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The mist lifts over China's sky-high railway

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For the Chinese, the ambitious railway between Qinghai and Lhasa in Tibet - now a year old - represents both a triumph of Chinese technology and the realization of "father of modern China" Sun Yat-sen's dream to link the East to the resource-rich West. The Chinese have provided a number of justifications for the project, including aiding development in the West, bringing economic benefits to Tibet, and improving the Tibetan quality of life.

To critics, these justifications are seen as an unconvincing cover-up for China's true intentions for the railway: to homogenize and colonize Tibet while stripping it of its natural resources and cultural heritage.

On July 1, 2006, the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, President Hu Jintao cut the ribbon to mark the completion of the railway between Qinghai and Lhasa and the linkage of Beijing to Tibet. The railway, begun in 2001 and completed at a cost of US\$4.2 billion, required such an impressive combination of engineering innovations to account for the extreme elevation and the harsh terrain that Swiss railway engineers declared the project impossible in 1990s. [1]

The train peaks at more than 5,000 meters at the Tanggula Pass, and 80% of the line has an elevation above 4,000 meters, requiring cabin pressurization and extra oxygen for passengers. The line also crosses 550 kilometers of permafrost, which rises and falls as it melts during the day and freezes during the night, leading to such potential problems as track buckling.

To account for the problem, Chinese engineers developed a series of solutions that include elevating more than 160km of track, [2] installing a permafrost-monitoring system, [3] and placing cooling pipes that use ammonia into the permafrost to prevent melting. These innovations have allowed passengers to cross 4,064km from Beijing to Tibet in just 48 hours, and for as little as \$49 for a hard seat. [4]

A year later, China's reasons for the railway and long-term plans for Tibet have become clearer. It is possible to discern some of the more veiled Chinese goals for Tibet and the role the train is meant to play in achieving them by looking at the projects and policies launched alongside the railway, how the railway complements these projects and policies, and China's progress in realizing its ostensible goals.

By determining China's actual goals for the region, and how the railway fits into those plans, we can begin to speculate on the long-term impact of the railway on Tibet and answer this question: Will the railway lead to greater prosperity for Tibetans, or is it the vanguard for less positive changes to come?

When we look at projects and policies launched at the same time as the railway, heavy-transportation projects stand out, indicating an emphasis on resource extraction. The central government plans to invest 77.8 billion yuan (about \$10 billion) in 180 projects in Tibet from 2006-10 as part of its Western Development Plan. [5] Additionally, China plans to build the world's highest airport in Ngari and has begun a rail line from Lhasa to Xigaze, which will be completed in 2010, [6] and is planning rail lines from Lhasa to Nyingchi and Xigaze to Yadong. [7]

Lu Yan, an engineer with the Geological and Minerals Exploitation Bureau in Tibet, noted that mineral deposits, including gold, copper and iron, could have a value of more than a trillion yuan, and Chinese officials recently commented that Tibet's minerals "could become a cornerstone of China's economy". [8] There are also plans for harnessing the power of Tibet's rivers: early last year, the Huadian Group signed an agreement with the Tibetan regional government to construct several hydropower plants. [9]

In light of the heavy investment in transportation infrastructure, the railway seems to take on a completely different significance, especially since it appears that heavy infrastructure will comprise a significant portion of China's development aid in Tibet.

The cultural and ethnic identity of Tibet has changed dramatically in recent years, and recently implemented policies and projects indicate this change is intentional and that the railway was built to assist with the achievement of these goals.

Though it is difficult to ascertain the true ethnic makeup of Tibet, as figures vary wildly (Chinese figures claim that 92% of the population is Tibetan, and just 5% Han Chinese, [10] while one non-governmental organization pegs the ratio at 7.6 million Han to 6.1 million Tibetans [11]), in 2002, Jin Shixun, deputy director general of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Development and Planning Commission, admitted that of 200,000 inhabitants in Lhasa, the capital, just half were Tibetans, and noted that he expected the numbers of Han Chinese to rise. [12]

The train has also brought about a dramatic increase in tourism. From July 2006 through June 2007, the railway transported 1.5 million tourists into Tibet [13] - an average of more than 4,000 tourists a day - and the Chinese are aiming to reach 6 million by 2010.

[14] More than 1.1 million tourists visited Tibet in the first half of 2007: an 83.6% increase over the same period last year, before the railway was launched. [15]

These changes, as well as the railway's role in them, are not coincidental, but rather represent a larger migration plan, particularly when considering Hu Jintao's appointment of Zhang Qingli as Tibet's party secretary. As former commander of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, Zhang helped coordinate Han Chinese immigration into Xinjiang and is experienced in implementing regional ethnic-assimilation policies. [16]

Along with an increased effort to assimilate Tibet ethnically, there has been a renewed emphasis on cultural assimilation. According to the United Nations office in Beijing, three-quarters of the homes in Lhasa's historical Tibetan quarter have been destroyed in the past five years. [17] Forced relocations have weakened cultural ties and have made it difficult for Tibetans to gain financial footing. According to the Chinese news agency Xinhua, in 2006, 290,000 herding and farming families were moved [18] to what has been called "socialist villages" [19] and an additional 40,000 nomadic herding people are next on the list. [20]

Many relocated families are required to pay for their new homes, which can mean an average of \$6,000 in loans, and a lack of skills means that many have difficulty finding work in their new and unfamiliar situations. [21] These policies may signify an intentional effort on the part of the Chinese to erase Tibetan cultural identity: an article published in January by Li Dezhu in a Communist Party journal indicated a change in policy from preserving minority cultures to merging them into an "advanced socialist culture". [22]

China has complemented these policies with a stepped-up campaign to repress religious freedom. Buddhist monks must attend "patriotic study lessons" [23] and Chinese authorities have jailed Tibetans, including monks, for possessing or distributing materials related to the Dalai Lama. [24] Robert Barnett, a Tibet expert at Columbia University in New York, noted: "Restrictions have been increasing in Tibet over the last year, with intensified campaigns against the Dalai Lama, renewed bans on religion for all officials and, recently, public warnings about 'Western hostile forces'." [25]

The severity of the situation is evident when it is noted that more than 2,500 Tibetans cross the Himalayas and illegally enter Nepal every year. [26] This exodus turned deadly last September 30, when Romanian mountaineers filmed the shooting of an unarmed group of Tibetan refugees by Chinese border guards, which resulted in multiple injuries, arrests, and the death of a Buddhist nun. [27] With Buddhism at its foundation, these restrictions go far in diluting Tibet's culture.

Another way of determining the intended role of the railway is to assess the progress made on China's justifications for the railway, the most important being that it would considerably improve the Tibetan economy, and subsequently the lives of Tibetans. The first goal has been achieved: Tibet reported a 13.4% increase in gross domestic product in

2006, the fastest growth rate in the past decade, [28] foreign trade has risen 75% since July 2006, [29] and domestic and overseas investment reached 4 billion yuan in 2006, nearly equal to the total investment from the previous five years. [30]

However, though Tibet's economy may be experiencing growth, this has not yet translated to benefits for ethnic Tibetans. Farmers make just 2,435 yuan a year compared with the national average of nearly 4,000 yuan, [31] and low incomes mean that Tibetans are unable to afford an education and find better employment. Tibetans are also facing increased competition for jobs, and compose the majority of the 10.3% unemployed in the Tibetan autonomous region. [32] Only 10% of the workers on the rail line were Tibetans, and out of 100 new government job openings in Lhasa, 98 went to Han Chinese. [33] Such rules as special salary incentives for Han Chinese indicate that the economic disparity between Tibetans and Han may continue unalleviated.

Furthermore, though it is difficult to determine the amount spent on social-service development, it appears that the promised improvement in quality of services has also not yet materialized for Tibetans, in contrast to the significant amount spent on transportation infrastructure. Tibet still faces severe social and health problems, such as illiteracy and child mortality. For example, women in Tibet are 40 times as likely to die in childbirth as women in Shanghai, [34] HIV/AIDS cases are on the rise, and China's 2000 census shows that 47% of Tibetan adults are unable to read (compared with just 4.9% of adults in Beijing). [35] Though economic growth was one of China's key justifications for the railway, the benefit of this growth has so far been limited in scope.

Although the Qinghai-Tibet Railway will not single-handedly destroy nor save Tibet, when viewed in the context of a number of accompanying projects, the railway plays a significant role in a more serious effort by the Chinese to assimilate Tibet and facilitate the extraction of valuable resources. This becomes clear when looking at how the railway complements China's hidden goals, and has done little to accomplish China's originally stated goals, such as bringing economic benefits to the Tibetan people.

The world's criticism of China's Tibet policies has not and will not have a significant impact on the Chinese government: for governments around the world, Tibet is an officially recognized part of China, and China has been historically resistant to outside interference in internal affairs. But it is also true that the long-term implications of Beijing's policy in Tibet will have a negative impact for Chinese interests. How could Beijing take up more progressive, "win-win" approaches in Tibet?

For example, the preservation of Tibetan culture, improvements in religious and civil freedoms and greater investments in education and health systems would help alleviate separatist tensions that characterize other regions of China. Also, despite the Chinese desire to "modernize", their goal of increasing tourism to the area will be only hurt by the destruction of historic quarters and monasteries.

One way to mitigate this problem would be to join with organizations such as the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization to give older sections of Lhasa protected status.

Overall, a more moderate and tempered approach in Tibet would help demonstrate Beijing's commitment to global norms - including respect for human rights, religious practice and individual dignity - and help it realize its aspiration to be viewed as a responsible and constructive power within the international community.

The Tibet situation requires the international community and China to walk a fine line: Beijing's hopes for a smooth and successful Summer Olympic Games next year will be troubled in light of the country's harsh policies in Tibet, and international calls for boycotts and the likelihood of increased protestations related to Beijing's Tibet policy are only likely to increase in the absence of more moderated policies there.

Notes

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