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## Review of *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great* by Alexander Gardner

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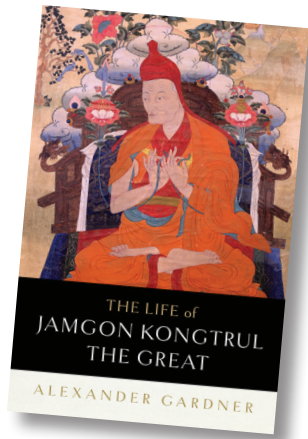


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# Jamgon Kongtrul's allegiances to particular people and places shines through the historical narrative

*Ford on The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great.*



## **The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great.**

**Alexander Gardner.** Boulder: Snow Lion, 2019. 506 pages. ISBN 9781611804218.

### **Reviewed by Renée L. Ford**

Alexander Gardner weaves together the intimacy and vastness of Jamgon Kongtrul Yonten Gyatso (*'jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho*, 1813 – 1899)'s life in *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great*. He does this through combining intimate details from his own translation of Jamgon Kongtrul's autobiography with biographical literature written by Jamgon Kongtrul's colleagues. He also fills in the vast context by consulting historical and self-reflective information found in Kongtrul's literary works, which are known as "The Five Treasures." The autobiography is Jamgon Kongtrul's diary, reflecting Kongtrul's daily life and perspectives on individuals, communities, and his

own contributions. Gardner attests that he approaches the diary with a critical view, adjusting historical dates for accuracy and weeding through Kongtrul's writing, which exposes his views and concerns for others' opinions about him (p. XI). The autobiography is then framed within a larger historical and contextual narrative, inviting the reader into Kongtrul's culture and history. This work reflects the author's command of Tibetan history and Kongtrul's significance in Buddhist literature production. We see Gardner's attention to filling in gaps of Jamgon Kongtrul's autobiography with his own research. This book reads like a non-fiction historical novel rather than a series of diary entries.

This book retells a historic chronological narrative. Right away, we are transported to Kham through Gardner's detailed description of the geographic, political, and religious contexts in which Jamgon Kongtrul is born. Within the first paragraph, Gardner sweeps us away to a small valley, near the kingdom of Ling and Gesar. Gardner immediately ties in the deep mythological history of Kham, which offers another layer into Jamgon Kongtrul's background. The valley, the birth-place of Jamgon Kongtrul, takes on geological formation with descriptions of river valleys, mountain ridges, and open grasslands (p. 3). Gardner bolsters these descriptions by telling us about the political borders of China and Lhasa-administered territories of

Tibet surrounding Kham. One may get lost in the fine details or settle into beautifully written historical non-fiction, which at times reads like a screenplay.

In bringing Jamgon Kongtrul's story to life and the West, Gardner garnishes the biography with detailed explanations of Buddhist topics. Some of these topics, such as beings who are not perceptible to the Western eye, prove most difficult to describe. The author approaches these topics lightly but matter-of-factly, allowing the reader to understand Kongtrul's world. For example, Kongtrul's process of choosing a hermitage site is sprinkled with various descriptions of deities, auspicious signs, and blessings. A fine example is a description of *nāgas* or serpent deities and *tsen* (*btsan*), evil deities, being vanquished from previous occupancy of the land. Brief but full of depth, these insights lend color to Kongtrul's life.

Most noteworthy are the relationships that are cultivated throughout Gardner's book. Jamgon Kongtrul's allegiances to particular people and places shines through the historical narrative. These threads highlight Kongtrul's political allegiances and authority to figures such as Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (*'jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*, 1820 – 1892) and Chokgyur Lingpa (*mchog 'gyur gling pa*, 1829 – 1870). Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's decline in health and eventual death play heavily on Kongtrul. This

affectation glows through Gardner's retelling of Kongtrul's efforts and offerings to prolong Wangpo's life. Gardner has a gift for transmitting Jamgon Kongtrul's devotion to the tradition, and specifically, to special individuals.

Gardner's re-telling of Jamgon Kongtrul's story offers a reader an in-depth historical and cultural perspective on Kongtrul's life, yet I want to bring attention to the literary category of biography and autobiography in Tibetan literature. This work excels as a Western historical biography, yet if I had one critique, it would be to ask how we can categorize Jamgon Kongtrul's autobiography in Tibetan literature. Dr. Ulrike Roesler (University of Oxford) writes that "Tibetan autobiographies and their modes of self-presentation are situated between literary convention and personal expression." (Roesler, 2019. "Between Self-Expression and Convention: Tibetan Reflections on Autobiographical Writing" in *Life Writing*. Oxford: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1) Jamgon Kongtrul's diary, the main source for this book, is categorized as a *tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*), a recording of the day-to-day deeds and activities of the individual. (Roesler, p. 2) In reading Gardner's book, I do not get a sense of Jamgon Kongtrul's intention in writing his diary. Gardner does say, "Kongtrul was, like most people, concerned about how his peers and posterity would view him, and he edited and framed his narrative accordingly" (p. XI). The translator's critical eye stirs my curiosity. How does Kongtrul interpret particular events and relationships, inaccurate or otherwise, in his diary? Perhaps reading Richard Barron's translation of *The Autobiography of Jamgon Kongtrul* would offer comparative insight into this query.

Jamgon Kongtrul's significant contribution to Tibetan Buddhism deserves a thoroughly written biography. Alexander Gardner offers his talents and knowledge in researching and writing *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul*. Tibetan scholars, historical, religious, or otherwise, may gain new insights by reading this book. 19<sup>th</sup> century Kham and Tibet come to life through this biography, which provides new contexts and views of Buddhism, Tibetan history and politics, all of which dissolve sweeping stereotypes. Casual readers may grow overwhelmed with the minutiae, but Gardner attempts to keep their attention with his story-narrative.

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