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THE CAREERS OF THE NOBLE OFFICIALS OF THE GANDEN
PHODRANG (1895–1959): ORGANISATION AND HEREDITARY DIVISIONS
WITHIN THE SERVICE OF STATE

Alice Travers

his paper presents a socio-historical investigation into the Ganden Phodrang (Dga'ldan pho brang), the central government of Tibet and its administration, through a prosopographical study, which could be defined as a kind of collective biography. It presents data concerning the period from 1895, when the Thirteenth Dalai Lama assumed power, to the end of the Ganden Phodrang's existence in 1959.

The officials (*gzhung zhabs*) of the Tibetan government were divided into a monastic branch, whose members were called *rtse drung*, and a lay branch, whose members were known as *drung 'khor*. The members of the monastic branch were recruited from all levels of society—from monasteries—whereas those of the lay branch were recruited almost exclusively from the aristocracy (*sku drag*).¹ The members of this aristocracy held hereditary estates in exchange for compulsory government service by at least one member of the family at each generation. Moreover, a few aristocratic families specialised in producing monk officials as well, who were called *rje drung*. Theoretically, the number of lay and monk officials was 175 each, but in reality each group was larger. During the period under investigation the number of officials increased greatly indeed. According to one of Melvyn Goldstein's informants there were two hundred lay officials and 230 monk officials, and these figures were probably even higher at the end of the period.² There are countless interesting aspects to be discussed regarding the functioning of the Ganden Phodrang administration. I have chosen to examine only a few points here; among them are the

¹ There were other groups of aristocrats in Tibet, linked to the semi-autonomous administrations of the Tashi Lhunpo and Sakya monasteries. Since this study concerns only the aristocracy linked to the Ganden Phodrang administration, when speaking of the "Tibetan aristocracy" or "the aristocracy," I will be referring only to this group.

² Goldstein 1968: 145. Given the rise in the number of offices and departments in the government at the end of the period under investigation, the increase in the number of officials seems absolutely logical. According to estimations based on my data and descriptions of the Ganden Phodrang administration (see the sources and references at the end of the paper) there were, during the period of maximal extension of the Tibetan administration, in the 1940s and 1950s at least 422 positions held permanently by monk or lay officials in the different branches of the administration (government, army, territorial administration, and house of the Dalai Lama).

crucial questions regarding if and how hereditary divisions among the officials were manifested in their careers.

If we sum up what information on the Tibetan officials' careers is available in the literature on the subject, the ground-breaking works of two authors, Luciano Petech and Melvyn Goldstein, have to be mentioned. Petech's book furnishes precious and detailed information on the careers of forty-seven families, but his study comprises only the higher-status families. Moreover, he does not derive from the descriptions of the careers an overall study of their organisation. In the introduction to his book, the only place he describes the course of the officials' careers reads as follows:

There were at first no fixed rules for appointment and advancement in officialdom. Between 1751 and 1788 membership of the *bka' shag* [council of ministers] was practically by direct inheritance from father to son. This custom was abolished by the Chinese, and in later times a young nobleman had to follow a sort of administrative career, starting with his first official appointment (*zhabs gsar ba*) usually on New Year's day and following either the financial branch up to the *rtsis dpon* [finance secretary] or the treasury service up to *bla phyag* [treasurer], or the military career up to *mda' dpon* [general]. These three offices were the usual stepping stones from which the judgement and trust of the Dalai Lama (or of the regent) raised him to a seat in the *bka' shag*.³

Petech makes two important points with which I will take issue here. The first point concerns heredity. Although this aspect will not be discussed here, if we look in detail at the careers of different members of a single noble family during the first half of the twentieth century, we can deduce that there was indeed, though not in the positions of ministers, a certain amount of hereditary transmission of positions in the administration.⁴

As for the second point, I will show that it is not accurate to say that officials would follow a certain branch in the administration, be it the financial branch, the treasury service, or the military.

Regarding the recruitment of officials of certain status to certain positions, Petech and Goldstein have clearly shown that there was a difference between the families of the higher aristocracy and the *sger pa* group.⁵ According to my estimations, the Tibetan aristocracy comprised around 213 families. It was divided internally into a hierarchy of sub-groups. The most prestigious groups were the *sde dpon*, four families who claim to date back to the ancient ministers and kings of the Tibetan Empire (seventh to ninth centuries), the *yab gzhis*, six ennobled families of the Dalai Lamas,

³ Petech 1973: 14.

⁴ For a longer discussion on the hereditary transmission of the positions, see Travers forthcoming.

⁵ The term *sger pa* in certain contexts also denotes the whole group of aristocrats, in their capacity of "private" (*sger*) landowners.

and the *mi drag*, eighteen rich and politically influential families. These first three subgroups formed the upper-strata families, twenty-seven altogether.⁶ The rest of the aristocracy, often simply termed *sger pa*, comprised around 186 families.⁷ The upper-strata families tended to monopolise the higher positions.⁸ One of the reasons for this inequality of opportunity is the fact that the sons of the *sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, and *mi drag* families had the privilege of starting their career with the title of *sras rnam pa*, a title just under the fourth rank, whereas most *sger pa* sons would start as ordinary officials, at the seventh rank. The other reason, according to Goldstein, was the necessity of being rich in order to gain access to the higher positions, the consequence of which was that the most prestigious noble families, who were also usually the richest, would obtain these positions more easily.⁹

The crucial question of the balance between a replication of the social hereditary hierarchy and social mobility in the Tibetan administration needs to be examined. In order to do this, the observations presented here will be based on the study of a large sample of officials and positions or offices, which will also enable us to inform other undocumented points regarding the course of the careers. Hence, the aim of this study is double: first, to document some new aspects of the officials' careers; and second, to reassess the importance of the higher aristocracy's domination.

This examination here is particularly pertinent because my research made it possible to gather data based on a much bigger sample than what Petech and Goldstein were able to work on, especially concerning the *sger pa* group, as most of the studies on the aristocracy have focused on the higher-status aristocracy.

Once the database has been presented, key aspects of the careers will be described and then the question of how hereditary divisions among noble officials are reflected in their careers will be broached.

The database

My database includes oral and written sources, namely interviews with approximately seventy Tibetan men and women of the aristocracy, biographies and autobiographies written by male and female aristocrats since the 1980s in Tibet and in exile, and British archives.¹⁰ The data concerning the social identity and careers of 441

⁶ NB: $4 + 6 + 18 = 28 \neq 27$ because one of the *sde dpon* families, Bsam pho, was also a *yab gzhis*.

⁷ A list of all Tibetan aristocratic families and a discussion concerning their status can be found in my PhD dissertation, Travers 2009.

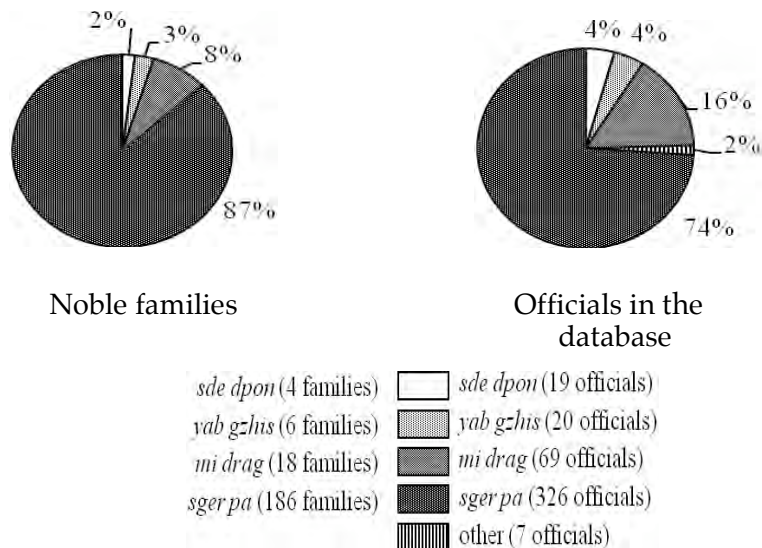
⁸ Petech 1973: 19 and Goldstein 1968: 186.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 184.

¹⁰ Not all the sources used to construct the database can be presented here in detail. Only those specifically mentioned in the text and the most important ones are included in the sources and references at the end of the paper.

noble officials of the government have been collected and put into a computerised prosopographical database. My main objective in the construction and study of this database is to allow a different approach to the functioning of Tibetan political institutions and administration that would not be based on normative presentations or the way it is written or believed that they should function, but would view the whole question from the individuals' point of view, looking at the way the officials conducted their careers and used the institutions, sometimes testing their flexibility and their limits.

The advantage of this database is that it is representative of the composition of the aristocracy and its internal divisions. The proportion, for example, of the *sger pa* group (74 per cent of the officials) in the database is very close to the proportion they represent in the whole aristocracy (87 per cent of the families), as Graphs 1 and 2 show. Here we can see the two proportions: that of *sger pa* among the families in the aristocracy, according to hereditary social status, and that of *sger pa* among the officials in the database. We can thus, by extension, get quite an accurate picture of certain aspects of the careers of the whole group of noble officials that are key to this study. It should be noted that the officials whose careers are under examination here, being all aristocrats, are divided into a massive majority of lay officials (90 per cent) and a tiny minority of monk officials.¹¹



Graphs set 1 and 2. Distribution of the 441 noble officials of the Ganden Phodrang in the database according to social status compared to the distribution of social status in the aristocratic group

¹¹ Five men were originally monk officials and became lay officials. The status of ten officials is unknown.

The whole database population was divided into five generations, born between 1860 and 1941. The majority of the officials in the database and whose careers have been studied were born between 1881 and 1920.

The first step of the analysis was to achieve a clear notion of all existing positions in the Tibetan administration, their rank, the domain of activity, and their evolution during the period. This was accomplished using a compilation of work done by Luciano Petech and Melvyn Goldstein, British descriptions, and information on the Ganden Phodrang in archives, and Tibetan written and oral sources, mainly interviews, and published descriptions of the government.¹²

The ranking system was as follows: an official would receive a position or a title which were linked to a rank, on a ladder of seven ranks, inspired by the Manchu system. The Dalai Lama's rank was the first, the prime minister's second, the ministers' third, the *rtsis dpon* and *drung yig chen mo* fourth, etc. The lowest positions were occupied by the members of the seventh rank.

It was then necessary to find, with the help of all the different available sources mentioned above, information on as many officials as possible and establish the different positions they held in their career. Regarding the information collected in these archives, it was important to find the Tibetan name of a position matching the description of it used by the British in their records, in order to determine the rank the officials held at this time and the field they were working in.¹³ Fortunately, the identification of the positions was made easier by the fact that the British instituted a system of translating the names of Tibetan administrative positions that became quite efficient after 1906 and varied little, apart from a few exceptions.

The database comprises information concerning the careers of these 441 officials, with a total of 1,210 positions. Out of the 1,210 positions, 320 could not be identified in terms of rank, either because the British description was not clear enough or because only the office was named. For instance, we know that one official worked in the *so nam las khungs*, the agricultural office, but we do not know his exact position, which could be "in charge of the office" (*do dam pa*), or only assistant or worker, *las byas pa*, positions which did not bestow the same rank. In some cases, officials would work in a position usually described as a sixth-rank position, but would benefit from a higher rank because they had received a higher title.

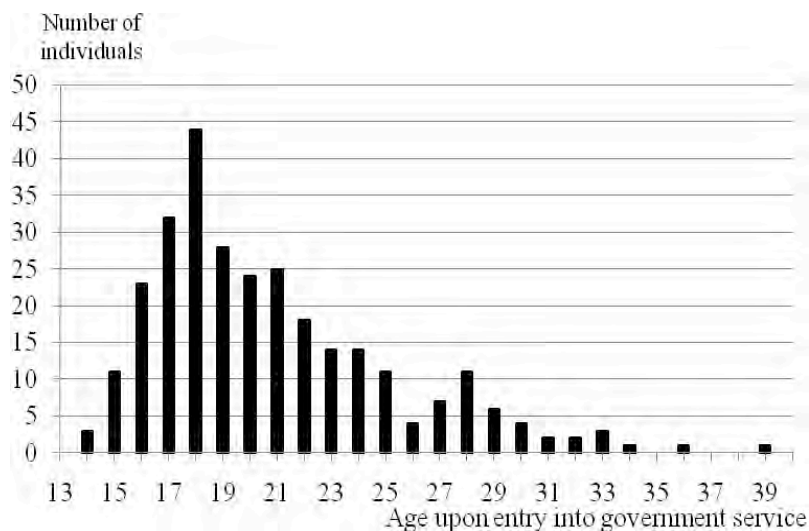
¹² For the British descriptions, see the archives files' descriptions at the end of the paper and also Bell 1906; O'Connor 1903; Richardson 1945; and Williamson 1934. For the Tibetan written descriptions, see Bshad sgra, Chab tshom, Sreg shing, and Blo bzang don grub 1991; Dge rgyas pa 1988a, b, and c; Tsarong 1998a and b; and Zhe bo 2002.

¹³ Mainly in *Who's Who* and various lists of noblemen and officials, but also in all the diaries and correspondence of the British officers present in Tibet during the period. See the references of these documents at the end of the paper.

The highest rank known has always been the one taken into account in the database. Let us now come to the interpretation of the data.

Organisation of the careers

The careers started with entry into government service, and my first point for consideration is age upon entry. The database permitted me to ascertain the age upon entry of 289 officials. The aristocratic officials of the Ganden Phodrang entered government service from the age of fourteen and apparently without any upper age limit. Over the whole period, and for all generations, the most frequently occurring age is eighteen, as is shown in Graph 3.¹⁴ A huge majority (92 per cent) of the aristocrats became officials between the ages of fifteen and twenty-eight years.

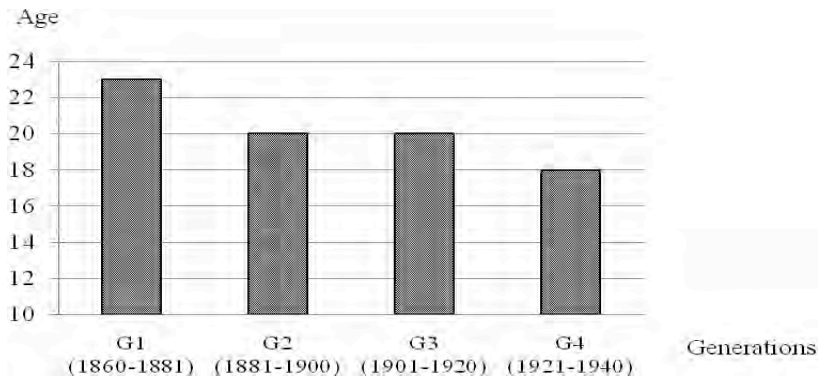


Graph 3. Age upon entry of Ganden Phodrang officials

A general decrease in the age of entry into government service over the whole period is also obvious. This is partly due to the fact that fewer officials would enter at a later age. If we look at Graph 4, the median age decreases from twenty-three years for the first generation to eighteen years for the last.¹⁵

¹⁴ This corresponds to the statistical term “mode;” i.e., the age for which there is the biggest population. The median age is twenty years and the mean age 20.8 years.

¹⁵ For any distribution the median value is that which divides the relevant population into two equal parts, half falling below the value, and half exceeding it. Thus, the median age is the age at which half the population is older and half is younger.



Graph 4. Median age upon entry into government service among the four generations

Another interesting feature highlighted by the database is linked to the question of the influence of hereditary subdivisions on the careers: the mean or average age of entry into government service decreases as the social status increases. If we look at Graph 5, it is 17½ years for the *sde dpon* of the second generation and 18 years for the third generation; for the *yab gzhis*, these ages are 19½ and 18 years; for the *mi drag* they rise to 20½ and 19 years; lastly, for the *sger pa*, they are more than 21 and 20½ years.¹⁶ This could indicate that higher-status aristocrat families hold the prestige and the influence needed for their sons to enter the government at an earlier age. This raises an important question: was government service an obligation or a privilege for aristocrats? Melvyn Goldstein has shown that, before considering themselves in a position of obligation, aristocrats thought they had a monopolistic right to the lay side of the administration.¹⁷

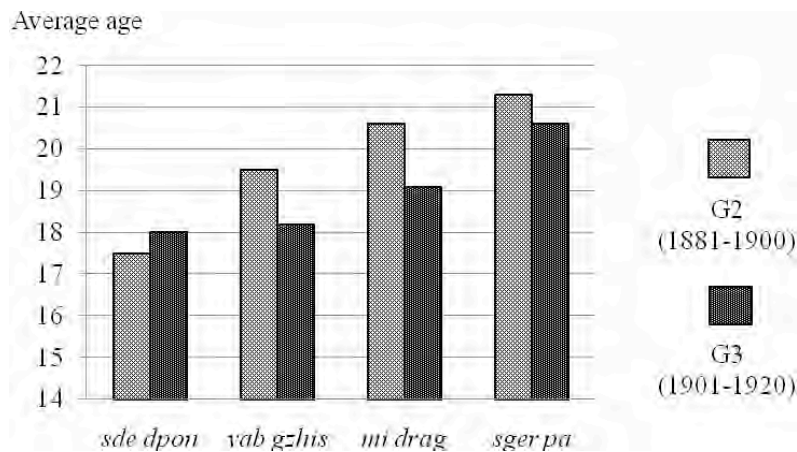
Government service had, indeed, a complex significance for aristocrats. It was compulsory and considered a duty. A noble family that could not ensure that a member would serve the government as an official could definitely be deprived of its hereditary estate(s) and lose its noble status. But, at the same time, government service was perceived by all as a privilege. The compulsory nature of government service appears very clearly in the case of some families where it looks very much like a relay: as soon as one official could no longer serve, because of illness or death, he would be replaced by another member of his family. To give some examples: in the Gngang byung house, a groom (*mag pa*) named Stobs rgyal was called in from the Klu khang house; he entered the administration just after the untimely death of the Gngang byung's son in order to ensure continuity in government

¹⁶ Only generations G2 and G3 were taken into account here, because their respective numbers (110 and 122 officials) were large enough to make significant calculations on sub-populations (the numbers of officials in G1 and G4 are 24 and 33 respectively).

¹⁷ Goldstein 1968: 149.

service.¹⁸ In the Pad tshal house, Mgon po phun tshogs retired quite early, when his elder son Mgon po dbang phyug entered the government in 1938.¹⁹ When the latter fell ill, his younger brother replaced him in government service in 1939.²⁰ In other families, every male—father and sons—would serve at the same time and this occurs in all hierarchical subgroups of the aristocracy.

One of my informants believes that it was a new phenomenon, during the last period of the Ganden Phodrang's existence, that although one member of each family being in government service was sufficient, families would send more.²¹ In the Glang mthong zur pa house, two brothers—Yon ten rgya mtsho and Rig bsam—became monk and lay officials respectively on the same day in 1958.²² But it appears that the reason why Rig bsam entered government service, although it had been previously decided that he would become the family estate manager (*gzhis bzhu*gs), is that his elder brother and lay official Lhun sgrub rdo rje had accidentally passed away.²³ It seems that for aristocratic families sending a son to serve the government as a monk official was not a way to fulfill the obligation to the state. They had to provide a lay official and, if they could and wanted, they could also have a son enter as a monk.



Graph 5. Average age of entry into government service for G2 and G3 according to social status

My second point for consideration concerns the rank held by officials upon entry into the government. As already mentioned, sons of *sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, and *mi drag* families had the privilege of entering the government with the rank of *sras rnam pa*, which was

¹⁸ *Who's Who in Tibet 1948*: 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Anonymous interview.

²² Anonymous interview.

²³ Anonymous interview.

near the fourth rank. However, it seems that some officials of higher-status families did not use this privilege. To take one example, although they were sons of a prestigious *mi drag* family, the two brothers Zur khang Dbang chen dge legs and Lha dbang stobs rgyas started their career as ordinary officials with the seventh rank.²⁴ On the other hand, a few sons of *sger pa* ministers during the period under investigation—for instance, the sons of the ministers Ka shod and Bon shod—started their careers as *sras rnam pa*.²⁵

This actually raises the question of the *mi drag* subgroup identity, which seems to have been under negotiation during the first half of the twentieth century. Some informants described the *mi drag* as comprising all families that counted a minister among their ancestors, which means that sons of new *sger pa* ministers would have to be automatically and legitimately elevated to the *mi drag* group. Other informants, however, refused this view as erroneous: technically, the *mi drag* group comprised only a fixed number of families and no new family of *sger pa* could enter it, even by producing a minister. The study of the careers shows that these two definitions of the *mi drag* group coexisted concurrently and that the system of hierarchical divisions and ranks provided a kind of flexibility. Some *sger pa* ministers' sons preferred not to enter the government service with the *sras rnam pa* rank, apparently out of respect for a fixed hierarchical order or out of humility: for instance, when 'Phrin las rnam rgyal Klu khang, son of the prime minister (*srid blon*) Klu khang, entered the government in 1947, he could have entered with the *sras rnam pa* rank due to his father's rank, but, probably because his father asked him not to, he started with an ordinary rank (*drung 'khor dkyus ma*).²⁶ It was apparently considered good manners not to try to elevate oneself above one's birth rank.²⁷ Moreover, in a few cases the government could forbid an official from bearing the *sras rnam pa* title: according to Petech, in the *sger pa* house Glang zur, the sons of the minister were not allowed to bear it because their father had been appointed minister by the Manchu while the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was in exile in India in 1910.²⁸

We come now to another interesting point in the course of the careers. To enter officially into the government did not always mean having an actual position. Out of the 441 officials in the database, lay or monk, we have information on the careers (titles and positions) of 410. For twenty of them, only the date of entry into the government

²⁴ *List of Chiefs and Leading Families in Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet* 1933: 22.

²⁵ Anonymous interview. For the son of Ka shod pa, cf. *Lhasa letter for the week ending the 30th May 1943 from Major Sheriff, Additional Assistant, Political Officer, Sikkim, Officer in charge, British Mission Lhasa* (IOR/L/P&S/12/4201).

²⁶ *Who's Who in Tibet* 1948: 73 and anonymous interview.

²⁷ Because it was not always certain, except for a few officials, that the first position mentioned in an official's curriculum vitae, as described in the sources, was the first one held, it was not possible to study precisely over the whole database the rank of the first position according to social origin.

²⁸ Petech 1973: 98.

is known. Hence, information on the positions held by only 390 officials is available. The database includes 1,210 positions held by these 390 individuals. Each official held between one and fourteen positions, with a median number of three different positions held per official.²⁹

In the British archives, numerous officials are described as being without any official duty at the time of writing the *Who's Who* or the letter, report, or diary. Most of the time, this period seems to last a few months, but sometimes a few years, without any explanation being given.³⁰ The analysis of the careers brought to light a significant amount of inactivity, which existed apart from the holidays and sabbaticals sometimes taken. The total number of officials who were officially registered in the government and who took part in the many functions did not equal the number of officials who were really in charge in the administration. To take one example, a member of the Tsha rong family, Bdud 'dul rnam rgyal, was registered in the government as an official at a very young age because his family had just received a new estate for which they were supposed to enter another official into the government service. Because he was so young, he was allowed to take leave and continue his studies first, before actually working for the government. Very often, this inactivity was not intended. When he was finally available for service a few years later, he did not get appointed. His family had to decide which course of action to take and they thought that he should receive further training in calligraphy. Therefore, they requested the council of ministers (*bka' shag*) to enrol him as an assistant scribe (*bka' shag yig 'bri*) in its office, a position he held from 1940 to 1942.³¹

It appears that the government could not always ensure continuity in government service. Although it did happen that an official was appointed suddenly, and without his prior request, to another post, most of the time it was the officials' responsibility to get recruited by asking for a position and trying to secure it by various means.

All of this clearly shows that to become an official meant first gaining a status before getting a position. The British Trade Agent

²⁹ Again, except for the officials interviewed or for those who wrote their autobiography, the whole career of each official is not necessarily known. Moreover, those of the last generation saw their careers interrupted in 1959 by the abolition of the Ganden Phodrang. Thus, this median number of three offices is given only to show what is in the database. It does not adequately reflect the average number of offices held by the officials.

³⁰ For instance Sgo mo gzhon tshang Don grub dbang rgyal, Sgog mkhar Rta mgrin dbang phyug, Rgyal grong nang bzo Ngag dbang blo bzang, Sman ri Rdo rje rgyal po, Snye mo mdo mkhar 'Jam dpal tshe dbang, Rong brag 'Jigs med, Bsam grub gling Phun tshogs rdo rje, Skyid zur Phun tshogs stobs rgyas, Snyan grong Bsod nams dbang 'dus, Skyid sbug Dbang 'dus nor bu, 'Jun zur Dga' ba rig 'dzin and Lcang ra (first name unknown).

³¹ Anonymous interview.

Captain O'Connor observed at the beginning of the period: "The rank of *Dung-kor* is often bestowed by Government on private gentlemen, merely as an honorific title (like 'Esquire') without any public duty whatever being involved."³² It was partly true then that service was an obligation, but it was also necessary to use one's influence and family connections to get a position. As well, a number of officials who had received their nomination remained without any activity for a short period of time while waiting to start the post.³³ We could then talk of partial inactivity that was chronic, probably because there were more officials than available jobs in the administration.³⁴

Regarding now the duration of the appointment, a few informants quoted three years as being their official length, with the possibility of being reappointed and doubling the length to six years. Actually, as Melvyn Goldstein has pointed out:

Although a few offices such as the district commissioners [*rdzong dpon*] and governors [*spyi khyab*] had a limited term of office, the majority of the offices, particularly the higher ones, had no fixed tenure and the incumbents remained in their positions until they were either promoted or demoted. Thus, for the highest offices, appointment was tantamount to granting the position for life.³⁵

Other offices not mentioned by Goldstein had a limited term of three years. Two examples are the positions of *aide-de-camp* (*gzim 'gag pa*) and barley flour receiver (*rtsam bzhes pa*).³⁶ Even when a position had a limited length, it was possible to renew it, as previously noted: for instance, when Rdo dgon pa Bsod nams stobs rgyal was appointed district commissioner (*rdzong dpon*) of 'Phyongs rgyas, the inhabitants of the district wrote a petition to the central government after three years to have him renewed in the position (the opposite could also happen of course).³⁷

³² O'Connor 1903: 41.

³³ When an official was appointed to an office but not yet functioning in the position, he was called by the name of the position with the addition "*tog 'dzin*." For instance, a district commissioner recently appointed but still not in charge was styled *rdzong tog 'dzin*, cf. Petech 1973: 236.

³⁴ A number of officials held several positions at the same time, a phenomenon discussed in Travers forthcoming.

³⁵ Goldstein 1968: 171.

³⁶ Anonymous interview.

³⁷ *Ibid.* For instance, it happened that inhabitants sent a request to the government to get rid of a district commissioner who did not suit them, cf. Carnaham and Lama Kunga Rinpoche 1995. See also a British report on the Western province: "The province of Nari Khorsum is governed by two high officials (*Tungkor*), of equal rank, sent from Lhasa. These officials are called *Garpon* in Tibetan, and *Urku* in Hindustani. If a *Garpon* is popular, he may retain the post for many years. If unpopular, the people over whom he rules send a petition to Lhasa, and he is changed. Some *Garpons* have remained nine years, while some have been changed after three years. The two *Garpons* now in office are very

Regarding the other positions, their length depended mostly on promotions, as the data confirm. If we consider all the positions for which the dates of beginning and end are known with accuracy, and if we take out the higher ones, which were always given for life, the number is reduced to 277 positions. They last between one and twenty years. As is shown in Table 1, even though the average duration is around three years, more officials stayed in a position for more or less than three years, than for three years exactly, which indicates that the length was first linked to promotion and not to any fixed length.

3 years	61	22%
More than 3 years	119	43%
Total	277	100%

Table 1. Time spent in office (except life-long positions)

The last aspect of the organisation of careers to be discussed here concerns specialisation. As mentioned earlier, the positions have been classified by field of activity in order to show possible specialisations in the individual careers, to test Petech's assertion, and also to reveal possible specialisations within a single family or within a hereditary sub-group of the officials (*sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, *mi drag*, or *sger pa*).³⁸ From the data, it first has to be noticed that the careers of the whole group of noble officials were made in the central administration (for 49 per cent of the positions), the territorial administration (33 per cent), the army (14 per cent) and the household of the Dalai Lama (2 per cent).

Regarding the central administration, a more detailed classification of the area of activity was made by grouping the positions into the following domains: first, the three main offices (council of ministers or *bka' shag*, finance bureau or *rtsis khang*, and office of ecclesiastical affairs or *yig tshang*), then the offices of diplomacy, industry, justice, religious affairs, communications, the treasury, and other miscellaneous domains.

popular," cf. *Report on the Trade and Trade routes between India and Nari [ngari] Khorsum, the Province of Tibet in which Gartok is situated by Lieutenant F.M. Bailey, 32nd Sikh Pioneers, Simla*. Printed by Government Central Printing Office, 1905 (IOR/L/P&S/7/178/P1082).

³⁸ This classification of all positions into four branches is mine, to facilitate analysis. No such classification is to be found in the Tibetan descriptions of the government, which simply give a list of all offices. This classification was difficult to establish since some offices had multiple areas of responsibility, for instance police and justice for the *mi dpon*. The *gnyer tshang las khungs* was an office that could be described either as a treasury or a municipal office.

This being said, let us examine Petech's assertion regarding the different branches followed by officials—the military branch up to the post of general (*mda' dpon*), or the treasury service up to the post of treasurer (*bla phyag*), or the financial branch up to the post of finance secretary (*rtsis dpon*). He adds that from one of these three fourth-rank positions, the officials could be chosen to become ministers. According to the data, this last part of the description is absolutely accurate, since three-quarters of the ministers during the period did actually hold the office of *mda' dpon*, *bla phyag*, or *rtsis dpon* before they were appointed as ministers.³⁹

The first hypothesis, however, is invalidated by the data. Indeed, out of the twenty-five *rtsis dpon* in the database, only three had been accountants before; out of the ninety-three generals (*mda' dpon*), only seven had held a military position before being appointed to this high command post. So the vast majority of the generals were holding their first and last military appointment in this position. I first looked for an explanation for this situation in the fact that the sons of higher aristocrats starting with the *sras rnam pa* rank were appointed at fourth-rank positions (by virtue of their social status) in a field where they could not have any experience since it was the beginning of their career. However, this did not provide the explanation because the *sger pa* who were appointed *mda' dpon* or *rtsis dpon* were in the same situation of having generally no previous experience in the branch.

Thus, while the idea of administrative officers following a path of progression up through a branch of government would seem to be an ideal scheme, there were no lines of progression in the different fields of activity. Officials had more or less the same background, acquired in private schools and private tutoring, and then in the government schools, either the Potala school for future monk officials (*rtse slob grwa*), or the finance bureau school for future lay officials (*rtsis slob grwa*). They were considered non-specialised and able to fill all kinds of positions in the administration.

More generally, when we look at the whole list of positions held, it is clear that the majority of the careers were made up of positions belonging to at least two of the four domains of activity described earlier (central administration, territorial administration, army, and the household of the Dalai Lama).⁴⁰ But if individuals' careers were not specialised, there was some hierarchical sub-group specialisation (according to individuals' belonging to the *sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, *mi drag*, and *sger pa* sub-groups).

We come now to the last point of this study: did the careers reflect a replication of the social hereditary hierarchy within the

³⁹ Twenty-six out of thirty-five ministers: eight former *rtsis dpon*, eight former *bla phyag*, ten former *mda' dpon*.

⁴⁰ As there were actually very few positions for lay officials in the house of the Dalai Lama, they would work mostly in two of the other three domains.

Ganden Phodrang administration and to what extent did they offer opportunities for upward social mobility within the aristocracy?

The careers: replication or social mobility?

Theoretically, in the discourse of the aristocrats themselves, there was a high degree of homogeneity or equality in the Tibetan nobility which ensured that any aristocrat from any hereditary hierarchical subgroup should be allowed to hold any office in the Ganden Phodrang administration. Indeed, no written law forbade an official of a small noble family from being appointed to a high position, and it did happen. But the holding of the office of minister is obviously linked to the social origin of the officials, as Luciano Petech and Melvyn Goldstein have underlined. Petech observed that between 1844 and 1959, the position of minister was given to thirty-four different families. Among these families, a dozen had counted several ministers, two families three times and eight families two times. He concludes that social differentiation among the nobility was much more prevalent than one could have thought at first.⁴¹ He adds at the same time that this phenomenon was even stronger before this period, between 1728 and 1844, a period of the same length, as the office of minister was distributed among only eleven families.⁴²

Moreover, Goldstein, who also studied the origin of ministers, stressed that 72 per cent of the lay ministers came from *mi drag* or higher families and 14 per cent came from *sger pa* but very rich families. According to his calculation 86 per cent of the lay ministers came from families of high rank or rich families, or 80 per cent if the monk ministers are taken into account. He does the same calculation for the monk official position of grand abbot (*spyi khyab mkhan po*), in ten cases only, and reaches the proportion of 90 per cent of the *spyi khyab mkhan po* coming from the same privileged minority.⁴³ According to Goldstein, this differentiation between high and low nobility in careers came from the fact that small and poor *sger pa* noble families were interested only in lucrative positions (he mostly refers to the offices of *rdzong dpon* or district commissioner) while higher-status rich families tried to gain positions conferring prestige and authority. Thus, officials from lower families mainly worked in provincial areas whereas the higher-status families mostly worked in Lhasa. It is necessary to explore this question in more detail.

My database confirms to a certain extent the domination of the higher-status families in the highest positions, but also puts things into perspective. Again, it is important to keep in mind that the high aristocratic families represented only 13 per cent of the noble

⁴¹ Petech 1973: 18–19.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 19.

⁴³ Goldstein 1968: 187.

families in general, and the *sger pa* 87 per cent of them. In order to assess in what measure career opportunities were conditioned by family origin, I calculated the proportion of each hierarchical subgroup, and especially the high aristocracy, on one hand, and the *sger pa* on the other, in all positions and titles, and finally at all ranks of the hierarchical administrative ladder.⁴⁴ The idea was to identify the positions and ranks (given by an official's position or title) where there was an overrepresentation of one group or another.

There was indeed a certain amount of professional specialisation in specific fields according to hereditary social status. Let us start with the study of the positions by domain of activity. A kind of class specialisation between high and low nobility, regarding three types of positions, is noticeable.

First, provincial careers were the special field of the *sger pa*. The position of district commissioner or *rdzong dpon* is one of the most frequently held offices in the careers of the whole group of officials, not just *sger pa* (261 such positions for 180 noble officials). The officials tried to become *rdzong dpon* near their family estate, which made the supervision of the estate easier. For instance, Lcang lo can Dbang phyug rgyal po was *rdzong dpon* of 'Ol dga' *rdzong*, which was located very near the family estate of Yar stod gzhis ka.⁴⁵ At the end of his career, Rgyal mkhar nang pa Tshe dbang rta mgrin was appointed *rdzong dpon* of Rdzong ka as a reward for his good services, because the district was again very close to the family estate.⁴⁶ Goldstein was accurate when he stated that the low nobility held the majority of the provincial or territorial positions since they represent 90 per cent of the offices of *rdzong dpon*, *gzhis sdod* and *gzhis gnyer* in the database. Their majority position holds true even for the high rank provincial offices, namely provincial governor (*spyi khyab*), which held the fourth rank and more rarely the fifth, for the Po bo region for example.⁴⁷ Moreover, if we look at the profile of the 10 per cent of officials from the high aristocracy, we notice their extreme youth (for the position) with a mean age of twenty-five years, whereas the mean age of the *sger pa rdzong dpon* at their entry into office was thirty-two years.

Second, the military appears to have been the higher-status domain. Although real military function was no longer an important part of the aristocratic identity during the period under scrutiny, a few individuals and even certain families specialised in this field. There is an overrepresentation of the high aristocracy in the position

⁴⁴ In the database, the table or list "Positions" comprises 1,210 entries, but the precise rank is known for only 890 of them. The table "Honorific titles" comprises 109 entries.

⁴⁵ Anonymous interview.

⁴⁶ Anonymous interview.

⁴⁷ The *rdzong dpon* were district commissioners, whereas the *gzhis sdod* and *gzhis gnyer* were administrators of districts under the direct management of the central government.

of general (*mda' dpon*) (39 per cent) and even more in that of general-in-chief of the armies (*dmag spyi*) (55 per cent).

Lastly, another area of activity—diplomacy—was partly the preserve of the higher-status families. We observe indeed an overrepresentation of high nobles in the diplomatic missions abroad (52 per cent) and also in the temporary position of guide for foreigners in Lhasa or elsewhere in Tibet (*sne shan*) (45 per cent). Of all the diplomatic positions, at the foreign bureau for instance, and in diplomatic missions, 45 per cent were held by the high nobility. The officials who had received an education in India and could speak English were of course well disposed for this kind of position, and quite often came from high families.

Although hereditary status did determine to a certain extent the domain of activity and the level of positions of the officials, there was also a certain amount of internal social mobility. The study of the data shows, unsurprisingly, that the proportion of the small nobility (*sger pa*) goes up when we go down the ladder of ranks and, logically, the proportion of the high nobility (*sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, and *mi drag*) decreases. Thus, if we take the total of all offices and titles, the two thirds of those which conferred the first, second, and third ranks were occupied by officials from the high nobility and only one third of the seventh-rank positions were held by them. These figures confirm the idea of Petech and Goldstein of a real domination of high-ranking positions by the higher-status aristocracy.

Nevertheless, it seems that in previous scholarly literature the place of *sger pa* in high positions has been minimised along with the structural opportunity for upward social mobility within the noble group—inside and outside the administration. There is a need to temper the known discrimination against the *sger pa*. Regarding the first point, a reality can always be presented in different ways. If we take into account the politically influential positions of fourth rank, including finance secretaries (*rtsis dpon*) and ecclesiastical secretaries (*drung yig chen mo*), instead of only the ministers and the grand abbot, as Goldstein did, the domination of the high aristocracy significantly decreases, from 80 per cent to 62 per cent of these positions, over the whole period.⁴⁸ Which means that *sger pa* held 38 per cent of these positions. These high positions represented a real career opportunity for some *sger pa*.

The officials of the fourth rank and above, according to Petech, were considered to form the upper part of the bureaucracy.⁴⁹ If we take into account all the positions and titles of fourth rank and above (ranks 1, 2, 3 and 4), almost half of them (49 per cent) were held by *sger pa*. Half of the *rtsis dpon* in the database (twelve out of twenty-four) were *sger pa* and one third (ten out of twenty-nine) of the lay ministers from 1885 to 1959 were *sger pa*.

⁴⁸ This figure takes into account the prime ministers, ministers, finance secretaries and the ecclesiastical secretaries.

⁴⁹ Petech 1973: 8.

This evaluation differs from Goldstein's not only because more high positions are taken into account, but also because rich *sger pa* families have not been assimilated into the group of the high aristocracy, as is the case in Goldstein's estimation. In my opinion, this artificially conceals a type of social mobility within the group. There was indeed a movement under way during the period under study: a certain number of *sger pa* families did become richer, mainly through trade, and these new rich families could win high positions, send their children to India for schooling, etc., and intermarry with families of the higher aristocracy. At the same time some eastern trader families, again mainly because of their wealth, were being ennobled and incorporated into the noble group. All these trajectories embody social mobility and the fact that enrichment is at the heart of social upward mobility is nothing new.

Actually, some of the *sger pa* who became ministers have something in common that is worth mentioning: during their career they worked in the territorial administration, which was so common for *sger pa* as we have seen, but in this case in higher territorial positions such as governor general.⁵⁰ This type of high-responsibility office was considered a sure means of enrichment and also a way of gaining experience in large-scale administration.

Social ascent of *sger pa* always had a visible "translation" in physical terms. Most of the *sger pa* families did not own a house in Lhasa. When a member of one of these families was appointed to an administrative post in Lhasa, he lived with relatives or rented a flat in a house, as was the case for most of the *sger pa* officials interviewed. Whereas officials from higher-status families owned, in most cases, their own house. Hence, having a house constructed in Lhasa was a sure sign of success or of social ascent. Those who started their ascent rented a flat in Lhasa, and then, when they got rich enough, they would buy a house or have one built. Thus, when Bon shod Tshe brtan rdo rje (1889–1945) became minister, he bought a two-storey house in Lhasa.⁵¹ The *sger pa* Gngang byung Spen ba don grub (1884–1951), who also became a minister, did not own a house in Lhasa at the beginning of his career either, and rented the third floor of the Rin sgang house. Then, he bought a house in Lhasa and his son became a *sras rnam pa* and was appointed as a secretary in the council of ministers (*bka' drung*). Some of the officials interviewed went as far as to assert that the possession of a house in Lhasa was a criterion for belonging to the *mi drag* group.⁵²

⁵⁰ Two were, for instance, governor of the Western province (*sgar dpon*)—Sman khab stod pa Rdo rje don grub, born 1874, and Gngang byung Spen ba don grub mentioned above.

⁵¹ Anonymous interview.

⁵² Anonymous interview.

Conclusion

Through this study of officials' careers, especially given the large sample, it has been possible first to provide insights into aspects of the Tibetan government service not previously described—for example: the age upon entry and its variation over time and according to the noble hierarchical subgroup the official belonged to; the rank at first position not always being linked to the official's hierarchical subgroup. Second, the database has made it possible to confirm and refine some aspects that were already known, like the variable length of tenure of official positions, the fact of periods of inactivity, and the definition of government service as an obligation and privilege for aristocrats. Third, it has provided an opportunity to refute Luciano Petech's idea regarding the existence of specialised branches of progression within careers, and, more generally, to underline the general non-specialisation of officials, while refining the understanding of a limited amount of specialisation, according to one's hereditary status. Finally, Melvyn Goldstein's point on the overrepresentation of higher status families in the higher ranking positions was confirmed but also balanced.

It would be interesting to know what the general tendency was regarding recruitment of high and low aristocrats into high and low positions during the nineteenth century. As underlined earlier, according to Petech, the first half of the twentieth century saw a broadening of the social recruitment of the *bka' shag*.⁵³ As well, a very widespread opinion among aristocrats is that the reign of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was one of increased meritocracy, and there are indeed a number of spectacular cases of ennoblement. Before his reign, according to one informant, sons of the higher aristocracy would monopolise the offices of fourth and higher rank and the *sger pa* would stay between the seventh and the fourth.⁵⁴

Because all of the generations studied here became officials after the beginning of the reign of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, it is impossible to verify this assertion here. Moreover, because of the state of the sources, it seems that it would be almost impossible to reconstruct as many officials' careers for the nineteenth century. As for now, we can simply observe, according to the data, that this possible opening up of the higher ranks, the fourth and above, to *sger pa* officials, is not a tendency that became radically stronger after the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's reign, since the proportion of *sger pa* in these positions is no higher for the generation born between 1901 and 1920 than it is for the generation born between 1881 and 1900, but probably an earlier tendency of the Tibetan administration.⁵⁵

⁵³ Petech 1973: 19.

⁵⁴ Anonymous interview.

⁵⁵ Only these two generations present sufficient numbers to make a significant comparison.

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