coal consumption in the 2000-2012 period. The result: in 2012, Chinese CO₂ emissions had to be reassessed at one billion tonnes, or nearly thrice the total French emissions! Nothing too surprising in this discovery, given that an article published in 2012 showed that based on data supplied by local statistics departments, China in 2010 emitted 1.4 billion tonnes of CO₂ more than it was declaring. (3)

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 policy changes during this period, she analyses the interconnections among physical, economic, and social transformations that affected the historical and religious capital of Tibet.

The main argument of the book is that from the beginning, the Chinese state enterprise’s coercive development strategies were conceived as acts of benevolence and that development itself was “offered” to Tibetans as a gift that generates obligation and indebtedness, while bringing with it a high expectation of being reciprocated with gratitude and loyalty.

Based upon historical sources, policymaking analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, Yeh effectively shows how development has been deployed by the Chinese state as both a theoretical principle and an applied strategy aimed at the territorial incorporation of the Tibetan land and its inhabitants. In this sense, the purpose of any Chinese development project carried on since the 1950s ultimately entails a hegemonic discourse that—beyond its merely economic purpose—assumes and in fact demands that Tibetans should appreciate the gift.

The book exposes the consequences of different development projects and outlines the social and economic dynamics involving Tibetans, the state, the land, and Han newcomers over the course of 60 years. The author identifies three 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 vivify 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
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