

Xiaofei Kang and Donald S. Sutton, *Contesting the Yellow Dragon: Ethnicity, Religion, and the State in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland*

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For centuries, Songpan—a multiethnic town on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands of Sichuan province—has been home to groups known today as Tibetans, Qiang, Hui Chinese Muslims, and Han Chinese. Through examining the past and present of Songpan and the nearby Huanglong nature reserve between the Ming dynasty and the present, Xiaofei Kang and Donald Sutton's *Contesting the Yellow Dragon* both complements and extends a growing body of literature dedicated to complicating our understandings of life on China's culturally and geographically diverse margins in Chinese history. This diachronic study provides new perspectives on continuities, ruptures, and formations of ethnicity, religion, and the state as experienced by one community in Western China.

The complexity of this project should not be lost on readers. The authors spent years in archives and conducting fieldwork in Songpan. The resulting book features an introduction, nine chapters, and a conclusion spread across 424 pages as well as a bibliography, an appendix providing a ritual calendar of Songpan, a Tibetan Glossary, and an index. In writing a work that attends diachronically to Songpan's immense complexities, it sometimes feels like two books mixed together: one focused on the ethnoreligious history of Songpan, the other on the history and contemporary tourist development of the Huanglong nature reserve.

Nevertheless, the monograph does successfully join the two threads, so that they revolve around a central theme: contestations over time involving not only religious sites but the Chinese state's efforts to control, civilize, revolutionize, and modernize; the struggle of Chinese soldiers and civilian migrants to adapt to the region; the resistance, evasions, and adaptations of the majority population of locals of Tibetan culture and their institutions; and finally the contested politics of tourism and environmentalism (4). Thus, even where the monograph feels like two books, they are mutually reinforcing.

The Introduction locates Songpan in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and their own formation of the ethno-religion concept on China's peripheries. Following the intro-

duction, the first three chapters are largely historical, beginning with Chapter 1, “Garrison City in the Ming: Indigenes and the State in Greater Songpan.” This chapter discusses Songpan across the entirety of the Ming dynasty. The Ming sought to control Songpan through garrisons, the indirect control of the *tusi* (local leaders granted hereditary authority from the emperor), and control of the tea trade. Toward the end of the Ming dynasty, the tea trade fell apart and the state’s presence in Songpan waned leading to rebellions. Most interestingly, Kang and Sutton notice how indigenous religious and political structure, like *tsowa* clans and monasteries, were important institutions in the cultural, economic, and political world of Songpan.

Chapter 2, “Qing Songpan: Recovery: Over-extension and disaster,” recognizes the intensified sense of ethnic identity by all of Songpan’s groups, as well as Songpan’s diminished strategic position. Despite the diminishing of Songpan’s strategic importance, however, local institutions like monasteries and *tsowa* continued to exert significant influence in the region. Entitled “Guns, gold, gowns, and poppy: Ethnic frontier in a failing republic,” the third chapter describes the Republican government’s difficulties in controlling Songpan and the rise of poppy as an important cash crop in this period that facilitated the development of three great *tusi* in the region. In a fascinating section, it also describes the role of an underworld society, the Gown Brotherhood, in furthering the opium trade and hindering direct governance.

Chapter 4, “Sharing a Sacred Center: Conch Mountain of the East, Yellow Dragon, and Chinese and Tibetan Culture,” interrupts the historical narrative to describe the greater Songpan region’s religious geography from Tibetan and Chinese perspectives. It places the region as an important religious center and pilgrimage site within the Tibetan pantheon of mountain deities. The Han, meanwhile, re-appropriated Huanglong as an important Daoist sacred site. While Sutton and Kang conclude that Huanglong was originally a Tibetan sacred site, it has now become a polyethnic sacred space that is oddly immune to ethnoreligious violence. This is in part because Tibetan and Han Chinese worshippers shared the same path, but perceived a different world (217). This chapter brilliantly describes the complexity of Chinese and Tibetan interaction in the pre-modern period.

The fifth chapter, “Songpan, the State, and Social Revolution, 1950–1978,” continues the historical narrative of the earlier chapters with a discussion of Songpan under Mao. It is divided into four chronological sections: The United Front (1950–1955), Democratic Reform (1954–1960), the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the Aftermath under the Gang of Four (beginning in 1968 and continuing to the reform era). The authors suggest that for minorities, like Tibetans, with strong religious institutions, the period beginning with Democratic Reform (especially 1958) and continuing to the end of the Maoist period was particularly traumatic, as religion and social life together were “undermined.”

Chapter 6, with the heading “Opening up the Borderland I: The Politics of Tourist Development and Environmental Protection,” switches its focus from Songpan back to Huanglong and particularly its development in the post-Mao period as a tourist site. The tremendous attention to detail in the source material characteristic of the book’s more historical chapters continues here, with the analysis of Huanglong’s application for UNESCO world heritage status, and how this has since put the site, its local governmental administrators, central policies, and international organizations into an uneasy relationship, as they balance competing demands of economic development

through increased tourism with the imperative to preserve the region's fragile ecology.

Chapter 7 is a sequel to Chapter 6, turning its focus to the remaking of Huanglong for tourist purposes. Doing so has included preparing appropriate historical narratives of Sino-Tibetan friendship, new myths of the Long March and of different scenic spots for consumption by (overwhelmingly) Han Chinese tourists, and ethnic representations—the perfect balance of familiar (Chinese) and strange (ethnic minority)—for consumption guests. It ends through discussing how Chinese tourists experience Huanglong both through a series of uniquely Chinese tourist practices (like visiting scenic spots in the *mingsheng* tradition) and others that seem to be influenced through contact with tourists from other countries.

Following this, the eighth chapter, “Contesting the Yellow Dragon in the Age of Reform: Local Initiatives and Responses,” explores religious revival in Huanglong and the greater Songpan area in China's reform era and how this contests the region's development into a national tourist center. From lay devotees raising funds to rebuild the Daoist temples in the park, to the Tibetan monasteries that have sometimes participated in tourist development and sometimes resisted it, the region's religious undertones continue amidst the largely non-religious tourist treatment. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which this chapter shows different stakeholders creatively working within the Chinese state system to promote personal and local goals.

The book's final chapter, “Ethnoreligion, Ethnic Identity and Regional Consciousness at Songpan,” shifts focus back to Songpan County to analyze how Han Chinese, Tibetans, and Qiang interact in contemporary Songpan's religious spaces. The chapter begins with a description of ethnicity, language, and education at different points in the post-Mao period, before narrating how, despite tremendous assimilation, remembered customs serve as local identity markers, fortified by media representation, and stage performances (384). Next, the chapter introduces how Songpan's Hui Chinese Muslim community chafes against their erasure from official tourist literature and marginality in the tourist economy, but also resists being too visible in it. The chapter ends with an analysis of the City God temple in Songpan. Once an emblem of Han domination of frontier space, elderly Han stakeholders rebuilt the City God Temple without governmental support in the post-Mao period. But just as Han Chinese have added their own meanings to the originally Tibetan sacred site at Huanglong, Tibetans have begun worshipping at the City God temple. Han and Tibetans worship at different sites and in different ways, creating multiple layers of meaning for the religious site.

Following this, in a two-part conclusion, the authors first discuss the contribution of their “*long duree*” approach to understanding the uneven process by which the Chinese center incorporated this borderland town into Chinese state. This long view, allowed recognition of the resilience of indigenous institutions, and how the landscape was eventually (literarily) created as a Chinese landscape with new meanings layered over (though not replacing) the original Tibetan ones. The second half of the conclusion, styled as an epilogue, discusses how the book's description of a multiethnic Songpan complicates narratives of Tibetan resistance to Chinese oppression.

Given the manuscript's diversity, the book's greatest classroom uses will probably come in assigning one, or a few chapters alongside other works about Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. For example, the discussion of the Republican era poppy trade in Chapter 3 could complement literature classes examining Tibetan author Alai's *Chen'ai Luoding* (translated in English as *Red Poppies*), while the

chapters focusing on Huanglong (particularly Chapters 6–8) would be of interest for course modules on tourism and development in the post-Mao China. Despite its many strengths, the book would have benefited from engaging with Tibetan sources—the authors acknowledge as much in the introduction—and it occasionally fails to explain the cultural significance of particular vignettes—as when narrating how Red Army soldiers are remembered as having left bootprints on scriptures without describing how this ignored Tibetan views and taboos relating to the written word. These small issues aside this book’s erudition and historical breadth ensure that it is a valuable contribution to studies of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and to Tibetology, and Sinology more broadly.

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