

Celebrating the Men-Tsee-Khang's 100th Anniversary*

12-13 September 2016

A Report from Lhasa

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Tibetan medicine, also known as Sowa Rigpa (“the science of healing”), boasts a recorded history of well over 1000 years, and constitutes one of Asia’s great scholarly medical traditions. For centuries, it served a vast swath of Inner Asia and the Himalayas as the only professional, pharmaceutical health resource, providing effective care through a network of monasteries and local lineages of lay doctors. Since at least the late seventeenth century, however, Tibetan medicine’s scholarly center was Lhasa with its elite institutions, the “Chagpori Drophen Ling” founded in 1696 and the “Men-Tsee-Khang” founded in 1916. While the Chagpori institute was destroyed by Chinese military during the Lhasa uprising in 1959, the Men-Tsee-Khang (“House of Medicine and Astrology”) remains the most important and prestigious institution of Sowa Rigpa today. Its 100th year anniversary in 2016 thus marked an important event in the history of Tibetan medicine, which was taken not only as an occasion for celebration among its practitioners, but also as an opportunity to showcase Tibetan medicine’s development to wider, international audiences.

There are two main establishments of the Men-Tsee-Khang today: the original one in Lhasa, commonly referred to as the “Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang,” and the exile institution in Dharamsala, known in Tibet as the “Indian Men-Tsee-Khang.” The Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang today boasts a new 500-bed hospital and a busy outpatient clinic in Lhasa’s old town, together distributing

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous invitation by Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang to attend this event, and the outstanding treatment I received as a guest there. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Tenzin Lhundup for his untiring and kind assistance during my stay in Lhasa. The contents of the Chinese speeches reported here are derived from my notes of the official simultaneous translations provided by the organizers. Despite my best efforts, inaccuracies or misunderstandings are therefore possible, and should not be attributed to the speakers themselves. While fully funded by Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang, my attendance at this conference was part of my ongoing European Research Council Starting Grant project RATIMED (www.ratimed.net).

some 200 tons of medicines annually to mostly Tibetan patients. The Indian Men-Tsee-Khang, by contrast, is organized as a network of nearly 60 outpatient clinics across India and Nepal, and affiliate clinics in Russia, Europe and North America, distributing some 76 tons of medicines annually to over 600,000 mostly non-Tibetan patients. The Men-Tsee-Khang's centenary celebrations thus took place at two locations and three different events: in March 2016 in Dharamsala (see Barbara Gerke, this issue), and in August (see Katharina Sabernig, this issue) and September 2016 in Lhasa. While the August event in Lhasa was more international and academic, the one in September was the institute's actual celebration as well as a political event. This report is only concerned with the latter, which I attended upon the invitation of Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang.



Internal centenary celebrations at the old Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang, 12 September 2016 (Stephan Kloos 2016)

The Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang's internal celebration took place on 12 September 2016, at the premises of the institute's historical building and courtyard. This was a relaxed all-day event, with all senior doctors and staff present, much incense burning, Khatag giving, and socializing, but no official speeches. The official "Celebrating Conference for the 100th Anniversary of the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang and First International Tibetan Medicine Forum"

was held the next day, 13 September, at the Intercontinental Lhasa Paradise, a new five-star hotel resort on Lhasa's eastern outskirts. Virtually all senior Tibetan medical practitioners, experts, and officials from all Tibetan regions of China had been invited to attend the event, which was presided over not only by the Men-Tsee-Khang's top leadership, but also the Chairman of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and a number of other high officials. The conference was organized in two sections, the first with speeches by high medical and political representatives, the second with presentations by invited Tibetan, Chinese, and international experts.

Mrs. Yeshe Yangzom (Yixi Yangzong), the executive vice-president (i.e. director) of the "Traditional Hospital of the TAR" opened the conference with an overview report on the development of Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang over the past 100 years. According to her, the Men-Tsee-Khang began as a small institute established by Khyenrab Norbu in 1916, which "merged with the Chagpori institute during the democratic reforms in 1959." Since then, the Men-Tsee-Khang grew dramatically, from a single outpatient department with no beds to a large institution with 21 departments, 392 professional staff, 500 hospital beds, 340,000 outpatients per year, about 18 million CNY annual turnover, and over 300 million CNY in fixed assets. Men-Tsee-Khang's declared aim is to expand throughout China as well as globally.

Next, Mr. Yumba (Yinba), astrologer and vice-president of the Men-tee-hang (i.e. deputy director), presented a project on collecting historical Tibetan medical and astrological texts. In 2014, with the consent of the TAR Chairman, plans were made to acquire old texts from all over Tibet, scan and digitalize them, and use them for research. So far, a total of 130 volumes could be collected from the Potala palace, Drepung monastery, and the public, 46 of which are on astrology, the rest on medicine. This will be the first time that these texts are published and made accessible to the public.

The third speaker was Mr. Lobsang Chanzom (Luosang Jiangcun), Chairman of TAR, who pointed out that the Men-Tsee-Khang has made great contributions to the preservation of ethnic culture, while also providing services to the people. According to him, Tibetan medicine is an essential part of traditional Chinese culture, and, thanks to "Tibet's peaceful liberation and democratic reforms," it is now available to all rather than just aristocrats, as was the case under feudal serfdom. Today, the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang has become one of the foremost ethnic hospitals in China, and is the largest of thirty Tibetan medical hospitals in the TAR. Over all, Tibetan medicine is

the most important health provider in the TAR, and China's 12th Five Year Plan allocates over 800 million CNY for its development. Lobsang Chanzom further pointed out that Tibetan medicine epitomizes the achievements of the Tibetans and the Chinese Communist Party, and has a huge untapped economic potential. There exists official consensus that it should be supported as a distinct industry, in order to protect Tibetan culture and promote Tibetan medicine corporations.

Mr. Wang Guoqiang, associate director of the National Health and Family Planning Commission and head of the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, argued that Tibetan medicine is developing fast in comparison to other ethnic medicines in China, but still lags behind in terms of fulfilling existing health needs. Its primary aims should therefore be to improve its services, strengthen the grassroots level, use modern technology and research to develop, and to achieve UNESCO recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage and Memory of the World for its future preservation.

After these four introductory speeches, the keynote speech section commenced with a presentation by Mr. Nyima Tsering (Nima Ciren), the Dean of the Tibetan Medical College in Lhasa, on innovation and development in Tibetan medicine. Then, each of the four international keynote speakers presented their papers in English (all other papers were presented in Chinese), with simultaneous translation provided via headsets. Saroj P. Dhital and Udaya Koirala from Nepal each spoke on (bio-)medical issues of the "One belt, one road" trans-Himalayan cooperation between China and Nepal. Ven. Damdinsuren Natsagdorj, head of Manba Datsan Traditional Mongolian Hospital and Otoch Manramba University in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, gave a presentation on the history and development of traditional medicine in Mongolia, stressing Mongolia's unique contributions to Sowa Rigpa. Mrs. Phuntsog Wangmo, originally from Lhasa and now head of the Shang Shung International Institute for Tibetan Studies in Massachusetts, USA, gave a lengthy introduction of her institute and its activities. As the final keynote speaker, the author of this report (PI at the Austrian Academy of Sciences) gave an academic overview of Tibetan medical education outside China, that is, in India, Mongolia, Bhutan and Nepal, stressing the fact that Sowa Rigpa is firmly established far beyond Tibet.

After these international speakers, eight Tibetan doctors and researchers presented papers on a variety of topics, including the sustainable use of Tibetan materia medica, the standardization of Tibetan medicine, external

treatment technologies, pulse-purging therapy, cataract treatment, and purgative therapy for hepatitis. The conference ended with a Statement of the Lhasa Communiqué. After that, the political leaders and keynote speakers were given a tour of the Museum of History at the National Clinical Research Base of the new Men-Tsee-Khang hospital, followed by a dinner and a "Celebration Party for Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang – using 100 years' inheritance to build up China Dream." This was an entertaining song-, dance-, comedy- and multimedia-show prepared and performed by Men-Tsee-Khang staff as well as professional singers and actors. Throughout, the entire 100 years' anniversary celebration and conference was covered by major Chinese TV channels (CCTV, Xizang TV, etc), newspapers, and Internet blogs.

While the August conference in Lhasa (see Katharina Sabernig's report, this issue) was certainly more interesting in terms of international and scholarly exchange, the September event described here was mainly a political function and an internal celebration. As such, it was impressively organized, showcasing the sheer magnitude of development – in terms of public health infrastructure, political organization, industry, and research – of Tibetan medicine in China. A hundred years after the 13th Dalai Lama's attempts at introducing modern reforms to Tibet, which included the foundation of the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang and its subsequent steps in the direction of Tibetan public health care, it is clear that this legacy not only lives on, but actually thrives.