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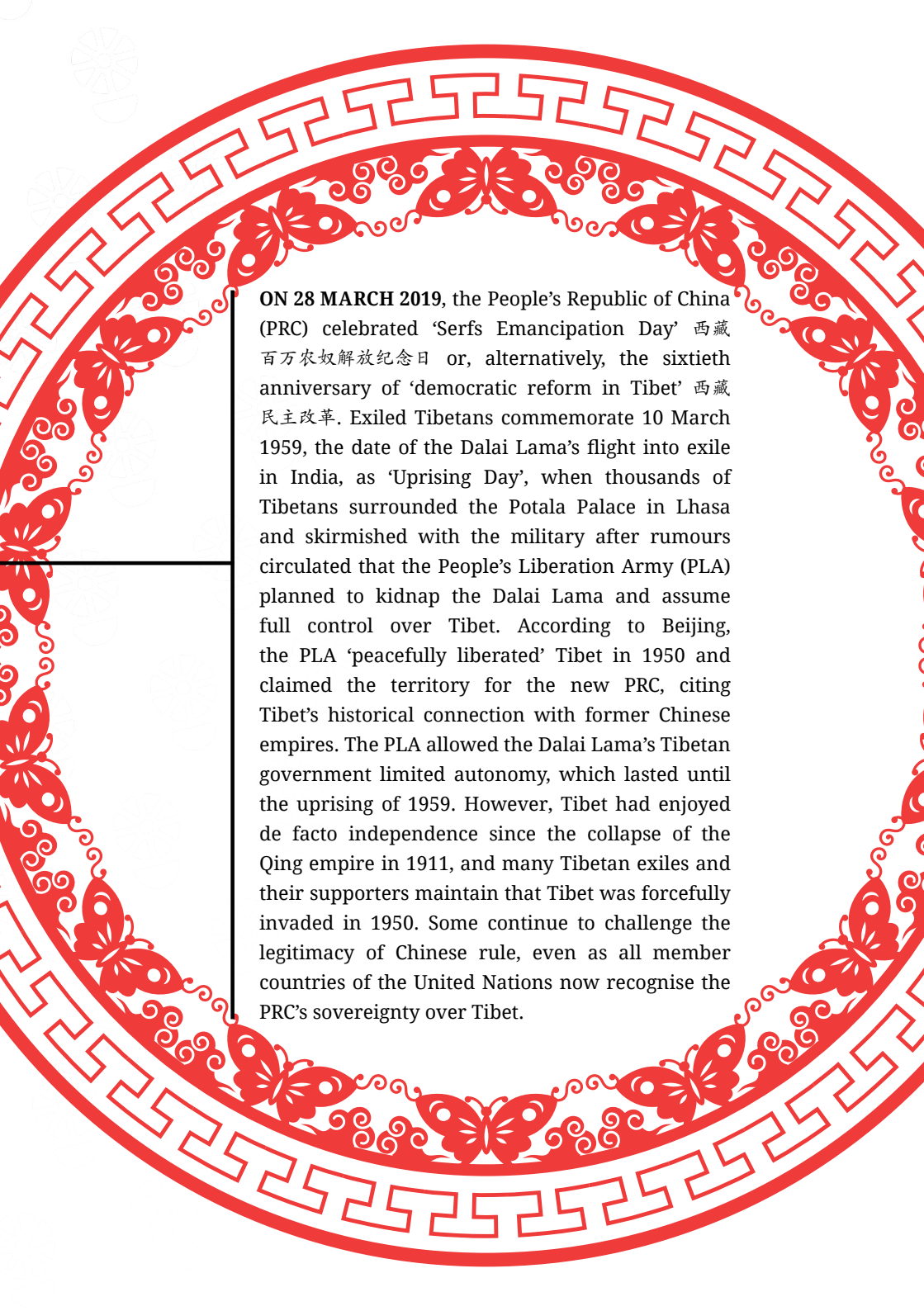
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URBANISING TIBET: ASPIRATIONS,

ILLUSIONS, AND NIGHTMARES

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ON 28 MARCH 2019, the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrated 'Serfs Emancipation Day' 西藏百万农奴解放纪念日 or, alternatively, the sixtieth anniversary of 'democratic reform in Tibet' 西藏民主改革. Exiled Tibetans commemorate 10 March 1959, the date of the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in India, as 'Uprising Day', when thousands of Tibetans surrounded the Potala Palace in Lhasa and skirmished with the military after rumours circulated that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) planned to kidnap the Dalai Lama and assume full control over Tibet. According to Beijing, the PLA 'peacefully liberated' Tibet in 1950 and claimed the territory for the new PRC, citing Tibet's historical connection with former Chinese empires. The PLA allowed the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government limited autonomy, which lasted until the uprising of 1959. However, Tibet had enjoyed de facto independence since the collapse of the Qing empire in 1911, and many Tibetan exiles and their supporters maintain that Tibet was forcefully invaded in 1950. Some continue to challenge the legitimacy of Chinese rule, even as all member countries of the United Nations now recognise the PRC's sovereignty over Tibet.

Like much of Tibet's history, the events of 1959 remain contentious, as does the PRC government's record in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which was established in 1965. Exiled Tibetans and other critics draw attention to human rights abuses, the marginalisation of Tibetans in their own land, and the suppression of religious and cultural practices.¹ Many Tibetans remain frustrated with policies that constrain religious and cultural expression.²

Meanwhile, Beijing trumpets its record in bringing prosperity and improved social systems to the region. Many among China's Han ethnic majority has long viewed Tibetans as culturally backward: superstitious savages who required 'saving' and 'civilising' by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to bring them into the modern world alongside the Han.³ As state media outlet Xinhua triumphantly proclaimed in March 2019:

Democratic reform has achieved a great leap from the feudal serf system to the socialist system in Tibet. The establishment of the socialist system not only liberated and developed the productive forces, but also promoted Tibet's economic development to a new level, and greatly promoted the overall progress of Tibetan society.⁴

Beijing has long maintained that Tibetan grievances can be best addressed by improving Tibetan living standards and better integrating Tibetans into China's mainstream society and economy.⁵ Since 2001, Beijing has invested more than US\$100 billion in development projects across the Tibetan Plateau,⁶ and around ninety percent of the budget of the TAR, which was established in 1965, comes from Beijing.⁷ Development policy for the region now centres on urbanisation, which is seen as key not only for economic growth, but also for taming the wild plateau and its unruly inhabitants, and promoting 'ethnic intermingling' 民族交融, including intermarriage.⁸ Urbanisation has emerged as a new tool of multiethnic governance for the CCP — an integral strategy for President Xi Jinping's dream of the 'great rejuvenation' 伟大复兴 and 'communal consciousness' 共同体意识 of the Chinese nation.⁹

Urbanising Tibet

Party officials in Beijing dream of a string of ‘civilised cities’ 文明城市 stretching across the Tibetan Plateau: urban landscapes of concrete, glass, and steel where Tibetans live, work, and consume much like their Han counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai. Cities are sites of civility and modernity in the eyes of Chinese leaders — places where orderly, rational, and obedient citizens act out the China Dream 中国梦 according to party prescriptions. With more intrusive and detailed forms of state surveillance, cities increase the control of the Party over citizens.

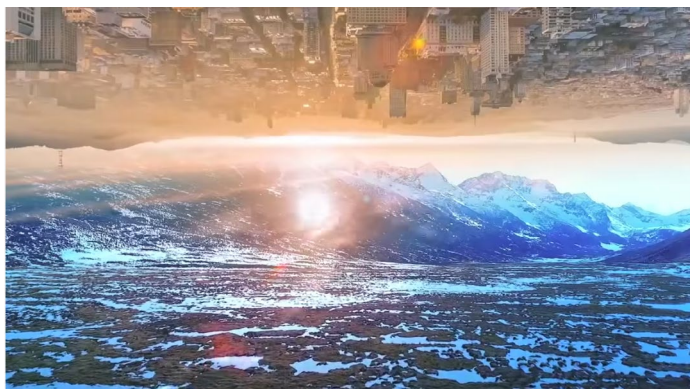
The National New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014–2020) aims to raise urbanisation rates to sixty percent nationally.¹⁰ This is not just an economic strategy to increase consumption and growth, but also a mechanism for enhancing Party governance. The Thirteenth Five Year Plan specifically targets China’s ethnic frontier, including all areas of Tibet, where urbanisation rates are relatively low: 47.1 percent in 2015 compared with the national average of 56.1 percent.¹¹ In 2010, only 5 percent of Tibetans permanently resided in a city — an increase of just 6.9 percent over the previous decade.¹² There are now ambitious plans to boost the urbanisation rate in the TAR to more than thirty percent by 2020,¹³ with similar efforts under way across the Tibetan Plateau (which extends beyond the TAR to include Qinghai province and parts of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Xinjiang).

Tibetans are shaping their own visions of what urbanisation means for them, including the opportunities and threats cities present for their livelihoods and ethnic identity. These visions, as expressed in popular culture, and pop songs in particular, are far from homogeneous. Three recent Tibetan pop songs, and the rich visual tapestry of their music videos, display a range of Tibetan attitudes towards urbanisation as well as providing an insight into the complex realities of Tibetan urbanisation today. They also evoke ideas of universal relevance to the vicissitudes of urbanisation in other places around the world.

The Nightmare City

The song ‘City’ རྫོང་ཁྱིམ་ by Lobsang Nyima ལྷོ་བཟང་ཉི་མ་ presents urbanisation as a Tibetan nightmare. The song’s video clip opens with the camera hovering above a snow-speckled mountainscape. The Tibetan lute ལྷ་སྟན་ that can be heard as the camera drifts across the landscape is deep and resonant, combining a Metallica-esque riff with a melody from a traditional circle dance རྫོང་གཞས་, and creating an unsettling trill reminiscent of a sprightly dirge. Suddenly, the urban form materialises: an upside-down cityscape occupying the empty space above the mountains. Here, we see the basic theme of the song: the city as the inverse of the rural.

The singer, Lobsang Nyima, was born in the countryside of Ngawa རྫོང་/Aba 阿坝 county¹⁴ in the mountainous north-western corner of Sichuan province, which has been a hotspot of ethnic protests and self-immolations since 2008. While ninety-one percent of its residents are still classified as nomads, the county seat, Ngawa/Aba town, is now home to nearly 12,000 residents, having tripled its population in recent decades. The new county-level city of Barkam འབར་ཁམས་/Markang 马尔康市 is only



Still from the music video, ‘City’, by Lobsang Nyima

Source: Tibetan HeartBeat, YouTube

a couple of hours away by road, and is home to another 60,000 urbanites, who live in high-rise buildings squeezed on to the region's steep, rugged mountains.

The lyrics to 'City' contrast images of rural purity — white clouds, white eagle feathers, and yoghurt — with the pollution of the city. This pollution includes not just the dust, noise, and bustle of the city, but also social pollution — the ways in which the city corrodes trust between people, leading to spiritual and emotional suffering. The singer laments losing his 'mind' རིགས་ and his capacity to love in the urban milieu.

The video follows the singer on his downward spiral through pollution and loss, from arriving in the city in his traditional robes to donning a leather jacket, getting drunk, and becoming violent and disoriented, before returning to his rural homeland, perched atop a mountain ridge, wistfully surveying the landscape. Equating the city with the sufferings of 'worldly existence' (from the Sanskrit *samsāra*), this idyllic return to the homeland seemingly equates the rural not just with freedom, but also with mastery of the self.

Decades of research by Indigenous scholars in settler-colonial states such as Australia, the United States, and Canada have shown how Indigenous peoples have been discursively erased from the city because their cultures are portrayed as being 'incongruous with modern urban life'.¹⁵ To portray Indigenous people as fundamentally rural is to justify their exclusion from cities and their containment in rural spaces. Since the mid twentieth century, Indigenous social movements around the world have asserted the right of Indigenous people to inhabit urban spaces and claim them as their own.¹⁶ Therefore, while Lobsang Nyima's song evokes the ways in which state-led urbanisation negatively impacts Tibetans, it also reinforces a problematic romantic binary in which 'authentic Tibetanness' is rural and traditional, while the urban and modern are antithetical to it; Han space can only corrupt, erode, and destroy Tibetan culture and identity.

The Aspirational City

The contrasting images of rural purity and urban pollution are challenged by one of the most popular Tibetan pop songs in recent years, ‘Fly’ འཕུར, by ANU ཨ་རུ. The rich synth tapestry, rolling beats, and electronic steel drums make for an irrepressibly upbeat song (think Avicii, but Tibetan). When the city first appears in the video clip for this song, the singer is standing on a mountain top, arms spread, the city far below him. Similar images are repeated throughout the video, showing the city as something to soar above and tower over rather than get lost within.

The city in the music video is Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai province and the largest city on the Tibetan Plateau, with 2.4 million permanent residents. Han norms dominate Xining’s language, architecture, and culture yet it is also home to more than 130,000 Tibetans. Payag and Gonpa are the two young men behind ANU. The band’s full name, Anu Runglug ཨ་རུ་རིང་ལུགས, means the ‘philosophy of youth’ or ‘youthism’ in Tibetan. Originally from rural Nangqên/Nangqian County རང་ཆེན་རྫོང་/囊谦县 in southern Qinghai, the pair moved to Beijing in their twenties to pursue their music dreams. Multilingual and media savvy, they make effective use of Chinese-language social media outlets such as WeChat and the video-sharing app Meipai to promote their music and fashion label (also called ANU), using one to cross-promote the other.¹⁷

Differing from the didactic cautionary tale of ‘City’, ‘Fly’ is more of a neo-liberal hymn to aspiration and self-realisation. The lyrics encourage listeners to ‘fly’ — breaking the chains of fate to love liberty, find their true soul, achieve their highest dream, and escape a meaningless life. And if you don’t fly? ANU tell us that your hopes will be wasted and your life will be over.

Throughout the clip, the fast-moving imagery shifts back and forth between the urban and the rural. Rather than presenting a binary contrast between the two, both environments are represented as spaces for unfettered bodily motion and human achievement; people run, leap,



Still from the music video, 'Fly', by ANU
Source: Tibetube, YouTube

and dance; they raise their fists in the air as they crest a mountain, the city lights glowing below them. Importantly, we see a city that is at once unashamedly modern and exciting and also Tibetan. Stupas and prayer flags perch above the metropolis, where Tibetans have tattoos featuring traditional iconography such as the Buddhist 'endless knot' and breakdance to Tibetan hip hop in nightclubs.

'Fly' highlights another contrast. Many Chinese cities such as Chengdu and Xining, and even Beijing and Shanghai, are important cultural and social hubs for Tibetan youth. With the exception of Tibet University in Lhasa, all the major institutions of higher education for Tibetans and other 'ethnic minorities' (or *minzu* 民族 in Chinese for short), which are major engines of socioeconomic mobility, are located in such cities. For Tibetans, the most significant institutions are Qinghai Minzu University in Xining, Northwest Minzu University in Lanzhou, Southwest Minzu University in Chengdu, and Minzu University of China in Beijing. For those such as Payag and Gonpa who seek commercial success and fame, moving to one of these larger cities — often to establish a business enterprise with the help of government subsidies — is an important strategy. Provincial and local governments offer start-up grants to entrepreneurs to support establishment costs (such as rent and decorating a store or restaurant) and staff training.

Yet Tibetans also migrate to cities in search of more menial jobs such as construction or factory work. The city has, therefore, in one way or another, become a place where Tibetans can pursue their dreams of upward mobility, regardless of their levels of skill and education. The Party-state uses the *hukou* 户口 (household registration) system and other forms of social control to guide Tibetan mobility and urbanisation. There is a hierarchical aspect to this. Rural migrants are more generally encouraged to move to, but not settle in, large cities, in a manner that sociologist Eli Friedman labels ‘just-in-time urbanisation’, attracting ‘high-quality’ 高素质 individuals to large cities as permanent residents while drawing on ‘low-quality’ 低素质 migrant labour as needed.¹⁸ In fact, for most Tibetans, urbanisation occurs in situ through the creation of small urban settlements built on former pastureland with only a couple of thousand inhabitants. In 1978, Qinghai province had just one city and six towns; today, there are six cities and 143 towns.¹⁹

The Illusory City

If ‘Fly’ subverts the moral binary proposed in ‘City’, ‘Flame’s Lament’ མེ་ལྷུང་འོ་དོར་ by Lhudrup Gyamtso ལུང་རྒྱལ་བླ་མཚོ་/黎智坚措, aka Uncle Buddhist, presents a more complex picture. It portrays both the city and the rural homeland as dreams — dreams in the sense of fantasies or mirages rather than aspirational goals. Uncle Buddhist delivers his lyrics in a rapid-fire whisper, both urgent and intimate. The acoustic guitar, soaring flute, and plaintive vocal hook of the chorus give the song a brooding, melancholic feel. And, while the video clips for ‘Fly’ and ‘City’ depict anonymous cities of steel, concrete, and glass, ‘Flame’s Lament’ takes us to Lhasa, bringing the tensions of urbanisation to the very heart of Tibetanness.

The thirty-year-old Uncle Buddhist, now known as ‘Scar K!d’ in English, was born in a pastoral area along the upper reaches of the

Yangtze River but grew up in the urban townships of Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture མགོ་ལོག་བོད་རིགས་རང་སྐྱོང་ཁུལ་/果洛藏族自治州 in south-eastern Qinghai. Like ANU, he honed his musical talents in Beijing, where he has lived since graduating in 2012 from the Beijing Contemporary Music Academy. His eclectic sound merges traditional Tibetan music with edgy urban rap in the style of Kanye West and Jay-Z, while singing in Mandarin, Tibetan, and English.²⁰

The lyrics of ‘Flame’s Lament’ begin by describing an idyllic image of the singer’s rural childhood home: the shining sun, clear water, and the grassland where he would happily sleep. He then compares this with his life in the city, which is noisy, polluted, hot, bustling, and alienating. The city is a space of absence, loss, and exclusion, where you have ‘no house, no car, no job’, and even ‘completely forget your mother tongue’ ཐ་ན་ཁྱེད་གྱིས་ཕ་མའི་སྐད་དང་ཡི་གེ་བརྗེད་ཅེས. But rather than settling with this familiar contrast between the idyllic rural and the nightmarish urban, the lyrics then take us back to the singer’s hometown, which is now developed and polluted. As the lyrical pace and intensity build to a crescendo, we hear that the city is becoming green, and its air pure — the rural and



Still from the ‘Dreaming of Tibet’ music video by Uncle Buddhist & Kalnor
Source: Tibetan HeartBeat, YouTube

urban have changed place — and the singer describes searching in vain for a road back to a homeland that has seemingly vanished forever.

Consistent with the complexity of the lyrics' treatment of the rural–urban divide, the images in the video clip also present contrasts that are less stark than those in 'Fly' or 'City'. Although we see iconic depictions of mountains and grasslands, most of the visuals are harder to parse. For example, the city is mostly represented by the Potala Palace, surrounded by bright lights and streaming traffic, and the rural is represented more often by images of small-town Tibet than by uninhabited nature. Like the lyrics, the visuals make it difficult to draw a sharp distinction between urban and rural, and to contain particular moralities and identities within either space.

Finally, 'Flame's Lament' draws attention to the translocalism and fractured identities of most Tibetans today. Although their rural homelands have been economically and socially dismantled, few Tibetans are able or have the permission required to move to large cities permanently thanks to the Party's 'just-in-time' urbanisation strategy. For most Tibetans, urbanisation presents two stark options. One is to relocate to low-tier towns — the orderly yet soulless prefecture and county-level settlements scattered across the Tibetan Plateau. The other is translocality — moving back and forth between urban places of employment and rural places of belonging; between exclusion from a dynamic urban socioeconomic context and inclusion in stagnant rural economies; between the social, linguistic, and cultural alienation of the city and the cultural security of the countryside.

Urban Futures: Dream or Fantasy?

President Xi recently asserted: 'Today, we must closely rely on the collective strength of each ethnic group if we are to achieve the China Dream.'²¹ Xi's vision involves an urban and collective future for all

Chinese citizens, including Tibetans. Cities are what Party officials call 'large melting pots' 大熔炉 in which to forge a shared national culture and identity and inscribe the thoughts, behaviour, and norms of the Han-dominated Party-state. By urbanising Tibet, the Party-state hopes to integrate Tibetans more firmly into the social fabric of the nation.

Yet, like other governments across the globe, the CCP also fears the instability associated with large-scale urbanisation and has sought to carefully manage it.²² It employs a toolkit of governance mechanisms such as the *hukou* restrictions, identification checks, facial recognition tracking, and other surveillance tools to regulate and monitor the flow of human and material capital to raise the 'quality' of urban populations and create a hierarchy of urban spaces. On the one hand, the Party stresses the need to make cities more accessible to ethnic minorities. On the other, it remains nervous about the clash of cultures and any spontaneous outbursts of resistance, especially in large urban centres.²³ And so most Tibetan urbanisation occurs chiefly in small and medium-sized townships created by the rezoning and development of former pasturelands, rather than through large-scale migration into major Han metropolitan centres.

Tibetan pop songs highlight some of the complex responses of younger Tibetans in the PRC to urbanisation. For some, the city is the secret to realising their dreams; it is a place where they can move easily, express themselves, and achieve their full potential. For others, the city represents a nightmarish end to Tibetan ethnic and cultural identity. Many more Tibetans are trapped in a sort of peri-urban limbo, lamenting the rural past while aspiring to a brighter future under the city lights. As cities come to Tibet and Tibetans go to the city, urbanisation is presenting a new test of what it means to be Tibetan in today's China.

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