

## Interpreters, translators and travelling agents: the role of *tongshi* in Sino-Tibetan relations

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This paper examines the development of the role of a certain group of semi-officials, known as *tongshi* in Chinese, in Sino-Tibetan relations from the late-fourteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, i.e. during the Ming and Qing dynasties, with particular reference to the part played by *tongshi* in events along the pre-modern Sino-Tibetan border. *Tongshi* were often Tibetans in Chinese and later Manchu employment, who undertook various duties, ranging from interpreting, the translation of official documents and accompanying Tibetan tribute missions to Peking to participate in court audiences, to acting as travelling agents in Tibetan territory whither they were dispatched to acquire military intelligence for their employers. As this paper shows, the information obtained from the activities of certain *tongshi* was of considerable importance in permitting the Ming and Qing dynasties in maintaining their notional claim to authority over the border region. The *tongshi* were thus instrumental in enabling the Ming and Qing rulers, who failed to incorporate the Tibetan border regions directly into the Chinese empire, in their attempts nevertheless to force the Tibetans resident there to submit to a high degree of Chinese jurisdiction. Drawing on the *Veritable Records* (*shilu*) of the Ming and Qing dynasty emperors, archival materials, and Ming and Qing dynasty official publications, the development of the institution of *tongshi* is traced and illustrations of their activities given.