Frontier Tibet

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Part I

Borders inside out
Introduction

The Editor

It is quite common to conceive of China and Tibet as two distinct culturally bounded entities in spite of the fact that the ‘Tibet’ we generally have in mind is territorially part of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.). Only an internal administrative border separates the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) from adjacent provinces, like Sichuan to the east, where today we find a significant number of Tibetans who make up the majority of inhabitants of other administrative units, such as the Ganzi (Kandzé) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. These current administrative divisions represent the modern ordering and territorialization of the so-called Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and the region called Kham.

On the one hand, the administrative border separating T.A.R. from Sichuan province does not correspond to a particularly conspicuous social boundary, yet the border introduces a separation that creates new differentiations. On the other hand, older regional distinctions such as the one between Central Tibet (Ü) and Kham or Amdo on the eastern edge of the plateau are nowadays fragmented by administrative borders that cut through them according to a different logic from a local sense of belonging and attachment. In other words, throughout China's Tibetan regions, current administrative divisions have implications regarding variations in policies and their implementations and, when combined with places' geographical and historical specificities, they have led to a high degree of diversity in local Tibetan societies and economies (see Hillman 2010).

The three chapters that follow take stock of the implications of this layered complexity of boundary-making in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and offer complementary perspectives on how to conceptualize borderland space in relation to neighbouring historical power centres but also in its own terms via a necessary re-centring. This first section offers an opening onto the volume's exploration of the intertwined questions of place-making, identity, and socio-political transformations that have made up Kham's convoluted historical trajectory and that have contributed to the emergence of its internal diversity. The three chapters therefore problematize the boundaries of Kham, its ‘plural unity’ across time and its characteristics as a cultural nexus.

The introductory chapter by Stéphane Gros provides both a historical and anthropological discussion and a conceptual framework to suggest
ways of understanding the production of place in a dynamic fashion. Such a perspective, he argues, forces us to look at Kham, within the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, as exemplifying a frontier situation at different historical junctures. There are specific processes that relate to imaginaries about civilization and progress, the emergence of institutional order, and the use of resources, which are characteristic of the frontier as a particular political project and an epistemological distinction (see Tsing 2005). This introductory chapter firmly identifies the relevance of Kham in the field of borderland studies and reflects on the topographies of power that have contributed to shaping the future of this intermediary zone between China and Tibet. As ‘borderland’ or ‘frontier’ are existing categories for both China and Tibet as expansive political and civilizational centres, Kham must be thought of as a third space, and not exclusively as ‘Tibetan’ in a simplistic binary opposition to ‘Chinese’.

In her chapter, Katia Buffetrille explores the relevance of the notion of ‘borderlands’ in the context of Tibetan history by reviewing the vernacular terminology. She posits the ‘Sino-Tibetan’ borderlands as being ‘between power centers’ (Zartman 2010, 2) that exert their influence in a civilizational, politico-economic, or more generally cultural sense, but her chapter particularly emphasizes the dynamic relationship between Kham (and Amdo) and Lhasa. As Buffetrille shows, the current administrative structure has channelled differentiated socio-economic developments, which have fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between Kham and the traditional centre, Lhasa and Central Tibet. These changes have nurtured a cultural dynamism that has now given Kham a new centrality. As she demonstrates, the massive changes that have taken place over the last decades not only reveal the vitality of the borderlands but also challenge our conventional perception of the centre and upset established hierarchies. In the contemporary period, the in-betweeness of Kham further blurs the boundaries of distinction and the sense of belonging, lending it increased prominence.

Some places in particular have gained more visibility, and newer understandings of identity prompt us to question older and emerging conceptualizations of place. This is certainly the case with Gyelthang in southern Kham, as discussed by Eric D. Mortensen, a place that has retained its own centrality in the eyes of its inhabitants but has also undergone earth-shattering transformations because it has been re-branded ‘Shangri-La’ for the sake of tourism development. Mortensen offers a multifaceted account of the sense of place inhabitants have forged in their interactions with other Tibetans but also with the numerous groups that surround them such as
the Yi, the Naxi, the Lisu, or the Bai further south. In doing so, Mortensen navigates along and across the various boundaries of Gyelthang, alerting us to their malleable character while at the same time foregrounding the variability of the conceptualization of place and sense of belonging. In his case, it is not so much the centrality of place that matters – although it seriously unsettles our understanding of such a place as a ‘borderland’ – but more crucially the issue of categorization and ordering, and of attempting to map the unmappable.

These inquiries force us to rethink our conventional categories and methodologies, and remind us that territory is not a given. The question of regional formation and identity raises the problem of defining boundaries, or borders, which makes the theorist run the risk ‘of going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition’, as political theorist Etienne Balibar (2002, 76) puts it. There are dynamics that cannot be contained by scaled spatial entities in any straightforward way. As Gros emphasizes in his introductory chapter, the dynamic process of interaction that animates Kham as a zone of contact is a ‘field of relations’ that is both at the edge and in the middle of territories. This, he argues, is the result of the constitutive role of the frontier, which creates evolving patterns of connection and division.

References


