

Pushed to the limits

Growing economic and cultural marginalisation of Tibetans
60 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China

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-Woeser



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A Free Tibet briefing on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China

1 October 2009

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A Free Tibet media briefing for 1 October

Pushed to the Limits

Growing economic and cultural marginalisation of Tibetans 60 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China:

Summary:

This briefing examines and refutes persistent claims by the Chinese government that Tibetans have largely benefited from government policies and a booming Tibetan economy in recent years.

Instead, the extraordinary growth of the Tibetan economy has failed to benefit a majority of Tibetans who increasingly feel marginalised from economic opportunities in Tibet's cities. This sense of marginalisation stems from educational disadvantages in Tibetan areas which leaves urban Tibetans increasingly unable to compete with ever-rising numbers of migrant Han Chinese workers. Incoming migrant Chinese workers are able to take advantage of their better education, as well as their Chinese language fluency and familiarity with Chinese business cultures, to gain higher wage jobs in the booming sectors of the Tibetan economy that are typically dominated by Chinese controlled companies and state-owned entities.

Major reasons for the increasing marginalisation of Tibetans include:

- Growth in Tibet¹ has been fuelled by intensive subsidies and subsidised investment from Beijing. Subsidies are focused on areas of the urban economy such as government administration, construction and tourism in which Chinese language fluency is required to gain employment and which are consequently dominated by increasing numbers of Han Chinese migrants.
- The majority of Tibetans, however, still derive their livelihood from the rural subsistence economy. But, according to official statistics up to 2005 taken from the official *China Statistics Yearbook* and cited by Andrew M. Fischer², almost no investment was placed into rural areas in the TAR in 2005, with agriculture accounting for less than 7% of investment³.
- Little of the subsidies and investment that are fuelling growth in the Tibetan economy is being targeted into areas where it is likely to create growth that will benefit Tibetans. For example, in 2005 state investment in government administration - one of the largest sectors of the economy although it employs only a very small and possibly shrinking share of the Tibetan workforce - totalled 13%, more than double that in education which received only 6% in comparison; health, social security and social welfare received only 1%⁴.
- Tibetans' ability to access employment in the growth areas of the Tibetan economy such as government administration is hampered by poor educational opportunities and resulting illiteracy.

¹ In this briefing 'Tibet' refers to all Tibetan populated areas in China, including the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) as well as the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAPs) and Tibetan Autonomous Counties (TACs) incorporated into the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai and Gansu.

² The rural subsistence economy accounted for 85% of Tibetans according to the 2000 census. This figure was cited by Andrew M Fischer in a Tibet Watch special report (2007) "Perversities of Extreme Dependence and Unequal Growth in the TAR". Fischer is Lecturer in Population and Social Policy at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. Fischer's 2007 report is available at: <http://www.tibetwatch.org/Tibet%20Watch%20Special%20Report%20Andrew%20Fischer.pdf>

³ Fischer 2007, p10.

⁴ ibid

· Only 11.5% of the Tibetan population had secondary education or higher in 2005⁵. The illiteracy rates for the TAR in the same year was a huge 45%; the illiteracy rate for China as a whole in 2004 was 10.3%⁶.

Fewer than 12% of Tibetans therefore are likely to have some degree of Chinese language fluency that would make it possible for them to gain employment in the booming sectors of the economy. These sectors remain largely dominated by migrant workers from elsewhere in China who are advantaged by their familiarity with the Chinese language and business culture as well as their connections to government and business networks in China. It is only a small minority of local Tibetans, therefore, who are reaping the rewards from the recent growth in the Tibetan economy.

Many Tibetans feel strongly that not only have they been largely marginalised from the material benefits of the growing Tibetan economy; they also feel that their identity, culture and language are being marginalised as a result of the increasing collective Chinese presence on the Tibetan Plateau. The speed and scale of Han Chinese migration on to the plateau is one of the most important criticisms of Chinese rule and formed a key grievance during the Tibetan protests against Chinese rule in 2008. ***(A forthcoming report by Tibet Watch⁷ on the Chinese presence in Tibet is forthcoming and will be published later this year. The report will for the first time present comparisons of demographic field data, collected from certain areas of Tibet, taken more than a decade apart.)***

Part 1 of this briefing examines official Chinese statistics, supplemented by anecdotal evidence from the ground, revealing that the majority of Tibetans are being increasingly marginalised from rapid growth.

Part 2 considers the findings of a recent paper by Andrew M Fischer that analyses the relationship between urban employment opportunities in Tibet and poor educational levels. Specifically the paper highlights severe educational inequalities not only between local Tibetans and incoming Han Chinese migrants, but also among Tibetans. As a result of the inequalities experienced by a majority of Tibetans, they fail to develop Chinese language skills, excluding them effectively from more skilled, and lucrative, forms of employment in the growth sectors of the economy, especially government employment.

Part 3 concludes the briefing by assessing the historical context of the Chinese presence in Tibet; how recent Chinese governmental policy is encouraging an increased Chinese presence in Tibet; and a description of the increased Chinese presence in Lhasa.



Tibetan school children exercise under the Chinese flag at the County Primary Middle School in Malho County



Streets in Lhasa are dominated by Chinese shop signs

PHOTO: Tibet Watch

⁵ Fischer 2007, p17.

⁶ Fischer, "Educating for Exclusion in Western China", 2009, page 18, table 1. The full report is available at: <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper69.pdf>

⁷ Tibet Watch is a research-based organisation which works in close collaboration with Free Tibet. Tibet Watch's researchers speak to a range of contacts, collating and corroborating accounts (testimonies and eye-witness accounts) of human rights abuses in Tibet. Tibet Watch staff also collate and corroborate information and, where applicable, testimonies from new Tibetan refugee arrivals in Dharamsala, India.

Part 1: The marginalisation of a majority of Tibetans from Tibet's booming economy

In 2007 Tibet Watch⁸ published a special report by Andrew Martin Fischer⁹ entitled "*Perversities of Extreme Dependence and Unequal Growth in the TAR*"¹⁰. The report used official government statistics to examine China's extremely heavy spending and investment strategies in the TAR. Fischer's analysis led him to a number of insights into official Chinese claims that rapid growth in the economy of the TAR was benefiting Tibetans.

Instead, Fischer observed, a majority of Tibetans were increasingly marginalised from rapid growth which was fuelled by government-sourced finance from outside the TAR (mostly from Beijing) and which tended to be targeted at predominantly urban areas and sectors where Tibetans struggled to compete with Han Chinese migrants.

The report noted that GDP in the TAR doubled between 2000-2005 and that in the decade up to 1997 the sectors of the economy that had witnessed this growth had changed significantly: until 1996 agriculture had been the largest sector of the economy, and was still employing about 75% of the workforce of the TAR in 2000. But while the overall GDP of the TAR economy had doubled between 2000 and 2005, agriculture had grown by only one third while the GDP value of the construction sector had almost tripled during the same period. Fischer observed that, by 2007, "*a phenomenal structural change in the economy*" of the TAR had taken place since the mid 1990s: the primary sector's share of the TAR economy (predominantly farming and herding) had fallen from 42% of GDP in 1995 to 19% in 2005 according to official statistics, and to less than 16% in the first half of 2007, according to official press reports. In contrast the tertiary sector of the TAR economy (a combination of government and party administration, social services, trade and commerce, transport and other services) had expanded its share of GDP from 34% in 1995 to 46% in 2000, and to 56% in 2005; and by the first half of 2007 its share had expanded still further to 64%, representing an extraordinarily rapid rate of growth.¹¹

Fischer observes that one of the largest sectors of the economy in 2001 was government administration and that it alone had come to account for over 13% of total GDP in the TAR by 2001. The scale of this can be appreciated when considering that it was close to that of total construction activity at the same time; and construction itself had received a boost due to the commencement of work on the Gormo-Lhasa Railway¹². Although government administration represented one of the largest sectors of the economy in 2001, it employed a very small and possibly shrinking share of the Tibetan workforce, indicating that a majority of Tibetans were already coming to be marginalised from employment opportunities in the rapidly expanding urban economy.



The centre of Lhasa is now dominated by Chinese businesses

Jim McGill Photography

⁸ ibid

⁹ At the time of publication in 2007 Andrew Martin Fischer was a development economist at the London School of Economics researching Chinese development strategies in Western China with his main focus on Tibet. ". Fischer is now Lecturer in Population and Social Policy at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. Fischer's 2007 report is available at:

<http://www.tibetwatch.org/Tibet%20Watch%20Special%20Report%20Andrew%20Fischer.pdf>

¹⁰ Supra f.n. 2

¹¹ Fischer, 2007 p 4.

¹² It had been a longstanding dream of the Chinese leadership to connect Tibet by rail into the main Chinese rail network. Built at enormous cost, the railway was finally opened in July 2006.

Fischer goes on to explore “*several unique characteristics of investment in the TAR*” which show that government strategies for boosting the overall Tibetan economy have not necessarily been targeted towards encouraging growth in sectors that would allow Tibetans to benefit. Official statistics for up to 2005 show that while the largest sector of investment in the TAR was “transport, storage and post” (which received 35% of total investment), investment in agriculture accounted for less than 7% of total investment. More worryingly still, education and “health, social security and social welfare” received only 6% and 1% respectively of total investment. This strategy for targeting government administration (to which a majority of Tibetans have relatively little access) with large-scale investment is unique in China. Fischer notes that in Sichuan, investment in education was double that in government administration.

The theme of the marginalisation of Tibetans from the growth areas of the economy is continued as Fischer considers ‘ownership’ or control of the main levers of the economy. With the exception of the primary sector Fischer argues the TAR economy is largely dominated by outside entities. Large construction and infrastructure projects are almost always contracted to companies based outside the TAR, with much of the work on these projects going to migrant Han Chinese workers, a cause of consistent complaint by Tibetans. The development of locally-owned businesses and local expertise, as well as local economic needs, are largely ignored as control of the economy is increasingly transferred to the out-of-province Chinese companies and entities.

This has led to what Fischer describes as a ‘*sharply polarised dualism*’ in the economy: a rural subsistence economy, increasingly neglected in terms of subsidies and investment, and which accounted for 85% of Tibetans in the TAR according to the 2000 census; and at the other extreme, a modern urban economy based on government administration, construction and tourism. This urban economy has attracted large investment and subsidies which are heavily controlled by outside interests and priorities which, in turn, have led to rapid (and artificially stimulated) growth or, as Fischer puts it, “*ethnically exclusionary growth*”. Disregard for local needs, such as investment in education, has disadvantaged Tibetans and increasingly marginalised them from integrating themselves into an increasingly competitive urban economy. Part 2 will consider in greater depth the low educational opportunities in the TAR which have led to this process of marginalisation.



Chinese state-backed shop sells Party photos in Lhasa

Part 2: Educational inequalities and the marginalisation of Tibetans from Tibet's competitive urban employment market

*"The primary reason for Tibetans getting lower paid jobs is that they are mostly not educated, and they don't speak Chinese. Secondly they are not very professionally skilled, and those from rural areas don't have the social foundation and background in the cities. So to get a job is difficult, let alone getting a good job. When people from rural area come to Lhasa to look for a job, they first have to have a guarantor who has the household registration certificate and who has some permanent job in Lhasa. Even to work in a restaurant, one needs to have a guarantor. Even the educated Tibetans such as those who have graduated from Tibet University, a lot of them are unemployed."*¹³
Tibetan layman from Chamdo, name withheld to protect identity .

Fischer has further developed his arguments on exclusionary processes in a paper, *"Educating for Exclusion in Western China"*,¹⁴ published last July by the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity.

Published after the Spring 2008 protests in Tibet, the paper noted Beijing's long-standing conviction that ethnic minority nationalism could be assuaged simply through economic progress and increased prosperity. Many Chinese commentators, Fischer notes, had concluded that Tibetans, in staging widespread protests, were 'complaining with their stomachs full', despite a fall in absolute poverty rates and the rise of average household incomes. Fischer explains why this is not the case by demonstrating that the introduction in Tibet and Qinghai of competitive labour market reforms within a context of extreme educational inequalities had exacerbated 'exclusionary processes'; or, put another way, the sense among Tibetans from all strata of society that they were being excluded from urban employment opportunities.

The paper makes an important differentiation between poverty and exclusion, noting that exclusionary processes occur throughout Tibetan society and are often accentuated by the move out of poverty: upwardly mobile Tibetans with resources migrate from rural areas to the city and, in so doing expose themselves to exclusion in a way that does not affect their counterparts who remain in rural Tibet. Despite an increase in their wages, the upwardly mobile Tibetans who move to the city are often excluded from the best jobs and opportunities as they come into direct competition on the labour market with Han Chinese migrants.

Many of these migrants are from Sichuan and are advantaged over their Tibetan rivals for employment due to their urban backgrounds and schooling. Fischer observes that even the most typically educated category of Tibetan – urban men – are far less educated on average than even the least educated Han migrant from other provinces, typically rural women from Sichuan. Fischer supplies statistics from the Chinese Statistics Yearbook of 2005 which show alarming disparities between illiteracy rates in the TAR and those in Sichuan: the city illiteracy rate in Sichuan is 3.6% whereas the rural illiteracy rate in the TAR is 42.6%.¹⁵ Fischer highlights this comparison as appropriate: many of the Sichuanese migrants in the TAR migrate from urban areas of Sichuan whereas urbanisation in the TAR is characterised by migration from rural Tibetan areas. Even the least extreme comparison highlighted from the 2005 statistics shows that rural Sichuanese are three times less likely to be illiterate (14%) than urban residents in the TAR (47%). These educational inequalities are reflected in the perceptions of Han migrants to the TAR who, according to anecdotal evidence provided by Emily Yeh and cited by Fischer, consider themselves superior to local urban residents.¹⁶ This perception is unusual as anywhere else in China, according to Fischer, local urban residents are generally considered to be of higher quality to migrants.

¹³ Interview with Tibet Watch.

¹⁴ The full report is available at: <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper69.pdf>

¹⁵ Fischer 2009, page 18, table 1

¹⁶ According to Fischer Yeh's observations were based on research with Han residents in Chengdu who had recently returned from Lhasa. See Fischer, 2009 p 25.

The educational disparities have produced in turn disparities between different types of urban employment: employment in the state sector, a privileged sector of the urban workforce where wages would be taken by many of the migrants working in the TAR, typically for a few years; and employment gained by workers from households registered as permanent residents, ie non-migrants. Comparison of the average income levels between these two groups gives an indirect indication of income inequality. Fischer observes that staff and workers in the state sector in the TAR were paid twice as well as elsewhere in China in 2002¹⁷, whereas per capita urban disposable household income in the TAR fell below the national average in 2004. Further pressure was placed on Tibetan incomes in the TAR due to a reduction in the number of Tibetan staff and workers employed in the state-sector between 2001 and 2003. While overall cadre employment, which accounted for two thirds of state-sector employment in 2003, increased by approximately 19,000 between 2000 and 2003, the number of Tibetan cadres fell by 6,000. A sudden move away from Tibetan representation in government resulted in 2003 in the outnumbering of Tibetan cadres by non-Tibetan cadres for the first time since 1980.

Squeezed out of state-sector employment, Tibetans have suffered most from rising inequality whereas sharp wage increases have been captured mostly by non-Tibetan migrant workers.



Jim McGill Photography

All too often Tibetan children are failed by China's education system. Tibet has the highest illiteracy rates anywhere in China.

Part 3: The increasing Chinese presence in Tibet

*“Superficially, it’s true: no matter how long the Han immigrants’ period of residency may be, it’s still transient, and the state of affairs is fundamentally one of transiency. But the transiency of today is a far cry from the transiency of the past. The transiency of the old days was meager and intermittent, while the transiency of today is like a torrential river, each wave in front hard-pressed by one behind; the reality for some time now has been that these migrants, chiefly Han, are the new inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau.”*¹⁸
Woeser

Historical background and policy context to the growing Chinese presence in Tibet:

China describes itself as a multi-ethnic state but a more accurate description would be that it is a much expanded empire, its territory today occupying roughly twice the size of Ming China. The expanding Qing empire pursued an aggressive policy of colonisation although it was unable to exert direct colonial control over Tibet. But at the height of Manchu power in the 18th century political influence in Tibet had been gained. At the time of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1949-50, Chinese ambitions to establish a permanent Chinese presence in the core regions of central Tibet above 3000 metres, while undiminished, still had not been realised and the Chinese presence remained negligible. Following China’s invasion and the establishment of direct rule from Beijing after the 1959 Tibetan Uprising, Chinese soldiers and settlers began to establish a more permanent Chinese presence on the Tibetan Plateau, although exact numbers rose and fell. During the relatively liberal period of the 1980s when the general secretary of the Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, oversaw Tibet policy, thousands of Chinese cadres actually left Tibet following Hu’s declaration that Tibetan cadres should occupy more than two thirds of government positions.

The Third Tibet Work Forum 1994

The eruption of protests calling for independence in the late 1980s brought such relatively liberal policies to an abrupt halt. Instead, the Third Tibet Work Forum of 1994 eliminated many of the improvements to Tibet policy introduced by Hu Yaobang and marked a radical change in policy direction. The Forum confirmed an earlier decision from 1992 on ‘opening up’ Tibet which essentially involved bringing into Tibet large numbers of Chinese to drive modernisation of the infrastructure and to boost the economy. China’s new strategy called for far greater direct control over Tibet, a requirement acknowledged by the Tibetan Deputy Secretary of the communist party in the TAR, Raidi. He declared in 1998:

*“Historic experience tells us that keeping a long stable core of officials of the Han and other nationalities in Tibet is absolutely not just out of expediency, nor is it merely out of a temporary need to do certain jobs during a particular period. Rather, it is needed to defend national unity.”*¹⁹

Statistical evidence of an upsurge in the Chinese presence in Lhasa

A forthcoming report by Tibet Watch²⁰ on the Chinese presence in Tibet is forthcoming and will be published later this year. The report will for the first time present comparisons of demographic field data, collected from certain areas of Tibet, taken more than a decade apart.

Evidence already cited in an early draft of the report points to a dramatic increase in the numbers of Chinese and Chinese businesses in Lhasa since the mid-1990s. Over the course of one day, 2 August 1994, a total of 66 Chinese were observed trading goods and services from shops and stalls in the Barkor street of central Lhasa. By the middle of August 2006 the number of Chinese businesses in the Barkor had leapt dramatically to 315.

¹⁸ <http://www.raggedbanner.com/aAAT.html>

¹⁹ Xizang Ribao, 29 July 1998. SWB FE/3368 G/10, 27 October 1998

²⁰ Supra f.n. 7