Wangdü Chöling Dzong: The Masterpiece of Gongsar Jigme Namgyel

Gengop Karchung*

Abstract
Due to political and spiritual significance, Dzongs hold a special place in the minds of the Bhutanese people. Unlike any other dzongs in Bhutan, Wangdü Chöling Dzong in Bumthang Shamkhar is quite unique due to factors like (1) the builder who was the father of Monarchy in Bhutan, (2) the accomplishment of victory over Jakar Dzongpön Tsöndrü Gyaltshen and (3) the place being used for Buddhist teachings by lama Je Jangchub Tsondrü. Constructed with elaborate Bhutanese architectural designs, it is said to have been built by Gongsar Jigme Namgyel himself in 1857, particularly the Utse. This paper attempts to figure out the significance and role of this well-known historical structure besides throwing some lights on establishment of the dzong and its renovation. It also tries to present other information related to this Dzong through available written and oral sources. Besides researching on written sources, interviews were conducted with Lam Jampel Dorje, Wangdü Chöling Lam, Agāy Rinzin Dorje, 84 (2010) and Agāy Sherub Wangdü, 76 (2010) who shared valuable information.

Introduction
Dzongs in Bhutan have special significance both politically and spiritually. In olden days, Dzongs were built mainly to signify a seat of certain religious institutions to

* Gengop Karchung is a Research Officer at the National Library and Archive of Bhutan. Correspondence: luckycarchu@gmail.com
flourish in that vicinity. Some were also built for security purposes, and others still were built in order to mark victories in warfare. Hence, Dzongs are revered as important historical monuments in the country. Likewise, Wangdü Chöling Dzong (dBang dus chos gling rdzong) in Bumthang has its own significance and history.

Wangdü Chöling Dzong is located on the broad floor of Chökor valley below the Jakar Yügyal Dzong (Bya dkar gyul rgyal rdzong) in Bumthang Dzongkhag in central Bhutan. Bumthang was known for five khar (mkhar; house) namely; Gyalkhar, Chamkhar, Gongkhar, Chagkhar, and Shamkhar. Before the establishment of Wangdü Chöling Dzong, the place was commonly known as Shamkhar. Though the Dzong served as a private residence of the Trongsa Pönlop Gongsa Jigme Namgyel (1825–1881) since its founding, it became a Royal Palace when Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck (1862–1926) was proclaimed as the first Monarch of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 1907. Since then, it served as the Royal Court for the successive Kings until the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928–1972) who shifted the Royal Court to Paro Ugän Pelri Palace and eventually to Thimphu Dechencholing, following the death of the second King Jigme Wangchuck (1905–1952). However, the descendants of Ashi Pem Dechen (1918–?) resided in the Dzong until they left for the capital city, Thimphu. Currently, Wangdü Chöling Dzong, the masterpiece of the Gongsar Jigme Namgyel, houses a monastic school (sLob-druwa) for novice monks that was established in 2004 as a branch of Trongsa Rabdey.

Establishment of the Dzong

Gongsar Jigme Namgyel became the Trongsa Pönlop when Tshoki Dorje of Ugän Chöling (Bumthang) retired in 1853. The succession was in reward for his bravery and loyalty in rescuing the latter from an assassination plot three years earlier in Punakha, the then seat of central administration. During the succession, there was an implicit understanding
that he would relinquish the post after three years in favour of the outgoing Pönlop's son, Jakar Dzongpön Tsöndrü Gyaltshen. However, Jigme Namgyal showed no sign of retiring when the time finally came.

As a result, Tsöndrü Gyaltshen took up arms against the Trongsa Pönlop in 1857. The armies of both the parties clashed on the field of Shamkhar below Jakar Dzong. When the battle proved indecisive, the Jakar Dzongpön and the former Pönlop Tshoki Dorje sought help from Druk Desi Künga Pelden (rg. 1856–1860). The confrontation continued till the negotiating team of Je Khenpo Yönten Gyaltshen (rg. 1851–1858) and Zhabdrung’s Zimpon Drachung came to negotiate a truce in 1858. The peace settlement ended at Kurje (Bumthang) with a nominal promotion of the Jakar Dzongpön to the post of Jakar Pönlop, with Lhuntse and Mongar Dzongkhags under his authority, whereas Jigme Namgyel retained the post of Trongsa Pönlop with an additional supremacy over the Dzongkhags of Zhemgang and Trashigang. It was a sign of the emergence of Jigme Namgyel as an indisputable figure with power and authority.

Since the post of Trongsa Pönlop was then one of the most coveted, for its power, fame and authority, Jigme Namgyel proved his legitimacy on its possession with the moral victory over his contender. So, to mark the victory in the tussle, he constructed Wangdü Chöling Dzong in the battlefield of Shamkhar where he had built a military camp before. According to varied sources, Wangdü Chöling Dzong was believed to have been built to mark the victory in the battle with the Jakar Dzongpön and his allies. Although the negotiation ended in 1858 only, the construction of the Dzong most likely started in 1857 at the site of the military camp when the battle was entering into a stalemate.

**Name of the Dzong**

The Dzong then built was known as Wangdü Chöling Dzong. The term Wangdü means victory achieved after taking
over all groups of adversaries under his single power. The additional term Chöling probably stemmed from Lam Jangchub Tsöndrü (byang-chub brtson-grub; 1817–1856) who blessed the place by giving Buddhist teachings. In due time, the Dzong attained its full name; Wangdü Chöling Dzong, ‘Fortress of the Land of Dharma and Victory.’

**Founder of the Dzong**

Gongsar Jigme Namgyel was born to Pila Gönpo Wangyal and Sonam Pelzom of Dungkar Chöje of Kurtö in 1825. The Dungkar Chöje originated from the descendants of Khedrup Künga Wangpo, the son of Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450–1521). At the age of fifteen, he moved towards Bumthang and Mangdelung (Trongsa) to seek his fortune, inspired as he was by his repeated dreams. On the way, he spent some months with the headman of Narut village in Tang valley of Bumthang, looking after herds of cows and sheep. Yet again, driven by the divine prophesy, he set out towards Trongsa, where he met Buli Lama Shakya Namgyal in Chumé valley, a person who featured repeatedly in his dreams. The Lama gave him shelter and clothing, and in fact arranged his travel to Trongsa, dispatching his servant Urup Döndrup.

Trongsa Pönlop Ugän Phuntsho was at an archery game when they arrived. Urup Döndrup presented the young Jigme Namgyel to the Trongsa Pönlop. After enquiring about his home and family, he was accepted as a Tozep, the lowest level of retainers in the service of Trongsa Dzong, and was allowed to have access to food from the common kitchen.

In 1843, he was promoted as a Zimgap (attendant) by his new master Tshoki Dorje. Likewise, he rose through various posts such as Zimnang (junior chamberlain), Darpön (chief of attendants), Trongsa Tshongpön (trade master), and in 1848, he became the Trongsa Zimpön (chamberlain of Trongsa), a position that signified the extent of trust and confidence that was bestowed on him. Because of his loyalty and outstanding service and courage, he was promoted to the post of Trongsa
Drönyer (guest master of Trongsa) in 1850. During his tenure as Trongsa Drönyer, he crushed all revolts of central and eastern Bhutan, which paved his way to the post of Trongsa Pönlop. He eventually became the Trongsa Pönlop when Tshoki Dorje retired in 1853. This generous retirement and award of the post on Jigme Namgyel rather than to his own son was a sign of gratitude owed to Jigme Namgyel who saved the life of his master. However, the Trongsa governorship had rested on an understanding that Jigme Namgyel should vacate the post after three years for the son of his master, Jakar Dzongpön Tsöndrü Gyaltshen. Since Jigme Namgyel disregarded the agreement to vacate the post as agreed, the forces of Jakar Dzongpön and Trongsa Pönlop clashed which proved indecisive. However, the seat of Trongsa Pönlop undisputably fell on Gongsar Jigme Namgyal that encouraged him to construct the Dzong in celebration of his apparent victory.

However, he continued to be engaged in various internal strife, apart from facing external threats from the British in India. He proved invincible in all these, and so in 1870, Jigme Namgyel ascended to the throne of the Druk Desi, the supreme ruler of Bhutan. He was fully supported by the Lhengä Zhung Tshok and the Central Monk Body. Finally, at the age of 56 in 1881, he passed away in Semtokha Dzong, few days after falling off from the yak he was riding at Hungtsho, near Dochula in Thimphu.

Significance of the Dzong

Wangdü Chöling Dzong, built in the mid 19th century by the father of the Wangchuck Dynasty, Trongsa Pönlop Gongsar Jigme Namgyel, is one of the finest examples of domestic architecture in the country, exclusively designed for secular affairs and for his family. It bears striking differences from the other Dzongs of the country that were built for the dual system of religious and temporal affairs by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651). The Utse (central tower) was
personally built by Gongsar Jigme Namgyel during his tenure as the Chötse (Trongsa) Pönlop. The original structure and architecture can be seen even today without any modifications. The architectural features of Wangdü Chöling Dzong are quite unique from that of the other Dzongs and the manor houses that are ubiquitous in Bhutan. It portrays a masterful blend of innovative architectural features present in the Dzongs as well as in the manor houses, in sync with the lifestyle of the time. Karma Ura (1995) fortifies the concept of the rich architectural heritage of the Dzong along with that of the two other Royal Palaces of Kinga Rabten (Trongsa) and Domkhar (Bumthang), all of which were not only hubs of Royal activities then, but which were also showpieces of the architecture of that era. The Dzong now stands as the oldest of all the structures that were built by the Monarchs of the country. Hence, it is a masterpiece of Gongsar Jigme Namgyel.

The Dzong, originally used as a private residence of Gongsar Jigme Namgyel, became the first Palace of the Wangchuck Dynasty. It was the place where the First King Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck and the Second King Jigme Wangchuck held their Royal Courts. Similarly, it was also the place where the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck grew up and absorbed the lessons of statecraft and court procedures alongside the common retainers at the court of the Second King. Therefore, Wangdü Chöling Dzong is a historic seat of the country’s revered Wangchuck dynasty.

**The Dzong and its purpose**

Initially, Wangdü Chöling Dzong was built by Gongsar Jigme Namgyel to serve as his family residence. Later on, it became the Royal Court of the early Wangchuck Monarchs.

It was in this Dzong that Gongsar Jigme Namgyel took his wife Ashi Pema Chöki, the daughter of ex-pönlop Ugān Phuntsho of the Tamzhing Chöje family. All their children were born at Wangdü Chöling including the future King Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck in 1862.
After Jigme Namgyel, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck began to pursue his father’s strategy of strengthening his political position through family ties and alliances. He married his first cousin Ashi Rinchen Pem and appointed her elder brother Chime Dorje as Jakar Dzongpön, and gave in marriage his own sister, Ashi Yeshe Chödrön (1864–?), to Chime Dorje. After the death of his mother in 1884, Ugyen Wangchuck bequeathed the Wangdü Chöling Palace and its other valuable assets to his sister and her husband.

After that, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck spent his time at Lamai Gönba Dzong Phuntsho Pelri, Künzang Chöling Gönba above Lamai Gönba and Thrinle Rabten above Jamba Lhakhang, devoting his time predominantly in prayers and religious functions, besides shaping the country simultaneously.

In 1890, the 8th Peling Sungtrul Künzang Dechen Dorje [Tenpai Nima] passed away. To commemorate his death and also to accelerate the rebirth of the succeeding Peling Sungtrul in Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuck left for Lhalung and initiated feast-offering for six weeks. As a result, the 9th reincarnation of Peling Sungtrul was born to his own sister Yeshe Chödrön in Wangdü Chöling Dzong in 1894. The Sungtrul was named as Tenzin Chöki Gyaltshen (1894–1925).

Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck introduced modern education though there was the predominance of monastic learning in the country. As the first steps towards this development, he opened the first modern school of Wangchuck Lhodzong at Há in 1914, and in the following year, the Thrinle Rabten School, attached to Wangdü Chöling in Bumthang, was also opened. The Crown Prince Jigme Wangchuck was also given formal education in the latter school, along with several children of the attendants and nobilities. The students were taught Hindi and English languages apart from traditional Bhutanese subjects. These schools were improved and upgraded later by King Jigme Wangchuck.
On the death of the second queen Ashi Tsöndrü Lhamo in 1922, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck promised to offer ten thousand butter lamps (sTong-mchod) at Kurjey and Jampa Lhakhang. But the pledge became ineffectual when Ashi Peldron of Lamai Gönba Dzong, the daughter of Ugyen Wangchuck’s first consort Ashi Rinchen Pem, was not able to arrange the items required such as buckwheat, wheat, butter, rice and so on during the grave period. During that difficult time, ex-drönyer Dorje Rabden of Wangdū Chöling Dzong, the son of Ugyen Wangchuck’s sister Ashi Yeshe Chödrön, had generously offered not only the essential items but also every help and services required to fulfil that pledge and other activities. Thereafter, although Dorje Rabden was a retired personnel, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck had given him due recognition and trust that ultimately led to his increased influence in the Royal Court of the First King. However, due to some dubious acts by zamsungpa Namgyal, the relation between the ex-drönyer and Prince Jigme Wangchuck was strained.

However, later on, the ex-drönyer’s mother Ashi Yeshe Chödrön solicited King Jigme Wangchuck to marry Ashi Pem Dechen, the younger sister of queen Phüntsho Chödrön, and also submitted the Wangdū Chöling Dzong of which Ashi Pem Dechen was the ultimate inheritor from Ashi Yeshe Chödrön. Consequently, in 1932, His Majesty accepted the proposal and married Ashi Pem Dechen, thereby, resolving the strained relation with the ex-drönyer. Simultaneously, His Majesty also took over Wangdū Chöling Dzong and established his Royal Court therein.

After the completion of the construction of Künga Rabten Palace in Trongsa in 1929, Wangdū Chöling Dzong became the Summer Palace. Hence, the Royal Entourage spent six months of spring and summer in Wangdū Chöling after which the Royal Court moved to Künga Rabten Palace to avoid the bitter chill of Bumthang’s winter. The Royal Court routinely
moved to its winter residence in Küngha Rabten in the ninth month of the Bhutanese calendar and returned to Wangdū Chöling by the third month every year.

Over the course of time, the Second King bequeathed Wangdū Chöling Palace to the younger queen Ashi Pem Dechen along with the Küngha Rabten Palace that was located on the Mangdechu river valley and which became his favoured residence.

His Majesty passed away at Küngha Rabten Palace in 1952. A month later, another tragic incident took place when Wangdū Chöling Mayum Ashi Yeshe Chödrön expired. So, their bodies were cremated together at Bumthang Kurje. After the funeral rites, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck became preoccupied with moving his Royal Court from Wangdū Chöling to Paro Ugän Pelri. The retainers at the court expected a hectic time packing some of the moveable properties of the late King found in Wangdū Chöling Dzong, though the younger Queen Mother Ashi Pem Dechen had decided to stay back. To the relief of the retainers and as a sign of generosity, His Majesty gave the keys of the Treasure House of Wangdū Chöling to the younger Queen Mother and did not want to own anything save four boxes of swords and some guns that was in the palace of Wangdū Chöling.

The departure of the Royal Family and the change of the location of the capital from central to western Bhutan not only made the Wangdū Chöling Dzong lonely and desolate, it also cast a mood of gloom over the public of Bumthang and Trongsa. The changes were made in the larger interest of the country, and therefore, the public was eventually reconciled to the changed reality. However, the Palace was never the same again.

Since then, Ashi Pem Dechen lived there with her son Prince Namgyal Wangchuck and three princesses who were the subsequent and ultimate dwellers and estate holders of the Dzong. As there were an increasing number of Tibetans
fleeing to Bhutan during the Chinese occupation of Tibet, with many people coming to Bumthang, the local people feared that they too might need to leave the place for safer havens. In addition, the increasing developmental activities in Thimphu convinced the estate holders to shift their base to Thimphu. Thereafter, the management and supervision of the massive estate of the Dzong fell partially on the government.

Under the charge of the government, nothing significant happened until the community was in dire need of monks for religious ritual ceremonies to be performed. So, in 2001, when Jampel Dorje was appointed as the Kangjup at the Dzong from Trongsa Rabdey, people living nearby expressed their interest in instituting a monastic school for the benefit of the community. Therefore, under the initiative of Kangjup Jampel Dorje, a monastic school with 15 novice monks was established on 13th April, 2004. Currently, headed by Lam Jampel Dorje, the monastic school is upgraded with 30 monks and has classes till 4th standard, after which the monks have to continue their higher education at Trongsa Dratshang. However, even before the establishment of the monastic school and the appointment of a Lam, there was a Kunyer for daily sölkha and lhachö performance in the Dzong.
Treasures of the Dzong

Even though the Dzong in itself is one of the most invaluable treasures of the country for its unique architecture and the history it holds, it contains some precious relics belonging the early Wangchuck Monarchs. Besides, the Dzong also houses the Utse Gönkhang and Chakdzö Lhakhang, displaying valuable kuten, sungten, thukten and other valuable objects.

Utse Gönkhang

The main tutelary deity of the Utse Gönkhang is Dralha Chegu. It also accommodates kusung thuktens such as Düsum Sangye (past, present and future Buddhas) as its main statue along with Chenrezi and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The kuten also includes a statue of Guru Rinpoche.
which used to be carried along during the migration to Küngra Rabten in Trongsa. It also has a Dröma statue and other relics.

**Sungten** consists of Bum (’Bum; Pran japaramita sutra; Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Lines), Domang (mDo mangs; Anthology of sutras), Kathang De ’nga, Gätom (brGyad stongpa; Pran japaramita sutra in eight hundred verses) in gold scripts and other sungchö texts. It also has Deshek Chöten Gā (bDe-gshegs mchod rten brgyad; Sugata stupa; Eight types of stupa depicting eight events in the life of Buddha Shakyamuni), stupa of Tshelha ’Namsum (Tshe lha rnam gsum; Tshe dpag med, sGrol dkar and rNam rgyal ma), Ashi Wangmo’s Kudung Chöten (sKu gdung mchod rten; Stupa of body remains), and Sidok Chöten (Sri bzlog mchod rten; Stupa for repelling evil).

**Chakdzö Lhakhang**

Chakdzö Lhakhang or Treasure House temple houses Tsheringma and Namsé, the gods of wealth and prosperity.

With regard to other valuable objects in the two lhakhangs, Lam Jampel Dorje confirmed that there were no objects of great value like gold and silver. There was however a pair of small butter-lamp vase made of silver. As the Dzong was of great significance, the Royal Family members contributed religious objects and at present, the lhakhangs have nine silver vases for butter-lamp offering.

**Kuchö Bumdé and festivals in the Dzong**

Besides other religious ceremonies at Wangdü Chöling Dzong, there was a great public fair held in the seventh lunar month every year which rivalled Punakha Domchöe. The fair was instituted first in 1937 to celebrate the completion of Domkhar Palace in Bumthang, but it became so popular that it became an annual event of Wangdü Chöling Dzong.

However, at present, besides the daily ritual and **yarngo marngo tshechu**, three days of Dralha Pangtö is carried out
Renovation and extension of the Dzong

After the end of Duar War (1864–65), Jigme Namgyel retired in 1866, passing on the seat of the Trongsa Pönlop to Dungkar Gyaltsen, his elder brother. During his brief retirement, he spent his life at Wangdü Chöling with his family, embarking on renovation and extension of Wangdü Chöling Dzong, and several other religious activities including offering of sertö at Bumthang Jampa Lhakhang. However, this period was interrupted when he had to intervene between Puna Dzongpön Drang Tashi and ex-Wangdü Dzongpön Darlung Tobgay, and incumbent Dzongpön Künlek Dorje and Thimphu Dzongpön Kawang Makhel in 1869.

The central tower (Utse) is the work of Jigme Namgyel but other extensions were carried out by Gongsa Ugyen Wangchuck. Later on, during the time of the Second King Jigme Wangchuck, he planned to completely demolish and reconstruct Wangdü Chöling Dzong. To this effect, His Majesty dispatched a writ to the garpas of Mangde, Punakha, Há, Kurtö and Trongsa to come for reconstruction works. In response to the writ, about three hundred garpas came for the reconstruction work. However, Trongsa Neten Dranglapa Dargā, who was a trusted and favoured courtier, counselled and pleaded with the King not to modify the Utse of the Dzong, though rest of the complex was to be renovated, as it represented the original workmanship of Chötse Pönlop Jigme Namgyel.

The garpas were deployed under the charge of Zhemgang Dzongpön Thrinle Namgyal, half brother of the queens, to extract timber from the mountains of Chökhor for an entire summer. Some of the garpas floated the timber down the Chamkharchu where it was trapped at Wangdü Chöling. By

from the 14th to 16th, and Göm Bangrim on 17th of the fifth month. Additionally, two days of Göm Bangrim is held on the 30th day of the ninth month and the first day of the 10th month annually.
the end of the summer, the meadows of Wangdü Chöling were blanketed with logs, beams and planks. However, the planned reconstruction was never launched as the events took a different turn.

Other historical monuments at the Dzong Site

**Linga Lhakhang**

Linga Lhakhang has *ku sung thuktens* (*sKu gsung thugs rten*) which comprise of khenlop chösum (*mKhan slob chos sum*); Khenchen Boddhisattva (*mKhan chen zhiba 'tsho*), Lopön Pema Jungne (Guru Rinpoche; *sLob-dpon pad-ma 'byung-gnas*) and Gäpo Thrisong Deutsän (*rGyal-po khri srong lde'u btsan*) of which the Guru Rinpoche statue at the centre was believed to have a right horn of the sheep that prevented falling rocks at Luggi Raw Lhakhang at Chökortö (Bumthang). The other statues include Tshe-lha Namsum. It also has Buddhist canon, *kanjur* (*bKa’-gyur*) as its holy scripture (*gSung-rten*).

With regard to religious ceremonies, a week long *Sidô Khorlo* (*Sr i bzlog 'khor lo 'bar ba*) is carried out starting on the 21st day of the ninth month every year. This was instituted by the successive Kings. This ritual was known to have been carried out for months on end in the olden days at the Linga Lhakhang according to the Lam Jampel Dorje.

**Linga Thang archery range**

Linga Thang was the place where the great fair of Wangdü Chöling used to be held during the time of the Second King. Although it served for multiple activities, it was initially created for archery that the successive Kings used to relish for weeks on end.

**Chukhor Mani**

There are five *Chukor Mani* just below the Linga Lhakhang. Although the first one (next to the gate), was as old as the *Dzong*, the four others were built by *Ashi* Chöki, according to
**Agay** Rinzin Dorje who is 84 years old (in 2010) and from the Wangdü Chöling locality.

**Kabra**

Although Kabra is not attached to Wangdü Chöling Dzong, it is very much a part of the Dzong since the time of ex-Drönyer Dorje Rabden. It is the Tsänkhang (bTsan khang; deity house) of Tseu Marpo (Tse’u dmar po), a protective deity. Dorje Rabden was believed to have discovered treasures as he was known for Terdak (gTer-bdag; Treasure Guardian) of Tseu Marpo. So, the Kabra served as his personal Lhakhang where he even instituted 15 monks.

**Conclusion**

The historic Dzong of Wangdü Chöling has endured the vagaries of the weather and climate, standing majestically firm and high in the valley of Shamkhar in Bumthang Chökor. The Dzong which once bustled with activities of the Royal Court, with footfalls of hundreds of men, now wears a dreary look. Since its Royal inhabitants have left for the new Capital, the Dzong has become defunct and is now in a state of disrepair.

However, there is hope in the near future with planned renovation involving international conversation experts. The Palace today serves the curiosity of the international and regional tourists, as they take a glimpse of the glorious history of our Monarchy. The Dzong is a majestic masterpiece, bearing a unique architectural, and conceptual design and purpose. Preserving the Dzong today will help cement the legacy of our early Monarchs, thus ensuring its survival for the posterity which will be much richer for it.
References


Wangdü Chöling Dzong
