



# Money Can't Buy Tibetans' Love

by Ben Hillman



**B**OTH OFFICIAL CHINESE and exile Tibetan responses to the protests that broke across Tibet last month followed a familiar, worn-out script. For the Tibetan exiles and their international supporters this was a last gasp for independence by the victims of cultural genocide. For the Chinese government this was premeditated mayhem orchestrated by the “Dalai Lama clique” and “criminal elements” bent on splitting China. Both sides have it wrong.

Certainly, Tibetan exile flags and “free Tibet” slogans were features of Tibet’s biggest and most violent protests in decades, but it is simplistic to see the widespread discontent on the Tibet Plateau as a bid for freedom of an oppressed people. Protests in Lhasa began with Tibetan monks using the anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile (March 10, 1959) to peacefully demonstrate against tight religious controls, including patriotic education campaigns and forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama, but they were soon joined by ordinary Tibetans who used violence against non-Tibetans and their property. Victims included Mus-

lim traders as well as Han Chinese.

As an initial media blackout turned into a media avalanche focused on the violence, many Chinese became confused and angry. Some enraged Chinese bloggers demanded Tibetan blood in return, but most Chinese were simply baffled by what they saw as Tibetan ingratitude for years of central government transfers that have resulted in rapid growth in the region’s economy and a surge in incomes.

Indeed, state transfers to Tibetan areas in recent years have been astronomical in proportion to the size of the local economy. Before completing the world’s highest railway in 2006, China announced 180 other major infrastructure projects for the Tibet Autonomous Region worth 77.8 billion yuan (around \$10.2 billion) to be constructed during 2006-10. The scale of these investments becomes apparent when measured

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against the TAR's GDP, which was 29.1 billion yuan in 2006. In fact, state subsidies account for around 75% of the TAR's GDP.

Giant injections of state capital in major infrastructure projects have been driving growth in Tibet in recent years, with GDP rising an average of 12% per annum since the launch of the Western Development Scheme in 2000. This scheme is intended to expand infrastructure (and markets) to redress growth imbalances between China's eastern seaboard and the impoverished hinterland. In 2007, the TAR's GDP grew at a staggering 14% over the previous year. Reportedly, incomes have been rising, too, with double-digit growth recorded for both rural and urban residents.

Because of the rosy picture painted by statistics and the state media, most Chinese are unaware that Tibetans have been among the big losers of China's economic miracle, and that within Tibetan areas the pace of economic modernization has polarized Tibet's economy, rewarding a minority of Tibetans with state jobs, but marginalizing the majority of Tibetans, who are poorly equipped to access new economic opportunities. Tibetans are mostly subsistence farmers and herders. They make a living in an upland rural economy that is much less diversified than other parts of rural China. Further gains in the productivity of staple crops are unlikely without major technological innovation. The already fragile mountain ecosystem is under further pressure from a population that has doubled since the 1950s. In response, tough new environmental laws have placed increasing restrictions on traditional practices such as grazing, hunting and, for a time, logging.

Despite the boom in investment, most Tibetans have very limited access to off-farm employment. Unlike China's eastern regions, surplus low-skilled rural labor is not readily absorbed by secondary industry. Distance and altitude make Tibet a

poor choice for the industrial activity that has been the engine of growth in other parts of rural China. For the limited opportunities that do exist, Tibetans must compete with migrants from other provinces who generally come with more education, skills and experience.

While these migrants from the east are not flooding the Tibetan population as is sometimes claimed, they are saturating the urban labor markets. Even Tibetan employers in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas admitted to me that they hire non-Tibetans. Not surprisingly, unemployed rural Tibetan migrants are reported to have been behind some of the worst violence of the protests.

### **Tibetans Need Not Apply**

NEW AIR AND rail links to Tibetan areas have been accompanied by explosive growth in tourism, but even when this tourism is largely culture-based, it has not necessarily translated into opportunities for Tibetans. In one large hotel in an ethnically Tibetan area outside the TAR, hotel managers reported that over 90% of their staff were non-Tibetans recruited from other areas. When I asked for an explanation, the managers cited Tibetans' dearth of skills, lack of experience in working fixed hours, and a cultural disposition not inclined to obediently comply with hotel guests' wishes. Even in the house-keeping department, more than 80% of staff were nonlocal.

In a more striking example of how Tibetans are missing out on the boom in tourism, when I visited Lhasa's Potala Palace a few years ago, I was surprised to find a young Han Chinese man dressed in Tibetan costume selling tickets. When I queried him, he laughed and said, "tourists don't know the difference anyway." In another market, a Han Chinese woman passing off wheat flour pancakes as Tibetan barley cakes gave a similar response to my queries. Tourists mightn't know the dif-

ference, but Tibetans do, and daily experiences like these are sources of a deep and growing resentment.

The reasons why Tibetans are being left behind by the rapid pace of economic development are complex, and do include cultural and language differences. Non-Tibetans have access to wider networks, capital and better information. But there is no systematic discrimination of Tibetans by employers. The labor market operates according to market principles and the most skilled people are getting the jobs regardless of ethnicity. My frequent contact with service industry leaders in Tibetan areas indicates that local employers (Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike) would happily hire Tibetans if they could do the job. Unfortunately, most Tibetans, especially rural Tibetans, simply do not meet employers' needs.

A central problem is the high rate of illiteracy among Tibetans—among the highest in China. Only 15% of TAR residents have some degree of secondary education. The curriculum follows the national one and is highly academic, demands strong Chinese literacy and is poorly adapted to rural and regional labor market needs. High school drop-out rates reflect the grim reality that investment in education is not rewarded by jobs, except for a tiny elite that are clever enough to continue to university and state jobs. More than 40% of Tibetans have no formal schooling at all, compared with China's national average of 8%.

State investment in primary education has increased since 2000, triggering an increase in literacy. But investments in rural education primarily target school construction and wages. The quality of teaching re-

mains poor, as the most capable teachers are reluctant to accept jobs in remote posts. Despite accusations to the contrary, the Chinese government has made increasing efforts to sponsor bilingual education, but it is a double-edged sword. In many Tibetan primary schools Tibetan is used as the medium of education in the first few years. But because Chinese literacy requires a huge investment in time, students need to switch to Chinese early to have a chance of competing with other Chinese students in higher level entrance exams. Many Tibetans simply never catch up.

The situation is slightly better in urban areas where there are more and better-quality schools. In Lhasa many educated Tibetans choose to send their kids to Chinese medium primary schools because students at these schools take English as a second language. At the Tibetan medium schools, second language studies are devoted to Chinese. Some have suggested bilingual policy be extended to require that non-Tibetans in Tibet learn Tibetan before being recruited to state jobs. However outside of Tibet's monasteries and an urban elite, levels of Tibetan literacy among Tibetans can be as low as or lower than levels of Chinese illiteracy.

Perhaps the biggest current challenge for education policy and investment in Tibet is the lack of access to vocational training—the kind of training that will allow Tibetans to compete with migrants from the east in construction, tailoring, food production and a host of other jobs in the dynamic service sector. The underinvestment in vocational training is evident in China's official statistics. While the Chinese government spends twice the national average per capita on educa-



tion in the TAR, and teacher-student ratios are comparable, there are half as many secondary schools per capita and only one quarter of the national average of vocational training schools.

Overall there has been declining public investment in education as a percentage of GDP, which stands in stark contrast to the scale and speed of other state investments in the region. As migrants move in to take advantage of the state-led boom, illiterate and semiliterate Tibetans with few skills suited to off-farm labor become marginalized in their own economy. This is not just a Tibetan problem. Across China inequality is closely linked to skills differentials, as wage increase among highly skilled workers outstrips increases among lower skilled workers. China's Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality where “zero” is perfect equality and “one” is perfect inequality—stands at 0.47 making China the most unequal country in Asia after Nepal.

While recent evidence suggests that inequality between regions might be narrowing, within Tibetan areas inequality is clearly increasing, especially between urban and rural households. According to Chinese statistics, urban incomes in Tibet are five times higher than rural incomes. Several researchers within China and abroad studying Tibet's economic development over the past few years have observed with alarm the increased polarization of Tibet's economy. In 2003 I cofounded the Eastern Tibet Training Institute, a vocational training center in an ethnically Tibetan region in northwest Yunnan province. The training center provides job skills training for impoverished

youth from the countryside. By designing courses in consultation with local employers and industry bodies, the institute's success rate for graduates finding wage employment has been above 90% during four years of operations. It confirms anecdotal evidence from local employers that Tibetans and other minorities can get jobs if they have the right skills.

While the Eastern Tibet Training Institute is small, its founders hope it can serve as a model for the sorts of education policies needed to achieve inclusive economic

development in Tibet and other parts of west China. The institute has received strong encouragement by local state-linked bodies such as the Federation of Commerce and Industry. But until the Chinese government itself puts serious resources behind vocational training, the impact of the few available programs will be severely limited. Central govern-

ment policies already call for more vocational training, but only limited resources are allocated to it, especially in rural areas, and local governments are not given incentives to invest in it over the long term.

Even granting Tibetans the opportunities that exist elsewhere is probably not enough. Because Tibetans have already fallen so far behind, only affirmative action can help them catch up. To reduce inequality, secure livelihoods and prevent future unrest, Tibet should have four times the number of vocational schools as the rest of China, not the present situation of only one quarter. This demands a redesign of development strategies to focus more on people, rather than just infrastructure. While roads, bridges, railways and buildings are certainly vital to Tibet's

**TIBET FARES POORLY**

*Average household income (selected provinces) in Chinese yuan, per annum (2005)*

Region/ Province	Urban households	Rural households
China	11,320	3,255
Tibet (TAR)	10,659	2,078
Beijing	19,533	7,346
Guangdong	16,250	4,690
Yunnan	9,995	2,042
Gansu*	8,902	1,980
Qinghai*	8,767	2,151
Sichuan*	9,004	2,803

NOTE: ASTERISK DENOTES PROVINCES OUTSIDE THE TAR WITH SUBSTANTIAL TIBETAN POPULATIONS. YUNNAN HAS A SMALL TIBETAN POPULATION LOCATED IN THE PROVINCE'S NORTHWEST

SOURCE: CHINESE STATISTICAL YEARBOOK (2005)

economic development, investment in capital construction is four times higher than for education, even though education expenditures are higher than capital construction across China as a whole.

China's policy makers have failed to appreciate the importance of investing in people as part of the Western Development Strategy. Their approach has been to expand markets and to let more "advanced" migrants lead the way. The policy assumption is that once Chinese migrants from central and eastern provinces will move into new markets, open small business, work on building sites, drive taxis (most taxi drivers in Lhasa are non-Tibetan), Tibetans will watch and eventually copy them. That approach is not working.

China's leaders need policies that foster inclusive development in Tibet, including assistance to Tibetan enterprise and targeted vocational training for Tibetans. There is a potential role for international NGOs here, but because of the internationalization and politicization of the Tibet issue and the broad sympathy the free Tibet movement enjoys in the West, Chinese leaders are highly suspicious of foreign activities in Tibet. In recent years, there have been increasing restrictions on international NGO operations in Tibetan areas.

There is little sign that the recent protests will trigger a change in China's Tibet policy. As I returned from Tibetan areas at the end of March, Chinese authorities were emphasizing control. Armed police reinforcements were sent to all ethnically Tibetan areas, including those free of protest. At the same time, the official media went on a publicity offensive, believing they could convince the world Tibetan rioters were nothing but violent criminals.

This publicity blitz included more than the usual heated vitriol against the Dalai Lama, who Beijing accused of orchestrating the mayhem in order to split China. The approach worked well in China where the

ethnic nationalist propaganda was unforfeiting. But the approach backfired on the international stage. In late March, foreign journalists taken to Lhasa to inspect the carnage were mobbed by monks crying and begging for recognition of their grievances. Nevertheless the Chinese leadership seems intent on hiding its policy failures behind one-sided propaganda. The nationalist card is designed to foster internal unity and stability, but it also fosters ethnic hatred. If Chinese policy makers and media coverage continue to treat Tibetan protests as seditious acts by violent criminals, it will only serve to fuel the growing resentment of ethnic Tibetans toward Han Chinese and of Han Chinese toward ethnic Tibetans. China must also end its policy of demonizing the Dalai Lama. How will Tibetans ever feel at home in a country that brands their most revered religious figure an outlaw?

China's leaders desperately need to take a fresh approach to Tibet, and acknowledge that unequal development is an underlying cause of social and political tension. This could serve to depoliticize the Tibet problem, and refocus the debate on practical solutions.

Recently, a group of public intellectuals led by Beijing-based writer Wang Lixiong circulated a petition urging national authorities to engage with the Dalai Lama and to take a more open approach to policy deliberations on Tibet. Referring to the recent protests, the petition states, "In order to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future, the government must abide by the freedom of religious belief and the freedom of speech explicitly enshrined in the Chinese Constitution, thereby allowing the Tibetan people to fully express their grievances and hopes and permitting citizens of all nationalities to freely criticize and make suggestions regarding the government's nationality policies." This is promising impetus for a fresh approach to Tibet policy, but it will be a long road ahead. ■