

Khams pa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority

Review >
Central Asia

Early histories of the Tibetan cultural world have concerned themselves with charting the development and idiosyncracies of a 'Tibetan nation', its complexly related political and religious institutions (Samuel 1993; Smith 1996), and with chronicling its demise through gradual Chinese encroachment (Goldstein 1991). One of the lessons drawn from these monumental histories of Tibet has been the sheer difficulty of pinning down the trans-regional influences that have come to shape Tibetan politics from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century. The Tibetan border regions of Khams and Amdo, caught between the competing influences of the central Tibetan politics and China, have developed their own, largely autonomous, political discourses. The relative autonomy of these regional locales poses a challenge to history's focus on the nation-state as a principal subject of inquiry, and calls for the elaboration of a Tibetan 'frontier history'.

By Audrey Prost

Khams pa Histories, along with the other regional investigations emerging from Tibetan Studies today, offers a more local and unique perspective on Tibetan border worlds. This collection of essays brilliantly demonstrates the political fluidity of Tibetan border worlds and the agency of local actors in negotiating both Tibetan and Chinese assimilationist projects.

Both Wim van Spengen and William Coleman investigate the causes of the ongoing political unrest in Khams at the turn of the twentieth century. Van Spengen examines the political backdrop to the 1906 siege at Sangpiling monastery in Khams' Chatring district, and the monastery's problematically liminal political position at the Sino-Tibetan border, as Chinese fears over British incursions in Central Tibet lead them to tighten control over the region. As local lamas and Chinese administrators vied for influence in the political vacuum created by the breakdown in local Tibetan administration, Chinese garrisons and Tibetans alike struggled for survival. The large number of people displaced by Chinese plundering was one of the causes for the growth of large-scale banditry in the region. Van Spengen argues that the siege of Sangpiling and endemic banditry are symptomatic of southern Khams' deeply unstable political climate, and a consequence of the frailty of its cultural-ecological frontier. William Coleman takes a somewhat different stance toward instability in the region in his discussion of the 1905 uprising at Batang. Coleman convincingly contends that a network of indigenous leaders, monasteries, Qing Empire representatives and merchants was responsible for maintaining a precarious regime of order in the region until the twentieth century. This fragile nexus was irrevocably lost after the Batang uprising, when Qing influence over the region overwhelmed both monastic authorities and indigenous leaders, inexorably drawing Khams into the Chinese nationalist project.

Peng Wengbin's fascinating contribution explores the intersection between Khamspa identity politics and China's nationalist project in the newly created province of Xikang in the 1930s. Peng offers an account of three incidents in which Xikang's composite identity was shaped and manipulated by both native Khamspas and the central Nationalist government, with the looming spectres of Tibetan and Chinese nation-building projects in the background. Fabienne Jagou discusses the political tactics deployed by Sun Yat-sen's Chinese Republican government in co-opting and controlling the sixth Panchen Lama through the granting of titles and their subsequent obligations. She argues that the sixth Panchen Lama was actively recruited to propagate Sun's values in the Tibetan border regions, but had little room to expand his own political acumen beyond China's prescribed agenda (for instance, in helping the impoverished provinces of Kham and Amdo or supporting Inner Mongolia against the Japanese incursion).

Carole McGranahan draws us into the tumultuous story of one of Khams' leading trading families, the Pangdatsangs, and the intricate identity politics at work behind the murder of its patriarch Pangda Nyigyal in 1920s Lhasa. The family penetrated the closed realm of Lhasa aristocracy by creating alliances with other powerful families and establishing themselves as patrons of the three monasteries (Sera, Drepung, Ganden). McGranahan's investigation of the circumstances that ended in Nyigyal's murder led her to interview descendants of the Pangdatsangs, in what is a testimony to the enduring evocative power of leading Khamspa figures in the contemporary Diaspora. Peter Schwieger proposes recapturing a sense of brag g.yad history through its oral tradition as remembered by refugees in Nepal, focusing on the way in which the narrative's structure and use of language delineates the contours of communal identity. Tsering Thar dis-

cusses the life of the prestigious nineteenth-century Bon scholar Shar rdza Bkra shis rgyal mtshan and the importance of his hermitage and movement in the unification of Bon schools in Eastern Tibet. Thar argues that the Bon religion suffered less discrimination in Khams than in Central Tibet and Amdo, although its influence remained largely limited to the eastern regions.

Collectively, the essays in *Khams pa Histories* present an eclectic and rich contribution to Tibetan Studies. One must, however, not succumb to the temptation of fragmenting the field into Khams or Amdo area studies and retain a com-

mitment to writing frontier histories as a history of networks, rather than a history of small and unstable places swept away in the forces of greater powers, be they Tibetan or Chinese. Much still remains to be explored in the way of Tibetan frontier history, particularly in the pre-nineteenth century period, and one awaits with anticipation what upcoming histories of Amdo and Khams will bring to the debate on changing identities in Eastern Tibet. The collection also bears witness to the revival of anthropological investigation in Tibetan cultural areas, with oral and family histories complementing the more traditional focus on religious literature. Both trends have not only localized, but also expanded the field of Tibetan Studies in promising ways. ◀

- Epstein, Lawrence (ed.), *Khams pa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority*, Leiden: Brill (2002), no ISBN.

Audrey Prost MA is a doctoral candidate in social anthropology at University College London. Her thesis focuses on the changing practice of Tibetan medicine among the refugee communities of India and the impact of Diaspora lifestyles on conceptions of health and the body.
ucsaagp@ucl.ac.uk