



TOURISM IN TIBET



Chinese tourists taking pictures of a Tibetan girl

Accelerated economic development under current Chinese government policies and, in particular, the advent of the railroad and resulting increase in tourism, have also heightened concerns for the survival of Tibet's unique identity. Ironically, as the Chinese authorities market Tibet to Chinese as a tourist destination based on the "exotic" landscape, they are tightening control over Tibetan religious expression and practice by the Tibetan people.

Today in Tibet some monastic courtyards, where hundreds of monks were once taught and debated scriptures, are now occupied by photo booths where Chinese tourists wear garish versions of traditional Tibetan clothing to pose for the camera. In parts of eastern Tibet, entire monasteries are run as commercial concerns where the salespeople dress in maroon robes, attempting to sell incense, statues and paintings to tourists.

Tourism in Tibet has hit a record high, with Lhasa alone predicted to get 15 million tourists a year in 2015. 97% of all tourists in Tibet are Chinese, and it has become increasingly difficult for foreigner travelers to enter the Tibet Autonomous Region in recent years. At a time when Lhasa is under lockdown, with its citizens subject to intense surveillance and ideological campaigns and snipers on the rooftops of houses, the global luxury hotel industry has embarked upon a major Lhasa building program. Surveys show China's new rich rank Lhasa high on their list of desirable destinations. According to a Hurun Rich List report on its face-to-face interviews with 150 Chinese millionaires in 2012: "*Sanya (Hainan Island), Hong Kong and Yunnan are the top three destinations in China, while Tibet rose to 4th place from 6th place last year.*" Lhasa now competes with Paris or the tropical resorts of Thailand for rich Chinese tourists who can afford to do them all.



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Persuaded by the Communist Party leadership of the harmonious situation in Tibet, the major hotel chains have calculated that Lhasa is beginning to attract premium paying tourists from around the world and from the newly rich Chinese elite. Hotels, including the Taj, Shangri-la and InterContinental Resort Lhasa Paradise, stand to gain and then maintain market share by having a presence in Lhasa, which is now experiencing a real estate boom, and fast rising land prices now that urban land can be legally bought and sold.

Since 1990 China has invested much in building airports and other hard infrastructure in remote areas, in readiness for implementing its vision. Now the infrastructure exists, the hotel rooms are under construction and Tibet has been re-imagined as a series of tourist ‘circuits’, attracting premium paying tourists who are presented with carefully staged displays of Tibet’s historic, cultural and natural attractions.

Fifteen years after the Ninth TAR Five-Year-Plan announced tourism as a “pillar industry”, Lhasa and elsewhere on the plateau have been transformed into major destinations. Fast, comfortable long-haul trains leave China’s key metropolitan cities daily for Tibet’s historic and cultural capital, the ticket prices heavily subsidized. Air travel, in order to compete, has become cheaper. Endless TV documentaries, and soap operas of Chinese heroes selflessly serving the Tibetan masses have familiarized mass Chinese audiences with Tibet. New prosperity and the pace of city life encourage Chinese to holiday in Tibet. Tour companies, hotels, taxis, brothels, karaoke bars, nightclubs have multiplied. Prawns and other seafood delicacies are flown in from coastal provinces daily.

While the tourism industry could easily be organized in such a way as to support both the preservation of a vibrant Tibetan culture and sustainable livelihoods for Tibetans, the reality is that this is not happening. While the Chinese authorities are marketing Tibet as a tourist destination based on the ‘exotic’, spiritual

attractions of its Buddhist culture and landscape, Beijing has tightened its control over Tibetan religious expression and practice. The authorities’ commodification of Tibetan culture and promotion of ‘Tibet chic’ coincides with a trend towards increasing repression of Tibetan cultural identity and a crackdown of unprecedented depth and scope.

In a reflection of this development, in China’s new national Tourism Law, which came into force on October 1, 2013, there is almost no mention of host communities, designated in the Tourism Law not as people but as places. Article 62 states: *“A travel agency shall inform the tourists of the relevant laws, regulations, customs, and religious taboos of the tourism destinations to which tourists shall pay attention and the activities which are not appropriate for the tourists to participate in according to Chinese laws.”* Further, Article 66 permits a tour company to terminate its contract with a customer if *“the tourist conducts any activities in violation of law or social morality.”* Article 41 states tour guides must *“respect the customs and religious beliefs”* not of local Tibetans, but *“of the tourists”*.

Tourism is a labour-intensive industry, much more so than mining, the only other industry in Tibetan areas now growing fast. Tourism creates employment opportunities for Chinese speakers in a wide range of roles from back of house cleaners, drivers, security staff to front of house tour guides, site interpreters, souvenir sellers, admission gatekeepers, prostitutes and entrepreneurs. After failing to find crops that would enable Chinese peasants to make a living on Tibetan land, it took many decades, and a huge capital expenditure by central leaders to find another way of integrating Tibet economically into China. Tourism is the key. Tourism achieves a twin objective, of populating Tibet with immigrants able to make a living and settle; and instructing masses of Chinese visitors in the discourse of China’s Tibet.