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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Tricks of the Trade: Debt and Imposed Sovereignty in Southernmost Kham in the Nineteenth to Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

Southernmost Kham, which borders Burma and Yunnan Province, remained at the juncture of several mutually competing political centers until the first half of the twentieth century. On the fringes of Tibetan, Naxi, and Chinese expansion and increasing political control, several Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups such as the Drung and Nung gradually became integrated into their neighbors' polities. Their political dependency often arose from trading with and accepting loans from commercial agents and from the intermediaries of local rulers, Naxi and Tibetans alike. This article addresses this practice of providing credit, which was developed at the expense of impoverished groups who were often obliged to accept the terms of the transaction. The author particularly emphasizes the connections between this system of debt dependency, the relationship between creditors and debtors that has to be considered in terms of exchange and reciprocity, and the question of political legitimacy. Within this broader context of regional interethnic relations, the article provides a detailed analysis of the concrete terms of the political relationship that existed between Drung communities and Tibetan chiefs of Tsawarong, which contributes to an understanding of the workings of this relationship and its economic, territorial, and even ritual components.

Keywords: Tibet, Kham, Drung, Nung, Naxi, trade, debt, tax, legitimacy, ritual

The area that lies at the juncture of present-day northwest Yunnan, eastern Sichuan, and southeastern Tibetan Autonomous Region poses particular challenges: we have only a fragmentary knowledge of its history, and its complexity defies the demarcations typical of our modern understanding of religion, politics, territory, and ethnic categories. Much remains to be done to gain better understanding of the history of interactions between Tibetans, Chinese, and other Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups such as the Naxi (Moso), Nung (Nu), Lisu, and Drung (Dulong), and the unique regional culture they have produced (see map 1).¹ This article is an attempt to write a regionally grounded ethnohistory of this portion of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on the late Qing and

Republican periods, I explore the multiple allegiances that resulted from the competing interests of Tibetan rulers, Chinese administrators, independent chieftains, and religious authorities. In doing so, I hope to provide a fuller picture of the social, political, and cultural environment in order to understand the relationships among groups in the making of this culturally diverse area. This picture will shed light on a little-known history and on underresearched aspects of local cultures and transcultural flows, exchanges, and power relations.



Map 1. Geographical location of the area of study and its main inhabitants (contemporary borders). *Source:* Created by Stéphane Gros and Rémi Chaix, based on data from NASA's Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM).

I approach this region as a buffer zone between the larger political entities of Central Tibet and China's interior, an area that can be regarded as spanning both cultural and political boundaries more than in any strict administrative sense. It is a historical frontier where several spheres of authority competed, expanded or retracted, and sometimes overlapped. The territorial extension of the Central Tibetan administration, on the one hand, the progressive influence of the Qing dynasty and later that of the Republicans, with their respective colonial policies, on the other hand, and the continuous fight for power contributed to make Kham a "contingent region" (Tsomu 2015, 1). And despite evidence of the relative autonomy, or even at times independence of the politically fragmented regions that made up Kham, it seems that, as Wim van Spengen and Lama Jabb (2009, 7) argue, "the local holders of power were very much aware of that intermediate location."

In what follows, I hope to go beyond simply reiterating the in-between quality of this frontier region by adding a layer of complexity and trying to recover some of the local voices that rarely emerge from histories of this region—for they are far less accessible than the better-documented depictions of events that appear in written records of the two main political players. The role of the Naxi, whose kingdom remained a major local power until the late eighteenth century, has long been acknowledged.² I hope to contribute chiefly the voices of Nung and Drung people to make for a richer and more complex microhistory that regards them as active participants in the social history of Yunnan's borderlands.³ This attempt contributes to a larger body of scholarship—within both Sinology and Tibetology—that seeks to further our knowledge of local cultures and our understanding of the ethnohistory of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands through detailed ethnographic studies of localized communities and their mutual interactions (see, for example, Gros 1996, 2012; McKhann 1998; Wellens 2010; Mueggler 2011; Tenzin 2013; Hayes 2013; Roche 2014).

This article focuses on a period when several political legitimacies coexisted in this region: an intricate situation of mutually overlapping sovereignties that resulted from a complex history of expansion from diverse political centers and forces of influence. At the local level, interethnic relationships were framed by power relations, and the Drung and Nung people often found themselves at the lower end of the political hierarchy. This article argues that in order to understand this hierarchy, one has to take into consideration the regional system of goods exchange and political relationships together as two faces of the same coin.

I will do this by taking into consideration the situation of a small region in southernmost Kham, sometimes referred to as Changyul, and its gradual inclusion in the Tibetan realm around the mid-nineteenth century. After providing the necessary regional contextualization, I delve into the details of the political relationship that tied the Drung people to local Tibetan rulers and how their political dependence arose from, or was entangled with, trade and commercial activities that created a network of indebtedness. A similar case of compulsory trade and forms of economic dependence can be found at a more regional level, and the creditor–debtor relationship seems to have played a key role in establishing and consolidating the authority of local rulers. Thus, one of the broader underlying questions concerns the processes by which authority—and the specific form it may take—was established in this borderland inhabited by diverse ethnicities. I aim to show that in certain remote areas, such as the one under scrutiny here, political expansion depended on commercial and trade activities that created forms of economic dependence from which political dependence derived.

A Disputed Frontier

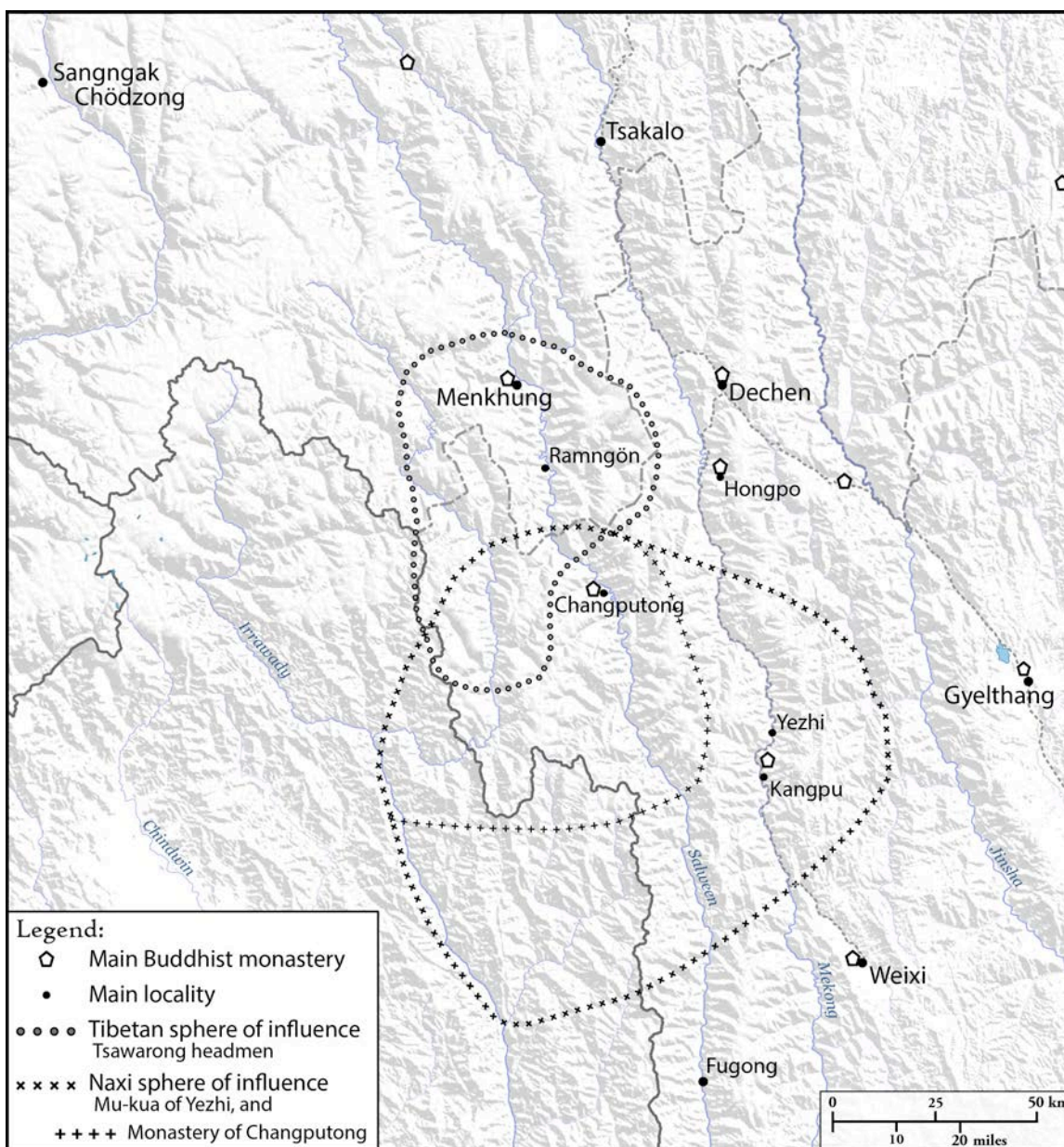
This remote area bordering Burma and Yunnan Province had long been coveted by both Tibetans and Chinese, and the strategic location of the Naxi kingdom gave it an important role as a buffer state between Tibet and China. The Naxi king was recognized as a vassal of the Emperor of China and took the surname Mu (1382), and the kingdom's capital, Sandan (Tib. Satam, N. Saddo), renamed Lijiang, became the de facto center of political authority over the entire northwestern Yunnan region. The Mu family armies won great victories (in 1548 and 1561) over the Tibetans (Tufan) during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), ensuring their control over the territories to the north of Lijiang. In the seventeenth century, the Naxi recruited Lisu regiments to invade the Mekong Valley, settled at Weixi (Tib. Balung), and reached Adunzi (today's Deqin, Tib. Dechen). During the reign of Wanli (1573–1620), the Mu king's troops went as far as Upper Burma, and large-scale migration of Lisu people to the Salween Valley further west took place during these military campaigns. However, after a switch of power and up until the 1720s, the regions of Adunzi (Dechen), Zhongdian (Gyelthang), and Weixi (Balung) were ruled by governors who had been dispatched to each region by the Lhasa government (the Ganden Phodrang). During this period, the Mu family of Lijiang again launched its troops against Tibetan incursions, and their army reached Yanjing (Tsakalo), Mangkang (Markham), and

Batang and Litang in Kham (Wang 1995, 53–57, 108–109). The Naxi remained the main ruling elite in this area when the Qing dynasty extended the indigenous chief system (*tusi zhidu*), which left a significant degree of autonomy to local leaders in return for their loyalty to the empire. In spite of the reform to attribute control of the administration to state-appointed civilian officials (*gaitu guiliu*), only local chieftains wielded real authority in the most remote areas (see Jagou and Tenzin in this issue). These chieftains included Naxi indigenous chiefs (or *tusi*) and independent Tibetan chiefs of Tsawarong.

Following the northern expansion of the Naxi during the Ming dynasty over the border zone between Yunnan, Tibet, and Sichuan, an administrative hierarchy was established in the context of the new military and territorial organization, and some garrisons were left stationed during these incursions (Diqing Zangzu 1986, 25; Yang F. 2005, 112–118). A higher level included indigenous chiefs holding the Naxi title of *mu-kua*, or “commander of soldiers,” in the Mu kingdom system of military rule. The title corresponds to a district-level office of military and civilian affairs and is generally referred to as *mugua* in Chinese documents.⁴ The office of *mu-kua* attests to the long-term political presence of the Naxi, and is to be found together with other titles. At the lower level of this administrative hierarchy were the *bbei-sui*, a Naxi term meaning “village head” (Yang F. 2005, 129; 2008, 99–101). These local leaders (known as *baise* or *huotou* in Chinese sources) were especially in charge of collecting the tribute at village level.⁵ This same position is to be found within the Tibetan village territorial organization known as *tshokak*, in Gyelthang in particular, partly because of the influence of the Naxi administration.⁶ However, after the conquest of Tibetan territories, the Naxi often bestowed their own titles (such as that of *mu-kua*) on local headmen of Tibetan ethnicity.⁷

In the Mekong Valley, a *mu-kua* resided in the village of Kangpu (see map 2).⁸ In addition to part of the Mekong Valley, his territory comprised, at least nominally, the upper reaches of the Nu (Salween), Nmai Hka (Irrawaddy) Valleys, including what was known at the time as the Qiu Valley (today’s Dulong Valley).⁹ The *mu-kua* exercised their jurisdiction over the distant Upper Nu and Qiu Valleys and received a yearly tribute. Chinese documents mention that when the subprefect took office in Weixi (1729), people from these areas (Nung and Drung) came with tributes in kind (animal skins, hemp clothes, medicinal plants, and so on) to be recognized as subjects of the new authority and to secure their protection against the Lisu and Tibetans.¹⁰ When the Qing dynasty reformed its policy in border areas with the aim of ensuring

better control of them by appointing new officials, Naxi indigenous chiefs (*tusi*) were confirmed in their office, granted fiefs, and bestowed military titles. At the time, a Naxi woman was in office and wielded authority in the area, having been granted her deceased husband's title of *mu-kua*. Her Chinese name was He Niang.



Map 2. Spheres of power in northwest Yunnan, c. 1850. *Source:* Created by Stéphane Gros and Rémi Chaix, based on data from NASA-SRTM.

The line of this indigenous female chief took the patronymic name of Wang and moved its residence to Yezhi (Yu dtu in Naxi).¹¹ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Wang *mu-kua* collected taxes, commanded military forces to quell the “rebellions,” and adjudicated criminal and civil cases, which were a significant source of revenue. The *mu-kua* owned considerable properties and were, with the Buddhist temples, the only landowners. They rented their land in exchange for taxes and corvée (Goré 1923, 309; Desgodins A. 1877, 176).

Among the Nung and Drung, a story is still told that explains how, at the time He Niang was in office, authority over their territories was transferred to the Tibetans of Tsawarong. The story goes that the female *mu-kua* known by the name of Aché Jomo was so impressed by the power of a lama who came to cure her sick child¹² that she decided to cede the right to collect taxes from the population of the Upper Nu and Qiu Valleys (Salween and Drung Valleys). In local lore, this story provides an explanation for the transfer of authority from the Naxi *mu-kua* to a Tibetan chief in Tsawarong. From the Drung people’s point of view, this Tibetan chief therefore acted as a legitimate “master of the place” (Dr. *mvli āqkāng*) and, as such, was entitled to ask for payment of a tax, which corresponded for the Drung to a “tax to eat the land” (Dr. *āmrā kaī kri*).¹³ This tax was levied on the basis of a rather precise political organization, which I will describe in a later section of this article.

The *mu-kua*’s authority and right to levy taxes were exerted—as far as the Upper Nu and the Qiu Valleys are concerned—through the Buddhist temple (Puhuasi) located in Changputong, a temple that the *mu-kua* helped build in the mid-nineteenth century. The political power of the *mu-kua* was closely linked to that of surrounding Buddhist monasteries. The Naxi indigenous chief, as well as the temples in this area, was in charge of tax-free fiefs, collecting from locals a tax in exchange for the right to cultivate. Strong links had been established over the centuries between the Naxi and some religious authorities in Tibet, mainly the Karmapa (Kagyü).¹⁴ The *mu-kua* financially supported the construction of many Buddhist monasteries in the Mekong and the Salween Valleys.¹⁵ In Changputong area, the Puhua temple was a filial temple of the Shouguo temple near Kangpu (both Kagyü), and in both cases there existed strong alliances and often close familial ties between religious and civilian authorities responsible for the administration of this territory and the collection of land taxes and other tributes.

North of Changputong was Tsawarong district on Tibetan territory, and on the west bank of the Salween River the village of Menkhung was the residence of the local headman and a

Buddhist monastery. It is to this monastery and to the local civilian authorities that the Naxi indigenous chief had given away the right to collect taxes throughout the northern part of Changputong territory and its mixed Tibetan and Nung population, and the valley of the Qiu (Drung) River to the west. This is the area that we sometimes find mentioned under the Tibetan name Changyul or Tshongyul—a debatable name, as we will see now.

On the Edges of Kham

The identification and delimitation of several discrete territories within Kham, as far as its southern section is concerned, is an arduous task. To draw the spheres of influence described above at any moment in time would surely be a challenge, for we know little of the changing administrative boundaries that would enable us to draw clear lines on the map.

Central Tibet's authority over Kham increased when the Fifth Dalai Lama attempted to exercise better control over the eastern territories in the late seventeenth century as part of a broader empire-building campaign, granting hereditary titles and land to deserving lay families, as well as granting estates or subjects to Geluk monasteries. A governor was posted to Markham, and he ruled over the heads of districts (Tib. *dzong pön*), such as Sangngak Chödzung, that bordered Yunnan. These regional headmen, who had been appointed by the Ganden Phodrang or had received hereditary titles, ruled side by side with the monasteries that held political authority, property, and armed forces. The districts were generally governed by two officials, one secular, one religious.¹⁶

In the Upper Salween Valley, north of Changputong, Menkhung was part of one of the administrative divisions of the district of Sangngak Chödzung, which had authority over subordinate officials with the rank of commander (Tib. *zhel ngo*), such as those of Dzayül and Tsawarong. Menkhung was part of the latter, ruled by both lay and religious authorities. Its territory extended southward toward Changputong's, and its subjects were Tibetan as well as Nung (Melam) and Drung.¹⁷

I would like to draw attention to the southernmost area of Tsawarong, which is sometimes referred to as Changyul, or Tshongyul. The American missionary J. H. Edgar (1933–1934, 52), who traveled to Tsawarong in 1911 with Lieutenant Bailey, refers to a southern area across the Yunnanese and possibly Burmese borders as a region local Tibetans called Tshongyul, “the country of trade” (53). The well-known French Tibetologist Jacques Bacot speaks of

“Khionieu”—no doubt his transcription of the local pronunciation of this name—and adds that this area extends from the Mekong Valley to the Irrawaddy (Bacot [1912] 1988, 247).¹⁸ The French missionary Goré, like Bacot, writes about “Kiongyul”—although he reports that this was the name given to the valley west of the Salween and adds that it was referred to by this name, which he translates as “valley of beer,” because Drung people enjoy drinking (Goré 1924, 602).¹⁹ He was therefore using the local pronunciation for Changyul, a name that we then find in writings by the famous explorer and botanist J. F. Rock, who probably derived his own knowledge from these earlier works (Rock 1947, 336n48). J. F. Rock’s writings in turn informed the map designed by Michael Aris to show where Changyul is situated that was published in a book devoted to Rock’s photographs (see map 3).²⁰



Map 3. Location of Changyul. *Source:* Adapted from Aris (1992, 21).

From these various accounts we gather that two possible names, Tshongyul or Kiongyul (understood as the local pronunciation for Changyul), were given to this southernmost part of Kham. Both of these names and their associated translations (“valley of trade”, “valley of beer”) are, however, problematic, and I would like to propose another interpretation.²¹

Instead of thinking that Kiong would be the way the word *chang* is locally pronounced (the pronunciation in the local dialect possibly being tɕ^hɑŋ^ŋ or even tɕ^hoŋ^ŋ), I propose that Kiong is in fact the Tibetan pronunciation of the name that was commonly given to the Drung people at that time, and from which the Chinese name Qiu(zi) was also derived. The Chinese name Qiu itself is, in all probability, derived from the name Tchò-pa (tɕ huʔ pɑ), a generic name in the Lisu language used to refer to the Drung and affiliated people living in Upper Burma. As Lisu is the lingua franca in this area, it is not hard to imagine how Tchò could have informed not only the Chinese name but also the Tibetan one. It should also be noted that one finds a similar root in the name given to the Qiu in Naxi manuscripts, where they are referred to as the T’khyü people (Mueggler 2011, 138–139). Tshong/Kiong would therefore be a variation of the Lisu word Tchò or the Naxi word T’khyü; and it is indeed still used nowadays by some local Tibetans as an ethnonym to refer to the Drung people.

Therefore, the Tibetan Tshongyul/Changyul could quite possibly simply mean “the valley of the Tshong (tɕ^hoŋ^ŋ) people”—not “the valley of beer,” although Drung people do indeed enjoy drinking. Nor is the designation “the valley of trade” fully convincing, despite the fact that trade has surely been of crucial importance in shaping their relations with their immediate neighbors, as I will now attempt to demonstrate.

Local Political System

The Kham region of southeastern Tibet was a strategic zone of loose influence that needed specific measures of control, such as installing settlers and granting them tax-free land. Efforts were made by the Ganden Phodrang to spread Buddhism and to fight against orders other than the official Geluk.²² Some monasteries played an important role in this area as they had real political and often economic power and, together with local headmen, were part of a complex political and also familial network. During the seventeenth century, when monastic hierarchs of other Buddhist schools in Gyelthang resisted the penetration of the power of the Geluk in the region, the insurgence was suppressed by troops from Lhasa. The Naxi king supported an armed

revolt (1674) that was quelled by Mongolian forces and resulted in the handing over of Gyelthang to the Dalai Lama (Tsomu 2015, 22). It should be emphasized that the importance of the order of the Karmapa (Kagyü) in this region was due in part to the Naxi but also to the Qing, who from time to time supported this religious order to fight against the Tibetans and the influence of the Geluk order. The growing influence of the latter in the region played a role in the discernible urgency, for the Qing, to establish a more direct form of control over the territory of Lijiang.

In spite of efforts by both the Ganden Phodrang and the Qing administration to control these liminal regions, they enjoyed only indirect and tenuous authority. The local headmen and the religious authorities enjoyed great independence, deriving large personal benefits from taxes and commercial activities. On Tibetan territory, land was considered to be state property, and all peasants to whom tenure rights were given had to pay taxes and services (Tib. *trel*). The Tibetan government fixed the amount of taxes, and district officials had to collect them. All excess tax collected from the local population was for their own benefit. Land administrators, officials appointed by the government, and hereditary headmen or monasteries were granted land, with local families thereupon becoming their dependents. According to missionary documents, at that time Tsawarong governed over about twenty villages, with a total population estimated at five to six thousand families. Of these, only 270 were tributaries (*trelpa*), the others being farmers, sharecroppers for monasteries or serfs of some rich landowner (Goré 1923, 377). It happened that some officials abused their authority and used the free transport service (corvée, Tib. *ulak*) for their own private business activities, or even imposed their commercial items on their subjects.

In Tsawarong, the governor had his own agents and a monopoly on commercial activities. But this privilege was often ceded to monasteries or private merchants (Carrasco 1972, 92, 213). Just south of Menkhung, the village of Ram ngön (Ch. Zha'en)²³ was the residence of rich merchants who had a monopoly on trade in the southern Tsawarong region, as well as among Nung communities of Changputong. They were also responsible for trade with the Drung people and acted as intermediaries by collecting tax from them. For example, according to French missionaries, during the mid-nineteenth century a rich merchant called Tsewang managed to indebt the local inhabitants, mainly the Nung and Drung, because of his commercial activities and right to receive taxes. Those who were unable to repay their debts became his domestic

slaves or else were sold. It is said that he had around sixty slaves. This is how a missionary described the situation of the Nung people of the upper reaches of the Salween:

The Arru [Nung] people pay a yearly tribute to China; the Lama of the place [Changputong] is in charge of sending it to Weixi. Moreover, they also have to pay a small tribute to the Tibetan mandarin of Menkong [Menkhung]; this is in the form of alms and consists of steel cooking-pots, local cloth, etc. . . . One local assured me that in principle the Arru should not have to pay any tribute to Tibet but the Tibetans, taking advantage of the weakness and kindness of the inhabitants, first asked for presents and then ended up demanding them; the mandarin then demanded free transportation of his salt loads; and then the bigwigs from the Tsa-kong [Ram ngön] bourgeoisie also asked for free transportation of their salt loads on behalf of Chel-ngo [Zhal ngo] and then for themselves. So things came to the point where, when the time came to pay the tribute, the poor Lutzi [Luzi, i.e., Nung] had to carry around 500 to 600 loads of salt every year and were then forced to buy it at a rate of five loads of cereal for one of salt. Two years ago [1862], the Lutzi, with the help of the Chinese settled in the area and assisted by a Lisu regiment, brought about a small revolution: they came to the tribute collectors and said that in the future they would regularly pay the tribute but would only carry the seventeen loads for the mandarin or Chel-ngo for free. (Desgodins C. H. 1872, 323)

The complexity of the situation the local Nung and Drung communities found themselves in reveals how competing powers had established overlapping rights over some of the population. In the northern Salween Valley, some villages had taxes and corvée imposed on them not only by the Naxi *tusi* and the temple of Changputong but also by the civilian and ecclesiastic authorities of Tsawarong.

Territorial Organization

The so-called Changyul, the valley of the Drung, was therefore part of one of the administrative divisions under the authority of Sangngak Chödzung and under the nominal authority of the commander (*zhel ngo*) of Menkhung, as previously mentioned. The Drung used to refer to this Tibetan chief by the name *shenwū*, likely their rendering of the Tibetan name. Under the *shenwū* were the *lěnbū* (Tib. *lönpo*)—a hereditary position—of the village of Ram ngön, who were in charge of tax collection (Yang Y. 2000, 57). The latter were no other than the rich merchants who had a monopoly on local trade, as referred to above. As these rich merchants also acted as intermediaries for collecting tax, these duties were therefore interspersed with

private profiteering and sometimes abuse. These rich merchants lived in very large houses (forts, *dzong*) generally described by explorers at the time as big castles. There were two such castles, and the description that Jacques Bacot gives of the biggest one when he visited it in 1908 makes it sound very impressive ([1912] 1988, 248–250) (see figure 1).²⁴



Figure 1. One of the forts (*dzong*) of the Tibetan chief in Ram ngön. *Source*: Bacot ([1912] 1988, 246).

The part of the Drung Valley under Tibetan rule—the central and upper Drung valley, that is—was divided into nine territorial units (called *shàp* in Drung); for each of these units, two Drung representatives were chosen (*gyöng-dāq* and *nyvm-zàng*). The overall political organization and hierarchical levels were as follows:

- head of district (Tib. *dzong pön*) of Sangngak Chödzung
- commander (Dr. *shenwū*, Tib. *zhel ngo*) of Menkhung
- two *lěnbū* (Tib. *lönpo*) of Ram ngön: *dāq lěnbū* (higher *lěnbū*) and *Pàng lěnbū* (lower *lěnbū*)
- nine territorial units (Dr. *shàp*) in the Drung Valley, each with two representatives: *gyöng-dāq* and *nyvm-zàng*

The names *gyöng-dāq* and *nyvm-zàng*, which are difficult to translate, designate two temporary positions that were held by local villagers on a rotational basis. They were in charge of collecting from villagers all items for the payment of tax, and they were responsible for hosting the group of Tibetans, which included providing food and a set of presents for the envoys and the Tibetan chief himself.

Collecting Tax: The Tug of War

According to oral accounts collected from Drung villagers, tax collection took place once a year in the fall and was the responsibility of the *gyöng-dāq* and *nyvm-zàng* in each of the nine territorial units. The Tibetan chief would announce the arrival of his party by means of a notched wooden tally board (Dr. *sheŭng-krīm*) that an envoy carried ahead of the group. The various notches, together with other additional signs, conveyed a message that the envoy would clarify to ensure that everything would be prepared in time (figure 2).²⁵

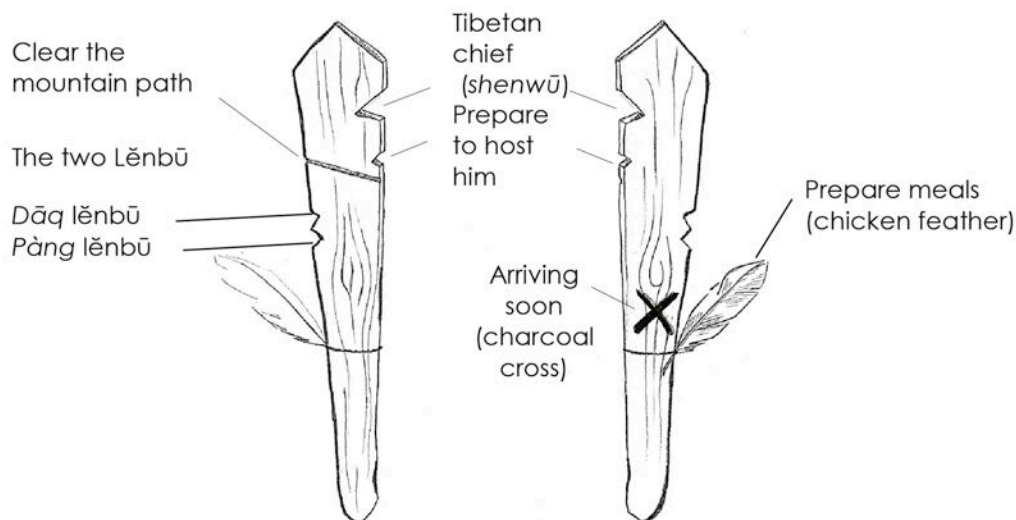


Figure 2. A notched wooden tally board (Dr. *sheŭng-krīm*). Source: Drawing by the author.

It is difficult to establish what the tax was made up of (medicinal plants, hemp fabric, furs, and so on), mainly because Drung people nowadays like to insist that the taxes were high but also because there is some confusion between what was actually paid as tax, what was prepared to host the party of Tibetans, and what was given to reimburse items—often salt—that

had been borrowed (pledged) at an interest rate. If oral accounts can be somewhat confusing about what comprised tax payments, this is also due in part to the fact that my elderly interlocutors mainly referred to a period when, after the turn of the twentieth century and the establishment of Republican rule, an administrative reorganization took place, imposing another form of taxation. There is yet another layer of complexity, for, even prior to Tibetan rule, Naxi indigenous chiefs had also been collecting a form of tax through their local intermediaries among Drung villagers. These three spheres of influence and sources of taxation ended up overlapping, making any distinction among them a real challenge for Drung people’s memories several generations later.

The unit used for tax collection was the household (Dr. *dzung*), and in every hamlet there was a set number of households that were counted as units of taxation. This tax gave the Drung the right to “eat the land,” as they say, that was granted by the Tibetans who were considered to be the “masters of the land.” The number of tax units was predetermined and did not change with any increase or decrease in population. If, for example, a household that paid tax had no heir, another household had to replace it, and it was usually the Tibetan leaders who would ask a family to settle on that piece of land and pay the tax. We find here a similar logic to that found in the taxation system in Tibet where the household is the tax unit, which contributed to the emergence of the “house” as a social unit—the ideal form of unity between siblings and the mono-marital principle (polyandry) to avoid division of property (Goldstein 1971).

Once the visiting Tibetans had arrived in a territorial unit, the Drung representatives would gather together all the villagers, often led by their traditional leaders, the *kasàng* (good orators).²⁶ They would greet the Tibetan chief and his party, kowtow, and say:

Grandmother Lěnbū, grandfather Lěnbū
 You arrive like the rising sun
 Grandmother Lěnbū, coming like the sun
 Grandfather Lěnbū, coming like the sun

ǎtsì lenbū, ǎkàŋ lenbū
nəmtsə̄r wà jitsə̄r jā-ǎbla?
ǎtsì lenbū nəm jā-ǎbla?
ǎkàŋ lenbū nəm jā-ǎbla?

Once all the items to be given had been collected, everything was piled next to the Tibetan chief and packed—wrapped in cloth and then sewn and sealed—not to be opened again. During the packaging, which was done by the Tibetans, the Drung villagers would start an incantation such as this:

This is worth the land, worth the place
 It's heavy as stone
 It's heavy as the earth

*ǎsā tlàŋ, mǎlì tlàŋ è
 lùŋ lā? wà ǎlì
 ǎsā wà lā? ǎlì*

The tax was paid as compensation because the Tibetans were regarded as “masters of the land.” For their part, the Tibetans reaffirmed that the place was theirs and the Drung their subjects (Dr. *prāsē*), who ate their land and drank their water:²⁷

This land is ours
 Wild animals are ours
 The water you drink is ours
 The hunting grounds are ours
 Wild animals are ours

*sā dī da?pù ηā .ā re
 rī rǎdā? da?pù ηā .ā re
 tēū tēǎnā ηā tēāsa ηā .ā re
 tā de dzuī tēāsa ηā re
 rī rǎdā? tēāsa ηā re*

The payment of the tax therefore took a ritualized form with the exchange of set formulas and incantations followed by a rope-pulling ritual. Before the Tibetans arrived, the Drung women would weave a long cloth of undyed hemp called *dom-bā*. Upon payment of the tax, the Drung villagers would stand in line, facing the Tibetans and their strong men. With the Drung on one side and the Tibetans on the other, each party would pull one end of the long cloth, as in a tug-of-war. The Drung pulled hard while they said:

It stretches like the place
 It stretches like the earth
 To pay compensation for the place
 Paying compensation for the land

*mǎlì wà pǎzēn
 ǎsā wà pǎzēn
 mǎlì tǎpù zāl
 ǎsā tǎpù zāl*

As the Tibetans pulled the cloth toward themselves, they would measure it, making sure its length corresponded to the number of households. The Drung would continue their incantation, claiming they were paying the price of the land: “It is as heavy as stone, as heavy as the earth, as heavy as the water,” listing all sorts of things the earth could produce. When the length corresponding to the number of households was reached, the Drung would quickly cut the fabric using a machete.

In this ritualized tug-of-war, there was no real winner or loser. Each party played its role in a well-established relationship, and the cloth was cut to an agreed length. The strength of the

Drung pulling on one side represented the “weight” of the tax and, thanks to its efficacy, the incantation loaded the cloth with the weight of what the land from which the Drung derived their livelihood could produce. Pulling on the other end, the Tibetan strongmen provided the effort necessary to “extract” the tax. The outcome was therefore not to challenge but to confirm the authority of the Tibetan chiefs, together with their position as “masters of the land.” There was no real competition, whether physical or oratory. The role of strength and speech was limited to ensure the smooth running of affairs, to ensure that the “weight” of the tax suited the demands of those in charge.

From Pawns to Peons

Although the Naxi or Tibetan headmen’s authority seems to have been imposed and accepted quite naturally, this did not happen without resistance. More importantly, Nung and Drung political dependency arose from trading with and accepting loans from business agents and intermediaries of local rulers, Naxi and Tibetan alike. As we have seen, Tibetan chiefs who levied taxes on the Drung were themselves rich merchants with a trade monopoly in southeast Tibet on the border with Yunnan. Similarly, the Naxi, who had been the main ruling elite in this area, had firmly established themselves early on in some villages in the upper Salween Valley. Loans with interest were common among the Naxi headmen and their agents, as well as among various Buddhist temples and Tibetan chiefs, who were the main actors in business transactions, especially for salt, tools, iron utensils, and woolen clothing. This was a great source of income, and the practice of providing credit developed at the expense of impoverished inhabitants, who were often obliged to accept the terms of the transaction. The inability of some borrowers to reimburse lenders led to them into debt, economic dependence, and eventually servitude.

Salt was a very important trade item. It was sold to, if not imposed on, Drung and Nung communities by Tibetan merchants or by traders who were intermediaries of the Naxi *mu-kua*. Generally speaking, salt has clearly been an instrument of power in human history, and as a rare food product, its control was particularly vital and a source of great profits. For the Drung people, it is worth mentioning that oxen were also an important trade item (because of their highly valued ritual use) that would sometimes be traded for children and women, or for people who were greatly indebted and who would become servants or slaves for life. Tibetan and Naxi headmen exploited this same process. Until the first half of the twentieth century, impoverished

peasants in this remote area could not escape the debt system. Debt slavery in eastern Tibet (Tsawarong, Dzayul), as well as in the Tibetanized part of northwest Yunnan, was described by missionaries and travelers as affecting a large part of the population (Goré 1923, 388–390; Ward 1934, 52; Lazcano 1998, 229–231).

Land appropriation was possible through debt relations. In many villages in the upper reaches of the Salween, the Nung (Melam) people had several creditors to whom they had to cede their land while remaining on as tenant farmers. As a guarantee for rising debts, rights over land were ultimately transferred. Farmers who did not have any means of paying their debts could become slaves to their creditor or settle their debt by giving the lender one of their children. Those enslaved because of their debts could, in theory, free themselves; however, rare were those who had the means to pay for their freedom. The creditor could transfer the debt to a purchaser, the debtor's status being handed down to his or her descendants. In Tsawarong, father, mother, and children could be sold separately, and Menkhung was known locally as a center for the slave trade (Bacot [1912] 1988, 273). In these Tibetan areas, many slaves were Drung or originally came from the Himalayan rim (Upper Burma, Arunachal, Assam), but this debt phenomenon concerned the whole population.²⁸

The creditor–debtor relationship overlapped political relationships.²⁹ In this regional context, debt seems to have been an essential matrix for the construction and expression of political relationships between groups, and it contributed to the establishment or abolition of the boundaries between them. In this sense, the logic of debt constitutes a common language that enables all groups to produce their differences, and which, in the process, includes them in a common social system in which not only goods, but also people, were exchanged.

Conclusion

This article has aimed at providing new insight into the history of Tibetan and Chinese expansion and a better understanding of the multiple actors who shaped the history of these borderlands by capturing the complexities of commercial, political, religious, and ethnic interactions that have taken place in this contact zone. It has further aimed at integrating the disparate levels, from the state down to the distinct practices of local life.

Several mutually competing political centers imposed, at different times or simultaneously, their ruling systems over this frontier territory that long remained at the limits of

the political expansion of the Naxi, Tibetan, and Chinese polities alike. Local indigenous rulers retained their authority based on an existing system that provided them with legitimacy and power over the local inhabitants—whether Tibetan, Nung, Drung, or another ethnicity. This system, I argue, derives from the logic of the creditor–debtor relationship. Debt appears to lie at the heart of relations between both economic and political dependence and, in order to understand the local political system that had subsisted until the end of the Qing dynasty and the earlier Republican period, one has to take into consideration the circulation of goods and people along with the values regarding wealth and differences in status that informed the workings of political relationships and exchange networks in the regional system.

Once the complexity of political and commercial interactions and the dynamic relationship between these contiguous societies have been underlined, some fundamental aspects of their relationships can be identified. The specific history of the area, as understood through oral accounts and historiography, throws light on the fact that, parallel to relations of exploitation, there were also important commercial bonds—a system of exchange between neighboring people. In other words, Drung and Nung were not only subject to economic and political domination but were also actors within a larger asymmetrical and hierarchical system that contributed to their creation of a sense of identity (see Gros 2011, 34–35). Oral history and written documents attest to the importance of these exchange networks, and the movement of goods appears to be completely entangled in political networks. Several politico-religious poles were in place, which resulted in a superposition of authorities that often came across as being concurrent. Drung or Nung people therefore found themselves in the middle of a polarized system which placed them in multiple relations of allegiance that can be grasped through the analysis of singular social networks clearly situated in time.

There is more to forms of allegiance and dependence than the mere economic nature of political control. Dependence implies not only bondage but also forms of hierarchical affiliation, where valued social relations are maintained. As evidenced throughout southernmost Kham, voluntary dependence was not uncommon (Gros 2007, 272). Debt relations are also to be understood within the logic of a form of unstable political power that derived from controlling the ultimate source of wealth: people, even more than land and goods.

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Glossary

<u>In-Text Vocabulary</u>	<u>Chinese Characters</u>	<u>Tibetan Transliteration</u>
Aché Jomo	Cf. He Niang	A Ice jo mo
Adunzi	阿敦子 (today’s Deqin 德钦)	Cf. Dechen
<i>baise</i>	白色	
Balung	Cf. Weixi	’Ba’ lung
Batang	巴塘	’Ba’ thang
Changputong	菖蒲通	
<i>dzong pön</i>		rdzong dpon
Dechen	Cf. Adunzi	Bde Chen
Dergé	德格	Sde dge
Dulong (Drung)	独龙	
Dzayül	察隅	Rdza yul
<i>gaitu guiliu</i>	改土归流	
Ganden Phodrang		Dga’ ldan pho brang
Gelukpa		Dge lug pa
Gyelthang	Cf. Zhongdian	Rgyal thang
He Niang	禾娘	
<i>huotou</i>	伙头	
<i>kha zang</i>		Kha bzang
Lanjing si	澜经寺	bKra shis rab brtan gling
Litang	理塘	Li thang
<i>lönpo</i>		blon po
Mangkang	芒康	Cf. Markham
Menkhung	门控	Sman khung
Markham	Cf. Mangkang	Smar khams
<i>mugua</i>	木瓜	
<i>muguan</i>	木管	
Nu (Nung)	怒	

Puhuasi	普化寺	
Qiu(zi)	俅(子)	
Ram ngön [?]	Cf. Zha'en	Gram sngon [?]
Sandan	三爨	Cf. Satam
Sangngak Chödzung		Gsang sgnags chos rdzong
Satam		Sa tham
Shouguo si	寿国寺	Bkra shis Dar rgyas gling
<i>tongpan</i>	通判	
<i>trepa</i>		khral pa
Tsakalo	Cf. Yanjing	Tsha kha log (var. Yar kha log)
		Tsha ba rong
Tsawarong		tsho khag (var. shog khag)
<i>tsokhak</i>		khral
<i>trel</i>		tshe g.yog
<i>tséyok</i>		
Tufan	吐蕃	
<i>tusi zhidu</i>	土司制度	
<i>ulak</i>		'u lag
Weixi	维西	Cf. Balung
Yangbajing si	杨八景寺	Yangs pa dge gling
Yanjing	盐井	Cf. Tsakalo
Yezhi	叶枝	
Zha'en	扎恩	Cf. Ram gnön
Zhongdian	中甸	Cf. Gyelthang
<i>zhelngo</i>		Zhal ngo

Notes

- 1 For an overview on the Naxi (and Moso), see Oppitz and Hsu (1998) and Mathieu (2003). For the Lisu people, see the long introduction in Dessaint and Ngwâma (1994). Nu and Dulong, respectively, are the standardized form (and official name in Chinese) of these two groups. For the relationships between these groups, see Gros (2004).
- 2 Much has been done since Rock's (1947) two volumes on the Naxi (Nakhi) kingdom; see, for example, Yang F. (2005) and Zhao (2004).
- 3 The material used in this article comes from archival documentation and secondhand sources, as well as oral memories collected during fieldwork among Tibetan, Nung, and Drung people (between 1998 and 2003, and again in 2010). Participant observation was the main methodology I used during a cumulated period of twenty months living among Drung villagers. This involved audio and/or video recording of both ritual and mundane activities. Shorter stays in Tibetan and Nung communities in the Upper Salween River Valley were the occasion of semi-structured interviews generally conducted in Chinese. My research was initially supported by a Lavoisier Grant from the French Foreign

- Affairs, the France Foundation, and the Louis Dumont Fund for Anthropological Research.
- 4 The orthography *mun-kwua* is given by Rock (1947, 2:307), who states that only two such offices existed, the second one being in Eya in the district of Muli (in Sichuan), where the name often appears transcribed as *muguan* in Chinese; cf. Wellens (2006, 55; 2010, 35, 227). One of the main sources of information regarding the seldom discussed role of the *mu-kua* in the territorial expansion of the Mu kingdom authority is Yang F. (2008). In present Naxi phonetic Pinyin script the term should be written as *muq gua*.
- 5 See Li Daosheng (1994, 263) and Xiao (1999, 127). According to Wang (1995, 71), *mu-kua* were generally Naxi military officers with kinship ties to the Mu family.
- 6 See Yang F. (2005, 113–114), Wang (1995, 111–124), Hu (2008), and Goré (1923, 354). For the Muli area, see Wellens (2006, 144; 2010, 34–35, 219), although he does not acknowledge its Naxi origin.
- 7 See Yang F. (2008, 90). The title of *bbei-sui* is to be found with varied orthographies (*nbesset*, *bessé*) in some documents from French missionaries of the late nineteenth century. Although the term exists in Tibetan, its orthography is unclear, as it seems to be derived from the Naxi term. Yudru Tsomu (2015, 287) mentions both spellings, *bal sel* and *dbal su*.
- 8 The first mention of Naxi chiefs in charge of the region of Weixi in the Mekong Valley is to be found in the chronicles of the Mu family, where the date given is 1406; see Rock (1947, 2:313). The region was called Nyina in Naxi, which included the Upper Mekong Valley up to the salt wells of Yanjing (Tib. Tsakalo).
- 9 See Xiao (1999, 121–123), Minzu Gongzuodui (1995, 166, 168–169), and Li Daosheng (1994, 262).
- 10 See Nuzu Jianshi Bianxiezu (1987, 19), after the *Yunnan beizheng zhi*. It is said that some representatives of the Nu and Qiu went to the *mu-kua* of Kangpu, while others went to Weixi to pledge allegiance to the new *tongpan*; cf. Gongshan Dulongzu Nuzu Zizhixian Gaikuang Bianxiezu (1986, 13), Rock (1947, 2:334n46). See also Mueggler (2011, 137), who mentions that by the first years of the twentieth century this tribute was the Wang lineage's sole source of income and nearly the only remnant of its hereditary privilege.
- 11 In Kangpu were two other indigenous chiefs, who were in charge of the Northern circuit (*bei lu*) and the Western circuit (*xi lu*), respectively. See Wang (1995, 158–172), Xiao (1999, 121–123), Li Daosheng (1994, 263), and Gong (1985, 172–175). Rock (1947, 2:296) provides a detailed genealogy of the Wang family that settled in Yezhi (309–313). For further details and the different versions of this genealogy, see Gros (2012, 132–135) and Mueggler (2011, 136–137).
- 12 According to another version, it was after the death of her husband, the *mu-kua*, that He Niang allegedly went to Dergé to find a Karmapa Lama, who then asked them to fund the building of several temples. See Guo (1995, 147).
- 13 In the simplified transcription used for the Drung language, a Tibeto-Burman language, in the main text, most letters follow English-language phonetics, except for the following: *v*=[ə/shwa] and *q*=[ʔ /glottal stop]. The International Phonetic Alphabet will also be used to note this language for longer excerpts in the last section of the article.
- 14 The Karmapa had established relationships with the Jang King of Satam (i.e., Naxi of Lijiang) as the Mu kings had been supporters of the Karmapa since the end of the

- sixteenth century. See Rock (1947, 2:204) and more recently Debreczeny (2009). For the history of Buddhism in Northern Yunnan and the increasing presence of the Gelukpa order starting in the seventeenth century, see Wang (1995, 124–129; 172–184), Yang X. (1999, 243–264, 283–302), Jackson (1973, 74–75), and Song (1985).
- 15 He Niang financed the building of several temples in the area: in 1731, the temple of Weixi (Lanjing si) was built; then, in 1734, not far from the village of Kangpu where the *tusi* resided, the building of the Shouguo si temple was completed, followed in 1753 by that of the temple of Hongpo (Yangbajing si). See also Wang (1995, 172–180) and Song (1985).
- 16 For a concise overview of the diversity of political systems in Kham, see Tsomu (2005, 5–24).
- 17 It is sometimes referred to as the Khion(g)song region. The precise administrative division remains blurry and sources are at times contradictory and provide only fragmentary information. See, for example, Bacot ([1912] 1988, 206) and Yang Y. (2000, 52–53).
- 18 Bacot unfortunately does not provide a translation or a transliteration.
- 19 See also Goré (1923, 366, 376), where it is transcribed as “Khiongyul,” and the map in Goré (1939). Kiong as an ethnic name was mentioned earlier by the first French missionaries in their letters in 1855–1856.
- 20 See the map published in Aris (1992, 21). Another map that shows Chang-yul is the historical map of Tibet “Karte Des Historischen Landschaften Des Ethnischen Tibet,” in Kessler’s “Laufende Arbeiten zu einem Ethnohistorischen Atlas Tibets (EAT): Lieferung 47.1, Das historische Konigreich MILI,” published in 1982 by the Tibet Institute.
- 21 The missionaries Desgodins (1869, 319; 1876, 408) and Dubernard (1875, 59, 63) also report the use of the name Ba-yul, and Ba-yul-wa, in Tibetan, given to the valley of the Drung, which they translate as the “valley of rattan” (Tib. spa/sba-yul).
- 22 See for example Kaulback (1938, 66) about Dzayul.
- 23 “Djrongneu” was the spelling used by Bacot ([1912] 1988). It was also spelled “Drangguen” or “Drang nguen” by Goré (1923, 373; 1924, 602).
- 24 See also Burdin (1938). Only very little of these large buildings remains today—a few pieces of wall on which other houses have been built.
- 25 This kind of notched wood to send messages was commonly used among Tibetans, Nung, and Lisu alike; see Dubernard (1875, 62-63); Xiao (1999, 205-211); Yang Y. (2000, 62); Dulongzu Jianshi bianxiezu (1986, 107); Li Jinming (1999, 255-256). Such tallies were found at the residence of the *mu-kua* in Yezhi and were used as a record of the payment of tributes; see Mueggler (2011, 137).
- 26 While the term is from the Drung language, it could well be derived from Tibetan *kha zang* (literally, “good mouth”). The Drung language contains many Tibetan loan words, especially in the religious sphere.
- 27 In the following excerpt the Tibetans are speaking in their own language, although the whole description and verbal exchange was retold to me by a Drung speaker.
- 28 Rockhill (1881: 285–286) provided one of the earliest descriptions of the situation in Tsawarong, stating that the “life servant” (*tsé yok*) could be sold, or otherwise disposed of, and all the children born to him remained slaves.

- 29 See Galey (1980, 145) on the creditor–debtor paradigm. For further details, see Gros (1996; 2007; 2012, chaps. 3 and 4).

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