

Kalimpong, Gergan Dorje Tharchin, and his *Mirror* newspaper

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Like Tashkent a thousand years earlier, Kalimpong of the twentieth century was one of those cultural junctures — the meeting place of age-old civilizations and a crossing over point between radically different worlds. Below and to the south lay the jungles and lowlands of British India and most prominently of all, Calcutta, where hill-stations such as Kalimpong met their commercial port, where the whole population of India — Lepchas, Nepalis, Bengalis, British, Chinese, Malaysians and a whole host of traders, missionaries, soldiers and bureaucrats — daily swarmed over each other in pursuit of their lofty and not-so-lofty goals. Above and to the north lay the mountain ranges of Tibet, a kingdom like no other, perched atop the high Himalayas, a monastic haven far above the mundane world below, a place that six million people called “home”; from the narrow valleys of Ladakh and Guge near Kaśmir in the west, to the wide open plains of Amdo and the Chang-tang on the border of China to the east, Tibet was an ethereal, 1.2 million square kilometer land-mass whose natural borders were visible from space. Kalimpong was where these two worlds met.

Called “Da-ling Kote” by the local Bhutias after the old fort on the 4,000 ft. ridge line, for most of its pre-history, Kalimpong was little more than the stockade (“*pong*”) of a Bhutanese minister (“*Kalön*”). It was only with the annexation of the area by the British in the late-19th century with the hopes of opening trade routes did the small village formed around the ruins of the old fort begin to grow. In the wake of the 1904 Younghusband invasion of Tibet, Kalimpong took on greater significance as trading post as the wool trade shifted markets from the administrative capital of the region, Darjeeling, to its new economic capital, Kalimpong, being slightly closer the Tibetan passes of Jelep-la and Nathu-la, with easy transport south to Calcutta for shipping to the textile mills of England and eventually, America.

Though still in many aspects a trading post and missionary enclave, by the early twentieth century Kalimpong had much to offer a Tibetophile. Most notably, Kalimpong was home to the only Tibetan language newspaper in the world, *The Mirror* or “Me-long,” as it was known in Tibetan. It was also home to the newspaper’s editor and the *de facto* center of the Tibetan ex-patriot community in Kalimpong, Dorje Tharchin, known affectionately to all and sundry as Tharchin Babu.

Tharchin was a unique man. Born in 1890 in the village of Pu (*spu*) in the Khunu region of Spiti (*spi ti*), Tharchin was the son of one of only a handful of Moravian Christian converts in the western Tibetan borderlands of Spiti, and had spent the early years of his life in Khunu being educated in missionary schools (taught in a mixture of Tibetan and Urdu). With the death of his parents in the early years of the century,

Tharchin finally left his village at the age of twenty. During the years that followed, Tharchin earned money as a common laborer spending his time between Delhi and the British “summer capital” of Simla at the mouth of the Kulu valley, and by the late 1910’s Tharchin was fully ensconced in his identity as a Christian and could often be found preaching in one of the cities’ local bazaars.

Accepting a job at the Ghoom Mission School outside of Darjeeling, Tharchin taught Tibetan and Hindi at a Christian school belonging to the Scandanavian Alliance Mission. By 1917, Tharchin had managed to secure a Government scholarship to attend school and so relocated himself to Kalimpong to enter into the “Teacher Training” program being operated by the Scottish Union Mission. Having recently published two small Tibetan language primers, a *Tibetan Primer with Simple Rules of Correct Spelling* and *The Tibetan Second Book*, his knowledge of Tibetan brought him to the notice of W.S. Sutherland, a missionary who had spent the better part of forty years in the area of Kalimpong running a combination orphanage and missionary school, who quickly put Tharchin to work teaching Tibetan to a mixture of Bhutia and Tibetan boys in the orphanage.

Despite all these activities and events, Tharchin continued his proselytizing throughout Sikkim, as well as serving as a Tibetan translator for embassies to Bhutan and Sikkim. It was during this time, as well, that Tharchin began to forge friendships with many of the high ranking Tibetan and British dignitaries who passed through the region on a regular basis and various current and future members of the Tibetan government, and relatives of the various aristocratic houses. In the midst of these activities he commenced work on what would be his greatest achievement, eventually earning him worldwide notoriety.

It was on one occasion, in August of 1925 while working for Sutherland’s successor at the Scottish Union Mission, John Graham, that Tharchin noticed “a Roneo Duplicator lying idle in the office of Dr. Graham” and asked him if he could take it, thinking to produce his own newspaper in Tibetan. Graham offered it to Tharchin, though offered little encouragement saying that his office staff had failed to get it working the entire time they had had it. Nonetheless, undaunted, Tharchin began tinkering with the duplicator in an attempt to get it working. After two months of work in his spare time, Tharchin was finally greeted with success, and on October 10th, 1925, Tharchin produced the first issue of his very own Tibetan language newspaper, “The Mirror — News From Various Regions” (*yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur gyi me long*). Following a brief hiatus, Tharchin commenced regular publication of his newspaper the following February with monthly issues to follow, and while receiving encouragement and advice from all around, his first real commendation came a year later, when he received a letter from His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama accompanied by a gift of twenty rupees stating that he was receiving Tharchin’s newspaper, “was very glad and added to continue it and send more news which would be very useful to him.”

Encouraged by this, Tharchin began to think of himself more and more as a newspaperman, expanding the scope of the newspaper beyond the simple relaying of news from other sources to the production of news content himself. With these goals in mind, Tharchin petitioned the Tibetan Government for permission to visit Lhasa as a reporter. With permission received, on August 20th, 1927, Tharchin headed for Gyantse, and from there left for Lhasa to conduct the first important interview of his career — an interview with His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Arriving in Lhasa a month later, Tharchin remained self-conscious about his broken Tibetan -- the result of having grown-up in borderlands of Tibet -- and spent the better part of the next three months attempting to improve his speaking abilities before finally applying for an audience with His Holiness in mid-December. Success achieved, Tharchin returned to India the following February, receiving 100 rupees along the way from the British Political Officer at Gyantse, Arthur Hopkinson, to support him in the continued publication of the newspaper. By June, the Scottish Mission had received a new Litho Press, which Dr. Graham made available for Tharchin to use, and sending Tharchin to Calcutta to receive training in its use, Graham allowed him to use the press to produce his newspaper as part of his official duties at the Mission.

Although Tharchin had begun his newspaper with only fourteen subscriptions, by the third year his subscriptions were close to fifty, but Tharchin was still sending more than a hundred issues freely to officials in the Tibetan government although more than half of those were usually “lost” along the way by the Tibetan Post Office. These, however, were the least of Tharchin’s troubles and his greater opposition during these years came less from officials in Tibet, than from more hard-line missionaries who would soon appear in Kalimpong, in particular, Dr. Graham’s replacement at the Mission, the Australian missionary, Rev. Knox. Despite the often prominent and unsubtle “articles” on Christianity that appear in the pages of the *Mirror* with regularity, Knox was not favorably disposed to Tharchin’s activities as a newspaper editor, and shortly after arriving in Kalimpong brought an end to the subsidization of the *Mirror* — both in terms of material resources and Tharchin’s time. By the early-1930s, Tharchin had managed to stabilize the publication of his newspaper, although was constantly in search of new subscribers and advertising to underwrite his publication costs. It was thus with a certain degree of trepidation that Tharchin rejoined the Scottish Guild Mission in Kalimpong under Rev. Knox as “Tibetan Catechist,” agreeing to accept strict limits on his official activities in exchange for a salary. While there was little love lost between Tharchin and Knox, the position allowed Tharchin to continue his publication efforts, although eventually their differences would prove irreconcilable and they would part ways, with Tharchin pursuing his newspaper work on his own.

Over the next twenty-five years, Tharchin remained hard at work publishing his newspaper. What had begun as a personal vision and occasional medium for Christian propaganda going into Tibet, and which later morphed into a Tibetan language chronicle

of world events (especially during World War II), by the 1950s became a vehicle for the fight for Tibetan freedom from the Chinese invasion and occupation. A major hub for information, Kalimpong and Tharchin's newspaper offices in particular became a clearinghouse for news about the ongoing Chinese aggression in Tibet. In his offices, Tharchin received handwritten accounts of military occupations and aerial bombardments of monasteries and villages in eastern Tibet, which he published along with illustrations. Even in crude cartoon form, the picture Tharchin painted for his audience of events transpiring in Tibet was sobering and hard to believe, and the accounts would only get worse. Over the years that followed, the events unfolding in Tibet and in the rest of central Asia took their toll in very human terms, and even those who escaped Tibet were not immune from their effects. On more than one occasion, Tharchin would find himself writing the obituary for someone he had known, and as with many of the articles that Tharchin authored for his paper, these editorial reports would carry a deeply personal touch.

By the early 1960s, with financial troubles that never seemed to end, Tharchin ceased publication of his newspaper (1963) despite being offered a substantial sum of money and guaranteed subscriptions by the Chinese authorities in Tibet if he would publish pro-Chinese articles in his paper. With the Tibetan exile community growing and Tibetan language newspapers such as *Freedom (rang dbang)* and others beginning to be published, Tharchin decided that he had done his part on the world stage, and instead turned to put his energies into an orphanage that he and his wife had begun running years earlier. As the years passed and the Tibet Mirror Press became little more than a small historical artifact of the streets of Kalimpong, the Tibet Mirror newspaper would become Tharchin's greatest achievement, an invaluable legacy and testimony to the abilities of one man and to a once free and independent Tibet.

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