sgron, 1699–1769). Among historical women for whom we have an extant *Life* (Tib. *rnam thar*), Mingyur Peldrön had a unique relationship to institutionalized religion. Unlike others, she was born into the very institution within which she would flourish, and her status of high privilege would ultimately aid that flourishing. I suggest that her *Life* is in part an argument in favor of her authoritative position at Mindröling. I examine three threads of authentication woven throughout her *Life* – delineated by distinct types of authority – in order to point to the dynamic connection between public persona, gender, privilege, and religious authority that hagiographic life writing can display. In dividing authority into the three types proposed in this article, and examining each separately, I aim to illustrate how accessibility to authority, when grounded in the privilege of family background, can supersede the Buddhist narrative of the disadvantaged female form.