



**Emily T. Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development***

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. 344 pages. 24 Illustrations, 19 halftones, 3 maps, 2 tables. Hardcover, \$75.00; paperback, \$26.95; kindle, \$21.97. ISBN-10: 0-8014-5155-8/ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-5155-3 (hardcover); ISBN-10: 0-8014-7832-4/ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-7832-1 (paperback).

IN HER MASTERFUL new book, *Taming Tibet*, Emily Yeh discusses the “gift” of development in modern Lhasa in a critical fashion, providing an excellent and informative examination of Chinese development projects over the last sixty plus years. She argues that different development projects serve to naturalize the continued incorporation of the Tibetan Autonomous Region within the People’s Republic of China. Her discussion deploys Maussian perspectives of gifts as both present and poison to understand how the state views its development programs, and also how the beneficiaries of these programs cannot refuse the gift and are thus drawn into closer (and sometimes unwanted) relations with the state in the process.

Development provides an excellent point of entry for the study of the Chinese state’s relations with Tibetan populations, because “[s]ince the 1980s and particularly after the deepening of market reforms after 1992, the Chinese state has staked the legitimization of its sovereignty over Tibet on Tibetan gratitude for the gift of development” (231). The official discourse about China’s minority nationalities in general, and Tibet in particular, has been that they are less developed than their big brothers, the majority Han ethnic group, and in need of modernization. The gift of modernization, once given, should then lead to feelings of gratitude in the other direction.

The state tries to ensure that modernization is best achieved through massive state-subsidized projects. Over the last sixty years, however, many of these projects have focused primarily on infrastructural development: roads, home-building, running water projects, and projects aimed first at conquering and later at conserving

nature. Spending on education and healthcare, however, has failed to keep pace. In fact, government spending on infrastructure has outpaced educational and medical spending in Tibetan areas four to one (TUTTLE 2010). Yeh wades into this tense social context and ultimately helps the reader make sense of the complex sets of ideas and ideals involved in the creation of a modern, urban, Chinese (nationally) capital for the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Emily Yeh begins her book with an introduction that provides a theoretical and cultural background to her project, pointing out that western China more generally, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region specifically, constitute a “zone of exception,” wherein different rules are applied to the people and governance of this region than are applied in the rest of China. China’s ethnically diverse western regions are not China’s only zone of exception (Special Economic Zones like Macau and Hong Kong come to mind), but it is certainly the most politically sensitive. Disagreement with state policies is treated as splittism, and punishments for protests are far more draconian than in other parts of China. This treatment is legitimized through discourses of backwardness and ethnicity and then implemented through an economy reliant on heavy state subsidization and employing a different set of legal practices.

After the introduction, Yeh takes the reader on a three-part journey, each part aimed at a different period of Tibetan development in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and each named for the primary material that marks the focal phase of development: soil, plastic, and concrete. The three major sections and their various foci hang well together and provide a compelling story both thematically and historically of development in the area. Vignettes drawn from the author’s decade of fieldwork in Lhasa are interspersed among the more analytical chapters. Signs on the street, art installations, and conversations with Lhasa residents all help to provide the reader with insights into Lhasa as experienced in the twenty-first century.

The first part, entitled “Soil,” examines in a single chapter the 1950s institution of state farms, and how the Chinese government sought to develop Tibet in the early period through mastery of the environment by recruiting women to their state farms. She also points out that Tibetans who participated in those early state farms, though subjected to insults and culturally debased work like carrying night soil, almost uniformly have much better memories of this period than those who were forced onto peoples’ communes.

Part II, “Plastic,” picks up the narrative in the 1990s to examine the ways in which Lhasa’s peri-urban landscape has become dotted with plastic greenhouses, as Han migrant workers have come to Tibet in droves under the freshly created neoliberal system to take up vegetable farming. Chapter 3, “Vectors of Development: Migrants and the Making of ‘Little Sichuan,’” examines how primarily Sichuanese migrants have been able to exploit these neoliberal policies to become the primary vegetable farmers in Lhasa. Initially these migrants were viewed as “vectors of development” whose presence would spread “scientific agriculture” to local peasant farmers. The end result, however, was an influx of migrant workers renting land from locals and marginalizing Tibetans out of the market. These Tibetans now live on an economy of rents. This chapter also introduces an important discussion of

*suzhi*, which rightly draws on ANAGNOST'S (2004) excellent study on the subject. She portrays it as a strictly geographical term such that bigger cities have more *suzhi*, and lower cities have less. Migrants who go to urban centers are thought to gain *suzhi*. But Lhasa, as a small city, provides benefits solely with pecuniary gain.

Yeh then examines Tibetan responses to their own marginalization in chapter 4, the “Micropolitics of Marginalization.” She argues that Tibetan non-participation in vegetable farming is overdetermined (see WILLIAMS 1974, 124)—the result of a far more complex set of factors than local explanations of an unchanging culture allow. She shows how Tibetans have trouble breaking into the vegetable market as it first requires start-up capital and market networks of the sort that many Tibetans lack, since the vegetable sellers are also overwhelmingly Han. Tibetan cultural predispositions relating to work and perceptions of cleanliness also further affect Tibetans’ decisions and Han Chinese perceptions of this phenomenon of marginalization.

The economic marginalization and the choices Tibetans make that reinforce it are then the subject of chapter 5, entitled “Indolence and the Cultural Politics of Development,” which closes out the section on plastic by examining how the trope of Tibetan indolence is reproduced by Tibetans. For Tibetans in Lhasa and its environs, she claims, laziness can simultaneously be a form of anti-nostalgia against the hours of meaningless work that characterized the Maoist period, indicative of fundamentally different cultural systems, a critique of the modern system wherein young Tibetans go to school and are still unable to compete with Han migrants for employment, or a critique of urban life whereby it ruins people who then become unwilling to return to the countryside. Spoiling is also an associated ecological problem, as many Tibetans believe that modern chemical fertilizers, though discursively aligned with scientific agricultural practices, spoil the land. In both cases, the ambivalence of development mirrors the ambivalence of the gift: both present and poison.

The third and final part—“Concrete”—dedicates two chapters to the rapid urbanization of Tibet in the form of its favored material: concrete. Chapter 6, “‘Build a Civilized City’: Making Lhasa Urban,” examines the process of “accumulation by dispossession,” (197) whereby the state took land from farmers and used it to build new apartment buildings. In particular she discusses the valorization of all things urban in China’s development of the region, and that the government not only has the right to plan such issues, but also actively determine the spaces in which people should live. In return, people are expected to “perform gratitude.” Failure to adequately perform gratitude is not merely dissatisfaction, but a rejection of the state’s territorial sovereignty, an unforgivable act of splittism.

Chapter 7, “Engineering Indebtedness and Image: Comfortable Housing and the New Socialist Countryside,” closes the book on a very high note through providing a fascinating examination of the state’s practice of “giving” comfortable new houses to people in Tibet. In this chapter, Yeh returns to the Maussian theory of the gift. Although conceived as a gift freely given, the house provided (in part) by the state draws Tibetans into a more complex set of interactions involving expectations of gratitude for the gift, which should take the form of loyalty and severing ties with more traditional leadership. The “gift” is also expected to incorporate Tibetans into China’s consumption-based market economy through their indebted-

ness to banks. The gift of development more generally, then, serves to incorporate Tibet within the state's boundaries through both the fiscal and moral indebtedness of its people, a cause of great consternation to residents.

To support her analysis, chapter 8 provides the stories of differing implementations of the comfortable housing project in four different villages—mini-case studies illustrating how this project was implemented differently in different villages. For some villages, it was only the houses along the roads that were rebuilt. In others, they were encouraged to build only within their means. In still others, only some families received subsidies but all were asked to rebuild. In general, the state provided subsidies amounting to approximately 30 percent of the houses. The remaining money must be raised through a combination of personal savings, bank loans (often interest free), and private loans. Even families with the means to repay their loans express concern over this regime of debt that characterizes life in Tibet.

In an afterword, Yeh emphasizes the expectations of loyalty that accompany the gift of development through showing how the gift can also be (and has been) taken away in certain instances. In response to the unrest of 2008, and again after the recent rash of self-immolations in Eastern Tibet, families of protestors have lost access to loan programs and higher education. The villages from which these protestors hail, meanwhile, have lost access to government-funded projects. It underlies how this gift is both present and poison and a form of Foucauldian biopower; the state is the only body with power over life and even death.

Ultimately, Emily Yeh provides an excellent description of post-liberation development in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in ways that find applicability more generally in western China. Her discussion throws into sharp relief the disconnect between Han Chinese who do not understand Tibetan frustrations (seeing all the “gifts” Tibetan have been given) and Tibetans who want to take the gift, but also want to maintain a variety of traditional practices: the opposite of what the state expects to receive in return for their gift.

Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that this is an account of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and more specifically urban and peri-urban Lhasa. Yeh frequently uses the name Tibet, although the scope of the study is not the altogether larger cultural Tibet (which includes parts of western China's Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan Provinces). Outside of Lhasa, one might find quite similar phenomena, the result of significantly different processes.

In Qinghai Province's capital city Xining, for example, conceptions of *suzhi* are not so ethnocentric or geographically unidirectional as Yeh suggests for urban Lhasa. I have, for example, heard Tibetans in Xining complain of migrant workers (regardless of ethnicity) lacking *suzhi*. In the newly rebuilt Jiegu town, the capital of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (also Qinghai Province), many Tibetans also live on an economy of rents, but this is less a consequence of leasing out land—although this has also been done—than it is a result of a combination of policies that require farmers to leave their fields fallow and the explosion of the caterpillar fungus trade (see GRUSCHKE 2012). These are a few of the factors that have provided many families with the surplus capital to build extra spaces for rent during the region's reconstruction after a devastating earthquake leveled the town

in 2010. This, in combination with an influx of migrants from a variety of regional and ethnic backgrounds, makes being a landlord seem an economically more efficient option than Yeh describes for urban Lhasa.

Such caveats do not, however, deter from the overall quality of the Yeh's work, which I heartily endorse to those who wish to understand the work of state development projects in western China. Though perhaps too advanced and difficult a read for undergraduate classes, it will be of use to scholars from a variety of fields including ethnicity in China, development studies, and geography, and is also a welcome addition to the Tibetological field.

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