

# Tropes of Indolence and the Cultural Politics of Development in Lhasa, Tibet

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Tibetans in Lhasa negotiate development, as a hegemonic project, through idioms animated by situated practices and historically sedimented memories. Two related idioms through which development is experienced are a pervasive trope of Tibetan indolence and one that describes Tibetans as being spoiled. A Gramscian analysis of contradictory consciousness is critical to understanding the trope of indolence, which is both a performative speech act and a reference to patterns of labor and time allocation. The trope is informed by contemporary state development discourse and national value-codings of “quality” under economic reform, as well as culturally, historically, and religiously constituted notions of proper work. These idioms tie together ambivalence about multiple aspects of life as transformed by development, including underemployment, urbanization, and chemically intensive agriculture. Though culturally specific, these idioms of development are not “merely cultural.” Instead, they are shaped by specific policies for economic development and political control in the Tibet Autonomous Region. These idioms, in turn, also shape possibilities for maneuver within the larger trajectory of reform and development. This analysis builds on the work of geographers, anthropologists, and others who have recently argued that conceptualizations of development as a monolithic and globally uniform discourse elide the cultural effects of development as well as the grounded practices through which it is enacted and contested. *Key Words: China, cultural politics, development, ethnography, Tibet.*

Development is the foundation of resolving Tibet’s problems. We must build Tibet into a better place through *hard work* [emphasis added], develop new businesses that can help people become affluent, accelerate the pace of development, improve the quality of development, make constant efforts to expand the capacity for self-accumulation and self-development . . . firmly seize the precious opportunities created by the country’s strategy of developing western China . . . firmly handle the two important projects—development and stability—ensure Tibet’s leaps-and-bounds economic and social development . . . and work hard to build . . . [an] affluent, civilized and harmonious socialist new Tibet.

—Hu Jintao, President of the People’s Republic of China and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (BBC, 6 March 2006)

Everywhere else in the world, people have to work all day, every day, all year round, but we Tibetans only work for four months and then spend eight months sleeping. . . . Tibetans are hopeless in terms of development. We sit around all day, don’t want to work hard.

Tibetans just learn bad things from the Chinese. These days [Tibetans] steal, lie, and cheat. They don’t learn any of the good things. Tibetans don’t see the bigger picture, [Tibetans] are satisfied with what little they have.

—Tibetan businessman, June 2004

Soon we’ll be so developed, we won’t even need to eat!

—Tibetan resident of a periurban village near Lhasa, July 2002

Since the beginning of economic reform, and particularly since the announcement of the *Xibu da-kaifa*, or “Open Up the West” campaign, in 2000, “development” has been a favored subject of state discourse in Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the primary justification for the Chinese government’s control in Tibet was once liberation from feudalism and the creation of a socialist future, economic development and the delivery of a comfortable and prosperous society (Chinese: *xiaokang shehui*) now form the major pillar on which the legitimacy of its authority rests. This requires a delicate balancing act, in which the state stresses those achievements in development that have already been attained, but also points out the great gaps that can only be addressed through further state intervention and the self-cultivation of Tibetans as desiring subjects of development. This focus on development is evident in many policy statements from China’s top leaders, such as Hu Jintao’s recent speech asserting that “development is the foundation of resolving Tibet’s problems,” and an article that appeared in the *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), stating:

Whenever one mentions Tibet, one usually associates it with backwardness, with being closed and with barrenness. . . . Tibet [has] a very, very long way to go for its economic development. . . . But this is no reason for Tibet to be content with the present situation and not to think of making progress. . . . Backwardness is not terrifying. Being geographically closed is not terrifying. What is terrifying is rigid and conservative thinking and the psychology of idleness.

—(*People's Daily* 1994)

According to these and other formulations of CCP ideology, Tibet's lack of development, its pathetic place along the spectrum of China's provinces, is the product of Tibetan indolence—Tibetans' "closed and conservative concepts" and "idea of doing nothing," all of which must be urgently overcome in a "great tide of large-scale development" (Chen Kuiyuan 2000).

Reminders of development as an unachieved but absolutely necessary goal are everywhere in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). White-character slogans boldly emblazoned on red banners admonish Tibetans to "Deepen reform, expand opening up, accelerate development, protect stability" (2001); other messages appear on posters with blue sky and snow-capped mountains in the background, chastising, "Only development is the correct principle" and "Support Tibet's economic development, for all-around construction of a prosperous society" (2004). Development does not circulate only in visual displays, leaders' speeches, policy documents, and academic conferences. It also finds its way into the intimate social spaces of the home and the teahouse, as the subject of everyday conversation, black humor, and ironic banter, which sometimes sarcastically exaggerates the eventual transformative power of development, as with the suggestion that, once truly developed, Tibetans will even be freed from the bodily constraint of needing to eat. More frequently, these redeployments of development by its subjects take the form of claims that Tibetans are lazy and "spoiled," attributes that constantly defer their achievement of developed status. Although these idioms may appear to be straightforward reflections of state discourse, this article will show through ethnographic analysis that they in fact far exceed its boundaries.

Seductive and powerful, development is one of the most influential and defining ideas of our time (Perreault 2003). It has come to seem perfectly natural and thus has had a profound effect on the structuring of socioeconomic transformations around the world. In the 1990s, a number of geographers and anthropologists drew insights from poststructuralism, and particularly the works of Michel Foucault, to analyze development as

first and foremost a regime of knowledge and power emanating from the West, a set of discursive relations that enframes and creates more objects for development intervention (Escobar 1995). Some scholars have traced the birth of the "age of development" to Harry Truman's inaugural speech in 1949 (Esteva 1992), and the creation of the "Third World" shortly after the end of World War II (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995), while others have traced it back to state practices rooted in nineteenth-century Europe (Cowen and Shenton 1995).

Critics have noted that these postdevelopment approaches share "debilitating elements of the structuralist logic [they] wish to transcend" (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003, 27), and thus risk substituting neoliberal or Marxist economism with discursive determinism (Moore 2000, 657; also Li 1999; Bebbington 2000; Blaikie 2000; Hart 2001; Curry 2003). Rather than seeing development as a universal "machine" (Ferguson 1994) that acts in the same way everywhere, development is better conceived of as a set of specific projects with their own histories and characteristics. The insistence on the West as the privileged, originary source of development and its meanings can be sustained only "by holding at bay the immense evidence on the polyvocal, polylocal nature of development performances and appropriations" (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003, 29).

The production of development in China has been underexplored, particularly by geographers, despite China's history as a colonizing center with its own civilizing missions. Examining the specificities of its development project does not, however, imply that the project is isolated and proceeds untouched through an unfolding of its own culturally determined trajectory (cf. Hart 2002, 817). Instead, it is precisely through spatial interconnections with other places that it takes shape. The contemporary rhetoric of a "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" is an attempt to articulate an "other" path of development to address the acutely felt need, which is constitutive of the postreform experience in China, to become more prosperous, advanced, and modern (cf. Gupta 1998, 11; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2004, on a similar situation in India).

In addition to a truncated historical view, poststructuralist approaches to development have tended to rely too heavily on textual representations, eliding the actual processes through which development projects are enacted (Li 1999; Moore 2000; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Hart 2004). Also obscured are localized practices and cultural politics, including the ways in which development transforms identities (Pigg 1992; Gupta 1998; Perreault 2003). Development has cultural effects and is struggled over and experienced in histori-

cally specific ways (Klenk 2003). Indeed, development can be conceived of as a “crucible of cultural politics,” experienced and debated through idioms that are animated but not completely determined by sedimented histories of struggle (cf. Moore 2000, 2005).

My article builds on these insights to examine ethnographically the ways in which Tibetans are subjected to and subjects of development. I explore the idioms through which development is experienced in Tibet. Though culturally constituted, these idioms are not “merely cultural” (Butler 1997). Rather, political economic conditions shape the cultural idioms through which development is understood and negotiated, and these in turn constrain and shape the possibilities for maneuver within the larger trajectory of political economic change. The section that follows examines this trajectory, particularly the dialectical relationship between development and stability in development discourse in Tibet and the economic marginalization of Tibetans vis-à-vis Han Chinese migrants.<sup>2</sup>

From here, the bulk of the article turns to two closely related idioms of development: a trope of indolence and one of being “spoiled.” The Gramscian concept of contradictory consciousness, which allows for an analysis in which resistance does not sit in a space cordoned off and separate from power (Gramsci 1999 [1971], 55), is critical to understanding both “indolence” and being “spoiled” as historically inflected cultural idioms for negotiating development as a hegemonic project. This discussion is followed by a detailed unpacking of the various layers of the trope of indolence, in which I draw upon performative understandings of speech to distinguish between indolence as a locutionary act, and indolence as patterns of labor and time allocation. Both layers contain interwoven elements of “common sense” and “good sense,” where the former refers to internally incoherent and contradictory assumptions and beliefs that are common to a given society in a particular era, conceptions of the world “mechanically imposed by the external environment” (Gramsci 1999 [1971], 323; also see Foucault 1990 [1978]; Moore 1998), and the latter to that which has gone beyond common sense “and has become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception” (p. 326). As with indolence, the commonly invoked idiom of Tibetans being “spoiled” encapsulates a profound ambivalence toward development that can neither be captured through dichotomous frameworks of resistance and power nor reduced to either “culture” or political economy. Moreover, as discussed in the final section, this idiom connects the experience of development across the social fields of agriculture, urbanization, and labor.

The arguments presented here are based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and other ethnographic evidence collected as part of a larger project over fifteen months of research in and around Lhasa, in 2000–2002, 2004, and 2005. This fieldwork included interviews with Tibetan urban residents, Tibetan rural and periurban farmers, Chinese migrant farmers, officials, and retired workers. Interviews and everyday conversations were conducted in Tibetan and Chinese.<sup>3</sup> Finally, while my claims in this article are limited to Central Tibet, and more specifically to the Lhasa area, my own observations in shorter-term work in Kham and Amdo, as well as conversations with Tibetan intellectuals and western scholars, suggest that the tropes of indolence discussed here resonate quite widely across Tibetan areas of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

## The Political Economy of Development in the TAR

Among China’s provinces, the TAR’s trajectory of development and reform has been exceptional in a number of ways, including the unusually high degree of central state intervention, subsidies, and emphasis placed on stability. The first two National Work Fora on Tibet, held in 1980 and 1984, respectively, marked the end of the draconian measures of the Maoist period and set out relatively liberal economic and cultural policies for the TAR. These liberal policies were reversed after a series of nationalist demonstrations in Lhasa from 1987–1989, after which martial law was imposed for more than a year (Schwartz 1994). The state employed a two-pronged strategy to respond to these events: on the one hand, a tightening of political control, a shift toward increased use of surveillance technologies, an expanded role for the State Security Bureau, and substantial funding for an informer network; and, on the other, a program of rapid marketization and the delivery of commodity goods, producing a privileged middle class and increased income disparities (Barnett 1998, 2006).

Following Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 southern tour, economic liberalization was deepened throughout China. Controls on movement into the TAR were lifted. While per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in coastal provinces rose dramatically, real per capita GDP in the TAR went further into recession (Fischer 2005), which attracted the attention of national leaders who responded by increased spending and investment in the mid-1990s and by launching the Xibu dakaifa campaign. This campaign was designed to reverse the trickle-west economic strategy that had characterized development in China since the early

1980s, and to help the “Western region”<sup>4</sup> close the development gap with the coastal and central provinces. The Third National Work Forum on Tibet, held in Beijing in 1994, criticized earlier policies for making too many concessions to a special “Tibetanized” form of development and promoted market reforms, but also marked a new period of heavy subsidization into the TAR. In addition to sixty-two infrastructural projects funded by the Central Government at 4.86 billion yuan,<sup>5</sup> the forum also established a new “aid-Tibet” plan in which fifteen provincial-level units were designated as counterparts to specific administrative units in the TAR, leading to the spending of an additional 2.24 billion RMB on 576 construction projects. The forum also launched a program to send “aid-Tibet cadres” from these provinces to work in Tibet (Yeh 2003).

The infrastructure projects implemented by these Work Fora were “turnkey” projects, in which all aspects of construction, from equipment to raw materials to workers, were brought in from the provinces responsible for their implementation (Hu 2003). This strategy not only thwarted the creation of backward and forward linkages but also brought many Han Chinese laborers to Tibet, many of whom stayed on or returned later as petty entrepreneurs. Prior to the Third Work Forum, officials felt pressured to justify the presence of Han migrants by claiming they were technicians bringing specialized skills to Tibet; however, the Third Work Forum marked a turning point after which non-Tibetan entrepreneurialism was encouraged, even without such claims. These policies were confirmed and extended by the 2001 Fourth Work Forum, which funded new infrastructure projects and implemented a policy of dramatically increased pay scales for TAR government personnel.

As many observers have noted, state subsidies to the TAR’s dependent economy have long exhibited a negative multiplier effect, which has gotten steadily worse since the mid-1990s (Wang and Bai 1991; Sharlho 1992; Dreyer 2003; Hu 2003; Fischer 2005). Currently, one yuan of central government aid to the TAR increases GDP by only 0.47 yuan. This is partly due to the nature of the aid, in which out-of-province construction companies and migrants are the primary recipients of funding from large, state-subsidized projects. As a result, the TAR rivals some of the worst cases of aid dependency in Africa (Fischer 2005, 73). Furthermore, since the mid-1990s, the economy has been restructured away from productive activities and toward the tertiary sector, of which government and party administration accounted for 50 percent by 2001. Indeed, since Xibu dakaifa began in 2000, almost all economic growth has been the result of administrative expansion (Fischer 2005, 73). In 2001,

94 percent of government expenditure was covered by direct fiscal support, mostly from Beijing, and per capita government expenditure is now more than 2.5 times average per capita rural income (p. 59).

Four times more is spent on capital construction than on education in the TAR (Fischer 2005), and Xibu dakaifa has only intensified investment in infrastructural construction. Between 2000 and 2005, some 15 billion yuan was spent on 13,000 kilometers of road in the TAR, and 1 billion yuan was spent on Lhasa’s urban infrastructure (Sinocast 2005; Asia Pulse 2006). The Qinghai-Tibet railway, which has been planned since the 1950s but thwarted by immense technical difficulties associated with high altitudes and permafrost, was made a key infrastructure project of Xibu dakaifa in 2001. The train, which began to run to Lhasa in July 2006 after expenditures of more than US\$4.1 billion, has been heralded for its great contribution to both development and stability. According to Hu Jintao, it “is of great significance to implementing the strategy of great development of the western region, accelerating economic and social development in Qinghai and Tibet . . . strengthening national unity, and jointly realizing the grand goal of building a well-off society (*xiaokang shehui*)” (Financial Times Information 2005a, 2005b).

### Development+Stability

One of the most striking aspects of recent economic development in the TAR is the growing income disparity within the region. Real purchasing power of rural incomes in the TAR was lower in 2001 than in the early 1990s, while urban incomes have skyrocketed, surpassing even those in Shanghai and Beijing to become China’s highest in 2002 (Fischer 2005). In contrast to the other western provinces where average urban living standards have been harmonized to the national average, TAR urban salaries are much higher. As Barnett (2006, 116) succinctly states, referring to dramatic increases in administrative wages as a means of securing loyalty and thus political stability, “some smart planner in the Party had worked out that wealthy people don’t take part in demonstrations and tripled all the salaries.”

This focus on stability cannot be overstated as a key element of development discourse in Tibet. While Tibetans are exhorted to improve themselves, work harder, and stop being “willing to accept the label of ‘being special’ and stand at the rear of reform and opening up” (*People’s Daily* May 1994), this imperative of improvement must always be accomplished on terms set by the state: loyalty and opposition to “splittism” (TIN 1996). In this

view, splittism is the logical continuation of nineteenth-century Western imperial ambitions, a foreign attempt to weaken or “split” the Chinese motherland. Demands for independence are by definition labeled splittist, but splittism is also wielded as a management device through which almost any overt opposition to state policy, or suggestion that Tibetans do not already enjoy as much autonomy as they need, is thwarted through the risk that it will be treated as an attempt to split the motherland (Yeh, forthcoming).

The overarching premise of the state’s project of development in the TAR is the dialectical relationship between stability—loyalty to the state and Party, in opposition to splittism—and economic development. Stability is a prerequisite for development, but development is also a strategy to increase stability. Thus, a high-level work conference in Lhasa held in 1999 issued the following statement: “Tibet’s experience in the past years has fully proven that social stability is the prerequisite for economic and social development and progress. Therefore, we must unswervingly wage a struggle against splittism, hold the anti-splittist banner even higher, enhance our consciousness of the struggle against splittism, and safeguard the unification of the motherland” (*Tibet Daily* 1999). Similarly, Tibet Television reported in June 2000: “last year, all levels of Party Committees and governments had a good grasp of the dialectical relationship between stability and development. . . . We must take safeguarding stability as the central task, focusing on waging anti-splittist struggles . . . thereby creating a stable social environment to facilitate the region’s sustained, rapid economic development and western China’s massive development” (BBC 2000).

The extent to which political dissent is made to disappear is thus a key indicator by which the state judges the success of its development in the TAR. The imperative of stability, as the elimination of splittism, conditions the limits of possibility of development. This is particularly true given the malleability of splittism, whereby almost any expression of explicit dissent with state policies, including development policies, is subject to the possibility of being interpreted and treated as a political threat to national unity.

### Migration and Marginalization

One of the ways in which the discursive force of splittism shapes the political economy of development in Tibet is by constraining local responses to the large and growing role of Han Chinese migrants in the economy. Their ability to dominate virtually all market niches is facilitated by several structural factors. On the one hand,

newly enriched urban Tibetan cadres have a significant amount of disposable income to spend on commodities and services, and no incentive to give up the benefits they gain from state employment for the risks of small-scale entrepreneurship. On the other hand, those Tibetans who have not been the beneficiaries of state-sponsored higher education and employment, including both rural villagers and the urban poor,<sup>6</sup> are usually at a severe disadvantage in the labor market compared to Han migrants in terms of both quality and quantity of education they have received, as well as in their Chinese language competency (since most market transactions in Lhasa now require Mandarin). Thus, macroeconomic policies have created a space for Han migrant entrepreneurs to move in, out-competing rural Tibetans and the urban poor (Hu 2003; Yeh 2003).

At the same time, explicit, public complaints about Han migrants are politically unacceptable, because they are coded as splittist and threatening to stability. In 1994, then-TAR Party Secretary Chen Kuiyuan announced that Tibetans “should welcome the opening of various restaurants and stores by people from the hinterland . . . [Tibetans] should not be afraid that people from the hinterland are taking their money or jobs away. . . . Tibet develops its economy and the Tibetan people learn the skills to earn money when a hinterlander makes money.”<sup>7</sup>

Though Han migration and the increasing Han presence in Lhasa are the subject of dissatisfaction, depression, and dismay, statements to this effect cannot be made very publicly, because of the use of splittism as a flexible management device. More generally, the political situation allows no scope for collective action around questions of Han migration (Yeh 2003).

In addition, the issue of Han migration is further inflected by a discourse of quality, or *suzhi* that operates across China. A national conference on “quality” in 1987 produced a report stating that “*suzhi* [however defined] is for the most part higher in the city than in the countryside, higher in Han areas than in minority areas, higher in the economically advanced areas than in the backward areas” (in Yan 2003, 496). The tautological association of *suzhi* with “development,” wherein low quality is the result of a low level of development, and a low level of development is an indicator of low quality, posits China’s eastern seaboard as the vanguard, the site of modernity, science, and progress, and the western periphery as backward and lacking in these traits. The dialectical association between the “quality” of peoples and places—the ways in which the characteristics of place are seen to inhere in the persons associated with them—make Tibetans an extreme case even in the west, belonging to a place of exceedingly low quality.

Because of their purported “low quality,” migrants across China are often denigrated and treated as second-class citizens in the cities to which they “float” (Solinger 1999; Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004). For many, the migration destination point becomes a place where the migrant accumulates *suzhi*, which can then be brought back to the rural household and become both a demonstration of *suzhi* improvement and a foundation for raising the quality of the local population (Yan 2003, 506–7). Migrant Han in Lhasa, however, accumulate no *suzhi*. Instead, they are positioned as being of higher quality than local Tibetans, and treated as bearers of the entrepreneurial spirit and ethic of hard work in which Tibetans are now judged to be lacking.

## The Trope of Indolence

One of the key markers of a high “quality” person, someone who has attained a sufficiently high degree of development, is the ability to cultivate the self toward greater productivity. In a 2006 speech on development in Tibet, Hu Jintao, President of the PRC, stressed the need to *work hard*, and to build Tibetans’ capacity for “self-accumulation and self-development.” This emphasis on self-governance and the cultivation of a particular work ethic incites its opposite, a trope of Tibetan indolence, as a key idiom through which development is experienced and its meanings reworked in Lhasa today.

I first noticed this invocation of indolence in conversations about vegetable farming when I was living in Lhasa in 1998–1999. Since the mid-1980s, and particularly since 1992, Han migrant farmers have profited greatly by growing vegetables in greenhouses on land they sublease from Tibetan peasants around Lhasa. In many villages, it is impossible to find a single Tibetan family that has not rented out at least some of its land to Han migrants. Although Tibetan farmers make more money renting out their land than by growing grain, they earn far less than the Han farmers, who report net profits of many times the lease fee. Despite their discontent with the scale of Han migration in Lhasa, and despite the fact that they could profit considerably more by growing vegetables themselves, Tibetan farmers continue to rent out their land, helping to reproduce Tibetans’ deepening marginalization in the new economy. Surprisingly, Tibetan villagers themselves frequently claim, in a distinct echo of state discourse, that the reason they don’t grow vegetables is that “Tibetans don’t like to work,” “can’t work as hard as the Chinese,” or, in short, are “too lazy.” One villager explained,

To plant vegetables, you must have a lot of patience. You must do the same work day in and day out, all the time. You must get up very early in the morning and stay up until late at night. Tibetans don’t like to get up early in the morning to work.

I have argued elsewhere that Tibetan nonparticipation in this and other new economic activities cannot be adequately explained in terms of mono-causal or single variable models in which a logic of utility-maximization determines behavior in the last instance (Yeh 2003). Instead, these processes are overdetermined by intersecting forces and processes. Some structural factors, such as those related to the spatial pattern of decollectivized plots and relative availability of labor time, are important in many cases. Others, such as lack of startup capital, are important only for some households. Access to means of production does not, however, completely determine land use decisions, which are instead also inflected by cultural understandings of work and identity. Most important, that analysis showed that local nonparticipation in vegetable farming and other economic activities cannot be reduced objectively to backwardness, unwillingness, or laziness.

Here, my concern is with the fact that though “indolence” cannot be an objective explanation of Tibetan positioning in the broader political economy, the circulation of a trope of indolence is very much a social fact in Lhasa. In more than 100 interviews and many more casual conversations with Tibetan periurban villagers about their agricultural practices, almost everyone had something to say about what they perceived to be the Tibetan work ethic. The following statement, by a middle-aged Tibetan woman who sells potatoes every morning in Lhasa’s Nyangrel wholesale vegetable market, is typical:

We Tibetans really are falling far behind (Tibetan: *rjes lus thebs*<sup>8</sup>) because we’re lazy (Tib: *sgyid lug ngan po*). . . . In Lhasa, we drink barley beer (*chang*) all day. We have “bottoms up” (Tib: *zhabs dag*) with *chang* all day. Really! We just make a little bit of money, and are satisfied, and think about having a good time (Tib: *skyid po gtang*). It’s true; that’s how it is.

These utterances about a naturalized Tibetan indolence are not limited to conversations about, or spaces around, vegetable farming. Indeed, a prolific discourse of Tibetan indolence and Han productivity circulates throughout Lhasa. Tibetans, rural and urban, young and old, speak about how Tibetans “don’t like to work” (Tib: *las ka ma sgyid pa; las ka sgyid sgyid mi ’dug*), “sit around” (Tib: *da ga se sdod*) in teahouses, bars, and at home, do

nothing but “hang out” and “wander around” (Tib: *khyam khyam*), and are too “spoiled” (Tib: *skyag lang shor*) to work; in short, that they are “lazy” (Tib: *sgyid lug ngan po*). The Han Chinese, on the other hand, are said to work hard (Tib: *dka' las rgyab*), to have the ability to “endure” hard work (Tib: *sdug rus rgyab*), eat bitterness (Ch: *chiku*), and get up early and work until late. In my fieldwork, I found that the figure of the lazy Tibetan was invoked not just in interviews about vegetable farming or other economic activities, but also in jokes, spontaneous conversations over dinner, at the bus stop, and in taxis. One day a young Tibetan taxi driver whom I had never met before struck up the usual conversation, asking me where I was from. When I replied, the United States, he asked,

Have you noticed that Tibetans in Lhasa are never busy? [We] like to sit around all day. [We] don't like to work. [We] can't work as hard as the Chinese. [We're] not like the Chinese. Have you, being from America, noticed this is the case?

### Unpacking Indolence

This trope of indolence resonates with state development discourse that incites Tibetans to work harder and warns them that their “rigid and conservative thinking and the psychology of idleness” (*People's Daily* 1994) is what has caused them to fall so far behind economically. They also resemble a common Han view of Tibetans, espoused for example by a Sichuanese migrant cobbler in Lhasa who said, “The Tibetans are lazy. It's only natural that Han people show them how to work” (Pomfret 1999) or a Sichuanese vegetable farmer who told me, “Greenhouse vegetable growing requires a great deal of hard work. Tibetans just don't work that hard.” These resemblances might be thought of as no more than mimetic reenactments of external representations. Merlan (1998, xvii) writes, for example, that “Fourth World or indigenous peoples are highly susceptible to others' representations of who and what they are, and this susceptibility plays a large role in shaping their conditions of life.” Adams (1996, 511) describes the Tibetan situation in Lhasa as one in which “Tibetanness is scripted by Chinese and Westerners and is internalized by Tibetans in performances that create and reinforce cultural differences between these groups.” While external representations are certainly powerful, such accounts risk circumscribing subaltern agency to that of mirroring—of following scripts set up in advance by others' representations.

Instead, I argue that the trope of indolence is a key idiom through which Tibetans, as subjects who are not self-sovereign, autonomous, and fully-formed, but who nonetheless exercise agency, engage with a specific project of development (cf. Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003, 44; Moore 2005). In addition to contemporary external forces and representations, the trope of indolence is also informed by historically and culturally constituted gendered framings of what counts as “work” and what sorts of work are worth doing. Understanding the trope of indolence as reducible neither to mimetic reenactment nor to “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985), I argue that a Gramscian conceptualization of contradictory consciousness allows for a fuller view of its complexities and contradictions.

In this framework, common sense, always fragmentary and incoherent, differs from mimesis in that it never exists by itself but, instead, is always imbricated with “good sense” critical conceptions. Rather than being a dead end that forecloses possibilities of change, it is precisely on the terrain of common sense that ideological struggle takes place (Hall 1988, 43). At the same time, good sense differs from “everyday resistance” in its folding back into common sense, despite a clear diagnosis of the nature of domination.<sup>9</sup> As a result, “a marked degree of disenchantment with the prevailing system . . . can coexist with a calm acceptance of the system and belief that there is no systematic suppression of personal chances in life” (Willis 1981 [1977], 119).

This contradictory condition of both disenchantment and acceptance characterizes different moments in the deployment of the trope of indolence and the experience of development more broadly. The following ethnographic presentation of various layers of this trope of indolence shows those elements that can be interpreted as good sense, and those that resemble common sense, to be always co-existing and interconnected. As Paul Willis (120) puts it in his discussion of English working class boys' conceptions of manual and mental labor, “the astonishing thing . . . is that there is a moment . . . [which] presents both a freedom, election, and transcendence, and a precise insertion in a system of exploitation and oppression.”

This is useful for considering *both* indolence as speech act (the claim to indolence), and to indolence as a referent to particular patterns of labor and exertion, shaped by culturally and historically constituted and gendered notions of work. In the analysis below, I turn to these two layers in turn: first to the performative deployment of indolence as a locutionary act, and then to embodied patterns of labor. Both layers are composed of elements of uncritical adoptions of state discourse *and* critical acts

of identity claiming and the production of difference; these elements are themselves shaped by history as well as the contemporary political-economic conditions discussed above.

### Indolence as Performative Self-Critique

Unlike some cultural idioms that evoke heroic struggles, the trope of indolence seems difficult to take seriously. “Well, aren’t they just saying that?” and “of course Tibetans are no more or less lazy than anyone else, so why does it matter if some people say that?” are two common reactions to discussions of the discourse of indolence.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there is a tendency to dismiss statements such as this, by a Tibetan woman from a periurban village: “We who are called Tibetans are very strange (Tib: *khyad mtshar*), as we don’t like to work and instead are lazy and stupid (Tib: *lkugs pa rang red*) compared to the Chinese.” One might argue that because such statements don’t really reflect reality (i.e., that Tibetans are not objectively lazy or stupid), they have no analytical value.

However, a performative approach to understanding speech, in which speaking is not merely a transparent reporting of a “real” concrete condition or action, but a form of concrete action in and of itself, suggests that the very fact of making statements about “laziness,” “not liking to work,” and, in a related manner, of being “stupid,” “lacking in skill,” and “spoiled,” is worthy of attention. To speak is also to do, and therefore to speak about indolence is an act deserving in itself of analytical engagement, as a separate question from patterns of time allocation in labor. A performative understanding of speech allows for speech acts to be both mimetic and the locus of agency, which can be seen as located within the possibility of variation on the regulated process of repetition that is the process of signification (Butler 1990, 185). As Judith Butler (in V. Bell 1998, 165) has also put it, this approach allows for an analysis of “how a subject who is constituted in and by discourse then recites that very same discourse but perhaps to another purpose . . . that’s agency, the moment of that recitation or that replay of discourse that is the condition of one’s own emergence.”

Spoken self-critiques of Tibetan work ethics are sometimes completely serious and sometimes self-consciously ironic and humorous; the distinction rests on the interpretation of a vocal inflection, a turn of the head, a mocking note, an exaggerated drawl, or a particular gesture, distinctions that ethnographic methods are best suited to uncover (Herbert 2000). References to indolence are always comparisons with the Han, whether

explicitly or implicitly, but sometimes what appears to be self-deprecation is simultaneously a positive celebration and, indeed, a process of the performative production of difference between Tibetan and Han.

Among the harsh critics of Tibetan villagers’ work habits are Tibetan elites, both village officials and urban Tibetan intellectuals. Here, there is an element of class and status superiority (also mapped onto the urban-rural divide), though their statements often refer simply to “Tibetans” rather than more specifically to “Tibetan villagers” as the locus of the problem. For example, a retired Tibetan CCP official of a county agricultural office explained to me that Tibetan villagers rent out their land for no other reason than that “Tibetans waste a lot of time, sitting around and drinking.” Many local officials also blame Tibetan laziness not only for their failure to grow vegetables, but also for their reluctance to use other agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Similarly, a respected Tibetan scholar and Lhasa resident articulated the following analysis of the Han domination of greenhouse farming:

The main reason is that [Tibetan] people these days are *so lazy*. They sit around and drink . . . they don’t like to work. As a result there will never be any improvement [of the economy]. There are too many places to hang out (Tib: *khyam sa*) in the city. . . . These days the farmers come to city to wander around. . . . They don’t work. . . . As a result there is no development.

Tibetan villagers invoke this discourse of indolence with as much regularity and vociferousness as do urban residents. They often do so through comparison with the Han, who are construed as much more hardworking. One middle-aged Tibetan farmer explained,

The Chinese farmers work hard, very hard. They get up early, at 4 am, to go to the market. Then they work early in the morning, and until very late at night. . . . Tibetans don’t get up early and work until late. It’s too much work for Tibetans.

A Tibetan man in his seventies living in a periurban village, who rents his own family’s farmland to Han migrants, said:

Tibetans don’t like to work! This is what Tibetans like to do: In the morning, we like to drink our delicious tea, then all day long we like to drink our delicious barley beer, and we like to have very delicious food to eat. All the Chinese need to do is drink water and eat a few vegetables and that’s it! We Tibetans don’t like to work. We like to sit in the sun all day.



His over-the-top remarks and sarcastic tone of voice suggested that while saying that Tibetans “don’t like to work,” he was also mocking the Chinese for not knowing how to enjoy their lives. The discursive injunction to reform one’s condition of being a particular kind of (lazy) subject produces such statements, which in Butler’s terms “exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated” (1990, 185), turning a presumed negative condition into a positive difference.

On some occasions, the question of whether laziness is the root cause of Tibetan nonparticipation in vegetable farming became the object of debate, indicating that it is also taken seriously as self-critique. In one village home, a younger man told me that Tibetans lack the skills that the Han have for vegetable cultivation. However, his father-in-law immediately interjected that the correct explanation is not lack of skills but rather dislike of work. An explanation of Tibetans as being unskilled compared to the Han is often invoked together with the trope of indolence. For some, what appears as “laziness” is actually a lack of skills, while others, in a more critical vein, insist that invoking lack of skills is simply an excuse for laziness.

This sometimes self-critical nature of indolence as a locutionary act also became apparent when Tibetan friends and acquaintances presented a critical view to me, but defended Tibetan work practices in front of Han migrant farmers. One woman in her late thirties, who had lived for much of her life in rural Phenpo, remarked to me in private conversations on numerous occasions, “Tibetans are lazier than the Chinese—isn’t that so?” When we were together with a group of Han migrants who implied that Tibetans should just work harder, however, she immediately defended Tibetans, saying that the problem was not that Tibetans are lazy, but rather that they search for work but can find none, and further that “we [Tibetans] work hard too!” Her defense of Tibetans as being hardworking in front of Han migrant farmers combined with assertions about the laziness of Tibetans in private suggests that in addition to working as positive claims of difference, these statements about indolence are also sometimes self-critical. As performative statements, claims of indolence are also often articulated through the idiom of being “spoiled,” to which I return below. First, however, I turn to other layers of indolence as expressed in gendered, and historically, culturally, and religiously inflected patterns of labor.

### Culturally Constituted Notions of Work

Sir Charles Bell, the British political officer who lived in Tibet for almost two decades in the early twentieth

century, implicitly noted the culturally constituted nature of work in his description of Tibetan work habits:

By Europeans, and occasionally by Japanese also, Tibetans are often described as lazy . . . when there is nothing to do, they can stay doing nothing for a long time without falling into boredom or peevishness. But, if work is to be done, there is no shirking . . . [at harvest] the peasants and their households rose at one or two o’clock at night, partook of a little tea and barley flour and went out immediately to their plots of land . . . while they worked, they sang. . . . No eight-hour day here, but rather eighteen.

—(C. A. Bell 1928, 40–41)

When Tibetans in Lhasa claim that they “cannot get out of their beds in the morning to work,” they are referring to specific activities, such as vegetable cultivation, and not to others, such as rising long before dawn to circumambulate the Lingkor for several hours. Barley cultivation is a type of work for which Tibetans willingly and regularly rise early and toil long hours without complaint. Sowing and harvesting barley, whether for the household or for other families as part of reciprocal labor obligations, is time-consuming and requires an enormous expenditure of labor power, but this is not what Tibetans refer to when they say that they do not like to work.

Cultural conceptualizations of work adopted uncritically and unquestioningly from the past are, in themselves, what Gramsci would have critiqued as common sense, “traces of previous systems of thought that have sedimented into everyday reasoning” (Hall 1988, 55), in opposition to good sense. Uncritical historical sedimentations include certain gendered notions of labor; for example, food preparation, child-rearing, and cleaning are done by women, but are not usually considered “work.” But a conscious embrace of certain types of labor and rejection of others can, even if drawn from “traditional” conceptions, *also* work in the context of Han migration and Chinese state hegemony as “critical conceptions” in the face of assimilating pressures, and indeed as part of an ongoing production of ethnic difference.

Just as the speech act of reiterating “we’re lazy” is a way of making an identity claim of difference from the Han, so too are actual labor practices and patterns of time allocation. Both patterns of embodied practice and the speech acts that refer to them are contradictory in their combination of disenchantment with the prevailing order with acceptance of common assumptions and conceptions of the world “mechanically imposed by the external environment” (Gramsci 1999 [1971], 323). With respect to their own nonparticipation in vegetable

farming, Tibetans often explain that they are reluctant to engage in “filthy” or “dirty” work (referring to the frequent use of nightsoil in vegetable farming), thus identifying “dirty” work with something that only the Han do. Furthermore, in making claims about how particular types of work are “Tibetan,” Tibetans frequently invoke religion, as in the following conversation between Jampa, a monk from a village in Phenpo, and Tsering, from a village near Lhasa:

*Tsering:* If one is not afraid of sin (Tib: *sdig pa*) then one can become rich very quickly. As a farmer, if I were not afraid of sin, I would kill animals. For example I'd keep many ducks. . . . Ducks grow quickly—in just three months. I could sell each duck for twenty-six bucks (yuan) and save up 1000 bucks in no time. But we Tibetans don't want to take any lives (Tib: *srog*). We work, but as long as our stomachs are full then that's good enough. . . . No matter how much I'm able to do, no matter how many tens of thousands of bucks I make, when I die, I can't take even one cent with me. . . . Because of society's development, one has no choice but to work these days. But we fall behind. We Tibetans think first about one job, then think that work causes a lot of sin, so we switch to another. . . .

*Jampa:* Tibetans are afraid of accumulating sins; [they] think about having compassion (Tib: *snying rje*).

*Tsering:* Yes, because of compassion, we fall behind. Tibetans think, as they are about to kill an animal: I should have compassion [and thus not kill it]. This is the main reason that there is a big [economic] gap between Tibetans and Chinese.

*Jampa:* They [Chinese] don't recognize compassion.

*Tsering:* Right, they don't have compassion. They'll do any kind of work at all.

*Jampa:* Tibetans have a lot of forbearance (Tib: *bzod sgom*), as well as compassion, and fear of sin. As a result, Tibetans lose all of the work to the Chinese . . . the [Tibetan] farmers think “this is enough for my livelihood,” and then do religious activities . . . but the Chinese are not like this. They just close their eyes and do anything at all.

My concern here is not with the truth or falsehood of compassion as practice, but rather with its deployment as an explanation for noticeable patterns of choosing (or not) certain forms of profit-making labor.

### A Tibetan Buddhist Work Ethic?

Tibetans in Lhasa frequently attribute their lack of economic accumulation to Tibetan Buddhism, much as Max Weber (1958 [1905]) attributed hard work, and hence economic success, to Calvinist doctrines in Protestantism. The characteristics that Tibetans ascribe to their work ethics are strikingly opposed to those

identified by Weber as constituting the Protestant ethic, particularly with regard to wealth accumulation and self-denial. For Weber, under the “spirit of capitalism,” to make, save, and keep money is the proper use of one's time and hard work (1958 [1905], 49–59). Accumulation of wealth is an end to itself. By contrast, many Tibetans in Lhasa claim that their religious beliefs and practices explain why they are “easily satisfied.” A Tibetan farmer in her forties explained this in a typical way: “Tibetans don't work diligently because even if I work today, I might die tomorrow anyway.” An urban resident explained this ethic as follows:

Many [Tibetan] people think that life is very short—we have a saying that a human life is as long as a cat's yawn—that is very short! People think: if my life is so short, there is no reason to work so hard. After all, when a very rich person dies and when a beggar dies, they are exactly the same. Neither of them can take anything with them when they die. . . . This kind of thinking is very popular among Tibetans. . . . I myself have frequently thought this: I have enough, so I don't need to keep feeling dissatisfied or strive for more.

In another statement of the same ethic, a Tibetan doctor said to me,

If I have ten [bucks] and someone else has twenty, nobody thinks “I should try to make twenty bucks.” I just sit and relax. This is related to religion. People think, “I'm going to die anyway, what's the point of working so hard?”

Related to this are the ideas that Tibetans “can't save money” but also that they *don't* save money, because wealth accumulation and labor beyond the fulfillment of basic needs are not valued.

Scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, both Western and Tibetan, sometimes dismiss these ideas as merely the misconceptions of those who do not *truly* understand Buddhism. One Tibetan scholar laughed at these ideas, saying:

No, no, no. These people don't really understand Buddhism. . . . If [Tibetans] don't work hard, they are just plain lazy. It's not because of religion. One should work as hard as one can, just not be attached to one's work. . . . Ninety percent of [Tibetan] people don't understand the essentials of Buddhism. The essence is to control your *sems* (mind).

Indeed, it is possible to find Buddhist sutras that support both sides of the argument; some suggest that one should give up one's wealth and meditate, while others discuss the importance of gaining and protecting

wealth.<sup>11</sup> Here, my concern is not with the correct textual interpretation of what Buddhist philosophy actually teaches about proper ethics of work, but rather with the social fact of the mobilization of religious rationales by lay Tibetans in Lhasa, and with how this interpretation is used to talk about and make sense of their day to day lives in the context of state development.

From their practical understanding, to be “easily satisfied” is a positive quality that sets Tibetans apart from Chinese migrants, whose purpose for coming to Tibet is precisely to accumulate wealth to take home. A Lhasa resident explicitly critiqued what he sees as the Han drive for accumulation as a negative characteristic, made worse by development:

On the one hand being easily satisfied is not good, but on the other hand I think this is a very good way of thinking. In [inland, Han] China, people do not have religion, and people’s minds (Tib: *sems*) have big problems these days. People are always saying: economic development, economic development, economic development. Now I get a headache whenever someone starts to talk about economic development. . . .

For Tibetans, the number one priority is for their *sems* to be happy. If their *sems* are happy, then, as for everything else [material goods], if they have just enough, then that is good enough. The Chinese, however, just think about money. They get more and more money, but their *sems* are unhappy. We say that wanting more and more is the source of all suffering. . . . Buddhism tells [us] not to have too much desire. These days, in China, people are really in psychological (Ch: *jing shen*) danger. With everyone only thinking about economic development, it’s easy to have a lot of jealousy.

This statement encapsulates a way in which Tibetan statements about both themselves (“easily satisfied”) and the Han (who want to make money) give Tibetans the moral upper hand in an active production of ethnic difference. It posits a very different regime of value in relation to labor than does the dominant national value-coding of *suzhi*, which positions Tibetans at the bottom of a spectrum of worthiness because of their purported inability to cultivate themselves toward greater productivity and accumulation.

Another difference between Weber’s “spirit of capitalism” and this Tibetan Buddhist work ethic turns on the Protestant commitment to self-denial and the avoidance of using wealth for personal enjoyment. Tibetans in and around Lhasa, by contrast, pride themselves on their ability to have a good time: “If Tibetans make a little money, then [we] go on picnics and enjoy ourselves.” Indeed, time spent on unhurried leisure has a long and significant history in Lhasa, as

Heinrich Harrer (1953) and Sir Charles Bell both noted with regard to the pervasive practice of picnicking, which Bell (1928, 264) called Tibetan townspeople’s “national pastime.” This was particularly true of the nobility in pre-1950s Lhasa, but today picnicking is common not just among wealthy urban families, but also rural and poor households. Indeed, most occasions—whether village meetings, circumambulation, mountain propitiation, festivals, or visits to monasteries—call for a picnic and a good time. A Tibetan woman in her fifties joked to me about this Tibetan penchant for having fun: “Americans would be shocked. In America, if you go to a party you don’t even stay for two hours. In Tibet, at New Year’s, we party for fifteen days straight.” Tibetans in Lhasa explain this difference as a logical outcome of the religious principles outlined above: that “you can’t take it with you” and therefore, might as well enjoy.

Though powerful, this invocation of a Tibetan Buddhist work ethic clearly does not explain all situated practices and patterns of work. Here, I briefly describe three lacunae. First, given that donation to monasteries as well as sponsorship of individual monks is a widely accepted practice for accumulating religious merit (Benavides 2005), it would seem equally logical for Tibetans to argue that they should labor more, in order to be able to donate larger accumulated profits to religious institutions. A second practice that is not explained by an appeal to religion is a noticeable pattern in Lhasa in which Tibetan businesspeople are much more likely to be involved in large-scale business (such as antiques, medicinal herbs, and carpets) with significant profit potential, than in petty daily sales with slow but steady earnings.

Finally, a third, significant aspect of Tibetan work and accumulation in Lhasa that cannot be accounted for by appeals to a religiously based work ethic is the gendered nature of labor and the public performativity of leisure. In those few instances where Tibetan vegetable cultivation has been successful, it is usually by women; vegetable cultivation is understood by Tibetans as a type of work that requires a great deal of “patience” and that can be very “annoying,” and women are said to be better able to complete such tasks. Furthermore, in Lhasa (as elsewhere), Tibetan men are much more likely than women to be found idle or jobless after economic reform. When Tibetans discuss the fact that “Tibetans don’t like to work,” they often refer implicitly to Tibetan *men*. Women do a large share of the farm work, whereas Tibetan men spend much more time than women in teahouses and bars, both public, gendered spaces of leisure. Together, these counterexamples suggest that patterns of work are shaped by, but certainly not reducible to, understandings of religion; they are also

structured by the state's development project and its assumptions about Tibetans.

### The Bountiful Land

The purported condition of being "easily satisfied" is most commonly attributed to Tibetan Buddhism, but Lhasa residents also ascribe their laid-back work style to the bountifulness of the Tibetan environment, which historically provided them with all that they needed and, unlike crowded eastern China, necessitated very little "sense of urgency." According to a professor at Tibet University, one source of Tibetan "laziness" is the fact that "Tibet is a vast land" with plenty of space and little need for competition over resources. In this view, Tibetans were blessed by a giving landscape that did not require them to struggle, and thus allowed them to be satisfied with what they had. This condition of satisfaction rather than competition is believed to contribute to Tibetans' lack of engagement in new economic activities, such as greenhouse vegetable cultivation.

This view of the Tibetan landscape as life-giving and nurturing contrasts sharply with both the Han migrant and state view of the Tibetan environment as harsh, barren, and unforgiving. One migrant farmer from Sichuan commented that, "Tibetans only think about today. They take one day at a time. If they have enough for today, then that is good enough, they are satisfied with just enough. They're not like the Han, who are always thinking about tomorrow." This echoes very closely Tibetans' descriptions of themselves, but the explanation is very different. The migrant explained why Tibetans are so present-oriented as follows: "Life in Tibet in the past was very difficult. Tibetans were lucky enough just to have enough to eat." He argued that because life was so tough in the past, because it was a struggle just to fill one's belly, Tibetans are now complacent. Contrast this with Tibetans' own explanation of the same work ethic: life on the Tibetan plateau was in fact rather easy. Land was plentiful and there was no fear of starvation. Without competition, Tibetans did not develop a sense of struggling to survive in the way that the Chinese did, with many people and few resources. Tibetans and Han migrants thus marshal dramatically different views of the same landscape in their attempts to explain real differences in patterns of work and accumulation under economic reform and development.

### Laziness as Antinostalgia

Contemporary constructions of work are inflected not just by understandings of the relationship between hu-

mans and the environment over the long *durée*, but also by much more recent memories of the Maoist period and collectivized labor. A number of researchers have found Han Chinese villagers and factory workers to be deeply nostalgic for the collective period and angered by the dominant devaluation of the Maoist past for the marketized present (Croll 1994; Rofel 1999; Liu 2000). By contrast, when older Tibetan villagers speak about the commune period, they frequently describe it as the time when "we worked twenty out of twenty-four hours a day." As one woman in her late fifties explained her life on the commune thirty years ago: "In the daytime, we had to work. At night, we had to work. In twenty-four hours we only rested two or maybe four hours every day. The rest of the time we had to work." Another woman, sixty-eight at the time of my interview, recalled that villagers had very little time to sleep at night during the time of the commune:

There were all sorts of work. The leaders came to find us at any time. Cadres came from Lhasa to inspect our work at night as well as during the day. . . . We had so much work that we slept in the fields. We just left our houses standing there. We ignored our houses the whole time and slept in the fields. You never knew when [the leaders] might give you some work to do, even in the middle of the night.

A third, nicknamed Granny Brigade Leader, for her role during the collective period, commented:

These days are the best. Compared with the brigade, things are much better now. You don't have to work if you don't want to. You can work, or you can not work, it's up to you. . . . During the brigade there was so much work to do. During the harvest we had to work at night. These days who works at night? If you want to work, you work. If you don't want to, you stay home and sleep. . . .

The present, she said, is much better in comparison: there is plenty of time to relax, and nobody tells you what you have to do. Many Tibetan villagers in their sixties and seventies made a thumbs-up gesture when describing the present period of reform, to make sure that I understood how good it is compared to the collectivized past. When I asked villagers about their lives, or the recent history of their village, or changes in agriculture and land use, they consistently described the collectivized past as a period of endless toil. Another rural Tibetan farmer recalled about the 1960s and 1970s that "We had to work from very early in the morning until very late at night. Nobody would have been sitting around like we are right now." Such distinctly un-nostalgic memories of labor in the collective period distinguish Tibetan memories of the Maoist period from the

more pervasive nostalgia across China for the time of high socialism (Rofel 1999, 135), and give their declarations of their own “laziness” in the reform period a celebratory moment (see Yeh 2003, forthcoming).

## Spoiled Tibetans

I have argued that development in Tibet is a hegemonic state project with particular logics that are similar but not identical to other development discourses. It encounters a landscape of historically sedimented memories, which animate the situated practices and idioms through which development is received, negotiated, and contested in complex and contradictory ways (cf. Klenk 2003). Among the most powerful of these idioms is the trope of indolence, but there are others as well. In the rest of the article, I turn to the idiom of being “spoiled” as a closely related and powerful way of negotiating and domesticating the project of development, and of personalizing and contesting its meanings.

Against the state discourse of a Tibetan “psychology of idleness” which must be overcome through development, is a contrary deployment of indolence as something that is not inherent, but rather a condition that results after one becomes “spoiled” (Tib: *skyag lang shor*) by development. This idiom is used not only with regard to patterns of Tibetan labor within the larger political economy, but also by older Tibetan villagers to describe how younger ones are influenced by the city, and by farmers to describe the effect of state-mandated overuse of chemical fertilizers on their soil. As a pervasive idiom, “spoiled” is much more than just a way of describing individual behavior, or a particular patch of soil. It is about personal experience as well as a collective condition; it is about a relationship with the past, and—with its suggestion of permanent ruin—it expresses a deep pessimism about the future.

Like indolence, this idiom is frequently invoked to explain why Tibetan periurban villagers rent out their land to Han migrant vegetable cultivators rather than trying to earn money by cultivating vegetables themselves. A Tibetan man in his seventies explained the situation in 2001 in his village, where there were more Han migrant families renting and working the land than the total number of local Tibetan households: “These days many Tibetans lie and many steal. Many do nothing but hang out. These days Tibetans are very spoiled. It is bad to spend all day not doing any work.”

At a year-end meeting in another village in 2000, the Tibetan township leader admonished villagers about the need to work hard and not sit around, play mahjong, and drink beer and liquor all day. If they did, he warned, the

villagers would become spoiled and “lose their foundations” (Tib: *rmang gzhi*), at which point it would be too late for them to recover. On another occasion, a Tibetan Party Secretary of a periurban village complained that village youth who have attended middle school in Lhasa have enough skills to grow greenhouse vegetables, but don’t because they are spoiled by city schools. As a result, they are not diligent and do not want to learn. They don’t put their hearts into work, she said, but rather want to hang out all day in teahouses or playing mahjong. Soon, she said despondently, the whole village might become a village of beggars. The reason for this turn for the worse, according to this Party Secretary, and many others, is that the village is too close to urban Lhasa, where there are “too many places to hang out.” This spoils young people, and drains their willingness to work.

The idiom of being spoiled critiques not only state-sponsored education, but also the political economy of reform, under which Tibetans have had a very difficult time finding employment because of competition from Han migrants. Periurban Tibetans complain that their village youth are lured by the prospects of employment in the city, which, after years of school, seems more appealing than returning to the village. However, as the same Party Secretary quoted above noted, “We Tibetans’ work [products] are not as high quality as that of the Chinese. Young people can’t find work even when they look for jobs. As a result, they have no goals.”

Nor is this problem limited to youth. Instead, as one middle-aged farmer put it, “everyone is the same, the younger ones learning from the older ones, and everyone learning from their friends. Everybody here is spoiled.” The Tibetan idiom of being “spoiled” expresses the experience of what David Germano (1998, 55) calls a “deep, abiding cultural depression among Tibetans, from the educated youth and religious elite to nomads and villagers.” Germano focuses on the alienation and feeling of inadequacy he found among religious communities in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham (in Sichuan province), but many of these conditions are relevant to lay periurban Lhasa villagers. In particular, Germano describes “inferiority complexes created by the racism and material superiority of recent Chinese immigrants, and a host of other associated realities of modern Tibetan” (1998, 55). In Lhasa, despondency about not being able to find salaried employment is translated into the idioms of being too lazy and spoiled to work.

Nonetheless, a Tibetan woman from the Lhalu neighborhood, where most families have lost all of their farmland to urban construction and where unemployment and underemployment are now rampant, remarked

that “because there are no more places to work [fields, etc.], the people of Lhalu have become lazy and the men sit all day in the restaurants and do nothing.”<sup>12</sup> Here, we see the lack of economic opportunity framed not as the effect, but rather the *cause*, of laziness. Thus, despite the negative connotation of “spoiling,” the idiom also contains a critical diagnosis of Tibetan marginalization as a result of structural factors: Tibetans are spoiled by economic marginalization, rather than Tibetans being marginalized because they are spoiled.

### Spoiled by the City

In all of these deployments, we see a reversal of the contemporary valorization of the urban, which has become increasingly identified across China as the primary site of development and of political, economic, and cultural interest (Cartier 2002, 2003; Ma 2002). The imperatives of reform produced an ideological shift across China; whereas the Maoist period saw severe restrictions on urbanization and considerable ambivalence about the urban, cities are now understood as the embodiments of progress and modernity. In minority areas in particular, urbanization is “both a shortcut to modernity and a means to overcome ethnic autonomy” (Bulag 2002, 198).

Many Chinese migrants to Lhasa echo this view of city as metonym for development. For them, Lhasa is defined by its lack, in terms of both adequate size (“hardly a city” to some) and degree of development. One woman from Luzhou, Sichuan, who had worked in several other provinces before joining her relatives in Lhasa, described the latter as being “as small as a little county seat back in *neidi* [inland China] . . . not developed at all!” Lhasa’s relatively small population contributes to its being perceived as backward and undeveloped. Only large cities have the potential to be civilized, developed, and desirable.

By contrast, many Tibetan periurban villagers express a deep ambivalence about the “modernizing” effects of the rapidly expanding city of Lhasa. We have already seen in several examples above that city schools, and proximity to the city’s many “places to hang out,” are blamed for villagers’ indolence and even Tibet’s “lack of development.” According to one urban resident quoted earlier, farmers prefer to wander around urban Lhasa rather than working on their fields, contributing to the general condition of indolence. Some maintain that the penchant for “not liking to work” is particularly pronounced among those who live too close to the city and its many temptations, while those who live in remote rural areas work harder because they are less distracted.

In a generational argument, periurban villagers also claim that Lhasa, with its bars, karaokes, and pool tables, spoils children by luring them away from agriculture. After children spend time in the city, at school or searching for employment, they “become spoiled” (*skyag lang shor*) and are unable and unwilling to adapt back to the village lifestyle. Rather than disciplining Tibetans with clock and calendar, making them more hard-working, the city spoils Tibetans, making them lazy.

The city’s excessive numbers of “places to hang out” include those associated with alcohol, gambling (*mah-jong*), and prostitution, making the city also a morally ambivalent place. Tibetans, old and young, often commented on excessive alcohol consumption in city karaokes and *nangmas* (Tibetan-style karaoke) as another indicator of how spoiled and unwilling to work Tibetans have become. Even more pervasive, though, is the association of Lhasa with prostitution. Indeed, I was surprised by the frequency with which Tibetan men and women of different ages brought the topic up in conversation and in jokes. On one occasion, a young, male teacher shared his views about Lhasa as follows:

The main reason that [Tibetan periurban farmers] don’t like to work is that they live very close to Lhasa. Lhasa is very strange. We learn all the bad things from inland China, and none of the good things. Inland China gets karaokes, and immediately Lhasa has karaokes. Inland China gets bars, and right away Lhasa has bars. Inland China has prostitutes and then right away Lhasa has prostitutes . . . in Lhasa, the “flowers bloom everywhere”—there is prostitution everywhere you turn. . . . I think this is exceedingly dangerous. . . . Look, as a result, there are so many divorces now! The main reason is prostitution.

Women, too, joked and complained about rampant prostitution, sometimes blaming Tibetan men for visiting sex workers but other times blaming the government and the (Han) sex workers. A Tibetan woman in her fifties described indignantly to me how Han prostitutes would “block [Tibetan men] in the streets and try to pull them into their shops.” She also charged that the government purposefully does nothing to stop prostitution despite its illegality; she then crossed her index fingers in an X over her lips to indicate that public complaints of this kind are forbidden, and that I should not tell others she had said this. In 2000, two young female Tibetan middle-school teachers averred that the persistence of the problem was due to government corruption. They joked that General Party Secretary Jiang Zemin’s national *san jiang*, or “three stresses” campaign, in which the CCP and government were to stress political consciousness, study, and probity, had taken a peculiar form in Lhasa; there, the “three

stresses” had become “stress mahjong,” “stress using the back door” (i.e., corruption), and “stress prostitution.”

Lhasa’s disproportionately high number of sex workers are kept employed by, among other things, a large military presence and the highly uneven influx of money associated with state development funding. Many Tibetans also believe that the very noticeable phenomenon is an effort to distract Tibetan men from more political concerns, keeping them off the streets and away from protest. Others suggest that it is a deliberate government strategy to “pollute” Tibetan culture (Adams 2005, 235). Though there are a rising number of Tibetan sex workers, often young girls from rural areas, the focus of complaints is for the most part on the larger number of Chinese prostitutes (TIN 1999).

This pervasive concern about prostitution (which is not new in Tibetan society) is incited partly by discontent about Han migration and state repression of public dissent. In addition, prostitution is also coded as a distinctly urban phenomenon; Han migrants to Tibet move to urban areas, not rural villages, and conversely where Han migrants go, further urbanization follows. The volatile discourse about the problem comes to stand in for the more general and pervasive spoiling effects of the Chinese city, equated in state discourse with economic development (Bulag 2002; Cartier 2002, 2003). It forges a link between development as spoiling Tibetans through overindulgence, leading to an inability to work hard, and development as leading to an adulterated condition of moral laxity. As such it encapsulates the uncertainty experienced by many rural and periurban Tibetans. As increasing numbers either move voluntarily to the city in search of work and cash income, or are forced to become urban through land expropriation, many have come to accept the premise of state discourse that the city is the site of development and of the future. As the idiom of “becoming spoiled” indicates, however, many are also deeply ambivalent about just what kind of urban future it will be.

### Spoiled by Chemical Fertilizer

The condition of being spoiled is not limited to humans. One of the most common complaints I heard in Lhasa from Tibetan farmers was that chemical fertilizers had “spoiled” the soil in their fields. In contrast to other parts of China, farmers in many TAR villages were still required in 2000 to purchase a set quota of chemical fertilizers, whether they wanted to use them or not. These distinct policies were implemented because of both the conflation of chemical fertilizer use with “scientific” agriculture, and the official view of Tibetans as

particularly lacking in science. This coding of Tibetans as unscientific motivated the imposition of development and modernity in Tibet through fertilizers, long after such measures were no longer considered necessary in other provinces.

Thus, a retired Tibetan agricultural official claimed:

In [villages in valleys] the farmers use agricultural chemicals. The thought level of the masses is not a problem. They understand the benefits. But in some places like [an upland village], which has many monasteries nearby—in villages like this, the farmers use too few agricultural chemicals. They are superstitious and don’t want to kill insects. The difference in productivity is very high.

He went on to say that agriculture in villages with a “high level of science” is as much as forty times more productive than in upland villages. The problem with upland villages, he said, was not so much their topographical location as the fact that they tended to be closer to monasteries (which are often located in high, remote places), and thus subject to more religious influence while also being simultaneously further from the scrutiny of officials and scientists in Lhasa. These remarks refer to the fact that villagers often refuse to use pesticides for religious reasons, and that such refusal is more common in remote villages than in those near the city. In practice, the less fertile soil of higher altitude villages, combined with the fact that they frequently rely solely on rainfed irrigation, account for significant productivity differences. However, this official downplayed these ecological factors, and instead emphasized the conflation of rural locations with religious and therefore “unscientific” Tibetans, thus reinforcing the valorization of the urban as the site of more scientific and developed citizens.

Many Tibetan villagers, including village leaders, complain not only about the high cost of the unwanted fertilizers, but also about the fact that the fertilizers have spoiled the soil, much in the same way as proximity to the urban center of Lhasa has spoiled their children. To be spoiled is to have a bad habit (Tib: *goms gshis ngan pa*); applying too much chemical fertilizer to the soil gives it a bad habit, one that is very hard, if not impossible, to break. Once the soil has been spoiled by the chemical fertilizers, it loses strength (*nus pa*) and is ruined. According to many farmers, chemical fertilizers and pesticides were not used during the “old society” (before 1951) and yet crops grew well. Now, however, like a person who has taken so much medicine that it loses its effect, the soil barely responds to chemical fertilizers, so that ever increasing amounts must be used. Tibetans

often explained the “spoiling” of the soil to me by comparing it with alcohol:

It's like this. If someone drinks barley beer and liquor all day long, you can tell them all you want not to drink, or to drink less, but it does no good at all. They can't stop, because they're spoiled on the beer and liquor. It's the same way with chemical fertilizers.

In periurban villages, rationales about the spoiling effects of chemical fertilizers are based not only on observations of how chemical fertilizers affect grain cultivation, but also on observations of Han vegetable farming practices. Chinese migrant farmers often move every two to three years to a new location because plant diseases and fungi take hold after a few years of the intense production conditions—high rates of pesticide, herbicide, and fertilizer application—in the humid greenhouses. According to Tibetan farmers, these inputs cause sickness in the soil (Tib: *sa'i na tsha*). Or, as another explained, “the soil dies” (Tib: *sa shi gi*) after a few years of vegetable production. Han migrant farmers are not unaware of the negative effects of these chemical inputs but claim they have “no choice” but to use large quantities because of market competition in Lhasa. They acknowledge using fewer inputs at home when growing vegetables for their own consumption. Indeed, one Sichuanese farmer exclaimed that the amount of chemical fertilizer he uses in Lhasa is “truly frightening!” (Ch: *xia ren*) and another reported, “really, it's not good to use too much.”

Though Han farmers do not use the same amount of inputs at home, and though many believe that overuse of chemical fertilizers is detrimental to long-term productivity, their idioms for saying so differ significantly from those offered by Tibetans. For Tibetans, the “spoiling” of the soil is also connected to their concerns about the health effects and taste of food grown with such fertilizers (Yeh 2003). The same term is used to make sense of not just agriculture, but also urbanization, economic marginalization, and the relationship between education and employment under conditions of rapid migration welcomed in state development discourse. It is in this sense that “spoiling” of the soil is not only an explanation for the observed effects of new chemical inputs, but also a more general idiom through which Tibetans experience development.

## Conclusion

The contemporary Chinese state project of development in Tibet is understood and negotiated through

pervasive tropes of Tibetan indolence and of the condition of being spoiled.

These idioms, which help organize memories of the past, experiences of the present, and expectations for the future, are both familiar and specific. In particular, the trope of indolence as the image of the “lazy native” draws easy comparisons to other historical and contemporary situations, especially in the contexts of colonialism and development. Simply seeing that stereotypes of lazy indigenous or impoverished peoples are rampant, however, does not complete the analytical work of understanding how these patterns are produced. As Stuart Hall (1986, 23) explains with reference to racism, “It is often little more than a gestural stance which persuades us to the misleading view that, because racism is everywhere a deeply anti-human and anti-social practice, that therefore it is everywhere the same.” Indeed it is precisely the familiarity of the “lazy native” as a figure in development discourses that makes it all the more imperative to analyze its production in particular places, within specific political landscapes.

Building on this premise, this article has employed an ethnographic approach to the culturally and historically specific ways in which development as a project is formed and implemented, and also experienced by its subjects in Lhasa, Tibet. The terrain on which development is negotiated is shaped by specific, central government policies that treat the TAR differently from other provinces in China, for reasons of political control. Particular political economic structures put in place by these policies have had a marginalizing effect, making it easier for Han migrants than Tibetan villagers to benefit from state investment. National development produces not only spatial inequalities between eastern and western China, but also differentiation within Tibet itself, between Tibetan residents and Han migrants. These political economic conditions shape the cultural idioms through which development is experienced, and these idioms in turn constrain and reshape the possibilities for maneuvering within the larger political economy, through situated practices such as the refusal to engage in greenhouse farming.

The particularities of the trope of Tibetan indolence can be emphasized through a brief comparison with Syed Alatas's (1977) study, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. Examining the image of Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the sixteenth through twentieth centuries, Alatas argues that because they were unwilling to become tools for colonial capitalism, and because labor was not measured by the clock, they developed a durable reputation as being lazy. As Alatas himself notes, this image was deeply interwoven in the political economic history of the region. It functioned first as moral justification for



systems of forced delivery and forced labor under colonial capitalism and, later, as capitalist justification for maintaining low wages. In Tibet, by contrast, the “laziness” of Tibetan farmers refers to their work on land to which they themselves have long-term use rights. Rather than functioning to justify forced cultivation, it produces a commonsense understanding of Tibetan marginalization under economic reform and development. Furthermore, whereas Alatas presents the image as being wielded exclusively by colonists, in Lhasa today Tibetans themselves participate actively in the everyday circulation and reproduction of this discourse.

Commonsense enactments of the trope of indolence, both as performative speech act and as embodied patterns of labor and time allocation, help naturalize Tibetan failure to benefit from the massive amounts of money that the central state pours into the economic development of the TAR. At the same time, however, the trope of indolence is also a good sense identity claim which refuses hegemonic imperatives of self-cultivation. It gives Tibetans the moral upper ground vis-à-vis Han migrants in a different system of value than the one now championed under economic reform, and sometimes becomes a way of expressing a critical insight into the structural underpinnings of economic marginalization. Moreover, appeals to culturally constituted notions of labor, with their roots in history but deployed under different conditions today, work as both common sense and good sense.

As with the trope of indolence, the idiom of being spoiled also ties together ambivalence about several aspects of development, including rapid urbanization and chemically intensive agriculture. To be spoiled is to be ruined through a range of bad habits, which are attributed to development. Chemical fertilizers spoil the soil, much in the same way as urban Lhasa spoils Tibetan children, and development spoils Tibetans in general, making them lazy. Food grown by the “hardworking” migrants is often said by Tibetans to “taste bad,” but is coded by state discourse as being more scientific and developed because of higher levels of agricultural inputs, their effects on the soil notwithstanding. These idioms are not only performances of Tibetan cultural identity but also commentaries on larger political-economic forces. They reveal the contradictory and contingent ways in which development as a historically and geographically specific project is both desired and resisted.

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## Notes

1. For the purpose of readability only, I use “Tibet” interchangeably with “Tibet Autonomous Region” (TAR) in this article. The TAR, corresponding roughly to the area under direct political control of the Tibetan government in Lhasa in the early twentieth century, is the administrative unit officially recognized as “Tibet” by the PRC government. However, it is home to less than half of the total population of Tibetans in the PRC, and covers about half of the area where Tibetans live. Other parts of what some scholars call “ethnographic Tibet” have been administratively divided into the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai.
2. According to the PRC’s minzu (nationality, or ethnicity) classification scheme, the Han make up about 92 percent of China’s population, with fifty-five minority minzu, including Tibetans, constituting the rest of the population. See Yeh (2007) for an extended analysis of how the state tries to attach “Chinese” (as a marker of nation-state belonging) to “Tibetan” and the troubled discursive relationship (for Tibetans) between “Han” and “Chinese.”
3. To protect the identities of the people with whom I worked, all names used in this article are pseudonyms and other identifying information is deliberately omitted.
4. Xibu dakaifa (re)defined “the west” as consisting of Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, and Guangxi Autonomous Regions; Chongqing municipality; and Qinghai, Gansu, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces. See Goodman (2004).
5. The exchange rate for one U.S. dollar was roughly 8.1 yuan (Renminbi).
6. According to Fischer (2005, 118), urban poverty rates in the TAR were the third highest in China in 1998 if measured against average per capita incomes.
7. 28 November 1994. Tibet People’s Broadcasting Station, Lhasa, in Chinese. Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB FE/2170/G), 5 December, 1994.
8. In this article, italicized Tibetan indicates the use of the Wylie transliteration system; a few proper names and common words are rendered with a more pronounceable spelling.
9. The argument for the interpretations of Gramsci developed by the Birmingham school of cultural studies is further developed in Yeh (2003). In brief, these avoid the mapping of resistance/dominance onto off-stage/on-stage, mind/body dualities that are implicit in the work on hegemony by Scott (1990), as discussed by Mitchell (1990) and Moore (1998).
10. There are two issues here: one theoretical, about how speech should be analytically considered, is discussed in the text; the second, methodological, is sometimes framed as, “how do you know that ‘lazy’ isn’t just a convenient way to

- dismiss the researcher?" The discourse of indolence is a whole complex of statements not limited to formal interviews or even, according to many informants, the presence of an outside researcher. A more reflexive consideration of the research is provided in Yeh (2006).
11. In the Sigalovada sutra in the Digha Nikaya, for example, the Buddha teaches: "Sleeping by day/Wandering all around untimely. . . . These things destroy a person . . . / . . . The wise endowed with virtue . . . / Shine forth like a burning fire/Gathering wealth as bees do honey/And heaping it up like an ant hill/Once wealth is accumulated/Family and household life may follow. . . . / . . . Energetic, not lazy . . . Such a person attains glory" (<http://accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/digha/dn-31-ksy0.html>; last accessed 24 May 2006). Benavides (2005, 79) notes that in a Buddhist story about beginnings, it is the laziness of primordial beings that begets work, and work that causes scarcity; "work, then, is both cure and blessing, for without the disturbance brought about by work, it would not have been necessary to have kings and priests; while in order to support them, it is necessary to work even more—the support of the priests being indeed a meritorious act." Furthermore, "work as production . . . appears as degrading, as something from which one must distance oneself; and if one cannot distance oneself from it in reality, one must at least cleanse oneself from it as much as one can" (2005, 87); but the act of giving brings merit, and donating to the monastic community requires accumulation and hence productive work.
  12. Though farmland is being expropriated at an ever more rapid pace across Lhasa today, at the time of my research most of the farmers on whose interviews this article is based still had use rights to their farmlands (and hence the ability to rent out their land to migrant farmers). Tropes of indolence and spoiling are invoked broadly—by new urban elites, urban poor, periurban farmers who still have use rights to land, as well as those such as in Lhalu who have recently lost it to urbanization.
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