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Mapping Amdo III. Dynamics of Relations and
Interaction, followed by Varia

Introduction

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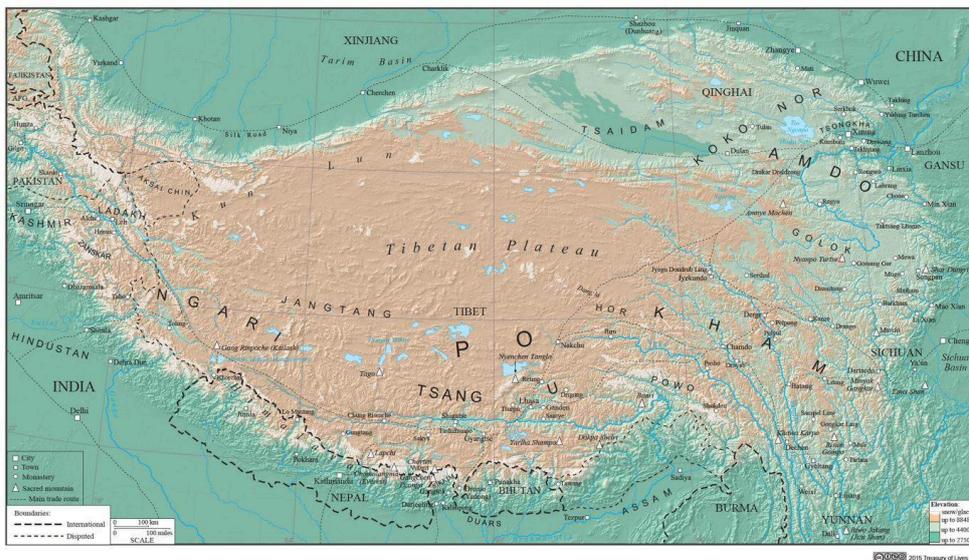
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Figure 1. Map of the Tibetan Plateau



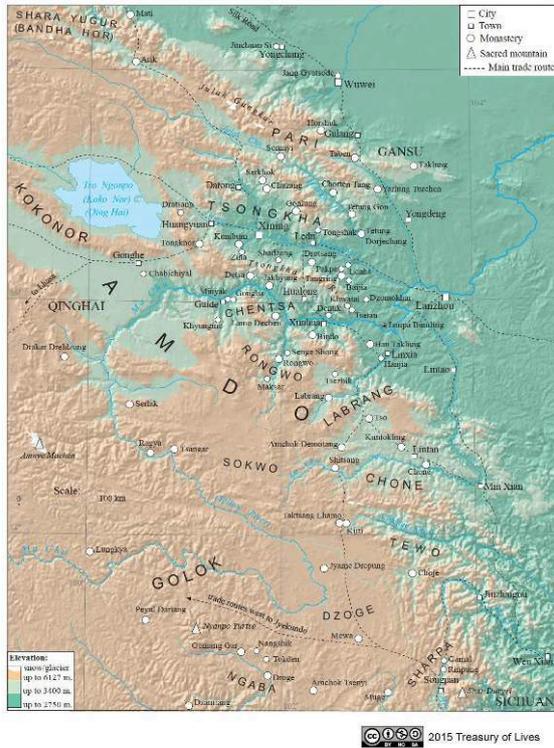
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- 1 The Amdo Research Network (ARN) is very pleased to present the third issue of *Mapping Amdo*, this time as a special issue of the online journal *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* (EMSCAT). In the not-too-distant past, the SARS-2 pandemic spread globally and resulted in conditions not conducive to field surveys and academic meetings. Tibetology, a field of research already constrained as it was, was all the more affected. In March 2020, China closed its borders to foreigners, and it was only three years later, in March 2023, that returning to Tibetan regions in China became possible again. Because of these three years of forced immobility and cessation of fieldwork – even for researchers who were on site but were hampered by long lockdown periods –

the Amdo Research Network decided to put out a call for contributions to foster collective research in such unprecedented circumstances.

- 2 The result of this call is published in this special issue of EMSCAT.

Figure 2. Map of Amdo



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- 3 Grounded in a multidisciplinary approach (anthropology, sociology, demography, history and linguistics), this collection of articles reflects the ethnic, religious, linguistic and social diversity of the Amdo region, a diversity already highlighted in the previous issues of *Mapping Amdo*, which resulted from workshops organised by the ARN, as well as in other publications such as Huber 2002, Gruschke 2001a and 2001b, and Hille *et al.* 2015, among others.
- 4 Given the sweeping changes that Amdo has been undergoing in the last decades, the first volume of *Mapping Amdo* focused on the “Dynamics of change” (Ptáčková & Zenz 2017). The shifts in power relations and the resulting strategising to maintain power were at the heart of the second volume, an exploration of the “Dynamics of power” (Wallenboeck *et al.* 2020). While these topics continue to permeate the present volume, the issue of social relations and interaction within communities or between different social or ethnic groups living in Amdo runs through it as a significant common thread.
- 5 With the exception of Palden Gyal’s article on the history of the Meu kingdom between 1700 and 1930 (based on Tibetan and Chinese sources, oral histories and missionary accounts), the eight articles presented here are based on research carried out during the first two decades of the 21st century, mainly in the years 2010-2022.
- 6 In their respective contributions, Jarmila Ptáčková looks at the economic problems faced by the middle-age generation among semi-nomads, and Tsehua Gyal at state-local

relations as mediated through land. Both emphasise the striking rural depopulation and rapid urbanisation that took place during the first two decades of the 21st century. Whereas Xénia de Heering, citing Fischer (2008), notes that “in 2000, nine out of ten Tibetans in Qinghai resided in rural areas, just as the majority of Tibetans in other provinces”, Ptáčková and Tsehua Gyal’s articles show that the accelerated urbanisation has already reached a highly advanced stage. Sweeping changes in demographic patterns, from rural to urban, are confirmed by findings also found in Andrew Fischer’s article. The migration of Tibetans to the provincial capital has been very extensive and rapid, resulting in serious challenges to adaptation, especially language and other cultural barriers. Transition from a rapidly disappearing rural Tibetan way of life to a Chinese form of market capitalism has proven notably harder for the middle generation (Ptáčková, Tsehua Gyal, Fischer), which has not received a sufficient level of education to open businesses or to work in the service sector, while it is quite difficult to maintain long-term activity in one of the few sectors left open to them, i.e. physically exhausting work as construction labourers, which cannot be continued at a more advanced age (Ptáčková). For many, the collecting of the caterpillar fungus (Tib. *dbyar rtswa dgun ’bu* or *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) is still an important means of subsistence. Outmigration is accentuated by expropriation and resettlement policies to make way for the expansion of infrastructure and the exploitation of local resources, both of which have had many undesirable consequences (Ptáčková and Tsehua Gyal).

- 7 This demographic shift is confirmed by Fischer in his study of the 2020 census (the seventh since the founding of the PRC in 1949), which provides the basis of his article. Fischer’s meticulous analysis of the “detailed census tabulations at the county level for all 56 ‘ethnic minorities’ (Ch. *minzu*) in China, available in the detailed provincial census tabulations”, offers valuable and much-anticipated information on age structures, fertility rates, residency status and education levels. One striking finding in this study is the Han depopulation in many counties. It also confirms that the most tense demographic interaction in Amdo is not between Han and Tibetans but between Tibetans and Muslims.
- 8 In his article, Tsehua Gyal (Caihuajia), demonstrates that the confrontation with the urban world reinforces Tibetans’ attraction for the rural world. As he notes, for Tibetans who live in a provincial capital, “keeping a house at home, in one’s homeland (Tib. *pha yul*), is literally the ‘face’ of the family because it signifies the family’s social status”. Consequently, houses are becoming extravagant in both size and choice of building materials. This explains the impressive dimensions of rural houses nowadays compared to what they were before, and the increasing use of timber, the most valued and expensive construction material.
- 9 De Heering tackles a rarely explored subject: reading practices outside a purely religious context. Her observations focus not on the elite, as is generally the case, but on popular readers – “popular being understood in the social and economic sense” – in a remote township of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Golok (Chinese Qinghai Province). With the help of a questionnaire, the author interviewed pupils and teachers at the school where she taught English in 2010 and 2011. The limited number of people that agreed to participate (twelve out of sixty people) was compensated for by de Heering’s familiarity with this field of study, so that her results provide valuable insights into the obstacles and constraints faced by readers in finding places to buy books or otherwise gaining access to them. She also sharply delineates the contexts and

languages in which these books are read, the kind of books that attract readers, the way the latter express their choices (by categories, titles, authors' names), and their estimates of the number of books they read. The study brings out the important role of the Gesar epic within the learning process as against the striking absence of religious books. More case studies will be necessary to complement this one, especially as this field is constantly changing as more and more Tibetans go to live in increasingly Chinese-speaking urban environments, where they receive a formal education but with emphasis being placed on the study of Mandarin to the neglect of the Tibetan language.

- 10 Palden Gyal's article on the Meu kingdom (in Ngawa) between the 18th and 20th centuries immerses us in a little-explored domain of history. The author presents a detailed study of this kingdom, the rise of which went hand in hand with the decline of the Khoshot Mongols' rule in Amdo. Over the course of its history, it maintained relations with the Qing, the Mongols and the government of Lhasa, demonstrating unusual political skill in this region of religious, ethnic and political diversity. Apart from providing a historical outline of the kingdom as it appears in Qing documents as early as 1720, the author also looks at the relations and interaction of its rulers with other powers, ranging from ones on the regional level to the Qing imperial centre. It also sheds light on its connections with religious forces, a priest-patron relationship (*mchod yon*) having been established with local monasteries on the basis of a non-sectarian (*ris med*) religious policy.
- 11 Three contributions on linguistics complete this volume and demonstrate the diversity of languages spoken in the area. Battye deals with the Gansu Bonan, a Mongolic language spoken by a small Muslim community in Linxia Prefecture (Chinese Gansu Province). The study is based on surveys carried out in 2012 and 2013 as well as on subsequent ethnographic fieldwork. It shows that the Gansu Bonan language is being eclipsed by Mandarin to such an extent that the author labels it a "threatened language". Giulia Orlando's article looks at Dongxiang, another Mongolic language spoken by a Muslim minority in Gansu, and describes its phonological features from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and contact linguistics. Lastly, Hiroyuki Suzuki and Yuxia Zou (g.Yu 'brug mtsho) discuss the local practice of using Tibetan script to write the oral Braghoglung dialect of Cone Tibetan (Tib. Co ne). The two authors reach the conclusion that "writing oral languages with Tibetan script can help the preservation of oral cultures and transmission to the next generations", yet another reason to preserve Tibetan, a language and script in the process of being replaced by Mandarin in schools that have opened in areas with a substantial Tibetan population.
- 12 This third volume of *Mapping Amdo* is a clear sign that academic interest in this region of the Tibetan Plateau continues unabated. The Fourth International Workshop of the Amdo Research Network, organised by Drumo Kyi and Andrew Fischer, took place at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, over three days on 4-6 October 2023¹; its proceedings will also be published. As for the present collection of articles on the dynamics of relations and interaction in Amdo, we hope that it will encourage colleagues and other readers to take a greater interest in this fascinating border region.

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1. <https://arn.orient.cas.cz/event/fourth-international-workshop-of-the-amdo-research-network/>