PART III

CONTESTED LANDSCAPES

Harmonious Society
and Sovereign Territories
This last section probes new kinds of environmental subjects and the new natures that they speak for and from in borderland regions now under the governing regime of the Harmonious Society. The building of a “harmonious society” in China, announced by Hu Jintao as a guiding principle for government policy in 2005, was initially aimed at addressing the threat to regime stability posed by the tens of thousands of protests that erupt across China every year over issues such as rural land expropriation, illegal fees and taxes, environmental pollution, and labor disputes. Along with the construction of the New Socialist Countryside (Shehui Zhuyi Xin Nongcun), launched in 2006, the Harmonious Society signified an intention to move away from the model of economic growth at all costs that had dominated China for more than a decade and toward a more “people first” development model that would address growing rural-urban and regional disparities as well as environmental problems. Hu defined it as a society “which gives full play to modern ideas like democracy, rule of law, fairness, justice, vitality, stability, orderliness, and harmonious co-existence between humankind and nature” (CCP 2007). Concrete policy measures of the New Socialist Countryside have included the elimination of agricultural taxes, the extension of the rural cooperative medical system, and elimination of tuition fees for compulsory education. However, in the priority areas of education, labor productivity, living standards, availability of medical personnel, and access to potable drinking water, results have been modest at best, with the most progress made in China’s wealthy eastern provinces (Guo Xiang-Yu et al. 2009).

Though stability has been at the core of the Harmonious Society since its inception, early formulations made relatively few references to minority areas. Setting a deadline of 2020 for the achievement of the Harmonious Society, the Sixth Plenum stressed the Party’s role in leading the “Chinese people of all ethnic groups” but did not emphasize minorities beyond a call for the promotion of “the harmony of relationship between . . . ethnic groups” and the statement that the “ethnic foundation for social harmony should be consolidated” (China.org 2006). Instead of concrete measures for promoting interethnic harmony, the Harmonious Society is supposed to work on minorities through development subsidies, which are assumed to improve their livelihoods and make them grateful to both the state and the “elder brother” Han. This gratitude in turn is presumed to produce “stability”—the absence of challenges to state power—and an enhanced sense of belonging to the Chinese (Zhonghua) nation and thus improved interethnic relations.
These presumptions have proved difficult to maintain. In 2008, an unprecedented wave of more than one hundred protests across the expanse of the Tibetan Plateau, carried out by rural and urban Tibetans, laity and clergy, young and old, cadres and peasants, caught officials by surprise and provided stark evidence of a failure to impose stability on the state’s terms. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the protests were peaceful, official media focused on violent unrest in Lhasa, whipping up Han nationalism against Tibetans, to the detriment of actual interethnic relations. These protests and other apparent manifestations of instability have been met with two kinds of state responses. First, they set off further attempts to create harmony through the “gift” of development (Yeh 2013). At the same time, those who challenge the existence of the Harmonious Society are relegated to what Giorgio Agamben has called a zone of indistinction between violence and law, the “threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence” (1998, 32). The increasing deployment of the sovereign element of the sovereignty-discipline-government triad since the protests of 2008 has been evident in the intensified militarization and surveillance of the Tibetan Plateau, as well as increasingly frequent periods in which Tibetan areas have been completely closed off to foreigners, and mobility and daily life practices restricted for local residents. Further heightening the state of emergency, between 2009 and the time this book was going to press in the spring of 2014, at least 125 Tibetans self-immolated, mostly in the Sino-Tibetan border areas of Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai (ICT 2013). The state has responded with further clampdowns, including fatal police shootings of unarmed demonstrators and bystanders, and the closing off of large areas of the Tibetan Plateau.

While the intentions of all those who have chosen to self-immolate cannot be fully known, the acts are, if nothing else, both intersubjective and social, and a fiery reclamation of sovereignty over individual bodies, in a time and space of greatly heightened struggle over sovereignty at all scales, from an imagined Tibetan territory writ large to the realm of the personal self. As governmentality in the Harmonious Society assumes the form of the ecological state, and indigenous culture is treated as a renewable and marketable resource, Tibetans (and other minority minzu) are reviving, restoring, and reinventing indigenous places, cultural practices, and identities. In this process, they are compelled as never before to reckon with a crisis of consent (in the Gramscian sense), having to choose whether to create new Tibetan subjectivities, culture(s), and landscapes or to refuse to participate in the cul-
tural politics of a colonial system. If the terms of participation require, or are understood to require, the loss of national identity and inevitable assimilation into an undifferentiated multiethnic nation (one that ultimately co-opt[s] dissent and obliterates difference), ritual acts of suicide may be embraced as the most potent offering to the cause of Tibetan sovereignty. In effect, those in the borderlands who are not compelled by hopes of indigenous reterritorialization are using their bodies to publicly insist on not being “made to live” under a regime in which even their own attempts to reclaim sovereignty are appropriated by the state as part of the Great Western Development strategy. The chapters in this section are, by contrast, about those who have chosen other ways of navigating the current crisis of consent.

Crackdowns and protests have happened simultaneously with the promotion of the Harmonious Society, which thus works not unlike the older term minzu tuanjie, or “unity of the minzu,” aptly described as a “hegemonic management device” (Bulag 2002). It names both a goal and a condition already assumed to have been reached. Violations of the appearance of harmony are eliminated through the exercise of sovereign power. The Harmonious Society has been promoted simultaneously with the decline of opportunities for interethnic cooperation through civil society, particularly through the NGO form. This is ironic only if the Harmonious Society is interpreted as being aimed at improving ethnic relations, rather than as a tool for reinforcing state territorial sovereignty. Instead, the Harmonious Society should be understood as a move away from an emphasis on actual interethnic relations and toward a focus on governing China’s minorities through sovereign power. It signals a stifling of the emergent potentials of subaltern cosmopolitanism, an ethic of living together with strangers, toward a reinforced statist multiculturalism (see Mayaram 2009; Yeh 2009c). At the same time, it deepens neoliberalism and the power of the market.

In chapter 8, Chris Coggins highlights and reflects on his collaborative work with Gesang Zeren, a descendant of aristocratic chieftains who was heavily persecuted by the local state for most of his formative and young adult years but who later became the founder of the Hamugu Village Indigenous Conservation Area (Hamugu Minjian Baohuqu) and the Hamugu Village Center for the Protection of Indigenous Ecology and Culture (Hamugu Minjian Shengtai Wenhua Baohu Zhongxin) in Shangrila County, Yunnan. The author’s field research on supernatural landscapes in ten villages of Shangrila County shows how fully geopiety is woven into the routines of everyday life, and why it is seminal in the politics of nature, territory, per-
sonhood, and economic development in Hamugu Village and beyond. From 2004 to 2011, Gesang’s purposeful fusion of native and nonnative environmental discourses has given rise to an alternative conception of modernity that foregrounds Tibetan territorial identity as a function of reciprocal relations with nonhuman beings animating the local landscape, while placing Tibetan nationalism within the contingent conditions of the Great Western Development strategy and its call to “develop a locally specific economy” (fazhan jingji tese) through “sustainable development.” After 2008, his efforts to develop Hamugu as a model for sustainable development subsided significantly, but his conceptions of alternative ecological modernity continued to be no less trenchant. While there are important points of incommensurability between Tibetan supernature, with its animate landscapes, and contemporary nature conservation of a formal scientific kind, there is much to be learned from Gesang’s narratives about the ways in which the two can be brought into conceptual harmony.

In chapter 9, Charlene Makley explores through her research with Amdo Tibetans in Qinghai’s Rebgong (Ch. Tongren) the implications of contestations over the authenticity of Tibetan deity mediums (Tib. lhawa) in the context of intensifying state-sponsored development pressures accompanying the Great Western Development strategy in the first decade of the 2000s. This study shows that the personhood of what might be thought of as “natural” features—in this case zhidak (territorial deities often abiding within mountains)—constitutes a field of resistance to state sovereignty, especially when it collides with (re)inventions of spiritual landscapes that animate local identities and offer new forms of power in borderland regions riven by conflicting narratives of moral and material value. Makley argues that it is the compatibility of shifting zhidak relations with the desires, power, and violence inherent to state-sponsored capitalism, and the threat of their escaping state, Buddhist monastic, and household disciplines, that have placed local officials in an adversarial relationship with a powerful genius loci and engendered new contestations over the mediums whose bodies “host” the zhidak on behalf of the village.

In the final chapter, Emily Yeh examines the rise of a particular kind of environmental subject, “the Green Tibetan,” at the conjuncture of contingent articulations between local Tibetan communities, Chinese environmentalists, and transnational actors early in the first decade of the 2000s. In what proved to be an ephemeral social formation, Tibetan culture became the agent for the salvation of China’s nature, particularly in the Sino-Tibetan
borderlands. These interethnic and translocal networks exemplify a kind of harmonious society, but not one that could endure the events of 2008, when the state’s Harmonious Society became hegemonic. Yeh focuses on her interactions with Rinchen Samdrup, who rose from being a spokesperson for a new regard for nature in his home village in Chamdo to a renowned exemplar of the Green Tibetan; he was later tried and imprisoned by the Chinese government for attempting to enforce anti-poaching laws meant to protect the nation’s wildlife resources. Yeh argues that Rinchen Samdrup’s case is emblematic of a (re)turn to governing China’s minorities by way of sovereign power and its attendant “statist multiculturalism” and neoliberal governmentality.

All three chapters describe landscapes in which the Harmonious Society initiative and struggles for Tibetan sovereignty simultaneously (or successively) converge, conflict, and vie for supremacy. These landscapes inform and embody ideological and cosmological conflicts that involve the visible and the invisible, the animate and the inanimate, the inert matter of nature as marketable resource and the animate matter of supernature, where deities abide within networks of social relations. The supernatural cannot be appropriated for mercenary or utilitarian ends alone, which provides one explanation for the less-than-harmonious relations between modern conservation efforts and indigenous sacred landscape practices. This is a critical source of tension between Tibetans’ efforts to promote grassroots, indigenous nature conservation and the ecological state’s will to sovereignty through zonation and commodification (described in chs. 4–7 in this volume). The latter holds a powerful monopoly on the economy of scale that underwrites nearly all transnational nature conservation schemes, whereas the former holds the potential to radically reconfigure landscape ecology so that it encompasses the human and the nonhuman in dialectical embrace. All three chapters show that these potentialities may persist in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands for some time to come, but only if the Harmonious Society or the policies that succeed it promote just and serious intercultural engagement.

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