

past frictions and maintain friendly ties with it. China's East Asian neighbours have long overlooked its frequent provocations and exemplified the pragmatism that characterizes international politics when the advantages of collaboration outweigh the disadvantages of principled stances. Finally, the relative ease with which Xi has consolidated his position and overturned the conventions regarding term limits, concentration of power, and cult of personality reinforces the impression that the CCP elite privileges stability and continuity above all, and the chaos of political succession is not likely to materialize in the normal course of affairs within the next decade.

Brands and Beckley's certainty regarding China's trajectory is matched by a similar assurance that American policy preferences are likely to remain consistent over the short and long term. While the Biden administration continued the 'great power competition' stance of its predecessor, it has pursued policies of 'de-coupling', or 'de-risking' in tandem while steadily improving relations with old allies and new friends. At the time of writing, such an expectation of continuity in policy may have been somewhat justified, but recent developments have undermined their assumptions. An inconsistent and erratic US strategy is now entirely possible should there be a second Trump presidency and the whole 'danger zone' approach of building coalitions of like-minded states to contain China, already a not too easy proposition given the costs of economic disengagement, may be upended by hedging strategies on the part of jittery erstwhile and prospective allies.

Overall, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* presents an interesting comparison of the current international power transition with historical examples and is right on the mark for pointing out the need for a coherent and intentional approach to managing the US-China relationship at such a crucial juncture. However, their claim that the 'idea of a danger-zone strategy is to avoid war, not provoke it', is considerably undermined by the hawkishness of their approach and the extent to which they underestimate China's warnings regarding its red lines on Taiwan and its immediate neighborhood including the South China Sea. The policies they advocate to 'degrade' China's capabilities and halt or reverse the expansion of its presence and influence are more likely than not to raise the prospect of confrontation than reduce it. The historical examples they provide to buttress their argument are not as illustrative as they make them out to be. In retrospect, the Truman administration's early containment initiatives may seem to have laid the groundwork for eventual success, but history is also full of contingencies, and similar policies in a different era and with a different set of protagonists may not produce the same results.

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Anthropocene in Tibet

Parimal Maya Sudhakar

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE EMPIRE: ON THE ROAD IN EASTERN TIBET

By Scott Ezell

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'In the dark times, will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.' These famous lines by Bertolt Brecht aptly fit Scott Ezell's epic *Journey to the End of the Empire: On the Road in Eastern Tibet*. In the late years of the Ming Dynasty, a painter, calligrapher and politician Dong Qichang said, 'to read ten thousand books means to travel ten thousand miles'. Later, this proverb was twisted by the Chinese to make it, 'to travel ten thousand miles beats reading ten thousand books'. Either way, American guitarist, musician and poet Scott Ezell's book justifies both versions of the proverbs. His experience of travels and interactions with the people on the boundary lines between Tibet and the rest of China has brought out the best of literary work with deep dives into the philosophy of life. On the other hand, reading the accounts of his journey on the edge of Tibet will make one travel ten thousand miles in the wisdom of wilderness. Yet, it would be gross injustice to classify Ezell's *Journey to the End of the Empire* as merely a great travelogue.

It is a first-hand account of the tumultuous demographic, environmental and political changes taking place in Tibet and areas between Tibet and the rest of China. The American curiosity over China goes back to the 1930s when Edgar Snow travelled deep inside the den of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and presented to the world his classic *Red Star Over China*. 75 years after Edgar Snow's rendezvous with the momentous changes taking place on the ground in China, Scott Ezell has minutely documented the transposing under the CPC rule in the wild-wild west of the Chinese empire. Since entry into the Tibetan Autonomous Region requires a special permit, Ezell travelled on the borders of Tibet interacting with the Tibetan community sprawled across the Yunnan and Qinghai provinces. Ezell is neither a political scientist, ethnographer or an environmental expert nor a journalist. He is an explorer of life. Prior to his sojourn into the borderlands of Tibet, Ezell had brought to the fore the culture and issues of an unknown indigenous community of woodcarvers, painters and musicians named the Open Circle Tribe, living on the edges between mainland China and Taiwan. Continuing the thread from *A Far Corner: Life and Art with the Open Circle Tribe*, Ezell expanded the quest to understand the

impact of globalization-led economic growth on people at the margins and on the environment at large.

When Ezell began his journey from Dali in 2004, the Chinese 'modernization' project was concentrated on the official Tibet region, while other ethnically Tibetan areas were left comparatively untouched. However, over the next 15 years nothing was out of the fisty grip of the Chinese state and development was swallowing everything that was standing virgin for thousands of years.

Ezell encountered a number of people who confirmed with him the worst of scenarios engulfing the western regions of China. His casual and informal interactions with youngsters, women and lamas revealed their sufferings, aspirations, and hopelessness in a crude but truthful way. Lost amidst the onslaught of development and suppression of culture, the people in China's west are crazy about going to the United States. Everyone wants the US visa, which surprises Ezell. Aware of the cost of living in the US, he knows that things would not be different there. Moreover, he compares in dismay the Chinese treatment of Tibetans with American misdeeds against the native Indians in the past. The environmental destruction of Tibet is superlative but not unparalleled in history or even in the contemporary period. But the Tibetans are sucked into not being the Han Chinese and consider anything better than the hell they are undergoing under the CPC rule. While they wished to fly to the United States, many of them ultimately sneaked into India without a passport or valid asylum document. Some of them also risk their freedom and lives to return to Tibet in the same fashion. They sourced valuable knowledge about their own history and became the carriers of the continued influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. The Chinese state doesn't allow his portraits anywhere in Tibet and he is someone whose name must not be uttered by anyone in any form.

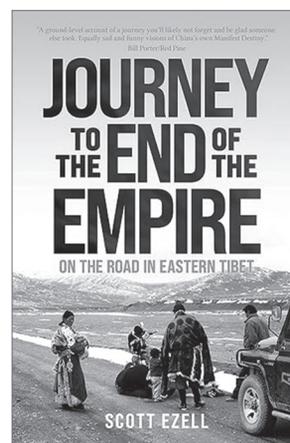
Scott Ezell travelled in the western regions of China when Hu Jintao, the predecessor to Xi Jinping, had adopted his much-celebrated policy of 'Scientific Outlook on Development for Harmonious Socialist Society'. Two

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important areas of this policy were development of China's underdeveloped western regions including Tibet and a balance between environment and development. Ezell witnessed the unprecedented scale of developmental activities in the areas between Yunnan province and Tibet. Highways at high altitude, mining, series of dams, four-star and five-star hotels as well as the sites of deployment of missile defence systems were coming up throughout the region. All of this causes enormous immediate and long-term damage to the environment in the fragile areas. The dust from mining, gravel crushers and diesel exhaust have occupied the skies of the roof of the world.

Hu Jintao, the then General Secretary of the CPC, had earlier served in the Tibet region as the Party Secretary and Political Commissar of the local People's Liberation Army. He knew very well about the land; yet, he unleashed the development policies antithetical to the habitat. Ezell notes the disturbing phenomenon of large-scale displacement of local population for developmental causes happening across the region. Resettlement zones have been erected for thousands of Tibetan refugees, who got displaced due to developmental projects or natural disasters like earthquakes. These zones are nothing but concrete ghettos of barracks-like buildings without places to plant gardens or hoard the animals. Resettlement zones seemed to be purposefully designed to erase the notion of freedom from the experiential memories of the Tibetan people. Ezell has termed the phenomenon as Disaster Occupation, a variant of disaster or displacement capitalism. He calls it an ethnocide wherein the state squeezes the identity of ethnic minorities without relocating them to far-away places or without indulging in genocide. The state expects dissolution of identities through creation of restrictive spaces, wherein the communities living there are being pushed to become dependent on the state for survival. The people in the resettlement zones have no freedom of livelihood and are surviving on meagre salaries and ration as the state makes them work on a range of development projects. In a nutshell, they are forced to dig their own graves down the barrel of a gun.

While the Chinese state justifies the developmental projects in the name of bringing in modernity and integrating borderland economies with the mainstream economy, the Tibetans know the intentions of the Chinese designs. The large dams were constructed not for local needs but to quench the thirst of developed cities in the East. Mining has been taking place to



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make China the world's number one economy without considering its impact on the livelihood and lives of ethnic minorities. The luxury hotels are meant for the Chinese and foreign tourists to give them peace of mind; even if it would disturb the serene tranquillity existing in the region for thousands of years. The highways are useless for the nomads but required for the smooth flow of tourists as well as military caravans. On top of it, Ezell noticed the well-planned huge construction sites for settling the Han population in the region. The big Han settlements would serve three purposes. One, the immediate beneficiary of the trickle-down effect, if at all, of the development projects would be the Han Chinese. Two, the demography of the region would tilt against the Tibetans and other local nomads. Three, the unemployed Han Chinese could see a hope for themselves. They were given seed money to start a business/shop in the region and were encouraged to marry Tibetan girls. Ezell explains, 'The "modernization" of the country seemed to be a process in which everything was being neutered and conditioned into a bland commodity to mass produce and purvey.' He further wonders if they were 'going to stop the hip-thrust of fucking, and implement a frozen blandness of state sanctioned coitus. The next step would probably be two test-tubes knocking against each other to produce offspring.'

China's developmental projects in its western regions have coincided with a significant level of militarization. It shows China's internal and external insecurities in and around the Tibet region. As development in the region shifted to the top gear nearing the hosting of the Olympics in Beijing, the levels of unrest increased amongst the Tibetan population. The authorities were establishing control over the monasteries to convert them into tourist sites. The Buddhist lamas became more and more restless leading to protests in the form of self-immolations. Ezell had to watch the weeping of the mother of a 22-years-old monk, who died in prison after his unsuccessful attempt at self-immolation. He also witnessed a river where a species of aquatic mammal used to swim freely for thousands of years. Those river dolphins had now become extinct in the twenty-first century succumbing to man-made changes in its ecosystem. If the species of sea creatures, land animals, warblers and humans are facing existential problems, then we need to ask again and again the oft repeated

question—development of, for and by whom? Professor Manoranjan Mohanty has called it the trap in his book titled *China's Transformation: The Success Story and the Success Trap*.

Even when many would not like to speak up for the rights of Tibetan people for the fear of their own houses being built of fragile glass, one cannot afford to forget the ecological significance of the Tibetan plateau. After the North Pole and South Pole, it has the largest reservoir of frozen freshwater. There are as many as ten major rivers originating from the plateau that feed not less than two billion people every day. According to Ezell, what is happening in Tibet concerns the existence of human civilization on earth. He laments, 'One day there would be no one left to see it (the mountain), no one to look up from the lowlands and regard its majesty, its blend of timelessness and senescence, its scars and emptiness...' . The only optimistic presumption of Ezell is the impermanence of everything except the grandeur of mother nature. He writes, 'Regardless of the coming and going of villages, armies, empires, the mountain would remain. Nothing as impermanent as a dam or rising water would harm it. And humanity couldn't heal it, but only rise up, abide, subside, just like the mountain, just like everything.'

Further, Ezell concludes his book by connecting the blue ocean, blue sky and blue rivers as symbols of depth, height and vitality which are required to fashion sustainable development. Writing in the *Diplomat* about this book, Ezell tries to overcome pessimism and says that we should not rush to the conclusion that the end of the world has come, when collectively we can still rise above the age of exploitative capitalism. Why should the progress of one country be at the cost of the suffering of another? Why should the richness of one society be derived from emptying the natural resources of their own and other societies? Humans, perhaps, need to listen to a Buddhist lama's wisdom on life during his brief conversation with Scott Ezell. When asked what he was doing there, the lama replied: What we are supposed to do—breathe, eat, shit. Everything else is greed, greed and greed.

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Readers Please Note

The special issue on International Relations, May 2024, will have a sequel in December 2024, also sponsored by Professor Manish Thakur in memory of his wife Dr Aparajita Gangopadhyay of Goa University.