Providing Access to Water: The pump, the spring and the klu

Brokerage and local development on the Tibetan Plateau

XÉNIA DE HEERING

ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationships between administrators and the administered within the framework of local development brokerage practices directed at setting up running water systems for domestic consumption in Tibetan rural areas of Qinghai Province. Split between several locations, the activities of the brokers entail finding agreements and compromises in various forms with a variety of interlocutors: local government, the recipients of the project – and also the deities.

KEYWORDS: local development brokerage, access to running water, Tibetan Plateau, Qinghai, relations with local government.

In certain rural areas on the Tibetan Plateau, women, sometimes helped by children, devote several hours a day to fetching drinking water for the household. They usually carry the water on their backs, sometimes with the help of a donkey or motorbike. The absence of running water fit for human consumption has a significant impact on health, the economy, and education at the local level. When several communities share water sources with an irregular and globally insufficient flow, water supplies are at the centre of frequent disputes. Water sources that are not easily accessible are the scene of regular accidents, particularly in winter amidst the snow and ice. But as Drolmatso explained to me one day, all these difficulties are only part of the problem for the locals: coming across someone with an empty bucket is generally interpreted as a bad omen.

This article examines relationships between administrators and their public within the framework of local development brokerage practices directed at setting up running water systems for domestic consumption in rural Tibetan areas of Qinghai Province. The projects under study are generally set up at village level and relatively cheap, since part of the cost is always met by the beneficiaries in the shape of manpower, locally available materials (stone, sand), or more rarely and to a lesser degree, money (see Table 1).

Whilst taking care to avoid any “ideological populism,” we use the expression “local development projects” to designate projects whose origin is “local” in the sense that the project proposal is not drawn up directly by the donors but is submitted to them only at a later stage. Although they may sometimes make assessment visits and occasionally attend inauguration ceremonies for the projects, the donors and their representatives do not take part in the practical implementation of the projects. It is clear that the “priorities” of the funders are frameworks that govern the content of these “local” proposals, which are assessed in the light of their compatibility with the specific objectives and budgetary limits governing the activity of the funder. The concept of “local development broker” appeared as the most appropriate for describing the reality of our research in that it places the emphasis not on a given organisational form, but on an activity. As “players who both draw flows of external aid to rural areas and channel requests for assistance in language developers can under-

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1. Tibetan words are here transliterated using the Wylie system. With names that recur frequently, proper names have been changed.
2. According to the Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary, “The Bon and Buddhist religions, in emphasizing the present, observe the omens (rta-gsigs sgrub-thabs) and good and bad links of interdependence (rten-brel) that show what will happen to each of us in the future. It is said, for example, that when someone is preparing to leave for a distant destination, if, on the day of departure, when they step outside their home they see someone coming towards them with an empty bucket, it is an omen and a rten-brel that their objectives will not be achieved.” Dung dkar’phri las, Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo (Dungkar Tibetological great dictionary), Beijing, Kiang go’ bod ri gui’jie akun khang (China Tibetology Publishing House), 2002, p. 987. On local usage of the concept of rten-brel, see also Sa mthos skyid, Gerald Roche, “Purity and Fortune in Phug sde Tibetan Village Rituals,” Asian Highlands Perspectives, No. 10, 2011, pp. 231-284, pp. 238 sq.
This table presents a selection of brokerage projects conducted in the autonomous Tibetan prefectures (ATP) of Yul shul (Yushu 玉树), Rma lho (Hainan 黄南), Mtsho lho (Haidong 海东), and Mtsho shar (Haidong 海东) between 2005 and 2012. Donors include the Canada Fund, Shambala Connection, The Asia Foundation, HQF, the German Embassy and the Dutch Embassy as well as private donors. The contributions of the beneficiaries correspond to work done free of charge and estimated on the basis of the daily wages of an unskilled worker.

### Table 1 – Brokerage projects for the supply of running water in Qinhai Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct beneficiaries (people) per project</th>
<th>Total cost (CNY) per project</th>
<th>Contributions (% of the total cost)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donor</td>
<td>Beneficiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>42,450</td>
<td>49 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>232</td>
<td>179,389</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>297</td>
<td>206,130</td>
<td>54 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>353</td>
<td>302,217</td>
<td>57 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>520</td>
<td>160,196</td>
<td>74 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>540</td>
<td>240,522</td>
<td>53 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>584</td>
<td>162,206</td>
<td>46 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,021</td>
<td>165,132</td>
<td>42 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,038</td>
<td>117,044</td>
<td>82 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>159,900</td>
<td>21 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributions (% of the total cost)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Local government provided some of the cement needed for the project.

2. The local Water Bureau and local government provided technical assistance and advice free of charge.

Sources: Internal documents. Calculations made on the basis of information provided in project reports.

stand,” (5) brokers intervene both within the framework of officially registered or informal associations and as “simple” individuals. We should make clear that the term “broker” is not a native term. The brokers present themselves to the funders as people of local origin wishing to help groups of individuals living in difficult conditions who have the desire but not the financial means to improve their own situation. The way they present themselves to potential project beneficiaries and to the local authorities varies, notably depending on the broker’s experience. The situation is very different, for example, between a broker working on a project for the first time, who still has to prove himself, and a broker who has already implemented several projects and has therefore gained a certain local reputation based on his past work. The activity may be voluntary and temporary: certain brokers then turn to other professions. It may also develop into a more formal, sustainable practice, with the founding of an association that may eventually receive grants to cover operating costs. Certain officials move into the non-governmental sphere just as certain brokers, paid by the government, implement projects during their “free time.” When describing the relationships between brokers and local authorities one must therefore abandon simplistic oppositions and attempt to understand the complexity of the social fabric that allows them to play a mediating role between different social worlds. (6)

The brokerage activities described result from the initiatives of Tibetan men and women, born mostly in the 1980s in rural areas that remain extremely poor. (7) As brokers operate most often in their home areas, the beneficiaries of the projects are mainly Tibetan, but sometimes also Han, Hui, Mangghuer (Tuzu 土族), Salars (Salazu 撒拉族), or Mongol. Most of the brokers concerned here studied English at university. Given the local economic and social context, the importance of these uncommon career paths, which led more than one broker to pursue higher education elsewhere in China or abroad, must be emphasised. (8) These young people have received atypical training and possess solid skills. Besides their
mother tongue, they speak standard Chinese, the local Chinese dialect, and English.

Besides the fact that projects to supply running water represented a non-negligible part of brokerage activities[10] at the time of the survey, this focus seemed relevant to us for several reasons. The government generally provides access to water, and in the context of the "great opening-up of the West" [xibu dakaifa 西部大开发],[10] which has been accompanied by major investments in infrastructure, the continued existence of these micro-projects supported by public or private funding may seem somewhat surprising. Access to drinking water in rural areas was designated as one of the priorities of the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), and with the increase in state investment in this field, the number of brokerage projects involving running water has fallen significantly in recent years.[11] Although brokers and the government share the objective of improving living conditions in rural areas, they are rarely involved in the same project (see Table 1). That water is a necessary and vital resource is nevertheless a universally recognised fact, and it would therefore seems legitimate to say that in brokerage situations, brokers, administrators, project beneficiaries, and donors cooperate for the public good. Hence, it is important to observe how agreements are achieved between these actors within relatively stable frameworks for each group and within specific constraints (budgetary, hierarchical, political, etc.), despite their often divergent evaluations of the situation.

Involvement in "non-governmental" activities is frequently studied through the prism of "civil society." The use of this concept underwent an important revival after the fall of Soviet-type regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe as well as in Latin American dictatorships. Besides the positive connotations that have been attached to it in this context, Gary Rodan notes that "the disillusionment of [theorists] with state-centred analyses which failed to anticipate the strength of social forces in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has added to the analytical and normative emphasis on civil society."[12] For example, the concept is at the heart of Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan’s study In Search of Civil Society: Market reform and social change in contemporary China.[13] In an article published two years earlier, Gordon White endeavoured to clarify the concept of "civil society," which became an integral part of the "magic trio" of solutions that had been prescribed to developing countries since the 1980s as a "sociological counterpart to the market in the economic sphere, and to democracy in the political sphere."[14]

When applying it to the case of China, researchers are often obliged to adjust the concept, speaking of an "embryonic" (Gordon White), "semi-civil" (He),[15] or "state-led" (Frolic)[16] civil society. Ma Qiusha points out that the diversity of relationships between associations and the state is such in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that it gives each author examples with which to support his position.[16] Because of its blanket nature, which presupposes a homogeneous "civil society," the concept risks hiding the diversity that actually exists. As Tony Saich points out, "in the domain of the relationships between state and society, explanations must be developed that take account of the changing complexities of the current system as well as of the fluidity, ambiguity, and institutional confusion operating on every level in China and which are still more pronounced at local level."[17] The determining nature of the hierarchy in no way precludes a certain fluidity and even a random, arbitrary dimension in interactions with the local government.

The approach through "civil society" is, moreover, often part of an idea that sees change in terms of "modernisation" and which has been criticised for its evolutionist and functionalist nature.[18] An alternative model for understanding change in East-European post-Communist societies has been put forward by David Stark.[19] Sandrine Devaux demonstrates the relevance of relationships between associations and the state in People’s Republic of China (PRC) to its evolutionist and functionalist nature.

9. Fourteen of the 25 projects implemented by Samdrup between 2004 and 2008 were running water projects. Out of a total of 47 projects implemented since 2003, eight of Dorje’s projects involved drinking water. At the time of the survey, brokers were also working in education (building of village schools, dormitories), agriculture (irrigation systems, building greenhouses), hygiene (building toilets), infrastructure (building of bridges), health (building of rural clinics), and access to sources of alternative energy (distribution of portable stoves and solar panels).


11. In 2010, according to the Qinghai Provincial Office of Statistics, the rate of access to running water in rural areas was 76.94 percent, www.qhtj.gov.cn/jtyx/201009/2010110807_43312.asp (consulted on 20 July 2012). People counted as having access to running water often share a water source with other residents in their locality: only 26.31 percent of rural households have access to running water in their home www.qhtj.gov.cn/jtyx/20103/t20120309_45321.asp (consulted on 3 August 2012). In 2011, 250,000 rural inhabitants in Qinghai Province benefited from running water projects implemented by the government, and it was planned to increase this number by another 250,000 people in 2012 http://english.mep.gov.cn/News_service/media_news/201202/t20120213_223411.htm (consulted on 25 July 2012).


Dealing with local officials

First contacts with local administrators and a few words about those who help brokers establish a relationship with officials.

All projects require at the very least the go-ahead, and more generally the approval, of the local authorities. Some projects involve their cooperation in the form of a fairly large monetary contribution or the sending of a specialist from the county water bureau (shuili ju 水利局) to draw up plans for the hydraulic system. The brokers frequently request mediators from their direct and indirect circle of contacts to intervene in their relationships with local government, in particular to help them establish contacts with the latter. Tseringkyi, aged 20 when she began her project, explained to me how she went about this:

Tseringkyi: [To draw up the plans for the hydraulic system] I first spoke to people who had already done this kind of project. Then I contacted the head of the township, who sent someone from the Water Bureau to draw up the plan, free of charge.

X: How did you contact this leader? Did you know him before?

T: No, I called him. One of my uncles, a businessman, knew him. He introduced me to him.

X: Were you able to go directly to the Water Bureau?

T: No, if I had done that, they would perhaps have said that they didn’t have time, or no money to help me. It’s better to ask the leader, who has some power. If he tells them to help me, they must. (20)

Tseringkyi took advantage of her knowledge of the local government hierarchy, and by calling on her uncle exploited the resources available in her family. Like Tseringkyi, most brokers, whenever possible, try to “ally themselves” with an official at a higher level to ensure the cooperation of his subordinates. To successfully approach government representatives, brokers

22. Ibid., p. 25.
23. April-June 2006; July-August 2007, with the support of INALCO; February-June 2008, with the support of EFEO. My network of interviewees was mainly built around networks of acquaintances starting with a contact established during a previous visit. Interviews were carried out with a total of 24 brokers at different stages in their careers, certain of whom belonged to formal or informal associations. Project documents and other available written sources were also consulted.
24. Zhihs dung, Chnam sa go ’byed (The demarcation between heaven and earth), no place of publication, n.d. (2009). During 2008, brokerage work was very difficult, even suspended. It must be said that the realities described here in no way claim to be representative of all the areas inhabited by Tibetans in the PRC. In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), even before 2008 it was extremely difficult to register associations, as described in the article “China pledges ‘fight to death’ with the Dalai Lama,” The Times online, 14 August 2006, www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25689-2312796.html (consulted on 23 August 2006).
25. It goes without saying that a comprehensive survey should also integrate the points of view of officials and local residents (both “beneficiaries” and “non beneficiaries” of projects), as well as those of the funders.
26. As Joseph Isaac points out, “A motive is not the subjective source of the action, but an act of language that is part of an available vocabulary for the social player and allows them to interpret conduct. A motive is firstly a way of replying to a question about what is unexpected about an action or about its alternatives, by presenting an excuse or a justification.” Joseph Isaac, Évring Goffman et la microsociologie (Évring Goffman and microsociology), Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 28.
The new heads of the township of Lungkar told Dorje they would speak to the county government to ask for support for the projects and promised to do everything they could. But Dorje did not believe they would succeed, for two reasons: on the one hand because they were not in a very high position, and on the other hand because of the attitude of the county government officials, who were suspicious of his work, saying, “It's just charity, when we are given money, we take it!” This is why he does not believe the leaders of the township. Dorje says he does not want to say they are bad people, but their attitude may change if they go to see the county government: local leaders generally cannot tell the county what to do. The township leaders cannot really oppose those of the county; it's not possible, because they want to keep their post. (29)

The vertical hierarchy of the bureaucracy may therefore work for or against the brokers, which reveals a certain fluidity in the system, the low level of institutionalisation of the regulations, and the importance, in such circumstances, of individual personalities.

The brokers' perception of the political and institutional environment is marked by uncertainty and incomprehension. In general, therefore, it is difficult for them to entirely trust the word of officials. In this context, rather than legislation, what is "relevant to the problem," (30) from the point of view of the brokers, is to find the ways, informal if need be, to carry out their projects successfully. The brokers point out that the system often functions more through contacts and clientelism than according to established rules. They therefore seek to counterbalance their original handicap in this respect by resorting to intermediaries when they need to obtain something from the authorities. The aim of the brokers' interventions is not to change a system they perceive as rigid, or to influence the drawing up of such or such rules, but to find solutions to precise situations as effectively as possible. This is far removed from the function of advocacy frequently associated with “civil society,” notably in the sphere of the environment. (31)

Observation of the networks of contacts and intermediation called upon in the localisation of brokerage activities reveals that these always lead to initial contact with a village leader before resulting, or not, in the launching of a project. The village leaders therefore appear to be a vital link in the realisation of any project, a fact that a simplistic dichotomy of governmental and non-governmental spheres could not have led us to anticipate.

Cross-typifications and contrasting relationships at supra-village level

The description of the relationships with local government must therefore be refined if it is to take into account the administrative levels of the different counterparts the brokers are dealing with. Besides close cooperation with the village leaders, in certain cases the planning and implementation of the projects involves relationships with the township and county administrators: chiefs and Party secretaries, and officials from the water bureaus. Several scenarios are possible. Whilst certain brokers prefer to keep these relationships to a strict minimum, and even to avoid, as far as possible, dealing with the authorities, others actively try to involve local administrators in their projects. Although a local government may sometimes take the initiative of contributing substantially to a given project, open cooperation with the latter is described as being an exception:

A new township leader was appointed, and Samdrup went to see him with the leader of the village where he was preparing an irrigation system project. The new township leader is very good, said Samdrup, he is in agreement with the projects and encourages the villagers to take part. He was very happy to learn that two projects were underway and said he would support them: he would do his best to send an expert in hydraulics free of charge and would take charge of the transport of stones and sand, and he even said that if funds were insufficient, the government might perhaps make a financial contribution. In fact, emphasised Samdrup, this leader is very special, he’s very good. The villagers agree, this leader is really very special. (32)

The fact that this township leader was said to be “very special” indirectly reveals that in Samdrup’s experience, relations with the authorities are often more complicated. Several brokers complain of being subject to undue suspicion, the result of local officials’ ignorance of non-governmental activities. To prove their legitimacy, certain brokers have been obliged to produce official documents downloaded from the Internet to convince local officials that “the Chinese government has already said that NGOs are good.” (33) In this situation, in front of local officials, some go as far as presenting their projects as though they played almost no role in these activities of which they are in fact the main instigators. For example, when Dorje showed his work to the new leader and Party secretary of Lungkar, he avoided putting himself forward, omitting to mention his own role when explaining to them that for projects to run smoothly “three parties must cooperate: the local beneficiaries, the government, and the foundation.” (34) Rather than highlighting his own intermediation and organisational work, Dorje insisted on the importance of the contribution of these local administrators for the success of the projects designed the benefit the local villagers. His objective is to win their support. In the face of the local government officials, the brokers, who see their own situation and ability to intervene for intervention as relatively insecure, generally adopt a low profile, placing more emphasis on how their projects make a modest contribution and fit into the development policy recommended and implemented by the government than on their own initiatives in these activities.

33. Interview, 7 May 2006.
34. Field journal, 16 May 2006.
The way these interactions play out depends partly on “how actors know one another” and “who knows (or thinks he knows) what about whom.” In particularly remote areas, for example, the recipients of a project may take the members of a local NGO for government employees by virtue of the fact that both players distribute aid—which does not go without affecting communications: taking them for officials, the local beneficiaries do not dare voice any criticisms of the projects.

Sonamtsö: Most of them do not know [our association]. In nomad areas, they sometimes even think that the project was initiated by the government. Because in the pastoral regions the government gives food, they give them many things, don’t they? When we went to Rdonak [for an evaluation visit], they took us for government employees. They think that and when we asked them questions, they were like this, “Super! Super! Everything’s great!” [...] In many places we spoke about [our association], but in certain places...we talk about it, but they forget. They do not even know that organisations that do this kind of things exist in the world, so for them...everything comes from the government. For example, some people, who live near the county town know, but the others don’t know. So when we talk about [our association], they listen, but they do not understand. (38)

To understand the reaction of Rdonak residents, the historical experience of the public use of speech in the PRC must also be taken into account. (39)

Suffice it to say here that more than 30 years after the launch of reform and opening, these herdsmen still display extreme caution when they believe they are dealing with the government.

Setting up credible cooperation

Reaching agreements to share responsibilities

Brokerage projects involving the supply of running water require the active cooperation of villagers in the work. Their involvement is crucial. Before writing a project proposal, the brokers consult those who solicit and will potentially benefit from their brokerage activity. Decisions are taken collectively by majority vote. In this respect, it may be said that the brokers place themselves at the service of the villagers whilst at the same time employing certain “participatory development” techniques.

Samdrup: I’m always writing [project] proposals for what the villagers ask me to do. If the villagers said “running water,” and then I said “Oh, no, running water is not good, I will write a school project!” [...] If I did that, then the projects would not be successful. [...] It may happen [...] that some people want this, and some people want that, and some [other] people want something else, but we always decide on what most people agree on. (37)

Each project then requires the setting up of a project implementation committee at the village level:

Samdrup: First, I have to meet the village leaders, for sure; then the village leaders will arrange a meeting with all the villagers. [...] After the project is funded, I go to the village to hold a community meeting. We need five to six people to act as the project implementation committee. Two of them must be the village leaders, so that they will listen, they will only listen to the village leaders. [...] The committee leader is always one of the village leaders. (39)

The village leaders therefore play a vital role not only in getting the project underway, but also throughout its implementation. During a meeting called by the village leader, all the residents (one representative per household) choose the other members of the project committee, which generally comprises five or six people, including one or two women. (39) Once the funding is secured, that is to say when the solicited donor, having approved the project proposal sent him by the broker, makes available the funds intended to finance the project, the committee organises the distribution of the work together with the broker, that is to say the purchase, transport, and storage of the materials, excavation of the ditches for the water pipes, provision of tools and food for the workers, etc. The committee takes into account the various constraints to which workers may be subjected. For example, women may be responsible for digging the ditches near the village so they can continue to look after the children and old people in their care, whilst the men dig further from the village. The committee is also in charge of quality control and for organising the long-term maintenance of the running water system.

Although most of the projects are implemented at village level, some require the cooperation of several villages. In a project to supply water to a monastery, the residents of seven different villages participated voluntarily in the work, supported by specialised Chinese workers and by the monks. Although working in a monastery presents special difficulties for women in the Tibetan context, Drolmatso managed to ensure that the work ran smoothly, skilfully encouraging the monks to take on certain tasks that were physically less demanding than digging trenches. So although the village leaders are often at the head of the local project committees, the brokers continue to play an essential role.

Drolmatso: In the beginning, it was very hard [to work with monks], because I wanted to do things according to my plans, so I needed to convince them. But they’re monks, right? Higher than me, so I need to respect them. But over time they began to appreciate my opinion, they listened to me more. [...] There were some monks in the project committee, so we had a short meeting and I said: “Because you need to participate. Local villagers, they have no relation to this project, but they are willing to do this kind of work, this kind of effort. [...] You could go there, and check the quality of the work. Maybe you guys could cook for them!” They did the next day. They bought some vegetables, [...] they cooked there, and sort of had a picnic in the forest [near the spring]. There was food, noodles... So local people were all very happy and willing to put in effort. [...] They can see the monks also care about this, right? (40)

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35. Interview, 10 May 2008.
36. On this subject, see for example, Isabelle Thireau, Chang Shu, “La parole comme arme de mobilisation politique” [Speech as an arm in political mobilisation], Études rurales, No. 179 (2007/1), pp. 35-58.
39. The participation of women in the project committees is actively encouraged by most brokers. This approach meets the requirements of many donors, but can also be explained by the fact that women are able to communicate more easily than men with the other female villagers involved in the project.
In the process of implementing each project, the brokers and their various counterparts—beneficiaries and administrators—define their respective responsibilities by dividing up amongst themselves the amount of work they are actually ready to take on, in order to reach fixed and relatively limited objectives within a set period of time and in accordance with a schedule drawn up in advance. The lack of willingness to cooperate shown by certain officials may lead to tense relationships. Dorje encountered problems with the officials in Dzamar County, where most of his projects were carried out:

I went with Dorje, who had to go to a valley where several projects were underway. He also had to meet two county officials, but the Water Bureau official was away and unreachable. The other spoke to us for a few minutes, clearly demonstrating his absence of involvement in the matters under discussion. Without inviting us to sit down, he literally showed us the door to put an end to the interview, whilst Dorje still tried, on the threshold, to remind him of the Education Bureau’s commitment to the school construction project that was in progress. Once outside, Dorje was really discouraged, bursting out, “I’m a student. My responsibility is to study, to do my homework!” Then he said to me, “For a water project, the Lungkar Township officials went to see the county leaders, asking them to send an expert to draw up plans for the hydraulic system and they refused. But [the township officials] did not ask why not. Why didn’t they ask, ‘Is our township part of the county?’”

Denouncing the lack of action on the part of the county officials, Dorje highlighted the illegitimate nature of their attitude. He judged the lack of cooperation on the part of these administrators all the more reprehensible since the development of the entire county is, in principle, their responsibility. As he suggests, calling upon them constitutes a legitimate initiative on the part of the township officials, who in this case find themselves in the position of citizens facing administrators on a higher level than themselves. The refusal of the county officials deserved to be called into question—by virtue of what principle did they refuse a township, within the county they are in charge of administering, the assistance of the Water Bureau? In this instance, cooperation came up against diverging opinions on the respective responsibilities of the broker and the government at its different levels. Dorje, aware of having received an exceptionally good education, feels indebted to those who, born in the same conditions as himself, have not benefited from the same opportunities. It is this feeling of responsibility that leads him to place studying opinions on the respective responsibilities of the broker and the government. It is this feeling of responsibility that leads him to place studying opinions on the respective responsibilities of the broker and the government, and to test his abilities to persuade the administration to take its responsibilities seriously.

Credibility put to the test and repercussions of the projects in the local arenas

Between villagers and brokers, cooperation requires tests of credibility. These are all the more important when a broker is managing a project for the first time in his region of origin, or more rarely, when he intervenes for the first time in a locality outside his region of origin. The absence of familiarity can, in fact, make local residents rather suspicious at first, and as a result, reluctant to cooperate.

Tseringkyi: [Once the funding had been secured,] I organised a meeting and told the villagers that I had obtained the money [for the running water project]. But I did not tell them how much. I also told them that the money was not in my possession, that a teacher was helping me and she was keeping the money. Otherwise, they might have tried to get hold of the money. So I told them that this teacher had the money, that she would go and buy the materials with me and that I would bring them. I also had them sign a guarantee paper, which is a document stating the dates on which the work is expected to begin and finish, in order to give them a sense of responsibility. I said that if they had not finished in time, I would no longer help them. Of course, I would still have helped them, but it was so that they would shoulder some responsibility. […] The villagers built the water box. Then they didn’t want to continue the work. They had doubts. “Will she really bring the materials?” They didn’t trust me. So I told them I would bring the materials when they had dug the ditch. They dug half, then stopped once again, asking for the materials. This time I said OK, I’ll bring them tomorrow. After that, they did everything I asked.

With this “guarantee paper” formalising the obligation created for the beneficiaries, Tseringkyi introduces a new way of operating, more reminiscent of bureaucracy than “traditional” Tibetan practices. “The Chinese [rely] on the written word, the Tibetans on the spoken word” (rgya yig thog bod tsig thog); if the proverb is to be believed, Tseringkyi is going against common practices. To establish mutual trust, however, neither the spoken nor the written word is enough. Tangible proof of goodwill must be given. Tseringkyi, after testing the determination of the villagers to work, gave in to their request instead of trying to affirm her authority and force respect for the signed contract, since she, too, had to prove she was trustworthy in the interests of the smooth running of the project. A single test on both sides was enough to establish a relationship of trust, the effect of which seems to have lasted: “After that they did everything I asked.” Tseringkyi has achieved a remarkable degree of authority, quite unusual for a young woman of 21 in the process of implementing a project by calling on her connections with donors based outside the local arena.

Brokerage has had tangible repercussions in the “local political arena.”

42. Interview, 29 May 2008.
43. Interview, 29 May 2008.
44. Thomas Bierschenk et al., op. cit., pp. 28 sq.
specia l feature

Drolmatso: Yes, yes. Then when I did the water project for the monastery, they really just felt regret: they thought that the quality of materials used for the village was not good, the quality of the pipes was not so good, [people said] "They collect money from us and then buy poor quality!" I bought, like, the most expensive pipes for the monastery, and then they compared the pipes, and said "Oh my gosh... they're so different!"

X: And did it cost you more, your...
D: No, no, no!
X: ... the water system you installed [in the monastery]?
D: It didn't cost me too much. So, according to what they said, [...] the local people said: "Oh gosh! Our project cost so much, and it's very poor quality," they complained. [47]

Most of the brokers get their supplies from factories that guarantee the quality of their pipes. Insufficiently robust pipes, especially if they have not been buried deep enough to prevent the water from freezing in winter, burst very easily. It was above all the weight of the pipes that enabled the villagers to notice the difference in quality between the pipes bought by Drolmatso and those supplied in the running water project organised by the government. [48]

Coping with multiple authorities: Administrators and divinities

The difference between a government project and a brokerage project: "An amazing story"

In order to try to understand more clearly, from the point of view of the recipients of a project and a broker, how a brokerage project and a government project may differ, I would like to retrace, through an account given by a broker, how a village situated near a big river finally obtained running water, after calling first on local government then on the services of Samdrup.

Samdrup: When the Rinak people noticed that I’m doing projects here in Serigon and in my village, then without anybody’s introduction the village leader of Rinak came to my home, and asked me to help them write a running water proposal. [...] They asked the government to do a project many times before they asked me [...] and one time the government visited their village. Their water source is seven to nine km away from the village. So the government came, designed everything, then said that to provide running water, they needed 720,000 RMB. 720,000 RMB! So the government said that to do a running water project was impossible, “because there are only a few people in your village,” there are 370 people in the village. Few people and the budget is very high, so it’s impossible. [...] So instead of conveying...
running water from the spring, [the government said they] will build a water pump, and then they will pump water from the big river. The villagers didn’t agree with this, because in this area, if a person dies, they will throw the body in the river. They consider the river water is not very clean to drink. So the villagers said, "We don’t need that pump." Then, after one or two years, they asked me. It was in 2005. I did a running water [system] for them, for about 170,000 RMB.49

It is difficult to imagine that the members of the government at the county level were ignorant of local funeral practices. It is therefore difficult to understand the proposal to install a pump so the inhabitants of Rinak could drink the river water. These administrators did not seem to show concern for the fact that the villagers consider this water unfit for human consumption and neglected the health risks linked to drinking water in which bodies have been decomposing.

Samdrup: A pump is much easier to do. You buy the little machine, you build a little house, and then that’s all. […] Then the villagers must pay the electricity fee, every year. Water fee, electricity fee, it’s a great burden for them, so they didn’t agree.50

According to Samdrup, the officials suggested a solution which, whilst technically simpler, would allow them to request a fee that the villagers do not have the means to pay. With a sum of less than a quarter of the government’s estimate, Samdrup, using the same source, supervised the realisation of a running water system supplying each house.

Samdrup: After my project was completed, they showed me the government’s plan, and it was a type of book, […] mostly [consisting of] a budget. It said how many pipes, how many kinds of pipes they needed, and what the pipes cost… A lot of the information wasn’t accurate.

X: You mean the price was not correct?
S: The price was not correct, and the length was not correct, and the… quantity of cement was not correct either. Twenty tons of cement is perfectly enough, but they wrote 70 or 80 tons, I don’t know where they inquired about this. This budget is still in the village leader’s keeping. The government made the budget, and then gave it to the village: “If you don’t believe us, then look at this” (laughter).51

We see here another use of the written word. The authorities produced “a sort of book” for the villagers to support its verdict in order to show it was well-founded. This certification is effective, until proof of the contrary. When Samdrup told the villagers he had obtained funds, they doubted it would be possible to install a running water system for so little money: “You can’t install running water with that amount, they said, the government has said we need 720,000 yuan to install running water!” Since he had already provided ten running water installations, Samdrup had the experience needed to evaluate the budget drawn up by the government, a skill the villagers lacked. Once the project was finished, the older villagers once again told Samdrup, “We couldn’t believe it, it’s like a dream!” They were not the only ones to be surprised, however:

Samdrup: In 2006, [another] village asked me to do a running water project. […] Several days later, after I had visited the project site, that village leader met the Water Bureau leader. The village leader told him: “We are also asking help from a person who did a lot of projects […] the same person who did the running water project in Rinak.” Then the Water Bureau leader couldn’t believe that: “Nobody can do running water in this village!”
X: He didn’t even know about it?
S: Yeah, he didn’t even know about it! (laughter) […] And a few days later, several officials from the Water Bureau visited Rinak village, and they said: “Oh, you have running water?” “Yes, we have running water, a person did this running water project.” “O.K., so you need to pay the water fee for this project, for the water you are drinking.” Then the villagers said: “No, we are not going to pay, because the money is not the township’s money. The money came from foundations.” Then the [Water Bureau] leader said: “If you don’t pay water fee, then if your running water has any problem, we won’t care.” Then the villagers said: “O.K., you don’t need to care, we don’t want to pay the fee. So if we have any problem with our running water system, you don’t need to care.” Then it stopped. It’s an amazing story (laughter).52

“Then it stopped.” The expression refers to a series of actions on the part of the local authorities who offered the residents of Rinak completely inappropriate solutions, deceived them over the budget, and then tried to obtain financial gain in exchange for unsolicited services the villagers had not requested. From the point of view of the villagers, one of the differences between a government project and a brokerage project lies in the fact that the administration sometimes collects, or tries to collect, sums of money considered unwarranted — taking advantage of a service provided by someone else in Rinak, and collecting considerable sums of money from residents to supply ultimately poor quality materials in Drolmatso’s village. This “predatory” behaviour on the part of the local officials and the fairly negative vision that results from this, particularly in rural communities, are far from being restricted to areas where Tibetans live.53

The Water Bureau officials responsible for this county, who were not aware of the project’s completion, appeared completely unfamiliar with the local situation. The contrast with certain brokers is striking. When I asked Dorje if many people come to see him to ask him to undertake projects, he told me that most of the villages in his valley have already asked him, that he has already visited all these villages and that until recent changes, he knew all the leaders.54 The lack of trust in the word of certain officials, anchored in the fact that they have never visited the most remote areas and are unfamiliar with the prevailing socio-economic conditions, undoubtedly hampers the establishment of harmonious relationships between brokers and the local authorities. Even in these often sensitive situations, the brokers are still obliged to find ways of cooperating as best they can with local government officials.

52. Interview, 18 May 2008.
54. Interview, 3 June 2008.
“It rained a lot because we dug near the spring!”

In Himalayan cultures, important precautions are essential near springs, which are the dwelling place of klus, underworld deities associated with water and rain. (55) “Particularly sensitive to pollution and developments through which man violates the environment,” (56) the klus are reputed to seek vengeance when they are disturbed – notably by giving the guilty parties illnesses that are sometimes deadly or by altering the balance of the local water table (drying up of a rivers or springs, abnormally heavy rain, etc.). So whilst the donor is supposed to cover the expenses of the project, local water table (drying up of a rivers or springs, abnormally heavy rain, etc.). So whilst the donor is supposed to cover the expenses of the project, the “beneficiaries” are sometimes ready to hire and pay Chinese workers to do work that might disturb the klus in order to protect themselves from the reactions of these deities.

Far from being systematic, problems linked to the klus nonetheless emerge regularly during projects to supply running water.

Drolmatso: When we were digging, of course locals are afraid to dig near a spring, they are afraid because according to the Tibetan perspective, there are, like, water deities there.

X: Klus?

D: Yes. If we dig around there, maybe it will bring disasters, like illness, and even kill people. So I hired some Chinese people to dig near the spring. But it rained a lot, and then local people started to say, “It rained a lot because we dug there!” It’s true, it was like this, so people were scared. But I just comforted my family: “No, no, no, if it was true, why... It didn’t rain only in our area, but in other areas also, so how can this be connected?” I said that, and then...

X: Were they reassured?

D: Actually, I was also afraid! If they start to say this... Because I’ve always believed there are water deities. So I asked all the monks to go near the spring and chant [prayers]. And then they did that activity, and... hmm...

X: Were people reassured after that, less worried, about digging?

D: After... After the project was completed, all the monks had running water in their homes, right? So even when they hold religious activ-

Drolmatso was frightened, too, but for the smooth running of the project, she had to overcome her own anxiety and appear sure of herself. Confronted with bad weather, she left the matter in the monks’ hands, relying on their authority and practical knowledge. This was a skilful move, since it conformed to custom and had the potential to reassure everybody. Religious practices, good and bad omens (Tib: rten brel), and worldly deities therefore appear very tangibly as decisive criteria in evaluations and decision-making, whether or not they are finally adopted. Drolmatso reassured the villagers even though she was afraid herself, and once the running water had been installed, the villagers “forgot” the anger of the klus. Drolmatso’s attitude is a good illustration of the skill of brokers who achieve their ends with relatively few resources at the start — in the face of officials and fears aroused by the deities alike. The brokers are dealing with the different sources of legitimacy that coexist in the local space, and there are further complex dynamics to be studied here in a rural world, where traditional cosmologies are called into question by practices and arguments based on more secular points of view.

Conclusion: Difficulties and successes of brokerage, compromises for the achievement of a public good?

It has to be said that the work of the brokers is complicated by uncertainty in the social practice of regulations, (57) including the effective distribution of responsibilities between administrators and citizens as well as between the various levels of government. The number of successfully completed projects nonetheless indicates that most often an agreement — or even more — with the local authorities is reached. Whatever their motives, the officials generally leave the brokers to their own devices, even if they sometimes denigrate their projects as “simple charity,” or turn them to their own advantage by mentioning them in reports serving as a basis for potential career advancement. In certain cases, fruitful cooperation agreements with the government are set up, which may be vital for the completion of a given project, and the brokers then explicitly recognise the decisive role played by local government.

The difficulties of brokerage are not caused, however, by just a few unpredictable or uncooperative officials. Far from it. There are many answers to the question “What can cause a project to fail?”: government officials, local deities, the villagers, the impossibility of finding funding, etc. The frameworks of political theories of “civil society” do not really help in describing the type of brokerage activities under study here, or in accounting for their successes. This is not so much because these theories were, historically, developed for the analysis of the constitution of democratic pub-

55. On the subject of the klu in Tibetan culture, see Reb gong pa mkhar rtse rgyal, ‘Jig rten mchod bston [Praise and offerings to the worldly [deities]], Beijing, Krung go’i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2009, pp. 68 sq. For the klu in Ladakh, see Pascale Dollfus, “De quelques histoires de klu et de btsan” (A few stories of klus and btsans), Revue d’Études Tibétaines, No. 2, 2003, pp. 4-39.
lic spaces in the West, as it is because accounts in terms of “civil society” are often ill-served by the imposition of meaning that is not congruent with the way in which the players see their interventions and commitments.

For the brokers, the government is one of their partners and has to be accommodated – there is no question of being “for” or “against” a player who, representing the state, is in any case in a position of power. When criticisms are voiced, they are above all condemnations relating to the moral sphere, calling into question individuals whose accumulated faults may result in unreasonable or ineffective ways of working. Above all, brokers are trying to complete their projects successfully, with compromises always involved in decisions that concern several groups with differing evaluation systems – “beneficiaries” and other villagers, donors and local authorities, not to mention the brokers themselves.

[Translated by Élisabeth Guillon]

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