

Afterword

Chinese Settler Colonialism: Empire and Life in the Tibetan Borderlands

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Abstract

What does Chinese settler colonialism look like? More precisely, what does Chinese communist settler colonialism look like? In this essay, I consider contemporary Chinese empire in Tibet as a structure of both dispossession and domination, including the loss of state sovereignty. As in situations of empire elsewhere, Tibetan responses to colonization range from consent to new hegemonic politics to outright refusal of them. Given structural limits for cultural and political expression in China, consent, resistance, and refusal necessarily coexist. While this may be true for peoples throughout the People's Republic of China, the burden of empire places additional forms of oppression on Tibetans. Identifying these forms of oppression as imperial, rather than simply those of a multi-ethnic state, enables a historical precision commensurate with peoples' experiences of empire under socialism.

Keywords: Kham, settler colonialism, empire, frontiers, self-immolation

The Chinese are like kind parents
The silver dollars rain down upon us
– *Local saying*

One person's frontier is the centre of another person's world. Kham is such a place. It is the eastern territory of Tibet, one of the country's three historical regions – Amdo, Kham, and Ü-Tsang. Kham is both centre and frontier, and for many people it is a homeland that precedes and thus transgresses borders and the nations and empires that define them. Kham

is a place of diversity and contrast, and like all places, of contradictions. In the current political period, Kham's contradictions are especially relevant for they illuminate Chinese and Tibetan histories in important, overlooked ways.

In the 1950s, in an imperial move of aggression led by Mao Zedong, the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) invaded and took over Tibet. In eastern Tibet, the Chinese soldiers were initially kind, offering ordinary Tibetans so many silver coins that these actions were memorialized in the above ditty that older Tibetans still remember today. The government of Tibet, including its leader the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, protested, but to no avail. Although a sovereign state, Tibet was not a member of the United Nations, and thus no country substantively came to Tibet's defence. These events unfolded during the era of the Cold War and of European decolonization. As countries around the world demanded and gained independence, Tibet ironically lost its independence and became a colony of the communist P.R.C. In Tibet, including Kham, a key aspect of Chinese communist empire is settler colonialism.

What is settler colonialism? Imperial territorial acquisition followed by ongoing dispossession and oppression through colonial administration and settlement. Canadian Indigenous political scientist Glen Coulthard defines settler colonialism as follows: 'A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of *domination*; that is, it is a relationship where power – in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power – has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority' (2014, 6-7, emphasis in the original). To settle includes to dispossess others of their land and autonomy. As explained by U.S.A.-based Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014, 2018), it is more than other people settling on native land, but also the unsettling of native practices and beliefs. It is to attempt to unmake existing worlds and replace them with imperial ones. In the case of Tibet, it is to replace Tibetan worlds with Chinese ones. In Tibet, Chinese colonial goals include economic and resource extraction, political administration, settlement incentives, the renaming and dividing of lands, cultural assimilation, and (thus far unsuccessful) efforts to eliminate religion in favour of an idealized atheistic socialism.

Imperial formations know no boundaries. They are not limited to certain parts of the world or time periods or types of polities. Thinking of empires as always in formation rather than as steady or coherent states enables

needed comparisons across cases in addition to appreciation of their specificities (Stoler 2006; Stoler and McGranahan 2007). Acknowledging that an imperial formation is as likely to be Chinese, communist, and of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries as it is to be English, capitalist, and of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries is both a historic reality and an analytic argument (McGranahan 2007). It is also a political claim. Claiming the People's Republic of China to be an imperial polity rather than (only) a multi-ethnic one is to assert an anti-imperial politics and to centre a colonized perspective. Given Tibet and China's long tenure as neighbouring polities, their shared political history ranges wildly. It has not always been a story of colonialism. Telling the story of Chinese colonialism in Tibet requires assessment of how empire is not only implemented but also how it is lived. Even in the most authoritarian of periods, people rarely respond to or experience colonialism in a singular way. As a structure rather than an event (Wolfe 1999), settler colonialism has shared features but not total coherence across Tibetan areas. Tibetans are colonized by China, but this structural reality has discrete geographic, historic, and political components to it.

Tibet's imperial realities are multiple. For the twentieth century alone, they are quadruple, including imperial relationships with British India, Qing China, the P.R.C., and the U.S.A. Going further back, they include the period when Tibet itself was an empire during the seventh through the ninth centuries, ruling over many of its neighbours, including portions of China, as well as territories further afield (Beckwith 1993). A genealogy of imperial formations related to Tibet over the last millennia thus includes a range of polities, including Tibet itself. The eighth-century arrival of Buddhism in Tibet effectively ended Tibet's imperial structure and activity. Governance, including relations with neighbours, was recalibrated within Buddhist frameworks. Across a vast territory that Tibetans often speak of as historically stretching from Ladakh in the west to Dartsedo in the east, Tibet was a patchwork of social, political, and religious institutions. Such variation was the norm. For example, depending on the village or town in which one lived in Kham, one could be under the administration of a monastic leader, a chiefly family, or a royal family. People living in border areas were sometimes under the influence or even direct rule of neighbouring non-Tibetan rulers and vice versa. Local power relations existed alongside other relations of trade, sociality, and religion. The latter was key for Tibet: Buddhist religious ties bound peoples through practices of patronage, pilgrimage, and devotion. Religious institutions and figures were omnipresent in Tibetan economic, social, and political domains. Indeed,

the common term for Tibetan systems of governance was *chösi*, or 'religion (and) politics'. This combination of religion and politics is a continuing and constant tension for Chinese empire today.

Studying Chinese colonialism in Kham is to ask questions about frontiers, empire, and sovereignty. As Stéphane Gros argues, the eastern Tibetan region of Kham presents a 'categorical challenge' to what we think we know about both China and Tibet (this volume, Introduction). Analysing Chinese colonialism in Kham challenges denials that the P.R.C. is an imperial polity. Instead, it insists on categorizing current Tibetan relationships to China as colonized, and asks what changes when we do so. Borderlands, for example, have never been neutral political sites of cultural and economic exchange, but are instead areas of political possibility distinct from metropole locations. In this sense, Kham has long been a site for Chinese workings out of imperial policy (Coleman 2002; Frank, this volume; Giersch, this volume; Jagou 2009; Lawson 2013; Lin 2006; Relyea, this volume, 2015; Sperling 1976, 1998; Tsomu 2013, 2014; Tuttle 2005; Wang 2011). For Tibet, centring history and society in Kham is to de-centre Lhasa, Tibet's capital. Challenging the idea of Lhasa as national centre forces attention to the historical place of regions such as Kham, Amdo, Ngari, or more provocatively perhaps, areas such as Bhutan (*druk yül*), in relation to central Tibet. It also forces a conversation on sovereignty.

Tibetan claims to state sovereignty, and thus to Chinese imperialism in Tibet, can be as productively grounded in Kham as in Lhasa (McGrana-han 2003a, 2003b). Kham is a region long associated with a fierce sense of independence, and people there have continued that tradition in response to the P.R.C. Since the 1950s, a consistent Tibetan response to Chinese political change has been resistance. As with colonized peoples elsewhere, Tibetan responses to empire exist along a spectrum from consent to refusal, including periods of more active or more passive reactions. Reconfigurations of everyday life under colonialism include consenting to new hegemonic policies and expectations to outright refusal of them (Simpson 2014). Given structural limits for cultural and political expression in China, consent, resistance, and refusal necessarily coexist. While this may be true for peoples throughout the P.R.C., the burden of empire places additional forms of oppression on Tibetans as well as Uyghurs and other colonized peoples (Bovingdon 2002, 2003; Byler 2019; Cliff 2016; Hillman and Tuttle 2016). For some individuals and communities, consent and refusal might be simultaneous, if contradictory practices of survival. This is part of the story of the contemporary Tibetan borderlands in Kham.

Settler Colonialism with Chinese Communist Characteristics

Empires take many forms. Settler colonialism is one form, elastic rather than rigid across cultural and historic contexts (Veracini 2013). It consists of the settling of others' land by the colonizer with the intention of displacing, replacing, or otherwise eliminating the natives of the colonized territory (Wolfe 1999). Classic examples of settler colonialism are Australia, Canada, and the United States of America. In each instance, there exist drastic policies of both assimilation and destruction, including of native peoples as well as of their historical beliefs, practices, and claims to land. Settler colonialism may be one of several strategies or forms an empire takes. While it is often linked to European colonialism and also white supremacy, it – like empire in general – is not solely a European or white phenomenon. Settler colonialism is a possible feature of all imperial formations, including that of China.

Is China an empire? If many China Studies scholars have been hesitant to call the P.R.C. an empire, Tibetan Studies scholars have not hesitated to do so. From political science and international relations (e.g., Anand 2019; D. Norbu 1985; Smith 1996, 2008) to anthropology, geography, and history (e.g., Carrico 2018, Hansen 2003, Lokyitsang 2017; McGranahan 1995, 2007; Yeh 2013), many Tibetan Studies scholars portray Tibet's relationship with the P.R.C. as imperial. However, not all scholars do. Some prefer the term 'occupied', a term that calls attention to the problematic and violent nature of Tibet's relationship with the P.R.C. but that falls short of the term 'colonized'. This dilemma of naming the socialist state an empire is not limited to China, but also exists within Soviet Studies. Given the development of colonial and later postcolonial studies from within Marxist frameworks, non-capitalist empires such as the P.R.C. and U.S.S.R. did not fit scholarly imperial models (Annus 2012; Chari and Verdery 2008; McGranahan 2007; Stoler and McGranahan 2007; Verdery 2002). While there are similarities in the two cases, the scholarly literatures on these two socialist empires has unfolded differently.

In much of China Studies empire is past-tense, with important studies focused on the Qing or further back (e.g., Crossley 1999; Hostetler 2005; Leibold 2007; Perdue 2007, 2009). Why is this? Avoiding labelling China as imperial draws on a range of possible reasons, including the following: 1) scholarly fears of criticizing the government, and thus potential persecution or loss of research access (Makley 2009; Milward 2011); 2) Marxist 'radical reductionism' or ideological affiliation with or apology for the Chinese communist government (Yeh 2009); 3) a myopic focus on European empire

(Stoler, McGranahan, and Purdue 2007); and, 4) pervasive 'discourse[s] of Chinese victimhood at the hands of Western empires' (Shih 2011, 709). Within China Studies, one important recalibration of the study of empire is through Sinophone Studies (Shih 2011, 2012; Shih, Tsai, and Bernards 2013) or the domination of the Chinese language.

Sinophone communities are one way to recognize Chinese empire. Literary scholar Shu-mei Shih identifies three historical processes of imperial consolidation: 'the continental colonialism of Manchu and Han Chinese empires that produced internal colonies in today's China; Han settler colonialism in select places such as Taiwan, Singapore and colonial Malaya; and (im)migration out of China that produced minoritized Sinophone communities in different parts of the world such as Australia, Europe, and the Americas' (2012, 5; on Taiwan, see also Chen 2010; Hirano, Veracini and Roy 2018; Sugimoto 2018). In this formulation, language is central. This holds true in some but not all ways for Tibetan colonial experiences in the P.R.C. A focus on language misses important historical and theoretical conversations about sovereignty that necessarily ground discussions and experiences of empire in Tibet. In the Tibetan language, the conceptual and imperial Other is China (*gyanak*) and the Chinese (*gyemi*), not the Chinese language nor the 'Han' Chinese. Thus, in addition to a genealogical connection to an imperial formation grounded around language, i.e. the Sinophone, in the case of Tibet, we also need a Tibetan-centred historical and political perspective.

Following World War II, China and the U.S.A. both used anti-imperial Cold War rhetoric to reframe empire as something else; for example, to posit imperialism as development or as the liberating spread of either socialism or democracy (McGranahan 2007, 2018). In the case of China, the consolidation of the People's Republic of China as socialist empire used and also retuned longstanding Chinese tropes of barbarians outside the gates of civilized society as well as new political strategies for and justifications of empire. When the People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet, the initial justification was the need for socialist liberation from feudalism and religion. Later the Chinese Communist Party added a historical justification to the earlier ideological one: the claim that Tibet was *always* a part of China. Ironically, this historical argument is itself only several decades old. For Xinjiang in addition to Tibet, anthropologist Kevin Carrico argues that such rhetorical shifts over time maintain the colonial project: 'the ideological application of the euphemism of development is particularly pressing in the current western areas of China, where from the Maoist rhetoric of "liberation" to the post-Maoist rhetoric of "development" a process of unrelenting Han Chinese

colonization has been insistently represented as anything but colonization' (2018, 640; see also Fischer 2013; Yeh and Wharton 2016). Whom does a denial of colonialism serve? Mostly, but not only, those in power.

Under socialism, the Chinese civilizing project has been one of forging national unity and ethnic harmony (Harrell 1995). In Tibet, one example of this is the ongoing Education Aid for Tibet project where Chinese citizens travel to Tibetan areas to work as teachers. This labour is seen as moral and part of a civilizing saviour complex familiar to colonial situations elsewhere (Yang 2019). Moral justifications for the programme rest on stereotypical narratives such as 'the Han [i.e., Chinese] are superior, central, civilized, and safe and the ethnic minorities [i.e., the Tibetans] are inferior, peripheral, barbaric, and unsafe' (Yang 2019, 5; see also Carrico 2017). In her ethnographic research with teachers in the programme, scholar Miaoyan Yang (2019) found they understood their participation to be not so much about education for its own sake, as education in the service of ethnic unity, national stability, and national integration. Underlying this discourse is the argument that Tibetans are not integrated into the Chinese state, and that this is a problem to be fixed. Instead of unity and harmony, Tibetans thus potentially present problems of 'separatism' and 'splittism' to a benevolent imperial state.

Tibet is not an internal colony of China. To call it an 'internal colony' would support the fiction that Tibet was historically part of China. An internal colony is a territory inside a state which is administered in a colonial fashion, or for which there exists massive economic inequality between it and the state centre (Hechter 1975). In the P.R.C., there are places and peoples whose relation to the state is that of an internal colony (Gladney 1998; Oakes 1995). These are mostly non-Han ethnic areas and groups, but not necessarily ones that had a sovereign state as did Tibet. All non-Han peoples are nonetheless grouped into one ethno-political category, that of 'minority nationalities' or *minzu*, in a way that defines this grouping as natural or inevitable, that is such that 'these peoples are officially described as always already a part of China, as if they somehow naturally belonged on this map and did not end up as part of China by being conquered' (Fiskesjö 2017, 7). Anthropologist of China Magnus Fiskesjö argues that this historical revisionism has stark political repercussions: 'One formidable effect of this formulation is that it equalizes all the minorities and thereby erases the differences between those who built their own states and empires in the past, such as Tibet, which could easily, like Mongolia, fulfill the criteria for being recognized by the modern world as independent states with their own seat in the United Nations and on the other hand, those minority peoples who never engaged in any such state-building in the past' (Fiskesjö 2017, 7).

Tibet's eighteenth-nineteenth-century imperial relations were with the Qing (Manchu) empire, which was a non-Han empire of China. Buddhism bound the Qing emperor and Tibetan Dalai Lama together in a 'patron-priest' relationship that Tibetans understood as a relation of equals, not one of subordination (Jagou 2009; Schwieger 2015). Being in an imperial relationship was not the same as being in a colonial one. During the same period, for example, British India also considered Tibet to be in its imperial interest; however, these Great Game politics were not an indicator of loss of sovereignty. In 1913, following the fall of the Qing empire and efforts of the new Republican government in China to assert claims to Tibet, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama proclaimed Tibet's independence. Tibet never came under the imperial or colonial administration of the Republican government of China. What then does current Chinese settler colonialism look like?

Instructions on how to be civilized. Exclusions from certain programmes and possibilities. Inclusions in other programmes and possibilities. Requirements to perform gratitude, to embrace aspects of socialism, to reject local beliefs and practices, including religious ones – Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang. A visible security presence, and invisible but known surveillance methods. State policies based on misunderstandings of native peoples, such as nomadic pastoralists (Tan, this volume). Alongside these, however, is everyday life. People find ways to live in empire, to live alongside colonizers, to survive and even thrive within limits. Strategies for doing so are multiple.

Within the P.R.C., at times Tibetans creatively push back on their state ethnic (*minzu*) categorization, and other times they operate within proscribed limits (Germano 1998; Grant 2017, 2018; Hillman and Henfry 2006; Jinba 2013; Keogh 2015; Makley 2007; Smyer Yü 2013; Yeh 2007). Poetry, literature, art, and song are all important genres for Tibetan cultural and political expression, often with risks of imprisonment and abuse for artists, intellectuals, and even community members (Buffetrille, this volume; Gayley 2016; Jabb 2013, 2019; Morcom 2015; Thurston 2017; Warner 2013). Changes in government policies for nomads, farmers, and urban residents have created new forms of inequality and struggle between Tibetans (Bum 2018; Gyal 2019; Sulek 2019; Yeh and Makley 2019; Zhaxi 2019). Tibetan experiences of nationalist modernity within China are shared across regions. For example, short stories written in Amdo are read by people in Kham. Songs performed by Khampas are beloved by people in Amdo. Poems composed in honour of historical events in Lhasa circulate among Tibetans in all provinces via social media (Jabb 2019). In the digital era, people have new ways to connect and communicate, including to 'undermine political authoritarianism' (Jabb 2019, 51).

Tibetan experiences with Chinese neighbours long precede contemporary empire. Traders, intellectuals, monks, and others regularly travelled to China and other neighbouring countries such as India and Nepal, and resided there sometimes by choice and other times as forced exile (Jagou 2013; McGranahan 2017; Stoddard 1985; Yongdan 2019). The city of Chengdu in Sichuan, for example, has long had Tibetan residents, and is currently being reimagined anew as a Tibetan place within China (Xu, Kou, and Wall 2018). While Kham and other Tibetan regions each have historical and administrative specificities, shared cultural sensibilities and forms have new uses under colonial rule. Understanding Kham thus requires understanding Tibet and vice versa.

Kham: Borderlands, Centre, Home

Where is Kham? It is north of Arunachal Pradesh and Burma and Yunnan, south of Amdo, east of Lhasa, and west of Sichuan and China. For Khampa Tibetans in exile, Kham is where they are not. Kham is a dreamt-of homeland, a place kept alive through memory and WeChat. Borders of Kham are not just with China; this is not simply 'the Sino-Tibetan borderlands'. Instead, borders of Kham and Tibet are also with a range of other peoples (Atwill 2014; Bhutia and Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2019; Gros 2016b; Guyot-Réchart 2017; Roche 2016). An orientation toward China is only one way to situate Kham, albeit a very potent way given the current geopolitical situation. However, borders are not only geographic, they are also conceptual and cultural. For example, religious borders in the form of different Buddhist sects stratify much of Tibet and provide impetus to overcome the limits of single sectarian approaches or dominance (Gardner 2009). Environmental borders of rivers, passes, elevation, and so on challenge and shape human possibility, as do linguistic borders. Kham is an area of religious, environmental, and linguistic diversity, and histories plural that match this diversity. Just as Tibet is not a singular cultural field, neither is Kham. The southern district of Gyelthang is an excellent example of this in terms of a distinct, and even at times indifferent, relation to Kham (E. Mortensen, this volume). When and how people identify as Khampa is situational and strategic. Nonetheless, in times of loss and change, geopolitical singularities can possess new meanings for people. The current moment is one such time.

A list of possible identities for any individual is always graduated. For an individual in Kham, geopolitical identities are layered and split. One has Tibetan geopolitical identities and now also Chinese administrative

ones. Historically, Kham was one of the *chölkha* (regions) of Tibet, and was comprised of many *phayül* (fatherlands) or districts. Each *phayül* had a central town and many villages and monasteries within its domain. Different Tibetan dialects and even languages are spoken throughout the region, some mutually unintelligible. Under Chinese rule, Tibetan terms were replaced with Chinese administrative units of prefectures, counties, cities, and townships. Nyarong is now Xinlong. Chaktreng is Xiangchen. Gyelthang is Shangri-La or Xianggelila (Hillman 2003). The names shift as the language does, the places reassemble with new boundaries and sensibilities. For some people, the two naming systems co-exist; for others, one fades in the face of the other. If your *phayül* is Nyarong and *chölkha* is Kham, your county is now Xinlong in the Chinese-established Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province. Colonizing a place, settling a territory, includes renaming and reshaping its land. This is not a neutral act. The Tibetan and Chinese languages are not related. They jointly head the Sino-Tibetan language family, but Chinese is the current language of empire (Shakya 1994). Resistance to this is ongoing.

Insistence on the use of Tibetan languages is one nationalist form of resistance. We see this in numerous projects and forms of activism in the eastern Tibet regions, from the building of schools and creation of language programmes to the Lhakar ('White Wednesday') movement's pledge to speak only Tibetan on Wednesdays. Such actions are considered counter-revolutionary by the Chinese government. In May 2018, three years after appearing in a *New York Times* video discussing his work to support the teaching and preservation of the Tibetan language, Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced to five years in prison for 'incitement to separatism'. His story dissolves important borders: he is from Jyekundo in the historic Tibetan region of Amdo, now known by its Chinese name of Yushu in the province of Qinghai. But his story of linguistic activism and of the state violence that accompanies it could be that of someone in Kham or central Tibet. Becoming visible to the state for advocating for things Tibetan – language, dress, religion, rights – is to take a risk. Even ostensibly safe ways to publicly present and perform Tibetan identities through, for example, 'ethnic' song and dance, always include such dangers. Negotiating the risks of state violence is something required under settler colonialism, even for things that on the surface seem apolitical.

How can one be unknowable to the state? At Yachen Gar, a religious community of nuns in Kham, women seek ways to be unknowable to, and thus uncontrollable by the state (Cho, this volume). This is a project in constant motion, as the nuns build huts in manners and formations designed

to deter, confuse, and refuse state mandates to be knowable. Remembering past resistance efforts against the state is also a political project. In exile as in the P.R.C., there are prohibitions against narrating histories of the Kham-centred citizen Chushi Gangdrug army that fought against the P.L.A. for almost two decades (McGranahan 2005, 2010). Also discouraged are histories that challenge either Chinese or Tibetan ideas of Kham or even of specific *phayül* as marginal places, rather than centres of their own (Turek, this volume). The historiography and scholarship produced under such conditions is partial and also political.

Histories written in service to the state, or as a form of international relations, flatten the complexities of actual people and the often complicated lives they live. For example, the experiences of an individual such as Khampa Tibetan communist Baba Püntso Wangyal cannot be reduced to his relationship to socialism or Buddhism or with Mao or the Dalai Lama (Goldstein et al. 2004; Stoddard 1986; Takla 1969; Wangyal 2007). Some beliefs are held constant across a lifetime and others necessarily change over time. Acknowledging the range of subject positions of an individual such as Wangchuk Tempa – monk, bandit, strongman, resistance fighter, communist party member, and Tibetan trying to navigate a Chinese political world – enables a fuller portrait of life in the borderlands, including the sometimes oppositional array of life choices available to individuals (D.P. Mortensen, this volume). In the twentieth century alone, numerous Khampa Tibetans participated in national political projects, from locations both inside and outside of Kham. Some families and individuals gained power through religious rank and accomplishment, others through trade success, and still others through education and literacy (in both Chinese and/or Lhasa Tibetan) which enabled access to and affiliation with new ideological worlds of democracy, nationalism, and/or socialism.

Political possibility in the borderlands has long been strategic rather than stable. Relations with Lhasa, with Amdo, with China, changed over the centuries and also varied across different places and for peoples of Kham. There was no one Khampa perspective or experience. At times, individuals and groups actively worked to effect political change. They agitated to change relations with neighbouring districts or *phayül*. They agitated for respect and power in relations with others deemed senior to them in terms of either religious or secular authority. Boundaries between districts could be fiercely defended by one generation, and productively blurred by the next. One area could declare its autonomy from any overlord, accept being under another polity, or reject external claims of subordination and instead proffer its own geopolitical preferences. The latter is the case of the kingdom of

Trokyap, which in the 1930s-1940s rejected new Chinese and Kham political affiliations in favour of maintaining an older political bond with the state of Sichuan (Jagou, this volume). In this same period, others organized to forge a pan-Kham polity with strategic links to existing Tibetan and Chinese powerholders (Peng 2002; Tsomu, this volume). These efforts were predated by those of Nyarong chief Gönpö Namgyel, about whom stories are still told in exile as well as in Kham. A figure who commanded both fear and respect, Gönpö Namgyel successfully conquered neighbouring districts and almost created a politically united Kham (Tsering 1985; Tsomu 2014). Writing histories of the present as well as of these often confusing pasts is also a matter of sources and accessibility.

Writing a history of Kham as a borderlands is to posit multiple centres elsewhere. These centres – be they Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, or otherwise – tell different stories of their margins. Some are familiar. The Tibetan state considered its borderlands as places to be both defended and civilized (Bufetrille, this volume). This language is echoed in Chinese colonial language found in contemporary education and development projects (Yang 2019; Yeh 2013) as well as in both European and Asian Christian missionary discourse in Tibet from the nineteenth century through to the present-day (Bray, 1991, this volume; Galipeau 2018; Gros 1996; Horlemann 2013; King and Klassen 2015; Zenz 2014). Sources for imperial histories of Kham exist in multiple languages and archives with varying degrees of access throughout the world. Sources for Kham-centred histories exist wherever Khampas are in the world. They are orally narrated, and written and published by Khampa individuals and communities inside Tibet and also in exile. From hagiographies and local histories to diaries and political testimonies and more (e.g., Galli, this volume; Hartley 2013; McGranahan 2017; J. Norbu 1986; Pemba 2017; Schwieger 2002; Thargyal 2007; Wangmo 2017), available sources are not always accessible inside Tibet. Many documents were destroyed during the 1950s-1960s. Access to Tibetan archives is controlled by the Chinese government, as is permission for field research. Access to non-archival sources is limited by fear of imprisonment and abuse for the researcher, the individual speaking and writing, or both. This is a reality of research in a settler colonial region.

Scholarly studies of Kham fall under both Tibetan and Chinese Studies. As such, they may have different orientations, research questions, and understandings of Kham in relation to both Tibet and China rather than to only one of the two polities (Epstein 2002; Gros 2016a; Van Spengen and Jabb 2009). Over the centuries, Kham's relations to Tibet and China were not commensurate. Kham was not a part of China. It was a part of Tibet. This

is a cultural, religious, and historical claim. Prior to the twentieth-century rise of the nation-state around the world, most peoples expressed and recognized identities in locally meaningful ways. People in Kham and throughout Tibet – all regions, not just the Chinese-designated Tibetan Autonomous Region – considered themselves connected to each other through religion and other cultural markers. They were *nang pa* (insiders), meaning practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. This term exceeded politics, as did another one still in use today: tsampa eaters, people who eat roasted barley flour. As historian Tsering Shakya explains, 'If Buddhism provided the atom of Tibetanness, then tsampa provided the sub-particles of Tibetanness. The use of tsampa transcended dialect, sect, gender, and regionalism' (1993). Kham is home to tsampa eaters. Yet, as scholar Katia Buffetrille asks about Kham (this volume), what happens to the periphery when the centre is gone? For if all Tibetans were tsampa eaters, the heart of the Tibetan world in recent times was Lhasa and the Dalai Lama. One answer to her question is that in the periphery, people have created new practices to re-centre what has been lost.

Bodies and Borders: A Conclusion

Tibetan brothers and sisters unite. Independence for Tibet. Long life to the Dalai Lama. Dalai Lama return to Tibet. Each of these statements is one made by a Tibetan self-immolator, and repeated again and again by others who have self-immolated. As of July 2019, 164 Tibetans have self-immolated. One person self-immolated in China, three in Nepal, and seven people have self-immolated in India; the rest have done so inside Tibet. 164 individuals have chosen to end their lives by pouring petrol over their bodies, or into their bodies, and lighting a match. They have done so consistently as a form of protest against Chinese rule in Tibet. We know this because of the oral and written testimonies they prepared before the act, as well as by the things they say while they are burning. Of the 153 Tibetans who have self-immolated in Tibet since February 2009, the great majority have done so in 'the Sino-Tibetan borderlands'. Six self-immolations have taken place in Central Tibet. In contrast, 147 self-immolations or 96 per cent of the total inside Tibet have been in eastern and northeastern Tibet, in the historic regions of Amdo and Kham, and the current Chinese provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan. Among this group, the majority of the self-immolators are doing so at the borders of Kham and Amdo, near Kirti Monastery in Ngaba, Sichuan. In Ngaba alone there have been 39 self-immolations, or 25

per cent of all self-immolations inside Tibet. At this Tibetan border, at a monastery where monks come from different areas of Tibet, a new practice of resistance and offering is centred.

Self-immolation is a twentieth-century form of political protest. It does not have a history in Tibet until now (Buffetrille and Robin et al. 2012; Dorjee 2019; McGranahan and Litzinger 2012; Woesser 2016). It is now a method – a drastic, bold method – used by Tibetans to speak in a new way to a situation they find untenable. To self-immolate is to kill oneself, but Tibetans widely consider these deaths to be sacrifices rather than suicides. New terminology had to be invented for the act of self-immolation. It is referred to as self-burning in fire (*ranglū mesek*), self-offering (*ranglū chöbül*), self-offering in fire (*ranglū mechö*), or self-giving and burning (*ranglū jingsek*). Acts of self-immolation are framed as religious offerings in the historic sense of fire offerings, of the flame that is always lit on family and monastic altars. They are pleas to the Tibetan community to remain united to defend country and religion, and use the same language to make these pleas that resistance fighters used in the 1950s. And, they are protests against the ongoing oppression and violence of Chinese colonialism.

Chinese governmental reactions are predictable. They blame self-immolations on the Dalai Lama and the exile community. They claim the self-immolators are disturbed individuals. They deny they happened at all. They arrest self-immolators (those who did not die during their attempt) and sometimes also arrest their families. They create policies against self-immolation and launch anti-immolation programmes. According to a 2013 report in the *Gansu Daily*, the messages of anti-immolation re-education campaigns are that ‘Tibet is an inalienable part of China’ and that Tibetan citizens must ‘uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China and protect social stability and economic development’ (TCHRD 2013). At the same time, other forms of protest continue. Detentions continue for all sorts of activism including linguistic activism, environmental activism, for displaying the Tibetan flag or possessing a photo of the Dalai Lama, for circulating certain songs or for writing them, or for offering condolences to the family of a self-immolator. However, amidst the imperial logics of surveillance and detention, life continues in Kham and throughout Tibet, including at its borders. Sometimes too, when the Chinese government permits, research also takes place.

Academic questions of empire and borderlands are lived by actual peoples. They are not abstractions. Borders and borderlands are thought to be places of possibility, where mixture is possible but where centres and claims to purity are also most strongly defended or illuminated at times (Stoler 1991, 2002). Historically, political practices and possibilities in Kham were not the same

as in Central Tibet, just as political practices and possibilities in Tibet were not the same as those of China. Today, these Khampa and Tibetan practices and possibilities continue to pose challenges. They challenge specific ideas of nation and empire; they challenge specific structures of power and the people who implement them. In contemporary Tibet, these challenges unfold in a ‘settler-colonial present’, a ‘deeply unequal scene of articulation’ in which people must both live their lives and structure their resistance while also insisting on and acting from another possible understanding of the political (Simpson 2016). In other words, there is a constant tension between consent and refusal (Simpson 2013, 2016). In Tibet, current Chinese rule is imperial. Self-immolation is one response to imperial rule. It is a refusal to live life in a certain way, a commitment to Tibetan ideas of life plural, and a reminder to all of the impermanence of things including, eventually, empire.

Glossary of Tibetan and Chinese terms

<i>chölkha</i>	<i>chol kha</i>
<i>chösi</i>	<i>chos srid</i>
<i>druk yül</i>	<i>‘drug yul</i>
<i>gyanak</i>	<i>gya nag</i>
<i>gyemi</i>	<i>gye mi</i>
<i>minzu</i>	民族
<i>pha yül</i>	<i>phayul</i>
<i>ranglū mesek</i>	<i>rang lus me bsregs</i>
<i>ranglū chöbül</i>	<i>rang lus mchod ‘bul</i>
<i>ranglū mechö</i>	<i>rang lus me mchod</i>
<i>ranglū jingsek</i>	<i>rang lus sbying bsregs</i>

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Stéphane Gros for the invitation to write this essay, and for his generous intellectual engagement with my argument as well as the ethnographic, historical, and political details. Thank you also to Christophe Besuchet for his precise, compassionate database of Tibetan self-immolators. My gratitude also to those mentors, colleagues, and students who have taught me so much over the years, especially the late Fernando Coronil, Nicholas Dirks, the late Lodi Gyari Rinpoche, Dawa Lokyitsang, Jamyang Norbu, Audra Simpson, Warren Smith, the late Elliot Sperling,

Heather Stoddard, Ann Laura Stoler, Tashi Tsering, and individuals inside Tibet who cannot be named.

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