

Souvenir Shops in Tibet

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Abstract

Souvenir shops in Tibet correspond to the City size as well as destination popularity.

Introduction

Tibet has a fast growing tourism industry that is changing the human geography of the region. The economy of Tibet is also changing as the tourist numbers continue to grow. The commodification of culture as is an important aspect of the local self-perception as well as the core for advertising a tourist destination.

This report will explain how many tourist oriented souvenir shops there are in each of the towns I traveled to during my time in Tibet over the past summer (2014). Along with this there will be a brief explanation of the frequently used tourist routes to Lhasa, the capitol of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), seen in figure 1.



Figure 1. Are enlarged, Tibet area and route take.

Methods

Over the summer of 2014 I spent 6 weeks on the Tibetan Plateau performing field work for my senior capstone. The data was collected using Geographic Positioning System (GPS) units that were both set to the World Geodetic System (WGS) 84 datum. At every town I visited I made a count of all of the souvenir shops around tourist areas. These data were then written down and saved for later use.

Once back in the lab the GPS units were downloaded and the points of each town were used to show the towns visited. I used the DNRGSP program to convert the files into a Shapefile. These were then added to a several base maps that I downloaded from the Web.

Finding the data for my base maps was a complicated process. Several sets of Digital Elevation Models (DEMs) were downloaded from (viewfinderpanoramas.org), un-zipped, then loaded into ArcMap. At this point I had near one hundred tiles of detailed elevation data in raster form. I then added all of this data to the mosaic tool to eliminate the seams between images. I then changed the symbology from black and white to a land cover color scheme and adjusted the brakes in the data to match the altitude. I then created a shaded relief with the hillshade tool in order to provide some depth to the image. I also added a political base layer of China in polyline form.

After the base layers were made I went into Google Earth in order to make a path of my trip including the trains and roads used. I exported this into a Shapefile using the DNRGPS application. I then added these to the map and assigned symbology accurate to the type of path, train track or road.

Analysis and Results

The map (Figure 2) shows the largest cities on the plateau also have the highest number of souvenir shops. This is not an outstanding finding but the map shows more than just that; it also shows the tourist path to Lhasa from Xining via train or from Chengdu via overland vehicle. The route from Chengdu to Lhasa is black on the portion of the road that I personally traveled and yellow with black in the middle for the path that a Chinese tourist would take in a personal vehicle.

In Lhasa, the Barkhor (a one kilometer path circling the Jokhang temple) is one such market with no fewer than 250 shops selling religious paraphernalia amongst other objects. The Barkhor path is roughly 50 feet wide at parts, consistently wide enough for crowds of people. The street is lined with buildings all selling goods a tourist, pilgrim, or local resident may want. At one stop tourists may be able to buy a cheap hat and then at the shop next door pick up a handmade Buddha statue. Most shops are very similar in size and inventory (Figure 3.). Souvenir shops could be limited to shops that sell small trinkets such as jewelry and art, but in the case of this study stores selling Buddhist-related consumables of a reasonable size for tourist consumption are included as “tourist shops”. In regards to the souvenir, Healy states, “a more appropriate synonymous term is ‘tourist merchandise’, referring to objects intended to be purchased on site and carried home” (1994). Though there are more shops now than in pre-

tourist Lhasa (<1978) the practice of buying souvenirs is not a new addition to the market place here. Historic sites such as monasteries have long been places of trade and commerce. (I look at the tourism industry looking at souvenirs— and why)

As recently as 2012, vendors would use the road area as a place to sell goods just as the shops on the side of the road do now. Due to regulations imposed by the government making it illegal to have a business on the road the vendors have been relocated to a brand new mall built from large blocks of granite. Here rows of small shops no larger than ten square feet operate everyday, all selling nearly the same the same goods. One such item is the mala, a string of beads 108 in total used as a prayer aid by Buddhists. These prayer beads are the most popular and prolific object sold in this mall as well as most tourist sites. Nearly every shop including convenience stores will have a small display with malas (prayer beads) for sale. The mala then, an object specific to Tibetan Buddhism, has become a symbol for Tibet.

The national Identity of Tibetans evolved from the 1950s when an uprising against Chinese occupiers created a source for Tibetans to base their shared identities. The implications of this national identity reach into every aspect of Tibet, socio-political relations, economics, as well as all aspects of human geography. This shared nationalism affects the way Tibetans use space, generate income, create self-perceptions as well as change cultural traditions, and the way local groups create a sense of place. In this landscape of economic change, political control, and marginalized people the commodification of place is key to understanding the adapting culture.

In conclusion it is obvious that the tourism industry in Tibet is capitalizing on the culture of Tibet, specifically the religion. The many souvenirs offered are all tied to religion showing the unique quality of Tibet among greater China. These economic drivers and policies set forth by the tourism bureau are serving to preserve the national identity in Tibet creating a soft power that may serve to keep Tibet from fully assimilating with China.

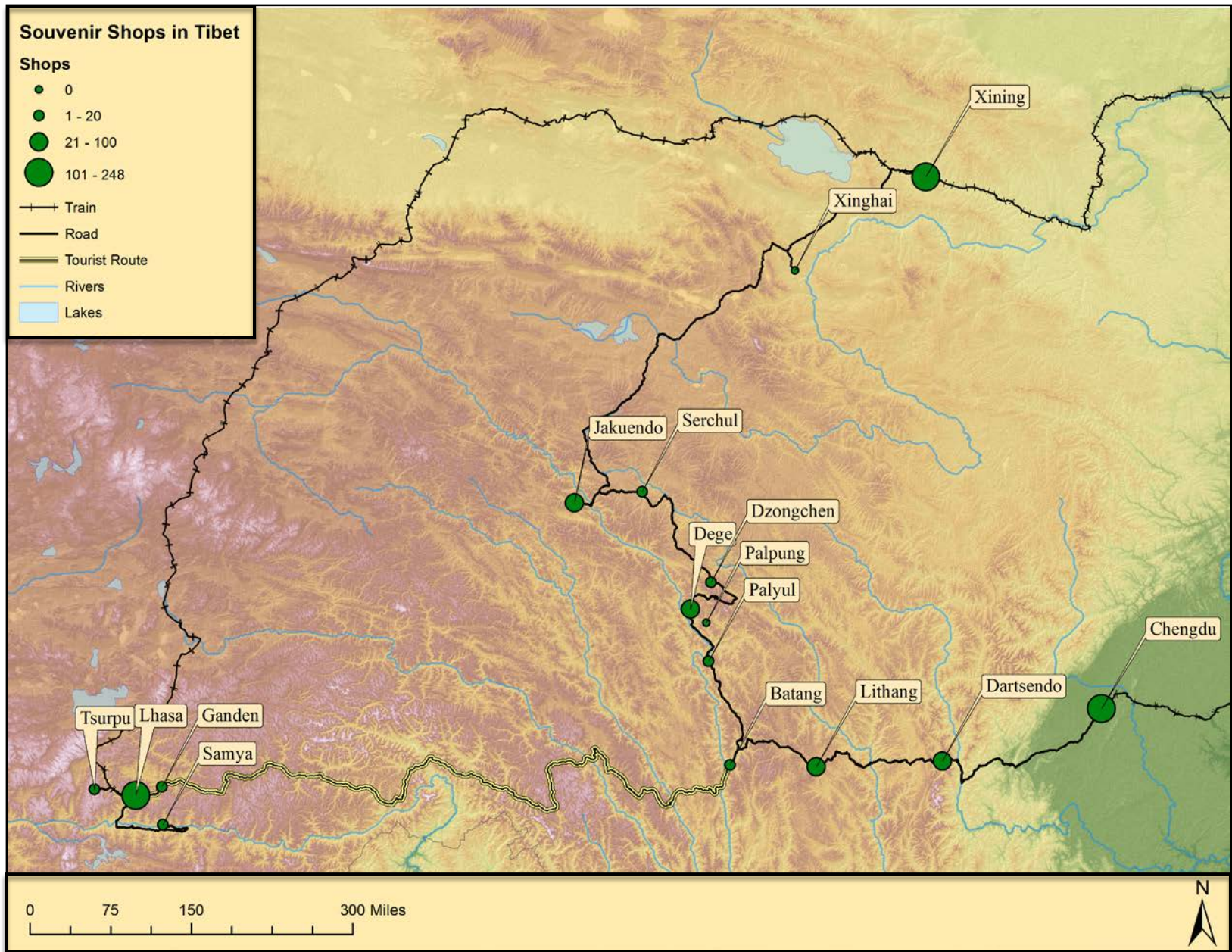


Figure 2. Map of the number of souvenir shops and tourist route. (Map by Author 2014)



Figure 3. Shows a typical souvenir shop in Tibet with various consumables related to Tibetan Buddhism.

References

Administrative borders:

GADM is a geographic database of global administrative areas (boundaries).

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Digital Elevation model Raster data provided by:

<http://www.viewfinderpanoramas.org/dem3.html#himalayas>

From the world coverage table in 3" tiles.

Rivers and Lakes downloaded from:

<http://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/10m-physical-vectors/>

Natural earth files set to 10 meter resolution ten cropped out unnecessary data not related to research area.

Road routes and train routes provided by: Google Earth
Imported as Shapefiles with DNRGPS application provided by Kosmos Lab at HSU

Healy, R. G. 1994. Tourism merchandise' as a means of generating local benefits for ecotourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 2(3), 137e151.

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