IN THE HEARTLAND OF THE EASTERN QUEENDOM:
MARGINALITIES AND IDENTITIES ON THE HAN-TIBETAN BORDER

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ABSTRACT

Based on twelve months of field research in Suopo Township of Danba County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China, my dissertation explores the ways in which Suopo locals negotiate and reconfigure their marginalities and identities through intensified conflicts with the County authorities for the prestigious and touristically profitable label of “Eastern Queendom” (Dongnüguo). Their queendom claim incorporates contradictory elements: a non-Tibetan queendom identity along with an essentialized Tibetanness; an apparent affirmation of women’s superiority along with reassertion of red-blooded Khampa Tibetan masculinity; a fierce denouncement of corrupted local state practices co-existent with unbounded eulogizing of the “pure” central state.

To unravel these puzzles and to delineate the convoluted socio-political landscape of the queendom discourse, this dissertation argues that Suopo locals’ marginalized status among both Han and Tibetans and their assumed political peripherality in Danba County inform their ethnic, political, regional and other identities. Simultaneously, they
appropriate and manipulate these various marginalities to subvert or contest their peripheral position and to pursue their political goals. In this way, what I call “voluntary marginality” permits various local actors and interest groups to negotiate and orchestrate their multiple identities, which circumscribes their choices but also leaves them room for maneuver.

This dissertation highlights the elasticity and fluidity of marginality as well as the shifting dialectic of center-periphery relations. Rather than look at Danba and Gyarong (the Tibetan sub-region to which Danba belongs) as peripheral to both Han and Tibetan society, I see it as a convergence zone where Han and Tibetan cultural-political centers interact, compete and fuse and where Gyarong locals retain distinctive local characteristics and carve a new space for their cultural expressions and construction of identities.

Moreover, I argue that contemporary scholarship on China’s minorities falls short in explaining the complexity and theoretical significance of the queendom discourse. The dissertation addresses various issues in this scholarship to highlight and exemplify often neglected but important aspects of marginality and contested identity as well as to suggest a more comprehensive perspective for studying China’s minorities through the ideas of convergence zone and voluntary marginality.