Abstract

A Historical Study of the Mon Region (India) and its relation with Tibet and Bhutan (16th-17th Century)

Studies in contested areas have received renewed interest among scholars. A case in point is Mon, a region situated between Tibet, Bhutan and India. The region is contested mainly because of the different claims to the region as well as the diverse ethnic and tribal groups living in the area. Only a few works have been published in English as well as in Tibetan on the history of Mon, and a historical study of the region, by paying close attention to present-day districts of Tawang and West Kameng, has so far not received the attention it deserves. The relative paucity of scholarly attention is partly due to lack of access to or unavailability of relevant historical texts, whether they be old Tibetan legal documents or independent textual sources.

Most of the works on the Mon region mainly focus after the late-seventeenth century and secondary sources on the region largely date from the mid-twentieth century onwards. The focus of this dissertation is on the sixteenth and seventeenth century history of Mon. By going back to the earlier period, this research explores the relationship between Tibet, Bhutan, and the Mon region in order to examine how the Mon region was incorporated into Tibet during the late-seventeenth century. Given the current Sino-Indian border disputes, which are particularly concentrated in this region, a detailed historical study of this region is essential and timely.

The dissertation follows a historical-analytical and descriptive method, particularly when it concerns the formation of the region. It first examines the term mon and its usage on a broader scale since a comprehensive analysis of the term is missing. Mon is acknowledged as an exonym and an autonym, but this study shows that its meaning is not specifically defined. Rather, it is used as a vague term that is not restricted to the Mon border region nor to a clan or lineage. In many cases, the term is used to denote an ethnic group but also a region. A major argument I make in this study is that the old Mon region was a specific area, and the Mon was not originally meant to indicate a larger area of the Himalayan region. Tibetan literature maintains distinct ethnic and historical information concerning Mon, Monpa (Mon pa) or Monyul (Mon yul). Additionally, as the region lies to the south of Tibet, I argue that old Mon, including present-day Mon region, refer to the Eastern Himalayas.

Furthermore, following the annexation of the Mon region by the Tibetan government
in 1680, only this region (i.e. present-day districts of Tawang and West Kameng) has been recorded as Mon. The region thus became much more identifiable since then and Tibetan sources on this region are relatively rich, although records relating to the region are available from the late-fifteenth century onwards. At the same time, the region’s crucial period was the late-seventeenth century. To what extent was the Mon area then politically and administratively incorporated into the Tibetan government? As this period of contact history is relatively well documented, it is also a central part of this inquiry. I discuss the interrelations by maintaining that changes of regime led to changes in identity formation and community building, which had a lasting impact on the cultural identity of the research area.

The study also investigates how identities of a peripheral non-state society were influenced by the encounters with political forces and by the cultures of their neighbors. More precisely, it examines the forms of reactions and adaptations these encounters entailed. I highlight also the specific historical relations and cross-contacts between three regions that emerged through migration and the spread of particular religious traditions. In particular, I point out the relevance of the spread of religious traditions that have led to the foundation of Tawang monastery.

I further attempt to reveal one of the striking links among the regions, with the formation of a local ruling dynasty, and their relations with local spiritual leaders whose ancestors arrived in the ninth century. This ruling dynasty is said to be collaterals of the Tibetan dynasty, but traces of the offshoots of these local ruling houses are lost in the sources from the early-eighteenth century onwards. Stating this, historical developments owe much to a number of local rulers, usually referred to as the ‘lord’ (jo bo; rje) and later on to some Tibetan Buddhist masters. The significance of this work also lies in analyzing local Tibetan Buddhist schools who, since the seventeenth century, may have been responsible for the decline of regional chieftains. With the presentation of this thesis by putting forward a number of historical events, which may help us to understand the region better. It is divided into seven chapters, in which the middle five chapters are the core studies of the region, and the remaining two develop into the introduction and the conclusion chapters. Annotated translations of important textual and legal documents are presented in the Appendices.