



RAILWAY



“The railroad is not inherently bad; in fact, if the Tibetans were the ones who could make the decisions about how the railroad would and would not be used, it could be a good thing. But Tibetans are powerless to affect the Chinese government’s economic, political and demographic policies in Tibet, and the railroad is an example par excellence.”

– A Tibetan living in the West, who visited the railroad in 2006



The 1142 km section of the railroad from Golmud to Lhasa traverses the vast altitude plains once mostly inhabited only by wild animals

The world’s highest railroad across the Tibetan plateau to Lhasa (completed in July 2006) and the forthcoming line from Sichuan to Tibet are the most high-profile symbols of Beijing’s ambitious plans to develop the western regions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As an indispensable element of Beijing’s ‘transportation revolution’, the aim of this construction is to expand the influence and consolidate the control of the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP), which regards this as crucial to China’s successful rise in the 21st century. While Chinese officials claim that the construction of the railroads and the accompanying development in Tibet will be of benefit to Tibetans, the absence of stakeholder involvement in planning and implementation of the rail lines has proven the reality of the situation contrary to this assertion.



RAILWAY



The completed Qinghai-Tibet railway has had a dramatic impact on the lives of Tibetans and on the land itself. The construction of the Sichuan – Tibet railway (to be completed by 2020) is likely to have similar effects for Tibetans, further accelerating the influx of Chinese people to the plateau, exacerbating the economic marginalization of Tibetans, and threatening Tibet’s fragile high altitude environment.

A number of other railways have now been proposed, which when completed will run through every region of Tibet. The proposed Sichuan - Tibet railway, for example, will span 1,629 km, 650 km of which will be in Sichuan province. It is said that trains will be designed to travel at a maximum speed of 200 km per hour and will take eight hours to reach Lhasa from Chengdu.¹ On December 6, 2014, Xinhua announced that works on the Chengdu – Ya’an section of the Sichuan – Tibet railway had begun.² After completion, the Sichuan-Tibet railway will connect with the Qinghai-Tibet railway.

The main impact of the railroads on Tibet can only be understood in the context of the CCP’s ambitious and transformative campaign of *Xibu da kaifa*, the strategy to develop the western regions of the PRC. The Chinese term *kaifa* in this context is often rendered into English as ‘development’; however, standard dictionaries define *kaifa* as ‘develop’, ‘open up’ and ‘exploit’, which reflects how the Party perceives the western areas of the PRC – essentially as providers of resources in order to facilitate development in the central and eastern regions. China’s leaders hope that the PRC’s western region’s resources can help to satisfy the nation’s rising demand for water, minerals and energy. The railroads provide the infrastructure to facilitate the increased exploitation of Tibet’s

natural resources by the Chinese state and Chinese companies – resting on the state’s absolute claim of ownership over Tibetan areas. Article 9 of China’s Constitution dictates that all natural resources on the PRC’s territory belong to the State.

As the railroads facilitate a draining of Tibetan natural resources, they also make possible a flood of Chinese people into Tibet. Civilian Chinese are entering Tibet in increasing numbers. The first railway opened in mid-2006, and in that year 2.4 million domestic tourists came. The authorities made the unusual admission that the majority of these passengers were migrant workers or business people rather than tourists. In the first full year of rail arrivals, 2007, the number of domestic tourists leapt to 3.66 million, dipped in the following year of protests and crackdowns, then in 2009 grew again to 5.44 million and in 2010 to 6.62 million.³ According to the World Bank, this makes Tibet a more popular destination for tourists than Norway, Sweden, Argentina, Brazil or India; but has not yet caught up with Japan, South Africa or Egypt.⁴ In mid 2012 overall passenger traffic numbers since the rail track opened were announced. The line “has transported 52.76 million passengers since going into operation on July 1, 2006”⁵, said Bao Chuxiong, General Manager of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway Company.” An extension to Shigatse was also completed, opening the Tsang region of Tibet to even greater Chinese influence.

Tibetans describe the rail-borne influx of Chinese as a “second invasion of Tibet”; an occurrence, which may even have intensified Tibetans’ sense of a separate identity, and fostered a desire to resist assimilation. Furthermore, in a move of geopolitical significance that has concerned Indian and world leaders alike,

¹ Chengdu to Lhasa: <http://www.chengdutolhasa.com/chengdu-lhasa-train/sichuan-tibet-railway.html>

² Construction begins on Chengdu-Ya’an section of Sichuan-Tibet railway, Xinhua, December 6, 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/06/c_133837008.htm

³ Tibet Statistical Yearbook 2011, table 13-3

⁴ World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL>

⁵ China to increase train services to Lhasa, Xinhua, July 1, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-07/01/c_131687734.htm



RAILWAY



the Chinese have increased the deployment of offensive mechanized forces to Tibetan regions, expanding Chinese influence and threatening longstanding geographic borders.

The sinicization of Tibet, a gradual dilution of Tibetan culture resulting from the influx of Chinese migrants has contributed to the further economic marginalization of Tibetans who cannot compete in a Chinese job market. Government finance channeled into Tibet continues to be targeted at urban areas where Tibetans have the hardest time competing with Chinese migrants. Opportunities created largely advantage workers and entrepreneurs with Chinese fluency, Chinese work cultures and connections to government or business networks in China. For the majority of Tibetans who do not speak fluent Chinese, which according to some estimates is as much as 80%, there remain few avenues to successful participation in the Chinese-dominated economy.

The impact of the migrants and tourists flooding into Tibet reaches well past the social and economic, as the railroads and their passengers also overwhelm the delicate Tibetan environment, upsetting the fragile balance on the plateau. Oil wells, salt pans, and missile bases already dominate the first half of the main rail line into Tibet, and along the Golmud-Lhasa

portion of the line completed in 2006 one can already begin to see the environmental toll. Grasslands turn to deserts, various species of Tibetan wildlife inch closer to extinction as their rangeland is cut in two by the railway, and mining projects leech toxic chemicals into the water resources of Tibetan people and livestock. Environmental issues remain secondary to successful completion of the main projects of the Western Development Strategy, most of which are concerned with large-scale infrastructure construction and resource exploitation.

Since the beginning of the Western Development Strategy in 1999-2000, the Chinese government has been implementing policies of settlement, land confiscation, and fencing of pastoral areas inhabited primarily by Tibetans, dramatically curtailing their livelihood and threatening their unique Tibetan identity. In some cases, the authorities claim that they are moving people from their land in order to protect the environment or to improve their way of life, however, the main areas of nomad resettlement coincide with the remote grasslands the Qinghai-Tibet railway passes through en route to Lhasa, and there is increasing concern that the imposition of Chinese urban and industrial models on one of the last examples of sustainable pastoralism is increasingly leading to growing poverty and contributing to grassland degradation.