

Document 20.6: Excerpts from “What has the Qinghai–Tibet Railway Brought to China?” by Zhang Xueying in *China Today*, October 2006

[Section 1]

Five years ago, when Rintor¹ heard that the Qinghai-Tibet Railway construction company was recruiting workers, he decided to have a try. His family members and friends tried to dissuade him as they had heard that the areas the railway traversed were dangerous and that the work was backbreaking. But when Rintor learned that he could earn RMB 15 (US \$1.87) a day and get free physical examinations and a daily lunch, he signed up. “I found working on the railway simple, and only had to work five to six hours a day,” recalls Rintor. He is now one of the wealthiest men in his village and in all of Damxung County.

Damxung County, 170 kilometers northwest of Lhasa, is Lhasa City’s only purely pastoral county, and is also its main meat production base. Locals mainly work in animal husbandry. One thousand years ago, Damxung was a commercial center, as the ancient Tea-Horse Trail passed through it to Bhutan, Nepal, India, and to Western Asia and the Red Sea coast in Western Africa. At that time the markets in Damxung County were thronged with merchants from China’s interior, monks from India, and Mongol and Arab traders. The trade route went into decline in the early 20th century owing to chaos caused by warfare.

New commercial forces are now emerging in the area, and Rintor is a pioneer. Joining the railway construction team meant that he spent most of his waking hours with Han workers, which gave him the chance to learn Chinese. Before long he had basic Chinese communication skills. Upon hearing that the engineering team was short of transportation vehicles, and knowing how expensive transportation was, Rintor made a bold decision. He sold his cattle and goats, bought a small tractor and contracted with the China Railway 15th Bureau for transportation work in the Damxung section of the railway. “Working in haulage is hard in Tibet because of bad weather and poor road conditions. I drove my tractor between the construction site and the freight yard five times a day, daily

¹ Many Tibetans use only one name.

clocking up 500 to 600 kilometers,” recalls Rintor. He thus differed from his ancestors in transporting stones and building materials rather than tea, salt and cloth....

[Section 2]

Rintor is becoming well off, having replaced his tractor with a small truck and later substituted that for a heavy-duty truck priced at RMB 110,000² (US \$13,750). Taking into account the commercial opportunities brought by the Qinghai–Tibet Railway, he plans to diversify. He has built an extension to his home in the direction of the railway that he plans to rent out, and intends to take the train to the interior areas, mainly because “I want to know how people there do business,” he explains. Rintor’s annual income now stands at RMB 300,000 (US \$37,500) compared to his former annual income of RMB 500-600 (US \$63-75) when he worked in animal husbandry, and that at times when the area was not hit by natural disasters.

Tibet is considerably better off now than it was five years ago. Roads in Lhasa are wider and cleaner, ramshackle dwellings have been demolished and replaced with new Tibetan-style buildings and more people can afford private cars. Stores no longer resemble small workshops, and have signboards in Tibetan and Chinese and impressive facades. The post offices and public telephones most commonly seen five years ago are now vastly outnumbered by telecom companies and pharmacies, in front of which sit groups of Tibetan pilgrims. As one pharmacy assistant says, “Tibetan people pay great attention to their health, and in addition to Tibetan medicine also buy Western and traditional Chinese medicine.” Pharmacies in Lhasa offer free physical examinations to pilgrims every morning, taking their blood pressure and checking their pulses, which is why pilgrims are often seen patiently waiting outside them.

Tibet saw remarkable economic growth in 2005. Its trade volume increased 34.76 percent over the previous year, and township enterprises realized a total production of RMB 1.8 billion (US \$225 million), up 14.4 percent on the previous year. Yang Qianrang, chief of

² 110,000 *yuan* (renminbi).

the Industrial Department of the Tibet Development and Reform Commission, says, “In the 1990s, Tibet produced Lhasa Beer, but at that time Qingdao Beer from the interior areas was popular, and later the US Budweiser became the local favorite. Ten years ago, 90 percent of beer came from outside Tibet. Now Lhasa Beer occupies 60 percent of Tibet’s market, and has also entered the American market.” In 2004, the Lhasa and Carlsberg breweries established a joint venture company....

[Section 3]

Lhasa’s New Multi-Culture

The railway has brought large numbers of visitors to Tibet. By August 2006, just one month after the railway opened, the autonomous region had received 2.2 million tourists—400,000 more than the total in 2005. The steady stream of visitors to the Potala Palace has forced it to impose a limit on numbers daily admitted, and to shorten the per capita tour time from two hours to one hour. At certain tourist spots, trash bags are issued with the sale of admission tickets in an effort to reduce damage to the environment and historical sites. Even so, tourists and pilgrims jostle for space on the circumambulation path around the Jokhang Monastery. Many tourists from the interior areas and overseas with no idea about the circumambulation ritual also make the grave cultural error of walking counterclockwise along it.

In Lhasa, Western eateries operate side by side with Tibetan and Sichuan restaurants, and Internet bars are common. Tibetan vendors selling souvenirs in front of the Jokhang Monastery can converse in simple English and Chinese, and the clocks on the wall at the Yak Inn, where many foreign visitors gather, show the time in Frankfurt, London and New York.

Lhasa residents like to remind visitors, “Anything you buy in Beijing you can find here.” In Rintor’s home we saw a 50-inch rear-projection color TV set, a cabinet air-

conditioner, a microwave oven, and even a disinfecting cabinet, which is rarely seen in interior area households.

The influx of tourists has enlivened Tibet's nightlife. In the past the shops selling souvenirs in the Jokhang Monastery Square closed at 8 pm, but they are now still open for business at 11 pm. Near the hostels where foreign visitors stay are various bars in Western style, as well as Tibetan bars that play Tibetan pop music, stage performances of Tibetan traditional dancing, or double up as book shops.

The Nyangrain Township of Lhasa City dance troupe performs in bars and song-and-dance halls. It is well known in Lhasa for its performances of complete Tibetan operas and folk dancing. Tobgye, general manager of the Nyangrain Township Folklore Garden who comes from village in Gyangze, founded the troupe. He began to do business with a foreign trade company in Lhasa in 1996 and later became manager of the Folklore Garden. He recruited villagers from Nyangrain Township and organized dance troupe performances for the guests at the folklore garden. In the beginning, troupe members rehearsed in winter, gave shows in summer, and returned to their farmland in spring and autumn. Now they are professional dancers, and their numbers have expanded from 36 to 80. They perform at all the big hotels, restaurants, bars and well-known holiday villages. "At first we were not that interested in giving shows. But to our surprise we were well received by tourists, and the dance troupe has since become more professional," says one troupe member. On the strength of the dance troupe alone, Tobgye's folklore garden is constantly busy, and was chosen as [a] venue for the Nokia Western Region Conference.

Makye Ame Tibetan restaurant is still at its original location in the Jokhang Monastery Square, but its yellow wall and English signboard no longer stand out from its many neighbors. The proliferation of restaurants, however, has not adversely affected the Makye Ame's business. Its second and third floors are packed from 5 pm onwards every day, which means it is no longer the quiet café where people come to read and think. These days its menu includes more Western and Sichuan than Tibetan dishes, but as

proprietor Lhamze Wangchen says, “I have no choice but to meet the tastes of a much wider range of customers.”

Lhamze comes from a Tibetan-inhabited area of Sichuan. His restaurant now has two branches in Beijing and one in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province. As a businessman, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway means a lot to him. It cuts the cost of transporting raw materials to his restaurants in the interior areas, and brings more customers to Lhasa. “As a Tibetan, I think the railway will bring a lot of changes that might influence the concepts of the Tibetan people,” he says, thoughtfully.

He cites an example. Ten years ago, Taiyang Island at the center of the Lhasa River was covered with trees, but no more. The island now has row upon row of two-storied buildings and has become the largest entertainment and gourmet center in Lhasa.

Tenzin, aged 31, believes that such changes are inevitable, and that they cannot solely be attributed to the railway, which merely accelerates changes already underway. Tenzin asserts, “It is impossible to maintain the scenario of a century ago.”

Tenzin is a good tour guide. He grew up on Lhasa’s Parkor Street. He recalls, “In the past only nobles had the privilege of residing on Parkor Street, but these days its residents are mostly businessmen from the interior areas or other parts of Tibet. The original residents have purchased villas in the suburbs.”

The government-funded renovation project around the Jokhang Monastery and the Potala Palace is still ongoing. Without Tenzin’s guidance, we cannot tell the old buildings from the new. He tells us, “The government has realized the importance of preserving Tibetan characteristics. Their goal is to retain the original features of old architecture when carrying out renovations.” The regional government recently established a leading group responsible for protecting intangible cultural heritage and preserving Tibet’s ancient culture. The list of intangible cultural heritage recommended to make application for

UNESCO heritage status as published by the Chinese Ministry of Culture includes 14 items from Tibet, among them the Epic of King Gesar—a folk literature masterpiece, and Tibetan Opera, dance, fine arts, handicrafts and traditional medicine.

Tenzin and other young people his age do not chant sutras or prostrate themselves on pilgrimages. When taking vacations, he goes on tours. He would most like to go to the African veldt and the Amazon, as well as to visit Beijing in 2008. Tenzin normally wears a Western style suit, and only dons his Tibetan robes on Tibetan holidays or for weddings. He says he intends to go on circumambulations after he has grown old.

Source: Zhang Xueying. “What has the Qinghai–Tibet Railway Brought to China?” *China Today*. October 2006.