

# Latent Modernisation in Traditional Tibet: An Essay on the Evolution of Land Lease Systems in Tibetan Rural Society

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## *Introduction*

**A**lthough much has been written about the social system in traditional Tibet,<sup>1</sup> many topics remain to be investigated. Among these, the land lease system suffers a lack of scholarly attention, despite its being an indispensable part of the rural economy of traditional Tibetan society. The present article aims to shed new light on the rural history of Central Tibet during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by examining a particular land leasing institution, known as *zhing skal*, that was locally practised in Mal gro gung dkar, a region located 100 kilometres northeast of Lhasa.

The reasons for investigating such a system, and others related to it, are manifold, as land lease practices reflected the changes undergone at a local level by pre-modern Tibetan institutions. In an effort to establish a typology of villages and social organisations, previous scholarship presented a rather static picture of traditional Tibet,<sup>2</sup> overlooking aspects of social change that might have affected their structure. The *zhing skal* institution is clearly an instance of such neglected factors, as it experienced continuous transformations and development throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, a close examination of this system provides important insights into the intertwining of social change and “modernisation”, since the evolution of *zhing skal* followed an inconspicuous yet important land reformation that facilitated a more balanced relationship between landlords and their dependant peasants.

In the present article, I will firstly argue for the existence of a

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<sup>1</sup> We can list studies by Goldstein (1968, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1971d, 1973, 1986), French (2002), Fjeld (2005), Bischoff (2013), and Gurung (2016) as examples of important achievements in this field. In the present article, “traditional Tibetan society” indicates Central Tibetan society under the rule of the Dalai Lama’s government, and most of the cases examined date to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Goldstein (1968, 1971a), French (2002).

nascent form of a voluntary modernisation movement within traditional Tibet and provide a dynamic picture of the changing social system. Secondly, due to the extremely local nature of this institution (to the best of my knowledge unique in the whole Tibet), this study will also present a specific local history, thus enriching our knowledge of the socio-economic and legal conditions in force under the Dalai Lama's government. Thirdly, the choice of such a peculiar case study will illuminate the existence of a contract-based economy, thus supporting the argument for an understanding of pre-modern rural economy as a variable mixture of contractual and corvée economies.<sup>3</sup>

Previous studies of Tibetan rural history insist that the basic economic relationship within a *gzhis ka*, or manorial estate, was based on a corvée economy.<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that Melvyn Goldstein, a leading figure in this field, carefully distinguishes between manorial estates and *grong gseb*, or autonomous villages.<sup>5</sup> I will here argue that such aspects of contract-based economy may be found even in manorial estates where the corvée principle seems dominant.

With these points in mind, I will now proceed to reconstruct the institution of *zhing skal* in the Mal gro gung dkar region, and to discuss social change, especially within a rural setting, and the peculiar form of Tibet's grass-roots modernisation process.

*Basic premises: source, name, place, and estate system*

Before delving any deeper in the matter at hand, a few words on the source of this study and the land lease system are in order. I will also provide some background information on the Mal gro gung dkar region and the basic structure of manorial estate villages in traditional Tibet.

As previously hinted, much of the relevance of the *zhing skal* system lies in its relative neglected status in both Western and present-day Chinese scholarship. Interestingly, Chinese scholars had recorded some information about this institution in the 1950s, but regrettably they did so in a non-systematic, fragmented, and confusing way. Such materials, collected by Chinese ethnographers in the course of fieldworks carried out in Central Tibet in the 1950s, were later published in *Zangzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* ("Research on Tibetan Society and History", hereafter *ZSLD*), a six-volume report which constitutes an

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<sup>3</sup> Okawa (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Goldstein (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Goldstein (1968, 1971a). For an evaluation of this dichotomy between a manorial estate and an autonomous village, see also Okawa (2018).

important corpus of instances of rural life in traditional Tibetan society.<sup>6</sup>

Since *ZSLD* was written in Chinese, no proper Tibetan spellings were given in most cases. That is unfortunately the case for the land lease system that is the subject of this study: *ZSLD* transliterates as *xin-gui* (新桂), a term that I reconstructed as a rendition of the Tibetan *zhing skal*, in accordance with the corpus' claim that the meaning of the word was "divided field".<sup>7</sup>

*Zhing skal* seems to be a locally specific custom practised in Mal gro gung dkar: when the *ZSLD* team conducted their research there in the 1950s, the Dalai Lama's government possessed seven villages out of 82 in the region.<sup>8</sup> Aristocrats and monasteries occupied most of the arable lands in Mal gro gung dkar: amongst these, the aristocratic household Hor khang and the 'Bri gung monastery had the largest estates and were the most powerful land-owners.<sup>9</sup> For the sake of convenience, the region is here divided into two parts, one in the south-west and one in the north-east, each identified with the entity that controlled the largest portion of their land, namely the Hor khang (south-west) and the 'Bri gung (north-east). Although *zhing skal* was practised in both areas, the form and management of this system shows clear differences, a fact that raises interesting questions in terms of social change in pre-modern Tibet. According to *ZSLD*, the *zhing skal* system was first introduced in the 'Bri gung area where it underwent some transformations in the course of its long history.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, *zhing skal* seems to be a relatively new custom in the Hor khang area, and that allowed for its original structure to be preserved as late as the 1950s.

In advocating the importance of distinguishing between a manorial estate and an autonomous village, Goldstein defined the first as "an estate divided into demesne and tenement lands with attached serfs".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Okawa (2014, 2016a) for an analysis of this report. Please note that the Chinese title of the report has been erroneously presented as *XSLD* (Ch. *Xizang Shehui Lishi Diaocha*) in Okawa (2014). Here I correct it as *ZSLD* (Ch. *Zangzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha*).

<sup>7</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 113. The term was also listed in major dictionaries such as Zhang (ed. 1993) and Goldstein (ed. 2001) as "allotted field". Note that the editors of the new-reprinted version of the reports gave the Tibetan spelling for the word as *zhing rgod* (*ZSLD*, v. 1: 113). That seems, however, highly unlikely. Further research is admittedly needed to address the proper spelling. It is also worth being noted that this word might have many variants; such is the case for many terms in official documents.

<sup>8</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 53.

<sup>9</sup> The power balance between the Tibetan government and local powers, such as aristocrats and monasteries, is discussed in Goldstein (1971d, 1973) and Okawa (2016b).

<sup>10</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein (1968: 104).

All of the serfs, or dependant peasants, owed many obligations, including the duty of cultivating the landlords' personal fields (demesne fields) in return for the permission to cultivate tenement fields from which the peasantry derived their subsistence.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the landlords exchanged recognition of peasants' tenement land tenures in return for unpaid labour on their demesne fields. This picture clearly shows a strong similarity to the so-called "classical" estate system in the Western Middle Ages,<sup>13</sup> or a close connection with Leninist ideas of a pure *corvée* economy.<sup>14</sup>

The barter exchange between land tenure and unpaid labour as mediated by a demesne-tenement relationship was not a free contract, but a compulsory and asymmetrical one. From the landlords' point of view, such *corvée* system was well-suited to the traditional rural Tibetan economy and ecology: it has been frequently pointed out in previous scholarship that, when suffering from a chronic lack of labour forces, landlords tended to seek people rather than land in traditional Tibet.<sup>15</sup> In light of this, land-owners aimed to minimise human costs in various ways, the *corvée* or demesne-tenement relationship being one of them. In such an unbalanced power relationship, the landlords were liberated from the task of taking care of their dependant peasants' subsistence (contrary to slavery), a situation that enabled them to save the human cost of managing the everyday life of their dependant peasants. In return for this, the landlords renounced to a portion of the harvest,<sup>16</sup> lending a portion of their land to their dependant peasants as tenement fields. This barter principle minimised the interactions between the landlords and their dependant peasants and was therefore conducive an efficient workload management. Due to a general underdevelopment of social communication, lack of governance technology, and chronic lack of human resources caused by several ecological limitations, this *laissez-faire*, low-cost principle gradually became one of the most basic tenets of Tibetan rural economy. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, acknowledging the existence of such principle

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<sup>12</sup> Goldstein (1989: 3)

<sup>13</sup> Arable fields of manorial estates in early Medieval Europe were "divided into two closely interdependent parts. On the one hand there was the demesne, known also to historians as the 'reserve', all the produce of which was taken directly by the lord; on the other hand there were the tenements, small or medium-sized peasant holdings [...]" (Bloch 1989: 241).

<sup>14</sup> "The entire land of a given unit of agrarian economy i.e. of a given estate, was divided into the lords' land and the peasants' land" (Lenin 1972: 191).

<sup>15</sup> Bell (1994: 29), Samuel (1993: 61–62). Samuel, inspired by Tambiah's famous thesis on Southeast Asian kingship (1976), pointed out this divergence between the rule over peasants and the rule over land in the Tibetan context (1993: 69).

<sup>16</sup> Goldstein remarks that from two third to one half of the estate was demesne, and the remaining was the tenement in general (1989: 3).

is functional to any discourse on social change in traditional Tibet.

With these premises in mind, I will now turn my attention to the land lease systems in general, and the *zhing skal* in particular.

*Land lease systems in traditional Tibet*

*Village lease and sublease*

Land lease systems prevailed in the traditional Tibetan rural society.<sup>17</sup> At first glance, lease systems contradict the notion of a corvée economy, since lands were mainly leased through a contract. However, the lease systems practised in traditional Tibet were not an exception or deviation from the barter-based, laissez-faire, and low-cost principle that dominated the rural economy of pre-modern Tibet: on the contrary, land leases were another effective way of minimising the management costs without decreasing the income gained from the field. Since many types of land lease systems other than *zhing skal* existed, I will discuss each of them in turn.

Leased land was not only limited to a small piece of field within a village; in many cases, a village in its entirety was also leased. Before examining the land lease systems within villages, I will briefly describe such whole-village leases, or *gzhis bogs*,<sup>18</sup> by presenting the case of Blon po *gzhis ka*, a government estate in the Mal gro gung dkar region that had been leased to Yon tan, a local taxpayer peasant (*khral pa*).<sup>19</sup>

Blon po *gzhis ka* was a manorial estate that included both demesne and tenement fields and totalled 295 *khal* of demesne field and 120 *khal* of tenement field. One *khal* of barley is equivalent to approximately 14 kilograms. When it is used to specify an area in an agricultural field, one *khal* indicates the area in which one *khal* of seed grain could be sown. As such, the actual area of one *khal* of land would differ tremendously according to its fertility. Yon tan had to pay 1,000-*srang* monetary leasing fee (roughly equivalent to the price of 295 *khal* of barley grain in the 1950s) to the government annually. As is calculated, the leasing fee was one *khal* of grain for one *khal* of land per year. Yon tan could resort to the corvée labour of the eight families of inner taxpayers (*nang khral pa*)<sup>20</sup> in the estate. However, these labour forces of his

<sup>17</sup> When referring to the institution of “human lease”, Goldstein simply states that “the most common item leased in Tibet was agricultural land” (1971b: 526), a claim that was no further discussed.

<sup>18</sup> *gzhis* indicates estate or manorial estate, and *bogs* means lease.

<sup>19</sup> For *khral pa*, or taxpayer, and other social stratifications in Tibetan commoners, see Goldstein (1971a, 1971b) and Okawa (2014).

<sup>20</sup> The inner tax (*nang khral*) was a tax paid directly to the lord in each village or estate. Usually the inner tax was performed as unpaid labour service on the landlord’s demesne field. Inner taxpayers (*nang khral pa*) were those who belonged to a land

inner taxpayers were not enough to cultivate his 295 *khal* of demesne field. Therefore, he also had to rely on other labour forces existing in the estate, namely, other eight families of *du gnam* (landless outsider labourers) who were working on Yon tan's demesne field based on annual contract base.<sup>21</sup>

All of the harvest from the demesne field went to Yon tan, who paid the leasing fee to the government from the demesne land's profit. In a sense, Yon tan internally ruled over and managed the estate as if he was the estate's owner. Interestingly, on top of the demesne fields and tenement lands, the Blon po estate included roughly other 500 *khal* of field, which were cultivated by four families of taxpayers. They were not dependent on Yon tan and had almost nothing to do with the management of the latter's demesne field.<sup>22</sup> Their only obligation consisted in the payment of an "outer tax" (*phyi khral*), in the form of transportation service for government purposes,<sup>23</sup> and they therefore belonged to the category of "outer taxpayers" (*phyi khral pa*).<sup>24</sup> Out of the four families, only one belonged to the Blon po estate, the others being the subjects of different landowners. Since their 500 *khal* of field was too large to be cultivated by only four families, they tried to hire the before-mentioned eight families of *du gnam*.

This kind of whole-village lease was virtually omnipresent in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Central Tibet, and especially in Mal gro gung dkar. For example, of the seven government estates of the region, six were leased out: five to taxpayer peasants who resided in their respective estates and one to two parties, namely a local taxpayer peasant and the Thar pa monastery.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that 85 percent of the government lands were neither autonomous villages nor directly under the management of the government. This whole-village lease was certainly widespread, so much so that there even existed a village

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where they owed an obligation to pay an inner tax. For more on inner taxpayer, see Okawa (2014).

<sup>21</sup> For *du gnam*, see Okawa (2016c). Note that since other employers (four families of outer taxpayers) were also existed in this estate, not all the labour forces of these eight families of *dud chung* were contracted to working on the Yon tan's demesne fields.

<sup>22</sup> They provided unpaid labour on Yon tan's demesne field for only one day per year. That was nothing more than a residual custom of a symbolic act of showing respect for bsTan rgyal gling monastery, former owner of this estate up to 1899; the estate was later confiscated by the government in the aftermath of the De mo incident (ZSLD, v. 1: 171).

<sup>23</sup> In pre-modern Tibet, any tax directly paid to the government was known as "outer tax" (*phyi khral*).

<sup>24</sup> For outer tax, inner tax, outer taxpayer, and inner taxpayer, see Okawa (2014, 2016a).

<sup>25</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 61–62.

sublease system, as demonstrated by the case of the Gyaka estate.<sup>26</sup> Owned by the dGa' ldan bla spyi, the managing office of dGa' ldan monastery, this religious estate held 800 *khal* of demesne fields originally attached to the monastic establishment. In the past it had been leased to a soldier of the Dalai Lama's bodyguard regiment, who had to pay, according to the original contract, 1,000 *khal* of grain per year. However, the soldier subleased the estate to the dGa' ldan byang rtse college (*grwa tshang*), which dispatched two monks to act as estate managers and collect the harvest from the demesne field, in addition to other corvée services. From these incomes, the dGa' ldan byang tshe college paid 1,000 *khal* of grain to the dGa' ldan bla spyi as a leasing fee and 150 *khal* of grain to the soldier as a middle margin fee, or *gzhog bogs*. At the soldier's death, the right of earning a subleasing fee was inherited by one of his relatives, a monk official.<sup>27</sup> These examples show that whole-village leases were commonly practised across many levels of society.

#### *Bog zhing and phyed shad*

In addition to the entire-village lease system, there also existed several land lease customs which were practised on a more basic level and had as object of lease a small lots of arable field; instances of such systems were *bog zhing*, *phyed shad*,<sup>28</sup> and *zhing skal*. Whereas the first two (*bog zhing* and *phyed shad*) were common throughout Central Tibet, the third (*zhing skal*) was only practised in Mal gro gung dkar. Before discussing the characteristics of *zhing skal* and its role in Tibetan rural economy, I will examine the first two.

Both *bog zhing* and *phyed shad* were widely practised in Central Tibet, as the presence of these terms in present-day dictionaries demonstrates. Goldstein renders *bog zhing* as "leased field".<sup>29</sup> However, this term not only indicated the object of lease but also the leasing system itself: as recorded in a *bog zhing* contract, the tenant had an obligation towards the lender to pay a fixed amount of crop (which was decided in prior negotiations) as a leasing fee. Goldstein's translation of *phyed shad* presents a more detailed definition as a "lease system where half of the crop from the field goes to the owner".<sup>30</sup> In view of this, I will use *bog zhing* and *phyed shad* as "fixed crop land lease contract" and "half crop land lease contract", respectively. To closer inspect these two systems, I will now examine the internal land structure of rNam

<sup>26</sup> I could not identify the original Tibetan spelling.

<sup>27</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 60.

<sup>28</sup> Many variants existed for the term, such as *phyed*, *shas*, and *shad*.

<sup>29</sup> Goldstein (2001: 725).

<sup>30</sup> Goldstein (2001: 698).

sras gling gzhis ka, the estate of the aristocrat rNam sras gling, which was located in the Lho kha region in the southern part of Central Tibet.

Since the structure of the rNam srad gling estate has been discussed in previous studies,<sup>31</sup> a few words of introduction will suffice here. Out of 1,522 *khal* of arable fields, the landlord rNam srad gling possessed 1,191 *khal*. The remaining 331 *khal* of fields were owned by the Dalai Lama's government and other aristocrats and monasteries. rNam srad gling's fields were divided into four parts according to their roles in the management of the estate: 501 *khal* were demesne fields, whilst 571 *khal* were provided to the dependant peasants as tenement fields. The remaining 119 *khal* functioned as leased fields, with 90 *khal* given as *bog zhing*, or fixed crop land lease contract lands, and 29 *khal* as *phyed shad*, or half crop land lease contract lands.<sup>32</sup> These two fields were exclusively used for land lease purposes and the tenements of these fields were always rNam srad gling's dependant peasants who cultivated the demesne fields of the estate. In the case of *bog zhing*, the landlord required four to six *khal* of grain in return for one *khal* of leased field. The rate of the leasing fee was decided in advance according to the fertility of the land. At first glance, this leasing fee seems relatively hefty for the tenant,<sup>33</sup> yet, according to ZSLD, the peasants still preferred this system to the corvée labour one, as they said that "cultivating *bog zhing* is better than corvée farming, since there is no need to perform many other corvée obligations", and they further confessed to prefer *phyed shad* system to *bog zhing*: "cultivating *phyed shad* is far better than cultivating *bog zhing*, since there is no need to worry about a bad harvest year".<sup>34</sup>

The peasants' preference for *phyed shad* to *bog zhing* is interesting and worthy of consideration. Since fixed amount leasing fees (such as *bog zhing*) allowed tenant peasants to accumulate surplus products more easily than the fixed rate leasing fees (such as *phyed shad*), *bog zhing* would seem to be a preferable contract, as it is conducive to individual economic gains. Tibetan peasants' preference for economic stability rather than speculative economic management is a clear indication of their basic economic attitudes, which strongly remind the moral economy of peasants discussed by James Scott.<sup>35</sup> As such, the existence of the land lease system gave peasants some, albeit limited,

<sup>31</sup> Okawa (2014).

<sup>32</sup> ZSLD, v. 2: 99–100.

<sup>33</sup> ZSLD records many sowing ratios in Central Tibet in the 1950s. The average was from six to ten for barley, meaning that six to ten *khal* of barley could be obtained from one *khal* of seed crop (or one *khal* of land). Other sources say that, in general, the leasing fee for one *khal* of land was from two to three *khal* of barley grain; see, for instance, Wang (1989: 34).

<sup>34</sup> ZSLD, v. 2: 99–100.

<sup>35</sup> Scott (1977).



alternatives in their labour management strategies. Furthermore, it has been already noted that the lease fields within the estate were separated from the landlord's demesne fields and treated as a distinct object of contract. Thus, their existence signified in itself the birth of a nascent contract economy within the midst of demesne field, the centre of a corvée economy. With these points in mind, we now turn our attention to the main focus of this article, the system of *zhing skal*.

*The institution of zhing skal*

*Zhing skal in the Hor khang area*

Although specific to the Mal gro gung dkar region, the practice of *zhing skal* presented a certain complexity and several local differentiations. The compilers of ZSLD failed to provide a clear explanation of such a system diversity; consequently, it is necessary to distinguish between at least two of the various types of *zhing skal* in force in the region, namely the form of *zhing skal* practised in the Hor khang area and that observed in the 'Bri gung area. According to ZSLD, the institution of *zhing skal* was first introduced in the 'Bri gung fields, and only later implemented in the Hor khang-owned ones. Since the custom had experienced a long history of development and change in the 'Bri gung area, *zhing skal* practiced there was complex and included many variants. Any analysis of *zhing skal* in 'Bri gung therefore cast light on local historical developments of this land system, which must be corroborated by insights on its original characteristics as provided by the study of *zhing skal* in Hor khang. A comparison of the two forms of land lease allows the reconstruction of the hitherto unknown changes undergone by land use in Tibetan rural society.

Firstly, I will discuss a work field system that characterises *zhing skal* in the Hor khang area. *Zhing skal* were contract-based and a work field (*las zhing* or *gla zhing*) was attached to each *zhing skal* field. To examine how this procedure worked, I will refer to an example from rGya ma gzhis ka, the largest and predominant estate of the Hor khang family.

sKar ma was a *dud chung*,<sup>36</sup> or small householder peasant, who lived in the rGya ma estate and had a *zhing skal* contract with his landlord Hor khang. The estate-owner was to lease eight *khal* from its demesne fields. Of this eight *khal*, four were leased to sKar ma as *zhing skal* fields, and he had an obligation to cultivate them. All of the harvest from these four *khal* of land went to the estate; in return for the unpaid

<sup>36</sup> On *dud chung* and other commoners' social status in traditional Tibet, see Okawa (2014, 2016a).

labour on *zhing skal* fields, sKar ma could use the remaining four *khal* of land as his work field, over which he had full rights with the sole exception of selling it.<sup>37</sup> Since the size of *zhing skal* fields and work fields was in most cases equal, I term this basic form of *zhing skal* as a “one-on-one” work field system. It is important to point out that this relationship between *zhing skal* fields and work fields was the same as the relationship between the demesne fields and tenement ones. The reproduction of the demesne-tenement relationship within the demesne fields was therefore a fractal reflection of the same barter exchange principle that I pointed out as a basic tenet of Tibetan rural economy. In the *zhing skal* contract, the transaction between the lender and tenant was reduced to a minimum, as was the case for corvée labour. The most striking difference between the demesne-tenement relationship and *zhing skal*-work field one was the contractual nature of *zhing skal*, as the latter was contracted on free will and agreement, and the relationship between the lender and tenant was not as asymmetrical as in the case of the corvée in force in a demesne-tenement system. It is also important to point out that, whilst the demesne and tenement fields were geographically separated, *zhing skal* and work fields were originally the same part of a demesne field, and their close proximity often led to wrong attribution, since they were only nominally differentiated. Due to such blurred distinctions, the institution of *zhing skal* appeared to have been by its own nature extremely unstable, a point that finds support in the ambiguity of the word *zhing skal* itself. In *ZSLD*, the term alternatively indicates the whole sum of the *zhing skal* land and the work fields, whilst in other cases its usage covers only the demesne-like land and does not include the work fields. The geographical proximity, institutional instability, and language ambiguity are all important elements to consider as they played a critical role in the social change, as we will see.

*Zhing skal* clearly had its own advantages both for the landlord and the peasant. From the landlord’s point of view, such a system was equally as energy-saving as the management of demesne lands based on corvée labour, with the additional bonus of being more profitable, since the corvée system’s productivity in demesne fields was predictably low: with the landlord taking all of the harvest, the corvée farmers had no incentive to work any harder than their obligations imposed them to.<sup>38</sup> In such a situation, corvée farmers frequently resorted to modest sabotage as an everyday form of resistance,<sup>39</sup> preferring to save their energy for carrying out work in their tenement field. As late as the 1950s, low productivity of the corvée labour in the demesne fields

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<sup>37</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 113–114.

<sup>38</sup> Bloch (1970: 91).

<sup>39</sup> Scott (1985).

was still rampant, as confirmed by the statistics reported in *ZSLD*: based on observations in the 'Bri gung area, 34 days were needed to cultivate one *khal* of demesne fields, whilst only 29–31 days were needed to cultivate three *khal* of tenement fields. This means that the labour productivity of corvée farming on the demesne fields was one third lower than the farming in tenement lands.<sup>40</sup> Because of this low outcome, the landlord usually dispatched a labour manager (*las dpon*) to supervise the collective corvée works on the demesne fields. Without the surveillance and coercion imposed by these supervisors, corvée farmers would have not exerted themselves. When taking these points into consideration, the advantage of *zhing skal* for a landlord is apparent: since both the *zhing skal* and work fields were originally part of a demesne field prior to the drafting of the *zhing skal* contract, through the latter the landlord was able to reconvert a part of the low productive and high-cost demesne fields into a profitable and cost-free land unit.

Although *zhing skal*, in a narrow sense, was demesne-like, its geographical proximity with the work fields precluded the peasants a clear-cut distinction between the two units at the time of farming them. Therefore, the peasants worked hard on the demesne-like *zhing skal* fields as well as on their work fields, meaning that the landlord no longer needed to dispatch a *las dpon* to supervise the unpaid corvée work. As such, the institute of *zhing skal* gave landowners a new and more efficient way of managing their demesne fields, thus turning landlords into land managers. This system appears to have been attractive for the peasants as well, as it liberated them from low-incentive group-farming work in demesne fields and enabling them to save labour time for their own leased lands. *Zhing skal* also provided them with more tenement-like work fields in addition to their original tenement ones. In other words, *zhing skal* contract would provide them a chance to integrating landlord's demesne fields into their tenement fields.<sup>41</sup>

Being advantageous for both the landlord and peasant, the *zhing skal* system rapidly spread within the Mal gro gung dkar region during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a situation clearly demonstrated by the case of dGe hor gzhi ka, a local government estate. Similarly to Blon po gzhis ka, this estate originally belonged to bsTan rgyas gling, the

<sup>40</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 63.

<sup>41</sup> If we compare the institution of *zhing skal* with similar cases in Western Europe, it shows strong similarity with the "lot-corvée" (Morimoto 2005) or "task-work" (Fr. *culture aux pièces*) systems (Bloch 1970). Bloch says, "the demesne fields which had once been the responsibility of tenants owing task-works were gradually being absorbed into the holdings of those who had previously been burdened with working them" (1970: 95–96).

main monastery of the De mo *ho thug thu*, a powerful reincarnation line. The government confiscated the estate in 1899, in the aftermath of De mo's alleged attempt to assassinate the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. ZSLD provides numerical figures of the changes undergone by the land structure of the estate: according to the survey, dGe hor gzhi ka held approximately 300 *khal* of demesne fields at the time of bsTan rgyal gling, that is, prior to 1899, while in 1957, when the ZSLD compilers carried out their research, the estate consisted of 30 *khal* of demesne fields and 250–260 *khal* of *zhing skal* fields.<sup>42</sup> Such figures clearly indicate that nearly 90 percent of the original demesne fields were transformed into *zhing skal* land in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although this might be an extreme instance, it is indicative of the strong tendency towards a land transformation—a movement from demesne to *zhing skal*—that occurred in rural Tibet at the time.

From the points discussed above, it seems clear that the central core of this practice, as carried out in the Hor khang area, was a “one-on-one” work field system. I will now present a more complex and slightly different version of this system as it was implemented in the 'Bri gung area, where *zhing skal* was first introduced and where it developed over two centuries.

#### *Zhing skal in the 'Bri gung area*

As previously mentioned, the *zhing skal* system practised in the 'Bri gung area shows interesting differences from the one in Hor khang. *Zhing skal* prevailed in the 'Bri gung area as no manor house existed locally due to the lack of need to supervise the corvée group work of the dependant peasants on a landlord's demesne fields.<sup>43</sup> It must be noted that, according to ZSLD, the 'Bri gung peasants who cultivated *zhing skal* land could not remember, at the time of the survey, whether they had been given a “one-on-one” work field,<sup>44</sup> meaning that the ZSLD researchers failed to identify many work fields as *zhing skal*: the *zhing skal* tenant peasants in 'Bri gung in fact paid a fixed amount of leasing fee to their landowner.<sup>45</sup> If that was the case, then the system in force locally was the same of *bog zhing*—the fixed and lease contract mentioned earlier. It might be noted, for the sake of clarity, that this does not mean that no *bog zhing* land existed in the 'Bri gung area. All three lease systems (*bog zhing*, *phyed shad*, and *zhing skal*) were present there. *Zhing skal* and *bog zhing* in the area showed no differences in appearance, and only the name of each of the leased lands allowed to

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<sup>42</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 210–211.

<sup>43</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 65.

<sup>44</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 64.

<sup>45</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 64.

differentiate them. One important point about *zhing skal* fields in the 'Bri gung area was their high leasing fees when compared to *bog zhing*. For example, in the Thar skyid estate of 'Bri gung monastery, the fixed leasing fee for one *khal* of *zhing skal* land was eight *khal*,<sup>46</sup> which roughly equated to the total amount of one-year's harvest in Central Tibet at that time. However, if this is true, and *zhing skal* was just a heavy burden compared to *bog zhing*, then what was the benefit for the 'Bri gung peasants who signed this type of contract without a work field?

Firstly, let us consider the situation of the Chewo estate.<sup>47</sup> This estate belonged to 'Bri gung monastery and included 130 *khal* of *zhing skal* land. Out of 130 *khal*, 50 *khal* were leased to *du gnam*, or "landless outsider labourers", in the manner of the "one-on-one" work field system.<sup>48</sup> The *du gnam* were a category of people who did not belong to the estate in which they resided but worked for it on a contractual basis. They usually received a *mi bogs*, or "human lease", which was permission from their landlords to leave their original villages and move somewhere else where they would resettle to work for large land-holding peasants or landlords.<sup>49</sup> I refer to this category as "freelance outsider labourers". Although most of the *du gnam* remained on one estate for a long period of time, they were considered as newcomers vis-à-vis the peasants who were the subjects of the landlords of each estate. Given the long history of the *zhing skal* system in the area, and the fact that old *zhing skal* peasants had already forgotten the existence of the "one-on-one" work field attached to their land,<sup>50</sup> I argue that the "one-on-one" work field was originally given not only to the newcomers *du gnam* but also to the all 'Bri gung peasants who entered a *zhing skal* contract; the practice had simply been forgotten by the 'Bri gung peasants by the time the ZSLD research team visited the area.

The reason for this collective "memory loss" is rather clear when the nature of the *zhing skal* practice is considered: in the 'Bri gung area *zhing skal* land lease was in fact managed through the payment of a fixed fee, as if it was a *bog zhing* lease. The tenant peasants tended to pay the leasing fee from the total harvest gathered from all the fields over which they possessed rights, thus making the distinction between demesne-like *zhing skal* lands and work fields pointless. The ambiguity of the term *zhing skal* also played an important role in this mingling

<sup>46</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 210.

<sup>47</sup> I could not identify the original Tibetan spelling.

<sup>48</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 207.

<sup>49</sup> For the institute of *mi bogs*, see Goldstein (1971b). Note that the categories of *mi bogs* and *du gnam* basically overlapped, as both terms indicated the same group of people (Okawa 2016c).

<sup>50</sup> ZSLD, v. 1: 64.

process, as it could either exclude or include the work field attached to the demesne-like *zhing skal*. The relationship between the demesne-like *zhing skal* and the work field was also characterised by geographical proximity, since the two fields were originally part of the same piece of demesne field. We can speculate that the tenant peasants and their landlords did not usually pay much attention to differentiate between *zhing skal* and work fields. In a Chinese report regarding the conditions in the Lho kha district prior to the 1950s, it is noted that landlords were not as interested in supervising *bog zhing* lands as they were in controlling *phyed shad* fields.<sup>51</sup> That is hardly surprising, as once the leasing fee was fixed, the landlord had no incentive to supervise the actual management of the land: the fees paid to them remained the same regardless of harvest productivity. The same logic applied in the case of *zhing skal* in the 'Bri gung area, as the leasing fee was settled at the time of drafting the contract. All the points above—ambiguous terminology, geographical proximity, and landlord indifference—obscure the distinction between demesne-like *zhing skal* lands and the work fields. I argue that in the case of 'Bri gung, the work field originally attached to the demesne-like *zhing skal* land was gradually integrated into the tenement fields of the peasants through this process. That would explain the apparently high leasing fee of *zhing skal* fields in comparison to *bog zhing* ones. The leasing fee for one *khal* of land was not eight *khal* as figures in *ZSLD*; in reality, those eight *khal* were paid in return for two *khal* of land: one *khal* of *zhing skal* land plus one *khal* of work field. The work field had been progressively absorbed into the peasants' tenements and their origin forgotten.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, the leasing fee for one *khal* land was not eight *khal* but four *khal*, and this figure (four *khal*) was similar to the average leasing fee for one *khal* of *bog zhing* land. We can find supporting evidence for this argument in fragmented descriptions recorded in *ZSLD*: for instance, in one of the autonomous villages belonging to 'Bri gung monastery, the monastic establishment recovered 50 *khal* of land when an old contract for 26 *khal* of *zhing skal* land was cancelled.<sup>53</sup> The other 24 *khal* formed a "one-on-one" work field. This episode indicates that work field were originally granted at the time of drafting a contract, and then inherited and absorbed into peasants' tenement fields. Such a process led to the enlargement of the peasant's tenement lands and

<sup>51</sup> XSNQ: 57.

<sup>52</sup> The memory is oral and very unstable by nature. This plasticity of memory plays an important role for social change as Bloch pointed out: "In short, human memory was the sole arbiter [...] Now the memory of man is singularly pliant and an imperfect instrument; it is quite miraculous how thoroughly it can forget and distort" (1970: 70).

<sup>53</sup> *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.

the decline of the landlord's demesne fields, a fact that shows how the balance between landlords and peasants experienced inconspicuous but significant local transformations.

### *Conclusion*

As discussed, the variable mixture of *corvée* and contract economies was one of the basic characteristics of Tibetan rural economy. It is important to note that these two systems were not clearly separated from each other but overlapped, as the institution of *zhing skal* and its evolution demonstrate. Although *zhing skal* in the Hor khang area was contracted according to free will, such arrangement was a fractal reproduction of the *corvée* system, wherein tenants had to cultivate the landowner's demesne-like fields. Although these obligations became in time monetised, this structure was clearly based on a *corvée* mode of production. If the *zhing skal* system in force in the Hor khang area represented the nascent form of the institution, the custom implemented in 'Bri gung (where the practice originated and developed) should be understood as its developed configuration. These two variations of *zhing skal*, although different from each other, still had important characteristics in common. The actual transaction and social communication between the lender and the tenant were minimised in both cases and this is compatible with the *laissez-faire*, low-cost principle of Tibet's traditional rural economy. Contrary to the *corvée* system, landlords were liberated from many of the costs of demesne management since they had not to concern themselves with sabotage or inefficiency from their dependant peasants. On the other hand, the peasants were freed from participating in directly controlled group works of demesne lands, and could concentrate more on incentive farming, thus gaining the possibility of accumulating surplus product. On top of that, this custom even provided dependent peasants with a chance to enlarging their tenement fields by absorbing landlord's demesne fields. Therefore, this change was fairly accepted by both concerned parties as a reasonable, that is, rational change for both of them.

When discussing modernisation in traditional Tibet, one might be reminded of the reforms that were promoted by prominent political figures such as the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Lung shar or even the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>54</sup> Yet, such approaches fail to give proper consideration to the grass-root origins of the social change that affected local rural life. The institution of *zhing skal* and its evolution were not the outcome of a plan designed from above, rather they were the product of long-term negotiations between local landlords and their dependant

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<sup>54</sup> Goldstein (1989).

peasants.

As I have demonstrated, such a system had its own advantages and solved the inefficiency inherent to the corvée without deviating from the basic principles of rural economy. As such, the invention and introduction of *zhing skal* in the Mal gro gung dkar region swung the balance between corvée and contract economies towards the latter, thus making of the *zhing skal* land lease system a nascent contract economy born within, not without, a corvée economy. This local, rural, and little-known balancing process of social relationships must be understood as a latent modernisation of pre-modern rural Tibet. Latent because it happened at a basic level, found no place in political history, and did not radically contradict those basic tenets of rural economy, yet it contributed to modernise land use in rural Tibet. The trajectory of this latent modernisation could not fully come to term due to the abrupt intervention of the Democratic Reform (Ch. *Minzhu Gaige*) implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in 1959, which totally changed the course of Tibetan history. Be as it may, acknowledging the existence of such a latent change of land system in pre-modern Tibet illuminates a hitherto unknown face of traditional Tibetan society, casting new light on instances of socio-economic change and widening our understanding of Tibetan rural life.

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