


The Ming, Tibetan and Mongol Interactions in Shaping the Ming Fortification, Multicultural Society and Natural Landscape in Mdo smad, 1368–1644

Gyatso Marnyi

(The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

his article focuses on the interactions between Ming China, Tibetans, and Mongols in the northeastern Tibetan Plateau from 1368 to 1644. To defend itself against Tibetan and Mongol raiders and stabilize western Shaanxi, Ming China captured eastern Mdo smad, set trade barriers, promoted the tribute system, and fortified its borderland. To continuously obtain Chinese goods, Tibetans and Mongols developed their own tactics to respond to the Ming-centric political, cultural, and trading orders. Their entwined military, political and economic interactions reshaped Mdo smad, prompting the Ming construction of fortifications in western Shaanxi, the formation of a multiethnic society in Mdo smad, as well as the transformation of the surface environment in the present-day Gansu-Qinghai borderland. Hence, this article analyzes how the Ming integration of eastern Mdo smad affected the settlers between the Kokonor and Shaanxi, how Tibetans and Mongols reacted to the Ming policies, how Ming China consolidated its borderlands, and how these multisided contacts led to substantial changes in the social and natural landscapes of Mdo smad.

1. Landscape and Peoples of Mdo smad at the Dawn of Ming China

According to traditional Tibetan geographical knowledge, Tibet was divided into three regions, namely, “the upper three divisions of Western Tibet” (Tib. *stod Mnga’ ris skor gum*), “the intermediate four wing-districts of Central Tibet” (Tib. *bar Dbus gstang ru bzhi*), and “the lower and upper six ranges of Eastern Tibet” (Tib. *smad Mdo khams sgang drug*).¹ Khams was the ancient Tibetan frontier that met the western borderland of medieval China, consisting of Mdo smad and Mdo khams. This paper focuses on the former region, Mdo smad.

¹ ‘Jam dbyangs ‘jigs med dbang po 1990: 7.

The actual implication of this term changed over time. In the late 13th century, Mdo smad referred to a narrow administrative region under the jurisdiction of the Tufan Regions Pacification Commission (*Tufan deng chu xuanweisi douyuanshuaifu* 吐蕃等處宣慰司都元帥府) of the Yuan Empire (1271–1368). Lintao 臨洮 and Gongchang 鞏昌 of Shaanxi, and Xining 西寧 of Gansu Province were adjoined to the Tufan Regions. Many post-18th century Tibetan scholars generally regarded the Yuan Xining and Tufan Regions as Mdo smad. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), this region was integrated into Shaanxi and known as Xifan 西番 (see Fig. 1).²

This region overlaps into the convergent zone of the Himalayan, Loess, and Mongolian Plateaus. It extends from the southern Qilian Mountains 祁連山 to the eastern prolongation of the Kunlun Mountains 昆侖山. In between the two chains of snow peaks, the Xiaojishishan 小積石山, Taizishan 太子山, and Dieshan 迭山 mountains tower up and form a significant natural barrier between alpine steppe and loess hills. With the radical altitude drop from west to east in the northeastern Tibetan Plateau, the upper Yellow River 黃河 drainage system shapes countless valleys in Mdo smad. The Datonghe 大通河, Huangshui 湟水, Daxiahe 大夏河, Taohe 洮河, and Bailongjiang 白龍江 rivers and their tributaries erode steep valleys in their upper streams and form alluvial plains in the lower streams.

² Song 1976: j87.2193–2196, Brag dgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 1. For a discussion of Yuan administrative incorporation of the Tibetan borderland, see Petech 1988: 369–380.



Fig. 1 — Location of Mdo smad

The mountains, river systems, and altitude changes shape the surface environment of Mdo smad into varied landforms. In specific, western Mdo smad consists of highland steppes and flat hill-grasslands with typical Tibetan Plateau features. The Himalayan highland crisscrosses with the Loess Plateau in central Mdo smad and is characterized by precipitous mountains, alpine meadows, pine forests, shrubberies, valleys, and deep gorges. To the east lie gentle mountains, rolling hills, flat valleys, and large alluvial plains showing the pale yellow of loess. Due to the latitude and climate of Mdo smad, small ecological zones arise at the interface of the temperate monsoon and plateau-mountain climates. Overall, the northeastern Tibetan Plateau was too cold and densely forested to develop large-scale agriculture. For centuries, the region's culturally diverse residents primarily relied on animal husbandry to adapt to the local environment.

From the 7th century, Tibetans migrated from Dbus gtsang and established garrisons in Mdo smad. Some Han 漢 and the vaguely termed Qiang 羌, Rong 戎, Xianbei 鲜卑, and Dangxiang 党项 groups were either absorbed or expelled by the expanding Tibetan Empire. The Tang dynasty (618–907) documented this geopolitical entity adjoining Longyou Circuit 隴右道 as Tufan 吐蕃, its subjects as Fanren 蕃人 and its non-Tibetan military slaves as Wamo 嗚末 (Tib. *g.yog mi, mun dmag* or *'od 'bar*).³ After the demise of the Tibetan Empire, Dbus gtsang-centric records show that petty rulers controlled this frontier region made up of purportedly barbaric inhabitants. Chinese sources show that Fan or Xifan were used as both geopolitical names and ethnonyms to primarily refer to the region and people living beyond the borders of the Song (960–1279), the Tangut Xia (1038–1227) and the Jurchen Jin (1114–1234) dynasties.⁴

These medieval powers vied for the control of 91 forts in the flat valleys of eastern Mdo smad.⁵ The seizure and abandonment of these forts fulfilled key military needs, leading the Song, Xixia, and Jin troops to manage them as temporary bases or outposts on this turbulent frontier. None of these states made sustained efforts to reclaim the valleys in Mdo smad. Chinese sources suggest that the Song relied on arduous long-distance transportation rather than local reclamation to supply its frontier troops. Albeit Han frontiersmen did settle in Mdo smad, they at best opened up a few agricultural patches near some forts.⁶ In the late 13th century, the Han settlers were under the jurisdictions of Lidian 禮店, Wenzhou 文州, Jiezhou 階州, Fuzhou 扶州, and Mongol-Han-Fan military battalions and companies (*Menggu Han Fan jun qianhu/baihu suo* 蒙古漢番軍千/百戶所). As the Yuan only installed a revenue supervisor (*shuiwu tiling* 稅務提領) in Wenzhou and a granary tax officer (*ke cheng cang liang guan* 課程倉糧官) in Hezhou 河州, the patchy farmlands seem to have been concentrated in easternmost Mdo smad. The population of Han, who were known as “native Chinese” (Tumin 土民) during the Ming, was not large.⁷

Fan groups, whose economy was sustained by nomadism, dominated the region outside the medieval forts. Although the Song court conferred official titles to Fan leaders and recruited *zu* to reclaim

³ Liu 1975: j196, Wang and Yang 1989: 11362a–b, Toqto'a 1977: j492.

⁴ For detailed discussions of the geopolitical and ethnic meanings of Fan and Han in the medieval dynasties, see Yang 2014: 9–35 and Beckwith 2005: 5–20.

⁵ Toqto'a 1977: j87.2143–2170.

⁶ Li 1792: j247, 12b–13a, 22a–24b, j442, j444, j514, j520. 35b–37b.

⁷ Song 1976: j60.1429–1434, j87.2195–2197; *Ming shi lu* (MSL) Taizu: j55.1098–1099.

valleys near its northwestern border, only a few Tibetans adapted to the sedentary way of life in Lintao, Taozhou 洮州, and Minzhou 岷州.⁸ Mdo smad Tibetans oftentimes organized tents into *cu* 簇 or *zu* 族, the Chinese terms designating a group, tribe, clan, or federative unit. Several dozens of *zu* aligned tens of thousands of tents into a *bu* 部 or confederation to launch war, plunder Chinese settlements, negotiate peace, or affiliate with a more powerful dynasty. Their animals grazed grasslands ranging from Tsong kha to Jiezhou, which interlocked with the Song Qinfeng Circuit 秦鳳路 and the Jin Lintao Circuit 臨洮路.⁹ The Yuan administrative boundary between Shaanxi Province and Tufan Regions indicates that this dividing line between nomadic Fan and agricultural Han worlds was retained up until the late 14th century.¹⁰

Besides, as Christopher Atwood notes, “Yellow-Head Uyghurs” 黃頭畏兀兒, “Straw-Head Tatars” 草頭韃靼 and Chong’ul 種楡 had settled in northern Mdo smad since the 11th century.¹¹ The Yuan incorporation of Mdo smad brought more Mongol and Semu 色目 populace into Mdo smad in the 13th century. The newcomers included Mongol nobles, officials and dependencies, Central and West Asian servants, merchants and craftsmen, as well as the soldiers of the Tanmachi army 探馬赤軍.¹² In the late 14th century, these Mongolic and Turkish speaking peoples appear as Salar 撒拉, Baoan 保安 and various Huoer 霍爾 (Tib. *hor*), as well as Dada 韃靼 or Dazi 達子在 the Ming accounts. It is noteworthy that the Ming court did not, at least from the perspective of indirect control, differentiate these groups from Tibetans. Although their cultural practices and social organizations might be distinct from Mdo smad Tibetans, they were generally treated as Xifan by Ming officials. In the Ming records, the same term *zu* was used to document these non-Tibetan communities.¹³

In sum, Tibetans predominated the population of Mdo smad at the dawn of Ming China, while several smaller culturally distinctive groups which added to the diversity of the region. The boundaries of Tibetan territories in eastern Mdo smad often interlaced and overlapped with the Ming administrative borders in western Shaanxi. Xining, Hezhou, Lintao, Taozhou, and Minzhou were known as the

⁸ Even after the Tibetan ruling lineages such as the Zhao 趙 (Tib. *Rgyal sras*) and the Bao 包 (*Yulongke*) settled down in Lintao and Minzhou, their tribesmen still roved in between Xining and Jiezhou. Toqto’a 1977: j264.9129, j492.14151–14168.

⁹ The term *cu* instead of *zu* was used in *MSL* before 1498.

¹⁰ Toqto’a 1977: j121.4733–4761, j492.14151–14166; Chen 1977: j41.401–408.

¹¹ Atwood 2015: 26.

¹² Liu 2010: 109.

¹³ Zhang 1990: j9.1a–12a.

“Gates of Xifan.” Without enough Chinese cities, forts, and farmlands to form a solid agricultural borderland for Ming China in Xifan, the land in western Shaanxi remained wild, the roads were dangerous, and the nomadic inhabitants were disruptive.¹⁴

2. *The Making of the Ming Garrisons in Xifan*

In 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398) expelled the Mongol ruler Toghon Temür (1320–1370) from Beijing and announced the Ming succession to the Mandate of Heaven. After expelling most Mongols out of China proper, Mongol cavalries began to repeatedly harass the new state on the northern frontier from end to end. The old Chinese rationale of defending against steppe raiders became the backbone of the Ming military strategy. Buffer zones were established in northern Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Zhili. The borders were blockaded. In this process, eastern Mdo smad became a major Sino-Mongolian battlefield. The Ming launched punitive campaigns in Mdo smad.¹⁵

In 1369, the Ming generals battled against Mongol forces over Gongchang and Lintao, the largest cities in western Shaanxi. Based on the experience of the early Ming military officer Yu Ben 俞本, the generals attached strategic significance only to Lintao and treated the further westward cities as the “land beyond civilization.” Although Hezhou was the capital of the Tufan Regions, Feng Sheng looted and slaughtered local residents and burned the city to the ground.¹⁶ When Ming troops left Shaanxi, the Mongol and Tibetan joint forces immediately launched a revengeful assault on Lintao. Even after the Ming army defeated Köke Temür (d. 1375), who commanded the largest Mongol force to attack western Shaanxi in 1370, the Yuan princes, generals, Daruḃačis 達魯花赤 and Tibetan chiefs still organized multifocal revolts to recapture the Tufan Regions.¹⁷

Consequently, Zhu Yuanzhang intended to build a strong border in western Shaanxi, similar to the one on the northern frontier. Following this defensive strategy, the Ming expeditionary generals occupied the four major cities in eastern Mdo smad after the suppression of Mongol-Tibetan unrests. The garrison (*weisuo* 衛所) system was set up in Hezhou (1371), Xining (1373), Minzhou (1378), and Taozhou (1379). The four cities became known as the “Four Guards in Xifan” 西番四衛. The garrisons were under the jurisdiction of Shaanxi Provincial

¹⁴ MSL Taizu: j122–1972; Zhang 1974: j330.8539–8541.

¹⁵ MSL Taizu: j34.627; Zhang 1974: j125.3726–3730, j327–28.8463–8504.

¹⁶ Yu 2015: 275–300.

¹⁷ MSL Taizu: j48–52.947–1032.

Administration Commission (*Shaanxi chengxuan buzheng shi si* 陝西承宣布政使司).¹⁸

However, Ming expeditionary generals were unwilling to set up permanent garrisons outside the Yuan Shaanxi. In Xifan, hostile Tibetans surrounded the cities and the natural environment was not particularly inhabitable to Chinese farmers and soldiers.¹⁹ In addition to the logistic difficulties, the generals in Taozhou and Songpan 松潘 suggested to the Hongwu Emperor abandon these front-line garrisons. Nonetheless, the emperor insisted that maintaining them was a small cost in comparison to the crisis that would result without them.²⁰

The cost was by no means small for both Ming China and Mdo smad Tibetans. The Ming troops relied on looting Tibetans before initiating the land reclamation (*tuntian* 屯田) to achieve military self-sufficiency. The Ming reports on punitive campaigns show that Ming troops took thousands of Tibetan yaks, sheep, and horses as trophies. The emperor typically advised his generals to construct garrisons and use the looted livestock as supplies.²¹ From the 1370s to the 1380s, the guard officers carried out many plans for the construction of military colonies (*juntun* 軍屯) and defensive infrastructures. In comparing the 530 fortresses established by the 1540s with the 91 outposts before the 13th century, it becomes clear that Ming China established many stockade-villages (*zhai* 寨) and forts (*bao* 堡) in eastern Mdo smad (see Fig. 2).²²

For the Ming, substantial manpower was required to manage western Shaanxi, which encroached upon Mdo smad. Regular troops (*zhengjun* 正軍) were deployed to the station in Xifan after building the new guards (*wei* 衛). In each garrison in Xifan, the number of soldiers exceeded 5,600—the standard number of the inland guards (*neiwei* 內衛). In particular, around 10,000 soldiers protected Hezhou and Minzhou in the 1370s, respectively.²³ In the Huangshui Valley, the Ming treated the hundreds of *zu* settled around Xining Guard as a constant threat. In 1377, the emperor moved 2,000 garrison soldiers from Zhuanglang 莊浪 to enlarge the standing troop of some 6,000 soldiers in Xining. After the revolt of Tao-Min Shibazu 十八族, nearly 7,200 soldiers led by six battalion-commanders were ordered to

¹⁸ Zhao 1997: 678–690.

¹⁹ *MSL Taizu*: j53.1056–1057, j59.1178–1179, j70.1439, j86.1541, j119.1938, j122.1972.

²⁰ *MSL Taizu*: j123.1986.

²¹ Gu 1977: j10.127–151; *MSL Taizu*: j122.1979.

²² Xu 2009: 349.

²³ Wu 2008: j1.28b.

construct and defend the Taozhou Guard.²⁴ In 1391, another division of 8,000 soldiers in Huayin 華陰 was transferred to reclaim Xifan. Moreover, demoted officials, criminals, and civilians affected by corporal punishments (*lian-zuo* 連坐) were registered as military households and sent to protect garrisons in northern and western Shaanxi.²⁵

Ming China thus made a strong presence in Mdo smad. Apart from soldiers stationed in the guards, the Ming frontier force was further distributed to the fortresses of battalions (*qianhusuo* 千戶所), companies (*baihusuo* 百戶所), and colonies. Based on the Ming policy, 40–90% of soldiers acted as the defending force in Xifan. The rest were responsible for farming.²⁶ These were highly trained and state-salaried Han and Hui soldiers. Ming sources suggest that these soldiers mostly came from Jiangsu, Anhui, Shandong, Zhili, and Shaanxi. It is noteworthy that the Ming often placed Han soldiers in the interior areas of the Four Guards and Hui soldiers at the outposts bordering with Tibetan territories. In Nianbo 碾伯 of Xining, Guide 歸德 of Hezhou, Jiucheng 舊城 of Taozhou and Xizhai 西寨 of Minzhou, the forts guarded by Hui men served as a buffer zone between Tibetan and Han settlements.²⁷

From the 1380s, the Ming government registered the hereditary military households (*junhu* 軍戶) nationwide and adopted the conscription methods on the basis of household obligations (*jixuan* 籍選) to draft troops. The Ming conscription regulation required the military household to send a replacement soldier, his wife and an attendant (*yuding* 余丁 or *junyü* 軍余) to the garrison and refill the empty slot. Ideally, such a policy would prevent soldiers from desertion. In practice, soldiers were far away from their homelands, separated from families, and placed in a harsh environment. The passive resistance of military households was severe. The desertion of garrison soldiers prevailed in western Shaanxi.²⁸ In 1436, Shaanxi officials had to hire 4,200 attendants and willing men as professional

²⁴ *MSL* Taizu: j115.1881, j122.1978–1979.

²⁵ Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j155.1a–23b; Zhang 1974: j93.2289.

²⁶ In general, 30% of soldiers protected the garrison and 70% of soldiers farmed the land. The reclamation soldiers in Minzhou comprised only 10% in 1435. For the defense against Tibetan raiders, Jiezhou decreased the reclamation soldiers to 60% in 1441. *MSL* Xuanzong: j76.1754; *MSL* Yingzong: j14.251–252, j83.1658; Zheng 1937: j2.97–101.

²⁷ This observation is based on the cross examination of my field data and the Hui and Han genealogies in eastern Mdo smad. I will do a more thorough investigation on the Ming deployment of Hui troops in another project.

²⁸ Zhang 1974: j89–92.

soldiers to refill the empty slots. Because of the scarcity of accounts, the scale of hiring men from non-military households is unclear. Our understanding of the process of drawing soldiers from northeastern China to fill the slots in Mdo smad also remains incomplete.²⁹ Nonetheless, it is evident that the Ming could not maintain the initial number of garrisons. In his record on frontier garrisons, the Shaanxi Regional Censor (*xun'an yushi* 巡按御史) Zhang Yu 張雨 indicated that nearly two-thirds of the total amount of soldiers were no longer in service in Xifan by 1547. Although new soldiers were conscripted or hired, the total numbers remained small, and the garrison system's deteriorating condition never improved in western Shaanxi.³⁰

In contrast to the declining military population, civilians or *min* 民 steadily increased in the four garrisons. As the military colonies were underdeveloped in the Hongwu reign (1368–1398), the supply of logistics often troubled the Ming generals in Xifan. In 1372, the Hezhou commander (*zhihui* 指揮) sought to employ Tumin farmers to ease the burdensome long-distance transportation of provisions from Xi'an to the Four Guards. The emperor approved and the soldiers were paid in valuable goods such as tea, salt, and silk to trade with native Chinese for grains.³¹ Since there were few Tumin in the upper Taohe and Huangshui Valleys, the Ming dispatched Han farmers to open up farmland and solidify the borderland. In 1378, Zhu Yuanzhang relocated a *li* of Qishan 岐山 farmers to Minzhou, expecting them to increase agricultural production and be “model people” (*yangmin* 樣民) to civilize Tibetans.³² In addition to state-directed migrants, there were also many military attendants, unregistered households, and traders in Xifan.³³ The Ming official data, which only counted males of registered households, shows that the number of civilian settlers in the four garrisons surpassed the soldiers by the 1540s.³⁴ To levy tax and corvée on the non-military households, the guard officers registered them in the *lijia* 里甲 system. The population was divided into the *li* 里 of 110 households. The *li* was further divided into ten units of ten households known as *jia* 甲.³⁵

²⁹ Zhang 1974: j91.2249.

³⁰ Zhang 1990: j2.71a–84b, j3.6b–9a. For a discussion of the tactics adopted by military households to cope with the Ming system of conscription, see Szonyi 2017.

³¹ *MSL* Taizu: j55.1098–1099; Wu 2008: j1.15a–16b.

³² Zhang 1974: j80.1947–1953.

³³ For the cases of unregistered settlers in Xifan, see *MSL* Yingzong: j70.1352–1353, j76.1501, j196.6311, j232.5079–5078, j305.6437–6438; *MSL* Xianzong: j150.2741; *MSL* Wuzong: j25.2503–2504, j162.3124–3125; Zhang 1990: j9; Wang 1706: j2.52b–53a.

³⁴ Zhao 1997: 678–690; Zhang 1990: j3.47a–84a, j4.1a–9a.

³⁵ *MSL* Taizu: j55.1098–1099; Wu 2008: j1.15a–16b.

This tax and labor allocation system was also established in some Tibetan *zu* despite most Mdo smad Tibetans being nomadic. Lintao and Hezhou were the trade centers and transportation junctions between Mdo smad and Shaanxi in the Yuan period. As the Ming border control blocked free trade, the Tibetans were in shortage of Chinese products, especially tea. When the court set up tea-horse bureaus (*chamasi* 茶馬司) in Shaanxi from 1374 to 1397, some dominant Xifan federations paid allegiance to the Ming, settled near the four garrisons, built or restored local monasteries, adapted to the Ming political-trading order, and became intermediate traders between Ming China and Greater Tibet.³⁶ The Confucian scholastic officials regarded them as either “raw barbarians” (*shengfan* 生番) or “cooked barbarians” (*shufan* 熟番) if they “were cultured enough to accept moral edification and eventual civilization.”³⁷ A more practical standard for the classification of Tibetans, from the Ming garrison officers’ point of view, was whether the Fan groups aligned with the Ming responded to the imperial instruction and paid taxes.

The *lijia* system was promulgated among *shufan*. In Hezhou, Qiezang 乧藏 and Laoya 老鴉 *zu* formed Yinchuan *li* 銀川里. Some *zu* in Minzhou were organized into 16 *li*. In Taozhou, 49 *zu* were organized into five *zongjia* 總甲 which were equivalent to five *li*. Native chiefs were appointed as *lizhang* 里長 and *jiazhang* 甲長. By the mid-Ming reign period, Xining, Hezhou, Taozhou, and Minzhou managed four, 45, 17 and five *li* of Chinese and Tibetan subjects respectively. The regional variation with respect to the Ming’s practical control over these *lijia* was complex. Han *lijia* were managed by guard officers. Tibetan *lijia* were ruled by local chiefs who were appointed as native officials (*tuguan* 土官). In Xining, the number of registered households was small. Only a registry bureau (*jingli si* 經歷司) under the supervision of the guard commander was instituted to manage local *lijia* in the late 15th century. In Taozhou, all *zongjia* were ruled by the native commander commissioner (*tu zhihui shi* 土指揮使), the Co ne king. Due to the growth of the civilian population, the court separated the civil administration from the *weisuo* system and established Hezhou (1472) and Minzhou (1544) subprefectures (*zhou* 州) under the

³⁶ Dongke Monastery 東科寺 (Tib. Stong 'khor dgon pa) in Xining, and Honghua 弘化 (Tib. Mdzo mo mkar) and Lingzang 靈藏/Maying 馬營 (Tib. Lin gtsang zi) Monasteries in Hezhou were regional markets. Wang 1706: j2.52b–53a; Yang 1908: 160–161; Yang 2016: 1–9.

³⁷ Harrel 1995: 19.

Lintao Prefecture (*fu* 府).³⁸

As Ming officials extracted tax in grain or horse from all registered households, the widespread desertion of registered households in the two subprefectures suggests that the civil administration was not welcomed by non-military settlers. In Hezhou, the *shufan zu* fled from the *lijia* settlements to avoid tax in the 1440s. They occupied northwestern Hezhou and robbed traders, travelers, and Han settlers. The local gazetteer composed by Wu Zhen in 1546 shows that the number of *li* decreased to 31 in Hezhou.³⁹ After the establishment of the subprefecture in Minzhou, Tibetan *lijia* chiefs who were removed from their positions in 1562 led local *shufan* to resist the Ming tax and labor allocation. Meanwhile, the Taohe Valley was repeatedly raided by Mongols. The court had to remove the circulating official (*liuguan* 流官) and recruit Tibetan chiefs to protect the garrison. Ming authorities explicitly stated that Fan peoples were accustomed to native officials. Up to the 1620s, Minzhou Guard still nominally managed 17 *li*.⁴⁰

3. The Ming Management of Mdo smad

After taking over Hezhou in 1370, the Ming inherited the Yuan administrative structure of Tufan Regions and reformed the nine marshal commissioner offices (*yuanshuai fu* 元帥府) into the *weisuo*. The surrendered Yuan officials, all non-Tibetans, were reappointed as six battalion heads 千戶, nine company heads 百戶 and 17 supervisory managers 都管. The court integrated them into the garrison bureaucracy. They were supervised by Vice Commander (*zhihui tongzhi* 指揮同知) Suonanpo 索南普, who was the highest Yuan official in the Tufan Regions and a Ming deputy commander in Hezhou.⁴¹ The Ming military personnel's control over the vast Mdo smad remained

³⁸ MSL Shizong: j497.8236–8237; Wu 2008: j1.17a–19b, j2.9b–10a, j4.52a–b; Zhang 1990: j9.4a, 9a; Wang and Tian 2008: j2.11b–14b; Yang 1990: j33.15a–b; Gong 1970: j5.15a–25b.

³⁹ MSL Yingzong: j66.1264–1265, j88.1761–1762; Wu 2008: j1.17a–19b.

⁴⁰ Wang and Tian 2008: j2. 12b–5b, j8. 1b–4a; Zhang 1974: j330.8845–8846.

⁴¹ By 1373, the nine marshal commissioner offices were reorganized into the Tiecheng 鐵城, Minzhou, Shibazu, Changyang 常陽, Jishizhou 積石州, Menggujun 蒙古軍, Mieqijun 滅乞軍, and Zhaozangjun 招藏軍 battalions (8), Taozhou Military-Civilian Battalion 軍民千戶所 (1), Shangzhai 上寨, Lijia-wuzu 李家五族, Qizu 七族, Fanke 番客, Huazhou-dengchu 化州等處, Changjiazu 常家族 and Zhualizu 爪黎族 companies (7), as well as Jiezhou-Fuzhou and Yangwa 陽峒 Han-Fan military-civilian companies 軍民百戶所 (2). See MSL Taizu: j70. 1439.

limited. After the establishment of the Four Guards, the court still did not exert that much control over Tibetans in Xifan.

During the punitive campaigns in 1369, 1370, 1372, 1373, 1376, and 1379, military reports from western Shaanxi reveal that Mdo smad Tibetans often colluded with Mongol princes. Once the Ming expeditionary force left Mdo smad, the Mongol-Tibetan joint forces would attack Hezhou, Lintao, or Lanzhou.⁴² To prevent the Mongol princes from collaborating with Tibetan rulers, Zhu Yuanzhang deposed the Mongol principalities in Mdo smad. He designated Princes Bunala 卜納刺, Heshang 和尚, and Sangge Duoerzhiban 桑哥朵兒只班 as vice commanders of Wujing 武靖, Gaochang 高昌, and Qishan 岐山 Guards, and later transferred them to the Ming capital as imperial bodyguards.⁴³ Nonetheless, the political sway of the Yuan princes and marshal commissioners over Xifan peoples was not as strong and direct as the Ming court expected. In addition to the large-scale construction of fortifications, Ming China implemented a series of policies to strengthen state control in Xifan.

First, the court adopted the Yuan policy that vested official positions in native rulers and let them manage their own *zu* without direct state interference. This is an archaic strategy known as *jimi* 羈縻 or bridle in Chinese history. The early Ming sought to enlist native leaders who would pay allegiance to the emperor. Hereditary positions such as command commissioner (*zhihui shi* 指揮使, 3a rank), vice commander (3b), command officer (*zhuihui qianshi* 指揮僉事, 4a), native battalion heads (*tuqianhu* 土千戶, 5a/b) and native company heads (*tubaihu* 土百戶, 6b) were conferred on many Tibetan and a few Mongol, Monguor and Turkish speaking leaders.⁴⁴ The Ming emperors appointed over 200 Tibetan chiefs to indirectly harness their subjects in Xifan. This policy was described as “divide and rule” by later historians.⁴⁵ However, Ming China mostly recognized the existing chiefs in Mdo smad, among whom many ceased to obtain Ming ratification and did not leave a trace in the official record (see Chart 1). The driven objective seems to be the enforcement of a more systematic control over Xifan instead of the fragmentation of an assumed Tibetan solidarity.

Second, the early Ming rulers embraced the same ideology to expand state influence through bestowing monastic official positions and fancy titles on Xifan religious authorities. Unlike the Yuan

⁴² MSL Taizu: j48–52.947–1032.

⁴³ Ibid: j60. 1172–1173.

⁴⁴ Wang and Nyima 1997: 31–33.

⁴⁵ Jia 2010: 67–73; Sperling 1983: 339–356.

emperors who favored the Sa skya sect, Ming rulers patronized all Tibetan Buddhist sects to preclude them from bonding with Mongols.⁴⁶ In the Monk Registry (*senglusi* 僧錄司) of the Ming central government, some Tibetan ecclesiastic leaders were designated as the left/right compassionate one (*shanshi* 善世, 6a), teaching elaborator (*chanjiao* 闡教, 6a), preacher (*jiangjing* 講經, 8a) or righteousness awoken being (*jueyi* 覺義, 8a). In the four garrisons, eminent religious leaders were appointed as monk supervisors (Chin. *sengzheng* 僧正, Tib. *bla dpon*), monk preceptors (Chin. *senggang* 僧綱, Tib. *mkhan po*) and supervisory monk preceptors (Chin. *dugang* 都綱, Tib. *mkhan chen*) to run local supervisory monk offices 僧綱司. Besides, hundreds of lamas and monks were granted titles like King (*wang* 王), Dharma King (*fawang* 法王), Great/State Preceptor (*da/guoshi* 大/國師), Son of Buddha (*fozi* 佛子) and Chan Master (*chanshi* 禪師).⁴⁷ These Buddhist leaders were sponsored by the emperors and honored by Mdo smad leaders and Tibetan communities. The court deployed them as political mediators to enlist Xifan chiefs, negotiate frontier peace, and organize tributaries.

Third, the court utilized border commerce as a key political device to establish a new political order in Xifan. As early as the 1370s, Lintao and Hezhou officials received trading requests from their Xifan neighbors. Border commerce was occasionally used to win over Tibetans. The privilege of trade was a gift to award those who yielded to the Ming. Nonetheless, such small scale and irregular trade could not satisfy the huge demand for tea in Mdo smad. Like the Mongols on the Ming northern frontier, the urge for increased trade motivated Tibetans to raid the border garrisons.⁴⁸ Taking into account Ming China's constant need for battle steeds to fight against Mongols, Ming officials revisited the Tang and Song tea-horse trade policies.

| Garrison | Native Official | | | | | Monastic Official | Entitled Monk |
|----------|-----------------|-----|--------|-------|--------|-------------------|---------------|
| | Tibetan | Han | Mongol | Salar | Others | | |
| Xining | 6 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | over 40 |
| Hezhou | 5 | | | 2 | 1 | 4 | |
| Taozhou | 3 | 5 | | | | 5 | |
| Minzhou | 8 | | | | 1 | 1 | |

Chart 1 — Native officials, monastic officials, and entitled monks in Mdo smad⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Wylie 1980, 339.

⁴⁷ In the reign of Chenghua (1465–1487), the emperor bestowed various titles on 437 Tibetan monks. See *MSL* Xiaozong: j4.56–57.

⁴⁸ Zhang 1974: j330.8540–8541, Rossabi 1970: 136–168.

⁴⁹ These authorities are the only traceable ones. The data is from *MSL*, Wu 2008, Liu and Long 1993, Wang and Tian 2008, Yang 1990 and Zhang 1970.

In an imperial memorial, Grand Secretary Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1421–1495) summarized contemporary officials' opinion on the Ming tea-horse policy:

Since the Tang dynasty, the Uyghur (Huihu 回鶻) paid tribute and exchanged horses for tea. Henceforth the northwestern enemies (*lu* 虜) were addicted to tea. As the enemies mostly liked milk, channels and collaterals were blocked and stagnant. While tea has the unobstructed character and can remove greasiness [...] the Song initiated to set up tea-horse bureaus. Our Celestial Dynasty levies tea-tax on *min* that does not benefit its revenue. The former dynasties' so-called market matters included various categories such as *tieshe* 貼射, *jiaoyin* 交引, and *chayou* 茶由 [...] that took the resources of people's livelihood and everyday use for the state's revenue. There is no such thing nowadays. Only a tea-horse bureau was established in Sichuan and three in Shaanxi [...] for utilizing horses from abroad as a war reserve in the borderland.⁵⁰

It was a common notion among Ming officials that "Fan people love tea and regard it as life. Exchanging tea for horses is not only supporting wars, but also controlling their lives."⁵¹

In 1383, Zhu Yuanzhang issued an edict to institutionalize the border commerce and further the civilizing project with the Chinese hierarchical political-cultural order and agriculture-based taxation standard:

Xifan people have pledged allegiance for a long time while [I] have not ordered them to pay tribute and tax. It is said that there are many horses in their land. It is better to count the amount of their land and levy tax. For instance, three households [in a *zu*] of 3,000 households pay a horse; four households of 4,000 households pay a horse. Set it up as a native tax (*tufu* 土賦) so as to let them know to honor the emperor, respecting the superiors, and following the rite of the court.⁵²

Ideally, the tea-horse policy monopolized tea, constrained enemies, lightened the burden of *min*, and was thus not regarded as trade by Confucian officials. Based on this rationale, the Ming established tea-horse bureaus in Hezhou (1374), Taozhou (1383), Xining (1397), and Minzhou (which separated from Taozhou in 1595).⁵³ In 1392, the Ming also set up the bronze tally system (*jinpaizhi* 金牌制) to regulate border

⁵⁰ The memorial to the throne is quoted in *Hezhou wei zhi*, see Wu 2008: j2.3a–4a.

⁵¹ Qiao 1568: j4.1a–b.

⁵² *MSL* Taizu: j151.3181.

⁵³ Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37.1a, 11b–20a.

trade. It distributed 41 tallies to 48 *zu* that were ruled by the early Ming appointed native officials. Some 29 *zu* managed by the Bili 必里 Guard of northern Khams and Hezhou Guard shared 21 tallies. In Taozhou, Huobazang 火把藏 and Sinangri 思囊日 the *zu* received four tallies. The final 16 tallies were taken by the *zu* managed by the Quxian 曲先, Arui 阿瑞, Handong 罕東, and Anding 安定 Guards, or “Four Guards in Steppe” 塞外四衛 somewhere in middle Mdo smad.⁵⁴

These *zu* were large confederations consisting of many smaller *zu*. They were selected as official suppliers to exchange horses for official tea (*guan cha* 官茶) at tea-horse bureaus once every three years. They were registered as horse-payers (*nama fan zu* 納馬番族) in the Ming records. Ming officials treated the Tibetans trading at tea-horse bureaus as horse-tax payers (*ma fu* 馬賦). The guard authorities played the role of tax collector and spared no effort to fulfill their duty and profit from it. For Mdo smad Tibetans, it was the only channel to obtain Chinese products after the fall of the Mongol Empire. To gain the imperial reward—tea, more and more Xifan trading representatives requested to pay horses as the *min* paying land tax.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, the Ming demand for horses continued to increase while the court set horse prices lower than market rates (see Chart 3). Yet, as more and more smugglers began to sell tea at lower costs, fewer and fewer *zu* were inclined to trade with the state. In the 1400s, the emperors received frontier memorials that reported some horse-payer *zu* were impoverished due to the demand for horses. Some *zu* such as Xining Aji 阿吉 and Alagu 阿刺谷, Hezhou Qie zang and Zhenzhu 珍珠, Taozhou Wuzang 惡藏, Shala 沙刺, Sinangri, and Halun 哈倫 *zu*, as well as several federations in Handong, escaped to distant steppe or the Hexi Corridor to dodge the horse-taxes. The Shibazu confederation even revolted against the Taozhou and Minzhou commanders.⁵⁶

| Location | Large <i>zu</i> | Small <i>zu</i> | Population Estimation |
|----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Xining | 19 | 170 | 1,0950 |
| Hezhou | | 47 | 74,780 |
| Taozhou | 54 | 118 | 17,350 |
| Minzhou | 43 | 194 | 5,735 |
| Xigu | | 159 | 21,943 |
| Guide | | 11 | unknown |

Chart 2 — Zu and population in Mdo smad⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37. 11b–12a; Zhang 1974: j80.1947–1955.

⁵⁵ MSL Taizu: j176.2672, j220.3222.

⁵⁶ MSL Taizu: j250.2616, j251.3635–3636; MSL Xuanzong: j19.511–512, j80.1849–1850; MSL Yingzong: j91.1834, j164.3181; Zhang 1970: 961–962.

⁵⁷ Zhang 1990: j9.

As a result, the guard officers directed troops to subdue the tax dodgers and force them to make supplementary payments. In extreme cases, they “induced and abducted [Fan] in the military camp, cut down [horse] prices, exchanged low-value [tea] for the high values. It resulted in the resentment and even suicide of Fan *cu*.”⁵⁸ These reported cases of horse-payers fleeing elsewhere and corruptive Ming officers in Xifan indicate that the state-led border trade became a burden for some horse-payers. The bronze tally system proved itself problematic and was banned in 1415. Although it was shortly resumed in the Xuande reign (1425–1435) and the Hongzhi reign (1487–1505), the system was abolished in both instances. In the 1490s, the government started to issue licenses (*chayin* 茶引) of commercial tea (*shangcha* 商茶) to the Ming traders. The court allowed certified traders to purchase tea, transport to tea-horse bureaus, and keep an additional portion to sale to Tibetans. The practice became less about taxation and more about trade. Up to the 1540s, the horse-payers increased to 98 *zu*.⁵⁹

Fourth, following a similar political agenda to bridle Tibetans, the court promoted the tribute system (*chaogong* 朝貢) to build a Ming-centric political and cultural order in Xifan. Since the Yuan officials surrendered and paid tribute to the Ming emperor in the 1370s, Mdo smad authorities started the tributary practice when renewing imperial ratification or congratulating a new emperor. In 1383, the Ministry of Rites 禮部 enacted rules and stipulated imperial rewards to Xifan tributary delegations, affiliated tributaries, native officials, and Ming commanders who enlisted and escorted the tributary crowds. Horses were given as local presents to the throne, and tea was the imperial reward. Yet, the majority of 1,000 *zu* in Mdo smad were excluded from this official channel of trade or the rare opportunity to pay tribute (see Chart 2). Instead, they traded with *shufan*, smugglers, Ming settlers, and garrison officers. In these transactions, lamas often served as middlemen. Since some Mdo smad people occasionally looted the Ming garrisons, Ming officials documented them as raw, wild or remote Tibetans (*shengfan* 生番, *yefan* 野番 or *yuanfan* 遠番).⁶⁰

To undermine the threat of these unpredictable raiders, the court instructed frontier officials to recruit *shengfan* to pay tribute, or trade in accordance with Tibetan understanding of the practice.⁶¹ Due to the quick collapse of the bronze tally system and the decrease of horse-tax

⁵⁸ MSL Xianzong: j131.2479–2480.

⁵⁹ MSL Taizu: j176.2672; Zhang 1990: j9; Zhang 1974: j80.1947–1953.

⁶⁰ Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j56, j76, j106, j115, j149, j234, j381, j383, j461; An 2008: j17.7b–13a.

⁶¹ Wylie 1980: 335–340.

revenue by the mid-Yongle reign (1402–1424), Ming China launched a long-lasting campaign to “open up barbaric region and trade horses” 開番中馬. The campaign led to a boom of raw Tibetan tribute in the early 15th century. Whilst, it was uneasy for the guard officers to enlist *shengfan*. The court could hardly ignore the influence of eminent lamas over Tibetans in interior Mdo smad. Owing to Tibetan monasteries’ role as local markets, influential lamas joined the tributary business without hesitation. They enlisted one to several *zu*, led delegations to Beijing, returned with Chinese commodities, and distributed goods through the monastery-based trading network.⁶² In the Yongle reign, they could pay tribute every year. More and more *zu* were recruited by Tibetan Buddhist authorities. The *shengfan* tributaries grew rapidly. By the 1540s, around 700 Mdo smad *zu* were registered as horse-tributary Tibetans (*gongma fanzu* 貢馬番族).⁶³

Overall, Ming China designed these policies to achieve the political goal of *jimi*. Tea played a significant role in the exertion of state control.⁶⁴ Although Ming officials demonstrated that exchanging tea for horses was a form of native tax collected from Tibetans who “wholeheartedly yearned for civilization” and horse-tribute was a way to “cherish people from afar,” as will be described in the next section, Tibetans treated paying the horse-tax and tribute as different means of trade. These policies were intertwined in practical terms and inevitably altered the social-political structures and trading patterns in Mdo smad. It was indeed hard for the imperial court to maintain the frontier garrisons and manage *nama* and *gongma* Tibetans. Yet, the most serious threats were triggered by the tea-horse trade and ultimately came from people who lived outside Mdo smad.

4. Tea, Mdo smad Zu and the Kokonor Mongols

Due to the low official horse prices set by the Ming government, tea smuggling became prevalent in western Shaanxi. Ming frontier officials, Chinese merchants, and Tibetans authorities all profited from smuggling, sometimes in direct collaboration with each other. On the one hand, the horse-tax payers usually sold license-less horses (*sima* 私馬) to the garrison officers or merchants inside the Ming border in

⁶² Shajia 1829: 4–6 *pin*; Zhao 1997: 678–690; Gu 1977: j27.38, 24–39, 50–1, 58–77, 94–107; Zhang 1970: j3.273.

⁶³ MSL Taizu: j154.2402, j225, 3295–3296; MSL Taizong: j27.493, j59.858, j99.1295, j121.1532, j168.1869, j196.2055, j220.2186, j240.2286; MSL Xuanzong: j25.656–657; Zhang 1990: j9; Zhang 1970: j16.928.

⁶⁴ Zhang 1970: j16.508.

return for license-less tea (*sicha* 私茶). On the other hand, given that every representative of the horse-tributary *zu* was allowed to purchase tea for their own use, native and monastic officials took advantage of the *kaifan* policy, enlisted “raw” Tibetans and enlarged the tributary missions.⁶⁵ Even “cooked” Tibetans and horse-tax payers used the identity of *shengfan* to participate in paying tribute. Chiefs ruling several thousand households worked with monks to register their *zu* (confederation) as many small horse-tributary *zu* as possible in order to get more quota of tributary representatives.⁶⁶

| Horse-Payer | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Year | Location | Horse amount | Tea (<i>jin</i>) ⁶⁷ | Average horse-price (<i>jin</i> of tea per horse) |
| 1383 | Hezhou | | | 30 |
| 1392 | Bili, Hezhou | 10,340 | 300,000 | 30 |
| 1398 | Hezhou | 13,528 | 500,000 | 36 |
| 1410 | Hezhou | 7,714 | 278,460 | 36 |
| 1435 | Xining, Hezhou, Taozhou | 13,000 | 1,097,000 | 84.4 |
| 1447 | Xining, Handong, Arui Anding | 2,946 | 125,430 | 42.6 |
| 1500 | Xining, Hezhou, Taozhou | 4,000 | 400,000 | 100 |
| 1508 | Shaanxi | 9,000 | 782,000 | 86.9 |
| 1580s | Xining | | | 138 |
| Horse Tributary | | | | |
| Year | Location | Reward of each horse apart from the horse price and 50 <i>jin</i> of tea per person | | |
| | | High quality | Middle quality | Low quality |
| 1425 | Xifan | 250 <i>ding</i> 錠 of cash, 1 <i>pi</i> 匹 of Boehmeria nivea silk | 200 <i>ding</i> , 1 <i>pi</i> | 80 <i>ding</i> , 1 <i>pi</i> |
| 1455 | Minzhou | 300 <i>ding</i> per middle horse | | |
| 1474 | Xifan | 300 <i>ding</i> , 1 <i>pi</i> of Boehmeria nivea silk per horse | | |
| 1518 | Xifan | 89,900 <i>jin</i> of tea | | |

Chart 3 – Horse prices for horse-payer and tributary⁶⁸

Moreover, some tributary monks were neither Xifan nor monks. Among Tibetan Buddhist priests, as Shaanxi and Sichuan provincial bureaus reported, there were many lay, deserted and unregistered people from the borderland. The investigation report of Censor Li Ji 李玘 shows that

[the] Tumin in Xining, Hezhou and Taozhou reside close to Fan people

⁶⁵ MSL Taizu: j254.3670; MSL Taizong: j39.658; MSL Xuanzong: j98.2207–2208; Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37.3b–20a.

⁶⁶ In this case, the raw Tibetans were mainly nomads. MSL Taizong: j59.858.

⁶⁷ A *jin* 斤 was 500 grams.

⁶⁸ MSL Taizu: j156, 2425; MSL Taizong: j110.1412–1413; MSL Yizong: j152.2983, j264.5618; MSL Xianzong: j141.2633; Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37.1a–20a.

and mostly speak Fan language. The runaway soldiers and civilians from every province gather in numbers of tens of thousands and collaborate with Fan to buy horses. They hire Tumin as translators and guides, group together, and mutually support each other to enter deeply into the *Fan* region and hide themselves. Not only soldiers and civilians do this, but also military officers below the rank of commander let family members and friends collaborate with the *Fan*.⁶⁹

Knowing the Tibetan language, some Han frontiersmen not only deceptively used monastic names and titles to join Tibetan tributary missions, but also simulated Xifan people and organized tributary delegations to trade in interior China.⁷⁰

Given that the court imposed few restrictions on these Xifan tributary missions before the 1440s, over 700 *zu* paid tribute regularly. A tributary delegation was a long-distance caravan in nature. Tibetan religious leaders often requested the throne to give tea as alms (Skt. *dāna*) for monks' usage. The emperors could grant 10,000 to 90,000 *jin* of tea to a leading lama. Meanwhile, Xifan delegations made requests for imperial permits or tea licenses to buy huge amounts of tea in the tea-planting provinces like Huguang 湖廣 or tea-horse bureaus in Shaanxi and Sichuan. The tributary envoys also privately traded with the *min*, purchased license-less tea, utilized the corvée labors of the courier system, and smuggled (*jiadai* 夾帶) the goods across the Ming border. Then, tea, grains, silk, paper, handicrafts, and so on were transported to the regional markets such as monasteries and bases of native chiefs for further distribution.⁷¹ The excessive growth in the size and frequency of tribute missions, along with the increasing amount of imperial rewards, became a huge burden for the Ming. In the 1440s, 2,000 to 3,000 tributaries gathered in the border guards to be trained in the imperial rite for presenting tribute, and then continued from Minzhou—the main checkpoint for Tibetan traders and tributaries—to enter into China proper.⁷²

Hence, the court set restrictions on tributaries from Xifan. Before the mid-1430s, the *jiadai* activities were fully tolerated. The throne's rhetoric was to "cherish people from afar." At the same time, the punishment for *min* who smuggled tea across the border, traded with Tibetan delegations in tea-producing areas or faked tea license was as severe as the death penalty according to the Ming law.⁷³ From the

⁶⁹ Yang 1820: j3.12b–13a.

⁷⁰ MSL Yingzong: j97.1942–1943; j177.3407–3408.

⁷¹ MSL Yingzong: j70.1352–1353, j76.1501, j196.6311, j232.5078–5079, j305.6437–6438; MSL Xianzong: j150.2741; MSL Wuzong: j25.2503–2504, j162.3124–3125; Zhang 1990: j9; Wang 1706: j2.52b–53a.

⁷² Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j461.17a–b.

⁷³ MSL Taizu: j254.3670; MSL Taizong: j39.658; Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37.3b–4b.

1430s onward, the court introduced regulations to control tea smuggling. In 1439, the Ministry of Rites declined the request of the monk Wenbushen Jianzang 溫卜什堅藏 to buy 6,000 *jin* of tea. In 1440, the Ministry of Rites prohibited Chan Master Gezang 葛藏 from transporting more than 100,000 *jin* of private tea through the courier system. In 1443, the rite officials alerted the emperor to the fact that State Preceptor Nange Zangbu 喃葛藏卜 of Xining Qutan Monastery 瞿曇寺 (Tib. Gro tshang lha khang) requested to buy 15,000 *jin* of tea. Such cases in *MSL* continued up to the 1450s, showing that Tibetan smugglers were pardoned and permitted to buy a certain amount of tea instead of being handled as the rite officials suggested to the emperor.⁷⁴

In the 1460s, the business of tea-horse bureaus was almost paralyzed. The number of tributary envoys escorted from Minzhou inflated to 4,200 persons per year.⁷⁵ In 1466, the Shaanxi vice inspection commissioner reported that less than one-third of the tributary lamas were from Central Tibet. The rest were monks of Tao-Min who counterfeited Dbus gtsang lama's identity and paid weak horses as a tribute. He further remarked that these monks exchanged imperial gifts for weapons to attack official troops.⁷⁶ The court thus made a more determinative effort to tackle the issues concerning tea trade in Xifan. These efforts included installing supervisory censors (*jiancha yushi* 監察禦史) and inspectors (*xingren* 行人) to survey official trade and smuggling in western Shaanxi and ordering horse-tributaries to pay tribute once every three years. In addition, a small *zu* was allowed to only send one to two envoys, a large *zu* could send three to five, and each envoy was allowed to cross the border with only 200 to 300 *jin* of tea. The quota of corvée labor used by Dbus gtsang delegations was standardized (up to 150 men). To stop Mdo smad *shufan* and non-Tibetan impostors of *shengfan* and Dbus gtsang lamas, the tributary entrance for central Tibetan delegations was changed to Sichuan. The court even specified that a tributary envoy sent from Sichuan got 60 *jin* of tea while one from Tao-Min received only 50 *jin*. These restrictions on *jiadai* culminated in 1490 after the emperor issued a statute that instructed frontier officials to confiscate license-less tea of Mdo smad tributaries.⁷⁷

As a consequence of the Ming's tightened tributary policy, Mdo smad Tibetans experienced a shortage of tea and plundered the four

⁷⁴ *MSL* Xuanzong: j115.2583; *MSL* Yingzong: j55.1056–1057, j66.1268, j101.2047.

⁷⁵ Zhang 1974: j330.8543.

⁷⁶ *MSL* Wuzong: j25.2503–2504.

⁷⁷ *MSL* Yingzong: j76.1501, j97.1942–1943, j196.6311, j232.5079–5080, j305.6437–6438; *MSL* Xiaozong: j63.1207, j194.3579–3580; Li, Xu and Shen 1988: j37.3b–20a.

garrisons. In 1468, the Shaanxi supervisory censor reported that 160 headmen of 30 “raw” *zu* and 91 chiefs of 24 “cooked” *zu* assaulted Minzhou with a joint force.⁷⁸ Up to the late 15th century, over 100 such cases were reported to the emperor, along with the tighter tributary regulations being put into action. Those *zu* within the same religious, social, and trading networks usually allied into a raiding force, consisting of 2,000 to 10,000 warriors that outnumbered or matched a Ming garrison force. They made trade demands, looted Ming settlements, and then fled into deep valleys and dense forests. The frontier officials often enlisted them again, awarding imperial gifts, particularly tea.⁷⁹

When western Shaanxi was harassed by Tibetans, the court did not expect that the new tea-horse policy affected Mongols in the northern Hexi Corridor. In 1502, Shaanxi Governor 巡撫 Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530) learned that Taozhou had private tea in abundance. “The remote, near, raw and cooked Tibetans in Hezhou and Xining trafficked in [tea] and connected external region, being hard to ban.”⁸⁰ Shaanxi Vice Inspection Commissioner Zheng Luo 鄭洛 asserted that Mongols relied on Tibetan smugglers to trade. The record of Xifan tributary products also confirmed this point. From 1436 onward, Tibetans frequently paid camels as tribute to the throne. Camels were the domestic animal extensively bred by Mongols but never by Tibetans. Mongol and Tibetan groups bypassed the Ming garrisons in the Hexi Corridor and traded for decades before the court paid attention to the issue.⁸¹

In 1509, the Eastern Mongolian (Dada or Right Wing) ruler Dayan Khan 達延汗 (1464–1517) defeated the Oirat (*Wala* 瓦剌, or Left Wing) leader Iburai 亦卜剌 in the ongoing Mongol civil wars. The defeated Oirats of 10,000 tribesmen withdrew to Guanxi 關西 from Hetao 河套. Iburai surrendered to the Ming and requested the Zhengde Emperor to open a border market in Suzhou 肅州 and allow his people to graze animals near the guard. The Ming had been long cautious about granting the access of trade and tribute to various Mongol groups, and the court declined the request. Notwithstanding, the Ganzhou and Suzhou officials expected no trouble with Oirat Mongols. After Iburai “borrowed road” (*jiedao* 借道), namely, the Ming border passes in Guanxi, to enter northern Mdo smad, they granted free pass to Oirat Mongols. In doing so, Ming officials intended to direct Iburai to cross

⁷⁸ MSL Xianzong: j64.1298–1299; Zhang 1974: j330.8843.

⁷⁹ MSL Yingzong: j404. 4337–4348; Zhang 1974: j330.8845–8846.

⁸⁰ Yang 1820: j3.1b.

⁸¹ MSL Yingzong: j32.627; Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j405.23a.

the Qilian Mountains and loot raw Tibetans troubling western Shaanxi.⁸²

Furthermore, Dayan Khan elbowed Taishi 太師 Burkhai 卜兒孩 out of his court around 1510. The latter trekked to Guanxi and joined Iburai with another 10,000 Mongols. They defeated the Tibetans near lake Kokonor, wrecked the Four Guards in Steppe, and settled down in western Mdo smad. They roved from Xining to Songpan and “coerced and drove Fanzu” to loot Tibetans near Four Guards in Xifan. The court and Iburai seemingly had a mutual understanding of the raid. The court only instructed frontier officers to protect crucial sites along the border. It disregarded the Mongol looting cases as long as its garrisons were not offended. The Jiajing Emperor (1521–1567) even issued an edict to the Mongols and asserted that they were allowed to raid raw Tibetans but were prohibited from looting the Ming subjects and subordinated Tibetans (*shufan* 屬番).⁸³

Later, the Right Wing crossed the Qilian Mountains to subdue the Oirats and seek trading opportunities on the Ming western border. In the early 1530s, Dayan Khan’s grandson Günbileg Jonon 吉囊 (1502–1546) vanquished Iburai. Jonon’s younger brother, the Tümed ruler Altan Khan 俺答汗 (1507–1582) defeated Burkhai and integrated the Kokonor Oirats into Eastern Mongolia in 1540. He requested the Ming to open border fair. The court turned down his demand yet continued to ignore his raids in Mdo smad. Then, Altan Khan returned to Hetao and persistently plundered the Ming until a Sino-Mongol treaty was reached in 1571. Apart from the 11 markets on the Ming northern border, the court opened Ganzhou, Suzhou, Zhuanglang, Xining, and Taozhou markets to the Mongols. Recognizing Tibetan Buddhism as a sophisticated religion and a political symbol, Altan Khan established Yanghua Monastery 仰華寺 near the Kokonor in 1575.⁸⁴ To “translate religious unity into political unity” of Tibetans and Mongols, as Morris Rossabi elaborates, Altan Khan established his legitimacy by bonding the patron-priest relation with the Dge lugs sect in 1578.⁸⁵

In the following decades, Altan Khan relocated several thousand Tümed Mongol yurts to the Kokonor region. His successors managed the region until Khoshut Mongols moved into Mdo smad in the final years of the Ming. In the 1630s, the Khoshut ruler Güshi Khan 固始汗

⁸² Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j404.1a–8a. For an illustration of the Ming-Mongol relationship, see Rossabi 1998: 221–271. For the discussions of Ming economic relations with Inner Asia, see Rossabi 1970.

⁸³ Gu 2012: j60.911–935; *MSL* Wuzong: j126.2528–2529; *MSL* Shizong: j4.201, j14.474, j124.1976–1978.

⁸⁴ Gu 1977: j60.911–934; *MSL* Shenzong: j61.1383; Zhang 1974: j330.8545–8546.

⁸⁵ Rossabi 1998: 237–239.

(1582–1654) conquered the Tümed Mongols. He suppressed the Tibetan dissidents of the Dge lugs order for the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and founded the Khoshut Khanate. His soldiers settled down as far as the southern bank of the Yellow River. These diverse Mongol groups were recorded as West Sea Mongols (*Xihai menggu* 西海蒙古) or Sea Raiders (*hailu* 海虜) in the Ming sources and referred to themselves as Upper Mongols.⁸⁶

However, granting a free pass to Mongols in return for weakening “raw” Tibetans ended up being a disastrous strategic mistake for Ming China. From 1522, Mongols who were supposed to only loot *shengfan* repeatedly plundered *shufan* and Ming settlers in eastern Mdo smad. When Tibetans reported the Mongol raiding cases, as Zheng Luo indicated, frontier officials intimidated by *hailu* usually punished Tibetans to please Mongols. This led to many *zu* between the Kokonor and Shaanxi to yield to the Mongols. They paid tribute known as *tianba* 添巴 to the Mongol overlords and turned against the Ming. Only a few powerful Tibetan *zu* aligned into large confederations and worked with the Ming guard officers for the purpose of self-preservation.⁸⁷ This Mongol-Tibetan collaboration grew over time. Shaanxi Governor Li Wen 李文 (1535–1609) stated that the Huangshui Valley had become a nest for the Mongols, who often employed Tibetans as spies, guides, and vanguards in attacking the Ming garrisons.⁸⁸ As a result, the Ming reformed the tea-horse policy to ease Ming-Tibetan tension and prevent Tibetans from joining the Mongol foes.

Based on field investigations in Xifan, Ming officials suggested to “enlist Tibetans and counterattack Mongols.” They regarded the four garrisons as the inner border (*neibian* 內邊) between Shaanxi and Mdo smad and treated the horse-payer and horse-tributary *zu* as the “outer fence” (*waili* 外籬) to protect the inner border. Since smugglers were blamed for sabotaging the *jimi* strategy, the revised tea-horse policy often aimed at eliminating private trade. The court raised the price of official horses, employed certified merchants to transport tea, increased penalties for smugglers, and strengthened its supervision over Shaanxi. However, Ming traders repeatedly used the same commercial tea licenses or excessively bought tea with one *chayin* to gain more profit. The policy, in fact, raised smuggling activities to a new level, leading the Ming to completely lose control over border

⁸⁶ Gu 1977: j10.127–150, j32.471–476; Wei 1978: 340b, 352b–354a; Zhwa sgab pa 2010: chapter 7.

⁸⁷ MSL Shizong: j110.2601; An 2008: j17.7b–13a; Wang 1706: j40.157–158; Dkon mchog 'jigs med dbang po 1773: 197.

⁸⁸ MSL Shenzong: j144.2680, j308.5770–5771; Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j405.26b–27a; Zhang 1974: j330.8544–8545.

commerce. With the Ming dealing with trouble from Mongols, peasant revolts, Manchu invasion, and so on, the state-directed trade was never able to recover. To secure western Shaanxi, the systematic fortification proved more reliable for Ming officials.⁸⁹

5. *The Landscape Transformation*

Unlike the Great Wall separating the steppe and northern China, there was no artificial border between Shaanxi and Mdo smad by the late 14th century. The Ming built the *weisuo* system to solidify the western borderland and defend against Tibetans from the outset. When Mongols entered Mdo smad, the early Ming defensive constructions were renovated and expanded throughout the 16th century. Combining local geographic features with a complex set of fortifications, the Ming defensive system eventually took shape. From 1377 to 1386, the Ming regular troops constructed the Four Guards in Xifan and started the primitive urbanization in eastern Mdo smad.

The Chinese geometric (*fengshui* 風水) tradition played a role in designing the guarded city. In Hezhou, the walled city was designed in the shape of a blade instead of a rectangle to quell Tibetans. In Taozhou, Ming troops dug apart the “dragon vein” (*longmai* 龍脈) of the local *zu* before the city was constructed. Based on local gazetteers and steles, the guard was normally encompassed by eight to nine Chinese miles (*li* 里) of the rammed wall. The city gates were intentionally named as “Quelling Fan” 鎮番, “Subduing Qiang” 伏羌, “Cherishing the Far Ones” 懷遠, and “Harmonizing Fan” 和番.⁹⁰ The cities were fully equipped with military facilities. Since Tibetan and Mongol raiders damaged the guards several times, the garrison generals reinforced the city walls, dug trenches, and deepened the moats from the mid-15th to the 16th century. Being the garrison headquarters, the guarded city contained official bureaus 公署, Confucian and Yinyang schools 儒/陰陽學, sacrifice altars 壇, temples 寺觀, markets and lodges to exert state control and satisfy the educational, economic and religious needs of the Ming subjects.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Wei 1978: 346b–357a; Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j404.1a–8a.

⁹⁰ “洮州衛城竣工碑,” “岷州衛建城碑文,” see Wu 2008: j1.12–13; Liu and Long 1993: 146.

⁹¹ An 2008: j16.1a–2b.

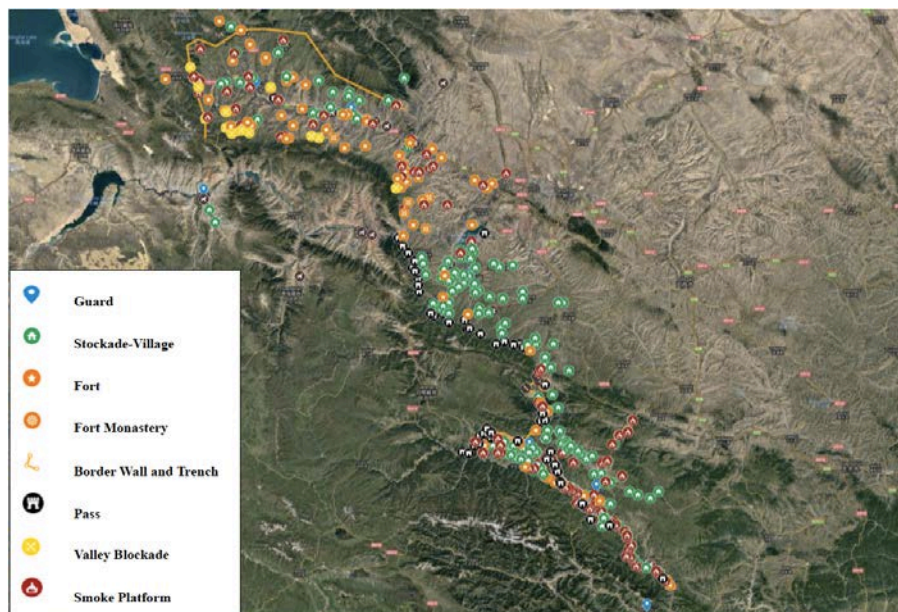


Fig. 2 — The Ming defensive constructions in Mdo smad during the late 16th century⁹²

The court required that a guard (5,600 soldiers) administrated five battalions, and each battalion (1,200 soldiers) commanded ten companies. A company (70–120 soldiers) governed two chief banners (*zongqi* 總旗, one chief banner leader, five small banner leaders, and fifty soldiers) which respectively controlled five small banners (*xiaoqi* 小旗, one leader, ten soldiers).⁹³ However, this regulation was flexibly executed in accordance with the specific local needs in Xifan. The Ming built 24 battalions (two defense battalions or *shouyu qianhusuo* 守禦千戶所, two military-civilian battalions and 20 regular battalions often named as “left, right, front, back and middle *suo*”) in Mdo smad. Xining Guard ran five regular battalions and Nianbo Defense Battalion (1465–87). Hezhou Guard managed six regular battalions and the Guide Defense Battalion (1375). Taozhou Guard commanded five battalions and Jiucheng Fort. Minzhou Guard controlled four regular battalions, and the Xigu 西固 Defense Battalion (established in 1375, changed into a military-civilian battalion in 1582). Normally, regular battalions were the defensive satellites of a guard.

⁹² The data is based on Zhang 1990: j3.47a–84a, j4.1a–9a.

⁹³ Zhang 1974: j76.1874.

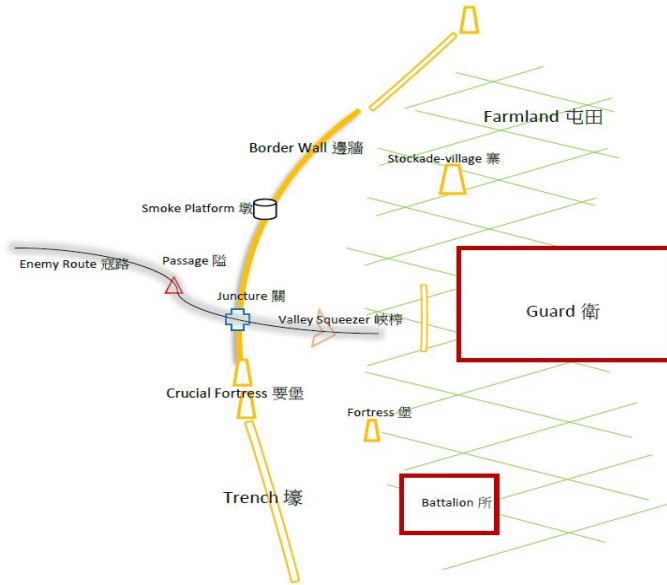


Fig. 3 — The Ming defensive system in Mdo smad

The military-civilian and defense battalions served as Ming outposts in the Tibetan-dominated areas. Each battalion was located near a crucial military route and encircled by two to three *li* of rammed walls.⁹⁴

The company and banner were built into a fort or stockade-village. Forts served as military outposts responsible for defense and reclamation. Being in the interior area of a garrison, stockade-villages had more residents, and were often the larger colonies or domestic markets. The Ming established over 530 fortresses and stockade-villages in Xifan. Some of these low-level defensive components were constructed shortly after the Ming integration of western Shaanxi, but most were built much later.⁹⁵ The perimeter of these fortresses ranged from 500 to 1500 meters. The distance between two adjacent forts was kept within five to ten *li* for reciprocal defense. All forts had smoke platforms (*fengdun* 烽墩) for early warning (see Fig. 2 and Chart 4). The crucial forts (*yaobao* 要堡) were built in strategic sites. Each *yaobao* was composed of an inner part (*neicheng* 內城) and a smaller outer part

⁹⁴ Zhang 1990: j3.47a–84a, j4.1a–9a.

⁹⁵ MSL Taizong: j39.659; MSL Xianzong: j68.1357.

(*wengcheng* 甕城), protected by 400 to 500 soldiers and equipped with a granary, a gatehouse (*menlou* 門樓), a gate-protector (*humen* 護門) and a wall-extension building (*xuanlou* 懸樓) for long-term defense.⁹⁶

Being trained in the battles against Tibetans and Mongols, Ming commanders increasingly understood eastern Mdo smad from a geo-military perspective. To block raiders, they controlled the bridges, ice bridges, and ferry-places along local rivers. They built passes (*guan'ai* 關隘) and valley blockades (*xiazha* 峽榨) on the routes that led raiders to the Ming garrisons. By the mid-16th century, 250 *li* of border wall 邊牆 (three to five meters in height) and trench 壕塹 (three to six meters in both depth and width) were constructed in Taozhou. From the 1530s to 1596, the Ming constructed over 613 *li* of the border wall in Xining. By linking the defensive constructions with geographic barriers, Ming China established a solid borderline between Shaanxi and Mdo smad (see Fig. 3).⁹⁷

| Guard | Battalion | Fort & Stockade-village | Pass | Wall & Trench (<i>li</i>) | Valley Blockade | Smoke Platform |
|---------|-----------|-------------------------|------|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Xining | 6 | 197 | 26 | 613 | 38 | 75 |
| Hezhou | 7 | 94 | 25 | | | 21 |
| Taozhou | 5 | 82 | 16 | 250 | | 38 |
| Minzhou | 5 | 157 | 6 | | | 59 |

Chart 4 — The components of the Ming defensive system in 1547⁹⁸

On the eastern side of the border lay the Ming colonies built to sustain the frontier troops and overcome the logistic difficulties. The clearance for construction, reclamation, and wood fuel swept away the obstacle of lush vegetation and high trees for the Ming sentries. Ming soldiers and civilians ploughed up valley grasslands that provided natural forages to Tibetan and Mongol cavalries. They terraced the loess hills and gentle mountain meadows on a large scale. Even though many soldiers deserted their posts and large tracts of farmland remained desolate, the result of reclamation was still impressive. In the 1540s, the military and civilian population of the Four Guards numbered up to 127,824 men (*ding* 丁 or *kou* 口, excluding women and children). They were distributed into guards, forts, and stockade-villages and cultivated 1,051,641 *mu* of lands (see Chart 5).⁹⁹ Comparing this data with the statistics in the 1990s, the agricultural acreage in the region

⁹⁶ Zhang 1990: j3.47a–84a, j4.1a–9a.

⁹⁷ Wu 2008: 21a–24b, Liu and Long 1993: 192; Yang 1990: j12.1a–12b, j13.7b–16a; Zhang 1970: 191–200.

⁹⁸ The data is based on Zhao 1997; Zhang 1990; Wu 2008; Liu and Long 1993.

⁹⁹ Zhao 1997: 678–690.

historically governed by the Four Guards only increased around 30% throughout the Qing, Republican, and China's pre-reform periods. It seems that the Ming transformed the surface environment of western Shaanxi into an agricultural landscape.¹⁰⁰

| Location | Military Population | Population (<i>hu/kou</i>) | | Farmlands (<i>mu</i>) | | |
|----------|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | 1547 (original/ newly recruited <i>kou</i>) | 1542 | | 1542 | | |
| | | Military | Civilian | Military | Civilian | |
| | | | | | Summer | Autumn |
| Xining | 6,875/500 | 7,479/12,260 | | 202,552 | 135,131.2 | |
| Hezhou | 7,700/2,292 | 4,211/ 6533 | 5,244/ 92,232 ¹⁰¹ | 344,628 | 292,101.3 | 29,061.2 |
| Taozhou | 5,622/800 | 1,432/3625 | | 223,528 | | |
| Minzhou | 5,913 | 3,113/ 5,382 | 442/ 562 | 186,036 | 13,920.6 | 43,985.8 |
| Nianbo | 575 (>1,000) | | | | | |
| Guide | 248 | | | | | |
| Xigu | | 1,110/ 3,615 | 410/ 3,615 | 44,800 | 5684.6 | 3,725 |

Chart 5 — Population and reclamation in the Ming Xifan Region¹⁰²

On the western side of the border, Tibetans slowly changed local landscapes. They initiated the process of fortification in response to the Mongols' frequent looting in eastern Mdo smad. The powerful Mdo smad native officials appointed by the Ming usually modeled their offices and residences on the Ming forts and *yamen* 衙門. These fortifications were concentrated in the vicinity of the four garrisons. Likewise, Tibetan monastic officials, especially those who were tributary leaders and patronized by the Ming emperors, built their monasteries in the form of fortresses, which became known as fort monasteries (*sibao* 寺堡). There were more than 100 new monasteries established in deep valleys adjoining the territories of raw Tibetans (see Chart 6). The fort monasteries, such as Honghua and Qutan *sibao*, were also divided into inner and outer parts for warding off invaders. The assembly halls, temples, and monk's quarters were encircled by the high rammed walls.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ According to the gazetteer records on agricultural acreage, the farmland of the region in the 1990s were Xining 885,000 *mu*, Linxia Hui Prefecture 2,240,000 *mu*, Lintan 300,827 *mu*, Minxian 1,145,896 *mu*.

¹⁰¹ The household number of Hezhou Guard was 5,280 *hu* and the population was 90,845 *kou* in 1546. See Wu 2008: j1.26a.

¹⁰² The data is from Zhao 1997: 678–690; Zhang 1990: j3.47a–84a, j4.1a–9a.

¹⁰³ Zhang 1990: j4.1a–9a, Mao 2016: 85–88.

| Location | Before 1368 | Before 1505 | Before 1690 ¹ |
|----------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Hezhou | 8 | 21 | 15 |
| Xining | 10 | 65 | 90 |
| Minzhou | 5 | 26 | 20 |
| Taozhou | 3 | 16 | 22 |

Chart 6 — Approximate number of Tibetan monasteries in Mdo smad¹⁰⁴

Some Tibetans also altered their ways of production. Eastern Mdo smad Tibetans became the middlemen who distributed Chinese goods to remote *zu* and sold Tibetan goods such as horses, yak-cattle hybrids (Tib. *mdzo*), herbal medicines, or fur and leather to western Shaanxi. To gain higher profits, they opened arable valleys, lived semi-sedentary life (Tib. *sa ma 'brog*), produced fodders to enlarge flocks, and exchanged grains for horses and *mdzo* with the inhabitants of the upper valleys and steppes. In central and western Mdo smad, the cold climate and high altitude restrained Tibetans from developing agriculture, and they instead bred large flocks of horses and farming ox. In the densely forested areas, Tibetans adopted slash-and-burn land clearance as a customary method to expand grasslands. Hence, the sedentary, semi-sedentary, and pastoral landscapes with the rise of elevation became more distinct from eastern to western Mdo smad.¹⁰⁵

6. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, Ming China established the four garrisons to protect China proper from the Tibetan and Mongol incursions. It developed a defensive system and established a long artificial border in western Shaanxi. It built a considerable number of Chinese and Muslim settlements in eastern Mdo smad and brought new forms of land use to the region. The Ming court used countless human and financial resources to protect this border and manage the peoples alongside it. It vested official positions and titles in Tibetan secular and ecclesiastic authorities and used tea-related trade and tributary as a political device to bridle over 1,000 *zu* in Xifan.

Meanwhile, Xifan natives shared and contested the physical space with the Ming settlers and Mongol migrants. The intertwined Tibetan-Ming-Mongol interactions changed the natural landscape in the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau. Through migration, trade, war, and politics,

¹⁰⁴ The data is based on Wu 2008; Liu and Long 1993; Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1864; Wang and Tian 2008; Zhang 1970; Pu 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Chen, Xu and Song 1962: j115; Zhang 1970: j16.925–931. For the similar deforestation practice in Songpan, see Hayes 2014: 3.

multicultural society that dominated the late imperial and modern Amdo history came into being along the Ming western border. After the demise of the Ming, the border still served as a boundary between Chinese-Muslim communities and Tibetan-Mongolian groups.

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