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Chinese authorities censored media reporting earlier this year on the activities of 23-year-old Rinzin Wangmo, the daughter of the late Tenth Panchen Lama, out of concern that her influence in Tibet might exceed that of the 16-year-old 11th Panchen Lama, Gyancaïn Norbu.¹ Unnamed media sources in China were quoted in early September as saying said that, starting in July 2006, the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party had blacklisted media coverage of Rinzin Wangmo in order to “avoid disturbing religious figures.” As a result, mainland Web sites removed postings of an interview with Rinzin Wangmo published by *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan*).² However, overseas Web sites continued to post the *Southern People Weekly* interview, which is translated here.

Wise Holy Woman: Princess Renji

The first floor of Jiali Center, Beijing. Twenty-three-year-old Yabshi Pan Rinzin Wangmo³ casually takes an English-language newspaper from the newspaper rack, and is immediately struck by the front-page headline: “The First World Buddhist Forum Will Be Held in Hangzhou on April 13.” When she tries to walk out with the newspaper, the waiter at the door stops her. She asks the waiter if she can buy it, but her request is declined with a smile. With a sigh of helplessness, she says she will buy it outside. The waiter is unaware of the identity of this exotic, fashionably-dressed young beauty, or why she feels a need to buy that newspaper.

In Buddhist terminology, the name Yabshi Pan Rinzin Wangmo carries the meaning of “wise holy woman.”

“My dad gave me that name,” she says after returning to her

chateau, which is heavy with the fragrance of Tibetan incense. She wears the saffron Tibetan attire restricted to the highest ranks of nobility. The dazzling brightness of her garments outshines the sun setting over Mount Everest in the fresco on the center wall of the room. She wears a badge bearing a portrait of a smiling man, her father—the 10th Panchen Lama, Choekyi Gyaltsen.⁴

The staff of the 10th Panchen Lama’s household all call Yabshi Pan Rinzin Wangmo “Princess.” Smiling, she says, “You can also call me Renji.”

A basin of red lotuses is displayed on the table, where a servant places a bowl of creamy buttered tea and waits quietly at the princess’s side. Renji leafs through a course catalogue for Tsinghua University while casually recounting her experiences in the anachronistic role of a princess in modern China.

“There’s no way to verify the origin of the title of princess,” Renji observes. “People around my dad have addressed me that way for as long as I can remember, and I’m used to it. I think the title originates from my dad’s status as the 10th Panchen Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism.

“I came into the world in June 1983. I’m sure a lot of people were surprised at my dad’s marriage and wondered how the Panchen Lama could marry and have a baby. Many people raised in mainland China aren’t familiar with the conventions of Tibetan Buddhism, which belongs to the Mahayana branch. Unlike Hinayana Buddhism, which focuses on self-perfection, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes altruism and benefiting the masses, and imposes fewer restrictions. So in the Tibetan region, it’s very common for a living Buddha to marry. Having said that, my dad was the first Panchen Lama to marry. Six hundred years passed from the First Panchen Lama to my dad, so for me to be the daughter of the Tenth Panchen Lama makes me feel a deep relationship with the Buddha.

“My mom, Li Jie, was the beloved granddaughter of a Kuomintang general, Dong Qiwu.⁵ It’s actually quite surprising that the daughter of a prominent family from the Han majority could become acquainted with my dad and marry him. When my dad passed away, I was only five-and-a-half years old, so it was impossible for him to explain to a child like me why, shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, he decided to enter into a secular marriage. Based on my mom’s recollection and my analysis, I think it was my dad’s experi-

ences during the Cultural Revolution that led him to eventually marry.

"In 1961, my dad went to visit many places in China. He had grave doubts about the People's Commune system, and became aware of problems in implementing policies on ethnicity, religion and establishing a united front. After he returned to Tibet, he decided to write a letter to the central Party leadership describing what he'd seen and heard. This was what later came to be known as his 'Letter of 70,000 Words.'

"This 'Letter of 70,000 Words' bluntly enumerated seven key points, which attracted serious notice from top officials in the central government. Although Premiere Zhou Enlai disagreed with some of the views in the letter, he agreed that my dad had raised some valid issues.

"But a little more than a year later, this 'Letter of 70,000 Words' was labeled as reactionary. My dad was subjected to severe criticism, removed from all of his official positions and denounced as 'anti-socialist, anti-people and conspiring to commit treason.'

"Premiere Zhou intended to protect my dad. He allowed him to leave Lhasa for Beijing and then arranged for our whole family to move into the former home of the democratic hero Shen Junru,⁶ who had died not long before. Except for attending reeducation classes held by the Nationality Committee and being sent to Reform-Through-Labor at a low-voltage apparatus factory, my dad got off pretty lightly compared with the sufferings of many other officials disciplined at the time. But he didn't know that his miseries hadn't really started yet. . . .

"In 1966 when the Cultural Revolution first started, my dad was abducted by a rebel faction at the Central Institute of Nationalities. They bound him so tightly with steel wire that it became embedded in his shoulders.

"In 1968, my dad was detained again, but this time he was completely secluded and imprisoned. There have been accounts of some details of his imprisonment saying that, in order to ease his boredom, he would intentionally quarrel with prison guards over trivial matters, and that at one point he smashed the window of his cell, and so on. I can't verify these details. But think about it—my dad had been raised since the age of three as a Living Buddha at Ta'er Temple,⁷ Qinghai Province. At the time he was jailed, he was only 28, a strong and vigorous man who had never experienced this kind of humiliation. A man in the prime of life, with no one to talk to for long stretches of time, nothing to look at but the cold iron door of his dingy cell, and no prospect of release any time soon, how could he not feel irritable and resentful?

"My dad's cell measured only eight or nine square meters and contained only a shabby bed, desk and chair. The funnel-shaped window in the cell allowed a prison guard to observe every move he made, but gave him no glimpse of the world outside.

"But he knew that the prisoner closest to him was Wan Li,⁸ the deputy mayor of Beijing, and that further along were Field Marshal Peng Dehuai, General Luo Ruiqing and many other national leaders.⁹ As a result of this 'next door neighbor' relationship at the time, our family and Wan Li's became very close after both men were rehabilitated.

In order to pass the time in prison more usefully, my dad not only recited Buddhist sutras every day, but also studied Chinese language and Marxist-Leninism. As a result, my dad, who originally spoke only Tibetan, eventually became fluent in Chinese and gained a firm grasp of Marxist-Leninism, and he translated a Tibetan dictionary into Chinese.

"All the same, these activities failed to cure the loneliness in his heart. Although my grandpa and grandma were still alive then, they were not among the people permitted to visit him. Whenever he learned of another prisoner being visited by his wife or children, he felt even sadder about his isolation."

The smiling Renji, with her purple eye shadow and exquisite make-up, cannot conceal the glint in her eye. She says that as a Gemini, she naturally possesses a dual character, and the blood of a Tibetan Buddhist leader and of her loving mother contributes to the firm and gentle sides of her character. In Tibet, she is part of the "unification group."

"In Tibet, children of mixed parentage belong to the 'unification group.' In any case, my dad was open and straightforward throughout his life, and in that respect I am very much like him.

"The 10 years in prison wore my dad down physically and psychologically, and after his release he craved the comforts of a secular family life.

"In 1978, the central government organized a group of special democratic figures, including my dad, to travel around and see how the country had changed. An inspection group was formed for this, and the deputy leader was Dong Qiwu, my mom's grandfather. My dad was the youngest person in the group, and he became friendly with the young man who served as my great-grandpa's bodyguard. Over the course of the next two months, my dad confided to the bodyguard his desire of finding a woman to marry. The bodyguard was a warm-hearted fellow, and he promised to find someone for my dad.

"After the tour, the bodyguard went to my mom and said, 'Xiao Jie, there's a man in our group called Panchen. Could you find a female soldier to match him up with?'

The bodyguard, who was barely educated, had been friendly with my dad all this time without knowing much of anything about the Panchen Lama. But my mom, with her upbringing, was well acquainted with my dad's background. After graduating from high school, she served as a medic in Corps 69, which was under her grandfather's command. Later she passed the examination for admission into the Military Medical Department of the Fourth Military Medical University. Even though she had never met the Panchen Lama, she would have heard enough stories to make a 19-year-old girl curious to meet him.

"My mom was in any case a lively, carefree and warm-hearted girl, and once she knew of this matter, she immediately devoted her full energies to the task. In order to be an effective matchmaker, she told the bodyguard to pass on the message that she wanted to meet the Panchen Lama.

"Somehow it seems the bodyguard's message was unclear, and my dad thought he was actually being introduced to a prospective wife. My mom took her fifth aunt along as a chap-



Princess Yabshi Pan Rinzin Wangmo pays respects at an altar to her late father, the 10th Panchen Lama. Photo: Reuters

eron, which only confirmed my dad in his happy error. I feel this was all part of fate.

"There's no way I can know how my dad felt when he first met my mom, but pictures of my mom as a girl show her to have been beautiful, with sparkling, clever eyes. Facing such a lovely woman, my dad might well have decided to persevere in his mistake even if he became aware of it.

"My dad, who had never had the chance to date a woman before, told my mom frankly from the outset that he had nothing and could give her nothing. In addition, since he had not yet been rehabilitated, if she became part of his life it could well lead to her being jailed on his account.

"Those remarks deeply impressed my mom. She had never known anyone to start a relationship with such frankness, and maybe it was this that led them to fall in love.

"My mom's family was strongly opposed to the marriage—first of all, because my dad was so much older, and also because, even though he was the distinguished 10th Panchen Lama, he remained under a political cloud. Despite their opposition, my mom and dad married in January 1979. From that time on, my dad strictly obeyed the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism and never again wore a monk's cassock, exchanging it for the attire of Tibetan nobility. Even when he participated in religious ceremonies, he never tried to conceal the fact that he had a wife and family."

At the age of 44, the 10th Panchen Lama was blessed with a daughter, Renji. Renji opens a thick, heavy album and

observes, "I was really the apple of his eye. I've had a very happy life, but the few years I had with my dad were my happiest time." As she speaks, the hint of a tear gleams appears along her drooping eyelids.

"One hundred days after I was born, the party elders Deng Yingchao and Xi Zhongxun¹⁰ came to my home. Deng gave me my childhood nickname, Tuantuan, 'Circle.' She picked me up and said, 'This baby's face is so round, you should just call her Circle!' The deeper meaning was a wish for an unbroken circle of solidarity and harmony between the Han and Tibetan peoples. In Chinese, the word 'circle' carries the meaning of solidarity.

"My dad adored me. If he had a meeting at home, he would require absolute quiet from everyone but me—I could run in and out, sometimes sitting on his knees with my arms locked around his neck, holding him close.

"Maybe because I grew up listening to Buddhist sutras, I was bright as a child, and retained everything I saw. I still remember things I saw when I was one, much to my mom's surprise. Being so aware at an early age, how could I forget the scene when my dad left us in January 1989?

"In the past, we had always just accompanied my dad to the plane when seeing him off. But that time, my dad couldn't bear to part from us, and had people call me into the plane's cabin time and time again. He kept telling me things, like that I should study hard so I could assist in his work in the future, and that I must obey my mom. The Living Buddhas¹¹ who

were with my dad at the time later recalled that he was very emotional in his regret at leaving us, and that he asked the Living Buddhas to take care of his family as they had taken care of him.

“On January 28, 1989, my dad attained Parinirvana¹² in Shigatse, Tibet, but news of his passing was blocked.

“My mom and I were told to go to Shigatse immediately. No one mentioned my dad on the way. When we arrived at Tashilhunpo, the seat of the Panchen Lama for generations, I saw many people crying, and some in a dead faint.

As the daughter of the 10th Panchen Lama, I never allowed myself to be bullied without fighting back.

“The azure sky of Shigatse on that day remains embedded in my memory. A portion of my heart died that day.

“When I was 10, my mom had a strange dream. In her dream, the Buddhist Patriarchs instructed her to send me far away to America, because studying there would make the best future of me. She awoke suddenly from her dream, but the idea stayed with her. It may sound unbelievable, but it’s true.

“On July 21, 1996, I graduated from elementary school, and then I was sent off to New York to study, living temporarily with my mom’s fifth aunt. I was just 13 at the time.”

Without the benefit of meeting Renji’s eyes, one might have difficulty believing what she relates of her life in America: adapting to life in the slums of Brooklyn, taking up a “big sister” role at Junior High School 128, where during an altercation she once brandished a knife at a schoolmate. She describes it as a precious experience in her life, removing her from the sheltered existence of a princess.

“Fifth Aunt hadn’t been in America very long—she was still establishing herself, and life was not easy for her. I lived with her in conditions that were nowhere as good as when I was in China.

“My aunt sent me to study at Junior High School 128, which was closest to her home. That was a really scary high school. There were four Asian students, including me, speaking no English and only a little Cantonese. A lot of the other students were black. While there, I saw Brooklyn’s worst living conditions, and for the first time experienced being attacked from the back. I got into the habit of suddenly turning around and looking behind me while walking alone.¹³

“I think that period of my life also brought out my fighting spirit. As the daughter of the 10th Panchen Lama, I never allowed myself to be bullied without fighting back. Of course, when talking on the phone to my mom, no matter how I missed her, I said nothing to her about my hardships.

“During the five months I spent at that school, I got into a fight with a bunch of black students, and one of them slashed a knife through a thick leather jacket my mom had given me. The amulet I wore may have prevented me from being seriously injured.

“Three months later, my mom came to America to see me. A mother always knows her daughter best, and from small

details that I revealed, she sensed that something had happened. In particular, when she stood by the window every day watching me go off to school and saw me suddenly turning to look behind me, she knew I was keeping something from her.

“Through close questioning, my mom learned of my true life in New York. Through the introduction of a friend, she found a new guardian for me in America, the action movie star Steven Seagal.

“After I transferred to a private school in Los Angeles, Steven sent a car for me every Friday to bring me to his home for the weekend. He had six kids, but after becoming my guardian, he often said he had seven kids, and he paid the most attention to me.

“My guardian was nothing like the cool tough guy on screen. A devout follower of Tibetan Buddhism, he was very kind and hospitable, and his home was like a marketplace, with people constantly coming and going.

“The most interesting thing about him was his attention to physical health. He not only devoted himself to body building, but calculated the calories in every meal like a lady of fashion. I can’t say he was my second dad, but he showed me the daring and independence of American people, and provided me with family warmth in America. Even after I went to study political science in Washington, D.C., he still often came to see me.”

Renji is obsessed with Tibetan cake, but also loves to drink authentic cappuccino. The cultures of China and America coexist within her just as the blood of both the Han and Tibetan nationalities flows in her veins.

“It was critical for me to choose political science as my major. My dad’s friends were all political figures, and I constantly saw them on TV and read about them in the newspapers. Inevitably, I became interested in what they were doing, and as time went on, I developed a keen interest in politics.

“Besides, I’m the daughter of the Panchen Lama, and I promised to continue his work for solidarity between nations, facilitating economic development in Tibet and improving communications between China and the West. I can’t do these things without knowing politics.

“I never forgot this ideal while in America. I studied hard, often being the last to leave the library at night. And in my free time, I participated as often as possible in school associations and international activities, like a seminar on Tibetan studies held at Oxford University and an international convention for female politicians. I visited the International Red Cross, and now hold the title of honorary vice president of the Tibetan Red Cross, as well as advisor to the International Rescue Committee.

“I began my university studies in the Political Science department of American University, and eventually graduated with a degree in Political Science from the University of Virginia.

“I won’t deny that I drove a brand-name sports car while I lived in America. When I was in college, a lot of my classmates were princes or princesses. I’m grateful to my mom for bearing my expense during that time. My dad left us some property, and my mom had income of her own. Some of my dad’s admirers offered to help us out, but my mom politely refused to accept anything. She hoped to provide for me through her

own ability, and this was not just because of her love for me. She said that as the daughter of the 10th Panchen Lama, my standard of living was a matter not only of personal dignity, but also of the dignity of our country and of the Tibetan people.

"Before I graduated from the University of Virginia, Oxford and Columbia both accepted me for graduate study. While I was still trying to make up my mind last May, my mom called me and said that certain officials had asked me to return to China. They said they would arrange for me to join the China Youth League and be admitted to the Ph.D. program at Tsinghua University. So I'm now pursuing a doctoral degree in finance at Tsinghua.¹⁴

"Ordinary people may think a princess has nothing to worry about, but I have a lot of anxieties. If I were not the daughter of the Panchen Lama, I wouldn't feel obliged to take on any substantial responsibilities, and I might allow myself to pursue a more ordinary career, like becoming a fashion designer. But I can't disappoint people.

"The year I turned 18, the government arranged for me to return to Tibet. This was the first time I went back to my native land without my mom. Although communications and transportation are not too advanced, and living conditions are quite basic, news that the daughter of the Panchen Lama had arrived quickly circulated, and every day thousands of people, young and old, sometimes entire villages, came to see me.

"All they wanted was to receive my blessing and to present me with a pure white khatag.¹⁵ As I gave them khatags in return, one after another, my arms became so sore that I could barely lift them.

"At the end of my 45-day visit, tens of thousands of Tibetan people gathered in the square of the Jokhang Temple to see me off. With tears in their eyes, they said, 'Please come back often. We'll miss you.' Even as my car drove off, people continued to stand there, waving at me. At that moment, I felt that the responsibility I had taken on was heavier than the soreness in my arms.

"I know the spirit of my dad is blessing me, and that his eyes are watching me. . . ."

Translated by Wei Liu

The Chinese version of this article was originally published on the Web site of *Southern People Weekly* on September 05, 2006, and was subsequently posted on the Web site of China Information Center, <http://www/quancha.org/info/artShow.asp?id=40524&ad=9/5/2006%203:00:00%20PM>.

NOTES

1. The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, named Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama in 1995, but the Chinese authorities took the child into "protective custody" and named Gyancaïn Norbu in his place. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima has not been seen in public since, although the Chinese authorities have reported that he is healthy and well cared for.
2. See Benjamin Kang Lim, "China's media censors 'blacklist' Tibetan princess," Reuters, September 1, 2006.

3. "Yabshi" is a Tibetan honorific given to family members of lamas. A different Tibetan term is used for the equivalent of a "princess." The title Renji bears is the Chinese term for princess, which was reportedly given to her under agreement with China's United Front Department. "Pan" is the simplified version of the family name of the Panchen Lama, and Rinzin Wangmo is the personal name, with "Renji" serving as a nickname.
4. The proper name of the Tenth Panchen Lama (February 19, 1938–January 28, 1989) is Lobsang Trinley Lhündrub Chökyi Gyaltsen.
5. KMT General Dong Qiwu (1899–1989) defected to join the Communists and was awarded with the rank of General in the People's Liberation Army in 1955. He served as vice-chairman of the 6th National Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference from 1983 to 1988.
6. Shen Junru (1875–1963) was active in the anti-Japanese resistance during the Sino-Japanese War. He co-founded the China Democratic League in 1939, and advocated that the League cooperate with the Chinese Communist Party. He attended the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 1949, and later held the position of vice chairman in the CPPCC and in the National People's Congress.
7. Known by Tibetans as the Gumbum Lamasery.
8. Wan Li was rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution and became Chairman of the National People's Congress in 1988. A political moderate, Wan was put under house arrest briefly in 1989 because of his sympathy for the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square, but he retained his official position until his retirement in 1993.
9. Defense Minister Peng Dehuai, arrested in 1966, died in 1974 of the injuries inflicted on him in prison. Army Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing was also arrested in 1966, after being denounced as "anti-Party" along with Peng Zhen, Lu Dingyi and Yang Shangkun. He attempted suicide by jumping from a building, and was left paralyzed. He eventually died in Germany in 1978.
10. Deng Yingchao, widow of former premier Zhou Enlai, was a revolutionary hard-liner who became a high-ranking official in her own right after Zhou's death. Xi Zhongxun, also a member of the first generation of revolutionaries, was an economic reformist who proposed and implemented China's first special economic zone in Shenzhen, and mentored future leaders Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.
11. In Tibetan Buddhism, Living Buddha is the title given to an eminent monk who is recognized as the reincarnated successor of the deceased leader of a monastery. The Dalai and Panchen lamas are the two highest Living Buddhas.
12. Parinirvana is the passing of a Buddha from the cycle of earthly life into a condition of perfect joy and harmony. According to official accounts, the Tenth Panchen Lama suffered a fatal heart attack while presiding over the collective re-interment of the bodies of the Fifth through Ninth Panchen Lamas. A few days before his death, the Panchen Lama had met with Hu Jintao, then newly-arrived as Party secretary, and publicly rebuked him for China's maladministration of Tibet. See <http://www.savetibet.org/news/positionpapers/hujintao.php>.
13. It is possible that Renji attended Junior High School 128 in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where she could conceivably have had the experience described. However, that district is much more racially diverse than Renji describes, with a white majority and substantial Asian population, and it is by no means Brooklyn's poorest or most violence-ridden neighborhood.
14. Tsinghua University is the alma mater of Chinese president Hu Jintao, whom Renji refers to publicly as "Uncle Jintao." See Benjamin Kang Lim, *op cit*.
15. In Tibetan tradition, a khatag (also spelled "khata") is a white silk scarf offered with respect to a lama, nun or official, or to a religious image.