



## SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF TIBETAN DISPLACEMENT AND CHINA'S MINORITY POLICY IN TIBET

by

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Since annexation in 1950, Tibet has been an important part of China's geostrategic outlook and an important source for China's energy security and hydro-hegemony. Numerous dams have been constructed across the plateau, with more planned, including the "monster" [Medog Hydropower Station](#). There is also extensive mining across the plateau, and it is a water source for China's expanding bottled water industry. These developments have significantly impacted the lives of Tibetans and the region's natural environment. Tibetans have been displaced to make way for Beijing's high-modernist development approach, which privileges modernization and industrialization over indigenous rights and environmental protection, and Beijing has adopted a heavy-handed approach towards the region. Combined, these factors have increased human insecurity across Tibet with Tibetans facing considerable social and environmental impacts stemming from Beijing's actions.

### Dam Protest

In early 2024, hundreds of Tibetans took to the streets to protest against the [Kamtok Dam](#) development in Derge county. Protests like this have become rare across China due to Beijing's increasing zero tolerance for dissent and its sophisticated [digital surveillance capacities](#), which means it can easily locate and detain dissenters. The Kamtok Dam protestors were motivated by their concerns about the social and environmental impacts of the dam, including the displacement of an estimated 4,200 Tibetans, the complete immersion of several villages and monasteries (some dating around 700+ years), and the destruction of important cultural and religious relics.

Chinese authorities responded by [beating protestors](#), whose ranks included many monks. Many

protestors were detained. Relatives and friends of those protesting were also targeted in the resultant crackdown and there was an increase in surveillance, travel restrictions were imposed preventing journalists from travelling to the region to report on the story, and online platforms such as WeChat were shut down to those living in the region. This protest is also noteworthy as it provides a lens into the widespread repression of Tibetans under Chinese rule.

### Impacts of Beijing's Development Approach

Dam construction is just one example of Beijing's [high-modernist development approach](#) in Tibet. This approach involves the widescale displacement of people, resulting in social dislocation, the break-up of communities and neighborhoods – including whole townships, as well as the economic toll displacement imposes on those affected because [compensation payments](#) often fall short of what is appropriate or promised.

Moreover, displacement of Tibetans is occurring on a grand scale. It has been estimated that between 2000 and 2025, [930,000 rural Tibetans were displaced](#) due to a variety of reasons, ranging from large-scale infrastructure works through to government policies aimed at ending nomadic pastoral lifestyles. Some Tibetans have experienced multiple relocations across this period and most notably, 76 percent of these relocations have occurred since 2016 under the leadership of Xi Jinping, indicating an intensification of Beijing's pacification efforts in the region.

Also resulting from Beijing's high-modernist development approach is the significant [destruction of important cultural and religious sites](#), including ancient monasteries and relics. Officials have responded to pleas for preservation of such sites with indifference, claiming that affected sites hold "no significant value or importance" (similar to their approach to calls to preserve [Kashgar Old City](#)). Furthermore, responding to concerns over Tibetan displacement due to dam construction, Lu Gang, secretary of the prefecture party committee, identified that building a "national clean energy industry highland" takes precedence over other concerns.



This disregard for the indigenous rights of the Tibetans and their cultural and religious sites, is evidence of the [unfolding cultural genocide inside of Tibet](#). This process has been ongoing since the annexation, but it too has escalated under the leadership of Xi Jinping

### Beijing's Colonial Endeavor

In a speech at the Central Ethnic Work conference in 2021, Xi emphasized the importance of applying [“correct historical thinking”](#) to ethnic policy in China and prioritization of Sinification of non-Han ethnic groups such as Tibetans. These emphases illuminate an important, ongoing intentional blind spot in Beijing, that is, its failure to acknowledge that [Tibet is a colony of the Chinese state](#). This blind spot, which is supported by historical falsehoods perpetuated by the Chinese Communist Party and some Chinese academics (“correct historical thinking”), means that Beijing goes to great lengths to avoid acknowledging that it operates as a colonial power inside of Tibet and they disregard the indigenous autonomy, rights or concerns of Tibetans.

Instead, Beijing paternalistically views minority nationality areas like Tibet as culturally and economically ‘backward’ regions that require the steady hand of the ‘big brother Han’ to guide them towards development and modernization. This is despite current programs of displacement causing many displaced Tibetans to suffer from [urban poverty](#) in their new locale.

In addition, minority nationality children have been targeted for Sinification, with an estimated [80 percent of Tibetan children](#) now being educated in boarding schools. This too forms part of the cultural genocide unfolding in the region as this is a deliberate state-sanctioned effort to remove Tibetan children from their family, language, culture and religion, thereby rapidly assimilating them in a single generation.

Clearly, Xi Jinping's [ethnic policy](#) seeks to eradicate the differences between minority nationalities and the Han majority, so that the minority nationality peoples are subsumed into [‘Cultural China’](#). This process involves full assimilation into the majority Han population via Sinification and settler colonial

practices such as [Han in-migration](#), the eradication of minority nationality languages, culture and religion, dislocating children from families, and displacing Tibetans from traditional lands.

### Extractive Colonialism on the Tibetan Plateau

In addition to settler colonialism, China also operates as an extractive colonial state in minority nationality regions such as Tibet. While this is reflected in [Beijing's dam constructions across this region](#), it is also visible in other industries such as mining and water harvesting. Beijing uses frontier regions and their natural resources to meet the needs of, and to benefit, the Chinese core. For instance, dams in Western China have long been viewed by Beijing as a source of hydroelectric power for the eastern core regions of the Chinese state. The goal of West-East Electricity Transmission (西电东送, *Xī diàn dōng sòng*) via hydroelectric dams was part of the [Western Development Strategy](#), a precursor to the BRI, with works officially starting in 2002. Therefore, peripheral frontier colonized regions such as Tibet are important to not only Beijing, but also the Chinese core regions and the ongoing prosperity of China.

However, this extractive colonial endeavor is having significant detrimental effects on the Tibetan people, their religion and culture, and the natural environment of the Tibetan plateau. Environmentally, Tibet is already experiencing the [negative effects of water diversion](#) such as deforestation, desertification of grasslands, irreversible environmental damage to the fragile ecosystem due to [“water grabbing”](#) and large-scale infrastructural works by Beijing. Additionally, there are concerns over increased [seismic activity](#) resulting from damming sections of the already seismically unstable plateau that sits on the seam of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates.

The displacement of Tibetans from nomadic pastoral lifestyles is especially problematic as it increases urbanization across Tibet, as well as energy needs and consumption. In addition, many Tibetan nomadic pastoralists have been displaced to make way for [“national parks”](#) that are officially designated to be areas for environmental conversation. However, this process appears to be a land grab by Beijing, transferring legal possession of these lands away from



Tibetans to the state. The national parks also allow for surveillance of these areas and the removal of Tibetan pastoralists who may still be in the area or those who attempt to return.

While Beijing claims they are displacing Tibetans to alleviate their poverty, displacement is actually increasing the poverty of many Tibetans. Displaced pastoralists forced out of their subsistence pastoral lifestyle to live in urban areas face unemployment or underemployment, urban poverty, and frequently experience poor health and life outcomes. Many displaced Tibetans [desire to return to their former home](#), but government policy requires their homes to be demolished as part of the relocation conditions so there is very little to return to. Moreover, displaced Tibetans are increasingly dependent on the [state for subsidies](#) to buy food supplies and other necessities, increasing their vulnerability, whereas they were previously self-sufficient as nomadic pastoralists.

Displacing Tibetans from pastoral lands also gives Beijing easy access to [further exploit the pristine lands of the Tibetan plateau](#). Beijing has large-scale mining operations in lithium, chromium, silver, copper and gold across the Tibetan plateau. These mines are degrading the natural environment, thereby increasing the environmental destruction of China's extractive capitalism in Tibet. In addition, by displacing pastoralists from the grasslands, herd mobility and sustainable stewardship of the land has been reduced. This threatens indigenous land management practices that have developed over centuries of custodianship and will eventually eradicate indigenous pastoral knowledge.

Beijing is also exploiting Tibet's dwindling water resources. [China's waterways and groundwater have been heavily polluted](#) due to poor water practices, with municipal and industrial wastewater contaminating China's water reserves. As water resources have become increasingly unfit for human consumption, and even agricultural and industrial uses, [bottled water consumption](#) has skyrocketed across China, and it is now the world's largest bottled water consumer and a [major producer of bottled water](#).

Known as the '[Third Pole](#)' due to its expansive glaciers and significant fresh water supplies, the Tibetan plateau and surrounding Himalayan region is increasingly attractive to [bottled water companies](#) who are now exploiting Tibet's glaciers and ground water to hydrate the rest of China and beyond. However, the Tibetan plateau is experiencing decreased snow falls, the glaciers are melting, and there is increased contamination of these valuable water resources too. Moreover, the Third Pole is of incredible significance to the global climate, so it requires environmental protection and responsible resource management. In spite of this, Beijing's extractive capitalism has allowed unrestrained corporate actors to exploit the region, and Beijing is failing to properly regulate their activities. To add insult to injury, [Tibetans are now forced to pay for the water](#) they used to access for free. This is due to the increasingly poor water quality of many of Tibet's waterways, due to contamination, which means – like the rest of China – Tibetans are now also increasingly reliant on bottled water.

### Conclusion

In her assessment of European [extractive colonialism in African states](#) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iva Pesa argued that the attitude of the colonial powers included a “mastery of the biophysical environment and a belief in perpetual economic growth, both of which tended to justify extractivism and further attempts to dominate colonised lands and peoples”. This same extractive colonizing mindset is present within Beijing's attitudes towards the peoples and environments of its frontier regions and undergirds Beijing's high-modernist development approach both inside and outside of China. As long as Beijing refuses to recognize Tibet is a Chinese colony that it is degrading via its ongoing cultural genocide and extractive colonial practices, the long-term outlook for Tibetans and their traditional lands appears dire.

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