In the Land of the Eastern Queendom

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There are many Tibets. There is the administrative Tibet Autonomous Region, a province of the People’s Republic of China. There is the geopolitical Tibet of the Government in Exile and its overseas supporters. There is the linguistic, religious, and cultural Tibet spread out over five provinces of China as well as parts of neighboring countries and diaspora communities. And there is the ideational Tibet of a venerable Buddhist civilization threatened by Chinese policies and globalization. But there is also the local Tibet of thousands of villages and townships, each with its own linguistic, sectarian, and cultural identity, and each with a different relationship to the Chinese regime and the global community. Suopo Township in Danba County, Sichuan, is one piece of this local Tibet, and Tenzin Jinba’s *In the Land of the Eastern Queendom* tells a compelling story of how this piece of the local Tibet is being transformed by China’s current tourism boom.

Danba is an area that is marginal in many respects. Marginal to China because it is sparsely populated and most of its inhabitants are ethnic Tibetans. Marginal to Tibet because it is part of the traditional eastern Tibetan province of Kham, outside the area previously administered by the Dalai Lama’s government in Lhasa, with its own language and martial tradition. Marginal to Kham because most of its inhabitants speak various
Gyarong languages only distantly related to the Kham variety of Tibetan. And marginal to Gyarong because most of Gyarong is in a different prefecture. But despite its quadruple marginality, Danba in recent years has come firmly within the orbit of the ethnic and scenic tourism that has become a favorite pastime of the Chinese urban middle class. The local elites in many parts of Danba, including Suopo, have jumped to take advantage of the tourism boom, both for its possible monetary benefits and in order to promote and display local cultural heritage and encourage local pride in the area’s culture and history.

As part of Danba’s and Suopo’s tourism boom, a dispute has recently arisen over the location of a legendary capital of the “Eastern Queendom” of the title, a matriarchal polity that may have existed a thousand years ago, as mentioned in Chinese historiographical literature. The book describes in lively detail the politics of the dispute, which involves ordinary villagers, community elites, and cadres serving at different levels of the state. Dr. Tenzin’s insider-outsider position as a Gyarong native, as well as his U.S. PhD degree, give him a combination of insider access and outsider distance that enables him to describe these disputes in a way that contributes much to our knowledge of the politics of ethnicity and tourism not only in Tibet but in China more generally.

Why should we care about the Eastern Queendom, since it may or may not have ever existed? There are three good reasons. First, we need a more realistic and complex knowledge of Tibet. In an era when monks are self-immolating, governments are being repressive, and journalists are feasting on the more sensational aspects of that country’s tragic recent history, more complex and subtle things are going on. Tibet is not uniform, and its relations with China are not fully adversarial, though of course almost all Tibetans long to see the authorities pursue more benevolent and less paranoid policies. This book helps to discredit any simplistic or romantic notions of Tibet. Second, we need to know more about ethnic tourism and local politics in China. As hundreds of millions of Chinese visit exotic places and peoples annually (and at least hundreds of thousands come to Danba), tourism not only affects local communities but also affects the way China is put together and the way people conceive of its being put together. Third and perhaps most importantly, we need more ethnographies of Tibetan communities. There are very few, and only a minority of these are based on intensive, long-term research by scholars like Dr. Tenzin who know the
communities from the inside out and also have the academic tools to analyze their local politics and culture in sophisticated ways.

Read In the Land of the Eastern Queendom for its analytical insights and its descriptive richness, to be sure, but also read it for a great story, about modernization, development, tourism, politics, and intrigue amidst both spectacular natural scenery and complicated ethnic relations. We are proud to introduce the Eastern Queendom in this, volume 15 of Studies on Ethnic Groups in China.

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