



Ashild Kolas and Monika P. Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. ix + 276 pages, 18 illustrations, glossary, index. Paperback, US\$24.95; ISBN 978-0-29598481-0.

KOLAS and Thowsen have written a useful work that contributes to the debates on contemporary Tibetan culture and development in China. In the often-polarized environment of such debates, this book offers an alternative data set of information, all the more unique because the authors had official research access, under the auspices of the *Research Project on Tibetan Culture*, to each of the twenty-five Tibetan counties under study (vii, 16). By attempting to draw out the voices of those intellectuals and elites who “are debating Tibetan culture” (10) while simultaneously referring to relevant Chinese government policies that so influence the lives of those concerned, this work ultimately seeks to understand the viability of Tibetan cultural survival.

In order to fulfill this aim, the authors provide research data on two pivotal aspects of Tibetan culture, namely its religion and language. After introducing their

readers to the main themes of cultural politics and ethnic identity, as articulated within the general literature and framed by the specifics of Chinese social research, Kolas and Thowsen proceed, in chapter 1, to summarize a history of Sino-Tibetan relations that have particular bearing on how policies are presently shaped. Chapter 2, “Religious Sites and the Practice of Religion,” focuses on monasteries and its communities in the areas of research. A wide range of information is provided, including statistics on numbers and percentages of monasteries and monks, religious practices among lay Tibetans, monastic education and administration, and funding for monasteries from the government. The authors conclude that the ways in which the Chinese authorities have tried to control Tibetan religious practice and monasteries have only resulted in toughened resistance and a stronger identification with religious markers. The conclusion of chapter 3, “The Dilemmas of Education in Tibetan Areas,” is less heartening. Referring to the statistics of students receiving bilingual education, with a Tibetan focus, the authors suggest that while the numbers for Tibetan instruction at primary level are quite promising, these figures become less so at middle school level and beyond. Combined with the economic and social pressures of acquiring skills in Chinese and/or English, the evidence suggests a possible decline in the use and level of the Tibetan language among its people, despite strong local recognition that the Tibetan language is a vital part of the culture.

The authors dedicate the rest of the book to a three-part analysis of the state of Tibetan culture. They look at the institutionalization of culture through song-and-dance troupes and horse festivals, at culture as a way of life of the grasslands, and at the future destruction or reconstruction of Tibetan culture. Each part represents a piece of the discussion of the state of Tibetan culture, as it is socially constructed both by the Chinese authorities and local elites. Each interpretation of these discussions is a carefully worded criticism of the definitions, policies, and implementing activities intended to delineate and control Tibetan culture. Kolas and Thowsen clearly state at the end that if Tibetan culture is to survive at all, it will need the efforts of Tibetan people themselves to manage and decide their own resources and future direction (181).

Through their five-month research and travel in the areas of research, Kolas and Thowsen are also able to complement their main work with interesting observations, for example, of the young man who was the hereditary medium in a mountain deity ceremony in Sagyel (62) and the monastery that did not dare use a gold-edged Nyingmapa version of the Kangyur and Tengyur (66). These observations are in themselves extremely telling of a cultural sensitivity that continues to pervade certain aspects of life for Tibetan people. Thus, it is puzzling that the authors mention these observations as asides rather than take the opportunity to fully incorporate them into the data and analysis, especially since they appear to want to give Tibetans the authority to define their own culture (178). Their intention would have been strengthened by including the voices and perspectives of these ordinary Tibetans.

Perhaps the reason for this choice lies in what might be the sole drawback of this work: by focusing on official and elite discourse, Kolas and Thowsen forefront cultural politics not only as the topic of research but also as the main way by which to understand Tibetan identity and culture. In fact, there are myriad aspects of

Tibetan identity and culture that do not fall within the radar of Chinese nationalities policies or the “Tibet Question” but are nevertheless integral to an understanding of Tibetan culture as a living and evolving set of relations, not just among humans but with nonhuman entities as well. These aspects play a vital role if one is to fully understand the viability of Tibetan cultural survival.

Nonetheless, given the paucity of direct research of any considerable period of time conducted on the Tibetan plateau, this book is a welcome addition to the literature. It is carefully written and admirably responsible in its attempt to contribute to debates on contemporary Tibet.

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