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Sino-Sikh Chushul Treaty 1842

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Abstract

The Treaty of Chushul, signed on September 16–17, 1842, was a peace agreement that ended the Sino-Sikh War (also known as the Dogra–Tibetan War) of 1841–1842. It marked a rare diplomatic resolution between the expanding Sikh Empire (*Khalsa Raj*) in northern India and the Qing Dynasty of China, which held suzerainty over its vassal state Tibet. The treaty formalized boundaries between Ladakh (under Sikh/Dogra control) and Tibet, restored pre-war trade routes, and prevented further incursions, reflecting the limits of both empires reach amid internal challenges. It is still relevant today.

Keywords: Ladakh, Tibet, China, Sikh, Khalsa Raj, Dogras, Qing dynasty.



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Introduction

South Asia is the ground for the Great Game. Major Powers do their best to distort facts and publish alternate views on events. S. Bajpai sums it well when he says that scholars face genuine difficulty in understanding events and trying to analyze historical events and treaties written more than a hundred years ago and in other languages.

...when rival claims on territories are put forward with equal vehemence based on seemingly incontrovertible evidence and when national sentiments are worked up, a scholar working on a subject like this faces genuine difficulty in formulating an unbiased and dispassionate attitude and avoiding national affiliation (Bajpai, 1970).

Founded by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1801–1839), the Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*) rapidly expanded from Punjab in South Asia, incorporating diverse ethnic groups through military prowess and alliances. Ranjit Singh's empire reached its zenith by the 1830s, controlling key Himalayan trade routes for salt, wool, *Pashmina* wool, and *Shahtoosh* wool (both discussed later). His death in June 1839 triggered a power vacuum, with succession wars among his heirs (e.g., Kharak Singh, Nau Nihal Singh) and reliance on Dogra Hindu generals like Gulab Singh of Jammu for stability.

By the 1800s, the Qing Empire was grappling with internal rebellions (e.g., White Lotus, Miao uprisings) and external pressures from European powers, including the looming First Opium War (1839–1842). Tibet, nominally under Qing protection as a vassal state, served as a buffer against Central Asian threats but had semi-autonomous governance under the Dalai Lama. Qing authority was more symbolic than direct, relying on periodic military garrisons (*ambans*) in Lhasa.

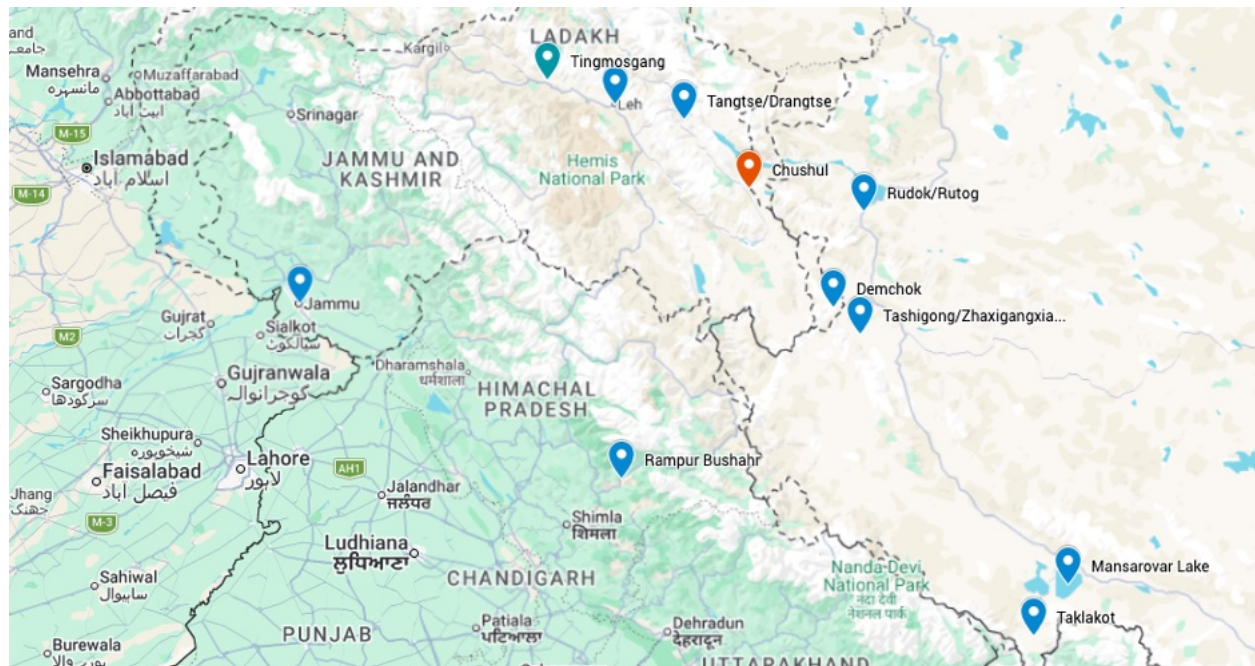
The British East India Company was also extending its influence in South Asia specially in the Himalayan border areas where Nepal and Tibet meet.

There was Qing Dynasty's declining Influence in Tibet and the rising Sikh Kingdom with expanding influence in Ladakh at the borders of western Tibet.

The Treaty of Chushul in 1842 was culmination of wars between the two powers. At stake were trade routes in the region.



Area enlarged below.



Location of places mentioned in the text.

Trade

In the 19th century, Ladakh was the hub of trade routes that branched out into Central Asia and Tibet. Its trade with Tibet was governed by the 1684 Treaty of Tingmosgang (Treaty of Tingmosgang, 2026). Some aspects of the treaty are:

- It was a Treaty between Ladakh and Tibet.
- Border between Ladakh and Tibet will be demarcated at the Lhari Stream (Charding *Nullah*) near Demchok (see map above) (Charding *Nullah*, Wikipedia, 2026). This is on the banks of the Indus River. There is a small Demchok settlement in both India and China. There is Demchok Monastery in India as well.
- Ladakh got the exclusive right to receive the *pashmina* wool produced in Western Tibet. Western Tibet was known as Ngari Korsum in old days. It is now called Ngari Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region. World famous Kashmiri *Pashmina* shawls were made with this *Pashmina* wool from Ladakh. The wool came from *Pashmina* goats that roam the cold high altitude Tibetan plateau. *Shahtoosh* is even finer wool from the Chiru antelope. *Shahtoosh* is illegal today as the endangered wild antelope has to be killed to get the wool.

Political Powers

In the early 1800s, the Kashmir Valley and the adjoining Jammu region were part of the Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But the *Dogras* of Jammu were virtually autonomous under the rule of Raja Gulab Singh, who was positioning himself to take control of Kashmir and the surrounding areas after the death of the Sikh monarch Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In 1834, Gulab Singh sent his ablest general and Kishtwar governor, Zorawar Singh, to take control of all the territory between Jammu and the Tibet border, leading to the conquest of Ladakh and Baltistan. Baltistan is the region between Gilgit in the West, and Ladakh in the East. Baltistan is northern part of Kashmir. It is in present day Pakistan. Gilgit and Skardu are important towns. By 1840, Ladakh and Baltistan were firmly under Dogra control, subject to the suzerainty of the Sikh Kingdom.

The British East India Company was the predominant power in the Indian subcontinent at the time. It treated the Sikh Empire as a valuable ally against the Afghans, but it also had designs for its own *Pashmina* trade with Tibet. Zorawar Singh's conquest of Ladakh broke the Kashmiri–Ladakhi monopoly on Tibet trade, and Tibetan *Pashmina* wool started finding its way into British territory. To regain the monopoly, Gulab Singh and Zorawar Singh turned their eyes towards Western Tibet.

From the early 18th century, Tibet had been under the protectorate of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty. A Qing *Amban* (imperial resident) was stationed in Lhasa to report on the affairs of Tibet. Nevertheless, Qing China was fighting the First Opium War (1839–1842) with the British Empire when the Dogra invasion of Tibet took place.

Prelude to Conflict: Sikh/Dogra Expansion into Ladakh (1834–1840)

The governance of Ladakh had deteriorated. This led to feudal clashes. The people appealed to the Governor for help but were treated with ‘contempt’. This affected the trade of lucrative *Pashmina* Wool, Tibetan Salt, and Tea from Tibet into Kashmir, Jammu, and Punjab.

The administration of Ladakh was far from satisfactory. Kaja (Gyalpo) Tshupal Namgyal, ('Tshe-dpal-mi-hgyur-don-grub-Knam-rgyal) who came to power in 1790, was not only peculiar in his personal habits but was also the reverse of the Ladakhi traditions in matters of administration. He had taken over the Privy Seal from Khalone (Prime Minister) and had dismissed all the old counsellors and governors. He appointed upstarts as his counsellors and governors. This resulted in the practical break-up of the administration... The people requested the King for help but the latter treated the request with contempt and punished them instead of offering any help. (Bajpai, 1970)

In 1834, General Zorawar Singh set out to conquer Ladakh from its Namgyal dynasty ruler, Tshewang Dorje Namgyal. By 1836, Ladakh fell, becoming a Sikh vassal and integrating into the empire's revenue system.

Gulab Singh, Zorawar's patron, and Raja of Jammu, was granted semi-autonomous control over Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh as a reward. General Zorawar Singh built a military fort in Leh (capital of Ladakh). It is still standing and is a military museum. (Ladakh Tourism, 2026)

The Sino-Sikh War (1841–1842): Spark and Escalation

It was both geopolitics and economics that triggered the war. The trade route from Western Tibet into Kashmir via Ladakh was a lucrative trade route. Perhaps if it were less important, its deteriorating governance and internal security situation would not have been considered important. The British also used the deteriorating governance to direct trade from Western Tibet to their controlled lands in Nepal-India border.

The hostilities and subsequent disorders attending his conquest of Ladakh had permitted the British to divert the shawl-wool trade to [Rampur-] Bashahr - a state of affairs that Gulab Singh could not long afford to tolerate (Fisher, 1963).

Shawl-wool was reaching British factories at Ludhiana and Delhi through passes in control of the British Government due to the unsettled state of affairs in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh (Bajpai, 1970).

Both the British and Chinese were also preoccupied with other wars. This created a window of opportunity for General Zorawar Singh.

Gulab Singh's chief objective in the conquest of Ladakh and Baltistan had been two-fold: to encircle the Kashmir valley - in anticipation of the day when the dissolution of the Sikh empire would permit him to claim Kashmir as well as Jammu - and to gain access to the lucrative wool trade that normally flowed from the plains of northwestern Tibet (Chang Tang) through Ladakh to the looms of Kashmir (Fisher, 1963).

General Zorawar Singh's Sikh and Dogra army entered Ngari region (Western Tibet) at Demchok and proceeded along the Ngari Valley to the area around Lake Mansarovar. The key battles were:

- **Frontier skirmishes at Demchok (1841):** Sikh and Dogra forces entered West Tibet from Ladakh.
- **Battle of Rudok (May 1841)**
- **Battle of Gartok (June 1841):** location uncertain as town has moved and been renamed.
- **Battle of Taklakot (September 1841)**
- **Battle of Toyo (December 10-12, 1841):** This was a decisive battle between the Sikhs/Dogras and Tibet/Chinese. It was fought 2-3 miles southeast of Taklakot. General Zorawar Singh was killed in this battle. A modest *samadhi* (memorial), known locally as chorten was built. It is likely just a heap of stones.
- **Battle of Drangtse/Tangtse (August 1842):** The decisive battle. This was near present day Leh, Ladakh. Tibetans launched counter-attack on Ladakh. Reinforcements under Dewan Hari Chand arrived and defeated the Tibetan army. The Dogras dammed the river to flood the Tibetan trenches, forcing them into an open-field battle where the Dogras had the advantage. The Tibetans fled. Dogras were in pursuit.
- **Battle of Chishul (September 1842):** A final battle was fought at Chishul.

The Treaty: Terms and Significance

The treaty was signed on September 16 and 17, 1842. The English translation of the treaty is shown below. The treaty is referred to as ‘Ladakhi Letter of Agreement’.

Shri Khalsaji Apsarani Shri Maharajah; Lhasa representative Kalon Surkhang; investigator Dapon Peshi, commander of forces; Balana, the representative of Gulam Kahandin; and the interpreter Amir Hah, have written this letter after sitting together. We have agreed that we have no ill-feelings because of the past war. The two kings will henceforth remain friends forever. The relationship between Maharajah Gulab Singh of Kashmir and the Lama Guru of Lhasa (Dalai Lama) is now established. The Maharajah Sahib, with God (Kunchok) as his witness, promises to recognise ancient boundaries , which should be looked after by each side without resorting to warfare. When the descendants

of the early kings, who fled from Ladakh to Tibet, now return they will not be stopped by Shri Maharajah. Trade between Ladakh and Tibet will continue as usual. Tibetan government traders coming into Ladakh will receive free transport and accommodations as before, and the Ladakhi envoy will, in turn, receive the same facilities in Lhasa. The Ladakhis take an oath before God (Kunchok) that they will not intrigue or create new troubles in Tibetan territory. We have agreed, with God as witness, that Shri Maharajah Sahib and the Lama Guru of Lhasa will live together as members of the same household. We have written the above on the second of Assura, Sambhat 1899 (17 September 1842).

[Sealed by the Wazir, Dewan, Balana, and Amir Shah]

Tibetan Letter of Agreement, 1842

This agreement is made in the interests of the friendship between the Lhasa authorities and Shri Maharajah Sahib and Maharajah Gulab Singh. On the thirteenth day of the eighth month of the Water-Tiger year (September 17, 1842), the Lhasa representative Kalon Surkang, investigator Dapon Peshi, Shri Raja Sahib, sat together amicably with Kunchok (God) as witness. This document has been drawn up to ensure the lasting friendship of the Tibetans and the Ladakhis. We have agreed not to harm each other in any way, and to look after the interests of our own territories. We agree to continue trading in tea and cloth on the same terms as in the past, and will not harm Ladakhi traders coming into Tibet. If any of our subjects stray into your country, they should not be protected. We will forget past differences between the Lhasa authority and Shri Maharajah. The agreement arrived at today will remain firmly established forever. Kunchok (God), Mount Kailash, Lake Manasarowar, and Khochag Jowo have been called as witnesses to this treaty.

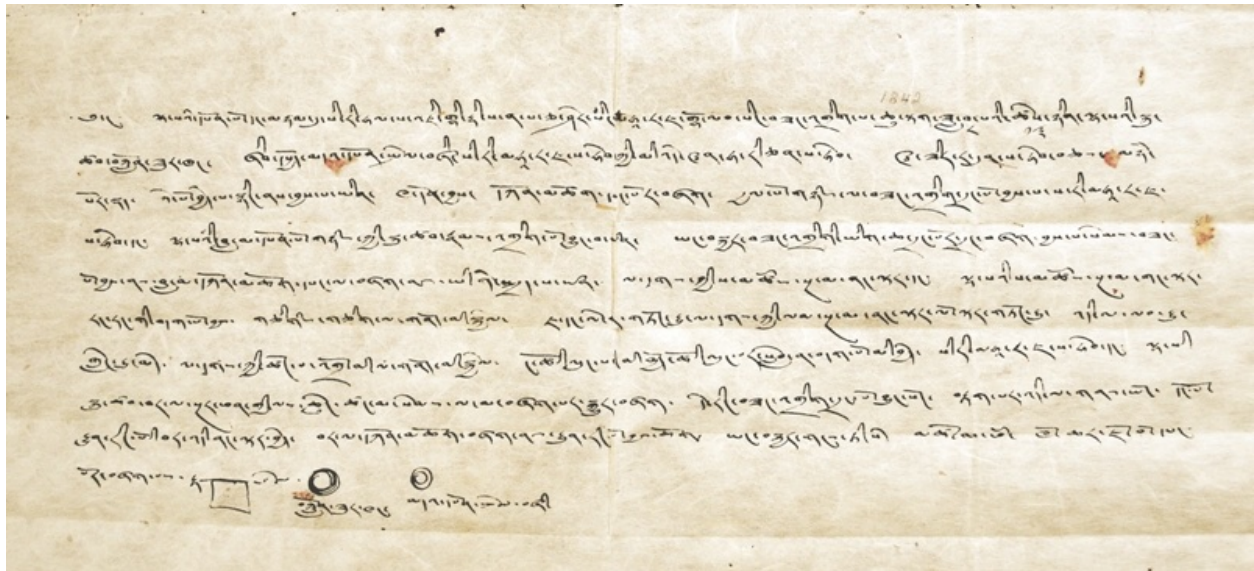
[Sealed by Kalon Surkhang and Dapon Peshi]

Signatories: On behalf of the Sikh Empire (Sher Singh and Gulab Singh) were Dogra envoys like Diwan Hari Chand; for Tibet/Qing, Lhasa officials (Kalon Soka and Bakshi Shajpuh) under imperial oversight.

Source: (Tibet Justice, 2026)

Core Provisions (from the treaty text):

- Format: Exchanged as ‘Letter of Agreement’ rather than a formal document, emphasizing personal vows over state seals.
- Mutual recognition of pre-1841 boundaries: Dogras withdrew from Tibetan territories like Rudok.
- Perpetual peace and non-interference: No future invasions or support for rebels.
- Trade resumption: Annual caravans of wool, tea, and salt via Ladakh routes, with no tariffs or blockades.
- *Pashmina* Trade: The lucrative *Pashmina* wool from Western Tibet will continue to go to Kashmir via Ladakh as it did before. It will not go to Rampur-Bushahr as the British wanted. “Continue trading in tea and cloth on the same terms as in the past, and will not harm Ladakhi traders coming into Tibet” (Tibet Justice, 2026). This is probably what the war was about.



(Wikimedia, 1842)

No full photographic reproduction of the Dogra/Sikh side of the exchange appears publicly digitized, but this Tibetan counterpart is the primary surviving original artifact.

This treaty provided that the Dogras were to be the rulers of Ladakh, but that their control was not to extend to Tibet, and that the boundaries of Ladakh and Lhasa would be constituted as formerly. "That in conformity with ancient usage Tea, Pashmina and Shatoosh wool shall be transmitted by the Ladakh road. That no person from Ladakh to Tibet and vice versa will be obstructed. That war will not be renewed between Ladakh and Tibet. That whatever customs were prevalent of old shall prevail" (Bajpai, 1970).

End of hostilities, agreement on borders and respect of sovereignty, non-aggression agreement, open to trade and tourism, and respect of old customs. This treaty delivered on all its objectives.

Is it Tibet-Dogra treaty or Sino-Sikh Treaty?

Dogra Kingdom was autonomous Kingdom but under suzerainty to Sikh Kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Tibet was autonomous Kingdom as well under suzerainty to China. The treaty was negotiated by Dogras and Tibetans. The treaty clearly states that "This agreement is made in the interests of the friendship between the Lhasa authorities and Shri Maharajah Sahib and Maharajah Gulab Singh" (Tibet Justice, 2026). It is also referred to as 'Ladakhi Letter of Agreement'. Should it not be Ladakhi-Tibet treaty as well?

It can be argued both ways on whether it was Tibet-Dogra or Ladakhi-Tibet or Sino-Sikh treaty. Perhaps it is a question of who you ask, and what people's motives are.

...genuine difficulty in formulating an unbiased and dispassionate attitude and avoiding national affiliation (Bajpai, 1970).

Long-Term Implications

- For India-China Relations: The treaty is cited in modern border disputes (e.g. Aksai Chin), as evidence of historical Ladakh suzerainty to Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*), while China emphasizes suzerainty over Tibet.

- Historiographical Notes: Often overshadowed by the Opium Wars, the conflict underscores the Great Game rivalries in Asia.

The terms were also summarised in the Ladakh Chronicles as follows. Tibet recognised that Ladakh was annexed to the Sikh Empire. And the Sikh Empire relinquished the ancient Ladakhi claim to western Tibet. Both sides would remain within their own territories. Biennial Lopchak missions would go on as before. Ladakhi merchants would be allowed to travel to Rudok, Gartok and other places in Tibet and the Tibetan merchants from Chang Thang would be allowed to go to Ladakh (Wikipedia, 2026).

The texts of the notes also state that the "old, established frontiers between Ladakh and Tibet would be respected. The Ladakhi king and queen were to be allowed to live in Ladakh peacefully, and it is the Ladakhi king that would send the biennial Lopchak missions to Lhasa rather than the Dogra regime. All trade between the two regions was to be conducted according to "old, established custom".

This is significant as the treaty ensured restoration of diplomacy, ended border disputes, restored Ladakh's and Kashmir's 180-year monopoly over *Pashmina* wool from Ngari Korsum (Western Tibet), and enabled trade.

Sikhs today have excellent relations with China. Chinese Ambassadors visit *Darbar Sahib* (Literally court of God), the holiest shrine of the Sikhs. Chinese Ambassador Sun Weidong visited in November 2019. Ambassador Luo Zhaohui visited in August 2018. Ambassador Le Yucheng visited in March 2015. China also add Punjabi language courses to its university (The Tribune, 2026).

Cao Yin, Associate Professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, wrote about history of Sikhs in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore in 1885-1945. Sikhs were brought in by the British to police international settlements. He wrote positively about Sikhs in China. Sikhs "clean, modest, and well-disciplined characteristics made them very qualified policemen" (Yin, *From Policemen to Revolutionaries: A Sikh Diaspora in Global Shanghai, 1885-1945*, 2017). Sikhs were not mere mercenaries, but with civilizing influence who would challenge the British authorities in Shanghai if need be.

They were not merely responsible for checking riots and crimes, but also for carrying out the civilizing project in the International Settlement; on the other, they frequently challenged the authorities that they thought to be oppressive and discriminative (Yin, *From Policemen to Revolutionaries: A Sikh Diaspora in Global Shanghai, 1885-1945*, 2017).

It is worth repeating for its importance. The treaty is important as evidence of historical Ladakh suzerainty to the Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*), while China emphasizes suzerainty over Tibet.

Conclusion

The Sino-Sikh Chushul Treaty of 1842 was the culmination of wars and between the two powers – Tibet, an autonomous region under China, and Ladakh controlled by the King of Jammu under the Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. At stake were trade routes in the region. The treaty restored the old status-quo established by the 1684 Treaty of Tingmosgang.

The treaty was signed after several battles between General Zorawar Singh leading the Dogra army of Raja (King) Gulab Singh of Jammu, who was subservient to the Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Sikh Kingdom (*Khalsa Raj*), and the Tibetans.

The trigger for the conflict was geopolitics and economics. The governance of Ladakh had declined. Traders and caravans were reluctant to travel from Tibet to Kashmir via Ladakh due to deteriorating security and governance. The British took this opportunity to route trade in lucrative pashmina wool to their region. This would have destroyed lucrative trade to Kashmir (under Jammu and the Sikhs). General Zorawar Singh led his forces to conquer Ladakh and force the existing *status quo*.

The *pashmina* wool manufacturing in Kashmir today probably owes it to General Zorawar Singh and the Sikhs for its survival. However, the old trade routes between Tibet and Ladakh are no longer open.

This treaty can serve as a blueprint for cooperation for the future - end of border conflicts in Ladakh-Tibet, agreement on borders and respect of sovereignty, non-aggression agreement, open to trade and tourism, and respect of old customs.

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