INTRODUCTION

OPENING VISTAS, BORDERING SPACES

The opened Chengduo [Tr. Trinde] County, the developing Chengduo County, are welcoming friends … from mainland and overseas toward here for vacation, tour, investment and business. Let us enjoy the splendid time together!
—Guide to Investment in Chengduo (Song 2001: 1)

This book is set in Yushu, a remote autonomous prefecture in Qinghai Province, in the far west of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the recent past, immense changes have been wrought across this region: personally, politically, economically, socially and culturally. Essentially, the book probes people's varying experiences of these multi-level global, national, regional, cultural and local shifts, with particular reference to themes of identity, identification and belonging. It does this by tracing these themes with regard to the genesis, dispersal, uptake and reformation of discourses of: class, development, nation/nationality, culture, ritual, modernity and media/visual cultural arts.

While the book attends to multiple levels of analysis, it is investigated throughout through the lens of people's daily lives in contemporary Trinde. Two intertwined themes—that of identity (Who am I?) and belonging (Where, and to which social bodies, do I belong?)—are salient throughout. Use of the idiom of identification (rather than the more static concept of identity) highlights how local people's understandings are not fixed, and instead involve dynamic, contextual, temporal and, in some senses, creative and generative processes.

The first half of this book investigates the changing resonance of idioms of identification as bases for social inclusion and political mobilization. The ethnography of this section highlights how contemporary expressions of belonging and difference are not categorically 'new' phenomena, and nor are they wholesale or partial resurgences of inert historical forms. Instead they are dynamic, innovative reform era processes that are being expressed through idioms like 'wealth',
'class', 'development', 'nationality' and 'civilizing culture'. This ethnography also indicates significant developments within what is called the 'reform era'.

To elaborate briefly the first chapter, focusing on 'class' discourses, basically asks: Who am I? in relation to China's revolutionary era class rubrics, and: To which social circles do I believe I belong on that basis? In the chapter on development, the question becomes: Where am I in the ladder of social progress? Where are we in that social ordering? In this case, 'we' may refer to any existing frame of social reference, for example: to Trinde School, to the prefectoral administrative unit of Yushu, to the locality of Trinde or to people categorized as being of the 'Tibetan' nationality in the province of Qinghai. The chapter on nationality asks: What does it mean to be categorized as a 'nationality subject' in China's contemporary body-politic? Who 'feels Tibetan,' and what actions become available, or are considered necessary, on that basis? This chapter also considers: Who is the 'we' in 'we Tibetans'? Who identifies with this idiom, when, why and how? What other concepts of identity/identification and belonging have simultaneous social currency in contemporary Trinde?

Focusing on and deepening similar themes to the previous chapter, the discussion on 'civilizing culture' investigates the place of learning in people's understanding of social belonging: Where does my personal piece of the social puzzle fit vis-à-vis my state-administered schooling/familial learning/knowledge of religious matters? In certain circles and contexts, the identification question may be mixed with considerations relevant for other idioms, for example: Where do I fit in China's/the world's ranking of 'advancement' based on my lowly/elevated level of cultural/modern knowledge?

The process of questioning is only loosely emulated here for academic purposes, and does not faithfully reproduce how this enquiry process actually happens. In practice, the process is mostly pre-conscious, and is often not explicable by most people. Exceptions to this prevailing situation often include: NGO workers, religious practitioners, students schooled in 'consciously cultural' Xining English Training Programmes, teachers with higher learning grounded in Tibetan cultural sciences (for example, 'Tibetan' literature and writing), students of the aforementioned teachers and local scholars (who are sometimes are

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1 The term is used here as a temporal indicator, while remaining aware of the many changes throughout this period.