

The Iron Dragon Came to Tibet; the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad and its impact on the local people and culture along the route

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Introduction to the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad

The Tibet Plateau, also known as Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (ch. Qingzang Gaoyuan) in China, stretches out in the western region of the P.R.C. The plateau has an average elevation of 3000-4000 meters above the sea level and for that reason sometimes it is referred to as “the roof of the world.” On this plateau there rise some of the highest mountains and mountain ranges in the world. There are the Himalaya Mountains in the south, the Kunlun Mountains and Tangula Mountains in the eastwest, and Gangdise Mountains and Nyenchthanglha Mountains in the center. Therefore, that is a region fenced by snowy mountains and Tibetans call it “the land of snows.” As the Chinese name for the plateau suggests, the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province lie on the plateau.

The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad (ch. Qingzang Tielu, tib. mdodbus lcagslam) starts from Xining, the capital city of Qinghai Province and ends in Lhasa. The construction of the railroad started in 1959 with the support of Chairman Mao, but due to the inadequacy of technologies required to build a railroad in such a climatically and geographically challenging region and the lack of funding at the time it stopped in Golmud, Qinghai Province, in 1978. The completed section from Xining to Golmud started to operate in 1984.

The construction of the remaining section of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad resumed on 29 June 2001 as an important project in the Western Development campaign (ch. Xibu dakaifa). This large-scale development campaign was initiated at the turn of the century. Its goal was to bridge the growing social, economic and developmental gaps between the coastal east and the landlocked west in China. Since the establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region its economic conditions have not improved significantly compare to the other regions in China. The typical government reasoning is that the transportation infrastructure was not efficient enough to support rapid economic development. Prior to the completion of the railroad, there were four major roads and two airports linking the TAR with the rest of the country. However, the road conditions were not always good and air travel was expensive.

The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad was finished in August 2005. It is 1956 km (1.218 miles) long and touted by the Chinese government as the highest environment-friendly railroad in the world. It was said to have created many engineering marvels and described as an engineering miracle.

On July 1, 2006, there was a big ceremony at the train station in Golmud. The Chinese President Hu Jintao cut the red ribbon to mark the beginning of the railroad operations. At the ceremony President Hu Jintao said, “The project is not only a magnificent feat in China’s history of railway construction, but also a great miracle of the world’s railroad history.” He said, “This successful practice has made it clear again to the people at large that diligent and intelligent Chinese people are ambitious, self-confident

and capable of standing among the world's advanced nations. (xinhua, 07/02/06) In many ways the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad represents and reflects China today.

The Chinese government has spent 28.5 billion Yuan (\$3.68 billion) to build the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad. They built a railroad that was considered simply impossible because the plateau posed many engineering difficulties due to its high altitude and the harsh climate. From Golmud to Lhasa, there are high mountain passes like Tanggula Shankou and a large section of the railroad is below the freezing temperature year round. However, despite all kinds of difficulties, the Chinese engineers built the railroad successfully at an average elevation of 4000 meters. "The Kunlun Range is a guarantee that the railway will never get to Lhasa." (Theroux; 479) is often quoted by the Chinese media and writers to say that Chinese are capable. Indeed, they proved that "impossible is nothing."

I arrived in Xining on June 1 to start the research on the railroad. Since the completion of the railroad the media, both national and international, have been reporting extensively on the railroad. The media "craze" that the railroad generated became even more intensive in June, just one month before the trial operations of the railroad. Since the start of the railroad construction the government has been tirelessly promoting the railroad through all channels of communication. As the operation day neared I could hear more and more people talking about the railroad. People were eager to see the moment when the iron "rainbow", a popular metaphor used by the government propaganda organs to describe the train, would appear on the plateau.

The Government Propaganda

The Sky Road

Early in the morning I stand on the green pasture and see the divine eagle wearing beautiful light, flying across the blue sky like an auspicious patch of cloud, bringing good fortune to the Tibetan men and women.

At dusk I stand between the high mountains hoping for the railroad to be built to my hometown. A long huge iron dragon would climb over mountains, bringing happiness to the snow-land.

That would be such an amazing sky road, sending all the warmth in the human world to the frontiers. From then on the mountains are no longer high, and the roads no longer long. And men and women of every ethnic group would come together.

That would be such an amazing sky road, leading us to the heaven in the human world.

Barley wine and butter tea would taste even more sweet. The happy singing voice will spread in four directions. The happy singing voice will spread in four directions.

The song called Sky Road was played five times on the train to Lhasa from Xining on July 15th in both Mandarin and Tibetan. This song was written from the

viewpoint of a Tibetan and it came out shortly after the start of the construction of the railroad. It became popularized by the state only after the completion of the railroad. It sings about the Tibetan people anticipating the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad and their prospects of a bright future ahead with the railroad. In this song there are some noteworthy phrases that the government propaganda apparatus has been using to describe the railroad. The railroad is described as “sky road,” which would seem to take people’s imaginations to a fantasyland. This metaphorical phrase does not only suggest the high altitude of Tibet but also nicely fits in the picture of Tibet that is often portrayed as a heavenly place on earth in the Chinese mainstream media in recent years.

A “line of happiness” (xingfuxian) best describes the theme of the railroad promoters. This song has been used to promote the railroad. This is an auspicious road that would only bring happiness and prosperity. This is an amazing road that has overcome the high mountains and other geographical obstacles. This is a road that shortens the distance between Tibet and the rest of the country both in time and space. In that sense this road brings people of different ethnic groups together and unite them under one common nation. The railroad would incorporate the TAR into the Chinese people’s imagined community, the Chinese nation, using Anderson’s definition of nation as an imagined community. A Tibetan woman in Lhasa said, “The railroad would demystify Tibet for many people outside of the TAR because the TAR with the railroad is much more accessible. Some people in the interior China even thought that the TAR was an independent country.” This song is thus a good overview of the themes drummed aloud in the government propaganda.

Among the most enthusiastic railroad promoters there are government officials at different levels, engineers, and business people. They have advocated the railroad through all forms of popular media such as TV, newspapers, www, radio, magazines, billboards, posters and etc. These promoters have concentrated on different themes to win people’s support and appreciation of the railroad.

For the government officials, “telling the bitterness” of the workers is a conventional way of asking for praises and appreciation from people. In the case of building the railroad the government has documented the railroad engineers and builders telling their bitterness. In the media there are many reports on the railroad builders and their personal accounts. On the official website of the railroad in Chinese (Qingzang tielu wang) there is a section devoted entirely to the literature on the people building the railroad. The majority of the literature is focused on the hardships that the railroad workers endeavored and the close relationships they established with the local people and the land.

Television as an important communication medium is an essential tool for promoting the railroad. Since the start of the railroad construction there have been TV news and documentaries on the building of the railroad. They have been frequently aired on the China Central TV channels that virtually reach every corner of the country. The first train leaving from Golmd for Lhasa was broadcasted live on CCTV 4, a TV channel targeting mainly at the Chinese audience abroad. When the first train arrived at the Lhasa train station, there was a big welcome prepared. The Tibetan dancers danced at the station and offered Kaptang to the train staff and passengers. Most of the passengers on the first train were the media workers such as journalists and TV reporters. The Chinese government also invited many international media workers to report on the railroad.

While I was doing the research I realized the great impact the media had on the consciousness of people. People particularly in the cities who have more exposure to the media proved it true. They told me mostly what the government media said about the railroad when I asked them about the railroad. Here is my short interview with a Han local taxi driver in Xining that would illustrate it;

Tse: How is the business?

Zhang: The business is OK. There are many Taxis now. It's very competitive.

Tse: Now the railroad is finished. Do you think it will affect your business?

Zhang: Definitely. There will be lots of tourists coming here.

Tse: What do you think about the railroad?

Zhang: The railroad is good for sure. Xizang (Tibet) will develop fast with the railroad. People there will benefit the most. There will be more people going there.

Tse: Do you think there will be any negative effect?

Zhang: I don't think so, otherwise the state would not spend so much money on the railroad. It was absolutely built for the benefit of the people in Xizang. The state will not gain any economic profits. They say the state would never be able to earn back the money that was spent on the railroad.

Tse: How did you know about all this?

Zhang: The TV and newspapers all say that.

However, it does not mean that people believe in everything that the media say. In fact, people have their explanations and opinions on the railroad that are not heard in the media. On the June 10th I was on the train to Golmud. People around me started talking about the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad that was scheduled to operate within two weeks.

My Railroad Journey to Golmud

"I have been on the train for more than three hours now. I have talked to some people hanging around me. They look relaxed and seem eager to find something to do in order to kill some time. This is a ten-hour trip. The railroad is part of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, which will be operational next month. The railroad has become a hot topic that people talk about on the train now. A man sitting across from me throws out a question asking the prices of the tickets to Lhasa. It looks like that people cannot answer that question, but they expressed their ideas. Some say it would be more expensive to take the train to Tibet, while others think that the train tickets would not be too expensive because Tibetans do not have a lot of money." (A short excerpt from my field notes, 06/14/2006)

They were a car dealer and his assistant, a soldier in plain clothes, and a Hui restaurant owner in Golmud. I did not participate in the conversation actively. I took out a notebook and jotted down their conversation. Here is their conversation regarding the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad.

Car Dealer Li: I think the railroad was not built just for accelerating the economical development. It is a political project (zhengzhi gongchen). The railroad was built to show the world that the Chinese state cared about the TAR and the Tibetan people. They spent a huge amount of money on the railroad.

Soldier Wang: The railroad explains one thing that China has the capability to

build a railroad like this and now China has grown powerful in many aspects.

Assistant Zhao: Now the railroad is completed. Are the troops still needed to smooth out the flows of goods between the TAR and the interior land (neidi) in Golmud.

Solider Wang: We are mainly there to keep the stability of the region. Also, we need to protect the railroad. Since the outbreak of the Sino-Indian war in the 1960s India has been hostile to China. They want to take revenge on their miserable defeat. Therefore the railroad has a great significance for the domestic defense.

Car Dealer Li: The railroad has done a good job protecting the eco-system and the endangered animals. The railroad made way for the Tibetan antelopes. Now many people take interest in the wellbeing of the antelopes. Now there are less people broaching them, right?

Restaurant Owner Ma: In Golmud there are few broachers. Before most broachers were based in Golmud because Golmud is close to the place where the Tibetan antelopes live. Now the government is serious about the protection of these animals. The Tibetan antelope has become a mascot for the Beijing Olympics. People do not dare broach.

Golmud is a small industrial city in Qinghai Province. It is also known as the salt lake city in China because of its famous Chaha Salt Lake, which is the biggest inland salt lake in the world. Golmud is the biggest production base for salt, potassium and magnesium extracted from the salt lakes. There are also huge natural gas reserves. This region is also rich with minerals like gold, copper, jade and precious stones. The majority of the people living in this city are Han from outside of the province. They are working in the services such as restaurants and hotels, and huge state-owned factories. My informants mostly taxi drivers told me that there was a significant decrease of the city population in Golmud after the completion of the railroad. As a result, their business was affected in a negative way. Before the railroad was completed people traveling to the TAR over land had to stop in Golmud. Now Lhasa is directly linked with the railroad to the major Chinese cities like Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Therefore, people working in the service industries expressed the view that there would be less people coming to Golmud and they would not be able to earn as much money as they used to. They were pessimistic about the future of Golmud. They agreed that the building of the railroad brought huge changes to the city and benefited the city tremendously because the state invested a lot of money on the railroad and it started from Golmud. However, according to these people the completion of the railroad meant the stop of development in Golmud. They were worried that there would be less tourists coming to visit a place like Golmud. Thus, they all seem to conclude that the railroad would be good only for the economic development of the TAR and bad for Golmud.

Nevertheless, the Golmud government is promoting Golmud as a tourist place and the production base for important chemicals such potassium. Just ten days before the trial operations of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad the city government sponsored a cultural art festival, inviting some popular Chinese singers to the city. During the festival there was an elegant exhibit show of the minerals in the sample cases to attract investments.

In Golmud the buses going to Lhasa were owned privately by the Salar men from Xunhua. They transported the people who stopped there by either bus or train on the way

to Lhasa. When I asked them about the possible effects of the railroad they responded that they would have to lower the ticket prices in order to stay in the business. Many of my informants told me that they would prefer to take the train to Lhasa because the railroad travel is safe, fast, comfortable and affordable. However, it seemed like the bus drivers were not driven out of business. When I was in Lhasa, many Tibetan pilgrims I met told me that they came by bus. They said it was difficult to buy a train ticket in Xining so they took the bus and paid a higher price than a hard-seat ticket (yinwo) on the train. Surprisingly, according to these Tibetan pilgrims all the buses were packed and most bus riders were the Tibetan pilgrims and the migrant workers from Sichuan. In Lhasa I went to the bus station located at the east side of the city and talked to some bus drivers going to Qinghai. They told me that the bus was normally full, even though the railroad had operated for a few weeks by then. So in the early stage of the railroad operations the bus service was not affected significantly. In Lhasa I read a news article saying that for the first time the airplane tickets to and out of Lhasa were sold with a discount.

Although the railroad would be bad for the taxi drivers in Golmud and the local economy, still the Golmud people held the view that in general the railroad was instrumental in pushing the development further and development was essential and crucial. Despite that, in Golmud I also met people who were not informed very much about the railroad. A restaurant owner from Chongqing said that she did not know very much about the railroad and how it would affect her business. A Salar man from Xunhua, who managed a hotel, which I stayed in expressed the same view. Therefore, it seems that people were related to the railroad in different ways and affected by the railroad quite differently.

There was a Tibetan settlement on the outskirts of Golmud. These Tibetans were called Shentai yiming in Chinese, which can be loosely translated as eco-migrants. These Tibetan nomads were from the Kekexili area in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Chamdo County in the TAR. They were moved here for what they call environment protection reasons. Now they lived in the brick houses and each household was given 500 rmb monthly to live on. The Tibetans I talked to there said that the railroad would make their pilgrimage to Lhasa much easier because the railroad travel is safe and fast. Besides this, they did not have other knowledge about the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad.

My Qinghai-Tibet Railroad Trip

On July 15, I hopped on the train departing from Xining to Lhasa. It left Xining at 8:15 in the evening. The passengers on the train were almost all Han tourists. They were from all over China. There was a group of people from Shanghai and a young couple from Wuhan and there were two or three families from Guangdong in our car. It was a hard-seat car (ch. yinwo chexiang). They were all tourists who paid for their tickets at a much higher price than the official price because it was notoriously difficult to buy a train ticket. I bought my ticket ten days in advance and waited in line for four hours early in the morning.

In Xining the taxi drivers told me that this summer there were more tourists than ever before. All the hotels in Xining were fully occupied. A travel agency manager told

me that there are more tourists because the people who are traveling to Lhasa would normally stop in Xining for a few days to adjust themselves to the climate on the plateau.

They were simply mesmerized by the beautiful scenery outside the window. There were always waves of excitement and admiration from the travelers upon seeing the antelopes grazing not far from the railroad and the magnificent snow mountains in the distance. For the Han passengers the Tibet plateau was filled with wonders. The railroad brought the nature close to them. The passengers were holding cameras and getting ready to take pictures of the lovely sights. Throughout the journey the passengers talked about the railroad and were impressed by the beautiful scenery the railroad brought them. There are some major stations along the route from Xining to Lhasa. Golmud is a major stop. We arrived there at the dawn of the next day. After the train left Golmud the train started to climb up steadily onto the heart of the Tibet Plateau. From Golmud to Lhasa as the train thundered on a beautiful and constantly changing picture of naked nature was unfolding in front of the passengers. The black nomads' tents looked like black dots on the green pasture; the snowcapped mountains looked like the pillars supporting the blue sky and the white patches of clouds danced over them. Riding the train to Lhasa becomes a comfortable way to see the beauty of nature still preserved on the Tibet Plateau.

People who had money and time were eager to make the railroad journey to Lhasa particularly in the first few weeks of the operations. The train riders that I talked with told me they just wanted to enjoy the experience riding the train to Lhasa. They did not particularly complain about the high prices they paid for the tickets. They thought that it was worth it. Most of them said that they would fly back home. I learned that the first travelers on the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad were mostly better-off Han urbanites. In fact, the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad was the most popular phrase that people used and saw in the summer of 2006 and the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad trip became a fashion in China.

On July 1, when the railroad began trial operations some guidebooks such as *The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad Guide* (ch. Qingzang Tielu Luyou Zhinan) and *Riding the Train to Tibet* (ch. Zuozhe Huoche Qu Xizang) came out and appeared on the bookshelves in the bookstores.

Nobody was using the oxygen tube to breathe.

The passengers praised the comforts of the train and the services provided on the train. In each car there were two attendants who were available for assistance. Before the start of the train they welcomed the passengers abroad in Chinese, Tibetan, and English. Although the attendants were Han Chinese, they had to say the greetings in Tibetan and English. I was told that they went through a month's training in the basic Tibetan and English languages. In fact, I helped them with pronounce the Tibetan correctly. They showed me the greeting words on a piece of paper. They were supposed to be competent enough to communicate with the passengers in their language and report the train's arrival at a train stop.

The railroads become part of the landscape but it helps speed up the transport of people and goods. "From July 1 when the railroad started operations to October 8 the line carried 65,000 passengers into Tibet and 212,000 out of the region, said Zhao Liwei, a publicity executive with the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad Company. The cargo service, which opened earlier on March 1, had transported 280,000 tons of goods into Tibet and 12,000 tons out of the region." (china.org.cn, Xinhua News Agency, 10/10/2006)

An article in the Lhasa Evening Newspaper on July 24 said that there were three times more tourists than the year before. The railroad brought more tourists to the TAR. The local Tibetans and the taxi drivers all informed that in Lhasa there were more people than ever before. When I asked different people in Lhasa what they thought about the railroad, there were a variety of opinions. I realized that the difference of opinion had to do with their age, job, ethnic background, and education. However, they were talking about the railroad in terms of the demographic change that they could feel and see immediately. Thus, when they talked about the railroad they were referring to the railroad as a means of transporting people and goods. Indeed, the flows of people and goods change economy, as the government and most people emphasize. However, it is important to note here that the economic change leads to the changes of society, culture, religion, and education.

Lhasa, the end

Since the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad just began operations it is too early to say exactly what impact the railroad will have on the Tibetan people and culture. Even though there are already some changes happening impressively, the impact cannot be felt immediately. The immediate change that people could feel and see is the outpour of many tourists in Xining and Lhasa. Without doubt the railroad is having an impact on the local society and culture as the changes it has brought occur. However, it seems like that within a month's operations of the railroad it is difficult for most people to realize and feel the impact. Perhaps the deep impact comes slowly and takes time.

However, after talking to many people from different backgrounds in the places along the railroad route, I realized that people who were related to the railroad differently would be affected in different ways by the railroad. People such as taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant owners were affected the first and they felt the effects of the railroad. People whose lives were not touched immediately and deeply could not figure out how the railroad would have a great impact on them. Therefore they were simply speculating on the railroad. Although these people could see some changes around them, they found it hard to relate the changes to them and point out the impact it would have on them as individuals. I found out that there was a big difference between people knowing about the railroad due to their personal experiences with and relations to the railroad.

To sum up, all I heard from my informants were the promises that the railroad promoters made, the concerns they had, and various speculations that they made on the railroad. At this point people were looking at the railroad as a mode of travel. Their views of the railroad were associated with travel. People were not thinking about the railroad in terms of how the railroad as a mode of travel would affect their culture and society at large. I think we need to wait and see the consequences of the railroad in the future. Needless to say there are good and bad aspects of the railroad.

What are the positive things that people say about the railroad?

A Han migrant worker from Shanxi said, "The railroad travel is safe, fast, and comfortable." He had been in Lhasa for three years and planned to go home by train.

A Sichuanese Taxi driver in Lhasa said, "The railroad is bringing more tourists to Tibet. They will spend money in the TAR and benefit the local people. So the railroad will push the economy of the TAR."

An old Chinese Muslim from Gansu said, "The railroad is convenient, fast and safe. It takes only 28 hours to get home by train now. When I first came to the TAR in 1977 it took 12 days to get here from Golmud. Now the high altitude sickness is not problem because there is oxygen supply on the train."

An old Lhasa woman said, "I would like to ride the train to Qinghai to visit Sku 'bum Monastery."

A Sichuanese restaurant owner said, "The railroad is good for the people who come to Lhasa to work. The railroad has made it easy for them to go home."

A Tibetan woman from Sichuan said, "The railroad will help develop the economy."

A young Tibetan girl said, "The railroad will help disseminate the Tibetan culture and more people will come to know about the Tibetan culture. And with the railroad it becomes convenient for the Tibetan students like me studying outside to return home during the school breaks."

A Lhasa man said, "The railroad will raise people's standards of living. There will be more goods available and the prices will go down."

What are the negative things that people say about the railroad?

A young Tibetan man said, "The presence of a overwhelmingly large number of Han people in the TAR would push the Tibetan culture into the margins and make the Chinese culture mainstream. That means that the Tibetan language would become marginalized. Nowadays the local Tibetans in Lhasa are coming to the conclusion that it is useless to study the Tibetan language because it would help them find a good and easy employment. The Tibetan monasteries are becoming commercialized and operating in a very commercial way. The monasteries have lost the peacefulness."

A group of Tibetan pilgrims from Qinghai said, "Now there are more and more Han people and Lhasa will soon become like a city in the interior Chinese cities (neidi chengshi). That's not good."

One old woman said, "There were many gods roaming around in the past, but now the dogs have disappeared because the Han people eat dog meat. It is also the same for the fish in the rivers. Now there are less and less Tibetans wearing Tibetan clothes on the street. When there are more people it would damage the environment." Also she added, "Only a few Tibetans go out so the railroad would not be particularly good for us." A Tibetan man also expressed the view. He said, "A very few Lhasa people go out. The railroad has made it easy for the Lhasa people to travel to the outside places. In the past people would ride buses to travel or fly if they had money."

A young Han man from Beijing who runs a bar near Bakhor said, "Now Xizang is not fun as it used to be before. The traditional and ethic stuff is slowly disappearing. For this reason many tourists are disappointed. There are more modern buildings being built. A few days ago a bunch of us biked to Namtso Lake and we saw it was pretty dirty."

A Han girl from Chengdu said, "I have been here for a couple of times now. It is not as good as it was before. I like Lhasa becoming like Shanghai."

"Now the railroad has linked Lhasa with many places and has make it easy for people to enter Tibet. The ticket prices are not very expensive and people with different backgrounds can come. Now there are more Han people begging," said a young Tibetan girl studying in Beijing.

One Tibetan girl working in a Tibetan restaurant near the Jolkang Temple said,
“There are more and more Han people coming to settle down here. They will take away
our jobs in the future if not soon ”

A Japanese woman said, “The railroad will be very bad for the environment”