

Development of Marginalized Areas and Peoples

Developing Kham: An inquiry into the use of environmental and economic history for development policy in Tibetan regions

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In recent years much has been made of development theories, practices, and problems throughout the world. Understandably, much of the ink spilled over the issue has concerned Africa—perhaps due to the West feeling guilty for several centuries of colonialism. Famous economists like Jeffery Sachs, or columnists such as Nicholas Kristof, and even Bono have all held the Africa banner high, and with good cause and distinction.* Unfortunately, other areas tend to be left off the radar of an increasingly development-minded world. China—a country with the most stunning rate of economic development in the world—is still a country with a staggering poverty rate, and is often ignored precisely because of the recent speed of their economic development, leading developing countries.

Alongside of their massive economic growth, there has been a converse shift in the ability of those in rural areas of China (most notably Western areas—Qinghai, Gansu, Xizang, Yunnan, and portions of Sichuan) to take advantage of the market boom occurring on the east coast. Also well-documented is the demise of the Chinese environment—while it received much press in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games, it largely has been ignored after. And this is looking at only the effect of China’s massive growth on areas like Beijing or Shanghai—reports have generally left the state of the western regions unmentioned, and therefore far from the concerns of the global community.†

The plight of Western China has received much attention from Chinese scholars, and even a few Western economists. Unfortunately, they all tend to say the same things: education, integration, and

* Jeffery D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and so Little Good*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

† The best of the rather paltry lot would have to be Elizabeth Economy’s “The Great Leap Backward?” in *Foreign Affairs* (Sept./Oct. 2007).

diversification are needed to advance the Western areas and make them comparable with the East coast of China. These issues do, in a large part, correctly identify the key problems facing development throughout China. Unfortunately for the people groups and areas being subjected to economic policy from the East, there is little understanding of localized ethnic groups, cultural needs and concerns, and of long term, historical effects and context on the ecological setting of the region—especially pastoralist groups on the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau.

There has also been an intense marginalization of the largely nomadic groups inhabiting the Plateau region as the economic fortunes of the coast have risen. This compels one author to say “it is important to rethink the boundaries between tradition and modernity, national and ethnic identity, and center and periphery.”[‡] As this marginalization has occurred, an intense contrast in understanding about the use of the natural environment has also happened—where the more “modernized” Eastern concerns have come in to help develop regions, they bring with them a fundamentally differing viewpoint, one introduced to nomadic and substance agriculture communities that often objectifies the environment as a tool to be exploited until it is of no further use. Caroline Cooper argues that the cause for environmental conservation, and in some ways, development, “inherently draws on the rights to a sustainable living environment and the empowerment of citizens to defend these interests.”[§]

Stretching over the top of all these problems is an absence of historical perspective in the development initiatives from Beijing. As a result of official rewriting of history throughout much of the pre-reform era, a distorted understanding of how Tibetans have historically lived in and on the fragile grasslands prevails in the Chinese Academy. What has been lost is a detailed understanding of how traditional Tibetan lifeways on the plateau, while not the ultimate solution, offer solutions to many of the current issues, and with enough success that they survived for at least two millennia.

Ranging from full scale removal of nomadic groups to smaller scale limited grazing of yak and sheep herds, the implementation of these policies are producing results that, sadly, are either hastening the demise of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, or at best, are seeing temporary gains in

[‡] Katherine Morton, “Civil Society & Marginalization: Grassroots NGOs in Qinghai” (book chapter), p 15.

[§] Caroline Cooper, “This is Our Way In” 109.

grassland recovery followed by yet another change for the worse on the plateau. Alongside of the abolishment of the traditional life ways of many Tibetan herdsmen, there have been no new mechanisms established to alleviate the societal and ecological stress of removing a central force in the region's ecology.^{**} This is perhaps in part due to a "long, deeply entrenched tradition of exploiting the environment for man's needs, with relatively little sense of the limits of nature's or man's capacity to replenish the earth's resources," resulting in a mindset that man should "overcome nature in order to utilize it."^{††}

A key rhetorical device used by the Chinese government as it swept through Tibetan regions in the 1950's was "liberation" from feudalism, religious tyranny, and inefficient economic practices. With the arrival of Chinese forces and the subsequent flight of upper class Tibetans, the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities were placed into communes after 1959 in an effort to bring them up to a Socialist understanding of economic advancement. As a part of Deng Xiaoping's post-Mao reforms, in 1980 and 1981, nomadic communities were allowed to return to their previous methods of subsistence, but with a few notable changes. Whereas land was communally held and reallocated based on herd and rangeland fluctuation, rangeland was no longer communally held.^{‡‡} This combined with the insistence by Beijing to more fully integrate Tibetan nomadic areas into the economic plan of China in an effort to bring up the quality of life of Tibetan nomads, as well as restore and preserve grassland ecosystems.^{§§}

Government officials often assume that the nomads are directly responsible for the current state of environmental degradation on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and have enacted a policy of "Ecological Migration" (*Shengtai yimin* 生态移民) to "relocate more permanently a

^{**} Namgyal "China's West Development Strategy and Rural Empowerment: Is There A Link? A Case Study of the Tibetan Plateau Region" in *China's West Region Development: Domestic Strategies and Global Implications* Ding Lu and William A.W. Neilson, editors (New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing Co. (2004), 413.

^{††} Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black*, 27.

^{‡‡} "Changing Pattern of Tibetan nomadic pastoralism" Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall, in *Human Biology of Pastoral Populations*, edited by William R. Leonard and Michael H. Crawford (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002), 136 & 138.

^{§§} J. Marc Foggin "Depopulating the Tibetan Grasslands: National Policies and Perspectives for the Future of Tibetan Herders in Qinghai Province, China" in *Mountain Research and Development* 28(1): 27.

large segment of the (former) herding population into new towns.”***
Government officials and scientists argue that the herders, who have nearly 5,000 years of a pastoralist life on the Tibetan Plateau, have overgrazed the area, leading to intense desertification in some areas, and a paucity of flora and fauna in others. In reality the emerging desertification has come about largely due to changing climatic conditions, and as our global climate continues to shift, most likely this trend will continue—through no fault of the nomads, who are merely following a way of life known to them for several millennia. As several authors have shown, the system used by the nomads “has allowed them to subsist on the Northern Plateau for centuries without destroying their natural resource base *precisely because it fostered a balance between their highly adapted herds and their harsh environment.*”†††

An element found in nearly all nomadic pastoralist communities is flexibility. It is “above all a flexible subsistence strategy, involving opportunistic food production and foraging in addition to livestock exploitation for meat, milk and blood.”‡‡‡ This flexibility can be severely curtailed, and even extinguished when a misinformed government attempts to reform pastoralist communities to either develop them economically or increase herd outputs. While this is currently happening on the Tibetan Plateau, it happened during the 1950’s and 1960’s with the Karamoja nomadic groups in Kenya. The colonial government in Kenya enacted massive agrarian reforms in 1954, removing livestock, closing in rangeland, intensive water production, and new types of veterinary care all appeared.§§§ These reforms, intended to push the Karamoja groups into a more modern state, actually served to “accelerate the rate of overgrazing and desertification, to aggravate the contraction of tribal grazing areas, and to inflame further both inter- and intra- tribal tensions.”****

By reaching back into the historical constructions that define the path development will take in Tibetan regions like Yushu, I hopefully have argued three principal things. First, the cultural context of development in ethnically Tibetan regions extends beyond the tense

*** Foggin, “Depopulating the Tibetan Grasslands,” 29.

††† Goldstein, “Traditional Nomadic Pastoralism,” 149 (italics added).

‡‡‡ “Uncertain disaster: environmental instability, colonial policy, and resilience of East African pastoral systems” by Samoha Gray, Paul Leslie and Helen Alinga Akol in *Human Biology of Pastoral Populations*, edited by William R. Leonard and Michael H. Crawford (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002), 99.

§§§ Ibid, 117.

**** Ibid.

political environment. It reaches back to the very foundations of Chinese and Tibetan culture, and is an area that must be more fully explored by both academic and policy makers within China and without. Further examination of the differing understandings of the environment, and man's role in the environment, are needed. Second, there has been a crucial failure by the academy to incorporate the environmental history of the region, and specifically the traditional ecologic knowledge that nomads have, into development plans. This oversight is coupled with the failure, and at times, inability, of many Tibetan communities to attempt to put forth their own knowledge to help shape development policies and the coming cultural change.

Finally, there has been continued repetition by policy makers to revert to old methods of development in the western regions of China—methods that have been tried over the course of several dynasties, and that have largely failed over the course of these dynasties. Policymakers must learn from the past, not blindly imitate it in order to arrive at workable solutions for the country as a whole. With these considerations, taking place in part in small regions of the plateau already, economic development stands to move forward in an organic manner, accounting for the needs of the local ecology, the local people, and the burgeoning Chinese economy. If not, further development will most likely falter at best, and at worst it will present a rapidly growing China with seemingly insurmountable problems.