

Tibet through Chinese Eyes by Peter Hessler**7500 words***Atlantic Monthly February 1999*

Many Chinese working in Tibet regard themselves as idealistic missionaries of progress, rejecting the Western idea of them as agents of cultural imperialism. In truth, they are inescapably both

Political views on Tibet tend to be as unambiguous as the hard blue dome of sky that stretches above its mountains. In Western opinion, the "Tibet question" is settled: Tibet should not be part of China; before being forcibly annexed, in 1951, it was an independent country. The Chinese are cruel occupiers who are seeking to destroy the traditional culture of Tibet. The Dalai Lama, the traditional spiritual leader of Tibet, who fled to India in 1959, should be allowed to return and resume his rule over either an independent or at least a culturally autonomous Tibet. In short, in Western eyes there is only one answer to the Tibet question: Free Tibet.

For Han -- ethnic Chinese -- who live in Tibet, the one answer is exactly the same and yet completely different. They serve what the Chinese call "Liberated Tibet." Mei Zhiyuan is Han, and in 1997 he was sent by the Chinese government to act as a "Volunteer Aiding Tibet" at a Tibetan middle school, where he works as a teacher. His roommate, Tashi, is a Tibetan who as a college student was sent in the opposite direction, to Sichuan province, where he received his teacher training. Both men are twenty-four years old. They are good friends who live near Heroes Road, which is named after the Chinese and Tibetans who contributed to the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet in the 1950s. This is how Mei Zhiyuan sees Tibet -- as a harmonious region that benefits from Chinese support. When I asked him why he had volunteered to work there, he said, "Because all of us know that Tibet is a less developed place that needs skilled people."

I went to Tibet to explore this second viewpoint, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Tibet question through Chinese eyes. Before coming to Tibet, I had spent two years as a volunteer English teacher at a small college in Sichuan, which made me particularly interested in meeting volunteer teachers like Mei Zhiyuan. I also talked with other young government-sent workers and entrepreneurs who had come to seek their fortunes, and for four weeks that was my focus, as I spent time in Lhasa and other places where there are large numbers of Han settlers.

Of all the pieces that compose the Tibet question, this is by far the most explosive: the Dalai Lama has targeted Han migration as one of the greatest threats to Tibetan culture, and the sensitivity of the issue is evident in some statistics. According to Beijing, Han make up only three percent of the population of the Tibet Autonomous Region, whereas some Tibetan exiles claim that the figure is in fact over 50 percent and growing. Tibetans see the influx of Han as yet another attempt to destroy their culture; Chinese see the issue as Deng Xiaoping did in 1987, when he said, "Tibet is sparsely populated. The two million Tibetans are not enough to handle the task of developing such a huge region. There is no harm in sending Han into Tibet to help.... The key issues are what is best for Tibetans and how can Tibet develop at a fast pace, and move ahead in the four modernizations in China."

Regardless of the accuracy of the official Chinese view, many of the government-sent Han workers in Tibet clearly see their role in terms of service. They are perhaps the most important historical actors in terms of the Tibet question, and yet they are also the most-often overlooked. Why did they come to Tibet? What do they think of the place, how are they changing it, and what do they see as their role?

Gao Ming, a twenty-two-year-old English teacher, told me, "One aspect was that I knew we should be willing to go to the border regions, to the minority areas, to places that are *jianku* -- difficult. These are the parts of China that need help. If I could have gone to Xinjiang, I would have, but I knew that Tibet was also a place that needed teachers. That was the main reason. Another aspect was that Tibet is a natural place -- there's no pollution here, and almost no people; much of it is untouched. So I wanted to see what it was like."

Shi Mingzhi, a twenty-four-year-old physics teacher, said, "First, I'd say it's the same reason that you came here to travel -- because it's an interesting place. But I also wanted to come help build the country. You know that all of the volunteers in this district are Party members, and if you're a Party member, you should be willing to go to a *jianku* place to work. So you could say that all of us had patriotic reasons for coming -- perhaps that's the biggest reason. But I also came because it was a good opportunity, and the salary is higher than in the interior of China."

Talking with these young men was in many ways similar to talking with an idealistic volunteer in any part of the world. Apart from the financial incentive to work in Tibet, many of the motivations were the same -- the sense of adventure, the desire to see something new, the commitment to service. And government propaganda emphasizes this sense of service, through figures like Kong Fansen, a cadre from eastern China who worked in Tibet and became famous as a worker-martyr after his death in an auto accident. Han workers are exhorted to study the "old Tibet spirit" of Kong and other cadres as they serve a region that in the Chinese view desperately needs their talents.

Central to their task is the concept of *jianku*. I heard this term repeatedly when the Chinese described conditions in Tibet, and life is especially *jianku* for Volunteers Aiding Tibet, who commit in advance to serving eight-year terms.

Most government-sent Han workers fall into the category of Cadres Aiding Tibet -- teachers, doctors, administrators, and others who serve for two or three years. Having graduated from a lower-level college, Mei Zhiyuan could not qualify for such a position, and as a result was forced to make an eight-year commitment. The sacrifice is particularly impressive considering that he assumed it would have serious repercussions on his health. Many Chinese believe that living at a high altitude for long periods of time does significant damage to the lungs, and a number of workers told me that this was the greatest drawback to living in Tibet. "It's bad for you," Mei Zhiyuan explained, "because when you live in a place this high, your lungs enlarge, and eventually that affects your heart. It shortens your life."

During my stay in Tibet I heard several variations on this theory (one from an earnest young teacher who was smoking a cigarette), but generally it involved the lungs expanding and putting pressure on the heart. There is no medical evidence to support such a belief; indeed, in a heavily polluted country like China, where one of every four deaths is attributed to lung disease, the high, clean air of Tibet is probably tonic. Nevertheless, this perception adds to the sense of sacrifice, and it is encouraged by the government pay structure, which links salary to altitude: the higher you work, the higher your pay.

The roughly 1,000 yuan (\$120) a month that Mei Zhiyuan earns is half what the local cadre teachers make. Even so, his salary is two to three times what he would make as a teacher in rural Sichuan, and he is able to send half his earnings home to his parents, who are peasants. It's good money by Chinese standards but seems hardly a sufficient incentive for a young man to be willing to shorten his life. Leaving before his eight years are up would incur a heavy fine of up to 20,000 yuan -- \$2,400, nearly two years' salary, or, for a peasant family like Mei Zhiyuan's, approximately twenty tons of rice.

The Dream of a Unified Motherland

From the Chinese perspective, Tibet has always been a part of China. This is, of course, a simplistic and inaccurate view, but Tibetan history is so muddled that one can see in it what one wishes. The Chinese can ignore some periods and point to others; they can cite the year 1792, when the Qing Emperor sent a Chinese army to help the Tibetans drive out the invading Nepalese, or explain that from 1728 to 1912 there were Qing *ambans*, imperial administrators, stationed in Lhasa. In fact the authority of these *ambans* steadily decreased over time, and Tibet enjoyed *de facto* independence from 1913 to 1951. An unbiased arbiter would find Tibetan arguments for independence more compelling than the Chinese version of history -- but also, perhaps, would find that the Chinese have a stronger historical claim to Tibet than the United States does to much of the American West.

Most important, China's reasons for wanting Tibet changed greatly over the years. For the Qing Dynasty, Tibet was important strictly as a buffer state; *ambans* and armies were sent to ensure that the region remained peaceful, but they made relatively few administrative changes, and there was no effort to force the Tibetans to adopt the Chinese language or Chinese customs. In the Qing view, Tibet was a part of China but at the same time it was something different; the monasteries and the Dalai Lamas were allowed to maintain authority over most internal affairs.

In the early twentieth century, as the Qing collapsed and China struggled to overcome the imperialism of foreign powers, Tibet became important for new reasons of nationalism. Intellectuals and political leaders, including Sun Yat-sen, believed that China's historical right to Tibet had been infringed by Western powers, particularly Britain, which invaded Tibet in 1904 to force the thirteenth Dalai Lama to open relations. As Tibet slipped further from Chinese control, a steady stream of nationalistic rhetoric put the loss of Tibet into a familiar pattern -- the humiliation by foreign powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Hong Kong went to the British, Manchuria and Shandong to the Japanese, Taiwan to the U.S.-funded Kuomintang. By the time Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China, in 1949, Tibet had figured into the nation's pre-eminent task: the reunification of the once-powerful motherland.

Tibet thus changed from buffer state to a central piece in Communist China's vision of itself as independent and free from imperialist influence. [Orville Schell](#), a longtime observer of China, says that even today this perception is held by most Chinese. "I don't think there's any more sensitive issue," he says, "with the possible exception of Taiwan, because it grows out of the dream of a unified motherland -- a dream that historically speaking has been the goal of almost every Chinese leader. This issue touches on sovereignty, it touches on the unity of Chinese territory, and especially it touches on the issue of the West as predator, the violator of Chinese sovereignty."

The irony is that China, like an abused child who grows up to revisit his suffering on the next generation, has committed similar sins in Tibet: the overthrow of the monasteries and the violent redistribution of land, the mayhem of the *Cultural Revolution*, and the restriction of intellectual and religious freedom that continues to this day. And as in any form of imperialism, much of the damage has been done in the name of duty. When the Chinese speak of pre-1951 Tibet, they emphasize the shortcomings of the region's feudal-theocratic government: life expectancy was thirty-six years; 95 percent of Tibetans were illiterate; 95 percent of the population was hereditary serfs and slaves owned by monasteries and nobles. The sense is that the Tibetans suffered under a bad system, and the Chinese had a moral obligation to liberate them.

Before traveling to Tibet, I asked my Chinese friends about the region. Most responded like Sai Xinghao, a forty-eight-year-old photographer: "It was a slave society, you know, and they were very cruel -- they'd cut off the heads of their slaves and enemies. I've seen movies about it. If you were a slave, everything was controlled by the master. So, of course, after Liberation the rich lords opposed the changes [instituted by the Chinese]. It's like your America's history, when Washington liberated the black slaves. Afterward the blacks supported him, but of course the wealthy class did not. In history it's always that way -- it was the same when Napoleon overthrew King Louis, and all of the lords opposed Napoleon because he supported the poor."

My friend is not an educated man, but many Chinese intellectuals make the same comparison. President Jiang Zemin made a similar remark during his 1997 visit to the United States (although he correctly identified Lincoln as the Great Liberator). The statistics about Tibetan illiteracy and life expectancy are accurate. Although the Chinese exaggerate the ills of the feudal system, mid-century Tibet was badly in need of reform -- but naturally the Tibetans would have much preferred to reform it themselves.

Another aspect of the Chinese duty in Tibet is the sense that rapid modernization is needed, and should take precedence over cultural considerations. For Westerners, this is a difficult perspective to understand. Tibet is appealing to us precisely because it's not modern, and we have idealized its culture and anti-materialism to the point where it has become, as Orville Schell says, "a figurative place of spiritual enlightenment in the Western imagination -- where people don't make Buicks, they make good karma."

But to the Chinese, for whom modernization is coming late, Buicks look awfully good. I noticed this during my first year as a teacher in China, when my writing class spent time considering the American West. We discussed western expansion, and I presented the students with a problem of the late nineteenth century: the Plains Indians, their culture in jeopardy, were being pressed by white settlers. I asked my class to imagine that they were American citizens proposing a solution, and nearly all responded much the way this student did: "The world is changing and developing. We should make the Indians suit our modern life. The Indians are used to living all over the plains and moving frequently, without a fixed home, but it is very impractical in our modern life.... We need our country to be a powerful country; we must make the Indians adapt to our modern life and keep pace with the society. Only in this way can we strengthen the country."

Virtually all my students were from peasant backgrounds, and like most Chinese, the majority of them were but one generation removed from deep poverty. What I saw as freedom and culture, they saw as misery and ignorance. In my second year I repeated the lesson with a different class, asking if China had any indigenous people analogous to the Plains Indians. All responded that the Tibetans were similar. I asked about China's obligation in Tibet. The answers suggested that my students had learned more from American history than I had intended to teach. One student replied, "First, I will use my friendship to help [the Tibetans]. But if they refuse my friendship, I will use war to develop them, like the Americans did with the Indians."

The Two Sides of Support

Regardless of China's motivations, and regardless of its failures in Tibet, the drive to develop the region has been expensive. According to Beijing, more than 200,000 Han workers have served in Tibet since the 1950s. Taxes in Tibet are virtually nonexistent; Tibetan farmers, unlike those in the interior, receive tax-free leases of land, and a preferential tax code has been established to encourage business. Low-interest loans are available, and business imports from Nepal are duty-free. Despite the dearth of local revenues, government investment is steadily developing a modern infrastructure. From 1952 to 1994 the central government invested \$4.2 billion in the region, and in 1994 Beijing initiated sixty-two major infrastructure projects for which the eventual investment is expected to be more than \$480 million. It is estimated that more than 90 percent of Tibet's government revenue comes from outside the region.

This investment of both human and financial capital complicates the issue of Tibet in ways that few outsiders realize. Foreign reports often refer to the exploitation of Tibetan resources as a classic colonial situation, which is misleading. Although Beijing is certainly doing what it can with Tibet's timber and mineral reserves, China spends an enormous amount of money in the region, and if self-sufficiency ever comes, it will not come soon. Tibet does have significant military value: the Chinese do not want to see it under the influence of a foreign power such as India, but not even this would seem to merit the enormous investment. In 1996 China spent some \$600 million in Tibet. One foreign observer who has studied the region puts this in perspective: "For that same year the United States gave a total of eight hundred million dollars in aid to all of Africa. That's all of Africa -- we're talking about hundreds of millions of people. In Tibet there are only two and a half million. So if they become independent, who's going to be giving them that kind of money?"

"Unless you're a complete Luddite," Orville Schell says, "and don't believe in roads, telephones, hospitals, and things like that, then I think China must be credited with a substantial contribution to the modern infrastructure of Tibet. In this sense Tibet needs China. But that's not to diminish the hideous savageness with which China has treated Tibet."

Almost every aspect of Chinese support has two sides, and education illustrates the point well. I met a number of young Han teachers like Mei Zhiyuan, who were imbued with a sense of service: they were conscientious, well-trained teachers, and they were working in places with a real need for instructors. One volunteer was teaching English at a middle school where the shortage was so acute that many students had to delay the start of their English studies until the following year, when additional Han teachers were expected to arrive. I visited one district in which out of 230 secondary-school teachers, sixty were Han, and many of the Tibetan instructors had been trained in the interior at the Chinese government's expense. Such links with the interior seem inevitable, given that the Chinese have built Tibet's public education system from scratch. Before they arrived, in 1951, there were no public schools in Tibet, whereas now there are more than 4,000.

Likewise the schools I saw were impressive facilities with low student fees. In one town I toured the three local middle schools; two of them were newly built, with far better campuses than I was accustomed to seeing in China. The third school, whose grounds featured massive construction cranes fluttering with prayer flags, was being refurbished with the help of a \$720,000 investment from the interior. Unlike students at most Chinese schools, those at the local No. 1 Middle School paid no tuition, and even high school students, who generally pay substantial amounts in China, had paid at most \$70 a semester, including board. Everything possible was being done to encourage students to stay in school: a student's tuition and boarding charge were cut in half if only one parent worked, and transportation to and from the remote nomad areas was often free.

In a poor country such policies are impressively generous; essentially, Tibetan schools are better funded than Chinese schools. And this funding is sorely needed: the adult illiteracy rate in Tibet is still 52 percent. Only 78 percent of the children start elementary school, and of those only 35 percent enter middle school. But Chinese assistance must be considered in the context of what's being taught in the schools -- a critical issue for Tibetans.

One morning I visited an elementary school on a spacious, beautiful campus, with new buildings and a grass playground that stretched westward under the shadow of a 14,000-foot mountain. Most of the school's 900 students were Tibetan. I paused at the central information board, where announcements were written in Chinese.

The board detailed a \$487,800 investment that had been made by a provincial government in the interior, and displayed a short biography of Zu Chongzhi, a fifth-century Chinese mathematician. Next to this was a notice telling students to "remember the great goals." They were urged to work on doubling China's GNP from its 1980 level, and they were reminded that by 2050 China needed to achieve a GNP and a per capita income ranking in the middle of developed countries. Beside these goals was a long political section that read, in part,

We must achieve the goal of modern socialist construction, and we must persevere in building the economy. We must carry out domestic reform and the policy of opening to the outside world.... We must oppose the freedom of the capitalist class, and we must be vigilant against the conspiracy to make a peaceful evolution toward imperialism.

It was heavy stuff for elementary school students (and indeed, if I were a Chinese propagandist, I would think twice before exhorting Tibetan children to resist imperialism), and it indicates how politicized the climate of a Chinese school is. Despite all the recent economic changes in China, the education system is still tied to the past. This conservatism imbues every aspect of education, starting with language.

Two of the schools I visited were mixed Han and Tibetan, and classes were segregated by ethnicity. The reasons here are linguistic: most Tibetan children don't start learning Mandarin until elementary school, and even many Tibetan high school students, as the Han teachers complained, don't understand Chinese well. This segregation leads to different curricula -- for example, Tibetan students have daily Tibetan-language classes, whereas Han students use that time for extra English instruction. To the Chinese, this system seems fair, especially since Tibetan students have the right to join the Han classes.

But Tibetans feel that there is an overemphasis on Chinese, especially at the higher levels, which threatens their language and culture. All the classes taught by Han teachers are in Chinese or English, and most of the Tibetan teachers in the middle and high schools are supposed to use Mandarin (although the ones I spoke with said they often used Tibetan, because otherwise their students wouldn't understand). In any case, important qualifying exams emphasize Chinese, and this reflects a society in which fluency is critical to success, especially when it comes to any sort of government job. Another, more basic issue is that Tibetan students are overwhelmed. One Han teacher told me that his students came primarily from nomad areas, where their families lived in tents; yet during the course of an average day they might have classes in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, three languages with almost nothing in common.

Political and religious issues are paramount. In Lhasa I met a twenty-one-year-old Tibet University student who was angered by his school's anti-religious stance, which is standard for schools in Tibet. "They tell us we can't believe in religion," he said, "because we're supposed to be building socialism, and you can't believe in both socialism and

religion. But of course most of the students still believe in religion -- I'd say that eighty to ninety percent of us are devout." One of his classmates, a member of the Communist Party, complained about the history courses. "The history we study is all Chinese history [of Tibet]," he said. "Most of it I don't believe." These students also adamantly opposed existing programs that send exceptional Tibetan middle and high school students to study in the interior, where there is nothing to offset the Chinese view of Tibet.

Such complaints reflect the results of recent education reforms. A series of them made in 1994, characteristically, represent both the good and the bad aspects of Chinese support. On the one hand, the government stepped up its campaign against illiteracy, and on the other, it resolved to control the political content of education more carefully, in hopes of pacifying the region. There has certainly been some success with this approach: I met a number of educated Tibetans who identified closely with China. Tashi, Mei Zhiyuan's roommate, seemed completely comfortable being both Tibetan and Chinese: he had studied in Sichuan, he had a good job, and he had the government's support to thank. When I asked him what was the biggest problem in Tibet, he mentioned language -- but not in the way many Tibetans did. "So many [Tibetan] students can't speak Chinese," he said, "and if you can't speak Chinese, it's hard to find a good job. They need to study harder."

Most Tibetans seemed less likely to accept Chinese support at face value. But it was clear that politically they were being pulled in a number of directions at once, and my conversations with educated young Tibetans were dizzying experiences. Their questions ranged from odd ("Which do you think is going to win, capitalism or socialism?") to bizarre ("Is it true that in America when you go to your brother's or sister's house for dinner, they charge you money?"), and the surroundings were often equally unsettling.

One Monday morning I watched the flag-raising ceremony at a middle school, where students and staff members lined up to listen to the national anthem, after which, in unison, they pledged allegiance to the Communist Party, love for the motherland, and dedication to studying and working hard. With the Tibetan mountains towering above, it was a surreal scene -- and it became all the more so when the school's political adviser, a Tibetan in his early thirties with silver teeth, walked over and asked me where I was from. After I told him, he said, "Here in Tibet we already have a lot of influence from your Western countries -- like Pepsi, Coke, movies, things like that. My opinion is that there are good and bad things coming from the West. For example, things regarding sex. In America, if you're married and you decide that you want another lover, what do you do? You get a divorce, regardless of how it affects your wife and child. But the people here are very religious, and we don't like those kinds of ideas."

I heard a number of comments like this, and undoubtedly the education system included a great deal of anti-America propaganda. I felt that here the Chinese were almost doing the Tibetans a service; nothing depressed me more than my conversations with less-educated Tibetans, who invariably had great faith in American support and believed that President Clinton, who was then in China on last year's state visit, had come in order to save Tibet.

Considering that China's interest in Tibet is largely a reaction to foreign imperialism, it's no surprise that nothing makes the Chinese angrier and more stubborn than the sight of the Dalai Lama and other exiled leaders seeking -- and winning -- support in America and elsewhere. And yet Tibetan faith in America seems naive given America's treatment of its own indigenous people, and because historically U.S. policy in Tibet has been hypocritical and counterproductive.

For example, the CIA trained and armed Tibetan guerrillas in the 1950s, during a critical period of mostly peaceful (if tenuous) cooperation between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese. The peace ended when Tibetan uprisings, in which these guerrillas played a part, resulted in brutal Chinese repression and the Dalai Lama's flight to India.

America also represents modernity, and a further complication, beyond the Chinese political agenda, is that the long-isolated Tibetan society must come to grips with the modern world. One college student said, "The more money we Tibetans have, the higher our living standard is, the more we forget our own culture. And with or without the Chinese, I think that would be happening."

Sichuanese on the Frontier

Perhaps the most hopeful moment in recent Han-Tibetan relations came shortly after 1980, when the Chinese Party Secretary, Hu Yaobang, went on a fact-finding mission to Tibet and returned with severe criticisms of Chinese policies. He advocated a two-pronged solution: Chinese investment was needed to spur economic growth in Tibet, but at the same time the Han should be more respectful of Tibetan culture. Cadres needed to learn Tibetan; the language should be used in government offices serving the public; and religion should be allowed more freedom.

There's no question that such respect is sorely needed, especially with regard to language. I never met a single government-sent Han worker who was learning Tibetan -- not even the volunteers who would be there for eight years. And in Lhasa at the Xinhua bookstore, the largest in the city, I found not one textbook for Chinese students of Tibetan -- books for foreign students, yes, but nothing for the Chinese.

Some of the 1980 reforms were implemented, but they were cut short by a series of riots in Lhasa that started in 1987. To Beijing hardliners, the riots indicated that too much freedom is a bad thing, and in 1987 Hu Yaobang was purged, partly for his recommendations regarding Tibet. By the spring of 1989 martial law had been declared in Tibet, and the Chinese concluded that relaxing restrictions on Tibetan culture and religion was tantamount to encouraging unrest. The two-pronged solution was quickly cut in half: Beijing would simply develop the economy, hoping that rising standards of living would defuse political tensions while building closer economic ties with the interior. This policy has been accelerated by the enormous investments of the 1990s.

Development, however, often comes at the cost of culture. Traditional sections of Lhasa are being razed in favor of faceless modern buildings, and the economic boom is attracting hordes of Han and Hui (an Islamic minority) migrants to Tibet.

Outsiders dominate Tibet's economy -- indeed, they've essentially built it, inspiring enormous resentment among the Tibetan population. I met some Tibetans who didn't mind that cadres were sent from the interior, but I never met one who wasn't opposed to the influx of migrant workers, especially the huge numbers of Han from nearby Sichuan. Longtime Han residents, too, felt this was a serious problem.

The phenomenon of *liudong renkou*, or "floating population," is affecting urban areas all across China, with some 100 million people seeking work away from home. In the west and south there are particularly large numbers of Sichuanese in the floating population, and during my travels I often heard the same prejudices: the Sichuanese migrants are uncultured, their women loose, their men *jiaohua*, sly. And worst of all, people complained, they keep coming.

Having spent two years in Sichuan, I understand why the Sichuanese so often leave. Their province, roughly the size of France, contains 120 million people, and the economy is so shaky that recent factory closings have led to worker uprisings in some cities. Mostly the Sichuanese leave because they aren't afraid to; they have been toughened by tough conditions, and all across China that is another thing they are famous for: their ability to *chiku* -- eat bitter. They work and they survive, and like successful migrants anywhere else in the world, they are resented for their success.

In Tibet the Sichuanese have helped themselves to a large chunk of the economy. This was clear from the moment I arrived at the Lhasa airport, where thirteen of the sixteen restaurants bordering the entrance advertised Sichuan food. One was Tibetan. Virtually all small business in Lhasa follows this pattern; everywhere I saw Sichuan restaurants and shops. Locals told me that 80 percent of Lhasa's Han were Sichuanese, and this may not be much of an exaggeration.

This influx is far more significant and disruptive than the importing of Han cadres, and it's also harder to monitor. One common misperception in Western reports is that these people are sent by the government: the image is of a tremendous Han civilian army arriving to overwhelm Tibetan culture. The truth is that the government has little control over the situation. "How do you cut off the people moving out there?" asked one American who had spent much time in Tibet. "What mechanism are you going to have to prevent that? They don't have any restrictions on internal travel -- and we always beat them over the head about not having those, because to institute them would be a human-rights issue."

Far from arriving with an ethnic agenda, the independent migrants are for the most part completely apolitical. In Lhasa I often ate at a small Sichuan restaurant run by Fei Xiaoyun, a thirty-one-year-old native of Chengdu who, along with her husband, had been laid off in 1996 by a bankrupt state-owned natural-gas plant. Each of them had been given a two-year severance allowance of \$30 a month, and when that was gone, they took their savings and bought plane tickets to Lhasa. They had left their five-year-old son with his grandmother -- a common choice for migrants, including cadres. This is partly out of fear of the effects on health of living in Tibet, and also because Tibetan schools are considered worse than those in the interior and children who are registered outside their districts have to pay extra fees.

Fei Xiaoyun never spoke of the growth of the GNP, and she had no interest in developing the motherland. Once, I asked her about Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, whose economic reforms are closing factories like hers, and she didn't even recognize his name. "All of the country's big affairs I don't understand," she said with a shrug. She was simply a poor woman with her back against the wall, and like the rest of the Sichuanese who had made their way to Tibet, she was trying desperately to make a living.

But such migrants have a political effect, as Tibetans watch outsiders develop an economy from which they feel increasingly removed. This also presents a question: If the rules are the same for everybody, why are the Han entrepreneurs so much more successful than the Tibetans? The most common response is that the rules aren't the same: the Chinese have easier access to government *guanxi*, or connections. But even on a level playing field the Han would have more capital and better contacts with sources in the interior. And their migrant communities have a

tendency to support recent arrivals. This is especially true of the Sichuanese -- one will arrive, and then a few relatives, and before long an extended family is dominating a factory or a block of shops.

In front of the Jokhang, the holiest temple in Tibet, rows of stalls sell *khataks*, ceremonial scarves that pilgrims use as offerings. It's a job one would expect to see filled by Tibetans -- as one would expect those selling rosaries in front of St. Peter's to be Catholic. But one saleswoman explained that all the stalls were run by Sichuanese from three small cities west of Chengdu. There were more than 200 of them -- relatives, friends of relatives, relatives of friends -- and they had completely filled that niche.

One day I walked past the *khatak* sellers with a Tibetan friend, and he shook his head. "Those people know how to do business," he said. "We Tibetans don't know how to do it -- we're too straight. If something's supposed to be five yuan, we say it's five yuan. But a Sichuanese will say ten." I felt there was some truth to this -- the Han are successful in Tibet for some of the same reasons that they are successful in so many places, from Southeast Asia to the United States. They have a stronger business tradition than the Tibetans, and virtually all independent Han settlers in Tibet have failed somewhere else, giving them a single-minded drive to succeed.

Consequently, Tibet feels like a classic frontier region, with typically peculiar demographics. There are disproportionately few Han children, and almost nobody comes to stay: the intention is invariably to return to the interior. The majority of the Han are men, including the government-sent workers. Of the Han women I saw in Tibet, more than a few were prostitutes; locals told me that they had come in a wave in 1994 and 1995, after the investments in the sixty-two major projects. One Han volunteer I spoke with had arrived in a group of thirteen men; one woman had applied but was rejected because the authorities felt that Tibet was no place for a young woman. The young man was resigned to finding a wife during his three paid trips home. "During vacation I'll be able to look for a girlfriend," he said. "I'll have six months. You can meet one then, and after that you can write and all when you come back here."

There were moments when everything -- the ethnic tension, the rugged individualism, the hard, bright sun and the high, bare mountains -- seemed more like a Jack London story than a real society. One day some American friends and I hired a driver, a twenty-five-year-old Sichuanese named Wei, who was nursing a defeated 1991 Volkswagen Santana. He had a two-year-old son at home, and he hoped to earn enough money by carrying passengers -- though he wasn't registered to do so -- to buy a new car in six months. We agreed to pay him \$36 if he drove us to Damxung, five hours north of Lhasa. Drive he did -- past the police checkpoint, where he faked his credentials ("It's simpler that way," he explained), and past a Land Rover full of foreigners driven by a Tibetan, who, realizing our driver wasn't registered, swore he'd turn him in at Damxung. "It's because I'm Han," Wei said grimly. "And at Damxung the police will be Tibetan." He drove faster and faster, racing ahead of the Land Rover, until finally he hit a bump and ruptured the fuel line.

The car eased to a stop in the middle of nowhere. To the west rose the snow-topped Nyenchen Tanglha Mountains. The Tibetan driver cruised past, glaring. Wei cut a spare hose and patched the leak, and then he addressed the problem of injecting fuel back into the carburetor. He unhooked the fuel line and sucked out a mouthful of gas. Holding it in his mouth, he plugged the line back in. Then he walked around the front of the car and spit the fuel into the carburetor.

The car started. I could see Wei working the taste of gasoline around his mouth, and then, a few minutes later, he took out a cigarette. Everybody in the car held his breath -- everybody but Wei, who lit the cigarette and sucked deeply. He did not explode. He stared ahead at the vast emptiness that stood between him and \$36, and he kept driving.

That was the way a Sichuanese did things in Tibet. Gasoline was bitter but he ate it, the same way he ate the altitude and the weather and the resentment of the locals. None of that mattered. All that mattered was the work he did, the money he made, and the promise that if he was successful, he'd go home rich.

A House Without Pillars?

Tibet gave rise to exciting stories, but it was indeed *jianku*, and the social problems made a hard place even harder. Near the end of my trip I ate dumplings at Fei Xiaoyun's restaurant, and as I ate, she complained about her situation. Business was bad, and her life was boring; she worked fifteen-hour days and she had no friends in Lhasa. She missed her son, back in Chengdu, and she probably wouldn't see him until the following year. She asked me how long it had been since I'd been home, and I said I hadn't left China in more than two years.

"We're the same," she said. "Both of us are a long way from home." I agreed, and she asked if I missed my family. "Of course I miss them," I said. "But I'll see them next month, when I go home."

It was the wrong thing to say. Her eyes went empty and then filled with tears. We sat alone in the restaurant. It was unusual for a Chinese to show emotion in public, and I didn't know what to say. Silently I ate my dumplings while she cried, the late-afternoon sun stirring the Lhasa flies that were thick about the table.

Tibet had started to depress me, and I was looking forward to leaving. Strangely, it almost seemed worse for not being as bad as I had always heard. There were definite benefits of Chinese support, and I was impressed by the idealism and dedication of some of the young Han teachers I had met. But at the same time, most efforts to develop the region were badly planned, and it was frustrating to see so much money and work invested in a poor country and so much unhappiness returned. And often I felt that the common people, who knew little of Tibet's complicated historical and cultural issues, were being manipulated by the government in ways they didn't understand.

But although I was certain that nobody was truly happy (most of the Han didn't like being there, and most of the Tibetans certainly weren't happy to have them), I wasn't sure who was pulling the strings. One could go straight to the top and probably find the same helplessness, the same strings. It was mostly the irrevocable mistakes of history, but it was also money -- simple economic pressure that drove a mother away from her son to a place where the people did not want her.

This was not the first time I'd seen somebody cry in Lhasa. Five days earlier I'd spent the evening in front of the Jokhang temple, where I talked with two Tibetans. The first was a doctor who had done time in prison for writing an article warning Tibetans to protect their culture, and the second was a fifty-three-year-old who described himself as a common worker. Both men were eager to speak with an American, and they had a great deal of faith in America's ability to help solve the Tibet question. That saddened me as well. I wanted to tell them that in America there are many FREE TIBET bumper stickers, but they sit next to license plates that often bear the names of forgotten tribes who succumbed to the same forces of expansion and modernization now threatening Tibet. And the Chinese solution to the Tibet question -- throwing money at the problem -- also seemed very American. But I held my peace and listened.

"Look at this pillar," the worker said. He was standing next to the temple entrance, and he rested his hand on the worn red wood. "If a house doesn't have pillars, or if the pillars aren't straight, what will happen? It will fall down. It's the same thing here -- our pillars are our history and our politics. If we don't have those, our society will collapse, and all of it will be lost -- all of our culture."

It was dark, and I could barely make out his face, but I could see there were tears in his eyes. There was no more politically sensitive place in Tibet; virtually every major protest had happened in front of the Jokhang, and I knew it was unwise to speak so openly here. He glanced over his shoulder and continued.

"You need to tell the people of America what it's like here," he said. "You need to tell them what needs to be done." I nodded and shook his hand, but I realized I had no idea what I would recommend, or what the people of America could do. Perhaps we could build casinos.

Related links:

- ["CPPCC Chairman On Central Government Policy Toward Tibet,"](#) (November, 1996)
Remarks by Li Ruihuan, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, "concerning the central government's policy on Tibet." Published in China News and Report.
- ["Seeing Hate in a Han Face: The Social and Economic Implications of Population Transfer,"](#) by Althea Henedige (Spring, 1998)
An article in the Columbia East Asian Review.
- ["Chinese 'Development Projects' in Tibet: A Tibetan Perspective,"](#) by Ngawang Gyaltzen Tsona (August, 1996)
An article posted on the official Web site of the [Tibetan Government in Exile](#).
- [The Tibetan Studies WWW Virtual Library](#)
A comprehensive, regularly updated site, providing links to "leading information facilities in the field of Tibetan studies."
- [The Tibet Information Network](#)
"An independent news and research service providing information and analysis of developments in Tibet." Includes news reports, general information about Tibet, suggested reading, and more.

[Links for a Free Tibet](#)

An index of links to activist sites devoted to liberating Tibet from Chinese rule.

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The Atlantic Monthly; February 1999; Tibet Through Chinese Eyes; Volume 283, No. 2; pages 56 - 66.