

# FUTURE TIBET:

CHINA'S STRATEGIC PLANS  
2025-2049



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## **Policy Brief**

This policy brief, based on Gabriel Lafitte's blog 'Future of Tibet', is aimed at understanding China's Tibet policies as a coherent whole rather than as isolated initiatives, enabling more effective strategic responses to China's comprehensive approach. It is intended to stimulate debate about the future of Tibet, a debate initiated by the Tibetan exile community, in Washington, New York, Paris and Dharamsala in 2022-2023.<sup>1</sup>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**China's strategy for Tibet through 2049 reveals a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach aimed at assimilation of Tibet into the Chinese nation-state, a major shift from the framework of nominal autonomy which allowed for some protections in preservation of language and culture.**

Young Chinese and Tibetans are compelled to learn a simplified caricature of China's history that portrays Tibet as part of China since 'ancient times'. As part of a long-term strategy to urbanise most Tibetans, reducing them to merely one of many ethnic groups mingling in municipalities where no nationality retains special rights, Tibetans face displacement and resettlement into frontier villages and concrete apartment blocks. The Tibetan landscape, now a premier destination for high-end tourism and an escape from urban pressures for young Chinese, presents a jarring juxtaposition of designer shopping malls alongside the omnipresent apparatus of total surveillance and securitisation.

This policy brief analyses China's policies in Tibet, which involve as aspects of a coherent plan the ruthless suppression of even moderate criticism of Party policy; the imposition of a 'Sinicisation' campaign in education and mainstreaming of Chinese language; infrastructure construction on a massive scale for dual civilian-military use; dramatic expansion in tourism which will increase with the completion of the Chengdu-Lhasa railway; mass removal of Tibetan rural population from their land including the displacement of pastoralists from areas designated as national parks; border village construction and resettlement; big data centres; extraction of minerals including important reserves of lithium and copper; construction of hydro dams in some of the most seismically unstable areas of the planet risking dangerous consequences downstream.

While there may be regional variations in implementation, policies from education reform to urbanisation work toward China's milestone years of 2035 ('socialist modernisation') and 2049 ('great modern socialist country').

**Key findings:**

- Xi Jinping has placed national security above all other objectives, and Tibet is of high strategic significance to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for factors including its important border areas, water, mineral and natural resources.
- China employs a suite of interconnected strategies including education reform, rural depopulation, tourism development, resource extraction, and urbanisation to achieve its strategic goals in Tibet.
- By 2035, Tibet is targeted to be fully integrated as a resource provider and tourism destination.
- By 2049, projections indicate most Tibetans will be urbanised with diminished cultural identity.
- China aims to transform Tibet from a 'cost centre' to a 'profit centre' while solving the 'Tibetan problem' through identity reconstruction.



A drive to urbanisation is central to China's policies in Tibet. This new development is on the road which runs through Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture between Linxia and Xining, Qinghai's provincial capital. Image courtesy of Vera Hue, 2024.



## China's Vision for Tibet: 2035 and 2049

### Strategic Goals and Timeline

Xi Jinping has outlined a two-phase plan for China's development:

- First phase (2020-2035): "Basically realise socialist modernisation" with six key indicators:
  1. Enhanced economic and technological strength.
  2. Improved governance systems and institutions.
  3. Heightened cultural soft power and influence.
  4. Improved living standards and common prosperity.
  5. Modern social governance.
  6. Moral improvement of citizens.
- Second phase (2035-2049): Complete the transformation into a "great modern socialist country" by the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China

## Tibet Assimilation Strategy

China's policies toward Tibet follow a coherent pattern aimed at complete assimilation:

- Dismantling cultural transmission to the next generation through boarding schools that split families, centralised to require family separation.
- Economic integration into China's national infrastructure networks, as essential supplier of industrial raw materials from lithium to water.
- Policies grounded in the Party state narrative that traditional Tibetan lifestyles are 'backward' and 'unproductive'.
- Systematic disempowerment, surveillance, relocation, and control.

## China's Strategic Plans in Tibet

**This briefing examines China's strategic vision for Tibet through the CCP's explicitly identified milestone years of 2035 and 2049, revealing a coordinated approach to transforming Tibet's political, economic, and cultural landscape.**

The Chinese Communist Party characterises heartfelt Tibetan support for the Dalai Lama and protection of Tibetan national identity as obstacles to its elaborate ambitions to re-shape the Tibetan plateau for its own purposes and ensure the domination of the Party, and so prioritises infrastructure construction and tourism as key elements of its strategic objectives in Tibet.

The Chinese Communist Party's 2035 long-term target is to “achieve socialist modernisation”, when China's economic and technological strength as well as its national strength will increase significantly, and with the aim of 75% urbanisation across the entire People's Republic of China (PRC). The 2049 target of the ‘great rejuvenation’ of the Chinese nation marks the centenary year of the founding of the PRC. Xi Jinping's aim is that by 2049 China should be a “great modern socialist country that leads the world”.<sup>2</sup>

Key to China's rise before the centenary of Mao's Republic, founded on 1 October 1949, is the enforced assimilation of Tibetans, Uyghurs and other peoples, enforcing a Chinese cultural nationalism, the concept

of ‘*Zhonghua minzu*’. Officials are required to prioritise ‘ethnic mingling’ (*minzu jiaorong*) of China's nationalities and ‘identification’ by Tibetans (and other ‘minority nationalities’ such as Uyghurs) with “Chinese culture” (*Zhonghua wenhua* ).

In the early 2000s influential Chinese scholars such as Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe proposed a “second generation of ethnic policies” directed toward diminishing ‘ethnic’ identity (Chinese: *minzu*) and strengthening a single, shared ‘national identity’ with the emphasis on cultural assimilation and the construction of an extensive architecture of surveillance and control before these policies became visible in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> The ‘national autonomy’ system in Tibet, legislated in 1984, originally allowing for some political representation as well as some tolerance of Tibetan language, religion and culture, has now effectively been relinquished, and a new phase of accelerated assimilation is underway.

Compounding the impacts, China is transforming Tibet into a modern economy intended to transition from cost centre to profit centre, providing China with copper, lithium, electricity, water and landscapes suitable for mass tourism, all now connected by high-speed electrified rail links, power grids and urban construction that integrates Tibet much deeper into the PRC.



# China's Assimilation Strategy

## Ideological Framework

The Constitution of the PRC as amended in 2018 guarantees minority rights and political autonomy through the framework of 'minority' or 'ethnic nationalities'. This is a term conceived by the Party and does not reflect the self-identification of Tibetans, Uyghurs, or others who fall under this category - nor does it convey the complex realities of their culture and history. Now, new developments compelling Sinicisation and assimilation have gathered force and are more far reaching than before.

In Tibet, where religion is central to cultural and national identity, the CCP aims to bring religion under the total control of the Party state, and to ensure the religious and personal feelings of monks, nuns and laypeople are supplanted by loyalty to Chinese cultural nationalism.

"Taking even greater effect this century, the PRC's massive expansion of transport infrastructure, urbanisation and economic activity in its western regions, as well as outbreaks of protest (2008 in Tibet, 2009 in Xinjiang), have spurred PRC nationalists to call for the withdrawal of the 'nationality autonomy' system," writes historian Matthew Akester for the Council on Geostrategy. "While the central leadership has ignored calls for its abolition, current policies such as 'forging a common Chinese community',<sup>4</sup> 'sinicisation of religion', along with the requirement that ethnic minority citizens 'promote the unity of nationalities' indicate that the system no longer has force."<sup>5</sup>

This transformation demands not just compliance but, for each individual, the internalisation of a new identity, codified through:

- Directives from the whole-of-government Seventh Tibet Work Forum (2020). At the meeting, which set policy for the decade ahead, Xi Jinping emphasised the "strategy of governing Tibet in the new era" including the Sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism according to priorities of 'national security' and 'ethnic solidarity'.<sup>6</sup> At the Work Forum, Xi outlined a particular focus on the 'patriotic education' of a new younger generation of Tibetans, calling on officials to strengthen ideological education in schools, "planting the seeds of loving China in the depths of the hearts of every teenager". Xi said that more education and guidance should be provided in order to combat 'separatist' activities in Tibet, "thus forging an ironclad shield to safeguard stability."<sup>7</sup> This is

consistent with Tibet's strategic importance for the CCP; Xi Jinping states that to govern the nation, "We must first govern our borders. To govern our borders, we must first stabilise Tibet." At the Work Forum, Xi outlined a particular focus on the 'patriotic education' of a new younger generation of Tibetans, calling on officials to strengthen ideological education in schools, "planting the seeds of loving China in the depths of the hearts of every teenager".

- A new Chinese government textbook, 'An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race', demonstrates how the CCP has moved from some acceptance of ethnic differences to a form of racial nationalism "to implant the consciousness of the Chinese nation's community into children's hearts from an early age".<sup>8</sup>
- The Communications University of China launched a new set of videos<sup>9</sup> promoting the concept of one Zhonghua race, speaking one common language, aimed at younger students.<sup>10</sup> Mobilisation of teacher training to impart this new story is now gathering momentum.



The new urban scene at Drago county in eastern Tibet, subject to a tough crackdown particularly since 2021. See Tibet Watch report documenting the impacts: <https://freetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Drago-County.pdf> image courtesy of Vera Hue.



# Implementation Mechanisms

## 1. Tourism Development

**As Beijing tightens its control over Tibetan religious expression and practice, Tibet is increasingly marketed as a tourist destination based on the spiritual and 'exotic' attractions of its Buddhist culture and language.**

Referring to tourism as a tool to counter cultural resilience and strengthen the drive towards 'Sinicisation', a Tibetan man in his sixties told the International Campaign for Tibet that: "For the Communist Party, religion has little to do with prosperity and development in a modern society. Guesthouses and fancy hotels inside and immediately outside monastic environments will grow to host more and more Chinese tourists, with the purpose of improving the local economy and at the same time detracting time from monastics' education and activities."

In December 2024, a Chinese state-owned airline based in Chongqing began flights several times a week between Lhasa and Singapore, while in February a new route opened up between Lhasa and Hong Kong. Not only does this bring more tourists, but it is also the creation of Tibet as an asset for distant corporations expanding into fourth tier cities, keen to be first movers in establishing their brands ahead of competitors.

Chinese influencers stay at Marriott's St Regis hotel and high-end Indian tourists

explore Tibet's historic and cultural capital. In a vivid reminder of how mass tourism in Tibet coexists with a securitised state that keeps citizens under total surveillance, Lhasa's InterContinental Hotel overlooks the notorious Gutsa Detention Centre,<sup>11</sup> known for its brutal torture of Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople.

By 2035 new regional airports will be operational, relieving Lhasa of being the sole destination. In the TAR, a new airport at Ngari (Chinese: Ali), built at an elevation of 4274 meters above sea level, facilitates pilgrimage to Mt Kailash, while Shigatse Dingri airport, around 50 kilometres from Everest base camp, opened in 2022. Projected to be the world's highest airport, the Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu) Daging airport is under construction while Linzhi Milin airport in fashionable hill station Nyingtri (Nyingchi) and others enable each area of the circuit to be branded a unique destination.

A new form of tourism is also underway. Young Chinese people are increasingly travelling to Tibet and other 'ethnic' areas as a getaway from the intense competitiveness of the big Chinese cities. The ethnic destinations of Dali and Lijiang at the foot of the Tibetan plateau can be reached by a new expressway and fast rail from the Tibetan area of Dechen in Yunnan, 90 minutes away.<sup>12</sup> But now Dali and Lijiang are so over-saturated with visits

from Chinese tourists that, failing to find the 'ethnic' welcome they imagine, many move onto Tibet.

A new high-speed rail link from Lhasa to Nyingtri, in a strategically important area bordering Arunachal Pradesh in India, serves both military purposes (making the transfer of troops to border areas easier) and civilian, facilitating speedy access to tourists. Chinese vloggers seeking a break from the oppressive humid heat of Chongqing and Chengdu in summer document the journey. In a heavily securitised frontier area (the administrative seat of Nyingtri is called Bayi in Chinese, meaning 'eight one', in reference to the PLA's creation on 1 August 1927), the Nyingtri Hilton hotel has the first mini-golf course in Tibet.

Even rapidly melting glaciers on the world's largest and highest plateau are not exempt from the tourism drive. Chinese scientists have researched the 'recreational value' of the Yulong Snow Mountain glacier as a possible ski resort.<sup>13</sup>

"China is aiming towards a consumer-led future by mass domestic tourism to pristine landscapes largely devoid of Tibetan guardians, a post-industrial economy capable of employing large numbers of Han emigrants," writes Gabriel Lafitte in his Rukor blog. "In 2025 there is sufficient momentum to try to see ahead to 2035 and 2049."

### **Tourism serves as both economic driver and cultural transformation tool:**

- New international air routes connect Lhasa to Singapore and Hong Kong.
- High-speed rail expansion will reduce Chengdu-Lhasa travel time to 14 hours by 2030.
- Multiple destinations and airports form a comprehensive tourism circuit.
- Tibet is marketed as an exotic consumer experience for urban Han Chinese.
- The developmentalist approach is inherently colonialist, imposing preconceived notions on 'underdeveloped' communities without consultation.
- Citizens 'dropping out' concerns a government expecting increased birth rates, hard work, and state devotion.



## 2. Rural Depopulation and Relocation

The scattered population of livestock herders and pastoralists on the high plateau has over centuries made a sustainable living by mobile, extensive land use, always moving on, to protect the grassland. Tibetan nomad livelihoods thrived in harsh conditions not despite uncertainty but because of it, and nomad adaptability.

But China has never understood this, and its priority is to depopulate the rangelands, relocating the displaced to newly built prefabricated settlements and to urban apartment towers, where inherited skills are redundant. This reduces the displaced to dependence on the Party state.

Tibetans living outside TAR continue to face sharp restrictions on pilgrimage to Lhasa and the blessings of being in the presence of the Dalai Lama's former home and centre of Tibetan governance, the Potala Palace. Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns wishing to study Buddhism in monasteries outside their home prefecture face restrictions and re-education,<sup>14</sup> and Tibetans traveling for pilgrimage to India in the past had been detained or ordered to return.<sup>15</sup> While Han mass tourism accelerates, China remains fearful of Tibetans gathering as crowds that enable social cohesion through the transmission of cultural values in the Tibetan language.

Together with current Chinese government programs to assimilate Tibetan schooling, culture, and religion into those of the

'Chinese nation', the mass displacement and resettlement of rural Tibetans is causing dislocation and degradation to Tibetan culture, the environment and ways of life. Contravening international law, relocation programs in Tibet move former farmers and pastoralists to areas where they cannot practice their former livelihood and have no choice but to seek work as insecure day labourers in off-farm industries.

Official statistics suggest that between 2000 and 2025, the Chinese authorities will have relocated over 930,000 rural Tibetans in the TAR, according to a report by Human Rights Watch that draws on over 1,000 official Chinese media articles as well as government publications and academic field studies.<sup>16</sup> In this same period, 3.36 million rural Tibetans - approximately half the entire Tibetan population - have been affected by other government programs requiring them to rebuild their houses and to adopt a sedentary way of life if they are nomads, without necessarily being relocated. These figures suggest that most rural Tibetans have been impacted by Chinese government relocation or rehousing policies in the past two decades. Many of them have had to move or rebuild their homes more than once, compulsorily fence their allotted land, then demolish the fences.

## Rural depopulation systematically disconnects Tibetans from traditional ways of life:

- Displacement and disempowerment are justified through various programs: productivity improvement, carrying capacity, stocking rate regulation, household responsibility, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and watershed protection.
- Frontier villages can serve as intermediate settlements before full urbanisation.
- Loss of traditional livelihoods creates dependency on state subsidies.
- By 2035 it is possible that most of rural Tibet will be depopulated, even if Tibetans are refused urban 'hukou' residential status in the fast-growing cities. By 2049, if assimilation is seen as successful, those who were displaced to new frontier villages, and the new generation educated in Chinese schools to identify as 'Zhonghua', may be permitted to resettle yet again, in cities, primarily Xining and Lhasa, also fast growing cities such as Shigatse, Chamdo, Nyingtri and Yushu.
- There are still counter indicators. For instance Chinese scientific recognition of the importance and indigenous knowledge of Tibetan pastoralists as guardians of the landscape;<sup>17</sup> the increasing engagement of Tibetans in rural areas in grass roots ecotourism initiatives and others seeking to create opportunities from Tibetans' 'comparative advantages' in livelihoods well suited to the conditions on the plateau despite the top down nature of the system. A further factor is also emerging in urban areas, where Tibetan communities in towns and cities are reinventing their cultural identity through forms of creative expression and language transmission.



Chinese tourists posing in Tibetan clothes at the palace of the Seventh Dalai Lama in Litang (Litang), Sichuan, the Tibetan area of Kham. 2025. Photo courtesy of Vera Hue.



### 3. Urbanisation as Final Goal and Changing Tibetan Identity

**China envisions a future where Tibetans are primarily urban dwellers:**

- Restrictions on Tibetan mobility to cities may relax by 2049 once assimilation is deemed successful.
- Urban environments accelerate cultural and linguistic assimilation.

But young Tibetans are creating new cultural spaces and communities in cities, and often see urban life as:

- Offering personal autonomy and freedom from traditional customs.
- Representing 'modernity' in contrast to 'backward' village life.
- Providing non-agricultural employment and urban amenities.
- Aligning with state discourse that assigns higher value to urban dwellers.<sup>18</sup>



New developments in 2025 in Tawu (Dawu, Daofu) in Kardze (Garze), Sichuan, an area known for its strong Tibetan identity, now in danger of erasure. Image courtesy of Vera Hue.



## 4. Industrialisation and Impacts

China policies project the eastern Tibetan area of Amdo as highly industrialised by 2035, in a belt stretching from the salt lakes of the Tsaidam Basin all the way east to Xining and Gansu. The drivers of this heavy industrialisation involve raw and semi processed minerals extracted from central Tibet but smelted in Amdo/Qinghai; photovoltaic solar panels manufactured in factories that used to be in Xinjiang; large scale animal feedlots fattening yaks trucked from Golog (Chinese: Guoluo), for slaughter and cold chain packing; heavy industries moving deep inland from the coast, incentivised by Beijing subsidies to go west. Many more facilities manufacture chemical fertilisers, plastics, aluminium, bitcoin, lithium batteries. The merging of two cities into one megapolis, stretching 200 kilometres from Lanzhou to Xining, is under way.

On a visit to Sichuan last July, Xi Jinping underlined China's priorities in using the Tibetan plateau as major extraction zones for water, electricity and lithium, urging provincial officials "to write a new chapter in advancing Chinese modernisation".<sup>19</sup> The completion of the world's highest altitude high-voltage power grid in 2018,<sup>20</sup> linked to the construction of a fully electrified high speed rail line from Chengdu in China's Sichuan Province to Lhasa,<sup>21</sup> demonstrates the CCP's demand for hydropower-based energy resources and plans to intensify infrastructure construction in Tibet consistent with the strategic importance of Tibet to the PRC.

For the first time, China's construction of hydropower dams is reaching upstream to the sources of Asia's great wild rivers in Tibet, with at least three major new dams on the upper Machu/Yellow (Chinese: Huang He) river, a river heavily dammed for decades. Chinese scientists have warned of the risks of heavy infrastructure construction in a seismically unstable region where river systems are increasingly unpredictable due to climate change.<sup>22</sup>

In 2025 a cascade of 11 dams in succession, repeatedly interrupting the Ma Chu/Yellow River, already generates so much electricity for industrial use that much is exported to far distant provinces. By 2035, as the Lanxi (Lanzhou-Xining) megapolis fills with industrial parks, the massive output - solar and hydro - from Qinghai is needed for local industries. In 2035 the world may congratulate China on having achieved a full-scale green energy economy in Amdo/Qinghai, even though this means ongoing intensive industrialisation.<sup>23</sup>

It may only be later - towards 2049 - that the world realises China's green energy leadership and industrial revolution dominance of nearly all industries contradicts claims to "ecological civilisation" and is incompatible with reducing actual climate heating emissions.

### Industrial development transforms Tibet's economic base:

- Heavy industrialisation in Amdo/Qinghai creates an industrial belt from Tsaidam Basin to Xining.
- Expansion includes mineral extraction, processing plants, photovoltaic manufacturing, and feedlot operations.
- Development of the Lanzhou-Xining (Lanxi) industrial megapolis.
- Exploitation of massive deposits of lithium, potassium and magnesium in salt lakes near Gormo.
- Risks of catastrophe with cascading dams on major rivers.
- Agribusiness brings Tibetan value systems and successful herder practices towards livestock and land management into direct conflict with the Party state's development model imposed on Tibet. The Chinese government's policy of establishing large commercial slaughterhouses in Tibet, established under the rubric of 'poverty alleviation', has faced increasing resistance by Tibetan herders and Buddhist teachers. An antislaughterhouse movement has developed, with Tibetans risking imprisonment and torture, just as environmental defenders do in their bid to protect Tibet's water and landscape.<sup>24</sup>



Close to the Machu/Yellow river there are many new developments, with elevated roads, factories and industrial sites. Image courtesy of Vera Hue, 2024

## 5. Resource Exploitation

China's strategy repositions Tibet from a 'cost centre' to a 'profit centre' through integration into national systems. This economic transformation simultaneously serves nation-building and assimilation goals.

China's scientists have deployed new remote sensing technologies for the first time to detect hard rock lithium deposits in remote areas of Kham and Amdo in Sichuan Province. Satellite imagery reveals a vast ore belt "sleeping in high mountains and deep valleys", according to Chinese state media,

which describe this as the largest lithium deposit in Asia. The acceleration of lithium mining involves high risk and energy-intensive forms of processing in the seismically active and heavily securitised landscape of the world's highest and largest plateau, a global epicentre of climate change.<sup>25</sup>

Tibet is crucial to China's efforts to achieve dominance in securing not just lithium, but also a wide range of critical minerals and rare earths in the global race to a decarbonised future.

## 6. Climate Impact

The impacts of climate change on Tibet, making river flow more uncertain and less predictable, present new risk factors and constraints, including:

- Increasing unpredictability of monsoon patterns and water resources.
- Potential destabilisation of hydrological systems critical to both Tibet and China.
- Risks of catastrophe from dam building in the upper reaches of Asia's great wild rivers, previously among the least disturbed habitats on earth.
- Melting permafrost. By 2035, as the world continues to heat, and the Tibetan Plateau heats faster than global average, the 60% of the plateau in the grip of permafrost is melting. Outside the Arctic, Tibet's permafrost zone is the largest in the world. As ice in the soil melts away, thousands of years of grass, shrub and tree roots in the soil are exposed to air, rotting microbially, emitting methane, a climate heating gas 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. There is no indication that China has policies or plans to prevent the methane gas emissions rising as permafrost thaws.



## Possible Scenarios

- Hydropower generated on Tibet's major rivers becomes unreliable, lakes spill, glaciers collapse, landslides and debris flows intensify, rivers are blocked and then burst out. Wetlands dry as ice recedes.
- By 2049 the monsoons coming towards Tibet from both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean weaken further, and become more extreme and erratic, while westerly winds and their western "disturbances" grow stronger. Lakes in northern Tibet overspill.
- Floods and droughts in China intensify, and China's efforts to geoengineer more rain over Tibet fail. Jetstream winds above the plateau weaken and wander, flipping unpredictably between skirting below the Himalayas in winter, and diverting to far northern Tibet in summer. As a result in some years the Indian monsoon and/or the East Asian monsoon completely fail to arrive onshore.



New development in Nagchu (Chinese: Nagqu) in the Tibet Autonomous Region, a major urban hub. Image sourced online from state media

## The Tibetan Plateau and Climate Change

On all the many rivers of Tibet, in whatever direction they flow, peak season is the summer monsoon, firstly, the South Asia monsoon flowing in from the Indian Ocean, then, weeks later, the arrival of the East Asian monsoon flowing in from the Pacific. These two monsoons originate in different oceans with quite different dynamics. Increasingly, both monsoons have become less reliable, sometimes weakening, occasionally failing to arrive at all, which in turn strengthens westerly winds over Tibet that are no longer blocked as much by monsoon winds. Rising ocean temperatures weaken the monsoon winds and the temperature gradient too – the difference in temperatures over land and sea which drives the monsoons.

One of the leading meteorologists closely tracking climate change across Tibet is a Tibetan professor, Lan Cuo.<sup>26</sup> Gathering evidence of climate trends and likely future trajectory is not easy when there is only a thin base of quantified past monitoring. Measuring of meteorological data began only in the 1960s, supplemented by digging deep into lakebed sediments and tree rings to understand climate dynamics across deeper time.

In a condensed presentation of her findings, at Columbia University on 22 February 2024<sup>27</sup>, Dr Lan Cuo, a professor at the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research at the

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, presented detailed evidence that the rivers of Tibet are becoming more and more unpredictable. This is based on rigorous analysis of data from leading teams in installing data monitoring tech far upriver, well beyond where China's streamflow stations are.

The results of this scientific expeditionary push are not reassuring, as there has been a drying trend across Tibet over thousands of years, reversing in this century to increasing rain and snow, especially in northern Tibet. While the official China Meteorological Administration speaks positively of the new wetter trend as signalling a Tibetan climate closer to China's, the increase in rain and snow comes with increases in unpredictability and extreme weather. This is very much in line with the observations of meteorologists worldwide. Despite China's best efforts to generate data in order to demonstrate to the public that what can be measured can be managed, the data generated most recently is disturbing.

## Water Politics: the Yarlung Tsangpo River

On 25 December 2024 Xinhua announced the construction of a colossal hydro dam just above India, on the Yarlung Tsangpo which flows into the Brahmaputra river. The proposed dam would generate three times more energy than the Three Gorges dam, currently the world's largest hydropower plant. India reacted immediately with alarm and announced it was going to build a huge dam further down the same river in Indian territory, Arunachal Pradesh.

It was unclear whether China's announcement was an influence operation aimed at India, a placeholder announcement until technical or political

groundwork was laid, a strategy to test small projects or conduct additional feasibility studies before full implementation. So far there has been no sign of preparatory design work or backroom engineering modelling - although Chinese scientists have published a succession of reports warning of the dangers of taming energies deep in the earth, where the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates collide. Gabriel Lafitte, who has been researching dams and infrastructure in the Tibetan landscape for decades, began an investigation.<sup>28</sup>

## Control and 'Ownership'

According to research by Gabriel Lafitte, the Yarlung Tsangpo River's development is controlled by specific state enterprises:

- Huaneng Tibet Yarlung Zangbo River Hydropower Development and Investment Co., Ltd. (Huaneng Yajiang Company) has monopoly rights over hydropower development.
- This subsidiary of state-owned Huaneng Group effectively controls Tibet's water resources.
- Local Tibetan governments court the company for investment, functioning more as clients than partners.



## Current Activities and Priorities'

Despite rumors of an imminent mega-dam at the Great Bend, evidence suggests different priorities:

- The company has completed several modest dams on the upper Yarlung Tsangpo.
- Increasing diversification into solar and wind projects across Tibet.
- Local electrification projects in Metok/Motuo county near the Great Bend.
- New subsidiaries focus on energy storage technology and AI applications.

## Technical and Business Challenges

Developing the Great Bend dam faces significant obstacles:

- Estimated cost of at least 1 trillion yuan (approximately \$137 billion).
- Construction timeline of 20+ years.
- Extremely remote location with difficult access.
- Massive infrastructure needed to transmit electricity to distant industrial centres.
- Solar and wind technologies offer quicker returns and greater flexibility.

## Technical Research and Long-term Planning

Some evidence suggests the project remains on long-term agendas:

- Research into advanced tunnel boring technology at Chengdu University of Technology.
- Focus on tunnel boring machines capable of 'geological discernment'.
- However, this stands alone amid otherwise complete silence about concrete preparations.

## 7. Challenges to Implementation

Several factors complicate China's plans:

- Tibetan cultural resilience and adaptability.
- Challenges of high-altitude development.
- Climate change impacts on infrastructure and economic models.
- International scrutiny and potential criticism.
- The pace of genuine identity transformation versus performative compliance.

Chinese scientific research warning of dangers of infrastructure construction in an unpredictable, seismically active environment, and the impacts on the landscape of mass resettlement policies.



Chinese tourists pose in Tibetan clothing for pictures in ShangriLa (Gyalthang), Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a county-level city that China named to attract tourists after the mythical land depicted in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Image courtesy of a recent visitor to Tibet



# CONCLUSION

China's approach to Tibet represents a comprehensive strategy with multiple reinforcing components aimed at full assimilation of Tibet and Tibetans into a unified Chinese nation-state. The coherence of these policies reveals a clear trajectory toward 2035 and 2049 milestones.

Understanding this strategic coherence is essential for developing effective responses. Rather than addressing each policy in isolation, strategy planning is more effective when considering how education reform, tourism development, rural depopulation,

resource extraction, and urbanisation work together to advance China's long-term objectives.

The success of this strategy ultimately depends on the inner strength of Tibetans to maintain cultural and linguistic transmission despite systemic pressures, as well as China's ability to address challenges posed by climate change and the practical difficulties of implementing such ambitious transformation plans in Tibet's unique geographical context.



Crowds of Chinese flock to the Sumtseling temple in Gyalthang (ShangriLa), in Dechen, Yunnan, a hotspot for domestic tourism. The temple is a site of worship of Shugden, an anti-Dalai Lama sect aligned with the CCP, and adorned with images of the Chinese Panchen. Photo courtesy of Vera Hue.



# RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Governments should seek to support the continuation of a genuine autonomy for Tibet, consistent with a more coherent and robust defence of basic rights and values that is essential for diplomacy with Beijing, particularly after events in Hong Kong since 2020. This would be in keeping with the recent US Congress Resolve Tibet Act, which challenges the PRC's historical claims to Tibet, and would support India's resistance to Beijing's aggressive posture in the Himalaya.

In a paper underlining the importance of protecting Tibet from the assimilationist push, the Council on Geostrategy<sup>29</sup> made the following recommendations to China:

- Reverse its policy of requiring all Tibetans to study in Chinese-medium schools and kindergartens and to provide Tibetan-medium education as an option in all Tibetan schools and kindergartens;
- Hold substantive talks immediately with the Dalai Lama and his representatives without preconditions to resolve his concerns about the preservation of Tibetan culture and meaningful autonomy in Tibet;
- Allow residents of the TAR the same rights as Chinese citizens in access to passports and thus to foreign travel;
- End all practices that involve pressure on Tibetans to relocate, or change their livelihood against their will;
- End the ban on any increase in the number of Tibetans who become monks or nuns and on all requirements on them to denounce the Dalai Lama and to preach political dogma or ideology on behalf of the CCP;
- Call on the PRC to end the ban on government employees, students, school children and others in Tibet from practising religion, visiting religious sites, or having religious objects in their homes;
- End the ban on images of, worship of, and religious publications by of the Dalai Lama and to cease all public denigration of him by the state;

- End all practices that mandate or pressurise Tibetans to 'mingle' with people of other ethnicities, including pressure on them to intermarry;
- Allow foreign tourists, scientists, diplomats and journalists the same access to Tibet as to the rest of the PRC, except where necessary to prevent environmental damage;
- Call on the international community to reject the PRC's claims to have authority over the identification of lamas and endorse the sole right of each religious community to identify such lamas;
- Recognise the exile administration as an essential party to any talks or discussions about Tibet and hold talks with its representatives accordingly; and,
- Provide solid and consistent diplomatic support for democratic nations such as Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia, who face acute pressure from Beijing over Tibet-related issues.



A Chinese tourist poses in colourful Tibetan robe next to the home of the Seventh Dalai Lama in Lithang (Chinese: Litang), Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, the Tibetan area of Kham. Chinese state media publicized efforts to protect this historical site, describing it as a “major measure” taken to protect Tibetan culture and promote tourism by the Chinese government.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Tibet 2040: 4 Scenarios on the Future of Tibet', Conference report, 18 December 2024, <https://future-of-tibet.org/en/conference-report-tibet-2040-4-scenarios-on-the-future-of-tibet/>

<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping, 'Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects', Political Report at the 20th National People's Congress, Xinhua, 25 October 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See James Leibold, 'Toward A Second Generation of Ethnic Policies?', China Brief Volume: 12 Issue: 13, 6 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ma Rong, 'Reflections on the debate on China's ethnic policy: my reform proposals and their critics', Asian Ethnicity, 15:2 (2014) and 第二胡鞍钢 胡联合 [Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe], '代民族政策: 促进民族交融一体和繁荣一体' [The second generation of ethnic policies: Promoting ethnic integration and prosperity], 北京大学 [Peking University], 11/05/2018, <http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/> (checked: 14/01/2025). The assimilationist turn in Tibet under the Xi Jinping Era' by Matthew Akester, Council on Geostrategy, UK Observatory, Primer No. 2025/02 January 2025, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/01/No.-2025-02-The-assimilationist-turn-in-Tibet-policy-in-the-Xi-Jinping-era.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> James Leibold, 'A family divided: the CCP's ethnic work conference', The Jamestown Foundation, 07/11/2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/a-family-divided-the-ccps-central-ethnic-work-conference/> (checked: 14/01/2025) and 'China's Communist Party Formally Embraces Assimilationist Approach to Ethnic Minorities', Wall Street Journal, 08/10/2024, <https://www.wsj.com/> (checked: 14/01/2025). Council on Geostrategy as above.

<sup>6</sup> Xinhua, 29 August 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-08/29/c\\_1126428221.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-08/29/c_1126428221.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Global Times, 30 August 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199356.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Official education website news, 15 October 2024, [https://www.cuc.edu.cn/news/\\_t114/2024/1015/c1976a244072/pagem.psp](https://www.cuc.edu.cn/news/_t114/2024/1015/c1976a244072/pagem.psp) - video intro - [https://www.gxbhxww.cn/content/2024-12/03/content\\_50715.html](https://www.gxbhxww.cn/content/2024-12/03/content_50715.html)

<sup>9</sup> Video at [https://www.gxbhxww.cn/content/2024-12/03/content\\_50715.html](https://www.gxbhxww.cn/content/2024-12/03/content_50715.html), posted 3 December 2024

<sup>10</sup> Official education website, 15 October 2020, [https://www.cuc.edu.cn/news/\\_t114/2024/1015/c1976a244072/pagem.psp](https://www.cuc.edu.cn/news/_t114/2024/1015/c1976a244072/pagem.psp)

<sup>11</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, 'China's control state in Lhasa', <https://savetibet.org/chinas-control-state-in-lhasa/>

<sup>12</sup> The railway connects ShangriLa (Gyalthang), with Lijiang Old Town, Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Tiger Leaping Gorge. China Daily, 27 November 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202311/27/WS6563e369a31090682a5f0220.html>

<sup>13</sup> 'Recreational value of glacier tourism resources: A travel cost analysis for Yulong Snow Mountain', Lingling Yuan and

Yang Shijin in the Journal of Mountain Science at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326321158\\_Recreational\\_value\\_of\\_glacier\\_tourism\\_resources\\_A\\_travel\\_cost\\_analysis\\_for\\_Yulong\\_Snow\\_Mountain](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326321158_Recreational_value_of_glacier_tourism_resources_A_travel_cost_analysis_for_Yulong_Snow_Mountain)

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Tibetan refugee conducted by Tibet Watch in July 2023 <https://tibetwatch.org/from-school-to-monastery-from-monastery-to-exile-in-india/>; A rare eyewitness account of a Tibetan monk expelled from a monastery in eastern Tibet obtained by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, published on 28 May 2018,

<sup>15</sup> 'Hundreds of Tibetans ordered to immediately return from pilgrimage sites', Tibet Watch, 4 January 2019, <https://tibetwatch.org/hundreds-of-tibetans-ordered-to-immediately-return-from-pilgrimage-sites/?hilite=pilgrimage>

<sup>16</sup> 'Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds: China's forced relocation of rural Tibetans', Human Rights Watch, 21 May 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>

<sup>17</sup> "A scientific revolution has quietly gathered momentum," states a report by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. "Wherever there are pastoralists, there is now a fresh understanding that, far from being to blame for desertification, there are skilful stewards of drylands whose willingness to maintain mobility enables them to live productively and in environmentally sustainable ways from uncertain, unpredictable climates. In China, the biggest grassland country in the world, there are now Chinese scientists speaking up at every opportunity for the new paradigm, explaining how the old paradigm, of sedentarising nomads, has caused only perverse, unintended outcomes, chiefly the land degradation that is blamed on ignorant, uncaring, selfish nomads." Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy report, 'Wasted Lives: China's Campaign to End Tibetan Nomadic Lifeways', <https://tchrd.org/wasted-lives-new-report-offer-fresh-insights-on-travails-of-tibetan-nomads/>

<sup>18</sup> According to a professor of ethnology who studied at Qinghai Minzu university, "For the younger cohort, the urban is characterised not by public infrastructure but rather by non-agricultural labour, spaces that give them freedom, availability of amenities such as shops, bars, malls, and movie theatres, and non-agricultural employment opportunities. Tibetan youth describe their villages as boring and a place of narrow-minded people. In contrast, cities are understood as progressive, developed centres, and thus modern. Young Tibetans' perception of rural/urban and village/city dichotomies reflect state discourse of quality or suzhi. People who reside in cities, Han Chinese areas, and economically advanced places are understood to have higher suzhi than those living in the villages, minority areas, and other 'underdeveloped' backward regions. During our casual chat, when I asked what they like most in Xining, rang dbang (freedom) is what both mentioned first." Dorje Tashi (Duojie Zhaxi), <https://www.colorado.edu/tibethimalayainitiative/dorje-tashi>, cited by Gabriel Lafitte in his future of Tibet blog, <https://rukor.org/future-of-tibet/>

<sup>19</sup> Xinhua, 30 July 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230730/e91543edf7da4d8588eb13ad895711da/c.html#:~:text=During%20the%20Sichuan%20tour%2C%20Xi,system%20known%20as%20%22Shudao.%22>



<sup>20</sup> Website of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, November 30, 2018, 'World's hardest power grid project operates in Tibet', [http://en.sasac.gov.cn/2018/11/30/c\\_676.htm](http://en.sasac.gov.cn/2018/11/30/c_676.htm)

<sup>21</sup> During Xi Jinping's first visit to central Tibet in July 2021, he inspected the Lhasa-Nyingtri section of the railway which had started operating since the month before; 'Xi inspects Tibet first time in Party's country's history,' Global Times, 23 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1229449.shtml>

<sup>22</sup> Turquoise Roof and Tibet Watch briefing, 13 November 2024, <https://turquoiseroof.org/the-risks-of-chinas-dangerous-dam-building-in-tibet-the-impacts-of-chinas-move-upstream-on-the-machu-yellow-river/>

<sup>23</sup> A previous report by Turquoise Roof and Tibet Watch provided a 3D map illustrating a region in Tibet where renewables coexist with coal infrastructure. While China can point to its solar and hydro projects in Tibet to signal a green transition, the smart grid is currently orientated to fossil fuels, which may reveal a slower, less substantial shift than these projects imply. Although hydroelectric power is technically renewable, the large-scale hydropower projects underway in Tibet have complex environmental and social impacts, including ecosystem disruption and displacement of communities. Map at: <https://turquoiseroof.org/chinas-accelerated-energy-infrastructure-construction-in-tibetan-areas-of-the-ma-chu-upper-yellow-river/>

<sup>24</sup> 'Saving Yaks from Slaughter Criminalised by China', accessed 18 August 2020, <https://www.freetibet.org/newsmedia/na/saving-yaks-slaughter-criminalised-china>. Also see International Campaign for Tibet with Gabriel Lafitte, <https://savetibet.org/growing-anti-slaughter-movement-against-chinese-commercial-slaughterhouses-in-tibet/#2v>

<sup>25</sup> Turquoise Roof briefing, 'Tibet: A new frontline in the white goldrush', 1 November 2023, [https://turquoiseroof.org/white\\_gold\\_rush\\_in\\_tibet/](https://turquoiseroof.org/white_gold_rush_in_tibet/)

<sup>26</sup> Summarised in Turquoise Roof/Tibet Watch report, 'Occupying Tibet's Rivers: China's hydropower battlefield in Tibet', 21 May 2024,

<sup>27</sup> Dr Lan Cuo was speaking at a hybrid event on 22 February hosted by Columbia University together with Dr Brendan M Buckley

<sup>28</sup> Gabriel Lafitte posted his first blog on the topic on 28 January 2025 at: <https://rukor.org/chasing-phantoms/>

<sup>29</sup> 'The assimilationist turn in Tibet under the Xi Jinping Era' by Matthew Akester, Council on Geostrategy, UK Observatory, Primer No. 2025/02 January 2025, [https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/01/No.-2025\\_02-The-assimilationist-turn-in-Tibet-policy-in-the-Xi-Jinping-era.pdf](https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/01/No.-2025_02-The-assimilationist-turn-in-Tibet-policy-in-the-Xi-Jinping-era.pdf)



Chinese tourists pose in Tibetan clothing for pictures in ShangriLa (Gyalthang), Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a county-level city that China named to attract tourists after the mythical land depicted in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.  
Image courtesy of a recent visitor to Tibet

