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Gateway to Tibet

Initial Qing occupation of the pass of Gas and its objectives with regard to Tibet (1715-1718)

1. Introduction

Dong Dacheng (董大成; fl. 1694-1716) had been selected to carry out the Emperor's orders. Three weeks after Xuanye (r. 1661-1722), the aging ruler of the Qing empire, issued his edict in Beijing, Dong Dacheng commenced his task. On 22 July 1715, he set out from Suzhou, the last military outpost within the protection of the Great Wall. Dong Dacheng and his two thousand troops averaged over thirty kilometers per day, traveling westward along the arid northern edge of the Tibetan plateau. At the crossing of a river, they lost many horses and provisions. After forty-nine days, Dong Dacheng finally reached Gas. It was a narrow mountain-pass, an inhospitable strip of land where nothing but some reeds would grow, surrounded by snow-capped mountains on three sides. Dong Dacheng could find no trace of any previous human traffic there. After only a month guarding the pass, provisions ran out, and he was forced to shift his camp to Debteri some five hundred kilometers southeast of Gas. The Emperor recalled him to Suzhou soon after.¹

While Dong Dacheng's mission may read like a misbegotten and poorly planned venture, it was the beginning of prolonged Qing presence at Gas. Xuanye was determined to reinforce Qing positions across the western frontier at any cost. When he was once counseled to reconsider because of the high costs of several hundred thousand taels (a tael is 37.62 grams of silver), he retorted that he was willing to spend far more.² Among the planned new breastworks of the Qing empire's western frontier was the desolate mountain pass named Gas, thousands of *li* (one *li* is 0,555 kilometers) removed from any significant city. Despite the remote location of Gas, emperor Xuanye intensified his efforts to establish a permanent presence there after Dong Dacheng's failed excursion. Why not occupy a point closer to the border? To date, existing scholarship has touched only superficially on Gas. Most notably, Chen Baiping has previously connected Gas to the Qing Emperor's desire to prevent military incursions, especially into Kokonor.³ That does not, however, explain why Xuanye chose to occupy a point so far outside the Qing border. To comprehend fully Emperor Xuanye's motivations for the occupation of Gas, I intend to demonstrate that they were closely connected to his desire to keep Tibet isolated. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how these plans failed. First, I will discuss the geological environment of Gas, as it was central to Gas's importance.

2. Geographical Situation of Gas and the Tsaidam Basin

Gas is a mountain pass located in what is today the northwesterly tip of Qinghai province in the People's Republic of China. In the early eighteenth century, the closest centers of population were the cities of Hami (Uyghur *Qumul*) to the

¹ Fuheng, *Strategic History of the Pacification of Zungharia = Jun Gar i Ba Be Neqihiyeme Toktobuha Bodogon i Bithe* = 平定準噶爾方略 (henceforth JGBB), 1:53r, 2:56v-58r; 3:31r-32v.

² Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2005), 231; For a conversion table of Chinese weights and measures, see Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xiii.

³ Chen Baiping 陈柏萍, 'Kangxi Yongzheng Shiqi Qinghai Zhujun Kaoshu = 康熙雍正时期青海驻军考述,' *Qinghai Minzu Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexueban)* 37, no. 03 (2011): 50-56.

northeast and Turfan to its northwest, both at a distance of approximately eight hundred kilometers.⁴ The pass provides the only passage on the western side of the Tsaidam basin (Chin. *cháidámù péndì* 柴達木盆地; Man. *qaidam*; Tib. *tsha'i 'dam*). The Tsaidam basin is shaped like a bowl, surrounded by mountains on all sides, and it has but few points of entry. Gas is one; in the east, several lead to the Kokonor region around Qinghai lake; and at Debteri one passage along the Kunlun mountain range on the southern side allows travel to central Tibet via the Tanggula pass. In terms of climate, the westernmost part of the Tsaidam basin is the harshest. It is home to a sandy desert, while salt marshes dominate the centre of the basin (the Tibetan name *tsha'i 'dam* literally means 'salt swamp'). Between the salt marshes in the centre and the mountain ranges around the edges of the basin lie grasslands of varying quality, so vital to the Qing troops for the grazing of horses and livestock.⁵

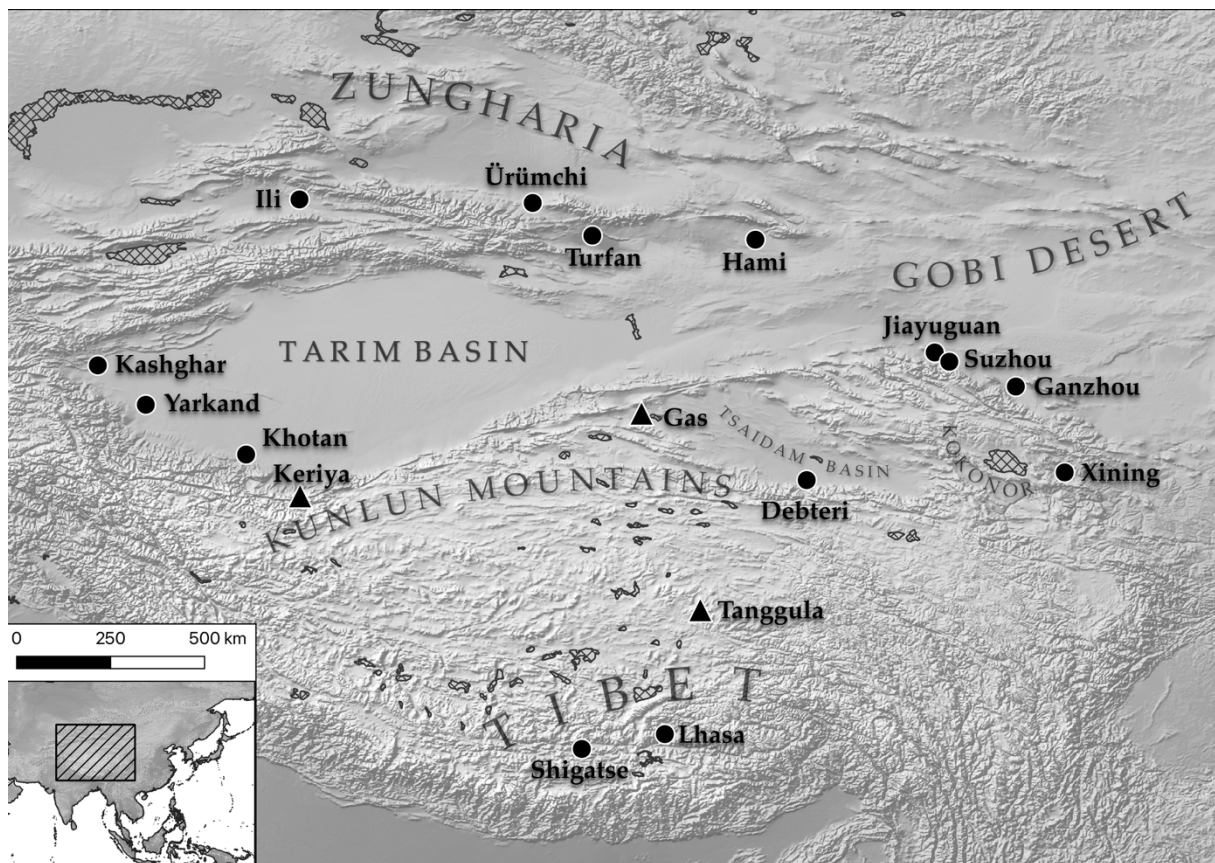


Figure 1: Relief map of Central and Inner Asia with locations relevant in this article indicated. Made with QGIS, and data from Natural Earth.

⁴ A thorough contemporary description of the location of Gas may be found in Jiang Tingxi 蔣廷錫, *Daqing Yitongzhi* = 大清一統志 (Beijing: Wuyingdian, 1744), 170:11v.

⁵ See Dong Dacheng's description in JGBB, 3:31v-33v; 'Qaidam Basin,' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Qaidam-Basin> (20 August 2021).

3. Establishing the Outpost(s)

So why did Xuanye decide to send troops to Gas? Who was he trying to keep from traversing the pass, and where was he afraid they might go? Xuanye had first become familiar with the routes that run through the Tsaidam basin in 1696. He was then in the prime of his life and had personally led campaigns for control over the Inner and Central Asian frontier against his rival, the ruler of the Zunghar khanate Galdan Boshogtu Khan (r. 1678-1696). Narrowly escaping capture, Galdan fled. Qing armies pursued him relentlessly, and he eventually committed suicide by taking poison, or was assassinated. His nephew intended to flee to Tibet via Gas with the remains of his uncle, and so Xuanye dispatched several hundred men there to try and capture Galdan's nephew.⁶ This was the first time that Gas came to the attention of Xuanye as an important gateway between the Tibetan plateau and Central Asia.

The death of the Zunghar khan did not, however, signify the disappearance of the khanate. Another of Galdan's nephews, Tsewang Raptan (Tib. *tshe dbang rab brtan*; r. 1697-1727) became the khanate's new ruler. His relationship with the Qing empire had always been tense, but only in 1715 did hostilities break out. A force of two thousand Zunghars attacked Hami, a vassal of the Qing, although the defenders of Hami held them off.⁷

In the later years of his reign, Xuanye emphasized that his pacification of the Central Asian frontier in the 1690s was a unique accomplishment, unmatched in the history of all previous Chinese empires.⁸ Renewed Zunghar incursions were a thorn in his side, so he was quick to mobilize a new campaign. Xuanye and his advisers planned the campaign as a three-pronged assault on Zungharia. One army would march via Hami and Turfan, the second would invade from northern Mongolia, and the third would march via Gas.⁹ Logistical constraints became a stumbling block for the ambitious advance.¹⁰ The main plans were postponed, but Gas could not be left unguarded. This was the moment at which Dong Dacheng was ordered to Gas, in the summer of 1715.

Dong Dacheng's story did not end well. When the emperor received word of Dong's tortured journey to Gas, he decided it was better that Dong Dacheng and his two thousand troops return to Suzhou and Ganzhou for the winter. After all, Tsewang Raptan was unlikely to order his troops to attack via Gas in winter. Still, the Emperor ordered Dong to burn the grasslands as a precaution, so that the Zunghars could not pasture their horses there.¹¹ Dong Dacheng either never received or did not obey this order. Months later, he was still at Gas. He only revealed his mistake as he reported that he shifted camp to Debteri. A thunderous reply came from the Emperor, containing the dreaded phrase '*gemun hegen de jikini*,' 'I want you to come to the capital.' To speed his journey, Dong was even commanded to make use of

⁶ Fang Chao-ying in Arthur W. Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1912* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 1944), 267-8; Unda, *Strategic History of the Personally-Led Expeditions for Pacification of the North Western Regions = Beye Dailame Wargi Amargi Babe Neqihiyeme Toktobuha Bodogon i Bithe = Qinzheng Pingding Shuomo Fanglüe* 親征平定朔漠方略 (henceforth WABB), 44:10v-15r, 28r-v.

⁷ JGBB, 01:32r-33r.

⁸ WABB, xii:3r-v. In his preface, Xuanye reflects on the accomplishments of past Chinese empires: 'One by one, I have read about the past enterprises of the Han, Tang, and Song [empires]. In most cases, they exhausted the China's strength, but were unable to accomplish the merit of cleansing the frontier' ('歷觀漢唐宋之已事往往罷敝中國之力而不能成廓清邊塞之功').

⁹ JGBB, 1:40v-41r.

¹⁰ Perdue, *China Marches West*, 231.

¹¹ JGBB, 2:56v-58r.

postal horses. On accusations of needlessly endangering the troops and exhausting the horses, he was removed from office.¹²

Xuanye needed a different solution to the crucial pass of Gas. Arid Gas with its sandy desert was clearly not suitable for long-term stationing of troops, but the Emperor was adamant: occupation of Gas was crucial to the security of the frontier. After all, should Tsewang Raptan hear that the Qing troops had pulled back, he would certainly dispatch troops to attack via Gas. Funingga, the general who commanded the garrison at Bar Kōl to the north of Hami, recommended contacting two Khoshud¹³ nobles who lived further east in the Tsaidam basin for intelligence on the region. The local nobles became key to the military occupation of Gas. On the fourteenth of April 1716, the imperial order came to the nobles of the Tsaidam basin to supply troops to keep an eye on Gas. The Emperor ordered the nobleman who lived closest to Gas, a minor prince called Rabgyur (Ma. *Arabjur*), to take five hundred men to Gas upon the arrival of the 'season in which the grass sprouts.'¹⁴ Additionally, Xuanye gave the instruction that 'should there be anyone belonging to Tsewang Raptan's people who crosses back or forth, apprehend them, and bring them [to me].'¹⁵

In this last instruction, the Emperor reveals a crucial intention of blocking the pass Gas. That he meant to prevent a Zunghar incursion into the Kokonor region is well-established, but the few Qing troops stationed at Gas would not be able to stop a true invasion force. It is also noteworthy that until this point, there is no indication that Xuanye feared a Zunghar military incursion into Tibet. The most pressing reason for Xuanye's near frantic attempts to keep Gas manned was diplomatic. It was an attempt to frustrate all contact between the Zunghar khanate and the powers in Central Tibet.

This requires some explanation. Tibet was at this point ruled by a Khoshud khan named Lhazang (Tib. *lha bzang*), who had installed himself as ruler in Tibet. To do so, he had overthrown the previous Tibetan government with the tacit support of the Qing Emperor. After taking Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, Lhazang sent the sixth Dalai Lama to Kokonor on Xuanye's request. Unfortunately, the young man died on the harsh roads (or may have been murdered). When the new Dalai Lama was identified, the child was brought to Kokonor and housed in Kumbum (Tib. *sku 'bum*; Ch. *tǎ'ěrsì* 塔爾寺) temple within Qing borders. Thus, the Tibetans came to detest Lhazang's rule, so much so that the religious establishment of the large temples surrounding Lhasa was scheming to have him removed. The Tibetan hierarchs turned to the Zunghars, who were fervent adherents of the Dalai Lama's school.¹⁶

Although Xuanye was aware of the tremendous influence that the Tibetan hierarchs commanded, he also feared the close ties between Tsewang Raptan and Lhazang. Their children were married, and upon earlier requests, Lhazang had once supplied troops to Tsewang Raptan.¹⁷ Should the Zunghars and Lhazang's Khoshud and the Tibetan hierarchs all unite, they might persuade many Mongol and Oirat

¹² Ibid., 3:32v-33v. Dong Dacheng had earlier reported that the journey to Gas was around three thousand *li*, whereas a trusted official sent to intercept Galdan's nephew in 1696 had reported a distance of seventeen hundred *li* from the same point of departure.

¹³ Like the Zunghars, the Khoshud are a community of Oirat; western Mongols.

¹⁴ JGBB, 3:9r-v, 3:28v-29r: '*niyanqihā tuqike erinde*.'

¹⁵ Ibid., 29r: '*cewang rabtan i niyalma , aikabade anasi julesi yaburengge biqi , jafafi benjikini*.'

¹⁶ Leonard Zwilling, ed., *Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri*, S. J., trans. Michael J. Sweet (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 245-248; Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *One Hundred Thousand Moons: An Advanced Political History of Tibet* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), chap. 8; Yingcong Dai, *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009), 79; Perdue, *China Marches West*, 229.

¹⁷ Zwilling, *Mission to Tibet*, 246; Dai, *The Sichuan Frontier*, 78; Perdue, *China Marches West*, 233.

communities to join their cause, instead of supporting the Qing. Therefore, it was crucial to make sure there was no contact between Tibet and Zungharia.

As far as Xuanye was aware, Gas was the only remaining route to Tibet for the Zunghars.¹⁸ Once more, he reinforced the Khoshud nobles' forces with a new Manchu-Chinese army. This time in August of 1716, the commander of the Qing presence in the Tsaidam basin divided his troops over four camps, stationed along the roads that led to and from Gas. In early 1717, it was decided that two thousand troops should be stationed along these roads in the Tsaidam basin at all times. The Emperor wrote in his instructions that 'Gas is of the highest importance, and it cannot go unguarded even for a single day.'¹⁹ Two groups of two thousand soldiers were appointed, and they would relieve one another every year: one group actively serving at Gas, one group recovering in the garrisons.²⁰

4. Gas Bypassed

The Zunghars then managed to do the unthinkable. Instead of making use of the conventional routes to Central Tibet, Tsewang Rapten ordered his brother Tsering Döndrup (Tib. *tshe ring don grub*) to go to Tibet via the western route. Tsering Döndrup set off from Kashghar in present-day western Xinjiang, moving south. Via Yarkand and Khotan, he crossed the Kunlun mountains near Keriya. From there, he traversed the desolate highlands of western Tibet with a force of six thousand. He had departed in November, 1716, and reached Central Tibet months later. Five hundred soldiers died en route. The remaining army reached Tibet with only one horse per person, and had been forced to consume the meat of dogs and humans to survive their daring venture.²¹

Although at a high cost, the Zunghars had outmanoeuvred and even confused the Qing Emperor. Qing records recount doubt about the truthfulness of the reports of Tsering Döndrup's journey via western Tibet. If the reports could be accepted as true, Qing advisors were uncertain whether Tsering Döndrup was more likely to ally with Lhazang or to attack him and take over Tibet. Both options were equally undesirable. The Emperor was swift to dispatch envoys to Kokonor for more intelligence on the matter, and began preparing his armies. The confusion was eventually cleared up by Lhazang's requests for aid. Xuanye also gave notice to the commanders of the Gas troops to be extra alert.²² There was good cause for this. In late 1716, Tsewang Rapten had dispatched three hundred Zunghars to Kokonor to liberate the Dalai Lama and then rendezvous with Tsering Döndrup's troops at Dam in northern Central Tibet. The Gas troops had made this impossible.²³ Nevertheless, the intrepid Tsering Döndrup could not be stopped in Tibet. The Qing histories recorded the over-confident Emperor's response to the news of Tsering Döndrup's arrival in Tibet:

In Tibet the Dalai Lama's stockpiled provisions and supplies are plentiful, and the Tibetans have all manner of weaponry. Furthermore, the people of Tibet are law-abiding. Now that Tsewang Rapten is bringing ruin to the Teachings without reason and professing his wish to be master of Tibet, how

¹⁸ JGBB, 3:41r.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4:3v.

²⁰ Ibid., 4:1r-5r.

²¹ Funingga, *Berichte Des Generals Funingga*, n.d., 1:52-3.

²² JGBB, 4:34v-37v.

²³ Chen, "Kangxi Yongzheng Shiqi Qinghai Zhujun Kaoshu," 52.

do you think the people there will be disposed to him? Moreover, Tsering Döndrup's army is exhausted to the extreme. They have fought with other troops and are dying of disease. How can there be even two thousand left? In this condition, would they be able to take Lhazang's city?²⁴

General Funingga, who commanded the Qing troops on the northwestern front, tells a different story. Tsering Döndrup's journey had indeed been exhausting, but once in Tibet, he could attack Lhazang 'with ease.'²⁵ Indeed, he had soon occupied Lhasa, and after three more days he also took the Potala fortress-palace and killed Lhazang. The Zunghars had taken Khoshud Tibet, a former ally of the Qing.

5. Conclusion

In the end, stationing troops at Gas had proved its value: the troops reduced the likelihood of Zunghar incursions into Kokonor and impeded the Zunghar's ability to communicate with Tibet. Unexpectedly, the Zunghars managed to outsmart Xuanye, who had erroneously assumed that Qing occupation of Gas would cut off communication between the Zunghars, the Khoshud, and the Tibetans. Renewed military efforts against the Zunghars first motivated Qing Emperor Xuanye to occupy Gas. Subsequently, strong diplomatic concerns prompted Xuanye to keep Gas occupied at all times. By controlling Gas, Xuanye hoped to indirectly control Tibet and isolate it from the Zunghars. The occupation of Gas failed to accomplish this goal, and if it ever had the objective of preventing a Zunghar military invasion of Tibet, it failed there, too.

After the fall of Lhasa in late 1717, the number of troops at Gas was again increased in November 1718 as the Qing armies undertook their first, disastrous campaign to wrest possession of Tibet from the Zunghars. Over the following decades, Gas remained an important crossing and the successive Qing emperors vigilantly continued to man Xuanye's garrisons in the Tsaidam basin. For several decades after 1715, the mountain pass of Gas was the single location in which the imperial ambitions of the Zunghar and the Qing empires toward Tibet, Kokonor, and the eastern oasis cities of southern Xinjiang became apparent. He, who controlled Gas, controlled the crossroads to all.

²⁴ JGBB, 52r-v: 'wargi zang ni bade dalai lama i asaraha jeku qaliyan umesi labdu , agvra hajun inu gemu bi , ere dade , wargi zang ni niyalma , fufun be tuwakiyambi , te cewang rabtan turgun akv xajin be efuleme , zang be ejeleki sere be , geren niyalma ainahai inde ombini , tere anggala , qeringdondob sei qooha , umesi mohoro ten de isinaha , dain de gaibuha , nineme buqehengge qi tulgiyen , ainahai juwe minggan bini , ede geli lazang ni hoton be gaima mutembio.'

²⁵ Funingga, *Berichte*, 1:53, 'heo seme.'