

## 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.<sup>1</sup> This paper outlines the ways in which the booming new tourist industry is transforming the region in economic, infrastructural, and cultural matters.

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\* 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.