

SEEKING THE SPLENDOR OF THE PAST —Excavating Sakya Northern Temple

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The wide streets of the Sakya County seat are paved with flat stones. The cement houses in imitative Tibetan style appear clean and bright under the sunrays. Shops, restaurants, teahouses, inns and various local companies are lined up on the sides of the road, and an internet café is evidence that the information age has arrived even here. Yaks and goats stroll along the streets in the morning and night, and the air is filled with the mixed flavors of yak butter, manure, Sichuanese food... Tibetan folk songs and pop music float out of the various storefronts. The county seat becomes the center of activity every weekend, with the crowds consisting mostly of three types of people, students in their blue and white school uniforms, lamas in their red robes, and local peasants in their Tibetan clothing, interspersed here and there with the odd tourist.

In the black and white photos taken by old reporter Chen Zonglie in 1957, the towering Sakya Monastery is surrounded by a broad expanse of agricultural fields, with trees in the distance blocking out Zhuoma Pozhang and Pincuo Pozhang. The Zhongqu River hugs the base of the mountains, and two small bridges traverse the waters. Temples and houses dot the mountainside, and a cloud of smoke hovers over the ridge in a scene that appears as if from another world. With such an enormous change in just fifty years, what would the scene have looked like a century ago in Sakya, which once ruled all of Tibet? We have come to this ancient valley to seek out the past splendor of Sakya.

July is the best time of year in Tibet. On the nearby Shaanxi Plateau, Xian is already blazing in the intense summer heat, but the fields around Sakya County are painted gold by the blooming rapeseed flowers. In order to assist in the establishment of an artifact preservation plan and implement a maintenance project for the ancient buildings of the Sakya Monastery, the Tibetan Autonomous Region Department of Relics and the Shaanxi Archaeological Research Institute have arranged for the Shaanxi Archaeological Research Institute to spend two years investigating and excavating the Sakya Northern Temple. The archaeological team arrived in Sakya County under the auspices of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Department of Relics on July 7, 2005 to begin their work with the assistance of specialists from the Tibet Museum. Through two years of hard work, the original face of the Sakya Northern Temple slowly began to emerge before our eyes. Few people in Tibet are unaware of the ancient Sakya Monastery. This, the most important temple of the Sakya Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, is located in the Sakya County seat and on the slope north of the Zhongqu River. It is separated into two temples, northern and southern, with the Southern Temple located in the county seat and the Northern Temple located on the slope by the river. Not only is the monastery complex extremely large, the buildings are also of a special design and construction, and home to a rich collection of Tibetan artifacts. It has played an extremely important role in Tibetan history, and in 1961 it was named among the first batch of nationwide protected historical sites.

The Northern Temple was the first of the two complexes to be constructed. In 1073 AD, Goinchu

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Gyibo, a descendent of the Khon aristocratic clan of the Tubo Kingdom, began by constructing a small temple for religious cultivation on the slopes of Wenpo Mountain along the northern bank of the Zongqu River, which later came to be called the Sakya Kwobu. In Tibetan, Sakya means gray, which is why the place took the name Sakya Monastery. Though Goinchu Gyibo was the founder of the Sakya Sect, the sect was in its infancy at the time, and the temple was of a very simple construction.

Goinchu Gyibo's son Kungpa Nyingbo followed in his father's studies of the Dharma and traveled throughout the land to seek out mentors in the esoteric doctrines, completing the teachings of the Sakya Sect. His fame spread, and he became known as a Sachen, or Great Sakya Master, later anointed as one of the "Five Founding Fathers of Sakya". Kungpa Nyingbo was not only instrumental in the establishment of the Sakya Sect; he also made key contributions to the construction of the Northern Temple. The "Lazhangsha" was a cultivation center he constructed, and the "Gurong" complex he later constructed consisted of a protector spirit shrine, a statue hall and a book depository. Kungpa Nyingbo also constructed the main building of the Northern Temple, which he later expanded and added a golden roof. A wing was added during the Yuan Dynasty, supported by eight columns. Subsequent Sakya leaders continued to expand construction on the slope, eventually creating a massive complex of stacked buildings.

Tradition states that between the Buddha shrines, protector spirit shrines, palace halls and residences there were 108 buildings in all. Construction in the Northern Temple area came to a close after the fourteenth century as the religious activities shifted to the south, and the Northern Temple had grown quiet by modern times. Many of the buildings had collapsed by the 1950's, and after the destruction of the 60's, all that remained was a tattered surrounding wall. Some of the more important buildings have been restored in recent decades.

The Southern Temple was constructed by Benchen Sakya Sampo in 1268 on request of Chogyal Pakpa. Chogyal Pakpa (1235-1280) is considered to be the fifth forefather of the Sakya Sect. At the age of ten he traveled with his uncle Sakya Pandita Gonggar Gyaltsen to Liangzhou. The Sakya Pandita died of an illness in 1251 while in Liangzhou. Chogyal Pakpa took over as Pandita, and was received by the Yuan Dynasty government. He was called on by Kublai Khan, who named him as a Great Master of State in 1260, a development which spread the influence of the Sakya doctrines. In 1268, Chogyal Pakpa appointed Benchen Sakya Sampo as protector of the 130,000 families of Tibet, and the region was officially incorporated into Chinese territory. In 1269, this "young, noble and enlightened scholar" was appointed as "Imperial Dharmaprince" of the Yuan Dynasty.

The South Temple, constructed on flat land south of the Zhongqu River, is a monastery complex built in the style of a fortress. The main buildings were constructed gradually according to a master plan. There are two concentric surrounding walls, with the inner wall standing large and thick with a main gate facing east, towers at each of four corners, and a depression running along the top wide enough for a man to walk. The outer wall "goat-horse wall" is shorter in comparison, constructed out of adobe and surrounded by a moat. The earliest building inside the walls is the

Lakhang Chenpo (Great Buddha Temple), constructed of a portico, sutra hall, Oudong Rencheng Lakhang, Puba Lakhang, Ciwai Lakhang and Lakhang Lazhang. The interior is home to many large statues Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vajras and Sakya masters as well as dagobas, thrones and a massive collection of scriptures and precious relics.

The national and regional governments have placed great importance on the preservation of the artifacts at the Sakya Monastery, and have allocated funds for restoration of the temples. This has been reiterated in the 21st century as the national government named the Sakya Monastery along with Potala Palace and the Norbu Lingka Monastery as the three key preservation sites of Tibet, setting a plan of action and working to maintain and restore the ancient buildings. As one of the key preservation and restoration projects, the restoration and preservation of Sakya Monastery has been closely followed by all levels of government from central to local, and a restoration project has been established to oversee the effort, which involves the participation of such organizations as the China Antiquities Institute, the China Palace Museum, the Dunhuang Institute, the Hebei Ancient Architecture Institute, the Xian Center for Preservation of Antiquities and the Suzhou Ancient Architecture Company, among others.

The focus of the archaeological work in 2005 was on the excavation of the ruins of the Deque Pozhang in the Northern Temple, and clearing the goat horse wall and moat of the Southern Temple. The Deque Pozhang ruins are located on relatively high land to the western end of the Northern Temple complex, and were constructed in the mid-twelfth century by the second group of Sonam Mumo. The rooms in the buildings were completely demolished in the 1960's, leaving only remnants of the original walls and thick piles of rubble. The Deque Pozhang is surrounded by a five meter high adobe wall, with the buildings inside organized into three groups in a triangular formation, one group in the south and two groups in the north. We marked these groups as areas I, II and III.

Archaeological excavation is a difficult task to begin with, and it becomes even harder on the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau. Sakya County seat lies at an altitude of 4300 meters, and the ruins of the Northern temple are nearly one hundred meters above that. To save time and strength, the archaeological team and the local Tibetan workers would eat simple meals and have a short rest right at the site every day at noon before returning to work. The summer sun blazes hot on the plateau, and there was no shade at the site. Before long all of the workers were burned black and red. All of the earth and stones that were cleared out had to be carried out in sacks by the local workers, and within three months a small mountain had risen south of the ruins. As the archaeological work proceeded, the original shape and structure of the building slowly emerged.

Through our work we were able to get a basic idea of the overall layout at Deque Pozhang, the relationships between the groups of buildings, and the structure of the individual buildings including the location of pillars and beams, the structure of the walls, locations of doors and windows, and building techniques; we were also able to get a relatively clear idea of the function of each building. According to the objects unearthed and the recollections of the old Lamas on site, the southern building (Area I) was the residence of the Dharma Prince, the northeast building

(Area III) was a protector spirit shrine, and the northwest building (Area II) was a workshop for the production of Tibetan medicine. The Dharma Prince residence was shaped like a traditional courtyard house, with a stone laden courtyard surrounded by an entry hall and two-story buildings to the east, west and north built with thick, solid walls. The rubble pile of the Vajra shrine at Area III stood three meters thick, and beneath the rubble was found the remains of 11 protector spirit sculptures. Among them was the most powerful protector spirit of the Sakya Monastery, “Sakya Damu”, and as we excavated its remains, the Lamas came over repeatedly to have a look. The building at Area II was the Tibetan medicine workshop that had been famous throughout Western Tibet since the 18th century, and there we found many stone mortars, mills and grinding stones used in the making of Tibetan medicine. In one of the central rooms there were 5 large mortars and more than ten grinding stones. This group of buildings was probably previously the residence of the Dharma Prince. The large building to the north was nearly one hundred square meters; the stone floor was smooth and flat, and there were stone anchors for 12 pillars. The southern wall had a large floor-to-ceiling window, and the western wall still had marks from a fresco. This place only became a medicine workshop after the Dharma Prince moved to the Southern Temple.

Many artifacts were uncovered in the excavation: a gold plated seated bronze Sakyamuni, a gold plated bronze Bodhisattva, a bronze seated Manjusri, stone protector spirit sculptures, silver Vajra daggers, bronze Vajra daggers, bronze Vajra bells, Kapala skull bowls, bronze bowls, porcelain bowls, ivory skulls, porcelain plates and bowls, silver Tibetan coinage, copper Tibetan coinage, copper Indian coinage, agate beads, coral beads, lapis beads, turquoise set in silver, deteriorated scripture fragments and all kinds of small clay sculptures. In total, more than five hundred objects and sets were unearthed. The most beautiful of these was the gold plated seated bronze Sakyamuni, which bore a tranquil and lucid expression, well proportioned body, wide shoulders and thick waist draped in a kasaya. Simple and elegant, it was marked by the styles of the Yuan Dynasty. Who knows how many high lamas and monks have used the Vajra bells we unearthed. The designs inscribed on the surface have already become faint, but the Chinese inscription “crafted during the reign of Emperor Yongle” inside is still clear and distinct. A blue and white porcelain basin that has been restored is surprisingly elegant, with the raised lotus petals and the exquisitely crafted flower lines showing a distinctive Muslim style.

Another excavation job in 2005 was the clearing of the goat horse wall and surrounding moat around the Sakya Southern Temple. The wall around the Southern Temple has two concentric layers, with the inner wall high and thick. Having been restored several times, the inner wall is in good condition. It has a main gate on the eastern face and a tower on each of four corners. The outer wall (goat horse) is shorter and thinner and has two gates on the east side, one smaller than the other. There is a moat trench on the east, south and west sides of the wall (the north face is aligned with the Zhongqu River, making for a natural barrier).

In order to provide the basic information for defining the scope of the “Sakya Preservation Project”, we engaged in a clearing excavation of the goat horse wall and the moat trench on the east, south and western sides, as well as a clearing of the two doors on the east face of the goat

horse wall. Now we are for the mostpart clear on the layout, structure and relationship between the wall and the moat. The goat horse wall and the moat around it are actually a single construct, with the wall constructed directly on top of the inner lining of the moat, which comes together with the higher inner wall to create a rather complete security system. A cross section of the moat trench would resemble an inverted ladder, wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. The wall of the moat is a solid construction of piled stones lined with pebbles at the bottom, reaching a maximum depth of 3 meters. The west and south sides of the moat trench have three recesses in sawtooth formation, reaching in 5-6 meters and stretching for 12 meters in length. The southern and eastern faces of the goat horse wall have sections that are still intact that reach 1.8 meters in height. They are built on a stone foundation that is built directly upon the inner slope of the moat trench. The walls are made of adobe and capped with a slate awning.

The 2006 excavation was even more challenging. The center of the excavation, the Wumu Temple, is located on a steep slope on the western side of Lazhang Xia. The upper level is the Gujie Pozhang, the lower level is the Wumu Ningma Temple, and the ruins on the south side were already heavily damaged. The height distance between the two sites is 20 meters, a distance already difficult to traverse when empty handed and much harder when excavating and sending out soil and rocks. Our only choice was to construct temporary steps and pathways to facilitate our work. This group of buildings was the center of Sakya religious activities from the 12th to 14th centuries, and remained important even after the center was shifted to the Southern Temple. Overall, the building used traditional Tibetan techniques and styles; it followed the landscape, rising and falling with utmost precision. Mr. Su Bai from Peking University investigated the site in the 1950's and drew a detailed layout of the Wumu Temple. During this excavation we were able to gain an overall understanding of the building's layout and structure. We cleared eight rooms of various sizes and one religious offering site. Overall, the excavation covered an area of roughly 1400 square meters.

In the Gujie Pozhang on the upper layer we cleared six rooms. In the highest altar room we found three round vaulted boxes lining the northern wall. Our research revealed that they once held sculptures of the "three white founders" among the five founders of the Sakya Sect. This practice of placing sculptures in open boxes on the wall was one of the marks of early buildings. A room next door was for housing Tibetan texts, where we found remnants of scriptures as well as wooden boards used for making bookcases and large amounts of richly inscribed gold plated bronze sheets for wrapping the altars of Buddha statues. According to records, the two buildings that served as altars for the protector spirits were among the earliest buildings at the Northern Temple. Built in 1073, the walls of the rooms still bore the traces of ancient frescoes, though they were of simple composition and crude painting techniques; large quantities of iron armor suits, helmets and arrowheads were also found nearby, but none of the remains or relics unearthed could serve as evidence of the building's early construction date.

We found a ceremonial offering site on the east side of Gujie Pozhang. The remains were centered on a piled stone platform, with 10 offertory pits surrounding it. The pits contained pots

that had been used in offerings. The pits usually had flagstones or pebbles on the bottom, with the walls reinforced by cobblestones. The pots were sealed around the edges with pebbles and covered with flagstone. Were these offertory pits for the founding of the temple, or are they the remains of a ritual to avert disaster? Even the oldest of the Lamas were unable to clear this up.

The Wumu Temple in the lower layer is made up of the Wumu Ningma Shrine and a Buddha temple to the north of it. Most of the original twelve pillars in the Buddha temple were preserved well, and the floor was made of solid aga mortar. Marks left by the original Buddha dais and the surrounding scripture racks were still visible. Though the southern half of the Wumu Ningma Shrine was damaged, the shape of the northern part was still very clear. Two rows of column foundations were lined up east to west at a distance of 3.6 meters, and each foundation was 0.6 to 0.7 meters in diameter, showing that the original columns were massive. We discovered a two meter circular depression in the center of the shrine, which was probably the location for a large Mandala. Not many relics were unearthed during this excavation, only some goldplated bronze sheets for wrapping Buddha statue dais and some remnants of paper scriptures, but we were able to get a clear idea of the shrine's overall layout, column distribution and the shrine's relationship to surrounding buildings, providing much reference information to assist in our understanding of the complex's overall layout and former splendor.

During the 1980's, the Sakya Temple organized its monks to excavate the Wumu Shrine. According to participants, they removed 4 large Buddha statues, 11 spirit pagodas and statues of protector spirits. They have been placed in the Southern Temple's Puba Lakhang, Quera Lakhang, Spirit Pagoda Shrine and Lakhang Lazhang. The 1.2 meter tall Tara sculpture that now rests at the Quere Lakhang has a well-defined face, elongated body, supple breasts and curved waist, a perfect image of feminine youth. At the time they also unearthed a large amount of scripture remains, which are now housed in the Puba Lakhang in the Southern Temple. To better understand the situation of the scriptures of the Northern Temple, we invited Xiong Wenbin, a researcher from the China Tibetology Research Center to Sakya to comb over the scripture remains with us. He was able to identify 92 types of scriptures. Among them, complete pages had been organized by the monks, which were packed into four packages. We focused much of our energy on searching through these loose pages. There were cover pages and back cover pages, but most of the pages were from the middle of the original books. We were able to compile some pages according to the marked content, page numbers and script fonts, but most of the pages stood alone. The scripture pages ranged from 20 to 50 centimeters in length, with the largest stretching 71.5 centimeters in length and 28.5 centimeters in width. Most of the pages had 4 to 8 lines of text. The pages were made of handmade Tibetan paper, scroll paper and machine paper, with most of them falling in the first category, either blue or natural in color. Blue paper is usually used for written script, while the natural color paper is used widely for both handwritten and woodcut script. There were 43 types of written works identified. Among them, one especially worth noting is marked in the Chinese script as *Page Twenty Six of the Saddharmapundarika Sutra*. Above the name of the sutra is an illustration of 6 monks from the Chinese interior holding a religious ceremony; the text below is in the Tibetan script. We also discovered diagrams of

Yoga and religious implements, sutras marked with chanting guides, and pages from books and letters.

On the south and west sides of the Deque Pozhang site stand many pagodas, creating a rather large pagoda forest. Over the ages, many of the pagodas have already fallen, and the remaining ones have been heavily damaged by people. Records show that some of the pagodas were erected quite early, and played an important role in the formation of the Sakya Northern Temple. We made a detailed examination of these pagodas in 2006, creating a layout diagram. Following the order of the examination, we separated the pagodas in the south and west into areas I and II, respectively. There were a total of 49 pagodas in Area I and 66 pagodas in Area II. Using the data from the examination, we excavated the closest row of pagodas on the south side. There were 9 pagodas in this row. Aside from the large pagoda on the east side that was independently erected, the other eight pagodas were erected close together on a single elongated foundation. These pagodas represented the eight great events of Sakyamuni's life, and are known as the "eight auspicious pagodas" (the lotus pagoda for birth, Bodhi pagoda for enlightenment, turning the dharma wheel pagoda for beginning the ministry, overcoming the spirits pagoda, returning from paradise pagoda, unity pagoda for uniting the factions, longevity pagoda and nirvana pagoda). The steeples of the eight auspicious pagodas had been destroyed long ago, and the bodies were severely damaged. The terracotta of the underground sections had been scattered around the area, but what was left of the bodies and bases allowed us to see the different structures.

By mid autumn, the two year excavation project of the Sakya Monastery had been completed. Two years of hard work, two years of rewarded effort gave us a better understanding of ancient Sakya.

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