

PASTURE FIGHTS, MEDIATION, AND ETHNIC NARRATIONS:  
ASPECTS OF THE ETHNIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE MONGOLS AND TIBETANS IN QINGHAI AND GANSU

SHINJILT (KUMAMOTO UNIVERSITY, JAPAN)

INTRODUCTION

'Conflict' is one of the traditional themes of anthropology; in particular, many scholars have studied 'ethnic conflict'. While most scholars hold the view that ethnic groups are for conflicts, not conflicts for ethnic groups, and they abhor conflicts in general (Kurimoto 1997), they have neglected the severity of the issue when a conflict slides into an ethnic conflict, especially from the point of view of those concerned. Since the publication of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), the discourses of imagination, creation, fabrication, and so on, have become fashionable to represent ethnicity. These discourses clearly represent intellectual preferences and a wish to move away from wars and conflicts caused by primordial instincts. Unfortunately, in the real world, ethnic conflicts have not lessened but intensified. In this respect, there seems to be some disparity between scholars' understanding of ethnicity and that of the people concerned. In other words, ethnic conflicts are not something that can be defined away or wished away, as there are many things both tangible and intangible that lead to real conflicts, especially in a multiethnic context.

This paper intends to analyse the ethnic conflict between the Mongols in the Henan Mongolian Autonomous County (hereafter Henanmengqi) and neighbouring Tibetans for pasture (see map 1). Both Mongols and Tibetans in China are ethnic groups or 'nationalities' (*minzu*) in the Chinese official lexicon, each having splendid traditions and cultures. Much has been said about their intertwined histories and religions but there has been little study on their contemporary social relationship. Far from being segregated, interaction between the two ethnic groups is still ongoing particularly in Qinghai province, and it is not always a happy one.

My study is centred on the narrations of the people concerned, and makes an interpretation of why and how they narrate and what they understand about ethnicity in pasture fights.<sup>1</sup> First, I will take a brief look at the history of the pasture fights between Henanmengqi and its neighbouring regions after Liberation, that is, after the Communist takeover in 1949. Then I will focus on the pasture fights of some Henanmengqi residents, who had recently changed their ethnic identity from Tibetan to Mongolian. At this point I also investigate the effects of mediation efforts made by communal authorities such as reincarnate lamas, popularly known as Living Buddhas, and local government officials. I will demonstrate how the official nationality category becomes an important factor when people narrate about the fight processes or judge the fairness of the mediations. Finally, I want to illuminate how the reality of an ethnic conflict is formed for the people concerned.

#### HENANMENGQI AND THE PASTURE FIGHTS

Mongols account for 91% of all the Henanmengqi population; the rest are Tibetans. However, they are isolated ethnically, surrounded by Tibetans in Qinghai and Gansu provinces. The Henanmengqi Mongols and Tibetans are not very different from each other in terms of either culture or language; in academic studies, the Henanmengqi Mongols are often described as 'Tibetanised Mongols'.<sup>2</sup> However, the Tibetanised Henanmengqi Mongols call themselves *Sogqi* (*Sog po*),

<sup>1</sup> My fieldwork—carried out from 1996 to 2003 for 15 months in total—was funded by the Toyota Foundation, the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research of JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) and the Shibusawa Fund for Ethnology. It was difficult to obtain comprehensive information from both sides due to the nature of the conflict. The fact that I am a Mongolian (from Inner Mongolia) made it even more difficult for me to gather information from the Tibetan side at the same level as from the Mongolian side. The main part of my fieldwork was conducted in Henanmengqi and related areas in Qinghai province; but in an attempt to correct a possible bias, I also collected data in and surveyed the central part of Gannan TAP. It may still be insufficient. The information contained in this paper is from my own field data published in *Shinjilt* (2003) and several newly obtained unpublished internal documents related to the pasture fights.

<sup>2</sup> For academic studies of the county, see Li (1989, 1992) and Jamsran *et al.* (1996). Other studies include Abe (1998, 1999), Dhondup and Diemberger (2002) and Dhondup (2002); the latter being a dissertation about historical personalities and literary scholars of Henanmengqi.

which means Mongol in the Amdo-Tibetan dialect. Interestingly, the majority of the Nyin mtha' Xiang (township) residents, the largest of the six Xiangs in Henanmengqi, belong to the Gtsang a rig tribe, historically a Tibetan tribe, which changed their identity from Tibetan to Mongolian in the 1980s (Shinjilt 1998, 1999, 2003).

Within the Henanmengqi local community, the category Soggo is not complicated. To set themselves apart from the category of Tibetan, the Henanmengqi Mongols always emphasise several elements that denote their identity as Soggo—for example, the tent's structure, the upper and under seating order within the tent, the placement of the oven, the clothing styles the naming practice of livestock, and so on. Those 'Things Soggo' have become ethnic markers or the standard of classification between oneself and others.<sup>3</sup> What complicates the situation is that the same ethnic markers as used *vis-à-vis* Tibetan are not always agreed upon by all the groups who claim to be 'Mongolian'. For instance, the people of Nyin mtha' are not ordinarily considered to be Soggo by the people of the other five Xiangs of Henanmengqi. In fact, they even doubt the former's identity as Mongolian *minzu*, a wider officially defined category encompassing Mongols elsewhere in China. What is the implication of such internal dynamics of the Henanmengqi for the category of the Soggo or Mongolian in Nyin mtha' Xiang at times of conflicts?

Before looking into the impact of pasture fights on the maintenance or loss of their ethnic identity, I would like to outline the pasture fights experienced since the 1950s in the Henanmengqi region. Pasture fights exist not only between Henanmengqi and its neighbours but also among

<sup>3</sup> For example, Soggo's tents (*sog gur*) are round in shape and covered with white sheep wool felts. They can be distinguished from Tibetan tents (*sbra nag*), which are generally square and covered with black yak wool felts. Interpretation for the upper seat and lower seat is also different. In both *sog gur* and *sbra nag* the deepest part of the tent from the entrance is the most sacred, the place for the Buddhist altar. Seen from the altar side, Henanmengqi people consider the right hand side more honoured place, and are for men and visitors. The left hand side is considered lower and is for women and children. The space symbolisms in *sbra nag*'s tents are completely opposite. There are Soggo's characteristics in the oven's shape and its direction. Henanmengqi's *sog thab* (Mongolian oven) is square and made of clay, the head faces the Buddhist altar and the fuel tank faces the entrance of *sog gur*. The *bod thab* (Tibetan oven) is triangular and faces opposite of *sog thab*. The shoes called *sog lham* (Mongolian shoes) have a long and big sole and curved toes. Hats called *sog zhwa* (Mongolian hats) have red tufts on the top. Characteristics of *sog rtsag* (Mongolian leather gown) include long collar and 'horse-shoe' shaped sleeves. Livestock with Henanmengqi origin are also distinguished, such as *sog lug* (Mongolian sheep).

Tibetans<sup>4</sup> and among the Henanmengqi Soggos.<sup>5</sup> However, disputes between Henanmengqi and its neighbours often last longer and are more complicated than other disputes and usually require arbitration and reconciliation.

Geographically, Henanmengqi is located in the centre of the Amdo Tibetan region and has a border of 478 km surrounded by several counties and prefectures: to the north there is Rtse khog county of the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP); to the west are Rma chen county of the Mgo log TAP and Thun te county of the Hainan TAP, Qinghai Province; to the south and the east are Rma chu county, Klu chu county and Xiahe (Bsang chu) county of the Gannan TAP, Gansu province (see Map 2). Henanmengqi experienced and continues to have conflicts over pasture with all of these counties,<sup>6</sup> often involving heavy human and livestock casualties (see Table 1).

#### PASTURE CONFLICTS AND THEIR ARBITRATIONS

Here I provide a brief ethnographic account of the conflict between Nyin mtha' Xiang of Henanmengqi and Dngul rwa zholma Xiang

<sup>4</sup> There has been a conflict since 1988 between Mgarrrtse Xiang of Tongren county and Xunhua county (Zhang 1993). The conflict between the Tibetan region surrounding the Bla brang monastery to the east of Henanmengqi and the Reb gong region which is to the north of Henanmengqi has lasted for a long time. This conflict, which had already lasted more than 40 years by the 1940s (Ma Wuji 1992 [1941]), was settled in the 1950s, but suffered 76 deaths (Huangnan Zangzu Zizhizhouzhi Bianji Weiyuanhui 1999: 898).

<sup>5</sup> There were a lot of pasture fights inside Henanmengqi before and immediately after it was reorganised as an autonomous county in the 1950s, but they decreased afterwards (Unreleased paper No. 7 1953; Unreleased paper No. 8 1955).

<sup>6</sup> This issue of conflicts between Henanmengqi and its neighbours has been deeply related to their external politics. After the construction of Bla brang monastery towards the first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Henanmengqi society ruled by the Qinwang had maintained macro diplomacy in order to either lessen the power of Tibetans or defend themselves from Tibetans in the north and the west by allying with those in the east in terms of religion and politics. Its political influence can be seen in the fierce pasture conflicts with Tibetans in the north. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the decline of Henanmengqi's political influence, pasture fights started to occur with Tibetan groups in the east and the west which have been Henanmengqi's allies. In the north, conflicts between Rtse khog county and Brag dmar Xiang continued from before the Liberation to the mid-1990s. In the east, conflicts between Xiahe county and Klu chu county, and those Brag dmar Xiang and gser lung Xiang of Henanmengqi lasted until 1992. And conflicts in the south between Rma chu county and khu sin Xiang continued for more than sixty years until 1995. Conflicts in the west among Rma chen county, Thun te county and Nyin mtha' Xiang are longstanding ones.

(hereafter Dngul rwa) of Rma chu county of the Gannan TAP, Gansu province, which lasted more than two years from 1997, and which not only impacted heavily on the local society but also attracted attention from both inside and outside China.<sup>7</sup> The so called '8.3 Incident' that happened on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1997, triggering a conflict which lasted two years, was over a pasture of about 330,000 mu (about 220 km<sup>2</sup>) to the south of the Yellow River.

Nyin mtha' Xiang has two settlement centres to the south of the Yellow River: 'Ob thung village and Rka chung village. The former was directly involved in the conflict. Since 'Ob thung belongs to Gtsang a rig, like the majority of residents in Nyin mtha' Xiang, the latter was pulled into this conflict, as the tribal norm dictated. Before 1997, when the conflict occurred, the actual boundary of the two Xiangs was the Dpyi khog mountain which divides the Yellow River and its southern branch, the Dpyi khog river: Dngul rwa lies in the south and Nyin mtha' in the north; until then people moved quite freely and naturally, according to the residents of both Xiangs.

From July 30<sup>th</sup> to August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, a woman from 'Ob thung who went to hospital in the central part of Dngul rwa disappeared. So did four of her relatives who went to look for her. Again, three out of the five who went to look for those four vanished during the same period. Early on the morning of August 2<sup>nd</sup> several Tibetan monks from Dngul rwa came to 'Ob thung and delivered a message: "This land originally belonged to us. You must leave this land now if you want to avoid war and rescue the eight". One senior man, who we shall call A, in 'Ob thung answered: "There is no reason we must leave. We will fight if you like. We want the eight returned". The monks then left, saying: "Come and get the eight at the top of the boundary mountain at eleven o'clock tomorrow".

The next day, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, eleven people of 'Ob thung were dispatched to receive the hostages in the early morning, only to encounter armed forces from Dngul rwa. Only seven people climbed up to the mountain top leaving the other four to look after their horses. Since their only weapons were three rifles, three were shot to death. With enforcement coming from Nyin mtha', fighting continued late into the

<sup>7</sup> Reports on the conflict appear frequently not only in China's internal reports, but also on the overseas Tibet related websites (Unreleased paper No. 9 1999; Unreleased paper No. 10 1999; TIN 1999).

night. But outnumbered and out-powered, Nyin mtha' had seventeen people injured and ten mountain peaks taken by Dngul rwa. This incident was later called the '8.3 incident'.

As indicated in Table 2, there had been four major battles between the '8.3 incident' and August 1998. At midnight on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998 several dozen Dngul rwa civilians attacked a Nyin mtha' camp and injured one person. Reinforcements of Nyin mtha' from the adjacent camps pushed the invaders to the border, where they encountered more Dngul rwa fighters waiting for them; Nyin mtha' finally avenged their humiliations by mounting a counter attack, which left twelve dead and five injured on the Dngul rwa side, with only two deaths on their own side.

The 'Ob thung region fell into anarchy; in order to defend the local people's safety, a group of civilian fighters called *soba* was organised in Nyin mtha'. In defence of thirty seven households, nomadic warriors from six out of the eleven communities in Nyin mtha' constructed six *so mgo* or defence camps of tent style in the Bor wol area, which are uninhabited mountains in the north more than 4,000 m above sea level.

Conflict mediation has two major methods in Qinghai and Gansu provinces: 'bureaucratic mediation' by administrative authorities from local or central governments, and 'non-governmental mediation' conducted by religious authorities such as Living Buddhas. Usually, mediation is entrusted to the county authority if the conflict is between Xiangs, to the prefecture if it is between counties, and to the province if two prefectures are involved. The central government has to be involved if two provinces are in dispute.

The conflict involving Nyin mtha' and Dngul rwa proved to be too difficult for local governments to resolve, as it involved two provinces and two ethnic groups/nationalities. Monks of the Bla brang monastery, which is considered to have a firm relationship with Dngul rwa, and those of the Gtsang monastery, which is reputed as a monastery of Gtsang a rig, initiated the non-governmental mediation. By virtue of its higher status and the involvement of well-known Living Buddhas, the Bla brang monastery took the lead.

Two Living Buddhas, Reverend B and Reverend C from the Bla brang monastery, who were given great credence by the public of both Tibetans and Mongols of the two tribes, and who were entrusted by the governments of Gansu province and Qinghai province, settled this reconciliation issue (Unreleased paper No. 3 1998).

At the final mediation session, these two Living Buddhas produced a 'mediation report' (Unreleased paper No. 4 1998).

The report stated that the disputed 330 thousand mu pasture originally belonged to Gansu province. However, given the reality that Nyin mtha' had owned this land for more than 30 years after the 1960s it was advised that the pasture be split between the two Xiangs of the two provinces: 180 thousand mu to be put under the jurisdiction of Dngul rwa, and 150 thousand mu under the jurisdiction of Nyin mtha'. Dngul rwa accepted this verdict but Nyin mtha' rejected it. There were three reasons for their rejection:

Historically, the curved region of the Yellow River had been within the jurisdiction of Henan Qinwang after the 1830s, and the controversial area was pastureland of Gtsang a rig and Gtsang lha sde tribes.

It was considered a fundamental mistake to settle the current pasture dispute based on the 1962 agreement for the pasture conflict mediation between Gansu province's Rma chu county and three counties of Qinghai province's Mgo log prefecture, for the agreement does not concern Henanmengqi.

The report violates the principle issued by the central government in 1997, which prescribed that the current condition of the region in which the local residents undertake their life and production activities be respected (Unreleased paper No. 5, 1998).

Since the local governmental and non-governmental mediation efforts failed, the local governments and the people involved had no choice but to call for central government intervention. The non-governmental representative of the village leaders from Nyin mtha' Xiang and their farm operators travelled to Beijing in September 1998 and presented a petition concerning the case.

This petition insisted on their proprietary rights to the disputed pasture, in accordance with the historical background. Their argument stated that some parts of the neighbouring regions such as Rma chu used to belong to Henanmengqi, and especially the central part of Dngul rwa was once pastureland of Gtsang a rig which belonged to the historical Henanmengqi Qinwang banner. On this basis, the petition referred to the ethnic condition of the Henanmengqi people:

Within the existing area [meaning Henanmengqi and surrounding Tibetan inhabited area], we are the minority of the minorities, and also the weakest group removed farthest from the main body of the Mongolian nationality [referring to the Mongols of Inner Mongolia] (Unreleased paper No. 6, 1998).

The petition justified the rejection by making the following statement:

The mediation report from the two Living Buddhas was not approved of by the mediation representatives from both sides; it was merely their personal opinion. This report neglected historical customs whereby the pastureland was used by the two parties concerned, and it also violated rules and principles of both provinces and the state. Therefore we reject the report (Unreleased paper No. 6 1998).

In response to this petition, in October 1998, the central government dispatched investigators to the actual sites of conflict. Based on their findings a report for reconciliation was finalised by the central government in November 1999, and the central decision was finally issued in March 2000. It was decided that of the disputed 330,000 mu pastureland, 30,000 mu should belong to Rma chu and 300,000 mu to Henanmengqi. This resolution went against Rma chu's expectation, but was welcomed by Henanmengqi. Confrontation between the two groups has not disappeared since then, but no armed collision has been reported.

#### PASTURE CONFLICTS AND ETHNIC NARRATIONS ABOUT ITS MEDIATIONS

All of Henanmengqi's 'enemies' in the conflicts are Tibetan according to China's nationality classification. However, if we further our study of the relationships between Henanmengqi and its enemies, things become more complicated. Dngul rwa is deeply related to Henanmengqi as far as its formation and expansion are concerned (Qinghai Sheng Shehui Kexueyuan Zangxue Yanjiusuo 1990: 394–95; Ma Dengkun & Wanmaduoji 1994: 74–79; Zhou Ta 1996: 162–63; Maqu Xianzhi Bianji Weiyuanhui 2001: 853–55). People of Henanmengqi insist that there are Soggos in Dngul rwa. The following rumours circulate within Henanmengqi concerning Dngul rwa's internal management in this conflict: one tribe in Dngul rwa was charged 140,000 yuan in penalty for not sending its fighters when Dngul rwa declared war against Nyin mtha' with an aim to drive the Soggos out of this land, just because the tribe's origin was Soggo.

As for what triggered the conflict, the Henanmengqi government report determined the '8.3 incident' as a cause, but other incidents were also referred to. As in other Tibetan districts, there is a tendency of revenge between Henanmengqi and its neighbouring regions.



Historically Nyin mtha' and Dngul rwa experienced a series of collisions over livestock rustling, often accompanied with bloody counter-attacks. Before the '8.3 incident' that led to the escalation of the conflict, there had already been fighting and heavy casualties on both sides: twenty-two had died on the Nyin mtha' side and twenty three on the Dngul rwa side.<sup>8</sup> According to the people of Nyin mtha', the '8.3 incident' was started by the people of Dngul rwa who wanted to get even with Nyin mtha' in terms of the number of the dead.

In the wake of the conflict, both sides sent requests to the civil administrative departments (*minzhengting*) of their respective provinces, Qinghai and Gansu, that Living Buddhas be involved in the mediation, and both provinces sent their respective reports to the central government. The central government entrusted authoritative power to the Living Buddhas. Had both sides agreed to the Living Buddhas' mediation report, that report would have had legal authority. As already mentioned, Nyin mtha' rejected it.

With hindsight, some people of Henanmengqi were ambivalent towards the role of the Living Buddhas in mediating the conflict: "Living Buddhas were not wrong; it was the bureaucrats in the region that were wrong". In other words although the decision made by the Living Buddhas was advantageous to Dngul rwa, Nyin mtha' people did not overtly blame the lamas but attributed the problem to Gansu province's ambition for land. As the conflict lasted longer than expected, some also felt anxiety at their rejection of the Living Buddhas' mediation report. As one remarked, "because the Living Buddhas have high status and influence, the state will consider their views when it requires some solutions". They were particularly worried that if the central government's decision was the same as that of the Living Buddhas they might lose not only their land but also their blessing from the Living Buddhas simultaneously.

Less religious people were more straightforward:

If the Living Buddhas were Soggo, and the majority of residents in this area were Soggo, the situation would be different. There's no Living Buddha who is serious about Soggo.

---

<sup>8</sup> According to a paper Henanmengqi presented in 1957, a fight which lasted from 1950 to 1951 left 19 dead on Dngul rwa side and 15 dead on Gtsang a rig side (Unreleased paper No. 11 1957).

This 'ethnic' way of thinking was supported by others who remarked:

We lost our lands because we were too weak in this region as Mongolians. Inner Mongolians and Mongolians in Haixi prefecture show no interest in us and their support is out of the question.

The stance maintained by Henanmengqi was not shared by people from the Gannan TAP who have been hostile to Henanmengqi since the Nyin mtha' conflict. Mr. D, a government official in the Gannan TAP, confided to the author in private:

Henanmengqi initially left the conflict mediation power in the hands of Living Buddhas, because they believed in them. If that was so, they should have obeyed their decision unconditionally.

On the other hand, he also acknowledged the internal dynamics of Henanmengqi, saying: "Mr. B or Mr. C must have known the difficulty of reconciliation with Henanmengqi. No one wanted to be involved in such troubles". It suggests that the government officials were wary of the ethnic dimension of the conflict, since to deal with Nyin mtha' was to deal with Soggo as a whole. Moreover, Mr E (a government official in the Gannan TAP) said to me as follows:

It was easy for Henanmengqi to penetrate into the centre of Dngul rwa zholma Xiang, occupying the Dpyi khog Mountain in the conflict with Dngul rwa this time [as of 1999]. Henanmengqi has always been strong when they fought their neighbours. They occupied the centre of Bla ru mgul Xiang in the fight with Klu chu county a few years ago. A public organisation in Henanmengqi supported them. Undoubtedly, the [Henanmengqi] armed forces department [Wuzhuangbu] gave its military support.

Why did *Wuzhuangbu* act as such, given the fact that it is a state organisation? Mr. E said: "No such thing would happen among Tibetans. Henanmengqi is Soggo, which is different from its neighbours".

Henanmengqi's criticism also targeted the political structure of the Chinese government. Some of the Qinghai provincial government officials were said to have given up their pastureland, until the 1980s, in order to maintain peace in the border region, under the idea 'to exchange pasture for peace' against the will of Henanmengqi. That they could do so was because the land belonged to the state. As pastureland and livestock were contracted to individual households after the 1980s, they acquired new meanings. As one said:

It is a crime to invade and steal other people's land. It is one's duty to protect one's own pastureland. So far we Henanmengqi have ceded our pastureland to Tibetans unilaterally. But we refuse to tolerate this situation any longer.

One official's remark best represented the view of most Henanmengqi government officials on the pasture conflict and its background:

Dngul rwa's final purpose is to expand into the land of Henanmengqi, an undertaking started in 1997. Although both sides interacted with each other in peace without any border conflict since Liberation [i.e. after 1949], they started to create new troubles after some forty years. They have undertaken military preparation in order to create a recognised fact of occupation before the state finished its border demarcation project. Dngul rwa have tried to occupy lands legally through the conflict mediation, which is their specialty, by redrawing the boundary deep inside the Henanmengqi territory.

In a report concerning conflicts on the Henanmengqi side, the ethnic elements that existed in Nyin mtha' vs. Dngul rwa conflict were described as follows:

The '8.3 incident' was Dngul rwa's conspiracy and was achieved systematically as planned. The chieftains of Dngul rwa Xiang started to procure weapons in the central area of Rma chu county and Dngul rwa Xiang from the end of July. Dngul rwa Xiang ordered that each household contribute one soldier, one rifle, and one horse out of one household, and that fighters gather at the border on July 31<sup>st</sup> when the first battle commenced. Moreover, at the centre of Dngul rwa, the chieftains of Dngul rwa tribe declared war saying: "It is the Mongols we will conquer and the Mongol land we will capture. They must return to their homeland". (Unreleased paper No. 2 1998)

One Xiang leader in Henanmengqi expressed the importance of the pasture conflict which Nyin mtha' experienced in this way: "The pressing current question is whether or not we Mongols can live on the Qinghai-Tibetan highland where we have lived for 300 years".

The former Henanmengqi representative who attended the peace conference stated that it was impossible to expect the provincial government officials to give a fair decision for Henanmengqi, since most of them are Tibetans whether they are from rival Gansu province or Qinghai province to which Henanmengqi belongs administratively. Regardless of their public stance, local government officials from both sides blamed the rival local government for being responsible for the conflicts and for their territorial expansionism; they were aware that

ethnicity would not make the conflict reconciliation any easier. In that case, how did the people's perception of conflicts affect their behaviour in concrete terms?

#### ASSERTION AS MONGOLIAN AND ACTIONS AS SOGGO

For Henanmengqi, it is the 'Tibetans' who invaded their territory. As a result this becomes an unmistakable 'fact' rather than a mere speculation supported by the recognition of 'unfairness' about the above-mentioned conflict mediation. Therefore, people in Henanmengqi demanded that the central government should be neutral in their decisions. As a means to approach this national authority, the name 'Mongolian' seemed to be most effective. Justification of their indigenous claim to the land became central to their fight against eviction. Strategies for justification included ethnic naming of the land and the emphasis on historical continuity of their living on the site of conflict. For example, Beshengkhe'ule and Shamar are words that are added to place names; they are probably Mongolian. All the land names in the controversial area are not necessarily of Mongolian origin, but a mixture of Mongolian and Tibetan or even pure Tibetan. The Mongol origin of a non-Tibetan land name is not readily discernable to most of the people in Henanmengqi who speak Tibetan as a first language, and who may not have historical or linguistic knowledge. Instead of pursuing the correct meaning in Mongolian, they find it meaningful to assert that the land name is simply not Tibetan.

The local Mongols frequently trace their history back to the Qing dynasty, sometimes even back to the Mongol empire and the Yuan dynasty of the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a basis to assert the fact that the Henanmengqi Mongols were the original inhabitants of the land.<sup>9</sup> In their petition presented to central government and other papers related to the conflict between Nyin mtha' and Dngul rwa, the Nyin mtha' side repeatedly emphasised that the territory was given to prince Henan Qinwang by the Qing dynasty. The purpose of this assertion was to maintain the present territory of the Autonomous County, and to point out that their original sovereignty was over a much larger territory that had been allocated to the prince Henan Qinwang. This appeal to history simultaneously reaffirms the Soggo characteristics of the land names, and is intended as a challenge to the attempts of their rivals and

<sup>9</sup> For example: Unreleased paper No. 12. 1998.

the arbitrators who question the Henanmengqi Soggo's qualifications as indigenous residents of the area.

Nyin mtha' Xiang officials emphasised Henanmengqi's historical territory as the main reason for rejecting the mediation decision of the Living Buddhas of the Bla brang monastery. In the 'petition' the Nyin mtha' people handed to central government, they explained in detail the size of the pastures of Henanmengqi Mongolians lost in the long-lasting pasture conflicts dating back to the late Qing dynasty, and they emphasised their unenviable dilemma as Mongolians having to confront neighbouring Tibetans:

Since we are isolated from our main nationality and surrounded by Tibetans with enormous population, we have historically suffered from many ethnic collisions. After the Liberation, a new socialist relationship between the Mongolians and Tibetans has been created, and the obstacle in nationality has been basically removed. However, we have been treated quite unjustly in the course of the mediations in pasture conflicts. These mediation decisions were made by either local government or the trusted Living Buddhas. Since the establishment of the Autonomous County, we have suffered thirty one deaths in the pasture conflicts, paid 900,000 yuan in penalty and given away more than two million mu of pastureland. It is one sixth of the pastureland that existed immediately after the Liberation, and one fifth of the present pastureland (Unreleased paper No. 6. 1998).

Moreover, they attributed the problem in conflict mediation and their crisis to their identity as Mongolian:

We have accepted most of the mediation decisions for the sake of life and border stability, and we are suffering from the pain. However, they were quite unfair and very wrathful. Under this condition, our nationality pride as Mongolians has been immensely hurt and the friendly Mongol-Tibetan relationship was compromised. We Mongolians, who have suffered the ethnic pressure and insult, even considered relocating ourselves from the river area [the curved area of the Yellow River, the present Henanmengqi] to move closer to the our nationality body [migration to the region where the majority of Mongolians live, such as Inner Mongolia] (Unreleased paper No. 6 1998).

For people of Henanmengqi including Nyin mtha', the emphasis on their 'Mongolian' identity was the most effective means to solve the problems they faced. In short, 'Mongolianness' for the people of Henanmengqi at the time of pasture conflicts is the latest weapon or strategy, which they use to protect themselves. In the past the Mongolian identity had no emotional or natural bond for them, espe-

cially for the people of Nyin mtha' who, historically, had been Tibetans. To prevail against the mediators, Henanmengqi officials began to insist on the historical rights their ancestors had established in the controversial area. Officials then picked up ordinarily unfamiliar Mongolian elements as symbolically important. This assertion as 'Mongolian' compelled the solution to the pasture conflicts to be sought beyond the boundaries of counties, prefectures and provinces. However, this alone could not bring about a solution. It was the identity of Soggo that mobilised Henanmengqi people in the actual action in each pasture conflict. Henanmengqi people often narrated with pride how they chased the enemy out of the Henanmengqi's land. The success was attributed to the mobilising power of Soggo, as all Xiangs and tribes within Henanmengqi are duty-bound to form a united front against their common enemies in the pasture conflicts. As mentioned above: "Inner Mongolians and Mongolians in Haixi prefecture show no interest in us, their support is out of the question".

Five of the Xiangs in Henanmengqi have a stereotype against Nyin mtha' Xiang as already explained at the beginning of the paper, i.e. they were believed to be originally Tibetan. However, under the conflict condition, Nyin mtha' as a member of Henanmengqi Soggo gained support in the form of weapons, provisions and volunteers from other Xiangs when they were attacked by Dngul rwa.

On the day following the '8.3 incident', scores of people from Brag dmar Xiang requested opportunities to defend a highland position, but Nyin mtha' refused by saying: "We appreciate the fact you have come. However, we don't want to trouble you any further". Instead, Nyin mtha' just rented the twenty five rifles that Brag dmar had brought. In 1998 more than ten people from Mdogsum Xiang and about one hundred fighters from Mthoyulma and Brag dmar Xiangs also came to support Nyin mtha'. A rumour circulated that the actual commander of the Nyin mtha' counter-attack in 1998 was someone from Gser lung Xiang.

In the course of conflict between Nyin mtha' and Dngul rwa, the entire Henanmengqi experienced the following: eight individuals became hostages; all of the members of their sub-village were attacked; and as a result there was co-operation among all sub-villages, villages, Xiangs, including several Soggo tribes within Henanmengqi. It can be pointed out that as a result of the conflict, in which the entire Soggo people were attacked, an unprecedented mutual co-operation developed among the Henanmengqi Soggos.

## CONCLUSION

Pasture conflicts can be seen from the perspective of common human relations among the cattle breeders whose basic livelihood depends on pastureland. Considering that severe pasture conflicts have occurred among the same Tibetans bordering Henanmengqi, it is not necessarily true that the Tibetan side intentionally cast a net in order to attack the Soggo of Henanmengqi. Thus from this more objective point of view, pasture conflict affecting Henanmengqi is not necessarily ethnic conflict. However, the ethnic category which encompasses certain local groups becomes significant only when it is necessary to mobilise people in the pasture conflicts between the Henanmengqi Soggo and its neighbours, and to facilitate a smooth reconciliation, as in the conflict case involving Henanmengqi and Rma chu. The people of Henanmengqi refer to the ethnic and political position of the Living Buddhas only when it is obviously a matter of problems concerning profits such as those over pasturelands. Nonetheless, their belief in the religious authorities remains undiminished. They question the fairness of bureaucratic reconciliation by pointing out that those officials involved are Tibetans. As is obvious, perceptions of ethnicity play a big role in the assessment of the fairness of the arbitration. Ethnicity pushed them to go beyond the local governmental and non-governmental arbitration and to appeal directly to the national authority that is believed to be more neutral.

In the appeal to the national authority, the case was presented as a matter of the survival of the Henanmengqi Mongolians on their present land. That the Dngul rwa side gathered fighters, was alleged to have intended the removal of Henanmengqi Mongolians (including Nyin mtha') from the 'Tibetan' highland. Regardless of whether such an intention existed, the appeal itself was a testimony to the extreme sensitivity of Henanmengqi to any outside hostility. The Henanmengqi people saw in ethnicity the best chance of obtaining a 'fairer' conflict settlement. By pointing out the Mongolian elements in land names, they insisted on historical sovereignty over the controversial site; they knew that history privileges the Mongols. Moreover, they attributed their current problems to their minority status; indeed, they called themselves a minority of the minorities. They fully capitalised on their Mongolian identity: what seemed to be a rather routine conflict among

nomads became more significant simply because it happened to occur on the borderland of Mongols and Tibetans. Ethnicity was then presented to the national authority as the very cause of the conflicts.

What we have seen so far shows how ethnicity is both imaginative and instrumental. However, if one recognises how the appeal and cooperation in the name of ethnicity leads directly to their chance of survival in the face of strong enemies, ethnicity becomes quite real for the people concerned. Ethnicity comes forward as the most important key word when people discuss the conflicts and the arbitrations, especially when the Dngul rwa raised a clarion call to 'drive away the Soggos'. Since ethnicity demands loyalty, the ethnicity of both the governmental and non-governmental authorities was also a prominent issue.

In this light, it is understandable that the Tibetans ignored the tribal differences in Henanmengqi and called the entire area including Nyin mtha' 'Soggo'. Soggo connoted 'non-nativeness' to the Tibetans who insisted on their own 'native' identity, thereby legitimating their entitlement to the disputed land. In their own defence, the Henanmengqi people appealed to much higher principles, that is, nationality, equality and citizenship, and emphasised their nationality identity as Mongolian and their status of being a minority of minorities, thus deserving special protection from the state.

These ethnic appeals as Mongolian and Tibetan come largely from officials on both sides of the hostility. Ordinary people in Henanmengqi are hardly fighting for 'Mongolian' *per se*. Their actions in and interpretations of the conflicts are multidimensional, and the only meaningful identity for them is Soggo. As in the case of the rumour about the alleged 'Soggo' origin of a tribe in Dngul rwa being fined for their refusal to participate in the conflict against Nyin mtha', it is 'Soggo' not 'Mongol' that was at issue. In short, it is the local identity as Henanmengqi Soggo, rather than the abstract principle of being members of the Mongolian nationality, that engendered mutual support in the pasture conflicts. This local Soggo identity took on a real meaning as the people of Henanmengqi have had a difficult relationship with neighbouring Tibetans.

For the Henanmengqi people who are thoroughly 'Tibetanised', the chronic pasture conflicts compel them to reconsider their identity and emphasise their identity as Soggo. As the Nyin mtha' conflict with the 'others' in the neighbouring Tibetan communities intensified, the often mutually quarrelsome people of the five Xiangs would temporarily sus-



pend their internal squabbles and come to the aid of Nyin mtha', recognising the latter's identity as Soggo, as their interests coincided. By this process, the Nyin mtha' side succeeded in presenting themselves as Soggo. With the extension of the Soggo category to Nyin mtha', Henanmengqi or the Autonomous County's administrative boundary becomes congruent with the Soggo boundary. Pasture conflicts with the Tibetan neighbours enabled the Soggo category to expand and maintain its people's life order, thereby becoming an indispensable instrument for protecting people's properties and their lives in Henanmengqi.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abe Jihei 1998. Yuboku wa kieru ka (Disappearance of Nomadism?). *China* 21(3), (special issue on Chinese nationality problems) 257–64.
- 1999. Chibetto kogen no tohoku kado (The Northeastern Corner of the Tibetan Plateau). *China* 21(6), 287–95.
- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Dhondup, Y. 2002. Writers at the cross-roads: the Mongolian-Tibetan authors Tsering Dundup and Jangbu. *Inner Asia* 4(2), 225–40.
- and H. Diemberger. 2002. Tashi Tsering: the last Mongol queen of 'Sogpo' (Henan). *Inner Asia* 4(2), 197–224.
- Huangnan Zangzu Zizhizhouzhi Bianji Weiyuanhui. 1999. *Huangnan Zhouzhi* (Huangnan TAP Gazetter) 2 vols. Lanzhou: Gansusheng Renmin Chubanshe.
- Jamsran, P., U. Erdenebayar and N. Altantsetseg. 1996. *Hyatad dakhii mongolchuud*, Ulaanbaatar: Suhkbaatar kompani.
- Kurimoto, Eisei. 1997. Mikai-no senso, Gendai-no senso (The primitive war and the modern war). In Nobohiro Nakabayashi (ed.) *Funso to undo. Iwanami kouza bunka jinruigaku*, vol. 6. Tokyo: Iwanami syoten, 23–62.
- Li Anzhai 1989. *Zangzu Zongjiao zhi Shidi Yanjiu*. (Field research on Tibetan religious history). Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue Chubanshe.
- 1992. *Li Anzhai Zangxue wenlun xuan*. (Collection of Li Anzhai Tibetan studies). Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue Chubanshe.
- Ma Dengkun & Wanmaduoji. 1994. Maqu xian Zangzu Buzu (Tibetan tribes in Rmachu county) in Gannan Wenshi Ziliao No. 11: *Gannan Zangzu Buzu Gaishu*. Hezuo: Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi Gannan Zangzu Zizhizhou Weiyuanhui Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui, 52–87.
- Maqu Xianzhi Bianji Weiyuanhui. 2001. *Maqu Xianzhi (Rmachu county Gazetter)*. Lanzhou: Gansu Renmin Chubanshe.
- Ma Wuji. 1992 [1941]. Gansu sheng Xiahe Zangmin Diaochaji. (An investigative report on the Tibetans in Xiahe County, Gansu Province). *Gannan Shiliao Congshu Labuleng Bufen*. Hezuo: Gannan Zhouzhi Bianjibu, 335–63.
- Qinghai Sheng Shehui Kexueyuan Zangxue Yanjiusuo. 1990. *Zhongguo Zangzu Buluo* (Tibetan tribes in China). Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue Zhongxin.

- Shinjilt. 1998. Educational movement of Mongolian in the Henan Mongolian autonomous county of Qinghai Province, China. *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 119(2), 104–22 (in Japanese).
- . 1999. Acculturation and change of ethnic identity: a case study of the Henan Mongolian Autonomous County of Qinghai Province, China. *JCAS Review* 2(2), 97–121 (in Japanese).
- . 2003. *The Grammar of Ethnic Narrations: an Ethnography of Daily Life, Pasture Fights and Language Education Campaign among the Mongols of Qinghai Province, China*. Tokyo: Fukyosha (in Japanese).
- TIN (Tibet Information Network). 1999. (News Update 21<sup>st</sup> June 1999) Nomads killed in pasture fights. Url: <http://www.tibetinfo.net/news-updates/nu210699.htm>.
- Zhang Jimin. 1993. *Qinghai Zangqu Buzu Xiguanfa Ziliaoji*. (Materials on the customary laws of Tibetans in Qinghai province). Xining: Qinghai Renmin Chubanshe.
- Zhou Ta. 1996. *Gannan Zangzu Buzu de Shehui ji Lishi Yanjiu*. (Study of the Society and History of Tibetan Tribes in Gansu Province). Lanzhou: Gansu Minzu Chubanshe.

#### *Unreleased Papers*

(The authors' names are omitted and the formal titles of the documents simplified for the protection of privacy)

- Unreleased paper No. 1. 1999. (Henanmengqi side). A report on the present condition of the Henanmengqi border.
- Unreleased paper No. 2. 1999. (Henanmengqi side). The process and the result of 8 severe blood-shedding incidents.
- Unreleased paper No. 3. 1998. (Non-governmental arbitrators). Report to the border control offices in Gansu and Qinghai provinces.
- Unreleased paper No. 4. 1998. (Non-governmental arbitrators). Opinion on mediation of the pasture conflict between Nyin mtha' and Dngulwa.
- Unreleased paper No. 5. 1998. (People in Nyin mtha'). A letter to nongovernmental arbitrators.
- Unreleased paper No. 6. 1998. (Representative of the Nyin mtha' public). Report on murder incident and armed attacks of the Dngulwa.
- Unreleased paper No. 7. 1953. (Working committee of the Communist Party in Henanmengqi). The final report on conflict mediation of all the tribes in Henanmengqi.
- Unreleased paper No. 8. 1955. (Working committee of the Communist Party in Henanmengqi). Report of conflict in Khusin and Mdogsum.
- Unreleased paper No. 9. 1999. (Central government) A notice for the local stability in border-demarcation project.
- Unreleased paper No. 10. 1999. (Central government inquiry-making organ). The final opinion on fixing administrative boundary between Henanmengqi and Rmachu in the conflict situation.
- Unreleased paper No. 11. 1957. (Henanmengqi side) Pasture conflicts between tribes in our county and tribes in Gannan TAP.
- Unreleased paper No. 12. 1998. (Leaders of Nyin mtha') The living condition of Nyin mtha' to the south of the Yellow River in the 1960s.
- Table 1: Number of dead and injured on Henanmengqi side in pasture conflicts since the second half of the 1980s.

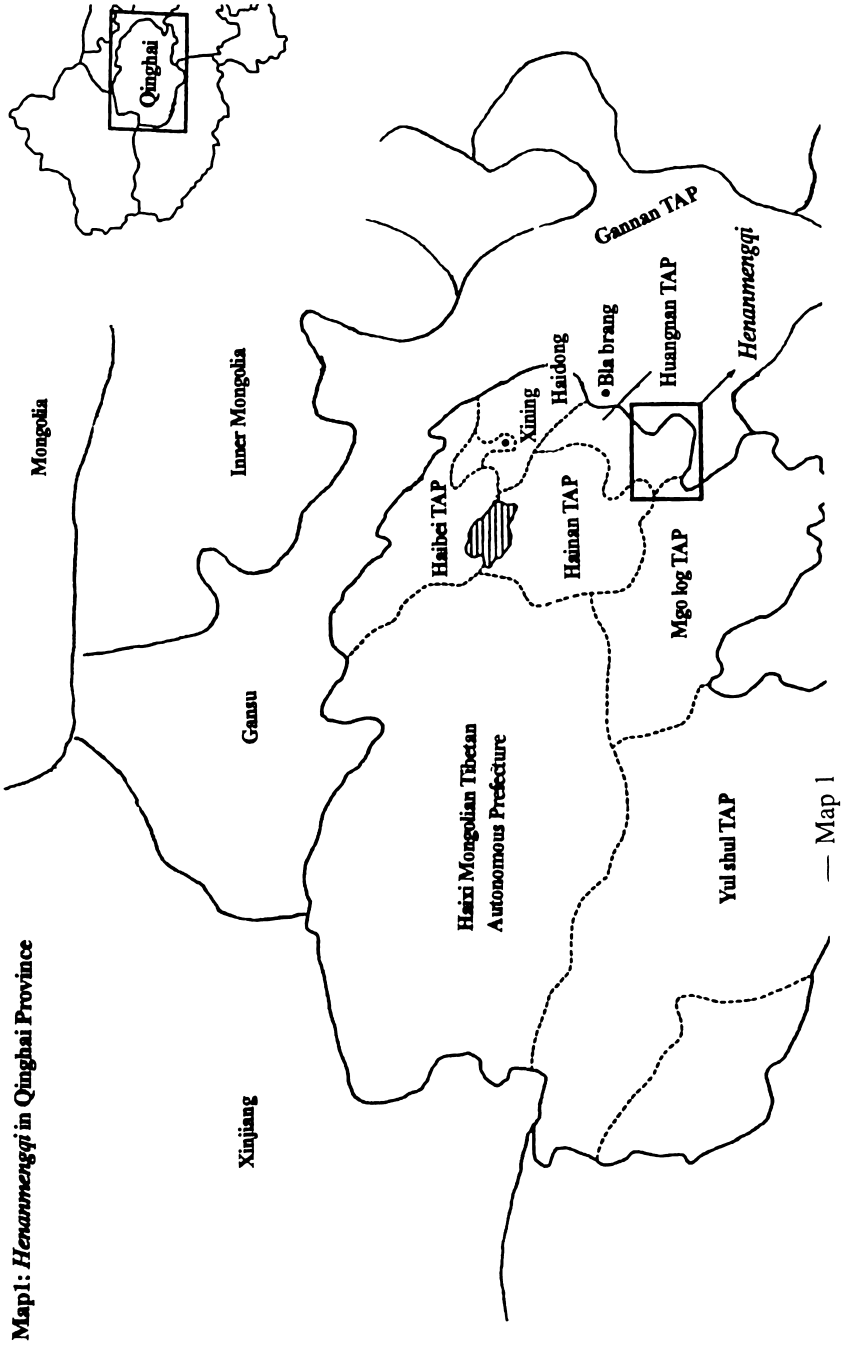
Table 1: Number of dead and injured on Henanmengqi side in pasture conflicts since the second half of the 1980s

<i>Xiang</i> name in Henanmengqi	County name of the opponents	Time of incident	Number of dead and injured	
			dead	injured
Gser lung Xiang	Klu chu county, Gansu province	16 July 1988	0	2
		09 June 1989	0	3
		22 August 1990	0	1
		29 August 1990	0	1
		14 September 1990	0	5
		07 September 1991	3	2
Khu sin Xiang	Rma chu county, Gansu province	05 August 1989	3	1
		02 October 1991	0	4
		09 September 1992	1	2
		01 April 1994	1	2
Brag dmar Xiang	Rtse khog county, Qinghai province	03 March 1987	1	9
		31 July 1992	0	1
		04 August 1992	0	1
		16 July 1993	2	1
		20 June 1995	0	1
Nyin mtha' Xiang	Ram chu county, Gansu province	03 August 1997-end of 1999	18	28
<i>Total</i>		For about 12 years	29	64

Table 2. Data of pasture conflicts between Nyin mtha' and Dngul rwa

Time of Incidents	Number of dead and injured on Nyin mtha'		Number of dead and injured on Dngul rwa		Total		
	village	dead	injured	dead	injured	dead	injured
03 August 1997	'Ob thung	3	17	0	0	3	17
17 October 1997	Nyin mtha'	1					
	'Ob thung	1	1	0	1	2	2
14 March 1998		0	0	2	0	2	0
22 August 1998	Mdzo mo	3	8	0	0	3	8
15 October 1998	Nyin mtha'	1					
	Bevula	1	0	12	5	14	5
24 April 1999	'Ob thung	1					
	Nyin mtha'	2	1	0	0	3	1
01 May 1999	Bde ldan	0	1	0	0	0	1
20 May 1999	'Brug lung	5	0	0	0	5	0
<i>Total</i>		18	28	14	6	32	34

Sources: unreleased papers No. 1 and No. 2 1999 and fieldwork data



Map2: *Henanmengqi* and the surrounding areas

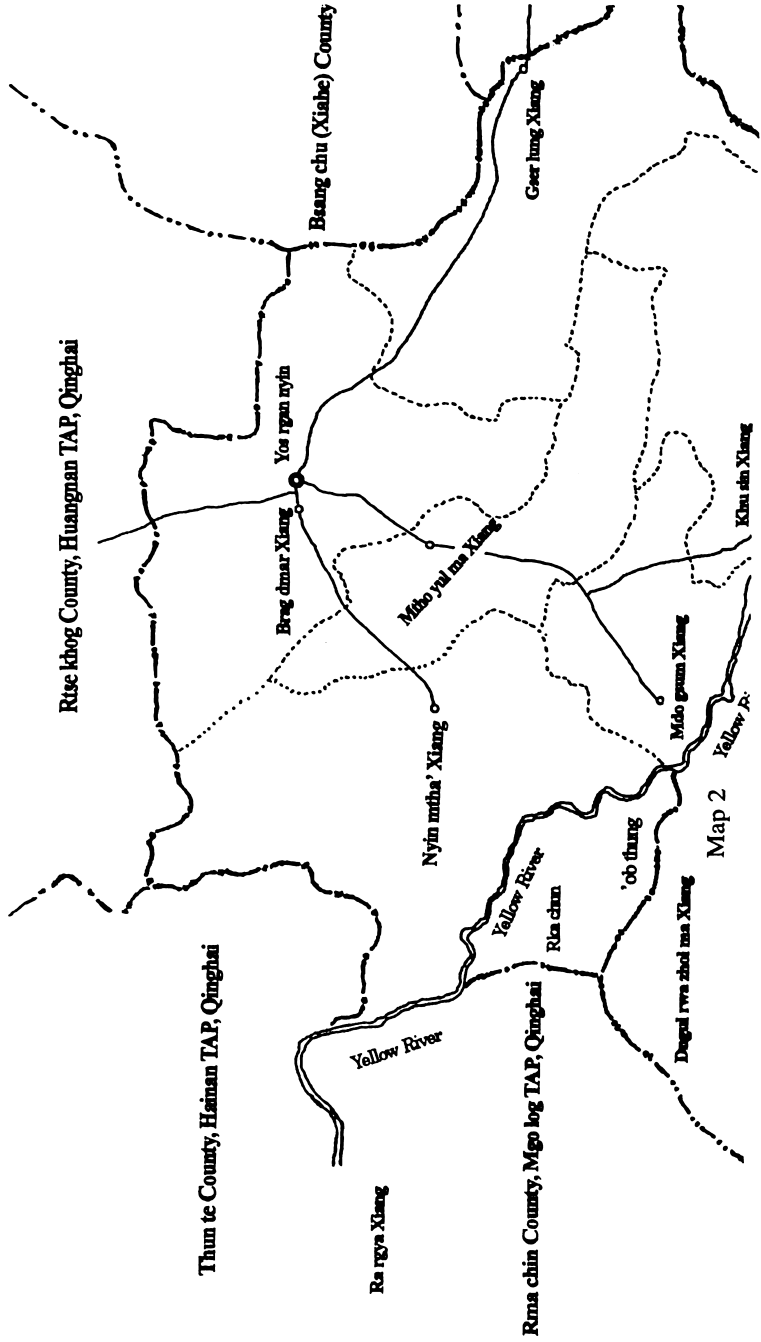




Plate 1: The bridge separating Henanmengqi from Klu chu county.  
Klu chu is to the west



Plate 2: 'Ob thung village and Rka chung village to the south of the Yellow River



Plate 3: An iron stove with a bullet hole in 'Ob thung village

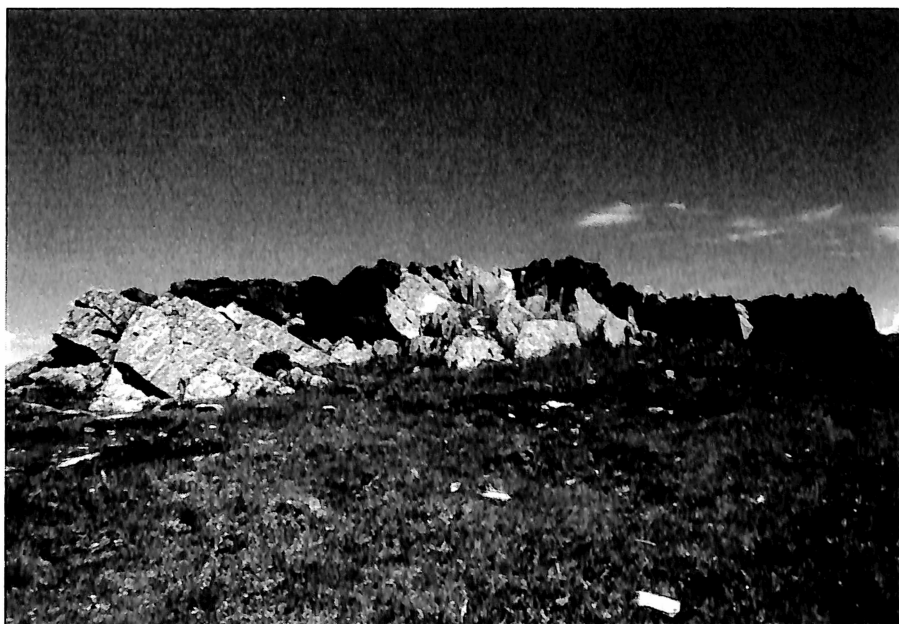


Plate 4: A trench on a mountain peak



Plate 5: Nyim mtha' militia surveying the 330,000-mu no man's land

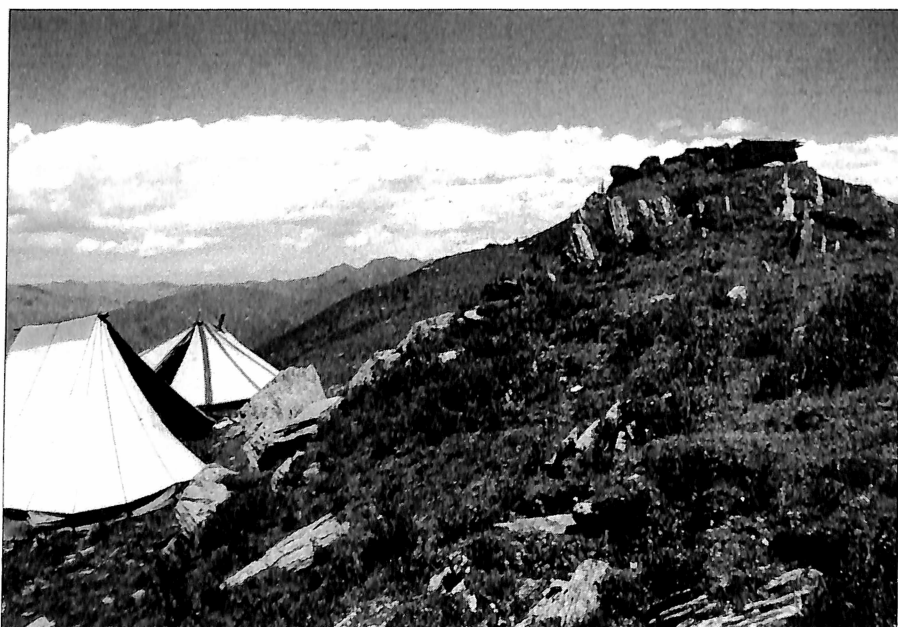


Plate 6: A white sentry tent





Plate 7: Militia attending a meeting in the sentry post



URADYN E. BULAG

is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Hunter College - the City University of New York. He is the author of *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia* (Clarendon 1998) and *The Mongols at China's Edge* (Rowman & Littlefield 2002).

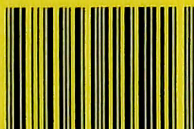
HILDEGARD DIEMBERGER

is one of the directors of the Mongolian and Inner Asia Studies Unit of the University of Cambridge and is also a research associate at the Austrian Academy of Science and a member of the Italian Ev-K2-CNR Committee. Together with Pasang Wangdu she is the author of *Shel dkar chos 'byung - History and Politics in Southern Tibet* (Vienna 1996) and *dBa' bzhed - The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet* (Vienna 2000).

THIS VOLUME FOCUSES ON THE INTERFACE between Mongolian and Tibetan cultures and aims to create a platform to encourage the development of new forms of scholarship across geographical and disciplinary boundaries. This forum lets new materials emerge and brings to the fore a variety of different approaches to studying Mongolian and Tibetan cultures and societies. The papers in this volume deal not only with the substantial Mongolian contribution to and engagement with Tibetan Buddhism, but also with multiple readings of shared history and religion, reconstruction of traditions, shifting ethnic boundaries and the broader political context of the Mongolian-Tibetan relationship.



ISBN 978 90 04 15521 3



9 789004 155213

This book is volume 10-9 in the series  
BRILL'S TIBETAN STUDIES LIBRARY.

A list of the publications in this series  
can be found at the back of this volume.

ISSN 1568-6183

www.brill.nl

# The Mongolia-Tibet Interface

OPENING NEW RESEARCH TERRAINS IN INNER ASIA



EDITED BY  
URADYN E. BULAG AND  
HILDEGARD G.M. DIEMBERGER

BRILL PROCEEDINGS OF THE TENTH SEMINAR OF THE IATS, 2003

*The Mongolia-Tibet Interface*

EDITED BY U. BULAG AND H. DIEMBERGER

PIATS 2003 6

BT  
SL  
10

BRILL