

Yudru Tsomu, *Chieftains, Lamas, and Warriors: A History of Kham, 1904-1961*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London (Lexington Books), 2025. xxi + 417 pp. + 3 maps. ISBN: 978-1-66695-899-7.

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udru Tsomu, whose book, *Blind Warrior of Nyarong: The Rise of Gönpö Namgyel in Kham* (Lexington Books, 2014), placed her in the forefront of scholars writing on the history of Kham, has since then expanded her range of study, resulting in the volume under review. Being herself a Khampa by birth and a respected researcher in China as well as internationally, the author is highly qualified for the task of writing this book, aiming, as she writes in the Introduction, to offer “a deeper understanding of the evolution of social and political changes in Kham by providing...an analysis and contextual history of the region” (p. 1).

Chieftains, Lamas, and Warriors is a detailed study of a period in the modern history of Kham, characterised by its transformation from being a complex and conflict-ridden region at the end of the Manchu Empire, through several decades following the demise of the Chinese imperial government characterised by sporadic but nevertheless at times fierce warfare, first between Chinese provincial military units and the Tibetan government in Lhasa, and later by the confusion and upheavals of the 1920's and 1930's involving local chieftains, lamas, and warriors (hence the title of the book) on the one hand, and, on the other, Chinese warlords in the neighbouring provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan as well as the Republican Kuomintang government. Throughout this middle period, all these stakeholders vied with each other for political control and economic benefit in Kham, a period which finally came to an end with the gradual tightening of control by the Chinese Communists in the years following 1949, with Kham, despite the revolt of large sectors of the population starting in 1956, becoming inexorably and totally integrated into the Communist state.

In dealing with these almost sixty dramatic years of Kham history, the author adopts a chronological approach, as reflected in the chapter headings: 1. Qing “New Policy” Reforms and Local Rebellions; 2. Political Turmoil and the First Boundary Dispute between Sichuan (Kham) and Central Tibet (1911-1913); 3. The Second Boundary Dispute and the Eastward Advance of Tibetan Troops (1914-1918); 4. Internal Conflicts; 5. Kham: The Struggle for Hegemony; 6. Lamas, Warlords, and Nationalists; 7. Kham under Warlord Rule (1935-1949) and the Establishment of Xikang Province; 8. The Communist Ascendancy; 9. Red Star over Kham: Democratic Reforms (1956-1961); 10. Red Star

over Kham: Occurrence and Suppression of Revolts.

Throughout the volume, the presentation endeavours to be strictly fact-based, making use of a wide range of sources, especially documents in Chinese, of which many, although existing in published form, are probably not easily available outside China, and even in China are not likely to be widely known beyond the circle of Chinese historians of Sino-Tibetan relations. Occasionally Tsomu also refers to unpublished archival sources, such as the Kardzé Prefectural Archives and the Sichuan Provincial Archives (pp. 315-317). A cursory glance at the Bibliography illustrates the preponderance of Chinese sources: the list of sources in Chinese covers 24 pages, while that of sources in other languages (except Tibetan) covers 12. The list of Tibetan sources, covering only 3,5 pages, is surprisingly short, suggesting that more extensive use of sources in the Tibetan language is likely to add to relevant information in the future.

This having been said, the breadth of the Chinese sources which the author has assembled makes *Chieftains, Lamas, and Warriors* a uniquely in-depth study of this crucial period in the modern history of Kham, with relevance for the entire Tibetan Plateau. I am not aware of any study of the history of Kham that comes anywhere near the meticulous and detailed research of Tsomu. The reader might lose her or his way in a maze of detail were it not that at intervals the author provides useful (in fact, necessary) overviews and summaries. This, in turn, may encourage the reader to reflect on the long perspectives of the history of Kham throughout the period dealt with and beyond, although Tsomu does not explicitly invite the reader to do so. Reading the book suggests patterns in Chinese policy since (at least) the beginning of the 20th century that appear to be constant. Thus, already in 1904 (as Tsomu points out), Chinese officials had plans for economic development of Kham "as part of the expansionist bureaucracy", including mining operations and agricultural land reclamation involving Chinese settlers, ushering in "a period of incorporation and intense reform". The situation was rendered more dramatic by the plans being implemented in a way that caused anxiety among local Tibetans "that the mountain gods would be disturbed" (p. 32); the opposition was increased by the Chinese "explicit disdain for and humiliating treatment of chieftains, headmen, and commoners" and, above all, by punitive action against monasteries, resulting in armed resistance by Tibetans (p. 33). The author describes these events in detail, at the same time pointing out that overall, the Chinese policies were "influenced by the globalizing norms of territoriality and sovereignty in the early twentieth century" (p. 39). One might therefore say that the upheavals in Kham in the early 20th century ultimately stemmed from Tibet's encounter with the modern world (although at the time, Tibetans would

not, of course, have seen it in that light), a pattern that was repeated and intensified with the introduction and gradual imposition of “democratic reforms” in the 1950’s – which, one could argue, inevitably led to fundamental transformations of society in Kham, as all over the Tibetan Plateau, up to the present.

Returning to Tsomu’s book, she carefully illustrates how the same policy, aiming at development and assimilation, was repeated from 1906 to 1911 during the campaigns of the Chinese military commander Zhao Erfeng, who was “charged with the task of incorporating Kham into the political and cultural spheres of China” (p. 38). Although his efforts were by no means successful, similar policies continued to be a driving force in Kham politics and power struggles in the 1920s and 1930s. Such policies were, however, rendered largely ineffectual by being “fragmented by warlordism” (p. 129). Only after the coming into power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, dealt with in Chap. 8 of the study, was there a gradual but eventually radical change in this situation.

Tsomu’s account, contained in Chaps. 3-7, of this middle period in the modern history of Kham – between the demise of Imperial China and the ascendancy of the Communist Party – is remarkable in scope and detail. A discussion of contemporary events in Amdo, the region to the north of Kham – events no less dramatic and complex than those in Kham – is, however, studiously avoided, leaving unanswered the question of whether events in the two regions were not only similar, but interrelated. Be that as it may, the author’s account is written in the same detailed way as the first chapters, with the same intensive use of sources, mainly in Chinese, but supplemented by sources provided by Western missionaries and officials. It is worth noting, as Tsomu does, that in the intermittent war between the Lhasa government and Chinese forces in Kham, “not all the ruling elites and people sided with the Lhasa government... Some of them... chose to assist the Chinese in safeguarding their independence from the Lhasa government” (p. 79), regarding the Chinese as less of a threat to their traditional *de facto* independence than the Lhasa government, with its centralised structure and the dominance of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (pp. 78-79). This is not without significance in the light of the fact, pointed out by Carol McGranahan in 2001 and quoted by Tsomu, that “the unified history of Tibet presented in popular literature and diaspora representations denies local identity and regional history in favour of what is assumed to be a greater Tibetan national history” (p. 3). This “unified history” can hardly be maintained in the light of research such as presented in *Chieftains, Lamas, and Warriors*.

Of particular interest is the discussion of the reactions of local Tibetans to the Great March, which passed through the eastern parts of

Kham in 1935 and 1936. Chinese units that entered Kham during the Great March were not widely opposed by local Tibetans. In the 1940's, some members of the Tibetan elite had already been working for a Communist Revolution in Kham, generally under the (mistaken, as it later turned out) assumption that Kham might obtain an autonomous status, not unlike that of the Soviet republics, a model which in fact reflected the CCP doctrine at the time (pp. 269-270). Likewise, in the years immediately following 1949, there was substantial support among Tibetan elites in Kham for CCP rule. However, "their identity was transformed from autonomous hereditary rulers to government cadres", with the approach of the CCP being "political persuasion work" (p. 280).

The increasing Chinese control, no matter how 'soft' at the outset, was nevertheless doomed to fail in ensuring a peaceful incorporation of Kham into the People's Republic of China (PRC). Tsomu points to two crucial factors. The first is a lack of understanding among the Chinese of local culture, such as "the importance of guns in Khampa culture" (p. 301); the second, and perhaps the most serious flaw, was pressure – perceived by Tibetans as attacks – on monasteries, beginning with their economic foundations. Monasteries were, as is well known, of fundamental importance in Khampa society, and violent reactions to any attempt to undermine their position were only to be expected.

The final two chapters deal with the so-called "democratic reforms". The author follows the same method in these chapters as in the preceding ones, and there is no doubt that she offers her readers a wealth of new information. However, when referring to the uprising (or, if one prefers, the series of uprisings) in Kham in 1956 and the following years, her account is less complete than one might have wished, although the reason for this is not difficult to understand, given the limitations, whether explicit or not, imposed by the authorities on historical research in the PRC. It is also worth noting that no mention at all is made to the similar widespread and violent uprising in Amdo in 1958. This – as already hinted at – is a pity, because a comparative study of the two uprisings would probably have provided deeper insight into their causes.

The chapters on "democratic reforms" seem to rely on a cut-and-paste procedure in which the sources are limited to published documents from the PRC. This is of course not to say that these documents are without relevance – they are indeed interesting and important – but they only present one side of the picture. In this sense, the author's approach may be said to be strictly 'archival'. Thus, the Khampa insurgents are designated "fighters", "rebels", and "rebel fighters". When dealing with them, the Chinese armed forces are said on one occasion in 1958 to have "wiped out 450 fighters" (p. 339), to have

"annihilated 500 rebels" in the same year (ibid.), and so on. A frequent term is "put out of commission" (e.g. p. 337, referring to "300 rebels"); it is unclear whether this means they were killed or that they simply surrendered. Examples among several similar ones are the following: "...during two weeks of cleanup operations, they [the Chinese army] quelled 2,200 rebels, which relieved over 4,000 nomadic households from revolts" (p. 340), and "By the end of 1959, over 100 battles for suppressing revolts took place in Sershül; these activities neutralized over 4,200 rebels" (ibid.).

In this final part of the book, the standard Chinese propagandistic-bureaucratic jargon of the time is, as the reader cannot fail to notice, quoted – which is fine – but without any critical comments on its limitations or reference to other narratives, such as those of Tibetans who fled Tibet, having been involved in the upheavals in that period. Such sources are accessible in numerous scholarly publications, e.g. the works of Carol McGrahanan which are listed in the Bibliography, as well as other sources which cannot be lightly dismissed.

It therefore comes almost as a surprise that at the very end of her book, Tsomu sheds the 'archivist' approach by concluding that, "In sum, the rebellion in Kham was not confined to a particular area or class. It was led by traditional chieftains who drew support from their followers. The popular nature of the revolt meant that the Communists were faced with united opposition from the Tibetan people" (p. 343). This describes the historical situation very well, and she points out that "According to Chinese sources, the last group of rebels in Kardzé was not purged until 1971, and it was not until 1973 that the last rebel leaders in Lithang were killed" – twelve years after the expiry of the period of history defining the scope of the book (p. 344).

In spite of the limitations indicated above, *Chieftains, Lamas, and Warriors* is, above all, a uniquely well-documented study of the modern history of Kham. The book represents a watershed in terms of broad and in-depth use of Chinese-language material, which, for historical reasons, probably constitutes the largest body of relevant sources. Future research, perhaps uncovering or using other sources, may, in some respects, contribute towards a more nuanced story. That being said, it must be emphasized that the book is an admirable piece of historical research and will remain a fundamental work of reference.

