

RECENT ACQUISITIONS TO THE NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF
TIBETOLOGY HOLDINGS AND FUTURE PUBLICATIONS¹

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Introduction

The last twelve months have seen a number of significant changes at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT). Not least amongst which was the celebration of its Golden Jubilee, marked with an international conference. In addition to this, NIT has also recently acquired two collections: The Sikkimese Palace Archives and a selection of manuscripts from Ri nag (Renock). Both of these collections offer an interesting insight into Sikkimese history and political organisation, something the current author is keen to explore and study in more depth. The acquisition of these collections has enhanced the variety of the holdings of NIT.

NIT has also recently invested in a number of technological tools which can be used to preserve these collections and allow, over time, public access to these collections through digital technology. It is the area of digitisation that NIT has invested heavily, with three digital scanners capable of scanning documents to museum and international archival standards. Plans are also in progress to create a hermetically sealed, climate controlled vault to hold rare manuscripts, and images which are susceptible to the variations (such as high levels of humidity) of the Sikkimese climate. It will be a number of years before this vault will be in operation but in the meantime a number of actions have been put in place to protect the documents from excessive damage from light and weather conditions. These actions include the purchase of a dehumidifying machine, the use of covered ventilated storage racks (to allow the flow of dry air through the collections and prevent light damage to the materials).

¹ The author would like to express his gratitude to the Director of NIT, Tashi Densapa for allowing me access to the Palace Archive and giving me permission to work on this material. This research project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust who have provided the author with research funds for two years of post-doctoral work.

The Sikkimese Palace Archives

The archives of the Sikkimese Royal Palace were recently transferred to the custodianship of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, having previously been held by the Art and Cultural Trust of Sikkim. This collection, of legal documents, letters and internal and international agreements, is a rare source of information for the study of Sikkimese, Tibetan, Bhutanese and British Indian history. This collection covers a range of historical periods, from the time of early Sikkimese state formation in the mid seventeenth century (the earliest document is dated 1663), the Sikkim-Gorkha war of the 1780s and 1790s, the British period c.1817-1947, to the period prior to the merger of Sikkim with India. The collection also contains documents written in a number of different languages including Tibetan (the majority of material), Lepcha, English, Nepali and Mandarin. Similarly they range in format, from letters, treaties, decrees and land grants to personal note books, receipts and private letters.

The complete archives also include photographs and films. Some of these photographs are copies of collections housed elsewhere, but some are personal albums including holiday snaps, providing an altogether different side of the royal family than the official photographs. The photographs and films will be added to the NIT photographic project, under the direction of Anna Balikci-Denjongpa. This project is aimed at preserving a visual record of the history and culture of Sikkim during the photographic age. By adding to this project and the literary holdings of NIT, the acquisition of the Sikkimese Royal Archives, will greatly improve the research work of NIT and contribute to our knowledge of Sikkimese history and culture. Indeed one of the key problems with conducting historical research in Sikkim in the past was the lack of accurate and authentic records; however, with the transfer of this collection this problem has been eased greatly.

In order to guide scholars through the documents in this collection the current author along with Hissey Wongchuk are compiling a catalogue of the collection. The catalogue, *Royal Records: The Sikkimese Palace Archives*, will be published in January 2010 and made available to local and international scholars. NIT is accepting pre-publication orders for this catalogue and those who are interested should contact NIT. In addition to the catalogue the entire collection of documents has now been digitised to allow future scholars access to the material without causing excessive handling of the original documents. It is anticipated that the collection will be available for consultation by

the wider academic community in 2011, following the publication of part of this collection. This second publication in the Palace Archive Project will include a selection of material from the collection, with translations and commentaries following the examples and methodology of Dieter Schuh (1978) and, more recently, Charles Ramble (2008).

Some examples from the Palace Archive

The variety of material found in this archive is astonishing, ranging from official government papers, to petitions by Sikkimese commoners regarding the excesses of the aristocracy as well as official and diplomatic correspondence with Tibet, Bhutan and British India. Whilst the official records and diplomatic letters inform the historian of Sikkim in its wider context of its geopolitical significance and the internal administration of the former country, the letters from ordinary citizens shed light on the hitherto unknown (or at least unrecognised) experiences and conditions which common people faced. With the variety of the material being such, for the first time in the study of Sikkimese history it is possible to envisage the macro political structures and their place in the international affairs of the region and the micro level of day to day existence. A number of examples may at this point enlighten the reader with regards to the importance of this collection.

The Case of the Missing Horse. In a series of documents found in the section of the collection regarding internal agreements and petitions one finds two rather interesting documents involving a trader known as Khos [Khol] chung dkar po. In the first document Khos chung dkar po is accused (and found guilty) of failing to pay for a horse he bought for the price of 10 dngul srang, he is ordered to pay the amount or face a fine of 2 gser srang. In the second document we learn that this same figure was a Tibetan trader from Khams, who once again had bought a horse from the Chogyal's horse trader, but according to the horse trader failed to pay for the horse. At first appearance it seems as if this Khos chung dkar po is nothing more than a thief, but at closer inspection of the documents we find the case a little more dubious. Reading between the lines it becomes clear that the second document was sent to the Chogyal in response to an earlier (but now lost) letter to the horse trader by the government in which they recognised a discrepancy in the accounts and enquire into the reason for this. The response of the Royal horse trader is to pass the blame on to an unknown Tibetan trader (who by virtue of being Tibetan was untraceable and outside the legal system

of Sikkim). The plot thickens when the horse trader states a number of times that he has done nothing wrong: a case of protesting too much perhaps. He goes on to say that in order to balance the books he will pay for the missing horse when he next travels to the capital: indicating to the reader of this document that there was more to this story than the failure of a Tibetan trader to pay for a horse. This leads one to suspect that the horse trader had indeed sold the horse and kept the money for himself. A document regarding another case of corruption in which a leading government figure and member of the aristocracy responsible for tax collection had embezzled taxes to pay for his father's funeral indicates that corruption may have been quite widespread. Indeed there are numerous documents in this archive written to tax collectors to collect the appropriate amount of tax, not to put strain on the ordinary people and pay the total amount of tax to the government.

The Unfortunate case of the commoners of La chen and La chung. In a series of documents regarding La chen and La chung a picture emerges of life in north Sikkim during the nineteenth century: and it is not an altogether pleasant one. Given the distance of La chen and La chung to the centre of Sikkimese political power, it appears that northern Sikkim was administered in a way resembling the American wild west, where like Sikkim the authority of the government felt very distant from everyday life and was thus either ignored or bent to suit the needs of particular individuals. The letters in the Palace Archives, written by ordinary citizens of La chen and La chung illustrate the abuse and misuse of political power and the extortion rackets run by powerful individuals. In one letter the people of La chen complain to the Chogyal about one Padma rta mgrin (a dpon po) and his son, who introduced laws forbidding the La chen pa from grazing their livestock on the pastures surrounding the region, in some cases using force to extort money and "taxes". The Sikkimese King responds to this letter in another document in which he states that the La chen pa had suffered many difficulties caused by two "bad" people, who are later mentioned by name as Padma rta mgrin and his son. The Chogyal adds that the La chen pa could now pasture their livestock in the region periodically, but not all at the same time so as to ensure the longevity of the pasture lands for the future and instead of paying their taxes directly to the King (as some had done so to bypass Padma rta mgrin) and avoid travelling to southern Sikkim to do so, they could pay their taxes via Gam pa in Tibet.²

² There seems to have been a mutual taxation obligation to Sikkim by the people of Gam pa and La chen. In another series of documents a dispute arose between Gam

Another case of the mistreatment of ordinary citizens from northern Sikkim can be found in a document from the early nineteenth century. In this document the people of La chung complain to the Chogyal about two individuals Khol nag and Tshe dbang rdo rje, who came to La chung with a group of Nepali hard men and roughed up the locals forcing them to pay “protection” money. It notes that these two people even attacked the local official Phun tshogs dngos grub, who was forced to pay 8 *srang*, 1 *zho*,³ and *kha brtags*. Others were forced to pay *chang* and 30 *rgya Tam*.⁴ Unfortunately the Chogyal’s response has been lost and so the outcome of this complaint is unavailable. What, however, can be seen with these examples from La chen and La chung, is the life and experiences of ordinary people in Sikkim.

An extradition treaty between Sikkim and Bhutan. In 1901 Sikkim and Bhutan signed an extradition treaty the details of which allow for an annual transfer of prisoners between the two countries. Prior to this treaty it appears as if torture was widespread within both governments’ prisons as within this document they agree not to torture prisoners “too much”. This document is the culmination of a series of incidents involving Sikkimese and Bhutanese prisoners. For example in a document dated 1866 from sPa gro to the Tibetan representative at Phag ri, they ask the Phag ri rdzong dpon to intervene on their behalf to secure the release of a Bhutanese prisoner held in La chen and ‘Gro mo. In this letter the Bhutanese state they are willing to travel to Sikkim with money and tea to ransom the prisoners, or failing that hold a tripartite conference on the border of Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan, but if that request is refused they would ask the British to arbitrate the case. Another undated document details the case of a Bhutanese man named

pa and Sikkim, which culminated in a negotiated settlement involving representatives of the governments of Sikkim, Tibet and the regional leaders of La chen and Gam pa. So serious was this dispute that the Phyag mdzod (Chancellor) of Tibet wrote to the Sikkimese government on numerous occasions. In addition the Panchen Lama also got involved and there survive a number of letters from this Lama in the Palace Archive.

³ *Srang* and *zho* are units of measurement. These units are commonly found within the wider Tibetan world. Throughout Tibet a *srang* is equal to 50 grams and ten *zho* are equal to one *srang* (i.e. one *zho* is equivalent to 5 grams). In a separate document in the Palace Archive the values of these measurements are given as one *zho* is equivalent to ten *srang* (i.e. one *Zho* is equal to 500 grams). If this was indeed the case then it appears Sikkim may have used its own unique form of weights and measures.

⁴ *Rgya tam* normally refers to Indian coinage, though in the early nineteenth century British influence had yet to reach northern Sikkim, in which case the use of this term here may refer to other coins.

dPal sbyor, who stole some property from a La chung pa whilst he was in Ha valley. The La chung pa then went to 'Gro mo to make a complaint to the Sikkimese government. Eventually dPal sbyor was captured and instead of receiving a trial was handed over to the La chung pa and 12 people from 'Gro mo who then killed him. This document echoed by numerous other documents illustrate the lawlessness of the Sikkim/Bhutan border and the need to create a legal framework to deal with captured criminals from either country.

The Ri nag documents

In July of this year (2009) fifty four documents were donated to NIT by the family of Ri nag via Tenzin Chuki Tashi a Research Assistant at NIT. They are now housed within the Archive room, along with the Palace Archive, at NIT. Hissay Wongchuk has been working on these documents and has compiled a short list of the material in this collection, which will be published in due course. The documents date from 1875-1919, though the majority of the material is from the 1870s-1890s. The majority of the documents are bound in Tibetan style (i.e. bound dpe cha format) and are accounts and taxation registers for the lands under the control of the Ri nag rdzong dpon. In addition within this collection are almanacs, expenditure lists for J.C. White (the first political officer in Sikkim from 1890-1908) and details of the expenditure of structural work such as the construction of bridges, etc. Further study of this material may prove useful in determining the precise events and details of the Tibet-Bhutan-Sikkim border dispute over Ri nag in the early twentieth century.

Final remarks

The acquisition of these important documents for the study of Sikkimese social and political history, by NIT, illustrate the growing importance of this institute as a resource for scholars of Tibet, the Himalayan region and Sikkim itself. Indeed the recent focus of the institute towards the study of Sikkim has brought increased academic interest in this region. Together with this growing international interest in Sikkim and the infrastructural and technological developments of NIT, there is now a recognised institution capable of housing rare and fragile manuscripts and providing a base for international and local scholars alike. Indeed the recent successes in the acquisition of the Palace Archives and a selection of documents from Ri nag shows that NIT can now be considered a safe repository for rare manuscripts and archival collections.

Forthcoming publications

Saul Mullard and Hissey Wongchuck

Royal Records: The Sikkimese Palace Archives

This book includes a detailed catalogue of documents found in the Palace collection. It also included chronological tables for the Sikkimese Royal family, royal palaces and residencies used throughout Sikkimese history as well as a note on official seals of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology will be accepting orders for this book from December 2009.

