

Western Frontier China's Big Push To Stoke Economy Rattles Rural Tibet

Meatpacking Modernization Threatens Beloved Yaks;
New Train Brings Suspicion
Ni Ma's Quiet Resistance
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NAGQU, China -- China is trying to revive poor rural regions through economic development. In Tibet, the plan has hit a snag: Ni Ma won't slaughter his yaks.

Duan Xiangzheng, a Chinese Communist Party official charged with stimulating the economy here, is pushing for the systematic slaughtering of yaks to kick-start a meat-packing industry. Mr. Duan says exporting the beefy tasting meat and the animals' black wool to markets elsewhere in China makes economic sense and is an "inevitable" development.

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China's government is trying to commoditize the business of raising yaks, to kick-start a meat-packing industry in the region.



Ni Ma

Ni Ma, 45 years old, wants to keep alive his 70 yaks, his family's most valuable and beloved asset. He sells yak milk, which is processed into the butter, cheese and

yogurt that are the staples of Tibetan diet and Buddhist ritual. Even the dung is used, for fuel. Fingering a cigarette on his vast ranch, Ni Ma says his family slaughtered just three of its herd last year, even though "the local government requested that we kill more."

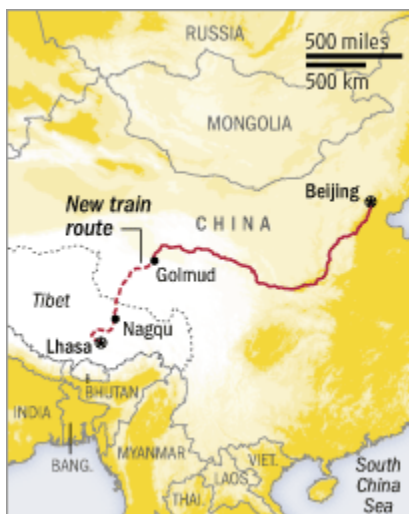
This remote, mountainous place, known mostly in the West as a human-rights cause, is feeling the force of China's economic juggernaut. The government in Beijing says it wants to make its 12 western provinces resemble the country's booming eastern seaboard. Lured by this vision, and by a new train connecting Tibet with the rest of China, entrepreneurs as well as tourists are flooding into the region known as "the roof of the world."

Yet Tibet is also still very much a rural place -- some 80% of its 2.7 million population is spread out on grasslands that cover almost a quarter of the country. Tibetans are protective of their distinctive Buddhist culture, which abhors the killing of animals. Many are suspicious of Chinese interference and some see the economic integration, part of the government's six-year-old "Go West" policy, as a form of colonization.

Tibetans already believe that Chinese are taking over the economy. In the capital, Lhasa, it is difficult to find a local-born taxi driver, waiter or laborer, since Chinese from other provinces will work for lower wages. Even on the \$4.1 billion railway project, only about 10% of the 100,000 construction workers hailed from Tibet, according to Zhu Zhensheng, a Ministry of Railways official. Now completed, the train promises to deliver an extra 800,000 visitors a year.

Tibet lags behind other Chinese regions in many areas, including literacy rates, life expectancy and average per-capita income, which is under \$250 a year in rural areas. Unlike the U.S. West, where access to the Pacific Ocean opened new trade routes, China's western regions border land-locked central Asia, home to some of the poorest and most remote locations on earth.

Nagqu, which means "Black River," is a county situated 15,000 feet above sea level on the northern steppe of the Tibetan Plateau, about 125 miles north of Lhasa. On a typical day, the temperature is below freezing. Its main town is a military base and truck stop, where garbage is left to smolder in open containers on streets that aren't lit at night, a gritty contrast to Tibet's legendary Shangri-la reputation.



Beijing's nationwide goal is to halt two decades of creeping inequality between urban and rural income, a gap the United Nations Development Program said last year may represent the world's most-uneven distribution of wealth. The Communist Party recognizes that its future depends on keeping people happy in the countryside, home to more than 80% of Chinese.

Shortly after China's communists took power in 1949, they grabbed control of Tibet, then an independent state. In 1959, the region's spiritual leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was 23 at the time, fled on foot over the Himalayan Mountains, fearing arrest. China's efforts to discredit the Dalai Lama, who in 1989 won the Nobel Peace Prize, have fueled support for one of the world's most-celebrated human-rights causes.

In the 1960s, the government tried instituting communal ranching and other Communist economic policies, with the same disastrous results -- such as famine -- seen elsewhere. During the next two decades, Beijing relaxed its supervision of the Tibetan economy and later started celebrating Tibetans as ethnic treasures, one of 55 groups distinct from the 93% of China who are of the Han race. But by the late 1990s, Tibet's economic semi-autonomy began to look like neglect as the region fell behind the sizzling east.

In Nagqu, the job of helping Tibet catch up has fallen to Mr. Duan, a 50-year-old agricultural expert from Beijing. An ethnic Han, Mr. Duan can't speak Tibetan. Like most outsiders, he says he struggled with the effects of its high altitude and thin air.

Still, he can count. The 7.4 million livestock in Nagqu far outnumber people and generate a third of the county's \$400 million in gross domestic product. Yaks, sheep and cows, which Mr. Duan calls the region's "pillar industry," are key to his goal: 50% GDP growth this year and a quadrupling of the local economy over five years.

Supporting his quest is the world's highest-altitude train, the \$4.1 billion Qinghai-Tibet Railway, that at times travels 16,641 feet above sea level. Completed this summer, it links Tibet with the outside world by rail for the first time, including Beijing 1,572 miles away. Its tracks are set in permafrost and an oxygen system helps riders combat altitude sickness. It will eventually run to the Indian border.

Chinese officials compare the rail's significance with that of America's transcontinental railroad. The train has made Tibet much more accessible -- passengers can ride from Beijing for less than \$200 -- and the cost of transporting freight is less than half that charged by truckers.

The world's highest-altitude bottling plant, Hong Kong-based Tibet Glacier Mineral Water Co., wants to use the train to transport branded water to Shanghai called "5,100," as in meters above sea level. The Yulong copper mine in eastern Tibet contains China's biggest deposit, with more than 10 million metric tons of proven reserves. In Nagqu, Canada's Sterling Group Ventures Inc. says it has signed a letter of intent with a Beijing company to extract lithium carbonate from a salt-water lake. The mineral is used to make batteries and glass.

Wu Yongpan, a 28-year-old entrepreneur from south China, bought an \$85 ticket for a middle bunk on the first train into Lhasa last month. He figured getting to China's new western frontier quickly would give him a head start in the wholesale jewelry business. "Tibet is now opened," he says.

After nearly a month in Tibet, Mr. Wu says he found business trickier than he imagined, not least of all because, "Tibetans are not very open minded." Jewelry makers wanted to be paid in cash because they weren't comfortable using wire transfers. Jewelry distributors in southern Guangdong Province said the samples Mr. Wu bought were too big and heavy for the Chinese market. Mr. Wu says he didn't like the food and that his skin felt dry.

He plans to make a second prospecting visit before the end of this year, perhaps to sell electronics. "The culture question is a very big one ... but if I do business for a while, I can learn a little and pass it on to my friends," Mr. Wu says.

The culture question looms large in the yak business. Where rancher Ni Ma lives, rocky flatlands stretch to bald mountains on the horizon, and brushes of green grass are the only summertime vegetation. Three generations of his 10-person family sleep in two rooms of a concrete house with no electricity. Inside, a Buddhist shrine is set on top of a row of hand-painted Tibetan cabinets, contrasting with posters of Chinese luminaries such as Mao Zedong.

In a bow to tradition, when Ni Ma slaughtered his three yaks last fall, he paused for a "crying" rite on behalf of each animal slaughtered, a ceremony he is teaching to his seven children. Before a rope is fixed around the neck of a yak to be suffocated -- considered the least painful way to kill -- Tibetan nomads comfort the animal by putting Buddhist blessing pills and holy water into its mouth, while holding smoky butter candles near its nose.

The term comes from the good wishes read when an animal or person dies, called bsngo-ba, which is pronounced like the word for cry -- ngu wa -- according to Tibetans and foreign experts.

A decision to slaughter an animal is, "not a simple market transaction," says Gabriel Lafitte, a lecturer in Asian civilizations and science at the University of Melbourne, and a long-time critic of China's role in Tibet. "It's a very quiet, simple dignified ritual."

Mr. Duan, the Communist Party official, dismisses the crying rites. He says emotion is unsuitable for the slaughterhouse industry he envisages. "The traditional concept has contained the economic development in our region," Mr. Duan says. "These traditional concepts will have to be changed." The local government also cites a need to fill its budget deficit.

Beijing thinks Tibet has too many yaks, which aren't raised systematically and threaten the grasslands through over-grazing. The Nagqu government is trying to enforce an edict from the Grasslands Construction Authority, the body that decides how such land is used, stating that no more than one yak can be raised per 120 mu, a Chinese measure equivalent to about eight hectares.

Nagqu's yak herders are trying to break into distant markets through a government-funded dairy cooperative. Tibetan butter, cheese and yogurt, all made from yak milk, are slowly becoming specialty products overseas. Tibetan Ragya Yak Cheese has been irregularly imported to New York by Slow Food U.S.A., a not-for-profit organization.

After sampling the Ragya Yak Cheese this year, chef Riccardo Buitoni of the Aurora restaurant in Brooklyn, N.Y., developed a pasta incorporating the "amazing cheese." Mr. Buitoni says he will put the dish on his menu permanently if he can get regular supplies. It reminds him of the unpasteurized cheese he ate as a child in Italy.

Local officials also used the cooperative to lean on yak farmers to slaughter enough animals each year to keep the herd from growing.

Yak meat tastes like tough beef. The woolly animals are two-thirds the size of cows but they're pound-for-pound more valuable; both sell for about \$750. The meat is often available jerk-dried or as an ingredient for dipping into a hot pot consisting of an oily, spicy soup. At Ba Guo Bu Yi, a Sichuan-style restaurant in Shanghai, raw yak meat is a delicacy that sells for \$16 a plate compared with a cold beef plate at \$3.25.

So far, however, there isn't much cargo leaving Tibet. About 60 loaded freight cars a day have pulled into Lhasa since freight services began in March, some of them ferrying supplies for China's military. Railway officials say through July, only about two dozen stocked freight cars left Lhasa for other parts of China.

In the Sichuan town of Manigango last year, some 300 ethnic Tibetans rioted and burned down a year-old slaughterhouse operated by Sichuan Longsheng Group. Ranchers said they faced government pressure to sell livestock to the company for slaughter, according to human-rights groups and an official at the company. The slaughterhouse has reopened "but business is not good," says a Longsheng official. "Tibetans aren't willing to kill their yaks. They just keep them and raise them," he says.

For Ni Ma, the train had an immediate financial impact. As the construction work stretched into Nagqu, he was hired as part of the preparation crew. The work tripled his \$250 yearly herding income.

Now the railroad is complete, Ni Ma says he recognizes the potential of a business-like approach to slaughtering his yaks. But for "family" reasons, he says he still isn't comfortable with it in practice.

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