

# The Rise of Mega Monasteries in Northeastern Tibet

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## Problem

What are the historical and institutional factors that lead to the rise of “mega monasteries?”

## Previous Studies

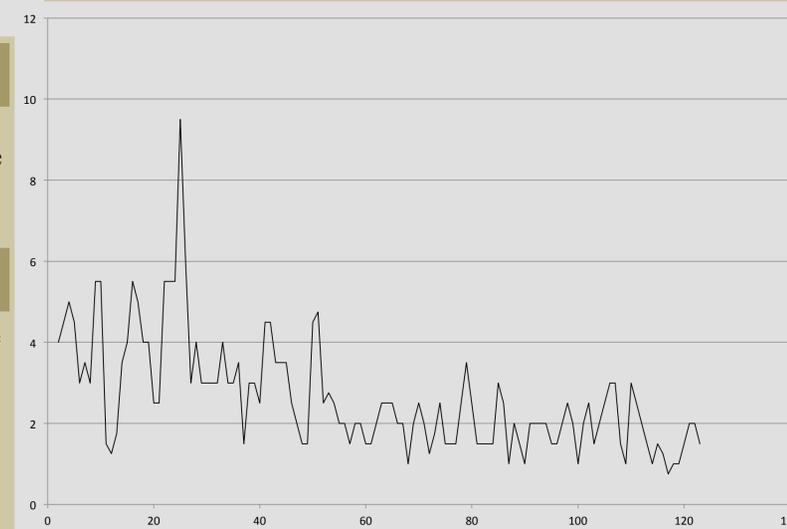
1. **Patronage** of monasteries in the seventeenth century by the **Fifth Dalai Lama’s** government (Tucci 1999; Dung dkar 1982).
2. A **decentralized organization** of monastic socialization and training as well as well a **lax approach to discipline** (Goldstein 1998, 2009) are two of the factors that allowed for the expansive growth of monasteries.



Gönlung Jampa Ling in 1934 (Zhuang Xueben 2009)

- historical gazetteers of the region
- compendiums of Qing imperial documents (e.g. “Collected Statutes,” official histories)
- archival documents (e.g. imperial edicts, memorials, land deeds, clan genealogies)

In addition, I made numerous extended visits to “the field” and read primary documents *in situ* (esp. Sept. 2010 to July 2011, and May 2012).



This chart illustrates the decline in the average number of years an individual served as abbot at Gönlung over the course of the monastery’s history. This reflects the instability within the monastery in later centuries as well as the monastery’s general demise.

## Conclusions

1. A **diverse network of patronage**—local regional, and international—contributed to the rise of mega monasteries beginning in the seventeenth century. Changes in Inner Asian politics affected such patronage.
2. **Strong institutions** in mega monasteries facilitated the recruitment and maintenance of a large number of monks, allowing them to outperform those monastic groups lacking these institutions. E.g.:
  - a. Creation of offices and endowments for the sustenance of the congregation
  - b. A system of distributing wealth that encourages high participation
  - c. Regularly rotating abbacy, free from the interests of the monastery’s proprietor.
  - d. Detailed and universal system of socializing new monks.
  - e. Strict system of discipline that ensures compliance with the institution’s rules and diffuses social dissonance.
  - f. Complex and universal scholastic curriculum.
  - g. Performance of universal, communal rituals.
3. Mega monasteries mutually support each other as members of overlapping **monastic networks**.

Top 10 Mega Monasteries at the End of the 17 <sup>th</sup> Century	Population
Drepung	4200
Sera	2850
Trashi Lünpo	2500
<b>Gönlung</b>	<b>1500</b>
Serkhok	1300
Ganden	1100
Kumbum	1000
Tangring	900
Ganden Dargyé Ling	740

## Hypothesis

The rise of mega monasteries is attributable to the patronage of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s government. However, other institutional factors must have been present to account for stable population of exemplary monasteries ranging in the hundreds or thousands.

## Methodology

Literary documents and some archival documents in Tibetan and Chinese languages were read primarily for their qualitative descriptions of the social and institutional history of one of Tibet’s largest monasteries, known as **Gönlung Jampa Ling**. These documents included:

- monastic chronicles/gazetteers
- histories (dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) of the region in question
- biographies of eminent monks connected with Gönlung Monastery
- monastic “customaries,” or “constitutions” written for Gönlung Monastery and its affiliate monasteries



The cluster of labels in the center of this map—along the Qinghai-Gansu border—represent the nearly four dozen branch monasteries of Gönlung. Gönlung also has branch monasteries some two thousand kilometers to the west in present-day Xinjiang Region and two-thousand kilometers to the east in present-day Liaoning Province.