Economic Development in Tibet Under the People's Republic of China

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Today, on the "roof of the world," home appliances such as TV sets, telephones, and refrigerators are as commonplace as they are in the developed eastern parts of China. . . . Since [1994], the average annual growth rate of Tibet's gross domestic product has reached 12.9 percent, higher than the national average. . . . In the past, most Tibetan farmers and herdsmen wore one woolen robe all year round, having no other clothes to change into . . . but today, young Tibetans not only have enough clothes to wear, they also want to follow the latest fashions, even in the farming and pastoral areas. . . . [They] did not have any choice for food and had to rely on beef and mutton, and farmers lived on a simple diet of potatoes and radishes in winter. But nowadays, more and more Tibetans can afford to buy seafood air-freighted from inland provinces. And greenhouse vegetables and fruits are now common sights on Tibetans' dinner tables.

—Xinhua, March 2002

The above quote is typical of official descriptions of life in contemporary Tibet, thanking the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the prosperity they have brought to the region. In other venues, however, neither party nor government would deny that accomplishments have fallen far short of aspirations. Although the Chinese name for Tibet, Xizang, means "western storehouse," it is by far the poorest area under the jurisdiction of the PRC. Even a cursory glance at the Statistical Yearbook of China will confirm that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) ranks last on virtually every indicator: total revenue, taxes remitted, per capita income, joint
ventures, literacy, and even life expectancy at birth. Notwithstanding Tibet’s daunting climate, which includes extreme cold and wind as well as aridity and thin air, the region does not lack natural resources. The gold-bearing sands of cultural Tibet have been renowned for centuries. Less well known are the area’s other rare metals, including lithium, lead, antimony, and, it is rumored, uranium. There are also coal deposits and an abundance of salt. Additionally, the region has received generous subsidies from the central government, exceeding those given to any other province or autonomous region.

Difficult to approach geographically because of its location in the Himalayas, Tibet’s unique culture and religious isolation have given it an aura of romantic mystery and spiritual enlightenment that lured a number of hardy adventurers from the West. In fact, though detached from the rest of the world in many ways, pre-1949 Tibet had a thriving export trade in wool—its principal export—and salt. Tea, first imported from China, and other goods were stocked against lean years and Tibetans ruled their own land.


The arrival of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in October 1950 was traumatic in many ways, particularly in the capital of Lhasa and other large cities, but did not initially have a major impact on traditional economic patterns. According to the treaty of agreement between the two countries, the PLA promised to improve the people’s livelihood, but it did not specify how this was to be done, and also promised that it would not use compulsion to implement reforms. Cultural Tibet was divided among Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and the Tibet Autonomous Region until 1965. Roads were built so as to ease the status of an autonomous region on Han China. While potentially of great value to the economies of these areas, the construction process caused a disruptive inflation. Soldiers who were building the roads needed local supplies, thereby bidding up prices and leading to shortages of many commodities. The indigenous population had been informed that the Chinese Communist Party had generously liberated them from the practice of corvee labor, known as "ala," from their feudal lords.

Not surprisingly, they sometimes failed to see the difference between the "ala" imposed by feudal lords and the road construction and maintenance duties exacted by the party. Moreover, the economic advantages conferred by the roads had to be weighed against the possibility that they represented the beginning of Han Chinese dominance; armies and immigrants could move across them as easily as trade caravans.

Economic data were released only rarely from the period 1950–1959; those figures that exist must often be calculated backward from numbers released later.
that is, "grain production in 1982 was more than three times the 1952 figure." It is likely that the central government had only the vaguest idea of what production figures were in this period, and that comparisons with later years are really guesstimates, at least some of which were designed to enhance the gains later-day officials claimed had been made under their administration. Production for Tibetan areas outside the TAR was included in the data of provinces to which they now belonged.

**Phase II: Democratic Reforms, 1959–1969**

The failure of a rebellion against Chinese rule in March 1959 began the second stage of economic development under the PRC. The uprising caused an estimated 80,000 Tibetans, out of a total population of little more than a million, to flee with their spiritual and temporal leader, the Dalai Lama, to India. This exodus, plus the mopping-up operation by the PLA, must have adversely affected production, although this cannot be confirmed, since no statistics were released for the period. The Chinese government declared that, since the local government of Tibet had broken the 1951 agreement, Beijing was no longer obliged to postpone reforms. It proceeded to enact them. According to official sources, the institution of what it described as democratic reforms led to huge increases in the production of virtually all goods. The exact amounts were not specified—a typical statement was, for example, "in 1961, there was a big increase over 1960, despite natural disasters." China as a whole was at that time suffering from a major famine brought on by the misguided policies of the Great Leap Forward. It was later admitted that party and government did not in fact know what the production figures for Han China were. Hence, it is unlikely that the figures for Tibet are any more reliable. The Tibetan economy after democratic reforms, as before, rested on animal husbandry and agriculture.


A third phase in Tibet's post-liberation economic development began with the institution of communes. As in many other sectors of development, this happened later in the TAR than in other areas of the PRC, where they were introduced in 1958. A 1965 source alluded to communes in unspecified "selected places" in the TAR; the party Central Committee's newspaper, *Renmin Ribao*, stated that experimental communes began to be introduced in the Lhasa area in 1965. Resistance from Liu Shaoqi and other recently discredited leaders was blamed for the long delay. Not until 1970, however, were communes formed in Tibet in any numbers. The official Xinhua news agency announced that a total of 666 communes had been established in 34 percent of the TAR's townships in that year, and that communes existed in 70 percent of townships in 1973. By 1974, 90 percent of townships were reported to have communes, a figure that rose to 93 percent in 1975.
No details of their organization were provided. It is likely that the TAR's command structure was very different from those in the rest of China, where the great majority of commune-building was done. The communes of 1958 contrasted all prior arrangements for the TAR's many nomadic herders. The TAR's economic disaster that followed the establishment of the communes was established at all in the TAR long after their deficiencies became well known, seems to indicate that there was considerable influence from ideological radicals. A mid-1970s description of a "model commune" in the TAR speaks of a two-level organization—mainly production teams—rather than the three-tier structure found elsewhere in China, where communes were collectivized. In 1973, 1974, and 1975, successive delegations of scientists from China's most prestigious research institutes investigated the area's climate and soil, and returned. They recommended that the TAR should cultivate potatoes, which they claimed could be grown at high altitudes. The recommendations were implemented, and potato cultivation spread rapidly. By the early 1980s, potatoes had become a major crop in the TAR, and the area's GDP began to grow rapidly. The cultivation of winter wheat was also heavily promoted, whereas the staple food of the area had been barley. Also frequently mentioned was a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, including tomatoes, peppers, apples, pears, and pomegranates. Though the benefits of these crops were due to the Han Chinese who brought them, the benefits were enjoyed by the local population as well. The cultivation of crops was a particular irritant, since local people preferred barley and felt that, in addition to being rule by the Han, they were now being forced to raise food for them. Production figures for livestock and wheat reported by the Han were near the point of causing panic for many in the TAR. However, by the end of the decade there was ecological disaster and widespread hunger. Emergency price controls were put into effect, and Han Chinese administrators who were deemed responsible were sent for trial. Two separate reports of Western scientists who visited reported seeing barely a plant or
l in their travels.\textsuperscript{16} Wheat cultivation, which according to official figures had increased by an average annual rate of 18.1 percent from 1972 to 1975, dropped dramatically. The 1979 harvest was a disaster.\textsuperscript{17} Intensive cultivation techniques appropriate to the fields that had exhausted the soil. With virtually no grain at a period, residents killed animals to keep from starving, reducing the total number of livestock allowed to increase beyond the capacity of grassland to provide food for humans. Lhasa Radio referred to “economic dislocation,” with numbers of soldiers killing thousands of animals for amusement, for their sale—which were subsequently sold, with the proceeds going to the units involved—and for target practice. This behavior reminded Westerners of their own ancestors, who slaughtered buffalo for similar reasons. The PLA also denuded forests for fuel and to manufacture and sell furniture for the of its members.


The stage of economic development began in 1980, when a central government delegation led by then-party head Hu Yaobang visited Tibet. Hu was, by all indications, appalled by what he saw. A high-level work meeting on Tibet was called to decide how to cope with the difficulties there. The TAR’s communes were disbanded, as was happening elsewhere in China as well. The disaster was on the leftist influence of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four. There was no indication of why the misguided policies had outlived their perpetrators: Lin had been in prison since 1976. One can hypothesize that the top levels of government continued to implement leftist policies at this time even after their mentors had been removed. A new first party secretary, Yin Fatang, was installed, presumably to indicate a break with these influences. According to his biographical sketch, Yin had worked in the for many years and, in contrast to many Han administrators, spoke Tibetan.\textsuperscript{19} It did not mention was that, like many long-term Han administrators in Tibet, Yin was a military officer.

The party and government pledged to make amends through a policy of rest and reorganization. In order to lessen the masses’ burden, agricultural, pastoral, industrial, and commercial taxes would be remitted “for a few years.” Animals were returned to private ownership, and farmers freed to return to barley cultivation. Raising disappeared from mention. The practice of producing farm, animal, sideline products under unified plans or through assignment was officially ended, as were all forms of apportionment. The state would subsidize agricultural and animal husbandry, and satisfy “the urgent needs of the Tibetan people in daily living.”

In this difficult situation, regional and local governments were to be flexible in
their policies and respect the right of production teams, work groups, and individuals to make their own decisions on production. Collectives and individuals were to be encouraged to engage in sideline and handicraft endeavors, to hold rural trade fairs, and to trade across borders. At celebrations held in May 1981 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the agreement between the Lhasa government and Beijing, the mood was upbeat. A major speech by the chief Tibetan representative at the signing of the 1951 compact set the goal of ending poverty in the TAR within the next two to three years, topping the region’s highest known living standards within the next five to six years, and “bring[ing] about massive development in Xizang’s economy within ten years.”

A New York Times reporter who visited the TAR in 1983 reported that the population was beginning to emerge from the brink of starvation; 37,800 acres of land had been taken out of winter wheat and returned to grazing or barley cultivation. Lhasa’s Han population, which had been 50 percent, or 60,000 people, was now only 30 percent, or 36,000. However, Beijing was already rethinking this policy in light of concerns about stability should too many Han leave.

The optimistic predictions of 1981 notwithstanding, poverty had not ended after two to three years. This is clear from the records of a second high-level conference on work in Tibet that was held in 1984. Three hundred cadres were summoned from Tibet to Beijing, and Hu Yaobang himself officiated at the sessions. Delegates were informed that, despite the reforms, economic indicators had dropped. Additional reforms were announced. The exemption from taxes was extended; workers were to be brought in from outside the TAR to help develop its industries, and tourism would be encouraged. Although the reforms introduced by the 1984 conference were later credited with beginning a sharp increase in living standards, this was not immediately obvious in the years following. In 1986, regional First Party Secretary Yin Fatang revealed that cadres had to grow their own vegetables and acknowledged the irony that, in a pastoral area, there were shortages of milk and other dairy products. Others complained that, while taxes had theoretically been abolished, they reappeared in the guise of government charges for services rendered to the populace. In order to encourage Han to come to Tibet to contribute their skills to its development, the government paid them salary supplements. This created a two-tier wage scale that disadvantaged local people, creating jealousy. Tibetans also complained that Han received preferential treatment in hiring and promotions. The official media spoke of problems of internal order in factories and offices, adding that these problems frequently had important consequences that included serious harm to both the disputants and production.

Yin Fatang was replaced as first party secretary by Wu Jinghua, a member of the Yi minority from neighboring Sichuan province. How this choice was made is a mystery. Tibetan leaders construed the appointment of someone of another minority—and, moreover, a minority group viewed as being exceptionally backward—as a denigration of their own capabilities. Another important constituency, the PLA, was annoyed because Wu had no military background. Despite this inauspicious
art, Wu did a number of things that endeared him to at least some Tibetans: turning streets in Lhasa to their original Tibetan names, appearing at religious monasteries, and making donations to monks. Still, he never acquired a power. Wu did not long survive the ouster in 1987 of Hu Yaobang, under whose tenure he had been appointed. And problems, though scarcely of Wu’s making, continued to accumulate. He was replaced by Hu Jintao, beginning a bright career that would culminate in the latter’s appointment as party general secretary and resident of all of China.

In an exceptionally frank article published in 1985 in a Shanghai newspaper at was later closed for being too outspoken, an unnamed commentator argued at the reported increases in the TAR’s total industrial and agricultural output were entirely attributable to state subsidies. Over the previous thirty years, total dustrial and agricultural output value increased fourfold, while state subsidies creased by 65 times. An increase of one yuan in output value required an increase of 1.21 yuan in state subsidies—that is, Tibet had a negative multiplier effect on investment. The average annual increase in output value was 5.45 percent, while the average annual increase in state subsidies was nearly 15 percent.

or the TAR to double its total industrial and agricultural output value in fourteen years, using the output value of 1981 as a base, the central government would have to provide subsidies of 4.5 billion yuan. Quadrupling the region’s output value in twenty-seven years would necessitate state subsidies of 27.5 billion yuan.\textsuperscript{25} This as an unthinkably large sum; the PRC’s defense budget in 1985 was, by comparison, only 18.67 billion yuan.\textsuperscript{26}

As will be seen, the unnamed author’s views were echoed more than a decade later by a group of economic scholars and officials in Tibet. One important reason for the failure of state subsidies to generate economic growth has been that the subsidies are used to support an overly large administrative superstructure. In essence, organizational forms designed for highly populated provinces in Han China were exported to sparsely populated Tibet. A second reason is the large PLA force stationed in Tibet to guard against infiltration from abroad and dissidence within. A third is the cost of subsidies for Han workers in Tibet. A fourth is that much of the state’s subsidies are used to buy the state’s goods from other parts of the country, rather than in order to develop local commodity production. A vicious cycle ad developed in which Tibet was becoming more, not less, dependent on central government outlays, rather than using them to develop internal productive forces. To the extent that these existed, they were state-owned enterprises which, as elsewhere in the PRC, were inefficient money-losers.\textsuperscript{27}

More friction was produced by a policy begun in 1985 of sending young people to be educated in Han China. Since, the government declared, Tibetans’ lack of skills and the region’s poor educational system were impeding economic progress, the youngsters would attend superior Chinese schools where they could acquire knowledge of use to their home areas. Four thousand middle school students were dispersed among seventeen provinces and municipalities where, needless to say,
the language of instruction was Chinese rather than Tibetan. Although official
propaganda emphasized how proud their parents were of them and the great hopes
that everyone held for what they could do for Tibet in the future,28 there were also
lurking suspicions that the real motivation of the program was assimilation rather
than economic development.

Tourism caused other problems. It definitely contributed to the region’s gross
domestic product and helped some Tibetans, who sold traditional handicrafts such
as ceremonial scarves, weavings, and the area’s distinctive turquoise, coral, and
silver jewelry. Others felt that they were being exploited. One of these stated force-
fully to a Western reporter that “First the Chinese cut our trees, mined our gold,
and took our grain. Now there’s nothing left, and they’re selling our country to the
foreigners.”29 There was a widespread perception that most of the benefits of tour-
ism went not to natives but to Han immigrants. Tibetans became a minority in
Lhasa, with most small businesses run by Han. This does not seem to have been
the result of a conscious central government policy of ethnic swamping. Beijing
had exempted Tibet from the general rule that one must be a permanent resident of
an area in order to open a business there. In addition, taxes were low. A “floating
population” of mostly impoverished young people from provinces like Sichuan,
Gansu, and Yunnan had arrived and seemed to thrive even though, unlike the workers
brought in under party/government sponsorship, they did not receive salary supple-
ments. Tibetans were either unaware that the central government had not planned
the influx or they were indifferent to the issue of whether it was culpable or not.
More important to them were the realities that Han were present, and that they
were taking jobs away from Tibetans. The locals were angry. Although Beijing
argued that non-Tibetans stayed in urban areas, and that nearly 88 percent of Ti-
betans lived in rural areas, natives complained that the estimated 200,000–250,000
Han in the TAR represented a solid 15 percent of the area’s population.

Phase V: Economic Development Under Strict Political Control,
1987–Present

This anger was a major factor in demonstrations in 1987. Tourists tended to symp-
pathize with Tibetans rather than the government, particularly when they saw po-
lice beating unarmed protestors. Some tourists had not come simply to see the
sights, but represented human rights groups on fact-finding missions. After learn-
ing this, party and government concluded that outside instigation had been behind
the demonstrations, and took measures to restrict it. For a time, individual tourists
were forbidden to enter Tibet, the assumption being that the activities of those who
traveled in groups could more easily be monitored.30 The restriction appeared to
have a relatively minor affect on tourism and, concomitantly, on the amount of
economic return realized from it. But even larger demonstrations in 1989 and the
declaration of martial law that accompanied them would reduce tourism to a bare
trickle for several years (see Appendix 6D).
In 1990, infrastructure development became a major concern. The State Planning Commission approved a program to develop the valleys of the three major waterways in central Tibet—the Yarlung Zangbo, Nyang Qu, and Lhasa rivers. Noting that the three comprised the political, economic, and cultural heart of the TAR and contained 35 percent of its population, the Commission pointed out that, collectively, they possessed significant potential for raising the grain output of existing farmland as well as afforestation projects. It was hoped that Tibet could become self-sufficient in grain by 2000, since about 150 million kilograms of grain had to be sent to the TAR from other parts of China every year, costing the government nearly 300 million yuan (US$64 million) in transportation fees. Modern industry, said to have been non-existent at the time of liberation, now had three pillars: electricity, textile/handicrafts, and mining. A fourth pillar, tourism, would later be added; 1990 would have been an inappropriate time to do so, since a declaration of martial law in Lhasa in 1989 had drastically reduced the number of tourists.

Echoing a theme applied to other minority areas of China, although of dubious validity—that economic development would erase ethnic tensions—a State Council inspection group opined that development of the three valleys was important to "stabilizing the situation in Tibet." Work on these projects would dominate economic news from the TAR for the next several years. Four counties were designated "agro-tech demonstration counties" in 1990; another six were added in 1991. These ten received training in crop enhancement from outside experts plus funds for water conservation, land improvement, and farm machinery.

In 1991 also, it was decided to divide Tibet into four economic zones for developmental purposes, based on the differing resource bases of the regions. A central zone, encompassing the eighteen counties through which the three above-mentioned rivers pass, would become the TAR's production base for commodity grain, nonstaple foods, light industry, textiles, and handicrafts, as well as be the focus of scientific and technological inputs. The geographically central zone was to become the center of the area's economic growth as well. The western zone, comprising Xigaze (Shigatse) and part of Ngari, was to take advantage of its frontier location by adopting special and flexible policies to promote border trade. The eastern zone, Nyingchi and Qamdo prefectures, with their milder climate and plentiful resources, was to boost infrastructure construction, including transportation and communications systems, and enlist human, material, and financial resources both within the zone and from elsewhere to build processing industries for minerals, forest products and by-products, Chinese medicinal materials, and wool. A northern zone, including Nagqu and the remainder of Ngari, would concentrate on developing animal products. Traditionally a pastureland, the northern zone would "build up animal husbandry, exploit energy resources, promote an animal commodity economy, and develop processing industries for animal products." It was also to develop its mineral and medicine material resources.

Nineteen ninety-four proved a watershed year for development. Beijing and the
Dalai Lama's government were in the process of reaching different conclusions on the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, engendering considerable tension, particularly after the child chosen by the Dalai Lama disappeared. Hu Jintao had gone on to higher office and was replaced by Chen Kuiyuan. Hu's lack of achievement in Tibet's economic development was clearly not held against him; one expert commented laconically, "when Hu arrived, there were riots. When he left, there weren't." A third forum on work in Tibet was held in July. The annual growth rate was set at 10 percent for the rest of the decade—a highly ambitious goal—with the intent of doubling the TAR's gross domestic product by 2000, when compared with 1993. To further this goal, "relevant central departments and provinces" were to render long-term aid to Tibet in addition to ongoing state subsidies and preferential policies. These relevant central departments and provinces would take charge of the construction of 62 projects and provide an estimated investment of 2.38 billion yuan (US$270 million), almost exactly one-fourth of the projected total cost of the projects. When completed, the projects were expected to have "played a great role in the all-around development of Tibet."

Almost immediately, concerns about how these projects would impact an environmental situation already perceived as deteriorating were voiced. They were emphatically dismissed by official sources. Other concerns were raised as well. A Western diplomat in Beijing opined that "If Tibetans want to cash in on the economic boom [created by the development projects], they will in effect have to become honorary Chinese," and the Hong Kong press construed party General Secretary Jiang Zemin's comment to the forum that social stability was an essential factor in Tibet's development as portending more repressive policies toward Tibetans. New party secretary Chen Kuiyuan did indeed introduce harsh policies aimed at dealing with resistance. Tibetans were told, point-blank, that if religion interfered with socialism and economic development, it was religion that would have to give way. Among other measures, Chen curtailed the teaching of Tibetan in schools, closed monastic schools, and restricted the number of monks and nuns to 46,000, as well as forcing the remaining clergy to undergo patriotic re-education. Tibetan bureaucrats who could not write in Chinese were fired, as were people who had been educated in India, including tour guides. An additional 13,000 Tibetans were sent to be educated in the interior of China where, it was said, they could better obtain the necessary skills the TAR needed to develop economically and culturally.

Whole neighborhoods in Lhasa were razed, ostensibly to provide better modern housing and a smoother traffic flow. Family planning measures, which had been much less strictly applied than in most other areas of China, were tightened, again in the name of economic development and prosperity. Since Han were coming into the TAR in sizable numbers to assist in economic development at the same time as Tibetans were being urged to limit the size of their families to help with economic development, some Tibetans concluded that the real motive behind family planning was genocide.
ial sources repeatedly denied that Han were flooding into Tibet. Ignoring presence variously estimated at between 100,000 and 300,000 and the uned floating population, with neither group being counted in census statis point out that the population of the TAR was well over 90 percent. The large numbers of Han who had come to help with economic development not expected to stay longer than the terms of their contracts, which range as long as ten years, and they would not in any case receive registration An article in Tibet Daily explained that having more Han than other lities was not a bad thing and was absolutely crucial to economic development warned that “unless people change their way of thinking, it will be very difficult for Tibet to enjoy development.” Han became the majority of the population in Lhasa and in the TAR’s second city, Xigaze.

id-1996, a group of scholars and officials gathered to address the gap in standards between Tibet and the interior, a discussion broadcast on Lhasa on’s weekly report. The economic growth rate in 1995 had been 10.6 percent exceeding the average for the entire country. However, the interviewees noted that the gains had been quantitative rather than qualitative. Development has been intensive, resulting from higher subsidies, rather than intensive: economic return was low, and dropping. Whereas the TAR’s total factor productivity was a meager 0.3 during the Seventh Five-Year Plan, 1.4 percent lower than the level, it had dropped to -0.1 percent during the Eighth Five-Year Plan, 4.2 below the national level. Even though Tibet’s gap with the interior of China rowed, it had widened in quality terms. Exactly as predicted a decade the TAR had become still more dependent on subsidies.

There were also indications from exile groups that the government’s statistics on population were being inflated. According to the Tibetan Review, premier of the exile community, the hydropower station at Yamzhong Yuncbo was critical of the central government’s failures. Beijing’s biggest project in the us far, the station had been built near a lake of the same name at an elevation of 3,900 meters above sea level. The Yamzhong Yuncbo station cost an estimated US$120 million to build, but had never worked properly. Other large-scale construction activities had caused flooding along the Yangtze and left 4,000 square meters of desert elsewhere. And, citing a United Nations Development Pro-report, Tibetan Review reported that life expectancy at birth in the TAR had from 63.9 years in 1982 to 59.8 years in 1990. The Los Angeles Times ed a situation in which young Tibetan women seeking employment had a choice between heavy construction work or prostitution. Led by huge influxes of money from outside, the TAR’s officially reported growth rate averaged an impressive 12.8 percent between 1993 and 1999, initially in excess of the 1994 forum’s already ambitious plans. Spurred by an in service industries and state investments, a 9.3 percent rate was expected for 2000. The rate eventually reported was still higher—10.2 percent, increases of over 12 percent projected for the coming years. These are in fact
being reported to date for the Tenth Five-Year Plan that was to run from 2001 to 2005: GDP for the latest year available, 2002, was 18 percent higher than 2001, adjusted for inflation to 12.4 percent. Heightened attention to development in Tibet was consonant with the PRC’s ambitious plans to develop the west. In the case of the TAR, these plans included construction of a very expensive railroad from Golmud, in Qinghai, to Lhasa. The cost of the railroad was a major factor in the expectation that growth rates would exceed 12 percent over the coming five years. Not surprisingly, this latest effort to develop Tibet entailed a large increase in the subsidies that, the central government has frequently reminded Tibetans, are already generous. During the Tenth Five-Year Plan, central government subsidies to the TAR were scheduled to reach 37.9 billion yuan, which is said to be twice those of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. An additional 32.2 billion yuan is to be provided by the central government in cooperation with other areas of the country for 187 designated projects; other preferential policies were promised as well.

The railroad project is highly controversial, both from an engineering/ecological perspective and for what its goals are perceived to be. With regard to the first obstacle, official sources insist that the technological problems of building a rail line through permafrost can be solved, and that Tibet’s fragile environment will not be harmed. As for the motive behind building the road, two simultaneously published magazines reflect diametrically opposing views. *Beijing Review* concentrates on the economic benefits that the line will bring to ethnic minorities who live along it and the enhancement of ethnic unity. By contrast, *Tibetan Review*, published in India, contains a cartoon depicting the railroad as the body of a sinuous dragon, symbolic of China, boring through the mountain under the Potala Palace, the symbol of Tibet, and dislodging it from its foundations. Out of the dragon’s open mouth emerge thousands of tiny termite-like Han, each wearing an army cap.

As if to underscore central government concerns about Tibet, a fourth Tibet work forum was held in Beijing at the end of June 2001. The forum report averred that economic development could not take place without stability, and named “the Dalai Lama clique” as the main source of Tibet’s instability. To thwart the clique’s nefarious designs, more than 10,000 cadres had been formed into work groups and rushed to agricultural and pastoral areas “to rectify and improve grass-roots party organizations.” If they did not succeed, the report stated, the gap between the living standards of Tibet and other parts of China would continue to widen. Development was the key to stability. It is not clear that forum participants comprehended the circularity of the chicken–egg dilemma their report outlined, that is, that instability causes failure to develop and failure to develop causes instability.

If the anticipated high growth rates can be sustained for five additional years, officials predict that the TAR can expect to “attain the mid-level of the country in ten years.” However, such statements contain the tacit assumptions that, first, large external subsidies will continue, and second, other provinces will continue to grow at the same rates they have been. Neither of these can be taken for granted. Other
nces are likely to experience changes in their growth rates, perhaps upward, which will make it more difficult for Tibet to attain the middle range, or perhaps downward in response to changes in the world economy or to unforeseeable natural disasters. The latter could inhibit their ability to contribute to the TAR’s development.

More important than this, perhaps, is that provinces are already reportedly averse to funneling the TAR funds that could be used to better advantage in their areas. There is increasing willingness to state this openly, as did Sichuan First Secretary Zhou Yongkang in March 2000, when he accused Tibetans of wastefulness by donating to monasteries (“What’s the point of talking about the future when you ignore the present?”) and the government of wasting money by insisting that Tibetan be taught in schools (“The whole world is learning English. Why r??”).

In essence, this attitude holds Tibetans responsible for their own poverty and argues that money should be spent where it yields a better return. While the concept itself is not new, there are fewer inhibitions to stating it publicly.

Another taboo that began to be addressed concerned the number of TAR residents who live below the poverty line. Official figures place the number at only 0.6 out of a total population of 2.6 million, and falling steadily. Representatives of the Hong Kong press who felt this figure was suspiciously low were able to ascertain that the standard for poverty had been set in 1990, at 600 yuan a year for workers and 700 yuan a year for herdsmen, both well below World Bank figures not adjusted for inflation.

The same time, some Han feel more free to express opinions about the TAR’s social development that are critical of party and government efforts for other reasons. Wang Lixiong, a scholar-author who spent fifteen years collecting data in the TAR, argues that modernization has not succeeded there because it was forced on the outside rather than at the behest of the people and with no regard for their culture. Since the sole driving force of development is massive support from Beijing, it cannot become self-sustaining. Wang argues, for example, that the main goal of road building was not, as the party claimed, eco-development, but rather the creation of a stabilizing group (wending jitian)—administrators and soldiers. The highways mainly carry goods to benefit the small number of Tibetans who have joined the stabilizing class. Hence, the roads have little relevance to the lives of the great majority of Tibetans, who live in small, dispersed communities in the high plateaus. Development is, more concentrated on showcase projects in major cities, mainly Lhasa. The result is the further marginalization of Tibetan society. Tibetan members of the stabilizing class play a role: on the one hand, they have common cause with party and government; on the other hand, fearing their privileged status will be adversely affected. On the other hand, wishing to enhance their value as stabilizers, they encourage small incidents of instability that they can soothe. Ordinary Tibetans are not inherently lazy in Wang’s frame of reference. They have simply lost their work incentive due to an unnatural way in which government has come to the TAR.
Another scholar has hypothesized that economic development in Tibet is a dichotomy that is urban versus rural rather than Han versus Tibetan. This falls athwart two problems. The first is one of data: Beijing releases income figures that are broken down only by rural versus urban, not urban Han and urban Tibetans on the one hand and rural Han and rural Tibetans on the other, so the validity of this hypothesis cannot be tested. The second difficulty is one of perception: since an estimated 88 percent of the TAR’s rural dwellers are Tibetans, the gap will be perceived as an ethnic one by the majority of those who feel themselves disadvantaged. Should the proportion of Han in Tibet be reduced while the Tibetan members of the stabilizing class increase, this urban/rural cleavage in development could become a reality, with a sinicized, relatively prosperous urban Tibetan ruling class governing a group of more impoverished, more traditional rural dwellers.

Conclusions

Even assuming that current high growth rates continue, there are questions about what they mean. Roads have brought not only Han Chinese soldiers and administrators, but access to better markets—for example, cashmere for the herdsmen of the northern plateau and, for Yunnan Tibetans, gourmet matsutake mushrooms for the tables of Japan. A sadder example of what markets can do concerns the near extinction of the Tibetan antelope, hunted so that its exceptionally soft hair can be woven into shantoosh scarves. These have been sold in South Asia and the West for prices exceeding a thousand dollars.

The average person has more food, and more varied food. Clothing and small consumer goods are more readily available, as even publications from the exile Tibetan community acknowledge. Although official statistics are notoriously inaccurate, the data presented in the appendices at the end of this chapter provide at least a rough outline of increasing food supplies. Exiles are also aware that, particularly for those who settled in India, living abroad has not necessarily meant prosperity, either. On the other hand, to the extent that development has produced better lives, its chief beneficiaries have been urban dwellers, most of whom are Han. The gap between rich and poor has widened; an exile website states that rural household incomes in 2003 remained below 1992 levels. And, despite Beijing’s offering foreign investors in the TAR better incentives, involving privileged rates on taxation, borrowing, and land transactions, there is not a single example of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Tibet to date. Ninety-five percent of Tibet’s trade is with Nepal, itself a desperately impoverished country, and the trade is characterized by various irregularities, including rampant smuggling. Trade with India has been severely restricted for political reasons, though the warming trend in Sino-Indian relations that began in the latter half of 2003 may result in facilitating commercial transactions between the latter and Tibet.

This raises an interesting issue pointed out to the author by a prominent human rights activist: the tacit Chinese assumption that the only way to develop the Tibetan
onomy is by integrating it with the Chinese economy. A few qualifications are in order, however. Beijing would not be encouraging trade with Nepal had it not appreciated trade with the outside world. External links would doubtless be more attractive if Sino-Indian relations were warmer and relations between Beijing and Tibetan refugees were less tense. Given several decades of infiltration and rapprochement of Tibetan dissidents through India, Beijing’s fears about restricting trade that nation seem justified.

Efforts to produce more food and different foodstuffs as well as develop other sectors of the economy have, however, caused significant environmental degradation. Deserts increase in area as do the sandstorms they produce. These impact animal husbandry and agricultural production. Concern that the central government’s plans for intensive development may cause irreversible ecological damage in Tibet is the central theme of a study published by the U.S. Embassy in 2002. It notes that, although there are several different ecosystems in Tibet, their common attribute is that they are easily upset by overexploitation to support human activity.

There has also been a degradation of Tibetan culture, which has been modified “developed” by party and government rather than by Tibetans themselves. Prejudice against Tibetans definitely exists, and has an adverse effect on economic development. For example, technology supplied by a Western philanthropic organization enabled Tibetans to turn yak milk into a tasty, Brie-like, cheese. However, when the cheese cooperative’s representatives tried to market their product to hotel managers in Beijing they were refused on the grounds that if it came from Tibet, it must be filthy. In another example, a Han bus driver refused to stop for a group of Tibetans, remarking loudly over her shoulder to the rest of the passengers, “We don’t want that smell in here.” And, the government’s claims to Tibetanized the governing structure notwithstanding, the TAR has never had a party secretary who is a Tibetan. In the end, the benefits, or lack thereof, of economic development are in the eye of the beholder.

Appendices

Livestock Production

According to the official Xinhua news agency, the TAR had 11.14 million head of livestock in 1958 and 9.58 million in 1959, presumably because of the rebellion against production. In 1961 and 1962, said to be years of natural disaster in the TAR, there were 11.5 million. The year 1963 saw a sizable increase, to 13.7 million; in 1964, there were 16 million. The total in 1965, calculated as an increase of 36 percent over 1958, comes to 15.544 million, possibly reflecting losses due to poor weather. By 1968, the figure had risen to 17.36 million, and in 1970, to 18 million. In 1971, under the influence of radical policies prevalent in Beijing as a result of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, communes were founded
in the TAR. As if on cue, livestock production again leaped forward, to 18.5 million in 1973, 19.2 million “despite a major wind disaster” in 1974,\textsuperscript{72} and 19.3 million in 1975—“up two percent over 1974.”

No figures were reported for 1976, but 1977’s was 22 million, “32 percent higher than 1965,”\textsuperscript{73} and consistent with “17 percent higher than 1970, despite natural disasters.” In 1978, the number of animals was reported to be 1.5 times that of 1958, or 17.25 million; in 1979, livestock production was expected to increase by 2 percent over 1978, or to 17.6 million. In 1980, the year that communes were disbanded, one source announced that livestock production had “increased somewhat,” another that the number of privately owned stock had increased from 1.21 million to 3.48 million head, or 15 percent of the TAR’s total livestock. This would yield a figure of 23.2 million livestock, a 31.8 percent increase, or far more than the modest increase claimed by the first source. This is consistent with the 23 million figure announced for 1982.\textsuperscript{74}

No figures were released for 1983 during and shortly after that year. Nineteen eighty-four saw a drop to 21.68 million, claimed to be an increase of 1.4 percent over the previous year, which would have meant the number of livestock in 1983 was 21.38 million. The next figures to be released put the number of livestock at 23 million, said to be 1.4 times the number in 1959.\textsuperscript{75} This is inconsistent with previous figures of 9.58 million in 1959.\textsuperscript{76} It is, however, consistent with the 23 million figure given for 1990\textsuperscript{77} and 22.8 million for 1991, “roughly the same as last year,” with a slaughter rate up 1 percent from 1990.\textsuperscript{78} In 1996, the figure was 22.5 million, with outputs of meat and sheep’s wool “basically the same as last year.”\textsuperscript{79} For several years thereafter, numbers of livestock went unmentioned, though the 2001 Tibet White Paper put the figure for 2000 at 22.6 million. The apparent stabilization of numbers of livestock, which can reasonably be attributed to the numbers that the ecosystem can sustain, began to change in 2001, when the numbers reached 23.6 million, and again in 2002, with 24.39 million reported.\textsuperscript{80}

It is somewhat puzzling that the number of livestock in the TAR should have had its greatest increase during the period of communes, which were a failure elsewhere in China. In Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, the institution of communes resulted in some herders slaughtering all their animals rather than turning them over to the communes, leading to severe shortages of meat in the ensuing years.

Also puzzling is the government’s attempt to take credit for avoiding the problem of overgrazing after communes were disbanded by persuading herders to limit the numbers of their livestock. While independent entrepreneurs would certainly have an incentive to increase the size of their herds, until two years ago the government’s own statistics did not show an appreciable rise in the period since the demise of communes. Goldstein and Beall, who lived among the nomads of the TAR’s northern plateau in 1986–87, discovered a well-developed traditional system for avoiding overgrazing and an understanding of the carrying capacity of the environment.\textsuperscript{81}
Agriculture

Ial agricultural statistics suffer from the same problems as those of livestock, the additional complication that for several decades they were sometimes
ted as catties or jin (catty), without specifying whether these are gong jin
kilogram) or shi jin (1.1023 English pounds, or exactly one-half kilogram).
e it should be simple to infer which is meant, some figures are not consonant
either measure unless one assumes improbably large deviations in the har-
In other years, grain totals are reported as kilograms or tons. Since the amounts
sted are rounded, translating rounded catties into tons, for example, intro-
s further bias. By excluding clear outliers, one can, however, come up with a
h time series.*

he 1952 harvest, calculating back from 1982 figures ("more than three times
952 harvest") was less than 158,333 tons. The harvest reached
00 tons. In 1974, for the first and only time since liberation, the TAR was
red to be self-sufficient in grain. The figure for 1979 was 423,000 tons—
ppng by a large amount, which will cause difficulties in the people’s liveli-
ue to natural disasters and some work problems; we must not neglect animal
andry to raise grain." In 1981, 483,500 tons was reported, an improbably
crease that may reflect grain shipped in from outside to alleviate food short-
82 In 1982, grain production was reportedly down to 475,000 tons. The harvest was
down again, to 450,000 tons, reportedly due to "various serious
sters" in 1988, 520,000 tons; in 1989, 549,500 tons according to one
ce, 532,000 according to a second, and 530,000 according to a third.
istics for 1990 put the grain harvest at 560,000 tons; 1991, 580,000 tons; 5
was a peculiar year in that five-year statistics only were presented, possibly
use of poor results; grain was projected to reach 625,000 tons. 1996, 777,000;
000; 2000, 922,000. In 2000, the figure reached 962,234 tons as well
assertion that self-sufficiency in grain and oils had been "basically real-
" The 2001 figure was 982,508 tons, up 2.1 percent over 2000, and for
, 983,970 tons, up one-tenth of a percent over 2001.

Roads

ccording to a 1981 source, Tibet had only a five-kilometer highway at the time of
ation, by 1979, official sources reported 22,200 km of motor roads. In 1981,
ure was lowered to 21,100, and in 1982 it was listed simply as "over
000." Figures hovering slightly over 21,000 continued throughout the 1980s
80s; in 1987, a delegate to the Thirteenth Party Congress from the TAR’s
d County was described as having to walk three days to get to a road, followed
a three-day automobile trip to reach Lhasa. In 2000, it was announced that 1.1
ion yuan would be spent to bring the TAR’s total highway length to 25,300 km, a
goal of 27,000 km by the end of 2005, though most of the additions would be
in the form of basic roads to open access to millions of isolated rural communities. The figure reported for 2000 was 22,500 km, said to reach all of the TAR’s counties and 80 percent of its townships.\textsuperscript{104} The goal for 2005 was surpassed the year after it was announced by an apparently chance discovery: a highway census conducted in 2001 discovered 13,000 km more roads than previously reported. Tibet scholar Barry Sautman hypothesizes they had been built by localities whose officials did not trouble themselves to report the roads to higher authorities. No information was supplied on the condition of the newly discovered routes. In 2001, 35,537 km of roads were reported, and in 2002, 35,538 km.\textsuperscript{105}

Ninety-four percent of the TAR’s cargo and 85 percent of its human travelers move over these roads. Only 2,000 km of them are asphalted. The others are described as rugged and vulnerable to harsh weather and other natural disasters.\textsuperscript{106} According to official sources, the Qinghai–Tibet highway is the only one of the region’s four major routes—the other three being the Sichuan–Tibet, Yunnan–Tibet, and Xinjiang–Tibet highways—to function on a year-round basis. The Qinghai–Tibet route carries fully 80 percent of the TAR’s cargo and passenger transport.\textsuperscript{107} Ambitious plans to extend a railroad from Golmud to Lhasa face formidable problems of engineering, given the difficult terrain and harsh climate.

6D. Tourists

The TAR was opened to tourism in 1980, and despite considerable added costs, the difficulty of getting there, and problems associated with adjusting to Tibet’s thin air, proved an immensely popular destination. By 1986, Tibet was hosting approximately 30,000 tourists a year; in 1987, 40,000. In 1989, the imposition of martial law dropped the number to 3,700;\textsuperscript{108} by 1990, the total improved to 11,000.\textsuperscript{109} In 1991, it was 16,755;\textsuperscript{110} in 1993, 24,900;\textsuperscript{111} and in 1994, 28,000.\textsuperscript{112} Interestingly, despite tremendous foreign interest in Tibet, the figures had not recouped to pre-1989 levels, although they rose quickly thereafter. In 2000, the TAR received 598,300 tourists, of whom 148,900 were from overseas and 449,400 from elsewhere in China. The direct income realized from tourism was 780 million yuan, or 6.6 percent of the autonomous region’s budget. Indirect income was 2.98 billion yuan, or 25.38 percent of GDP.\textsuperscript{113}

Numbers continued to increase: in 2001, there were 686,116 tourists, of whom 558,968 were domestic and 127,148 international; in 2002, the figure reached 867,320, with 725,041 domestic and 142,279 international.\textsuperscript{114} Clearly tourism had, as hoped, become one of the region’s pillar industries and an impetus to the development of other industries such as handicrafts.

6E. Per Capita Income

Statistics here are sometimes reported as regional averages; at others, for peasants and herdsmen on the one hand and urban dwellers on the other. They are not reported
or Han versus Tibetans, though since nearly all Han live in cities and the large
majority of Tibetans live in the countryside, it can be assumed that a significant
proportion of the higher urban incomes go to Han. The most consistent series of
data are for peasants and herders only. In 1996, the per capita income figure was
75 yuan.\textsuperscript{115} Data from earlier periods include 218 yuan in 1979 reported in 1987,
and 343 yuan for 1986, reported at the same time.\textsuperscript{116} Income figures throughout
the 1980s hover in the 300–plus yuan range until 1990, when the figure rises to
30 yuan.\textsuperscript{117} In 1992, it was 490 yuan,\textsuperscript{118} and in 1993, 521 yuan.\textsuperscript{119} In 1995, per
apita average net income of peasants and herders was 878 yuan, while that of
staff and workers was 7,382 yuan, showing a worrisomely large gap.\textsuperscript{120} Per capita
income of the TAR’s farmers and herders in 1999 was 1,258 yuan (US$151.56), or
3.3 percent of the national average, and the country’s lowest.\textsuperscript{121} In 2000, figures
were reported as percentage increases, up an astounding 62.9 percent for farmers
and herders, which can be calculated to be 2,049 yuan, and 93.6 percent for urban
residents.\textsuperscript{122} There is likely to have been a misplaced decimal, with the actual rise
of 6.29 percent to 1,337 yuan, since per capita income in 2001 was 1,404 yuan for
rural dwellers and 7,119 for urbanites; in 2002, the amounts rose to 1,521 and
7,626 yuan, respectively.\textsuperscript{123} These figures do not appear to be adjusted for infla-
ton, which, given the huge infusions of capital from the central government, is
substantial. Note that the difference between urban and rural incomes is more than
to one.

F. Gross Domestic Product

In 1987, gross domestic product (GDP) was 1.77 billion yuan\textsuperscript{124}; in 1993, 3.72 bil-
on.\textsuperscript{125} Tibet’s reported GDP in 1994 was 4.23 billion yuan,\textsuperscript{126} in 1995, 6.45 billion
yuan,\textsuperscript{127} and in 1998, 9.1 billion yuan.\textsuperscript{128} In 1999, it reached 10.661 billion yuan,\textsuperscript{129}
and in 2000, 11.746 billion yuan.\textsuperscript{130} The figure for 2001 was 13.873 billion yuan and
2002, 16.420 billion yuan, each up 18 percent over the previous year but reported
12.4 percent, presumably adjusted for inflation.\textsuperscript{131} As pointed out by numerous
sources, much of the GDP growth reflects massive state subsidies.

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the Journal of Contemporary China 12, no. 36
(2003): 411–430; the current version appears here with the permission of the editors thereof.
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