

Original article

Local development of Qinghai Province in the context of the New Silk Road

El desarrollo local de la provincia Qinghai en el contexto de La Nueva Ruta de la Seda

Desenvolvimento local na província de Qinghai no contexto da Nova Rota da Seda



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ABSTRACT

Territorial inequalities in the west of the People's Republic of China were evidence of extreme poverty in that region. With the implementation of a set of government programs, boosted by the New Silk Road initiative, this region has overcome the obstacles in order to report indicators that show the impact of such actions. The province of Qinghai is an example of this, showing encouraging indicators that demonstrate the importance of the transfer of technologies and state resources for the achievement of concrete sustainability objectives. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the impacts generated by the New Silk Road on local development in Qinghai province. For this purpose, it relies on scientific methods such as historical-logical and inductive-deductive, in a descriptive and analytical-exploratory type of research. The results reveal the significance of the implementation of the development program accompanying the New Road, while revealing the gaps that persist, from which actions are proposed to achieve a structural economic transformation in the province.

Keywords: local development; new silk road; impacts; Qinghai.

RESUMEN

Las desigualdades territoriales del occidente de la República Popular China fueron evidencia de la pobreza extrema de esa región. Con la puesta en marcha de un conjunto de programas gubernamentales, potenciados por la iniciativa de la Nueva Ruta de la Seda, esta región ha superado los obstáculos para referir indicadores que evidencian el impacto de tales actuaciones. La provincia de Qinghai es un ejemplo de ello, que muestra indicadores alentadores que manifiestan la importancia de la transferencia de tecnologías y recursos estatales para el logro de objetivos concretos de sostenibilidad. El objetivo del presente trabajo es evidenciar los impactos generados por la Nueva Ruta de la Seda en el desarrollo local de la provincia Qinghai. Para ello, se apoya en métodos científicos como el histórico-lógico e inductivo-deductivo, en una investigación de tipo descriptiva y analítico-exploratoria. Los resultados revelan la significación de la implementación del programa de desarrollo que acompaña a la Nueva Ruta, a la vez que se revelan las brechas que persisten, a partir de las cuales se proponen acciones para lograr una transformación económica estructural en la provincia.

Palabras clave: desarrollo local; nueva ruta de la seda; impactos; Qinghai.

RESUMO

As desigualdades territoriais no oeste da República Popular da China evidenciavam a extrema pobreza da região. Com a implementação de uma série de programas governamentais, impulsionados pela iniciativa da Nova Rota da Seda, essa região superou os obstáculos para apresentar indicadores que demonstram o impacto de tais ações. A província de Qinghai é um exemplo disso, apresentando indicadores encorajadores que demonstram a importância da transferência de tecnologias e recursos estatais para a realização de metas concretas de sustentabilidade. O objetivo deste documento é demonstrar os impactos da Nova Rota da Seda no desenvolvimento local da província de Qinghai. Ele se baseia em métodos científicos como o histórico-lógico e o indutivo-dedutivo, em um tipo de pesquisa descritiva e analítico-exploratória. Os resultados revelam a importância da implementação do programa de desenvolvimento que acompanha a Nova Rota e, ao mesmo tempo, revelam as lacunas que persistem, com base nas quais são propostas ações para alcançar uma transformação econômica estrutural na província.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento local; nova rota da seda; impactos; Qinghai.

INTRODUCTION

The western region of China, with an area of 5414 million km², covers 56.4% of the country's total (continental) land area, and comprises twelve regions, including provinces and autonomous regions. Bordered by eight countries: to the northeast by Mongolia, to the north by Russia, to the west by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and to the south by Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, it is the most culturally diverse, as it is here where the highest concentration of ethnic minorities is found. At the conclusion of the sixth population census of the People's Republic of China, which began on November 1, 2010, the western region had a population of approximately 640 million, or 48% of the total population of mainland China, and was home to 34.56% of the country's minority population, and was considered the most impoverished region in the country.

In September 2009, an economic cooperation agreement was signed between five western regions (Qinghai, Xinjiang, Tibet, Gansu, Shaanxi) to, among other priorities, jointly develop tourism in the provinces. In addition, since 2010, the National Western Tourism Talent Training Base was established in Sichuan Provincial Tourism Bureau and has since established itself as one of the four major tourism talent training bases established by the National Tourism Administration.

That is why the Chinese government, as part of the implementation of the Western Development Strategy, has attached great importance to tourism development in the West as one of the key points of the strategy, especially in the Silk Road extension areas where, for more than 20 years, the China National Tourism Administration has been developing (albeit timidly) initiatives for tourism promotion.

In parallel, hand in hand with the Western Development Strategy launched in 2000, the State has increased infrastructure construction along the New Silk Road, being accompanied by local governments for supporting service facilities. It is since then that tourism productivity has begun to take shape and, in that sense, resource development has been strengthened.

After several years of experimenting with assisted development plans in the west of the country, the promotion of tourism in the west as a strategy to boost the coordinated development of the economy -and of primary, secondary and tertiary industries, as well as environmental and cultural care- has

been presented as a friendly option that, at the very least, will strengthen integral autonomous development in the long term.

The objective of this paper is to show the impacts generated by the New Silk Road on local development in Qinghai province.

The research is considered important because it shows the achievements in terms of local development at the provincial level, in the context of the New Silk Road, recognizing possible measures to be implemented to overcome the gaps that still persist.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on a qualitative-quantitative, descriptive and analytical-exploratory approach. It is supported by general research methods such as historical-logical and inductive-deductive, which allowed identifying the impacts on local tourism development at the provincial level. The bibliographic analysis allowed the collection of information and the analysis of documentation issued by the governmental instances that propitiated the dialectic analysis that led to the results presented.

The theoretical foundation constitutes an approach to the understanding of the state programmatic framework for the use of tourism from its systemic and multi-scale dimension, through which cultural, social, environmental and economic components are integrated, which contribute to territorial development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Territorial inequalities in China. Government policies for their eradication

During the last forty years, the Chinese growth pattern has relied on high savings and investment rates and a high dependence on low value-added exports, a model that has generated structural problems, such as high pollution, increased inequality or underdevelopment of the country's western regions (Vázquez Rojo, 2021).

From the point of view of its geography, China's western region stands out for its enormous variations in terms of landscape and natural resources, however, it has been difficult to capitalize on this. Its considerable reserves of arable land, forests and grasslands have been noted, as well as its large

energy reserves -accounting for 40% of the nation's oil, 70% of its natural gas, 60% of its coal and 80% of its hydropower-, as well as the topographical complexities throughout the region which, in practice, have prevented the development of infrastructures that make possible the exploitation of all these resources, either due to the lack of a trained professional sector, or due to inadequacies in the management of the provincial government (Lahtinen, 2010).

Between the Qinghai-Tibet plateau in the southwest (the highest and most extensive in the world) and the vast low-lying basins with extensive deserts in Xinjiang in the northwest, half of China's poor have historically been found (Lahtinen, 2010). Poverty is most severe on the frontiers, where ethnic minorities reside - in 2005 the World Bank reported that it was precisely here that "the poorest of the poor" reside (World Bank, 2006), however, it is dispersed throughout the countryside, generally speaking, although its underlying causes vary from sub-region to sub-region. The following are usually mentioned as root causes (Maiza & Bustillo, 2016):

- the inconvenient geographical location
- the low level of urbanization and industrialization
- limited access to financial services, markets and value chains
- the low competitiveness of its economy and companies
- massive internal migration flows within China
- net loss of productive labor force in all sectors
- low levels of human capital

Likewise, their low economic growth rate and their low rate of impact on the national economy (in terms of foreign trade, exports, imports and foreign direct investment) have been historical, when compared with those of the rest of the country's regions. Based on reflections in this direction, Hu Angang summarized the disparities between regions with the phrase "one China, four worlds" (Ji & Wang, 2022).

Only in the 1980s, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita indices in the four regions did not show notable disparities (Li & Xu, 2008), however, by 1994 the regional gaps had become excessively large, hence the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report mentioned that China was making rational use of its national income, however, large disparities still persisted, with Qinghai and Tibet being the most disadvantaged regions. A noted index, moreover, was the unemployment rate of the disabled population, which was 46% at the time.

This situation led the XIV Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 1992 to present a series of regional development measures aimed at reducing the gap, but data from the fifth national census showed that, by 2000, the Western region was (once again) lagging behind the eastern region in many respects. Among these, the GDP per capita was only RMB¹ 9119, in contrast to the national average of RMB 15435 (Lahtinen, 2010).

The large economic and social gaps, together with the political instabilities that have characterized the region, as well as the implications of both factors for the shaping of its image (to the outside world) and national stability, are among the reasons why the development of the western part of the country has been a government priority since the triumph of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949.

It is the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) that marks the beginning of the western development policy of the new era, when one of the state priorities was to achieve balanced national development and the pursuit of heavy industry projects, mainly in the northwest. This policy would continue with the location of the so-called Third Front in the western region, in the period between 1965 and 1975, when, for national security reasons, the region became a favorite investment destination (Lahtinen, 2010). Finally, in 1999, Jiang Zemin propagated the initiative of "opening up the West" as the ultimate way to narrow the gap between Western China and the prosperous coastal area (Yeung & Shen, 2004).

The current Western region development strategy came to China with the beginning of the 21st century, when, in January 2000, the State Council announced the Western Development Strategy (*Xibu Da Kaifa*) as part of the CCP's strategy - endorsed in the X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV Five-Year Plans - to build *xiakokang*, a "well-off society," "with a view to advancing toward China's great national rejuvenation". To monitor development, the Leading Group of the State Council for the Development of Western China was established in January 2000, headed by the Premier himself and with membership composed of the heads of the ministries of Railways, Transportation, Construction, and Commerce (Cao et al., 2021).

According to the official document, the first stage would be carried out through massive investment in infrastructure and environmental protection. The second stage -the current one- from 2011 to

¹ The renminbi is the legal tender of the People's Republic of China.

2030, focuses on regional specialization and urbanization. And finally, in the third stage to run from 2031 to 2049, the entire Western region is expected to achieve modernization and thus, by mid-century, "western China will be economically prosperous, ecologically balanced, ethnically united, socially progressive and culturally advanced".

In summary, the objective of the strategy is to accelerate economic growth in the twelve underdeveloped units at the provincial level, in order to ensure China's overall growth to maintain social security and ensure the unity of the country.

The main axis of activity to be developed were established in terms of building infrastructure, urbanization, conservation of natural resources and the environment, and alleviation of rural poverty. To this end, not only government assets are taken into account, but links are increasingly being established with non-governmental companies, especially in the interest of involving them in the restructuring and upgrading of traditional industries and the development of high-tech industries in fields such as biology, general engineering and aerospace, renewable energies, new materials, electronic information processing and advanced manufacturing. These are systematized into four projects that serve as the basis for the strategy and are aimed at: 1) the diversion of water from south to north; 2) the transfer of natural gas from west to east; 3) the transmission of energy from west to east; and 4) the construction of a railroad via Qinghai-Tibet².

In May last year, the "Guiding Opinions of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council on Promoting the Development of the Western region in the New Era to Form a New Pattern" were released, a text that affirms the continuity of the Western development strategy through the issuance of 36 new measures that seek that, by 2035, the western region will have achieved standards in terms of basic public services, accessibility, infrastructure and life, roughly equivalent to those of the Eastern region. In official words, "the problem of unbalanced and insufficient development in the Western region remains significant, the task of consolidating poverty alleviation remains arduous, and the development gap with the eastern region remains large. The task of maintaining national

² Other strategies in support of this Development Plan have also been formalized, such as the publication of a new policy framework to promote the development of the western region through Foreign Direct Investment, during the conference "OECD-China. Foreign Investment in China and Regional Development," held in Xian in 2001.

unity, social stability and national security remains onerous, and a well-off society is still being built in all aspects" (CCP, 2021).

This important guiding text refers to the need to promote the reform of revenue sharing between the central and local governments in a steady and orderly manner. Since financial resources in the Western region are still relatively weak, it was determined to increase local government bond support for infrastructure construction and to include revenues from central government general transfer payments in the calculation of local government financial affordability, as well as to continue implementing preferential income tax policies for prioritized industries. In addition, grant general value added tax payer qualification to enterprises in the special customs control area that meet the conditions and needs of the western region, support commercial financing and cooperative financing, guide financial institutions to increase financial support for small and micro enterprises in the western region, implement regulatory policies such as loan renewal without repayment, due diligence and exemption, and increase support for qualified small and micro enterprises in the western region to renew loans under the premise of overall risk control. In addition, guide and encourage banking financial institutions to rationally allocate credit resources and increase support for poverty alleviation industries in impoverished western regions, among other measures.

It was also advised to intensify the opening up of the western region under the guidance of the joint construction of the Belt and Road and its active participation, which, on the other hand, takes into account the historical situation of the west and tries to put an end to the economic and social imbalance between regions that, despite the policies and incentives of the central government, has characterized the People's Republic of China.

Another central government policy that has impacted the development of the western region, specifically its rural areas, is the Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018-2022), issued in September 2018 by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, during the celebration of the 19th CCP National Congress. This national strategy is proposed as an alternative to the insufficient allocation of rural financial resources that has characterized Chinese finance. In its first five years, it aims to form a joint force in the rural financial market, expand the scope of services and optimize service models, expand capital inflow channels, improve the investment guarantee system, and innovate investment and financing mechanisms. Among other specific items, this strategy establishes new objectives, new missions and new requirements for leisure agriculture and rural tourism, the latter being understood as the main value orientation of modern tourism. In turn, the strategy is

conceived as an effective way to preserve the heritage of traditional Chinese culture, inasmuch as it understands that "Chinese civilization is rooted in agricultural culture, and the countryside is the basic carrier of Chinese civilization" (PMA, 2017).

In March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China jointly published the document entitled *Perspectives and Actions to Promote the Joint Construction of the Economic Belt along the Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. What the three government entities were presenting to the world was no less than the systematization, conjunction and argumentation of two development initiatives that, since September 2013, President Xi Jinping had launched during his visits to the Republic of Kazakhstan and Indonesia, namely the Economic Belt along the Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, respectively³. Both projects separately and their conjunction in a strategically articulated platform, modernize, expand and recontextualize, by land and by sea, a historical network of trade routes that stretched from the 1st century BCE across the Asian continent, connecting China, Mongolia, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Europe and Africa, with silk as the preferred commodity⁴.

The Belt and Road seek to counteract the still marked polarization between inland and coastal areas by presenting a new concept of opening up to the outside world in a more active way, reinforcing east-central-west interaction and cooperation from the two main directions: sea and land, and objectively breaking the original pattern of development formulated by the Reform and Opening-up.

A key milestone in this national strategy, for the benefit of the western region, is the consideration of the Uyghur autonomous region of Xinjiang (in the northwest) as the core region of the Silk Road Economic Belt, based on its particular geographical superiority and its role in the region. As envisaged, Xinjiang should emerge as an important opening window to the west, which will deepen the exchange and cooperation of this subregion with the countries of Central Asia, South Asia and

³ Both initiatives were proposed through official speeches (Cfr. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013 and Asean-China center, 2013).

⁴ "Along these trade routes, various products such as spices, cotton, tea, etc., were exchanged, but the term that gave its name to the Route was popularized by the German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen, since to Europeans it was silk that mainly attracted the attention of the Chinese trade. The old Silk Road began when the Chinese Han dynasty started trading with the Roman Empire through intermediary states in Central Asia. Trade flourished until the second half of the 14th century when the Mongol Empire disintegrated" (Schulz, 2019).

West Asia, form an important communication and transportation complex and a center of trade, logistics, culture, science and education in the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Among other priorities, this strategy aims to bring into play the comprehensive economic and cultural superiority of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces and the ethnic and humanistic superiority of Ningxia ethnic Hui autonomous region and Qinghai province, accelerate the development and opening up of Lanzhou (capital of Gansu province) and Xining (capital of Qinghai province), and push forward the construction of the open-type economy experimental area in Ningxia's hinterland. It will also take advantage of Guangxi ethnic Zhuang Autonomous Region's special advantage of bordering on land and sea with member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and accelerate the opening and development of the Beibu Gulf Economic Zone and the Zhujiang-Xijiang Economic Belt, border trade, tourism and cultural cooperation of Tibet Autonomous Region with Nepal and other countries, and rely on city clusters such as Chengdu-Chongqing to boost interaction and cooperation and industrial cluster development of the regions, forge important development and opening-up supports of western Chongqing.

As will be noted, many of the potentialities attributed to the region are based precisely on the rescue and highlighting of a cultural wealth typical of border areas, as in the specific case of the Ningxia ethnic Hui autonomous region and the province of Qinghai. These properties (or heritages) can only be manifested through platforms that promote rural cultural tourism in the tourism resource areas of the northwest Silk Road and the world roof of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, based on the understanding that tourism is the main channel for the manifestation and experience of culture.

It has been pointed that the western part of China is its most abundant area of tourism resources (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Several scenic places enjoy worldwide reputation. However, due to the lack of sufficient funds and talent support, tourism is less developed than in the eastern part of the country. Until the early 2000s, according to information from the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000), tourism in the region was barely considered a pillar industry in Yunnan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Lahtinen, 2010).

The low centrality of tourist-oriented cities from Xi'an to Xinjiang has been one of the main obstacles to establishing interaction between the ends of the chain, which also stems from the aforementioned regional imbalances. Cities such as Lianyungang and Rizhao were developing relatively fast, while Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang and other places still possessed a relatively low level of socio-economic

development, poor local infrastructure, and tourism service facilities that could not meet the needs of tourists. In particular, transportation facilities were inconvenient, resulting in poor accessibility for tourists outside the region and limited tourist flow.

Territorial development of Qinghai Province within the framework of the Silk Road

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, also known as the roof of the world, is the largest plateau in China. It covers 2.5 million km², or nearly a quarter of the country's total land area, with an elevation ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 meters. Many major rivers originate in its snow-covered mountain ranges. The ecosystem of the plateau is unique and fragile and is home to rare wildlife such as the Tibetan antelope and the snow leopard. It is also rich in mineral resources - 120 types have been discovered - and its plant and animal resources are found throughout the length and breadth of this geographical feature, so that, to this day, the ecological balance of the plateau can also be counted among its bounties.

In turn, this is the province with the highest proportion of the population not belonging to the Han ethnic group, so there is a great cultural diversity, based on the different characteristics and traditions of its 36 ethnic minorities.

It is from the implementation of the Western Development Strategy that the social and economic development indexes of Qinghai province begin to vary favorably, according to information issued by the Provincial Department of Finance, following an analysis of several parameters in the period between 1999 and 2009 (Acuña Ortigoza et al., 2018). However, almost at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, when the aforementioned Strategy had already been implemented for almost a decade, Qinghai province was among those with the lowest GDP indexes, only surpassed by others in its region of belonging (with the exception of Anhui, figure 1).

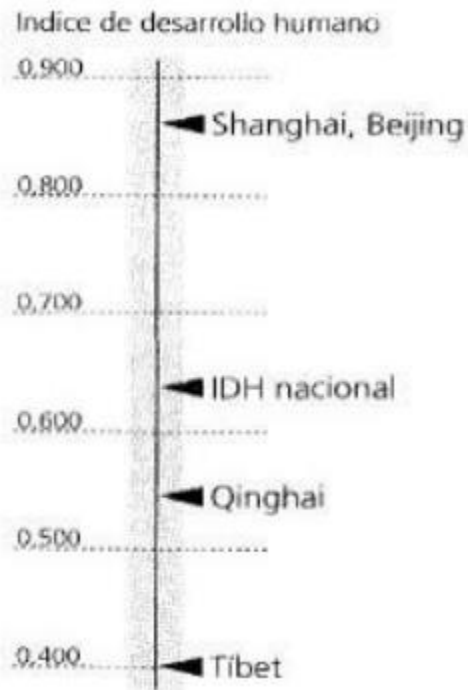


Figure 1. Human Development Index of Qinghai compared to the national one in 1994

Source: Adapted from the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 1994)

It is evident then that not even the national development plans, which benefited it as part of the western region, had succeeded in lifting the province out of its relatively impoverished situation.

The picture, however, changed with the launch of the New Silk Road operations, which has been very beneficial to the province's economic development. Qinghai has entered a period of open and comprehensive, multi-level and wide-ranging development. The network of open canals is becoming more and more perfect, the integrated development of agriculture, animal husbandry and tourism continues to advance, the scale of integrated industrial development continues to expand, the industrial system begins to take shape, and capital investment increases year by year, focusing on cultivation and brand building.

From 2015 to 2016, Qinghai Province focused on strengthening overall planning and high-level design, actively promulgating and improving policies and programs related to the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt. In 2015, Qinghai formulated the "Qinghai Province's Participation in the

Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Implementation Plan of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road". The general idea and development goals of the construction position Qinghai as, "a strategic channel of the Silk Road Economic Belt, an integrated logistics center, an important industrial base and an important cultural exchange base" (Acuña Ortigoza et al., 2018).

Taking advantage of the Belt and Road initiative, Qinghai Province has gradually adopted sustainable development as its main development guideline, reduced the number of heavy industry enterprises and started to focus on developing the tourism industry. The focus on cultural tourism has played a key role in increasing the income of people around tourist attractions and alleviating poverty.

In 2019, the permanent population of Qinghai province was 6078200, of which, 33748 million resided in urban areas, for 55.52 %. The regional GDP was 296595 million yuan, an increase of 6.3 % over the previous year, of which the added value of industries above designated size increased by 7.0 % over the previous year (CCP, 2021).

Meanwhile, general government budget revenue in 2019 was 45685 million yuan, up 1.8% from the previous year. Fixed asset investment (excluding rural households) increased by 5.0 % and total retail sales of consumer goods increased by 5.4 %, all from the previous year. The per capita disposable income of residents was 22618 yuan, an increase of 9.0 % from the previous year: among them, the per capita disposable income of urban residents was 33830 yuan, an increase of 7.3 % from the previous year and the per capita disposable income of rural residents was 11499 yuan, an increase of 10.6 % from the previous year (CCP, 2021).

The results derived from the analyses carried out, based on the bibliographic review and the documentary analysis, allow us to state that the promoting role of the Silk Road for the development of the province has become evident from the following realities.

I. Connectivity of facilities is gradually increasing

In recent years, Qinghai has continuously increased investment and accelerated infrastructure construction, with transportation (rail, road and air) being a privileged line item. The road network of "six verticals, nine horizontals and 20 connections" is gradually taking shape, and Qinghai's strategic position in the national transportation network is becoming more and more prominent.

At the end of 2017, the Lanxi-Ukraine high-speed railroad and the Xining-Xi'an North EMU were opened. In addition, the logistic railway channel connecting Qinghai from east to west and from north to Nantong was gradually formed.

In terms of road traffic, Lanzhou, Xining and Golmud are linked and Xinjiang's transportation network will also be connected in the future. By the end of 2017, the province's roads have achieved full coverage: cities and prefectures and all counties are connected to second-tier and higher roads, greatly improving the road connection between Qinghai and the northwest.

Since the ports of Qinghai province officially opened to the outside world in 2014, the airport of Xining, its capital, has opened to Bangkok, Seoul, Taipei, in addition to Hong Kong, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Medina, Siem Reap, among 10 other international (regional) routes such as Nha Trang and Phuket. In 2019, a total of 1252 international flights with 29 million international passengers materialized via this route, an increase of 16.1% and 26.6% respectively compared to previous years. In January 2020, the Xining-Phuket international route opened to Thailand was the first direct international route opened in Qinghai province during the year.

In terms of informatization, about twenty e-commerce enterprises have successively established branches in the province. The number of enterprises using e-commerce platforms to conduct business in their daily operations has exceeded 7,000; the logistics industry in the province has also entered a period of vigorous development. According to reports, China's leading e-commerce technology company JD.com has opened a "local feature pavilion" in Qinghai Province, making the province the first in western China for this company to incorporate local features into its operation.

Moreover, in 2016, Xining, the provincial capital and comprehensive logistics hub city of the Belt and Road, began construction of Chaoyang, Beichuan and Doba: three logistics parks integrating transactions, transportation, storage, distribution, operations center and support service functions.

II. Commercial channels have been broadened comprehensively

As a direct consequence of the implementation of the Belt and Road, the trade channels of Qinghai Province have increased significantly, as well as the figures for foreign trade and the establishment of foreign-owned and joint ventures on regional soil.

In 2015, Qinghai established economic and trade liaison offices in Turkmenistan and Nepal to deepen economic and trade exchanges with countries along the Silk Road. In 2016, the province inaugurated the first flight, from the west, between China and Europe and standard containers of products, including carpets and goji berry, have been shipped thereafter. By the end of 2017, 92 companies (most of them involved in mining, construction materials manufacturing, hotel and catering) financed by foreign funds and/or foreign labor cooperation (from developed countries such as the UK, US and Germany) had passed the provincial government's approval to settle on regional soil.

Among the province's goals in this area is the creation of a new green energy industry cluster. Relevant companies have signed contracts with Central Asia, South Asia and other countries to build projects in hydropower, solar energy, grain and oil refining and wool spinning.

Recently, Qinghai Xining High-end Consumer Experience Center, Qinghai Youyouhai Import Commodity Museum, Qinghai Xihai International Trade Import Commodity Store and Dongjiang Port Import Commodity Store have been established in the province. In addition, Qinghai International Specialty Commodity Marketing Center has established 25 outlets and branches in 15 countries and regions, including Europe, West Asia, South Asia and Africa.

Important channels to show the commercial potential of the region and to contribute to the progressive building of the Qinghai brand have been the various events in which the province has been involved, with different levels of prominence and participation. Among such events are worth mentioning: the Youth Fair, the Tibetan Carpet Exhibition and Qinghai Exhibition, the Qinghai Green Development Investment and Trade Fair, the Qinghai International Exhibition of Muslim Products and Halal Food and the Qinghai International Exhibition of Tibetan Carpets. Moreover, from July 29 to 31, 2016, the Outstanding Products and Economic and Trade Cooperation Exhibition of Haidong City, Qinghai Province, was successfully held in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic.

III. Cooperation and communication achieved real results

In order to better integrate Qinghai into the Silk Road Economic Belt, the CCP provincial committee and the government accelerated exchanges with countries and regions along the Belt and Road, and successively organized relevant government departments and enterprises to join in the implementation of the initiative. The purpose of carrying out not only economic and trade exchanges, but also cultural and cooperative exchanges in understanding the mutual development of the countries and regions along the route has been confirmed.

In 2014, Qinghai Province held the conference titled Silk Road Economic Belt Economic and Trade Cooperation Roundtable for the first time, within the framework of the International Halal Food and Supplies Exhibition. At this conference, which was attended by 16 Central Asian countries, the Ministry of Commerce and relevant leaders of the five northwestern provinces signed economic and trade cooperation agreements with the invited countries. Moreover, in 2015, leaders of the Qinghai Provincial Party Committee visited several countries, including Belarus, the United Arab Emirates and the Czech Republic, nations with which relations were established to foster future exchanges.

IV. Flourishing cultural exchanges

Because Qinghai has a good historical foundation, its cultural exchanges along the Belt and Road have national and international advantages. Another element in its favor on this particular issue is associated with the strong similarities in religion and ethnicity that are uniquely shared by Qinghai province and some Central Asian and West Asian countries. Building a bridge between these regions in terms of culture, education, economy and trade has advantages that can hardly be replicated.

In order to push forward the principles of the spirit of friendship and cooperation along the Silk Road, Qinghai has carried out extensive tourism exchanges and cooperation. In June 2015, Xining City held the Xiadu International Forum and Cooperation of Cities along the Silk Road, where the Memorandum of Friendly Exchange and Practical Cooperation in Cities along the Silk Road was signed with domestic and foreign representatives. Likewise, the 2016 Youth Fair held activities such as the China-Korea Cultural Festival and the Qinghai Lake Poetry Festival.

Trips are planned to Spain, Greece, Turkey and Cuba, among other countries, to hold conferences to promote tourism projects, which will increase the popularity of Qinghai and promote cultural and tourism exchanges between Qinghai and related countries.

V. Promotion of natural resources

Foreign demand for Qinghai's specialized agricultural products and mineral resources has increased significantly as part of the development of foreign trade. In this context, the highland barley planting industry has especially flourished, and its subsidiary products have been expanded and promoted. With the development of the Silk Road, local people and social economy have been promoted, in the face of which the Qinghai Provincial Land and Resources Department has developed a strategy for the sustainable development of the area's economy, society, resources and ecological environment

at the county level. This meets the requirements and wishes of local government and people to invest funds to carry out land consolidation projects, improve local land utilization rate, increase effective arable land, strengthen farmland infrastructure construction, improve agricultural production conditions.

Increased agricultural efficiency and farmers' income have provided a solid foundation for the development of modern agriculture and alleviated the tension between people and land. At present, it is worked on improving planting technology, planning some areas as the main raw material base of the upland barley wine industry to continue meeting the high demand for special products of Qinghai Province in the context of the Silk Road.

In 2019 alone, the Provincial Major Preliminary Projects Responsibility Division of the General Office of the People's Government of Qinghai Province promoted a total of 100 preliminary projects mainly involving 8 aspects such as water conservancy, transportation, energy, information, urban infrastructure, industrial development, ecological protection and improvement of people's livelihood, with an estimated total investment of 892 billion yuan (see attached for details). These include 7 water conservancy infrastructure projects with an estimated total investment of 86.1 billion yuan; 22 transportation infrastructure projects with an estimated total investment of 304.7 billion yuan; 11 energy infrastructure projects with an estimated total investment of 283.8 billion yuan; 3 information infrastructure projects, with an estimated total investment of 3.4 billion yuan; 12 eco-environmental protection projects with an estimated total investment of 54.8 billion yuan; 9 urban infrastructure projects with an estimated total investment of 95.8 billion yuan; 24 industrial development projects with an estimated total investment of 47.7 billion yuan; 12 people's livelihood improvement projects with an estimated total investment of 15600 million yuan.

However, beyond these praiseworthy facts that we have pointed out about the relative development of Qinghai and its consolidation as a space for exchange and cooperation, even in the context of the Silk Road, there are several obstacles that the region faces and that hinder its desire for progress.

1. Insufficient construction of tourism infrastructure
2. Weakly structured cultural tourism offer
3. Low competitiveness
4. Lack of a tourism brand

In order to achieve a relatively rapid structural economic transformation based on the optimal utilization of the potential opportunities of the New Silk Road, a series of economic development countermeasures must be adopted, comprising at least the following aspects.

I. Construction of cities and towns along the route

Most cities in Xining, Haidong, Golmud, Delingha, Jiegu and others in Qinghai have a long history of development and remain important transportation hubs, industrial parks, power projects, foreign trade and tourism facilities in the region. Qinghai should accelerate urban infrastructure construction, improve urban development plans, improve road conditions and sewage treatment infrastructure in Xining, Haidong and other urban areas, and build a livable city; increase investment in green areas, roads and communications in cities such as Golmud and Delingha. Lay the foundation for industrial transfer and upgrading, accelerate the development of small towns, create a modern small-town brand with national characteristics, and lay a solid foundation for expanding the local tourism market.

II. Improve the level of foreign trade

For Qinghai to integrate into the Silk Road Economic Belt, it is necessary for it to enhance its own foreign trade structure, form a superior industry for exports and become a manufacturing and product export base. According to Qinghai's natural resources, cultural conditions and actual conditions of countries along the Silk Road, Qinghai should accelerate the development of an export-oriented halal industry and turn Xining into a production and export base for Muslim clothing, food and religious items; Yiminhe, Xunhua, Hualong, Guide, Qaidam and other central regions, should form green products production and processing bases, and export green and healthy food to Central Asian countries; it should also take Longwu Town and Jiegu as the core, and build a Buddhist supply production base utilizing the New Silk Road from Xining to Nepal through Lhasa, to sell these products to Buddhist countries and regions in South Asia.

III. Strengthen the construction of transportation infrastructure

In Qinghai Province, the construction of basic transportation between cities and provinces has been developed on a large scale under the Western strategic development policy and the New Silk Road integration plans, but it obviously lags behind its surrounding areas, which are more developed in terms of railroad, highway, civil aviation and urban transportation construction.

To effectively promote the development of rural natural resources in Qinghai Province, it is necessary to strengthen infrastructure, especially the construction of urban and rural infrastructure transportation facilities. Strong transportation infrastructure can quickly compensate for the lack of geographical advantages and low efficiency in rural areas of the province in the context of the Silk Road. At this stage, Qinghai province should take full advantage of the opportunities of the time: it could create railway hubs, airport branches, provincial and national highways and other transportation facilities that connect the rural areas of Qinghai province to the main route of the Silk Road. In particular, there is a need to strengthen ties with border provinces such as Xinjiang and Tibet and thereby expand fully. Qinghai can become a relay station connecting southwest China with Central Asian countries.

IV. Integrate resources and implement environmental protection supervision

Firstly, it is necessary to implement resource surveys in rural areas of Qinghai Province, starting from field research, statistical management of natural assets, county-level surveys and provincial-level inspections. Likewise, it is urgent to carry out good work on planning and development of natural resources in rural areas of the province, take the strategic thinking of sustainable development as an important basis and optimize territorial development as the main goal. That a number of areas in the province's rural areas should be planned that can fully meet the needs of resource development while complying with the laws and regulations related to the protection and development of natural resources.

In addition, relevant departments should implement environmental protection inspection and rectification work in rural areas. In accordance with the principle of "he who destroys, he who controls", urge local governments, mining enterprises and geological prospecting units to complete environmental restoration and ensure that rectification work is completed as necessary.

The impacts generated by the insertion of the province in the area of influence of the Silk Road have triggered a set of positive impacts that, in accordance with the national vision, lead to the reduction of poverty and regional inequalities, in an environment of competitive pressures; however, the road ahead implies redirecting actions towards the minimization of negative impacts to ensure sustainable development in the medium and long term without the social and environmental dimensions being left in the watertight of the integral regional promotion.

The historical inequalities of China's western region are being progressively overcome, thanks to government programs and the momentum generated by the New Silk Road, which has harnessed the potential of natural and cultural resources for local regional development. Qinghai province is under obvious competitive pressure to appropriate the opportunities generated by the Silk Road in pursuit of economic development. Its current (and historical) state of development has been called "affluent poverty" precisely because of its manifest inability to convert its wealth of resources into wealth.

In order to achieve a relatively rapid structural economic transformation based on the optimal utilization of the potential opportunities of the Silk Road, it is necessary to implement a series of economic development countermeasures, including promoting the construction of cities and towns along the Silk Road, improving the level of foreign trade, and enhancing environmental protection.

The proposed actions seek to take advantage of the opportunities generated by a program that articulates the political will with the reality of the economic landscape in the local context, which requires the active participation of regional stakeholders, so that the expected benefits are produced in the context of the New Route.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contribution

Kang Min designed the study, was involved in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, and drafted the study.

Maité Echarri Chávez was involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data and drafted the manuscript.

Both authors reviewed the writing of the manuscript and approve the version finally submitted.



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