China – Tibet: marginalisation through development?


Alpo Ratia

China’s Western Development Strategy (WDS) has pumped billions of yuan into developing Tibet. In July 2006, for example, an impressive feat of engineering – the Tibet railway (stretching 1,142 km from Golmud to Lhasa), the TAR’s economy is now at serious risk of going from negative to positive growth, rising healthcare costs and environmental degradation have thrust large construction projects affecting Tibet’s tertiary sector (government, services) has been wholly dwarfed, engendering extreme outside dependence, imbalances in the local economy and an abdication of local power in policy-making. With the completion of the enormously expensive Qinghai-Tibet railway (stretching 1,542 km from Golmud to Lhasa), the TAR’s economy also faces the serious risk of going from boom to bust. In chapter III’s third part Fischer notes the extreme marginalisation of the TAR growth model: GDP growth through expansion of government and administration is not self-sustaining and requires increasing subsidies in order to be maintained. Beijing and minority provinces use public development funds to pay Chinese companies to undertake construction work in Tibet, with minimal consideration of the local population’s needs and without its participation. Many construction projects are ill-conceived and shoddily carried out of administrative and commercial jobs. Development policy is apparently depriving Tibetans of control over their own future, at least in the short term. As this is a socio-economic study largely based on an analysis of official government statistics, Fischer does not address cultural issues such as literacy and fluency in Chinese or Tibetan, the destruction of Tibet’s traditional education system (monastic seminaries and universities) or the rights of occupied peoples. Nonetheless, Tibet’s Social Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet is a pioneering work that addresses the West’s front-line confrontation with China – and continues through the two major conferences of the mid-1990s, in Geneva and Bandung.

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