Eco-Tourism on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau
Nacressa Swan

Contents:

Introduction .......................................................... Page 2

The Preliminary Research Phase: The Environment and Tourism in China Page 4
Interviews ............................................................. Page 6

The Expedition Phase: Maps and Route Taken ......................................................... Page 8
Introduction to the Qinghai Tibet Railway and Plateau ........................................ Page 9
Qinghai Province ....................................................... Page 11
Qinghai – Tibet Province: locations not on the domestic tourist itinerary .......... Page 16

Conclusion ................................................................. Page 19

Above: train station at Tuotuohe, on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau.
Introduction

Aim of the Research and Research Phases:
Between June and August 2006, a three-person team traveled overland through China and Tibet, in particular across the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau. The aim of this research was to record social attitudes towards the environment and to ascertain whether a new type of tourism - loosely coined eco-tourism - was emerging in this region of China and Tibet.

The research was split into two phases:

- The Preliminary Research Phase: During June 2006, the author of this report, Nacressa Swan, visited several cities in Northeast China including Beijing, Shanghai and Qingdao. These cities are home to some of the more affluent sections of Chinese society and are popular on the domestic tourist itinerary. Alongside helping us to better understand the tourism industry in some of China’s cities, visiting these locations allowed us to meet environmentalists, and representatives from the factory making railway carriages for the Qinghai–Tibet Railway - a new train line running between China and Tibet. In addition, as the author has previously visited these cities in 2000 and 2002, it allowed for some anecdotal comparisons between this visit and previous ones, and also comparisons between East and West China.

- The Expedition Phase: during July and August 2006, the three-person team traveled overland between Golmud and Lhasa, predominantly following the route of the new Qinghai Tibet railway. This route and the railway are discussed in further detail from Page 9.

The inspiration for this Fellowship was sparked by an interest in the Qinghai Tibet railway, which links China and Tibet by rail for the first time. Our interest grew on reading a newspaper article, which made brief reference to an organization called the Wild Yak Brigade, a:

“rag tag patrol of two dozen men formed to fight off poachers threatening endangered species. Having at least temporarily won the battle against the poachers they are now turning their focus to the development of eco tourism on the Qinghai Plateau.”

(The Railway Across the Roof of the World, the Guardian, 20th September 2005)

For the Fellowship team, the thought of such a group, working to protect their environment possibly at financial cost to themselves, was intriguing, especially considering the widespread assumption that China’s (and to some extent Tibet’s) primary aim is to elevate itself through economic development. In addition, the Fellowship team was compelled to attempt to see whether the aim of protecting the environment and developing eco-tourism on the plateau was compatible with the building of the new railway through the region.

Introduction to the Plateau and the Qinghai Tibet Railway:
The team, backed by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, felt that this was a timely piece of research, as it coincided with the opening of the new railway, the world’s longest and highest plateau train line. This railway is widely expected to act as a catalyst for change on the Qinghai Tibet plateau, an ecologically fragile area of astounding natural beauty.

In many circles, the railway is heralded as a feat of engineering, with the potential to enormously improve the living standards for the Tibetan population living alongside it. But in addition to these considerable gains, there is also some consensus that the environmental future of the Plateau is in danger, and that any interference will only accelerate an impending natural catastrophe in the area. Attitudes and the importance of the Qinghai Tibet Plateau to both Tibetan and Chinese populations will be discussed in more detail from Page 9.

Secondary Research Aims:
The Fellowship team was also very interested to see whether people in China were following the trend amongst many countries to live more environmentally friendly lifestyles, develop sustainably and enjoy environmentally friendly holidays. This is of particular importance in China: whilst
somewhat undiscovered by international holidaymakers, an increase in living standards and wealth amongst Chinese people has led to increased mobility and increased domestic tourism. As the Qinghai Tibet plateau is an ecologically fragile environment, as a team, we were motivated to see whether this would be taken into account as an influx of tourism threatens to emerge, thanks to the new railway.

At this junction, it is important to stress that this expedition was undertaken to draw conclusions into the social attitudes to tourism, the environment and the effect of the new train line, rather than to be a scientific study. With this in mind, whilst the Fellowship team wholeheartedly supports scientific research and monitoring of the Qinghai Tibet plateau, we have not added to this area of research. However, throughout this report, where appropriate we source reputable scientific research to illustrate the environment in China and on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau. In addition, whilst the team believes the political relationship between China and Tibet is important to the development of the Qinghai Tibet Plateau, and to Tibet as a whole, research and comment on this topic is widely available and therefore will not be discussed within this report.

Finally, as the environment is a global issue, a key part of our objectives was to attempt to openly discuss this research and further understanding of attitudes and lifestyle between young people in both China and the United Kingdom. It is for this reason that we facilitated the introduction between a school in Leeds, UK and Qingdao, China. More information on this and the Fellowship can be found on the research website, set up to allow the schools to follow the journey and research in real time: www.qinghairailway.co.uk

The expedition team:

The Winston Churchill Memorial Fund award was granted to television assistant producer, Nacressa Swan (centre of picture), to conduct the research with assistance from Xu Jingzhou, a recent graduate from Qingdao Tourism School Chinese (left).

We were joined during the expedition phase by Dr Duncan Borman (right), funded by a grant awarded by the University of Leeds, who facilitated the setting up of the website and brought to the team much appreciated expedition and mountaineering experience.

This report:

This report draws upon interview transcripts and the interactive blog featured on the research website, all of which were gathered and produced during the Fellowship. It should be noted, that the information taken from the website, such as the blog, was prepared and written to suit those following the expedition phase of the fellowship, in particular the two schools mentioned previously. In using these website tools in this report, our intention is to help give a better insight into the thoughts of the team during the Fellowship. In addition, the use of interviews in this report is to directly give information from those who have the biggest interest in the environment in China and Tibet – those who live there. As stakeholders in their societies, it is these people who will shape future policy in these countries, and help us to understand how we can globally work together to protect the environment.
The Preliminary Research Phase: The Environment and Tourism in China

Most people would agree that the health of the world’s environment is one of the biggest concerns that we, as a global society, face. As one of the world’s most populous nation, and with its fast growing economy, China in particular plays a central role in the shaping the future of our environment.

But China itself is facing some very specific challenges, which must be considered. The economic revolution occurring in China today is much faster than, for example, the industrial revolution, which occurred in the United Kingdom and most other western countries. Yet, many environmentalists argue that the world’s environment does not have the time and resources to withstand the detrimental impact that an industrial revolution of the scale underway in China might have. It is also argued that China already faces environmental problems as a result of its economic development:

- China now has sixteen of the world’s twenty most polluted cities, many of which are plagued with acid rain and sandstorms.
- In addition, levels of cancer are amongst the highest in China than anywhere else in the world.
- And, in 2005 alone, one new coal power station was built every ten day in China, helping to make the country the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. It is now predicted that China will soon overtake America in becoming the country emitting the largest amount of greenhouse gases.

But behind these statistics lie one of the biggest success stories of our time. China’s economic revolution, whether or not fuelled by methods damaging to us all in the not-so-long run, has lifted, and continues to lift, thousands of people out of poverty. To briefly bring us back to the main subject of this report, lifting Tibetan people out of poverty is just one of the many stated aims by the Chinese government in their motivation to build the Qinghai Tibet railway.

The government’s success can perhaps be measured in the increase in life expectancy. When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, life expectancy was at just 35 years old for people living in China. In 2004, the average life expectancy had risen to 72 years old. There can be no doubt that development has greatly increased the quality of life for some people living in China.

This success provokes us to discuss one of the questions which we, as a global society, face: how can countries, which are more developed (and, largely as a result of this, have a stronger environmental conscience) encourage other, less developed, countries, to develop in more environmentally friendly ways?

Answers to this may include long-term international cooperation to share technology and resources. But, as China already finds itself in this potentially environmentally dire situation, it has already engaged in some discussion about the future of its environment. In the Chinese Government’s Eleventh 5th Year Plan in 2000, Premier Wen Jiabao acknowledged that China should not follow the path in which countries “grow first, clean up the environmental mess later”. The plan goes on to suggest ways in which it intends to protect the environment, stating similar aims to many other governments, such as cutting green house emissions and total pollution output. This acknowledgement of the environmental problem from the Chinese government is positive. Considering China’s track record, it could be argued that, as a country, once there is the motivation to achieve something, the results follow quickly. Consider the economic revolution as an example of this, as well as the drive to have a Green 2008 Olympics, the re-introduction of bike lanes in many cities and the phasing out of leaded petrol in just two years. Yet it must also be acknowledged, that those who monitor China’s environmental records note a difficulty in obtaining independent evidence and statistics and that accurate information, on many matters, is
difficult to obtain in China. For the international community, this makes it very difficult to accurately monitor environmental change in China.

Personal Perspective: Personally, I have noticed a marked difference in attitudes to the environment in China since my first visit in 2000. One obvious difference is the introduction of recycling and litter dustbins on the streets of major cities. The picture opposite, taken on a less visited section of the Great Wall, shows a typical dustbin with two compartments, one for recycling and one for waste. Whilst the introduction of these dustbins is not enough to redress bigger environmental problems in China, such as air pollution and water sanitation, I would argue that these indicate not only of the government's attempts to consider their environment, but also that in this small way, Chinese people are actively participating and are more interested in their environment than they appeared to be several years ago.

Recycling in China has been successful, it might be acknowledged, due to the business aspect of the practice.

Considering the growth of recycling in China allows us to look into the psyche of people in China. As discussed earlier, Chinese people are enjoying better quality of life and increased wealth. Some commentators have noted that this marks a shift in Chinese society - perhaps for the first time, progressing in Chinese society is not wholly dependent on who you know (for example within business or government) but on individual achievements. The desire and ability to make money, spend money and be seen to do so is important to signify your status in Chinese society. For people who have never been to China, this may sound not so different from any other country in the world. In many respects it isn’t. However, the difference is that for the first time, people in China now have the money and freedom to do so. Business and making money is at the heart of Chinese society and of its astounding economic development. It may be a logical assumption, that any environmental efforts marketed in this way, such as recycling, will be successful.
The Preliminary Research Phase - Interviews

Some of the thoughts outlined in the previous section have been developed through discussions with Chinese people, in particular Xu Jingzhou, a member of the Fellowship team. This section of the report includes extracts of interviews conducted during the Fellowship to directly transfer to readers the thoughts of several Chinese people on the environment.

Interview with Xu Jingzhou, tourism graduate and expedition team member:
In one interview, conducted during the expedition phase of the fellowship, I asked Xu Jingzhou whether Chinese people and the Chinese Government think that, in general, the economy is more important than the environment:

“It depends on the different regions. Like this, in Beijing, the economy is much more advanced than any other city in China, so for them the most important problem is the environment. For the Olympic games, they must have the environment looking very well. And in Shanghai, there are high rises everywhere so they want more trees. And in Qingdao we want more economy because our environment is good already – is good enough. And here (in Qinghai Province), I think it is more about economy. We’re going to sacrifice a little bit. You can see why in Kokoxili (area of the Tibetan plateau). There is a lot of protection of areas and of the animals. But because people are too poor, they kill the Tibetan goat to get the fur for money. If they have a job, if they can make some money for their family, they can have a steady place to live, why would they do that? They won’t need to - nobody wants to kill something.”

Interview with Li Hao, environmentalist in Beijing
These issues were also discussed with Li Hao, an academic author and scientist with Beijing Earthview, an environmental agency in Beijing. The organisation aims to raise public awareness of the environment. I began the interview by asking her what motivated her to become interested in the environment:

“I used to be a scientist working in Germany for quite a long time. After I came back in 1995, I was really shocked. I had left for eight years and, when I came back, China had completely changed. The pollution was terrible and people did not have any basic knowledge about that. My research focus was in the knowledge – I know that after pollution happens, you cannot help people – after they get disease. Especially, China has a policy of each family should only have one child. If something happened to the child, it affects the whole family so that’s very serious. So I changed my career from science to public education. That’s also work a scientist should do - as scientists know quite a lot of background things. But at that time, I felt the most powerful thing was to introduce quite a lot of international films and translate them into Chinese and let young people have free access to this. After this, they’ve seen the films and they can immediately understand a lot of issues. You cannot go through the education system, through other systems, because the schools are full of programmes for children to learn and to help them to get into university and so on. And so no school at that time was interested in anything about the environment, as it had nothing to do with getting a good education. But after ten years, now we have a collection of about seven hundred and ninety films and we feel this is quite enough as it covers every issue, almost every issue, and people’s awareness has really changed a lot in the last ten years.”

When asked whether she felt the environment in China is getting better, Ms Hao replied:

“At least people know a lot of the issues and they start to take it very seriously and they care about the environment. And they know it’s connected with life quality – so they show a very supportive attitude to the issue. It’s completely different from what I saw ten years ago. At that
time, when I talked about environmental protection, they said ‘oh clean up the street…. That’s nothing to do with us that should be done by some workers’. This means they knew nothing about the environment. But now they know about air pollution, water pollution, ecosystems and land conservation.”

When asked if this is something the government has been driving, Ms Hao replied:

“I would like to see a relationship in which the Government and non-government organisations work together and talk about the issues and work together for solving problem. China, I feel, is developing this way.

Since 2002, every year, the local government of Beijing have organised a community manager training force, especially to learn how to deal with garbage. And they invite me to give them lectures so I really can see the change of that. The first year was very difficult. They said: ‘Yeah we come to the training course but our citizens won’t support it. We are still very poor. People can’t understand that (i.e.: the environment).’ That was in 2002. But around SARS, then they started to say: ‘Oh pollution. Yes, but it will happen fifty years later. At that time we'll have died already. We need to earn money at this time.’ But when SARS happened they started to take it seriously and this year, I noticed the managers are much younger and they are very curious. This year, after I did my lecture, they came to copy my notes and said they would bring it back to show other people. I am so happy they said that – now it’s time for me to retire!”

When asked what she thinks is influencing the change in attitudes, Ms Hao replied:

“Most people really now recognize that if we don’t do anything, if we don’t protect their environment, it’s harmful, even for themselves and it’s not safe for their own health. They also feel its ugly. We should at least have a clean environment. They told me: Now I feel comfortable if I don’t see garbage’. So that’s changed a lot. When you came to China some years ago, people didn’t say that – if they saw garbage they say: ‘oh its normal, its just part of the life’. At least now they feel uncomfortable.

When asked to summarizing the main environmental issues in China today, Ms Hao replied:

"China is a huge country so different areas have really different issues. But generally, all global issues are issues for China.”

The interviews and notes in the previous two chapters are intended to give a brief introduction to some of the social attitudes towards the environment in China and some of the environmental problems which Chinese society face. The following chapters will discuss the environment and attitudes towards the Qinghai Tibet Plateau and, in particular, the potential impact of the Qinghai Tibet railway.
The Expedition Phase: Maps and Route Taken
(Taken from the expedition website: www.qinghairailway.co.uk)

Above: overview map showing the route of the preliminary research phase and expedition phase.
Below: map showing the expedition phase route, following the Qinghai Tibet Plateau.

In the following chapters, several locations visited during the Expedition Phase of the fellowship will be discussed in more detail, using blogs and interviews. The places include:

- The Qinghai Plateau including Qinghai Lake;
- Tuotuohe;
- Nagqu;
- Lhasa.
The Expedition Phase: Introduction to the Qinghai Tibet Railway and Plateau

In 2001, Chinese engineers and builders began constructing a train line predicted to revolutionize both the way people travel between China and Tibet, and the lives and environment of those living alongside it. It was completed and put into trial operation in July 2006. The expedition phase of the research was planned to coincide with this date.

The railway travels through some of Asia’s most inhospitable regions – through deserts, grasslands and mountains all, on average, over 4000m above sea level. This makes it the highest, but also the longest plateau railway in the world at 1,200km long, almost the distance from John O’Groats to Lands End. The train line begins in the city of Golmud, which, in turn, is accessible to the rest of China through the existing rail network, and ends in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

Yet despite the inhospitable terrain, the train line also runs through areas of outstanding natural beauty, home to nomadic peoples and rare wild animals. This presents a stark contrast to the modernization sweeping across the northeastern cities visited during the Preliminary Research Phase of the fellowship. In addition, the Qinghai Tibet Plateau is home to the sources of some of Asia’s greatest rivers - the Yangzi, the Mekong, and the Yellow River.

Mindful of these factors, conscious effort was made to consider the environment when building the railway. Underpasses were created to allow seasonal migration to continue, and plans to build a railway station in the Gulu Wetlands, the world’s highest wetland, were cancelled due to doubts over successful wetland relocation (but not, notably, the tourists it would bring).

Yet discussions amongst some environmentalists in China suggest that the moves made, predominately by the government, are not enough. During my interview with environmentalist Li Hao, I asked her what environmentalists thought about the railway. After discussing an academic who openly expresses grave concerns about the potential impact of the railway, she said:

“I think it’s good to let the government hear a completely different voice, because these days all the mass media - they only talk about how wonderful, how exciting the railway is. Now people have freedom, we can see everything and that area is so beautiful, so most of us should go there to see. But no one has come out and said we should limit the number, we should be very careful to this region. I hope bad things will not come if we are cautious of them.”

I also asked Xu Jingzhou what he thought of the railway and its potential impact on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau:

“Lots of people have a very optimistic opinion about it but that guy Mr Zhang (the same environmentalist mentioned by Li Hao) holds a very, very negative and sharp idea about it. But, for me, it's quite ok. It's still about – do we sacrifice the environment for the economy or do we sacrifice the economy for the environment? It's always a problem. I think that if the government takes some action, then the environment won't be damaged that much. Soon it will have as many tourists as Qingdao has (Qingdao is Xu’s home city in East China). You can see in Qingdao that there are millions of tourists every year but its still ok, its still quite clean. So yes it will be affected, but I don’t think it will be affected much. But in some ways this region is better than Qingdao. For example I love the sky here – it is so blue. We don’t have blue sky as often as it is here.”

Unfortunately, due to time restraints and his location, we were unable to interview Mr Zhang, the environmentalist mentioned in the interview excerpts above.
There is no doubt that the Qinghai Tibet railway is a modern miracle of engineering. This is, after all, a railway the Chinese have dreamt of building since the Communists came to power. The technology employed is astounding, for example, successfully working to withstand the constant freezing and melting of the ice that it is built upon. As a result, the train line is one of the world’s most technically advanced railways, requiring aircraft style pressurized cabins to allow passengers to cope with the altitude.

Thanks to contacts established during previous visits to China, I gained access to visit the Bombardier – Sifang factory in Qingdao, which was constructing the train carriages for the railway. The following text is taken from a website blog written following the visit to the factory. As discussed in the introduction, these blogs were written during the Fellowship, particularly for link schools in Leeds and Qingdao.

**Train factory visit**

Qingdao (the seaside city and home of our Chinese co-ordinator Xu Jingzhou) is directly involved with the new train line, which we have come to China to research. Before we left for Beijing, we were invited to visit the factory, which has made the trains for the new railway. Remember that these trains are unlike normal trains. As the railway is on average at least 4,000m above sea level, all the train carriages are oxygenated and the luxury carriages will be pressurized. This, my first visit to a factory in China, was surprisingly pleasant - not least perhaps because western engineering company Bombardier are involved with the manufacturing of the trains. Although we were not permitted to take photographs or recordings, the visit was useful to understand the work of the factory and the thoughts of its Western and Chinese workers. We have omitted their names from this blog. The factory here has made 173 carriages for a total of 11 trains and will begin to make luxury trains later this year. Recently, to test the trains, more than 100 workers traveled on them to Tibet. Their tales are similar to the ones we have heard before - that the height makes it hard to breathe, induces headaches and that the pressure is bad. Thankfully, this did not deter them from enjoying the scenery! Furthermore, they believe that the railway will help to develop the area and tap into resources such as coal and gold mining. All the workers we talked to believe this to be a very positive thing for China (to them, Tibet is one part of China). A manager for the project (a European) believes that developing the region will help to increase the standard of living in this area (which he believes to be poor) and that Han Chinese people will go to the area regardless of the railway. He also said that his conscience was clear - if he worked for a weapon, or arms, manufacturing company it would be a different story. Claims that the Dalai Lama should become head of the area, he suggests, would be similar to the Pope insisting on gaining control over all Catholic countries or the Queen of England governing over Church of England countries. Nonetheless, he acknowledges, this is a good time to go to Tibet, as the area is likely to change.

Further conversations with the European project manager revealed other factors about the railway – most notably that the ‘stops’ on the train line’s route are technical stops rather than passenger stations. During the trial period of the railway, this was certainly the case, as no passengers were allowed to disembark and embark during the journey between Golmud (the train’s starting point in Qinghai Province) and Lhasa. However, the project manager went on to say that, in the future, infrastructure may be put into place to allow stops on route and tours of the area.

The Chinese government has frequently suggested following the trial period, passengers will be able to disembark during the journey. It is widely anticipated that the trial period will be completed before the Beijing Olympics in 2008. There is much evidence to suggest that these technical stops will be stations at a later date, and there should be no doubt that in the near future the hundreds of passengers aboard the three daily trains will have the opportunity to explore this fragile plateau to some extent. Evidence for the intention to introduce tourists can be seen, for example, in the facilities such as the sign and waiting room at the small town of Tuotuohe. In addition, close to the station, there are plaques describing environmental protection in the region.
Most notably, many are written in English and suggest that the government intend to introduce international tourism to the region. It is important to note that it is currently illegal for foreigners to travel overland between China and Tibet without traveling with a tour agency and without obtaining a permit stating intended locations. Beyond destinations such as Bird Island and Qinghai Lake (both on the Qinghai Plateau), tour package itineraries currently do not offer other locations on the route between Golmud and Lhasa. With this in mind, it was with some difficulty that we were able to arrange our own visit to the region.

The Expedition Phase: Qinghai Province

The newly built section of the railway starts in Qinghai Province, Northwest China, and is one of the country’s poorest regions. This is a particularly inhospitable area, known as the “Wild West”. It is renowned for being home only to banished political prisoners and those hardy enough to brave the elements. Originally, this province was part of Tibet’s much larger Amdo province, the birthplace of the present Dalai Lama, until the borders were redrawn and it was included as part of China.

Fifty years on, Qinghai Province is home mostly to Hui Muslims, one of 55 ethnic minorities recognised by the Chinese Government, and Tibetan nomadic herders. Only the population of its capital Xining, once an important Silk Route trading post, resembles China’s ethnic majority, the Han Chinese. The province’s distance and solitude from Beijing, has, until recently, led to an untapped market in goods, trade and natural resources. But a governmental push to open up this region for business and tourism has led to an increasing number of migrant Han Chinese workers and businessmen in the region. One indication of this is the use of AIDS posters in the city and the availability of condoms to buy in many hotel rooms in the region. None of the expedition team had seen these indicators in other areas of China.

Below is the blog we wrote about Qinghai’s capital Xining:

**China’s Wild West**

The journey so far - one by one, Qingzang project members have carved their way through Shanghai-Qingdao-Beijing-Xian-Lanzhou.

Now we have reached Xining, the capital of Qinghai province and in some ways the start of our real journey. In Chinese circles, Xining marks the beginning of the Wild West - where the landscape becomes more barren and deserted as we climb into high altitudes and areas of ethnic diversity. It is here that the Chinese government first begin their ambitious project to build a railway to Tibet - started over 20 years ago, before being abandoned and resurging with fresh enthusiasm to be completed last year, and opened last week.

Whilst Xining itself has the trimmings of every modern Chinese city, it also fulfils its reputation of the Wild West. The city is surrounded by mountains - too high and physically exerting to climb thanks to the altitude - and grasslands - some too barren for agriculture and cultivation.

We are, after all, almost two days journey away from Beijing.

Just 4.5 million are said to live in the province and in this city the shops and food signal the strong presence of Hui Muslims amongst the Han Chinese (the dominant race in China). As we
approaching Tibet, it is not uncommon to see Tibetan monks striding through the neon lit city streets. And perhaps not representive of the area at all - the man in front of us collecting his laundry was carrying a gun and there was a bomb explosion last month in the city.

Over the next two weeks we shall make our way deeper into the 'Wild West' and down into Tibet through areas of undisputed natural beauty. From here we hope to bring you pictures and blogs about those who live alongside the new railway and the communities who the Chinese government hope will benefit from the promise of development.

The Expedition Phase: Current Tourist Destinations in Qinghai Province:

The most famous tourist destination in the province is Qinghai Hu (Qinghai Lake) and nearby Bird Island. Qinghai Hu is China’s largest salt lake, at 10,500ft above sea level. It is also home to thousands of migratory birds and infamous to Tibetan herders. According to Tibetan legend, the surrounding grasslands were once fertile land, flooded by an angry demon. As the story goes, a kinder god took pity on the residents, turning the flood water into Qinghai Lake.

One aspects of this story are more than mere folklore – the grasslands of Qinghai were once fertile lands. But far from being threatened by an angry demon, some areas were instead over-grazed by people and herds making the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled lifestyle. Whilst it may have taken centuries to get into its current state, it is acknowledged that this may have been accelerated around the towns and villages that have grown up around the highway built in the 1950s. Building on this argument, some assume that the railway will lead to further expansion of existing towns or the setting up of new towns around the railway tracks and stations.

The future of the Qinghai Tibet Plateau affects the whole of China – not least because the agriculture here helps to sustain the population of China. Alaramingly, scientific research shows that the glaciers on the Plateau are shrinking faster than originally thought. The rate of melting, an estimated seven per cent per year, is predicted to lead to water shortages across Chinese and Southern Asia in the long term, and flooding, soil erosion and desertification in the short term. With 100 years, the UN estimates, Tibet’s glaciers may disappear. The erosion of grasslands here (as well as in Mongolia and Xinjiang Province) also lead to a lack of protection for Northwest China from the sandstorms already hitting cities such as Beijing and Shanghai with alarming frequency. In one particularly fierce sandstorm in late 2006, 330000 tonnes of dust was blown into Beijing, and impacted on neighbouring South Korea and Japan.

Whilst it may be too early to ascertain the potential impact tourism and the railway may have on the plateau, these are already prominent issues for those who live there. The following extracts are blogs written during our time in Qinghai Province.
Right before leaving Qinghai Lake, we decided to try the food at the base camp. While ordering, we had a talk with the waitress, a girl that served us hot water. She is Tibetan, just graduated from high school, and will start her university life in September. We all felt happy for her, but to our surprise, she has decided not to go, and has chosen to strive for a year to go to a “proper” university. As she said, the one she will visit is called Northwest Folk University, which her classmates, brothers and sisters visit. They all told her that the campuses are full of fights, and arguments, which worries her very much. "Why don't you go to another one?" We asked. "No way" was her answer, "we don't have a chance".

I thought she is a bad student, which is not true. She is very good at writing, and won a Bronze Prize in a national essay competition in Beijing, and the Gold Prize in Qinghai Province. Then how could it be? As she said, the Tibetan students can only go to Tibetan universities, because their English is so weak. All the “proper universities” demand at least 60% of the whole score in the English exam to let students in. In Tibet, children are taught in Tibetan from primary school to high school and the education is free. They learn Chinese as a foreign language. Moreover, all the English books are written in Chinese. How can they learn a language through another foreign language? Lots of English teachers are graduates of vocational schools. "How can our English be good?" She sighed.

We all felt sorry for her, and wish we could help. When we asked what if she can't make it? She told us her dream is to be a novel writer, and her tanned face blushed. Actually she is already writing an article about the changing environment of Qinghai Lake, and believes this article can raise people's awareness of the ecology in Qinghai. Another dream of hers is to go to Paris after she got her wealth by writing.

After all the discussions for the future, we asked about her plan of the year. Unfortunately there is no plan. She mentioned that a school not far from her, which has a foreign teacher who speaks perfect Tibetan, and the students of the school are very good at English. Suddenly we came up with an idea. She speaks perfect Chinese, and Qinghai lacks teachers. She might go to the school, talk to the head master, see whether she could be a teacher there, then she can enjoy the lesson. Or if it doesn't work, she just go and have a talk with the foreign teacher, we believe he won't refuse her. She seemed to be delighted by the idea, but no one knows will it work or not. Still worrying about her, we left the next morning. It's a pity that we didn't take any photo of her, but we gave her our email addresses and promised to keep in touch.
From grasslands to desert

In the space of just two or three days, we have moved from the most lush green countryside, surrounded by mountains and inhabited by Tibetan herders and their yaks - to a barren desert.

We spent the end of last week at Qinghai Hu, China’s largest salt lake and said to be three times the size of Hong Kong. We pitched up our newly acquired Chinese tents next to some bizarrely located Mongolian tents in an absolutely gorgeous little corner of the world called 151 - so called as it is 151km from Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province.

Our time there coincided with North West China’s event of the year - a glittering, televised live opening ceremony for the 2006 Bicycle Tour of Qinghai Lake. Teams of cyclists from across the globe were there - including some from Britain, Italy and USA - and were cheered on by thousands upon thousands of spectators, including Chinese tour groups and Tibetan herders from surrounding villages.

It was both the best and the worst time to be there.

The preparation and event were great to see - national pop stars performed during the live ceremony and it helped us to see the effects of tourism on this tiny place when the government wished the spotlight to shine on it. The live programme beamed across China boasted of the beauty of Qinghai Lake - its shimming green-blue waters with sun kissed Tibetans dancing and singing in nearby yellow rapeseed and grass fields. But once the cyclists had begun their race, the cameras turned off and the crowd disappeared, the environment of the whole area was devastated. For miles and miles, litter was strewn across the same beaches and fields featured in the programme. When we left the day after the event, the intricate set stage built in the shape of a bicycle was still there - waiting for the sea to demolish it and carry it away. And the only litter collections were by people collecting plastic bottles hoping to earn a mao (about 1p) through recycling them. Some of the other litter and plastics had been set on fire, but much of it was still there. A local worker told us that the Tibetans from around the area would come to clean them up. It was an absolute disgrace - especially as the event was organised by a government run television company - the same government marketing the 2008 Beijing Olympics as the ‘green’ Olympics.

Not only was our last impression of Qinghai Hu different to the ones the government wish the world to see, but it was very different to our visit to the home of a local Tibetan family. Some Chinese construction workers invited us to meet their friends and so off we set, 11 of us crammed into their jeep, up into the hills. Together we all ate, drank beer and played football until nightfall amongst their herd of over 3000 yaks in the most pristine beautiful grasslands you can imagine.

But all that is behind us now - we are now in Golmud, a city built in the desert. On our way from Qinghai Hu, the landscape dramatically changed from grass to sand and we spotted some wild two humped camels. From here we make our way south through the Kunlun Mountains and into north Tibet. See you there.
We also interviewed the waitress that Xu mentions in his blog – a young woman called La Juntuo, who was a Tibetan student, working part time in the tourism industry near Qinghai Lake. Translated through Xu Jingzhou, below are the interview notes related to the environment. As mentioned in Xu’s blog, La Juntuo wished to be a writer, and so we asked what in particular inspired her to write:

“She would like to write something about the environment problem at Qinghai Lake because the pollution here is so serious. People come - all the tourists come and they keep littering all the time and it damages the environment and makes it look awful, which she hates. She’s already writing a novel about the environment here – especially about Qinghai Lake. The story is about the change in Qinghai Lake, especially like the pollution and the protection carried out by the people. She was born here in Hainan, the northern place of Qinghai Lake (not the other Hainan in China). That’s a poor place. She really hates how the people damage the environment here. Often the rubbish, which is littered all over this region, will be collected and moved away by the Tibetans who organize it together. They are not from the Government, they take the act by themselves.”

When asked who is making the mess, she replied via Xu:

‘All the tourists – it’s all caused by the tourists. Like after the show today – wow pure green grass becomes colourful - multicolour. Everything - plastic bags, tissues, they are everywhere.”

Following this response, we asked her about the cycling race and the potential impact on the area:

“The show was the opening ceremony for around Qinghai Lake cycling race. I think we got around, I think, more than 3000 people here. It’s so crowded. All the Tibetans from the villages around here they just rush here in order to enjoy this greatest festival in Qinghai Province, and also lots of cyclists and their coaches, their cars and lots of people from government, soldiers, and police. They just mess everything up.”

When asked whether she believed they would clear up after the event, she responded:

“No idea but maybe impossible. When they were building up the stage they threw the empty paint buckets and wooden boards into the lake. So the Tibetans have organized to get them out of the water. She also talks about yellow fish – which is protected by the nation – it grows very slowly (in Qinghai Lake) and if the water is polluted we are going to lose another species. It is a very serious problem.”

We also later interviewed Xu Jingzhou about his feelings of Qinghai, the cycling festival and what La Juntuo had said. He spoke in particular about the yellow fish:

“The yellow fish in Qinghai Lake are protected by the nation. It is said that they only grow 50 grams a year and that means they grow very, very slowly. As they said, people threw everything into the lake, like when they were building up the stage for that cycling race opening ceremony, they threw the empty paint buckets and some wooden board into the lake which will damage the water quality. And of course if the water quality goes bad, the yellow fish will die. Simple, quite simple. Actually for the buckets and the wooden boards its ok, but the problem is they throw some paint, or some used water from other factories or even gas from cars into it – that will be a huge problem.”
The Expedition Phase: Qinghai – Tibet Plateau: locations not on the domestic tourist itinerary:

Overview of the region and tourism:
The Qinghai Tibet Plateau covers 2.5 million square kilometres – about a quarter of China’s land surface. As noted earlier, overland access across the Qinghai Tibet plateau has been available since the 1950s when the highway linking Northwest China to Lhasa was built. It is via this highway, which the new Qinghai Tibet train line runs alongside, that we were able to make our journey.

However, beyond Qinghai Lake and Bird Island, there was a distinct absence of domestic and international tourists. In fact, we had some difficulty in securing our own vehicle to travel. Many agencies informed us that, whilst domestic tourists travel along the highway in hired cars, they generally make the journey, of over 1000 km, in just two days, preferring to spend time only at the beginning of the journey, at Tai’er Si (a Tibetan temple near Xining), Qinghai Lake and Bird Island, and at the end in Lhasa. Drivers of this journey, including our own, were predominantly Han Chinese living in Northwest China. Generally, drivers would make the two days journey to Lhasa, before returning with same passengers after several days or finding new passengers wishing to make the return journey. Agencies also informed us that amongst Chinese passengers, there was little demand to stop on route, and that apart from for sleeping arrangements, due to safety reasons they would not advise stopping.

After visiting several agencies, we were able to secure an agency and driver willing to stop at locations on route. During this journey across the plateau, we came across very few other tourists. On occasion, we met several small groups of cyclists, for whom cycling across the plateau via the highway has become an infamous challenge. In addition, we met one family of domestic tourists who had stopped to walk to a glacier.

Our experience of traveling across this highway shows that, currently, there is little infrastructure to support tourists. Across the plateau, accommodation is scarce, with some limited accommodation in some small towns as the highway is used to transport goods and food in the region. Besides small inns, in particular, the accommodation on route to Lhasa is predominately Chinese Army inns in which other travelers can rent rooms. The size and quality of the accommodation suggest that they are for people passing through and not for those intending to stay for longer periods in the region. As we had anticipated a lack of accommodation, camping became our primary source. However, this is not necessarily an option for the majority of Chinese people. As a nation, China has only recently began to explore outdoor pursuits and to market the associated equipment and clothing. Xu Jingzhou, in common with many Chinese people, had never been camping.

During the journey, we interviewed Xu Jingzhou about his impressions of different locations on route. Below are extracts from these interviews, which illustrate different aspects of tourism and his impressions of the area. Some of the larger locations can be cross-referenced with the maps on P.9 to give an indication of our location on the Plateau.

Xu Jingzhou on Tuotuohe, a small village in Qinghai Province:

“Tuotuohe is quite a beautiful place. We were staying at a small inn. The pollution there is very heavy because all the people who live there are all passengers – truck drivers, tourists and what they want is to rush their way to their destination.

They just neglect all the environmental problems and that section of Tuotuohe is full of rubbish, which is what I hate most. I took a walk in the morning, to take a photo of the sun rising. When I get off the bridge and I try to take a walk on the bank, I don’t even know where I should put my foot! Actually that is way too far but actually there is lots of rubbish there.

In years, I think the situation there will change; the small village will grow into a town or county. There will be some institute that cares for the environment. I have already seen lots of preservation stations for the wild animals and I think they are doing a good job. Their job is not
only to protect the animals but also the environment. We've seen so far wild donkeys, wild camels and that famous Tibetan antelope. They are very cute, but they are very shy. Not afraid of people but vehicles.

Here we can see a line between the grassland and the sky. But in my hometown you can only see the top of the buildings and big crowds. My hometown is very beautiful. But it's just too artificial – even at the beach there are artificial rooms, showers and the coastal footpath, which lasts more than 40km. It is nice, very nice but it's just too artificial. For sure, development will bring the same things to here, but I don't think it will become very modern in this region because there is too small population here and very large land. And by the way, there are not many sources here, like mines or fields for people to grow plants. If there is a land where people can grow plants, like rice or something it will be soon popular, very crowded. But it is not a land for growing plants but a land for grazing and people living in their mobile house. So they keep moving around, they keep grazing around. Once you make things steady, you will think about how to enhance it.

When asked about the railway, Xu said:

“I think the railway will bring something away from this region. Lots of restaurants were quite welcoming before the time of the railway. But people will go on the railway because it's faster and cheaper, much cheaper. While the national express was the only way to get into Lhasa, of course all the people will take the vehicles. That means they have to stop for meals that means the restaurants on the route will be quite welcome. Right after the commissioning, lots of restaurants just close down because they don't have guests anymore. I think it's cool – it can be understood. As humans, people always want to choose something faster, something more comfortable, something more direct. They don't need to sleep in the inns anymore – you know the inns here are smelly. They have everything on the train – so why wouldn't they choose the train?

After crossing into the Tibetan plateau, we stayed in Nagqu, which Xu Jingzhou describes below:

“We're at the city centre of Nagqu. It's very like a Chinese city maybe twenty years ago. In Qingdao it was like this 20 years ago. For me it's really muddy and dirty. They are even repairing the sidewalk. For me, Nagqu is just so so. I don't like it very much. I think there is a lot of development going on here – as you can see. We can see from people’s dress and the development of the city. But people’s dress maintains their own style – not modern at all. But the city’s development is gradually faster than people’s development in their mind. So yes I think it really is a very fast developing city.

It's quite strange on the streets – there’s lots of sheep, motorcycles everywhere and the sidewalk is more like a parking lot – you know cars everywhere, motorbikes everywhere. They even have that kind of, I call it, the rubbish goats and the rubbish sheep. Normally for us, all the sheep shall run on the grasslands and eat the grass there. But here, I was quite surprised that this morning, I saw a couple of sheep they just jump on the garbage and look for the food there. I still don’t like it. The sheep is for people’s meal and they are eating rubbish and that means I am eating rubbish or something. And actually we are on the main street.
As our journey continued, goats and sheep eating from skips, became a regular occurrence in both Nagqu and Amdo, a town further north on the Tibetan plateau.

Our journey finished in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, which Xu described below:

“On the way here there are still mountains everywhere, the famous Tangula Mountains, which averages over 5000m. And as we come close to Lhasa, we see many more villages than we have ever seen before and when we enter the outskirts of the city, I feel it must be a very big city as there are trees everywhere. They have more trees than Golmud. That was the last time I saw a tree but not the last time in my life!

But I think the whole of Lhasa is upset, just like people. Sometimes when people are upset they feel confused and look kind of different, I think that is happening here. Right next to Potala Palace is a very modern architecture, China Post Office, which I regard doesn’t go well in this environment. And the main street in front of the Palace, which leads us from the east and west, is full of all kind of stores. You know I always look for flaws of a place and the thing that doesn’t go well with the city is the Potala Palace. Because you see all around the Palace is so modern, so global so commercialized. The Palace stays there alone – lonely - and I think it would be much better if they just kept the environment around here like it is in the old town. Development is good for sure, but sometimes, but we cannot just always try our best to develop our city. At the same time we should maintain some very important legacy from our parents or grandparents. I think this is the right time to show how much we treasure their legacy. I hope they will maintain Lhasa, so they do not get any further development in this area. Because if the Palace is sheltered by the high rises what will it feel? It’s not very good, but it’s not bad. It just disappoints me very much, it shouldn’t be like this, Lhasa shouldn’t be like this. It should be like a conventional city. Lamas everywhere, people wearing their wild west boots.”

I asked whether foreign people might think the same thing when they visit China:

“I think maybe yes, because we just show the world the conventional side, the Terracotta Army, the Great Wall. The Potala Palace, everything. So that will make people have a certain idea about a certain place. When they come here they must feel the same way. The buildings, the surroundings disappoint us. It’s just not the ideal city in our mind. I think development doesn’t just mean stores, commercials everything, it can also mean the place gets cleaner or the people get politer. Yes the people here are getting cleaner and politer, yet it doesn’t go well with the culture here. Or it doesn’t go well with my idea. Or I should simply say my idea doesn’t go with the place.”
Conclusion

When embarking on this Fellowship, our aim was to explore attitudes to the environment. As predicted, in general, we found that the Han Chinese way of life and attitudes continues to vary greatly from the Tibetan way of life. In our experience, whilst those living on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau may not be engaging in the nomadic lifestyles that they once did, we found that their lifestyle continues to rely heavily on living self sufficiently off the land. This is contrast to Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities, who appear to engage more in business and consumerism and are part of the economic revolution occurring in China.

With regards to the environment, as discussed in the Preliminary Research Phase chapters, there have been marked improvements. However, amongst Chinese populations, these appear to be spearheaded by the government, as can be seen through regular government initiatives and environmental expos.

With regards to the Qinghai Tibet Plateau, both the government and population acknowledge this as a special and beautiful environment, which they wish to preserve. However, in the Plateau, this aim appears to be super ceded by the desire for economic growth and to open up the region – aims which in general appear to have been shaped by the government, and reflect the mood for economic development across the entire country. This ascertain is supported by our contact with Xu Jingzhou and others we met during the Fellowship, who are undoubtedly more aware of their environment, but share a current priority to strive for economic development and a better standard of living. Their awareness and public participation in preserving the environment can be seen for example through recycling and the use of solar panels. In any case, the Chinese public cannot be seen to be at fault for engaging in economic development – a pattern, which all developing nations must undergo.

With regards to the Qinghai Tibet Railway, the government is particularly keen to be seen to be protecting the environment, for example through underpasses for migratory animals. These signs are positive indeed and for this, the government should be congratulated.

However, as with all nations, more can and should be done and this is essential for China, as many of their efforts could be interpreted to be for appearance sake only. Whilst there is much reporting of how the railway was built to accommodate antelopes, we could find little information on environmental building practices used to construct the railway, or how tourism and its potential effect will be monitored. If we consider the so-called ‘green’ Beijing Olympics next year, the same interpretation of appearances sake can also be made, especially if we look at the suggested way of tackling air pollution during this time is to request that factories in the city close for the week prior to the Games. Whilst this may reassure international audiences that Beijing may not be as polluted as rumoured, it is unlikely to affect Beijing’s air pollution levels in the long run.

Nonetheless the Olympics and the Railway are good examples in China to illustrate the money and effort that the Chinese Government is investing in preserving the environment. With the Olympics for example, it is very commendable that many of the purpose built buildings incorporate technology such as solar paneling and water conservation methods. Looking at these examples, it is clear, that China is developing for a more environmentally friendly future. Nonetheless, it may appear that the country is not keen to change the practices already in place today, for fear of disturbing their economic growth. Yet in the long term, conserving an environment will affect economic growth – a lesson which China has already began to learn and which may cost them more in the long run: in June 2006 the Government’s Environmental Department predicted that dealing with the environment may have cost them 10 per cent of China’s GDP.
The Qinghai Tibet Railway and Plateau:
The appearance of railway stations and signage in Chinese and English throughout the plateau is a certain indicator of the intention to introduce tourists to the region via the railway. This was assumed by many to have always been the intention. In addition, the growth in Chinese domestic tourism has already proven that a market exists for visiting Qinghai and Tibet. However, through speaking to potential tourists and tour agencies during our journey through the Plateau, it is clear that currently many Chinese people see less accessible parts of the plateau as too remote and dangerous to visit. For many, it is enough to be able to see these areas from the train window.

In any case, during our Fellowship, there were few signs of any infrastructure to support tourists getting off at the train at stations on route. Should the opportunity to get off the train arise, more research is needed to see whether this infrastructure emerges, and its effect on the local community and environment. At present, the tourists we encountered were at more accessible and established sites such as Qinghai Lake. The effect that such tourism is already causing has been discussed within the report from Page 12. Generally speaking, the tour groups and agencies that we encountered visiting more established tourist sites, could do so with little interaction with Tibetan people. One of the aims for the railway, to alleviate poverty in the region, does not appear to be one of the aims of existing tourism in the region. This is not to say that the Tibetans are not financially benefiting from tourism in the region – in many locations we visited which were also visited by Chinese tourists, there was trade in hiring horses for short rides and to pose for pictures, as well as the sales of trinkets and insect grass. Other encounters with Tibetan people ranged from those working in tourism in Han Chinese businesses and children begging and offering to have their photographs taken for money.

However, during the Fellowship, we found that generally speaking, Tibetans were not involved in the main sources of financial benefit from tourism, such as through accommodation, transport and food. This may be due to a lack of start up costs for such ventures and a lack of knowledge of tourism and how to start and run such ventures. Further research could be carried out in these areas and it should also not be automatically assumed that Tibetans living in this region wish to engage and financially benefit in tourism. In addition, whilst entrepreneurship is encouraged in China, currently many Han Chinese encountered during the Fellowship, had been living on the Plateau for many years, including those whose parents moved there after the building of the Highway. During our research, some of these people appeared to already seen an impact from the railway, through a reduction in trade due to people who would normally take the highway, choosing the railway.

Finally, the introduction to this report begins by asking whether eco-tourism had emerged on the Qinghai Tibet plateau and whether this was compatible with the Qinghai Tibet railway. As our fellowship was conducted during the trial period of the railway during which train passengers could not disembark, it is too soon to discuss the effect that the railway might have on the region. But anecdotal and photographic evidence used throughout this report would suggest that domestic tourists and people traveling through the region via the existing highway and in tour group have some negative effect and do not necessarily travel through the region taking into account their effect on the environment. It is possible that the railway, instead of engaging local communities into developing tourism in a sustainable way, may instead lead to an expansion of existing small towns such as Tuotuohe (discussed on Page 16), and the growth of new ones on route, built up to accommodate passing trade, without consideration to the effect on the environment.