



## Culture Clash: Tourism in Tibet

Thematic report commissioned by Free Tibet  
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## Introduction

This report was inspired by the discovery of *She is Crying on the Hill*, a blog post by a Chinese traveller named “December” which presents, and comments on, images of other Chinese tourists photographing Tibetans at the Taktsang Lhamo temple in a highly intrusive and aggressive manner. It is an evocative series of photographs and, as the author points out, many of the images are as disturbing as scenes of outright violence. They certainly raise questions about the social impact of tourism in Tibet and how it is being marketed by the Chinese government.

Based primarily on online research, this report looks first at the development and scale of tourism in Tibet - how it has evolved from just a few thousand visitors each year to a lucrative industry which regularly sees Tibet flooded by a number of tourists exceeding its official population. It secondly looks at freedom of movement and contrasts the restrictions imposed on both local Tibetans and foreign tourists with the efforts being made to open up remote areas of Tibet for Chinese tourists.

This is followed by a look at China’s latest propaganda and the Chinese government’s realisation that the culture they have spent the last six decades systematically suppressing actually has significant financial value. Having successfully marketed their own romanticised version of Tibet to the domestic tourist market, China is investing heavily in turning Tibet’s heritage sites into Disneyland style tourist attractions. This is being done without genuine community consultation and with no regard for the marginalisation of the local population or the damage to traditional religious and cultural practices.

The focus of this report then turns to the social and cultural impact of tourism. This includes our presentation of *She is Crying on the Hill*, the series of photographs described above, as well as other images and blog extracts depicting the negative side of Tibetan tourism and the inherent cultural clash. Finally this report shows some of the ways that Tibetans are utilising social media to express their feelings about tourism and also to push for change.

## Background

In the last few decades, international travel and tourism has become one of the largest and fastest growing industries. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the industry currently supports 260 million jobs across the world and generates nine per cent of the global economy<sup>1</sup>. In Tibet, tourism has evolved from something that was heavily controlled and restricted to a lucrative and ever expanding industry. However, tourism in Tibet is also showing signs of politicization and, on a day-to-day basis, is becoming a focal point for cultural differences and tensions.

In the immediate aftermath of China's invasion in 1950, Tibet was effectively closed to the outside world. China opened up the newly created Tibet Autonomous Region in 1978, although access was initially restricted to a few thousand visitors each year who were allowed to book onto expensive and heavily supervised tours. In 1984 there was a radical change and Tibet was opened up to independent travel. The number of visitors soared exponentially, reaching 44,000 tourists per year by 1987. By 1989, however, Tibet was closed once again as China responded violently to protests in Lhasa and declared martial law. In the subsequent years, tourism has remained a hostage to politics with access to Tibet varying in line with China's perception of the area's stability.

One of the more recent closures was imposed in March 2008, as a wave of protest swept the Tibet Autonomous Region ahead of the Beijing Olympics. In June 2008 the ban was lifted and an official Tibetan tourist website was quoted as stating: "Tibet's society is stable and harmonious, its markets bustling, and its environment beautiful."<sup>2</sup> Tibet was closed once again in June 2012, following a series of self-immolation protests. Interestingly, Tibet remained open to Chinese visitors during this ban and it was only foreign tourists who were denied access.

Today, the overwhelming majority of tourists in Tibet are Chinese and they are arriving in greater numbers than ever before. According to figures released by the Chinese government, 3.43 million people visited Tibet in the first half of 2013<sup>3</sup>. This is not only an increase of over 20 per cent compared to the previous year but a number of tourists in excess of the Tibet Autonomous Region's official population and, of this 3.43 million, only 30,306 were overseas visitors. According to an article in the Guardian in July 2012, these numbers are only set to increase as the Chinese government expects Tibet to be receiving 15 million tourists a year by 2015. They also anticipate this will generate annual revenue of 18bn yuan (£1.8bn).<sup>4</sup>

The sheer number of tourists visiting Tibet is becoming a cause for concern, especially given the patterns of concentration. Rather than being evenly spread across the country and/or the year, large numbers of tourists often converge on certain high profile sites or festivals. According to official state media, "a total number of 1.4 million tourists visited Tibet during the Shoton Festival, which was wrapped up on the evening of Aug. 31 [2014], in Lhasa."<sup>5</sup> The news article goes on to say, "It is reported that the number of tourists has increased by 16.08 per cent year on year. And during the Shoton Festival, Lhasa has realized tourism revenue receipts of 378 million yuan, a 32.16 per cent rise as opposed to the previous year."<sup>6</sup> The ability to generate 61.5 million \$US in just four days shows how lucrative the tourism industry can be but the influx of 1.4 million extra people into a small city over the same period puts immense pressure on the environment, the infrastructure and the local population.

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<sup>1</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council <http://www.wttc.org/>

<sup>2</sup> *Beijing Olympics 2008: Tibet reopens to foreigners*, the Telegraph, 25 June 2008

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2192995/Beijing-Olympics-2008-Tibet-reopens-to-foreigners.html>

<sup>3</sup> *Tibet reports strong surge in tourist numbers*, Xinhua news agency, 19 July 2013

[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/travel/2013-07/19/c\\_132557108.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/travel/2013-07/19/c_132557108.htm)

<sup>4</sup> *China plans £3bn theme park in Tibet*, Tania Branigan, The Guardian, 6 July 2012

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/06/china-plans-theme-park-tibet>

<sup>5</sup> *Tibet receives 1.4 mln tourists during Shoton Festival*, 2 September, 2014, China Tibet Online

[http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/pd/ly/201409/t20140910\\_2019186.html](http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/pd/ly/201409/t20140910_2019186.html)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Cyclists blocking the road on National Highway 318

The above photo from Chinese Twitter-equivalent micro-blog site Weibo shows just how many Chinese tourists were flocking to Tibet in search of adventure over the summer of 2013. According to the accompanying blog post:

“China’s National Highway 318 runs from Shanghai to Zhangmu on the China-Nepal border, connecting one of the country’s most developed cities on the east coast and Tibet. It was rated by the National Geographic as one of China’s best scenery highways. To pedal to Tibet along 318 used to be the ultimate dream of a hard-core outdoor fan. But this year, there was a traffic jam of cyclists. ...

Unlike Chinese outbound tourists who are known for being more likely to show up in high-end shopping malls than in museums, China’s domestic tourists, especially the young and the nouveau riche, has long grown out of the “I came, I saw and I shopped” type of tourism. Instead of souvenirs and “I was there” pictures, what they desire is a special experience of exotic and distant cultures.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a high level of interest in Tibet could be very positive - creating jobs and investment opportunities, driving infrastructure improvements and raising awareness of Tibetan culture. Yet, as this report will show, there is significant doubt over the extent to which the local population benefits from these improvements. There are also questions about which version of Tibet the tourists, especially the Chinese tourists, come to see and how their presence impacts on the local people.

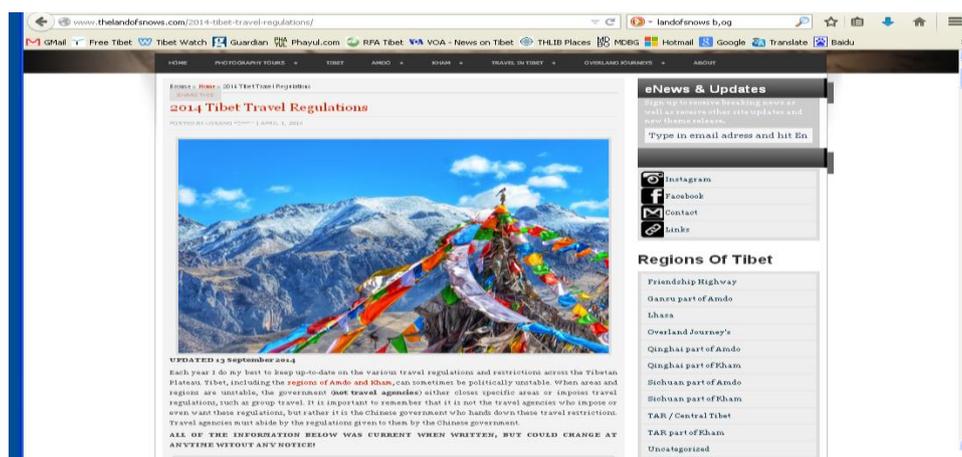
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<sup>7</sup> *Why the huge influx of domestic tourists will hurt China’s ethnic harmony?* Offbeat China, 14 August 2013  
<http://offbeatchina.com/why-the-huge-influx-of-domestic-tourists-will-hurt-chinas-ethnic-harmony>

## Tourism and freedom of movement

### Getting into and around Tibet

There is a marked difference between how Chinese domestic tourists can move around within China and Tibet, how Tibetans themselves can move around within China and Tibet and how foreign tourists can move around within China and Tibet. Despite Chinese claims that Tibet is an integral part of China, foreign visitors are required to get further permission, above and beyond their Chinese visa, to go there. Foreign visitors require a total of three separate permits, one of which is the 'military permit' allowing access to areas of a 'sensitive nature'. Although the guidelines for foreign tourists are constantly changing, independent travel is currently not permitted in Tibet and visitors are usually only allowed to go on organised tours with a guide.



Screenshot from the Land of Snows travel website<sup>8</sup>

As the above screenshot from the Land of Snows travel website shows, travel regulations for foreigners are in constant flux. The notice on the blog post says in capital letters: "ALL OF THE INFORMATION BELOW WAS CURRENT WHEN WRITTEN, BUT COULD CHANGE AT ANYTIME WITHOUT ANY NOTICE!"

The imposition of restrictions on the movement of foreign tourists is not unique to Tibet. The neighbouring nation of Bhutan, for example, places strict controls on foreign visitors and India restricts tourist access to certain areas. Such restrictions are sometimes intended as protective measures for fragile eco-systems or to limit the social impact of tourism on remote communities.

Placing similar, and at times even harsher, restrictions on the movement of the local population, however, is not an approach shared by neighbouring countries; nor is it one that can be justified as a well-intentioned protective measure.

For Tibetan people there are various restrictions on movement, particularly within the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and Lhasa, the Tibetan capital city, is the most difficult place for Tibetans to access. As an early-2014 report in the Washington Monthly says:

"It has become more difficult for Tibetans to move around, much less leave the country. Their Tibetan ethnicity is written on their ID cards, which police inspect at checkpoints outside Lhasa and at the border of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is difficult for most Tibetans to enter Lhasa at all, especially the pilgrims who once prostrated their way to the religious capital."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The Land of Snows <http://www.thelandofsnows.com/2014-tibet-travel-regulations/>

<sup>9</sup> *The Disneyfication of Tibet: How tourism has become a tool of occupation*, Pearl Sydenstricker, Washington Monthly, February 2014  
[http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january\\_february\\_2014/ten\\_miles\\_square/the\\_disneyfication\\_of\\_tibet048349.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january_february_2014/ten_miles_square/the_disneyfication_of_tibet048349.php)

An article in the Atlantic in December 2013 also confirms the heavy-handed approach to Tibetan movement:

“But the dominant aspect of life in Lhasa remains the checkpoints. Some consist of a folding table with two security guards, squeezed in between shops on a crowded street. Others are large pre-fabricated buildings that host teams of Chinese police and are equipped with riot gear including helmets, shields, and fire blankets. Checkpoints on Lhasa’s major roads are surrounded by knee-high spiked metal barriers, protecting the buildings from vehicles. Leaving the city by car, the checkpoints appear on the highway nearly every half hour.”<sup>10</sup>

Like the restrictions on foreign tourists, the rules for Tibetans are constantly changing depending on the political climate. After the protests that started in March 2008, Tibetans from Amdo and Kham (referred to in Chinese as any Tibetan not resident of Tibet Autonomous Region i.e. Tibetans from Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan), including monks, were expelled from Lhasa and made to return to their home areas. These expulsions continued and were escalated in June 2012 following the 27 May self-immolation protests in Lhasa by two Tibetans from eastern Tibet.

As reported by Human Rights Watch, “These expulsions are unprecedented because they extend to Tibetans who have valid business permits to live and work in Lhasa and who have been running businesses there for years. Other post-2008 expulsion campaigns around sensitive dates have focused only on those without permits to stay in Lhasa. Those currently targeted include Tibetans with valid temporary residence permits (*zanzhuzheng* in Chinese; *gnas sdod lag khyer* in Tibetan) to stay in the city.”<sup>11</sup>

Tibet Watch reported a more recent example of restrictions in Driru County, Nagchu Prefecture, during October 2013. Following a series of protests and the ensuing crackdown, Chinese authorities imposed restrictions on movement in or out of the county. Tibetans who were staying in Lhasa or other parts of Nagchu Prefecture at that time were unable to return home. Furthermore, on 8 October a notice was issued to all police stations and security checkpoints in Lhasa by the Old Lhasa Neighbourhood Headquarters. The notice instructed all police and security personnel to “observe the movements of Tibetans from Nagchu and increasingly interrogate the suspicious people from Nagchu”. The notice also provided details of the monitoring procedures and the code language to be used.<sup>12</sup>

Another leaked document, publicised by Tibetan writer Tsering Woeser in February 2014, suggests that hotels in Lhasa have been instructed to register Tibetan guests from certain politically sensitive areas with the police and obtain permission before allowing them to check-in. Police registration for Chinese guests from the same areas is not required.<sup>13,14</sup>

In addition to the problems they face moving around the Tibet Autonomous Region and accessing their own capital city, Tibetans have no automatic right to a Chinese passport. Many Tibetans object to the idea of a Chinese passport, however, those who do need or want to travel internationally and take the step of applying for one often encounter difficulties. For example, Tsering Woeser, a Tibetan woman who writes about human rights and other Tibet related issues, is unable to travel outside of China as her application for a passport is continually denied.

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<sup>10</sup> *Tibet’s Tense New Reality*, The Atlantic, 13 December 2013 <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/12/tibets-tense-new-reality/282338/>

<sup>11</sup> *China: Arbitrary Expulsions of Tibetans from Lhasa Escalate*, Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2012 <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/19/china-arbitrary-expulsions-tibetans-lhasa-escalate>

<sup>12</sup> *Driru County: The new hub of Tibetan resistance*, Tibet Watch, April 2014

<sup>13</sup> *Racist hotel policy targets Tibetans*, Free Tibet, 11 February 2014 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/racist-hotel-policy-targets-tibetans>

<sup>14</sup> All hotel guests in Tibet have to be registered on the security database at check-in. The measures described in the document were above and beyond this standard security registration and applied solely to Tibetans.

“I cannot get a passport, just like many other Tibetans, it is almost unthinkable that this regime that controls us will ever grant us a passport, which should, in actual fact, be a fundamental right that every citizen enjoys. Last year, Lhasa gave out passports to anyone above 60 years of age, albeit only for the period of one week. As a result the office in charge of passports was full of the grey-haired, limping elderly; and it was clear that they were all heading for the foothills of the Himalayas to visit relatives, pay homage to the holy land of Buddhism, as well as to fulfil that dream that no one speaks of but everyone knows. I am sorrowfully thinking that I may have to wait until I am 60 years old until I get hold of a passport.”<sup>15</sup>

Most recently, Tsering Woeser was denied a passport in March 2013 when she was invited to travel to the United States of America to collect an International Women of Courage Award. She has repeatedly applied for a passport over a number of years and been denied every time. Passport applications for Chinese people, however, are normally successful within a few weeks. Even those Tibetans in possession of a passport are not able to travel freely, however, as their passports can be severely time limited (as noted above) or revoked at any given time.

The kind of restrictions imposed on the movement of local Tibetans and foreign tourists are not applicable to Chinese people and China is investing heavily in opening up popular areas of Tibet to domestic tourists.

## Infrastructure development

China has invested huge amounts of money building infrastructure to facilitate tourism in Tibet. This includes a high-speed railway from Beijing to Lhasa, completed in July 2006, with an extension to Shigatse which opened in August 2014. A number of new roads and airports have also been built in recent years. The Tibet Autonomous Region now has five airports: in Lhasa, Ngari, Nyingtri, Chamdo and Shigatse. The airport in Ngari, which opened in 2010, has greatly improved access to Tibet’s south western sites of pilgrimage, such as Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. Rather than making life easier for pilgrims, though, opening up this part of Tibet has prompted commercial development on a scale which side-lines the pilgrims and threatens the traditional sanctity of the site.

Despite being one of the most sacred sites in Buddhism, the holy mountain and lake have now been incorporated into 'Tibetan Kailash Manasarovar Tourism Development Project'. The development includes the construction of highways and cable car routes so that tourists can access the sites in comfort and without having to walk any long distances. Yet, the walking that the authorities seem so keen to save people from is an essential element of pilgrimage and one that may no longer be possible once the area is full of vehicles.

“The walk around the mountain and lake is a continuation of the traditions of pilgrims in the past, because only through the physical act of walking, and the “labour of the bones”, can one achieve religious sublimation.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the detrimental effect on traditional pilgrimage practices, there are potential political aspects to the recent infrastructure development. On 8 September 2014, Lhasa Evening News reported that senior Chinese Communist Party official in Lhasa, Qizhala, visited the site of a future planned Lhasa international airport. In his speech he emphasised the importance of an international airport to “advance development and promote the long-term peace and stability of the region and to strengthen the modernisation of national

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<sup>15</sup> *How I Met His Holiness the Dalai Lama Without a Passport*, Tsering Woeser, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 12 January 2011 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/how-i-met-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-without-a-passport-by-woeser/>

<sup>16</sup> *Please Stop the ‘Development’ of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar for Profit*, Tsering Woeser, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 15 July 2011 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/please-stop-the-development-of-mount-kailash-and-lake-manasarovar-for-profit-by-woeser/>

defence.”<sup>17</sup> The Chinese official usage of the word “stability” is widely understood to mean the absence of any protests or unrest and references to “promoting” or “maintaining” stability are a coded way of justifying repressive measures against local Tibetans.<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine that improved travel infrastructure will make it easier to move around the 40,000 troops currently stationed in the Tibet Autonomous Region as well as tourists.

International businesses have also invested heavily in tourism in Tibet, mainly via the building of hotels. They appear to have all but ignored the ethical issues surrounding investing in an occupied country, seeing only the opportunity to gain financially. High profile foreign investment, especially in luxury developments, supports China's political aspirations for Tibet as well as delivering financial benefits for the governing regime. Such investment helps to normalise the occupation and supports the propaganda that Tibet is a peaceful and happy part of China.

It should, moreover, be noted how little these infrastructure and construction projects benefit the economic well-being of local Tibetans. The majority of the jobs created are filled by migrant Chinese workers. Evidence of the extent of this issue was provided during the disaster at a gold mine in Meldro Gungkar County, 70km east of Lhasa, on 29 March 2013. Over 80 miners were killed when a landslide buried the miners' camp. Only two were Tibetan – an indication of how few Tibetans are employed on Chinese projects in Tibet, rather than their good luck.<sup>20</sup> Another example was provided by Free Tibet as part of their campaign against InterContinental Hotels Group's plans to open a luxury resort in Lhasa. In communications with Free Tibet, the company said they anticipated employing only 40 per cent local Tibetans in their hotel.

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<sup>17</sup> 齐扎拉考察调研拉萨新机场规划设计等前期工作开展情况, Lhasa Evening News, 8 September 2014

<http://www.chinatibetnews.com/2014/0908/1356699.shtml>

<sup>18</sup> *Preserving Stability*, China Media Project, 14 September 2012 <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/09/14/27074/>

<sup>19</sup> For further examples of measures taken by Chinese authorities in the name of “stability maintenance”, see: *China: Alarming New Surveillance, Security in Tibet*, Human Rights Watch, 20 March 2013

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/03/20/china-alarming-new-surveillance-security-tibet>

<sup>20</sup> *Tibet mine landslide: Hopes fade for survivors*, BBC News, 30 March 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-21980535>

## Marketing Tibet

Since 1949, China has destroyed over 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and shrines, leaving only a fraction of the number there was before the invasion. It has imposed strict controls on many of the remaining monasteries and on the religious practice of the Tibetan people. It has also restricted teaching of the Tibetan language and all other forms of cultural expression. Tibet Watch has documented numerous cases of people being arrested for possessing images of the Dalai Lama or songs promoting Tibetan national identity. The Tibetan flag is also strictly prohibited.

Now, after decades of systematically suppressing Tibetan culture, China seems to have realized that it may have financial value – if it can be marketed in line with Chinese state political beliefs. While the cultural expressions of Tibetan people are still being suppressed and punished, some aspects of Tibetan culture are being incorporated into Chinese propaganda and the Tibet Autonomous Region is being marketed, especially to domestic tourists, as an attractive holiday destination.



Online Banner Ads Promoting the “China Tibet Tourism and Culture Expo” in Lhasa, September 2014

In packaging up a politically acceptable version of Tibet, China has re-written history and also presents the Tibetan people in a very negative light. The official state position is that, rather than being invaded, Tibet experienced a “peaceful liberation” which marked “the commencement of Tibet’s progress from a dark and backward society to a bright and advanced future.”<sup>21</sup>

Exhibitions depicting life in Tibet prior to ‘liberation’ are very popular in China and the veracity of the narrative is rarely ever questioned. A visitor to one such exhibit in Beijing told an LA Times journalist, “Of course it’s true ... It is history. We learn the same from textbooks.”<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, another visitor was quoted in the China Daily explaining how the exhibition had helped them understand “the barbarianism and darkness that permeated old Tibet”.<sup>23</sup>

At times, China has even used the Tibetan people’s own resistance against them; characterising them as ungrateful savages who are incapable of appreciating China’s benevolence. In the aftermath of the 2008 uprising, however, China changed tactics and invented “Serf Liberation Day”. Introduced in 2009, this was portrayed as a Tibetan festival celebrating their liberation from their former rulers. Despite the seeming change in approach, the end goal would appear to be the same. As Tibetan scholar, Tsering Shakya notes, “in repeatedly using the words ‘serfs’ or ‘slaves’ (albeit in relation to past oppressions), official China also reduces Tibetans to the status of primitives, and authorises outside management of their lives.”<sup>24</sup>

The restrictions on Tibetan movement, freedom of expression and access to communication channels prevents the spread of any alternative to China’s Tibet narrative. Consequently, “the idea of the Tibetan being *luohou* (backward) is entrenched in the official state discourse on Tibet; and the perception has penetrated

<sup>21</sup> *White Paper: Sixty Years Since Peaceful Liberation of Tibet*, The Information Office of the State Council, published by Xinhua, 11 July 2011 [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-07/11/c\\_13978644.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-07/11/c_13978644.htm)

<sup>22</sup> *This Tibet exhibit toes the party line*, Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times, 8 July 2008 <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/08/world/fg-exhibit8>

<sup>23</sup> *Tibet exhibition draws appreciation from visitors*, China Daily (Xinhua), 5 May 2008 [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-05-05/content\\_6661752.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-05-05/content_6661752.htm)

<sup>24</sup> *Tibet and China: the past in the present*, Tsering Shakya, published by Open Democracy, 29 March 2009 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/tibet-and-china-the-past-in-the-present>

the Chinese popular image of Tibet.”<sup>25</sup> The version of Tibet marketed to potential Chinese tourists, therefore, comprises a beautiful region, full of fascinating traditions and interesting historical sites but populated by primitive, ungrateful people who are of little value.

In recent years, as part of their Tibet re-branding exercise, China has graduated from re-writing history to re-building it. The Potala Palace looks down on Lhasa, dominating views from the city. According to legend, a palace was originally built in that location by Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The current building dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and, prior to the invasion of Tibet, was the winter palace of the Dalai Lama. In 1994 it was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. In July 2006, the Chinese authorities announced plans to build a replica of the palace on the outskirts of Lhasa.



Scene from the Princess Wencheng show in front of the Potala Replica<sup>26</sup>

The replica was completed in July 2013. It stages a show aimed primarily at tourists which tells the story of the Chinese Princess Wencheng, who married the King of Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This marriage forms part of the basis of China’s claim that Tibet historically belongs to it. Chinese state media explicitly links the show to boosting tourism, demonstrating the importance placed by the authorities on the political and economic value of their propaganda<sup>27</sup>.

China has also undertaken ‘redevelopment’ work in Lhasa, which includes the construction of shopping malls, car parks, hotels and other facilities seemingly aimed at making the city more accommodating for Chinese tourists. Some of the developments appear to disrupt and prevent Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims undertaking a traditional circumambulation route<sup>28</sup> around the Jokhang Temple (a key part of the route). Yet, in 2013, the Chinese government stated – in an answer during the United Nations review of China’s obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child – that significant infrastructure projects are only undertaken on “a voluntary, not a compulsory, basis, exercising no negative impact on the production and cultural traditions of the local Tibetan people.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Regal Romance Between Tibetans and Han*, China Tibet Online, 9 September 2014  
[http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/xw/201409/t20140909\\_2018954.html](http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/xw/201409/t20140909_2018954.html)

<sup>27</sup> *Regal Romance Between Tibetans and Han*, China Tibet Online, 9 September 2014  
[http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/xw/201409/t20140909\\_2018954.html](http://eng.tibet.cn/2012sy/xw/201409/t20140909_2018954.html)

<sup>28</sup> This is a religious ritual involving walking around a sacred site or object.

<sup>29</sup> Response of the Chinese Government to Questions Concerning the Combined 3rd and 4th Periodic Reports on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (unofficial translation published by the United Nations)

The idea that the Tibetan people would voluntarily consent to developments that might damage their ancient heritage is unthinkable and Tibet Watch is unaware of any instance of open and honest local consultation that has been undertaken by China. Nevertheless, government officials have previously quoted surveys of local people. For example, in the renovation of Lhasa's Barkhor area, a government official was quoted as stating: "91 per cent of the [street] vendors said they supported the renovation and are willing to relocate."<sup>30</sup> However, in a state where no opposition to the policies of the ruling Communist Party of China is tolerated and even the hint of dissent can prompt a violent reaction from the authorities, it is improbable that any community would feel able to voice its opinion freely, even if the consultation was carried out in good faith.

While the voice of Tibetans in Tibet is often stifled, the "beautification" of the Barkhor area of Lhasa has been severely criticised by Tibetans in exile, Tibet supporters and noted writers such as Tsering Woeser.<sup>31</sup> The developments in Lhasa have already been criticised by the United Nations. In 2005 UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the International Council on Monuments and Sites highlighted the "uncontrolled urban development and expansion of tourism-related facilities" and the "negative impact of the rehabilitation projects on the protection of the traditional urban tissue of the historic centre [of Lhasa]."<sup>32</sup>

As noted above, the story of Princess Wencheng forms part of the basis of China's claim that Tibet historically belongs to it. The Chinese government places huge importance on this and their version of Tibetan history is passed down in various ways, notably through the Chinese tour guides in Tibet. Tibetan blogger Gonpo Dorje picks up on this and writes:

"When you come to Tibet, you will have to listen attentively to everything your tour guide says, this you cannot avoid. But if the tour guide is only reciting a list of government achievements, and lecturing you about the autobiography of Princess Wencheng, then I ask you this, is this really getting to the true history of Tibet?"<sup>33</sup>

What is clear from the post is that Tibetans have deep reservations about the information and version of Tibetan history fed to the tourists by their guides. In a February 2014 Washington Monthly article about the 'Disneyfication' of Tibet, the author writes:

"Tibetan tour guides have told me that Han Chinese tourists employ Han guides, if they have guides at all. The state-led development of the tourism industry seems to benefit Han people more than Tibetans, and it comes with a major dose of propaganda. In fact, while tourism is surging, Tibetan hotel owners are losing business, because their base was foreign tourists. The newest tourist attraction this year in Lhasa is a live-action re-enactment of the story of Princess Wencheng, the Chinese wife of a Tibetan emperor, a staple of government propaganda. The show is choreographed by director Zhang Yimou in a style similar to that of his opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing."<sup>34</sup>

Disneyfication is a word that has only entered the English language in recent years. The Collins Dictionary describes it as "the act of transforming historical places, local customs, etc., into trivial entertainment for tourists." Regrettably, it is an accurate description of what is occurring in Tibet today.

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<sup>30</sup> *Life made easier in Lhasa's old city zone*, China Daily, 22 June 2013 [http://www.chinadaily.com/cn/xinhua/2013-06-22/content\\_9388087.html](http://www.chinadaily.com/cn/xinhua/2013-06-22/content_9388087.html)

<sup>31</sup> *Our Lhasa is on the verge of Destruction! Please save Lhasa*, Tsering Woeser, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 10 May 2013 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2013/our-lhasa-is-on-the-verge-of-destruction-please-save-lhasa-by-woeser>

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO <http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/394>

<sup>33</sup> *I Dare to Ask, What Have you Come to Lhasa For?* Gonpo Dorje, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 17 August 2010 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/fish-speaking-back-to-ichthyologists-two-blogposts-on-chinese-tourists-in-tibet/>

<sup>34</sup> *The Disneyfication of Tibet: How tourism has become a tool of occupation*, Pearl Sydenstricker, Washington Monthly, February 2014 [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january\\_february\\_2014/ten\\_miles\\_square/the\\_disneyfication\\_of\\_tibet048349.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january_february_2014/ten_miles_square/the_disneyfication_of_tibet048349.php)

## Culture clash and the ethics of tourism

In 1983 China became a member state of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. The UNWTO promotes tourism as an instrument in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, which are aimed at reducing poverty and fostering sustainable development. It also encourages implementation of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, which seeks to maximize the socio-economic benefit of tourism while minimizing its negative impacts.

According to Article 1 of the Code, tourism should contribute to mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies. It goes on to say: "Tourism activities should be conducted in harmony with the attributes and traditions of the host regions and countries and in respect for their laws, practices and customs." Article 2 of the Code further states that tourism activities should promote human rights. Meanwhile, Article 4 encourages tourist access to religious sites but stipulates that this should be done in a way which does not adversely impact normal worship.

This report has already detailed how the development of some of Tibet's key pilgrimage sites is side-lining pilgrims, threatening the traditional sanctity of the sites and making pilgrimage practices more difficult. It has also described how aspects of Tibetan culture are being appropriated by Chinese propaganda and Disneyfied. This section now shows how the behaviour of individual tourists impacts on the local population.

In Tibetan Buddhist culture, the written word is highly respected and prayer flags in particular are regarded as sacred objects as they are printed with Buddhist prayers. The sacred images and inscriptions on prayer flags are believed to be transmitted into the world through the wind, exerting positive energy into the environment and bringing benefit for all living beings. They are, accordingly, handled with respect by Tibetans and it is considered inappropriate for sacred texts of any kind to be carried under the arm or lower than the waist. In particular, the sacred word should not be touched by the feet<sup>35</sup>. In the photos below, which circulated on Chinese social media in August 2014, Chinese tourists are shown to be standing, walking over and sitting on prayer flags.



<sup>35</sup> "Dharma books and puja texts do not belong on the floor, out of respect for the truth that they contain, but on a table or cushion. Texts should not be stepped over, stepped on or sat on." *Dharma Etiquette*  
[http://www.kagyu.org/ktd/monastery/dharma\\_etiquette.php](http://www.kagyu.org/ktd/monastery/dharma_etiquette.php)

These additional photographs, which circulated at the same time, show further examples of intrusive and culturally disrespectful behaviour as tourists invade the privacy of a prostrating pilgrim and pose inappropriately on a Buddhist statue.



It would seem that while the current Chinese propaganda and marketing are certainly raising interest in Tibet, the Disneyfied presentation of Tibetan culture does not encourage tourists to take it seriously. The failure of tourists to show due respect to the Tibetan people and their traditions can manifest itself quite bluntly, as shown in the photographs above. However, the Chinese marketing approach has also given rise to a new source of cultural tension exemplified by the inadvertent disrespect of the “zangpiao”.

### “Zangpiao” – The Tibet Drifters

A subculture has emerged amongst a segment of Chinese society that is interested in a romanticised Tibet. These Chinese admirers of Tibet have come to be known as “zangpiao”, an abbreviation of a Chinese phrase for “one who drifts into Tibet”, and are also called “Tibet Drifters”. The Tibet Drifters are generally more interested in culture, spirituality and the arts; setting them apart from more traditional Chinese tourists and also the Chinese migrant workers who come to Tibet for the economic opportunities.

Unfortunately, many Tibetans find the interest of the Tibet Drifters to be superficial and lacking in any affinity or empathy for the Tibetan people themselves. In a blog post written in March 2010, writer Tsering Woeser shows her disdain for this type of traveller:

“As for the currently quite popular “Tibet Drifters” and those middle-class inland people who call Tibet a “spiritual home”, it is just like someone commented: those people are in fact quite unfamiliar with the suffering Tibetans endure; perhaps they are even totally oblivious to suffering. Some “Tibet Drifters” have said to me that “Tibet Drifters” do not specifically have anything to do with Tibet, no matter in which place they “drift”, they are always the same. But I have encountered those “Tibet Drifters” sitting at the main entrance of Jokhang Temple laughing, giggling and snuggling up to each other. Cigarettes dangle from their lips; they drink beer and sunbathe while watching Tibetans prostrating. They gaze and stare and while laughing and giggling, they also go and prostrate a few times as if it was just some kind of game, just some type of popular amusement.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Who is Really Safeguarding Lhasa*, Tsering Woeser, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, April 2010  
<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/who-is-really-safeguarding-lhasa-by-woeser>

The Tibet Drifters are attracted by Tibet’s rich heritage and often drawn to historical pilgrimage sites. What they seemingly fail to appreciate, though, is that these are not archaeological sites of some ancient and forgotten civilisation. Many of Tibet’s traditions are as alive today as they have ever been. The Tibetan pilgrims do not come to observe history but to fulfil their current religious practice. The area around the Jokhang temple in Lhasa is one such site and the cultural misappropriation of this site by the Tibet Drifters echoes the way the Chinese government appropriates Tibetan culture for its own use.

In 2011, Tsering Woeser wrote about how a sacred site opposite the Jokhang temple had been turned into a “Romance Wall” by Chinese tourists and media hype:



Photo from a Chinese travel website showing Lhasa's “Romance Wall”

“The term “Romance Wall” first appeared on the internet a few years ago. Some people who had travelled to Tibet, as well as those who had lived in Lhasa for some time, bragged about inventing that term and posted various photos of themselves crowding around the wall. Subsequently, this caught the media’s attention, which resulted in tourists swarming into Tibet, blindly searching for something unobtainable. The so-called “Romance Wall” is situated opposite Jokhang Temple, which originally served as a place for pilgrims to offer thousands of butter lamps in small cups and as a place for those prostrating to take a rest. But after it was transformed into the “Romance Wall”, it was often occupied by tourists looking for a slice of “romance” and the pilgrims had no choice but to cramp together, standing back to back when prostrating.”<sup>37</sup>

Fortunately, not all Chinese tourists are blind to the feelings of the local Tibetan people. In 2010, a blog post by a Chinese traveller called “December” generated much online discussion as it contained images of other Chinese tourists (described as ‘Photographer Friends’) intrusively taking photographs of local Tibetans at the Taktsang Lhamo temple<sup>38</sup>. The post is titled “She is Crying on the Hill” and was re-posted many times on blogs and popular discussion forums<sup>39</sup>. Unusually, “December”, the author of the blog post, shows empathy for the local Tibetans and likens the camera lenses to guns.

The translation of the blog post below describes the author’s journey in 13 photographs and shows their increasingly emotional reaction at seeing the privacy and dignity of the Tibetans violated:

<sup>37</sup> *The Media Hype About Lhasa’s “Romance Wall”*, Tsering Woeser, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 16 June 2011 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/the-media-hype-about-lhasas-romance-wall-by-woeser/>

<sup>38</sup> Taktsang Lhamo temple (Ch: Langmusi), located in a small village straddling the border between Gansu Province and Sichuan Province

<sup>39</sup> e.g. <http://www.douban.com/note/147765317/> and <http://bbs.news.163.com/bbs/photo/181381927.html>

## She is Crying on the Hill

Image 1

“This was the first impression of the hillside in the afternoon, two Tibetan women and six ‘Photographer Friends’ surrounding them.”



Image 2

“Walking just a few steps on the right hand side, greeted by this scene. The child of a Tibetan woman was being photographed by three ‘Photographer Friends’, please pay special attention to the Tibetan woman standing on the right hand side.”



Image 3

“Carrying on, please note the Tibetan woman's face and the direction it's pointing in”



Image 4

“With someone always persisting, the Tibetan lady bends over to leave”



Image 5

“This doesn't mean that the ‘Photographer Friends’ give up, they turn next to shooting children of Tibetans, the distance kept by the ‘Photographer Friends’, is it one step or two steps? Taking photos without permission?”



Image 6

“Beautiful girl, who will stand up for you? Even surrounded by faces, you're not let off. Which direction lets you hide? Towards the left or the right?”



Image 7

“A change of people, many different ‘Photographer Friends’.”



Image 8

“Your hand blocks your face in protest. But no-one cares.”



Image 9

“I don't know what kind of feelings you experience or helplessness, you move to hide your face, I feel deep sorrow.”



Image 10

“There is also your Tibetan sister, surrounded by gun-like camera lenses.”



Image 11

“Counted conservatively, 5 ‘Photographer Friends’, note the expressions on the Tibetan faces.”



Image 12

“I was stunned by this scene! Can the lens be any closer!!!”

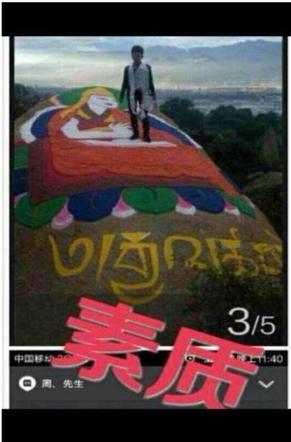


Image 13

“‘Red Emergency’ and ‘Black Assault’, being shot by the camera, makes me think of the end of a gun.”



## Tibetan responses to tourism and travel on social media



This image (left), which circulated amongst Tibetans on the popular Chinese mobile app WeChat, shows a Chinese tourist standing on a Buddhist rock painting. According to Buddhist culture, it is both disrespectful and sinful to stand on or touch a sacred text or image with one's feet.

The Chinese characters which have been superimposed on the photograph say 素质 (suzhi) meaning someone's basic inner quality. The fact that these words have been superimposed onto the image could suggest disapproval of this tourist's behaviour and that his "inner quality" is negative.

This is an example of how Tibetans are using social media as an outlet through which to express their disapproval of such behaviour from Chinese tourists. In 2010, Tibetan bloggers published posts in which they aired their views on Chinese tourists coming to Tibet. Blogger Gonpo Dorje in Lhasa wrote humorously in August 2010 on his blog:

"These new tourists (please excuse my harsh words) need to act according to their new environment. ... When you come to Tibet, for the time being try to be a bit more contemplative and attentive, and concede to the fact that you don't know everything. The Potala Palace in Lhasa has to bear the strain of hosting 4000 tourists every day, a heavy burden you must agree. Therefore, please be a bit more quiet and considerate when visiting this place, you flashy tourists with your sunglasses and cameras. A true traveller needs to read and adhere to notices and signs. If you were to visit Buckingham Palace, do you think they would allow you to be bustling around, disturbing everything in such a manner? China already has too many little emperors who think the world revolves around them, and there is no way of avoiding these people.

When you come to Tibet, you will take lots of photographs. Understand that this is to earn your traveller's stripes and prove you've journeyed far and wide. There's also no harm if it ensures that those people without the means to travel to Tibet can also be that little bit jealous of you. But have a little heart!"<sup>40</sup>

A much angrier blog post appeared online in November 2010 written by a blogger named Namtso. It was titled "These Kinds of People Should Stay Away From Us!" and addresses the tourists directly:

"To you, religion is just another scam that you will never be conned by.  
To you, belief in a religion is merely for primitive and uneducated people.  
To you, compassion is just another word for a fool.  
To you, having mercy in one's heart is merely a show of weakness.

OK, I'm already sick of this dispute. I thank the Lord Buddha for blessing me with my knowledge and understanding.

Just leave us alone, and let us be the uncivilised, backwards and incompetent fools you think we are!

We are quite happy this way, we don't need you to come and save us.

So take your culture and rationale,  
And leave us alone!"<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *I Dare to Ask, What Have you Come to Lhasa For?* Gonpo Dorje, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, 17 August 2010 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/fish-speaking-back-to-ichthyologists-two-blogposts-on-chinese-tourists-in-tibet/>

<sup>41</sup> *These Kinds of People Should Stay Away From Us!* Namtso, translated by High Peaks Pure Earth, November 2010 <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/fish-speaking-back-to-ichthyologists-two-blogposts-on-chinese-tourists-in-tibet/>

On micro-blog sites such as Weibo, similar to the Chinese-banned Twitter, Tibetan netizens<sup>42</sup> have also been vocal about what they see as the marginalisation of Tibetan language in the face of greater development and expanded infrastructure.

When the Shigatse-Lhasa railway line opened in Tibet on 15 August 2014, Tibetan netizens were quick to notice the fact that the train tickets contained no Tibetan language information. Photographs circulated on social media with comments about the lack of Tibetan language, for example this post (right) of 17 August 2014:

*Translation: [Strongly recommend that train tickets be in two languages.] If Tibet's train tickets had Tibetan language on them, who knows how many farmers and nomads it would help on their journey, those who agree please re-post!*

Another Weibo user, on 16 August 2014, commented on a post (left) about the new train that “The biggest problem right now is that the train ticket has no Tibetan language on it!!”<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, a third Tibetan netizen (below) comments on more than just the lack of Tibetan language on the train tickets, they also point out that the way that Shigatse is written on the ticket is Rikaze, the pinyin transliteration<sup>44</sup> and not the correct transliteration from Tibetan.

<sup>42</sup> The term netizen is an amalgamation of the words internet and citizen, meaning a citizen of the internet, and was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in September 2003. Online activism and the resistance of Chinese netizens is well documented by websites such as China Digital Times; Tibetan cultural and online resistance by websites such as High Peaks Pure Earth and Tibet Web Digest.

<sup>43</sup> <http://weibo.com/5172750941/BixNRFR6b>

<sup>44</sup> Pinyin is the official phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet in China.

On this occasion the online action generated some success and by 19 August 2014 netizens on Weibo were posting images of the revised train ticket, this time containing Tibetan language as well.<sup>45</sup>



Translation: Train ticket with Tibetan, today I'm re-posting this success.

<sup>45</sup> [http://weibo.com/2674969054/BiYo6CmC6?mod=weibotime#\\_rnd1409930330604](http://weibo.com/2674969054/BiYo6CmC6?mod=weibotime#_rnd1409930330604)

## Conclusion

Tourism at its best promotes communication and understanding between cultures. At its worst, it is simple voyeurism. Unfortunately, it seems that the latter is most common in Tibet at present.

People have been attracted to Tibet's mystique for centuries. The difference today is that Tibet's ancient traditions are being commercially packaged up and sold by the occupying Chinese regime. The Tibetan people no longer have control of their own borders and are not consulted, at least not in any meaningful way, about the 'development' of their towns and cities or the transformation of their sacred pilgrimage sites into tourist attractions.

Consequently, many of China's developments in Tibet impact negatively on the local people, the environment, the physical sites and on traditional religious and cultural practices. Pilgrims are finding themselves squeezed out, sometimes literally, as hundreds and thousands of visitors descend on what were once remote and peaceful sites. The developers build facilities to enhance the tourist experience – some of which actually prevent traditional pilgrimage practices - and the advertisers encourage yet more tourists to come, thereby fuelling the demand for even further development.

Much of the marketing focusses on those aspects of Tibetan culture which have always intrigued outsiders. So, rather than being evenly spread across the country and/or the calendar, tourists converge in huge numbers on certain festivals and sites, most often pilgrimage sites. This places immense pressure on the environment and host communities. China's marketing of Tibet also presents a Disneyfied image of Tibetan culture which is designed to support China's political position. While adverts extol the beauty of Tibet's landscape, the people are often presented as backwards, clinging to old-fashioned beliefs and practices, refusing to embrace the benefits of Chinese society. China may hope that the increasing number of Chinese people visiting Tibet, together with all the newly built roads, hotels, restaurants and shops, will eventually win over the Tibetan people and they will come to appreciate the 'advantages' of Chinese culture. However, if this is part of China's plan then it is proving counter-productive as the propaganda filled marketing of Tibet is encouraging tourism of a kind which generates cultural tension rather than cohesion. It can also be distressing for Tibetans to watch China encouraging Chinese tourists to travel to areas of Tibet that they are often hindered or even prohibited from visiting.

Although there are rare expressions of empathy from Chinese visitors to Tibet, the images in this report show that intrusive and disrespectful behaviour is widespread, from tour groups and "Tibet Drifters" alike. In their rush to maximise tourist income, the Chinese authorities have brushed aside the right to privacy for many Tibetans. As the photographs within this report illustrate, it seems that the Tibetan people are sometimes viewed by Chinese tourists as little more than exhibits, much like zoo animals, there to be photographed regardless of whether they want to be or not. They are sometimes photographed at very close range, even during religious activities. Their privacy and dignity are violated as they are left at the mercy of visitors' camera lenses.

Many Tibetan people do not even benefit economically from the influx of tourists. As noted in this report, the majority of the jobs created by tourism development go to migrant workers from China. In addition, the numbers of tourists arriving each year require the development of infrastructure and facilities on a scale that normally only foreign or government-backed Chinese companies can finance. The views aired on Tibetan blog sites and social media also suggest that many Chinese tourists prefer Chinese service providers, including tour guides. This leaves Tibetans working in the tourism sector largely dependent on the custom of the much smaller pool of foreign visitors, while most of the income generated from the ever increasing number of Chinese tourists flows back to China.

The online activism of Tibetan netizens gives a voice to the frustration that many Tibetans feel. However, it also provides a channel for cultural resistance to the occupation and even a means for trying to bring about

change. As we can see from the example of the train tickets, it is a channel which can be effective and the success that the netizens have enjoyed so far is hopefully only the beginning.

There is also hope in the attitude of Chinese visitors like "December" who can learn to see past the government propaganda and appreciate the humanity of the Tibetan people around them as well as the true value of the culture.



Culture Clash: Tourism in Tibet  
October 2014