Khamspa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority

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 greater Chinese encroachment. The monumental histories of Tibet have been the sheer difficulty of pinning down the trans-regional influences that have come to shape Tibetan politics from the late nineteenth century. The Tibetan border regions of Kham and Amdo, caught between the competing influences of the central Tibetan political entities and 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 Prest

Khamspa Histories, along with the other regional investigations emerging from Tibetan Studies today, offers a more local and unique perspective on Tibetan border territories. This collection of essays brilliantly demonstrates the political fluidity of Tibetan border zones and the agency of local actors in negotiating both Tibetan and Chinese assimilationist projects. Both Winn van Spengen and William Coleman investigate the causes of the ongoing political unrest in Kham at the turn of the twentieth century. Van Spengen examines the political backdrop to the 1906 siege at Sangguling monastery in Kham’s Chatring district, and the monastery’s problematically liminal political position in the Sino-Tibetan border, as Chinese nationalists and European powers in Central Tibet struggle to control the region over the area. As local lamas and Chinese administrators vie for influence in the political vacuum created by the breakdown in local Tibetan administration, Chinese garrisons and Tibetan 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 Sangguling and endemic banditry are symptomatic of southern Tibet’s deeply unstable political climate, and a consequence of the fragility of its cultural-ecological frontier. William Coleman takes a somewhat different stance toward instability in the region in his discussion of the 1903 uprising at Batang. Coleman convincingly contends that a network of indigenous leaders, monasteries, Qing Empire representatives, and merchants was responsible for maintaining a precarious order in the region until the twentieth century. This fragile nexus was irreversibly lost after the Batang uprising, when Qing influence over the region overwhelmed both monastic authorities and indigenous leaders, inexorably drawing Kham into the Chinese nationalist project.

Peng Wenghong’s fascinating contribution explores the intersection between Khamspa identity politics and China’s nationalist project in the newly created province of Xikang in the 1950s. Peng offers an account of three incidents in which Xikang’s composite identity was shaped and manipulated by both native Khamspa 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 agenda beyond China’s prescribed agenda for instance, in helping the impoverished provinces of Kham and Amdo or supporting Inner Mongolia against the Japanese incursion. 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 agenda 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 Kham’s leading trading families, the Pangdatsangs, and the intricate identity politics at work behind the murder of its patriarch Pangdrol Nygmo in 1920. The family scrutinized the young monk’s body with particular interest. By interrogating accounts of the Pangdatsangs, and in what is a testimony to the enduring evocative power of leading Khamspa figures in the contemporary Diaspora. Peter Schweiger proposes recapitulations in the Tibetan g yud 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.Tiering That dis-