Dilemma of development: Tibet’s development project and reductionist reading

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Introduction:¹

Before his journey through the fringes and heart of what is now China’s colossal landmass, Indian author and essayist, Pankaj Mishra, made several trips to Dharamsala.

He considered the exiled Tibetans he found here in their “jeans and American college sweatshirts” unlikely “heirs to a traditional culture…………… not with karaoke bars and video game parlours standing next to Buddhist temples.”

After struggling with “what to make of Tibetan refugees, in their oddly westernised way”, Mishra surveyed data relating to economic indices, particularly those concerning ‘Tibet’, before stating that: “there is more religious freedom in Tibet than any time since Cultural revolution. It has also recorded higher GDP than any other provinces in China. (Mishra 2006)”.

The author later somewhat redeemed himself, however, by adding: “Still economic development has not made for political passivity (as it has elsewhere in China)”. Unlike him, many other intellectuals have failed to delve beyond this extraordinary yet misleading figures and succumbed to what I refer to as reductionist reading.

China has poured money and resources into Tibet and Tibetan areas. Development became one of the key policies with which to ‘tame’² the restive Tibetan inhabited areas. A sense of dilemma and confusion gripped policy makers, academics, and observers in the wake of protests by a large number of Tibetans in 2008, which were followed by an unprecedented wave of self-immolations across Tibetan inhabited areas.³

In an effort to diagnose the causes of such protests and, in some cases, the complete rejection of China’s rule over Tibet, it is essential to look beyond questionable published figures and avoid slipping into reductionist reading.

Reports and data compiled with the blessing of the Chinese government should be treated with caution.⁴ Out of necessity, few researchers who have managed to carry-out field work in Tibet rely on government data. Comparing their field notes and observations with such data, it is assumed that these data are useful for studying trends and drawing fairly accurate conclusions.

Reductionist reading

In 2008, an unprecedented wave of protests swept across Tibet in the run-up to and during the time when China hosted the world’s leading sporting event in its capital. (Shakya 2008 and Smith 2009). Scholars, pundits, and activists began scuttling through their papers, notebooks, and numerous internet pages to monitor and examine the protests. Many of their analyses were overwhelmingly aligned in order to assert their preconceived political ideas, as a result of which they slid, tumbled, and clumsily collided on their way down the slippery slope of reductionist reading.⁵ One of the principal flaws of such analyses was the draining of Tibetan agency and failure to recognise that the protests couldn’t be reduced to one single and ultimate factor.
In 2008, the eccentric Slovenian cultural theorist and avowed Marxist, Slavoj Zizek, who has a journal devoted to studying his ideas, wrote in a leading French daily:

"The Chinese invested heavily in Tibetan economic development, as well as infrastructure, education and health services. Despite undeniable oppression, the average Tibetan has never enjoyed such a standard of living as today. Poverty is now worse in China’s own undeveloped western rural provinces than in Tibet."

Zizek is joined by a chorus of other scholars whose line of argument sits comfortably within the realm of reductive analysis. For instance, Barry Sautman, who has written extensively about Tibet, stated that Tibetans protesting “in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas were organised to embarrass the Chinese government ahead of the Olympics.” In his opinion “the large monasteries have long been centres of separatism, a stance cultivated by the TYC and other exile entities, many of which are financed by the US State Department or the US Congress’ National Endowment for Democracy. Monks are self-selected to be especially devoted to the Dalai Lama.”

There is a startling resemblance between the aforementioned analyses and reductive reading by various other scholars, and information provided by Chinese propaganda arms. The fundamental problem with these largely Marxist analyses is their complete disregard for Tibetan agency, where they conveniently assume that the Tibetans are incapable of acting independently and making their own free choices.

**Tibet’s development project**

Since 1951, Chinese government involvement in Tibetan polity and economy has created an awkward financial dependency through fiscal transfer payment and financial subsidies. According to its own figures, financial subsidies made by Beijing to Tibet between 1952 - 2013 amounted to 542.343 billion Yuan, which constituted 91.45 per cent of the region’s total financial revenue. In terms of expenditure, the central government doled out around 92.36 per cent of Tibet’s total expenses in financial subsidies to support the functioning of society and regulate Tibetan affairs.⁶

It is therefore imperative to understand how such staggering amounts of money earmarked for the development of Tibet make their way from the board rooms of Beijing to individual Tibetan households.

It also raises a more pertinent intellectual and philosophical question regarding the validity of development --aided by hand-outs -- as a means by which to bring about positive changes to the Tibetan peoples’ quality of life. If our education through the recent global experience of the development of impoverished countries through aid from richer countries is any indication, the development project in Tibet should be understood in the light of such new understanding (Fischer 2009).

**Share of Tibetan economy**

Before China’s intervention, Tibet’s economy was based upon what a Marxist would describe as feudalism. Although this system was undoubtably replete with flaws, the traditional, pre-industrialised Tibetan system functioned with remarkable efficiency, and the sudden economic transition imposed in Tibet against its geography, cultural disposition, and demography led to the unfolding of costly and sustained tragedy.

Tibet’s traditional economy was largely dependent on pastoral activities and farming. In 1959, the primary sector (comprised chiefly of agricultural and pastoral activities) accounted for 73.6 per cent of the country’s economy. By 2008 this figure had plummeted to just 15.3 per cent.
As the primary sector's share of Tibet’s cumulative economic output dropped, many Tibetans were compelled to abandon traditional ways of making a living. The share of employment in the primary sector (the number of people making their living by traditional means) had also sharply declined by 2008 - a trend not restricted to the Tibet Autonomous Region, but also evident within Tibetan inhabited areas in Gansu, Sichuan and Qinghai (see figure 1).7

![Graph showing primary sector employment trends](image)

Figure 1. Source: Tibet Statistical Yearbooks, 1990-2008; China Statistical Yearbooks 1990-2008, (Fischer 2011)

However, whilst the primary sector's share of its economy has dramatically declined, Tibet has witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of people employed in the tertiary sector (comprising roles in which people offer their knowledge and time to improve productivity, performance and sustainability). In order to benefit from this sector, workers and employees require certain levels of skill, education, expertise, and know-how. Increasingly, huge chunks of money earmarked for Tibet's development are consumed by this sector. In Tibet, the increase in the tertiary sector’s share of the economy has had a reverse relation to the decline of the primary sector, the former’s share of Tibet's cumulative economic output having risen steadily from just 15.8 per cent in 1959 to 55.5 per cent in 2008.8

As more and more manpower was needed to run this new rising sector of the economy, employment figures rose, generating the tertiary sector’s current employment share in the economy (see figure 2). A policy of China's cadre transfer was implemented to sustain this transition, carried out by providing lucrative incentives as well as administrative compulsion. In 2003, cadres employed in the Tibet Autonomous Region were paid an average annual wage of 26,931 yuan, almost double the national average of 14,040, and surpassed only in the national commercial hub of Shanghai where the figure stood at 27,304.

The generous remuneration offered to cadres in Tibet is remarkable considering the stunted growth in other sectors of the economy. This cash-rich sector has also witnessed a sudden shift in the representation of Tibetans. The number of Tibetan staff and workers employed within state-owned units fell from 71.4 per cent to 64.6 per cent between 2001 and 2003, whereas the proportion of Chinese employees rose from 28.7 per cent to 35.4 per cent within the same period. Moreover, this trend is not restricted to state-owned enterprises, but is also
in evidence concerning the appointment of Tibetans at cadre level. Cadre level appointment accounted for two-thirds of permanent state-sector employment in 2003 - the number of available positions having increased to 88,734 from 69,927 in 2000. However, the number Tibetans employed at this level dropped from 50,039 (72 per cent of the total number) in 2000 to just 44,069 three years later (around 50 per cent) (TIN 2005).

The disaggregation of minzu (ethnic) into official staff and workers' data was rolled back in 2004 to be replaced by gender disaggregation in the following yearbooks (TSY 2004).

**Sustaining Development**

Since the global economic meltdown, China has attempted to transition from an export driven economy to a consumer based one. This could be an attempt to shield it from economic turmoil on a global scale. As China steers its way into transition, can it continue to subsidise Tibet’s economy? China is currently bracing itself for a “new normal” of slower yet safer and more sustainable growth, which involves giving the market a more decisive role in the economy (IMF 2015). Will Tibet’s traditional way of life, as well as its economy, become casualties of this shift?

Amongst regions in western or central China, Tibet receives by far the largest proportion of subsidies from the government. If the subsidies are evenly spread to the population in Tibet, then on a per capita basis, each Tibetan would receive 17,105 Yuan annually in 2010, whereas per capita subsidy for all provincial government in the same year is 2,481 Yuan.

It has now reached a point wherein, the remarkably high cost of sustaining development in Tibet couldn't be carried on if strains on Chinese economy becomes exposed. If and when confronted with nervous jolts in the larger global and national economy, will the government pursue subsidizing Tibetan economy?

Since large portion of this money would be consumed in retaining the tertiary sector, which is to run Tibet efficiently, it is evident that the government is pouring all resources possible to balm the scarred wounds caused by other failed policies in Tibet.
**Conclusion**

To sustain and to improve Tibetan participation in the burgeoning tertiary and secondary sector, Tibetans would be required to acquire a level of education and skills.

After an invitation by the Chinese government in September 2003, Katarina Tomasevski, the UN expert on education, presented her report to the UN human rights forum and described the illiteracy in Tibet as “horrendous” and "lacking far behind in comparison with the situation in China.” (ITC 2004)

In contradiction to the remarkably high expenditure in the tertiary sector, illiteracy among Tibetans remain discouragingly low. This might lead to discouragement of Tibetans in participating in various public sector opportunities.  

In China as a whole, the low-hanging fruits of development are plucked and further unconstrained development had shown strains on ecology and less impressive GDP figures. The unprecedented global consensus on climate change in Paris had turned the spotlight on energy-dependent development in a country like China. Under these constraints, China's global ambition adjusted to the new reality confronts challenges to its legitimacy to rule huge population and ethnic schism by citing development and GDP figures.

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1. This paper has benefited enormously from Andrew Fischer's sustained work on development in Tibet. His close and critical reading of statistical publications on Tibet, corroborated by his insightful field experiences during his trips across Tibet has made invaluable contribution in the field of development studies in Tibet.

2. In her wonderful book, see Yeh (2013), in the introduction she writes: "Taming (‘ dul ba ) is central to Tibetan conceptions of self as well as landscape, and is thus particularly resonant with territorialization. In theTibetan Buddhist view, the ego must be tamed in order to obtain liberation from cyclic existence...The remaking of Tibetan selves and landscapes by the PRC through territorialization threatens to undo this earlier process of taming through a new project of civilization, cultivation, and conversion."

3. For a comprehensive report and testimonial compilation on self-immolations in Tibet, see Kirti Monastery (2013).
Numerous economists and scholars have questioned the reliability of statistics published by the government, see Koch-Weser (2013) for an incisive thesis challenging the China’s national output statistics against that of US and European countries. Also see Rawski (2001).

See Yeh (2009). I echo an excellent critique of such reductionist reading in what she described as “radical reductionism.” She writes: “Many Tibetans, differently positioned within society, vis-a-vis class, gender, religious status and sect, geographical and rural/urban location, took part in the protests, making wide range of claims and demands. In addition to acknowledging this sheer multiplicity within Tibetan society, we need to recognise Tibetans as capable of political subjects, who like all historical subjects, are inevitably complex and contradictory.”

Figures and data mentioned here are calculated by using Tibet Statistical Yearbooks and China Statistical Yearbooks; it is denoted otherwise if used from other sources.

The figure and data is adapted from Andrew Fischer's excellent paper on transformation in Tibet and Xinjiang, see Fischer (2011). He is also considered one of the foremost authority on development and economic policies in Tibet.

See Fischer (2001). In a detailed analysis Tibetan participation in each sectors. It is worthwhile looking into the same trend found in the secondary sector.


See Fisher (2014 p.247-290) for a detailed analysis on 'education-employment nexus of exclusion in Tibet. He approaches 'exclusion' of Tibetans in public-funded enterprises and public sector job opportunities by firstly analysing literacy and schooling outcomes in the lower end of labour hierarchy. Secondly, the exclusion in 'upper end' of the labour hierarchy through various state policies.