The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier. By Benno Weiner. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. pp 312. $45.00.

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Benno Weiner's *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* opens in 1958 on the eve of the Amdo Rebellion, an earth-shattering event in Sino-Tibetan history. Heralded by Chinese sources as a moment of historical rupture, whereby the Amdo Tibetans cast off their feudal, backward past and joined the modern socialist nation-state of China, the rebellion's swift and violent pacification in fact witnessed the imprisonment, displacement, and death of over one hundred thousand people. Amdo is the northeastern region of cultural Tibet that encompasses current day Qinghai and portions of Gansu and Sichuan provinces. Prior to the arrival of the Communists, Amdo was a decentralized space, governed largely by local headmen and religious hierarchs, "operating within an integrated, syncretic, often conflict-ridden, but mutually authenticating web of personal and institutional relationships" (26). This is what the Communists encountered upon their arrival on the Tibetan Plateau. Weiner's story, however, is not about the arrival of the Communists nor the building of the Communist state on the Tibetan Plateau, but instead about the CCP's attempt at *nation* building in the region during the 1950s.

The CCP's nation-building project was bestowed upon the United Front (*tongyi zhanxian*), which forms the core of Weiner's study. The United Front is broadly defined as a bureaucratic network and theoretical platform for creating allies out of non-Party and non-proletarian elements. It was institutionalized in the form of the United Front Work Department whose job it was to promote this cooperative principle on the frontiers. While the United Front immediately brings to mind the alliance between the CCP and the KMT against the Japanese, the story that Weiner covers gives an entirely different meaning to what the United Front meant for the PRC *after* its establishment in 1949. A surprisingly understudied institution and ideology, the United Front, in Weiner's own words, was not a "cynical ruse" meant to placate the Tibetans as others have argued before, but a platform that should be studied and understood on its own terms and by its own logic. Faced with the difficulties of convincing the ethnic minorities in Amdo of their socialist subjecthood, the CCP adopted the United Front to "'gradually,' 'voluntarily,' and 'organically' bridge the gap between the empire and nation" (4). The primary objective of the United Front in the Amdo grasslands was therefore of persuasion rather than compulsion.

The United Front was essentially the Communist and socialist answer not only to Western forms of nation building, but also to long-standing Han forms of exploitation. The CCP recognized that beyond the all-encompassing rubric of class exploitation, there also existed *nationalities exploitation*, and that there were deep antipathies between nationalities. This alienation among the nationalities, according to the CCP, was caused by the existence of "great Han-chauvinism," which had over the long term impeded the growth of subjugated minority peoples (16). By this logic, intra-ethnic conflict was also a function of Han chauvinism, and the goal of the United Front was to eradicate it under the rubric of a new socialist nation. If carefully and conscientiously implemented, the United Front ideology would gradually foster both mass consciousness and patriotic consciousness, eliminating the exploitation of the nationalities (181). Weiner's contextualization of the United Front in Tibet demonstrates our blind spots in conceptualizing the early PRC period and the ethnic frontiers.

The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier centers around the Zeku (Tib. rtse khok) grasslands, a nomadic pastoral region with an altitude over 3,500 meters and lying roughly 250 km south of Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai Province. Chapters One and Two are devoted to the CCP's reliance on the Qing and Republican-era tactics in the transition from empire to nation-state in Amdo. These "subimperial" tactics, a term coined by Uradyn Bulag, describes the use of former imperial modes of rule as a means to establish nationalism, such as courting the local headmen and lamas into the party apparatus despite their "feudal" nature. While the purely imperial tactics did not foster a notion of nationhood, the CCP realized that employing subimperial tactics was a necessary step in the creation of national consciousness among the Tibetans in Amdo. While these earlier chapters provide the necessary background, it is in Chapter Three that we begin to witness the everyday dealings of the CCP in Zeku.

Chapters Three to Six constitute the heart of the book and contain Weiner's invaluable contribution to the study of the CCP in Tibet. Here, he introduces the readers to the contents of the rare and now exceedingly difficult-to-access Zeku archives that show how the CCP officials brought their high modernist agenda to local Amdo Tibetans, and the immediate conflicts that emerged. This agenda and the scripted nature of the United Front is perfectly encapsulated in the naming of Zeku County in Chinese. Despite the CCP's insistence on "meaningful" democratic engagement, not even the county name was up for genuine discussion (71). The name Zeku, "ze" from Mao *Ze*dong and "ku" from treasure house (baoku), i.e. "Mao Zedong's Treasure House" was decided before the democratic meeting of the Party and the county headmen (71). This dynamic is neatly contained

within the phrase "masters of their own home, under the leadership of the Party," which also serves as the title of Chapter Three. This inherent contradiction, Weiner shows, generated the main tension underlying CCP efforts in Amdo. Despite the CCP's desire for meaningful participation from the Tibetans (mostly headmen and lamas participating under varying degrees of volunteering and paid work) and making the Tibetans the "masters of their own home", the latter's choices and opinions were not given genuine value, as captured in the caveat "under the leadership of the party." The critical point that Weiner makes, however, is that instead of disregarding the notion of autonomy as an empty promise to veil the true desire to dominate and control in 1950s Amdo, "nationality autonomy was considered the key mechanism by which non-Han people would be both administrable and psychologically integrated into the new state and nation" (66-67). This "minoritization" of the Tibetans within a new nation, ridding them of their intra-ethnic conflict, and bringing meaningful change with the minorities' input was an intrinsic part of the "high modernist" ideology espoused by the United Front. As Weiner describes, 1956 is what marked the turning point, prior to the Amdo Rebellion. With the coming of the "High Tide," a crack in the United Front ideology crystallized for all Tibetans to see.

Chapter Six chronicles the initial crack in the United Front's high modernist ideological practice, when the High Tide of Socialist Transformation (1955-1956) sought to rapidly establish agricultural and pastoral cooperatives. With the High Tide push to collectivization, the former logic of attacking Han-chauvinism was discarded, and instead attacking local nationalism came to the fore. This is what initially and prematurely laid bare the final agenda, the inherent contradictions between the United Front policies and socialism. Here Weiner explains, the "revolutionary impatience" was released and the rhetoric used to describe the Tibetan elites shifted from being "covictims of nationality exploitation" to being the exploiting class (124). From this point on, Weiner shows the slow but steady build to the 1958 Amdo Rebellion. With the High Tide, the tone and terminology subtly but significantly shifted among the party cadres. The High Tide unveiled the contradictions between the United Front ideology and the operating mechanisms (one could say the final goal) of the Communist Party (145).

Despite a short respite in revolutionary fervor following the High Tide, by 1958 the Great Leap Forward began, and with it came the rapid failure of United Front ideology. While there is no evidence to suggest that party or military leaders purposely stoked the flames of rebellion in order to manufacture an excuse to rid the plateau of the old elite, once the uprising began, the party saw it as a "fortunate event," allowing them to finally take forceful action against the old

"feudal" class. What followed was, according to the CCP, "a life-or-death class struggle" (172), in the form of the Amdo Rebellion. Weiner devotes the eighth and final chapter to the rebellion itself, providing one of the first histories of the rebellion in the English language. It is in this chapter that we witness how the United Front pragmatism finally lost to the revolutionary impatience of the CCP, as the rapid establishment of communes was followed by rebellion and brutal suppression in 1958. Here the fear and frustrations of the Tibetan people finally come to the forefront and all the horror as well as structure of the rebellion is laid out before us.

The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier revolves around the rise and fall of the United Front, but it is not exclusively an institutional and intellectual history of the CCP in Amdo. While Weiner's major contribution lies in his clear presentation of the little known (and even less understood) role of the United Front in early-CCP frontier policies, his ability to present this study while never diving into a "state-led" narrative is one of the most impressive aspects of his work. At no point does one lose sight of the tension underlying the CCP's endeavor, and Weiner convinces us to take seriously the United Front's directive and mission while not making invisible the very people this affects. Weiner's work is a superb example of reading against the grain in the archives—a necessary tactic in Tibetan history and one well practiced in histories of Native Americans. And despite a near complete lack of sources directly stating the local Tibetans' position (apart from their chronic practice of showing up late or not at all), we still feel their confusion and are sucked down into the chaos and fear as the narratives reaches a climax in the Amdo Rebellion.

Weiner openly heads off the immediate questions of most critical readers with a "Note on Sources" at the outset of the book. His sources constitute nearly twenty-five hundred folios from the Zeku County Communist Party Committee Archives and the Zeku County People's Government Archives covering 1953 to 1960, the majority of which were generated at the district and county levels and sent upwards through the prefectural and provincial levels, while the remaining documents were those received from the higher authorities (xv). In summarizing the limitations of his sources, he explains the lack of Tibetan local accounts and the political sensitivity of conducting interviews. This preface is referenced periodically throughout the book. Even so, the only major problem that I, as a reader, felt difficult to see past is that of translation practices. Even a small amount of information regarding how specific terminology was translated and understood by Tibetans in the Amdo language would have gone a long way in helping the readers understand the limitations of the United Front's "high modernist ideology." Possible tactics to overcome the dearth of sources could have been contemporary local accounts or

memoirs, published interviews, or CCP pamphlets translated into Tibetan. While the difficulties of this type of research are clear, a couple of examples would have aided the readers' ability to fully comprehend the vast ideological canyon separating the Tibetans and the Communists of the early 1950s. This would have further helped the readers' understanding of, for example, Chapter Four where we start to see the party plan unraveling under the apparent miscommunication or misunderstanding of what the local people are supposed to do. Weiner himself is indeed aware of this problem (118, 122), and I second the question he raises: why were translation issues left so unremarked in the Zeku archives?

Apart from translation issues, Weiner's narrative left me wondering what was different about the United Front in Tibet. Was the United Front operated across the borderlands in the same way? Or was there something distinct about Amdo? Additionally, I was surprised to see that Weiner did not engage with the historiography on colonialism in narrating the history of the United Front. Weiner's argument about the United Front as an alternative to Western capitalist exploitation is well put. Its purpose was to disrupt the Western model by promoting a socialist alternative and encouraging national liberation based on equality. And, in the face of the absence of a proletariat (like in Amdo), the United Front's objective was to be the progressive, uniting force meant to bring unity to a socialist nation (17). Ostensibly, the United Front was there to transform, not to occupy. Yet, despite all of this, the United Front *did* set the stage for settler colonialism in the following decades. What then is the conceptual overlap between "transformation" and "colonialism"?

My final comment about the book concerns the overarching theme of transition from empire to nation-state. The use of subimperial tactics as an explanatory device for this transition period is convincing, but Weiner takes the analysis a step further by noting that the nation-state's use of these subimperial tactics signaled the death of empire at the hands of the nation-state. The key issue, however, is that the use of these subimperial tactics did *not* create a nation. What we are then left with is a historical anomaly, whereby the transition from an empire to nation-state in fact never took place in Amdo. How much further, then, can we push the notion of this transition from empire to nation-state when that transition did not fully transpire?

Overall, *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* represents a substantial contribution to Tibetan studies, Amdo studies, and the history of the early PRC. Weiner demonstrates through his history of the United Front that there was a whole world the CCP could not see through the high modernist ideology they strived for. Over the

following sixty years, the United Front would be dismantled and reassembled time and again under different directives. Far from a defunct historical entity, the United Front continues to be relevant in the Communist propaganda machine today, sponsoring Confucius Institutes and the "co-opting of overseas Chinese willing to quietly promote CCP interests" (17). While an argument for the earnestness of the Communist cadres and the United Front ideology in the early PRC is not necessarily new, Weiner's work represents the most in-depth lens into the minds and workings of these officials on the Tibetan frontier. Understanding the ideology of the United Front and the CCP while never losing sight of the deep-seated tensions and horrors of the 1958 Amdo Rebellion is the most important contribution of Weiner's book. It should be a required reading for anyone seeking to understand the history of the CCP in China's borderlands.