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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j14k519>

### Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(24)

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### Publication Date

2017-09-01



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**Contesting Border/Frontier Studies in China and Beyond: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Zomia as a Metaphor**

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Bryson, Megan. *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 264 pp. \$60 (cloth).

Xiaofei Kang and Donald S. Sutton. *Contesting the Yellow Dragon: Ethnicity, Religion, and the State in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland*. Leiden: Brill, 2016. 494 pp. \$202 (cloth/e-book).

The scholarship on borders, frontiers, and margins in China and beyond has flourished in the last decade, reflecting an academic trend in anthropology, sociology, history, and other disciplines to restore the previously neglected, or “stolen,” agency of marginal populations. Edward Said (1978), James Scott (1985), and the members of the Subaltern Studies Group (for instance, Gayatri Spivak [1987]) are among the most read and cited scholars who continue to inspire keen interest in challenging the dominant discourse and spotlighting agency at the peripheries. These so-called peripheries comprise diverse categories that derive from different statuses and roles regarding gender, sexuality, ethnicity, caste, race, class, colonialism, religion, political stance, the world order, and so on. Among the most-examined peripheries are borderlands/frontiers, due in large part to the fact that these regions often entail geographic inaccessibility, boundary crossing, political volatility (e.g., border conflicts), ethnocultural heterogeneity, autochthonous unruliness, and/or the target of the state-civilizing mission. Two recent books—*Contesting the Yellow Dragon* (hereafter, *Yellow Dragon*) and *Goddess on the Frontier* (hereafter, *Goddess*)—reflect this academic current in China studies. Starting with these works, I will discuss the potential for an enhanced cross-disciplinary approach to borderlands (borders and margins at

large) and reflect on the methodological dilemma created by striving to go beyond the circumscription of area studies (broadly defined here to include geopolitical, disciplinary, and thematic dimensions).

To begin, I will discuss the increasingly popular concept of Zomia, a term coined by social historian Willem van Schendel (2002), and later theorized by political scientist and anthropologist James Scott (2009), since it epitomizes both the prospects for and predicaments in border/frontier and area studies. To clarify, although Dali in Yunnan and Songpan in Sichuan—two sites focused on by *Yellow Dragon* and *Goddess*, respectively—are associated with Zomia, either as part of Zomia or as quasi-Zomia, I am inclined to look at Zomia as a metaphor instead of as a bounded locality. As a metaphor, Zomia gives prominence to its vision for border/frontier studies in general, as well as to its illustrative capacity to capture identity fluidity, cultural hybridity, transboundary interconnectivity, and local ingenuity in dealing with the state and other external forces at borders. More importantly, this notion poses a further challenge to the legitimacy of area studies, whose often-arbitrary geopolitical delimitation of “areas” has already been called into serious question. Located at the juncture of East Asia, Inner Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, Zomia constitutes a “shatter zone” (Scott 2009) on its own, meaning that mountainous peoples there managed to keep the state, modernity, and lowland civilizations at arm’s length until the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, Zomia can neither fall comfortably into any one of these particular “areas” nor be sufficiently illuminated by state-dominant narratives in area studies. Nonetheless, it promises more intensive dialogue and intellectual convergences among these multiple area studies. As a result, Zomia seems to usher in a new era in which area studies can potentially be transcended, if not left behind.

We should be mindful, though, that border/frontier studies can easily fall into the same pitfalls as Zomia if we consider the degree of difficulty involved in the study of a vast Zomia in terms of linguistic, cultural, and historical complexities—for instance, James Scott is often identified for his inadequate knowledge and incomplete portrayals of such complexities.<sup>1</sup> Then the question becomes: what are the implications and pitfalls of Zomia as a metaphor for a critical reading of *Yellow Dragon* and *Goddess*, and for border/frontier studies more broadly? In so doing, we should at the very least acknowledge and analyze how local/indigenous societies are situated as a middle ground or contact zone and how such “betwixt and between” statuses or hybridized identities are shaped by various local and extra-local political, cultural, and other

(e.g., commercial) forces. In my opinion, these two books fulfill that basic goal, but there is much more to explore.

In *Goddess*, religious studies scholar Megan Bryson situates the multiple manifestations and incarnations of a local deity, Baijie, in Dali's reconfigurations of its relationship with neighboring political and cultural entities throughout history, including China, India, and Tibet. The transformation of images and identities of Baijie from the twelfth century to the present—as the consort of Mahākāla (an Indian god in origin), the mother of the Dali Kingdom's founder, a widow martyr, and a village deity—resonate with the political vicissitudes of this place, which went from being an independent political entity to a peripheral region of the successive Chinese (including Mongol and Manchu) empires/states. This situation suggests that of all the surrounding historical forces, China has exerted the most substantial influence on Dali's cultural and religious landscapes. I have little problem with this assertion, but I am somewhat puzzled by the fact that we do not really see as much of Zomia (as an intercultural contact zone) in this study as the author claims. In my view, the author throws in the idea of Zomia without sufficiently unpacking it. As a result, in addition to the predominant influence from China (and then India), Dali's historical interactions and cultural exchanges with other neighbors probably need to be more carefully contextualized. For instance, I suspect that the influence of Tibet is underestimated. I say “suspect” because I am neither trained as Tibetologist/historian, nor do I know enough about the subject proper to make a more assertive statement. However, I do have my reasons for making this assertion.

One frequently encounters terms such as *'jang pa* (people of *'jang*) and *'jang yul* (the *'jang* region) in Tibetan manuscripts and folklore (including the most widely known *Epic of King Gesar*). What is *'jang*? This flexible concept, whose meaning is context dependent, refers roughly to the region that overlaps with the Nanzhao Kingdom, the subsequent Dali Kingdom, and then Lijiang (to the north of today's Dali Prefecture). It also denotes the indigenous populations that live in this region (including Naxi, Bai, Mosuo, and others, to use the contemporary ethnonyms). These manuscripts and folklore show that Tibetan Buddhism historically played an important role in these areas. Lijiang, which used to be part of the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms, became a Tibetan Buddhist center, and a stronghold of the Karma Kagyu school in particular, starting in the fourteenth century, thanks to the endorsement and patronage of successive Lijiang chieftains. Although there is little doubt that Dali was more influenced by

China, it is hard to imagine that the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in neighboring Lijiang to the north of Dali would not have had any impact on Dali proper, which, after all, had a short-lived alliance with Tibet during the period of Nanzhao rule in the eighth century. As a matter of fact, Mount Jizu (Tib: *ri bo bya rkang*) in Dali has long enjoyed a reputation as a sacred mountain among Tibetans in Kham, and it continues to attract Tibetan pilgrims each year, especially during each Year of the Rooster (like 2017).

These historical realities offer, I feel, legitimate reminders to the author to reexamine and double-check the historical facts. Even if we agree with Bryson that there is little evidence that the elites of the Dali Kingdom drew on Tibetan and other Buddhist traditions (other than those from Song China) (50), we should not exclude the historical influence of Tibetan Buddhism in Dali society and among the common folk. Moreover, I would also like to offer my own observations and research, which suggest that there has been an ongoing “de-Tibetanizing movement” among many ethnic groups that have been strongly influenced by Tibetan culture and religions throughout history, such as the Naxi, Qiangzu, and Yugur. This has to do partly with the demonized image of Tibetans (as rebels) but more to do with these groups’ efforts to construct their own unique or “uncontaminated” cultural traditions (Tenzin 2017). Dali (Bai) is not an exception, but the situation there is different because it started the “de-Tibetanizing” project as early as the eighth century as a result of the suspension of its temporary alliance with Tibet. Thus, I assume that evidence of Tibetan influence in Dali may not be traced or located that easily. However, does this justify claiming that the image and representation of Bajie Shenfei (Holy Consort White Sister) must have Tibetan influence (considering the significance of esoteric or tantric tradition in Tibet)? I do not have an answer to this, but it is advisable to consider this possibility, however remote, and explore it further with Tibetologists or scholars of Tibetan Buddhism.

Now let’s turn to the Sino-Tibetan borderland. This region is also known for its cultural hybridity, linguistic diversity, and identity fluidity. Arguably, some parts of this border area, especially those located in Yunnan and Sichuan that used to be ruled by the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, fall into or lie next to a broader Zomian region. Technically, Songpan, which *Yellow Dragon* focuses on, is not considered part of Zomia. However, in a sense it is more Zomian than Dali because of its relatively weak state control and the high degree of autonomy that indigenous society has enjoyed throughout most of its history. That is why, in another recent book on

Songpan, the author compares this region to Zomia (Hayes 2014). As mentioned above, whether or not Songpan is part of Zomia should not be our concern; instead, what matters here is whether the local society's complexity as a middle ground between China and Tibet can be thoroughly unraveled. This is what Zomia as a metaphor (with its accompanying pitfalls) entails. In order to achieve this goal, scholars must be able to integrate at least two branches of the loosely defined "area studies": Tibetan studies and China studies. Due to political factors and their distinctive intellectual traditions, these two fields rarely engage, and many hardcore Tibetologists in the West have limited knowledge of Chinese language and culture, although this may be changing among younger Tibetan studies scholars. Regardless of the fact that *Yellow Dragon* may not be considered to fall squarely within Tibetan studies (as it does not primarily use Tibetan-language materials), I assume that it will be admired in the field because the authors make sincere efforts to incorporate Tibetan (translated and reinterpreted) materials and indigenous (Tibetan) perspectives.

*Yellow Dragon* explores how an array of terrains in Songpan—political, religious, ethno-cultural, commercial, technological, and environmental—have evolved over the last six hundred years and how they intersect with one another to inform social change and local identities. These evolving terrains are entangled in the status of Songpan, which straddles the Chinese (including Mongol and Manchu) and Tibetan worlds, as political and cultural borders that have been contested since the seventh century. Its in-between position is highlighted further by the fact that the walled Songpan garrison city and outlying forts were literally an enclosed Chinese world on their own: this barricaded world was populated not only by dispatched soldiers and a growing number of *minren* (tax-paying subjects of the empire composed of civilian Chinese and Hui Muslims) but also by Chinese gods, since the City God Temple and other Chinese-style temples and shrines were built and venerated here.

Outside of these fortresses, especially to the north and west of Songpan city, lay an expansive land inhabited by "barbaric" indigenes (mostly Tibetans and then Tibetanized Qiang). These indigenous societies were organized largely around the *tsowa* (alliances of hamlets), chieftains, and monasteries. The *tsowa* organization is very fragile but easily adaptable; the alliances can be expanded, divided, or restructured in response to internal and external power dynamics. On the one hand, various *tsowa*, chieftains, and monasteries were either in coordination with or in conflict with one another, depending on the situation; on the other hand,

all of these local powers had to negotiate their relationships with the empire and frontier officers to seek their own best interests. As a consequence, numerous conflicts and violent acts of varying scales occurred, and mutual agreements and compromises were negotiated and reached on a temporary basis. In due course, more rounds of feuds and settlements took place.

Interestingly, against a backdrop of defiance and resistance characterizing the turbulent political history of Songpan, Huanglong/Sertso evolved centuries ago into a multiethnic, sacred site in a relatively peaceful manner. Since then it has embraced religious elements from Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Bon, despite the ongoing contentions among these sectors, especially after Huanglong became a world heritage site in the early 1990s and a tourist mecca in Sichuan thereafter. What is more, according to historians Kang and Sutton, in post-Mao Songpan as a whole, regardless of mutual stereotypes and competition over resources (including tourism revenue), different ethnic communities there (Tibetans, Qiangzu, Han, and Hui) have developed a regional Songpan identity as locals who share the same territory (400–409). But how has this present status quo come into being? Simply put, the current developments are inseparable from the above-noted phenomena of multiple terrains in transition, the engagement of local and extra-local politics, and the status of Songpan as the Sino-Tibetan frontier. The coauthors draw a clear historical trajectory over hundreds of years that enables us to see how this type of middle ground has evolved. However, a problem arises: since Qiangzu and Hui (not only Tibetans and Han or their ethnocultural and religious practices) also converge at this middle ground and are an indispensable part of Songpan's past and present, is it justifiable for us to continue to use the overarching notion of the Sino-Tibetan borderland, which seems to prioritize either the Chinese or Tibetans? Doesn't this overlook the agency and historical-cultural particularities of the many other groups residing in this region (the Qiangzu and Hui, in the case of Songpan)? For those who employ the term "Sino-Tibetan frontier/border/borderland" in our research (Kang and Sutton, myself, and many others), it is time to consider its methodological implications and seek to be either more inclusive or more methodologically solid (see, for instance, Roche 2016).

In a nutshell, both of these books offer us an opportunity to reflect on the research agenda in area studies and on the methods we employ when working on transcultural (and trans-regional) contact zones, such as borders. This includes rethinking the real possibility of adopting a cross-disciplinary approach. The two books under review here are both historical and ethnographic,

combining archival research and textual analysis with in-depth fieldwork. This brings us to the well-known debate between anthropologist James L. Watson and historian Evelyn S. Rawski (1988) on the significance of orthopraxy (right practice) or orthodoxy (right belief) regarding China's cultural unity within diversity, a debate in which Rawski criticizes anthropologists for their neglect of historical texts. As a matter of fact, I, an anthropologist, was criticized by a respected Tibetologist for my "obsession" with theory at the expense of close manuscript-based examination of local history and culture in my first book on the Sino-Tibetan border (Tenzin 2014). In the last few years, my personal experiences have taught me that it is easier to play with theory than to read and analyze historical texts. Moreover, I have become increasingly aware that one must have profound regional and trans-regional knowledge in order to identify cultural hybridity and convergence in a border area, although this undoubtedly depends on the degree of cultural complexity involved at different borders. Therefore, while I admire these authors' solid historical analyses based on field observations as well as their efforts to bring different area studies together, I am moving toward a more comprehensive view of the methodological and epistemic challenges to border/frontier studies (Tenzin 2017).

As noted, I think that Bryson could be inspired by collaborating with Tibetologists on Tibetan cultural and religious influences in Dali in order to better illustrate the role of Dali as a zone of convergence among various cultural and political entities in history. Likewise, Kang and Sutton will reveal an even more complex picture of local Tibetan religious landscape if they are able to engage with and look into the relevant Tibetan manuscripts. Hence, despite the fact that the cross-disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) approach—as well as developing research agendas across area studies, for that matter—is both laudable and indispensable, the reality is that most scholars are "grounded" in certain disciplines and research areas (and, to varying extents, their respective institutional structures). Hence, border/frontier studies as a whole is also situated in the same dilemma. That said, since borders and frontiers require an open and integrative perspective to look in multiple directions at the same time, we should see in a positive light the flourishing of border/frontier studies in China and beyond as an enhanced opportunity to break, or at least soften, the existing boundaries in area studies and disciplinary demarcations, as heralded and promised by the use of Zomia as a metaphor.



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### **Note**

- 1 A substantial amount of literature has been written in response to Scott's Zomian model, including critiques of this model's insufficiency in capturing the complexity of upland Southeast Asia. See, for instance, "Zomia and Beyond," a special issue of the *Journal of Global History*, edited by Jean Michaud (2010), with contributions from C. Patterson Giersch, Sara Shneiderman, Bernard Formoso, and others.

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