In recent years, reports of desertification in Inner Mongolia have reached alarming proportions, despite the recognition since 1984 by Chinese authorities and multi-national aid organisations that something is seriously wrong with Inner Mongolia’s steppe environment. Dee Mack Williams’s *Beyond Great Walls* is a timely investigation of the cultural and policy background to what appears to be an accelerating social and ecological catastrophe.

For twelve months in 1993–1994, covering all but the coldest portion of the winter, Williams conducted fieldwork in Ongni’ud Banner in Chifeng Municipality (formerly Juu Uda League) in eastern Inner Mongolia. The eastern part of the banner, in which is located Williams’s research site of Ulaan’odu guchai (village) of Ashikhan sumu (pastoral district) is part of the Khorchin Dunes area and is heavily Mongol in ethnic composition. (Williams throughout refers to Ashikhan as Nasihan for reasons I find inexplicable.) Williams conducted his field work under the auspices of the GEMS (Grassland Ecosystem of the Mongolian Steppe) project, an international project under the leadership of James Reardon-Anderson.

As he discusses in his first chapter, Williams was placed in a weather-station and grasslands research outpost operated from Shenyang and manned by Han Chinese scientists. From the beginning he was something of the odd man out at the GEMS project; a social anthropologist in a project dominated by a natural-science, grasslands-management perspective. As Williams became more familiar with Ulaan’odu’s inhabitants, he became odd man out in another way: socially associated with weather and range scientists about whose approach he became steadily more sceptical.

In *Beyond Great Walls*, Williams advances four broad theses: 1) Neither desertification nor rangeland protection can be dealt with as purely objective processes definable without reference to social and cultural relations of power; 2) Han Chinese scientists perceive the grasslands very differently from the local Mongols, and it is the Han Chinese scientific perspective which international experts almost invariably adopt when they work in Inner Mongolia; 3) Chinese and United Nations policies in Inner Mongolia, particularly the promotion of enclosure and privatisation of range land, actually accelerate pasture degradation whilst framing the issues in a way that blames the Mongols themselves for this policy failure; 4) in the particularly poor and marginal community of Ashikhan,
this policy of enclosure is exacerbating inequality and imposing tragically high costs on the most vulnerable members of the community.

While his arguments are highly plausible and his evident indignation at the injustices done to the poorer members of Ulaan’odu commendable, Williams does not really fasten down key causal connections. Williams’s crucial third point, that rangeland enclosures cause pasture degradation, is documented rather briefly on pp. 128–32, where he shows that unenclosed land is now heavily overstocked in the summer and fall, that the recommended rotational grazing does not occur, and that the local Mongols are convinced unenclosed rangeland quality is rapidly declining. Yet he does not really address the possibility that aggregate overstocking is the problem and that enclosures have not had a large effect on accelerating rangeland degradation one way or the other.

Again, while he shows convincingly in pp. 138–44 that access to fencing is very unequal in Ulaan’odu, that fencing is used by the local upper class in an predatory way, and that inequality is increasing, he does not really address the possibility that rural inequality (which is increasing all over China) is driven by factors independent of enclosures. Similarly in his discussion of alcohol use, where he notes the correlation of alcohol abuse with poverty, he makes no effort to disprove that possibility that alcohol abuse causes poverty, not just the other way around.

While Williams implicitly contrasts his own sensitivity to the local perspective to that of other international aid workers and places great emphasis on culturally influenced ways of looking at landscape, his account of local culture in Ulaan’odu is very slim. He did not learn Mongolian and is unfamiliar with any serious English-language ethnographic literature on the East Mongols (Vreeland, Aberle, Pao Kuo-yi), let alone the extensive Mongolian-language literature. The few aspects of culture he does mention, such as the oboo cult or the naadam (misspelled throughout as nadaam) are given no interpretive heft. As a result, I find his claims about cultural perceptions of landscape and community (surely the oboo cult, for example, would be relevant here), to be unproven, however plausible they may sound. Trying to apply patterns observed in Khalkha Mongolia to Ongni’ud Banner (pp. 155–6) is a very dubious procedure.

Similarly his local history is very vague. Claims that political campaigns of the Maoist period did not really cause long-lasting bitterness within the community because they were ‘generally instigated by outsiders and never became routine behavior’ (p. 155) leave me wondering how frank the people of Ulaan’odu really were with Williams.

In conclusion, Beyond Great Walls is an important, if somewhat superficial, look at a major issue. Grassland enclosure is a radical innovation in Inner Mongolia and may well, as Williams contends, be the cause of even further range degradation. Culture and society, moreover, are unquestionably important both in perceptions of landscape and in the relations of power that govern who gets to use it and who gets to blame whom for its degradation. It is to be hoped