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The Sino-Tibetan Borderlands

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Summary

The Sino-Tibetan borderlands cover a vast mountainous expanse inhabited by agricultural and pastoral communities of various ethnicities, predominantly Tibetan-speaking groups. An area of mutual interest, rivalry, and conflict, it has been the scene of lively religious and commercial exchanges, remarkable cultural flows, and circulations, which have involved many diverse peoples who were part of varying motley sociopolitical entities (kingdoms, estates, tribal federations, etc.) on various scales. Central Tibet, Mongolia, and China have historically exerted a strong political influence that has greatly contributed to shaping local political formations, religious landscapes, and cultural identities. For a proper understanding of this diversity, an anthropological history of this area cannot be limited to Sino- or Tibeto-centric narratives but needs to take into account multipolar perspectives. However, very few sources provide a borderland-centered history and, where written sources do exist, they generally portray the view held by the centers of power. A more kaleidoscopic view of this mountainous area can complement a social history of Sino-Tibetan relations and of the associated processes that have contributed to shaping the region into a borderland by restoring the multiplicity of historical experiences of the communities in between.

Keywords: center-periphery, corridor, ethnicity, frontier, minorities, Tibeto-Burman

Subjects: Borderlands, China

Borderland Kaleidoscope

“Sino-Tibetan borderlands” is a designation conventionally applied to areas on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau that span several of the current administrative divisions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC): the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan Provinces. From the highland pastures adjacent to Lake Kokonor to the rugged landscape of the deep river valleys that run north-south through the Hengduan Mountains, diverse ecological niches or transition zones are home to a large number of ethnolinguistically distinct communities, each with its own sense of place and belonging sometimes at odds with contemporary administrative boundaries or ethnic taxonomies.¹

The Sino-Tibetan borderlands are as much a place of continuous frontier engagement as they are a locus for historical dynamism—they are multifaceted spaces where political stakes are not the same for all and where for many, according to their vision of their own history or contemporary condition, their existence is not determined by being on either side of a “border.” A multipolar reenvisioning of the region and its people is needed to highlight the way local communities have made up a world of many worlds.

One aspect that certainly complicates the understanding of the social configurations that existed in the borderlands and the diversity of indigenous notions they mobilized is the importance of the multiethnic makeup of the region and the diverse religious traditions. A unified historical narrative of these borderlands is unrealizable, not least because of the difficulty in grasping their diversity or the overwhelming quantity of sources in several languages, but also because of the seldom studied local historical narratives that are embedded in processes of place-making, memory, and identity constructions with their ritual and symbolic expressions.²

A Corridor of Contact

In spite of recent advances in the archaeology of the eastern Tibetan Plateau, little is known of the peopling of the Hengduan cordilleras beyond a few Neolithic sites (c. 3rd millennium BCE) that attest to early millet agriculture, Yangshao style pottery, or various types of graves (cist stone tombs) at several locations in the Upper Yellow River and western Sichuan with artifacts suggesting long-distance exchanges. Overall, these finds attest to the fact that interactions took place as of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age along the whole eastern rim of the plateau from Qinghai to Yunnan, connecting communities living off agriculture and mobile pastoralism. Changes in occupation and subsistence practices occurred due to changing climatic or political conditions, but contact between regions with different economies prompted various forms of exchange along and across natural pathways, linking the high altitudes of the plateau to the lower elevation areas of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.³

The ethnolinguistic prehistory of trans-Himalayan languages attests to the extremely complex histories of migration, contact, and linguistic shift across the mountainous regions that have left little trace in historical accounts.⁴ Dating from about 1300 BCE, oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty mention the Qiang, an exonym that refers to widely distributed groups living mainly along the eastern edges of the Tibetan Plateau and the Upper Yellow River valley. Chinese historical records use *Qiang* as a broad tribal and geographical label that was applied to the western boundary of the Chinese Empire.⁵ One of the earliest attested languages in this family is that of the Bailang Qiang, recorded in the form of poems—the “Songs of Bailang”—and transliterated using Chinese characters during the late Han dynasty (58–75 CE).⁶ The Bailang, however, left no written records. Most of these mountain-dwelling speakers of Trans-Himalayan languages are characterized by their oral traditions.

From the northern edge of the plateau through the strategic crossroads of Central Asian trade routes and Upper Yellow River grasslands to the corridor of alpine mountain ranges bordering present-day Sichuan and Yunnan, the region is a complex makeup of people of different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds resulting from a long history of settlement, voluntary immigration (traders, artisans), and forced resettlement resulting from Tibetan, Mongol, Chinese, and Manchu expansions and military conquests over the centuries.

Groups beyond the western borders of the Tang and Song dynasties (960–1279) began to be referred to by the exonyms *Fan* or *Xifan* (“Western foreigners”)—thereby named in relation to the Tibetan Empire known as *Tufan*.⁷ Both a geopolitical name and generic ethnonym, Xifan groups were to be found all along the mountain corridor where, further south, they met with the White and Black Man (“barbarians”), also collectively referred to as Yi.

Tibetan imperial expansion into northeastern and southeastern parts of the plateau has undoubtedly influenced the makeup of the region where some communities still refer to origin stories that relate to Central Tibet, Ü (Dbus). This vast eastern region was called Dokham (Mdo khams, Ch. *Duogansi*), subdivided into upper and lower parts, Dotö (Mdo stod) and Domé (Mdo smad)—regions that became known as Kham and Amdo.⁸ Tibetan communities speak a variety of sometimes mutually unintelligible dialects, and of those officially recognized as members of the Zang “nationality” (Ch. *minzu*) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), more than ten subgroups speak non-Tibetan languages.⁹

Under Chinese imperial influence, native elites were to receive a Confucian education, and the Sinitic script was the language of officialdom. However, with the diffusion and adoption of Buddhism in Central Tibet since the 9th century, Tibetan script imposed itself among eastern Tibetans and many non-Tibetans. According to a distinction between believers (*nang pa*) and nonbelievers (*phyi pa*), Central Tibet projected its own civilizing project onto the frontiers of the state.¹⁰ Among the often multilingual frontier communities, only a few had developed their own scripts, such as various Yi communities inhabiting northeastern Yunnan and southern Sichuan. While these scripts sometimes served political or administrative purposes, they were generally the prerogative of ritualists, as was the case for the Naxi *do-bbaq* (Ch. *dongba*) pictographic script, reputedly invented in the 13th century under a possible Bonpo influence.¹¹ Together with what remains of these indigenous scriptures, the only alternative sources to balance Tibetan or Chinese historical written records are oral traditions—in the form of epics, origin stories, and rituals—many of which are still alive today.

Imperial Legacies

Power centers and imperial forces certainly shaped the territoriality of this heterogeneous region, exerted civilizational, politico-economic, or cultural influence and introduced different practices and beliefs, which affected the destiny of its historical kingdoms, principalities, or diverse communities. Frontier situations varied according to evolving historical conditions but have been presented predominantly as a bipolar confrontation with the Chinese on one side and the Tibetans on the other. The places in between, however, are not exclusively “Sino-Tibetan,” if understood as a marker of exclusive belonging or hybridity: “Tibet” and “China” are themselves changing historical formations forged by successive political regimes.

The beginning of a “Sino-Tibetan” historiography proper, however, can be traced back to the concomitant emergence of Tang China (618–907) and the Tibetan Empire (618–842) of the Yarlung dynasty, with the first frontier treaties between the two empires being concluded in the 8th–9th centuries. The Tibetan Empire’s northward expansion led to the absorption of the

Zhangzhung and Sumpa Kingdoms that had flourished on the upper plateau since c. 1000 BCE.¹² After successful military incursions against pastoral nomadic empires and the submission of the Azha (Tuyuhun) Kingdom, the Tibetan Tsenpo (“King”) Songtsen Gampo (604–650) requested a matrimonial alliance and one was eventually sealed with the marriage of the Tang dynasty’s Princess Wencheng.

Further south were vast zones of mutual influence, dotted with many independent polities of various natures. The Tibetans made the Mywa tribes of north Yunnan vassals in 703–704. These Black Mywa (Ch. *Wuman*) and White Mywa (Ch. *Baiman*) were divided into six principalities (*zhao*) which Piluoge united to found the Nanzhao Kingdom (737–903) with support from the Tang court that granted him the title of “King of Yunnan” (*Yunnan wang*). In its growth northward, Nanzhao subjugated the Naxi (Moso) Kingdom that would continue to play a major role as a buffer polity with Tibet—which called both of them *Jang*. Nanzhao later sided with the Tibetans and was recognized as “Tsenpo’s younger brother” (*btsan po gcung*). These mutual recognitions did not prevent tactical reversals and large-scale military campaigns: Tibet’s sacking of the Chinese capital Chang’an (763) attests to its strength and Nanzhao, which maintained shifting alliances, became powerful enough to attack Chengdu (829).¹³ To counter Nanzhao’s growing regional influence, the Tang formed military alliances in the mid-9th century with several Wuman (Nasu) tribal polities located on the border between Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou.¹⁴ The last treaty signed between Tang China and imperial Tibet in 821–823 was memorialized by a bilingual stele erected in Lhasa, which qualifies the relationship between the two empires as “uncle and nephew/father-in-law and son-in-law” in reference to their matrimonial alliances.¹⁵

During this period, China, Tibet, and Nanzhao were expansive political and civilizational centers in their own right, increasingly influenced by Buddhism and shaped by geopolitical tensions consisting of reciprocal albeit hierarchical relationships and often overlapping sovereignties. As their power and influence evolved, the three polities engaged in regular commercial exchanges, diplomatic dealings, and war. The major military campaigns launched by the Tibetan Empire and Tang China involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sometimes recruited among indigenous allies, and led to military settlements and very significant population movements and displacements. Such was the case of the Tangut/Minyak tribes who, after assisting the Tang against the Tuyuhun, escaped pressure from the Tibetans and migrated eastward until they founded the Western Xia (1038–1227) Empire. Its total destruction by Genghis Khan (c. 1167–1227) caused a new wave of migration toward eastern Tibet.

Sectarian persecutions during the 7th and 9th centuries in Central Tibet had a profound influence on the religious composition of the eastern regions and on the presence of various Buddhist sects. There, the religious landscape evolved with a growing presence of Bonpos, especially in southern Amdo and Gyalrong, or the predominance of the Nyingmapa (*rnying ma pa*) in Kham, and deeply influenced many communities’ religious practices and shamanic traditions. In the early 17th century, when the Geluk (*dge lugs*) school emerged as the state religion of Tibet, many non-Geluk sects were again marginalized and migrated to the eastern edge of the plateau. Non-Tibetan regional powers also played a role in promoting Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Naxi Kingdom, which became a strong supporter of the Karmapa.¹⁶

The incorporation of both Tibet and China into the new Mongolian imperial power brought profound transformations and reshuffled ethnic and political identities and solidarities. Mongols supported Buddhism and established a “priest–patron” or *chöyön* (*mchod yon*) relationship with Tibet. Northeastern Tibet became dominated by Mongol princes, and Kubilai Khan (1215–1294), founder of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), launched a military campaign that followed the eastern edges of the Tibetan Plateau in a southward movement that reached upper Burma. One of the Mongols’ chief goals was to subjugate the Dali Kingdom (937–1253) that had succeeded Nanzhao. The fall of this regional polity to the Mongols, along with the Naxi Kingdom of Lijiang, marked the beginning of a territorial–political integration and peripheralization process that the Ming and Qing dynasties were to consolidate.

Lingsang and Gonjo became the first important and stable polities of eastern Tibet in the 13th and 14th centuries, with the support of the Sakya government of Central Tibet. Lingsang played an important role concerning trade and diplomacy with the Yuan–Ming dynasties until its incorporation into the Dergé Kingdom in the 17th century.

The Mongols remained powerful political actors in Amdo during the 16th and 17th centuries but gradually disappeared from the political scene by the mid-19th century. In contrast, Muslim communities became more prominent and actively engaged in trade but also divided by intrareligious conflicts. Major unrest in Shaanxi in the late 19th century led a vast number of Muslims to flee to Gansu. With the declining power of the Qing dynasty and the subsequent unrest in Republican China, Muslim influence in the economy and politics of Amdo increased.¹⁷

The Mongol conquest reveals the importance of a north–south axis of influence and circulation facilitated by the main river valleys, which had long constituted natural migratory corridors. Various boundaries—ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural—crisscrossed the region and largely evolved over the course of historical encounters involving many diverse local communities. The continuous ebb and flow of internal and external power dynamics and successive processes of reterritorialization of large populations have constituted the social and historical matrix where political loyalties and ethnicities emerged and developed over the centuries, while economic and cultural exchanges intensified.

Trade and Commodities

Among the many products exchanged, salt was, as elsewhere in world history, a key resource subjected to early forms of state monopoly regarding its trade and production. Harvested from large salt lakes in Qinghai and northern Tibet, salt was more readily available to nomadic pastoralists who would exchange it for grain and other goods. It was also produced from brine from springs and salt wells in the border areas of Sichuan and Yunnan. Control over production sites remained critical for local power holders. For example, the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms regulated the supply of salt within its population and gained dominance over the salt wells in southern Sichuan after a long struggle with the Tang dynasty and the Tibetans.¹⁸ But the tea–horse trade was even more crucial in the history of exchanges that took place across the borderlands between the two “cores.”

Horses and other equidae had long been used for military operations, courier service, or transportation. The Yuan Mongol administration consolidated or established relay horse stations (Ch. *yizhan*) to contribute to the flow of transportation. Tea-horse bureaus (*chamasi*) and military garrisons were set up in Shaanxi from 1374 to 1397 to control the trade and became key nodes of exchange with Tibetan and Mongolian neighbors. The court utilized border commerce and the tribute system (*chaogong*) as a political device, and the privilege of trade became a gift awarded to those who brought “tribute items.” Horses were given as local presents to the throne and tea was the imperial reward.¹⁹ Many great monasteries and influential religious hierarchs led gift-offering delegations to the Emperor’s court and returned with Chinese commodities, tea, and luxury items. So-called “tribute missions” came from many of the native domains located along the borderlands.²⁰

Throughout the centuries, military operations became a channel for reforms, and merchants from Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Yunnan took advantage of the military presence to resume trade. Long-distance trade chiefly benefited power holders and religious estates, but commercial activities also involved local agricultural or pastoral communities. Smuggling was rife, mounted gangs of nomadic robbers were a constant threat, and banditry was a common feature of life in these borderlands.

By the 1650s, the horse-trading market activity was drawing to a close, and the Manchu-led Qing no longer needed Tibetan steeds. Trade on the border changed, involving a wider range of local products and various trade arrangements. The horse trade began to be replaced by musk, deer antlers, pelts, yak tails, wool, medicinal herbs, and many other products that were collected in growing numbers and processed throughout Kham.

While Tangkar (Stong ‘khor) in Qinghai had been the dominant trade mart and carried trade from Tibet to northern China (horses and wool), a growing network of routes led to three trading centers in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands: Dechen (Deqin/Adunzi) and Gyaltang (Zhongdian) in the south, Dartsedo in the center, and Zungchu (Songpan) in the north. The town of Zungchu in the Sharkhok region, where some Tibetans still trace their ancestors back to Songtsen Gampo’s soldiers and live alongside the Qiang, became a military headquarters for the Mongols, and the Ming maintained a permanent garrison there since it represented a strategic outpost. A stronghold of Bon religion, it became a key commercial node for the trade of “border tea” (Ch. *bian cha*), which was exchanged for horses in Amdo. During the early Ming dynasty, Dartsedo also became a center of the Sino-Tibetan tea and horse trade.²¹ Since the great majority of tea destined for Tibet originated from around Ya’an (Yazhou) in Sichuan Province, many routes eventually reached the towns of Dartsedo and Zungchu and were the main gate to Tibet. For economic, political, and practical reasons, these exchanges came to be increasingly channeled along the Sichuan-Kham border, with tea bricks often serving as a form of currency.

In Dartsedo, by the mid-18th century an increasing number of Shaanxi merchants dealt with the famous *achak khapa* (Ch. *guozhuang*), Khampa inn-keepers with roots in the hereditary nobility who mediated commercial exchanges between Chinese tea merchants and Tibetan wholesalers. Similarly, in Amdo, the *xiejia* (hostel) institution inherited certain duties from the former tea and horse trading administration that had been dissolved in 1735. *Xiejia* were an important

component of the political and economic structure of Gansu, and those established in major market places such as Xining or Tangkar were run by Muslim and Han Chinese and catered to Tibetan nomadic pastoralists, Mongols, and Monguors, shaping socioeconomic relations until the great political and economic changes of the 1920s.²²

Monastery-based trading networks played an important role in commercial activities. A monastery like Labrang (founded in 1709 in south Gansu), for example, was strategically located between the Tibetan highlands and the Chinese lowlands. Thanks to its vast revenue-generating estate, Labrang grew into a major religious, political, and economic institution and became a major conduit for cross-border economic and political relations between Tibetans, Muslims, Chinese, Mongols, and Manchus.

At the community level, market fairs were rare because most trade occurred in a more organized or professionalized manner, increasingly wholesale in the hands of bigger merchants, in major towns, and along main routes. From the late 18th century onward, trade lay at the heart of changes in which local communities contributed to structural transformations alongside the growth of more globalized networks and the emergence of transnational firms.²³ The Pangdatsang, a trading family from Markham in Kham, became one of the most successful family firms of 20th-century Tibet, even entering government service and aristocratic ranks.²⁴

From Frontier to Borderlands

The intensification of economic exchanges was made possible by the political and infrastructural changes that took place over the centuries following the Mongol conquest. The control of trade routes by central powers was accompanied by efforts to establish a form of administration that allowed for the extraction of taxes and corvée on their territorial border. While effective control was beyond their reach in most cases, transitional frontier zones gradually gave way to formal borderlands placed under more direct administration. The imperialism experience and the type of state presence differed significantly across the borderlands, just as they also varied greatly over time and from one place to another.

In the conquered region of far northeastern Tibet and the Gansu corridor, the Tibetan Empire had nominated a “pacification minister” (*bde blon*) to govern over the area of colonial administration named Delön-kham (or Dekham) where Tibetan became a lingua franca. The Mongols restructured their conquered territory on a massive scale according to a geo-administrative organization based on their military decimal structure, common in Inner Asia, whereby households were grouped by hundreds, thousands, or ten thousands.²⁵ “Pacification commissions” were established, such as the Dokham commission (Ch. *Duogansi xuanweisi*) that encompassed the eastern edge of the plateau. Administrative subdivision included “circuits” (Ch. *dao*) and “routes” (Ch. *lu*), in which requirements for tribute, maintenance of postal routes, or militia were enforced. These are key institutional elements of an imperial formation strategy for dealing with the borderlands that evolved into the Ming-Qing “native chieftain system” (*tusi zhidu*).²⁶

Concomitantly with the founding of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the fifth Dalai Lama came into power with the military assistance of the Qoshot Mongol Gushri Khan, a supporter of the Geluk school of Buddhism. From 1642 until 1952, the Ganden Palace (Ganden Phodrang) government, based in the city of Lhasa, ruled over the central part of the Tibetan Plateau and most of its western areas. During this period, the Dalai Lama expanded his religious as well as political influence over the eastern region through the building of a large number of monasteries or the conversion of existing ones to the Geluk school. From the east came the sustained effort of the Qing dynasty to incorporate parts of eastern Tibet into Sichuan Province both administratively and economically. The building of “officials’ roads” (*quandao*) that would facilitate the circulation of goods and people was promoted just as much out of geopolitical and military concerns as out of trade opportunism.²⁷ Of the two main trans-Kham trade routes, the southern one that connected the lowlands of the Sichuan basin to the highlands of the Tibetan Plateau through Dartsedo, Litang, and Batang was a vital pathway. After the Qing forces first garrisoned troops on the Tibetan Plateau in response to the Zunghar Mongol invasion and established resident commissioners (*ambans*) in Lhasa, a simple stone stele was erected (1727) on the mountain pass southwest of Batang along the main artery of communication between Sichuan and Tibet. The stele marked the political divide between Central Tibet and China proper at the watershed between the Driчу (Upper Yangtze) and Dzachu (Mekong) Rivers, which became the de facto Sino-Tibetan border.

Qing military interventions, combined with infrastructure work such as road building, brought about increased imperial authority in certain regions. This was particularly the case for the Gyalrong (Ch. Jiarong) region in northwestern Sichuan Province that became the theater of the two so-called Jinchuan wars (1747–1749 and 1771–1776), the costliest of all Qing military campaigns. In their aftermath, the policy of “substituting chieftains with state-appointed civilian officials” (*gaitu guiliu*) was introduced in the area, which would later be the case throughout the borderlands following a change from indirect to direct administration. From then on, the strategic goal became a more forceful integration of eastern Tibet.

The Tibetan state ruled over the exemplary religious center in Lhasa surrounded by regional administrations of lay and monastic estates. However, in the regions further removed from the Ganden Phodrang’s administration or Geluk religious networks, local kings, powerful monasteries, or tribal confederacies produced a variety of social structures and local models of jurisdiction. All along the eastern fringes of the Tibetan Plateau, there had long existed a wide variety of political and social formations and an intricate network of powerful religious institutions of different schools of Buddhism which, for some, played a very significant political and economic role.²⁸ Many of these polities displayed a resilient sense of centrality, even as other centers tried to define them as the periphery and often negotiated competing allegiances.²⁹

The increase in commercial activities undoubtedly influenced the growth of the polities located along the main arteries, such as the four main kingdoms of Kham, that is Chakla, Batang, Litang, and Dergé, which declared allegiance to the Qing emperor and for this reason became known in Chinese as the “four big native chieftains” (*si da tusi*). What this allegiance meant, however, differs largely. Traversed by the northern and more difficult of the two trans-Kham routes, the powerful Dergé Kingdom—founded around the same time as the Qing dynasty and the Ganden

Phodrang—enjoyed its heyday during the 18th century as a major political, economic, and religious center that gave birth to one of the most important printing houses in the Tibetan world and became known for supporting a more ecumenical *rimé* (*ris med*) movement. It could rival religious centers in Central Tibet and remained de facto independent until Qing military intervention in the late 19th century.³⁰

In effect, many Tibetan elites did not object to being subjects of the Chinese Empire whenever it was advantageous for them. The king (*rgyal po*) of Chakla who ruled over Minyak territory was among those who appreciated the benefits, given the strategic position of its capital in Dartsedo, which became the gateway to Tibet from Sichuan. In the mid-17th century, when the Dalai Lama's government extended across the plateau, a commissioner from Lhasa was stationed in Dartsedo to collect taxes. The Chakla king (Mingzheng *tusi*) rebelled against this set-up (1666): his murder, followed by Tibetan armies' eastward incursions, led to Qing retaliation. Their military intervention allowed new territories to the west to be placed under the king's authority and henceforth outside of Lhasa's political influence, with Dajianlu prefecture (*ting*) being created in 1729.

Further south, in northwest Yunnan, the Naxi were one of the few border peoples to pledge allegiance immediately upon the founding of the Ming dynasty (1369–1644). Granted a hereditary title and the Chinese surname Mu, the Naxi ruling house was made responsible for resisting Tibetan advances to secure the empire's southwestern border. As a result of several military campaigns during the Ming dynasty, the kingdom of Lijiang (Tib. 'Jang sadam) expanded its domain to areas of northwest Yunnan and southwest Sichuan, as far as Batang and Litang, in Kham.³¹

The Chinese Empire's system of indirect rule through native domains certainly became a step toward integration but it also allowed for the maintenance of native leaders and their political system with a large degree of independence. Even when they had been granted *tusi* titles that implied a form of allegiance and sometimes contributed to legitimating their position locally, imperial bureaucracy—especially during the Ming and the early Qing—did not interfere with *tusi* administration and demanded only a nominal level of tribute.³²

The Impossible Border

The Chinese Empire, which nurtured a vision of a core territory surrounded by tributary states, maintained a sphere of influence with evolving and often porous borders. Similarly, the frontier constellations of the Tibetan borderlands did not rely on established hard boundaries. For both centers of power, the borderlands played the strategic role of buffer zones. Internally, the borderlands were also the locus of political movements that attest to the agency of local polities, clans, or particular strongmen. The rise of the Nyarong chieftain Gönpo Namgyel in the mid-19th century and the ensuing instability in trade and political relations became an issue of concern for both Tibetan and Chinese centers of power. His attempt to unify the Kham region politically was eventually defeated by military intervention on the part of the Lhasa government which extended its administrative rule to this part of Kham.³³

The Anglo-French advance in South and Southeast Asia and increased geopolitical pressure on Tibet from Russia from the late 19th century onward prompted the Qing government to strengthen its administrative control over Sichuan and Yunnan: the Sino-Tibetan borderlands became tied to larger geopolitical issues framed by notions of suzerainty and sovereignty. In 1903–1904, a British military incursion reached Lhasa and imposed trade relations and direct diplomacy that challenged Qing authority. As the imperial government sought to limit the loss of its control over Tibetan areas, the Sichuan governor general Lu Chuanlin (1836–1910) prescribed a forward policy and a more interventionist stance. The emergence of a transformative developmentalist approach during China's modernization efforts from 1895 to 1911 saw the frontier as a space requiring both political and economic intervention. When Zhao Erfeng (1845–1911) was appointed first Sichuan-Yunnan frontier commissioner in 1906, he launched deadly military interventions against Tibetan leaders and monastic institutions to establish a new administration.

The Lhasa government felt the urge to modernize and militarize and, as the Qing government disintegrated, it proclaimed control over all “Greater Tibet” (*Bod chenpo*) and expelled Qing troops from the capital. After the founding of the Republic of China, divergent boundary proposals were discussed at the Simla Conference held in India in 1913 with British and Tibetan representatives, but the line of demarcation between what came to be known as “Inner” and “Outer” Tibet remained a source of conflict.³⁴

In Republican China, various Guomindang-allied warlord regimes competed for power with one another and with a myriad of local lay and monastics power centers. A border war broke out in 1930 when Tibetan military advances in Sichuan and Qinghai were countered by combined offensives by the prominent Hui Muslim Ma family in Amdo and the governor of Sichuan Liu Wenhui (1895–1976). Liu took control of territories that were consolidated into Xikang Province in 1939, an idea first formulated in the late Qing to incorporate administratively most of the Kham region. He ruled over Xikang as his fiefdom until 1949, implementing ambitious modernizing measures for which more settlers were required; he also took advantage of Xikang's remoteness to promote opium production in the 1930s and 1940s, which the Qing had tried to eradicate.³⁵ In Amdo, the Ma family reached a pragmatic accommodation with secular or monastic leaders to establish their provincial power, and gained a reputation as petty despots who conducted ethnic pogroms and religious persecution. In the context of nation-building projects, the 1930s saw the rise of “self-rule” movements in eastern Tibet, such as “Kham for the Khampa,” that devised new visions for political action and forms of regional autonomy.³⁶ Bapa Püntso Wangyel, who was from Batang and had been educated at a Chinese school, founded a secret Tibetan Communist Party in the 1930s and supported self-determination for Tibet.³⁷ After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), however, many Khampas joined a resistance movement which for several decades was backed by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Resistance then became a national project and it is in this context that the “three regions of Tibet” (*chol kha gsum*; Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham) acquired an aura of political unity.³⁸

Sense of Place

The historical encounters between the Tibetans and Chinese certainly ensured the maintenance of a cultural and ethnic divide but also involved many diverse local communities who did not recognize themselves in either of these two large categories of identity. There is in fact no strict equivalent to “Tibetan” in the vernacular—either *Böpa* or *Börik*—and what “Chinese” refers to has varied historically and is not the equivalent of Han. The coinage “Sino-Tibetan borderlands” is a trope for what lies “in between”: worlds of tremendous complexity, cultural distinctiveness, and diversity.

Local communities lived in a complex and multipolar politico-cultural environment that involved mutual influences, processes of cultural translation, and flexible arrangements in religious and cultural practices from which their own self-representations emerged. At the village or family unit level, historical experiences vastly differed for the various agricultural and pastoral populations who had developed forms of regional attachment that evolved in the context of a changing political landscape. Many dimensions other than ethnicity shaped people’s identities in this shifting field of cultural, religious, economic, and political relationships. Access to land for grazing or subsistence farming and subsequent taxation was of course an important factor in patterns of relations within or between communities; and land was in the hands of a few lay or religious power holders. Within the fragmented political systems, territorial demarcations were not always clear but, for most people, there existed a strong attachment to their valleys of residence, considered as “homelands” (*pha yul*, “fatherland”)—or their equivalent for non-Tibetan speaking communities.³⁹ For Tibetans, the perceived divide between Bö (or Ü-Tsang), Kham, and Amdo only corresponds to a higher level of identification and regional attachment, with little relevance at local level.

This sense of belonging inscribed in particular landscapes animates local identities. Territorial deities have long played an important role in local notions of authority and sovereignty. In contemporary eastern Tibet, the propitiation of local mountain deities (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*) who control particular territories is still a major part of the religious life of lay communities and contributes to inhabitants’ sense of identity.⁴⁰ These practices may have pre-Buddhist components and exist with many local variations among neighboring non-Tibetan communities for whom mountains are ancestral figures. In their oral traditions, the high peaks are often places of origin from which migration routes lead to current areas of settlement—a journey that the souls of the deceased follow back to the land of their ancestors.⁴¹

In this regard, there are many points of overlap between origin stories of neighboring groups, Tibetans, Qiang, Naxi (Moso), Pumi (Premi), Yi (Nuosu), Ersu and others. These include, among other themes, the descent from heaven (by a rope or chain) onto a mountain, which often informs vernacular notions of authority; four or six primordial clans at the root of social organization; or descent from a pair of siblings or two brothers from whom ethnic differentiation is then established.⁴²

Some of these themes are well represented in the famous Gesar epic (one of the world's longest) which is a repository of a mixture of shamanic and Buddhist ideas and values in its various written or oral forms. Widespread in eastern Tibet where it possibly originated, it has been transmitted far beyond (from Mongolia to Ladakh) and its recitation is a specialty of bards from nomadic areas of Kham and Amdo. Gesar of Ling, historicized as an ancestral hero associated with the ancient Lingsang polity, is a prominent culture-hero also venerated as a protector deity by local people and propitiated in a manner akin to mountain deities.⁴³ Today, the multifaceted Gesar tradition is actively promoted in the People's Republic of China. This epic, listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has inspired modern cultural productions and the figure of the warrior-King Gesar is celebrated at various festivals. Several regions have claimed to be the location of authentic sites in the epic, which has become a vehicle of a regional sense of identity, in particular in Dergé, Yulshul, and Golok.

Territorialization and Reordering of the Borderlands

In this context where various peoples speaking different languages have long interacted across differences, past political loyalties and patterns of religious or cultural difference were not necessarily formulated in terms of ethnicity. However, the hardening of the fluctuating ethnic boundaries of the past became important in a process of territorialization and ethnic categorization, characteristic of borderland integration in the 20th century.

Since the administrative restructuring that followed the founding of the People's Republic of China, only an internal administrative border separates the Tibet Autonomous Region from adjacent provinces to the east where more than half of the current six million Tibetans make up the majority of inhabitants of several autonomous administrative units. Qinghai has four Tibetan/Zang autonomous prefectures, one Golok-Tibetan as well as one Mongol-Tibetan prefecture. It is adjacent to Sichuan's Ngawa/Aba Tibetan-Qiang autonomous prefecture and a large part of Kham lies in the Kardze/Ganzi Tibetan autonomous prefecture. Further south, northwest Yunnan hosts a Tibetan autonomous prefecture where Tibetans make up only one third of the population. These administrative divisions represent the modern reordering of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, which reinforces or challenges preexisting forms of attachment and territorial anchorage of identities.

In the 1950s, the official identification and classification of all "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*) contributed to sorting out as well as to assigning identities. The name Qiang became the official minzu name for the Rma people of western Sichuan; and many self-identified or officially identified Tibetans who speak a variety of non-Tibetan languages, such as the Gyalrong, Minyag, Ersu, Nameze, among others, because of long historical political and cultural influences, have been merged into the Zang category—which makes its translation as "Tibetan" problematic. Although some have contested this inclusion and have claimed a separate minzu identity, in most cases these groups are treated as local (cultural) groups rather than as collectivities eligible for minzu status.

The official identification process has resulted in a mismatch of ethnic/minzu categories that have created new distinctions. While the so-called Xifan of historical records located in Sichuan were generally recognized as Zang, the Xifan living in Yunnan Province sought and obtained recognition as the Pumi minzu.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Mosuo/Naze, depending on which side of the border they were situated were either grouped into the Naxi minzu (in Yunnan) or identified as Menggu (Mongols), claiming to be descendants of Yuan dynasty soldiers (in Sichuan). These situations are just as much the result of particular historical trajectories and shared memories as political strategies. Through a process of reinvention, local history and mythical motifs can serve to claim a particular ancestry to match the official classification and, together with the active promotion of cultural features, minzu identities are reinforced.⁴⁵

The totalizing nature of official minzu identification and historiography contributes to producing a unified national history. Within this framework, the ancient Qiang (or Di-Qiang) category is considered to be the ancestral source of the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples found along the Sino-Tibetan rim, all of whom would ultimately be of the same origin.⁴⁶ However, with the emergence of the educated minority elite and in the context of various political stakes in the development of historiography in China or the promotion of indigenous culture, new visions of each group's place in history have emerged. Some of these new historiographies may run counter to the dominant scholarly narrative of a common Qiang origin, and several historians—notably Yi and Naxi—assert their minzu identity on their own terms, claiming an indigenous origin that places them at the source of Chinese civilization.⁴⁷

Insofar as minzu identities are accepted—even promoted—and as they are embedded in administrative structures at different levels, borderlands no longer exist as such. In the contemporary period, multiple factors have contributed to a recentering of many of the places and communities through a process of cultural revitalization, as well as internal economic and religious dynamics, which coexist with new forms of marginalization.

Recentering the Borderlands

After decades of material and spiritual devastation, a major cultural revival took place due to changes initiated by the Chinese regime in the 1980s, with accrued religious freedom, notably the rebuilding of temples and monasteries.⁴⁸ Since the 2000s, internal economic changes and more global influences have affected local economies, culture, and social life on an unprecedented scale and at an unprecedented speed, resulting in profound social transformations.

In this context, communities can reaffirm particular identities and a sense of centrality, often through the reappropriation of local history—the past grandeur of a kingdom or the uniqueness of ancient traditions. The Gyalrong region, with its unique linguistic features that set it apart from both Amdo and Kham, is now for example branded in popular culture the historical “Nüguo” or “country (ruled by) women” of Chinese annals, the “Hot Valley of the Queen in the East” (Tib. *shar rgyal mo tsha ba rong*).⁴⁹ Contemporary cultural politics, associated with heritage discourses and practices and the development of tourism, contribute to sweeping transformations on a different scale. A case in point is the town of Gyaltang (Zhongdian) in

Yunnan Province, which changed its name in 2001 to the myth-laden Shangri-La (Xianggelila). This process of branding epitomizes the merging of Western and Chinese imaginings, supposedly infused with local Buddhist and Tibetan culture, in order to create a new paradise for tourism that fosters harmonious interethnic relations.⁵⁰

The “multinationalist” ethos of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has encouraged the marketing of minority customs, music, dance, and “ethnic” culture, which often emphasizes local distinctiveness. Concurrently, the borderlands are the ongoing target of sweeping biopolitical interventions that result in forms of disempowerment and inequalities. The Great Western Development Strategy (Ch. *Xibu da kaifa*) launched in the 2000s introduced a series of policies and large-scale investments in infrastructures (highways, railways, and airports) and economic growth, which contributed to social-spatial transformations, increased urbanization, and the resettlement and sedentarization of farmers and many pastoral communities. The establishment of one of the largest nature reserves in the world, the Three Rivers’ Headwaters National Nature Reserve (*Sanjiangyuan guojia ziran baohuqu*) in Qinghai, has in particular accelerated the implementation of an “ecological migration policy” to relocate nomads. Translocal trade networks are reemerging in new forms with a boom in the trade of matsutake mushrooms and especially of caterpillar fungus, a seasonal activity that has had profound repercussions on rural economic life and income discrepancies throughout the region.⁵¹ The various ways in which people adapt to these policies and seize new opportunities make them active agents of change.

The eastern borders of the plateau occupy a significant place in the religious landscape as the home of major centers of Buddhist monasticism (such as Kumbum or Labrang in Amdo) and important religious pilgrimages to sacred mountains (such as Amnye Machen in Golok country, or Khawa Karpo in northwest Yunnan). But more importantly, they have also become particularly attractive because of charismatic religious “treasure-revealer” (Tib. *gter ston*) figures. Among these prominent masters are founders of semimonastic encampments (*chos gar*), such as Yachen and Larung Gar (in Peyul and Serta, respectively). This old tradition has reached an unprecedented scale as the encampments have grown exponentially, with over ten thousand practitioners joining, including many Han Chinese, to the extent that the state felt compelled to order demolitions and evictions throughout the 2000s.⁵² These movements have become epicenters of Tibetan Buddhist revival in post-Mao China, involving a large proportion of nuns, new networks of economic support from Chinese urbanites, and the rise of an antislaughter and vegetarianism movement.⁵³

People living in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands differ in their relation to the state, depending on their education, residence, and minzu affiliation. Local grievances are often linked to a lack of economic opportunities, problems of access to education, or specific government policies. Identity claims are also politicized in different ways.⁵⁴ The political protests that erupted in the months leading up to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing took place chiefly in various locations across the northeastern Tibetan Plateau. The quasi-totality of self-immolations occurred in Kham and Amdo where the movement began.

The historical trajectories of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and their changing territorial imprint have constantly altered and shaped the way people are located. A kaleidoscopic view emphasizes the importance of relations of interdependence, beyond the binaries of domination and resistance, to bring to the fore borderland multiplicities, emerging dynamics, and new forms of belonging.

Discussion of the Literature

There is no linear genealogy in the development of the “Sino-Tibetan borderlands” as a field of inquiry. Diverse or divergent interests motivated the first scholars, botanists, explorers, or missionaries who collected knowledge and wrote about the border regions during the high tide of Euro-American imperialism.⁵⁵ Major contributions about Kham and Amdo Tibetans and questions of frontier policies came from Chinese scholars such as Li Anzhai and Ren Naiqiang who played a leading role in the development of Tibetan studies in the Republican period.⁵⁶ And early contributions by Rolf Stein about the historiography of the “Sino-Tibetan marches” and the Gesar epic particularly stand out.⁵⁷

A growing body of scholarship falls within the scope of Sino-Tibetan Borderland studies, even if it may not always make use of this debatable conventional designation. By and large, contributions have come from either Tibetan studies or Chinese studies, and only more recently from the perspective of borderland studies. The regionalization of research on the Tibetan cultural area has laid the focus on specific locales and historical contexts relevant to either “Kham studies” or “Amdo studies,” which has led to the publication of seminal edited volumes.⁵⁸ Research has concentrated on the influence of the Chinese imperial system in relation to larger geopolitical issues and the emergence of the nation-state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, on the shifting strategies of colonization and the provincialization of the frontier, or on the development of self-rule and resistance in Kham.⁵⁹

More in-depth studies of specific premodern polities, monastic institutions, or religious traditions have started to uncover the great diversity of historical experiences. Several authors have shown how premodern Tibet developed its own Buddhist civilizing mission at the state border, and that the Tibetan world is also characterized by internal diversity and the related dynamics of ethnicity.⁶⁰ Studies have increasingly prompted a reconsideration of the center-periphery paradigm as a historical construct and have contributed to a multipolar social history of Chinese and Tibetan worlds as they meet on the border. One key development in recent studies of locales in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands is the emphasis on a history from below and growing attention to alternative histories not found in official records. There is now greater attention to local agency beyond the role of elites and a deeper analysis of the dynamics of colonial expansion. In this new wave of studies, notions of “contact zone” and “middle ground” are applied to various aspects of local adaptation and change.⁶¹ Some approach borders as inherently ambivalent and unstable liminal spaces, or focus on marginalized populations in the context of porous and labile ethnic, linguistic, and territorial boundaries.⁶²

Since the 1990s, under the leadership of Tibetan researchers in China and in exile, several series of publications on the history and cultural traditions of eastern Tibet have been produced, most notably the key set of publications from the Amnye Machen Institute and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.⁶³ In China where there is a growing interest in local histories, from individual monasteries or former chieftains to specific regions, there are numerous contributions in both Tibetan and Chinese languages regarding the history, culture, and contemporary economic development of Amdo and Kham.⁶⁴ Chinese language sources seldom make use of the politically sensitive “Sino-Tibetan borderlands” (*hanzang bianjiang*) coinage, but focus instead on “frontier Tibetan societies” (*zangbian shehui*), or simply studies of Kham and Amdo. A major wave of contributions since the late 1990s falls under the heading of studies of the “Tibeto-Yi corridor” (*Zang-Yi zoulang*), following anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s coinage in 1980, and combine *longue-durée* historical approaches with ethnographic and linguistic studies. Published in large numbers, these studies have contributed significantly to reframing the region away from Sino-Tibetan relations per se to focus on local cultures, ethnocultural diversity, and the dynamics of exchange.⁶⁵ There has been debate in China over this label, which replaces “Sino-Tibetan” by another binary and tends to overshadow the multiple other communities (Qiang, Naxi, Bai, Gyalrong/Jiarong, etc.). Another particularly effervescent topic is that of the “tea-horse roads” (*chama gudao*), which have been over-popularized beyond academia and highly marketed for tourism.⁶⁶

Primary Sources

The study of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands is highly dependent on Chinese sources because historically the China-based states of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties were particularly concerned with their respective frontiers. Major archival collections can be found at the First Historical Archives in Beijing, the Second Historical Archives in Nanjing, or the Tibetan Autonomous Region Archives in Lhasa.⁶⁷ Provincial archives also hold collections relevant to the study of the borderlands, such as the Sichuan Provincial Archives in Chengdu⁶⁸ or the Qinghai Provincial Archives in Xining. Local Chinese gazetteers⁶⁹ in particular can provide useful information on local history and culture.

Few Tibetan sources are available for earlier periods and the majority of Tibetan-language records go back to the 17th century with the rise of Geluk power. The Ganden Phodrang polity in Central Tibet produced limited records of its institutional (religious) presence in eastern Tibet. Many Tibetan-language sources can be found in the collections of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala, India. Biographies of important lamas who visited the eastern regions are also valuable historical sources, and some autobiographical and hagiographical accounts of Tibetan clerics have recently been published (see Links to Digital Materials).

More importantly, oral histories are a key resource for the study of nonofficial historiographies. The Tibetan Oral History Project covers Tibetan life during the first half of the 20th century. It features interview material documenting conditions of monastic, social, and political life in modern Tibet.

Western primary sources, beyond published documentary works, include missionary archive collections, travel writings, and unpublished government documents, such as Foreign Office files in London.

Links to Digital Materials

The Buddhist Digital Resource Centre, BUDA Library [_<https://library.bdrc.io/>](https://library.bdrc.io/)

The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives [_<https://tibetanlibrary.org/>](https://tibetanlibrary.org/)

The Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL), University of Virginia, Mandala [_<https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/>](https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/)

The Treasury of Lives [_<https://treasuryoflives.org/>](https://treasuryoflives.org/)

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Notes

1. Transcription of Chinese terms follows the pinyin system. Tibetan terms in-text are transcribed mostly according to the Tibetan and Himalayan Library Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan and are generally followed by the Wylie transliteration given in parenthesis.
2. The focus here is not historiographical and a strict chronology has not been followed. For an overview of major events of relevance for this region, see Stéphane Gros, "Chronology of Major Events with Particular Attention to the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands," in *Frontier Tibet: Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, ed. Stéphane Gros (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 19–33.
3. Jade D'Alpoim-Guedes and Mark Aldenderfer, "The Archaeology of the Early Tibetan Plateau: New Research on the Initial Peopling through the Early Bronze Age," <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-019-09137-6> *Journal of Archaeological Research* 28 (2020): 339–392; and Jade D'Alpoim-Guedes and Anke Hein, "Landscapes of Prehistoric Northwestern Sichuan: From Early Agriculture to Pastoralist Lifestyles," <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2018.1423830> *Journal of Field Archaeology* 43, no. 2 (2018): 121–135.
4. Geerge Van Driem, "Trans-Himalayan," in *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics*, ed. Thomas Owen-Smith and Nathan W. Hill (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2014), 11–40.
5. Wang Mingke, *Hua-Xia bianyuan: Lishi jiyi yu zuqun rentong* [On the Borders of China: Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006); Wang Mingke, *Qiang zai Han-Zang zhi jian: Chuanxi Qiangzu de lishi renleixue yanjiu* [The Qiang between Han and Tibetans: A Historical Anthropology of the Qiang of Western Sichuan] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2008). The "Qiang belt" included many subgroups, such as the Canlang Qiang, Baima Qiang, Bailang Qiang, or Maoniui Qiang, among others.
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7. Yang Shao-yun, "Fan and Han: The Origins and Uses of a Conceptual Dichotomy in Mid-Imperial China, ca. 500–1200," in *Political Strategies of Identity-Building in Non-Han Empires in China*, ed. Francesca Fiaschetti and Julia Schneider (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2014), 9–35.
8. Ren Naiqiang and Tshe-dbang Rdo-rje, "A Toponymic and Administrative Study of *Mdo-Khams*," in *Theses in Tibetology in China*, compiled by Hu Tan (Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 1991), 30–66.

9. These languages used to be referred to as “Xifan languages” and their phylogeny is still debated; they include Nameze (Namuyi), Minyak (Muya), Ersu, Rgyal-rong (Jiarong), Horpa (Ergong), Premi/Prinmi (Pumi), Shixing (Xumi), nDra-pa (Zhaba), Choyo (Queyu), Lavrung, and Guiqiong. See George van Driem, “The Ancestry of Tibetan,” in *The Third International Conference on Tibetan Language, Volume 1: Proceedings of the Panels on Domains of Use and Linguistic Interactions*, ed. Gray Tuttle, Kunsang Gya, Karma Dare, and Johnathan Wilber (New York: Trace Foundation, 2013), 363–397. For Tibetan “minority languages,” see Gerald Roche and Hiroyuki Suzuki, “Tibet’s Minority Languages: Diversity and Endangerment,” *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2018): 1227–1278.
10. Françoise Pommaret, “The Mon-pa Revisited: In Search of Mon,” in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Toni Huber (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives), 52–73; Sara Shneiderman, “Barbarians at the Border and Civilising Projects: Analysing Ethnic and National Identities in the Tibetan Context,” in *Tibetan Borderlands, Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003*, vol. 2, ed. P. Christiaan Klieger (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 9–34; and Peter Schwieger, *Conflict in a Buddhist Society: Tibet Under the Dalai-Lama* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021), 77–95.
11. For Yi, see David Bradley, “Language Policy for the Yi,” in *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 195–213; and Erik Mueggler, “Lady Qu’s Inscriptions: Literacy and Sovereignty in a Native Domain, Southwest China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 1 (2020): 27–48. For Naxi, see Duncan Poupard, “With the Power of Their Forefathers: Kinship between Early Tibetan Ritualists and the Naxi dongba of Southwest China,” *Revue d’études Tibétaines*, no. 56 (2020): 89–124.
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15. Pan Yinhong, “The Sino-Tibetan Treaties in the Tang Dynasty,” *T’oung Pao* 78, no. 1/3 (1992): 116–161.
16. Karl Debreczeny, “Dabaojigong and the Regional Tradition of Ming Sino-Tibetan Painting in the Kingdom of Lijiang,” in *Buddhism between Tibet and China*, ed. Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 97–148; and Yang Fuquan, *Naxizu yu zangzu lishi guanxi yanjiu* [A Study of the Historical Relations between Naxi and Tibetans] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2005).
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18. Zhao Min, “Salt, Grain and the Change of Deities in Early Ming Western Yunnan,” in *The Transformation of Yunnan in Ming China: From the Dali Kingdom to Imperial Province*, ed. Christian Daniels and Jianxiong Ma (London: Routledge, 2020), 20.

19. Practices of gift exchange often imply ambiguities and the Chinese Emperors understood things given to them as “tribute.” For a recent contribution, see Gyatso Marnyi, “The Ming, Tibetan and Mongol Interactions in Shaping the Ming Fortification, Multicultural Society and Natural Landscape in Mdo smad, 1368–1644,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 55 (2020): 351–384.
20. Morris Rossabi, “The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia during the Ming,” *Journal of Asian History* 4, no. 2 (1970): 136–168.
21. Elliot Sperling, “The Szechwan-Tibet Frontier in the Fifteenth Century,” *Ming Studies* 26 (1988): 37–55.
22. Bianca Horlemann, “Tibetan Nomadic Trade, the Chinese ‘xiejia’ System and the Sino-Tibetan Border Market in Stong ‘khor/Dan’gaer in 19th/20th Century Amdo,” in *Studies on the History and Literature of Tibet and the Himalaya*, ed. Roberto Vitali (Kathmandu: Vajra, 2013), 109–142; and Yudru Tsomu, “Guozhuang Trading Houses and Tibetan Middlemen in Dartsedo, the ‘Shanghai of Tibet,’” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 5, no. 2 (2019): 291–349.
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25. Evelyn Yang, “Tracing the *Chol kha gsum*: Reexamining a Sa skya-Yuan Period Administrative Geography,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 37 (2016): 551–568.
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