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Tibet: Seeking Common Ground on the Rooftop of the World: A Staff Trip Report

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COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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March 2011

Dear friends,

Last fall, a small bipartisan delegation of staffers from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Senator Inhofe's office visited Tibet to meet with officials and assess current conditions there. Attached is their report, which we hope will be of interest to all those concerned with Tibetan issues.

Sincerely,

John F. Kerry, Chairman
Richard G. Lugar, Ranking Member

Tibet: Seeking Common Ground on the Rooftop of the World:
A trip report from staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Submitted by Frank Jannuzi, Jay Branegan, Nicholas Ma, and Joel Starr

Overview

This bipartisan report from the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee presents our findings from a visit to Tibet from September 7-19, 2010. Four staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, accompanied by officials from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, traveled to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan regions of Western China. It was the first trip to Tibet by SFRC staff since August, 2002, when a seven person delegation traveled for 17 days in the TAR, Qinghai Province, and Gansu Province. The delegation was the first Senate staff delegation permitted by Chinese authorities to travel to Tibet since large-scale peaceful protests and some riots shook the region in March 2008. While our delegation was in Lhasa, the Chinese granted formal approval for U.S. Ambassador Jon Huntsman to visit Tibet. His request had been pending for several weeks. Ambassador Huntsman traveled to Lhasa and to Yushu County, in Qinghai Province, in late September.



The restored Potala Palace in central Lhasa, the historical official residence for the Dalai Lama, draws hundreds of thousands of tourists and pilgrims each year. (Jannuzi photo)

The staff delegation was the result of more than a year of planning, including extensive consultations with the Chinese government and representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan exiles, with human rights advocacy groups, non-governmental organizations, Tibetan activists inside China, and Chinese and Western academics. The itinerary was designed by the SFRC staff members to provide a glimpse into the lives of Tibetans from many walks of life – herders, monks, pilgrims, small business operators, teachers. It was also designed to provide access to both rural and urban areas. The trip to a large extent replicated the 2002 visit, allowing staff to assess changes in economic development, infrastructure, Han migration, monastery restoration, environmental protection, and other factors of interests. An unstated, but major goal of the delegation was also to demonstrate continued bipartisan Congressional concern about human rights and other conditions inside the TAR and other Tibetan regions of China.

Chinese authorities clearly remain concerned about the possibility of a resurgence of social unrest in Tibet, and seek to insulate visitors from encounters that might tarnish the image of an idyllic, modernizing Tibet. In Tibet, unlike in most other parts of China, foreign tourists must be part of a “tour group.” Independent tourism remains prohibited. And all official visits to the TAR are carefully scripted by Chinese authorities to emphasize the positive aspects of



Tibetan pilgrim with prayer wheel in front of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. No evidence remains of the riots that scarred this plaza in the spring of 2008. (Jannuzi photo)

development. Throughout our official program in the TAR, we were accompanied by officials from the China People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and the Tibet Foreign Affairs Office. We were discouraged from deviating from the official program. Notwithstanding these constraints, however, staff members enjoyed several hours of unaccompanied time each morning and evening. Chinese officials made no effort to impede our meanderings through the city during off hours. In addition to our official meetings, each day we traveled unescorted around Lhasa, observing city life and chatting with a variety of residents and visitors to the city. China’s willingness to open Tibet to foreign official visitors reflects growing

confidence among Chinese authorities that conditions in Tibet have stabilized, and that the Chinese government has a good story to tell with respect to economic development and religious freedom. Shortly before and after the staff delegation, the Chinese invited foreign journalists to travel to Tibet, albeit on tightly controlled visits that afforded the journalists few opportunities to interact with average Tibetans.

The delegation first went to Beijing, arriving on September 7. After a short, informal pre-brief with U.S. embassy officials, we had three official meetings: 1) with the United Front Work Department, which handles negotiations between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader; 2) with the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), the official sponsor of the trip; and 3) with researchers at the China Tibetology Research Center, a government-sponsored institute staffed mostly by Tibetan researchers who advise the government on policy and conditions in Tibetan regions of China. The next day, September 8, we flew to Xining in Qinghai Province, western China, and met with officials of the People's Congress of Qinghai province before boarding a train for Lhasa, Tibet.

Following the 25-hour train trip across the Tibetan plateau, we had two full days of meetings in Lhasa with officials responsible for economic development, cultural heritage, education, and ethnic and religious affairs. We were also taken to a "model village" just outside Lhasa, and visited some of the prominent cultural features: the iconic Potala Palace, traditional home of the Dalai Lama; Sera monastery, one of the biggest and most important of the Gelukpa Sect (the sect headed by the Dalai Lama); the Jokhang temple, the holiest shrine in Tibetan Buddhism; and the Barkhor market area around the Jokhang temple.

On Sunday, Sept. 12, we left Lhasa and drove to the adjacent valley of the Yarlung River, which gave us a chance to glimpse conditions in the countryside. Along the way we observed several large-scale forestation projects to control erosion and prevent desertification. Even though Tibet is the source of six major Asian rivers, the Yarlung valley is quite dry, with scrub vegetation and even sand dunes in some places. We visited Samye monastery, the first built in Tibet. Like many religious sites, the monastery had been sacked and nearly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It is now under extensive government-funded restoration. We also visited the tombs of the early Tibetan kings and Yumbu Lhakhang, the home of the first Tibetan king, which has also been restored following near-destruction during the Cultural Revolution. We spent the night in Tsetang, a riverside town, and met with local officials, and left the region via plane on Monday, September 13. One member of the delegation traveled to the Tibetan regions of western China in mid-September, spending additional days examining conditions in Amdo, Eastern Tibet, which is folded into Qinghai and Gansu provinces. The findings from that portion of the delegation are reported in a separate section below.

Recommendations for U.S. Tibet Policy

The staff traveled to Tibet to identify areas of common ground, particularly in the areas of equitable economic development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation. Discussions between U. S. and Chinese officials on Tibet issues are often contentious. Chinese officials tend to characterize U.S. interest in the human rights situation in Tibet and Washington's advocacy of dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Beijing as unwelcome intrusions into China's internal affairs. Beijing objected when the Congress passed the Tibet Policy Act in 2002, and lodged formal protests when Congress later awarded the Dalai Lama the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor. Nonetheless, ***we believe it remains vital for the U.S. government, consistent with the Tibet Policy Act, to continue to urge the government of China to pursue reconciliation with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetans in exile through mutually respectful dialogue. Reconciliation would not only help resolve a long-standing political and humanitarian crisis, but also allow the expertise, resources, and energy and Tibetans in exile to assist in the economic development of Tibet and the protection of its fragile environment and unique culture.***

While that dialogue continues, there are steps that the United States can take that might not only bring direct benefits to the Tibetan people, but also begin to build a foundation of trust between Washington and Beijing on Tibetan affairs. Given Beijing's stated objectives for Tibet, and in light of some of the economic development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation projects we observed there, we believe there is room to explore collaborative efforts in Tibet. Accordingly, we make the following recommendations for the U.S. government:

- Working in concert with officials in Beijing and in Tibetan regions of China, ***identify specific projects in the areas of sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation that could be undertaken jointly.*** Possible areas include lessons learned by the United States in dealing with discrimination and prejudice, bilingual education, environmentally sound mining practices, collection of data on glacier melt and river management, historically accurate restoration of cultural relics, collaborative research on Tibetan Buddhist teachings, etc. Projects could be implemented through a combination of non-governmental and official channels, with both private and public funding;
- Cooperating with Chinese officials, ***seek to scale up existing U.S.-funded NGO activities in Tibetan regions,*** studying what works and replicating success stories in other ethnic minority prefectures; and

- ***Encourage China to relax restrictions on movement of U.S. government officials, journalists, tourists, and pilgrims to and from Tibetan regions, and, consistent with the Tibet Policy Act, press China to permit the United States to open a Consulate in Lhasa.***

Restrictions on access to Tibet make it harder for China to tell the positive stories of Tibet, even as they afford corrupt or brutal officials protection from scrutiny. Tibet should be as open as any other part of China. Establishing a full-time diplomatic post in Lhasa would not only allow greater support for U.S. citizens traveling to Tibet, but also signal our government's enduring commitment to working with Chinese authorities and the Tibetan people to promote sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation.

The Great Train

The delegation entered Tibet by traveling 25 hours on the newly opened Qinghai-Tibet railway, which connects Golmud in northwest Qinghai Province with Lhasa. The "Great Train" is an engineering marvel, built across more than 700 miles of permafrost at altitudes ranging from 11,000 to nearly 17,000 feet. Although the train is not, as some Chinese initially claimed, "pressurized," it does carry oxygen and some passengers were observed taking oxygen during the journey. The train carries roughly 1.5 million passengers a year, a blend of tourists, business people, pilgrims, and migrant laborers seeking employment or a new life in Tibet. In 2009, more than 561,000 tourists visited Tibet. Most of them were Chinese, and most arrived by train. It is the last category of visitors – migrants – more than any other that causes greatest concern among ethnic Tibetans who worry they will soon be a minority in their own land.

During the train trip, staff members spoke with many fellow travelers. Roughly half the passengers appeared to be ethnic Tibetans, concentrated in the 2nd class berths and 3rd class seating cars. The first-class compartments were mostly filled with ethnic Han Chinese – business people, government officials, Chinese tourists, and Westerners. The Tibetans aboard the train were a mixed lot – students, workers, pilgrims, and business people.

One Tibetan passenger was returning from Shanghai Expo, where she had been deployed as part of a Tibetan cultural troupe at the China Pavilion. The eldest of three siblings, she had one younger brother who was a monk and another who was a student. She spoke of her excitement at getting to present Tibetan culture at Expo, but also of her family's sense of dislocation and unease about the changes underway in Tibet – changes that she characterized as both positive and negative. She said that her family's overall quality of life, including income, housing, education, and health care, had improved markedly over the past 15 years. But she complained about Han migration into Tibet and about "unnecessary interference" by



The Qinghai-Lhasa railroad crosses more than 700 miles of permafrost – a bleak and mostly deserted landscape, punctuated by dramatic glaciated peaks and the occasional mine or nomad camp. (Jannuzi photos)

authorities in the religious life of Tibetans, especially the heavy police presence in Lhasa since the riots of 2008 and the requirement for “patriot education” in monasteries. She expressed admiration for the Dalai Lama, and was aware of both his Nobel Peace Prize and his Congressional Gold Medal (an “award from the U.S. Government”), but expressed uncertainty about whether the Dalai Lama and Tibetans living in exile had a good grasp of conditions inside the TAR after so many years away. Her mixed views of the impact of modernity and Chinese rule in Tibet were typical of those expressed by many average Tibetans with whom staff members spoke during our visit.

One China, Many Tibets

Over the course of five days in the Tibet Autonomous Region and six days in other minority regions of Western China, the members of the delegation experienced what can be described as “One China, Many Tibets.” Indeed, one core finding of the delegation is that ***understanding the situation in contemporary Tibet requires disaggregation***. The life experiences of Tibetans under Chinese rule vary widely by region, occupation, and education level. Moreover, the policies of the Chinese government affecting Tibet – the push for economic development, the efforts made to ensure that Tibetans participate meaningfully in economic and other policy decisions, the emphasis on sustainable environmental practices, the authority granted to religious leaders to manage their own affairs, the respect afforded average Tibetans to practice their faith and sustain their cultural traditions – all of these policies vary in design, and, more importantly, in implementation, from place to place in Tibetan regions found in western China.

Development is real, and benefits are widespread...

On balance, the delegation was impressed by the scale and scope of the economic transformation that is obviously underway in Tibet and other parts of Western China. ***The region's transportation infrastructure has been transformed over the past decade, as a massive investment by the central government has produced thousands of miles of new highways, hundreds of bridges and tunnels, dozens of airports, and most significantly for the future of Tibet, the Qinghai-Lhasa rail link (soon to be extended from Lhasa to Xigaze in Western Tibet).*** These large-scale infrastructure projects have spurred economic development throughout the region, allowing goods to and people to reach markets, while also consolidating the government's administrative hold on Tibet, even in remote areas. Chinese authorities report that Tibet has enjoyed sustained double digit economic growth over the past decade. Although the delegation does not have enough reliable data to confirm those figures, we saw nothing that would call this claim into question. Indeed, members of the delegation who had traveled to Tibet multiple times over the past 25 years saw ample evidence that, although Tibet still lags behind most provinces of China in GDP per capita and other economic benchmarks, the region obviously has enjoyed high growth rates for many years. The growth is spurred by massive central government subsidies and investment. *Officials told us that the central government provides 93 percent of the budget of the Tibetan Autonomous Region.*



Modern two-lane highways now crisscross Tibet, cutting travel times from days to just hours. (Jannuzi photo)



View from the Potala Palace shows railroad bridges and development in western Lhasa. (Jannuzi photo)

The central government's investment has not been limited only to the transportation sector. According to Chinese authorities, the government has completed 80% of roughly 225,000 units of "safe and comfortable" housing, designed ultimately to provide modern accommodations for 1.2 million Tibetans. The delegation was taken to one "model village" a short drive outside of Lhasa, where we were invited into an "average" residence that indeed proved to be "safe and comfortable." The Potemkin-like quality of the village – newly constructed in the past few months, with photos of Chinese leader Deng Xiao-ping prominently displayed on the wall, and the presence of a family patriarch whose life story (former serf, PLA soldier, and now a retired grandparent full of gratitude to the PRC) – was emblematic of the story that Beijing wants to tell in Tibet. ***Yet it could not diminish an important underlying truth: average Tibetans are better housed today than before.*** Moreover, Tibetans said they were grateful to have housing that is warm and has electric power, running water, and modern appliances. Members of the delegation were able to confirm both the extent of this massive housing initiative, and the generally appreciative Tibetan attitude about it, both in the TAR and in other Tibetan regions.

The government has also made a significant investment in education over the past decade, although by its own admission, Tibetans still lag behind ethnic Han Chinese in educational achievement and opportunity. According to government statistics, which we were unable to independently verify, Tibetan enrollment rates for primary school now top 98%, and graduation rates from high school surpass 56%. These figures lag only slightly behind the rest of China. Tibet, like most of China, has nine years compulsory education, although on travels in the region the staff members often saw school age children, particularly in nomadic areas, who were clearly not enrolled in school full time.

According to Chinese officials, more than 20% of Tibetans receive some tertiary education, and the government is making a major investment to expand college education opportunities in the TAR. There are now six universities located in the TAR, reducing the need for Tibetans to travel to other parts of China to pursue higher education. Until recently, Tibetans had few options for higher education close to home. The staff delegation visited the very modern, just completed Lhasa campus of Tibet University (8,000 students) and met with professors and scholars engaged in research on ancient Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. Other faculty, students, and staff are working to develop Linux and Microsoft compatible Tibetan language software. The professors, some ethnic Tibetan, others ethnic Han, were excited to share their work with the staff delegation. They displayed obvious dedication to the mission of the university, namely; bringing higher education and new opportunities to a generation of Tibetans. Unfortunately, our visit to the campus fell on a student holiday, so we were not able to meet with students. The faculty however, eagerly invited us to return and meet with students in the future.

The work being done on Tibetan language computer software seems to be especially significant. In order to be successful in modern China, Tibetans need both fluency in their native tongue and fluency in Chinese. The major obstacle to greater accomplishments in the field of education for many Tibetans appears to be the language barrier. Most Tibetans with whom the staff members spoke had only rudimentary Chinese language ability, although younger Tibetans were more likely to be fluent in Mandarin than their parents. This is a major impediment to landing a good job or advancing in a career. The language barrier also complicates daily tasks, from filling out government forms (almost all of which are printed only in Mandarin) to navigating the city of Lhasa. Shop signs, billboards, large neon signs and even traffic signs in Lhasa are often only in Chinese characters, with no Tibetan script. The language barrier cuts both ways. Very few ethnic Han Chinese living in Tibet, even those officials charged with administering the province, have any Tibetan language fluency. When asked about this, Chinese officials responded that Tibetan language training was not required for officials posted to Tibet, although an *optional* one-month cultural awareness course, which included some very basic language familiarization, was available for those who wanted it.



The newly completed Tibet University campus in Lhasa has an enrollment of 8,000 on a modern campus, helping to remedy a shortage of higher education opportunities inside the TAR. (Jannuzi photo)

...But discrimination, inequalities, and Han migration fuel discontent

Economic development and China's investments in Tibet have clearly improved the lives of many Tibetans, **but discrimination, Han migration, and growing income inequalities are also fueling discontent. Restrictions on religious practice – discussed below – are also a major source of unhappiness for many Tibetans, especially for monks, nuns, and other devout Buddhists.** As one staff member, paraphrasing the Beatles, summed it up in a candid conversation with Chinese authorities, "Money can't buy you love."

Chinese officials are reluctant to acknowledge that discrimination, whether officially sanctioned or otherwise, exists in Tibet. The standard government-approved message is that Tibetans enjoy many special privileges, especially the ability for a married couple to have more than one child. Apart from exemption from the "one family, one child" rule, Tibetans receive some other special benefits, including preferential access to elite universities for those few who qualify based on test scores and completion of high school. But many Tibetans told us they do not feel privileged. They feel disadvantaged, particularly by the influx of ethnic Han Chinese to Tibet.

The growth boom in Tibet has attracted many Han Chinese migrants and businesses, so that today Lhasa no longer has the feel of a Tibetan city, but rather that of a Chinese city with a Tibetan quarter. It appears that a large percentage of the jobs created by the boom are going to Han Chinese rather than native Tibetans. Not surprisingly, Chinese investors in Tibet prefer to hire people with whom they can easily communicate. They also tend to favor friends and relatives, following a long-established Chinese custom of *guanxi* (connections). Even relatively low-skill jobs like taxi-drivers and hotel clerks are often, though not always, held by ethnic Han Chinese.

The Chinese we were able to talk to said they were attracted to Tibet by the economic opportunities there, not by government incentives or subsidies. Han Taxi drivers, for instance, said they could make twice as much in Tibet than in their native provinces. Many came from Henan and Anhui, two of the poorer provinces of China. ***Indeed, a surprising finding is that Han migration appears to be occurring organically, and does not appear to be the result of a deliberate Chinese government policy to populate Tibet with non-Tibetans. The migration of ethnic Han settlers to Tibet is more the byproduct of Chinese economic development strategies than a goal of them.***

Most of the Chinese migrants with whom we talked did not have a *hukou* (residency permit) for Tibet, and therefore were not eligible for subsidized health care, housing, and education. In other words, most were technically illegal migrants, who had to pay for health care, education for their children, and apartments. Moreover, since they do not possess a Tibet *hukou*, the migrants are not tallied on official government census forms as living in Tibet. This helps explain how Chinese authorities can claim that the population of Tibet is 90% Tibetan (and 95% minority, overall).

Chinese authorities also claim that the population of Lhasa is overwhelmingly Tibetan. These claims, however, do not seem credible. Most visitors to Lhasa would quickly conclude that the city is now predominantly Han. Indeed, every Tibetan with whom we talked reported that the city, with population of roughly 500,000 people, was at least 60 percent Han. Many Chinese migrants unaffiliated with the government said the same thing. Anecdotal evidence gathered by our delegation tended to bear out the notion that Tibetans are now in the minority in Lhasa, and are likely to remain so, as a steady stream of Chinese migrants continues to add to the Han population of the city.



Plainclothes police sit atop many buildings in the Barkhor district of downtown Lhasa during daylight hours, alert for any public disturbance. (Jannuzi photo)

Mood in Lhasa – still uneasy

We saw no signs of the property damage that reportedly occurred during the March, 2008 anti-Chinese riots that rocked Lhasa and spread to other parts of Tibet, including, unusually, Tibetan areas outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). However, the omnipresent security forces in the Tibetan quarter and the tight control exercised by our handlers seemed to indicate that tensions remain and officials continue to be concerned about unrest. The Tibetan quarter, centered on the Jokhang Temple and the Barkhor market, the epicenter of the 2008 anti-Chinese riots, is now heavily patrolled by Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP). Every entrance to the quarter features a checkpoint manned by PAP police in riot gear and carrying AK-47s, carbines and other heavy weapons. It is not permitted to take pictures of the checkpoints. Inside the quarter there are surveillance cameras and more PAP outposts. Police detachments regularly march through the area in a show of force. Plain clothed PAP are stationed on rooftops throughout the Tibetan quarter of town during daylight hours, usually in pairs, observing pilgrims and generally seeming alert to any signs of protest. Other plain clothed police were present inside temples and in the Barkhor. The maintenance of such a heavy

police presence is highly unusual in China, and speaks to the importance the local and national authorities attach to preventing any recurrence of the 2008 riots. We did not observe police stopping pilgrims or others from entering the Tibetan quarter, nor did we observe them searching the belongings of merchants or others entering the Barkhor area with bags and carts. Nonetheless, we got the impression that the riot police were alert to any possible disturbance, and were prepared to respond promptly and decisively if directed to do so.

Intensive cultural restoration and preservation efforts underway

The delegation had the opportunity to visit several sites of great religious and cultural significance during our travels in the TAR and Tibetan regions outside the TAR. Most were thronged with pilgrims, evidence that Tibetans remain deeply spiritual and that for average Tibetans, a visit to a local shrine or monastery remains a regular feature of life. As already mentioned, we observed contrasts from province to province, and from site to site. ***Our general impression is that throughout Tibetan regions of China, there are massive investments being made to restore sites of religious and historical significance, and in some cases expand them. Some of the restoration work is being carried out with central government funding, while other efforts, particularly outside of the TAR, are being privately financed by donors and through the revenue generated by tourists.***

Officials in charge of cultural preservation proudly announced that since 2001, the government has spent more than 1.4B yuan (more than \$200 million) inside the TAR to help reconstruct and renovate cultural sites damaged during the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, nearly all religious sites in China experienced some damage, and the 6,000 monasteries of Tibet were devastated. Some were destroyed by ethnic Han Red Guards, but others were pillaged



and vandalized by Tibetans themselves, radicalized under Mao and encouraged by officials to eliminate all vestiges of “feudal” times. Today, hundreds of those monasteries have been rebuilt. The reconstruction at Ganden Monastery just outside of Lhasa – leveled during the Cultural Revolution – has been particularly dramatic.

Temple building under reconstruction at Samye Monastery in the Yarlung River valley. Samye, one of Tibet’s oldest monasteries, has enjoyed a major infusion of government resources over the past five years. (Jannuzi photo)



Inside the ancient Jokhang Temple, officials in charge of cultural preservation prefer to renovate existing structures rather than build new ones, wherever possible. Here, two Tibetan craftsmen repair a structural pillar more than 300 years old by hammering fresh wood into cracks and then shaping the wood to fit. (Jannuzi photo)

Although physically the monasteries of Tibet are recovering, spiritually Tibet's monastic community continues to labor under strict rules and official scrutiny. Regulations governing Tibetan Buddhism are administered by the Religious Affairs Bureau of China. [Ironically, none of the officials we met in charge of cultural heritage or religious affairs, even those who were Tibetans, professed to be Buddhists. Although the Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion, as a practical matter no one who is openly religious can obtain a high government or party position.] The Religious Affairs Bureau and the Ministry of Public Security carefully monitor and control most major religious institutions inside the TAR. The government supervises the selection of new incarnate lamas, an important power, particularly since the head of all four of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism are currently living in exile. The government also requires monks to go through “patriotic education” programs, although the intensity and frequency of these propaganda campaigns varies according to local conditions and the enthusiasm of the officials charged with carrying them out. The government prohibits the display of photographs of the Dalai Lama, although many monasteries ignore this rule when

police are not around. The government prohibits young boys and girls, those under the age of 18, from becoming novices at monasteries and nunneries, although again, the rules are applied with varying degrees of rigor in different regions. The government limits the number of monks who can be in residence at large monasteries by establishing a quota, and at times restricts the freedom of movement of religious leaders. At all major monasteries, the government has set up a “democratic management committee” to ensure compliance with all applicable regulations. In some monasteries, particularly in and around Lhasa, the government has installed video surveillance equipment. In some cases, the government has built police stations adjacent to monasteries. ***Taken together, these rules and restrictions breed resentment and interfere with the ability of Tibetan Buddhists to enjoy that full measure of religious freedom promised them under Article 36 of China’s constitution and called for by international norms that China has at least nominally pledged to respect.***



Police video cameras, such as this one at Sera Monastery, adorn most of the cultural sites of significance around Lhasa, but are rarely seen at Tibetan monasteries outside the TAR. (Jannuzi photo)



Power transmission lines cross mountain passes at altitudes in excess of 3,700 meters in Qinghai and Gansu Provinces. (Jannuzi photo)

Qinghai and Gansu: Still land of nomads

Only about half of all ethnic Tibetans living inside China reside in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Perhaps two million Tibetans live in Tibetan regions of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan Provinces in western China. These Tibetans, many of them semi-nomadic herders, some of them farmers, mostly reside in Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, although some can be found in

major urban areas such as Chengdu and Kunming. On the last SFRC staff delegation to focus on Tibetan issues in 2002, staff found that Tibetans in these prefectures often enjoyed greater freedoms than those living inside the TAR, and also seemed to have more voice over their own affairs than those Tibetans in the supposedly “semi-autonomous” TAR. At that time, travel in the “Amdo” region – as the eastern region of Tibet is called in the Tibetan language – was very difficult. Most roads were unpaved, communications infrastructure poor, and access quite restricted by Chinese public security forces. The return visit to Amdo provided points of contrast and points of continuity.

Most Amdo Tibetans outside the northern edge of the Tibetan Autonomous Region are still poor, nomadic herders or subsistence farmers, but are reaping some of the gains of economic development. New roads stretch across the valleys, power lines thread over high mountain passes, and cell phone wielding yak herders watch TV soap operas from the comfort of their *gor* tents (the traditional round tent made of wool used by Tibetan nomads for hundreds of years). Higher prices for agricultural goods, central government subsidies, religious tourism, and soaring payments for locally harvested “caterpillar fungus” are bringing new sources of income to the region. Unfortunately, many of these economic benefits continue disproportionately to accrue to Han and Hui residents and migrants, and local development specialists worry that Tibetans are neglecting craft skills that have traditionally sustained them during times of difficulty. Further, Tibetan nomads are failing to take advantage of windfall income and loans to increase their agricultural productivity or start businesses. Housing built by the government to settle Tibetan nomads in small towns throughout the plateau is evident. Tibetans say they welcome the subsidized housing for use in the winter months, but do not plan to give up their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

Signs of Economic Progress

In general, Tibetans in Amdo still have very low incomes. Most are semi-nomadic herders or subsistence farmers supplementing their incomes in the winter with manual labor or simple services jobs in small market or monastery towns. They are, however, enjoying some of the benefits of economic development and increased government spending. A monk at the large Labrang Monastery in Gansu explained that the monastery supports monks and students from families that are too poor to provide basic subsistence funds, but in recent years such community support was almost completely unnecessary since all of the surrounding nomad families “were not rich, but no longer poor.”



The average family has roughly 50 head of yak, enough to lift most out of poverty. (Jannuzi photo)

Nomads interviewed on the high plains without exception confirmed that they were feeling some of the benefits of economic progress. A Tibetan nomad residing in a traditional Tibetan *gor* in the Zeku Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture said that his 16-person family had 50 head of yak, and the 4 adult women in the family each had several gold-capped teeth. Most nomadic family groups visited boasted similar herds, and teeth! Almost all had invested in a small solar panel and generator sets which provided enough power for a small TV. We saw families travelling between grazing sites with all of their possessions packed on the back of yaks, including the solar panel and generator charging their modern camera-equipped cell phones. Traditional mud-walled villages sprouted satellite dishes from most roofs, even in remote areas.



Mobile solar unit, costing \$350, are found at most ger camps. (Jannuzi photo)

Throughout the region, we noted numerous road, housing, and hydropower projects. Particularly in the areas designated as Tibetan “autonomous” districts, the roads were new and remarkably well-maintained. National and local state-owned power companies were investing in a large number of new mini hydro-electric plants and small-scale solar energy plants designed to power local communities. Electricity and telephone wires stretched over 3700 meter high passes, and public electric power reached up valleys to lone permanent dwellings. All of the local monasteries visited were building new stupas, assembly halls, and residences.



New mini-hydro power plants abound in western Qinghai and Gansu. (Jannuzi photo)

High commodity prices, government subsidies, religious tourism, and fungus bring money

The European head of a small local craft company explained that, in part, the new-found economic comfort was the result of a better market for the yak and sheep that form the basis of the local economy. However, other factors were also bringing new money into these remote areas. The national government has provided large subsidies to build infrastructure such as roads and power generating facilities. More controversially, the government is building a huge number of houses in the small towns to encourage Tibetan nomads to move into market towns. In many areas the number of new houses equaled or exceeded the existing town housing stock.

Religious tourism appears to constitute an important source of income in the towns surrounding important monasteries. Noting the large new stupas under construction, a monk at the Wudunsi Monastery in Qinghai stated that the money came from private donations, not government subsidies. Another monk at the Labrang monastery stated that monks were allowed to keep all of the proceeds from admissions tickets, and use them to repair and rebuild facilities. In the easier-to-reach monasteries within a day's trip of an airport, we encountered groups of well-off Buddhist pilgrims from Taiwan, Guangdong, and Japan.



Privately-built stupas await dedication in Rebgong, Qinghai Province, center of Tibetan Buddhist art. (Jannuzi photo)

The rising popularity and prices of a traditional Tibetan medicine called caterpillar fungus is also increasing the incomes of Tibetans living in some of the most isolated areas. The fungus, which grows on a caterpillar host and is only suitable for harvest during a few weeks in late spring on the Tibetan Plateau, is recognized internationally as a “natural Viagra.” Retail prices in Xining currently range up to RMB 150 (USD 22) per “stem,” and average about RMB 40 (USD 6) per small unit. A Tibetan economic development specialist told us that a good collector could gather at least 50 caterpillars per day at the height of the eight-week collecting period. He explained that this trade was providing important supplemental income for herders, who now often rent out “gathering rights” on their land.



Hui girls sort caterpillar fungus in Xining. Girl on right is holding \$100 worth in her hand. (Jannuzi photo)

Economic Benefits flow to Han and Hui disproportionately

Although no Tibetans that we spoke to complained, it was apparent that the economic development in most areas disproportionately benefited non-Tibetan groups based outside or on the fringes of the Tibetan areas. A European NGO head explained that Tibetan herders sold most of their livestock and wool through Hui middlemen each fall for a very low return. He stated that, while some families did well, those on the economic margins or who had experienced some kind of difficulty, or who had no supplemental income, had trouble even subsisting. At the infrastructure projects, all of the skilled and semi-skilled laborers we questioned turned out to be Han migrants from Shanxi, Henan, Sichuan, or Anhui provinces,

with local Tibetans working as unskilled shovel-slingers. In the monastery towns, many of the hotels and restaurants frequented by tour groups are Han or Hui-owned. The caterpillar fungus trade, likewise, is dominated by Han traders. A Han businessman last year opened a four-story “Caterpillar Fungus Mall” in Xining, capital of Qinghai province, for the use of exclusively Han dealers.

The Tibetan development specialist in particular worried about the possible impact the fungus trade on local communities. He stated that the price was very unstable, and had dropped by half in 2009 only to rebound in 2010. He said that, in the decade that Tibetans had turned to fungus collecting, many in more remote areas had failed to pass on the traditional craft skills that had sustained them and supplemented their incomes in difficult times. For example, many Tibetans traditionally worked for temples in the winter, carving or painting decorations. In Gansu, we observed Tibetans doing this type of work, but in Qinghai the craftsmen were all Han migrant laborers.

Failure to invest, or move to find work

The ethnically Tibetan development specialist complained that neither Tibetan nomads, nor their more settled farming counterparts, have the ability to take advantage of the money coming in from higher agricultural prices or the caterpillar trade. Rather than investing the money in better stock or equipment, he explained, the Tibetans tend to use the money to work less in the winter. Another Tibetan confirmed that many use the income to go on pilgrimage. Likewise, government schemes to encourage microfinance and small-business loans are not met with much enthusiasm. The development specialist explained that the farmers and nomads have no experience with businesses or financial plans, and although state-run banks are willing to consider offering such loans, few could make enough profit from them to pay them back. The European businessman noted that Tibetan young women, unlike their Han



"Safe and comfortable" housing development in the grasslands of western Qinghai Province. (Jannuzi photo)

counterparts, are not willing to move to take factory jobs, even in the surrounding areas. He said that they were needed at home to provide elder and child care.

Resettlement plans

The government’s nomad resettlement plans met with mixed reviews on the ground. The European NGO head explained that the government’s objective is to settle the semi-nomadic populations permanently in towns, and encourage them to give up their herds. According to his understanding, the local

government is trying to provide service and construction jobs for these new residents in the towns, although he expressed doubt that suitable employment could be found.

Nomads who were to receive new housing often greeted the news with enthusiasm. They already owned permanent winter houses in the mountain valleys, and liked the idea of virtually-free residences close to town. One nomad explained that his family planned to use the government-provided house for most of the family in the winter; only one man in the clan would stay in the old winter house to watch the livestock. When spring arrived, other members of the family would gradually return to the *gors* and their summer grazing lands in the mountains, leaving behind only the elderly and children still in school.



Thousands of monks gather in Rebgong for a celebration to dedicate a new privately financed stupa. (Jannuzi photo)

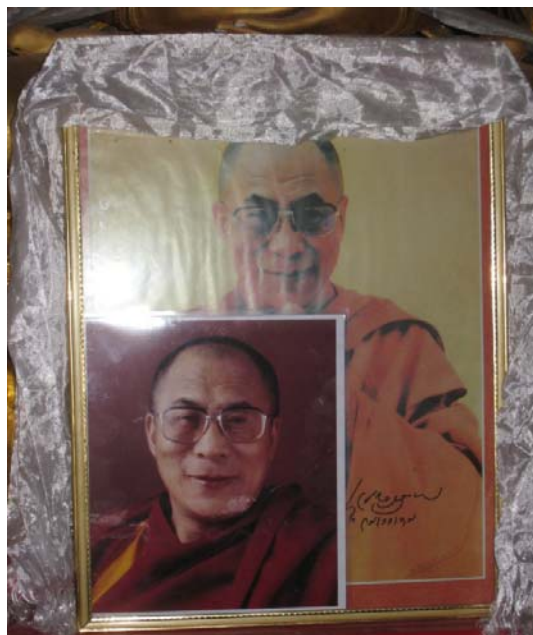
Tibetan Buddhism outside the TAR

One of the more dramatic contrasts between life in Amdo and conditions inside the TAR can be found at the monasteries of the region. Inside the TAR, many monasteries appear to depend on government subsidies to perform renovations and restorations of facilities, using their own income only to cover basic daily expenses. Outside the TAR, monasteries we visited rely

principally on private income, generated from tourists, pilgrims, and wealthy donors, many of them Han Chinese. In Rebgong, a world-renowned center of Buddhist art in Qinghai Province, monasteries looked positively flush with cash, much of it generated by the sale of exquisite Thangka paintings that routinely sell for \$100 to \$500, but outstanding examples of which can fetch as much as \$100,000 in Beijing, Tokyo, or London.

Inside the TAR, official scrutiny of monastic life is much more intense than in Amdo. Monasteries we visited in Tibet had video surveillance, plainclothes police officers, or security check points at entrances. We never observed a picture of the Dalai Lama inside Tibet, and young monks, below the age of about 16, were hard to find. At dozens of monasteries we visited in Amdo, security forces, and their video surveillance equipment and checkpoints, were noticeably absent. Outside of the TAR, we observed some pictures of the Dalai Lama, and young novices, some only 5 or 6 years old, participated in literacy, dance, and music extracurricular studies while also attending normal public school.

Some Monks questioned about issues related to religious expression explained that during the 2008 riots, large numbers of monks had been detained for a day or two and questioned by authorities, and all had undergone intensive “patriot education” campaigns subsequent to the violence, which did extend into many parts of Amdo. But over the past year, the situation had stabilized. Patriot education had slackened, religious life at the monasteries had returned mostly to “normal.” We observed monks engaged in a wide range of religious activities –



Photographs are of the 14th Dalai Lama, who fled China in 1959, can be found outside the TAR, but very rarely inside it. (Jannuzi photo)

philosophy classes, debates, dance and music practice, pilgrimage, instruction for young monks, and escorting visitors. Many of the monasteries we visited had increased the number of monks in residence in recent years, building new housing or renovating existing houses to accommodate the influx. At Labrang Monastery, we were told that 3,000 monks are now studying – up from only about 1,200 in 2002, although a government-imposed quota still limits the number of monks who can be resident at Labrang. Asked why the situation in Amdo was better than that inside the TAR, monks and other Tibetans with whom we spoke quickly answered, “Because here (meaning in their Tibetan semi-autonomous prefectures or local municipalities), many of the authorities are Tibetan and they understand us.”

Conclusion

Over the course of our brief visit to Tibet and Tibetan regions of western China, staff found that the situation defies simple explanation. Rapid economic development has produced real improvements in the quality of life, lifting hundreds of thousands of Tibetans out of poverty and bringing new opportunities to most of the residents of the rooftop of the world. Infrastructure improvements not only serve Chinese national security needs, but also allow goods to travel to market, students to reach schools, and doctors to treat the sick. Hydro and solar power plants are electrifying the Tibetan plateau, giving humble yak herders access to satellite television and cell phones with digital cameras. Tibetans are living longer, healthier, and more productive lives. As Tibet is integrated into modern China, Tibetans are enjoying new opportunities in China and even abroad, and many are seizing them.

But modernity brings stresses to the ancient Tibetan culture. Environmental damage from smog and water pollution accompanies development. Various social ills, from drugs to prostitution, are flowing into Tibet along with migrant laborers. Growing income inequalities present in other parts of China are being repeated in Tibet. Preserving ancient ways, from Buddhist teachings and art to stone construction methods, can be difficult given the influx of Chinese culture and the lure of “get-rich-quick” schemes such as foraging for caterpillar fungus. And as Tibet urbanizes, a semi-nomadic way of life is under threat, not only from Chinese policies designed to fence the frontier, but also from the simple fact that life on the grasslands is hard compared with life in the city.

Apart from the challenges of coping with modernity, Tibetans also live under a political system that too often affords them little real power over their own affairs. In fact, the residents of the Tibet Autonomous Region and the semi-autonomous Tibetan prefectures of Western China arguably enjoy less autonomy than their fellow citizens in other parts of China. Ethnic Han Chinese officials continue to dominate decision making on most matters of consequence, from questions of economic development to the curriculum to be used in schools. Shortly after we returned from Tibet, thousands of Tibetans rallied peacefully in Qinghai Province and in Beijing to urge the government to preserve the teaching of Tibetan language in schools, expressing a desire that poses a dilemma for education officials who want to prepare Tibetan students for careers for which fluency in Mandarin will be essential. Resolving such policy dilemmas to the satisfaction of Tibetans is made infinitely more difficult by the fact that Chinese authorities too often deny Tibetans the opportunity to participate meaningfully in governance decisions.

When Tibetans are involved, in positions of real responsibility, the policies adopted by the government, and their implementation, are demonstrably more successful.

During our visit, we encouraged our Chinese and Tibetan counterparts to think creatively about how China and the United States might work together to achieve greater success in the areas of sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation in Tibetan regions of China. Many officials and ordinary people with whom we met expressed enthusiasm for such collaboration, although others expressed skepticism about whether it was feasible given continuing Chinese sensitivities about foreign involvement in China's internal affairs. The few non-governmental organizations operating in Tibet or Tibetan regions do so now by keeping a low profile on sensitive issues – human rights, religious freedom – and by cultivating close working relationships with local officials. It is not clear whether they could “scale up” their work without a significant commitment to such collaboration from authorities both in Beijing and in Tibetan areas.

Officials in Beijing acknowledged that the government faces challenges in Tibet, and that economic development alone is not sufficient to build a “harmonious” China. Fostering “harmony” at home and abroad is a central goal of the Communist Party articulated by President Hu Jintao. For Tibet to thrive, China must ensure that Tibetans have equal opportunity, that they participate fully in the region's economic growth, that the fragile environment is protected for future generations, and that the unique Tibetan culture is preserved and its relics sensitively restored and protected. These objectives are not alien to the Chinese government. In fact, they appear to be integral to the “Fifth Tibet Work Plan” recently adopted by the Chinese Communist Party and the central government. ***But putting words on paper is easier than crafting and implementing policies to carry them out.*** It remains to be seen whether China will learn from its own successes in parts of the Tibetan world, districts where it has afforded Tibetans greater latitude to manage their own affairs, and apply those lessons to the Tibet Autonomous Region itself.

It also remains to be seen whether Beijing will find a road forward in its halting dialogue with the Dalai Lama and Tibetans living in exile. After nine rounds of official dialogue over eight years, the two sides have narrowed some differences, but a chasm of mistrust still separates them. China views the aspirations of the Dalai Lama for “genuine autonomy” for the Tibetan people as code for “independence.” Chinese officials are especially leery of proposals by the Dalai Lama's representatives to include all of cultural Tibet, including not only the TAR, but also Tibetan regions of other provinces, within the framework of the reconciliation dialogue. Beijing sees this as an attempt to re-draw China's political boundaries. For their part, Tibetans in exile mistrust Beijing's intentions, fearing that China only wants to “run out the clock” with the Dalai Lama while completing the full integration of Tibet into China.

The staff delegation urged the Chinese government to engage in a sincere dialogue with Tibetans in exile, and we attempted to correct some misimpressions we heard while in Tibet. We were told, for instance, the following: that the Dalai Lama does not acknowledge improvements in living standards for Tibetans (false); and that the Dalai Lama does not acknowledge that Tibet is a part of China (also false). Even as the United States encourages reconciliation talks between the Dalai Lama and Beijing, however, we believe that Washington should take steps to establish joint projects. These should draw on the expertise of many parties, including even Tibetans in exile, and promote a better life for Tibetans inside China. These projects could themselves facilitate the dialogue and reconciliation process by expanding trust and demonstrating the value of tapping into outside expertise to address some of the myriad challenges confronting Tibet.



Pilgrims and tourists circumambulate clockwise around the Jokhang Temple, Tibetan Buddhism's most holy shrine, passing numerous small stalls selling souvenirs and handicrafts. (Jannuzi photo)