

Andrew Grant, *The Concrete Plateau: Urban Tibetans and the Chinese Civilizing Machine*. (Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University) Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. 2022. 222 pp., 16 b&w illustrations, hardback \$36.95, ISBN: 9781501764097

In the rhetoric of the Chinese state, ethnic minorities are often represented in terms of folkloric or rural identities. Tibetans, for instance, are depicted by the state media wearing their colourful dresses and jewellery, drinking milk tea and herding yaks. In this book, Andrew Grant takes us to Xining, one of the many mid-sized cities in China's interior – or what he calls 'the Western periphery of China' – to narrate stories of urban Tibetans whose lives are very different from that cliché. This group makes up roughly 30 per cent of Xining's population. Based on ethnographic data collected between 2013 and 2017 during around 17 months of primary research, the book complements the numerous studies on urban space-making along China's eastern coast by analysing urbanisation in a multi-ethnic city. It discusses the unfolding of Tibetan modernity through everyday place-making in seemingly Hanicising settings, as encountered in other borderland cities of Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Xinjiang or Tibet. By accompanying urban Tibetans through different public and private spaces, we learn how they fashion and negotiate their urban identities and Tibetan regional modernity.

Chapter 1 explicitly addresses the rural – urban linkages in urban Tibetans' lives by outlining economic dependencies and migratory movements, but the idea of connected worlds on the 'concrete plateau' that has emerged from recent infrastructure developments permeates all chapters. Cities are attractive as centres of economic exchange for Tibetan entrepreneurs, as locations that offer higher education and which provide convenient dwelling where one can spend winter in heated apartments as opposed to unheated rural houses. Far from reproducing stereotypes about Tibetans, the analysis here emphasises how urbanisation presents opportunities for individual and collective place-making. This is reflected in Chapter 2 in the concept of 'chronotopes of pacification', which refers to the interplay of past and present stories about urban places demonstrated through different approaches to the city. Tibetans often use the name 'Ziling' for Xining, which stresses the local history of this place as a religious, commercial and urban centre. This 'wild history', in the words of one informant, is complemented by an official history based on symbolic infrastructures such as the massive elm trees on West Avenue or Qingtang City Historic Ruins Park, which invoke historical connections between Xining and the rest of China.

At the heart of Grant's analysis is an inquiry into how Tibetans make a home for themselves within 'the Chinese civilizing machine'. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the author defines this 'machine' as a state-led and Sinocentric process of urbanisation that transforms urban places into economically developed, eco-aesthetically beautiful and ethnically assimilated environments. Xining's eastern districts, largely inhabited by Tibetans and Muslims, are often perceived as 'dirty' and 'criminal' by Han and Tibetans alike – a factor that influences interethnic encounters. The objective of the civilising mission to transform uncivilised parts and inhabitants of the city is, however, engaged critically by Tibetans who fear that urban lifestyles will pollute their Buddhist morals.

In his approach to the material and social texture of contemporary Xining, Grant elaborates in Chapter 5 his use of the concept of the city as assemblage. Within these rhizomatic urban geographies, Tibetans connect places of relevance to them: they move between markets that sell Tibetan products, restaurants offering Tibetan foods, the homes of relatives, and so on. This urban assemblage provides an endless kaleidoscope of possibilities for each citizen to find their preferred localities for everyday life. It also involves the active creation of Tibetan cultural markers, such as the integration of shrines and wooden decoration in the interior of apartments, or prayer wheels in residential compounds, or of Tibetan restaurants, shops and religious iconography in public spaces.

Grant denominates urban Tibetan place-making as 'subaltern urbanism' that challenges the Sinocentric civilising machine, because '[r]ather than being incompatible with embracing urban possibilities, Tibetans' critiques of the urban are tactical engagements with a massive urban developmental project that Tibetans cannot openly resist without facing potential repression' (p. 150). The author sees subtler forms of politics expressed through the built environment, social values and relations with non-humans. Overall, the book puts forward an optimistic view on ethnic place-making instead of framing urbanisation in borderlands as urbanicide or simply the assimilation of non-Han Chinese citizens. This allows the reader to see Tibetans as actors rather than victims, which is refreshing, but does also push to the background some of the ongoing structural oppression. Tibetans may live a comfortable, modern, urban life within a rhizomatic cityscape, but they are constantly concerned about not drawing too much attention from the state. This self-policing and unvoiced, invisible pressure to act in the right way so as to avoid state scrutiny could have been afforded more consideration.

This study adds a more than necessary perspective on the ways in which urban Tibetans in the early twenty-first century have lived their own culture in a seemingly Han-dominated environment. The focus lies on potentials rather than restrictions within the civilising machine; it is only in the afterword that Grant puts into perspective the significant state-induced changes in China's borderlands since his fieldwork took place. As has happened with Xinjiang's mosques, Tibetan areas also face a politically motivated erasure of religious markers in public spaces. It remains unclear, due to the difficulties in visiting these regions since the outbreak of Covid-19, in what ways the civilising machine has deteriorated entrepreneurial possibilities and identity processes for urban Tibetans in recent years.

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