

The China Quarterly

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CQY>

Additional services for ***The China Quarterly***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



***Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development.* EMILY T. YEH.** Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013.

xvi + 322 pp. \ \$75.00.

***Spoiling Tibet: China and Resource Nationalism on the Roof of the World.* GABRIEL LAFITTE.** London and New York: Zed Books, 2013. x + 204 pp. £16.99.

ISBN978-1-78032-435-7

Thierry Dodin

The China Quarterly / Volume 219 / September 2014, pp 888 - 890

DOI: 10.1017/S0305741014000939, Published online: 06 October 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0305741014000939

How to cite this article:

Thierry Dodin (2014). The China Quarterly, 219, pp 888-890 doi:10.1017/S0305741014000939

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

timely given the importance of reorienting policy towards a more synergistic support of such Tibetan-led developments.

Other fascinating details discussed by Zenz include: Tibetan students strategically switching between the Chinese and minority education systems; the “Sinicized in-betweens” of Tibetan society; Tibetan discourses of backwardness and development; the informalization of public employment; and corruption in government job recruitment (likely one of the most comprehensive accounts on this important subject in Chinese minority studies). He also discusses how the political dynamics created and promoted by the central government have led to obstacles in applying minority nationality legal frameworks in China.

Overall, the value of his work is immense for our understanding of contemporary Tibet, minority nationality policy in China, and the anthropology of education more generally. It highlights the importance of preserving some degree of preferential employment policy – even if not in the institutional form of the “iron rice bowl” that Zenz deems to be unrealistic and irretrievable – but at least some degree of legal and administrative measures to assure that those who govern and teach communities of largely unilingual Tibetans are proficient in speaking the local dialects and literate in the written language of these communities. Insisting on this would serve as a crucial means to sustain the education revolution already well underway.

ANDREW M. FISCHER

fischer@iss.nl

Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development

EMILY T. YEH

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013

xvi + 322 pp. \$75.00

ISBN 978-0-80145-155-3

Spoiling Tibet: China and Resource Nationalism on the Roof of the World

GABRIEL LAFITTE

London and New York: Zed Books, 2013

x + 204 pp. £16.99

ISBN 978-1-78032-435-7 doi:10.1017/S0305741014000939

There has been a long controversy as to whether the regime imposed by the People's Republic of China in the ethnic Tibetan regions it controls and regards as its own amounts to colonialism. Debates on political taxonomy – especially when such emotionally laden terminologies are involved – are rarely infused with facts, and positions seem determined by ideologies, projections and personal subjectivities. Yet, leaving the “c-word” aside, if there was a need to establish a phenomenology of the socio-political situation in contemporary Tibet – with whatever name we might want to qualify it – then this need has now been perfectly satisfied in the form of Emily Yeh's *Taming Tibet*.

Indeed, the all-round picture that emerges from Yeh's work evokes a perfect example of alien rule-cum-exploitation, disturbingly akin to any classical colonial rule by a 19th-century European power. All constituent elements are there: military and para-military subjugation, the cultural alienation of the locals in their own environment, a direct control of the primary resources by non-locals with privileged access to state power, the same outsiders *de facto* (i.e. not *de jure*) controlling the economy, and the manipulation of historic antagonisms to keep the local majority population in

check. On the locals' side, there is a well-anchored and stereotyped discourse about their place in a grand order that fully escapes their sway, and internalized views about their own indolence – an attractive but alas inefficiency-inducing feature. Meanwhile, ambiguities press on the minds of those for whom the arrival of the dominant outsiders opened new life perspectives. For those dominant outsiders and their institutions, there is a confident sense of manifest destiny and a paranoid narrative about the gratitude owed to them by the locals for the Chinese civilizing mission.

Few researchers can boast the deep insights that Yeh has accumulated through direct encounters in the field. Her unique scope covers the memories of those who experienced first-hand the arrival of Chinese troops more than six decades ago as well as casual discussions and observations in the hotel lobbies of today's Lhasa, brought together to create history. Yeh's personal opinions are plain to see and at times she conveys emotion, but without losing orientation. Sympathy never lures her into smoothing out the complexities and contradictions that make up the texture of reality, in Tibet as elsewhere. This is scholarship at its best.

If I were to express any reservation, then it would be about what appears to be the author's occasionally excessive concern with literary delivery. The unique value of Yeh's work lies in her ability to mine factual information and submit it to rigorous analytical introspection. This could result in a rather dry text. Perhaps to avoid this, Yeh picks chapter titles and sub-headings for their literary effect, rather than to reflect factual content. While this might be a matter of taste, it sometimes complicates navigation within the book, although this is partly offset by the excellent index. This issue of accessibility does not in any way depreciate the exceptional quality of Yeh's work.

Less overwhelming is the quality of the second book under review here, Gabriel Lafitte's *Spoiling Tibet*, which is about the state of mineral exploitation on the Tibetan Plateau. Like Yeh, Lafitte is concerned with the flawed development policies deployed by Chinese authorities in the region and with the fact that they make Tibetans mere spectators rather than actors of this endeavour (and in the case of mining often not even spectators).

Where Yeh approaches her topic sensibly, balancing arguments and adequately admitting all shades of grey, Lafitte's perceptible spectrum does not allow for such nuances. Admittedly, there isn't much positive to report about the mining industry in Tibet, but a book that suggests it adopts a scholarly approach to a given subject matter cannot afford to dwell in the hyperbolic and monochrome approach of a political pamphlet. Unfortunately, behind the reasonable tone and a pleasantly sophisticated writing style, this is exactly what *Spoiling Tibet* does.

Furthermore, while acknowledging that mining has hardly benefitted Tibetans so far, this verdict alone does not constitute enough information to fill an entire book. What matters is tracing the how and why, the modalities, evolutions, the ups and downs and how these relate to institutions and individuals, i.e. the real life texture so well elaborated in Yeh's book. But this is not what Lafitte's book is about.

In fact, a substantial part of the book is not concerned with current issues relating to mining in Tibet. Instead, Lafitte places a heavy emphasis on Chinese Marxist ideological positions, thus suggesting some sort of blueprint to an unavoidable disaster. The book then moves on to describe in detail the "wild mining" period, when free-operating Chinese gold diggers roamed the plateau in hope of making a proverbial "quick yuan" and left lasting environmental damage. But how useful is ideological criticism in a setting like today's China, where Marxism has long become irrelevant in the political equation? Then, as "wild mining" was consistently suppressed by the authorities during the 2000s, would it not have been fair to acknowledge and detail the positive impact of this move on Tibet's environment, even if it was primarily

motivated by a desire to replace amateur mining with established companies in order to generate more profit?

Despite these criticisms, *Spoiling Tibet* is full of interesting details, insider stories and geographical information which are not otherwise easily accessible. This is because for many years Lafitte has been assiduously tapping into the impressive amount of literature collected in Australian university libraries on China, which host a wealth of titles on mining. Internet research on the companies involved has added more details. This makes *Spoiling Tibet* a rewarding book, at least for the lay reader.

Yet the problem lies in the selective presentation of this data, the lack of an adequate analytical framework and Lafitte's agenda to expose rather than explain. This leads to bizarre outcomes. For instance, the book suggests an imminent ecological catastrophe due to mining activities in Tibet, but Lafitte must admit that there are only a handful of large operating mines there, since, except for a few extremely valuable minerals, the very high costs of mining in Tibet have so far hampered the development of any industry of scale (and will likely continue to do so in the foreseeable future).

In the same vein, Lafitte seems obsessed with state involvement in the development of mining and suggests a hidden agenda. There is no need to speculate about agendas when the state explicitly acknowledges economic development as the fundamental vector of political "stability," and hence logically seeks to develop mining in a mineral-rich region like Tibet. Again, this policy feeds into a swamp of speculation where mining projects – no matter how promising they may be (many exist merely on paper) – are bought and sold for the sole purpose of enriching speculators, who then seek to take their money abroad for more secure investments. This says a lot about the nature of the mining industry in Tibet.

THIERRY DODIN

UPP701@uni-bonn.de

China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival

RANA MITTER

London: Allen Lane, 2013

xxi + 458 pp. £25.00

ISBN 978-1-846-14010-5 doi:10.1017/S0305741014000940

When historians of East Asia are asked to recommend an English-language book on China's long war with Japan, whether that is defined as the series of Japanese invasions beginning in 1931 or the Sino-Japanese war dated from the skirmish at Marco Polo bridge in July 1937, the works that come to mind have always been less than ideal. There are several edited volumes with superb essays on many aspects of the conflict; there are over half a dozen strong works debating the role of the conflict in the rise of Communist power; there are histories that focus on Nationalist party rule and its role in the war, as well as a growing number of more thematically focused volumes that explore everything from the issues of collaboration to refugees. Most recently, Diana Lary's excellent *Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) is ideal for teaching, with its innovative combination of short narrative summaries, thematic essays, case studies and primary-source readings. But this war, which so profoundly impacted