



# Apples and Oranges: Reflections on Western Development Strategies in China and Canada

*Graham E. Johnson\**

**Abstract:** Western China and western Canada are significant parts of their respective national economies, and are societies that experienced distinctive developmental trajectories. The two regions also share some intriguing characteristics. This paper compares the two regions in terms of the development process.

**Key words:** regional comparison, development strategies, investment, western China

---

## 1. Introduction

It may seem odd to the non-native speaker of English to speak of apples and oranges in the context of a paper that attempts to compare development in both western China and western Canada. It is a figure of speech to suggest that attempted comparisons are in fact inappropriate. To be sure, apples and oranges are fruits and they are round and occupy the same end of the color spectrum. Beyond roundness and color they are dramatically different and are not, in the end, comparable. Is an attempt to compare the western region of Canada and western China inappropriate, a case of comparing apples and oranges? To be sure, the two regions are different geographically, historically, and culturally. They are part of two economies and societies that have experienced distinctive developmental trajectories. At the same time, there are some intriguing aspects that the two regions share. To look at their characteristics for revealing and comparisons of features of development in the two regions can be instructive.

## 2. Definitional issues

An important initial question is to establish the territorial dimensions of the two western regions. The definition of the both is as much the product of politics and history as of geography and economics. The Chinese state and the territories that comprise it are much older than the Canadian state and the territory over which the Canadian state holds sovereignty. Both are roughly comparable in size. The population of China, however, vastly exceeds Canada's population. Much of Canada is empty and uninhabitable, as is

---

\* Graham E. Johnson, Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, British Columbia, CANADA V6T 1Z1. Tel: +1 604 822 2878 Fax: +1 604 822 6161 Email: kwanmunhau5@yahoo.ca

much of western China, which is characterized by high mountains and deserts. The western segments of both nations contain approximately a third of their populations.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. The Canadian west

Canada, as a nation-state, dates back only to 1867. It was the result of an agreement to bring together a set of British crown colonies, in the eastern and central portions of what is now Canada, and to the north of the former British colonies that had formed the United States in 1776. The Canadian territories were acquired from France, as a result of European wars, which incorporated a large number of French-speaking settlers of European origin, which was to have a significant consequence for the character of the new Canadian confederation<sup>2</sup>. The point to note is that the creation of the Canadian state was, like the creation of the American state, a result of white settlers from Europe imposing their political will and their cultural and economic structures over the indigenous inhabitants who had occupied what was to become Canada for several millennia. The creation of Canada was an act of resettlement as Cole Harris has termed it.<sup>3</sup>

Canada attained its present territorial dimensions gradually after 1867. In 1871, British Columbia as an amalgam of two small British colonies on the Pacific coast opted to join the Canadian confederation on the promise of a railway link from central Canada, which was finally completed in 1886. The lands between Ontario and British Columbia ("The Prairies") were organized as the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta between 1870 and 1905 and were settled by people of European origin, who arrived in large numbers along the trans-continental railway, attracted by the promise of land which the Dominion government made available as part of its immigration policies. This constitutes what is known as "The West". Newfoundland became a Canadian province in 1949. The sparsely settled north is composed of Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories and, most recently created of all, Nunavut.

Canada was firmly in Britain's imperial orbit until after the Second World War and the concept of Canadian citizenship did not exist until 1947. The major economic centers were located in Quebec and

---

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive account of Canadian geography is in the remarkable three volume Historical Atlas of Canada.: Cole Harris (Ed) and Geoffrey J. Matthews Volume I From the Beginning to 1800 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Geoffrey J. Matthews and Louis Gentiflore (Eds) Volume II The Land Transformed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Donald Kerr and Deryk Holdsworth (Eds) Volume III The Twentieth Century (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). For China see the classic G.B.Cressey Land of the 500 Million: A Geography of China (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955) Ho Ping-ti Studies in the Population of China (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959) and Tuan Yi-fu The World's Landscapes: China (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For a general history of Canada see Robert Bothwell The Penguin History of Canada (Toronto: Penguin, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> R. Cole Harris The Resettlement of British Columbia; Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997)

Ontario for more than a century after 1867 and domestic politics were dominated by the two provinces and the tensions between the English-speaking and the French-speaking elites. Canada became highly regionalized. The smaller provinces along the Atlantic seaboard, the swath of enormous but lightly populated territories to the north, and the “west”, that is the provinces that lie to the west of Ontario, across the flat and fertile prairie region and over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific coast, were marginalized. The four western provinces have made an important economic contribution to Canada in terms of their agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining, and especially in Alberta, petroleum and natural gas resources. Since the 21st Century its economic role has become increasingly important. With 30 per cent of Canada’s population it now contributes 40 percent of Canada’s GNP. (Table 1) In an increasingly globalized world, there is a perceptible shift away from the historic manufacturing dominance of Ontario and Quebec.

There are issues, economic and political, geographical and cultural, which are both historic and contemporary, which I will raise below. Let me first turn, however, to western China.

**Table 1. Western Canadian Provinces; Size, Population, and GDP (2007)**

<b>Province</b>	<b>Area (Km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>Population (million)</b>	<b>GDP ( million \$)</b>	<b>Per Capita GDP (\$)</b>
British Columbia	944,735	4.414	190,214	43,093
Alberta	661,848	3.498	259,941	74,311
Saskatchewan	651,900	1.007	51,166	50,810
Manitoba	647,797	1.194	48,586	40,692
<b>Canada</b>	<b>9,984,670</b>	<b>33.144</b>	<b>1,531,427</b>	<b>45,662</b>

*Source:* Statistics Canada, Canada’s population estimates, fourth quarter 2007 (preliminary) The Daily March 27, 2008; CANSIM table 384-0002. GDP is expenditure-based

#### **4. The Chinese west**

China is an old state, vast, complex and, like Canada, highly regionalized. Similar to Canada, China is geographically diverse. While its population is enormous, it is unevenly distributed across its territorial space. The great bulk of its population, in excess of 90 per cent, occupies but a fragment of its geographical extent and is concentrated to the east of a line that runs from Heilongjiang in the northeast to Yunnan in the southwest. There are few parts of the world that are more densely populated than the eastern sixth of the country and few that are more empty than its westernmost portions. The effectively inhabited part of China’s 9.5 million km<sup>2</sup> is about 1.55 million km<sup>2</sup>. The three westernmost administrative regions of China - Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang - occupy fully 37.5 per cent of Chinese

territory and are home to a mere 1.5 per cent of the population. The contrast between the empty western part of China - which is characterized by mountains and deserts, and has the world's highest and lowest terrain - suggest an important broad distinction between that and what was once known as Agricultural China (sometimes known as China Proper). While not a perfect association, this draws attention to another important contrast between the Han Chinese of Agricultural China and the non-Han peoples who live in Outer China.

On the face of it, China's west is large, lightly populated, geographically diverse, and culturally distinct with a large non-Han population. It is also poor and the object of a development strategy that has received a good deal of attention from China's political centre. It is not immediately clear however, as to what exactly constitutes China's west and what might constitute an appropriate strategy for development.

There is an annual outpouring of information from the State Statistical Bureau (SSB) in Beijing which becomes mandatory reading for those with an interest in the economic performance of the People's Republic of China. The China Statistical Yearbook provides an annual inventory on a wide variety of topics - administrative divisions, national accounts, population, economic activities, transportation and communications, tourism, education, culture, sports, public health, and summary statistics on Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. The information can be overwhelming. China's administrative units send in statistical reports which are then presented in large volumes. It becomes a useful exercise to examine the performance of the country as a whole, its provinces and autonomous regions, and its municipalities. In the "national accounts" section (typically Chapter 3 of the Yearbook) there are a series of tables that deal with the "regional" character of China's economy.

The bureau divides the nation into four broad regions "Northeast", "East", "Central", and "West". The western region includes: Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang<sup>4</sup>. The logic of the national division is perhaps clear. The northeast region has a readily understood commonality, which is often referred to by its older name of Manchuria. The eastern region is composed of the administrative units that have developed intimate links with the global economy and which have prospered since the reforms that began in 1979. The centre has less firm links with the global economy, a smaller industrial sector and larger agricultural sectors, especially in less lucrative grain, and a good deal of poverty. The western region is the balance. Its components are either remote, have large non-Han populations, have large pockets of poverty, or are located in strategically sensitive regions.

---

<sup>4</sup> The "Northeast" consists of the three north eastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning; the "East" is composed of the provinces and provincial level municipalities along the eastern seaboard, and which includes Guangdong and Hainan; the Centre is: Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan.

The definition of western China leads to some questions as to what an appropriate strategy might be for such a diverse array of administrative units. It includes three very large autonomous regions - Nei Mongol, Tibet, and Xinjiang - each with distinctive features and distinctive problems. All have been highly contested regions in China's modern history and all three are in highly sensitive border regions. Qinghai is a large, sparsely populated, isolated physical extension of Tibet. Yunnan is also along the sensitive border with Southeast Asia. Its population is arguably the most culturally diverse of China's provinces. It has extensive poverty. Guangxi is also a border region, with a large non-Han population. It has been primarily agricultural but stands in the shadow of its illustrious twin to the east, Guangdong. Guizhou is scenically beautiful, ethnically diverse, but landlocked and, despite its name, achingly poor. Sichuan and Chongqing, until recently part of one enormous culturally distinctive province but now a province and a provincial-level municipality, have a large and culturally distinctive Han population, although the western extremities of Sichuan share many of the characteristics of Tibet and Qinghai. Its southern portions are similar to Yunnan in its ethnic diversity.

Apart from the drawbacks of its large population and its limited land resources, despite a rich agriculture and a substantial and growing industrial base, it is challenged by its major geographical feature, the Sichuan basin, which constrains communications. Chongqing, China's (possibly the world's) largest municipality has shifted away from its reliance upon military-focused industrial activity, but like Sichuan, constrained by its geography and its rural hinterland is both large and agricultural. Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia, a crucial cradle of Chinese civilization and one of the old Communist base areas, are also primarily Han but with significant minority populations, especially Islamic Hui in Gansu and Ningxia, and in the Shaanxi capital of Xi'an. There is a glorious history in the region, and in the 1960s many state industries were moved to the region. It suffers, however, from its remoteness. Gansu abuts Qinghai, Xinjiang and Nei Mongol. Northern Shaanxi is rich in revolutionary history but the loess lands are arid, there is desert, and the communications link eastwards to the North China plain, or northwest through Xinjiang to the uncertainties of the Central Asian republics.

The components of the western region and some of its characteristics are displayed in table 2. The data are revealing. It might be noted that I have arranged the data according to certain internal characteristics of the units that are identified.

**Table 2. Western China: Area, Population, GDP, and GDP per capita (2006)**

<b>Administrative Unit</b>	<b>Area (Km2) [rank/31]</b>	<b>Population (Million) [rank/31]</b>	<b>GDP (Billion RMB/\$US) [rank/31]<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>GDP/Capita (RMB/\$US) [rank/31]</b>
Nei Mongol	1,183,000 [3]	23.84 [23]	479/60.1 [17]	20,000/2,500 [10]
Shaanxi	205,800 [11]	37.05 [11]	438/56.7 [20]	11,784/1,516 [22]
Gansu	454,000 [7]	26.19 [22]	228/29.4 [22]	5,749/1,130 [29]
Ningxia	66,000 [27]	5.88 [29]	70.7/9.2 [29]	11,784/1,517 [21]
Xinjiang	1,660,000 [1]	19.13 [24]	301.9/28.6 [25]	14,871/1,865 [18]
Chongqing	82,300 [28]	31.44 [20]	349/45.2 [24]	12,437/1,640 [19]
Sichuan	485,000 [[5]	87.25 [3]	864/112.6 [9]	10,570/1,320 [25]
Yunnan	394,000 [9]	44.15 [12]	400/51.7 [23]	8,961/1,180 [28]
Guizhou	176,100 [16]	39.04 [15]	226/29.2 [27]	5,760/736 [30]
Guangxi	236,700 [9]	48.89 [10]	480/62.1 [16]	10,240/1,330 [24]
Qinghai	721,000 [4]	5.39 [30]	64.1/8.3 [30]	11,753/1,519 [23]
Tibet	1,274,000 [2]	2.81 [31]	13.9/1.8 [31]	4,496/640 [31]

Nei Mongol stands alone. It straddles a huge area along the northern boundary of units that compose the east, centre and western regions of the SSB tables. It is an autonomous region in part because a substantial fragment of its population, although by no means even close to a majority, is Mongolian. The politics of Nei Mongol in China's modern and contemporary history have been complex. It was part of a larger and culturally disparate unit until the early Republican period when the northern half of the territory became the Mongolian People's Republic, in part due to the activities of Soviet agents in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution. It became a puppet state (Mengjiang) during the Japanese occupation of north and northeast China, and Nei Mongol was created in 1947, after some assistance from the Red Army, and became an Autonomous Region following Soviet practice.

<sup>5</sup> The economies of the various provinces, provincial-level municipalities and autonomous regions are ranked as follows (per capita rankings in brackets): 1 Guangdong (6); 2 Shandong (7); 3 Jiangsu (5); 4 Zhejiang (4); 5 Henan (6); 6 Hebei (12); 7 Shanghai (1); 8 Liaoning (8); 9 Sichuan (25); 10 Beijing (2); 11 Fujian (9); 12 Hubei (17); 13 Hunan (20); 14 Heilongjiang (16); 15 Anhui (28); 16 Guangxi (24); 17 Nei Mongol (10); 18 Shanxi (15); 19 Jiangxi (24); 20 Shaanxi (22); 21 Tianjin (3); 22 Jilin (13); 23 Gansu (29); 24 Yunnan (28); 25 Chongqing (19); 26 Xinjiang (14); 27 Guizhou (30); 28 Hainan (18); 29 Ningxia (21); 30 Qinghai (23); 31 Tibet (31).

Nei Mongol was thoroughly incorporated into the centrally-planned economy and its vast coal reserves, and other minerals, were likely seen to be more significant than the agriculture, especially animal husbandry that is typically associated with the region. It is, however, the politics of this crucial part of China's Inner-Asian frontier that have been as salient as developmental issues. Separatism is less of an issue than in other parts of the west but it IS an issue. It certainly came to a head in the Cultural Revolution and into the 1980s. The memories of the past are still present, which may be the reason that Nei Mongol was subject to major administrative changes from the 1960s. Nei Mongol, like other parts of the west, occupies a strategic place in the view of China's leadership. It is also very close to Beijing. The developmental scenarios that emerge with respect to this sprawling territory, with historical links north, east and west, are likely to raise the issue of "security"<sup>6</sup>.

The second grouping in Table 2 might neatly be described as "The Northwest". It is arrayed to the northwest of "China Proper" with the addition of sprawling, and complex, Xinjiang. It is one of the historic cradle areas of Chinese culture and Xi'an (or Chang'an), its major city, was the Chinese capital for a dozen dynasties. It was the capital of the short-lived Qin, and the Emperor Qinshihuang is known, not merely as a tyrant, but as the great unifier of China. Under his rule, the Chinese written language was standardized. Chang'an was the capital of the Tang, which was not merely glorious, but defined China and the northwest. It was the historical terminus of the "Silk Road" and the incorporation of Xinjiang ("The New Frontier") into the Chinese state was accomplished during the dynasty. Shaanxi is unmistakably Han and it is the glory of Han culture that is celebrated in the museums and the historic sites of Xi'an. Yet its links with central Asia, and the Islamic cultures that were so critical a part of Silk Road culture, make the entire set of administrative units identified here an understandable, if not necessarily coherent, grouping. One of Qinshihuang's concerns was with frontier security. Eight centuries later, one of the Tang's achievements was to link issues of border security with economic well-being. It is a motif which is highly relevant in thinking of western development strategies in the contemporary world.

During Qin and Tang times, the ecology of Shaanxi was very different from the present. The region was likely dry, but less arid than it now is. It was heavily forested, forests which disappeared in part to meet the needs of China's emerging bureaucracy. Its critical resource was the distinctive loess soil, windblown from the deserts to the west, which was fertile and water-retentive<sup>7</sup>. It was this geographical feature that created the economic base for successive dynasties, and allowed for Han domination of the territories to the west, and expansion to the east and south. Control of economic resources led to generalized control of the contested frontier regions which remained throughout imperial times, and into the modern period, as

---

<sup>6</sup> See David Sneath *Changing Inner Mongolia: Pastoral Mongolian Society and the Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

<sup>7</sup> See Tuan Yi-fu *op cit* esp. pp.45-52.

Barfield has noted, as “perilous”<sup>8</sup>. If I delve into history, it is because I think history to be important. It can also be instructive in giving perspectives on contemporary issue of “development” strategy.

Historical question link these four administrative entities into a coherent group. Clearly there is diversity within the group and yet there is logic to the composition of the grouping. Xinjiang is characterized primarily by its Uighur population and without question much of the development strategy since the formation of the People’s Republic of China, not least the encouragement of Han migration, was to further the integration of this fractious region into the Chinese political system<sup>9</sup>. Western Gansu is very like Xinjiang and even southern Gansu (not to mention Lanzhou) is ethnically diverse, where there are not merely Hui administrative units but Tibetan ones also. Ningxia, by contrast to its neighbours is quite diminutive, but it too registers a significant non-Han character, which is recognized in its administrative status. It shares, with much of Gansu and the western and northern portions of Shaanxi, poverty and isolation.

The third grouping might be termed the “Southwest”. It is, of course, dominated by the Sichuan/Chongqing complex. The core is the Sichuan basin—highly fertile as an agricultural region but also densely populated. It is a coherent cultural region—one can point to its distinctive variety of Chinese, its cuisine and its rich local culture. It has a dynamic industrial base and rich resources not least of which are minerals and natural gas. Chongqing has become a key player in the western development strategy and in many ways is seen as the “gateway” to the west, which was likely a major factor in its creation as a provincial-level municipality separate from Sichuan. Beyond the Sichuan basin, western Sichuan is high, ethnically diverse, and was once administered as two Tibetan provinces. The south, bordering on Yunnan, is also rugged and high, ethnically much more diverse, and has major industries based upon its rich mineral resources.

The biggest issues facing Sichuan/Chongqing are location and population. It is locked into the Sichuan basin, with mountains or desert on the west, southwest and north; to the immediate south, there is mountainous Yunnan. The traditional point of exit to the Chinese coast was down the Yangzi, through scenic yet difficult gorges. It was its very isolation that provided a refuge for the Nationalist government after the fall of Nanjing to the Japanese invaders. In the modern period, railroad had to overcome the challenges of geography to reach the edges of the North China plain through Shaanxi and into Henan, and gives only modest relief to its inaccessible position.

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Barfield *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford, 1989)

<sup>9</sup> See Frederick S. Starr (Ed) *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004)



Population is its second major handicap. Fertility of the Chengdu plain was matched by relatively high rates of natural increase. Although the size of the economy places it the highest in the west, the very size of the population drags its per capita GNP towards the bottom of the provincial rankings. As one consequence, out-migrants from Sichuan are among the most numerous among the workers that have become a key to the economic success of eastern and south eastern coastal provincial economies, such as Guangdong and Jiangsu. The three remaining units in the category, like Sichuan, are generally landlocked, although Guangxi was fortunate to gain Beihai and access to the South China Sea from Guangdong in the 1950s. They are all poor and Guizhou and Tibet are the poorest. There is substantial ethnic diversity, especially so for Yunnan and Guizhou. Population size is certainly an issue but, as for the rest of the group, geography constrains communication links.

Qinghai and Tibet constitute a grouping, in part because this is traditional Tibetan territory. They are both huge, and their populations are small. Tibet of course occupies the highest terrain in the world. Its indigenous population was, and is, engaged in a subsistence economy. It is a contested place, which has enormous consequences for political, economic and cultural development. It is last in population, the size of its economy and its per capita GDP<sup>10</sup>. Qinghai is large, remote, and lightly populated. It shares many characteristics with Tibet, although its military importance and its mining resources elevate its per capita GDP to the level of the northwest (except for Gansu).

## **5. The Canadian west by contrast**

Let us return to a consideration of western Canada. China's west (Nei Mongol aside) is composed of those units lie west of a line drawn due south from Shanxi through Hebei, Henan and Hunan to Guangdong. Canada's west composes provinces that are to the west of Ontario, but excludes the northern Territories. It is a definition that is resoundingly political and relates to the development of the Canadian nation-state from 1867 until the early years of the twentieth century. In 1867 the Colony of Canada was an amalgam of Upper Canada (Ontario and English-speaking, dominated by Scots and a dour form of Protestant Christianity) and Lower Canada (Quebec, which was French-speaking and predominantly Catholic). It invited itself to a meeting of British colonies in the Atlantic region, and the Canadian Confederation was invented. Thereafter, Ontario and Quebec remained dominant politically at the federal level, although there was an agreement to share federal power, and certain responsibilities, not least education, were reserved for provincial jurisdictions. External relations were left to Britain until the early 1930s. In 1867, the centre of economic power was in Ontario and Quebec, although in general the

---

<sup>10</sup> See Barry Staufman and June Teufel Dreyer (Eds) *Tibet: Politics, Development and Society in a Disputed Region* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2006

English-speaking elite dominated in the Quebec economy until the 1970s. Until the end of the First World War, Canada was one of the pre-eminent industrial economies in the world.

The British colonies that formed the Canadian Confederation were the remnants that remained loyal to the British crown after the American revolution of 1776. The British had conquered New France in 1759, incorporating a substantial population of French-speaking settlers from France, most of whom were rural cultivators. It was governed through the compliant French-speaking elite and political relationships were defined by the Quebec Act, which reinforced a set of feudal relationships. This modeled on those in France, which was to disappear forever from the French landscape in 1789 but which survived in Quebec until well into the twentieth century. Security concerns were major issues after 1776, and focused upon perceived territorial threats from south of the border. The concerns with territorial integrity continued after 1867.

North America was not uninhabited when settlers from Europe first arrived. There were indigenous people who lived across the North American continent unable to resist the territorial ambitions of European people, and whose ways of life were utterly compromised. Large numbers died, and some peoples were simply eliminated. European settlement, whether in what is now Canada or the United States, was initially concentrated in the east. There were smaller settlements on the west coast fuelled initially by trading activities especially in furs, and after mid-century by the discovery of precious metals, especially gold. By 1867, settlement into the interior was well underway in the United States, facilitated by railway building.

Political leaders in Canada were anxious to forestall threats to territorial integrity. They wished to both link the British Colony on the west coast, which had expanded its territory in 1858 from Vancouver Island to include the mainland after gold was discovered along the Fraser River. Shortly thereafter in the Cariboo region in the interior, it incidentally brought large numbers of Chinese people from the western reaches of the Pearl River delta region in Guangdong to participate in the quest for gold. By 1867, the gold rush was over but the prospect of creating an economy based on the rich resources of the British Columbia mainland, not least of which were based on forestry and fishing was a spur to entrepreneurial activity. The very large indigenous population in the region - the coastal regions and the river valleys had the largest and densest aboriginal population in the North America - were marginalized in the process of economic transformation. Many died from disease and their cultural expressions were severely repressed. Significantly, these depredations occurred in the absence of formal treaties.

The political leaders in central Canada were anxious to incorporate the British colony on the west coast into the new Canadian Confederation. The leaders in the west were unsure of their political future. British Columbia could remain a colony, it could opt to join the United States, which was a viable option, or it

could join Canada. In 1871 the decision was made to join Canada on the understanding that a transcontinental railway was to be built to link British Columbia with Canada's economic centre. It was to be an expensive undertaking, and one that was to be 15 years in the making. In the process, it was to secure Canada's as an integrated entity, and forestall threats from American expansionism by creating a mechanism whereby Canadian territory from Ontario westward to British Columbia could be made available to European settlement.

The period from 1871 until 1914 is one of relentless in-migration from Europe to North America, of settlement across the continent and the re-peopling of lands that had been the preserve of an array of indigenous people for upwards of 8,000 years. The process came at a terrible cost to the people whose lands the settlers occupied. It resulted in total economic and social transformation. In Canada it brought into being three new provincial units in addition to British Columbia. The Canadian west was created as a result of political decisions that were made in Ottawa, and to a lesser but critical degree, in Toronto and Montreal. Rather like China's west, it was to be quite diverse.

The critical element in the development of western Canada was, without question, the decision to build a railway. It began to open Canada's west in the same way that railways opened the central and western parts of the United States to European settlement. It facilitated the refashioning of the prairie landscape from the edge of the Canadian Shield to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta were established, and linked British Columbia, beyond the mountain ranges, to the Canadian industrial heartland.

It was not an easy process, nor did it come all at once. This was mired in enormous political controversy and took almost a decade to get underway. The first train steamed onto the coast of British Columbia on July 4 1886 and into the settlement that was to be called Vancouver the following year. It had been a tortuous process, which contributed to building a new nation, putting down a rebellion, and facilitating a national economy<sup>11</sup>. The engineering problems were enormous, as were the political issues that needed resolution, from creating an all-Canadian route, to forestall potential American rivals. The first railway was a heavily subsidized private venture, the Canadian Pacific Railway. This profited handsomely from land grants along the right of way, and in and around Vancouver. It was astute and encouraged European immigration to the Canadian west by utilizing the full extent of its services on land and sea, and offered land as an incentive. The route was a Canadian route, and it facilitated the building of towns and cities along it. It furthered national economic integration by providing resources for eastern Canadian

---

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Impossible Railway: The Building of the Canadian Pacific* (Knopf, 1972), is a combination of two books *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*. It is the best source that I know of, and entertainingly written of the saga of building the most critical element in the exploitation of Canada's west. See also the earlier (1924) account by Harold A. Innis *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, revised edition, 1971)

manufacturers<sup>12</sup> and access to western and world markets. The building of the British Columbia segment of the railway was accomplished with the labor of upwards of 9,000 Chinese workers, recruited primarily from the western Pearl River delta region of Guangdong province, the kinsmen of the gold miners that had been in both the Fraser River and Cariboo gold rushes in from 1858. Their contribution to Canada's "National Dream" is undeniable. They were poorly paid, worked under appalling conditions and were shabbily treated after their work was completed. They remained to create a distinctive tile in Canada's ethnic mosaic.

In the end, the Canadian prairie region (CPR) was insufficient to complete the task of opening Canada's west, although it was a crucial beginning. A parallel effort to the CPR began in the north and was taken over by the Government of Canada after the First World War. Again, there were trials and tribulations but a network of railways were established through the Prairie Provinces and in the British Columbia interior, which moved resources, grain and people. It was an expensive undertaking but the investment in transportation infrastructure was crucial to the economic well-being of Canada's west, and to the Canadian economy as a whole.

Times have changed. Alternative forms of transportation have seen railways lose the dominance that they once had, as road and air transport have grown in significance both as people movers and as movers of goods. Railways have been eliminated and the network greatly simplified. While both the northern and southern routes across the west are still in place, they carry few passengers although are still central for the carriage of grain and bulk goods, such as coal, and since the 1970s, of container traffic. Immigrants arrive by air, and an extensive road network carries people by cars and buses and increasing amounts of goods of all kinds by trucks (lorries). The economies of Canada's west are still resource-based but the mix is different when compared to the golden age of railway building. Agriculture is still of major importance in the Prairie provinces and the hard red wheat flour of Manitoba's Red River valley still makes the best jiaozi in Beijing. Forestry is still a major component of the economy of British Columbia, although climate change is threatening its well-being. The British Columbian fishery is at risk, as are the world's fisheries, from over-fishing and ecological damage to fish habitats. It is part of a world-wide problem.

Transformation of the global economy has been generally beneficial to the economies of western Canada. Non-agricultural resources have become of increasing importance in the economies of western Canada. The most dramatic example is the exploitation of the tar sands of Alberta as world energy supplies

---

<sup>12</sup> Asian imports were carried from Canada's major Pacific port at Vancouver. The most entertaining were carried on the famous "silk trains" which carried silk cocoons to textile manufacturers in Canada and the eastern United States which arrived on CP Ships and were carried by special fast freight trains, complete with armed guards, that travelled non-stop, except for changing engines, obliging even passenger trains to be sidelined as they passed through. Canadian grain was also shipped at preferential rates from Vancouver to the world. The CP also had a monopoly on moving Imperial mail across the Pacific and through Canada to Britain.

become strained, and more expensive. Technological advance and increases in energy costs have allowed for the economic extraction of oil from Alberta's tar sands, which explains in part the growth in size of Alberta's gross domestic product (GDP). It comes, however, at a significant environmental cost. Other resources - potash from Saskatchewan, coal and other minerals from British Columbia - have all contributed to the growth of western Canada's economies, as the traditional manufacturing economies of Ontario and Quebec are declining, at least shifting their manufacturing character and sometimes literally shifting their production bases to such places as eastern China.

The key to western development in Canada has been infrastructural development which is on-going as the global economy has shifted centers of manufacturing to Asia, and has increased demand for Canada's resources and its food grain and edible oil. While the United States and Europe are still major Canadian markets, Asia is of increasing importance which has placed an increased significance on Canada's west. Flows of immigrants to Canada are now predominantly from Asia, which has changed the character of Canadian society from what it was two generations ago. 40 years ago, a royal commission could reflect upon Canada as bi-lingual and bi-cultural with its two "Charter Groups" of British and French origins.

By the early 1970s, Canadian political leaders recognized the multi-cultural character of the nation and acknowledged its ethnic diversity, within a dual official language policy. The major cities of Canada fully reflect the ethnic realities of Canada in the wake of extensive non-European migration, which has seen redress of some major past injustices, notably an apology to Japanese-Canadians for the harsh treatment of their internment during the Second World War. There have also been efforts to deal with maltreatments of Canadian of Chinese origin, who were obliged to pay an onerous "Head Tax" from 1886 until 1923, and then became subject to exclusion from Canada after the Chinese Immigration Act in 1923 until repeal of the legislation in 1947. The final marks of disability for potential Chinese immigrants were not removed until 1967.

The changes in Canadian political culture over the past 40 years have recognized the diversity of Canada's population and the contributions of those, like the Chinese railway builders, to Canada. Another group that was long overlooked, and which was grievously wronged, is Canada's original inhabitant. Their numbers were much reduced and their cultures catastrophically affected. The majority lived in western Canada, which was precisely the region of Canada where treaties were never signed. As Canadian political leaders have become more aware of the multi-ethnic character of the nation and as different cultural groups have been given recognition—Canada's current Governor-General is a woman of Haitian origin, her predecessor was a Chinese woman—there have been efforts to deal with the status of Canada's First Nations. They were dispossessed from their traditional territories without adequate compensation (or none at all) or due process, repressed, denied cultural rights, placed in often marginal

reserves, and their children were severed from their parents and their culture. Their traditional territories are often rich in resources to which they have little more no access. There is at last the recognition that the generational injustice needs redress. It is a complex process that is getting underway in British Columbia although is tortuously slow in other parts of Canada's west. Some land claims have been accepted and the idea of aboriginal government has been established. These are issues that may assume increasing significance over the coming decades.

## **6. The wests of Canada and China: Apples and oranges?**

Canada's west was remote from the centers of economic and political power a century and more ago. It became integrated into Canada's economy and political system for a variety of reasons, not least of which was territorial integrity and security. The initial strategy for western Canadian development came from the political centre. There were political leaders on the very edge of what was to be Canada's west that was convinced by Canada's federal leaders that it was in their interest to throw its lot in with Canada. During the first decade, they must have wondered if the correct decision had been made. The demands that a railway be built were eventually met—and the Canadian west became an integral part of Canada, both economically and politically.

China's west is remote and poor. It is not well integrated into the Chinese economy. Much of it is vast and only sparsely populated. Even Sichuan or Chongqing, which has a substantial economy, is dragged down the provincial rankings by its population, and its location is a major handicap. What constitutes China's west is a diverse set of administrative entities and while Nei Mongol ends in the west, it begins in the Northeast, and skirts the central region. Is the "Western Development Strategy" primarily one of poverty alleviation and improving the economic well-being of the 330 million people who live in this vast region? Is a further issue one that was dominant for Canada's political leaders in the 1870s—ensuring territorial integrity and security? The two issues are, of course, related. People who see their economic well-being improving are less likely to demand change and opt for alternative arrangements.

The issue is, as Lenin noted most famously "What is to be done?" Canada's solution to the issue of western development was infrastructure and especially transportation infrastructure. Economic development has to be built on a sound infrastructural base. For Canada it was a railway system, later augmented by roads, airports and for the west coast, port facilities.

Since 1979, China as a whole has been transformed. I began my own work in the Pearl River delta region before the reforms that began in 1979 that has seen a wholesale shift from a pristine agricultural landscape to one dominated by industrial and commercial activities. Motorized vehicles were few and far between and the road network was simple and unsophisticated. It took a long time to move about the delta. There were few bridges across the numerous rivers and there were often long waits for ferries, especially

across the West and East Rivers. My first visit to Dongguan, in the Guangzhou-Hong Kong corridor, one of southern China's industrial power-houses today, took four hours and four ferries to travel the 50 km from Guangzhou. (It was 360 when I arrived and the power was off all day!). My first visit to Taishan, the major point of origin of Chinese Canadians origin, some 120 km to the southwest of Guangzhou, took eight hours. My memory of my first visit to Shunde in the centre of the delta is not merely one of its stunning beauty, but of roads topped with sand, smoothed by yellow cows pulling rakes. The past three decades have been ones of relentless infrastructural up-grading.

After 1979, Guangdong quickly entered into a frenetic period of bridge building, road building and up-grading its ports and, later, its airports. It was crucial to the well-being of Guangdong. The journey to Dongguan now takes 45 minutes and Taishan can be reached in 90 minutes along a series of high speed limited access expressways. Shunde is covered by a dense network of highways. Guangdong was a leader in infrastructural developments, which was crucial to the delta economy. It was a controversial strategy—not least because it levied tolls and thus users paid for the privilege traveling on a highway or across a bridge—as were many of Guangdong's economic policies, but by the 1990s, the commitment to infrastructural improvements was echoed throughout the country, and was central to economic change throughout the eastern region. And the idea of users paying was no longer the scandal that it had been in Guangdong in the 1980s.

One mark of all these developments is that the roads and the highways of the Pearl River delta, indeed the whole of Guangdong, are packed with vehicles of all kinds from throughout the country<sup>13</sup>. China as a whole has over 50 thousand km of expressways and of course private vehicle ownership now numbers over 18 million, to the dismay of environmentalists as urban pollution grows, but to the joy of car manufacturers throughout the country. It now has the world's longest sea-crossing bridge across Hangzhou Bay to Shanghai's new deep-sea port, and Beijing is linked by a high-speed train to its port of Tianjin. Plans are afoot to invest US\$30 billion in a high-speed rail link between Beijing and Shanghai, perhaps the grandest of all the projects to augment the rail network of China. Its ports are in the process of upgrading and there is now less dependence on Hong Kong, since Ningbo and Shanghai's new port in Hangzhou Bay have relieved some of the pressures on Hong Kong, which is nonetheless still a critical export outlet.

Where is the west in all this? The link between infrastructure and development is clearly understood by Chinese policy makers. The centre has committed vast amounts to infrastructural development but in

---

<sup>13</sup> I become fascinated by the presence of out of province vehicles in my frequent visits to Guangdong—they are identified by the single character provincial designations on their licence plates (鲁 for Shandong or 鄂 for Hubei for example), which reflects China's ancient past, and is excellent for my knowledge of Chinese history. Only vehicles from Tibet seem absent from Guangdong roads.

general the costs have been shared by provincial levels which, in the eastern region, are flush with revenues. The economic situation in much of western China is simply not up to the capacity of their eastern region counterparts. It likely makes economic sense, in the short term at least, to improve infrastructural facilities in the eastern region, where much of the growth over the past 30 years has occurred. The eastern region is more intimately linked with global economic forces and movement of resources into the region and of finished goods from the reason is likely seen as a first priority for the political centre and local levels. Given the levels of economic activity, the richer eastern region can afford the often huge costs associated with infrastructural developments. They are seen as worthwhile investment.

The west in general does not have the economic capacity to engage in the kinds of infrastructural investments that have become typical in the eastern region. “Self-reliance” cannot make the key differences that are needed. It requires help and assistance from centre, which obtains its resources ultimately from the richer eastern region. Yet, decisions which are as much political as they are developmental must be made. They are not easy. One major investment in the infrastructural enhancement of the west was in the construction a railway, one of the world’s highest, from Golmud to Lhasa, which opened in 2006. Its costs were reportedly a “mere” US\$4 billion, only a sixth of the cost of the proposed Beijing-Shanghai link. The Golmud to Lhasa section was the last in a railway line that runs from Beijing, across the North China plain through Xi’an, Lanzhou and to Xining in Qinghai. Was the decision to build the railway primarily developmental to deal with the issues facing the economy of Tibet, or was it an issue of the territorial integrity of the People Republic of China or both?

Issues of security and territorial integrity are at least as important as development strategy for the enormous territories of Nei Mongol, Tibet and Xinjiang and certainly present in both Yunnan and Guangxi. They are probably less important in the other components of the west. Here I must enter some distinctly sensitive areas. I have mentioned in the context of Canada’s development that a forgotten or overlooked element is the indigenous population that existed as long term settlers in all of Canada. I have noted that in the western region, that aboriginal title had never been legally extinguished and claims by the descendants of Canada’s original people to territories that their ancestor’s has access to have become a strategic issue in future developments. There may be similar issues in much of the western China region which, I have noted, is ethnically diverse. Han settlement has been ongoing throughout the west since its incorporation into Chinese territory. The significance of the non-Han population is recognized by the creation of autonomous regions, prefectures and counties. However in most the Han constitutes the majority and if non-Han are often heads of government, the Party Secretary is typically Han. The control of China’s borders and relations between the Chinese state (even when it was in the hands of non-Han rulers) where non-Han were numerous, has been a troublesome issue for centuries.



The imperial arrangements which secured China's borders began to crumble in the nineteenth century and both Tibet and the Mongolian region declared their independence in 1911. Xinjiang was only intermittently under Chinese rule during much of the Republic. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) secured the border in 1949, having taken control from a Soviet-backed administration, one of several administrations that had governed the region during the Republican period. It is seen as a "peaceful liberation", a view which Uighur ethnic nationalists reject. Ethnic nationalism has been an under-current since 1949, and received a boost after the demise of the Soviet Union, and its earlier retreat from its conflict in Afghanistan, which led to both Islamic Republics and the rise of militant Islamic movements in areas adjacent to Xinjiang. The large Islamic population of Xinjiang is not immune to global currents, and there are keen memories of the recent past. Substantial Han in-migration to Xinjiang since the 1950s is likely contentious for segments of the Uighur population. There have been protests, bombings and arrests of an indeterminate number of Uighur nationalists.

China's control over its Tibetan borderlands has been in place since early Qing times. The status of Tibet as a Chinese dependency was formalized by the Qian Long emperor. Even as the British attempted to secure their interests in the Tibetan region, Chinese sovereignty over the area was formally recognized. Tibetan politics were complex but rule by various Dalai Lama were accepted. The 14th Dalai Lama exercised both temporal and spiritual power as the PLA entered the region after 1950, again to re-establish Chinese control that had not existed since the fall of the empire. There were Tibetan reactions, not merely in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but also in the former Tibetan provinces in Qinghai.

In 1959 widespread rebellion in the Tibetan heartland provoked a harsh reaction from the political centre, and the Dalai Lama fled to India to set up a government in exile, a not dissimilar parallel to events at the very end of the Qing dynasty when a punitive expedition was launched in Tibet. There are, from this moment, two very different accounts of Tibetan developments and Tibetan-Chinese relations. There was much destruction of Tibetan culture, which was exacerbated during the xenophobia of the Cultural Revolution period. There are wrongs and rights on both sides. Cultural destruction occurred not only in Tibet but throughout China, which cannot be readily justified. The effects are long-lasting as they also have been in Canada if on a different scale. I have suggested that there are some efforts to redress past injustices in the Canadian contexts. The ethnic issues are a part of China's western development strategy and they have to be recognized even if they are part of a contentious political context.

## **7. Conclusion**

Whether security or conventional development issues are uppermost for China's west, infrastructural development is crucial, as it was and still is for Canada's west. The development of adequate transportation links seems a key issue. The rail link to Lhasa may be largely symbolic but it can also have

important economic consequences. Tibet is likely rich in mineral resources. The Golmud region is not only centered on Qinghai's second largest municipality, it is also resource rich, and with facilities to deal with some of the potential of Tibet's resources, which are in great demand by industrial concerns in the eastern region, to which it is now linked. Rail links through both Xinjiang and Nei Mongol can be crucial for the land-bridge from Europe to China, which has not yet achieved its full potential. The Ala Shankou crossing runs into Kazakhstan, before it turns up to Novosibirsk on the Trans-Siberian. The Erenhot crossing goes through Ulan Bator, before it turns to Irkutsk. Both routes have been marked by some uncertainties, although they have been important for Chinese traders which have flocked across the borders.

Railway development is of great significance for the parts of the west that are not border regions, or have borders that are less fractious than those in Nei Mongol, Tibet and Xinjiang. Kunming is a railhead with the potential for links to Southeast Asia. There is a single track narrow gauge to Vietnam, although the Beijing-Hanoi express crosses Guangxi. There are plans for building a new rail line (standard gauge) from Kunming to Vietnam, a second to Myanmar, and even hopes for a link to Singapore.

There have been two developments of importance. The Chengdu-Kunming line, which was justifiably touted as one of the great infrastructural achievements of the Cultural Revolution period, has been doubled tracked. Chongqing is also linked to Guiyang, which gives access to Liuzhou in Guangxi, and then to Zhanjiang, Guangdong's second largest port (after Hong Kong) in a region of enormous economic potential. Rail links south from the Sichuan/Chongqing complex are an alternative to either the rail or road routes out of the Sichuan basin northeast to the North China plain. Chongqing is also linked by an expressway to Zhanjiang. (Zhanjiang in its turn is linked by cross-provincial highway to Pearl River delta region). If the most effective domestic communications channels for the northwest and Tibet/Qinghai are to north China, and internationally to central Asia and Siberia, for the southwest its greatest potential lies in south China and southeast Asia.

One of the intriguing prospects for the southwest is western Guangdong. We think of Guangdong in terms its central region, which has been an economic powerhouse for almost 30 years. Outside the Pearl River delta writ large economic change has been less dramatic. The next stage in Guangdong's development may well be in the western regions of the province. Historically the region, rather like western China, has been poor and isolated. It is now firmly linked to the rest of the province by an extensive road network and a cross-provincial railway. It has two enormous assets. The one is Zhanjiang and its two harbours, and the other is Maoming and its oil shale. Zhanjiang was under French domination from 1898 (when it was known as Kwangchowwan or Fort-Bayard) until it was occupied by the Japanese and formally returned to China by the French in 1946. It never lived up to its potential for French hopes that it would

be useful for mineral and railway rights that it had acquired in south and southwest China or its colonial possessions in Indochina, in part because of the poverty of the broader region.

Zhanjiang has two magnificent harbors, which never achieved their potential because of locational disadvantages (one is the base of China's south China fleet). In the 1950s Maoming, 160 km to the east, became the location of a large oil refinery, in the expectation that the oil shale which abounds in the region would be a significant source of refinery products. A rail link was built from Zhanjiang. The oil shale proved too costly for extraction of the oil. Thereafter crude oil was shipped from Zhanjiang to Maoming for refining. There were expectations that oil fields in the South China Sea might come on stream in the 1980s. There is potential—but the area is contested. In the meantime, crude oil has become expensive, China is energy deficient, and the technology to extract oil from shale has advanced (witness northern Alberta!). The prospects for western Guangdong have changed for the better. There are well-developed facilities in the region to deal with oil and gas. Not least of new sources of energy are the natural gas fields of Sichuan. It makes economic sense to run a pipeline from Sichuan to parallel the highway to Zhanjiang. Road and rail links to western Guangdong can go some way to opening up Sichuan, and other parts of the southwest region to both the affluent regions of south China, but also to Southeast Asia and international markets.

**About the Author:** *Dr. Graham Johnson* is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His research focuses primarily on the economic and social transformation of the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong province in southern China, migration into the region, and the integration of Hong Kong into southern China. His research interests also include food security in China, and the impact of transport infrastructure in Guangdong, Gansu and Shanghai. Dr. Johnson maintains a standing interest in the changing New Territories of Hong Kong, especially Tsuen Wan, and Chinese-Canadian communities in Canada. Dr. Johnson is a language expert, speaking English, French, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hakka.