

Regional Perspectives on the Origin and Early Spread of the Bon Religion based on Core Areas of Monastery Construction across the Tibetan Plateau

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1. Introduction

his study examines the early growth and spread of the Bon religion of Tibet based on mapping the spatial densities of monastery constructions ca. 1000-1240 CE. These historical spatial patterns will also be compared to the earliest Buddhist temple and monastery building activities ca. 600-1240 CE across the Tibetan Plateau. The purpose of this approach is to provide a spatial perspective on how Bon grew and spread by constructing a core-periphery cartographic model of early Bon compared to Buddhist monastic areas. These include 70 Bonpo sites, and 363 Buddhist sites, constructed during the Imperial and Second Diffusion of Buddhism periods. The end date of 1240 is selected based on the beginnings of Mongol incursions and involvement in Tibetan internal politics that witnessed new patterns of patronage and official tolerance of different religious traditions under a 'Pax Mongolica' that altered previous indigenous ways in which the Bonpo and Buddhists spread their networks of temples and monasteries across Tibet.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study relate to Regional Religious Systems, and also the study of Nativism in major religious traditions. As noted by Blezer and Teeuwen, the history of religion includes many cases of emerging traditions claiming distinction from their competitors, while they in fact adopted a great deal of similar doctrines, beliefs, ritual practices, and outlook.¹ Good examples are Shinto in Buddhist Japan, Bön and Buddhist traditions in Tibet, Islam in its Judeo-Christian environment, and perhaps the rise of organized Daoism in China. And, in such competitive fields, there are clashes

¹ Blezer, Henk, and Mark Teeuwen. 2013. *Challenging Paradigms: Buddhism and Nativism Framing Identity Discourse in Buddhist Environments*. Leiden: Brill.

between newly arising universalizing (or proselytic) 'systems' and localising ethnic traditions that claim authority based on being native to the area. In fact, Shinto and Bön are key examples of nativist traditions that were triggered by Buddhism but not subsumed by it. I believe spatial analysis and models offer useful approaches to better understanding these problems, and apply it here to model the early growth of core areas of Bon as an organized monastic tradition in Tibet to discover if there were systemic regional patterns and processes.

2. Regional Religious Systems

An initial theory of Regional Religious Systems was first promulgated as a working definition by Wu, Tong, and Ryavec (2013) based on a study of religion in China:

A Regional Religious System is a type of spatial formation in which a group of related or unrelated religious institutions are conditioned by physical, geographical, administrative, cultural, or socioeconomic systems and are highly dependent on regionally and locally distributed variables such as economy, transportation, education, culture, ethnicity, and language, etc.²

This initial definition highlighted the spatial dependence of religious sites within larger socioeconomic systems and pointed to the regional features of a religious system. In this sense, it was assumed that certain aspects of the late G. W. Skinner's patently spatial research on China's agrarian economy and society, generally referred to as Regional Systems Theory, would likely prove relevant in developing an applied theoretical model of Regional Religious Systems.³

Research on RRS is still in its infancy, and only a small number of related studies have been carried out. Ryavec and Henderson, applied core-periphery theory to study the growth and spread of mosques in China according to core areas to better understand the historical geography of Islam.⁴ But this study did not differentiate mosques in

² Wu, Jiang, Daoqin Tong, and Karl E. Ryavec. 2013. "Spatial Analysis and GIS Modeling of Regional Religious Systems in China: Conceptualization and Initial Experiments," pp. 179-196 in Yongtao Du and Jeff Kyong-McClain (eds.), *Chinese History in Geographical Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

³ See for example: Skinner, George William. 1964/65. "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 24: 3-43, 195-228, 363-399. *The City in Late Imperial China*. 1977. Stanford: Stanford University Press. "Presidential address: The Structure of Chinese History." 1985. *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 2: 271-292.

⁴ Ryavec, Karl Ernest, and Mark Henderson. 2015. A Core-Periphery GIS Model of the Historical Growth and Spread of Islam in China. *Historical Methods* 48:103-111.

any attempt to rank them in importance, such as by number of adherents, or presence of an Islamic school, and so did not contribute towards any greater methodological development of RRS by either borrowing or building upon Skinnerian Regional Systems methodologies. And, while a number of recent studies have conducted important research with georeferenced historical religious data pertaining to China, these studies are based upon observing and commenting on local and regional patterns mapped, and not utilizing GIS to further construct new forms of data (such as core-periphery zones) for spatial analysis.⁵ This present study on the early growth of temple networks of the Bon religion across Tibet builds upon these initial studies by utilizing georeferenced data on Tibetan Buddhist compared to Bonpo temples to identify if there was a systemic core-periphery zoning to each tradition based upon regionally and locally distributed factors, such as ethnicity and language.

A specifically economic approach to explaining how and why some religious traditions gained wider acceptance, and greater politico-economic power in different areas, forms the Economics of Religion approach. Scholars have utilized this line of inquiry to study religious competition in terms of a plurality of religious providers or a monopoly, and to try to understand the pricing of religious goods.⁶ Given that a fundamental building block of Regional Systems Theory is based on Central Place Theory with its focus on the retailing of commercial services and commodities in an open market, the Economics of Religion approach is certainly worth examining to see how it might help improve upon RRS Theory. But there are obvious difficulties in attempting to define a standardized set of the types of 'services' religions offer (such as funerary rites), and how to determine comparative economic or spiritual values to such services between different religions and sects.

To date only one study has applied the Economics of Religion approach to the case of Tibetan Buddhism. In "The Market Approach to the Rise of the Geluk School, 1419-1642" McCleary and van der Kuijp argue that the new Gelukpa sect or school of Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion of the Ganden Podrang government (i.e.

⁵ Chen, Shih-pei. 2016. Remapping Locust Temples of Historical China and the Use of GIS. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 3(2):149-163. Protass, Jason. 2016. Toward a Spatial History of Chan. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 3(2):164-188. Bingenheimer, Marcus. 2016. Knowing the Paths of Pilgrimage. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 3(2):189-222.

⁶ Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. 2002. "Beyond Church and Sect: Dynamics and Stability in Religious Economies." Ted G. Jelen (ed.), *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Ekelund Jr. Robert B., Robert F. Hébert and Robert D. Tollison. 2006. *The Marketplace of Christianity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Kingdom of the Dalai Lamas) of Tibet ca. 1642-1950 due, in part, by introducing new and superior organizational methods (such as celibacy and ordained abbots).⁷ Certainly the Gelukpa increased their political and economic control over more areas through collecting taxes-in-kind from both their own religious estates, and those they confiscated from other sects, but Buddhism became the state religion of Tibet not the Gelukpa sect, which furthermore did not become any sort of religious monopoly. Instead, they became the monopoly sect with an appendage government within a highly decentralized state. Across Tibet, monasteries of the older Tibetan Buddhist sects continued to collect, and retain for themselves, taxes-in-kind from their agricultural estates and agreements with nomads. And, the Tibetan government formally acknowledged the ownerships rights of non-Gelukpa sects to various agricultural estates across Central Tibet.⁸ Furthermore, during the period of their rise, and even when they achieved paramount political power, the Gelukpa were not able to convert adherents in areas they controlled who remained faithful to Bon. For example, some of the Bonpo monasteries converted into Gelukpa establishments as a result of Lhasa's inroads into the Gyelrong (Chinese: Jiarong) region of Sichuan during the Qing period were actually turned back into Bonpo centers in recent decades based on local popular support when many monasteries destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution were restored with government approval during the 1980s.⁹ In other words, the local inhabitants remained true to their long-term traditional Bon faith despite more than one century of Gelukpa overseers. Also, most Tibetan Buddhists do not discriminate among the different schools in seeking religious services, such as naming a newborn child, or arranging funerary services. Farmers and herders across Tibet seek out the services of Buddhist monks and incarnate lamas based primarily on geographic proximity to their homes. A much more relevant application of the Economics of Religion approach to Tibet would be to study how and why certain people converted to Buddhism in the first place while others adopted the new form of organized Bon. Within the market arena of the new Gelukpa sect, any expansion of their control over more agricultural feud lands, or trade marts, was more the result of political and

⁷ McCleary, Rachel M. and Leonard van der Kuijp. The Market Approach to the Rise of the Geluk School, 1419-1642. *Journal of Asian Studies* 69(1):149-180.

⁸ Ryavec, Karl Ernest. 2001. Land Use/Cover Change in Central Tibet, c. 1830-1990: Devising a GIS Methodology to Study a Historical Tibetan Land Decree. *The Geographical Journal* 167:342-357.

⁹ Karmay, Samten G., and Yasuhiko Nagano (eds). 2003. *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Bon Studies 7. Senri Ethnological Reports 38. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

economic intrigues and machinations than due to the Tibetan population following a new sect based on the marketing of more appealing religious products and services.

3. Data

The locations of 70 Bonpo monasteries (Map 1: Bonpo Monasteries Founded ca. 1000 - 1240 CE), and 363 Buddhist monasteries (Map 2: Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries Founded ca 600 - 1240 CE), founded during the Imperial and Second Diffusion of Buddhism periods have been georeferenced to facilitate mapping their spatial densities to discern whether there were distinct core-periphery structures to their patterns of construction. These sites are documented in various works compiled by numerous scholars and research institutions based on field surveys and archival textual materials (Appendix 1: Sources Consulted in Mapping and Documenting Buddhist and Bonpo Temples and Monasteries). Only two of these nineteen sources were published outside of China, and among these the 2003 report “A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya” by Karmay and Nagano specifically focused on the temples and monasteries of the Bon religion. The other survey volumes include both Buddhist and Bonpo sites in their surveys. Also, information about a key Bonpo monastery near the main town in Kyirong county just north of the Nepalese border was only gleaned from Chan’s valuable guidebook to Tibet.¹⁰ The 2003 report likely omitted this site because their researcher could not gain access to this border area the Chinese tightly restrict access to. The monastery in question is named Jadur (Tib. Bya dur), and although Chan could not determine its precise age, he noted that Bonpo pilgrims to Mt. Kailash in western Tibet traditionally obtained barley flour (tsampa) for their journey here, lending me to speculate that it could be an early site due to its location along this ancient trade and pilgrimage route.

I was earlier able to construct a more detailed GIS database of a total of 2,925 Buddhist and Bonpo monasteries from these nineteen sources based on all of the sites documented from ca. 600 to the 1950s, and these data then formed the skeletal framework for my *A Historical Atlas of Tibet*.¹¹ For this reason, the Appendix included here is very detailed and extensive in covering mainly Tibetan and/or Chinese language survey volumes that document Tibetan Buddhist and Bonpo monasteries across different counties, prefectures, and provinces that

¹⁰ Chan, Victor. 1994. *Tibet Handbook*. Chico, CA: Moon Publications.

¹¹ Ryavec, Karl Ernest. 2015. *A Historical Atlas of Tibet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

today cover the Tibetan culture region in China. Readers should refer to these nineteen key sources for detailed information about specific sites.

For mapping the regional densities of the early Bonpo monasteries, I was fortunately able to extend this survey to key areas in northern Nepal thanks to the above-mentioned report by Karmay and Nagano which includes three early Bonpo monasteries in Nepal (two in Dolpo district, and one in Mustang district). In addition, at least one ruined monastery site in Dolpo is believed to date from this early period and is also included. There are also many family temples of the Bon religion in these Himalayan regions of Nepal, though unfortunately they were not included in the 2003 survey so I could not determine if any also date from before the thirteenth century. As far as I can ascertain, no Bonpo monasteries were constructed during the premodern period outside of the current boundaries of China and Nepal, though legends ascribe some Buddhist sites in Ladakh in northern India to earlier Bonpo foundations.

An important aspect of these data documenting the historical Bonpo monasteries mapped in this present study concerns the inclusion of sites no longer extant in Central Tibet and northern Yunnan province of China, as well as sites that were forcibly converted to Tibetan Buddhist sects prior to ca. 1240 CE. The first paramount monastery in the early development of Bon as a formal, organized religion was Yeru Wensakha (gYas ru dBen sa kha). It was constructed on the north bank of the Tsangpo in Central Tibet in 1072, but was destroyed by a flood in 1386, and rebuilt about 10 km to the north as Menri (sMan ri) in the fifteenth century. Also, among a number of Buddhist monasteries destroyed by Mongol supporters of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1674 in northern Yunnan province, four sites are recorded in the 1997 Zhongdian County Gazetteer as having been Bonpo establishments.¹² Considering the possibility that one or more of these monasteries may date from prior to ca. 1250, I have included one of these sites. And, three Bonpo monasteries in present-day Yushu prefecture of Qinghai province are recorded as having been converted to Buddhist establishments during the period of Mongol dominance in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. One of the early Bonpo monasteries in this region was converted to the Drigung Kagyu sect (bum dgon), and two to the Sakya sect (Thub bstan, and Seb mda'). Interestingly, both of these Tibetan Buddhist sects performed roles integral to the Mongol's territorial administration of Tibet, and the conversion of these Bonpo monasteries may have been a form of

¹² Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Difang Zhi Cong Shu. 1997. *Zhongdian Xian Zhi* (Zhongdian County gazetteer). Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe.

reward for the civil services of the Drigungpa and Sakyapa, and likely indicate key locations along trade routes vital to maintaining Mongol control.

To summarize, these data documenting the locations of early Bonpo and Buddhist monasteries of Tibet and the Himalaya are most likely incomplete and fragmentary. Nevertheless, there is value to these data in the rigorous, multi-faceted approach to their collection and recording. Different scholars and teams of official government researchers covered all local administrative districts across the Tibetan Culture Region in China, and that part of Nepal where Bonpo monasteries were also constructed. These specialists consistently applied their efforts to visiting the sites in question, and verifying information collected from local informants with historical texts whenever possible. As a result, even though many early sites may no longer be extant and/or recorded, it is reasonable to assume that the geographic pattern to those sites documented reflect the actual core-periphery structure of their historical locations. In other words, where there used to be many sites, more sites are documented than where there used to be fewer sites, even though the total number of sites is unknown.

4. Methodology

Based on the 70 Bonpo and 363 Buddhist monastery locations, the Kernel density function of ArcGIS (ESRI, Redlands, California) was utilized to map the density surface of sites according to nine zones ranging from an innermost core to an outermost periphery. For any point in space, the Kernel density estimator searches the neighboring monastery sites within a predefined distance range or bandwidth. A value of 300 km was used for this bandwidth function. The densities are mapped in nine zones, though there is no specific number of zones required. But too few zones would not allow specific core areas to be identified within regions, while too many zones would spread the highest density values over a multitude of core zones.

In this survey, each monastery point was weighted (i.e. treated) equally due to the paucity of historical variables pertaining to all sites. Though it would be worthwhile to reexamine these data in the future should more information become available. For example, the number of monks, seats of incarnations housed at each monastery, or presence of specialized colleges such as for medicine or dance, or presence of wood-block printing establishments, would all be worthwhile to attempt to assign weights for either individually or as a complex. For the most part, however, these sorts of specialized institutions within the Bonpo and Buddhist monasteries developed over centuries and

accurate data about them mostly date from the 1500s and later. It would be possible, though, to do this sort of more intricate and nuanced survey for a later point in time, especially for the eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

5. Findings: Core Regions of the Bon Religion Compared to Tibetan Buddhism

The main findings of this study are presented in Map 3: Core Regions of the Bon Religion of Tibet ca. 1200, and Map 4: Core Regions of Tibetan Buddhism ca. 1200. There was a paramount core of early Bonpo monastery constructions across Kham and Amdo in eastern Tibet centered on the Gyelrong (Chinese: Jiarong) region, while Tibetan Buddhist monastery constructions centered on Lhasa and Central Tibet. In addition to these two clearly defined regions of early Bon and Buddhist monastery building activities, each religious tradition also promoted additional temple building in several minor core areas. In the case of Bon, there are also areas of high temple densities in Tsang in Central Tibet, and in the Dolpo and Mustang districts in Nepal. And, in the case of Buddhism, high densities are also discernable in part of western Tibet in the core region of the Guge Kingdom, and in part of Kham. However, it is important to note that the early Tibetan Buddhist temples in areas outside of China today in India, Nepal, and Bhutan are not included in this survey, so it is possible one or more additional minor Buddhist core areas existed during this period too.

Problems in identifying core-periphery zones based on monastic centers of religious traditions point to the need to reassess theoretical tenants borrowed from Regional Systems Theory for formalizing a more robust Regional Religious Systems Theory. The basis of the city-based regional economies of premodern peasant Eurasian civilizations are marketing areas defined by hierarchies of settlements with distinct urban core areas. Certainly, most of the early monasteries of the Bonpo and Buddhists were in agricultural valleys connected by long-distance trade routes. But, it is necessary to question whether these core cultural areas identified by the concentration of agricultural resources and population would have historically developed along the same lines without the presence of these religious institutions? Some speculation in this regard might consider the development of mass-monasticism, with about one-quarter of the male population residing as monks in the monasteries, as integral to the agrarian economy in that multiple sons did not place as much demand on land inheritance, which would have fragmented farming systems more and made them less productive. Also, there is some evidence that the earliest long-distance

trade in tea from China to Tibet, dating from at least ca. 200 CE, was for medicinal and ritualistic purposes.¹³ It was only during the advent of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism ca. 1000 CE that tea became a daily beverage across Tibet, thereby making it a staple item that would have led to large increases in trade volumes. As a result, the Bon and Buddhist monastic traditions diffused largely according to marketing and trade connections across these regional economies of Tibet based not on urban but on their own monastic centers.

To summarize, the Bon monastic systems ca. 1000-1240 CE were based on three regions, which may be termed Gyelrong, Tsang, and Dolpo-Mustang. And, Tibetan Buddhist monastic systems during approximately the same period were based on the three macroregions of U-Tsang (Central Tibet), Guge, and Kham. These core regions of monastery constructions illustrate important geographical differences between the early development of Bon and Buddhism. Based on these findings, I believe the most important factors that explain the historical social processes that led to these spatial patterns are: 1) areas where different Tibetic and non-Tibetic, specifically Gyalrongic, languages were spoken, and 2) the Imperial territorial administration of Central Tibet ca. 600 – 900 CE, and subsequently that of the Guge Kingdom in Western Tibet ca. 900 – 1240 CE. Environmental factors, such as land cover patterns, do not appear relevant given that both Bon and Buddhist monasteries were founded in different ecoregions, such as in forested valleys and alpine meadows.

Tibetic and non-Tibetic Language Areas

Language appears to be one of the most important factors in the locations of monastery building activities of the Bonpo and the Buddhists. The core area of the Bonpo in eastern Tibet is centered on Gyelrong to southern Amdo near the bend of the Yellow river,

¹³ Lu, Houyuan, Jianping Zhang, Yimin Yang, Xiaoyan Yang, Baiqing Xu, Wuzhan Yang, Tao Tong, Shubo Jin, Caiming Shen, Huiyun Rao, Xingguo Li, Hongliang Lu, Dorian Q. Fuller, Luo Wang, Can Wang, Deke Xu, and Naiqin Wu. 2016. "Earliest Tea as Evidence for one Branch of the Silk Road across the Tibetan Plateau." *Scientific Reports* 6, article no. 18955. According to John Vincent Bellezza's review of this report in the April 2016 issue of *Flight of the Khyung* (www.tibetarchaeology.com), tea in the Gurgyam burial in Western Tibet was accompanied by vegetal traces (lemma phytoliths) of barley (*Hordeum vulgare*). And, this seems to document the presence of what is called *pak* (*spag*), a staple food in historical-era Tibet, consisting of tea and parched barley meal kneaded together into a paste. It is likely that this edible mixture was deposited in the tomb as provisions for the dead in the afterlife, as part of an elaborate series of funerary rites. The use of barleycorn and barley cakes in funerary rites is attested in Old Tibetan literature.

specifically the agricultural valleys of the upper Dadu watershed in the present-day counties of Jinchuan (Tib. Chuchen) and Barkham, and the grasslands of Hongyuan, and Dzoge. In Jinchuan and Barkham, The Gyalrongic (Chinese: Jiarong) language is spoken.¹⁴ The Gyalrongic language, and its close neighbor Qiangic, are widely considered Tibeto-Burman subgroups that have been heavily influenced by Classical Literary Tibetan, and together with the southern Himalayan Bodish languages of Nepal, India, and Bhutan can be considered to belong to the “Tibetosphere” (Tournadre 2013).¹⁵ In fact, Gyalrongic language speakers became classified as ethnic Tibetans by the Chinese state in the 1950s, while the Qiangic language speakers to the east and closer to Agrarian China obtained their own Qiang *Minzu*, or Nationality, designation.

Unfortunately, I am not aware of detailed linguistic maps of the non-Tibetic languages spoken across Tibet, as it would be interesting to see if any such pockets occur in the other Bon cores in Tsang, and Dolpo-Mustang. It is also possible, even if those adherents of Bon in these areas now speak Tibetic languages as it generally the case in Tsang, that in pre-historical times up to the Second Diffusion of Buddhism many spoke non-Tibetic languages. This is certainly an area that requires further research.

The Imperial and Guge Kingdom Territorial Administrations

In addition to language differences, some of the reasons that led to the spatial patterns of the core areas of Bon monastery constructions relate to the areal extents of the Imperial (ca. 600-900) administration in Central Tibet, and the Guge Kingdom's administration in western Tibet after ca. 900. These territorial administrations are important for explaining the absence of Bonpo monasteries in western Tibet, considering the numerous historical accounts that Bon was the religious tradition of Zhangzhung as this region was called during the Imperial period and earlier. The Tibetan Empire annexed Zhangzhung in the 640s, though Guge maintained the name of Zhangzhung by which it was called well into the historical period until its fall in 1630. During the aftermath of empire and the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, the pro-Buddhist Guge kingdom was the only strong, centralized kingdom on the Tibetan Plateau, and as such was able to prevent

¹⁴ Wurm, S. A., Rong Li, Theo Baumann, and Mei W. Lee. 1987. *Language Atlas of China*. Hong Kong: Longman.

¹⁵ Tournadre, Nicolas. 2013. “The Tibetic Languages and their Classification,” pp. 105-130. In Thomas Owen-Smith and Nathan Hill (eds), *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics: Historical and Descriptive Linguistics of the Himalayan Area*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Bonpo monasteries from being constructed anywhere in its territory. It is reasonable to assume that, in the absence of a strong pro-Buddhist political administration, some Bonpo monasteries would have been constructed in western Tibet. The locations of the Bonpo monasteries in Eastern Tibet, and the Himalayan frontier, are less problematic in this regard given the lack of strong centralized pro-Buddhist polities there. Similarly, Central Tibet lacked any regional form of government in the post-Imperial period, and instead was characterized by various local centers of the new Buddhist sects and schools. And, there is evidence the Bonpo monasteries in Tsang were constructed in areas with relatively weak pro-Buddhist local sentiment. Only in areas where the Tibetan Royal Court (Pho brang) had not seasonally resided, nor where the Council ('Dun ma) had met, were Bonpo monasteries subsequently constructed leading to one of the core regions of Bon (Ryavec 2015).¹⁶ These patterns indicate the local populations in these areas may have been ethnically different from the clans that gained prestige by inviting the Emperor and his court to stay on their lands. This movable court was based in a tent encampment that generally shifted between summer and winter sites.

6. Conclusion: Geographic Perspectives on the Origins of Bon

The most important finding of this study is that the paramount core region of Bon was centered in eastern Tibet in Gyelrong where non-Tibetic languages were spoken. Of course, these patterns do not prove that most early adherents of Bon prior to ca. 1000 CE were largely non-Tibetic language speakers, but they do indicate this is a serious possibility, and that there was a certain amount of cultural difference between them and the Tibetans further to the west in Kham, Central Tibet, and western Tibet who largely converted to Buddhism. It is also clear that the local population in Gyelrong were largely adherents of Bon by the fall of the Tibetan Empire considering how many Bonpo monasteries were constructed ca. 1000-1200 CE. It is not reasonable to assume, as many scholars have speculated, that Bonpo refugees from Central Tibet or Zhangzhung during the Imperial period and aftermath of empire could have persuaded an entire regional population to suddenly support their religion, instead of Buddhism, or even Daoism, to such a great extent by giving lands, building materials, and the great amount of labor required to construct the monasteries. In this regard it is intriguing that Nicolas Tournadre, a

¹⁶ Refer to Map 14 "Central Tibet, 650-764: Annual sites of the royal court and council" in *A Historical Atlas of Tibet* by Karl E. Ryavec. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

leading expert on the Tibetic languages, considers it a very probably hypothesis that some of the Tibetic languages spoken on the grasslands to the north of Gyelrong (but still within the paramount core region of Bon), such as Khalong, have a Qiangic substratum.¹⁷ If this is the case, it would lend even more credence to this line of speculation. In this sense, we may view the Bon religion by ca. 1000 CE as both a form of Tibetan Buddhism and thus a Universalizing religion, that in some way appealed to Gyalrongic and Qiangic language speakers, and as an ethnic religion that resisted conversions to the standard forms of Tibetan Buddhism taught by Tibetic language speakers.

In light of these findings, I would propose a theory that Bon already was an ethnic religion by the Imperial period. If Bon was an ethnic religion, this might help to explain why Buddhism mainly appealed to non-Bon adherents in Tibet beginning in the Imperial period, and reached a mass conversion state by the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, when as we have seen the monastery became important in facilitating increased economic trade, and promoting agricultural growth by providing the option of monkhood to the extra sons of farming families. According to Samuel (1990), the content of early Bonpo texts appears more distinctive from that of early Buddhist (i.e. *chos pa*) texts, and there is some historical reality to placing the origin of Bon religious teachings in pre-Imperial Zhangzhung and countries to the west.

The Tibetan Grasslands as the First Silk Roads

The spatial patterns to the core areas of Bon also indicate long-distance trade connections from Sichuan to South Asia and Persia. Unlike the so-called 'Silk Road' for which the term was coined in the nineteenth century to refer to the long-distance trade routes between China and South and Western Asia that ran from Han and Tang China through the Tarim Basin, the Sichuan to India routes via Kham and Central Tibet developed much earlier because they are shorter, and offer water and pasturage for livestock year-round. Also, recent research findings have found that some pre-Buddhist cultural and religious sites of the Bronze and Iron Age periods on the Tibetan Plateau were located in the viewsheds of long-distance least-cost paths in wholly pastoral

¹⁷ Tournadre, Nicolas. 2014. "The Tibetic Languages," pp. 26-29. In Karl E. Ryavec, *A Historical Atlas of Tibet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

regions.¹⁸

It is possible the earliest contacts ca. 2000-1500 BCE between East Asia, and South and Western Asia, during the Bronze Age Shu civilization of the Sichuan Basin and early Indian and Harrapan civilizations, was facilitated, in part, by people who lived and travelled between areas that became these later Bon cores. Over time, these various peoples could have started to share aspects of language, ethnicity, and religion, as a result of long-distance trade contacts. Also, for people who became familiar with these overland routes from Sichuan to South Asia via Central Tibet, it would have been advantageous to develop family connections at key staging places along the way through marriage alliances. Family connections are repeatedly mentioned as key factors in the spread of the later Bon teachings during the period of monastery constructions, with esteemed teachers from Central and Western Tibet coming to Gyelrong and the Himalaya. And, to this day, many adherent of Bon in Gyelrong and Amdo have maintained the practice of marrying Bonpo from Tsang.

The Tibet routes would have been faster and safer for travel and trade between Sichuan and India prior to the Han period than the Tarim Basin routes to the north. Note how the Chinese were not able to secure the Tarim Basin route until the Han period when they finally possessed the resources of an empire strong enough to extend the Great Wall westwards with limes and watchtowers through the Gansu Corridor and into the Tarim Basin, and to support agricultural colonies there. The Chinese also needed to be wary of nomadic groups, such as the Xiongnu and Qiang, who could easily harass caravans along the Gansu Corridor from regions of relative security on the Tibetan and Mongolian plateaus. Whereas, in contrast, the routes from Sichuan to India via Kham and Central Tibet would have been safer for peoples of the Tibetan plateau because the sheer remoteness and distances involved made it much more difficult for hostile groups to harass the caravans. And, the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau provided pack animals with ample water and forage year-round in stark contrast to the lack of water and forage along the desert stretches between oases in the Gansu Corridor and Tarim Basin.

We know that by ca. 350 BCE, silk fabric of ancient Shu (i.e. Sichuan) became a valuable trade and marketing item in India from the Sanskrit

¹⁸ Ryavec, Karl E. 2018. "GIS Derived Viewsheds of Mountaintop Tombs in Western Tibet: A Preliminary Survey. *IEEE Xplore Digital Library* pp. 1-4. DOI: 10.23919/PNC.2018.8579467.

Arthashastra text written around this time.¹⁹ It is clear this trade in general ran from Southwest China to India over the Tibetan-Burman highlands. And while the bulk of this trade likely went via Yunnan into Assam to reach India, it is also reasonable to assume that some went via Eastern Tibet to Central Tibet, and thence along Himalayan routes to India, while some continued westwards to Zhangzhung and beyond. According to the great Chinese historian Sima Qian, information about this older, Tibeto-Burman trade route came from the report submitted to Emperor Han Wudi by Zhang Qian, who, as an ambassador of the Han court, had been sent to the West to establish an alliance with the Dayuezhi against the Xiongnu in 139-126 BCE. Zhang Qian states that he was surprised to have found in Daxia (Bactria) bamboo sticks from Qiong, and cloth from Shu, both in present-day Sichuan province in China.²⁰ The Bactrians told him that these goods had come from a country called Shendu (i.e. India) and provided some new information to the Han about it.

Over time, certainly by the Tang to Song periods in China, long-distance trade in tea from Southwest China across the Tibetan Plateau would have further benefited the economic base of the later core region of Bon in Gyelrong and bordering parts of Kham and Amdo. From a long-term perspective on Chinese history, what is fascinating about the Gyelrong Bon core is that it formed a 'folk fortress' that was never directly incorporated into Chinese territorial administrations from the Qin annexation of the Sichuan Basin ca. 350 BCE, until the Qing period in the eighteenth century when the Jinchuan Wars were fought to subdue Bonpo polities.

It is clear the Bon religion inherited a great deal of cultural traditions from Tibet's neighboring civilizations, particularly China, Persia and the Indus Valley. The reputed founder of Bon was Shenrab Miwo (gShen rab mi bo), but there are no sources with which to establish his historicity, and many scholars dismiss this figure as a later invention because he occupies a position very similar to that of Sakyamuni in Buddhism. Bonpo tradition also claims that the ultimate source of Bon is the land of Olmo Lungring, which appears to mean literally 'Long Valley of Ol-mo' (Karmay 1998).²¹ Most scholars are

¹⁹ Duan, Yu. 2016. "Unfolding the Westerly Transmission of Chinese Silk", pp. 16-23, in Paramita Mukherjee, Arnab K. Deb, and Miao Pang (eds.), *China and India: History, Culture, Cooperation and Competition*. London: Sage.

²⁰ Yang, Juping. 2013. The Relations Between China and India and the Opening of the Southern Silk Road During the Han Dynasty. *The Silk Road* 11:82-92.

²¹ Karmay, Samten G. 1998. "Extract from A General Introduction to the History and Doctrine of Bon," pp. 104-156, in Samten G. Karmay (author), *The Arrow and the*

convinced this sacred land, if it really existed, was likely somewhere in South Asia, Persia, or Central Asia. I, however, would venture the possibility that Olmo Lungring may have referred to Gyelmorong in Eastern Tibet, because this is where the paramount Bon core developed when the Bonpo tradition of this sacred land began. There is no factual evidence from recovered manuscripts or inscriptions that indicate the existence of the name or even the notion of Olmo Lungring as a sacred land of Bon before ca. 1000 CE. Gyelmorong is characterized by a long valley formed by the Gyalmo Ngul Chu (Chinese: Dadu river), and sounds closer to Olmo Lungring than any of the other possible candidates proposed to the west of Tibet.

It is possible, over time, the ethnic make-up and shared religious traditions of the Bonpo became more developed as a way to maintain their distinctiveness and group solidarity to protect their economic niches along the ancient trade-routes from Sichuan to India and Persia. But the Islamic conquests by ca. 1000 CE across South and Western Asia closed off any possible remaining cultural links and family ties. Ethnic differences would also explain why pro-Buddhist Tibetans discriminated against Bonpo when and where they could in not allowing them to construct their monasteries in the Guge Kingdom, and parts of Central Tibet. In this sense, the Bonpo by ca. 1000 CE may well have come closer to Buddhist outlooks in their worldviews, even though their ancestors may have held other beliefs, but this may not have been enough to alter their ethnicity vis-à-vis those Tibetans who started to convert to the more international form of Buddhism that became a Universalizing Religion.

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Kham and Amdo

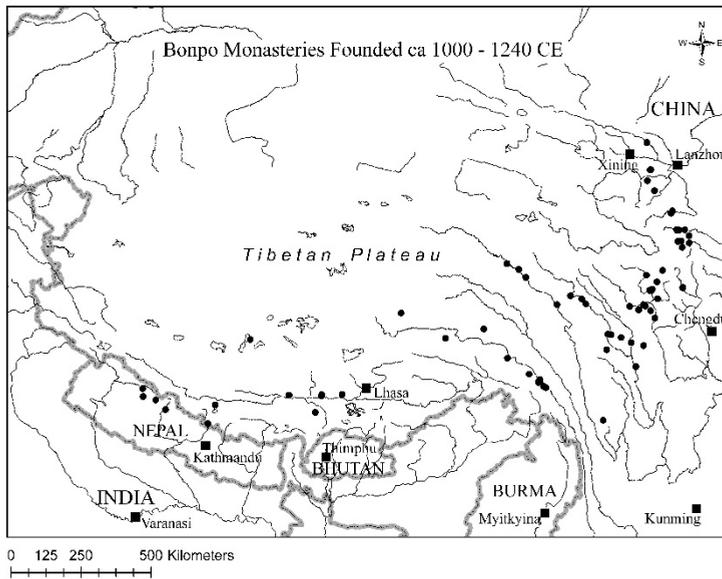
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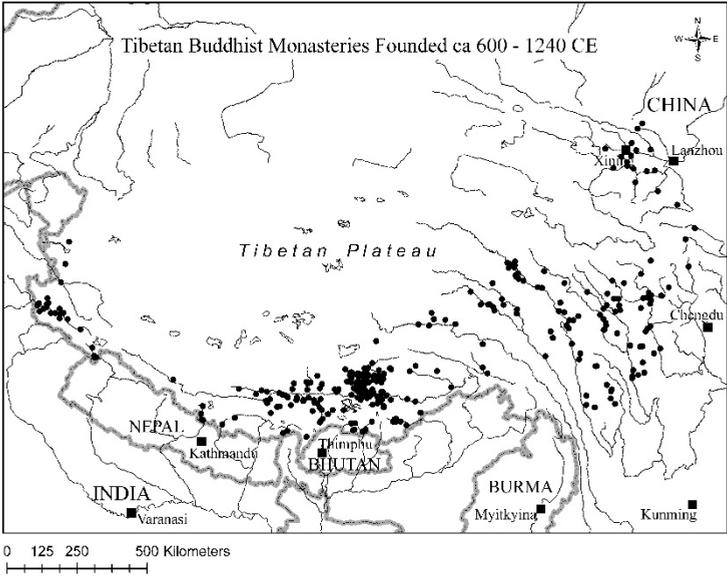


Legend

■ City

• Bonpo Monastery

----- Contemporary State Boundary/Line of Control



Legend

- City
- Tibetan Buddhist Monastery
- Contemporary State Boundary/Line of Control

