Genuine Charisma and Its Transmissibility: The Inner Landscape of Tulkus in Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Khams and Golok

Dan Smyer Yu

Tibetan Buddhism in Khams and Golok has been undergoing an unprecedented revival since the late twentieth century. Nyingmapa, the oldest sect of Tibetan Buddhism, is most active in this dynamic revitalization. Mostly located in the rugged mountains of Khams and Golok, Nyingma monasteries’ revitalization is no longer a local event but has become a transcultural and transnational religious phenomenon in the early twenty-first century. Tulkus or reincarnated lamas play a vital role in both the physical reconstruction of Tibetan monasteries and spiritual guidance for both Tibetans and non-Tibetans. The seminal volume on Tibetan Buddhist revival, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet* edited by Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein (1998), largely overlooks this prominent role of tulkus in the Tibetan religious revival. David Germano is the only contributor who mentions the “charismatic presence” (1998:57) of visionary Tibetan reincarnated lamas, particularly citing the late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and his Buddhist academy. He sees “the institution of the reincarnate lama as a peculiar form of hereditary authority…” and “as a strategy for institutionalizing spiritual legitimacy and charisma…” (ibid. 89). However, this linkage between tulkus and charisma is not given enough interpretive space in Germano’s work. Having also worked in the same regions, I think that relevant sociological interpretations of the religious and cultural role of tulkus as a unique case of charisma studies is long overdue. As Tibetan regions are becoming more accessible in recent years, empirical data concerning the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist revival deserve much needed interpretive attention from all scholarly disciplines, not just from traditionally-conceived Tibetan studies which is known mostly for its emphasis on textual and historical orientations.

It is my intent in this article to bring forth a case of charisma studies from a sociological perspective in the context of contemporary Nyingmapa’s revitalization. My focus is on what Stanley Tambiah calls “the religious charisma” which possesses a transcendental orientation (1984:325). This transcendental dimension is categorically a common feature of world religions. From an outsider’s perspective, this identical feature across various religious traditions could be seen as a set of what Roy Rappaport deems “the Ultimate Sacred Postulates” that “can be verified neither objectively nor logically. And yet they are taken to be unquestionable” (1999:281). In other words, religious charisma appears other-worldly and imbued with a sacred character. In my actual pursuit of this Tibetan case of charisma studies, I associate the charisma of tulkus with Weber’s phrase—pure charisma or genuine charisma that is referred to as “the gift of the grace” or charisma in *status of nascenti* in which the awe-inspiring quality of a given individual “…revolutionizes men ‘from within’” (Weber 1978:1115). However, genuine charisma in this article is not a general application of the Weberian typology of magnetic personality; instead, I intend to work against the typecast of Weber’s
genuine charisma solely as a personality phenomenon which is subject to its eventual demise as it undergoes a routinization process due to the pressure of worldly economics and institutionalization (ibid. 1121). By situating my case study in the contemporary Nyingmapa revitalization, I wish to put forward three arguments from the perspective of Durkheimian sociology of religion along with my ethnographic experiences with several Tibetan tulkus and their communities in Khams and Golok.

First, genuine charisma is not confined only within the charismatic personality; instead, it is collective in nature. In the Tibetan case, this collectivity of charisma is inscribed in both the geographic and cultural landscapes pertaining to the idea of the sacred. Second, the genuine charisma of tulkus is highly institutionalized in the context of Tibetan monasticism; however, it is positively sanctioned for its reproduction and not subject to Weber’s linear developmental model in which charisma undergoes its birth, routinization, and demise. In other words, the institutionalization process in Tibetan monastic settings rather preserves and rejuvenates the genuine charisma of tulkus. Third, this type of Buddhist genuine charisma is transmissible to those who wish to acquire it.

TULKUS’ CHARISMATIC INCARNATION IN THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF THE COLLECTIVE

Sangye Tserang Rinpoche heads Ňoshil Monastery in eastern Khams, which is named after the mountainous site where it is said that Padmasambhava once lived during his solitary meditation and where he left his hand-print on the precipice of the sacred mountain as an integral part of Ňoshil Monastery. The size of monastery is a small fraction of the size of Kathok Monastery, in the same area, but has been magnetic enough to draw pilgrims from Lhasa, Golok, coastal China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North America. Sangye Tserang Rinpoche is the reincarnation of Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, a legendary lama who once threw a rock the size of a cabin over a mountain, as a folktale circulates in the region. Many of his disciples became renowned tantric masters. Among them, Chadral Sangye Dorji, who mentored Thomas Merton in Dharamsala in the 1960s, is still actively giving tantric instructions in Nepal even as he is in his late 90s. The legendary Khenpo Ngawang Palzang was born in Ňoshil in 1887. One day in his childhood, while herding yaks, he and his younger sister Karli saw a mirage of a large monastery on a mountain slope. Later, their vision became reality. Khenpo Ngawang Palzang was the founder of Ňoshil Monastery.

I stayed at the Ňoshil monastery in 2002 and 2004 for my field research on the revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism in Khams. Unlike the commanding appearance of his predecessor, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche looks more like a nomadic elder than a prominent reincarnated lama who holds an eminent Nyingma lineage. His soft voice and height, approximately 5’5”, do not give him an overpowering projection onto his audience. Similar to what happened to other tulkus of his generation, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche was also imprisoned twice by the Chinese state during the years of the Religious Reform and the Cultural Revolution in the mid-20th century. Many monasteries were destroyed, and monks and nuns were physically subject to violence and imprisonment. His lower spine and right hip were seriously injured when a Red Guard repeatedly beat him with a crowbar. These injuries left permanent marks on his body, and he limps when he walks. His appearance, in many ways, does not resemble that of his charming urban peers in the West, such
as Sogyal Rinpoche and Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche. He and Dzashi Drolma, his *khongdrol* (consort), live a simple life with their son and daughter-in-law. He spends his day mostly on his multifunctional bed where he reads texts, takes charge of monastic daily affairs, and performs healing and spiritual counsel for pilgrims and nomads herding in the vicinity of the monastery. Regardless of my perception of his ordinariness in his personal appearance and in what he does inside his house, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche is a “mana-figure” (Durkheim 1915:223) or a person who possesses extraordinary qualities. It is this inner quality that magnetizes his monastic community and pilgrims from afar.

Derived from its Melanesian cultural context, R. H. Codrington delineates mana as “what works to effect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature” (Codrington 1957:118-19). Referencing Codrington’s work, Durkheim frequently uses the “mana-figure” as an operational concept to address the sacred dimension of a totemic community that is united with the shared sense of the sacred derived from the totemic being. From this perspective, I treat Sangye Tserang Rinpoche as a mana-figure for I see his charisma not as the property of his personality; instead, it is impersonal and collective in nature but is incarnated in a human body and manifested in the physical surrounding of its incarnation. In his study of the Theravada saints of the forest in Thailand, Tambiah also see the mana-quality in them as he evokes Marcel Mauss’ delineation of mana, “Mana was a quality, a thing, an essence; it was a contagious and transmissible force possessed by both objects and spirit beings” (1984:338). From this angle, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s mana, not as mysterious as its Melanesian counterpart, is inherently the gift of his tantric lineage. In other words, as a Buddhist charismatic, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche draws people to him not because of his oratory skills but because he is a tulku, a reincarnated lama embodied with a distinct tantric tradition fundamentally connected with Padmasambhava, the Indian master who brought Buddhism to Tibet. In addition, his predecessors such as Jigme Lingpa Rinpoche and Guru Virochana are an integral part of the Tibetan Buddhist collective memory. As one would expect, his charisma permeates and finds expressions on the monastic ground and the nearby sacred sites. It flows from object to object and from person to person when things or people come in contact with it. It can be viewed as a sacred contagion in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1952:128), whose influence descends on his monastic and lay communities as well as on pilgrims from afar.

My living in his house made me also susceptible to his mana-like influence. When I walked out of his house, monks, nuns, and nomads would often invite me into their cabins and tents for tea and fresh yogurt. At first, I thought that it was only people’s hospitality at work. However, after a while, I realized that I was receiving the type of reverence that I did not deserve, when they insisted on my sitting in the center of their gatherings, and on preparing food that was reserved for special occasions. Sangye Tserang’s sharing his living space with me apparently qualified me as a close recipient of his spiritual power from the perception of bystanders. Apparently, the closer one gets to the incarnation of the sacred, the more likely one may also be treated as a part of the sacred or at least as its representation. In reality, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche is selective of imparting his tantric teachings to potential learners. I was not among his chosen disciples at the
monastery, who actually received his tantric instructions. But, the point here has little to do with who receives what secret teachings from him; it has to do with how one connects him or herself with the currents of the collectively-acknowledged Buddhist sacred. At Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s monastery, the flow of his intangible spiritual power is communally cherished and finds its representations in myriad ways.

Pilgrims, who arrive at Ñoshil, start their first day by paying their homage to Sangye Tserang Rinpoche and Khongdrol Dzashi Drolma. The remainder of the day will be spent on a guided tour of the sacred sites of the monastery, which are mostly located on the precipice of the sacred mountain peak nearby. Young monks between the age of eight and sixteen were the most spirited guides for the pilgrims. My guide was a thirteen-year-old monk. The first site he led me to was Padmasambhava’s hand-print on the rock face. It is discernibly a print of a large hand. He also showed me the foot prints and fist-prints of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche and his son, which sank in the solid precipice in the same manner as that of Padmasambhava. These sacred marks are said to be the manifestation of enlightened masters’ mngon shes which refers to the lucid revelation of all hidden knowledge, past, present, and future, based on Buddha-like wisdom. Its force can penetrate through material objects such as the hard rocks on the Ñoshil Mountain. This is a common sacred feature of Nyingma charismatics. Germano also narrates his witness of sacred objects unearthed by the late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, which contribute to the charismatic presence of this most revered tantric master in Khams. In this regard, these physical marks of enlightened teachers and sacred objects are a vital source of charismatic empowerment for tantric practitioners. This externalization of the genuine charisma of a Tibetan tulku coincides with how Thai Buddhist amulets are sacralized, as Tambiah lucidly points out, “The charisma is concretized and sedimented in objects; these objects are repositories of power” (Tambiah 1984:335). For Tibetan lay folks and pilgrims from distant places, the hand-and-foot-prints of Padmasambhava and Sangye Tserang Rinpoche on the hard precipice of the Ñoshil sacred mountain are regarded as a proof of Buddhist enlightenment; thus, their magnetizing effect is predictably conspicuous on the monastic ground.

I share the same sentiment as William Swatos, that charisma is fundamentally collective and “is always contingent upon a shared belief on the part of both leader and followers in the genuineness of the leader’s charismatic possession” (Swatos 1986:134). The shared sense of the sacred at Ñoshil is extended beyond its monastic boundary. Many nomads, especially women, daily circumambulate Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s house. Their devotion to him is extraordinarily heartening. Once, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s son gave me two large posters of his father. On the way to my guest room in Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s house, three nomadic women saw these photos, asking if they could have them. As I showed my reluctance on my face, the three women all knelt down. I was shamefully touched, and handed the two posters to them.

In late fall 2002, an eighty-two year old nomadic woman moved into the woody side of the monastery ground with a torn tent buttressed by tree trunks. She came to the monastery to die. She wanted to die in Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s presence. For the first fifteen days after she moved to the monastery, many nuns attended her by sending yogurt and bread to her. She did not speak clearly and her hearing...
was impaired, but one of the nuns was able to read her lips. From that nun, I learned that when the nomadic woman had been in her early sixties, she attended Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s Powa ritual (ritual for the preparation of conscious dying), and had obtained permission from him to die at the monastery and, most importantly, could receive spiritual guidance for her departing consciousness for her next life. Four days before she passed away, she stopped receiving food from nuns. She quietly died among the juniper trees.

In the case of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche, the field of genuine charisma is a field of spiritual energy that goes beyond the charismatic, and its tangible manifestations are readily identifiable for those who come into its field. Hereon, Weber’s confinement of genuine charisma within a given personality (1978:1114) does not allow enough inclusion of the culturally-specific ambiance of the charismatic into an interpretive understanding of genuine charisma as a vital collective representation of the sacred in various religious traditions, not just Tibetan Buddhism. On this ground, I take a Durkheimian turn to look upon religion as a system of collective representation (Pickering 1984:295), in which the preservation and expression of genuine charisma is not the sole action of a given personality but is “a relationship, a mutual mingling of the inner selves of the leader and followers” (Lindholm 1990:7). From this angle, charisma is a collective register that is an inherent part of the sacred that a given collective constituency reveres. From his Durkheimian perspective, Lindholm notes, “…a venerated leader is less a person than the ‘group incarnate and personified’” (ibid. 32).

Returning to my earlier discussion on the sacred attributes of totemic beings, I discern that the charismatic bond of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche with his monastic community and pilgrims qualitatively resembles that of a totemic bond. In Durkheim’s analysis, the totemic being and its human counterpart reside in one entity which shares the same sacred character. With this shared sacred character, the individual member of a totemic community has a “double nature” (1915. 157): two beings co-exist within him, a man and a totemic being, or the mundane and the supermundane. Through the community, the totemic being is ushered into the human fellowship in which the totemic being and its human counterpart “are made of the same flesh” (ibid. 157). It is the totem which makes the unity or the solidarity of a given social group and, in turn, the group also embodies the sacred character of the totem. Durkheim’s logic lies in the fact that the sacred character of the totem unites all members of the group based on their “feeling of resemblance” (ibid. 171) between the totemic being and its group members. In this manner, the sacred content of the totemic being unimpededly circulates among the members of the totemic community. The totemic quality that each member holds is identical to that of the totemic being himself, as Durkheim remarks, “When a sacred thing is subdivided, each of its parts remains equal to the thing itself…the part is equal to the whole…It has the same powers” (ibid. 261). This totemic “feeling of resemblance” is apposite to the tantric practice of the Buddhist goal, that is, the enlightened state of being which is qualitatively the same as that of the historical Buddha. One of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s admonitions to pilgrims states, “If you only look upon your teacher as a person, your achievement will be only the achievement of a dog. If you revere your teacher as a Buddha, you will have the achievement of a Buddha.”
Although the ultimate state of Buddhist achievement transcends dualities of all sorts, such as the sacred and the profane, and this world and the other world, Tibetan Buddhism on the ground level is represented in the expressions of the sacred, demarcating itself from the mundane world. In this sense, genuine charisma in the case of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche is a collective representation of the Buddhist sacred. Franck Pearce remarks, “the sacredness of sacred beings is an effect of collective representations—‘sacred beings exist only in and through their representations’ (Durkheim 1915:349)—and, these in turn are tied into collective practices” (Pearce 2001:212).

Obviously, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche as a tulku is more a collective entity rather than a private person because he is an embodiment of a distinct set of Buddhist collective memories and knowledge. As a collective entity or a totemic being, he can be seen as “a transpersonal, spiritual being,” as Eric Neumann remarks on the transpersonality of totem, “He is transpersonal because, although an animal, a plant, or whatever else, he is such not as an individual entity, not as a person, but as an idea, a species…” (Neumann 1964:145). In regard to Tibetan tulkus, the locus of this spiritual species is not exclusively within their personalities; instead, it is what Charles Lindholm calls “the inner content of the charismatic character” (Lindholm 1990:24). In the cultural history of Tibetan tulkus, the hagiography of a tulku mostly underscores his inner content rather than his familial ancestry. Herein, the inner content is synonymous with the lineage of the tulku. In contrast to the genre of conventional biography, it is the essential function of hagiography to highlight the sacred content of a given hallowed individual, as shown in various religious traditions of the world. Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s short hagiography written by Lama Gyatso, Noshil’s distinguished khenpo, precisely fits this religious narrative genre. Lama Gyatso writes:

…that day, people saw a rainbow emerge in the sky. Meanwhile, they also heard sounds of conch shells and saw large snowflakes and other auspicious signs. Unrivaled conviction arose from their minds…A baby tulku was born on that day. The birthplace was a sacred abode of Padmasambhava. The tulku’s father was Padma Tserang; his mother was Tseyang Lhamo, a woman without defilement. It was this couple who gave birth to an extraordinary infant, born with his head up and in the cross-legged position in the morning of the fifteenth day of the fourth month in the Wooden Monkey year. Fragrance, rainbows, eagles, and other wondrous signs accompanied the birth of the baby tulku. The family members were all astounded with this amazing infant. His father named him Sangye Tserang. Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, the baby tulku’s previous incarnation, once in the middle of performing an initiation, sadly remarked, “After I die, I will be reborn in Gongpo area. My body, speech, and consciousness will be entirely committed to this rebirth. But, elder khenpos at Kathok Monastery may not take care of this old man (himself), while the young khenpos are unable to do so. What shall I do?” At the time, the young Chadral Rinpoche beseeched him, “When you’re reborn in Gongpo, please let me take the responsibility to recognize and enthrone your reincarnation!”

As Khenpo Ngawang Palzang prophesied, his reincarnation had a celebratory birth. Chadral Rinpoche did what he promised: he identified and enthroned the baby tulku. Unarguably, the birth of a tulku in Tibet is a public event with cross-
references such as prophecies and official recognitions from honorable monastic elders. Throughout Lama Gyatso’s hagiographic narrative, the baby tulku’s parents only appear in the beginning while the rest of it is centered on the details of the extraordinary qualities of Sangye Tserang Rinpoche. He is a communal hierophany or the manifestation of the sacred (Eliade 1959:11-12).

Returning to the theoretical significance of the idea of genuine charisma, the Tibetan case I have presented so far compels us to look at a new consideration for the life-span of charisma not as a linear one as Weber discerns but as a continuously rejuvenated inner process of a religious community. As a spiritual species, the inner content or the genuine charisma of a tulku is a collective body of Buddhist liberative knowledge. Thus, it is an idea which is expressed as a communally-binding force. I share the same sentiment as Lindholm who describes the force of charisma as “a strong force; it binds people together in ways that transcend and transmogrify the sense of the follower, and quite possibly, the self of the leader as well” (Lindholm 1990:7). In this sense, genuine charisma is a re-process—that is, re-counting, re-collecting, re-visiting, re-newing, and re-celebrating. It is a matter of bringing the presence of the past to the present, a call for regaining a paradise lost. Thus, the nascent moment of charisma is the moment of renewal as well as the moment of thorough newness breathing spiritual inspiration into those who are in contact with it, not in the past but in the present sense.

THE INTERIOR BEING OF THE CHARISMATIC IN THE MONASTIC SYSTEM OF TULKUS

Weber treats genuine charisma and tradition as two opposing forces, and in their interactive process, tradition seems to have the upper hand that eventually transforms genuine charisma into a common sight framed in an institution. According to him, the merger of genuine charisma with tradition is tantamount to the routinization of the revolutionary nature of genuine charisma, as he says, “…the charismatic message inevitably becomes dogma, doctrine, theory, regiment, law or petrified tradition” (Weber 1978:1122). In the Buddhist history of Tibet, monasteries, especially since the ninth century onward, have been centered upon tulkus, both known and lesser known. This historical phenomenon is an integral part of the monastic system that ensures the successions of tulkus. This aspect of the monastic system has truly transformed the charisma of tulkus into a conspicuous tradition that is now globally known, as demonstrated in the 14th Dalai Lama and other tulkus propagating Tibetan Buddhism in the West. This tradition of tulkus does possess its dogma and rules; however, it is not petrified as Weber’s typologized assessment of the routinized charisma indicates. Instead, the tradition of Tibetan tulkus utilizes monastic institutional resources to guarantee the renewal of the Buddhist genuine charisma. Thus, unlike Weber’s idea of charismatic education as part and parcel of routinization process, charismatic education in Tibetan case is a rejuvenation process.

Siddhe Lama, a beloved tantric master in the Dudjom lineage based in Dorkha Monastery of Golok, passed away in 2001. Two years later, among five candidates, the monastery chose Hwaden Dzashi, a three-year-old boy of nomadic origin as the reincarnation of Siddhe Lama. Dorkha Monastery is situated in Gamde County, the poorest area of contemporary Golok. Like Sangye Tserang Rinpoche, Siddhe Lama was also imprisoned by the Chinese state for nearly two decades, and
meanwhile his monastery suffered from destruction. Now, Dorkha is still slowly recovering from the past destruction. In spite of the lack of resources, the monastery has shown its utmost effort to care for and provide Hwaden Dzashi with tantric instructions based on Siddhe Lama’s lineage. The team of his instructors and caretakers consists of Siddhe Lama’s four of his intimate disciples and Hwaden Dzashi’s parents.

In the summer of 2003, shortly after Hwaden Dzashi’s enthronement as Siddhe Lama’s reincarnation, monastic elders, his instructors, and a group of lay devotees crammed into Hwaden Dzashi’s parents’ tiny home, a lone house on a vast grassland. Upon seeing Hwaden Dzashi, several devotees began to weep as if they had found their long-lost parents in the body of a three-year-old boy. After the weeping quieted down, in the midst of recounting their memories of Siddhe Lama, monastic elders began to discuss Hwaden Dzashi’s monastic training. In the next few hours, a decision was reached that Hwaden Dzashi would be relocated to the monastery with Gedri, his mother. In the meantime, the division of labor was assessed among his instructors. Ani Lhajam, a nun renowned for her mastery of tantric rituals, and Yogi Deñie, a disciple and nephew of the late Siddhe Lama, are responsible for imparting ritual knowledge to Hwaden Dzashi.

The monks, Khenpo Genden and Shambha teach him literacy and textual recitation. Because of his extensive connections with pilgrims from urban China and abroad, Janangara Rinpoche, an intimate disciple of Siddhe Lama, is expected to do fundraising for Hwaden Dzashi’s monastic upbringing. Toward the end of this meeting, a small donation from lay devotees was allotted to building a small cabin on the monastery ground as Hwaden Dzashi’s new residence.

Charismatic education, in the case of Hwaden Dzashi, is a demanding process for a young boy. His childhood is mostly not being spent with his peers. Instead, he is being disciplined as an adult monk, who, after rising at 5:30 daily, begins his training with his teachers. This demanding process is the monastery’s collective work to reinstitute in Hwaden Dzashi what his predecessor had mastered. When his childish playfulness disrupts his training, he is dealt with spanking by Khenpo Genden and Shambha. In addition to his daily training at Dorkha Monastery, he also takes pilgrimage trips to receive teachings from other tantric teachers in the same lineage. In late fall 2006, Hwaden Dzashi, with the entourage of his monastic instructors, participated in an initiation for the first Dudjom Rinpoche’s teachings. Tulku Otse, one of the very few teachers in Dudjom lineage in Golok, performed the initiation. An initiation usually consists of two parts, namely hung (dwang) and lhong (lung). Hung in Tibetan means authorization or being given permission to practice, while lhong (lung) means lineage of teachings. For Tulku Otse’s initiation, it took seven days for the completion of hung and ten days for lhong. Each day the initiation started at 6:00am and ended at 8:00pm. It is particularly worthwhile to mention that the process of lhong was literally the reading, by Tulku Otse, of the first Dudjom Rinpoche’s teachings verbatim from a twenty-one volume set. It was a tedious process; however, within the ten days, the teachings of the first Dudjom Rinpoche’s entire lifetime were condensed and pumped into initiates. This concentrated dose of teachings is meant to be recollected and reactivated continually in the initiates’ practice throughout their life time. Hwaden Dzashi returned to Dorkha Monastery with the twenty-one volumes of the first Dudjom Rinpoche’s teachings, getting ready for new lessons.
For the last three years of rigorous training, Hwaden Dzashi has begun to show a charisma that he did not have when he was three and that boys in his age do not possess. Nomads in the vicinity are now regularly coming to him for blessings. According to Weber, genuine charisma is an inner quality of the charismatic. In Hwaden Dzashi’s case, this inner quality is embodied in him but its recollection is a collective process. From my Durkheimian perspective, I see this inner quality as an “interior being” of the collective body of Buddhists, which is an inherent property of the historical Buddha’s genuine charisma. Durkheim uses “the interior being” to delineate the sacred dimension of “the totemic animal and man” (1915:151), which is unitive and collective in nature as its sacredness bind together the entire totemic community. In other occasions, he refers to the interior being simply as “the principle of life which animates it: this is the soul” (ibid.274). From this perspective, it is not exaggerating to say that the inner contents of tulkus are the soul of Tibetan Buddhism. In this Durkheimian sociological framework, this collective soul can be best described as “the social fact” which constitutes “the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively” (Durkheim 1982:54), and expresses “a certain state of the collective mind” (ibid. 55) because of the transpersonal nature of this animating soul. Thinking in line with Durkheim’s sociology of religion, I also discern tulkus as an “extreme immateriality of social facts” (Pickering 2000:45). It is because the interior being of the tulku does not perish while its numerous, successive bodies are subject to the birth and death like all other sentient beings. Moreover, this interior being is collective in nature, representing memories of the Buddha’s teachings. Its reinstitution in a young tulku requires the monastic system’s sustained nurturing and training in a collective fashion, as shown in the case of Hwaden Dzashi.

It is agreed among most scholars of Tibetan studies that Tibetan monasticism is committed to the continuation of the historical Buddha’s teachings and the perpetuation of this monastic tradition among the lay population of Tibet (Goldstein 1991, Thurman 1995). It is also agreed that Tibetan monasticism is indisputably an institution that possesses similar features resembling those of secular organizations, i.e. rules and regulations, personnel hierarchy, top-down style of distribution of resources, and mechanisms dealing with financial insecurity. These features of Tibetan monasticism could indeed routinize and eventually end charisma from Weber’s point of view because these circumstances fit Weber’s notion of routinization which takes effect when charisma in status nascendi becomes “a concrete historical structure” and “is often transformed beyond recognition” (Weber 1978:1121). To Weber, these characteristics of an institution reflect “the conditions of everyday life” (ibid. 1121-1122) and the worldly powers whose responsibility is predictably assumed for its eventual domination over genuine charisma. To Weber, routinized charisma is the charisma that is alienated from its essence or purity which is “revolutionary” and yet “unstable” (ibid. 1121). This assessment has largely to do with Weber’s conceptualization of charismatic attributes as personal, not transpersonal and not transgenerational as shown in the case of Tibetan tulkus. This generic model of charismatic studies has been widely applied in various case studies, such as of Gandhi, Mao, Hitler, and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. It is understandable that these case studies focus on the person-centered charisma because these charismatic individuals do not possess a trans-
generational lineage resembling that of a tulku. To widen the theoretical scope of charisma studies, I take Philip Smith’s cultural perspective that advocates the contextualization of the charismatic within a specific cultural structure (Smith 2000:101-111). In his cultural analysis of charisma, Smith recognizes a distinct religion-based cultural structure that tends “to mark out charisma from routine deviance, suggesting that the charismatic is the bearer of a transcendent, positive essence” (ibid.103). To add, a cultural structure, which is saturated with the moral and spiritual values and practices of a world religion, seems to safeguard rather than deprive the transcendental essence of charisma.

The monastic system of Tibetan Buddhism, as von Brück points out, primarily sustains “the scriptural tradition” and the “reincarnated lama (Tulku, sprul sku), who embodies lineages of tradition that have shaped a specific monastic interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism and social allegiance that has given Tibetan Buddhism in its (regional) coherence” (2001:330). To add, in my ethnographic observation, the sustainability and the interpretation of scriptural tradition in Tibetan monastic system is largely upheld by successions of tulkus. Again, the crucial function of a tulku in a monastery lies in his interior being as a bodhisattva or a Buddhist spiritual being who has the freedom to choose his or her rebirth in the sentient realm for the fulfillment of his previous bodhisattva vows to liberate sentient beings from agony in the cycle of the birth and death (ibid. 333). As von Brück puts it simply, “The tulku is a physical manifestations of higher levels of consciousness” (ibid.332) and “a personalized expression of the cumulative tradition” (ibid.334). From this Buddhist spiritual angle, each new reincarnation of a tulku in a new person is also a moment of renewal in a given lineage. The monastic charismatic education, as shown in Hwaden Dzashi’s case, is primarily responsible for the actual process of the renewal of his lineage in a new human body.

THE TRANSMISSIBILITY OF THE INNER QUALITY OF TULKUS
As a cultural anthropologist, I am wary of essentialist pitfalls in both scholarly and popular realms of Tibetan Buddhist fans. The works of Trungpa Rinpoche (1973), Donald Lopez (1997), Orville Schell (2000) coincidently criticize the fantasized images of Tibetan tulkus in literature, cinematography, and Tibetan Buddhist communities in the West, which mystify and typecast Tibetan tulkus as a category of spiritual virtuosos who are above and beyond the reach of common people. This religious cultural phenomenon, in my view, corresponds to what Liah Greenfield deems the “unreflective imitation of the excited behavior of others” (Greenfield 1985:127). This has little to do with the actual life and the religious function of lineage-based tulkus. Truly, tulkus are charismatic; however, their charisma is not based upon “blind faith” (Madsen and Snow 1991:6-7) and epileptic seizure (Lindholm 1990:26). My point is to reemphasize the impersonal but spiritual quality of tulkus’ genuine charisma, and, in the meantime, to make an argument that the inner quality of tulkus is entirely transmissible, meaning that anyone who seriously wishes to acquire it will eventually become a tulku or a tulku-like Buddhist teacher. In other words, the transmission does not have to be vertically done from the previous incarnation to the current incarnation; instead, it is acquired through one’s disciplined practice. This argument is based on my experience with current popular Tibetan teachers who were not recognized as tulkus to start with, but who
have been retroactively recognized as tulkus when they become popularly acknowledged as teachers of spiritual achievement by both their monastic traditions and lay adherents.

Chadrul Choyang Rinpoche, popularly known as Akha Choyang, is a very popular lama in both eastern Khams and Golok. He is a modern exemplar of *ris med* or non-sectarian movement of Tibetan Buddhism. Although he is a Geluk monk, he is nevertheless better known for his received and practiced teachings from Nyingmapa, Jonangpa, and Sakya. Most of his teachers were and are Tibetan tantric luminaries, such as the 4th Dodzechin Rinpoche, Visionary Dorji Dzadu (the youngest son of the first Dudjom Rinpoche), Mensor Rinpoche, Siddhe Lama, and Jana Benn of Jonangpa. Akha Choyang was born in a nomadic family in Gamde, Golok in 1945. In 1958 when he was fourteen years old, the Chinese military “liberated” Golok. It was this year when he took a vow of silence. For the next twenty years he lived as a wanderer and a vagabond who dug through trash for leftovers. He was often drafted by the Chinese as a janitor and a road construction worker. He was robbed and beaten many times. Prior to the mid-1980s, he was already well-known not as a highly venerated lama but as the pitifully “deaf and crazy monk” in Golok among both Tibetans and Chinese who had no idea about what it meant to take a vow of silence. Buddhism then was forbidden and forgotten. In my interview with Tibetans who lived through that time period, many of them recalled Akha Choyang as the most filthy and piteous person in Golok. Darje, the first Communist governor of Golok, recollected that his office personnel often called in Akha Choyang to do cleaning and to transport construction materials. In Darje’s reminiscence, Akha Choyang never resisted; instead, he always had a smile on his face. When he needed to communicate with Darje’s staff, he would write what he needed on a piece of paper. One of Darje’s assistants once proposed to have “this deaf and dumb monk” cured in the hospital as “a merciful deed of Chinese socialism.”

However, twenty years later, this “deaf” monk cured himself—he began to speak and to show the true color of his tantric practices. As a matter of fact, beneath the popular picture of him as a “deaf and crazy” monk, he had been a firm tantric practitioner. His vow of silence afforded him an inner freedom from the destructive forces at that time, and shrouded him from forced activities such as weekly political studies and the “class struggle” sessions in which tulkus and well-known lamas were the targets of both symbolic and physical violence. Tsewang Norbu, an intimate disciple of Akha Choyang and a famed contemporary writer, narrated to me that his teacher slept on charnel grounds and wore dead people’s clothing during his twenty-year silence. To Tsewang Norbu, his teacher is an achieved modern tantric yogi under the most abject conditions. Although Akha Choyang is no longer a “deaf and crazy monk,” he still retains the style of a wanderer. Unlike other well-known lamas, he does not wrap himself in spiffy robes made out of exquisite fabrics and does not have a large entourage of monastic assistants. Since I met him in 2002, I have seen him travel like a wandering monk with a tiny tent. He receives offerings but gives them away to the poor and the needy. Among his Chinese devotees from coastal China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Akha Choyang is equated with the monk Jigong, a legendary late 19th-century Chinese Ch’an monk who violated all the monastic rules he could and yet performed miracles
helping the poor and the suffering. This image-association is in fact not accurate, as Akha Choyang is fully a precept-bound monk. Unlike the legendary Jigong, he does not drink nor does he cultivate relationships with women. In the summer of 2006, when I visited Akha Choyang, he was working at a construction site with monks and lay people; however, this time, he was building his own monastery. While working at the monastic construction site, he also received a constant flow of pilgrims who were seeking blessings from him. Whether rich or poor, he equally gives blessings. One morning, in a period of two hours, Akha Choyang received a Jonangpa lama who sought advice on reading Kalachakra texts; accepted wool yarns as offerings from a family who owns a small rug business in town; comforted a nomad who lost his yaks, and blessed a brand-new SUV driven by its well-to-do owner.

Although not as popular as Akha Choyang, Janangara Rinpoche, one of Hwaden Dzashi’s instructors, has traversed a similar path in terms of seeking tantric teachings from various teachers in eastern Khams and Golok, and eventually became a tulku-like teacher. We have been close friends since 2001 when we met in Sertar, Khams. Born in 1974 in a Han Chinese family in Shanxi Province, he lost his mother when he was five years old. At the age of fourteen, he became a monk in a Chinese monastic order. His Dharma name then was Wuzhu which means “non-attachment.” After reading the entire Mahayana Buddhist canon in less than two years, Wuzhu was profoundly touched by the Buddha’s teachings. He had many questions and thoughts regarding the methods for and the state of enlightenment; however, there were no peers around him who were in the similar stage of practice; neither did he find monastic elders who were caring enough to listen to his inquiries and reflections. On the contrary, some elders, out of their jealousy, rather looked down upon him as an annoyance. He decided to leave the monastery as soon as he heard about Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s Buddhist academy in Khams. He was sixteen years old when he arrived on the campus of the academy. Under the guidance of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and the instructions from Khenpo Soudarji who was in charge of teaching non-Tibetan students, he quickly excelled as a bright learner. In addition to completing tantric assignments, he also learned both spoken and written Tibetan so well that he was often taken as one of the local Tibetans when he spoke. Within two years, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok conferred upon him the title of khenpo qualifying him as a teacher. In early 1995 when he visited Dragmgo Mdomang Monastery near Sertar, Tulku Tishtha, the abbot there, was so astonished by Wuzhu’s accomplishment as a non-Tibetan that he bestowed upon him the title Vadjra Acharya. In the fall of the same year, he traveled to Dorkha Monastery where he took discipleship with Siddhe Lama. He lived there until the passing of Siddhe Lama in 2001. During the six years at Dorkha, he received the full teachings of the first Dudjom Rinpoche from Siddhe Lama. Toward the end of his life, Siddhe Lama took in Wuzhu as an essence-disciple whose achievement was regarded as the same as his teacher. From Siddhe Lama, Wuzhu received his current Dharma name Acharya Janangara. Siddhe Lama’s affection for his essence-disciple did not stop there. Before Siddhe Lama passed away in spring 2001, he enjoined Janangara to inherit his position as the thirty-ninth abbot of Dorkha Monastery. The following year, Janangara was formally enthroned as the new abbot. Now, he is also an instructor of Hwaden Dzashi, his teacher’s reincarnation.
In the Tibetan Buddhist context, the purpose of charismatic education, on one hand, is a regeneration process for the spiritual maturity of a newly-recognized tulku. On the other hand, I also see charismatic education is a self-initiated quest for the Buddhist enlightenment but it is situated within and sanctioned by the monastic system of Tibetan Buddhism. Most crucially, charismatic education in the Tibetan context is open to everyone who is willing to enter the tantric realm with voluntarily-accepted monastic disciplines as shown in the case of both Akha Choyang and Janangara Rinpoche. Their charisma is qualitatively the same as those who were recognized as tulkus when they were toddlers or infants. The difference is that both Akha Choyang and Janangara Rinpoche did not have a team of assigned instructors when they were young boys. Instead, they searched for their teachers as seekers and practitioners. Their achievement is a subsequent effect of their sustained practice but not based on a prior recognition with immediate positive sanction from their lineage-related monastic systems.

The Tibetan monastic system in the context of contemporary Nyingmapa in Khams and Golok is, on one hand, responsible for educating lineage-based young tulkus, and, on the other hand, its seemingly worldly structure, in terms of finance and bureaucracy, also makes charismatic education available for those who voluntarily take tutelage under their chosen monastic teachers. This aspect of Nyingma monastery coincides with Goldstein’s and Paljor Tsarong’s field research on a monastic settlement in Ladakh, India. In their observation, the Tibetan monastic system is not merely a “theocracy,” a stereotypical term characterizing its charismatic authority as a type of political structure based on the institution of the Dalai Lama. In their findings, Goldstein and Paljor Tsarong emphatically recognize the Tibetan monastic system as “one of human history’s most ambitious and radical and social psychological experiments…” and as “a cultural template” (Goldstein and Paljor Tsarong 1985:17), in which the ideals of Buddhism are rigorously cultivated. Of course, not every monk would become a charismatic teacher; however, this does not rule out the horizontal transmissibility of the inner quality of tulkus to non-tulkus. The case of Akha Choyang and Janangara Rinpoche is not an exception from the rule but is one of the results from the imperative practice of the Tibetan monastic system whose endeavor is to train all possible participants toward the regeneration of exemplary teachers of Buddhism.

**POSTSCRIPT—THE SYMBIOSIS OF RELIGIOUS GENUINE CHARISMA AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

For nearly half a century, charisma studies in North America have mostly focused on magnetic figures in the political arena and short-lived New Age communes. The most prolific era of charisma studies were between the 1960s and 1980s. This time period coincided with the geopolitical dualistic positioning of large nation-states, during the Cold War. It also reflected the general ethos of North America at the time, which could be characterized as the “culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1978) as North Americans were experiencing a collectively-felt sense of identity crisis in the midst of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the popular spiritual experiments with psychoactive sacraments and gurus of alternative belief systems. Following on Lasch, Lindholm describes the era of narcissism in terms of a popular “convulsive search for pleasure and stimulation to compensate for a lost sense of
vitality and meaning…” (1990:84). In response to these international and domestic political and psychological conditions, charisma studies produced copious theoretical literature; however, to a large extent, many of them, aligning with Weber’s typology of charisma, reified charisma mostly as personality attributes (Csordas 1997:136). Key words in charisma studies, such as “seizure,” “blind faith,” and “unreflective imitation,” frequently appeared in the scholarly conceptualization of charisma. Charisma studies were obviously conditioned with social and psychological upheavals. Arthur Schweitzer’s The Age of Charisma (1984) was representative of that era. In essence, its varieties of charisma did not deviate from Weber’s typology except in different nomenclatures. Resembling Weber’s demarcation, Schweitzer’s conception of charisma was limited to personality qualities. His list of the twentieth-century charismatics, such as Nehru, Mao, and John F. Kennedy, reflected the geopolitical landscape of the time. The rise and the fall of these charismatic individuals perfectly fit Weber’s linear developmental model of charisma from the nascent stage to routinization and decline. Works on religious charisma at the time, particularly situated in established ecclesiastic systems, were rare.

Tambiah (1984), Glassman and Swatos (1986), Lindholm (1990), and Csordas (1997), are the exceptional few who have gone beyond Weberian typology by linking charisma with other theoretical traditions such as Durkheim’s collective conscience, Mauss’ idea of collective spirit embedded in gift exchange, and Codrington’s use of mana. My effort in this article, along with this group of scholars, is made to denominalize and decenter charisma from the personality of the leader (Csordas 1997:138). At the same time, it is also meant to de-typologize charisma by contextualizing the charismatic in his cultural, religious, and political milieu. Like Tambiah, I also find that tradition and pure charisma in the context of Buddhist traditions are not necessarily diametrically opposing to one another. In Tambiah’s association of the Theravada saints of the forest with the Buddhist traditional idea of arahantship, and my observation of Tibetan tulkus and their monastic system, the relationship between traditional institution and genuine charisma can be also understood in symbiotic terms. The genuine charisma of both Theravada arahants and Tibetan tulkus are inextricably part and parcel of the traditionally-conceived and scripturally-sanctioned image of the historical Buddha. Both Theravada saints and Tibetan tulkus acquire their charisma through their respective monastic systems responsible for charismatic education. Thus, charisma in this Buddhist context is the result of the symbiotic effort of the charismatic and the institution where he is situated.

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Fig. 1 Нoshil Monastery in eastern Kham

Fig. 2 Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, Sangye Tserang Rinpoche’s previous incarnation (Нoshil Monastery archival photo)
Fig. 3 Sangye Tserang Rinpoche

Fig. 4 Padma Sambhava’s handprint on the precipice of Ňoshil’s sacred Mountain
Fig. 5 Infant Sangye Tserang Rinpoche held by his mother flanked by his father (left), Chadrel Rinpoche (middle) and other monks. Monastic archival photo

Fig. 6 Hwaden Dzashi, the reincarnation of the late Siddhe Lama, at age five, in Golok, 2005.
Fig. 7 The late Siddhe Lama with Ani Lhajam, one of his essence-disciples, in 1996. (from Ani Lhajam’s personal photo collections)

Fig. 8 Three-year-old Hwaden Dzashi with Akha Rigsum, Ani Lhajam, and Janangara Rinpoche (right to left), three intimate disciples of the late Siddhe Lama, 2003
Fig. 9 Hwaden Dzashi with his father Solan, in front of his house, 2003

Fig. 10 Hwaden Tashi receives tantric instructions from Yogi Deñie, 2006

Fig. 11 Tulku Otse performing Dudjom lineage initiation in Golok, 2006
Fig. 12 Hwaden Tashi met with one of the first Dudjom Rinpoche’s descendents at Tulku Otse’s initiation in Golok, 2006.

Fig. 13 Akha Choyang receiving pilgrims, 2006

Fig. 14 Akha Choyang working at his monastic construction site, 2006
Fig. 15 Janangara Rinpoche in Golok, 2005

Fig. 16 Akha Choyang’s young monastic students in Golok, 2006