

XI JINPING IN LHASA: SPECTACULAR DELUSIONS

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The spectacular party-state has a frontier construction theory that classifies Tibet as a national security risk, because Tibet is full of Tibetans, for whom the Party's interest do not come first. Partly this is because party-speak makes no sense. Then you discover "promote the construction of the Chinese nation's community" means abandoning one's mother tongue, opting instead to believe not only are you really racially Chinese, so too were all your deluded ancestors. Xi Jinping flies to Lhasa to inspect his campaign to rectify the minds of the Tibetans. On cue amassed Tibetans duly perform in song and dance their enthusiasm for discovering they are actually Chinese, embracing Chinese characteristics smothered on everything Tibetan, declaiming their love for the core leader because the Party's interests always come first. Can we believe what we see? Does Xi Jinping believe his own propaganda? Can performative declamation of slogans actually change minds?

Xi Jinping's brief inspection of central Tibet in August 2025 culminated in his public messaging: China is successfully moving Tibet into modernity with Chinese characteristics. Tibetans no longer live in a timeless present, they have now entered history, thanks to the benevolence of the Party.

Xi Jinping's private message, to senior cadres and party bosses in Lhasa is of course secret, and may

take some time to become apparent. In Xinjiang in 2014, Xi Jinping ordered the mass incarceration of millions of Uighurs in hastily built concentration camps, an order that took time to become public.

For the Tibetans and the Uighurs the bottom line is the same: your traditional identity, culture and values are no longer permissible, frontier construction theory 顶层设计 classifies your

identity as a national security threat. What is permissible is performative displays of dance moves and costumes, on command, as required for party-state spectacle. The modern spectacular state can be repressive, or festive, or both. The Soviet model continues to shadow China's compulsory festivities: "In Weberian terms, we can see the spectacular elements of Soviet holidays, the scale and the colour, as an attempt to overcome the disenchantment of a Soviet rationality that permeated even festive occasions with a sense of officiousness. The spontaneity and creativity were more like the spectacular culture of a theme park: a simulation carefully controlled by its creators."¹

The Spectacular Scale

Look closely at the eight minutes of CCTV news coverage on August 21, 2025.²

Beginning with military band music, the entire square in front of the Potala is filled with Tibetans waving red flags and *khatag* scarves, all smiling. Lots of soldiers in uniform enthusiastically clapping. A goose-stepping squad of soldiers carry the sacred national flag to the flagpole. The flag is unfurled, the national anthem is struck, all sing. Crowd shots jump cut fast, no time to notice the ennui. The centerpiece is a huge plaque, Xi Jinping's gift of his very own words, to be left behind as an enduring gift, golden lettering on a red background, in supersized *putonghua* characters, and much smaller Tibetan font underneath: "Jointly Build the Community of the Chinese Nation, Write a New Chapter of a Beautiful Tibet", a permanent reminder of assimilation into Chinese identity, required of each and all.

Lhasa, a holy pilgrimage city, momentarily becomes a simulacrum of Beijing, the parade ground below the Potala a mini Tiananmen Square, widening the panoptic gaze of the party-state, able to make scrutable, legible each assembled citizen.³ Having swept away all jumbled laneways and private courtyards, all is revealed, and if necessary military guns have line of sight. This is "an urban

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site redolent with symbolic meaning, a panoptic political regime struggling to contain its own power in the face of a modernity it both ardently desires and resolutely opposes.”⁴

“The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.”⁵

The scale of the spectacle is reminiscent of the revolutionary operas 样板戏 of the Cultural Revolution, such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*,⁶ *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*,⁷ *Red Detachment of Women*,⁸ and *The White-Haired Girl*.⁹

This is legislative voice, in command, requiring all Tibetans to identify, as their primary loyalty, with the Chinese Nation/Chinese Race/Zhonghua Minzu 中华民族.¹⁰

The methods for achieving the Xinjiang and Tibet forced march into modernity, remaking the self into a capitalist factor of production, do differ. In Xinjiang the security state assessed the situation as urgent, triggering top level design of concentration camps in which recalcitrant Uighurs, both in the interrogation rooms and in their packed detention cells, were pressured to repeat and repeat Xi Jinping's slogans, to abandon all outer appearances of difference, redefined as deviance. Head scarves

and beards were forbidden.

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In Xinjiang, after years of unrelenting pressure, top level design decided the public sphere had been remade, all overt signs of difference had been erased, then years later it was time to move on, declare everything is normal again, do come and make a tourist trip to Xinjiang, you'll be so glad you did.

Top-level Design in Chinese Style

Top level design in Tibet had the same goal as in Xinjiang, but different methods. In Xinjiang the coercion strategy mobilized large numbers of Han immigrants who speak some Uighur, to install themselves in Uighur homes, monitoring compliance of each family member, reporting results to the surveillance state. In central Tibet few such home invasions could be mobilized, because in Ü-Tsang/Xizang/Tibet Autonomous Region there are few Han immigrants, few who stay more than three years, and very few who can speak Tibetan.

Top-level design 顶层设计, spun off from cybernetics, had to come up with a different

strategy to achieve the required level of performative declamation by Tibetans identifying primarily as Chinese, while doing Tibetan dance moves.¹¹ That appears to have pleased Xi Jinping. In the purely material world of spectacular performative compliance, this signals success. Tibet is now defined by Chinese characteristics. China's Tibet has at last been accomplished. Yet security risks are everywhere. The state still feels insecure.

Top level design of frontier construction theory 顶层设计 always requires more that can and must be done if Tibet is to complete its compulsory journey into “a new era in which Tibet would turn from darkness to light, from backwardness to progress, from poverty to affluence, from seclusion to openness.” That formulation, a litany of opposites, is repeated endlessly, in the Confucian expectation that endless repetition does eventually rectify wrong thinking.

This parading of polar opposites—with no middle way—convinced the party-state that top-level design is working. Propagandists tend to believe their propaganda. The dualisms inherent in China's liturgy of liberation are, to Tibetan minds, extremes that constitute each other. Far from there being a historically necessary and inevitable transition from backwardness to progress, there can be no cold without hot, no short without tall, no affluence without poverty.

But for the materialists of top-level design, this is too subtle, too confusing. So Xi Jinping is happy with what he has wrought in Tibet; especially as there was a staged spectacular of costumed dancing to assure him, and the world, that Tibetans are grateful to their liberators, and still appear to be Tibetan.

This fossilization of outer appearances infantilizes minority nationalities, especially when they are required to dress in full ceremonial gear on occasions such as walking into legislative sessions of the National People's Congress, amid a sea of

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Han Chinese in suits. This is known in Chinese as staged authenticity, a pairing that in English sounds contradictory, but not in China.¹²

The elaborate folk fest spectacle staged in Lhasa in August 2025 for Xi Jinping and world media repeats the way Qing and earlier dynasties classified China's exotic minorities, presented to the emperor in albums featuring not only the archetypal clothing of the minorities, but also their gestures and dance postures, a miscellany of othernesses, a Wunderkammer chamber of curiosities, an imperial internal orientalism that sometimes went further in appealing to the imperial gaze by feminizing some minorities, suggesting the women are sexually available.¹³

It was this mishmash of fantasies and projections that revolutionary China's Ethnic Classification Team was instructed to overturn, instead classifying each minority by objective, scientific criteria. That was in 1954.

Since then, essentializing minority ethnicities by requiring them, in the public sphere, to wear outfits as exotic as possible, has persisted. The ethnologists, deployed in 1954 to take out of the hands of the minorities any self-determining power to self-classify, and impose on them a state grid, made their rulings reducing hundreds of asserted group identities down to the official 56. Despite this exclusionary simplification, the 55 non-Han nationalities to this day must revert to type, whenever the party-state commands it. This is how top level design works, designing the staging of authenticity, the more elaborate the better.

Lots of shots panning across rows of personages, Han and Tibetan, all cadres, party bosses, all in suits, all legislating their assent. Finally, time for the mass spectacle, for movement. Massive floats, memes on wheels roll past, intercut with Xi Jinping waving, smiling benevolently. CCTV voiceover explained: "Afterward, a grand mass parade brimming with auspicious and festive spirit

was held. The parade comprised four sections—"Guided by the Banner," "The Four Major Tasks," "Forging Ahead in the New Era," and "Toward the Future." Twenty-six mass contingents and floats proceeded in sequence to lively music. People of all ethnic groups wore brilliantly colored attire and broke into spirited, joyful dances to express their happiness at living better lives and their gratitude to the Party and the country. Xi Jinping and others waved to the crowds from time to time."¹⁴

These outbursts of spontaneous joy at seeing the Core Leader remind us that China sees Tibetans as backward, simple folk, who break into joyful dancing just like that. Nothing to do with choreography and repeated rehearsals. This spectacular enlisted 20,000 participants, trained to simulate spontaneity on cue.¹⁵ At no other time would the party-state allow 20,000 Tibetans to gather on the streets and square immediately below the Potala; any genuinely popular gathering would be swiftly declared a threat to national security.

The CCTV coverage then switched to "*The gala opened with the exuberant song-and-dance number 'Thank You · 'Tuk je che'.*" *The performance comprised three chapters. The first chapter, through songs and dances such as "The Starting Point of Happiness," "Stepping to Song in Celebration," and "The Five Golden Flowers of the Farm," presented vivid scenes of building a socialist new Tibet. The middle chapter—featuring the scene-based song-and-dance "The Running Plateau," the medley "Beautiful Hometown," and the narrated piece with music "Deep Affection"—depicted the vigorous vitality that reform and opening up has brought to the snowy plateau. The final chapter, with numbers such as "A New Journey," "The Laughter of Gala Village," "Zither and Cranes in Unison," "We Are All Brothers," and "In the Embrace of the Motherland," showcased a beautiful panorama of a happy new Tibet, with "Dancing Together in the New Era with One Heart" pushing the gala to its climax. The entire performance was emotionally rich and splendid, reflecting the glorious course of the Tibet Autonomous Region over the past 60 years and*

expressing the sincere feelings of the people of all ethnic groups in Tibet to always heed the Party, feel gratitude to the Party, and follow the Party.”

Finally, this gathering was rewarded with trinkets for the natives. Xinhua reported, “The central delegation attending Xizang Autonomous Region’s 60th founding anniversary celebrations has presented gifts and souvenirs to local people and officials. The gifts, ranging from congratulatory plaques to automatic butter tea makers and projectors.”¹⁶ Now any Tibetan with a smart phone and a white wall can project the core leader to life size and beyond.

Is this elaborate spectacle proof that top-level design of frontier construction theory has succeeded? Does this mean China can now relax, and trust Tibetans?

No End to Rules and Regulations

No. As recently as March 2025, new regulations came into force in Lhasa and all TAR prefectures further tightening the suffocation of Tibetan culture and language.¹⁷ On top of lengthy regulations issued at least once a year, specifying in detail how Tibetans of central Tibet are to behave, the succession of rules and punishments gets more and more detailed in each iteration.¹⁸

China seeks to persuade itself it is succeeding in winning the hearts and minds of the Tibetans. Paternalistic, patronizing spectacles reassure top leaders that their campaign to coerce sloganeering compliance is succeeding. This is circular, path dependent, and delusional. These are the fruits of top level design, China’s chosen methodology of scientific management.

Does anyone seriously believe the Tibetans joyously sing and dance in praise of the propaganda slogans that suffocate Tibetan civilization?

Does this mean top-level design, with its fixed categories, actually solves China’s frontier construction problems? In Lhasa, “Xi Jinping

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emphasized the importance of fully implementing the Party’s strategy for governing Tibet in the new era and striving to build a united, prosperous, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful new socialist modern Tibet.....and do a solid job in livelihood issues such as employment, education, healthcare, social security, elderly care, and childcare, further enhancing the sense of gain, happiness, and security of people of all ethnic groups.”¹⁹

Do Tibetans believe China is building in Tibet a united, prosperous, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful new socialist modernity? Does that fit their daily experience?

This is popularly known as gaslighting, an unending campaign of controlling the minds and thoughts of others.

Does this mix of compulsory behavioral compliance, and ritual displays of exotic otherness, actually create the community of a single shared

identity that the party-state urgently craves? Does this spectacle of conformity and difference mean Tibetans do now see themselves, as their primary loyalty, as Chinese?

Clearly this coercive campaign has not worked. For several decades Tibetans have said quietly to each other: the more I see of the Chinese, the gladder I am to be Tibetan.

Xi Jinping's brief inspection of Lhasa was a performative declamation of those paternalistic mnemonics, performed en masse, endlessly rehearsed, elaborately staged, all delivered at contemporary Chinese spectacular speed, faster than customary song and dance.

The speediness of the dance moves is a clue, since modernity always requires acceleration. Clearly this extravagant event was choreographed for newsclip reels, Instagram feel-good, influencer ticks.

For whom was this extravaganza staged? While there are many audiences, primarily it was for Xi Jinping, to assure him the Tibetans do love the Party and the core leader, do love being patronized by the colonizer, and China's top-level design has succeeded. This is deeply delusional.

In his lengthy speech to the assembled masses, Xi yet again demanded *"all ethnic groups in the region to work hard and forge ahead, uphold and improve the system of regional ethnic autonomy, and carry out in-depth anti-separatist efforts. Xi emphasized that the first thing to do in order to govern Tibet and stabilize it and revitalize it is to maintain political stability, social stability, national unity, and religious harmony in Tibet. It is necessary to further build a strong sense of the Chinese nation's community, promote the construction of the Chinese nation's community, strengthen publicity and education on the history of the party, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, the history of socialist development, and the history of the development of the Chinese nation, widely publicize the glorious*

*achievements of the Tibet Autonomous Region over the past 60 years.actively create a national model area for ethnic unity and progress, promote and popularize the country's common language, promote exchanges and integration among all ethnic groups, and promote two-way economic, cultural, and personnel exchanges between Tibet and the mainland". It is necessary to guide Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to the socialist society in accordance with the requirements of systematically promoting the sinicization of religion."*²⁰

Conclusion: A Spectacular Delusion

Rewind the CCTV footage: the centerpiece is the parade of polystyrene floats proclaiming the key slogans of the compulsory negation of Tibetan identity, slogans repeated in Xi Jinping's performance of command.

The core message is in the four slogans of the four sections of the parade, slogans designed as memorable earworms, in Chinese or in Tibetan. "Guided by the Banner," of the leadership of the Party; "The Four Major Tasks," of stability, development, ecology, and strengthening border defense, codewords for no dissent, no protests, no gatherings, no objections to extractivist infrastructure, no objections to displacement from home pasture in the name of biodiversity protection, no avoiding patrolling the border with India, when relocated to a new frontier village.

"Forging Ahead in the New Era," is a slogan summarizing several other slogans, chiefly "building a strong sense of the Chinese nation's community, promoting the construction of the Chinese nation's community", code for a language education policy that relegates children's mother tongue Tibetan as a relic of the backward past, while privileging standard Chinese as the gateway to all that is modern and wealth generating. This slogan also erases Tibetan history, replacing it with, in Xi Jinping's words: "education on the history of the party, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, the history of socialist development, and the history of the development

of the Chinese nation.”

“Toward the Future” is vague, yet utopian.

China’s party-state has the power, backed by surveillance and algorithmic predictive policing, to insist on behavioral compliance, but this does not turn alien rule²¹ into a singular Chinese race -Zhonghua minzu- in Tibetan hearts.²² Top level design has not only failed to achieve more than performative declamations; it has deeply alienated Tibetans from the master race.

China’s reliance on top-level design to translate its frontier construction theory into a menu of actions has resulted in a dead end. Far from master planning Tibet’s transition into embracing a new identity, as loyal Chinese citizens, the counterproductive outcome of intensifying pressure is the deepening of Tibetan dismay at the relentless intrusion of China’s slogan jargon into every aspect of life. Tibetans feel stifled, asphyxiated, cancelled by the tide of propaganda memes they must memorize, repeat, and perform, whenever required.

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