In the Land of the Eastern Queendom

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**CONCLUSION**

The Suopowa are ethnically Zangzu, but they, along with other Gyarongwa, are marginalized by many other Zangzu, who claim that the Gyarongwa speak non-Tibetan languages/dialects and/or are culturally close to the Han. The Suopowa are unique among subgroups of Gyarong, as they speak a Khampa dialect, which they claim to be solid evidence of their “authentic” Tibetan origin in comparison to other Gyarongwa of “impure blood.” However, other Khampa people do not usually count the Suopowa’s language as Tibetan because they have difficulty communicating in that dialect. The Suopowa’s belief in the Tibetan indigenous religion—Bon—has also often placed them in a disadvantaged position in respect to Tibetanness as conceived by the dominant Tibetan Buddhists. As a result, the Suopowa have developed a Tibetan identity that is insecure but also flexible and open. In response to their marginalized status in the Zangzu family, they have appropriated the image of the Eastern Queendom to highlight their unique status among Zangzu and in China. The Suopowa’s queendom discourse also derives from their politically marginalized status in Danba. Accusing the county of practicing favoritism and nepotism, the Suopowa represent themselves as neglected townspeople. This self-representation is instrumental in pressing their queendom and other claims, since the assertion of mar-
originality justifies their struggle for the queendom label and other political rights and benefits.

The Suopowa’s queendom struggle encompasses local (i.e., Suopo Township and Danba County) sociopolitical and cultural contexts, the political marginality of the Suopowa, Zangzu identity and the Gyarongwa marginality, China’s ethnic and Zangzu politics, ethnic representations in China, the lure of tourism, China’s political reforms and social transformations, rural politics and grassroots unrest, and changing state-society interactions, as well as the Suopowa’s responses to these situations and their self-representations. Therefore, the Suopowa’s queendom struggle delineates a complex picture in which marginalities, real or imagined, inform and shape their multiple identities. Their modernist pursuit of a better politics and a better life as Danba inhabitants, as the Gyarongwa and Tibetans, as citizens and peasants of China, and also as objects of tourist exoticization and consumption demonstrates that treating them as marginalized or rebellious minority members, or as provincial and inward-looking peasants in an out-of-the-way place, obscures the intricacy and broader implications of the queendom discourse.

THE CONVOLUTED LANDSCAPE OF THE QUEENDOM DISCOURSE

Who and what are the Suopowa? This seemingly simple question has no single, easy answer. The Suopowa’s queendom discourse not only reflects the particular ethnic, cultural, and social contexts of the local society but also involves a much broader macroscopic environment—China’s political transition, modernization agendas, rural reforms and grassroots unrest, ethnic representations, and Zangzu and minority politics. Therefore, the category “Suopowa” has different connotations in these different sociopolitical settings and embodies actors’ dissimilar roles, responses, and identities in various contexts. Accordingly, the queendom discourse unpacks itself in each of these situations.

First, the term “Suopowa” refers to the residents of Suopo Township. The queendom struggle is rooted in this collective’s common interests vis-à-vis those of other townships, especially their closest competitor, Zhonglu. Their shared destiny as bullied and marginalized townspeople in Danba County
serves as an in-group and out-group boundary marker. Thus, people with different social backgrounds, agendas, and statuses are united against Zhonglu “thieves,” other rivals (e.g., Jiaju), and especially the county in defense of their collective rights. The Han-Zangzu distinction is ignored in this context, and Dongfengwa, or the Han Gang, are considered the outer layer of the Suopowa category. Although the Suopowa are officially recognized members of the Tibetan ethnic group, their insecure Tibetan identity has prompted their desire to shun or drop the connection with Gyarong and accentuate their indispensable status among Tibetans through the queen-dom discourse.

As Chinese citizens, the Suopowa also congratulate themselves on the achievements of the Chinese government in combating poverty, improving living conditions for millions, and elevating China to the position of a formidable world power. They also declare their political allegiance to the Party by blaming Tibetan rioters for disturbing social stability and harming the common interests of the Zangzu public. Therefore, they assume that their political rights should be safeguarded by the state, especially the powerful, “pure” central state, and have every confidence in justice and the success of their queendom and other political claims. Regardless of their Chinese citizenship, their minority status as Zangzu registers their difference from the Han and from other “peaceful” or less “colorful” minorities. As an ethnic minority in China, they are subject to China’s ethnic politics and representations. Qualities popularly associated with Tibetans, such as primitiveness, masculinity, wildness, religiousness, simplicity, innocence, and rebelliousness, as well as China’s ethnic policy, specifically toward Zangzu, inform and shape the Suopowa’s self-representations. The queen-dom discourse is more than a political struggle against the “corrupt” local state; it is also a challenge to negative portrayals and a simultaneous justification and substantiation of local Tibetans’ positive images in the Chinese official and popular discourses. They advocate this agenda through their announced allegiance to the Party-state as well as their assumed superior morality and civility. As expressed in the queendom discourse, only Suopo males know how to treat women properly on account of their self-presentation as real gentlemen and “authentic” men who are morally superior to the Han and other men in a male-chauvinist world that has unjustly rendered women subordinate to men.

Furthermore, as mountain peasants, the Suopowa, together with mil-
lions of Chinese peasants in other less developed provinces and regions, are often assumed by the state and urban population to have very low personal quality, as indicated by limited sanitation, low literacy, and “conservative” outlooks (e.g., clinging to “feudal” traditions such as male privilege, folk religious rituals, etc.). Therefore, Suopo must be modernized materially and spiritually by accommodating itself to rapid social transformations through such means as tourism development and implementation of the countrywide New Socialist Countryside Construction project. The queendom discourse is embedded in local responses to this modernist agenda and is inseparable from local anticipation of a profitable tourism industry and a modern way of life, and the Suopowa use various modern means such as the media and the Internet to promote their queendom agenda and tourism. The Suopowa also present an image of “civility,” namely, high moral standards and women’s status in local society, as a subtle challenge to the state’s modern personal-quality discourse. The queendom struggle is an example of the rural unrest and peasants’ collective action that have become common in China as a consequence of intensified reforms and the unprecedented sociopolitical transformation of rural society.

The complexity of the queendom discourse is also revealed through the internal heterogeneity of both Suopo societal sectors and the state as well as through dynamic ongoing state-society interactions. Even though Suopo is only a small administrative unit in Danba County, issues related to who are the real Suopowa and who are authentic descendants of the queens exhibit conspicuous village-based nepotism, various degrees of lineage and cultural purity in relation to the ancestral queens, crystallization of Han-Tibetan dissimilarities, and divergence of political goals. Elites and common villagers show different concerns and interests in the queendom dispute, and the Suopowa show varying degrees of awareness of the implications of negative or sexualized images associated with the queendom and local women. The members of the Moluo Tourism Association also have divergent opinions on the association’s relationship with the township and on development models. These are, to some extent, an extension of everyday intravillage disagreements. Likewise, the state is far from being a homogeneous whole.

Many Suopowa speak highly of the “great” policies and “purity” of the Chinese central government while blaming local state officials for their irresponsibility or corruption even though the majority of county and township officials are Zangzu. This shows that the Suopowa don’t see the state as a
monolithic unit and that they have developed a hierarchical preference for different levels of the state, imagining that the closer a certain level of the bureaucracy is to the central state, the better and less corrupted it is. This also indicates that although the local state is in the hands of Zangzu, the Suopowa are inclined to judge the state based not on its ethnicity but on its performance, even if many locals are skeptical about Han practices and morality in general. In Suopo Township, four out of six officials are listed as Zangzu on their IDs. Most Suopowa don’t have a clear idea about whether these four officials are “real” Zangzu or not. At the county level, more than two-thirds of the leading officials are ethnically Zangzu, too—most Suopo locals neither know nor care about this. My Suopo informants declare that the ethnicity of these officials is not their concern, and what really matters is whether they take their work and the people seriously.

Suopo Township’s ambivalent attitude toward the queendom dispute suggests that the township has its own agenda and interests. The township cadres’ middle-way approach of neither expressing public support nor cutting the debate short is their most pragmatic choice, allowing them to avoid resentment from Suopo villagers and censure from county authorities. In similar fashion, the county government also takes an ambiguous attitude toward the queendom dispute. The Suopowa’s claim has already been approved by an important leader from the prefecture; thus, county leaders chose not to dismiss the claim, but they do not endorse it, either. These cases indicate that although the Chinese state is known for its authoritarian and top-down ruling style, various levels of the local state have room for pursuing their own objectives and concerns or, at the very least, a chance to abdicate responsibility and let a situation play itself out more or less free of external intervention.

The way of engagement between the Moluo Tourism Association and the local state exemplifies the dynamic relationship between these two sectors. The tourism association is both a quasi–state agency, due to the penetration of state power and local state regulations, and a quasi–civil society, thanks to its role in linking local society with the local state and generating free space for political claims. Thus the relationship between the tourism association and local state is neither oppositional nor simply cooperative. It is a much more complex interrelation that needs to be contextualized and deconstructed.

The Suopowa’s manipulation of their marginal status in China and
among Zangzu contributes to the convolution of the queendom landscape. This tactic stems from their assessment of the power structure and overall situation that have placed them on the periphery. They have worked to turn the disadvantage of marginality into an advantage and find a proper niche for themselves in the existing social and political system.

**STRICT STRATEGIC MARGINALITY AND THE CONVERGENCE ZONE**

The Suopowa are situated on the periphery in both the Chinese sociopolitical landscape and the Tibetan ethno-national terrain. Nevertheless, marginality need not constitute merely a constraint or circumscription that confines actors on the damned and dismal periphery; it can be an opportunity to act for benefits. The Suopowa not only take advantage of their marginal status for the vigorous promotion of their political goals but also advertise their assumed marginality with the anticipation of rewards and compensation.²

Marginality can be a rare resource in some situations. Although the Suopowa may be looked down upon by other Tibetans as “impure” or “fake” Tibetans, their linguistic, cultural, and historical distinctiveness can become an important source of attraction or pride. The multiplicity of magnificent stone watchtowers and the flourishing of the queendom heritage have elevated Suopo in the local discourse as an unmatched place in Zangzu regions and in China. The Suopowa take delight in the assumption that their stone watchtowers are probably the oldest and are among the most historically significant structures throughout Zangzu areas. Some of them, especially local elites, promote the intact queendom tradition of valuing women over men as evidence of their unrivaled nobleness and civility among Zangzu and in relation to the Han and others and propose that their religious marginality as Bon followers in a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist world illustrates their incomparable broad-mindedness and tolerance. As a result, the Suopowa have earned enough social capital to support their advertising of Suopo as a truly exceptional and touristically peerless destination in the Chinese tourist market.

The Suopowa also make use of their asserted political marginality in Danba as justification for their queendom struggle and other claims. The
Suopo Bridge and queendom issues are said to demonstrate the county’s unfair treatment of them. A similar claim is made by people from Moluo Village, one of the first two villages in Danba selected in 2008 for the government-funded New Socialist Countryside Construction development project. Moluo is also the only village in Danba County that has been officially granted the prestigious and valuable label “Famous Historical and Cultural Village of China.” Construction of the big new Suopo Bridge, which will allow buses and cars to enter Moluo, was initiated in 2008 and completed in 2011; a new road from the bridge to Moluo Village was finished in 2009 and will be extended to connect another six villages on the eastern bank of the Dadu River over the next few years. The county is also promoting Suopo’s stone watchtowers to the media and tourists in the hope that this ancient architecture will be formally placed on the World Cultural Heritage list. If this does occur, Suopo, especially Moluo Village, is expected to become a more important tourist destination. Nonetheless, the Suopowa, including Moluo villagers, still loudly complain that they are treated “badly” by the county. How can one make sense of this?

To a large extent, this phenomenon originates in the bureaucratic dysfunctions and falsifications prevalent in the Chinese political system. Various government agencies in Danba—as in other Zangzu regions and all parts of China—prepare different statistics and reports on the same issue that are delivered to different departments of the higher state. When required to display their achievements, they will present a version of the statistics that shows progress. When they need to demonstrate their difficulties and harsh working conditions, they will present a different version, highlighting their tough situation and highly motivated working spirit. In doing so, local officials hope to receive financial support or preferential treatment from their superiors. Suopo villagers have learned this trick, too, knowing that if they complain to officials and outsiders, they may be compensated or rewarded later in one way or another. With the increasing investment and financial support available for the development of Zangzu and other regions in the past decade, this strategy has become increasingly common. They also hoped that outsiders like me, as well as other scholars or intellectuals, will help voice local grievances in a way that could pressure the county government so that the Suopowa could keep what they’ve gained and even improve their prospects.

Suopo males’ self-feminization is another prominent case of strategic
marginality, although this has a different focal point and evokes different impressions from that of political marginality. With political marginality, the Suopowa construct and publicize the pitiful image of townspeople who are unjustifiably neglected in Danba, while with self-feminization, local men design a somewhat atypical but desirable picture of women’s queenly superiority in local society. In both cases, the Suopowa strategically choose to ignore or renounce the possibility of identifying with the dominant group or discourses, instead placing themselves on the far margin in exchange for benefits. An inevitable consequence of propagating the queen-don discourse is that Suopo men have to abandon the symbolically dominant virile Khampa image—at least for the time being—and embrace an emasculated self-representation. This seemingly degrading act is not, however, equal to the repudiation or sacrifice of their virility. On the contrary, it is a pronounced declaration of their unmatched manliness as evidenced by their recognition and advancement of women’s status.

Although their marginal status may have brought the Suopowa various advantages, most of the time they claim to be either part of both the Han/state and the Tibetan centers or part of one or the other. The justification for this assertion has everything to do with the obscurity and ambiguity of their historical and cultural traits and hence ethnic identity. Just as they are able to foreground their difference, they have no difficulty underlining sameness and swearing allegiance to these two centers. The Suopowa approvingly identify with the central state and proclaim their legitimacy as Chinese citizens just as do the Han. They choose to centralize themselves as people who are as deserving of equal rights as the Han, but many Suopowa believe that Tibetans, including themselves, are more “civilized” than the Han in general because of their religious beliefs and unique traditions. In contrast, the Han are often portrayed as money-hungry, dishonest, untrustworthy, and of comparatively lower moral standards. The Suopowa thus propagate their Tibetanness and highlight their Tibetan centrality, positioning themselves at the Tibetan core and placing the Dongfengwa at the margin. They authenticate this claim by specifically stressing their ancestral, linguistic, and cultural connections with the Tibetan mainstream while dismissing ambiguities.

Although the Suopowa have recognized the dominant position of both the Han and Tibetan centers and aligned themselves with these two centers, this alliance stems precisely from their political marginality in China as
well as the ethno-national periphery of the pan-Tibetan or Zangzu identity. The Suopowa also endeavor to construct Gyarong and Suopo as another dynamic center. Gyarong was a relatively independent political and cultural entity vis-à-vis Tibetans and the Han before 1950. Despite the fact that Gyarong has been increasingly integrated into the Zangzu family and the Han/state since Liberation, its historical particularity, linguistic-cultural singularity, and sociopolitical specificity still inform a separate identity. Consequently, in local discourse, Gyarong constitutes a vital center in and for itself and thus interacts with both the Tibetan and Han centers as a relatively self-sufficient and autonomous political and cultural entity. The message conveyed in the queendom cause that the Suopowa are morally “superior” to other Tibetans, the Han, and even Westerners thanks to the claimed dominant position of women in the local society is not surprising. This is another example of the Suopowa’s attempt to demonstrate their centrality, but rather than being a validation of closeness to Tibetan or Han centers, it is an unreserved demonstration of the Suopowa’s supremacy and thus their attempt to set an example for both the Han and Tibetans.

The center and periphery are not absolute but are elastic, situational, negotiable, and even reversible in certain circumstances. Therefore, always placing the Suopowa on the periphery of the dominant Han and Tibetan realms is not justifiable. The Suopowa may in fact sometimes reverse this structure by placing the Han and other Tibetans on the margin instead. The notions of both hybridity (Bhabha 1994) and creolization (Hannerz 1992) spotlight this dialectic center-periphery paradigm, but their focus on the inherently “impure” and “bastard” quality of peripheral populations and cultures prevents them from fully depicting and grasping the distinctive identities of marginal societies and their capacity for counteracting the powerful centers. Therefore, the idea of a convergence zone is more useful for conceptualizing the Suopowa’s dynamic interplay with the two centers and their effort to strategize their marginal status and centralize themselves as an independent party interacting with both centers.

In this convergence zone, the Suopowa can move relatively freely between the Han and the Tibetan centers or choose to safeguard their own social and cultural territory. Nevertheless, there is no absolute freedom in their choices and actions. Their decision is based on the evaluation of the status quo and available conditions. There is no way for them to display their centrality all the time. The ubiquitous presence of the Han/state and Tibetan influence

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makes it sensible for them to identify with these two centers, but this choice is not made by rationally assessing all possible consequences. Oftentimes the choice is influenced by historical and cultural bonds, and especially the state’s ruling system and ethnic and Zangzu policies. Their alignment with the state and the Tibetan ethnic group doesn’t necessarily originate from calculation of potential benefits and rewards; instead, it is inseparable from the ineradicable impacts of historical, political, and cultural convergences between the centers and local society and the subsequent attachment of the latter to the former. This situation illustrates the complications of a convergence zone.

In intensive encounters, interactions, competitions, or conflicts with powerful centers, a local society that acts as a convergence zone has absorbed various elements from dominant societies and cultures. Nevertheless, natives are not necessarily integrated into the centers, and in some circumstances, they even choose to escape from the state and other powerful sociopolitical entities, as is illustrated in James Scott’s portrayal of the Zomian case (2009). In Zomia—an interstate zone linking a number of mostly Southeast Asian countries—people choose to become fugitives from the state and “modernity.” Although the Suopowa have taken a different approach in their interactions with the state and “mainstream” Tibetans, from time to time, they may invoke their separate identity and even moral centrality in order to distinguish themselves from the Han and Tibetans. The idea of a convergence zone similarly illuminates the impacts and constraints of powerful centers as well as local agency in building local centrality.

Suopo, Danba, and Gyarong are not situated at the end of Tibetan or Han cultural and political territories but in the convergence zone where these two sociopolitical and cultural worlds encounter each other, contest, and converge, where local identities as the Suopowa, the Danbawa, and the Gyarongwa negotiate with their Tibetan identity, their relationship to the Han, and their status as Chinese citizens. It is a space where border ambiguity or marginality can be appropriated as a rare resource and opportunity. This convergence zone is characterized by dynamic interactions between sameness and difference as well as bursts of creativity and innovation that have emerged out of constant reconfigurations. Various degrees of sameness and difference in the Suopowa in relation to the Han and Tibetans have placed them in a unique context: they can claim both Tibetan identity and,
like the Han, the identity of Chinese citizens, and they can also assert their distinctiveness, exclusivity, and superiority vis-à-vis both the Han and Tibetans. Thus, in Suopo, Danba, and Gyarong, we see not only how the Han and Tibetan worlds converge or hybridize but how an indigenous society on the borders encounters and negotiates with these two powerful socio-political and cultural centers as well as how a new people, identity, and center have been born out of these multiple convergences. Vicissitudes of individual and group variation also are evident within this contested and transformative space. The Suopowa’s attempt to claim the queendom label exemplifies this complicated process. Through the lens of the queendom struggle, one can see personal, social, political, and cultural transformation and reconfigurations of Zangzu society as well as the multiple contradictions and ambivalences of Chinese society at the levels of both governmental and personal identity. Simultaneously, it is obvious that the Suopowa’s responses to such changes are deeply rooted in their own local cultural and political contexts. The queendom discourse thus engenders and represents an unusually rich and nuanced sociopolitical landscape.