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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Afterword: Why Kham? Why Borderlands? Coordinating New Research Programs for Asia

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This special issue of *Cross-Currents* is dedicated to Kham, or Eastern Tibet, which, according to the European Research Council grant supporting these articles, can be called a “Sino-Tibetan Borderlands.”¹ But why should East Asianists, including readers of this journal, care about Kham, and does it in any way help us to conceive of the region as a “borderlands”? The first question was on my mind in May 2015 as I participated in the first of two workshops devoted to Kham; the second was raised by rightfully skeptical participants—most of them experts on Kham—at the February 2016 conference in Paris that concluded this project. The two questions are related, I believe, and this afterword suggests that one possible answer to both lies in using local Kham history to push the boundaries of global borderlands studies. My goal is to argue for an approach that both frames the complexities of Kham for outsiders, including myself, and provides one (but certainly not the only) option for coordinating the diverse research agendas of Kham specialists.

Kham is a place of extraordinary complexity. As Jinba Tenzin demonstrates, the past looms large here, although it is interpreted in contradictory ways: early twentieth-century rebels might seek to restore the Qing even as their shared historical memory inspired collective actions through opposition to the Qing imperial campaigns of the 1740s. Complexity is also found in Kham’s politics and administration. As Stéphane Gros notes, Kham was for centuries a contested region in which China- and Lhasa-based regimes sought influence, only to face both regional power holders (e.g., the Naxi Mu family of Lijiang) and local power holders (e.g., merchants, headmen, and monasteries) who exercised material and ritual control at the local level. The largest local power holders—often the rulers of locales such as Dergé or the leaders of major monasteries—could muster the resources to invest in major works, such as the Dergé Printing

House investigated by Rémi Chaix. Local leaders also managed trade through adaptive institutions such as the *achak kapa*, or *guozhuang*, so carefully described by Yudru Tsomu. And, as with many peoples who lived outside “inner China” (*neidi*), Kham locals gendered their work and families in ways that differed from Chinese, and Yudru Tsomu reveals the role of female “dealers” in the trade town of Dartsedo.

One of the triumphs of this issue, then, is that it brings together scholars who have the linguistic and disciplinary skills to interpret the complex experiences of Kham’s peoples (Khampa, Drung, Han, European, and others), male and female, commoner and noble. This work is important because we still do not possess deep and broad understandings of Kham’s history. As in many places that fall outside the cores of Asian studies regions, Kham desperately needs experts, such as those represented here, who are—in the words of Peter Perdue, Helen Siu, and Eric Tagliacozzo (2015, 6)—“versed in the particularities of a space and tradition” to interpret Kham’s spaces and traditions for us.

But how should the space that is Kham be interpreted for nonspecialists? In introducing their trilogy-in-progress, *Asia Inside Out*, Perdue, Siu, and Tagliacozzo emphasize innovative approaches to Asian periodization and spaces, asking that “instead of viewing regions, cultures, and peoples as physically bounded units occupying continents and polities, we need to focus on multilayered, interactive processes” (Perdue, Siu, and Tagliacozzo 2015, 6; see also Siu, Tagliacozzo, and Perdue 2015, 3). In other words, we need to break free of dominant spatial paradigms, particularly the static, ahistorical notions of national and area studies boundaries that limit the investigation of dynamic processes of movement and change. Such a call is not new, of course, but it remains important.² However, some of the results to date have produced newly reified concepts such as Zomia (Scott 2009). Originally envisioned by Willem van Schendel as a challenge to institutionalized and essentialized Asian studies regional boundaries, Zomia was to encompass the transnational highland peoples of eastern India, mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China, and the high plateaus and ranges of the Himalaya, and it was supposed to allow scholars to work against treating regions as ahistorical, preexisting “containers” for human activity (van Schendel 2002). In practice, however, Zomia and its inhabitants have been saddled with “immobile aggregates of traits” (particularly the idea that all highland culture and activity was organized to oppose lowland states), which anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and others suggest that we leave behind (Appadurai 2000; Giersch 2010). At the same time, *Asia Inside Out*

provides a welcome but extremely open-ended approach, and it remains to be seen if such open-endedness allows for those “versed in the particularities of a space” to find common ground with those who are not. An obvious question is whether there are any ways to avoid these pitfalls when interpreting Kham for a broader audience.

One solution is to position work on regions such as Kham at the intersection of the Henri Lefebvre–inspired approach to the production of space and scale (Lefebvre 1991; Brenner 1998), as *Asia Inside Out* suggests, and the older American intellectual tradition of borderlands studies. On one hand, this solution requires a critical stance toward the experience and representation of space: as guest editor Stéphane Gros notes in his introduction, Kham itself must be questioned. For insiders, Kham might be understood as a coherent space and a source of belonging, while, for many outsiders, it simply never existed as a single unit but has always been an incoherent hodgepodge of rugged terrain and divided loyalties. In addition to adopting sophisticated approaches to space, we must clarify how the political and economic forces producing and shaping the region were exercised at local, regional, imperial or national, and even global scales. At the same time, our evaluation of these scalar influences must remain dynamic—we do not want to reproduce the “static timeless containers of historicity” that characterizes approaches to nations or traditional area studies regions (van Schendel, 658–659), nor do we want to avoid Lefebvre’s challenge to examine how spaces “interpenetrate one another” (1991, 86). In other words, we must use multiple scales at once while also describing carefully what actors and actions at each scale were doing by explaining “the actual workings of social and economic processes,” rather than simply relying on convenient labels such as “local,” “regional,” or “global” (Cartier 2002, 124).³ For Kham, the historical records reveal that the geographical reach of local or imperial powers ebbed and flowed and interpenetrated. At some point before the 1740s, for instance, the Chakla king and his elite administrators, the *achak kapa*, gained control over trade and transport; they therefore developed the power to support Qing imperial campaigns that reached well beyond Chakla’s borders in the 1740s and 1770s. By 1911, on the other hand, the Chakla kingship had been abolished (by the Qing), though the *achak kapa*’s influence in Dartsedo endured, independent of the king they once served and depended on for power, because their local commercial activities had been increasingly separated from their administrative tasks. In the 1930s, however, the *achak kapa* themselves would face decline as trade networks changed, and new merchants and tea from Yunnan gained greater hold over the Dartsedo markets (see

Yudru Tsomu in this issue). As the scales and networks of trade were transformed, so too were the patterns of power and authority.

When we examine the exercise of power at each scale—local, regional, national, or imperial—we cannot imagine each regime to be limited by the spatial boundaries of its realm. As Gros notes, we need to treat spatial boundaries as “porous” and investigate how political and social processes cross boundaries. In Lefebvre’s well-known analogy, he addressed this approach by arguing that a modern house is experienced as a bounded space, but, in reality, it is “permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route: water, gas, electricity, telephone lines, radio and television signals, and so on. [The house’s] image of immobility would then be replaced by an image of complex mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits” that reveal the house’s solidity to be illusory, a constructed representation of space (Lefebvre 1991, 93; White 1999, 977–978). In a somewhat similar mode, the power of many local elites in Kham relied on the complex mobilities embodied by trade and control over transport (the tradition of *ulak*, or compulsory supply of animals and corvée transport labor). It was trade that brought the tea, cloth, and other goods that allowed Dergé to pay its workers and build its printing house, which was, in turn, an effort to reorganize urban space to house valuable wood-block editions of “canonical collections [that] were not only prestigious works produced by the House of Dergé but also part of its policy of developing the new kingdom, which was expected to rival religious centers in Central Tibet” (Chaix in this issue). The streams of energy running in and out of Dergé were, in essence, harnessed to the king’s program of representing his domain as a devout Buddhist regime on par with competitors in Central Tibet.

If dynamic approaches to the scale of activities and the representations of space can help frame Kham histories for outsiders, then so too can borderlands studies as developed in the American tradition. Borderland studies is rooted in the work of Herbert E. Bolton (1870–1953), a self-professed disciple of Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932), who, thankfully, never actually embraced Turner’s frontier thesis and its Anglo American–centric definition of the frontier as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner [1893] 1994, 32). Instead, Bolton and his students primarily examined the Spanish empire in North America, seeking to focus on, says historian David Weber, “the interplay of cultures on *both sides* of the frontier, be it Spanish and Indian or Spanish and French” (1986, 73, emphasis added). This was a challenge to Turner’s

dismissal of indigenous and other societies, just as recent scholarship seeks to challenge the Sino-centrism of earlier approaches to (and current government narratives about) China's peripheries.⁴ Since Bolton's time, borderlands scholars have pushed the field in many exciting ways, and it is the more recent formulations that might prove helpful in interpreting Kham for outsiders.

In a seminal essay on the state of the historical field, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron defined the North American borderlands as “the contested boundaries between colonial domains” where indigenes could exploit imperial divisions (Adelman and Aron 1999, 816). “Colonial domains” meant the French, British, and Spanish (and, later, American and Mexican) empires, of course, and while this terminology may or may not adequately describe the Ganden Phodrang (the Lhasa-based Dalai Lama regime established in the seventeenth century) or the China-based imperial and national empires, it is imperative to build on existing scholarship that compares the Qing regime and its competitors to expansive European empires (Perdue 2005) by investigating other expansive regimes in Asia. If we are sensitive to the combined methodologies of borderlands studies and scale, for example, it becomes clear that it is now time to include the Ganden Phodrang, in both the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and the modern Tibetan state (1912–1950)—each an expansive regime—within this comparative borderlands framework as well. When it comes to the nineteenth-century Ganden Phodrang, moreover, we can really only begin to articulate its expansiveness if we understand that scales—in this case, administrative and military—can interpenetrate each other. This particular regime was quite remarkable in that it remained *under* Beijing's supervision through the stationing of Qing imperial officials (*amban*) in Lhasa while simultaneously expanding its influence *into* other Qing-claimed areas, such as Kham's Nyarong (Tsomu 2013, 320). Such a realization certainly highlights the dynamism of scale and also disrupts any efforts to narrate Chinese national history as a linear process of nation-state consolidation over former imperial space.

Adelman and Aron's approach, however, does not necessarily challenge such linear narratives. For them, it is important to understand how powerful modern states developed their liminal borderlands into “bordered lands” where autonomous indigenous action was curtailed; thus, they emphasize the narrative of the increasingly powerful central state (1999, 816–817). On one hand, this is certainly an important focus, and it parallels the interests of Kham specialists writing in European languages, who, since Elliot Sperling's early work (1976), have sought to

understand the complex transitions of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on Chinese state building (for example, see Epstein 2002). An understanding of borderlands methodologies, however, demands that we develop further our insights into how Tibetan state building was proceeding at the same time—a point made by Gros in his introduction. What is particularly fascinating about Kham is that two self-consciously modernizing states (Chinese and Tibetan) began to contest the Kham area in the early twentieth century, and these open contests lasted until the early 1950s. There is room, perhaps, for balancing out the tendency in the scholarship to emphasize Chinese state building to bring the Lhasa regime's efforts in Kham—and local responses—into the mainstream. On the other hand, adopting Adelman and Aron's framework is also limiting in that, in the end, it emphasizes nation creation as a signal historical watershed. This leaves the illusion of the national house intact, whereas more recent borderlands scholarship reveals the national house as an “image of complex mobilities” by emphasizing the need to pay careful attention to local scales of activity (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011, 356). When we bore down into the regional or local, the grand machinations of states and empires remain relevant, but they take on new meanings and new timetables, as in the case of the expansion of Lhasa's authority in the nineteenth century. The traditional transitions become less clear, and there emerge more nuanced stories of trade, hybrid identity, and challenges to centralizing state power and categories—stories that may help other East Asianists better understand larger pictures of the past. As historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett note, “Anchored in spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and the ambiguities of power, this is the brave new world of borderlands history.... Borderlands are the places where [national] narratives come unraveled” (2011, 338). For modern China today, greater Tibet, including Kham, is one place where the national narrative comes unraveled, as the evidence simply cannot support current Chinese historical claims in the region (Sperling 2009).

Studies of Kham have more to offer, however, than a mere refutation of the current Chinese state's manipulations of the historical narrative. Following the borderlands studies imperative that we gain expertise in indigenous languages, cultures, approaches to environment, and structures of authority and territoriality,⁵ this special issue places local practices at the fore. In Gros's work, the careful excavation of the rituals of taxation and debt among Drung communities extends our study of Kham into what is now northern Yunnan, reinforcing the crucial point that the limits of Kham are not coextensive with past or present administrative

boundaries—nor, he implies, is Kham a space whose ethnic composition is exclusively made up of Khampa (the people of Kham). Just as importantly, the hierarchies of local power in the Qing and Republican periods did not necessarily include Manchus or Han Chinese, but could be created among others, such as Naxi and Khampas, whose contests over the area began long before there even was a Qing empire. Naxi and Khampa extensions of economic and fiscal power over the Drung and Nung, moreover, were enhanced by the growth of trade—and money lending—that, according to Patrick Booz, increased in the region from the 1690s forward. These fascinating relationships were, I take it, enfolded into the imperial Qing practice—not unlike the hegemony exercised by Tai aristocrats over the hill peoples of southern Yunnan (Giersch 2006). Such realizations must make us question our representations of the Qing Empire as a space in which positions of power were primarily held by Manchus and Han. We need to examine—as do Gros, Chaix, and Tsomu—the methods, rituals, institutions, languages, and flows of commodities that supported alternative cultures of political power, for knowledge of such alternative cultures will lead to more sophisticated understanding for all East Asianists.

As we investigate the various scales of Kham's past, it is clear that the foundations of power were multiple; they included control of land, religion, and violence, but one key was to control trade and movement across distances both vast and near. Access to salt, tools, and clothing is what allowed Khampa merchants to control the Drung through debt, and it is what, presumably, allowed the Dergé king to pay his laborers and to build both his printing house and his spiritual reputation through the manipulation of urban space. For the Qing, controlling the flow of commodities was so important that they invested heavily in reconfiguring eastern Kham by building bridges and roads (Booz). However, those roads, which brought more merchants, also brought more trade, thereby enhancing the power of local elites such as the *achak kapa* and the monasteries. Thus, the outcome of building roads both added to the Qing ability to project power into Kham and, at the same time, opened possibilities for others to empower themselves as well. Moreover, once built, the roads were not constant circuits of mobility, and Booz describes nicely how weather and banditry could affect mobility along these routes.

For the Qing, road and bridge building were conscious efforts to remake eastern Kham into imperial territory, and Booz quotes Peter Perdue's new classic, *China Marches West*, to demonstrate the way in which Qing efforts to impose an imperial spatial vision in Kham paralleled other parts of the empire:

The story of the eighteenth-century Qing empire is of an effort to seal off this ambiguous, threatening frontier experience once and for all by incorporating it within the fixed boundaries of a distinctly defined space, and by drawing lines that clearly demarcated separate cultures. (Perdue 2005, 41–42)

This brings us back to Lefebvre and the importance of both constructing and representing space. As historian Courtney Campbell notes, “Lefebvre emphasized that spaces change over time, as do our use of them, representations of them and symbolic associations with them” (2016, 3). If the Qing sought to make Kham into imperial strategic space, and Lhasa, through the appointment of monastic leaders, sought to turn it into Gelukpa space, then we are treated, in Scott Relyea’s paper, to an analysis of how, at the end of the Qing, the imperial commissioner, Zhao Erfeng, and others tried to turn it into modern Chinese national space. Unlike Adelman and Aron, we must not treat this as *the* major turning point in thinking about and representing space—for there had been turning points earlier. However, this was *a* major turning point in conceiving, constructing, and representing space—a turning point that, in the modern discourse of Chinese borderlands and non-Han peoples as primitive and thus peripheral to the main history of the nation (Tsomu 2013), is still with us and against which we still must struggle in order to understand Kham in all its historical complexity.

Around this turning point, for the Qing officials in charge, one key was to simplify Kham’s complexities by preventing the Kham “house” from accepting important energies from the north and west—rupees from India and spiritual guidance from Lhasa (Relyea in this issue). Instead, the inputs into Kham would all be from the Chinese side—nationalized Confucian education and the new silver Zangyuan coin. In conjunction with these efforts to enforce, for the first time, a new type of sovereignty on Kham, would-be modern state builders and their Sichuanese gentry allies developed new representations of Kham and Tibet as Chinese national space and of Khampas as Chinese citizens (Relyea 2015; Yudru 2013; Giersch 2008). The story of nationalism and nation building in China has been studied for decades, of course, and we have some excellent studies of how modern Han identities were created in opposition to the categorization of peoples indigenous to the borderlands (Leibold 2007), but it is also important to evaluate the ways in which these processes involved the development of new representations of space. As early as the 1890s, Sichuanese elites were already developing a discourse designed to reveal and make real both Kham and Tibet, which they chose to portray as backward places that

belonged to China and yet needed saving. This was a new sort of intentionally popular spatial discourse, which played out in new types of media in turn-of-the-century China. In journal articles, writers called for the public to make various cognitive leaps, to acquire new perceptions about the political-spatial community called China. For the first time, the reading public was being asked to conceive of the borderlands as vital national territories that were China's historical legacy. As part of these representations, Khampas, who were simply grouped with Tibetans as a whole, were portrayed as potential fellow citizens who were exploited by rapacious lamas, including the Dalai Lama, and were thus in need of help to develop culturally and economically (Giersch 2008). Such portrayals were not the only new representation of Tibetan Buddhism available; there were also important ideas about a collective Buddhist-based future for the Han and Tibetan people (Tuttle 2005). But, in hindsight, the former vision has dominated over the succeeding decades, helping to create a concept of two-tiered citizenship—the developed Han and the undeveloped and oppressed (by their own elites) Tibetans (Yudru 2013; Tuttle 2015). And it is fascinating that these ideas were taking hold just as the lived experiences for many families in Dartsedo were so different: Han and Khampa were intermarrying at greater rates (see Tsomu in this issue) and Han might join Khampa revolts (see Tenzin, also in this issue).

In contemporary journal articles published in the 1890s, moreover, authors experimented with ways to make Tibetan space (which included Kham) real for their readers. In an 1898 article, published in Chengdu's *Shuxue bao*, one Chinese nationalist developed important imagery to help people imagine Tibet as part of Chinese territory. This writer's imagery would have been immediately understood by Lefebvre even as it sought to impose a false or wishful vision of space onto the Kham borderlands: he described Sichuan as a courtyard house and Tibet as the screen (*waiping*) protecting the house compound from the street. Without the screen, Sichuan was exposed to the outside world, and it was therefore urgent to better integrate Tibet into Chinese national territory (Chen 2005; Giersch 2008). In appealing to Chinese visions of the courtyard house as a closed, domestic space, this author was deliberately mobilizing representations of nation as a solid, contained, unified space that have, for a century or more, both shaped expectations and fueled frustrations as the realities of experienced space continue to diverge from the representations. The Chinese house never has been the solid "image of immobility" that Chinese state builders hoped to create (see Relyea in this issue), and this special issue's authors probe a range of actors and actions, working at multiple scales, that not only

introduce the complexities of Kham to this journal's readers but also demonstrate how this region can push the boundaries of global borderland studies.

C. Patterson Giersch is a professor of History at Wellesley. He would like to thank a number of people who helped him think through some of the ideas for this afterword. First are the participants in the conference "Territories, Communities, and Exchanges in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands" (Cité Universitaire Internationale de Paris, February 18–20, 2016), especially Eric Mortensen and Katia Buffetrille, and the provocative questions they raised. Next are Mark Frank, Scott Relyea, and Elizabeth Joy Reynolds, who, over pretty good Sichuanese food in Paris, pushed him to think carefully, in ways that he had not done in earlier writings, about combining borderlands and space/scale scholarship. The author would also like to thank Sam Truett for an enlightening Skype conversation this past spring, when he shared important borderlands readings, as well as his visions of the future of borderlands studies. Finally, the author is grateful to Stéphane Gros, who not only organized this project but also guided it with an enviable professionalism and generosity that included providing crucial feedback on this piece.

Notes

- 1 The research program "Territories, Communities and Exchanges in the Sino-Tibetan Kham Borderlands (China)" received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Program for research, technological development, and demonstration, European Research Council (ERC), Support for frontier research (SP2-Ideas), Starting grant n° 283870 (PI: Stéphane Gros).
- 2 For earlier calls for reconceiving space in Asia, see in particular Lewis and Wigen (1997), as well as my particular favorites van Schendel (2002) and Cartier (2002).
- 3 Perhaps the best example of this in Chinese history is Shepherd (1993); see my analysis in Giersch (2014, 373–374).
- 4 Scholars who have challenged Sino-centrism are increasing in numbers, but Perdue (2005) is a superb starting place.
- 5 Recent work that focuses on understanding indigenous perspectives includes Barr (2011) in North American history and Hayes (2014) in the Tibetan regions of Sichuan. In Giersch (2006, 82–87), I sought to try and understand Tai Lue visions of the Qing.

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