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# Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928-49 By Hsiao-Ting Lin; Reviewed by Carole McGranahan

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PHOTO: KENNETH HANSON

# TIBET AND NATIONALIST CHINA'S FRONTIER: INTRIGUES AND ETHNOPOLITICS, 1928-49

BY HSIAO-TING LIN

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006. 285 pp. ISBN:  
9780774813020

REVIEWED BY CAROLE McGRANAHAN

Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist China was not interested in "unconditionally and uncompromisingly" making Tibet a part of China. This counter-intuitive claim is at the heart of Hsiao-ting Lin's *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928-1949*. Lin goes against prevailing historiography to argue that Chiang and his Kuomintang government (KMT) used "the Tibetan agenda as a means to elevate its prestige, to reinforce its authority, and to initiate its state-building projects, from China proper to the Inner Asian border regions" (14). Drawing on newly available Chinese sources in Taipei, specifically from the Academia Historica, the Kuomintang Party Archives, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, as well as from American and British governmental archives, Lin sheds new light on KMT approaches to and relations with Tibet. He does so from a China-centered

perspective which is the book's main contribution, but also one of its primary limitations.

Lin clearly and consistently states what *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier* is not about. It is not a Sino-Tibetan political history; it does not offer an answer to the political impasse between "these two nations" (14). Instead, he provides historical and political context and a new depth by stepping outside conventional China-Tibet frameworks to focus, instead, on the KMT frontier agenda. He opens with contextual chapters assessing first, the Republic of China as a political and conceptual entity in the 1920s and 30s, and second, frontier policy during this period. The next eight chapters are chronological, covering in three chunks the prewar decade of 1928-1937, the wartime period of 1938-1945, and the post-war period of 1945-1949. A brief epilogue restates the book's overall argument as squarely focused on the KMT and Chiang Kai-shek.

In this book, Tibet is never anything more than an "issue." Although Lin acknowledges Tibetan claims to sovereignty, he nonetheless writes throughout the book as if this period of Tibetan independence is merely an aberration in Chinese rule of Tibet. He speaks, for example, of China's "sovereign rights over [its] traditional peripheries" (159), and indeed, frames the entire book not "in the conventional Han Chinese versus Tibetans" framework, but instead in a frame that places the Tibetans in an almost primordially subordinate relationship to the KMT (15). On many occasions this feels ironic given Lin's efforts to show that the KMT was merely using Tibet to advance its own causes. Thus, he makes statements such as "it is undeniable that the wartime Chinese government was ultimately unsuccessful in its efforts regarding Tibet" (156) but does not complete his analysis: i.e., if KMT Tibet policy was unsuccessful, then what does that tell us in geopolitical terms about not just China, but also Tibet? In several instanc-

es, Lin refrains from developing and extending his analyses in ways that would open up his China-centered vision. For example, he details multiple cases of KMT deception of Tibetans. One such example is when KMT officials invited Tibetans to a “conference” that Tibetans believed was to discuss Tibetan-Chinese relations, but was, in reality, a meeting of the National Assembly, following which KMT officials argued that Tibetan presence at the Assembly was evidence of Tibetan membership in Nationalist China. Moments like this lend this book a contradictory feel and disappointing limitation in that Lin appears to get stuck between theory and practice. He overtly argues that during the period of KMT rule, Tibet was not a part of China in practice. However, he pairs this with the presumption that Tibet is a part of China in theory.

Why is this a problem? For this reviewer, the problem lies in the fact that this assumption is left unacknowledged. It provides the default grounding for the book, but is neither historicized nor theorized. There are multiple places in the book where analytical attention to Chinese ideas about Tibet as part of China would be welcome. Chapter Two, for example, is titled “Professed Frontier Policy, Policy Planners, and Imagined Sovereignty.” The concept of imagined sovereignty is a provocative one, with which Lin could do much work in getting inside KMT approaches to Tibet. What does it mean for sovereignty to be imagined? Does the KMT’s imagining of its sovereignty over Tibet trump the empirical reality that KMT China did not have sovereignty over that region? Lin does not do the needed analytical work with the term, instead stating “how Chiang Kai-shek ... really perceived China’s relations with Tibet” is a “topic for further exploration” outside of this book (79).

If the book is strongest in its inclusion of new Chinese sources and analysis of Chinese intentions towards Tibet, it is weakest in its understanding of Tibet. Numerous mistakes and misunderstandings plague the text, from the place of the Panchen Lama in the Tibetan political system to the geographically incorrect claim that Kanze and Nyarong are on the “east bank of the upper Yangtze River” (62). Getting details like these correct is important. Placing Kanze and Nyarong on the bank of the Yangtze river rather than acknowledging their location several hundred kilometers east of the river is politically problematic given the importance of the Yangtze River (or Dri Chu in Tibetan) as a disputed border between Tibet and China. In the Epilogue, Lin even goes so far as to ponder if Tibetans engage in state-building tasks, that is, not to ask which practices they use or how, but *if* they engage in state-building at all. Familiarity with current scholarship from Tibetan Studies would help to remedy some of these flaws. The work of Fabienne Jagou on the ninth Panchen Lama, Gray Tuttle on Tibetan Buddhists in Republican China,

and Yudru Tsomu on Chinese intellectuals and Tibet, each of whom draw on both Tibetan and Chinese language sources, would be of great value in rethinking this period and gaining a Tibet-centered understanding of Tibet to both supplement and sharpen Lin’s China-centered approach.

In sum, this is a historically detailed book written for specialists. It has exceptional detail to offer and an intriguing thesis. While it lacks a situating of its own historical and political orientation, and falls short in terms of grasping the Tibetan side of the equation, it is undoubtedly a valuable and welcome resource for scholars of Tibet.

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## A BOY FROM SIKLIS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CHANDRA GURUNG

BY MANJUSHREE THAPA

New Delhi: Penguin Books, India, 2009, 226 pp. ISBN: 9780143065487.

REVIEWED BY DON MESSERSCHMIDT

It is not often that a biography is reviewed in this journal, but this is an exceptional book about an exceptional individual – a renowned Nepalese environmentalist – whom many of us either knew well, or had met, or have certainly heard about: Chandra Prasad Gurung (1949-2006). It is a remarkable biography, about someone of outstanding accomplishment, from whom we can learn a great deal.

*A Boy from Siklis: The Life and Times of Chandra Gurung* is by Manjushree Thapa, one of Nepal’s preeminent writers, and the much-acclaimed author of fiction (*The Tutor of History*), literary non-fiction (*Forget Kathmandu*) and short-stories (*Tilled Earth*). Manjushree knew Chandra Gurung well; she worked with him some years ago when he was in charge of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) during its formative start-up years. Many of us knew Chandra then, or perhaps earlier when he was an impressionable young student just back from America, or later when he so resolutely directed the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Nepal Program. Ms. Thapa has successfully captured the Chandra that we knew.