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THE “NEPHEW UNCLE” RELATIONSHIP IN THE INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY OF THE TIBETAN EMPIRE (7TH 9TH CENTURIES)

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INTRODUCTION

Tibet’s foreign relations during the imperial period were driven forward by dynastic marriages between the Tibetan royal family and the ruling houses of its neighbors. Princesses became cultural and political ambassadors in their new environs and played key political roles as links between their husbands’ kingdoms and those of their fathers. These marriages were by definition contracted between culturally disparate peoples, each with their own assumptions about dynastic marriage, and this created a climate in which this key element of political alliance and diplomacy could be interpreted differently by each party. Here, as is perhaps the case in most premodern kingdoms or empires, we find a type of fluidity that allows *de-facto* eventualities to confound *de-jure* arguments, a situation that will be familiar to those aware of the problematic nature of Tibet’s subsequent international relations contracted in the language of patronage (*mchod yon*), suzerainty and, more recently, autonomy.

This union of matrimony and politics is a common, probably universal feature of premodern diplomacy, and one can imagine its origins in the earliest and most fundamental exchanges between one group and another. There are a number of points at issue when considering dynastic marriage in a given setting. What are the assumptions concerning the status of bride-givers and bride-receivers? What is the role of the out-marrying princess, be she an aunt, sister, daughter or otherwise, in her new environs following a marriage? How are collateral lineages

— the king’s brothers and cousins — kept from usurping royal power? What is the role of the king’s maternal relatives? What sort of power do unmarried princesses exercise? More generally, we can also ask whether or not the rules governing dynastic marriage reflect those operating on a more general level in the marriages of aristocrats and commoners.

The practice of dynastic marriage in Central Eurasia has a very long history of accommodation between Chinese and steppe peoples, who borrowed from each other various ideas about marriage and status. While this history has been well documented, less has been written about the Tibetan approach to dynastic marriage and how this relates to the diplomatic language found, for example, in the bilingual 823 Lhasa Treaty Inscription that describes Tibet and China respectively as “nephew” (*dbon*) and “uncle” (*zhang*).¹ This chapter will investigate the nature of the so-called “nephew–uncle relationship” (*dbon zhang*) during the period of the Tibetan Empire (ca 600–850 CE), and consider how it served as a model for Tibet’s international relations during this period.

THE NATURE OF THE *DBON ZHANG* RELATIONSHIP

In a Tibetan cultural setting, the “nephew–uncle relationship” (*dbon zhang*) describes simultaneously the relationship between uterine nephew and maternal uncle, son-in-law and father-in-law and bride-receiver and bride-giver, all of which can, and often do overlap in a single pair. While it refers fundamentally to individuals, who may be of any social stratum, the terms *dbon* and *zhang* also can extend to include these individuals’ families, their clans and, in the case of dynastic marriage between ruling houses, to their countries. In the case of the famous *dbon zhang* relationship between Tibet and China, for example, the terms *dbon* and *zhang* referred initially to Emperor Srong btsan sgam po (ca 605–649) and Emperor Taizong (626–649) respectively, but the terms extended to include all subsequent Tibetan and Tang emperors, and were used metonymically to refer to Tibet and China. It is for this reason that we find the phrase “Uncle China” (*zhang po rgya*) used in later Tibetan histories.²

One possible reason for the ability of the term *dbon zhang* to expand sufficiently to describe the relationship between two countries is its already expansive use as a kinship term. *dBon* designates not only son-in-law and bride-receiver, but can also extend to his descendants.³ Similarly, *zhang* can be applied not only to an individual father-in-law or bride-giver, but to his descendants as well. An *dbon zhang* relationship created between individuals through marriage thus comes to pervade their lineages, sometimes for generations. This practice is informed by traditional patterns of exchange in Tibet, in particular matrilineal cross-cousin

marriage. A by-product of this pattern of exchange is that *zhang* means not only father-in-law and bride-giver, but also maternal uncle (mother’s brother), while *dbon*, besides meaning son-in-law and bride-receiver, also means uterine nephew (sister’s son).

This inquiry is concerned primarily with dynastic marriage. The vocabulary of such marriages is necessarily based on those found in society at large, but dynastic marriage tends to be governed by unique, or at least extreme sets of circumstances. The most obvious of these would be inheritance: during the period of the Tibetan Empire, only one son could inherit the Tibetan throne. By comparison, an aristocrat might inherit his father’s land, might have to share it with his brother(s) or might indeed strike off on his own and set up his own household.⁴ Another obvious circumstance peculiar to the royal line is that of hypergamy: if everyone is “marrying up” in the status hierarchy, then this leaves those at the top with few marital options. So while we might investigate the nature of the *dbon zhang* relationship between Tibet and China, for example, with recourse to the relationship between nephew and uncle / bride-receiver and bride-giver / son-in-law and father-in-law as it operates on a more general level in Tibetan societies, we cannot assume a one-to-one correspondence between the rules and circumstances governing dynastic marriage and those obtaining in the marriages of aristocrats and commoners. On the other hand, the one informs the other, or rather, they interpenetrate and borrow from each other, as we see, for instance, in the many wedding songs existing up to the present day that refer back to the marriage of Srong btsan sgam po and the Chinese princess, Wencheng.

THE *DBON ZHANG* RELATIONSHIP AND DYNASTIC MARRIAGE IN OLD TIBETAN SOURCES

Not all of Tibet’s dynastic marriages were referred to as creating an *dbon zhang* relationship. Limiting ourselves to select Old Tibetan sources, the term *dbon zhang* is found in the *Old Tibetan Annals*, where it refers to the relationship between ’A zha and Tibet, and in the Lhasa Treaty Inscription and *The Religious Annals of Khotan*, where *dbon zhang* refers to Tibet and China. It is certain that there were others such relationships. The king of Dags po, a vassal minor kingdom in southern Tibet to the west of Kong po, was referred to as *dbon* in the *Old Tibetan Annals* because of the *dbon zhang* relationship between Dags po and Tibet that existed in the late 7th century.⁵ Similarly, the *Old Tibetan Annals* records other cases of dynastic marriage where Tibetan princesses depart to foreign countries, and we might assume that these unions also created *dbon zhang* relationships.

Other Old Tibetan sources, such as the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, record further dynastic marriages, some of them even prior to the Yarlung Kingdom's expansion to become the Tibetan Empire in the late 6th century.

Rather than providing a narrative blow-by-blow account of Tibet's dynastic marriages as recounted in Old Tibetan sources, it will be sufficient here to examine in some detail those two relationships explicitly referred to as *dbon zhang* in Old Tibetan sources, that between Tibet and China, and that between 'A zha and Tibet. Besides attending to the all-important power dynamics at play and the issue of status, I will also consider a question at the heart of the ambiguity (or elasticity) of *dbon zhang* as a relationship that can span generations: does it begin with marriage or with the birth of an heir? Put differently, must the "nephew-uncle" relationship even involve a nephew and an uncle?

TIBET'S ZHANG: "UNCLE CHINA?"

The *Jiu Tangshu*, or *Old Tang Annals*, briefly describes the marriage of the Chinese princess and the Tibetan emperor in the following terms:

The 15th year of Chenkuan (641) the Emperor gave Princess Wencheng, of the imperial house, in marriage. He appointed the President of the Board of Rites, Daozong, Prince of Jiangxia, to preside over the ceremony, and he was given special credentials, and escorted the princess to Tufan. Lungtsan led his warriors to await her arrival at Pohai, and went himself to receive her at Heyuan. He received Daozong most respectfully, with the rites due from a son-in-law.⁶

Here the marriage has only just begun, but there is already mention of ritual duties of the son-in-law vis-à-vis his father-in-law. This tells us more about the Chinese perception of this relationship than anything else.

Almost two hundred years after this marriage, the bilingual text of the Lhasa Treaty Inscription of 823 (commemorating the treaty of 821–822) refers to the *dbon zhang* relationship between the Tibetans and Chinese as follows:

Twenty-three years of the Tang era having passed from when the first lord of China, Li, assumed the throne. After one generation, the divine emperor, Khri Srong brtsan, and the Lord of China The'i tsong BU n bU Sheng Hwang te [Taizong] both agreed to unite their kingdoms. In the Ceng kwan year Mun sheng Kong co was married to the bTsan po. Later, the divine emperor Khri lDe gtsug brtsan and the Chinese lord Sam Lang kha'e 'gwan sheng bUn shIn bU Hwang te [Xuanzong], agreed to unite their

kingdoms, and building on their relationship (*gnyen*), Kim shing Kong co was wed to the bTsan po in the keng lung year. Having become *dbon* [and] *zhang*, they rejoiced ... in this way, as neighbors and relatives (*gnyen*), and acting precisely in the manner of *dbon* [and] *zhang* ...”⁷

The inscription refers first to the marriage mentioned above in the *Jiu Tangshu*, then to the second and final marriage between a Tibetan emperor and a Chinese princess. This second marriage took place in 710, when the young Khri lDe gtsug brtsan (704–ca 754), who would not be enthroned for another two years, married the Princess of Jincheng. The text of the inscription describes the *dbon zhang* relationship in terms of uniting polities (*chab srid*) and in terms of relation / affinity (*gnyen*). The inscription’s statement that Tibet and China act “precisely in the manner of *dbon* and *zhang*” again emphasizes that rights and duties are attached to the relationship and that there is a proper “manner” (*tshul*) in which the relationship ought to be conducted.

The first term used to qualify the *dbon zhang* relationship, *chab srid*, is usually translated with “politics,” and demonstrates the primary function of such dynastic marriages. In fact, the term’s use in Old Tibetan sources, particularly the *Old Tibetan Annals*, has a wider range of meaning. *Chab srid* refers to political alliance in the treaty pillar quoted above when the rulers of China and Tibet agree to unite their polities (*chab srid gcig du mol*). Similarly, in the *Old Tibetan Annals* entry for 762–764, the political alliance is destroyed (*chab srid zhig*) preceding the Tibetan invasion of the Chinese capital.⁸ In the context of dynastic marriage, we find several references in the *Old Tibetan Annals* to Tibetan princesses who are sent as brides to foreign lands, where they “go to [conduct] politics” (*chab srid la gshegs*). Stein compares this phrase, which he translates with “va comme épouse,” with a similar phrase in the *Old Tibetan Annals* in the same context, “va comme fiancée” (*bag mar gshegs*). Stein’s translation of *chab srid la gshegs* is contextual, but is also based on an analysis of the term *chab srid* that focuses on *srid* and its meaning “to create, to procreate.”⁹ While this is certainly relevant, a more formal translation as “politics” highlights the important diplomatic role these princesses played as agents of statecraft.

The second term that qualifies the Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship in the above passage is *gnyen*, meaning “relatives.” This is the same term that is used in the celebrated fragment at the beginning of the *Royal Genealogy* (PT 1286), the “tale of the ancient relatives of the four borders” (*gna’ gnyen mtha’ bzhi’i rabs*). The short, fragmentary list mentions ladies of four districts who were taken into the royal line as queens.¹⁰ This might suggest a narrowing of the definition of *gnyen* to “affinal relatives.” This meaning is supported by such phrases as “to ask

for one's hand in marriage" (*gnyen slong*); "to divorce" (*gnyen slog*); "the in-marrying bride (*mna' ma*) or groom (*mag pa*) visiting their natal family for the first time after getting married" (*gnyen log*); "to establish marriage relations" (*gnyen lam 'dzugs*), "to marry" (*gnyen byed*) and "marriage by sale" (*gnyen tshongs*).¹¹ On the other hand, the term *gnyen*, misspelled *gnyan*, unequivocally refers to patrilineal relatives in the Old Tibetan legal document PT 1071. In a clause treating a case in which one clansman shoots another with an arrow during the hunt, a *gnyen* [*gnyan*] is qualified as a clansman (*phu nu po*), and is subject to the law governing fratricide (*dmer brtsi khrims*).¹² This constitutes rather incontrovertible evidence that *gnyen* cannot be refined to indicate solely affines, and indicates relatives more generally.

The Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship is also mentioned in an Old Tibetan Dunhuang document, *The Religious Annals of Khotan*. "At about that time [during the events in Khotan described earlier in the text] the divine Tsenpo of Tibet and the lord of China formed [the relationship of] nephew and uncle, at which the Chinese princess, too, became the divine Tsenpo's bride."¹³ The text is here referring to the marriage of the second Chinese princess in 710, and essentially echoes the information found in the Lhasa Treaty Inscription.

The above quotations demonstrate that the *dbon zhang* relationship between Tibet and China began with the first marriage in 641, was renewed with a second and final marriage in 710, and was still characterized Tibet–China relations in the treaty of 821–822. It is also evident from the above quotation from the *Jiu Tangshu* that the Chinese equivalent of the *dbon zhang* relationship began with marriage. The Chinese kinship terms — *sheng* and *jiu* — overlap, however, in precisely the same manner as Tibetan *dbon* and *zhang*, so the later passage from the bilingual Lhasa Treaty Inscription could also conceivably refer to a blood relationship.¹⁴ Uebach has demonstrated rather conclusively, however, that the first Chinese princess did not give birth to a Tibetan emperor.¹⁵ Likewise, the *Old Tibetan Annals* clearly shows that the second Chinese princess was not the mother of Khri Srong lde btsan (742–ca 800) or any other Tibetan emperor, so we can conclude with some certainty that the *dbon zhang* relationship between Tibet and China was an affinal relationship only and not a blood relationship.¹⁶ That a relationship of Tibetan son-in-law to Chinese father-in-law would in fact be fictive because neither Chinese princess was a daughter of the Chinese emperor is beside the point; while princesses closely related to the emperor were deemed more prestigious, they were not required to establish the *dbon zhang* relationship, or indeed any other such treaty marriage with a foreign power. This again emphasizes that the bond created is not simply between two royal families, but between two kingdoms or empires.

The Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship demonstrates that *dbon zhang* was a lasting relationship that could be based on little more than marriage. Here it describes Tibet and the Tibetan emperor as the son-in-law or bride-receiver in relation to China and the Tang emperor, who stands as father-in-law and bride-giver. It is also evident that this relationship was classificatory, and that it persisted for almost two hundred years from the initial marriage in 641, with dynastic marital relations being renewed only once, in 710. In so far as neither Chinese princess gave birth to an heir to the Tibetan throne, one cannot accurately refer to the Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship as “nephew–uncle.”

TIBET’S *dBON*: “NEPHEW ’A ZHA”

While the Tibet–China example is obviously the most famous of Tibet’s *dbon zhang* relationships, it is not the only one, and is not even the best documented in Old Tibetan sources. This honor belongs to the *dbon zhang* relationship between ’A zha and Tibet, where, in the inverse of the Chinese example, Tibet stood as *zhang* in relation to ’A zha, a once-independent Turkic kingdom incorporated into the Tibetan Empire as one of its vassal “minor kingdoms” (*rgyal phran*) after its conquest in 663. The ’A zha people, referred to as Tuyuhun in Chinese, occupied the area around Lake Kokonor, and in particular the areas to the west, probably stretching into the Qaidam Basin.

The *Old Tibetan Annals* records a marriage in the ox year 689–690 that appears to have inaugurated this *dbon zhang* relationship between ’A zha and Tibet: “Princess (bTsan mo) Khri bangs went as a bride to the lord of the ’A zha.”¹⁷ In the *Annals of the ’A zha Principality*, an official court record of ’A zha modelled on the annals kept by the Tibetan court, and which covers the years from 706–707 to 714–715, the ruler of the ’A zha, who is referred to by the title Ma ga tho gon Kha gan, is most certainly the son of this Tibetan princess, who is called “the mother, Princess Khri bangs” (*yum btsan mo khri bangs*).¹⁸ The Tibetans seem to have referred to the rulers of ’A zha only by their titles, and the *Old Tibetan Annals* uses the term “lord of the ’A zha” (’A zha rje) to refer to successive rulers.

The ruler of the ’A zha does not appear again in the *Old Tibetan Annals* until the entry for the hare year 727–728 — nearly forty years after the last such reference — where it states that the bTsan po “met with ’Bon ’A zha rje [as] bride-giver and bride-receiver” (*zhang dbon gdan tshom*).¹⁹ This relates to a new ruler of the ’A zha who is referred to by the same title. The passage most likely indicates the renewal of the Tibet – ’A zha matrimonial relationship, and here *’bon* is a variant for *dbon*. *dBon* ’A zha rje is mentioned once again in the *Old Tibetan Annals*

entry for 745–746,²⁰ so we see that *dbon* as a kinship term-cum title persisted over time and continued to be attached to the ruler of the 'A zha. This point is further demonstrated by two other references to the lord of the 'A zha as *dbon* in Old Tibetan edicts preserved in the 16th-century *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* of dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba. In the edict (*bka' tshigs*) of Khri Srong lde btsan accompanying the *bSam yas Inscription*, dating to ca 779, the monarch pledges to uphold the Buddhist religion. The edict gives a list of all those who swore an oath to this effect, beginning with “dBon 'A zha rje.”²¹ Over thirty years later, in ca 812, the son of Khri Srong lde btsan, Khri lDe srong btsan (reigned ca 798–815), renewed his father's oath to promote the Buddhist religion with his *sKar cung Inscription*, again accompanied by an edict preserved in the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*. After listing the names of three queens who swore to the oath, the edict lists three minor kings, the first of whom is “dBon 'A zha rje Dud kyi bul zhi khud par Ma ga tho yo gon Kha gan.”²²

It cannot be known for certain whether or not another marriage was contracted between an 'A zha ruler and a Tibetan princess following the marriage with Khri bangs in 689–690. Nonetheless, the appellation *dbon* applied to the lord of 'A zha at least from 727–728 to approximately 812, which is to say over several generations. The apparent longevity of the term's application to the hereditary rulers of the 'A zha is mirrored also by the use of the term *dbon zhang* in Tibet's relations with China. Khri lDe gtsug btsan's marriage with the Princess of Jincheng in 710 was contracted three generations after the marriage of Princess Wencheng to a Tibetan emperor in 641. Khri gTsug lde btsan (reigned 815–841), in proclaiming a treaty with China in 821–822 three generations after Khri lDe gtsug btsan's marriage with the Princess of Jincheng, defines the relationship between Tibet and China as *dbon zhang*.

The main difference between the two examples of an *dbon zhang* relationship with Tibet is that while the arrangement with China was based solely on marriage, the relationship with 'A zha was based also on the birth of an 'A zha ruler to a Tibetan princess. In the Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship, the term refers to bride-receivers and their descendants and bride-givers and their descendants. This is also true of the relationship between 'A zha and Tibet, but here *dbon zhang* additionally refers to a relationship that is based on descent, where the rulers of the 'A zha are classificatory nephews in relation to their classificatory maternal uncles, the Tibetan emperors. The precise relationship between the two rulers who met in 727–728, assuming that Princess Khri bangs was a sister of Khri 'Dus srong (676–704), is in fact between cross-cousins: the lord of the 'A zha is Khri lDe gtsug btsan's father's sister's son, and from the latter's perspective Khri lDe gtsug btsan is his mother's brother's son. Along with the continued use of the

term *dbon* to refer to the hereditary rulers of the 'A zha until at least ca 812, this demonstrates that *dbon zhang* applies to the descendants of those who undertook the initial pact as bride-receiver and bride-giver, and in as much as this is not a generational relationship, it cannot be accurately termed “nephew–uncle.”

STATUS AND HIERARCHY IN TIBET’S DYNASTIC MARRIAGES

We have seen above that “nephew–uncle” can be a misleading translation for *dbon zhang*. We might more accurately revise this to “the relationship between bride-receivers and their descendants and bride-givers and their descendants.” Something, however, would be lost in translation. This is because the point that is most inexact in the phrase *dbon zhang*, namely its generational aspect, is the very point that reveals the explicit hierarchy in this relationship. The *zhang* are the classificatory elders of their *dbon*, and the *zhang* stand in a position of superiority vis-à-vis their *dbon*.

We see this principle at work in Tibet’s dynastic marriages not as a categorical marker of status in every marriage, but only in those where an heir is produced. The essential point at issue in these dynastic marriages is the birth of the heir to the throne: an heir born to a foreign princess can jeopardize a kingdom because the heir may fall under the power of his mother and her brother, a foreign king (in other words, the heir’s *zhang*). This accounts for the king of Zhang zhung’s sexual avoidance of his Tibetan bride Sad mar kar in the early 7th century,²³ for the minor kingdom of Dags po’s loss of its semi-autonomous status in the early 8th century²⁴ and for the incorporation of 'A zha as a vassal kingdom within the Tibetan Empire. The power of the heir-bearing queen in subordinating her son to her father or brother and his kingdom informs the power dynamics of Tibet’s dynastic marriages. In marrying off his sisters and daughters, the Tibetan emperor’s imperative was that they be chief queens (that is to say, heir-bearing queens) in their new countries. Reciprocally, no foreign princess accepted as a bride of the Tibetan emperor enjoyed heir-bearing privileges.²⁵ This practice is not quite as inflexible as that of the Chinese, who in their “peaceful marriage arrangements,” known as *heqin*, famously always gave brides and never received, but at the same time it ensures that Tibet’s princesses “went to [conduct] politics” (*chab srid la gshegs*) in foreign lands as chief, heir-bearing queens while in-marrying foreign princesses were never allowed to gain the upper hand for their countries by giving birth to heirs to the Tibetan throne.

Matthew Kapstein writes insightfully that “the uncle–nephew relationship may have had very different cultural connotations in Tibet and China,

and that this, unfortunately, has contributed to the long history of Sino-Tibetan misunderstanding.²⁶ It is interesting to observe how in the negotiation of the symbolism and ritual to solemnize peace treaties, each side attempted to subordinate the other, often according to cultural codes poorly understood by the other side. So it is in the treaty of 783 performed in Gansu, for example, that the original (presumably Chinese) arrangement, whereby the Tibetans would sacrifice a horse and the Chinese would sacrifice an ox, was swiftly abandoned when one of the Chinese officials realized that this could be seen as placing Tibet above China both in Chinese terms (the *Yijing* associates the horse with the sun and the ox with the moon) and in Tibetan terms (the Tibetans raid Chinese towns on horseback and the ox is a beast of burden).²⁷

What is most striking is the relative absence of a marital or diplomatic *lingua franca* in Sino-Tibetan relations at this time, and the way in which treaties were celebrated in a double ceremony. In solemnizing a treaty, there were extensive negotiations on the form and protocol of the ceremony itself, which often had both a Chinese and a Tibetan component.²⁸ In an additional double movement, the agreed-upon ceremony took place once on Chinese soil and once on Tibetan soil, a protocol that has been seen as an indicator of the equality of the two parties.²⁹

This sense of diplomatic fluidity or give-and-take is evident in the case of the Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship. The principal Chinese imperatives — that they give brides but never receive, and that brides very seldom be actual daughters of the emperor — were met, while the chief concern from the Tibetan side, namely, that no foreign bride received be allowed to bear an heir, was also achieved. In this context, one cannot say that Tibet, as *dbon*, stood in a structurally inferior relationship to its *zhang*, China, for the simple reason that no Chinese princess gave birth to a Tibetan emperor. In other words, China was never “uncle.” As a consequence of this fluidity and the tolerance of divergent interpretations of their status vis-à-vis one another, one might argue that the *dbon zhang* relationship, beginning in 641 and cited by both Chinese and Tibetans in their treaties and their official correspondence, is far less important as a signifier of status than the blunt instruments of incursions and military victories.³⁰ In this sense, the *dbon zhang* relationship can be seen as one of the few constant elements in the relationship between two empires whose balance of power changed several times.

In the other *dbon zhang* relationship examined here, by contrast, Tibet was indeed “uncle” to ’A zha, whose rulers were of Tibetan blood after the Tibetan princess, Khri bangs, bore an heir to the ’A zha throne. Both structurally (as classificatory nephew) and practically (as a vassal minor kingdom or *rgyal phran* within the Tibetan Empire), ’A zha was subordinate to Tibet.

THE LEGACY OF THE *DBON ZHANG* RELATIONSHIP

In the political arena, the *dbon zhang* relationship was predicated on marriage between the royal family of Tibet and the royal houses of neighboring countries. Its legacy as a model for Tibet’s international relations waned therefore with the collapse of the Tibetan royal line from the mid-9th century. With the absence of a centralized monarchy, and with the renaissance of Tibetan culture through tantric Buddhism and the development of incarnation lineages, new models for Tibet’s international relations, such as the so-called “priest–patron” (*mchod yon*) relationship, came to the fore.³¹

While *dbon zhang* ceased to have great relevance in international relations, it remained and remains a fundamental concept in Tibetan culture that informs basic patterns of exchange.³² The sort of alliance created by the *dbon zhang* relationship also operated sometimes on a local level between Tibetan principalities. This is evident in the case of Tshal Gung thang and Grib, two neighboring districts in the Lhasa Valley. Here the *dbon zhang* relationship is a symbolic union between the male protector deity of Grib, rDzong btsan, and the female goddess Gung thang lHa mo of Tshal Gung thang. This creates a fictive kin relationship between the two areas that is re-enacted annually during the Gung thang flower-offering festival (*me tog mchod pa*), when a statue of Grib rDzong btsan is carried in procession to visit his bride in Tshal Gung thang.³³ Here we also see an interesting coexistence of *dbon zhang* and *mchod yon*, with the latter relationship between the two areas said to go back to Bla ma Zhang (1123–1193) of Tshal gung thang and his donor (*yon bdag*), an official of the mGar clan in Grib.³⁴

A similar *dbon zhang* relationship between neighboring principalities is immortalized in the epic of Gesar, where one of the principal characters, ’Dan ma spyang khra (sometimes spelled mDan ma or lDan ma), is known as *tsha zhang* ’Dan ma. This epithet refers to the *dbon zhang* (or *tsha zhang* in its non-honorific form) relationship between the region of ’Dan ma, from which ’Dan ma spyang khra takes his name, and Gesar’s kingdom of Gling. In this case ’Dan ma were bride-givers (*zhang*) and Gling were bride-receivers (*dbon*), but ’Dan ma had a tributary status towards Gling. While this is largely based on oral tradition, it seems to have persisted up until modern times.³⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The *dbon zhang* relationship, as a model for Tibet’s international relations during the imperial period, was based on uniting polities (*chab srid*) and on kinship

(*gnyen*). It began with a dynastic marriage between the Tibetan royal line and a foreign royal house, and could continue for several generations. The term *zhang* refers to the bride-giver and his descendants, and *dbon* to the bride-receiver and his descendants. The same is true regardless of whether or not the bride, usually a “treaty princess,” gave birth to an heir to the throne. In such cases where an heir is produced, the explicit hierarchy of the *dbon zhang* relationship becomes evident: the bride-receiver and his descendants are now also classificatory nephews, and are by this point usually the vassal of the bride-givers / classificatory maternal uncles. It is for this reason that the power dynamics of Tibet’s dynastic marriages are most apparent by examining the status of the princesses. During the period of the Tibetan Empire, Tibet accepted foreign princesses from the Chinese, the Turks and possibly many others. None, however, was permitted to give birth to a Tibetan emperor. As a result we cannot say that the Tibet–China *dbon zhang* relationship subordinated Tibet to China. Reciprocally, those kingdoms who accepted Tibetan princesses as chief, heir-bearing queens were in most cases vassal kingdoms on their way to becoming consolidated within the Tibetan Empire. This is true of Zhang zhung in the early-to-mid-7th century, and both ’A zha and Dags po in the late 7th century.

With the collapse of a centralized monarchy ruling over all of Tibet and with the rise of new models of political alliance less dependent on the ties of kinship, and usually predicated on religious lineages, *dbon zhang* ceased to be as relevant on a dynastic or “international” level. It continued to serve as a model for alliance within the Tibetan cultural area, where neighboring principalities were often linked through marriage, either between their ruling houses or their local deities. Alongside this, the basic and fundamental context of the *dbon zhang* relationship as uniting two groups through marriage, and describing their rights and duties, remains relevant up to the present day.

NOTES

- 1 For a summary of China’s dynastic marriage arrangements, see Pan Yihong, “Marriage Alliance and Chinese Princesses in International Politics from Han through T’ang,” *Asia Major* 10.1–2 (1997), 95–131; and Jennifer Holmgren, “Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming.” In *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 58–96. I wish to thank Georgios Halkias for his comments to earlier drafts of this chapter, and to Per Sørensen for pointing out to me some valuable sources on Chinese dynastic marriage.
- 2 dPa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba (1504–1566), *Dam pa’i chos kyi ’khor lo bsgyur ba rnams kyi byung ba gsal bar byed pa mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1985), 334.

- 3 In fact *dbon*, like its non-honorific equivalent *tsha*, can indicate not only uterine nephews, but parallel cousins and cross-cousins, as well as grandsons. For a discussion of this term, see Helga Uebach, “Notes on the Tibetan Kinship Term *dbon*.” In *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, ed. Michael Aris and Aung San Suu kyi (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980).
- 4 For a discussion of inheritance and related issues in early Tibet, including royal succession dynastic marriage, see Brandon Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet’s First History* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 25–37.
- 5 Helga Uebach, “Eminent Ladies of the Tibetan Empire According to Old Tibetan Texts.” In *Les Habitants du Toit du Monde*, ed. Samten Karmay and Phillipe Sagant (Nanterre: Société d’Ethnologie, 1997), 61.
- 6 Stephen W. Bushell, “The Early History of Tibet. From Chinese Sources,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12 (1880), 444–45; Paul Pelliot, *Histoire Ancienne du Tibet* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1961), 4–5; D.Y. Lee, *The History of the Early Relations between China and Tibet. From the Chiu t’ang-shu, a Documentary Survey* (Bloomington, Indiana: Eastern Press, 1991), 9–10.
- 7 Lines 21–33 (with some elisions) of the east inscription: *dang po rgya rje ll rgyal sar zhugs nas// de’i tang gi srlid lo nyi shu rtsa gsum lon// rgyal rabs gclg gi ’og du// ’phrul gyi lha btsan po khri srong brtsan dang// rgya rje the’e tsong bUn BU zheng hwang te gnyIs// chab srid gclg du mol nas// ceng kwan gyl lo la/ mun sheng kong coll btsan po’i khab du blangs// phyis ’phrul gyl lha btsan po khri lde gtsug brtsan dang// rgya rje sam lang kha’e ’gwan sheng bUn shIn bU hwang te [gnyIs]// chab srid gclg du mol tel/ gnyen brtsegs nas// keng lung gl lo la kIm shang kong coll btsan po’I khab du blangs nas// dbon zhang du ’gyur te dgyes pa las// ... ’di ltar nye zhIng gnyen pa yIn na// dbon zhang gl tshul kho na ltar//. (Capital ‘I’ indicates the reverse *gi gu*, otherwise the transliteration follows extended Wylie.) For alternate translations, transcription and transliteration, see Hugh E. Richardson, *A Corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1985), 110–13; and Fang Kuei Li and W. South Coblin, *A Study of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions* (Taipei: ROC, 1987), 48–49, 96–97.*
- 8 Jacques Bacot, Frederick W. Thomas and Charles Toussaint, *Documents de Touen-Houang relatifs a l’histoire du Tibet* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1940–1946), 59, 65; Dotson 2009, 132–33. A single entry in the *Old Tibetan Annals* covers one year according to the Tibetan calendar followed at that time. The year began in March or April, so the entry for the ox year 689–690, for example, begins in the spring of 689 and ends in the spring of 690, hence I have rendered it “689–690,” with the two years separated by a hyphen to indicate not a range of dates but a single Tibetan year. In the case of 762–764, this entry in fact covers two years; for further details see Géza Uray, “The Location of Khar-can and Leng-chu of the Old Tibetan Sources.” In *Varia Eurasiatrica: Festschrift Fur Professor Andras Rona-Tas* (Szeged, 1991), 203–05.
- 9 Rolf A. Stein, “Un ensemble sémantique Tibétain: créer et procréer, être et devenir, vivre, nourrir et guérir,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36.2 (1973), 414–17. Stein is doubtful of the translation of *chab srid la gshegs* as indicating going to battle, though one can easily see that a “political campaign” could be a prelude to a military campaign.
- 10 On this fragment see Hugh E. Richardson, “Further Fragments from Dunhuang.” In *High Peaks Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture*, Hugh Richardson, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 28–29.
- 11 On this last term, see Tsuguhito Takeuchi, *Old Tibetan Contracts from Central Asia* (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan, 1995), 162–64.
- 12 PT 1071, ll. 325–28; Hugh E. Richardson, “Hunting Accidents in Early Tibet.” In *High Peaks Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture*, Hugh Richardson, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 155.

- 13 *dus de sham na / bod kyi lha btsan po dang / rgya rjer yang dbon zhang du mdzad / nas // kong co yang lha btsan po'i khab tu bzhes ste //* (PT 960, ll. 57–58). Translation from Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism. Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41; transliteration following Ronald E. Emmerick, *Tibetan Texts Concerning Khotan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 85. The document was first translated in Frederick W. Thomas, *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents Concerning Chinese Turkestan. Part I: Literary Texts* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1935), 303–23.
- 14 Paul K. Benedict, “Tibetan and Chinese Kinship Terms,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6.3–4 (1942), 337.
- 15 Uebach 1997, 66.
- 16 For an analysis of the episode in later Tibetan histories that makes Khri Srong lde btsan the son of the Chinese Princess of Jincheng, see Kapstein, 23–30. It may in fact be the case that the Princess of Jincheng had a son, lHas bon, but he died in 739–740, in the same year of the princess’ death, and it is not clear that he would have been crown prince.
- 17 Bacot et al., 17, 37; Dotson 2009, 96.
- 18 Zuiho Yamaguchi, “Matrimonial Relationship Between the T’u-Fan and the T’ang Dynasties (Part 2),” *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 28 (1970), 63. On the *Annals of the ‘A zha Principality* (PT 1368), see Géza Uray, “The Annals of the ‘A zha Principality: the Problems of Chronology and Genre of the Stein Document, Tun-Huang, vol. 69, fol. 84.” In *Proceedings of the Csoma De Kőrös Symposium*, ed. Louis Ligeti (Budapest, 1978), 541–78.
- 19 Bacot et al., 24, 47; Dotson 2009, 116.
- 20 Bacot et al., 55, 62; Dotson 2009, 126.
- 21 *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston*, 372.
- 22 *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston*, 411–12. Kha gan indicates a Turkic ruler, in this case the lord of the ‘A zha. Ma ga tho gon is not a name, but an epithet, and is also found to indicate the ‘A zha ruler during the early 8th century in the *Annals of the ‘A zha Principality*.
- 23 Géza Uray, “Queen Sad-mar-kar’s Songs in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 25 (1972), 36.
- 24 Uebach 1997, 61.
- 25 Heirs to the Tibetan throne were provided by wives taken from Tibetan aristocratic clans, notably four clans – ‘Bro, mChims, Tshes pong and sNa nam – whose members were known as *zhang*. These heir-producing unions followed certain rules that created a sort of “*zhang* rotation” such that no single *zhang* clan could gain a monopoly on mothering Tibetan emperors; see Brandon Dotson, “A Note on *zan*: Maternal Relatives of the Tibetan Royal Line and Marriage into the Royal Family,” *Journal Asiatique* 292.1–2 (2004), 94–96. That “international *zhang*” in the context of dynastic marriage were thought of differently than “domestic *zhang*” who provided heirs is evident in a famous couplet from the *sBa bzhed*, cited by Matthew Kapstein in the context of a conflict between the Princess of Jincheng and a lady of the sNa nam clan over which was the mother of the young heir, Khri Srong lde btsan. To resolve the conflict the young prince exclaims, “Khri Srong lde btsan is China’s nephew. Pray what’s for the sNa nam uncles to do?” (*khri srong lde btsan rgya tsha lags/ sna nam zhang gi ci gyi ‘tshal*); Kapstein, 28. Here the prince pits the domestic *zhang*, the sNa nam clan, against the international *zhang*, China, spotlighting the incongruity of the pretensions of the former. This is of course a literary episode, and has no basis in the historical record (Khri Srong lde btsan was in fact the son of a sNa nam princess, *contra* the claim put into his mouth here); its value, rather, is in its illustration of a principle, namely that dynastic marriage operates on a different level than “domestic” marriages involving the royal line.
- 26 Kapstein, 221, n. 77. Kapstein goes on to argue that in the process of becoming bride-givers (*zhang*) of the Tibetan emperor, and being granted titles such as “ministers” (*zhang blon*),

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- Tibetan clans participated in a “symbolic code” in which “a familial designation of seniority was in effect exchanged for a subsidiary political position; real power was alienated for a gain in political prestige.” I am less sure that the rights and duties of the *dbon zhang* relationship were dispelled or replaced by a lord-and-vassal-type arrangement. One could argue more persuasively, I think, that the conflict between these two models of power accounts for several of the Tibetan Empire’s crises, and played a large role in the events leading up to and following its collapse.
- 27 Rolf A. Stein, “Les serments des traités sino-tibétains (8^e–9^e siècles),” *T’oung Pao* 74 (1988), 132–33; Pan Yihong, “The Sino-Tibetan Treaties in the Tang Dynasty,” *T’oung Pao* 78 (1992), 140–42.
- 28 It is for this reason, in fact, argues Stein, that Tibetans performed blood sacrifices to solemnize treaties; they were enacting the Chinese custom after having performed their own, presumably bloodless, rites; Stein 1988, 129–30, 136. Imaeda disputes Stein’s interpretation of the Chinese sources on this point, and argues that both sides simply performed the ritual that had been agreed upon, and that sacrifice was relevant to both Chinese and Tibetan traditions; Yoshiro Imaeda, “Rituel des traités de paix sino-tibétains du VIII^e au IX^e siècle.” In *La Sérinde, Terre d’échanges*, ed. Monique Cohen, Jean-Pierre Drège and Jacques Giès (Paris: La Documentations Française, 2001), 89–91.
- 29 Stein 1988, 127–28; Pan 1992, 152; Imaeda 90.
- 30 This point comes across clearly in the tone of official diplomatic correspondence from the Tang court to the Tibetan emperor, where the form of address opening the letter, though theoretically determined simply by the legal status of the addressee as either vassal or rival, in fact was influenced more often than not by recent political events and whether the Tang emperor was pleased or displeased with the Tibetans at the time of writing. See Kaneko Shuichi, “T’ang International Relations and Diplomatic Correspondence,” *Acta Asiatica* 55 (1988), 96–100. In these letters the Tibetan emperor is addressed as “son-in-law.”
- 31 The so-called “priest–patron” (*mchod yon*) relationship characterized Tibet’s political relations with the Mongols and the Manchus, and can be viewed as the forerunner to later terms such as suzerainty, which was equally problematic from a legal perspective. On *mchod yon*, a contraction of “officiant–donee” (*mchod gnas*) and “donor” (*yon bdag*), see David Seyfort Ruegg, *Ordre spirituel et ordre temporel dans la pensée Bouddhique de l’Inde et du Tibet. Quatre conférences au Collège de France* (Paris: Collège de France, 1995). The term *mchod yon*, like *dbon zhang*, not only designates the two sides of the pair, but also implies the rights and duties attached to their relationship.
- 32 There is a danger of being too categorical on the matter of the superiority of bride-givers to bride-receivers across the Tibetan cultural area. One can certainly point to instances where the opposite appears to be the case, such as Corlin’s description of exchange in rGyal thang; Claes Corlin, “A Tibetan Enclave in Yunnan: Land, Kinship, and Inheritance in Gyethang.” In *Tibetan Studies: Presented at the Seminar of Young Tibetologists, Zurich, June 26–July 1, 1977*, ed. Martin Brauen and Per Kvaerne (Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, 1978), 75–89. On the variability of alliance systems and kin classification over the Tibetan cultural area (mostly the Himalayas), see Michael Oppitz, “Close-Up and Wide-Angle. On Comparative Ethnography in the Himalayas – and Beyond. The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture, Dec. 15th 2006,” *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 31 (2007), 155–71.
- 33 Guntram Hazod, “In the Garden of the White Mare: Encounters with History and Cult in Tshal Gung-thang.” In *Rulers on the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastical and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet. A Study of Tshal Gung-thang*, Per Sørensen and Guntram Hazod in cooperation with Tsering Gyalbo (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 585–93.

- 34 Ibid., 583–84. In other words, Tshal Gung thang stood as “officialant-donees” (*mchod gnas*) and bride-givers (*zhang*) in relation to Grib, who were the donors (*yon bdag*) and bride-receivers (*dbon*). Incidentally, it can be observed that the very name “Bla ma Zhang” demonstrates the persistence of *zhang* as a kinship term-cum-title, since it refers to his membership to the sNa nam clan, one of the four *zhang* clans of the imperial period. The relevance of these clans that mothered the Tibetan emperors would have ceased to be applicable in a formal sense with the collapse of the royal line in the 9th century, but whose symbolic historical resonance continued to link them to the glory of the imperial period well into the 12th century and beyond; Per Sørensen and Guntram Hazod in cooperation with Tsering Gyalbo, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastical and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet. A Study of Tshal Gung-thang* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 75, n. 11.
- 35 Solomon George FitzHerbert, “The Birth of Gesar: Narrative Diversity and Social Resonance in the Tibetan Epic Tradition” (DPhil Dissertation: University of Oxford, 2007), 263–64.