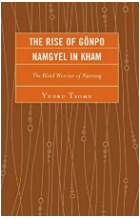


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 REVIEW: *THE RISE OF GÖNPO NAMGYEL IN KHAM*

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Yudru Tsomu. 2015. *The Rise of Gönpo Namgyel in Kham: The Blind Warrior of Nyarong*. Lanham: Lexington, 2015, xxxiii + 365. Two maps, seven appendices, index. Studies in Modern Tibetan Culture. ISBN 978-0-7391-7792-1 (Hardcover 116USD), 978-0-7391-7793-8 (E-book 114.99USD).

Yudru Tsomu's book, *The Rise of Gönpo Namgyel in Kham: The Blind Warrior of Nyarong*, is a vitally important and inspiring work that represents a new standard not only for Eastern Tibetan history, the focus for events in the book, but also for the study of border regions of the Tibetan cultural world more generally. The way that Yudru achieves this is through a dismantling of the very idea of border region in her evocation of nineteenth-century Kham as a political, cultural, and economic center that was not simply a "buffer zone" between the neighboring states of Qing China and Gaden Podrang in Central Tibet. Yudru sees the dynamism in Kham's position within broader regional geopolitics as indicative of the shifting nature of power in East and Inner Asian history, where she argues that historians often mistake official discourse radiating out of powerful states as authoritative and overlook the complexity of "what unfolded on the ground" (xx). This is at the expense of local perspectives and agency, which remain obscured, especially in contemporary nationalist histories. In order to counter representations of Kham as merely an "in-between" on the frontiers of China and Tibet, Yudru engages with the extraordinary figure of chieftain Gönpo Namgyel (1799-1856) and his leadership behind the almost complete unification of Kham between 1836 and 1861.

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The events around the rise and fall of Gönpo Namgyel represent an important and unusual moment in Kham history: born without the traditional mantles of authority in Kham society such as an inherited territory or monastic seat, he managed over a period of twenty-seven years to unite thirteen polities in eastern Tibet through gaining local support in his native Nyarong before moving on to eliminate rivals and seize other territories (57). Eventually, he challenged even the Qing and Galdan Podrang governments. Previous historians have claimed his success was due to his charisma and intelligence (58), but Yudru deftly complicates the situation by positioning Gönpo Namgyel within broader currents of local and regional historical events. She does this through the incorporation of a phenomenal set of different sources. Tibetan language sources include a wide array of dialects and genres, from local Khampa folk songs to religious biographies to the crucial contemporary eyewitness account of Gönpo Namgyel's rise by Yelé Tsültrim. Yudru is one of the first scholars to deeply mine this source, which is well complimented by Sherap Özer's 1981 account of events and other collections of materials published by local offices in contemporary Sichuan.

Her Chinese language sources are similarly impressive, and include official sources from the Qing government, as well as gazetteers and local histories from the Republican and post-1949 periods. Yudru also draws on a wide variety of secondary sources, including scholarship from the New Qing History and borderland histories. She invokes the work of American historian Richard White in an especially creative way to sketch out the "middle ground" that existed between the Qing court and the kingdoms and states of Kham that was defined through negotiation, rather than a top-down, center-periphery approach (25). The eight chapters that make up her study each outline the factors that led to Gönpo Namgyel's success, and also trace his decline and legacy.

After the Introduction that outlines Yudru's approach to re-centering local history, Chapter One, "Kham in the Nineteenth Century: Land, People and Politics," elaborates on that local history and is a significant contribution to our understanding of eastern Tibetan

history on its own. The chapter includes an outline of the topographical and political diversity of Kham, with the author providing vivid description of Kham's rugged mountainous barriers, complex kingdoms, and monastic polities. Here, Yudru outlines the dynamic relations between these polities and the Qing and Lhasa governments, demonstrating how neither managed to gain absolute authority in the region, and how it was only through negotiation between local rulers and these centers that elements of the "official middle ground" such as the Qing *tusi* system managed to have any influence.

Chapter Two, "Crisis of the Centers: Qing China and Central Tibet," outlines the broader picture of Qing-Lhasa relations and events in the nineteenth century that facilitated the success of Gönpo Namgyel. Yudru argues that to the east, factors such as the popularity of opium, the growth in population, rebellions, and natural disasters, all contributed to the weakening of the Qing in Kham. Looking westward, the nineteenth century was also a turbulent time for the Galdan Podrang government, with conflicts over succession of power and wars in the Himalayas, all leading to a vacuum of authority in Kham, which Gönpo Namgyel stepped into.

Chapter Three, "Nyarong: The Iron Knot of Tibet," changes scale again, zooming in on Nyarong, the polity Gönpo Namgyel came from, to examine how local conditions, including cultural values of family honor and revenge feuds, social structure, and local history all contributed to his ascendancy.

Chapter Four, "The Blind Man from Nyarong," introduces us to Gönpo Namgyel and his connections to Nyarong society, providing an overview of his family, childhood, ambivalent relationship with Buddhism, and obligatory participation in local honor codes. This chapter demonstrates how "[n]o single cause or factor served as the decisive element paving the way for Gönpo Namgyel's rise and expansion" (109). Instead, it posits that it was through a confluence of factors and events, including military prowess gained in local battles and the preoccupation of the Qing and Lhasa governments with issues far from Kham that allowed for a figure like Gönpo to "realize his personal ambition" (109).

Chapters Five through Seven outline what this realization looked like. Surrounded by local support, Gönpo Namgyel managed to unite Nyarong, which led neighboring areas to petition the amban for intervention against Gönpo's armies (136-137). However, military intervention by the Qing was not successful, which led Gönpo Namgyel to gain a region-wide reputation as "the chief whom neither the Chinese nor the Tibetan could defeat..." (148). Over the following decade, he expanded his rule over much of Kham, and began to eye areas beyond, in Lhasa and Qing-controlled territories.

Greatly concerned, the Lhasa Government launched fierce campaigns against Gönpo Namgyel, which were eventually successful and led to his death and the end of his extraordinary career in 1865. The Qing were also concerned, but despite historical representation of the subduing of Gönpo Namgyel as a Qing-Lhasa collaboration, they were less involved due to other pressing events taking place in China (206-207, 211).

The final chapter, "Contention over the Sphere of Influence in Kham," outlines the aftermath of Gönpo Namgyel's death and his legacy. The Lhasa government response to his campaigns led Lhasa to extend their influence into Kham, but there were still disputes over authority in the region with the Qing (233) and later with the Nationalist government (237-238). In this chapter and her conclusion, Yudru demonstrates how the local aspirations of Gönpo Namgyel had serious repercussions for Sino-Tibetan relations through its unsettling of center-periphery power relations (252). As she states, Kham remained fragmented into the twentieth century due to its political diversity, geographical complexity, and cultural practices, all facets of the need for a "middle ground" with outside forces. It was only in 1949 that Kham was finally incorporated into a nation state, the People's Republic of China.

Yudru Tsomu's vivid representation of Gönpo Namgyel's career greatly enriches our understanding of Kham's history through her attention to myriad source materials and local histories, and is therefore invaluable to scholars of Tibetan history and culture, especially working on frontier areas. Her accessible writing style and

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lively evocation of key events makes her work appropriate for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, as well as general audiences interested in Tibetan history and culture. However, this detailed work is also an important challenge to scholars of New Qing History, a methodology that has added important nuance to the study of Chinese history. While New Qing historians have called on scholars of Chinese history to engage with the multilingual archive of the multicultural Qing empire, scholarship still tends to be China-centered. Yudru's work instead resists centralized visions of history through her prioritization of Tibetan language sources and Khampa, and even more specifically, Nyarong perspectives. She argues that, "[t]here is no single maker of history and locals are not mere observers of national events" (252). This key point makes Yudru's book a vital contribution beyond Sino-Tibetan history in the field of the global history of frontiers.