Frontier (of) Experience

Stéphane Gros

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Introduction and Prolegomenon

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Abstract

This introductory chapter lays out the historical background and the conceptual framework that underlie the volume's collective effort to problematize the Kham region of eastern Tibet, and, more broadly, the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. It discusses conventional depictions of political, economic, and ideological topographies of these borderlands, and brings to the fore frontier dynamics that lead to a topological reconfiguration in which Kham appears neither simply distant *nor* proximate and neither outside *nor* inside, and where the distance between core/periphery and Sino/Tibetan, become distorted.

Keywords: border, boundary, frontier, Kham, space, topology

Introduction

Places are singular concretions made up of plural experiences. They accumulate sediments of time, layers of meaning linked to the evolution of landscape and the multiple histories of human activities that have contributed to shaping them. They are also contested spaces subjected to internal and external forces that often work against each other and contribute to variegated place-making processes.

This book focuses on one such place that defies a straightforward characterization: the eastern region of the Tibetan plateau that Tibetans call Kham. This name is one of several conventional divisions of the Tibetosphere, and seems to imply a form of regional unity. However, this eastern fringe of the plateau, a rugged mountainous region that has long been a frontier for both China-based regimes and Lhasa-based regimes, is not easily described as

a whole and the question of what makes the region cohere is left hanging. In this book we use Kham as a heuristic category to explore the various implications of the designation of this region as a Sino-Tibetan borderland.

More than half of the six million Tibetans currently residing in the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) live in the eastern borderlands of the Tibetan plateau that span across several of the current administrative divisions: the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces. Within this larger area, Kham is of undeniable demographic importance and we can estimate that nearly thirty per cent of all Tibetans in the P.R.C. live in what is known as Kham (see Ryavec 2015, 178-180) (see Map 1.1).

Kham is an area about three times the size of France. Until the 1950s it consisted of a plethora of agricultural and pastoralist societies of different scales, with their own sense of locality, each differentiated by variations in traditions and modes of authority. Politically speaking, Kham has been a very fragmented region where numerous principalities, chiefdoms, or tribal areas have coexisted, ruled by semi-independent chiefs, local kings or lamas, who rubbed shoulders with one another and occasionally with Tibetan or Chinese armies, heralding the presence of distant centres of power. Kham exhibits great internal diversity – whether in terms of language, culture, ethnicities, or historical trajectories – and it is difficult to disentangle the region from external influences, from both Central Tibet and China proper, which are themselves far from self-evident historical entities. Our goal is not to delimit an 'identity' or to inscribe Kham in some kind of regional 'naturalness' that would take for granted the existence of bounded geographical-cum-cultural territories. On the contrary, by combining approaches that shed light on variegated processes of transformation, we emphasize change and becoming, and dynamic processes of place-making.

There are several reasons for focusing on the region within the Sino-Tibetan borderlands that Tibetans call Kham. First and foremost, as a vernacular name for a place to which its current inhabitants, the Khampas, have a strong sense of belonging, it constitutes a meaningful category and a logical entry point into its diverse on-the-ground realities. A second reason is that by using Kham as a starting point for our enquiries we may be in a better position to recognize Kham's own centrality and specificity – one that is not strictly limited to or defined by political polarities. A third reason for considering Kham as a significant spatial unit is precisely its pivotal role in the history of Tibetan and Chinese expansions and resistance to them, and how these encounters and experiences have contributed to the becoming of places and peoples, whether Tibetan or not. Finally, it also

Map 1.1   Situating Kham
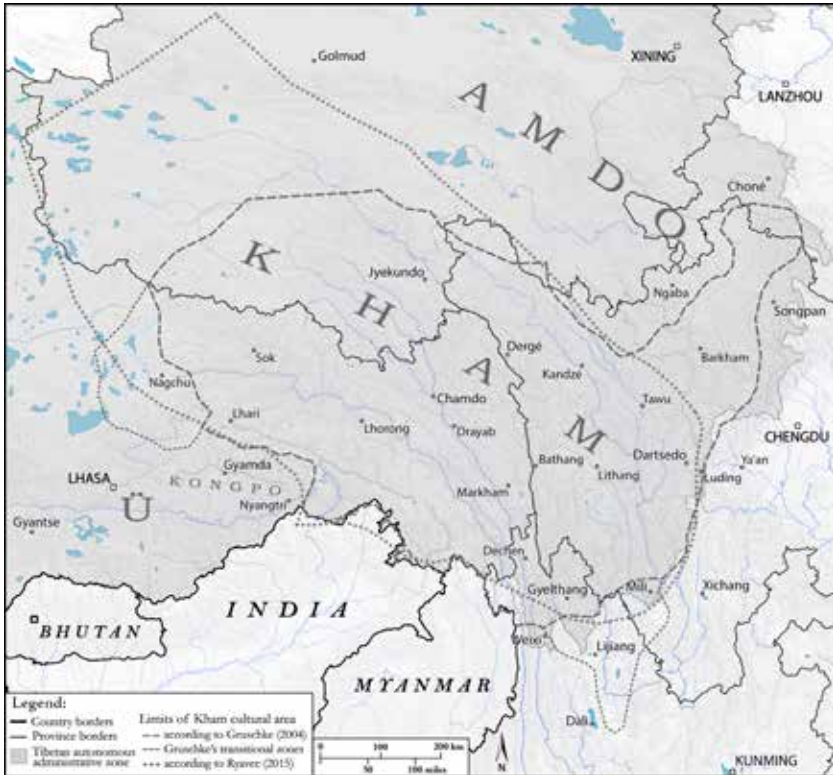
Sources: Based on SRTM (NASA) and modern administrative borders extracted from GADM
database (www.gadm.org, v.2.5 July 2015)
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seems methodologically sound to delve into the particularities of a place
before we launch into any comparison on a regional or global scale.[1]

In this volume, we scrutinize Kham through a sense of spatial anchor-
ing and through the nexus of relations that contributes to its vibrant life.
The various representations and perceptions of these lands are all equally
valuable for our scholarly endeavour, for it is at the intersection of these that
even a partial understanding of Kham can be reached. The contributions to

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1   The emergence of a field of 'Kham studies' is to be linked to the gradual 'regionalization'
of research on the Tibetan cultural area since the 1980s. The construction of these new poles
of regional studies ('Ladakh Studies', followed by 'Bhutan Studies', and 'Amdo Studies') should
not distract us from a multipolar and integrated approach to the Tibetan world. About the
development of Amdo studies, see the recent volume edited by Ptáčková and Zenz (2017), and
in particular the Introduction by Emilia Róża Sułek and Jarmila Ptáčková (2017).

this endeavour bridge historical investigations with contemporary ethnographies of Kham, focusing on a period of major transformations on various scales that started in the mid-nineteenth century. Given the involvement of external powers and the degree of these transformations, the notion of *frontier dynamics* seems particularly fitting and equally applicable to past and present patterns of change without ruling out Kham as a place in its own right. As anthropologists Lars Rodseth and Bradley Parker (2005, 9) pointed out, 'frontiers are the quintessential matrices of change'. We understand change as multidirectional and inherently dependent on forms of agency that generate hybridity as well as acculturation, social mobility as well as marginalization. The events and individual stories that several of the chapters recount are lived experiences of people who made history at their own level. They reveal the dynamics of exchange and interaction that influenced their trajectories in the complex entanglements of life at the frontier. As we try to capture these stories and these actors' perceptions of the events as they unfold, we unavoidably encounter the frontiers of our own experience, the limits and complexities of knowledge production. There is no typical frontier pattern and no reason to consider the American West as the model against which to assess other frontier experiences – or to discard the term altogether (see Klein 1996, Imamura 2015). The 'frontier' is very much part of the political imagination of China for example and, as Tim Oakes (2007, 243; also 2012) puts it bluntly, '[t]he western frontier has been a defining aspect of Chinese identity for several thousand years, making the U.S. version a mere blip in history by comparison'. Here, the common narrative of the frontier as a place facing expansive forces meets the metaphorical use of the term that discursively projects political imaginary onto the space characterized as a frontier.

This introductory chapter provides a framework for this approach to Kham by examining the literature and the conventional political, economic, and ideological topographies of the 'Sino-Tibetan borderlands'. I particularly bring to the fore frontier dynamics that lead to a topological reconfiguration in which the distance between binaries such as core/periphery and Sino/Tibetan become distorted. Kham as a frontier is neither simply distant *nor* proximate and neither outside *nor* inside. From a Chinese perspective, the 'Tibetan' Other remains a vital but not absolute 'outside': it is intricately entangled, across differences, with a Chinese 'self'. From a Tibetan perspective, Kham is part of 'Greater Tibet' through a sense of a naturalized link between identity and territory, even though the exiled community itself constitutes a deterritorialized appendix. How has Kham managed to survive in spite of its spatial, administrative, economic, and political

reconfigurations that led to the very transformation of its conditions of existence and forms of renewed vitality?

Topographic Meanderings

We often use 'Tibet' in various ways as a macro-regional category to refer to three overlapping layers: the geological expanse of the Tibetan Plateau, the 'Land of snow' (*gang jong*); the ethno-cultural entity that is conventionally called 'ethnographic Tibet'; and finally the political entity. All three layers encompass different places and societies, and there is generally no single term to describe them collectively. Before the idea of a 'Greater Tibet' made up of 'three regions' (*chölkha sum*), Ü-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham, gained prominence over recent years, Tibet was spatially divided into the 'upper region' of Ngari to the west, the 'middle region' of Ü-Tsang centred around Lhasa, and the 'lower region' of Dokham to the east (see Mills 2014, Ryavec 2015, Weiner 2016, Yang 2016). The issue, to which I will return, is that this ethno-cultural complexity questions where exactly an ethnographic Tibet starts and ends (see Weiner 2016), and the eastern edges of the plateau exemplify the problem of the crisscrossing of various ecological, cultural, and political zones. As a matter of fact, 'Tibet', like 'China', are changing historical entities with evolving contours, deeply influenced and shaped by successive political regimes.

The overarching toponym for the so-called Sino-Tibetan borderlands is Dokham, meaning the 'confluence (do) on the frontier (kham)', and can be further subdivided into Amdo and Kham.[2] In other words, as Katia Buffetrille explores in her chapter, Kham can be understood as the frontier/border that lies on the eastern edge of Central Tibet (Ü). The central part of the plateau, with its capital Lhasa, is generically called Bö (*Bod*), which often stands for our 'Tibet'. It is roughly speaking this area that corresponds historically to what in Chinese is referred to as Xizang (see among others Gruschke 2004a and b, Jagou 2010, Ren and Rdo rje 1991).

The strongly felt divide between Bö, Kham, and Amdo as spaces of respective regional attachment and belonging is key to understanding Tibetan diversity. Within each of these categories, it is common for the inhabitants

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2   According to the White Annals (*Deb ther dkar po*) by the Tibetan scholar Gedun Chopel, 'Kham-Amdo' meant 'frontier' or 'border' in Tibetan, while the term 'Amdo', as a separate geographical designation, is a fairly recent invention. It is generally assumed that Kham and Amdo are equivalent to Dotö and Domé respectively.

to identify themselves in reference to local toponyms or to the valley (*yül*) as a form of localized identity. This results in a fragmented landscape of 'homelands' (*phayül*, 'fatherland'), as Eric Mortensen discusses in his chapter about Gyelthang. In fact, Emily Yeh (2007) rightly points out that the sense of nativeness, to be 'born of this soil and rocks' (*sakyé dokyé*), is typically used to indicate one's belonging to a particular village or neighbourhood, not on a level of a broader collective identity.

Reference to the landscape when describing Kham as a whole is, however, evident in the designations 'the four rivers and six ranges' (*chushi gang-druk*) and 'the four great valleys' (*rong chenshi*). These are the deep valleys formed by the Yalung, the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Salween, running almost parallel to each other, which over the course of history have been important migratory corridors and have constituted pathways allowing for significant trade and cultural links. Exchanges and communication were sustained eastwards and westwards, and gave birth to major routes that connect China and Tibet. However, they have remained constrained by the high elevation ranges that separate them and the disjointed landscape of a tortuous crisscross of mountains.[3]

In Chinese, the mountainous barrier that made up the marches leading to the plateau has generally been referred to as a border or frontier (*bian*), and the name Kang, derived from the name in Tibetan (Kham), appeared relatively recently.[4] Viewed from the east, the high-altitude passes of this mountain range are both limits and connecting points. Here, like elsewhere on the Empire's periphery, 'inner lands' (*neidi*) were clearly demarcated from lands that lay 'beyond the pass' (*guanwai*). In Kham, the town of Dartsedo (Dajianlu, today's Kangding) became the gateway to Tibet from China proper. It constituted a 'frontier portal' (Millward 1998, 153) and, for many people, it represented the border itself; it was the main node on the communication channels that linked both sides. Situated within larger networks of roads that developed in the course of the centuries, starting mainly in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it developed as a principal site for trade and commercial activity. Even today, 'the Chinese still refer to travel

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3   I use conventional English names for these rivers which in Tibetan and Chinese are respectively called, from east to west: Nyak chu / Yalongjiang; Dri chu / Jinshajiang; Dza chu / Lancangjiang; and Ngül chu / Nujiang. These great rivers, to which the Dadu River next to the Minyak region further east should be added, drain the area which is made up of six highland ranges. The mountain ranges themselves are key elements in the delimitation of the Kham region.

4   Before the Chinese term Kang came into usage, one of the first mentions of Kham is to be found, for example, in the form of 'Kanma' in the *Yuzhi pingding Xizang bei* (1724). I thank Yudru Tsomu for bringing this to my attention.

beyond Dartsedo as "going beyond the pass" (*dao guanwai qu*), implying that the other side of the mountain is a totally different world' (Tsomu 2015, 3). This evokes the stereotypical vision of the 'frontier' as a contact zone between formerly separate populations deeply confined within their cultural attributes and various ecological determinisms.

These depictions still fail to render the texture of the lived space with all the layers and facets of the experience of place the inhabitants of these lands have accumulated. For various boundaries—ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural—crisscross the region and are often obliterated by the overriding binary of the Sino-Tibetan encounter. Regional boundaries are porous and therefore political and social processes move across these boundaries. A much needed ethno-history of toponyms would be revealing of the several topo-*graphies*: ways that people have been 'writing the earth' in their mutually constitutive relationships with the environment. These are stories of landscapes in their relation to human occupation, of pocketed communities and their sense of place, of a constellation of sacred 'powerful places', but also stories of various political reconfigurations, or expansions and their renaming practices.[5]

Frontiers, Boundaries, Border(land)s

Despite the permanence of the sense of identity Kham continues to portray, it is not a stable entity. It is made up of a constellation of places where encounters between various actors have produced a complex interweaving of various belongings and a nested sense of place. Given the diversity of local realities rendered even more complex by the contemporary context and by integration into the Chinese State, resulting in Kham being parcelled out between the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) and several autonomous administrative units within Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces, it is unproductive to search for the unity of this region in a 'cultural core' subtracted from the centripetal and centrifugal forces that have been at work here. It is the combination of both its 'relative location' (van Spengen and Jabb 2009, 7) vis-à-vis China proper and Central Tibet and its own

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5   Little in-depth research on toponymy has been undertaken yet it is certainly a long-awaited contribution. See, however, the work carried out through the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library (THDL). For the name of 'Tibet', see Jagou (2010), and for toponymy in the Gesar epic, see Chayet (2003). Several bilingual (Tibetan and Chinese) volumes providing lists of place names (*diming lu*) have been published in China since the mid-1980s, but they are often problematic and seldom reliable.

multifaceted internal composition that contribute to making Kham a locale where specific identity, territorial, economic, and social processes take place. Can the terms 'frontier', 'boundary', or 'borderland' capture some of these processes?

Let us briefly synthesize the spatio-temporal variation of Kham as an in-between place surrounded by two power centres and highlight its changing political geography (see Maps 1.2 and 1.3). As mentioned in the historical account provided with the chronology of events, Chinese imperial expansion led to the first materialization of the border between China and Tibet in the form of a stele (1727), a single anchorage point in the mountainous landscape of Kham that was meant to symbolize a linear frontier of territorial engulfment. It was a visual marker on one of the two major trade routes, which was also the so-called 'official's road' (Ch. *guan dao*, Tib. *gyalam*, 'wide road') connecting Sichuan to Central Tibet. It was to take two centuries for this stele to turn into a more clearly demarcated extended frontier zone on the map for the purpose of specifying, according to Western standards of sovereignty, the territorial distinction between China and Tibet. This led to drawing several borderlines, each according to competing claims put forth by Tibetan and Chinese authorities and mediated by the British at the Simla Convention (1913-1914) (see Map 1.2; see also Relyea, this volume). China's claim over this transitional zone that Kham had long constituted resulted in the border zone ('Sichuan border', *Chuanbian*) being reconfigured as an administrative unit with shifting borders (redrawn in 1926 and 1939), which became the short-lived province of Xikang (1939-1955) (see Map 1.3). Here we have a good example of how China's territorial expansion relied on 'imperial machineries' that aimed at transforming these frontiers, 'plastic intermediate zones' (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, 3, 17) into 'legible state spaces' (Scott 2009). Finally, after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), Xikang province disappeared from the map, and Kham was divided between several provinces, mostly outside the Tibet Autonomous Region. The administrative boundary between T.A.R. and the province of Sichuan has since played a critical role in the becoming of places and the people it separates (see Buffetrille, E. Mortensen, and Cho, this volume).

The changes outlined above remind us of the organic metaphor that historian Michel Baud and Willem van Schendel (1997, 223-225) put forth as a developmental model of the borderlands corresponding to a five-stage life-cycle, from infancy to adolescence and adulthood, then decline and disappearance. However, this depiction tells us far less about the borderlands themselves than about the Chinese perspective and the explicit claim since the early twentieth century that this borderline was in fact an *internal* one;

Map 1.2   'Inner Tibet' and the limits of Central Tibet Government according to McMahon's line (Simla Convention)

Sources: Based on Richardson (1945); SRTM (NASA) and modern administrative borders extracted from GADM database (www.gadm.org, v.2.5 July 2015)
Author: Rémi Chaix

a claim highly contested by the Tibetan government, but 'officialized' by the Simla Convention's use of the artificial labels of 'Outer Tibet' and 'Inner Tibet'. From both perspectives, on the other side of the disputed borderline that cut through Kham there was not an outside but an integral part of their respective 'geo-body' (Winichakul 1994). Yet, these two perspectives ultimately erased other indigenous knowledge of political space. The two frontiers clashed with each other and the borderland itself remained 'embryonic' (Baud and Van Schendel 1997). In fact, Kham became one of these 'inner frontiers' of China, discussed by Owen Lattimore (1951, 234), a quality it has retained to this day. The administrative border that separates the Tibet Autonomous Region from its adjacent Tibetan administrative units in Qinghai, Sichuan, or Yunnan has created a strong dichotomy in terms of both policies and cultural dynamism. In light of these spatio-temporal changes, we are now better equipped to clarify how the terms 'borderland',

Map 1.3   The borders of Xikang province as defined in 1933 and 1939
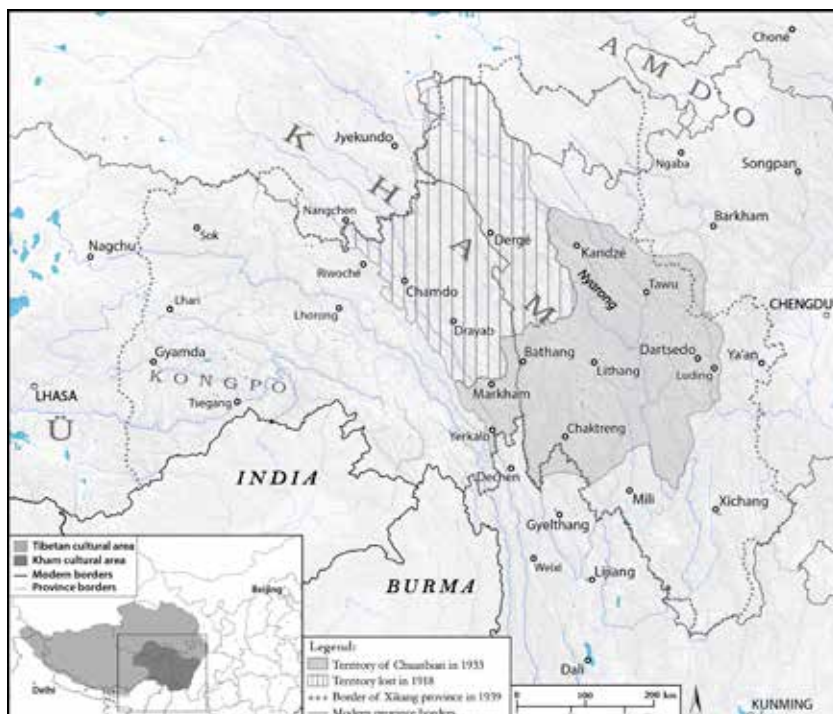
Sources: Based on Ren Naiqiang (1933), SRTM (NASA) and modern administrative borders
extracted from GADM database (www.gadm.org, v.2.5 July 2015)
Author: Rémi Chaix

'boundary', and 'frontier' equally apply to the case of Kham as they each refer to different specificities. Let us clarify our lexicon in this context.[6]

While the word 'borderland' has been widely applied to various regions and contexts similar to frontier zones, it is, however, defined by the presence of an actual border. If *border* designates an international boundary line, we have seen how the drawing of such a line between 'Tibet' and 'China'

6   The approaches are just as diverse as the definitions of these terms, and here I can only clarify my use of them for the purpose of the present discussion. Twenty years ago, two books discussed the by then already extensive literature and diversity of approaches to borders, frontiers, and boundaries, i.e. Donnan and Wilson (1999); Rösler and Wendl (1999); and the same year Adelman and Aron's (1999) seminal article was published. See also Hall (2005) and Parker (2006) in particular for a discussion of the terminology. Much has therefore been written since then in the fields of 'border studies', 'frontier studies', and 'borderland studies' and it is beyond the scope of this section to do justice to this very extensive literature.

through Kham was attempted but ultimately failed – and transformed into an internal one within the administrative division of the P.R.C. The *boundary* did not disappear because of the impossibility of such a border in the given geopolitical context at the time. This boundary not only indicates in spatial terms a division imposed by the topography but also refers to a more dynamic sociological one through processes of exclusion or incorporation that take place on the edges of socio-political units or between ethnicities for example, as the interactional approach introduced by Barth (1969) has long demonstrated regarding ethnic formations.

Seen from the distant centres, Kham was a *frontier*, a meaning that the name in Tibetan is said to convey. It was not a static frontier, nor was it reducible to a fluctuating colonization front but it was a dynamic, permeable, and shifting space; in other words, a 'frontier zone' similar to other spaces of imperial expansion such as those depicted by Peter Perdue in his seminal study *China Marches West* (2005). Frontiers and borderlands function in tandem. The Chinese word *bianjiang*, or the French word *frontière*, both conflate the two meanings. Katia Buffetrille (this volume) shows that in Tibetan the vernacular terminology 'defines the borderlands as places to be defended or to be made civilized'.[7]

The notions of borderland and frontier clearly overlap when understood as zones of contact (e.g. Pratt 1991) and of intense interactions, composed of various types of boundaries (i.e. geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic), and which can rapidly change according to local circumstances. This locally variable volatility is a special characteristic of frontiers and borderlands alike, where the transboundary solidarities and alliances that take place, often motivated by economic interest or livelihood strategies, become invisible if we look through an exclusively territorial lens of the border defined as the 'end of the state', subsumed to the one-dimensional issue of national sovereignty. Looking at Kham as a

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7   As Mark Elliot (2014) recently discussed, the distinction between the terms in English can hardly be portrayed by translation into other languages, whether it be French and Chinese, or Manchu for that matter. It should, however, be noted that because of the nuances in the English terms, a coinage like *jiequ* is now often used in Chinese to refer to 'borderlands'. For a very detailed survey of the terminology related to frontiers, borders and boundaries in Chinese historical texts, see Calanca and Wildt (2006). Etymologically, the French *frontière* originally refers to a military front and the extension of civilization; its different levels of meaning are more complex however. See for example Febvre (1928) and the constructive discussion in Jeanpierre (2010). I hope it is clear for the reader that my use of 'frontier' here is distinct from that of Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), whose frontier thesis and Anglo-American centric definition of the frontier as the 'meeting point between savagery and civilization' (Turner [1893] 1994, 32) has led many to abandon the use of the word altogether.

frontier or a borderland should not limit us to a state-centric view: there are many places in Kham that could be considered as having been central in many different ways because of their economic, political, cultural, or religious role. After all, Kham saw the emergence of multiple independent polities, such as the powerful kingdom of Dergé that could rival with religious centres in Central Tibet, or that of Chakla, with its capital at Dartsedo that made it the gateway to Tibet from China. There were four main kingdoms (Dergé, Chakla, Bathang, and Lithang) in Kham, which declared allegiance to the Qing emperor and for this reason became known in Chinese as the 'four big indigenous chieftains' (*si da tusi*).[8]

A multidimensional and relational approach to Kham is indeed necessary if a thorough examination of the range of connections constitutive of the social fabric is to be made. Our collective investigation in this volume considers historically specific geographies of social relations and forms of interconnection that denote the different dimensions of space and scale, territory and network (see Jessop et al. 2008; also Rumford 2012; Giersch 2016). As Lawrence Epstein pointed out in his Introduction to the seminal volume *Khams pa Histories* (2002), frontier processes are both political and discursive. There is a wide array of voices to be taken into account depending on whose perspective we adopt. We can only offer a polyphonic assemblage, furthermore limited by the range of archival or ethnographic sources. Thus, the fragmentary politico-religious landscape and complex cultural matrix of Kham necessarily results in 'multivocality'. I would argue that it also requires us to pay due attention to its constitutive 'multilocality' which we can address, according to the anthropologist Margaret Rodman (1992, 641), as the 'politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions' of places affected by influences of imperial history, modernity, and contemporary contexts. The chapters in this volume set out to explore these dimensions by considering diverse spatial entanglements and historical (dis)continuities.

Relational Spaces

Some regions, particularly contested frontiers, continuously defy categorization in conventional terms altogether. The historians Mark Lewis and

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8   There were, however, many other smaller polities in Kham. The Qing Empire's indirect rule relied on 'indigenous chieftains' (*tusi*) to levy taxes and other duties, such as quelling 'rebellions' for which they received military titles.

Kären Wigen (1997) have provocatively challenged the limits of our spatial lexicons for anthropogeographical analysis and in so doing have drawn up four particularly productive models: the middle ground, the archipelago, the diaspora, and the matrix (ibid., 142-156). Each helps to grasp how cultural territories are increasingly being cross-cut and redefined by networks and mobility, as growing diasporas of merchants, migrants, and refugees around the world lead to mutations of conceptions of place and identity on different scales. But before I return to the notions of 'middle-ground' and 'matrix' in the context of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and in relation to 'frontier dynamics', it is necessary to further clarify the implications of an approach to Kham not as a regionally confined space but as a process-oriented spatial formation.

In the context of a re-evaluation of area studies and borderland studies, Willem van Schendel's (2002) proposal to design an unconventional regional area as a heuristic was a particularly powerful intervention: 'Zomia' (the land of highlanders) not only created an arena of alternative thinking about borderland areas where Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia meet but also started a new narrative of place inspired by process geographies. This toponymic invention has since taken on a life of its own, especially following the publication seven years later of James Scott's (2009) depiction of Zomia as an area where people strategically keep the state at a distance, helped by the 'friction of terrain'.

Much debated, Scott's (2009) book helped shed some light on a vast territory that was overlooked by various 'center-centric' gazes that kept reproducing a centre-periphery paradigm without renewing an understanding of these peripheral zones. For all the productive discussion it triggered, Scott's Zomia is, however, only one way of looking at a more general methodological and conceptual challenge that the region offers us, as Jean Michaud (2000, 2006, 2010, 2017) has been particularly apt at showing. As geographical and cultural concepts, however, we may still wonder, as Michaud queries (2010, 212), whether 'notions such as Zomia, the Southeast Asian Massif, the Himalayan Massif, or Haute-Asie, have [ever] been needed by the subjects themselves'. In our case, doesn't Kham already stand as a categorical challenge of a kind – without us having to coin another Zomia-like term?

This volume complements recent interventions which for a large part engage the now quite inescapable notion of Zomia and take borderlands as an entry point into issues of agency, sovereignty, and transnational connections. Yet the problem remains: how can we productively think about Zomia *as a place* if it is after all a kind of borderland-cum-frontier zone, which should be addressed *as a process*? In this regard, Kham is not

posited in this volume as a prescribed geophysical regional framework but as a fragmentalized space of interconnected and interdependent locales and people. By looking at Kham through diverse lenses and approaching it on varied scales, and combining history and anthropology, the chapters take into account different forms of conjunctions and territorial belongings conceived as heterogeneous, discontinuous, and relational (e.g. Cartier 2002, Jessop et al. 2008).

In other words, Kham is a good-to-think-with category. As we move away from a purely spatial definition, there is one important question that 'Zomia-thinking' (Shneiderman 2010, 293) forces us to address: by operating a kind of topological reversal by which the borderlands (the in-between) of culture areas and political centres come to the foreground, it raises the question of self-determination and sovereignty. As the etymology of the term *region* conveys, a region is a form of spatialization of sovereignty, a spatial entity (*regio*, 'direction, district') where a form of control is exercised (*regere*, 'to rule, direct'). The region as a place of otherness destabilizes and complicates the claims of powerful centres (Rafael 1999). Kham offers a rich historical and ethnographic challenge to those who want to articulate the parts and the whole of a regional category, and what it 'is' and 'does' (see Paasi and Metzger 2016) as I will further analyse in the last part of this Introduction.

Historical and contextual specificity should certainly inform the way we think about regional formations. Whatever the scale, regions are not timeless entities but are shaped by diverse historical forces and often reorganized economically and politically through multiple cross-cutting influences. At the same time, we need not assume that any of these regions are discrete, continuous blocks, even when they are named and seem on the surface to constitute the basis of some kind of unity – whether cultural or otherwise. At the heart of our inquiries lies the apparent paradox of Kham as a named regional category and at the same time a heterogeneous frontier zone and nexus of power.

Archaeologies of Sovereignty

The history of Kham when regarded as a frontier zone has to be set against the background of geopolitical tensions between Lhasa-based regimes and China-based regimes, and the growing presence of Western powers.[9] Tensions arose mainly during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth

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9   Some of this historical background is presented in the Chronology of Major Events (*supra*).

centuries and revolved around issues of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and nationhood. The issue at stake was the definition of where the eastern border of the Central Tibetan polity should be in relation to the Chinese polity and therefore the determination of the respective territorial reach of the interlocutors, as alluded to above (see Maps 1.2 and 1.3). This was at the very least an ambiguous issue, given that imperial formations do not end at their geographic boundaries, and that the expansive states of Tibet and China similarly contributed to creating zones with overlapping forms of authority at their peripheries (see Lattimore 1962, McGranahan 2003a, 2003b, 2007, Perdue 2001). But the adoption of standards derived from international law and the notion of sovereignty in a modern sense, as Scott Relyea discusses in his chapter, carried implicit recognition that the outside of the nation is another nation's inside.

It should first be emphasized that several 'sovereignty regimes' (Agnew 2005) have to be taken into account. The confrontation of the two centres that contributed to making Kham a site of overlapping and fragmented sovereignties, a 'Sino-Tibetan' borderland tied to larger geopolitical issues, is the result of the emergence in the nineteenth century of the nation-state as the primary vehicle of sovereign power. As Benedict Anderson (1991) demonstrated, this Western-born notion that was to become an international standard created a new spatialization of authority, which implied that boundaries were part of what define the state and its sovereign rule over a homogenous territory.[10] At the turn of the twentieth century in the case of Tibet in its relation to China and British India, there was no clearly marked boundary. The imperative to map the territory and to identify its borders clearly with respect to a bounded sense of statehood became most pressing.

There were various attempts to draw a borderline in Kham, and today the linear demarcation is internal to the Chinese nationscape between T.A.R. and other provinces such as Sichuan and Yunnan. These arbitrary territorial and administrative divisions have been acquiring greater salience and verisimilitude, but as Charlene Makley has argued for Amdo further north, in Kham too 'these modern boundaries are just the most recent in a long history of contending "maps of power" over the region' (2003, 599).

We know of at least one attempt at an alternative geography of Kham that was formulated in the late nineteenth century by the polymath Jamgon

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10   European powers increasingly relied on border treaties to define the territorial sovereignty of individual states following the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. In its political dealings with European nation-states, China was forced to clarify its borders and what remained of its frontiers. European colonial powers forced upon China the Western concept of treaty-defined territorial sovereignty.

Kongtrul (see Gardner 2006, 2009; Zangpo 2001). In a text entitled the 'Twenty-five holy sites of Dokham' (*Dokham né chen nyer nga*), a selection of religious sites are drawn together to elaborate what Alexander Gardner (2009, 98) calls a 'narrative map'. As Gardner shows, it was a symbolic rather than scientific and political attempt to establish the geographic existence of Kham through the grouping of meaningful and powerful places in the landscape. Significantly, this grouping was inclusive of Kham's religious diversity – the region saw the blossoming of diverse religious sects in the eighteenth century – but exclusive of Geluk sites. Therefore, the spatial and religious unity of Kham represented by Jamgon Kongtrul's 'map' was a reaction to the 'looming annexation of his homeland' by Central Tibet, which in 1868 he perceived as the 'invader' (100), even if in the end it was China that appropriated Kham.

If the Ganden Phodrang and Geluk domination was what constituted a threat to Kham's identity in the eyes of Kongtrul, it was also at this particular time in history that Gönpo Namgyel strived towards a political unification of Kham and 'dared to defy the authority of both centers of power' (Tsomu 2015, 132) until his expansion was halted by the Lhasa government. An insider's perspective thus shows that external territorial threats and claims came from both Central Tibet and China; it also shows, perhaps more importantly, that there was a diverse but nevertheless resilient sense of centrality. As Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2011, 8) has argued, the main polities (kingdoms) in eastern Tibet 'ultimately conceived of themselves as their own centres, even as other centres tried to define them as the periphery' (see also Turek, this volume).

Kham never displayed a stable religious or political unity. However, the 'self-rule' movements of the 1930s exemplify how new visions for political action were taking shape in response to Tibetan and Chinese nation-building projects, and how forms of regional autonomy were strategically devised (Peng 2002).[11] For many eastern Tibetans the potentiality of unity resurfaced when invasion and military enforcement of Chinese rule made it necessary to have recourse to a form of national cohesion; resistance was strong in Kham and the rebel army (significantly named the Chushi Gangdruk) joined

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11   See in particular Duara (2003) for a discussion of imperialism and nationalism in China in the twentieth century. While nation-building has often been approached in terms of the influence of Western concepts, Tuttle (2007) makes an important contribution to the reconsideration of the Sino-Tibetan interface on Tibetan terms, by underlining the role that Buddhism played in China's transition to a nation-state, thereby portraying the Chinese nationalist narrative as not purely secular. On the role of Buddhism during the national construction of the republican period, see also Bulag (2007, 33-40).

forces with Tibetans in Lhasa. Kham has since become closely associated with its 'warrior' spirit and is regarded as a place of resistance (McGranahan 2010, 61; Norbu 1986). Resistance then became a national project and it is in this context that the 'three regions of Tibet' (*chölkha sum*) are referred to as 'provinces' and have been given an aura of political unity (Mills 2014; Weiner 2016).

The Sino-Tibetan frontier was clearly not a no man's land and there existed former politico-religious arrangements which, according to Geoffrey Samuel's (1993) overview of Tibet's political history, were part of a continuous field of a wide variety of political and social formations. In her discussion about the critical intervention of British diplomacy in the frontier dispute, Carole McGranahan (2003b) points out that in Tibet, 'state organization operated under different principle and organizational strategies' compared to the nation-state; therefore, different understandings of statehood and authority made the delineation of the eastern border between Tibet and China 'the one issue that consistently impeded the passing of any treaty' between China, Tibet, and Britain (2003b, 40; also 2010, 42ff). That such a clear boundary did not exist exemplifies the fact that there remained a contested area with overlapping zones between the two centres' claim to sovereignty and territorial integrity on the one hand, and the constellation of polities themselves in Kham on the other hand.

This fragmented political landscape with its local models of jurisdiction and often competing allegiances was also made up of an intricate network of religious institutions belonging to different Buddhist sects. In the context of Tibetan areas, therefore, while it has often been pointed out that rule was more a matter of control over people than land, such rule also involved some ritualistic components linked to local territorial deities, and could rely heavily on monastic institutions that exercised authority over agricultural and nomadic land and levied taxes. In other words, access to land for sub-sistence farming and for subsequent taxation was an important factor in territorial demarcations and in the political systems or patterns of relations within or between communities.[12] One aspect that certainly complicates our understanding of the variations of configurations that existed and the diversity of indigenous notions they mobilized is the importance of the multi-ethnic make-up of the region and the various religious traditions.

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12   See Huber (2004, 142-143) about ritual practices (*ri-khrims* or *ri-rgya*) that entail a claim or control over a territory, at local community or state level, with reference to Amdo and Kham. Macdonald (1987) laid the ground for a comparison across the extended Himalayas of indigenous notions of authority that can be linked to the emergence of the state.

Cults to mountain deities that control particular territories can, for example, contribute to the inhabitants' sense of identity (Karmay 1994). Spiritual landscapes animate local identities and territorial deities have long played an important role in local notions of authority and sovereignty.

What is conventionally referred to as 'ethnographic Tibet' or 'historical Tibet'[13] is often presented as corresponding to a complex mixture of societies loosely connected together, each of which represented a peculiar type of political institution and system of authority. Among the various political entities in Kham under religious or secular rulers, there is also evidence of the limited degree to which an aristocratic or monastic estate could exercise its authority over its peasant tenants or nomadic clients. Some of these polities, however, were fairly centralized states, generally kingdoms, with recognized figures of authority (kings, *gyelpo*) such as in Dergé or Chakla, estates ruled by chieftains or lords (*pon*), or territories headed by hereditary lords (*depa*), such as Bathang and Lithang, designated by the Lhasa government (the Ganden Phodrang).

One of the challenges when writing about these political formations is the use of Western terminology, such as 'nation-state' in relation to forms of centralized political authority and control, or more generally the application of notions of sovereignty or nationalism to socio-cultural realities that are not entirely fitted to our conceptual tools. Even more challenging and important, however, is to re-think notions such as (territorial) sovereignty and its foundational assumptions in a comparative perspective that would take full account of indigenous notions beyond those that come from the two main centres.[14] When the anthropologist Edmund Leach (1960, 49-50) was writing about the 'frontiers of Burma', he rightly alerted us to the 'dogma' of sovereignty as 'a by-product of the clash of European Imperialist interests'. He pointed out that in the case of Burma and adjacent regions, the political systems interpenetrated and that in this context their delimitation should not be equated with the hard line of the border between sovereign nation-states but should be considered as 'zones of mutual interest'. This formulation is also reminiscent of the work of Owen Lattimore, a prominent figure in

13   Historical or ethnographic Tibet encompasses both the predominantly Tibetan areas located in today's Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu provinces and the Tibet Autonomous Region. In some works, the latter is also referred to as 'political Tibet', see for example Goldstein (1998, 4), and the discussion in McGranahan (2010, 48-52).

14   While the need to revisit the notion of sovereignty is even greater for the contemporary period, the conventional understanding of sovereignty as a state's unlimited and indivisible rule over a territory and its population has been increasingly examined and challenged (see Biersteker and Weber 1996; Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr 2017).

the history of 'Inner Asian frontiers', who stated that 'the linear Frontier never existed [in China] except in concept. The depth of the trans-Frontier, beyond the recognized linear Frontier, made possible a historical structure of zones, which varied from time to time' (1962, 115).

Kham exemplified several of these 'zones of mutual interest' where overlapping forms of authority sometimes led to multiple allegiances, and as Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat (2006, 295) presented in their discussion about sovereignty, in such places and societies 'sovereign power historically was distributed among many forms of local authority'. Places where borders have indeed crystallized at various historical moments were subjected to influences of varying intensity emanating from multiple centres. And so much so that belonging and allegiance themselves could be variable and multiple, favouring specific forms of sovereignty, anchored in the liminality of these zones.

Frontier Dynamics

Recent scholarship has overall significantly contributed to a multipolar social history of Chinese and Tibetan worlds and their internal diversity. In such works, conventional unitarian visions of 'China' and 'Tibet' are unsettled, opening up to the different forms of relations that existed between the centres of power and the various groups under their rule or influence, and foregrounding the diversity of frontiers themselves, away from the highly polarized antagonism and with closer attention to local agency.

There is now growing literature on the borderlands of China that empha-sizes the need to include indigenous conceptions and actors in historical narratives of place-making.[15] Most of the recent contributions about the histories of specific locales within the Sino-Tibetan borderlands have offered a thicker description of events and people in the making of these histories. In this endeavour, the 'middle ground' approach developed by Richard White (2011 [1991]) in his study of the processes of mutual accommodation and creative misunderstandings between Algonquian-speaking Indians and French, British, and Americans in the Great Lakes region between 1650-1815 has proven particularly inspiring. As histories of China's Southwest started to highlight border transformation mechanisms, resistance movements,
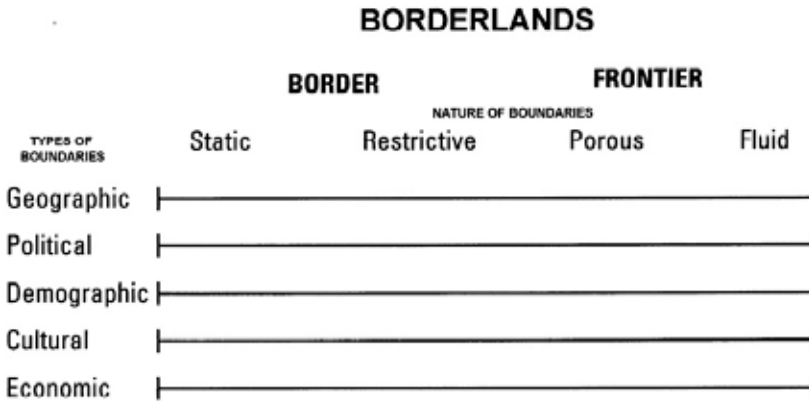
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15   Most notably all the contributions that fall within the so-called 'New Qing history' (see for an overview Waley-Cohen 2004; and more recently Wu 2016), as alluded to in the Foreword to this volume.

identity processes and ethnic entanglements (e.g. Atwill 2005; Herman 2007), C. Patterson Giersch (2001, 2006) applied the 'middle ground' model to his analysis of the negotiations between Tai polities and Qing officials across Southern Yunnan province. This approach has opened avenues for a deeper understanding of historical agency in other parts of Southwest China. There is now greater attention to indigenous agency beyond the role of elites and more in-depth analysis of the dynamics of colonial expansion and the need to break out of the centre-local typology (e.g. Faure and Ho 2013, Weinstein 2014, Lawson 2017).

Bridging studies of China's Southwest with those of eastern Tibet, Yudru Tsomu (2009) distinguishes an 'official' and an 'unofficial' middle ground in her study of the Chakla kingdom of Dartsedo, notions she equally applies to describe the situation of other polities in Kham (Tsomu 2015). The 'official' middle ground corresponds to the negotiations of forms of accommodation, albeit limited, that took place in the political and administrative dealings between local Tibetan leaders and the Qing administration. The 'unofficial' middle ground corresponds to the social interactions, cultural contacts, and exchanges that developed through trade and economic activities, involving merchants and immigrants. Similarly, Patrick Hayes (2014) draws on this distinction in his environmental and social history of the Songpan (Zunchu) region of northern Kham, and shows how adaptation to ecological conditions is an important factor in the formation of the 'middle ground' at these two levels.

These depictions point to the diversity of experiences on the ground and to the need to acknowledge the reality of a felt sense of centrality of some of Kham's communities at different times in their history (see also Jinba 2014; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014; Kang and Sutton 2016). In other words, they raise the questions: how is our understanding of local history reconfigured if we 'see like a border' (Jinba 2017; Jonhson et al. 2011, 67; Rumford 2012, 896) and fully acknowledge the agency of local inhabitants in processes of change? How can we centre the narrative more on local people's role in socio-political and environmental transformations?

If Kham makes for a comparable case of continuous frontier engagement, like the one studied by C. Patterson Giersch in the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands, it is not only for its 'middle ground' specificity but also for its maintenance as a 'persistent frontier' (Giersch 2006, 9). One of the reasons for this persistence is precisely, as we have seen, because the *border* never materialized. It is also because the *frontier* remained the locus of historical dynamism, modulated by change. The comparative model proposed by Bradley Parker (2006) of a 'continuum of boundary dynamics' that

Figure 1.1   The Continuum of Boundary Dynamics, from Parker (2006)[16]

BORDERLANDS

TYPES OF BOUNDARIES	BORDER		FRONTIER	
	NATURE OF BOUNDARIES			
	Static	Restrictive	Porous	Fluid
Geographic	├─────────────────────────────────────┤			
Political	├─────────────────────────────────────┤			
Demographic	├─────────────────────────────────────┤			
Cultural	├─────────────────────────────────────┤			
Economic	├─────────────────────────────────────┤			

forms what he calls the 'borderland matrix' is helpful here in tracing this 'persistence'. For the purpose of this model, Parker defines borderlands as 'regions around or between political or cultural entities where geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic circumstances or processes may interact to create borders or frontiers' (81). The variations among these processes are conceived on a continuum from the more static and limiting border situation to that of the fluid and less constrained frontier situation (see Figure 1.1).

In Kham, the geographic (topographic, climatic) boundary was fairly restrictive, marking a clear border as one entered the Tibetan world. The political boundary similarly became an increasingly constricting one as attempts were made to delimit a border. The demographic and cultural boundaries remained porous, even if the numeric importance of immigration was not very significant until recently. But when this is set against a longer time period, we can see both a tendency to maintain cultural and ethnic distinctions and forms of 'merger' or 'fragmentations' (see Rodseth 2005, Gros 2014b). The economic boundary was probably the most fluid, and a crucial aspect of Kham's economic dynamism, and relative political and cultural importance throughout history.

Overall, one interesting thing regarding this model is that it confirms that the different boundaries are not congruent. This way of conceptualizing the

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16   The five major categories of boundaries (boundary sets) are further subdivided and, for example, the 'Demographic boundary' in the figure encompasses population density and ethnic composition, and the 'Cultural boundary' includes religious as well as linguistic boundaries.

borderland is not without similitudes with what was proposed under the label 'Tibetan-Yi corridor' (Ch. *Zang-Yi zoulang*), a designation originally coined by the famous Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005). Over the last two decades this corridor, running along the eastern edge of Kham but extending further north and south, has been a lively field of study across disciplines (see Li 2008, Shi 2005). However, this 'ethnic corridor', as it is also called, has never been clearly defined (see Gros 2014a, b) but serves as a moniker for an approach to the linguistic, ethnic, or cultural variability set against the historical *longue durée*. In areas that could be regarded as the edges of Kham, the borderlands are less clearly Sino-Tibetan and more Naxi-Tibetan or Yi-Tibetan or, as Eric Mortensen discusses in his chapter, not even borderlands at all.

Knowledge, Imagination, and Utopia

> Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> Those people were a kind of solution.
> – *C.P. Cavafy, 'Waiting for the Barbarians' ([1975] 1992)*

As we consider various approaches to the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, it is worth reminding ourselves that ethnology as a discipline developed in China in close connection with frontier studies. Consider the year 1926: the famous educator and reformist Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) published a seminal article that officialized the term *minzu xue* to designate the ethnological discipline; the same year Wu Wenzao (1901-1985), then still a sociology student at Columbia University, promoted *bianzheng xue*, the 'study of frontier affairs', framed as an inclusive approach to the cultures of peripheral peoples that in turn influenced the development of field anthropology.[17] During this same period, the scholar Li Anzhai (1900-1985) who became

17   See Cai (1962 [1926]) and Wu (1990 [1926]). Professor at Yanjing University, Wu Wenzao moved to Kunming where he founded the Department of Sociology at Yunnan University as well as the Yunnan Ethnology Society (*Yunnan minzu xuehui*). He became the mentor of a generation of ethnologists in the 1930s, including Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yaohua (1910-2000). About Wu Wenzao, see in particular Wang (1999, 2000). While Wu Wenzao's approach to development in border regions was inspired by the methods developed for colonial administration in the United States, Ling Chunsheng, a student of Marcel Mauss and Marcel Granet in Paris became one of the main actors in the promotion and institutionalization of ethnology as applied to frontier issues (Brown 2008, 56-90). Field research had proven to be a necessary tool for colonial powers to manage and control their empires, and as Chen Zhihong (2017) recently demonstrated, a similar methodological shift happened in China in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, geology,

one of the founding members of the study of Sino-Tibetan borderlands, advocated 'social work' and 'frontier service' at the borders as a project to modernize and promote the development of minority societies (Chen 2010, 106-130; Rodriguez 2011; Yen 2012).

The republican period was dominated by the experience of a 'frontier crisis' (*bianjiang weiji*) and the question regarding the place that ethnic and cultural diversity could hold in nation-building. A plethora of diverse frontier study societies sprang up that proposed ways of developing the frontiers. 'Go to the frontier' (*dao bianjiang qu*) was a dominant slogan of the intellectual and political life of the republican era that encouraged the study and ethnography of these frontiers, where migrants had settled and new cultivated lands had been established, where agents were charged with carrying out cartographic and topographical surveys, and new natural resources had been identified.[18] While the 'frontier' was reinterpreted and naturalized as a quintessentially national space it was also the site of ambivalent attitudes; 'frontier reconstruction' remained 'work in progress' and contested ground between both scholars and officials. The new provincial entity of 'Xikang' is a case in point. During the Sino-Japanese war, it appeared in official propaganda as an example of frontier provinces contributing to a national united war effort, promoted by the rising power of the warlord Liu Wenhui (1895-1976) who held the reins of Xikang's construction. To extend their influence, Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomingdang (G.M.D.) pursued a policy of economic reconstruction involving large investments in transportation and communications, which allowed for effective penetration of the region and ensured the central government's role in its development.[19]

After being resettled in the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan where universities were displaced during the war, Chinese ethnologists or anthropologists, many of whom had returned from study visits abroad, conducted the first field surveys on ethnic groups in border regions. In short, this period was a golden age for the development of the discipline, and the southwestern borders an ethnographic paradise. During this period Kham became an important locale for new imaginings of the nation's geo-body. The border

and modern geography, and 'field research was linked to scientific spirit, and was regarded as an important symbol of new-style intellectuals' (217-218).

18   See in particular Chen Zhihong's (2008) study which rightly places this movement during the republican era in the broader context of modern 'territoriality'. James Leibold (2007, 51-79) has demonstrated that at the political level, 'border administration' (*bianzheng*) was based on a genuine willingness to establish minority allegiance.

19   For example, by creating the Sichuan and Xikang economic development committee in March 1939. See Lin Hsiao-ting (2006).

zone was raised to province status: a 'New Xikang' open for travel, discovery, and dreams of growth and progress (see Frank, this volume).

The promotion and idealization of these regions whose inhabitants could no longer be portrayed as barbarians because they were now regarded as co-nationals was an important component of the 'frontier reconstruction' spirit. Travellers and ethnographers were often motivated by a nationalist impulse, a 'crusade to reaffirm Chinese sovereignty' over the border regions, so Mo Yajun (2013, 130) writes about the ethnographer-photographer Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984) whose work represents, she argues, a kind of objectification of his Khampa subjects, even though his work also leaves behind more multi-dimensional legacies (see Holmes-Tagchugdarpa 2015). Scholarly circles did not break free from these stereotypes, as Yudru Tsomu (2013) underlines with regard to the ethnologist Ren Naiqiang (1894-1989) and his paternalistic, erotic and exotic view of the Khampa. However, not all past or present descriptions of peripheral groups were derived from paternalism, or cultural judgment. In the 1930s Shen Congwen (1902-1988) was already portraying 'barbarians' in positive terms and exerted significant influence over a younger generation of artists and aspiring ethnographers, as Lara Maconi (2014) recently affirmed. Today border regions inhabited by minorities are increasingly becoming places of spiritual renewal in the national discourse (Oakes 2007, 253; Ying 2014, 29).

The historically shifting boundaries of Kham's entangled forms of allegiance and belonging certainly resonate in its situation today: Kham's contemporary cultural politics, complicated by new factors linked to the global economy, tourism, and heritage discourses and practices, all converge to create alternative restructurings. In the words of Charlene Makley (2003, 598), such borderlands have been and remain 'creative grounds for the making and unmaking of often-competing sociocultural worlds'. Since the period of reform and liberalization of the late 1980s in particular, places have been undergoing profound changes. Pasts are being reinvented, full of potentialities for the present. A case in point is the town of Gyelthang (Ch. Zhongdian) in Yunnan province which changed its name in 2001 to the myth-laden Shangri-La (Ch. Xianggelila). This process of branding epitomizes the merging of Western and Chinese imaginings, supposedly infused with local culture, in order to create a new paradise for tourism (Hillman 2003, Kolås 2008; see Buffetrille and E. Mortensen, this volume). Myth turns into capital.

More recently, a much larger zone designated as the 'Great Shangri-La economic zone' (*Zhongguo da Xianggelila jingji quan*) was drawn on the map by the combined efforts of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Sichuan, and

Yunnan provinces – a zone whose boundaries more or less match Kham's and which blurs the physical space and the representational space (Map 1.4). In a similar fashion to what happened in Northwest Yunnan with the 'Great rivers project' led by The Nature Conservancy (T.N.C.) in collaboration with the provincial government, the idea is to convert protected areas into sources of revenue. As Zinda (2014, 109) points out, the issue at stake is the designation of 'a special conservation zone in the spirit of the special economic zones that have had a famous role in coastal China's economic ascent; this would complement its unofficial designation as a special ethnic zone, a location of authentic Tibetan difference'.[20] To paraphrase Tim Oakes (2000, 683) who commented on how place-based cultural traditions were being 'traded in' and replaced with provincially defined regions, an ideology of 'zone' culture is a necessary enabling device for the trade. The very idea of a 'zone' speaks directly to our concern here as a re-branding of the frontier. As Carolyn Cartier (2018, 468) argues, by such designations 'the party-state re-maps urban and regional futures at large through targeted changes to subnational territory'. This is a different kind of 'provincialization' from the transformation of the borderland into Xikang province that took place in republican times. This time the western frontier is being turned into a commercial utopia (Oakes 2007, 2012) and the Shangrilaization process is escalating (see Yeh and Coggins 2014). It is a renewed vision of the region's imagined wilderness (that of the 'frontier') and pristine landscape, where nature and culture should be preserved selectively, once again deprived of their agency and creativity.

As Tim Oakes (2007, 258) astutely notes, 'the frontiers of China and America meet and converge in Shangri-La, and it is the commercial dimension of the frontier idea that has enabled this'. This convergence brings to mind the work of the artist Qiu Zhijie whose project 'Mapping the world' (Ch. *shijie ditu jihua*) involves creating imaginary maps by drawing inspiration from various geopolitical contexts. Qiu's maps depict geographical and conceptual territories placed according to his own categorization of knowledge and ideologies, and cartography is used as a tool to reflect on the naturalization of knowledge and power. On one of these maps (see Figure 1.2) we can find an area where the fifth-century poet Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* encounters the Shangri-La of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, a proximity that alerts us to some continuities across time and space, and the dynamic reconfiguring of sites enacted by the convergence noted by

20 On 'special economic zones' (S.E.Z.) as 'special ethnic zones' see also Vasantkumar (2014, 54-56).

Map 1.4   The Great Shangri-La Eco-Tourism Zone
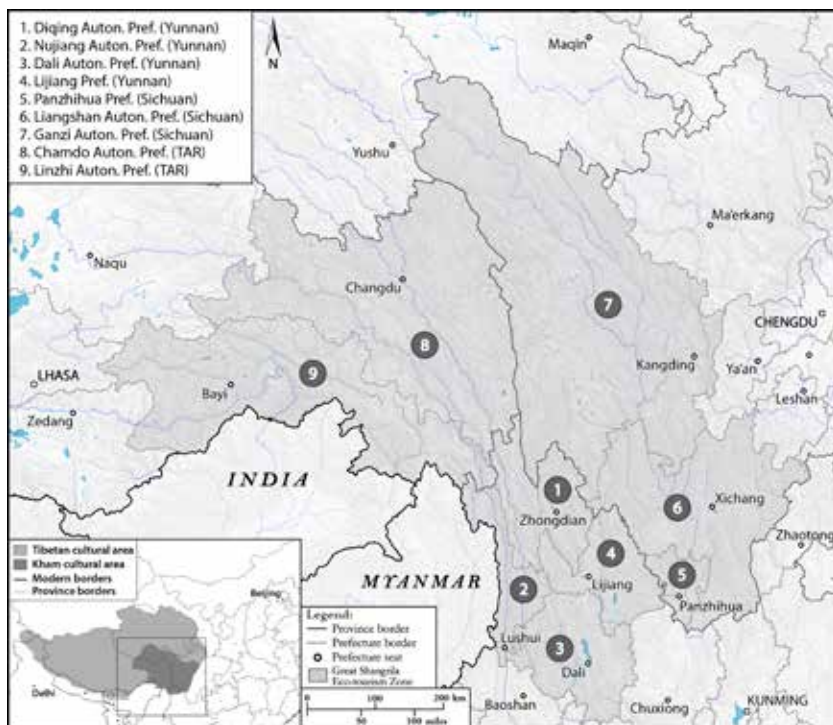
Sources: Based on SRTM (NASA) and modern administrative borders extracted from GADM
database (www.gadm.org, v.2.5 July 2015)
Author: Rémi Chaix

Tim Oakes. Not far from these utopian sites is the 'city on the border', an
allusion to an influential novel by Shen Congwen that humanizes, if not
romanticizes, ethnic folk of China's southwestern frontier. In this 'Pure
land' is also to be found the 'country of women' and the famous Lugu lake
(nowadays a major tourist destination in Yunnan), right next to Thoreau's
Walden pond. This kind of cross-cultural coming together on Qiu's very
large maps produces a recasting of place 'in its gathering and collusion of
othernesses and spatiotemporal elsewheres', to borrow Robert Oppenheim's
(2007, 486) formulation; they also create a visual overflow with perhaps
irreconcilable meanings.

Beyond the 'commercial dimension' that contributes to the emergence
of these new geographical formations, there is also some interplay between
the dimensions of tradition, tourism, and politics. A site like Shangri-La –
the town, the region, the 'zone' – becomes what Michel Foucault called a

Figure 1.2   A detail of Qiu Zhijie's 'Map of the World' series

heterotopia, an 'effectively enacted utopia', both an alternative place and a place of alternatives, a place that 'is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (1986, 24, 25). On a larger scale, as Peter Bishop (2001, 204) argues, Tibet itself can be designated as a heterotopia, because it has become 'a plurality of often contradictory, competing, and mutually exclusive places simultaneously positioned on a single geographical location'.[21]

Patterns of Change and Topological Figures

Growing scholarship in the field of Chinese studies has been tracing the continuities between periods, from the late Qing to the founding of the P.R.C., that were often considered as radical ruptures. We must be careful when talking of change regarding borderland narratives that focus on the centrist view of radical turns, such as from Empire to nation-state. These

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21   Bishop (1999, 381) also applied the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia more specifically to Lhasa and to the Potala Palace.

turning points should be assessed in light of locally rooted continuities even when some political, economic, and environmental transformations are indeed perceived as a 'change in worlds' (Hayes 2014). Just as historians of borderlands Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett (2011, 357) alert us to the fact that '[f]inding new centers for borderlands history means also plotting *change* differently'.

Speaking of borderlands necessarily implies looking at politics and its entanglement with other fields of social activity, and how they evolve through time and across cultures. Continuities and changes are articulated around a dynamic and heterogeneous process of intervention. Such interventions of necessity rely on new forms of thought, new ideas, and new thinkers but they do not exclusively refer to a contingent or exterior character that would be the source of change: they may be internally engendered or externally produced. The chapters here explore some of these interventions and how places are products of local histories and practices as well as relations with the broader environment. These interventions are, I would argue, 'frontier moments' that through a process of territorialization also become 'spatial moments' (van Schendel 2015), which can be used to examine the 'clashes, negotiations, compromises, and adjustments as people construct places out of a range of resources, human as well as non-human, and material as well as discursive' (see Siu, Tagliacozzo, and Perdue 2015, 10). These historical and cultural conjunctures, the issues of interpenetration, hybridity, convergence, and the sense of exclusion and inclusion are addressed through different lenses, sketching different patterns of change that have affected and continue to affect people and places in Kham.

The picture of Kham I have endeavoured to draw in this Introduction is a kaleidoscopic view of its historical trajectories and changing territorial imprint, shifts that alter and shape how people are located. It points to the importance of taking into consideration the relations between the whole and its parts with their own autonomy and histories, and the merging of the material, the emotional, and the discursive in processes of place-making in order to grasp Kham's multiplicity. This multiplicity not only raises questions about the 'relations of interiority' (properties) that are attributed to Kham as a category of identity, as a culture area, or even as a newly crafted 'zone'. It also poses the question of the 'relations of exteriority' (capacities) in which the outside/inside divide becomes blurred and can hardly be disentangled from *both* 'Tibet' and 'China' – themselves contingent historical entities. In Kham, where does one end and the other start?

At the meso-level of a regional entity, Kham as a heuristic illustrates the complexity of experiences of commonalities and connectedness, and

the conundrum that multiplicity poses regarding concepts of identity and belonging especially in a highly politicized context (Mills 2014).[22] The notion of 'belonging' is helpful here to emphasize boundary dynamics and 'the shifting character of borders and frontiers, imagined and real, as well as the possibilities of boundary-crossing, boundary-shifting, and boundary-blurring' (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011, xiv). Kham is a reminder that 'there are several places in the same territorial extension' (Feuchtwang 2004, 10). The 'frontier situation' is less about reactively stressing an identity than crossing imposed boundaries; the 'frontier' is a variable-geometry notion.

By recognizing that Kham is in *both* Tibet and China we can perhaps complexify the exclusion and inclusion binary (and the domination vs. resistance binary) and productively complement discussions that have so far relied on notions of hybridity, or more recently of symbiosis (Smyer Yu 2017) and of convergence (Jinba 2017). An apt reformulation of the implication for thinking about Kham and the Sino-Tibetan borderlands in this fashion is to move away from the constraints of topography and territory towards a more topological imagination, whereby the gap between the here and there is not so much a matter of actual distance than social relations, exchange, and interactions.

A topological imagination can be applied to frontiers and borders alike, seen as porous membranes (Slatta 1997, 32, 53), which not only constitute what distinguishes the inside and the outside (of a political, cultural, ethnic unit) but also the encounter between them. In other words, borders are not so much containers than 'outer membranes' of state territoriality, with varied thickness and permeability (Billé 2017). The idea of the thickness of the boundary conjures images of the border or frontier zone as an interface that mediates relations, an 'in-between' quality that has direct implications on its internal non-homogenous composition, made up of a constellation of diverse social formations with variable spatial imprints.

There have been many attempts to reflect on these issues using more unfamiliar forms of spatialization such as archipelagos or hollow rings, lattices, meshwork, and patchwork, fuelled by an increased need to move away from spatial containers (such as the nation-state) and to explore process geographies (see van Schendel 2002). Since John Agnew's (1994) influential article about the 'territorial trap' the traditional vision of the topography

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22   As a matter of fact, the often naturalized tie between identity and territory has become a particularly salient problem in the case of Tibetan identity and nationalism. Chris Vasantkumar (2017, 119; 2013, 228) recently commented about how some Tibetans locate their 'homeland': 'true Tibet lies not in a territorially defined homeland, but in a body of religious and cultural practice that has travelled with the Dalai Lama and other members of the Tibetan religio-cultural elite into India and the West and, perhaps, beyond territory itself'.

of power has been shattered and has led to questions about the existence of clear 'insides' and 'outsides' of spatial authority.

The vision of a social landscape where the centre's reach is limited in the remote periphery, and according to which horizontal relations and vertical hierarchies determine the equation of various topographies of power, is a vision anchored in Euclidean geometry. As anthropologist Hjorleifur Jonsson (2010, 200) has already pointedly proposed in criticizing the underpinnings of the Zomia concept, 'it is imperative to rethink the assumptions that sustain this particular production of knowledge'. In order to deconstruct the centre/periphery binary it is useful to think along the lines of what Edwin Ardener (2012, 523) suggests in the case of 'remote areas' that 'the actual geography is not the overriding feature – it is obviously necessary that "remoteness" has a position in topographical space, but it is defined within a topological space whose features are expressed in a cultural vocabulary'.

Because frontier zones, like 'remote areas', are both geographical spaces and social constructs, one satisfying characteristic about the notion of 'middle ground' as a spatial metaphor is that it conflates the process of accommodation characteristic of the frontier and the actual space where the process unfolds; but it does not qualify that space. The matrix, as discussed above, as a 'boundary-blurring cultural formation' (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 151), can perhaps better capture a process through which cultures inter-penetrate each other's core spaces; as a result, in the 'borderland matrix' the internal exclusions and the external inclusions constitute a topological conundrum. We are faced with the shaping of a topology of belonging whereby the *merging* between the internal and the external creates pos-sibilities for *emerging* social forms and events. We then inescapably face the challenge, as scholars, of renewing our vocabulary for an accurate rendering of these processes and of what emerges.

Therefore, to consider that Kham is in both Tibet and China results in rethinking the analysis of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands as a space and the very meaning of the hyphen (see Gros 2016, 220). The Möbius strip is a good metaphor to think with and can perhaps help provide a topology-inspired new conceptual grammar (see Figure 1.3).

The Möbius strip and its *a priori* paradoxical two-sidedness displays characteristics that are congruent with processes that take place in the frontier zone: 1) the inside and outside are part of a single continuous space, yet can nonetheless be identified as distinct sides at any one point or location; 2) there is a continuous exchange between what happens internally and what takes place outside; 3) sources of change, as stressed above, are both internal and external and produce transformations that allow relationships to be

Figure 1.3   The Möbius strip: from frontier zone to topological space

Source: Allen (2016, 42)

reproduced differently. For social topology, these continuities undergoing transformations are what is of interest here (see Allen 2016, Martin and Secor 2014). In the case of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, topology can capture the non-linear characteristic of this zone, and perhaps how the colonial process with its constant 're-mapping' can be effectively addressed as spatial history. Furthermore, the trope of the Möbius strip also conveys the malleability of Kham as an analytic and heuristic concept.

According to a recent discussion about topology in social and cultural theory, a topological surface such as the Möbius strip can be described as 'a relational field of emergence' (Lury, Parisi, and Terranova, 2012, 8). This is a particularly fitting formulation for Kham if we are to challenge its givenness and fixity as a spatial entity that would exist 'out there' prior to the relations and the world they create. Places and territories are continuously produced in a relational manner. The description provided in the previous sections of the spatio-temporal variation of Kham as an in-between place substantiate the claim that the multiplicity of its constitutive relations 'does not simply happen *in* the in-between' of power centres 'but rather operates a topological continuum *of* the in-between' (Lury, Parisi, and Terranova, 2012, 13, emphasis added). The Möbius strip, as a continuous surface with only one side, also aptly evokes the historical process by which frontier dynamics tends to cycle through, producing new forms of territorialization and re-ordering. If one starts on one side and follows the loop of the Möbius strip, one ends up on the other side without having crossed a border.

This brings us back to our original question: what about Kham then as a 'regional entity' in this complex lattice of relational networks and non-Euclidean geometry? As I have tried to emphasize in this Introduction and as the following chapters further illustrate, it is important to recognize that Kham is a composite entity. According to Ansi Paasi and Jonathan Metzger's recent discussion about regional formations, multiple actors are involved in these processes: local actors but also more or less distant 'others' who 'lie topologically and topographically both "inside" and "outside" the everlastingly reconstructing, material and discursive socio-spatial process that becomes labelled as "the region", and where variegated actors contribute

to producing (often contested) accounts and narratives of such regions as to some degree constituting coherent and definable entities' (2016, 8). To promote the notion of frontier is to go beyond regarding Kham as a straightforward and unproblematic regional category. To push for a vision of Kham as a topological space is another step towards formulating aspects of co-presence that acknowledge the continuity of relationship of power in a process of transformation that shapes forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Glossary of Tibetan terms

chölkha sum	*chol kha gsum*
chushi gangdruk	*chu bzhi sgang drug*
Dokham	Mdo khams
Domé	Mdo smad
Dotö	Mdo stod
Dza chu	Rdza chu
depa	*sde pa*
Dokham né chen nyer nga	*Mdo khams gnas chen nyer lnga*
Dri chu	'Bri chu
Ganden Phodrang	Dga' ldan pho brang
Gedun Chopel	Dge 'dun chos 'phel
gang jong	*gang ljongs*
gyalam	*rgya lam*
gyalpo	*rgyal po*
Ngül chu	Rngul chu
Nyak chu	Nyag chu
phayül	*pha yul*
pon	*dpon*
rong chenshi	*rong chen bzhi*
sakyé dokyé	*sa skye rdo rkyes*

Glossary of Chinese terms

bian	邊
bianjiang weiji	邊疆危機
bianzheng	邊政
Chuanbian	川邊
Daduhe	大渡河

dao bianjiang qu	到邊疆去
dao guanwai qu	到關外去
guan dao	官道
guanwai	關外
jiequ	界區
Jinshajiang	金沙江
Lancangjiang	瀾滄江
neidi	內地
Nujiang	怒江
Shen Congwen	沈從文
shijie ditu jihua	世界地圖計劃
si da tusi	四大土司
Xianggelila	香格里拉
Yalongjiang	雅礱江
Zang-Yi zoulang	藏彝走廊
Zhongguo da Xianggelila jingji quan	中国大香格里拉經濟圈

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