A Linguistic and Anthropological Survey of the Tibetan Borderland

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Abstract

This paper reports the linguistic and anthropological situation of an important but poorly documented region of Tibet, namely the cultural province of Kham. Characterized by "four rivers and six ranges," the region is a historical frontier zone between Tibet proper and western provinces of China and has been a meeting place between the Tibetans and the Han Chinese and a common home for these peoples as well as other ethnic minorities. As an introduction to the ethnic and linguistic complexity of Kham, the paper pays special attention to Gyalthang (Zhongdian), which is located on the southernmost tip of the frontier and is the last Khampa town in the embrace of the Yangtze river. An investigation of local history, cultural identity as well as linguistic diversity of this and other Kham communities not only advances our understanding of Kham regionalism, but also sheds light on Modern Tibet as a whole.

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1. The Sino-Tibetan Borderland of Kham

The most integral and lasting contacts between the Tibetans and the Chinese did not develop from formal diplomatic relations in Lhasa or Beijing. They evolved naturally on the frontiers where the two peoples met in war, trade, and pilgrimage, in regions where the writ of their governments barely ran at all.

(Aris 1992: 13)

The term "Frontiers of China" emerged from travel accounts and scholarly writings of pioneering explorers of the early twentieth century (cf. the work by Fletcher (1979), Latimore (1962), Migot (1955), and Rock (1956)). In the common conception, this term conjures up an image of remote wilderness, which inevitably evokes the discourse of fear. Numerous accounts of brigandry, murders, landslides and hailstorms - among major calamities on the high plateaus ñ as well as strange tongues and habits of their inhabitants justify the fear and augment the sense of distrust. Thus the Tibetan frontiers constituted another "forbidden land" provoking the challenge for those who wanted to tame them.2

For shepherds, traders and farmers who live along the borderlands, the term conjures up another image. It was their only known world whose genuine rulers were not the Chinese emperors or the Dalai Lamas but local chieftains. The line on paper marked by cartographers meant little

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2 It is interesting to note that many western explorers (including Christian missionaries) attempted to enter Lhasa through the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. That is, Lhasa has always been the true forbidden land.
to them; the only boundaries they recognized were the rivers and mountains which separated them from their neighbors. Their world was of complex interdependence cutting across cultures, religions, languages and ethnic groups. Hence the frontiers were neither restricted areas to be controlled nor political arenas between two governments.

Acknowledging the spatial greatness of the Sino-Tibetan borderland and its independent relationship with the central government of Lhasa, Tibetan scholars call it phö chemo (bod chenpo) "Greater Tibet," in contrast with phö (bod) "Tibet."3 The latter simply designates Ü-Tsang (Central Tibet of which Lhasa is the capital), whereas the former refers to the two remaining traditional provinces of Kham and Amdo in East and Northeast Tibet respectively.

Though the location of the frontier zone covers both Kham and Amdo, it is surprising to see that most relevant existing literature talks greatly about the latter, paying little attention to the former. Aimed at remedying this gap, the paper investigates the Kham part of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. As an introduction to its linguistic and ethnic complexity, the paper pays a special attention to Gyalthang (Zhongdian), which is located on the southernmost tip of the frontier and is the last Khampa town in the embrace of the Yangtze river.

Although the notion frontier or borderland is quite meaningless when one talks about modern politics (presently Kham is divided into several Tibetan autonomous prefectures, see §2), I contend that the borderland discourse is instrumental and is still fitting on the following grounds. Firstly, it helps us see the relationship between Khampas and Tibetans from other regions, particularly Lhasans, more clearly. Secondly, from a linguistic point of view, the notion instigates cultural interactions resulting in linguistic diversity. Kham is by no means a monolithic speech community. Cultural contact has brought about language contact

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3 Note on transcription and transliteration: For practical reasons, most place names in this paper are written using Roman letters based on broad phonetic transcription. The names in parentheses correspond to Written Tibetan and the Chinese pinyin which appear in official maps.
resulting in loanwords, bilingualism and multilingualism in the region. Lastly, the notion reminds us that the term Tibet is a misnomer—it merely refers to Central Tibet (what is today Tibet Autonomous Region [TAR]/Xizang) and does not include outlying provinces where Tibetan-speaking people, with strong ethnic identity and different local histories, live.

Traditionally labelled the land of "Four Rivers and Six Ranges," Kham has played an important role in frontier politics and trade and served as one of the most important pilgrimage routes to Lhasa and Mt. Kailash for several centuries. Bathang in southern Kham, for example, provides an overland route for trade and pilgrimage via Markham into Tibet proper. Moreover, the frontier region is not only the meeting place of the Tibetans and the Han Chinese but also home of descendents of Mongol tribes (e.g., the Hor) and various Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups who exhibit cultural and religious affinities with Tibetans. They are, for example, the Chiang (Qiang) and the Gyalrong in the north and northeast and the Naxi (Nakhi/Moso) in the south. Apart from the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism, the frontier has also been influenced by Bon and Islam, though the population of the believers of the latter faiths cannot be compared with the number of Buddhists.

2. Geographical Location

Presently, there are about 5 million Tibetans in China. Half of this number live in the Lhasa valley and TAR; the remaining half in Amdo and Kham. Modern Amdo is located in Qinghai and Gansu Provinces, 

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4 The four great rivers which flow in parallel from north to south of Kham are the Salween (Nu jiang/Ngul chu), the Mekong (Lancang jiang/Dza chu), the Yangtze (Jinsha jiang/Dri chu) and the Yarlong (Yalung jiang/Nyag chu). The six ranges are Tsawa gang (5,100-6,700 m.), including Mt. Kawa Karpo (6,702 m.) lying between the Mekong and the Salween; Markham gang (5,100-5,700 m.) lying between the Mekong and the Yangtze; Pobor gang lying between the southern Yangtze and the lower Yarlong; Zelmo gang (4,800-5,400 m.) between the northern reaches of the Yangtze and the Yalong; Mardza gang (5,100-5,700 m.) between the upper Yalong and the Yellow river; and Minyak Rab Gang (4,800-7,750 m.) including Mt. Minyak Gangkar (7,756 m.), the highest mountain in Kham between the lower Yalong and the Gyarong (Gyurme Dorje 1996).
whereas Kham extends from the southeastern part of Qinghai and western Sichuan to northwestern Yunnan. Like other parts of Tibet, Kham is divided into several Tibetan autonomous prefectures (TAP) and one Tibetan autonomous county, as follows:

- **TAR (21 counties):** Chamdo TAP, Nakchu TAP, Nyangtri TAP
- **Qinghai (6 counties):** Jyekundo (Yushu) TAP
- **Sichuan (18 counties):** Kandze (Ganzi) TAP, Mili (Muli) county
- **Yunnan (3 counties):** Dechen (Diqin) TAP

The Kandze TAP is today the cultural heart of Kham extending from the prefecture's government seat, Dartsedo (Kangding/Tachienlu) to Dege (Derge) in the north and Lithang and Bathang in the south. Chamdo and Jyekundo lie in the periphery of modern Kham territory, though they had been important trading towns of this region. Despite the separate polities under Chinese administration and a continuing process of sinicization, Kham still retains its strong regionalism and Tibetan culture is very much thriving. Migot's description of Dartsedo (i.e., Kangting) as the gateway of Tibet still has some application today:

> But once one is west of Kangting, he has finished with China. Henceforth only Tibetan is spoken, only Tibetans are to be seen. Even the landscape alters. The religious monuments are all Buddhist, the temples are all lamaseries. Chinese money ceases to circulate, and the only Chinese one meets are officials or soldiers or little merchants, all seemingly lost in a land which they do not understand and in which they keep to themselves, living in the Chinese fashion, having as little as possible to do with the weird and (to them) barbarous world around them,...

*(Migot 1955: 92-3)*

Kham is further divided into two sub-regions with Dartsedo in the middle. Northern Kham - area northeast of Dartsedo - includes the great kingdoms of Dege and Nanchen ruled by hereditary kings, the Hor states of Kandze, Daowu and Drango ruled by hereditary chieftains, and the northwestern states of Chamdo, Drayab and Riwoche governed by lama
dignitaries. Southern Kham covers the states ruled by appointed regents, viz. Lithang, Bathang, Derong, Tsawarong and Markham (Gyurme Dorje 1996).

The Khampa of both sub-regions depend on both agricultural and pastoral economy. Northern Kham at higher elevations is inhabited mainly by drolpa ("brog pa") "nomads/pastoralists," whereas the Tibetans in lowlying southern Kham, with Lithang as an exception, maintain their lifestyles as samadrok (sa-ma-'brog) "semi-nomads/neither farmers nor pastoralists" herding cattle as well as growing barley, wheat, buckwheat and potato.

3. History

After the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty in 842 A.D., the Tibetan empire broke up and Kham, together with Amdo and other borderland territories such as Gyalrong, remained independent territories. They were never ruled again by any Tibetan government (Gruschke 2001: 11). Kham was later composed of several small principalities and kingdoms governed by local chieftains, hereditary kings and reincarnate lamas (Aris 1992). Each kingdom was perceived as a center in its own right, not lying in the margin, as was the case when judging from the Lhasan perspective. The case of Dege is clear. It used to be a great kingdom ruled by kings and its territory covered the large area including Denkok in the north. It has been renowned for having its own printing academy housing and publishing thousands of precious Buddhist scriptures. Having produced great scholars and lamas, Dege is still considered the cultural center of Kham, in a similar manner that Lhasa is perceived as the center of Tibet.

Frontier politics did not apply merely to the rulers of Central Tibet and China. But it also involved other foreign powers. Southern Kham (i.e., Lithang, Bathang, and Gyalthang) was attacked by the Naxi kings of Lijiang (Jang Sadam kingdom) and was subsequently ruled by them until the early 20th century when the Chinese province of Sikang was

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Nowadays Denkok belongs to Dzachukha (Serqu) county.
established. Northern Kham was subjugated by the Mongols since the period of Kubilai Khan's reign in the 13th century.

Around the end of the 17th century the Manchu domination was felt in the Kham region. As politics and religion in Tibet usually go hand in hand, the Qing emperors brought about the spread and power of the Gelugpa sect under the leadership of the 5th Dalai Lama in Kham and Amdo. They were the patrons of this sect and co-operated with them to control the frontier people. As a result, a number of Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyu monasteries (three former sects in Kham) were sacked and replaced with Gelugpa ones.

Subsequently, there was an attempt to mark the frontier zone. According to Migot (1955: 90), a pillar on the Bum La, a pass which lies two and a half days' travel to the southwest of Bathang was erected. From there the frontier ran north along a line parallel to, and slightly west of, the Yangtze. All the territory to the west of this line was under the direct authority of the Dalai Lama, but to the east of it the petty chieftians of the local tribes remained a considerable measure of independence.

During the early 20th century a small province of Sikang was established. This corresponds to the area on the west side of the upper Yangtze. It had 27 sub-prefectures with Bathang as the capital. This act was to announce that Kham was an official territory of China. However, Migot remarks that even under Chinese administration, the Tibetans completely disregarded it and obeyed only their own chiefs. "One very simple fact illustrates the true status of Sikang's Chinese rulers: nobody in the province would accept Chinese currency, and the officials, unable to buy anything with their money, were forced to subsist by a process of barter." (Migot 1955: 92)

Another aspect of Kham history worth noting here is that the region was home of Tibetan soldiers who were sent by the Yarlung kings since the reign of Srong-btsan sgam-po in the 7th century AD to protect the empire's borders. After several military campaigns, these soldiers settled in the region and became ancestors of several Khampa communities, including Gyalthang.
4. Linguistic and Ethnic Make-Up

The Sino-Tibetan borderland of Kham is populated by a number of nationalities, namely Tibetans, Han Chinese, Mongols, Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims), Tibetanized Qiangic-speaking groups such as Gyalrongs and Minyaks, and other Tibeto-Burman groups such as Yi, Naxi, Pumi and Lisu. The Gyalrongs and Minyaks consider themselves Tibetans and are officially included within the Tibetan nationality, though they speak non-Tibetan languages as their mother tongues. Smith (1996) notes that the ethnonym Hor refers to almost all of the northern nomads of Kham and that they are the descendants of the Mongol tribes who migrated to the plateau after the fall of the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) and during the early Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

The Tibetans call themselves *khampa* (khams pa), instead of *phopa* (bod pa), which designates Lhasans and other people from Central Tibet. Therefore, when asked what language they speak, they tend to answer *khámke* (khams skad) "Kham language," instead of *phökê* (bod skad) "Tibetan language". It is interesting to note that since the change of the political system in China and subsequent changes in Tibet, the term *phöril* (bod rigs/ zàngzú) "Tibetan nationality" has become widely used. This term is in contrast with such terms as "Yi nationality" or "Hui nationality" referring to other nationalities in China, among the 56 official groups. The Khampa thus describe themselves as being *phörik* as well as *khampa*, but not *phopa*.

Linguistically speaking, Tibetan belongs to the Bodish branch of the Tibeto-Burman division in the Sino-Tibetan language family. It consists of three major dialects, corresponding to the three traditional provinces: Ü-tsang, Kham and Amdo. Lhasa Tibetan is the most important variety of Ü-tsang and is the standard dialect. Kham Tibetan is a conglomerate of dialects roughly divided into two groups: valley/agricultural dialects *ronke* (rong skad) and nomadic dialects *droke* (*brog skad*). The former...
group consists of a number of sub-dialects which are mutually unintelligible; the latter group poses fewer internal differences and are similar to the dialects spoken in Amdo.

In concomitant with the geographical location, Kham Tibetan is classified into four sub-dialectal groups, as follows:

1. **Sichuan Kham Dialects**
   Dege is the most prestigious dialect and is generally considered Kham khowinÈ. Other important dialects are Bathang, Lithang in the south and Dartsedo and Kandze in the north. In addition, a number of nomadic dialects, e.g. Dzachukha and Golok (Sertha) are included in this group.

2. **Yunnan Kham Dialects**
   Gyalthang is the most important dialect of this group.

3. **Qinghai Kham Dialects**
   The most important dialect is Jyekundo.

4. **TAR Kham Dialects**
   The most important dialect for this group is Chamdo.

5. **Gyalthang**

   **Frontier town on the Upper Yangtze**

   With its population of approximately 120,000, Gyalthang (Gyelthang/Rgyalthang) or its widely known Chinese name Zhongdian is the prefecture's seat and one of the three counties of the Diqin TAP in northwestern Yunnan; the other two counties being Dechen (Deqin) and Weixi populated mainly by Tibetans and Lisu respectively. Apart from Tibetan and Han populations, there are also other ethnic groups in the three counties, e.g., Hui, Bai, Naxi, Yi and Pumi.
At an elevation at 3,300 meters, Gyalthang is situated on the highland plains surrounded by numerous mountains. It is in the Do Med (mdo mad) region. The road to the north-west for a distance of 180 kilometers leads to the sacred Karwa Karpo Mt. in Dechen, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in East Tibet. Due to poor road conditions occasionally worsened by heavy snowfalls and its location in a remote valley, Dechen is often isolated from Gyalthang and other parts of Kham. Gyalthang, on the other hand, has a much closer connection with China, TAR and Kham, partly because of the recently built airport which links it with Kunming, Lhasa and Chengdu.

The Gyalthangwa often describe themselves as people who live in the embrace of the Yangtze river before it leaves Tibetan land and falls into China proper. The Upper Yangtze is the natural boundary separating Gyalthang from Lijiang, its Naxi neighbor in the south. The Gyalthang county is composed of two towns: Da Zhongdian "Big Gyalthang" and Xiao Zhongdian "Little Gyalthang". The major villages of the county are Ketsa and Demarong in the north and Nixi in the west. The villagers are mainly Tibetans and their dialects are similar to the one spoken in Gyalthang, though there are some variations, especially in the pronunciation of certain consonants. Because of their remoteness, the dialects have a lesser degree of contact with the Chinese language. Hence, they possess fewer loanwords, though generally speaking most villagers can carry on basic conversations in Chinese.

Although Gyalthang is under the Yunnan administration and has a large number of Han Chinese settlers, it shares a lot of cultural and historical affinity with other southern Kham communities. The Gyalthangwa call themselves khampa, in contrast with phöpa (or lhasawa) and amdowa. When talking about their history, they often make a reference to Bathang and Lithang, which today belong to the Ganzi TAP under the Sichuan administration. As mentioned earlier, the three counties ñ the

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7 Because of these fertile plains, wealthy families from Demarong (Dangwang), home of notorious robber tribe, migrated to Gyalthang and settled down there (Fieldnotes, Gyalthang, 1996).
three cousins in the natives' conception ñ used to be governed by the Naxi kings since the Yuan dynasty in the 13th century.

However, in terms of language, the Gyalthangwas view that their language is superior than most Khampa speeches. Gyalthang ancestors were descendents of the soldiers of the Yarlung dynasty who set up garrisons during military campaigns on what was then the border between the Tibetan empire and the dominions of the Tang rulers of China (Makley et al 1999; Wang Xiaosong, personal communication). Therefore, the language is derived directly from Old Tibetan, the standard dialect of that time.

As in most southern Kham communities, the Gyalthangwa are samadrok: they both herd animals and do farming. The following interview excerpt clearly illustrates this statement (Fieldnotes, Khoce village, 1998):

de ngatsho khaba zhe na gazo byas dgos zer na
te ṇatshe khawa sə nə kazo ṭu gya sə nə
gcig de phyugs rta 'tsho dgos red
tɕi tə çota sə gya re
gnyis de sə zhung 'debs
nei tə sə zin̄ to

"If we talk about the land of snow, if we say how we must do it, first, we must tend cattle. Second, (we) do farming."

Each family in the village possesses a plot of land where they once a year grow potato, wheat and barley. In addition, they own horses and cattle, particularly the dzo and dzomo, male and female crossbreeds of yaks and cows. Other animals such as sheep, goats, pigs and chickens are rare. The work of a herder can be summarized as follows:

Herders go up the mountain taking the animals there and stay with them throughout the whole summer (July-September). Then they will move down at about 5 stages until the winter months approach when they have to return to the village. A day's activities are centered on feeding the
cattle and dogs who help look after them; herding the cattle on the grassland; milking the dzomo; making yoghurt, butter and cheese; collecting firewood, making tea and enjoying themselves on the beautiful highland where both the animals and herders are happier than anybody can imagine. (Fieldnotes, Khoce village, 1998).

**Linguistic and Cultural Practices**

There are several interesting Gyalthang linguistic and cultural practices such as kinship terms, terms relating to animals, household terms which reflect how Gyalthang people view their family and the universe, as well as idioms, proverbs and various kinds of songs and performances. Due to limited scope, the paper will discuss only the yak vocabulary which reveals a close affinity between lexicon and the way of living of these people.

The Gyalthang dialect has more than 30 terms for calling cattle and their crossbreeds. In other words, the borrowed term yak in English in fact refers to cattle of various kinds: whether they are male or female and whether they are crossbreeds of yak and cow, bull and female yak, yak and dzo (hybrid of yak and cow), bull and female dzo, yak and ty (hybrid of yak and female dzo), or bull and kuba (hybrid of bull and female dzo). The Gyalthangwa also have endearment names and terms to call these animals depending on their age and characteristics, such as when they are one year old, two year old, when they are ready to mate, when the female one gives birth to her first calf, and when the male one is castrated.

Most dzos and dzomos are given special names because they are closer to their owners and are treated more affectionately. Yaks are generally raised for meat and mating; they do not get to spend time with their owners as much as the dzo and dzomo do. Common names for dzos and dzomos include "the black one with straight horns," "the black one with leaning horns," the black one with white forehead," "the black one with

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8 For an analysis of the Gyalthang kinship system, see Corlin (1978).
white tail and limbs," "the black one with yellow marrow," "the black, stout one with yellow marrow," "the black one with no horns," "the ordinary, black one," and so on.

Apart from dzos and dzomos, horses are also given names, such as "the red one," "the beige one," "the white one," "the black one," the dark blue one," or "the dark blown (chocolate color) one". A female horse is called guiwang, whereas a male one is ta, which is also a general term for horse. Chopa are horses reserved only for mating. The offspring of horse and donkey is called cong (male) and kore (female).

China's Shangri-la

(Th)he land is high and mountains are numerous; the soil is hard, and the five grains cannot be grown. The peasants are poor and the land unfertile; the lamas are of great importance and are the real rulers of the country.

(Rock 1947: 249)

Contrary to Rock's description above, modern Gyalthang is by no means an impoverished area. When compared to neighboring communities (i.e., the Yi), the peasants of Gyalthang have fared better in terms of farming and housing. They possess abundant, fertile land for farming and grassland for herding animals. Farm products such as potato are sold in Dali, where they buy grapes, bananas and other kinds of fruits not found on the plateau. Dairy products, particularly cheese and butter are transported daily to the local markets and the peasants bring back to their villages Chinese goods. Their two-storied walled houses with a large courtyard where animals are kept are made singly of wood and are beautifully decorated. The size of a Gyalthang house and the amount of wood spent are particularly impressive and quite unusual when one compares it with most houses in other parts of Kham.

The Gyalthang lamas are still of great importance, but during recent years Tibetan Buddhism has become a commodity attracting a number of Chinese tourists to this part of the borderland. To promote tourism in the county, Gyalthang was proclaimed "gateway to Tibet" and the long-lost "Shangri-la" by the Yunnanese government. This discourse of
development brought about the new airport linking Gyalthang with Kunming and recently with Chengdu and Lhasa. Three and four-star hotels replace traditional guesthouses. Caraoke bars become the major entertainment center in town. The county is no longer a hidden frontier town where the Tibetan and the Chinese engaged in tea and horse trade. In the past five years its reputation has come even to Southeast Asia, among Singaporean, Indonesian and Thai tourists.

To cater to tourists who come to Gyalthang for the exoticness of the Tibetan culture, there are several new shops in Gyalthang selling Tibetan dresses, snowland tea, processed yak meat and traditional handicrafts. It is ironical that more and more billboards and shop names are written in Tibetan; yet, most young Tibetans in this county are illiterate in Tibetan and they tend to speak Chinese in their everyday life. The fact that Chinese has become the main medium of communication among Tibetans of all regions is hardly new. But the situation in Kham is quite different. In other parts of Kham, particularly Dege, Jyekundo and Dartsedo, it is not difficult to find a Tibetan who is well versed in Written Tibetan, whereas throughout the whole Diqin prefecture I have come across few Tibetans who are literate in Tibetan and among them there is only one who can provide the Written Tibetan equivalent of Gyalthang words.

Conclusion

As is evidenced from the above discussion, the concept of Kham is a complex one. It is a cultural province of Tibet covering the borderland areas which nowadays fall under the administrations of Tibet Autonomous Region and three western Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan. An investigation of history from an analysis of frontier accounts reveals that Kham was not a united, centrally ruled region since the fall of the Yarlung dynasty. On the contrary, it was composed of a loose federation of tribal states, kingdoms and dependant districts (Gruschke 2001: 9). This historical fact explains why Kham regionalism is still strong and why the Khampa generally view themselves as a separate group distinct from Central Tibet and Amdo, though they do share religious beliefs and the mythical origin as descendants of the union of the monkey and the rock ogress. The history
is also intertwined with the contemporary linguistic situation in which so many mutually unintelligible dialects, together with non-Tibetan languages, are spoken in the region.

The linguistic and cultural complexity of Kham can be clearly seen from the above account of Gyalthang, the Khampa town on the southernmost tip of the frontier. Although Gyalthang is under the Yunnan administration and the Gyalthangwa have intermingled with the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups for centuries, they still retain their Khampa characteristics clearly reflected in their ways of living and speaking. It will be interesting to see the impact of the changes that are taking place in this county on Kham language and culture.
References


