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Rethinking the Oriental City: Urban Process and Mobility of Urban Elites in Southwestern China

Through a case study on the urban development and elite mobility of Zhaojue county, Liangshan Yi minority region, China, this research aims to reveal the spatial logic of the urbanisation of ethnic periphery within the socialist politico-economic system and China's ethnic structure and explore how the urban process is shaped by, and likewise shapes the social and geographic mobilities of urban elites. This thesis first investigates the urban process of Zhaojue, and its features, functions and the mechanisms it lives and works. The concept of centripetal urbanisation is introduced to describe a distinct urban process in ethnic peripheries of China, whereby centripetal forces drive the military-administrative transformation to the built environment for socialist state building purpose. This transformation set the stage for the conduct of state projects to integrate and 'civilise' the minorities and nurture political loyalty and economic dependency of ethnic peripheries on the centre. Centripetal urbanisation requires constantly high state investment of resources which spurs a kind of urban development that's dependent on the contingent nature of political interests and administrative/military spending. This research also presents the mobility pattern of urban elites in Zhaojue and reveals that their mobility practices are the art of being governed and an alternative to being a full subject of market or neoliberal rules. The third finding social hierarchy in China, either in apolitical, economic, or cultural sense, is determined by one's accessibility to valuable and scarce reproductive resources. This further depends on the institutional distance of an individual to the state. The hierarchy lies in the state redistributive system, which has transformed minorities and their societies from (semi) independent ethnic enclave into as state dependents and has fostered dependent relations between the two.