This book is about a small number of villagers at the far eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau who are struggling to find a proper niche in the sociopolitical constitution of their native county, among the Gyarongwa and Tibetans, and in China. It is expected to build dialogue with two categories of queries from critical reviewers and potential readers: the scope of investigation and the issue of ethnicity. To be more specific, can this case study speak to a much broader range of issues regarding sociopolitical changes and state-society relations in Tibet and China beyond this seemingly trivial incident in a tiny, out-of-the-way place? Does ethnicity or Tibetanness matter in this case and also in this work?

This book displays the convergence of my general concerns and academic interests: Chinese nationalism and ethnic representations, civil association and social change, Chinese reform and collective action, tourism and modernity, the Tibetan riots of 2008 and their repercussions, border/frontier and marginality, gender politics, ethnic (Tibetan) policy, grassroots (subaltern) agency, and so on. Simultaneously, it aims to bring to light the intricate and complex terrain in which the queendom dispute is situated. I also want to show that this case is both microscopic and panoramic, meaning that it deals with a local Tibetan society’s transition as much as it
addresses the transformation of Tibetan and Chinese societies in general. Likewise, it is as much about a borderland society as it is about the societies in the Chinese and Tibetan heartlands. Moreover, I expect some critiques of its “inadequate” attention to the locals’ ethnicity, namely, the locals seem not to be ethnic or Tibetan enough. As a matter of fact, this is what I am striving for. Many of the works on ethnic groups in China tend to highlight their ethnic performativity—for instance, Tibetans do what Tibetans are supposed to do—but I want to show that ethnicity is just one of the multiple identities of the locals and doesn’t matter to them all the time, even though it does play a role in the queendom dispute and their political agendas. The natives have the same problems as millions of other villagers or peasants throughout China, as they are all subject to Party-state policy and reform and to modernity and globalization with Chinese characteristics. However, I hope I have succeeded in balancing the difference and sameness, particularity and universality, regarding the locals’ responses to social transformation vis-à-vis those of other Tibetan communities, the Han, and other minority villagers.

This book has been inspired by three major streams of influence: my own status as a Gyarong/Tibetan native, Victor Turner’s idea of liminality, and James Scott’s works on subordinate groups’ resistance strategies, especially those occurring in borderlands like Zomia. Tsanlha Ngawang—a reincarnate lama and distinguished scholar on Gyarong—has been hoping that we could work together to dispel doubts about Gyarong’s “authentic” Tibetan status. This was the plan for my PhD program in the United States, but it turns out that I have been fully “brainwashed” by sophisticated anthropological theories of ethnicity and identity; that is, instead of authenticating Gyarong’s Tibetanness, I have been fascinated with the issue of how and why Gyarong’s Tibetan identity becomes problematic. Turner’s insights, added to Arnold van Gennep’s writing on rites of passage, kindled my initial interest in the concept of liminality—a state of being “between and betwixt”—and this eventually fueled my visualization of borders as liminal spaces that are ruled by ambivalence, uncertainty, outsidersness, namelessness, instability, resistance, temporariness, convertibility, and innovativeness. I have also benefited from Scott’s approach to subordinate and borderland (e.g., Zomia) populations by spotlighting their agency in making the best out of disadvantages.

These inspirations, however, are inseparable from the training I received
at the Anthropology Department of Boston University, which played an essential role in fostering my intellectual perspicacity and critical perspectives. Fredrik Barth has been the greatest influence on my life and career. He is the only person I have met so far in my life who can be described as both truly charismatic and decently humble. He showed me with his manners, dignity, and wisdom that a great scholar must be a great person in the first place. This book reflects my contemplation on his conceptualization of ethnic and cultural categories as unbounded entities interfacing with each other, as well as his advocacy of the significance of individual concerns, interests, positionality, and creativity in cultural analysis. Charles Lindholm enlightened my path with his scholarly sophistication and interdisciplinary approach, which helped shape the major themes in this book, for example, modernity, tourism, authenticity, and identity. Kimberly Arkin never tired of telling me that I could do better, and this book has been accomplished with her stimulation and urging. My encounter with Robert Weller, my chief adviser, was one of the greatest things that has ever happened in my life. I am inclined to count it a miracle, since he managed to turn such a naive and misplaced initiate into a “complicated” anthropologist. Therefore, this book is my most special gift for this exceptional mentor.

What I acquired from people with whom I worked in the field, who welcomed me with warmth and frankness, was no less than the contributions of the above-mentioned erudite scholars. Among them, I am most indebted to Uncle Tenzin. It was he who ushered me into the convoluted landscape of the queendom dispute and introduced me to his family, Moluo Tourism Association members, and other key informants in Suopo. All of them are either anonymous or pseudonymous in the book, but I hope they can feel my wholehearted appreciation for sharing their thoughts and concerns with me. At the same time, I am sorry if I have let them down by being unable to prove that the Eastern Queendom is theirs as they have hoped it would be.

A better book has been made possible with important feedback from the following scholars: Stevan Harrell, Emily Yeh, Lorri Hagman, Leonardo Schiocchet, Janet Gyatso, Merry White, John G. Blair, and Jerusha McCormack, to name just a few. So many others have also helped me in one way or another in the course of gathering ideas and completing this book, and I would love to extend my sincere thanks to Robert Hefner, Parker Shipton, Frank Korom, Jenny White, Charlene Makley, Gray Tuttle, Nicolas Sihlé, Navid Fozi-Abivard, Mentor Mustafa, Andrew Armstrong, Shelby Carpenter,
Naoko Nakagawa, Chelsea Shields Strayer, Sarah Tobin, Susan Costello, Chrystal Whelan, Ahmet Selim Tekelioglu, Mark Palmer, Kathy Kwasnica, Jiangye, and many more.

This book would not have been possible without the general support of the Cora Du Bois Charitable Trust, which granted me a dissertation writing fellowship, and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities from Lanzhou University (Project Title: The Reconfiguration of Grassroots Politics in Tibetan Regions in the Transitional Era with granting No: 12LZUJBWZD008).

Finally, I am grateful to the Agrarian Studies Program of Yale University for hosting me as a postdoctoral associate in 2013–14. This gives me the opportunity to make the best use of the university’s dynamic and creative academic environment. Here I am able to continue my investigation of theoretical debates on borders/frontiers and marginality, collective resistance and political change, and grassroots associations and state-society relations as well as to amplify and extend my analytical model of convergence zone and strategic (or voluntary) marginality into the Himalayan region and Southeast Asia. Readers of this book will also see my further reflections on the issues discussed here and those that will be broadened and freshly explored in the near future. Thus I would like to thank all of you in advance for your continuing interest.