China’s Many Tibets: Regional Autonomy and Local Policy in Diqing

Ben Hillman

The overwhelming majority of the world’s ethnic Tibetans live within the borders of the People’s Republic of China. Just under half of China’s 5.5 million Tibetans live within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)—the provincial level administrative unit most closely associated with the name “Tibet”. Just over half of China’s ethnic Tibetans live outside this region in territories that have been incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan.¹ These territories are administered as sub-provincial autonomous prefectures and counties. In total, Tibetan China spans over 2,000,000 km², which is more than one fifth of China’s land area.²

¹ The south eastern region is known to Tibetans as Kham while the northeastern region is known to Tibetans as Amdo. While the Tibetan government in exile claims jurisdiction over this entire territory, not since the eighth century have Tibetan rulers exercised administrative control beyond the borders of the present day Tibet Autonomous Region, although the Lhasa-based Dalai Lamas have been influential.
² Here I use the term “Tibetan China” to refer to the region in China in which Tibetans are the dominant ethnic group. Melvyn Goldstein refers to “ethnographic Tibet”, but this term rightly includes ethnic Tibetan areas in the neighbouring countries of India, Nepal and Bhutan. See Melvyn Goldstein, “Introduction” in Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein, Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: religious revival and cultural identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)
While international commentators often refer to Tibet as if it were a homogenous and clearly defined ethnographic entity, differences in geography, resources and local histories have produced many different ‘Tibets’. Everyday life for ethnic Tibetans varies greatly from one part of the plateau to another. In this article, I will introduce the reader to a part of Tibet outside the Tibet Autonomous Region—the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. I will demonstrate how tourism-based economic development has brought positive cultural and economic benefits to the region. Diqing’s experience suggests how economic development and modernization with Tibetan characteristics is possible within China.

Diqing Prefecture lies at the edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in the northwest of Yunnan Province. Established as a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in 1957, Diqing borders Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province to the east, Changdu and Linzhi Districts⁴ in the Tibet Autonomous Region to the west and Lijiang City to the south. Divided into three counties, Diqing Prefecture has a population of 374,500,⁵ of which minority nationalities (i.e. non-Han Chinese groups) make up 83.56 per cent of the total. Tibetans make up 33 per cent of the total population, followed by the ethnic Lisu, comprising 28 per cent. However, because the Lisu and other the non-Tibetan populations are concentrated in the southwest of the prefecture, Diqing retains a distinctive Tibetan identity on the whole.⁶ As the dominant ethnic group in the region for centuries, Tibetan culture has influenced other non-Tibetan groups, some of whom migrated to the area to escape conflicts in the final decades of the Qing Empire (1644-1911). For example, a number of ethnic

---

³ Maps courtesy of Cartography Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.
⁴ ‘Districts’ (diqu) in the TAR are the same administrative level as the ‘prefecture’ (zhou) in other provinces—i.e. the level of administration immediately below the province.
⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all Diqing statistics are taken from Diqing Prefecture Statistical Yearbook (Diqing Nian Jian) 2008.
⁶ In Deqin County, for example, Tibetans make up 81 per cent of the total population.
Lisu and Hui (Muslim) communities have adopted Tibetan customs and speak local Tibetan dialects.\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tibetan</td>
<td>117,099</td>
<td>33.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisu</td>
<td>98,195</td>
<td>27.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>57,928</td>
<td>16.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naxi</td>
<td>45,269</td>
<td>12.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bai</td>
<td>18,182</td>
<td>5.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi</td>
<td>11,616</td>
<td>3.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hui</td>
<td>1,496</td>
<td>0.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumi</td>
<td>1,496</td>
<td>0.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miao</td>
<td>1,434</td>
<td>0.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) In many parts of Tibetan China there are long-standing tensions between ethnic Tibetans and Muslim Chinese based on religious and cultural differences and economic competition. This is especially true in Qinghai Province where there is a large Muslim Chinese community. The Muslim Chinese population in Diqing is very small by comparison.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nu</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derung</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>0.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of Diqing Prefecture Population population according to Year 2000 census.

Sitting at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau with valleys reaching below 2000 meters in elevation, Diqing has a milder climate and a higher degree of biodiversity than many parts of Tibetan China. Whereas only barley and potatoes can be grown at higher elevations, in Diqing many farmers supplement their barley crops with corn, buckwheat and oats. Just over 300,000 of Diqing’s population of 374,500 are farmers. Most are transhumant agropastoralists, i.e. they practice a combination of sedentary agriculture and herding, moving cattle from the village to upland pastures during the summer months. In contrast with higher elevations on the Tibetan Plateau, there are few nomads in the Diqing area. The prefecture is rich in forest resources. Forest covers 65 per cent of the prefecture’s 23,870 square kilometers. In the 1980s and 1990s forestry was the prefecture’s dominant industry. Before logging was banned in 1998 there were 84 timber mills across the prefecture of which 6 were state-owned (mostly county-controlled) and 78 were community-owned (mostly township-controlled) enterprises, contributing between RMB 300-400 million per year to local government coffers.

By the mid 1990s, however, timber revenues had begun to decline. Timber prices had fallen as a result of trade liberalization and increasing competition from mainland Southeast Asia. Due to unchecked clear-felling beginning in the 1970s, by the mid 1990s stocks of valuable hardwood species were largely depleted. While non-timber forest products like the *matsutake* pine mushroom and the caterpillar fungus provided a new source of revenue for the rural population and local government, they did not compensate for lost revenues from logging.
Even before logging was banned in 1998, local authorities had begun to look for alternative means of developing the local economy. Like other parts of Tibetan China, Diqing’s distance from China’s largest markets limited potential for the development of industrial enterprises that had been central to the economic take-off in China’s coastal regions. But the growing wealth of China’s eastern provinces and the emergence of a middle class increasingly interested and able to travel had created opportunities for the expansion of tourism. Building on an already strong tourism industry just a few hours drive to the south in Lijiang and Dali, Diqing's local government decided to orient economic development policies toward tourism. Initially, this was a political problem. Like many other parts of Tibetan China, Diqing was a ‘closed’ area. Due to central government concerns over political and social stability in ethnic minority border regions, outsiders were not permitted to travel there without permits. Diqing successfully applied for these travel restrictions to be partially lifted in 1994. Travel restrictions were completely removed in 1997.

In 1995 35,000 domestic tourists and 8000 foreigners visited Diqing Prefecture. Revenues from tourism amounted to between RMB 300,000 and 400,000 (US$40-50,000), mostly comprised of entrance fees to the monastery and a handful of scenic locations. In 1995 prefecture officials created their first tourism development centre on Zhongdian, Diqing’s southernmost county. Zhongdian County boasted one of the region’s largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, which was already attracting overnight visitors from nearby Lijiang, but local facilities and infrastructure were poor and tourists rarely stayed for longer than a day. In 1995 Zhongdian County established a Tourism Bureau that embarked on three key tourism development projects: (1) the restoration of the county’s largest Buddhist monastery, (2) the renovation of the prefecture government’s guesthouse, and (3) the building of a second hotel in the county capital.

---

As tourist arrivals grew steadily during 1996 and 1997, local government leaders applied to the province for funds to improve roads and tourist facilities and to build an airport. Using Diqing’s unique status as the only Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Yunnan Province, local leaders were able to secure a number of grants and soft loans. Their culture and nature-based tourism development strategies dovetailed with the province’s economic development strategies.

Following the total logging ban introduced in 1998, a successful tourism development strategy became even more important for the region. With funding from the provincial government, construction began on the prefecture’s first airport. Funds were also obtained to improve the main highway into the county. Further resources were invested in marketing the region’s attractions. Tourism numbers increased steadily between 1998 and 2002 with 1.24 million visits recorded by the Tourism Bureau in 2001. While this figure includes all arrivals—e.g. business travel and locals returning home, in a prefecture with a total population of 375,000, the high number of visits had a significant impact on the local economy. Dozens of new hotels and restaurants sprung up in the county seat. The increase in numbers enabled the Diqing to secure more grants from the provincial and central governments for further infrastructure development.⁹

An key element in Diqing’s tourism development strategy was the prefecture’s bid to rename Zhongdian County as “Shangri-la” (Xianggelila) County. Zhongdian, like many other places in and around the Himalayas, had been using the name “Shangri-la” as part of local tourism promotions for some years. The origin of the name dates back to the novel Lost Horizon written by British author James Hilton in 1933 and turned into a blockbuster motion picture by Hollywood director Frank Capra in 1937. In the story, a group of four Westerners, including a British diplomat and an American hustler, flee a revolution in India only to crash land in a remote part of the Himalayas. They find themselves in a land of great beauty and spiritual wisdom that

---

⁹ Many of these grants were provided under the auspices of the Great Western Development Strategy unveiled by State Premier Zhu Rongji in 2000.
Hilton describes as 'touched with the mystery that lies at the core of all loveliness'. The story made “Shangri-la” synonymous with earthly paradise.

Despite the fictional origins of the name, Diqing officials had begun to collect ‘evidence’ as early as 1996 to make a case for Zhongdian being the ‘true’ Shangri-la. Local authorities organised a number of conferences and invited historians, linguists and anthropologists specialising in the study of Yunnan’s minority nationalities. A final group of experts submitted a report that the county government used as evidence to prove that Zhongdian was the ‘real’ Shangri-la. They argued that Shangri-la was an ancient word in the local Tibetan dialect that meant “sun and the moon in one’s heart”.

Armed with the experts’ report, and with the support of the prefecture and provincial governments, Zhongdian County applied to the State Council—the highest decision-making body in China—requesting that Zhongdian County’s name be officially changed to “Shangri-la” (Xianggelila). In the application local authorities argued that the name change would be beneficial not just to tourism but to the general development of the province. They argued that “the name represented what people of all races were searching for—a desire that among people and between people and nature there be no conflict, no chaos (qingluan), only economic prosperity, national unity and social stability”. The proposal also suggested that the name change would help make Diqing a ‘leading’ Tibetan area in China.

---


11 The title of the document is ‘Guanyu Yunnan Sheng Diqing Zangzu Zizhizhou Zhongdian Xian Gengming wei Xianggelila Xian de Qingshi’ (‘Application Concerning the Name Change of Yunnan Province, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Zhongdian County to Shangri-la County’). Diqing officials generally use the original English spelling “Shangri-la” or “Shangri-La” in English-language documents—a practice emulated in the tourist literature. “Xianggelila” is the Chinese pinyin romanization of the Chinese word for Shangri-la.

12 For a book-length treatment of tourism development and the construction of Tibetan identity in Diqing since the name change, see Ashild Kolas, Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition. A Place Called Shangrila (London: Routledge, 2008).
This claim turned out to be prescient as Diqing soon proved to be one of the most stable and fast growing Tibetan regions in China. The State Council approval of the name change in December 2001 paved the way for a further boom in tourism and related infrastructure development.\textsuperscript{13} Visits to the prefecture skyrocketed from one million per year in 2001 to over three million in 2007. In 2007 tourism revenue comprised RMB 3.2 billion of Diqing’s regional GDP of RMB 4.4 billion, bringing GDP per capita to RMB 11,797 (US$1,580). By contrast, in neighbouring Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, GDP per capita was RMB 6,450 (US$864).\textsuperscript{14} In Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province—a prefecture with a similar size population to Diqing—GDP per capita was RMB 4,363 (US$585).\textsuperscript{15}

While GDP per capita is not necessarily a useful guide to wellbeing and can mask inequalities in distribution, tourism-led growth in Diqing has led to a restructuring of the economy that has been relatively inclusive. Agriculture now makes up only 15.7 per cent of regional GDP, with industry and construction making up 37.5 per cent and services making up 46.8 per cent. Importantly, in contrast with state-led development practices in other parts of the plateau, the private sector has been prominent in recent growth. The private sector share of Diqing’s GDP in 2007 was RMB 2.06 billion or 46.82 per cent of the total. Critically, local government has promoted and supported small enterprises in private sector activity. Since 2003, local authorities have sensibly offered interest-free and low-interest loans to local residents for tourism-related start-ups.

The effect of tourism on cultural identity and practices is another hotly debated issue, particularly in Tibetan areas where the influx of non-Tibetans is sometimes seen as a threat to local culture. Ethnic and religious-based tourism in Tibetan areas

\textsuperscript{13} Authority for changing the name of any part of China’s territory or an administrative unit at any level rests with the State Council.
\textsuperscript{14} While GDP figures in China are not always reliable, they are nevertheless useful as an indication of the relative scale of economic activity.
\textsuperscript{15} GDP per capita figures for Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture are from 2005—the most recent available on the prefecture government’s website.
is also sometimes criticized for commercializing and debasing Tibetan culture. While there is certainly evidence of superficiality in ethnic tourism (how can tourism be anything but superficial?), this does not necessarily threaten cultural or religious identities. A number of Buddhist monks in Diqing with whom I have spoken see pros and cons with tourism. Several Buddhist monks expressed a view that increased government funding has helped to refurbish parts of the monastery. Monasteries in Diqing are richer than they have been in decades thanks to fees from entrance tickets and donations from visitors. Sometimes this revenue is used to sponsor younger monks to pursue higher studies in monasteries that offer more advanced Buddhist training in other parts of Tibetan China and in India. While some monks admit to being annoyed at tourists poking their nose into every corner of the monastery, new facilities and management arrangements have helped to minimize the impact of tourism on monastic life. Important areas are cordoned off periodically to prevent disruptions to religious activities.

Tourism’s benefits for religious activities in Diqing are not necessarily replicated in other parts of Tibetan China and must therefore be understood in the broader context of Diqing Prefecture’s social policies. In Diqing there have been fewer restrictions on cultural and religious expression than in other parts of Tibetan China. Since the mid 1990s Diqing has adopted one of Tibetan China’s most liberal approaches to Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other parts of Tibetan China, government officials in Diqing are free to visit monasteries and other religious sites. This has created space for Communist Party and government officials to develop meaningful relationships with local religious leaders. It is not uncommon in Diqing to see government officials and monks meeting informally and dining together.

This approach has created space for monastic inputs into local policy making. At the same time, local authorities have understood that support from senior Buddhist

---

clergy provides their leadership and decision with a degree of legitimacy. For the last decade, monasteries have been involved in key local development decisions. In 2003 the largest monastery in Diqing won a battle with a local government department over the ownership of revenues from entrance tickets. In 2004, the same monastery vetoed a plan to develop a tourist precinct close to its main entrance. In many instances of local decision-making that I have documented over the years, it is clear that genuine relationships between government and Party leaders and Buddhist clergy have facilitated mutual understanding and cooperation. When there has been conflict, monastic representatives have been successful at applying pressure on the local government by sending ever larger delegations of monks to government offices. The larger the delegation, the more nervous local authorities become. As one might expect, relations between the local state and the monastery have not always been harmonious. There have been conflicts and occasional violence, but authorities have generally relied on personal relationships between officials and senior monks to settle disputes. The ability of local leaders to prevent conflict and settle disputes quickly is considered an important criterion for promotion within China’s local government. In other parts of Tibetan China where personal relationships between government officials and clergy are weak or non-existent, it is more common for local authorities to use coercion in dealing with conflicts.

While Diqing’s emergence as a ‘leading’ Tibetan area in China can be attributed to a number of factors including coincidences of geography and history, political leadership has been a vital ingredient. While regional autonomy in China is frequently derided because leaders are appointed from above and because the Communist Party trumps government, local governments do have significant scope for autonomous decision making in social, cultural and economic policy. In Diqing, a succession of prefecture leaders have cautiously sustained and overseen liberal policies, maintaining formal and informal relationships between government and local religious leaders. Key local leaders including a former prefecture governor and a party secretary associated with the promotion of liberal policies have risen to
senior positions in the provincial government where they have been able to further advocate for Diqing’s local autonomy. Local leaders have also benefited from Diqing’s status as the only Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Yunnan. They have harnessed their unique status to win grants and soft loans from provincial authorities to develop the region. Even though much of the funding for Tibetan areas comes from the central government, provincial funding and provincial allocation of central government funds matter greatly for local development.\textsuperscript{17} In recognition of the region’s success, two recent former governors of the prefecture have been promoted to the post of prefecture Communist Party secretary.\textsuperscript{18} In every other Tibetan autonomous region in China, this powerful position is occupied by a non-Tibetan, reflecting the central government’s lack of confidence in local Tibetan leadership in these regions.\textsuperscript{19}

While governance challenges remain, in comparison with neighbouring Tibetan areas, Diqing’s leaders have achieved a respectable level of economic development and social stability. A combination of inclusive economic development policies and a liberal approach to cultural and religious expression has been the foundation for this success. When violent protests erupted across Tibetan China in March 2008, no major social unrest was recorded in Diqing.\textsuperscript{20} While Diqing authorities made some

\textsuperscript{17} Yunnan Province is much richer than Qinghai Province where several large Tibetan prefectures compete for attention. Sichuan Province draws on large resources, but it administers one of China’s largest populations, including several Tibetan prefectures with large Tibetan populations.

\textsuperscript{18} At every level of government, the Communist Party secretary outranks the head of government at the same level. Because regional autonomy laws only specify that the head of government must be a member of the ethnic group to which autonomy has been granted, critics argue that the seniority of Communist Party secretaries gives the lie to regional autonomy in China.

\textsuperscript{19} In the past ethnic Tibetans have served as Communist Party secretaries in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but the performance of ethnic Tibetans leadership has had mixed reviews. In some cases, possibly motivated by a need to demonstrate loyalty to the state, ethnic Tibetan leaders have overseen even more Draconian policies than their non-Tibetan counterparts. Education levels among ethnic Tibetan officials have also traditionally been low. Because of low levels of education, administrative experience and questionable loyalties among local Tibetans, prior to the 1980s most leadership positions in Tibetan areas were filled by Han Chinese from other regions. In another example of the central government’s emphasis on non-local leadership, Diqing was administered by the neighboring non-Tibetan district of Lijiang until 1976.

\textsuperscript{20} The author was in Diqing when demonstrations in Lhasa turned violent and triggered similar large-scale protests across Tibetan China. One analyst with access to senior officials reported a government estimate that the unrest involved up to 30,000 Tibetan protestors in approximately 100 separate incidents. See Willy Wo Lop Lam, “Hope for a Better Tibet Policy”, \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review}, April 2008.
arrests to demonstrate toughness and to set an example to would-be trouble-makers, it would be a mistake to interpret this toughness as the reason for Diqing’s stability during the crisis. Policy makers in Beijing and in China’s other ‘Tibets’ would be wise to draw lessons from Diqing’s experience. Shangri-la might be a fantasy, but it is built on policies that work.
Bibliography


Hillman, Ben. 2003 'China's Mountain Poor: Integrating Poverty Alleviation and Environmental Protection', Development Bulletin, No. 61, May. 51-54


