

All the Life We Cannot See: New-Historicist Approach to a Modern Tibetan Novel

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In the early 1980s, Western literary studies were rapidly and pervasively transformed by a re-orientation towards history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, social context, and material base. This new trend, evolving within post-structuralist theory and characterised by an “emphasis on the literary as both a form of and a forum for cultural practice, on literary analysis as a vehicle rather than an end in itself”,¹ eventually came to be known as “New Historicism”, a term first coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 to describe the body of works compiled by North American Renaissance scholars since the late 1970s. Albeit controversial,² the label caught on, and, among heated debates and discussions, it eventually asserted itself as “the dominant *modus operandi* of literary criticism”,³ to the point where the mere idea that only thirty years ago “there [was] no clear consensus that the task of literary criticism [was] to teach an analysis of the historical production of writing”⁴ now appears unconceivable. Almost two decades into the 21st century, the original theoretical framework of New Historicism, based on Althusser and Foucault’s anti-humanism, has lost part of its fascination; the increasing pressures of cognitive science⁵ indicate the need to move beyond outdated theories and practice to bring again to the fore the idiosyncrasies of the

¹ Mullaney (1996: 19).

² The term was judged by Greenblatt’s critics as misleading in its suggestion of a unified theoretical movement and deemed uncomfortably close to the 19th century positive historicism (Mullaney 1996: 19).

³ Parvini (2012: 2).

⁴ Simpson (1988: 723).

⁵ The anti-humanist stance of the early New Historicists appears to be at odds with some of the most recent arguments of cognitive scientists, who have rather compellingly showed that human beings, although conditioned by cultural surroundings, are also the product of biological and genetical inheritance, see Pinker (2002).

individual.⁶ Whereas certain aspects of New Historicism call for improvement and can no longer be considered orthodoxy, the adoption of an approach based on the premise that a literary text should be understood as a communal product rather than an autonomous and isolated expression of an author's intention provides scholars with a powerful critical method. The so-called "historical background" is suddenly put to the fore and transformed into a task of investigation, through a process that broadens the textual base beyond literary texts, consequently including archival sources and other forms of cultural representation. The attention of the new historicist has moved from the centre—that is, the text—to the borders where the text connects with the material world. As Kaes aptly points out, "the new-historicist project overlaps the concerns of a social history of literature [...] Social history displaces the literary text from the centre and focuses instead on the historical conditions and functions of literary production and reception."⁷ In the new-historicist view, literary texts represent the arena in which social tensions are expressed *and* repressed, a make-believe, fictional world in which subversive movements and thoughts, as well as common fears and hopes, can be safely displayed and resolved. The scholar is no longer a remote bystander in the "historical reconstructive process"—on the contrary, s/he influences the recreation of the historical background, by actively selecting the sources under scrutiny. By reinserting a text in its historical context, the scholar relates it to a wide array of cultural representations (e.g. religious, legal, and political documents, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries) and symbolic representations (e.g. festivals, rituals, material objects). Although originally restricted to the English Renaissance and Shakespearean studies, the new-historicist approach has proved to be flexible enough to be successfully applicable to other fields as well. I would argue that in the case of Tibetan Studies, the adoption of a method that calls for the analysis of literary and non-literary texts, as well as other forms of cultural expressions, has been already advocated by Charles Ramble and Peter Schwieger in recent times.

The remarkable results obtained by the ANR/DFG project on the social history of Tibetan societies strongly supports claims to a broadening of the textual base, thus encouraging a critical practice that synthesises theoretical, historical, literary, and anthropological methods of analysis. To veer away from the main central text, circling back to it after having reached an element in its periphery to which it might be connected, means to add new information about a remote

⁶ Parvini (2012: 176–78).

⁷ Kaes (1989: 214).

partner in what is, to paraphrase Frank Kermode, a lost "negotiation".⁸ It is a process of reconstruction of the past that, going beyond the literary text, recreates the complex socio-historical and intertextual networks in which the work and its author are embedded.

In the present contribution, the literary work from which "try[ing] to track what can only be glimpsed [...] at the margins of the text"⁹ is *Drel pa'i mi tshé* ("Life of a Muleteer") by Lhag pa don grub. Set in the decade preceding the Chinese invasion, this historical novel narrates the passage to adulthood of Zla ba phun tshogs, a young *mi ser* from gTsang; the growing pains of Zla phun mirror those of pre-modern Tibetan society, struggling to adjust to the challenges posed by modernity. *Drel pa'i mi tshé* captures the spirit of the time—a period marked mostly by elation and anticipation of a better future. Tellingly, the novel ends when the tides of history are about to sweep away the same socio-economic and cultural structures it depicts; the roars of the Peaceful Liberation no more than a weak echo, barely reaching the remote estate of Gangs ro, a location that marks both the beginning and the end of Zla phun's story. *Drel pa'i mi tshé* promises a closure that is only partially fulfilled; the plot ends when the Chinese occupation has just started, and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution are yet to come. By sparing the fictional world of Gangs ro from the suffering that befell Tibetans from the late 1950s onwards, Lhag pa don grub bursts the illusive bubble of historical mimesis. It is this tension between creative writing, that is fiction, and historicity, that is facts—at the core of historical and realistic novels—that supports the application of a new-historicist approach.

In the following paragraphs, selected passages from *Drel pa'i mi tshé* will be compared to information found in contemporary non-literary sources, such as personal records, legal documents, and Tibetan-medium journals, in an attempt to increase our understanding of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the middle and lower classes in 1940s–early 1950s Tibet. A main source of comparison will be provided by a factual, first-person account written by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a Khams pa trader who recollected in the form of diary entries thirteen years of his life—from 1944 to 1956. The text comes to us as a published Western-style book, edited by Tibet House in Delhi and printed by Indraprastha Press in 1997. The foreword informs us that the text, originally on scroll-papers, was part of the author's family archives and that it was 'Dzam yag's nephews who first acknowledged the potential benefit that such a

⁸ Kermode (1988: 32).

⁹ Greenblatt (1988: 7).

personal narrative could bring to the Tibetan community at large.¹⁰

The events described in the text span a thirteen-year period (1944–1956),¹¹ mainly spent by the author journeying, trading, and pilgrimaging between the central provinces of dBus-gTsang and the trade hubs and holy sites of India and Nepal. Although categorised by the editors as *nyin deb*¹²—a Tibetan term that is often used as equivalent to the English umbrella-term “diary”—the text is clearly a recollection of events; suffice to say that, while presenting features ascribable to a personal journal, due to the process of recollection and narrativisation, ‘Dzam yag’s account is, in my understanding, closer to an autobiography than a diary. Whereas the literary categorisation of the *nyin deb* may be open to discussion, what is of undisputable value is the information the text offers regarding the social status of traders in mid-20th century Tibet. Kha stag ‘Dzam yag is in fact a representative of what Travers quite aptly defines the “intermediate social groups”, in which “professional groups and social stratum were intertwined”.¹³ In the *nyin deb*, the author gives accounts, albeit in a rather off-handed fashion, of his interactions and business relationships with important figures of the time—chieftains, nobles, chief-merchants, and government officials. ‘Dzam yag’s upbringing is itself a reflection of the intermediate position eastern Tibetan traders had come to assume by the early 20th century.

Born and raised in one of territorial divisions of the Nang chen kingdom, Khams, he belonged to a local *be cang* family, nominally under the rule of the king who held court at Nang chen sgar, but *de facto* answering to the local *be hu*, the lord of Rab shis.¹⁴ Although he

¹⁰ By the 1990s, the diaspora was extremely active in editing and publishing personal narratives for preservation purposes, and it is easy to understand that a factual account based on diary entries taken during a crucial period of modern Tibetan history could not fail to attract the attention of indigenous and foreign scholars alike; see Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani (2008).

¹¹ The last part of the *nyin deb* contains an additional summary of the years between 1956 to 1960, presumably compiled after 1959, when the author fled from Tibet to West Bengal, where he died in 1961.

¹² The text was published under the bilingual title *Phyi lo 1944 nas 1956 bar bod dang bal po rgya gar bcas la gnas bskor bskyod pa'i nyin deb*. *A Pilgrim's Diary: Tibet, Nepal and India 1944–1956*.

¹³ Travers (2013: 143).

¹⁴ According to the system of bestowal of hereditary imperial titles and official positions, often referred to as the *tusi* system, the king of Nang chen was recognised as *chan hu* (Ch. *qiān hù*), a commander of one thousand households, under which there were eighteen major and fifteen minor divisions, each headed by a lord, whose titles were converted to *be hu* (Ch. *bǎi hù*, commanders of one hundred households) and *be cang* (Ch. *bǎi zhàng*, commanders of fifty households) respectively. Lesser ranks were indicated by other positions, e.g.

never addresses himself as such, the events described in the *nyin deb* strongly point towards an identification of 'Dzam yag as one of the agents of the Sa 'du tshang, one of the most powerful and influential Khams pa trading families.¹⁵ The information contained in the *nyin deb* supports and supplements the events described in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*; whereas the latter offers a realistic and historically accurate representation of the life of a fictional *mi ser*, 'Dzam yag's account is an autodiegetic recollection of a "real" historical character, treading the same social stage depicted by Lhag pa don grub in his novel.

Following the new-historicist method, the dialogue between main text (i.e. *Drel pa'i mi tshe*) and ancillary sources (e.g. the *nyin deb*) will be put to the fore as illustrative of the conditions of mid-20th century Tibetan traders and hired caravan leaders.

The main text

In *Drel pa'i mi tshe* Lhag pa don grub narrates the personal growth of Zla phun, a young *bran g.yon*¹⁶ from the gZhis ka rtse area, who earned his living driving caravans of pack animals along the Indo-Tibetan route, bravely facing the "dangers of mountains, rivers, and narrow passages, the fatigue of snow, wind, and rain, and the pain of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion".¹⁷

The novel starts with the death of bKra shis, Zla phun's father and late leader of the local donkey-drivers, employed for the transportation of commodities between their homeland—the branch estate¹⁸ of Gangs ro—the trade-hub of Phag ri, and the landlord's

rgan res, *hor 'dra*, *rgan chen*, and *bcu dpon*. For an in-depth description of the divisions of tribes in Nang chen, see *Yul shul rdzong*: 281 and '*Brong pa'i deb*: 39.

¹⁵ At the beginning of the 20th century, A bo bhu, head of the Sa 'du household and father of Rin chen Sa 'du tshang, moved from sGa khog, at the easternmost borders of the kingdom of Nang chen, to the village of Gling tshang, a nomadic area lying about thirty kilometres west of dKar mdzes and only three kilometres east of Dar rgyas monastery, one of the largest monastic instalments of the Tre hor region. It appears plausible that the connection between the Kha stag family and the Sa 'du tshang preceded the latter's relocation in dKar mdzes; hailing from the same area of Nang chen, the two families might have collaborated in local trading ventures, entertaining relations that continued after the Sa 'du's relocation to dKar mdzes.

¹⁶ Domestic servant belonging to a *dud chung*, lit. "small smoke", a term indicating small households of landless peasants who worked for wages. The *dud chung* is one of several statuses held by *mi ser* under the dGa' ldan pho brang government, see Goldstein (1971a, 1971b, 1986, 1987, 1989); Miller (1987, 1988); Bischoff (2013).

¹⁷ *ri chu 'phrang gsum gyi nyen kha dang | gangs lhag char gsum gyis [*gyi] dka' ba | ltogs skom ngal gsum gyi sdug bsngal / Drel pa'i mi tshe*: i.

¹⁸ Gangs ro is presented in the novel as a branch estate (*gzhis lag*) of sKyel yul, the main estate (*ma gzhis*); both Gangs ro and sKyel yul were part of a *gser gzhis*,

residence in Lhasa. In a matter of a few days, another tragedy befalls Zla phun's family; the sudden demise of bKra shis meant a critical shortage of donkey-drivers for the estate, an imbalance to be corrected by recruiting the deceased's son. The pleas of sKyid pa, Zla phun's mother, who finds herself without any capable man in her household, are in vain; even her daughter, Phan thogs, is taken away from her, summoned as a domestic servant to the estate and prohibited from returning home at night. Zla phun joins his late father's co-workers, Don grub, the newly appointed team leader, and Phur bu, and leaves the quiet remoteness of Gangs ro to set off on a journey that will turn him into a man.

In narrating the first of their round-trips to Phag ri, Lhag pa don grub offers a rather detailed description of a *gan 'dzin*, a written agreement drafted between two or more parties. These obligation documents, often called *gan rgya*, were a common legal practice in pre-modern Tibet and were issued in a variety of situations, such as settlements of rents or leases of land, reception of loans, payments of outstanding debts and so on.¹⁹ The contract concerns the delivery of several goods entrusted to the donkey-drivers by a Khams pa trader through the intercession of an innkeeper of Phag ri, who agrees to act as guarantor. The *gan 'dzin* reads as follows:

On the 29th day of the 9th month of the Water Horse Year (November 9th, 1942), [we] submit the content of an abridged contract of agreement, the main points [of which are as follows]. With respect to the merchandise from India to be dispatched to Lhasa by the chief-merchant Tshe dge lags from Brag g.yab for delivery to a *cag* sGrol dkar, resident of the Tre hor monastic household in Lhasa, the trio of donkey-drivers led by Don grub of sGo shar estate of Gangs ro, hereby agree to undertake the freightage and attest to the following considerations. The freightage comprises: 10 *do po*²⁰ of coloured prayer flags, each *do po* containing 20 bolts; 10 *do po* of jeans/cotton [(*ras*) *sbying*], each *do po* containing 10 bolts; 10 *do po* of Benares muslin cloth, each *do po* containing 15 bolts, all wrapped in jute and bound with bands, and 15 boxes of bowl-shaped rock-sugar and 15 boxes of bowl-shaped molasses, for a total of 30 boxes, tied together with metal bands. The freight charge for each back load is 75 silver *srang*. From the total freight charge of 2,250 silver *srang* for 30 loads, 1,125 silver *srang*, half the price of freight charges, has been paid now and the

'aristocratic estate'. Lhasan nobility provided personnel to the dGa' ldan pho brang government which, in exchange for their service, allowed them to collect revenues on landed estates; since the head of the family usually resided in Lhasa, the management of the estates was usually entrusted to local administrators.

¹⁹ Schneider (2002: 418).

²⁰ *Do po* refers to one of two packages that constitute a *khal rgyab gcig* or one full load for a donkey, mule or any beast of burden.

remaining half is to be paid when the loads are delivered in Lhasa, no later than the 18th day of the 10th month [November 26th, 1942]. Should the delivery be delayed beyond the above date, it is agreed that, for each day of delay, a fine of 1 silver *srang* and five *zho* shall be deducted for each back load. Should there be any breach of the agreement or shortfall in the quantity of merchandise due to fire, water, robbers, loss, theft, etc., the abovementioned donkey-drivers are solely liable for compensation according to the prevailing rate in Lhasa at the time, according to the proverb 'If you wash your head, you are expected to clean your neck as well',²¹ rather than blaming each other, going back on their words and coming up with new thoughts, speaking with two tongues and [saying things like] 'At the time it was not like that', or 'It wasn't I, it was he'. According to the terms of this document of agreement, any transgressions shall be referred to the Justice Commissioner.²² [Committing] to strictly abide by the law, [the agreement] is sealed by the three donkey-drivers including Don grub as recipients of the loads; the innkeeper of Phag ri, Nor chos, who offered to act as a guarantor; the chief-merchant, owner of the merchandise, Tshe dge.²³

²¹ The meaning of the saying is "to perform a duty completely", thus being fully accountable for what has been promised.

²² The expression *lugs gnyis gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba*, lit. "submitted to feet of the highest, the precious preserver of the law of the two systems" is a typical *inscriptio* of *gan rgya* documents. It addresses whichever official represents the Dalai Lama as administrator of the law at the time of the drafting of the contract. I thank Charles Ramble for pointing this out to me, see also Schneider (2002).

²³ *chu rta zla 9 tshes 29 nyin | gan 'dzin gcig bsdus su 'bul snying | don rtsa lha ldan tre hor khang tshan nang bzhugs a cag sgröl dkar lags nas rtsis bzhes mdzad rgyu'i brag g.yab tshong dpon tshé dge lags kyi lha 'gro'i rgya zog steng nas gangs ro sgo shar gzhis kyi bong bub a don grub sogs mi gsum nas bdal zhus kyis dngos grangs ca lag dar lcog tshos tshogs do rer ras yug nyi shu re yod pa do bcu | spying do rer ras yug bcu re yod pa do bcu | ka ci do rer ras yug bco lnga re yod pa bcu bcas rnames rtswa btun shan sbyar dang | shel dkar rting pā [*ting par ma = ting kor ma (rting pā)] sgam do bco lnga | bu ram rting pā sgam do bco lnga bcas sgam do sum cu de lcags shan rgyun sbyar bcas rtsis sprod song bas rgyab rer bdal gla dngul srang bdum cu don lnga re byas khal rgyab sun cu la bsdoms bdal gla dngul srang nyis stong nyis brgya lnga bcu thob pa nas phyed bdal dngul srang chig stong brgya dang nyi shu rtsa lnga 'dir sprad zin | phyed bdal lha sar do rtsis sprad zin mtshams sprod rgyu dang | zla 10 tshes 18 'gyang med lha sar do rtsis sprad rgyu dang de nas 'gyang tshé nyin rer do rgyab re nas 'gyang chad dngul srang gang zho lnga re sprod rgyu bcas kyi kha dan gtsang zin dang | gal srid kha dan rgyab skyur dang | lam bar me chu rku shor bor brlag sogs kyis dngos zog tshang min byung na gong ming bong bub a rang nas lha sa'i yul thang gzhi bzung gis rtsis rgyag mgo dkrus mjing dag zhu rgyu las | de dus de min | nga min kho yin sogs kha gcig lce gnyis kyi dran gtam gsar skyes g.yas khag g.yon dkri byas tshé gan 'dzin 'dir brten lugs gnyis gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i drung du byas nyes la gzhihs te khrims 'khur g.yo med bsgrub rgyu'i do bdag don grub sogs bong bu ba mi gsum nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len 'jal nus yong zhu ba phag ri'i gnas mo nor chos nas rtags | zog bdag tshong dpon tshé dge'i rtags / Drel pa'i mi tshé: 11–12.*

Albeit fictional, the *gan 'dzin* drafted by Lhag pa don grub replicates the formulaic structure typical of these agreements, thus achieving a remarkable degree of historical verisimilitude, as clarified by a comparison of the above with a *gan rgya* between *mi ser* as published in *Snga rabs bod kyi srid khrims* (henceforth *Srid khrims*).

An agreement submitted on the—day of the month—of the Iron Monkey Year.²⁴ The main point [of the agreement is the following]: since I, the shoemaker Don 'grub Phun tshog, am in urgent need of some money for my family, I am grateful to have been successful in my request for a loan of 100 *tam rdo* with an annual interest rate of the 20 percent from Lha gzim bSam pho's attendant Tshe nor lags. Within six years, I will unconditionally repay the loan and the interest in full, without any excuses or quibbles such as blaming others,²⁵ renegeing on agreed terms,²⁶ returning less than what was given,²⁷ being ungrateful,²⁸ and so on. It is submitted that, regardless of whether the terms of agreement are clearly specified herein or not, on the date and time specified above, the loan will be repaid in time without any excuses. Signed in person by Don ['grub] Phun [tshog].²⁹

The fictional *gan 'dzin* share with the historical *gan rgya* a wide array of formulae, reproduced by Lhag pa don grub almost *verbatim*, e.g. "It wasn't I, it was he" (*nga min kho yin*), "at that time it was not like that" (*de dus de min*), and so on. Such formulaic expressions often provided the structure upon which a *gan rgya* was drafted, as demonstrated by several written documents contained in the archives of the Upper Tshognam, Mustang, recently published by Charles Ramble in collaboration with Nyima Drandul. The *gan 'dzin* hereafter is quoted as illustrative of other forms of formulaic compositions used in the drafting of written agreements, in this case a contract for

²⁴ Even though the lack of *rab byung* makes it virtually impossible to date with certainty the *gan rgya*, the context and the structure of the contract seem to suggest that it was drafted either on the Iron Monkey of the 14th *rab byung* (i.e. 1860) or on the Iron Monkey of the 15th *rab byung* (i.e. 1920).

²⁵ Lit. "it was not me, it was him" (*nga min kho yin*).

²⁶ Lit. "at that time it was not like that" (*de dus de min*).

²⁷ Lit. "cooked meat returning raw again" (*btsos sha rjen log*).

²⁸ Lit. "repaying tea with water" (*ja lan chu 'jal*).

²⁹ *lcags spral zla tshes la | gan 'dzin gcig 'thus su 'bul snying | don rtsa | gus pa lham bzo don 'grub phun tshogs khyim tshang la gang ci'i lag mdzangs ci cher brten | lha gzim bsam pho'i zhabs gras tshe nor lag kyi phyag nas lo 'khor bcu skyed 'khri 'bul zhu rgyur ngo bo tam rdo brgya tham pa g.yar zhus don smin bkrin che byung na | slar lo drug song mtshams ngo skyed grangs tshang gtsang 'bul gleng med zhu ba las | nga min kho yin | de dus de min | btsos sha rjen log | ja lan chu 'jal sogs gan don 'dir tshig gsal 'khod min la ma ltos pas gong gsal lo dus rang la ka kor med pa 'bul lam zhus 'thus su phul bas don phun ngo ma'i rtags | | Srid khrims: 412.*

a loan of grain at a rate of 25 percent interest.

A brief written contract (*'gan 'dzin*) presented on the—day of the—month. Tshangchog, a housemistress (*nang dag ma < nang bdag mo?*) of Tshug, has asked Sonamcan of Te to make her a loan of 100 *pāthi* of grain as her means of livelihood for this year and to take care of her child[ren]. She agrees that at the harvest time this year she will repay the loan in the form of wheat that is unadulterated by stones, moisture or chaff at a ratio of 4:5, *i.e.* 25 percent. There shall be no violation of this agreement; no reciprocal accusation; no acting as if one had two tongues in one mouth; no new raising of recollected issues.³⁰

The formula “two tongues in one mouth” (*kha gcig lce gnyis*) is the same used by Lhag pa don grub in drafting his contract, whereas the expression “no new raising of recollected issues” (*bsam btang dran skyed*) strongly recalls the “going back on their words and coming up with new thoughts” (*dran gtam gсар skyes*) found in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*. The fictional contract was drafted among three parties: the Khams pa trader Tshe dge, the innkeeper Nor chos, and Don grub as representative of the donkey-drivers. The involvement of the guesthouse owner as financial guarantor for the donkey-drivers is not unusual; in her study of Eastern Tibetan trading houses (Tib. *a lcags kha pa*; Ch. *guōzhuāng*), Yudru Tsomu (2016) convincingly demonstrates their role as cultural and financial brokers. As safe-havens for travellers, pilgrims, merchants, and hired porters, guesthouses functioned concurrently as meeting points, temporary warehouses, rented lodgings, and supplies stations, even providing currency exchange services if needed.

The drafting of written contracts occurred frequently in Tibet, especially when money was involved. Even though 'Dzam yag makes no reference in his *nyin deb* to legal documents of any sorts, there are a few instances that suggest the existence of an *a priori* agreement. For instance, before setting off from Khams, he states clearly that he has cleared his debts and collected his loans from close friends and regular customers based in sKye dgu mdo, an activity that may have entailed the stipulation of *gan rgya* or *gan 'dzin* between the parties. Furthermore, being a trader, 'Dzam yag had to hire professional porters and pack-animal drivers like Zla phun, as he indeed did when the Khang gсар *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan entrusted him with 15,000 *dbyin sgor*³¹ for a business venture to

³⁰ Ramble and Nyima Drandul (2016: 209).

³¹ Generally used in Tibetan language to indicate British currency, the term *dbyin sgor* may here be a misspelling for *hin sgor*, “rupees”. At the time of 'Dzam yag's

Kalimpong, for which he engaged a caravan leader and two helpers, an event that presumably required the signing of a *gan 'dzin* very similar to the one Lhag pa don grub conjures in his *Drel pa'i mi tshe*.

The price of doing business

The agreement signed by Don grub establishes the payment of a substantial fine in case of delay, damage, or loss of the entrusted goods; the donkey-drivers are also responsible for the welfare of the pack animals, and, in case of the death of donkey, the price of the animal is deducted from their wages, as Don grub himself complains.

Last year, after two donkeys died on the Ka la phag plain because they were unable to bear the loads. Since the honourable manager of the estate took our monthly salary [to cover for] the value of the donkeys, the wages for the transport of two loads to Lhasa, and a fine for the delay due to our not being able to deliver the loads on time, it was hard even [to get] provisions for ourselves, let alone feeding our wives and children.³²

Like any other *bran g.yon*, Zla phun and his co-workers receive a monthly wage (*phogs*) consisting of grains. When interrogated on the matter by the head of the aristocratic family and estate owner,³³ Zla phun identifies the amount of a domestic servant's wage as 10 *bre*³⁴ of grain per month; in his case, with only him and his sister Phan thogs working, the domestic income consists of 20 *bre* per month, barely enough to feed four people. Small side trade, allowed by the head of the estate, represents a vital source of additional profit, obtained by buying small and valuable items, e.g. cloth, tea balls and fuel, to be sold at a higher price. The loss of merchandise and animals is one of the hazards of doing business; as a matter of fact, the larger the quantity of goods handled, the higher the risk of losing everything.

business venture (1952), the relatively new independence of India could have justified the use of *dbyin* either as a near-homophone for *hin* or as a slight anachronism for the [British]-Indian rupee (I thank Charles Ramble for drawing my attention to the possible misspelling). On January 1st, 1952, the finance section of *The Tibet Mirror* (a): 11–12 gives the following exchange rates for 1 rupee: 5 *srang* in Lhasa and 5 *srang* and 5 *zho* in Phag ri, thus making the investment entrusted to 'Dzam yag worth about 75,000 *srang*.

³² *na ning ka la pag thang steng khal ma theg par bong bu gnyis 'chi ba des gzhis bzhugs sku zhabs kyis bong bu'i rin pa dang | khal rgyab gnyis kyi lha sa bar gyi bdal dngul | do po dus thog rtsis sprod mi thub pa'i 'gyang chad bcas tshang ma nga tsho gsum gyi zla phogs nas bcag stabs khyim gyi bza' zla bu phrug gso rgyu phar bzhag | bdag tsho'i lam rgyags kyang ha cang khag po byung // Drel pa'i mi tshe: 19.*

³³ *Drel pa'i mi tshe: 126.*

³⁴ Volume measure for solid, about 700 gr.

In the summer of 1954, 'Dzam yag and his nephew decided to store their goods in Lhasa in anticipation of the winter months and moved 70 *do po* of bundled goods from gZhis ka rtse to the river banks of the 'U yug dma', where they were carried away by the great flood that destroyed most of rGyal rtse and a quarter of gZhis ka rtse. The fury of the water swept away entire villages, bringing death and devastation.³⁵ 'Dzam yag himself was not left unscathed, since more than 60 of his bundled loads were lost in the deluge; in an attempt to recover some of his financial losses, he sent what was still in his possession—40 bundles of raw cotton and 100 *khal*³⁶ of grain—to Nag chu, entrusting his nephew Blo 'jam to cut the best deal possible with the nomads.³⁷ The small-scale trade done by the donkey-drivers pales when confronted to the amount of money handled by professional traders. For instance, on the occasion of his visit to bKra shis lhun po in 1946, 'Dzam yag met with rDo rje rNam rgyal, the business manager of the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse, and with a *tshong dpon* ('chief-merchant') from dGong thog in Tre hor, Rin chen rdo rje, whose name appears time and time again as one of the author's business partners³⁸ and companions during his pilgrimage to India.³⁹ From bKra shis lhun po, the trader moved to Zha lu where he attended the celebrations for the *sa ga zla ba* (the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar) of the Fire Dog Year (May 1946), together with another companion from Tre hor, a monk named Pad ma rnam rgyal. Once back in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag acted as a trade agent for a certain bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household, the strongest *be hu* of the Yul shul area. At the time, the trader transported 100 *do po* of butter from gZhis ka rtse to Lhasa.⁴⁰ A month later, when in Lhasa, the author acted again as a dealer for bKra shis nor bu, buying 773 *khal* and 5 *nya ga*⁴¹ of butter packed into 96 leather bags (*mar ltang*), paying 33 *srang* for each *khal*. In addition, he bought a further 73 *khal* of butter, paying 780 *srang*. He calculated that, by selling these goods, he earned 26,297

³⁵ The flood hit the prefectures of rGyal rtse and Pa rnam on July 17th, 1954. More than 170 villages were submerged; among the 16,180 people affected by the natural disaster, 691 drowned and 34 died due to the severity of their injuries. 10,074 houses were destroyed, and thousands of animals were lost in the deluge. For information regarding the rescue activities carried out by the Tibet Work Committee, the Tibetan government, and the State Council in Beijing, see *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus* 23: 17–19

³⁶ Weight unit, about 13kg.

³⁷ *Nyin deb*: 234–235.

³⁸ *ibid.*: 46; 61–62.

³⁹ *ibid.*: 143.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*: 66.

⁴¹ Weight unit, about 0.120 gr.

srang, 2 *zho*, and 5 *skar*.⁴² The liquidity that traders enjoyed made them perfect business partners for the Lhasan nobility, whose assets were tied to land revenue. In *Drel pa'i mi tshé*, the purchase of three *lag*⁴³ of mules by the lord of the estate is made possible by a loan granted to him by one of the sPang mda' tshang's traders.⁴⁴ Incidentally, Lhag pa don grub provides us information about the price of mules at the time, since the *tshong dpon* offers 500 *ṭam rdo*⁴⁵ in cash, a sum deemed sufficient for the purchase of good quality mules from Xining, Amdo.

Khams pa trading families

Ready cash, access to warehouses and lodgings in Lhasa, gZhi ka rtse, rGyal rtse, Phag ri, Kalimpong, and Calcutta, as well as a tightly-knit network of agents scattered in strategic locations represented the trademark of a few eastern Tibetan families who, by the beginning of the 20th century, emerged as a new force in the rather crystallised scenario of Tibetan society. By the end of the 19th century, the offices of some of the largest among the Khams pa trading firms—sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang, and A 'brug tshang—had been moved to the main cities of Central Tibet; their political influence increased with the burgeoning of their economic power, allowing them access to the exclusive circles of Lhasan nobility.

By the mid-20th century, any class divisions that still existed between aristocracy and wealthy traders had become blurred and porous at best; what traders lacked in terms of titles and lands was amply compensated by money and influence. Relationships of dependence and gratitude were forged through the granting of loans and the exchanging of gifts, in a *do ut des* system that allowed sPang mda' and Sa 'du representatives to enter the ranks of the government, customarily reserved for Lhasan nobility alone.⁴⁶ 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* corroborates the porosity of social boundaries; in an entry dated November 1945, the trader recalls a visit paid to the

⁴² *ibid.*: 68

⁴³ Unit of ten horses or mules used for transportation

⁴⁴ *Drel pa'i mi tshé*: 139.

⁴⁵ Equivalent to *rdo tshad*, a *ṭam rdo* is a banknote with a value of 50 *srang*. 500 *ṭam rdo* are therefore equal to 25,000 silver *srang*.

⁴⁶ sPang mda' Yar 'phel was given the fourth rank in the dGa' ldan pho brang in 1940 (Goldstein 1989: 210), while Sa 'du Rin chen was accorded the fifth rank in 1948 (Sadutshang 2016: 107–117).

family of the *bka' blon* bShad sgra⁴⁷ from whom “a small amount of money was due”. Apparently, the household was ready to comply and added a gift to the sum already owed.⁴⁸

In such a context of intertwined interests, friendship and business often went hand in hand; in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*, the sPang mda' trader who granted the loan to the *sku ngo*,⁴⁹ the incumbent Western district commissioner (*rdzon dpon*) of Phag ri, is none other than one of his mahjong game partners. The sPang mda' tshang make frequent appearances in Lhag pa don grub's novel; their agents, active in the main trade hubs inside and outside the Tibetan plateau, were on friendly terms with Zla phun's master at the time of his appointment as *rdzong dpon*. By entertaining good relationships with government officials, Eastern Tibetan traders made sure to maximise their income, often through a conspicuous reduction of taxes and customs fees.

Despite his connections, 'Dzam yag was not always able to avoid the payment of expensive tolls, especially at a local level. On the 9th day of the 10th month of the Wood Bird Year (November 12th, 1945), the trader left Lhasa, reaching gZhis ka rtse thirteen days later, accompanied by a hired labourer and several mules.⁵⁰ During his stay in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag was hosted by the abovementioned Rin chen rdo rje, most probably he himself an agent of the Sa 'du tshang. On the 25th of the 10th month (November 29th, 1945), the two of them went to bKra shis lhun po, where they discussed business with a certain Blo rdo rje, presented in the *nyin deb* as the treasurer of gZigs rgyab, a lama from Tre hor.⁵¹ Three days later, 'Dzam yag set off with one of his nephews to Lha sa, with the intent of buying commodities to export to India. On the 11th month of the Wood Bird Year (January 1946), 'Dzam yag returned to gZhis ka rtse, bringing with him goods to sell in Kalimpong; on the way the trader met with his nephew Blo 'jam, who was then passing through gTsang. At the time of leaving Central Tibet, 'Dzam yag “joined some mule drivers who were going to Kalimpong, paying [their] wages for the transport of Chinese goods”⁵² and, on the 25th day of the 12th month of the Wood Bird

⁴⁷ Although mentioned in 'Dzam yag's notes as *bka' blon* bShad sgra, the man in question was not the minister dPal 'byor rdo rje, who died in 1920, but simply a member of his household, one of the highest and wealthiest families of Tibet.

⁴⁸ *Nyin deb*: 44.

⁴⁹ Title of address for lay government officials.

⁵⁰ *Nyin deb*: 45–46.

⁵¹ *ibid.*: 46.

⁵² *rgya zong rnam bdal gla ka sbug du gtong ba'i drel ba dang 'grogs nas* (*ibid.*: 50). The term *rgya zong* is rather ambiguous since it is used to indicate both Indian and Chinese goods. Since 'Dzam yag was on his way to Kalimpong, it appears safe to assume that his commodities were mainly of Chinese origin.

Year (February 27th, 1946), they set off following the road that crossed the Myang chu. A few days later, having left rGyal rtse district behind them, the company reached Phag ri, thus approaching the Sikkimese border. Leaving Phag ri the next day, 'Dzam yag and his companions continued toward Kalimpong, but, at the border, they were forced to show their merchandise and pay further taxes.

At Shar gsing ma,⁵³ we had to show our loads and after that, because I had to pay a customs tax to the government office at sPel 'phel thang, I showed the documents [listing the goods I was transporting].⁵⁴

After reaching Kalimpong at midday, 'Dzam yag immediately went to the market to sell his merchandise; the debts incurred during the business trip were cleared and the remainder of the profit he made was saved for religious offerings.

Taxes were, not surprisingly, a source of constant distress and frustration for the author; while passing through the Chab mdo area, on the 7th month of the Wood Bird Year (August 1945), 'Dzam yag commented on the rather arbitrary imposition of salt taxes (*tshwa shog*) by dGa' ldan pho brang officials. These taxes are reported to have particularly affected travellers from other provinces, and several Khams pa—'Dzam yag included—thereby lost a small fortune.⁵⁵ In another note dated to the 7th month of the Iron Tiger Year (August 1950), the author execrated the greed of certain lords of dBus-gTsang, who, after accumulating a great deal of wool, imposed a monopoly on the market, fixing the price and prohibiting the purchase of cheaper wool from their subjects. At the time, the district leader of gNam ru⁵⁶ summoned all the merchants who travelled to the area for trade and fined them for infringement of the newly established law; 'Dzam yag, who was among them, lost 29 *srang*. In the *nyin deb*, the author compares the “shameless custom fees”⁵⁷ to falling rain, vouching never to return to that place for trade.

As muleteers of the district commissioner of Phag ri, Zla phun and his coworkers are spared body searches and confiscation of merchandise; by merely showing a sealed letter from their master, they were immediately let through the customs gate of Shar gsing

⁵³ A township and administrative seat located in Lower Gro mo, at the border with Sikkim.

⁵⁴ *shar sems (*gsing) ma la do bo (*po) rnams ston dgos l de nas spel 'phel thang du gzhung sa la yar sho gam sprod dgos pas rtsis sprad byas // Nyin deb: 52.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 26.

⁵⁶ District located northeast of Lhasa.

⁵⁷ *'khrel med sho gam /Nyin deb: 194.*

ma.⁵⁸

The wool trade

Social status and trade volume aside, our characters—the “fictional” Zla phun and the “real” ‘Dzam yag—share similarities. The first of them is certainly their involvement in the profitable business of wool. By the time of ‘Dzam yag’s departure from the Nang chen kingdom, in 1944, wool covered almost 90 percent of Tibetan international exports, most of it being sold at Kalimpong; by the turn of the 20th century, the centre had definitely replaced Kathmandu as a major trade hub, to the point that even the Newari merchants had moved their stores and warehouses to West Bengal, the final destination of the trade route connecting India to Central Asia via Sikkim. An emergent category of traders from central and eastern Tibet started distinguishing themselves by their skills and ambition, competing in the southward-bound wool trade with the local Marwaris.

Among those new traders, particularly active were the members of the sPang mda’ tshang, whose fortunes began at the beginning of the century, when the leader of the family, Nyi ma rgyal mtshan, gained the favour of the 13th Dalai Lama. In less than fifty years—from the end the 19th century to the 1920s—this fairly obscure trading family from eastern Tibet imposed itself in the social circles of Lhasa, winning the trust of the ruling elite and thus securing the monopoly of the wool trade.⁵⁹ The sPang mda’ tshang, however, were only the avant-garde of a new powerful social class, bound to play an important role in the political events of the following decades. By opening the path for the ambitious eastern Tibetan traders, the sPang mda’ tshang contributed, albeit indirectly, to the rise of other Khams pa trading families and their agents, becoming instrumental in the socio-economic consolidation of the “intermediate class”.⁶⁰

From the early 1930s, the business between Tibet and India gained new momentum, especially along the Sikkimese route, and the largest Khams pa trading families set up offices and warehouses in both Phag ri and Kalimpong. In the mid-1930s, the Sa ‘du tshang occupied a two-storey wooden house about a kilometre and a half from the centre of the town; the members of the family resided on the upper floor, while the ground floor accommodated the two managers’ quarters and a storeroom. Commodities such as wool and

⁵⁸ *Drel pa’i mi tsho*: 153.

⁵⁹ On the sPang mda’ tshang and their rise to power, see Goldstein 1989b and McGranahan (2002, 2005, 2015).

⁶⁰ On the social impact of wool trade in Tibet in the first half of the 20th century, see Travers (2018).

consumer goods were kept in a large godown adjacent to the main house; the building had a large compound on the front, wide enough the pack animals on their way to and from Tibet for a few days.⁶¹

Valuable information regarding the wool trade in the 1940s and 1950s is also found in an essay written by Shar chen bKra shis tshe ring, a trade agent for the monastic establishment of dGa' ldan chos 'khor gling in Shangs, gZhis ka rtse district. The text was published in 1996 as part of the 19th issue of *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs* (henceforth *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus* 10), a collection of articles on Tibetan history and culture. According to bKra shis tshe ring, in the 1940s the price of a bale of wool on the Kalimpong market oscillated between 50–60 silver *srang* (wool of medium quality from the Shangs valley) and 70–75 silver *srang* (wool of higher quality from gZhis ka rtse). The bales of wool were referred to as *mon do*, a Tibetan rendition of the Anglo-Hindi word *maund*, a unit of weight used in India and other parts of Asia. Its value varied greatly according to locality; in India, a *maund* ranged from 25 to 82.286 pounds (11 to 37.4 kg), the latter being the standard *maund* adopted by the Tibetans. In the mid-20th century, the Shar chen family was dealing in terms of 3,000–4,000 *mon do* of wool per year; caravans made up of 20 yaks and about 13–14 donkeys transported the loads to Phag ri, and, from there, to Kalimpong. In Phag ri, the *mon do* were unloaded and loaded again onto local animals for each of which a transport fee was applied—15–20 silver *srang* per yak and 14–15 silver *srang* per donkey; the caravan was therefore entrusted to a local guide, especially appointed for the task of conducting the animals to the trade hub. Trade occurred during winter time, and to accommodate the needs of the Tibetans, most people of the Mon district hired their animals and travelled back and forth between Phag ri and Kalimpong, up to 12–13 times per season. In *Drel pa'i mi tshe*, Zla phun and his master comment on the resourcefulness of the local Pha ri bas in these terms.

[The *sku ngo* said:] “I reckon the people of this place [i.e. Phag ri] really don't have any other way of making a living apart from doing a bit of trade. If you cultivate grain in the fields, nothing grows apart from grass.” Zla phun answered: “Indeed, it is as you said. If there were a need to rely on the fields, there really wouldn't be any way of making a living. However, due to its location, this place is like the neck of the trade route between India and Tibet and there are many ways of earning a living.” The *sku ngo* looked carefully at Zla phun's face, saying: “Yes.” Zla phun continued: “Even though the grain is not ripe [yet], the households of the taxpayers of Phag ri pile up the

⁶¹ Sadutshang (2016: 30).

green sprouts and sell them at a high cost to the muleteers who travel the [trade] route; they get a large profit at the moment of the sale. Many families have nomadic pastures nearby, and they use [their] good resources [such as] white cheese, meat, and butter, not only for themselves but sell them to those who haven't got them. Some families import merchandise from Kalimpong to Tibet and sell [it] in gZhis ga rtse, rGyal rtse, Lhasa, and so on; those who have a small capital, after buying local products from Phag ri, export them to Bhutan. The money exchange business is done mainly by the different guesthouses as well as most of the small households; even if a small household trades just a load of the sPom mda' [i.e. sPang mda'] or Sa 'du's wool, just that is enough [for them] to make a living."⁶²

The situation changed drastically in 1951, when the American ban *de facto* stopped the transactions of wool on the Kalimpong market; it was only in 1956 that a business agreement was signed, and Tibetan wool was once again sold in Kalimpong. The reinstated wool trade was, however, short-lived; in 1959 the Communist government imposed a restriction on the export of wool, and the *mon do* still in the Tibetan warehouses were sold on the Chinese market.

The Tibetan market had grown so dependent on the international wool trade that the cuts in the exports caused by World War II severely affected the country's economy. The incorporation of Tibet into China in 1951 had a devastating impact on the wool export trade by abruptly stopping any transactions with the United States, at the time the country's main business partner.⁶³ In 1951, following the signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, the U.S. Treasury Department passed regulations prohibiting business deals with Communist China, and thus with

⁶² "dngos gnas lung pa 'di mi rnams tshong phran bu brgyab na ma gtogs gzhan lto gos 'tshol thabs mi 'dug | zhing kha'i nang phar 'bru gshos na tshur rtswa ma gtogs gzhan gang yang skye rgyu mi 'dug" ces gsungs pas zla phun gyis "sku ngo yis bka' gnang ba de rang red | zhig khar brten dgos byung na dngos gnas 'tsho ba 'khyol thabs med | yin na'ang lung pa 'di chags sa rgya bod bar gyi tshong 'grul lam gyi med pa lta bur 'khel yod stabs lto gos 'tshol rgyu'i thabs lam mang po yod pa red" ces bshad pas sku ngos zla phun gyi dgong la zhib par zgigs te "o'o" zhes gsungs pas zla phun gyis mu mthud de "phag ri'i nang gi khral pa dud tshang tshos sa zhing thog 'bru ma smin rung ljang phung brgyab ste lam 'grul drel pa tshor gong chen po brgyab ste 'tshong dus yong 'bab chen po yod | mi tshang mang por nye 'gram du 'brog ra yod pas dkar phyur dang sha mar thon khungs bzang bas rang gis spyad pas mi tshad gzhan la 'tshong rgyu'ang yod | mi tshang khag cig ka sbug nas tshong zog bod du nang 'dren byas te gzhis rtse dang rgyal rtse | lha sa sogs su btsongs pa dang | ma rtsa chung ba tshos phag ri nas yul zog nyos nas 'brug yul du phyir tshong byed kyi yod | dngul 'dza'i tshong de gts'o bos gnas khag khag dang de min dud tshang mang che bas brgyab kyi yod | tha na dud chung khag cig gis spom mda' dang | sa 'du sogs kyi bal do po kho na brgyab ste lto gos da ga rang gyi 'phyid kyi yod" / Drel pa'i mi tshe: 146.

⁶³ Goldstein (2007: 263).

Tibet.

As the United States cut their economic ties with China, 4,000,000 pounds of wool were left rotting in the warehouses of Kalimpong.⁶⁴ In an attempt to avoid an economic breakdown, the Chinese government stepped in, inflating the value of the Tibetan wool by purchasing it at a price higher than the one set by the market.⁶⁵ By the mid-1950s, 70 percent of the wool trade between Tibet and India had been bought out by the Chinese State Trading Company directly from Tibetan traders, thus cutting at the source a long-standing business relationship for traditional Newar and Marwari traders based in Kalimpong.⁶⁶

The Communist Party's decision to purchase 80,000 *mon do* of Tibetan white wool, offering 184 rupees per *mon do*, required every owner of wool loads in Kalimpong to provide certain information, as reported in *The Tibet Mirror*.

(1) The name and place of residence of the trader (2) Region of origin (3) Place of residence in Kalimpong (4) Year in which the wool was purchased (5) Calendar date (day and month) (6) Place of origin of the wool purchased (7) Number of eventual helpers for the wool purchased (8) Wool lost along the way (9) [Wool] that is in Phag ri (10) [Wool] that has reached Kalimpong (11) [Wool] that has been sold in Phag ri and Kalimpong (12) Whatever wool of the Water Dragon Year (1952) is in Kalimpong (13) Year in which the above-mentioned wool reached Kalimpong (14) State clearly the location of the warehouse⁶⁷ in which the above-mentioned wool is [stocked] in Kalimpong (15) Whether or not the above-mentioned wool in Kalimpong has been entrusted as a security loan (16) Whether or not other people's wool has been mixed with the above-mentioned wool.⁶⁸

The sudden drop of the wool price in Kalimpong makes its dramatic appearance in *Drel pa'i mi tshe* too, and it could hardly be otherwise,

⁶⁴ Harris (2013: 39).

⁶⁵ Goldstein (2007: 264).

⁶⁶ Shakya (1999: 115).

⁶⁷ The new regulations were clearly addressed to the wealthiest Tibetan traders in Kalimpong, the only ones who could afford to keep warehouses at Phag ri and Kalimpong (Harris 2013: 38).

⁶⁸ 1. *tshong pa'i ming dang sdod gnas* | 2. *yul gyi ming* | 3. *ka sbug sdod gnas* | 4. *bal nyos pa'i lo khams* | 5. *zla dus tshes grangs* | 6. *bal nyos sa'i yul* | 7. *bal nyos pa lag yod do grangs* | 8. *bal lam phyogs khag tu lus pa* | 9. *phag rir yod pa* | 10. *ka sbug tu 'byor zin pa* | 11. *phag ri dang ka sbug tu btshongs pa* | 12. *ka sbug tu chu 'brug lo'i bal ji yod* | 13. *ka sbug tu gong gsal bal 'byor lo khams* | 14. *ka sbug tu gong bal gyi do khang gar yod kha gsal* | 15. *ka sbug tu gong bal gte gcol* [*te bcol] *du bzhas yod med* | 16. *gong bal nang mi gzhan gyi bal 'dres yod med* / *The Tibet Mirror* (b): 12.

since Zla phun's master mainly hired his *lag* of mules to traders transporting wool bundles from Phag ri to Kalimpong. Fluctuations in the demand of wool initiated at the end of 1949, as correctly recalled by Lhag pa don grub in his novel, when the topic of the falling price of the commodity in the market of Kalimpong is brought up by the *tshong dpon* gSer thangs.

“Excuse me, precious *sku ngo*. Even though they say that in these days the price of the wool in Kalimpong has decreased, the price of yak tails⁶⁹ and musk is still good. I was planning to buy some from Lhasa, but I am a bit short of money.” The *sku ngo* said: “I can surely give you ready cash, if you need some.” The *tshong dpon* said: “If that's the case, tomorrow, after getting the money, I'll immediately buy yak tails and musk. I'll send them through [your] mansion's mules.”⁷⁰

The American ban and the emergence of China and the U.S.S.R. as new business partners produced a series of shock waves bound to unsettle the markets of Kalimpong. The forced interruption of the wool transactions triggered a shift in the traders' attention. As the above excerpt from *Drel pa'i mi tshe* indicates, other products began to acquire new value in the eyes of visitors and merchants alike. To make even with the wool that remained unsold in their warehouses, local merchants began to increase the value of the rupee and the price of other goods on sale,⁷¹ while decreasing the amount of money they were willing to pay for transport wages.

Traders as go-betweens and intermediaries

The connections (*'brel ba*) forged between traders and aristocrats went

⁶⁹ For a rough estimate of the fluctuations in yak tail prices on the market of Kalimpong between 1948 and 1958, see Harris (2017: 209).

⁷⁰ “*sku ngo mchog la zhu rgyur | deng sang ka sbug tu bal gong chag 'dug kyang rnga ma dang gla rtsi la gong yag po 'dug ces shog kyis | ngas lha sa nas tog tsam nyo rtsis yod kyang dngul kha thang tsam byas song*” *zhes bshad | sku ngo yis "tshong dpon la phyag dngul dgos kyi yod na ngas phul dang phul" zhes bshad par tshong dpon gyis "da byas na dngul de sang nyin rang len nas lam seng rnga ma dang gla rtsi nyos te gzim shag gi drel thog la gtong gi yin"* *zhes bshad | Drel pa'i mi tshe*: 245.

⁷¹ Even though Kalimpong earned its fame as a wool trade hub, wool was not the only Tibetan commodity widely appreciated and sought after; among the Tibetan items most requested on the market were white and black yak tails—the first considerably more expensive than the latter—pig bristle, musk deer, snow-leopard, golden lynx, fox, and marmot hides, medicinal plants, and tea bricks; other goods, subject to market fluctuations, were cans of kerosene. Currency exchanges, as well as the value of silver and gold, based on quotations in Calcutta, were also reported. As for the Tibetan traders, they were keen buyers of Indian textiles, grain, and various paraphernalia coming from the West, such as watches, fountain pens, glasses, etc., see Harris (2013).

beyond business relationships developing into forms of clientelism. In the ninth chapter of *Drel pa'i mi tshé*, the owner of the Gangs ro estate, the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, calls in favours to ensure the release of Zla phun, who has been imprisoned for manslaughter, following an unfortunate event that triggered a chain reaction involving several people—Zla phun's master, the official at the head of the Zhol las khung and the *tshong dpon* Tshe dge—thus giving a glimpse of the complex net of interregional and interclass affiliations and divisions. Out of respect for the old friendship that ties him to Thub bstan 'od snang, the official in charge of the Zhol prison agrees to an internal settlement of the matter, to be solved within the Khams pa trading community through the intervention of the *tshong dpon* Tshe dge, a relative of the chief-merchant of the gSer tsha tshang, the aggrieved party in the dispute. Tshe dge agrees to act as mediator in consideration of the help provided by the *sku ngo* during his term as district commissioner of Phag ri, thus *de facto* acknowledging the existence of a *quid pro quo* system. The incident is settled with the drafting of a *gan rgya* between the *sku ngo* and the *tshog dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang, an agreement that reads as follow.

On the 12th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 6th, 1949), the people concerned, names and seals listed below, submit to the Justice Commissioner the contents of this clear and irrevocable agreement. The main points are as follows. Zla ba phun tshogs, the muleteer of the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, the incumbent Commissioner of the Western district of Phag ri, and Ngag dbang rig 'dzing, mule-driver of the mDo khams gSer tsha tshang, disagreeing on who had priority and right of way on the docks of the iron bridge, fought and attacked each other. Eventually, Zla ba phun tshogs used a pistol to shoot Ngag dbang rig 'dzing, thus taking his life. Consequently, the parties involved on both sides, having discussed the matter in person, and in accordance with the code of law for the compensation in case of manslaughter, have agreed that Zla ba phun tshog will pay 1,000 silver *srang* to Ngag dbang rig 'dzing's family without any kind of delay or excuses. After receiving the recompense, the relatives of the deceased are prohibited from renewing the dispute like inflaming an old wound and, especially, from resorting to any kind of physical attacks to take revenge according to the Khams pa custom of "Life for a Life". Should any contravention of the agreement occur on behalf of either of the two parties, the liable party shall be required to immediately pay a fine of 100 gold *srang* and subject to the severity of the criminal offence the golden yoke of law shall be enforced firmly. Sealed by the parties to attest the clear resolution of the case in the above terms: gSer tsha tshang *tshong dpon*

Rab brtan, the guarantors Khams tshang dGe legs and rNam sras.⁷² The “blood price”⁷³ is set at 1,000 silver *srang*,⁷⁴ a sum advanced by the *sku ngo* to Zla phun after he vouches to repay it through his work as a muleteer. The clientelist network connecting Khams pa traders, Lhasan aristocrats, and government officials tightens a bit more, deaf to the cries of the powerless individuals trapped inside it.

The freedom of movement granted by their business made eastern Tibetan trader perfect go-betweens as intermediaries between religious figures as well. On the 1st month of the Water Dragon Year (February 1952), during a dinner with the retired abbot (*mkhan zur*) Thar rtse rin po che,⁷⁵ at the time about to leave Chu bzang ri khrod⁷⁶ for sGa pa, the trader produced a blessed statue of Mañjuśrī, entrusted to him by a relative of his root-guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) rDo rje 'chang Ra nyag skal bzang rnam rgyal dpal bzang po. The *mkhan zur* Thar rtse rin po che, moved by the gift, accepted the statue as a “support” (*rten*) and reciprocated with a statue of rDo rje 'chang, to be given to the relative of 'Dzam yag's root-guru. Acting as a middleman between religious and aristocratic figures is indicative of the “liminal” social status of mid-20th century Khams pa traders—

⁷² *sa glang la 9 tshes 12 nyin lugs gong ma khirms bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba | ming rtags gsham gsal do bdag rnam nas blos blangs 'gyur med kyi gan rgya gtsang 'bul zhu snying | don rtsa phag ri rdzong nub las thog pa sku ngo thub bstan 'od snang lags kyi drel pa zla ba phun tshogs dang | mdo khams gser tsha tshang gyi drel rjes ngag dbang rig 'dzin gnyis lcags zam gru khar 'don snga phyi'i thad ma mthun par 'thab res rgol res byas mthar zla ba phun tshogs kyi 'phril mda' spyad de ngag dbang rig 'dzin 'chi lam du btang ba'i mi srog bcad pa des phyogs gnyis kyi do bdag ngo ma gros mol byas nas mi bsad stong 'jal gyi zhal lce ltar zla ba phun tshogs phyogs nas ngag dbang rig 'dzin phyogs su dngul srang chig stong tham pa 'jal sprod ka kor med pa bya rgyu dang / 'das po'i spun nye rnam nas dngul 'bab byung phyin slad rma rnying bskyar 'bar gyis rtsod rnyog rigs dang | lhag par khams lugs kyi sha lan len pa zhes srog la rgol ba sogs gtan nas byas mi chog | gal srid do bdag su thad nas 'gal rigs byung tsho 'ba' nyes gser srang brgya tham pa 'phral sgrub thog nyes don la gzhigs te bka' khirms gser gyi gnya' shing de thog tu 'bebs rgyu bcad tshig 'khrun gtsang chod zin pa do bdag gser tsha tshong dpon rab brtan nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len khams tshang dge legs nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len rnam sras nas rtags / Drel pa'i mi tsho: 243–244.*

⁷³ Prior to 1950s, the payment of life indemnity (*mi stong*) was standard procedure in many parts of Tibet, especially in Amdo and Khams, for sealing off a blood feud and preventing revenge killing. On the practice of *mi stong*, see Ekvall (1954). For a discussion of the role of mediators among tribes in mGo log after the 1980s, see Pirie (2005).

⁷⁴ The payment of 1,000 silver *srang* seems to corroborate Ekvall's hypothesis that the term *stong* in *mi stong* stands for “thousand”, thus indicating the standardised custom of paying a thousand of a certain unit of value for life indemnity, see Ekvall (1954).

⁷⁵ Thar rtse rin po che acted as abbot (*mkhan po*) of the Sa skya establishment of Ngor E wam chos ldan until the Iron Tiger Year (1950), when he retired to Chu bzang ri khrod.

⁷⁶ Hermitage on the west side of U yug mda' mdo.

literate,⁷⁷ resourceful, reckless, they cut for themselves a special niche in the texture of Tibetan society, filling in the gaps between classes.

Conclusion

Drel pa'i mi tshe ends at the beginning of the 1950s. The tide of change is about to sweep away the traditional way of life, yet the Tibetan youth is blissfully unaware and the atmosphere in Lhasa is vibrant and full of possibilities. Modernity has forcibly intruded on the scene: carts, bicycles, and motorcars are replacing mules and horses, posters of Indian movie stars decorate the walls of taverns, and Lhasan youngsters take active part in educational activities carried out by the Communist Party. Zla phun's life is also affected—the creation of roads and the purchase of cars drastically changes the display of wealth and power. Cars replace pack mules as status symbols, and the aristocratic mansions in central Lhasa are closed in favour of modern houses outside the city. Yet, the estate of Gangs ro seems unfazed. It is in this remote valley, secluded and peaceful like a mountain hermitage, that Lhag pa don grub chooses to close his narrative; Zla phun, released from his duty as muleteer, takes charge of the local mill. The inner tension between filial duty and responsibility as family provider is finally overcome: the boy, become a man, puts an end to his wanderings to take care of his aging mother, a clear homage to filial piety, a fundamental feature in the Tibetan system of values.

This contribution is meant to be open-ended, first and foremost because *Drel pa'i mi tshe* has still much to offer in terms of socio-historical material—travelling inside and outside Tibet prior 1949, currency exchange, social modifications during the early 1950s, or the emergence of forms of spiritual tourism in India, just to name a few perspectives.

My intent has been to show the value of a new-historicism investigation of modern Tibetan literature, finally conceiving it not as mere aesthetic product but as source of historical and social information, albeit delivered through the eyes of fictional characters. It is my hope that recent formulations of New Historicism could be eventually applied to Tibetan novels and short stories as well, thus

⁷⁷ To take care of business, basic literacy and computational skills were vital. 'Dzam yag received his education at the local dGe lugs monastery in Rab shis, and his *nyin deb* is filled with annotations regarding texts read by the author during his travels. Zla phun, on the contrary, does not know how to write or calculate, a condition hampering his dreams of increasing his side trade (*Drel pa'i mi tshe*: 136). The compilation of ledgers (*brdzang tho*) is an activity closed to the mule-driver, who must rely on secretaries and/or traders.

bringing back into view the figure of the author, his/her intentionality, and his/her socio-historical perspective.

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