

Kirkus Reviews

In a polished, occasionally stuffy autobiography, the revered abbot of the Kumbum monastery in Tibet recounts his trials under the Chinese Cultural Revolution and recent exile to America. In 1998, the author, who has been recognized since age two as the eighth reincarnation of Arjia Rinpoche ("precious father"), secretly flew to the West because he had grown tired of "constantly navigating the treacherous shoals of Communist policy as it affected so many Tibetans." A new round of Chinese repression, including being forced to denounce the Dalai Lama, reminded him bitterly of what he and his fellow Buddhists had endured during the Cultural Revolution. Rinpoche chronicles his life story in beautifully fluid English that belies his recent learning of the language (no co-author is credited). Born in 1950, Rinpoche was chosen as the reincarnation of the last hereditary abbot after a series of fortuitous signs and prophecies, including his birth on the Dolon Nor Steppe to a family of nomads. It helped that his uncle Gyayak Rinpoche was the powerful teacher of the Panchen Lama, the spiritual leader of their Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism and the religious equal of the Dalai Lama. Immersed in practicing dharma and reciting sutras, the boy nonetheless had plenty of time to play and be mischievous. With the advent of the Great Leap Forward, however, cadres of Chinese Communists invaded the monasteries and organized struggles and public denunciations "to stamp out religion in the name of reform." Famine, forced labor and imprisonment followed, and under the "dragon's claw" the boy grew up secularly and without proper instruction. Rinpoche's account offers valuable details of this absurd era, and he writes poignantly that he could no longer tolerate collaboration with the criminal regime once he had assumed his birthright at Kumbum. A bold work that underscores Rinpoche's cultural and political—rather than spiritual—journey.