



**Tim Chamberlain** explores a connection between the BM and a time of revolution and warlords on the Chinese-Tibetan frontier

# Edge of empires



**Above** Hevajra, with his consort, 17th century, given by Louis King

Shortly after World War I a collection of Tibetan religious artefacts was given to the British Museum by Louis Magrath King, a member of the British Consular Service in China. The collection contains some fine examples of Buddhist gilded bronze statuary, prayer wheels, trumpets made from human bone, and *thangka*, paintings done on textile. King had collected these objects while travelling in the region of eastern Tibet known as Kham.

Born in 1886, King was the third generation of his family living in China. He began his career in the consular service in 1905. Following the revolution of 1911, the country was in a state of chaos. The Imperial family had been ousted and the old order superseded by that of the new Republic. Yet the Republican movement itself was far from cohesive. Different

factions vied for prominence and, as a result, parts of China suffered from the internecine rivalry between different generals. These warlords fought each other incessantly for regional power, until the country was finally unified when Communist forces seized complete control in 1949. Foreign officials such as King weathered these unstable times, often in some very remote outposts, and many consular officers could recount real tales of romance, peril and adventure. King's own story, in particular, was one that became a consular service legend; he was long remembered by his colleagues as the Consul who married a 'Tibetan Princess'.

In 1913 representatives of the governments of British India, Tibet and China met at Simla in northern India to discuss the demarcation of boundaries for their respective territories but failed to



**Above** Louis King meeting with the Kalon Lama, Commander of the Tibetan Armed Forces in Eastern Tibet and Governor-General of Kham (standing to Louis's right; reproduced with kind permission of the owner).

reach an agreement. Soon after this, King was sent to western China. Most consular officers spent their days dealing with issues of trade or legal disputes regarding the foreign business concerns of their respective nationals in the treaty ports. King, however, was given secret instructions to gather military intelligence on China's western frontier with Tibet. Shortly before the fall of the Qing Court in 1911 the Chinese Imperial Army had made a push into eastern Tibet and after the revolution the Tibetan Armed Forces had successfully pushed back. The situation was now at best a precarious stalemate. King was entering the political machinations of the 'Great Game', a term popularised by Rudyard Kipling in his 1901 novel *Kim*.

Setting out from the British Consulate in Chengdu, King made his base at remote Tachienlu (present-day Kangding), a market town at the edge of Sichuan Province where Tibetans traded with the Chinese. Ostensibly there to observe frontier trade, King soon made good connections with the region's most prominent Chinese and Tibetan officials and merchants. His reports were sent to both Peking and India, as well as to the Foreign Office in London. The only other foreigners in Tachienlu and the surrounding area were a handful of Christian missionaries. Mostly American and French, many had been there for long periods of time and were good, reliable sources of local information. King was permitted to travel and so contributed to the first official maps drawn of the region (in some places he is said to have been the first Westerner to set foot). Three of Asia's major rivers, the Salween, the Mekong and the Yangtze,

originate in the mountain valleys of Kham. Two of King's colleagues who were later stationed at Tachienlu (when he returned to Europe to serve in World War I) published accounts of their explorations through the Royal Geographical Society. King's own writings on the region, however, took a different focus. He was much more interested in the people and personalities of his time. Today his writings offer a rare first-hand glimpse of an important transitional period in this region's social and political history.

At times it was a life-threatening adventure. In 1915 a company of Chinese soldiers, disgruntled at harsh conditions and long lack of pay, mutinied and killed their commanding officer. They turned bandit and set about marauding the region, eventually laying siege to Tachienlu. The local Chinese Commissioner asked King to lead a deputation to mediate with the rebel soldiers. King set out with some local merchants and two missionaries, the Norwegian Theo Sorensen and the Frenchman Francis Goré. The negotiations ended with King and his companions being taken hostage by the rebels who then attacked the town. Once Tachienlu had fallen to the rebels, King managed to persuade their leader, Ch'en Pu-san, to stop his men from looting and so saved the town from destruction. King set out once more to mediate, meeting with the Commissioner who had retreated to the neighbouring town. In the meantime, the rebel soldiers were routed by another Chinese general who mounted a surprise attack from the opposite side. The rebels fled in disarray, but over the next few days they were captured and dealt



**Above** Rebel leader, Ch'en Pu-san (seated) and one of his men, shortly before their execution in March 1915 (Reproduced with kind permission of the owner)

**Facing page top left** Climbing a snow-covered mountain spur, photograph taken on one of Louis King's journeys in Tibet (Reproduced with kind permission of the owner)

**Facing page top right** Rinchen Lhamo and Louis Magrath King were married at Chengdu in 1922. In the midst of renewed civil war, the city was under siege at the time and during the marriage ceremony several artillery shells landed nearby (Reproduced with kind permission of the owner).



**Above** Arriving in London in 1925 Rinchen Lhamo was the subject of much press interest, including this front page interview for *The Vote* – *The Organ of the Women's Freedom League*.



**Above** A photograph from one of Louis King's journeys in Tibet, showing the crossing of a mountain pass (Reproduced with kind permission of the owner)



**Below** Scene from a religious festival held in one of the Tibetan Gumpa at Tachienlu, this is probably the *Ya-chiu* or 'Summer Festival' as described by Rinchen Lhamo in *We Tibetans* (Reproduced with kind permission of the owner)

with severely. The next time King was to encounter Ch'en Pu-san, it was merely to see his severed head being paraded through the streets of Tachienlu.

Several years later King was called upon to mediate between the leaders of the local Chinese and Tibetan Armed Forces. His mediation was a success and ensured that the fragile truce held for a further ten years. Such diplomacy, however, precipitated events which eventually destroyed King's career. The historian Alastair Lamb observed that King's views were not in line with those of Sir Charles Bell, a senior British official, who may have encouraged certain unsubstantiated complaints from the Tibetan government regarding King's intervention. King was alleged to be anti-Tibetan and so when it was thought prudent to withdraw him from the region, it must have seemed somewhat anomalous when he returned to Chengdu with a Tibetan partner, Rinchen Lhamo, and their baby daughter.

King had sent ahead a request for the Consul-General at Chengdu to formalise his and Lhamo's marriage, but the Consul-General, W.M. Hewlett, whom King had been instructed to relieve, was scandalised. Senior staff in Peking maintained that such a marriage was contrary to their statutes of employment for consuls. Even though

King cited examples of other mixed-race marriages in the consular service, it was to no avail. It was said that, as a native of Tibet, Rinchen Lhamo was 'insufficiently civilised for the position of a consul's wife'. King was required to retire, aged only 37.

The Kings left China in 1925, sailing on a Japanese ship, the S.S. Kitano Maru (Rinchen's ethnicity apparently precluding passage on a Western steamer). They were accompanied by her brother, Namka Dendru, who intended to study English and engineering in England. Their arrival in London caused a stir. Rinchen was interviewed by a number of newspapers. Descended from Tibetan nobility, many newspapers incorrectly described her as a 'princess'. She was widely thought to be the first Tibetan to marry a Westerner and the first Tibetan to settle in England. The family made their home at Hildenborough, Kent, and in 1927 King published *China in Turmoil*, a book of character studies of people he had known on the frontier. Rinchen had also written a book about her native Tibet and Tibetan culture; *We*

*Tibetans* was published in 1926 and remains popular to this day.

When a Labour government came to power in 1929, their policy opposed racial discrimination so King sought reinstatement, backed by the prominent MP Ellen Wilkinson. But his appeal to the Foreign Office was unsuccessful. That year Rinchen died of tuberculosis at the age of 28.

A few years after his sister's death, Namka Dendru returned to Tibet. A newspaper interviewer at the time reported on his most memorable experiences of life in England: 'The British Museum had an endless attraction for Namka. Here he used to spend many of his days enjoying the exhibits from the lands afar. He was also greatly interested in the Tibetan section and the exhibits from the Roof of the World.' Some of these exhibits may have been the very same Buddhist bronze figures, prayer wheels and *thangka* paintings which King had collected on his journeys in Tibet, where, as he later wrote, he had known what it was to be a 'man lost in the vast loneliness of Tibetan spaces'.

Louis King, the grandfather of the author's brother-in-law, gave a collection of 22 objects to the British Museum, some of which are on permanent display in the Joseph E. Hotung Gallery (Room 33).