Book Reviews

On the Margins of Tibet. Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier
Åshild Kolås and Monika P. Thowsen

On the Margins of Tibet is conceived as a survey of ‘cultural survival’ in the Tibetan autonomous administrative units incorporated within the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan (note the map on p. 2 depicts these areas, but incorrectly labels them ‘Map of Tibet Autonomous Region’!). The authors’ research was conducted closely together with government authorities in China. Along with very general observations from the type of fieldwork which official collaboration would have permitted them over such a vast survey area, much of the text is a digest of local Chinese gazetteers and administrative literature. Predictably then, the authors deal in Chapter Two with state prescribed forms of religious expression, in Chapter Three with the state defined (and mostly supported) education system, and in Chapter Four with officially sanctioned and sponsored expressions of culture in the form of artifacts and events (literature, song and dance troupes, painting, horserace festivals, etc.). A less predictable Chapter Five investigates ‘Culture as a Way of Life’ through economic development and the environment.

The authors define ‘cultural survival’ as central to their project, but this is problematic. They state ‘Our aim is to investigate current conditions for expressions of Tibetan culture as defined by those who are debating its preservation’ (p. 6), and list the primary debating partners as the Chinese authorities, the Tibetan exile government, and apparently less so ordinary Tibetans. Thus, the starting point for thinking about culture here is drawn primarily from the propaganda rhetoric of two competing hegemonic groups each with their own recently developed discourses on ‘culture.’ The authors are fully aware of this and discuss it. Then, confusingly, they also appeal to or imply several quite different notions of ‘culture’ of their own throughout the work while occasionally repeating the proviso ‘whatever the definition of culture …’ as if clarifying this issue were unimportant. Ultimately, this book largely sidesteps its promised Tibetan debating partners and primarily represents the Chinese state’s hegemonic discourse of culture and how both local government administrators and Tibetan participants seem to fit themselves within this. Throughout, Tibetan understandings of what ‘Tibetan culture’ was, is and might be in the future, as well as expressions of Tibetan agency have been consistently muted by the authors’ generic and superficial assessments, or only captured in a few anonymous one-
liners (‘the headmaster said …’, ‘a nun told us …’), and even masked altogether by the official categories of Chinese statistics (see below). There are in fact frequent and vigorous public (not to mention private or more local) debates about Tibetan culture being conducted among Tibetans themselves in the authors’ research area. One prominent example which occurred in Amdo when the authors where there gathering their data was the widespread debate over a series of controversial Tibetan newspaper articles by Zhogs-dung (see Lauren Hartley, “‘Inventing Modernity’ in Amdo: Views of the role of traditional Tibetan culture in a developing society’ in Amdo Tibetans in Transition, 2002: 1–25). Another current example of such explicit debate about ‘Tibetan culture’ in Amdo (and one widely publicized in global media) involves Tibetans from all possible backgrounds doing no less than voluntarily burning their expensive, traditional fur-lined ‘Tibetan’ costumes en masse in public settings. These and many other different forms of Tibetan agency and self-expression have been manifest throughout the region since the early 1980s, as the results of longer-term ethnography in the region are beginning to reveal. Regrettably, they do not figure in this book.

Even when the authors finally venture beyond the state-defined terrain of ‘culture’ as religious institutions, education, literature and performance, and so on, as they attempt to do in Chapter Five, ‘Culture as a Way of Life,’ they continue to completely miss or avoid the importance of Tibetan agency in relation to local choices about economy and environment, and thus tend to portray the Tibetans as helpless victims by repeating oft-published laments about centralized reforms to pastoralism, tourism development, the Dulan resettlement project, or Chinese deforestation. Against this, one can cite the huge boom economy in the harvest and trade of caterpillar fungus (Cordiceps sinensis) among Tibetans in Amdo and Kham. I witnessed this boom already well underway among local Tibetan communities throughout the region in 1999 at the same time as the authors were there conducting their research. Caterpillar fungus quickly brought unprecedented (and mostly untaxed) wealth to many Tibetans, it lead to Tibetans themselves prioritizing wild harvesting while neglecting their local pastoralism or farming cycles, not to mention such effects as the environmental degradation of pasture land caused by Tibetan harvesters and the problems created for the state-sponsored tourism industry due to seasonal Tibetan labour shortages. If this is ‘Culture as a Way of Life’ it is not represented in this book.

What lessons might there be here for the rest of us? For one thing, the authors were clearly restricted by their chosen ‘survey’ style methodology in collaboration with state officials, which removed them too far from the real pulse and depth of local Tibetan life. They also naively view Tibetans too closely through the lens of official statistics and the state’s own categories. We can see this by comparing one major focus in On the Margins upon monasteries and their clerical populations as representing Tibetan culture (Chapter Two, Appendix 3), with