

**Urbanizing Tibet:  
Differential Inclusion & Colonial Governance in the People's Republic of China**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the urbanization of Tibet. We argue that urbanization is a new technique of colonial governance for the Chinese Communist Party in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and is characterized by what Yen Le Espiritu calls 'differential inclusion': a form of forcible incorporation resulting in particular spaces and populations being "deemed integral to the nation... only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing." We explore how urbanization achieves the differential inclusion of Tibet and Tibetans through three distinct processes: *segregation* (the separation of Tibetan and Han Chinese spaces), *congregation* (the creation of Tibetan-dominated towns), and *negation* (urbanization as an administrative process that undermines Tibetan political autonomy). We argue that these three processes form an integrated strategy of colonial governance aimed at achieving differential inclusion. We conclude by arguing that our case study of the urbanization of Tibet offers a model for thinking about the role urbanization plays in enforcing differential inclusion as a means of colonial governance elsewhere in the PRC, and beyond.

**Key words**

colonialism; governance; urbanization; Tibet; People's Republic of China

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## **Policing Tibet: The Urban Transformation of an Ethnic Periphery**

*“...to police and to urbanize is the same thing.”* (Foucault 2007: 337).

Urbanization in Tibet has intensified like never before under Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ‘new era’ of domestic transformation and political repression (Economy 2018). Seen as crucial to driving continued economic development, achieving the status of a ‘moderately prosperous society’ by 2021, and a ‘strong, modern socialist country’ by 2049, urbanization is the focus of a number of national policy initiatives (Wilmsen 2018).<sup>1</sup> China’s vast ethnic periphery—home to less than ten per cent of its population but comprising over sixty per cent of its territory—has been specifically targeted for large-scale urbanization work (Yeh and Makley 2019). In this article, we examine the urbanization of ‘Tibet,’ the area covering the entire Tibetan plateau in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and home to more than six million people officially classified as ‘Tibetan.’ We argue that urbanization is emerging as a new technique of colonial governance for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The CCP’s 13th National Five Year Plan set ambitious targets for urbanizing China’s ethnic periphery (State Council, 2016). The Party-state seeks to dramatically boost the urbanization rate in this region, eventually achieving parity between the PRC’s Han ethnic majority and its various ‘ethnic minorities,’ including Tibetans (SEAC, 2015). This is justified with reference to the low rates of urbanization among ‘minorities’ in general (see Appendix 1), and Tibetans in particular, who are described as having the lowest urbanization rate in the country, with only five per cent of Tibetans permanently residing in cities in 2010, compared to 32 per cent among the Han (see Appendix 2). Tibetan urbanization rates are also seen as slow, having

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly, the National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020) and Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program (2011-2020). As Wilmsen (2017) points out, the aim of these policies is to drive the national shift from an investment- and export-led economy to a consumer-led economy.

increased only 6.9 per cent between 2000 and 2010, with most of this growth (six per cent) occurring in small towns rather than larger cities (0.9 per cent) (Ma, 2015: 22).<sup>2</sup>

In response, the Chinese government seeks to lift the urbanization rate in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to over 30 per cent by the end of 2020 (Xinhua, 2015), and similar efforts are underway in other Tibetan areas in the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. In 2017, there were 13 officially designated cities throughout these Tibetan areas (Roche 2017) and hundreds of smaller towns continue to develop, with plans to link these new urban spaces through a dense network of roads, rails, pipes and wires. Much of this urbanization is taking place in forms specifically tailored for Tibet's 'frontier environment,' including frontier trading towns, tourist towns, and ecological towns and cities (State Council 2016).

In this article, we argue that urbanizing Tibet, which the Party-state presents as a technocratic exercise in promoting development and reducing regional inequality, is also a form of colonial governance. We make this claim in the context of rising attention to the colonial nature of the CCP's rule over Tibet and Xinjiang (Anand 2018; McGranahan 2019; Wang and Roche *fc*). We argue that urbanization seeks to integrate the ethnic periphery into the Chinese nation-state by bringing about its total transformation; urbanizing Tibet and Xinjiang, like colonialism itself, is "a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations" (Mbembe 2003: 25). For the Party-state, urbanizing the frontier is central to 'policing' it: rendering space orderly and governable so as to ensure the legibility and docility of its inhabitants (Foucault 2007; 2003).

In order to explore Tibet's urbanization as a form of colonial governance, we look at three distinct facets of this process: *segregation* (the separation of Tibetan and Han Chinese spaces), *congregation* (the creation of Tibetan-dominated towns), and *negation* (urbanization as an administrative process that undermines Tibetan political autonomy). We show how these three different aspects of urbanization constitute a cohesive strategy of colonial rule that brings about what Yen Le Espiritu (2003:47) calls 'differential inclusion'—a form of 'forcible' inclusion resulting in subordinated populations being "deemed integral to the nation's economy, culture, identity, and

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<sup>2</sup> A distinction is made in the Chinese language between urbanization through the expansion of 'cities' (*chengshihua*) and the expansion in the number and size of smaller 'towns' (*chengzhenhua*).

power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing.” Espiritu sees differential inclusion as leading to “legal subordination, economic exploitation, and cultural degradation” (48). We argue that the Party-state’s regime of differential inclusion through urbanization constitutes a form of structural violence (Sargeson 2013; Pavoni and Tulumello 2020), which includes elements of assimilation, marginalization, and subordination, but cannot be reduced to the eliminatory logic typically associated with settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006).

In pursuing our argument, we draw on insights from the literature on urbanization and settler colonialism. This literature, much of it written from an Indigenous standpoint, has shown how urbanization enables colonial powers to assert control over territory (Porter and Yiftachel 2017), renders Indigenous populations surveillable and legible (Nemser 2017), and makes territory available for resource extraction and other forms of exploitation (Mumford 2012), while also intensifying the production and reproduction of hierarchicalized schemas of racialization (Edmonds 2010). Urbanization has been described as a process that asserts spatial segregation and enforces hierarchy between colonists and natives (Fanon 2004; Kipfer 2007; Mbembe 2003), maintains segregation through the expulsion of Indigenous people from cities (Edmonds 2010), curtails the formation of Indigenous urban communities (Gagne 2013), erases Indigenous presence from the built environment (Moreton-Robinson 2015), and contains racialized populations in enclaves. Peters and Anderson (2013) also argue that cities enforce chronopolitical segregation, with ‘natives’ associated with the rural past, and colonizers with the modern, future-oriented city. In short, this literature has demonstrated the various ways urbanization has been used to dominate colonized peoples.

The emerging literature on urbanization in Tibet has made similar observations. Authors such as Yeh (2013) and Rohlf (2016) argue that urbanization is an integral aspect of the consolidation and territorialization of state power in Tibet. Urbanization is also seen as being at the ‘crux’ (Fischer 2013:85) of intensifying ethnic tensions in China’s ethnic periphery (Hillman and Tuttle 2016), and as with elsewhere in China, urbanization is seen as crucial to ensuring regime stability (Wallace 2014). The relationship between urbanization and economic development has also been explored, showing that although cities are intended to offer Tibetans economic opportunities and a stake in the nation (Brox and Bellér-Han 2014), they have actually resulted in entrenched economic disempowerment (Fischer 2013). In a

related vein, Charlene Makley (2018) has explored how state-led development in northeast Tibet has unleashed a ‘battle for fortune’ that not only pits assimilatory authoritarian capitalism against Tibetan counter-development, but also leads to increasing disparities and conflicts within and between Tibetan communities. A final theme in this literature is the contested production of Tibetan space in cities dominated by the PRC’s Han ethnic majority, such as Zi ling/ Xining (Grant 2018a, 2018b) and Chengdu (Brox 2017, 2019). Our contribution builds on this literature and the literature on colonial urbanization to explain how differential inclusion serves as a mechanism of ethnic governance.

Ethnic governance has taken a new direction under the Xi administration. The cultural nationalism at the heart of Xi Jinping’s ‘new era’ marks a decisive departure from previous attempts to propitiate ethnic minorities through special preferences and ethnic autonomy (Leibold 2019). Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has promoted cultural transformation and political integration through increased ‘inter-ethnic mingling’, including mixed residency, marriage, migration and schooling, that are now actively promoted by the Party-state as a mechanism for ‘ethnic fusing’ (Leibold 2015). Alongside calls for a ‘second generation of ethnic policies’ (Leibold 2013; Zhu 2012; Ma 2012), the leaders of the CCP are promoting cities as ‘melting pots’ where it hopes ethnic boundaries will soften, separatist tendencies will abate, and new forms of collective ‘Chinese’ subjectivity will take root (Hillman 2013; Leibold 2015). An ongoing crackdown on civil society (Howell 2019) means that space for resistance to this increasingly assimilatory regime is also shrinking (Roche 2020).

Our exploration of these issues draws on an eclectic range of sources and methods which in turn are informed by the different skillsets of the authors. We analyze policy documents in Chinese and news and social media posts in Tibetan. Sections of the article draw on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews,<sup>3</sup> and our work is also informed by the authors’ experiences.<sup>4</sup> In the

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<sup>3</sup> The first author has carried out ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews in Rong bo in northeast Tibet (113 interviews, conducted in 2016 and 2017); Guza in eastern Tibet (observation and informal conversation in 2016 and 2017); and in Chengdu (6 focus group interviews, each with between 2 and 5 participants in 2018). All interviews were conducted with Tibetans who speak minoritized languages: Manegacha, nDrapa, and Gochang.

<sup>4</sup> The first author lived in Xining, capital of Qinghai, for eight years (2005-2013), working with Tibetan communities there, and not only lived through a period of rapid urbanization, but also, during this time, had many informal conversations with Tibetan interlocutors about urbanization, both in Xining and elsewhere in Tibet. The second author lived in Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing for nearly a

discussion that follows, we interrogate segregation, congregation, and negation in turn, before concluding with a discussion of how these processes constitute an integrated strategy of colonial governance, and how this might inform studies of urbanization and colonialism elsewhere in the PRC and beyond.

### **Segregation: Spatial Distinction and The Logic of Coerced Inclusion**

In his landmark critique of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes a division of colonial space into two zones, each with distinct urban forms (Fanon 2004; Kipfer 2007). There is the settlers' town, made of "stone and steel," a place of bright lights and paved roads, where the people are all well-fed. The native town, by contrast, is "a world with no space" where people live atop each other. Here, the people are "hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light"—they live crouched and cowering, on their knees (Fanon 2004: 4). Achille Mbembe (2003: 26) describes this distinction between the settler town and the native town as part of Fanon's broader exploration of "the spatialization of colonial occupation," which is based on "the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers."

In this section we draw on Fanon's schema between native and settler towns to explore the Tibetan experience in Han-dominated cities. We explore how many Tibetans are *forced* to travel to Han-dominated urban centers, where they are marginalized and demoted to the status of subordinate semi-citizens, and denied basic legal equality with urban Han. This does not result in a regime of total exclusion, such as in more rigid regimes of segregation based on mobility restrictions such as Apartheid South Africa or America's South under Jim Crow laws, but rather one of partial, temporary, and coerced inclusion in the context of enforced hierarchy. Rather than excluding Tibetans from Han cities, this segregation necessitates that most Tibetans cycle through Han urban space, but places barriers to them settling there.

Many of the 'settler towns' that Tibetans visit and reside in are gateway cities on the margins of the Tibetan plateau: Ziling (Xining), Lanzhou, Chengdu, and Kunming. However, there are also significant Tibetan populations in Han-dominated

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decade during the 1990s and 2000s and has travelled extensively throughout the ethnic periphery. The third author has spent more than three years living and working in Tibetan parts of Yunnan Province.

cities in the eastern PRC, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Beijing. The number of Tibetans living outside Tibetan autonomous regions, mostly in Han urban centers, has increased by 30 per cent during the first decade of the twenty-first century, now amounting to over half a million people, or 8.6 per cent of the Tibetan population (Ma 2015: 25).

Yet census figures are a poor guide to the actual number of Tibetans in these cities, as they only capture permanent, registered residents. As discussed below, most Tibetans do not stay long in Han cities, and among those that do, many choose not to formally register as residents. Trine Brox (2017) estimates that in Chengdu, the actual Tibetan population of the city may be up to ten times larger than census figures. Exploring the Tibetan population of Han cities thus calls for ethnographic observation into different forms of migration; what we categorize as visitors, sojourners, and residents.

The majority of Tibetans visit Han cities only briefly. They may come to buy things that are either unavailable or too expensive in their homelands: cars, computers, white goods, and luxury items. Healthcare migrants (Tsering Bum 2018) also come to access medical services that are not available in their homelands. Many Tibetan visitors require some sort of intermediary to help negotiate Han cities, and overcome language barriers. Such intermediaries may be kin or someone from the same homeland but increasingly, such functions are becoming professionalized. For example, Chengdu now has a brokering service that helps Tibetans purchase cars, as well as a medical liaison service that helps people to negotiate the bureaucracy and Chinese language of medical institutions.

‘Sojourners’ typically spend several weeks or months in Han cities. Two important categories of sojourners are migrant workers and over-winterers; the socioeconomic backgrounds of the two groups differ significantly. Migrant workers are typically farmers who undertake informal labor in cities during the agricultural slack season. Over-winterers, on the other hand, are typically affluent: wealthy enough to buy a second property outside their homeland (Yeh 2013). They are often retired or semi-retired government workers, or privately wealthy entrepreneurs, and come to cities looking for a milder climate, superior social services, and a wider variety of social activities. Migrant workers, meanwhile, come in search of income, often at a cost of great personal hardship (Swider 2015). Such migrants first began moving into cities in the 1980s, following the marketization of the PRC economy and

the dismantling of the Mao era's collective agriculture (Goldstein, Childs, and Puchung Wangdui 2008; Fischer 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Students, including university and high-school students (Washul 2018), are a distinct category of sojourners, perhaps best described as long-term sojourners. Most Tibetan university students attend designated *minzu* universities (Yang 2017; Zenz 2013)—of six such institutions, none are located in Tibet<sup>6</sup>—though some choose to study in ‘mainstream’ universities. They spend four years for a BA degree, returning home for summer and winter vacations. Tibetan high school students in Han cities, meanwhile, are often part of the ‘interior classes’ program, which recruits students from Tibet and Xinjiang: over 100,000 Tibetan students have been recruited since 1985 (Leibold 2018). This program typically selects academically talented students who are sent to study in Mandarin in Han-dominated cities, where it is hoped that they will become culturally transformed and return home as political elites (Postiglione 2009). However, these students find themselves in a complex predicament, often with an intensified sense of ethnic identity, but deprived of the linguistic and cultural habitus that enable recognition by their Tibetan peers (Yang 2017; Yi 2018). A smaller number of Tibetans make their way into mainstream programs at Chinese-medium schools, either selected for their academic performance, or placed there by their parents hoping to give their children a competitive advantage (Henry 2016).

Long-term residents are typically professionals, entrepreneurs, cultural workers, or government employees. Retirees, especially those retired from the civil service, also account for a significant number of long-term residents (Xu, Kou, and Wall 2018). Even residents typically do not live permanently in Han cities. They are born elsewhere, and often do not stay in the city their entire lives; there are very few intergenerational families or communities. Such long-term residents do not necessarily relocate their official resident permit to the city where they live, instead

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<sup>5</sup> Of the more than 200 million migrant workers in China today, between 20 and 25 million are ethnic minorities. State policies aim to increase this population by 1.81 per cent annually. See State Council 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The six ‘*minzu*’ universities in the PRC where Tibetans study are Qinghai Nationalities University (Zi ling); Northwest Nationalities University (Lanzhou); Southwest Nationalities University (Chengdu); Yunnan Nationalities University (Kunming); and Minzu University of China (Beijing). This list excludes vocational tertiary institutes: Gansu Nationalities Normal University (in Gtsos), Sichuan Nationalities Normal University (in Guza), or Tibetan Medical University (Lhasa). Lhasa is also home to the only university in Tibet, Tibet University, which, despite having a student body dominated by Tibetans and other ‘minority’ students, is not designated as a ‘*minzu*’ university.



choosing to retain it in their homeland. For young professionals this may be due to a desire for their children to attend school or take the university entrance exam in their homeland, and for older people, it may enable them to spend their final years surrounded by family. For all such residents, translocal ties are important (Washul 2018). These include regular visits to the homeland, often during the New Year period, as well as irregular trips for important events, such as funerals. These long-term residents are thus the inverse of visitors, spending the majority of their time in the city, but returning to their homeland for short times, for specific purposes. Their lives in the city are also often translocal in that long-term residents often help kin and community members, both visitors and sojourners, to navigate the city.

The presence of Tibetan visitors, sojourners, and residents in Han cities reveals the distinction between settler and native zones in Tibet. This distinction is not as stark as Fanon's differentiation between the 'well-fed' settler town and the 'hungry' native town, but it does exist. Although Tibetan spaces do not necessarily constitute a zone of death and suffering, as in Fanon and Mbembe's 'native' spaces, they are a space of relative, and deliberately constructed, lack. For example, with the exception of Lhasa, no universities have been built in Tibet: they were all deliberately located in urban Han centers. Medical services exist in Tibet but are incomparable to those in Han cities. For Tibetans, higher education, decent healthcare, and general 'ease of living' have all been built into Han urban spaces, outside their homelands.

Even when Tibetans come to Han cities to access all these things, they continue to face numerous barriers. Prominent among these are language barriers; cities are dominated by the national language, Mandarin Chinese, which is typically a second or third language for Tibetans. Tibetans are also subjected to regimes of quotidian discrimination from Han residents; they are racialized as dirty and dangerous (Brox 2019; Hillman and Henfry 2006), insulted and discriminated against (Grant 2017), and even physically attacked; targeted attacks against Tibetan university students have occurred twice in the last decade in Chengdu (in 2011<sup>7</sup> and 2019<sup>8</sup>). Exclusion is also structural and juridical, enforced through the household registration (*hukou*) system, which denies non-registered residents the same rights as

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/clash-12162011173240.html>.

<sup>8</sup> This event was reported on Chinese social media platform WeChat, and was also shared on Twitter, see: <https://twitter.com/lhaphur/status/1115394924709593089?s=19> and <https://twitter.com/lhaphur/status/1115762734937800704?s=19>.

registered residents, particularly regarding access to critical services, such as education and healthcare.

Nonetheless, Tibetans continue to migrate to these cities to access the services and infrastructure that are denied them in their homelands. This migration does, in part, result in the emergence of a concentrated and visible Tibetan presence in these cities, such as the Wuhouci district in Chengdu (Brox 2017; 2019), or the Tibetan market in Xining (Grant 2016). However, although such neighborhoods are visible as distinct Tibetan spaces within the Han city, they are primarily sites of consumption, and not the location of communities. And while these neighborhoods provide facilities that act as ‘hubs’ (Ramirez 2007) where Tibetan identity is produced and reproduced, they also serve as sites where state surveillance and securitization are concentrated (Brox 2019), and where Tibetanness is commodified and consumed by Han urbanites. Given the contradictory tensions at play in these neighborhoods, we should not be surprised that Tibetans typically live dispersed throughout these cities, in communities that are “diffuse but connected” (Grant 2018a:1457).

In summary, inequalities between Tibetan and Han space force Tibetans into Han urban centers, often for short periods of time, with education, employment, and healthcare being three key dimensions of this inequality. Many Tibetans are caught in a translocal existence, circulating between Han cities and Tibetan space, and for those Tibetans who choose to build a community in Han cities, their capacity to do so comes at a price: expectations of assimilation, and exposure to discrimination and violence. If, as David Theo Goldberg (1993:185) suggests, “power is in the polis,” the extent to which Tibetans are forced into but excluded from Han cities is a significant form of political subordination. It constitutes a simultaneous effort to concentrate Tibetan elites in Han urban space, while excluding other Tibetans from the city due to their supposed ‘low quality’ (Friedman 2018), and out of fear that they might endanger ‘orderly’ urbanization by forming slums and ghettos (Wallace 2014; Sorace 2014). This is how segregation operates as an aspect of differential inclusion: by enforcing inequality between Tibetan and Han space, and creating barriers to accessing the latter to all but a handful of Tibetans.

## Congregation: Native Towns and the Logic of Lateral Violence

From the settler space of Han cities outside Tibet we now move to native space. And from techniques of segregation, we pass to techniques of ‘congregation’—the process of concentrating dispersed rural populations, whether by coercion or manufactured consent, into condensed settlements (Nemser 2016). Historical examples of this process have been seen in the Scottish highland and lowland clearances, the *reducciones*<sup>9</sup> of Latin America, the removals and reservations of North America, and the missions and government stations of Australia. We seek to explore urbanization in Tibet in relation to these forms and processes of congregation insofar as they are all characterized by a similar logic, which involves the dissolution of rural communities, removal of populations from their homelands, and their reconstitution in a new physical and social context. As both Nemser (2016) and Mumford (2012) point out in their studies of *reducciones* in Hispanophone America, congregation is hence simultaneously constructive and destructive, a theme which we explore below, showing how the reconstitution of community in Tibet’s new cities entails negotiations among Tibetans regarding the form of an emerging pan-Tibetan identity (Roche 2017; Hillman 2018).

The most obvious, and well-studied, example of congregation in the Tibetan context is the resettlement of both pastoralists and high-altitude farmers, which has been an important element of Party-state developmentalism in Tibet, particularly since the start of the Great Western Development Strategy in the early twenty-first century (Bauer 2005; Ptackova 2011; Rogers and Wilmsen 2019). Just as important, but far less-studied, has been the growth of large towns associated with administrative centers of county and prefecture-level governments. These cities typically have populations in the tens of thousands, and include Rong bo (10,000; Longwu), Skye dgu mdo (23,000; Jiegu), Nying khri (54,700; Linzhi), ‘Bar khams (55,000; Maerkang), Chab mdo (116,500; Changdu), Rgyal thang<sup>10</sup> (175,000), and the largest Tibetan-majority city outside of Lhasa, Dar rtse mdo (134,000; Kangding). Towns of this scale are the main target of China’s ‘new type’ urbanization plan. Furthermore, the PRC’s most recent five-year plan called for a 7.11 per cent increase in the

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<sup>9</sup> As Mumford (2012:1) describes, *reduccion* comes “from the Spanish verb *reducer*, meaning to subdue, persuade, or reorder.”

<sup>10</sup> Now officially known as Shangri-La (Hillman 2003).

urbanization rate in ethnic autonomous regions, but only a 1.81 per cent increase in the rate of ethnic minority migration to large cities (State Council 2016), highlighting how the Party-state aims to urbanize the majority of Tibetans within such towns.

Formation of these towns through congregation involves two distinct processes. One is known as *in situ* urbanization,<sup>11</sup> which involves the transformation of rural communities, as both places and populations, into urban sites. It thus involves the transformation, but not displacement, of these communities. The second process involves the migration of people to these towns, typically involving ‘de-agrarianization’ that entails dispossession, displacement, and the partial or complete dissolution of the original rural community (Sargeson 2013).

The *in situ* aspect of congregational urbanization entails the engulfment of pre-existing communities, leading to dispossession of their land and the erasure of communal sovereignty (Makley 2018). *In situ* urbanization typically involves combinations of voluntary and coerced land acquisitions which take place with varying levels of consent and compensation (Tashi Nyima 2011). It also normally involves the physical destruction of rural communities—the houses, laneways, temples, threshing grounds, prayer halls, and so on—to make way for new urban forms, though some aspects of these villages may be retained, with the city being built up around village households.<sup>12</sup> Rural Tibetan communities engulfed by the urban undergo a radical reordering of their social world, which takes place on two planes: the dismantling and resignifying of relations within the community (Makley 2018), and the enforced construction of new and typically unequal relations with immigrant populations (Suzuki and Sonam Wangmo 2017).

The immigrant population of *in situ* cities is recruited and concentrated in a variety of ways, including forced resettlement. Although justified by reference to ecological protection, disaster-prevention, and poverty alleviation (Rogers and Wilmsen 2020), resettlement also serves to meet urbanization targets (Wilmsen 2017). Migrants are also enticed to urban centers through the centralization of important services, such as educational, medical, and government facilities (Tsering

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<sup>11</sup> Zhu et al (2013: 43) define *in situ* urbanization as “...a phenomenon where rural settlements and their populations transform themselves into urban or quasi-urban settlements without much geographical relocation of the residents.”

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the violence of urbanization here is not a case of ‘urbicide’ (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2006)—the destruction of a city—but it is coherent with other forms as architectural violence described by Bevan (2007). What we see is destruction *by* the city rather than destruction *of* the city.

Bum 2018). Economic incentives are also important: urban employment is highly coveted for its material benefits, especially in the public sector, which dominates employment in Tibetan cities and towns (Hillman 2009; Yeh 2013); urban jobs for Tibetans have expanded dramatically in recent years (Hillman 2013). Whether people are settled or seduced into the city, these sites proffer an exchange of life—better health, better conditions, greater ease of living, and so on—for control, surveillance, and socio-cultural transformation (Nemser 2016).

Within these urban congregations, Tibetans are predominant and dominant; they constitute the numerical majority and often a local power bloc. Although Han migration into these towns has been promoted sporadically over the years, it has largely failed; few Han have established themselves in these towns on an intergenerational basis (Hansen 2007; Yeh 2013; Rohlf 2016).<sup>13</sup> Tibetans' demographic dominance is often leveraged against other populations, as seen, for example, in the anti-Muslim movement that swept Tibetan towns in northeast Tibet from the 1990s, and saw widespread boycotts of Muslim businesses by Tibetans, and flared up into violence on several occasions (Makley 2009; Fischer 2005). Mortensen (2016) also describes how, in the city of Rgyal thang, Tibetan racism against ethnic Naxi and Yi residents is a feature of everyday life.

But describing these towns as 'Tibetan-dominated' elides much complexity: both complexity within the Tibetan population, and in the workings of the PRC's colonial governance through urbanization. Differences among Tibetans exist in terms of sectarian affiliation, language, kin-groups, class, regional identities, and allegiance to territorial and protector deities, among other things. For example, in the town of Rong bo, in northeast Tibet, the local Tibetan population speaks three distinct languages (the local variety of Tibetan, as well as languages known as Manegacha and Ngandehua), profess adherence to three different sects (Dge lugs pa, Rnying ma pa, and Bon), and also divide themselves between valley-dwellers, mountain farmers, and pastoralists, each tied to different statuses and idealized identities. Not surprisingly, then, as these populations are congregated into new towns, urbanization has entailed an unprecedented, state-mediated renegotiation of Tibetan identity

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<sup>13</sup> Han migration to these places has failed for a number of reasons, including the collapse of state-led agricultural projects that did not take into account the plateau environment (Rohlf 2016), as well as the economic conditions of Tibetan regions relative to the Han heartlands.

(Hillman 2018, 2009) at the level of public discourses and representations, as well as at the individual and interpersonal level.

This renegotiation of identity is not necessarily a project of effervescent comingling entailing conviviality and cosmopolitanism; it also involves the production of new contours of marginalization, exclusion, stigmatization, and discrimination *among* Tibetans. Language demonstrates this acutely. Speakers of Tibet's demographically and politically minoritized languages are often outnumbered by Tibetan speakers in these towns (Roche and Suzuki 2018), and urbanization has become a driver of language loss (Roche and Yudru Tsomu 2018; Tashi Nyima and Suzuki 2019; Dawa Drolma 2020). Furthermore, these languages are excluded from all state institutions, and their speakers are typically denigrated and stigmatized by Tibetans who speak languages that are marked as more standard, and which are imagined as having a more direct relationship to Tibetan identity (Sonam Lhundrop, Suzuki and Roche 2019). One indicator of how hegemonic Tibetanness comes to dominate in towns can be seen in protests held by Ngandehua-speaking Tibetans in the town of Rong bo in 2012. As they marched from their village to the town, protestors carried banners opposing police brutality, and in their chants, described police as murderers; both chants and banners used Tibetan, which is, for Ngandehua-speakers, the language of the local state.<sup>14</sup>

Relations between speakers of minoritized languages and mainstream Tibetans is but one example of how cities can become sites of lateral conflict among Tibetans (Mortensen 2016). In cases of other forms of difference—religious, sectarian, regional, communal, migrant versus local, and so on—urbanization entails power-laden struggles than benefit some Tibetans at the expense of others, often tied up with the production of material inequalities as a result of state-led development (Makley 2018); these inequalities tend to privilege local populations over rural-to-urban migrants (Wilmsen 2018). Underpinning all of this is the Party-state's willingness to allow such conflicts to play out, so long as they remain within the confines of 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes 1992) and do not escalate into large-scale

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<sup>14</sup> Although English language sources do not describe the protestors' background (<https://savetibet.org/tibetans-in-rebkong-gather-to-protest-police-brutality/>), Tibetan sources clearly state that protestors were from the Ngandehua-speaking community of Seng ge gshong (<https://www.voatibetan.com/a/protest-in-rebkong-/1485909.html>). Video of the protests, including the chants, are at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPTT6D6oMVU&feature=youtu.be>

conflicts, or entail critique of the central government (rather than the local state, see Tenzin Jinba 2014). Tolerance towards such conflicts is highly significant, given the state's highly punitive response to conflict and protest *against* the state. As we explore below, such unchecked conflict is central to the Party-state's project of governing through differentiated inclusion.

The built environment is an important aspect of this lateral violence. Struggles over Tibetan identity are embedded in an urban form that presents the city as a spectacular materialization of Tibetanness. Rather than the ethnically anonymous tiles and concrete of an earlier wave of urbanization in the 80s and 90s, the urban form of contemporary Tibetan towns is rich with indexical cues of Tibetanness. These range from the subtle, such as color schemes and decorative motifs (Figure 1), to the spectacular, such as giant prayer wheels and gilded statues (Figure 2). Primarily intended to spur on the profitable consumption of ethnic difference by Han tourists (Hillman 2009, 2003), as part of a broader strategy to make tourism a cornerstone of the Tibetan economy (Yeh and Coggins 2014), this standardized presentation of homogenous Tibetanness is also intended to index the Party-state's gift of tolerance for ethnic difference, and promotion of ethnic unity.<sup>15</sup> It thus creates what Bulag (2010:443) refers to as a "simulacrum of cultural efflorescence" that seemingly belies the underlying assimilatory dynamics. While ostensibly recognizing and respecting diversity, this superficial branding of the semiotic landscape serves to erase local distinctions and prior relations of sovereignty, in much the same way that cities in settler colonies erase Indigenous presence (Moreton-Robinson 2015).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province, the number of annual visitors grew from 43,000 in 1997 to over 3 million in 2007 following a successful tourism marketing campaign centered on "Shangri-la" (Hillman 2010: 274). Today tourism is one of the largest industries in China's Tibetan areas.

<sup>16</sup> An important exception to the pattern outlined in this section are the cities of Golmud and Delingha, and others, in northern and Western Qinghai. These towns are essentially Han settler towns inside Tibet. They are characterized by the demographic dominance of non-Tibetan populations—Han, Hui, and other ethnic groups—as well as large military garrisons. Tibetans living in these cities are, despite being within Tibetan territory, inhabiting non-Tibetan sites. These cities are characterized by "audaciously expansive" (Edmonds 2010: 66) forms: broad streets in regular grids that radiate from a political center, a pattern common in modern Chinese urban planning (Abramson, 2008). Most of these cities operate primarily as bases for resource extraction and logistical hubs for the processing and transport of natural resources.





*Figure 1. These two photographs show how the built environment is Tibetanized in the context of congregation. Features of this 'Tibetanesque' style include the use of brown and beige and the styling of the window lintels. The upper picture is in Guza town, Sichuan, and the lower is in Rong bo, Qinghai.*





*Figure 2. A giant prayer wheel in Rgyal thang marks the space as visibly Tibetan, but also ties it to the nation. The (partial) text in Tibetan here discusses the need of ethnic groups to work together to achieve development. Photograph by Ruth Gamble.*

Congregation in Tibetan towns thus contributes to colonial governance through differential inclusion. Whereas segregation produces large-scale separation and hierarchicalization between Tibetans and Han, urban congregation produces and exacerbates inequalities among Tibetans. These inequalities become sites of lateral violence that the state tolerates, and even provokes, in order to produce a homogenized Tibetanness that is available for consumption by Han tourists. In the process, communal solidarities and sovereignties are destroyed, while the Party-state mobilizes this violence to pursue a goal of ‘double assimilation’ (Hirsch 2005): a process whereby assimilation is carried out both *within* the minority group, and between the minority and majority. The result is a form of coercive inclusion, where social and material urban forms forcibly and selectively reproduce difference, thus creating and exploiting inequalities among Tibetans.

## **Negation: Administrative Transformation and the Logic of Hierarchy**

Patrick Wolfe (2006) described invasion as ‘a structure, not an event.’ He was referring, in part, to the ways in which the seizure of land from native populations during invasion is rendered permanent through various legal measures—not simply the assertion of alien sovereignty, but also the creation of differentiated legal regimes for relating racialized populations to land. In this section, we examine how urbanization in Tibet acts as a way of legally transforming land, and altering its place, and that of its inhabitants, within the Party-state. As parallels from the broader literature on colonialism, we can think about urbanization as a change in legal regimes similar to the 1887 Dawes Act in the USA (which enabled the division and privatization of communally held Native American lands), the impacts of the Native Title regime in Australia (which established a legal distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ groups in relation to land; Vincent 2017), and the Reindeer Acts in Sweden (which restricted the extent of Sami territory by limiting it exclusively to reindeer-herding territories; Axelsson 2010). In this section we argue that urbanization serves to negate pre-existing ethnic autonomy and relegate Tibetan urban land and its inhabitants to the lower rungs of a national hierarchy.

These maneuvers are enabled by the fact that urbanization in the PRC today is partially driven by administrative design. By re-purposing and re-zoning territorial space for economic and political purposes, the Party-state is compelling the development of new urban forms. New cities and towns can be created by rescaling the administrative status of formerly rural areas, or through the merger of spatial units. This process of reclassifying and rescaling territory as urban is what Liu et al (2012) term ‘administrative urbanization’ and Carolyn Cartier (2015) refers to as ‘territorial urbanization.’

Successive administrations have engaged in the adjustment of administrative divisions (*xingzheng quhua tixi*) to reorder and rationalize state territories within a complex spatial hierarchy of power and authority (Cartier 2011; 2013a; Fitzgerald 2002). At present, there are four tiers of administrative division in the PRC: 34 provincial-level units; 334 prefecture-level units; 2851 county-level units and 39,888 township-level units. Urban administration—ranging from massive metropolises such as Chongqing to sparsely populated towns such as Gser thar in Sichuan’s Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture—exist at the top three tiers, creating a hierarchy of urban spaces which are linked chiefly to administrative authority rather than

economic, demographic or infrastructural features (Chung and Lam 2009). The higher the administrative rank, the more power and resources are delegated by the central government, and the greater the prestige (Hillman 2013).

Yet urban centers of the same administrative rank also vary greatly in size and sophistication, something that is particularly obvious in frontier regions of Western China where some 'cities' possess a permanent urban population of less than 50,000 people, and only a few thousand in the case of remote 'towns.' The rescaling of administrative divisions in the PRC is a non-transparent and highly contested political process that has evolved over time and is thus difficult to track and analyze (Cartier 2015), resulting in a patchwork of urban assemblages that territorializes and deterritorialize space over time with local elites negotiating the terms and conditions of how a particular site 'becomes urban' (Tomba 2017).

Through the process of administrative urbanization, the PRC has, over the last three decades, dramatically increased the number of cities and towns at different administrative tiers. The number of cities, for example, has increased nearly 250 per cent since 1978, to 673 today. The creation of towns has been even more dramatic: there are now 21,116 towns in the PRC. Many of these cities and towns include both concentrated residential areas as well as agricultural (even 'vacant') land, meaning formal urban status does not neatly equate with substantive urban form. Territorial urbanization represents an administrative enclosure that is aspirational in its transformative potential (Yeh 2013; Bulag 2002), marking space and its inhabitants as embryonically urban. As a result, much of the officially designated urban space in Tibet is still rural, poor, and sparsely populated.

Qinghai Province demonstrates the scale of these processes. In 1978, there was only a single city (Xining) and six towns in the province, with the vast majority of its Tibetan population living inside one of the six (chiefly rural) autonomous prefectures that comprised over 97 per cent of Qinghai's territory. While these autonomous regions still exist, they now include five new cities and 143 towns. In fact, prefecture- and county-level cities now comprise 32.26 per cent of Qinghai's total territory, and this statistic does not include many smaller towns such as Yanshiping, one of the highest elevation year-round settlements, with a little over 3,000 people, located along the strategic Xining-Lhasa railway line (Luo 2016).

Under Chinese law, cities are not entitled to ethnic autonomous rights. Since its founding in 1949, the PRC has granted limited autonomous powers to regions

where ethnic minorities such as Tibetans are territorially concentrated. Autonomy was greatly restricted in that CCP policies had to be adhered to, but autonomous localities were given some discretion in the implementation of those policies (Hillman 2014). However, the PRC's Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy (1984, revised 2001) does not mention cities. It states that regional ethnic autonomy can only be exercised at the provincial, prefecture and county levels. Cities, regardless of their administrative rank, "are not supposed to be ethnic, or autonomous" (Bulag 2002: 202), and therefore urbanization is a "means to overcome autonomy" (198).

Most of the new cities and towns in Western China are located within ethnic autonomous units at the provincial level (as in the case of the TAR), the prefecture level (such as Rnga ba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province), and the county level (such as Dpa' ris Tibetan Autonomous County in Gansu Province); yet this autonomy is stripped away when Tibetans either move into cities and towns inside these autonomous regions, or have their autonomous units placed under the direct administration of a nearby city. The reach of this urban transformation is extensive: six out of the TAR's prefectures—home to 97 per cent of the region's population—are officially prefecture-level cities. In Yunnan, Sichuan, and Gansu, the seat of all Tibetan autonomous prefectures is designated as a county-level city. At present, 53.5 per cent of all Tibetan territory,<sup>17</sup> including 75 per cent of the TAR, is administered by 'urban' units of territorial government.

The complex history of administrative transformation is illustrated by the case of Dpa' ris Tibetan Autonomous County, which became the PRC's first ethnic autonomous region (county) on 6 May 1950 (Wang 2018; XZQH 2016). Strategically located in the Hexi Corridor that links Shanghai with Rotterdam along the Eurasian land bridge, two highways (312 National Road and G30 Lianhuo Expressway) and a dual-track railroad now pass through Dpa' ris. The new transport infrastructure has dramatically altered Dpa' ris's landscape. In 2010, Dpa' ris County had a permanent population of 174,793 of which around 35 per cent were Tibetan (XZQH 2016). Despite the fact that most residents are still classified as rural, more than 74 per cent now live inside one of the county's nine towns, and this does not include the nearly 40,000 residents that are living and working outside the county.

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<sup>17</sup> This figure was calculated by the authors using 2010 census data, and does not include the two autonomous counties of Muli and Dpa' ris.

Dpa' ris is now a 'directly-administered county' under the jurisdiction of the neighboring prefecture-level city of Wuwei, which (administratively) absorbs its autonomous, ethnic and rural status, undermining its autonomy. With its snow-capped mountains and famous white yaks, Dpa' ris's ethnic otherness is still available for Han and foreign tourist consumption, while its former nomads are now resettled in peri-urban housing estates. Since 2012, county officials claim to have resettled sixty-four thousand individuals in new urban settlements, creating in the eyes of Party officials a 'win-win' situation for the fragile ecology and economic prosperity of these former pastoralists (Lü 2018).

The negation of ethnic autonomy through administrative urbanization also serves to relegate Tibetan territory to the lower ranks of national hierarchies. Within the PRC, taxonomies of urban rank exist alongside administrative divisions, with frequent popular reference to different tiered cities in China. This unofficial system of city ranks is driven by media outlets and state-owned enterprises who publish yearly lists of Chinese cities using a range of different indicators from hard economic statistics to soft livability measures. In western China, Chengdu and Xian are considered 'first-tier cities.' Lanzhou is an example of a second-tier city; Xining is a third-tier city, and Wuwei a fifth-tier city. Most of the county-level cities in Tibetan areas are ranked as fifth or sixth-tier cities. These ranks purport to quantify the physical and cultural qualities of urban spaces, as a way of rationally directing capital and human talent up ladders of civility.

Notions of civility also inform a moral hierarchy of cities in the PRC. The CCP has long evaluated work units (offices), hotels, roads, airports, among other infrastructure, presenting awards of civility (e.g., 'civilized work unit,' 'civilized hotel') to places that meet Party norms of civility. Now there are prestigious awards for 'civilized cities' (Cliff 2016). Through the 'national civilized city' scheme, the Party-state has created a much larger set of criteria (across over one hundred categories of evaluation, from clean toilets to clean officials) for determining which cities meet the required level of civility and should be awarded the honorary title (Cartier 2013b). With much fanfare, Lhasa received national civilized city status in 2015, despite being ranked a lowly fourth tier city by Yicai Magazine's 2019 city rankings (Yicai 2019). The pursuit of 'civilized city' status is used by city officials to guide and direct citizen's behavior, instructions for which can be found in ubiquitous street propaganda. CCP requirements for civilized, orderly and obedient behavior is

also reflected in the growing number of state-sponsored ‘social credit’ schemes, which score citizens’ actions according to a range of CCP-determined metrics.

This ranking and transformation of territories and sites is ultimately about the evaluating and transformation of persons. Through urbanization, the Party-state seeks to upgrade the ‘bio-quality’ (*suzhi*) of its ethnic inhabitants as well as the ‘physical quality’ (*zhiliang*) of its urban infrastructure. Cities are sites of cultivation and disciplining, where citizens’ innate physical, mental and emotional character are altered and transformed into that of an ideal urbanite (Murphy 2004). Urbanization is thus a key modality of what Delia Lin (2017: 52) calls “transformational citizenship”: the reshaping of “incomplete and insufficiently capable” rural, peripheral, and ethnic subjectivities into modern, competent and loyal citizens.

The legal transformation of land through urbanization therefore serves to negate pre-existing autonomous status, thus cementing the structural and legal nature of invasion and the obliteration of prior sovereignty. An important aspect of this negation is the relegation of certain spaces and populations to subordinate ranks within national hierarchies, aiming not at permanent stasis, but constant, gradual, orderly movement up the Party-state’s hierarchy of civility. Therefore, administrative urbanization encodes urban space as an evolutionary ladder, seeking to systematically draw Tibetans towards normative and cultural centers as they progress toward higher tiers of civility, a structure which exemplifies the unequal logic of differential inclusion.

## **Conclusion: Colonial Urbanization and Differential Inclusion in Tibet and Beyond**

We have distinguished three different processes in the urbanization of Tibet—segregation, congregation and negation—and argued that each of these processes demonstrates what Yen Le Espiritu calls ‘differential inclusion,’ which coercively but unequally integrates Tibet and Tibetans into the PRC. Segregation refers to the creation and maintenance of inequalities between Han and Tibetan space, and the forced, partial, and conditional inclusion of Tibetans within Han space. Congregation refers to the construction of towns in Tibetan space and the collection of diverse Tibetan populations into these settlements, resulting in new contours of lateral

violence as an integral element of identity formation processes among Tibetans. And finally, the process of negation refers to the ways in which the Party-state deploys administrative urbanization to undermine ethnic autonomy and integrate Tibetan territory and its people into a national hierarchy of ‘quality,’ while relegating it to the lowest rungs.

These three distinct processes are integrated into a coherent strategy of colonial governance by the Party-state, one that seeks to ‘police’ Tibet, in Foucault’s sense, integrating the territory and its people into the nation-state through the macro-scale ordering of spaces and subjectivities. In much the same way that the processes of segregation, congregation, and negation are characterized by differential inclusion, so is the overall colonial program for governing Tibet through urbanization. This strategy creates a spatial, legal and cultural hierarchy that is used to sort Tibetans into different populations and which, although it includes aspects of assimilation, also requires the maintenance of certain distinctions.

This strategy valorizes the urban form and seeks to distribute the population spatially in accordance with a person’s supposed ‘bio-quality,’ with populations becoming progressively higher quality as they advance through tiers of urban space. The unassimilated distinctions of intra-Tibetan diversity is relegated to rural space, a violently homogenized pan-Tibetan population is consigned to towns in Tibetan space, and elites who are willing to assimilate, pass, or put up with discrimination and abuse, are sorted into Han urban space. This subordinates all Tibetans to the standards of a normative Han center (Murphy 2004) but does not aim to entirely eliminate Tibetanness, but rather leverage it to drive consumption, social stability, and nation-building.

Beyond Tibet, we see important parallels and contrasts at play in the PRC’s other major colonial possession, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Segregation, in places, has been taken to an extreme end. Coerced inclusion continues to be an important practice of the Party-state, including forced labor and educational migration through the ‘Xinjiang Aid’ program (Leibold 2018; Xu et. al. 2020). But beyond this, segregation has intensified to include exclusion and expulsion of Uyghurs from Han-dominated cities, and more recently, mass incarceration in enormous detention and re-education centers, some the size of small towns (Leibold 2019). We therefore see an intensified production of bifurcated space and widening divide between settler and native zones in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, urbicide has played a

greater role in the process of congregation in Xinjiang, with the violent refiguration of urban neighborhoods (Steenberg and Rippa 2019) and once private domestic spaces (Grose 2020) in order to reduce rather than highlight ethnic difference. Additionally, we also note that urbanization as negation has been used in Xinjiang in ways that partially mirror what has been undertaken in Tibet (Bovingdon 2010), although the complexity of Xinjiang's administrative patchwork and ethnic categories exceeds that seen in Tibet. Overall, the distinct ways in which segregation, congregation, and negation are carried out in Xinjiang are suggestive of a far more impatient and coercive form of 'differential inclusion'.

The similarities and differences between urbanization in Xinjiang and Tibet suggest that the model of colonial governance through urbanization that we have proposed here is flexible enough to be extended to other sites within the PRC, but also robust enough to retain explanatory power and enable comparison. We hope that future research will bear out the applicability of the model to other sites where urbanization in the PRC is increasingly forming a cornerstone of colonial governance. We also hope that this model, derived from the study of other colonial context outside the PRC, enables broader comparison between sites of colonial urbanization, and inspires further research on how the urban and the colonial intersect in practices of governance and domination.



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## Appendix 1

**Table 1: Ethnic minority urbanization rate, 2010**

Area	Ethnic minority population (millions)	Ethnic minority urban population (millions)	Urbanization rate among ethnic minorities (%)	Percentage of changes since 2000
National	112	36	32.84	9.48
northeast	3.40	1.60	47.09	5.63
East	1.10	0.65	58.79	15.78
Central	1.80	0.64	35.72	12.27
northwest	4.25	1.34	31.42	8.52
Gansu	2.41	0.70	29.17	12.04
Qinghai	2.64	0.83	31.31	13.48
southwest	9.08	2.27	25.02	8.79
Sichuan	4.91	0.82	16.61	6.46
TAR	2.76	0.48	17.48	1.92

Source: Jiao (2014). China conducts a census every 10 years. The 2010 census provides the most recent available data.

## Appendix 2

**Table 2: Urbanization Rates, 2000-2010**

Group	2000				2010				% increase towns hip rate	% Increased urbaniz ation rate
	Urban %	town %	Urban/town %	Rural %	Urban %	town %	Urban/town %	Rural %		
National	23.5	13.4	36.9	63.1	30.3	20.0	50.3	49.7	13.4	6.8
Han	24.6	13.5	38.2	61.8	31.6	20.2	51.9	48.1	13.7	7.0
Mongols	15.8	16.9	32.7	67.3	22.6	23.6	46.2	53.8	13.5	6.8
Tibetans	4.1	8.7	12.8	87.2	5.0	14.7	19.7	80.3	6.9	0.9
Uyghurs	10.3	9.1	19.4	80.6	11.5	10.8	22.4	77.6	3.0	1.2

Source: Ma (2015: 22)