



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Environmental concerns over new railway tunnel in Tibet; music video conveys harsh propaganda message

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Chinese scientists warn of environmental consequences as railway tunnel completed in Tibet

Bizarre music video conveys harsh propaganda message on Tibet

Chinese state media have announced the completion of one of the longest tunnels on the strategically important Lhasa to Nyingtri (Chinese: Linzhi) section of the “Sichuan-Tibet” railway, which Chinese engineers have described as the “world’s riskiest” rail connection. The route is of key geopolitical significance, and despite scientists’ warnings of untold environmental consequences and risks of earthquakes and other disasters, it is considered a priority at the highest political levels in China.

Chinese Communist Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping has emphasized the Chengdu-Lhasa rail link’s importance. The official Xinhua news agency reports on a meeting that he addressed in 2018 saying, “Xi also highlighted the Sichuan-Tibet railway, saying it was of profound significance for the country’s long-term stability and the development of Tibet.”

The Lhasa-Nyingtri section of the line traverses a highly militarized zone of Tibet’s border with Arunachal Pradesh in India.¹ It is part of a second, 1,700-km rail route linking Tibet to the People’s Republic of China (following the opening of the line from Golmud in Qinghai in 2006), connecting Lhasa, Tibet’s historic and cultural capital, to the Sichuan provincial capital of Chengdu and beyond. According to Chinese media, most of the tunnels along the Lhasa-Nyingtri route have been completed, with one of the longest, the 9,240-meter Bukamu Tunnel, finished last week on Aug. 2, 2019, according to the government-run newspaper China Daily.

¹ The Chinese government claims Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state, describing it as “South Tibet”. Lobsang Gyaltsen, chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region government, said during a meeting of Tibetan delegates to China’s National People’s Congress in 2016 that: “We really do place a lot of emphasis on this railway.” (Reported by Associated Press following a news conference on the sidelines of the meeting, March 7, 2016). The Chinese state media said it would cut journey time from Chengdu to Lhasa from 42 hours by train and three days by road to less than 15 hours. Lin Shijin, a senior civil engineer at China Railway Corporation, was cited by China Daily as saying: “It’s like the largest rollercoaster in the world. With a designed service life of 100 years, it is believed to be one of the most difficult railway projects to build on Earth.” (China Daily, February 2, 2016, http://english.chinatibetnews.com/ly/lyxw/201602/t20160201_1064992.html).

The high-speed railway under construction will pass through earthquake zones such as the Longmen Mountains on the eastern rim of the Tibetan plateau and the Yarlung Tsangpo River² seismic belts, with scientists indicating that prospective dangers along the alignment include landslides, debris flows and snow and ice damage.

Even Chinese scientists have pointed out that a construction project of this scale could in itself aggravate the risks of mountain disasters, causing untold damage to the fragile high-altitude environment of the world's highest and largest plateau, with implications downstream from the river.

You Yong, chief engineer of the Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), told state media outlet Xinhua that the construction and operation of the Sichuan–Tibet railway across the world's highest and largest plateau must overcome “the biggest risks in the world.” Speaking about the dangers, You Yong said: “We must urgently master the distribution pattern of landslides, debris flows and other mountain hazards, and their influence on the railway project. We need to demarcate safe and dangerous areas, and study how to forecast and prevent disasters.”³ According to Global Construction Review, You Yong “said the dangers of this section include relatively frequent earthquakes, particularly in the Longmen Mountains and [Yarlung Tsangpo] River seismic belts. Among the difficulties, too, are sudden changes in elevation, frequent landslips and avalanches, and a fragile ecology.”

In October 2018, Xi Jinping chaired a meeting in which he declared the acceleration of efforts toward the planning and construction of the Sichuan-Tibet railway — and also, improving the capability of safeguarding against natural disasters.⁴The conflation of the two did not appear to be a coincidence.

On Oct. 11, 2018, just one day after the meeting, Xinhua reported that a “barrier lake” had formed on a section of another river, the Drichu (Chinese: Jinsha), due to a landslide that had taken place in Jomda (Jiangda) county of Chamdo (Chinese: Changdu) prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region.⁵ Just a week later, another landslide in Nyingtri led a second barrier lake to form in a short period in Tibet, presenting “a substantial hazard,” according to experts. The new railway is set to traverse this same ecologically fragile terrain en route to Chengdu.

Intensive infrastructure construction in such a seismically active mountain landscape is known to contribute to earthquakes and landslides, and an informed Chinese blogger raised the alarm about the impacts of construction of the first section of the line from Lhasa to Shigatse. The blogger, whose post received wide circulation on social media, gave specific detail on safety concerns, including skimping on material such as steel needed for tunnels, bridge pillars that are too short, and not enough cement used, which had contributed to “severe landslides” during construction of a tunnel entrance. The blogger, whose post was translated into English by the International Campaign for Tibet, warned that officials from the Lhasa-Nyingtri Railway Construction Command Bureau had turned a blind eye, saying: “According to the Chinese news website, [guancha.cn](http://www.guancha.cn), the Shigatse-Lhasa-

² The Yarlung Tsangpo flows into India, and becomes the Siang and the Brahmaputra downstream.

³ Xinhua's Yu Fei writing in the International Rail Journal, ‘Bridging the Tibet-Sichuan Gap’, August 16, 2017, https://www.railjournal.com/in_depth/bridging-the-sichuan-tibet-gap

⁴ A report by Xinhua in English on October 10, 2018, stated: “Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, on Wednesday called for efforts to improve the country's capability of safeguarding against natural disasters and fully launch the planning and construction of the Sichuan-Tibet railway. Xi, also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks at the third meeting of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs. He is also head of the committee.” http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/10/c_137523642.htm

⁵ Dave Petley at the Landslide Blog, October 23, 2018, ‘Jomda County: a large, valley blocking landslide in Tibet on 11th October’, [HTTPS://BLOGS.AGU.ORG/LANDSLIDEBLOG/2018/10/23/JOMDA-COUNTY-1/](https://blogs.agu.org/landslideblog/2018/10/23/jomda-county-1/) VIDEO ON CHINESE OFFICIAL MEDIA, OCTOBER 12, 2018, AT: [HTTPS://NEWS.CGTN.COM/NEWS/3D3D414E7A45444F7A457A6333566D54/SHARE_P.HTML](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3D3D414E7A45444F7A457A6333566D54/SHARE_P.HTML)

Nyingtri railway with Lhasa as its strategic fulcrum, is to be used for passengers as well as for commodities and military personnel. From a geopolitical and regional military perspective, the strategic value of the Lhasa–Shigatse Railway is shocking!”

The Chinese government has described the railway’s construction as a “new era in railway construction,”⁶ and Xi Jinping highlighted the political importance of the high-altitude rail link to Sichuan, telling the third meeting of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs in 2018 that it “has great significance for national stability and the economic and social development of Tibet to plan and build the railway, adding that the project must be processed well,” according to a report by China Daily. A statement issued by the meeting said, “The importance of work on the railway comes from the demand for promoting ethnic unity, safeguarding national unity and strengthening the stability of the border.”

Completion of the tunnel in Nyingtri last week required the positioning of massive ice blocks, fans and oxygen facilities inside the tunnel to prevent workers getting sick because of the high temperatures, which reached 42 C due to the tunnel’s depth and high geostress inside it. A worker on the tunnel, Kang Yanjun, was cited by China Daily as saying: “The tunnel is like a steam room. Once you get inside, you begin sweating profusely. It is like doing anaerobic exercise.”

State media footage of the earlier completion of one of the tunnels on the rail link to Nyingtri depicted Chinese workers waving the red Chinese Communist Party flag in celebration.

Massive infrastructure construction across Tibet is re-shaping the Tibetan plateau — a global epicenter of climate change — in the context of a political climate in which the top priority for the leadership is to ensure complete compliance to Chinese Communist Party authority and no one is permitted to question or raise even mild criticism of policy imposed by Beijing. The International Campaign for Tibet has documented massive damming of major rivers connected to the demand for hydropower-based energy; in turn, the recent completion of the world’s highest altitude high-voltage power grid is linked to the construction of the fully electrified high speed rail line from Lhasa to Chengdu.⁷

The official importance of the new railway was also underlined during a visit by China’s Premier Li Keqiang a year ago to the site of a tunnel in Lhokha (Chinese: Shannan) prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). During his visit, the Premier said that Beijing would invest more in infrastructure in Tibetan areas, which he linked to “ecological protection” in a demonstration of the language used by Chinese authorities to frame construction, urbanization and mass tourism as beneficial to the environment, even though they are actually harmful.⁸ Various commentators have pointed to rumors of a different approach by Xi and Li, however, suggesting that Li’s statements during his Tibet visit indicated less enthusiasm for big-ticket, risky infrastructure spending, particularly given the risks of the Sichuan-Tibet route.⁹

⁶ Chinese state media report, China Tibet Online, October 23, 2017. The report stated: “Since 2012, Tibet has opened the Lhasa-Shigatse Railway, and the Lhasa-Nyingtri Railway also enters its construction, starting a new era in railway construction. Highway distance increased from 62,500 kilometers in 2012 to 82,100 kilometers in 2016, an increase of 25.9 percent. There are 71 domestic and international air routes connecting Tibet with 41 cities.”

⁷ Website of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, 30 November 2018, ‘World’s hardest power grid project operates in Tibet’, http://en.sasac.gov.cn/2018/11/30/c_676.htm

⁸ Chinese State Council website, July 28, 2018, http://english.gov.cn/premier/news/2018/07/28/content_281476240005360.htm

⁹ See for instance Claude Arpi, Daily O, October 25, 2018, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/landslide-in-tibet-both-india-and-china-have-reasons-to-worry-about/story/1/27408.html> and Wall Street Journal, ‘China finds Big Ticket Spending is a Road to Nowhere’, October 20, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-finds-big-ticket-spending-is-a-road-to-nowhere-1540036800>

The construction of the railway and the damming of the rivers are integral elements of China's strategic and economic imperatives in Tibet which involve securing control over borders; expanding mining of the plateau's rich resources (which include uranium, lithium and gold) in order to fuel China's economic development; and addressing the growing scarcity of water resources in North and Northeast China with water sourced in Tibet. The dramatic increase in Chinese domestic tourism in the TAR is also linked, placing Lhasa at the center of a new network of roads, railways and airports with dual military and civilian use, highlighting the region's strategic significance to the Chinese government.

The Golmud-Lhasa railway, which has had a dramatic impact on Tibet's demography and development, could not have been built without massive investment by the Chinese authorities into how to construct infrastructure on the shifting, fragile ground of the Tibetan plateau, carried out mainly by China's top permafrost research facility, the Cold and Arid Regions Environmental and Engineering Research Institute based in Lanzhou. However just a month after the line had gone into operation in 2006, the state media made a rare admission that fractures had started to appear in some railroad bridges because of permafrost movements under the rail bed. Even the official press acknowledged that rising temperatures on the Tibetan plateau could threaten the long-term viability of the railway.

China releases a Tibetan women's rap video to convey harsh message on political crackdown

A music video featuring Tibetan women in pink and blue traditional chubas is being broadcast in Tibet to convey the Communist Party's harsh ongoing crackdown on "black" and "evil forces," which in Tibet means attacking loyalty to the Dalai Lama. Expressions of support for the Dalai Lama are regarded as an organized crime, according to a circular issued by police in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) last year.¹⁰

The video [embed here], screened on official TV in Tibet and circulated on social media, is in line with the trend of producing catchy music videos on Party campaigns. In May, China made music video promoting the importance of "trustworthiness" ahead of the rollout of the controversial Social Credit System in 2020. Another video showing happy children of different ethnicities singing about the virtues of China's One Belt One Road campaign was described as "Sesame Street style propaganda."

In this latest video, which was also circulated on social media, the Tibetan female singers use Party language to refer to Xi Jinping initiating the campaign to "eliminate evil forces" in order to "maintain social stability" in line with the "great leadership of the Communist Party in the new era." It calls on the people to eschew "separatist thoughts" and to beware of "Dalai clique." It reflects the intensification of a nationwide political campaign that in Tibet strongly emphasizes cracking down on "separatism in the name of religion".

The music video features a mix of backdrops, including an interior of an official building with Communist Party slogans and a red star on the ceiling, with urban and rural Tibetan landscapes, including one featuring a traditional Tibetan tent. Similarly, it mixes a contemporary rap style with

¹⁰ The circular, issued in February 2018, urged the public to inform on people they suspect of being loyal to the Dalai Lama and his "evil forces" across Tibet. According to the Chinese state media, the circular was aimed at deterring the "gangsters" that "the Dalai group uses to spreading its message of separatism." International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Chinese police circular urges public to report on loyalty to 'evil forces' of Dalai Lama', February 13, 2018, <https://savetibet.org/chinese-police-circular-urges-public-to-report-on-loyalty-to-evil-forces-of-dalai-lama/>

some Tibetan characteristics in the melody. The singers are also depicted against the backdrop of a portrait of Chinese leaders Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.

Tibetans are increasingly compelled to display these images of Chinese leaders, particularly Xi, and to remove pictures of the Dalai Lama. The International Campaign for Tibet has reported news from eastern Tibet that Tibetans are being told even to prostrate and make offerings to pictures not of Buddhist icons, but of Xi Jinping. The Tibetan singers in the video conclude in a submissive pose, sinking to their knees and stretching out their hands.