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Review of 'Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development' by Emily T. Yeh

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[The author] confirms that a particular type of modernizing medical discourse shapes how Nepal constructs modern subjects.

Steve Folmer on *Development and Public Health in the Himalaya: Reflections on Healing in Contemporary Nepal*

Chapter 8 queries how the DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment, Short-course) program for TB was implemented at the National Tuberculosis Centre in Kathmandu. How program bureaucracy affected the treatment of patients is viewed through the stories of two men: “both Harka’s and Hari’s experiences of having tuberculosis were directly linked to being categorized with the disease under these programmatic conditions,” of “spatialization,” thus locating the disease rigidly and arbitrarily in time and space, revealing “the limits of this biomedical order” (p. 134).

The conclusions do not simply summarize the main points of the chapters, but offer a synthesis of how medicalization of everyday life is unfolding in Nepal. Harper masterfully joins a variety of ethnographic experiences with a range of theoretical concepts without becoming bogged down by jargon. He fuses applied and theoretical perspectives successfully and confirms that a particular type of modernizing medical discourse shapes how Nepal constructs modern subjects. This book stands as a most significant contribution to medical anthropology in Nepal, one with appeal to many audiences including graduate and undergraduate students and scholars concerned with the globalization of health in local settings such as Nepal.

What Dr. Harper does not cover is the place of Ayurveda in his conceptualization of the discursive

gulf between medical tradition and modernity, a binary that only exists by ignoring Ayurveda. This poses a variety of unexplored issues from the strictly ethnographic, i.e., the use of it among practitioners and the public, to the theoretical. I wonder, for example, about the place of Ayurveda in the pharmaceuticalization of life in the hills of Nepal, where use of Ayurvedic remedies is known to be common but beyond the gaze of most Western practitioners.

That being said, this book is a significant contribution to medical anthropology in Nepal, with appeal to graduate and undergraduate students and scholars concerned with the globalization of health in local settings such as Nepal.

Steve Folmar is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Wake Forest University. His research interests have concentrated on caste, specifically the conditions of Dalits in the hills. He currently is at work on a project, Oppression and Mental Health-Nepal, funded by the National Science Foundation, which investigates the relationship between caste/ethnicity and mental health in Lamjung.

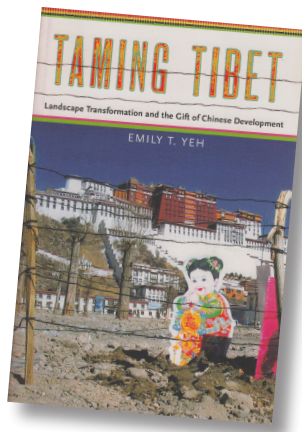
Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development.

Emily T. Yeh. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 344 pages. ISBN 9780801478321.

Reviewed by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

In the past decade Emily Yeh has distinguished herself with articles that combine detailed quantitative data and rich ethnographic description with recondite theoretical engagement and incisive policy analysis. This is her first monograph, and, as with her articles, it musters a formidable collection of information, experience, observation, and analysis. The book is based on Yeh’s ethnographic fieldwork in Lhasa during 2000-2001, but it also draws heavily on more recent research there and across the Tibetan plateau. This sustained experience, language ability in both Lhasa Tibetan and Chinese, knowledge of China generally, and solid grounding in contemporary social theory equip Yeh to carry out a study that is singularly nuanced and insightful.

Yeh divides the book into three categories — soil, plastic, concrete — that correspond to three major landscape transfigurations that have taken place in and around Lhasa since the 1950s. “Soil” refers to the introduction of high-intensity vegetable farming to Tibet through state farms during the 1950-70s; “plastic” alludes to the coverings



for the now-ubiquitous greenhouse agriculture practiced mostly by Han migrants since privatization in the 1990s; “concrete” relates to the most recent drive towards urbanization and housing resettlement heavily promoted since 2000. This spatial restructuring of the urban and peri-urban environment corresponds to a variety of material, economic, political, and social transformations that collectively form the substance of *Taming Tibet*.

By exploring the peculiar idioms of development in Tibet, Yeh also hopes to re-conceptualize what “development” itself means. Key to her interpretation is the notion of development as “gift” (in the Maussian sense)—something bestowed by the state that necessarily entails reciprocal obligation or indebtedness. But rather than viewing development from a strictly economic point of view, Yeh analyzes the gift as a hegemonic “state-effect” (borrowing from Gramsci) that entails inter-determinant factors of culture, politics, identity, and behavior. The cultural politics of development in Tibet thus becomes an ever-recursive process rather than the abstracted imposition of modernity or a dichotomy of state oppression vs. local resistance—two overly-simplistic interpretations that are too often professed in reference to Tibet. Yeh’s process-oriented perspective allows her to investigate how Tibetans are in continual negotiation with the state, the environment, and themselves, rather than confining

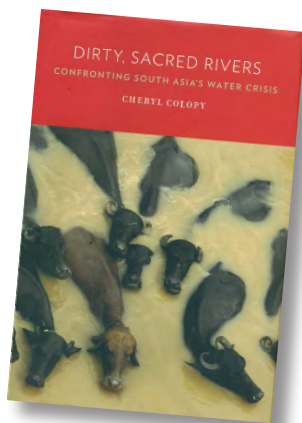
herself to static presentations of culture, landscape, or politics.

On what we might call a situational level Yeh’s description and analysis are penetrating. The discussion of rental economies and the reluctance to commodify community relations (Chapter 4) elucidates how and why Tibetans rent land to Chinese migrants seemingly against their own interests and beliefs. Her investigation of “indolence” and “spoiled” as recursive tropes applied both to and by Tibetans (Chapter 5) transcends the question of validity with a subtle understanding of meanings, tactics, and self-perception. Her explanation of how physical transfigurations influence thought-patterns and how financial debt creates a collective burden (Chapters 6-7) provide keen insight into the contemporary ethos of development in Lhasa today.

Unlike most commentary on Tibet, Yeh’s analysis rests solidly on deep ethnographic understanding of the peculiarities not just in Tibet, but in a specific village or household at a particular time. She is very sensitive to the inconsistency and ambiguity of government policies, the uneven implementation and effects of particular strategies, and, perhaps most importantly, the irregular perceptions of different households and people, even within the same community. Yeh’s talents as a nuanced ethnographer are most evident when she can give full accounts of the same phenomena (e.g. greenhouse vegetable production, or

the “Comfortable Housing Project”) from the often dissonant perspectives of migrant Han farmers, state officials implementing policy, and Tibetan landowners renting-out fields or rebuilding homes. She includes detailed interviews with Han farmers both in Tibet and in their home villages of Sichuan. She takes part in official meetings and even translates for government work groups. Most of her time, and most of the book, is spent with Tibetan households, discussing various aspects of their life, relations with the state, relations to Han, and attitudes towards agriculture and development. Not surprisingly, the different narratives do not always match, and Yeh’s book is largely an attempt to understand and reconcile these dissonant points of view.

Unfortunately, this reconciliation proves to be difficult on the comprehensive level of the book as a whole. This may be appropriate for a work on Tibet, itself characterized by irregularity and paradox, but Yeh includes several layers of information and analysis in the space of one volume without providing a clear formula to hold it all together. The interlocking spheres of metaphor (soil, plastic, concrete), theory (hegemony, gifting, indolence, “quality,” gratitude among others), chronology (1950s, 1980-1990s, 2000s), and space (urban, peri-urban, pan-Tibet, national and international) each spin with their own significance, but they do not always spin together in the most effective way. To provide



one example: the “state memory work” invoked in preparation for the 2001 anniversary celebrations (p. 26) is directly relevant to the discussion of Debord’s “spectacle” and the Tibetan neologism *nampa ringlug*, “appearance-ism,” in a later chapter (p. 253), but each discussion revolves independently of the other without explicit connection. The problem of too much substance is a good one to have in an otherwise discerning book, but it is a problem that will likely keep less ambitious readers from working their way through the entire volume.

Fortunately, Yeh’s writing is so dense with consequence that even a single chapter or interlude contributes to our understanding of Tibet and development. The combination of ethnographic method and spatial analysis provides an excellent model for students of human geography, anthropology, sociology, and development studies. Anyone wishing to understand the micro-politics of state power in China would do well to read this volume cover-to-cover.

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath is visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Lewis and Clark College. He has lived, worked, and studied in Tibet since the mid-1990s. His doctoral research focused on the urban space of Lhasa and now he is pursuing projects involved with tourism, photography, and borderlands.

Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis.

Cheryl Colopy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 400 pages. ISBN 9780199845019.

Reviewed by Sagar Rijal

The Himalayans are the source of three mighty river systems—the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra—that flow through South Asia and provide the lifeblood of freshwater for more than a billion people in the subcontinent. In the last few decades various anthropogenic causes—both localized and related to global climate change—have led to a large-scale crisis of pollution, degradation, and mismanagement of these vital arteries. In *Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis*, Cheryl Colopy investigates the complex strands characterizing the water crisis along the Ganges river and its tributaries. It is a fascinating book, that rare amalgam of an engaging travelogue with cogent environmental policy analysis describing the depths of the water crisis and exploring their myriad causes. The product is a long, satisfying narrative.

The book documents the various manifestations of the water crisis along the 1500 miles trajectory of the Ganges basin. While the predominant Hindu populations of the river basin have traditionally considered the waters of the Ganges as holy and pure, the seeming paradox of its utter befoulment spurs Colopy’s curiosity.

Over a period of seven years in the 2000s, she traverses various locations along the Ganges river basin: from the river’s glacial source at Gangotri in Uttarkhand, India, then its tributaries in Nepal, onto the plains of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India, and finally to the delta of Bangladesh and the magnificent Sundarbans by the Bay of Bengal. Along the way, we encounter locals whose traditional religious and social practices have historically been enmeshed with the Ganges, but who in modern times have succumbed to the temporal demands of more utilitarian and haphazard usage of the the river and its holy water. The larger themes of the variety of human interaction—spiritual, manipulative, exploitative, and destructive—with the watershed come to light. But also present in each stop of the journey are the ensemble cast of heroes, local environmental advocates, social campaigners and non-governmental activists, who are doggedly toiling in the face of intractable crisis and state neglect. One admires people like Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak in New Delhi who has dedicated his whole life to liberate the caste-based sanitation workers from their prescribed job of menially disposing human excrement. Another shining example is Mr. Bel Prasad Shrestha, a former mayor of Dhulikhel in the outskirts of Kathmandu, who was able to use his leadership and resourcefulness to build a local water supply system that remains in use. Many such exemplary yet regular individuals give the reader a dose of hope against