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Arjia Rinpoche continues to play role of spiritual leader

By Robert King

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- Arjia Rinpoche sweeps snow from the sidewalks around his Buddhist temple here and thinks of Tibet. There are other reminders -- photos of Tibet in a cultural center he oversees and a tall religious monument containing the ashes of the teacher who taught him as a boy.

For Rinpoche, the journey from Tibet's rooftop of the world to Indiana truly has been long. Born to a family of nomads, he was introduced to the life of a prince after monks from the prestigious Kumbum monastery identified him as the reincarnation of a high lama, or spiritual teacher -- at age 2.

After the Chinese takeover of Tibet, he saw his teachers tortured, his family imprisoned and his faith challenged. Eventually, he would flee to the West and, ultimately, this little slice of Tibet situated on 108 acres in Bloomington -- the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center, where he has served as director since 2005.

Rinpoche, 59, who is sharing the lessons

of his life in a new book, also offers Buddhist wisdom in private counseling sessions, and public teachings draw about 50 people a week to the center's ornate temple, which is decorated with colorful art and silk flower bouquets and features an altar in front of a golden statue. Among those sometimes in the audience is Elaine Mellencamp, model, temple board member and wife of singer John Mellencamp.

Rinpoche's book, "Surviving the Dragon: A Tibetan Lama's Account of 40 Years Under Chinese Rule," in many ways is a tally of China's effort to extinguish Tibetan culture.

"I wanted to share my life experience and the story of Tibet -- what's happened to me, what was around me, what I heard, what I saw," Rinpoche (pronounced RIN-po-shay) said recently from a sitting room at his temple in Bloomington. He lives in a house on the cultural center's grounds.

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Rinpoche made a daring escape from China in 1998, the most important defection by a Tibetan religious leader since the Dalai Lama fled in 1959. Among the few possessions he escaped with were the photos of his early life -- as the lama on the throne at Kumbum, as a young man in tattered work clothes.

Born in 1950, shortly after China's invasion of Tibet, Rinpoche as a young boy was taught sacred Buddhist scriptures and adored by crowds who lined the streets to watch him pass in an ornate chair carried on the shoulders of monks. Yet he also was a child who coveted candy, played hide-and-seek in the monastery and delighted when visitors presented him gifts of toy airplanes and other trinkets.

That world was upended in 1958 when China's communist leader, Mao Zedong, called for a "Great Leap Forward," an attempt to increase farm and factory production and teach a good "worker" ideology. Soldiers dragged monks into the courtyard of his monastery for beatings in front of the young boy. Some were hauled off to prison. Others were tortured, their hair pulled from their head, their skin burned with cigarettes.

By the mid-1960s, China was trying to eradicate religion with its Cultural Revolution. Prayers and rituals were forbidden. Monasteries were ransacked or destroyed. Ancient scriptures were burned and Buddha statues smashed. Monks and young students, including a

teenage Rinpoche, were forced to denounce spiritual leaders such as the Panchen Lama -- second in prominence only to the Dalai Lama.

"I felt debased by this," Rinpoche writes, "but in my fear I also felt I had no choice. Monks who refused to go along were tortured, sent to prison camps and even killed."

Rinpoche's family was relocated, and some members were imprisoned. A few, including his father, disappeared forever. Rinpoche was forced into hard labor, building dams and participating in collective farming. Famine ravaged the land. By age 26, Rinpoche writes, "I had rubbed shoulders with death with an awful and numbing frequency. Years of forced labor and public denunciation had reduced my self-image to that of a leper."

By the mid-1980s, Rinpoche was allowed to attend college. He took a job acting as a bridge between Tibet and the Chinese government, justifying the job by saying

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it put him in a position to look out for Tibet. He helped see that a hospital was built. He oversaw the restoration of Kumbum after decades of neglect.

But China would try to co-opt Rinpoche's religious standing as a propaganda tool, allowing him certain freedoms as long as he put on a brave face for the outside world. After years of hardship, the perks of the job began to grow on him. He began dressing like communist bureaucrats and spending time with friends "gossiping in cafes."

"The temptations of the material world were very strong," he writes, "and threatened to sever my ties to the sacred vows I had taken."

By 1995, the Chinese demands on him grew worse.

From India, the Dalai Lama announced he had discerned the identity of the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. China disputed the announcement, forcing Rinpoche to go on TV and denounce the Dalai Lama's choice.

A few months later, under armed surveillance, he and other monks would be forced to witness China's own selection of a Panchen Lama -- a rigged process he says produced a "counterfeit" Panchen Lama. He then had to prostrate himself in front of the newly minted, communist- approved religious leader.

"I felt soiled by the gesture," Rinpoche

writes.

Larry Gerstein, a Fishers resident and president of the International Tibet Independence Movement, said China's lengthy occupation has led many Tibetans to make compromises that appear unseemly. But they do it strategically, in ways intended to preserve their country. The key for Buddhists, Gerstein said, is their motivation. And he thinks Rinpoche's motives were pure.

"I have met a lot of Tibetans that are capable of doing that, and it is a survival strategy," he said. "You know if you yell and stand up to them you might be sent to prison and stay for a long time."

When the Chinese government asked Rinpoche, in 1998, to become the counterfeit Panchen Lama's tutor, Rinpoche reached a breaking point: "My political life," he writes, "was betraying my religious and moral principles."

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So Rinpoche contacted a friend in Guatemala he had met while on a closely supervised state visit to Central America. The friend arranged visas for Rinpoche and a small entourage. He put aside his lama's robes for Western clothes, grew a mustache, donned sunglasses and a hat, and boarded a plane bound for Central America.

The Dalai Lama helped Rinpoche and four others come to the United States. His first two years in America -- starting in New York, then in California -- Rinpoche feared that China's long arm would pull him back under "the dragon's claw."

When he concluded the Chinese could no longer reach him, he said from the safety of his enclave in Bloomington, "that means you are really free."

The strain of being a middleman between China and Tibet weighed heavily on Rinpoche, said his longtime assistant, Chunpay Jiumei, who followed Rinpoche to Bloomington. Yet he stayed true to his core Buddhist values.

"His life is like a teaching to me," Jiumei said. "I think of myself as very lucky because I am always with him."

Rinpoche is on a multicity tour for the book, with proceeds going to a library in India and a cancer center in Mongolia. But his primary job is building support for the Tibetan Cultural Center in Bloomington.

Founded in 1979 by the late Thubten Norbu, an Indiana University professor and the eldest brother of the Dalai Lama, the center has become a lifeboat for Tibetan culture and religion. The Dalai Lama, who wrote a forward for Rinpoche's book, has visited five times and is due again in May.

The trials of his life, Rinpoche writes, taught him valuable lessons about "the workings of karma, impermanence, ignorance and discontent." Yet he writes that Tibet, once free like a fish in the sea, is now "broiled and on the table, already half devoured."

And Rinpoche is beginning to doubt whether he will ever again see Tibet.

"I had that dream that after 10 years I can return -- this is my dream," Rinpoche said. "Already, at 12 years, it is too far away."

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