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TIBETAN BUDDHISM AND THE TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS REGION

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Introduction

Over the past few years, Chinese news has dominated Western headlines. Politicians, media, scholars, and the public have keenly observed China as it launched the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, crackdowns on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, and faced accusations of genocide for their treatment of the Uighur ethnic minority group in Xinjiang province. More recently, China's heightened pugnacious tone towards Taiwan and Xi Jinping's unprecedented third term as president of the Chinese government have been the focus of scrutiny in the West. However, one topic has seemingly disappeared from the public eye: Tibet. What once seemed like a consequential international credibility crisis for the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is now an issue seemingly irrelevant to all but a few in the West.

The lack of attention Tibet receives from the international community represents a success story for the CCP. The Party successfully brought the region under control through extremely oppressive tactics, received minimal backlash from the international community, and bolstered their sense of national security. Nonetheless, the Party is not finished with Tibet. In addition, the Party plans to remain involved with Tibet to further a calculated agenda. All evidence thus far indicates that the ultimate goal is to sinicize the region's predominant faith, Tibetan Buddhism, to turn the region and religion into a strategic asset of China. Increasingly, the CCP apprehends that an opportunity to subject Tibetan Buddhism to its authority is soon approaching.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama and spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, is now 87. It is expected that he will pass away within the next decade. As a lama, Tibetans believe he will be reincarnated, and typically a group of Tibetan monks will select his successor within a few

years. However, the CCP has already disrupted this process by abducting the 11th Panchen Lama, implementing a Party-approved Panchen Lama, and stating their intentions to name the 15th Dalai Lama.¹ These deliberate moves are part of the CCP's long-term strategy to maintain control over Tibet.

Tibet and China currently stand at a crucial time period, the outcome of which will determine the future of Tibetan Buddhism inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). However, by engaging Tibet's historical relationship with China, Tibet's strategic importance to the CCP, the role the CCP's president Xi Jinping plays, and the contemporary social situation in Tibet, it becomes clear that the outcome of China and Tibet's critical juncture will likely result in a threatening era for Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, this situation contains the elements for widespread unrest within Tibet unparalleled in the region's history. Exploring these different areas is not to say Tibet's future is predetermined. However, these factors demonstrate that the next decade will be a tumultuous era for Chinese-Tibetan relations that could result in a perilous future for Tibetan Buddhism.

Abstract

This paper explores the uncertain future of Tibetan Buddhism within the TAR based on historical and contemporary indicators. This paper demonstrates that Tibet and China are at a critical juncture that, if mishandled, will result in disastrous effects for Tibetan Buddhism. This paper is not seeking to predict the future of Tibetan-Chinese relations but uses available evidence

¹ Chien-peng Chung, "China's Buddhist Diplomacy Under Xi Jinping: A Preliminary Investigation," *East Asia* 39, no. 3 (September 2022): 259–78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09380-z>, 269.

to gauge the most likely outcome for Tibetan Buddhism inside the TAR. In doing so, it becomes evident that in the next decade, Tibetan Buddhism within the TAR will likely experience heightened oppression, a crackdown on any dissent towards the CCP, and a fundamental transformation in how the religion can be practiced. All such predictions are due to the immense value the CCP believes Tibet offers the Party in achieving its strategic objectives.

The historical relationship between China and Tibet from the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 is explored to support this argument. Next, Tibet's strategic importance for the CCP is outlined to showcase why Tibet is considered essential. In addition, the part Xi Jinping plays in the future of Tibet is explained to demonstrate the shifting dynamics within China and the high importance placed on national security. Subsequently, the contemporary social situation in Tibet will be detailed to show the ongoing oppressive nature of the CCP's stances towards Tibet. The paper concludes by synthesizing the material to demonstrate that Chinese-Tibetan relations will enter a threatening phase in the near future.

Background Information

A comprehensive discussion of the future of Tibetan Buddhism in the TAR begins with essential background information regarding Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and the CCP. Tibet itself can be distinguished into two geographical areas, "political" and "ethnographic" Tibet. "Political" Tibet refers to the area comprised of the TAR and the region the Dalai Lama governed prior to the PRC. "Ethnographic" Tibet is the areas that consist of ethnic Tibetans in the regions of Amdo and Kham, which have been incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai,

Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan.² Tibet's historical borders are significantly larger than the borders of the TAR, but this paper focuses specifically on the TAR and Tibetan Buddhism within the region.

Tibetan Buddhism is an umbrella term that refers to the form of Buddhism that emerged through a syncretic process with the indigenous Bon religion in the Tibetan plateau during the eighth century. There is a wide diversity of beliefs and practices within Tibetan Buddhism. The religion has a critical role in Tibetan society by guiding the people through core concepts such as karma, reincarnation, and enlightenment.³

Tibetan Buddhists can be split into two main categories: lay and monastic practitioners. Within monastic Tibetan Buddhism, there are four main sects: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug. At the heart of these various sects lie monasteries that carry significant power within Tibet and local communities. The different sects of Tibetan Buddhism are internally diverse and unique among the other sects; accordingly, each sect has a different relationship with the CCP.⁴ This paper is not minimizing these important distinctions within Tibetan Buddhism but, instead, is attempting to infer the future of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole within the TAR.

Lastly, it is necessary to provide background information on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Party was established in 1921 and came into control of China in 1949 by establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Party is distinct from the Chinese government but maintains complete control of the government and bureaucracy through

² Melvyn C. Goldstein, ed., *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, 1. Indian ed (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 4.

³ Goldstein, 5.

⁴ Enze Han and Christopher Paik, "Dynamics of Political Resistance in Tibet: Religious Repression and Controversies of Demographic Change," *The China Quarterly* 217 (March 2014): 69–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741013001392>, 77.

“organizational parallelism,” where every government agency has a corresponding Party structure. For example, the National Party Congress is the Party institution that parallels the National People’s Congress and assures that the Party’s interest triumphs.⁵ Regarding ethnic and religious policy, the Chinese government uses the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) and the State Bureau of Religious Affairs (SBRA).⁶ In conjunction with these institutions, the CCP uses the United Work Front Department (UWFD) to regulate policy towards their roughly 120 ethnic minorities and five state-sanctioned religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.⁷ Policy regarding ethnic and religious groups follows a top-down trajectory. The head of the CCP, Xi Jinping, outlines the policy direction while local Party officials, or cadres, are expected to implement these policies based on local conditions.⁸

History

⁵ Patrick H. O’Neil, Karl J. Fields, and Donald Share, *Cases in Comparative Politics*, Sixth edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 403.

⁶ Taotao Zhao and James Leibold, “Ethnic Governance under Xi Jinping: The Centrality of the United Front Work Department & Its Implications,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 124 (July 3, 2020): 487–502, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1677359>, 487; Richard Madsen, “The Sinicization of Chinese Religions under Xi Jinping.,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 61 (2019): 1–10, 3.

⁷ Zhao and Leibold, 487; Cathy Sun, “DIFFERENT BUT THE SAME: Religious Persecution in China.,” *Harvard Political Review* 50, no. 1 (2019): 9–11, 1.

⁸ Yuen Yuen Ang, “Decoding Xi Jinping: How Will China’s Bureaucrats Interpret His Call for ‘Common Prosperity?,”” *Foreign Affairs*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-08/decoding-xi-jinping>.

In 1949, the CCP defeated the Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist Party and established the PRC.⁹ At this point, Tibet had been functioning as a de facto independent country with no intention of joining the PRC. Regardless, Mao viewed Tibet as integral to China. However, Mao sought a legitimate claim of sovereignty over the territory. Therefore, Mao intentionally pursued a temporary strategy of “gradualism,” intending to slowly incorporate Tibet into the PRC by interfering with the country’s institutions as little as possible. To accomplish this strategy, Mao demonstrated the Peoples Liberation Army’s (PLA) ability to conquer the whole country with military force by moving troops into the eastern part of Tibet and then began negotiations with the Dalai Lama’s government.¹⁰ In these negotiations, the 17-point agreement was signed, in which the Dalai Lama ceded Tibet’s claim to independence in return for non-interference with the governing of the region.¹¹ Nevertheless, a theme that would soon become common between Tibet and China emerged: the use of oppression to secure stability in Tibet.

With the 17-point agreement, new borders for Tibet were established, forcing Tibetans who were now part of the Chinese province of Sichuan to participate in land reforms. In 1955, These reforms resulted in open fighting, prompting Tibetans to flee to Lhasa seeking protection.¹² Tensions between Tibet and China remained high, but Mao continued to assure the Dalai Lama that the CCP would interfere as little as possible. However, the situation came to a

⁹ Linda Benson, *China since 1949*, Third edition, Seminar Studies (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 36.

¹⁰ Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 6-7.

¹¹ Allen Carlson, “Beijing’s Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2020): 54–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2020.0013>, 55.

¹² Benson, *China since 1949*, 36.

head when uprisings in Lhasa began in 1959, and the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India.¹³ Mao used the PLA to squash the uprisings, reportedly killing thousands of people.¹⁴ Subsequently, the PLA was utilized to demolish the traditional way of life for Tibetans. The PLA ended the old socioeconomic order and destroyed any monasteries participating in resistance to the CCP.¹⁵ The worst was yet to come; in 1966, the effects of the Cultural Revolution reached Tibet, and the region entered a ruinous phase.

In 1965, Tibet's territory was redistributed into what is contemporarily referred to as the TAR.¹⁶ This redrawing of Tibet's borders began the diction between "political" and "ethnographic" Tibet. A year later, in 1966, Mao called for a cultural revolution to commence where the traditional feudal society of China would be wiped out and replaced by a new socialist society. Carrying out these orders were the Red Guards, young people who formed revolutionary groups and roamed the country, destroying any vestiges of traditional society.¹⁷ Within two years, Tibetan Buddhism had been forced underground, monasteries were closed and sacked, monks were forced to return to lay life, and private religious practices were prohibited.¹⁸ By the end of the cultural revolution, only eight of the 2,713 temples in the TAR remained.¹⁹ During the Cultural

¹³ Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 6 & 9.

¹⁴ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 2017, 86–107. 90.

¹⁵ Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 9.

¹⁶ Carlson, "Beijing's Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China," 55.

¹⁷ Benson, *China since 1949*, 39.

¹⁸ Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 9-10; Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 90.

¹⁹ Meng Yuanxin, "Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping's Regime," *Chinese Law & Religion Monitor* 11, no. 2 (May 2019): 93–135, 93.

Revolution, the CCP used extraordinarily oppressive methods to subdue Tibet into a region it deemed stable. The harshness the Party exhibited on the region opened the door to a less hostile period in the TAR.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping succeeded Mao as the leader of the CCP and subsequently attempted to modernize China by allowing the privatization of agriculture, followed by business, and finally expanding foreign investment and trade. This period became known as “reform and opening.” In addition to economic liberalization, the CCP permitted the practice of religion in what became known as “Document 19.”²⁰ In “Document 19,” the Party admitted to errors in its attempt to forcefully eradicate religion from society and instead adopted a sympathetic stance towards religion. The CCP would now allow for the freedom of religious belief, including disbelief, and promised to protect and respect this freedom.²¹ This shift in the CCP’s policy opened the door for Tibetan Buddhism to experience a revival.

Over the next thirty years, Tibetan Buddhism returned to Tibet, some monasteries were rebuilt, a few monks returned, and lay practitioners began to worship openly. However, this period came with difficulties. The peaceful protests started by monks in 1987 were met with martial law in Lhasa when they occurred again in 1989. In addition, after a rapprochement with the Dalai Lama failed continually during this time, the CCP implemented a propaganda campaign to discredit the Dalai Lama and present him as an enemy of Tibet.²² Regardless, the

²⁰ O’Neil, Fields, and Share, *Cases in Comparative Politics*, 400; Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 1.

²¹ Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*, First Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), 27-28.

²² Goldstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, 14.

situation for Tibetan Buddhism improved drastically compared to the Cultural Revolution. Yet, this did not mark the end of the CCP employing oppression to stabilize Tibet.

The opportunity for profound reconciliation between Tibetans and the CCP ended in 2008 when protests prompted the current era of harsh suppression towards the TAR. Tibetan protesters thought demonstrations would garner international media coverage and support because of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Dalai Lama being awarded the US Congressional Gold Medal and the 49th anniversary of the 1959 uprising. Tibetans across the TAR and ethnographic Tibet began to protest after the CCP jailed monks attempting to celebrate the Dalai Lama's award. Soon several hundred monks came out against the arrest, which quickly escalated into a pro-independence protest. Overall, there were over 100 protests in the TAR and ethnic Tibet in urban and rural areas. These protests were met with fierce resistance as the CCP sent paramilitary troops to stamp out any protests.²³ Officially, it is unknown how many Tibetans were killed or imprisoned due to the protest. However, Tibetan activist groups claim that at least 100 were killed in the protest, with hundreds more being arrested.²⁴

The 2008 protest and subsequent clampdown by the CCP solidified a pattern of harsh repression used by the Party to maintain control over the TAR. These protests also marked a shift in the CCP's management of Tibetan Buddhism in the region. The Party began to ramp up patriotic education campaigns, regulate the ability to travel and position more Party officials within monasteries throughout the TAR.²⁵ Furthermore, the Party began to use technology to its advantage through surveillance of any information regarding the 2008 protest. Any videos posted

²³ Han and Paik, "Dynamics of Political Resistance in Tibet," 72-73.

²⁴ Benson, *China since 1949*, 84; Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 91.

²⁵ Freedom House, 91.

online or shared through the internet were immediately taken down, and the individual who posted them could be arrested.²⁶ The extreme oppression led to desperate acts of resistance, with anywhere between 140-150 self-immolations between February 2009 and 2015.²⁷ The entire history between the CCP and Tibet has consisted of the frequent use of highly oppressive techniques to control the TAR. With the rise of Xi Jinping, the tactics the CCP was already using became strengthened, and new strategies were implemented to meet his goals.

The Role of Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 signaled a new era for China. As President of the CCP, Xi Jinping set out to usher in the Chinese Dream of an era of rejuvenation and prosperity. He laid out plans for the Belt and Road Initiative, instituted an anti-corruption campaign, and established further control of Chinese society to achieve this ambitious objective.²⁸ Integral to his policy agenda is the "sinicization" of Chinese culture, the idea that every dimension of China's culture should conform to the CCP's ideology.²⁹ He signaled the importance of this goal by becoming the first Party Secretary to attend to National Religious Work Conference in 2016, where he announced that the Party needed to bring Chinese religions into accord with the Chinese

²⁶ Benson, *China since 1949*, 94-95.

²⁷ Jeff Kingston, *Nationalism in Asia: A History since 1945* (Chichester: John Wiley et Sons, 2017), 248; Avinash Godbole, "Stability in the Xi Era: Trends in Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang and Tibet Since 2012," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 2 (June 2019): 228-44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928419841787>, 238; Praggya Suruna, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," *Knowledge World* 70 (2018): 1-32, 11.

²⁸ Benson, *China since 1949*, 105-112.

²⁹ Madsen, "The Sinicization of Chinese Religions under Xi Jinping," 2.

Dream.³⁰ Underlying the goal of sinicization lies the alarming strategy to get ethnic minority groups, such as Tibetans, to prioritize a Chinese identity.³¹ Xi Jinping believes that by convincing Tibetans to associate themselves as Chinese first, they will be less likely to act against the Party. This idea stems from the newfound importance placed on national security in the era of Xi.

The primary objective of Xi Jinping's Sinicization strategy is a "stability-first driven approach" to ensure national security.³² National security has become a vital topic for the Party; it is perceived as critical for ensuring the Party's survival and social control goals. The CCP holds a Party Congress every five years, where the direction of the Party can be inferred from the terminology used. Before Xi Jinping became Party Secretary, the term national security was rarely mentioned. Then, in 2017, the term was featured 18 times, and in 2022 the term was featured 27 times. Xi Jinping is pushing national security to the forefront of the CCP's agenda.³³ Moreover, he has indicated that critical to national security is governing China's borders which requires a stable Tibet.³⁴ Xi Jinping's strategic objectives of sinicization and national security come to fruition in numerous ways in contemporary Tibet. The sum of the policy directives from Xi Jinping reveals the extent of tyrannical techniques the Party deems necessary to govern the

³⁰ Kuei-Min Chang, "New Wine in Old Bottles : Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China," *China Perspectives*, no. 1-2 (113) (January 1, 2018): 37–44, 37.

³¹ Godbole, "Stability in the Xi Era," 238.

³² Godbole, 228-229.

³³ Kevin Rudd, "The Return of Red China: Xi Jinping Brings Back Marxism," *Foreign Affairs*, November 9, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/return-red-china?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=ftoday&utm_campaign=The%20Return%20of%20Red%20China&utm_content=20221109&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017.

³⁴ Carlson, "Beijing's Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China," 56.

TAR, as he knows that Tibet is an invaluable asset for achieving the goals of the Party and his personal ambitions.

Tibet As A Strategic Asset

The Chinese economy is beginning to slow down, and the country faces mounting social and political challenges. In light of these shifts, the CCP is attempting to ensure its survival and maintain its grip on power. Survival and social control are two of the primary goals of the CCP, and policy regarding the TAR is rooted in these objectives.³⁵ Maintaining control over the TAR gives the Party an extra layer of assurance for both objectives. The principal strategic value the TAR holds for the Party is its geopolitical advantages and economic potential. Geopolitically, the region acts as a strategic buffer zone between mainland China and India, providing the Party with an increased sense of security. Economically, the region plays an essential role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and contains copious amounts of natural resources vital to the Chinese economy. For these reasons and more, the CCP perceives the TAR as necessary to survive and retain power in China. It will likely take extreme measures to maintain its command over the territory.

When the CCP looks past its borders, it perceives a hostile environment that needs to be closely watched to ensure its security. India is paramount in the CCP's mind. The nations share a 2,167-mile border that has been a source of conflict for decades. The two countries fought a brief

³⁵ Michael Beckley, "Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/new-world-order-enemies-my-enemy-china>; Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23, no. 3 (September 2018): 323–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9541-z>, 329.

war in 1962 over border disagreements, in which disputes over the Aksai Chin region, which contains the Ngari Prefecture in Southern Tibet, played a role.³⁶ Heightening tensions in this situation is the fact that India is operating as the host country of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in exile, a constant source of tension in relations between them.

More recently, in 2020, Chinese and Indian troops clashed in the Galwan Valley, located in the same region that the 1962 war was fought in, resulting in the deaths of at least twenty Indian and four Chinese soldiers. Then in 2022, Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed again, resulting in injuries on both sides.³⁷ While relations between two of Asia's most significant countries have fluctuated between their 1962 war and today, the events that transpired in the Galwan Valley have fostered an all-time low for relations. This situation poses a potential security risk to the CCP.³⁸ Although the prospects for an armed conflict between China and India are meager, China understands that the TAR is vital as tensions rise with India.

The importance of the TAR in managing the border with India has not gone unnoticed by the CCP. Since Xi Jinping came to power, there have been military standoffs in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017. These standoffs have resulted in the border region becoming increasingly militarized and dangerous. Additionally, Nehru Modi, India's prime minister, has been more

³⁶ Kingston, *Nationalism in Asia*, 246.

³⁷ Sameer Yasir and Emily Schmall, "Indian and Chinese Soldiers Again Trade Blows at Disputed Border," *New York Times*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/13/world/asia/india-china-border-clash.html>.

³⁸ Tanvi Madan, "China Has Lost India: How Beijing's Aggression Pushed New Delhi to the West," *Foreign Affairs*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-has-lost-india>.

willing to act abrasively toward China. Earlier this year, the prime minister publicly acknowledged phone calls he conducts with the Dalai Lama.³⁹

If a conflict between China and India escalated to the point of military intervention, the CCP understands the strategic value the TAR would play. Foremost, the CCP would strive to isolate the conflict within the TAR. This move would allow the Party to keep the mainland unaffected and the conflict concentrated in a hinterland. Moreover, the region contains the infrastructure necessary to mobilize the PLA. Lastly, the geopolitics of fear is always at play; if China does not maintain authority over Tibet; they could never guarantee India would not try to take the region, an unimaginable situation for the CCP.⁴⁰

In 2013, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trillion-dollar overseas infrastructure development plan. The BRI is Xi Jinping's signature policy initiative. It is meant to link China to countries economically and assist in ushering in Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation that will improve the livelihood of the Chinese.⁴¹ Integral to the success of the BRI is China's ability to develop infrastructure in the TAR to connect to neighboring countries. Underlying China's BRI initiative is the need for continual economic growth. The country is now under pressure to provide better living standards for nearly a fifth of humanity,

³⁹ Tanvi Madan, "China Has Lost India: How Beijing's Aggression Pushed New Delhi to the West."

⁴⁰ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything about the World*, First Scribner paperback edition (New York, NY: Scribner, 2016), 49.

⁴¹ Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 8 & 12; Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," 331.

and the BRI presents an opportunity to meet these demands.⁴² Without control over the TAR, the CCP would be missing a crucial element for the BRI.

Interestingly, no official BRI projects are listed in the TAR. However, this does not mean the BRI is absent in the region. For example, in 2019, China and Nepal agreed to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railroad into Nepal despite no mention of the project on the map.⁴³ Despite Tibet not being mentioned in official BRI projects, it is undeniable that the region is essential to the BRI initiative.⁴⁴ Further evidence of Tibet's importance is that the CCP has now invested roughly eighty-one billion dollars in transport infrastructure with plans to continue expanding.⁴⁵ A major component of this strategy is China's goal of connecting all counties, towns, and administrative villages through a network of roads. China has already successfully constructed over fifty thousand miles of roadways in Tibet. At this pace, it is only a matter of time before all of the TAR is connected via roadways.⁴⁶ China wants to build on its infrastructure developments in Tibet to expand the scope and reach of the BRI.

The last key component in China's analysis of Tibet is the region's natural resources; they make Tibet indispensable. At the forefront are Tibet's water resources. The region is home to the source of the Yellow, Yangzi, Mekong, Salween Brahmaputra, Indian, and Sutlej rivers, making it one of the world's largest repositories of fresh water, a critical resource for a country is

⁴² Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), 199.

⁴³ Galen Murton, "Power of Blank Spaces: A Critical Cartography of China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 62, no. 3 (December 2021): 274–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12318>, 276.

⁴⁴ Praggya Surana, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," 1.

⁴⁵ Godbole, "Stability in the Xi Era," 238.

⁴⁶ Praggya Surana, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," 14.

expected to fall short of its water needs by 2030.⁴⁷ Furthermore, a 2007 survey of Tibet revealed that the area had an estimated one hundred billion dollars in natural resources vital to the Chinese economy. These natural resources include significant deposits of chromite, copper, gold, and lithium. In lithium alone, there is estimated to be 2.4 million tons, and lithium is now a critical mineral in the production of batteries for cell phones, laptops, and electric cars.⁴⁸ Tibet's abundant natural resources like water and minerals assure the CCP will use any means necessary to remain in control of the territory.

The Contemporary Situation in Tibet

Before addressing the contemporary situation of Tibet, it is worthwhile to address two misconceptions. First, the idea that Han Chinese (China's ethnic majority) are shifting the overall demographic of the TAR. Supported by the idea that the Qinghai-Tibet rail line was completed in 2006, the CCP made it feasible to supplant the ethnic Tibetans with Han Chinese.⁴⁹ Advocates point to the increase of Han Chinese in the TAR from 39,500 in 1964 to 245,000 in 2010, along with the CCP's goal of making thirty percent of the TAR's population ethnically Han.⁵⁰ The theory is that the CCP will supplant ethnic Tibetans with ethnic Hans and, in the process, reduce

⁴⁷ Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, 204.

⁴⁸ "Tibet's Natural Resources: Tension Over Treasure," *Chatham House*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2010/10/tibets-natural-resources-tension-over-treasure-0>.

⁴⁹ Praggya Surana, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," 4; Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, 51.

⁵⁰ Surana, 3.

the role Tibetan Buddhism plays in the TAR. However, this argument exaggerates the situation as ninety percent of the population remains ethnically Tibetan.⁵¹

Moreover, while Han numbers have increased over time, so have the numbers of ethnic Tibetans. Between 1950 and the present day, the population of Tibet has increased by an additional one million individuals putting the total population around 3.64 million.⁵² The increase in Han migration is a component of the CCP's long-term strategy for maintaining regional control. However, the idea that Han settlers are completely replacing ethnic Tibetans is incorrect. The more credible threat to the TAR is the eradication of Tibetan culture through various oppressive methods by the CCP.

Second, the idea that the CCP's presence in the TAR has modernized the region and brought economic prosperity lifting rural Tibetans out of poverty, is an illusion. As mentioned earlier, the CCP has undoubtedly improved infrastructure networks across the TAR with new roads, highways, railways, and even airports. In addition, the economy has experienced decades of double-digit growth, and the CCP has claimed to relocate 2.3 million rural Tibetans to modern housing.⁵³ These factors lead the CCP to argue that it has played an essential role in improving the quality of life for the majority of Tibetans and brought the region great economic prosperity. However, this negates the reality that Tibet has consistently ranked last among all China's provinces in total GDP.⁵⁴

⁵¹ O'Neil, Fields, and Share, *Cases in Comparative Politics*, 426.

⁵² Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer, eds., *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and Society in a Disputed Region*, An East Gate Book (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2006), 247.

⁵³ Praggya Surana, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," 4, 7 & 13.

⁵⁴ Sautman and Dreyer, *Contemporary Tibet*, 129.

Furthermore, the infrastructure constructed in the TAR has provided jobs for locals, but disproportionately compared to the numbers of Han Chinese, who are also the primary economic beneficiaries of these projects.⁵⁵ Lastly, the resettlement of rural Tibetans has been done through coercion, not by choice.⁵⁶ Overall, the benefits the CCP has brought to the TAR have been greatly exaggerated by the Party and should be understood in the context of the oppression the Party holds over the region.

One of the most consequential factors for the TAR was the appointment of Chen Quanguo as the TAR CCP Party Secretary from 2011 to 2016. During this period, he transformed the surveillance infrastructure in the TAR, making it possible for the Party to maintain a tight watch over the entire region. He made this possible through a grid-style management system that split areas of the TAR into geometric zones, created an extensive network of CCTV cameras, and gathered internet users' data giving CCP officials the ability to monitor the TAR.⁵⁷ Chen Quanguo was able to institute this widespread surveillance through a sharp increase in policing-affiliated positions.

From 2007 to 2011, Chen Quanguo broadcasted 2,830 policing positions. Between 2011 and 2016, he publicized 12,313 further policing positions in the TAR. His strategy in Tibet proved to be highly effective, prompting Xi Jinping to move him to Xinjiang province, another area where the CCP is experiencing trouble with an ethnic minority group.⁵⁸ Overall, Chen

⁵⁵ O'Neil, Fields, and Share, *Cases in Comparative Politics*, 426.

⁵⁶ Praggya Surana, "China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage," 4.

⁵⁷ Carlson, "Beijing's Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China" 56.

⁵⁸ Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Chen Quanguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *China Brief* 17, no. 12 (September 21, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>.

Quanguo couples a grid-style management system with an increased police force to assist in bringing the TAR under the strict supervision of the CCP. Xi Jinping would soon build on these policies, making it evident that prospects for Tibetan Buddhism in the TAR are unfavorable.

Chen Quanguo's effective techniques in the TAR were welcomed by Xi Jinping, who took power in 2012 shortly after Chen Quanguo's appointment to the TAR. Xi Jinping sought to expand the initiatives started by Chen Quanguo and signaled the importance he placed on stability in Tibet through numerous actions, such as heading a Political Bureau Central Committee Conference where policy strategies for Tibet were discussed and by delivering a speech at the Sixth Forum on Tibet.⁵⁹ What emerged from these meetings were broad policy directives seeking to gain stability in Tibet, sinicize Tibetan Buddhism and bring Tibetans in line with party ideology to assist in the China Dream.⁶⁰

Some of the concrete policy directives that emerged from the forums with Xi Jinping present included mandates for Tibetan Buddhism, such as the "six musts" and the "nine haves." The Party's Sixth Forum on Tibet put forth the "six musts" to guide policy in the TAR. These musts include the backing of CCP leadership and the socialist system, recognition that governing China's borders demands a stable Tibet, ridding the region of support for the Dalai Lama, improving ethnic unity in conformity with the CCP, and increasing the Party's capabilities of governing Tibet.⁶¹ The "nine haves" required every monastery to have two items that project Chinese power into Tibetan Buddhism. These are portraits of the CCP leadership, such as Xi

⁵⁹ Meng Yuanxin, "Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping's Regime," 96.

⁶⁰ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 92.

⁶¹ Carlson, "Beijing's Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China," 57.

Jinping, and the PRC national flag.⁶² The implementation of Xi's policy directives and specific mandates manifested in a range of broad policy initiatives that representatives of the UWFD set out to implement at the local level. These resulted in a threatening atmosphere for Tibetan Buddhism in the TAR with few prospects for improvement.

When Xi Jinping came into power, Tibetan self-immolations were reaching their apex. To curb this problem, Xi Jinping decided to criminalize the act of self-immolating, not just for the individual but for any individual involved.⁶³ The number of self-immolations has drastically decreased since this decree. Further restrictions heralded by Xi Jinping included travel restrictions; Tibetans are frequently barred from receiving a passport and typically receive harassment when returning.⁶⁴ In the process, Xi Jinping specifically targets Tibetan Buddhist's ability to travel abroad, mainly to India for the Dalai Lama's prayer sessions, attend religious festivals or participate in a pilgrimage.⁶⁵ Criminalizing self-immolations and implementing travel restrictions mark just a few of the oppressive techniques the CCP has enforced.

Prominent among the oppressive methods for Xi Jinping is exhibiting as much control as possible over monasteries in the TAR. In 2015, over 7,000 CCP officials were allegedly positioned in 1,787 monasteries across the TAR.⁶⁶ These CCP administrators gave the CCP immense surveillance capabilities over the daily operations of monasteries and implemented the

⁶² Meng Yuanxin, "Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping's Regime," 105.

⁶³ Carlson, "Beijing's Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China," 56.

⁶⁴ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 96.

⁶⁵ Freedom House, 96; Meng Yuanxin, "Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping's Regime," 99.

⁶⁶ Yuanxin, 105; Freedom House, 96.

“Four Standards” in monastic education. The “Four Standards” mandate that monks demonstrate competence, political reliability, moral integrity, and the ability to operate efficiently at critical junctures.⁶⁷ The “Four Standards” operate alongside quotas for the number of monks each monastery is permitted to have.⁶⁸ Regardless, the CCP sought additional measures to gain complete control over Tibetan Buddhism, which took the form of a re-emphasis on patriotic education initiatives to implement Xi Jinping’s goal of sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism.

Patriotic reeducation campaigns have been a feature of the CCP’s strategy towards the TAR for decades, but their frequency and intensity have increased since the 2008 protests. Using the vast amount of Party representatives in the TAR, the Party coerces monks and lay practitioners to stop supporting the Dalai Lama, accept the Panchen Lama’s legitimacy, and profess loyalty to the CCP.⁶⁹ The patriotic reeducation movements are a way for the CCP to enforce their “one education” initiative, which is guided by “patriotic love and religious love.”⁷⁰ This “one education” endeavor is yet another way the CCP seeks to force Tibetans to accept the Party’s legitimacy above all others, and it continues into Tibetan Buddhist doctrine.

Likewise, Xi Jinping has mandated that all Tibetan Buddhist doctrine taught is in accord with his sinicization objective, essentially attempting to turn sacred scripture into Party

⁶⁷ Carlson, “Beijing’s Intensifying Campaign to Ensure That Tibet Remains a Part of China,” 57-58.

⁶⁸ Freedom House, “The Battle for China’s Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism,” 95; Meng Yuanxin, “Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping’s Regime,” 105.

⁶⁹ Freedom House, 95.

⁷⁰ Meng Yuanxin, “Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping’s Regime,” 107.

propaganda.⁷¹ The manipulation of doctrine is part of an ongoing effort by the CCP to pressure Tibetan Buddhist sects into revoking their support of the Dalai Lama and supporting the Party's goals instead.⁷² The manipulation of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine also creates scripture that supports the Party's interest and promotes a sinicized version of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷³

In addition to these tactics, the CCP is seeking to turn monasteries into tourist destinations for the Han Chinese to solidify Tibetan Buddhism as a dimension of Chinese culture under the control of the Party. Part of the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism includes a growing interest in the religion among Han Chinese. Millions of ethnically Han Chinese have become involved with different aspects of Tibetan Buddhism; however, the Party attempts to ensure that interest in Tibetan Buddhism is its sinicized version.⁷⁴ The CCP has turned monasteries inside the TAR into tourist locations to accomplish this task. For example, popular monasteries like the Sakya Monastery and the Gandan Monastery, which once operated as centers for Tibetan culture and spirituality, now feature Party-controlled tourism.⁷⁵ These tourist initiatives can disrupt religious practices in the monasteries and have led to Chinese tourists' displacement of religious worshippers.⁷⁶ Moreover, Jane Caple notes that tourism in monasteries has contributed to the fear

⁷¹ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 93; Godbole, "Stability in the Xi Era," 75.

⁷² Chung, "China's Buddhist Diplomacy Under Xi Jinping," 269.

⁷³ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 93.

⁷⁴ Yinong Zhang, "Between Nation and Religion: The Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Network in Post-Reform China," *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 1 (October 1, 2012): 55–69, <https://doi.org/10.2753/CSA2162-0555450103>, 61.

⁷⁵ Meng Yuanxin, "Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping's Regime," 107.

⁷⁶ Freedom House, "The Battle for China's Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism," 93.

amongst monks that they will lose “monastic autonomy” as the government will take over and lead to the “aestheticization of monastic space” as monasteries turn into sight-seeing locations.⁷⁷

Another effective method the CCP utilizes for asserting its authority over the TAR is controlling the internet. Starting in the early 2000s and gaining traction after the 2008 protests, the CCP has found practical ways to control and monitor internet activity within the TAR. This control over the internet includes requiring citizens to download government-produced apps that allow the Party to monitor online activity and then crack down on material deemed dangerous.⁷⁸ Measures such as this have led to the arrest of smartphone users who store images of the Tibetan flag or the Dalai Lama.⁷⁹ The CCP can also completely shut down the internet. Internet blackouts to specific regions in the TAR, typically where self-immolations or protests emerge, have increased since 2012.⁸⁰ Shutting down the internet provides the Party with short-term security assurances as it makes it more difficult for protesters to organize and communicate. However, the CCP also has implemented long-term strategies to secure control over the TAR.

The most alarming tactic the CCP is using to maintain its grip over the TAR is the Party’s efforts to remove Tibetan culture from the region’s youth. Most Tibetan students attending university go to prescribed *minzu* universities, all located outside the TAR. In getting Tibetan youth to study in mainland China, the CCP hopes that they will pick up Han Chinese tendencies

⁷⁷ Jane E. Caple, *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet* (S.l.: Univ of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 72.

⁷⁸ Godbole, “Stability in the Xi Era,” 231.

⁷⁹ Meng Yuanxin, “Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping’s Regime,” 101.

⁸⁰ Freedom House, “The Battle for China’s Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism,” 96.

and aspirations.⁸¹ The CCP has been successful in this regard, as often students who attend school in mainland China return to Tibet and have become accustomed to speaking Mandarin instead of Tibetan.⁸² The CCP is taking a long-term strategic approach through education. The Party pushes the younger generation to disassociate from their Tibetan identity and adopt a Han Chinese identity. Even if the Party only sways a portion of the Tibetan youth into Han Chinese culture, they are increasing the likelihood that future Tibetans will be loyal to the Party.

The measure Xi Jinping has taken with the most far-reaching consequences for Tibetan Buddhism is controlling religious leadership positions, specifically Tibetan lamas. According to the “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas” from 2007, CCP approval is required for any future Tibetan lamas.⁸³ Furthermore, since 2010 these lamas have been required to have a “Tibetan Buddhism Living Buddha Certificate” issued by the Party. Any lama without this is considered invalid by the CCP.⁸⁴ By requiring all lamas to be authenticated through the CCP, Xi can insert far-reaching control over the religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhism. The most alarming feature of the CCP policy toward lamas is its actions toward the Panchen Lama and Dalai Lama.

As mentioned previously in the introduction, in 1999, the CCP abducted Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family after the Dalai Lama announced him as the 11th Panchen Lama. The CCP subsequently replaced Gedhun with Gyancaïn Norbu. Despite most Tibetans rejecting the

⁸¹ Gerald Roche, James Leibold, and Ben Hillman, “Urbanizing Tibet: Differential Inclusion and Colonial Governance in the People’s Republic of China,” *Territory, Politics, Governance*, December 1, 2020, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1840427>, 5.

⁸² Praggya Surana, “China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage,” 6.

⁸³ Freedom House, “The Battle for China’s Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism,” 95.

⁸⁴ Meng Yuanxin, “Extreme Oppression: Observation of Tibetan Religious Freedom in China since Xi Jinping’s Regime,” 110.

legitimacy of this Panchen Lama, the CCP has remained steadfast in their claims that he is the true Panchen Lama.⁸⁵ The Panchen Lama is traditionally integral to selecting the Dalai Lama. However, now that there is a CCP Panchen Lama, there are questions about who will select the next Dalai Lama. The CCP has expressed that it will be the entity that selects the next Dalai Lama despite the Dalai Lama expressing that he will not be reincarnated in a communist country.⁸⁶ If the CCP selects the 15th Dalai Lama instead of Tibetan monks, the consequences will be devastating to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. This situation also contains the seeds for widespread social unrest the Party may use to justify its oppressive methods.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Formulating a credible argument for why Tibetan Buddhism will enter a threatening period in the near future starts by acknowledging the arguments that disagree with this analysis. The work of Jane Caple and Yinong Zhang provides a good example. Caple argues against the idea that the situation in Tibet can be described through the power the CCP exhibits over Tibetans. Instead, Caple argues that Tibetans are “accommodating, adapting to, negotiating, or opposing the boundaries of what the state defines as permissible.”⁸⁸ Yinong Zhang concurs with Caple by stating, “the authenticity of the revived Tibetan Buddhist practices has been a dynamic

⁸⁵ “Gedhun Choekyi Nyima – The Panchen Lama” (United States Commission for International Religious Freedom, n.d.), <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/current-rpocs/gedhun-choekyi-nyima-panchen-lama>.

⁸⁶ Freedom House, “The Battle for China’s Spirit: Tibetan Buddhism,” 101; Chung, “China’s Buddhist Diplomacy Under Xi Jinping,” 269.

⁸⁷ Freedom House, 101.

⁸⁸ Caple, *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet*, 6.

negotiating process among Tibetan monks/lamas, the Chinese tourists/believers, and the Chinese state policies.”⁸⁹ These arguments posit Tibetan-Chinese relations as a two-sided affair, with Tibetans playing an active role in the negotiating process. While it is undoubtedly important to factor in the role Tibetans play in practicing Tibetan Buddhism within Tibet, such generalizations miss the more significant dynamics at play in the TAR.

The relationship between Tibetans and the CCP may, in practice, appear to be a two-sided affair, but ultimately it is the Party that controls the situation. If Tibetans act against the CCP in a manner they deem threatening, the CCP will come down on Tibetans with fire and fury. The use of oppression to gain control of the TAR has been a consistent feature in the relationship between the TAR and the CCP. From the time of Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and the 2008 protest, the CCP has demonstrated it will use force to maintain control of the TAR. The TAR is also an essential strategic asset for the CCP, serving as a buffer zone with India, containing essential natural resources and helping Xi Jinping achieve his ambitions. Such ambitions include the Chinese Dream, the BRI, and the sinicization of religions. All these factors have led to the heightening of oppressive techniques within the TAR.

The CCP has demonstrated that it will use various techniques to maintain its hold over the TAR. The Party instituted a systematic surveillance system to allow more acute monitoring of Tibetan activity, increased the presence of Party representatives inside monostatic, criminalized self-immolation, implemented travel restrictions, and gained control over internet activity within the TAR. To sinicize Tibetan Buddhism, the Party has also launched more patriotic education campaigns, manipulated Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, tuned monasteries into tourist locations, sought to remove Tibetan identity from the younger generation, and required monasteries and lay

⁸⁹ Zhang, “Between Nation and Religion,” 65.

practitioners to abide by Party regulations like removing pictures of the Dalai Lama for pictures of Xi Jinping.

Most significantly, the CCP has established control over lamas, including the Panchen Lama and potentially the Dalai Lama. If the Dalai Lama passes away in the next decade, all signs point to the CCP attempting to put forth their own Dalai Lama. This event would lead to widespread dissent from Tibetans, which the CCP has shown will be met with a harsh response. The CCP has already escalated its use of oppression in recent years to maintain authority over the TAR, and it will not hesitate to escalate these tactics even further in the case of the Dalai Lama's death. All these factors make it evident that Tibetan Buddhism within the TAR is entering an ominous era. If the CCP continues on the track it's on, it will fundamentally alter the way Tibetan Buddhism is practiced in the TAR.

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