

Spring 2006

Nixi: A Case Study of the Influences of China's Economic Development on the Fringe of Tibet

Zachary Johnson
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection



Part of the [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Zachary, "Nixi: A Case Study of the Influences of China's Economic Development on the Fringe of Tibet" (2006).
Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 323.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/323

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

**Nixi: A Case Study of the Influences of China's Economic
Development on the Fringe of Tibet.**

Zachary A. Johnson

2006

On the eastern mountainside of Nixi cling several tall, red earthen houses, the winding road to Deqin cuts between; they face a swell in the middle of the valley where several more houses stand, and one in mid-construction. The two clusters of beautiful Tibetan houses are connected by a fairly recently added crushed stone road, walled in by rough stonework patched with cement. The village is surrounded by evergreens and blossoming mountain laurels. To the north the green mountains are staggered until they slowly fade into pale blue creases humbled by a high snowcapped range at the Tibetan border. To the east rises a bald mountain holy to the Nixi villagers and with a barren peak is appropriately called the grandfather and faces on the western side the grandmother peak where pines reach the summit. The city of Zhongdian lies only 15 miles to the south, hidden by a drastic snowcapped mountain daunted by black stone cliffs between the white snow-slides.

There are only 11 families in Nixi, making up a population of 213 people, although on a typical day there are a couple dozen working elsewhere. The population of Nixi is of the Zang nationality, and dominantly Tibetan although several members have married outside their nationality. For as far back as the elders remember, Nixi has never been isolated; interregional relations, trade and outsourcing have always been a functional part of survival. But over the past decade

a new change is coming with the introduction of new technologies, appealing job opportunities and an influential media. This paper will analyze recent history as how the villagers have adapted to survive, the villagers present fulfillment, and their hopes for the future. It is critical to remember throughout that cultural tradition, unique lifestyles and community organization go beyond profitability value but instead are valued because they are in existence as a fragment of a diverse whole.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Considering the varying interpretations on the contemporary terminology of modernization, development and progress, I would like to clarify my own understanding of the applied discourse to hopefully achieve a common understanding between my own interpretations and the readers.

First, I believe that modernization must primarily be the transnational trade and cooperation to promote developed technologies and infrastructures that support improved living conditions, ecologically considerate industry, and social welfare. Unfortunately, applied modernization, uniquely distinct from its ideals, is more concerned for the introduction of transnational corporations and the creation of a consumer society, than the ecological and social impacts of their presence. Predominantly, social welfare initiatives have been grossly ignored, environmental degradation largely considered inevitable blowback, and living conditions improving only for those who integrate themselves into the competitive wage labor market.

Second, development is an incredibly broad term referring to the growth of

economical and industrial infrastructure made to generate jobs, commerce, technologies and political stability. It also ideologically implies a natural progression of evolution as the global community pragmatically adopts successful mannerisms and expels its failures.

Thirdly, progress has been directly linked to modernization and development discourse without much discussion of the regressive achievements of the two. It is true that some undeniable progress has been made in certain sectors, but we must not ignore that developing countries are facing urgent issues contradictory to the progressive claims. Progress must not tolerate a widening income inequality gap, that industries ignorant of our planets ecological capacity operate largely without consequence, that the competitive nature of increasingly materialistic countries is creating great anxiety crisis resulting in suicide, crime and drugs, that the healthcare industry is largely inadequate to the needs of its subscribers, that poverty is still tolerated, that elitism, corruption and white-collar crime is so prevalent. Progressive entitlements must not apply only to those few primary beneficiaries of economic development, but should encompass the state of the entire affected population.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

This project hopes to depict both the external and internal influences at work which are transforming Nixi as China's economic growth is transforming countless such rural communities. I will not remain completely neutral and unbiased on some issues as there are aspects which, in my opinion, are either positive or negative; black or white. It is your responsibility as an opinionated reader to either agree or

disagree with my perspective. While it is difficult for me to fathom, I know there are those who truly subscribe to man's lesser qualities, and thus justify inequality, exploitation, greed by inevitable traits of our species. While I do not deny these characteristics eternally exist, I refuse to believe that they prevail out of encompassing biological norms, but instead are the deliberate actions and projects of some with political or economic influence. In opposition, it must be the faith in our compassionate qualities which dictates the political and economic environment that reaches into the most remote areas of others.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Nixi historically and presently enjoys participation with regional neighbors. There has been for century's trade, regional cooperation, border disputes, and job migrations. The "Caravan Trail" runs through the village which allowed for regional trade, agricultural specialization, and a market for goods not produced locally such as tea, butter, silk and salt. Work has also not been confined to the village. When my host grandparents were young, after the New Year men would leave to collect the coming year's fuel wood, and then would leave for several months to earn money as carpenters. Additionally, they often left for long trips to Tsakalon to import tea on the backs of horses and donkeys. The families were also not economically equal: some families had more horses than others which allowed them to import or export more products, and some even had servants to help with the house work.

Their homes are large by any standard, which has created some speculation that the Tibetans were financially prosperous. There is usually a walled enclosure for the

livestock, including a separated area for their food preparation. During the nights and foul weather the livestock are able to go into the first level. The infamous Tibetan Mastiff however, braves all weather at its tethered post, barking ferociously at both familiar and unfamiliar faces. The second floor has several bedrooms along the right side, a large area for a fuel wood stockpile, and an open door to the balcony overlooking the livestock pen and, of course, the dramatic scenery. On the left there's a doorway to the main living area, a large space with a fireplace, freshwater basin, a shrine devoted to Tibetan Buddhism and discreetly to the Dalai Llama, a TV set, a gas stove, and a massive tree trunk rises through the center of the floor. The greater the diameter of the trunk, the more prosperity the family will enjoy. Two more bedrooms branch off from here, as well as a room to store the crops.

The third floor is rarely finished, as it wasn't in the family that I stayed with. There was a large gap looking out the front wall giving a glimpse of the neighboring cluster of houses, but this central space was not used for more than the golden prayer wheel in the center of the room, so the elements were of little concern. When it is finished, it is usually capped with a simple railing overlooking the view.

Three more bedrooms run off the right side, and a room for hanging butchered meat. On the left are the bathroom and a large room for prayer and prostration, decorated beautifully with Tibetan Buddhist tapestries and artifacts.

There's a shallow loft for storage, mostly of extra wood shingles, which lie on packed earth used as insulation against the rain. Outside each family has a small plot

adjacent to their home for a greenhouse or other crops such as broccoli or chives.

Between the eastern cluster of families and the western cluster, there are 11 plots for agriculture, laid out methodically and differing in size according to the crop and the size of the family it's feeding. From the early morning until dusk, there are always women and men working hard in the red soil. They harvest barley, potatoes, wheat, and corn primarily, and several specialty crops in their smaller gardens such as broccoli, cauliflower, chives, apples and mint.

In summery, the village and its enveloping mountains are a breathtaking sight. The houses, built from local materials with delicate carvings and colorful painted windows, the staggered wooden shingles held down by stones, all seem no more than a graceful extension of their surrounding environment. Among the villagers there is an abundance of happiness, perhaps stemming from a codependence that has been the fabric of their success for generations.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The land, being such a central theme in the villager's everyday lives, has religious significance as a provider and protector, and is praised through daily rituals habitually. Some villagers even claim that the 5th Dalai Llama once rested in their small monastery at the western side of town. Each morning most villagers burn pine boughs collected from small saplings, mixed with barley flour in a small outdoor fireplace and purify themselves in the dense smoke, chanting prayers which are carried by the wind directed towards the god and goddess of the eastern and western mountain. There are also 12 stupas, called choedin's in the local Tibetan

dialect, encircling the town where villagers make the same ritual when passing by anytime throughout the day. Many days they will happily hike in groups to several of the choedin's built on the neighboring mountainsides. On the grandmother mountain, monks and other volunteers have begun construction of a large choedin which will overlook the town. The belief is that the choedin will guard the village from evil spirits, sickness, misfortune and attacks. Each choedin contains inside Holy Scriptures, various valuables, and tolls of the locals daily life.

I expected to find that religious practice would be far more active among the elders, but was surprised to find that young boys and girls also participate on their free will in daily religious rituals. When the schoolchildren had several days of holiday, each morning they eagerly hiked up to the nearby choedins to make their prayers. Both young and old are grateful to have their freedom of religion returned as it was restricted by the Chinese government for decades beginning in the military overthrow of the Tibetan government.

Still today they are not permitted to display photos of the Dalai Llama, but at each meal the first drops of their yak butter tea are poured into a goblet in his honor. The villagers are eager to share their appreciation for Buddhism and the Dalai Llama, but certainly are extremely uncomfortable discussing the political environment regarding relations between China and the Tibetan people.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

There exists, just behind their smiles, a bitterness towards the Chinese authorities for the assimilation of Tibet. It was fairly frustrating attempting to

converse when so much is considered politically inappropriate. Yet I was shocked to learn that it is not only Tibetan pride and resentment creating these awkward conversational obstacles, but inappropriate also for reasons I could only begin to comprehend. For example, during a conversation with the father of the household, he blurted that “now that China is economically progressing, we are happy to consider ourselves Chinese, not Tibetan.”

With such a turbulent history still prevalent in the memories of the elders, it seemed obvious that the locals would be adamant about considering themselves nothing but Tibetan. However, more and more I began to hear them claiming Chinese identity. In another conversation with a couple passing through who live in Lhasa, I hesitantly asked whether they still supported a liberated Tibet. They explained that first a country must gain strength, become economically powerful before it can seek independence. There is some truth to here, but it also contains multitudes as I feel that the Tibetans, understandably politically exhausted, are finding some comfort in the material prosperity that China’s economic boom is providing.

Though it is undeniable that resentment remains towards the Chinese and exists some Tibetan nationalism, apparent in their discomfort with discussing political matters, but predominantly it seems that in Nixi they are generally voluntarily assimilating themselves, at least superficially, into mainland China.

Living on the fringe of the Tibetan province, technically within Yunnan, Nixi is thus more vulnerable to become assimilated into mainstream trends of China and

find ways in which to legitimize a separation from Tibet. They will never forget that they are Tibetan, but they are beginning to voluntarily subscribe to the Chinese nationality so as to prosper economically. Without a doubt, were Tibet the one recently developing economically, the villagers would be far less sympathetic with the Chinese. This was a difficult concept for me to ponder, primarily because it is upsetting to think that economics can be valued more than cultural identity. However, the elders are maturely more interested in the development of a serving health care system, better education for the children and the opportunity to help others. It is the youth who are at greater risk as they are more excited by the more glamorous aspects of modernization, as discussed below.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

While Nixi pragmatically is thus relatively unchanged, the introduction of new technologies and ideals has reshaped daily practices to some extents. For the most part they are utilized only to maximize the efficiency of traditional practices without much ecological impact, or creating any evidence of envy, or egocentric possessiveness between the villagers.

Historically, as previously noted, fuel wood collection was a large task undertaken by the entire male population for up to two weeks following the New Years festivities. Several years ago the current village chief applied for money to give the villagers a gift: gas stoves. Now each house cooks most of their meals on the gas stove which are cheap to refill and save the villagers enormous amounts of fuel wood. This is both convenient and ecologically more considerate as

deforestation is becoming a global concern.

Water pumps are scarce, as the majority of the village is provided for by a well built and maintained gravity fed pool of mountain runoff. Historically water was a problem but with the introduction of cement, piping and water valves the villagers use water without much restraint.

Building materials for the houses have largely been ignored, as they prefer the durability and charm of the traditional rammed-earth houses. Few houses have applied waterproofing sheet metal, but not without covering it with traditional staggered wood shingles. Nicely constructed boards built only with simple hand tools and planers take a great amount of time, so the village has an electrically powered board cutter, called a dizhu. The dizhu is liquid cooled with a flexible 10' blade that can be resharpened. It's a fairly crude operation requiring some human strength and improvisation when loading large trunks, but can finish roughly 10 trunks per day.

Still today several families till their land with their "zo" (half cow, half yak breed) pulling a tiller. But the village possesses five gas powered, walk-behind rote tillers. Although the machines are privately owned, they are lent to any without hesitation, thus it is only when all five are in use (assuming they're mechanically operational) that a family will have to mount the zo with the tiller. Unfortunately fuel is quite expensive at four Yuan per liter, and not consistently available.

Transportation into Zhongdian relies on the help of buses and friends for a ten Yuan charge. Villagers do go into the city fairly regularly to sell produce on the

street side or in markets, they visit the Buddhist monastery, and various other activities or businesses. The son-in-law of my host family, for example, paints carved wooden chests at home, then transports them to stores in Zhongdian where he gets the rough equivalent of US\$150 for each. He is also employed as a painter for new constructions in the old section of Zhongdian. This skill allows the family a greater income than most enjoy, as the average annual regions income is 1,400 Yuan, roughly equivalent to US\$170.

Cheap and available plastic have made a tremendous impact on diversifying their locally produced crops. Five of the eleven families have erected greenhouses to grow otherwise vulnerable produce because of the often harsh climate and high elevation. Plastic sheeting is also used to promote initial sprouting of the corn rows in the fields. Once the corn sprouts, they simply tear the plastic and the corn grows with relative ease and consistent success.

Electricity is unfortunately not stabile, and a good portion of the dinners are by candlelight. Nonetheless, they are extremely grateful for the occasional luxury which allows them to prepare dinner more conveniently, clean their clothes in the washing machine, and watch their TV shows.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Several externalities could be influencing Nixi's changing identity; most prevalent is the introduction of the media into many of the homes via satellite television. Each evening, when the electricity is functioning, the family watches various programs, ranging from news, to fictional dramas based in either ancient

China or battles during the Communist revolution or competitive programs comparable to “American Idol.” Most surprising to me is the competitive nature of broadcasts which beg “what skill do you possess which separates you from others.” It is a fairly harmless question, yet considering the Communist ideology it seems an ironic and unlikely transition from the historically horrific demands for human equality and conformity.

More harmful, television has provided fragmented portrayals of the developed world, which I believe is influencing the interpretations of both young and old of modernization and development. In several conversations they expressed that America does not have the problems which the Chinese suffer, that America a perfectly created, efficient society that listens to the concerns of the population. The father enthusiastically supports the anti-terrorist campaign, stating that it is the duty of the developed world to help others around the world and create a safe environment for our children. This conversation was very emotional and moving, and I could not agree with him more. However, he was not aware of the controversy of the matter, or its failures.

The Chinese media has legitimized the political atmosphere of developed countries, perhaps to justify its own economic growth and give its population an ideal for the future as well as to favor the transnational corporations who are promoting the growth of a consumer society as financial opportunity is spreading throughout China. But the depictions are one-sided and often ridiculous.

For example, when my interpreter first arrived, the family and several friends,

both young and old, overwhelmed me with completely unexpected questions. They asked if it was true that even the farmers in America own helicopters, whether I own a yacht, an airplane, how many rooms in my house, do I have machine guns, a Rolls Royce, do I know Michael Jordan, how much money do I make? With every answer their eyes dimmed in disappointment, and I began to feel guilty for not allowing them this fantasy world. After all, China has boasted that before long its economy will surpass that of the United States, so they might genuinely believe that such riches are only a few years away.

The villagers feel excluded from the glamorous world they see on TV; They feel they deserve to be drowned with the same luxuries, enjoy the same leisure's, become more healthy, well educated, and they feel that China is going to provide this in the near future. One man was thrilled to discuss the plans to build a golf course in a neighboring village.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

While striving for stability and financial security is harmless, if the villagers were to begin abandoning their traditional subsistence practices and engage themselves into the wage labor market, soon the characteristics of their village which they cherish would not be able to survive. They no longer would be able find time to harvest their own crops, spend their meals together as families and friends, and there would be little need for regional cooperation.

The influence of the media, in perpetrating an unrealistic utopia of developed countries, is a deliberate marketing scheme by businesses both domestic and

international. Marketing relies on demand (both genuine needs and manufactured), economic growth relies on consumption and investment, the combination creates a pressure to conform to the world of mass material consumerism. This is largely apparent in the more easily influenced youth of Nixi. When my interpreter returns home, his nephew, a plump 11 year old boy, was excited to explore the new fashions and gadgets his uncle had brought home. Throughout the course of dinner he rarely took his eyes off the new, shiny-white basketball sneakers, questioning and marveling over the unfamiliar plastics and materials.

The mixture of the villager's interpretation of the developed world, and the fascination with the new technologies beginning to infiltrate the village, could have drastic effects on the next generation. Presently, many young men have found jobs as truck drivers, an occupation which requires that they leave the village often for months at a time. While this does transfer a greater workload on the family to tend the household chores and agricultural crops, the community social organization is a cooperative fabric so that members of other families, both within Nixi and from neighboring villages, will help during times when the workload becomes too much.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The community cooperation system grew much strength following the Cultural Revolution as all work, earnings, and produce was pooled equally into the community's local government. The villagers were assembled into work units to undertake large tasks such as terracing the hillsides or during harvest times. All monetary earnings were also given back into the local government and redistributed

according to the needs of the people by the local officials.

My host father remembers when he made RMB5,000 profit from a tractor he had rented for RMB10,000. Instead of keeping the profit, a well respected monk in the village reported it to the local government and he was asked to donate the profit back into the community. This practice of pooled resources was abandoned long ago, but the cooperation and voluntary sharing of goods and services continues as an adapted trait to overcome the instability of their lifestyle.

Social welfare, in addition to the regional cooperation and interdependence, is aided by the Zang tradition that the eldest child physically remains living in the same household throughout his/her life. This provides that the grandparents will be cared for in old age, the household chores attended to, and crops harvested. In my host family the daughter is the eldest and with her husband provides extremely well for the grandparents whom are among the eldest in the community. The eldest labors extremely hard, but without any visible quarrels with the tradition.

Other members may choose to remain living in the house, but because construction of one's own house is a community effort costing little more than time, and carpentry, most choose to move out.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Today's Nixi has retained local village governance, although money is no longer pooled or work units organized. Families look after their own crops, are employed as they wish to accumulate however much money they choose. Some specialize in making butter, or selling crops to nearby villages or the markets in

Zhongdian, many forage for mushrooms which have a high value in the city. There is great freedom, and little need for external governance. There is a village chief whom is elected communally in 3 year terms. His responsibilities are to advise when to sow crops, to settle the occasional disputes, to organize festivities with the help of other local volunteers, to apply for grants from the national government, to announce village prayer sessions, and to appease the villagers concerns.

In the past village cadres held the position for up to fifteen years, but the grandfather remembers this as problematic, both creating political egocentrism and failing to meet the needs of the villagers.

The village chief is distinct from the government appointed officials whom have local offices two kilometers south of the village. Here villagers can obtain work permits, building permits, submit electricity taxes, and the truck drivers can pay their road taxes. Although none of the villagers that I asked reported any corruption, my interpreter explained that often bribes were forced in exchange for government services.

There is also a police station with fulltime officers. Two weeks into my stay in Nixi, and after only several interviews, the officer on duty hollered for me to enter the station. He explained that it was standard procedure to have me fill out a tourist form because I was staying more than two weeks. Of course I obliged, but strangely there was no form, only a submission of my name, address, school of study, and passport number. The next day a friend informed me that the police have been asking the villagers about the nature of my studies and whether I have been

snooping into the shadows of history. Immediately, none of the villagers would be seen speaking with me if I carried my backpack, and would only conduct interviews in outmost secrecy and visible nervousness.

This was nearly the worst situation I could imagine, because I did not want to endanger myself, or more importantly endanger the villagers. Thus I chose to emphasize my study by participant observation with fewer interviews. And, of course, it was informative as indicative of the political atmosphere which quietly slumbers beneath the visible surface.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

As China develops with remarkable growth rates, reshaping both the rural countryside and industrial urban centers, we must always analyze by our own interpretations of progress, modernization, and development. I was thrilled to experience a village where traditional subsistence practices were active, a localized economy flourished, and communities were in cooperation with one another. The technologies they have adopted are used responsibly, without waste and for the benefit of all the families.

There are needs which I hope that the Chinese government promotes more than the excessive useless materialism: a better funded hospital which meets the needs of the villagers with affordable services and medicine, better funded educational facilities which will allow children to grow creatively and as active members of the global community, while retaining their cultural identity and pride, and a system of waste management to preserve the purity of the land they cherish.

It seems contradictory to modernization that these societal aspects have not been addressed while the introduction of junk foods and useless products are available. The elders are luckily discouraging the consumption of unhealthy foods knowing that they create more illnesses than locally produced and consumed goods. A waste management system could be organized without the funding or aid from the national government; it only takes some initiative and time.

The mentality of the elders gives me comfort in the future of Nixi, that they might teach their grandchildren the value in the simplicity of their lives. However the temptations of glamour make me worry greatly that feelings of inferiority may already be manifesting in the youth. The only ways in which I could combat this was to praise the beauty, happiness and simplicity that their lifestyle allows them, to give them some perspective on the riches they already possess but perhaps have not taken the time to explore.

There were difficulties in the project: the language barrier when my interpreter was not present, the investigations by the local police, the confusion in trying to understand the contradictions and shifting mentalities taking place. But any challenge was greatly outweighed by the compassion and hospitality they offered without a second thought. The only challenge that stuck was watching their smiles fade in the rearview mirror on my departure.