Channeling Xining: Tibetan place-making in Western China during the era of commodity housing

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Abstract

Through an analysis of Tibetan place-making in China's Xining City, I argue that a focus on *channeling* in place-making provides a way to move beyond typical accounts of resistance and domination in urban spaces. In China's frontier cities, an ethno-territorial institutional framework has resulted in the curtailment of how and where Tibetans and other ethnic minority groups may construct places. Furthermore, a nationwide urbanization project centered around the privatization of commodity housing and resulting in the hanification of the urban environment is producing a hegemonic urbanism that appears to be reducing urban difference. Yet Tibetans in Xining are channeling their place-making efforts to not simply fit in with or fight against urbanization, but to assert their own meanings and rhythms and satisfy their own place-making desires. In doing so they are learning how to navigate urban regulations and sensibilities while creating a rhizomatic network of urban places. The result is a piecemeal approach that has allowed a minority ethnic identity to thrive in the city through the creation of a diffuse but connected urbanism. Channeling highlights the careful path that marginal place-makers must tread as they find their way through territorial regulations and commercialism in the city. This research is based on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with forty-five Xining urbanites.

Keywords: *China, ethnicity, place-making, rhythm, territory*

I. Introduction

In 2007 the streets of Xining City were largely devoid of cars. A taxi could make the drive from the city's west end to its east end in twenty minutes, something that can only be achieved today before dawn. Xining's roads were then bordered with the mid-rise concrete and brick buildings that were the hallmark of late 20th century housing stock across China. Only the earthen

walls of the homes in the city's Muslim-dominated East District disrupted this architectural landscape. Over the past decade, urban redevelopers have razed most of this mid-rise architecture and replaced it with high-rise housing structures. The result has been an erasure of much of the city's former architectural form and the creation of a new visual order. During the second decade of the 21st century, a new wave of visual sensibilities tied to vertical housing developments, shopping spaces, and the trappings of Han Chinese culture have come to dominate Xining, overwhelming other influences in this city located at the eastern end of China's ethnically diverse Qinghai Province. The era of commodity housing and commercial architecture has entered the Tibetan Plateau, bringing new sensibilities and territorial codings to the city. While the urban landscape promotes the hanification, or turning Han, of urban places, I argue that Tibetans are not simply accommodating or resisting an ethnocratic Chinese state. They are active participants in the co-production of urbanism in China's West and are channeling rhizomatic places foundational for Tibetan urban society.

This article intervenes in the growing body of literature concerned with the negotiation between the state and marginal groups in the urban Global South. I argue that the encounter between marginalized migrants and a state-promoted urban hegemony occurs in part through a process of *channeling*. Rather than look at channeling as primarily a tactic of a dominant state for striating space, the focus here is on everyday acts of place-making that sprout continuously with neither coordination nor direct external prompting (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). I use the term *channeling* to examine how marginalized populations appropriate and alter the normative urban environment for their own place-making projects. This channeling is both a feeling out of what can be safely done -- a toeing for a secure way forward amidst a turbid stream -- and a manipulation of dominant place sensibilities. The latter makes it possible for an urban landscape already

structured by ethno-territorial law and dominated by Han Chinese signs and rhythms to serve as a medium for Tibetan ethnic place-making.[1] Despite occupying a sub-altern position in contemporary Chinese society, Tibetans are taking advantage of urban conditions and executing place-making projects that become foci for urban Tibetan communities. The urbanization of western China is unleashing a host of tools for the creation of ethnic minority places in the city; it allows for the building and customizing of homes, private venues for social gathering, and sites for religious structures and activities.

Following a discussion of theory and methodology, the article gives an account of commodity housing in China and its impact on neighborhoods in Xining. Subsequent sections explore how Tibetans are channeling place-making in Xining. First, I show how affective place-making is accomplished through the keeping of animals in the city. Territorial regulation and dominant urban sensibilities restrict the keeping of livestock in Xining, though ethnic minorities in the city continue to keep certain animals that serve as place-making creatures. Second, Tibetans in modern commodity housing are channeling urban signs and rhythms in their housing complexes in order to retain ethnic characteristics while avoiding state attention. I discuss these acts' relative invisibility within, and overlap with, urban ethno-territory. Although Tibetans have been enrolled in the normative environment of private housing, this does not mean that they must be understood as passively assimilating. Finally, religious structures have become foci for urban Tibetan communities. I argue that despite regulations on minority ethnicity religion in Xining City, structures such as prayer wheels are channeled in careful negotiation with territorial restrictions. Though local government destruction of a prayer wheel site did trigger resistance from neighborhood Tibetans, the overall trajectory of religious development in the city has been channeled to secure a place for religious identity in the city.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Places are on-going relational constructions. Economic and social conditions shape places, but people vivify places by finding meaning within them and working to mobilize them for social projects (Pierce et al. 2011). Places facilitate belonging, and whether made through fiat or community collaboration, they tend to carry normative expectations (Sack 1997; Curry 2002). This may cause problems for urban migrant dwellers, as place-making may work to normalize exclusion. The laws of the sedentary have long valued place over mobility; the very conception of place brings to mind particular conceptions of being in place or out of place (Cresswell 2006). Reactionary political projects are often tied to exclusive senses of place that marginalize populations deemed outsiders (Massey 2005). Place-making, however, remains an important resource for vulnerable communities whose worlds are in flux (Escobar 2001; Martin 2003). Physical places allow for interpersonal communication and may provide a social bulwark against economic trauma and environmental disturbance (Smith and Winders 2008; Puleo 2014). Places are not only physical, they can also be affective, evoking a sense of belonging and communal connection that sustains a group over time (Tuan 1991; Basso 1996).

Territories influence place-making. Whether in private or in public, places are made within political territories that proscribe what people may do or say (Delaney 2005). A given municipal territory thus regulates how marginalized groups may engage in place-making. When one ethnic group dominates urban political institutions, discrimination can become institutionalized, even creating an urban ethnocracy that empowers one ethnicity at the expense of others (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003). As Adam Moore (2016) has argued, an institutionally empowered ethnic group may

create territories that are infused with the symbols and practices of their own ethnic group while excluding those of others. Ethno-territories that formally restrict urban expression and exert strong normative cultural pressure can strongly affect disempowered ethnic groups' ability to make places.

Even without the collusion of ethnicity and politico-legal territory, everyday practices including public rituals, religious activities, and other bodily acts can spatialize ethnicity and bring about inter-ethnic conflict (Jones 2007). Anna Secor (2004) has demonstrated that in situations of ethnic and geographic polarization, ethnic identity can be tactically mobilized to avoid hegemonic normativity in the city and to create spaces of belonging for marginalized groups. Such places can be established through conversation and emotional comfort, as well as material structures. Informal use of public space can push the limits of what the state deems acceptable, filling the city with what Asef Bayat (2000) has called the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary," the accretion of unpermitted and unsanctioned infrastructure in which the marginalized assert their presence. Slowly and incrementally, a marginalized group can engage in place-making acts that bolster group identity and make their worlds more livable.

The creation and maintenance of places should not, however, be viewed as locked in a binary of place-making resistance against the domination of a prevailing ethno-territory. While adding nuance to the binary of dominance and resistance, geographers of everyday politics have often continued to reinscribe it. The notion of entanglements of power, wherein dominance and resistance are found to contain one another, has been used to complicate everyday political geographies (Sharp et al. 2002), but the approach consistently begs the location of figurations of dominance and resistance in order to realize the entanglement. Reece Jones (2012) has criticized the predominance of such a binary, highlighting everyday spaces of refusal where the state only

unpredictably, if at all, interferes in people's lives. Jones' account shows a dominance that can be refused when the state's presence is poorly realized. On the other hand, a channeling perspective emphasizes the many instances in which urban dwellers resourcefully make places to maintain the communities and identities that would otherwise be lost through the urbanizing process. It focuses on the co-existence and co-opting of prevailing material and symbolic resources rather than locating resistance or refusal.

Even seemingly hegemonic urban environments can support overlapping places and territories that do not map easily onto one another and need not necessarily be interpreted within the binary of dominance and resistance. Cities can be sites of "illegibility, partial belonging, and disorder" where people can pursue their projects without drawing the state gaze (Das and Poole 2004, 6). Andrea Brighenti (2010a) has drawn attention to how graffiti creates a communicative realm of the visible in which hegemonic and unauthorized symbolic inscriptions co-exist within the urban landscape. His relational understanding of territory sees territories "as heterogeneous as the ensemble of subjects and agents who form [them]" (Brighenti 2010b, 68). As long as they are able to create them, an urban social group's everyday visual practices serve as a communicative media for those within the group. In this way, places and (legal) territories interpenetrate. The rhizomatic conception of place offered in this article suggests how marginalized groups channel their place-making projects within urban contexts of interpenetration such as those that Brighenti describes.

The rise of private property in Chinese cities has laid the groundwork for urban geographies in which the rules of Chinese urban territories interpenetrate with everyday place-making acts in commodity housing districts. Chinese cities are increasingly governed through biopolitical techniques that enroll a newly reconfigured urban population into private middle-class pursuits.

Luigi Tomba (2009, 2014) has argued that community districts, or *shequ*, are key to contemporary China's biopolitical governmentality.[2] Regulations and surveillance in these housing districts aim to foster a Chinese middle-class (Ch. *zhongchan jieceng*) concerned with preserving private property and signaling social status. These pursuits ensure urban stability, promote smooth social development, and, ultimately, contribute to national goals of social harmony and sustained economic growth. Private housing districts are also venues for social interaction and places where urban residents can assert their values and identities at home and within the neighborhood, often through the manipulation of the visual and aural landscape.

Capitalist urbanization can attenuate visual variety in the city, reducing the semiotic diversity of places as developers reformat the urban world (de Certeau 1984; Soja 1989). The routinized temporalities of capitalist cities can lead to a synchronization of everyday rhythm that homogenizes daily routines (Lefebvre 2004; Kärrholm 2009). Meanings and rhythms can also diverge along ethnic lines. While a dominant ethnic group can plunge an entire city into a seasonal rhythm, such as the Chinese New Year or the Anglo-American Christmas, ethnic minority urban residents assert their own signs and rhythms by channeling the semiotic and aural resources available to them. This requires careful modification of place-making practices so that they may both satisfy the desires of the group creating them and avoid offending the sensibilities and laws of the dominant ethno-territorial group. The distributed places of a group can thus create a community across the communicative context of the entire city. People in these places perceive the ethnic intensities towards which they are attuned just as individual bodies are disposed to isolate the microperceptions for which they are attuned (Deleuze 1992).

Contemporary Chinese urbanization policy aims to put 60% of the country's population in cities by 2020 (Chan 2014). The continuing expansion of cities and attraction of new migrants to

them has made place-making an important part of creating a sense of belonging and community in cities across China. Hong Zhu, Junxi Qian, and Lei Feng have shown how large-scale migrations to new urban high-rises leads to new desires for place-based community identities. Guizhou urban dwellers consciously strove to recreate a place-based identity based on their former housing community in their newly re-organized and re-constructed neighborhood (Zhu, Qian, and Feng 2011). In a rich analysis, Zhu and Qian (2015) have also looked at home and place-making in Lhasa, where they find Han migrants attempting to develop meaningful relationships with their high-altitude home and middle-class Lhasa Tibetans negotiating their relationship to these Han migrants. Their adoption of a universal framework of identity politics, however, risks bracketing off the realities of institutional ethno-territory. As Uradyn Bulag (2002) has argued, the urbanization of China's ethnic autonomous administrative cartography implicitly creates unmarked Han ethno-territory and threatens ethnic minority institutions and cultural protections. It is in these circumstances that Tibetans channel places in order to sustain an urban community.

Finally, ethnicity in China adds an important dynamic to urban power relations in part because the Chinese ethnocratic city can quickly morph into an overbearing security state nervous about ethnic minority bodies and places.[3] Emily Yeh (2013) has demonstrated the implications of this state in Lhasa, where public places and religious sites have become subject to repressive measures after the Lhasa protests of 2008 and continuing unrest. Urbanization has also facilitated a sense of ethnic discrimination among Tibetans in Xining during periods of police crackdowns on unregistered ethnic minority migrants following unrest elsewhere in the country (Grant 2017). Clearly, urban geographies can facilitate or become sites of state oppression. Yet as this article will argue, they can also catalyze the creation of urban ethnic minority communities.

For this project, I conducted interviews and ethnographic participant observation of everyday activities over a sixteen-month period in 2013-2014 and conducted one month of follow-up research in 2017. I recorded forty-five semi-structured interviews with Tibetans, Muslim, and Han urban dwellers whose names and identifying information have been changed to protect their identities. I conducted the interviews in Mandarin and Amdo Tibetan and worked with research assistants to help me understand the local Chinese dialect (Ch. *Qinghai hua*), reduce misunderstandings, and assist in transcription. Following Nick Megoran (2006), I used ethnography to grasp everyday concerns in a social context where interviewing providing important but limited and potentially limiting information about Tibetans' urban experience.

Interviews and ethnography included discussions of participants' experiences in Xining City, their thoughts about their neighborhoods and neighbors, and ethnic relations and identity. Study participants included young people working in family businesses or as entrepreneurs whose businesses included restaurants, printing shops, and clothing stores. I also interviewed employees in state offices or as teachers, as well as non-profit workers. Older Tibetans (over forty years of age) more often had secure incomes or pensions related to their relatively secure public-sector employment. Rhys Jones (2012, 806) has identified a persistent problem in theorizations of state encounters that reify states and persons as separate, opposed, entities, as well as more recent efforts to reduce this opposition by showing the "peopled character" of the state. In my research, I found that urban Tibetans, whether they worked in state positions or not, often imagined the local and national governments and their territorial striations as primarily Han Chinese impositions that at times act imperiously towards ethnic minorities.

III. Xining in the Era of Commodity Housing

During the Maoist Era, the Chinese state strongly controlled who lived where and in what sorts of places. Populations of Chinese cities were segregated from the those in the countryside through the housing registration system. Cellular housing and work units called *danwei* were the basis of Chinese cities, while communes and collectives were the organizational units of the rural population. During the post-1978 Reform period and especially since the 1990s, the central government has promoted private house ownership as property developers have competed with weakening socialist land masters for urban territory (Hsing 2006). Over the last several decades, the urban territorial unit has become more salient on the Tibetan Plateau. A number of development programs have promoted the sedentarization of pastoralists and the ownership of homes with modern amenities among Tibetans (Yeh and Robertson 2008; Bauer and Nyima 2010). The rise of the urban territory has accompanied the rise of commodity housing. Chinese cities are today filled with privately purchasable and alienable condominium units that real estate agencies advertise to private buyers based upon their amenities and attractiveness.[4] Li Zhang (2010) has linked commodity housing to Chinese citizens' pursuit of the middle class, drawing connections between upwardly-mobile urbanites and their pursuit of private home paradises. Expressing their personal preferences and desire through their choice of housing location and decoration, Chinese populations pursue social distinction, community, and a sense of home.

The era of commodity housing has reconfigured Chinese urban territory away from the Maoist *danwei* and towards territorially-based *shequ*, or "community districts," which ensure basic social services for urban populations and a territorial basis for social bonds in a rapidly changing society. Luigi Tomba (2014) has argued that *shequ* were designed to reinforce the privatization of China's housing and provide biopolitical mechanisms for the creation of a self-responsible population of high quality citizens that pursues the accumulation of property and remains in

harmony with itself and the state. Over the past several decades, commodity housing has reached Qinghai Province, and Xining has been reterritorialized accordingly. During this period, Tibetans from farming and pastoral areas have migrated to Xining City, where they have purchased commodity housing (Grant 2016).

Throughout China the rise of commodity housing and citizens' aspirations to enter the middle-class have led to anxiety about the future. The arrival of the *shequ* has spelled the end of the *danwei* housing unit and all that accompanied it: a guaranteed home, job, provisions, and pension (Bray 2005). As they enter the city and are enrolled into the urban social project, Tibetans are having to compete in the same neoliberalizing economic and social environment as their Han Chinese peers. While they are facing similar economic and social status anxieties, they also have anxiety over their ethnic otherness. Despite its biopolitical and disciplinary structure, the *shequ* is not, however, a key way of organizing Tibetan community in the city. Instead, Tibetans are living all across Xining and participating in middle-class selectivity about where to live and whether to register their residence.

As of 2014, Xining City's East District, where Muslims and Tibetans live in the highest concentration, was divided into thirty-one community districts, which were in turn divided into smaller grid systems (Ch. *wangge*). In accordance with the biopolitical expectations of the *shequ,* the managers of the grid systems are supposed to keep daily journals of people's feelings and activities within their "fields of duty" (Ch. *renwu tian*) and register the comings and goings of those who enter the grid (East District Government of Xining City 2012). Yet rather than being sites where employees of the local state closely monitor urban bodies, I found that home-owning Tibetans rarely encountered agents of *shequ* government as either disciplinarians or health

providers. What Tibetans mostly wanted was that their housing community remained tidy and secure for their safety and peace of mind.

Participants often described the city as a dangerous place where theft, murder, and child kidnappings occurred. Tibetans who owned apartments were apprehensive about the poorer and less developed areas of the city where crime was imagined to be located. At a new café in Xining's West District, I interviewed Jamtso, a young college educated woman. She had accompanied her family when they moved to Xining from Yushu, a largely pastoral prefecture southwest of Xining. She described the ineffectiveness of the private security in her new housing compound.

> That old codger the guard is always taking breaks, and the surveillance cameras are broken. It is difficult to guard against theft. Thieves can pry the protective bars off of the windows and climb into our buildings up to even the third floor.

Jamsto was currently considering with residents in her building to change their housing unit's private management firm (Ch. *wuye*). Residents such as Jamsto marshalled security forces and technologies to secure places that would exclude people who posed threats to their communities. This phenomenon is in line with the theory that community districts attempt to engineer social harmony and personal responsibility among citizens (Tomba 2009), and it also speaks to the more general success of the promotion of private property and class distinction among urban dwellers in the era of commodity housing.

Community districts are also designed to promote responsibility through the facilitation of community participation. Heberer and Göbel (2011) have criticized the "grassroots" democratic elements of community districts as largely fictive, as the system is organized through cadres and Communist Party members. In one of the housing communities in which I resided, elections were

advertised through large red paper signs detailing the time and location for community district voter registration. I asked my friend, who lived in the same housing community, about the sign. She told me that she had no intention of voting, saying, "they have already selected the candidates and will pick the relative of the party head of the community district." There was a deep cynicism about the new voting systems, and although many older women in my housing community did participate in governance as volunteers who helped take care of one another, Tibetans largely steered clear of state-organized social organization, instead pursuing self-created and privately organized communities.

Many participants chose where to live based on the quality of the housing and whether they had friends or family nearby. One retired teacher had coordinated the purchase of apartments not only for him, but for nine friends. They created a cluster of ten units that they hoped to turn not only into housing but into business offices as well. In more crowded and less affluent districts, such as those in un-redeveloped portions of Xining's East and Central Districts, Tibetans skirted or ignored restrictions that would prevent them from living there without the proper housing permit. While some renters registered for temporary residency permits, most never bothered. One resident from Golok, a pastoral prefecture south of Xining, told me that he only registered for a temporary permit after several years of living in multiple Xining rental units. His sole impetus to do so was a need for the permit to apply for a driver's license. In another circumvention of the rules, informal urban dwellers asked registered friends or relatives to sign up for broadband Internet access in their stead. With low incomes and little family financial assistance, many young renters had little interest in establishing a sense of community within the *shequ*, preferring to do so with their own flat mates or relatives elsewhere in the city. Renters' lives also centered around

their Tibetan-related businesses, such as a cellphone store and printing shop in the Tibetan market (Ch. *xiaoshangpin*), a place that they saw as crucial to Xining's ethnic Tibetan community.

As Xining has entered the era of commodity housing, the city is enrolling increasing numbers of Tibetans into urban lifestyles. The most effective social engineering work of the Chinese city has been Tibetans' own channeling of the possibilities the privatizing city makes available for place-making. They create their community by creating and maintaining Tibetan places across the city and through a selective accepting or ignoring of items in the *shequ* toolkit, rather than being beholden to a narrowly defined *shequ* geographic community. A variety of other place-making means including animals, rhythms, and religious practices can also be found in contemporary Xining, and complement the private pursuits of Xining's Tibetans.

IV. Place-making with Animals

Much of Xining's new housing stock is occupied by recently arrived migrants from the farms and pastures of Qinghai Province. Whether owners or renters of the houses they move into, they are making Xining their new home. Like Han migrants from inland China, Xining's Tibetan residents are embracing the Chinese urban dream. They strive to purchase comfortable housing that will serve as good investments, and they worry about placing their children in the best schools and providing for their families. Many Tibetans also worry about how Xining's housing complexes will affect their ethnic identity. Tibetans with whom I spoke, young and old, regretted that the city seemed to be eroding Tibetan culture. Over tea and oil cakes in his small Xining apartment, Rinchen Lobsang, an older Tibetan ex-cadre and active member of a chief cultural organization for urban Tibetans argued that "urbanization has the goal of assimilation, it is an effective and critical method to eliminate a culture and a nation." During our two-hour long interview, Rinchen

Lobsang repeatedly reminded me that the city was a site where many aspects of Tibetan culture were disallowed or made difficult. He deplored how the city alienated Tibetans from cultural practices including grassland gatherings and activities closely to rural livelihood and folkways, including the keeping of livestock. Animals and their relationships with humans play key roles in the politics of place creation. Who has the right to decide where and what types of animals should be kept and how they should be treated touches upon attitudes about cultural development, control over territorial codification, and the relationship between place and life (Trudeau 2006; Hobson 2007). Though Rinchen Lobsang presented Xining City as a place where ethnic animals practices were eliminated, Tibetans do continue to keep animals in the city.

In Xining and other Northwestern Chinese cities, ethno-religious divisions structure animal geographies: in markets Han pork vendors butcher and sell their cuts in stalls set apart from those offering halal beef and chicken. In private housing complexes, the rules governing what sorts of animals can be present (and to what purpose) juxtapose territorial rules against the desires of different ethnic groups. While it was common during the Maoist period for Han urban dwellers across the country to keep small numbers of livestock such as chickens and pigs within communal spaces, in contemporary commodity housing dogs have replaced these animals as residents become more concerned about maintaining a clean civilized urban environment (Zhang 2010). Pets are placed in the city, while livestock and wild animals are relegated to a rural and ethnicized outside.

For some pastoralist Tibetans, this transition has been difficult. Tibetan writer and director Pema Tseden, in his award-winning 2015 film *Tharlo,* poignantly illustrates the mismatching of these places when a pastoralist named Tharlo carries his weening lamb into a township photo studio. A Tibetan husband and wife are already posing inside for a family portrait against a changing backdrop that shows, in turn, Lhasa's Potala Palace, Beijing's Tian'anmen Square, and

the New York skyline. Dressed in traditional Tibetan gowns for the first images, the photographer and photositters realize that something isn't right in the matching of their costumes with the New York urban backdrop. The couple then decides to change into modern Western clothes for their American photo. But the photo still isn't right. The herder Tharlo then provides his lamb for the wife, who eagerly holds it. The double movement of the prop change feels absurd, but the husband smooths out the contradiction: "It's OK, we used to be herders." Their pastoral past is not neatly divided from the modern, urban present.

Livestock practices can also make Tibetans feel out of place in the urban environment. In *Tharlo* the police eventually investigate the pastoralist clutching his lamb; the protagonist's unrushed actions and wandering eye appear suspicious among the purposeful rhythms of town life. Pema Tseden's short story "Life in Town" explores the friction between Tibetan religious tradition and urban place using wild animals (Virtanen 2008, 253-254). A Tibetan character acting on the counsel of a lama and tantric practitioner carries out the practice of a "life release" (Tib. *tshe thar*) of fish in a city pond. In the city, the action draws not respect but sarcastic laughter. Tittering onlookers know that someone else is destined to scoop out the fish. Embarrassed, the Tibetans rush away from the fountain.

Tshe thar is a powerful place-making tool. It is a meritorious activity in which live animals are freed from captivity or impending slaughter to live out their remaining days unharassed. It occurs as a mass phenomenon, rhythmically set to recurring holy days (Holler 2000, 215). The freed animals wander the land as an inversion of Agamben's (1998) *homines sacri:* unable to be slaughtered (without incurring great karmic penalty) and serving as reminders of the sacrality of all life. Yet such animals are, to the eyes of non-Tibetan urban neighbors and housing authorities, misplaced livestock that hardly have a place in China's residential complexes, where pet dogs are

increasingly popular. I found a *tshe thar* animal in Xining's Tibetan-dominated Chengduo County housing complex. Tied to a tree and fed from a bucket, it brings merit to the entire community. Tibetans I interviewed that lived in majority Han Chinese housing communities rarely saw these animals in their neighborhoods. They were more prominent in Xining's specially-built ethnic neighborhoods, discussed in further detail below.

The existence of multiple animal geographies in the city suggests a way that Tibetans channel their place-making processes. Contemporary urbanism's emphasis on high-rise dwelling and private responsibility curtails what sorts of animals may appear in the city and where they ought to be. Because hegemonic urban regulations and sensibilities threaten Tibetan animal practices in the city, Tibetans channel these practices to fit with urban codes: the sheep is tied so that it does not wander out of the Tibetan housing compound, and the new urbanites in Pema Tseden's story learn that a city fountain is not a place to release fish. While these animals continue to be co-travelers in place creation, their scattered presence points to how Tibetans are learning to channel their place-making across Xining city.

V. Signs and Rhythms

The sights and sounds that dominate Xining's urban environment can be largely identified with Han Chinese culture or capitalist commercialism. They exert a normative pressure on public space and even, to a degree, the interiors of private houses. The result has been a general hanification of Xining's environment. For instance, when Xining's municipal government began to rebuild its downtown to attract tourists in the early 2000s, they chose to resurrect the North Gate

of Ming Dynasty Xining – a garrison town constructed to pacify a diverse imperial borderland. Elsewhere, Xining's upscale housing projects bear the imprint of traditional Chinese gardens, their middle-class developments largely indistinguishable from housing projects in Xi'an or Beijing.

Urban inhabitants continuously encounter advertisements, graffiti, and door decoration in the stairwell landings of their housing complexes. This semi-public, semi-private inner passage is enclosed by walls that act as "surface[s] of inscription for stratified, crisscrossing, and overlapping traces" (Brighenti 2010a, 323). Walls and doors are places where Tibetans channel the hanification of urban space. In Xining's housing communities, nearly every residential door has decoration that signifies the ethnicity of its residents. Door décor is common throughout Han regions of China, where paper strips called *duilian* are placed around doorframes. These strips carry auspicious sayings that invoke prosperity and good fortune. In my housing complex, Tibetan households' décor used a different script and symbology than Han Chinese designs. Some Tibetan households had Tibetan door markings that were more elaborate and consisted of multiple pieces of paper with different messages and images on them, yet they all fit in well with the Han visual order, maintaining the basic form of the *duilian.* Tibetans were able to identify other Tibetans through these door markings. In some instances, they were the only hints that their neighbors were Tibetan. During the Chinese New Year, Han door imagery creeps beyond individual residences, and enters the more public, ostensibly unmarked spaces of the housing community.

The city is filled with "public (therefore social) rhythms: Calendars, fêtes, ceremonies and celebrations; or those that one declares and those that one exhibits as *virtuality*, as expression" (Lefebvre 2004, 18). Xining's most expressed public rhythms are those of the Han Chinese. The rhythm of the Chinese New Year consumes the entire city, affecting public transit times, closing stores, and generating a loud bustle (Ch. *renao*) of firecracker reports that dominates the urban

soundscape in the early months of the year and which clouds housing communities with sooty smoke.

Funeral practices are another urban community activity that ethnicity rhythmically shapes. Han funerals last many days and are frequently held in the shared public space of housing communities. They use a considerable amount of space and produce noises such as trumpeting and wailing that can be heard for days on end. In distinction to this practice, Tibetans do not carry out large funeral ceremonies in commodity housing complexes, but some Tibetan health and death related practices can be seen in less conspicuous places. When my neighbor, a Tibetan man in his thirties, died unexpectedly, his grieving family made offerings to encourage a better rebirth for him. Every morning for nearly a month they went to a small area of concrete pavement just outside of our unit door and burned a small pile of *bsang,* a type of scented offering. Makeshift *bsang* altars also smoldered at roadside margins near the Tibetan hospital, and boxes or plates of offerings shaped into animals and deities (Tib. *gtor ma*) were placed along sidewalks. Near the Tibetan Hospital, residents of the Chengduo housing community turned prayer wheels, listened to electronic scripture reading machines, and intoned prayers. These sounds mingled with the shouted drills of the soldiers in the nearby military compound. Tibetan rhythms in urban space might seem relatively subdued compared to those of the Han. However, they create a sensual network of places that is continuously being renewed through repetition.

A common site for the establishment of Tibetan place is within homes, beyond the hegemonic rhythms of the street. In Tibetan villages and pastoral areas in eastern Tibet, ethnicized architecture and décor is publically visible. Prayer wheels, temples, stupas, and stylized metal gateways can be found in and around villages. Yet in Xining, Tibetans tend to conduct most of their religious and decorative practices in interior places. Nearly every Tibetan home I visited had

a shrine room (Tib. *mchod khang*), typically given in its own room or a corner of a windowed balcony. These shrines contained images and statues of deities and teachers associated with their family's home areas, as well as protective deities and high-profile teachers. One web designer and homeowner in his mid-30s, from the nearby farming county of Xunhua, was in the process of renovating the woodwork in his kitchen: "We are Tibetans, so when guests come we want it to be apparent (Tib. *snang*) that this is a Tibetan home." Many owned apartments feature delicately molded cabinets for tea bowls, Tibetan paintings, and images of Potala Palace. These selections are more than cultural residuals (Williams 1977), but are actively refashioned and reimagined for modern home interiors. It some instances the products were mass reproduced, while in others they reflected designs that would fit into Chinese homes but with distinct Tibetan aesthetic twists, such as incorporating into wooden lintels marmots clutching gems in their mouths.

Likewise, Xining's popular Tibetan apartment restaurants are decorated with Tibetan woodwork, yak hair, and traditional Tibetan implements. While tourist-oriented regions of the city, such as Culture Street, host a concentration of Tibetan restaurants, apartment restaurants are invisible from the street. They may be on the fifth or tenth floor of a high-rise, and except for some Tibetan door decoration, no external signs or advertisements mark their presence. Tibetans hear about the restaurants through word of mouth. The owner of one small chain of restaurants explained to me that this was in part to cater to, and to encourage, a Tibetan clientele. The walls were also decorated with poles resembling those used to prop up black yak hair tents, pictures of locally famous hair jewelry from the owner's hometown, and images of Tibetan singers. Such Tibetan-themed restaurants are urban inventions that are intended to generate a Tibetan sense of place. The owners channeled the intimate appeal of the private housing unit to create thoroughly Tibetan places within heavily Han housing compounds.

Many housing complexes and public parks host Tibetan circle dances that enthusiasts informally organize, using speakers strapped to battery packs on small dollies to generate sound. These mobile music units produce their own rhythms. One participant explained to me through humorous words and gesture how Amdo Tibetans and Kham Tibetans could be distinguished through their body technique, the latter dancing with their arms up in the air. These dances are ethnic gatherings that sustain Tibetan identity through bodily technique and song. Some *shequ* organize dances in ethnically mixed housing areas, which draw Han dancers as well. These mixed dances are more in step with the rhythms of public dancing found in large cities across China, set in parks and the courtyards of housing communities, circumscribed as exercise and entertainment.

Tibetans living in a hanified urban landscape work to channel their place-making to co-exist within the acceptable forms and rhythms of the dominant urban ethno-territory. But this does not necessarily mean that their place-making acts are done in resistance. Tibetans pragmatically work to make places in ways that effectively signal where Tibetans live and where their communities are. They maintain a multisensory environment where their ethnicity is practiced. The result is a rhizomatic spread of Tibetan places that are discontinuous and uncoordinated, but which form a Tibetan Xining City that is partially invisible within the potentially nervous hegemonic urban ethno-territory.

VI. Religion in the City

Since the beginning of China's Reform, there has been a religious revival in Tibetan areas (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998). Among middle-class urban Han Chinese, increased interest in

Tibetan Buddhism has resulted in growing Han patronage for incarnate lamas and religious tourism (Yu 2012). Nonetheless, the Chinese state has restricted the movement and education of Tibetan monks and closely regulated religious structures (Powers 2016). At the national level, the Religious Affairs Bureau (Ch. *zongjiao ju*) regulates religious groups and registers large (Ch. *daxing*) religious structures such as temples. At subordinate scales relevant territorial authorities, such as municipal districts, have power over the construction of religious structures (Potter 2003; Leung 2005). The creation and location of religious places in the city sheds light on how Tibetans channel place-making.

Religious place-making in Xining occurs within an institutional ethno-territory that privileges the Han as the dominant (and unmarked) ethnic group. With an eye towards its ethnic minority populations, Xining's municipal government has sought to control religious and unregulated superstitious activity through urban territory (Xining City Government 2011, 5; Xining Financial Information Network 2013). Examining restrictions on the religious built environment in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Robbie Barnett (2013) has pointed to an increase in "venue-specific regulation" that limits religious activities and the construction of religious sites to certain territories. This reflects "the importance of location in Chinese legal thinking about religion – a presumption in post-liberalization China, and perhaps earlier, that religion belongs in certain places" (Ibid., 90). In Xining City urban regulations also structure the place of religion.

The 1992 Qinghai Province Venue for Religious Activity Management Regulation restricts the construction of venues for religious activity (Ch. *zongjiao huodong changsuo*), compelling would-be constructors of religious structures to seek out permission from urban authorities and disallowing the creation of religious structures in most state-owned spaces (Qinghai Province Standing Committee 1992). In a telephone conversation, an official from the Religious Affairs

Bureau stated that their bureau was having to refuse more building permits because of a rising number of requests to build nonstandard or irregular (Ch. *buguifan*) structures. As more of the city is developed as commodity housing, there is increased demand for smaller informal religious sites beyond the large temples and mosques which are the usual focus of urban regulation. The structures that Tibetans have completed in *shequ* are careful accomplishments of channeled place-making in Xining.

The most conspicuous religious structures can be found in retirement housing complexes. In one such housing complex, named after the Chengduo County of Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province, residents built a circuit of prayer wheels. The wheels are not only symbols of Tibetan Buddhism and ethnic identity, but as Charlene Makley (2003) has illustrated, they are linked to circumambulation circuits in which the generation of religious merit through bodily acts produces Tibetan social space in state-controlled environments. When housing complex inhabitants in Xining, or even informed visitors to the nearby Tibetan hospital, had the opportunity they would circumambulate and spin the wheels.

In another housing complex, Yushu New Village, residents built several Tibetan Buddhist religious structures in a similar fashion. I interviewed an inhabitant who had lived in this complex since 2007, shortly after it was built. He explained to me the negotiations over creating the prayer wheels: "Originally the Yushu people planned to build a stupa and Tibetan-style housing, but the Xining government did not allow them to do so because it would be too Tibetan." Though their religious constructions were restricted, the completion of the prayer wheels was an important goal for this community and contributed to the rhizomatic network of Tibetan places in Xining.

One September morning in 2014, I arrived at the Luxurious Garden Community, an ethnically mixed housing complex, to interview Pema, a man involved with a dispute over the

construction of prayer wheels within the confines of his newly developed residential compound. Tibetan residents there had pooled their money together in order to build a prayer wheel installation, but a conflict had arisen with local authorities. Walking the length of Luxurious Garden Community searching for the prayer wheels, I passed many concrete manifestations of Han culture: sages, historical figures, calligraphy scrolls, etc., but no instances of anything visually Tibetan. When I finally located the prayer wheels, tilers were just finishing the roof that would shield the wheels and their turners from the rain. Sitting under the roof, Pema and his wife Sonam explained how the community's attempts at place-making had upset the ethno-territorial order of the complex.

After raising funds, the residents began to build a housing for prayer wheels without obtaining prior approval from the district Religious Affairs Bureau or the *shequ*. They didn't know where to request permission to build the wheel, and were hoping that it would qualify as an elderly activity center (Ch. *laonian huodong zhongxin*). Pema gave an account of the process:

> Before [residents] bought these two building units they made a request to the construction boss to build a small platform for prayer wheels. . . . Then we started to build the [largest] prayer wheel and the local government came and said we were not allowed to build it and destroyed [it].[5]

On the first day of construction, the complex's private management firm notified the local government about the unpermitted construction. The government subsequently ordered bulldozers to come demolish the site. Female residents then used their bodies to obstruct the bulldozers, calling their operators Japanese devils (Ch. *riben guizi*), a 20th century degoratory term that continues to circulate in China. Having been informed where to properly apply for permits during the bulldozing, Sonam then said that residents gathered signatures and began submitting

construction permission requests. Authorities accepted the residents' seventh request and they were able to build the prayer wheels, but the structure never qualified for public support as an activity center and residents struggled to raise funds to finish the project as they had envisioned it.

Housing communities like Luxurious Garden Community are "classified and represented as 'mixed,' but dominated by one ethnonational group." (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003, 690). Tibetans that attempt to place-make in these mixed communities risk an unsuccessful channeling, a misreading of the possibilities of creating ethno-religious places in the city. Though these residents were able to build their prayer wheels, they had to go through a similar, if more violent, process of learning the limits and constraints of place-making in the city.

The majority of Xining's publically accessible Tibetan Buddhist places are built in compliance with the state, not in resistance to it. Rig'zin met me in a stylish modern office with fish tanks, leather couches, and a long glass-topped coffee table. A director for the Qinghai Tibetan Research Group, she presented me with a large postcard of the one of group's proudest achievements, the Bodhi Stupa located along the mountain ridge north of the city. They worked closely with the government to get the structure approved and constructed on a high peak easily visible from city streets. She motioned out the window of the tenth-floor office towards the north of the city, and I could see the Stupa glistening in the sun. Many of Xining's Tibetans now visit this stupa on an itinerary of the city's Tibetan Buddhist sites, where they can see a stone bearing an inscription of the names of all Xining's Tibetans who donated to the construction of the Stupa. For Rig'zin it had become part of the rhythm of the urban Tibetan New Year: "On the evening before the New Year begins, my whole family goes to Kumbum Monastery [near Xining City], and the following morning, my brother and I go to the Bodhi Stupa to circumambulate and burn *bsang*."

The Bodhi Stupa is becoming a local icon of 21st century Tibetan urbanism. In the music video for the popular song "Fly" (Tib. *'phur*) by the Tibetan pop group ANU, a camera soars over the top of the Stupa and reveals Xining City spread out below, illustrating how Tibetan religious geographies can thrive despite ethno-territorial restrictions on them.

Tibetans in retirement communities and regular market housing complexes face restrictions on the sorts of religious places that they can build. Tibetans in Yushu New Village and Luxuriant Garden Community were not able to build their religious structures as they had initially hoped, but they were still able to accomplish distinctly Tibetan places. Indeed, Tibetans are continuously channeling available avenues for constructing places in Xining to attain their place-making goals. As the retired cadre Rinchen Lobsang explained, "You must feel the bottom of the river, but the river is very deep." Sometimes there is a slip up or the way forward is unclear, but incremental progress eventually augments Xining's network of Tibetan places.

VII. Conclusion

The term channeling expresses how urban Tibetans continue to create places in the era of commodity housing despite the hegemony of ethno-territorial laws and Han culture. Marginalized ethnic groups channel the restrictions and sensibilities of the city when they place-make, adapting the places they make with the tools and trends available within the contemporary city. Channeling describes a technique for which the dominance and resistance framework does not account. A convincing vision of the urban dream works to draw urban minorities into a state-mediated social vision. While this can be described as a social engineering project aimed at managing and molding an urban population, such a perspective must recognize the productive possibilities that this

biopolitical project enables. Channeling allows a way through what appears to be an inexorable march towards the homogenization of urban life.

The result is a rhizomatic expression of ethnic place that emerges within the arborescent urban territory; place-rhizomes channel through the regulations and sensibilities of the ethno-territorially ordered city. They are co-present with the places of hegemonic urbanism, but are neither reducible to nor fully constrained by them: they each demarcate geographies only partially visible to one another. Furthermore, rhizomatic geographies are not entirely separate from the dominant arborescent form: "the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models… the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 20). Rhizomatic places create venues for the emergence of new trajectories for marginalized groups in the city, providing the means for cultural resilience and agentic transformation, for the allowance of alternative objects to have pride of place, be they animals, home shrines, or a stupa. Xining Tibetans continuously discuss Tibetan aspects of Xining: where a new restaurant has opened, the size of the prayer wheels in Yushu New Village versus those in Luxurious Garden Community, where the best dancing in the city can be found, and so on. In so doing they knit together disparate Tibetan places into a Tibetan Xining.

A second aspect of channeling in place-making illustrates how marginal urban groups must carefully feel out what is acceptable in the city. The majority of Tibetan places are created in compliance with ethno-territorial rules, such as restrictions on building religious sites, and are created with emerging Chinese middle-class sensibilities in mind. This is in part a practical response to the nervous activity of the ethnocratic state and in part a reflection of the resemblance in desires that ethnic groups enrolled in the production of commodity housing spaces have come to share. Channeling is therefore neither resistance nor refusal, but strategic appropriation for

pragmatic place-making ends. It can supplement the recent work looking for alternatives to the binary of dominance and resistance (Jones 2012; McGranahan 2016).

Finally, the assumption that China's middle-class urban growth, or the growth of such lifestyles elsewhere in the urbanizing Global South, must necessarily lead to the destruction of difference is misleading. Despite normative biopolitical programs and restrictive laws, marginal groups continuously place-make. Many places can come assemble to form a city. Tibetans across Xining City, as a group, perceive many urban Tibetan places and inhabit them as the macro-place of a Tibetan Xining, an alternative urbanism that is neither reducible to nor separate from Xining's ethno-territorial codification or the commodification of urban space.

Notes

[1] I am here appropriating the Chinese folk saying made famous by Deng Xiaoping to describe China's incremental economic and political reforms: "Crossing the river by feeling the stones" (Ch. *mozhe shitou guo he*).

[2] Mitchell Dean (2010) and Nikolas Rose (1999) have de-contextualized Foucault's (2003, 2007) work on governmentality from its European empirical roots and argued that it has implications for governance across the modern world. Their work has influenced much of the research on governmentality in China's urban neighborhoods.

[3] Ethnic minorities are not the only citizens of China who face pressure to conform their place-making activities to those of state planners or normative sensibilities. For instance, Han practitioners of folk religion have had to move shrines and alter their practices to accommodate urban planning orthopraxy (Abramson 2011).

[4] While the construction boom in China has drawn international attention for its apparent creation of ghost towns, many units are purchased not for immediate dwelling, but for business and investment purposes. Indeed, Chinese homeownership rates are close to ninety percent, high above US ownership rates (Wildau 2017).

[5] It is common to find groups of Tibetans who have purchased, either privately or through a government department in their rural home counties, a number of apartments in a commodity housing complex. These residents both get a discount from the housing developer and can live in proximity to one another. Several floors of a unit (a vertical subsection of a building) can be purchased, or the entire unit, which in a six-floor building would be equal to twelve apartments.

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