

Development For Tibetans, But By Whom?

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1. Introduction: Tibetans in China

In addition to the Han majority, the People's Republic of China officially recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups within its borders. The degree to which minorities have been incorporated into the national mainstream community varies widely from group to group, with some demonstrating considerable resentment against the ethnic majority. Most notable are the Turkic Muslim Uyghurs, who made international headlines in July 2009 for the Urumqi riots; the Hui in Hunan province, where unrest broke out in 2004; and, of course, the Tibetans, whose high-profile protests were in the spotlight in the months preceding the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing.

The Tibet-China conflict is one of the most polarized disputes in which China is currently embroiled. At the core of this debate is Tibet's status as either an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China or an independent country. The Chinese leadership is staunchly against the "legitimate and meaningful autonomy" demanded by the Dalai Lama (BBC News, 2009); the Dalai Lama has also been labeled as a "separatist" by China's president Hu Jintao but maintains that he does not want to separate Tibet from China (Mazumdar 2010). Additionally, discontent among Tibetans is not limited to those residing in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). A majority of the 6.5 million ethnic Tibetans live in the neighboring provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan, and Qinghai, where discontent among Tibetans is also pervasive.

Dissatisfaction dates back 50 years to the failed 1959 Lhasa uprising against the invading Chinese Army. The violent demonstration resulted in the Dalai Lama's escape to Dharamsala, India, where the Tibetan Government in Exile is now based. The most recent large-scale Tibetan uprising began as a commemoration of this flight. The Tibetan unrest in 2008 (also known as the 3•14 riots) started in the Lhasa but spread to Tibetan Buddhist monasteries outside the TAR.

The Tibetans' struggle extends beyond political and ethnic tensions. According to census data from 2000, Tibetans have the highest illiteracy rate of any ethnic group in China with a population of over 500,000. The illiteracy rate among Tibetans, 47.55%, is five times greater than China's national average illiteracy rate, 9.08% (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2005). This is partly due to

lack of access to a bilingual Tibetan-Mandarin Chinese education system. Primary school is the only educational level for which Tibetans are comparable with the national average. Han migrants in culturally Tibetan areas graduate from universities at more than three times the Tibetan rate and from senior middle school at five times the Tibetan rate (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2005). This makes competing for employment and economic benefits vastly more arduous for Tibetans.

Tibetans' low levels of education contribute significantly to their slow economic and social progress. In 2004, the annual per-capita income of Tibetan farmers and herdsman was 1,861 Chinese *renminbi* (\$225 US dollars), and the disposable income of urban Tibetans was 8,200 Chinese *renminbi* (\$991 US dollars). According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, the Tibetan Autonomous Region's 2009 GDP ranked 31st out of 31 province-level divisions and 28th in GDP per capita (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). It also ranked lowest on the Human Development Index in the same year (UNDP China, and Renmin University of China, 2010). While both numbers are exceptionally low for national averages, the Chinese government emphasizes that they are increasing at an accelerating rate (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2005).

Due to Tibet's suboptimal economic, social, and political situations, the Chinese government, interested foreigners, and Tibetans themselves have all put effort toward sustainable development. In this article I focus on both top-down policies instated by the national government and a number of grassroots efforts implemented by foreigners and Tibetans. I learned about these citizens' organizations when I was in Qinghai Province, China in January 2009 with a MIT team of undergraduate and graduate students. We attempted to implement village-level development projects, including water testing, air quality monitoring, energy usage surveying, and development worker training. Our team operated in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations operating out of Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. I keep specific names and locations undisclosed to secure the privacy of Tibetan friends and colleagues.

2. For Tibetans, By China

There have been a number of national policies implemented to benefit Tibetans, including the Great Western Development (GWD) program and the Qinghai-Tibet railroad. The GWD program was instated by China to increase the income of its less developed western regions, which have traditionally lagged behind since Deng Xiaoping's reform policies. Major components of the GWD program include developing infrastructure, attracting foreign investment, increasing ecological protection (e.g. reforestation projects), promoting education, and retaining talent to prevent brain drain. The Qinghai-Tibet railroad is a high-altitude railway connecting Xining, the capital of Qinghai province to Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region. One motivation for its construction was to increase the flow of industrial products and goods into Tibet from more developed regions, thus benefiting the TAR population.

Many Tibetans believe that these policies and others exert additional pressure on Tibetan culture and heritage because they attract Han migrants to Tibetan areas. In 2000, state Ethnic Affairs Commission Minister Li Dezhu wrote that a westward

flow of ethnic Han would be “in keeping with the execution of large-scale western development” (Congressional-Executive Commission on China. 2005). Tibetans’ suspicions are exacerbated by the persecution of prominent Tibetan religious leaders who are believed to have links to the Dalai Lama (Congressional-Executive Commission on China. 2005).

Another policy that I had the opportunity to see the effects of in person is the resettlement of nomadic Tibetans in the TAR and adjacent ethnic Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai Provinces. According to a June 2007 Human Rights Watch report, “the Chinese government has been implementing resettling, land confiscation, and fencing policies in pastoral areas inhabited primarily by Tibetans, drastically curtailing their livelihood.” These efforts began in 2000 and have intensified considerably since 2003. Required to move into newly built housing settlements or nearby towns, many Tibetan herders have been forced to kill most of their livestock and abandon their traditional way of living. After moving to the resettlements, they are frequently unable to find jobs other than temporary or menial labor. This results from their inability to speak Mandarin Chinese, the lack of capital to start small businesses, the lack of skills training available on resettlements, and the inappropriateness of the newly resettled areas to their existing skill sets. Additionally, while the state purports to act as an indefinite caretaker, promising shelter, food, and fuel, resettled populations need to get food and fuel from elsewhere (often relatives), the provided shelter is of poor quality, and healthcare and education are mostly difficult to access (Shenk, 2009).

The Chinese government has justified the relocations of Tibetan herders as necessary actions to protect the environment and to “develop,” “civilize,” and “modernize” China’s western provinces. By concentrating Tibetans closer to towns, they arguably would have better access to jobs, education, and medical services. However, authorities failed to consider what Tibetans wanted and have not responded favorably to complaints. Tibetans had no opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, and the reasons they are given for resettling were unclear.

I visited a resettlement after spending time in a nomadic village near Rebgong in Qinghai Province. With its rows of identical brick houses and small, fenced yards, the cramped resettlement area starkly contrasted with the pastoral village. Per the government’s demands, nomadic families had begun moving into their houses by sending family members to live in them. The resettlement was mostly empty and physically generic, providing little to no room for individual preference. It was difficult to imagine its becoming a livable community.

Considering these unlivable conditions, the policies of the Chinese government are often thought to have indistinct motives. Many Tibetans are still suspicious of the tens of billions of dollars spent by the state in the name of development. According to Tibetologist Parvez Dewan, coauthor of *Tibet: Fifty Years After* with Siddharth Srivastava, “even the most massive infusions of funds have never been able to buy the affection of the people. You can’t get rid of the alienation of a people through development” (Mazumdar, 2010).

3. For Tibetans, By Foreigners

Global interest in Tibetans is considerable, and the international media readily picks up Tibet-China issues. Events like the Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, the Tibetan uprising of 2008, and repeated reports of China's accelerating economic growth that is occurring at the cost of curtailed human rights have motivated the establishment of Tibetan-aiding social development organizations.

During my team's visit to Qinghai Province, one of the nation's poorest and most ethnically diverse provinces, we met with many foreigners working for the development of Tibetans. In 2009, the province's GDP was only 108.1 billion Chinese renminbi, ranking 30th out of 31 province-level administrative areas. Its GDP per capita was 19,407 Chinese renminbi, ranking 22nd (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The population is approximately 5.5 million, among which the Han majority accounts for 54 percent. Other ethnic groups include the Tibetans (21 percent), Tu, Hui, Salar, and Mongols (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

3.1 The English Training Program

Groups working on development issues for Qinghai's lowest income populations, usually ethnic minorities living in rural areas, include the Sanchuan Development Association and the Snowland Service Group. My team's main contacts in Qinghai were directly associated with the English Training Program (ETP), and four students served as our trilingual translators. ETP was specifically designed to address the lack of high-level educational opportunities for Tibetans by offering "innovative school practices that provide [minorities] with improved access to education and mainstream Chinese society" (English Training Program, 2009). Founded by Americans in 1991, the program operates out of the Nationalities Department at Qinghai Normal University in Xining, the capital of Qinghai. ETP's original goal was to use foreign teachers to train young Tibetans to become English teachers in rural Tibetan areas, thus addressing the lack of bilingual education. The program also teaches Tibetan youth "to expose and mentor students in small-scale rural community development, to train students to be community activists, [and] to encourage students in the importance of cultural development work" (English Training Program, 2009).

ETP has accomplished the goal of offering a high-quality education to students who otherwise would have likely remained in low-quality middle schools and vocational training schools. Nearly all of the students are from low-income rural households. For these students, one of ETP's strongest draws is a full tuition scholarship, which make it possible for them to attend. Most graduates are working in rural areas and others are working for or have worked for nonprofit development organizations, environmental protection agencies, and cultural preservation groups (English Training Program, 2009). Students have traveled abroad and have returned to China to teach English at higher levels of education (Yi, 2008).

3.2 One Earth Designs

Part of my team included members of One Earth Designs (OED), a nonprofit organization co-founded by a MIT graduate. OED "serves as a catalyst for socially and environmentally minded innovation among Himalayan...communities.

Acting as a conduit through which communities can access technical and business support, [it] unleash[es] the potential of modern design.” (One Earth Designs, 2010). Current projects include SolSource, a lightweight solar energy device that provides users with a low-cost a portable means of cooking, heating, and electricity generation, and HeatSource, a product that captures and redistributes excess body heat. Both products were made with the input from partners in the Himalayan region.

OED attempts to fill in the gaps existing in the development-oriented nongovernmental organization network by providing scientific analysis and design-based support, hosting web tools to connect communities with policy makers, and training for capacity building through workshops, school construction, and scientific and engineering curricula. It also plans to offer technical and financial support for developing sustainable businesses among local entrepreneurs—a method of development that few nonprofit organizations in the region have attempted.

During our visit, OED members were engaged in a number of projects, including creating a water testing training video with local Tibetan students, demonstrating and testing a SolSource prototype, and surveying villagers about energy usage. The goal was to apply and transfer MIT students’ engineering and scientific know-how to local Tibetan development workers so that projects can be carried out in the absence of OED members.

4. For Tibetans, By Tibetans

An interesting consequence of ETP is spin-off development work that begins as extracurricular activities. As part of their coursework, students are first exposed to development through a popular sustainable development class, which teaches students theories of development and practical steps for implementing small-scale projects. Such projects include collecting Tibetan handicrafts from a village to sell or delivering books to a village to make a library. There are also workshops for students to learn how to write project proposals that solicit donor funding. Every small-scale development project is completely voluntary and student-initiated. According to the teacher, there are three main reasons for why students do projects. First, they want to follow in the footsteps of prior students, many of whom have established their own nongovernmental organizations. Second, by reading case studies in the sustainable development class, they understand issues of poverty and are made aware of their own villages’ needs. Additionally, they can see the need for change, can envision a direction for change, and have been shown examples of how other people have helped. Third, exceptional English speakers have goals to study abroad, and in order to earn scholarships they first need to demonstrate their societal contributions.

Spin-off organizations are another result of ETP. One organization, Imaging Tibet, began as an extracurricular workshop that provided ETP students with practical skills and technology to visually document their home villages. Imaging Tibet began in March 2007 by an ETP teacher, but plans have been made to entrust it to ETP graduates. Program members have created a digital archive of hundreds of photographs that are divided into three broad fields: small-scale development (visual documentation of students’ development projects), cultural preservation (using

photography to preserve elements of Tibetan communities' intangible heritage), and social documentary (small bodies of work describing life in rural Tibetan communities).

Shem Women's Group helped set up our village visits. It describes itself as a group "dedicated to empowering Tibetan women and their communities through grassroots development" and began in 2003 as an ETP extracurricular course on gender studies (Shem Women's Group, 2007). Female ETP students wanted to become involved with development projects, so a teacher began to meet with a group of women to teach a small-scale development course. Now, members consist of female ETP graduates and typically come from communities where they are the only females with more than a middle-school education. The Shem women see themselves as strong female role models, which they hope will raise villager confidence in women's abilities and encourage villagers to value women's education. The organization offers sustainable development-related discussion groups, workshops, and training to female ETP students. Many of the development issues in communities are gender-related. Women shoulder much of the burden caused by limited access to clean water, electricity, basic health care, and basic education. Female ETP students not only have first-hand knowledge of this life, but also can talk one-on-one with women in their communities, which is why their leadership is so crucial.

ETP graduates also return to their villages to advance their home community. My team had the opportunity to stay in one nomadic village where an ETP graduate had recently reinvigorated the local primary school as the new principal. Even at a young age, the young man had gained the respect of community elders and the local government. This ETP graduate's desire to see improvement in his community and his connections to people who could help were invaluable resources. Another ETP graduate was on the brink of establishing his own nonprofit organization, with which he hoped to start small handicrafts businesses for people in his village.

5. Conclusion: Who Should Do The Work?

My trip to Qinghai revealed the various layers of who is doing work to help the Tibetan community. From talking to villagers and from accounts of development workers' experiences, I was able to gauge Tibetans' receptivity toward different sources of development. Most villagers I met continued to distrust the Chinese government and welcomed foreigners with open arms, but often to the point of dependency. ETP students I talked with told me that gaining respect was sometimes difficult, but if they could carry one project out successfully, they could gain their villagers' trust.

Compared to other development organizations run by foreigners, I have great respect for the English Training Program because it trains Tibetans to help Tibetans. This is unique in that foreigners themselves do not carry out development work in the Tibetan villages, but rather encourage villagers to do so on their own through education. There are many advantages to this, with knowledge of the local culture and language being key. As natives, Tibetans are more sensitive to what could be considered "good" changes and "bad" changes. These are cultural issues that

foreign development workers most likely do not consider when implementing projects. The viewpoints held by ETP graduates, who have straddled the worlds of their Tibetan background and a Western-style education, are beneficial in setting an appropriate mindset for development work.

However, there are still some obstacles confronting the development workers trained by the English Training Program. They are well-trained in English, but they lack technical skills in engineering and business. It is in these areas where a lot of potentially beneficial work could be done for Tibetans in an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable fashion. For now, many of the ETP student projects and the Shem Women's Group are one-time ordeals that are donor-funded and require immense effort on behalf of the implementing development worker.

It is in these gaps where organizations like One Earth Designs can play an important role by building the capacity of local Tibetan development workers and introducing new technologies that are co-created with local users. This goes to show that any development work requires larger-scale collaboration across sectors, across skill-sets, and also, perhaps, across boundaries and cultures.

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