

Railway Development in Tibet

“The railroad is not inherently bad; in fact, if the Tibetans were the ones who could make the decisions about how the railroad would and would not be used, it could be a good thing. But Tibetans are powerless to affect the Chinese government’s economic, political and demographic policies in Tibet, and the railroad is an example par excellence.”

—A Tibetan living in the West, who visited the railroad in 2006, as quoted in ICT Report, “Tracking the Steel Dragon,” available at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon

THE WORLD’S HIGHEST RAILROAD across the Tibetan plateau from Golmud in Qinghai to Lhasa (completed in July 2006) and the forthcoming line from Chengdu in Sichuan to Lhasa are the most high-profile symbols of Beijing’s ambitious plans to develop the western regions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As an indispensable element of Beijing’s ‘transportation revolution,’ the aim of this construction is to expand the influence and consolidate the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which regards this as crucial to China’s successful rise in the 21st century. While Chinese officials claim that the construction of the railroads and the accompanying development in Tibet will be of benefit to Tibetans, the absence of stakeholder involvement in planning and implementation of the rail lines has proven the reality of the situation contrary to this assertion.

The completed Qinghai-Tibet railway has had a dramatic impact on the lives of Tibetans and on the land itself. The construction of the Sichuan-Tibet railway, expected to be completed by 2020, is likely to have similar effects for Tibetans, further accelerating the influx of Chinese people to the plateau, exacerbating the economic marginalization of Tibetans, and threatening Tibet’s fragile high altitude environment. (See CECC Special Topic Paper: Tibet 2008-2009.)

The main impact of the railroads on Tibet can only be understood in the context of the CCP’s ambitious and transformative campaign of *Xibu da kaifa*, the strategy to develop the western regions of the PRC. The Chinese term *kaifa* in



Passengers wait on the platform for a train bound for Xining from Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu).

this context is often rendered into English as ‘development,’ however, standard dictionaries define *kaifa* as ‘develop,’ ‘open up’ and ‘exploit,’ which reflects how the Party perceives the western areas of the PRC—essentially as a provider of resources in order to facilitate development in the central and eastern regions. China’s leaders hope that the PRC’s western region’s resources can help to satisfy the nation’s rising demand for water, minerals and energy. The railroads provide the infrastructure to facilitate the increased exploitation of Tibet’s natural resources by the Chinese state and Chinese companies—resting on the state’s absolute claim of ownership over Tibetan areas. Article Nine of the Constitution of the PRC dictates that every nugget of gold mined, every lump of coal and every tree in Tibet’s forests belong to the state.

As the railroads facilitate a draining of Tibetan natural resources, they also make possible vastly increased population transfers into Tibet. Civilian Chinese are entering Tibet in increasing numbers, according to official statistics, the Qinghai-Tibet railroad transported “1.5 million passengers into Tibet” during its first year of operation, and the authorities made the unusual admission that the majority of these passengers were migrant workers or business people rather than tourists. Many Tibetans describe this

influx of Chinese as a “second invasion of Tibet,” an occurrence which may even have intensified Tibetans’ sense of a separate identity, and fostered a desire to resist assimilation. Furthermore, in a move of geopolitical significance that has concerned Indian and world leaders alike, the Chinese have increased the deployment of offensive mechanized military forces to Tibetan regions, projecting Chinese influence to sensitive and contested border areas.

The sinicization of Tibet, a gradual dilution of Tibetan culture resulting from the influx of Chinese migrants has contributed to the further economic marginalization of Tibetans who cannot compete in a Chinese job market. Government finance channeled into Tibet continues to be targeted at urban areas where Tibetans have the hardest time competing with Chinese migrants. Opportunities created largely benefit workers and entrepreneurs with Chinese fluency, Chinese work cultures and connections to government or business networks in China. For the majority of Tibetans who do not speak fluent Chinese — who according to some estimates are as much as 80% of Tibetans — there remain few avenues to successful participation in the Chinese-dominated economy.

The impact of the migrants and tourists in Tibet reaches well past the social and economic, as the railroads and their passengers also put pressure on the delicate Tibetan environment, upsetting the fragile balance on the plateau. Oil wells, salt pans, and missile bases already dominate the first half of the main rail line into Tibet, and along the Golmud-Lhasa portion of the line completed in 2006 one can already begin to see the environmental toll. Grasslands turn to deserts, mining projects leech toxic chemicals into the water resources of Tibetan people and livestock, and the impact is yet to be seen on various species of Tibetan wildlife that have had their rangeland cut in two by the railway. Environmental issues appear to remain secondary to successful completion of the main projects of the Western Development Strategy, most of which are concerned with large-scale infrastructure construction and resource exploitation.

Since the beginning of the Western Development Strategy in 1999-2000, the Chinese government has been implementing policies of settlement, land confiscation, and fencing of pastoral areas inhabited primarily by Tibetans, dramatically curtailing their traditional means of livelihood and

undermining the unique Tibetan identity. In some cases, the authorities claim that they are moving people from their land in order to protect the environment or to improve their way of life; however, the main areas of nomad resettlement coincide with the remote grasslands the Qinghai-Tibet railway passes through en route to Lhasa, and there is increasing concern that the imposition of Chinese urban and industrial models on one of the last examples of sustainable pastoralism is increasingly leading to growing poverty and contributing to grassland degradation. (See ICT’s briefing page on “Nomad Resettlement in Tibet” for more information.)

ICT recommends the following to decrease the impact of China’s railways in Tibet:

- The PRC must adopt or abide by laws and regulations that allow the practice of genuine autonomy so that Tibetans have the rights and means to participate in decision-making on the development of Tibet;
- The PRC should comply with the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and other human rights treaty obligations to ensure it provides the greatest possible security of tenure to occupiers of houses and land;
- Outside developers should engage local Tibetans at an early stage, so that local communities can learn and consider options, impacts and long-term consequences; and
- The U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights should raise questions about the social exclusion and marginalization of Tibetans resulting from China’s economic policies and the advent of the railroad system.

For more complete information on the far-reaching impacts of China’s railway development in Tibet, please see ICT’s extensive report “Tracking the Steel Dragon: How China’s Economic Policies and the Railway are Transforming Tibet.” (A full pdf version is available online at: <http://www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon>.)