

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 Schwiager proposes recapturing a sense of braggy 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.

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A New Focus on the Caspian Region Turning the Periphery into the Centre

Review >
Central Asia

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh once again addresses one of his favourite themes, the control of hydrocarbon resources in Central Eurasia and the Caspian region. With 14.6 per cent of the world's proven oil resources and almost 50 per cent of its gas reserves, the Caspian region has become the focus of tough competition in which both state and non-state actors have a stake.

By Frédéric Grare

Amineh tries to analyse the phenomenon in relation to globalization. Globalization, he argues, is not only an economic process but involves a variety of 'transnational processes and domestic structures with countries engaging one another economically, politically and culturally'. Hence the need for a new theoretical framework, which he calls neo-geopolitics, that returns to a strong geographical focus in the analysis of complex realities. Neo-geopolitics distances itself from classical realism in its refusal to centre entirely on the state as the sole protagonist in international relations. On the contrary, it stipulates that the division of global space must also take into account transnational governmental and non-governmental institutions, religious groups, and organizations such as companies, armed forces, terrorist groups, and environmental organizations.

However, despite this supposedly new approach, the book does not really distance itself from a neo-realist perspective. State politics still constitute, and rightly so, the bulk of the analysis. The description of the impact of factors such as international corporations, the drug trade, or Islamic groups, does not question the primacy of the state and its quest for power as the driving force of regional relations. The Caspian states themselves, but also external parties such as Turkey, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States, are undoubtedly constrained in their respective policies by multinational corporations, and the instability created by drug dealers or Islamic groups. They

remain, nevertheless, the ultimate decision-makers. Moreover, the degree of autonomy of such non-governmental forces is sometimes questionable.

Afghanistan is a particularly revealing example in this regard. Many (but definitely not all) Islamic groups had a large degree of autonomy but at the same time served as proxies for some of the external parties mentioned above. Already for quite some years, Afghanistan has been the location of regional and global conflicts conducted through its local warring factions.

The book's contention that its hydrocarbon resources make the Caspian region one of the most important areas of the post-Cold War era, also seems highly debatable. The Caspian type of energy resources (oil and gas) may be vital for advanced industrialized countries, but this alone does not make the region 'one of the most important geopolitical areas in the post Cold War era'. Other factors such as fear of terrorism, partly developed in this region in the power vacuum left by the disintegration of the Soviet empire, play at least as important a role in the present evolution of the region. Moreover, the quantity of resources is an important factor for the hydrocarbon business, but certainly not the only one. Accessibility, production costs, and consequently international hydrocarbon prices, are at least as important for investment decisions. Taking this aspect into consideration, the Middle East, not only possessing greater resources but with much more favourable conditions for exploitation, is still better placed in the global competition for energy and likely to remain strategically more important in the fore-

seeable future. As a consequence, Caspian hydrocarbon may well be an element of Russia-US relations in the region, but it remains secondary in the hierarchy of priorities which structure these relations.

This is not to say that Caspian hydrocarbon resources are unimportant. They remain the main and in some cases, only opportunity for the Caspian states in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. So far, however, they remain essentially a potential. Hydrocarbon production is yet to be developed and exported. The Caspian states are facing the challenge of using these resources to become more effectively part of the global system.

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh's book does nevertheless constitute a good synthesis of existing knowledge about the energy issue in the Caspian region. Throughout, it greatly helps to clarify some aspects of a complex situation and facilitate the understanding of an important stake in a part of the world which remains predominantly unknown to the public at large. ◀

- Amineh, Mehdi Parvizi, *Globalisation, Geopolitics and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region*, The Hague: Clingendael International Energy Programme (2003), pp. 260, ISBN 90-5031-085-0

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