On the Road Again: roads as a governmental tool and benefit to development

China has come of age in many ways within the last few decades. The nation’s development has been a very visual one and can be seen throughout the country to this day. A large part of the visual evidence of China’s modernization and industrialization can be seen in roads. Progress can be seen in relation to the creation of roads throughout rural and urban China. Roads are the basic building blocks of development, as seen by Guardian reporters in Africa, and China is no different. Roads are ultimately beneficial to development – in creating industry and markets, increasing productivity throughout, and connecting rural and urban areas – but in China especially it is important to recognize a the different effects and benefits had in the promotion of differing types of roads in various areas. Similarly while roads have been beneficial in development and recognized as such by the Chinese government, they have also become a tool of control employed by the CCP within its borders.

In the initial stages, roads simply open up and connect previously isolated areas of the nation. Looking to Uganda, the Guardian stressed that building roads is exactly the kind of infrastructure project that is gives the landlocked country the best chance at regional economic integration, which is crucial to its development. Such efforts of regional integration are applicable to China today. A nation as large as China has provinces and areas that are landlocked, others bordering the ocean, and some bordering other countries. It is important for China to not only integration within its region of the world, but also integrate and connect areas within its own borders and roads have allowed just that. Now it is possible, as we did, for people to travel by bus from Kunming all the way to Shangri-la or traverse the 4,064 kilometer – or 2,525 mile – route from Lhasa to Beijing by train.
No longer are certain areas only accessible by foot or horse; now cars, trains, or motorcycles can boldly go where no cars have gone before. Tiger Leaping Gorge is a great example of this. In the late 1980s, the Yunnan provincial government started a new road project through the bottom of the gorge. This new road links Qiaotou and Yongke along the gorge (Hayes, 2007). This road has ushered in tourists and new opportunities for those living along the gorge, at the expense of the environment.
In examining roads as a tool of development the economic implications are central to the discussion. While research on the impact of road investments on economic growth and poverty reduction in China is a bit thin, general consensus supports the assumption that roads have a favorable impact on production and productivity as well as on poverty alleviation (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). Looking still to Tiger Leaping Gorge, families along the gorge that were interviewed stated that their children had been moving out of the area in search of opportunities beyond the gorge and in the three largest villages along the gorge there has been a small influx of outsiders attempting to capitalize on the growing influx of foreign and domestic tourists driving or hiking the gorge (Hayes, 2007). This road made it easier for those wanting to seek opportunity in other cities easier, while creating business opportunities and demand where previously there was none. Development of economic activity and roads seems to go hand in hand throughout China. Where roads go economic opportunities soon follow. Development of transportation infrastructure has uniquely effected China’s industrialization in that it has allowed it to reach further. Cities like Kunming and Dongguan have become boomtowns of economic activity. Dongguan has become a mecca for the rural young in search of opportunity. Factories fill this city and surrounding areas are connected by transportation infrastructure, facilitating a great migration of the young to these cities to work (Chang, 2008). Whichever came first – the chicken or the egg, roads or factories/economic activity – roads have become crucial to the maintenance of such activity.

Important to any economic development strategy in China is cultivation of tourism. Turn on a TV in China and wait until the next commercial break. Inevitably on the screen commercials for the different areas of China to be experienced will appear. Tourism is big money and its cultivation has become quite important throughout China. Yunnan province is a shining example within the Chinese tourism industry. In 1999, even before the official launch of the Open Up the West campaign, Yunnan was earning $350 million from tourism, 25 percent of the entire western region’s tourism income that year (Welcome to Paradise, Tim Oakes). By 2006 tourism accounted for 30 percent of total foreign currency earnings in Yunnan (Tapp, 2010). The development of the road along Tiger Leaping Gorge in recent years has further aided the development of tourism in Yunnan. The three largest villages in the gorge have seen increasing numbers of people coming in to try to take advantage of the growing numbers of tourists driving or hiking along the gorge (Hayes, 2007).

Similarly cities like Dali, Lijiang, Zhongdian (Shangri-la), and Yunnanyi are trying to take advantage of the presence of tourists. Looking to Dali and Lijiang there was a deliberate creation of tourist attractions. Both cities had “old” versions that were there for tourists. Old Dali and Old Lijiang were separated from the larger cities sharing their names and retained a traditional Chinese look about them. Buildings, while looking new, were in the style that many people expect from Chinese architecture. Shops peddling souvenirs lined the streets and tourists crowded in to enjoy a piece of what China “used to be”.
Zhongdian and Yunnanyi can be seen to aspire to the largess of Dali and Lijiang. Zhongdian, or as it is now called Shangri-la, is under construction to become the paradise represented in its new name. Shangri-la had many of the elements of Old Dali or Old Lijiang, but it was still in its youth as a tourist destination. In the few days we spent there the streets were rarely crowded and events like seven o’clock dancing in the square made it seem a bit less touristic. Yet the construction is still there, and the difference from the tourist district from the rest of the city is just as stark as in Lijiang or Dali. Yunnanyi is in its infancy in regards to developing as a tourist attraction. Construction of the village was everywhere. It seemed as though the only places not under construction were houses or the museums we went to visit. Everything was being revamped to attract the level of tourists that flocked to Dali, Lijiang, or even Shangri-la.

While both Yunnanyi and Shangri-la are in the process of developing themselves as a tourist attraction they are not equal in their popularity. It seems that this is in part due to poor access and marketing to Yunnanyi. While a very nice expressway passes near the village, the road leading into it is quite rough, narrow and not well marked. Yet in a few years, with the help of the construction and development of the town, Yunnanyi will be yet another tourist trap among the many trying to sell visions of old China.
Recently the CCP has prioritized development of roads, recognizing their positive effects. Since 1985 the Chinese government has given high priority to road development, more specifically to the construction of high-quality roads such as highways (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). The uneven promotion of urban road building rather than low-quality rural roads has been the pattern. It is important in the analysis of roads in China’s development to differentiate the types of roads in that they can have very different economic returns and impacts on poverty. In 2002 development of urban expressways has achieved an annual growth rate of 44 percent, while rural roads grew by an annual rate of only 3 percent (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). While the Chinese government initially devoted more resources in building roads to the coastal regions, recently its focus has shifted to western China. Location of the projects may have shifted, but the focus was still on urban expressways and highways. The aims of these projects were to connect all counties with highways and expand the length of the road network (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005).

Urban expressways were larger, fancier and receiving more attention than low-quality rural roads. Initially they garnered profitable marginal returns, yet as more and more investments were poured into these larger projects the marginal returns began to decline (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). Large expressways were still profitable, but becoming less so. Thus studies now show that low-quality rural roads have benefit-cost ratios for national GDP that are nearly four times greater than the benefit-cost ratios for high-quality urban roads (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). In terms of urban GDP, agricultural GDP, rural non-farm GDP low-quality roads generate higher returns as well as raise more rural and urban poor above the poverty line per yuan invested (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). It seems that now is the time to shift focus. Urban expressways have been the priority long enough and have been executed well. More low-quality rural road development is needed in many parts of rural China. Many villages we visited were making due with subpar roads. On two occasions the roads were too steep for some of the vans to drive up with all the passengers inside, requiring many to get out and walk or push the van for a bit. The technologies of cars, vans, and busses have reached the rural areas quicker than appropriate infrastructure. In these areas where roads have yet to catch up to the presence of motor vehicles, drivers have adapted their habits and practices on the road. Unbothered by the violently bumpy or narrow roads our drivers soldiered on. When the road looked to narrow to pass other cars, we passed other cars. When turns became perilously sharp, drivers sped around the bend with a honk. Despite the ease with which rural drivers deal with the subpar roads, investment in low-quality rural roads is needed.
Beyond the financial benefits low-quality rural roads have in comparison to urban roads, local use of roads in rural areas seems to also provide a benefit to the people. Throughout rural agricultural areas roads seemed to be used as a tool. Farmers spread wheat along the roads to be ran over and walked on to help in the threshing process. Construction of houses or businesses was aided by the extra storage space the roads seemed to offer the people. One of our guesthouses along Tiger Leaping Gorge was expanding and used the road as a place to store some materials and tools. Sean’s Guesthouse was benefiting economically and spatially from the road along the gorge.

In *Where the Dragon Meets the Angry River*, Edward Grumbine recounts a similar vision in Kunming’s initial stages of development. In its modernization was wrought with entire blocks of rubble, piles of old tile, brick, and wood, cranes and bulldozers. Roads in rural China are more than something to drive on. While many in these areas do not have use for these roads in the traditional sense, they have become tools integrated into daily life.
Large regional variations also exist in road infrastructure in China. Western China previously was poorly equipped with roads in comparison to central and coastal regions. In 2002 Tibet was one of the provinces with the worst road infrastructure, with a road density of only 33 kilometers per thousand square kilometers of land (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). It is also important to recognize the trade-off between growth and poverty reduction that differ based on region. Road investments, it was found, yield their highest economic returns in eastern and central China while their contributions to poverty reduction are greatest in western China (Fan and Chan-Kang, 2005). Thus it is important to have different regional priorities in constructing roads. As western areas like the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Yunnan province gained lucrative tourist business the importance of prioritizing them became apparent. With the Open Up the West campaign the CCP began to build roads, high-quality expressways still, connecting western China with Beijing. Tibet’s transportation infrastructure greatly benefitted in the creation of roads during the Open Up the West campaign.

To the left is the highway leading into Lhasa. To the right is the same highway further into the rural areas along the route that loops back to Lhasa. Regardless of proximity to the urban capital roads in Lhasa were some of the best we had seen. It wasn’t until we got far outside of Lhasa and up into the mountains that we went off the paved roads.

In the CCP’s quest to cultivate the west it seemed that this movement served as a reminder of its size. Throughout imperial China the size of the empire was an issue. Protecting dynastic China led to many safety measures such as the Great Wall. Looking to Yunnan province, the Yuan Dynasty was important for provincial history and development. After Kublai Khan realized the importance of the strategic location of Yunnan in 1252 he appointed a governor who carried out sweeping reforms, including building nearly 78 post roads (Shen, 2010). Thus Yunnan was put in the control of the central government and it had more political, economic, and cultural contracts with mainland China (Shen, 2010). Dynastic China realized the importance of roads in controlling and maintaining authority within its borders. Yunnan was brought under control and influence of the Yuan Dynasty largely because of the construction of roads.

The CCP’s dealings with Tibet today are not too different. The Open Up the West campaign is said to eventually redress “growing inequalities associated with market-oriented reforms and economic decentralization” (Oakes). Officially the government represents this campaign as a solution to the ills of rural China, yet the ultimate use of the roads in Tibet by the government tells a different story. An ultimate benefit to the creation of infrastructure within the TAR is increase control. Our arrival in Lhasa was preceded by two self-immolations, the first ever to occur in the capital of the TAR. These protests threatened our ability to enter the region, but we were allowed in. Leaving the airport in Lhasa was quite the awakening to the situation. Military lined the doors, checking people’s information. Each
The view from atop the Jokang Temple in Lhasa. In the distance at the front of the square is where the makeshift security check is. Also periodically a troop of military men would patrol around the square guns, fire extinguisher and all. The military made its presence known in Lhasa really fast after the self-immolations and religious buildings were largely the focus of their presence.

temple we went to in Lhasa had a large military presence, checking our bags at a makeshift entrance for lighters and the like.

Two days was all it took for Chinese authorities to swoop in, establish a presence, create makeshift security checks, and take control to quash any further protest. The roads in Lhasa and highways connecting surrounding areas were some of the nicest we had seen – and felt – thus far on the trip. The need to maintain contact and control within the TAR was very apparent throughout our visit. Convenient transportation promotes the economic prosperity and development and the social progress, which in turn, are conducive to political stability (Shen, 2010). Governmental policies can influence the west quicker and Beijing can respond to issues faster due to roads.

Transportation and communication are indispensable factors in social life and roads in China have increasingly had a positive effect in development (Shen, 2010). While the experience of traveling along roads in China was initially jarring, the connections created are apparent. Rapid growth and industrialization has caused economic disparities throughout China and roads have been an integral part in filling the gap. It is important to understand though, while current policies focusing on urban roads have been successful that now is the time to invest in low-quality rural roads. Similarly different priorities based on regional differences ought to guide Chinese road policy in the future. Roads in rural China have yet to fully catch up to the technology that is everywhere. If roads are to continue to have a positive effect on development in China a shift in approach needs to be made.