

Tibet: China's 'Sky Train' - fast-track to genocide?

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July 1 marked the departure of the first train from Beijing to the roof of the world, with President Hu Jintao trumpeting an engineering feat that puts China's interests within 48 hours of Tibet's heartland, as opposed to weeks and months via land routes. Coincidentally, the launch marked the onset of intensified political repression in Tibet, with the Communist Party's Tibet secretary Zhang Qingli announcing that the struggle against the Dalai Lama and his supporters was a "fight to the death".

Stretching from China's western city of Xining to Lhasa, the provincial capital of Tibet, the new rail line was built by 100,000 workers over a period of five years. It cost around \$5 billion and stretches over 1956 kilometres.

Train 27 Special Express, dubbed the "Sky Train", was hailed by Hu in his televised speech as a "magnificent feat by the Chinese people". More accurately, the credit also belongs to the US's General Electric and Canada's Bombardier for the design and construction of rail engines and carriages able to withstand the journey through Tibet's frozen alps. At one point the train reaches Tanggula Mountain, 5068 metres above sea level, and regarded by local Tibetans as "insurmountable even by eagles".

By heralding the Sky Train as the fulfilment of a 100-year-old dream, Beijing admitted that China had eyed Tibet long before the bloody annexation of 1949. Even prior to the July 1 launch, the railway venture, by far the most ambitious and costly step in "China's Great Leap West" to develop its western regions, had a negative impact on Tibetans.

Tibetan nomads were displaced from rural settings into cities totally alien to their culture, and the project exclusively enriched the Han Chinese, by now the dominant population in Tibet, via the employment which came with the project.

Fifty years ago, Tibet's Qinghai Plateau was a scantily populated wilderness. Today, following "development a la China", it is a land conquered and settled by Han engineers, miners, soldiers, police and prisoners. The streets of Lhasa, as too those of Shigatse, bear testimony to Tibetan "disappearance": Han Chinese monopolise the running of factories, shops, bars and restaurants. In this context, despite China's claims to the contrary, the anticipated economic windfall from the railway is unlikely to flow towards native Tibetans.

China's earlier economic paradigm for Tibet led to the demolition of world-heritage neighbourhoods, as "Communist concrete" turned Lhasa into a Himalayan Bangkok, awash with bars, video arcades, military barracks and a thousand brothels. Thriving prostitution is attributed to tourism, the vast inflow of China's military and the economic disparities resulting from rural-urban migration.

Most prostitutes are Han Chinese, but poverty has also driven Tibetan women into the sex industry. By day the brothels operate as hair salons and bars. By night they become "pink parlours", where

the flesh trade prospers under China's modernisation drive.

China's development model for Tibet reeks of cultural and religious genocide. Since 1949, an estimated 1.2 million Tibetans have been slaughtered at the behest of Beijing's whims; 175,000 while held hostage in prison and labour camps, 150,000 from execution. To this day, displaying the Dalai Lama's photograph or the Tibetan flag, or protesting the Chinese occupation, brings harsh penalties.

All but eight of Tibet's 6259 Buddhist monasteries and convents were destroyed during the first 25 years of China's occupation. Today the odd monastery is restored, but purely to attract tourist dollars.

China's phasing out of the Tibetan language from primary education has hastened Tibet's identity crisis. The poor health care afforded Tibetan women translates to their being 40 times more likely to die in childbirth than mothers in Shanghai.

Like China's development paradigm, the Sky Train project also has major flaws, with the rail's foundations sinking into the permafrost and the thousands of yak grazing along the tracks becoming a derailment threat within the first month of operations.

Worryingly too, the line passes through an earthquake-prone zone where yearly tremors register around six on the Richter Scale. However, assessment of the earthquake impact of the rail's cooling pipes in rural Tibet awaits the completion of a seismological monitoring system.

Train 27 Special Express undoubtedly facilitates the rapid mobilisation of China's military strength against Tibetans. But the project also enables China to transfer the country's entire export and import trade to an impenetrable warehouse on the roof of the world - Tibet.

Our Tibetan sisters and brothers are indeed an endangered species.

P.S.

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