

# Research on the Dilemma and Pathways for High-Quality Development of the Population in Western China

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**Abstract:** *The population challenge has consistently represented a comprehensive, enduring, and strategic issue confronting China. Western China, serving as a crucial security bulwark within the nation, holds its high-quality population development in close relation to national unity, social stability, and national security. Grounded in the realities of Western China's economic and social progress, this paper delves into the obstacles impeding the high-quality development of Western China's population, considering factors such as the natural environment, economic and social development, and the current demographic landscape. It then proposes the following effective strategies: bolstering the construction of the public service system, enhancing the medical service infrastructure, and fortifying disaster prevention mechanisms; fostering the internal driving forces of economic growth, reinforcing scientific and technological innovation, and cultivating new, high-quality productivity tailored to the plateau's unique conditions; and optimizing the population structure, promoting balanced regional development, and maximizing the benefits of talent utilization.*

## 1. Introduction

Human beings constitute the essence of all social relations. Population, serving as the fundamental prerequisite for the existence and progression of human society, exerts a significant influence on economic and social development. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi Jinping at its helm, has placed significant emphasis on population-related matters and has implemented a series of strategic work arrangements concerning fertility and the long-term, balanced development of the population. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China unequivocally emphasized that Chinese-style modernization is characterized by a vast population. We must firmly grasp and comprehend this distinctive feature, and strive to advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization.

Situated at the southwestern border of China and nestled within the southwestern reaches of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, Xizang serves as a crucial security bulwark for the nation. The development of its population is intricately linked to national unity, social stability, and the safeguarding of national security. Lixiaoning, President of the Academy of Social Sciences of the Xizang Autonomous Region and Chairman of the Federation of Social Sciences, emphasized that enhancing the quality of the population, fostering unity among its millions of residents, and cultivating outstanding talents are fundamental strategies to drive Xizang's long-term stability and high-quality development. For an extended period, Xizang has been intensely concentrating on the pivotal themes of population, the people's sentiments, and talent acquisition. It has conducted a series of in-depth work discussions and formulated strategic arrangements, successfully transforming the population development dilemma characterized by high birth rates, high mortality rates, and low natural growth rates [1]. However, it continues to grapple with issues such as an uneven distribution of population, an aging demographic structure, and a low quality of population [2].

Based on this premise, this paper delves into the realities of Xizang's social development to analyze the challenges hindering its population growth, with the ultimate goal of fostering high-quality demographic development in the region.

## 2. The Dilemma Surrounding High-Quality Population Development in Xizang

### 2.1 Geographical Conditions

Firstly, Xizang is situated in the heart of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, with an average elevation exceeding 4,000 meters across the entire region. The natural conditions, characterized by thin air, low atmospheric pressure, extreme cold, and hypoxia, pose significant challenges to human health, as well as production and daily life. On one hand, residing and working at high altitudes can induce short-term symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbances, thereby impacting both work efficiency and overall quality of life. On the other hand, prolonged exposure can lead to altitude-related illnesses, including pulmonary edema, brain edema, and cardiovascular diseases, which can cause irreversible harm to the body. By 2024, the average life expectancy in Xizang is projected to reach 72.5 years, more than doubling the 35.5 years recorded in the early days following its peaceful liberation. However, this figure still falls short of the national average life expectancy of 79 years. In the meantime, as of 2023, the national maternal mortality rate stood at 15.1 per 100,000 live births, while the infant mortality rate was 4.5 per 1,000 live births. The maternal mortality rate in Xizang stood at 38.63 per 100,000, approximately 2.56 times higher than the national average. Meanwhile, the infant mortality rate was recorded at 5.37%, which is 0.8% lower than the national average. It is evident that Xizang's unique natural environment, to a certain extent, poses threats to the residents' physical health, fertility, infant growth, and lifespan, thereby impacting population development.

Secondly, Xizang is characterized by a complex climate, marked by significant temperature variations between day and night, robust winds, and a high incidence of natural disasters such as droughts, snowstorms, hail, thunder, and lightning. These phenomena are prone to inflict substantial losses on both lives and property, significantly impacting the daily existence and productivity of its inhabitants. For instance, droughts and snow disasters can lead to a decrease in crop survival rates and grain yields, subsequently reducing the income of farmers and herders and diminishing the quality of family life. Moreover, strong winds and hail are capable of wreaking havoc on residential structures, cattle sheds, chicken coops, and other buildings, resulting not only in direct economic losses for farmers and herders but also posing a grave threat to their personal safety.

## 2.2 Economic and Social Development is Comparatively Lagging

Currently, Xizang's development is confronted with a situation characterized by a fragile economic base, inadequate talent attraction, and limited local training capabilities. In 2024, Xizang's GDP reached 276.494 billion yuan, representing merely 0.2% of the nation's total. The economy is modest in scale, with a feeble foundation, insufficient endogenous driving forces for economic growth, and struggles to sustain the construction of essential livelihood projects, including healthcare, education, elderly care, and transportation. Furthermore, the challenging geographical conditions and restricted development opportunities contribute to Xizang's relative weakness in talent cultivation, particularly in attracting high-caliber, technologically advanced professionals. It lacks a competitive edge in this regard, with a notable trend of failing to attract and retain such talent. Simultaneously, Xizang's industries exhibit a heavy reliance on resources and funding, and are plagued by issues such as a truncated industrial chain, low added value, and a feeble capacity for innovation [3]. Consequently, the industry offers fewer job opportunities, with inadequate employment absorption capacity and relatively limited talent development prospects. Currently, farming and pastoral regions remain predominantly reliant on agriculture and animal husbandry, with agricultural production models like courtyard economies and rural tourism still in their exploratory phases. Farmers and herdsmen face limited employment options, resulting in low incomes for rural households. During the industrial development phase, most enterprises are resource-based and labor-intensive, primarily consuming fossil fuels such as coal, electricity, and thermal power. These enterprises are characterized by high consumption and pollution levels, poor working environments, and challenges in ensuring employee health. Among the three primary sectors, the tourism industry shows strong growth potential; however, the development of emerging manufacturing, high-end services, and other industries lags behind, leading to a scarcity of high-quality job opportunities.

## 2.3 Mbalance in Population Structure

First, the population distribution is unbalanced. Xizang covers an area of 1.2284 million square kilometers, accounting for about 1/8 of the total land area. According to statistics, at the end of 2023, the total population of Xizang was 3.65 million,

accounting for only 0.26% of the total population of the country, presenting a situation of vast territory and sparse population. The population of Xizang at the end of the year increased year by year from 2014 to 2022, and showed a downward trend after 2022. At the same time, the proportion of urban population has increased year by year, which indicates that a large number of people have migrated to cities, the population in agricultural and pastoral areas has decreased year by year, and the phenomenon of "hollowing out" in many villages in agricultural and pastoral areas is serious. It can be seen from table 1 below that Lhasa has the fastest growth of permanent population, and the population density is much higher than that of other cities. The permanent population of Shannan and Naqu showed an upward trend from 2013 to 2018, but a downward trend from 2018 to 2023. At the same time, compared with other cities, the permanent population of Nyingchi also increased less. The possible reason is that Shannan and Nyingchi are relatively close to Lhasa, and the siphon effect of the capital Lhasa is more obvious, and the population flows to Lhasa more; From the perspective of population density, the population density of Ali and Naqu are 0.37 and 1.43 respectively, which is far lower than that of Lhasa, indicating that most of the population is distributed in Lhasa and other cities, while the area accounts for a larger proportion. The population distribution in remote areas such as Ali and Naqu is less, which is not conducive to the long-term development of the region and the consolidation of the border.

**Table 1:** Margin specifications

	Permanent Population (ten thousand persons)			Population Density (persons per square meter)		
	2013	2018	2023	2013	2018	2023
Lhasa City	58.85	70.38	86.79	19.86	23.75	29.29
Shigatse City	72.88	78.57	79.95	4.05	4.37	4.44
Chamdo City	67.95	71.77	76.1	6.19	6.54	6.93
Nyingchi City	20.39	23.3	23.89	1.78	2.04	2.09
Shannan City	34.18	37.53	35.32	4.31	4.74	4.46
Naqu City	47.88	51.32	50.48	1.36	1.46	1.43
Ngari Prefecture	9.92	10.95	12.33	0.29	0.32	0.37

Secondly, the demographic dividend is on the decline. From 2020 to 2023, as living standards improved and fertility concepts evolved, Xizang witnessed a consistent year-on-year decrease in both birth rates and natural population growth rates, coupled with a concurrent rise in the dependency ratio of its elderly population. This trend indicates a waning childbearing inclination among Xizang's youth, a deceleration in population growth, and a gradual increase in the elderly population's proportion. Consequently, Xizang's society is gradually transitioning into an aging phase, marked by a diminishing labor force and a fading demographic dividend. This shift poses significant challenges to future pension services, social security, and other public service systems.

## 3. An Effective Pathway for the High-Quality Development of the Xizang Population

General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that the population issue has consistently been a comprehensive, long-term, and strategic challenge confronting China. Xizang, serving as a crucial security bulwark for the nation, its pursuit of high-quality population development is intricately linked to national unity, social stability, and national security.

Consequently, analyzing the current challenges hindering population development in Xizang and exploring effective strategies for its high-quality population growth hold immense significance and have far-reaching implications for the region's economic and social advancement.

### 3.1 Enhancing the Development of the Public Service System

First, improve the medical service system. On the one hand, the government should increase the special fund investment for medical construction, set up specialized hospitals for plateau diseases, and increase the number of county, township and village medical service points to ensure that residents "do not leave the village for minor diseases, do not leave the village for common diseases, and do not leave the county for serious diseases"; Formulate relevant preferential policies, such as increasing employment subsidies, housing subsidies and other benefits, attract excellent medical workers to work in Xizang, so that their work conditions, officers have a platform, and treatment are guaranteed. At the same time, strengthen exchanges and cooperation with mainland hospitals and universities, regularly organize personnel to study in well-known local medical institutions, and cultivate medical talents that meet the needs of the plateau. On the other hand, we should strengthen medical publicity and education and establish a disease prevention system. For plateau residents, we should strengthen the popularization of plateau life, plateau disease prevention and other knowledge, and regularly carry out health testing for pregnant women and infants to ensure the health of plateau residents.

Second, it is imperative to fortify the disaster prevention mechanism. To begin with, from an architectural standpoint, it is crucial to thoroughly account for Xizang's intricate climate patterns and the prevalence of disasters. This involves promptly repairing and refining the design of aging and obsolete structures, elevating construction standards, and enhancing disaster resilience to safeguard both residents' property and lives. Secondly, leveraging modern information technology is essential for monitoring climatic shifts. By establishing a comprehensive natural disaster monitoring network, we can promptly track disaster developments and mitigate their impact to the greatest extent possible.

### 3.2 Strengthen the Inherent Driving Force of Economic Development

We should strengthen scientific and technological innovation and develop new productivity on the Plateau according to local conditions. General Secretary Xi emphasized that "science and technology are the primary productivity, talents are the primary resources, and innovation is the primary driving force". In agriculture, we should further explore the production mode of "agriculture + science and technology +". For example, we should use modern agricultural equipment to carry out agricultural machinery operations, improve grain production, and liberate the agricultural surplus labor force. At the same time, farmers can rely on crops, housing and other household resources to develop courtyard economy, agritainment, etc. , expand the income channels of farmers and herdsmen, and village secretaries and directors can sell agricultural products through online live broadcast,

cooperatives and other channels to improve the income of village collectives and residents; In industry, enterprises should increase the investment in scientific and technological innovation, improve the R & D efforts of enterprises, realize the transformation from resource-based and labor-based enterprises to science and technology-based and innovative enterprises, strengthen the vocational training of residents, expand the employment and income channels of farmers, and at the same time, the government should also improve the environmental regulation, encourage the green transformation and development of enterprises, improve the working environment of employees, strengthen the investigation of enterprises, and ensure the legitimate rights and interests of employees; In the development of three industries, we should actively cultivate and vigorously develop new industries, such as financial services, new energy, manufacturing, etc. , introduce relevant enterprises to settle in Xizang and take root in Xizang through policy attraction and financial support, provide more high-quality jobs, and ensure the quality of residents' employment.

### 3.3 Enhancing the Population Structure

First, promote coordinated regional development. On the one hand, we should strengthen the construction of infrastructure such as transportation and hydropower in agricultural and pastoral areas, improve the development status of agricultural and pastoral areas, and improve the production and living conditions of farmers and herdsmen; At the same time, farmers and herdsmen, based on local natural resources and advantages, develop characteristic industries in agricultural and pastoral areas, such as yak meat, highland barley wine, Zanba, milk products, etc. , forming an industrial chain integrating production, processing and sales, attracting migrant workers to return home for employment and entrepreneurship, and reducing excessive population loss; On the other hand, we should increase the policy preference for Shannan, Ali and other cities. Through the investment of enterprises in land, capital and other elements, we should develop regional characteristic industries according to local conditions, improve the attractiveness of the city, help local residents and foreign personnel obtain employment, and promote talent return.

Second, strengthen the release of talent dividends. First, we will introduce relevant birth incentive policies and improve the childcare service system to encourage young people to have more and better children. For example, we should increase maternity allowance, increase maternity leave for pregnant women, establish community nurseries, reduce the cost of childbearing for young people, and solve the pressure of young people after childbearing; Secondly, explore diversified pension models and improve the pension service system. Through the establishment of community canteens, door-to-door nursing, health care services and other ways, create a comprehensive service around the clothing, food, housing and transportation of the elderly. At the same time, through the establishment of the elderly talent information database, according to the wishes and health conditions of the elderly, combined with the skill level of the elderly, promote the elderly to get employed again; Finally, we should improve the quality of human capital and cultivate local talents. By increasing investment in health care and education, improving

the health and education level of the labor force, accelerating the transformation of Xizang from the disadvantage of demographic dividend to the advantage of talent dividend, and realizing that people stay in Xizang, talents build Xizang, and talents prosper Xizang.

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