

Tourism in Tibet

ACCELERATED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER CURRENT CHINESE GOVERNMENT POLICIES and, in particular, the advent of the railroad and resulting increase in tourism, have heightened concerns for the survival of Tibet's unique identity. Ironically, as the Chinese authorities market Tibet to Chinese as a tourist destination based on the "exotic" spiritual attractions of its Buddhist culture and landscape, they are tightening control over Tibetan religious expression and practice by the Tibetan people.

Today in Tibet, courtyards where hundreds of monks were once taught and debated scriptures are now occupied by photo booths where Chinese tourists wear garish versions of traditional costumes to pose for the camera. In parts of eastern Tibet, entire monasteries are run as commercial concerns where the salespeople dress in maroon robes, attempting to sell incense, statues and paintings to tourists.

Tourism hit an all time high in Tibet in 2007, with just over 4 million visitors, an increase of 64 percent year-on-year. Chinese officials explained the increase as the result of better marketing and improved transport links, including the controversial train to Lhasa from Golmud that began service in July 2006. The Chinese government forecast that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) would receive at least 5 million tourists in 2008 — a figure that is nearly twice its population according to Chinese statistics. It is unlikely that figure will be met, as in the immediate wake of the protests in Lhasa (and elsewhere in Tibet) in mid-March 2008, the Chinese authorities barred all tourists from entering the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Domestic tourism to the TAR resumed in time for the national week-long May Day vacation in early May 2008, six weeks after the unrest in Lhasa. Only a trickle of Chinese tourists traveled to Lhasa, where many buildings were still shuttered and smoke-stained following the March 14 unrest, and police still lined the streets. Government spokespeople were initially vague about when *foreign* tourists would be allowed back to the TAR, with most observers guessing not until after the Olympics finished in late August, and probably not until the Paralympics finished in September. However, a spokesperson announced in late June 2008 that tour groups



Chinese tourists in Tibet

— as opposed to individual, independent travelers — were to be accepted again as of June 25, 2008.

For the foreseeable future, tour groups are likely to face the most cumbersome and expensive application procedures ever seen for entering the TAR. Chinese authorities claim that these restrictions are intended to protect foreign tourists from possible instances of further unrest; but they are also well aware that foreign tourists in Tibet have witnessed and reported on instances of severe human rights abuses against the Tibetan people.

TAR officials set a target of 3.4 billion yuan (US \$460 million) in revenue from tourism in 2007 and expect at least 6 billion yuan (US \$770 million) from 6 million tourists in 2010. But analysts report that much of the revenue from tourism leaves the region. Development economist Andrew Fischer, a specialist on Tibet's economy, says: "Most of the tourists visiting the TAR are Chinese nationals and they mostly stay in Chinese-owned and -run hotels on the west side of Lhasa, close to an abundant supply of Chinese restaurants and entertainment centers, complete with Chinese brothels and Chinese sex workers, who obviously service the military personnel and cadres stationed there as well. It is likely that much of the revenue that such tourism generates is channeled through such venues and eventually out of the province altogether. Under such conditions, the tourism

industry will have a difficult time functioning as a self-sustaining pillar industry that accumulates capital and profits in the TAR, rather than servicing as another drain from which incoming resources flow back out of the province almost as fast as they enter.” (See: ICT report, Tracking the Steel Dragon, www.savetibet.org.)

The Chinese government prioritizes fast-track economic development above cultural protection, and changes in Chinese laws and regulations tend to decrease the protection

of the Tibetan language and culture. The commoditization of Tibetan culture and promotion of “Tibet chic” by government and business coincides with a trend towards repression and, in fact, the weakening of Tibetan identity. The replacement of Tibetan tour guides with Chinese guides is just one example of how the authorities block Tibetans interpreting their culture to visitors and the outside world.