

[Hans Steinmüller](#)

Comments to 'seeking like borders: convergence zone as a post-Zomian model' by Jinba Tenzin

Article (Accepted version)

Original citation:

Steinmüller, Hans (2017) *Comments to 'seeking like borders: convergence zone as a post-Zomian model' by Jinba Tenzin*. [Current Anthropology](#), 58 (5). pp. 568-569. ISSN 0011-3204

DOI: [10.1086/693731](https://doi.org/10.1086/693731)

© 2017 [The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68592/>

Available in LSE Research Online: October 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

There are a number of concepts available that aim to describe the borderlands in the West and South-west of China's heartland. Fei Xiaotong spoke of the 'Tibet-Yi Corridor' and emphasised the historical and cultural connections created in these borderlands. Developing this notion further, Wang Mingming labels the region an 'intermediary zone' between the 'inner circle' of the Chinese heartland and the 'outer circles' of foreign lands. And Wang Mingke uses the notion of 'the Chinese periphery' (*huaxia bianyuan*) to research the history of Han Chinese expansion westwards. What is common to these concepts is the tendency to look at the histories and cultures of the borderlands from the perspective of the centre. Even the concepts themselves express a centrist view, that puts the region in question in a position peripheral to those centres. In many senses – political, economic, cultural - those regions certainly were peripheral to the centres of imperial expansion in the past, and they remain peripheral to the centres of the People's Republic of China today, its government and its megacities. But if academic observers simply reproduce the perspectives of such centres, the everyday social worlds of this region will never appear in their particularity, but rather as lesser fusions and replicas. Such are the risks in common discourses of 'Tibetanization' and 'Sinicization', which over-emphasise the force and direction of processes of assimilation and hybridization, as if everything could be explained only in terms of 'Tibet' and 'China'.

Borrowing the concept of 'convergence' from the natural sciences, Tenzin Jinba proposes to look at the practical and pragmatic interactions that take place in such a border region. Unlike the concepts just cited, Jinba's focus is decidedly not on the history of Chinese and Tibetan expansion, but on the present relations of the Gyalrongwa (who are registered as 'Tibetans' in the PRC) and the Qiangzu in Sichuan province. While both groups share a complicated and interlocked history, shifting between Tibetan, Qiang, Chinese, and Gyalrong identities, they forcefully assert their Qiang and Gyalrongwa/Tibetan identities, and they have done so in particular since the 2008 unrest. The contrasts they draw between themselves and other groups are essential to the assertion of their particular ethnic identity: both groups blame each other, insult each other, deny any cultural borrowing, and yet sometimes also share things with each other. Jinba describes their everyday politics of resistance, and in particular the use of strategic essentialisms, or in his words, 'strategic marginality' and 'dissimilation through analogy'.

The concept of the 'convergence zone' is meant to emphasise both the hybridity of the border, and the particular 'innovations, initiatives, and concerns' of locals in this zone. Jinba acknowledges how notions of hybridity and creolization, in particular in postcolonial discourses, share many similarities with his emphasis on constant transcultural negotiation, the emphasis on shared histories, and the celebration of

plurality. But he ultimately rejects those concepts, because in his view, they reproduce center-periphery relations, privileging the centre as a reference point, and neglecting different layers of centre-periphery relations. What Jinba's brief discussion misses is a central point that authors such as Bhabha and Prakash have frequently made, namely that the 'centre' (be it 'the West', 'Europe', or some other entity) is, and always has been, hybrid too.

In fact, though it is acknowledged that local identities are hybrid and that various centres are available, most of the ethnographic examples of identity dynamics described in the article are 'strategic essentialisms', the assertion of supposedly 'pure' identities of Qiang, Tibetan, and Gyalrong. The contrast drawn briefly with Scott's everyday forms of resistance and Spivak's strategic essentialism seems to not do justice to the complexity of their arguments; the main emphasis of Scott's argument on the weapons of the weak was that they are more than just 'coping mechanisms'.

The weakest point of the article, however, is the reference to Willem van Schendel and James Scott's concept of Zomia. As I read Jinba, he aims to correct Scott's focus on escape and flight, wanting instead to focus on the constant engagements across border zones. Yet only half of the features of 'Zomia' – defined as stateless and characterized by great cultural and linguistic diversity – apply to the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. The Sino-Tibetan border has long been governed by states, and many of its mountains have been objects of worship for the surrounding Tibetan and Chinese populations – a feature strikingly absent from the 'Zomia' debates. If the mountains of Zomia are in these senses quite different from the Sino-Tibetan border, perhaps the implication of Jinba's argument is the need for us to reconceptualise 'Zomia' as a 'convergence zone'. But even if we accept that this might help us appreciate the status of highland communities as 'distinct local centers' and better grasp 'their tactics of engaging with external powers', the specificity of the 'convergence zone' remains slightly opaque. And it is even further generalised in the conclusion, where it is argued that just about every geographical border or social margin could be reconceptualised as a 'convergence zone'.

It appears that the 'convergence zone' implies a particular perspective on borderlands and marginality, foregrounding continuous interaction and multiple centres. Convergence zones generate their own centres under local conditions of remoteness, resourcefulness and dominance from the more distant centres. Historically the more distant centres' dominance over and dependence on the peripheral centres as mediators waxes and wanes or changes its form in other ways. But the geographical, social, and cultural differences between the Sino-Tibetan border, and other borders and margins surely also imply different politics and different strategies. It has been often noted that borders and margins can be places of creativity, and that seems to be

also the main thrust of Jinba's argument. But the kinds of creativity that appear in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands of Sichuan, in Hongkong, in Zomia, or in any 'subculture', take different historical forms and shapes, and perhaps these differences are elided if we describe them all as 'convergence zones'.