

# Tibet Through the Looking Glass: Reflections into the Dependencies of Tibet with China

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the contentious issue of Tibet's development within China. Following its 1950 invasion, China established a complex relationship with the region. The 17-Point Agreement (1951) promised Tibetan autonomy while asserting Chinese sovereignty. Limited autonomy was initially granted, particularly in "central Tibet," but not extended uniformly across other Tibetan areas. This preferential treatment reflects the strategic importance of central Tibet for the Chinese government, aiming to consolidate control and weaken the Dalai Lama's influence. By examining the interplay of economic policies, political dynamics, and cultural complexities, the paper explores the dependent nature of Tibet's relationship with China. It ultimately questions the character of Tibet's incorporation and its long-term consequences.

## 1. Introduction

Tibet is an autonomous region in south-western China, known for its rich cultural heritage, including Tibetan Buddhism. The region has a complex history, marked by periods of independence and Chinese influence. The development of Tibet within the context of China has been a contentious and complex issue, marred by historical, political, and cultural complexities. The narrative surrounding Tibet's development is deeply entwined with the broader geopolitical landscape and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to assert control over the region since the 1950s. Following the invasion of Tibet by People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950, there were attempts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to grant special rights to the Tibetan government led by the 14th Dalai Lama, recognizing the distinctiveness of the region.

In the 17-Point Agreement signed in 1951, the Chinese government and representatives of Tibet agreed to a framework for the incorporation of Tibet into the PRC. The agreement, while asserting Chinese sovereignty, also promised a high degree of autonomy for Tibet, including the preservation of its political system and the role of the Dalai Lama. During the first decade, there were efforts to maintain a degree of autonomy for Tibet, particularly in what is often referred to as "central Tibet." This autonomy, however, did not extend uniformly across all Tibetan regions such as Kham and Amdo, which were subordinated to the surrounding provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. This preferential treatment to central Tibet, also known as Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) since 1965,

reflects the political and strategic importance of the region contributing to Chinese government's policies, aimed to assert authority over this central hub and diminish the influence of the Dalai Lama thereby curbing the historical resistance to Chinese rule.

The article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between economic policies, political dynamics, and cultural complexities in Tibet, ultimately highlighting the complex web of dependencies that characterize the region's relationship with China since its occupation. The article seeks to question the nature of Tibet's occupation and its ultimate outcome.

## 2. China's Tibet Policy: Economic Development and Integration

China's primary justification for occupation of Tibet has constituted the goal of promoting economic development and modernization in the region. Beginning with the Democratic transformations introduced in 1950s and 1960s to convert the feudal structure of the society, Tibet has seen several phases of development and reforms. Under Deng Xiaoping in 1970s economic development became a focus, and there were efforts to improve infrastructure and living conditions. Since the 1990s, China's Tibet policy shifted towards emphasizing economic development, poverty alleviation, and addressing regional disparities and fostering economic growth and stability through the 'Go West' campaign. The Chinese government has been trying hard to bring stability and develop Western region by launching a grand strategy, popularly known as "Go West" campaign. The campaign led

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to significant investments in infrastructure development, including the construction of roads, railways, airports, and other key facilities enhancing connectivity and accessibility in the remote and mountainous terrain of Tibet. The policy aimed at diversifying the traditional economic sectors by establishing industrial parks to attract investment. In addition, it also promoted investment in education and healthcare infrastructure and encourages tourism to attract domestic and international tourists. The campaign significantly changed the economic picture of Tibet and improved the overall standard of living for some inhabitants of Tibet. China's Tibet policy has undergone various shifts and reforms over the years, reflecting changing political, economic, and social dynamics. The policies have evolved in response to internal and external pressures, as well as shifts in the Chinese leadership's approach to governance.

The subsidies under the 1990s economic reforms contributed growth in western China and especially in the TAR and Qinghai, where growth accelerated rapidly, above national-average rates. The speed of economic growth in the TAR and Qinghai over this period was phenomenal, even by Chinese standards. For instance, the nominal gross domestic product (GDP) of both provinces grew at a rate about one-third faster than the national economy from 1997 to 2010, even though the national experience has been perhaps the fastest (and the largest) experience of sustained rapid economic growth the world has ever seen (Fischer, 2013). Such unprecedented growth has also trickled down to the rural areas and households as per principles of "harmonious" and "people-first" development subsequently leading to a falling of poverty rates and rise in the average household incomes.

Nevertheless, despite such unprecedented economic growth, the developmental gap has been mitigated only to a limited extent and contributed in structuring the Tibetan areas within China's development strategies as peripheries. Despite the rising economic growth rate in Tibet, the fact remained that industrialization and development in Tibet did not extend beyond specific enclave ventures due to consumption-driven integrations into "industrial civilization" without necessarily engaging in industrial modes of production (Fischer, 2013). Another contributing factor to the development gap is also held to be the state-set prices of raw materials which are extracted from regions in western Tibet and used as indirect subsidy to other parts of the country, presumably where raw materials are used in downstream industries. Economic development in Tibet is comparable to that of a peripheral region whereby resources and raw materials are not only extracted and exploited, but also selective urbanization centres are also created providing employment and markets.

Additionally, Tibetan scholars share a consensus that the "Go West" campaign is a strategic move by the Chinese government to sustain its assertive policy of integrating Tibet under the guise of economic reforms. They assert that, according to China's strategic outlook on Tibet, the development campaign in the western region is a gradual process designed to create economic dependence on China, ultimately leading to the complete integration of Tibet into the PRC. Contrastingly, the Chinese government maintains that the objective behind the western region's development is to bridge the economic gap between the underdeveloped

western areas and the more prosperous eastern regions. This, they argue, is part of a broader strategy to position China as a global power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the Chinese perspective, since Tibet is a territory of their fifth largest minority which is historically backward, the western development programme would also benefit Tibet.

### 3. Cultural Preservation and Religious Freedom

The economic and cultural dimensions in this region are intricately intertwined, shaped by the contrasting narratives put forth by the central government and the exile government of the Dalai Lama, represented by the Central Tibetan Administration. This is due to the justification of economic development provided by central government to build the claim of its legitimacy in the region vs the claims of the exile government of Dalai Lama, the Central Tibetan Administration, of widespread ethnic and cultural marginalization and discrimination of the Tibetans by the changes brought about by development initiatives have, in some cases, led to the erosion of cultural heritage and values that are deeply rooted in Tibetan identity. Since 1959 ethnic protests and uprisings have continuously persisted uprising in the Tibetan plateau to resist against the Chinese rule, some peaceful while other violent means include the self-immolation protests of Tibetans in 2008. However, it is crucial to comprehend ethnic protests through a nuanced perspective. While the Chinese leadership blames the 'Dalai Cliques' and hostile western forces to incite and abet such protests, the Tibetan government in exile claim such protests to be a result of not separatist tendencies but the reaction to marginalization of such ethnic communities. The 1959 Tibetan uprising which was subdued by the Chinese army led to the fleeing of Dalai Lama and several Tibetans with him to Dharmasala, India.

The occurrence of such protests at regular intervals can be attributed to various factors. A contributing factor is the diminishing political autonomy of the region, a trend that has persisted since 1959 and throughout the Maoist era, despite the conferred autonomous status. The prevailing reality is that development policies in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan regions have primarily been dictated from Beijing in a top-down manner, aligning with national development trends. Furthermore, despite the delegation of decentralization powers to local governments, officials in this region are constrained from applying creative approaches to policies, unlike their counterparts in other parts of China. As a result, local governments in Tibet strictly adhere to policies directly aligned with the national development policy framework. The politicization of unrest and the pressures of political competition compel local officials to adopt a stringent stance against such protests. In return for taking a hardline approach, these officials are rewarded with substantial incentives. This dynamic underscores how the diminished citizen-official linkages and the restrictions on the infusion of new ideas into local government thinking are perpetuated. (Hillman, 2016).

Moreover, this accelerated growth has resulted in a significant influx of immigrants from the predominant Han Chinese ethnic community, contributing to widespread discrimination against Tibetans in their native land. Tibetans and other ethnic communities face instances of 'Han-chauvinism,' where they are subjected to prejudice and bias.

In some cases, they are idealized in somewhat patronizing terms as cheerful and noble yet somewhat naive, seen as requiring the guidance of the Chinese. Conversely, in a more explicit manifestation, Tibetans are portrayed in derogatory terms as backward, unruly, and even lazy, depicted as barbarians in need of civilization (Fischer, 2013). The Han community comprises skilled workers with access to superior educational facilities, helping them in their seamless integration into the national economy. Consequently, they dominate the majority of employment sectors. Discrimination faced by non-Han Chinese groups, such as Tibetans, has engendered an identity crisis among them. While, on one hand, these minority groups are acknowledged as an integral part of the 'Chinese nation,' they are simultaneously perceived as 'less Chinese' by the dominant Han community. This perception arises from linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, leading to the classification of these minority groups as both an "exotic Other" and a constituent of their own nation. The paradoxical interplay of integration and exclusion gives rise to a mutually dependent insecurity and identity crisis on both sides (Alpermann, 2023). Consequently, a greater resistance against government policies is anticipated from these groups, even though their economic conditions are comparatively better than those of the impoverished (Fischer, 2013) thus invalidating the claims of central government that increasing prosperity is a sign of ceasing discrimination among different ethnic groups.

Ethnic unrest among Tibetans can also be attributed to their desire to preserve their cultural and religious distinctiveness. In Tibetan regions, there is a noticeable increase in constraints on monastic life, exemplified by the implementation of 'patriotic education' for monks and nuns, along with restrictions on the number of monks a monastery can enroll. Travel restrictions to specific monasteries, preventing nonlocal visitors from accessing them, further contribute to the escalation of these constraints. The presence of suicide notes left by several self-immolators is considered evidence that concerns about cultural survival play a role in motivating these desperate acts (Hao and Liu 2012; Shan and Chen 2009).

#### 4. Navigating Solutions for the Tibetan Issue:

China historically views ethnic groups as political entities and emphasizes unity, political power, and territorial conservation. While regional ethnic autonomy and preferential policies for minority regions have been implemented, ethnic conflicts persist, prompting a crucial need for depoliticizing Tibetan ethnicity within the broader context of China's ethnic relations management.

As a solution to adjust the asymmetrical relationship between development and Tibetan culture and identity, some scholars advocate for a "second generation" of ethnic policies, calling for the gradual cancellation of preferential policies to achieve equality among all ethnic groups. While acknowledging the historical benefits of preferential policies, scholars argue that their perpetuation may lead to growing disparities between ethnic minorities and the Han majority. The dominance of the Han community in implementing these policies could also restrict Tibetans' participation in the market sector. Another proposal suggests the depoliticization of China's ethnic issues,

treating them as cultural interactions rather than political problems. This concept, termed "culturalizing," is proposed by Ma Rong, emphasizing the recognition and respect of different cultures and traditions within the broader context of a unified nation (Ma 2007). The idea is to promote understanding and harmony among diverse ethnic groups through cultural appreciation and exchange rather than focusing solely on political solutions. However, both solutions, whether focusing on cultural preservation or achieving equality among all, encounter inherent challenges rooted in the political nature of ethnicity. Identity politics plays a crucial role in the pursuit of self-determination and the quest for recognition by each ethnic group. The intricate interplay between politics and ethnicity poses significant obstacles to any resolution that attempts to depoliticize the Tibetan issue. Moreover, achieving the depoliticization of Tibetan ethnicity would necessitate a fundamental change in the central government's approach. This shift should prioritize the preservation of Tibetan culture and traditions while removing the label of "politically-sensitive ethnic group." Such a transformation would grant Tibetans more autonomy for economic and cultural development, advocating for a balance between support and limited intervention.

Barry Sautman puts forth an alternative perspective, emphasizing the promotion of Tibetan cultural self-representation while discouraging any pursuit of self-determination or separatism. This approach allows ethnic groups to express their history and culture, fostering a sense of ethnic dignity and self-esteem. Sautman recommends that minorities actively reject self-determination or separatism, acknowledging the lack of legitimacy in such claims, particularly in the realm of international law. The Dalai Lama's pursuit of self-determination, based on international regulations, is deemed illegitimate by Sautman, as it does not align with the circumstances of colonialism or foreign occupation. Moreover, Sautman notes that the nonviolent nature of Tibetan society contradicts the violent tendencies often associated with the pursuit of self-determination (Sautman, 2014).

#### 5. Conclusion:

Tibet as a region has been characterized by the complex interplay of economic development, political and cultural complexities. Tibet as a region forms the borderlands of China and thereby poses huge strategic importance. The occupation and annexation of Tibet in 1950 has been fraught with several complexities originating from the surrounding political atmosphere of China. China's Tibet policy of economic development and integration is doomed to failure due to the cultural and ethnic policies pursued by it of political repression, patriotic education campaigns, particularly in monasteries, and various other forms of cultural and religious insensitivity or prejudice. The economic development in the region aims to completely replace traditional pastoral and nomads practices. Moreover, the modernity brought about through such development can be compared to western models of development whereby traditional structures in regions are replaced by virtue of something better by the West who 'knows it all'.

China's Tibet policy is nothing short of the forced

globalization imposed by the west. China through increased development in Tibet and other policies such as subsidization, poverty alleviation is not only creating increased Tibetan dependency on PRC but also legitimization their disempowerment in terms of political autonomy. China's treatment of Tibet is comparable to a that of a periphery dependent on the core economically and providing resources and raw materials used by industries in other parts of China. Indeed, there has been large scale development brought about by China however, such development was seldom driven by decisions of Tibetans' themselves, thus limiting their control over their development. The globalization forced upon Tibet reinforces existing inequalities of power and resources thus restricting opportunities for economic, cultural, and political development.

The Western narratives of large-scale genocide and violation of human rights by the Chinese government is also a flawed narratives which lack evidence. However, there has indeed been continuous protests by the Tibetans to Chinese rule. China's Tibet policy aims to create a complex web of dependencies for Tibet forcing it to integrate. The nature of China's occupation requires a nuanced understand as Tibet, despite being occupied, has seen huge economic development and betterment of living standards. The central government has been successful in diluting separatist tendencies by breaking the homogeneity in the region with the settlement of the dominant Han Chinese majority thus altering the demographic composition of the region.

The solution to the Tibet issue is not to start the dialogue on a moral high ground based on human rights, particularly civil and political rights due to an aversion to such rights but is associated with the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy, making it seem an expression of U.S. interests. Engaging in dialogue with China requires putting aside sensitive issues to avoid immediate censorship. This approach is seen as necessary to address the urgency of the present, focusing on the rapid changes facing Tibetans and their marginalization within these changes. Instead, a path of cultural and literary preservation efforts in Tibet should be undertaken, noting that many institutions in the exile community were run by Tibetans who grew up and were educated in Tibet, indicating cultural and linguistic preservation efforts funded or permitted by the Chinese government.

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