

# Seeing like Borders

## Convergence Zone as a Post-Zomian Model

by Jinba Tenzin

This article examines the interests and concerns of two ethnic communities straddling the Sino-Tibetan borderlands—the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu—in the reconfigurations of their relations with the Chinese state, the Han, the Tibetans, and with each other, especially since 2008. I argue that both the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu employ various tactics for their anticipated goals, notably strategic marginality, dissimulation through analogy, or the marginal's scapegoating, partly as responses to the Tibetan unrest and Sichuan earthquake. The differences and similarities in their authenticity and other claims as well as the approaches and strategies adopted are primarily outcomes of their hybridized identities and their marginal status vis-à-vis the Han state and Tibetans in history and at present. Above all, I adopt and expand the natural science convergence zone concept to identify multifarious manifestations and layers of the center-periphery paradigm as well as processes and effects of convergences among multiple external and internal forces at borders and margins. In provoking a further critical analysis and comparison, I bring forth Hong Kong's unique role as both a world metropolis and a peripheral Chinese city. I then conclude with open-ended questions regarding this theoretical model's prospects and challenges in examining and comparing a diverse range of borders and margins (and beyond) across time and space, including various subcultures in urban and other settings.

The year 2008 was an eventful time in Sichuan's Sino-Tibetan borderlands. Two dramatic events had profound impacts on the sociopolitical landscape there: the Tibetan unrest in March and the Sichuan earthquake in May, the latter of which severely hit the residential and surrounding areas of the Qiangzu (an officially identified ethnic group). As a consequence, Tibetans were stigmatized as a "bad" ethnic minority for their widespread protests and self-immolations, while the Qiangzu were lauded as a "good" one for their lavish praise of "our great Party" in appreciation of the latter's disaster-relief projects. Simultaneously, the lingering historical images of the Qiangzu and Tibetans toward one another ("barbarians" [*manzi*] and "shitty Qiangzu" [*lan qiangzu*], respectively) found their latest expression and direction. These two instances are therefore instrumental in the reconfigurations of the relationship of Tibetans and the Qiangzu in relation to the Chinese Party state as well as in the reconfigurations of their mutual relations. In comparing responses and relevant claims by the Qiangzu and the Gyalrongwa—a Tibetan subgroup ("wa" means "people" in Tibetan)—I will inquire into how such similarities and differences derive from their historical and ongoing interactions with Tibetan and Chinese cultures and politics and with one another. Extrapolating from the findings, I will ask how the locals' strategies and concerns may contribute to our understanding of

dynamic interplays of borderland or peripheral societies with dominant cultural and political entities.

First, I would like to give a survey of the two groups I have been working with (figs. 1, 2). The Gyalrongwa are officially recognized Tibetans (*zangzu*).<sup>1</sup> Gyalrong has a native (Gyalrongwa) population of about 300,000. The majority reside in Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (hereafter, Ngawa Prefecture) and Danba County of Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (hereafter, Garzê Prefecture). Besides the nomadic Amdo Tibetan and the Kham Tibetan dialects, a number of distinctive local dialects are spoken here. The classification of these dialects is still under debate among linguists, but they are usually considered to belong to the Qiangic branch of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family, as is the Qiang(zu) language (see, e.g., Jacques 2008). Nonetheless, many of these dialects are hardly comprehensible to speakers of other dialects. Like the Gyalrongwa, the Qiangzu have a population of about 300,000. Most of the Qiangzu live in Wenchuan, Maoxian, Lixian, and Songpan counties of Ngawa Prefecture and in Beichuan County of Mianyang City. The Qiang language comprises the northern and southern Qiang dialects, whose lexicon and morphology (e.g., loan words) appear to be influenced relatively more by either Tibetan or Chinese, respec-

**Jinba Tenzin** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore (11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570 [socdj@nus.edu.sg]). This paper was submitted 3 IX 15, accepted 15 VII 16, and electronically published 12 IX 17.

1. From 1953 to 1957, the Chinese government organized a large-scale ethnic identification project, but it was not until 1979 that a total of 56 ethnic groups (*minzu*)—with the Han included—were officially recognized. Tibetans (*zangzu*) are one of them. Thomas Mullaney (2011) provides an elaborate account of this project.



Figure 1. Map of Gyalrong and Qiangzu regions (with major sites marked with rectangles). A color version of this figure is available online.

tively (see LaPolla and Huang 1996). Nevertheless, not more than 30% of the overall Qiangzu population can speak either of these dialects, so this suggests that the majority of the Qiangzu use Chinese exclusively in their daily lives (see Huang 2009).

Scholars tend to believe that the two groups used to be among ancient Qiang tribes, but they have taken different historical trajectories.<sup>2</sup> With the westward advancement of Chinese political and cultural domains and the eastward expansion of Tibetan counterparts (as a result of the rise of the Tibetan empire in the seventh century), these tribes, which were situated in the middle of these two predominant powers, were strongly influenced by both of the dominant forces. Today's Qiangzu are said to be the only direct descendants of the ancient Qiang people, but they have absorbed plenty of Chinese and Tibetan cultural practices. However, the Qiangzu and their

2. The term “Qiang” in ancient Chinese texts refers to nomadic or seminomadic “barbarian” populations residing to the west of Han regions, so the ancient Qiang were composed of peoples of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Many, if not the majority, of today's ethnic populations in southwestern China, oftentimes with Tibetans (especially those outside of Central Tibet) included, are broadly identified as descendants of the ancient Qiang. Despite such heterogeneity, many assumed descendant groups of the ancient Qiang, like the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu, as well as their ancestors are said to share or have shared varying degrees of linguistic and cultural features (see, e.g., Shi 2011).

recent predecessors have been influenced more by the Chinese culture, to the degree that they constitute what Mingke Wang (2006) refers to as *huaxia bianyuan* (Chinese cultural frontier). Arguably, the Gyalrongwa may retain some ancient Qiang elements in their language and customs, but they are Tibetanized to the extent that they have been recognized as part of “us Tibetans,” although situated on the far eastern edge of the Tibetosphere. Nevertheless, their culture and practices cannot avoid being strongly influenced by the Chinese as well, especially since the Qing's eighteenth century large-scale campaigns against the insurgent local chieftains. The majority of today's Qiangzu region used to be ruled by Gyalrong/Tibetan kings and nobles. The political dominance of Tibetans in Ngawa Prefecture has not changed since the founding of the People's Republic due to their larger population as well as the higher stakes for the Party state's scheme of territorial (Tibetan) stabilization.

My fieldwork in Gyalrong started soon after the earthquake of 2008. During the following year, I conducted my research mainly in Danba County. From 2010 on, I started to explore other parts of Gyalrong. Since then, I have also stopped over in different Qiangzu counties on my way to Gyalrong or made short visits there a number of times. At least twice a year since 2011, I have conducted more in-depth fieldwork in these counties for durations of 1 week to 2 months. A top agenda of my field observations and interviews has been to investigate the consequences of the Tibetan unrest and the earthquake. I have looked

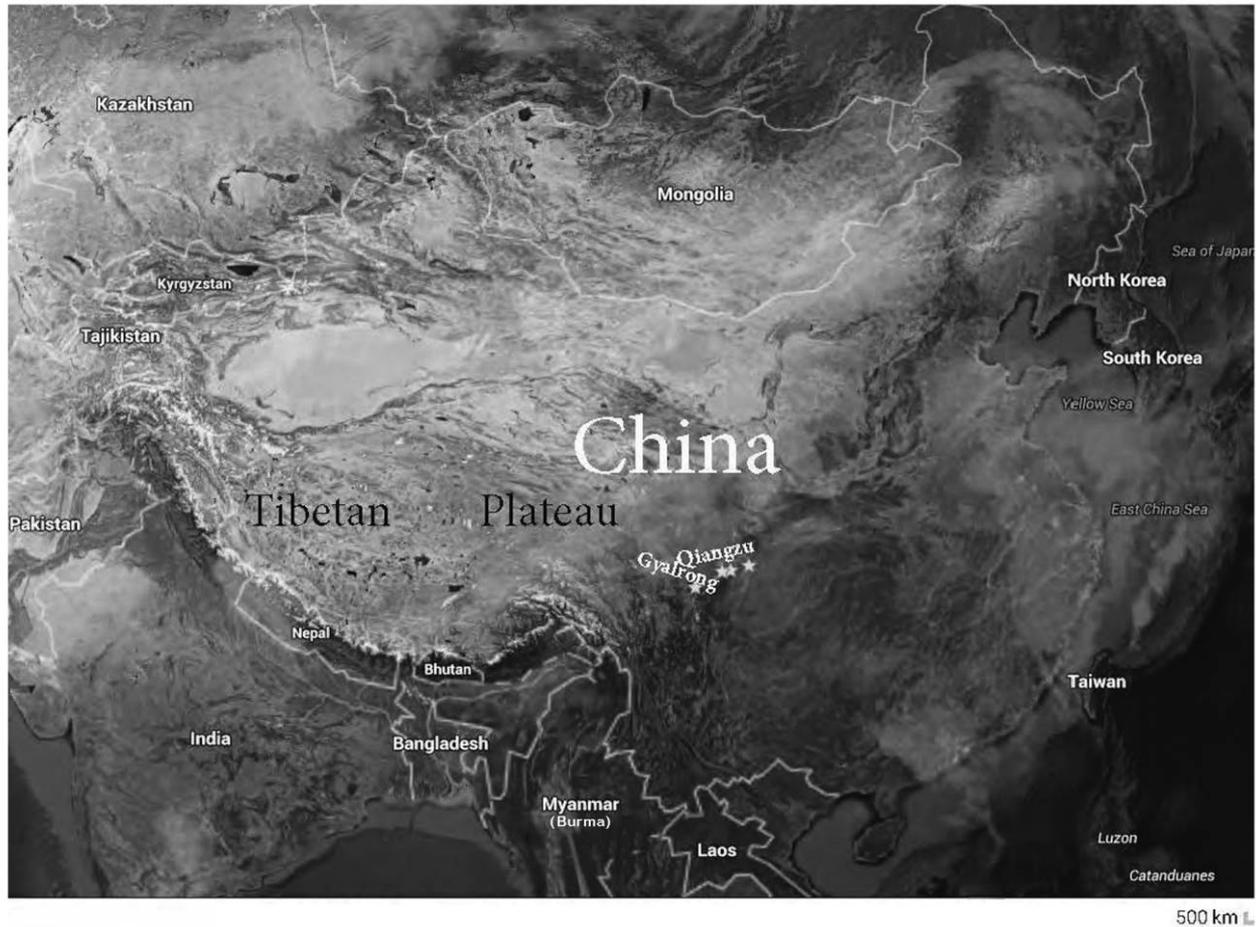


Figure 2. Map of Gyalrong and Qiangzu regions in China and elsewhere in Asia. Four major sites are marked with stars. From left to right, these are Danba, Lixian, Wenchuan, and Beichuan. A color version of this figure is available online.

into the ways the local populations cope with and live through these incidents. I have also explored their interactions with the Han state and Tibetans as well as their images of each other.

Building upon these observations, this article discusses how the political and ethnocultural identities of the two communities are embedded in their border or marginal status and are also substantially informed by the incidents in 2008. I then situate this study in a broader analytic framework by introducing a new theoretical lens on borders and margins, namely the notion of convergence zone.<sup>3</sup> This model aims to shed a fresh light on initiatives and tactics of borderland and marginal populations in engaging with powerful centers and with one another, notably their strategic use of the unfavorable peripheral standing (I coin the term “strategic marginality” to identify this type of

tactic, which I will explain later).<sup>4</sup> I argue that this analytic framework is useful to identify multiple dimensions and layers of convergences as well as diversified intergroup and intra-group interests and agendas at borders and margins. In addressing this model’s distinctive attributes, I draw parallels between it and the theoretical angle of hybridity/creolization and other established analytic models, such as Zomia (Scott 2009; see also van Schendel 2002), while simultaneously setting it apart from these frameworks. In so doing, I propose to look at the convergence zone as a post-Zomian model for our potentially deeper understanding of intentionality, strategies, and constraints at borders and margins in the ways people deal with dominant political and cultural imperatives. Next, to facilitate the reading of this article, I provide an overview of key sites and necessary ethnographic contexts.

3. This notion was first explored in my book *In the Land of the Eastern Quedom: the Politics of Gender and Ethnicity on the Sino-Tibetan Border* (Tenzin 2014). I consider it an initial but crucial stage for a more theoretically oriented and extensive comparative study of different types of borders and margins, which I have been conducting at present.

4. The multilevel process theory of ethnicity developed by Andreas Wimmer (2008) is also useful in considering how various tactics or strategies of marginal groups (e.g., boundary marking) are defined by institutional structure, power relations, political positioning, and so on.

*Suopo and Danba.* Suopo is a township (*xiang*) in Danba County, Garzê Prefecture, in western Sichuan. Danba is one of the core Gyalrong regions, but because Garzê Prefecture residents are predominantly Khampa Tibetans (one of the major Tibetan subgroups), Danba is often officially labeled as a Khampa Tibetan county.<sup>5</sup> The Suopo population (and Danba as a whole) is composed mostly of the Gyalrongwa (with a small number of Han immigrants), whose official ethnic label is hence Tibetans (*zangzu*). Their mother tongue is a Khampa Tibetan dialect, instead of one of the more common Gyalrong dialects spoken in Danba and other parts of Gyalrong. Even so, their native language is not easily recognizable as a Kham Tibetan dialect thanks to its distinct pronunciation and many indigenous expressions. As a result, the Suopowa (Suopo locals) are still considered by Khampa Tibetans as the “typical” Gyalrongwa.

*Beichuan.* Beichuan County is administered by Mianyang City in northeastern Sichuan. Officially, Beichuan is the only Qiangzu autonomous county in China. In the early 1950s, soon after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), few locals in Beichuan identified themselves as Qiangzu, but since the mid-1980s, many locals have changed their ethnic label from Han to Qiangzu owing to the county government’s initiative of turning Beichuan into the Qiangzu autonomous county for the sake of the central state’s preferential policy toward ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the ethnic Qiangzu make up a little over 40% of the local population in Beichuan at present. These Qiangzu in Beichuan are hence widely considered by those in Ngawa Prefecture to be “fake Qiangzu.” As Beichuan is faced with such a critical (Qiangzu) identity crisis, the county has had long battles with the Qiangzu counties in Ngawa Prefecture, especially Wenchuan, in defense of their Qiangzu status. For instance, Beichuan has been competing with Wenchuan in the last two decades over the status of the birthplace of *Dayu* (Great Yu; ca. 2200–2100 BC)—a legendary iconic figure of ancient Qiang who is credited with introducing flood control—to reassert Beichuan’s authentic Qiangzu origin.

*Lixian.* Lixian County is part of Ngawa Prefecture in northern Sichuan. Nearly 50% of the population is the Gyalrongwa

(hence officially Tibetans), and a little over 30% is the Qiangzu. The western part of the county is populated mostly by the Gyalrongwa, while its eastern part is inhabited by both the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu (and the Han). Largely because the Gyalrongwa in the eastern part of Lixian live side by side with the Qiangzu, my Gyalrongwa informants there tend to harbor more negative opinions on their Qiangzu neighbors than do other Gyalrongwa I have interviewed. For instance, the expression “shitty Qiangzu” is more often heard here.

### Setting the Stage: The Gyalrongwa/Tibetans and Qiangzu in 2008 and Afterward

The unrest in 2008 was probably the most widespread rebellion throughout Tibetan regions since the start of the reforming era at the end of the 1970s. In particular, Ngawa Prefecture and Ngawa County, which is under its jurisdiction, have become a hub of Tibetan protests, because the first instance of self-immolation occurred here. Ever since, it has had the largest number of such cases among Tibetan areas in China.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Party state tightened its control over Ngawa Prefecture as well as over its neighboring Garzê Prefecture (and other Tibetan regions)—a land popularly associated with intransigent and unyielding warriors—through a sharp increase in army and police presence. Tibetans in general, including the Gyalrongwa, were seen by the Han Chinese and others as ungrateful and rebellious.

In contrast, the Qiangzu’s splendid gratitude toward the Party state regarding the latter’s disaster-relief efforts reinforced their image as a model minority who reiterated the seemingly unwavering golden principle that “Only the Communist Party can save China.” During interviews, most Qiangzu intellectuals and officials in Ngawa Prefecture expressed the idea that it is an unprecedented opportunity for the Qiangzu to “stand up.” The idea of “standing up” has several connotations: besides the restoration of damaged buildings and cultural artifacts and foreseeable economic leaps with huge state investment, it embodies the notion that the Qiangzu can take advantage of this special occasion to transform their unfavorable status vis-à-vis Tibetans at a time when Tibetans are under tight control, as is implied in the words of a Qiangzu informant, “We have been bullied [by Tibetans] for too long.”

This statement proper suggests that Tibetans (especially the Gyalrongwa) and the Qiangzu are not always on good terms. Although their interactions are not remarkably confrontational on a daily basis, the mutual distrust is noticeable.

5. Garzê Prefecture claims to be the core of Khampa culture, and as a result, officials there tend to overlook its internal diversity (Amdo, Gyalrong, and other seemingly non-Khampa elements) to conveniently lump different groups and regions together as a whole (Khampa). Many Danba locals do label themselves as the Khampa, but most do not deny their Gyalrongwa identity, either. Moreover, the Danba County government brands Danba as the (exclusive) core of Gyalrong culture, which is sometimes received with disapproval by Gyalrong counties (and locals) in Ngawa Prefecture.

6. It is not uncommon in China that some Han change their official ethnic status into that of a certain ethnic minority, because the central Party state offers various preferential policies toward ethnic minorities and their inhabited regions, such as more accessible poverty alleviation funding and direct investments. Stevan Harrell’s book *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China* (2011) will be able to provide a general reference to what connotes being an ethnic minority in China.

7. According to the blog of Tsering Woser, a Tibetan dissident writer living in Beijing, 39 of the 155 Tibetans who performed self-immolation from February 27, 2009, to May 19, 2017, were from Ngawa County, and 59 were from Ngawa Prefecture (<http://woeser.middle-way.net/>). So far, this has been the most reliable unofficial source. These self-immolation incidents have attracted wide attention in Western academia (see, e.g., Makley 2015; McGranahan and Litzinger 2012; Smith 2010; Whalen-Bridge 2015).

I often heard the Gyalrongwa in Lixian County refer to their Qiangzu neighbors as those who “carried our sandals [shoes] on their backs.” In local accounts, during the Qing military expeditions in central Tibet (against the Gurkhas invasion from Nepal in the eighteenth century) and in Zhejiang in eastern China (against the British during the nineteenth century opium wars), the Gyalrong soldiers fought at the front lines, whereas the predecessors of today’s Qiangzu were not qualified to take up arms but were to perform some “lowly” jobs for the former. Moreover, the Gyalrongwa and other Tibetans tend to believe that the Qiangzu are rather sly and calculating, “just like the Han.”

In the eyes of many Qiangzu, “typical” Tibetans are quite wild and barbaric, as they do not normally follow rules or have good manners and are easily provoked to fist fighting or knife stabbing. Other common images regarding Tibetans are that they are unhygienic, dull-witted, promiscuous, or superstitious (meaning religious). However, seen as unashamed of their “bad qualities and practices,” Tibetans are said to be very arrogant and to look down upon the Qiangzu. Even worse, according to Qiangzu informants, the state actually encouraged such an attitude by continually offering them “carrots,” including predominant political status in Ngawa Prefecture and other Tibetan regions, to forestall their rebellions. These interviewees saw the 2008 unrest as a lesson that the Party state should learn from—spoiling Tibetans would be reciprocated, not with gratitude or loyalty, as had been anticipated, but with escalated rioting. In other words, the Qiangzu deserve the state’s protection and backing thanks to their allegiance. They also deserve the moral obligation of the Party to redress the previous partial policy toward them.

This kind of tension found expression in a letter circulated online in February 2012. Titled *A Public Letter from A Tibetan (Chinese Communist) Party Member*, the letter accused the then Party secretary of Ngawa Prefecture, a Han, for his strategy of *tiqiang dazang*.<sup>8</sup> To translate, *Qiang* is a pun word in Chinese, meaning either “Qiangzu” or “guns.” Thus *tiqiang dazang* means either “elevating the Qiangzu to beat up Tibetans” or “carrying guns to beat up Tibetans.” It asserts that this top leader and his clique intentionally promoted the Qiangzu cadres and culture while marginalizing Tibetans and undermining Tibetan culture.

Who was in the clique? This letter suggests that major Qiangzu officials in Ngawa Prefecture were involved. In discussing this letter with Tibetan officials and others, they made it more explicit that the Qiangzu were colluding with the Party state to bring Tibetans down. One even called the Qiangzu cadres “running dogs” of the Party. Several of them pointed out that, although many Tibetans in Ngawa Prefecture suffered much during the earthquake, the Qiangzu officials and their Han superiors managed to label this disaster in a way

that was ethnically (Qiangzu) biased for the sake of more funding and support exclusively for the Qiangzu. However, some Qiangzu elites believed that much of the disaster-relief money was actually embezzled secretly by more politically advantaged Tibetan officials in support of their “fellows” instead.

On this and many other occasions, the Gyalrongwa and other Tibetans banded together as a single collective with an assumed common identity that they themselves, the Han, and others would claim. However, from time to time, the Gyalrongwa’s marginal status among Tibetans came to prominence because of their distinctive cultural practices and, particularly, their questionable political identity in the eyes of many other Tibetans. Therefore, this situation has great impact on the ways the Gyalrongwa interact with the Qiangzu, the Han state, and other Tibetans.

Following this, I examine how relevant existing research on borders and margins may provide insights into intergroup and intragroup tensions between local Tibetans (the Gyalrongwa, in particular) and the Qiangzu as well as insights into the ways that these two groups interact with the state and (“mainstream”) Tibetans. In particular, I discuss how my proposed theoretical model of convergence zone is instrumental in identifying a more nuanced center-periphery paradigm in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and borders and margins as a whole, through a comparative lens.

### Borders, Margins, and Convergence Zone

The concept of border or frontier itself embodies marginality or peripherality—a state of being distant or withdrawn from sociopolitical and cultural centers or mainstreams. Thus, borders often become a site of escape and flight from the state or similarly powerful political entities (Scott 2009). For that reason, borders repeatedly turn into contested spaces where modern states attempt to exercise their sovereignty while local populations resist such incursions (e.g., Kinnvall and Svensson 2015). Similarly, with attention to their volatile sociocultural nature, borders are frequently portrayed as sites of “(border) crossing” (Rosaldo 1993) and transgressing boundaries (Ewing 1998), which, however, entail creative cultural productions and intersections of power and difference (Mueggler 2001; Ortner 1999; Pratt 1991). Therefore, it has been widely acknowledged that borders serve not merely as barriers to disrupt and divide but as intermediaries or bridges to connect and interlock. Hence, they are often perceived as corridors of people, goods, and cultural flows (Fei 1980; see also Giersch 2010; Mingming Wang 2008). Borders are also sites of overlapping and fragmented sovereignties (Coggins and Yeh 2014), heterogeneity and transcultural dialogue (Tsing 1993), or “interstitial zones” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992)—creative grounds for the making and unmaking of often-competing sociocultural worlds (Makley 2003:598). Simultaneously, in addressing the previous discourse of the recurrent freezing of borders and people there in time and space, the past decade has seen a growing emphasis on the transfor-

8. Not long after its appearance, this letter was removed from websites by the state agency. However, it can still be seen online outside of China (e.g., [http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/02/blog-post\\_18.html](http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/02/blog-post_18.html)).

mative and fluid nature of borders (see Makley 2007; Shneiderman 2015).<sup>9</sup> This, as a result, situates borders in increasing interactions with transregional, nation-state, and global forces at work in the modern era (Ortner 1989; see also Appadurai 1996).

Therefore, borders are not simply the loci where political or cultural territories end. Instead, borders are where these territories meet, contest, negotiate, converge, and fuse. Thus, they are where hybrid and new cultures and identities flourish. Accordingly, I am inclined to look at the frontier or border as a convergence zone, a concept that has yet to be widely applied in social science. This notion is originally found in geology, meteorology, and oceanography. These disciplines all refer to a convergence zone as an area of converging forces resulting from the encounter and collision of two tectonic plates, different bodies of airflows, and water masses, respectively. In similar fashion, convergence zone here can be defined as the outcome of intensive engagement and interaction of at least two prevailing powers or forces and, consequentially, as a hybridized zone. Above all, a convergence zone should be recognized as a power center in its own right that constantly generates vitality, productivity, and restiveness.

Thus, instead of being viewed as peripheral to formidable powers in interactions, a border area should be seen as such a zone, one where dominant and local peoples and cultures connect, exchange, compete, clash, blend, and coexist. There, the local society not only incorporates various elements from the two peoples and cultures but also carves a new space for its cultural expressions, identity construction, political positioning, and creative productions. In that sense, the idea of convergence zone embraces hybridity and creolization while simultaneously highlighting locals' innovations, initiatives, and concerns.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some differing connotations, the notions of hybridity and creolization, in their often-postcolonial interpretations, break down the symmetry and duality of self/other and inside/outside (Bhabha 2004:165; see also Hannerz 1992), and they emphasize dialectic interactions between center and periphery with "intertwined histories and engagement across dichotomies" (Prakash 1994:1,486; see also Kuortti and Nyman 2007). Such conditions are thus entailed as sources of creativity and self-assertion and hence as something to celebrate, thanks to their embrace of plurality, diversity, and transformativity (Gilroy 2010; Munro and Britton 2012; Prabhu 2007). They are also seen as ever-changing and ongoing processes of transcultural negotiation, simultaneous resistance and domination, and identity remapping (Lyll Smith and Leavy 2008). While such a process is embedded in history, it has been reconstituting

itself by constantly taking new forms or directions in line with concrete sociopolitical contexts (Lionnet and Shi 2011:30; see also Bulag 2002).

The ideas of both hybridity and creolization are useful for identifying aspects of a dynamic convergence zone in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands due to the considerable impact of the Han state and Tibetans on local cultures, politics, and identities in their intensive encounters. The local communities' representations and positioning in relation to the Han state and Tibetans exemplify complex interplays between center and periphery, as illustrated below. In spite of the above-noted insightful revelations of existing analytic frameworks of hybridity and creolization, such as those by Homi Bhabha (2004) and Ulf Hannerz (1992), both of these notions per se are complicit in conceptually reproducing the predominant status and role of the powerful center (e.g., the West), which continues to serve as the primary point of reference (see Hall 2003; Kraidy 2005; Palmié 2006; Stoler 1997; Young 1995). Simultaneously, the theoretical frameworks in question often draw inadequate attention to multiple layers of center-periphery interactions at margins (and centers).

The model of convergence zone is thus distinguished from these two notions in two ways. First, both the center and periphery are seen to serve as equally important points of reference for one another. This framework therefore attaches due importance to the dialectic center-periphery paradigm from the points of views of borders and margins (hence the title of this article, *Seeing like Borders*).<sup>11</sup> Second, this model underlines multifarious manifestations of center-periphery interfacing at borders and margins. Notably, the periphery may be further divided into one or more centers and peripheries.

Above all, this model gives prominence to both converging and conflicting interests and concerns among borderland or marginal populations. On the one hand, they constantly negotiate with, if not undermine, the dominant discourse and political structure that displace them in a disadvantaged situation. On the other hand, their choices and actions are constrained for the lack of various (e.g., material, social, and symbolic) resources available to them.

James Scott (1985) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987), among others, identify two common modes employed by the marginal. These are oftentimes an individually oriented, everyday form of resistance and also a collectively orchestrated essentialist process of representations. Scott argues that the marginal can always find a way to disrupt the existing dominant social structure little by little through often seemingly

9. Nonetheless, this notion is in line with Fredrik Barth's pioneering work on both the resilience and persistence of ethnic boundaries despite personnel, material, and cultural interchanges (Barth 1998 [1969]).

10. I am aware that the notions of hybridity and creolization have their own historical and theoretical specificities (see Stewart 2007), but I do not intend to make this conceptual distinction here.

11. In China studies, the seminal work *Empire at the Margins* (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006) is an illustration of the dialectic center-periphery paradigm by taking in the perspectives of borders. This book's "anti-Sino-centric" stance is in line with those of Owen Lattimore (1962 [1940])—a pioneer of China's frontier studies in the West—and the present-day so-called "New Qing Historians" (such as Pamela Kyle Crossley, Mark Elliott, Evelyn Rawski, and Laura Hostetler), who see the irreplaceable role of Inner Asia and frontiers in formulating and sustaining the Chinese-Qing empire.

trivial acts, such as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, and so on, but this may be able to produce impacts on the existing sociopolitical system unmatched by direct resistance, including revolutions. Spivak coins the term “strategic essentialism” to demonstrate the way in which the subaltern or peripheral populations sometimes choose to essentialize their identities as collective effort for certain political agendas or common interests by putting aside internal differences for the time being to satisfy the criteria imposed by outsiders. This kind of strategy is widespread, but it may be manifested in multiple forms in particular situations.

In the Chinese context, alongside the so-called internal orientalism (Schein 1997)—the frequently gendered or sexualized images of internal others (ethnic minorities) that are consumed by the majority Han for exoticness and nationalist aspirations (see, e.g., Bulag 2010; Litzinger 2000)—many of these ethnic individuals engage in auto-orientalism for the Han’s gaze and state agenda in exchange for the return of capital and favorable policy (see Blumenfeld 2010; Walsh 2005). However, this is not as simple as the reproduction of a dominant internal colonialism structure that characterizes the structural inequality between the Han state and ethnic minorities (Gladney 1998b; Oakes 1998). It should be seen as the essentialized others’ struggle to become the subjects, rather than objects, of modernity as well as of their own representations (Oakes 1998:223).

While Scott’s model may risk a romanticized rendering of ordinary people’s resistance strategies and overstretch the notion of resistance and agency of the powerless (see the critiques, for instance, by Fletcher 2001), it shows how the marginal can possibly make the best use of the rather limited resources available for their own interests and talk back in their own ways. Spivak herself sees essentialist images and strategies used by the marginal or minority groups, which are often represented for all by the privileged societal sector (e.g., males, elites, and others), as harmful to their long-term goals (Danus, Jonsson, and Spivak 1993; Spivak 1988). Despite this fact, her model, and especially her concern over this issue, exhibits constraints that the dominant discourse exerts on the marginal’s choice—in most circumstances, the marginalized are given no better alternative options to act upon—and it also showcases the internal divergence and power imbalance in a given group.

Rather than privilege one over the other, the idea of convergence zone gives prominence to a mutual embedding of individual aspirations and dominant discourses at both personal and collective levels among peripheral populations. It does so by pinpointing the coexistence of despairs and hopes, constraints and initiatives, and power and resourcefulness in these people’s efforts to secure a space for their survival and expressions. What is more, in both Scott’s and Spivak’s models, the status of the weak or the subaltern seems to be doomed in a way that reflects more an adaptation to social realities than transformation, despite their capability to undercut the dominant structure (see Ortner 2006). To redress the deficiency, the idea of convergence zone not only sees a marginal group as capable of speaking back but also spotlights such a society as a

self-sufficient power center in certain circumstances, if not always.

James Scott’s book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) provides an exemplary study of how the periphery becomes a self-sufficient power center. This work popularizes the notion of Zomia—an interstate zone linking a number of (mostly Southeast) Asian countries—to the extent that this concept has become one of the best-known and most controversial analytic frameworks on borders and margins in the last few years.

According to Scott, Zomia consists of “non-state spaces,” or “shatter zones,” which are characterized by their geographic inaccessibility and heterogeneity of languages and cultures (Scott 2009:8). In this circumstance, the “weapon of the weak” that these hill people use is to flee from state control and cultural hegemony through using the most valuable resource that they have available, their geographic isolation and mountainous landscape. Making the best use of this existing ecologic condition, the native lives are built upon “escape agriculture” (swidden agriculture), frequent movements, social fluidity (e.g., shifting ethnic identities), and above all, egalitarian social structure. These aspects of life enable local communities to place themselves out of the reach of the predatory state and colonizing (e.g., Indian and Chinese) civilizations.

My notion of convergence zone draws much inspiration from Scott’s Zomian model.<sup>12</sup> The Sino-Tibetan borderlands, on which I focus, are known for their cultural hybridity, linguistic diversity, and identity fluidity as well. Arguably, some parts of this border area even fall into or lie next to a broader Zomian region.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, whether or not some segments

12. I should point out that there are also some other frameworks that overlap with my notion of convergence zone, such as “contact zone” (Pratt 1991), “middle ground” (White 1991), and “middle ring” (Mingming Wang 2008), because they focus on the “between and betwixt” status of borders and frontiers in relation to neighboring powerful forces. In particular, the notion of middle ground is gaining popularity in the fields of Chinese and Tibetan history (Giersch 2006; Hayes 2014; Tsomu 2015; Tuttle 2005), and it is often used to identify the status of southwestern China and the Sino-Tibetan borderland as intermediary between Chinese (Qing) and other (Tibetan or southeast Asian) political and cultural domains. All of these above-noted frameworks have their respective merits, but convergence zone distinguishes itself from them because this concept proper places due emphasis on the historical and ongoing processes and effects of various kinds of contacts and convergences of multiple forces. Also, it simultaneously embodies local communities’ hybridized conditions as well as constraints and initiatives in their assertions of local centrality.

13. The Tibetan region is considered to be incorporated into Zomia according to van Schendel (2002). In Scott’s work (2009), the core Tibetan region is excluded from Zomia, but Yunnan and parts of Sichuan (which cover segments of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands) are included. Despite such a discrepancy, many scholars contend that the notion of Zomia is useful to explore the Himalayas, Tibetan regions, and Sino-Tibetan borders thanks to its emphasis on identity fluidity and agency of indigenous communities with respect to the state (e.g., Samuel 2013, 2015; Shneiderman 2010; Yeh and Coggins 2014).

of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands constitute part of Zomia is not relevant to this analysis. That is because, first, Zomia itself is a fluid concept. Scott, along with Willem van Schendel (2002), who first developed this concept, uses this notion to challenge the often-arbitrary geographic delimitation in area and cultural studies. Second, just as Scott focuses more on the “spirit” of Zomia, namely nonstate communities’ modes of thinking and behaving, rather than on Zomia as a bounded physical locality in its largely premodern settings (see also Samuel 2015), my work on Sino-Tibetan borderlands is intended to advance a broad theoretical model of borders and margins. In so doing, I ask how we can possibly go beyond the Zomian model, especially considering the fact that so many scholars have already engaged intensively with this idea in the last few years. Therefore, deriving from my own findings on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and from existing critiques of the Zomian model, I argue that the notion of convergence zone may be helpful not only to identify limits of Scott’s work but also to suggest a new angle for looking at Zomia and borders and margins as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

In line with critiques of the overstretched anarchist Zomian model, I am also inclined to think that Scott fails to fully capture the impact that dominant political and cultural entities have on these hill peoples.<sup>15</sup> Located at the intersection of several titanic civilizations (e.g., Indian-Hindu, Han-Confucian, Theravada-Tibetan Buddhist, and so on) and of multiple states and cultural domains of varying scales, Zomia—a zone that features hybridized cultural forms and creolized political institutions—comes from intensive encounters, confrontations, and fusions among various cultural and political forces. Therefore, rather than situate these hill peoples in nonstate or stateless spaces, I propose to look at their relative autonomy as more immediate state effects and cultural effects, or as a way that the natives adopt to engage with (not disengage from) dominant powers. In other words, Zomia deserves to be a convergence zone on its own to a greater extent than what Scott describes. When Zomia is reconceptualized as a convergence zone, the status of its highland communities as distinct local centers will come to even

14. There has emerged a substantial amount of literature in response to Scott’s Zomian model. For instance, “Zomia and Beyond,” the 2010 special issue of the *Journal of Global History*, is devoted to a critical examination of Zomia (Michaud 2010b). This special issue is edited by Jean Michaud, with contributions from C. Patterson Giersch, Sara Shneiderman, Bernard Formoso, and others. Some of these works will be cited elsewhere in this article.

15. Such critiques can be seen in the works of Dove, Jonsson, and Aung-Thwin (2011); Formoso (2010); Gellner (2013); Giersch (2010); and Ramirez 2014. I would like to highlight two of them. First, based on extensive research on northeast India, Ramirez convincingly contends that the hills and plains are actually fundamentally interconnected spaces (2014:118); thus, this allows the entry of state, plain culture, and other forces into the mountainous Zomia in a more convenient manner than what Scott portrays. Second, Giersch is able to show that Zomia was actually well connected with outside worlds (China and global transformations) through trading networks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that, as a consequence, these external forces infiltrated this region.

more prominence, and their tactics of engaging with external powers will be better grasped. In this way, convergence zone serves as a post-Zomian model to potentially reevaluate both prospects and restraints of borders and margins as local centers vis-à-vis dominant external powers.

Next, I use the stories of the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands to elaborate on how the model of convergence zone may contribute to our better understanding of this kind of dynamic at borders and margins.

### The Gyalrongwa Story

Since 2005, some cadres and elites from Suopo, Danba County, have urged the county government to return to them the label of “Eastern Queendom” (*Dongnüguo*). This label has been granted to a rival town because of what is assumed to be nepotism and partisanship among county officials. Suopo locals argue that they discovered, within their territory, the relics of the palace that used to be the residence of the queens of the legendary matriarchal kingdom recorded in ancient Chinese texts.<sup>16</sup> To press their claims, the Suopowa sought to initiate collective actions, such as demonstrations, pleas to the higher authority, and use of the media to promote their exclusive queendom tradition, which they claimed had asserted women’s superior status in the local society since the time of the ancient queendom. However, there exist some revealing paradoxes in the locals’ claim to the label Eastern Queendom and in the associated political claims.

First, while the Suopowa assert that they are descendants of the non-Tibetan Eastern Queens, they declare that they are authentic Tibetans. To validate the claim to the queens’ lineage and hence build their direct and exclusive connections with the Queendom, the local elites integrate the local oral history of the queens—who were said to have fled here with their retinue from somewhere else (the location of which remains unknown)—with often unsubstantiated historical accounts and literary writings. At the same time, to highlight their true Tibetan lineage, they start to reject their historical identity as Gyalrongwa.

Second, Suopo elites present local males as authentic Khampa Tibetan men who are known for being well built, fiercely courageous, and socially unconstrained, but they also sell an apparently feminized image of themselves by declaring that local women are more capable and politically sophisticated than men. Suopo queendom advocates argue that, in local tradition, women have enjoyed a prominent political position rarely seen in the Han and other Tibetan regions. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s, almost all the leading positions in one of the villages in Suopo were taken by women, and three local women leaders

16. Scholars in China point out that the term “Dongnüguo” (Eastern Queendom) was used to describe two different political entities at the time of the Sui dynasty (581–618) and the Tang dynasty (618–907). One was located to the south of the Pamir Mountains—more precisely, in western Tibet adjacent to the Himalayas—and the other was somewhere between Tibet and Sichuan (see Shi 2009).

were received by Mao thanks to their exceptional leadership skills. In their views, these Suopo women's superb talent is not an accident but is inseparable from the ancient queendom heritage and the locally deep-seated "women's culture" that fosters women's leadership faculties and political wisdom.

Third, while fiercely attacking the local state for all the wrongs done to them, the Suopowa proclaim their faith in the absolute justice and purity of the central state and the Party. Suopo villagers declare that they are largely marginalized in Danba, based on the assumption that the county has not invested in Suopo's development and tourism as much as it should. They attribute this neglect to the fact that there are no native officials "in the court"—namely, in the county or higher-level governmental agencies. The queendom dispute is seen as solid proof of their peripheral status in Danba. Nonetheless, they speak highly of the "great" achievements of the central government in economic and other fields. In their view, if Beijing learned about their pains, they would not only retrieve their "stolen" queendom label but would also have all other injustices redressed.

The dispute occurs as Danba has appeared as a nationally acclaimed tourist destination in China and as the Danba people have become increasingly aware of sexualized representations of local women in the tourist market. However, the dispute intrinsically stems from the marginalized status of the locals and Gyalrongwa in both Tibetan and Chinese societies. Due to the linguistic and other differences, the Gyalrongwa's Tibetan status has been challenged by other Tibetans, and they are thus sometimes seen as inauthentic or fake Tibetans. However, the publicized ungrateful and insurgent images attributed to Tibetans as a whole since 2008 put the Suopo and Gyalrong locals in an even more delicate situation. Many of them feel wronged for being undifferentiated from other "bad" Tibetans. Simultaneously, due to their denunciation of the unrest, some Tibetans have seen this "pro-Han" stance as a betrayal of Tibetan interests and hence of their Tibetan status. Therefore, the queendom dispute and the subsequent identity politics of the locals are informed by this broad cultural and political context. I will further illustrate this point below.

### The Qiangzu Story

As part of the disaster-relief effort, the Chinese state has appropriated billions of dollars for reconstruction in Qiangzu and the neighboring regions. Much importance is attached not only to the restoration of damaged buildings but also to the so-called cultural reconstruction that aims to rescue Qiangzu's material and intangible cultural heritages. A number of tourism-oriented ethnic Qiangzu villages (*Qiangzhai*) have been rebuilt under this program. Such villages are particularly designed to exhibit the great cultural traditions of the Qiangzu. Qiangzu officials and intellectuals have played a key part in this endeavor as directors, designers, specialists, or consultants, but the questions of what is the essence of Qiangzu traditions and what needs to be revived do not seem to have easy answers for them.

During the interviews, many Qiangzu informants admitted that they have not developed as "colorful" a culture (including writing, architecture, and religion) as the neighboring Gyalrongwa and other Tibetans. This partially explains why many of the Qiangzu cultural elements in these villages are actually borrowed from the Gyalrongwa and Tibetans (fig. 3). Simultaneously, to show how antique and mysterious the Qiangzu traditions are, the designers often use primitive symbols of the seminomadic ancient Qiang, their declared ancestors, such as rock painting (fig. 4) and images of goat and cattle skulls. The goat and cattle are the presumed totems of the ancient Qiang and hence symbols of their own culture (fig. 5).

When I asked my Qiangzu informants why their traditions were represented in this way, one of the most common answers was that many other Qiangzu officials and elites had quite limited knowledge of their own traditions. In this way, they tend to blame each other for misinterpreting Qiangzu traditions. In particular, they point their fingers at Beichuan in Mianyang City for distorting and thus indeed destroying the Qiangzu culture, as nearly all the locals are fully Sinicized, and few speak the Qiangzu language or practice indigenous rituals. Therefore, the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture always call the Beichuan Qiangzu "fake Qiangzu." Among the Qiangzu counties, Beichuan suffered most severely from the earthquake. It attracted greater attention and investment from the central government, media, and general public. Many Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture believe that such attention had everything to do with Beichuan's official status as the only Qiangzu autonomous county in China, so they argue that, since such a status is purely fabricated, why did Beichuan deserve such special treatment? Under such a circumstance, it is not surprising to hear that the Qiangzu elites in Ngawa Prefecture would accuse Beichuan of forging the Qiangzu traditions. The logic is clear: how would these fake Qiangzu know the proper way to represent the authentic Qiangzu culture? An underlying message is that, no matter how the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture represent or even misrepresent their traditions, they have the exclusive right to do so.

In answering my inquiry on these projects' tremendous borrowings from and mimicking of others, Mr. Wang Bin (one of the best-known Qiangzu elite entrepreneurs from Ngawa Prefecture and a chief designer of several large-scale cultural reconstruction projects in the prefecture) argued,

Based on ancient oracle records, the Qiangzu were the original progenitors of the *zhonghua minzu* [the Chinese nation]. Their "blood genes" and "cultural genes" have been spread in each ethnic group in China. . . . Therefore, what can be found in the Qiangzu culture today are the roots of all cultures in China. . . . The totemic and architectural symbols I used are partially from Gyalrong, Tibetan, and Yizu [another minority group residing in southwestern China], etc., but none [of these symbols] are theirs particularly at the same time. . . . The Qiangzu cultural elements are quite abstract and elastic . . . and can be borrowed from here and there but still stay authentic.



Figure 3. “New Qiang City” with Gyalrong and Tibetan architectural style. A color version of this figure is available online.

In Mr. Wang’s assertion, the Qiang(zu) culture, as the “mother culture” in China, is not confined to a specific cultural form. It is a combination of every culture in China. Therefore, he and other Qiangzu elites deserve to incorporate cultural elements from all other ethnic groups into their own projects.

### Two Stories in Parallel: An Illustration of the Center-Periphery Paradigm

The identity politics revealed in the two stories above, which revolve around authenticity, marginality, and political positioning, are inseparable from the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu’s geopolitical periphery as well as cultural hybridity. With the two powerful cultural and/or political entities to the east and west, their negotiations of relationships with the Han state and Tibetans as well as with each other are not only unavoidable but also undergoing great transformations in accord with the unfolding and shifting sociopolitical contexts. The stories exemplify both similarities and differences in the two groups’ responses and approaches to this state of being. On the one hand, they endeavor to address their hybridity and marginality by embracing the centers and by centralizing their own respective standings; but on the other hand, they strategize their marginality for anticipated goals. Their discourse of authenticity is informed by this process. This status quo speaks to the dynamic relations between center and periphery as well as to the ingenuity and elasticity at borders and margins.

### *Positioning Vis-à-Vis Tibetans, the Party State, and the Han*

Most of the Qiangzu elites and people I met were inclined to deny or ignore the Tibetan influence on their cultural practices and political system throughout history. This is not unexpected, as it is quite common for various ethnic minorities to brand their unique traditions, largely as an outcome of the heightened ethnic awareness that was a by-product of the ethnic identification project initiated in the early 1950s (Chao 2012; Gladney 1998a; Harrell 1995). Nonetheless, the Qiangzu case has its own particularity. Of the population that was later officially identified as Qiangzu, most appeared to have taken on more Chinese cultural elements than Tibetan ones before 1950. Along with this, they used to be situated in an unfavorable position vis-à-vis the politically dominant Gyalrongwa or Tibetans. According to my Qiangzu informants, this situation has not changed fundamentally, as Tibetans continue to “bully” them with the state indulgence. The 2008 unrest further ruled out the possibility of their identifying with Tibetans. The earthquake that followed helped them advance their agenda of differentiation.

As a result, the Qiangzu portrayed themselves as culturally distinctive from Tibetans (and from the Han as well) but also as politically unwavering in their loyalty toward the Chinese Party state, in polarization with Tibetans’ “problematic” religion-oriented culture and “unpatriotic” political stance. Many of my Qiangzu interviewees claimed that the majority of Tibetans so blindly follow the Dalai Lama that they continue to create troubles for the Party state despite the latter’s great policy to-



Figure 4. Primitive art on a newly built “traditional” Qiang farmhouse. A color version of this figure is available online.

ward them. Tibetans seemed not to be “touched” by the sincerity of the Party, and instead they continued to commit self-immolations. Several Qiangzu interviewees expressed the opinion that this kind of “ungrateful” Tibetan did not deserve to be forgiven and should be “exterminated” (*shaguang*) instead. Thus, in contrast to the Tibetans’ unfaithful attitude, they once again pronounce their absolute loyalty to the Party state and demonstrate their overflowing gratitude toward the state.

Many Qiangzu do claim that they have much to share with the Gyalrongwa in their clothing, language, and other traditions. However, as the Gyalrongwa are not, in their understanding, real Tibetans, the Qiangzu are able to dismiss the attribution of their cultural resemblance to the Gyalrongwa to the Tibetan influence. They do so by ignoring the fact that everyday village life in Gyalrong is full of Tibetan elements, ranging from religious rituals to food preparations—assuming, for the time being, that they are not real Tibetans.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not mean that the Qiangzu embrace the Gyalrongwa as “one of us.” Both the Gyalrongwa and the Qiangzu oftentimes have low

17. Many different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon (a pre-Buddhist “indigenous” religion in the Tibetan regions) exist in Gyalrong. Moreover, folk tales and songs there exhibit strong Tibetan characteristics in their themes and contents. When it comes to food and drink, yak, butter, *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), and *chang* (barley beer) are very common. However, we must also be alert to the fact that the livelihoods and customs in the Tibetan regions vary from one to another, largely due to different altitudes, climates, and environments.

opinions of each other. Interestingly, they see each other as barbaric or at least as somewhat uncivilized. Many Gyalrongwa would mock the Qiangzu for their lack of a formalized religion, like Buddhism. That is often used as evidence to prove how primitive the Qiangzu are, hence justifying the derogatory term *lan* (“shitty”) *qiangzu*. In the eyes of the Qiangzu, many of the Gyalrongwa are unintelligent, uncultivated, and reckless, although they may be a little better than “typical” Tibetans.

To go further, Qiangzu elites sometimes claim that they are ancestors of the Gyalrongwa and Tibetans by equating the Qiangzu with the ancient Qiang. Consequently, Tibetans as a whole, including the Gyalrongwa, are said to have been strongly influenced by the Qiangzu culture rather than the other way around. This not only serves to justify their emulation of Gyalrong and Tibetan cultural elements in the cultural reconstruction projects but also, more importantly, enables them to assert their moral superiority to Tibetans by reversing their power imbalance.

Likewise, the Gyalrongwa in Danba declare both their cultural and political differences from other Tibetans. Suopo elites were fully conscious that their collective action to reclaim the queendom label could easily be considered as riots in support of the Tibetan campaign for more religious freedom and political autonomy. To pursue their agenda, the Suopowa declared that, in line with the Party state guideline, they were opposed to any “splittist” activity by “bad” Tibetans, instigated by the Dalai Lama clique. However, even if their action would not be branded as “pro-Tibetan riots,” it still lacked legitimacy, because any



Figure 5. The Qiang's totem. A color version of this figure is available online.

collective resistance as such was discouraged and curtailed in China. To gain legitimacy, the Suopowa proclaimed that their action was actually in defense of the central Party state agenda against corruption and dereliction of duty at the local (county) state level.

Having said that, the ubiquitous Tibetan elements in Suopo language, religion, architecture, and other aspects of everyday life as well as their official Tibetan status entail their ethnocultural allegiance to Tibetans. As noted, the Suopowa often assert that “we Tibetans” have a superior culture compared with that of the materially “pragmatic” Han. However, their observable differences and discrimination from other Tibetans played a significant, if not deciding, role in their asserting the non-Tibetan queendom lineage as well as their distinguishing themselves from “bad” and “treacherous” Tibetans. A political proclamation like this was surely anticipated by the Party state, but their validation of cultural and lineage differences from Tibetans was equally welcomed and even encouraged. According to some Tibetan officials and intellectuals, this was a perfect example of the Party state’s “divide and rule” machinations directed exclusively toward Tibetans.

Both the Qiangzu and Gyalrongwa centralize themselves as loyal subjects of China, and thus they deserve special care from the Party state: elevation of the Qiangzu’s status in Ngawa Prefecture and throughout the country, and the retrieval of the queendom label and relevant compensations, respectively. However, while the Qiangzu elites sell their moral centrality as forefathers of the Gyalrongwa and Tibetans, the Gyalrongwa in Suopo trumpet their authentic Tibetan ethnocultural status to counteract their peripheral standing in the Tibetan cultural world.

Simultaneously, the two groups feel it necessary to position their own cultures and identities in relation to the Han. In my own observations, the often-heard Chinese word *Hanhua* (Sinicization) sounds almost like a curse to them, because the essentialized ethnic category entails rejections of hybridized identities and assertions of cultural distinctiveness from the Han and others. Many Tibetans blame the Gyalrongwa for

their *Hanhua*, which conveys a clear message that the culturally hybrid Gyalrongwa do not qualify as real Tibetans. Also, the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture refer to those in Beichuan as such. However, among the Qiangzu within the Ngawa Prefecture, the degree of *Hanhua* is quite high, meaning that the majority of those living in the valleys and around central towns can barely speak the Qiangzu language, and their life style is not different from that of the Han. Therefore, the Qiangzu in both Beichuan and Ngawa Prefecture feel great pressure to validate their Qiangzu status in opposition to the Han. Ultimately, as demonstrated, 2008 and thereafter saw a flourishing of newly invented Qiangzu cultural symbols and customs independent from the Han (and from Tibetans).

For the same purpose, the Suopowa defend against the *Hanhua* charge by juxtaposing themselves with other Gyalrongwa with “impure” Tibetan blood and “adulterated” culture, as noted earlier. Likewise, the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture choose to use those in Beichuan as a foil or counterexample for their self-righteous authentic Qiangzu status. In so doing, certain Gyalrong and Qiangzu communities find a scapegoat from within for their marginal status or their designation as inauthentic.

#### *Self-Positioning as Center*

Both the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu make great efforts to construct themselves as dynamic centers of their own. Such an endeavor is embedded in both historical conditions and contemporary sociopolitical changes. Gyalrong was a semiautonomous political and cultural entity vis-à-vis Tibetans and the Han before 1950. According to historical documents and oral accounts, different kings or chieftains and their subjects in this region recognized each other roughly as a common regional and cultural entity in spite of internal divergences and conflicts. They were also so identified by central and other Tibetans. Although Gyalrong has been integrated into the Tibetan cultural sphere since the eighth century (as well as being gradually integrated into the Han [Manchu] state since the eighteenth century and especially since the founding of the PRC), its historical particularity, linguistic-cultural singularity, and sociopolitical specificity still inform the Gyalrongwa’s separate identity.

The Qiangzu’s case appears a little more complex. Thanks to the enactment of direct administration by the Manchu court in Sichuan’s Sino-Tibetan border regions since the eighteenth century, many Qiangzu villages in today’s Ngawa Prefecture were able to break away from their previous Gyalrong overlords and were subsequently either ruled by their own headmen or officially appointed Han administrators. In contrast with the Gyalrongwa, the Qiangzu seem not to have possessed an equally coherent common identity before the founding of the PRC.<sup>18</sup>

18. This, however, is not to deny the fact that, by 1950, shamans and elites in various Qiangzu regions had relatively sufficient knowledge about “our people” and their geographic distributions (See Sichuan Editorial Office 1986; Mingke Wang 2008).

Consequently, their collective identity, based on the asserted common ancient Qiang ancestry, is a recent reinterpretation. This situation suggests that they might have to work even harder than the Gyalrongwa to forge a collective identity.

Notwithstanding the Beichuan people's being incriminated as "fake Qiangzu" for their misinterpreting the Qiangzu culture, I have seen that they are starting to be "adopted" as "one of us" by Qiangzu elites in Ngawa Prefecture. My informants explain that the Qiangzu are a small ethnic group in comparison with Tibetans. Thus different communities must be united to rise as a collective. The shared interest at stake is to continue producing and reproducing the ancestral myth as the forefathers of Tibetans and the Han or the Chinese nation.

In a word, in local discourses, both the Qiangzu region and Gyalrong constitute a vital center in and for itself. Therefore, the locals interact with both Tibetans and the Han state as rather self-sufficient and autonomous political, cultural, and/or regional entities.

According to Suopo elites, what makes Suopo extraordinary and unrivaled is their lineage connection with the matriarchal queendom as well as the supposed queendom heritage or thriving "women's culture" that gives prominence to the significant role of women in the local sociopolitical sphere. According to them, women are not well respected among either the Han or Tibetans. However, two female former village heads who had been sent to Beijing to be received by Mao as model grassroots cadres told me that their important role in the local politics in the 1950s and 1960s had little to do with their supreme leadership ability; they took such positions because nearly all of the eligible young men had been recruited to the army and to the newly founded governmental agencies. Therefore, the local elites twist the reality in a way that sounds politically correct and appealing to tourists. Simultaneously, though, the Suopowa are consciously retrieving the sexualized image and negative connotations associated with Danba women.

Danba is advertised as the Valley of Beauties (*meirengu*) in China thanks to an abundance of beautiful women in this land, and this label is so sexualized that many tourists come here to see (and perhaps embrace) good-looking Danba women. In focusing on women's wisdom and dignity, the Suopowa's queendom discourse is a challenge to the "superficial" popular discourse of the Valley of Beauties, which has put so much emphasis on beautiful looks or sexualized images of Danba women while ignoring women's important role in family and society. In so doing, they are able to elevate Suopo, and sometimes Gyalrong, as a moral center that is worthy of admiration from the Han, Tibetans, and even Westerners.

The claim of the ancient Qiang as forefathers of the Han, Tibetans, and others was not invented by the Qiangzu intellectuals. As a matter of fact, in both the Chinese academic and popular discourses, the Yan Emperor (one of the two attributed progenitors, along with the Yellow Emperor, of the *huaxia* or the subsequent Han) is often believed to have originated from an ancient Qiang tribe, as Tibetans did. Although the validity of this claim is debatable, most Qiangzu elites I encounter accept it

without question. They play an important role in popularizing and reproducing such ideas among the Qiangzu public and others. Their often-overextended interpretations even agitate fair-minded Qiangzu intellectuals. According to a Qiangzu writer,

Some Qiangzu scholars and officials often make "irresponsible" remarks. They go on and on to brag about how great the Qiangzu have always been. Some even dare to say that the First Emperor of Qin (*Qin shihuang*) [Founded in 221 BC, Qin was the first centralized Chinese dynasty] was a Qiangzu himself. I think this is not simply an act of reinterpreting the Chinese history, and these people are actually falsifying the history. Can you tell me what else it is if this is not nonsense? What they are doing is just a big joke. These scholars have become laughing stocks of other ethnic groups, but I cannot figure out why they are never tired of doing it.

Such a voice is, however, largely submerged in the ongoing and escalated myth-making of glorious Qiangzu history and traditions. In this way, the Qiangzu centralize their indisputable role in relation to the Han and Tibetans and in China.

Nonetheless, I want to point out that each of the ethnic communities is internally divided regarding the debate over which each sector deserves to be a more "real" center. As shown, the Suopowa and the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture claim their centrality with respect to other less "pure" sectors and constituents among the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu, respectively. This exhibits a distinctive aspect of the center-periphery dynamic at borders and margins. The periphery is often composed of its own center(s) and periphery (or peripheries).

#### *A Theoretical Sketch: The Weapon of the Marginal*

As demonstrated, the Qiangzu and Gyalrongwa's embrace of the (central) Party state agenda and the elevation of their status as powerful centers—as well as what is almost an obsession with authenticity—are not separable from their "between and betwixt" status or hybridized identities in relation to the two powerful political and cultural entities, the Han state and Tibetans. Although Tibetan culture appears to have lost much of its ground as a result of its Party state-engineered assimilation into the Chinese cultural and political orbits, its historical influence and persisting vitality continue to shape the cultural and political identities of a variety of groups in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (e.g., Wellens 2010), including the Qiangzu and Gyalrongwa. Likewise, the Qiangzu and Gyalrongwa are situated in a peripheral position in relation to the Han and in Chinese political arrangements, because their status, like that of many other ethnic groups, defines their differences, if not "barbarism," compared with the more "civilized" and "advanced" Han and the Han-dominated state (e.g., Fiskesjö 2011). Therefore, this dynamic entails the need for the two groups to act upon their peripheral status for their survival and their political and other agendas. However, their ways to engage with or disengage from this status demonstrate that marginality should not always be seen

as a constraint or circumscription to confine actors to the damned and dismal outer edge. Instead, both see marginality as a beneficial opportunity. Nonetheless, since they are positioned differently with respect to Tibetans and the Han state, this condition defines their concrete tactics and goals as well as their interests and concerns. The two incidents in 2008 provide a stage for their similar and dissimilar orchestrations of their marginality and identity politics.

The Suopowa sometimes not only seize the initiative of marginalizing themselves but also strategize such asserted marginality with the anticipation of possible rewards and compensations. Above all, the Suopo locals' peripheral status is conducive to the assertion of their uniqueness. Although they may be looked down upon by other Tibetans as "hybrid" or "fake" Tibetans, their linguistic, cultural, and historical distinctiveness could become an important source of attraction or pride. The advertised queendom heritage could potentially elevate Suopo as an unmatched place and a desirable tourist destination in the Tibetan regions and in China. The locals also avail themselves of their pronounced political marginality in Danba as justification for their queendom struggle and other claims. Although, in reality, Suopo has not obtained fewer subsidies from the county than have other towns, the locals continue to publicize their neglected status and affliction in Danba through the queendom dispute as justifications for many more benefits from the local state. Another prominent case of strategic marginality (an ingenious use of peripheral status as leverage for anticipated goals) is the local males' seeming self-feminization in contradiction with their masculine Khampa Tibetan image. As argued, this is actually a pronounced declaration of their unmatched manliness thanks to their recognition and advancement of women's status.

The Qiangzu's approach to their unfavorable status in relation to more powerful Tibetan neighbors is to adopt the politics of differentiation, or what Geoffrey Benjamin (2002) and James Scott (2009) refer to as "dissimilation." That is a group's purposefully distinguishing itself from an interacting party that usually has historical, political, and/or cultural connections that lead to subsequent likenesses. The Qiangzu elites and others distinguish themselves from Tibetans both culturally and politically. More than that, they simultaneously attempt to build historical genealogical connections with the Gyalrongwa and Tibetans first, before putting the latter down as their descendants. We can call this kind of approach "dissimilation through analogy," a strategy characterized by a deliberate creation of superiority over rival parties by means of establishing parallels or resemblances as an initial step to demarcate and enhance the mutual boundaries. The Qiangzu act in the same way to subvert their secondary status as the Chinese cultural frontier. As a result, they situate themselves as a superior entity compared with Tibetans and the Han.

Another category of dissimilation can be referred to as the "marginal's scapegoating." This is a strategy often adopted by one sector in a marginal group through their delimiting an intragroup boundary to set themselves apart from the others.

They relegate the others to their own inferior margins so as to brand the others as malefactors, who are seen to dilute and degenerate their culture and are also responsible for other negative consequences, as a means to increase their stakes in negotiating with dominant powers.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, to avoid the often-negative connotations of the *Hanhua* label, Gyalrong locals in Suopo and the Qiangzu in Ngawa Prefecture choose to pick out the supposedly less authentic ones—namely, other Gyalrongwa and the Qiangzu in Beichuan, respectively—to defend their central role as bearers of the most authentic indigenous culture. Likewise, we can see a similar process of scapegoat identification among the allegedly more authentic Qiangzu or those Gyalrongwa who claim to be real Tibetans.

### Conclusion and Further Thoughts

The self-positioning of the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu with respect to Tibetans and the Han state illustrates that both center and periphery are not absolute. They are elastic, situational, negotiable, and even reversible in certain circumstances. The notions of hybridity and creolization do spotlight this dialectic center-periphery paradigm, but they tend to fail in fully depicting and grasping multiple dimensions of this paradigm as well as distinctive identities of marginal societies and their motivation and capacity to counteract powerful centers. While the theoretical lens of Zomia is useful to consider initiatives and the centrality of borders and margins, impacts of external forces on local societies are yet to be fully captured. Therefore, I maintain that the framework of convergence zone is able to better define dynamic interactions of borders and margins with dominant forces. This framework helps illuminate not only the endeavors of those at borders and margins to adapt and transform but also the constraints and limits of such endeavors.

At this convergence zone, the Gyalrongwa in Suopo move between the Han and Tibetan centers or choose to safeguard their own social and cultural territory. Concurrently, the Qiangzu take advantage of the Tibetan unrest and the earthquake to advance their self-elevation agenda. They do so by further detaching themselves from the de facto predominant Tibetans and by embracing the state schemes as well as by pushing forward their undertaking as a powerful center of their own. Moreover, from time to time, these groups engage with their hybridized identities and peripheral status through such strategies as strategic marginality, dissimilation through analogy, or the marginal's scapegoating to serve their own interests. These strat-

19. The phenomenon of scapegoating is found across diverse societies and different historical periods. Scapegoating is generally considered to serve potent sociopolitical and psychological needs to blame innocent others for social problems and crises (Girard 1986). The victimized groups and individuals are usually racially, ethnically, religiously, and/or socially marginalized "others." For that reason, the Jews became victims of the Holocaust (Bauer 2001); Muslims turned into the target of hate crimes during the ongoing antiterrorist wars in the United States and Europe (Welch 2006); and so on.

egies fall into the categories of what Scott refers to as “the weapons of the weak” (1985) and Spivak identifies as “strategic essentialism” (1987). On the one hand, this points in the direction that those at a periphery are active actors who are able to speak back in creative ways and potentially transform their peripheral status. On the other hand, it shows that there is no absolute freedom in their choices and actions.

The decisions of the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu are based on the evaluation of the status quo and various conditions available. The ubiquitous presence of the Han state and the Tibetan influence make it sensible for them to either distance themselves from or identify with these two powers. However, this does not mean that their choice is necessarily made out of the rational assessment of all possible consequences. Oftentimes, their choice is structured in the way that their reconfigurations of relationships with Tibetans and the Han state are deeply implicated in historical and cultural bonds and especially the state’s ruling system and official agendas. In other words, their approaches to engage with the state, Han, and Tibetans do not definitely originate from calculation of potential benefits and rewards. Instead, the choice is inseparable from the inerasable impacts of historical, political, and cultural convergences (and subsequent attachment or detachment) between dominant powers and the local societies. What is more, various sectors in these two groups (which derive from class differences, historical ties, regional identities, political arrangements, cultural practices, and economic development) may develop different political, cultural, and other agendas. A notable consequence is that one particular sector of either of the two borderland groups elevates itself as the “pure” center in juxtaposition to more “contaminated” margins, which other sectors of its own group are relegated to. These situations speak exactly to the complications at a convergence zone.

To sum up, Gyalrong and the Qiangzu region are not situated at the end of Tibetan or Han cultural and political territories but at a convergence zone where these two sociopolitical and cultural worlds encounter, contest, and converge and where the locals negotiate their identities in relation to Tibetans, the Han, the state, and each other. A convergence zone is a space where hybridized identities, border ambiguity, or marginality can be appropriated as a “scarce resource” (Harrison 1999) and a rare opportunity. Therefore, what characterizes this convergence zone is that, in this region, there have been dynamic interactions between likenesses and differences as well as surges of creativity and innovation that have emerged out of their constant reconfigurations. More precisely, various degrees of likenesses and differences of the Suopowa and Qiangzu in relation to both the Han and Tibetans have placed them in a unique context. The Suopowa can claim both Tibetan identity and Chinese (citizen) identity in parallel to the Han, whereas the Qiangzu choose to unpack the Tibetan influence and highlight their political centrality as grateful and loyal Chinese citizens. Both of them, though, can also assert their distinctiveness, exclusivity, and superiority with respect to either the Han or Tibetans. Thus, what is seen among the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu locals is not

merely the fact that the Han state and Tibetan worlds converge or hybridize in this region but also how indigenous societies at borderlands encounter and negotiate with powerful sociopolitical and cultural entities as well as how new people, identities, and centers have been born out of these multiple convergences. At the same time, it can be seen that the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu people’s responses to social changes are deeply rooted in their own local cultural and political contexts. In this way, both stories told here engender and represent an unusually complicated and nuanced sociopolitical landscape.

The Gyalrong and Qiangzu stories manifest themselves in various ways in different border regions and among the marginal. Therefore, I argue that the analytic framework of convergence zone may be useful to understand dialectic center-periphery relations in general. In particular, this model will be useful to situate intentionality, strategies, and constraints of borderland populations and the marginal in such relations as well as in multiple dimensions and layers of convergences among different political, cultural, and other (e.g., globalization and commercial) forces. In engaging with these forces, people and communities at the margins cultivate different intergroup and intragroup interests and tactics, and their identities (national, ethnic, regional, and political) exhibit different ways and degrees that these forces intersect with each other.

Surely, the forces and powers that other border regions have to deal with can be very different from those in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands or Zomia, but the idea of convergence zone allows a deep comparative analysis of varying forms and degrees of convergences among these forces and powers. To take Hong Kong, a unique type of border, as an example, it is certainly significantly different from the Sino-Tibetan borderlands or Zomia in every conceivable way. However, its status as an important global financial center does not change the fact that it is situated on the margins of China, both geographically and conceptually.<sup>20</sup> The framework of convergence zone can be used to inquire into how the status of Hong Kong as both center and periphery and the ongoing political struggles for autonomy as well as divergent interests and concerns of various social sectors and individuals are both reflections and outcomes of convergences among global market, postcolonial discourses, the Chinese central state agendas, and local initiatives in Hong Kong. The subsequent stances and strategies of different Hong Kong residents in situating themselves in relation to Beijing and the mainstream Chinese culture and to the West and global market inevitably address and act upon these multiple convergences and hybridized conditions. Thus the model of convergence zone is able to bring to the fore likenesses and differences of interests, concerns, and tactics among diverse social sectors and individuals there.

20. Many scholars have examined the conflicting roles of Hong Kong as both a world metropolis and a peripheral Chinese city as well as its volatile identity politics (see, e.g., Abbas 1997; Chu 2013; Faure 2003; Lee 2008; Pang 2013; Siu 1993).

In a nutshell, I argue that this post-Zomian analytic model has potential to be applied broadly to help explain multifarious manifestations and layers of the center-periphery paradigm as well as processes and effects of convergences among miscellaneous external and internal forces at borders and margins. Although the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, Zomia, and Hong Kong are geographic entities, this model can possibly be employed in the study of social peripheries at urban centers and beyond as well (e.g., slums, ghettos, prisons, the underclass, and religious, racial, and sexual minorities). To be specific, this framework can be utilized to identify these distinctive subcultures vis-à-vis the “mainstreams” and, especially, illuminate strategies and choices of people in these settings (see, e.g., Bourgois 2003; Kulick 1998; Sampson 2012; Santos 2006). However, doing so entails a further critical reflection on the plausibility of the model in such broad and comparative contexts. Should all borders and margins be seen as convergence zones, or should convergence zones be considered as one particular type of borders and margins with distinctive characteristics? And are “physical” borderlands comparable to social margins? We may even possibly go on to ask whether this model is also applicable in a social and geopolitical milieu other than that of borders/borderlands and margins. These questions go far beyond the scope of the article proper, but they may stimulate debates on both the prospects and challenges of this analytic framework (or possibly any alternative theoretical model) in examining and comparing a diverse range of borders and margins (and beyond) across time and space.<sup>21</sup>

### Acknowledgments

In memory of my teacher Fredrik Barth (1928–2016), a man of simultaneous nobleness and humbleness. This study was funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Start-Up Grant at the National University of Singapore (NUS), which I gratefully acknowledge. I also thank Stéphane Gros for sponsoring part of my fieldwork and several conference trips to present my related work through his European Research Council–funded project “Territories, Communities, and Exchanges in the Sino-Tibetan Kham Borderlands” (grant 283870). I am simultaneously grateful to Jean Michaud, Sara Shneiderman, Hans Steinmüller, Michael Wang (Mingke Wang), Yinong Zhang, James Scott, Philippe Ramirez, Grégoire Schlemmer, Kimberly Arkin, Robert Weller, and my colleagues at NUS as well as to the anonymous reviewers for *Current Anthropology* for their invaluable feedback. I also take the opportunity to thank a number of institutes for inviting me to present parts of my earlier versions; the critiques I received from the audiences helped me revise this article substantially. Among these institutes are the

21. Baud and van Schendel (1997) offer insights on the social history of borderlands and their fluctuating spatial dimensions, and it is useful to integrate such a diachronic perspective to investigate borders and margins as both transforming entities and evolving concepts across time.

Agrarian Studies Program, Yale University; the Yale Himalaya Initiative; the Modern Tibetan Studies Program, Columbia University; the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University; the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences; the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (both in Paris); and the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong. Moreover, I am especially indebted to my informants and interviewees in Gyalrong and Qiangzu regions for their trust and support. Finally, let me extend my sincere thanks to my teacher Charles Lindholm for helping me coin the term “convergence zone.”

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## Comments

### Jean Michaud

Département d'Anthropologie, De-Koninck 3431, 1030 avenue des Sciences humaines, Université Laval, Québec G1V 0A6, Canada (jean.michaud@ant.ulaval.ca). 23 X 16

Tenzin's article is an ambitious piece. Upon reading it, two key elements struck me. The first was that the foundations for his “post-Zomian model” appear rather fragile. Tenzin states that “this model aims to shed a fresh light on initiatives and tactics of borderland and marginal populations in engaging with powerful centers and with one another.” It has become possible and fruitful, he says, “to look at the convergence zone as a post-Zomian model.”

But post-something, in principle, should refer to one paradigm having been stretched to unsolvable tension and needing to be replaced by something else that both reaches beyond and transcends this tension. Many social anthropologists have engaged dynamically with Scott's cluster of ideas in his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) and have tested them on the ground, yielding a wealth of ground-truthing, as it were, of his grand Zomian scheme. Many contest Scott's ideas, and others are happy with contextualizing them, while some have adhered to them passionately. Others again have hailed it as a breakthrough to make visible a huge chunk of territory and humanity that has otherwise been passively or willingly sidestepped by official historiography and nation-centric gazes, such as China's. This blind spot had previously resulted from what van Schendel (2002) labeled a “geography of ignorance.”

Such a variety of responses and critiques deny Scott's Zomian thesis an overriding verdict of either legitimacy or obsolescence. Indeed, the extensive process of testing his proposition is still ongoing, and Tenzin's article is yet another illustration of this practice. Hence I fail to see in his model a conclusive post-Zomia stance and, rather, see it as one more dialogue with, and addition to, Zomia debates.

For Scott, Zomia has been a shatter zone of refuge for weak populations fleeing the state. Importantly, Scott himself had

declared that his narrative came to an end in the mid-twentieth century. In this sense, it might make good sense to talk of a post-Zomia era today, although Scott never suggested that, and it is not what Tenzin has in mind either. Tenzin assesses, instead, that Scott failed to “fully capture the impact dominant political and cultural entities have on these hill peoples,” but no evidence is provided to assert this claim, while Tenzin’s “convergence zone” approach seemed remarkably similar to elements of Scott’s “shatter zone” anyway. All the same, Tenzin then brings up a number of other works by Scott—including paraphrasing Scott’s own book *Seeing like a State* (1998) for his article’s title—to support his claims. But my concern remains that this analysis is not post Zomia, since the Zomia trope as a whole far exceeds the discussion here in terms of both theoretical coverage and geographical scope. I turn now to my second point.

The other element of the article that struck me, to paraphrase Victor Lieberman (2010:336) when he reviewed Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed*, is that it appears that this article’s empirical evidence is too fragile to support its theoretical superstructure. Paradoxically, the paper is strongest on the ethnographic side, the author having grown up in close proximity with the subjects of his research (which I had to gather from other sources, the paper staying mute on this). This remote part of China is underrepresented in the English-language literature, and such a view from the inside is path-breaking. But I sense that the theorization of these data is also overenthusiastic. It takes equal amounts of courage and recklessness to start from two township field sites and erect a theoretical challenge of the scale offered here. This means that one can only question the wisdom in declaring a “new model” based on the consideration of a couple of communities located next to each other within the same country. This predicament does not automatically undermine the author’s conclusions, of course, but it unavoidably puts into question their foundations.

Given that the ethnographic data themselves are sound, what is worrying is this reach across incredible scale—the smallness of the sample put in critical dialogue with such a huge body as Zomia, touching over 100 million “minority” people spread over 10 countries (up to 15 according to some authors). There is, unfortunately, just not enough evidence here to accept as valid generic statements such as, “Above all, a convergence zone should be recognized as a power center in its own right that constantly generates vitality, productivity, and restiveness.” Notwithstanding the possibility of intrinsic fertility in Tenzin’s model, and despite the careful ethnographic research, this narrowly focused case study does not suffice to warrant the broad claims put forward.

In my opinion, it might have been a more fruitful strategy for this case study to resolutely occupy and situate itself in the field of border studies, which the section “Borders, Margins, and Convergence Zone” reviews very well. There are obvious drawbacks and benefits of this suggestion. Drawbacks would include that the two Chinese provinces from which Tenzin

takes examples, although distinct administrative entities, do not have the same configuration of legal, cultural, and linguistic complexity that two countries would have; this is especially so in this highly multiethnic and multiregime part of the world. Benefits would include that eastern Tibet and western Sichuan have, in their long history before 1949, been rooted in entirely different states on the edges of two large empires, each generating a high level of complexity in their overlying periphery. This complexity translates, on the ground, into narratives of distinction and exclusivity, which the article captures compellingly.

Tenzin’s convergence zone project could, at the local scale and as a conceptual tool to further border studies, be useful and perhaps persuasive. Yet I am not convinced that, as a post-Zomia model, it makes the theoretical and geographical scale leaps required.

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#### Sara Shneiderman

Department of Anthropology and the Institute of Asian Research,  
University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver,  
British Columbia V6T 1Z1, Canada (sara.shneiderman@ubc.ca).  
11 XII 16

Tenzin’s “convergence zone” concept is a timely intervention that summarizes a simmering set of recent debates in Asian studies around the notion of Zomia (as initially proposed by van Schendel 2002 and popularized by Scott 2009), and it offers plausible next steps toward realizing their ethnographic and theoretical promise. It also amplifies the key points of the Zomia debates for a broader audience by recognizing the heterogeneous agencies of so-called peripheral populations as potential forms of “strategic marginality.” In so doing, it opens up new ways of understanding relationships between states, their erstwhile margins, and the margins’ margins. My comments focus on four points: the contributions that this piece makes to the scholarship on Tibetan communities in particular, its theorizations of ethnicity and authenticity, the possible limits of the “convergence zone” model, and some aspects of it that I believe are relevant beyond China in relation to specific ethnographic contexts in the southern Himalayas and South Asia broadly conceived.

The piece offers a very welcome approach to understanding ethnicity within Tibetan cultural contexts by exploring the content of regional subgroup identities as well as the practices through which they are forged. Rather than taking the category of “Tibetan” for granted as a homogeneous identity universally marginalized by exile, Tenzin presents a richly textured ethnography of “Tibetanness” within China and its associated forms of agency—both marginal and dominant—in all of their multiplicity. We see how Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu differently articulate their relationships to the category of “Tibetan” under various historically contingent political, economic, and cultural conditions.

This ethnography demonstrates well the argument that I have sought to make elsewhere (Shneiderman 2014, 2015): that ethnic consciousness may be simultaneously affectively real at a deep, subjective level and politically instrumentalized in the service of what Tenzin calls “strategic marginality.” The competitive authenticity in which Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu (and their various internal factions) engage must not be understood as crass instrumentalism in bad faith but rather as, in itself, an authentic expression of their place in the world, at the center of a periphery where multiple groups have long negotiated the terms of coexistence with each other and various state forms. This theorization moves beyond the notion that ethnicization occurs only within the boundaries of a hegemonic nation-state as well as beyond the Zomia concept, which emerged as a corrective to the former by suggesting that people intentionally seek to escape the nation-state by moving beyond its reach to what Scott calls “shatter zones” (2009). Instead, Tenzin posits that convergence zones embody multiple overlapping state spaces, which yield their own decentered ethnic formations. These refract power—in both the political and cultural senses—in a much more diffuse and complex manner than either earlier theoretical formulation allowed.

In concluding, the author asks whether all borderlands are convergence zones or whether convergence zones are borderlands with special characteristics. I would be inclined toward the latter, noting that the convergence zone concept is especially applicable to areas where political borders have remained relatively fluid, such as the expansive swathe of high Asia recently referred to as Zomia. The scope for exercising strategic marginality seems more limited for populations facing a wall—for instance, on the US-Mexico border or between Palestine and Israel. In such contexts, the infrastructural indication of otherness—while never fully realizing its intended objective of total separation between populations—may inhibit the practices of convergence that Tenzin describes in the Sino-Tibetan context.

That said, I believe the convergence zone model has broad—if not universal—application, and I conclude with some specific thoughts about its resonance for the southern Himalayas and South Asia. The concept of strategic marginality has strong resonance with the mobilization of “backwardness” as an aspirational category of recognition in India and Nepal in recent years. While such mobilizations are often decried as destabilizing “identity politics,” applying the convergence zone approach in such contexts would treat their proponents not as peripheral minorities gone awry but, rather, as central, agentive actors whose bald manipulations of their own positionality expose the logics of power emanating from the state centers from which they seek recognition, creating mutually transformative forces of convergence.

Finally, I turn to the theme of disaster relief (here in response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake) as an opening for the renegotiation of existing power structures. This has been a key concern for scholars of Nepal since the 2015 earthquakes there, as it has been in other disaster-affected locales. Tenzin shows

how such moments must not be viewed as one-way opportunities for top-down state or corporate intervention but as opportunities for marginalized communities to reposition themselves vis-à-vis both the state and each other as they make new claims, or “stand up,” as the Qiangzu put it. In this, Tenzin illustrates that the processes of hegemonic integration that undoubtedly occur at such moments of upheaval must not be understood as only unilateral projects of the state directed at marginal populations but rather as mutually transformative processes of negotiation. In such moments, the disparate groups and individuals that make up the perceived periphery in fact reveal the logics of the center, while also defining their own agencies and intentions. This is precisely the work of the convergence zone.

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#### Hans Steinmüller

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom (j.steinmuller@lse.ac.uk). 29 XI 16

There are a number of concepts available that aim to describe the borderlands in the west and southwest of China’s heartland. Fei Xiaotong (1980) spoke of the “Tibet-Yi corridor” and emphasized the historical and cultural connections created in these borderlands. Developing this notion further, Mingming Wang (2008) labeled the region an “intermediary zone” between the “inner circle” of the Chinese heartland and the “outer circles” of foreign lands. And Mingke Wang (2006) used the notion of “the Chinese periphery” (*huaxia bianyuan*) to research the history of Han Chinese expansion westward. What is common to these concepts is the tendency to look at the histories and cultures of the borderlands from the perspective of the center. Even the concepts themselves express a centrist view that puts the region in question in a position peripheral to those centers. In many senses—political, economic, cultural—those regions certainly were peripheral to the centers of imperial expansion in the past, and they remain peripheral to the centers of the PRC today, its government, and its megacities. But if academic observers simply reproduce the perspectives of such centers, the everyday social worlds of this region will never appear in their particularity but rather as lesser fusions and replicas. Such are the risks in common discourses of “Tibetanization” and “Sinicization,” which overemphasize the force and direction of processes of assimilation and hybridization, as if everything could be explained only in terms of “Tibet” and “China.”

Borrowing the concept of “convergence” from the natural sciences, Tenzin proposes to look at the practical and pragmatic interactions that take place in such a border region. Unlike the concepts just cited, Tenzin’s focus is decidedly not on the history of Chinese and Tibetan expansion but on the present relations of the Gyalrongwa (who are registered as “Tibetans” in the PRC) and the Qiangzu in Sichuan province.

While both groups share a complicated and interlocked history, shifting between Tibetan, Qiang, Chinese, and Gyalrong identities, they forcefully assert their Qiang and Gyalrongwa/Tibetan identities, and they have done so in particular since the 2008 unrest. The contrasts they draw between themselves and other groups are essential to the assertion of their particular ethnic identity: both groups blame each other, insult each other, deny any cultural borrowing, and yet sometimes also share things with each other. Tenzin describes their everyday politics of resistance, and in particular the use of strategic essentialisms, or in his words, “strategic marginality” and “dis-similation through analogy.”

The concept of the “convergence zone” is meant to emphasize both the hybridity of the border and the particular “innovations, initiatives, and concerns” of locals in this zone. Tenzin acknowledges how notions of hybridity and creolization, in particular in postcolonial discourses, share many similarities with his emphasis on constant transcultural negotiation, the emphasis on shared histories, and the celebration of plurality. But he ultimately rejects those concepts, because in his view, they reproduce center-periphery relations, privilege the center as a reference point, and neglect different layers of center-periphery relations. What Tenzin’s brief discussion misses is a central point that authors such as Bhabha and Prakash have frequently made, namely that the “center” (be it “the West,” “Europe,” or some other entity) is and always has been hybrid too.

In fact, although it is acknowledged that local identities are hybrid and that various centers are available, most of the ethnographic examples of identity dynamics described in the article are “strategic essentialisms,” the assertion of supposedly “pure” identities of Qiang, Tibetan, and Gyalrong. The contrast drawn briefly with Scott’s everyday forms of resistance and Spivak’s strategic essentialism seems to not do justice to the complexity of their arguments; the main emphasis of Scott’s argument on the weapons of the weak was that they are more than just “coping mechanisms.”

The weakest point of the article, however, is the reference to Willem van Schendel and James Scott’s concept of Zomia. As I read Tenzin, he aims to correct Scott’s focus on escape and flight, wanting instead to focus on the constant engagements across border zones. Yet only half of the features of “Zomia”—defined as stateless and characterized by great cultural and linguistic diversity—apply to the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. The Sino-Tibetan border has long been governed by states, and many of its mountains have been objects of worship for the surrounding Tibetan and Chinese populations—a feature strikingly absent from the “Zomia” debates. If the mountains of Zomia are in these senses quite different from the Sino-Tibetan border, perhaps the implication of Tenzin’s argument is the need for us to reconceptualize “Zomia” as a “convergence zone.” But even if we accept that this might help us appreciate the status of highland communities as “distinct local centers” and better grasp “their tactics of engaging with external powers,” the specificity of the “convergence zone” remains slightly

opaque. And it is even further generalized in the conclusion, where it is argued that just about every geographical border or social margin could be reconceptualized as a “convergence zone.”

It appears that the “convergence zone” implies a particular perspective on borderlands and marginality, foregrounding continuous interaction and multiple centers. Convergence zones generate their own centers under local conditions of remoteness, resourcefulness, and dominance from the more distant centers. Historically, the more distant centers’ dominance over and dependence on the peripheral centers as mediators waxes and wanes or changes its form in other ways. But the geographical, social, and cultural differences between the Sino-Tibetan border and other borders and margins surely also imply different politics and different strategies. It has been often noted that borders and margins can be places of creativity, and that seems to be also the main thrust of Tenzin’s argument. But the kinds of creativity that appear in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands of Sichuan, in Hong Kong, in Zomia, or in any “subculture,” take different historical forms and shapes, and perhaps these differences are elided if we describe them all as “convergence zones.”

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#### Michael Wang

Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 130 Academia Sinica Road, Section 2, Nankang District, Taipei, Taiwan 11529 (michael@mail.ihp.sinica.edu.tw). 4 X 16

Tenzin’s paper contains deep theoretical insights and ambitious claims. In the following, I will not deal with theoretical issues, which have already been extensively discussed in the paper. I limit myself here to some summary remarks based on my ethnographic findings on the Qiang and Gyalrongwa people in the hope that they may support Tenzin’s theory or help him to refine his paradigm of “convergence zone.”

From a macrogeographical and long-term historical perspective, the land and the people along the eastern fringe of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau were, and still are, overlapping “borders.” This has primarily to do with their straddling across the political, cultural, and ethnic centrism of both the Han Chinese and Tibetans. From the first century onward, the Chinese literati of the Central Plain have commonly used the word “Di-Qiang” to denote the land along the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and its inhabitants. In the seventh to ninth centuries, with the rise of the Tibetan Kingdom and its subsequent northeastward expansion, this belt region became the kingdom’s borderland, and the subjects who lived here started being portrayed as peripheral Tibetans (“Amdowa” and “Khampa”) by early Tibetan scholars as well. The people’s double-border situation is vividly revealed in two “histories” created by ancient Chinese and Tibetan literati, respectively. Both versions of “history” regard the people residing in this

region as “family members” but, at the same time, also as the “black sheep” of the family—the offspring of a defeated hero escaped from China, as recorded in ancient Chinese mythological history, or, according to Tibetan folklore, the descendants of the two youngest and most mischievous brothers among the six ancestral Tibetan forefathers (Mingke Wang 2010). The “centers” from which these two narrative perspectives emanated have both considered the “border” of the Di-Qiangs and Amdo-Kham as a peripheral part of their respective cultures.

We may turn now to a microgeographical analysis of a few localities, like a village or a conglomerate of villages within a narrow valley. The picture obtained by observing social interactions in these localities is much more complicated than that of an intersection of center-border narratives that Tenzin gives us. Up until the 1980s, along the rivers in the northwestern corner of the Beichuan County—where the “fake Qiangzu” mentioned in Tenzin’s paper should supposedly live—the people from small villages who addressed themselves as Han Chinese and called the upstream villagers *manzi* (barbarians) were also maliciously depicted by their downstream neighbors as *manzi*. This even occurred inside a small village, where people tended to boast about the “authenticity” of their Han ancestry and customs and discriminate against other families for their mixed *manzi* origins and habits (Mingke Wang 2008).

Along the Heishui River in the Maoxian County, where the “true Qiangzu” live, the people of some villages used to address themselves, before the 1950s, as *rma*—meaning “our people”—while the upstream and downstream villagers were called *tzebu* (“barbarians”) and *erh* (“sly Han”), respectively. What interests us most here is the fact that the self-appointed *rma* become *tzebu* in the eyes of the downstream people and *erh* for the upstream ones. In addition, I was informed by the elderly villagers that the locals had never known anything about “Qiangzu,” the comprehensive ethnic label they have been given after the early 1950s.

Similar considerations also apply to the Gyalrongwa, who were neither a linguistically and culturally uniform group nor a clearly defined ethnic entity prior to the 1950s. The tremendous diversity of languages and cultures found in the various Gyalrong localities has been the focus of research for scholars from different disciplines. The old stone defense towers built across the Gyalrong and Qiangzu areas, especially the Suopo township, mentioned in Tenzin’s paper, with the name “the kingdom of a thousand towers,” certainly attest to the intensive resource competition that characterized the lives of the people from the villages, village aggregates, and chiefdoms during the past few centuries. The famous “Valley of Beauties” (Badi Township in the Danba County), which is also mentioned in the paper, as well as the less-known “Valley of Handsome Boys” (Zhonglu Township in the same county) are other examples of resource competition and its consequent “island communities”—culturally, linguistically, and genetically isolated communities that have been built on the fear of being constantly assaulted by dangerous neighbors. It is against the human-

ecological configuration of the Gyalrong and Qiangzu areas and their historical background that the question “who are the Gyalrongwa” has been the object of much debate among locals. During my fieldwork in Badi (from 2006 to 2009) and in the Qiang region (since 1994), I discovered that there is still little agreement about who actually are “our people” and who are not.

I think that the polarized categories of authentic/fake, center/border, Sinicized/Tibetanized, patriotic/unpatriotic, and sly/barbaric at the center of the dispute among today’s Qiang and Gyalrong ethnic cadres and officers as well as among the broader stratum of literati elites are only a modern elaboration of, in Tenzin’s words, “multifarious manifestations and layers of the center-periphery paradigm” and, as such, need to be adequately verified through comparison with the perceptions, views, and responses of the commoners and significant lower-strata groups. I believe that a similar perspective on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and the “double positionality” of their inhabitants—which Tenzin describes in terms of a convergence zone, where borders between Chinese and Tibetans are straddled and constantly crisscrossed—can increase our knowledge not only of the human ecology of these borderlands per se but also and especially of the mechanisms through which “isolated identities” are formed out of fear and suspicion of near or far “outsiders”—through which “scapegoats” are made inside, outside, or in-between borders.

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#### Yinong Zhang

Institute of Anthropology, Shanghai University, 99 Shangda Road, Shanghai 200444, China (yz36edu@gmail.com). 27 X 16

Much has been debated regarding the concept of Zomia that James Scott (2009) drastically elaborated on the basis of Willem van Schendel’s (2002) original application. While the critics view the Scottian model of Zomia as a romanticization of the marginal and an anarchist deconstruction of the nation-state, the fact that it has generated a widely covered discussion and debate across disciplines—even in the general public—shows not only the controversial nature of this neologism but also the potential horizon/zone/field that it may open up. Tenzin’s paper is one of those efforts that seeks to shed new light on the concept of borders. Through an innovative adoption of the scientific concept “convergence zone” in the politically charged and socially complex context of the contemporary Sino-Tibetan borderland in China, Tenzin intends both to criticize the conventional notions often associated with borders, such as center-periphery, hybridity, and creolization, and to advance the Scottian model of Zomia from which his own theme derives. He focuses simultaneously on two local ethnic groups in this region: Gyalrongwa, who are officially categorized as a branch of the Tibetan ethnic group (or Zangzu) in China but nevertheless both enjoy and suffer from their some-

how not-so-Tibetan status (Tenzin 2014); and Qiangzu, who are also one of the 55 official ethnic minority groups in China yet have been seen by Gyalrongwa as being Sinicized—thus culturally inferior—and by the Han Chinese, meanwhile, as a yet-to-be-fully-civilized minority. To make things more interesting and complicated, Tenzin has well contextualized these inter-ethnic relations, indeed tensions, in the particular period of 2008, which witnessed two dramatic events: widespread Tibetan unrest in March and a heavy earthquake in May. Both have set a path for the seemingly invisible yet palpable and indeed unavoidable omnipresence of the Chinese state.

Since the Chinese “open-door” policy was adopted in the early 1980s, which gave foreign researchers access to areas deep within China, including the ethnic minority areas, that had been closed for decades, studies on non-Han ethnic groups have flourished. Minority studies have gone from being marginal and unimportant to being a formal and even vital part of today’s China studies.<sup>22</sup> From Stevan Harrell’s pioneer invention of the “civilizing project” model to the more recent critical studies on the Han themselves, the incorporation of minority studies into traditional “Chinese” studies has as much strengthened as diluted it (Harrell 1995; Mullaney et al. 2012). Studies on ethnic groups like the Tibetan, Mongol, and Uyghur ethnic groups, which used to be situated ambiguously between South Asian Studies, Central Asian Studies, Inner Asian Studies, and East Asian Studies, now claim their place in East Asian Studies because of this changing conception of China and China Studies. On the other hand, China, for the past decade, has witnessed the rapid growth of an approach that is a hybrid of Western-influenced anthropological studies on the minority peoples and the Soviet heritage of socialist ethnology. Heavily fettered by state politics, mainstream Chinese academia clearly sees this minority studies trend as a splitting incentive, if not conspiracy, from the West. Hence the counter narrative—such as the “snowball theory” of an organic Han nationality and “corridor studies” that integrate various ethnic minority groups within the constant shadow of China or Chinese civilization—has also been growing in the Chinese hemisphere (Mingke Wang 2008; Xu 2012).

The Scottian model of Zomia, despite its romanticizing and anarchist penchant, can be used to go beyond this discrepancy by “disembedding minority studies from the national strait-jacket” (Michaud 2010a). The “corridor studies,” when confined within the nation-state scheme, start as “geographical facts,” whereas a pastoralist-life-based concept of “Inner Asian mountain corridor” or a trade-network-based “process geographies” turns those “geographical facts” into “problematic heuristic devices” (Appadurai 2001; Frachetti 2012; Giersch 2010). Tenzin, like others, argues for the need to go beyond Zomia.<sup>23</sup> His insight that local strategies or choices do not necessarily originate from a rational assessment of potential rewards but

rather are “inseparable from the inerasable impacts of historical, political, and cultural convergences [. . .] between dominant powers and the local societies” echoes Michaud’s (2010a) call for a mutual-related approach of anthropology and history. Furthermore, his ambition to bring the “convergence zone” model into a broader context (e.g., Hong Kong), although not fully realized in this paper, deserves more serious attention. However, to conceive such comparability in the first place, what we need is not a new theoretical gadget like “convergence zone.” Lévi-Strauss, when arguing against early theories on totemism, insisted that “natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’” (Lévi-Strauss 1963). In this case, the “convergence zone” may be “good to eat,” as it may “fully capture the impact of external forces,” namely, the state. But it is the Scottian model of Zomia that helps to connect these “shatter zones” that conventional “geographical facts” break apart. It thus makes the unconceivable things conceivable and “good to think.” Only then can we start to disenchant such asserted notions as Tibetan, Chinese, Gyalrongwa, and Qiangzu and build a macroscopic model without sacrificing the operational object.

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## Reply

My article revolves around two basic questions: Why convergence zone? Why post Zomia (i.e., the post-Zomian model)? These questions are the core to my research agenda and goal. Therefore, I would like to address them again to further clarify my theoretical stance and continued reflections on the prospects and limits of such an analytic framework.

First, why convergence zone? Starting with my own contemplation and book (Tenzin 2014) about Gyalrong’s positioning vis-à-vis Tibetans and the Han state, I have also come to see the same kind of straddling between two (or more) formidable cultural-political entities in other parts of the expansive Sino-Tibetan borderlands (spread through the Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan, and Qinghai provinces), the broad Himalayan region (intersections of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Inner Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia), and in many other borderlands. I am hence driven by the desire to inquire into how such a wide range of borderlands come out of intensive interactions among various agentive forces (internal and external, local and trans-local, macroscopic and microscopic, historical and “modern,” and so on). In this sense, I do not study borderlands simply because “they are there” (as “geographic facts”); instead, I focus more on the discursive analysis of borders (both “physical” borderlands and “social” margins) to help reveal how they ended up becoming borders and how their “between and betwixt” status came into being. To identify the workings of such discourse as well as the multiple forces at work, I find it important to develop a new analytical perspective for this en-

22. Louisa Schein, personal communication (August 2016).

23. See the special issue *Zomia and Beyond* in the *Journal of Global History* (Michaud 2010b).

deavor. Surely there are multiple existing theoretical frameworks available (which are discussed in the article and have also been nicely appraised by Zhang and Steinmüller), but I think that the notion of convergence zone is rewarding for its capturing both collisions/encounters of overpowering external forces (e.g., civilizations, empires/states, globalization, and/or modernization) and the dynamic “life-worlds” of the native/indigenous/local societies (partially) as outcomes of the multilayered convergences of such powers and forces.

To a large extent, the present-day identity politics emerging among the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu is a “cultural effect” of colliding Tibetan and Chinese civilizations. If we assumed that Tibetan civilization had lost momentum due to the Chinese Party state’s curtailment of its development, this would be an incomplete or misinformed representation of the status quo on the ground. Based on my observations in the last few years, Tibetan Buddhism (and also Bon, a pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion) has been reviving and growing precipitately in Gyalrong and other Sino-Tibetan borderlands (e.g., Amdo and Kham) as well as in major Chinese cities.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that the clashes between Chinese and Tibetan civilizations are not only an ongoing process but also may possibly escalate if the Chinese state continues to check the growth of Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan unrest and self-immolations in and after 2008 highlight such tensions.

I argue that the idea of convergence zone in natural science is a most vivid metaphor that seizes this dynamic process, because its effect is easily comparable to the impacts and consequences of collisions between different tectonic plates, bodies of airflows, or water masses. For example, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and 2015 Nepal earthquake showcase the overflow of energies at convergence zones. When a convergence zone comes into being, it takes on its own vibrant life trajectory, which can be translated into agency in actual social settings (e.g., borderlands). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the fact that a convergence zone is usually built upon or overlaps with the original zone (or the previous “autochthonous” society). In that sense, the original zone contributes to the making of a convergence zone, and some of its charac-

teristics are also incorporated or integrated into the emerging and new life-world of the convergence zone.

Moreover, it is advisable to bear in mind that the nature, density, and magnitude of these prevailing converging forces are not homogeneous and that the degrees and layers of collisions and convergences vary from one particular spot/site/space to another at the convergence zone. This helps illustrate—in the context of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands—why and how the Gyalrongwa and Qiangzu as well as their respective subcommunities do not always position themselves in relation to Tibetans and the Han state in a uniform manner but may instead adopt dissimilar strategies regardless of the fact that they are all situated on the same border region or at the same convergence zone. This simultaneously suggests that it is quite likely that there may emerge multiple smaller scales of centers and peripheries at one particular convergence zone or border region partly as a result of different degrees of impact and influence from powerful external forces or predominant centers and partly thanks to the ways and capacities of local forces to engage with the invading powers. Wang’s example of (Qiangzu) villagers’ categorical but seemingly random distinction of “our people” (occupying the local moral center in relation to other villages along the river) from “sly Han,” and especially “barbarians,” illustrates vividly that such a categorization and discriminating mechanism has much to do with various villagers’ physical, psychological, and cultural distance from (and closeness to) dominant Han and Tibetan neighbors, who serve as points of reference for their own identity.

Furthermore, if we admit that a diverse range of convergence zones in geology, meteorology, and oceanography share certain features as conjunctures of prevailing colliding forces, this rule is largely applicable to borders and margins—the type of convergence zone I focus on. That is, although borders or margins vary from one to another, they have something in common as convergence zones. We may refer to this commonality as the general effects of miscellaneous converging and hybridizing external and internal forces and manifold layers of the center-periphery paradigm, which engender some parallel intentionalities, strategies, and constraints at borders or margins accordingly.

Then, the two ensuing questions are “what do I mean by borders and margins?” and “are all of them convergence zones?” Although I focus on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (and Zomia), my notions of borders and margins go far beyond “natural” (and political) borderlands. As a matter of fact, as noted earlier, I tend to see borders and margins also as a discourse that embodies the politics of representation and constantly reconfiguring power relations between centers and peripheries, and this kind of discourse, and hence borders and margins, is seen in all types of societies and thus in the world metropolises too, such as New York City, Paris, or London. In this sense, a dominant center (e.g., Europe or North America) can be a convergence zone on its own or may consist of a number of convergence zones for the reason that different types of borders and margins (e.g., inner cities; prisons; the underclass; religious, racial, and sexual mi-

24. For instance, the state’s repeated crackdowns on the Serthar Buddhist Academy, the largest of its kind in the world—which is located just outside of westernmost Gyalrong—exhibit Tibetan Buddhism’s thriving and expanding trend in China. Complicating the landscape of Tibetan Buddhism in China, Serthar has a huge number of Han disciples, and Tibetan lamas have also become increasingly visible in major Chinese cities as they give teachings there. There is even a popular joke that goes that there are as many as 300,000 Rinpoches (referring to reincarnate lamas and learned masters) in the Chaoyang District exclusively, one of the eight major (urban) districts in Beijing. Despite the fact that this is a mockery of an “overflow” of lamas, especially fake ones, in Chinese cities, it demonstrates, from a different angle, the growing popularity and influence of Tibetan Buddhism among the urban Han Chinese. Smyer Yü (2012), among others, elaborates on the spread of Tibetan Buddhism and its growing popularity among the Han Chinese.

norities; or refugees and illegal immigrants) often exist at such highly hybridized centers.

Nonetheless, due to the scope of my research and the ethnographic data available, I do not elaborate on this particular aspect. That partly explains why I chose an open-ended conclusion to invite further discussions—for instance, by suggesting the possibility of looking at social peripheries in urban centers (and beyond) as convergence zones too. I should add that this proposition has much to do with questions of, discussions with, and challenges from criminologists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, historians, gender studies scholars, area studies specialists, and others regarding possible wider applications and implications of convergence zones as an analytic framework. Be that as it may, this does not mean that the notion of convergence zone can be equally and effectively applied to all kinds of margins and borders across time and space. As suggested by Shneiderman, it is better to see convergence zones as borderlands with special characteristics, for she finds that this notion is especially applicable to areas with relatively fluid borders. Even so, I would rather think that borders can be seen as composed of roughly two different categories: “typical” and “atypical” convergence zones, which can be defined by their degrees of fluidity and otherness in terms of boundary crossing and identity demarcation (if we follow Shneiderman’s reasoning). That said, what is “typical” or “atypical” is relative and contingent. It is largely subject to different interpretations while also depending on discrete criteria.

That being so, I am inclined to see most, if not all, types of borders or margins as convergence zones, either “typical” or “atypical.” Nonetheless, this does not mean that nonborders/nonmargins are excluded from the category of convergence zones. As suggested above, we could even consider the predominant center, such as “the West,” as a convergence zone or a conglomeration of multiple convergence zones. Then, if we go one step further, could we even consider a slight possibility that the whole world is a convergence zone that is global in scale? Certainly, we can, but doing so brings about serious methodological and epistemological problems, as has also been noted by the commentators. In my opinion, Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis (1996) is an arresting figure of speech, although gravely hyperbolic, essentialized, and far-stretched, of a convergence zone with both local and global dimensions. The encounters, collisions, and convergences of various civilizations and cultures could occur in any part of the world (or even in the “virtual” space of the internet) at different scales and different intensities. Then problems arise: If both center and periphery can be convergence zones, what is the point of spotlighting borders as convergence zones in the first place? Does this somehow justify a postmodern interpretation of the breakdown of center-periphery (West vs. East) boundaries (so that centers are also margins, for that matter, and vice versa)? I cannot fully address these questions at this point but hope to evoke debates afterward. For now, I can say only that, if we introduce a discourse analysis (on the constant reconfig-

urations of the center-periphery paradigm and oftentimes-contingent categories of centers and peripheries), the analytic model of convergence zone has the potential to be applied widely beyond borders or margins (as has been demonstrated to some extent) while attending to the inevitable methodological and epistemological dilemmas.

Likewise, I am inclined to look at Zomia not only as a geopolitical entity but also as a discourse, even though I share Steinmüller and Michaud’s concerns about the (in)comparability of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands with Zomia regarding the scope, complexity, and local-historical particularities. The reason why I compare the Sino-Tibetan borderlands with Zomia is that the Zomian model is really “good to think” (to echo Zhang), and simultaneously, Scott’s works on agency and strategies of the marginal are inspiring. Therefore, I am not as much concerned with whether the Sino-Tibetan borderlands are part of or resemble Zomia—an empirical statement of geographic and ethnographic truism—as I am concerned with how both are subject to the discourse of/as convergence zone in spite of sheer disparities. This leads to (an answer to) my second question: why post Zomia? The idea of post Zomia advocates a discursive understanding of the workings of different forces that produce and reproduce Zomia, rather than fixate on Zomia exclusively or predominantly as some sort of geographic entity.<sup>25</sup>

To clarify, I do not propose an abstract idea of Zomia as discourse or model only, and I do think that a purely discourse analysis is problematic for its foreseeable neglect of Zomia’s literal embedment in particular geographic, ecological, historical, political, and cultural contexts. Therefore, I recommend instead that scholars reconsider whether it is worthwhile to see Zomia predominantly as a bounded physical locality or stick to the debates on whether Scott’s Zomia thesis is empirically true or not. Surely, both the dimension of Zomia as some sort of “bounded” entity and the empirical disputes are important, but if we shift our focus a little more toward the “spirit” of Zomia and its role as a discursive analytic framework (hence with an emphasis on seeing Zomia as “as if”), this approach may inspire more fresh discussions. What is more, I would like to clarify what I mean by “post” (as in “post Zomia”). It appears that my understanding is quite different from that of Michaud and possibly some others. I do not intend to claim that we should leave behind or replace the Zomian model or that “post Zomia” simply means the end of Zomia. “Post” here instead highlights the necessity to continue and further Zomia. Therefore, if we follow the thesis of Anthony Giddens (1991)

25. The academic discourse regarding Zomia could also be part of the discursive analysis in question. We may start to ask how the notion of Zomia has been invented and reinterpreted. While tracing Scott’s academic trajectory, we will find that agency of the weak and anarchist interpretations have been a consistent theme. So a logical question we may ask is whether Scott arrives at his Zomia thesis primarily because Scott is an anarchist-oriented scholar himself or because Zomia is an anarchistic zone on its own.

and Ulrich Beck (1992), among others, that what the misconceived idea of postmodernity actually denotes should not be “beyond modernity” but should instead indicate “late modernity” or “second modernity,” then my notion of post Zomia hence means “late Zomia” or “second Zomia.” It emphasizes not utter disapproval or rupture but continuity and reflection (reflexivity). To conclude, let me rephrase Zhang, and hence Lévi-Strauss, by saying that I hope that the post-Zomian model of convergence zone is both “good to eat” and “good to think.”

—Jinba Tenzin

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