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Landscapes of Little Lhasa: Materialities of the Vernacular, Political and Commercial in Urban China

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes the juxtaposition of place and identity. By analyzing different dimensions of landscape, it asks how an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Chengdu, China, has become considered a Tibetan place. The article engages with and pushes John Brinckerhoff Jackson's distinction between political and vernacular landscapes, introducing a third category: the commercial landscape. Each of these three dimensions of the landscape, which are deeply entangled but conceptually distinct, transforms multi-ethnic space into a Tibetan place. The vernacular emerges from the traces of quotidian life in the form of languages, bodily practices, sights, scents, and colors: it 'feels' Tibetan. The political relates to the securitization of Tibetan spaces and how people re-imagine the traces of state-led spatial management and organization. Finally, the commercial has to do with the appropriation of Tibetan aesthetics in the pursuit of profiting from a Tibetan Buddhist identity. I argue that these three different landscapes are what enable us to recognize a multi-ethnic space as a Tibetan place.

1. Introduction

The illustrations on postcards from Tibetan places will frequently be of two types: a stunning rural scenery from "the roof of the world" with few if any traces of human presence; and a human-made Buddhist and pastoralist landscape that has emerged from the activities of a people with strong religious convictions – complete with Buddhist material culture, rituals, and maroon-clad monks. These ideal Tibetan landscapes are vital to Western imaginations about Shangri-la (Bishop, 1989) and Chinese spiritual longing (Ying, 2014). As individuals, we read landscapes differently. Yet, through shared expectations and imaginations of Tibet most of us will recognize certain landscapes, including those appearing on the postcards, as Tibetan. However, Tibetan people are not immobile properties of these landscapes, rooted like the mountains and grasslands. They move and create new landscapes by using and occupying them.

In Chengdu, the bustling capital of Sichuan province and one of China's migrant-attractive cities, one can find a Tibetan landscape made up of the material traces left behind by the people who live and do business there. The neighborhood is a multi-ethnic location, yet it has a Tibetan atmosphere. Chinese and Tibetans alike perceive it as Chengdu's Tibetan quarter. Chinese colleagues call it "Little Lhasa" (Chi: *xiao Lasa*) (Xue, 2009: 41) after the Tibetan capital, and "the Barkhor Street of Chengdu" (Chi: *Chengdu de bakuojie*) after Lhasa's

famous pilgrimage site (Feng, 2005: 104), marking the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu as a proxy for the sacred Buddhist center of Tibet. My Tibetan interlocutors in Chengdu call it Wuhouci, the name of a nearby Chinese temple complex dedicated to the memorialization of Zhuge Liang (181–234), the regent of the Shuhan state. This name and its referent are not Tibetan, perhaps indexing the awareness among Tibetans that this quarter is – unlike Lhasa – situated in a Chinese city. It is next to another attractive tourist site: the entertainment area Jin Li, replete with multi-ethnic shopping and dining – and a Starbucks. Yet, as this article will show, Tibetans also see and experience the quarter as a "Tibetan place." The Tibetan quarter anno 2019 was built upon the structure of two intersecting streets, Wuhouci Bystreet and Ximian Qiao Bystreet/East Wuhouci Street. Shops and spacious pavements line these streets, but tucked away behind or above the commercial storefronts and in the neighboring roads are residential areas, offices, and education centers, the most important being the Southwest University of Nationalities. In the evening, small businesses pop up on the sidewalks. Little Lhasa constitutes a significant spot on the Chengdu map as a tourist site and a vibrant commercial area especially renowned for its trade in Buddhist material culture, which attracts Tibetan and Han Chinese merchants and customers, Buddhist devotees, and voyeurs of Tibetan culture.

The creation of a Tibetan place in the Chinese metropolis of Chengdu is fascinating since Tibetans are considered a highly politically

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sensitive ethnic group in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The central and western Tibetan regions that had been under the authority of the Dalai Lamas (known as Utsang in Tibetan) were incorporated into the PRC in 1951 and defined by the Chinese state as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). However, Tibetans inhabited a much vaster area, which we can refer to as 'ethnographic Tibet.' This included the indigenous Tibetan regions of Kham (eastern Tibet) and Amdo (northeastern Tibet), which were integrated into Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces. Since the foundation of the PRC in 1949, Tibetans have resisted Beijing's overlordship through various means, including: attempts at international diplomacy (late 1940s/early 1950s), armed resistance and rebellion (1950s), CIA-assisted guerrilla warfare (1956–1974), a democratic government-in-exile (since 1960), and largely non-violent protest (particularly in the 1980s). More recently, a wave of 125 Tibetan protests that erupted in March 2008 and 155 self-immolations (February 2009 to February 2019) have been particularly troublesome to the Chinese Party-State which interprets them as outbursts of local nationalism threatening the territorial integrity of the PRC.¹ Yet, concurrent with rising political tension in Tibetan areas, Tibetan Buddhism has become increasingly popular among Han Chinese (Caple, 2019, Caple, forthcoming). In response to a perceived "spiritual crisis" in China, Chinese who are yearning for religious experiences have turned to the Tibetan landscape (Ying, 2014) and the spiritual specialists that they identify among Tibetans (Smyer Yü, 2011). In short, the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu, which prominently displays Tibetan and Buddhist identities, has emerged in a highly-charged constellation of security concerns, Tibetan nationalism, and the revival and spread of Tibetan Buddhism. How has this ethnically diverse neighborhood become considered by its visitors as a mono-ethnic Tibetan place? How is it defined and delimited in an otherwise Chinese urban landscape? What can the materiality of this landscape tell us about the ways in which the Tibetan identity of this place is claimed and contested?

I base my inquiry upon John Brinkerhoff Jackson's distinction between two different but complementary dimensions of landscapes, the political and the vernacular: "... one established and maintained and governed by law and political institutions, dedicated to permanence and planned evolution; the other, the vernacular landscape, identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility." (Jackson, 1984: xii). The political landscape is recognizable through traces of the management and organization of space that has been designed and planned to be used by specific people in specific ways. The concept of vernacular landscape privileges the material traces of people's community-building activities: the unstable, irregularly shaped landscape lying underneath the symbols of permanent political power, and whose character, ownership and dimensions are endlessly being transformed (Jackson, 1984: 150). This article reveals the deep entanglement of the vernacular and political dimensions of the landscape. Moreover, it argues that the ensuing commercialization of Little Lhasa suggests the emergence of another noticeable dimension. Therefore, I expand on Jackson's conceptualization of landscape by suggesting a third category, the commercial landscape, which is dedicated to the pursuit of profit through the appropriation of the Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics and identity that lend commodities their value. In each of these three senses, landscape defines a *Tibetan* place. Although I will highlight them individually in three separate readings, it is important to note that they are, in reality, deeply entangled.

Landscapes are experienced by viewing and walking through them (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008). This is the main method applied here: I have walked around the Tibetan quarter during numerous visits between 2010 and 2019. I have observed life there, interacting with

shopkeepers and customers in shops and tea houses; photographed and filmed the storefronts, the commodities for sale, and the people and their transactions; and conducted a survey of 472 businesses there (Brox, 2017). In this article, I walk the reader through the neighborhood and point to various ways in which Tibetan ethnicity and religiosity forcefully penetrate the political landscape. Hence, this article highlights the agency of those who are often regarded as marginalized people – marginalized where they are considered to belong and marginalized when they move – by highlighting how they have been able to create a place of their own that is identified as Tibetan.

2. The making of landscapes in urban China

As discussed by scholars such as Gupta and Ferguson (1997), place and identity have a special relationship: place-making inevitably involves the construction of difference that is always contested, imagine, enforced, uncertain and unstable. The meaning and demarcation of a place is never pre-determined but is constantly constructed and contested through processes that set it apart, not only as different from but also as *opposed* to other places (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 13). I am interested in landscape as that which enables us to identify a complex, multi-ethnic space as a Tibetan place – just by taking a looking at it.

When we think of landscapes, we commonly think of the scenery that can be viewed when looking from a distance and a certain vantage point: the landscape is a "portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance" (Jackson, 1984: 8). However, there is scholarly disagreement about the proximity and distance of this gaze: is landscape that which we experience when looking at it from afar as an outsider or that which we experience as an insider who lives in it? Tim Cresswell (2015: 17) summarizes this by distinguishing between 'place' and 'landscape.' Unlike place, which is difficult to get a sense of without doing it or experiencing it from the inside, landscapes are those meaningful locations that we think we understand just by looking at them. The landscape that I am interested in, which at a glance can be comprehended as Tibetan, is a landscape of the urban kind to which people attach different meanings. I am inspired by the work of Jackson, who argues that the landscape that we look at is never a natural scenery that merely serves as a backdrop for people's performances:

Whatever its shape or size it is *never* simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is *always* artificial, always synthetic, always subject to sudden or unpredictable change. We create them and need them because every landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time.

Jackson, 1984: 156

Jackson points to the shifting meanings of landscape across time and space, and how it has been used differently by different people. My understanding of the term is grounded in its etymological roots, as traced by Jackson (1984, 1996, 1997). Historically, the first syllable of the compound, *land*, designated a space defined and delimited by people, and the second syllable, *scape*, designated the collective reality of this space. The second syllable means "to shape," so etymologically, landscape means land that has been shaped by people (Ingold, 2012: 198, Olwig, 2008: 82). A landscape emerges from the activities of the people who live there (whether plowing the land or setting up shops), how they make themselves at home in it, or how they come to belong to the land. To be more precise, the landscape constitutes the imprints made by a group of people. It is the product of a community.

The particular landscape giving a downtown neighborhood in Chengdu a Tibetan identity is the byproduct of the activities going on in the neighborhood: how people have lived and organized their lives, the commercial activities that have evolved, and other traces from community-building. It is a product of Tibetans' need for a meeting-place in urban China where they can make exchanges and transactions; their wish to congregate with kindred spirits; their need to rest before continuing their travels; and their motivation to find a job and earn money.

¹ See for instance the special issues of *China Perspectives* 2009 (3), *Cultural Anthropology* 2012 (April), and *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 2012 (December).

In other words, the landscape evolved out of the needs and desires of mobile Tibetans and their practical arrangements at this particular spot. As Jackson (1984: 12) argues, the landscape is the product of groups doing activities in order to form a community, not in order to form landscapes: “...the landscape as its visible manifestation is simply the by-product of people working and living.”

Situated just east of the Tibetan plateau, Chengdu is a gateway city for Tibetans and Chinese. Tibetans were attracted to this particular neighborhood in the city with the establishment of the Southwest University of Nationalities (where minority cadres and intellectuals were educated) in 1950, and other institutions such as a hospital, government offices, and boarding for Tibetans in the same small area. The growth of a Tibetan commercial zone and residential area accelerated in the wake of the reforms following Mao Zedong’s death in 1976. During the 1980s, these resulted in increased leniency toward religious belief, movement, and making money, opening up a space for Tibetans to create their market in Chengdu and, over three decades, to transform it into a center for trading Tibetan goods and Buddhist commodities.² The Tibetan neighborhood continues to attract Tibetans who stay temporarily, seasonally, or permanently, including both the privileged Tibetan who moves there because he is following his dreams and can afford it and the underprivileged moving to escape marginalization. The Tibetan quarter will often be the first port of call for Tibetans traveling from eastern Tibet to inland China. It is where they can find the accommodation, shops, and information that they need (Fig. 1). Tibetans keep coming to this particular area of Chengdu to do their business, look for a job, beg for money, go to the hospital, get an education, do their banking, and go shopping. This movement makes the boundaries of the Tibetan quarter wax and wane and continuously transforms the landscape.

Tibetans who are creating community and thus also landscape in Chengdu – outside of the place where they are considered to belong, namely Tibet – are not restlessly drifting in and out of the city, but are pushed or driven there with the aim of improving their lives. Chengdu is an attractive city for young Tibetan students and entrepreneurs (Washul, 2018), but also an older generation of retired TAR-cadres who buy second-home apartments there (Xu et al. 2018). Like other migrants in China, Tibetans typically benefit from their ethnic, kinship, and native-place networks and connections when they come to the city. Solinger (1999: 249ff) writes about the power of co-provincial colonies in China that, like the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu, were products of chain migration and providers of work and lodging to new arrivals. The most advanced were akin to ethnic enclaves, with organized mutual aid and economic cooperation, community services, and welfare schemes (Solinger, 1999). At least some of these colonies likely started as “vernacular communities” similar to those described by Jackson in the American context (1984: 156):

This is the kind of new community that we are seeing all over America: at remote construction sites, in recreation areas, in trailer courts, in the shanty towns of wetbacks and migrant workers; the emergence of what we may call vernacular communities – without political status, without plan, ruled by informal custom, often ingenious adaptations to an unlikely site and makeshift materials, destined to last no more than a year or two, and working as well as most communities do. They would be better and last longer if they were properly designed and serviced. They could acquire dignity if the political landscape made a gesture of recognition. Yet very little is needed to give those new communities a true identity; a reminder, a symbol of permanence to indicate that they too have a history ahead of them.

A promise of permanence was given to the Tibetan quarter when

Fig. 1. Tibetan accommodation. The Tibetan letters sprayed in red on the worn-down gate offer lodging: “mgroṅ-khang yod” (“Accommodation available”).

it was named on the city map as an ethnic market and neighborhood (Brox, 2017). With this gesture, it was recognized as a place with a particular identity. In brochures and advertisements aimed at attracting tourists to Chengdu and guiding them towards places that could be named on a map and portrayed in a guide, the Tibetan market was a sight worth visiting. The category of Tibetan ethnicity was impregnated in the name, in the map, and in the brochure. Yet, the political landscape did not make any further ‘gesture of recognition’ by adding Tibetan place names, language, and particular ethnic markers in its organization of the quarter. China has a system of autonomy in places with high numbers and density of minority groups, which today amounts to more than 1300 ostensibly self-governing units across three levels: regions, prefectures, and counties (Leibold, 2013: 7). Nevertheless, the recognition of political territory that theoretically comes with self-governance – and materially manifests itself in markers such as bi-lingual road and street signs – does not include native-place residential groups in urban China, such as the Tibetans congregating in downtown Chengdu. In the words of Uradyn Bulag (2002: 202): “Cities are not supposed to be ethnic, or autonomous...” Despite this, the Tibetan quarter is still a place dominated by Tibetans and serving as a proxy for a Tibetan home. In his study of the city of Xining, Andrew Grant (2018: 1459) shows how Tibetans have channeled their efforts in ascribing and appropriating urban space with new meanings, i.e., creating Tibetan places: “Even without the collusion of ethnicity and politico-legal territory, everyday practices including public rituals, religious activities, and other bodily acts can spatialize ethnicity...” We can thus see the political and the vernacular tangled up as constant reminders that the downtown neighborhood is a place dominated by Tibetans, but regulated and managed by the Chinese State. However, as I will show, the ways in which the regulation unfolds in this place actually reinforce its “Tibetan-ness.” The task, therefore, is to investigate how social and cultural meaning is attached to this urban location, the people inhabiting it, and the activities that are taking place there – interpreting how each of these three senses (the vernacular, political, and commercial) designates a Tibetan place.

Before we turn to read the vernacular, political, and commercial landscapes, we must remind ourselves that it is a multi-ethnic and polyglot location. The Tibetan area is very small in geographic extent: it stretches over only a few blocks. Tibetans share this space with other people who identify with other ethnicities and who leave their own material traces, contributing to the vernacular landscape in ways that might reinforce or contest its Tibetan ownership. Forty-four recognized ethnic groups dwell in Wuhou district where the Tibetan quarter is situated (Feng, 2005). If we disregard the majority (Han Chinese), the

² For a more detailed discussion of the historically situated Tibetan appropriation of the urban landscape, see Brox (2016, 2017).

Fig. 2. A multi-ethnic neighborhood. Halal meat is advertised using Arabic, Chinese, and Roman letters on the small, turquoise sign. The staircase wedged between the two shops leads to Lhasa-Chamdo Mgron-khang, one of the numerous hostels in the quarter.

largest ethnic group is the Tibetan,³ and Mandarin and Tibetan are the most common languages that one will hear. In a few shops, the shopkeepers only speak Tibetan dialects, and in other shops, Han-Chinese shop clerks have learned to speak Tibetan because of the high numbers of Tibetan customers. Although this is a pragmatic choice, it also has a symbolic force contributing to the apparent Tibetan-ness of this place. It and other material manifestations of language in public space can be used to “index identity and present a certain image of self...” (Leeman and Modan, 2009: 336). Given the important role of linguistic environment in all three dimensions of the landscape, I draw on linguistic landscape research (LL-research) in my reading of each. As will be clear from the following, landscapes enable us to recognize Tibetan identity but also its contestation where, for instance, signage and storefronts show how languages compete on behalf of people and politics (see Fig. 2).

3. Reading landscapes

Our reading of a landscape is based on previous experiences and expectations. My own experience stems from time spent in Tibetan communities in Central and East Tibet, as well as India and the Kathmandu valley in Nepal. I have seen how one of the most iconic Tibetan places, the Barkhor in Lhasa (both a major pilgrimage site and a historical marketplace), is busy with commercial and religious activities. I have also lived in Tibetan settlements in India that are pockets of Tibetan life in an otherwise non-Tibetan environment: entering the gates of Majnukatilla in Delhi, Dekyiling in Dehradun, or Lugsam in Karnataka, it was obvious where the limits of the Tibetan settlements were. The Tibetan quarter in Chengdu, in contrast, does not have a gate with a welcome sign or an arch signaling the boundary between a Chinese downtown and Little Lhasa. In that way, it is not a clearly demarcated Tibetan enclosure set apart from an otherwise Han-Chinese city. The Tibetan quarter just consists of shops and residences situated in ordinary streets that for some visitors might be indistinguishable from the rest of Chengdu. A visitor might not know exactly when she is

inside or outside the Tibetan neighborhood. Is it even a neighborhood? Is it Tibetan? Can it be treated as separate from its Chinese surroundings?

Little Lhasa, then, is both a real and imagined place. It is an imagined place for visitors expecting to see archetypical Tibetans (the monk and the nomad) and stereotypical markers of a Tibetan collective identity. A visitor might expect maroon robes and Tibetan fur coats, or rosy-cheeked women with long braided hair and long-sleeved dresses, singing, dancing, and expressing their longings for the grassland. She might expect special foodstuffs like butter tea and yak cheese. Another visitor might expect to hear the sound of Tibetan chanting and the sight of smiling and bespectacled Buddhist masters, religious symbols, calmly abiding Buddhas, prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and prayer wheels and prayer beads. Such imaginings of Tibet also materialize in China’s commercial strips, museums, theme parks, and villages elsewhere.⁴ The Tibetan vernacular expressed in Chengdu’s Tibetan quarter includes many components of an imagined Tibet, but it also lacks signs of Tibetan-ness that characterized the Tibetan places that I have experienced in India, Nepal, and Tibet. Although the most salient feature of the neighborhood distinguishing it from the rest of the city is its overarching Buddhist theme, key sensory and bodily markers of Tibetan religious space were missing, such as the smell of rancid butter from butter lamps lit in front of an icon or the murmur of mantras by a continuous flow of pedestrians circumambulating a holy monument. This makes it significantly different from the Barkhor in Lhasa or the Tibetan enclaves in India and Nepal. The facades of Little Lhasa showing from the street are storefronts – so from the look of it, the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu is first and foremost a commercial strip. Yet, as I show in this article, this commercial landscape depends upon the creation of a Tibetan landscape in both its vernacular and political dimensions. The following three sections unpack three deeply entangled dimensions of the landscape that, for the purpose of analysis, are highlighted individually in three separate readings.

3.1. The vernacular landscape

Tibetans in downtown Chengdu have produced the vernacular landscape in a myriad of ways that establish Tibetan ownership and confirm its “ethnic authenticity.”⁵ The Tibetan markers that set this neighborhood apart from the rest of the city as a Tibetan place are everywhere. When we walk these streets, we first notice that there is an extraordinarily high concentration of visibly Tibetan people. Although some men wear their hair short and dress like any Chinese, we see others with long hair, wearing traditional Tibetan clothes (Tib.: *phyu-pa*). Some are lay pilgrims; others are there to shop or visit family. There are women sporting wide-brimmed hats and women’s *phyu-pa*, perhaps with rosy cheeks as if they have just come down from the Tibetan plateau. Monks and nuns, instantly recognizable swathed in their maroon robes, are out shopping – or you might see them blessing a shop clerk’s goods, reciting prayers for a customer, or performing some other religious service. Here also come touring Tibetan Buddhist masters passing by on their way home from their visits to devotees in Beijing, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. You see Tibetan nomads chitchatting in the teahouses; grandmothers of Tibetan children attending school in Chengdu; Tibetan businessmen from Lhasa replenishing their inventories; and Han Chinese Buddhists shopping for religious

³ Of Chengdu’s 14.0476 million residents, only 32,332 Tibetans were registered in the 2010 census (DERAC, 2011), but the actual number of Tibetans living in Chengdu is as much as ten times greater (Brox, 2017). Tibetans in Chengdu and Xining usually do not register as urban residents, even if they have lived in the city for a long time (Brox, 2017, Washul, 2018: 501, Grant, 2018: 1462). They reside in several neighborhoods of Chengdu, but Little Lhasa has earned the status of being the Tibetan quarter.

⁴ See Bishop (1989), Brauen (2004), and Lopez (1998) for Western imaginings, and Smyer Yü (2015), Yeh and Coggins (2014), Zhu and Qian (2015) for Chinese imaginings.

⁵ I use the term “ownership” to connote the domination of or feeling of being at home in a place by a particular group (in this case Tibetans), rather than in the Euro-American legal sense. According to my interlocutors, most Tibetans rent their slots in these commercial buildings from either Han-Chinese or the Southwest University of Nationalities.

paraphernalia. Once in a while, you might bump into a couple of foreign tourists browsing a curio shop for souvenirs; more often you will encounter some of the increasingly numerous Buddhist devotees and Chinese voyeurs of ethnic culture who have been taken there by tour operators to experience a little piece of Tibet outside of Tibet. You might also come across Tibetan urbanites living elsewhere in Chengdu who occasionally visit the market when they miss their *yul* (“home”) or *pha-yul* (“fatherland”).⁶ Diki, a 32-year-old woman training to become a teacher, related that she often went there: “Sometimes [I go] just to buy the stuff that I need. Sometimes when I miss home. I go there to meet Tibetans, listen to Tibetan music, see Tibetan fashion.”⁷

Tibetan-ness is not only represented by the people frequenting the streets; it is also embodied and performed, for example, in eating habits. Apart from a few Muslim noodle stalls also patronized by Tibetans, the market is packed with places to eat Tibetan style. In 2010, 74 out of the market’s 472 enterprises dealt with food and drinks, the majority being teahouses and restaurants (Brox, 2017). These included low-key tea-stalls with a couple of tables and chairs on the pavement for guests to play the Chinese board game mahjong and more intimate restaurants without menus, serving a crowd of Tibetans. There were also large, multi-floor restaurants with trilingual menus in English, Chinese, and Tibetan. A few shops sold butter and instant butter tea, yak milk, and beef products branded as Tibetan. There were a couple of Chinese franchise groceries like Hongqi Chain and Wowo, but none of the international franchise consumer outlets like Starbucks or McDonald’s that attract an upper-end clientele in China. Compared to other immigrant neighborhoods in global cities, which are often connected with poverty, this is perhaps to be expected. Yet, the Tibetan quarter of Chengdu is a zone displaying socio-economic differentiation.

There are poor people: the destitute elder pleading fellow Tibetans for help while reciting mantras; the crippled Chinese begging among generous Buddhists; the female peddler squatting on the sidewalk with a baby on her arm; and the group of ragged, young Tibetan men, dominating a street corner with loud behavior. Amid this display of poverty are rich people: the Chinese businessman strutting about with a lady on one arm and his money bag on the other; the charismatic Buddhist teacher with his entourage of monks and middle-aged, female, Chinese patrons; and the successful Tibetan entrepreneur possessing cash and connections. They undeniably have disparate means and methods to create landscapes. The Tibetan quarter is not a unitary enclave since there are substantial differences between people. Poverty and prosperity exist side by side, and these wealth disparities create contesting vernacular landscapes. Humble dorms and hostels offered to Tibetans coming to the neighborhood and their accompanying signs of lower status are in sharp contrast to the gentrified façades and wealth displayed in, for example, the fancy Golden Lemon Hotel and Shufeng Garden Hotel accommodating the Tibetan elite of lamas, wealthy businessmen and high-level cadres. The presence of three banks is also a sign of profit and prosperity and testifies to the importance of Chengdu for Tibetan economic life. This place is not a poor ghetto or an enclosed ethnic enclave on the fringes of the city. Generally speaking, it is a prosperous commercial space in downtown Chengdu.

We can also learn a lot about this place just by looking at the storefront signs, advertisements, window displays, colors, and designs. Although these are material signs of a commercial landscape (discussed in a later section of the article), they also contribute to a Tibetan vernacular landscape, establishing the neighborhood as a Tibetan place. Generic Chinese shop names, such as Ethnic Jewelry Shop (Chi.: *minzu jin yin shoushi jingpin dian*) and Ethnic Articles Wholesale (Chi.: *minzu yongpin pifa*), declare that they deal with “ethnic products” (Chi.: *minzu shangpin*) and “religious articles” (Chi.: *zongjiao yongpin*), although at

times they include specific references to Tibet (Chi.: Xizang). Tibetan shop names, on the other hand, contain more explicitly Tibetan referents, including Tibetan placenames (e.g. Lhasa, Songpan) or simply Tibet (*bod-ljongs*); figures or places in Tibetan history and mythology (e.g. Gesar, Shambala); or words meaning or associated with Tibetan culture (Tib.: *bod-kyi rig-gnas*). Very few Tibetan language shop signs contain a Tibetan equivalent of the Chinese *minzu* (“ethnic group,” “nationality,” in Tibetan *mi-rigs*).

Commercial signage is the most common sign of ethnicization in the vernacular landscape (cf. Krase and Shortell, 2011: 376). In their formative work establishing LL-research, Landry and Bourhis (1997) single out two functions of commercial signs, one being to communicate (informing customers where to park, persuading them what to buy) and the other to symbolize (declaring ownership or dominance by writing in a particular language or stating affiliation). While they see these signs as texts that can be read, they pay less attention to the complexity of their authorship and layers of readings. This complexity is obvious in several examples from the Tibetan quarter in downtown Chengdu. To give just one: an attractive sign board outside the store Zhuoma Kitchen Machines showed a Tibetan woman standing in a landscape of snow-capped mountains and beautiful green grasslands dotted with dandelions and wooden houses – it could be the Swiss Alps, but here it represented Tibet. She promoted a modern butter-tea blender named Zhuoma (Tib.: *Sgrol-ma*). It was a Chinese-made product advertised in Chinese, but given a Tibetan name and a Tibetan face, and equipped with a slogan: “The bright star that sparkles on the grassland: The butter-tea machine called Zhuoma.”⁸ The shop clerk was Han Chinese and the kitchen machines were produced in a factory in Guangdong province, which is the origin of an enormous amount of products made in China meant for both global and local markets. There were three shops that dealt with kitchen machines, each promoting their brand and design with a particular Tibetan look. These commercial signs were meant to persuade the Tibetan consumer to buy the machines as high-street brands (according to the LL-function to communicate), but simultaneously signaled that this neighborhood was indeed a real Tibetan place (according to the LL-function to symbolize), their effect thus surpassing the target group (Tibetan consumers). The signs told the visitor that this was a product that Tibetans needed, and this is where Tibetans went to get it. These material signs are, therefore, not only commercial but also constitutive of the vernacular landscape.

Furthermore, the kinds of enterprises and the commodities for sale at the market communicate the status of the people who are expected to shop and dwell there. In immigrant neighborhoods in general, we can expect to find travel agencies, special clothing and beauty services, foreign grocery stores, as well as communication, money transfer, and packing services (Krase and Hum, 2007). In the Tibetan quarter, similar shops signify that this is a place for people belonging to somewhere else or people on the move. Most Tibetans here are mobile people creating a mobile, vernacular landscape: the landscape is continuously evolving according to the stream of Tibetans moving and in and out of the neighborhood. There are many signs revealing its status as transitional space, such as the numerous dorms, hostels, guest houses, and hotels offering accommodation. Strings of SUVs and the occasional lorry are parked along the streets, some with the driver’s phone number and maps of the routes they operate plastered on the car windows. They drive their Tibetan and Chinese customers or goods to Tibetan places: 2000–3000 Yuan for relatively nearby locations in Sichuan, like the enormous monastic encampments of Yachen and Larung, or 15,000–16,000 Yuan for the long haul over to Lhasa.

These readings of a vernacular landscape, which is one layer in the

⁶ See Washul (2018) for a discussion of translocal senses of home and the difference between *yul* and *pha yul*.

⁷ All personal names are pseudonyms.

⁸ The bi-lingual slogan read in Tibetan: *tho-sgang na ‘tsher-ba’i skar-ma ‘od-chen/ sgrol-ma rtags-can gyi srub-je’i ‘phrul-khor/* and in Chinese: *caoyuan zhi xing – zhuoma dianqi*. I saw the same advertisement when I visited the shop’s Barkhor branch in Lhasa.

multi-modal construction of collective identity, show how, symbolically at least, this has become a Tibetan place which has even made it on to the Chengdu city map. By looking at the landscape, we see how Tibetans have asserted their agency and laid claim to the neighborhood: the privileged consumer following his heart's desires and the immobile, marginalized city dweller are social agents as they continuously re-inscribe their identity in this place. We see how the authorship of the vernacular landscape is constituted by an ever-changing body of Tibetans and non-Tibetans, including both those who signal Tibetan-ness through clothing, language, bodily practices, and commercial strategies, and those who read it in the landscape. However, as David Malinowski (2009: 108) argues, the author of signs is “a complex, dispersed entity who is only somewhat in control of the meanings that are read from his or her written ‘utterances.’” Thus her or his display of agency, materially manifested in the vernacular landscape, has not overwritten the landscape established and maintained through Party-state plans and policies and their implementation. It is to a reading of this political landscape and its entanglement with the Tibetan vernacular landscape that I now turn.

3.2. The political landscape

While it is obvious for most visitors that Buddhist statues and maroon robes are codes for Tibetan-ness, it is the *density* of Tibetan clothing, storefronts, quotidian behavior, and religious and food practices that establishes the ownership of a place (cf. Krase and Shortell, 2011: 373). Because this place is carved into a Han-Chinese city, the concentration of signs proclaiming Tibetan origin marks the space as contested: “People lay claim to space as theirs by announcing their identity in it” (Krase and Shortell, 2011). In terms of the linguistic environment, the shopkeepers’ signs and the government signage correspond respectively to the categories of bottom-up and top-down signs that are commonly studied in LL-research (e.g. Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Malinowski, 2009). For example, all signage pointing to planned and organized spaces in the neighborhood marks the neighborhood’s political landscape, telling us that this place is subject to management by Chinese authorities. Whereas Tibetan language has a relatively strong presence in the vernacular landscape, signage displaying street names and house numbers, or directing residents and visitors to parking lots, offices, residential areas, and other formal spaces recognized and named by local authorities is in Chinese characters only. This brings to mind Jackson’s comparison of language and landscape: “A landscape, like language, is the field of perpetual conflict and compromise between what is established by authority and what the vernacular insists upon preferring” (Jackson, 1984: 148). At the same time, Chinese-language signs create corridors or passages through this neighborhood for non-Tibetan pedestrians for whom this is only a transit-space. By following the Chinese signs, they need not relate to the Tibetan ownership claims throughout this part of town, and they can move about the neighborhood without interacting with the surrounding Tibetan culture.

Furthermore, when I say that Chinese signage represents the political landscape, I refer to the landscape that was planned to be used by specific people in specific ways, and which was designed to produce or educate particular inhabitants of that landscape, like law-abiding and patriotic citizens, consumers, and minority exemplars. This political landscape is based upon ideology and is deliberately created according to a plan: “The political landscape, artificial though it may be, is the realization of an archetype, of a coherent design inspired by philosophy or religion, and it has a distinct purpose in view.” (Jackson, 1984: 43). For example, as related by David Bray (2008: 394), residential compounds in China spatially buttress community values like “‘social cohesion’ (*ningjuli*), ‘neighbourliness’ (*linli guanxi*), a ‘sense of security’ (*anquangan*) and a ‘sense of belonging’ (*guishugan*).”

The political landscape materially manifests the attempts by the state to regulate this location and is part of this neighborhood’s history. Migrants and merchants have created a vernacular landscape that the

State has tried to discipline by imposing regulatory material elements in the landscape, including (but not limited to): signage that gives directions, and names and categorizes its constituents; administrative units, such as the TAR government’s Chengdu office; the traffic signal at the heart of the market; and a massive police presence compared to other districts in the city. While elements of the political landscape, such as signage and traffic signals, relate to broader patterns of governance and governmentality in China, the imposed regulation of the Tibetan quarter in the form of conspicuous police presence sets it apart as a Chinese-controlled Tibetan political space. Particularly since the Tibetan protests in 2008, there has been increased securitization of Tibetan areas. In Chengdu’s Tibetan quarter, armed police are the most eye-catching and reminded me of the Barkhor area in Lhasa where the presence of armed soldiers on rooftops and groups of marching soldiers expressed the State’s fear of a restive Tibetan population. Similarly, the intersection that is the center of the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu was heavily controlled on each of my visits between 2010 and 2019, with several police installations in place. On the north-western corner of East Wuhouci Street and Wuhouci Bystreet, a police bus packed with uniformed men peeping out from behind closed curtains was parked along a several-meter-long flower bed that protected one side of the bus. I read this as a monument to the potential and unlawful separatism that Tibetans have been negatively labeled with and the security threat they are perceived to pose. Similarly a police minibus and police guard was stationed on the opposite side, on the corner of Ximian Qiao Bystreet and Wuhouci Bystreet. On the main roads stretching out from the intersection in each direction a manned police car waited next to a roped off police post guarded by a uniformed, stiff-necked policeman holding a 1.5 m-long black stick. Additionally, the occasional police car patrolled the streets. Such a strong police presence is unusual in Chinese city centers – apart from troubled areas in Tibet and Xinjiang (Fig. 3).

The police were aided by patrols of so-called “volunteers” – a group of men uniformly dressed in camouflage trousers and t-shirts, equipped with batons, and wearing alarming red arm-bands printed with white Chinese characters. They are known in Tibetan as the “Red Armband Patrols” (Tib.: *dpung-rtag dmar-po*) and are part of a micro-management system that collects intelligence and monitors the community. The presence of a well-equipped police force assisted by baton-swinging, middle-aged male volunteers, is supposed to have a preventive effect, mitigating the risk of Tibetans protesting or otherwise causing trouble. Their visibility and behavior contribute to the creation of a political landscape, confirming the identity of the quarter as Tibetan territory, imbued with danger and violence, that needs continuous discipline.

The massive police presence in a geographically small place like Little Lhasa will, of course, be experienced differently and arouse very

Fig. 3. Politization and enchantment. Buddhism is a dominating theme in the Tibetan quarter but is disenchanting by the conspicuous police presence.

different feelings among the people dwelling and visiting there – or it might not even be noticed. One Tibetan interlocutor, Lhamo, remarked that regulatory measures like Chinese signage, surveillance, and police had been normalized in the everyday lives of Tibetans like herself who frequented the market daily: “We are so used to it that we barely notice it.” Yet, others will come up with politicized readings of the landscape. For instance, crowd-stopping barriers in the shape of big flower displays are perhaps pleasing to look at for the outsider (when they display lush, green plants, as they sometimes do), but provocative to those among my Tibetan interlocutors who interpreted this gentrification as a cover-up for the real purpose, which is to physically restrain the movement of angry Tibetan crowds (in an imagined, future scenario). Another example is the fenced pavement and bike lane that prevents people from crossing the street other than at designated places. Although fenced bike lanes are a feature of the political landscape all over urban China, they can be read differently. They are not generally politicized when situated in other places, for example in another part of Wuhou district where I used to live, which was replete with office towers, high-end shopping, and Euro-American dining for expats and upper-middle class Chinese. However, in the Tibetan quarter, the population consists of a continuous flow of people entering and leaving this place, disciplined by permanent measures displayed in the political landscape in the form of signage, traffic signals, police posts, and barricades. Here, the aesthetics of state control in the form of a flower bed or a fenced bicycle lane are re-imagined; they become something else that tells us that this area is considered a politically sensitive and potentially dangerous place because it is Tibetan.

It is not only the authorities who associate Tibetans with danger and violence. Concurrent with increasing Chinese interest in Tibetan Buddhism and the associated shangrila-ization of Tibet, a more negative image of Tibetans as a people to be disparaged and feared was exacerbated by the circulation of images of attacks on Han Chinese persons and businesses during the 2008 Tibetan demonstrations. Several Chinese acquaintances advised against going to the Tibetan quarter after dark, and Chinese cab-drivers warned me that this was a bad neighborhood as they drove me to my many visits to the market. According to one taxi driver, the neighborhood’s indigenous Han Chinese population felt forced to rent out to Tibetans whom they feared. The Tibetans were driving out the Chinese and colonizing the place, transforming it into a hotbed for greedy and hot-tempered Tibetans. He did not like to transport Tibetans and refused to enter their turf after dark. The quarter has earned itself a bad reputation among a section of the non-Tibetan population, but it also caters to much more positive stereotypes that attract many of the people who come to Little Lhasa to consume – and who thus participate in the creation of a third dimension of its landscape, entangled with but conceptually distinct from the vernacular and the political: the commercial landscape.

3.3. Commercial landscape

Although there is a strong commercial dimension to the vernacular landscape, separate treatment of this commercial dimension helps us to problematize the close connection between place and identity. By commercial landscape, I am referring to a landscape that is intended for, and characteristic of, commerce, rather than using the term in a metaphorical sense to point to the transactional nature of human relationships and activities in this place. I argue that since the identity of this place as Tibetan and Buddhist is a valuable resource, its landscape can also be purposefully created to profit from that image. For instance, the advertising of the Zhuoma butter-tea blender and Tibetan-language signs confirm an ethnic authenticity that attracts customers to the Tibetan quarter, making Tibetan language “an important tool in the symbolic economy” (Leeman and Modan, 2009: 338) but also a resource to tap into for entrepreneurs. Language is commoditized in Little Lhasa, just like it is in the Chinatown explored by Leeman and Modan (2009: 333) in Washington DC, which turns the place into “a

commodity, marketing it and the things in it for consumption.” Literacy in Tibetan is not necessarily important since the aesthetics of Tibetan letters signal Tibetan identity and attracts customers. For the consumer who comes here to shop for Tibetan goods but who does not read Tibetan, it does not matter if words are misspelled or meaningless as long as they look Tibetan.

The majority of the goods sold at the market are purportedly connected to Tibetan culture in one of two ways: by *appearing* as Tibetan or by *appealing* to Tibetans (Brox, 2017). Since many Tibetans come to Chengdu, there is a demand for products favored by them, such as butter, ceremonial scarves, and prayer flags. Products appealing to Tibetans are not necessarily produced in Tibet. They can variously originate from, for example, the Kathmandu valley, Zhejiang, Shenzhen, Beijing, Gansu, Qinghai, and Taiwan. One shop sold expensive Akubra hats that are particularly popular with wealthy Tibetans. The proprietor was a Hong Kongese who imported the hats from Australia. His store was filled with Australian hats, and in the back room was a house altar with a devotional picture of the Tibetan Buddhist patriarch the 10th Panchen Lama. While the hats appeal to Tibetan consumer tastes, other products, such as Buddha statues and carpets, gain their appeal from their claim to have a Tibetan origin. The target market might be Tibetans, non-Tibetans or both. Printing presses, for example, have shops in the market selling Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, almanacs, poetry, and dictionaries. These presses are immensely important manufacturers and mediums of Tibetan culture, and the books end up in Tibet, USA, and Germany – everywhere where there are Tibetans, Tibetan Buddhists, Tibet-enthusiasts, and scholars. Other shops appeal to non-Tibetans by selling accessories, costumes, and religious items with a purported Tibetan origin. One tailor shop run by a Han-Chinese couple displayed minority dresses, including Tibetan outfits. These products appealed to non-Tibetans for whom they were not clothes, but exotic costumes that the tailor sold or rented out for costume parties and dance performances. Like many other products sold at the market, the dresses were not Tibetan-made. However, it is obvious that an item does not have to be made by a Tibetan or in Tibet in order to ‘be Tibetan,’ and more than half of the shops in the neighborhood were in fact not in Tibetan hands (Brox, 2017). People sat outside stores packing their goods, some being carefully placed into nice boxes with the firm’s logo, while others were thrown together in untidy piles. The goods followed old trading routes and ended up in monastery shops in eastern Tibet or in Lhasa showrooms. Other goods entered the circuit of diaspora trade networks operating within global economies and reaching Tibetan communities and non-Tibetan shops in South Asia, America, and Europe (see Fig. 4).

Many enterprises in this quarter have become so affluent, and the

Fig. 4. Tibetan dress in downtown Chengdu. The Tibetan quarter is a good place to see Tibetan fashions: both women’s and men’s robes and wide-brimmed hats are not only worn by people but are also for sale in shops.

Tibetan atmosphere has grown so strong, that Tibetans are perceived by their non-Tibetan neighbors as constituting a successful economic collective. The positive stereotypes that brand and attract many non-Tibetans to the quarter, and which the businesses there prosper from, are connected to Tibetan religion. The connection that is made between Tibetans and Buddhism – which is also expressed in the landscape – has in fact increased the symbolic value of this place, off-setting the negative image that is communicated by, for instance, the heavy police presence and cab-drivers' slander. In particular, Buddhism is a value that is traded at the market, sought not only by Tibetan visitors but also non-Tibetans.⁹ It comes in the form of material culture like statues and scriptures, but also the value that lies in the promises that are generally ascribed to Tibetan places; namely the possibility to meet a professional Tibetan Buddhist who embodies the wisdom that is sought for, or whose mantras, rituals, blessings, and efficacy can positively affect one's life course or business.

The market in Chengdu has evolved into a supply center for the revival and spread of Tibetan Buddhism among Tibetans since the 1980s and among Han-Chinese since the 2000s (Caple, 2019, Caple, forthcoming). General economic growth and people's strengthened purchasing power have supported this development. Because the Tibetan quarter has a prominent and prospering commercial strip, it attracts people looking for profit: not only merchants and entrepreneurs but also entrepreneurial religious professionals. A few of the non-Tibetan businessmen who have established themselves at the market used to have their shops in Lhasa, but evacuated after 2008 because they felt unsafe, or after 2013 when they were shut down on government orders due to the Barkhor area being renovated. The landscape has become a brand attracting more people who, as they compete for a share of the market, actively participate in the recreation of a sensorially "Tibetan" landscape for commercial purposes. In order to appeal to customers by drawing attention to their goods, many shops not only sell commodities fitting the image of Little Lhasa but also package them in enchanting ways that speak to a Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics. Through their display, branding, and marketing, commodities are staged within Tibetan Buddhist narratives and values (Brox, 2019). In many shops, there are heaps of banknotes in the lap of a Buddha statue in meditation pose, Buddhist chants sound over the loudspeakers, and the smell of incense fills the room. Together with the shopkeeper's sales pitches and the promises explicitly laid out in the available marketing material and manuals, the commercial landscape is enchanted by transforming commodities into sacred objects that are ready to be worshipped, be given as offerings, and be implemented in Buddhist rituals (Brox, 2019). In other words, when people compete commercially, they also set out to create a landscape that will pull in customers and increase their profits. One Han Chinese convert characterized the market as a place where you can hear the sounds of mantras on the lips of Buddhist customers and non-Buddhist shopkeepers: "Chanting a mantra is very normal in this area... Even non-Buddhists have prayer beads; [they] pretend to be a Buddhist... for the purpose of [getting] more business." Young Tibetan urbanites I spoke with also talked about the ways in which non-Buddhist shopkeeper purposefully mimic sacred space and Buddhist virtues as a commercial strategy. Pema, an entrepreneur in his twenties had been operating his business from Chengdu for the last four years, having given up a similar attempt in Guangdong. During a conversation in June 2016, I asked him about the piety of the many Han Chinese shopkeepers who played Buddhist sermons on the loudspeakers and displayed devotional pictures. He responded by comparing them to Tibetans who, he said, kept their faith private: "It is true that you can see some Chinese having devotional pictures and these things, but for Tibetans, their faith is not superficial... Tibetans have faith, although they perhaps do not display it by openly praying, or with pictures of their lama. Actually, Tibetans have a stronger belief than the Han even if they don't display a

devotional picture there [on the wall]. Many of the Han people do it for business purposes to attract customers, especially Tibetan customers."¹⁰

This purposefully built element of the landscape, intended for and characteristic of commerce, is not accounted for in Jackson's bipartite distinction between the vernacular landscape, which is the material by-product of community building, and the political landscape, which is deliberately created in order to produce particular inhabitants according to a political ideal. Yet, this commercial aspect is important. Not only is it conceptually distinct from the other landscapes, it is prospering from and dependent upon them. The Tibetan commodities, people, colors, languages, and so forth that constitute the vernacular landscape appeal to customers and make them believe that this is an authentic place where one can purchase real Tibetan commodities. Thus the Tibetan identity of the landscape, which is reconfirmed in the political landscape, is used as a resource in the creation of a commercial landscape that appropriates Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics and profits from the Little Lhasa image. The place associated with this positive image is distinctive – different from and in opposition to the rest of a Chinese Chengdu.

4. Conclusion

There is a strong connection in peoples' minds between people and places. Despite being a multi-ethnic location, this neighborhood in Chengdu has evolved into a powerful symbol of one ethnic group, the Tibetans. Although many Tibetans and Chinese interpret the location as a Tibetan place, their translations and valuations of it are multifarious. The neighborhood is a consumer paradise and a money-spinning Tibetan collective, but also a promising market open to non-Tibetan entrepreneurs with cash and connections. For some people, it is a dangerous place, threatening and encroaching on its surroundings, and therefore must be controlled and contained. Yet, for others, the Tibetan quarter is a Buddhahood: a spiritual gateway offering the possibility to reinsert the Buddhist sacred into contemporary urban life. What we know or imagine fills this landscape with meaning, enabling us to interpret what we see. We could say that we are readers of different texts contained in the landscape, or that we are all the authors of the multiple texts that shape it. I have asked into the production of landscapes that have involved the translation of a multi-ethnic space into a Tibetan place that is set apart from and in opposition to its Chinese surroundings as a little piece of Tibet in urban China. Engaging with Jackson's bipartite theorization of landscape, I have problematized the boundaries and internal homogeneity of the categories he proposes, showing how wealth disparities and multi-ethnicity diversify the vernacular landscape, and how the political landscape is re-imagined because of its Tibetan identity and historicity. I have also extended his conceptual framework by examining how Tibetan aesthetics are appropriated for commercial purposes. I argue that each of the three landscapes – the vernacular, political, and commercial – works to conjure a Tibetan place in multi-ethnic urban space.

The economic success of the Tibetan market and, moreover, the economy of successful domination can be taken as evidence for Tibetans' sense of right to belong there. In fact, by 2019, the Tibetan neighborhood had outgrown the immediate vicinity of the intersection and the geographical area of the *shequ*,¹¹ which was recognized as the Tibetan quarter. It had grown larger and encroached on the neighboring streets, especially to the south of the market where Tibetan enterprises, restaurants, and nightclubs had mushroomed. Chime, a Tibetan entrepreneur in his early thirties, told me that he felt very

⁹ Shopkeepers selling Buddhist commodities at the market, whom I have talked to, estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of the customers were Tibetan and the rest Han-Chinese, and guessed that 80 percent were Buddhists.

¹⁰ The overarching Buddhist theme of the commercial landscape is an important but too complex issue to unpack here. I intend to explore it in detail in a future article, "The aesthetics of in/authenticity," that will delve into how the Tibetan quarter is seen as endangering and compromising Buddhist virtues because Buddhism is sold for profit.

¹¹ The Chinese term *shequ* ("community") designates the basic territorial and administrative unit of urban governance (Bray, 2008: 398).

proud of the Tibetan quarter in Chengdu. Despite all the pressure that the Chinese State had subjected Tibetans too, Tibetans had been able to develop their own place on foreign ground, which everybody recognized as a Tibetan place. Sitting in a café south of the market one evening in June 2016, Chime told me:

Actually, I am very proud of seeing the Tibetan market. Because, you know, Tibetans are not supposed to be there and to have such a big place, but they have been staying there for many years....I heard that many years ago, the government tried to destroy the market and send the Tibetan people to another place, some rural part of the city. But, you know, they are still there [in the city center].

Chime related how Tibetans were invading the surrounding blocks, transforming a part of Chengdu's city center into a Tibetan neighborhood with its Tibetan language, symbols, scents, food preferences, and music. It was no longer strange to meet Tibetan monks in the nearby Walmart or hear the Tibetan language spoken at the neighboring table at a local restaurant where the menu was in English and Chinese. For Chime, this represented a kind of victory: a material and living proof of the Tibetans occupying a little piece of China. Chime argued that the government had lost the struggle to relocate the Tibetans to some remote corner of the city. The Tibetans had won and had even burst the officially defined administrative boundaries of the neighborhood and encroached on the surroundings. Tibetans dominated. Yet, during my latest visit to the market in January 2019, I learned that the story about forced relocation had resurfaced. There were rumors that the neighborhood faced imminent demolition to make way for a magnificent theme park.¹² Some people with whom I spoke seemed to meet precarity with refusal, either by celebrating the illusion of certainty (as Chime had done in 2016) or by incorporating the looming threat of demolition into a positive narrative about their personal futures – it was, in any case, time for them to retire. Others were anxious when faced with unsettling rumors about new State measures to discipline Tibetans, or when seeing that neighboring shops had to close because they were not able to renew their leases. Like the American trailer parks and shanty towns described by Jackson, the Tibetan quarter of Chengdu was characterized by insecurity, uncertainty and temporality, its survival subject to the leniency of the local government and changing political winds. What Chime interpreted as a triumph was also an index of political precarity, signaling the ongoing struggle for authorship and ownership of this little piece of China's urban space.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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¹² According to local government plans, the theme park will be a celebration of the dynastic period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE) when Chengdu was the capital of the Shuhan state. Little Lhasa will be swallowed up into what is planned to become one of the biggest cultural areas in China with matching architecture, colors, greenery, and cultural events. Reports about these plans appeared in the Chinese media in 2004 (eg. <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2004-08-27/06493506741s.shtml>) and resurfaced in 2017 and 2018 (eg. http://scnews.newssc.org/system/20170906/000814901.html?url_type=39&object_type=webpage&pos=1).

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