Tenzin Jinba  

Tenzin Jinba’s study tells the story of how tourism is affecting one corner of Tibet, Suopo 梭坡 township in Danba (丹巴) county (Sichuan) which is the border zone where the peoples and cultures of the Han and Tibetan worlds connect. As such, the people of Suopo (Suopowa) are in many ways marginalized. But this book also shows how the locals are participating in the discourse of ethnicity, gender and political identity and the creation and promotion of tourism. Jinba is professor of anthropology and sociology at Lanzhou 蘭州 University, educated in the United States but also native of Gyarong, and thus, both an insider and outsider, a fact on which he reflects. The main theme of the book is how ‘categorizations of others’ affect the locals of Suopo, and how these people are not passive recipients of these classifications but engage actively in the discourse between themselves and others.

The book is comprised of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. The introduction sets the stage of the queendom dispute and introduces the ways in which the Suopowa are marginalized. They claim a lineage connection with ancient matriarchal queens while at the same time they assert their Tibetan-anness, identifying with the Khampa, a Tibetan subgroup famous for its masculinity. The Suopowa also speak highly of central state policy and the Chinese Communist Party while they also accuse county officials of favoritism and partisanship. They are situated on the periphery of the Tibetan ethnic group and are often not recognized as “authentic” Tibetans. But instead of periphery Jinba uses the term “converge zone” to highlight the peripheral society’s status as an active local center. In Danba County, in which Suopo township is located, Tibetans make up 77% of the total population. The Danba Tibetans speak four major languages or dialects. Danba, including Suopo, is part of the Gyarong region.

The first chapter of the book introduces what the queendom dispute is all about and focuses on different historical canons. Queendom traditions allegedly evident among the Gyarongwa include housing styles, women’s clothing, an abundance of beautiful women, women’s high status, and courtship and marriage customs. The exact location of the queendom is in dispute. Some claim that it was situated in Jinchuan county, Aba Tibetan and Qiang autonomous Prefecture, while others contend that it was in Danba county, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous prefecture. Within Danba, two townships, Suopo and Zhonglu, compete for the queendom. But as Jinba points out: “the queendom
discourse is not simply a product of tourism propaganda, nor is the uncovering of the Eastern Queendom merely an accident ... this discourse sheds light on the Suopowa's negotiation of various identities and their initiatives for strategizing marginality in pursuit of their political objectives” (p. 10).

One of the main points of this chapter is the classification of Gyarongwa. What Jinba successfully argues is that the Tibetans were “unified” under an ethnic umbrella created by the state. First the Chinese government classified Gyarongwa as Gyarong nationality but because of protests from former nobles they were officially recognized as Tibetans in 1954. However, the Gyarongwa's Tibetan identity has been questioned by other Tibetans and scholars ever since. As a response, some Gyarongwa emphasize their uniqueness and traditions in comparison to other Tibetans. Despite the historical and linguistic ambiguity, Tibetan cultural elements are clearly visible to outsiders. Still, many Central Tibetans don't recognize people from Amdo and Kham as “authentic” Tibetans. Also the Gyarongwa's secularization marginalizes them among Tibetans. In addition, the majority of the Suopowa practice the Bon religion. In their interactions with tourists, the Gyarongwa have developed “standard” interpretations of Tibetan and local history and culture, assuring tourists that they are not only authentic Tibetans but also the most unique Tibetan subgroup.

The second chapter deals with masculine and feminine and the ‘internal Others’ in official public discourses in China. According to this scenario, minorities are exotic and primitive, while the majority of Chinese people are mono-ethnic and modern. The official discourse in China promotes a model of “a unified country of diverse ethnicities” in which minority cultures are an indispensable part of the Chinese nation and enjoy equal status with the Han. In reality this usually turns out to mean “unified with or under the Han” (p. 47). The popular discourse, which is inseparable from the official one, varies from demonization to romanticization. Usually the images of minorities portray beautiful women in exotic landscapes, but in the case of Tibetans (and particularly the Khampas) the exotic and erotic are mostly male, and they are proud of their masculinity. In this light, the Suopowa's emphasis of the feminine image is paradoxical.

Danba is advertised by the local government and media as the land of beautiful women who are higher in status than men and engage in romantic love at will. The making of the Eastern Queendom from the valley of beauties is the subject of the third chapter. It also answers the question, why it is that mostly men engage in the queendom dispute while they assert women's high status and political wisdom. Jinba's response is that “the supposed superior status of women in Suopo's sociopolitical life is manipulated by local men for tourists