

# Some Reflections on the Question of Military Innovation in Tibet A Preface

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When the British invaded Tibet in 1904 they were met by a Tibetan army that they described as being obsolete. The perceived backwardness of the Tibetans' weapons and military tactics no doubt played a role in fostering the Western image of Tibet as a Shangri-La outside of time.<sup>1</sup> At the same time it also needs to be recognised that this was not the first time that Western military superiority had defeated an Asian army. Rather, throughout the nineteenth century – on account of what historian Tonio Andrade has called the “Great Military Divergence” – it was at this time that Europeans came to dominate the globe.

Thus, on one level what happened in Tibet was not unique. The same thing had happened in China during the Opium Wars, in the East India Company's conquest of Mughal India, in Africa as the con-

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**1** For a critical reevaluation of the Western representation of the Tibetan military see Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World*, 129-35.



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continent was carved up by European powers, and across North America as white settler colonialism moved West. Yet, at the same time, the case of Tibet was distinctive – especially in the context of the early twentieth century – on account of the military disparity between the forces of Sir Francis Younghusband and those of the Ganden Phodrang government being so stark in 1904. The Tibetans went into the field against the Maxim gun with matchlock rifles, swords, and magical amulets, a fact that confirmed for the invaders that Tibet was clearly disconnected from conventional historical developments.

This, at least in terms of military developments, was certainly true; however, an important question related to this fact is: why was this the case? What were the historical contingencies that had made Tibet not keep pace with military technological developments? And more to the point, when did this divergence actually begin and why? Since, as is well known, once the Tibetans did realise how far behind – or disconnected – they were from modern developments and its consequences (i.e. conquest), as early as in 1888 (the first confrontation against the British military and technological superiority at Lungtu) and then again in 1904, the Ganden Phodrang government tried to rectify the situation. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama in particular was an avid supporter of modernising Tibet's military. But, as everyone also knows, it was in the end too late. Thus, the question arises: why and when did the Tibetan army devolve into obsolescence?

It is important to begin by noting that the Tibetans had once been a formidable military force. During the Empire period (seventh to ninth centuries) they conquered not only the capital of the powerful Tang dynasty in China (although briefly, in 763), but also came to dominate Inner Asia and the lucrative Silk Road trade (between 670 and 692, and at various points during the eighth century). Moreover, in the subsequent centuries after the so-called 'dark ages' – from the Tibetan renaissance to the Mongol Yuan period and up through sixteenth century – it appears as if Tibetans were not only almost constantly at war, but also keeping up with the military innovations then taking place across eastern Eurasia. This suggestion is not only reflected in the historical record, but also in what may seem an unlikely source; namely, the so-called connoisseurship manuals that Donald La Rocca has skilfully used reevaluating the history of Tibetan weapons and armour.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, he has ably translated the section on swords of the most famous of these manuals: Paljor Zangpo's (Dpal 'byor bzang po) fifteenth century *The Chinese-Tibetan Compendium. A Mirror Illuminating the World and Bringing Great Joy to the Learned* (*Rgya bod yig*

<sup>2</sup> La Rocca, *Warriors of the Himalayas*, 146-18, 253-63.

*tshang mkhas pa dga' byed chen mo 'dzam gling gsal ba'i me long*),<sup>3</sup> which describes the five types of prized swords as follows:<sup>4</sup>

May there be merit in these words. It will now be shown the way in which there gradually appeared amazing and miraculous new developments, such as porcelain, tea, and swords, which did not exist in Tibet prior to the establishment of the rule of the Tibetan kings. In this way, swords first appeared and spread in Tibet from the time of Drigum Tsenpo (Gri gum btsan po). Praise and homage to Acala, the unshakable wrathful guardian king, who unlocks the door to emanations of pure reality by subduing with his sword of wisdom the enemy represented by wrongful views, and by binding with his lasso of mindfulness the thief that is agitation. Up to now in Tibet, nothing has been written about the classification and use of swords. Having made a careful analysis of the pleasant discourses of the experts, I have composed this extensive written explanation concerning swords.

Therefore, the types of swords are classified as follows: *zhang ma*, *sog po* and *hu phed* are three; with *dgu zi* and '*ja' ral* making five [...].

The *zhang ma* type is the sword that flourished at the time of the Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649). It was forged in a district of the emperor's uncle by a woman in the form of a wrathful female goddess who was the uncle's consort. With that sword, anything that existed could be cut [...].

The *sog po* type was the sword of the border peoples, which flourished in the time of the Uighur king named Thub rgyal (possibly T'ung Yabghu Qaghan, r. 619-630). In that limitless land of the Uighurs, the sword was forged by an elderly smith. That sword was made from [...] a piece of meteoric iron the size of a frog. Therefore, Uighur iron was regarded for its sharpness [...].

The *hu phed* type is the sword of the Mongols, which became widespread from the time of Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162-1227) onward. It was first forged in a place called Hu in Mongolia by one called Phed. This sword can cut through six wild yak horns bundled together and is, therefore, known as sharper than horn. The place and the maker's name were closely connected, so this particular type was called *hu phed* [...].

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<sup>3</sup> Although the *Rgya bod yig tshang* of 1434 is a general history of Tibet and China, it does also contain chapters on the connoisseurship of various commodities (see Martin 1997, 68, no. 115; Tshering, "A Short Introductory Note on Porcelain Cups of Tibet").

<sup>4</sup> The following translation is based on La Rocca, "An Early Tibetan Text", 98-9, with minor corrections, such as rendering *sog po* as 'Uighur' here instead of 'Mongol' in La Rocca, and *hor* as 'Mongols' here instead of 'Horpa Mongols' in La Rocca.

The type of sword one finds in Tibet is known as *dgu zi*, which flourished from the time of King Drigum Tsenpo. It was forged by the nine Squint Eye brothers [...] in a wild region of a place called Zi 'du. The eldest brother provided the sword that was used to cut the sky rope. The swords of the eight younger brothers also gave evidence of great sharpness [...].

As for the 'ja' type, this is the sword of the southern regions of Mon, which flourished in the time of Namkha Didze. It was forged by a smith called Mitok Thalgo in the dense forests of Lhodrak in the region of 'Ja'. This sword could cut through nine fresh tree branches. Therefore, the 'ja' *ral* is famous for its sharpness against wooden staves [...].

These are the oral teachings comparing the defining characteristic of each type. For the *zhang ma* type it is the *zhang them* (series of circles or 'steps' in the blade pattern?). The sign of the *sog po* type is the *go chog* (peak-like mark in the blade pattern). The sign of the *hu phed* is the *hu rdzi* pattern [fn. 42: this seems to indicate a dagged pattern on the blade, possibly resembling eyelashes]. The sign of the *dgu zi* is a blade pattern like the Milky Way constellation. The sign of the 'ja' *ral* is that the iron glistens [...].

For the most part (the surface of the blades of) *zhang ma* swords glisten indirectly, as if they had been rubbed with sheep-colored fat. Most *sog po* swords have sides that are even from the base of the blade to the tip, like the delicate needles on a pine tree. In the *hu phed* sword, one usually sees the *rdzi* pattern, which resembles a black snake pursued by a Garuda [...]. The *dgu zi* is usually gray and heavy, like a gray [...] willow branch covered with moisture. The 'ja' *ral* usually is strong and resplendent, like a tigress running over a plain [...].

An invariable feature of the *zhang ma* type is that at the place measuring three finger widths from the point, whether or not the blade has been tempered, there is a design like the round impressions made by fingernails. [...] An invariable feature of the *sog po* type is that if one measures down from the point three finger widths there is a pinnacle formed by the male and female iron. An invariable feature of the *hu phed* type [...] is a consistent border of a design like tiger's teeth, starting at a measure of five and half finger widths from the tip. An invariable feature of the *dgu zi* type is that the color of the tempered iron in the center of the blade looks like the Milky Way. Invariable features of the 'ja' *ral* type are that the blade is thin and very wide, and the point is broad.

Of course, as La Rocca has made clear, it is quite difficult to make sense of what precisely all these swords and their qualities actually refer to since these connoisseurship manuals were written, compiled and redacted over the centuries.

Yet, it does seem as if in the fifteenth century Tibetan elites recognised five basic types of swords, each with a specific origin:

1. *zhang ma* - China
2. *sog po* - Inner Asia
3. *hu phed* - Mongolia
4. *dgu zi* - Tibet
5. *'ja' ral* - South Asia

As such it seems possible to suggest that when these manuals were being prepared in the post-Mongol period, the authors drew upon the combined historical knowledge of the empire period, when Tibet was engaged with the surrounding peoples found in these manuals - China, Inner Asia, South Asia- and then added to it the latest global empire of which the Tibetans were a part: the Mongols. These connoisseurship manuals therefore reflect an awareness of the military innovations - or realities - of the preceding centuries. Or to put it another way, as reflected in these connoisseurship manuals, Tibetans were up through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries both aware and appreciative of new weapons. But then the tradition of such connoisseurship manuals seems to fade, and one might wonder whether the Tibetan interest in military innovation did not too.

In trying to explain this break Robert A.F. Thurman has argued that the reason for this turn away from militarism and its weapons was Buddhism. To wit, on account of the dharma's advocacy of non-killing the Tibetans simply turned away from their earlier warlike nature and abandoned their interest in military innovation. In particular, Thurman claimed that the Fifth Dalai Lama had made Tibet a "unilaterally disarmed society" on account of Buddhist principles.<sup>5</sup> Of course, it was precisely such utopian images of Tibet as a Shangri-La that were then beginning to be critiqued by numerous scholars.<sup>6</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr., for example, noted in his *Prisoners of Shangri-La. Tibetan Buddhism and the West*: "Nor was Tibet, in George Bataille's phrase an 'unarmed society', Tibet did not renounce armed conflict when it converted to Buddhism in the eighth century, or in the eleventh century, or under the fifth Dalai Lama".<sup>7</sup> All of this is no doubt true; however, at some point the Tibetan interest in keeping up militarily with its neighbours did indeed wane.

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<sup>5</sup> Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, 38-40. For a critique of this historiographical supposition see Sperling, "'Orientalism' and Aspects of Violence in the Tibetan Tradition", 328 fn. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The number of works that engaged with this project are now too numerous to list here; however, some of the standard works in this scholarly reevaluation are Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La*; Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha*; Schell, *Virtual Tibet*; and Dodin, R  ther, *Imagining Tibet*.

<sup>7</sup> Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 8-9.

In thinking about the Tibetan separation from global military innovation – which thus seems to have happened at some point during the reign of the Ganden Phodrang government (1642-1959) and in any case before the end of the nineteenth century – one may very well wonder whether Thurman was actually correct in asserting that there was something intrinsic to Buddhism that led Tibetans to not engage in the technological rat-race of military innovation. Indeed, the same argument had in fact been made in China for centuries; namely, Ming court officials had long argued that promoting the dharma among the Mongols would weaken their military impulses, thereby allowing the Ming to spend less time and money on defending its northern border.<sup>8</sup> But, as the continuing warfare between the Chinese and Mongols – including after they had become Buddhist – makes clear that the adoption of Buddhism did not halt violence or military innovation among the Mongols (or the Chinese for that matter). Rather, as with any state – be it Catholic, Buddhist, communist, democratic or what have you – the maintenance and upkeep of military technology is crucial to its own survival. And, in this regard, it is also important to keep in mind that during the reign of the Ganden Phodrang government Tibet was virtually at war all the time:

Tibetan armies fought against Ladakh in 1681, against Dzungar Mongols in 1720, in numerous incursions into Bhutan during the eighteenth century, against invading Nepali forces from 1788 to 1792 and again in 1854, against Dogra forces invading Ladakh from Kashmir in 1842, and against the British in 1904.<sup>9</sup>

Thus it was not as if the Tibetans did not need to keep up with military innovations. Quite the opposite, in order to maintain their way of life they would have benefited from a technological military edge.

In fact, it is precisely for this reason that military technology is such a crucial component of world history. It quite simply explains the rise and fall of civilisations. And as such it has recently become part of the age-old question about the rise of the West; namely, what was it that gave Europeans the edge in the early modern period that allowed them to conquer the world? Of course, the answers given to this question are many and varied, from Protestantism,<sup>10</sup> to New World silver,<sup>11</sup> to easier access to natural resources.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as Tonio Andrade has argued in his recent book, *The Gunpowder Age. China,*

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<sup>8</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*.

<sup>9</sup> Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, *Potosí. The Silver City that Changed the World*.

<sup>12</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

*Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History*, it was also related to military technology, especially the development of more sophisticated weapons in the nineteenth century, since it is obviously much easier to win a war if you are using a machine gun as opposed to a bow and arrow. As a consequence we are left with the question raised above: why did the Tibetans, who had earlier seemingly kept abreast of military innovations eventually disengage from broader developments in Asia and the world?

In trying to answer this question it is important to highlight the long running issue of the nature of Tibetan society and its relations with the larger Eurasian world, which, as with much in the field of Tibetan Studies, has gone through something of a sea change over the last generation of scholarship. Thus, rather than being imagined as a remote and isolated kingdom on the roof of the world, the more recent scholarly consensus – echoing transnational, inter-Asian and world historiographical trends – has it that Tibet has long been intertwined with the economic and political trends that have shaped Asian history.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if that is indeed the case, then when and why did Tibet become wholly divorced from military developments in both Asia and the world?

As stated above this divergence took place during the reign of the Ganden Phodrang government. And as such we need to think not only about the nature of the Dalai Lama's government that led it in this direction, but also the broader military historical context in which these developments occurred. To that end it is therefore interesting to note that the two-century period after the fall of the Mongol empire (1350-1550) was one of general technological stagnation as the Mongol age of 'globalisation' came to an end.<sup>14</sup> This fact is reflected in the Tibetan connoisseurship manuals from this period of time: there simply was nothing 'new' to add to the preestablished five types of swords of the earlier imperial periods. But then, as Andrade shows in his global history of military technology, innovations started up again in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And as he argues, there was a general parity between the East and the West at this time; however, in the late eighteenth century European military innovation went into overdrive and Asia stagnated, resulting in such legendarily lopsided military battles like those of the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tibetan-British war of 1888, and then British invasion of Tibet in 1904.

In trying to explain why this military divergence occurred, Andrade points to what he calls the "Great Qing Peace". To wit, after the

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia*; Akasoy, Burnett, Yoeli-Tlalim, *Islam and Tibet*; Tuttle, *Mapping the Modern in Tibet*; Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World*; Diemberger, Ehrhard, Kornicki, *Tibetan Printing*.

<sup>14</sup> Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

massive expansion of the Manchu state into Mongolia, Central Asia, and Tibet in the eighteenth century, the Qing court basically came to rest on its laurels and largely gave up on the endless struggle of gaining and keeping a military technological advantage. While Europeans, on the other hand, as a result of their endless 'national wars', kept innovating with great success. This in turn enabled the Euro-American empires to subsequently conquer the world.

Even though this all seems readily evident, a further question is where does Tibet fit into this global history of military technology? As we have seen, by the beginning of the twentieth century the Tibetans were militarily woefully out of date. Yet, as such they were clearly not unique, the Tibetan experience was largely the same as that of the rest of Asia. But unlike other Asian polities which tried to rectify the situation by modernising their militaries in the nineteenth century - including the Qing dynasty of which Tibet was ostensibly a part - the Ganden Phodrang government did not do so until the end of the nineteenth century. I would like to suggest that there are two reasons for why this was the case.

The first was quite simply the nature of the Ganden Phodrang government itself, which was in my opinion not a typically conceived state, at least in its inception. Rather, it progressed from a religious institution - like the Vatican - whose mission was to propagate itself through monasteries, incarnations, and systemised knowledge networks within the power structures of other states (be that the Tümed, Oirad, Khalkha, Dzungar, or Manchu).<sup>15</sup> And in expanding this Gélukpa empire the Ganden Phodrang government was remarkably successful.<sup>16</sup> More to the point, it did not require a military to do so. Rather, just as the Western Christian Church lacked 'army and cannon' and depended on temporal powers to insure its power,<sup>17</sup> so too did the Ganden Phodrang. Thus, whenever they did need military support to shore up their political standing in central Tibet, they could most of the time rely on these other states to do so for them (e.g. Khoshud, Khalkha, Dzungar, Manchu). In short, unlike states that needed a military - and military innovation - to stay in power, the Ganden Phodrang did not for a significant period of time. It could readily allow its own military to devolve into obsolescence, which is clearly what happened in the course of the nineteenth century.

Yet again, this did not happen in a vacuum. Rather, a second factor that needs to be considered is the relationship between the Ganden Phodrang government and the Qing dynasty, the nature of which is still being debated. Regardless of the actual nature of this relation-

<sup>15</sup> King, *Ocean of Milk, Ocean of Blood*.

<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, *Building a Religious Empire*.

<sup>17</sup> Heather, *The Restoration of Rome*, 408.



ship – for example, Tibet was never made into a province like Xinjiang – what cannot be disputed is that central Tibet never became a vital node in a global empire as was the case in the Mongol period. Rather, central Tibet became a marginal frontier zone of far less importance than even Kham (Khams) or Amdo (A mdo).<sup>18</sup> And this reality was further accelerated in the nineteenth century as the Qing became consumed by a range of destabilising events (from Euro-American imperialism to internal rebellions of all sorts), whereby central Tibet was no longer relevant to the Qing court and it was thus allowed to virtually go off on its own.<sup>19</sup> As a result, in many ways central Tibet – under the religious rule of the Ganden Phodrang – had essentially become the hermit kingdom of lost wisdom divorced from modernity at the turn of the twentieth century.

The collapse of Tibet's military capabilities can therefore be seen as yet another example of the great military divergence that defined the nineteenth century. But on account of the nature of the Ganden Phodrang government itself, and its relations with the Qing dynasty, the devolution of the Tibetan army did have a distinctive trajectory. One that sadly would have disastrous consequences in the new age of nation-states.

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<sup>18</sup> Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*.

<sup>19</sup> Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn*.

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