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Meritocracy in the Tibetan Army after the 1793 Manchu Reforms: The Career of General Zurkhang Sichö Tseten*

Alice Travers

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1. Introduction

Biographical and autobiographical sources available for the military history of Tibet are numerous for the early 20th century, but much rarer for previous periods. It is therefore very fortunate that a manuscript of the autobiography of the early 19th century army general and cabinet minister Zurkhang Sichö Tseten (Tib. Zurkhang Sri gcod tshe brtan, 1766–1820) has recently come to light. This manuscript is composed of two distinct texts, namely the autobiography itself, entitled *Bka' gung blon gyi 'khur 'dzin pa'i rtogs brjod bung ba'i mgrin glu (stod cha)* in 150 folios (hereafter *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*), and a much shorter biography compiled by his disciples and his son Tseten Dorjé (Tshe brtan rdo rje, ?–1844) entitled *Bka' zur zur khang pa blo bzang chos 'byor brtan 'dzin rgya mtsho'i rnam thar smad cha slob bu rnam nas phyogs sdebs su bgyis pa tshangs pa'i drangs thig ces bya ba bzhugs so*, in 21 folios (hereafter *Bka' zur zur khang pa'i rnam thar*).¹ The aristocratic house Zurkhang belonged to the high-ranking noble subgroup called *midrak* (*mi drag*).² The family claimed an illustrious ancestry going back to the *dharmarajas* of Gugé (Gu ge), taking its name from a

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¹ I would like to thank Tashi Tsering Josayma for having shared with me his copy of this rare and previously unknown source and for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. My sincere gratitude also goes to George FitzHerbert for his editorial work and for his correction of my English. All remaining errors are my own.

² The Ganden Phodrang aristocracy—a group of a little more than 200 families in the first half of the 20th century—consisted of four hierarchically-arranged subgroups, namely the *depön* (*sde dpon*), four families who claimed ancestry going back to the former kings and ministers of the Tibetan Empire (7th–9th centuries); the *yapzhi* (*yab gzhis*), six ennobled families of the previous Dalai Lamas; the *midrak*, approximately eighteen rich and politically-influential families; and finally, the

branch family (*zur du chad pas*) descended from the royal lineage of Lha Lama Jangchup Ö (Lha bla ma byang chub 'od, 984–1078).³ Several members of the family are known to have served as prominent officials in the Ganden Phodrang (Dga' ldan pho drang) government, starting, according to Zurkhang Sichö Tseten, in the mid-17th century with an ancestor who served the Fifth Dalai Lama.⁴ Petech's research only attested the use of this family name in historical sources from the early 18th century, with a Zurkhang named Guyang Khashaka (Gu yang kha sha kha) appearing in the *Biography of Pholhané* (Pho lha nas), known as the *Miwang Tokjö* (*Mi dbang rtogs brjod*), as a commander during the Bhutan war of 1714.⁵ This information is corroborated by Sichö Tseten's autobiography, in which he states that one of his ancestors named Guyang Khashaka fought heroically with the army general or *dapön* Bumtangpa ('Bum thang pa)⁶ against the "Lhomön" (Lho mon).⁷

After a career in the army, Zurkhang Sichö Tseten was appointed cabinet minister or *kalön* (*bka' blon*) in 1804. In 1815, upon retirement from government service, he became a monk, taking the name Lobzang Chöjor Tenzin Gyatso (Blo bzang chos 'byor bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho) and passed away five years later.⁸ At the outset, it is worth briefly contextualising these newly-available historical texts within the historiographic genre to which they belong.

1.1. *Life Accounts by Government's Officials in Pre-modern Times and their Value for Military History*

Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's autobiography is extremely interesting from a general historical point of view because of the rarity of such sources,

gerpa (*sger pa*), a term referring to all other landowner families. For more on the Tibetan aristocracy in pre-1959 Tibet, see Travers 2009.

³ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 5b5. Dorje Yudon Yuthok mentions an even older origin in the 9th century: King Langdarma (Glang dar ma) would be the first known ancestor of her maternal family Zurkhang (Yuthok 1990: 28). Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's manuscript allows us to get much more detailed information on the family history and origins, but it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss it in more detail.

⁴ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 6b4.

⁵ Petech 1973: 144. In addition to the *Miwang Tokjö*, Petech browsed a great number of Tibetan sources including most of the Panchen and Dalai Lamas' life accounts, as well as primary Chinese-language sources for this period.

⁶ He most probably refers to the *dapön* (*mda' dpon*) of Ü (Dbus), Bumtangpa Ngödrub (Bum thang pa Dngos sgrub) who is mentioned by Petech as dying from his wounds shortly after having fought the Zunghar invasion; Petech 1973: 127.

⁷ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 6n1 and 6n6.

⁸ The date of his death is not precisely recorded in his biography, but he is said to have passed away when he was fifty-four (fifty-five *Tibetica more*) years old, i.e. in 1820 (*Bka' zur zur khang pa'i rnam thar*, folio 18b3).

i.e. life accounts by ministers in pre-modern times. Indeed, the Tibetan biographical (*rnam thar*) and autobiographical (*rang rnam*) genres were traditionally the preserve of religious masters, with their life-stories being offered as an edifying example for their followers. Around 2,000 biographies of prominent religious figures are known in Tibetan literature,⁹ with the earliest examples of autobiographical accounts dating to the 12th century. From the 17th century onwards, the autobiographical genre expanded considerably, spurred by the autobiographical writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama, particularly his “outer” biography in three volumes, which would serve as a model for such autobiographies until the 20th century.¹⁰ Janet Gyatso has counted as many as 150 book-length Tibetan autobiographies, a figure which excludes the various modern autobiographical accounts published since the Chinese occupation.¹¹ For the military historian, these (predominantly) religious autobiographies or hagiographies do occasionally include some information regarding the military history of Tibet, but it is very rare for such matters to be treated in any detail or with any precision. Instead, such sources inform the military historian more about the ongoing discourses and rhetoric around the legitimisation of violence by clerics, or on the use of rituals in warfare,¹² rather than on the precise state or activities of the Tibetan army.

However, in the 18th century there also emerged the custom of writing life accounts—whether biographical or autobiographical—of senior lay government officials (in particular cabinet ministers) in which their service to the government is presented as an example for future government servants.¹³ Such accounts—of which three others

⁹ Schaeffer 2004: 4.

¹⁰ Gyatso 1998: 101.

¹¹ More recently, in the Tibetan diaspora, a new form of autobiography has emerged: the life stories of lay people from various social backgrounds, though most often of high birth. These emerged first in English and only later in Tibetan (see McMillin 2002). See also Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy 2013. She has counted 157 biographical or autobiographical writings published in exile as of 2013 (*ibid.*: 4); several of these modern (auto)biographical accounts, are useful for our research on the military history for the 20th century. Also useful are other (auto)biographical accounts published in Tibet, in particular the collection entitled *Bod kyi lo rgyus rig gnas dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs* (*Materials for the Culture and history of Tibet*), which is part of the wider enterprise of the *wenshi ziliao* (cultural and historical materials) in China, on which see Travers 2013 and Travers forthcoming.

¹² For examples of the study of the Fifth Dalai Lama's writings in that sense, see Venturi 2018 and FitzHerbert 2018.

¹³ As Hartley (2011: 45) and Sperling (2015: 146) underline, there are known examples of secular biographies in periods prior to the 18th century, like the *Si tu bka' chems* (*Bka' chems mthong ba don ldan*) of Jangchup Gyeltsen (Byang chub rgyal mtshan,

are currently known—were all authored by high-ranking aristocrats. Because of their value (albeit variable) for Tibetan military history during the Ganden Phodrang period, it is worth mentioning each of these individually.

The first is the above-mentioned *Biography of Pholhané*, widely known by its abbreviated Tibetan title *Miwang Tokjö*, which was written in 1733 by Dokhar Tsering Wanggyel (Mdo mkhar Tshe ring dbang rgyal, 1697–1763).¹⁴ This is a very important source for military history insofar as Pholhané was himself a prominent military leader and it gives detailed accounts of several episodes of military engagement in late 17th and early 18th century Tibetan history.¹⁵

Second is the autobiography of Dokhar Tsering Wanggyel himself (author of the work above) which was written in 1762 and is usually referred to as the *Account of a Minister* or *Kalön Tokjö (Bka' blon rtogs brjod)*.¹⁶ This is currently our earliest example—though others might of course surface—of a Tibetan-language autobiography written by a layman. Dokharwa was himself appointed a colonel (*ru dpon*) in the Tibetan army in 1726¹⁷ and later (1752) was put in charge of Tibetan troops in the Tengri Nor/Namtso (Gnam mtsho) area.¹⁸

Third is the autobiography of yet another cabinet minister, Doring/Gazhi Tenzin Penjor (Rdo ring/Dga' bzhi Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, 1760–after 1810), usually referred to as the *Biography of Doring Pandita (Rdo ring PaNDita rnam thar)*, written in 1806, which gives an important

1302–1364). However, the *Si tu bka' chems* cannot be really considered an autobiography; see Hartley 2011: 45. At any rate, the 18th century represents an increase in the scope and scale of this particular genre; see Sperling 2015: 146.

¹⁴ Zhabs drung Tshe ring dbang rgyal [1733] 1981. The Dokhar family was also known under the name Rakhasha (Rag kha shag) in the early 20th century.

¹⁵ Pholhané's biography has been used by several scholars including Petech ([1950] 1972; 1966; 1973), Shakabpa (2010), Sperling (2012, 2015), as well as Federica Venturi and Hosung Shim in this volume, to name just a few. Sperling considers the emergence of “secular biographies” in the 18th century—and in particular the *Miwang Tokjö*, which is entirely dedicated to highlighting the political and military prowess of Pholhané—as representing “an innovation in eighteenth-century Tibetan historical writing, an innovation that reflected Tibet's inclusion in the larger Manchu Mongol order under the Qing, beginning in the seventeenth century [and] that the prevailing conditions in that order made the appearance of such works something more than just a literary development or an adjustment to a genre. They effectively made them into a harbinger of a sort of nascent modernity in Tibet”; see Sperling 2015: 143–144.

¹⁶ Mdo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal [1762] 1981. Its full title is *Dpal mi'i dbang po'i rtogs brjod 'jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i gtam*. For an analysis of this autobiography as a whole, see Hartley 2011. Riga Shakya is currently undertaking a Ph.D. focusing on these ministerial biographies Columbia University, New York.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 21. Petech depicts his part in the civil war as a “lukewarm” one, as an officer of the Lhasa army; see Petech 1973: 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 72.

testimony concerning the events surrounding the two Tibet-Gorkha wars of 1788–1789 and 1791–1792.¹⁹

It is notable that although these life accounts by and about prominent lay Tibetans who held senior official positions, were innovative, they cannot be considered as entirely distinct from the wider Tibetan genre of religious biography/autobiography, because all their subjects/authors also carried strong religious identities: Doring Pandita and Zurkhang Sichö Tseten both became monks at some point, while the aristocratic house of Dokhar had a particularly strong religious identity: Dokhar Tsering Wanggyel himself held the religious title of *zhapdrung* (*zhabs drung*), usually reserved for some high incarnates and for the ecclesiastic heads of a few families of the high aristocracy;²⁰ and, by tradition, the Dokhar family counted among its number two lines of incarnates (*sprul sku*), always to be found among members of this family, one of Riwoché (Ri bo che) and one of Taklung (Stag glung) monastery.²¹ Even the lay aristocrat Pholhané had a significant religious dimension to his life and status, having been educated at Mindröling (Smin grol gling) monastery and recognised as an incarnation of Begtse (Beg tse).²² Likewise Zurkhang Sichö Tseten had already become a monk when he decided to write his autobiography.

In the first lines of the text, Sichö Tseten justifies his autobiographical project, placing himself in the tradition of his predecessors by naming his literary endeavour a *tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*; lit. “account”) both in the title—translatable as *The Humming of a Bee, Being the Life Account [tokjö] of the Holder of the Titles Minister and Duke*—and in the first folios, indicating perhaps that he took the *Account of a Minister* as a model. As explained by Luran Hartley, the term *tokjö*, which translates the Sanskrit *avadāna*, was usually used for religious figures only. Dokhar Tsering Wanggyel, though himself a “quasi-ecclesiastic official” as Hartley underlines,²³ had not in fact called his biography a *tokjö* himself, as this was probably a title only posthumously attached to the work.²⁴ Perhaps Sichö Tseten felt authorised to use it because he was a monk in

¹⁹ Its full title is *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gtam gyi rol mo*. This work is available in three editions, one of them being Rdo ring pa Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor [1806] 1986. This autobiography has been used in Li Ruohong's 2002 dissertation on the Doring/Gazhi family. It has also been studied by Franz Xaver Erhard (2019).

²⁰ Hartley 2011: 50, quoting Petech 1973: 238.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See George FitzHerbert's paper in this volume.

²³ Hartley 2011: 66.

²⁴ As Hartley remarks (*ibid.*: 67), the actual title of this work is *Dīrghā yur indra dzi na'i byung ba brjod pa zol med ngag gi rol mo*, and the name of the author, Tshe ring dbang rgyal (“Long life-power/lord-ruler”), was rendered in Sanskrit.

the later part of his life when he composed it. Nonetheless, he underlines how far away from spiritual matters he has remained during the major part of his life, and adds some self-deprecation when qualifying his *tokjō*, as “summarised” or “rough” (*rtogs brjod rags rim*):

Even though I obtained a human body in a country possessing the *dharma*, I have been busy with worldly activities and have had no time for religious activities. This is an account of the life of an old layman without religion who, despite being familiar with religious activities, had fallen under the influence of laziness. [...] As for the majority of the worldly activities undertaken by myself and others in *saṃsāra*, they are nothing other than like children’s games. For the rest, although not visible, there were nonetheless some things I did in my youth and some wonderful things I have seen which I could not include here as they were not related to these activities; therefore, I have arranged this rough account just in the manner of an experience arising naturally. It is not only because some elder relatives and some close friends exhorted me to, but also because I had some leisure for the activity of writing, that I passed my daytime doing it [...].²⁵

Let us now come back to the value of Sichö Tseten’s autobiography for the social history of the military in Tibet, which is the centrepiece of this article.

1.2. The Value of Sichö Tseten’s Autobiography for the Social History of the Military in Tibet

In addition to its value as a unique historical and literary source—which it is beyond the scope of the present paper to analyse in depth—Zurkhang Sichö Tseten’s autobiography sheds interesting light on one particular aspect of Tibet’s military history, namely the Manchu influence on the structural evolution of the Tibetan army hierarchy at the end of the 18th century. At that time, the Tibetan army consisted of two distinct elements: local militia (*yul dmag*; lit. “local army”), levied

²⁵ *Bka’ gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folios 4 and 5: *chos ldan yul du dal ’byor rten thob kyang / chos spyod long med za za’i bya bas brel / chos byar khoms kyang le lo’i dbang shor ba’i / chos med khyim pa rgas po’i gnas lugs gtam [...] rang gzhan ’khor bar spyod pa phal mo che ni byis pa’i rol rtsed dang mthun pa sha dag las / gzhan du ma dnigs mod / ’on tang ngos rang gzhon nu chung ngu’i dus su kun spyod dang / mthong snang ya mtshar zhing / rgyun bsgrigs kyi bya spyod rtag mi thub pa kha shas byung rigs rang bzhin nyams ’char gyi tshul tsam du rtogs brjod rags rim zhig ’god pa ’di ni sku ngo bgres gras dang / zla bo blo nye ba kha shas nas bskul bar ma zad / lag sor gyi ’du byed dal bas nyin mo’i dus tshod ’phul bar byed pa ni [...] / .*

or raised only at times of emergency;²⁶ and regular troops which from the mid-18th century could be called a standing army, or at least a semi-standing army, placed under the command of a variety of military officers²⁷ (as we will see in more detail below), the highest-ranking of whom enjoyed the status of government officials (*gzhung zhabs*).²⁸ As such, they were recruited from among the lay nobility, as was the case for Zurkhang Sichö Tseten.

Notwithstanding a number of remaining uncertainties, the 18th century seems to have been a crucial period for the creation of these regular troops and for the parallel and gradual stabilisation of its military hierarchy into a form that remained largely intact from 1793 at the latest, until 1959.²⁹ These developments seem to have been directly related to the successive Manchu reforms of the 18th century in Tibet.³⁰

The last and most significant of these 18th century Manchu reforms, the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* (also referred to as the *Twenty-nine Articles*) of 1793, promulgated in the immediate aftermath of the second Gorkha war (1791–1792), aimed at ensuring a higher degree of Qing imperial control over the Tibetan government, and among other significant aspects,³¹ at initiating a particularly strong change in the Tibetan army. In particular, the fifth article of this *Ordinance* intended to introduce some degree of meritocracy in the Tibetan army by regulating the rules governing the recruitment and advancement of military officers up to the highest position of army general or *dapön* (*mda'*

²⁶ In pre-Ganden Phodrang times, they had constituted the entirety of Tibetan military organisation, at least since the Mongol/Sakya (Sa skya) time. Such local militias continued to be utilised up until 1950.

²⁷ The military leadership in the militia was, to a certain extent, functioning according to a different system.

²⁸ Government officials of the Ganden Phodrang government received positions as well as honourific titles. Positions and honourific titles both being correlated to ranks (*rim pa*) on a ladder from the seventh up to the third grade. This ranking system, introduced in 1792, was modelled after the Manchu system, with the particularity that only five (the seventh to the third) out of nine ranks were used; see Petech 1973: 8. When an official received an honourific title conferring him a higher rank than the position alone gave him, then he held the highest rank attached to the honourific title.

²⁹ I am here talking only of the officers' hierarchy, not of other aspects of the Tibetan army such as its size, training, equipment, etc., which underwent drastic changes in the early 20th century.

³⁰ See Travers 2015.

³¹ Secondary literature in western languages on the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, its contents and its various implications, is rich: see Petech [1950] 1972 and 1966; Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las [1991] 1993; Jagou 2007 and 2013; Chayet 2005; Schwieger 2015: 186–192; Oidtmann 2018. To this can be added various articles in the present volume.

dpon).³² Thus, the military career of Zurkhang Sichö Tseten, which happened to take place between 1799 and 1804, i.e. in the years following this *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, can be considered as a starting point for an assessment of the degree to which the regulations concerning the advancement of the military officers in the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* were actually enacted.³³

Therefore, based on Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's autobiography, and taking the Zurkhang family as a case study, this paper will discuss the question of whether and how the 1793 *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* impacted the Tibetan military officers' corps from the late 18th century onwards, and the more specific question of whether or not it succeeded in introducing some degree of meritocracy. The information available in Sichö Tseten's autobiography on his own military career, as well as the military careers of other Zurkhang family members, is documented and checked against secondary sources as well as an additional primary source, namely the recently-published transcription of several Ganden Phodrang archival documents listing lay government officials, including military officers, from 1794 to the early 20th century. These have been collated in a book entitled *Gzhung dga' ldan pho brang pa'i las tshan phyi nang tog gnas kyi go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba* (hereafter *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*), published in 2016 by the Lhasa Archives.³⁴

³² I have discussed elsewhere (Travers 2015) other military aspects of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* and discussed them in light of other legal texts of the Ganden Phodrang period, including other Manchu reforms. The present paper should be seen as a follow-up paper to this first work, trying to continue and bring the discussion there a step further. See also Ulrich Theobald in this volume for a discussion of other military-related articles of this reform and more generally on the Manchu policy regarding the Tibetan army.

³³ Prior scholars have underlined the significant question of whether the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* had been applied or not. In the conclusion to her paper "A propos du règlement en 29 articles de l'année 1793", Anne Chayet called for further research, if new documentation became available, on how the decrees were actually applied (Chayet 2005: 181). With regard to Article 14 of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* this issue has already been addressed. This article forbade the Tibetan government from entering into correspondence with or replying to correspondence from foreign countries, without either prior validation by the *amban* or entrusting the *ambans* to reply themselves, for smaller countries. Schwiieger (2005) has studied a letter received by Lord Cornwallis from the Eighth Dalai Lama in June 1793, i.e. just a few weeks or months after the promulgation of the *Ordinance*. He has shown that the Eighth Dalai Lama's answer, though not being a direct translation of the Manchu general Fuk'anggan's own separate letter, was very close to it in content (*ibid.*: 159) and could be described as being almost "dictated" (Schwiieger 2015: 192) by the *ambans* and Fuk'anggan to the Dalai Lama—as well as to the Panchen Lama, who was also part of the correspondence.

³⁴ Bod rang skyong ljongs yig tshags khang 2016. The value of this source as being of an intrinsically more reliable—from the historian's point of view—nature than the

The next section starts by introducing the content of the military articles of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, and briefly recalling the innovations and progressive stabilisation of the military hierarchy in the course of the 18th century and up to 1793. Then we will analyse how the military career of Zurkhang Sichö Tseten, as described in his autobiography and the *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*, gives hints about whether the Article 5 of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* was put in practice or not. The last part will broaden the analysis both to the Zurkhang family in general, and to later times, arguing that the fortunes of this house—along with a few others—were emblematic of a social shift in the military leadership, probably under Manchu influence, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

2. The Military Provisions of the Twenty-Nine-Article Ordinance of 1793

The *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*,³⁵ a decree generally aiming at improving the Tibetan administration, was introduced by Qianlong in March-April 1793 after the war against the Gorkhas, which had revealed the weakness of the Tibetans on the military field.³⁶ It is therefore no surprise that as many as a third of the articles of the reform tackle the question of the reorganisation of the Tibetan army (i.e. articles 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 16, 17, 24, 26, 27). They aim at establishing a permanent army, with strict rules regarding recruitment, promotion and pay, as well as the supervision of troops, weapons and ammunition. Among other things, it emphasises the importance of maintaining a meritocratic principle within the officer corps of the Tibetan army. The fourth and fifth articles are of particular significance from the point of view of the social history of the Tibetan army.

autobiographic genre, is here undermined by the fact that this publication does not include the facsimile of the archive documents themselves, but only their edited transliteration. This editorial choice deprives us not only of the possibility of seeing the outer form of the original documents, but also of checking the editors' choices in their reading of the cursive hand writing, etc. For a thorough discussion of the problems raised by this type of publication in the People's Republic of China, see Schwieger 2015: 3-4.

³⁵ The Tibetan text of the reform on which this paper is based is the one reproduced in Nor bu bsam 'phel 2008: 156-171. The transcription of the ordinance was first reproduced and described in Chab spel Tshe brtan phun tshogs (ed.) 1989; and in Chab spel Tshe brtan phun tshogs dang Nor brang O rgyan 1991: 315-347. For a detailed description of the Ordinance's two available versions (abridged and elaborate) either in facsimile and Tibetan transcription, and a critical analysis of their peculiarities as historical source, see Schwieger 2015: 186-187.

³⁶ Chayet 2005: 173.

2.1. *The Creation of a Sixth Dapön Position in Article 4*

Article 4 stipulates that the troops' strength should be fixed at 3,000 soldiers with the creation of a sixth general/*dapön* position. Incidentally, this addition is presented as taking place in the context of the "establishment of a new army" (*dmag mi gsar 'dzugs byas pa*), which has led some authors like Chen,³⁷ and after him Fredholm,³⁸ to date the first standing army of Tibet to this year of 1793. However, earlier attempts both by Tibetan rulers as well as by the Manchu power to create such a standing army are documented in secondary literature.³⁹ The most probable reason for this statement of the "establishment of a new army" as a goal of the reform, is that these previous attempts had—at least partially—failed.

It is worth emphasising here the significance of the appearance, during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, of the new officer title *dapön* as the highest-ranking Tibetan military officer, commanding the largest military unit, namely the *dashok* (*mda' shog*), a unit larger than the "wings" (*ru*), which had hitherto been the largest military unit since the time of the Tibetan Empire. Indeed, the title *dapön*, translatable as "general", appears to have been the main innovation, in terms of military officer titles, during the entire Ganden Phodrang period, since all other subaltern military titles in use by the Tibetan army during this period predated the Ganden Phodrang, and a number of them even dated back to the "ancient" period of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries).⁴⁰

Not only did the creation of this new title suggest a substantial change in military organisation, but an increase in the number of such high-ranking officers also indicated an increase in the opportunities for subaltern officers to access such a position. It is still unclear when exactly the title *dapön* (*mda' dpon*, lit. "chief of the arrow") started to be used formally as a rank in the Tibetan army. The term is first found in the writings of *desi* Sanggyé Gyatso (*sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), both in his biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (the *Du ku la'i gos bzang*)⁴¹ and in his *Guidelines for Government Officials* (*Blang dor gsal bar ston pa'i drang thig dvangs shel gyi me long nyer gcig pa*)⁴² written in 1681, where it seems to designate the highest military officer after

³⁷ Chen 2005.

³⁸ Fredholm 2007.

³⁹ See Travers 2015 for a discussion on that point.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Another new title created during the later period of the Ganden Phodrang, i.e. in the early 20th century, was the rank of "*me 'byar*", in imitation of the English "major".

⁴¹ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009.

⁴² Norbu Samphel 2008: 73.

the *makpön* (*dmag dpon*), who is still mentioned there.⁴³ Its etymology likely lies in a borrowing from the Manchu military rank⁴⁴ with the same meaning (Ma. *niru-i ejen*, lit. “chief/lord of the arrow”).⁴⁵

This seems plausible, given the Fifth Dalai Lama’s fascination with Manchu military titles, as revealed in a passage of his autobiography describing his visit to Beijing in 1653.⁴⁶ So it seems likely the title was introduced during this period (especially in the period after the death of Gushri Khan when Manchu influence increased in the 1670s).⁴⁷

Now, regarding the number of available *dapön* positions at one given time: we already know from Petech’s work that the number of *dapön* grew, along with the size of the regular troops, during the course of the 18th century as reflected in the various Manchu reforms.⁴⁸ From an initial three it went to six *dapön* in the following steps: in the first quarter of the 18th century there were three *dapön*, two in Tsang (Tib. Gtsang), one in Kongpo.⁴⁹ In the *Miwang Tokjö* (1733), four different *dapön* are mentioned: two for Tsang, one for Kongpo and one for Ü (Dbus).⁵⁰ The Kongpo *dapön* position then disappeared, so there were three again. After 1728, a fourth *dapön* was added: one in Ü, three in Tsang (so the addition is here of a third one in Tsang).⁵¹ Then in 1751, with the seventh article of the *Reform in Thirteen Articles* (*Las don skor gyi rtsa ’dzin don tshan bcu gsum*), a fifth *dapön*—a second one in Ü—

⁴³ *Ibid.* The term *makpön* then disappears as a specific military title and become a generic term including all or any type of military officers.

⁴⁴ Fredholm (2007: 12) already suggested this Manchu origin.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Nicola Di Cosmo.

⁴⁶ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989 [1681]: 396, translated and discussed by Gray Tuttle in Schaeffer *et al.* (eds.) 2013: 542.

⁴⁷ It is important to note that after its introduction, the term *dapön* is not used exclusively in the historical sources, most probably for stylistic reasons, with other literary formulations also employed to designate the highest military officers. For example, in the *Miwang Tokjö* written in 1733, *dapön* is rarely used, as the author prefers ornate formulations to describe army leaders, like “helmsman of the force” (“*dpung gi kha lo pa*” or “*g.yul gyi kha lo pa*”). These titles in the *Miwang Tokjö*, sometimes indicate whether they led Ü or Tsang troops, i.e. “*dbus ljongs dmag dpung gi kha lo pa*”, “*dbus kong gi dpung tshogs kyi gtso bo*”, and “*yul dbus kyi g.yul gyi kha lo pa*”. The only army leader who is actually referred to as *dapön* is Lobzang Dargyé (Blo bzang dar rgyas). One century later, Zurkhang Sichö Tseten’s autobiography also uses both terms, sometimes appending one to the other, as in general Changlo (Lcang lo)’s title “*g.yul gyi kha lo pa mda’ dpon lcang lo*”; *Bka’ gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 34n2.

⁴⁸ See Travers 2015: 257.

⁴⁹ Petech 1973: 12.

⁵⁰ A pair of leaders of the army for Tsang termed “*gtsang ljongs g.yul gyi kha lo pa zung*”, and a pair composed of one *dapön* in Ü (named Orong) and one in Kongpo (named Bumtang): “*dbus kong gi dpung tshogs kyi gtso bo o rong pa dang ’bum thang pa zung*”.

⁵¹ Petech 1973: 200.

was added so there were three in Tsang and two in Ü.⁵² In 1793, a sixth was added, as per the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*.⁵³

This number of six *dapön* then remained the same until the beginning of the 20th century—when it started to rise again, until it reached seventeen *dapön* at its peak in 1950.⁵⁴

2.2. Article 5: Subaltern Officers and the Introduction of Meritocratic Rules for Recruitment and Promotion

The fifth article of the *Ordinance* starts with the statement that in previous times there had been no officer other than the *dapön* (*sngar nas dmag gi 'go yod mda' dpon tsam las med 'dug kyang*) and that from now on, the *dapön* would have *rupön*, *gyapön* (*brgya dpon*) and *dingpön* (*lding dpon*) under their command. However, the general development of these military officers' titles and the prior existence of the officer titles *rupön*, *gyapön*, *dingpön*, and *chupön* (*bcu dpon*)⁵⁵ have already been shown elsewhere.⁵⁶ This assertion thus appears to have been either an exaggeration intended to emphasise the value of the reform, or to mark a new meaning in terms of men under the command of these officers.

In any case, from at least this time onward, there was stability in the subaltern officers' titles, structure and meaning until the early 20th century.⁵⁷ This hierarchical structure was as follows (from senior to junior): *dapön*, *rupön*, *gyapön*, *dingpön* with a stable number of soldiers under their orders (see table 1).

⁵² See Travers 2015. The Tibetan text is available in Norbu Samphel 2008: 140–155. A translation in English of the whole reform is available in Schwieger 2015: 152–153. Translated passages from Articles 4 and 5 in this paper are my own.

⁵³ Strangely enough, Petech has this sixth position of *dapön* appear only in the mid-19th century, when a fourth position was added in Tsang, permanently detached to Dingri. Petech has obviously not consulted the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, which already mentions the “Ding ri mda' dpon” in its fourth article; see Norbu Samphel 2008: 158.

⁵⁴ Khreng ping 1981: 184.

⁵⁵ See Travers 2015: 258. *Rupön*, *gyapön*, *dingpön*, and *chupön* appear already as military titles in the *Zhal Ice bcu drug*, a text dating from just before the beginning of the Ganden Phodrang in the early 17th century. In the *Miwang Tokjö* (1733), a few *rupön*, *gyapön* and *dingpön* are mentioned. In the *Kalön Tokjö*, the author himself is appointed as “*g.yas ru'i ru dpon*” (Mdo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal [1762] 1981: 21), but there are no further mentions of this or any other of these titles, including *gyapön*, *dingpön*, or *chupön*. Most probably this is simply because such officers were too low-ranking to deserve mention. The same is true of Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's autobiography, where lower officers below the rank of the *dapön* are not mentioned, except when he himself is appointed to these positions. Also, the meaning of these titles obviously underwent some changes over time.

⁵⁶ Travers 2015.

⁵⁷ As remarked by Petech 1973: 12.

Tibetan title	<i>dapön</i>	<i>rupön</i>	<i>gyapön</i>	<i>dingpön</i> ⁵⁸	<i>chupön</i>
English translation	general	colonel	captain	lieutenant	sergeant
Rank as government official	Fourth rank	Fifth rank	Sixth rank	Seventh rank	no rank
Head of	500 soldiers	250 soldiers	100 soldiers	25 soldiers	10 soldiers

Table 1. Table of the officers' hierarchy from 1793 to the mid-20th century.⁵⁹

The rest of the fifth article focused on the meritocratic principle that should be developed in the military careers, it reads:

Article 5: Since the past, as the head of the army, there was nobody except the *dapön*. In the future, under the *dapön*, there will be twelve *rupön*, and under each *rupön*, there will be 250 soldiers. Under the *rupön* there will be 24 *gyapön* and under each *gyapön* 125 soldiers; under each *gyapön* there will be *dingpön* and under each *dingpön* 25 soldiers. All these [officers] should be engaged after having been chosen only from healthy young and capable men and they should also be certified by a diploma. Promotion should be gradual: to be chosen as a *dapön*, a *rupön* is suitable; to replace a *rupön*, a *gyapön*, and in place of a *gyapön*, a *dingpön*. Even if they are aristocrats and lay officials, it is not allowed to ascend to a high position by "jumping" ranks, like before. It looks like there is a custom of denying a higher rank than *dingpön* to soldiers who come from the commoners (*mi ser*). From now on, it is allowed to gradually promote soldiers when their own bravery, intelligence and value make them suitable, and this should not be opposed.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ In the 20th century, one finds also the term *zhelngo* (*zhal ngo*) as an alternative for the military title *dingpön*.

⁵⁹ The English translations for these titles more or less follow the English and American hierarchical order, with the omission of intermediate ranks. These translations are offered purely for convenience. The smaller size of the Tibetan army compared to its western counterparts during this period renders any assertion of direct equivalence inappropriate.

⁶⁰ Nor bu bsam 'phel 2008: 158–159: *don tshan lnga par / sngar nas dmag gi 'go yod mda' dpon tsaam las med 'dug kyang / da cha mda' dpon gyi thog tu ru dpon bcu gnyis dang / ru dpon re'i 'og tu dmag mi nyis brgya lnga bcu re / ru dpon gyi 'og tu brgya dpon nyi shu rtsa bzhi / brgya dpon rer dmag mi brgya dang nyi shu rtsa lnga re / brgya dpon gyi 'og tu lding dpon / lding dpon re'i 'og [tu] dmag mi nyi shu rtsa lnga re bcas de dag tshang ma mi na gzhon rtsal ldan sha stag 'dem sgrug gis 'jug pa dang / bka' shog kyang sprod dgos / mda' dpon gyi 'os la ru dpon / ru dpon gyi tshab tu brgya dpon / de tshab lding dpon bcas rim bzhin 'phar dgos la / mi drag dang / drung 'khor yin kyang gong bzhin gnas rim 'phar las / mtho 'dzeg byas mi chog pa dang / mi ser byings dmangs kyi khongs nas lding dpon*

Here it is written that officers' ranks should be open to soldiers coming from the lower social strata. It also seems to create new rules for promotion, based mainly on merit and open to commoners—unlike the rest of the administration—who could advance step by step from *dingpön* to *rupön*. It also stipulates that all officers, even aristocrats, should only be promoted step by step from the lowest to the highest rank.⁶¹

As a matter of fact, we know that in the 20th century almost all *dapön* were aristocrats and ninety-five percent of them had never held any military position before being appointed to this highest position.⁶² This situation casts some doubt on whether the 1793 articles had ever been enforced at all. It is in offering some evidence on this particular point that Sichö Tseten's autobiography is crucial.

2. Sichö Tseten's Background and Military Career

Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's military career needs to be placed in a particular family context. The first folios of his autobiography describe at length his ancestry on his paternal and maternal sides, introduced as follows:

And to begin with my family and lineage, as far as the origins of my main ancestors and their descendants are concerned, although it is not necessary to establish extensively the origins of my white paternal bone/lineage (*rus*), in the same way as is not necessary to praise a self-arisen golden image, or as it is not needed to comb the hair of Drugmo [Gesar's wife], I will nevertheless give an abbreviated account.⁶³

What he seems to be implying here is that his ancestors were so worthy and well-known, that they need no introduction. However, luckily for

*gyi go sa byas mi chog pa'i srol zhig yod tshod la / de yang phyin chad so so'i blo stobs shes
'khos sogs kyiis 'pher ba yod tshe rin bzhin 'phar chog pa las / bkag 'gegs mi chog / .*

⁶¹ A special case is made for the recruitment of *dapön*, who can be selected among *rupön*, of course, as well as among district governors (*rdzong dpon*) of the borders and among officials working as assistants in the cabinet (*bka' shag mgron gnyer*). It is worth underlining that this particular provision might reflect an existing practice since this is exactly what had happened to Sichö Tseten's uncle, whose career had taken place before the 1793 reform. He had become a *dapön* after holding the position of assistant in the cabinet.

⁶² Travers 2009.

⁶³ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 5: *de yang dang po'i rigs dang rus / cho dang 'brang sogs kyi 'byung khungs ni bstod mi dgos gser sku rang byon dang / shad mi dgos 'brug mo'i skra lo'i dpe ltar pha rus dkar po'i 'byung khungs sogs rgyas par 'god mi lang na'ang / skabs 'dir rags [bsdusu] bsdus su brjod par byed na / .*

us, his abbreviated account (*rags bsdus*) is actually quite detailed (it occupies around twenty folios) and reveals that his ancestors in the 18th century included a military figure on both his maternal and paternal sides, which helps put Sichö Tseten's military career in perspective.

2.1. Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's Military and Spiritual Background According to his Autobiography

On the maternal side, he traces his family to his great grand-mother PhüntsoK Drölma (Phun tshogs sgröl ma).⁶⁴ She belonged to a noble *gerpa* (*sger pa*) house—with an estate in the Yarlung valley named Khesum (Khe gsum)—who were said to be related to the lineage of Tang-tong Gyelpo (Thang stong rgyal po, 1385?–1464?). Significantly for the present discussion, this PhüntsoK Drölma married someone named “E bus pa li/E bus pi li” in the text. He is described as holding the Sino-Manchu title of army general (Ch. *jiang jun*), and as having been sent to Tibet to fight against the Zunghars with the Mongol duke, General Tsewang Norbu (Tshe dbang nor bu). He is probably one-and-the-same as the “Aboo” who appears frequently in the *Miwang Tokjö* and is described by Petech as a Mongol chief of the Alashan Qoshot, and a great-grandson of Gushri Khan,⁶⁵ who was part of the provisional military government presided over by General Yansin in 1721.

We learn in Sichö Tseten's biography that this Mongol chief went on pilgrimage to the Yarlung valley and could not find a suitable place to stay. He therefore stayed on the estate of Khesum, where he met the entire noble family including the young PhüntsoK Drölma, whom he married. When she became pregnant, they were making preparations to send their child to Beijing if it was a boy, but the child turned out to be a girl whom they named Dorjé Gyelmo (Rdo rje rgyal mo), and she stayed on the estate.⁶⁶ According to the *Miwang Tokjö*,⁶⁷ Aboo then

⁶⁴ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 9bl6 to 10.

⁶⁵ Petech [1950] 1972: 74. Petech refers to him as “Efu Aboo” and explains that the Chinese texts call him “Efu Apao” while Tibetan sources call him “Ebus Beile”, Ebus being the transcription of the title Efu (imperial brother-in-law), that he had been bestowed in 1704. Thus the “pa li” or “pi li” in Tibetan sources would be the transcription of the title Beile 貝勒, prince of the third rank. It is worth noting that Petech changed his mind on him between the two versions of his book *China and Tibet in the early 18th century*, published in 1950 and 1972: after having described him as a Manchu army officer in the first 1950 edition (Petech 1950: 62), he turned to the Mongol identification of this personage in his 1972 edition; Petech [1950] 1972: 74.

⁶⁶ The fact that this daughter is described by Sichö Tseten as having famously a “Mongol beauty type” corroborates Petech revised opinion regarding Aboo's ethnicity.

⁶⁷ Quoted by Petech [1950] 1972: 92.

went back to China with Tsewang Norbu on imperial orders in 1723, where he rose rapidly, receiving the title *junwang* (prince of second rank) in 1724 (he was later demoted in 1729, and then reinstated in 1732). He died in 1739.⁶⁸

Another interesting detail relevant for understanding Sichö Tseten's future military career is his description of his maternal family's connection with the "great *dharma* protector" (*bstan bsrung chen po*). The above-mentioned daughter of the Mongol military officer, Dorjé Gyelmo, later married Lobzang Trinlé (Blo bzang 'phrin las), a former monk from Riwo Chöling (Ri bo chos gling) monastery who had come to manage the Khesum estate and gave up his monastic vows in order to marry her. Not only is he described in the autobiography as a "descendant of the reincarnation of the mother of Drakpa Gyeltsen (Grags pa rgyal mtshan), the lineage called Chinga marpo (Chi nga dmar po) from Chonggyé", but also he was connected to the family lineage of the Fifth Dalai Lama himself.⁶⁹ Referred to as *chöjé* (*chos rje*) Lobzang Trinlé, he became famous as a spirit-medium of the "great *dharma* protector".⁷⁰ He and Dorjé Gyelmo had a number of children, among whom was Sichö Tseten's own mother Sönam Peldu

⁶⁸ We find a further description of Aboo in another of Petech's works: "Aboo, called E-p'u (or E-bus) Beile Batur Jo-nañ in Tibetan texts, was the third son of Batur Erke Jinong Qoroli (d. 1709), a grandson of Gušri Khan, who after a long diplomatic struggle between Sañs-rgyas-rgya-mts'o and the K'ang-hsi emperor had left Köke-nör and settled in Alashan (1686). He was given in 1704 the rank of imperial brother-in-law, *hošo efi*, with rights of inheritance. In 1709 he succeeded his father as *beile*. He held a command on the Dsungar frontier and in 1720 came back to Köke-nör, from where he was ordered to Tibet with 600 men. He was recalled in 1723 and fought in the last stages of the campaign against Lobjang Danjin. As he was a personal enemy of general Nien Kêng-yao), the latter's disgrace contributed to his fortune. In 1724 he came to court and was promoted to *chiin-wang*, but in 1729 was degraded to *beile*, banished from Köke-nör, and confined in Alashan. He was given back the rank of *chiin-wang* in 1732 and died in 1739"; Petech 1966: 288–289.

⁶⁹ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 11n4: *sngon gzim khang gong gi sprul sku grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi yum gyi sku skyer 'bod pa 'phyongs rgyas chi nga dmar po ba'i rigs su bltams shing rgyal dbang lnga pa chen po'i sku bryud la gtogs pa blo bzang ('phris) 'phrin las* /.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* I have not been able to conclusively ascertain which protector-deity this refers to. It is mentioned elsewhere in the biography as "*zhal mngon sum du gzigs pa*" (*ibid.*: folio 11n6); "*zhal mi gzigs pa*" (*ibid.*: folio 28n5); and "*zhal gzigs pa*" (*ibid.*: folio 41n3). In his translation of the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography, Karmay understands "*bstan srung chen mo*" as always referring to Nechung (Gnas chung). In *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, Nebesky-Wojkowitz writes: "Only a few aristocratic families enjoy the privilege of consulting the state oracle in private matters at any time. Their prerogative is based on the circumstance that one of their ancestors had been a benefactor of the Nechung monastery. Thus e.g. the family of gZim shag bshad sgra, one of the ministers who negotiated the British Treaty of 1904, is permitted

Dzompa (Bsod nams dpal du 'dzom pa).

On his paternal side, he also had military antecedents in the form of his paternal uncle Zurkhang Kelzang Rapten (Skal bzang rab brtan). This is revealed in his description of his father's career, when he writes:

He was appointed to the position of assistant to the cabinet (*bka' shag mgron gnyer*) as an inherited position from his own father (*pha shul bu 'dzin du*), and after he had served for a long time, he was replaced by his younger brother Kelzang Rapten who [also] served in this position of assistant in the cabinet. Because he [Kelzang Rapten] had served in the gradual stages of government service with great altruism and without blame during the fighting (*sde gzar*)⁷¹ between Tibet and Nepal in the Earth Monkey year [1788], the mighty Pusing Lungtang (Phu sing Klung tang) [probably Fuqing] praised him and elevated him to the position of *dapön* on the battle field of Tö (Stod).⁷²

In the *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*—the list of government officials of the Wood Tiger [1794] year (*Shing stag bod mi drag dang las tshan phyi nang gyi rgya deb*) starting in 1794 and giving the name of the officials in each position and of the officials who then succeeded in this position—the exact year when Kelzang Rapten was appointed to the position of *dapön* is given as being 1793, thus slightly later, at the end of the second Tibetan-Nepal war. The entry regarding Kelzang Rapten reads:

Ü *dapön*: Zurkhangpa Kelzang Rapten aged 46, appointed *dapön* and bestowed the fourth rank in the 58th year of reign of Qianlong [1793].⁷³

2.2. Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's Military Career in the Immediate Aftermath of the Twenty-Nine-Article Ordinance

Later in Sichö Tseten's autobiography,⁷⁴ we hear of his own service to the Ganden Phodrang government, which he had entered into in

to consult the state oracle whenever necessary"; Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1998: 432.

⁷¹ This is the term always used to refer to the Gorkha-Tibet war in Sichö Tseten's biography.

⁷² *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 12: *bka' shag mgron gnyer pha shul bu 'dzin du bsko bzhang stsal zhing yun ring song mthar dgongs pa zhus khröl gyi tshab tu / gcung bskal bzang rab brtan la bka' mgron mu 'thud du stsal zhing zhabs 'degs mdzad mud (mus) thog sa spre bod bal sde gzar skabs gzhung sa'i zhabs 'degs kyi rin pa lhag bsam rma med du gyur gshis / stod kyi dmag sa rang du phu sing krung thang chen pos mda' dpon gyi go sar gnas spar gzengs su bstod pa sogs /*.

⁷³ *Dbus mda' dpon zur khang pa bskal bzang rab brtan rang lo 46 lha skyong nga brgyad par mda' dpon gyi go sa dang rim pa bzhi pa'i tog stsal (Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba: 2–3).*

⁷⁴ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 34–36.

1786.⁷⁵ His military career took shape just five years after the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* was promulgated:

In the Earth Horse year [1798], because I was to take leave from Lhuntse (Lhun rtse) *rdzong* [where he was then a district magistrate or *rdzong dpon*], my beloved paternal uncle [Kelzang Rapten, the *dapön* mentioned above] and my mother, conferred and decided that I should request a position as assistant in the Cabinet (*bka' shag mgron gnyer*). [But] after the question was examined by the transcendent wisdom of the “great *dharma* protector”,⁷⁶ the prophecy arrived that I should [instead] enter the ranks of the military officers of the “Chinese-trained” (*rgya sbyong*) troops.⁷⁷ Therefore in the Earth Sheep year [1799], I requested that I might occupy the position of an acting captain (*brgya dpon tshab*), and this was granted.⁷⁸

He then describes how he climbed through the military ranks within a few years (see table 2) on account of his good behaviour and despite not being very skilled at either archery or horsemanship. He was promoted to full *gyapön* in 1800 “without having to exert pressure”, he underlines, having drawn attention to himself during the visit of two envoys of the Emperor. The following year (i.e. 1801), according to his own account, he was promoted to *rupön*. The exact date of that promotion—including the confirmation of the year—is to be found in the list of government officials of the Wood Tiger [1794] year. For the *Ü rupön* position, one reads:

Ü rupön: Khyamtöpa Sönam Wangdü; was replaced when he passed away by Jang *gyapön* Tashi Gyelpo; when the latter was promoted to

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: folio 19n1-n2. The brief information on Sichö Tseten's career given by Petech was hypothetical and patchy (1973: 145). He gave no information on his father or his uncle Zurkhang Kelzang Rapten. This biography is therefore a welcome additional source to augment what was already known of the Zurkhang family earlier.

⁷⁶ The “great protector” referred to here is most probably the same as the one to whom his maternal uncle was an oracle (*chos rje*).

⁷⁷ Dung dkar has the Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) create these regiments in 1782; see Dung dkar 2005 [2002]. This passage confirms that the regular troops in Tibet, or at least the regiment Sichö Tseten entered as an officer, were already known as “*rgya sbyong*” by the time of the described event, i.e. in 1799.

⁷⁸ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 35n3–n5: *de nas sa rta lo rdzong dgongs zhu mdzad pa'i phyir 'khor stun (bstun) / byams ldan khu bo mchog dang / skyes ma chen po bka' gros te / kho bor bka' shag mgron gnyer gyi go sa zhu ba gngang rtsis la / bstan bsrungs chen po nyid nas ye shes kyi gzigs pas dpyad te (de) rgya sbyongs dmag mi'i 'go byed gyi (kyi) gral tsam su (du) zhugs dgos pa'i bka' lung phebs don sa lug lo brgya dpon gyi tshab lta bur bsdad mthus zhus pa don smin byung zhing /*

dapön, Zurkhang Sichö Tseten was appointed in his place [as *rupön*] on the 14th of the 5th month of the Iron Bird year (1801).⁷⁹

At that point, according to his autobiography, after another prophecy by the “great protector”, his uncle Kelzang Rapten, who was still a general or *dapön* at this time, decided to retire from government service (after consulting, once again, the great protector) and managed to have him recruited as *dapön* in his place, in 1802.⁸⁰ The date and the manner in which the position was transmitted by his uncle are confirmed in the same list of government officials of the Wood Tiger [1794] year:

Ü *dapön*: Zurkhangpa Kelzang Rapten aged 46, appointed *dapön* and bestowed the fourth rank in the 58th year of reign of Qianlong [1793]. In the 2nd month of the 7th year of reign of Jiaqing [1802], with permission, his relative *rupön* Sichö Tseten was appointed [in his place].⁸¹

Thus, we can see that Sichö Tseten did actually ascend through all the military ranks up to general / *dapön*, shortly before becoming a cabinet minister in 1804 (see table 2).⁸²

Year	Position	English translation
1799	<i>brgya dpon kyi tshab</i>	acting captain
1800	<i>brgya dpon</i>	captain (full position)
1801	<i>ru dpon</i>	colonel
1802	<i>mda dpon</i>	general
1804	<i>bka' blon</i>	cabinet minister

Table 2. Zurkhang Sichö Tseten's five-year-long military career before becoming a cabinet minister.

⁷⁹ *dbus ru dpon 'khyams stod pa bsod nams dbang 'dus 'das tshab ljang brgya dpon bkris rgyal po mda' dpon du 'phar tshab zur khang sri bcod tshe brtan lcags bya zla 5 tshes 14 la bsko bzhag stsal /*; *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 7.

⁸⁰ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 36b1.

⁸¹ *dbus mda' dpon zur khang pa bskal bzang rab brtan rang lo 46 lha skyong nga brgyad par mda' dpon gyi go sa dang rim pa bzhi pa'i tog stsal / bca' chen khri bzhugs bdun pa'i zla 2 nang dgongs 'khrol tshab spun ru dpon sri bcod tshe brtan la bsko bzhag stsal /*; *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 2–3.

⁸² *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 40b5; Petech 1973: 145.

Of course, one can also observe that he lost no time—he went through all the officer ranks within the space of five years—making one wonder whether the whole exercise was anything more than a bid to become eligible for the *kalön*-ship, since, as Petech has observed, the position of *dapön*, along with a few others, was considered as a stepping stone from which one could be elevated to the post of cabinet minister.⁸³ Whatever reasons Sichö Tseten had for embracing a military career, it seems that this model, set by his uncle and then by himself, would be followed by many in the Zurkhang family (and needless to say, other families, though we are here focusing only on this particular family) over the next two centuries.

This survey of military careers within the Zurkhang family in the long run will now enable us to address another aspect of the military reforms of 1793 and assess their application: the hereditary transmission of military positions.

3. The Zurkhang Family: An Emblematic Example of the Significant Social Changes at the Top of the Army Leadership at the Turn of the 19th Century

In my view, the case of the Zurkhang family illustrates a shift in the state of the Tibetan officer corps in the late 18th century. First of all, the very fact that a Zurkhang family member could become a *dapön* in the first place, might be a direct consequence of another measure that was taken in the context of the Manchu military reforms in Tibet, i.e. the end of the monopoly of very few aristocratic families over the *dapön* positions—which came as an addition to their above-mentioned increase in number.

3.1. The End of the Monopoly of the Four Families Over the Dapön Hereditary Positions after the Twenty-Nine-Article Ordinance

It seems that there was from 1751 onwards, i.e. before the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, an already-existing tendency to introduce more meritocracy at the highest level of the Tibetan army and to get rid of the hereditary principle. Indeed, as Petech has observed, only four families exercised a monopoly on the first four *dapön* positions after 1728:

The four posts existing after 1728 (one in dBus, three in gTsang) were the apanage of four noble families: g.Yu thog (alias 'Bum thang) in

⁸³ This was first observed by Luciano Petech (1973: 14) and proved to be accurate after examination of my careers' database; see Travers 2011.

dBus, Lcang lo can, Pad tshal and Ram pa in gTsang. The office showed thus a definitely feudal character and may be compared with the *ministeriales* of post-Carolingian times in Europe. The second post of dBus *dapön* added in 1751 was not tied to a definite family (in spite of a certain prevalence of the Phu lung house). The rule was extended to the other four posts in 1792, when the rights of direct heredity (but not of exclusive tenure) of the aristocracy in the military administration were done away by the Chinese.⁸⁴

Petech's observations stop here, but if we look in more detail at the careers of Bumtang,⁸⁵ Changlochen (Lcang lo can),⁸⁶ Petsel (Pad tshal),⁸⁷ Samdrupling (Bsam grub gling)⁸⁸ and Orong (O rong)⁸⁹ family members, we can indeed observe a visible hereditary transmission of these positions of *dapön*. However, this transmission clearly stops at

⁸⁴ Petech 1973: 200. The hereditary transmission of military positions in this period is not surprising since it also seems to have been true for most (if not all) government positions. Taking the example of the Zurkhang family as described in Sichö Tseten's biography, we can observe this for instance in the transmission of the positions of assistant in the cabinet (*bka' shag mgron gnyer*): Sichö Tseten's father, then his uncle, then himself, then his son all became assistant in the cabinet through an explicitly hereditary transmission. We also know that this practice continued well into the early 20th century even though it was not officially allowed anymore, with many officials receiving the same government position which their father, uncle or brother had just occupied; see Travers 2009.

⁸⁵ For instance, the above mentioned Bumtangpa Ngödru, who was *dapön* in 1714, transmitted his position of Ü *dapön* to his son Lobzang Dargyé in 1722. It is not clear what happened afterwards, but one again finds a Bumtang *dapön* in the late 18th century. After that there is then nothing further to be found about them; see Petech 1973: 127–132.

⁸⁶ For instance, the first Changlochen (Lcang lo can) *dapön*, who fought with Pholhané, transmitted his Tsang *dapön* position to his son; there is another one with the same name and title in the 1830s, and then again in the third quarter of the 19th century; see *ibid.*: 200–203.

⁸⁷ For instance, Petsel Tsering Namgyel (Pad tshal Tshe ring nram rgyal), who first held the position *dapön* after 1731 according to Chinese sources, was succeeded by his brother who was *dapön* in 1762, and by the latter's son in the 1760s. It seems that the succession was then discontinued as there are no further mentions of *dapön* afterwards; see *ibid.*: 205.

⁸⁸ One of two families that are mentioned in the *Miwang Tokjö* as military officers and included by Petech among the military families in his book *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728–1959* (1973). They very soon completely disappeared: Samdrupling (Bsam grub gling) had a Tsang *dapön* in 1706, and another one in 1789 (Petech 1973: 208), and then again another one in 1808, but nothing later.

⁸⁹ The Orong family is mentioned in the *Miwang Tokjö* as having one military officer, and is classified by Petech among the families "connected with the territorial military organization" (Petech 1973). However, they very soon completely disappeared in the second half of the 18th century: they had one military commander in 1717, then the latter's son was also appointed *dapön* in 1721 (see the *nram thar* of the Seventh Dalai Lama, quoted by Petech), but it seems that this particular position disappeared in the family later on, see *ibid.*: 209.

the end of the 18th century, thus lasting less than a century. The odd one out here is the Rampa (Ram pa) family, whose military involvement continued well into the 19th century.⁹⁰ This last case shows that in practice the same families could, albeit in unusual cases, continue to maintain a dominant position in the military organisation even after 1793.

With the disappearance of the military leadership of the four families mentioned above as *dapön*, either from the end of the 18th century or during the 19th century, we observe a growing diversity of other aristocratic families being appointed in the position of *dapön* (see table 3 below). For the entire 18th century, according to our calculation and based on a survey (certainly not exhaustive) of various primary and secondary sources, twenty-four different individuals from twelve different aristocratic families were found occupying the position of *dapön*. It has to be kept in mind that the total concurrently available positions of *dapön* varied over this period between three at the beginning of the century to six at its end.

Century	Number of individuals found occupying <i>dapön</i> positions	Number of different noble families of origin	Number of available seats of <i>dapön</i>
18	24	12	3 to 6
19	36	20	6
20	96	74	6 to 17

Table 3. Number of *dapön* and their family of origin.

For the 19th century, thirty-six different individuals from twenty different families have been identified occupying the position of *dapön*. During this entire period six *dapön* positions would have been available concurrently.

For the first half of the 20th century, an inventory of ninety-six different individuals from seventy-four different families occupying the

⁹⁰ In the Rampa family, one finds nine (or eight if two are the same, as there remains one uncertainty) members serving in the army in the 17th and 18th centuries among which seven were *dapön*: Penden Wanggyel (Dpal ldan dbang rgyal), Tsang *dapön* in 1728, followed by his son Raptan (Rab brtan), active in 1748, and again by the latter's son Gönpö Dargyé (Mgon po dar rgyas) (see *ibid.*: 155), another one named Tsewang Raptan (Tshe dbang rab brtan) in 1792, and perhaps his son in 1820. In 1830, there is a *gyapön* (*brgya dpon*) in the family, and then again a *dapön* Lhawang Dorjé (Lha dbang rdo rje) in 1871. A last one is reported being active in the 1930s; see *ibid.*: 154–157.

position of *dapön* has been compiled by the present author. For this period the number of concurrently available positions varied between six (until 1913) and up to as many as seventeen in 1950. Only the Rampa family are represented in both the first and last periods. In this final phase, holders of the position came from all substrata of the aristocracy but with a visible overrepresentation of the higher strata families.

3.2. Zurkhang: A “Military Family”? The Continuation of a Certain Degree of Hereditary Transmission in the Conferral of Senior Military Positions

Thus, a significant change of the noble families involved in the highest Tibetan military position (*dapön*), occurred in the early 19th century with the arrival of completely new families, and the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* most probably—perhaps along with other factors—played a role in this evolution. These new families “specialised” in military careers, and their involvement in military affairs lasted until the end of the Ganden Phodrang’s rule in Tibet in the 1950s.

Among them, apart from the Rampa family already discussed, we find four families in particular: the Zurkhang family, the Palha (Phalha) family and the Dokhar family, having each at least eight members documented as occupying army positions, as well as one newcomer in the first half of the 20th century, the Sampo (Bsam pho) family.⁹¹

The example of the Zurkhang family seems very clear, as this family boasted no fewer than nine *dapön*, mostly Ü *dapön*, from the late 18th to the early 20th century (see table 4 below). Table 4 shows that apart from the first two generals listed, whom we have already noted were uncle and nephew, and the last two who were brothers, the rest represents an uninterrupted transmission from father to son, or to son-in-law in the case of Wangchen Norbu (Dbang chen nor bu) who came as a *magpa* (*mag pa*, i.e. adopted bridegroom) to be the heir of the Zurkhang house.

The stark military prevalence of these four aristocratic families could only happen through the partial maintenance of the old system of hereditary transmission for the position of *dapön*, even if not in a systematic and official way as had been the case in the early 18th century.

It is all the more noticeable because, as I have shown elsewhere for the 20th century, military positions were held only by a minority of the lay officials in the course of their career: only one in six lay officials served

⁹¹ The Sampo and Dokhar/Rakhashar families have four *dapön* in the early 20th century, Zurkhang five and Palha two.

in the army in the course of his career.⁹² However, even in this context, only a few noble families tended to specialise in military positions.

The three aforementioned families who particularly specialised in the military and whose lineage lasted until the 20th century were part—in this late period of the Ganden Phodrang aristocracy—of a minority of higher-ranking aristocrat families, either *depön* or *midrak*.⁹³

Thus, it actually seems a plausible hypothesis that the turnover of the families chosen for recruiting the *dapön* initiated by the Manchu reforms in the 18th century did have, to a certain extent, an impact on the final hierarchical internal organisation of the aristocracy in the last stage of its existence in the 20th century.

Personal name	Starting date	End date
Bskal bzang rab brtan	1793 ⁹⁴	1802 ⁹⁵
Sri gcod tshe brtan	1802 ⁹⁶	1804 ⁹⁷
Tshe brtan rdo rje	1823 ⁹⁸	1829 ⁹⁹
Dbang chen nor bu (<i>mag pa</i> from the Lcang lo can family)	1872 ¹⁰⁰	c. 1889 ¹⁰¹
Bsod nams dbang chen	c. 1889 ¹⁰²	before 1893 ¹⁰³
Dbang chen tshe brtan	1917 ¹⁰⁴	1924 ¹⁰⁶

⁹² This is not surprising since only fourteen percent of all the possible/existing government positions were linked to the military; see Travers 2009 and 2011.

⁹³ See note 3 above for an explanation of the Ganden Phodrang aristocracy's sub-groups.

⁹⁴ *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba* (2–3). He is not present in Petech 1973.

⁹⁵ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 36b1 and *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 2–3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Bka' gung blon gyi rtogs brjod*, folio 40b5; Petech was not sure whether the Zurkhang General promoted to minister was Sichö Tseten or not; Petech 1973: 145. The biography allows us to confirm this hypothesis.

⁹⁸ Petech 1973: 145; *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 37 and 100.

⁹⁹ *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 37 and 153; Petech (1973: 146) has this promotion confirmed by the emperor in 1830 only.

¹⁰⁰ *Go rim deb ther rin chen phreng ba*: 492. Petech had found him in this position but did not have the year; Petech 1973: 149.

¹⁰¹ Petech 1973: 150.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ He is then appointed minister (*bka' blon*), but he had received the third rank already in 1890 (see Petech 1973: 150), and it is not clear whether he was still occupying the position of general (*mda' dpon*), which is usually associated with the fourth rank.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* and *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 119.

¹⁰⁶ Petech 1973: 150 and "List of lay officials in 1924" reproduced in Petech 1973: 240–249.

	again in 1928 ¹⁰⁵	1934 ¹⁰⁷ or 1936 ¹⁰⁸
Bsod nams dbang 'dus (<i>mag pa</i> in the Khesmad family)	c. 1925 again in 1938	1932 1942 ¹⁰⁹
Dbang chen dge legs	1938 ¹¹⁰	1939 ¹¹¹ or 1941 ¹¹²
Lha dbang stobs rgyas	1942 ¹¹³	1947 ¹¹⁴

Table 4. *Dapön* from the Zurkhang family in the 18th-20th centuries.

Conclusion: Outcomes of the 1793 Reforms in the Long Run

To conclude, the example of Sichö Tseten's military career as described in his biography, of the Zurkhang family in general, and the identification of the family origins of *dapöns* in the 19th and 20th century seems to demonstrate the actual implementation of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance*, at least in the years immediately following the reform. The *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* certainly introduced—to some degree at least—a social change in the composition of the Tibetan army's officer corps in the 19th century. As we have seen, this change included the arrival of new aristocrat families among the highest commanders, and the obligation for aristocrats to ascend step by step through the military ranks, an obligation that could however, as we have seen, be observed rather perfunctorily.

It is quite probable that these regulations fell into disuse at some point—either progressively or suddenly—after the 1793 reform, but this is still hard to assess. Indeed, in later times, there are hardly any aristocrats to be found in the rank of *gyapön*: only four have been identified among *gyapön* during the 19th century (from the Palha, Rampa and Zurkhang families), and not a single one in the 20th century (when the available sources are more voluminous). The situation is even starker in the case of *dingpön*. So far in the course of this research not a single aristocrat has been identified in this rank. One can also observe

¹⁰⁵ Yuthok 1990: 41; Petech 1973: 151 and *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 119 do not have information on the exact year.

¹⁰⁷ *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 119.

¹⁰⁸ Petech 1973: 151.

¹⁰⁹ All dates for him are taken from Petech 1973: 94; *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 54 only confirms 1932 as his date of demotion.

¹¹⁰ Petech 1973: 152.

¹¹¹ *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 117.

¹¹² Petech 1973: 152.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ When he left Tibet as the English Interpreter with the Tibetan Trade Mission to India, China, the United Kingdom and the United States of America; *Who's Who in Tibet* 1949: 118.

that although *dapön* and *rupön* were included in the 1924 list of government officials (*gzhung zhabs*) published by Petech,¹¹⁵ there are no *gyapön* at all included in that list.

Now, what about the highest ranks reached by a commoner? For the periods before the 20th century, when an officer is mentioned without a family name in historical sources, it is not possible to definitively ascertain whether he was a commoner or not (as this occurs also for aristocrats). The text of the *Twenty-nine-article Ordinance* asserts that prior to 1793 it had been difficult for commoners to rise beyond the position of *dingpön*. By the early 20th century we find a good number of commoners in the *gyapön* and *rupön* positions, which indicates a real change. A “glass ceiling” seems nevertheless to have persisted, since even in the 20th century we do not find commoners in the position of *dapön*.

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