

# Walking on the edge: explorers in China's borderlands

Each of the chapters collected here capture Western and Southwestern China at a time of great flux: the imperial order is ending, the Republican Era is rising, and just over the horizon looms World War II and the Communist takeover. Our explorers, captured in time as they are, know little of this. Instead, they are certain of their place in 'civilization' and convinced that their efforts in recording new places, peoples, flora, and fauna will pave the way for not only the West to continue to grow, but also for the East to rise out of its undeveloped state. As Steven Harrell notes in his introduction to the collection, we are able to better "understand some of the intellectual and political characteristics of an age that already seems very foreign to those of us who tread the same ground only two or three generations later." (p.5)

Jared Phillips

## Reviewed publication:

Denise M. Glover, Stevan Harrell, Charles F. McKhann & Margaret Byrne Swain (eds.) 2011. *Explorers and Scientists in China's Borderlands, 1880-1950*, Seattle: University of Washington. ISBN: 9780295991184 (paperback), 320 pp.

THE WORK IS COMPRISED of eight essays exploring mainly Western figures in Southwest China (predominately located in Yunnan and Sichuan); they illustrate more concretely the intricacies and competitions in this nebulous place that is often overly romanticized by commentators and scholars alike. Connecting the work even more than the subject of explorers are these ideas: notions of modernity, of nationalism, of cultural revival and commodification. While these are not unfamiliar themes to students of exploration and the great shifting of nations in Africa and Asia through the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, we are only just beginning to see them applied to the study of dynastic China, or the Republican and Communist eras. Modernity, never openly defined throughout the collection, is a pervasive theme and is hinged on the clash of American or European notions of civilization that are to be maintained while out in the hinterlands of Southwest China. Contested notions of nationalism, whether imagined or not, emerge as the essays chart the dawning of a new era in China, highlighting the tensions among not just Han groups, but also in the emerging *minzu* groups. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the extent to which most, if not all of the authors in this volume discuss the ways in which their subjects have been or are being used by the current Chinese government (both local and provincial, and in some cases nationally) to resurrect a consumable cultural history.

## Clashing styles: modernity and nationalism

The idea of modernization touched upon throughout the book has little to do with the esoteric debates waged by philosophers and more to do with the day-to-day realities, captured perhaps most in the narratives of Joseph Rock (by Alvin Yoshinga, et. al.) and Paul Vial (by Margaret Swain). In many ways, Rock serves as a trope for the stereotypical explorer – aloof to his Naxi workers, yet friendly when it suited him, capable of extreme largesse (by taking them to Europe or America) or of cultural stinginess, that is, giving of monetary gifts to his employees that were seen as pittance, if not outright insulting. Vial, in a less obvious way, was still intent on modernizing his beloved Sani. While he made enormous contributions to the study of Sani language and culture – contributions still relied upon today – and attempted to at least partially assimilate (wearing similar clothing, eating the local cuisine, etc), he was still firmly rooted in his European cosmology; by showcasing his difference he hoped to bring the Sani up to his level, setting up a microcosm of a French feudal estate with his mission, which for all intents and purposes replaced the previous Chinese landlord with that of the French Catholic Church. Vial was focused, like many missionaries and long-term explorers, on not just reaping some material or spiritual reward for his efforts, but in creating a Francophone place within the wilderness of borderland China. These explorers, which have been loosely characterized by Rock and Vial, were committed to remaking the world through an imagined understanding of how the West (either Europe or America) was ideally operating. While they had a unique appreciation and love for the regions they walked and worked in, they were unable to break free of this dominant view of the last decades of the colonial order.

The second major theme of the work is nationalism, a discussion always fraught with peril. While explorers like Earnest Wilson and the Weiss couple, and even Johan Andersson, were at times critical of the grand style of imperialism that had propelled them to their locations, they were rarely able to dispense with it – setting in place a model to be followed by the growing Chinese Republican and, later, Communist state. While it is difficult to fully agree with Harrell's assessment that these chapters illustrate the creation of a "scientific basis for nationalism", especially in light of Thomas Mullaney's recent work, it is certainly easy to agree that based on the inter-actions Western explorers and missionaries had throughout Yunnan, Sichuan, Hubei, and surrounding provinces that the Chinese state in both its forms was copying the West's propensity for the classification of peoples in order to train them up into a new type of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> And, as recent scholarship has shown, it was indeed to Western modes of classifying minority groups and physical landscapes that the new leaders of China would turn as they attempted to build a state capable of interacting in the new, post-war world.

## The resurgence of cultural commodification

The themes mentioned above are alone enough to recommend this collection, but it is the use to which the explorers discussed have been turned by the current Chinese government that speaks most powerfully to students of post-1945 China. The posthumous fortunes of Western explorers in China's borderlands have been unpredictable at best – initially used to help understand the new nation-state under Mao, then reviled during the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and now again experiencing a slow revival in the Deng and post-Deng era. This is perhaps no more true than in the story of the American archeologist and missionary David

Crockett Graham, founder of the West China Union University Museum (now Sichuan University Museum) and his works in the Sanxingdui. As Jeff Kyong-McClain (et. al.) and Charles McKhann (et. al.) attest, Graham's work is experiencing a revival as his writings are translated and readily available throughout Sichuan, and the director of the Sichuan University Museum has declared that Graham's contributions "will go down in history" (p.236) This is part of a larger trend throughout China right now; a trend that began during the 1980s and early 1990s, as China has been working to actively commodify both its past and its minority populations (*minzu*) as the profits from national and international tourism have become increasingly apparent.<sup>2</sup> The legacy of the explorers mentioned here have helped to lay the foundation for this ethno- and archeo-tourism boom.

## What about the other borders?

In light of this marvelous examination of the foundations of China's tourist expansion, it is surprising to see two major omissions in the work. By narrowly limiting China's borderlands to the familiar Yunnan-Sichuan corridor, we are left wondering what has happened in Gansu or Qinghai, the great crossroads of Tibetan, Muslim, and Han cultures. Western missionaries and explorers were incredibly active in this region, a region vastly different in culture, geography, and ecology than the lowland regions discussed. The inclusion of these regions – perhaps a study of Robert Ekvall or Victor Plymire – would have presented a more complex and nuanced understanding of a larger contested region, especially with the opening of the railroad into Lhasa. Another region with little mention is the proverbial 'holy grail' for late 19th and early 20th century explorers and missionaries: Tibet. While Tibet's capital city Lhasa does not neatly figure into the direct story of the borderlands, it cannot be denied that many of those moving about Yunnan, Sichuan, and Qinghai from 1880 to 1950 had originally arrived precisely to become the first to penetrate this adventurer's holiest of holies.

Despite these minor critiques, this work is excellent. By highlighting known and unknown explorers in new and insightful ways it opens a new world of study for experts and interested laymen alike. It successfully blends the histories of missionaries, botanists, and adventure-seekers into the story of multiple peoples and a nation at the precipice of great change. This work is a testament to the growth in interdisciplinary and international studies as scholars from multiple fields and regions give an erudite look at this crucial period of Chinese history. The book is destined to become part of the standard readings for students of modern China.

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## Notes

- 1 See Mullaney, T.S. 2011. *Coming to Terms With the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- 2 An excellent look at this is chapter 4 of Gladney, D.C. 2004. *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities, and other Subaltern Subjects*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Below: The Graham houseboat on the Yangtze River, 1920. (public domain)

