

GSP 270 Final Project: Tibet in Transition

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Introduction

Over the summer of 2014 I traveled to Tibet on my senior research field expedition through Humboldt State University. The trip lasted roughly two months. My topic of study was the residential landscape of Tibet. I looked at how the housing structures of Tibet are being developed and what this means for the broader scope of Tibetan culture. Tibet was incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1951 and therefor is undergoing a unique trajectory of development as it is being dictated primarily by the Chinese government. (Sperling 2004, 9-15).

There are many research projects that study the booming development and growing
Figure 1. Locator map of the Tibet Autonomous Region and its capital city, Lhasa



urbanization in China. Many come to similar conclusions that point to rapid economic advancement and a still lingering Maoist mindset of taking down the old and building up the new. Though each place differs slightly in process the drivers and impacts are relatively clear.

However the same cannot be said for Tibet as little research has been conducted on this topic. While there has been some research on development in Tibet it typically overlooks the aspect of residential change which is one of the most crucial parts of a city.

My goal was to map the development status of a neighborhood that I surveyed in Lhasa and color code it based on that development.

Methods

In Lhasa, I surveyed multiple neighborhoods and took GPS tagged pictures. I chose the Jiangzhongcun neighborhood to map.

Figure 2. Locator map of the Jiangzhongcun neighborhood in the city of Lhasa (basemap



provided by ArcMap)

There is not much existing data for Tibet and what data is available is largely incomplete. I needed to digitize my own data for the neighborhood. The satellite imagery in ArcMap was low resolution and did not allow me to get close enough to digitize. I found the Jiangzhongcun neighborhood in Google Earth and created a JPEG of my desired area. Then, I imported the image into ArcMap.

Next, I georeferenced the raster image taken from Google Earth. I used Esri's satellite basemap to georeference my raster and size and locate it accurately. Once this step was complete I could begin the digitizing process.

I created a new shapefile and began drawing polygons. Because my pictures were tagged with GPS I was able to determine where the buildings of the neighborhood were located and what their development status was. I created a new column in the attribute table for development status. As I digitized I coded my polygons based on their development status. Once the neighborhood was digitized I used the symbology tab to color code the polygons based on their coding under the development status column in the attribute table.

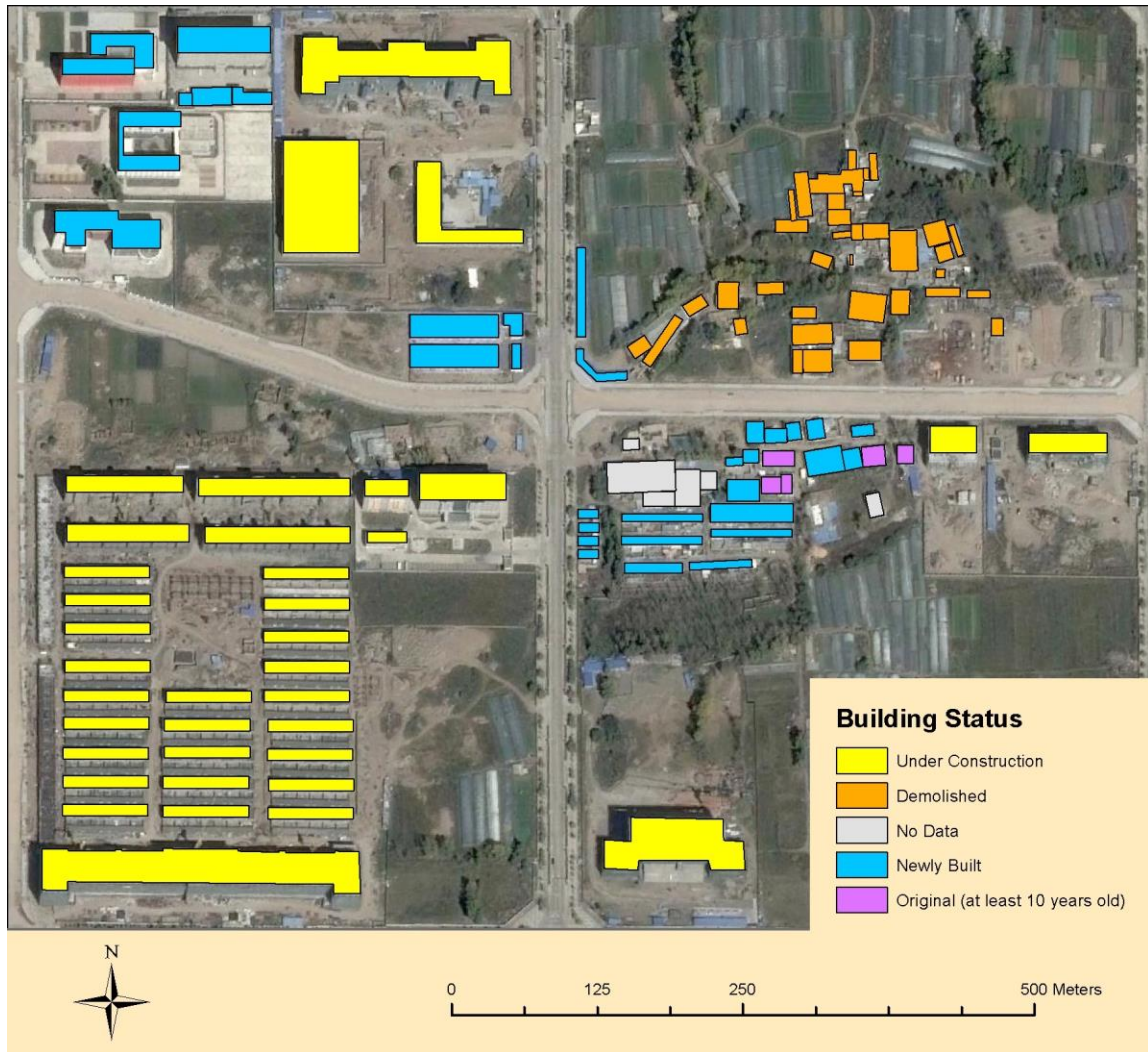
Results

The Jiangzhongcun neighborhood is experiencing large amounts of construction. Much of the area has been demolished and newly built. This is not due only to the expansion and growth of the city. By using Google Earth and looking at past satellite imagery it was possible to determine that this area used to be made up of traditional Tibetan neighborhoods just 10 years ago. The only remainders of those structures are the originals, coded in purple (see Figure 3). Essentially the entire area has been changed and developed. This development is driven by the Chinese government.

What is also important to note about the development in the Jiangzhongcun neighborhood is the style of the structures that have been constructed there which is an aspect that the map cannot convey. While the structures do bear some elements of Tibetan architecture they are largely built in the style of westernized, standardized architecture meaning large, multi-story apartment complexes and other high rise structures. Many are so standard looking they could be found anywhere. Tibetans do not traditionally live in that style. The only reflection of traditional Tibetan architecture and style are, again, the few remaining original houses, coded in purple on the map.

This type of change goes along with the small amount of research that has been conducted on this topic in Tibet. In a study that looked at the development of Lhasa, the changing demography is a subject that has contributed to the changing residential landscape. More and more Han Chinese have begun to move into Lhasa over the years and the composition of the city is changing (Nyima 2008, 257-270). This makes sense as government led construction and development is booming in Tibet, especially Lhasa and as the city grows, its residential areas are, in many cases, taking on a new face.

Figure 3. Map of development status in the Jiangzhongcun neighborhood of Lhasa



Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to provide an example that illustrates the nature of residential development taking place in Tibet. Though Lhasa, being the capital city, is an extreme example, this type of development follows suit with almost every other place I studied in Tibet. Often researchers claim that this type of demolition and development lead to a destruction of culture however I believe that is too broad of a statement. and too much of a stretch. I do believe however, that Tibet's culture is changing and that this residential development is a sign that is indicative of the change.

In an age of unprecedented growth and advancement, Tibet serves as a necessary place of study to further understand how residential structures reflect changing culture. Many cities' residential areas around the world have been studied in the face of rapid economic advancement, but this is an untapped aspect of the Tibetan landscape that has been overlooked.

Acknowledgements

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The satellite basemap for Figure 2 was provided by Esri.

Satellite imagery used for Figure 3 was provided by Google Earth.

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Bibliography

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