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Published on H-Environment (November, 2022)

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Jared M. Phillips on Jarmila Ptáčková, _Exile from the Grasslands: Tibetan Herders and Chinese Development Projects_

For several years after I left Qinghai Province, I struggled to communicate to my colleagues in academia the difficulties surrounding pastoralist communities on the Tibetan Plateau. It wasn’t as simple as they wanted to think—the “standard” story of cultural extermination did not match everything I saw on the ground throughout the region. Nor did it match the carefully sanitized releases coming from China’s various ministries involved in developing the region. How I wish I had been able to share Jarmila Ptáčková’s excellent _Exiles from the Grasslands_ at that time. Ptáčková’s brief work takes a complicated web of history, culture, dreams of modernity (by both the state and its people) and deftly crafts a discussion that informs readers of any level of the issues facing Tibetan herding communities as China faces the expanding impacts of climate change, global economic chaos, and more.

The first few chapters acquaint—or maybe reacquaint—readers with the history of development in China’s West, centering first on the idea and emergence of the Xibu da Kaifa, translated by Ptáčková as the Great Opening of the West. The author highlights how central planners in Beijing approached development (_fazhan_ and modernization (_xiandaihua_), noting that intervention in the name of modernity or state planning has been the norm for herding communities across the Plateau since at least the 1980s. Ptáčková’s study, however, locates us in this newer era, roughly from 2005 to 2017, and discusses how the Western Opening placed new questions in front of nomadic communities, forcing them into a cultural quandary as they reflect on their pastoralist history and future. With this established, our guide takes us into the problem of sedentarization, which Ptáčková argues is the “most significant” component of the Western Opening (p. 27)—a sentiment I heartily
agree with. As a response to poverty (both real and applied), an increased desire for control, and environmental degradation, the government decided to settle nomads by fiat, creating new areas of urbanization. The reality of these resettlement villages was often far from the promises of modernity given out, however. As resettlement evolved under the guise of ecological concern (*shengtai yimin*), nomadic families, Ptáčková notes, often found ways to take advantage of portions of the resettlement village without totally giving up everything. For those with a background in the Tibetan highlands, be it in Qinghai or elsewhere, all of this is a familiar story, but told with deftness and brevity.

The real meat of the book comes in its final chapters, which gives the reader a detailed discussion of how the myriad policies that make up the development schemes in western China play out on the ground in Zeku County, to the northeast of Yushu Prefecture, the home of the heart of the Sanjiangyuan, or Three Rivers’ Headwaters. Quickly, Ptáčková orientates the reader to the history of the county’s experience with all these programs, and then jumps right in to how, even after a decade of focused effort by the PRC to enact these development and modernization policies on the region, success, however defined, is still just around the bend. Carefully selected case studies from within the Zeku community highlight the extensive field work undergirding this project as well as provide ample foundation for Ptáčková’s conclusions. The discussion of the rGyal bo community serves to highlight this. Ptáčková’s informants in the area discussed all manner of things, from how the acquisition of solar panels to getting new housing was discussed, but often without also informing the nomads they would lose a large portion of their land. To make up for this loss, among other things, nomadic communities turned to an old folk practice: hunting caterpillar fungus, a tough but lucrative alternative to life in the resettlement villages. Collecting the fungus, in regions that have it, has become a major portion of income security despite government efforts to encourage small business development, especially for families that have increasingly been pulled into the orbit of the Western Opening.

Ultimately, the book shows that often the PRC’s initiatives often work in a contradictory manner, making it hard for participants to always grasp everything that is happening and what potential—if any—gain for them and their families there might be. Ptáčková effectively argues that despite the general goal of pulling everyone off the grasslands, most nomadic families, especially if they have moderately large herds, split their attentions and use their resettlement home as a business interest or base while also keeping the “traditional” ways alive, even as commons grazing structures are continually eroded by policies or environmental change. Adding to this has been the gradual integration of the Tibetan agricultural system, thanks to a meat-processing facility in the county, into the economy of eastern China.

While I greatly enjoyed this book, and the refresher on all things Xibu da Kaifa, there are two things I wish had been included. The first is a link-age of these policies to the global conversation around ecological change and human impact surrounding commons use and pastoral lifeways. This study is valuable as it is, to be sure, but by linking these distinctly Tibetan concerns to an international discussion, students, scholars, and activists alike would be able to readily take the lessons of processes like the *shengtaiyimin*, (forced) ecological resettlement, into their own communities as we all ask questions about the future of agricultural work and cultural systems in a changing climate.

The second thing that would strengthen this work would be a detailed discussion of how, as these policies have impacted the communities of Zeku, this evolution fits within the broader cultural changes within modern Tibetan life. Admittedly, this is approach is fraught with political problems, but this would allow academic commentators to
gain a better sense of how policies often debated at conferences or in classrooms impact lived experiences and create and change cultural meaning and form.

Those minor critiques aside, this is an excellent addition to studies of pastoralism, Tibetan communities, and the Chinese state. It's book with enough meat to provide excellent discussion in the undergraduate classroom, enough brevity to be of aid to community advocates and policymakers, and contains—importantly—enough real-world grounding to vault the book beyond the usual tropes surrounding scholarship of the Tibetan world.

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