


Decoding Mid-19th Century Maps of the Border Area between Western Tibet, Ladakh, and Spiti¹

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Introduction

n general, this paper is about maps and their makers. The respective maps were made in the mid-19th century by a Tibetan lama and commissioned by the British official William Edmund Hay (1805–1879). They show the border area between Western Tibet, Ladakh, and Spiti. In fact, these maps are just extracts of a much larger panoramic map. They are part of a set of so-called *picture maps* that belongs to the British Library's Wise Collection.² The maps cover the areas of Lhasa, Central Tibet, Southern and Western Tibet, Ladakh and Zangskar. According to the British Library's references they are divided into six map sections: 'Lhasa map' (Add.Or. 3013, folios 1–2), 'Central Tibet map' (Add.Or. 3017, folios 1–6), 'Southern Tibet map' (Add.Or. 3016, folios 1–3), 'Western Tibet map' (Add.Or. 3015, folios 1–7), 'Ladakh Indus Valley map' (Add.Or. 3014, folios 1–4) and 'Zangskar Valley map' (Add.Or. 3018, folios 1–5). Placed side by side, the maps present a continuous panorama from Lhasa to Leh on a length of more than 10 metres and thus represent the largest panoramic map of Tibet of its time. Places on the maps are consecutively numbered from Lhasa (No.1) westwards to the Parang La (No. 404) – the mountain pass on the 'old established' border between Ladakh and Spiti. The maps of Ladakh

¹ This paper refers to my research on the Wise Collection and represents an extract of my forthcoming monograph *Journey of Discovery. An Atlas of the Himalayas by a 19th Century Tibetan Monk*.

² Next to the *picture maps* the Wise Collection consists of 28 additional drawings that depict monastic rituals and different kinds of ceremonies. For a general overview on the Wise Collection; see Lange 2016a.

and Zangskar are provided with separate numberings.³

In particular, this paper is about decoding maps. Toby Lester stated about his research on the 'Waldseemüller map' – the map that gave America its name: "The map draws you in, reveals itself in stages, and doesn't let go."⁴ This is also true for the Wise Collection's maps. Some of them reveal themselves more easily than others. Explanatory notes referring to the numbers on the maps were written by William Edmund Hay on separate sheets of paper. Full keys exist only for the picture maps of Ladakh and Zangskar; the maps of Central Tibet are mainly labelled by captions in Tibetan – which makes them comparatively easier to 'read'. In contrast, the maps of Lhasa and Southern Tibet are not accompanied by captions nor explanatory texts – thus many places on these maps cannot be identified with certainty. The maps of Western Tibet are not accompanied by explanatory texts either. However, there are (incomplete) English captions on these maps. Decoding these maps has been a real challenge, but they have revealed themselves in stages. The two westernmost sections of the 'Western Tibet map' show the border area between Western Tibet, Ladakh, and Spiti. This paper focuses on decoding exactly those two maps.

The mapmakers

The maps were commissioned by William Edmund Hay who was appointed Assistant Commissioner of Kullu in the Western Himalayas in 1847.⁵ In November 1844 Hay departed from the army of the East India Company.⁶ He then became a merchant in Shimla where he was also appointed Postmaster.⁷ Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, Shimla was a good starting point for exploration trips and Hay travelled widely in the following years to the Tibetan borderlands northeast of Shimla, in today's Kinnaur district,

³ For a general overview of the Wise Collection's maps and the numberings; see Lange 2016b: 135.

⁴ Lester 2009: xxi.

⁵ Diack 1899: 26 and 152.

⁶ Hay joined the army as a cadet in 1821 (London Gazette, 19 May 1821), fought in the First Afghan War (1839–1842) and reached the rank of Major.

⁷ British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers, Mss Eur F335/6: 1845.

himachal Pradesh.⁸ Hay's commercial ventures were not successful, and his appointment as Assistant Commissioner provided a more stable income, while his duties enabled him to travel and explore. In the winter of 1849/50 he successfully undertook an exploration of the Spiti Valley. His most popular publication was his *Report on the Valley of Spiti*, published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1850.⁹ Hay was knowledgeable about natural history; especially botany, geology, and ornithology. During his stay in India he created large collections of coins, minerals, plants, and zoological specimens such as birds; he eventually published papers on various topics related to these collections.¹⁰

It seems likely that Hay's travels in the Western Himalayas stimulated his interest in Tibetan culture. Thus, he also started collecting objects from Tibet. Furthermore, in 1857 William Edmund Hay engaged a travelling lama from Lhasa to make the set of maps and drawings that became known as the British Library's 'Wise Collection'.¹¹ Hay was definitely aware of the ongoing exploration of the Himalayas at that time and thus he took the opportunity to engage this man to draw the maps of his travel route for him. We do not yet know the mapmaker's name; like many other mapmakers he has remained anonymous. However, this does not mean that we know nothing about him. Charles Horne (1823–1872) stated that he was 'one of the travelling Llamas from Llassa'.¹² So, it very likely that

⁸ See Pagell and Heyde 1860: 141, Hay 1859 and Hay's private letters to Leopold von Orlich (British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers, Mss Eur F335/6: 1845).

⁹ See Hay 1850.

¹⁰ See Hay 1840, 1841 and 1859 and Lange 2017 (forthcoming).

¹¹ "In the year 1857 one of the travelling Llamas [lamas] from Llassa [Lhasa] came to Lahoul, in the Kûlû country on the Himalêh [Himalaya], and hearing of the mutiny [this refers to the Indian rebellion in 1857] was afraid to proceed. Major Hay, who was at that place in political employ, engaged this man to draw and describe for him many very interesting ceremonies in use in Llassa, [...]" This statements most probably refers to the drawings that now form the British Library's Wise Collection. (Horne 1873: 28). See also Lange 2016a.

¹² Charles Horne worked for the Bengal Civil Service. He was a judge in Benares and travelled extensively in India. He published papers on various topics such as archaeology, Buddhism and anthropology; see (Horne and Sherring 1866 and Horne 1876a). Several times he mentioned Hay in his publications. Obviously Hay must have provided him objects from his collections to work on, such as the so-called 'Kulu vase' and a Tibetan teapot, both now hold in the British Museum (see Horne 1876 and 1871).

he came from Central Tibet. He was probably on a pilgrimage when he met Hay in the Western Himalayas. The extent of the Wise Collection – the large number of maps and drawings and the breadth of detail – means that the lama had in-depth local knowledge about many of the places he depicted, and he was clearly experienced in drawing. Horne called him 'a very fair draughtsman'. Hay referred to him as 'my lama' in the explanatory notes accompanying the drawings.

The maps

Thanks to explorers like Alexander Cunningham and Henry Strachey the Western Himalayas were comparatively well-known to the British in mid-19th century. Both officers travelled extensively in their respective areas and produced accurate maps thereof.¹³ The maps that were based on their observations have been very helpful to decode the Wise Collection's maps. This is also true for the maps compiled by Frederic Drew and John Walker. Furthermore, the maps and travel accounts by Sven Hedin, who travelled in the Western Himalayas in the early 20th century, provided useful information, too.

The maps which this paper deals with show the route between the village of Demchok and the Parang La mountain pass. The use of scale is not uniform across the maps, neither is their orientation. While they might not always seem 'accurate', they can give lots of information about their maker, e.g. the travelling lama from Lhasa. Shrunken to the dimension of the maps and ignoring scale and cardinal orientation, one could virtually walk through the landscape along the travel route shown on the maps. As the most important points of orientations are depicted, these maps would pass a practical test. I assume that the mapmaker travelled along this route, familiarizing himself with topographical and infrastructural characteristics, such as mountains, rivers, lakes, flora, settlements, bridges and mountain passes, which in turn were depicted on the maps.

¹³ See Cunningham 1854 and Strachey 1854.

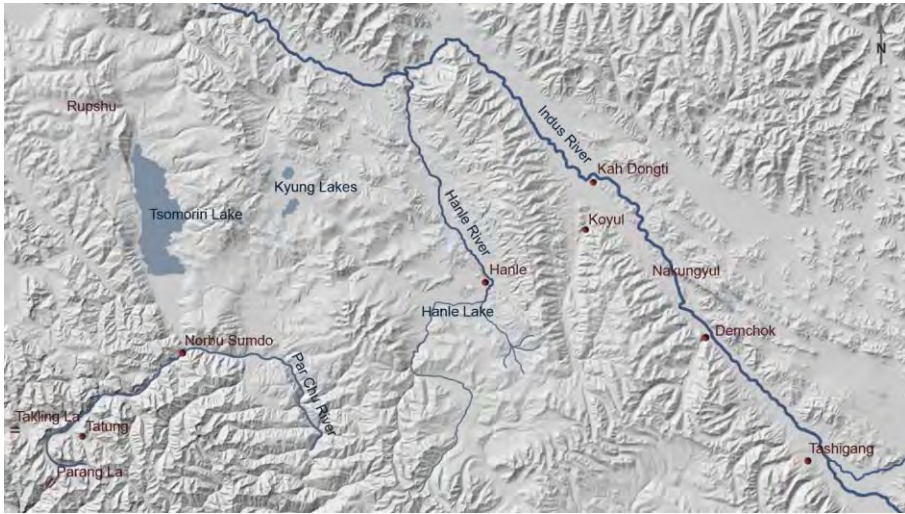


Fig. 1 — Modern map covering the area shown on the maps, drawn by Marina Durovka (IAM/TU Graz).

At present officially located in India, the village of Demchok marked the border between Tibet and Ladakh for a long time. Abdul Wahid Radhu, a former representative of the Lopchak caravan,¹⁴ described Demchok in his travel account as “the first location on the Tibetan side of the border”.¹⁵ The caravans travelling from Leh to Lhasa usually followed the Indus River to Rupshu, passed the Tsomoriri Lake, and continued through Hanle and Demchok.¹⁶ This route, however, is not shown on the maps of the Wise Collection. Instead, the ‘Ladakh Indus Valley map’ of the collection shows the route between Leh and Hanle following the Indus River and later the Hanle River, without ever crossing Rupshu and the Tsomoriri Lake.¹⁷

The route coming from Western Tibet along the Indus River, as represented on the ‘Western Tibet map’, follows the Indus only until Demchok. Instead of continuing to Leh, it leads to the Parang La mountain pass, the ‘old established border’ between Ladakh and Spiti. In fact, two routes are even depicted from Demchok to the Parang La that later meet up.

¹⁴ For a detailed travel account of this caravan; see Gray 1997, Bray and Gonkatsang 2009.

¹⁵ Gray 1997: 84.

¹⁶ See also Lange 2016b: 161.

¹⁷ *ibid.*: 139-147.



Fig. 2 — Map showing the route leading to Spiti from Demchok.
The lower part is oriented to the south, on the upper right part the orientation is changing.
Add. Or. 3015 f6 © British Library Board.

This map shows illustrations of the places labelled as *Lungmur* (383), Tashigang Monastery – labelled as *Chang Tushigung* (385),¹⁸ Demchok – labelled as *Demjök* (386), and a place labelled as *Nakūnggyul* (388, from left to right). A route is indicated. It leads from Demchok southwards through the mountains and continues on the right side of the map, passing through two lakes. Taking a look at Strachey's map one realize that there are several routes leading from Demchok via the Lhagang La mountain pass southwards. Thus, it is impossible to say which of these routes the mapmaker had in mind

¹⁸ There are three different settlements known as Tashigang in the Western Himalayas, i.e. in Upper Kinnaur, Spiti, and West Tibet. The *Chang Tushigung* (Tib. *byang bkra shis sgang*) of the map designates the settlement and Gelgupa monastery located on the northern plateau (Tib. *byang thang*) of West Tibet as the use of the toponym 'Chang' indicates.

here.

The large river appearing in the map's lower left corner is the Indus River (382). It is labelled as *Singki Ka Bub, Ladak Indus River*—referring to its Tibetan name *Senge Khabab* (Tib. *seng ge kha 'bab*). The Gartok River coming from the east and labelled as *Garchū river* is flowing into the Indus. The building labelled as *old fort* (381) has not been identified yet. Written on the upper part of the map, a Tibetan term refers to the frontier area in the south as 'chu-mo-stil', or Chumurti, which was described by Cunningham as "the Chinese district of Chumurti".¹⁹ There is no English caption describing the exact border between Ladakh and Tibet. The absence of comment regarding the boundary between Tibet and Ladakh indicates that the person who commissioned the drawings already knew where the border was located.²⁰ As Assistant Commissioner of Kullu, a district close to the Tibetan border area, William Edmund Hay already had that knowledge, and there was no need for further comments on the map.



Fig. 3 — Extract of fig. 1, Tashigang and surroundings.

¹⁹ Cunningham 1854: 22.

²⁰ The boundaries between British India and Kashmir and between Kashmiri and Tibetan territories were demarcated in 1846/7 by the commissioners Van Agnew and Cunningham as part of the 'first and second boundary commissions'; see Howard 2005.

The place east of Tashigang (384) is shown with tents, houses, and green patches. The place could not be identified with certainty. It probably represents the place called 'Tagle' on Walker's map; one of the halting stages between Tashigang and Gartok. Some houses are depicted next to Tashigang Monastery, along with green patches, water spots, two *chorten* and a mani wall. The monastery's main characteristics are illustrated like they were described by Hedin who visited the place some 50 years after the map was made: "Right in front of us the monastery Tashi-gang gradually grows larger. Its walls are erected on the top of an isolated rock of solid porphyrite, which crops up from the bottom of the Indus valley like an island drawn out from north to south. (...) on the short side stand two round free-standing towers, (...). The whole is surrounded by a moat 10 feet deep (...)." ²¹



Fig. 4 — Photography of Tashigang, taken by Eugenio Ghersi as part of the Tucci's expedition in 1935. The two round free-standing towers are clearly visible.

© IsIAO, reference N.6043_08.

²¹ Hedin 1913: 48-49.



Fig. 5 — Extract of fig. 1, Demchok.

The depiction of Demchok consists of three black tents and a house. Green patches and the Demchok bridge, labelled as *Demjok zampa* (387), are also depicted. Hedin described the place as follows: "Rolled stones play an important part in the country which we have now reached. The whole of Demchok, the last village on the Tibetan side, is built of them. It consists, however, of only four or five huts with brushwood roofs."²² A fork in the road is clearly visible next to the Demchok bridge; with one route turning southwards before the bridge (coming from the east), and a second crossing the bridge and continuing westwards.

²² Hedin 1913: 60.



Fig. 6 — Extract of fig. 1, Nakungyul.

Travelling from Demchok westwards the route crosses a place labelled as *Nakūnggyul*,²³ which is further described as *a cultivated spot belonging to the Rūpchū Gōpā* (Tib. *rub chu 'go pa*); a reference to the headman (Tib. *'go pa*) of Rupshu. This place must refer to the spring that Sven Hedin called 'the spring Na-gangkal' in his travel account, and to a place called 'La Gangskiyil' on Strachey's map.²⁴ Next to the tents, green patches and a spring are depicted; the presence of natural resources underlines the significance of this place as an important halting stage.

²³ According to local informants from Leh, 'Nakung' means 'North' and 'Yul' means 'Village'.

²⁴ Hedin 1913: 61.



Fig. 7 — Extract of fig. 1, mani wall and Kah Dōngti.

Following the route one crosses a mani wall labelled as *Mani* (389). It was probably used as a waymarker and was mentioned by Hedin as “an excellently built stone wall with slabs bearing large letters in red and white is named Mani-tumtum.”²⁵ Soon after the mani wall, the route turns southwards at another waymarker, which is composed of a pile of stones, prayer flags, and a *lhato* (Tib. *lha tho*),²⁶ and labelled as *Kah Dōngti* (390). *Kah Dōngti* is most probably the ‘Kardong’ on Hedin’s map. Following the numbers on the map, one reaches an unlabelled cross (391). It likely represents the place called ‘Koyul’ on Strachey’s and Drew’s maps, which is located at the same place on the same route turn. On Hedin’s map the place is called ‘Kujul’. Granting that the cross No. 391 represents Koyul, the river running parallel to the route must be the so-called ‘Koyul River’ (on Drew’s map).

²⁵ Hedin 1913: 213.

²⁶ A *lha tho* is a small structure made of stones for propitiating the gods, very often decorated with branches on the top (as shown in the drawing).

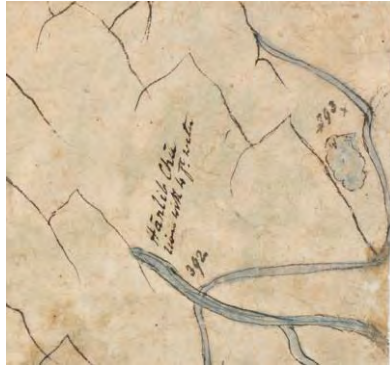


Fig. 8 — Extract of fig. 1, Hānlib Chū and lake.

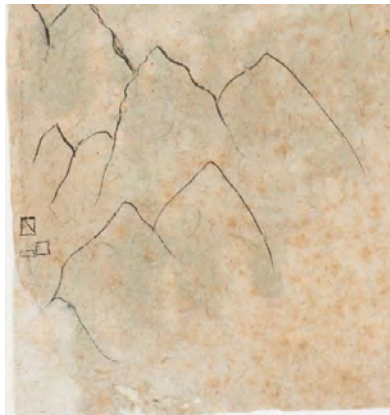


Fig. 9 — Extract of fig. 10, continuation on the adjoining map.

The route now crosses a river, labelled as *Hānlib Chū*, river with 4 ft. water (392) and an unlabelled lake (393). I very much assume that *Hānlib Chū* refers to the Hanle River and that the depicted lake is the Hanle lake; the only lake I could find in that area. The small houses close to the lake probably represent the Hanle Monastery. Cunningham who also marked the Hanle lake on his map, stated about it: "The *Hānlé-Tsho* is the largest sheet of fresh water that to my knowledge exists in Ladák. The extent of open water is not great, but the whole extent of swamp is between three and four miles in length. (...) To the east of the lake is situated the picturesque

monastery of Hanle (...)."²⁷



Fig. 10 — Extract of a map of the "Ancient Lake System of Ladak" by Cunningham. The Hanle Lake is shown on the right side.



Fig. 11 — Extract of fig. 1, two lakes and nomad tents.

²⁷ Cunningham 1854: 142-143. The Hanle Lake is depicted on the map between pages 136 and 137 (in the same book).

The route continues crossing unlabelled lakes (393, 394) before arriving at a nomad settlement labelled as *Kyungū dōkpa* (396). The term *dōkpa* (Tib. *'brog pa*) refers to the Tibetan word for nomads. The term *Kyungū* most probably refers to two lakes both called 'Kyun lake'. Drew distinguished between a fresh and brackish 'Kyun Lake' on his map. Walker and Strachey showed only one 'Kyung Lake' on their maps.²⁸ In this regard, Strachey stated that: "In addition to the lakes above described, there are several small ones, all fresh-water, (...) but they have no geographical importance, and are often mere duck-ponds, though interesting as objects of topography or landscape, and seldom without Tibetan names. The largest that I have heard of is the lake of Kyung, said to be 3 or 4 miles round, in the ravine of *Nidar*, entering the left of the Indus in Upper *Ladak*, (...)." ²⁹ On modern maps both lakes are shown and called 'Kiung Tso N.' and 'Kiung Tso South'.³⁰ The area around the lakes seems to have been an attractive grazing ground and thus provided good conditions for a nomad settlement. Furthermore, it probably represented an important halting stage or even market place for caravans passing through the plain.

The route coming from the west and leading between the two Kyun lakes is labelled as *road leading to Spiti from Demjōk* (395). It is not possible to decode this route since we only see the starting point, i.e. Demchok. It seems to lead from Demchok southwards through the mountains. Some houses are depicted on the mountains, although hardly recognizable, perhaps representing a settlement or a monastery. Maybe this route leads partly through the area of Chumurti?

From the nomad camp the route goes through a mountain range and crosses an unlabelled mountain pass (397) before continuing on the following map. The pass could be the 'Kyungse La' on Strachey's and on Walker's maps; or 'Kyanse La' on a modern map.³¹ Lethbridge described the pass as "Kyungzang pass, leading out of Rupshu into the Hanle province."³²

²⁸ On Hedin's map only one unnamed lake is depicted in the respective area.

²⁹ Strachey 1854: 52.

³⁰ Trekking map of Ladakh and Zanskar/South, by Editions Olizane, 1:150,000. Genève: 2013.

³¹ Trekking map of Ladakh and Zanskar/South, by Editions Olizane, 1:150,000. Genève: 2013.

³² Lethbridge 1929: 80.



Fig. 12 — Adjoining map showing the route to the Parang La; mainly oriented to the south.
Add. Or. 3015 f7. © British Library Board



Fig. 13 — Extract of fig. 10, Norbu Sumdo and surroundings.

Coming down from the mountain range and after having crossed another unlabelled mountain pass (398), probably the 'Kurzakh La' on Strachey's map, a comparatively green landscape is shown (399). There is no further comment on the map but the area must represent a watershed called 'Norbu Sumdo', or 'Nurbu Sumdo' on Strachey's and Walker's maps, a marshy landscape and an important halting stage.³³ The term 'Sumdo' (Tib. *sum mdo*) can be translated as 'a place where three roads intersect'.³⁴ Indeed, three routes meet up at

³³ I owe Veronika Hein from Solothurn in Switzerland special thanks for sharing her knowledge about that region with me and for helping me decoding the places on the map.

³⁴ Goldstein 2001: 1125.

that place: one leading from the Parang La, one leading from the unlabelled mountain pass (398), and one leading from the Tsomoriri. Just below this green landscape a route to the Tsomoriri lake is indicated. It is labelled as *road to Chūmoriri Lake* (400). Following the route from the watershed to the other direction, a small building labelled as *Zowara Singh fort* (401) is depicted before crossing a river.³⁵ This river is most probably the Par Chu or 'Pára River' on Walker's map.



Fig. 14 — Extract of fig. 10, Parang La.

The route now follows the river through a gorge; with a tributary stream labelled as *river from Tugling* [?] *Lā* (402) flowing into the

³⁵ According to Quentin Devers this fort marked the traditional border between Spiti and Ladakh.

main river. *Tugling La* must refer to the 'Takling La', which is located northwest of the Parang La. It was described as a pass into Rupshu and "off the direct route, and not much used" by Lethbridge who travelled in that area in the 1920s.³⁶ On the left side of the route, a cross indicates a place labelled as *Tātung* (403); an important pasture ground for animals. On Strachey's map the place is marked as "Pasture Grounds, or Encamping Places of Travellers" and called 'Tratang'. The route continues through the gorge, crossing a rocky landscape and a formation that looks like a glacier. It then arrives at the Parang La mountain pass; labelled as *Parung Lā* (404). In his *Report on the Valley of Spiti* Hay mentioned three "passes into Tartary", including the Parang La about which he gave the following description: "2nd Pass into Tartary – 'Párang.'—The second pass over the 'Párang' lámú, upwards of 16,000 feet, and goes by the village of 'Ki Gúnpá' and Kibar to Rúksú, a district of Ladak. This is usually called the 'Párang Lá,' Lá being the contradiction of 'lámú' a pass."³⁷ Regarding the boundaries of Spiti, he explained: "It is bounded on the North by the Párang range, which separates it from Ladakh. To the North East there is no defined boundary, but inaccessible mountains."³⁸ According to Hay's statement, the Parang La did not only represent the border between Spiti and Ladakh at the time of the creation of the maps, but was also regarded as one of the gateways to 'Tartary'; a term often used to describe the land of nomadic people such as the Tibetans.³⁹

Considerations about the purpose of the maps

We know for certain that the lama who produced these maps travelled from Lhasa westwards. It is unclear, however, which route he took to get to Kullu where he met Hay. We can therefore only speculate on the itinerary followed based on the maps. Coming from Western Tibet the most important trade route led to Leh along the

³⁶ Lethbridge 1929: 78.

³⁷ Hay 1850: 431.

³⁸ Hay 1850: 431.

³⁹ In several travel accounts the word 'tartars' is used for nomadic people, such as in Markham's description of Tsomoriri nomads: "a tribe of wandering Tartars, who, like the Bedouins of the desert, have no fixed residences, but roaming about their flocks and herds, dwell altogether in tents."; Markham 1854: 324.

Indus River.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the 'Western Tibet map' does not show a direct route to Leh. Instead, the route turns to the southwest from Demchok to the Parang La mountain pass. After crossing this pass one would arrive in the Spiti Valley from where it was possible to continue towards the British territories of Lahul, Kullu, or Bashahr-Kinnaur.

The map of the 'Ladakh Indus Valley' represents in reality the continuation of the route on the 'Western Tibet map'. According to the numbering on the map, the starting point is Leh and the map leads to the southeast along the Indus Valley. At the very end of the Indus Valley map, the route splits. The first route follows the Hanle River to Hanle,⁴¹ while the second continues along the Indus River and leads directly to Demchok. The 'Western Tibet map' ends at the Parang La, but Demchok and the Indus coming from the east are depicted on this map. The 'Western Tibet map' and the 'Ladakh Indus Valley map' do not fit together seamlessly, yet, the route that is shown represents a continues one.

According to these maps, the lama could have travelled to Kullu along the route from Demchok to the Spiti Valley. Whichever route the lama has chosen the maps suggest that he travelled in that area, most probably just before he came to Kullu. Thus, his memories of these routes were probably still very fresh. The itinerary he followed was not unusual. Several similar routes were shown on the maps of Strachey and Walker. For a long time, I assumed that the maps under review depicted an unusual, perhaps even unknown, route between Demchok and the Parang La. But they don't.

These maps were made in the late 1850s at a time when the mapping of British India was largely complete, but before the time when Tibet began to be mapped for the first time by Indian pundits, the 'spies' of the British Empire. Because of its strategic location in Central Asia and increasing economic interests and mercantile investments, Europeans edged closer to Tibet during the 19th century. Hence the role of knowledge production was significant, especially for the competing empires Russia and British India. The seeking and acquisition of systematic knowledge of Tibetan landscapes and societies became an ambitious goal for both empires. Thus, these maps were most probably of high interest for the British, for several

⁴⁰ See the map of the local trade routes in Rizvi 2012 and Gray 1997: 60.

⁴¹ See Lange 2016b.

reasons – such as the British Indian trans-Himalayan trade. Particularly, the Parang Pass was used to divert part of the wool and pashm trade from West Tibet towards British territories, and thus circumvent Kashmir monopoly.⁴²

During my research on the whole Wise Collection I have started to learn the 'codes' of these historical maps and how to 'read' them. Ignoring 'Western' cartographical codes and references like 'orientation' and 'scale' enabled me to approach the mapmaker's way of thinking. As far as I know, these are the only maps that provide us with a visual representation of a route used in mid-19th century between Demchok and the Parang La from an indigenous perspective. These maps have many stories to tell. They transmit valuable ideas about the mapmaker's perception and representation of the territory they illustrate, as well as his way of seeing and looking.

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⁴² For further information; see Rizvi 2012, particularly chapter 2 on Pashm trade.

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