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The book by Rock and Toman containing meticulous analyses, several graphs, tables, and concrete examples constitutes an interesting contribution to a debate that is far from over.

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Studies about the economic development of China’s western regions have mainly focused on the central government-driven plans carried out since the post-1980 reform period and intensified during the last decade. However, without a much-needed historical assessment of earlier development projects started in the 1950s, the China Western Development (Xibu da kaifa) program launched in 2000 and the most recent One Belt One Road (Yi dai yi lu) initiative promoted last year have often been mistakenly presented as sudden sprouts without seeds.

In her insightful work, Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development, Emily Yeh contributes to filling this gap with an excellent monographic study that explores the topic of development in the circumscribed location of Lhasa City and its environs over the long stretch from the 1950s to the 2000s. Through a detailed account of Chinese development projects started in the 1950s, the China Western Development decade. However, without a much-needed historical assessment of earlier phases of government intervention in Tibet, and more specifically in Lhasa, each characterised by a single development focus, respectively: state farms, greenhouses, and house building. This long narrative is arranged around these three thematic and chronological nuclei, poignantly named soil, plastic, and concrete, which over time have reconfigured Lhasa from originally being the very centre of Tibet to its present status as a geographic, cultural, and economic periphery in need of development.

The first part, “Soil,” deals with the earliest phase of development (1950s-1980s) and the first transformations of the Tibetan landscape through the institution of state farms, with the introduction of new modes of production and the initial cultivation of the land that involved the joint efforts of the Chinese army and the local people. In terms of centre-periphery relations, the first years witnessed the best period in the history of the region: the enthusiasm animating both the Han soldiers and the local Tibetans working in the state farms sustained relatively good ethnic relations that rapidly deteriorated afterwards, following the increasing symbolic and effective conquering of the land.

This part of the book sheds light on many pieces of diversified memories from that time that have been often silenced in the Tibetan exile communities, including, for example, the improvement of gender equality thanks to the inclusion of women in farming work. Extracts from interviews and memories vividly and contextualise the historical reconstruction of this and the next two parts of the book: the constant shifting between concrete micro-examples of biographical experiences and broader political issues offers a complex and complete narrative to the reader, and this alternating macro-micro lens authenticates the accuracy of the historical and political analysis.

In the second part, “Plastic,” the chronological focus is on the 1990s, a critical phase of transition from state economy to market economy at the national level that had a direct impact on development strategies in Tibet. State farms were progressively abandoned, and a growing number of Han migrant workers from Sichuan Province took over the emerging market of greenhouses that spread through the suburban villages around Lhasa.

The author provides an insightful analysis of the interdependence of multiple political, economic, and cultural levels of discourses and practices that, following the introduction of greenhouses, marked Tibetans’ overdetermined condition of marginalisation in vegetable farming and markets (p. 121). For Tibetans, the decollectivisation of agriculture essentially entailed not only nonparticipation but also a progressive exclusion from the new lines of market-led development.

With Han immigrants replacing the previous direct intervention of the state, the issue of Tibetan development became further connected to ethnic tensions, and the naturalisation of the increasing presence of Han workers
turned into the second strategy of territorialisation in Tibet. The author clearly outlines how Tibetans were prevented from taking advantage of the new liberalised market due to the concurrence of Tibetan traditional social relations and cultural norms, the failure of technology transfer from Han workers, and the sharp contrasts between "scientific" agriculture and traditional use of the land. The interiorised Tibetan negative notion of Chinese-style development as systematically spoiling the land with chemical fertilisers and corrupting the people through urbanisation made Tibetans live in a renting economy that gave up increasingly larger portions of the land to Han immigrants to build greenhouses. The author attentively argues that the reproduction of economic and ethnic imbalance in Lhasa was also connected to the failed applicability of the Chinese popular concept of suzhi, the quality of place and people, to the city of Lhasa. In inland China, the increment of suzhi is in fact deliberately associated with urbanisation: moving to the city from the countryside means an automatic rise of suzhi that, in the case of the small and under-populated Lhasa, dramatically failed to meet Han immigrants’ expectations: based on dominant representations of backwardness, dirtiness, and superstition, Tibetans were and still are considered low in suzhi, as is Lhasa, a periphery becoming urban.

In the last part of the book, "Concrete," the focus is on the enforced urbanisation of Lhasa and its environs that in the last decade has been pursued in order to spread development through building construction. The imposition of new living spaces that affects family relations and traditions of the domestic space is one of the consequences of the state’s intrusive and pervasive presence in local lives. Once again, the Tibetan failure to "perform gratitude" for this new gift made of concrete is disapproved of, and its acceptance is forcefully imposed.

Constantly shifting policies regulate different programs aimed at restoring old villages, expanding the urban space, relocating people from old houses in the historical centre, and building new ones in the periphery. The author insightfully points out the specific economic dynamics of these housing projects involving both central Lhasa and the neighbouring villages, and defines the sources of investment that sustain them. Although the state provides a substantial contribution towards most of the housing plans, house owners themselves are required to cover part of the funding. Being dependent on both private credit and bank loans, Tibetans’ involuntary participation in the state’s development and urbanisation projects becomes an inescapable condition of indebtedness. The book ends with further reflections on the Maussian theory of the gift, originallyelaborated in the context of "archaic" societies, and its applicability to contemporary state-citizens relations in Tibet.

This work is a notable contribution to the study of the PRC’s long-term development strategies to incorporate peripheral areas within the body of the state and to clearly demarcate its territory in a way that, as the author notes, sinisterly echoes state terror.

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The author of this work, an expert in economic history, takes an interdisciplinary approach to study the non-economic consequences of the developmental process followed by China since 1978. So it does not take into account such matters as the environmental aspects of that growth but is concerned mainly with the social and cultural costs of the model that has predominated throughout the period. The author notes that even the notion of a “price” or cost does not imply any value judgment: every growth process comes with a price tag. The question is one of assessing the price in relation to the confirmed benefits, especially if the price in question involves a burden imposed on a considerable number of people.

The interdisciplinary aspect of this analysis arises from the tripartite nature of the transitions undergone since 1978: from a planned to a market economy; from an agrarian to an industrial society; from a traditional to a civic culture. The author advances two main theses, the first of which is that these three transitions have combined to form a “power-capital institution” (or, in Chinese, quanli ziben zhidu 权力资本制度) made up of an economic structure, a culture, and specific players. This institution manages the transfers from political power to capital and vice-versa; within it the players ensure the maximisation of their profit from the use of labour power by capital; and finally, the overall institution takes the form of specific institutions, norms, values, and discourses. It goes without saying that the relationship between political power and capital has radically changed since 1949, and that the study of the modes of their interconnection has become necessary for understanding the current system in China.

The second thesis that forms the framework of this volume is that this “power-capital institution” has arisen in parallel with a “poverty of rights.” The term applies to civic, economic, social, political, and cultural rights, along with the absence of any space where such rights could be claimed. The nature of the discriminations linked to the poverty of rights has itself developed in tandem with the reform process, and the denial of those rights is the direct cause of both the poverty and the low morale weighing on certain sectors of the population. So the study of the “denials of rights” coming into effect at different stages in the developmental process should have to form an integral part of the history of the process, enabling a comparative approach to it, and influencing in turn its future planning. (Incidentally, it seems to me that one of the most interesting ideas in the work is precisely that the various rights – to property, free expression, social security, etc. – are subjected to denials whose vigour and extent vary according to the stages of any given developmental process).

This volume sets out these two theses in two parts, The Haves followed by The Have-Not. The first is focused on the emergence and development