

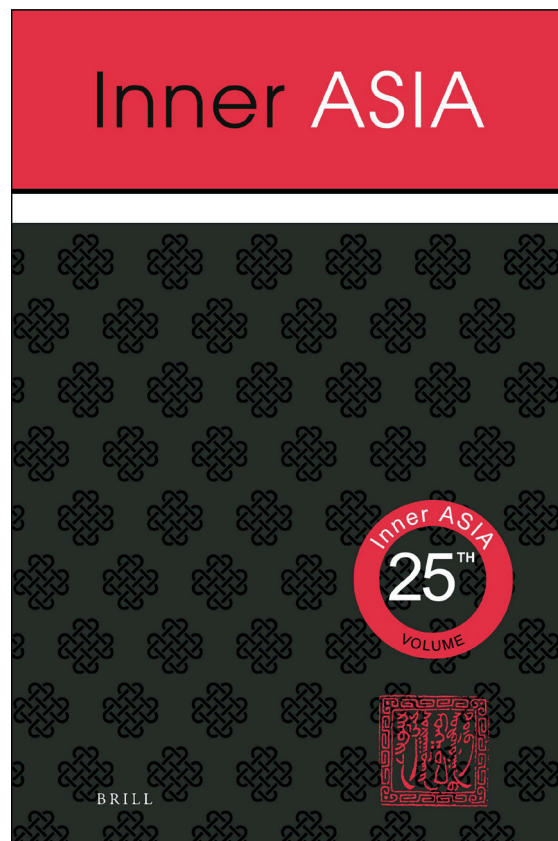
Book Review

## Review of *Kinship and the State in Tibet and its Borderlands* by Eveline Bingaman, Heidi E. Fjeld, Nancy Levine, and Jonathan Samuels

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The special section “Kinship and the State in Tibet and its Borderlands,” published in the journal *Inner Asia*, begins with an introduction written by the four authors Eveline Bingaman, Heidi E. Fjeld, Nancy Levine, and Jonathan Samuels. The aim of the special section is to understand “how Tibetans imagine their kin relationships and act with reference to them under conditions of cultural contestation and ongoing social change” (p. 3). Newly translated documents, such as Sangye Gyatso’s (1653-1705) text on incest, bring new insights into what marriage restrictions, kinship practices, and the role of the Tibetan state in regulating them might have been in the 17th century. These documents also shed light on contemporary debates about kinship and thus, fill a crucial gap in the historical analysis of family life in Tibetan societies. The authors consider three leading developments in the study of kinship, namely (1) the impact of material forces, such as land tenure and taxation systems; (2) the widely acknowledged criticism to use Euro-American concepts to describe kin relationships in non-Western societies; and (3) the applicability of social units, such as the house, for collective actions.

The four authors rightly insist on the heterogeneity of everyday social life in pre-modern Tibet: “Each of the contributions in this special section highlights kinship’s variability and adaptability in one way or another” (p. 12). Samuel’s comment on Sangye Gyatso’s writings on incest seeks to understand actual kinship practices compared to orthodox dogma. Levine’s contribution shows how new economic conditions induce change in Tibetan pastoralist societies. Fjelds explains why a wide range of possible marriage types allows people to adopt the one that suits them. And, finally, Bingaman describes how parenting strategies can help escape monastic “conscription.”

Samuels’ “Incest classified: A seventeenth Century Tibetan Ruler’s Perspective on Sexual Proscriptions and the Boundaries of Kinship” discusses a previously unreported section of a text written by prime minister

Sangye Gyatso, who is considered one of the main architects of the Tibetan state. In this text, Sangye Gyatso answers a series of questions on kinship practices posed by his interlocutor Ngawang. Ngawang attempts to gather as much information on incest prohibitions as possible by referring to both popular and learned literature. He states that written information is sometimes contradictory, and the very purpose of his questions is to obtain clarification from an authority in order to verify if certain practices should be accepted (or not).

In “Measures and Countermeasures: Monk Levies and Kinship in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland” Bingaman argues that “a full understanding of marriage and kinship practices requires consideration of the governance structure within which families are embedded” (p. 52). She chooses the example of the Naxi community in the Woya Valley of southwestern Tibet that uses marriage and kinship practices to escape the monk levy imposed by a monastery. In particular, her study “examines systems of monastic recruitment as a lens through which to explore how one non-Buddhist community negotiated its own space by utilizing kinship and marriage strategies” (p. 52).

The Woya Valley, on which Bingaman focuses, was part of the Muli kingdom, a theocracy that was founded in 1648 by a reincarnated lama or *tulku* (t. *sprul sku*) and lasted until 1953, when the Chinese put an end to it. In the Muli Kingdom, all important positions were in the hands of ordained monks, with the notable exception of the headman of the Naxi community in the Woya Valley. This headman, called *muguan* (c. 木管) was integrated into the monastic bureaucracy with a hereditary title which presented a “non-ecclesiastical equivalent of that of the highest-ranking monk official” (p. 60).

Bingaman specifies that each peasant household received a hereditary land allotment as long as they paid their taxes. Household, however, is not the right word. The central unit of kinship is called *yao* ‘*gho*, “domestic groups that act as the basic social

economic, ritual and kinship unit” comparable to the Levi-Straussian “houses.”

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- Patrick Kaplanian on *Kinship and the State in Tibet and its Borderlands*

The taxes to be paid to the monastery were in kind (i.e. grain, etc.) and in drudgery (i.e. labor in fields or mines, transportation, or military service). All male children had to enter the monastery except for the eldest and the youngest. If rules of taxation in the Muli Kingdom were strict and severe, those of marriage were vague, as practically all forms of marriage were tolerated: monogamy, polygyny, and polyandry. This allowed a family’s third son to escape the monk levy. He was simply sent to another *yao ‘gho*.

Levine in her article “Practical Kinship: The Centrality of Siblings in Pastoralist Life” first reviews a number of concepts of local kinship groups that appear in ethnographic literature, such as tribe and clan. She criticizes the notion of tribe, a concept that is too vague to describe Eastern Tibetan pastoralists. Instead, the concept of clan (*t. rus*) seems to be more appropriate since it is based on patrilineality. The members of each clan stand together in disputes over access to grassland. But clan membership does not seem to be the only criteria for solidarity, nor even the main one. One conclusion, according to Levine, is that “household membership, not clan identity, provided the key to understanding rights to territory and property in such communities” (p. 85).

In general, the analysis is difficult because these nomadic communities have undergone many changes: Before communism, pastoralists lived in encampment groups

whose members shared seasonal pastures for grazing their privately owned herds.

Then, during the 1950s, the Chinese implemented a communal re-organization and collectivization of herds. In the early 1980s, members of a household took back a share of the collective’s animals and returned to producing for their

own consumption. They also resume living in encampment groups. In the late 1990s, the Chinese government privatized grazing lands and granted subsidies for the construction of durable houses and the fencing of plots, which altered “family relationship, obligation to kin and the make-up of social networks” (p. 89). Drawing on her own research in Serthas (Sichuan) in 1994 and Maqu (Gansu) in 2014, Levine observed three living arrangements:

- Conglomerate families: alternating residence and collaboration between kin who are based on grasslands and those settled in town.

- Conglomerate household: two or more children remain with their parents after they marry, creating a household that can be described as simultaneously extended and joint.

- Alternating residence: because of the lack of pastureland, a couple may have to live alternately in the house of the wife and the husband (it can also describe a collaboration between kins who have remained on the grassland and those who have settled in town).

Levine also highlights the importance of the brother-sister relationship, previously neglected by ethnologists in favor of topics such as marriage, affinity, hierarchy, and descent. Mutual help is generally maintained between brothers and sisters even if they are married in different households.

In “Relations as Potential: Pragmatism and Flexibility in Tibetan Kinship,” Fjeld also observes transformative changes in household composition and gender roles and relations, as well as in land-tenure systems, political regulations, and state-society interactions. Her research is based in the village of Sharlung in Tsang. The situation in Sharlung, however, is different from that of the societies described by Levine, who are obliged to invent new systems of kinship and social life depending on contextual changes. In Sharlung, the range of kinship possibilities is so wide that there is always one that will fit changing societal circumstances. Preference is given to fraternal polyandry. But if there is only one son in a family, people would choose a monogam relationship, and if there are only daughters, the family would bring a son-in-law (t. *mag pa*) into the household. And in the case of a couple being infertile, a sister (sororal polygyny) or even a brother of the husband (polygynandry, two brothers marrying two sisters) is added. Even bigenerational marriages are accepted in Sharlung.

Jonathan Samuels points out that while in many western countries, the Church has played a considerable role in defining incest and imposing rules of marriage, regulations on matrimony seemed to be more a matter of local customs in Tibet. He cites an apt reflection by Sangye Gyatso, which also serves as my conclusion: “Buddhism can offer no guidance regarding correct practice in this sphere, and specifically with regard to what constitute incest, it is to other tradition that one must turn” (p. 40).

*Patrick Kaplanian is an independent researcher working on the ethnology of Ladakh since 1975.*