Exile from the Grasslands

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Developments take many forms and is perceived differently depending on the circumstances and expectations of participants and observers. “Development with Chinese characteristics,” as demonstrated in rural Qinghai, involves the expansion of infrastructure networks, including the building of roads, highways, high-speed railways, airports, and phone, mobile, and broadcasting networks, at a pace that is unimaginable in Western contexts. It also entails the creation of huge real estate and housing clusters that enlarge existing cities, turn villages into towns, or sometimes remain empty and become ghost cities or settlements. Development in western China also means placing the latest mobile phone in the hands of each yak herder. It means more children in schools, more pollution and more environmental protection, and more involvement of the state in the daily lives of the people, for whom there will be less control over their own futures, more mobility, and less free time. The monasteries, holy places, and beautiful natural sites are being turned into tourist spots, herds sold, pastures turned into forests, and fields along the roads transformed into flower gardens so that tourists have something nice to look at. People are being relocated to meet the requirements of the development. Development offers new opportunities and new sources of income. Hundreds of thousands have risen out of poverty and similar numbers have become impoverished through the rising costs of living and the loss of their livelihoods. Development does not always mean an improvement. The costs for the state are high and often nonrecoverable. But is there a strategy behind all this?

If we want to understand the mechanisms of what is actually taking place on the ground among the Tibetan pastoralists and elsewhere in western China, we first must examine the national development plan of the Chinese
government. Although the targeted, large-scale rollout of the Great Opening of the West development strategy started only at the turn of the century, it is just another step in China’s attempt to secure national stability and the unity of China’s peoples and to (re)establish its position among the global economic and political leaders through “development.”

**CHINA’S QUEST FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Development (Ch: fazhan), modernization (Ch: xiandaihua), and civilizing (Ch: wenminghua) became the key concepts of the Great Opening of the West, which was aimed at the reformation of the still “backward” (Ch: luo- hou) areas on China’s western peripheries. Expressing the opposite of these key policy words, the term “backward” reflects the lack of urban spaces and networks, the absence of certain material objects in people’s daily lives, the type of subsistence-based production adapted to marginal environments, and the persistence of local ethnic customs, beliefs, and values. Use of the term “backward” in state policy discourse also reflects the perception of a certain level of superiority on the part of the sedentary Chinese civilization toward the inhabitants of the peripheral regions and surrounding areas, whose livelihoods are dominated by the steppe. This attitude, which is based on advanced urbanism as well as literary culture, has persisted in China since the imperial period and is still apparent today. It provides the background for the perceived necessity to civilize those sections of the population that diverge from current Chinese standards and refers mainly to the minority areas. The “civilizing mission” of development, which aims to accelerate the social and economic transformation of the western Chinese landscapes and populations, also serves to strengthen internal political stability through the integration of ethnic minority groups and the unification of lifestyles and values among the population of China.

This kind of superior attitude toward “backward” or “barbarian” societies living in a state of close interdependence with nature is not exclusively Chinese. It has also been evident in Western countries, especially during periods of colonialism, when developed countries felt it necessary to “modernize” (or “civilize”) the “backward” places by implementing a “comprehensive package of technical and institutional measures aimed at widespread societal transformation.” Encouraged and guided development has ever since been regarded as the way to achieve modernization, as demonstrated through economic growth, high technology, schooling, and militarization.

This Western perception of modernity forced on China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also influences the current direction of
China’s own model of modernization, which has been accelerated and expanded, significantly outperforming all the previous achievements of Western countries. Although European societies are slowly beginning to value sustainable lifestyles that are in balance with the natural environment, the general idea of modernity and development promoted in western China is still based on consumerism and industrialization and driven by a pragmatism that aims to shape national consensus and ensure overall political and macroeconomic stability.

In local contexts, the current controlled development objective aims to achieve a certain concept of modernity as defined by the state. The affected people (in this case the Tibetan pastoralists) are prevented from participating in the formation of development policies. Plans and official implementation often do not take into account whether modernization trends are suitable for the local infrastructure, environment, and population. In many cases this approach of orchestrated “modernization at all costs” not only leads to the destruction of existing and well established livelihoods based on sustainability but also bolsters the marginalization of the people involved rather than reducing it. The impression of “backwardness” among pastoral members of the population is thereafter reinforced by imposing on them certain models of “development” and forcing them to comply with the establishment of environments for which they are not adapted. Moreover, influenced by propaganda and confronted with a single general model of development, people in rural areas of China’s West, including the Tibetans in Qinghai, often adopt the label of “backwardness,” that is, being less civilized or less morally worthy, when referring to themselves, thus agreeing with the state-promoted necessity to be guided toward development.

THE “DEVELOPMENT” STRATEGY BEHIND THE GREAT OPENING OF THE WEST

Modern attempts to develop the western borderlands of China started with the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949. The government introduced reforms in these areas beginning in the 1950s, including two previous Opening of the West (Ch: Xibu Kaifa) campaigns. At that time, the deployment of heavy industry was promoted as a solution. The Great Opening of the West development strategy, however, differs from the previous campaigns. The aim of earlier development measures can be seen as the prevention of wars with neighboring countries and the establishment of an internal relationship between China’s West and East based on the exploitation and processing of natural resources, whereas the current development strategy
targets the growing socioeconomic disparities between eastern and western China, which are a result of the “unbalanced development” reforms implemented earlier by Deng Xiaoping. 

From the point of view of Tibetan pastoralists in particular, the Great Opening of the West differs greatly from previous development initiatives. Since the 1950s the state has been intervening in the lives of Tibetan pastoralists through the introduction of agricultural reforms, the establishment of people’s communes, and the allocation of usage rights over grasslands to individual households. However, until the start of the twenty-first century, animal husbandry remained the main occupation of Tibetan pastoralists. Even though some pastoralists accepted employment by the state, primarily in the administrative or cultural sectors, they maintained connections with their close relatives, who continued to live on the grasslands. Aimed at narrowing the gap between China’s East and West, the Great Opening of the West development strategy seeks not only to increase the income levels of rural households and their standard of living but also to acculturate them to a way of life experienced by the majority of Chinese population. Interpreting development as a shift from a mobile lifestyle and a livestock- and environment-dependent economy to a market-economy-dependent life in settlements, the Great Opening of the West encourages the sedentarization of the pastoral population and their engagement in cash-earning livelihoods. Such circumstances force Tibetan pastoralists to face a huge challenge, which requires them not only to adapt to the new modern environment but also to find new occupations and sources of income. This makes the Great Opening of the West development strategy an extraordinary initiative, especially when considered from the perspective of the pastoral society.

THE AGENDA OF THE GREAT OPENING OF THE WEST DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Great Opening of the West’s development strategy does not have clearly defined boundaries. It embodies all aspects of numerous subject areas, including infrastructure, the economy, tourism, the administration of natural resources, ecology, culture, social welfare, social control, and so on, and can be described as “an amorphous set of diverse policy agendas and instruments not designed to form a complete and coherent program, but rather to appeal to as many interests as possible simultaneously.” At its inception this development strategy established merely a theoretical framework that could be populated in the future with tangible projects. Therefore, it is possible to claim that all state-funded projects introduced since 1999–2000 in western
China, either directly or indirectly, as part of the provincial-level budget have been implemented in the name of the Great Opening of the West development strategy. The final interpretation of the state’s objectives and the implementation of individual projects lies in the hands of the actual executive actors at the lower administrative levels. This fact leads to a large diversity in local outcomes, even in relation to centrally designed projects; therefore, it is difficult to make general statements for whole areas of Qinghai, let alone the entire territory targeted by the development strategy.

The promotion of the Great Opening of the West development strategy was a major policy initiative of the former general secretary of the Communist Party of China, Jiang Zemin, announced in March 1999.\textsuperscript{17} It was he who first accentuated the necessity of speeding up development in central and western China to safeguard both national development and stability. The official launch of this policy followed in June 1999, promising to bring about “a flourishing economy, social progress, a settled life, unified nationalities and a graceful landscape in the west of China.”\textsuperscript{18}

The definition of “western China” within the concept of the Great Opening of the West development strategy has changed since its first announcement. However, in general it has been defined generously. In 1999 the state identified ten provincial-level jurisdictions that would benefit from the development initiative: Tibet Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Qinghai, Gansu, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Chongqing Provinces, which together comprise 56 percent of China’s territory and 23 percent of its population. The documents issued in 2000 also include Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (see map 1.1).\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, in 2001 Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hunan, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hubei, and Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin were also included. This territory covered amounts to 71 percent of China’s total area and includes about 29 percent of China’s population, as well as the majority of China’s minority regions and populations. The selected regions were characterized by their common experience of economic underdevelopment, the lack of economic infrastructure, and large numbers of ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{20}

At its inception, the Great Opening of the West was scheduled to include three phases. The objective of the first phase, scheduled originally for 2001–10, was to prepare the ground and further develop and strengthen the connectivity between the East and the West.\textsuperscript{21} It was focused on the development of infrastructure, in particular on regional airport, highway, and
MAP 1.1. Geographical dimensions of the implementation of the Great Opening of the West development strategy, showing the areas under study, Qinghai Province and Zeku County
railway constructions but also on rural infrastructure constructions or relocation of rural population through encouraging returning of farmland into forests and pastureland into grasslands with a total investment of over ¥2.874 trillion. According to a report by the Qinghai Great Opening of the West Leadership Group in 2005, a government investment of ¥700 billion was designated for the building of 350,000 kilometers of roads in western China between 2000 and 2010. For the construction of around 18,000 kilometers of railways in western China, an additional ¥100 billion were spent in the first five years alone. Also included in the list were the west-east electricity and gas projects, the construction of hydropower stations, and mining infrastructure. The program highlighted the intention to enhance growth of the gross domestic product, provide adequate health care and accessible schooling systems, extend the radio and TV broadcasting system in the countryside, manage the restoration of grasslands and forests, and alleviate poverty through granting subsidies and encouraging the resettlement of population groups. Infrastructure development in western China did not end in 2010, however. The major objectives of the Great Opening of the West, such as infrastructure extension, economic development, and the exploitation of western China have been absorbed into the agenda of the current Chinese leadership and now comply with the policy of making western China the gateway of the New Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative (Ch: Yi Dai Yi Lu), thus aiming to replace national investments in local development with foreign money sources. Additional rail lines, airports, and highways are being constructed, which will bring the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau closer to Chinese (and also certain foreign) metropoles and change the lives of the grassland inhabitants. The major infrastructure projects completed in Qinghai since 2000 include the railway connection between Golmud and Lhasa, completed in 2006 and further extended to Shigatse in 2014, as well as the high-speed Lanzhou-Xinjiang rail connection, which includes a link with Xining, Qinghai’s capital. Further examples of development include Xining and Yushu airports and increased traffic on the Yangzi River.

The second phase of the Great Opening of the West from 2010 to 2030 is intended to accelerate economic and cultural development. As a result of the final phase, to be completed by 2050, the living standards of China’s West are projected to meet the standards of the East.

Publicly, the agenda of the current development efforts is formulated so as to predominantly benefit the targeted regions’ populations, economies, and environments, with the state playing the role of generous and altruistic
benefactor.  In practice, however, the majority of reforms introduced in the context of the Great Opening of the West development strategy have been designed more to serve nationwide goals.

At the local level, it seems very likely that the objectives of improving the living standards of urban and rural residents in western China, bringing standards into line with the national average, narrowing the gap between eastern and western China, and creating a well-off society in western China will be achieved. It is also the aim to reduce and eliminate poverty, which is still (statistically) widespread in rural areas. From the national perspective, the Great Opening of the West helps to strengthen the state economy through the efficient exploitation of local natural resources and other economic resources, including, for example, the expansion of house building and (eco)tourism. The tourism industry will be able to take advantage of the wonderful natural sights and of the unique cultural features of the ethnic minorities. Additionally, the economic development of the minority population should help to establish social harmony, political stability, and national security. In this regard, the Great Opening of the West can be understood as a nation-building strategy based on the principles of standardization and homogenization and as a realization of the social and cultural unification of China’s population. It is hoped that the sociocultural unification, aimed at strengthening administrative and political control over the western regions, will finally lead to the integration of minorities that has been the objective of the government of the People’s Republic since it came to power in 1949. This objective has been repeatedly accentuated after each episode of unrest in minority areas. The huge inward migration of predominantly Han peoples from eastern parts of China has taken place as a result of the emerging possibilities created by the Great Opening of the West and could lead to the absorption of the minority population into the sociocultural framework of the majority.

Although the final phase of the decades-long strategy has not yet started as of 2020, the term *Xibu da Kaifa* has already almost vanished from Chinese policy rhetoric. The goal to push forward the development of China’s West, however, still remains, though it is wrapped up in different names, such as the national call for the final elimination of poverty through the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Project or the internationally oriented Belt and Road Initiative. Whenever the leadership changes in China, policy strategy labels are often altered so that the new leader can promote his own role in forwarding China’s development ambitions, but many of the specific initiatives he pursues remain the same.
In the case of huge undertakings such as the Great Opening of the West, it is difficult to assure effectiveness and avoid the risk of overlap or program contradiction. This is especially so when supervision is undertaken in parallel by multiple state organs and institutions and when the subject of review consists of incoherent programs and projects executed at different administrative levels, with the accent placed on speed and quantity rather than sustainability. Given the lack of communication between policy planners and policy objectives, as well as the omnipresence of corruption, it is no wonder that both aims and implementation suffer from severe contradictions and that the results of the development measures are not always positive. Although the Great Opening of the West covers environmentally and culturally diversified regions of China, insufficient testing to establish appropriate development methods took place before implementation. Nor was the experience of the local people, such as Tibetan pastoralists, with their local landscapes and lifestyles, taken into consideration. The incompatibility between some aspects of state-driven development and the needs and adaptation ability of the targeted landscapes and peoples has in certain cases led to conflicts and, in the longer term, the failure of individual projects.

The major points of contradiction include the different levels of development perception. Local expectations that “development” will involve a simultaneous improvement in local conditions do not always correspond with the goal of boosting the national economy. An example of this is the exploitation of natural resources and the development of secondary industries such as mining and manufacturing, which are now growing significantly in western China, following their decline in the 1980s. Although billed as a benefit to the western regions of China, this kind of industrial development predominantly benefits the East, where most of the natural resources are transported, processed, and used in manufacturing. The problems associated with local economic improvement through orchestrated development are further exacerbated by the tendency toward western migration, a phenomenon that increases as development occurs. While infrastructure expansion, market development, and urbanization all lead to countless new business opportunities, the ones who benefit the most from these new initiatives are predominantly the inhabitants of urban areas, migrants from neighboring provinces, and investors from eastern China, all of whom are
aware of the potential and possess enough capital and knowledge to prosper in such circumstances.\(^{38}\)

The socioeconomic wellbeing of the majority of the rural population has not improved as fast as envisaged in the development policy statements. Since the implementation of the Great Opening of the West began, the flow of large investments has been directed toward the western regions, and the per-capita GDP in western China has indeed risen, from a 6.6 percent average annual growth rate between 1991 and 2001 to 13.58 percent between 2000 and 2010.\(^{39}\) However, the eastern Chinese regions also show an increase in GDP growth. By 2010 the eastern Chinese provinces were still generating 59.5 percent of the national GDP, with the contribution made by western territories, including relatively well-off Sichuan and Chongqing, amounting to only 13.8 percent. It seems that, at least in terms of the GDP, the gap between the East and the West still remains significant, and may in fact have increased.\(^{40}\) Moreover, these figures present only the regional average, not the further disparities that emerged within western China after the initiation of the Great Opening of the West, including intraregional disparities and an urban-rural income divide.\(^{41}\) Statistics for regional GDP and income increases are also distorted by enormous state subsidies granted directly and indirectly to both provinces and households. The partly illusory economic benefits of the Great Opening of the West and the actual beneficiaries are apparent in analyses of the reality behind the statistical figures, which reveal large discrepancies between the officially proclaimed achievements and the impact on local populations in China’s West.\(^{42}\) We should also evaluate people’s economic lives with reference to both income and consumption because in some cases the increase in daily expenses caused by development in fact decreases the socioeconomic status of rural households.\(^{43}\)

The variations in the economic outcomes resulting from the Great Opening of the West might suggest that the primary aim of the strategy is not local economic growth but rather something else, such as the “incorporation of minority ethnic groups, and the reconsolidation of central state control after two decades of decentralization and localism.”\(^{44}\) The goal of social harmonization through development also raises important questions. It was hoped that the increasing number of predominantly Han inward migrants in areas where the majority of inhabitants belong to a minority group might encourage social integration and erase the significant cultural differences that exist among the fifty-six nationalities of China. This would prevent acts of local nationalism based on cultural distinctions and help to consolidate inter-state stability. In reality, however, the large social, economic, and
cultural transformations, as well as high levels of Han inward migration, have often resulted in expressions of discontent among the minority population, who have been unable to keep up with the pace of development, eventually escalating even in such dramatic acts as self-immolation in the Tibetan areas. When evaluating the outcomes of the orchestrated development, the Tibetans are thus sometimes labeled as being ungrateful and not adequately appreciating the Chinese gift of development.\textsuperscript{45}