

Travel Destination: Tibet. Modernizing the Present and Concreting over the Past

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Summary

Modernization is understood as the implementation of innovations of various kinds and can happen gradually or very suddenly. After the invasion of China's People's Liberation Army in 1951, Tibet was literally catapulted into "modernity." Transformations took place on various levels. The introduction of the new Communist ideology went hand in hand with the destruction of the old Tibetan culture and its values. The old Tibet was branded as feudal, backward, and underdeveloped, and therefore needed to be modernized. By now — sixty years, or nearly two generations, later — the face of Tibet has completely changed. The improvement in the region's technical infrastructure has not only led to fundamental changes in the lifestyle of many Tibetans, but has also reshaped the environment in which they live and work. A network of roads and airports, a new railroad, new bridges, tunnels, and piers, new houses, power supply lines, and solar fields are everyday features of the region today. Tourism has been growing more and more important as a branch of the Tibetan economy. Expectations regarding the growth of tourism were the basis of improvement and extension of the road network on a grand scale in the last decade. The boom of tourism is possible only through perfectly repaired roads and newly constructed railways and highways. The growing numbers of tourists, in turn, demand and stimulate even more improvements in the infrastructure and facilities such as new hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, travel agencies, and souvenir shops. Most tourists come to Tibet from mainland China and expect to find an untouched world with sacred mountains and lakes, including a unique monastery culture. The area that was once considered to be backward has now become a magnet for visitors, and once-denigrated "traditional elements" are experiencing a revival today under arguably positive auspices.¹ This paper outlines the ways in which the booming new tourist industry is transforming the region in economic, infrastructural, and cultural matters.

Manuscript received on 2013-06-21, accepted on 2013-09-21

Keywords: Tibet, tourism, infrastructure, economy, transformation

* This paper is based on the author's personal observations and fieldwork research conducted in Southern and Central Tibet between 1999 and 2012. The term "Tibet" refers to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), which is part of the People's Republic of China today.

1 This paper focuses on the Tibetan Autonomous Region, where tourism is a comparatively young branch of the economy, unlike in other parts of China and Tibet. For an in-depth case study on the socio-economic effects of "Shangri-La tourism" in Eastern Tibet, see Kolås (2008); she shows how "Tibetan culture" is being reconstructed as a marketable commodity for tourists.

Modernizing Tibet

The idea of modernizing Tibet is not a new one. Modernization has always been stimulated from outside the country — primarily by the Chinese and the British — and has focused on the development of traffic and communications right from the beginning. Tibet's geographical position was of strategic significance, especially for Britain, China, and Russia. Having a good infrastructure at their disposal was crucial for those who strove for control of the area.

Shaped and dictated by the environment and climate of the Tibetan Plateau, transportation in pre-modern Tibet had to adapt to the natural conditions of the land. The Tibetan Plateau is at a high altitude (4,000 m above sea level on average) and is surrounded by high mountain ranges. Traffic and transportation in pre-1959 Tibet relied on a combination of waterways and roads, with the majority of the roads amounting to no more than tracks or pathways for beasts of burden. Overland transport for people and goods relied almost entirely on animal power with no mechanical assistance; the Tibetans did not use the wheel for transportation. Yaks, sheep, and donkeys were used for long- and short-distance transportation of goods. People would travel on horseback or just walked. In order to indicate the distance between two places, Tibetans would use terms like “a three-day ride on horseback.”

Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the revolutionary and founder of the Republic of China, drew up a plan to develop the regional economy in Tibet. This included the construction of railways in order to reclaim wasteland, exploit Tibet's mineral resources, and support the Chinese armed forces in defending the national frontiers. The British Younghusband invasion of Tibet in 1904 was regarded as a result of China's inability to transport troops into the inaccessible area.²

In the early 20th century, the British gained influence not only over the Tibetan nobility, but also over the 13th Dalai Lama, who was open-minded about “modernity.” It was the British who set up the first telegraph stations in the region. Young Tibetans were sent abroad to study. Upon their return to Tibet, they became aware of the backwardness of their homeland and pushed the idea of modernization. However, all modernization efforts, including those concerning the army, were nipped in the bud by the monastic elites, which feared losing their political power and influence. Following its declaration of independence in 1913, Tibet had a period of nearly forty years to prepare for an armed confrontation with the Chinese, but rather than building up its defense capacity, “Tibet saw itself as a uniquely religious country in which the pursuit of Buddhism was the dominant goal” (Goldstein 1993: 816). Thus, the Chinese invasion faced comparatively little resistance when it took place.

One of China's main goals after the signing of the “Seventeen-Point Agreement” and its takeover of Tibet was to modernize the region on several levels. As Goldstein has stated, building tarmac roads from inland China to Lhasa was a priority

2 China Tibet Online (2009).

right from the start (Goldstein 2007: 414). The first section of road from Ganze to Chamdo in Eastern Tibet (445 km) was completed in less than one and a half years, viz., by November 1952. Construction of the highway to Lhasa — another one thousand-odd kilometers of roadway — began in 1953 and was completed in December 1954. Another road from Lhasa to the northern province of Qinghai was opened at the same time (Goldstein 2007: 414–419).³

Today there are many way of reaching Tibet and traveling within the region. Airlines, highways, and the railroad network all play a significant role in long-distance traffic, whereas local and short-distance traffic relies on an efficient network of local roads. After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese leaders wanted to see rapid development in Tibet. The economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s were comparatively moderate. The introduction of free-market relations caused the economy to diversify, as individual business activities were permitted again. Educational and medical systems were set up and gradually improved. Nevertheless, although economic conditions slightly improved for many Tibetans as of the 1980s, overall living standards remained quite poor compared to those in Eastern China. Drastic modernization started only at the beginning of the 21st century. In 1999, the Chinese Government initiated the so-called “Open up the West” campaign (*xibu da kaifa* in Chinese), which was designed to overcome the imbalance of economic development between the booming Chinese east coast and the western provinces, including the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In Tibet, most investments were aimed at improving the region’s infrastructure: it was provided with electricity (dams and hydropower stations were constructed), new roads and highways were built, existing roads were repaired or tarmacked, and a new railroad was constructed from Golmud to Lhasa. Experts had regarded the project of a railway between Tibet and its neighboring province Qinghai as unfeasible, but even so, the world’s highest rail route was opened in 2006. The railroad runs across dams, over bridges, and through tunnels. The permafrost soil has been subdued with poles made of cement and steel. A vast number of bridge piers have been constructed, quite a few of them more than fifty meters high. More than 1,000 km of rail tracks were laid through mainly deserted areas and over 5,000-meter-high mountain passes.⁴ Although the journey takes 24 hours from Qinghai’s capital Xining to Lhasa and as much as 48 hours from Beijing, traveling to Tibet by train is very popular among Chinese tourists.⁵

3 The road was mainly constructed by Chinese soldiers, although Tibetans were also involved in the construction work. For a detailed eyewitness report including historical pictures, see the published diary of Lin Tian, who was a Chinese soldier at the time.

4 For a good overview of the railroad construction project, see Peters and Lu (2006).

5 For her Master’s thesis, Ming Ming Su undertook extensive research, which included a questionnaire on travelers’ perspectives concerning the railway. She focused on travelers to Tibet on the train from Beijing to Lhasa and identified the region’s natural scenery and culture “as the most important reasons for travelers to visit Tibet.” Half of Ming Ming Su’s respondents stated that “if there were no train, they would not have come to Tibet.” Many tourists not only appreciate the splendid panorama as the most important attraction on the train journey, but also believe that traveling by train helps

Many people in Tibet have directly benefited from modernization in the form of infrastructural changes, which has made everyday life easier. Like other people, most Tibetans therefore embrace “modernity” and are now quick to accept technical improvements.⁶ They appreciate shorter routes and speedy means of travel like cars and motorbikes. New furniture and technical equipment such as TV sets, refrigerators, and cell phones have entered Tibetan homes on a large scale. Since 2004 or so, many old farmhouses have been replaced by houses of higher quality furnished with tiled floors and glass windows. Even relatively new houses that were built of mud in the traditional style have been pulled down and replaced by new stone houses. The new building materials are quite easy to obtain, since stone is a byproduct of the many tunnels that are built in the region and of nearby mines. The construction of new houses along with extensive electrification has led to a remarkable change in the lifestyle of many Tibetans.

Fig. 1: A new two-floor stone house near Lhasa



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012. The new car is parked just next to the traditional fuel: yak dung.

them to adapt to the high altitude of Tibet, which they consider a positive side effect. The majority of her respondents agreed that the train journey was an important part of their trip, and 85 percent even considered it the best part of all. “Undoubtedly, the opening of the Qinghai–Tibet railway has had a great impact on the economic development of Tibet, especially from the tourism perspective” (Ming Ming Su 2007: 86–87).

- 6 See Altner [Lange] (2009 and 2010); Goldstein, Childs, Puchung Wangdai (2008 and 2010); Sautman, Teufel Dreyer (2006); Gruschke (2012).

This is, in fact, part of an ongoing global trend that has not left Tibet untouched. In the past, the Tibetan Plateau gave human beings only two “natural” options in life to assure their livelihood: nomadism and farming. A third option — life as a monk — existed as a result of the basic condition of pre-modern Tibetan society where pious and monastic life would make up for the lack of lay opportunities, while a tiny elite consisting of Buddhist clerics and members of the hereditary nobility ruled and administered the country. Today, “traditional ways of life” are gradually being replaced by a variety of new economic activities and a totally new everyday lifestyle. The booming tourist business offers Tibetans the opportunity to keep the “traditional way of life” alive, however, or rather, to revive it by creating a new range of jobs.

Experiencing a “traditional Tibetan way of life”: tourism in Tibet

As soon as Mao Zedong founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, he proclaimed the liberation of Tibet to be one of the main goals of the People’s Liberation Army. In 1951, the “Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet”⁷ was signed and the Tibetan government was encouraged to reform the existing “feudal” institutions, which were sharply criticized by Chinese Communist leaders. At the same time, the Chinese government started confiscating the estates of the religious and secular elites, closing down thousands of monasteries, and creating a new Communist governmental structure. As a consequence of this, Tibet’s farming and nomadic pastoral areas were turned into communes. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which was initiated to destroy “the old world” everywhere in China, i.e., old ideas, culture, customs, and habits, Tibetan traditional culture and religion came close to the point of extinction. Tibetan Buddhism was denounced, and most of the monasteries and castles were destroyed (Goldstein 1997: 37–60). All expressions of Tibetan culture were banned, including the Tibetan language, Tibetan songs, dances, and drama, and even local clothing (van Schaik 2011: 246). There is a joke that circulates everywhere in Tibet and characterizes the period of Tibetan history from 1950 to 1980 as three different stages describing the losses the region suffered. It goes as follows: “In the first ten years (1950–60), we lost our land [i.e., Chinese troops entered and took control of Tibet]. In the second ten years (1960–70), we lost our political power [i.e., the traditional government was replaced by a Han-dominated Communist government]. And in the third ten years (1970–80), we lost our culture [i.e., the Cultural Revolution destroyed Tibetan religion and other customs]” (Goldstein 1997: 96).

⁷ The official English translation is “Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.” In Tibetan, it is known as *krung dbyang mi dmangs srid gzhung dang bod kyi sa gnas srid gzhung gnyis bod zhi bas bcings bkrol ‘byung thabs skor gyi gros mthun*, and the Chinese name for it is *Zhongyang renmin zhengfu he Xizang difang zhengfu guanyu heping jiefang Xizang banfa de xieyi*.

After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping implemented reforms to strengthen China's economy. The disparity in economic and social development between the western areas and those of the Han Chinese in the east had not been bridged over the years but broadened, with Tibet even lagging behind the other minority regions (Tsering Shakya 1999: 371). The transformations resulting from post-Mao policies now started to change the essence of life in Tibet and led to a renaissance of "traditional" Tibetan culture in the 1980s. Customs and religious activities experienced a revival (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998: 10).

Nowadays, the "Tibetan way of life," which had been criticized as being "feudal" and "backward" for decades, is undergoing discursive re-evaluation and experiencing a true revival, albeit in the name of economic prosperity. An increasingly important branch of the economy, tourism has become a source of income in a variety of business sectors in Tibet. The service sector provides jobs for tour guides, drivers, and the countless staff required by hotels and restaurants, for instance. In fact, the region is brimming over with Chinese tourists who want to experience the "simple, traditional Tibetan way of life" in a breathtaking natural environment and make sure they get to see the most famous sites. Many of the monasteries that were once destroyed have now been restored or rebuilt. The scale and quality of reconstruction depends on the location and historical significance of the respective monastery. Those who take care of small monasteries in remote places usually depend on donations from the local population to rebuild or renovate their temples. The reconstruction of monasteries located close to tourist routes or in tourist areas, on the other hand, is often supported by governmental money. One of the highlights of the reconstruction activities is a fort in Shigatse, which was completely destroyed in the 1960s and rebuilt in 2007. Instead of natural stone, however, concrete was used for the walls. Sadly, this "instant" building is no more than a façade; local Tibetans call it "concrete castle." In contrast, many buildings in the historic city of Lhasa have been rebuilt with local materials, and traditional techniques such as roof cladding (accompanied by work songs) have been employed.⁸

The fees raised for visiting monasteries have increased tremendously, and entrance fees have even come to be charged at natural sites such as lakes and rivers, too; nothing seems to be free anymore. However, most visitors are still willing to pay in order to see the sites. Although the entrance fee for Potala Palace in Lhasa was doubled from 100 to 200 yuan in 2012, the queues of visitors are still very long.

The manufacturing sector is also benefiting from the tourist boom and the demand for "Tibetan products" that has come with it. The growing number of tourists has not only led to an increasing number of restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies being set up, but also to an extensive trade in Tibetan souvenirs. Souvenir shops offer a wide

⁸ For a detailed description and analysis of the traditional roof cladding and work songs, see Grothmann (2011).

Fig. 2: Fort Shigatse, or “Concrete Castle”



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

Fig. 3: Traditional roof construction at the Barkhor in Lhasa



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

range of products. Some of these shops extol their goods as “local handicrafts” produced by “Tibetan village artisans.” Religious objects like prayer wheels, rosaries, and scroll paintings (*thangkhas*) are very popular articles. The increasing demand has, in turn, stimulated Tibetan handicrafts, such as *thangka* painting. *Thangka* painting centers where young Tibetans are trained in the traditional craft are mushrooming on the Barkhor, the traditional trading area of Lhasa, as are showrooms displaying such artwork. The demand for “traditional” Tibetan products has led to a revival of handicrafts like those of the clay statue builder, metalsmith, carpenter, and tapestry maker. The ongoing reconstruction of monasteries is creating

a demand for statues and all kinds of metal and wooden objects needed in these holy buildings. Traditional materials, techniques and skills that had almost fallen into oblivion in the past are now experiencing a revival. Large-scale re-skilling is taking place, and people are re-adopting traditional materials: chemical colors that were used for dyeing wool and for paintings in recent years are now being replaced by natural colors that were successfully used in the past, for instance.

Fig. 4 and 5: Thangkha painter and unfinished metal statues in Lhasa



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

Along with the revival of traditional handicraft technologies, the producers are adapting their products to the demand and taste of their new customers. Traditional ornaments and motifs are very popular, and products with an “ethnic design” sell well on the tourist market. Handicraft goods that are created today are often made for completely different purposes than the original products were. While pre-modern local craftsmen primarily attended to the needs of the local population, today their production is directed at international customers in local and regional markets — and even worldwide. The cultural heritage of handicraft traditions is being turned into a new source of income (Lange 2013). Frederick Wherry undertook an in-depth study of “global markets and local crafts” in Thailand and Costa Rica and drew similar conclusions there: “Some artists have gone global, either exporting their crafts abroad or selling directly to international tourists, if not both” (Wherry 2008: 133).

Fig. 6: Leather bags in “Tibetan style” for the international market



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

How tourism is changing the face of Tibet

The scope and intensity of construction at tourist sites and the transformation of historical and religious sites into touristic attractions varies from one place to another. A selected number of monasteries along perfectly constructed roads have been almost perfectly reconstructed, but at the same time, they have been “concreted” into the surrounding landscape, since large parking lots were built right next to them for tourist busses. Many mountain passes — and more generally, whatever spot promises a good glimpse of natural or cultural features of interest — are provided with one of these large parking areas for busses. The famous Gampala Pass between the Yarlung Tsangpo River and Lake Yamdroktso is completely covered by a parking lot intended for at least ten large tourist busses. Every single visitor is charged a fee; parking outside the car park is not allowed. Platforms that offer a nice panoramic view over the river have been constructed all along the Yarlung Tsangpo River. Tourists’ needs are catered to at practically every level. Big concrete toilet facilities have been built in much-frequented places, and newly erected cell phone towers guarantee telephone connections in many remote areas, for example.

Fig. 7: The Gampala pass



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

Fig. 8: Platform for a panoramic view on the Samye Monastery



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

A recent Xinhua report stated that “the region is home to 70 class-A national scenic spots as well as 211 star-rated hotels.”⁹ The hotel construction boom is not confined to Lhasa or major towns, but extends into relatively remote areas as well. Guesthouses are built close to monasteries, especially those in a picturesque landscape like Samding Monastery at Lake Yamdroktso. The functions that many monks carry out have also changed: aside from devoting themselves to their pious duties, they collect entrance fees, sell “religious” souvenirs, and guide tourists around their monasteries. Some monasteries have shops of their own comparable to museum shops. Local people outside the monasteries also try to benefit from the booming tourism. They sell all kinds of products, like prayer flags, butter for religious offerings, or ceremonial scarves. Some of them have specialized in selling “Tibetan antiques,” the authenticity of which is not always easy for non-professionals to determine. Nomads try to do some petty business by selling fresh, handmade cheese. Others rent their yaks out for short rides or for tourists to be photographed on as they sit on the animals’ backs.

Fig. 9: Guesthouse built right beside Samding Monastery near the Yamdroktso



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

Owing to infrastructural changes like the construction of roads and bridges, the old hide boats, which were essential in the water transport system before the advent of modernity in Central Tibet, have outlived their usefulness in the last few decades.

9 Xinhuanet (2013).

Water transport as such has lost its past significance almost completely. In Central Tibet, there is only one village left where these boats are still built and used for fishing, although most villagers have now given up fishing as a livelihood. One reason why boats are still being constructed is tourism: boat tours are being offered on the Kyichu River. The former fishermen of Chun even design little model boats made of sheepskin as souvenirs (see Altner 2009 and 2010); the exotic boats appeal to tourists and have therefore become a new source of income. This has encouraged people from the nearby village of Lungpa who had also given up boat construction a number of years earlier¹⁰ to revive their old tradition. In 2012, an entire new fleet of boats was awaiting tourists when the season began.

Fig. 10: Part of the new boat fleet in Lungpa



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012.

The boom in tourism — and the rush to make money from it at practically any cost — is not appreciated by everybody, though. When certain sacred lakes finally came into the focus of tourist companies and the respective local governments, local and national resistance to the tourist-development policy started to grow. In June 2012, local media announced that boating tours would be offered on Lake Yamdrokto south of Lhasa — one of the largest sacred lakes in the Tibet Autonomous Region (after Lake Namtso north of Lhasa and Lake Manasarowar in Western Tibet). These plans were rejected by environmental activists and prominent individuals — Han

10 Altner [Lange] 2009: 61–62.

Chinese and Tibetans alike.¹¹ Chinese film star Chen Kun appealed to the public: “Let’s leave something for later generations to enjoy! Don’t be blinded by short-term interests!”¹² While the boating tours were stopped, the opponents failed to halt the construction of a big fish restaurant on the northeastern shore of the lake. The sacred status of the Yamdrokto is not an impediment to harvesting part of its fish population, it seems.

Fig. 11: Fish restaurant under construction on the shore of the Yamdrokto



Source: Diana Lange, June 2012

Nevertheless, the number of tourists is still on the rise, and it seems that the climax of the tourist economy has not been reached yet.

Conclusion

Most tourists come to Tibet to experience the “simple, traditional Tibetan way of life”; they want to visit the famous monasteries in an untouched countryside. Tibet is one of the most exotic travel destinations for many tourists and has not lost any of its fascination — the mystique of Shangri-La — so far. In the preface to his book on Lhasa, Robert Barnett underlines these developments: “From the mid-1990s, the culture once reviled as feudal and barbaric became a tourist attraction for wealthier

¹¹ Liu Jianqiang (2012). Liu is the Beijing-based deputy editor of *chinadialogue*. He has reported extensively on China’s environmental movement and Tibet.

¹² Liu Jianqiang (2012).

Chinese, with nearly a million a year visiting Tibet to enjoy its exotic architecture, customs, and religious traditions” (Barnett 2010: xxix). Tourism is big business — in the meantime, possibly even the most important branch of the Tibetan economy. Recent developments like “concreting over the landscape” and converting everything to the anticipated taste of the average traveler are highly questionable, however, for they may lead to the destruction of the very features that attract tourists to Tibet in the first place: its untouched countryside and unspoiled landscape, the inhabitants’ simple lifestyle, and a kind of “otherness” compared to many other parts of China. The charms of many a remote area would be spoiled if it were to swarm with tourists. The renaissance of Tibetan culture initiated in the early 1980s has changed the culture’s dimension and character. The revival appears to have been stimulated from outside and therefore has a “synthetic” touch to it. The Tibetan countryside might be transformed into a huge tourist attraction for visitors from other parts of the world if this continues. There is no evidence to suggest that the current trends are going to change in the near future.

The picture gets even more complicated when the needs and interests of local residents are taken into consideration. Tibet has been overtaken by modernity, and most Tibetans now enjoy the fruits of modernization. The “traditional way of life” has been superseded by new economic options, lifestyles, and values. The tourist industry is just one of many new sources of income. In this context, the value of the region’s heritage can be turned into economic gain — one more ongoing global trend that has not left Tibet untouched. More than a few Tibetans currently earn their living as tourist guides, drivers, storekeepers, or hotel and restaurant owners and are constantly in touch with tourists who appreciate their “traditional” way of life.

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