UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND POLITICS IN A MDO:
THE SDE KHRI ESTATE AT BLA BRANG MONASTERY

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Introduction: Crossing Borders in A mdo

The Bla brang, Reb kong, and neighboring communities were subdivisions of the larger A mdo Tibetan region, with functioning political, economic, and social authority structures. The Sde khri Estate was part of the Bla brang community, one of some thirty-two such estates in greater Bla brang, and an example of A mdo's authority structures. It serves as the case study for this essay. Understanding A mdo's historical political structures is complicated by A mdo's location on ethnic borderlands, where communities negotiated, battled, and traded with their neighbors. As Gray Tuttle and others show, A mdo's location on the borders of Chinese, Muslim, and Mongol cultures resulted in cross border descriptions and definitions that changed over time. The borderlands location moreover necessitated different webs of negotiations and re-negotiations in efforts to assert and preserve regional autonomy on all sides (Tuttle, 2011).

Bla brang and Reb kong shared A mdo's social and political cultures, and they shared parts of the historical Kha gya tsho drug region that extended from northeastern Qinghai to Gtsos (Ch. Hezuo) (Ban de khar, 1989, 1994, 1995). Still, like other local A mdo communities Bla brang and Reb kong had regional qualities in their exercise of Tibetan Buddhism and observances of local religions, in regional language and accent, in their affiliations with specific estates, and in their historical relations with each other. From a larger perspective, their respective interactions with neighboring Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, and Muslims were sometimes similar, but at times they preferred to develop individual ties with outside authorities. The Chinese and Manchus for their part placed Bla brang in Gansu and Reb kong in Qinghai Province, and were at a loss about how to

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1 Samuel argues for an “ideological-cultural cohesion without a centralized political authority.” Some data on A mdo governance and on the conflict over the succession of the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa is from Nietupski, 2011: 54–64, 125–127, used here by permission of the publisher.
engage A mdo as a single unit, likewise often developing diplomatic ties with individual regional authorities.

These cross border “national” and “inter-national” relations were made difficult by the broad range of visions of regional authority. The Chinese and Manchu visions are relatively well known, and there are many examples of local sensibilities. The Ocean Annals for example mentions the “border between Tibet and Salar” (bod dang za lar gyi mtshams su…), treating the Salar territory on equal terms with Tibet, here extended to A mdo (Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, 1972: II.163b2). Jacoby has shown that the A mdo Dbal shul mgo log gser thar did not consider themselves part of Tibet or of China, and Dbal mang Pandita routinely refers to China, Mongolia, and Tibet with the same terminology (Jacoby, 2011; Dbal mang dkon mchog rgyal mtshan, 1974). One Chinese emissary noted that A mdo nomads he encountered in Rnga ba (in modern Sichuan) recognized the political authority of Bla brang, not of Sichuan Province (Gong Ziying, 1933: 23, 30; Gan qing zang bianqu kaocha ji, 1936: 84).2 A mdo’s status with respect to central Tibet, to its neighboring civilizations, and in light of its internal divisions—like those between Bla brang and Reb kong—merit our attention. This essay argues that A mdo was a recognizable unit, but that its unity was based on criteria very different from that of other governments.

Bla brang’s, Reb kong’s, and others’ shared history in the A mdo region is not fully studied, but their contacts were nonetheless strong. From this perspective, modern Chinese provincial borders, and modern scholarly research area specialties artificially divide what was, and to an extent remains a contiguous cultural unit. The Mongols who sponsored Bla brang’s formal 1709 founding in Rtse rkhog were clearly active on both sides of the border. Prominent lords from the Reb kong-affiliated community at Zho ‘ong, their complex relationships with Bla brang’s Kho tshe and Dngul rwa, and their support for the First ’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa are well documented (’Jam dbyangs bsod nams grags pa, 2010: 538–576; Sha bo padma rgyal, 2007: 121–122, 158–164; Kun mkhyen dkon mchog ’jigs med dbang po, 1991: 148–149). While the Mongol sponsorship of Bla brang Monastery is well known, the Ocean Annals also records the donation of the summer pasture for the site of Bla brang Monastery by the Reb kong affiliated Rgan kya Tibetan lords, which relationship is also noted in Chinese

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2 In Gan qing zang bianqu kaocha ji, 1936: 84 it is stated that the Tibetans in northern Sichuan (Xikang) and Qinghai regarded Bla brang as their capital city (Ch. shou du) and A mdo Tibetan dialect as their primary language.