



***Social Status
in the Tibetan World***

**Social Status as Reflected
in Tibetan Fictional
Narrative Literature,
Biographies and Memoirs**

30–31 May 2017
Bonn

Social Status in the Tibetan World

<http://www.tibetanhistory.net/>

Workshop Schedule

*Social Status as Reflected in Tibetan Fictional
Narrative Literature, Biographies and Memoirs*

30–31 May 2017

Hotel Bristol Günnewig,
Prinz-Albert-Str. 2, 53113 Bonn

Salon Beethoven

MONDAY, 29 MAY

19:00 Dinner for Workshop Participants: *Café von & zu*, Bonner Talweg 77, 53113 Bonn

TUESDAY, 30 MAY

9:45 Welcome and Introduction

SESSION 1

Chair: *Peter Schwieger*

10:00 *Lewis Doney*: Tibetan Social Statu(e)s: Anagnorisis in the Padma-*vita* tradition

10:45 *Franz Xaver Erhard*: Social Status and the *Biography of Rdo ring Paṅḍita*

11:30 *Coffee/Tea*

SESSION 2

Chair: *Maria Turek*

12:00 *Jim Rheingans*: Local patrons, donors, and rulers in Tibetan hagiographic life writing: description of their social roles and their setting in the narrative

12:45 *Éva Kamilla Mojzes*: Cooks, Craftsmen, Criminals: the Others seen and unseen in the Autobiography of the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa (1453–1526)

13:30 *Lunch*

SESSION 3

Chair: *Charles Ramble*

15:00 *Hildegard Diemberger*: Hierarchy, leadership and responsibility: 15th century reflections from Chos kyi sgron ma's rnam thar

15:45 *Petra Maurer*: Topoi or Facts? A Critical Analysis of Events in Ngawang Tshering's Life

16:30 *Coffee/Tea*

17:00 *Lobsang Yongdan*: Inventing of a Tibetan Lama General: A Biographical Account of the Lama Kharpo (1835–1895)

18:30 Dinner for Workshop Participants: *Restaurant Majestic*, Hotel Bristol Günnewig

WEDNESDAY, 31 MAY

SESSION 4

Chair: *Petra Maurer*

10:00 *Lucia Galli*: All the Life We Cannot See. The Social Self in Tibetan Ego-documents:
The Case of Kha stag 'Dzam yag's Nyin deb (1944–1956)

10:45 *Charles Ramble*: Making the Right Match: Marriage Strategies and Social Pretensions
in Two Modern Tibetan Novels

11:30 *Coffee/Tea*

SESSION 5

Chair: *Franz Xaver Erhard*

12:00 *Lauran R. Hartley*: Negotiating Class in Tibetan Fiction: Representations of social roles
in early 20th century Tibet

12:45 *Riika Virtanen*: Could a Lion Cub and an Apso Puppy Be Friends? Social Criticism of
Discriminative Attitudes and Practices in Modern Tibetan Novels

13:30 *Lunch*

SESSION 6

Chair: *Jim Rheingans*

15:00 *Maria Turek*: Return of the Good King: The Prestige of The Nangchen rGyal po in
Contemporary Historical Narratives

15:45 *Tsering Paldrun*: The representation of social stratification in the Bonpo gter ma
Klu 'bum nag po

16:30 *Coffee/Tea*

17:00 *Kalsang Norbu Gurung*: A debate on status of superiority and inferiority in the 18th
century Tibetan literature

17:45 Business Meeting

19:00 Dinner for Workshop Participants: *Mam-Mam*, Königstraße 76, 53115 Bonn

ABSTRACTS

**Hierarchy, leadership and responsibility:
15th century reflections from Chos kyi sgron ma's rnam thar**

Hildegard Diemberger, University of Cambridge

The biography of Chos kyi sgron ma offers some remarkable reflections on how ideas of hierarchy and leadership are linked to a sense of responsibility. According to quotations attributed to the Gung thang princess those who have power and can do greater deeds are also at risk of falling to deeper hells if they abuse their position and don't accomplish what they are supposed to do. She was deeply critical of many of the privileged people around her and was aware that her position had to be used as a basis for spiritual leadership. She was a pragmatist who was both challenging and relying on social hierarchies. On several occasions, she also made it clear that, when circumstances required, she had the responsibility of taking on the burden of intervening in difficult situations and mediate conflicts as well as accomplishing other actions for the benefit of sentient beings. Providing a commentary on the hierarchical conventions of the time, including a remarkable insight into Chos kyi sgron ma's awareness of gender relations, the biography can be read against the background of wider debates on hierarchy and responsibility (see e.g. Sponberg 1997).

Tibetan Social Statu(e)s: *Anagnorisis* in the Padma-vita tradition

Lewis Doney, British Museum

The Tibetan imperial period (c.600–850 CE) saw a shift in the stratification of society with the coming of the Dharma. Christopher Beckwith and Michael Walter introduced Tibetologists to the complex mixture of Central Eurasian Culture Complex and Indian values present at the court of the emperors as they described Buddhism as a state religion during the later part of this period. Unfortunately, this approach tends to blur the chronological distinction of its sources due to a natural focus on what light later works shed on the “historical” imperial period. A proper chronological ordering of an expanded set of biographical sources, especially those on Padmasambhava and other religious figures said to be present at the Tibetan court during the eighth century, offers a more nuanced look at the *changing* values of Tibetan society from the imperial into the *phyi dar* (“second dissemination” of Buddhism) period. It uncovers a shift from status based upon kinship, military endeavour and fealty to the emperor as the highest member of Tibet, to religious status drawing on Indic social structures. Such a shift, expressed within material culture as within literature, opened up the possibility that a subject (at least rhetorically) could outshine an instantiation of indigenous divine kingship (be it Indic, Tibetan or Mongolian). A Buddhist cleric could be superior to royalty.

Social Status and the *Biography of Rdo ring Paṇḍita*

Franz Xaver Erhard, University of Oxford

Life writing occupies a central place in Tibetan literature. International scholarship often speaks of hagiography as the genre was mainly reserved for the narration of accomplished life stories of spiritual masters. Nevertheless, the 18th century saw a few examples of life writing departing from such conventions of the genre. My presentation will introduce *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gtam gyi rol mo*, generally referred to as *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita*. These memoirs, composed shortly after 1806, are perhaps the most detailed account of not only Tibet's ruling elite, but also its culture and society in the 18th century.

Besides being a rich source on political and social relations in 18th century Tibet, this early example of secular memoirs are preoccupied with social status. In this presentation I will argue that the author Rdo ring ba Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor (b.1860) utilized or perhaps even invented a new literary genre in order to defend his and his family's social status.

**All the Life We Cannot See. The Social Self in Tibetan Ego-documents:
The Case of Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *Nyin deb* (1944–1956)**

Lucia Galli, University of Oxford

Life narratives and ego-documents have much to offer to social historians, provided the latter's willingness to embark in a careful process of deduction, the matter of investigation, *i.e.* society, being the one often left looming in the background. Embedded into a specific socio-cultural context, any self-narration inevitably mirrors, to a greater or lesser degree, its structures and concepts. The examination of ego-documents through the lenses of social history proves particularly valuable in the case of pre-modern Tibet; whereas it may be true that many "escaped the historian's net", much information on Tibetan society may be retrieved by taking a closer look at the documents at our disposal. In my contribution, I will discuss a travel journal (*nyin deb*), only but one example of ego-documents contained in the Tibetan literary corpus. Written by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, an otherwise unknown 20th century Khams pa trader, the *nyin deb* records the impressions and encounters experienced by the author over a thirteen-year period (1944–1956), mainly spent travelling and pilgrimaging within the Tibetan plateau and to India and Nepal. In spite of their being often forgone in favour of extremely detailed listings of offerings, prostrations, and religious endeavours, 'Dzam yag's descriptions of his travels, largely prompted by business reasons, offer precious glimpses of the Tibetan society prior to the dramatic changes following the 1959 uprising. The shifting self-perception of the author—alternatively trader, pilgrim, and tourist—matches the frenzied atmosphere of the mid-1940s and 1950s in the Tibetan trading communities inside and outside the plateau, suspended as they were between past and future, tradition and progress, resistance and exile.

A debate on superior and inferior status in 18th century Tibetan literature

Kalsang Norbu Gurung, University of Bonn

At least since the beginning of the last millennium, Tibetans enjoyed the reading and writing of literature such as *legs bshad* (elegant sayings), *gtam dpe* (proverbs), *'bel gtam* (discourses), and so on. Many of them, as we can see, were based on the wisdom and philosophy of Indian scholars, in particular the early Buddhist scholars who came to Tibet and whose Buddhist texts were translated into Tibetan. After becoming accessible to a wider readership, Tibetan literature played a crucial and decisive role in people's views and thinking. This eventually resulted in the introduction of different statuses in Tibetan society, and it can be argued that the difference in rank between the aristocratic lord and his *mi ser*, and between a master and his servant, have been interpreted to some extent through an understanding of *legs bshad* and *gtam dpe* literature.

In this paper, I will explore the master-servant relationship in the context of the relative superiority as this is represented in the genres of Tibetan literature cited above. In particular, I have come across a short but interesting 18th century *'bel gtam* entitled, *Paṇḍita spu ring tshe ring 'phel zhes bya ba'i rtsod yig*, which may be considered as fictional literature, but presents an interesting perspective of what is meant to be born as a dog and what it means to be a human. As Ingrid H. Tague argues in her *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Pennsylvania 2015), we can see from this fictional *'bel gtam* how the author articulates his view of what it means to be a human and what it means to be an animal such as a dog.

**Negotiating Class in Tibetan Fiction:
Representations of social roles in early 20th-century Tibet**

Lauran R. Hartley, Columbia University

The relatively late advent of literary realism in Tibet limits the potential of most twentieth-century Tibetan fiction to serve as a source for the study of Tibetan societies prior to the 1950s. Tibetan novels and short stories written in the 1980s and 1990s generally cannot be read as we might a Victorian novel, for example, as a window on 19th-century England through the lens of a contemporaneous writer. With a regrettable dearth of archival and other historical sources, however, we are anyway tempted and read the works of older-generation Tibetan writers with special interest.

Two novels, in particular, have garnered the interest of Tibetan readers and repeated analysis by scholars: *Gtsug g.yu* [The Crown Turquoise] (1984) and *Bkras zur tshang gi gsang ba'i gtam rgyud* [The Secret Tale of Tesur House] (1994), both written by Lhasa-based aristocrats who, however young, experienced the time and setting of their novels first-hand. While drawing on the work of Riika Virtanen (2016), who examines these novels most thoroughly for their characterization and representation of social relations, as well as the studies of Franz Xaver Erhard (2011), Françoise Robin (2007) and Tsering Shakya (2000), I wish to widen our pool of sources to include an early and unusual work by an Amdo writer named Lhun-grub (1935–1985), who is a contemporary of the authors of the two novels just mentioned. His short-story was published in the Xining-based journal *Sbrang char* [Light Rain] in 1982 under its original title: “Ston-mjug tu byung ba'i gtam rgyud Rta nag srog 'gros” [Tale that Occured in Late Autumn: Gait of the Black Hobbled Horse], and has a ballad-like quality, as observed by Lama Jabb (2015).

For the purpose of this workshop, I shall examine the story “Rta nag srog 'gros” for its depiction of nomadic life in Amdo in the early 20th century, most probably the 1930s. The story's plot centers on the plight of a poor nomad woman whose husband has been arrested for killing a wealthy fellow tribesman, and raises in literature a case of conflict and mediation resembling dynamics discussed by Fernanda Pirie (2005). Though the author employs some of the tropes and themes of socialist realism, his experiment differs substantially from the depiction of class conflict in the novels above, which were written around the same time but in Central Tibet. I argue that the author's engagement with Marxist ideology might reflect concrete differences in the respective socioeconomic structures. Finally, despite the caveats stated above, I look at the story for what it might reveal about social roles and institutions in the author's grasslands home.

Topoi or Facts?

A Critical Analysis of Events in Ngawang Tshering's Life

Petra Maurer, International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

Ngawang Tshering (sGrub chen Ngag dbang tshe ring, 1657–1734) was born in the middle of the 17th century in Ating in Zangskar. He wrote an autobiography but never completed it. It was published by his son Zhepa Dorje (bZhad pa'i rDo rje) after his death. He took up the task to compile, edit and publish the notes of his father after he had seen him in a vision.

The biography that offers detailed information on many aspects of life in 17th century Zangskar differs from most hagiographies. Ngawang Tshering describes his childhood as very unhappy, because he had to bear the maltreatment by his stepmother. After his mother had passed away, his father married again. With the new wife, his difficulties began as his stepmother treated him very rude and unexpectedly cruel. He finally decided to become a monk. When he turned seventeen years old he entered Hemis monastery hoping for positive changes. Deeply interested in Buddhism he longed for intensive studies and the practice of meditation. He was also active in other fields: he helped with a text edition, served as caretaker (*dkon gyner*), performed rituals, and helped to burn the bodies after a small pox epidemic. Later on, he was forced to enter an armed conflict between two monasteries. A military conflict with the *Mon pa* and the Mongols in 1682 seems to mark a turning point in his life: he moved into a cave and adopted the lifestyle of an Indian ascetic.

In Tibetan or Ladakhi biographies or hagiographies accounts of a saint's or yogi's youth are rare. Therefore, I would like to inquire whether such a narrative is realistic or not. Did the stories, like others later in his life, really happen? Are there any possible reasons for the cruelty of his stepmother towards him? Or, is the cruelty he describes a mere invention to justify his actions?

**Cooks, Craftsmen, Criminals: The Others seen and unseen in the Autobiography of the
Fourth Zhwa dmar pa (1453–1526)**

Éva Kamilla Mojzes, University of Bonn

The *rTogs pa brjod pa'i tshigs su bcad pa utpa la'i phreng ba* (1503) is the spiritual autobiography of the fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes dpal bzang po, the second highest spiritual eminence of the Karma bka' brgyud lineage and significant power player of the Rin spungs pa period in Tibet. This previously un-researched narrative is the earliest available biographical source material and serves as the basis for all his subsequent biographies. The fourth Zhwa dmar pa chooses to describe in it numerous life episodes with painstaking attention to detail, yet he provides relatively few and cursory descriptions of the particular people who facilitate these life events. He reserves naming only a 'chosen few,' while at best he points to people by the monotonous term 'gzhan' and lets the reader deduce the existence of the rest. Based on the close reading of the *Utpa la* narrative, but also aided by additional information found in the colophons of the fourth Zhwa dmar pa's *Collected Writings*, this talk addresses what there is to know about the social status of these 'others,' the 'rest,' the unknown and unnamed masses of 15th–16th century Tibet.

The Hierarchical World of the Serpent Spirits According to the *Klu 'bum*

Tsering Paldrun, EPHE, Paris

Four main types of divinities are believed to dwell in the Tibetan natural environment, notably in water, on mountains, in the earth and in water. Water is the realm of the *klu*, the serpent spirits. The text that is most closely associated with the *klu* is the *Klu 'bum*, the “Hundred thousand serpent spirits.” The work consists of three volumes, White, Black and Multicoloured (*dkar po*, *nag po*, *khra bo*), that are believed to have been concealed during the time of Gri gum btsan po, who persecuted the Bon religion. According to the *bsTan pa'i rnam bshad dar rgyas gsal sgron* by sPa bsTan rgyal bzang po, the White and Black *Klu 'bum* were rediscovered by three Indian *acāryas* in bSam yas monastery in 913, and the *Klu 'bum khra bo* was found by three hunters in sPu rong (Shel gyi brag ra). The texts are believed to contain the teachings that sTon pa gShen rab mi bo bestowed on the *klu* when he visited their realm. A significant feature of the *klu* is that their society is structured in a way that is very reminiscent of the human world, with a system of social stratification based on a caste-like hierarchy: royalty, aristocracy, brahmans, servants and finally an inferior rank. This presentation will examine the hierarchical ordering of the *klu* realm as it is set out in the *Klu 'bum dkar po* and *Klu 'bum nag po*, with reference to the particular features of each of the castes and the relationship between them.

**Making the Right Match:
Marriage Strategies and Social Pretensions in Two Modern Tibetan Novels**

Charles Ramble, EPHE/CRCAO, Paris

Published less than a decade apart, dPal 'byor's *gTsug g.yu* (1985) and bKra shis dpal ldan's *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug* (1991) are pioneering literary works, each with a reasonable claim to be the first truly modern Tibetan novel. Like the language and organisation of the novel itself, the setting of *gTsug g.yu* is a highly constructed universe, with characters fixed in a rigid framework by hereditary rank and economic means. dPal 'byor is unflinching in his excoriation of a world in which women servants are defenceless objects of sexual exploitation and cross-class romances are unthinkable transgressions of the established social order. The problem of contracting an appropriate marriage provides the main plot-line of *Phal pa'i khyim tshang*. Here, however, prospective couples and their families are faced with a very different set of social dynamics: the post-1970s world in which the story is set is a much more complex place than that of *gTsug g.yu*, with shifting hierarchical registers and complicated freedoms, and the author himself takes a more distant, non-judgmental view of his characters and the society in which they live.

**Local patrons, donors, and rulers in Tibetan hagiographic life writing:
description of their social roles and their setting in the narrative**

Jim Rheingans, University of Bonn

In Tibetan *rnam thar* we often find a so-called “patron” or “donor”: a figure considered belonging to the worldly sphere (*srid*), who wields some sort of local power and supports the Lama central to the *rnam thar* in various ways. This paper examines if and how different hagiographic narratives depict such a patron’s social status vis-à-vis the spiritual teacher. Which social roles does the text lend to them and where do they occur? How and through which narrative techniques are they described? Can possible events be verified by other sources? This paper will use selected Tibetan sources from the 16th century Sa skya milieu.

**Return of the Good King:
The Prestige of The Nangchen *rGyal po* in Contemporary Historical Narratives**

M. Maria Turek, Bonn University

The 'Bru were a powerful clan which claimed descent from one of the six ancient proto-Tibetan families and key posts at the Yarlung court. In early 13th century, the 'Bru became instrumental in the early political formation of Nangchen as well as in the establishment of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud as a monastic order and their rise to supremacy in Nangchen. In 1300 the 'Bru son Chos kyi rGyal mtshan received Mongol-Sakya support and ascended the Nangchen throne as the first king. This is what we learn from contemporary sources on local history, and while the current possibilities of validating most of this information as historical reality are limited, it is a fact that the 'Bru dynasty reigned Nangchen until the Chinese communist obliteration of the realm's traditional socio-political order in 1950. Today, Nangchen kings are consistently remembered in recent local literature published both in China and among Tibetans in exile. This presentation will explore the historical arguments and narrative strategies in which contemporary local historians recognize, negotiate, celebrate or perhaps even contest the royal status, legitimacy and actual political control of the 'Bru monarchs of Nangchen.

Could a Lion Cub and an Apso Puppy Be Friends? Social Criticism of Discriminative Attitudes and Practices in Modern Tibetan Novels

Riika J. Virtanen, University of Helsinki

When examining characters in modern Tibetan novels set in Tibet before the 1950s one often notices that there are clear differences in the social status of the various characters and some characters appear to be depicted as lower class or even outcaste. This paper concentrates on discussing characters whose social status can be viewed as low or who come from family backgrounds who were traditionally regarded as lower, such as blacksmiths, servants and wandering musicians and performers. Special attention will be given to the scenes in which they are depicted facing problems in social interaction and relations with other characters due to their family or professional background. The areas where problems of a discriminative nature are depicted include dating and marriage, playing together and going to school, and enjoyment of food and beverages. The idea of “pollution” (*grib*), which occurs sometimes associated with some lower class characters, will be discussed to some extent, as will proverbs illustrating differences of social status.

The literary works which will be discussed were all written in Tibetan and appeared between the 1980s and 1990s. Two of them are set in Tibet before the 1950s, namely dPal 'byor's *gTsug g.yu* (1985) and Brag gdong bKras gling dBang rdor's *bKras zur tshang gi gsang ba'i gtam rgyud* (1997). bKra shis dpal ldan's novella “rGyud skud steng gi rnam shes” (1991/1999) tells a female *bildung* story of a wandering musician and performer which takes place both before and after the 1950s. One of the works, bKra shis dpal ldan's novel *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug* (1992), is set in more contemporary times and gives an idea how a character's traditional family background may still affect other characters' attitudes and behaviour towards him. These works located partly or completely in later times provide an opportunity to draw comparisons between modern works set in earlier and more contemporary times. How the characters are depicted will be examined making use of James Phelan's (1989) rhetorical theory of character. In addition, some thought will be given on the nature of the relation between fictional representations of lower class characters suffering from discriminative attitudes and practices, and on information on groups of people of lower social status found in earlier research literature (e.g. Bell 1928, Rin-chen Lha-mo 1926, Fjeld 2005). The extent to which artistic representations might be ideologically influenced, since they were all written in Tibet under the rule of the People's Republic of China, will also be discussed. It is suggested that literature provides a medium to express through fictional means and characters such social problems as discriminative attitudes and practices present in society which might be challenging or too sensitive to discuss in real social situations with reference to actual persons or in real life documentaries.

**The Invention of a Tibetan Lama General:
A Biographical Account of the Lama Kharpo (1835–95)**

Lobsang Yongdan, University of Bonn

In the past reincarnated Lamas were the highest social stratum in Tibet, as demonstrated by the successive Dalai Lamas who were the head of the Tibetan government. It was assumed for a long time that the social status of Tulkus emerged only through monastic training, religious practice and reincarnation systems. While it is true that most Tulku systems emerged from this standard tradition, there are many exceptions. For example, reincarnation systems may have emerged from secular politics or from violence and wars. In studying the Tibetan biographical account of Jampa Tutop Kunga Gylaltsen, widely known as the White Lama (Lama Kharpo), I shall show how an ordinary young monk became one of the most important Khutuktu in the Qing Empire. In an historical coincidence he found himself in the midst of Islamic rebellions in Xinjiang and became a great warrior, leading him to become a military general in the region. The Qing imperial court in Beijing installed him as Khutuktu in recognition of his heroic deeds. I will also show how he manoeuvred politics at the Qing court and settled disputes in Lhasa; he later died at his own monastery. I will argue that the social status of Tulku was not fixed through past religious achievements and cultural norms: rather, it could be invented through war, violence and destruction.
