

Dokham (*mdo khams*) -

The Eastern Part of the Tibetan Plateau

[Excerpt of: "[The Cultural Monuments of Tibet's Outer Provinces: Amdo, volume 1. The Qinghai Part of Amdo](#)" (Northeastern Tibet) by © [Andreas Gruschke](#), published at [White Lotus Press](#), Bangkok]

The regions east and northeast of the Lhasa-dominated areas are called Do-Kham (*mdo khams*). Amdo and Kham are generally considered to be the two Tibetan 'provinces' that make up eastern Tibet. These 'provinces' are seen from a Lhasa perspective as extending as far as the foot of the mountain ranges that frame the Tibetan Highland to the north and east, i.e. the geographical boundaries of the plateau. If this were so Amdo would be bordered in the north by the oases along the southern edge of the Mongolian Gobi: Dunhuang, Jiuquan, Zhangye and Wuwei. These old trade markets of the ancient Silk Road belonged to the Tibetan empire during the eighth and ninth centuries; yet such a delimitation of ethnic Tibet is obviously questionable. Tibetans live in some zones of the Nan Shan¹ mountains stretching on the border of China's Gansu and Qinghai provinces, but they can hardly be considered as the main population of the Silk Road oases; in some areas there are none at all.

The Chinese province of Qinghai is generally identified with the greater part of Amdo. This Tibetan term, however, refers to an area stretching far into the neighbouring Chinese provinces of Gansu and Sichuan. Moreover, Tibetans consider the Qinghai-administered regions of Yushu and Nangchen as belonging to Kham. Kham reaches further north in the inner part of the plateau than in the east, whereas Amdo occupies some areas in northern Sichuan province. Historical reasons may play an essential role in the distinction of what is a part of Amdo and what belongs to Kham. For general purposes it is useful to look at the river systems which dominate the two areas.²

Although maps on the Do-Kham region tend to show some indistinct borderlines, it can be easily recognized that Amdo mainly comprises the river system of the Ma Chu - as the Yellow River is called by Tibetans - and of its tributaries that join the stream before reaching Gansu's capital Lanzhou. Kham, on the other hand, occupies that part of the Tibetan Plateau that is characterized by deep gorges cut by China's largest river, the Chang Jiang or Yangzi Jiang (Yangtse; Dri Chu in Tibetan) and its tributaries like the Yalong Jiang (Nya Chu), as well as the Southeast Asian rivers Mekong (Dza Chu) and Salween (Nag Chu).

This is a rough outline of how the two areas could be distinguished from each other, although the Ngawa (Chin. *Aba*) area makes it obvious that the river systems cannot be taken as an absolute criterion. The rivers of that area drain south into the Yangtse system although they belong to Amdo in the north. The main reason for this may be the ethnic structure of that region: the Ngawa Prefecture is populated by members of the Ngolok-Seta tribes and therefore has close relations with the famous Ngoloks who live in the adjacent area of Amnye Machen, Amdo's most famous sacred mountain.

¹ The Nan Shan or Qilian Shan demarcates the borderline between the Tibetan highland and the desert land of the Gobi. Qilian Shan is transcribed *Trilen* in Tibetan, and named 'red hills' (*gongbu dmar ru*) in old Tibetan sources. (Karmay 1998, p.525)

² Gruschke 1997a, pp. 279-286

The absence of distinct borderlines indicates that Amdo and Kham, or rather Do-Kham, are not and may never have been provinces in an administrative sense.³ As they exhibit some distinct features which distinguish them not only from Central Tibet but also from each other, we should rather speak of Amdo and Kham in the sense of ‘cultural or geographical provinces’ of Tibet. During the 18th century, Amdo even created the impression of being at least relatively autonomous, if not independent.

From the states of Hor and Amdoa no soldiers are taken, from motives of distrust, as the first are adherents of the Tatar rather than the Tibetan cause, and usually speak the Tatar language, while the second dwell on the confines of China beyond the Great Wall, and speak more Tibetan than Tatar and Chinese.⁴

On the other hand, had Amdo and Kham been under the Dalai Lama’s secular and not only spiritual rule, the extent of his incumbency would still have seemed to be quite unclear; Central Tibetans of the 18th century seemed to be very ignorant about the location and extension of Amdo:

The King of Tibet is also ruler over the state of Amdoa, mentioned above, which is bounded on the east by China, on the north by Kokonor and Chang, on the west by Kham, and on the south by Tonquin, Pegu, or Siam, as far as is known; but this is not known for certain, as the Tibetans have very little knowledge of those countries and the states neighbouring them.⁵

Whatever the political relationship between Lhasa and Amdo may have been, it can certainly be noted that throughout a very long period of Tibetan history Amdo was a region on the Tibetan Plateau that was felt to be quite different from Central Tibet:

In my time nearly all the lecturers and lamas of the university, masters of the Supreme Lama, and the Grand Lamas who have been born again, came from Amdoa, a province from which they do not draft soldiers, as mentioned above. (...) Notwithstanding the (...) blameable habits of the Tibetans, they have some good points, among which, being generally intelligent (although not equal to the people of the state of Amdoa, who are extremely quick), they are gentle and humane and amenable to reason.⁶

Administratively, the Do-Kham territory seems to have been torn apart and distributed among modern China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR, Chin. *Xizang zizhiqu*) and the four Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. This ‘dismantling’ of Tibet, especially of the Do-Kham region, is usually attributed to the Communist government of the People’s Republic of China, founded in 1949. This is not quite correct, as the administrative pattern had already been created during the Chinese Empire and the Republican era. Details of the historical development will be illustrated in the section on Amdo, and, in a separate volume, on Kham.

³ It is different regarding the joint term *mdo khams*, which has been an administrative term on provincial level even during the Ming reign of imperial China, occupying the sphere of the Yuan military commission of *Tubo* (cp. Franke 1981, p.296; Zimmermann 1998, pp.10-14). It therefore seems that the use of the term *duo gansi* as an administrative unit only came into practice during the Chinese Ming dynasty, though it was surely based on the older Tibetan designation of *mdo khams*.

⁴ Fra Francesco Orazio della Penna di Billi, *Brief Account of the Kingdom of Tibet*, (1730), in: C.R. Markham, *Narratives of the mission of G. Bogle to Tibet*, London 1876, App. III, p. 309.

⁵ Orazio della Penna 1730, loc. cit. p. 313.

⁶ Orazio della Penna 1730, loc. cit. p. 313 and 318. As for this description, Amdo would not be including the Kokonor and (probably) Changthang areas - Chang, cp. della Penna, p. 311 - but rather covering what nowadays is considered to be eastern and southeastern Kham plus northeastern Kham, Tebo, cp. loc. cit. p.313, and the southernmost Ngawa resp. eastern parts of what is today’s Amdo, loc. cit.: Tongor (Tangkar) and Kungbung (Kumbum) may represent the Tsongkha valley, Chenisungba is likely to be Chone.

However, the divisional character, the disunity and particularism in Amdo is a reality that is accepted even by Tibetan scholars: 'The Amdowa had never been ruled by any one leader as a united people ever since the fall of the Tibetan empire in the ninth century A.D.'⁷

The area of Amdo forms part of three present-day Chinese provinces. It occupies the bulk of Qinghai, the southwestern edge of Gansu and the northernmost grasslands of Sichuan. Historically it comprises the former kingdoms and tribal areas of Chone (*cone*) and Thewo (*the bo*), the Ngolok (*mgo lok*), Thrika (*khri kha*) and Shara Yugur (*'ban dha hor*) as well as the Tsaidam (*tshva'i 'dam*) and Hor Gyadé (*hor rgya sde*) regions, the Tsongkha (*tsong kha*) and Rongwo (*rong po*) valleys and those of their tributaries, as well as the monastic state of Labrang. Nowadays the administrative divisions take the ethnic structure of the population into account. That is why one finds the Haibei, Huangnan, Hainan, Ngolok and Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (AP) and the Haixi Mongol-Tibetan-Kazakh AP in Qinghai, Gannan TAP and Tianzhu (*then kru'u*, or *gling chu gser khab*) Tibetan Autonomous County (AC) in Gansu besides Ngawa (*lnga pa*, Chin. Aba) Tibetan-Qiang AP in Sichuan province. The Ngawa Prefecture only partly belongs to Amdo, while the bigger part, together with the Kandse TAP, is considered to make up the East of Kham.

The western part of Kham consists more or less of what is now the Chamdo district of the TAR, while northern Kham lies in Qinghai's Yushu TAP, and its southernmost part in Sichuan's Muli Tibetan AC and Dechen TAP of the province of Yunnan. In terms of history and Tibetan tribes, Kham comprises the realm of the former Nangchen kingdom (*nang chen*) in the north, Nubhor (*nub hor*), Poyül (*spo yul*), Chamdo (*chab mdo*), Drayab (*'brag yab*), Pashö (*dpag shod*), Dzayül (*rdza yul*), Tsha(wa)röng (*tsha ba röng*) and Markham (*smar khams*) areas in the West; centrally located are the former kingdoms of Lhatog (*lha thog*), Dege (*sde dge*), Ling (*gling*), Te Hor (*tre hor*), Ba (*'ba*) and Lithang (*li thang*) and Kyenaröng (*sKye nag röng*); Gyethang (*rgyal thang*) and Muli (*rmi li*) lie to the south. While Lhasa Tibetans, especially authorities of the government in exile, tend to include Minyag (*mi nyag*), Gyaröng (*rgyal mo röng*), the Qiang mountain areas of Min Shan (*byang*, in Sichuan) and the Naxi-Moso-Pumi regions around Lake Lugu and the Lijiang Naxi AP (*lho 'jang sa tham*, in Yunnan) within Kham province, the populations of those areas have their own perception of where they do or do not belong. From an anthropological point of view they live in the circumference of ethnic Tibet, i.e. they are the same Bönpo or Tantric Buddhists as the Tibetans, or at least have been influenced by Tibetan culture, but they speak their own language.⁸ Some of them even have their own specific script.

We have to accept that no province of Kham existed as a distinct area under a certain district government with jurisdiction over its land and population. Until the 20th century most western regions of Kham were governed by officials of the Dalai Lama. There was a subsequent change from absolutely independent little kingdoms in the north and in the heart of the region to the semi-dependent principalities further east up to the Chinese controlled areas in the bordering mountains. The concept of Kham was not a province but rather a loose federation of tribal states, kingdoms and dependant districts.⁹ The same is true for Amdo.

⁷ Cit. Karmay 1998, p.525.

⁸ Cp. maps in: Kessler 1983, S.VI to XI.

⁹ Kessler 1983, S.15, 81-84. - Actually, there was a single attempt to establish an administrative unit of Kham, from 1927-1955, not by a Tibetan, but the Chinese Nationalist government. The area of that province, called Xikang (cp. Samuel 1993, p.66, 71, 80) in Chinese, roughly covered what is considered to be Kham today, thus lying between U in Central Tibet, Qinghai province to the north, Yunnan to the south and the foot of the highland's fringe mountains to the east. Although Xikang was given the status of a regular province in 1939, with the administrative centre at Kangding, theirs was just a more or less nominal authority, especially when approaching the Yangtse river from the east.

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