

Marginalization of Tibetans

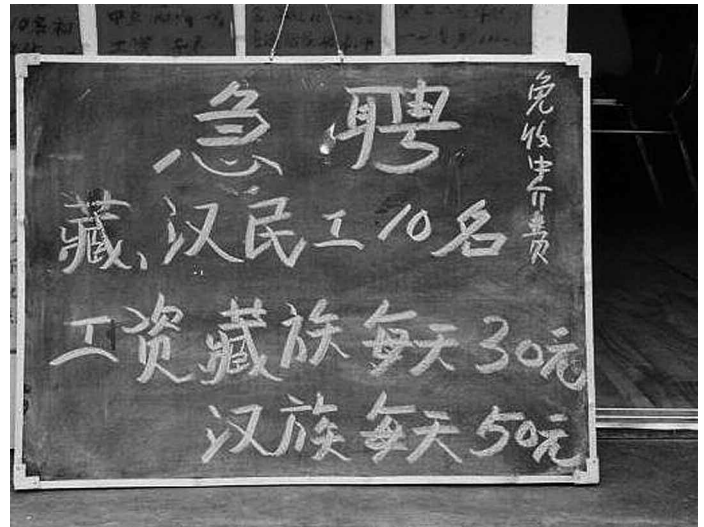
“It feels as though the city’s going to burst; prices for food are getting more and more expensive... going to the temple to pray, it’s hard to move through the mass of tourists, and furthermore the tourists speak so loudly, they spit on the ground and the men smoke and the women bare their flesh; go to a shop or a restaurant and the owners ignore the locals, with the Han just looking out for the Han, and Tibetans truly becoming marginalized.”

—A local Tibetan from Lhasa describing the “plague of locusts” brought on by the railroad, As quoted in ICT Report, “Tracking the Steel Dragon,” available at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon

THE TIBETAN QUOTED ABOVE IS NOT ALONE IN HIS SENTIMENTS OF MARGINALIZATION. The implementation of the Western Development Strategy has increased the gulf between Tibetans and their migrant Han Chinese neighbors who benefit from state-supported policies and investments creating opportunities which largely advantage workers and entrepreneurs with Chinese fluency, Chinese work cultures and connections to business networks in China. Government finance channeled into Tibet continues to be targeted at urban areas and sectors where Tibetans have the hardest time competing with better educated Chinese migrants.

Development economist Andrew Fischer explains: “This combination in turn exacerbates inequality and the exclusionary dynamics of growth, given that the majority of Tibetans have more and more difficulty accessing the state or private networks that control the dominant sources of wealth in the economy. Therefore, the most urgent problem within these developments is what can be called ‘ethnically exclusionary growth.’” (Fischer’s full report “Perversities of Extreme Dependence and Unequal Growth in the TAR” is available online at www.tibetwatch.org.)

Such exclusionary growth both results from and fuels the influx of Chinese migrants entering Tibet since the completion of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad. It has been made clear in various official statements that China’s Western Development Strategy actively encourages China’s profes-



A help wanted sign seeks Tibetans at 30 RMB per day and Han Chinese at 50 RMB per day.

sionals, experts and workers to go with their families to “develop and pioneer in ethnic autonomous areas,” a phrase which is enshrined in legislation as a part of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL)—the major piece of legislation defining the status of Tibetan autonomy within the People’s Republic of China (PRC). While subsidies are not explicitly given to Han Chinese, various other incentives are offered to those willing to relocate to Tibet, including university loan repayments for Chinese graduates who agree to work in “western or remote areas” of the PRC, placing even educated Tibetans at an economic disadvantage to their new neighbors.

This marginalization is further compounded by the coerced settlement of nomads into urban environments where they lack the adequate education and skills to compete with their Chinese counterparts. Amid explicit concerns about unemployment among Tibetans, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Labor and Social Security Bureau estimated in May 2007 that 20,000 to 30,000 Tibetan herders and farmers were leaving the land each year and therefore in need of work. This compares with the bureau’s forecast of 200,000 to 300,000 Han Chinese arriving each year on the train in search of work.

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Chinese enterprises operating in Tibet almost invariably prefer to hire migrant Chinese employees, who are more familiar with the Chinese work culture and Chinese practices, not to mention the Chinese language. Furthermore, the family and business networks among Han and Hui (Chinese Muslim) settlers in Lhasa, which effectively exclude Tibetans from significant participation in the economy, are replicated throughout all economic activities in Tibet, often exclusively employing non-Tibetan staff for ventures intended to benefit non-Tibetan interests. “Help Wanted” signs are often seen in Lhasa explicitly stating “Han only” need apply.

In urban Tibet, the migrant population from rural areas of the PRC is better educated than the local urban population. Everywhere else in the PRC, urban populations are ‘protected’ to some degree by a job market which favors their higher levels of education. As the development economist Andrew Fischer has noted, in urban Tibet, however, the average female migrant worker from rural China is better educated than the average Tibetan urban male. Tibetans are hampered further by a lack of any meaningful access to vocational training which could prepare them to compete with Chinese migrants—and what little vocational training there is on offer serves to prepare people for menial jobs that have little prestige or prospects. On the question of education alone, therefore, Tibetans face an immediate disadvantage when competing for work with the migrant population. (Please see ICT’s briefing page on “Education in Tibet.”)

Aware of the various disadvantages and obstacles faced by Tibetan students in Tibet, the TAR government used to guarantee Tibetan graduates employment—a system which used to exist throughout the PRC but which remained in the TAR for several years after it had been abolished elsewhere. After this guarantee was abolished, Tibetan students at Lhasa University protested in October 2006, angered when 100 government positions were filled by 98 Han Chinese candidates and only two Tibetan candidates. While the total number of recruits was eventually raised to include an additional 71 Tibetan graduates, Tibetan participation in the public sector is limited, and Human Rights Watch reported that at present, there are fewer Tibetans in Lhasa’s municipal administration than at any time since 1966 (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/11/06/china-fewer-tibetans-lhasa-s-key-ruling-body>).

Describing the systematic marginalization of Tibetans, development economist Andrew Fischer states that while the state may have moved to increase educational opportunities for Tibetans, “it also moved towards a stronger assimilationist position together with strong exclusionary pressures in labor markets. Ultimately, the situation breeds considerable frustration and alienation, while the additional elite option of full assimilation further accentuates class polarization among Tibetans themselves.”

Current development plans in Tibet focus on what China needs, what China can extract, and how the Party can consolidate its power over Tibet, rather than what would most skillfully lift Tibetan incomes. By continuing to pursue a model of development that appears to increase rather than close the gap between urban and rural, rich and poor, Chinese and Tibetan, the Chinese state risks further marginalizing and alienating the Tibetan people, potentially undermining the political objectives of its current development: a stable Tibet, united within China.

For further information on this topic, please refer to ICT’s report “Tracking the Steel Dragon” specifically, the chapter entitled “Social Exclusion and China’s Economic Polices” available online at www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon.