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Changing Population Characteristics in Tibet, 1959 to 1965

MICHAEL FREEBERNE

Chinese statistics of any description have been so rare during the last five years, following the first two years of the Second Five-Year Plan (1958–62) and the great leap into statistical chaos, that even the fragmentary figures, indicating a population increase in Tibet, are of special interest.¹

Just as the national census of 1953 was intimately associated with the general elections and the need to obtain an up-to-date register of voters, so the present count of the population of Tibet is connected with the recent local elections, at township and county level.² The census may be regarded also as a further indication that the authorities are planning to take another step forward along the road to collectivization, as it is reported that the existing mutual aid teams are inadequate.³

A population of 1,273,969 was recorded for Tibet and Chamdo together, as of 30th June 1953. Apart from the report under discussion, the latest year-end figure, for 1957, was reduced to 1,270,000.⁴ According to the NCNA statement of 20th August 1965, the Tibetan population declined still further to 1,180,000, including the 310,000 inhabitants of the Chamdo Area, by 1959. This represented a 7·4% decrease between 1953 and 1959. (See Table 1.)

In the official doctrinaire explanation the sharp decline in population, which ran contrary to the national trend, is attributed to the prevalence of feudal serfdom. 'Cruel persecution and oppression of the labouring people by the ruling classes was the root cause for the decline in population. The serfs and slaves had to do corvée labour like beasts of burden. Many of them were prohibited from getting married or having children. The heavy work for women after birth, and epidemic diseases were among the reasons for the shrinking population.'⁵ No mention is made, however, of the state of intermittent civil war which has existed since the Chinese entered Tibet in 1951, and the flight of refugees which occurred especially after the 1959 uprising.⁶

Serfdom was abolished under the democratic reform of 1959, and according to the Chinese this was the chief factor leading to the increase in population since 1960 recorded in Table 1.

Between 1959 and 1960 the number of Tibetans increased by 17,000, from 1,180,000 to 1,197,000. By 1965 there were 124,500 more Tibetans than in 1960, making a total of 1,321,500.

¹ NCNA, Lhasa, 20th August 1965.

² *Peking Review*, 13th August 1965.

³ Lhasa Radio, 5th and 8th August 1965.

⁴ *Ten Great Years*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1960.

⁵ NCNA, Lhasa, 20th August 1965.

⁶ In his book, *My Land and My People*, 1962, the Dalai Lama states: 'After I left my country about 60,000 Tibetans followed me into exile . . .', p. 202; he also refers to a total population of 'seven or eight million Tibetans . . .', p. 200. It is not clear whether the 7–8 million refers to Tibetans living in Tibet alone, or in the whole of China, but the Dalai Lama's figure is much higher than the 2·8 million Tibetans recorded as living mainly in Tibet, Szechwan and Chinghai, in the 1953 census.

TABLE I. *Population of Tibet 1947 to 1965*

1947 ^(a)	1,000,000
1953 ^(b)	1,273,969
1957 ^(c)	1,270,000*
1959 ^(d)	1,180,000
1960 ^(d)	1,197,000
1965 ^(d)	1,321,500

^(a) *China Yearbook* (1948).

^(b) 1953 Census.

^(c) *Ten Great Years*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1960.

^(d) NCNA, Lhasa, 20th August 1965.

* The population was given as 1,270,000 as recently as 1964, 'the vast majority being Tibetans . . .'; Jen, Yu-ti, *A Concise Geography of China*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1964.

The NCNA release gives the number of families in 1960 as 230,000, which would give an average family size of 5.2 persons compared with 274,000 families in 1965, showing a reduction in average family size to 4.8 persons.

The annual increase in the number of Tibetans was only 17,000 in 1959–60 compared with an average annual increase in the last five years of 24,900. This gives a rate of increase of only 1.4% in 1959–60 compared with a 2.0% average in the last five years, during which the population had increased by 10.4%.

The Chinese account of the reasons for the increase in population is of considerable significance. With the abolition of serfdom 'all serfs and slaves were given land, grain and animals during the democratic reform in 1959', with the result that 'grain per person in the whole of Tibet was 36.4% more last year (1964) than in 1959'. Again, 'after the democratic reform, the People's Government helped all the former slaves, about 5% of Tibet's population, and large numbers of homeless serfs to settle down'.⁷ Moreover, it is claimed that 'the improved life of the people, the rapid growth of agriculture and livestock breeding, and the widespread distribution of medical facilities are factors in the increase. . . . One hundred and sixty-four modern medical establishments have been set up in Tibet since liberation. Free medical treatment is available. Much work has been done in the past few years to bring smallpox, typhoid fever, venereal diseases and other prevalent infectious diseases under control. Government reliefs for big families, new methods of child delivery and the spread of child-care and health work have all brought down the infantile mortality rate in Tibet'.⁸

Whereas this account of demographic trends is obviously highly coloured, nevertheless important patterns are revealed and it is in line with a number of similar, current official Chinese reports concerning general economic conditions and living standards. For example, three brief summaries describe the development of industry in Tibet and its effect upon settlement; and the changing urban morphology of Tibet's two largest cities, Lhasa and Shigatse.

⁷ Compare: 'At the time of the 1959 reform, nomads wandering the countryside numbered tens of thousands. To-day they are living in settled communities on their own farmland with homes and livestock.' (NCNA, 14th March 1965.)

⁸ NCNA, Lhasa, 20th August 1965.

There was no industry in Tibet before 1950. Now it is claimed that there are 67 factories, and that the Autonomous Region produces electricity, coal, farm tools, cement, machine accessories, milled timber and certain light industrial goods. In particular, 'the growth of the building industry has . . . brought about the rise of dozens of new towns on the Tibetan plateau in the past fifteen years'.⁹

Lhasa is said to have acquired a new skyline since 1959. 'New industrial districts, with many modern factories, have been put up on former wasteland or marshes around Lhasa. A new power station now lights 95% of Lhasa's houses, turns the machines in factories and powers pumps to irrigate the farmland on the outskirts.'¹⁰ Tap water is available to at least some of the population, and there is a 'children's palace' with 'film-showing auditorium, reading room, table tennis and other recreation rooms'.¹¹

Shigatse, too, has 'undergone a transformation. New houses have been built in the former slum area. New buildings, including an assembly hall, a hospital, a school and a bookstore, have sprung up along a new paved road. Hundreds of thousands of trees planted since 1959 have turned Shigatse into a city full of greenery. . . . The People's Government, by setting up a farm tools plant, a tannery and oil pressing mill, has set the local people an example in the technical transformation of handicrafts production.'¹²

One of the perplexing problems with regard to these latest figures of Tibet's population is that the figures listed for 1959, 1960 and 1965 in Table 1 refer only to the Tibetan population of Tibet, and no mention is made of the number of Chinese in Tibet; this point may also apply to the 1953 and 1957 figures. Unfortunately there are no reliable figures for the number of Chinese living or stationed in Tibet. As the writer of a recent, if strongly biased, article indicates: 'Estimates on the number of Chinese military and civilians in Tibet vary.' Patterson then states: 'Civilians are thought to total around five million. The *Sunday Statesman*, March 25th, 1962, estimated 300,000 men stationed in Tibet, 50,000 of them along the Sino-Indian border; in 1963 Jean-François Chauvel of *Le Figaro* reported 250,000 Chinese in Tibet; the *Hindustan Times* has quoted United States intelligence estimates of 60,000 men and an Indian estimate of 150,000 men. Some of the large discrepancies may be due to the inclusion or exclusion of figures on the militia forces. Khamba guerilla leaders estimate there are 300,000 Chinese military in all throughout Tibet.'¹³

Almost certainly Patterson exaggerates grossly the number of civilian Chinese in Tibet, although the People's Liberation Army may well total somewhere between 60,000 and 300,000. For example, another source claims: 'We saw no signs of a mass invasion of the country by civilian

⁹ NCNA, Lhasa, 21st August 1965.

¹⁰ NCNA, Lhasa, 19th August 1965.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² NCNA, Lhasa, 8th July 1965.

¹³ George N. Patterson, 'The "fish" in the "sea" of Tibet', *Current Scene*, 3, 23, Hong Kong, 15th July 1965, p. 10. Similarly a recent press report mentioned 'the presence of some 15 divisions of the Chinese army and nearly nine million immigrants', *Daily Telegraph*, London, 19th July 1965.

Chinese,' and states that Wang Yuen-hsiang, Director of the Tibetan State Bureau of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, 'told us that the total number of Chinese civilians in Tibet including women and children was about 40,000. It was not expected that this would increase very much because a great many technical experts of all kinds . . . were also badly needed in China proper.'¹⁴ The Gelders have no estimates of the military population, simply asserting that 'Lhasa is a garrison town and, apart from the western frontiers with India, the greatest concentration of troops is in this district.'¹⁵

As more than the accepted decade has passed since the 1953 census, it is possible that the release of population statistics for Tibet may be a forerunner of a complete set of national and regional figures. Rumours concerning a census conducted in 1964 have circulated widely. Two main arguments were suggested. First, if a census had been organized, then it could hardly have been carried out in secret because of the very nature of recognized census techniques; in other words, by now it would be known for certain if there had been a census. Secondly, assuming a census did take place, then if the results revealed a population of more than 700 million (and this is probably the case), then the Chinese would wish to keep the results secret anyway, presumably for strategic reasons. On the other hand, a recent edition of *Population*¹⁶ anticipates the publication of census materials. Assuming that in fact a census has been conducted during the past two years or so, then clearly the results would be essential for the adequate planning of the delayed Third Five-Year Plan, which began in January 1966. Furthermore, an early release of data might be expected, as being in keeping with the current optimism in economic spheres, especially following consistently improved harvests since 1961; with indications that a new leap forward is planned; and with the present pride in population numbers, now that birth control is less in evidence if not actually abandoned.¹⁷

¹⁴ Stuart and Roma Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 1964, p. 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Population*, 20, 3, 1965, pp. 478-513.

¹⁷ Michael Freeberne, 'Birth control in China', *Population Studies*, 18, 1, July, 1964. This last statement contrasts with the intriguing description from the Special Correspondent of *The Times* in Peking: '. . . one now sees few pregnant women. Everywhere there are masses of toddlers, but hardly an infant, which ties in neatly with the beginning two or three years ago of the Government's present restrictive population policy', *The Times*, London, 26th October 1965.