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Review of *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in Socialist China*, edited by Brox Trine and Ildiko Beller-Hann

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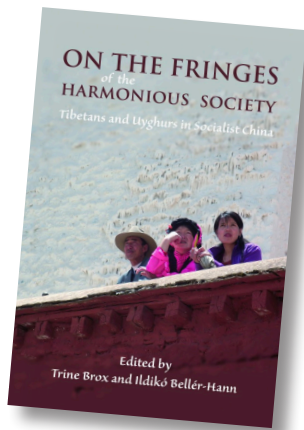
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On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in Socialist China.

Edited by Brox Trine and Ildiko Beller-Hann. Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2014. 352 pages. ISBN 9788776941413.

Reviewed by André-Anne Côté

Today's People's Republic of China colonized a heterogeneous population inhabiting a large, diverse geographical topography established during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Defined as a multiethnic state, China supported ethnic diversity during the last decade, but the recent political mood has shifted to the imperative of unity. The "Harmonious Society" concept was created by President Hu Jintao in 2002 as a vision for socioeconomic development to promote national cohesion by tackling economic inequities between China's western and eastern regions. It was incorporated formally in the Chinese government's 11th five-year plan (2006-2010) in an effort to facilitate social stability by mitigating social costs associated with rapid economic transformations. Indeed, the Central Committee in 2005 translated the concept of a harmonious socialist society into multiple policies focusing on rural development, employment, education, public health,

environmental protection, the legal system and taxation. *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society*, a collection of essays edited by Brox Trine and Ildiko Beller-Hann, provides a rich analysis of the repercussions of these national policies on local actors and how the latter negotiated their application in two regions: the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Tibetan ethno-cultural areas.

Emerging from two academic forums at the University of Copenhagen in 2010 and 2011, the book is the sum of eleven contributions from scholars based in a variety of academic disciplines and variously drawing on discursive, statistical, historical, and ethnographic data. Rather than focusing on the facile state-society dichotomy, the book's novelty lies in its focus on the complexities of everyday resistances that demonstrate that local actors are by no means passive victims of the Chinese state who are deprived of agency. Although the editors did not divide the book into sections, the chapters can be grouped around four themes: socioeconomic development, environmental issues, language practices, and other cultural domains.

The book's first several chapters provide a theoretical framework to the all-encompassing concept of a harmonious society in order to better understand the resulting national policies. For example, in his rich comparison of social inequalities from the mid-1990s to 2010, Andrew Fischer (Chapter Two) reveals that minorities are still hugely underrepresented in state-sector employment due to institutional norms and racial discrimination against non-native Chinese speakers. Fischer splendidly links the roots of social protests with labor exclusion, which caused much frustration and restriction of upward mobility for Tibetans and Uyghurs. In the same

line, Henryk Szadziwski (Chapter Three) reinforces the paucity of ethnic minorities' representation in the political sphere by showing that they cannot access legal recourse in order to participate in decision-making. At the same time, Szadziwski challenges the assumption that aligns Uyghur protests with separatist claims, namely, that demonstrations for better living conditions and greater Chinese state intervention have actually taken place. According to Tracy Zhan's study of the Tibetan carpet sector (Chapter Four), state-led development policies also affect market dynamics. While defining ethnic minorities as backward and incompatible with the logic of capitalism, policymakers are promoting Tibetan cultural knowledge and transforming the carpet sector into a folkloric handicraft industry. This paradoxical situation is mainly due to the rise of Chinese middle-class and Western tourists in quest of exoticism.

Everyday resistances connected to environmental issues is a second major theme in the book. Tashi Nyima (Chapter Five) explores the concept of ecological migration promoted in the "pastures to grasslands" campaign (p. 127), which aims to protect nature but inevitably separates Tibetan nomads from their pastures. Far from being passive recipients, herders in Yushu Tibetan prefecture have actively engaged in peaceful grassroots resistance after their resettlement in new socialist houses. Their resistance has taken the form of, for example, public petitions, negotiations with local elites, assistance from central government and environmental organizations. Elisa Cencetti (Chapter Six) corroborates the fact that local herders managed to manipulate state interventions despite constrained circumstances. Indeed, even if the

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reorganization of the space acted as a technology of population surveillance, Tibetan pastoralists navigated through the system's cracks. They maintained a double residence pattern, sold half of their livestock, rented their socialist house, asked for double subsidies or even returned to their pasturelands. Despite this current antagonism, Emily Yeh's (Chapter Nine) insightful study of China's environmental movement in the 1990s offers another look on Sino-Tibetan relationships. While strengthening Tibetan areas within PRC frontiers, common ecological struggles allowed a genuine collaboration between Tibetan and Chinese activists. This occurred, first, by offering space to Tibetan cultural expression and, then, by validating it through the discourse of science.

The book's third theme focuses on how Tibetans and Uyghurs negotiate state policies with respect to language practices. On one hand, Chris Hann (Chapter Seven) explains that, as a result of massive state-led migrations, Uyghurs felt they were second-class citizens in comparison to wealthy Han newcomers. Xinjiang people could not benefit from the economic boom due their incapacity to compete against Chinese speakers. Although bilingual schools have been set up, Uyghur graduates cannot find a decent job because they are still perceived as inferior citizens and they lack *guanxi*, namely, a good network. On the other hand, Françoise Robin (Chapter Eight)

highlights new paradigms for the protection of the Tibetan language and the construction of an alternative Tibetan-medium education. Robin offers a complete review of these multifarious grassroots reactions such as local associations to promote Tibetan alphabet, literature, and language revival.

Culture and religion is another main theme of the volume. Joanne Smith Finley (Chapter Ten) analyzes intermarriages between Han men and Uyghur women, which simultaneously constitute a sign of assimilation and resistance. By analyzing the controversial TV series *Xinjiang Girls*, in which Uyghur people are depicted as not modern enough to accept intermarriage, the author explores the use of television as a mean to engineer social harmony in the region. However, the unconvincing drama portrayals created waves of resentment among the targeted audience. Also in Xinjiang, Rachel Harris (Chapter Eleven) examines the mutations of *büwi*, known as women's rituals in Islam. Since the Cultural Revolution, PRC policies provoked the incorporation of foreign styles of recitation, an increase in women's contribution in religious practices, and the privatization of religious practices. On an intellectual level, Eric Schluessel (Chapter Twelve) prodigally shows that the Chinese state has not colonized the mind of Uyghur people. By analyzing writings of Uyghur scholars, the author explains how the concept

of a harmonious society failed to gain acceptance because it has been understood as a symbol of submission to the Chinese state.

While the book focuses on grassroots resistances, the authors neglect the apparatus power of the Chinese state. By putting emphasis on agency, they tend to over evaluate the potential of everyday resistances in these highly politicized contexts. Indeed, even if linguistic resistances are delaying the implementation of state policies, settlements of herders seem irreversible. Furthermore, instead of studying the state-society dichotomy, authors replaced it for the opposition between harmony and homogeneity. Therefore, the book lacks alternatives by suggesting that the pursuit of a harmonious society is incompatible with the achievement of a homogenous society. In order to fully recognize the diversity of Chinese culture, only Cencetti's suggestion to integrate *büwi* rituals as part of UNESCO heritage convince us that a plausible third path exists.

Ultimately, the book is intended to inspire collaborative research between Tibet and Xinjiang specialists, with greater participation of local scholars. It enlightens readers to notice parallels between the two regions and prepare the ground for direct comparisons in the future. *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society* offers to all observers concerned about the future of ethnic minorities in China—a future that is closely related to that of the Chinese nation—a nuanced analysis

of ongoing processes involving a multiplicity of forces, rather than a struggle between two antagonist entities.

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