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# Demographics, Development, and the Environment in Tibetan Areas

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## Introduction

This special issue of *JIATS* presents the results of recent research on population, economic, environmental, and development issues in Tibetan societies. It is the product of two panels convened at the eleventh seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS Bonn, 2006). These in turn derive from a particular lineage within Tibetan Studies. A glance through earlier IATS conference proceedings confirms that, until the 1990s, Tibetan Studies was dominated by historians, religious scholars, and philologists. The occasional anthropologist who attended these seminars usually worked in the ethnically Tibetan borderlands of Nepal and India, or among the refugee communities of South Asia. Representatives of other disciplines, notably demography, sociology, geography, economics, and political science, were conspicuously absent. However, the situation has changed due to three developments: (1) a dramatic expansion of interest in Tibet that has attracted scholars from an increasing array of academic disciplines, (2) the opening of the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan-inhabited areas of China to foreign researchers, and (3) the maturing in China of the social sciences, in particular scholarship on Tibet. Whereas the proceedings of the 1992 IATS meeting in Fagernes, Norway, included only a few papers that dealt with demography, social change, and contemporary expressions of political dissent,<sup>1</sup> the 1995 IATS

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<sup>1</sup> Ma Rong and Pan Naigu, "The Tibetan Population and Their Geographic Distribution in China," in *Tibetan Studies*, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 507-16; Nancy E. Levine, "The Demise of Marriage in Purang, Tibet 1959-1990," in *Tibetan Studies*, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 468-81; Ronald David Schwartz, "Buddhism, Nationalist Protest, and the State in Tibet," in *Tibetan Studies*, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 728-38.

meeting in Graz, Austria, witnessed a quantum leap in social scientific research on Tibet. The late Graham Clarke proved to be a driving force by organizing a panel devoted to development. Those who attended the Graz seminar will no doubt recall Clarke's admonitions, repeated mantra-like after each paper, that research on Tibet continued to be plagued by weak methodological approaches and unreliable data sources. In a preface to the resulting publication, he cogently summarized the state of affairs in the following terms:

In the past thirty years there has been more debate on policy, politics and change in Tibet than field description or other in-depth data. In the absence of detailed information speculation has been fuelled by glimpses from a distance. Rather than arising from neutral analysis of events and the full range of circumstances, interpretations have been projected onto data according to pre-existing stereotypes and political agendas.<sup>2</sup>

The published results of the Graz development panel<sup>3</sup> contained seminal papers on development and environmental issues, including two by authors (Ma Rong and Daniel Winkler) who have contributed to this current issue. Subsequent IATS publications from the Leiden and Oxford seminars were marked by a substantial increase in the number of papers devoted to the social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

For the Bonn seminar the editors of this special issue of *JIATS* formed two interdisciplinary panels, one devoted to demography ("Tibetan Populations: Past, Present, and Future"), and the other focusing on development and the environment ("Tibet in Transition: Challenges to Development and Environment in the Shadow of the Leaping Dragon"). The resulting papers showcase how far the state of social scientific research on Tibetan societies has advanced since the 1995 Graz seminar. Not only do social scientists now have better (albeit sporadic) access to Tibetan societies, they are also deploying more sophisticated methodologies, gathering more detailed data, examining existing data sets with sharper critical scrutiny, and situating their analyses in more nuanced, diverse, and robust theoretical perspectives. The resulting papers provide insights into how politics and culture influence long-term demographic trends, land use practices, social organizational principles, resource usage, and patterns of urbanization. Conversely, these contributions help us grapple with the ways that rapid economic growth and structural transformations are also influencing culture and politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Graham E. Clarke, "Preface," in *Development, Society, and Environment in Tibet*, ed. Graham E. Clarke (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), xv-xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Graham E. Clarke, ed., *Development, Society, and Environment in Tibet* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Toni Huber, ed., *Amdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz, eds., *Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); P. Christiaan Klieger, ed., *Tibetan Borderlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Mona Schrempf, ed., *Soundings in Tibetan Medicine: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

To present the results of this research, this issue is divided into two sections mirroring the seminar panels: the first centers on demography and population studies, while the second covers economic development and the environment.

## **Tibetan Populations: Past, Present, and Future**

The first six papers in this section of the issue focus on fertility, population growth, marriage patterns, migration, and urbanization. The study of Tibetan populations has been a topic of interest for more than two centuries since Thomas Malthus used Tibet as an exemplary Asian society wherein preventive checks (those that operate through marriage) rather than positive checks (those that operate through mortality) restrain population growth. Malthus was of course referring to polyandry and the high number of monks in Tibetan society as population regulating mechanisms. Despite the theoretical importance of his observation, research on Tibetan demography was relegated to marginal status due to a dearth of empirical data and the difficulty of accessing study populations. The situation changed with the opening of the highlands of Nepal and India where ethnically Tibetan populations began to be studied first-hand during the 1960s. Some of this research focused on demographic issues such as the fertility depressing effect of polyandry, and the ways that structural and cultural factors influence the survival chances of children.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1980s larger, more robust data sets began to emerge. Although the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and many ethnically Tibetan areas were excluded from China's first two censuses in 1953 and 1964, Tibetans began to be systematically enumerated by age, marital status, and other variables in the 1982 census. This was followed by the much more detailed 1990 and 2000 censuses. The latter is considered to be the most reliable in terms of data quality, although problems exist with respect to the TAR's non-Tibetan population.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Nepal and India have been collecting national censuses that include data on ethnicity and "mother tongue," thereby allowing scholars to better understand population trends in the Himalayan highlands. Furthermore, in 1998 the Tibetan government-in-exile conducted the first census of Tibetan refugees living in South Asia and published both a summary of findings and the tabularized data. Together, the data sources on Tibetans living in China, India, and Nepal now present scholars with unprecedented opportunities to engage in the empirical study of Tibetan populations, research that far exceeds the scope of village-level anthropological studies. Yet despite recent advances, many gaps remain to be filled in our understanding of Tibetan populations. Two such gaps, historical demography and

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<sup>5</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, "New Perspectives on Tibetan Fertility and Population Decline," *American Ethnologist* 8 (1981): 721-38; J. L. Ross, "Culture and Fertility in the Nepal Himalayas: A Test of a Hypothesis," *Human Ecology* 12 (1984): 163-81; Nancy E. Levine, "Differential Child Care in Three Tibetan Communities: Beyond Son Preference," *Population and Development Review* 13 (1987): 281-304.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew M. Fischer, *Theory of Polarisation, Exclusion and Conflict within Disempowered Development: The Case of Tibet in Western China* (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 2007).

contemporary patterns of migration and urbanization, are partially filled by contributions in this issue.

Although research on Tibetan historical demography was pioneered by Dieter Schuh several decades ago,<sup>7</sup> it remains an understudied topic. Four papers in this section of the issue advance our knowledge of Tibetan historical demography, each in a very unique manner. Christian Jahoda's contribution on India's ethnically Tibetan enclave of Spiti is noteworthy for its longitudinal perspective. His research is based on an analysis of under-utilized data sources, namely, local archives and British-era administrative documents. Jahoda uses these sources to not only document population changes over time, but also to demonstrate continuity in Spiti's customary law and social organization as evidenced by data on house names, land holdings, as well as marriage and inheritance patterns. Alice Travers also makes novel use of colonial archives and indigenous sources, in this case to document marriage patterns among the hereditary nobility of Tibet. Her contribution is unique in that it statistically documents marriage trends, providing the first quantitative perspective on social class endogamy in historical Tibet. Turning closer to the present, the contribution by Jan Magnusson and colleagues utilize household registers from Lugs zung bsam grub gling, the first Tibetan refugee camp established in South India. Their quantitative analysis reconstructs fertility and population growth during the early decades (1960s and 1970s) of that camp's existence. Furthermore, they introduce evidence from interviews and administrative archives to demonstrate how rapid population growth was a contributing factor to conflicts over resources between the refugees and the surrounding population. Meanwhile, Childs' paper extends his recent work on demographic transitions by comparing Tibetan fertility declines with those that have transpired (or are still occurring) in Europe, India, and China. His paper situates Tibetan demographic trends in a global context by showing ways in which they resemble, and differ from, fertility transitions in other parts of the world. He concludes by discussing some of the long-term consequence Tibetan societies are likely to face as a result of sustained low fertility.

The other two papers in this section deal with how rapid economic development and migration are transforming Tibet's city landscapes in unprecedented ways.<sup>8</sup> Ma Rong, an established authority on migration patterns in the TAR, recently conducted an extensive survey among migrants in several cities of western China. For this issue he and co-author Tanzen Lhundup contribute a landmark study of Tibetan and Han labor migrants in Lha sa: who they are, where they are from, where they reside, what types of jobs they do, how much they earn, where their children go to school, what administrative obstacles they face, and how long they intend to stay. In addition, the authors discuss some of the ramifications of the documented patterns of temporary wage-labor migration. Importantly, they deploy

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<sup>7</sup> Dieter Schuh, *Das Archiv des Klosters bKra-shis-bsam-gtan-gling von sKyid-grong* (Bonn: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Fischer's contribution to this issue (see below) deals with similar issues of urbanization, in particular the effects of migration on wage rates and other variables.

appropriate caution by noting that survey questions covering sensitive issues, such as Tibetan-Han relations in Lha sa, may not yield accurate portrayals of people's attitudes. Their analytical prudence is pertinent in light of the ethnic violence that erupted in Lha sa in March 2008. Meanwhile, Emily Yeh and Mark Henderson present a theoretically nuanced discussion of urbanization in Lha sa. They point out that Tibetans traditionally did not envision a strictly binary opposition between the city and the countryside, which stands in contrast to China's contemporary discourse on modernization that equates urbanization with progress. As such, the movement and settlement of rural residents to towns and cities is seen by the state as a desirable driver of development. This is the first research to document how the city of Lha sa is administratively defined and demarcated, but also to link development and urbanization policies with long-term consequences for Lha sa's landscape and residents.

In summary, the papers on Tibetan populations break new empirical and theoretical ground, and point to emerging questions that call for scholarly investigation. For example, how did Tibetan refugee communities resolve conflicts with their Indian neighbors during times of rapid population growth? What are some of the long-term consequences for Tibetan societies of sustained low fertility? How will wage labor migration patterns affect the ethnic composition of Tibet's urban population? How sustainable, in developmental terms, is a policy that encourages the development of towns and cities on the Tibetan Plateau? With these papers we hope to demonstrate the utility of incorporating the perspective of population studies into research on Tibetan societies, and inspire other scholars to pursue some of the questions that have been raised.

## **Tibet in Transition: Challenges to Development and Environment in the Shadow of the Leaping Dragon**

Demographic processes such as fertility, population growth, marriage patterns, and migration both affect and are affected by the economic development and conservation policies and programs pursued by the respective nation-states in which Tibetan populations live. The papers included in this issue are focused on the People's Republic of China. Comparatively speaking, this provides us the opportunity to examine the differences and similarities in the trajectories of planned social change pursued by China versus other states; the case of China is relatively unique in the region since international non-government organizations and bilateral agencies have had relatively less influence in China in terms of direct and indirect assistance when compared to other countries such as Nepal, India, and Mongolia. Arguably, then, these cases studies offer a relatively unalloyed look at the rationale for and consequences of interventions pursued by a developmental state.

Andrew Fischer's contribution provides a bridge between the population and development sections of this issue by reflecting on the role of subsistence in the livelihood strategies of rural Tibetan households living through China's rapid economic and social transitions. He examines the apparent paradox observable in Tibetan areas between relative income poverty and asset wealth. Fischer counters



the position held by Wang and Bai,<sup>9</sup> who asserted that ongoing subsistence practices and strategies in Tibetan areas are symptoms of “backwardness.” Rather, he suggests that the persistence of subsistence-based livelihood strategies are better understood as both symbolic of and instrumental for wealth given that they provide a basis from which Tibetan households can act in a variety of strategic ways in the face of rapid transitions and dislocations of traditional forms of livelihood and hierarchy. In this way, he uses his research from Tibet to also engage with debates in the wider development studies literature on agrarian transitions and urbanization. Echoing themes raised in the previous section, he also questions the rationale of state-imposed urbanization strategies that undercut these subsistence-based strategies, suggesting that this might lead to the emergence of small town ghettos in the Tibetan areas.

Andreas Gruschke presents some preliminary findings on changes in the life of pastoralists in the Yushu region, Qinghai Province. Gruschke’s analysis reveals that many of the region’s pastoralist inhabitants can no longer depend on animal husbandry, in part as a result of official policies that are inducing transformations in Tibetan nomadic systems. The author explores how Tibetans are adapting to these changes, specifically observing patterns of “regionalization” in response to globalization. Gruschke underscores a number of the critical issues that are facing pastoral communities including diminishing rangeland productivity, off-range migration, rising costs of health care, and a rapidly growing population with few employment options. He also highlights the importance of the trade in caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*), which is supporting broad swaths of the rural Tibetan economy, fueling higher rates of consumption including spending on religious activities and increases in livestock numbers.

The interface between development and the environment was a central theme of the demography and development panels since there is a significant dependence on natural resource usage among rural Tibetans. Daniel Winkler reports on the economics of the collection of a wild edible fungi in Tibetan areas. In recent years, the harvesting of matsutake (*Tricholoma matsutake*) and caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*) has developed into the main source of cash income in rural Tibet. In the Tibet Autonomous Region alone, caterpillar fungus is contributing an average of 40 percent to the annual rural cash income, in prime collection areas up to 80-90 percent. The income contribution of matsutake is not as substantial and widespread, but locally still of great significance. The fungal industry is of manifest importance as it offers cash income badly needed to pay for health services, schooling, transportation, as well as cash consumer goods and start up capital for business ventures.

Dawa Tsering and John Farrington report on the primary causes of the significant and relatively recent increases in reported human-bear conflicts in the Byang thang Nature Reserve, which they argue are the result of changes in wildlife protection

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<sup>9</sup> Xiaoqiang Wang and Nanfeng Bai, *The Poverty of Plenty* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, translated from 1986 original).

policy, growing human and livestock populations, and subsequent changes in predator behavior. In some cases, protected wildlife populations have re-occupied the Byang thang Reserve's more productive southern grasslands, from which they had largely been displaced by herders and their livestock in recent decades. As in the American west and elsewhere, some bears in the Byang thang have become habituated to subsisting by killing livestock and raiding human food supplies, as opposed to hunting their natural food base, the black-lipped pika (*Ochotona curzoniae*). The interactions between humans and wildlife are changing particularly as a function of development interventions such as fenced enclosures, construction of energy and transportation infrastructure, resource extraction, parcelization and privatization of common property, and the provision of government services (e.g., clinics and schools). The authors attempt to discern if there are any clear associations between three surveyed socio-economic factors – residence type, living arrangement, and self-assessed economic status – and the likelihood of a household experiencing conflict with brown bears; the clearest pattern of human-brown bear conflict appears to be geographic, not socio-economic, in nature.

Joe Fox, Ciren Yangzong, Gesang Dunzhu, Tsechoe Dorji and Camille Richard examine current development efforts to modernize livestock husbandry on the northern Tibetan Plateau, which have the potential to disrupt current wild populations, particularly the large-scale migrations undertaken by some ungulate species. In the western part of the Byang thang Nature Reserve, development interventions appear to be in conflict with conservation goals. Although some accommodations between human and wildlife interests are possible, as in other pastoral regions of the world, the mixing of wild and domestic large ungulates can be very problematic. Current development and conservation policies appear to be on a collision course if the desire is to continue that coexistence in the large designated conservation areas in western Tibet.

## Closing Thoughts

As the papers in this issue show, contemporary research in Tibetan areas is tackling complex issues and yielding insights of broader, comparative importance. The papers shed light on salient issues such as the tensions and opportunities latent in current economic and demographic trajectories; the ongoing and long-term interactions between people and the environment; the cultural, political, and economic pressures that result from the application of development policies; and the interrelationships between macro-level economic policies and local-level adaptations. These papers indicate there is much to learn from case studies on Tibetan societies across Asia, but just as importantly, there is clearly much work that lies ahead to fill our gaps in knowledge about historical and contemporary Tibetan societies.

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