

Stéphane Gros, ed., *Frontier Tibet: Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 554 pages. Hardcover, €109.00. ISBN 9789463728713.

This massive volume, published by Amsterdam University Press in its “Asian Borderlands” series, is the latest of three volumes, edited by Stéphane Gros, a researcher at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France. The first dealt with the borderlands in southwest China, *Worlds in the Making: Interethnicity and the Processes of Generating Difference in Southwest China* (2014), the following two with the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, *Frontier Tibet: Trade and Boundaries of Authority* (2016) and the present volume. While the aim of the first volume (2014) was “to go beyond the pervasive dichotomy that often leads to a depiction of encounters in terms of acculturation, absorption by the other, or resistance to the other” (as defined in the present volume, 2019, 9), the second volume (2016), taking this lead, focused on trade and commerce in eastern Tibet (Kham), particularly in the first four decades of the twentieth century, when “eastern Tibet became an exemplary case of frontier expansion and state building” (defined in the present volume, 9–10). The present volume, consisting of fourteen substantial chapters, has a double aim. Most of the contributions focus on a specific place or region in Kham (eastern Tibet), usually at a particular time or period of modern or contemporary history. Some of these chapters offer “thick” descriptions of local history and contemporary societies in Kham (Mortensen, Turek). Others provide new insight into the politics of domination and colonization in the twentieth century (Relyea, Frank, Giersch). At the same time, the book aims at “using local Kham history to push the boundaries of global borderlands studies” (10), and considerable effort is therefore made to relate the Kham borderlands to a wider discourse.

The foreword and opening chapter, both by Gros, provide the theoretical groundwork of the volume, not by insisting on one particular theory but by referring to a range of different scholars and their contributions to theory. In this context, among other questions, three topics of central importance are discussed: First, the concept of “borderlands,” with Gros pointing out that, “Scholars have been increasingly challenging centrist views and their peripheralizing gaze to uncover the borderlands” own centrality (10). This involves emphasizing “a history from below” and alternative histories not found in official records (12); second, the emergence of a fresh view of history, particularly inspired by the so-called “new Qing history,” which “challenges the received wisdom of the Sino-centric model of Confucian cultural unity” (10). The volume, like much recent scholarship, also challenges “a unitary history of the Tibetan people”—contrary to what has long been the dominant narrative, especially in the Tibetan diaspora, which posits a Tibetan nation, occupying a defined territory divided into three “provinces,” of which Kham is one; third, the necessity of a dialogue between history and anthropology, “with greater attention to the intricacies of the local and effective use of the notion of ethnicity” (10).

Summing up Gros’s discussion, Kham should be thought of “as not exclusively ‘Tibetan’ in a simplistic binary opposition to ‘Chinese’” (38), but rather “as a place in its own right” (44). At the same time, “the challenge is to write a regional history that speaks to the complexity of the lived experiences of place, territory, sovereignty, and agency” (12).

One of the many themes in this complex book is “the different ways some places have kept their own centrality in the eyes of their inhabitants” (12). A chapter that broadly explores this theme is Katia Buffétrille’s contribution, “The Increasing Visibility of the Tibetan Borderlands,” which also deals with Amdo. It deserves mention as it points out the fundamental problem of continuing to refer to Kham and Amdo as “borderlands,” when in fact these vast regions are at the present moment in no way peripheral to Lhasa and Central Tibet; in fact, “the centre is in decline and the periphery has somehow dethroned the center” (87) in literature, art, active promotion of the use of the Tibetan language, and, significantly, in terms of religious revival.

The view of Tibetans themselves, necessarily expressed in other terms than those of present-day academics, is not absent from the volume but hardly comes to the fore. An exception is the chapter contributed by Lucia Galli, “Money, Politics and Local Identity: An Inside Look at the ‘Diary’ of a Twentieth-Century Khampa Trader.” Surprisingly, the book does not explore the vibrant contemporary Tibetan song tradition in Kham. The volume’s scope is to a large extent limited to history and social science, including economics, sociology, and political science.

While Central Tibet may no longer be a “center,” a Sino-centrist view persists, also among scholars, and in relation to China, Kham remains, in the dominant discourse, including in this volume, a “borderland,” however much this term is nuanced, for example by suggesting (it is not entirely clear whether Gros endorses this or not) that “Kham is both in Tibet and in China” (70).

In contrast to the orientation of the chapters by Gros and other contributors to the volume, the afterword by Carole McGrahanan adopts a different view, implied in the title: “Chinese Settler Colonialism: Empire and Life in the Tibetan Borderlands.” She regards Kham as one of Tibet’s “three historical regions” (517) and maintains that the inclusion of Tibet, a sovereign state, into the PRC in the early 1950s was “an imperial move of aggression,” with the result that, “As people around the world demanded and got independence, Tibet ironically lost its independence and became a colony of the PRC” (519). She wishes to speak of Kham “as a part of a modern Empire,” frequently not recognized as such as it is neither Western nor (officially) capitalist. While aware of diversity and local power relations in Kham (and elsewhere in the Tibetan world), she also highlights the elements uniting Tibetans throughout the Tibetan world, especially emphasizing that “Buddhist religious ties bound peoples through practices of patronage, pilgrimage, and devotion” (519). In the context of the unprecedented social, political, and economic changes happening in Kham at the present time, McGrahanan focuses on the multiple ways that Tibetans resist official policies and what is perceived as oppression by the state. She concludes, “Academic questions of empire and borderlands are lived by actual peoples. They are not abstractions” (531). Her goal, as stated at the outset of her contribution, is to “achieve a historical precision commensurate with peoples’ experiences of empire under socialism” (517).

Lest the impression should remain that there is an unbridgeable gap between the introduction and the afterword of this volume, it would be well to point out that at least one chapter deals with conflict and resistance in quite specific terms, namely Yasmin Cho’s chapter, “Yachen as Process: Encampments, Nuns, and Spatial Politics in Post-Mao Kham,” which explores how nuns in a monastic “encampment” in Kham are able to flourish through a strategy of continual transformation of their material conditions and activities. Another chapter worth noting is C. Patterson Giersch’s, “The Origins

of Disempowered Development in the Tibetan Borderlands,” in which the author, adopting a longer-range historical framework than the establishment of the PRC in 1949, maintains that “economic inequality, especially along ethnic lines, did not begin in the Communist period”; this was “deeply ingrained in Chinese institutions, both public and private, from the beginnings of modern economic and political development” (257).

Stéphane Gros must be congratulated on editing this volume. *Frontier Tibet* is a unique survey of borderland-oriented research in the context of Sino-Tibetan (or, if one wishes, “Sino-Kham”) studies, a rapidly evolving field of scholarship, and the book is an indispensable basis for further research.

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