3 **Boundaries of the Borderlands**

Mapping Gyelthang

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Abstract

This project seeks to discern and problematize the physical and conceptual boundaries of the Tibetan region of Gyelthang, in southern Kham. At issue are questions about the relationships between older conceptualizations of place and newer understandings of identity *vis* place. How do the various peoples who live within its boundaries understand Gyelthang? I argue that the complex and dynamic webs of religious institutions and ethnic identities in the region neither conform to fixed physical or conceptual boundaries, nor situate Gyelthang as being in a 'borderland' between Tibet and China for local inhabitants. My work is based on an evaluation of historical sources coupled with ethnographic and folkloric data gathered during fieldwork conducted over the past twenty-five years in Gyelthang.

Keywords: folklore, Geza, Gyelthang, Shangri-La, Xianggelila, Yunnan

Introduction

This chapter seeks to discern and problematize the physical and conceptual boundaries of the Tibetan region of Gyelthang, in southern Kham. At issue are questions about the relationships between older conceptualizations of place and newer understandings of identity *vis* place in 21st-century Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and about what might constitute a borderland. I argue that the complex and dynamic webs of religious institutions and ethnic identities in the region neither conform to fixed physical or conceptual boundaries, nor situate Gyelthang as being in a 'borderland' between Tibet and China for local inhabitants.

Today, Gyelthang is part of Northwest Yunnan Province of the People's Republic of China, roughly corresponding to the current administrative division of Shangri-La County (Ch. *Xianggelila xian*), although not, more expansively, the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Ch. *Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou*). Gyelthangpa – the people of Gyelthang – speak several local Tibetic languages,¹ and there are pockets within this territory where Tibetan inhabitants identify neither as Gyelthangpa nor Khampa. Gyelthang cannot be cleanly defined by the constellations of monastic power. With no specific historical political or religious demarcation of the boundaries of Gyelthang, and with no unified linguistic or ethnic identity, what then makes (or made) Gyelthang Gyelthang? How do the various peoples who live within its boundaries understand Gyelthang? Do Tibetans of Gyelthang understand themselves to be Khampa, or even Gyelthangpa?

As historians and anthropologists interested in Kham, many of us seek to understand the interface of the Tibetan and Chinese cultural, political, and religious 'borderlands', and recent works have ostensibly addressed the region, sometimes without adequately scrutinizing the way we employ the term – as Gros and Buffetrille also point out in this volume.² The concept of a Sino-Tibetan 'borderland' also assumes a prioritization of the points of view of the large but historically distant power centres of 'Tibet' (whatever 'Tibet' might mean or might have meant historically to Gyelthangpa), and 'China', writ large (same issue). The borderlands are further problematized by the ethnic diversity of the interface. Not only are there many ethnic groups such as the Naxi, Yi, Primi, Drung, Nung, Lisu, Bai, and Malimasa who live within and between regions traditionally understood as Tibetan and (Han) Chinese in southern Kham, but the cultural identity of these peoples is differently understood depending on the perceiver (e.g. many Tibetans from areas further north in Kham think of the Naxi as being slightly wayward Tibetans, despite the Naxi understanding of themselves as distinct from Tibetans), and depending, *bien sûr*, on the imposed ethnic classificatory scheme devised by the Chinese state. Historically, and to a lesser degree still today, Gyelthang is positioned between other Tibetans to the north, and non-Han groups to the south, east, and west. So, in effect, Gyelthang might be better considered the Naxi-Tibetan borderlands or the Yi-Tibetan, rather

1 See Bartee (2007), and for a nuanced account of the 'Tibetic languages' of the region, see Suzuki (2015).

2 In her review of Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins's (2014) edited volume, *Mapping Shangrila*, Katia Buffetrille (2016) celebrates the scholarship inside the volume, while 'regretting the absence of a discussion about the definition of the term "Sino-Tibetan Borderlands"'.

than the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. My point here is that there is a worry that the term 'borderlands' runs the risk of assuming a simple dichotomy between two important groups, but such is not necessarily the predominant way Gyelthangpa understand themselves; many Gyelthangpa neither think of their neighbours as two large clearly-defined identity centres, nor do they see themselves as living 'in between'.

In what follows, I will delve into two related tributaries that together contribute to the difficulties in fixing a clear definition of Gyelthang. First, in admittedly rough and broad brushstrokes, I will attempt to contextualize the roles of power and history in the demarcation of Gyelthang with an emphasis on the importance (or lack thereof) of Ganden Sumtseling monastery.³ While since the seventeenth century Ganden Sumtseling monastery constituted an important centre of identity-gravity in the region, the geographical extension of its control was not congruent with the region of Gyelthang.⁴ The monastery includes eight *kangtsen*, or monastic colleges. Importantly, some of the geographical areas controlled by the eight *kangtsen* fall outside of Gyelthang.⁵ Herein, I will bring us up to the present moment (2018) and

3 Although certainly not the only monastery in the region, Ganden Sumtseling was, since the late seventeenth century, the primary monastery of Gyelthang, representing the reach of influence of the Ganden Phodrang in Lhasa. However, the much smaller Geluk monastery of Ringa (Ch. Da Bao Si) is sometimes better known to Tibetans from other regions and remains a place of great spiritual import to locals.

4 By 'identity-gravity', here, I am highlighting the idea that for many Gyelthangpa, the monastery itself was an important part of their identity, and the monastery and its geographical location served as a crucial place indicator for one's homeland. When speaking with people about where one is from, monasteries not only serve as part of an answer, but people from farther afield often associate people with the religious and/or political affiliations of the most prominent local monastery or even monastic *kangtsen*. Of course, a monastery is much more than simply an identity marker.

5 *Kangtsen* are physical structures within the monastery, associated with geographical areas near to the monastery. In total, the areas associated with the *kangtsen* correspond to the full range of control of the monastery, and the Tibetan (and Naxi) inhabitants traditionally paid taxes to and sent their sons to be monks at their corresponding *kangtsen*. This is not to say that the entirety of the population represented by a *kangtsen* of Sumtseling Monastery were Gelukpa Buddhists. For example, while Dongwang *kangtsen*, one of the most important and economically powerful at Sumtseling, is the place Gelukpa families from Dongwang send their sons to be monks, the valley system of Dongwang includes many Nyingmapa families that do not support and are in no way affiliated with Sumtseling. When Gelukpa pilgrims from Dongwang visit Sumtseling, a stop at the Dongwang *kangtsen* is a central component of their visit, is the central place of their financial donations, and is the residence of the monks who would be asked to travel to Dongwang when there is a need for the performance of domestic ceremonies. More to the point of this chapter, though, Dongwang lies to the north of and is not considered to be part of the region of Gyelthang. The constellation of power of the most central and important monastery in Gyelthang – both in terms of constellation of monastic institutional power and

illuminate how difficulties associated with the monastery contribute to a lack of clarity about Gyelthangpa identity. Second, attention will be turned to the theoretical work of scholar of comparative religious theory Jonathan Z. Smith. I employ Smith's claims and warnings about the relationship between 'map' and 'territory' in relation to dynamics of identity among Tibetans of Gyelthang. I do not think that the idea of Kham, the notion of being a borderland, and even the moniker of Gyelthang are particularly important to local inhabitants or central to their identity. Instead, far more value is placed on the very local, the very ground beneath very real feet. My work is based on an evaluation of historical sources coupled with ethnographic and folkloric data gathered during fieldwork conducted over the past twenty-five years in Gyelthang.

Gyelthang as Territory: Power, the State, and the Monastery

All told, Gyelthang is relatively small, and today one can drive across from east to west in three hours, and from south to north in about five.⁶ There are two common misconceptions about Gyelthang: first, that it is the Tibetan region of Yunnan Province. Rather, it is one of several Tibetan regions of Yunnan; the regions of Dechen and Tacheng are not part of Gyelthang, nor are other Tibetan areas of Yunnan such as Yagra, and Dongwang.⁷ Second,

the related power of the Geluk religious order – does not correspond to the physical landscape of the region of Gyelthang. See Schwieger (2010) and Kolås (2008), and for a detailed account of the power dynamics behind the founding of the monastery, see Schwieger (2011). For details about Ganden Sumtseling prior to its destruction, see Bstan-pa-rgyal-mtshan (1985). For an understanding of Sumtseling monastery's destruction during the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, see the chapter by Dáša Mortensen in this volume. For a glimpse into the role of the monastery *vis* the local community fifteen years ago, see Hillman (2005). For a sense of Gyelthangpas' understanding of and sentiments about Sumtseling, see Mortensen (2016).

6 Gyelthang is approximately 120 miles (193 km) north to south, and at its widest, 60 miles (97 km) east to west. However, due to the high mountains and steep river valleys running longitudinally more or less north to south, there are no direct east-west roads. Gyelthang is approximately 10,000 km².

7 The edges of Gyelthang are, alas, difficult to define, and the definitions can depend on whom you ask. Inhabitants of Balagezong, for example, do not universally consider themselves to be Gyelthangpa, and their neighbours, the inhabitants of Nagara, do not think of Balagezong as part of Gyelthang. However, some people from Shangrila Town with whom I have spoken describe Balagezong as being part of Gyelthang. Part of this discrepancy can perhaps be attributed to the fact that while Balagezong does lie within Yunnan and to the (north)east of Benzilan, which is considered to be just outside the western edges of Gyelthang, the inhabitants of Balagezong are rumoured to be descendants of refugees from Bathang, in today's Sichuan Province, to the

that it corresponds to Shangri-La County-Level City (*Xianggelila* County); it does not (see Map 3.1).

The idea of Gyelthang is bordered to the southwest by the (primarily Lisu, Tibetan, Naxi, and Han) Weixi Lisu Autonomous County (within Diqing Prefecture), including the Tibetan area of Tacheng, which is not part of Gyelthang. To the west, Gyelthang does not include areas west of the Nixi valley. Thus, Benzilan and Dechen fall outside of Gyelthang. Deqin County (Ch. Deqin *xian*) to the northwest, is not part of Gyelthang. The country of Myanmar and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) lie not far to the west and northwest.

The Tibetan Autonomous Ganzi Prefecture of Sichuan and the proximate valley of Chaktreng (*Xiangcheng*), lie just beyond the northern boundary of Gyelthang, just north of the mountain Daxueshan (locally *Jiarongya*) and the valley system of Dongwang Township (Tib. *Termarong*).⁸

north. This suggests that for some, inclusion in the category of Gyelthangpa can sometimes include conceptions of historical homelands and dynamics of migration.

8 The Tibetans who live in or hail from the valleys of Dongwang do not consider themselves to be Gyelthangpa. Thus, the northern boundary of Gyelthang lies along the granite outthrusts of the earth's crust that form the Daxueshan (literally 'Big Snow Mountain'), and, to the west, form the watershed between the village system of Nagara and Dongwang. It is entirely possible that Dongwang is *today* considered by some to be part of Gyelthang in that it is part of Shangri-La County. However, most commonly, Dongwang and Gyelthang are discussed by locals as separate places. Today, people in Dongwang refer to people from Chaktreng (Ch. *Xiangcheng*) as Sichuan people (*Sichuan ren*). The etymology of the Tibetan name for Dongwang is a bit unclear. Most commonly, the Chinese name Dongwang is understood to be a rendering of the Tibetan *Termarong*, marking a relationship between the precipitous valley and the treasure (*terma*) revelation tradition (*rong*, in Tibetan, means 'gorge' or 'narrow ravine', which very accurately describes Dongwang). Another possible Tibetan root for Dongwang is the name *Tongrong*, with *tong* echoic of one of the six tribes of Yarlung. A third possibility for the Tibetan name for Dongwang is simply *gtorma rong*, as one prominent mountain peak in the region resembles a cone-shaped *torma* (ritual effigy). The possible etymologies of *Tongrong* and *Torma rong* were provided to me by Bai Linde, assistant director of the *Foxueyuan* (Buddhist Research Institute) in Shangri-La (personal interview 12 July 2017). See also Zhongdian xian renmin zhengfu, *Zhongdian xian diming lingdao xiaozu* (1984). Interestingly, Bai Linde also claimed that many of the current inhabitants of Dongwang trace their ancestry to the south, and that they were once Naxi. This would not be surprising, as Naxi communities can be found in Sichuan and the T.A.R., and the complex and syncretic relationship between Naxi and Tibetan religions is in evidence throughout the region, such as in the use of Naxi pictograph-painted wooden slats in Dorje phurba rituals in the Karma Kagyu monastery of Phangpu northeast of Chaktreng, and the huge overlap of local ritual practices and folklore; see, for example, Mortensen (2006). Today, the Nyingmapa maintain a strong presence in Dongwang, and there are notably no Nyingma monasteries in Gyelthang. About half the populace of Dongwang is Geluk, and Ganden Sumtseling monastery has a Dongwang *kangtsen*. Semantically and structurally, it is unclear whether Sumtseling has a *kangtsen* for Dongwang, or if, from a more grass-roots perspective,

Map 3.1 Gyelthang (Xianggelila) and its surroundings

Sources: Based on SRTM (NASA) and modern administrative borders extracted from GADM database (www.gadm.org, v.2.5 July 2015)

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Dongwang maintains a *kangtsen* at Sumtseling. Nevertheless, in terms of Geluk identity, the inhabitants of Dongwang, despite their *kangtsen* at Sumtseling to the south, have a stronger affinity with religious institutions to the north in Chaktreng, across the border in what is today Sichuan Province; see Thondup (1992). This affinity is in part related in recent decades to the religious affiliation with the tantric *yidam* Dorje Shugden; Shugden practice is strong among the Gelukpa of Dongwang, and Chaktreng remains one of the centres of Shugden practice in southern Kham. Geluk monasteries in Chaktreng, Bathang, and Gyelthang, for example, had strong bonds, although bandit raids from Chaktreng to Gyelthang were notorious; see D. Mortensen (2016) and Rock (1947). Chaktreng raids prior to the 1950s on the valleys of Yagra (just to the northwest of Gyelthang) were particularly devastating, as large percentages of the young men in Yagra villages were killed. While conducting folklore fieldwork in Yagra in 2013, I was told on several occasions that P.R.C. control in the region was welcomed largely because it brought an end to such raids and low-intensity internecine warfare.

The (historically mostly Tibetan, Primi, and Nuosu Yi) Muli Tibetan Autonomous County of Sichuan, just east of the village of Nizu (Tib. *Mik-sur*), is the eastern border of Gyelthang, and the (primarily Naxi) Lijiang prefecture-level City lies to the south.⁹ The southern boundary of Gyelthang, in essence, is the Yangtze River (locally called the Jinshajiang, 'Golden Sands River'). Thus, predominantly Naxi areas such as Sanba and Baishuitai spring, the Hui reaches of upper Haba village, several Yi villages such as Jiulong, and the entirety of Haba Mountain (the north side of Tiger Leaping Gorge, Ch. *Hutiaoxia*), all lie within Gyelthang. The land across the river from Shigu town, as is evidenced by the territorial demarcation inscribed on the town's famous stone drum from which the town gets its moniker, marks the southernmost reaches of Gyelthang.

Historically, prior to P.R.C. control of the region, Gyelthang was only periodically under the political control of Tibetan powers (Gyaltzen 1971). Indeed, we should be careful to distinguish between 'political' and 'religious' Tibetan power, for although monasteries were and are often seats of political, economic, and military dominance (or perhaps 'centres of gravity', depending on one's perspective), even when the Gelukpa government of the Ganden Phodrang, based in Lhasa, exerted only limited control over Gyelthang, Ganden Sumtseling Monastery remained the most important institution in the minds of many Tibetans (and many Naxi) in the region.¹⁰ Gyelthang was not part of the large region controlled by (Nyagrong) Gönpo Nyamgyel during the height of his power between 1835-1865. Indeed, the areas of Jol (Dechen),¹¹ the region of Lijiang and the Mu kingdom, Gyelthang, and Muli (in today's Sichuan), all lay to the south of his control (Tsering 1985, Tsomu 2015).

9 For early definitions of Gyelthang, see Schwieger (2017). See also Diqing zhou gaikuang bianxie zu (2007).

10 Historically (and in some small senses into the present), the Naxi were practitioners of Kagyu Buddhism. With the destruction of many Kagyu monasteries in the 1870s during the Muslim Panthay Rebellion, many disenfranchised Naxi monks returned to their home villages to become ritual experts, syncretically blending Bön and Buddhist ritual cycles with local religious dynamics including elements of Yi religion. For more details, including the argument that this shift in the 1870s led to the flourishing of Naxi *dtô-mbà* pictographic script, see Jackson and Pan (1998); also Jackson (1979). For alternative perspective, see Mathieu (2003). Indeed, it is difficult to say who the Naxi were prior to their identification as such at the hands of the state in the 1950s, and their religious practices were not definitively separable, taxonomically, from the religious practices of their neighbours: the Moso, Gyelthangpa Geluk Tibetans, Nizupa, Primi, Yi, etc. See Mortensen (2009) for a discussion. In fact, boundaries of ethnicity were far more fluid and malleable prior to the 1950s than they are today, when ethnic identity is more 'fixed' by institutional and state power structures.

11 Identifying Dechen as Jol is questionable here, as Jol is sometimes understood as the region stretching south into Yunnan, including Jang (Jang Satam), although whether Jol encompassed

Gyelthang's centre is Jiantang Town, the county seat, generally known as Xianggelila, called Zhongdian throughout at least the second half of the twentieth century until 2002, and still sometimes called Zhongdian by locals who find the tourist-driven transformation of the name of their home to be somewhat surreal. The town and region have long been a Tibetan interface with neighbouring peoples, primarily the Naxi, and the 'Old Town' of Dukezong was around 30 percent Naxi until the tsunami of tourism shattered the traditional demography. Xianggelila has recently exploded into a burgeoning small city, stretching across the entirety of the valley between the central village of Dukezong and the historically important Geluk monastery Ganden Sumtseling. Following the logging ban of 1998, the economy has largely transformed into a tourist service industry, with mining, *song rong* mushroom, and caterpillar fungus collection and sales providing a massive influx of capital in the past two decades.

In order to understand the geographic and perhaps cultural identities of the people who live in the region where southeastern Tibet interfaces with the rest of Yunnan Province, we must scrutinize and complicate any simplistic notions of what constitutes the 'state'. Studies of the role of the Chinese state have drawn valuable attention to the problem of historical blame and to complicity in the enactment of state policies in local non-Han contexts.¹² If one's nominal identity is in formal ways created or established by a 'state', per se, then understanding *who* constitutes the 'state' becomes of increased importance. It is clear that local government actors enact policies that affect minority nationality (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*) communities in differing ways in different regions. It is simultaneously valuable to understand the construction and negotiation of ethno-political identity as being as much informed by inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationships and perceptions as it is by the hitherto prioritized (and overly simplistic) binary model of assessing the identity of a given minority group in relationship to the Chinese state. In other words, the tensions, concerns, conflicts, and everyday grievances at the forefront of

the entirety of Jang is questionable. I am unsure about this point, and do not know how the Naxi under the Mu kings (and earlier) understood the boundaries or overlaps between Jol and Jang Satam, let alone how they understood Gyelthang.

¹² See, for example, Mueggler (2011), Harrell (2007), and D. Mortensen (forthcoming). Mueggler's brilliant ethnography complicates the notion of simplistic blame for devastation suffered by a community that found the Chinese state both imaginatively distant and manifest as eager members of their own community. Harrell's point is similar, focusing on the examples of several individuals who, despite their local ethnic identity, represented the state. Both Mueggler's and Harrell's works address Yi peoples, geographically close to but culturally distinct from Gyelthangpa Tibetans. For an assessment of the dynamics between Gyelthangpa and 'the state', see also Mortensen (2016).

the minds of locals in (for example) Gyelthang are as much shaped by their relationships with other local minority ethnic groups (such as the Naxi, Yi, and Hui) and non-local Tibetans as they are by relationships with the Han Chinese or the local or national governments.¹³ Local relationships with the state are only further complicated in Gyelthang when the local authorities and policy implementers (and sometimes makers) are themselves Naxi or Tibetan.

Part of the reason the identification of institutional agents of power (the 'state', monasteries, etc.) is so vital is that just as victors write history, those with power are the ideological if not the literal cartographers of identity in terms of the nomenclature of place. Any older model wherein Gyelthang marked the interface between Tibetan populations and various other peoples such as the Naxi, Yi, Lisu, Bai, etc. (but notably *not* Han Chinese population centres), is also rendered complex now that the government of the P.R.C. controls Gyelthang.

Most Tibetans of Gyelthang are Gelukpa Buddhists,¹⁴ although the decimation of institutional religion over the past sixty years has left the region with a precarious sense of its own Buddhist identity. Sumtseling monastery has been rebuilt from the utter devastation it underwent at the hands of locals in 1966, during the early tumult of the Cultural Revolution (D. Mortensen, forthcoming). Sumtseling, though, remains a complex and tense institution – a tension largely exacerbated by issues surrounding the divisive personage of the protection deity (*yidam*) Dorje Shugden. In essence, over the past two decades, the Chinese government has seized upon the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's dismissal of Dorje Shugden from the Geluk pantheon, and augmented the post Cultural Revolution ostensible rehabilitation of Buddhist practice with legitimation and amplified valuation of Dorje Shugden temples and monasteries, particularly in southern Kham. Thereby, a tense bifurcation has been exacerbated in Gyelthang (and elsewhere, such as in Dongwang) wherein monastery, *kangtsen*, temple, household, and individual loyalties to either the Dalai Lama or Dorje Shugden (and thus 'the state') have become polarized (Hillman 2005, E. Mortensen

13 McKhann (1998) observed and warned of this needed perspective a full twenty years ago.

14 Karma Kagyu power in the region predated Gelukpa hegemony. There is still one small Taklung Kagyu monastery just outside of Jiantang Town, Nyagpel Monastery (*sngags 'phel sdom gsum gling*), and there are several other Kagyu monasteries in the broader region. For information about religions in Zhongdian county, see Zhondian xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (1997, 227-230, 233-235), also for descriptions of the various monasteries in Zhongdian county. In addition, there are vital elements of Bön in the religiosity of the people of Nizu valley, although from the best I can discern, Nizu religion is a syncretic mix of Bön, local (non-Bön, *mi chö*) practices and beliefs, and some Geluk influences.

2016). Entire village systems within Gyelthang, such as Xiao Zhongdian and Sanba, where Dorje Shugden practice is strong, are in the throes of something akin to what citizens of the U.S.A. call 'culture wars', vis-à-vis the anti-Shugden areas of Geza and Dukezong, which are loyal to the Dalai Lama. Stories in Jiantang town abound about family members who won't eat with one another, about village families whose member's funerals are shunned by other families from the same small village, and businesses refusing to hire employees who maintain religious loyalties on the other side of this sensitive divide. The tensions are very high, and the 'Shugden issue' is perhaps the most serious divisive force in Gyelthangpa society today.

Again, although the territory of the regions affiliated with Sumtseling's *kangtsen* does not match up with the map of Gyelthang, the tensions are perhaps most acute at Sumtseling itself, despite the outward gleam presented for the throngs of Han tourists. The 'pro-Shugden' *kangtsen* have the support of the abbot (Tib. *khenpo*), and the government, which, as the anti-Shugden people will tell you, provides a lot of funding for Shugden temples and monasteries precisely to aggravate and sew discord within the community. The 'Shugden issue' is prevalent beyond Gyelthang, of course, and throughout Kham there are push-pull tensions within Tibetan communities between those who are striving for cooperation and unity and those who are heated in their partisanship over the issue. In Gyelthang and Chaktreng, however, 'pro-Shugden' support is a vibrant, if minority voice. Döndrupling monastery (also Gelukpa) outside the town of Benzilan (and therefore also just outside of Gyelthang) does not suffer this same tension, as it eschews Shugden practice, and as a result many residents of Gyelthang have more respect for Döndrupling than they do for the more local and larger Ganden Sumtseling monastery. Clearly, one set of outlying and obvious questions that remains unanswered in this analysis includes why the boundaries of Gyelthang do not match with the territory associated with the eight *kangtsen* of Sumtseling. The strongest conclusion I can offer to this issue is that the idea of Gyelthang long predates the establishment of Ganden Sumtseling (1679).¹⁵

A Sense of Place: Ambiance, Identity, and the 'Idea' of Gyelthang

So, as we examine what Kham is, in other words where it is and who lives there, we must ask the same thing of its sub-regions, its southern plateau

15 The ruins of a Karma Kagyu monastery that predated Geluk hegemony in the valley can still be found in the forest east of Napa Hai on the road to Nixi.

grasslands (Tib. *thang*), of its 'borderlands'. How close can we 'zoom in' to best understand place? Of course, in wondering such things, we note that political and religious control is not the only cartographer at work in defining Gyelthang or the identity of its inhabitants. Granted, in saying this I am making several assumptions. First, I am assuming that there is a marked difference, at times, between authoritative definitions of a region and the understandings of regional identity by local inhabitants. Second, I am assuming that a sense of place is not constituted entirely by places. When I imagine my own hometown, the ambiance of my memories of that place is constructed by more than just its physical setting, the land, and weather. The ambiance of place is often informed by one's friends, kin, experiences, by the languages used in the transmission and creation and negotiation of culture, and by such things as wildlife, cuisine, past events, jokes, and lullabies. Place is in vital ways a blending of the physical place and the people who live there, yet augmented by oppositional definitions of who does not live there and what other 'places' are like.

Gyelthang, then, is a place wherein Tibetans live alongside and interspersed with Naxi, Nuosu Yi, Hui, Lisu, Bai, and other minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu*) peoples, as well as with increasing numbers of Han Chinese, many of whom have migrated from Sichuan. It is a place that has on the one hand seen its ethnic identity effaced in Mao-era campaigns, and on the other hand experienced reified state-narrated Tibetan identity-revivification in light of ethnic tourism in recent years. It is a place with a relatively weak sense of Tibetan nationalism and, correlatively, with a diluted and arguably insecure sense of pan-Tibetan identity, although the suppressed political uprising of 2008 in Kham has led to a slight augmentation of this pan-Tibetan identity. Gyelthangpa are often belittled or demeaned by Tibetans from Ü-Tsang and from farther north in Kham (e.g. Dergé and Kandzé) and Amdo, with sentiments ranging from 'Ah... that's China', to 'Shugden people'. The local Tibetic languages spoken in Gyelthang are unintelligible even to Tibetans from nearby places like Lithang or Dechen, let alone Lhasa, and indeed, Tibetan is spoken by less and less Gyelthangpa, and Chinese loanwords are increasingly common in local parlance. Tibetic languages within Gyelthang are also at times mutually unintelligible, and it is important to note that language is not a unifying characteristic of what makes Gyelthang Gyelthang. Tibetan language education is not robust in Gyelthang, and Tibetan literacy is rapidly declining, although it is questionable whether it was ever particularly strong.

Gyelthang is a place where many rural Tibetan women regularly sport communist Mao caps, in part because they do not adhere to the sentiment

that communist policies constituted a bad change. Gyelthang is a place where many villagers in remote regions are thankful for the establishment of the P.R.C. rule. Gyelthang is a place where Chinese nomenclature for geographical features is employed on a regular basis and the Tibetan and Naxi names are often all but forgotten. It is a place where the local names for many gods are forgotten.

Gyelthangpa are sometimes seen as 'less Tibetan' by other Tibetans, and the Gyelthangpa know this. Coupled with a particularly ineffectual and politically compromised monastery,¹⁶ few Gyelthangpa know much about Buddhist philosophy, ethics, or practices. Indeed, many Gyelthangpa see themselves as peripheral to the rest of Tibet (although there are also peripheries within this peripheral place) and understand themselves as well-integrated with the rest of China. This is not, of course, to say that Gyelthangpa are in fact 'less' Tibetan than other Tibetans, as such a claim presupposes an ideal Tibetanness or a normative cultural authority. The sense of difference from other Tibetans, even their direct neighbours, contributes to a local sense of distinction. Although if asked 'are you Khampa', most Gyelthangpa would say 'yes', very few offer Kham as part of their identity unless asked. Instead, locals will say they are Gyelthangpa (typically with the Chinese pronunciation of Jiantang), or that they are from Shangri-La (Ch. *Xianggelila*).

For Gyelthangpa, despite the embarrassment or insecurity about having less religious or linguistic vitality or 'authenticity' as other Tibetans, there is *never* ever a sense for Tibetan Gyelthangpa that they are not Tibetan. The 'border' is to the east, south, and southwest. Gyelthangpa do not think of themselves as a border-'land', per se, but instead as the southeastern reaches of Tibet, with the territory of other minority nationalities on the other side of an often-inexact boundary. That Gyelthang's location in Yunnan Province separates it politically and administratively from Sichuan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.), and thus from the rest of Kham, is important, but Gyelthangpa don't think of themselves as thereby less Tibetan, regardless of what other Tibetans might think. They also don't see themselves as more a part of China than any other part of Tibet. One crucial and enormous caveat to this line of thinking is that it is foolish to generalize and thereby essentialize all Gyelthangpa as thinking or believing the same thing; just as it is wildly problematic to claim that 'Chinese people believe' any singular thing, Gyelthangpa are diverse in their perspectives, and certainly do not share identical senses of their own identities.

16 For details on the sentiments toward Ganden Sumtseling monastery, see E. Mortensen (2016).

For most Gyelthangpa, the ambiance of daily life does not involve a heavy flavouring of the sense of being a 'borderland'. Sure, farmers in Geza (Tib. *Ketsak*) are influenced by their proximity to Han China in ways as varying as the effects of outside mining companies on clean water to the lament for the religious vacuum resulting from the spiritual impotence of the monastery, from the television they enjoy to their inability to procure a passport with ease, and from mandatory hospital childbirth to mandatory centralized boarding schools. And their view to the north and northwest, to Kham and the rest of the Tibetan world, is infinitely more profound and pervasive. In order to conceive of living in a 'borderland', in a place of liminality or 'between-ness' or even of interface, culturally or ethnically or even religiously, there needs to be a sense of belonging to both or to neither.

The 'idea' of Gyelthang remains relatively clear in the minds of most locals, regardless of changes in language, demography, institutional power, politics, or maps. Whereas much else has changed for locals in the way place is defined by power or authority, the idea of Gyelthang, perhaps because it is so local and old, has remained a more vital part of local identity than the idea of Kham, although that it remains does not mean that it has not changed.

Most Gyelthangpa consider themselves to be Khampa only secondarily, unlike, for example, in Lithang, where Khampa identity is central and primary. Gyelthang is an old idea and is potentially thereby more stable.¹⁷ There are also differences between Gyelthang and the rest of Kham worthy of note, such as the fact that there are relatively few Gyelthangpa nomads. In this, Gyelthang shares something with the Tibetans of Muli, Dechen, and other places that are technically (whatever that means) part of Kham. Key, here, is why any of this matters, and for whom? Obviously, identity matters deeply to more or less everyone, from the *song rong* hunters to the state, and a sense of homeland is central to Tibetan life. The Tibetan term *phayül*, 'homeland', is often one of the first things Tibetans from different regions ask of one another when they meet. Gyelthangpa visiting Lhasa do not answer this question with the word 'Kham', but with 'Gyelthang'. If asked for more specificity, most would follow-up with 'Xianggelila' (only in the last few years has the old name Zhongdian faded from use) or 'Yunnan'. Obviously, Gyelthangpa visiting Lithang (as it is also part of Kham) would never answer 'Kham'. And although where you say you are from is not the be all and end all of identity, the degree to which Gyelthangpa think of themselves as Khampa matters in important senses when it comes to issues of larger Tibetan regional

17 I do not know when the term Gyelthang was first employed.

identity and affiliation, which can have political and religious ramifications. However, locally, on a day-to-day level, the boundaries of what is and what is not Gyelthang, whether or not one is foremost Khampa or Gyelthangpa, and whether or not Shangri-La Town is a 'borderland', per se, matter little.

Yes, there are small pockets of Amdowa inside northern Kham and vice versa, and yes, people in Tibet generally identify, with great specificity, as being from a particular region (e.g. people are not simultaneously Khampa and Amdowa). This aspect of identity – that of the place you identify as being from, your *phayül* – is not edgeless; this aspect of Tibetan identity does not bleed like watercolours. But other aspects of identity, of culture, religion, and ethnicity, absolutely do. In Gyelthang, maps don't help much. Maps are not identity.

Map, Territory, and the Cartographer's Guild

Who are the cartographers, and why are they (we) making the maps they (we) make? What is at stake, and for whom? In his work 'Map Is Not Territory', Jonathan Z. Smith (1994, 291, and f.n. 115) worries about 'the insistence on the cognitive power of distortion, along with the concomitant choice of the map over the territory'. In the case of understanding Gyelthang, of attempting to see landforms through the mist, why is it we sometimes privilege the map? Who might want us to privilege the territory? Whose territory? Owned or controlled by whom? Territory how defined, how constituted? 'Borderlands' according to whom?

Jonathan Z. Smith continues: 'There are situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed' (ibid.). In his introductory chapter, Stéphane Gros describes the constant 're-mapping' that results from discursive socio-spatial processes and various knowledge economies. Similarly, here, there are Buddhist institutional maps (e.g. *kangtsen* territories), Chinese geopolitical taxonomic maps, ethnic maps, road maps, satellite maps, linguistic maps, and tourist maps all defining Gyelthang differently, and all with different sorts of agency and power. Yet they do not agree or conform when it comes to Gyelthang. A map, writes Smith (2004, 17), 'guarantees meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity'.

Smith's concern is religion, and the problematic nature of discerning patterns in religiosity. Perhaps Smith's greatest contribution to the discipline of comparative religion has been to critique problematic methods of comparison, identifying quagmires and pitfalls for the comparativist. He writes (ibid.):

Students of religion have been most successful in describing and interpreting this locative, imperial map of the world – especially within archaic, urban cultures. [...] Yet, the very success of these topographies should be a signal for caution. For they are largely based on documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchical cultures. The most persuasive witnesses to a locative, imperial world-view are the production of well organized, self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place. [...] In most cases one cannot escape the suspicion that, in the locative map of the world, we are encountering a self-serving ideology which ought not to be generalized into the universal pattern of religious experience and expression.

Smith's identification of a 'universal pattern' is 'intended to refer to Mircea Eliade's "archaic ontology"', but the 'ideological element' was expanded to include 'a variety of approaches to religion which lay prime emphasis upon congruency and conformity, whether it be expressed through phenomenological descriptions of repetition [or] functionalist descriptions of feedback mechanisms' (1994, 229). Smith is concerned with what he sees as a pervasive tendency of scholars of the historical and comparative study of religion to seek out and identify patterns of similarity between religious phenomena. He famously identifies this tendency as methodologically problematic, noting that similarities in the eye of the beholder were importantly not constitutive of causal mechanisms. In other words, patterns of religious phenomena described by scholars led to associative conclusions about the relationships between religious phenomena based on such 'magical' causal criteria as mimesis, contiguity, or raw similarity. Smith expands his concerns with 'universal patterns' he saw in the work of Eliade to critique the broader field of comparative religion, and emphasizes the importance of scrutinizing difference instead of similarity when engaging in the methodology of comparison. In our creation of and wondering about maps and borderlands, how might we best avoid the error of generalizing our emphases on the production of locative classifications of the people who live in the mountains and grasslands and forests of the area called Gyelthang? Can we possibly, as Gros calls for in his Introduction, conceive of spaces as social constructs through more unfamiliar forms of spatialization?

When we identify 'the very success of these topographies' as being the historical forces and institutional agents of place naming for a place such as Gyelthang, we wonder about what 'self-serving' ideologies are being generalized. Who, in the case of Gyelthang, are the 'well organized, self-conscious

scribal elites who [have] a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place'? Could the answer be the 'state', or perhaps the Tibetologists who perpetuate a focus on 'borderland', 'frontier', or 'territory' based on a hermeneutic that privileges the large, powerful, power centres of Tibet and China?¹⁸

One point here is that Smith's emphasis is on religion, and when we 'map' his point onto the lived ground of Gyelthang, we must wonder about the applicability of his larger question. What are the parallel 'ideologies' and patterns for our wonderings about the 'idea' of Gyelthang for the people who live therein? Identity for Gyelthangpa certainly includes religion, but religious identity for Gyelthangpa is not markedly different from other peoples in southern Kham, excepting perhaps that institutional Buddhist revival has been relatively stagnant in Gyelthang. To what degree can Smith's cautionary about the cartographers of a locative map help us to remove the boundaries of provinces and counties, the demarcated regions of Sumtseling's *kangtsen*, or even, if we expand the notion, the edges of 'minority nationality' groups, or the importance of sacred mountains (as decided by whom)?

What are the contexts being negotiated when the question of Gyelthang comes up in conversation? In scrutinizing Gyelthang, it is not so much that boundaries move as that different models are selectively employed based on the context of identity-negotiation. For example, even with the issue of *phayül*, whether or not a local will use the word or even think of the notion of Gyelthang depends on with whom they are speaking or interacting and why. Gyelthang is only used as an identifier of home-identity when someone from, say, Geza, is speaking with a Tibetan (only when speaking Tibetan) from the outside, or when the Geza person is themselves outside of the region speaking with another Tibetan. Thus, while it is understood that Gyelthang is a placename known to Tibetans in general, the word is only used to locate one's homeland in the ears of an outside listener. While this is not too surprising – I do not harp on about being a North Carolinian when I am in North Carolina talking with other North Carolinians – the situation is distinct in that when inside Gyelthang 'territory' there is almost never any sense of a sufficient cohesion, or nationalism (or the equivalent), not much sense of local Gyelthangpa pride – because there is not really a strong sense of bounded place or importance of place or central notion of what Gyelthang even means. This is not to say that farmers in Geza in

18 Note that in China (and to some degree in other countries) it is difficult to disentangle Tibetology from the 'state'.

Gyelthang, for example, are not proud of their valley, or even of the larger region, and this sense of awesomeness can include a sense that this southern reach of Kham is in fact different in qualitative important ways to locals. They feel a strong sense of 'Ah, home again in this beautiful land' when they come back.

I would argue that identity in Gyelthang is particularly local, tied to the land itself but not to any map of the land, similar to the ways in which religion is often very local in 'peripheral' areas (thus defining the periphery). Particularly in more rural parts of Gyelthang, the revivification of local non-Buddhist, pre-Buddhist (yet not Bön), 'folk religion' (Tib. *mi chö*) has been the result of the systematic deconstruction of institutional religion. The absence of numbers of charismatic or respected teachers at Sumtseling has left communities without religious teachers for decades. In conjunction with decreased literacy and a general state-imposed dismantling of the importance of religion, people in, for example, Geza or Nagara villages have replaced aspects of what were formerly more orthodox Buddhist valences with religious identity strands of story that are markedly and often beautifully folkloric. In this context, the cartographers are very local, and do not add to their recipes, at least not intentionally, emphases on notions such as 'periphery' or 'borderland'. The village community is a centre, and the mountains above the tree lines are full of monsters.

In Geza, for example, the animated landscape is instrumental in the construction of local identity, and people are concerned about mining and water, and about mushroom harvests. They re-perform stories about now-uninhabitable (and previously invisible) villages that were made visible and abandoned due to dangerous *nak nyi gö* (wild people), transgressions having to do with the bounds of what it means to be human, or forced relocations of villages at the hands of representatives of the state due to the perceived remoteness of the high villages, or both. The border is something akin to everything out of sight over all the surrounding mountains.

Smith's topography employs three categories: 1) the 'here' of domestic religion, located primarily in the home and in burial sites; 2) the 'there' of public civic and state religions, largely based in temple constructions; and 3) the 'anywhere' of a rich diversity of religious formations that occupy an interstitial space between these other two loci, including a variety of religious entrepreneurs and ranging from groups we term 'associations' to activities we label 'magic' (Smith 2004, 325). Of the three, the people of Geza and Nagara, for example, are far more focused on the first, the local, the 'here' of domestic religion, though not merely relegated to the house. The extended family's local domestic religion is the category we see most

manifest in Geza village life.¹⁹ With local domestic religiosity, displacement and forgetfulness become paramount concerns, alongside the worry about agency and who controls or creates memory (Smith 2004, 326-327; Mueggler 2001; E. Mortensen 2016). In the sphere of civic and national religion, the religion of 'there' is 'over there' in relation to one's home place and involves expressions of power. For the people of Geza, this is Buddhism, and the 'there' is, quite fundamentally, Ganden Sumtseling monastery. What does 'political legitimacy' mean for locals? To what degree are jurisdictions based on what local people care about?

For Gyelthangpa, seeing themselves as peripheral to Central Tibet or to the rest of Kham is a different thing, categorically, than seeing themselves as the borderlands, as the in-between people on competing guild maps. Larger questions of whether Tibet historically understood itself as a centre or peripheral world (*vis* Kalachakra or other cosmography, or in relation to powerful neighbours) are also worthy of deeper exploration.²⁰

I'd like to argue here that Gyelthang is, in a sense, an *idea* of place, the definition and meaning of which is quite old, if vague, and the reasons for its territory no longer very important. Locals absolutely identify as Gyelthangpa, understand themselves to be Khampa even if this is only secondary, and many do deeply love where they live. Locally, the 'idea' of Gyelthang is stronger than the 'idea' of Kham, and while Gyelthangpa may understand Gyelthang to be peripheral to the rest of the Tibetan world, they don't really locate themselves when they think about their identity as being the borderland between two or more places. Proximity matters. Just because Gyelthang is peripheral to Tibetan cultural power centres does not make it the interface between Tibet and China. It is not adjacent, historically, to China, but to other minority regions. It is not the boundary, although it might be considered frontier for the Chinese, particularly in years long past.

'A theory, a model, a conceptual category cannot be simply the data writ large', pens Smith (2004, 31). Gyelthang, if it is an idea, cannot be constituted merely by a constellation of data points – unless we connect them differently, more topologically, as Gros suggests in his chapter. What would be the data points of Gyelthang? Tourist maps readily available in the Old Town do a fine job of offering a version of such a way of understanding places within a larger place, and their importance. Religious sites are writ large, with sketches of monasteries sized according to their 'importance' for the tourist (and for

19 For an example from China, see Granet (1929, 205; 1951, 21-25).

20 Regarding ways in which China and India have historically understood the other-ness of their neighbours, see White (1991).

their entrance ticket sticker price). Roads between these sites are the only paths depicted, and the maps are printed on brown paper reminiscent of enticingly old and perhaps mysterious maps. Truly, the effect of tourism on Gyelthang in the past twenty years has been profound. Huge government money has revitalized the same buildings that the same government's policies razed half a century ago, and there are now nice roads, hundreds of hotels, an airport, and soon, a rail line. Opportunities to capitalize on the boom are myriad, and, like in much of China, the populace is far better off economically than they were a few decades ago. The tourism is, of course, managed by the state in conjunction with local entrepreneurs, etc., but the degree of agency locals have to determine how their own identities are marketed is questionable at best. The exotification and racism that has accompanied the creation and control of the narrative of 'authentic' Tibetanness has had an odious effect on Gyelthangpa identity, including religious identity.

In the performance of cultural identity, formative stories are dripping with the charisma of the suspension of (dis)belief. Just as the 'truth' and 'reality' of monsters in wild-forest-man tale performances is importantly unimportant, and just as accuracy (and sometimes even efficacy) in local non-Buddhist divination rituals is not (always) why they are performed, so too the 'authenticity' of Tibetan religio-cultural identity is not really why the tourists come to Shangri-La. The description of 'authenticity', after all, depends on whom you ask. Gyelthangpa agency is, at best, not of primary concern to the Cartographer's Guild of Shangri-La County.

Epilogue

In his wonderful essay 'Bible and Religion', Jonathan Z. Smith exhumes Jorge Luis Borges' parable about the perfectly congruent map that is, among other things, absolutely useless for 'finding one's way around' (2004, 209). Borges' passage is worth quoting in full:

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, these Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographer's Guild struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point by point with it. The following generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography, as their Forebears had been, saw that that

vast Map was useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all of the Land there is no other Relic of the Discipline of Geography.²¹

I ask you to envision Borges' empire (imperial power, cartographers?) as 'us', the practitioners and cartographers of Tibetology. Ever cognizant of China's imperial hegemony and goal of assimilation as a 'spectral state'²² that looms over our need as historians to complicate, to problematize, and to emphasize the proportionality of even minute detail, we also care for emic assertions of identity, care about the local, and seek out stories that fill out and paint our map of Kham with bleeding watercolour. But as we seek to define, taxonomize, and render intelligible the nuances of Kham, we may be wise to push through to see the ramifications of Smith's claim that 'map is not territory'.

If territory, for Smith, equals data that needs to be processed and analysed in order to create a map (a model), then if maps are not territory it is because they are inevitably merely representative abstractions – phantom and inexact semiotic parole penned by power. How then might Tibetologists create useful maps to best represent, for example, Gyelthang? Only if the notion of 'borderlands' (or of Kham) is particularly helpful for a given purpose should it be employed.²³ Importantly, not all 'maps' are contributions to cartographic knowledge. Some might be dreamscapes, others records of experience, some pathways of memory, and others intentionally misleading. When we consider Gyelthang, perhaps Smith is suggesting that if we wish to consider a map, we need to critically admit its quality of abstraction, but also that maps are nevertheless not things that we should not make at all, or that should exist only as tatters in western regions populated by animals and beggars. Focusing on the identity of Gyelthang as place, a multi-layered place with lived experiences and ambiances, is such a problematic abstraction, and one we should consider, perhaps, only for certain purposes. But mapping Gyelthang as a borderland, and even as part of a larger borderland, belies the local sense of place.

21 Borges, 'Exactitude in Science', as quoted in Smith (2004, 209).

22 Here taking out of context a phrase coined by Mueggler (2001).

23 I am indebted here to Stéphane Gros for his valuable comments on this section of this chapter, and for his suggestions about rethinking Smith's notions of maps, particularly in light of their possible 'utility'. Regarding the problem of what kind of knowledge can produce what kind of conceptualization of space and thus of 'map', see Mueggler (2011).

We add as many details as we possibly can to our understanding of the histories (and who constructed them), of the religions (and how they make meaning in people's lives), and of the importance of place in each. With collective scholarship, isn't our map becoming increasingly detailed? Wouldn't it be more 'helpful' were we to highlight certain places of interest (to the reader, unless 'they' is really 'we', in which case the guild's map is intended for internal circulation only), perhaps by sketching them in relative size of value or importance across Kham? Are we the Cartographer's Guild, 'striking' a map, like minting currency, coinage we can exchange for contested histories? Is the utility of smaller maps more beneficial to us as we seek to define 'borderlands'? Why should we, or why should the Gyelthangpa, care whether or not the Central Tibetans, who don't give much of a flip about Gyelthangpa in the first place, see Gyelthang as a 'borderland'? How do other residents of northwest Yunnan and Gyelthang, many of whom are not Tibetan, see themselves?

Perhaps the Cartographer's Guild is comprised of pan-Tibetan advocates. Imagine zooming in on Google Earth²⁴ but instead of the image getting closer to a particular locus, the borders of the map – the physical edges of the computer screen – grow wider with each click on the zoom function icon. And almost as an afterthought, if we as scholars are the Cartographer's Guild, then who are 'the following generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography'? Smith writes: 'For Borges, when map is the territory, it lacks both utility and any cognitive advantage with the result that the discipline which produced it, deprived of its warrants, disappears' (Smith 2004, 209).

Glossary of Chinese and Tibetan Terms

Chaktreng	Phyag phreng
Deqin <i>xian</i>	德钦县
Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou	迪庆藏族自治州
Döndrupling	Don grub gling (Tib.), Dongzhulin si 东竹林寺 (Ch.)
Dorje Shugden	Rdo rje Shug ldan
Geza	Skad tshag
Gyelthang	Rgyal thang

24 <https://google.com/earth/> Ironically, this is not something easy to do inside China, where Google is currently blocked.

Hutiaoxia	虎跳峡
Jinshajiang	金沙江
kangtsen	khang tshan
khenpo	mkhen po
mi chö	mi chos
Nagara	Nags rked rag
nak nyi gö	nags myi rgod
Nizu	Rmig zur
shaoshu minzu	少数民族
Termarong	Gter ma rong
Tongrong	Stong rong
Tormarong	Gtor ma
Xiangcheng	乡城
Xianggelila xian	香格里拉县

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