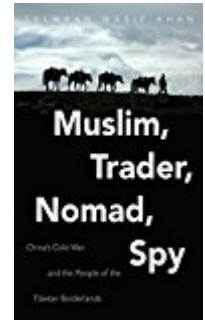


**Sulmaan Wasif Khan.** *Muslim, Trader, Nomad, Spy: China's Cold War and the People of the Tibetan Borderlands.* The New Cold War History Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 216 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2110-4.



**Reviewed by** A. Tom Grunfeld

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

For centuries, Tibet and China have interacted with each other on multiple levels (military, diplomatic, trade, religious, etc.), but the nature and substance of these relationships have been highly contentious. From 1913 to 1950, Tibet had de facto, but not de jure, independence. In 1951, Tibet was incorporated into the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC), radically transforming that relationship. From 1951 to 1959, China's policy toward central Tibet (what is today the Tibet Autonomous Region) was one of largely maintaining traditional Tibetan society intact, despite revolutionary upheavals throughout China at that time.

While the policies in central Tibet were benign, this was not true in the Tibetan-inhabited regions beyond the areas controlled by the government in Lhasa where approximately half of the PRC's Tibetan population lives. In eastern Tibet (Kham), radical policies designed to transform society led to a revolt against Chinese rule beginning in 1956 and spreading westward, culminating in Lhasa in March 1959. During this revolt,

there was a mass flight into exile of the Dalai Lama and some thirty thousand to fifty thousand of his countrymen southward to India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The March 1959 rebellion led to a crack-down in central Tibet. It is the subsequent events of 1959-62 that are the focus of Sulmann Wasif Khan's study, which is based on a 2012 dissertation at Yale University under the guidance of John Lewis Gaddis.

These tumultuous events led to international condemnation of China and severely complicated relations with Nepal and, especially, India at a time when these two giant neighbors were engaged in forging a new type of relationship among the recently decolonized nations: *Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai* (India and China are brothers). The deterioration of Sino-Indian relations reached its nadir in a 1962 border war where Indian troops were easily overcome.

Khan argues, quite rightly in my opinion, that previous histories of Sino-Tibetan relations have been too state-centric, viewing this history from

the top down. His remedy is this study, which is based on the activities of non-state actors (thus the title) who, he claims, had a sizeable impact on the foreign policy of China. This is, he writes, “the first attempt to tell the story from the ground up: that is, to track the movements of actors in the disputed regions and the impact of the movements on the policy of faraway capitals” (pp. 157-158n4). Khan’s thesis is that in the early years of the PRC, authorities came to realize that the central government had little control over the borderlands with Nepal and India. This realization led to two outcomes, according to Khan: one was the creation of an “empire-lite” regime (more on his use of terms later) and the other a significant shift in the PRC’s foreign policies (p. 2).

He suggests that his challenge to the previous state-centric histories will allow a better understanding of Chinese foreign policy during the Cold War. He promises to do this by focusing on the peoples of this border region, a group he refers to as the “fourth world—that stateless realm of nomadic tribes and hamlets strung along the peaks” (p. 2). This book, he contends, “is the first to explore the nature and transformations of the PRC as an empire.... It offers anthropologists a case study in the problems of state formation and transnational movements.... It offers geographers a close look at attempts to draw boundaries in the Himalayas. It illustrates the difficulties of counterinsurgency in a mountainous, cosmopolitan realm” (p. 6).

This is a very tall order for a book with a mere 136 pages of which 37 are devoted to a historical summary based, almost exclusively, on secondary sources. Of necessity, such a brief historical introduction can only gloss over important events and analysis and fails to give general readers a good grounding of this history. Specialists will find nothing new in this section.

The years 1959-62 were indeed significant to China. Its seemingly close alliance with the Soviet Union ruptured as did its equally seemingly close

alliance to India. Moreover, it was a time when the ability of the Chinese Communist Party to maintain its rule was being tested as they managed their way through the Great Leap Forward, which resulted in the premature deaths of tens of millions.

Khan’s most important contribution was his access to Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives between 2006 and 2012. A 2013 revisit found the documents had been reclassified. Few scholars have had this opportunity, and his accounts about the activities of the nomads, traders, and spies along these borders is a fascinating and valuable addition to our understanding of this history. This is the strength of this book.

Tibet’s southern borders have historically been open to Indians, Nepalis, Kashmiris, and other Asians who came as traders and pilgrims, although it remained closed to Westerners. The incorporation of Tibet into the PRC did not change that situation, until the Lhasa revolt in 1959. Khan introduces us to intriguing accounts of traders, small-scale spies, and low-level skullduggery in the region. This is the heart of Khan’s book, the appealing tales of the activities of ordinary people and how these events changed their lives. These stories add depth to the historical understanding of this time, but they do not alter the overall history as we know it.

Two chapters are devoted to activities along the Nepali and Indian borders. The limiting of access to Tibet changed historical patterns of commerce and pilgrimage and had an immediate effect on Tibet in that it suffered from food scarcity, not due to the Great Leap Forward, as one would assume, but, according to Khan, due to the end of food imports from India.

The difficulty in the book comes when Khan makes claims for what his findings demonstrate concerning policies enacted by the authorities in Beijing. By isolating this region from the larger historical context of these years, Khan overstates the importance of the events he is depicting. All of

China's borders (with fourteen states) were, in China's estimation, undefined and several were not under Beijing's total control. One of the new government's major tasks was to negotiate new border agreements and demarcations with all of its neighbors. Moreover, China's military clashed not only with India but with the Soviet Union and Vietnam as well. Khan mentions none of this, giving the impression that the Indo-Nepali border was a unique factor in the decision making in Beijing.

Some of Khan's contentions are curious. For example, he sees the PRC as not "fully sovereign" because its southern borders were porous (p. 83). The inability to totally control borders is hardly unique. The nations of the European Union are perhaps the most immediate example of porous borders where sovereignty is not contested.

On the question of statehood, Khan argues that "decisions in Lhasa had little impact in Kham" and that this is the "clearest evidence that Tibet was not a state at all" (p. 39). He, however, contends that his "goal is not to get into the endless—and rather dull—debate about the legal status of Tibet" (p. 146n5). In fact, Lhasa authorities had little ability to rule over the areas outside central Tibet for hundreds of years and their inability to do so does not diminish its status as a state. It is generally accepted among historians that the authorities in Lhasa ruled over central Tibet and it was indeed a *de facto* state with a government, military, currency, international relations, etc.

Khan also neglects the global context of the PRC in the first dozen years of its existence. Unmentioned is the international economic and diplomatic blockade led by the United States, the Korean War, or the series of Central Intelligence Agency operations along a huge stretch of China's borders from Tibet to Burma to Laos to the islands between the mainland and Taiwan meant to destabilize the government in Beijing. Beijing's policymakers made decisions based on the cir-

cumstances of all these events, not any one in isolation. So Khan's claim that "the frontier and its people" were "fundamental ... to PRC grand strategy" is not convincing, and he provides no evidence to back up the claim (p. 88).

As mentioned above, the Sino-Tibetan relationship is highly contentious and Khan insists on using language that can only fuel this contention. In this vein, he says, the establishment of the PRC was a "reemergence of a Chinese empire" (p. 142n35). He also describes the policies of the 1950s as "empire-lite." He goes on to state that after the 1959 insurrection, "the PRC shifted from empire-lite to a harder, heavier imperial formation" (p. 2). In addition, "empire [in Tibet] was perpetuated between 1959 and 1962 with the U.N., third world civil society, and first world empires all working towards that perpetration" (pp. 41-42). Furthermore, Khan explains that he uses the "terms 'empire' and 'imperialism' in this book neutrally, free of any moral charge" (p. 3). I am not sure that is possible; his reference to Tibetans who work with the Chinese as "collaborators" brings into question his neutrality (p. 10).

This is a good read, full of fascinating tales and an important contribution to our knowledge of this region and a corrective to the state-centric histories to date. It is also possible that the non-state actors of the border region ("fourth world") might have influenced policy in Beijing to a discernable degree, but, unfortunately, those claims remain unproven.

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