

(Re)defining Mobilities at the Margins of China

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“Considering human society through its movements, rather than through its settlements, brings to the fore that even in firmly settled societies there is always a part of the population that is mobile.” (Wendrich and Barnard 2008: 11)

From the medieval Jurchen, founders of the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), to contemporary Mongol pastoralists, China’s peripheral regions have long been inhabited by non-Chinese peoples, many of whom practiced nomadic pastoralism, an economy based on extensive seasonal mobility conducted by pastoralists together with their livestock and encompassing a broad range of skills, techniques and values. A longstanding view in both history and anthropology is that these nomadic pastoralists’ mobile way of life was opposed to that of sedentary Chinese farmers living on the northern plains. Recent research has demonstrated how opposing mobile nomads to so called fixed sedentary people is an oversimplification. Archaeological finds have revealed that in Antiquity, the Xiongnu, who were long perceived as “pure nomads,” possessed practices similar to those of other sedentary groups.¹

In the same way, some ethnographic studies have shown that numerous pastoralists who were sedentarized as part of Chinese political projects of modernization launched in the second half of the 20th century remain highly mobile today, despite having experienced multiple episodes of forced settlements in designated administrative entities and fixed dwellings.² Furthermore, economic or pastoral subsistence matters are by no means the only factors to be taken into account when seeking to explain the mobility logics of a given local society. How then can we reassess the mobility — or rather the different forms of mobility — of nomadic and sedentary peoples in the margins of China? What can mobilities tell us about human and non-human relationships to territory and environment, about technologies and religious practices? How can mobility help us situate frontier territory, ethnicity and margins? To put in another way: what does mobility do to places and peoples?

These different questions arose during the international workshop *The Mobility of Nomadic and Sedentary Peoples in the Margins of China. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* organized in October 2023 by the two authors and held in Paris.³ Taking into account the

¹ Brosseder & Miller 2011.

² For China and Inner Asia in general, see Humphrey & Sneath 1999. For the Evenki of Inner Mongolia, see Dumont 2018, and for the Kazakhs of Xinjiang, see Shanatibieke 2016.

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questions, reflections, doubts and challenges raised over this two-day workshop, the contributions of this special issue of *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* aim at rethinking mobilities from the East Asian laboratory. Such an attempt could only be achieved through an interdisciplinary approach, with a broad geographical lens and a diachronic perspective. In other words, we sought to bring together the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, film studies, and history to rethink different kinds of mobilities at the geographical margins of China over the imperial period, but also in contemporary times.

But what kind of mobility(ies) are we talking about? Mobility is a human (but also animal) universal. It is among the most polysemous terms, with a meaning that evolves regularly. As Salazar and Forget have pointed out, studying mobility in the social sciences is not an easy task, as interpretations of what is meant by “mobility” vary widely. It may refer to spatial, physical, informational, cultural, social, or material mobility, to name just a few.⁴ Furthermore, the “mobility turn,”⁵ with its novel mobile theories and methods⁶ for analyzing how people, ideas and objects are moving in a globalized world, constitutes a new paradigm in and for the social sciences. This shift has led to an increasing number of empirical studies on a wide range of movements, questioning the taken-for-granted bonds between people, place, and culture.⁷

Along China’s margins, mobility has usually been thought of in relation to the nomadic confederations and Steppe empires (Xiongnu, Mongols) from the Northern margins of the empire, and is now mostly studied from the viewpoint of the pastoral people scattered around the various margins of China (Mongol, Tungus and Tibetan pastoralists mostly). The dichotomy between sedentary people, who depend on agriculture and are established on long-term fixed settlements in a given area, and pastoral nomads, whose mobile way of life is determined by historical and ecological conditions, requiring movements and aimed at meeting food needs⁸ may be useful in certain case studies, especially when the actors themselves use these categories. However, our aim is not so much to abandon two exclusive categories — nomads on the one side, sedentary people on the other — as to simply observe how people move, when and under which circumstances. Thus, our concern is primarily to start from spatial mobility, namely the capacity and need for movement from place to place as proposed by Wendrich and Barnard⁹ in order to analyze how mobility is paralleled by various social and temporal complexities and is infused with different meanings.

In the context of spatial margins, how can the difference between mobility, movement and migrations be addressed? Mobility entails much more than mere movement and thus implies larger social, religious, economic phenomena that can be sometimes defined as “lifestyle mobilities.”¹⁰ Within this framework, how can various types of mobility (forced vs free, individual vs collective, State vs communities, permanent vs seasonal, living vs dead, etc.) be categorized? Depending on disciplinary boundaries, the type of mobility (geographical, social, religious, etc.) that is examined can be blurred. Mobility is not only concerned with motion

l’Asie orientale (CRCAO). Maddalena Barengi, Siyen Fei, Sayana Namsaraeva and Liang Zhong, took an active part in the workshop but for various reasons did not contribute to this special issue.

⁴ Forget & Salazar 2020: 16.

⁵ Faist 2013.

⁶ Sheller & Urry 2006.

⁷ Salazar & Smart 2011: 1.

⁸ Bourgeot 1972: 86.

⁹ Wendrich & Barnard 2008: 5.

¹⁰ Forget & Salazar 2020: 16.

(roads and trajectories), but also with obstacles and topographic markers (places, walls, etc.). Furthermore, mobility almost always comes with its interconnected paradigm: immobility. As Urry pointed out, different forms of migrations and movements are often embedded in immobile infrastructures that facilitate movements.¹¹ In the case of the Mongolian Empire for instance, “its trading routes, travelling people, and cultural flows embedded in immobile infrastructures emphasize that dislocated places are tied into networks of connection that transcend fixed places.”¹²

Many disciplines have tackled the issue of mobility. Archaeologists remind us that people have always traveled the earth, thus leaving traces of their movements. Although mobile people’s traces differ from (and are often fewer than) those of settled communities, they are nonetheless useful to reconstruct their trajectories, especially for prehistorical periods.¹³ That being said, Lia Wei’s as well as Shelach-Lavi, Lotze and Zhang’s contributions in this volume show that archaeological approaches can be fruitful for understanding historical periods as well, especially in frontier territory, regions towards which historians working for the imperial state have historically shown significantly less interest.

History tends to record events that take place within spaces of varying size but often clearly defined: the home, royal estates, gardens, cities, regions, or countries are all fairly fixed and stable entities. Mobility challenges this unit of analysis. It offers other ways of writing history, highlighting different actors and trajectories, especially since ordinary situations generally escape the attention of historians, who have historically paid more attention to things and events out of the ordinary. For several decades, connected history has developed in a similar direction, even if the mobility it studies is often that of intellectual and social elites. Here, studies in the fields of moral economy and critical geography prove useful in understanding blind spots, be they concerned with the working class or ethnic, sexual, or religious minorities.¹⁴ Nevertheless, history as a discipline has finally taken full account of the circulation of people, objects, and ideas.¹⁵ In addition to this, the spatial turn has also affected historical studies. Places change the people who pass through them, just as people change places, and historians now understand this. Being mobile allows one to dominate a space and its social, human, and animal components: one need only think of the itineraries of medieval monarchs or imperial hunting grounds under the Qing Dynasty to appreciate this.¹⁶ Some rulers travel to worship mountains, while others send official representatives to represent them there.

Anthropology, too, has attempted to understand how places change the people who cross them, and how people change places they go through. The study of mobility and especially “new mobilities” emerged out with the intensification of globalization and its concomitant links to the growing flows of people, things and ideas in contexts of both migration and transnationalism. In his now-classic work dedicated to the theory of global cultural flows, Appadurai has shown how what he calls the *ethnoscape*, defined as the landscape of the diverse moving groups and individuals, constitutes an essential feature of the shifting world in which we live and affects the politics, the cultural identities and the social relations.¹⁷ Since then and over the past three

¹¹ Urry 2007.

¹² Kollmar-Paulenz 2020: 5.

¹³ See Wendrich & Barnard 2008.

¹⁴ Schmoll 2025.

¹⁵ See, among numerous publications, Jami 2013 & 2017, La Vaissière 2024.

¹⁶ McKitterick 2011; Elliott & Chia 2004, Madeline & Lycas forthcoming.

¹⁷ Appadurai 1996.

decades, mobility has become one of the most important foci of research in anthropology. Studies have expanded from migration, diaspora, and exile to global markets, virtual displacement, transnationalism, local societies and their spaces of flow in every corner of the world. Furthermore, anthropological research comes to address not only the movements of humans but also those of non-humans — objects, things, and ideas — as well as the ideals, and ideologies surrounding mobility itself. From this perspective, mobility is being promoted as normality, while attachment to place tends to be interpreted as a digression or resistance against globalizing forces.¹⁸

In Inner Asia, mobility (but also immobility), have structured social, political, and economic life for centuries, notably because pastoral nomadism has been the primary economic mode of subsistence. However, during the 20th century, the communist regimes of the area led to the deep transformation of the nomadic way of life. In their pioneering work on the mobility of pastoralist peoples in Inner Asia, Humphrey and Sneath have argued that, while nomadism has now disappeared virtually everywhere in Inner Asia, mobility remains a central pastoral technique made of local knowledges and techniques located in particular historical circumstances.¹⁹ To illustrate this, the contribution of Golik in this volume highlights the fact that even though they live in urbanized places, many ethnic minorities located in Inner Mongolia still maintain strong economic and social ties with the rural grasslands, which is made possible by specific mobility patterns.

With this brief overview of the way mobility has been treated by various disciplines of the social sciences, one is forced to recognize that little scholarship has been dedicated to the mobility of sedentary people²⁰. In the same manner, while numerous works have carefully examined the social and economic impacts of sedentarization processes among newly settled nomads in diverse peripheral regions of China²¹, few studies have been carried about the new forms of human (but also sometimes animal) mobilities that emerge when local people settle and/or when they also give up pastoral economy. Another hindrance to the study of mobility in the East Asian context is the prevalence of the ancient spatial dualism opposing a Chinese civilized centre to “barbarian” peripheries. In social practices, mobility across the borders is as much part of the experience of place as are boundedness (of state territories) and spatial hierarchies.²²

1. Mobility and Power: State Decision Making and the Control of Mobility

Contrary to popular belief and as mentioned above, medieval Mongol rulers were not constantly on the move. Caroline Humphrey has argued that they “had stationary seasonal residences constructed at some of their more regular stopping places, and these palaces were supported by storehouses for supplies sent by cart from far and wide,” and that they “used moveable palace tents for audiences and hosting.”²³ In an approach that combines archaeology and history, Shelach-Lavi, Lotze and Zhang’s paper focuses on the control and reduction of mobility

¹⁸ Salazar & Smart 2011: 2.

¹⁹ Humphrey & Sneath 1999: 1.

²⁰ With the exception of recent studies dedicated to the communities of people who physically move for work or other purposes, which is beyond the focus of this special issue.

²¹ For the Kazakhs and the Mongols of Xinjiang see Tsui 2012; for the Tibetans of Amdo region see Ptáčková 2020, and for the Evenki of Inner Mongolia see Xie 2015.

²² Joniak-Lüthi and Bulag 2016: 4.

²³ Humphrey 2019: 179-180.

between the tenth and thirteenth centuries under the Liao and Jin dynasties. Mobility is viewed from a political perspective, through the role assigned to what they call the “Medieval Wall System” (which was actually made of several “lines”). The northernmost lines were technically more like trenches than walls, which led authors to see them more as instruments of control than of defense. While one might imagine walls as essentially defensive elements, their work shows that walls were primarily elements of population control, regulating people’s movements, whether they crossed them from the inside or the outside. In short, this system was more about controlling populations than a given territory. It was an instrument of political control for both the Liao and Jin states (the Liao were more “nomadic” than the Jin). Although its effectiveness is difficult to measure, it was a solution to curb and organize the movement of the nomadic populations that made up the State.

In nomadic societies, mobility was often linked to political power and mastery. In early 20th century Mongolia, a master was not expected to be stuck in one place. Rather, masterhood came with ideas of superior mobility of one kind or another.²⁴ Furthermore, as Atwood reminds us, mobility is not only an expression of freedom but also one of power, control and constraint.²⁵ Discussed in this issue by Shelach-Lavi, Lotze & Zhang, as well as Wei, and Chircop-Reyes, the measurement of mobility appears to be an administrative and logistical tool, both for historical actors (the state, caravan companies, artisans who need to calculate the overall cost of their work) and for contemporary observers who need to define it. In the article by Shelach-Lavi, Lotze, and Zhang, as well as in Wei’s article, the goal of the authors was to measure mobility through the infrastructure put in place to regulate and measure it. This may seem counterintuitive, but it is obviously the only way, in addition to written accounts, to do so for ancient periods. The article by Shelach-Lavi, Lotze, and Zhang therefore focuses not so much on mobility itself as on the mechanisms put in place to control it. One of the questions raised by the article is to what extent walls/trenches were or were not intended as a tool for sedentarization, and if so, whether it was effective.

Wei’s article also deals with roads and allows us to take into account the issue of distance, as we often forget that we are dealing with immense territories in the areas concerned here. Her work thus questions the relevance of thinking in terms of macro-regions, a model that does not always survive the study of the mobility that crosses these very regions. One of the interests of mobility studies is precisely to redefine the boundaries of certain spaces and therefore of these spaces themselves.

In contemporary China, the extensive use of barbed-wire fences (which is closely associated with the implementation of grazing ban as part of environmental policies) on frontier pasturelands since the last three decades is reminiscent, even though the political and historical context differs greatly, the walls established under the former Liao and Jin dynasties to regulate the movements of people. As Golik’s article illustrates for the case of Hulun Buir in Inner Mongolia, the communist political agenda has always been directed against mobility, which was one of the main features of pastoral management system. In the Inner Mongolian grasslands and desert region, the aim was to produce communities that were “settled with moving herding” (*dingju youmu* 定居游牧), that is to say easily manageable communities whose mobility could be measured and coordinated by the local governments on newly demarcated pasturelands.

²⁴ Humphrey 2019: 190.

²⁵ Atwood 2015.

2. Logistics, Landscape and Local Knowledge

If logistical problems associated with mobility are universal — supply and self-sustainability, transportation, animal care, adaptation to terrain and climate, as well as human, animal, and natural hazards —, the technical and social solutions are specific to the regions, climates, and types of actors involved. In her article, Wei shows that funerary landscapes are linked to water and land routes: decisions to build rock-cut burials depended on transportation, access, and communication constraints. In a way, her work also raises the question of artistic mobility. The combination of a form of “opportunistic monumentality” is the result of the mobility of the artisans. Indeed, the lightness and speed of construction of these rock burials are only possible thanks to the mobility of those involved in the production process. Some things cannot be achieved when one is on the move, while other things can be done precisely because one is mobile. In other words, these are artisanal solutions found in response to logistical constraints.

Chircop-Reyes’s contribution sheds light on vernacular solutions found by Shanxi caravanners to adapt the size and pace of their organization: distances were conceptualized in “relational terms, contingent on access to water, forage, and animal stamina.” The reported information shows that ecological representations and material constraints were more important than topographic accuracy. One understands that, for modern Shanxi merchants, tacit knowledge was crucial, and certainly more than scientific knowledge.

The study of mobility makes it possible to give or restore agency to populations that are ethnically, geographically or socially marginalized. Several articles enrich and refine our understanding of areas and populations that were less familiar to literati than those in the center because they were considered barbaric, nomadic, or primitive. Wei’s analysis shows that the populations of the Southwest developed their own techniques and styles that were distinct from those found elsewhere under the Han. Shelach-Lavi, Lotze & Zhang explore the high degree of sophistication in the respective practices of the Liao/Jin, who were not nomads with loose control over their territory, but complex societies led by governments who took under consideration the best way to control a specific State with unprecedented boundaries. By focusing on hitherto overlooked narratives recounting the embodied practices of middle men, intermediaries and less-visible persons, Chircop-Reyes makes cameleers and armed escorts visible to us. Bringing to light intermediary actors whom we would not encounter in other circumstances is another benefit of studying mobility.

This brings us to non-human actors: animals, which are indeed important actors and means of mobility. For the last thirty years, historians, geographers and anthropologists have considered human-animal interactions and the diverse mobilities co-produced by humans and animals, bringing new insights about animal agency and how they influence routes, landscapes, as well as social and economic organization.²⁶ In Chircop-Reyes’s article, not only can we see how animal movements are shaped by human actions, but we also understand how the camel — used mainly by Mongol pastoralists as a traditional pack animal during nomadizations — was not only vital for sustaining mobility in Mongolian territories for Han cameleers, but also became the core of a more complex social and economic organization known as the camel caravans. In the context of emerging tourism in the Nyanpo Yutse Tibetan area (Qinghai province), Chio

²⁶ See among others, Urbanik 2012 as well as Novick, Onaga & Rosenberg 2025.

highlights how moving with horses, and more precisely riding horses through the natural landscape, links nature with bodily and physical movements of both Han and Tibetan people. Other articles show how mobility can be intimately linked to people's memory, emotional experiences and racialization process. The decline of the mobile nomadic way of life in Inner Mongolia, as elsewhere in China, is largely connected to the communist modernisation policies launched in the course of the second half of the 20th century. Golik underlines that although a lot of pastoralist people have been sedentarized in urban areas in the last decades, they tend to maintain some elements of their past nomadic lifestyle in both their memory and imagination. Indeed, the “nomadic heritage” still impacts local people's daily practices, including social interactions and mobility between urban and rural areas.

Based on analyses of two movies directed by two Tibetan filmmakers, Lepri's and Chio's articles both explore, from complementary perspectives, how Tibetan communities represent and perform their own identity/racial belonging and cultural encounters within contexts of political, ethnic and economic marginalization across Tibetan territories located outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (i.e. the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture for Lepri and the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture for Chio, both situated in Qinghai province). Through the analysis of Sonthar Gyal's movie *Ala Changso*, Lepri argues that mobility, taken in its multiple dimensions, can be performed on religious, emotional and cultural levels in order to display Tibetan identity and cultural negotiation. For her part, Chio shows how the Han and Tibetan people's various forms of mobilities (by car, by foot and by horse) screened in *The Tourists* by Dhunkar Kyab in Nyanpo Yutse highlight “how the physical and emotional experiences of being and moving in the nature produce racialized bodies in China's tourism.” Indeed, Chio argues that Tibetan horse guides are not valued for their *Tibetanness* but rather for their mobility: their bodies as well as the bodies of their horses, moving through the space, “accumulate value precisely because they are considered to have an entirely different experience” of Nyanpo Yutse natural space.

3. Experiences of Religious Space and Narratives of Mobility

The prism of mobility makes it also possible to apprehend religious spaces as well as their related narratives and ritual practices. Numerous medieval pilgrimages to holy lands — to Jerusalem for Christians or to the Western Lands for Buddhists — were recorded in religious topographies produced from the 4th century onwards. Some were rather bare and only recorded physical movement through space and the positions of religious markers, while others contained a wealth of precise and novel descriptions about unknown lands and peoples.²⁷ Religious practices and their related spaces indeed entail various forms of mobilities, from pilgrimage (one of the oldest forms of religious mobility) and missionary travels to processions, ritual journeys and economic networks.

Let us take the example of Mongolian territories again. From the second half of the 16th century, Buddhist institutions spread among the Mongols and the establishment of stationary monasteries was essential for the adoption and practice of Buddhism.²⁸ However, Charleux has shown that Buddhism was also compatible with mobility and felt architecture at this time: beside stationary monasteries, the Mongols also possessed mobile monasteries made from felt and wood that periodically moved.²⁹ As Chircop-Reyes shows in his article, some of these

²⁷ See for instance Halbwachs 1941, Drège 2013, and Lycas 2025.

²⁸ Sobkovyak 2020: 55.

²⁹ Charleux 2025.

monasteries played in turn a significant role in attracting to Mongolian territories Chinese merchants who founded economic workshops. Monasteries served not only as religious sites but were also key nodes in caravan networks.

Tweed, who has portrayed religion as both rooted in place and shaped by movement, emphasizing the dynamics of dwelling and crossing, has shown how religious practices may situate devotees within time and space, locating them within the body, the home, and the homeland.³⁰ Through Drolma, the main female character of the movie *Ala Changso*, Lepri highlights in her article how pilgrimage within Tibetan territory can be taken as a form of cultural mobility which may move across bodies and territorial borders. Drolma's bodily movement across the Tibetan plateau "becomes a form of existential agency, situating her within a Tibetan cosmology in which mobility is both a performative act of devotion and a practice of self-determination in the face of mortality."

Mortality brings us finally to the mobility of the dead, or rather on how the mobility of the living may influence the dwellings of the dead: Wei's article also examines how troglodytic cemeteries were temporary markers of professional mobility on longer routes. These routes were those of the stonemasons who produced the coffins. Wei shows that the distances traveled by these stonemasons could sometimes be long, but were most often short (on a regional scale and more specifically within a single river basin). In *Ala Changso*, Drolma eventually passed away in the mountainous region. The pilgrimage is continued by her husband and son, transforming religious mobility into a form of mobility embedded in familial devotion.

Several articles of this special issue highlight how people use narratives to make sense of their diverse experiences of mobility within the margins of China. In Tibetan areas again, Lepri exposes how identity, loss, and belonging are explored through narratives on mobility. In Mongolian areas, Chircop-Reyes focuses on how oral and written narratives may be used to recount caravan activities centered around mobilities. Lastly, Golik presents the local people's own perspectives and narratives about seasonal and short-term movements between rural and urban spaces in contemporary Hulun Buir.

Conclusion

While aware of the impossibility to cover all aspects of the multiple mobilities that (co)exist at the margins of China, our aim was rather to provide some insights into several relevant topics concerning mobility and power, mobility within landscape and local knowledge but also the experiences of religious space and narratives through the prism of mobility of nomadic and sedentary people. However, the nomadic and sedentary mobilities on China's margins has much more to offer as a topic. Thus, we would like to conclude this introduction by suggesting some short considerations on topics that we could not address in this volume and that we believe would deserve further development.

In the geographic margins of China where ethnically diverse people have historically been scattered, the link between mobility and ethnicity is worth considering. Indeed, mobility appears very useful to rethink key terms such as "tribe," "ethnicity," "ethnic group" but also the "Han" paradigm. However, although "minorities" and local communities are usually carefully described, they are often thought of in sharp contrast with one big and undefined Han group. It is therefore indispensable to unpack the "Han" and address them not as an indistinct

³⁰ Tweed 2006.

majority but as idiosyncratic social groups that vary in sizes, interests and attitudes, as Joniak-Lüthi has shown for contemporary China.³¹

Mobility alters divisions that are generally considered fixed (between nomads and sedentary peoples, humans and non-humans), and the meaning we attribute to socio-professional categories (such as the “merchant”). A phenomenon such as mobility cannot be reduced to a single type of approach: mobility also helps to rethink disciplinary divisions between anthropology, archaeology, history, and the temporal divisions that go with them. To take but one last example, mobility should also be more systematically thought of as a means to settle: beyond the mobile vs sedentary, forced vs free and mobility vs immobility dichotomies, this workshop has indirectly highlighted the historical importance and difficulty of settling people either totally or partially in previously unknown territory. This practice, which involved both human and non-human actors, was generally linked to the political development of specific economic needs, usually agriculture or pastoralism.

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³¹ Joniak-Lüthi 2015.

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