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VALENTINA PUNZI

Making (hi)stories in Amdo: voices, genres, and authorities

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Ridzin Gyatso, Aku Ta and myself in Drakar village in July 2014

“So tell me,
since it makes no factual difference to you and
you can’t prove the question either way,
which story do you prefer?”

— Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi*

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle
of memory against forgetting.”

— Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

“If that threat has been learned along with your mother tongue,
the ruins of a fireplace and empty foundations feel quite homely;
or, to put it more accurately, they do not make any kind of impression.”

— Viivi Luik, *The Beauty of History*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More than ten years passed since the first time I came to the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, in 2012 as a visiting PhD student. That first stay broadened my personal and academic horizons and deeply influenced my approach to the writing of my first PhD on the topic of Tibetan mountain gods.

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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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Article II
Punzi, Valentina 2019. "Remembering *jag pa* in Amdo: social bandits, anti-revolutionaries or folk heroes?" In *Wind Horses. Tibetan, Himalayan and Mongolian Studies*, edited by Andrea Drocco, Lucia Galli, Giacomella Orofino, Chiara Letizia and Carmen Simioli, 407–420. Napoli: Unior Series Minor.

Article III
Punzi, Valentina 2020. "The Genre Intertextuality of *sgrung* and the Question of Social Authority." *Asian Ethnology* 79 (2): 259–277.

Article IV
Punzi, Valentina 2021. "Burying gold, digging the past: remembering Ma Bufang regime in Qinghai (PRC)." In *Dealing with Disasters: Perspectives from Eco-Cosmologies*, edited by Pamela Stewart, Andrew Strathern, Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. Palgrave Macmillan: 233–254.

NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTION OF TIBETAN AND CHINESE

The most widely used romanisation system for the Tibetan language is known as Wylie, after Turrell Wylie, who created it in the 1950s (Wylie 1959). It offers the advantage of being a consistent system to transliterate a text written in literary Tibetan. For example, ཡིག the Tibetan word for 'letter of the alphabet' and 'written language' is, roughly speaking, pronounced "yik" and rendered in Wylie as *yig*. By providing an accurate rendering of the Tibetan script, Wylie makes any Tibetan term univocally recognisable in spite of specific local pronunciations. This is particularly useful for the disambiguation of homophones. For example, if we consider the word རི 'mountain', which is pronounced approximately "ri", and is almost homophonic with the word རིས 'painting' and is similarly pronounced "rii". In this case, the Wylie system allows us to mark clearly the respective Tibetan orthography: the first is spelled "*ri*" while the latter is spelled "*ris*". However, Wylie appears to be less suitable for rendering spoken Tibetan in its wide range of regional differences.

Spoken Tibetan in fact presents such a variation that locally spoken variants are mutually unintelligible, even across neighbouring communities. Beyond phonetic differences, area-specific uses of grammar, and semantic preference, further complicate the picture. The latter often reflect unique cultural characteristics that pertain to a specific community but may not be significant in another. For example, "amye" (Wylie: *a myes*) is the most common kinship term used in the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau to address grandfathers. By extension, it is also used for the oronyms of those local mountains that are worshipped by a village and are often considered their common (mythical) ancestor. While all Tibetans are familiar with the latter meaning of "amye", especially through important pilgrimage destinations like the mountain Amye Machen Pomra (*a myes rma chen spom ra*), only in Amdo is "amye" also commonly used in the daily context of kinship relations.

With regard to spoken Tibetan in the People's Republic of China (PRC), both Tibetans themselves and scholars of Tibetan linguistics (Tournadre and Sangda Dorje 2003) acknowledge a general macro-division into three 'dialects', which coincides with the geo-cultural distinction into Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo, the three regions that the Tibetan government in exile consider to be constitutive parts of Tibet and are now under the administration of the PRC. A second linguistic division, which to my knowledge is specific to Amdo, reflects the distinction between the two main socio-economic groups of the local Tibetan population into "rongwa" (*rong ba*, peasants) and "drokpa" (*brog pa*, pastoralists). Accordingly, two variants of Amdo Tibetan are identified: "rongkè" (Wylie: *rong skad*, language of the peasants or agricultural dialect) and "drokkè" (Wylie: *brog skad*, language of the pastoralists or nomadic dialect) (Sung and Lha Byams Rgyal 2021). Tibetans in Amdo attach certain ideas and stereotypes to both. While rongkè is considered to be spoiled by Mandarin due to the daily interaction of

Tibetan peasants with Han Chinese in the context of multi-ethnic agricultural villages that are closer to the townships, it is also considered softer and kinder in tone. In contrast, drokkè is considered an older and purer form of the Tibetan language since Tibetan pastoralists – at least until recent times – hardly have any contact with Mandarin speakers on the pastures, which are also located relatively far from urban areas. Drokkè is, however, considered rough in tone and more challenging to understand and learn.

In conclusion, taking into account the gap between written and spoken Tibetan and the regional variation within spoken Tibetan, it appears that there isn't a single best way to navigate these differences. While the exclusive use of Wylie would erase the regional differences in spoken Tibetan, the non-standardised rendering of Tibetan words would make them difficult to understand for the reader.

Most of the Tibetan sources in my thesis are oral and come from the interviews that I carried out in eastern Amdo with both agricultural and pastoralist members of Tibetan communities between 2010 and 2018. While I did not report the pronunciation differences between rongkè and drokkè, I tried to find a balance between the accessibility to the non-specialist reader and the most common scholarly practice of using Wylie. In the introduction, I favored the general readership. Accordingly, based on the phonemic transcription system used by Kuo-ming Sung and Lha Byams-rgyal in their book *Amdo Tibetan: A Comprehensive Grammar Textbook*, I used an approximate pronunciation of the Tibetan terms in Amdo Tibetan, while still reporting the Wylie transcription in brackets. In the published articles, all the cited Tibetan terms are in Wylie. The final glossary offers a list of all the Tibetan words and expressions that appear in the entire text both in Wylie and Tibetan script.

The Chinese terms that appear in the text are reported according to the Hanyu Pinyin romanisation system for standard Mandarin Chinese, which was introduced in the PRC in the 1950s and remains the most widely used. A complete list of the Chinese characters is provided in the final glossary.

Finally, in brackets "Ch." and "Tib." respectively stand for pinyin and Wylie, i.e., "Chinese" and "Tibetan".

INTRODUCTION

1. Context of the research

The rapid and intense political, social, and economic changes in China over the past seventy years have left a significant mark on the lives of individuals. With communist ideology subverting existing values and social hierarchies and culminating in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Chinese society experienced a dramatic transformation that gave rise to a profound sense of disorientation.

The Third Plenum of the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1978 inaugurated an era of reforms that aimed at restoring a sense of normality. On that occasion, Deng Xiaoping's speech, titled "Liberate Thinking, Seek Truth from Facts and Unite and Look to the Future" – though in practice more moderate than announced – paved the way for the revision of the country's recent past. Together with the launching of economic reforms, Deng Xiaoping promoted a relaxation of the political climate that allowed for the rethinking of the "ten years of big disaster" (Ch. *shi nian da zainan*) and a more open debate about its role in shaping the identity of China at the turning of the century. However, although the Party officially condemned this key part of its history, it preserved Mao Zedong's legacy intact.[1] As a result, after creating the collective body of Mao Zedong Thought, the only critical perspective allowed on the founder of communist China distinguished between the early – good – and the late – less good – Mao. The individual responsibilities of the latter in the Cultural Revolution were diluted and almost dissolved within the collective responsibility of the entire leadership, while Deng emphasised that 'Mao Zedong Thought will eternally be our most precious spiritual heritage' (Barmé 1993). Overall, while the new leadership promoted a partial de-Maoisation, it remained extremely cautious. As Judith Pernin and Sebastian Veg argued, "the link between the nature and institutions of the PRC polity and the mass violence that took place under Mao was never officially probed" (Pernin and Veg 2014).

While the official reading of the past remained under the direct control of the Party and was therefore politically sanitised, in the 1980s memories of personal tragic experiences started to pour out and circulate throughout the country. The Cultural Revolution had unfolded into specific episodes of unprecedented violence. The sessions of public humiliation, the separation of families, the physical and psychological harassment, the persecution of public enemies, and the destruction of religious objects and buildings could not be hastily removed from

[1] Deng granted that Mao did "30% bad and 70% good" (Ch. *san fen guo, qi fen gong*). Although that 30% bad cost the lives of millions, the official line claimed that it was balanced out by the positive achievement of the remaining 70% of his deeds. The toll of victims from the Maoist time was not limited to the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. Already in the fifties the campaigns for industrialisation were implemented at the expense of agricultural production dropping and causing one of the biggest famines in history with a human cost that is still not known in clear numbers (Yang, Jisheng 2012).

the individual and collective memory. The short-lived "scar literature" (Ch. *shanghen wenxue*) movement in 1978–79 elaborated on some of these experiences (Knight 2016).

In 1989 the government's brutal crushing of the protest by thousands of students, intellectuals, and workers gathered on Tiananmen square to demand the democratisation of the country put an end to the hope that the economic reforms would soon be followed by a substantial transformation of the single-party system.

In spite of the political setback, during the 1990s projects related to grassroots experiences during the Maoist years took on an increasingly organised and pluralistic character, giving voice to conflicting memories of the past that could hardly be reconciled (Lee and Yang 2007). Nostalgia for the enthusiasm of the revolutionary years often coexisted with the trauma of extreme violence. The continuous efforts to find, collect, organise, and store stories of the past into writing projects as well as cinematic production highlighted the significance of the past and its fundamental role in defining identities in post-Mao China. In spite of the political constraints, books such as Ji Xianlin's *Niupeng zayi* (1998)[2] and films like Zhang Yimo's *Huozhe* (1994)[3] have managed to circulate in China to the present day. These individual endeavours to elaborate on the past and make sense of it exposed the Party's uneasiness in coping with the drama of the Maoist years and the Cultural Revolution and the difficulty of folding these events into national history.

With the advent of Xi Jinping's leadership in 2013, the urge to establish an international strong role for China coupled with the consolidation of national identity. On the occasion of the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October 2017, Xi declared that "the Chinese Dream is a dream about history, the present, and the future".[4] The Chinese Dream (Ch. *zhongguo meng*), a concept introduced by Xi in 2012, is intended to promote the revitalisation of the Chinese nation as a Chinese collective dream of bringing its past glory back. Accordingly, the plural past of the country is collapsed into a preordained vision of China as a monolithic ancient civilisation that, starting from the source of the Yellow River, flows down

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[2] Translated into English in 2016 under the title *The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, the book is an autobiographical account of the author's imprisonment in 1968 on the campus of Peking University and his subsequent disillusionment with the cult of Mao. Quite surprisingly, when compared to other censored books on the subject of the Cultural Revolution, the book was published by the Central Party School Publishing House and remains available to the readership in mainland China.

[3] *Huozhe* (English title: *To Live*) is a fiction film that portrays the dramatic life story of a common Chinese couple through the tumultuous years of the civil war in the 1940s and the later Cultural Revolution. In spite of being internationally acclaimed, the film was never screened in cinemas in mainland China. However, it is now available in China through streaming websites.

[4] The English translation of the full speech is titled "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era". The full text is available at: http://www. xinhuanet. com/english/download/Xi_Jinping%27s_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

to the present but needs to be rejuvenated.[5] The nationalistic overtones of this narrative also connote the projection of China's glorious march on the path to becoming a global power. By linking the past and the future, a totalising linear history emerges that bridges the gap between the legacy of the national essence rooted in the past and the new modern nation that China aspires to become (Duara 1995). To further highlight this temporal continuity, the central government launched a message aimed at "telling the world the story of China well" (Ch. *xiang shijie jiang hao zhongguo gushi*), which comprehends an articulated set of narratives about China in different domains, told by the monologic voice of the state. A summary published on the CPC website retraces some of these "stories" (Ch. *gushi*) through the speeches given by Xi Jinping on different occasions: "tell the story of national rejuvenation well" (Ch. *jiang hao minzu fuxing gushi*), "tell the story of the Chinese way well" (Ch. *jiang hao zhongguo daolu gushi*), "tell the story of Chinese culture well" (Ch. *jiang hao zhonghua wenhua gushi*), "tell the story of the blending of civilisation well" (Ch. *jiang hao wenming jiaorong gushi*), "tell the story of people's friendship well" (Ch. *jiang hao renmin youhao gushi*), "tell the story of international connections well" (Ch. *jiang hao guojia jiaowang gushi*), "tell the story of peaceful development well" (Ch. *jiang hao heping fazhan gushi*), "tell the story of globalisation well" (Ch. *jiang hao quanqiuhua gushi*).[6] Together these stories strive to portray positively the image of a prosperous, powerful, and assertive China that seeks international recognition for its economic success and political stability.

By crafting the history (Ch. *lishi*) of the Chinese nation into a homogeneous collective story, this state-monopolised representation leaves little space for the plurality of other stories rooted in the local experiences of the past. This single narration especially fails to represent socially marginalised and economically disadvantaged groups such as those communities classified as so-called ethnic minorities (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*) following the foundation of the PRC.[7] However, these communities question their participation in the consolidation of Chinese national identity precisely by telling their own versions of the past (Duara 1995).

Oral history has developed as an independent field of enquiry with its specific methodology and focus on documenting the past of underrepresented and marginalised individuals and groups. Alessandro Portelli argued that "the first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events as such than

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[5] While the Chinese dream remains vague with regard to its definition, the most pressing question concerns its implementation. As Perry (2015: 911) put it, "Can the Party's syncretic blend of science, democracy, Confucian harmony, and Maoist revolution, all wrapped in one dreamy package of national modernity, serve as a sustainable framework for regime legitimacy?"

[6] A description of each story is provided on the official website of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at: http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0222/c40531-30897581.html

[7] In the aftermath of the foundation of the PRC, the state sponsored ethnographic and linguistic surveys to identify the ethnicities in the country. The result was the official recognition of 56 ethno-national groups (*minzu*). While the Han accounts for 91% of the Chinese population, the other 55 groups go under the collective name of ethnic minorities.

about their meaning" (Portelli 1981: 99). The meaning of an event and the ways of narrating it reflect the agency of different social groups and therefore differ widely depending on political and cultural context. This thesis contributes to pluralising our knowledge of history and history practices in the People's Republic of China by focusing on the ways the past is remembered and culturally re-elaborated in the context of Tibetan communities. To this end, my research has primarily relied on oral accounts and locally published materials that circulate in the Tibetan area of eastern Amdo (Qinghai Province). These sources are fragmented, place-specific, and often lack the general context of national history. Instead, subjectivity characterises both the content and the narrative organisation of the narratives I recorded. In addition, the narrators were not committed to providing a strict chronological narration but established somewhat arbitrary connections between events, based on their significance for Tibetan individuals and communities today. As a result, the case studies presented in the four articles are not bound to a specific timeframe but extend back and forth into the remote and recent past. Do these narratives qualify as history? In the wake of postmodern reflections on the relationship between history and narratology, scholars have shown how professionally trained historians ultimately "emplot" events into narratives that reflect their political leaning as much as their interpretations and preferences. As Hayden White wrote, "in telling a story, the historian necessarily reveals a plot" (White 1984: 28), thus historical works are crafted representations of the past. While historians have largely rejected White's narrativist arguments, which deprive historiography of its claimed objectivity and authority, later developments in postnarrativism have pushed the dialogue between history and narratology in new directions. In this latest trend, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen has argued that history writing should not be framed as representational of past events but as a discursive practice characterised by rational argumentation, in which "contextual situationality enables one to see the rational force of someone who comes from another context" (Kuukkanen 2015: 238). These postnarrativist reflections on historical works are equally valid and appliable to the narrative recounting of the past made by individuals that are not professional historians but had first-hand experience of the events. Under the constraints imposed by the state monologic narration of history, Tibetan 'stories' are histories that give voice to alternative versions of the past through telling and writing, as well as through material objects and artistic representations. In this way, the vagueness of the 'stories' presented in the four articles opens up the epistemic possibility of appreciating individual and collective Tibetan practices of storytelling while emphasising its intrinsic historical value.

The elicitation of these stories gives voice to minor historical events that did not make it into official history and yet are fundamental to the plurality of individual and community experiences. The four articles highlight the polyphony of Tibetan micro-storytelling vis-à-vis the national masterpiece of history while acknowledging that the two share the narrative format and are far from being in absolute dichotomy. The practice of micro-storytelling does not in fact set itself in direct confrontation with the monologic narration of the state. At most, it

includes passing references to the bigger picture of political movements launched at the central level by focusing on the effects produced in the local context. In this way, different aspects of the same historical events are given prominence by the state and at the local level. While the marginalisation or exclusion of local historical events is not always necessarily the result of state censorship, it does reflect a strong inclination towards minimising regional and ethnic identities and creating a standardised national past. Conversely, stories told from the standpoint of individuals who are not trained historians but protagonists in their own lives and witnesses to that of other community members bypass censorship by avoiding competing with the state's master narrative for the official label of history. Each of the four articles presents an empirical case study of Tibetan locally narrated history. The third article specifically analyses the Tibetan emic theorisation of the categories of 'history' (Tib. logyü, *lo rgyus*) and 'story' (Tib. drung, *sgrung*) while exploring how it differs from the practice of Western historiography. Together the articles demonstrate that history and story are overlapping categories that are blended in the Tibetan narrative representation of the past. Regardless of the genre labels used by the state and at the grassroots level to qualify a narration, (hi)stories that conflate source-documented and undocumented events are produced from both sides and rely on similar modalities of (hi)storytelling.

2. Research questions and aims

This research contributes to the understanding of contemporary personal and community elaborations of the past among Tibetan communities in Amdo.

It has four main aims:

I. to investigate Tibetan emic perspectives on history and memory in oral and written genres;
II. to analyse these perspectives in the broader context of the Chinese state's monopoly over history writing;
III. to generate new knowledge about Tibetan local history in Amdo;
IV. to contribute to the theorization of history and memory practices from a Tibetan cultural perspective.

The thesis addresses the following main research questions:

- What do Tibetans in Amdo consider as history? How can the Tibetan understanding of history contribute to pluralize the cross-cultural theorization of history and memory practices?
- What role do beliefs and rituals play in the ways Tibetans elaborate traumatic memories?
- What sources of authorities validate Tibetan history and memory practices?

More specifically, my research is oriented by the following specific research questions:

– What are the features of Tibetan written and oral history? What continuities and discontinuities can be identified?
– What do individual grassroots **voices** in Tibetan history tell us? How do they challenge official historical narrations produced by the Chinese state?
– What Tibetan **genres** encompass history content? What are their formal characteristics? What emic perspectives on history do they reflect?
– How are Tibetan traumatic memories transformed into communicable oral and written stories in spite of the state's censorship?
– How do different institutional and non-institutional sources of **authorities** support or undermine Tibetan history and memory practices?
– What is the role of the supernatural in processing and elaborating Tibetan memories?
– What function do rituals perform in addressing place-specific situations of crisis?
– How is the case of Tibetan communities in Amdo situated within the broader context of ethnic minorities' history and memory practices in China?

3. Background of the research

Over the past two decades, research on Tibet has become increasingly place-specific and diversified in terms of disciplinary approaches. The four articles that constitute this thesis are geographically focused on a specific area of Tibet, a regional entity that Tibetans know as Amdo. Although the borders of Amdo were never clearly marked on the map, both Tibetans and scholars agree in identifying it with the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. Vast and sparsely populated, Amdo is approximately the same size as France and epitomised by three major geographic elements: Lake Kokonor (Tib. tso ngonpo, *mtsho sngon po*), the upper course of the Yellow River (Tib. machu, *rma chu*), and the 6,282 meter peak Amye Machen Pomra (Tib. *a myes rma chen spom ra*). This stunning landscape is celebrated in Tibetan songs and poems with deep affection. Below is an example from a collection of folk songs (Tib. lashe, *la gzhas*) (Ban de tshe ring and Bsod nams tshe brtan 2009):

Ri mthon po rma rgyal sbom ra red//	The high mountain is Magyal Bomra;
Gangs dkar po sprin dkar ‘phyur ‘dra red//	Its white snow is like rising white clouds;
Seng dkar mo g.yu ral rgyas sa red//	It is a place where snow lionesses with turquoise manes increase;
Gnas ‘gangs chen yin no de don red//	It is a very important place.
Chu chen po rma chu lu ma red//	The big river is Machu Luma;
Lho g.yug ‘brug thang nga babs ‘dra red//	It is like a dragon swinging southwards and descending into the plain;
Nya gser ma gshog rtsal rgyas sa red//	It is a place where golden fishes with skilful fins multiply;
Chu ‘dang chen yin no de don red//	It is a great river.
Sde chen po g.yu lung sum mdo red//	The big village is the intersection in the turquoise valley;
Grong sde ba skar tshogs shar ‘dra red//	The small villages are like rising constellations of stars;
Gling seng chen mtshan snyan rgyas sa red//	It is the place where the fame of the Great Lion of [the Kingdom of] Ling spreads;
Sde ming chen yin no de don red//	It is a famous village.
Stod rma rgyal dbu ‘phang mtho gi//	In the upper part the head of the sublime Magyal on high
Pha a khus phying zhwa gon ‘dra//	It is like fathers and uncles wearing a felt hat;
Sprin dkar bo’i sked la ‘thibs na//	If white clouds gather at the waistline;
Gos dkar bo’i na bza’ bklubs ‘dra//	It is as if it were wearing a white robe as a garment;
Lho g.yu ‘brug dgung nas grags na//	If a southern dragon resounds from the sky;
Gsung snyan mos kha bton bton ‘dra//	It is like a pleasant voice calling out;
Nga’i skyes lha rma chen gangs ri//	My birth-deity, the snow mountain Machen;

Nam yin rung mchod don de yin//	Whenever it is possible, make offerings.
Mtsho sngon po kha mdog yag ki//	The color of Kokonor is beautiful;
Nga'i ma los gos lwa gon 'dra//	It is like my mother wearing the best robe;
'ja' dar tshon sna lnga shar na//	When the multicolor rainbow appears,
Ling la da'i ske rags bcings 'dra//	It is like its blue is tied by a belt;
Bya ka la ping ga grags na//	When the call of the Indian cuckoo resonates,
Skad snyan mos ma ni bton 'dra//	It is like hearing a pleasant voice reciting mani (mantra);
Mtsho sngon po khri gshegs rgyal mo//	Blue Lake Trisheg Gyalmo,
Nam yin rung mo mchod don de yin//	Whenever it is possible, make offerings to her.

Amdo is often described as a Sino-Tibetan borderland, caught between the territorial aspirations of the Chinese empire to the east and the Dalai Lama's government to the southwest (Kolas and Thowsen 2005; Nietupski 2014; Yeh and Coggins 2014; Kang and Sutton 2016). While the influence of these two powerful neighbours was surely strong, though discontinuous, narrating history from the standpoint of either of these outside actors risks overshadowing the importance of Amdo as a region to be studied in its own right. This ascription of geographic and political in-betweenness couples with a perception of Amdo as a peripheral area, marginal but yet part of the Tibetan empire (seventh to ninth centuries), the most powerful polity in Tibetan history. Accordingly, the history of Amdo has long been studied primarily with regard to its role in the post-imperial history of Tibet itself as a whole. However, this narration misrepresents Amdo as an exclusively Tibetan area, thus overlooking its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural complexity. The history of the region is in fact not only closely related to Tibet and the larger Tibetosphere but was also shaped by the long-term residence and rule of other people, particularly the Mongols and the Hui Muslims. Centuries of immigration, emigration, economic exchange, invasion, and displacement resulted in a linguistically and culturally highly diverse region that can by no means be considered exclusively Tibetan.

The past two decades have witnessed a considerable rise in the study of the political and religious institutions as well as the linguistic, social, and cultural diversity of Amdo from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The emergence of this interest is partially connected with the fact that, compared to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, since the 1980s the region has been relatively easily accessible to international visitors, whether researchers or tourists. Thanks to the relaxation of policies, until recently researchers were able to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Amdo under limited constraints – as far as the context of the ethnic minority areas in the PRC and especially Tibetan is concerned (Yeh 2006). As a result, while Amdo used to be only cursorily mentioned in relation to the historical events or the religious institutions in Central Tibet, an emerging body of scholarship is now committed to studying it in its own right. These efforts supported the foundation of the Amdo Research Network in 2014

and the successive organisation of four international conferences, which were followed by the publication of two volumes of the respective proceedings. Both philological and ethnographic approaches as well as a variety of focuses on historical events and contemporary socio-economic transformations are now well represented in the scholarship. The introduction of the first volume of proceedings published in 2017 provides a geographic definition of the region which does not narrow it to its Tibetan population:

> 'Amdo' is a Tibetan word and its use provides us with an entry point into a region which is largely informed by Tibetan Studies. However, the choice of this name should not suggest that we define the region as a purely Tibetan space. The limitations of the Amdo Research Network are rather geographic than ethnic and, it should also include research into other population groups, e.g. the Mongols, Huis, Salars, Hans or Monguors, as well as their interaction with the Tibetans and their influence on each other. (Sulek and Ptáčková 2017: 4)

In agreement with the authors, I use 'Amdo' to define the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau characterised by the long-term social interactions among different communities that shaped the contemporary profile of the region. Apart from these peculiarities, we also need to situate Amdo within the larger context of Tibet.

3.1 Tibet and the Tibetosphere, *cholka sum*, and the "small homeland"

Snow-capped mountains and green grasslands are the constitutive elements of a widely shared imagination of the Tibetan landscape. However, the geopolitical contours of Tibet are far less clear and agreed upon.

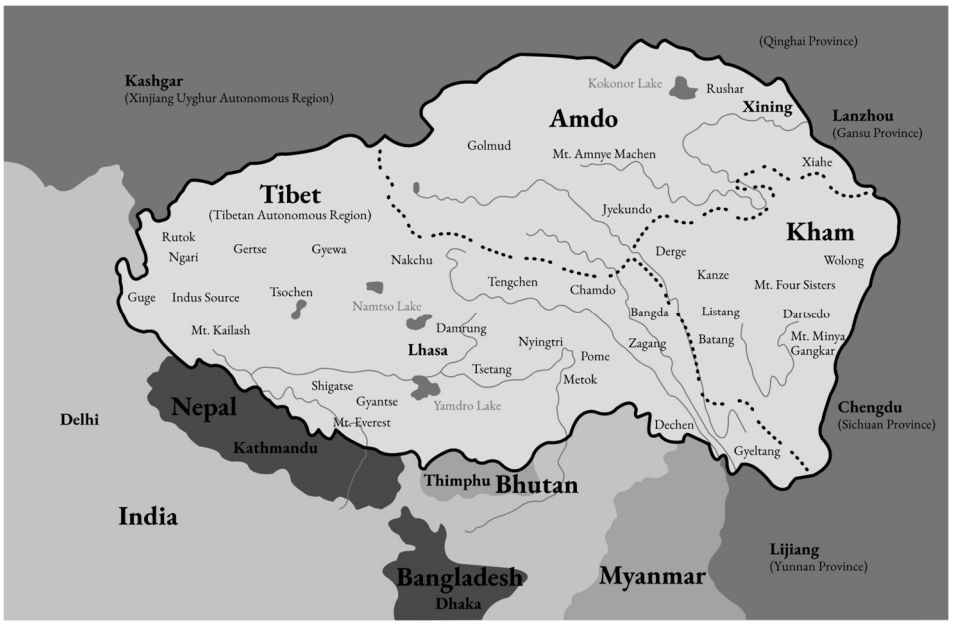
"Ethnic Tibet" and the "Tibetosphere" are commonly used designations for the areas inhabited by people who are identified – but who do not necessarily self-identify – as linguistically and culturally Tibetan. This definition encompasses a transnational space that displays certain linguistic and cultural continuities. However, there is no agreement about the actual size of the Tibetosphere, a term which is often implicitly used by the Tibetan diaspora community and shared by the majority of scholars in Tibetan Studies as equivalent to Tibet. In general, Tibetosphere refers to the area wherein Tibetan language and culture spread from an implied centre, which coincides with Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan empire in the seventh to the ninth centuries and of the government of the Dalai Lama in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, towards the peripheral areas, where political and religious power largely revolved around monastic institutions and local forms of social organisation. This vast space is now fragmented among different nation-states but in fact even in premodern times never constituted a single polity. While large portions of the Tibetosphere today fall within the national borders of the People's Republic of China, the Tibetosphere also includes Tibetan communities in countries and regions beyond the southwestern border of PRC, i.e., Baltistan, Ladakh, fifteen enclaves in Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. In

an even broader understanding, the Tibetosphere is stretched as far as including communities who do not self-identify as Tibetan but are nevertheless loosely qualified as Tibetan or "Tibetanised" due to the influence of Tibetan language and culture.[8]

Tibetans are in fact a diverse group of people who, towards the end of the twentieth century and more decidedly under the rule of the PRC, have developed a strong sense of belonging to a collective identity. As Tsering Shakya pointed out, the formation of a collective Tibetan identity "owes much to the nationality policies and ethnic categorization system", which "categorized the people of the Tibetan Plateau as a single *borig* and provided fixity to 'Tibetanness', homogenising it typologically" (2012: 24). In other words, the emergence of a Tibetan ethno-national group (Tib. *bod rigs*, Ch. *zang zu*), which came into being as a result of the ethnic classification project carried in the PRC in the 1950s, played a major role in fuelling the emergence of pan-Tibetan nationalistic sentiments in the twentieth century.

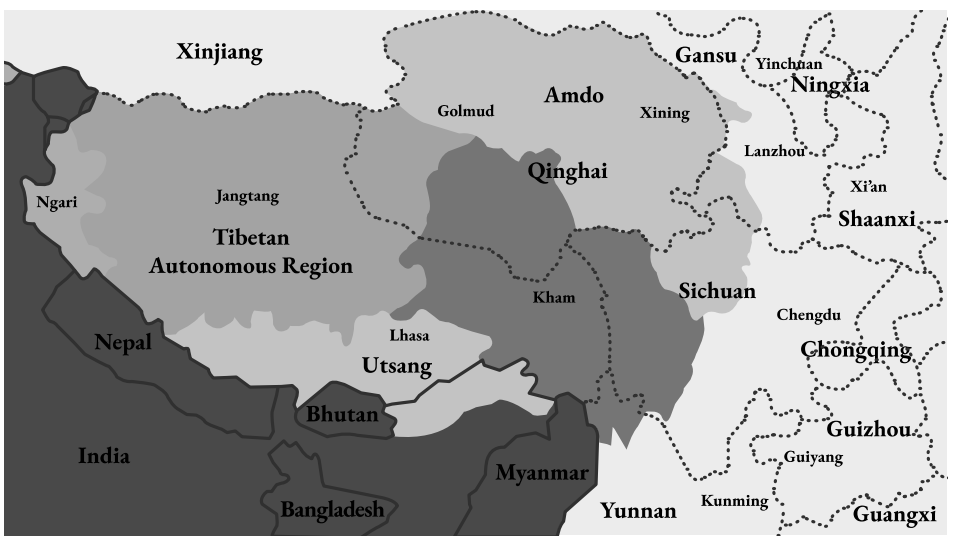
Apart from the shared sense of belonging to the Tibetan nation, Tibetans keep alive a mental map of Tibet divided into three macro-areas that embody distinctive regional identities: Ü-Tsang (Tib. *Dbus Gtsang*), Kham (Tib. *Khams*), and Amdo (Tib. *A mdo*) (see Map 1). This three-fold division goes under the name of cholka sum (Tib., *chol kha gsum*), a phonetic calque based on the Mongolian word, *čölgä* meaning "district" (Yang 2016: 553). While the idea of cholka as a geo-administrative unit dates back to the thirteenth century, its geographical referents shifted over time. Based on analysis of Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian primary sources, Eveline Yang (2016) demonstrated that the connection between the introduction of cholka and the patron-priest relationship established between Kubilai Khan, founder of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) in China, and Phags pa, abbot of the Sakya School in Tibet, is a later narrative construction that has not been historically probed.

[8] The linguistic and cultural diversity of the communities that do not self-identify as Tibetans has been largely overlooked in favour of a totalising image of Tibet, characterised by written Tibetan language and dominated by Tibetan Buddhism through its vast body of scriptures, monastic institutions, and devotees. In recent years, such an understanding of Tibet is increasingly challenged by the emerging scholarship on the languages and socio-linguistic practices of communities that used to be treated as by default part of the Tibetosphere but that in fact have their own languages and cultural and religious practices (Roche and Hyslop 2022).



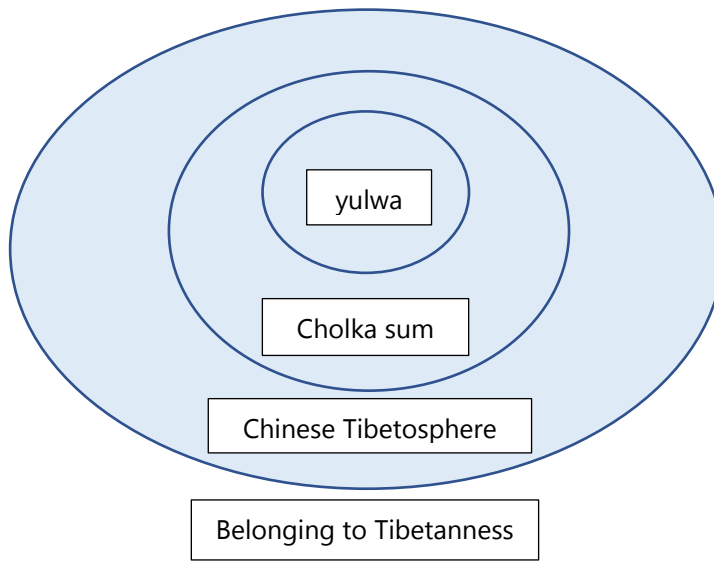
Map 1: Tibetan cultural area

Under the rule of the PRC, this older subdivision has been torn apart and folded into the Chinese administrative system. While Ü-Tsang roughly corresponds to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Amdo and Kham have been split into a number of Tibetan Autonomous Counties (TACs) and Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAPs) under the provincial administration of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan (see Map 2).



Map 2: Tibetan cultural area under the administration of the PRC

Within this new geopolitical order, Tibetans identify as part of the larger Tibetan community while maintaining a strong attachment to what Emilia Sulek pointedly calls "the small homeland" (Sulek 2019), which corresponds to a specific area, as small as a village or a pasture, within one of the three cholka sum. Therefore, in the PRC the contemporary Tibetan self is situated in increasingly larger concentric circles of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) that horizontally overlap with both Tibetan regional subdivisions and the Chinese administrative reorganisation of the same territory. For example, going from the most narrowly defined unit of space, an individual might say that her homeland (Tib. yulwa, *yul ba*) was in a village (Tib. dewa, *sde ba*) or pastoral encampment (*ru*), which was located in a county (Tib. zong, *rdzong*) within one of the cholka sum and in one of the Chinese administered prefectures (Tib. sakul, *sa khul*). To complicate the picture, each of these circles of belonging often bears both an older Tibetan toponym and a newer Chinese one. Finally, other markers of identity play an important role and are applied regardless of one's place of origin: livelihood, i.e. agriculture vis-à-vis livestock, language, and the affiliation to a specific monastery (Tib. gonpa, *dgon pa*) or reincarnated lama (Tib. trulku, *sprul sku*).



Together these multiple expressions of belonging define what being "Tibetan" in contemporary "Tibet" means. In light of these general considerations, the four articles in this thesis exclusively focus on the Amdo part that corresponds to today's Qinghai Province, thus not including any place in western Gansu and northwestern Sichuan. Specifically, I conducted fieldwork in Hainan and Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, and Hualong Hui Autonomous County in Haidong City (see map below).

Map 3: fieldwork areas in eastern Amdo – Qinghai Province

The next section offers an overview of the historical background of the region, thus providing the temporal coordinates of the events mentioned in the four articles.

3.2 Situating Amdo: people and places in historical perspective

In his famous book *The Amnye Ma-chhen Range and Adjacent Regions: A Monographic Study* (1956) Joseph Rock, who travelled extensively in the eastern areas of the Tibetan Plateau, noticed that "prior to 1928 the province [Qinghai] was smaller, for part of its present eastern territory belonged then to Kan-su, the adjoining province, while a good part of its western region was then reckoned to Tibet. With the exception of the changes in the boundary to the east, that in the west was ill-defined and more or less arbitrary, for the Chinese did not control the territory" (Rock 1956: 3).

From the Tibetan standpoint today, Amdo, largely coincident with the PRC-administered Qinghai Province, is enduringly situated within the Tibetan orbit. However, historically the region has been a linguistic, cultural, and religious crossroads shaped by the networks and the interests of highly diverse communities. According to the 2020 national census, Qinghai has a population of 5.6 million, with national minorities making up a total of 49.5%. Tibetans constitute a fifth of the population of Qinghai, while the Hui are roughly a sixth. In addition,

there are relatively small Mongol and Turkic-speaking insular communities such as Salar, Dongxiang, and Bao'an.[9]

In his insightful recent book about the modern history of the pastures in southeast Amdo and the subsequent establishment of Zeku County under the Communist Party of China (CPC), Benno Weiner argues that "it is difficult to determine how sovereignty, territoriality, and political identity were historically experienced and understood by individuals and communities within Amdo and how these may have changed over time." (Weiner 2020: pos. 777).

Prior to being put under the administration of communist China, the Tibetan population of Amdo was socially and economically organised into tsowa (Tib. *tsho ba*) and dewa (Tib. *sde ba*). In spite of the contemporary administrative system of the PRC, these two institutions remain the core of the territorial organisation, especially in pastoral areas.[10] In Chinese contemporary historiography, some of the leaders of the above institutions are labelled *tusi*. This was a Chinese title conferred on indigenous chiefs in frontier areas to ensure the indirect rule of the Chinese empire over non-Han people. However, in the context of Amdo, *tusi* artificially simplifies the complexity of the relationship that Tibetan leaders had with the imperial court in Beijing. Political power in Amdo was also exercised through the abbots of the big monasteries in the region, who often engaged in direct contact with their out-region non-Tibetan sponsors, be they Mongol, Han Chinese, or Manchu.

After founding the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), the Mongols took control of Amdo and introduced a new system of administrative units based on the number of households – one-hundred (Ch. *baihu*) and one-thousand (Ch. *qianhu*). While this system was already commonly implemented among Mongol and Turkic populations as early as the time of the Tibetan Empire in the eighth century, it was new to Amdo and overlapped the existing tsowa and dewa organisation. After the fall of the Mongol Empire, within which the Yuan dynasty had ruled over the entire Chinese territory, the local institutions of power in Amdo maintained close relationships with the imperial administration in Beijing under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Soon afterward, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Tümed and Khoshud Mongols became the protagonists of the second Mongol military rule over Amdo. During this time, the Mongols played an important role in consolidating Tibetan monastic institutions, for example by sponsoring the construction of Labrang monastery in 1709. Supported by the new rulers, the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism became prevalent in Amdo, thus

[9] These figures are based on the data published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (ed.) 2021. An introduction to the Turkic-speaking as well as the Tibetan-speaking Muslim communities in the region is presented in Hille, Marie-Paule, Bianca Horlemann and Paul Nietupski (eds.) 2019.

[10] Tsowa and dewa are often respectively translated as "clan" and "tribe", further rendered in Chinese as *buzu* and *buluo*. Both terms have been discussed and criticised for their shortcomings and for evoking a type of primitive society that does not adequately account for the situation in Tibet. For a detailed discussion see Langelaar 2019. I choose to leave the terms untranslated.

promoting the expansion of monastic networks from the Lhasa-based Ganden Podrang government of the Dalai Lamas (1642). The power of monasteries like Rongwo, which had converted to the Geluk school in 1630, was further strengthened and consolidated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1723, following the violent repression of a rebellion led by the Khoshud Mongol Prince, the entire region of Amdo fell under the control of the Manchu Qing Empire. As part of the process of establishing the new authority, the office of the amban was founded for the administration of Tibetan and Mongol affairs while the *qianhu* and *baihu* system was reformed. The Qing were careful in allying with the existing political and religious elites in Amdo to secure their control by supporting the institutional presence of the Gelukpa. Benno Weiner (2020: pos. 887) points out that "loose control, administrative flexibility, and relative reciprocity [were] inherent to these types of imperial borderlands." Yet, these ruling strategies did not end with the empire but constituted the bulk of a successful ruling experience that survived the collapse of the imperial system in 1912.

Towards the end of the Qing empire, Hui Muslim leaders were promoted in the administration of local civil and military affairs. Among them, the Ma family consolidated its power with official imperial endorsement. Andrew Fischer adds that "for the first time in the history of Amdo, local Tibetans were surpassed by local Muslims in strategic alliance and military strength" (Fischer 2005: 10). After the foundation of the Republic of China (1912–1949), the Kuomin Tang backed the Ma family's rule over Amdo for two decades (1930s–1940s) until the communist takeover in 1949. The main protagonist of those years was the warlord Ma Bufang, who controlled the region while China was undergoing big political transformations. The Ma regime created a transgenerational trauma for Tibetans, characterised as it was by high taxation, violence, and discrimination against the Tibetan population. However, Ma Bufang also made attempts to modernise Amdo through the improvement of roads and the establishment of schools, the regulation of taxation, and the exploitation of natural resources, albeit resorting to the coercive and violent means that often characterise the making of a state. In spite of favouring the Muslim population, the Ma could not operate these large-scale transformations without considering the diverse ethno-cultural landscape that they were ruling. Accordingly, "each autumn the Mas presided over a large ceremony on the banks of Qinghai Lake to placate the 'god of Kökönuur'. … Now, in front of large gatherings of officials, lamas, and headmen, it instead sought to ensure their loyalty to the multiethnic Republic of China" (Bulag 2002: 43–44).

The advent of the CPC and the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 put an end to the Ma regime. Against the backdrop of China's overall transition from the imperial model to a modern nation-state, the power balance and the ethnic relations in Amdo underwent a deeper transformation. At the initial stage, the CPC relied on the newly founded United Front to establish a strategic temporary alliance with the Tibetan and Mongol ruling elites. However, the long-term target was the incorporation of the ethnically diverse population of Amdo as citizens of the state.

In the uncertain times of the first decade of the CPC's rule, the intervention of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Amdo forcefully carried out the task of absorbing the territory and the people of Amdo into the body of the Chinese nation. The blurred nature of boundaries and the loose control over the region that had characterised the imperial times was substituted by a rigid administrative system revolving around prefectures and counties. At the same time, due to the state-promoted classification of China's population into ethnic groups, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui among others were each officially accorded the status of ethnic minority.

After a decade of relatively slow implementation of central policies that took into account regional specificities, in 1958 Mao launched the nationwide campaign known as the Great Leap Forward to accelerate the process of agricultural collectivisation in parallel with the rapid development of steel production. This was to be proved a dramatic failure that caused the death of millions by starvation in the countryside. In Amdo, the devastating socio-economic impact of the "economic reforms" of the Great Leap Forward caused a large-scale rebellion, which was violently repressed by the PLA. Rampant famine, persecution of religious and secular Tibetan leaders accused of fuelling the rebellion, and the imprisonment or killing of thousands of ordinary people makes 1958 an indelible year in the memory of Tibetans in Amdo and a prelude to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that was to unfold.

In 1978 a series of so-called open-up policies were inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping to guide the transition from a planned economy to a market economy. While eastern provinces benefitted greatly from this, the sparsely populated yet strategically important western areas of the country remained largely excluded. To address this imbalance, in 2000 Jiang Zemin launched the Great Opening of the West (Ch. *Xibu Da Kaifa*), a series of special economic plans aimed at the development of infrastructure and industry, the exploitation of natural resources, and the attraction of foreign investments to western China. The later addition of two successive steps in the Great Opening of the West – respectively planned for the years 2010–2030 and 2030–2050 – testifies to the growing ambition of the central authorities as well as the challenges to implementation. As a result, Tibetans in Amdo have been among the target people expected to witness a dramatic improvement in their living standards. However, the "gift of Chinese development" – to borrow from the title of Emily Yeh's 2013 book *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* – is far from generating the unanimous gratitude of Tibetans.[11] In the specific context of Amdo, the state-led sedentarisation of pastoralists, the fencing of pastures, the "scientific"

[11] The main argument of the book is that the Chinese state enterprise's coercive development strategies are conceived as acts of benevolence and that development itself was "offered" to Tibetans as an irrefutable gift to establish effective national rule in Tibet. Drawing on the Maussian theory of the gift, the author maintains that through the disguised act of disinterested giving, Chinese development generates obligation and indebtedness, while bringing with it a high expectation of being reciprocated by Tibetans with gratitude and loyalty.

protection and use of grasslands, and the full-scale introduction of a Mandarin-medium education system have not only encountered resistance on the ground but have also largely failed in their declared intention to bring a better life to the people. To understand the apparent short-sightedness of the state's agenda, "we should keep in mind that the local population is not always regarded as the major beneficiary and that national goals often outweigh local interests, resulting in an initiative's failure to meet local expectations" (Ptáčková 2020: 109). What future people in Amdo will face under the current leadership of the CPC remains to be seen, but the present is not encouraging.

4. Theoretical framework and main concepts

Receiving academic training in Chinese and Tibetan Studies made me encounter theory quite late in my journey. As is often the case for students in area studies, I used to highlight the uniqueness of the cultural phenomena that I had become acquainted with from textual materials or during my ethnographic fieldwork trips in Tibetan areas in the PRC. At no stage in my first PhD in Asian Studies was I required to elaborate a theoretical framework to situate my research findings. The later encounter with folklore studies and its vocation to be a self-reflective interdisciplinary field of study posed new questions for me when opening up a much broader horizon to reflect on my own research.

This section presents an overview of the three main streams of interests – narrative history, collective memory, and vernacular religion – that I developed and explored through the writing of this thesis. While each of the above field labels covers a large body of academic literature, here the discussion is limited to the main concepts that I retrospectively extrapolated from my articles and identified as important without amounting to a systematic theoretical framework.

4.1 (Hi)storytelling as the narration of the past

The scepticism and the uncertainty that characterise the postmodern debate on knowledge production have undermined the very foundations of history as a discipline that commits itself to the recording of true facts. By questioning the objectivity of the historian in selecting, interpreting, and arranging sources, Hayden White (1984; 1987) exposed the narrative nature of history writing, thus rejecting the modern historiography's claims to factual truth as well as its aspirations to generate grand theories.

A growing sensibility towards the variety of non-Western practices of history writing has also made scholars more aware that not only is history as a genre contingent on the specific cultural context wherein it emerges and makes itself recognisable to community insiders, but also the emic understandings of time are not immediately graspable from an etic perspective. Accordingly, appreciating Tibetan approaches to history requires a readjustment of the expectations towards the genre of history as a whole and an epistemological openness towards alternative worldviews and ways of conceptualising the past.

In the PRC, history remains a dangerous terrain. However, without openly challenging the state's monopoly on the narration of national history, people still express other histories by making "adjustments" at the fringes (Barnett 2020: 10). The four case studies that are discussed in the articles do not even go that far. My Tibetan interlocutors limited the scope of their narration to the local circumstances and the specific events they lived through or knew about, whereas bigger national political events remained in the background and were stated as simple facts or taken for granted. Based on different time focuses, the four articles contribute to shaping a nuanced understanding of the relationship between national and local histories. By dismissing their knowledge of the past as "stories", the

narrators eluded the censorship applied to history as a genre scrutinised by the state, while carving a safer space for their expression. Although in these Tibetan "stories" the Chinese state is an abstract, "inanimate and malignant force" (Barnett 2020: 15), its presence as "a unitary, radically alien and uncannily powerful paternal agent – Apa Gongjia, Father State" (Makley 2005: 64) still surfaces through its lasting effect on individual lives.

In the context of this thesis, history is understood as the narrative organisation of past events that are meaningful to Tibetan communities in Amdo from the standpoint of the present. The case studies presented show that although the Chinese state and the Tibetan communities in Amdo engage the past in substantially different ways and mobilise it for different aims, they do share the practice of (hi)storytelling, a term which I use to emphasise the situatedness of history in narrative frameworks characterised by the use of storytelling operational modes. By merging both state and grassroots narrations of the past under the collective genre of (hi)story, I wish to point out the blurred distinction between history and story that, in spite of their respective claims, under the constraining political circumstances of the PRC are but strategic labels that do not reflect a different commitment to truth.

In the following two sections, I introduce microstoria and oral history as the two main theoretical and methodological sources of inspiration that oriented my approach to the analysis of the collected material. The third section offers an overview of Chinese and Tibetan historiographic approaches as they emerge through written genres that reflect different sources of authority.

4.1.1 Microstoria

In the 1970s a group of Italian historians, under the initiative of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, introduced microstoria as a new approach to historiography in reaction to the strong theoretical models that were dominating the field. In spite of the absence of a collective manifesto, microstoria soon became an umbrella term covering a number of diverse approaches that acknowledged the value of local complexities while disrupting a linear teleological understanding of history. Over time, the novelty of microstoria received increasing attention while undergoing a localisation process that brought into existence specific national schools, especially in France and the United States.

A focus on micro-histories critically engages the social practice of recording history by pluralising its formal characteristics as well as its contents. Since its original formulation, two key features have characterised microstoria: scale and context. With regard to scale, at first sight, the term microstoria appears self-explanatory as "micro" evokes a focus on the small, be it a place, a community, or a time span. Instead, as Francesca Trivellato (2011) argues, "in its most inspiring versions, microhistory applied the micro-scale of analysis to any object of inquiry but also combined micro- and macro-scales, rather than favoring the micro as an article of faith". With regard to context, rather than identifying it with the blurred notion of local circumstances that surround what is to be the object of

study, Maurizio Gribaudi (2011) suggests that context in the approach of microstoria is defined by pertinence. The latter refers to the network of interdependent connections that need to be taken into consideration and analysed for the role they play in the emergence of a particular phenomenon.

The emphasis that microstoria places on scale and context is especially relevant to the articles in the thesis, which take a small-scale approach to the larger historical events that took place among Tibetan communities in Amdo. Through a selective process of forgetting and remembering, Tibetan micro-histories are not only local accounts of the past but also a response to the present lived by Tibetans in the PRC. In recalling details of local events, it becomes obliquely possible to voice alternative re-elaborations of bigger historical events. While each article is based on the (hi)storytelling of narrators who belong to a specific community, to some extent the narrated events are similar to those that one can hear in any place in Amdo. The first article focuses on the Mongol presence in the region during the thirteenth and/or seventeenth centuries. The second article focuses on banditry in the early years of the PRC; the third article focuses on 1958 and the Cultural Revolution; the fourth article focuses on the Ma regime during the first half of the twentieth century. This broad selection of temporal horizons shows how recent history is relevant to the contemporary definition of Tibetan identities, as well as how the remote past speaks to present ethnic relations and determines the boundaries of ethnic belonging.

4.1.2 Polyphony in oral history

Scholars have questioned the validity of oral history both as a method and as a field of study, voicing their concern about the reliability of the sources, i.e., the selection and the trustworthiness of the narrators, the fallacy of their memory as well as their biases and agendas (Kirby 2008). One possible way to address and partially overcome these critiques is to acknowledge, rather than deny, that in oral history "narrative locates the event in the storyteller's experience and always bears the signs of the narrator's presence" (Portelli 2017: 10). Starting from this positive formulation of what an oral historical narrative is instead of what it should not be, we can appreciate the subjectivity of the narrators as a resource rather than a flaw. Accordingly, oral histories can be seen as "creative narratives rather than flat information, recognising the manipulations of personal and historical time, the focused point of view as a mark of the narrator's own position, a sound sense of structure, a recurrent use of symbols" (Portelli 2017: 10).

This same narrator-centred approach can be also applied to the analysis of oral historical narratives that refer to events that the narrator did not experience in her or his lifetime. In his classical book *Oral Tradition as History*, Jan Vansina distinguishes oral history from oral tradition by defining the latter "as messages [that] are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them" (Vansina 1985: 12). In this sense, the articles in the thesis are not limited to oral history but expand into the oral tradition that refers to the pre-communist time of the republic

(articles II and IV) and even – with its mythical transposition – the Mongol domination in the seventeenth century.

Although narrators are the core of any oral history project, the narrator's voice is not a self-referential monologue but emerges from the dialogic process of interacting with the researcher. The neat written product that appears on the page is in fact the synergic result of the dialogue between the narrator and the researcher in the specific moment of the interview as well as through the broader implied relations that take shape over a longer period of acquaintance. In the preface to the first edition of *The Voice of the Past*, Paul Thompson's open declaration that "the richest possibilities for oral history lie within the development of a more socially conscious and democratic history" (Thompson 2000: iv) probably speaks for a political commitment that is widely shared among oral historians. While the focus of oral history is not necessarily on those who are socially or economically discriminated against, be they individuals or communities, there is a general preference for recording the past of ordinary people and making it audible through their own narration. Even when the oral historian does not directly engage the agenda of the community, her or his academic endeavour contributes to disclosing information that is silenced, not endorsed, or altogether neglected by official historiography. However, this is not always the case. While the narrator and the researcher together set up the direction of the narration, the subsequent entextualisation of oral history reveals adjustments and interpolations that are often not explicitly acknowledged by the researcher.

The mushrooming of local history books in Amdo in the 2010s offers an example of how oral sources can be mobilised for different aims and situationally convey very different messages depending on the venue and the distribution of the published oral histories. This distinction is especially relevant when oral history projects benefit from state sponsorship. As Uradyn Bulag (2010: 109) put it, "the socialist oral history practices in China are not just for the purpose of archiving memories; rather they are profoundly critical and political. Oral history is a public political ritual, and it performs a governmental and pedagogical function pervading all social strata."

During my fieldwork in Amdo in the 2010s, I often experienced the frustration of facing my interlocutors' silence whenever I would venture into the topics of collectivisation in 1958, the Cultural Revolution, as well as less sensitive issues related to their life experiences. A number of more and less obvious reasons could explain this reticence. First, the initial lack of acquaintance surely didn't motivate my interlocutors to open up with a stranger. Second, in the context of Amdo Tibetan society, my age and gender didn't provide much incentive for my elder male interviewees to take me seriously. As one of the anonymous reviewers of the third article in this thesis commented, "How old are these three men, how old are you? Are these narrators responding to your relative youth?" The fact that I was a 24-year-old female student was surely not an ideal position from which to start. There is, however, a third possible explanation to add. By the time I met my interlocutors, some of them had been involved in the recording of their memories for local history projects that were either already published or about to be. In these cases, I was often

redirected to "the book" as the authoritative source for answers that in many cases had been given by the very same people with whom I was talking.

After some of these books were gifted to me or purchased by myself, it soon became evident that the publication of the local history of this or that village, primarily based on oral sources and published in Tibetan, was not a sporadic phenomenon but was part of a more widespread cultural movement among Tibetans in Amdo to recount their past as a way to express their belonging to a place as much as to their community of origin.[12] Yet, these numerous publications presented a striking polarised difference with regard to sponsorship, production, and accessibility. While some were based on the private research and financial initiative of individuals who wanted to record the past of their own community, a conspicuous number of other books were sponsored by cultural bureaus and offices at the county and prefecture levels. The different geneses were reflected in the production of, respectively, expensive hardcover books and cheaply bound books made of thin (almost transparent) paper. While the former were published by official publishing houses such as the Gansu Minzu Publishing House and the Qinghai Minzu Publishing House, the latter were printed in copy shops and exhibited a fake ISBN on the back cover. In terms of access for readers, the officially published books were available on the shelves of all bookshops in Qinghai Province, while the latter circulated informally in a limited number among family members and friends.

With regard to sources, both independent oral history, and state-sponsored, publications relied on the recording and editing of interviews with community elders, who in some cases contributed their knowledge to both. However, the respective final publications were substantially different. An example of a comparison between a grassroots and a state-sponsored publication is provided in Appendix I.

Given the political constraints, the efforts to produce grassroots oral histories in Amdo are especially valuable. In their material fragility exemplified by the thin paper they are printed on and the limited number of copies available, these books serve the important purpose of keeping the voices and the agencies of their background communities distinctly audible. This also reminds us that Tibetan oral accounts of the past reflect the linguistically and culturally diverse settings wherein Tibetan communities cluster in the contemporary PRC. However, while individual narrators have a certain degree of freedom in voicing their stories by way of unofficially published oral histories, it is fundamental to keep in mind that

[12] The fever for collecting oral history also triggered the sudden circulation of a number of forged historical documents, as noticed by Hannibal Taubes and Benno Weiner (2022: 14). In 2012 I was offered the opportunity to pay to take photos of piles of notes hand-written in school notebooks and stored in four wooden boxes at the home of a retired cadre in a village outside of Rebgong township. The owner claimed to have personally and secretly copied these notes during the Cultural Revolution from a history book from Rongwo monastery. However, just before my second visit, I was warned by a number of people that the man was a well-known forger who had been producing and trading historical documents for both Tibetan and Western researchers.

"far from being free 'the people' – new subaltern speakers or oral historians – are in fact disciplined, performing a subjectivity dictated by a greater force, the CCP. The energy unleashed by oral history in this way is as destructive as it is constructive, so it requires careful management on the part of the CCP so that the Party itself is not hurt" (Bulag 2010: 97).

The articles in the thesis attempt to shed light on minor events that are primarily if not exclusively meaningful to Tibetan local communities, while hardly known to outsiders and at most familiar to those within the provincial borders. In this safer space, other (hi)stories circulate by keeping a low profile.

4.1.3 Chinese and Tibetan historiographies: genres and authorities

History plays a fundamental role in the consolidation of contemporary Chinese national identity. In his influential work *Rescuing History from the Nation*: *Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Prasenjit Duara explores the interdependent relationship between history and the nation, based on Chinese historiography written in the early twentieth century. One of his main arguments is that national history is predicated upon the mutually constitutive relationship between the national self and the Other. As he argues, "the national self contains various smaller 'others' – historical others that have effected an uneasy reconciliation among themselves" (Duara 1995: 15). Yet, in spite of making efforts to secure control over both national and local history writing, "the state is never able to eliminate alternative constructions of the nation among both old and new communities" (Duara 1995: 9). One century on, this same tension still characterises Chinese historiography amidst the renewed formulation of the nation produced under the contemporary PRC governance. While the specific content and arrangement of historical narratives have changed to align with the current political ends of promoting the Sinicisation of the "others", the main purpose of ensuring the state's monopoly over the narration of the past remains unaltered. At the same time, the "others" resiliently work with the changing political winds to ensure the marginal survival of their histories.

How are state-endorsed historical narratives made truer and more legitimate? This is achieved not only by repressing the circulation of alternative narratives but also by confining them in non-truth committed genres, i.e, ballads, proverbs, placelore, and myths. In this way, historical information conveyed in other-than-historiographic pieces of writing is preventatively disqualified from directly competing with the master narrative of the state. However, as the four case-studies presented in the thesis articles show, in response to the ban on history, Tibetans strategically exploit other genres to push the limits of what can be narrated by safely avoiding qualifying it as history.

Tibetan history writing from the pre-PRC time does not find a one-to-one genre correspondence with Western historiography, but encompasses multiple genres. In the introduction to *Tibetan Histories: A Bibliography of Tibetan-language Historical Works*, Dan Martin (1997) lists nine distinct Tibetan sub-genres

that are related to history and explains the reason for leaving out other history-relevant sub-genres. Leonard Van der Kuijp (1996) also provided a description of the formal and content characteristics of three main Tibetan history genres, while in general highlighting the narrative dimension of Tibetan history writing. Peter Schweiger (2013) has elaborated in detail on the Tibetan understanding of history, concluding that it mainly revolved around the preservation of an uninterrupted connection with the past, which eventually crystallised in a mythical understanding of history itself. The cultural context into which Tibetan history writing emerged was characterised by the rule of Buddhist institutions, wherein religious and political powers were often conflated. Against the backdrop of this socio-political setup, history was sponsored and written by religious personnel and inspired by pious intent. Its primary purpose was to establish the authority of a lineage, a monastery, or a religious order. As a result, Tibetan historiographic approaches remained the same for centuries. As Peter Schweiger put it: "in Tibetan depictions of history, the actions and protagonists take center stage, while social, economic, and political structures take a back seat. In the presentation of interrelationships between the protagonists, complex ideas are reduced to simple binarism. … This allowed the events of history to be repeatedly relinked into the same familiar patterns, giving a static quality to history as narrative" (Schweiger 2013: 71–72).

Since the 1950s Tibetan history writing has been subsumed within the framework of Marxist historiography. While preserving certain characteristics and approaches derived from Tibetan tradition, contemporary Tibetan history production is situated within the larger context of history produced in the PRC. For this reason, a brief outline of characteristics of Chinese historiography is useful to understand the state of Tibetan history writing in the PRC as a whole.

From the 1950s on, Marxist ideology became the only available theoretical model (Ch. *lilun*) to interpret historical materials (Ch. *cailiao*). In spite of the more articulated debate that took place among Chinese historians, a linear and teleological interpretation of historical events prevailed, based on the fact that "the precondition for writing history was not working on historical records, but understanding totality in its claim for the future" (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2005: 452). This has essentially become a claim to absolute historical truth that denies any other history in order to firmly establish itself. The reform era inaugurated in 1978 allowed a partial openness to debate over the national past.[13] Nevertheless, Robert Barnett notes how in spite of the partial and cautious revision of the past

[13] Lawrence Sullivan (1990) synthesises the three main trends in Chinese historiography that emerged in the 1980s as "materialist", "political", "great man". Historians of the first trend remained closer to the original Marxist formulation of historical materialism and economy-driven determinism to advocate one-party rule in the contemporary PRC, in line with the persistence of despotism in Chinese imperial and modern history. More moderately, historians of the third trend have highlighted the need for enlightened individuals to improve the rule of the country while preserving the one-party system. As for historians of the second trend, they supported institutional reforms that would lead to the end of any Chinese inclination towards authoritarian power.

amidst the reforms in the 1980s, "the underlying rationale of history writing in China remained intact" (Barnett 2020: 1).

The implications of state-controlled historiography for "others'" histories are many. Histories of others are not only required to conform to the Marxist theoretical model but also to merge – or better dissolve – within the collective history of the Chinese people (Ch. *zhonghua*). By using sources available in other languages, i.e., Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, etc., historians select and establish a hierarchy among emic genres that are history-related. The result is that certain emic genres become the only officially recognised history while others are excluded. In the third article of this thesis, I explored how the Tibetan emic genre of *lo rgyus* was first identified and then appropriated as the exclusive emic genre suitable to translate the whole genre of history. In this process, the emic foundations that used to sustain the authority of multiple history-related genres become marginalised. One example is represented by "old books", as Rian Thum (2014) calls Uyghur-language books which, with regard to their format and content, are traditional history books that "carry multiple significance" for people today. He notes how old books are perceived as more reliable and original, but also "untainted by the historical interventions of the current government". I observed the same attitude among Tibetans in Amdo towards religious manuscripts as well as monastic histories, collected works of masters, and autobiographical notes that predate the PRC. Today none of the above qualify as proper *lo rgyus*. However, while some of these old books might even have become available in print from official publishing houses, I repeatedly heard that one could not be sure about what had been removed or added and therefore the old version was better.

In the pre-PRC period Tibetan history writing appeared across multiple genres that were endorsed by religious authorities and complied with a specific understanding of time and truth. The dramatic change in political circumstances brought Tibetan historiography under the authority of the PRC. This caused a disconnection between the Tibetan traditional multi-genre approach to history writing and the new single authority of the state. While the intervention of the latter is strongly perceivable through censorship as well as through a homogenous understanding of history in Marxist terms, the plurality of Tibetan history-related genres survives and further expands in response to the challenges posed to it.

4.2 Collective memory

Memory Studies is an interdisciplinary field that developed out of a major focus on the study of memory in its collective dimension. While acknowledging the interdisciplinarity of memory and the need to develop effective methodological approaches to the variegated materials that are used in research on memory, I choose the study of concrete phenomena that in their fragmented nature offer a kaleidoscopic view of the local experience of the past among Tibetan communities in Amdo. What unites these apparently scattered pieces is what can be

defined as "the narrative and temporal texture of memory, perceived as an articulation or representation of the past" (Võsu, Kõresaar and Kuutma 2008). Memory is often portrayed in opposition to history and celebrated for its ascribed quality of being more romantic than authentic and able to produce a sort of counter-history. However, many of the apparent binary oppositions in collective memory studies, i.e., individual–collective, memory–history, remembering–re-experiencing, are actually "to be viewed as tensions between two poles" (Wertsch 2002: 65).

The need to take memories as a fundamental aspect, or even as an integral part, of history is evident in those sociopolitical contexts where history production is monopolised by the state. In my case studies, memory is best understood as the affordable possibility to share and reproduce knowledge about the past, in spite of the strict control of official history production in minority areas in the PRC.

4.2.1 Individual, communicative and cultural memory

Memories, even the most intimate ones, are inscribed in a social and cultural dimension that shapes their expression. Accordingly, what we remember reflects a particularly situated way of elaborating our individual experience of the past. Jan Assmann (1995: 127) highlighted how "every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others", however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past." The individual and the group in fact dialogically produce memories: the group affects the shaping of individual memories as much as the sharing of individual memories itself partakes in the formation of a collective memory. With regard to this formation, Assmann (1995) distinguished between two types of memory: communicative and cultural. While both are fundamental to the constitution of group identity, each embodies a distinct form of relationship between the individual and the social aspects of memory-making. Communicative memory is formed and reproduced in everyday communication. It is characterised by the informality of the exchange and the focus on a limited temporal horizon. In contrast, cultural memory refers to events of the remote past that are distant from the everyday but shared by a group of people without direct cross-generational communication.

The distinction between communicative and cultural memory is further elaborated by Jan Assmann (2008) and Aleida Assmann (2011) with reference to content, form, media, time structure, and participation structure. Jan Assmann (2008: 117) summarises these criteria in a table reproduced below:

	Communicative memory	Cultural memory
Content	History in the frame of autobiographical memory, recent past	Mythical history, events in absolute past ("in illo tempore")
Form	Informal traditions and genres of everyday communication	High degree of formation, ceremonial communication
Media	Living, embodied memory, communication in vernacular language	Mediated in texts, icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds; "classical" or otherwise formalised language(s)
Time structure	80–100 years, a moving horizon of 3–4 interacting generations	Absolute past, mythical primordial time, "3,000 years"
Participation structure	diffuse	Specialised carriers of memory, hierarchically structured

While Aleida and Jan Assmann provide concrete examples from different linguistic and social contexts that support the validity of this binary division, they also warn against the risk of taking it too literally.

When the above criteria are applied to analyse the production of collective memory in Amdo, it is evident that the circular process that shapes individual and group memories is deeply affected by the broader political context. More specifically, in response to the constraints imposed on the expression of Tibetan collective memories concerning the recent past under PRC rule, the two levels of communicative and cultural memory appear in fluid continuity rather than being neatly separated. With regard to content and time structure, memories of the recent past are connected with events of the more remote past by means of narrative associations. For example, the fourth article recounts how contemporary tensions over mining activities bring back the haunting memory of gold extraction a century ago. With regard to form and media, everyday storytelling in vernacular language is used to substitute textual materials written in formal Tibetan to avoid censorship. At the same time, rituals offer a formal framework to deal with painful memories. For example, the third article elaborates on traumatic experiences from the Cultural Revolution that people remember during ritual performances in storytelling rather than in historical terms.

The blurred nature of boundaries between communicative and cultural memories in Amdo puts any narration about the past in a permanently unsolved, transitory state. Politically sensitive memories – which constitute the great majority of what the Amdo population, regardless of their ethnic status, remember about what they experienced through the first seventy years of the twentieth century – seem confined to the communicative level and prevented from the long-term consecration of becoming part of cultural memory. In contrast, Tibetan attempts to make a decisive move in the direction of cultural memory have been rare. Xaver Erhard (2014) has employed Assmann's distinction to analyse three cases

of literary elaboration made by Tibetan authors in Amdo about 1958 (the year when the Great Leap Forward was launched, causing a catastrophic famine across China). As proof of the relevance of keeping Tibetan communicative and cultural memory separated, he argues that "in Amdo the Collective Memory has been actively and heavily constructed by the Chinese state, who suppresses the memory of e.g. the Great Leap Forward and portrays the period as a success story of liberation and democratic reforms. Public unrest, resistance and war-like battles including the shelling of monasteries as well as torture, struggle sessions, executions, famine, cannibalism are deleted from the Collective Memory. The memory of these events is locked away in the silenced personal and individual memories of the people who witnessed the events or in restricted party archives where secret records are kept" (Erhard 2014: 103).

Nevertheless, in the course of the elicited conversations I had during my fieldwork in Amdo it was apparent that, in comparison with published literature works, my interlocutors were taking oral communication as an opportunity to elaborate on the recent past beyond the level of communicative memory. By shifting and switching between different genres and registers of communication, Tibetan narrators produce frameworks of signification that allow them to relate events of the recent past to those of the remote past within the same narration. This transition from communicative to cultural memory is never secured but remains open to autobiographical contribution as well as to narrative angle and personal involvement in the recounted events. In this way, rather than separated from communicative memory, Tibetan cultural memory emerges as a selective sum of reiterated pieces of communicative memory that people consider meaningful to their contemporary identity.

4.2.2 The times and places of remembering and forgetting

Pleasant and painful memories of collective experiences are rooted in specific times as much as they are tied to specific places. In the articles of the thesis, I have employed a phenomenological approach to memories by highlighting the specific locations and time coordinates of the events narrated by my interlocutors over a systematic theorisation of memory. While these narrations are individual, they are also part of the communicative memory that people share through verbal communication.

Pierre Nora's definition of *lieux de memoire* as places "where memory crystalizes and secretes itself" (Nora 1989: 7) suggests that a clear one-to-one relationship exists between place and memory. While this definition has inspired a significant body of research, it appears incomplete to account for those places that have no exclusive or conclusive association with one set of memories but are re-storied through both individual and collective memories (Valk and Sävborg 2018). Places in fact rarely elicit a single instance of memory but remain open to the stratification, coexistence, and transformation of memories while continuously building connections with present happenings.

In Amdo, the stratification of memories is reflected in the use of multilingual toponyms, i.e. in Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian (of course, toponyms in other languages spoken in the region also exist, but not where I carried out fieldwork), which in turn bears witness to the historical polysemy of places.

While all Tibetan counties, prefectures, and townships have an official Chinese name, their Tibetan equivalents coexist with an older autochthonous Tibetan toponym. One example is represented by the county-level city of Repkong (Tib. *Reb gong*) in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The official Chinese name of Repkong is Tongren. However, both toponyms also exist in the two alternative forms of a Tibetan-based Chinese phonetic calque (*Regong*) and a Chinese-based Tibetan calque (*Tung rin*). The use of one or the other in verbal communication is context-dependent and reflects the political leaning of the speaker.[14] In contrast, the toponyms of Tibetan villages and pastures usually exist only in their original Tibetan, which occasionally betrays a Mongol origin, but lacks a Chinese official translation. For example, the oronym Warwon (Tib. *Bar dbon*), a mountain located in Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, suggests a Mongol origin. "In the Mongolian dialect still spoken in some areas of Amdo, 'war won' means 'on the west side of…'. This possible explanation implies that something located to the east of Warwon mountain is considered very relevant for the characterization of A myes Bar dbon itself, to the point that the mountain's name reflects this relational spatial arrangement" (Punzi 2013: 97).

In other cases, newly introduced Chinese toponyms for administrative units that were set up in the 1950s are a reminder of painful memories for the local Tibetan population. As Paul Connerton argues, "at the moment when names are assigned to places, those who do the naming are often particularly aware of the memories they wish to impose" (Connerton 2009: 11). There are many examples of toponyms of this type in Tibetan areas as well as in minority areas in general. Some placenames are more obvious references to the People's Liberation Army's military operations in minority areas in the 1950s, such as Xunhua ("Tamed"), Kangding ("Submitted Kham), or Ninglang ("Pacified Lang"), among many possible examples. Some others seem neutral or even randomly chosen as an auspicious wish in reference to the economic development promised by the post-Mao economic reforms. One such occurrence is presented in the fourth article. Here Gold Source (Ch. *Jinyuan*) is the Chinese name of a Tibetan township that evokes the plunder of gold by Hui soldiers a century before. However, Gold Source is not saturated with this single imposed memory of the past. For the local Tibetan population, the contemporary mining activities in the area re-story and revive the meaning of the toponym by connecting the past exploitation of resources to the present happenings and further to the presence of supernatural beings in the same environment.

A last set of toponyms that deserves consideration is represented by Tibetan descriptive placenames that mark the pastures and the natural landscape in

[14] For detailed research on the early history of the area of Repkong and its multilingual and multiethnic complexity, see Taubes 2019.

general. In the third article, the story of the establishment of the latse (Tib. *la btsas* or *la rtse*)[15] on the top of the mountain provides the opportunity to remember the name of the area: "the place where the *la rtse* was erected is called Chu-'phen-sgang (On-the-top-of-water-throwing), at that time that place was called Chu-'phen-sgang. The exact place where the *la rtse* was erected is called Chu-'phen-sgang. Previously, this place had a different name, it was called Dge-bsnyen-rdo-ri-nag-po (Vow-bound-black-rocky-mountain)[16]" (Punzi 2020: 268).

In recalling memories, the accuracy of space often doesn't match that of time. While placenames condense the past of a place into a name, thus signalling its cultural significance, historical value, or a particular reading imposed onto it, the narration of memories linked to a place is less linear and easy to pinpoint. This is especially evident in the narration of events of the remote past. Such is the case of the temporal vagueness in the narratives of the first article concerning whether Mongol dominance refers to the thirteenth or the seventeenth century. The two temporal frameworks collapse into a single semi-mythical one. As a result, the time specificity appears subordinate, if not altogether irrelevant, to the main purpose of showing the foreign ancestry of a Tibetan protector god in an area once occupied by Mongols. In contrast, the (hi)story of Hui mining exploitation in the fourth article establishes a link between past and present through which memories of violence and ethnic tension are not confined to the specific time of the past but are also experienced in the present.

Memories are about what people forget as much as about what they remember. Forgetting is not just a default result of the stratification of memories attached to a place, which over time substitute the preceding ones. The process of forgetting is intertwined and co-emergent with the process of remembering as a result of the community's complicit decision to focus on certain events while omitting others. In this latter sense, when memories are too painful to find a verbal expression, the conscious choice of silence can be wrongly interpreted as forgetfulness. Alternatively, silence can be equally misunderstood as the answer to the repression of memory enforced by totalitarian regimes. None of the above is necessarily a wrong explanation but likely a reductive one.

There is possibly more to understand about silence than what would appear at first sight. In the book *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, Luisa Passerini discusses a wide range of examples from communities that dealt with the memory of their traumatic past in very different, when not completely opposite, ways, in spite of the similarity of the experiences. In analysing the different approaches of

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[15] Latse is a ritual cairn erected on the top or in the proximity of those mountains considered to be the abodes of territorial gods. Since different villages might share the worship of the same territorial god but still erect their own latse, there is no exact correspondence between the number of territorial gods in Amdo and that of latse.

[16] In the published article, I translated the Tibetan *dge bsnyen* as "vow-bound". However, I wish to thank Charles Ramble for pointing out that this translation is incorrect. "Vow-bound" is the usual translation of the Tibetan word *dam can*, which refers to the wordly protective deities that have vowed to protect Buddhism. In contrast, *dge bsnyen* refers to a lay-follower of Buddhism and is a common epithet of mountain deities.

the Roma and the Jewish communities to the tragedy of the Holocaust, the author respectively qualifies them as "defiant silence and monumental remembrance" (Passerini 2003: 242). Interestingly, the same distinction can be observed within the Tibetan community, wherein the apparent silence of the Tibetans living in the PRC is counterbalanced by the published outpouring of memoirs and historical works in the Tibetan diaspora, both autobiographical and academically compiled. Apart from the relaxation during the 1980s and 1990s, the severe restrictions imposed on Tibetan intellectual life in the PRC, of course, are the primary reason behind the silence. Nevertheless, this silence was not homogenous but had different motivations and covered a variety of memories. The next section proposes a nuanced understanding of different forms of silence (Seljamaa and Siim 2016) performed among Tibetan communities in the PRC while exploring their significance in the context of the official policies of remembering and forgetting.

4.2.3 Trauma, amnesia and postmemory among Tibetan communities in the PRC

The memories of the Maoist era among Tibetans living in the PRC are still a largely unexplored topic in academic research. A notable exception is the work of Charlene Makley (2005; 2007), who carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Amdo in the 1990s, a period of relative political relaxation that allowed Tibetan informants to open up and share memories while being less concerned about the possible repercussions on their safety. The recent publication (2020) of the book "*Conflicting Memories: Tibetan History Under Mao Retold*" edited by Robert Barnett, Benno Weiner, and Françoise Robin is a milestone in the direction of a deeper and pluralised understanding of the many dimensions of Tibetan memories. Based on case studies conducted across the Tibetan Plateau, the authors analyse a variety of sources, i.e., literary works, films, as well as oral history interviews and primary documents concerning that period. One common theme in the volume is the time gap, which almost amounts to a temporal disconnection between the historical events and the much later elaboration of their memory in one form or the other. Each chapter in its specificity contributes to showing how in spite of the severe constraints imposed on them, Tibetan voices found a way of using Tibetan cultural resources to process the human, cultural, and material traumas of the Maoist years. The result is a heterogeneous picture that tackles the monologic narration of official PRC historiography by shedding light on the complexity of memory-making practices among Tibetans.

The experience of almost three decades of the Maoist regime (1949–1976) is stored in a myriad of fragmented painful memories found everywhere across the country, in urban as well as in rural contexts. In spite of this shared dimension, so far different ethnic backgrounds have determined different degrees of affordability to remembering. The demarking line not to be trespassed is drawn

between the Han majority and the rest of the population made up of ethnic minorities.[17]

Though precarious and continuously scrutinised by censorship, the space for expressing Han memories has long existed and has been further enlarged by new possibilities offered by the online sharing of materials and discussions. The organised efforts to come to the public in official and unofficial venues were initially fuelled by a mixture of regret and nostalgia. Starting with the collection of personal memories in the 1990s, groups of veterans and participants in the political movements of the Mao era started to publish their memoirs in unofficial journals. Since the 2000s family histories, independent documentaries, as well as artistic and literary works have exposed the private dimension of memory by projecting it into the public sphere in what Sebastian Veg (2019) literally translates as the "space of the people" (Ch. *minjian*).

In contrast, the ethnic others face a radically different situation wherein a much higher degree of state alert has prevented the circulation of any counter-memory that challenges official historiography. Even visualising the violence of the Maoist years beyond the aesthetics of the propaganda posters has been largely impossible until recently. The only photographic documentation of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet became available to the international audience thanks to the publication of Tsering Woeser's book *Forbidden Memory*, first published in Chinese in Taiwan in 2006 and later in English in 2020. Without altogether renouncing the recollection of the past, ethnic minorities such as Tibetans had to seek options to voice personal memories while ensuring their safety. As Robert Barnett argues, this could be done only by de-centring the role of official ideologies and political campaigns and re-centring the narrative around minor characters and events, thus avoiding any direct confrontation with the master historical narrative of the state (Barnett 2020: 31). During my fieldwork in Amdo, indeed, after initial reticence, my interlocutors would share with me personal memories, narrated from the local experience of national political movements. The first was often presented as a consequence of the latter, which in turn were never questioned or criticised but were taken for granted and remained in the background.

Below I propose a brief discussion of two concepts that have been used to describe Tibetan memory-making practices in the PRC: amnesia and postmemory.

Following the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, Fang Lizhi coined the expression "generational break" (*duandai*) to indicate one of the "techniques of amnesia" implemented by the Party to prevent the cross-generational transmission and sharing of memories. In her book *People's Republic of Amnesia*, Louisa Lim further elaborated on the concept, speaking about "state-engineered amnesia". Yet, amnesia is not only imposed on people by the regime; it can also be a choice.

[17] Han is itself not a homogenous group of people, but one that was created as much as the other categories that were implemented for the classification of the 55 ethnic minorities. See Mullaney, Thomas, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros and Eric Vanden Bussche (eds.) 2012, especially part III on "The Problem of Han Formation".

Omissions and selective memories in fact characterise both official and individual retelling of the past, with the purpose of achieving acceptable memories.

In the case of individual memories, acceptability is connected to the need to ensure social respectability in the present. Discussing the role of those Tibetans who actively took part in the destruction activities of the Cultural Revolution in Gyalthang, Daša Mortensen notices how they conveniently disguised such memories under the collective "trope of victimhood" (Mortensen 2020: 291) in compliance with the state narrative. In this way, individual responsibility became blurred into the image of the "Ten Years of Big Disaster", i.e. the Cultural Revolution, thus actively reinforcing the amnesia of any specific act of violence. By avoiding the identification of clear responsibilities and accountability for the past, Tibetans in Gyalthang are partaking in the reconstruction of the town of Shangrila while instances of individual and family memory still haunt the survivors.

Although in my fieldwork I did not come across anyone who admitted to having actively participated in violent action during the Cultural Revolution, I did come across other expressions of amnesia or selective memory. For example, the narration about Alak Zongkar in the fourth article omits that he got married and had children during the Cultural Revolution. The conch shell that was lost during the Cultural Revolution becomes a material epitome that stands for these unspoken painful memories.

Postmemory is another relevant concept for understanding the complexity of the political context within which Tibetan memories take shape and circulate.

According to the definition given by Marianne Hirsch, who introduced it, "'postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to the experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* (emphasis added) to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2012: 5). Françoise Robin identifies literature and fictional writing in Amdo as the only available venue to express the memory of 1958 and the Cultural Revolution. Because the authors of such works did not personally experience those years, as they belong to a younger generation, she qualifies them as postmemory. Her analysis of the emergence of postmemory works in Amdo is not limited to the political circumstances within the PRC, but also the low education level of many survivors which prevented them from feeling entitled to use writing to bear testimony to what they had witnessed. Therefore, she observes that "testimonial practices are turned out of necessity into postmemorial practices" (Robin 2020: 419). However, this is a partial picture of the memory landscape of Amdo. Beyond fictional works, many efforts to collect the memories of survivors through oral history interviews have been carried out at the grassroots level and circulated (see section 3.1.2). Their explicit and politically sensitive content made official publication impossible. Nevertheless, between 2010–2018, when I was regularly visiting Amdo, I came across many of these projects that were unofficially published. Among them, one was particularly memorable, as it was informally shared with me in a Word file by my friend

whom an anonymous author had asked to revise the Tibetan spelling. The book was apparently never published, but I came to know that this has been the fate of many other such projects. The very real fear of the possible repercussions of expressing counter-memories that question the national historical narrative is a primary concern that forces people into silence. However, bringing a message of hope for the future, Luisa Passerini reminds us that "silence can nourish a story and establish a communication to be patiently saved in periods of darkness, until it is able to come to light in a new and enriched form" (Passerini 2003: 238). In the meantime, an object for daily use, a proverb, a passing reference in a conversation, or a joke can be the shared reference to the unspoken.

4.3 Vernacular religion and vernacularity

The use of vernacular as a specific attribute of religion was introduced by Leonard Primiano (1995) in his article "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife". The concept of 'vernacular' proposes a new approach that moves beyond the traditional divide between institutional and folk religions. In particular, Leonard Primiano emphasises the negative effect that such a divide has had on the study of the so-called 'folk religion'. In his words: "folklorists have followed the two-tiered model employed by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and religious studies scholars which creates distinct categories separating the 'folk' or 'popular' religion of the faithful from 'official' or institutional religion administered by hierarchical elites through revealed or inspired oral and written texts. This practice both residualizes the religious lives of believers and at the same time reifies the authenticity of religious institutions as the exemplar of human religiosity" (Primiano 1995: 39). In contrast, 'vernacular' suggests embracing the experiential dimensions of religion as it is lived by individuals in their verbal and non-verbal expressions of belief, including narratives, statements of belief, behaviour patterns, rituals, and performances. As the author indicates in the title, this definition has important methodological implications. The epistemic value of vernacularity is in fact not confined to religion but is reflected in the multiple modalities of knowledge that express a plural approach to the world. The case studies in the two coedited volumes by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life. Expressions of Belief* (2012) and *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Belief* (2022) demonstrate the ductile and yet pertinent applicability of the concept of vernacularity across different cultural and religious contexts.

In the four articles of the thesis, vernacular religion is the ensemble of cultural resources, including beliefs, narratives, and rituals, that Tibetan individuals and communities creatively draw upon to express their contemporary identity in dialogue with the past.

This section is divided into four parts. The first provides an overview of Tibetan vernacular religion and worldview. The second offers a brief introduction to the evolution of the meaning of "folk religion" in the PRC. The third and fourth

parts respectively elaborate on the concept of the supernatural as a way to articulate ethnic and religious otherness, and on rituals as the concrete actions undertaken to cope with it.

4.3.1 Tibetan vernacular religion and worldview

While Tibetan Buddhism is primarily known in the West for the sophistication of its philosophical system and for the meditation techniques taught by erudite monks, the lived experience of religion for most Tibetans mainly revolves around the wish to ensure "world maintenance" (Kapstein 2013: 37–38). The latter translates into keeping balance in a network of relations with human and nonhuman beings in order to carry on daily activities as well as to deal with extraordinary life circumstances.

'Nonhuman' encompasses the many classes of Tibetan beings that otherwise can be approximately called gods (*lha*) and demons (*srin*). However, in contrast to the inherent connotations of good and bad that are ascribed to these categories in other cultural contexts, in the Tibetan milieu any nonhuman agent can display both benevolent and malevolent behaviours towards the individual. The balance between humans and these beings is in fact never secured but needs to be constantly addressed through appropriate offerings and rituals. This important task lies at the core of the activities of religious specialists both in Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon religion. The latter is an umbrella term that refers to three different phenomena. Firstly, Bon is used to describe the non-systematic complex of beliefs and practices that existed in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism from India and its spreading on the plateau from the eighth century onwards. Secondly, in its post-tenth century reformed version, Yungdrung ('Eternal') Bon is today an organised religion that closely resembles other schools in Tibetan Buddhism. Thirdly, Bon is often invoked to explain the origin of certain elements in Tibetan 'folk religion' the source of which is considered indigenous Tibetan or otherwise difficult to identify.

The early classical work of Réne de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and the Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, published in 1956, offers a detailed description of the physical characteristics of various classes of protector being, their taxonomy, and the ways of worshipping them. In spite of their originally violent and aggressive nature, their conversion to Buddhism or Bon put them under the oath of defending and propagating the teachings.

One widespread system of classification is known as *lha srin sde brgyad* (the eight classes of gods and demons). The written descriptions of *lha srin sde brgyad* vary across time and by author; therefore, each category listed under this label is not bounded but rather permeable (Steinmann 2003). When turning to different expressions of vernacular religion, including rituals and oral narratives, the variation encountered is even deeper. While Charles Ramble (1996) argues that a comprehensive classification is impossible, his study shows that focusing on the role and function of a specific spirit in relation to a community can be a more rewarding task. In spite of this high level of variation, it is worth mentioning some

of the main groups of gods and demons that feature in the narratives that are the topic of the four articles in the thesis. Relatively stable groups among the eight subcategories are: *lha* (upper gods), *klu* (naga spirits dwelling in water), *gnyan* (spirits usually dwelling in trees), *btsan* (spirits usually dwelling in rocks), *sa bdag* and *gzhi bdag* (owners of the ground), *sri* (vampires), *rgyal po* (angry spirits).

Despite rituals that address "gods and demons" being so pervasive in the Tibetan lived experience of religion, they also assume a highly local character that Charles Ramble defines as 'pagan'. In his words, "whatever its shortcomings, 'pagan' at least expresses the essentially local character of these cults (the Latin *pagus* could be very acceptably rendered by the Tibetan word *yul*), and also suggests an ethos that is at odds with the tenets of high religion, whether Buddhism or Bon" (Ramble 1998: 124). In this sense, 'pagan' ties the manifold ritual expressions of Tibetan vernacular religion to specific locations while also acknowledging their adherence to a shared worldview that goes beyond the Buddhism–Bon divide.

Worldview is a problematic term, both vague and ambitious in its aspiration to grasp a potentially unlimited array of different perspectives, items, beliefs, and behaviours synthetised into a single entity. Linda Dégh described worldview as the "sum total of subjective interpretations of perceived and experienced reality of individuals. … It contains beliefs, opinions, philosophies, conducts, behavioral patterns, social relationships and practices of humans, *related both to life on this earth and beyond in the supernatural realm*. [emphasis added] Worldview, then, permeates all cultural performances, including folklore. Narratives, in particular, are loaded with worldview expressions: they reveal inherited communal and personal views of human conduct – this is their generic goal" (Dégh 1994: 247). Following up on Linda Dégh's plea for the need for worldview to receive more attention, Alan Dundes further distinguished between one older and one more recent understanding and implementation of the term. According to him, "the older notion of worldview tended to consider the term synonymous with cosmology. Worldview in that sense meant man's view of man's place in the world, in the cosmos. … A more modern notion of worldview tends to be more cognitive and structural. It refers to the way in which people perceive the world through native categories and unstated premises or axioms" (Dundes 1995: 230).

More recently, following the work of Ninian Smart, André Droogers has revived the concept of worldview with specific reference to the study of religion. In his definition, worldview is an inclusive concept that points to "the variety of answers given, in religions, secular worldviews, ideologies and spiritualities" (2014: 23). Therefore, in this formulation, worldview moves beyond the religious-secular divide, which further reverberates with Ülo Valk's operative definition of vernacular knowledge "to overcome the dichotomy between religious and non-religious meaning-making" (2022: 6). Indeed, the conceptual implications of worldview reach far beyond a narrow definition of religion. Pointing to the limits of religion studies in stretching the discipline into the analysis of nonreligious worldviews, Ann Taves proposes to introduce worldview

studies as a super-category that encompasses both religious and nonreligious worldviews (Taves 2019). Along the same line, in a recent article advocating the establishment of worldview studies from the standpoint of the philosophy of religion, Mikael Stenmark further argued that "a worldview contains those parts of our ontology, epistemology, and ethics that are of central importance for how we understand our lives and live them. A worldview is life orienting: it expresses a particular way of living in the world" (2022: 565).

Based on the above definitions, worldview can be understood as a shared horizon of signification that allows individual actions to be intelligible to others and shareable in a group. In this sense, the study of vernacular religion in any setting can hardly be disentangled from a contextual understanding of worldview. A real-world example better illustrates this point. In the fourth article of the thesis, the ritual burying of precious metals and stones in specific spots of the landscape aims to appease the relationship between the villagers and the resident deities. While the actions involved in the process are an expression of Tibetan vernacular religion, they are not simply the enactment of a belief but are inscribed in a broader Tibetan worldview that considers the exchanges of substances between human, nonhuman, and the environment fundamental to regulate their coexistence. The same worldview is reflected in Tibetan reactions to contemporary mining activities carried out in Tibetan areas and supports similar ritual undertakings.

4.3.2 "Folk" religion in the PRC

The modernist scientific discourse that permeates all aspects of social and economic life in China, what Prasenjit Duara labels "scientism" (Duara 1995: 86), is termed by the CPC "scientific socialism" (Ch. *kexue shehui zhuyi*). As Ülo Valk poignantly argues with regard to the Soviet Union, "spreading scientific knowledge was not a goal in itself but a measure to establish the hegemony of communist doctrines. Propagating sciences provided rhetorical devices to promote the totalitarian discourse of the all-powerful state" (Valk 2010: 855). Similarly, in the PRC context, Tibetan vernacular knowledge is identified as both the cause and the result of "backward thinking" (Ch. *luohou sixiang*), which in turn is blamed for the "backwardness of the social system" (Ch. *shehui zhidu luohou*) and poverty (Ch. *pingqiong*). For example, the desertification of the grasslands in Amdo is attributed to the Tibetan pastoralists' little scientifically-informed knowledge about land management which allegedly caused the overgrazing of the rangelands (Ptáčková 2020).[18] This same scientific discourse is applied even more vehemently to the role of religion in Tibetan society. While maintaining a

[18] Ironically, as Jarmila Ptáčková argues, "most aspects of grassland degradation identified by researchers are strongly influenced by governmental policies. … Evidence thus suggests that it is not necessarily Tibetan pastoralism that has been the main culprit for changes in the ecosystem. More probably, the policies implemented by the central government significantly contributed to the disturbances and changes in the frail symbiotic existence of pastoralists in the rangelands" (2020: 31-33).

distinction between "institutional" and "folk" religion, it is especially critical of the latter.

The last decade of Xi Jinping's administration has witnessed an escalation of control and restriction on religious activities at central and local levels alongside the state's open agenda to task religious institutions to spread patriotic education and "Sinifying" their teachings (Chang 2018). The present situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) shows how these policies particularly hit the Uyghur and Tibetan minorities as well as the Christian communities nationwide. While this turn in religious policy has targeted institutional religions that are officially recognised in the constitution, e.g., Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism, non-institutional local religious phenomena collectively addressed as 'folk' or 'popular' religion (Ch. *minjian zongjiao*) fall into an even more vulnerable grey area. Earlier seen as feudal superstition (Ch. *fengjian mixin*) to be eradicated, while more recently treated as traditional customs (Ch. *chuantong xisu*) and cultural heritage (*wenhua yichan*) to be preserved, village rites, fortune telling, geomancy, physiognomy, and a long list of other "folk" practices have met with a variety of reactions from the state, ranging from suppression and harassment during the Cultural Revolution to open encouragement and co-optation (McCarthy 2009; Swancutt 2020). The growing interest in cultural heritage across the country has set 'folk religion' on a gradual yet seemingly irreversible trajectory of being reframed as 'folk culture' (*minjian wenhua*) (Zhou 2017; You 2020).

4.3.3 The supernatural and Otherness

The ontological turn has questioned the epistemological foundations of anthropology, having a deep influence in other ethnography-based disciplines such as folkloristics. The departure point of the turn consists, quite literally, in turning away from the Euro-American ethnocentric position that assumes the divide between nature and culture. To put it in simple words – that by no means bear simple consequences – scholars who embrace the ontological turn argue that people do not experience the world through different cultural lenses but actually *live in* different worlds. Taking a further step, we have been made aware that the criteria that define personhood should be expanded to become potentially inclusive of any form of life that "relates to humans (and to each other) in a particular way" (Valk and Sävborg 2018: 15) while dispossessing humans of the supremacy granted to them in the Judeo-Christian cosmology. As a result, 'non-human' and 'other-than-human' have emerged as overarching categories that comprise animals, plants, and spirits whose agency is believed to be the expression of the same human interiority, in spite of their exhibited different physicalities (Descola 2013). Though still uncertain in application, the implications of the ontological turn promise to be far-reaching. Following the work of Viveiros De Castro (1998) on the indigenous cosmologies in the Amazon, ontological perspectivism has become the way to go for approaching the study of communities whose cosmologies appear different to the point of being untranslatable in

the language available to conventional ethnographic writing. In this regard, in the book *Animism Beyond the Soul: Ontology, Reflexivity, and the Making of Anthropological Knowledge* (2018), edited by Katherine Swancutt and Mireille Mazard, what the editors call the "reflexive feed-back loop" – the mutual shaping and nurturing of theoretical perspectives between the outsider anthropologist and the native thinkers – represents an original exploration into the critical applicability of the ontological turn. In their words: "at its best, anthropology is open to changing its theoretical models and its ethnographic language. In this spirit of openness, native thinkers and native practices can enrich our theoretical models of animism" (Swancutt and Mazard 2018: 22)

Few would disagree with the initial call of the ontological turn that urges scholars to question the validity of their ethnocentric coordinates before getting close to other cosmologies. However, the full recognition of the coexistence of plural ontologies that have equal validity is a discovery as fascinating as disorienting. How can we experience, appreciate, and describe a different ontology if we are outsiders to it? Is it possible at all? For the time being, these remain open questions that, based not only on academic training but also on individual sensitivity and intellectual honesty, provide very different answers.

The brief discussion above is necessary to explain my use of 'supernatural' in the articles of my thesis as an analytical category that seems to have become superfluous if not difficult to justify in the light of the ontological turn (Valk and Sävborg 2018). In the introduction to the edited volume *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg propose a nuanced approach to the supernatural as a category that is both etically and emically meaningful, thus arguing for an ontology of the supernatural. Having cited the critical voices against their position, the two scholars conclude that "as a consistent but boundless realm, the supernatural appears in oral and literary traditions throughout all ages and in all societies, and it can be studied as a more or less distinct field" (Valk and Sävborg 2018: 17).

Along the same lines, the concept of 'supernatural' retains its utility not only to identify the various classes of spirit, god, and demon that populate the Tibetan landscape but also to understand how Tibetans in Amdo translate the ethnic, religious, and linguistic others into a more radically extraneous presence. The two types of supernatural share the condition of being evoked when relevant to the present, but otherwise they lie beyond the immediate temporal and spatial coordinates of daily routine. For this reason, the supernatural is an apt way to describe the perception and the position of otherness without denying its ontological existence. Different forms of otherness that are rooted in the past find their expression both in specific figures, as is the case of the Mongol general in the first article, and in a generic category, as is the case of the Hui soldiers in the fourth article. In elaborating these historical encounters, Tibetan perceptions of otherness merge into the existing worldview of "gods and deities". Therefore, quite paradoxically, by alienating the others into the supernatural, Tibetans simultaneously make them a familiar presence in their own cosmology.

4.3.4 Ritual performances and ritual addressivity

Rituals have been studied across different cultural contexts and traditions from a variety of theoretical perspectives and analytical angles with an exclusive or combined focus on their structural, functional, symbolic, performative, and linguistic aspects. With rituals being so pervasive in Tibetan societies, it might appear surprising that scholars in Tibetan Studies have shown little interest in elaborating a theorisation of rituals, in spite of the plethora of approaches available to them. However, as José Ignacio Cabezón (2010) noted, while avoiding grand theoretical narratives, they have contributed to shaping a metatheoretical narrative that expresses closeness, or at least openness, to Tibetan indigenous accounts. This approach indeed has been prevalent and productive in both the textual and ethnographic documentation of Tibetan rituals. The detailed studies of specific Tibetan rituals based on primary sources and authored by Daniel Berounský (2016, 2019, 2020, 2023), Samten Karmay (1987, 1991, 1995), and Charles Ramble (2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2019), to mention but a few of their published works, provide the vivid impression of a self-contained world with its own rules and processes of signification that would hardly fit into a single theory of rituals.

Three of the articles in the thesis include contemporary rituals that are performed to seek a solution to a crisis in the relationship between human and supernatural beings. This task is undertaken by ritual specialists whose knowledge draws on a variety of sources, ranging from the teachings received in the institutional context of monasteries to empirically acquired expertise. While the apparently rigid communication setting of a ritual performance is organised around reiterated patterns of formulaic and writing-based speech, rituals remain acts of communication that take place in an interactive dimension of exchange with one or more interlocutors, both supernatural in the form of deities, demons and other beings to which the ritual specialist addresses or aims his words and actions, and in human form, i.e. the sponsor or the entire community present at the ritual. The main concern of any ritual, constituting its primary aim, is efficacy: rituals should work and produce the effect they promise. Perception of ritual efficacy is primarily based on the ritual specialist's competent management of words that accompany the ritual performance and make the ritual effective. In the Tibetan villages I visited in Amdo, the ritual manual owned by each ritual specialist was an inherited or hand-copied book that often contained many discrepancies that were often explained not with claims on the authenticity of one's own and the deviation of others' manuals, but with an equal recognition of the validity of any written text. From an emic perspective, authority is ascribed to the text per se together with the competence displayed by the ritual specialist in using it. In contrast, when uninitiated readers are in direct contact with Tibetan ritual manuals, the text itself turns into a harmful device: words suddenly become not only inefficacious but also uncontrollable, due to the lack of authority of the accidental reader. For this reason, in the course of a documentation project carried for the British Library aimed at digitising Tibetan Buddhist ritual manuscripts, I

was occasionally prevented from accessing some of the texts, while in other cases the owner allowed the digitisation but requested restricted access.

The ritual interventions described or referred to in the articles address supernatural beings, i.e., the "owners of the ground" (Tib. sadak, *sa bdag*) and local protector gods (Tib. yulha, *yul lha*) as well as spirits reborn after a human existence who have turned into protectors or alternatively harmful ghosts, in terms of the relationship they have with the human community. The purpose of the ritual is to establish, maintain, or subvert such a relationship. In the third article the relationship with the local protector gods is maintained through the reconstruction of a ritual cairn (Tib. latse, *la rtse*), followed by the recitation of an auspicious text (Tib. sangcho, *bsang mchod*) accompanying the offering of barley, juniper fumigation, alcohol, and yoghurt. The fourth article introduces a description of the ritual burial of precious substances in the soil as a way to replenish the gold that had been plundered a century earlier. While this action appeases the Tibetan sadak, there is no possible intervention against the lingering presence of Muslim ghosts that were responsible for the depredation. This last case shows the limits of rituals in incorporating outside human and supernatural beings within the Tibetan worldview. Failing rituals also speak to the difficult elaboration of historical trauma, a recurrent topic emerging from the haunting recent past of China under the PRC's regime. This period has deeply affected so-called ethnic minorities, such as in Erik Mueggler's ethnography exploring the Lolopo's struggle "to reshape past and present time in a place where ordering time was the central project and exclusive prerogative of the state" (Mueggler, 2001: 4). More recently, the past of the Mao era remains a heavy burden for the Han majority. In her ethnography on mediumship in Hunan, Emily Ng writes that: "on the smaller scale of time, the benevolent and the corrupt, the godly and the ghostly, have become dangerously blurred after Chairman Mao's death in the contemporary cosmology. On a lengthier scale, gods have been corruptible and ghosts relatable far beyond the modern political era" (Ng 2020: 6–7). For Tibetans as for other citizens in contemporary China, rituals provide limited help in dealing with painful memories that affect the perception of the past as much as they prevent a serene engagement with the present.

5. Sources and methodology of the research

The data presented and analysed in the articles were collected between 2010 and 2018. During this time, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the region of Amdo with both agricultural and pastoralist Tibetan communities. While I initially planned to record place-specific personal memories and experiences exclusively related to the Maoist years, such a narrow approach soon appeared unfeasible due to the political sensitiveness of the topic. I have restructured my research accordingly and selected different episodes of the past as they were narrated to me by different narrators and in different locations in the region, with a broader focus on the southeastern part of Amdo. In this process, the timeframe also dramatically shifted to encompass the pre-communist times. The oral and written data selected for the four articles reflect such a temporal stretch and provide a better understanding of what is historically meaningful to people: from the Mongol occupation in the thirteenth century to the soldiers led by the Muslim warlord in the early twentieth century, from the Tibetan resistance to the Red Army to the Cultural Revolution in the mid-twentieth century.

5.1 Sources

5.1.1 Oral interviews

The four articles that constitute the thesis make use of oral interviews that I personally conducted with fourteen interlocutors in southeastern Amdo. More precisely, the interviews took place during multiple fieldwork trips in Hainan and Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, and Hualong Hui Autonomous County in Haidong City between 2010 and 2018. During these years I interviewed the same people more than once. The total time of recorded interviews is about 30 hours, of which about 10 hours were used as data for the thesis. The content mainly revolves around personal experiences, family and community history as well as supernatural encounters and ritual practices. The specific locations and times of the interviews are reported in the Appendix II. In order to protect the privacy and safety of the interviewees, their names are pseudonymized.

The people who kindly participated and contributed their stories are all male and identify themselves as Tibetan. At the time of the interviews, they were all above the age of 60. Since most of them asked me to address them as grandpa (Tib. *a nye*) or uncle (Tib. *a ku*), I struggle to call them informants or interlocutors, as the professional convention would require. Two of them were monks who were forced to give up monastic life during the Cultural Revolution but had nevertheless retained a deep knowledge of Buddhist scriptures. Eight of them were well respected lay community elders. Four of them were ritual practitioners (Tib. *ngakpa*) that operated outside of monastic institutions. With the exception of the two monks, all the others were not or very limitedly literate in Tibetan or Chinese

and relied on their incredible memory to recount specific details of the stories they knew or their biographic experiences.

In the course of recording interviews, the narration often started off *in media res* while the broader historical and political background was taken for granted. The cultural referents were equally not explained as the storytellers drew upon a background of shared knowledge that made the stories immediately communicable and understandable to community insiders. In order to understand the references that remained obscure to me, I consulted a variety of published materials that are presented in the next section.

5.1.2 Relevant published sources

The thesis includes the analysis and translation of selected sections from three sets of published works that are listed in the Appendix III.

The first group of publications is represented by single-authored and collective articles and books in Tibetan language on the topic of local history. The authors usually follow a similar arrangement of the contents. The first part starts off with a broad historical overview of the entire Tibetan Plateau from the raise of the Tibetan empire, through the rule of Chinese, Mongol and Manchu dynasties up until the foundation of the PRC. The second part narrows the spatial focus down to the modern and contemporary history of the specific place that is the topic of the book. Here we find the most interesting details concerning the history of the tsowa (tribes) and the dewa (villages) as well as the portraits of leaders and religious figures of local significance. An additional section in these publications is devoted to the history of the local monasteries, customs, protector deities, and festivals.

The second group is represented by officially published gazetteers (Ch. *difangzhi*) and compendiums of "materials for culture and history" (Ch. *wenshi ziliao*) in Chinese language.

Contemporary gazetteers present some common characteristics: restriction to one specific area, continuity (regular updating), comprehensiveness (describing geography, history, administration, military, households, tax system, local products, customs and habits, religion, eminent persons and their writings, and so on).

The compendiums of "materials for culture and history" are collections of documents with a specific temporal focus (Republican China) and a relatively narrow geographic one (from a county to an entire province). They have been published throughout China since 1960, with the exception of twelve-year gap during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1978). They are an original source because they display testimonies from witnesses who played a (big and, more often, small) role during the period that spanned from the end of the empire in 1898 to the foundation of the PRC in 1949. These materials contain a wealth of information, yet they reflect the deep influence of the political context in which they were written.

The third group is represented by published folklore collections on different topics, i.e., folk songs, customs, proverbs, placenames and placelore, and legends. In spite of being heavily edited and often not reporting neither the specific place and time of recording nor the author, these materials are a precious source of information.

5.2 Methodology

In collecting and using the data from oral interviews and fieldwork observations, I strictly followed the ethical guidelines stated in the "Position Statement on Research with Human Subjects"[19], published by the American Folklore Society in 2011 and in the "AAA Statement on Ethics. Principles of Professional Responsibility"[20], published by the American Anthropological Association in 1998. In the following sections I provide more details on my positionality, methods of collecting data through fieldwork and interviews as well as analysing data.

5.2.1 Researcher's positionality

Being a foreign woman researcher exploring the topics of communist and post-communist memories and local histories among Tibetan communities in the PRC was a challenging condition. At first, my interlocutors were rather reticent due to my gender and young age. I discussed the limits and potentials of my position in the field in a short online essay titled "A Narrator-Centered Approach to History: Oral Sources in Amdo (Qinghai, PRC)". In it, I described how "the role of a highly educated foreign researcher often clashed with my status of being a young woman, which irremediably didn't align with the local notion of authority, based on gender (male) and age (senior). In my experience, the mediation of entrusted figures in the community, i.e., elders, monks, and school teachers, often has been fundamental in order to clarify and make my questions more culturally pertinent, to overcome my interviewees' uncertainties about the sincerity of their answers and, last but not least, to take me more seriously" (Punzi 2016).

Once I became more aware of these dynamics, I developed better communication strategies with my interlocutors. Asking fewer questions, becoming a better listener observing and being ready to grasp inferential meanings, especially when interviewing elder respected members of the community, dramatically improved our interaction. Of course, some difficulties remained. Upon my questions and attempts to assess the accuracy of my understanding, some people crafted more systematic and complete stories that targeted me as a specific audience and were quite different from those that were more informally shared within the community. In the thesis my interpretation of the recorded interviews

[19] https://americanfolkloresociety.org/our-work/position-statement-human-subjects/ Last access: 31 January 2024

[20] https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/ Last access: 31 January 2024

is combined with fieldwork observations. Of course, I am aware that my analysis does not necessarily reflect the local worldview and might only partially account for it.

5.2.2 Fieldwork in preparation and practice

The preparation of my ethnographic fieldwork trips and the analysis of the data collected through interviews and participant observations were based on the indications provided in the 5th edition of the book *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (2011) by Harvey Russell Bernard and in the 25th edition of the book *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (2010), edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus.

Between 2010 and 2015 I was based in Beijing, a circumstance which positively impacted the preparation of my fieldwork for three reasons. First, being affiliated to a Chinese university (Minzu University of China) conveniently entitled me to obtain research permits to conduct fieldwork in Tibetan areas – which would otherwise require a complicate bureaucratic process that could easily end up to be unsuccessful for a foreign applicant. Second, travelling to Amdo from Beijing was economically much more affordable to me than travelling internationally from Europe. Therefore, I could easily access the field and make multiple follow-up fieldwork trips, often without planning too long in advance. Third, the China National Library in Beijing provided me with all the resources that I needed to consult in terms of both Chinese and international academic publications. Following my resettling in Europe and the enrolment in the PhD program at the University of Tartu in 2017, the opportunities to visit Amdo have become fewer and my stays shorter. Therefore, while I already had assembled a relatively large corpus of data from interviews and fieldwork collected before the start of the PhD, I used and analysed it according to the research questions formulated in the thesis.

Before starting fieldwork, I prepared a preliminary list of topics and general questions to ask during the interviews. Only after analysing the data collected during my first fieldwork trip on the basis of this preliminary work, I elaborated more specific questions that I asked during the follow-up trips. My Tibetan classmates and professors at Minzu University of China provided me with invaluable help to search for contacts and arrange meetings with people living in the hometowns. Accordingly, I made a plan of the main counties and villages to visit in Amdo. While in Beijing I also took classes in colloquial Amdo Tibetan in order to improve my language skills in preparation for fieldwork. From a logistic and technical point of view, I also familiarized myself with using a professional audio recorder and camera. Before each departure for the field, I also purchased small gifts for my hosts and interviewees.

Once in the field, some of the topics of my research were perceived as politically sensitive by my interlocutors. The surveillance from the ever-watching state and the fear of possible negative consequences on the individual – being reported to the police and interrogated – initially prevented to establish a relationship of

trust with me, a foreigner that could be easily be suspected to be a spy, a missionary, or a journalist.[21] Other scholars with long-term fieldwork experience in China (Yeh 2006; Turner 2014; Joniak-Lüthi 2016) have pointed out how the foreign researcher eventually starts to practice a certain degree of self-censorship on sensitive topics in order to protect the safety of her interlocutors. In response to this circumstance, which is not unique to China but part of the experience of conducting fieldwork under any authoritarian regime – I gave absolute priority to the safety of my interlocutors. For this reason, I proposed to hold meetings and conducting interviews only in private spaces, thus avoiding that we would be seen together in public. In addition, I switched off the recorder every time I was requested to do so and resorted to taking notes. Finally, all the names were pseudonymized already when making storage copies of the audio files.

Besides audio-recorded interviews, participant observation and fieldnotes constitute a substantial part of my fieldwork data. During my fieldwork I travelled primarily by public buses and occasionally by car and motorbike. In different villages in the region, I was fortunate enough to be hosted by relatives of my Tibetan classmates and professors in Beijing. Spending more days in the same household allowed me to fully immerse myself in the ethnographic context while providing me with unique insights into the daily life. When not conducting interviews, I was actively participating in collecting water, cooking, washing ritual items, teaching English to my host's children, and not the least improving my colloquial Tibetan. This arrangement also offered me the opportunity to gradually expand the network to involve more people in my research.

5.2.3 Methods of conducting interviews

For the planning, implementation, and processing of interviews I consulted the *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* (2016). Earlier, I was also inspired by the call to "empathic interview" that Sofie Strandén (2009: 3) describes "as a result of trying to understand the interviewees both emotionally and intellectually, both during the interview itself, and afterwards, during the analysis".

The primarily used methodology consisted of unstructured qualitative interviews that I conducted in Tibetan and Mandarin, occasionally with the support of Tibetan friends helping as translators. After receiving explicit consent, the interviews were audio recorded.

As stated above, all my interlocutors were elderly male. My choice to select only interlocutors above the age of 60 was determined by the necessity to interview people that would have personal memories or were at least born at the time

[21] In the PRC being a spy or a missionary are illegal occupations, while working as a journalist requires a special entry visa and working permit. Foreign scholars are often misunderstood to belong to one of the above categories, which people commonly perceive to be equally suspicious and potentially dangerous to associate with. Accordingly, the interaction with a foreigner is usually approached with great caution because of the potential risk this may entail for one's safety.

of the political and historical events that are the topic of my research. By contrast, the gender homogeneity of the interviewees did not result from my choice to exclude women but from the constrains imposed by the cultural context of Amdo Tibetan society, where hegemonic masculinity is largely prevalent. Since women shoulder all housework and childcare, they are left with very little time for chatting and even less for sitting down. As a foreign visitor I was treated as a guest by my hosts. This meant that I would have meals with the men of the house sitting on the sofa while the women were eating in the kitchen. During daytime, I would be often taking car trips to the county seat or to visiting other community members, while the women would stay home. This circumstance caused me to have little chance to conduct formal interviews with women. Nevertheless, I relied on observation data and occasional chats in the kitchen in the early morning or in the late evening when they were preparing meals, washing clothes, or attending to the livestock.

I pursued a narrator-centered approach to allow my interlocutors to freely orient themselves in the process of the interview while developing a relationship of mutual trust over time. To this end, I minimized the use of direct questions, which could have negatively affected the narration strategies chosen by my interlocutors. During the interviews I elicited the narration of stories without qualifying them as either stories or history but by referring to the name of a character or a historical event as a departure point for the free expression of the interlocutor.

The time of the interviews was determined by the availability of my interlocutors, which often entailed making more than one attempt to meet them. My interviewees' sudden absence due to a variety of reasons, i.e., departing for a checkup in the township hospital, helping a neighbor with the slaughtering of a pig, or sending off children to boarding school, forced me to rearrange the originally scheduled time. All interview sessions took place in the houses of the interlocutors, usually indoors in the winter and outdoors in the summer. The different seasonal setting of the interviews played a fundamental part in the stories that people told me. In the summer, sitting in the courtyards triggered the interlocutors to accompany their narration with ostensive gestures that pointed in the direction of mountains, counties and villages that were mentioned in the story. Tibetan toponyms were largely prevalent, while only county names were given in Chinese. In the winter, sitting near the stove offered a more intimate space for sharing personal, often unpleasant, memories.

5.2.4 Analysis of collected data

With the kind assistance of Tibetan friends in Xining and Beijing, first I listened to the recordings. Second, based on the coherence of the information, I selected a total of about 10 hours of audio interviews. Third, relevant excerpts were transcribed into Tibetan and later translated into English. While space constraints imposed the selection of a limited number of stories and events, my analysis was informed and complemented by the extended time I spent in the region and the

many informal conversations held with Tibetans of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds over the years from 2010 to 2018. In addition, I combined my analysis of the interviews with the data from the three distinct sets of published works listed in 5.1.2. The gazetteers provided a historical perspective to my data while the contemporary published Tibetan local histories contributed to enhance the "theoretical dialogue" between orally recorded information and published materials. Finally, the folklore collections, both those resulting from state-led efforts and those from Tibetan grassroot, were useful for identifying folklore motives, storylines, and customs to shed light on my own fieldwork findings.

6. Summary of the articles

6.1 Article I. "Dying Mongol and Being Reborn Tibetan": Otherness and the Integration of Foreigners in the Landscape of Amdo

Revue d'Études Tibétaines, 2017, 42, 268–288.

In this article I discuss how the historical memory of the Mongol presence in Amdo became spatialised into the Tibetan landscape. Different Mongol tribes had arrived and ruled over large portions of the area between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Relations between Mongols and Tibetans are often described in terms of the century-long linguistic and cultural assimilation of the former into the latter, who had been the majority in the region. Accordingly, people of Mongol ancestry today are often qualified as Tibetanised. The analysis of Tibetan stories related to the encounter of the two communities offers insights into the specific cultural modalities that shaped their later coexistence. While Mongols have been a constant presence in Amdo, the timeframe of the contemporary Tibetan stories concerning them is in fact rather vague. Consequently, one cannot be sure about the specific Mongol tribes and occupation periods to which they refer.

The article analyses three different stories told by three village elders in eastern Amdo to show how local Tibetan communities engaged the remote past Mongol presence by reframing it in Tibetan cultural and religious terms. Based on these stories, I analysed how the past Mongol occupation is elaborated into a belief narrative that integrates the Mongol Others by transforming them into Tibetan mountain gods after their human existence. Two important elements are shared by the three stories. The first is the narrative trope recounting the origins of the three Tibetan mountain gods, i.e. Amye Drakar punsum, as Mongol chiefs. The second is a cliché sentence that synthesises how Tibetans conceptualise the cultural otherness of the Mongols and envision their cultural assimilation. In this prophetic cliché, the red-fringed hats of Mongol men and the earrings of Mongol women are overdetermined signifiers of difference that signal cultural alterity, which is also displayed in the iconography of Amye Drakar punsum.

The post-mortem deification of foreign generals and rulers and their further inclusion in the Tibetan pantheon is a widespread act of cultural domestication and submission carried out by the local Tibetan population in Amdo. While the Mongols are portrayed as culturally different from Tibetans and inherently evil, the three stories balance this perception by recounting the conversion and assimilation of the Mongols into the Tibetan cultural sphere. In contrast, documentation shows that large scale violent exorcism rituals took place in Central Tibet to expel the Mongol armies in the seventeenth century. This difference in Tibetan cultural strategies in the approach to foreign invaders stems from the different historical and political contexts of these two Tibetan areas. While in Central Tibet a centralised institution of power could afford to confront and negotiate with the

Mongols in the seventeenth century, the politically fragmentary situation of Amdo gave rise to the premise of opting for the integration of Mongols in the Tibetan landscape, where Mongol communities, indeed, are still an enduring presence.

In addition to the Tibetan worship of Amye Drakar punsum, which bears the memory of the Mongol ancestry of the three gods, other traces of the Mongol presence in Amdo can be found in the Tibetanised toponyms in the area that are still used today. The Tibetan emic inscription of the Mongols into the landscape testifies a culturally specific articulation of the borders between the two communities through the relationship between human and non-human.

In conclusion, the article demonstrates how beliefs are powerful tools for the strategic reinterpretation of historical facts and how they can be used to revise cultural differences.

6.2 Article II. Remembering *jag pa* in Amdo: social bandits, anti-revolutionaries or folk heroes?

In *Wind Horses. Tibetan, Himalayan and Mongolian Studies* (edited by Andrea Drocco, Lucia Galli, Giacomella Orofino, Chiara Letizia and Carmen Simioli). 2019. Napoli: Unior Series Minor, 407–420.

This article traces the transformation of the Tibetan definitions and imaginations about banditry in Amdo and its role within the broader political context of China in the twentieth century. The political instability and lack of central institutions of power together with the seasonal scarcity of resources and the frequent inter-tribal fights made Tibetan banditry (*jag pa*) an endemic social phenomenon, as observed in the 1920s and 1930s by Giuseppe Tucci, Alexandra David-Neel and other European travellers and explorers alike.

While the general imaginary of bandits in China revolves around the cinematic and pop culture representations of fearless horse riding men roaming in the wild, the political and social assessment of their deeds is a different matter. In the PRC, bandit – *tufei* – is a blurred label that sticks to different categories of outlaw that in the Republican (1912–1949) and following first decade of the PRC confronted the established institutions of power, as well as common robbers who used to loot villages as a regular supplementary source of economic subsistence. According to Hobsbawm's interpretation (2001), bandits in rural societies aim to contrast with the centralisation of power because modern states' legal institutions challenge those traditional social structures and customary laws that tolerate banditry. Therefore, bandits participate in actions of political resistance primarily in the name of their own interest. Nevertheless, the ruling agency understands bandits' personal fight as a form of conscious political resistance, and thus targets them as political enemies.

While Han banditry has been little explored in academic research, even less scholarship focuses on banditry in ethnic minority communities due to the political sensitiveness of the topic. The new communist leadership in fact condemned

banditry as part of the old feudal society that had oppressed and impoverished the masses. In contrast, Tibetan oral accounts remember their bandits as heroes that resisted the People's Liberation Army. However, the picture is not so polarised. Two texts from a collection of official documents translated and published in Tibetan in the early 1950s show how the same term *jag pa* also renders the Chinese *tufei,* which qualifies the counter-revolutionary troops led by the warlord Ma Bufang fighting against the People's Liberation Army. Therefore, *jag pa* reflects two contrasting sets of meaning. On the one hand, in the official political discourse it is used as an equivalent to the Chinese term to describe common robbers and political enemies of the transition period between the Republican and the Communist regimes. On the other hand, to these negative connotations that reflect the Chinese political and historiographic discourse on banditry, Tibetans add the positive sympathetic figure of the *jag pa* that is celebrated in Tibetan ballads as the hero of the resistance in Amdo. This retrospective politicisation of banditry in Tibetan discourse only exists in oral communication and in privately published books that avoid the censorship of the official publishing market. While the political context of the contemporary PRC sets constraints on Tibetan historiography, it remains difficult to assess whether Tibetan bandits in the 1950s were as politically conscious as contemporary Tibetans claim or if this is a retrospective romantic reconstruction.

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of different sources shows that *jag pa* is an ambiguous polysemic term that embodies conflicting interpretations of the historical phenomenon of Tibetan banditry.

6.3 Article III. The Genre Intertextuality of *sgrung* and the Question of Social Authority

Asian Ethnology, 2020, 79 (2): 259–277.

In this article I apply Briggs and Bauman's intertextual approach (1992) to genres to explain the ambiguous relationship between history and story in the Tibetan context. Theories of genre produced in the West have long established a rigid taxonomic approach to literary and artistic production. Since the 1990s an increasingly performance-oriented, contextual and intertextual approach to genre theory has emerged, paving the road to a more dynamic understanding of genre. The article opens with an overview of the respective characteristics of *lo rgyus* and *sgrung*, two Tibetan genre labels approximately translatable as 'history' and 'story'. I highlight three main overlapping features that show a close relationship between the two genres: the narrative mode, the arrangement of events into a vertical linear transmission from the past to the present, and the lack of commitment to scientific-objective truth. In the light of this comparative analysis, I argue that the two genres are not clearly divided either in their conceptual formulation as genre labels or on the basis of the written and oral production they are applied to. The next section presents the attempt by two Tibetan scholars, Nor bu Dbang ldan (2012) and Klu thar (2008), to articulate a distinction between *lo rgyus* and

sgrung in academic terms. In spite of recognising the intertwining relationship between the two genres, the two scholars highlight the authority and reliability of history vis-à-vis story. Such a definition betrays the broader context of the PRC in which Tibetan scholarship is produced, which is strongly affected by the commitment to Marxist historiography and scientific truth.

In contrast to Tibetan academic definitions, I provide examples of contemporary Tibetan storytelling that can be situationally understood as historical. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork, I take the rebuilding of a ritual cairn (*la rtse*), which took place in 2014 in Zekog County in eastern Amdo, as the central event that triggered memories of the time when the earlier *la rtse* was built in 1957, before the Cultural Revolution. As the elderly participants in this ritual gathering voiced their biographic memories, they recalled personal experiences as well as good omens, tribal fights, or the invitation to local deities to change their abode. While the narration of the above was presented as the account of empirical experience, the big historical picture of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution stayed in the background, their echo being heard through the personal memories of the effects caused by the local enactment of these political movements. Yet, none of the narrators qualified their narrations as history but dismissed them as either stories, the thoughts of old men, or oral stories and tales. By not claiming the label of 'history', the individual narrators do not compete with the authority – and the control – of state-sanctioned historiography. On the contrary, the choice of the genre label 'story' strategically allows a safer and freer space to express views and memories of the past.

My analysis shows that an intertextual definition of genre better addresses the epistemological distinctiveness of the Tibetan narration of the past, in which the blurred genre distinction between 'story' and 'history' is primarily related to the source of authority. Accordingly, I conclude that Tibetan emic usages of 'history' and 'story' should be redefined as interpretative frameworks that elude a precise mutually exclusive definition and application.

6.4 Article IV. Burying gold, digging the past: remembering Ma Bufang regime in Qinghai (PRC)

In *Dealing with Disasters: Perspectives from Eco-Cosmologies*, edited by Pamela Stewart, Andrew Strathern, Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. 2021. Palgrave Macmillan, 233–254.

This article analyses the conflation of local memories and ethnic tensions arising from mining activities in Hualong Hui Autonomous County (eastern Amdo) from the standpoint of a Tibetan ritual. Under the rule of the warlord Ma Bufang (1930s–1940s), Hui Muslim soldiers conducted intense gold plundering in this area and died during a flood. Thereafter, fear of the roaming souls of the soldiers became inscribed in the local Tibetan landscape. This further links up with the present mining activities run by Han mining companies in Hualong.

In 2014 floods and hailstorms evoked the memory of the flood of almost a century before. Supernatural elements played a fundamental role in establishing this temporal connection. The unfolding of natural disasters was in fact interpreted as the revenge of the *gzhi bdag* ("owners of the land", a category of non-human beings) against Tibetans, who failed to protect the gold seams, while leaving underground the alien corpses of the Hui soldiers. The geomantic analysis performed by a ritual specialist from the local monastery attempted to address this crisis by burying gold and other precious metals, a widespread ritual practice in the Tibetan cultural milieu.

Based on a collection of original documents and secondary literature, I first provide an overview of the management of gold mining activities under the Ma family regime during the Republican period (1910s–1940s), which faced opposition from Tibetans to mines set up near sacred mountains. In the next section, I draw upon Tibetan sources and Western missionary accounts that attest to the presence of Tibetan mining activities in spite of the religious and cultural taboo that supposedly prevent them. I unpack this contradiction in the Tibetan attitude towards mining by suggesting a correlation with the practice of burying *gter ma* ("treasure"). This practice relates to the revelatory teachings in both material and immaterial form, i.e. scriptures and objects as well as dreams that are hidden and supposed to be discovered by the right person at the right time. The retrieval of *gter ma* and the mining of minerals share the process of extracting something precious from the land, which in both cases falls under the jurisdiction of the *gzhi bdag*. Moreover, based on the reciprocal exchange that regulates the coexistence of human and *gzhi bdag*, in both situations the extraction is acknowledged and compensated for.

In the second part of the article, I juxtapose the Hui-led gold plunder of the Republican period with the contemporary Han mining companies in Tibetan areas. I argue that, regardless of the time gap, Hui and Han are brought into the same image of alien authority that threatens the Tibetan land and its resources. This perception further excludes both Hui and Han from the Tibetan landscape and its human and supernatural inhabitants. This has two important implications. On the one hand, the ritual intervention of burying treasures in order to compensate for the *gzhi bdag* is not accessible to foreigners and can only be carried out by Tibetans themselves. On the other hand, the radical Otherness of the Hui soldiers makes it impossible for Tibetans to engage their ghosts ritually and send them away.

The case study analysed in the article shows how a locality-centred approach contributes to shedding light on events that are confined to the periphery of national history. In a broader perspective, it also unveils the central role of the supernatural in Tibetan cultural strategies that articulate Otherness and ethnic borders by establishing continuity between the past and the present.

7. Conclusions and perspectives

Following the arrival of Tibetan refugees in India and the formation of a Tibetan exile community in the late 1950s, there has been a flow of academic and not academic publications on the traumatic experiences of Tibetans before their departure from the PRC. Being largely based on interviews as well as on grassroot oral history projects and memoirs published in the diaspora, these publications have greatly contributed to our knowledge about the life of Tibetans in the twentieth century. By contrast, Tibetans that stayed in the PRC had very limited, if any, possibility to openly reflect on the very same experiences and to elaborate them in either oral or written forms. In addition, because of the restrictions to conduct fieldwork research and interviews with Tibetan communities in the PRC, these topics have been underexplored until recently.

Building on the existing scholarship, this thesis moves a step forward in the direction of pluralising our understanding of history-making and memory-making practices among contemporary Tibetan communities in the PRC. However, instead of assessing sources and accounts in terms of their historical accuracy, I explored what narrating voices, what concepts of history and memory, what discursive practices, and what genres are involved in different Tibetan history-labelled works. Rather than comparing different versions of history that result from the single narrating voices of either the Chinese state or the Tibetan government in exile, the four articles in the thesis empirically focused on small (hi)stories, that often the storytellers themselves dismissed as "not important" and "just the words of the elders". By choosing to engage with this material, I aimed to give significance to those memories that are marginal to major historical events but yet from the local standpoint are a fundamental part of history. In this respect, the microhistory focus allows to see beyond the state-people and the history-memory divides.

This thesis demonstrates that local history among Tibetans in Amdo cannot be understood without considering the censoring regime of the PRC. Yet, in spite of the serious challenges posed by the political context, contemporary Tibetans voice "other stories" that embody first-hand experiences of the past. While official historiography is published both in Chinese and Tibetan languages under the close scrutiny of the state, Tibetan-language written histories manage to circulate effectively as unofficial publications. Within the constraints of expressing one's view, these (hi)stories obliquely tell us about the ways Tibetans in eastern Amdo have experienced, stored and re-elaborated the past at the local level. In the complex mosaic that the individual consciously and unconsciously mobilizes and assembles into her own narrative configurations, not every piece of small (hi)story aims at openly challenging the official historical narrative produced by the Chinese state. In small (hi)stories traditional knowledge interweaves with contemporary political speeches, locally written history as well as memories crafted by the state, family traumas and officially endorsed pieces of history.

Through the four case studies presented in the articles, the thesis also demonstrates that history is declined in a continuum of written and oral genres that reflect distinct sources of authority. These multiple genres don't necessarily commit to the scientific-objective criteria that characterize the epistemological foundation of history as a discipline. Accordingly, we can see liturgical texts, oral descriptions of the landscape, and ballads as equally historically valuable pieces. Tibetan written and oral (hi)stories display overlapping formal features in terms of the use of metaphors as well as direct and indirect references to the shared knowledge of events. Both written and oral (hi)stories show that individual stylistic preferences are subordinated to certain formal features of history-related genres.

In terms of the sources of authorities sustaining Tibetan history and memory practices, many Tibetan history-related works are not officially recognized as such in the framework of Chinese historiography. Nevertheless, traditional sources of authorities, both institutional like monasteries and abbots, and non-institutional like shepherds and clan leaders regarded as knowledgeable about local history, sustain the publication and circulation of such works.

The analysis of data from oral and written Tibetan histories show that there is no univocal correspondence to be found between individual voices, genres, and authorities. Individual memories, state censorship, religious beliefs, ritual undertakings are different factors that intermingle into the shaping of specific – and to a certain extent unpredictable – pieces of historical narratives. Instead, it is more fruitful to conceptualize history and memory practices as situation-dependent.

Beliefs and rituals play an especially important role in the ways Tibetans elaborate traumatic memories of the recent past. For centuries big monastic institutions have not only transmitted the knowledge and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, but have also acted as centres for the preservation of Tibetan culture. In spite of the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution and the later implementation of restrictive policies on monastic activities, monasteries have managed to keep such double role up until nowadays. However, beliefs and rituals are not confined to monasteries but pervades the daily life of Tibetans through multiple expressions and actions that aim at establishing a communication between the human and the supernatural. The fluidity and complexity of these exchanges are part of the larger framework of Tibetan vernacular religion and worldview. Accordingly, events of the human past are readdressed into new narrative forms that include supernatural elements in the form of interlocutors to address when seeking for a crisis' diagnosis as well as a solution to it.

The vitality of Tibetan vernacular religion shows a continuity with the pre-PRC times that is often overlooked in favour or a "before" and "after" narration – the temporal point of reference being the institutionalization of the Chinese rule over Tibetans. My findings concur with what Lama Jabb, a Tibetan scholar native to Amdo, wrote with regard to his research on contemporary Tibetan literature: "a nation may desire a state but it can still be a nation without a sovereign political power of its own. Many Tibetans aspire for a state of their own but their nation

is not defined by it. On the contrary, … Tibetan national identity flourishes in spite of the absence of a centralized state" (Jabb 2015).

Tibetan emic perspectives about history and history telling reveal a culturally specific understanding of time and truthfulness that is particularly valuable to nurture a cross-cultural theorization of history and memory practices. As I wrote in the third article, "the strict application of a distinction between fiction and non-fiction is a culturally constructed and not natural one. Thus, it should be employed with great caution in different cultural contexts wherein history is primarily expressed in a narrative format and the notion of historical truth does not necessarily imply that the reported events are verifiable according to a scientific-objective assessment of documentary evidence." (Punzi 2020: 263).

Based on the example of Tibetan communities in eastern Amdo, future research should be oriented towards: seeking for the resilience of Tibetans in strategically exploiting their marginal position in the PRC instead of reproducing victimizing narratives; going beyond the state-grassroot divide in approaching politically sensitive topics concerning Tibetans and ethnic minorities in general in the PRC, thus seeking for identifying the diversity of cultural expressions within the grassroot level. More broadly, future research should problematize homogenous representations of traumatic memories, while recognising the central role of individual creativity in drawing upon cultural resources to elaborate coping strategies.

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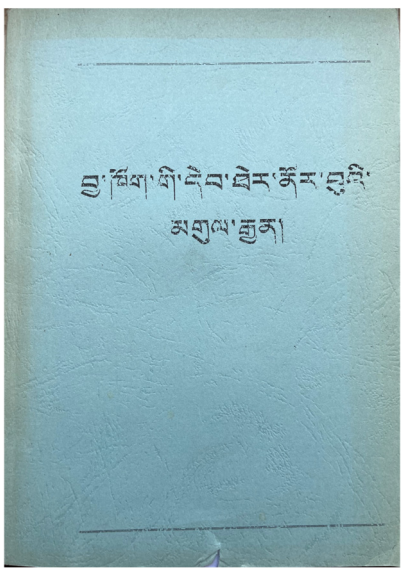
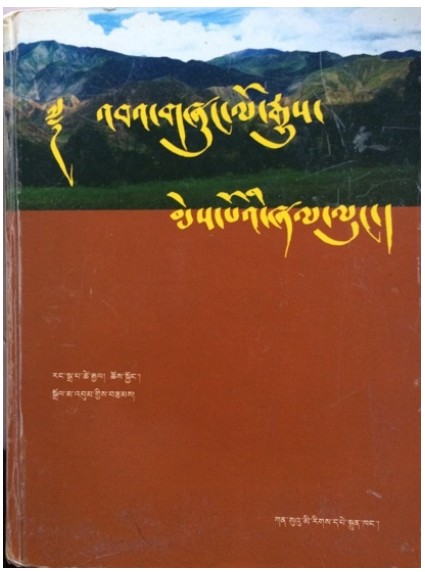
APPENDIX I: An example of two book-length oral history projects published in Amdo

Below are two examples of Tibetan oral history published in the 2010s. The comparison between the two books, among the many others that could be chosen as examples, shows how in this politically sensitive context it is especially important to discern the polyphony of voices that make up oral history projects.



"The Necklace of the Precious Records of Bya khog" (*Bya khog gi deb ther nor bu'i mgul rgyan*)



"The Oral Teachings of the Ancestors on the History of Ba" (*'ba' gzhung lo rgyus mes po'i zhal lung*)

The first book is entitled "The Necklace of the Precious Records of Bya khog" (Tib: *Bya khog gi deb ther nor bu'i mgul rgyan*). I made my own black and white copy of the book from the photocopied copy of a Tibetan classmate in Beijing, who is originally from the Shakok (Tib. Bya khog) area. I never came across the original printed version. The anonymous author indicates that she or he completed the writing in Xining on 6th July 2000. The book is presented as the result of the common efforts of different community members who also sponsored its printing (their photos and exact financial contribution are listed at the end of the book). The book is 224 pages and is divided into four sections. The first one introduces the geographical features of Shakok, including the geology, the weather, as well as the demographics and number of livestock. The second section contextualises the area of history of the area in the context of early Tibetan history and introduces the seven *tsowa* as well as providing some information

about the folklore, religious festivals, i.e. new year (Tib. *lo gsar*), ritual cairns (Tib. *la btsas or la rtse*), customs (Tib. *yul srol goms gshis*), and customary laws (Tib. *yul khrims*). The third section offers a detailed account of the local history following the foundation of the PRC. Interestingly, the time is subdivided as follows: 1949–1957; 1957–1961; 1962–1966; 1966–1976; 1977–2000. This chronological arrangement reflects the Tibetan perception of the year 1958 as a tragic watershed that deserves a separate section, when rampant famine spread in Amdo as a result of the Great Leap Forward and the land collectivisation reforms. While the Cultural Revolution is covered in the 1966–1976 decade, any event thereafter is merged into the post-1977 Deng Xiaoping reform era. The last part of the section introduces brief biographies of eminent lay and monastic figures. The fourth and last section of the book is dedicated to the contemporary social life of the seven tribes of Shakok. The anonymous author concludes the afterward by "thanking all the lay and clergy, the eminent teachers and the helpful friends who contributed to the cause of this book".

The second book is titled "The Oral Teachings of the Ancestors on the History of Ba'" (Tib. *'Ba' gzhung lo rgyus mes po'i zhal lung*). Published by the Gansu Minzu Publishing House in 2011, it is a hard cover book of over 500 pages, including ten pages of colour photos, printed on thick paper. It is penned by a writing committee constituted of 25 members tasked with developing the book idea, writing and editing, and recording interviews. The eight sections in the book are arranged as follows. The first section introduces the geography of Ba (*'ba'*). The second section focuses on mythical-remote history and folklore of the area. The third section offers a brief general history without chronological subdivisions. The fourth section goes into the twenty-century historical details of the twenty-one villages. It also includes individual biographical notes accompanied by photos. The fifth section focuses on the monasteries and meditation caves in Ba. The sixth section introduces important figures from religious lineages and reincarnations. The seventh section is on education and economic development in the area. The eighth section is dedicated to customs (Tib. *yul srol*) and religion (Tib. *chos lugs*). The first of the two appendices presents the curricula and photos of all the cadres working in the local government. The second features a long list of two-line biographical note for each of the civil servants employed at the village level in the county.

Going into a detailed comparison between the two books would far exceed the purpose of this introduction. Yet, it is worth making a few considerations that show both differences and continuities.

First, authorship. While the author of "The Necklace of the Precious Records of Bya khog" chose to preserve her or his anonymity, probably out of concern for political sensitivity, the 25 members of the writing committee of "The Oral Teachings of the Ancestors on the History of Ba" are not only listed with their individual tasks but also appear in a group photo on the second page.

Second, material aspects of the book. The limited budget available to the author of "The Necklace of the Precious Records of Bya khog" was a constraint

on book layout. This was evidently not an issue for the publication of "The Oral Teachings of the Ancestors on the History of Ba".

Third, content. With regard the general arrangement of the content into sections, the two books appear quite similar. However, the criteria adopted for the selection of the materials differ in important respects. In the first book, tsowa (as mentioned before, loosely translatable as tribe) is the main social unit taken into consideration to discuss demographic profile as well as the history of the area. Though tsowa are a fundamental social institution in pastoral areas such as Shakok, they are not officially recognised by the government. In contrast to this, the second book only refers to the villages (dewa) that are part of the official administration system. In the first book, the chronological arrangement of the post-PRC history closely follows the brutal experience of people in 1958 and during the Cultural Revolution. This is largely omitted in the second book. In the second book, religion is treated as part of folklore and the history of the region with a musealising approach. While there isn't a dedicated section in the first book, religious figures and monasteries are directly integrated into each tsowa's history.

Fourth, photo materials. The use of photos is common to both books, but with a major difference in the choice of the portrayed individuals. In the first book there are photos of eminent figures in the community as well as of the financial contributors to the book. In the second book, apart from the colour photos of Ba's landscape and monuments, individual photo portraits of the cadres in the local government occupy about 70 pages in the book.

APPENDIX II: Index of interviews

Name	Place	Tshoba	Time
Aku Rig ‘dzin	Sumdo village (Mangra County)	-	spring 2010; autumn 2012; autumn 2015
G.yang bhe	Wangjia village (Mangra County)	Lutsang	summer 2014; summer 2015
Tshe ring Rdo rje	Wangjia village (Tsekhok County)	Lutsang	summer 2010; winter 2013; summer 2014
Dorje Bkra shis	Zequ township (Tsekhok County)	Sonak	spring 2010; autumn 2012; autumn 2013
Aku Byams ‘bum rgyal	Mdoba dewa tshodruk (Rebgong County)	-	spring 2013; summer 2014
Sngag Bon Tshe grub rgyal	Zequ township (Tsekhok County)	Bongya	spring 2010; autumn 2012
Aku Stag lta rgyal	Rongwo township (Rebgong County)	Keri	winter 2011; winter 2014
Aku Jiko	Zequ township (Tsekhok County)	Keri	summer 2012; autumn 2013; spring 2014
Sngags Bon Meri	Tonche village (Khrika County)	-	summer 2012; summer 2016; summer 2018
Aku Thub bsang	Wangjia village (Tsekhok County)	Lutsang	summer 2010; winter 2013; summer 2014
Aku ‘phags pa rgyal	Sumdo village (Guinan County)	Lutsang	spring 2010; autumn 2012; autumn 2015
Aku Brug grags	Sergya monastery (Khrika County)	-	summer 2016; summer 2018
Aku Bstan pa	Zequ township (Tsekhok County)	Sonak	spring 2010, autumn 2012; summer 2016; summer 2017
Apa Lcag byams rgyal	Wangjia village (Tsekhok County)	Lutsang	summer 2010; summer and autumn 2012; winter 2014

APPENDIX III: List of Tibetan and Chinese published sources

Works in Tibetan language on local history:

- sGo me lo rgyus rtsom sgrig lhan tshogs 2010. SGo me rigs rgyud kyi ‘byung khungs la mdo tsam dpyad pa. *Qinghai Zangzu* 2010.2.
- Qinghai sheng Hainan Zangzu Zizhizhou Fojiao Xiehui 1999. *MTsho lho khul gyi dgon sde khag gi lo rgyus snying bsdus*. Xining: Minzu Publishing House.
- Tsering dBal ‘Byor (ed.) 1995. *Bod kyi gnas yig bdams bsgrigs*. Tibetan ancient texts Publishing House.
- Tshe lo (ed.) 2010. *Mtsho lho khul sa ming rig gnas brda ‘grel*. Lanzhou: Minzu Publishing House.
- [n.a.] 1992. *Rma lho’i rig gnas dang lo rgyus dpyad yig*. [no publication venue available]
- Rin bzang gi mu ‘brel zin tho 2008. *Nga’i pha yul dang zhi ba’i bcing grol*. [no publication venue available].
- “The Necklace of the Precious Records of Bya khog” (*Bya khog gi deb ther nor bu’i mgul rgyan*)
- “The Oral Teachings of the Ancestors on the History of Ba” (*‘ba’ gzhung lo rgyus mes po’i zhal lung*)

Gazzeetteers and compendiums of materials for culture and history in Chinese language:

- Guojia tongji ju nongcun shehui jingji diaocha sibian 2018. *Zhongguo xianyu tongji nianjian 2018 (xiangzhen juan)*. Beijing: China Statistics Publishing House.
- Li Qingfen 1983. “Ma Bufang longduan qinghai jinkuang de jishu.” – *Qinghai wenshi ziliao xuanji* 11: 112–119.
- Zeku Xian bianji weiyuanhui 2005. *Zeku Xianzhi. Volume 1. Qinghai sheng difangzhi zongshu*. Zhongguo xiezheng nianji Publishing House.
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- Liao Hansheng 1990. Guanche Zhixing Minzu Pingdeng he Minzu Tuanjie wei Qinghai Sheng Renmin Zhengfu de Jiben Zhengce. – Zhonggong Qinghai Shengwei Dangshi Ziliao Zhengji Weiyuanhui and Zhonggong Renmin Jiefangjun Qinghai Sheng Junqu Zhengzhibu (eds.). *Jiefang Qinghai Shiliao Xuanbian*. Xining: Qinghai Xinhua Publishing House, 104–107.
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Junqu Zhengzhibu (eds.). *Jiefang Qinghai Shiliao Xuanbian*. Xining: Qinghai Xinhua Publishing House, 92–103.
- Wajia and Lajia 1982. Tongren Decang Buluo bei Jiaosha de Jingguo. *Qinghai Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji* 10: 219–23.

Folklore collections in Tibetan language:

- Khyung thar rgyal 2000. *Bod kyi lha sgrung skor gleng ba*. Lanzhou: Nationalities Publishing House.
- Mang tshogs sgyu rtsal rtsom sgrig khang 2011. *Bcar 'dri ngag gi snye ma*. Xining: Qinghai Minzu Publishing House.
- Mang tshogs sgyu rtsal rtsom sgrig khang 2011. *Dmangs srol gsal mgul rgyun*. Xining: Qinghai Minzu Publishing House.
- Mang tshogs sgyu rtsal rtsom sgrig khang 2011. *Gangs can dbyid kyi bang mdzod*. Xining: Qinghai Minzu Publishing House.
- Tshe brtan rgyal 2010. *A mdo'i goms srol nyung bsdas*. Lanzhou: Gansu Minzu Publishing House.

APPENDIX IV: Outline of major events in Amdo

This chronology provides an overview of the historical periods and a selection of the major events in Amdo that are referred to in the introduction and in the articles.

13th century	First Mongol domination of Amdo while in eastern China the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) rules.
14th-16th centuries	Second Mongol domination of Amdo while in eastern China the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) rules; consolidation of Gelukpa monasteries in Amdo and connection with the monastic networks in Central Tibet.
1636–1724	The Qoshot Khanate, under Gushri Khan (1582–1655) and his sons, rules over most of Amdo.
18th century	The Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) ruling in eastern China takes control of Amdo.
1910s–1920s	Ma Qi is appointed governor of Qinghai
1930s–1940s	The Muslim warlord Ma Bufang rules over Amdo
1949	Foundation of the People's Republic of China
1949–1976	Leadership of Mao Zedong
1958	Great Leap Forward and collectivisation reforms
1966–1976	Cultural Revolution in the PRC
1978–1989	Leadership of Deng Xiaoping
1978	Third Plenum of the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of China inaugurates an era of economic reform
1989	Repression of Tiananmen protest
1989–2002	Leadership of Jiang Zemin
2000	Launching of economic plans for the development of infra-structure and industry in Western China (Great Opening of the West)
2002–2012	Leadership of Hu Jintao
2003	State-led program for the sedentarisation of pastoralists in Qinghai
2008	Tibetan protests against the Olympic Games, in Amdo and other Tibetan areas
2012 –	Leadership of Xi Jinping

APPENDIX V: Glossary of Tibetan and Chinese terms

The two glossaries present the Tibetan and Chinese terms in alphabetic order.

Tibetan	Wylie	English translation
འདུ་ཁང་	*'du khang*	assembly hall
འགོ་བའི་ལྷ་ལྔ་	*'go ba'i lha lnga*	five groups of protective deities
ཨ་མདོ་	*a mdo*	Amdo
ཨ་མྱེས་རྨ་ཆེན་སྤོམ་ར་	*a myes rma chen spom ra*	Amye Machen mountain
བླ་རི་	*bla ri*	soul mountain
བོད་རིགས་	*Bod rigs*	Tibetan ethno-national group in the PRC
བཙན་	*btsan*	spirit usually dwelling in rocks
ཆོལ་ཁ་གསུམ་	*chol kha gsum*	the three provinces (Ü-Tsang, Kham, Amdo)
ཆོས་ལུགས་	*chos lugs*	religion
ཆོས་རྒྱུས་	*chos rgyus*	religious lineage
དབུས་ཙང་	*dbus-Tsang*	Central Tibet and Zang
དགོན་པ་	*dgon pa*	monastery
དགྲ་ལྷ་	*dgra lha*	warrior gods
དུལ་བ་	*dul ba*	to tame, to subjugate
དུང་དཀར་གཡས་འཁྱིལ་	*dung dkar g.yas 'khyil*	right-turning conch shell
གཙུད་	*gcud*	nourishing essence
གནམ་ས་འི་ཀ་བཞི་	*gnam sa'i ka bzhi*	four columns between the sky and the earth
གནས་དུས་	*gnas dus*	anniversary of the opening of a mountain
གནས་སྒོ་ཕྱེ་	*gnas sgo phye*	opening of the gate (to a mountain), which marks the start of a pilgrimage site
གཉན་	*gnyan*	spirit usually dwelling in trees
གསར་བརྗེ་ངོ་རྒོལ་བྱ་བ་	*gsar brje ngo rgol bya ba*	anti-revolutionary activities
གཏམ་གྱུད་	*gtam gyud*	tale
གཏེར་སྣམ་	*gter bum*	treasure vessel
གཏེར་ཁ་	*gter kha*	mine
གཏེར་མ་	*gter ma*	treasure
གཏེར་སྟོན་	*gter ston*	treasure-discoverer
གཞི་བདག་	*gzhi bdag*	owner of the ground
རྒག་དམག་	*jag dmag*	bandit armies
རྒག་པ་	*jag pa*	bandit
ཁམས་	*khams*	Kham
ཀླུ་	*klu*	naga spirit dwelling in water
ལ་གཞས་	*la gzhas*	love song

Tibetan	Wylie	English translation
ལ་རྩེ་/ལ་བཙས་	*la rtse/la btsas*	ritual cairn
ལྷ་	*lha*	gods
ལྷ་རབས་	*lha rabs*	gods' lineage
ལྷ་སྒྲུང་	*lha sgrung*	fairy tale
ལྷ་སྲིན་སྡེ་བརྒྱད་	*lha srin sde brgyad*	eight classes of gods and demons
ལོ་གསར་	*lo gsar*	New Year
ལོ་རྒྱུས་	*lo rgyus*	history
མདུང་	*mdung*	arrow
མི་རབས་	*mi rabs*	human generation
མོ་ལྷ་	*mo lha*	maternal gods
མཚོ་སྔོན་པོ་	*mtsho sngon po*	Lake Kokonor
ཕ་ལྷ་	*pha lha*	paternal gods
ཕྱིང་ཞ་	*phying zha*	felt hat
རྫོང་	*rdzong*	county
རྒྱལ་པོ་	*rgyal po*	angry spirit
རྒྱལ་རབས་	*rgyal rabs*	royal genealogy
རི་ཁྲོད་	*ri khrod*	hermitage
རིགས་ལྔ་	*rigs lnga*	five families of Buddha or ceremonial crown made of five vertical petals
རྨ་ཆུ་	*rma chu*	Yellow River
རུ་	*ru*	encampment
རུས་རྒྱུས་	*rus rgyus*	clan ancestry
ས་བདག་	*sa bdag*	owner of the ground
ས་ཁུལ་	*sa khul*	prefecture
སྦྲ་ཆེ་ཆུང་	*sbra che chung*	big and small tent
སྡེ་བ་	*sde ba*	village
སྒྲུང་	*sgrung*	story
སྔགས་པ་	*sngags pa*	ritual practitioner
སྤྲུལ་སྐུ་	*sprul sku*	reincarnated lama
སྲི་	*sri*	vampire
སྲིན་	*srin*	demons
སྲོག་ལྷ་	*srog lha*	life gods
ཚེ་བ་	*tsho ba*	tribe
ཡུལ་བ་	*yul ba*	homeland
ཡུལ་ཁྲིམས་	*yul khrims*	customary law
ཡུལ་སྲོལ་	*yul srol*	custom
ཞང་ལྷ་	*zhang lha*	avuncular gods

Chinese	pinyin	English translation
百户	*baihu*	one-hundred households
保安族	*bao'an zu*	Bao'an
兵工	*binggong*	soldier-workers
部落	*buluo*	tribe
部族	*buzu*	tribe
材料	*cailiao*	(historical) materials
传统习俗	*chuantong xisu*	traditional customs
大西北	*da xibei*	big northwest
地方志	*difangzhi*	local gazetteer
东乡族	*dongxiang zu*	Dongxiang
断代	*duandai*	generational break
封建迷信	*fengjian mixin*	feudal superstitions
官督商办	*guandu shangban*	supervision office
鬼	*gui*	ghost
故事	*gushi*	story
海东市	*haidong shi*	Haidong City
海南藏族自治州	*hainan zangzu zizhizhou*	Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
化隆回族自治县	*hualong huizu zizhixian*	Hualong Hui Autonomous County
黄南藏族自治州	*huangnan zangzu zizhizhou*	Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
回族	*hui zu*	Hui
活着	*huozhe*	"To Live"
讲好国家交往故事	*jiang hao guojia jiaowang gushi*	tell the story of international connections well
讲好和平发展故事	*jiang hao heping fazhan gushi*	tell the story of peaceful development well
讲好民族复兴故事	*jiang hao minzu fuxing gushi*	tell the story of national rejuvenation well
讲好全球化故事	*jiang hao quanqiuhua gushi*	tell the story of globalisation well
讲好人民友好故事	*jiang hao renmin youhao gushi*	tell the story of people's friendship well
讲好文明交融故事	*jiang hao wenming jiaorong gushi*	tell the story of blending of civilisation well
讲好中国道路故事	*jiang hao zhongguo daolu gushi*	tell the story of the Chinese way well

Chinese	pinyin	English translation
讲好中华文化故事	*jiang hao zhonghua wenhua gushi*	tell the story of Chinese culture well
金夫	*jinfu*	worker in gold mining
金头	*jintou*	investor in gold mining
科学社会主义	*kexue shehui zhuyi*	scientific socialism
两	*liang*	unit of measurement (1 *liang* corresponds to 50 g)
理论	*lilun*	theory, theoretical model
历史	*lishi*	history
落后思想	*luohou sixiang*	backward thinking
蒙古族	*menggu zu*	Mongolian
民间	*minjian*	space of the people, folk, popular
民间文化	*minjian wenhua*	folk culture
民间宗教	*minjian zongjiao*	folk religion
迷思	*misi*	myth
内部资料	*neibu ziliao*	documents for inner circulation
牛棚杂忆	*niupeng zayi*	*The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*
	pingqiong	poverty
千户	*qianhu*	one-thousand households
青海	*qinghai*	Qinghai
撒拉族	*sala zu*	Salar
伤痕文学	*san fen guo, qi fen gong shanghen wenxue*	30% bad, 70% good scar literature
少数民族	*shaoshu minzu*	ethnic minority
社会制度落后	*shehui zhidu luohou*	backwardness of the social system
十年大灾难	*shi nian da zainan*	“ten years of big disaster” (an expression referring to the Cultural Revolution)
诉苦运动	*suku yundong*	speaking bitterness movement
土匪	*tufei*	bandits
吐司	*tusi*	pre-PRC local chief
文化遗产	*wenhua yichan*	cultural heritage

Chinese	pinyin	English translation
文史资料	*wenshi ziliao*	materials for culture and history
向世界讲好中国故事	*xiang shijie jiang hao zhongguo gushi*	Tell the world the story of China well
西部大开发	*xibu da kaifa*	Great Opening of the West
藏族	*zang zu*	Tibetan
中国梦	*zhongguo meng*	Chinese dream
中华	*zhonghua*	Chinese People

SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Pärimusliku ajaloo loomine Amdos: hääled, žanrid ja mõjuvõim

Väitekiri koosneb sissejuhatusest ja neljast artiklist. Selles analüüsitakse mineviku kujutamist ja mõtestamist neis tiibeti kogukondades, kes elavad Hiina Rahvavabariigis Amdo regioonis. See on Tiibeti kiltmaa kirdeosas asuv keeleliselt ja etniliselt kirev piirkond, mis langeb suuresti kokku Hiina Rahvavabariigi Qinghai provintsi territooriumiga.

Artiklites käsitletud välitööaines pärineb suhteliselt piiratud geograafiliselt alalt, aga kogutud materjali ajaloolised mõõtmed on ulatuslikud, hõlmates mongolite vallutusi 13. sajandil, moslemi sõjapealike valitsust 20. sajandi algul, tiibetlaste võitlust punaarmee vastu ning 20. sajandi keskel toimunud kultuurirevolutsiooni.

Esimene artikkel põhineb Drakari külas salvestatud kohapärimuslikel rahvajuttudel, milles avaldub mongoli väepealikute ümberkujundamine kohalikeks kaitsejumalateks. Jutuvestmisest selgub, et mongolite ja tiibetlaste vastandav eristamine ei piirdu ainult inimestega, vaid see vastandus kantakse samavõrd üle kultuuriliselt määratletud üleloomuliku tegelikkuse valdkonda.

Teine artikkel käsitleb Amdo piirkonnas tegutsenud röövlite ehk bandiitidega seotud rahvapäraseid arusaamu ja ettekujutusi 20. sajandi Hiina poliitilises kontekstis. Sõna „bandiit“ (tiibeti *jag pa*, hiina *tufei*) on mõlemas keeles mitmetähenduslik, kandes endas nii positiivseid kui ka negatiivseid tähendusvarjundeid. Seoses Hiina Rahvavabariigi kehtestamise ning ülemvõimuga omandas bandiidi roll rahvapärimuses uusi poliitiliselt laetud tähendusi.

Kolmas artikkel lähtub Jacques Derrida žanriteoreetilistest vaadetest, kus teksti ja žanri suhteid mõtestatakse osaluse kaudu. Teisalt olen artikli kirjutamisel saanud inspiratsiooni Charles Briggsi ja Richard Baumani töödest, kus žanrimõistele lähenetakse intertekstuaalselt. See uurimus analüüsib rahvapäraste žanrimõistete „jutu“ (*sgrung*) ja „ajaloo“ (*lo rgyus*) omavahelist suhet rTse-khogi maakonna tiibeti jutuvestmistraditsioonis, milles kajastatakse kultuurirevolutsiooniga seotud sündmusi (1966–1976). Kui rahvapäraselt on nende mõistete vahel suuri tähenduslikke kattuvusi, siis Hiina RV tiibetikeelses ajalooteaduslikus kirjanduses on marksistliku ideoloogia mõjul „jutt“ ja „ajalugu“ teineteisele vastandatud.

Neljas artikkel analüüsib mälestusi etnilistest pingetest ja rituaalidest, mis kaasnesid kaevandustegevusega tiibetlaste asustatud Hualongi külas Hualongi Hui autonoomses maakonnas. Väepealiku Ma Bufangi valitsuse (1930.–1940. aastatel) all tegelesid Hui moslemi sõdurid kulla röövkaevandamisega. Paljud neist hukkusid üleujutuse tõttu. Võõraste sõdurite vaimude lepitamiseks on korraldatud rituaale, mis pole soovitud tulemusi andnud. Artiklis käsitletud rituaalid ja uskumused on tihedalt seotud tänapäeval toimuva Hani kaevandusfirma tegevusega samas piirkonnas.

Kõik artiklid illustreerivad Amdo tiibetlaste rahvapärast arusaama ajaloost, mille all mõeldakse minevikusündmuste esitamist jutuvormis, keskendudes neile juhtumitele, mis on kogukonna jaoks tähenduslikud olevikulisest vaatepunktist. Lisaks avab väitekiri üleloomulikkuse suurt osa tiibetlaste kultuurilises strateegias. Üleloomulikkuse kaudu väljendatakse suhtumist võõrasse, luuakse seoseid mineviku ja oleviku vahel ning markeeritakse etnilisi piire regioonis, kus elab kõrvuti mitmeid rahvaid.

Uurimus põhineb Amdo regioonis toimunud korduvatel ja pikaaegsetel välitöödel (2010–2018), mille käigus salvestasin jutuajamisi kohalike inimestega ja kogusin visuaalset teavet video- ja fotomaterjalina. Metodoloogia põhines struktureerimata kvalitatiivsetel intervjuudel, mis toimusid nii tiibeti kui ka mandariini keeles. Lisaks süvenesin kohalikku ajalookirjandusse, mille seas on nii ametlikult heakskiidetud kui ka väljaspool riiklikku kirjastamispoliitikat avaldatud teoseid. Viited sellele materjalile on lisatud artiklite kasutatud kirjanduse loendis.

Otsustasin kaasata uurimusse tiibeti ja hiina suulised allikad ning trükis avaldatud materjalid, mis ringlevad Amdo regioonis selleks, et rõhutada selliste kohalike sündmuste olulisust, mille tähendus ei ulatu riikliku ajaloo tasandile, kuid on erakordse kaaluga, aidates mõista tiibetlaste arusaamu oma minevikust, sellega seotud kogemustest ja ajaloo ümbermõtestamisest. Rangetesse raamidesse surutud Hiina RV poliitilises surutises avardab ja rikastab selline lokaalne uurimistöö meie teadmisi tiibeti kogukondade ja nende ühiskondliku tegelikkuses kohta.

Väitekirja teoreetiline raamistik põhineb kolmel akadeemilisel traditsioonil: ajaloo narratiivne uurimine, kollektiivse mälu ja rahvausundi (*vernacular religion*) uurimine.

Ajaloo narratiivse uurimise osas valisin itaalia mikroajaloo suuna, et analüüsida tiibeti ajaloolise jutuvestmise mitmekülgsust Hiina riikliku monumentaalajaloo taustal. Pidasin siiski vajalikuks vältida rohujuuretasandi ja riikliku ajaloo vastandamist, et näidata kahe suuna sarnaseid võtteid ajaloo narratiivsel kujutamisel, ehkki mõlema taotlused ja autoriteedi allikad on erinevad. Saame küll eristada riiklikku ja folkloorset vormi mineviku sündmuste jutustamisel, ometi ei ole nende vahe absoluutne, sest kahe suuna arusaam tõest polegi kvalitatiivselt kuigi erinev.

„Kollektiivse mälu“ mõistet kasutades viitan ühiskondlikule mõõtmele, mis on sidunud tiibetlaste püüdlusi mineviku omavahelisel jagamisel ja meenutamisel, hoolimata süstemaatilisest riiklikust kontrollist, mis peaks Hiina RV väikerahvastele kehtestama nende ametlikult heakskiidetud ajaloo. Lähtudes Jan Assmanni kommunikatiivse ja kultuurilise mälu erinevuse teooriast, väidan, et tiibeti kultuuriline mälu kujutab endast valitud kogumit kommunikatiivse mälu väljendustest, mida inimesed peavad tähendusrikkaks, väljendamaks oma tänapäevast identiteeti. Jutustatud sündmuste sisu ja nende ajalise korraldatuse osas järeldasin, et lähiminevikus toimunut seotakse kaugema möödanikuga narratiivsete assotsiatsioonide kaudu. Väljendusvormi ja -vahendite osas väärib märkimist, et rahvakeeles toimuv argine jutuvestmine pakub alternatiivi tiibeti kirjakeeles sõnastatud tsenseeritud ajaloole.

Tuginedes Leonard N. Primiano definitsioonile, mõistan rahvausundi (*vernacular religion*) all religiooni kui kogemust, kui inimlikku fenomeni, mida elatakse läbi nii sõnaliselt kui sõnadeta väljendatud uskumustes. Väitekirja aluseks olevates artiklites olen tiibeti uskumusi ja rituaale analüüsinud kui vastuseid teatud kultuuri kontekstis tekkinud vajadustele ja sündmustele, mis kuuluvad nii lähedasse kui ka kaugemasse minevikku. Rahvausund pakub tähenduslikult avara ruumi ja raamistiku, et mõtestada ajaloole keskenduvat jutuvestmist tiibetlaste jagatud maailmavaatena.

Väitekiri keskendub mineviku mäletamisele ja kultuurilisele ümbertöötamisele Amdo regiooni tiibeti kogukondades. Selleks valitud perspektiiv avardab meie teadmisi ajaloo ja mälu konstrueerimisest ning sellega seotud praktikatest Hiina Rahvavabariigis.

SUMMARY IN FRENCH

Faire des (hi)stories en Amdo: voix, genres et autorités

La thèse comprend une introduction et quatre articles. Il analyse la représentation du passé et la compréhension de l'histoire qui y est associée du point de vue des communautés tibétaines contemporaines vivant dans l'Amdo. Cette dernière est une région linguistiquement et ethniquement diversifiée située dans la partie nord-est du plateau tibétain, qui coïncide aujourd'hui en grande partie avec la province du Qinghai en République populaire de Chine (RPC).

Même si les études de cas présentées dans les articles ont une portée géographique relativement limitée, elles couvrent une période temporelle considérable : de l'occupation mongole au XIIIe siècle au régime d'un seigneur de guerre musulman au début du XXe siècle, des bandits tibétains résistant aux L'Armée rouge à la Révolution culturelle au milieu des années vingt.

Basé sur un récit oral enregistré dans le village de Drakar, le premier article retrace l'inscription de trois généraux mongols dans le paysage tibétain au moyen de leur transformation en divinités protectrices. Le scénario témoigne que la définition des frontières entre les communautés mongoles et tibétaines ne s'applique pas seulement aux humains mais est également transposée dans des notions de surnaturel culturellement spécifiques.

Le deuxième article retrace la transformation des définitions et des imaginations orales et écrites tibétaines sur le banditisme dans l'Amdo et son rôle dans le contexte politique plus large de la Chine au XXe siècle. Plus précisément, à partir de la polysémie du terme « bandit » en tibétain et en chinois, l'article montre les connotations politiques positives et négatives associées aux bandits avant et après la fondation de la République populaire de Chine.

Basé sur la notion de Derrida de participation aux genres et sur la théorie de Briggs et Bauman sur l'intertextualité des genres, le troisième article analyse la relation d'interdépendance entre « histoire » et « récit » dans la narration orale contemporaine telle qu'elle est interprétée dans une communauté tibétaine du comté de Tsekhog à propos de la Révolution culturelle (1966–1976).

Le quatrième article analyse la façon dont les mémoires locales et les tensions ethniques liées aux activités minières sont rituellement abordées dans un village tibétain du comté autonome de Hualong Hui. Sous le règne du chef de guerre Ma Bufang (années 1930–1940), les soldats musulmans Hui ont mené un pillage intensif de l'or dans cette région et sont morts lors d'une inondation. L'échec des rituels visant à lutter contre les fantômes extraterrestres des soldats résonne avec les activités minières actuelles gérées par les sociétés minières Han dans la région.

Ensemble, les articles démontrent que l'histoire est avant tout comprise comme l'organisation narrative d'événements passés qui sont significatifs pour les communautés tibétaines de l'Amdo du point de vue du présent. Dans une perspective plus large, la thèse révèle le rôle central du surnaturel dans les stratégies culturelles tibétaines qui articulent l'altérité et les frontières ethniques dans

une région ethniquement diversifiée en établissant une continuité entre le passé et le présent.

Les principales données de la recherche ont été collectées lors de mes multiples voyages de terrain dans l'Amdo entre 2010 et 2018. Les principales sources sont constituées d'entretiens enregistrés audio, de photos, de vidéos. La méthodologie était basée sur des entretiens qualitatifs non structurés que j'ai personnellement menés en tibétain et en mandarin. De plus, j'ai également consulté des livres d'histoire locale publiés officiellement et officieusement et qui sont répertoriés dans les références de chacun des quatre articles de la thèse.

En choisissant d'utiliser les sources orales tibétaines et chinoises et les documents publiés qui circulent dans l'Amdo, j'ai cherché à donner une signification à ces événements qui sont confinés à la périphérie de l'histoire nationale mais qui sont pourtant fondamentaux pour faire la lumière sur la manière dont les Tibétains ont vécu, stocké et réélaboré le passé dans cette région. Dans le contexte politique contraignant de la RPC, cette approche centrée sur la localité contribue à pluraliser notre compréhension des diverses réalités sociales des communautés tibétaines contemporaines en RPC.

Le cadre théorique de la thèse s'appuie sur trois corps distincts de littérature académique : l'histoire comme narration, la mémoire collective et la religion vernaculaire.

En ce qui concerne « l'histoire comme narration », j'ai choisi le focus à petite échelle de la microstoria italienne pour mettre en évidence la diversité du récit oral tibétain dans l'Amdo par rapport au chef-d'œuvre national chinois de l'histoire. Cependant, plutôt que d'opposer la base et les niveaux de l'État, j'ai démontré que les deux partagent une approche narrative du passé qui est mise en œuvre pour des objectifs différents et qui s'appuie sur des sources d'autorité différentes. En fusionnant les récits étatiques et populaires du passé sous le genre collectif de (hi)story, je souhaite souligner la distinction floue entre les genres « histoire » et « récit » qui, malgré leurs prétentions respectives, ne reflètent pas un engagement différent envers la vérité.

Par « mémoire collective », j'entends la dimension sociale dans laquelle les Tibétains peuvent partager et reproduire leurs connaissances sur le passé, malgré le contrôle strict de la production historique officielle dans les zones minoritaires de la RPC. En m'appuyant sur la distinction faite par Assmann entre mémoire communicative et mémoire culturelle, je soutiens que la mémoire culturelle tibétaine émerge comme une somme sélective d'éléments réitérés de mémoire communicative que les gens considèrent comme significatifs pour leur identité contemporaine. En ce qui concerne le contenu et la structure temporelle, les souvenirs du passé récent sont liés à des événements d'un passé plus lointain au moyen d'associations narratives. En ce qui concerne les formes et les médias, les récits quotidiens en langue vernaculaire remplacent les documents textuels écrits en tibétain formel pour éviter la censure.

Suivant la définition de Primiano, j'utilise « religion vernaculaire » pour désigner les multiples dimensions expérientielles de la religion telle qu'elle est vécue par les individus dans leurs expressions verbales et non verbales de

croyance. Dans les articles de la thèse, les croyances et rituels tibétains sont analysés comme des réponses à des besoins spécifiques qui émergent du contexte culturel pertinent en relation avec les événements passés et présents. En conséquence, la religion vernaculaire offre un espace permettant de situer la narration du passé dans le cadre plus large d'une vision du monde partagée par les Tibétains.

En se concentrant sur la manière dont le passé est mémorisé et culturellement réélaboré dans le contexte des communautés tibétaines de l'Amdo, la thèse élargit notre connaissance des pratiques de fabrication de l'histoire et de la mémoire dans la République populaire de Chine dans son ensemble.

PUBLICATIONS

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2017.09–	Ph.D. student Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu (Tartu) and École Doctorale 472 Langues, civilisations et sociétés orientales, École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris)
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Professional employment

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Selected publications

2024 "Emic perspectives on the transubstantiation of words in Tibetan-script textual amulets." In *Tibetan Magic: Past and Present*, edited by Aleksandra Bozena Wenta and Cameron Bailey. Bloomsbury Publishing plc., 125–148.

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2017 "'Dying Mongol and Being Reborn Tibetan': Otherness and Integration of Foreigners in the Landscape of Amdo (Qinghai, PRC)." *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 42: 268–288.

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2024 "Emic perspectives on the transubstantiation of words in Tibetan-script textual amulets." In *Tibetan Magic: Past and Present*, edited by Aleksandra Bozena Wenta and Cameron Bailey. Bloomsbury Publishing plc., 125–148.

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2017 "'Dying Mongol and Being Reborn Tibetan': Otherness and Integration of Foreigners in the Landscape of Amdo (Qinghai, PRC)." *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 42: 268–288.

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