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Introduction

The Sino-Tibetan frontier remains one of the most contested borderland spaces in modern Chinese history, as well as one of the most culturally diverse and politically complex. It falls within the broader rubric of James Scott’s Zomia due to its altitude and elements of its cultural make-up, including large numbers of nomadic pastoralist populations. However, the complexity of the borderland space between the Eastern Tibetan region of Kham1 (Tib. Khams) and the historical provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan differs from many of the characteristics that Scott argues unites Zomia. Most significantly, this area is home to a diverse and rich range of historical traditions, many of which are written. This contradicts Scott’s assertion that Zomia societies are against or even post-literate.2 Yet written historiographies are not the only histories available for the study of this borderland region: from the nineteenth century onwards, visual history in the form of photographs also exist for a deeper investigation into local conditions on the ground. These forms of history that are tied to literacy and technology are not inherently associated with a monolithic state, as Scott would argue they are;3 instead, their presence allows for local histories to emerge which reveal the “discursive process” of frontier creation4 and how

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1 For accessibility, I have transliterated Tibetan into a phonetic rendering followed by Wylie.
3 Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed, 229.
these sources, written and visual, continue to be adapted, just as Scott argues that oral texts are, to “the needs of the present context.”

This chapter delves into the local history of borderland Kham in the Republican period (1912–1949). The time period to be examined has been chosen for two specific reasons. Firstly, the Republican era is a crucial time, as it vividly represents how successive Chinese powers attempted to respond to the age-old challenge of dealing with the borderlands during rapid and volatile change. A myriad of new sources related to Nationalist attempts to handle China’s frontiers have recently become available in official archives. However, rather than deal with the events of the Republican period from a purely state-based perspective, this essay engages with an alternate set of sources for understanding frontier history on the ground. These sources relate to the second reason why the Republican period provides us a unique time to study borderland history.

New technologies that appeared during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in different parts of China led to entirely new options for recording history. At this point, the historical narrative of the borderlands was further complicated, and centralized state claims and polemics violently disrupted, by the entrance of photographic technology. The significance of this new technology goes beyond what it can tell us about the mobilization of new forms of information and communication in fields such as publishing and consumerism. It allows for new forms of subjectivity in narrative, and the circulation of new ideas related to beliefs in the unique ability of photography to capture “truth” through pictures, even if this “truth” was in reality as much staged and framed by the photographer due to “tactic imperatives of taste and conscience” as in traditional art. Like other forms of narrative available to historians, photography is also loaded with power, with the photographer wielding the technology to frame and capture the image, as the representative of modernity and often in early days, colonial authority. In the case of China, even after indigenous photographers appeared, they were linked to other institutions of power, as they were based in the cities. Even when they ventured out of the cities, they were often doing so as representatives of one of China’s successive state pow-

7 These benefits are outlined in Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh’s introduction to their volume History in Images: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2012), 1–5.