

TWO SIDES OF TIBET

BY NAMLO YAK

Two essays address urgent and sometimes conflicting concerns on the Roof of the World.

The Fragile Ecology

Threats to the delicate ecology of the Tibetan plateau may be irreversible if not addressed as a priority.

Tibet's snow plateau, known throughout history as "the source of rivers," "the roof of the world" and the earth's "third pole," has an average altitude of over 4,000 meters. It is no easy task for man to cultivate trees or plants here, but the plateau has benefited from the Bon religion, the most primitive religion of the Tibetans, which is based on the concept that all creatures have a spirit. The Bon "worship of nature" and the Buddhist concept of "infinite mercy" have led Tibetans to develop an interactive relationship with nature, animals and plants based on the concept of "love and responsibility." As a result, Tibet has become the Eden of the global village, with abundant and highly diversified species of fish, birds and plants. Migratory birds from all over the world are the diligent sowers of the rich variety of plants and grains that have protected the plateau's water resources and have made it an important source of surface water for the Asian continent.

Ten of Asia's major rivers and lakes originate in this region, nurturing more than three billion people in China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Bangladesh, an area that accounts for half of the global population. As the Ganges nurtured ancient Indian civilization, the Yellow River of the Tibetan plateau is the root of ancient Chinese civilization. In a similar way, the Tibetan Plateau plays a key role in protecting the global ecology.

Preserving the natural environment and civilization of the snow plateau has therefore become the responsibility of all humankind. If damage to the environment of the plateau continues unchecked, it will threaten not only the survival of Asian peoples, but eventually also the wider climate and environment shared by all of humanity.

The unique natural environment and climate of the snowy Tibetan Plateau makes its ecological environment very fragile

and difficult to restore once it suffers damage. For that reason, it is not enough to closely monitor the effects of ongoing infrastructure and construction projects; we must minimize any damage to the plateau environment from these activities in the first place. Damage to the ozone layer, widely acknowledged as a direct cause of global warming, is a case in point, and China discovered damage to the ozone layer in Tibet in 1999. From a Tibetan point of view, this is an omen of the prophecy that the world will be destroyed by fire. If we don't start taking active steps to reverse the situation, there is no doubt that global warming and damage to the ozone layer will bring an end to all living creatures on earth, including human beings.

However rich the grasslands are in the Tibetan Plateau, the soil is very weak; a shortage of water causes frequent sand storms. However, if properly protected, grassland plants can prevent drought, desertification, erosion, the drying up of springs and lakes and deterioration of the climate, thus effectively contributing the preservation of the earth's wider environment. In this way, the plateau plays the role of "adjuster" and "generator" of the northern and eastern hemisphere.

A Tibetan scholarly study, *The Ecological Beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism* describes the existing threat to the plateau:¹

The grasslands in the Chinese Communist territory cover 39,283 hectares, accounting for 40 percent of China's total land area. Relevant materials indicate that since the 1960s, desertification of the grasslands has occurred at a rate of 2 million hectares a year, with a drying rate of 0.5 percent per year. Meanwhile the recovery rate is just 0.3 percent per year. For example, Qinghai Province covers a total land area of 720,000 square kilometers, of which 96 percent is pastoral land. Some 109 million mu,² or 19.93 percent of the total area of the grasslands, has already dried up. As a result, the loss of water and soil in the Qinghai pastoral region has accelerated, leading to the destruction of 161 million mu of

grassland along the upper reaches of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers.

The desertification of the grasslands and the weakening of the eco-environment can be attributed to natural factors such as the fragility of the natural environment, the deterioration of the climate, rodents and frequent fires, but *Ecological Beliefs* suggests some others:

The removal of grass to transfer land into farmland accounts for 25.4 percent [of the loss], the over-breeding of livestock accounts for 28.3 percent, the misuse of fertilizer and other related factors 31.8 percent, urban construction and transportation 0.8 percent, and damage due to excessive exploitation of the upper Yellow River 8.3 percent.

Deducting the 28.3 percent of loss attributable to livestock leaves some 66.3 percent caused by humans.

A *Brief History of Contemporary Qinghai*³ states that the Qinghai provincial Party committee implemented a policy of turning the pastoral region into a grain base in 1959. From 1958-1960, they actively organized a large number of herders and some 100,000 youths who had been sent down to the countryside in Henan, Shandong and other provinces, together with prisoners from Reform Through Labor (*laogai*) camps, to transform some 6 million mu of grassland and 1.50 million mu of forest into farmland. The document goes on to say:

The arable grassland area within the so-called Tibetan Autonomous Region amounted to 800 million mu, of which 35 percent has become arid. The most severely aridified land totals 140 million mu, with 50 million mu qualifying as desertified. In the 1960s, each hectare of fenced grassland in Naqu Prefecture could grow 2,760 kg of grass, and each hectare of natural grassland could grow 1,175 kg. However, by the 1990s, those figures had dropped to 1,107 kg and 511 kg respectively.



The Tibetan Plateau at the source of the Yarlung Zangbo River. Photo: Sinopix

In short, blindly waving the banner of “man is the master of his own fate” gave birth to the current situation of uncontrollable desertification of the grassland and the drying up of rivers.

From 1996 to June 1999, the flow of the Yellow River, referred to by the Chinese as Mother River, was disrupted twice at its source. In 1996, the disruption lasted for 136 days and affected an area of 700 km, compared with the 150 km affected during 16 days of disrupted flow in 1991. The direct damage caused by this is unimaginable. According to *Ecological Beliefs*,

The average annual water flow capacity in Qinghai Province during the period from 1946-1991 was 67.52 billion cubic meters, but fell to 51.68 billion cubic meters in the period from 1991-1996. The water flow of the Yellow River in Gansu Province, totaling 28.50 billion cubic meters in 1949, dropped to 18.78 billion cubic meters by 1996. Malai County in the Yushu region had more than 500 rivers in the 1950s, but by the 1990s nearly all had dried up, and 70 percent of the county’s grassland was desertified.

The water level of the Zhaling and E’ling lakes at the head of the Yellow River dropped half a meter between 1991 and 1999. In the 1960s, the Maduo grasslands of that same region held 4,077 lakes of various sizes, but by the 1990s there were only 2,977, with another 100 rivers also dried up. These various factors caused the flow of the Yellow River to drop to 15.84 billion cubic meters and 9.72 billion cubic meters in some areas, and water levels show tendencies toward further decline. According to *Ecological Beliefs*, “Of the more than 4,000 lakes at the source of the Yangtze River, nearly two-thirds have already dried up.” In other words, only around 1,333 lakes remain (there are now only about 2,180 lakes in all of Tibet).

The snow plateau includes some 1,600 rivers that straddle other regions. Among them are the Lion Spring River passing from Kashmir, India to Pakistan; the Elephant Spring River flowing from Siram, India to Pakistan; the Peacock River

passing from Nepal to the Indus River; the Horse Spring River, one of the sources of the Indus River; the Yarlung Zangbo (also known as Yarlung Tsangpo or Brahmaputra), flowing from India to Bangladesh; the Nu River flowing from Myanmar to the sea; and the Lancang (Mekong) River flowing through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam into the Indian Ocean. As a source of great rivers and lakes, the Tibetan snow plateau’s practical value for humanity and society far surpasses the political demands of the Tibet issue. As a result, examining, or re-examining, the multifaceted and complex Tibetan issue has become a top priority.

Not long ago, someone predicted that there would be a “water war” in the not-so-distant future. The factors described above

suggest that this is an objective reality. Destroying the land that gave birth to the great civilizations of the Yellow and Ganges rivers would be catastrophic.

Forest coverage, weather and water levels are strongly related to water supply. Currently, the forest areas remaining on the Tibetan plateau are distributed through valleys and at the feet of the mountains in the east and the south area of the plateau. According to statistics provided in *History of the Tibetan People: Auspicious Treasure Vase*, by Dhe-Rong Tsering Dhondup,⁴ “The overall forest coverage of the Tibetan plateau is 182.3 million mu, accounting for 6 percent of total land surface. Of this, the area currently demarcated as Tibet makes up 94.8 million mu, including 1.4 billion cubic meters of timber with a coverage area of 5 percent.” The other areas of the plateau region have forest coverage ranging from 2.1 percent in Qinghai to 36.4 percent in Yunnan’s Deqing County.

According to *Ecological Beliefs*, “Tibet’s primitive forest area is disappearing at a rate of 8,700 hectares a year.” Meanwhile, “The Haixi region of Qinghai Province felled 30,000 hectares of forest between 1950-1990, decreasing the coverage from 35 percent in 1950 to 17.5 percent today. The economies of Ganzi Daofo County and Deqing County in Zhongdian (now officially known as Shangri-la) are based on timber.”

Since the eco-environment of the Tibetan plateau has suffered varying degrees of damage, the plateau that previously provided so many benefits to the environment has gradually become a source of meteorological hazards to nature and man, including blizzards, strong winds, frost, drought, deluges and hail. Most serious is the significant flooding resulting from the melting of mountain snows in the summer, and desertification

from sand carried by strong winds. And then there is the huge impact on those making a livelihood in farming and herding as a result of hail, drought, excessive rain and frost, as well as the diseases that accompany these disasters.

All of this information may produce the feeling that nothing can be done, or that the situation is hopeless, but that is not the case. Given that the current situation affects not only Chinese or Tibetans, but all of the earth’s inhabitants, we need to come up with a solution that will ultimately benefit the entire global village. And this solution should begin with the advantages inherent in the Tibetan snow plateau. We should turn this into a mutually beneficial “natural park for the global village.” Everyone should be involved in suggesting solutions; only in this way can we banish the widely held misconception that this problem is hopeless and unsolvable.

NOTES

1. The author states that this book was co-edited by nine well-known Tibetan scholars and published in Tibetan in April 2004 by the Yunnan Minorities Publishing Co. However, no further information could be found on it without the Tibetan title.
2. Approximately 7,270,300 hectares.
3. *Dongdai Qinghai shilü*. No further information was found on this book.
4. 0 published in Chinese by Tibetan People’s Publishing, August, 2001. The author is an official with the archive bureau of Ganzizhou, Sichuan Province. The book is described on the Web site of People’s Daily Tibetan Channel (<http://unn.people.com.cn/BIG5/channel450/451/1356/200202/05/157931.html>) as the first Chinese-language publication on the history of the Tibetan people. Namlo Yak notes that this book was banned in November, 2002, but that the book’s author subsequently denied that it was banned.

The Need for Development

Tibet also needs economic development that will benefit the region’s people.

I would like to examine from several aspects how the development of the Tibetan economy will negatively and positively impact the region’s people generally.

Official statistics on per capita income

“Xinhua Net, the Tibetan channel, Lhasa, January 14, 2005. According to the Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Department of the Tibet Autonomous Region, the entire region produced a total grain output estimated at over 950,000 tons in 2004, with the per capita net income of farmers and herdsman reaching 1,863 yuan, marking an increase of 10.4 percent and 10.2 percent respectively over the previous year. This marks the 17th consecutive year of bumper harvests for Tibet’s agriculture industry.”

The increases quoted in this official release look like good news, but based on the current exchange rate, the annual per capita income of Tibetan farmers and herdsman was only \$219, or a daily net income of 60 cents. Given that the interna-

tional poverty level is one dollar per person per day, it is clear that Tibet’s farmers and herdsman live far below the poverty line. And this does not even take into account possible padding of the officially acknowledged income.

Furthermore, according to the Qinghai News on January 3, 2005: “Good news comes from the press conference held by the provincial statistical bureau: there were significant breakthroughs in last year’s per capita GDP, the productivity of the provincial industrial enterprises, the per capita net income of the farmers and herders, the natural increase of the population of Qinghai and four other indicators. For example, the provincial per capita GDP has surpassed the key level of \$1,000.” This figure surpasses the poverty level, but as far as I know, the decisive factor in this increase is the harvesting of the medicinal fungus cordyceps.¹ If there are no controls, what will be the result of this endless hole-digging on the grasslands? Another official media source acknowledges, “The urban and rural incomes in Qinghai are obviously far behind the national average, equaling only 79.5 percent and 69.3 percent of the national average, and ranking the province 27th and 26th respectively out of all provinces and cities.”²

Investment-induced migration

According to official media reports, “China has made special arrangements for the construction of infrastructure and the development of basic industry. From 1984 to 1994, nine of China’s provinces and cities invested more than 480 million yuan in 43 projects in Tibet. From 1994 to 2001, the central government directly invested 3.9 billion yuan in 30 projects. The developed regions in the east have supplied 960 million yuan for the construction of 32 projects. During the Tenth Five Year Plan (2001–2005), the central government invested 31.2 billion yuan in 117 projects in Tibet.”³

However, according to Tibetan refugees in India and informed sources in Tibet, the Han migrants who arrived in Tibet on the heels of the huge investment drive have prevented local residents from benefiting from the projects. Because the majority of the migrants came specifically to take advantage of the investment projects, their skills and other advantages far surpass those of most local residents, and claims of “fair competition” were mere window-dressing. Meanwhile, phenomena such as the ousting of previous owners from arable land have already raised questions regarding the survival of future generations. One can only question how meaningful the benefits of these investment programs have been.

A flawed system

The well-known Professor Nie Hualin has observed, “The flawed system is an urgent problem that must be solved for the development of the western region. There are three main aspects to flaws in the system: The state-owned economy accounts for too high a proportion of the domestic economy, and the traditional paternal managerial model has not been sufficiently adapted, resulting in a situation where a distinction cannot be made between government and enterprises. Problems resulting from governmental interference are rather obvious.”⁴

These phenomena led a provincial journalist from Qinghai to comment: “Due to the special natural conditions of Qinghai, almost all of the province’s commercial fairs have been squeezed into a very short period in the summer, with journalists running around flattering local officials. In fact, the number of the contracts reported is astonishing, but if as many as 30 percent are actually implemented, that would be quite good. Even of this 30 percent, the majority are likely to be projects that were agreed well in advance, and are being shown off at the fair in case nothing else materializes.”⁵ I’m afraid this phenomenon has already become a common means of earning money for special interest groups in the minority regions. How can we put this situation back on the right track?

Exploiting energy resources

Although development of the Tibetan snow plateau has begun its intermediate phase, how many people have actually benefited from it? While it is true that a certain number of people are really not capable of developing their abilities to take advantage of the new economy, the exploiters have never taken

the interests of the people into consideration. In the 54 years that the People’s Republic of China has occupied Tibet, the number of local people trained to effectively develop their own abilities is negligible. Is this really helping the development of minority peoples, or merely strengthening oneself on the pretext of helping minorities?

Another intolerable phenomenon is the exploitation of the energy resources of one minority in the name of another minority. One example is the recent signing of a contract between the Nonferrous Metals Mining Bureau of Qinghai Province and the Qinghua Group from Inner Mongolia to grant the Qinghai company exploration rights in inner Mongolia’s Kendeke region.⁶

One way forward

In my view, the initiatives outlined by the Qinghai Political Consultative Committee in January 2005⁷ are relatively beneficial to the improvement of the local residents’ well-being, and are also in line with what the current Tibetan government-in-exile advocated as the solution to the Tibetan issue in May 2005. The initiative centers on developing rail transport links between Xining, Geermu and Lhasa to form a new economic zone rivaling the Pearl River and Yangze delta through exploitation of rich mineral resources and tourism.

Translated by Paul Mooney

The original Chinese article was posted on the Web site of the Asia Democracy Foundation, <http://www.asiademo.org/b5/news/2005/12/20051206a.htm>.

NOTES

1. Cordyceps, a species of mushroom considered to have powerful aphrodisiac qualities as well as general benefits to the health, is predominantly found in isolated high-altitude regions of southwest China, including Tibet, Sichuan, Qinghai, Guise and Yunnan. The wild variety sells for up to \$1,000 per 100 grams (with cordyceps from Tibet considered the best in the world), while cultivated cordyceps is considered inferior and sells for much less.
2. Xinhua News Agency Qinghai, Xining, January 19, 2005, report by Jiang Chenrong.
3. Xinhua News Agency Tibet, March 7, 2005.
4. An expert on agricultural and rural development from the economics faculty of Lanzhou University, Nie is quoted in “Liu da pingjing zhiyao xibu xiaokang jianshe,” Xinhua Net Qinghai, May 20, 2005, http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/www.qh.xinhuanet.com/2005-05/20/content_4272496.htm.
5. Xinhua News Agency Qinghai, Xining, May 22, 2005.
6. Report by Ye Chao on Xinhua News Agency Qinghai, Xining, May 21, 2005.
7. “Provincial Political Consultative Conference Recommends Quickly Creating Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau Development Zone [Sheng zhengxie weiyuan tiyi: jinkuai dazao Qingzang gaoyuan jingjidai],” Qinghainews.com, January 15, 2005, <http://www.qhnews.com:81/561/2005/01/15/61@82309.htm>.