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Chinese Population Shares in Tibet Revisited:

Early insights from the 2020 census of China and some cautionary notes on current population politics

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Abstract

The early results of the 2020 Census of the People's Republic of China shed light on the highly politicised issue of Han Chinese population shares in the Tibetan areas of western China. Two opposite patterns are evident. The Han share increased in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in the 2010s and the increase accelerated in comparison to the 2000s, but from a small base, reaching 12 percent in 2020. It also appears to be mostly concentrated in the capital city of Lhasa and to a lesser extent in a few other strategic locations in the province. In contrast, the Han share fell in the other half of Tibetan areas. The fall also accelerated in Qinghai and Gansu. If trends continue, minorities will become the majority of Qinghai within a few years.

These insights confirm earlier analyses that the dominant structural trend facing these relatively poor peripheral areas is net outmigration, not net in-migration. Because outmigration is stronger among the Han than among minorities, combined with higher fertility and natural population increase rates among minorities (Tibetans in particular), there is a tendency for rising minority shares. This tendency is only counteracted by extremely high levels of subsidisation, such as in the TAR. These population dynamics need to be carefully differentiated, both inside Tibet but also from other regions in China such as Xinjiang. The development implications also run counter to the logic underlying recent allegations of forced or coerced labour in Tibet.

Keywords

Tibet, China, population, migration, census, ethnic shares, minorities, Tibetans, Han Chinese.

Chinese Population Shares in Tibet Revisited: Early Insights from the 2020 census of China and some cautionary notes on current population politics

As the results of the 2020 Census of China are slowly being released through a series of central, provincial, and prefectural communiqués, we can already gain valuable insights into the population dynamics of the minority regions in Western China. It is worth highlighting these insights now given that the release of the detailed census will probably take much more time (the 2010 census took over two and a half years to be released), and because Chinese migration to Tibetan areas has resurfaced as an object of considerable international concern and scrutiny. The attention has been partly based on allegations that government policies in 'Tibet' (usually meaning the Tibet Autonomous Region, or the TAR) and Xinjiang (the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) have been resulting in population or demographic 'swamping' of the local indigenous populations, by encouraging, subsidizing, or even orchestrating the in-migration of Han Chinese, or what is sometimes even referred to as 'population transfer' (although this is an outdated term in China). Concerns have also been related to allegations of population control of locals, such as through forced sterilisations, although these latter allegations mostly concern Xinjiang. These concerns have been mentioned or alluded to, for instance, in recent US or draft UN human rights reports on China,[1] and they are regularly relayed through the international (especially western) press.

Leaving aside the more controversial region of Xinjiang, for which detailed census data will be required to assess the veracity of the highly politicised claims of population control, the snippets from the census communiqués for the Tibetan areas allow us to quickly assess the concerns of Han Chinese in-migration in these areas. While the available data are still quite limited, they are sufficient to reveal several important trends that confirm previous demographic studies (e.g., Goldstein et al 2003; Fischer 2004, 2008, 2014; Childs et al 2005; Childs 2008; Ma 2011). In particular, they broadly confirm earlier assessments I had made about the nature of population movements in this region – that the dominant tendency was for net out-migration rather than net in-migration, and because of greater mobility among the Han versus higher fertility among Tibetans and other minorities, the share of Tibetans and other minorities would tend to rise over time, except in the exceptionally subsidised context of the TAR. In this sense, narratives of 'population invasion' are urban- and especially Lhasa-centric and are better understood in terms of the employment pressures that migrants bring to urban areas in a context of rapid urbanisation of locals.

For clarification, the officially recognised and indigenous Tibetan areas in China constitute a region about the size of Western Europe (see the map below). About half the area and half the Tibetan population are in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which is entirely composed of Tibetan areas, borders India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and is often referred to as simply 'Tibet'. The other half are in official recognised Tibetan 'autonomous areas' absorbed into four other western provinces: Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan.

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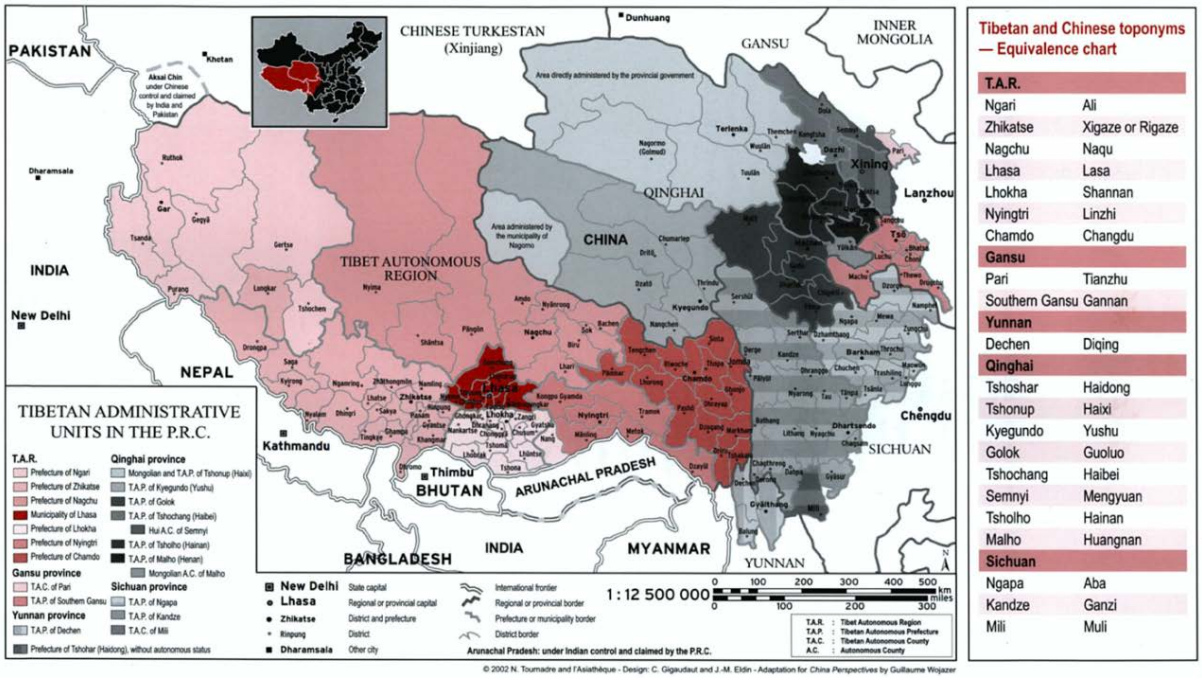
[1] For instance, these concerns are briefly mentioned in the 'Tibet 2020 Human Rights Report' of the United States Department of State (https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/tibet/), and they were mentioned in the 'List of issues in relation to the third periodic report of China' released by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on 7 April 2021. In the latter, Paragraph 22 specifies: 'Please also clarify the reasons for the reportedly marked decline in birth rates among religious minority groups and provide information on the trend in the demographic composition in the Xinjiang Uighur and Tibet Autonomous Regions over the past five years.' (See: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2fC.12%2fCHN%2fQ%2f3&Lang=en).

Map 1
Map of Tibetan administrative units in the People's Republic of China



Source: Allès et al (2009).

The initial census data for all these Tibetan areas was compiled from provincial and prefecture level statistical communiqués, which are listed at the end of this paper. Some of these are online, and others only reported in local newspapers (such as with the Qinghai communiqués).[2] The level of detail varies across the communiqués. Many – especially the prefectural – do not divulge ethnic decompositions. Those that do divulge ethnicity only present a binary of Han and minority, but do not differentiate between various minorities (such as Tibetans and Hui Muslims), except the TAR communiqué, which specifies Tibetans. However, a variety of other demographic data can be used to indirectly infer ethnic population dynamics, such as age structure, as analysed below.

These census data also refer to 'permanent resident' populations. As with the 2010 census, this refers to a de facto rather than de jure definition of 'residence' and includes a range of permanent and temporary residencies.[3]

These data are analysed in three sections. The first explains the regional differentiations in population changes, with Xinjiang included in the provincial data for comparison. The second focuses more specifically on the TAR, or more specifically, Lhasa exception that dominates narratives of population swamping. The third discusses some of the employment and development implications, especially around allegations of forced or coerced labour, followed by the conclusion.

[2] I was assisted by a local researcher in collecting and sending me these communiqués although s/he prefers to remain anonymous.

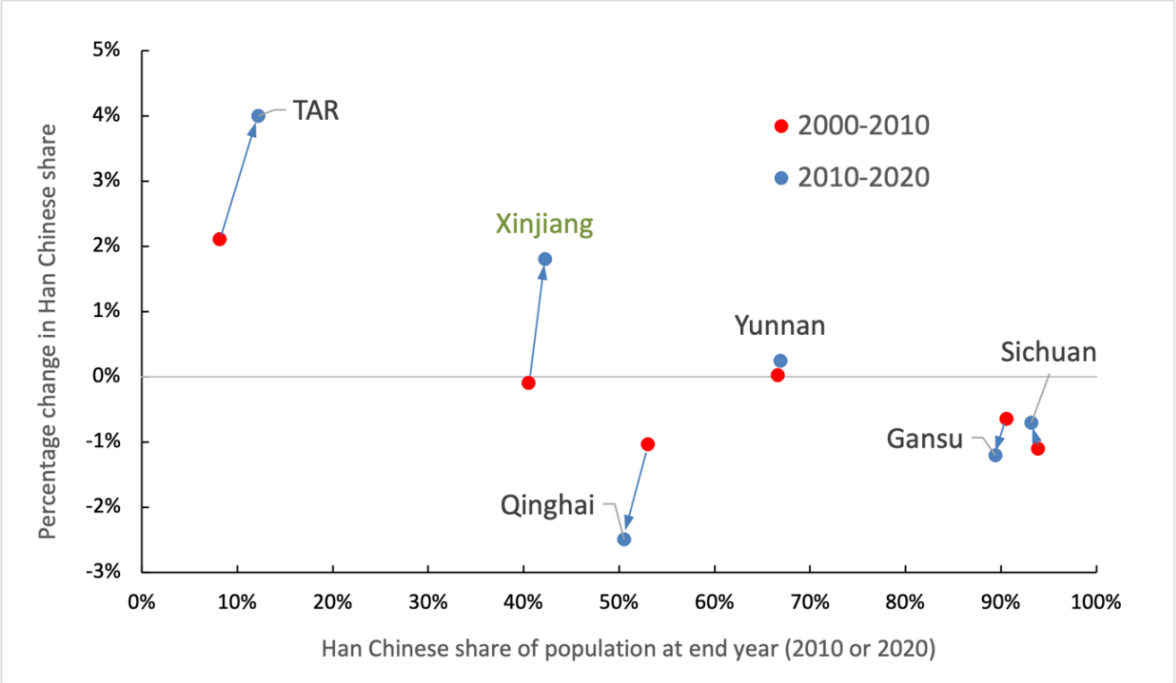
[3] For instance, as explained in the third national communiqué: 'Permanent Residents include people living in the current town/street where their household registration is located or with their household registration to be settled; people living in the current town/street and leaving the town/street of their household registration for over 6 months; people leaving the town/street of their household registration for less than 6 months or working or studying overseas, with their household registration located in the current town/street.'

1 Regional distinctions and peripheral tendencies

The first important distinction is that the trends are opposite across the two halves of Tibet, particularly between the TAR and Qinghai, the province with the next highest Tibetan population share and the second most subsidised province in China after the TAR.[4] Moreover, the difference intensified since the 2000s, as shown in Figure 1 below. The Han Chinese population share increased sharply in the TAR, encouraged by massive subsidies from the central government that exceeded 100 percent of the TAR GDP from 2010 onwards (Fischer 2015). The increase also accelerated compared to the 2000s, but from a small base and the Han remained a small minority, reaching just over 12 percent of the population in 2020 (up from six percent in 2000 and eight percent in 2010). The increase in share and its acceleration in the 2010s was similar only to Xinjiang, but not to any of the other provinces containing Tibetan areas.

Outside of the TAR, Han Chinese shares fell (or were stable in Yunnan).[5] The fall was sharpest in Qinghai, where it also accelerated in the 2010s (as well as in Gansu to a lesser extent). If these trends continue, minorities will become the majority of Qinghai within a few years.

FIGURE 1
Provincial-level changes in Han Chinese population shares from 2000 to 2020



Source: calculated from provincial communiqués and the detailed 2000 and 2010 census tabulations.

Differences in population growth also underlie these trends, as shown in Table 1 below. In the TAR, like in Xinjiang further west, there was strong population growth of close to two percent a year during the 2010s. This was through a combination of relatively high natural population

[4] See Fischer (2015) on subsidies. Qinghai Province is also 97.2 percent constituted of Tibetan (and one Mongolian-Tibetan) autonomous prefectures, even though almost than two thirds of the population live in the remaining 2.8 percent of the province, namely Xining City and Haidong City (between Xining and Gansu province, which was converted to a prefecture-level city in 2013).

[5] In Yunnan, with only one Tibetan autonomous county, ethnic population shares have been remarkably stable since the 2000 census, at about two thirds Han and one third minorities, although Tibetans constitute a very small share of these minorities.

increase rates (NPIRs) and net in-migration.[6] NPIRs would have been higher among the indigenous minorities, as indicated by the fact that their annualised population growth rates – which would not have included much in-migration – were significantly higher than the provincial average NPIRs. Similarly, net in-migration is indicated by provincial annual population growth rates that are higher than the NPIRs, which in the TAR was clearly dominated by Han Chinese.[7]

TABLE 1
Population changes and Han/minority shares in five provinces with Tibetan areas

	Population 2010	Population 2020	Difference	Decadal Change	Annualised change	NPIR, 2010-19 average	Pop. share of total	Percentage change in share
TAR	3,002,166	3,648,100	645,934	21.5%	1.97%	1.05%		
…Han	245,263	443,370	198,107	80.8%	6.80%	n/a	12.2%	4.0%
…Tibetan	2,716,389	3,137,901	421,512	15.5%	1.62%	n/a	86.0%	-4.5%
…other min	40,514	66,829	26,315	65.0%	5.72%	n/a	1.8%	0.5%
Qinghai	5,626,722	5,923,957	297,235	5.3%	0.52%	0.83%		
…Han	2,983,516	2,993,534	10,018	0.3%	0.03%	n/a	50.5%	-2.5%
…Minorities	2,643,206	2,930,423	287,217	10.9%	1.04%	n/a	49.5%	2.5%
Gansu	25,575,254	25,019,831	-555,423	-2.2%	-0.22%	0.57%		
…Han	23,164,756	22,363,438	-801,318	-3.5%	-0.35%	n/a	89.4%	-1.2%
…Minorities	2,410,498	2,656,393	245,895	10.2%	0.98%	n/a	10.6%	1.2%
Sichuan	80,418,000	83,675,000	3,257,000	4.1%	0.40%	0.33%		
…Han	75,495,644	77,987,000	2,491,356	3.3%	0.33%	n/a	93.2%	-0.7%
…Minorities	4,907,679	5,688,000	780,321	15.9%	1.49%	n/a	6.8%	0.7%
Yunnan	45,966,239	47,209,277	1,243,038	2.7%	0.27%	0.65%		
…Han	30,629,000	31,573,245	944,245	3.1%	0.30%	n/a	66.9%	0.2%
…Minorities	15,337,239	15,636,032	298,793	1.9%	0.19%	n/a	33.1%	-0.2%
Xinjiang	21,813,334	25,852,345	4,039,011	18.5%	1.71%	0.98%		
…Han	*8,746,098*	10,920,098	*2,174,000*	24.9%	2.24%	n/a	42.2%	1.8%
…Uyghurs	*10,001,257*	11,624,257	*1,623,000*	16.2%	1.52%	n/a	45.0%	-0.9%
…other min	*3,065,979*	3,307,990	*242,011*	7.9%	0.76%	n/a	12.8%	-1.3%

Source: same as above. The italicised numbers for Xinjiang are approximate, given that the communiqué rounded these numbers to the nearest thousand.

In contrast, the provinces with Tibetan areas outside of the TAR had either stagnant or declining populations due to net outmigration (as indicated when provincial annual growth rates are substantially lower than the average NPIRs). As shown in Table 1, the stagnation or decline was mostly attributed to Han Chinese, which would have been due to strong out-migration combined with low NPIRs. Conversely, population growth rates among minorities were higher than the average provincial NPIRs in all cases besides Yunnan, indicating that higher minority NPIRs were compensating for Han outmigration and lower Han NPIRs. Population growth among minorities would have also been lower than their NPIRs given net outmigration as well, although to a lesser degree than among the Han except apparently in the case of Yunnan.

These data reflect that the dominant structural tendency facing these relatively poor peripheral areas is net population outmigration to more central locations, not net in-migration, besides in the heavily subsidised context of the TAR (more on the TAR in section 2 below). Moreover, such emigration is more prominent among the Han Chinese, who are mostly non-indigenous in the minority areas, are more urban, educated, and mobile in these western regions,

[6] In demography, 'natural population increase' (or decrease) is the change in population that results from births minus deaths, not including net migration. 'Population growth' includes net migration.
[7] See Fischer (2012) for further explanation of this indicate way of estimating net migration.

and more culturally connected to other parts of China, whereas local Tibetans (and other minorities) have higher rates of natural population increase.[8]

This tendency is best exemplified by Gansu, currently the poorest province in China in terms of per capita GDP.[9] The population declined by 2.2 percent over the decade despite an average NPIR of over 0.57 percent. Similarly, even though Qinghai and Yunnan grew, their annualised growth rates were significantly lower than their average NPIRs. Only Sichuan managed to register slightly higher annual population growth rates than NPIR, which was a sharp reversal from the 2000s, when there was a large outmigration from the province (see Fischer 2012). In all three cases, the minority shares of the population increased, most strongly in Qinghai, where Tibetans constitute the largest minority ethnic group (Tibetans, Mongolians and Monguors (Ch. Tu) together account for close to two thirds of minorities in Qinghai, while local Muslim groups account for the other third). Indeed, if these trends continue, minorities will become the majority of Qinghai within a few years.

1.1 Prefectural and County-level granularity

These provincial aggregates do not capture the dynamics in sub-provincial Tibetan areas outside the TAR, which will require more detailed census data to confirm. However, there are strong indirect indications that the structural tendencies are even stronger in these areas. Examples are given in Table 2, focusing on the Tibetan autonomous prefectures (TAP) outside of the TAR.

TABLE 2
Selected population data from Tibetan autonomous prefectures outside the TAR (including one Tibetan-Qiang and one Mongolian-Tibetan AP)

	Population 2020 (people)	Change since 2010 (people)	Change (%)	Annualised change	NPIR average 2010-19	Proportion aged 0-14 (2020)	Minority share in 2010
Gansu			-2.2%	-0.22%	0.57%	19.4%	9.4%
…Gannan TAP	691,808	2,676	0.4%	0.04%	n/a	22.4%	61.3%
Qinghai			5.3%	0.52%	0.83%	20.8%	47.0%
…Haibei TAP	265,322	-7,982	-2.9%	-0.30%	n/a	20.2%	64.1%
…Huangnan TAP	276,215	19,499	7.6%	0.73%	n/a	26.5%	93.9%
…Hainan TAP	446,996	5,307	1.2%	0.12%	n/a	24.3%	75.2%
…Guoluo (Golok) TAP	215,573	33,891	18.7%	1.73%	n/a	29.7%	93.4%
…Yushu TAP	425,199	46,760	12.4%	1.17%	n/a	31.4%	96.9%
…Haixi M&TAP	468,216	-21,122	-4.3%	-0.44%	n/a	18.7%	34.0%
Sichuan			4.1%	0.40%	0.33%	16.1%	6.1%
…Aba T&QAP	822,587	-76,121	-8.5%	-0.88%	n/a	18.9%	75.4%
…Ganzi TAP	1,107,431	15,559	1.4%	0.14%	n/a	23.0%	81.8%

Source: same as Figure 1 and the respective prefectural communiqués.

In this and subsequent tables, the youth dependency ration (i.e., the proportion of the population aged 0-14 years old) is used as a rough proxy for NPIR data (which are not available for these prefectures). This follows the demographic logic that younger population structures result from higher NPIRs (high fertility with low mortality). In contrast, migrants in Tibetan areas (especially Han migrants) are mostly in the adult working age range, have very low fertility, generally do not settle, and keep their children in their sources of emigration. They would therefore not register in the youth dependency ratio but instead would tend to depress it and

[8] For instance, see earlier evidence of this in Iredale et al (2003), Fischer (2004, 2008, 2014), Ma and Lhundup (2008), and Ma (2011).

[9] Gansu had a per capita GDP of 31,336 yuan in 2018, less than half the national average of 64,644 yuan, $4,490 USD and $9,260 USD respectively, converted at the average nominal exchange rate for 2018 of 6.98 yuan/USD (tables 3.1 and 3.9 from the 2019 China Statistical Yearbook).

enhance the adult working age bulge in the early stages of population ageing (the so-called 'demographic dividend').

The strongest population growth was in the two remotest prefectures in Qinghai, namely Guoluo (Tib. Golok) and Yushu, both of which are almost entirely Tibetan in 2010 and do not border any non-Tibetan areas (although Yushu technically borders Xinjiang on its far western edge). Given that the age structures in Guoluo and Yushu are among the youngest in China (and the youth dependency ratio did not decrease since the 2010, but even increased slightly in Guoluo), it is clear that their population growth rates have been driven by relatively high NPIRs among local Tibetans. The effects of net migration would have been marginal to this. If anything, net migration would have probably been negative, as is evident in the case of Yushu with its younger population but more moderate growth rate than Guoluo.

The less remote prefectures that border Han areas and that have lower minority shares and older population structures – Haibei, Hainan and Haixi in Qinghai, Gannan in Gansu, and Aba and Ganzi in Sichuan – exhibit low or negative population growth, closer to their respective provincial trends. The intermediate case is Huangnan (Tib. Malho) TAP, which is relatively close to the capital of Xining and is an important educational and cultural centre in the region, was mostly minority in 2010 (with a strong presence of Muslims in one county), but with a slightly lower youth dependency ratio and a more moderate population growth rate than Guoluo.

The population decline in Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai is particularly interesting given that it was the location of the controversial resettlement scheme in the Tsaidam Basin of western Qinghai in the late 1990s and early 2000s – euphemistically known as 'The Qinghai Project' (IBRD/IDA 2000). The World Bank withdrew its funding after a concerted campaign by the Tibetan Government in Exile and International Tibet Support Groups, who alleged that it was promoting PRC population-transfer policies (see Mallaby 2006). The government proceeded with its plans in any case, in support of the expanding petroleum and mining extraction in the basin, as part of its broader western development strategies (see Fischer 2002, 2005, 2008). The population of this prefecture in the 2010 census was about two-thirds Han Chinese, following strong in-migration in the 1990s and 2000s, especially around the rapid growth of Golmud City, the centre of the prefecture mining industry. The reversal and decline of the prefecture population in the 2010s might have been related to difficulties in the mining sector following the collapse of international prices from 2013 onwards, leading to China's first offshore default in 20 years in 2019, when a Qinghai state-owned aluminium producer failed to make payment on its US-dollar bond in Hong Kong.[10] However, it might also reflect more generally that the labour demands of the increasingly capital intensive mining and petroleum industries have been insufficient to overcome the strong tendency for out-migration from such sparsely-populated and remote peripheral regions, which tend to reassert themselves over time.

Although ethnic breakdowns are not provided in the 2020 communiqués of these prefectures, minority (especially Tibetan) shares would have increased given that outmigration would have been stronger among the Han and Hui Muslims in these prefectures, as noted above with respect to provincial trends. This is especially evident in the prefectures that border Han Chinese regions. In these limitrophe cases, population decline is predominant in the lower altitude counties on the eastern edge of these prefectures, that are well integrated with the capital cities of these provinces, where minority population shares are lower and age structures older

[10] Gabriel Wildau and Don Weinland (2019). 'Landmark offshore default by Chinese state company sparks worry.' *Financial Times* 26 February 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/45270b1c-3984-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0

(often very old, suggesting that they might even play a role of providing retirement community options, such as for Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan). In contrast, the more remote counties that are mostly Tibetan and younger generally exhibit strong population growth. The exceptions are the prefecture seats, which have been focal points for localised migration including resettlement, consolidated schooling, and other factors or opportunities conditioning urbanisation.

TABLE 3
Selected population data from Gannan, Ana and Ganzi autonomous prefectures

	Population 2020	Change since 2010 (people)	Change (%)	Annualised change	Proportion aged 0-14 (2020)	Minority share in 2010
Gannan TAP	691,808	2,676	0.39%	0.04%	22.4%	61.3%
Hezuo City	112,173	21,883	24.2%	2.2%	19.1%	68.2%
Lintan County	127,387	-9,614	-7.0%	-0.7%	23.1%	29.4%
Zhuoni County	95,387	-5,135	-5.1%	-0.5%	22.7%	70.9%
Zhouqu County	125,367	-6,741	-5.1%	-0.5%	21.7%	34.5%
Diebu County	52,192	26	0.0%	0.0%	20.7%	87.4%
Maqu County	57,076	2,331	4.3%	0.4%	28.1%	92.2%
Luqu County	35,871	241	0.7%	0.1%	23.7%	90.9%
Xiahe County	86,355	-315	-0.4%	0.0%	22.9%	86.9%
Aba T&QAP	822,587	-76,121	-8.5%	-0.9%	18.9%	75.4%
Wenchuan County	82,971	-17,800	-17.7%	-1.9%	14.7%	56.4%
Li County	36,926	-9,630	-20.7%	-2.3%	13.9%	78.5%
Mao County	95,361	-9,468	-9.0%	-0.9%	16.7%	93.5%
Songpan County	66,937	-5,372	-7.4%	-0.8%	17.3%	65.7%
Jiuzhaigou County	66,055	-15,339	-18.8%	-2.1%	16.9%	31.7%
Jinchuan County	58,068	-7,908	-12.0%	-1.3%	14.7%	77.9%
Xiaojin County	64,813	-12,918	-16.6%	-1.8%	14.5%	66.3%
Heishui County	44,564	-16,140	-26.6%	-3.0%	15.3%	89.9%
Markang County	58,390	-47	-0.1%	0.0%	14.5%	76.9%
Rangtang County	44,679	5,506	14.1%	1.3%	30.7%	93.9%
Aba County	80,467	8,076	11.2%	1.1%	26.8%	94.1%
Zoige County	76,712	2,093	2.8%	0.3%	23.6%	93.6%
Hongyuan County	46,644	2,826	6.4%	0.6%	26.9%	82.7%
Ganzi TAP	1,107,431	15,559	1.4%	0.1%	23.0%	81.8%
Kangding County	126,785	-3,357	-2.6%	-0.3%	15.3%	61.5%
Luding County	84,204	818	1.0%	0.1%	16.5%	17.9%
Danba County	49,872	-9,824	-16.5%	-1.8%	14.6%	79.3%
Jiulong County	53,738	-8,395	-13.5%	-1.4%	23.3%	65.0%
Yajiang County	51,162	937	1.9%	0.2%	19.4%	89.4%
Daofu County	53,378	-2,018	-3.6%	-0.4%	21.7%	91.0%
Luhuo County	47,185	627	1.3%	0.1%	24.8%	88.9%
Ganzi County	72,698	4,175	6.1%	0.6%	23.9%	94.3%
Xinlong County	45,698	-4,695	-9.3%	-1.0%	28.9%	92.9%
Dege County	88,542	7,039	8.6%	0.8%	28.4%	97.3%
Baiyu County	59,524	3,234	5.7%	0.6%	23.2%	95.8%
Shiqu County	103,633	22,799	28.2%	2.5%	33.4%	98.0%
Seda County	64,681	6,075	10.4%	1.0%	27.9%	95.5%
Litang County	67,293	-1,753	-2.5%	-0.3%	27.8%	93.5%
Batang County	49,967	1,318	2.7%	0.3%	22.4%	94.3%
Xiangcheng County	31,407	-1,763	-5.3%	-0.5%	16.9%	88.2%
Daocheng County	32,916	1,803	5.8%	0.6%	18.5%	93.0%
Derong County	24,748	-1,461	-5.6%	-0.6%	19.3%	94.8%

Source: the communiqués of the respective prefectures and the detailed 2010 census tabulation (for the minority shares).

This is demonstrated in Table 3, including Gannan in Gansu, and Aba and Ganzi in Sichuan, for which county-level data is available from their prefecture communiqués. Underlying the stable prefecture population in Gannan, for instance, were large declines in the populations

of three eastern counties bordering non-Tibetan areas, two of which had low minority shares in 2010. Moderate growth occurred in pastoral Maqu (Tib. Machu), the most remote county with the highest minority (mostly Tibetan) share. Maqu was also by far the youngest population of the prefecture, corresponding with higher fertility as still commonly observed in pastoral areas, and the NPIR would have been high enough to compensate out-migration from the county. Meanwhile, the strongest population growth by far was in Hezuo City, the prefecture seat. Given the lower youth dependency ratio, this would have been largely due to net in-migration, probably dominated by migration from the other counties of the prefecture.

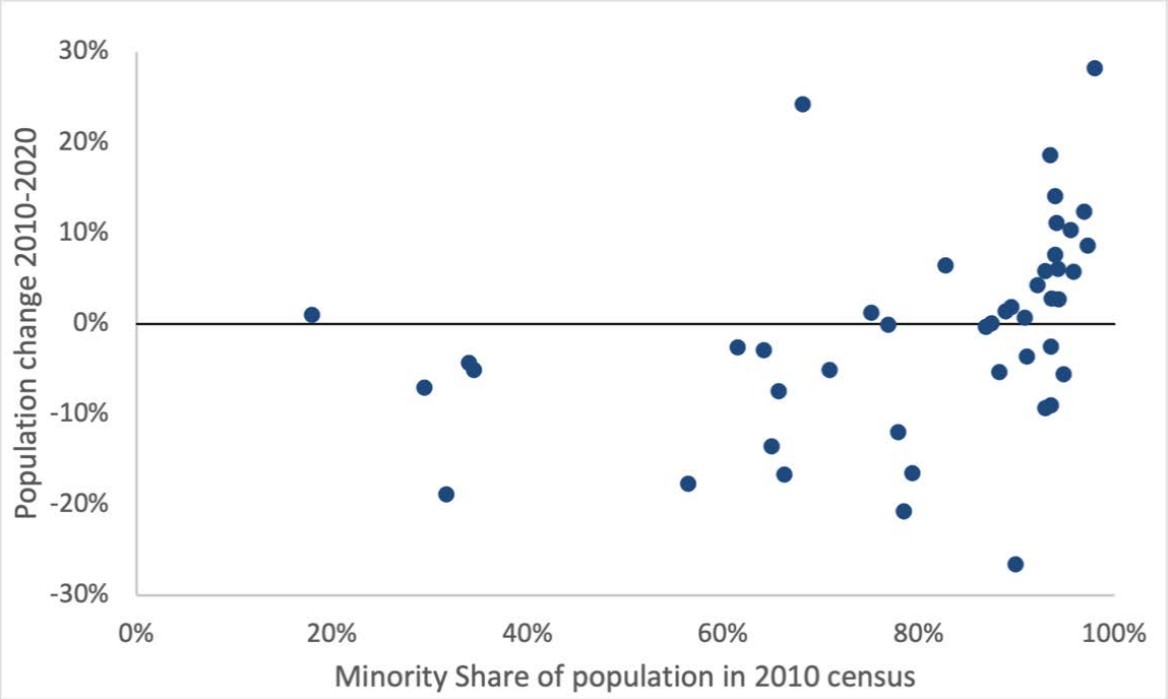
The strongest fall in population across all the Tibetan prefectures occurred in the Aba (Tib. Ngawa) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. In this case, there was a sharp differentiation between the eastern counties with much higher Han shares and much older populations, versus relatively strong growth in the more remote, definitively Tibetan counties with high minority (mostly Tibetan) shares and younger populations (Rangtang and Aba Counties, and to a lesser extent Zoige and Hongyuan Counties). Among the former, a notable example is Wenchuan County, which was the epicentre of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan – in a Tibetan autonomous county even though most of the casualties were Chinese, living in the lower altitude eastern edge of the county where population is also much denser. The renowned tourist destination of Jiuzhaigou also experienced a very sharp drop in population of almost 19 percent over the decade. The very low youth dependency ratios in these counties (and, correspondingly, the high old-age shares, not shown here) suggest that these are classic cases of counties with both low fertility and predominantly elderly populations due to strong out-migration of working-age adults. There are also a few anomalies, such as Mao County, with a very high minority share of 93.5 percent but strong population decline. In this case, the high minority share is mostly comprised of the Qiang minority group, who are demographically more similar to the Han than to the Tibetans in the western side of the prefecture, and the county is located on the very eastern edge of the prefecture, well integrated to Chengdu, the provincial capital. Similarly, the very sharp fall in the population of neighbouring Heishui County, with a high minority share but low youth dependency ratio, also probably has a locally specific explanation.

The patterns are broadly similar in Ganzi Prefecture. However, in this case, the population surged by 28 percent in the very remote Shiqu County, at the north-western edge of the prefecture, bordering Golok and Yushu in Qinghai and sharing similar attributes, with a minority share of 98 percent in 2010 (mostly Tibetan). The young population structure – one of the youngest in China – suggests that this was due to relatively high NPIRs and fertility rather than in-migration. Relatively strong growth was also registered in Seda (Tib. Serthar) County, which is well known in the region for the expansive Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute that authorities have partially demolished on several occasions. In contrast, even Kangding (Tib. Dartsedo) County, one of the main gateways into Ganzi on the eastern edge of the prefecture, experienced a mild population decline, despite being the prefecture seat and having been converted to a county-level city during the decade (Yeh and Makley 2019), and often studied as a crucial case of urbanisation in these Tibetan areas (e.g., Nyima 2010). Other local variations deserve further attention – such as Daofu or Litang Counties, both with high minority (mostly Tibetan) shares but mild population decline – although they broadly fit the general picture of being more integrated counties exhibiting low or negative population growth, closer to their respective provincial trends.

Figures 2 and 3 summarise these observations with scatter plots of these 39 counties as well as the six autonomous prefectures of Qinghai. Figure 2 clearly shows that counties with population decrease are spread across the full range of minority shares, while those with strong population growth were mostly concentrated among the counties or prefectures with very high minority shares in 2010 (in most cases mostly Tibetan). Figure 3 plots population change with the youth dependency ratio in the 2020 census, which has an even tighter correlation. This clearly indicates that – with a few exceptions – higher population growth in the minority

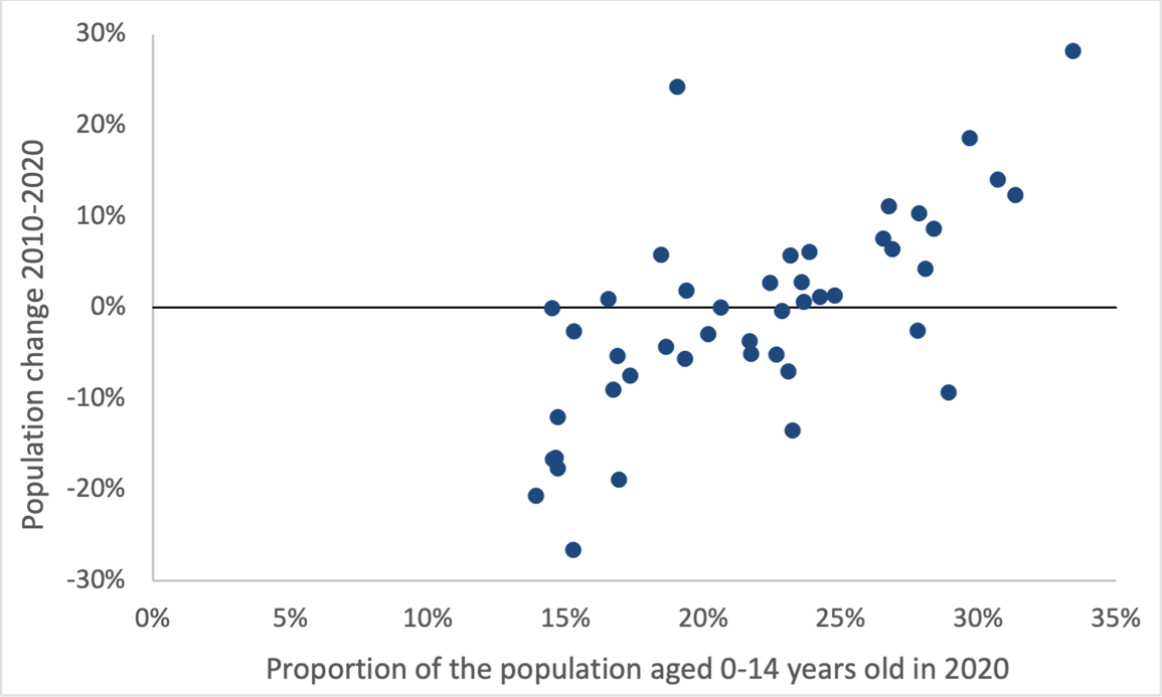
(Tibetan) dominated counties would have been largely driven by higher fertility and NPIRs, rather than by in-migration.

FIGURE 2
Population Changes and Minority Shares in the TAPs of Qinghai and TACs of Gannan, Aba and Ganzi



Source: same as above.

FIGURE 3
Population Changes and Youth Dependency Ratios in the TAPs of Qinghai and TACs of Gannan, Aba and Ganzi



Source: same as above.

2 The TAR (or Lhasa) exception

The only exception to the rule is the Tibet Autonomous Region (entirely composed of Tibetan areas and often considered as 'Tibet' but constituting only about half the indigenous Tibetan areas and population in China). However, the exception is only with respect to rising Han shares, not with respect to other dynamics. While the data from the TAR communiqué is more limited than the others, we can still observe – as summarised in Table 4 – that the strong provincial growth of almost 2 percent a year was almost half due to the very rapid growth of Lhasa, which grew by almost 4.5 percent a year (or 55 percent over the decade, after roughly doubling in 2000s). This was clearly due to strong in-migration, especially that fertility rates and NPIRs would have been lower in Lhasa than in the other prefectures given the much higher share of Han migrants in Lhasa. Nyingchi and Ngari also had rapid growth of over two percent a year, reflecting that both are strategic locations with significant military presence, given that both contain or border disputed territories with India (note, however, that military personnel are not included in the census data, so these data would only reflect civilian migrants). Nyingchi is also known as having a more temperate climate and lower altitude, which makes it popular for Han migrants, as reflected in its lower minority share in 2010, similar to that of Lhasa. It is also clear from the minority shares that, up to 2010, Han migration was heavily concentrated in Lhasa (and to a lesser extent Nyingchi). Given the above observations, it is likely that this continued.

Otherwise, the other four prefectures exhibited population growth as would be expected according to the fertility rates and NPIRs observed among rural Tibetans, among the highest in China. In other words, the TAR exception of rising Han shares due to net in-migration was more precisely a Lhasa exception, reflecting the very peculiar characteristics of this highly securitised and massively subsidised administrative capital of the TAR.

TABLE 4
Selected population data from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)

	Population 2020 (people)	Change since 2010 (people)	Change (%)	Annualised change	NPIR average 2010-19	Proportion aged 0-14 (2020)	Minority share in 2010
TAR	3,648,100	645,934	21.5%	1.97%	1.05%	24.5%	91.8%
Lhasa	867,891	308,468	55.1%	4.49%	n/a	n/a	78.4%
Shigatse	798,153	94,861	13.5%	1.27%	n/a	n/a	96.3%
Changdu	760,966	103,461	15.7%	1.47%	n/a	n/a	96.1%
Nyingchi	238,936	43,827	22.5%	2.05%	n/a	n/a	82.7%
Shannan	354,035	25,045	7.6%	0.74%	n/a	n/a	94.4%
Nagqu	504,838	42,457	9.2%	0.88%	n/a	n/a	97.2%
Ngari	123,281	27,816	29.1%	2.59%	n/a	n/a	92.3%

Source: the TAR communiqué.

Yet even despite a doubling of the Han share over two decades, the relatively low Han share of just over 12 percent in 2020 will still probably be greeted with incredulity by those who claim the government has been swamping the local population with Han in-migrants. However, it is important to recall that the census was conducted on 1 November (as it was in 2010 and 2000, but not in 1990, when it was conducted in July). This is well after the tourist season ends (which itself was probably much smaller in 2020 than in previous years due to COVID19). The Han Chinese population obviously swells in the summer months with tourism (as with all tourist destinations), which is also when the population is most visible to outsiders (including to the annual government guided tours for journalists, which is when most reporting on the TAR happens). In other words, the census count represents the year-round non-military Han Chinese resident population and, as such, might well be credible (see this point also in Fischer 2004, 2008; Yeh and Henderson 2008).

Moreover, we know from previous censuses that the Han are concentrated in the urbanized core of Lhasa and – to a much lesser extent, as noted above – a few other major towns, and very few reside in rural areas (Fischer 2004, 2008; Ma and Lhundup 2008; Yeh and Henderson 2008; Ma 2011). But that is precisely why they are so sensitive – not because of their population share, but because they dominate economic opportunities in Lhasa and other urban centres, where they are also most visible. Indeed, it is notable in this sense that the perception and narrative of Han population swamping in Tibet is essentially Lhasa-centric, which stands out as the exception – an important culturally and politically symbolic exception, but an exception nonetheless – across a vast region the size of western Europe.

3 Urban employment versus population shares

As noted above, it is also clear from past census data that this migrant population is predominantly male, of working age, and economically active, which magnifies their population share in urban employment many times over. For instance, the 6.1 percent Han share in the TAR in 2000 was effectively equivalent to more than 55 percent of total urban employment at that time (Fischer 2014, pp.117-8). Given the heavy concentration of Han migrants in the city centre of Lhasa, their share of employment there would have been even greater, and correspondingly less in the smaller secondary towns, besides perhaps in Bayi District (Tib. Chagyib District), the administrative seat of Nyingchi Prefecture. Similarly, the 8.2 percent Han share in 2010 would have still been equivalent to about 40 percent of total urban employment in that year, despite a more than doubling of the number of urban employed, from 226,000 people in 2000 to 531,000 people in 2010 (ibid). As I wrote then:

> Under these circumstances, the increasing share of the Han in the overall population, even though from a small base, placed a hugely disproportionate pressure on the expansion of urban employment opportunities, particularly considering that the Han tend to dominate the most lucrative of these opportunities. Again, the likely underestimation of the number and share of the Han in the 2010 census emphasizes the gravity of this situation (ibid).

The Han share of urban employment in the TAR might have again been slightly attenuated at the provincial level in the 2010s, given that the urban population almost doubled between the 2010 and 2020 censuses – from 680,589 to 1,303,443 people (as reported in the TAR communiqué) – whereas the Han population only increased by 80 percent. The Tibetan population structure would have also aged with falling fertility, meaning that more of them would have been economically active. However, the detailed census data is required to evaluate this, especially for Lhasa, given that much of the increased urban population would have been in secondary towns, whereas the Han population increase was concentrated in Lhasa.

Hence, as I argued in the past (Fischer 2004, 2008, 2014) and is still evident now, the key issue around Han in-migration to the Tibetan areas in China more generally is not about population swamping given that Han shares are decreasing in most areas. Rather, it is about their economic dominance at a key moment of socio-economic transition for local Tibetans, particularly given their strong competitive advantages over local Tibetans. The confluence of Han migration with the rapid urbanisation of local Tibetans thereby generates considerable exclusionary pressures for Tibetans within urban employment, across all levels of the labour hierarchy. Moreover, these pressures can arguably persist even when Chinese population shares are declining if urban employment opportunities do not keep up with the needs of the rapidly urbanising local population. These subtleties need to be assessed to have a better understanding of the grievances that in-migration might exacerbate in such contexts.

Regarding competitive advantages, Han migrants have much higher education attainments on average than locals and are obviously fluent in Chinese, whereas Chinese is a second language

for Tibetans that until recently they only seriously studied and gained proficiency at the secondary school level (this is especially the case in the TAR although perhaps less so in some parts of eastern Tibet that have had longer experiences of assimilation, especially in Sichuan). These educational and linguistic attributes augment the competitive advantages of Han migrants in the urban contexts dominated by state and non-local entities with clear Chinese linguistic and cultural biases.

In contrast, the census results also confirm previous survey data that illiteracy has remained much higher among Tibetans than other regions in China, especially in the TAR. For instance, the 2019 national population survey measured an illiteracy rate of 33 percent in the TAR (for the population 15 years old and older). This was higher than in the 2010 census, when illiteracy was 32 percent, although the composition of the latter would have included a higher share of Han migrants than the surveys. The 2015 survey that took a large sample of approximately 1.5 percent of the national population similarly measured a rate of 37 percent. In other words, illiteracy had barely improved over the decade despite now decades of government education campaigns claiming to address this. Similarly, in the 2020 census, 34 percent of the population (presumably aged 6 years and older) did not have any schooling and an additional 32 percent only had a primary level of education – rates that again had not substantially changed since the 2010 census (e.g., the no-schooling rate in 2010 was 40 percent; see Fischer 2014, p.261).

These rates in the 2020 census were not as severe in the eastern Tibetan areas although they were still quite high – much higher than their respective provincial averages. For instance, the proportion of the population aged 6 and older with no schooling in prefectures in Qinghai that are said to have strong education traditions (e.g., see Zenz 2013), such as Huangnan or Hainan, was 25 percent and 20 percent respectively. In more remote prefectures such as Guoluo and Yushu, it was 22 percent and 32 percent respectively.

While this speaks to the failure of government policy in these areas, especially in the TAR, it also speaks to the urgent imperative for training and preferential employment programmes tailored to the specific needs of such a population. In this regard, preferential recruitment policies have been traditionally designed to address disadvantages at the upper level of the labour hierarchy (e.g., in public employment), as recently researched in Fischer and Zenz (2018). However, vocational education and state-mediated employment at the lower strata of the employment hierarchy remain a paramount development priority for most Tibetans.

The irony of recent claims of forced or coerced labour in the TAR – based on the observation of increased vocational training and the association of this with analogous vocational training in Xinjiang (Zenz 2020) – is that such vocational training and state-mediated job placements in Tibetan areas are sorely needed for non-elite Tibetans. I have advocated this for two decades (e.g., Fischer 2002, 2005, 2009, 2014). Other scholars such as Childs et al (2011) and Goldstein et al (2003, 2008, 2010) have studied the evolution of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for rural Tibetans in the TAR (specifically in Shigatse Prefecture) and noted the positive role of such vocational and related policies in these rural areas. Nonetheless, vocational training in the TAR has been, until recently, massively undersupplied relative to elsewhere in China (Fischer 2014, p.158-61), exhibiting the sheer maladjustment of the education system in these areas dominated by public security concerns vis à vis the educational needs of the non-elite local population.

From this perspective, the allegations of forced/coerced labour in the TAR are a distraction from these paramount development issues. Barnett (2021) has convincingly debunked these allegations as drawing a false equivalence with the situation in Xinjiang (which also requires a careful evaluation of the highly politicised evidence-making), although the narrative has already been set in the popular imagination on these issues, such that carefully nuanced critiques are always on the backfoot and wary of being deemed as appeasing Chinese policies. Nonetheless, it is important to qualify that the recent increase in vocational education is in principle a good thing

and indeed it is often quite popular among poorer Tibetans with lower levels of schooling attainment, insofar as it does not involve coercion and conforms to local employment preferences (such as training in mechanics and as drivers for men). Indeed, the alarm raised by Zenz (2020) regarding the militarised style of vocational training promoted in official documentation in the TAR also overlooks the fact that the military has long served as a pathway of employment, training and upward mobility for many rural Tibetans, as it does in many rural and/or minority communities in the United States and elsewhere.[11] State-mediated job placements also encourage or force employers to employ local Tibetans when they would otherwise prefer to hire migrant workers if left to their own devices, and as such, serve as a crucial element of preferential policies aimed at correcting or even reversing the inequalities, discrimination, and disadvantages faced by minorities in labour markets.

There is no doubt that cases of coercion and abuse exist within such systems of training and recruitment, as is also the case within workfare programmes or among migrant workers in the US, UK, or Europe. But to assume that such cases demonstrate a systematic policy of forced or coerced labour risks making false generalisations. If the broader context is being seriously misinterpreted along these lines (as appears to be the case in the TAR), this also risks undermining the evolution of state-mediated preferential employment policies, which have perhaps moved away from targeting ethnic identities but towards poverty targeting, as advocated by Ma (2007), with the same intention of addressing minority disadvantages given that minorities are disproportionately poor. The perverse effect of sanctioning government vocational and employment policies in this sense could ironically reinforce the position of hard assimilationists in the government who would prefer to do away with all vestiges of such policies.

It is also clear that the broader policy context has become increasingly assimilationist over the decade, including this shift away from ethnic targeting and towards poverty targeting, which is underlaid by an assimilationist agenda. However, this must also be qualified by the fact that Tibetans with no schooling or only primary levels of schooling – roughly two thirds of the population aged six and older in the TAR in 2020 – would essentially be monolingual Tibetan speakers (and it should be recalled that Tibetan as such has almost no relation to Chinese). The emphasis on Chinese language instruction in short-term vocational training programmes directed at them would at best be able to impart a basic level of Chinese proficiency (e.g., basic conversation, recognition of basic instructions, etc). There is a danger in this sense of both elite-bias and Lhasa-centricity within the narratives around these programmes and related population policies. Contentions around the intensification of Chinese-medium education in primary schools in Lhasa catering to relatively privileged government workers, for instance, needs to be put into context given that the Tibetan population is still, in the majority, rural, relatively poor and with low levels of schooling attainments.

Conclusion

In sum, despite concerns and narratives that have captured international headlines and channelled popular conceptions, Tibetans are not becoming a minority in their own land. With a few exceptions, they appear to be becoming gradually more dominant in most Tibetan areas. Even in the TAR, the exceptions appear to only apply to Lhasa and perhaps Nyingchi and Ngari, all highly securitised and the latter two of huge geopolitical and military significance for China given that the two fronts of the ongoing border conflicts with India are both located in these two prefectures. Otherwise, the rest of the prefectures in even the TAR exhibited population growth

[11] I especially noticed this during my fieldwork in the eastern Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Sichuan in the early 2000s.

that was roughly in accordance with what we would expect from natural population increase rates in the province, which would have been mostly driven by Tibetan rather than Han fertility.

Outside the TAR in the other half of Tibetan areas, the predominant pattern was falling Han shares. If trends continue, minorities will become the majority of Qinghai Province within a few years, with Tibetan and related groups making up about two thirds of these minorities (and indigenous Muslim groups the other third). This is also reflected by the fact that the lower altitude Han-dominated counties of the Tibetan prefectures in eastern Tibet typically exhibited sharp population declines, whereas more remote Tibetan-dominated counties generally exhibited population growth. The latter also had among the youngest population structures in China, strongly suggesting that growth was not due to in-migration but instead to some of the highest levels of fertility and natural population increase rates in China.

These insights confirm earlier analyses (e.g., Fischer 2004, 2008, 2014) that the dominant structural trend facing these relatively poor peripheral areas is net outmigration, not net in-migration, which is stronger among the Han than among minorities, hence leading to a tendency for rising minority shares in the contemporary era. Such tendencies only appear to be counteracted by extremely high levels of subsidisation, as observed in the TAR. Hence, the only exception to this dominant structural trend is in the urban centres of the TAR – Lhasa in particular – given the extreme intensity of subsidisation there. This compensates for the tendency of outflows but at a hefty cost, which the government is probably willing to bear given the heightened geopolitical and military sensitivity of this border region with India. However, in the absence of such intense subsidisation, the trends in other Tibetan areas conform to the logical dynamics facing poor peripheral regions, that is, net population outflows towards more central locations. In the 2010s, this even occurred in areas that were previously the focus of alleged population transfer policies and intensive resource extraction, such as Haixi Prefecture in Qinghai. Indeed, these dynamics might even be occurring in the TAR outside of Lhasa and a few other urban centres of strategic government interest (or at the very least, Han shares are probably not rising in these locations).

These insights highlight how population dynamics need to be carefully differentiated inside Tibet, even inside the TAR, but also from other regions in China such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Area. Xinjiang similarly has net migration inflows and a rising Han share, but with less extreme subsidisation than the TAR, although the context there is different, with a much stronger productive economy and corporate sector than in most Tibetan areas. Along with other observations from the census, such as with regard to illiteracy rates and education levels in the population, these insights also highlight some of the paramount development issues in the Tibetan areas with regard to disadvantages and exclusion in urban employment, the implications of which might actually run counter to the logic underlying recent allegations of forced or coerced labour in Tibet.

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