TIBETAN MDO

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myi la la myi dgos pa’i yan lag la ni zhib ching dgos pa’i mdo la ni rtsing ba yang yod do/ “There are also some people being minutely concerned with unnecessary details while dealing roughly with essential points.”

Phu bo snyun bar btams shing bstan pa’i mdo
(Edition of Chab spel [1997, p. 32])

This paper addresses the problems surrounding mdo, a Tibetan word occurring in varied contexts (religion, jurisprudence, geography, medicine etc.); and several difficult Tibetan passages are also discussed.

Key words: Tibetan orthography, toponym, medicine, India, China.

Tibetan mdo refers, in the first place, to the meeting point (thug / ‘phrad mtshams) of two roads (lam mdo, srang mdo ‘junction’), two rivers (chu mdo ‘confluence’), two valleys (lung mdo ‘mouth of the valley’), and two channels / furrows (dka’ mdo, rka mdo). The meeting place of three roads etc. is sum mdo (sum / gsum ‘three’) and that of a crossroads is [lam] bzhi mdo (bzhi ‘four’). Hence ‘dus mdo ‘the gathering point’, gyes mdo ‘the parting point’, ‘gag mdo ‘the strategic locale’, mdo ‘gag ‘the juncture, the crucial point’, spyi mdo ‘general summary’, mdo don ‘gist’ (also rdo don where rdo being a variant of mdo has nothing to do with rdo ‘stone’), mdor bstan ‘concisely shown’, mdo tsam ‘just briefly’, mdor bsdus na ‘in summary’. In pathology, we have tsha grang gal mdo, the crucial point of the transition of body temperature. In religion, we have mdo ‘scripture’ for Sanskrit sūtra, the Buddha’s teachings that were gathered into compilation (mdo dril ba) forming the essential precepts that every Buddhist should follow.

In the process of reading Tibetan texts, one may find that there are other words which seem to be phonetically and semantically related to mdo and the problem is made complicated by Tibetan orthography which may not reflect the actual pronun-

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ciation of every Tibetan word at the time when the words were first written down in the forms we see today. In addition, it may not be easy to grasp its meaning when it occurs in contexts with which we are not completely familiar. I shall present just a few cases in this paper.

**mdo, zla, do**

In the *dbu can* version of U rgyan pa Rin chen dpal’s (1230–1309) biography edited by Rta mgrab tshes dbang and published in Tibet, one finds this sentence:

> zla ba thams cad hal cing <zhing> dad par gyur skad/

(Bsd dam grwa zer 1997, p. 198)

It is said that all *zla ba* panted and were inspired by faith.

*zla ba* means ‘the moon, month, soma, semen’ which does not fit in this context. The same sentence reads somewhat differently in the *dbu med* version reproduced and published in Sikkim:

> mdo bo pa thams cad ha las shing dad par gyur skad/

(Bsd dam grwa zer 1976, p. 140)

It is said that all mdo bo pa were amazed and inspired by faith.

There are at least two possible ways to read this:

1. **Mdo bo pa** may refer either in general to those dwelling in the lower valley (*mdo, mda*) or in particular to the members of Mdo bo che ba, a branch of the Bka’ brgyud pa school (Smith 1970, p. 7). The variance of spelling, probably indicative of dialectal difference, is also found in the compound *zla ‘gril* (compare also zla in *zla ’dres* ‘to mix’) and *mdo ‘dril* ‘gather together’.

2. **Zla ba** should probably be understood as *zla bo* ‘companion, associate’. Zhang (1993, p. 2908) has sa yi zla ba ‘the helper (助 伴) of earth’ as a kenning for gold. Likewise, it is probable that *mdo bo pa* is a variant of *do pa / do po* ‘assistant, attendant’. To be sure, zla and do are synonymous. Consider ‘gran do = ‘gran zla’ ‘rival, match’, *do med = zla med‘peerless, without a counterpart’ and the binom *do zla* ‘match, pair’. Therefore *zla ba thams cad* means ‘the whole entourage’. As for *mdo bo pa*, the repetition of possessive suffix is not unusual. Dngul chu Dharmabhadra (1772–1851) writes with reference to

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1 There are variants of spelling, either retrieved from ancient manuscripts or coexisting in current usage, which may be traced to different historical periods or different geographical localities. There must also be cases where only later forms are extant. For instance, ’lynx’ is spelled *dbyi* and *gyi*, supposed that *gyi* is a later development and is the only form known to us. Now, any study involving this word based on the assumption that *g’y* reflects the phonetic reality of the word when it was first recorded is destined to be flawed. A comprehensive dictionary of Tibetan variants of spelling based on extant sources such as Dunhuang documents, *gter ma* texts etc., is still a desideratum in Tibetan and Sino-Tibetan studies.

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mda’ pa ‘dwellers of the lower valley’ (to be distinguished from mda’ pa ‘archer’); mda’ pa zhes pa’i pa yig de dang por bdag sgra yin pa bden yang slar ming gi cha shas su gyur nas bdag sgra bskyar du sbyor dgos pa du ma mthong phu pa ba/ mda’ pa ba/ chang ma pa/ thang ma ba/ zhes pa ita bu’o/ “Although it is true that the syllable pa of mda’ pa is in the first place a possessive suffix, when it had further become part of the substantive, the need of affixing to it a possessive suffix as a repetition is seen in many instances such as phu pa ba, mda’ pa ba, chang ma pa, thang ma ba” (1979, p. 473).

The mda’ in ra mda’ ‘assistant’ also has nothing to do with mda’ ‘arrow’ but is related to zla in zla rogs / grogs ‘companion, assistant’, bza’ zla (compare za grogs) ‘spouse’, sput / tshang / tshad zla ‘brothers’, dpa’ zla ‘an aide, lieutenant’, ming zla ‘(in grammar) an auxiliary’, rtsed zla ‘a playmate’ etc.² It is certain that mda’ and zla were used interchangeably only after zla had assumed the same pronunciation as mda’ [da]. The frequency with which Tibetan scribes and writers use homophones interchangeably represents a major obstacle to effective reading, especially for inexperienced students. This is reminiscent of the phenomenon which is very common in Classical Chinese known as tongjia ‘borrowing of interchangeable characters (i.e., those with similar or close pronunciations)’, the critical awareness of which reached its maturity only in the 17th–18th centuries when first-rate Chinese scholars turned their major attention from historiography to paleography and phonology³. Much work has still to be done especially in the domain of the Tibetan language before comparative studies of both can yield reliable results.

Besides zla, there is do meaning ‘two, pair’ (dor ‘in a pair’) as opposite to gang ‘one’. Hence bar [ma] do ‘intermediate existence (Skr. antarabhāva) between the two [states of death and rebirth]’ (skye’ chi bar do). It is neither related to Pers. 9 du, do ‘two’, nor, as suggested in Simon (1984, p. 133), to Skr. dva , Lat. duo and Ch. dui.

One may view do gal ‘importance, crucial point’ as but a variant of gal mdo. As for chad mdo ‘a covenant [between two parties, or that brings two parties

² ra mda’ = ra grogs is given already in Csoma de Körös (1834, p. 230). Репих (1987, p. 10) gives ‘помощь, содействие / help, assistance; помощник, подручный / helper, assistant; друг / friend’. The Qing official title 司安撫使 (Manchu. aiman-i tokobure bilure hakan) was rendered by Tib. ‘jags byed rams (read: ram, cf. rogs ram ‘assist’) zla ‘a deputy assisting [the local chieflain in the preservation of peace’, see the second juan (no pagination) of Fu Heng e. I do not know of any earlier occurrence of ram zla that predates ra mda’. In the translation of the Vina-yivštshanga by the 8th-century Tibetan translator Cog ro Klu’i rgyal mtshan, we find the five hundred fishermen dragged out to sea by a giant fish (Tib. chu srin, Ch. mojie < Skr. makara) shouting ra mda’ zlog shig (Peking Kanjur, ‘Dul ba, Vol. Che, f. 146r, line 5; cf. ra mda’ ba bzlog pa in line 6) which is given in Yijing’s 義淨 (634–713) Chinese translation as 共我相濟 ‘Be with us [to / and] help / save one another!’ – see 根本說一切有部毘奈耶 (Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya), Taishō No. 1442, p. 669a. The function of zlog ‘revert, counter’ in this context is to make the preceding verb reciprocal (< Skr. prati-), hence ra mda’ zlog = ‘Help one another!’.

³ As for Tibetan scholarship in linguistics in the 18th–19th centuries, see van der Kuijp (1986, pp. 31–32, 48–49).
together?], one should recall the Tibetan judicial term mdo lon⁴ in the fourth principle of Srong btsan sgam po’s legal codes (khrims yig):

kha drag zhan gnyis rtsod na bden rdzun brtags pa’i mthar kha
drag pa ma skyengs shing zhan pa yi mi ‘chad par gcod pa mdo lon zhu
chad kyi khrims yig (Dpa’ bo 1986, p. 193).

If the lofty and the inferior dispute, to resolve it by not mortifying
the lofty and not dejecting the inferior after examining what is right
and wrong [is] the rule of judging a lawsuit (zhu chad) [by] mdo lon.

One may read mdo lon as ‘to suffice (lon pa) two (do⁵, or the very two parties
involved, do bdag gnyis phyogs)’ or ‘to attain / reach (lon pa) the meeting point

⁴ Cf. Mkhas pa Lde’u (1987, p. 270): mdo lon zhu bcad kyi khrims dang lhzi. This expression
must not be confused with mdo long which occurs in the narrative of Karma pa Rang byung
rdo rje’s (1284–1339) transmigratory experience in his biography bar do mar.
[... ...] cong zhi brgyal/ dran pa mdo long mdo long byung ba na nag la mun pa ici zhih
‘thih pa kham/ tshub pa’ (Dpa’ bo 1986, p. 923).

I tentatively read mdo long as ‘du long which is synonymous with zing long ‘commotion’
slong slong po ‘hurried, flustered’; Zhang (1993, p. 2817): long long ‘swirling upheaval, seething,
gust’. Compare also thugs blong blong ‘perplexed, ruffled, discomposed’ as in, e.g., Mgon po
skyabs (1983, p. 41) where we read of the young Buddhist monk (who was to become the founder
of the Ming Dynasty some sixteen years later) in his vacillation before deciding to join the mass
uprising against the Mongol regime: [...] jiitar bya sog kyi dogs pa thugs blong blong por
gyur [...] A tentative translation for Karma pa: ‘[...] he fell unconscious for a little while.
When his memory became perturbed (smiti-vibhrama?), the darkness thickened, enshrouded [every-
where] and overwhelmed his body.’ The history by Tshal pa Si tu (1981, p. 95) reads dran pa mdo
long tsam byung / sku kham/ tshub cing ‘a brgyal ba which is rendered in Chen-Zhou (1988, p.
84) by ‘after he has recovered consciousness (醒後) (I), he felt his body particularly wearied’.

⁵ The meaning of do is somewhat elusive in do dgon ‘this evening’, do snyi ‘tonight’, do
zham ‘recently’ etc. Though it might appear that do in do dgon was ‘di ‘this’ being assimilated by
the subsequent vowel, such a principle of ‘vowel harmony’ cannot account for do cing ‘the current
year’ which already occurs in the Dunhuang Sino-Tibetan lexicon studied by Lajos Ligeti (1968, p.
287). The meaning ‘this’ for do given by Jäschke and Das should not delude us. Consider de ring
(lit. ‘that period’) and de dgon (lit. ‘that evening’) which have also come to mean ‘today’ and ‘this
evening’ respectively and no lexicographer should thereby interpret de as meaning both ‘that’ and
and states that “von ihnen wird do kaum verwendet”. The compilers of the Tibetan–Tibetan–
Chinese dictionary (= Zhang) were cautious in that the meaning ‘this’ is not included under the
entry do. Judging from do dgon = da dgon ‘this evening’, do ‘at present, right now’ (also da lha
‘at present’), do snyi ‘almost dead, dying’, do gnod ‘just about to kill’ etc., do may well be
understood as ‘just, right, immediate’. It may not be amiss here to compare its semantic field to that
of an unrelated Chinese word, namely, dang 聲 ‘match, on a par with; right, proper, fit; should;
right at the moment when...’. E.g., bandang 當 ‘retinue, companion’ which was used to be
translated as Mo. nökör in the Secret History of the Mongols: 薛兀迭列徹不速那可兒兀該
(següder-eč busu nököř ügei), 除影兒外無件當 ‘having no partner aside from [one’s own
shadow’, Eldengetei-Ouyan Dalai (1980, pp. 88–89, 936); zhèngdàng 正 當 ‘right, proper’,
zhèngdàng 正 當 ‘just about... aller bien à...; at an opportune moment’. In Buddhist Chinese,
there is dangzai 當 在 [that which] should come, the future’. More familiar words are dangzian 當天
‘that very day, the same day’, dangye 當夜 ‘right that very night’, dangxia 當下 ‘hic et nunc’,
dangshi 當事 and dangzai 當代 ‘contemporary, nowadays’. Also dangzai 當日 ‘that very day’

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(mdo)’ (to reach a compromise). It is no less probable that lon functions like slon
‘mend’ or ‘blend, unite’ as in zla bor slon pa ‘to coalesce’ (cf. Zhang 1993, p. 2998).
The reading remains doubtful.

**mdo in the medical context**

The following passage appears with the section of epistaxis
(sna khrag gcod pa’i thabs) in Zur mkhar Mnyam nyid rdo rje’s (1439–1475)
Grangs med gsung ngag dum bu khrigs su bkod pa:

[... ...] yang na ltog khung dang ro stod du chu grang phyar/
yang na dpal mdo la dbyug btsos <bcos> sam me btsa’ byas na chad
do/ (1977, 2: A, p. 34)

[... ...] or, [when] cold water was sprayed on the nuchal
concavity (ltog khung)⁸ and the chest; or alternatively, when the

treatment by [patting with a] stick or cauteronization on the forehead’s
mdo was done, [the bleeding] was stopped.

and dangnian 常年 ‘the current year’, both in the course of time have come to mean ‘in the past’.  
(A similar semantic shift can be observed, e.g., in Malay sediakala ‘previously, olden times’, sedia
‘to be ready, to make ready or prepared’ < Skr. sadvākāla ‘the same day’, sadya ‘the same day, 
just.’) For easy reference, a passage illustrating how do nab and de ring function is cited here:
thsandra go ni ‘phags pa spyan ras gzigs kyi lha khang zhig na bzhugs kyin yod de/ zla grags kyi de
ring rtson pa mang po bkod pa i lan/ do nab ‘phags pa spyan ras gzigs la zhus te nang par lan btab
pa na/ zla grags kyi las gdab par mi nus so/ (Tăranātha 1976, p. 505) “While residing in a temple of
Aryāvākulikīsvarā, Candragomin asked Aryāvaikutikīsvarā at night (do nab ‘right at the same
night’) for responses to the many arguments formulated by Candrakīrtī during the day (de ring ‘that
day, the same day’) and, when he answered back in the [following] morning (nang par), Candra-
Kīrti was unable to riposte.” Berthold Fauber has Tangut to, do ‘true’ on his list of “words not
traceable to allied languages” published in his pioneering study of Tangut in 1916 (1987, p. 703). It
seems that these Tangut words, 黈 ‘genuine’, 點 ‘right, upright’ (cf. Li Fanwen 1997, p. 930),
together with Burmese taw ‘upright; proper, fit; meet; opportune; just about’ (cf. Bernot 1981, p.
145, Budon 1953, pp. 499–500), are related to Tib. do.

⁸ khung ‘hole, hollow’, cf. mchan khung ‘armpit’. To mention in passing, mchan is a meaning-
ful word which also indicates ‘intimate relationship’ as in mchan gyi mchis brang ‘beloved
wife’, mchan gyi bu phrag ‘beloved child’ (Zhang 1993, p. 845) and for which, compare Manchu
oho siraha akon deo ‘brothers of different fathers but of the same mother’ (Hu 1994, p. 598; lit.
‘armpit-related brothers’) and Ch. chouye 距 膽 ‘those closest to oneself’ (lit. ‘elbow and armpit’).
There are basically two mchan bu (bu ‘son’): mchan bu, ‘close associate or disciple’ and mchan bu, 
glosses’. For the latter, cf. Ch. zizhu 子 注 ‘sonly annotations’ which are notes inserted in a basic

text. For the Buddhist origin of zizhu (ca. late 3rd–early 4th centuries), see Chen Yinke (Y. K.
Tschen 1933 and 1939). However, the mchan in mchan bu, and mchan ‘grel might very well be a
loan word from Ch. jian 簡 (< Ts ien]) ‘annotations, exegeses, scholia, memo’ simply taking the
orthographic form of mchan. Note that jian is a variant of qian 简 ‘a slip of paper containing notes
posted on a page or inserted in a book; memorandum; endorsement’ and so is qian 簡 (< Ts iam]).
The Mongolian equivalent for ltog khung is zill-yin monggurqi (see Lessing 1995, pp. 707, 963).

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This mdo refers to synapses and the junctures of a vessel (rtsa mdo). It is already found in the Tibetan medical classic Rgyud bzhi and in this connexion we quote the following from the commentary by Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705):

    rkan gyi dkyil na dbang po bzhi ’dom ba’i rtsa sum mdo ris yod de/ yan lag brgyad par/ lce mig sna dang rna ba yul/ bu ga bzhi ni ’dus pa dag/ rkang <rkan> dang sgo ru kha bzhi ste/ bu ga’i nang ni de rnam kyis/ gnad ni sum mdo ris zhes bya/ zhes gsungs pa dang/ de ltar nang rtsa dpyang thag bcu gsum/ phyi rtsa drug/ so rtsa ldad byed gnyis/ ’dom rtsa sum mdo ris gcig ste nyi shu rtsa gnyis po chu rtsa’i gnad du bstan no/ (1973, f. 155).

There is the confluence of the three meeting vessels of the four sense faculties in the centre of the palate, as said in the Eight Branches: “What combines the four cavities of the tongue, eyes, nose and ears is the quadrangle (kha bzhi) [shared] among the palate and the aperture; their crucial point (gnad, Skr. marma ‘vital spot’) within the cavities is called sum mdo ris,” and, as such, the suspending threads [linked to] the internal vessels being thirteen [in number], the external vessels being six [in number], the dental vessels of mastication being two [in number], the mdo ris of the three meeting vessels being one [in number], [totally] twenty-two, are shown at the crucial point of nerves (chu rtsa).

The Eight Branches refers to Vāgbhaṭa’s (Pha khol) Aṣṭāṅga-hṛdaya-saṃhitā (Yan lag brgyad pa’i snying po bs dus pa). The verses cited were translated from the fourth section of the second chapter Sānīrasthāna (lus kyi gnas). The Sanskrit original for Tibetan sum mdo ris is śrṅgātaka (Murphy 1991, p. 427, Hilgenberg–Kirsch

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7 Tib. mdo as a medical term is equivalent to xuedao 穴道 (acupoint) in Chinese therapy. In Chinese medical philosophy the human body (microcosm) is likened to the universe (macrocosm). That is why most, if not all, of the names of acupoints can be traced to their astro-geographical origin. It must not be forgotten that dao is a geographical term. When a river flows into a larger one, the river is said to “take the right course” or to be “rightly conducted (道, 將) [by King Yu 禹, the hero in the Chinese legend of flood]” and the meeting place of both rivers is named dao, somewhat like mdo in Tibetan place-names such as Chab mdo, Mdo chu, A mdo, Dar rtsa mdo etc. This is found in the Dili zhi (Treatise on Geography) in Ban Gu’s Han History (1st century B.C.), e.g., 美水東至 美道 入江 “The Yishui (or Yi River. The original meaning of Ch. shui is ‘water’, like its Tibetan equivalent chu ‘water’, river’) flows eastward, reaches Yidao where it enters the Yangzi River” (1962, p. 1566). Chinese historians and archaeologists have long been aware of the fact that the toponyms that carry the word dao as found in Ban Gu’s treatise are traces of non-Chinese nomadic groups (Tibetans? Indo-Europeans?) in Shexi and Gansu, e.g. Yidao 美道, Qiangdao 其道, Didao 盾道 etc. (see, for example, Xu 1933, p. 211). It is puzzling that Ch. dao was used in a much similar way like that of Tib. mdo mostly, if not exclusively, in “barbarian” toponyms. To my knowledge, no satisfactory etymology has been given of dao which is better known in European languages in the form of tao and has been fashionably, if not misleadingly, drawn parallel to Greek logos. This has to be treated on a separate occasion.

8 Gyu thog (1993, p. 411): rkan gyi dkyil na ’dom rtsa sum mdo ris/ nyi shu rtsa gnyis chu rtsa’i gnad du bstan/
1941, p. 192). The locus of this particular sum mdo ris is well indicated in the 17th-century Tibetan medical paintings reproduced in Parmithövich, “Книга II, лист 14” (1994, p.129), where rkan gyidbus gsum mdo is rendered by слияние трех сосудов нёба and in “Книга III, лист 38” (p. 269) where rkan gyi dbus na gsum mdo ris is given as [точка] трех ветвей сосуда ‘рамлуг’ [? – my question mark] середины нёба. These are given respectively in the English version edited by Anthony Aris as ‘confluence of the three channels of the palate (rkan gyi dbus gsum ‘dus)’ (1992, p. 199) – in which ‘dus (instead of mdo) must be an oversight – and ‘pattern of the [bloodletting locus of] confluence of three [vessels] at the mid-palate (rkan gyi dbus na gsum mdo ris)’ (p. 247). In Li Yongnian (1983, p. 308), sum mdo ris is rendered by sanjiaowen 三 交 紋 ‘pattern of the intersection of three [vessels]’. The new Russian translation also has «рисунок тройного слияния» (Дашнев 2001, p. 410). Ris has been understood as ‘pattern’. It should be noted that Г-ю тог гsar ma Yon tan mgon po’s (12th-century) treatise has ‘dom rtsa sum do <mdo> rigs (1967, p. 277) while Padma dkar po’s (1525–1592) commentary has gsum mdo ris (1973, p. 354) as well as sum mdo rigs (p. 356). It therefore seems that among the several meanings of ris, the one of ‘class’ (e.g. lha ris ‘royal family’, mtho ris ‘high class [of birth]’) should be taken to match that of rigs ‘class, kind’. This may imply that there are other mdo-s apart from that at the mid-palate, such as the one on the forehead, and they form a class of mdo-s. This, however, is not the case. We must bear in mind that although Tibetans had adopted a phonetic script modelled on the Indian writing system, Tibetan spelling had become deceptive in the course of oral and textual transmission. Ris and rigs have both come to be pronounced like ri ‘mountain’, i.e., all with a final stop. Ri in ri mo ‘drawing, pattern’ and ri mo ba ‘artist’ does not mean ‘mountain’ but rather should be taken as ris ‘pattern, figure’ as in g-yung drung ris bris pa ‘drawing the figure of a svastika’. Consider also zla ba’i ra ri = zla ris ‘the moon’s black spot’. Even if we are able to prove that the rigs in sum mdo rigs is not the result of textual corruption and that Padma dkar po did himself spell rigs, we still cannot rule out the possibility that by writing rigs he actually meant ris or ri. In fact sum mdo ris is nothing more than a calque on Skr. śrṅgātaka ‘a place where four roads meet’, ‘a collection or mountain of three peaks’ (Wilson 1832, p. 856) in which ris (= ri) serves to reflect the Skr. śrṅga ‘peak’ (ri rtse).


10 The second meaning is cited in Böhtlingk–Roth (1875, p. 290) which also gives ‘Dreieck’ and ‘Kreuzweg’ (cf. also Monier-Williams 1899, p. 1087). The Mongolian version of Rgyud bzhis is not available to me. However, from the manuscript of a Tibet-Mongolian medical lexicon conveniently reproduced in Särközi (1984, p. 262), we find that gsum mdo ris – the letter sa is added beneath ri in the manuscript – had been rendered by Mo. yurban ebedcin-ü ayuljar where yurban means ‘three’ and ayuljar ‘confluence, juncture, crossroads’. It is curious to find ebedcin-ü ayuljar instead of tamir-ün ayuljar (ebedcin ‘disease’; tamir ‘blood vessel’). The translator seems to have puzzled by ris and read it as rims ‘plague’; rims nad = Skr. jvara ‘fever’ is found at the beginning of the Pramāṇasamuccaya where the Buddha is praised as one thoroughly cleansed of febrile disease (rims nad legs par byang ba) (Hattori 1968, pp. 23, 176, 238). I failed to locate in вадмаев a reference to the anatomical term in question.

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Is this then a ‘misspelling’ on the part of later scribes or of the great translator (lo chen) Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) who translated Vāgbhata into Tibetan? It should be noted that mdo ris is found in a Dunhuang manuscript on hippiatry, namely, Pelliot Tibétain 1064 which had been studied by Anne-Marie Blondeau:

\[
\text{rta rngo byung ba’i sman dphyad la thog ma rngo ga las byung ba dang/ ma byung ba’i mthams su/ lcags bsregs pas mched du mi gngar bar/ mdo ris tshabs tsam du/ bkor la/}
\]

Moyens de soigner la gale apparue sur un cheval. D’abord, on cautériser avec un instrument en fer, à la limite où la gale est apparue et où elle n’est pas encore apparue, et pour empêcher qu’elle ne se propage, on entoure cette région sur une surface d’environ un empan (?). (1972, pp. 240–241)

In connexion with the difficult mdo ris, Blondeau suggested, with a question mark, the reading of ‘a span’ (which should be mtho re). The correct reading, in all likelihood, is mdo ris\(^{11}\). As the Dunhuang cave-depository was sealed around the mid-11th century, we may deduce that this spelling was current by Rin chen bzang po’s time\(^{12}\).

\(^{11}\) I am thankful to the anonymous referee of Acta Orient. Hung. for drawing my attention to the fact that mdo ris also occurs in Pelliot Tibétain 1297 published and translated under the title ‘A contract for the sale of a horse’ in Takeuchi (1995, pp. 155–158): dge srong cang don car gyis rta gcig mjal la/ spu rtags dang mdo [ris] la/ pho gva skya la mdo ris shing lo dang phyo mkhar mchis pa gcig [ … ] rta ‘di dbyar sku khrute mdo ris lhag chad cig mchis na’ dpang rgya phral la brje bar bgyis/ [T]he priest Cang bon-car bought a horse; as for its hair features and patterns (mdo-ris), it is a male [horse] with white nose (gva), its [body fur being] gray with patterns of the shapes of a leaf and phyo-mkhar; [ … …] if in summer time the hair [of] this horse having fallen and either a surplus or a shortage of its mdo-ris appears, the contract should immediately be replaced.’ Takeuchi adds: ‘I infer that mdo-ris may be either ‘pattern or shape of hair colour’ or ‘shape or bend of muscles’. Also, mdo may be considered as a variant spelling of ‘do-ba ‘excellent breed of horses’ or ‘horse’.’ Chen and Wang (1983, p. 97), in an earlier edition of this document, furnishes a note for mdo ris, namely, rta mdo ba’i spu ris (pattern of hair – in respect to, understandably, the colour – of a horse). I read spu rtags as spu ‘hair’ and rtags ‘sex, genital sign’ (e.g., mo rtags ‘female, female genitals’) whereas mdo ris as the ris ‘family, species’ of mdo ‘horse’; see also note 13 below. In terms of spu, it is of gva skya ‘pale-grey forehead’ (gva ‘bovine or horses with white forehead’, see Zhang 1993, p. 379); in terms of rtags, it is of pho ‘male’; in terms of mdo ris ‘species of the horse’, it is shing lo dang phyo mkhar (presumably the name of such a species). Also, lhag chad probably means ‘deficiency’ rather than ‘a surplus or a shortage’. Compare skyid sdug (lit. ‘happiness and misery’) which often means either ‘well-being’ or ‘ill-being’ exclusively. That is to say, it is probably not a copulative compound but is similar to the so-called panyak ‘[semantically one-sided] compounds in [Old, Middle, Modern] Chinese which consist of a pair of antonyms. It follows that mdo ris lhag chad cig mchis na’ may be read ‘should there be any deficiency [inherent in the species’. My reading is admittedly tentative.

\(^{12}\) The final stop of ri seems to be the remnant of a final -g, cf. riga ‘mountain’ in Zangskar dialect (Riaboff 1996, p. 26). The spelling ris was probably typical of the orthographic convention followed by Rin chen bzang po who came from the royal house of Mnga’ ris gu ge. The only spelling variant of Mnga’ ris known to me is Mnga’ rigs (Anonymous 1987, p. 46) and both can mean ‘the class of [people] being ruled, subjects’ (cf. bangs rigs) or ‘territory, assigned domain’ (cf. dbang ris, sa ris / rigs). There is good reason, however, to consider a possible link be-
The treatment of Tib. *mdo* in this paper is by no means exhaustive. Also, *mdo ba/* *do ba* ‘steed, courier, messenger’ \(^{13}\) found in Dunhuang manuscripts must be distinguished from the *mdo* discussed earlier. It is hoped that the facts presented in this paper, however trifling they might appear, can be of some use for future research.

\(^{13}\) See Bloudeane (1972, pp. 157, 297) and Btsan lha (1997, p. 360). Zhang (1993, p. 1413) has ‘*do ta* ‘messenger’ which seems to be a variant of *mdo*/*do rta*. According to the 18th-century writer ‘Jig med rig pa’i rdo rje, the Mongol prince Göden sent a *do rta zhes pa’i rkang mg yogs* (‘einen Schnellflüssigen namens Dorta’ – Huth 1892, p. 131) to ‘invite’ Sa skya pandita for a meeting. The 15th-century writer Dpal ’byor bzang po (1985, p. 357) has *rdo tha* (cf. *tha* ‘horse’ in *tha skar* ‘the star presided over by the Asvins’) *shri* (Ch. *shi* ‘messenger’)? instead of *do rta*. Could it be the title by which Tibetans called the messengers of the Mongol relay system? It may be of interest that there was a courier system known as *mingtuo* in Tang China. The Song-dynasty writer Yue Shi recorded that Emperor Xuanzong’s amour, Lady Yang, once dispatched secretly the *mingtuo* courier 私發明駝使 to send three Malay camphors (dryobalanops aromatica) – out of the ten which the emperor had bestowed on her – to An Lushan, the Turko-Sogdian general and excellent performer of the “Iranian whirling dance” (*Huxaunwa*), with whom she had a liaison. An interlinear note in Yue’s record reads: 明駝使, 腹下有毛, 夜能明, 日行五百里. ‘The *mingtuo* (lit. ‘camel of light’) courier, on the belly [of the camel he rode on] there is hair that can glow at night, travels five hundred miles per day’ (1927, p. 11b). (This note is so poorly phrased that it sounds as though the glowing hair belonged to the messenger rather than to the camel!) The Qing poet Zha Shenxing 查慎行 (1651–1728) must have felt troubled by this fanciful account – indicative of the fact that the name *mingtuo* was foreign to the Song writer – when he offered a “less imaginative” but no less unpersuasive explanation in his miscellany *On Retreat amid the Multitude* 人海記 (1989, p. 114): 臥面駝草, 腹下不沾地, 故曰明駝 ‘Lying down, it chews grasses [and] its belly never touches the ground. So it is called *mingtuo* (‘camel of daylight’, implying its being sleepless!).’ In the poem *Mulan shi*, the heroine Mulan petitioned the *Qayan* to furnish her with a *mingtuo* which could travel as far as a thousand miles so as to send her home very soon (see Lu 1983, p. 216f). As is well known, this famous folk song from *circa* the 6th century A.D. might have undergone textual modification during the Tang period in view of a few traces of probable embellishment by Tang writers. The “History of Tibet” in the *New Tang History* states that the dromedary in Tibet traveled a thousand miles per day (see Ouyang 1975). According to Zheng Chuhui’s *Miscellaneous Records on the Reign of Emperor Minghuang*, when the Turkic general Geshu Han was in charge of defending Qinghai from the Tibetan military threat, he had messengers travel five hundred miles a day on white camels to send reports to the Chinese emperor (乘白駝駝以奏事, 日行五百里). Is there any connexion between the couriers of the two states (Tang and Tufan) known contemporaneously as *mingtuo* in Chinese and *mdo* in Tibetan? Such an inquiry is significant insomuch as we know so little about the system of communications that enabled the Tibetan *btsan po* to rule his empire and to wage victorious wars against Tibet’s neighbouring states. The term *mingtuo* had been translated into Manchu *serkingge temen*, Tibetan *rnga mg yogs*, Mongolian *sedgil temege* and Uigur *atan tūgā* as can be found under the rubric *morin ulha-i hacin* in the Qing pentaglot dictionary (*Tamur–Imanishi–Satō 1946, p. 926*) and which seems to be the source for Zakharov (1875, p. 590): poetčovjéh djojčyj verblyojd, kóldrjyj pribýjvajj 1,000 li wěнь děny při spánně ně sájjdita břoхomjy n jognami na zemljo. Hauer (1955, p. 785) and Norman (1978, p. 239) merely give ‘schnellgehendes Kamel’ and ‘a fast camel’ respectively for *serkingge temen*. These are all very late translations which shed no light on the obscure Chinese name documented about a thousand years earlier.
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Fu Heng et al. (1773): Yazi zhending qingwen jian (Han-i araha nonggime totkobuh manju gisun-i b解除 bihe). Harvard-Yenching Library Ma5806.05/2540T(9).

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