

# AMDO

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Generally speaking, the Amdo region comprises all those areas which are situated fully within the precincts of the Ma Chu River drainage area - as the upper reaches of the Yellow river are called in Tibetan. Most of those regions belong to the present-day Chinese province of Qinghai. We may consider the watershed between Ma Chu and Dri Chu (Tibetan name of the upper reaches of the Yangtse river) to be Amdo's natural boundary in the south. To the West extend the highlands of Yarmothang and Changthang across which the Drogra (*'brog pa*), Tibetan nomads, wander with their flocks of yaks and sheep. The Kunlun ranges make up the mountainous barrier to the deserts of the Tsaidam Basin where, ethnically, a Mongolian environment begins. Parts of the Tsaidam Basin and the vast stretches of the Changthang near the headwaters of Ma Chu and Dri Chu are almost uninhabited.<sup>1</sup>

On the very north of the Tibetan Plateau the mountain ranges of Nan Shan or Qilian Shan drop off to the Inner Asian desert regions. Once more we find Tibetans living in the higher areas, while in the densely populated northeast of Qinghai there is a high degree of ethnic mixing. The river valley of the Huang Shui, a Yellow River tributary, is a natural gateway to Tibet. Hence it is an ethnic patchwork of Tibetans (about one million in Amdo), Tu or Monguor (approx. 200,000 persons), Hui Muslims (0.6 million in Qinghai and approximately 0.4 million within Tibetan areas of Gansu province), Salar (90,000), Mongolians (60,000), Bao'an (12,000), Dongxiang (150,000 to 240,000) and Han-Chinese (59,7 % of the Qinghai populace). The mountainous rim of the plateau's north and northwest is populated by Yugur (13,000), Kazakhs (3,000), and Uyghurs (in Xinjiang), living side by side with Hui, Mongolians, Tibetans and Han-Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

As is the case in all Tibetan regions, the population of Amdo is also composed of peasants and itinerant herdsmen. Most of the arable land is concentrated in the eastern part. This is where the big monastic centres of the so-called 'Yellow Hat sect' developed: the 'Valley of Onions' - Tsongkha, with the monastic university Kumbum Jampa Ling which recalls the great Lamaist reformer Tsongkhapa; the monastic centres of Labrang and Chone situated in the southwestern part of Gansu province; Rongwo valley, home to the remarkable Rebgong or Rebgong art. One must not forget Rgolung, the centre of the religious activities of the Tu people who spread the Tibetan form of Buddhism in both eastern Tibet and China proper.

The Tibetans share all those fertile and climatically favourable domains with other sedentary peoples: the Salar Muslims, who immigrated into the Ma Chu Canyon of Lower Amdo (around Xunhua) during the Chinese middle ages; the Hui, who started to settle on the eastern precincts in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries; and especially the Han-Chinese, who in 121 B.C. founded their first military base near Xining, today's capital of Qinghai province. The mountains of the northeastern fringe of the Tibetan Plateau, i.e. the border regions of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu, are still populated by Tibetans. Together with some dispersed and numerically few

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<sup>1</sup> Hermanns 1948, p. 6. - The alpine steppes of the barren highland are periodically used by Mongolian and Tibetan nomads.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Gruschke 1993, p. 44, and 1997a, pp. 279-286; *Minzu zhishi jizui*, Chengdu 1991; *Jianming Qinghai Shouce* 1989, p.15; GZZG 1986, p.31; and GSM 1989.

peoples - like the Old-Mongolian Monguor (Tu) in Huzhu and Datong counties, the Dongxiang (0.25 million persons) and Bao'an (just about 9,000 people) - the Tibetans are a big minority, while neighbouring central Gansu is inhabited entirely by Hui and Han-Chinese.

The nomads among the Amdowas, as Amdo Tibetans call themselves, are easily outnumbered by their farming countrymen, and yet their living space extends over the largest expanse of Qinghai. South of the Kunlun Mountains, in the vast grasslands of Yarmothang and around Lake Kokonor, as well as around the holy mountain of Amnye Machen, their way of life is determined by the itinerant herdsmen. The vast steppes and the harsh climate of the highlands, not suited to agriculture or forests, offer a living to itinerant cattle-breeders only. However, there is again, as in former times, plenty of wildlife. In the vast open space hunting was difficult before the introduction of rifles;<sup>3</sup> today certain species are protected by law. While the southern parts of Amdo undoubtedly are the incontestable realm of the Tibetan Ngolok-Seta tribes, the prairies and desert areas within and around the Tsaidam basin were taken possession of by Mongolian tribes, starting in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Even to the far West of the barren Changthang region and south of Rongwo, Mongolian tribes of herdsmen are still to be found. Originally all those nomadic tribes only bred sheep and yaks;<sup>4</sup> later they also started to keep goats, cattle and, of course, horses.

#### **Derivation of the toponym 'Amdo'**

The meaning of a province named Amdo has not yet been found in any of the early Tibetan sources. After the collapse of the ancient Yarlung dynasty in 842 A.D., the process of political centralization came to an end and the Tibetan Empire broke up. It was the first and last empire covering the entire Tibetan Plateau and beyond. Political fragmentation was continually resisted by the attempts at regional unification by aristocratic families and even monastic rulers. Kingdoms, tribal lands and tiny principalities co-existed in medieval Tibet up to modern times and offered a large variety of social and political structures.<sup>5</sup> Thus there was no specific administrative divisional pattern in the Tibetan realm, much less well-defined provinces of a centralized government. Even though the government of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and his successors, especially the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, tried to follow in the footsteps of the emperors of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was no administrative re-organization of Tibet.

The Dalai Lamas had created a centralized administration modelled after the Yarlung realm, and even intended to restore its territory to the former extent of this realm. Although the aims and the prototype after which the policy was modelled might be called imperial(ist),<sup>6</sup> they did not lead to an organizational pattern adopting provincial divisions. We find districts (*rdzong*), autocratic sedentary and tribal kingdoms throughout the country's history, but no regular legal body on a subdivisional (provincial) level of a centralized government.

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<sup>3</sup> Hermanns 1948, pp.Xlff.

<sup>4</sup> Hermanns 1948, pp.Xlff.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel 1993, pp.39-41, 64-114.

<sup>6</sup> First of all it should be noted that the so-called kings of Tibet were actually perceived as emperors (cp. Pelliot 1961, p.143; Karmay 1998, p.525), as the term *btsan po* designates a sacred ruler equivalent, in contemporary Chinese sources, to Chinese *tianzi* - son of heaven, i.e. emperor. The sacred character as well as the celestial origin is still reflected in old Tibetan myths (cp. Gruschke 1996, pp.174-176). Beckwith (1987, p.14) ascribes the consistent use of the term king to an inaccuracy of later Tibetan writers. It should be noted that this may not have been an accidental inaccuracy, namely because the title *btsan po* had fallen out of use. It is rather likely that the Tibetan word *rgyal po*, king, was chosen for its subsequent Buddhist connotation of a religious king, *chos rgyal*. Needless to say that an emperor rules over an imperial realm, yet we have to emphasize that his reign included the territory of completely foreign ethnic populations. As the recovery of those territories later no more controlled by Lhasa was a political aim of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas, and even of the modern government in exile, this policy may be labelled imperialist - at least to the same extent as China's traditional stance is judged this way.

This is why we suggest the designation ‘cultural provinces’ for toponyms like Ü, Tsang, Amdo and Kham. As we shall see, defining their delimitations was always rather vague, so that errors and misconceptions concerning the affiliation of smaller areas to one of these ‘provinces’ are quite common.<sup>7</sup>

While the designations Amdo and Kham have become widely used in modern times, it is less known that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan sources only used the composite Tibetan term Do-Kham. As *mdo khams* it may be found in Tibetan, as *duo gansi* in Chinese sources, starting in the Mongol-Chinese Yuan dynasty (1274-1368).<sup>8</sup> eastern Tibet, i.e. the region beyond the Central Tibetan provinces of Ü and Tsang, is then generally referred to as Do-Kham Gang-sum (*mdo khams sgang sum*), or Do-Kham Gang-drug (*mdo khams sgang drug*): that is to say the ‘three, or six, mountains [of] mDo [and] Kham’.<sup>9</sup> The term *sgang* is meant to designate the pasture grounds on the high upland between the great river systems of Salween, Mekong, Yangtse, Yalong Jiang, and their tributaries.<sup>10</sup> As a toponym Do-Kham thus seems to represent a comprehensive concept of the eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau or realm, as is stated in Das’ *Tibetan-English Dictionary*:

[*mdo khams*] *Mdo* and *Khams*, indicates Amdo, the province of Tibet S.E. of Kōkō Nor, and Kham.<sup>11</sup>

By contrasting various sources we may discern that both terms, Amdo and Kham, or rather *mdo* and *khams*, are concurrently used to circumscribe a deficiently delineated East Tibet. Southeastern Tibet, for instance, was sometimes either called Do-me (*mdo smad*) or Kham, both being ‘a vague geographical term without definite political significance’ (Teichman<sup>12</sup>). Ren and Tshe-dbang rdo-rje alike use the term Do-Kham as ‘a reference to the whole Tibetan-populated area east of Kong-po and Nag-chu’.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, it includes all the regions embraced by the modern toponyms Amdo, Kham and Gyarong, plus some minor adjacent regions.

We should moreover note that in former times the designation Do-Kham Gang-sum (or -drug) was used to distinguish Lhasa-dominated areas of Central Tibet from those parts of the plateau that are characterized by:

1. The river system of the Ma Chu and its tributaries that reach the stream before Gansu’s capital Lanzhou and, on the other hand,
2. That part of the Tibetan Plateau that is characterized by deep gorges cut by China’s largest river, the Yangtse (Dri Chu in Tibetan) and its tributaries like Yalong Jiang (Nya Chu), as well as the Southeast Asian rivers Mekong (Dza Chu) and Salween (Nag Chu).

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<sup>7</sup> The modern maps do not offer any help, as they do not show any borderlines (due to a very imprecise state of information, was not very practicable till now) and the labelling of regions by inscribing names onto the maps rather indicates the heartland than the borders of those areas. Old written sources often include related territories where Tibetans never settled, or at least had not settled for centuries. Or else, areas belonging to neighbouring regions are also included: like in Lama Dragönpa’s *Political and Religious History of Amdo* (cp. PRHA, p.224) where he does not draw a line of demarcation between Amdo, Kham, and Gyarong. In order to find some dividing lines, besides making use of Tibetan sources (unfortunately in English, French, German or Chinese translations only), we also evaluate settlement patterns and, most important, of the local populace the comprehension as to these matters.

<sup>8</sup> Cp. Ren & Tshe-dbang 1991, pp.30; 34. - The Chinese term is a conspicuous derivation from the Tibetan *mdo khams*, although this might not be manifest to amateurs. Chinese sources sometimes use different Chinese characters, which is imaterial as they have the same pronunciation. Slight variations are due to the problems of transcribing Tibetan, a language rich in consonants, by using Chinese characters which offer only the possibility to reproduce both phonemes and syllables by entire syllables. Still, Chinese language was capable of portraying historical changes of Tibetan articulation, which is also shown by the use of different Chinese characters.

<sup>9</sup> Cp. *bdsoqs ldan gshon nu dga’ ston*/Liu Liqian 1991; PRHA p.3; Ren & Tshe-dbang 1991, pp.35f.; *rgyal rabs mam kyi byung tsvul gsal ba’i me long chos ‘byung*/Wang Yinnan 1949; Wylie 1962, p.98.

<sup>10</sup> Cp. Samuel (1993, pp.65f.), and a volume to be published soon, dealing with the Kham and Gyarong areas of Eastern Tibet. (Gruschke, *forthcoming*)

<sup>11</sup> Cit. Das 1902a [1989], p.675.

<sup>12</sup> Cit. Teichman 1922, p.4, n.1.

<sup>13</sup> Ren & Tshe-dbang 1991, p.34.

Within this context it is interesting to note that Lama Tsenpo in his Tibetan geography of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century distinguishes between the people of Khams and Mongolia (sog) and Tibetans of the Ü-Tsang (*dbus gtsang*) region. He also speaks of the countries of Mdo-Khams and Mongolia.<sup>14</sup> The Tibetan scholar Gedün Chömpel (*dge 'dun chos 'phel*) even went as far as to interpret *khams* as 'borderland', which was and is indeed true, compared to the Central Tibetan provinces.<sup>15</sup>

We therefore should look at Amdo and Kham in the sense of cultural or geographical provinces of Tibet, as they were not individually defined by the toponym Do-Kham alone, but rather as areas beyond Ü-Tsang.

Toponyms are often assigned according to a topographical situation or geographical features, and not only in Tibet. Therefore, the meaning of a word in a specific language may hint at the significance of an area within a certain cultural complex. Ancient Tibetan scholars ordinarily made tripartite subdivisions of large cultural and geographical regions. The main areas were called upper, lower and middle parts of the country, with the core civilization as the middle part, the upper one being situated to the West and the lower one to the East.<sup>16</sup> As the Tibetan term *mdo* also refers to lower lands, namely the lower part of a valley where it merges into the plain,<sup>17</sup> it thus looks as if the East of the Tibetan Plateau was originally just called *mdo*.<sup>18</sup>

After the military expansion of the Tubo Empire of the Yarlung dynasty (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century) the Tibetan realm went even beyond regions traditionally inhabited by Tibetans. The distinction of outlying districts from the Tibetan heartland, which of course was the middle region (*dbus*),<sup>19</sup> was often made according to the categories of upper (*stod*) and lower (*smad*) areas. Consequently, the term for eastern Tibet used after the Tubo Empire was not Do-Kham but rather Do-me (*mdo smad*) and Do-tö (*mdo stod*),<sup>20</sup> as it was further subdivided into a lower and an upper part. More confusion arises from the fact that some works divide Amdo in two sections, an upper (*mdo stod*) and a lower Amdo (*mdo smad*). Upper Amdo then is considered to comprise the headwaters of the river Ma Chu, its upper reaches and the grounds above and north of it, including the basin of Lake Kokonor and

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<sup>14</sup> Cp. Wylie 1962, p.97. Lama Tsenpo: 'most of them [= many learned Skyes-bu dam-pa in the countries of Mdo-Khams and Mongolia] obtained the rank of Mkhas-pa (Skt: pandita) after coming to Tibet.' (Cit. ibid. p.97) Being lama of an important monastery in Amdo, it shows his distinct self-perception as an Amdowa and not as a Böpa or (Central) Tibetan.

<sup>15</sup> *White Annals* by Gedün Chömpel (*dge 'dun chos 'phel*) acc. to Ren & Tshe-dbang (1991, pp.35). He cites *khams gyi rgyal' phrin* as 'a small borderland country'. See also Zhang Yisun 1993, vol.I, p.223: *khams kyi rgyal po*, a 'king of a small borderland kingdom' (Chin. *bianjing xiaoguo guowang*). This might as well mean that *mdo khams* just designates the borderland of *mdo*, especially if we see how easily the terms are confused and mixed, thus creating paradoxes: 'Sangs-ryas-dbon...was born in Mdo-khams... He went to Khams when he was 26'. (cit. Wylie 1962, p.181, n.607)

<sup>16</sup> Ren & Tshe-dbang 1991, pp.31f. Another way of naming tripartite regions was by the terms inner, middle and outer. Cp. for instance the division of the early, rather mythical Tibetan empire of Shangshung, the westernmost part of which, Upper or Inner Shangshung, is located, according to the geographical descriptions, in Persia. (Cp. Gruschke 1996, p.104)

<sup>17</sup> Das 1902a, p.675. Cp. as well: Hua Kan & kLu-'bum rGyal 1993, p.290; Jäschke 1998, p.273; TCD 1979, p.447.

<sup>18</sup> This is supported by the circumstance that in the higher-up regions of Amdo in today's Qinghai Province *mdo stod* is still used as a regional toponym, while *mdo smad* as another designation for the Chamdo area in Kham. (Cp. Zhang Yisun 1993, vol.I, pp.1383f.) It would be further supported by Paltul who 'divides the whole region of K'am and Amdo into Dotöd and Domed but, while the greater part of K'am counts as Domed, the Nyingmapa *gompa* of Shech'en and Dzog'chen are counted as being in Dotöd.' (cit. acc. to Samuel 1993, p.589, n.1) The latter restriction is not too big a contradiction as those monasteries lie in a transitional zone between those areas which are attributed to either Amdo (Serta) or Kham (Dege).

<sup>19</sup> Thus *dbus* signifies both 'the middle, the centre' (cp. Das 1902a, p.912) and the name of the Central Tibetan province Ü (*dbUs*).

<sup>20</sup> Cp. Samuel 1993, pp.588f., n.1. Samuel notes the confusion about the delimitations of the toponyms, as they are not consistently applied. Tibetan sources refer to different areas of varying size. This may be due to the circumstance that when the term *mdo khams* was introduced, starting from the Yuan dynasty, it may successively, yet not definitely, have been substituted for the use of *mdo smad* and *mdo stod*.

as far to the east as the Datong River, the valley of the Huang Shui down to its outlet into the Yellow River. Lower Amdo consequently lies to the east and southeast of the Ma Chu, between the river Tao He and the Min Shan mountain range.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, if *mdo* in its meaning of lower part in the Tibetan cultural context also may indicate the eastern part, the above-mentioned additional subdivision takes on another meaning: upper East (*mdo stod*) for the vast highland steppes of the northeast, and lower East (*mdo smad*) designating the deep-cut valleys and high mountain ranges in the southeast of the Tibetan Plateau. It is the latter which became known in the West by its modern name of Kham (*kham*s). However, this very *kham*s later became, as we have seen, part of the designation *mdo kham*s.<sup>22</sup>

The Tibetan word *kham*s has a number of different meanings, of which here those of empire, realm, territory or world seem to be the most significant.<sup>23</sup> With *yul kham*s interpreted as a political territory or empire<sup>24</sup>, and *rgyal kham*s as a kingdom, an expression like *mdo kham*s may also be taken, at least originally, as ‘the lower world, the territory of the lowlands’. In a Central Tibetan perspective, those lower or eastern regions were border areas, completing Ü-Tsang to form a ‘Greater Tibet’ (*bod chen*). Technical terms at the beginning, the words *mdo* and *kham*s have only recently turned into separate toponyms.<sup>25</sup>

Lama Tsenpo (*bla ma btsan po*, died in 1839) refers in his reference work, the only comprehensive Tibetan geography, to what nowadays is called Amdo by the term Mdo-smad A-mdo<sup>26</sup>, i.e. the lower mDo Amdo. The eastern part of Changthang, called Yarmothang by the Amdowas, is represented as mDo-Kham Yarmothang. The latter is regarded by Lama Tsenpo as being a section of Amdo.<sup>27</sup> Even 19<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan use of the terms Amdo and Kham does not bring us any further.

So, why should the northeast of Tibet as a geographical or cultural entity be called Amdo? According to Hermanns<sup>28</sup>, there is a steep rock on the northern slope of the Bayankara Mountains, somewhere near the headwaters of the Ma Chu. It is said that a natural formation resembling the Tibetan letter A is found on that rock. Near there, the river leaves the mountains, flowing into a wider valley, and as such a river outlet in Tibetan is called *mdo* the name of Amdo may be explained as the ‘[Ma Chu] river outlet near the A-shaped rock formation’.

### **A historical sketch of Tibet’s Amdo region**

As the northeastern part of the Tibetan Highland has distinct natural, ethnic and geographic features, it may be worthwhile to take a short look at the historical development of Amdo. The Amdowas, Tibetans of Amdo, are

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<sup>21</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.2; and 1959, pp.12f. While he realizes that sometimes parts of Amdo are mistaken as Kham, he subsequently seems to mistake Lower *mdo* as southeastern Amdo - except there would exist a simultaneous use of this term for both Kham (*mdo smad*) and southeastern Amdo.

<sup>22</sup> Even at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only *mdo kham*s was used and the independent toponyms Amdo and Kham were not yet utilized, as may be seen in the *Annals of Kokonor* (cp. Ho-Chin Yang 1969, p.40), for instance.

<sup>23</sup> Cp. Das 1902a, pp.140f.: *kham*s: I. appetite; II. health, condition, root; III. the six elements; IV. empire, realm, territory; V. world; VI. eastern Tibet.

<sup>24</sup> According to Jäschke’s *A Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1998, p.39), *yul kham*s means empire, in a geographical sense. (Das 1902a, p.141, *kham*s IV.)

<sup>25</sup> In contrast to Ren & Tshe-dbang (1991, pp.34: ‘The formation of the place-name *mdo kham*s implies that it is a merger of two Tibetan nouns: *Amdo* and *Kham*s.’) I do not believe the toponym *mdo kham*s to be a merger, but rather the two toponyms *Amdo* and *Kham* to be the result of the separation of that term.

<sup>26</sup> Wylie 1962, p.104.

<sup>27</sup> Wylie 1962, p.112.

<sup>28</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.2; and 1959, p.12f.

said to consider themselves as Böchenpa (*bod chen pa*), people of ‘Greater Tibet’, in contrast to those of ‘Little Tibet’, Böchung (*bod chung*). According to Hermanns,<sup>29</sup> Tibetan tribes of Amdo regard themselves as the proper and eldest Bö (*bod*) while Tibetans of central and western Tibet are thought to be their descendants. This view does not seem unfounded, especially when considering early proto-Tibetan immigration. The Tibetan tribes of Amdo can be closely associated to the Qiang (Wade-Giles spelling: Ch’iang) peoples of old Chinese records. Beginning in the first millennium B.C., parts of those Qiang tribes gradually migrated from Central Asia onto the Tibetan Highland. Passing through the valleys of northeastern Tibet, they thus first spread in Amdo and gradually continued to take possession of southern and western Tibet.<sup>30</sup>

Those Qiang of course mixed with autochthonous tribes present and with peoples who subsequently invaded Tibet. Under these circumstances it can hardly be possible to trace a kind of original *bod*-people with a root common to all Tibetan tribes. Lama Tsenpo, too, who - at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - had composed the only all-comprehensive geography of Tibet en toto, also expresses his doubts:

As for the (origin of) the people of the country of Tibet, it is difficult to make a decision, because they are explained by the Tibetans as having been produced from a monkey (...) Among the kings, ministers, and translators of Tibet in former times, there were Khu, Zo, Dpang, G-yung, Rma, and others; and there were Chinese and many famous tribes (rus) of Hor, such as Sa-ri, Gru-gu, Di-mir, Shi-ri, and others; therefore it is not certain that there was (only) one racial origin (rus dang chad khungs).<sup>31</sup>

The ancient Chinese term Qiang covers all the nomads of the regions west of China and might have been derived from the old Tibetan word ‘*Jang* (pronounced Djang). The Chinese character for Qiang carries the symbols for ‘man’ and ‘sheep’ which can easily be interpreted as ‘men leading sheep to pasture’, i.e. stock-farming nomads. During the early Shang period of Chinese history (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.) those western neighbours of old China settled in an area stretching from Shanxi in northern China’s loess highlands through Gansu to northern Sichuan. Chinese mythology has it that Qiang were involved in overthrowing the Shang dynasty and establishing the power of Zhou dynasty. The early or rather proto-Tibetans have most likely played a major role in the formation of the Chinese<sup>32</sup> civilization of antiquity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hermanns 1948, pp.7f. According to Sarat Chandra Das 1902a, p.878, this distinction of Bö-chen and Bö-chung is recognized in Central Tibet, too.

<sup>30</sup> Gruschke 1996, p.130.

<sup>31</sup> Wylie 1962, p.113.

<sup>32</sup> Discussion of the relationship between old Tibet and China ordinarily meet a host of problems which do not just reflect imperialist inclinations of the Chinese side (and of Tibetans in olden times, too), but is a matter of concepts and definitions as well. (Cp. Gruschke 1993, p.139.)

One basic problem arises from the Western concept of a nation state. This notion was born in Europe, and although true nation states on the basis of homogenous ethnic groups are hard to be found on our globe, it was carried all over the world and is decisive for political action. The other basic problem is one of denominations, or rather of definitions of terms. While denominations like China and Chinese are taken in the sense of a nation state, these terms should rather be understood as the description or representation of a culturally defined realm which nowadays is - by both the West and politicians of the PRC - inappropriately considered a nation state. But as a multi-ethnic country, China never was and never can be a nation state in a Western sense; and although Chinese took up that term, they still comprehend China as a culturally defined, historically grown country. This view makes it difficult to define exact borderlines. These could be drawn by an agreement that takes the common interests of all those ethnic groups as a basis for the formation of a common state. So far, the first moves have been made on paper - by the text of the Chinese constitution - but the reality of political life indicates that there is still a long way to go.

As we cannot discuss or solve these problems of definition here, it should be said that here the terms China and Chinese are used in a cultural rather than a political or ethnic sense. Han or Han-Chinese will be used for ethnic Chinese. In Western linguistic use two terms which are differentiated in Chinese language by the terms *hanzu* for the majority people of China and *zhongguo ren* (‘people of the Middle Kingdom’) as the citizens of China are both translated as Chinese. This root of mutual misunderstanding should be avoided here, as none of the historical

After the establishment of China's first imperial dynasty - by another kingdom that had its roots in the 'barbarian west' - the genesis of the Han-Chinese identity brought the agriculturally based Chinese Empire again into conflict with pastoral tribes at its western border, especially with the Xiongnu who virtually ruined the state by the tributes they got in exchange for peace. This was the reason why Han Emperor Wudi (140-67 B.C.) started his military campaigns which ended in the conquest not only of the bordering regions but of all the Tarim Basin in present-day Xinjiang. When the Qiang-Tibetans threatened the newly opened trade routes to Middle Asia, they were repelled by a well-equipped Chinese army in 62-60 B.C. A first military outpost of the Han dynasty had already been established near today's Xining in 121 B.C. From there the Chinese started the colonization of the area between the Yellow River and Lake Kokonor.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning of the Tang dynasty's rule of China, Tibetans were called Tubo, a term that seems to be derived from *tu phod* or *stod bod* (upper Tibet)<sup>35</sup>. The archaic Tibetan dialects of Amdo have retained the articulation of the medieval Tibetan language; as such the pronunciation is *Töwöd*, as in Mongolian tongue. Thus, the term was handed down as *Tübüt* in Turkish diction, *Tibbat* in Arabic and passed on as *Tibet* in Western languages. As in Chinese annals *tu phod* or *stod bod* was represented as *Tubo*, the character reading *bo* may also be pronounced *fan* (which in the West is usually translated as 'barbarian', but actually means 'foreign'); later the Chinese pronunciation *Tufan* became generally adopted.<sup>36</sup> Therefore in old travelogues we can also find Chinese expressions like Sifan and Hsifan (*Xifan* in Pinyin spelling). These were interpreted as western barbarians' and included the Tibetans of Amdo. Furthermore the Turko-Mongol word *Tangut* originally used for Tibetans in general, yet specifically referred to the Amdowas, as northeastern Tibet is the area of permanent contact and exchange between all those peoples around the pivot of China, Tibet, Mongolia and the Inner Asian Silk Road.

Although Amdo had long been the realm of the proto-Tibetan Qiang, they did not fully occupy the region throughout the last two thousand years. When in Central Tibet the ruler King<sup>37</sup> Songtsen Gampo started to build up a Greater Tibetan Empire, several other kingdoms existed in the northeastern part of the plateau, like those of Minyag, Sumpa and Turuhun. Chinese named dynasties like the Early Qin (351-394 A.D.), Late Qin (384-417) and Late Liang (386-403) obscure the fact that the ruling bodies of those principalities and kingdoms were proto-Tibetan.<sup>38</sup> Besides that, the fringe of the Tibetan Plateau always tended to offer retreat to ethnic populations who came under pressure from large-scale migrations of neighbouring peoples or for political reasons.

One such example is the Yugurs of the Gansu-Qinghai borderland on the northern slope of the Tibetan Highland. Beginning in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Central Asian Uyghurs (Chinese *Huihu*), originally inhabiting the Orkhon valley of Mongolia, increasingly came under pressure because of internal struggles for power and due to natural disasters. They therefore started to move in waves in a western direction where they set up the Uyghur kingdom of the Turpan Basin. They also settled along the oases of the Hexi-corridor in Gansu where they built up a Ganzhou Khanate. After a war against the developing Tangut Kingdom of Xi Xia in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, the Hexi-Uyghurs became vassals of the latter kingdom and mixed with neighbouring

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depictions and interpretations here are meant as political statements, neither **for** nor **against** the independence of any part of the PRC.

<sup>33</sup> Hermanns 1948, pp.23ff.

<sup>34</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.26.

<sup>35</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.9.

<sup>36</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.26; Yang Zhiguo 1985, p.13. The *tubo* pronunciation is rendered in *The Great Dictionary of Chinese Language* (Hanyu Da Cidian), Shanghai <sup>3</sup>1994, vol.3, p.89, and Shanghai <sup>2</sup>1994, vol.9, p.552.

<sup>37</sup> or rather emperor: see note 17.

<sup>38</sup> Cp. Gruschke 1996, pp.93f., 128f., 178f., and Hermanns 1965, p.234.

populations - thus finally forming a Yugur nationality. After the destruction of Xi Xia by the Mongols in 1227 and during the decline of the Yuan-Chinese Empire (1274-1368) conflicts started among the local feudal lords which finally drove the Yugurs to the mountainous region (Qilian Mts. or Nan Shan) that separates Amdo from Central Asian deserts.<sup>39</sup>

On the eve of the Mongolian assault under Chenggis Khan's leadership, Amdo to some extent formed part of the Northern Song dynasty's empire: especially the area around Xining and the region between the Yellow River section near Gonghe (Jishi Jun) and Lower Amdo's Taozhou district. Amdo's northern part - from Lanzhou westward along the Qilian Mountain Range - belonged to the Tangut Empire Xi Xia.<sup>40</sup> The latter's disastrous defeat by the troops of Chenggis Khan had quickly brought the whole of Tibet under Mongolian control. The total destruction of any unyielding enemy was too horrifying to have permitted the organization of any resistance. Present-day Tu (the so-called Monguor<sup>41</sup>) and Dongxiang national minorities are said to be the last vestiges of the former population of Xi Xia, and they are supposed to have intruded into the Datong-Huzhu-Linxia area after the defeat by Chenggis Khan in 1226/1227.<sup>42</sup>

The conquest of the Amdo area had started in 1226 by Subudei, one of Chinggis Khan's greatest commanders, who invaded the Tsongkha area on his way to Lanzhou. In 1275, i.e. soon after the establishment of the Yuan dynasty, another Mongol army invaded Amdo to fight the impetuous Tufan-Tibetans whose nomad pastures extended in the Lake Kokonor area. A war raged for half a century within the Tsongkha region around Xining. Therefore the small Tibetan tribes living there had to flee the country and leave it to the invading Mongolians.<sup>43</sup>

During the Yuan dynasty of the Mongol-Chinese Empire, Muslim tribes of Samarkand in Western Turkestan migrated towards the East. Under the guidance of a mullah they reached the upper reaches of the Yellow River and settled in the valleys around the present-day Xunhua area (Tib. Dowi). Tradition has it that a legendary camel carried bags full of earth from their home which were mixed with earth around a 'Camel Spring'. There the camel turned to stone, and the tribe's long migration came to an end. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century they occupied that small section of the Yellow River gorge around Xunhua, and the Salar, as this Muslim population is called, shared their environment with Tibetans living high up in the mountains, together with Hui Muslims and Han-Chinese. The language they speak corresponds to Chaghatai-Turkish, but not surprisingly includes a lot of Mongolian, Tibetan and Chinese loan-words.<sup>44</sup>

Long after the end of the Mongol-Chinese Yuan dynasty (1368), political and ethnic unrest on the Inner Mongolian Ordos Plateau induced the first Mongolian groups to move further southwest. Headed by Ibulus those tribes reached the shores of Lake Kokonor in 1509 and ravaged the people living in the grassland area around it. In 1566 they were strengthened by the hordes of Setsen Gung, and in 1573 finally by Altan Khan. Reinforcements from Mongolia continued to come, as Ligdan Khan (1592-1634), since 1604 prince of the Chakhar tribes in Inner Mongolia, tried again to establish a Great Khanate modelled after the example of Chenggis and Khubilai Khan. Because of his repressive actions, most of the Mongolian tribes rebelled against

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<sup>39</sup> Ma Yin et al. 1990, pp.190f.

<sup>40</sup> Cp. map pp.36f. of *The historical Atlas of China*, vol. VI, Shanghai 1982.

<sup>41</sup> Cp. Schram 1954, 1957 and Schröder 1952, 1953 (about the Tujen = Monguor = Tuzu).

<sup>42</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.30.

<sup>43</sup> Schram 1954, p.29.

<sup>44</sup> Ma Yin et al. 1990, p.179; Hermanns 1948, p.30; Gyurme Dorje 1996, p.590.



him. In 1631-32 Ligdan's last punitive expedition against the Aru Khorchin in the southeast of Inner Mongolia brought about the devastating response of the emerging Manchu Empire. After gathering the remaining followers around him Ligdan had to flee westward. A trek of 100.000 people, including women and children, moved across the Ordos into Amdo. The Mongolian tribes took possession of the Kokonor area and, strengthened by other groups of Khalkha Mongols, made their way farther south to the headwaters of the Ma Chu (Yellow River).<sup>45</sup>

Thus arose a Mongolian kingdom in the Kokonor area that was formally established by Gushri Khan in 1633. He belonged to the Khoshot Mongols, a sub-tribe of the Oirats, and traced his origins to the younger brother of Chenggis Khan. In 1636 Gushri Khan invaded Kham, the eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau, six years later he conquered Central Tibet, eradicating the local kingdoms there. In 1641 he assigned the whole country to the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatsho (1617-1680) and thus helped to establish the Tibetan theocracy. The support of the Mongolian princely dynasty of Amdo for the Lamaist take-over of autocratic power in Tibet was substantial.<sup>46</sup>

Possibly in the course of the warfare between Mongolian and Chinese armies during Ming dynasty's Wanli reign (1573-1620), a Chinese army unit named 'secure the peace', *ba'o'an*, was established in Amdo's Rongwo valley. Under the command of Gansu's Hezhou (today's Linxia district in Gansu) military commission a town of Bao'an developed. Its inhabitants mixed with Tibetans, Hui and Mongolians of the surrounding area and thus developed distinct features of an ethnic population of its own - the Bao'an. As both the Ming and Qing dynasties of the Chinese Empire supported the development of the Lamaist monasteries in Amdo as an effort to pacify the region, the feudal power of Rongwo's main monastery grew to an extent that during the Tongzhi reign (1862-74) of the Qing dynasty the Bao'an started to move towards the northeast. First they established themselves around Xunhua where, two centuries earlier, the Salar had stabilized their colony, and finally settled in the area of Jishi Shan. Thus they constituted a buffer between the Hui Muslims of Hezhou and the Salar Muslims and Tibetans in the Yellow River area around Xunhua (in today's Qinghai province).<sup>47</sup>

During the Yongzheng reign (1723-35) of the Manchu-Chinese Empire Muslim immigration into Amdo started from southern Gansu's Hezhou area. Those Muslims seem to be some other descendants of the Uyghurs of the Middle Ages who had substantially participated in power during the Chinese Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). The Hui Muslims settled in Tsongkha valley and around Hualong on the northern slopes of the Yellow River canyon. The Muslims of Datong, north of Xining, originally came from northern Gansu's Liangzhou (Wuwei).<sup>48</sup> As at that time these parts of Amdo were part of Gansu province, it was a matter of provincial and not of national settlement policy. In the train of the 'pacification' of the Mongol tribes during the Qianlong era of Manchu-Chinese rule, the Hui Muslims filled the political vacuum in Tibet's northeast, and encroached southwestward from Xining toward northern Kham, thus dominating the trade routes.

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<sup>45</sup> Gruschke 1993, p.44; Veit 1986, p.400. By modern Tibetan historians this is not seen as a 'military invasion, but migration by their own compatriots that led them to settle on Tibetan land.' (Karmay 1998, pp.526f.) According to such an odd concept of settlement especially by martial tribes, as the Mongolian warriors were, there should not exist any kind of military expansion or colonization. It allows viewing this part of history in northeastern Tibet as a kind of altruistic reception of foreign tribes into the Tibetan realm.

<sup>46</sup> Hermanns 1948, pp.29f.

<sup>47</sup> Ma Yin et al. 1990, pp.184f.

<sup>48</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.30.

From 1727 until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the whole of Amdo - with the exception of the vast grasslands of the pastoral Ngolok and Serta - was controlled by the Muslim Ma clan.<sup>49</sup> The territory that they looked upon as their family's realm was the foundation for Kokonor province of the Manchu Empire and, consequently, for the present-day Chinese province of Qinghai. Border delimitations on the boundary line with Central Tibet have hardly changed. Though today Hui Muslims are found all over Amdo, the aforesaid places still are their main colonies, and generally they live in towns rather than in the country. The thoroughly Chinese character of central Tsongkha - the heartland of Lower Amdo - is last but not least produced by the presence of the Hui who are sinicized descendants of medieval Central Asian Uyghurs.<sup>50</sup>

About two centuries ago, Tibetans again started to penetrate the Kokonor and Ma Chu areas which earlier were populated by Mongolian tribes. Their migration started with the upcoming influence of Amdo's huge Labrang Monastery.<sup>51</sup> Today there are only a few Mongolian families left in the area north and east of Lake Kokonor, some more only south of Rongwo valley. The Mongolian tribes had to withdraw into the desolate domains of the Tsaidam Basin which was more or less deserted, as the Tibetans' livestock - yaks and sheep - couldn't bear the arid climate there. The camels, horses and fat tail sheep can endure the rough conditions in Tsaidam's deserts.<sup>52</sup>

The last minority group that immigrated into Amdo were the Kazakhs who, ethnically, are more likely of Kirgiz origin. They entered the area near the western end of the Qilian Shan mountains and into northern Tsaidam in 1936.<sup>53</sup> They had been suffering from the bloody rule of the Xinjiang warlord Sheng Shicai and therefore they started to move eastward into those parts of Gansu and Qinghai which are considered to belong to Amdo. Actually their situation did not improve much as the Muslim regime of the Qinghai warlord Ma Bufang suppressed them as much as he did the Tibetans and Mongolians in the area.<sup>54</sup>

The name of the province comprising most of Amdo in today's People's Republic of China, Qinghai, is the literal translation of the Mongolian word *Kokonor* [Khöke Nor] and Tsho Ngombo (*mtsho sngon po*) in Tibetan. It means 'blue lake' or 'blue sea', named after the largest lake on the entire Tibetan Plateau. The history of the province started in 1727 when the Ma family gained control over it. In 1928 Qinghai (former English spelling: Tsing hai) was re-established as a province of the Nationalists' Republic of China, its area enlarged at the expense of neighbouring Gansu. After the Chinese Red Army's victory over Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist troops, the Muslim warlord of Qinghai, Ma Bufang, succumbed to the Communists.

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<sup>49</sup> Gyurme Dorje 1996, pp.558f.

<sup>50</sup> They should not be confused with the Uyghurs (Chin. *Weiwu'er*) of today's Xinjiang who are closely related to modern Turkish peoples of central and western Asia. The Hui Muslims' past is recalled by their name, Hui, a remnant of the term *Huihu*, as the medieval Uyghurs were called in Chinese sources. As they played a major role in politics and state affairs during the late Tang dynasty (618-907) of the Chinese Empire, they underwent an early process of sinicization. They lost their own language centuries ago, and Chinese became a *lingua franca* among the various peoples all over northeastern Tibet. Sinicization was both a process of assimilation furthered by governments and acculturation entered upon by the respective tribes themselves. This was also the case with Tibetans in Tsongkha, and not, as modern Tibetan writers assume, just 'carried out by the Chinese Nationalists' (Karmay 1998, p.528). Similarly we have good reason to believe that among Amdo-Tibetans considerable numbers of other peoples have been 'tibetanized' as well, thus becoming Tibetans.

<sup>51</sup> Cp. Tafel 1914, vol. II, p.292. Modern Tibetan historians seem to ignore that the Tibetans living in these areas partially moved into them only very late. According to Karmay (1998, p.527) it was rather internal quarrels that caused the Mongolian tribes to migrate further.

<sup>52</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.28.

<sup>53</sup> Hermanns 1948, p.31.

<sup>54</sup> Ma Yin et al. 1990, p.233.

### Highlights of Amdo culture

Being a pivot between the civilizations of Tibet, Mongolia, Inner China and the Silk Road, the cultural province of Amdo in the northeast of the Tibetan Highland shelters relics and monuments belonging to various epochs and different cultural realms. Ruins, tombs and more archaeological sites dating to prehistoric eras and pre-Buddhist pastoral societies are found, just as are vestiges of early Chinese dynasties. By the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan conquest of both North Tibet and neighbouring Central Asian regions, Mahayana Buddhism was rooted there, since the proximity of Silk Road oases and Chinese Buddhism had already partially influenced the population of Amdo.

Starting with the Mongol conquest of Inner Asia and followed by a Chinese imperial policy of supporting Tibetan lamas, Amdo developed to become another religious and cultural core besides Central Tibet.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, there are some of the most important lamaseries, i.e. monastic centres of Tibetan Buddhism, among the numerous cultural relics found all over Amdo. If we particularly mention Kumbum and Labrang monasteries, it is because these were most famous in the West, while other lamaseries, dating to an earlier age, had been very important focal points at their heyday. Therefore, monastic institutions and their furnishings can be considered to constitute the bulk of Amdo's cultural relics:

The monastery ... is the centre of all religious teachings of Buddha. On entering it, one is overcome with the wealth of creativity that abounds on the walls and altars of the various temples. ... The first [monastery] ... was based on a *mandala* as were those of subsequent monasteries and temples. (...) More than just a diagram, the mandala is a symbol of a consecrated region. The outer line which delineates the first layer of the mandala is the line which separates the terrestrial from the celestial. ... Just as the disciple mentally enters the spiritual realm of the diagram through concentrated meditation, he too, by physically entering the temple, arrives within a spiritual realm.<sup>56</sup>

The lamaseries and their temple buildings were, and are again, the focus of Tibetan social activity, and as such they offer the pilgrims the possibility to worship Buddhist deities, and accumulate religious merits by donations to the monastic communities. Although it should not be forgotten that monasteries have always played an important role in Tibetan hegemonic politics, their most prominent function is education. In these monasteries monks are trained to acquire exemplary knowledge of fundamental Buddhist principles, of both exoteric and esoteric studies. For the ordinary faithful the temples submit an opulent pictorial broadsheet portraying the rich pantheon related to their every-day life. However, the statues and murals are not believed to just depict the deities, but the latter are presumed to dwell therein and hence to assist the worshipper:

The painting ... is a record of visions, mystical experiences and teachings which are laid down in texts or personally interpreted by lamas. ... The ... painted image ... means 'liberation through sight' [*mthong grol*], implying that the person viewing the painting [in which the deity is considered to dwell] and

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<sup>55</sup> It is often overlooked that many of the most impressive and famous religious personages of Tibetan cultural history originated from Amdo. By way of example here we may only mention the Kagyüpa scholar Uryenpa Rinchen Pel (*urgyan pa rin chen dpal*, 1230-1309), Kadampa master Döndrub Rinchen (*don grub rin chen*, 1309-1385), Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelugpa order, 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, and 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. Some of the most influential incarnate lamas at the Ming and Qing imperial court were Amdowas: Mindröl Khutuktu, Tukvan Khutuktu, Chankya Khutuktu, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jebtsündampa Khutuktu in Urga, and the first three Jamyang Lamas of Labrang. (Cp. Yang Guiming & Ma 1992)

<sup>56</sup> Cit. Khosla 1975, p.76.

understanding it (or for that matter entering the temple) will be liberated through his vision of the spectacle.<sup>57</sup>

As everything - each painting, each image, decoration and feature - has a symbolic meaning, the interpretation and explanation of those artistic elaborations lie beyond the scope of this work. Numerous catalogues and iconographical works, together with introductions into the philosophical and mystical systems of Tibetan Buddhism may have already led our reader to a certain understanding of Tibetan fine arts.<sup>58</sup> It is necessary to specify the historical, social and political prerequisites and accompanying circumstances of the development of relics found in northeastern Tibet, in modern Amdo.

The richness in architectonic shaping and the profusion of artistic and ornamental fittings of monasteries in Amdo reflect the versatile cultural exchange relationships. Qutan Si is looked upon as one of those jewels of the olden times, as its architecture dates from the early Ming dynasty (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century) and its walls carry some of the oldest murals of eastern Tibet. Similarly, Tsangwa Gompa of virtually hidden Dzamthang must be seen as a major vestige of medieval Tibetan history, although and because the order it represents, the Jonangpa, was eliminated in Tibet proper.

Yet, historically, many Amdo monasteries are also among the most significant in Tibet and China. According to a local legend, it was in northeastern Tibet that Buddhism started to recover after it had been wiped out by the Yarlung dynasty King Langdarma. Amdo monasteries other than Gelugpa are generally underestimated, as the renowned lamaseries of Kumbum and Labrang, besides other important monastic institutions of the Yellow Hats, overshadow the fact that there were important monastic institutions of all Tibetan Buddhist orders before the Gelugpas' arrival.<sup>59</sup> Even today, the latter are mainly represented in northern and central Amdo, while in the southern half the Nyingmapa play a similarly predominant role.<sup>60</sup> (see map, *fig.* M4)

Tsongkhapa, founder of this most influential order of Lamaism, was born in Amdo's heartland, and the Kumbum Monastery was founded in his memory. The presumably oldest monastery of Amdo, Shyachung Gompa, is where the great reformer started his monastic career. The high density of Gelugpa monasteries distributed all over Amdo, particularly in the most populated areas, may give an idea of the importance of Tibet's northeast for the development of this Buddhist school. It was well-represented here even before the Gelugpa overcame all resistance in Central Tibet. The political importance of Lamaism is further shown by monastic centres like Labrang Tashi Khyil - one of the 'big five' of the whole of Tibet -, Rongwo Göñchen, Kirti Gompa, Tagtshang Lhamo, and Ragya Gompa near holy Mt. Amnye Machen. Even among autonomous principalities like Chone and among non-Tibetan tribes like the Tu and Yugur, the influence of the Gelugpa

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<sup>57</sup> Cit. Khosla 1975, p.78.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance: Bell 1987; Hoffmann 1956; Li Anche 1994; Lopez 1997; Rhie & Thurman 1991, 1996; Tucci 1970. As for the symbolism in Tibetan monasteries we recommend an exposé of Khosla (1975).

<sup>59</sup> Karmay (1998, p.528) only admits the existence of 'a few Sa-skyapa and bKa'-brgyud-pa monasteries before the arrival of the dGe-lugs-pa order'. The rich and varied monastic life of pre-Gelugpa Amdo is obscured by the circumstance that many of the later Gelugpa lamaseries had originally been established as Nyingmapa, Sakyapa, and Kagyüpa institutions. Many of these had been founded on initiative of, or supported by, the Ming government of imperial China. Some of the Red sect monasteries can still be found in the more secluded parts of Amdo, be it in the barren mountains of the Yellow River canyon and the gorges of its tributaries, or in the far south of Amdo where the formidable Ngolok nomads (*ibid.*, p.525) prevented the old orders of being obliterated.

<sup>60</sup> In the southern and eastern part, Karmay (1998, p.528) largely over-estimates the role of the Bön faith. While there are certain areas where the Bönpo still have a leading role, mostly in the gorges of northern Gyarong and neighbouring grasslands and hills of Ngawa, Sharkhog and Thewo, the various red sects of Tibetan Buddhism are still rooted much deeper in southern Amdo. Even the Jonangpa order which was believed to be extinct has survived the central Tibetan suppression since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

spread quickly, and left its traces in lamaseries like Rgolung (Chin. *Youning Si*) which became the spiritual centre for the Tu-Monguor population. At the same time, the high incarnate lamas kept in touch with the Chinese Imperial court in Beijing and developed to become a significant political factor in the Chinese Empire. The importance of Amdo's spiritual leaders and therefore Tibetan influence at the imperial court should not be underestimated.

Close observation of remote and secluded valleys shows that Lamaist scholarship was not fended off, even though some of their inhabitants, like the notorious Ngolok tribes, were ill-famed for their ruthless temper. Not only did they produce monastic communities like other Tibetans, but even developed artistic expressions of their own. Nowhere else on the Tibetan Plateau can we find large-scale architectural interpretations of a 'pure land' than in the Nyingmapa realm of eastern Tibet. Monasticism has experienced an impressive revival in Amdo (and Kham), presenting about a third of the more than 3,000 Tibetan monasteries and temples which have been rebuilt during the last two decades.<sup>61</sup> Nobody should be astonished to meet with monastic institutions that did not exist before 1950, and one of these, Serthang Larung Academy, supposedly is the world's largest Buddhist institution.

Beyond that, vast expanses of Amdo may offer some of the most splendid and varied landscapes of the Tibetan Plateau, reaching from the glacial world of Qilian and Kunlun Shan, the charming valleys of Tsongkha through rugged canyons of the Yellow River to the deserts of Tsaidam Basin and the vast grasslands of the Changthang steppes. At the point of intersection the highland's biggest water body and most famous lake stretches like a pole of imperturbability and peace: the 'Blue Lake'. It is known in the West by its Mongolian name Kokonor, while the Tibetans call it Tsho Ngombo. The land throughout Amdo is full of legends; various peoples and old cultures left their traces there in many archaeological sites, thus adding even more colour to this part of the roof of the world.

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<sup>61</sup> Today (1999) more than 1000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and temples exist in Amdo: about 600 in Qinghai (without Yushu prefecture which is seen as part of Kham), 370 in Gansu, and some 170 in Sichuan (Amdo share of Ngawa and Kandse). (Sources: AZZ, Pu 1996, Ran 1994, and own research findings)