EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION:
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TIBET AND THE FIRST
TIBETAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS

This book presents a monograph by Rinzin Thargyal, one of the first Western-trained native Tibetan anthropologists to have produced substantial works of research on Tibetan societies. Rinzin’s study of pastoralists from the ancient kingdom of Dege in eastern Tibet represents an original contribution to knowledge about Tibetan societies, and one that is unique and valuable for a number of reasons. Based upon detailed ethno-historical documentation of a Khampa community during the mid-20th century, this monograph offers a wide-ranging and well-grounded analysis of the most crucial and controversial relationship in pre-modern Tibetan societies, that ensuing between a local “lord” or “leader” (dpon/dpon po) and his “dependents” or “subjects” (‘khor pa/‘khor ’bangs). The study also throws important new light upon the possibilities for social mobility which existed for ordinary rural persons in a Tibetan society prior to the Chinese takeover. Because Rinzin’s research was undertaken during the early 1980s, it must be appreciated as belonging to a distinct period in the development of a modern anthropology of the Tibetan plateau and must also be viewed in terms of Tibetan contributions to this anthropology. In what follows, I will first place Rinzin’s work in its proper context, then discuss its importance for the study of Tibet, and finish by offering a brief biography of Rinzin’s own eventful life and the circumstances which lead to his becoming an anthropologist.

In Part One of his seminal work Civilized Shamans, Geoffrey Samuel attempted the first comprehensive synthesis of much of the anthropological data on Tibetan-speaking societies which was

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1 I make this point particularly for the period of the 1970s and early 1980s, when Rinzin Thargyal studied anthropology in Norway. During the period of high Maoism and the Cultural Revolution, anthropology (or “ethnology”, minzuxue) in China was labeled a “capitalist class discipline” and heavily circumscribed and then banned altogether; Litzinger 1998:225. Anthropology in Communist China only slowly began to regenerate during the early years of the post-Mao reform period, although the discipline as it subsequently developed in China has been significantly different in various respects from that pursued outside of the country, especially compared with the West; see Harrell 2001; Lemoine 1986.
available to scholars up until the 1980s. Among other things, Samuel’s survey clearly revealed large gaps in our knowledge about the nature and variety of social groups that have existed across the Tibetan plateau. These lacunae were and still are significant, and they have arisen out of particular historical circumstances.

Up until very recently, and even still today in some cases, the development of a modern anthropology of Tibet has been significantly determined by two related factors. On the one hand, the anthropologist’s work has been heavily circumscribed by the difficulty or impossibility of gaining official permission for freely conducting research on the Tibetan plateau. On the other hand, it has also been defined by scholars’ creative efforts to understand Tibetan societies in spite of official restrictions. For instance, researchers have often worked in the high altitude Himalaya directly adjacent to political China or with migrant and refugee informants who departed from the plateau. The territorial expansion of China’s Communist state from the mid-20th century ensured that the Tibetan plateau region remained officially closed to independent academic researchers for nearly four decades, from 1950 up until the late-1980s. However, during this same period, extensive Chinese state ethnological surveys were undertaken across the region as part of the Minzu Shibie Gongzuo program of national ethnic classification. Along with the limited research done by a handful of western missionary ethnographers and western-trained Republican era Chinese ethnologists in parts of eastern Amdo and Kham prior to 1950, the Minzu Shibie Gongzuo program, for all its defects and colonial intentions, counts among the

2 Maoist era Chinese ethnology in Tibetan areas was based upon a theoretical legacy extending back via Friedrich Engels to Lewis Henry Morgan, and the practice of Stalinist ethnic classification in the Soviet Union. One of the major outcomes of the Minzu Shibie Gongzuo program was the impressive Zhongguo shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha series of ethnographic reports. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the quality of such materials can be highly variable and sometimes unreliable, and that the data must be appreciated very carefully in relation to the political context in which it was collected; Knödel 1995, Wellens 2006. Moreover, ethnic groups derived from it are often arbitrary constructs based upon insufficient data and poor research, not to mention political convenience. For example, the officially designated Luoba/Lhoba nationality (minzu) of southern Tibet is merely a composite of members of a range of very different highland populations of the far eastern Himalaya (i.e. the Bokar, Na, Nyising, Sulung, Shimong, Idu Mishimi, and so on). The Minzu Shibie Gongzuo program has been critically revisited by Chinese and Tibetan scholars periodically since the late 1970s, in order to resolve disputed local ethnic classifications in Tibetan areas and elsewhere; see Fei Xiaotong 1981, Harrell 1996, Upton 2000.