Why are so many Tibetans moving to Chinese cities?

China File


Author: Ben Hillman (with Gerald Roche and James Leibold)

China’s Tibetan areas have been troubled by unrest since 2008, when protests swept the plateau, followed by a series of self-immolations which continue to this day. The Chinese state, as part of its arsenal of responses, has intensified urbanization, hoping that economic development and cultural contact will lead to assimilation and stability. However, cities are also becoming sites of resistance to assimilation and focal points of unrest, as well as arenas for internal power struggles about what it means to be Tibetan in contemporary China.

The scale of urbanization in China’s Tibetan areas can be seen in Qinghai province, home to 1.3 million Tibetans. Xining, Qinghai’s capital, is the largest city on the Tibetan Plateau, with 2.3 million residents, including roughly 120,000 Tibetans. Qinghai will be home to seven new cities by 2020, as the province seeks to urbanize nearly half a million people and create a new network of transportation and communications infrastructure. As it is in China’s Tibetan areas elsewhere, urbanization is increasingly an integral fact of life for Tibetans in Qinghai. This new reality is creating anxieties around linguistic and cultural continuity, and the very survival of the Tibetan people.

Urbanization is Beijing’s new model for modernizing and civilizing the country’s ethnic borderlands. It is now the centerpiece of policies for poverty alleviation and economic growth, as outlined in the state’s ambitious National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020, launched in March 2014), which aims to create more than 100 million new urbanites by 2020, and the Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program (2011-2020, launched in November 2011). Employment, education, and business opportunities draw many Tibetans to cities. (In the 2010 census, Beijing classified only 33.5 percent of the country’s 6.2 million Tibetans as urban residents.) For rural youth in particular, cities offer a vibrant and exciting alternative to country life, even though some find it difficult to adjust to the pace of life, Han cultural norms, and widespread ethnic discrimination that define city life.

Other policies encourage urbanization by undermining the traditional subsistence economy and divesting Tibetans of their rural homelands. Key among them are the Grain for Green policy (Tuigēng HáiCǎo), which appropriates farmland for conservation; and resettlement programs, which have sedentarized mobile pastoralists in townships while either collectivizing or selling their livestock. Meanwhile, schools and health clinics in rural areas have been closed, and new facilities opened in urban centers, which also pushes Tibetans towards cities.

For China’s policy makers, however, urbanization is more than just an economic strategy for developing Tibetan areas. Throughout ethnic minority areas—from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia and Tibet—urbanization is also a key mechanism within a series of ethnic policies designed to integrate restive minority populations. Cities promote cultural transformation and political
integration through increased interethnic “mingling” (jiāoróng) with the Han majority. And while this process is intended to reduce separatist tendencies by minimizing ethnic difference, cities also conveniently lend themselves to monitoring and high-tech surveillance by China’s state security apparatus.

This assimilationist logic underscores the Party-state’s municipalization strategy (chè xiàn shè shì), which upgrades rural administrative areas to “municipal” (shì) status if they meet certain criteria relating to urban population and economic infrastructure. Once a region becomes a municipality, it loses its ethnic autonomous status, thus diminishing Tibetans’ already limited claims to special political and cultural rights enshrined in the Chinese constitution and enacted through the Law on Regional Autonomy.

Beijing incentivizes county and prefecture-level governments to upgrade to municipality status. Cities entail higher ranks for government leaders, additional departments, and more resources. **Five of the seven prefectures** in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) have already been designated municipalities. Other cities have also been created in regions outside of the TAR with large Tibetan populations: Gyaltang (Shangrila) in Yunnan province; Dartsemdo (Kangding) in Sichuan, Yushu in Qinghai, and Tso (Hezuo) in Gansu have each been “upgraded” in the past decade.

Tibetans who move to large, Han-dominated cities with populations in the millions like Xining become minorities subject to societal discrimination and state-led assimilation efforts. But urbanization also facilitates new forms of Tibetan interaction and mobilization. In cities, Tibetans find themselves connected to resources that enable them to mobilize around topics of common concern and to build coalitions for cultural preservation and development.

Cities therefore have the potential for new forms of Tibetan politics that resist and coopt the state’s push for assimilation. Universities, teahouses, and bars are all urban venues where Tibetan intellectuals exchange ideas and organize to pursue collective goals. The Internet and new social media platforms provide other opportunities for resistance—despite China’s heavy online censorship—resulting in a fluid, ever-evolving public sphere where Tibetans interact with each other, other ethnic groups, and the state.

Some of these projects are specifically designed to resist assimilation and assert Tibetan identity, such as the **Lhakar campaign**, which encourages Tibetans to speak “pure” Tibetan (without Chinese loanwords) and to dress in Tibetan robes every Wednesday. But the emerging urban Tibetan public sphere also grapples with other issues, including indigenous development, religious reform, environmentalism, entrepreneurialism, and education.

While cities provide spaces for Tibetans to mobilize in defense of collective identities and to pursue other shared goals, they are also venues for internal power struggles amongst Tibetans. These include debates between different Buddhist sects over issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy; struggles for control of institutions and places of employment; and the competition for domination of certain Tibetan language groups over others – to the detrimental of Tibetans who speak small, indigenous, non-Tibetan languages of the region rather than Tibetan.
Such struggles are likely to predominate in the many small urban centers growing across the Tibetan plateau: Despite a significant Han presence, Tibetans remain the largest population groups in these towns. Here, life continues to be unmistakably Tibetan; but what and who defines that “Tibetanness” is being hotly contested as Tibetans from different localities and walks of life live closer together.

For Tibetans, cities are therefore sites of cultural erosion, resistance to assimilation, and intra-ethnic competition. As a result, the possible futures of urban Tibetans are far more dynamic than any one-dimensional notions of assimilation, meaning that the fault lines of future unrest are not only more numerous, but perhaps also less predictable than previously imagined.
References


