

**Urbanizing Minority *Minzu* in the PRC:  
Insights from the Literature on Settler Colonialism**

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**Abstract**

This article provides a synthesis and critical review of the literature on urban minority *minzu* 民族 in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The vast majority of the Chinese-language literature on minorities in cities adopts a state-centric view through the lens of stability and integration, focusing on how minorities can adapt to urban life for the purpose of creating a “harmonized” society. This statist narrative not only denies the subjectivity of minorities in the city but also constrains the understandings of the dynamics of urban indigeneity. In this article, we draw on the literature of urban Indigenous peoples in settler colonial contexts to suggest new ways of examining the urban experience of minority *minzu* in the PRC. We suggest that this literature provides useful insights that help center the subjectivities and agency of Indigenous people in the PRC's cities. Literature on urban minorities in the PRC can be expanded by engaging with

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the Indigenous urbanization literature to include coverage of three topics: representation (how minority people are shown as belonging to the city), mobilization (the use of urban space by minority people to pursue social, cultural, and political projects), and translocalism (movement and interconnectedness between rural homelands and the city).

## Keywords

minorities, indigeneity, urbanization, People's Republic of China

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## Urbanization and Minorities in the PRC

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is urbanizing rapidly. From 1978 to 2013, the urban population increased from less than one-fifth to more than half of the country's population. Urbanization is now seen as a key strategy for realizing the goals of development, modernization, and national rejuvenation. Announced in its New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020) 新型城镇化规划, state policy aims to both drive and steer urbanization processes in order to achieve a national urbanization rate of 60 percent (CCPCC, 2014). By the end of 2018, this overall target was nearly achieved, with 59.58 percent of the country's population living in urban areas (Xinhua, 2019). However, despite having reached this target, urbanization will almost certainly continue to be a significant social force in the PRC in the years to come, and more so in certain regions of the country.

The PRC's urbanization plan specifically targets areas where most of its minority *minzu* population lives.<sup>1</sup> As part of the PRC's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), the country has aimed to urbanize 300 million people 三个一亿. This includes granting an urban *hukou* to 100 million

former rural residents; improving housing for 100 million residents of villages within city boundaries; and in its central/western provinces, resettling 100 million people into nearby urban areas (NDRC, 2016). Urbanization has been particularly intense in the PRC's west, where the majority of the country's 113 million minority citizens live, and where urbanization rates are currently low: 44.2 percent compared with 62.8 percent in coastal areas (CCPCC, 2014). What does this urbanization mean to minority people in the PRC, and how do scholars understand the way urbanization reshapes and transforms people's lives in a variety of urban environments? The Chinese-language literature, as our analysis will show, often adopts a state-centric view through the lens of stability and integration, focusing on how the state can better control minority populations and how minorities can adapt to urban life, both for the purpose of creating a harmonized society. This problematic narrative significantly constrains the understanding of the predicament of the PRC's urban minorities.

In this context, we respond to Alan Smart and Li Zhang's call for more interdisciplinary and comparative work in the study of urban PRC (Smart and Zhang, 2006) by drawing on the literature on settler colonialism and urban Indigenous peoples, in order to suggest new ways of understanding the urban experience of minorities in the PRC. This literature focuses on settler colonialism as a distinct formation of colonialism, in which colonists seize Indigenous lands, aiming to not only *displace* Indigenous people, but to *replace* them (Cavanagh and Veracini, 2017; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 1999, 2006, 2016). Settler colonialism therefore differs from other forms of colonialism, such as the indirect rule imposed on India and parts of Africa by the British (Mamdani, 2012), and requires a distinct set of analytical tools to understand it. Much of the settler colonial literature focuses on Anglophone contexts, such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand, but has in recent years expanded to include places such as Japan (Lu,

2019), Taiwan (Friedman, 2018; Hirano, Verancini, and Roy, 2018), and the PRC (Bulag, 2002; McGranahan, 2019). Although we note important caveats in our discussion below, we argue that the label of settler colonialism applies to the PRC, and therefore that the settler colonial literature can offer important insights into the contemporary situation in the PRC. Situating our discussion within this literature also enables us to position the urbanization of minorities in the PRC within broader global trends in urbanization and Indigenous people, to which we now turn.

In many contexts, but most notably in the Americas, Indigenous urbanization predated colonization (Andersen, 2014). However, unprecedented rates of urbanization among Indigenous peoples around the world have occurred in the colonial era: at present, “a definitive global shift of Indigenous peoples towards cities has taken and is continuing to take place” (Watson, 2014: 29). Reliable estimates for global rates of Indigenous urbanization are generally lacking (Muedin, 2008), but we do know that in all Anglophone settler colonial societies, the majority of Indigenous people live in cities, with Indigenous urbanization rates currently at 54 percent in Canada, 64 percent in the United States, 75 percent in Australia (Watson, 2014), and 84 percent in New Zealand (UN-Habitat, 2010). Meanwhile, Mark Watson (2014) gives urbanization rates of 62 percent for the Mapuche of Chile, and claims that in Panama, 47 percent of Indigenous people live outside their designated lands (presumably in cities); the UN-Habitat 2010 report claims that between one-third and 60 percent of Indigenous peoples in Latin America live in cities. Estimates for Indigenous urbanization rates across Asia are particularly lacking. Our discussion aims to reorient the urban experience of the PRC’s minorities toward the literature that is emerging in response to this global trend of urbanization among Indigenous peoples.

Before proceeding to the main sections of the article, we also want to note the complexities inherent in talking about “the urban” and “urbanization,” and the pluralities implied

by these terms. As in other parts of the world, the PRC has seen cities expand through the process of peri-urbanization, whereby rural areas close to city centers become absorbed into extended metropolitan regions (Seto, Parnell, and Elmqvist, 2013). In addition to making new and large cities, more frequently, urbanization in the PRC is being achieved through administrative transformation: “upgrading” rural areas to urban zones. Carloyn Cartier (2015) shows that over the past three decades, the numbers of “cities” designated in different administrative levels has increased three-fold, which has contributed to the phenomenon of so-called in-situ urbanization, meaning urbanization without relocation of the residents (Zhu, 2000). In addition to the rearrangement of space, extensive rural-urban population migrations have also produced rapid urbanization in the PRC (Zhang and Song, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Despite the diversity in urbanization processes, we follow the literature under consideration here to maintain a fairly limited focus on the city as a site of migration, demographically and politically dominated by majoritarian populations.

With these caveats in mind, our article is organized as follows. We begin with a discussion of the Sinophone literature on urbanization and minorities in the PRC. We present major themes in this literature, based on a bibliometric analysis, and argue that overall, this literature presents a state-centered, techno-managerial approach to the issue, treating urban minorities as a problem to be solved. We then contrast this literature with the Anglophone literature on urbanization and Indigenous peoples, based on a thematic analysis of major recent works in this field. This literature, primarily written from an Indigenous standpoint, allows us to see how urbanization works as a tool of domination, while also creating opportunities for resistance. In the discussion section of the article, we look at the Anglophone literature on minorities in the PRC, using the case of urbanization in Tibet as an example, and explore how

the literature on Indigenous urbanization can help expand this body of work by setting a new agenda for writing and research, focusing on three key themes: representation, mobilization, and mobility. In the Conclusion, we draw on standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) to make a call for more “minority standpoint” research on urbanization, which would eschew a state-centered perspective, center the experiences of urban minorities, and engage in empirical research and theorizing that promote and contribute to the interests of urbanized minorities.

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### **Chinese Literature on Urbanizing Minorities**

In our bibliometric analysis of contemporary scholarly narratives on urban minorities in Chinese-language journal articles, we conducted two sets of keyword research in the Chinese Academic Journals (CAJ) database, using “minority” 少数民族 and “city” 城市 as the first set of keywords, and then “minority” and “urban” 都市. This literature search was conducted in January 2019; the first set of keywords generated 292 results while the second set generated only two. The year of publication for the articles ranged from 2000 to 2018. We then ranked these journal articles by the number of times they were cited, which can be used as an indicator of the importance of the journal articles and the influence they have in academic discussions. Out of the 294 articles, we select the twenty with the highest number of citations (between 109 and 29 citations each) to represent dominant academic discourses of urbanization and minorities in the PRC. Although this list is not exhaustive, it nevertheless provides a solid indication of the dominant framings of urban minorities in the academic arena in the PRC. In addition, we did a frequency analysis of terms in the abstracts of these twenty articles, using NVivo 12 to support our analysis. When an English abstract was absent (in three articles), we provided the translations for operating NVivo.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this literature, extensive attention on urban minorities focuses on this population's mobile characteristics. A word count of the abstracts from these twenty articles suggests that the term "floating" or "mobile" population 流动人口 is the sixth most repeated word, but the most common term following the defining words of the subject (ethnic, minority/minorities, urban/cities). "Floating" population is a particular term in Chinese referring to migrants who do not hold a local hukou. In fact, this term has given rise to some confusion, as these population may not be "floating" or "mobile," as the term suggests: this population merely has no local hukou. The term therefore more accurately reflects their official exclusion rather than their behavior. And while the terms "floating" or "mobile" may seem neutral, they are closely tied to the following interrelated arguments which the narrative of these twenty articles is based on.

The first common argument is that urban minorities (UM) are problems, or the sources of problems, that need to be managed. Among the twenty articles, seven (35 percent) use the term "problem" either in their titles and/or abstracts. This perspective, adopted by, for example, Chen Yun and Tang Duoxian (Chen, 2006; Tang, 2008; Tang, 2009), commonly portrays UMs as being associated with various negative characteristics, including being unsanitary, disorganized, low-quality, careless, and having low levels of education. For example, Tang identifies several problems brought by UM into cities, including a lack of birth control, increased garbage, use of illegal housing, and crime (Tang, 2009). A common narrative is that since these people are "floating," their movement is disorderly 无序地流动, and eventually, they are the source of "conflicts and arguments" which are "difficult to manage" (Tang, 2009: 32). While some of the authors point out that the problems of the mobile population are the results of the PRC's binary urban-rural policy, they nevertheless fail to discuss the differences between minority and

majority groups in cities, resulting in an ambiguous analysis (Liu, 2011; Tang, 2009; Wang, 2008).

Furthermore, scholars state that the “disordered and ‘blind’ movement of urban minorities” significantly damages interethnic relations (Tang, 2008: 25). This stream of thought is strongly influenced by the conservative Chicago school of urban sociology, as seen in Tang’s (2009) article, which draws on Robert Park’s work in showing that the migration of minorities results in the disruption of society.<sup>4</sup> In sum, when Chinese scholars identify urban minorities as a problem (Tang, 2008; Liu, 2011), they also frequently argue for improving and/or strengthening state control of these populations to remedy the problem.

The second shared argument observed in the selected works is the need for minorities to adapt to urban life and integrate into urban society. Again, 35 percent of the selected articles use the term “adaptation,” “acculturation,” or “integration” in their titles and/or abstracts. For example, Liu Yi argues that the ultimate solution for the UM “problem” is social integration (2011). This argument not only denies the subjectivity of the UM but also ignores the multiple possibilities for how the cultures of minorities may exist in cities. The concept that it is necessary for minorities to adapt to and integrate into urban life is related to the first common argument, which sees UM as a problem. Proper adaptation to the city is suggested as a solution, and the inability of UM to adapt to urban culture is thought to be the fundamental source of the conflict and problems that thereby arise (Tang, 2009).

The third common argument of the literature is that urban minorities are “others,” while the majoritarian, Han urban culture is as superior. In general, there has been ignorance of the historical context of the development of minority communities in China’s cities. In the Sinophone literature, minorities are rarely seen as integral to the city or city-making processes.

Rather, “the urban” is often labeled as “colorful” (Tang, 2009), “civilized,” or “modern” (Chen, 2005b), while, in contrast, minorities are labeled as “backward” (Tang, 2009) or “superstitious” (Chen, 2005b). Urbanization is thus suggested as a pathway for minorities to acquire modernity (Chen, 2005a, 2005b). Even in discussions of community support for minorities (Li, 2006), the focus is on “improving” minorities, implying that minorities are inferior and therefore in need of improvement. Chen Xiaoyi concludes that through acculturation and adaptation urban minority groups acquire modernity, which eventually is conducive to their integration into and construction of a harmonized society (Chen, 2005a).

As has been suggested (Chen, 2005a), Sinophone academic literature on urban minorities often focuses on achieving a harmonized society and maintaining the stability of the state. It has also been suggested that “if [urban minorities are] not properly managed [. . .] it will affect the progress of urbanization and the establishment of a harmonized society” (Liu, 2011). Li Jihe argues that “understanding and grasping these characteristics [of urban minorities] will help establish harmonious ethnic relations in cities” (2008: 1). This argument demonstrates that this research serves to promote the state’s management and control of minority populations. In total, 35 percent of the selected articles make similar arguments. Tang Duoxian further suggests that maintaining ethnic identity can undercut the goal of a harmonized society. In other words, Tang suggests that ethnic identities should be eliminated in urban environments for the sake of state control (Tang, 2009).

Only a few of the articles we analyzed consider the subjectivity and the historical context of urban minority communities. Liang Jingyu touches on the issues of the subjectivity and autonomy of the Hui people in Beijing (who have been in the city since it was founded in the Yuan dynasty) by discussing the temporal development of their community (Liang, 2003). Some

work shares the view that urbanization includes the diversification of ethnic culture (Lin, 2004; Zhang 2004), a view that departs from the majority of Sinophone scholarship, which treats minorities as “others.” Furthermore, even though the rights of minority groups in urban areas should be an important topic, only two articles consider this issue (Lin, 2004, 2007), and they do so primarily from the perspective of the state and with the goal of ensuring social stability. Overall, then, the Sinophone scholarship has depoliticized the urbanization of minorities and rendered the relevant issues techno-managerial.

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### **Literature on Indigenous People and Urbanization**

In contrast to the literature reviewed above, research on urban Indigenous peoples in settler colonial contexts consistently portrays urbanization as a strategic technique carried out by specific agents within a field of power relations, rather than as a spontaneous process that directs human action. Rather than seeing urbanization as a historical, socioeconomic and environmental protagonist, this approach views it as a strategy to assert control over both people and territories. This explicitly politicized understanding of urbanization drastically reframes the way issues regarding urban Indigenous and minority people are approached, primarily insofar as it highlights, first of all, that urbanization is always carried out in specific ways and with specific goals, and secondly, that the experience of Indigenous and minoritized people in cities must be viewed in relation to those specific goals. Before looking at how Indigenous peoples have responded to urbanization in settler colonial contexts, we first further unpack the ways urbanization is used as a technique of domination.

Cities enable colonial regimes to have access to and control over land. For example, in the Americas, Indigenous people were driven from their lands and concentrated in settlements

(Nemser, 2017; Mumford, 2012), rendering them legible (Scott, 1998) and their land accessible. Urbanization also enables territorialization of the polity, and the creation of integrated political, economic, and social control over territory: cities are nodes in circulation networks that connect urban centers to rural hinterlands (Thrush, 2017) and resource frontiers (Cons and Eilenberg, 2019). The placement of cities throughout territory has thus been an integral aspect of modern statecraft (Foucault, 2009). This role of urban centers and urbanization processes in colonial control of people and territory has led Penelope Edmonds to remark that colonial frontiers “did not exist only in the bush, backwoods, or borderlands; they clearly sat at the heart of [. . .] town and city” (Edmonds, 2010: 5; see also Sassen, 2013). Importantly, the city as colonial frontier and means of dispossession has persisted beyond invasion, as seen in, for example, the termination and relocation policies in the United States that drove Native Americans into cities from the 1940s to the 1960s.

The city itself, and not just its position within territory, also enables colonial domination. One way this is achieved is through population swamping. In the city of Melbourne, Australia, for example, the estimated seven hundred local Indigenous inhabitants in 1836 were confronted with a settler population that grew from 5,500 (1841) to 25,000 (1851), and then 125,000 (1861); by 1901 there were just thirty-six registered Indigenous inhabitants in a city of half a million (Edmonds, 2010). Urbanization is also pursued in ways that seek to disperse Indigenous inhabitants within the city, such as the “pepper-potting” practices in New Zealand (Gagne, 2013) and Australia (Cowlshaw, 2009), where Indigenous households are deliberately scattered through the settler population. Or, Indigenous people are simply excluded from the city (Greenop and Memmott, 2013; Abu-Saad, 2008). When Indigenous communities do form in cities, they are frequently targeted for destruction (Thrush, 2017; Edmonds, 2010; Gagne, 2013), often under

the guise of ‘hygienic racism [. . .] that pathologizes indigenous bodies as sick, contaminated and dirty’ (Swanson, 2007: 710). Such practices continue today, with the Lower Brule Sioux scholar Nick Estes claiming that neoliberal gentrification “doesn’t only mimic colonial processes—it *is* colonialism” (2019: 189). Urban space, and varying forms of exclusion and violent inclusion, therefore, serve as mechanisms of colonial domination.

Beyond dispersing Indigenous people among massive settler populations and breaking up Indigenous communities, colonial urbanization also erases Indigenous claims to, and presence within, cities. Discursively, indigeneity and the urban are portrayed as chronopolitically incommensurate (Peters and Andersen, 2013). This rhetoric is enforced by the material erasure of Indigenous people from the city; although settler colonial cities are built on Indigenous land, this fact is materially obliterated through the construction of built environments that index non-Indigenous identities and aesthetics. As Moreton-Robinson puts it, “These cities signify with every building and every street that this land is now possessed by others; signs of white possession are embedded everywhere in the landscape” (2015: xiii). Cities thus discursively and materially erase Indigenous people and their sovereignty.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in this context of persistent erasure, one of the hallmarks of the literature on Indigenous urbanization has been an assertion of Indigenous people’s continuing, and legitimate, presence in cities—the assertion that Indigenous people *belong* in urban environments. In contexts including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors have, since the 1980s repeatedly made two related assertions. The first simply confirms the presence of Indigenous people in the city, drawing attention to a population that has endured in urban space despite being rendered materially and demographically invisible (Irish, 2017). Secondly, this literature has argued that not only are

Indigenous people simply *in* the city, but that they also *belong* there. This debate has centered primarily on the issue of authenticity, arguing that it is possible to be both urban and authentically Indigenous. To some extent these assertions are built on the fact that in settler colonial contexts, cities are always built on land appropriated from Indigenous people, but they also extend to include the recognition that Indigenous people are capable of maintaining an Indigenous identity away from their homelands.

Literature on urban indigeneity has demonstrated how urban Indigenous people, despite the hostility they and their communities face, have succeeded in “place-making” in settler colonial cities. Gillian Cowlishaw has described how this sometimes takes the form of “private public spaces” that are created when Indigenous people gather publicly (2009). Inclusion and exclusion are maintained at these ephemeral sites through “greetings and familiarity, and [. . .] a particular look, style and set of manners” (Cowlishaw, 2009: 43). Kelly Greenop and Paul Memmott describe more durable practices of place-making, referring to practices of Indigenous homophily: the preference for living close to other Indigenous people, rather than, for example, near sites of employment, study, or lifestyle amenities (2013). Natacha Gagne, meanwhile, recounts the creation of Indigenous infrastructure in urban centers, with a discussion of *marae* (Maori community and ritual centers) in Auckland (2013). She shows how even in the absence of such centers, some family homes take on this role, informally. Therefore, in social practices and the creation of infrastructure, Indigenous people are able to make places for themselves in settler cities.

In addition to exploring Indigenous place-making in cities, the Indigenous urbanization literature has also discussed mobility, noting the high degree of mobility among urban Indigenous people, which includes movement within the city, between cities, and between cities

and rural homelands. This “hypermobility” (Andersen and Peters, 2013) results in what Mary Norris and Stewart Clatworthy call “the churn”—a population structure defined by movement (2011). Such movement has many underlying causes: economic exclusion and unstable employment, but also affective ties to homelands, and social and religious obligations to one’s community. This “churn” is not random “floating”; kin relations typically play an important role in patterning mobility and residence (Sahlins, 1999a; Bruner, 1961). Rather than being a centrifugal force leading to the dissipation of community, the high rates of mobility thus often have an integrative effect, helping to maintain community connections across space and time, resulting in a situation where there is “no strict dichotomy between the rural and the urban milieus” (Gagne, 2013: 162). Social media have intensified this capacity to bridge the urban-rural divide. Recognition of mobility and connectivity, and their capacity to blur the urban-rural divide, has resulted in a call to resist “metronormativity”—the centering of the city as the norm—in the study of contemporary Indigenous people (May, 2014).

A highly influential account of Indigenous mobilities and translocal practices is the concept of “Native hubs” from the Ho-chunk scholar Renya Ramirez, who, in turn, draws this concept from Laverne Roberts, a Paiute woman and one of the founders of the American Indian Alliance (Ramirez, 2007). Native hubs are physical and virtual spaces, characterized by differing temporal profiles—continuous, occasional, and regular—that serve to connect Indigenous communities with their rural homelands, while also connecting Indigenous communities with one another. Rather than seeing mobility as detractive and corrosive, Ramirez argues that it “can be a purposeful, exciting way to transmit culture, create community, and maintain identity that ultimately can support positive changes” (2007: 2). Since cities provide multiple spaces where Indigenous people can innovate and exchange ideas, they act as “a collecting center, a hub of

Indian people's new ideas, information, culture, community, and imagination that when shared back 'home' on the reservation can impact thousands of Native Americans" (Ramirez, 2007:2). Ramirez argues that rather than the spaces of threat and assimilation that cities are often intended to be for Indigenous people, cities can also be powerful resources and platforms that enable Indigenous people to engage in social and political mobilization in pursuit of their own interests. Importantly, the way cities bring together Indigenous peoples from a diversity of backgrounds means that they also foster what Ramirez calls "Indigenous transnationalism," which creates horizontal political solidarities between Indigenous nations, both within and across state borders, without succumbing to the homogenizing force of pan-Indianism (see also Simpson, 2017).

Ramirez's work points to the existence of urban Indigenous social organizations that serve to meet the needs of Indigenous people in cities; indeed, her work includes examples of several such organizations from California. Examples from other contexts include the "friendship centres" that have existed in Canadian cities since the 1950s (Howard, 2011), providing a range of social services and physical infrastructure to Indigenous peoples. Coll Thrush describes an example of a US-based urban Indigenous organization—the Daybreak Star Cultural Center (Thrush, 2017). Kanako Uzawa, in a discussion of the Ainu community in Tokyo, describes how an Ainu restaurant, Rera Cise ("House of Wind") served as a hub for the Ainu community, providing a space of respite from the city, as well as opportunities for young urban Ainu to meet with and learn from elders (Uzawa, 2018; see also Watson, 2014). Other, less institutionalized forms of mutual aid and collective sociality for urban Indigenous people have also been described. Kathleen Buddle, for example, discusses how gangs among urban First Nations people in Canada provide support for Indigenous people who are estranged from their nation (Buddle, 2011).

The existence of these organizations and physical infrastructure is evidence that cities have become sites where Indigenous people can and do pursue political, social, and cultural projects, and of the existence of what Nancy Fraser calls a “subaltern counterpublic sphere” (1990). Such mobilizations operate in a number of ways. Mobilization often takes the form of explicit resistance against the state (see Estes, 2019, for an overview), and is aimed at securing and defending rights for Indigenous peoples. Other Indigenous social movements may be more broadly oriented, aiming for social change rather than political reform, or targeting corporations, and seeking interventions by the state against these powerful commercial operators. Urban Indigenous social movements also target other Indigenous peoples, and aim to address issues of inequality among Indigenous peoples, rather than with settler society or the state; such movements include, for example, Indigenous feminist movements. Finally, for all these social movements aimed at the state, society, corporations, and Indigenous people, cities are not only important hubs for agitation and organization, but also sites where they may encounter, and position themselves relative to, the global Indigenist movement (Merlan, 2009).

Therefore, although cities have clearly been a significant aspect of the infrastructure of settler colonial domination and its program of elimination (Wolfe, 2006), they have also provided “infrastructure for diversity” (Burchardt and Höhne, 2015)—physical, social, and political infrastructure that has enabled Indigenous people to pursue their own projects of resistance, revitalization, refusal (Simpson, 2014), and resurgence (Simpson, 2017; Maddison, 2019). Increasingly, cities are sites where Indigenous people demonstrate the “inventiveness of tradition” (Sahlins, 1999b)—the creative, generative capacity of Indigenous cultures and philosophies (Clifford, 2013). They are sites where languages are being revitalized (Shulist, 2018; Ferguson, 2019) and new Indigenous cultural forms are being brought into being. In short,

cities are key sites of what has been called “Indigenous efflorescence”: the demographic, economic, and cultural flourishing of Indigenous people currently seen around the world in many settler colonial contexts (Roche, Maruyama, and Viridi Kroik, 2018).

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### **Discussion: Setting a New Agenda for Researching the PRC’s Urban Minorities**

In order to foster new approaches to the study of urban minorities in the PRC based on the literature discussed above, it is important to begin with some caveats. Although we have followed authors such as Bulag (2002) and McGranahan (2019) in describing the PRC as settler colonial, we do not think this label captures the full complexity of the colonial endeavor in the PRC. Instead, it might be more accurate to say that the PRC’s colonial endeavor (Anand, 2019; Roche, 2019; Tobin, 2019) is characterized by moments and spaces of settler colonialism. Therefore, while we claim that the PRC is colonial, and in important ways settler colonial, the unique form of colonialism it practices—its distinct logic and harms—needs much greater analytical attention within the broader literature on comparative colonialisms (Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue, 2007; Wolfe, 2016; Mbembe, 2019).

Just as we are hesitant to reduce the PRC to simply another case of settler colonialism, we are also reluctant to describe minorities in the PRC as Indigenous people, for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is crucial to note that in the PRC, the state conceptualizes diversity in terms of nominally isomorphic *minzu*, without any having the precedence of indigeneity (Elliot, 2015). Indigeneity is thus effectively forbidden in the PRC. This stance is broadly coherent with the application of the so-called saltwater theory throughout Asia, which rejects a colonial past and Indigenous present for many of the states of the region (Baird, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, states are not the only agents capable of refusing indigeneity. Emily Yeh (2007), for example, has

described how Tibetans have rejected Indigenous status in order to pursue a nationalist project predicated on a history of invasion and illegal occupation, rather than one of colonialism and indigeneity. All of this means that, although we might recognize many minorities as indigenous (without the capital), insofar as they are prior occupants of a particular location, they cannot be describe as Indigenous (with a capital) as either a professed identity or part of a transnational political project of Indigenism (Niezen, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Applying the label “Indigenous” to minorities in the PRC would not only erase the constraints placed on indigeneity by the state, but would also undermine much of the work done by Indigenous scholars and activists to represent indigeneity as a political identity and not simply a descriptive label. Our use of the term “minority” throughout the article should therefore be taken as drawing attention to and problematizing state practices and terminology rather than reproducing them.

With these two caveats in mind, we can begin comparing the two bodies of literature described above.

One of the starkest points of contrast between the two bodies of literature is the depoliticization of urbanization in the Sinophone literature, and politicization in the urban indigeneity literature. This does not mean that the Sinophone literature is apolitical. In pursuing the state’s goals of harmony and stability (nominally social stability, but ultimately regime stability) through urbanization, the literature on minorities in the PRC is clearly political. However, it is depoliticized in the sense that it attempts to remove these political goals from critical scrutiny. For example, the Sinophone literature constantly naturalizes the urbanization of minorities as a “spontaneous” process: minorities leave their hometown due to “poor conditions” or “remoteness,” and migrate to the cities due to “conveniences,” “better job opportunities” and/or “higher income” (e.g., Tang, 2006; Li, 2008).

The literature on urban Indigenous people in settler colonial societies, on the other hand, suggests two ways the veiling of the political nature of urbanization can be resisted. The first is by examining the goals—social, economic, and political—of the state in urbanizing minorities, and the pernicious impact these have on minority communities and individuals.

Much of the Anglophone literature on the PRC's urban minorities already does this. We can see this, for example, in the growing literature on urbanization in Tibet (Yeh and Makley, 2019), which largely focuses on the harmful impact of state-led urbanization on Tibetans. Urbanization in Tibet is seen as a primary means of state-building (Rohlf, 2016) and the main technique for modernizing and integrating Tibetan areas (Fischer, 2013). Emily Yeh examines how urbanization achieves state territorialization and the transformation of Tibetan subjectivities (Yeh, 2013). Other issues addressed in this literature include dispossession and displacement (Tashi Nyima 2011; Hillman, 2013); the erosion of communal sovereignty and the role of authoritarian capitalism in urbanization (Makley, 2018); the ways urbanization places assimilatory pressures on Tibetans (Grant, 2018a), and exposes them to discrimination (Grant, 2017); and how the centralization of government services drives rural abandonment and urbanization (Tsering Bum, 2018). This research is broadly demonstrative of the Anglophone interest in minorities in the PRC primarily as examples of “marginalized urban lives” (Engebretsen, 2016). This focus essentially inverts that of the Sinophone literature, viewing urbanization as a problem for minorities, as opposed to the state-centric view, which sees minorities as a problem for orderly urbanization.

However, research on urban minorities can also be politicized in a second sense, one less commonly seen in the Anglophone literature. This second sense would involve centering the social projects and political agendas of urban minorities, and undertaking research projects that

actively support these. Some literature on Tibetan urbanization does address these issues.

Andrew Grant (2018b), for example, examines place-making practices among urban Tibetans in Xining. Eveline Washul (2018) looks at practices of translocalism among urban Tibetans, and Trine Brox (2017, 2019) explores the emergence of a Tibetan community in Chengdu, a Han-dominated city. Following, we draw on the Indigenous urbanization literature to suggest three topics that could further extend this focus on the use minorities make of urban space. These themes are: representation, mobilization, and mobility.

In terms of *representation*, we recommend critical analysis of the discourses, narratives, and imagery used in the PRC to represent minority peoples and urban spaces as opposites. The Sinophone literature at present depicts minorities as needing to adapt to urban environments, rendering them alien and external to the city. Within such discourses, the city is seen as a transformative environment that modernizes minorities, and in the process, assimilates them. The literature on urban Indigenous peoples demonstrates that these propositions are only true insofar as the state is willing to pursue them against the interests of subject peoples. Alternative social and cultural projects that enable minority people to make use of the city must be based in a robust critique of dominant narratives that see the city and ethnic difference as incommensurate. The possibility of minority urban futures must be vigorously asserted, and representations that imagine this possibility sought out and created.

Secondly, we call for research that focuses on existing social and political mobilization among minorities in the cities of the PRC. The literature on urban Indigenous peoples in settler colonial contexts has demonstrated how social and political mobilization has been central to their persistence, and efflorescence, in cities. This mobilization has involved the creation of virtual and physical spaces, the construction of material and organizational infrastructure, and political

agitation in defense of the right to the city. We should not expect *all* these features to be present in the PRC, given its authoritarian political context. However, the literature on social mobilization and protest in the PRC provides much insight into what we might expect urban ethnic mobilization to look like. For example, this literature describes mobilization in the PRC as frequently lacking formal organization and prominent leaders (Fu, 2017). The literature also presents mobilization in the PRC as focusing on a critique of local, rather than central, government, and of the *implementation* of policy, rather than policy itself (Tenzin Jinba 2014). Horizontal linkages and network-building have also become increasingly prevalent in social mobilization in the PRC (Bondes and Johnson, 2017). Mobilization in the PRC also frequently exploits the divergent interests within the state (O'Brien, 1996), but nevertheless, often reproduces, rather than explicitly refuting, state discourse (Lhagyal, 2019). Taking all these caveats into account enables us to explore how minorities may be mobilizing in urban space: the organizational, virtual, and physical infrastructure they employ, the techniques they use, and the challenges they face.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we also recommend that researchers give greater attention to the use minorities in the PRC make of translocal practices to maintain connections with their homelands. Although the Sinophone literature portrays urbanization as a permanent, unidirectional transformation, the literature on urban Indigenous peoples suggests that urbanization does not necessarily sever ties with the rural homeland and its community. Although the “churn,” as seen in many settler colonial contexts may be less significant in the PRC, translocalism of some sort is an important fact of life for all people in the PRC, not just minorities (Oakes and Schein, 2006). We recommend building on this literature to look at how urban minority people strategically engage in practices of translocalism to maintain links to their homelands, and what affective, cultural,

and other goals they pursue in doing so. An important aspect of these translocal practices is likely to be the use of social media to maintain connections with rural homelands (Yulha Lhawa, 2019).

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## **Conclusion**

In this article we have provided a critical review of the literature on urbanization and minorities in the PRC, by contrasting it with literature on urbanization and Indigenous peoples in settler colonial societies. In doing so we aim to offer novel ways of understanding the urban experience of minorities in the PRC. Our findings demonstrate stark contrasts between the two bodies of literature.

While urbanizing the PRC's 113 million minority citizens is a mega social project, academic discussion surrounding the topic is somewhat monochromatic. Probably not surprisingly, the focus in this literature is on minorities adapting to urban life, thus creating both regime and social stability and a harmonized society. The subjectivities and agency of urban minorities in the PRC are largely absent from the Sinophone literature. Furthermore, while explicitly political in its goals, this literature is heavily depoliticized, insofar as it does not critique the state or those who implement its policies. In contrast, the literature on urban Indigenous peoples in settler colonial contexts explicitly forefronts the political nature of urbanization for Indigenous people: urbanization is portrayed as a technique of colonial domination, while at the same time, Indigenous place-making, high degrees of mobility, and explicit Indigenous agency are also highlighted.

As the PRC continues rolling out its urbanization strategy it will continue having deeper and more extensive impacts on the lives of the country's minorities. Researchers both inside and

outside of the PRC are likely to intensify their efforts to research the interface between urbanization and minorities. In light of the comparative literature analysis undertaken above, we argue that future research on this topic should adopt a “minority standpoint”: one that centers the lived experiences of urban minorities, and attempts to represent their interests and support their social and political projects. We recommend that such a standpoint can be achieved by focusing on the three themes of representation, mobilization, and mobility, and by drawing on the literature on Indigenous urbanization. We hope that doing so will not only provide new and interesting research questions for the study of urban minorities in the PRC, but will also do so in a way that centers their experience, highlights their agency, and advances their interests. Doing so will contribute to the dual projects of both understanding and resisting the harms of colonialism in the contemporary PRC.

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## Notes

1. In this article we translate the Chinese term *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族 as “minority,” leaving 民族 (*minzu*) untranslated in this first instance and eliding it thereafter. As Barabantseva (2008) discusses, in the Anglophone literature, the term “minzu” is translated alternatively as “nationality” or “ethnicity,” with differing political implications. In using the term “minority” we aim to draw attention to both the demographic quality of smallness, and the political status of minoritization. And as we explain in the discussion session, although we draw on settler colonial and Indigenous studies literature, and recognize important parallels between minorities and Indigenous people, we refrain from referring to *shaoshu minzu* as “Indigenous people.”
2. Although analytically separating in-situ urbanization and rural-urban migration enables a degree of clarity in understanding the different modes of urbanization in the PRC, we also note that these two processes often occur together, with rural migrants settling in formerly rural urban communities.
3. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that enables the analysis of large text corpora.
4. The Chicago school of urban sociology was driven by a heavy emphasis on qualitative data, and drew theoretical inspiration from the science of ecology. It has a significant focus on investigating and addressing “social disorder” in cities. See Bulmer, 1984, for an overview of the Chicago school of sociology, and Pardo and Prato, 2018, for a recent overview of its role in urban anthropology.

5. Also known as the “blue water principle,” this concept was proposed during the UN decolonization process, and suggests that in order to qualify for decolonization, a colonized state had to be physically separated from the colonizing metropole by a body of water. Although designed to prevent the dissolution of African states in the process of decolonization, this principle has been used to justify ongoing colonialism in the absence of an intervening body of water (Churchill, 2003).

6. Michael Hathaway (2016) has discussed how indigeneity, as a transnational political project, has had some limited purchase within specific contexts in the PRC.

7. Banfill (2020) provides a demonstration of how urban minorities in the PRC engage in crafting self-representations, with a discussion of “retro” portrait photography among urban Nuosu university students.

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