

Impact of urbanization in rural areas of Tibet Autonomous Region

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The first group of more than 70 Chinese cadres to study the Tibetan language in Lhasa graduated from Tibet University in July; they are now being sent into the townships and towns around Lhasa to serve as officials. The Chinese press has also announced the voluntary assignments of 6000 Chinese university graduates to the western areas of China, including Tibet, to work on sanitation, health, agricultural and other projects. Both measures reflect the authorities' aim to attract skilled personnel into the region as part of the ongoing implementation of far-reaching policies to develop China's western regions. The current reforms to residency registration policies, which mean that Chinese workers can register as residents in Tibetan areas as well as keeping their residency in their home area, also formalises the continued transfer of skilled Chinese workers to Tibetan and other western areas of the PRC.

Many of the Chinese cadres who have graduated this summer from Tibet University after studying the Tibetan language for three years are likely to be appointed to senior positions under the current China-wide policy of urbanising rural areas, which involves the aggregation of smaller townships into larger administrative units. Townships (Chinese: xiang) which are near or adjoining an existing town, or which are already a small town (Chinese: zhen), are being combined with neighbouring townships and renamed as one administrative entity. This represents the implementation of plans to construct 106 new urban centres laid out in the 15-year plan for the Tibet Autonomous Region, and described in the plan as due for completion by 2005. The Tenth TAR Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) states: "The pace of small town development will quicken, with urbanisation reaching 19" or so." Resources will be concentrated into each administrative centre, and health and education administered at this level. There has been some concern among Tibetans that Tibetan cadres may lose their jobs and be replaced by Chinese cadres, including those who have studied Tibetan. These fears reflect the general insecurity felt by Tibetans about the ongoing threat to their livelihoods from the influx of Chinese workers, both skilled and unskilled, to Tibetan areas, and the difficulties they are experiencing in terms of competition for jobs.

The authorities state that the rationale for the urbanisation of rural areas is to improve social services, to create new productive enterprises, to raise the standard of income and living for rural people and to improve employment prospects for rural Tibetans. While the majority of Tibetans live in rural areas, most growth in the economy has been concentrated in urban areas of Tibet, with much of the above average growth taking place in either construction or the tertiary sector, which includes trade, transport, services and government/Party administration. Andrew Fischer, a development economist who specialises in Tibet, says: This radical restructuring of the TAR economy, which has been accelerated since the beginning of the Western development strategy in 1999, has been away from productive activities such as agriculture and small-scale industry and into urban services and large-scale construction projects. This is despite the fact that the TAR, along with Yunnan, is the most agrarian and rural province of China. (See: TIN News Update, 8 April 2003 Deciphering Economic Growth in the Tibet Autonomous Region and TIN News Update, 31 May 2003, The rich get richer, and the poor -- Rural poverty and inequality in Tibet -- indications from recent official surveys). Despite Chinese official statistics on the growth of the TAR, extreme poverty in the TAR, as measured by the official poverty line in China, was declining up until the end of the 1990s, but still remained at one of the highest levels in the PRC by 1999, slightly higher than that of Qinghai.

The shift towards fewer and more compact communities is likely to have a dramatic impact on rural livelihoods - for instance, it is likely to involve the resettlement of Tibetans from more remote rural areas to the new towns. Experimental pilot programmes for the relocation of Tibetans from rural areas to the new communities have recently been started in all prefectures of the TAR in order to test out the policy, which includes preferential treatment, such as access to loans, in setting up new enterprises. At this stage, some entire families have moved to the pilot enterprise sites, but in most cases just one or two members of a family have moved.

An article in the influential journal Qiu Shi (Seeking Truth), a semi-monthly journal of the Party Committee published in Beijing, referred to the importance of such urbanisation programmes to the western development strategy. The article, written by Shi Peijun and Liu Xuemin on the theme of developing new ideas for western development, stated: urbanisation is also an important link that must not be neglected. Through industrial development, we should enable scattered peasants and herdsmen in the western region to live in compact communities, to engage in non-agricultural economic activities, and to enjoy the modern way of life. In the meantime proceeding from restoring the ecosystem, protecting the environment, and developing the economy, we should assemble the highly scattered population in ecologically fragile localities into new villages and towns through migration. (Qiu Shi in Chinese, 16 February 2003).

The same policies of urbanisation of rural areas, proposals to make it easier for those seeking work to move from the countryside to urban areas, and administrative reforms based on cutting the number of township officials are being carried out throughout China as well as in Tibetan areas.

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Chinese graduates volunteer in western regions

The Chinese press reported in August that 43,763 university graduates applied to work voluntarily in the western regions of China, and 6000 were accepted. This was part of a new annual programme launched on 10 June by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the Ministry of Education to recruit volunteers from college graduates to help develop impoverished regions? (Xinhua, 10 June). After working in the fields of education, health, poverty reduction, or agricultural science, the graduates would be free to choose whether to continue to work in the west or seek chances in other developed regions of the country, according to Zhao Yong, a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China. The high level of applicants for the voluntary posts reflects the difficulty of China's graduates in finding work following the completion of their college courses. The Xinhua article reports that 2.12 million college students are graduating this year, which is 620,000 more than last year when Chinese institutions of higher learning began to expand student enrolments.

The total of 6,000 graduate volunteers to be assigned to Western provinces under this scheme is relatively small given the vast territory that makes up the Western regions of the PRC, which covers Chongqing Municipality, Sichuan province, Guizhou province, Yunnan province, Tibet Autonomous Region, Shaanxi province, Gansu province, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Qinghai province, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (while Inner Mongolia and Guangxi are not part of the western regions of the PRC, they were assigned as "Western" areas under the western development strategy). But it reflects the Party's intention to attract more skilled workers to Tibet and other western regions under western development strategy.

Li Dezhu, one of the founder members of the Leading Group for Western Development set up under the State Council in February 2000, stated in June 2000 that two-way population flow was an inevitable trend of Western development. In an article for Qiu Shi on 1 June 2000, Li Dezhu referred to people from the western regions moving to the east as a result of the rapid development of the coastal regions in China, and also stated: In carrying out the strategy of large-scale western development, development of the west will be greatly accelerated and human talent will flow westward if the country favours the western regions in policy and capital. It is conceivable that a phenomenon of "The peacock flying west" will appear in keeping with the execution of large-scale western development.

Residency reform facilitates continued influx of Chinese workers

The ongoing reform of the household registration system in China is likely to facilitate the movement of more Chinese workers, both skilled and unskilled, and college and university graduates to live and work in Tibetan areas. China is one of only a few countries that practises residency registration, which requires people to transfer their registered residence whenever they change their residence. The reforms to the residency system are China-wide; the influential hardliner Luo Gan is said to be one of the members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee involved in initiating these reforms. They are linked to western development strategy in that the authorities are aiming to make it easier for Chinese people to go to work in the west, have residency there if they wish to do so, while retaining residency in their home area so they can return if necessary.

The Ministry of Public Security announced in August that China would ease household registration rules in the western areas to encourage university graduates and investors to migrate and invest there (China Daily, 8 August). The new measures stated that college graduates and investors can either transfer their registered place of residence to the western regions where they are working or back to their home, while professionals who have registered their residence in large or medium-sized cities who decide to work in small towns or rural areas may retain their urban residence registration.

The changes in residency policy were reported by the Chinese press several years ago and appear to have now reached implementation stage. Xinhua stated on 14 July 2000: "The new policy is aimed at providing a better environment for the country to carry out its West Development strategy and encouraging a reasonable and orderly population immigration." A State Council circular on the implementation of policy measures regarding development of the western regions published by Xinhua on 27 December 2001 underlined the importance of household registration reform and expanding cadre interflow between the eastern and western regions? The circular stated: All persons who maintain a legal, steady residence, and have a stable job or source of livelihood in a city below the prefecture level (including prefectural cities) or small towns in the western region may be able to apply for regular urban residence if they wish to do so. Reasonable transfer of surplus rural labour force and reasonable cross-regional flow of transients are encouraged.

The residency reforms formalise a process of population movement that has been underway for some years in China. The reforms encourage a temporary type of migration, in which workers can maintain the security of their home residency while trying a more temporary form of residency elsewhere and still having the freedom to return home. In practice, obtaining residency in the western areas, where the authorities want to encourage workers, is likely to be easier than in cities like Beijing. But the new regulations also make it easier for Chinese workers to settle permanently in Tibetan areas, investors and students can obtain permanent resident

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status after three years residency, according to regulations made public in October 2000. This could have long-term consequences for the ethnic balance of Tibetan areas.

This is one in a series of independent reports by Kate Saunders commissioned by the Australia Tibet Council, Free Tibet Campaign and the International Campaign for Tibet.