


Introduction

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his volume is the second in a series of thematic collections produced within the framework of *Social Status in the Tibetan World (TibStat)*, a research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) and the German Research Council (DFG).¹ With the concept of status as it was construed, maintained, and propagated within Tibetan societies still at the core of their interest, the contributions of this special issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* investigate the impact of economic factors on the indigenous social dynamics, extending their examination to issues of group domination, economic inequality, social resistance and change.

The unequal distribution of wealth and power, and consequently, the relative status of one individual to another, have been the subject of Western scholarly analysis for centuries, yet when it comes to Tibetan Studies, works offering any in-depth scrutiny on the matter are startlingly few and far between.² Still, relations of status represent a major factor in any inter-personal behaviour, since the possibility to access the relatively restricted number of highly esteemed social

¹ The first volume of the series, “Reflections on Social Status in the Tibetan World”, was published in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, issue 49, see Galli and Schwieger (2019). *TibStat* was meant as an ideal continuation of the previous ANR/DFG research project “Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries” (*SHTS*), the results of which were presented into three thematic collective volumes (Ramble, Schwieger and Travers 2013, Bischoff and Mullard 2017, Bischoff and Travers 2018) and into four monographs (Ramble 2008, 2015, 2019, (forthcoming)). The contributions contained in this volume were originally presented in Panel 51 (“The Relationship Between Economic and Social Status in the Tibetan World until the mid-20th Century”) at the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Paris 2019.

² Despite the amount of Western scholarship dedicated to the intricacies of Tibetan social structure, the number of works actually centring on the interplay of social and economic status are surprisingly limited and often the outcome of a few scholars’ taking on the matter of landownership and the correlated issue of serfdom, as it is the case for the earliest studies by Carrasco (1959), Goldstein (1971, 1986, 1988), Miller (1987, 1988) and the most recent ones by Bischoff (2013, 2017). For a more general overview of economy and trade in Tibet, see, in particular, van Spengen (2000) and Harris (2013). On the value of gift-giving in Tibetan societies, see Bischoff and Travers (2018).

positions is clearly affected by one's own position within the group hierarchy.

Although the human tendency to control and manage resources to ensure social standing is a primordial need, reproduced and shared in different contexts, times, and forms—from myths, religious and literary texts to philosophical and political discussions—the debate pertinent here mainly originated in 18th-century Europe, when the positivist tendency to apply reason and progress to any field of learning, including historical affairs, enforced the assumption that status inequalities depended exclusively on power *obtained through* and *expressed in* economic prerogatives. Rooted in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, these concepts further developed into 19th-century ideas of inequality and oppression formulated as functions of economic relations. Social interactions then began to be defined in terms of predominance and control: the legacy of Karl Marx's theory of class and domination, broadly construed as the control wielded by one group over the production and reproduction of another, proved to be long-lasting and far-reaching. Arguing against Marx's materialistic interpretation of history and his conviction that "[t]he mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and intellectual processes of life",³ Max Weber proposed a more nuanced concept of social relations, thereby denying economic factors that universal and dominant power ascribed to them by the Marxist matrix.⁴ Ideas and values shaping people's life, as well as any legitimising process of inequality, were, in other words, to be understood as a product of a particular time and setting, where different aspects—economic, social, and religious—co-occurred.⁵ Among the two competing approaches to social knowledge that were monopolising Western scholarly debate at the end of the 19th century—the idiographic method and its focus on particular scientific facts and processes *versus* the nomothetic one and its research for general laws of society—Weber came down squarely on the side of the latter, although his understanding of Carl Menger's

³ Marx (1904, 10).

⁴ Weber ([1905] 1930, [1921] 1968).

⁵ Wolf (1999, 41). Openly critical of Marx's historical materialism and economic determinism, Weber built upon the theory presented in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first translated into English in 1930) in 1905 to elaborate an economic sociology wherein inequality is defined in terms of difference in life chances rather than exploitation. His main work, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (*Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, first translated into English in 1968), published posthumously in 1921, made a profound impression on the field of social science, due to its systematic examination of social structures and their inner laws and tendencies and its critical stance towards Marxism and socialist thought. For an in-depth analysis of Weber's *magnus opus*, see, among others, Camic, Gorski and Trubek (2005).

methodological individualism was historical rather than ontological, as the “individual” was not recognised by Weber as being an entity that remained constant across time.⁶

Whereas the Marxist concept of social domination as economically based still appeases the common-sense imagery of an automatic correlation between *authority* and *wealth*, the emphasis placed by Weber first and later Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser on social and ideational factors productively pushed the reflection on inequality beyond the restrictions imposed by economic forces to include the role played by ideological and cultural strategies in the establishment and maintenance of subordinate relations.⁷ Althusser, in particular, turned the issue of hegemony on its head, arguing for an understanding of power as deeply heterogeneous: by maintaining that economic relations themselves had an inherently strong political and ideological structure, he defined the concepts of wealth, status, and class as mutually translatable but not entirely reducible to one another.⁸ The stress posed on the heterogeneity of social forms, and the relations of powers created by and within them, soon revealed the limits inherent to the concept of inequality construed “as the conditions of rank or status ordering, or as the relative distribution of power in society”.⁹

In the attempt to capture the complexities of non-Western and/or pre-capitalist societies, later scholars began to address vocabularies that were “more productive to think of power relationally”,¹⁰ using concepts such as dominance and resistance to “define the nature of difference, the process of subordination, the creation of social categories of the ineligible, the inferior and the outsider in different social and historical settings”.¹¹ Taking their cue from the works of Paul Ricœur, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, late 20th-century social scientists and historians gradually moved away from the certainties posited by structural analyses, opening their inquiry to notions that integrated the topics of age, sex, and class and the way they affect power relations. In inextricably linking social relations and the resulting status inequalities with values other than economic, an idea of status as a *social construct* that is constantly negotiated by interacting individuals and groups began to affirm itself, thus arguing for a concept the forms of which were deemed to be *culturally specific* because dependent upon the particular historical, cultural, and geographical setting creating it. Although not devoid of critics, the theories advanced

⁶ Caldwell (2006).

⁷ Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989), Wolf (1999, 44–47).

⁸ Althusser (1984), Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 10).

⁹ Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 2).

¹⁰ Wolf (1999, 66).

¹¹ Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 3).

by structuralists first and poststructuralists later contributed to shape the still ongoing discourse on power and dominance in Western academia,¹² providing interesting and fruitful venues of investigation for non-Western contexts, such as the one explored by the contributions presented in this volume.

The issue opens with an essay by Peter Schwieger, the first of two chapters by the author, in which he broaches one of the most intriguing and lesser known aspects of the socio-economic history of the dGa'ldan pho brang period: money lending. Basing his study on figures originally gathered in the 1950s and successively reproduced and broadcast in Communist propaganda—from leaflets and books printed in the 1960s to more recent websites publicising the PRC's policy towards Tibet—, Schwieger offers an informative overview of the process, identifying lenders and borrowers and fleshing up the bare data with colourful details drawn from contemporary sources. The picture that emerges is that of a complex yet largely informal exchange system, the inner dynamics of which were normalised by customary control mechanisms. In delving into the technicalities of interest rates and repayment methods, Schwieger uncovers the inherent intergroup domination practices upon which the whole process was built, as the divide between the two acting parties—the lenders and the borrowers—patently mirrored the one severing the socio-economic tissue of pre-modern Central Tibet. By accumulating *wealth*, and therefore *positive social value*, the dominant social groups (i.e. the government, the monasteries, and the nobility) ensured themselves total control over money lending, which in turn granted them dominance over the lowest strata (i.e. dependent farmers). Here, the Marxist axiom that equates *economic power* with *authority* reveals its compelling simplicity: by recurring to legal procedures, such as the drafting of private documents (*gan rgya*), the lending party safeguarded themselves against borrowers' default, thus actively using hierarchy-enhancing institutions (e.g. legal and criminal justice systems) to secure their own interest. While insolvency was legally (and socially) punished and several instruments were available to lenders to minimise their risks, no law was ever issued to protect borrowers against usury. Obligations were, in other words, *expected* to be fulfilled, and it was not unusual for debts to be bequeathed from father to son, to the point of becoming an inescapable state of bondage and serfdom.

Further elaborating on the joint issue of debt and dependency, John Bray reconstructs the history of the Moravian Mission in Poo, Kinnaur, and the fascinating tug-of-war engaged in by the local German missionaries over the souls of its inhabitants. Basing his study on a critical

¹² Han (2014).

reading of missionary letters published in the monthly *Missionsblatt aus der Brüdergemeine* ("Moravian Mission Magazine"), Bray retraces the steps taken by the first missionaries, starting with Eduard Pagell and his frustrated attempts to spread the Gospel in the rural community of Poo. Part of the princely state of Bashahr and mainly populated by Tibetan Buddhists, the village was a religious and cultural melting pot where Buddhist and Hindu beliefs and social practices overlapped, and economic disparities affected residents' daily life at both an individual and group level. Poverty and debt shackled the poorest castes, mostly cottagers of Indian origin, and thwarted their mind and spirit—a "crippling influence" that Pagell's successor, Theodor Schreve, was set to shatter. Upon his arrival in Poo in November 1890, the missionary recognised in the endemic indebtedness the main threat to the nascent Christian community and immediately began to implement aid supports. At the time of Schreve's departure in 1903, Poo was the largest Christian congregation in the Himalayan region, yet the social experiment conjured by the Moravians did not stand the test of time, and by 1924, the station was closed due to the converts' lack of commitment and their materialist approach to the faith. In his concluding remarks, Bray convincingly presents the interaction between the German missionaries and the locals in the light of a cultural and ideational miscommunication: whereas the first framed conversion as a freeing act, the latter saw it as a contractual obligation, subject to specific conditions. Thrift, perseverance, and hard work—virtues that the Protestant ethic valued as paramount to a life devoid of dependence—failed to answer the needs of the locals, as they did not fit within their conceptual framework. In his engaging study of the history of debt, David Graeber interrogates himself at length on the moral quagmire that debt represents, as the expectations connected to "owing" appear to be powerful ones, shared across civilisations and times.¹³ As Bray points out, in the case of the bonded labour system, the owing side owned in turn, as debt went both ways: debtors relinquished control over their freedom in exchange of protection and security, a process that hierarchically connected the lowest classes to the highest ones, in an institutional perpetuation of social dominance.

Bonded labour has been by far one of the most discussed—and controversial—topics of pre-modern Tibet, yet the same cannot be said of another facet of its rural history: farm leasing. In his contribution, Kensaku Okawa aims to shed some light on the topic by examining the institution of *zhing skal*, a unique form of land leasing practised in the Mal gro gung dkar region. Drawing from field research conducted by Chinese ethnographers in the 1950s, Okawa reconstructs the historical

¹³ Graeber (2011).

development of *zhing skal*, exposing the complexities of a system that he sees as illustrative of a progressive shift from bonded labour to contract economy. Although limited to a relatively restricted area, the phenomenon evolved into two distinct local manifestations, identified by Okawa as Hor khang and 'Bri gung in consideration of the respective zones of emergence. In comparing the two forms of land leasing—interpreted in his study as indicative of “the intertwining of social change and ‘modernisation’”—Okawa plots the evolution of *zhing skal* from the “one-on-one” work field system of Hor khang (still largely based on a bonded labour mentality) to the contract-based type of 'Bri gung. Product of long-term negotiations between local landlords and their dependent farmers, the form of *zhing skal* practised in early 20th-century 'Bri gung successfully merged the needs of the dominant groups (e.g. constant income against low output) with those of the lower ones (e.g. total control over surplus products), thus representing a localised, yet effective attempt at a socio-economic modernisation. In Mal gro gung dkar, change occurred at a micro-level, as farmers acted within the social hierarchy to attenuate the landlords' power over tools of dominance (e.g. corvée labour) and to better their living conditions without threatening the *status quo*.

Our contributors' scrutiny has been so far concentrated on the lower sectors of society, admittedly the most affected by economic inequality and group dominance dynamics, not only, as Antonio Gramsci would say it, at an institutional level, but at a deeper, ideological and cultural one. The “subaltern” groups described by Schwieger, Bray, and Okawa were in fact active participants in the preservation and implementation of the very same hegemonic processes that confined them at the bottom of the social ladder. Originally defined by Weber as an “effective claim for social esteem”,¹⁴ status is, in and by itself, hierarchical, as it can be viewed as “either a hierarchy of *rewards* and as a hierarchy of *displays*—or both simultaneously”,¹⁵ the functionality of which “require[s] a relatively stable acquiescence (begudging or not) from the ‘have-nots’”.¹⁶ Such compliance translates into displays of deference—visual expressions paid to high-status holders in symbolic acknowledgement of their dominance and/or prestige.¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Weber ([1921] 1968).

¹⁵ Henrich and Gil-White (2001, 166, emphasis added).

¹⁶ Weisfeld and Beresford (1982) as quoted in Henrich and Gil-White (2001, 166).

¹⁷ Social asymmetries have been variously (and inconsistently) labelled, regardless of the differences inherent to the term used. Although often used as equivalent to “status” and synonymous with one another, concepts such as “influence”, “prestige”, “power”, and “dominance” differ greatly, as they convey different types of leadership. While “influence” and “prestige” involve persuasion and non-agonistic sources, “power” and “dominance” entail force and agonistic confrontation (Henrich and Gil-White 2001).

offering of tangible goods figures predominantly in the following study by Lobsang Yongdan on the exchange of European timepieces between Tibetan religious figures and members of the Qing dynasty. The patterns and significance of gifting in Tibetan societies have been recently explored by Jeannine Bischoff and Alice Travers, and Yongdan's contribution is an ideal continuation of the discussion carried out in their collective volume. As the editors of *Commerce and Community* aptly point out, "exchange, be it of gifts or of traded goods, through barter, or payment in kind or monetary means, creates reciprocity and obligations on a social level; [...] it directly contributes to the shaping of social and political status".¹⁸ Any investigations of gift systems must closely examine the nature of the goods exchanged, for selection pressures may be at work in favouring certain items rather than others. The adoption of a poststructuralist understanding of economic phenomena "has undermined the idea of economic value itself as an intrinsic and permanent quality of an object" as "[t]he very process of exchange bears the economic value of an object, the production of commodities being a cultural and cognitive process".¹⁹ In other words, the *value* of the object exchanged goes beyond its economic worth to impinge upon its symbolic importance within the exchange process itself: in the practice examined by Yongdan, the donation of European timepieces occurred in the context of a *mchod yon* ("patron-priest") relationship, with the gift being the visual representation of the bond—spiritual and political—existing between the giving (the Qing emperors) and the receiving parties (Tibetan lamas). The choice of a foreign object added to the symbolic value of the gesture, as the possession and/or (over)consumption of exceptional goods of non-indigenous origin are one of the means through which elite social status is signalled. Although by the 18th century most of the timepieces circulating in the Qing court were produced in local workshops, the finesse of the craftsmanship ensured that only those of higher status could have access to them.

In his work on consumption preferences, Bourdieu remarks on the connection between variations in consumption patterns and social inequalities, asserting that the first not only reflect the key forms of the latter, but also cater for their reproduction and preservation through time.²⁰ As "a system of relatively autonomous but structurally homologous fields of production, circulation and consumption of various forms of cultural and material sources",²¹ Bourdieu's concept of society presents a separation into classes formed by individuals who share

¹⁸ Bischoff and Travers (2018, 13).

¹⁹ Babić (2005, 76).

²⁰ Bourdieu (1984), Babić (2005, 80).

²¹ Brubaker (1985, 748).

similar conditions of existence, similar dispositions, and therefore similar *tastes*: dominant groups, in other words, signal their higher status by adopting a peculiar lifestyle through which they broadcast a capital that is both *economic* and *cultural*. Following a similar vein of enquiry, Teresa Raffelsberger explores the culture of aristocracy adopted by the rNam rgyal dynasty of Ladakh, from its representation of wealth to its forms of interaction, exposing in doing so its dependence on a broad network of different social groups and professions. From her analysis it clearly emerges how the policy implemented by the kings of Ladakh was aimed at gaining, and retaining, full control over the material and social resources at their disposal—a strategy of dominance that was pursued politically, economically, and symbolically. Active displays of power and authority were used to promote specific ideas and concepts of rulership, in a self-perpetuating hierarchy-enhancing circular process that had its hub in the king. The consumption patterns of the high-status groups pushed the production and circulation of various forms of commodities, incentivised commerce and trans-regional trade, and made of their seats a point of attraction for individuals from all paths of life, from professionals to beggars.

The relevance that physical centres of power, such as royal and monastic seats, acquired in the Tibetan socio-economic and political milieu is akin to Ian Morris' notion of Greek burial as a reflection of *social structure*—buildings that become idealised projects, a “mental” template of the society, to be distinguished from its actual organisation, the concrete state of affairs. Ideology, for Morris, manifests itself in the gap between *social structure* (the way things are meant to be) and *social organisation* (the way things are).²² Rituals, both spiritual and secular, allow the enactment of structure and provide a sanctioned stage upon which to display one's own status and advance one's own claims to power. If it is true, as Laurie Bagwell and B. Douglas Bernheim argue, that status ultimately depends on relative wealth,²³ the direct observation of the latter becomes, in times of ritual performance, vital. In her contribution, Lucia Galli explores the role that costly-signalling, ethnic kinship, and a common non-sectarian attitude played in the social affirmation of Khams pa trading firms in the first half of the 20th century. Whereas, Galli claims, ritual performance efficaciously signalled group commitment and expedited Eastern Tibetan traders' integration into the urban environment of Central Tibet, the trustworthiness of the firms' members, often employed by monastic establishments and incarnates as personal trade agents (*tshong dpon*), much relied on the clan-like structure of the families themselves, based, as they

²² Morris (1987).

²³ Bagwell and Bernheim (1992).

were, on principles of reciprocal obligations and shared beliefs. In examining the enacting of specific costly signals, such as generous sponsorship of religious rituals and teaching sessions, Galli opens the floor to questions regarding the offering system in force in monastic institutions, from its more practical aspects, such as the actual share distribution, to ethical issues surrounding the economic transactions within a religious environment.

In tracing the emergence and development of the Tibetan term *dkor*, a concept generally translated as “wealth” or “possession”, Berthe Jansen offers an engaging reconstruction of a meaning-making process that led to “a gradual shift from the material to the immaterial”. Turning on its head any theories of “commodification of religion”, Jansen presents *dkor* as the outcome of an opposite process, whereby tangible, commodifiable objects acquired an intangible, yet potentially harmful, quality. Reconstructing the use of the term since its first instances in Dunhuang texts, Jansen elegantly peels through the multi-layered nuances of the concept and its progressive association, evident in later Tibetan Buddhist literature, with a pronounced karmic weight, often of negative connotation. To “eat *dkor*” becomes therefore a proverbial expression to indicate the wrongful partaking of common goods to which one has no right, and for which harsh punishment will be exacted, in this life and the next. As Jansen warns us, the complexity of *dkor* lies in its “unavoidability”: no one who “lives off religion” may refrain from incurring its polluting effects. While rituals of purification may cleanse the monks’ karma, many are the cautionary tales that urge for a spiritual compensation of what has been received as *dkor* (e.g. offerings, alms). While the complexity of the term prevents the endorsement of a translation upon another, Jansen convincingly identifies its most basic feature in a unique, very Tibetan, sense of indebtedness—towards the Three Jewels, one’s teacher, one’s sponsor, the society as a whole, and even to the government—thus reaffirming the prominent role that Buddhism exerts in all aspects of the devotees’ life, including the most secular, prosaic ones.

With their focus on donations as the external expression of social status (Galli) or potential karmic threat (Jansen), the previous contributions have furthered our appreciation of the socio-economic and religious importance of offerings, yet detailed information on the nitty-gritties of the process is relatively scarce. Kalsang Norbu Gurung’s study of what Robert Ekvall (1964) defined as “the religious observance of offerings”²⁴ aims to bridge the gap in the field by providing a quantitative analysis of the shares (*skal ba*) allotted to each monastic rank according to the regulations detailed in the monastery’s

²⁴ Ekvall (1964).

rulebooks (*bca' yig*). Using the monastic system as a frame of reference, Gurung further extends his analysis to the secular sector, by presenting examples of offerings made to government officials and individuals on the basis of an official record of expenditure drafted by two officials of sPo rong between 1891 and 1895. Although special circumstances may account for exceptions, when it came to the actual amount of the donation, the social positions of both giver and receiver were, by and large, the main factor at play: donors were expected to contribute according to their means, and the offering had to take into consideration the rank of the beneficiary, be they monks or government officials. Similarly to other formal institutions, the system of donation was essentially a hierarchy-enhancing scheme—a top-down structure of privilege through which high-status individuals preserved and promoted their socio-economic dominance by granting public *recognition* to representatives of lower classes against their fellows.

Pervasive as it may have been, under the dGa' ldan pho brang administration such a system merged almost seamlessly with the other forms of payment methods for government services, as compellingly showed in the second of Peter Schwieger's contributions. The study centres on the construction of the Red Palace, the highest of the two main buildings forming the Potala, seat of the Dalai Lama and administrative centre of the Central Tibetan government since the mid-17th century. Designed to accommodate the golden reliquary of the Great Fifth, the edifice required three years for its realisation, with hundreds of labourers, craftsmen, and workhands present on site at any given time. Meant as an elegant counterpart to the utilitarian, solid look of the White Palace, the Red Palace brimmed with painters, sculptors, and engravers, as its inner halls were decorated with statues and murals. It is on the latter that Schwieger concentrates his attention, offering reproductions of close-ups the circulation of which has been so far limited to Chinese publications. The account written by *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the mastermind behind the architectural project, provides a textual map of the various phases of the process, consigning to history the name of each craftsman, as well as the amount owed by the government for their services. The list of expenses and farewell gifts carefully recorded by the *sde srid* depicts a clear "chain of command", where supervisors, representatives of estates, and specialised workers were arranged according to their expertise and responsibility. Workhands, mustered by the dGa' ldan pho drang administration and comprising most of the common workforce, formed the bottom of the ladder: although their services counted as unpaid, bonded labour (*'u lag*), the government was responsible for their welfare, as it had to cover for their basic necessities, providing them staple food, lodgings, and medical care for the whole

duration of their employment on site. Sociological literature acknowledges that different occupations have different social status and that the prestige that comes with being associated to a particular profession may in turn positively influence the economic outcome of the latter, especially in terms of wages.²⁵ Schwieger's latest contribution further corroborates Gurung's and Yongdan's insights, in so much that in pre-modern Tibet the demands of social status influenced the wage structure, be it expressed through offerings, gifts or actual salaries.

It seems fit to conclude our discussion where we began it: *wealth* and *power*, or, better yet, the *power of wealth*, especially in the matter of law and justice. In his contribution on crime and punishment in the early 19th-century Mustang (Nepal), Charles Ramble introduces the thorny—and still very much relevant—entanglement of legal discrimination and economic inequality. Although reports of cases in which economic circumstances dramatically affected a person's standing in society may be found in several textual sources, especially of biographical nature—Ramble himself presents two of such instances, both concerning important religious figures—it is in the dry language of legal documents that the actuality of financial “weakness” and its repercussion on the very same principle of egalitarianism emerge more starkly. In selecting brief excerpts from the criminal records of Geling, Upper Mustang, Ramble shows “just how far the ideal of equality under the law—*drag zhan med pa*—was translated into reality.” Among the offences recorded, theft is by far the most common, and the one the punishment of which was more influenced by the economic, rather the social, status of the perpetrators: any failures to pay the required fine, either by the lack of financial means or wealthy guarantors, were harshly met, and often led to the loss of indivisible commodities, be they houses, personal freedom, or, in the worst cases, limbs. Ramble sees such a disparity in punishments as a manifestation of a more profound divide between social *ideology* and social *praxis*: whether in Tibetan Buddhism wealth is neither positively nor negatively connoted, discriminations born from socio-economic inequalities *de facto* affected the indigents' position in front of the law, putting them at a disadvantage. To borrow Ramble's words, “everyone may have been equal under the law, but in practice some were clearly less equal than others.”

The ways in which economic factors influence society and the individual's stand in it are complex and multifaceted, and defeat simplistic generalisations: prototypical stimuli and underlying psychologies behind prestige and dominance processes are in constant flux, and differ greatly in relation to time, space, and inner socio-cultural

²⁵ Fershtman and Weiss (1993).

sophistications. In broaching issues of economic inequality, social mobility (or lack of thereof), and hierarchy-enhancing institutions in Tibetan societies, the present contributions have the merit of corroborating previous scholarship on the topic by adding new pieces to a fascinating, and still largely inchoate, puzzle. As such, the editors see this volume as complementary to the works produced within the framework of the ANR/DFG research projects in their common effort to further our understanding of social status in Tibet while maintaining a multi-disciplinary approach to the matter at hand. We are deeply aware that the choice of positing our enquiry against a Western theoretical background may be at odds with the most relativist and post-modernist stances that invite scholars to reject any culture-bound view, yet we find ourselves unwilling to relinquish potentially useful (although tainted and imperfect) hermeneutical tools for the sake of an ideological “purity”. History and social sciences are a mixture of objective and subjective, as any arrangement and/or interpretation of facts is by itself a social and political construct. In offering different readings of the economic mechanisms and dynamics at play in forming, preserving, and morphing social status in pre-modern Tibet, the present volume aims to move forward from the rigid positions of the formalist-substantivist debate by adopting those models that better allows to appreciate the idiosyncrasies and complexities of a unique human reality.

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