

# Tribute and Trade— Economic Exchanges Between Central Tibet and Early Ming China

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*Tribút a obchod: ekonomická výmena medzi Centrálnym Tibetom a ranou mingskou Čínou*

*Resumé* Štúdia analyzuje ekonomické aspekty vzťahov dynastie Ming s tibetskými panovníkmi z rodu Phagmodu (*phag mo gru*) vládncami v Centrálnom Tibete v priebehu rokov 1368–1434. Autor túto problematiku skúma v kontexte tradičných vzťahov čínskych dynastií s vládcami z Centrálnej Ázie, pri ktorých tribút a obchod predstavovali kľúčové aspekty čínskej zahraničnej politiky. Štúdia sa zameriava na oficiálny obchod a tribút, ktoré prebiehali v hlavnom meste čínskej dynastie a vychádza primárne z dobových čínskych prameňov (v prvom rade *Ming shilu* 明實錄). Štúdia ponúka úplný zoznam produktov, ktoré tibetskí vyslanci v rámci tribútu priniesli na čínsky cisársky dvor (napr. buddhistické texty, relikvie, kone, vlnené látky, meče, brnenia atď.) a aj dary udelené čínskym cisárom pre členov tribútnych misií a vládcov rodu Phagmodu (napr. hodvábné látky a odevy, sošky buddhistických božstiev, papierové peniaze, čaj). Intenzita tribútno-obchodných misií a typ produktov, ktoré si Číňania s Tibetanmi vymieňali, ilustrujú skutočnosť, že ekonomické aspekty zohrávali vo vzťahoch medzi mingskou Čínou a vládnucim rodom Phagmodu iba marginálnu úlohu.

*Keywords* China · Tibet · Ming Dynasty · Phagmodru (Tib. *phag mo gru*) ruling house · 14th–15th cent. · Economic History · Tribute

This paper is a sequel to my contribution focused on political and religious issues of the relations between the Phagmodru (Tib. *phag mo gru*) ruling house

(1354–1434) and the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).<sup>1</sup> The economic exchanges, which included tribute and trade, should provide a more complex picture of the relations between a Central Asian ruler and the Chinese emperor. Political, as well as economic relations between Ming China and the Phagmodru ruling house<sup>2</sup> could be analysed only within the context of the traditional relations of Imperial China with the neighbouring polities, where trade played a crucial role, as »in the intercourse between the Chinese state and the barbarians, commercial relations became inseparably bound up with tributary«. <sup>3</sup> The tribute system, a praxis established during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), proved to be the most effective foreign political tool for the management of relations between Chinese and non-Chinese rulers, and during successive dynasties it underwent only limited modifications. Tribute and trade had composed the core of the Sinocentric worldview and these measures were adopted by all Chinese dynasties, which had further developed its operation in praxis. The tribute system was for the first time enacted during the first two centuries of the Han Dynasty rule, which had to deal with the threat of the Xiongnu 匈奴 Empire.<sup>4</sup> Trade with foreign countries and rulers did not reflect only the economic demands and the overall economic policy of a particular Chinese dynasty, but it was subordinated to a more pressing priority, namely the maintaining of superior status (at least on a theoretical level and the self-perception of the Imperial court) of the Son of Heaven (Chin. *tianzi* 天子) *vis-à-vis* other non-Chinese rulers. Thus tribute and trade were perceived by Chinese statesmen

- 1 Martin Slobodník, »The Relations Between the Chinese Ming Dynasty and the Tibetan Ruling House of Phag-mo-gru in the Years 1368–1434: Political and Religious Aspects«, *Asian and African Studies* NS 13,2 (2004), 155–172; repr. in *Critical Readings on the History of Tibetan Foreign Relations*, 4 vols., ed. by Saul Mullard (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1: 357–375.
- 2 On the political history of Central Tibet in this period and the role of Phagmodru see Tsepon W. D. Shagabpa, *Tibet: A Political History* (New York: Potala Publications, 1988), 73–91; Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and Mongols. The Yüan—Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Roma: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), 85–138; Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp, »On the Life and Political Career of Ta'i-si-tu Byang-chub Rgyal-mtshan (1302–?1364)«, in *Tibetan History and Language. Studies Dedicated to Úray Géza on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Ernst Steinkellner (Wien: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1991), 277–327; Shen Weirong, *Leben und historische Bedeutung des ersten Dalai Lama dGe 'dun grub pa dpal bzang po (1391–1474). Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der dGe lugs pa-Schule und der Institution der Dalai Lamas* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2002), 41–48.
- 3 John King Fairbank and Teng S. Y., »On the Ch'ing Tributary System«, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6,2 (1941), 139.
- 4 For more details see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies. The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190–248.

primarily as political tools embedded with the complex ideology and praxis of the interaction with foreign dignitaries. The presentation of tribute was a necessary precondition not only for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Imperial China, but also for official trade relations of foreign empires with China, which due to the economic potential of China (and its political role and status in East Asia) was coveted. The close link between the ceremonial and ritual part of the tribute (which included the kowtow before the Chinese Emperor) and its economic aspect reflected the two facets of the complex interaction between China and its neighbours, as well as the divergent interest of the actors. Whereas the Chinese side stressed the ceremonial and ideological role of the tribute system, as the number of the tribute missions recorded in Chinese annals enhanced the authority and prestige of the Chinese Emperor, the non-Chinese tribute bearers were interested in the access to Chinese commodities and thus they usually accepted the Chinese model of non-equal relations as an inevitable nuisance which enabled them to trade with China.<sup>5</sup>

'Barbarians' were keen to exchange goods with China and although they were not economically dependent on China, they were interested in luxurious items (e.g. silk fabrics and garments), which were popular as status symbols among the Central Asian population. A monopolized access to these products had enabled the non-Chinese rulers and chieftains to distribute them among their followers which contributed to the strengthening of their political authority. Besides luxurious items, the nomadic empires regularly imported from China some other commodities which were scarce in the steppes (e.g. cotton clothes, grain). The traditional Chinese perspective, as documented by the abundant Chinese official histories, reflected the traditional self-perception of its own superiority and therefore the tribute articles presented by the non-Chinese envoys at the Imperial Court, were described as superfluous to the Chinese economy. However, the situation of the Ming Dynasty was to a certain degree different, as during this period China was dependent on the import of horses from Central Asia (see below).

The mechanism of trade exchanges<sup>6</sup> with China had involved several administrative levels of imperial bureaucracy together constituting the complex

5 According to Benjamin Schwartz the Sinocentric model of Chinese foreign relation should not be understood as an objective fact accepted by all the involved actors and although the non-Chinese had made use of the Sinocentric terminology of foreign relations, they did it with a certain distance and did not accept Chinese claims. See Benjamin I. Schwartz, «The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present», in *The Chinese World Order. Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. by John King Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 276.

6 I will discuss the official trade, i.e. the commercial activities of the tribute missions in the Chinese capital and the frontier marts administered by Chinese officials. Besides it, there had

institution of Chinese foreign trade. The first and most important part consisted of the presentation of the tribute (Chin. *gong* 貢, *ru gong* 入貢, *chao gong* 朝貢) to the Chinese emperor at the imperial court in the capital.<sup>7</sup> Chinese sources usually list 'local products' (Chin. *fang wu* 方物) which were typical for a particular region that dispatched its envoys to China.<sup>8</sup> These products had primarily a symbolic value as they had played a role in the ritual acceptance of the authority of the Chinese emperor, but it should be noted that via this channel various goods not present in China itself found its way there. Tribute did not represent an important asset for the economic development of any given Chinese dynasty. The ritual part of the tribute presentation included the bestowal of gifts or so called 'return gifts' (Chin. *ci* 賜, *hui ci* 回賜) by the emperor to the members of the tribute mission and the foreign ruler. These items were an expression of the emperor's gratitude for their manifestations of loyalty and favour. As a rule, the value of these exchange gifts were higher than the value of the 'local products' presented as a tribute. This only underlines the generally accepted conclusion, that economic benefits played only a marginal role in the assessment of the tribute system by Chinese officials and statesmen.

Gifts bestowed by the emperor on the envoys bringing tribute constituted a problematic issue once the number of the tribute missions and their frequency increased,<sup>9</sup> as this financial burden was exhausting the Imperial treasury.<sup>10</sup> Typical exchange gifts bestowed by the Chinese Emperor included silk fabric, silk garments, gold jewellery, silver or cash. Apart from the financial value, these gifts—as well as the visit to the imperial capital and the prolonged stay in China—were at the same time another means of the attempted gradual Sinicization of non-Chinese elites and contributed to the spread of Chinese

always been a flourishing illegal trade—smuggling of goods in the border areas, which the Chinese authorities had attempted to suppress (one of the reasons was that the prices of certain Chinese goods in these illegal trades were more favourable than the high prices fixed by the state). One finds only scarce and indirect information in the available Chinese sources relevant for the relations between Ming China and Central Tibet.

7 Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs* (1400–1600) (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1975), 35.

8 E.g., animals, furs, precious gemstones, medical herbs, handicrafts, art goods. Below, I shall deal in greater detail with the typical local goods presented by envoys from Central Tibet.

9 For instance in the second period of the Ming Dynasty rule the situation became financially unmanageable and the Chinese authorities had striven to regulate the frequency and size of tribute missions.

10 Henry Serruys, »Sino-Mongol Trade During the Mings«, *Journal of Asian History* 9,1 (1975), 35.

culture in neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup> After the tribute presentation, the foreign missions were lodged in the Chinese capital for several weeks, and members of these missions devoted themselves to commercial activities: selling the goods brought from their native countries and buying Chinese products. The costs for their lodging and board were covered by the Chinese side as well as the considerably high transportation costs of the tribute missions within Chinese territory.<sup>12</sup> Apart from the Imperial capital, trade exchanges had also taken place in frontier regions,<sup>13</sup> where local authorities established frontier markets (Chin. *bian shi* 邊市) once it was approved by an Imperial decree.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of a frontier market was a sign of the emperor's benevolence towards a particular non-Chinese regime, thus again political and ideological considerations prevailed over economic benefits.

Foreign trade during the Ming Dynasty was firmly anchored in this tradition and took place within the context of tribute relations. Foreign trade during the Ming Dynasty had involved a number of actors on central and local levels. The central role was naturally played by the emperor who by accepting the tribute enabled the establishment of political and economic relations. The Emperor Ming Chengzu 明成祖 (1360–1424, *reg.* 1402–1424) advocated the strengthening of Chinese relations with Central Asia<sup>15</sup> (as well as other neighbouring empires), as he was aware of the fact that China was dependent on the import of horses from this region. The analysis of the foreign policy—especially in relation to Central Tibet and its ruling house of Phagmodru—of the successive Ming emperors was quite problematic due to the fact that from the available sources it is not clear, which decisions were made by the emperor himself and which measures were designed and implemented by the Imperial bureaucracy. Both Ming Taizu 明太祖 (1328–1398, *reg.* 1368–1398) and Ming Chengzu had quite detailed knowledge on the political and military situation in Central Asia, due to repeated military conflicts with the Mongols, and they took advantage of this

11 Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions* (1400–1600) (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1967), 111.

12 During the Ming period tribute mission were lodged in the Huitongguan 會同館 palace in the vicinity of the Imperial Palace. See *Ibid.*, 408–435; Roger Greatrex, »Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court (1400–1665)«, *Acta Orientalia* 58 (1997), 123.

13 Morris Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 70.

14 Huang Yusheng 黃玉生 & al., *Xizang difang yu zhongyang zhengfu guanxi shi* 西藏地方與中央政府關係史 [History of Relations between Tibet and the Central Government] (Lhasa: Xizang renmin chubanshe, 1995), 438–439.

15 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 62.

expertise when implementing their Tibet policy, which consisted of political and religious measures.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the emperor, who played a crucial part in the ceremonial and ritual part of the tribute system, other agencies of the Imperial government were involved in foreign relations, namely Ministry of Rites (Chin. *li bu* 禮部), Ministry of Revenues (Chin. *bu bu* 戶部) and the Ministry of Defence (Chin. *bing bu* 兵部).<sup>17</sup> The strategic proposals of these ministries with regard to the policy towards Central Asia differed to a certain degree, as the ministries of rites and revenues primarily attempted to limit the frequency and size of the tribute missions in order to relieve the Imperial treasury,<sup>18</sup> but the officials from the Ministry of Defence argued that the *de facto* interruption of contacts with Central Asia and the refusal to trade with China would inevitably lead to the destabilization of Chinese frontier areas as it would provoke periodic attacks. A specific role in Chinese political and economic relations with neighbouring countries was played by eunuchs, who were dispatched by emperors on diplomatic missions abroad bringing gifts to local rulers.<sup>19</sup> Eunuchs were also involved in the contacts with the Phagmodru ruling house in Central Tibet, especially during the reign of Ming Chengzu who repeatedly dispatched Yang Sanbao 楊三保 to Central Tibet in 1413, 1414 and 1419, Dai Xing 戴興 in 1423 and finally the eunuch Hou Xian 候顯 in 1427.<sup>20</sup> Besides the institutions of central government, an important role was played by local officials who were in touch with tribute missions during their travels from the Chinese frontier to the capital and back. Chinese sources repeatedly mention that these officials were abusing their positions in order to gain personal benefits.<sup>21</sup> An important role was also played by the traders, who were doing business directly with members

16 For details, see Slobodník, »The Relations between the Chinese Ming Dynasty and the Tibetan Ruling House of Phag-mo-gru in the Years 1368–1434«.

17 For details of the Ming administrative system see Charles O. Hucker, »Governmental Organization of the Ming Dynasty«, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 21 (1958), 1–66.

18 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 62–63.

19 The most famous Chinese traveller, fleet admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433), who was dispatched for several naval expeditions to Southeast and South Asia in the years 1405–33, was also an eunuch. See Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 613–617.

20 For details of their missions to Central Tibet please refer to Slobodník, »The Relations Between the Chinese Ming Dynasty and the Tibetan Ruling House of Phag-mo-gru in the Years 1368–1434«, 165–168.

21 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 397–398.

of tribute missions in their lodging in the Imperial capital or at the frontier markets.<sup>22</sup>

The prevalent items brought to China from Central Asia during the Ming Dynasty within the tribute system included animals: primarily horses, camels (they were used for transportation in northern China, but in comparison with horses, the number of camels presented as tribute items was negligible) and sheep.<sup>23</sup> Mongol tribes also often presented falcons and hawks, which were used for hunting.<sup>24</sup> Typical tribute items also included furs of Central Asian animals (e.g. sable, squirrel or fox), which were very valued by the Chinese Imperial court.<sup>25</sup> The rulers inhabiting the territory of today's Xinjiang often presented as tribute jade which was used in China for ritual objects and other articles.<sup>26</sup> Among the »local products« presented by tribute missions to the Imperial court one also finds various healing herbs which were used for traditional Chinese medicine. Chinese emperors usually bestowed to tribute missions paper money which we find on the lists of gifts to foreign envoys from various neighbouring regions.<sup>27</sup> Other Imperial presents included silk fabrics and silk garments which were according to their quality assorted into several categories<sup>28</sup> and they were appreciated by foreign rulers as they repeatedly requested their bestowal. Apart from silk fabrics and garments, the gifts consisted of cotton clothes and clothing.<sup>29</sup> Members of the tribute and trade missions from Central Asia were primarily interested in the acquisition of tea, paper and porcelain, which they usually acquired not as a part of the presents bestowed by the emperor, but by purchasing them in China from local traders.<sup>30</sup> The composition of exchange goods in particular Central Asian regions showed certain peculiarities with regards to items, but in general the similarities prevailed.

The most important items in the economic exchanges of Ming China with Central Asia was the import of horses and the export of tea. The import of horses from Central Asia to China has a long history reaching back to the Han Dynasty period. In China, there was also a tradition of horse breeding, but the Chinese soon acknowledged that the horses of their northern and western neighbours, mainly nomadic societies, were of a higher quality and more suitable

22 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 66.

23 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 193–196.

24 *Ibid.*, 200–201.

25 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 73.

26 *Ibid.*, 74.

27 *Ibid.*, 76.

28 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 211–218.

29 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 76.

30 *Ibid.*, 77–78; Huang Yusheng, *Xizang difang yu zhongyang zhengfu*, 442–443.

for the cavalry.<sup>31</sup> Starting from the period of the Han dynasty emperor Wudi 漢武帝 (156–87 BC, *reg.* 141–87 BC), the Chinese were importing horses from Central China and this trade continued until the Ming Dynasty. Chinese statesmen were well aware of the strategic importance of ‘barbarian horses’ especially in connection with the devastating intrusions of nomadic armies, when the superiority of Central Asian horses clearly manifested itself. Although, during the Ming Dynasty the Chinese had striven to breed horses on Chinese territory, the pasturelands were not suitable and there were not enough qualified horse breeders,<sup>32</sup> also this dynasty was dependent on the import of horses from Central Asia.

During the initial period of the Ming Dynasty, when the previous Mongol rulers were conquered and escaped towards the Mongol steppes, the situation in the northwest frontier area with Central Asia was very unstable and thus the Chinese were not able to import horses from Mongolia. Therefore, the Emperors Ming Taizu and Ming Chengzu had to turn to other regions and they repeatedly dispatched envoys to the area of today’s Xinjiang with the aim of persuading the local chieftains to present to the Chinese emperor tribute horses.<sup>33</sup> However, tribute was an irregular and unreliable source of horses<sup>34</sup>—moreover, substantial financial resources were needed for the maintenance of the tribute system—and the Ming Dynasty acquired the majority of the horses through trade, which was under the control of state authorities and not private traders.<sup>35</sup> Before the year 1400 most of the horses were imported from Korea, and although Chinese sources sometimes mention tribute in connection with these horses, the large number of imported horses (e.g. 5000 horses in 1385, 3040 in 1386, 10000 horses in 1391<sup>36</sup>) was the outcome of commercial purchases and not tribute. At the beginning of the 15th century, during the reign of Emperor Ming Chengzu, Korea was still the most important importer of horses for China. Apart from Korea, the horses were also imported from the Sino-Tibetan marches<sup>37</sup> in northwest China, another region with a long history of

31 H. G. Creel, »The Role of the Horse in Chinese History«, *American Historical Review* 70 (1965), 655–656.

32 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 138.

33 *Ibid.*, 139.

34 The other source of horses—namely war booty—was likewise unreliable.

35 *Ibid.*, 140. Later, starting at the end of the 15th cent., private traders played an important role in this trade.

36 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming. Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs*, 25.

37 Area located in the borderlands of today’s Shaanxi and Gansu provinces.

horse breeding.<sup>38</sup> The founder of the dynasty Ming Chengzu had established several horse markets (Chin. *masbi* 馬市)<sup>39</sup> along the Sino-Tibetan frontier in today's Shaanxi, Gansu and Sichuan provinces, which were further expanded in the first half of the 15th century. At the beginning of the 15th century, the situation in the Sino-Mongol marches was stabilized and with the rising number of horses imported from Mongolia, the role of Tibetans in the horse trade had gradually diminished. The role of horses as an important commodity in Chinese foreign trade can also be illustrated by the detailed ranking of horses into several categories and the fixed price calculated according to cotton clothes to be found in Chinese sources<sup>40</sup> as well as the establishment of special government offices which were in charge of the imported horses.<sup>41</sup>

Central Asian rulers received in exchange for horses primarily tea.<sup>42</sup> Tibetans were also exchanging horses for silk and cotton clothes, silver and salt.<sup>43</sup> The tea horse trade had already flourished in the northwest frontier during the Song Dynasty<sup>44</sup> and the Ming Dynasty carried on with this business. As it was the case in the past, the Ming Dynasty had also enforced state monopoly on the tea trade. Chinese statesmen had perceived this tea horse trade not as a standard commercial transaction, but as a strategic tool through which it was possible in their understanding to regulate relations with Central Asian nations, including Tibetans. According to Chinese authors, »if the Tibetans do not possess tea, they get sick and die.«<sup>45</sup> The Chinese perception of the strong Tibetan (and also

38 Elliot Sperling, »Early Ming Policy Toward Tibet: An Examination of the Proposition that the Early Ming Emperors Adopted a 'Divide and Rule' Policy Toward Tibet« (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1983), 206.

39 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 281; Sperling, »Early Ming Policy Toward Tibet«, 210.

40 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs*, 256–257. According to the record from the year 1426 fixed prices were settled for horses of various categories, these prices were calculated according to scrolls of silk and paper money. See Du Changfeng 杜長風, »Mingdai Wusizang chaogong shulüe« 明代烏思藏朝貢述略 [Brief Description of the Tibetan Tribute During the Ming Dynasty], *Xizang yanjiu* 西藏研究 3/1990, 69.

41 On these administrative offices see Mitsukata Tani, »A Study on Horse Administration in the Ming Period«, *Acta Asiatica* 21 (1971), 73–97.

42 According to *Da Ming Huidian* 大明會典 [Collected Statutes of the Great Ming], Sibu beiyao 四部備要 Edition (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 1525 (hereafter abbreviated as *DMHD*): »Tibetans do not possess any other products, they only exchange horses for tea.«

43 Sperling, »Early Ming Policy Toward Tibet«, 210.

44 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 141.

45 Yan Congjian 嚴從簡, *Shuyu zhou zilu* 殊域周咨錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 369.

Mongol) addiction to tea—and thus dependence on China as a source of this strategic item—led to the endeavour to monopolize this business by state in order to influence the policy of Central Asian nations towards China through regulations limiting the export of tea.<sup>46</sup> The importance of this trade for Chinese officials can be further illustrated by the establishment of a special government agency, namely the Horse Trading Office (Chin. *cha ma si* 茶馬司)<sup>47</sup> with its branch offices in Shaanxi and Sichuan.<sup>48</sup> This office was authorized to secure the state monopoly of the Ming Dynasty tea trade, enforce the prices fixed by the state which were profitable for the Imperial court. Harsh punishments should have prevented the illegal tea trade organized by Chinese private traders: Chinese sources distinguish between the ‘private tea’, *sicha* 私茶, and the ‘official tea’, *guan cha* 官茶, this term was used for the tea sold by government offices. Private traders were depriving the state of substantial profits and their activities were in opposition to the attempts of Chinese officials to control the ‘barbarians’ through the regulation of their access to tea.<sup>49</sup> On 13 March 1397, Ming Chengzu noted: »Because private tea is exported across the border, there are only a few horses coming to frontier markets. Therefore their [i.e. Tibetan; MS] horses are increasingly expensive and Chinese tea is cheaper and cheaper.«<sup>50</sup> The Chinese government was not able to enforce in praxis the tea trade monopoly, but despite this the tribute system had proven to be the most effective way for the purchase of horses.<sup>51</sup>

One of the obstacles in the analysis of the Chinese trade relations with neighbouring countries is the brevity of Chinese sources. The trade with foreign empires is not treated as a specific topic by traditional Chinese historiography and the relevant information is scattered within the parts dedicated to the tribute system, which was the primary interest of Chinese historians with regards to foreign relations. The records of the items which were presented as tribute as well as of the return gifts bestowed by the emperor are extremely terse. Often the detailed list of the tribute items and return gifts was not

46 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 79; Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 402.

47 See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 105. Literally ‘tea horse office’.

48 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 143.

49 Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 79.

50 Gu Zucheng 顧祖成 & al., *Ming shilu Zangzu shiliao* 明實錄藏族史料 [Historical Materials on Tibetans from the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty] (Lhasa: Xizang renmin chubanshe, 1982), 106 (hereafter abbreviated as *MSL*).

51 On this issue see also Chen Yishi 陳一石, »Mingdai chama shi zhengce yanjiu« 明代茶馬市政策研究 [Research on the Policy of the Tea Horse Markets during the Ming Dynasty], *Zhongguo Zangxue* 中國藏學 3/1988, 34–41.

included in the record and only goods which represented a certain modification or exception were considered worthy of recording by the historian.<sup>52</sup> This is also the case with regard to Chinese sources on the tribute and trade relations between the Ming Dynasty and the Phagmodru ruling house which are not complete and detailed.<sup>53</sup> In the available Chinese sources I was able to locate twenty-one instances which relate to the commercial exchanges between Central Tibet and China in this period. All these instances record the activities of the Tibetan envoys dispatched by the Phagmodru to present tribute and subsequent bestowal of return gifts by the emperor. There are no records related to the trade exchanges between the representatives of the Phagmodru and Chinese merchants at the frontier market. It is liable, that the trade in Sino-Tibetan borderlands was predominantly conducted by local Tibetans and not the Phagmodrus. Chinese historical records neither mention business activities of Tibetan envoys in the Chinese capital after the presentation of the tribute to the emperor.

I list all the instances related to the tribute presentation and bestowal of gifts in chronological order:

- 1) On 23 May 1372, Ming Taizu Emperor had bestowed to the 2nd ruler (Tib. *sde srid*) of the Phagmodru Jamyang Shākya Gyeltshen (*'jam dbyang shākya rgyal mtshan*, 1340–1373, *reg.* 1365–73) the title ‘anointed national preceptor’ (Chin. *guanding guosbi* 灌頂國師) and had dispatched to him envoys with a jade seal (Chin. *yuyin* 玉印) and gifts: garments with lining and varicoloured satin (Chin. *caiduan biaoli* 綵段表裏).<sup>54</sup>
- 2) In response to this the Tibetan envoys arrived in the Chinese capital on 19 February 1373, presenting to the emperor the following tribute items: Buddhist images (Chin. *foxiang* 佛象), Buddhist scriptures (Chin. *foshu* 佛書), Buddhist relics (Chin. *sheli* 舍利).<sup>55</sup> After the arrival of the Tibetan tribute mission Emperor Ming Taizu proclaimed in an edict the foundation of a Buddhist monastery.<sup>56</sup> The members of

52 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, ix.

53 The most important Chinese sources I have used include *MSL*, *DMHD* and Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 & al., *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming], Sibu beiyao 四部備要 Edition (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 331, 6a (hereafter abbreviated as *MS*). A detailed comparison showed, that in the *MSL* one finds the fullest record, while in the *MS* and *DMHD* only about a third (*MS*), or one fourth (*DMHD*) from the twenty one instances is recorded and these records are extremely brief, often including only the fact of the tribute presentation and the date when it took place.

54 *MSL*, 17; *MS*, 331, 5b; *DMHD*, 1530.

55 From Sanskrit *śarīra*, ‘relics or ashes left after the cremation of a Buddha or saint’. See William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 279.

56 On the close attachment of this emperor to Buddhism see Slobodník, »The Relations between

the tribute mission were granted according to their rank (Chin. *you cha* 有差) silk garments with floral pattern (Chin. *wenqi xiyi* 文綺襲衣).<sup>57</sup>

- 3) Another tribute mission was dispatched by the new Phagmodru ruler Dragpa Changchub (*grags pa byang chub*, 1356–1386, *reg.* 1374–1381) and presented the tribute on 25 January, 1375. The envoys brought a ‘vassal letter’ (Chin. *biao* 表) and ‘local products’ (Chin. *fang wu* 方物). The Chinese term *biao* translated as »vassal letter« is used in the Ming sources as a *terminus technicus* for the correspondence from a local ruler to the Chinese emperor. In theory it was a necessary precondition for a tribute mission to bring such a »vassal letter« as their credentials.<sup>58</sup> In return the emperor bestowed on them the following presents according to their rank: silk garments with floral pattern (Chin. *wenqi* 文綺), monk’s habits (Chin. *chanyi* 禪衣), and silk with floral patterns and golden intertexture (Chin. *zhijin wenqi* 織金文綺).<sup>59</sup>
- 4) Chinese sources record another tribute mission from the Phagmodru ruler on 8 March, 1379. The envoys presented »local products« which are not further specified.<sup>60</sup>
- 5) In response to the Chinese mission dispatched to Tibet and Nepal in 1384 another tribute mission from Central Tibet arrived in the Chinese capital on 27 January, 1391 and presented to the emperor »local products« and New Year greetings (Chin. *he mingnian zhenqian* 賀明年正旦). Before leaving, the Tibetan envoys were bestowed silk with floral patterns, silk garments (Chin. *boyi* 帛衣), paper money (Chin. *chao* 鈔) according to their rank.<sup>61</sup>
- 6) The last tribute mission dispatched by Dragpa Changchub to Emperor Ming Taizu arrived in the Chinese capital Nanjing 南京 on 24 February, 1394. Chinese sources record two items: armour and helmet (Chin. *jia zhou* 甲冑) and felt tufts (Chin. *jiying* 鬩纓), but the return gifts from the emperor are not mentioned.<sup>62</sup>
- 7) When Emperor Ming Chengzu ascended the throne he wanted to restore communication with the Phagmodru ruling house and on 4 September 1402 dispatched a mission to Central Tibet with the following presents: white silver (Chin. *baijin* 白金 ‘white gold’, this term usually refers to silver), varicoloured silk fabrics

the Chinese Ming Dynasty and the Tibetan Ruling House of Phag-mo-gru in the Years 1368–1434: Political and Religious Aspects», 162.

57 *MSL*, 20; *MS*, 331, 5b; *DMHD*, 1530.

58 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 443.

59 *MSL*, 33–34.

60 *MSL*, 46.

61 *MSL*, 85.

62 *MSL*, 98.

(Chin. *caibi* 綵幣) in the total amount of 2200 *liang* 兩<sup>63</sup> and 110 pieces of varicoloured silk.<sup>64</sup>

- 8) In 1404 Phagmodru dispatched another tribute mission to Nanjing, which is briefly mentioned only in *DMHD* (p. 1530) where the presentation of tribute is recorded.
- 9) On 23 February, 1406, envoys dispatched by the 5th ruler Dragpa Gyeltshen (*grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1374–1432, *reg.* 1385–1432) and the local Tibetan ruler from the Drigung (*bri gung*) area presented tribute to the emperor and the emperor bestowed them according to their rank.<sup>65</sup>
- 10) Ming Chengzu soon responded to this tribute mission: on 21 March 1406, he granted Dragpa Gyeltshen the title ‘anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation’ (Chin. *guanding guoshi chanbua wang* 灌頂国師闡化王) and dispatched a Chinese envoy with the following presents for Dragpa Gyeltshen: 500 *liang* of silver, three garments made of silk with patterns (Chin. *qiyi* 文綺), 50 scrolls (Chin. *pi* 匹) of varicoloured densely weaved silk with patterns (Chin. *jinqi* 錦綺), 100 scrolls of raw varicoloured cotton (Chin. *caijuan* 綵絹) and 200 *jin* 斤<sup>66</sup> of tea.<sup>67</sup>
- 11) The Chinese mission to Tibet dispatched on 20 April 1407, was the result of the Chinese endeavour to secure the reconstruction of relay stations (Chin. *yizhan* 驛站) in Tibet. The Chinese envoys brought garments made of varicoloured densely weaved silk with patterns (Chin. *jinqi yifu* 錦綺衣服) for various dignitaries, Dragpa Gyeltshen is listed first.<sup>68</sup>
- 12) The first tribute mission dispatched by Dragpa Gyeltshen after the bestowal of the title ‘anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation’ arrived on 13 January, 1409. This mission included envoys from various Central Tibetan important dignitaries who were subjugated to his authority. The mission brought tribute horses and »local products«. The emperor endowed them with paper money and silk (Chin. *bi* 幣) upon the tribute presentation and then again on 16 February 1409, when they left with paper money and silk fabrics.<sup>69</sup>

63 During the Ming Dynasty 1 *liang* was equal to ca. 37 grams – Endymiom Wilkinson, *Chinese History. A Manual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 237.

64 *MSL*, 114.

65 *MSL*, 125; *DMHD*, 1530. Drigung is located about 80 km northeast of Lhasa.

66 In the Ming Dynasty 1 *jin* was equal to ca. 590 grams – Wilkinson, *Chinese History. A Manual*, 238.

67 *MSL*, 126.

68 *MSL*, 133; *MSL*, 331, 6a; *DMHD*, 1530.

69 *MSL*, 140–141.

- 13) In response to the mission of Yang Sanbao, Tibetan envoys arrived at Chinese court on 11 March, 1413. Four members of the tribute mission received varicoloured densely weaved silk with patterns and silk fabrics.<sup>70</sup>
- 14) The emperor dispatched Yang Sanbao on 25 January 1414 again to Central Tibet with presents for Dragpa Gyeltshen and other local leaders with the request to reconstruct the relay stations. The gifts for them are not specified in Chinese sources.<sup>71</sup>
- 15) On 26 June 1415, the emperor again dispatched an envoy to Dragpa Gyeltshen who brought varicoloured silk fabrics for him.<sup>72</sup>
- 16) In response to this Chinese initiative Dragpa Gyeltshen dispatched a mission to China, which presented tribute on 5 June 1416. The tribute items included horses and »local products«. The envoys received paper money, silk (Chin. *bi* 幣) and unspecified »other items« (Chin. *deng wu* 等物).<sup>73</sup>
- 17) Another tribute mission arrived on 29 January 1418. They presented to the emperor Buddhist statues, Buddhist relics and »local products«. The emperor gave them paper money and silk.<sup>74</sup>
- 18) The emperor dispatched to Central Tibet again the eunuch Yang Sanbao on 30 October 1419 in order to strengthen ties. Yang Sanbao brought lavish presents to Dragpa Gyeltshen and other dignitaries: Buddhist statues, Buddhist ritual objects (Chin. *fa qi* 法器), monk's habits (Chin. *jiasha chanyi* 袈裟禪衣), velvet (Chin. *rong* 絨), varicoloured densely weaved silk, garments with lining made of varicoloured silk (Chin. *caibi biaoli* 綵幣表裏).<sup>75</sup>
- 19) On 15 March 1423, a tribute mission dispatched by Dragpa Gyeltshen and other Tibetan dignitaries presented tribute, which included »local products«. The emperor endowed them with garments made from fine silk with golden intertexture (Chin. *zhibin zhusi siyi* 織金紵絲襲衣) and paper money according to their rank. Immediately after this, on 28 March 1423, the emperor sent his envoys with the returning Tibetan mission. They brought to Dragpa Gyeltshen silk fabrics with pattern as a gift.<sup>76</sup>
- 20) On 29 April 1427 Emperor Ming Xuanzong 明宣宗 (1399–1435, *reg.* 1425–1435) dispatched his first mission to Central Tibet and Nepal after his accession to the throne. He sent the eunuch Hou Xian with presents for Dragpa Gyeltshen and other

70 *MSL*, 152, *MS*, 331, 6a.

71 *MSL*, 155; *MS*, 331, 6a.

72 *MSL*, 159.

73 *MSL*, 161.

74 *MSL*, 164.

75 *MSL*, 167; *MS*, 331, 6a.

76 *MSL*, 170–171; *MS*, 331, 6a.

local rulers. The presents included velvet, varicoloured densely weaved silk, and uncoloured fine silk (Chin. *zbusi* 紵絲).<sup>77</sup>

- 21) The last recorded tribute mission from Dragpa Gyeltshen arrived at the Imperial court on 26 December 1431. It presented horses and »local products« to the emperor. On 13 January 1432, Ming Xuanzong dispatched his own envoy with the returning Tibetan mission. His gifts for Dragpa Gyeltshen included silver, varicoloured fabrics, *sba* 紗 and *luo* 羅 fabrics, silk (Chin. *chou juan* 紬絹) and garments with golden intertexture (Chin. *jinzhi siyi* 金織襲衣).<sup>78</sup>

We can draw some conclusions from this scarce information. The most frequent contacts between Central Tibet and the Ming Imperial court occurred during the reign of Emperor Ming Chengzu, when thirteen instances (7 to 19) of tribute and gift exchanges are recorded in Chinese sources. This illustrates the fact, that this emperor had striven to further expand diplomatic relations with Central Asia and also relations with the Phagmodru ruling house were strengthened. During the period of the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Ming Taizu, seven instances (1 to 7) occurred. These contacts were important as due to his initiative relations with Central Tibet had continued even after the decline of the Yuan Dynasty. The missions dispatched by the Phagmodrus were arriving at the Chinese court irregularly. However, according to various Chinese sources, the Ming Dynasty established a system according to which the Phagmodru ruling house was obliged to send tribute missions every three years. For instance the MS (331, 6a) records, that in 1388 a system was introduced that they should bring »one tribute every three years«. Later, Chinese records also referred to the system established by Ming Taizu according to which the Phagmodrus should bring tribute once in three years.<sup>79</sup> According to these sources, a fixed number of the members of the tribute missions (30 to 40 persons) was also settled while other members of the tribute missions had remained at the frontier, where they could trade their products. Chinese officials refer to this system once the frequency and size of the tribute missions dramatically increased and they positively praised this system. However, the records in Chinese sources from the period 1368–1434 do not include enough information to confirm this assertion. Chinese sources do not provide the number of the members of particular tribute missions and the only record with this information (12) gives the number 61. The frequency of tribute missions during this period is irregular and although some of the tribute missions might be omitted from the sources, the remaining records enable us to find a pattern in the diplomatic exchanges: the arrivals of Tibetan tribute missions were

77 *MSL*, 213.

78 *MSL*, 294.

79 *DMHD*, 1530; *MS*, 331, 6b.

usually a response to the dispatch of Chinese envoys to Central Tibet who were either proclaiming the granting of a title to the Phagmodru ruler (1 and 2), informing them on the ascendancy to the throne of a new Chinese emperor (7 and 8, 9), sending presents to the Tibetan ruler (15 and 16), or requesting the reparation of relay stations and these requests were accompanied by lavish gifts (11 and 12, 14 and 15). Chinese sources only record very few instances, when a tribute mission from Phagmodrus did not arrive at the Chinese court in response to some Chinese initiative.

Tibetan diplomatic missions to the Imperial court often arrived during New Year celebrations (2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 17, 21), which were usually in January or February. In one case (5) sources recorded the New Year greetings brought by the mission. The time of the tribute missions of particular foreign empires were firmly set by the Imperial court—the majority of diplomatic envoys arrived during the winter solstice, New Year celebration and during the birthday celebrations of the emperor.<sup>80</sup> Most of the foreign envoys were lodged in the Chinese capital during New Year celebrations. This is also the case with the diplomatic missions dispatched by the Phagmodrus, which as a rule arrived during New Year celebrations, but there are some exceptions. Apart from the date when the mission arrived at the Imperial court, another important issue—due to the substantial costs—for Chinese officials was the length of its stay in the capital. According to *DMHD*<sup>81</sup> there was a regulation stipulating that envoys from Central Tibet could stay at the most two months in the capital and similar fixed periods were also stipulated for other foreign missions.<sup>82</sup> Foreign envoys and their entourage had often attempted to prolong their stay in the capital in order to have more time for business activities.<sup>83</sup> The tribute missions from Central Tibet included Buddhist monks, and due to the fact that both Ming Taizu and Ming Chengzu showed interest in Tibetan Buddhism, several Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were established in the capital, where these monks could stay.<sup>84</sup> In Chinese sources there are no records suggesting that the envoys from the ruling house Phagmodru were trying to prolong their stay in China. From the available sources it is possible to determine the length of their stay in five instances: from 27 January until 5 February 1391 (5); from 23 February until 21 March, 1406 (9, 10); from 13 January until 16 February, 1409 (12); from 15 March

80 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming*, 157; Du Changfeng 杜長風, »Mingdai Wusizang chaogong shulüe«, 70.

81 Quoted from Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 414–415.

82 For instance tribute missions from Mongolia and Korea were permitted to stay in the capital for not more than 40 days.

83 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 415, 419.

84 *DMHD*, 1526.

until 28 March 1423 (19); from 26 December 1431 until 13 January 1432 (21). The length of the stay thus span from 10 to 35 days and it never reached the allegedly set maximum length of two months. However, the available sources do not record whether all the members of a given mission returned from the capital back to Central Tibet and how long they stayed in all on Chinese territory. The stay of foreign missions in the capital included a festive banquet offered by the emperor, which is explicitly mentioned only on one occasion (19), when the emperor 'ordered the Ministry of Rites to give a banquet' (Chin. *ming libu ci yan* 命禮部賜宴) in honour of the Phagmodru envoys.<sup>85</sup>

The sources mention just very briefly the items comprised in the Tibetan tribute. Usually we only find the general term 'local products' (4, 5, 9, 12, 16, 17, 19, 21). Comparatively high is the presence of tribute horses, which are however explicitly mentioned only in three instances (12, 16, 21) in the first half of the 15th century, and the number of horses is not exactly stated. Due to this lack of precise information and their scarcity it is possible to conclude that the Phagmodru ruling house was not an important importer of horses to China. At the same time this information suggests, that trade, and not tribute, was the main source of imported horses in Ming China. There are only three other instances, when the Chinese sources give specific information on the tribute items, and twice sacral objects are listed: Buddhist images, Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist relics (2), and again Buddhist relics and statues (17). These objects were presented as tribute during the reign of Ming Taizu and Ming Chengzu, i.e. the two Ming emperors with interest in Tibetan Buddhism. These tribute items had an impact on Chinese Buddhist art production, especially during the reign of Ming Chengzu. Chinese artists were imitating Tibetan art and a distinctive Sino-Tibetan art style emerged.<sup>86</sup> In one case (6) the tribute included typical Tibetan products: armour, helmet and felt tufts. It is not known how these felt tufts (Chin. *jiying* 罽纒) were utilized, probably they were used as decorative objects. The frequent use of the general expression »local products« in the *MSL*, *MS*, and *DMHD* can be further appended by other Chinese sources with information on typical tribute items from Central Tibet. According to these sources<sup>87</sup> the most prevalent tribute items were paintings of Buddhas (Chin. *hua fo* 畫佛), bronze statues of Buddhas (Chin. *tong fo* 銅佛), Bronze stūpas (Chin. *tong ta* 銅塔), Buddhist relics, dye stuff of various colours (Chin. *ge se zulima* 各色足力麻),<sup>88</sup> varicoloured woollen fabrics called *therma* (Tib. *ther ma*, Chin. *ge se tielima* 各色鐵力麻) and woollen fabrics called *phrug* in Tibetan (Chin.

85 *MSL*, 171.

86 Heather Karmay, *The Early Sino-Tibetan Art* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1975), 72–103.

87 Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhou zilu*, 383; *Xuanlantang congsbu xuji* 玄覽堂叢書續集 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1947), 631a.

88 Probably from Tibetan *tsburmo* (*tsbur mo*), 'dye stuff'.

*pulu* 氍毹),<sup>89</sup> rhinoceros horns (Chin. *xijiao* 犀角), corals (Chin. *shanbu* 珊瑚), woollen tufts (Chin. *maoying* 毛纓), butter (Chin. *suyou* 酥油), helmets (Chin. *kui* 盔), armours (Chin. *jia* 甲), knives (Chin. *dao* 刀) and swords (Chin. *jian* 劍).<sup>90</sup> Some of the items listed above could also be found in the passages relevant to the Ming China relations with the Phagmodrus, so it is plausible to assume that also the rest was presented as tribute generally described as »local products«. <sup>91</sup> There is no further information on the use of these items by the Imperial court, but it seems some of them were reused as presents for the envoys from other parts of Central Asia, as the rhinoceros horns and dye stuff are listed among the gifts for Mongol dignitaries<sup>92</sup> and the woollen fabrics *pulu* are mentioned among presents for the Mongol ruler Beg-arslan in Turpan.<sup>93</sup>

The Chinese sources provide more detailed information on the return gifts of the emperor (only in two instances—9 and 14—are they not listed in detail). The emperor bestowed presents after the tribute presentation and also on other occasions: when a new emperor wanted to establish contacts with Central Tibetan rulers (1, 7, 20), when he granted them the title ‘anointed national preceptor’ and ‘anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation’ (1, 10), and when he dispatched envoys to Tibet with specific requests for help (11, 14). The amount and value of these presents varied and the most lavish gifts were presented on the occasion of the bestowal of the title ‘anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation’ to Dragpa Gyeltshen in 1406 (10), and it reflected the importance of this ceremonial act in the Tibetan policy of Emperor Ming Chengzu. The emperor’s presents can be subdivided into two groups: silk fabrics and silk garments (plus other valuable fabrics), which we regularly found in all the instances where these gifts are specified, and other presents which are infrequently mentioned, namely silver, paper money, tea and Buddhist objects.

Fabrics and garments were typical presents bestowed by the emperor not only on the tribute missions from Tibet, but also Mongolia.<sup>94</sup> Silk garments, silk fabrics, satin, velvet produced in China were presented to foreign representatives on various occasions: as gifts for the members of the diplomatic missions (2, 3, 5, 12, 13, 16, 19, 21), when the news about an enthronement was announced

89 Greatrex, »Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court«, 125.

90 Swords and knives were presented as tribute articles also by Mongols, similarly the *pulu* fabrics. See Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 207.

91 Tribute articles from other Tibetan regions (Amdo, Kham) were comprised of similar articles. See *Xuanlantang congsbu xuji*, 631b; Greatrex, »Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court«, 125–128.

92 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 245, 268.

93 *Ibid.*, 255.

94 *Ibid.*, 229.

to Central Tibetan rulers (1, 7, 20), when a Chinese title was granted to the Phagmodru ruler (1, 10), or when the Chinese court requested the reconstruction of relay stations (11). It seems there were no specific garments or fabrics used exquisitely as presents to the Phagmodrus. Among the fabrics presented by Ming Taizu, silk with floral patterns is mentioned twice (3, 5), as well as silk garments with floral pattern (2), and silk with floral patterns and golden intertexture (3). Similar articles can be found among the return gifts for Mongol tribute missions.<sup>95</sup> During the reign of Ming Chengzu, Tibetans regularly received varicoloured silk fabrics (*caibi*; 7, 15, 19, and 21), or short silk fabrics (*bi*; 12, 13, 16, 17). Also these articles figure among the presents for Mongol diplomatic envoys.<sup>96</sup> Starting with the reign of Ming Chengzu the sources mention varicoloured densely weaved silk with patterns (10, 13, 19, 20) and garments made of this silk (11). These fabrics and garments made of them are also listed among presents for other Central Asian rulers.<sup>97</sup> As a rule all the different fabrics and garments mentioned in relation with the Phagmodrus are also recorded among the gifts for Mongol princes.

The second group of return gifts consisted of various other items. The most frequent included paper money (5, 12, 16, 17, 19), while the exact amount of the money is not recorded. Paper money was a typical present for the members of diplomatic missions coming from Central Asia and they were popular among Tibetans. In the case of members of a Tibetan mission not bestowed with paper money they demanded it.<sup>98</sup> Paper money was used in the capital where the members of diplomatic missions were permitted to trade and they mainly purchased Chinese goods with this paper money.<sup>99</sup> The paper money could also be used for trading even during the return journey and at the Chinese frontier markets.<sup>100</sup> Another common present was silver (7, 10, 21), which, however was not presented to the members of the tribute mission, but directly to Dragpa Gyeltshen on important occasions (enthronement of the emperor, bestowal of Chinese title). Silver was also a typical return present for Mongol and Jurchen dignitaries.<sup>101</sup> Sacral objects, such as monk's robes (3, 17), Buddhist statues and ritual utensils (3, 18) stress the important role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Ming relations with the Phagmodru ruling house and similar presents were also granted to envoys dispatched by Mongol princes.<sup>102</sup> Chinese sources only record

95 *Ibid.*, 230.

96 *Ibid.*, 229–230.

97 *Ibid.*, 213, 236, 272.

98 *MS*, 331, 4a.

99 Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 239.

100 *Ibid.*, 240.

101 *Ibid.*, 233.

102 *Ibid.*, 270–271; Serruys, »Sino-Mongol Trade During the Ming«, 44.

once the presentation of 200 *jin* of tea (10) to Dragpa Gyeltshen on the occasion of the bestowal of the Chinese title 'anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation' in 1406, although tea was a much coveted item in Central Asia. Tea is neither listed among the return gifts for other Central Asian rulers,<sup>103</sup> and Tibetans acquired tea through different means. Chinese sources record that Tibetan diplomatic missions exchange the gifts from the emperor (such as silk fabrics and garments) for tea at the frontier markets.<sup>104</sup>

A detailed analysis of the economic relations between Ming China and the Phagmodru ruling house in the years 1368 to 1434 shows that neither side considered it a crucial and strategic issue, the trade between these two polities was thus negligible. All records related to commercial activities are mentioned only within the context of the tribute system. The items presented to the Chinese court by diplomatic missions dispatched by successive Phagmodru rulers were not an important asset for the Chinese economy, the number of tribute horses was very limited and horses were also presented as tribute items by other Tibetan local rulers.<sup>105</sup> The limited interest of the Imperial court for other items brought by the missions from Phagmodrus can be illustrated by the fact that some of them were subsequently redistributed as return gifts to other foreign envoys. The return gifts for the members of diplomatic missions and the Phagmodru rulers did not include any specific items that would be solely used in the relations with Central Tibet. These gifts consisted mainly of fabrics and garments that were exchanged by Tibetans for more needed goods such as tea. The available information on economic exchanges corroborate the overall pattern of the relations: neither the Phagmodru ruling house nor the Ming emperors perceived mutual relations as strategic and pivotal. Central Tibet was only one of the peripheral regions and the Imperial court was more preoccupied with the Mongols. On the other hand, the diplomatic exchanges with the Chinese emperors were of marginal importance for the ruling house of the Phagmodru who had governed Central Tibet until 1434.

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103 Ibid., 44; Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, 281.

104 Chin. *yi ciwu yi cha* 以賜物易茶 (MS, 331, 6a; DMHD, 1530).

105 Sperling, »Early Ming Policy Toward Tibet«, 212–213; Gu Zucheng 顧祖成, *Ming Qing zhi Zang shiyao* 明清治藏史要 [History of the Rule on Tibet in Ming and Qing Dynasties] (Lhasa: Xizang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 70–72.