

Sikkim and the Sino-Nepalese War of 1788-1792: A Communiqué from Bǎo tài to the Sikkimese Commander Yug Phyogs thub

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INTRODUCTION¹

Sikkimese involvement in the Sino-Nepalese War of 1788-1792, barring a few works in Nepali or by Nepalese writers,² has not been a topic of serious academic enquiry. This has largely resulted from a lack of access to relevant sources that provide insight into the Sikkimese theatre of this conflict. For example little is known regarding the coordination of the military forces of the Qing and the Sikkimese. The full details of Qing-Sikkimese collaboration will only likely be discovered with access to the Lhasa archives. That being said, there are a number of sources in the Sikkimese Palace Archives (SPA) that provide, if not a complete picture then at least, a glimpse of Sikkim's role in this war. The letter presented in this article is one such source. Ultimately sources like this one will, in time, radically transform our understanding of this period in Tibetan and Himalayan history.

This paper, however, has more modest ambitions. The primary aim is to present the letter from Bǎo tài – the Qing Imperial representative in Tibet (Amban) from 1790-1791 – and his assistant, to the sons of the Sikkimese Chancellor (*phyag mdzod*) and military commanders Yug Phyog thub and Yug gNam lcags. This has been ac-

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² Dhana Bajra Bajracharya and Gnyan Mani Nepal, *Aitihāsik Patra Sangraha* (A collection of Historical Letters), Kathmandu: Nepal Samskritic Parishad, 1957, pp. 56-74. Translated in *Regmi Research Series* 1970: Year 2, No. 8: 177-188. See also Dhamala, Jaya, *Sikkim ko Itihas* (History of Sikkim), Darjeeling: Shyam Prakashan, 1983.

complished through an edited transliteration, translation and facsimile – a method which, though first employed by Prof. Dieter Schuh in his work on Tibetan archives, has become a standard format for the publication of Tibetan administrative material. The secondary aim is to provide a very preliminary and introductory comment on the relationship between Qing-Tibet-Sikkim and Sikkimese involvement in the war, that may, in time and with more research, contribute to the critical analysis of this event as a pan-Himalayan conflict.

THE IMPERIAL COMMUNIQUÉ

The dispatch from the Amban Bǎo tài and the assistant Amban is recorded in the catalogue of the Sikkimese Palace Archive (catalogue number PD/9.5/006).³ The original document was one of several documents that went missing prior to the relocation and transfer of custodianship of the archives from the Arts and Cultural Trust of Sikkim to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in 2008. Many of the documents that are currently missing were photographed by the author in 2005 as part of the Sikkimese Manuscript Project, which ran from 2004-2006. Though the document itself is undated, Kolaš' study of the Qing Imperial representatives in Lhasa provides the dates in which Bǎo tài served as Amban (1790-1791), and it is logical to assume it was written during the same time. It is twenty-one lines long, written in 'khyug and is marked with the large red rectangular seal of the office of the Amban. Compared with other documents in the Sikkimese Palace Archive, PD/9.5/006 is relatively free of scribal errors, with only two deletions in the text and only half a dozen orthographical inaccuracies. As a result it is a reasonably straightforward text, without any significant complexities in composition, vocabulary and grammar. This is quite rare when compared with other examples of Tibetan administrative writings, particularly from the Sikkimese Palace Archive.

The recipients of the communiqué's are two brothers Yug Phyogs thub and Yug gNam lcags. These two men were the sons of the Sikkimese Chancellor (*phyag mdzod*) Gar dbang 'Bar spungs pa, who, along with his own father, had ruled Sikkim from around 1747. The 'Bar spung family comes from the Lepcha clan of the Barfung-putso, though Gar dbang's great-grandfather was in fact the illegitimate son of the second king of Sikkim and the Lepcha wife of Yug mthing (*sde srid*), who constructed Rab brtan rtse palace in 1649 during the reign of the first Sikkimese king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal. The Barfung

³ See Mullard and Wongchuk 2010.

family is one of the most important aristocratic families in Sikkim, from which seven of the leading Kazi families can trace their origin as direct descendents of Gar dbang. This family ruled during the puppet reigns of the fifth and sixth kings of Sikkim until the execution of the Chancellor Bho log Barfunpa in 1826.

Yug Phyogs thub was one of the most successful military commanders in Sikkimese history. He was instrumental in the Sikkimese resistance to Gorkha expansion into Limbuwan and Morang in the late 1770s, but it was his command of the Sikkimese army from the 1780s which is most remembered in Nepal. His victories in seventeen battles against the Gorkha forces earned him the title of Satrajit from the Gorkha military commanders: a name by which he is referred to in Nepali sources.⁴ He was mainly active in the eastern regions of what is now Nepal (both in the hills and Terai), but he also defended Bhutan and the region of Ri nag (modern Rhenock) through which the route to the Jalep-la passes. For his efforts he was awarded the estate of Ri nag by the Tibetan government and tax collection rights in Dam bzang (near modern Kalimpong) by the Bhutanese.⁵ His descendents became the Rhenock Kazis.

Less is known about his brother Yug gNam lcags. We know he was also a military leader, commanding the northern Sikkimese armies, and (like Phyogs thub) was the Chancellor of Sikkim for a brief period. He is not given much attention in the main Sikkimese historical works such as *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*, and his line is considered to have ended with him. Perhaps, though there is little evidence suggesting it, he died during the war.

TRANSLITERATION

1. gong ma'i bka' mngags bod kyi las don 'khur 'dzin pa spa'o Am ban dang_ g.ya' Am
2. ban gnyis nas yig ge btang bar rtsi⁶ 'jog dgos rgyur_ 'bras ljongs mdzod pa'i bu yug
3. phyogs thub dang_ yug gnam lcags can nas nges dgos_ 'bras ljongs dang bod pa'i sa yul
4. 'dres ma yin zhing _ sku zhabs rin po che thugs rje la rten pa'i 'bras ljongs dang bod gnyis

⁴ See for example a letter from King Rana Bahadur Shah written in 1793. Translated in Regmi Research Collections, Vol. 5, pp. 251-256.

⁵ See PD/9.5/007.

⁶ *rtsis*.

5. nye po yod zhing_ gor kha nas yang skyar mi btang ba'i bod kyī sa tshams gnya' shing la gsun⁷
6. gtser btang ba byed lugs ngan pa yin 'dug cing_ da sgos nged Am ban gnyis nas gong ma
7. bdag po chen po'i gser rnyan sgron pa'i bod kyī dmag mi gang yod bskul ba'i sa tshams so so
8. la bsrungs 'gag nan gtan byed dgos la 'bras ljongs dang gor mi lung pa 'brel ma yin
9. shis bod kyī sa tshams khag rnams bod dmag gi bkag yod pa gor kha nas shes na_ khyod tsho
10. 'bras ljong phyogs nas gor kha mi yong ba'i ngas pa mi 'dug pa bcas khyod 'bras ljongs mdzod pa'i
11. bu yug phyogs thub dang_ yug gnam lcags nas de kha'i dmag mi 'bor che bskul ba'i sa tshams so sor
12. mgo mi drag pa bcas btang thog sa tshams so sor bkag bsrungs byed dgos dang_ gor kha'i mi de khyod
13. tsho'i lung pa nas don yong tshē dgra yin stabs khyod rang tshor kyang bzan⁸ rgod⁹ che ba yong ba bcas bzan
14. rgod che min sems gsal bcas de phyogs kyī sa tshams gang yod la sa bsrungs dmag mi bzhag
15. pa'i dam sgrags gang che byed dgos dang_ 'di'i don gong ma chen por gser snyan sgron pa bcas
16. nged bod pa'i rogs ram gang drag byed dgos dang _ rogs ram sogs khur bskyed byas tshe nged Am ban gnyis nas
17. gong ma chen po'i gser snyan la dwang pa¹⁰ byas nas gsol ras mang po gnang yong ba'i de'i mched
18. yi ge 'di bzhin btang ba khyod yug phyogs thub dang_ yug gnam lcags nas nges pa dang_ yi ge 'di bzhin
19. 'byor 'phral de kha'i sa tsham gang yod la dmag mi bkod¹¹ bzhag byas pa'i 'di yod kyī

⁷ sun.

⁸ zon.

⁹ Must mean something like danger.

¹⁰ dwangs pa.

¹¹ bsko.

20. gnas tshul phral du nged Am ban gnyis la bskur lugs gyis_ yi ge brten kha btags bcas

21. tshes 26 bzung por bskur/ [SEAL]

TRANSLATION

It is necessary to obey this letter which has been sent by the two Amban [named] sPa'o Amban¹² and g.Ya' Amban,¹³ who are invested with the responsibility of the administration of Tibet, which is in accordance with the order of the Emperor. It is necessary that the sons of the Chancellor of Sikkim, Yug phyogs thub and Yug gnam lcags, should keep [the contents of this letter] in mind. The boundaries of the Sikkimese and Tibetans are merged¹⁴ and on account of the compassion of the Dalai Lama, Sikkim and Tibet have an intimate [relation] and the act of causing misery in the gNya shing border region of Tibet by the Gorkhas who have again sent an army is evil. As a result of this now we the two Amban have posted to all the borders whatever Tibetan soldiers there are of his Supreme Highness. It is necessary to act firm and repulse [the enemy] and protect the borders. Regarding this, because Sikkim and the land of the Gorkhas has a common border and, if the Gorkhas come to know that the Tibetan army has been dispatched to the borders, it is certain that the Gorkhas will attack via Sikkim. So you, Sikkim's treasured sons Yug phyogs thub and Yug gnam lcags, should send the Sikkimese army to all the borders and together with the powerful commanders must hinder [the enemy] and protect each border. When the Gorkha come via your country as they are the enemy, even if great danger and uncertainty [of how to act] is upon you, with bravery¹⁵ it is necessary, as much as it is possible, to strictly enforce the placement [of] the military on whatever borders of that area. According to this, with the adornment of precious veneration to the Dalai Lama it is necessary for us to assist the Tibetans as much as possible and when the time comes to perform our responsibilities and such assistance we the two Amban act in truth towards the Dalai Lama and as many gifts shall be bestowed [upon you by the Supreme One]. So you, Yug phyogs thub and Yug gnam lcags, must adhere to the contents of this letter which has been sent. As soon as this letter

¹² This is Bǎo tài Amban from 1790-1791 (see Kolmaš, J. 2003: 610).

¹³ This is Yaman tài assistant Amban 1790-1791 (see Kolmaš, J. 2003: 610).

¹⁴ That is they are not clearly defined.

¹⁵ [Lit: with the thought that there is no danger or uncertainty.]

is received inform us the two Amban that the army has been dispatched to whatever borders there are there and inform us of the situation [on the border]. The letter together with a *kha btags* has been sent on the auspicious date of the twenty-sixth day.

COMMENTARY

The primary concerns of the Amban of Lhasa, documented in the communiqué, are the protection of the Sikkim-Nepal border regions and the prevention of a Gorkha attack on Tibet through Sikkim. The logic being that once the Gorkha realize that the Nepal-Tibet border region has been secured by a Qing-Tibetan force, the Gorkhas will attempt a flanking maneuver to the east, penetrating into Tibetan territory via Sikkim. For that reason the Amban are ordering the Sikkimese to strengthen the border regions, inform them once the troops have been deployed, and provide information regarding enemy movements in that area. The language used in the above document is thus that of a senior military allied commanded to that of a subordinate: the text is ultimately a military command.

What makes this document interesting is that, the tone of the letter implies that there existed a coordinated approach to the defense of Tibet. Of course, more research needs to be done in order to assess the level of military coordination, the ability of officers to relay information through communication lines, the structure of the military hierarchy in this war and if indeed this structure was formalized and coordinated. However, this document does, when read in isolation appear to suggest that there was both a means for communication between different commanders and that there was a theoretical chain of command, sweetened with the possibility of financial rewards. Yet whether this chain of command was actually formally agreed upon by the different actors allied to Tibet, or whether this chain of command emerged out of the traditional and theoretical political relationship of hierarchy and authority between Sikkim, Tibet and the Qing still requires further research. Though it seems likely (and the promise of rewards documented in the text seems to suggest this)¹⁶

¹⁶ By appealing to the self interests of Yug Phyogs thub and gNam lcags (through reference to the gifts that shall be bestowed upon them by the Dalai Lama), it is perhaps the Ambans' intention to convince the Sikkimese of the importance of the order and the need to comply with it. That is the three-tiered system of hierarchy (Qing-Tibet-Sikkim) was politically pragmatic as well as religiously or philosophically laudable as the practical capacity of the Qing to control Sikkimese affairs was ultimately negligible.

that this emerged out of the father and son relationship (*yab sras dang 'brel ba [bzhin] lugs*), which encompassed the traditional political and diplomatic relationship between Tibet and Sikkim. Whilst the level of political authority the Qing managed to assert over Tibet was certainly contingent upon various factors and has been debated widely in academic circles, the relationship between the Qing and Tibet was articulated in the form of the donor-preceptor relation (*mchod yon*). This relationship can, of course, be personal and spiritual as well as political and diplomatic. Yet we can say there was a perceived, if not always actual and practical, hierarchic dimension inherent in Qing Imperialistic understanding of this relationship. Sikkim was thus tied into this hierarchy through its subservient diplomatic and political connections to Tibet through the father-son system: leading to the perception of a three-tiered level of diplomatic and theoretical, if not practical, hierarchy. This is certainly apparent in other examples of Qing-Sikkimese communications, where the tone of those texts implies a level of high-handedness and arrogance, not found in other 'inter-state' communications.

FINAL REMARKS

This text provides interesting insights into the military communications between the Qing and Sikkim during the Sino-Nepal War. This raises questions regarding the structure of the chain of command and the hierarchy of diplomatic relations involving the Qing, Tibet and Sikkim. Whilst more research needs to be completed, both with regards to Sikkim's involvement during the Sino-Nepalese War and Qing-Sikkim relations, this text is an fascinating example of a military and diplomatic dispatch.

SOURCES

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APPENDIX: FACSIMILE OF PD/9.5/006

