



CHINA, GLOBAL CONSUMPTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Number 9 in a series of 10 briefings on climate and Tibet

China does everything it can to grow as fast as it can, and that requires engineering the lands and peoples of Tibet to maximise Chinese production.

The industrialisation of Tibet over the past 50 years has focused on creation of resource extraction enclaves, urban centres and transport corridors to connect them all to China across great distances.

The colonisation of Tibet has been energy intensive, requiring massive external inputs to subsidise settlers migrating from China. The dependence of Tibet on artificial external subsidy deepens year by year. If China ceased trucking and railing in almost everything manufactured, from soy sauce to steel girders, from plastic shoes to glass fronted office towers, the millions of immigrants to Tibet would starve.

Worse, the nomads who made light, sustainable, extensive use of alpine meadows and pastures stretched over an area the size of western Europe, are themselves now herded off their land, their livelihoods cancelled by official order, in the name of growing more grass.

While Tibetan productivity and self-sufficiency are cut, Chinese immigrant lifestyles are subsidised to the point that, on Chinese statistics, the urban dweller of Tibet –most of them nonTibetan immigrants- enjoy incomes and consumption levels found elsewhere only in Shanghai and Beijing.

The accelerating curbs on nomad livelihoods reduce those who created the Tibetan landscape and curated its long term sustainability for thousands of years, to paupers, in cinder block reserves, suddenly useless, illiterate and unskilled in modern industrial employment.

Meanwhile China powers ahead, maximising consumption, while resisting any global treaty obligations to play its part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Although China is now the world's biggest emitter, it argues that the developed countries are obligated to undertake all the emission reductions for decades to come, before China will be liable for any serious action. Further, China argues strongly, at every opportunity, for multibillion dollar compensation for any moves it might make to reduce the energy used per ton of manufactured product, even though the total tonnage manufactured goes up and up and up.

China embraces a form of capitalism which assumes everyone is motivated by the selfish desire to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. Tibetans have little enthusiasm for this, preferring to regularly redistribute wealth rather than accumulating for its own sake. Yet China assumes greed and selfishness are universals, and that Tibetan nomads care only for their animals, and have no concern for the land. Thus, in order to conserve China's upper watersheds, the nomads must be expelled. This is a tragic mistake.

China boasts, in 2009, that it has successfully boosted car sales by as much as 90 per cent in a month, by providing subsidies to the rich to buy more cars, as part of the official economic stimulus package. "China's passenger-car sales surged a record 90 percent last month, as tax cuts and government subsidies spurred demand, bringing the nation closer to overtaking the U.S. as the world's largest auto market. This year, a 4 trillion yuan (\$586 billion) stimulus plan has shielded China from the global recession, helping car sales jump at least 45 percent for four months in a row. Surging demand helped China's biggest privately owned carmaker, to double profit in the first half." (Bloomberg 9 Sept 09)

China's new rich are in command. They say publicly this is the best opportunity for wealth accumulation in 5000 years of Chinese history, and nothing should get in the way. Environmental costs can be sorted out some time in the future; right now the precious opportunity to get rich is all that matters.

Where does Tibet fit into all of this? Northern Tibet (Amdo in Tibetan, Qinghai in Chinese) was industrialised over a generation ago. From the arid rangelands of Amdo, especially the Tsaidam Basin, China has for decades extracted 2 million tons of oil a year, pumped and railed straight to Chinese refineries. The salts of the many

dry salt lake beds of Amdo have been excavated for industrial salts, including potash, magnesium and lithium salts as well as ingredients for manufacture of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and plastics. Extraction of boron (for use in cooling nuclear reactors) and asbestos, fatal to human lungs, have persisted for decades. More recently gas has been found close to the oil fields, and is now extracted in huge amounts, again piped straight to Gansu in China.

South-central Tibet, further from China, has been slower to develop extractive industries. But now there are chromite mines –the only domestic source of chromium in China- and several mines digging up copper, gold and silver. These are now on such a scale they require huge state subsidies to provide the rail network, power supply, urban infrastructure and workforce for such remote areas.

All aspects of Chinese colonisation of Tibet are energy intensive, unsustainable, expensive, are almost always state financed and transfer massive profits to factories processing Tibetan raw materials, with little employment or financial benefit going to Tibetans. Chinese economists identify the sum total of state subsidies and state favouritism for its biggest state owned manufacturing corporations, as a major distortion, accounting for much of China's rise, exaggerating the cheapness of its manufactures and high profit margins.

In the name of building “national champion corporations”, bulking them up to world scale, China's central leaders intervene powerfully in the market, nakedly favouring the most favoured, at the expense of the poor, the remote and the ethnic minorities.

Senior Chinese economist Yiping Huang has quantified the total cost of all these subsidies, the endless willingness of the state to build and pay for the dams, powerlines, rail tracks, urban centres that maintain immigrant settlement in Tibet. He also identifies the official policies that extract as much tax from the peasants and other poor people, while repressing any inclination of workers to organise to obtain their legal minimal rights at work. He includes the systematic rigging of prices of raw materials and electricity at artificially low levels, to maximise corporate profits.

This is where Tibet fits in to China's gradual shift, away from the coast, to inland manufacturing hubs which will remain low-cost centres for world factory production for decades to come. China calls this policy xibu da kaifa, opening up the west, announced first in 1999. In China's western half, the most favoured city is Chongqing, the most direct beneficiary of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River. Facing east, downstream, Chongqing can now manufacture and export motorbikes, cars and many other manufactures, on heavy ships, straight downriver to Shanghai and the world. Facing the other way, to the west, upstream, is the source of Chongqing's fact accumulating wealth. The Yangtze rises in Tibet, and China is building several rail lines to improve resource extraction access to Tibet. Copper, gold, silver, chromite, oil, gas and many other minerals will be extracted from Tibet on a much bigger scale than now, according to official Chinese announcements.

If these mines, waste dumps, rock crushing plants, chemical concentrators and even smelters in Tibet at least trained and employed a substantial Tibetan workforce, one could argue there is some benefit. But the reality is that all Tibetans get is the waste dumps, the tailings and toxic residues. In the case of Canadian miner Continental, due to begin extraction from its mine near Shigatse in southern Tibet in 2010, copper concentrate containing only 25% actual copper will be longhauled 2000 kms to a Chinese state owned smelter, only to have three-quarters of all rock transported dumped as waste. The amount of diesel fuel needed to haul trainloads of waste across Tibet, in high altitude thin air that makes engines burn poorly, is extraordinarily wasteful.