

REVIEW: CHINA'S 'TIBETAN' FRONTIERS

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Beth Meriam. 2012. *China's 'Tibetan' Frontiers: Sharing the Contested Ground*. Leiden and Boston: Global Oriental. xxii+331pp, five maps (xvii-xx), preface, two appendices ("Chronology of China's Reform Era" and "Multilingual Glossary of Principal Political Terms"), references, index. Volume Six of the *Inner Asian Book Series*. ISBN 9781906876302 (hardcover 121USD), E-ISBN 9789004212695 (ebook 121USD).

In recent years, the study of China's minorities has become something of an ethnographic subgenre. Given the political sensitivities involved, however, it is unsurprising that relatively little of this fieldwork has been conducted among populations the Chinese state defines as 'Tibetan'. Beth Merriam's important new addition to the literature, *China's 'Tibetan' Frontiers*, begins to fill this gap. However, as the author is quick to point out, hers is not an ethnography of Tibet or Tibetans, nor the ethno-cultural region of Khams, or even Yushu Prefecture. It is, instead, an intensely local, "school-based study" (10) of Trinde (Khri 'du, Chenduo) Township, a remote, eponymously named county seat in the far south of Qinghai Province. Meriam spent fourteen months (2002-2003) as the first foreign teacher at Trinde County Nationalities Middle School. Her inquiry is focused on the region's cultural elite, "a small educated class of the local population" (10) primarily consisting of the school's directors and teachers, but also students, work unit functionaries, cadres, and NGO administrators. "Rather than analysing a specific 'ethnic group,' or political structure," Meriam writes, her study "proceeds from a critical vantage point of practices and concepts associated with a number of broadly-defined political themes and

social contexts" (292). The result is a compelling and sophisticated ethnography that not only problematizes the Chinese state's narratives of national(ity) unity, but also those disseminated within the exile Tibetan community. Moreover, Meriam explicitly challenges the English-language field of "Tibetan studies," in which "nationality rubrics are also commonly invoked as discrete, homogenous, and unambiguous objects of knowledge" (290). As suggested by the book's title, she summarizes, "A key argument of this ethnography is that context and practice are more appropriate bases for analysis than 'ethnicity,' 'identity' or 'Tibetans'" (147).

Meriam primarily focuses on questions of identity and belonging, "investigated through the lens of people's daily lives," to underline "how people's understandings are not fixed, and instead involve dynamic, contextual, temporal and, in some senses, creative and generative processes" (1). Leaning on previous ethnographies by Gladney, Litzinger, Kaup, Kipnis, and others, she rejects categories of analysis that posit binary distinctions such as majority/ minority, tradition/ modernity, resistance/ collaboration, cultural authenticity/ degeneration, and official/ unofficial discourse. For example, she demonstrates that the state is not a singular, external entity exercising power over a coherent, local society, but instead insists, "the idea of a separation between 'state' and 'non-state' must be problematized to highlight how these realms overlap and involve each other in ways that cannot be disentangled" (45). As such, Meriam maintains, "official rubrics are not foisted wholesale upon local people by a 'Chinese' regime. [...]. Instead, policies involve subjective, localized and context-specific differentiation [...]" (289).

Chapters one through four investigate "idioms of identification as bases for social inclusion and political mobilization" (1). In Chapter One, Meriam ably argues that Mao-era class distinctions continue to color present-day perceptions of wealth and morality. Although finding class in reform era China to be "an officially de-legitimized and locally suppressed discourse" (55), she balks at the suggestion that the reform era should be considered a period of "revival" of pre-revolutionary traditions. Instead, Meriam provocatively concludes:

These reform era social distinctions are not a return to pre-revolution identifications, nor are they entirely novel. Instead these expressions constitute new social phenomena informed by Mao era divisions and prior social arrangements (65).

Similarly, chapters two through four tackle the manner in which local elites mediate and disseminate ideas, applications, and anxieties generated by the state's respective discourses on development, nationality, and civilization. Finding, for example, that "Local ideas of 'development' are not coterminous with state-sponsored rhetoric" (89), Meriam shows that her subjects often internalize stereotypes in a manner that allows them to explain the perceived "backwardness" of their locality while simultaneously asserting moral superiority. Likewise, arguing that "Local articulations of nationality idioms are also part of a larger governmental discourse of local 'autonomy'" (146), Meriam demonstrates ways in which local people, individually and communally, are able to leverage state rhetoric and policies to support their material, political, or emotional aspirations. Challenging scholarship that has depicted nationality schools as loci of state hegemony, the author instead reports that in Trinde, "[schools] are prime sites for contesting and dismissing civilizing cultural ideals" (156). Rejecting the dyad of state domination versus social resistance, she concludes:

[Local authorities] enter into a series of micro-political practices aimed at redirecting people's esteem for scholarship and religious practice in a reform era system of relative nationality autonomy (157).

In chapters five through seven, Meriam makes a subtle switch from a focus on idioms of identification to instead "explore how key social concepts are elaborated in the contexts of 'ritual practice,' 'modernity' and 'media'" (3). For example, agreeing with several recent ethnographies of post-Mao China, she finds that reform era resurgences of religious practice:

are not a return to a previous tradition that counters the disturbances created by China's associations with modernity. [...] but are an adaptable way of *engaging with* modernity, even if that involves the expression of conflict" (197, italics in original).

Her multilevel analysis of new media (in this case, VCDs and cellphones) demonstrates how these technologies "facilitate the objectification and rearticulation of local practices as a stable, definable, exclusive body of knowledge known as 'nationality culture'" (246). In the process, Meriam concludes:

local media specialists have, in some ways, accomplished what the state failed to, namely to cultivate a politically unproblematic, culturally anodyne and socially bounded version of a single nationality, their lands and a 'way of life' (275).

China's 'Tibetan Frontiers' is an important, provocative ethnography, but it is not without imperfections. The text is dense, and arguably makes too frequent references to other authors without sufficient accompanying explanation to be of use to any but the most anthropological insider. Moreover, on several occasions Meriam makes controversial statements with no attempt to elaborate or defend them, other than citing another author's work, for example remarking, "The term *minzu* has been widely used only since the 1980s" (119). More substantially, there is a disconnect between Meriam's "call for ethnographies of given contexts" (292) and her historical framework that often relies upon sweeping narratives of China's nationality policies, in some cases referring to studies of other regions (e.g., Inner Mongolia) and other nationalities (e.g., the Yao) as if they are self-evidently applicable to her study of Trinde. Given the genre in which she is working and how little we know about the recent histories of localities such as Trinde, perhaps a more consistent concentration on communal memory would have been a more useful method to explore the remembered past and its implications for Trinde's present. After all, Meriam herself notes that her ethnography "highlights the latitude currently accorded to local people to interpret and represent local history" (281).

Methodological concerns common to many ethnographies include issues of representation, interpretation, and data collection. Meriam adroitly defends her focus on Tride's educated leaders by noting their "significant weight in evaluating and approving local political and cultural matters" (11). Still, much of her material is presented through a series of short anecdotes gathered through "spontaneous, informal conversations" (20) and less often "semi-structured interviews" (13) from which the ethnographer assumes tremendous power to assign meanings. While her intercession is acknowledged, the full impact of these power imbalances is not sufficiently addressed. In fact, exchanges were mainly conducted in local Trinde Tibetan or Qinghai Chinese, neither of which Meriam appears to have studied prior to conducting her fieldwork (20). Yet, in several cases she provides extensive direct quotations of animated conversations at which she was present but not a direct participant. Given the prominence she gives to the 'localization' of language and meaning, regardless of linguistic proficiency, it is difficult to imagine that something has not been lost in translation.

Lastly, in her conclusion, Meriam argues that "to analyse these fast-paced developments," researchers must move beyond bureaucratic and textual studies "in order to understand how particular social aspirations are harnessed, endorsed, sustained or reworked in practice" (289). Unfortunately, this important observation serves to underscore that her own research – in which the Iraq War appears as the major international event and her analysis of media technologies is based on VCDs and a recent increase in cell phone accessibility – was conducted a decade prior to the book's publication. This, perhaps unavoidable, passage of time, leads one to wonder how Trinde Tibetans' understandings of identity, belonging, and difference have been reshaped by the not insignificant domestic, international, and technological changes of the past ten years, including the 2008 uprising and an ongoing epidemic of self-immolations.

Nonetheless, these are relatively minor quibbles. Far more important are Meriam's contributions to a field that has often framed conflict "as a struggle between state domination and nationality

resistance" (44) while failing to investigate "differentiations, idiosyncrasies and stresses between local people" (66). In her own words:

More than anything, this book deconstructs the concept of nationality, and argues for a more nuanced, shifting and interpersonal understanding of identification, subjectivities and belonging (287).

We can only hope that Meriam, with her keen ethnographic eye, will have an opportunity to revisit Trinde and report on her findings.