

## 2 An Overview of Tibetan Geography

[28] In the last section, I described the routes that I traveled in the eastern, southern, and northern regions - destinations I visited myself. For other areas, the details I share here are based on reports by others. People from the West, who usually arrive in Tibet<sup>1</sup> from India, often classify Tibetan geography along a vertical axis from north to south. Therefore, they talk about southern and northern Tibet. They refer to the area surrounding the tributaries of the Tsangpo River,<sup>2</sup> extending to the Himalayas,<sup>3</sup> as Southern Tibet.<sup>4</sup> The territories located northward of Penpo,<sup>5</sup> which stretch to the Xinjiang 新疆 frontier, are regarded as Northern Tibet.<sup>6</sup> Xikang, situated in the eastern region, does not fit perfectly with this classification, which is why it is commonly known as Eastern Tibet.<sup>7</sup> There is no specific designation provided in Western sources for the territories located west of Sakya Monastery<sup>8</sup> up to the Nepal border. By contrast, Han people, who typically

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1 Fazun employs the sinograph “Xizang 西藏” to denote Tibet as a country. This usage aligns with conventions rooted in the geographical knowledge developed during the Qing dynasty and the Republican Period. Cf. Dibeltulo Concu 2021.

2 C. Zangbu jiang 藏布江. The Yarlung Tsangpo is the longest river in Tibet. Downstream in India, it is known as the Brahmaputra.

3 C. Ximalaya shan 喜馬拉亞山.

4 C. Nanzang 南藏.

5 C. Panbo 盆薄; T. 'Phan po. Penpo is the nearest forested valley north of Lhasa.

6 C. Beizang 北藏.

7 C. Dongzang 東藏.

8 C. Sajia si 薩迦寺; T. Sa skya dgon pa.



travel to Tibet through Xikang, view the landscape of Tibet as being oriented in an east-west direction. They frequently refer to Tibet as ‘Kang-Zang 康藏’ and make a distinction between Anterior Tibet<sup>9</sup> and Posterior Tibet.<sup>10</sup> This classification aligns with Tibetan views, which most of the times employ the three names ‘Kham’, ‘Tsang’, and ‘Ü’.<sup>11</sup> Still, the terms Southern Tibet and Northern Tibet are never heard among the Tibetans. The term Kham is used to describe the region situated to the west of Dartsédo,<sup>12</sup> extending to the Dangla Mountains<sup>13</sup> near Lhasa. When considering latitude, it reaches from the southern border of Yunnan 雲南 to the northern frontier of Golok. The term ‘Ü’, which translates to ‘Center’, refers to the region that is commonly known as Anterior Tibet. The passage from the Dangla Mountains in the east to the Gampala Mountains<sup>14</sup> in the west is estimated to take approximately ten to twenty days. The area that runs latitudinally from Lhokha<sup>15</sup> – south of Lhasa – to Penpo is designated as ‘Tsang’. This region is commonly known as Posterior Tibet.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the segment located from the west of Gampala to the Nepal border is referred to by Tibetans as Posterior Tibet.

Breaking Tibet down into these three broad regions does not fully capture its vastness. For instance, Tibetans frequently label places such as Nakchu as *jepa*,<sup>17</sup> which translates to ‘stranger’. This suggests that individuals from these regions are viewed as living outside of Ü. The separation is even more pronounced for those [29] residing north of Nakchu. Moreover, while the areas located north of Phakri fall under the jurisdiction of Posterior Tibet, the southern regions from Phakri, like Sikkim and Bhutan, are generally not considered part of Ü-Tsang. As a consequence, the conventional threefold division of Tibet into Kham, Tsang, and Ü does not fully account for all the Tibetan area. To offer a more inclusive framework, I suggest dividing Tibet into five regions [including a slightly larger area]. I will discuss the life of the nationals and the resources of these five areas in the following sections. A brief overview of Xikang’s terrain reveals that it is primarily mountainous, with few plains. The few plains that are present are situated at high altitudes and experience cold temperatures, which makes them more ideal for nomadic herding than for cultivating crops. Nevertheless, counties

9 C. Qianzang 前藏.

10 C. Houzang 後藏.

11 C. Kang 康, Zang 藏, and Wei 衛; T. Khams, Gtsang, and Dbus.

12 C. Dajianlu 打箭鑪.

13 C. Tandala shan 坦達拉山. This is most likely Fazun’s transcription of the Tibetan ‘Dangla’ (T. Gdang la) into sinographic writing. In modern Chinese, the Dangla Range is known as Tanggula shanmai 唐古拉山脈.

14 C. Gangbala shan 崗巴拉山; T. Gam pa la. The mountain pass that separates Tsang and Ü.

15 C. Shannan. 山南; T. Lho kha.

16 Here, the pronoun *wo* 我, literally ‘I’, should be intended as an inclusive ‘we’. The term should be intended here as ‘we [in China]’.

17 C. heba 賀巴; T. byes pa.

such as Litang,<sup>18</sup> Batang,<sup>19</sup> Dawu,<sup>20</sup> Drango,<sup>21</sup> and Karze are considered some of the milder and lower-altitude locations in Xikang. The region allows for the growth of not only barley and peas but also other crops like wheat, millet, and vegetables including radishes.

Lush pine and fir forests line the roads that join Litang, Batang, and Chatreng.<sup>22</sup> Abundant pine forests can also be found in Dawu and the [30] elevated parts of the rivers flowing through Karze. Still, the inadequate state of transportation systems results in lumber transportation expenses that surpass its market value – occasionally by multiple times. In turn, the forests remain untouched, and the open landscapes remain undeveloped. The rugged terrain in areas like Dergé<sup>23</sup> and Chamdo features steep, barren mountains that are even more striking than those in Karze.

These regions are predominantly inhabited by nomadic tribes. In the northern half of Xikang, most of the land is part of Golok, where the elevation is significant, yet the mountains are comparatively modest in height. The landscape here is predominantly made up of open pastures, devoid of any villages. The territories situated north of Lhasa, like Nakchu, possess traits that are comparable to Golok. The mountains within the boundaries of Anterior Tibet are not particularly tall, and the area is characterized by a greater presence of plains. This area's mild climate is highly favorable for agricultural activities. By providing irrigation, the tributaries of the Yarlung Tsangpo River ensure dependable harvests, regardless of whether conditions are dry or flooded. Consequently, this area stands out as the most prosperous and flourishing part in all of Tibet.

The climatic conditions in Posterior Tibet, particularly in Gyantsé<sup>24</sup> and Shigatsé,<sup>25</sup> are similar to those in Anterior Tibet, making agriculture feasible in these locations. Conversely, the land located to the north and west of Shigatsé primarily features pastures. Valleys dominate the terrain found in the southern regions of Tibet, particularly in Sikkim<sup>26</sup> and Bhutan. The mountains flanking the rivers here are covered [31] with green forests. These areas, which have a more humid climate and lower heights, are warmer than Kham, Tsang, and Ü, and yield a larger quantity of grain crops. Rice cultivation is possible in the area of Bhutan. And indeed, Bhutan is the primary supplier of rice sold in the markets of Lhasa. Even though the quality is somewhat lower than that of rice grown in regions south of the Himalayas, it is more affordable. Bhutan is now an independent country and is no longer under Tibetan jurisdiction. Still, owing to its linguistic similarities and cultural connections with Tibet, I have placed it within the geographical context of Tibet for this discussion.

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18 C. Litang 襄塘; T. Li thang.

19 C. Batang 巴塘; T. 'Ba' thang.

20 C. Daofu 道孚; T. Rta'u.

21 C. Luhuo 爐霍. T. Brag 'go. Here, the Chinese manuscript reads *lulei* 廬縹, however this is a print error. The correct Chinese toponym for Drango is *luhuo*. See Fazun 1937a, 29.

22 C. Xiangcheng 鄉城; T. Cha phreng.

23 C. Dege 德格; T. Sde dge.

24 C. Jiangzi 江孜; T. Rgyal rtse.

25 C. Yijiase 亦迦則; T. Gzhis ka rtse.

26 C. Zhemengxiong 哲孟雄; T. 'Bras mo ljongs.

