



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 30

Number 1 *Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and
Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition No. 1 &
2*

Article 8

October 2011

Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition

Kenneth Bauer
Dartmouth College

Geoff Childs
Washington University, St. Louis

Andrew Fischer
Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam

Sienna Craig
Dartmouth College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Bauer, Kenneth; Childs, Geoff; Fischer, Andrew; and Craig, Sienna (2011) "Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/8>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



KENNETH BAUER

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

GEOFF CHILDS

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

SIENNA CRAIG

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

ANDREW FISCHER

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES,
ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM

DEVELOPMENT IN TIBET: LAND, LABOR AND SOCIAL POLICY IN A CONTEXT OF RAPID TRANSITION

Tibetan communities across China are undergoing rapid and potentially irreversible social, economic, and cultural transformations. That much is clear. Less clear is how Tibetans are responding to and being affected by state-sponsored development initiatives, or how policies differ from one community to the next and from macro-level directives to micro-level implementations. The following collection of essays represents the most up to date and comprehensive view on development initiatives that are enveloping the Tibetan Plateau. The authors, who represent a range of academic disciplines, provide original analyses based on first-hand fieldwork and a careful scrutiny of official data and documents. Their research presents new perspectives on the present situation of Tibetans and provides a baseline for assessing the magnitude and direction of future changes.

The papers in this volume of *Himalaya* were presented at the 12th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS) held at the University of British Columbia, Canada, in August 2010. Most are from the panel “Social, Political, Economic, and Environmental Change Amidst Development in Tibetan Areas” that was convened to explore and debate policies and their consequences across the Tibetan Plateau. We also solicited papers from other panels that provide empirical perspectives on development and associated socioeconomic changes that are impacting Tibetan communities. The resulting articles led us to organize this volume along three broad themes: land (in reference to resettlement and conservation policies), labor (in reference to entrepreneurial and employment transitions, including migration and urbanization), and social policy (represented by education, health care, and poverty alleviation strategies).

Several prominent themes emerge in this volume.

First, development in Tibetan areas is inherently political. Second, development in Tibetan areas is fraught with a host of unintended or unanticipated consequences. Whereas some of the outcomes benefit the livelihoods and living standards of Tibetan commoners, others challenge the sustainability of traditional lifestyles, social cohesion, and cultural practices. Third, many outsiders view China as an omnipotent state that imposes its will on a powerless population. These papers offer an important corrective by displaying the agency Tibetans possess—albeit in sometimes limited capacity—to engage and adapt, contest and negotiate the rapid changes being thrust upon them through state policies.

From education to resettlement, access to markets and labor opportunities, conservation and urbanization, the studies presented in this volume tackle a broad set of issues that are impacting the daily lives of Tibetan populations. Reading these as a collection provides timely information on the current situation in the rural countryside where the majority of Tibetans live, and the rapidly growing urban areas where increasing numbers are settling or seeking employment.

The first set of papers examines Tibetan pastoral communities as they respond to robust state initiatives aimed at achieving modernization. In a study of nomad communities in Domkhok Township in Qinghai Province, Emilia Sulek examines how nomads are changing their production systems in response to the infusion of capital that caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) has brought to their area. Kenneth Bauer and Yonten Nyima describe the national-level laws and regulations that have structured contemporary property regimes and affected the rate and extent of the enclosure movement among Tibetan nomads. Focusing on the Three Rivers’ Sources Nature Reserve

(Sanjiangyuan) in Qinghai Province, Elisa Cencetti compares official policies with Tibetan herders' ideas concerning their environment to argue that the Chinese government's discourses are modifying the relationship between Tibetans and the rangelands they steward.

The second set of articles investigates development in Tibet through the lens of socio-economic change. Childs, Goldstein, and Wangdui document the rise of rural entrepreneurs in the wake of China's Develop the West Campaign. Andrew Fischer investigates the rapid and potentially irreversible transition out of farming and herding and into urban forms of employment unleashed by China's development programs. Finally, Tashi Nyima considers gaps between local realities and government discourses on development by examining how villagers in "New Kangding Town" (Ganze Prefecture, Sichuan Province) have responded to an urbanization project that is reshaping their lives.

The third set of papers focus on responses to educational and health policies. Lilian Iselin examines the impact secondary schooling has on identity construction in nomadic communities of northern Sichuan and finds that educated youths are expected to simultaneously access different sources of income and maintain a connection to their ancestral culture. Sienna Craig's conversational engagement with the post-development literature illustrates the ethical, political, and pragmatic dilemmas of implementing health care initiatives in the highly politicized context of Tibet, and sheds light on the possibilities and limits of engaged anthropology under such circumstances. Jan Magnusson examines development philosophies of the 1950s and 1960s that helped shape the first Tibetan settlements in South India and documents how refugees ended up in the hands of technocrats whose Nehruvian vision had much in common with the communist ideology they had recently fled.

For scholars interested in Tibetan Studies, East Asian Studies, and the Himalayan region, research in this volume presents some of the first in-depth views on issues that have enormous implications for all Tibetans. This collection also represents an important contribution to the study of state-lo-

cal interactions in the context of development programs. The majority of development literature centers on post-colonial engagements between the West and the world's poorer nations. China, however, presents scholars with a unique challenge: to address development in a context whereby a government attempts to rectify socioeconomic disparities that map along ethnic lines within a single nation. Simply put, the ability of a powerful state dwarfs the capacity of international development agencies and NGOs to design and implement social engineering programs. While the pace of development limps along in many nations, the speed of social and economic changes occurring across the Tibetan Plateau astounds even veteran researchers. These changes are taking place in a region that has a history of contentious relations between ethnic groups and between the state and its citizens. The political ramifications of development are enormous, as they have the potential to mollify a restless population or exacerbate ongoing conflicts.

This volume also serves as a reminder of the urgent need for research that provides up to date information on the lived realities of Tibetan nomads, farmers, and urban dwellers. It is essential to keep tabs on contemporary developments if we are to maintain a relevant understanding of the broader social and economic context in which studies of Tibet and Tibetans are located. The spirited discussions and debates that occurred during the 12th IATS Seminar were telling of the high level of interest development holds among scholars from Asia, Europe, and North America. Unfortunately, during this time of rapid change research access to the field is currently constrained in China. We hope the publication of this volume will encourage a renewal of collaborative opportunities by demonstrating the invaluable nature of independent social science research. The ramifications of development on the Tibetan Plateau cannot be addressed from afar. An accurate, nuanced, and unbiased understanding of how policies and programs are affecting the lives of Tibetans can only be achieved through rigorous, empirical, and engaged scholarship that takes place within the communities that are being impacted.