

# News from Qinghai and Xizang (Tibet)

by Guy Mettan,\* Geneva



Guy Mettan  
(Picture ma)

Next time you travel to Lhasa, be sure to visit the Museum of Modern Art. Climb the often narrow and steep stairs of the White and Red Potala Palace, light a candle made from yak butter in front of one of the thousands of painted Buddhas of the Jokhang. They are to Lhasa what Ver-

sailles and Notre Dame are to Paris.

But don't miss the milestone of the brand-new art museum, which opened in December 2023 in Lhasa's former cement factory. It is masterfully converted and restored by designers and architects from Tongji University in Shanghai. Here you will get to know a radically new facet of the autonomous province of Tibet, or rather Xizang, as it is officially called.

## Industrial history and cultural modernity

I dare to make this recommendation because I know you will not be disappointed by either the outside or the inside. Visually both are so rich and surprisingly innovative. Here, the combination of industrial history and cultural modernity has been very successful. In doing so, I consciously take the risk of being ridiculed and called a "useful idiot of the Beijing regime", since the cliché of the Tibetans "invaded and oppressed" by the Chinese perseveres so persistently in our country. I take this risk because I limit myself to telling what I have seen and what will sooner or later find its way into the consciousness of all of us.

## A journey through two provinces

For two weeks, I travelled around Qinghai province and the area around its capital Xining, as well as Xizang province from the Lhasa valley to the prefecture of Nyingchi, accompanied by a senior employee of a Catalan cultural foundation,

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Lhasa. White and Red Potala Palace,  
130 meters above the city. (All pictures gm)

a Canadian photographer and designer, a doctor from Xian and a local communications officer.

The two provinces are very similar. They are mountainous, semi-desert, have a very harsh climate and are inhabited by about ten million people in an area four times the size of France [2,5 mio. km<sup>2</sup> totally, edit.]. Together they form the heart of the Tibetan plateau and Tibetan Buddhism.

Contrary to the stereotype that it is an area under the sole control of the Dalai Lama, it is home to Buddhist sects of various denominations and numerous religious and ethnic minorities such as Muslims, Christians, Taoists, Han, Hui, Tu, Salar and Mongols. With altitudes ranging from 2,600 to 8,000 metres, the region is the water tower of Asia and it is the source of the major rivers that irrigate the Chinese plains, in particular the Yellow River and the Yangtze.

For the sake of simplicity, it should be noted that Tibetan Buddhism is derived from Tantrism and is divided into four main schools:

- Gelug, the youngest school, also called the Yellow Hat school, to which both the XIV Dalai Lama, who fled to India in 1959, and the XI Panchen Lama, who lives between Beijing and Shigatse, refer;
- Nyingma, the oldest school, the red-capped school, which is closest to the original Tibetan religion and includes the six major monasteries;
- Kagyü, the White Sect, because of the white stripes that adorn the robes of the monks, and
- Sakya, the smallest school, which is referred to as colourful (grey, white).

Each of these schools have their own traditions, doctrines and practices, which are more or less strict, and they don't always get along well. The various obedience groups include about 46,000 monks.

So much for the general context.

### **Spectacular visits**

In Xining, our programme included a visit to the Ta'er monastery complex, one of the oldest and largest in the country, with dozens of buildings and nearly 10,000 monks; the Qinghai Salt Lake Biological Reserve, one of the largest and highest (3,000 m above sea level) in continental Asia; the village of Deji, where some 250 families from the most remote areas of the province live; the city of Tongren, a historic commercial and cultural centre; the famous Regong Art School in Longshu (traditional thangka painting, frescoes and patchwork), and the ethnic secondary school in Golog, a free boarding school with 800 students from the region's various ethnic minorities.

But the most spectacular visit was undoubtedly the Hainan Prefecture Energy Complex. There, 20 billion dollars have been invested to create the largest solar farm in the world (600 km<sup>2</sup> of photovoltaic panels – more than twice the area of the canton of Geneva), coupled with towers for concentrated solar energy and huge wind farms in an area larger than the canton of Vaud (4000 km<sup>2</sup>). The whole thing was linked with hydroelectric dams on the Yellow River. With 1,200 gigawatts of installed solar and wind power (see *Le Temps*, 14 December), China has become by far the world's largest producer of these renewable energies.

In Xizang (Autonomous Province of Tibet), the programme was similarly concentrated: the Potala Palace with its walls bleached with yak's milk, the Jokhang Temple, an important place of pilgrimage, the Museum of Modern Art and the Jieguan Gallery of Contemporary Art with works worth several million dollars, the Centre for Tibetan Medicine, the university, the Tibetan Buddhist Academy (a huge theological campus with 700 monks and 100 nuns from different schools) and even a factory for high-tech non-stick titanium pots and pans!

The last part of the journey was dedicated to the natural beauty of Nyingchi Prefecture (known as the "Throne of the Sun" to Tibetans and "Little Switzerland" to tourists), which can be reached via a brand-new motorway up to an



Monks studying.

altitude of 5,000 metres. The city, with a population of 500,000, is situated in the middle of forested valleys with lakes and towering peaks, such as the spectacular Namcha Barwa massif, which at 7,782 metres is considered to be the holiest mountain in Tibet after Mount Kailash.

What can you learn from this trip? First, a surprising impression of modernity and economic development. As sleepy, dusty and slightly depressing as the city and the area around Lhasa appeared to me on my first visit in 2003, today it seemed so active, lively and full of energy. Motorways, high-speed rail lines (Beijing-Xian-Lhasa and Chengdu-Nyingchi lines), impeccable airports, but also fully restored residential buildings, heritage buildings and old towns, asphalted streets and electric car parks, high-voltage power lines, tourist infrastructure, schools, high schools, hospitals, small and large companies.

### **Growth through an imaginative measure**

Since the decision was taken in 2012 to develop the eastern provinces, hundreds of billions of dollars have been invested in infrastructure development. This is clearly visible. Tibet is becoming a popular destination for Chinese and Asian tourists.

For several years, growth there has been more than 10% per year. To achieve this result, Beijing has mobilised the country on a large scale with a rather imaginative measure, which consists of mobilising not only the financial resources of the rich coastal provinces, but also their entrepreneurial and social resources.

In this way, energy production is being developed by consortia from central or western China, and the rich provinces of Shanghai or Canton are building roads, schools, hospitals or



opening factories, providing not only the material means but also the human and technical resources, sending executives, teachers, managers and officials on internships to train the local workforce.

A form of mentoring that has the advantage of both sides taking responsibility for the country's development. Western propaganda has seen this as a form of paternalism towards the Tibetans. This remains to be proven, because the results are spectacular: in less than ten years, widespread poverty and illiteracy have been eliminated. It should not be forgotten that until the 1950s, 90% of the Tibetan population lived in serfdom and could neither read nor write.

### **Culture and Buddhism in Tibet do not appear to be under threat**

Another observation is that Tibetan culture and Buddhism do not appear to be under threat, quite the opposite. Only 20 years ago, the devastation wreaked by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution could still be seen on the walls of some temples, while greedy monks held bundles of banknotes between their fingers that had been entrusted to them by pilgrims entering the temple lying on their stomachs in the mud.

Today, this is no longer the case. The offerings are placed in unobtrusive donation boxes. The halls filled with paintings and Buddha statues, Bodhisattvas and other Maitreyas have been restored and illuminated. Monks in red robes are a common sight on the streets, in the temples and in the monastic schools. Many monasteries have been renovated and equipped with heating, access roads and internet connections.

The sites of Potala and Tibetan culture are UNESCO World Heritage, as is Tibetan medicine. The Tibetan language is taught in schools and appears on public monuments and in official documents alongside ordinary Chinese.

Numerous museums and libraries preserve, collect, transcribe, annotate and digitise the sacred texts of Tibetan Buddhism and make them available to monks and the public on the internet – an unprecedented effort to archive and preserve documents that have sometimes been forgotten in the archives of the monasteries. More than 200 scholars are dedicated to this work, whether at the Xizang University or at the Research Centre for Tibetology in Beijing.

On the government website, you can even find an official document praising freedom of reli-



Lhasa. Museum of Modern Art, integrated into the city's converted and renovated former cement factory.

gion and worship in Tibet. However, in the temples you are more likely to find the portrait of the Panchen Lama than that of the Dalai Lama, who has been hated since he fled to Dharamshala and is strongly suspected of having supported resistance movements and the 2008 riots in Lhasa. For a European, it is perhaps a paradox, but in Lhasa and Xining, Tibetan tradition and religion seemed to me much more alive than Christian tradition and religious practice in Europe.

The campaign to modernise and integrate historic Tibet into modern China was carried out under the motto "Tibet is our home, China is our homeland". It is not unreasonable to believe that the bet will be won. With the agreement on joint border controls concluded with India shortly before the BRICS summit in Kazan in October, the West's last hope of separating Tibet from China was lost.

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*



View of the Namcha Barwa massif, which reaches an altitude of 7,782 meters.