

Touring in Tibet: A Han-Chinese Dominated Trap

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In the early summer of 2017, after having finished two research projects on China's regional development policies toward Tibet and Xinjiang (which have been published by Springer Nature and Elsevier, respectively), I decided to reward myself by spending a 10-day tour to a few of scenic spots in Tibet. In much contrast to what I stated in my book, which is mainly based on a group of data released by the Chinese central government, my touring experiences in Tibet have led me to rethink the sustainability of China's development policies toward Tibet (or Xizang in Chinese, meaning "treasure in the west").

Of course, this article is not intended to evaluate all of what the Chinese government has done in and for Tibet; instead, it is focused on a much neglect aspect of the Han-Chinese dominated tourism sector there. The stories stated below, which include part of my experiences in Lhasa (meaning "place of the gods") and Linzhi (also called "Gongbo" in Tibetan, meaning "lowland") from June 24 to 30, 2017, might reveal a larger, Han-Chinese induced, problem relating to the sustainability of long-term development of Tibet. At the very least, I hope they can provide some helpful advice for those who want to visit there in the future.

Before departure, my friends in Beijing had reminded me of the problems of tourism in Tibet and other places of China. Therefore, upon my arriving at the Lhasa Airport, I decided to choose the largest, and the state-owned, tourism agency (called "Guolv" in Chinese abbreviation) of Tibet, which also has a reception office immediately at the airport's exit. With smiles throughout her conversations with me and my friends, a young lady, named Liu, enthusiastically suggested us to choose their delicate, five-day tour in and outside Lhasa and Linzhi (Figure 1).

"Will there be any shopping stops during our tours?" I asked, keeping in mind of my past unhappy experiences with some Chinese tourism agencies.

"No. There will be no shopping burdens for all our guests." Ms Liu confirmed. She mentioned that in the last day back to Lhasa, tourists will visit an exhibition of Tibetan-style goods near Linzhi. Finally, she emphasized: "However, there is no compulsory purchase by our guests there. Don't worry."



Figure 1: A glance of the Potala Palace, Lhasa – taken by author.

According to the schedule, on the first day, we would visit the Potala Palace and the Jokhang Temple (or called the Great Brightness Temple) – the two top tourist attractions in Lhasa and Tibet as well. However, immediately after our tour bus left, the tour guide, Ms Li, Ms Liu's colleague, informed us that, due to the fact that it needed some time for them to purchase the tickets for the Potala Palace and the Jokhang Temple, our first stop was an exhibition center in suburb Lhasa.

As a matter of fact, the center, which was described by the guide as one displaying Tibet's abundant and unique natural resources that cannot be found elsewhere, is a shopping center not open to local residents. And the prices of the goods there, mainly of jewelry rings and necklaces, were dozens or perhaps hundreds of times higher than those of the same quality that were sold elsewhere.

During our stay at the center, the guide, whenever seeing someone who had nothing to buy, would repeatedly mumble the same words: "Please give me some support." After having spent nearly two hours of shopping activity, we were drove to another, tourists-only marketplace, though the latter being officially called the Tibetan Medicine Museum. And the herb medicine and other Tibetan-style goods that were sold there, which the guide said could not be found elsewhere, were unbelievably expensive than those that I only knew later could be easily found in downtown Lhasa.

Thanks to my early knowledge, I did not follow the guide's advice and bought nothing there. Obviously, my decision was at the expense of the guide's unhappiness and impatience of me during the whole day. At three o'clock in the afternoon, and thanks to God, we eventually arrived at the Jokhang Temple and, later, the Potala Palace. However, the whole duration of our stay at the two scenic spots combined was only two and a half hours, not a whole day as previously stated by the tourism agency. It is quite ironic to note that even though my residence was only a few hundreds of meters from the Potala Palace, I was still asked by the guide to wake up at 7 am (unless stated otherwise, all the time mentioned is as of the Beijing standard) that is not yet the break of that day in Lhasa.

The following day was scheduled for a visit to Namtso (or called Lake Nam, meaning "heavenly lake") – a plateau scenic spot in central Tibet, which is about 250 km away from Lhasa. Since I had been tired of the commercialization of the first day's tour, I decided to stay alone at downtown Lhasa and took a rest. In the afternoon of that day, when I

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was walking near my residence and around the Potala Palace, I received a message sent by my wife:

“Please send me 20,000 yuan [about 3,000 US dollar] immediately; otherwise, I am not allowed to leave here! I will explain the story in detail later, but it seems that I just made a mistake when I and other tourists were buying Tianma [gastrodia tuer, a traditional Chinese and Tibetan herb medicine]. The guide just helped pay it on behalf of me but I must return the money to him as soon as possible...”

I was quite confused since we had never planned for such a purchase deal, especially given the fact that 20,000 yuan is not a small amount of money for any ordinary family in China. Nevertheless, I did what my wife requested. After coming back, my wife explained that many other tourists each had made an even bigger purchase than she did and that she had previously thought that the price was only 4 yuan per jin (an usual unit used in inland China, which is equivalent to 500 grams) instead of 4 yuan per gram (a unit that is seldom used in China) as insisted later by the sales assistant there. My God! That is a 500-time difference! She also told me that many of the others who had bought much more than she had herself had had no objection to that price and had frequently said that their purchases were worth. However, my wife did recall that she did not notice any details about how or even whether the other tourists had paid for their respective purchases.

I began to suppose that the real story should have been much more complicated. And, as I had expected, it would have repeated in the rest of our tour in Tibet. According to the tour contract signed with the Guolv, our round trip from Lhasa to Linzhi would last a total of three days, only the last day of which included some shopping activity on our way from Linzhi back to Lhasa. However, a close witness of the Lhasa-Linzhi tour, I dare say that there were a series of big traps in our (and, probably other) tours in Tibet. With regard to our two-day tour in Linzhi, I noticed:

Of our tour team consisting of a total of only 17 members, six are believed to have behaved different from the rest of us, but they always cooperated with the guide. Along the way to and from each scenic spot, stops were frequently arranged by the guide. Each having lasted about a half hour, the stops were said to let the tourists use toilet. However, most, if not all, of them seemed to be unnecessary. Instead, they looked like shopping traps designed by scalpers (called ‘tuoer’ in Chinese) (Figure 2).

For instance, at one stop, a trap, which has been identified by



Figure 2: Touring in Tibet is an asymmetric Han-Chinese game – taken by author at the Natural Resources Museum of Linzhi.

my wife as duplicating the one in which she had been a victim in the previous day, is summarized as follows:

For a certain time before our bus arrived the stop, the scalpers deliberately talked to the guide in a loud voice: “I learnt Shihu (dendroba, a traditional herb medicine) is very good for health. Can we buy it here?” (...) As soon as the bus arrived, they would invite other tourists to rush into a store and talk to sales assistants: “How much does Shihu cost?” Someone asked. “Five yuan,” replied by someone in a low voice, without mentioning the unit of measurement that is usually jin (equivalent to 500 grams) or kg in inland China but would definitely be gram whenever a deal was finally made. Then, almost in the meantime, a scalper spoke loudly: “50 yuan? Oh, look! It is so cheap. We three want a big portion of this pile. Please help weigh it as soon as possible and check it out. Hi! You two,” she glanced over her shoulder and said to the tourists standing behind her, “may buy the rest of this pile right now like we have just done. It cannot be found elsewhere and it is really a worth deal! Come on! Our bus is about to leave.” (...)

About 20 minutes later, after all the tourists and scalpers left, I came back to the store and only but found that the price for that herb medicine was meager 0.8 yuan per gram. Since I had left the store some time earlier than all the other tourists did, I do not know how much money they had lost...

I estimated that the stories similar to the above-mentioned one had occurred for at least six times during our two-day tour in and around Linzhi city. I also identified that the six scalpers had made a huge amount of purchase (including, among others, buying jewelry rings and necklaces and herb medicines) and, naturally, I did not notice if they had paid for their big bills – if they had done, then it can be reasonably judged that their expenses must have far exceeded their respective incomes. And, as soon as they came back to the bus, these scalpers would show off how worth what they had just bought were and that they would have also sincerely advised others to follow them to buy at the following stops.

Enough was enough. I began considering fleeing from the tour – the last day was designed as a go-shopping day, which might become a big harvest day for scalpers and the tourism agency as well, but indeed doomsday for some tourists. On my way to the airport, a taxi driver, who is a Han-Chinese guy coming from Sichuan province, complained that the top Party and government officials of the Linzhi city, who are all Han-Chinese, have made a difficult time for himself. He only mentioned one example: that a taxi car like his, whose original market value was only about 100,000 yuan, was sold by the government for as high as 700,000 yuan. As a result, as the driver said, the costs for running a taxi had increased. I have not clarified whether what the taxi driver talked about, which is quite persuasive, is real or not. Nevertheless, it is certain that he charged me a total of 200 yuan for the 50-km distance from downtown Linzhi to the airport, which is much higher than in other small or medium-sized cities in China (Figure 3).

While flying away from Tibet, I recalled a short and friendly conversation with a young lady in downtown Lhasa. A native Tibetan who came from a small border town about 10 km from Bhutan, the lady never went to school, but she had learnt some basic Chinese from her Han-Chinese friends living in Tibet. From our conversation, I learnt that she had been quite satisfactory with her life: With the made-in-China commodities that her Han-Chinese friends provided for her, and granted by the Chinese government, she was able to make profits



Figure 3: The Great Brightness Temple, Lhasa, with Tibetans gathering to pray to Dalai Lamas and other ethnic heroes in worship there – taken by author.

by conducting tax-free, barter trade with the Bhutanese. Before our conversation ended, the Tibetan girl kindly reminded me of keeping away from thieves in some public places in downtown Lhasa.

At last, she, while smilingly looking at me, mentioned that all the thieves were, in fact, Han-Chinese, not Tibetan... [END].