

Gillian Tan. *Pastures of Change: Contemporary Adaptations and Transformations among Nomadic Pastoralists of Eastern Tibet*.

Dordrecht: Springer, 2018.

ISBN 978-3319765525, 216 pp.

Gillian Tan's *Pastures of Change* is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature that examines ongoing adaptations and transformations in the lives of contemporary nomadic pastoralists in Eastern Tibet. Given her extensive experience in the region and her linguistic facility with both Tibetan and Mandarin, Tan's monograph is well-positioned to add substantively to this literature. The book succeeds in some ways; however, *Pastures of Change* falls short of reaching its full potential. Some of these shortcomings are structural, while others reflect an ethnographic 'thinness' that seems to run counter to Tan's long-term fieldwork experience and knowledge.

Much of Tan's book reads like a dissertation. Each chapter commences with a conscientious, if effortful, review of the relevant academic literatures and then proceeds methodically to the subject at hand. In Chapter 1, for instance, Tan rehearses some well-trodden reviews of pastoralism literature (e.g., Irons 1974; Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980), to give context to the mode of pastoral production practised on the Tibetan Plateau and to argue, as most scholars would readily agree, that Tibetan nomads depend on multiple livelihood strategies and multiple uses of resources. While this summary of core arguments about pastoralism demonstrates Tan's fluency with the literature, at times she is perhaps too willing to draw from far-flung examples in the pastoralism literature, ranging from the Nuer of East Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1940) to the Basseri of Iran (Barth 1961), in order to make selective claims about Tibetan pastoralists. As many of us do, Tan also succumbs too often to rhetorical academic-ese.<sup>1</sup> Consider this example, from page 1: 'The livingness of the pastures provides Tibetan nomadic pastoralists with a phenomenological experience of change, predicated on relations with other inhabitants of

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<sup>1</sup> As Swartz (2018) puts it, recondite, tenebrous prose meant to impress, not communicate <http://www.dsprel.com/can-understand-im-something-wrong/>

the place.' If, more simply, Tan is stating that Tibetan nomads live in relationship within a dynamic environment, one must ask, 'Who doesn't?' Regardless, Tan does not pursue phenomenology as a thread in her argument and never really shares with us how pastures manifest 'livingness', particularly in any local vernacular.

Tan's main framework for understanding contemporary pastoral society in Eastern Tibet is that, 'Change is more fully understood when unhitched from its predication on stability and instead analyzed in terms of relationships' (p. 169). That a structural lens is less useful than a functional one in assessing social change is not a novel conclusion, particularly in relation to mobile pastoralists, who live in highly variable climates and marginal ecologies. Indeed, relationships are a useful lens through which we can view the phases of change experienced by pastoralists in Eastern Tibet over the past 50 years – from collectivisation in the 1960s, to decollectivisation and the enclosure movement beginning in the 1980s; from conservation initiatives like the creation of the Changtang National Preserve (the world's largest conservation area) in the 1990s to the rapid resettlement and urbanisation of nomad households throughout the 2010s. For each of these phases, Tan suggests two kinds of change are possible: *adaptation* (situations where qualitative shifts may occur without altering the functional relationships between variables) and *transformation* (functional relations alter to the extent that qualitative shifts occur in the structure of the ensemble as a whole). Had Tan systematically followed through in applying this framework of adaptation and transformation, a more consistent narrative might have emerged, especially in terms of understanding whether and how Tibetan pastoralists' relationships have either *adapted to* or *been transformed by* successive shifts in governance, property regimes and capital penetration. As it is, this account is uneven, particularly in terms of the units of analysis that Tan chooses to present. While Tan posits 'relationships' as a fundamental axis of her stories, we rarely hear directly from pastoralists, government employees or development workers themselves about these relationships and how they are, or perhaps are not, changing.

For instance, in Chapter 3, Tan briskly outlines fifty years of Chinese policies towards Tibetan pastoralists, from Maoist dogma to market liberalisation. In this chapter, Tan invokes the state as a unitary entity, in contrast to the manifest divergences seen in the

implementation of government grassland policies in different provinces with Tibetan nomad populations after the 1950s. Tan's treatment of these policies stays at the macro-level and sheds little light on the historical experiences of these policies in the communities in which she conducted research. It is important to acknowledge the many challenges involved in doing research in China's Tibet, whether ethnographic, historical or policy-oriented. However, had Tan delved more deeply into localised manifestations of these forces of change, the argument she is making about adaptation or transformation would have been enriched.

Tan then makes a sharp transition into Chapter 4, both in spatial and temporal terms. She argues that international development projects have adopted methodologies that prioritise indicators and targets as measurable products of change, over the expressed needs of local Tibetan communities, just as the policies and practices of the development Chinese state have. In this chapter, Tan closely observes the 'Star Foundation', a pseudonym for one of the three international development organisations that were contracted by USAID to carry out development projects in Tibetan areas of China in the 2000s. International development is a relatively recent – and notably limited – phenomenon in Tibetan areas of China. But in this chapter-length treatment of a small-scale international development project, Tan effectively gives equal analytical weight to the interventions of one foreign organisation and the government's nationwide policies, including the massive bureaucracy it leverages to transform China's rangeland areas and their inhabitants.

Beyond this issue related to analytical scope and objects of comparison, Tan at times ventures into troublesome territory in this chapter with respect to her positionality. In reporting on this development project, Tan does not make her own role, or how she represented herself, clear. She positions herself as a neutral observer ('... in many ways, I was told, the practitioners were similar to government officials'), reporting dialogue as a second-hand narrator, even as her familiarity with project documents and her own photos reveal an intimate engagement with the activities she is critiquing.

Critically, Tan sidesteps critical analysis of the contemporary changes that have been catalysed by religious figures in Eastern Tibet. Specifically, in her study site, a cultural

center engineered by a local Buddhist lama forced ten per cent of the households in this community to move off of their land, placing additional burdens on pastures and other natural resources, and presumably straining local relationships. Left unexamined are questions about the effects of the widespread vegetarianism movement preached by Eastern Tibetan Buddhist leaders, which has prompted further changes in relationships between Tibetans and their animals, community members and outsiders. Though she references Yeh's (2013) insightful work on related topics, Tan misses an opportunity here to explore what Tibetans' *non-participation* in the market economy means in terms of nomadic cultural identity and how this may undermine the long-term viability of pastoralism on the Tibetan Plateau.

Having discussed the development interventions of the Chinese government and international organisations in Chapters 3 and 4, *Pastures of Change* takes a puzzling turn in Chapter 5, looking back to feudalism and the political economy of pastoral areas prior to China's absorption of Tibet. While presenting important information, this chapter disrupts Tan's narrative flow and leaves the reader wishing for grounded examples from a specific community. Instead, this historical diversion is derived from various parts of the eastern Tibetan Plateau and heavily references others' work to support its assertions.

It is only in the penultimate chapter (ch. 7) of the monograph that we settle more comfortably into an ethnographic rhythm, when Tan turns to the topic of *yartsa gunbu* or caterpillar fungus (T. *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*). The richest sections of this book are found in the descriptions of how *yartsa gunbu* is harvested and traded. Tan evocatively shows how the collection and marketing of *bu* is at once a very local, social activity and a part of a cutthroat, global market. A question that Tan raises but does not explore fully in relation to caterpillar fungus is how or whether Tibetans' core values are changing as a function of the pervasive effects of the *yartsa gunbu* economy and the shifts in relationships it entails. After Tsing (2013), Tan recognises that this commodity creates the desire for cash at the expense of the relationships that fuel its creation. Yet, she concludes that the persistence of 'certain kinds of relationships is reinforced even when transformations of other relationships occur' (p. 169). This suggests that Tibetans' 'non-commodifying relationships' are, by dint of Buddhist values and long-lived sociality, resilient when faced with the

disruptions of capitalism. As in other sections of the book, one is left wishing that Tan had more ethnographic material to substantiate such assertions, compelling though they may be.

Despite these critical observations, *Pastures of Change* remains a valuable contribution to the literature on contemporary pastoralism in Eastern Tibet, and should be of broad interest to scholars interested in understanding ongoing patterns of statemaking in China.

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