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Volume 30

Number 1 *Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and  
Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition No. 1 &  
2*

Article 16

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10-1-2011

# Development Discourses on the Tibetan Plateau: Urbanization and Expropriation of Farmland in Dartsedo

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## Recommended Citation

Nyima, Tashi (2010) "Development Discourses on the Tibetan Plateau: Urbanization and Expropriation of Farmland in Dartsedo," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 16.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/16>

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# DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES ON THE TIBETAN PLATEAU: URBANIZATION AND EXPROPRIATION OF FARMLAND IN DARTSEDO

The term “development” defines the Chinese official discourse on Tibet and Tibetans. Officials speak of development in symbolic and practical terms as it serves the overall policy strategy towards Tibet. This paper examines the meaning of development in the context of encounters between government officials and local residents in Dartsedo (Chin.:Kangding) in Eastern Tibet over a new town project. Because urbanization has been portrayed as the driving force of growth and development in Tibetan areas, this paper investigates the implementation of such an initiative. I argue that project implementation on the ground stands in sharp contrast to the language of “people first” and “scientific” development in the official discourse. Furthermore, I argue that the discrepancies between rhetoric and reality have led to a series of socio-economic problems for the relocated farmers.

## INTRODUCTION

Urban areas in China, including Tibet, have grown rapidly since the 1980s (Yeh 2008). The government and, to an extent, the academic community in China, have largely overlooked the implication of rapid urbanization for the millions of farmers or villagers who have been “legally or illegally” made landless over the years. They have been officially categorized as “land-lost farmers” (*shidinongmin*) who lost their land, especially in peri-urban villages, due to urbanization and real estate development. The population of land-lost farmers was 40 to 50 million in 2005, although this figure does not include farmers who have moved illegally (Zhao 2005). According to official statistics, three million people become land-lost farmers every year in China. The total number is expected to double in 2020 with the current pace of urbanization (Zhao 2005). The official media, both national and local, frequently carries news of how well “land-lost farmers” have been compensated in the form of education, health and employment benefits (Sichuan News Online 2009).

The urbanization rate has grown steadily in the 18 counties of Ganzi (Tib.:Kardze) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, including Kangding, from 15.8 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2010, according to local government reports (Ganzi Prefecture Government 2004, 2010). In Kangding, the urbanization rate had already reached 39 percent in 2002 (Kangding County Government 2005). Indeed, development and investment have brought economic opportuni-

ties, modern infrastructure, and an increased flow of goods and capital into the region. However, for some, the intervention has resulted in the creation of dependence due to the low priority given to local participation and empowerment through such facilities as education, science, technology, and public health (see Gele, Zhuoma, and Lumei 2006; Demurger et al. 2002). At the same time, cities such as Lhasa and Kangding have increasingly been populated by Chinese migrants from impoverished regions.

## URBANIZATION: RE-TERRITORIALIZING TIBETAN SPACE

Emily Yeh and Mark Henderson (2008) describe urbanization in Tibet as a “process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of a westward-expanding Han China.” Urbanization has not only brought about economic growth, urban infrastructure, and population increase but at the same time a reorganization of the traditional Tibetan cultural landscape. In other words, it involves a re-appropriation of both physical and socio-cultural space in order to serve government objectives. Nyiri (2006) illustrates how the Chinese state draws on cultural history to produce “scenic spots” across the country. In contrast to the construction of sites in mainland China, newly created Tibetan scenic spots appear to lack local cultural history, but are constructed in tune with the popular imagination of the Tibetan periphery. This raises the question of what rapid “development” and urbanization could mean for the peripheral Tibetan or non-Tibetan

residents. In his seminal book on economic growth and discrimination in Tibet, Fischer (2005) argues that the current top-down and urban-biased state development investment model has resulted in the further marginalization of Tibetans, who inhabit mainly rural areas. In contrast, official cadres and Han migrants living in Tibet's urban areas are among the first beneficiaries of development. Drawing on Fischer's (2005) ideas, Yeh (2006) argues that while greenhouse projects in Lhasa have significantly expanded the production of vegetables, these developments have not benefitted local Tibetans due to a lack of flexibility and sensitivity in the government policy about the structural and cultural context of development and livelihood. Quantitative surveys carried out by Hu (2003) also show that migrants in Lhasa (mainly from Sichuan and Gansu) have substantially benefitted from the state development drive, whereas Tibetans lag behind in terms of education and employment opportunities.

The official discourse of development in Tibet portrays a rosy picture. It does so primarily through official figures on macro-level growth (see State Council 2009). There has been little dispute regarding the rapid economic growth and urbanization that have taken place during the last two decades in Tibet. Nevertheless, the distribution of development benefits have become a key issue in research on contemporary Tibet, as I have discussed in this paper. This marginalization, I would argue, is mainly due to the existing power relations between development actors implementing government interventions. A caveat is that this does not mean Tibetans have not benefitted at all from the current development drive. The fact that rural Tibetans get access to comparatively better goods and infrastructure such as electricity, TV, mobile phones, modern transportation, and housing are obvious signs of development as understood in official discourse. Rather, the concern here is how "development" as a concept, discourse, policy, and value has been practiced, experienced, and understood by policy-makers and locals alike during the implementation of development projects. This paper examines the extent to which policy-makers achieve their objectives while locals abide by the official definition of development in order to make the best of it.

In their field studies of rural households in Shigatse Prefecture, Goldstein, Childs and Wangdui (2010) argue that, far from being marginalized, Tibetan farmers have benefitted from the trickle-down effects of the "people-first" development drive. They report that approximately 46.9 percent of the villagers in their survey received between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan for the construction of new houses, thanks to the "comfortable housing program." The government subsidy constitutes between 15 and 20 percent of the cost of a new house. Official TAR sources state that, by the end of 2010, the government would provide 80 percent of the region's rural households with subsidies of between 10,000 and 25,000 yuan (Xinhua 2009). The housing program has been praised in the official media as a "project of the people" aimed at improving their livelihood. This program, Goldstein, Childs and

Wangdui (2010) argue, is a government attempt to buy loyalty from the Tibetans in order to bring stability to the region. However, the project has been subject to criticism from rights group such as the Human Rights Watch (2006) over its strict specifications and the mortgage burden it imposes on rural Tibetan households.

This article builds on the work of the aforementioned scholars, and explores how the macro-level, top-down, and monolithic development discourse has come to terms with the issues of livelihood and local empowerment in Kangding. Yeh's (2007) insightful work on the use of "quality" and "backwardness" in official development discourse shows that development idioms are not only "merely cultural" constructs but have also been shaped by specific national and regional development policies. However, the meaning of "development" as used in official discourse and, to some extent, in academic literature on China appears to be taken for granted.

## THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

I examine in this article how government officials as well as local residents in Kangding invoke the concept of "development." Looking only into the quantitative data of income and subsidies may not be sufficient to characterize development in the region. A qualitative inquiry into how development as a concept has been interpreted, experienced, and negotiated can complement the analysis of the official statistics and surveys. Towards this end, the article draws theoretical and methodological inspiration from post-modern theorists.

In his groundbreaking book on development, Ferguson (1994:17) argues that development in Lesotho failed because of the conceptual gap between policy makers and reality on the ground. In the process, bureaucratic state power expanded. Ferguson treats the failure of development as an "anthropological puzzle" that needs to be solved through contextualization of development discourse, which comprises a complex web of stated goals, unstated intentions, and unintended outcomes. Similarly, Escobar (1995) defines development as a social construct embedded within a web of institutions and power relations, and thus better approached as discourse. Discourses of development are systematic constructions and representations of subjects, dominant and dominated actors. Such a critical outlook on development provides a theoretical foundation to analyze the discourse of development in Tibet, but is by no means a rejection of development as such. On the contrary, development as a set of practices cannot be considered devoid of historically evolved institutions, norms, and discourses (Rist 1997). Development actors are located within their own respective life-worlds and discursive domains. Thus, development policy and practice can be approached by exploring "how discrepancies of social interest, cultural interpretation, knowledge, and power are mediated at critical points of confrontation and linkage" (Long 1999: 21). Drawing on this perspective, I will examine how local officials define, practice, and represent development in the process of a project intervention, and how villagers of Simaqiao experi-

ence, articulate, and respond to this intervention.

## A NEW KANGDING AND THE FATE OF SIMAQIAO

Simaqiao (Tib.:tsamchusampa) was one of seven villages in the township of Yulin (one of 18 townships in Kangding County). The village used to be a small and fertile peri-urban village on the outskirts of Kangding. The villagers harvested vegetables two to three times a year, which they sold in the town market. There were approximately 144 households with 400 people in total. However, in 2004, the Kangding government decided to erect a new town on village farmland with approval and funding from the Sichuan provincial government. The project area stretched beyond the village boundary to include land of two neighbouring villages. As a result, the local government relocated 800 villagers in 177 households.

The county government appoints the township and village leaders. A relatively rich Han villager was appointed as the head of the Simaqiao village committee along with six committee members.

There were no official records of the village's population by ethnicity, although almost every villager possesses an ID card indicating his or her ethnic identity. According to villagers whom I interviewed, however, the Tibetan and Han populations were roughly 60 and 40 percent respectively, divided among

Tibetan Buddhists, Catholics, and nonbelievers. Simaqiao was the only Christian community in the region with a century-old church located in the heart of the village. A Christian missionary constructed the church in the nineteenth century. The local government, however, approved the demolishing of the church, along with other village houses. The villagers mostly speak the Sichuanese dialect while Tibetan is used only in some private homes. Many residents, particularly young villagers, are ethnically Tibetan but cannot speak Tibetan.

There were 1,598 mu (about 106.5 hectares) of cultivable farmland in Simaqiao Township, with 1,744 farmers including 1,126 Tibetans and 609 Han (Kangding County History 1997:15). Interviewees estimated their total household income prior to relocation to be roughly 20-30,000 yuan per year. This exceeds the income of two people engaged in full-time work as self-employed taxi drivers in the town. According to official data, the average rural net-income per person in

2005 within the prefecture was 1,310 yuan (Ganzi Yearbook 2006: 87). After the 1980s, the production of vegetables increased significantly, thanks to the introduction of "scientific" cultivation methods. By 1997, the annual production of vegetables per mu was around 3,000-4,000 kilograms. The total agricultural production of Yulin reached 3,000 tons, generating a total cash income of between 1.5 and 2 million yuan (Kangding County History 1997: 14).

The average annual income from vegetable sales alone was around 1,300 yuan per person in the village. Income from animal husbandry and the harvest of medicinal plants such as caterpillar fungus were not included. They constitute at least 40 percent of rural income in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Winkler 2008). According to 2005 data, there was an increase in productivity of 5.8 percent in the primary sector compared to the previous year. In 2010, the average increase in vegetable prices was 16 percent (Sichuan Price Online 2010). Considering the increasing trend in productivity and in

commodity prices, income from vegetable sales of a household with 7-8 members would be 15,000 and 20,000 yuan. In other words, the villagers' own estimation of their income prior to the project was, more or less, in accordance with the official figures. The economic viability of their cash crop-based livelihoods was one of the



A century old church demolished in Simaqiao. Photo: Tashi Nyima

main reasons why the urbanization project met with opposition.

## METHOD AND THE FIELD-SITE

Simaqiao was the main site of my fieldwork, although I also interviewed informants from outside the village. I conducted in-depth interviews in 30 households and with 10 individual villagers. In addition, there were 40 local government officials from various work units, including the village leader. Interviews typically lasted more than two hours, included formal questions and informal interactions. Household interviews were conducted in such a way that members, including household heads, sat together when responding to questions. In some cases, I interviewed members of the same household repeatedly. I also had the opportunity, formally and informally, to interact with many locals in the old



town, including several well-educated residents.<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork in Ganzi and Yushu occurred between June and September 2007. Political unrest in the region prevented access in 2008. Nevertheless, I have through telephone and electronic communication followed development in the region during the last three years.

Officially, Kangding has 113,238 permanent residents, including 106,474 people with local household registration (*hukou*). The county has 70,641 Tibetans, 34,132 Han, and 1,701 members belonging to other ethnic groups living on 11,600 square kilometres (Ganzi Yearbook 2006). The old Kangding town (2.3 km<sup>2</sup>) became one of the most densely populated places in China and the world, with 26,000 residents per km<sup>2</sup> (Ganzi Prefecture Government 2008). One reason could be the unique location of Kangding, which is surrounded by steep mountains that sandwich the town. There is thus not enough space for the growing population. On the other hand, with its relatively low altitude of 2,500 meters and its proximity to metropolitan Chengdu, Kangding provides easy access to migrants and tourists alike. Thus, high population density was stated as an important reason why a new town was needed to catalyze development.

In 2005, the total production output in the county was 660 million yuan, an increase of 20 percent from the previous year. The increases found were 5.8, 44, and 10 percent in the agricultural, industrial, and tertiary sectors, respectively (Ganzi Yearbook 2006: 295). The increase in the industrial sector indicates the current influx of investment by mining and hydro companies. In 2005, the secondary sector constituted 44 percent and the tertiary sector 43 percent of the local economy, with the agricultural sector constituting the rest (*ibid.*).

When I first arrived in Kangding for fieldwork in the summer of 2007, much of the relocation issue remained “unsettled.” The majority of the 800 villagers had already moved into new apartments but were complaining to the construction companies and the local government about construction defects, which residents were eager to show me. In addition, there were dozens of villagers living in improvised roadside settlements. They either refused to move into the new apartments or did not receive one, and some protests occurred outside the newly built apartment blocks. During my fieldwork, the construction of the planned town was under full swing, and some roadside shops near the apartment blocks were already finished. Larger buildings were halfway through construction.

In contrast, local officials whom I interviewed projected a bright picture of the new town plan. According to them, villagers were compensated generously by the government. Nevertheless, the controversy between the construction companies, whom the county government contracted to build the new apartments, local government, and the villagers, was ongoing when I arrived and remained so until I left Kangding.

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1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

## WHY URBANIZATION?

Kangding County government has aimed primarily to provide residential and nonresidential space for local communist party, military, government (*dangzheng jiguan*), and public institution staff (Ganzi Prefecture Government 2007). The total investment in the new town had reached approximately 800 million yuan by the time it was completed (*ibid.*). The project thus constituted a significant amount of investment to the local economy equivalent to 13 years of the county’s revenue (Ganzi Yearbook 2006). Mining, hydropower, and tourism are the main sources of revenue for the prefecture government. In this context, the construction of the new town is part of a broader development campaign not only to urbanize and extract natural resources but also to build up local government institutions (Yang 2007).

The local government had internally begun discussing the idea of the New Kangding Town project some years prior to the construction in May 2005. Two months before the construction began, most of the villagers had moved out, with their farmlands expropriated. Once a “backward” village, Sima qiao was now perceived to be “developed.” The construction was subsequently portrayed as part of campaigns such as the “Scientific Development View” in 2003 (*kexue fazhan guan*) and the “New Socialist Village” in 2005 (*shehui zhuyi xinnongcun*) and “Develop the People, Stabilize Kham” in 2007 (*fumin ankang*). At the heart of “scientific development” lies the idea of “people first” (*renweiben*), meaning the interest and the voice of the people are to be safeguarded in the “development” process. The “new socialist village” aims to “develop” a backward production system, modernize farmers, and “stabilize” backward villages in order to raise family incomes. The underlying assumption is that local villagers are of “low quality” (*suzhidi*) and have a “backward mentality” (*sixiang luohou*), which have been singled out as the principal causes for the aforementioned problems. In accordance with this discursive representation, the government thus launched the “three rurals” (*sannong*) program to end the “chronic problems of poverty” facing rural villagers.

## THE OFFICIAL RATIONALE OF DEVELOPMENT

In 2006, Li Peixue, the head of Kangding County and Chen Nanqiao of the China Power group—a Taiwan-based real estate development company—signed a formal investment contract (Chang 2006) paving the way for the company to invest in Ganzi. The head of the provincial Taiwan Affairs Office attended the meeting along with the prefecture leadership. According to the contract, the latter was to invest 300 million yuan to construct the commercial district and the pedestrian street of the planned town while the county government was to provide village farmland for construction. Chengdu Sanjian, one of the largest construction companies in Sichuan, was contracted to complete the project.

A few months later, the prefecture government made an official statement on its website outlining the project’s rationale (Ganzi Administration Online 2007), and circulated it

widely through the official media, especially official Internet sites. The goals of the new Kangding town plan were primarily to “safeguard the unification of the motherland [*weihu zuguo tongyi*] and stabilize the situation in Tibetan regions” (*wending zangqujushi*). Being the political, cultural, and economic centre of Ganzi Prefecture, Kangding has occupied a strategic position (*zhanlue yaodi*) in the maintenance of “stability” and “governance” of Tibetan regions as a whole. The development of a strong local government has always been the main concern behind official development campaigns and policies in western China since the 2000s and even before (Demurger 2002).

Promoting economic development was the plan’s second major goal. Official discourse portrayed the urbanization project as necessary to solidify Kangding’s “strategic position in ecological and cultural tourism in Western China.” The government, therefore, intends to construct the new town “scientifically” with “local cultural characteristics,” and “unearth the romantic culture of folk music” (*wajue qing wenhua*). The plan was thus to construct not only a new town but also a tourist destination similar to ethnic theme parks, tourist sites or “scenic spots” elsewhere in minority regions (Nyiri 2006). The plan was to “theme” the new town in order to attract tourists, increase property values, and bring certain messages to the public eye. On construction site walls large characters reading “ethnic unity” (*minzutuanjie*), “social harmony” (*shehui hexian*), and development (*fazhan*) were written in Chinese. The town was intended to house 100–120,000 new residents (Ganzi Administration Online 2007). The county officials explained that, in addition to social stability and population reduction, the commoditization of local Tibetan culture would not only “preserve” but also “develop” it.

The government’s development discourse thus invoked an array of concepts that closely paralleled the international discourse. Concurrently, the government’s rhetoric could be distinguished from the “global” discourse of development, and could thereby be regarded as “uniquely Chinese.” Urbanization and industrialization had always been understood as the main priorities of development in official discourse (Chen 2004; Yeung, Jin, and Zeng 2004). Based on the local government’s statements on the project, the development interventions in Kangding had multiple dimensions and purposes. Questions of social stability, economic growth, demographic accommodation, and modernization are all built-in goals of new Kangding town’s construction.

The relocation of Simaqiao’s villagers was barely mentioned in the statement. The only village-related information stated that the work related to relocation including school enrolment for children, social insurance, unemployment insurance, and other benefits had been “successfully completed” (*shunli wancheng*). The villagers found themselves powerless before the powerful official development campaign. Their only option was to ensure that the government delivered on its promises. In official discourse, urbanization has come to mean, among other things, the construction of modern infra-

structure coupled with migration, whereas industrialization has been mainly about the extraction of natural resources. If urbanization was to be understood as the driving force for development, how had this socioeconomic and political project been experienced, contested, and negotiated? How has the transformation of Simaqiao into a new town affected the livelihood of villagers? An investigation of local villagers’ experience of project implementation illuminates what development means on the ground.

#### LAND EXPROPRIATION: PROMISES OF A BETTER FUTURE

In summer 2004, a delegation of Kangding County, township, and village-level officials, including the deputy party secretary Huang, accompanied by the village leader, Tan, came to Simaqiao. These are the key state bureaucratic institutions responsible for any policy implementation in rural China. The purpose was to inform villagers about the plan to turn their village into a “modern” town. The villagers were shocked that the county government had decided to build a new town on their farmland. Many whom I interviewed reported a reaction of disbelief; they could not fathom the idea of moving from their age-old homes. Other concerns arose, including their livelihood, children’s future and so on. Many villagers, especially the elders, found it unbearable to give up farming and move into apartments. I was confronted with a sense of desperation and hopelessness among the relocated villagers. Dao, a village elder who initially opposed the plan, said,

We were not prepared to go from our ancestral home and live together in the new apartment blocks, but what could we, ordinary people [*laobaixing*], do? We did not have any choice but had to follow what came from the top. The government had promised that everything would be provided once we had moved, and we would then be living in paradise.

Despite its proximity to old Kangding town, Simaqiao used to be what the villagers described as “a peaceful village” (*anjing de cunzi*). A 67-year villager named Cheng, who lived with his children and grandchildren, said everyday dealings (*laiwang*) with county-level officials prior to the project were relatively few, but started to change when the project began. Cheng was present during the meeting, and likened it to any other official meeting, “in which the officials had coerced the villagers to follow in accordance with the official policy imperative.” Opposition to the project during the first meetings was intense. In order for the villagers to accept the plan, the local government packaged it with an array of promises, including the provision of modern block apartments. The apartments were between 85 and 150 square metres in size, and were to be of better quality than their former houses. The government also promised to compensate villagers 270 yuan

per square metre of their old houses, and the opportunity to buy a 22-square meter shop space in the new town to secure future incomes. They were also offered 10,000 yuan per mu of farmland. The government promised to build one school within the new town for village children and promised that villagers older than 60 would receive old-age subsidies along with benefits for the unemployed. According to village informants, they were also promised minimum living insurance as urban residents (*chengshi jumin dibao*). The promises, according to the village informants, were too good to be true. In the midst of villagers' scepticism the government promises brought a sense of curiosity and excitement of living in a new town without the hard labor to which they were accustomed. The plan was also discussed in the media and official policy meetings as part of the policy to eradicate the "difficult" livelihood problems of rural villages.

The transformation of the village into a town in which residents would enjoy the benefits of modern living was spoken of as the government's mission. One county official, who was responsible for project implementation, summarized the policy, "...under the benevolence [*guanghuaixia*] of the party and the state, the county government decided to build the new town in Simaqiao as part of the "Open up the West" and the "New Socialist Village" policies. The idea was to bring about "new life" [*xinshenghuo*] to the villagers." It was, therefore, crucial for the officials that the villagers buy into the idea and move out from the village in time. He was confident that the project would bring opportunities to the villagers in the long run, despite "temporary" problems of livelihood and economic grievances.

During the land expropriation, however, officials warned the sceptical, if not defiant, villagers about the irreversibility of the government plan since it was supported by those "higher-up" (*shangji*) and was in the "public interest" (*gonggongliyi*). It was thus "natural" for the villagers to move out since the state held ultimate land ownership. The local government had to follow proper procedures of land expropriation, compensation and housing accommodations. Constitutionally, the village collective has the right to use and manage the land. However, it has no right to transfer land for compensatory use. The state may, in accordance with the constitution, expropriate land under collective ownership if it is in the public interest (Guo 2001: 424). In theory, the local government did not have direct access to the farmland under Simaqiao village committee. According to villagers, their leader, unlike elected village leaders elsewhere in China, was appointed by the township administration. In terms of housing, the government had planned to construct six six-storey apartment blocks in the corner of the planned town. The officials whom I interviewed interpreted the housing construction as a means to provide compensation and modern accommodation for the villagers more than a means to create livelihoods, and thought it would effectively win over the villagers who had been living in "backward" conditions. Some villagers, however, negotiated farmland compensation and asked for

180,000 yuan per mu. However, the overwhelming majority of the villagers whom I interviewed opposed the plan. After several meetings, the local government raised the farmland compensation to 36,966 yuan per mu while the rest of the government package remained unchanged. Officials became increasingly frustrated and threatened to bulldoze the villagers' houses if they continued in their opposition. The villagers, hardly unified, had to choose between accepting the plan or continuing to engage in what many described as a "hopeless battle" against the government. In the meantime, the local government launched a signature campaign and deployed a series of new tactics to convert the villagers.

The village committee began to recruit new party members. One notable reinterpretation of what it meant to be a communist party member was to obey party decisions. According to Dao, new party members were pushed to accede to this in order to convince others to follow. Party membership provided a network of relations with other party members, including the village leader. Such connections later proved useful in getting apartments, construction jobs, and other benefits of development. After the recruitment, the village officials cajoled the families and friends of new party members into accepting the plan. Another tactic, according to the villagers, was to spread rumors saying the majority of the villagers had signed in favor of the plan when, in fact, this was not the case. Thus, it prompted a number of households to give up their opposition. Ultimately, with various tactics and forceful language, the local government removed the villagers from their homes and farmlands in March 2005. As a result, Simaqiao villagers joined millions of other "land-lost farmers" in China.

According to the villagers the Kangding government resold the expropriated agricultural land (around 400 mu) for 400,000 yuan per mu. Villagers cited this when they complained about the corruption of local officials. Nevertheless, the head of the local Bureau of Land told me that the government had sold to the China Power group 190 mu of land at around 200,000 yuan per mu. The government contracted the rest of the land to Chengdu Sanjian. The gap between the officially stated price and that mentioned by the villagers was significant and impossible to verify. However, based on its own figures, the local government earned a net-profit of at least 70 million yuan through the sale of Simaqiao's farmland to the investors alone. The villagers received only 18 percent of the market price as compensation for their land; the rest went to the local government. Later, the construction companies resold newly constructed apartments to the local government at a market price of 3,600 yuan per square meter. It is obvious who has benefitted from the land expropriation and urbanization project.

#### LIFE IN THE NEW COMMUNITY: DEVELOPMENT AS "COMFORTABLE HOUSES"

The government paid villagers a "transitional compensation" (*guodufei*) of 150 yuan per head per month in 2005 to

be temporarily settled before moving into new apartments. The government promised to complete these by the end of 2005 but did not do so until 2006. The villagers' demand for compensation for that year was rejected with no further explanation. Local officials told me that the villagers were well compensated. Except for a few county and village level officials, most in the local government do not have much knowledge of land expropriation and compensation. Some even confused the transitional compensation with minimum urban living expenses. However, most officials were well versed in the relevant government policies when asked about Simaqiao, and projected a rosy picture of how villagers benefitted. To the contrary, the first year was difficult for the villagers who had to live on the compensation fund, as town residents without farm work. As Wang, a 57-year old villager said, "...in the beginning, we thought that the compensation we received for our land was an enormous amount. However, once we began to live in the town, we discovered that it was nothing compared to the high-living expenses in the town, and after what we had to pay for the apartments as well."

In late 2006 and early 2007 the relocated farmers started moving into new apartments that cost 850 yuan per square meter. While the government was to pay between 30 and 35 percent of the total cost, the rest had to be borne by the villagers. There were approximately 200 new apartments of varying sizes. In reality, the local government paid only 750 yuan per square meter when they bought them from the construction companies. Distribution of the apartments, however, became problematic. Distribution was to be based on land ownership, which in theory indicated the size of the family, but in reality other factors held sway. The family size of households has changed significantly since the early 1980s. This meant that the government could only allocate apartments to those who had farmland of their own prior to the project. The allocation rationale thus rendered many young villagers homeless since those born after de-collectivization in the early 1980s did not have land.

De-collectivization allocated farmland to households based on the number of family members. Village households in Simaqiao, like elsewhere in rural Tibet, were composed of three generations with many siblings who held farmland jointly. However, a single apartment of 95 square meters was not enough space for families with more than 8 members. They required two apartments but could only afford to buy one. This situation was particularly problematic for young people who had raised families on their parents' farmland but did not have land of their own, and were typically left without apartments. Furthermore, outsiders who had married local villagers did not have farmland and ended up without apartments. Taking matters into their own hands, these villagers turned, individually or collectively, to the Administrative Committee, deputy party secretary Huang, and other organizations for help. Some even set up stands in the middle of community to protest when they had no options left in their dealings with bureaucracies. I noticed that, in spite of all the

private criticisms, most villagers did not offer public defiance or protest out of fear of repercussions.

After the relocation, the villagers lived mainly on the compensation fund but were unaccustomed to planning their household economies as town residents. This resulted in the unwise and sometimes unscrupulous use of the compensation fund. Previously, the villagers had enjoyed a subsistence livelihood. They produced many of their necessities, although it is difficult to put a precise cash value on farm products for self-consumption. In contrast, the government's compensation appeared, at first sight, to be a large sum for the villagers. According to my own survey a household with 7-8 members, 5 mu of land, and a 250 square meter house would be compensated 184,830 yuan for the land (RMB 36,966/mu) and 67,500 yuan for their house (RMB 270/meter) for a total of 251,500 yuan. Compensation funds quickly vanished into housing and other expenses. Each household had to repay the government 56,528 yuan for the 95-square-meter apartment they bought after the 30 percent government subsidy, and the 22-square-meter shop cost 18,700 yuan. Thus, once each village household with approximately 7.5 members paid back 75,228 yuan, they were left with a total of 176,272. It was all they had for the foreseeable future without farmland and a need to buy all their food, cover medical insurance, education, and other living expenses for the entire family.

Three years after expropriation, the government promises had not materialized. Government subsidies for unemployment, minimum living expenses for urban residents, and a new school were not delivered. The only promise kept was old-age insurance for those over 60. In interviews, some villagers stated that they had misunderstood the promise as social security to cover the daily living expenses of this age group. In Kangding, 60 yuan could only buy two kilograms of pork. A 67-year old villager, who complained desperately about the relocation, said "...had I known this was what I would receive, I would never even dream of agreeing to move." The language of disappointment, dispossession, and desperation countered the government's discourse of development. Not surprisingly, the deterioration of relations between the local government and the villagers intensified. The villagers whom I interviewed blamed the local government for taking advantage of their illiteracy in national law and central government policies. They had expropriated farmland and houses for very little compensation. Ironically, peoples' livelihoods deteriorated compared to the "subsistence" economy prior to the development project. A failure of the new town plan has therefore been its inability to address the villagers' livelihoods in the post-relocation period. There seems to have been an underlying assumption that the construction of a new town would automatically create opportunities and prosperity for the villagers despite there being no concrete proposals for how to achieve that goal.

#### UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE NEW COMMUNITY

Unemployment was a serious problem within the com-



munity, although the local officials did not have statistics on unemployment. My interview data suggests that more than 85 percent of people aged between 16 and 60 were unemployed. Previously, only a few people worked in the town, while most villagers engaged in cultivation. After the sudden relocation, most villagers found themselves without a job. Prior to the relocation, the local Department of Labour and Human Resources conducted a one-day job training for relocated villagers but this did not result in the employment of any trainees afterward. During my fieldwork, there were many young villagers searching for employment, including petty jobs. Commenting on development, a 29-year-old villager said, "We had work to do before they developed us. After the development, we were turned into jobless beggars. The government promised us a "paradise", but we have ended up in hell". Another informant said, "Development must be good from a bigger picture [*dade fangmian*], but it is just not helping us improve our lives. It has only enriched the local officials and their acquaintances".

A former village, Simaqiao has been incorporated into Kangding County municipality. The overwhelming majority of the villagers whom I interviewed spoke nostalgically about village life prior to relocation. Previously, the pressure for making cash income or finding employment was relatively low. Life in the village was more or less self-sufficient. In addition to consumption of their own farm products, villagers also sold produce for cash, and kept cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens. Despite the official discourse of the backward village, Simaqiao's residents were self-sufficient and had access to the market.

In interviews county government officials cited the Bureau of Human Resources and Labour as the agency responsible for the villagers' employment issues. In cooperation with the village committee and several government agencies the Human Resources Bureau set up an unemployment insurance fund in 2006. Only 112 land-lost farmers from Simaqiao and the neighbouring villages participated in the program, according to the officials. Villagers told me that they did not know about this program, or simply did not trust it and thought it was too expensive in relation to what they got in return. The total fund was 934,016 Yuan, including a Bureau of Finance grant of 400,000 Yuan and the contributions from the villagers of 534,016 Yuan. This meant that each participant had to pay 4,768 Yuan for one-time insurance in order to receive employment benefits of 3,572 Yuan from the government (Kangba 2006). Each would thus receive 347 Yuan per month for two years. However, the insurance was too expensive for villagers whose average wage was around 1,000 Yuan per month.

The local media and officials portrayed the villagers in glowing terms, despite the contentious situation on the ground. Apart from the unemployment benefits, few mechanisms were in place to secure access to the labour market in the post-relocation period. The villagers had to find work on their own. Villagers frequently told me that they were desper-

ately looking for jobs. The low level of education and the lack of "guanxi" connections left them particularly vulnerable to discrimination in the labour market. People frequently stated in interviews that construction company bosses did not want them because outside workers were perceived as being better "skilled" and "intelligent" than the villagers. Ironically, the local officials, including the village leader, believed that the villagers were too lazy to find jobs. According to some local officials, the main problem was that villagers wasted their time drinking, playing mahjong, and watching videos.

Local officials depicted villagers as supposedly having the choice between work and wasting time. However, approximately 10-15 villagers worked on the construction site and were paid 40 Yuan per day without food and shelter, even as workers from the outside were paid 60 Yuan plus food and shelter. In TAR, Tibetan construction workers normally get 60 Yuan per day as of 2010. Construction companies often failed to pay the villagers on time for this low-skilled construction work. Nevertheless, these jobs were rarely available for those willing to work. The village leader and party members, in cooperation with the local construction companies, were in control of the construction work. From time to time, the village leader used his influence to find construction jobs for his relatives and friends. Regarding development an unemployed villager said, "Does it matter what I think about development? I have no land, no job, no home, no money, and no power." Previously, the villagers, young and old, had enough work to do on their own farms. After relocation they became dependent on the compensation money.

## INCOME GENERATION

Unemployment exacerbates the problem of family income. However, officials from the prefecture's Department of Poverty Alleviation described Simaqiao as an "exceptional case" (*teshude*) in the sense that its villagers had received generous compensation from the government. They were thus well-off and had no need of government support. There were, however, approximately ten households in Simaqiao and the nearby villages that received minimum life insurance prior to relocation. The selection of the low-income households (*dibaohu*) was said to be fair and transparent. The process was publicly announced and selection made through the township government and village committee. In Simaqiao, the selection process was, however, far from transparent. A 34-year old villager, Zhaxi, described the procedure:

... it was carried out silently. The village leader and his men distributed the list and selected their candidates. If we raised objections or suggestions, they would not care much. The voice of the common people [*laobaixing*], whatever we do or say, does not have any weight or influence over the decisions of those in power. In other words, if you have power, then you have everything, including wealth [*you quanjiu you*

*qian*]. If not, you are nothing.

During a videotaped conversation, I repeated the official claim of transparency and fairness to a group of young villagers and met with strong dissent. A woman responded, “We have no land, no apartment, and no source of livelihood. Our lives have been virtually impoverished because of this project.” She dismissed the statement of transparency and high income as a “joke” [*chuiniude*] and added, “All this is just talk. Ultimately, it is power and nepotism that decide who gets what here.”

Except the monthly old-age insurance of 60 Yuan per person, the minimum life insurance for ten households was the only economic support provided by the government. Approximately 15 households in Simaqiao owned rental cars for driving in and out of town, mainly to the local hot spring. Most homeless and unemployed villagers struggled to meet their daily needs in the new community. Villagers often understood development as an official project designed, first and foremost, to strengthen the state (*guojia*) while the government officials themselves become prosperous in the process.

### Speaking back: The counter-discourse of development

I often asked villagers, “How is the new life?” The common response was “[it is a] hard life” (*hen laoku*), an expression often used in the Sichuanese dialect. They would elaborate, “Nowadays, we do not have land, no apartment, and not even a source of livelihood.” It was evident that the main grievance was the lack of livelihood opportunities. I then asked, “What about the hundreds and thousands from the compensation fund, and the new fancy apartments?” I even repeated what I heard from government officials and some town residents that the villagers had received about 300-400,000 Yuan from the government and other benefits as well, including access to urban facilities. The two most frequent responses I received were either “No, that is not true” or “Yes, that is true. We have received them but have spent them on the apartments in which we are living.” The contention then boiled down to the nature of the compensation.

Many villagers felt the compensation funds were only a trick to deceive them into accepting the government’s development plan. The official discourse projected a bright future for the villagers in the new town. The villagers, in their own opinion, were first dispossessed of their traditional means of livelihood, and then eventually lost their own voice. When the local government was unable to fulfil its promised compensation, the voices and grievances of the villagers became depoliticized. The local authorities characterized contention as a “practical or technical” problem rather than a question of power relations and participation. In desperation, villagers established their own representative group with 12 members who were elected to petition the local government to address their socioeconomic problems, above all, the loss of their farmland and homes.

When asked, most villagers I interviewed defined develop-

ment as something positive, desirable, and directly related to the improvement of livelihood. But no one believed they had benefitted from such “development.” Villagers unanimously agreed that they were not “developed” due to the project but that the local officials and the state in general had become developed. When asked about development, one villager in his mid-30s responded, “We are not developed but impoverished [*bianqiong le*]. The state and the local officials involved in the project have been developed.” For the villagers, the official development of their centuries-old village life did not result in the improvement of their livelihoods and income as they had hoped prior to the relocation.

The villagers were deeply suspicious of the officials. During the farmland expropriation, the village committee, headed by the village leader, played a pivotal role in mediation between villagers and local officials. Tan used his unique position as both a grassroots level official and a local villager to implement the project. He established close connections with his superiors such as the county party secretary and managed the construction work. When the project was announced, he was at first sympathetic to the desires of the villagers. However, as he began to work with the county officials, he switched his loyalty and became the main figure in its implementation. He used his networks, including family relations, to get as many as possible to accept the plan. In a number of interviews, the villagers accused this village leader of corruption.

In 2009, allegations of corruption against the village leader were made in a strongly worded petition in the name of Simaqiao’s villagers addressed to the provincial Discipline Inspection Bureau. The petition was blogged anonymously on the Internet, giving details of how the village leader and his fellow cadres used their power and positions to accumulate massive wealth (Baidu 2009). In interviews two years earlier, I had been told that the village leader controlled the construction work, including work contracts. He was accused of pocketing up to 30,000 Yuan from construction workers’ wages and the sale of materials to the construction companies. He paid less to the workers per cubic meter of sand and stone than they were supposed to get, and bargained for higher prices on these construction materials than the initial price. Tan was thus labelled “the land emperor” (*tuhuangdi*) in the petition, which begged the provincial authority for further investigation. As of October 2010, however, there had been no response from either the prefectural or provincial authorities.

The local government, after the completion of the new town in 2008, launched a lavish ribbon-cutting ceremony to inaugurate the transfer of the local party and the government offices into the new town. Thousands of people, including top officials of the prefecture, gathered to celebrate what they described as the successful completion of a new town within three years. It was interpreted as a clear sign of rapid development in the county. This affirms what Yeh (2008) termed “administrative urbanization”, meaning urbanization that has been primarily centred on and around the development of state institutions rather than private enterprises. The first

beneficiaries are thus the people working within the state institutions. In the labour market created by these government projects, Chinese migrants enjoy better structural advantages, including language skills, comparatively higher education, and better connections or networks than the local Tibetans (Fischer 2005; Yeh 2006).

The county government had contracted real estate companies to build offices, residential blocks, and commercial apartments. However, the global financial crisis in the following year affected the housing market. Therefore, in order to attract “middle class” customers from Chengdu and other metropolises to buy houses in the new town, the local government decided to subsidize buyers of apartments there (20,000 Yuan to Kangding residents and 10,000 to outsiders) (Chen 2009). The offer was available between May 1 and December 31, 2009. The real estate companies were to also provide a series of preferential incentives such as free assistance service. The local government presented the apartments as potential “summer houses” for those who wished to flee the scorching heat in Chengdu and Chongqing.

In official discourse, government officials represented the development of Sima qiao as a benevolent gesture to the “backward”, “unstable”, and “traditionally minded” villagers, although the villagers did not identify themselves as “backward” and “primitive.” Development was further constructed to be both “scientific” and “people-based.” Officials were convinced that the this project had served the people’s interest, although the villagers had experienced development as a disruption of their traditional subsistence livelihood, something that every villager interviewed would return to if given the choice. The “side effects” of development described by Ferguson apply here. According to Ferguson (1994), development projects produce regular and often unintended side effects such as the expansion of state power. In the process of urbanization, the villagers’ own rights and ability to shape development were significantly constrained while the state bureaucratic power expanded into the village. Contrary to the government’s rhetoric, the means of livelihood in the transformed community were far from secured. Instead of responding to the grievances of villagers, local officials attempted to achieve the targets and priorities established by their superiors. The official ideology of development thus masked some notable effects. First, with the invocation of “people-based” or “scientific” development, the official development discourse has systematically concealed the direct and unintended outcomes of development, namely the expansion of urbanization at the expense of local villagers. Moreover, the participation of local people in development was rarely mentioned as an alternative approach.

Urbanization was perceived to be part of the “marketization” (*shichanghua*) process, according to the local officials whom I interviewed. In other words, the village was modernized. Nonetheless, the lack of post-relocation livelihood opportunities has been a source of distress for landless villagers. The implementation of the project had placed the (mostly Tibetan) villagers in limbo. They were no longer “villagers”

since they had lost their homes and land to the project, and were not “town residents” either since they did not receive minimum living insurance as town residents. The official development drive in Kangding could thus be interpreted to be what Hobart (1993), Baudrillard et al. (1988), and Fairhead (2000) have termed the “process of de-civilisation”—meaning the detachment of development discourse from the voice and philosophy of the subjects. In Kangding, the official “development project” removed the villagers from the process of thinking, arguing, and acting on what defines “civilization” in the making of the development plan.

The government’s priorities and goals are designed within the framework of the Chinese state system, which Croll (1994) described as the “identifiable and the centralized agency of development.” This “agency” can be divided into central, provincial, and local prefecture, county, township and village levels of government. The local agents of development since pre-reform China were designated to adapt national policies to local “conditions” (*ibid.*). In the case of Kangding, the County government initially planned the project with approval from the provincial and central government. Thus, the idea of “local agents” only applies to the county level but not to the township and village. The local authorities had consulted neither the villagers nor the village leader when they formulated the plan to construct the new town. Far from seeing local villagers as active agents of change, the official discourse portrayed them as “backward”, “passive”, and in need of state intervention. In the process, it failed to take into account the value of traditional livelihoods for people when planning the project. More often than not, deals were sealed between the village leaders and the county governments unbeknownst to the villagers themselves (Guo 2001:430). In addition to an immediate decline in household incomes, the material freedom provided by the subsistence-based economy was also lost. Meanwhile, dependency on state institutions, in spite of lack of compensation, has been a major “unintended” consequence.

## CONCLUSION

Development in official discourse has primarily been defined by predetermined goals: long-term social stability, regional development, and modernization of the “backward periphery.” In Kangding, the thrust of development has been the construction of the new town, which, although assumed to improve the livelihood of the villagers, has sidelined their participation in various stages of the construction. The polarized discrepancies between the official discourse and the local counter-discourse are thus prominent. When they deploy the concept of development, officials often tend to stress social stability (i.e., the absence of any form of protest), mineral resource extraction, accommodation of migrants, and above all, the strengthening of state institutions. The villagers, on the other hand, were preoccupied with their own everyday challenges of low income, unemployment and lack of housing. The new town *per se* was only secondary to them. Whenever

I discussed development with villagers, I noticed a sense of scepticism. Their resistance, however, cannot be interpreted as a rejection of the idea of development. On the contrary, villagers perceived development to be inherently good if carried out with “pure” intention. Development programs could serve the interests of the people if they took into account their wishes and grievances.

Top-down programs deprive villagers of their participation in planning. Villagers were portrayed as the “development problem.” Ironically, the implementation had simultaneously depoliticized the project and portrayed it to be technically necessary for a number of reasons, particularly for political stability. The villagers, who the official discourse constructs as “backward” and “primitive”, were supposed to be the focus of development. However, their own experiences of development hardly correspond to the glittering official representations. The attempt to redefine the project in their own terms had met with very little success due to existing power relations. The aforementioned goals and development ideology deployed within the official discourse have, therefore, surprisingly little relevance to the actual wishes and desires of the villagers.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Andrew Fischer, Ken Bauer, Geoff Childs, and Arjun Guneratne for their invaluable comments and corrections.

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