In the Land of the Eastern Queendom

Jinba, Tenzin

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2005, an article in a local newspaper, “The Capital of the Eastern Queendom Comes to Light,” rocked Danba County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in Sichuan, China. The author, Uncle Pema—a cadre from Suopo Township in Danba—claimed that the capital of this legendary matriarchal kingdom was located precisely in Suopo. Key officials at both the prefectural and county levels were shocked and wasted no time in ordering an investigation into this matter. The reason for their uneasiness was that Danba County had already bestowed the title “Ancient Capital of the Eastern Queendom” (Dongnü Gudu) on Suopo’s neighboring rival township, Zhonglu. So the article was seen as a direct challenge to county authorities. This incident marked a milestone in the efforts of Suopo elites and villagers to reclaim the queendom label. The Suopowa, or people from Suopo (wa means “people” in Tibetan), accused county officials of favoritism and partisanship. In pressing their claims, the Suopowa were seeking to take advantage of the media and initiate collective actions such as demonstrations and pleas to higher authority as well as make use of the legal space of their newly founded quasi-civil association, the Moluo Tourism Association (Moluo Lüyou Xiehui). However, the Suopowa’s queendom discourse is full of puzzles and paradoxes that are key to our understanding of the nuances, com-
plexity, and multidimensionality of the queendom dispute. It illuminates local Tibetans’ concerns and interests, as their society is deeply entangled in unprecedented social transformation and engages more intensively with different levels of the state in response to China’s all-inclusive political rearrangements and the ensuing consequences, exemplified by the unfolding intricacy of state-and-society interactions and the proliferation of collective actions throughout China.

The Suopowa’s claim to a lineage connection with the matriarchal queens seems to contradict the pronouncement of their Tibetanness and their desire to identify with the Khampa—a Tibetan subgroup celebrated for its masculine culture. If the Suopowa take pride in their Tibetan identity, why do they label themselves as descendants of non-Tibetan queens? If the Suopowa advertise local males as authentic Khampa men, who are known for being well built, fiercely courageous, and socially unconstrained, why do they sell an apparently feminized image of themselves by declaring that women are more capable and politically sophisticated than men in Suopo? Then, if Suopo women are superior to men, why do they seem not to have played a more active role in the queendom struggle and other collective actions?

The Suopowa’s political stance toward the state and the Chinese Communist Party is also full of puzzles: Why do most Suopowa speak highly of central state policy and the Party while Tibetans as a group are further marginalized in China’s social and political structure as a result of the 2008 Tibetan riots? Why do they fiercely attack the local state for all the wrongs it has done to them while proclaiming their faith in the absolute justice and purity of the central state?

The queendom dispute occurs as Danba has become a nationally acclaimed tourist destination in China and as Danba people are increasingly aware of sexualized representations of local women in the tourist market. This period has also seen exacerbated conflicts within and among villages and townships as well as burgeoning antagonism and resistance against the local state—the county and township. These disputes, however, have little to do with the Tibetan desire for independence. The queendom dispute is not merely an accident or a product of broader Tibetan ethnic politics; instead, it stems from the marginalized status of local people in both Tibetan and Chinese societies and also their experience of modernizing economic and social change in a distinctive local setting. Therefore, the Suopowa’s local political pursuit must also be located within a macro-
scopic picture of transformations in Chinese society. Thus, the Suopowa’s queendom struggle is simultaneously unique because it is embedded in particular ethnic, cultural, social, and political contexts and not unique because it is a reflection of the profound repercussions and implications of China’s reforms and social change, as showcased in intensified contention between state and society and the boom in various kinds of intermediate associations all over China.

The Suopowa’s perception of marginality, both real and imagined, informs their negotiations of multiple identities and their modernist pursuit of a better life, culturally, economically, and politically. Their marginalized status among both the Han and Tibetans as well as their assumed political peripherality in Danba County are conducive to their reconfigurations of ethnic, political, regional, and other identities. The Suopowa utilize their marginality either as a means of subverting their peripheral position or for the sake of anticipated political goals. In this way, the attribution of marginality sets the stage for their constant negotiations and orchestration of their multiple identities—on the one hand, they have to conform to the framework prescribed by the state and pursue their political aspirations in accordance with that framework, but on the other hand, they are left with much room for playing with and maneuvering within this framework.

As members of a minority ethnic group, and especially as members of the officially identified Zangzu (Tibetan ethnic group), the Suopowa are subject to China’s ethnic and Zangzu policies. Despite the state’s efforts to incorporate Zangzu as an integral part of China, their cultural and linguistic differences and, particularly, the supposedly rebellious nature of some Zangzu distinguish them from the Han and most other less different and thus “loyal” and “patriotic” minorities. Therefore, the Suopowa’s queendom struggle and political claims are informed by this broad social and political environment that has placed them on the margin. As “colorful” and “exotic” minority members, the Suopowa’s identities and self-representations are shaped and structured by the official/state and Han popular discourses. Their queendom and other political claims as well as their identity quests are embedded in their marginalized position among Zangzu. The Suopowa and the Gyarongwa (people of Gyarong) as a whole—a subgroup to which the Suopowa belong—are situated on the periphery of the Tibetan ethnic group and are often not recognized as “authentic” Tibetans in the eyes of many “mainstream” Tibetans. The Suopowa’s contested Tibetan identity has had a profound impact on
their identity construction and political positioning. Simultaneously, their struggle for the queendom label also derives from their perceived or imagined political peripherality in Danba—that is, they complain that they have been neglected and taken for granted by the county government. The queendom dispute serves only as an outlet for the expression of such a status on the sociopolitical map of Danba County. Therefore, their queendom discourse is a direct response to and reflection of their ethnic and political marginalities and plays out in the framework of these marginalities.

Yet marginality should not be looked at as merely a constraint that circumscribes actors’ choices. Marginality can also be an opportunity to act as agents. Marginality connotes difference, uniqueness, and, therefore, authenticity in certain circumstances. The Suopowa appropriate their ethnic marginality in order to construct an image of their distinctiveness among all Zangzu subgroups and, thus, their irreplaceable role and “authentic” status in the Tibetan family. They also use this marginality to advertise Suopo as an exceptional and particularly appealing destination in the Chinese tourism market. Making use of their political marginality, the Suopowa hope for possible compensation or rewards from the state and also outsiders’ attention to their grievances and political claims. In so doing, they sometimes situate themselves on the margins, as they consider a state of strategic marginality to be instrumental in engendering positive changes and achieving anticipated political goals.

THE SINO-TIBETAN BORDER AS A CONVERGENCE ZONE

The Suopowa’s identity construction is inseparable from their multiple marginalities as well as the constraints and opportunities these may evoke, and this state of being has everything to do with their status as a people on the Sino-Tibetan border. Therefore, it is necessary to reexamine the concept of border to see how the redefined border illustrates the fluidity and elasticity of marginality and helps identify and unravel the convoluted intricacy of the queendom discourse.

The concept of a border or frontier embodies marginality or peripherality—a state of being distant or withdrawn from sociopolitical and cultural centers or mainstreams; thus the border often becomes a site of escape and flight from the state or similarly powerful political entities (Scott 2009).
Many scholars have pointed out that borderlands are also sites of heterogeneity and transcultural dialogue (Tsing 1993), “interstitial zones” (Gupta 1992)—creative grounds for the making and unmaking of often competing sociocultural worlds (Makley 2003, 598)—or sites for “(border) crossing” (Rosaldo 1993) and transgressing boundaries (Ewing 1998) that entail creative cultural productions and intersections of power and difference. Therefore, borders are locations not simply where political or cultural territories end but where they meet, contest, negotiate, converge, and fuse and thus where hybrid and new cultures and identities flourish.

Danba, part of the Gyarong region, is situated on the border of the Han and Tibetan regions both geographically and culturally. Danba and Gyarong exemplify the ambiguity, mobility, vitality, creativity, restlessness, and diversity of the border. Thus, Danba and Gyarong may be seen not as peripheral to both the Han and Tibetans but as a convergence zone where the Han and Tibetan peoples and cultures connect, interact, exchange, compete, blend, and coexist. They are places where locals not only incorporate various elements from these two peoples and cultures but also carve out a new space for their survival, cultural expressions, identity construction, and political positioning. The term “convergence zone” may embrace hybridity (Bhabha 1994) and creolization (Hannerz 1992); however, this notion best describes Gyarong’s in-between status as well as its distinctiveness in relation to the Han and Tibetans.

A hybridized condition requires a space where the center and the periphery (e.g., colonizers and the colonized, or the West and the East) are no longer positioned as antitheses but exist in dialectic ongoing interactions with “intertwined histories and engagement across dichotomies” (Prakash 1994, 1486; see Bhabha 1994). As a consequence, the hybrid breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside (Bhabha 1994, 165). In this way, hybridity opens up a space of ambivalence and ambiguity characterized by the blurring of the once clear-cut center-periphery boundary. Thus it creates a possibility for the once marginalized to move from the periphery toward the center. Nevertheless, the center will simultaneously remap itself as the authority and embodiment of purity and authenticity in contrast to the peripheral “bastards” who are very close to “us/white” but not quite “white,” or who simply present black skins with white masks (ibid., 88, 172; see also Fanon 2008).

The idea of creolization demonstrates a similar form of interaction
between the center and the periphery. Creolized cultures are seen to be saturated with power structure and asymmetric relations because the cultures that interact are not equal to each other and at least one is always situated in a dominant position; however, the cultural processes of creolization involve much more creative center-periphery interactions (Hannerz 1992). A new (creolized) culture emerges out of multidimensional cultural encounters as unique combinations and creations. Therefore, creolized cultures are not simple replicas of dominant cultures; instead, they are combinations of innovative and selective appropriations of dominant cultural forms and indigenous readings and applications of them in a particular local context. The agency of the marginal is underscored in the way that the periphery is believed not only to be able to talk back but also to possess the potential of rising as the center (ibid., 266).

The notions of hybridity and creolization are useful for identifying aspects of a dynamic convergence zone. Gyarong forms a hybridized or creolized society due to the considerable impacts of the Han/state and Tibetans on local cultures, politics, and identities in their intensive encounters. Gyarong’s representations and positioning vis-à-vis the Han/state and Tibetans exemplify the dialectic interplay between the center and the periphery as illustrated by these notions. A noteworthy example is the locals’ use of their ambivalent ethnic and linguistic origins and their marginal status as leverage in negotiating their identities with the centers. Nevertheless, both concepts still tend to underline the predominant role and “purity” of the center and thus the secondary value of the periphery. As a result, the relatively separate cultural forms and distinctive identities of peripheral societies are left unattended.

What distinguishes the idea of a convergence zone from these two notions is the importance it attaches to a peripheral society’s status as an active local center. As a convergence zone, Gyarong is the site where the Han and Tibetan centers coalesce, fuse, and contend and where the local society engages and intersects with the Han and Tibetan centers simultaneously. In this instance, Gyarong is not always in a peripheral position; in fact, in local discourse, Gyarong is viewed as a dynamic center. What comes out of these multiple encounters and convergences is a new, heterogeneous, and dynamic Gyarong culture and identity. This new culture and identity carry imprints from both of the centers, but in this convergence zone, one also sees the flourishing of distinctive local culture and identity. Therefore, Gyarong
society is not simply the equivalent of Tibetan elements plus Han/state components. Gyarong society has its own indigenous traditions and local sociopolitical contexts; thus, Gyarong stands as a relatively independent political and cultural entity. This suggests that the Suopowa’s queendom struggle and identity construction are embedded not only in engagement and contention between state politics and Tibetan identity/ethno-nationalism but also in the local society’s distinctive historical, cultural, and political contexts and its positioning vis-à-vis the Han/state and Tibetans.

The queendom discourse is deconstructed not so much through the marginalizing of the Gyarongwa and the Suopowa as through their persistent efforts to challenge or even reverse the dominant discourse and political structure that often place them at a disadvantage. Their ingenious application of their peripheral status, noteworthy strategic marginality, is rooted in their liminal standing as a people straddling two worlds on the Sino-Tibetan border—a convergence zone where a dynamic center-periphery paradigm is constantly reconfigured and renegotiated. They are peripheral to the Han/state center and the Tibetan center but are simultaneously ushered into both; alternatively, they take the initiative and validate their unequivocal centrality, and in their local representations, Gyarong is also seen as a self-sustained vital center. In this way, three major dimensions of their identity are brought into being: worthy Chinese citizens, “authentic” Tibetans, and distinctive Gyarongwa. Each of these identities and other derivative identities come to prominence in different contexts. Although the Suopowa cannot always choose who or what they are, they have managed to secure space for manipulating these and other identities to their advantage. In constructing and negotiating their identities, they activate and invigorate an intertwined network of sociopolitical restructurings: evolving Chinese ethnic landscape and fluctuating Tibetan policy, the repositioning of the local society vis-à-vis the township, county, and other levels of the state, and an upsurge in collective action or rural unrest as well as the heterogenization of the societal sector and the state. This state of being will not only bring to light the nuanced and involuted sociopolitical landscape of the queendom discourse but also provide a glimpse into transforming Chinese, Tibetan, and Gyarong societies.