

Ethnography in Selective Places*

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Place tells and drives stories. Stories give meaning to place. This book tells place-driven stories with the goal of exploring the meanings of places in China's northwest. I see place as the interconnection of three analytical layers: the physical location and environment, the socio-organizational locale, and the discursively constructed sense of place. These three layers are interwoven processes that converge in place and actively shape, instead of passively contain, social transformation.

As a process, place is as much about time as it is about space. Territory, as politicized place, drives power processes in places, forges interconnections, builds territorial dynamisms, and enables territorialized social analyses.

I use territorial dynamism as a conceptual tool to tell stories about complex places and times across multiple territorial scales: the global, national, regional, local, and anywhere in between. With the intention of telling the multi-scalar place stories arose the question of execution: where to begin? Among all the possible scales from which to launch a place story, I find the grassroots story to be the most fertile and least predictable. From the bottom up, grassroots stories generate multi-layered meanings of place. Yet, grassroots stories, crowded with diverse local actors in divergent physical, social, and discursive transformations, are inevitably noisy and untamable by a tidy narrative or a grand theory. In many ways, telling place-driven stories from the grassroots level is not unlike trying to herd a clowder of cats. To preserve the stories and keep the cats kicking, I chose to nurture them in a garden that seeds surprises and preserves complexity instead of squeezing them into a bag that confines the cats and sterilizes the stories.

Telling a place-driven story from the ground up, while trying to make untamable stories legible and meaningful, is a matter of experimentation. This experiment affords several interconnected methodological, analytical, and theoretical implications. In this brief article, I reflect on my experiment with Ethnography in Selective Places. I tell multi-vocal place stories mainly through ethnography. Ethnography, like life, defies planning. The places where I try to carry out ethnographical work select and deselect me. The fact

* **Author's Note:** This article is drawn from the concluding chapter of my forthcoming monograph, *Conserving China's Northwest Frontier: Nature, Culture, and Future* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press in Fall 2025). In this chapter, entitled *Telling Place-Driven Stories: Methods, Analyses, and Theorization*, I discussed three interwoven processes of ethnography, analysis, and theorization in three sections, those are, (1) ethnography in selective places, (2) analyzing generative place, and (3) theorizing with territory. This article is based on Section 1, Ethnography in Selective Places. This is a geographer's attempt to show the active role of space in social transformation. Personal and village names are fictional.

that place defines me as an outsider during my fieldwork offers little reassurance. As an outsider, I have little say in choosing an ideal research site that fits my research plans.

At the onset of this project, I had a general research direction in a geographical area, that is, the politics of conserving culture and nature in China's arid northwest, far away from my previous research sites on China's eastern seaboard. But I had little idea where in the immense expanse of the northwest I should or could focus on. Through direct and indirect contacts and chance encounters, I conducted pilot studies over the course of three long summers in various places in Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia (IM). Missteps there were quite a few. While preparing for my first visit to IM, for example, I expected to meet Mongol nomads but arrived in the steppe only to find immense corn and wheat fields in the Yellow River Loop Plain in Hetao of West IM. I felt disappointed and disoriented. Determined to see the "authentic" Mongolian steppe with grazing animals, I ventured out to the pastoral areas in Central IM, where I was met with herders without herds and herds without pastures. Meanwhile, chance encounters led me on a detour to the farming county of Minqin in Gansu, the showcase site of China's desertification crisis management. In public and policy discourse, Minqin was presented as a hopeless farming area that would soon be swallowed up by the encroaching sand dunes. Yet, in Minqin, I met farmers who were actively searching for farmland within and beyond the officially sanctioned crisis zone, strategizing to survive not just desertification but more immediately, the water restrictions imposed by conservation policies. These farmers' active strategization for survival, albeit with varying degrees of success, contradicted with what I had read about the immobilized ecological victims. As I grappled with my confusion and tried to learn, unlearn, and relearn at each stop, this book found its shape.

During my sojourns, some places turned out to be more accessible than others, and some contacts lasted longer than others. At times, unpleasant meetings drove me away from places: one involved an aggressive local boss, and another concerned two extorting local thugs. At other times, the rejections were more subtle. When de-selected by place, whatever burning questions I had hoped to pursue in that place became impractical. By incidental encounters and sheer luck, three places—Ejina and Horqin Right Front (Horqin RF) Banners of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), and Minqin County of Gansu Province—eventually selected me: they allowed me to stay and revisit.

Take my fieldwork in Fresh Springs Village in Horqin RF Banner of East IMAR (Chapter 8) for example. In 2016, I met a Mongol graduate student, Wave, when I gave a talk at a university in China. Up till then, my fieldwork had focused on the western, pastoral-dominant Alxa League in IMAR (Chapters 1 and 2) and the farming villages in Hexi Corridor of Gansu Province (Chapters 3 and 4). In that talk, I compared the Mongol herders' and Han Chinese farmers' strategies of surviving China's conservation policies since the 2000s. After the talk, Wave approached me and hinted that I had missed an important actor and place: the Mongol farmers of East IM, where she grew up. The next summer, I followed Wave to her home village, Fresh Springs in Horqin RF, to learn how much I had missed. I cannot thank Wave enough for opening my eyes to the worlds of Mongol farmers and the agropastoral and pastoagricultural entanglements of East IM, the heart of IM's "half-agricultural, half-pastoral" belt, as presented in Chapter 8. Through

Wave's generous family, neighbors, and relatives, I was selected by Horqin RF, where I was able to visit several villages and towns, conduct repeated and lengthy interviews and collect oral histories across generations.

These incidental encounters are not necessarily accidental ethnography. Once a place and people accept me, I reciprocate their generosity and trust. I respond to their curiosities about me and open up about my job, my research, my home, my family, and my hopes and worries. Without demanding answers to my research questions, I try to understand my hosts' concerns through their words and silences, action and inaction, presence and absence, and join in on their activities and travels when invited. And I try to help (such as teaching their children English) without getting in the way as much as I can. With the understanding that any interview and participatory observation during fieldwork is affected by my presence and colored by the power dynamics of the occasion, I do my best to make ethnography an exchange of life experiences instead of one-way Question-and-Answer sessions. The narratives derived from such exchanges are a process of co-production: my presence, perception, expectation, reaction, and emotions like excitement, empathy, bewilderment, anxiety, and frustration are all part of the interactions between me and my hosts in specific places, moments, and circumstances.

Place that selects and deselects me is a selective place. Selective place is also pedagogical. Place poses new questions, and place broadens and deepens my original direction of inquiry. As Wave took me to visit her relatives in Fresh Springs Village, one of the many things I learned was how different Wave was from her kin.

Before the visit, I saw Wave as a farm girl from a poor, hilly East IMAR village who had made it (see Chapter 9). Trudging through numerous competitive exams and breaking the class, gender, and ethnoterritorial barriers, Wave triumphed in getting into a prestigious university in a metropolitan center with a promising urban future beyond the peripheral, rural IMAR. I identified her with her rural origin more than with her achievements in the city. In the villages, Wave's kin saw her differently: Wave was an enviable inspiration and a role model for their children. Her identity was associated with her achievements, not her origins. During our village visits together, our hosts were kind enough to heed my inquiries about agropastoral transformation in the village. But they were eager to steer the conversation towards their children and grandchildren's schooling. Wave's cousins, aunts, uncles, grand uncles, and grand aunts seized the opportunity of Wave's visit to solicit her advice on strategies in choosing school tracks—what are the advantages and disadvantages of attending Mongolian versus Mandarin-track schools? How should they prepare their children or grandchildren for the upcoming high school or college entrance exams? How should they project their children's future, based on their current grades and rankings at school? Is it too late to invest in the costly tutoring classes? As I watched Wave fielding the questions, I was impressed with Wave's rich knowledge on the subject. Admittedly, I could understand only about half of the conversations, given that they switched between Mongolian and Putonghua. Wave filled me in afterwards about her experience in the convoluted bilingual education system in IMAR. In our many follow-up conversations, Wave recounted in vivid detail about her arduous preparations for the college entrance exam and the nerve-wracking, real-time online enrollment battle for college admission. As

the conversation went further, she shared with me her setbacks and lucky encounters as she maneuvered the winding paths from a peripheral Mongolian farming village to one of the top universities in China. Wave's recount of her experiences eight years after the exams (such as her scores on every subject in the mock and formal college entrance exams) with extraordinary detail reveals just how much the competition meant to her. I realized that the college race is just as relevant as agropastoralism in Mongolian farming families' aspirations for the future.

I had previously noted the importance of children's schooling in upward mobility in my studies of the Han Chinese farmers in Minqin (Chapter 4). At the onset of this study, I had presumed a fundamental distinction between the Mongol and Han Chinese students (and their families), in the same way I was looking for the "authentic" Mongol herders and their "alternative modernity." In Wave's home village, I was therefore surprised to find that rural Mongolian and Han Chinese families shared a similar set of aspirations and followed a similar path for upward mobility. I then consulted the literature on Mongols' cultural assimilation in China today. These writings helpfully illustrated the predicaments of the bilingual education policy and the drastic decline of younger generation Mongols' Mongolian proficiency and their assimilation into the dominant Han Chinese culture and language, Putonghua Mandarin. But Wave's recounts of her bilingual schooling in which English mattered more than either Putonghua or Mongolian went beyond the question of linguistic assimilation and accommodation. Her stories also opened my eyes to Mongol students' deep entrenchment not just in the linguistic orbit of Putonghua, but in China's nationwide sociocultural milieu of hyper competition, crystalized in college and job races and ballooning in the post-financial crisis era. Mongol students of IMAR are an integral part of such a sociocultural milieu.

The ethnoterritorial dynamism in this case is structured by Mongol students' navigation of IMAR's bilingual school system under China's national education institutions that are parallel to the territorial hierarchy across the national, regional, and subregional levels. The story is less about an alternative modernity or a disparate future for the minority in IMAR's rural peripheries. Rather, it shows the intertwined modernities that are entrenched in highly uneven paths towards a shared aspiration of the future. Wave and other Mongol students, as their navigation and struggle in China's college and job races have shown, are not in isolation. Their experiences are intimately intertwined with and actively shape the national politics of social mobility. The story, in other words, is about Mongols *of* China, not just Mongols *in* China.

In brief, my ethnography is composed of chance encounters, detours, and reroutings. Place selects and deselects me. Place raises and evades questions. Place steers and curbs my inquiries. Yet, being reactively selected by place does not preclude proactive analysis and theorization thanks to the generative power of place.