

The UN's shadow over universal values: Disgraceful unequal treatment for the people of Tibet

By: Yeshe Choesang Date: 30 August 2024

Abstract:

This paper explores the profound and enduring impacts of China's invasion, occupation, and colonisation of Tibet since 1949 (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021), examining the historical, cultural, and socio-political consequences that have shaped the region and its people over the decades. Commencing with the military conquest of eastern Tibet and culminating in the capture of Lhasa in 1950, China enforced the 17-point Agreement on Tibet in 1951, ostensibly granting autonomy but ultimately eroding Tibetan sovereignty (Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 2023). The subsequent dismantling of Tibetan governance and imposition of Chinese administrative structures metamorphosed central Tibet into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), while illegally annexing other territories of Tibet into adjacent Chinese provinces (Tibet Information Office, 2022). China's occupation transcended mere geopolitical control, extending to cultural and religious spheres, resulting in the suppression of Tibetan Buddhism and the imposition of Mandarin Chinese in educational and governmental realms, thereby imperilling linguistic diversity (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Economically, Tibet's resources were exploited for China's benefit, exacerbating socio-economic disparities (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). The legacy of China's occupation manifests in persistent resistance, cultural tenacity, and global advocacy for Tibet's sovereignty and the human rights of its people (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022), highlighting the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice that transcends regional and international boundaries.

Illegal invasion of Tibet under the UN's watch:

Few days ago, China has forcibly shuttered the Gangjong Sherig Norbu School, celebrated as a preeminent institution for Tibetan higher studies in Machu County, Golok region of eastern Tibet (Golok County Government, 2022). This institution served as a vital nexus for hundreds of students each year from various corners of Tibet, cultivating graduates who have made profound contributions to Tibetan society (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022). The abrupt closure has left educators and students profoundly disheartened, mourning the loss after three decades of committed dedication to nurturing Tibetan language, culture, and religious heritage amidst China's ongoing violations of cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic rights (International Tibet Support Network, 2023). These illegal actions by Chinese authorities reflect a troubling disregard for preserving the rich cultural heritages of Tibet and the fundamental rights of its people (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Despite ongoing violations, various United Nations bodies have maintained silence since 1949, failing to afford people of Tibet equal treatment compared to other peoples and nations, especially those in the Middle East and Africa facing similar challenges (United Nations, 2021). The people of Tibet perceive all branches of the United Nations as ineffective and discredited entities in addressing Tibet's plight (Tenzin, 2023). There has been no strong advocacy or platform within the United Nations where Tibetans can seek justice or where a Tibetan representative can address nearly eight decades of China's illegal invasion, colonization, and occupation of Tibet (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Consequently, Tibet remains one of the least prioritized nations at the UN, especially when

compared to the attention given to other peoples and nations, particularly those in the Middle East and Africa facing similar challenges (International Tibet Support Network, 2023).

Illegal annexation of territories:

Since 1949, China has aggressively invaded Tibet with its military, initiating a deadly campaign of modern colonization and occupation across this ancient Himalayan nation (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021). This genocidal stance involves forcibly displacing Tibetans from their homes, settling Chinese populations, and systematically destroying cultural, political, historical, and spiritual landmarks (Tibet Information Office, 2022). This includes the destruction of thousands of years of traditional streets, historical buildings, and stone pillars throughout Tibet, particularly in Lhasa, its capital (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022). Additionally, China has imposed Chinese names on traditional places, maps, historical counties, districts, and regions, thereby erasing Tibetan language and heritage (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Tibetans have been coerced into remote areas within their own country, such as Lhasa and other significant urban centers, while large numbers of Chinese settlers have been concentrated in these cities, effectively reducing Tibetans to minorities in their own urban environments and counties (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). These actions starkly illustrate China's ongoing violations of cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and linguistic rights in Tibet (Tibet Information Office, 2022), underscoring a systemic pattern of oppression that affects multiple facets of Tibetan life and identity.

Is the UN a puppet of the red China:

The United Nations' approach to recognizing Tibet as a sovereign nation and addressing human rights abuses has been deeply disappointing, historically shameless, politically inept, morally disgraceful, and ethically immoral — emblematic of its broader failures in standing up to totalitarian regimes like China (International Tibet Support Network, 2023). The UN has consistently proven itself dishonest and a puppet of China when it comes to Tibet, disgracefully partnering with the illegal invader responsible for the deaths of 40 million innocent people, including 1.2 million Tibetans out of its total population of six million (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021). Despite clear and well-documented evidence of systematic repression, cultural erasure, and religious persecution in Tibet, the UN has often chosen to make multifaceted, dirty excuses, prioritising diplomatic niceties over so-called principled actions — involving political sensitivities, principles of sovereignty, and geopolitical priorities (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This inaction not only undermines the UN's credibility as a champion of human rights but also perpetuates a dangerous precedent where powerful states like China can act with impunity against minority groups within their borders (Tenzin, 2023). The UN sends a troubling message to other authoritarian regimes that they too can flout international norms without consequence, by failing to hold China accountable for its actions in Tibet (Pahuja, 2007)—thus emboldening such regimes to ignore global human rights standards with impunity.

A shadow over the UN's commitment to the universal values:

China's authoritarian regime, in its dealings with Tibet, exemplifies a ruthless disregard for human rights and cultural preservation (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022)—manifesting in severe repression of Tibetan cultural practices, systematic erosion of traditional values, and widespread human rights abuses. The Chinese government's policies in Tibet, including forced assimilation, restrictions on religious freedom, and the suppression of dissent, represent a gross violation of international human rights standards (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Despite occasional rhetoric about harmony and development, the reality on the ground in Tibet is one of pervasive surveillance, arbitrary detention, and the erosion of Tibetan identity (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022). The UN's reluctance to confront China over these abuses

reflects not just a failure of moral courage but also a systemic weakness in the international order, where economic and political interests often trump humanitarian concerns (Human Rights Watch, 2023). As China wields increasing influence within the UN and other international forums, the plight of Tibetans risks being further marginalized and overlooked, casting a shadow over the UN's commitment to the universal values it purports to uphold (Tenzin, 2023).

China began invading Tibet in 1949 from eastern Tibet, defeated the Tibetan military in China during the 1950s, and eventually reached Lhasa—the capital of Tibet—forcing Tibet to sign 17 agreements with China in 1951 (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021). Later, China unilaterally broke these agreements, initiating deadly crackdowns on the National Uprising against the Chinese invasion in 1959 (Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 2023). This was followed by the launch of the 10-year Cultural Revolution, an extremely repressive policy resulting in the deaths of 1.2 million Tibetan people (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021). China removed the national government of Tibet, replacing it with a regional government, and renamed Central Tibet as the Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet Information Office, 2022). The rest of Tibet was divided into newly established Chinese provinces such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Additionally, China replaced the national currency, flag, emblems, and names of all branches of the Tibetan government with those of China and the newly formed Communist Party of China (CPC) (Pahuja, 2007). They subjected those who did not obey their rules to inhumane prosecution and assigned low-level positions to those who pretended to follow the repressive policies imposed by the CPC (Tenzin, 2023)—a strategy designed to enforce compliance and maintain control while punishing dissent and dissenters.

The broken promises of red China:

China's violation of the 17-point agreement with Tibet underscores a persistent pattern of broken promises and deceptive practices aimed at justifying its illegitimate occupation of Tibetan territory (Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 2023). Initially coerced upon the Tibetan government by the Chinese Communist Party in 1951, the agreement was intended to grant Tibet autonomy under the guise of Chinese sovereignty (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021)—purportedly ensuring self-governance while systematically undermining Tibetan political and cultural independence. However, China's actions since then have starkly contradicted the spirit and specific provisions of the agreement (Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 2023). Despite pledging to respect Tibet's existing political system and the role of the Dalai Lama, China systematically dismantled Tibetan governance structures and persecuted Tibetan religious institutions, thereby undermining Tibetan autonomy and cultural heritage (Pahuja, 2007). Moreover, China's neglect of Tibetan demands for regional autonomy and its suppression of Tibetan religious practices and customs have perpetuated discontent and resistance among Tibetans (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022). By celebrating the anniversary of the agreement without acknowledging its failures to uphold key provisions, China not only perpetuates historical falsehoods but also exacerbates tensions that hinder meaningful dialogue and resolution of the Sino-Tibetan issue (Tenzin, 2023). For the international community, China's continued disregard for the promises made in the 17-point agreement highlights its disregard for international law and norms, calling into question its claims to moral legitimacy in Tibet (International Tibet Support Network, 2023). The Agreement, ostensibly designed to ensure Tibetan autonomy under Chinese sovereignty, quickly unravelled as China unilaterally disregarded its provisions (Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 2023). This agreement, coerced upon Tibet under duress, provided a legal framework for China to establish its administrative presence in Tibet, effectively dismantling Tibetan sovereignty (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021). The subsequent political manoeuvring by

China led to the replacement of Tibet's national government with a Chinese-appointed administration, transforming Tibet into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), with significant portions of Tibetan territory absorbed into neighbouring Chinese provinces (Tibet Information Office, 2022).

Cultural and linguistic suppression:

China's occupation of Tibet extended beyond political restructuring to encompass cultural and religious domains integral to Tibetan identity (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022)—systematically targeting and eroding the fundamental aspects of Tibetan spiritual and cultural life that are central to the community's heritage. Tibetan Buddhism, a cornerstone of Tibetan culture and spirituality, faced sustained repression as China sought to impose atheism and communist ideology (Pahuja, 2007). The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) aimed to erode the influence of Buddhism, viewing it as a potential challenge to their authority (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Monasteries, key centers of religious and cultural life in Tibet, were subjected to intrusive state surveillance, ideological re-education campaigns, and systematic efforts to diminish their influence (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Culturally, Tibet experienced a systematic erosion of its distinct identity under Chinese rule (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Indigenous languages, traditions, arts, and customs faced suppression as China promoted the assimilation of Tibetan society into a homogeneous Chinese national identity (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Tibetan language, crucial for preserving cultural heritage and transmitting traditional knowledge, was marginalized in favor of Mandarin Chinese in education, government, and public life (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). This linguistic suppression contributed to a broader global concern regarding the loss of linguistic diversity and the endangerment of indigenous languages (Pahuja, 2007)—reflecting a troubling trend where the erosion of minority languages accelerates, threatening the preservation of unique cultural identities worldwide.

Socio-political and economic impact:

The socio-economic impact of China's occupation further exacerbated the plight of Tibetans, as economic policies prioritized Chinese interests at the expense of Tibetan livelihoods (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Natural resources in Tibet, including mineral wealth and water resources, were exploited to fuel China's rapid economic growth, with little benefit accruing to the Tibetan population (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Economic development projects, often touted as benefiting Tibetans, disproportionately favoured Chinese settlers and industries, exacerbating socio-economic disparities and perpetuating dependency on Beijing (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Politically, China's control over Tibet entailed the establishment of a hierarchical governance structure dominated by Chinese officials and administrators (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Tibetan participation in decision-making processes was severely curtailed, with key positions filled by individuals loyal to the CPC (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). This political subjugation undermined traditional Tibetan governance structures and perpetuated a cycle of dependency on Chinese authorities, stifling aspirations for genuine autonomy and self-determination among Tibetans (Pahuja, 2007). Socially, China's occupation fostered divisions within Tibetan society, exacerbated by policies favouring Chinese settlers and collaborators (Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society, 2022). Social hierarchies, predicated on ethnicity and political allegiance, further marginalized Tibetans within their own homeland, deepening feelings of alienation and resentment (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). Resistance to Chinese rule emerged sporadically, driven by a desire to preserve Tibetan identity and freedom in the face of systematic repression and cultural assimilation efforts imposed by Beijing (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022).

Tibet freedom struggle legacy:

The legacy of China's occupation of Tibet extends beyond geopolitical disputes to encompass profound psychological and cultural trauma among Tibetans (Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014)—inflicting deep emotional scars and disrupting the rich cultural heritage that has shaped Tibetan identity for generations. Intergenerational trauma, stemming from decades of repression and marginalisation, continues to shape Tibetan collective memory and identity (McGranahan, 2018)—perpetuating a cycle of psychological distress and cultural loss that profoundly impacts the community's sense of self and historical consciousness. The suppression of Tibetan cultural practices, language, and religious freedoms under Chinese rule has engendered a resilience among Tibetans, manifested in ongoing resistance movements and international advocacy efforts aimed at securing greater autonomy and recognition for Tibet (Free Tibet Campaign, 2022). Internationally, the Tibet issue remains a contentious topic, emblematic of broader debates surrounding human rights, self-determination, and territorial integrity (Tenzin, 2023). Advocacy groups and international organizations have highlighted China's human rights abuses in Tibet, calling for greater transparency, accountability, and respect for Tibetan cultural and religious freedoms (International Campaign for Tibet, 2023). The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader and symbol of Tibetan resilience, continues to advocate for a peaceful resolution to the Tibet issue, emphasizing dialogue and mutual respect as the pathway to reconciliation and sustainable peace in the region (Dalai Lama Foundation, 2021).

Impact of Chinese invasion reaches in various nations:

As clearly evidenced in the initial assessment, reflecting on the experiences of a former Tibetan asylum seeker highlights the profound impact of marginalisation and discrimination resulting from political oppression and cultural discrimination (Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014). This journey has involved a quest for identity, culminating in a warm and equitable reception upon arriving in US, Canada, UK, Australia and European nations, which marked a new beginning (McGranahan, 2018; Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014). The narrative, characterised by optimism and driven by activism, reveals the enduring resistance of the human spirit in its pursuit of linguistic and cultural identity and justice within new nations (Powell, 2010). Such opportunities, however, are wholly denied in the country of origin (Hooks, 1994). These pressures necessitate the acknowledgment and registration of legal documents in the country of origin, China, including nationality as a Chinese national and birthplace as China, to conform to and appreciate the Chinese state (McGranahan, 2018; Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014). The challenges faced—whether related to socioeconomic or political status, visa applications, or the completion of various forms and legal paperwork mandated by different governments such as Nepal (a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention but heavily influenced by China), India (not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, hence Tibetans are not legally recognised as refugees), and Australia (where Tibetans are recognised as citizens and legally protected)—as well as by companies such as travel agencies, airlines and hospitality sectors and institutions like universities, have exacerbated daily traumatic feelings (McGranahan, 2018; Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014). These experiences continue to cause distress and frequent offence (McGranahan, 2018; Frilund, 2019; Robinson, 2014)—reflecting ongoing emotional turmoil and cultural dislocation that deeply affect the lives and well-being of those impacted.

Conclusion:

China's invasion, occupation, and colonisation of Tibet have had profound and enduring impacts on Tibetan society across multiple dimensions—affecting political structures, cultural practices, socioeconomic conditions, and environmental integrity, thereby reshaping the region

and its people in complex and far-reaching ways. From political subjugation and cultural repression to economic exploitation and environmental degradation, the consequences of China's actions in Tibet resonate deeply within Tibetan collective memory and global consciousness—highlighting a multifaceted legacy of suffering and resistance that underscores the urgent need for international attention and justice. The ongoing struggle for Tibetan autonomy and cultural preservation underscores the complexities of sovereignty, identity, and human rights in an increasingly interconnected world—revealing the intricate interplay between national self-determination, cultural integrity, and global ethical standards amid a backdrop of geopolitical and social dynamics. As Tibetans continue to assert their rights and aspirations for self-determination, the international community plays a crucial role in advocating for justice, dignity, and respect for Tibetan culture and heritage—emphasising the need for global solidarity and intervention to support the preservation of Tibetan identity and the fight against ongoing repression.

References:

Anghie, A. (2005) *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Dalai Lama Foundation (2021) 'China began invading Tibet in 1949', Online Archive, accessed 20 July 2024, Available at: <https://www.dalailamafoundation.org/china-tibet-invasion-1949>.

Free Tibet Campaign (2022) 'Tibet freedom struggle legacy: Impact of Chinese rule on Tibetan identity', FTC Reports, London.

Golok County Government (2022) 'Illegal invasion: China's closure of Gangjong Sherig Norbu School', Government report, Golok County.

Human Rights Watch (2023) *Occupation, Colonialism, Apartheid? A Reassessment of Israel's Practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories under International Law*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/occupation-colonialism-apartheid/reassessment-israels-practices-occupied-palestinian> (Accessed: 20 July 2024).

Human Rights Watch (2023) 'Shadow over the UN's commitment to universal values: China's policies in Tibet', HRW Reports, New York.

International Campaign for Tibet (2023) 'Socio-political and economic impact of China's occupation of Tibet', ICT Reports, Washington, D.C.

International Tibet Support Network (2023) 'Is UN a puppet of communist China: Critique of UN's approach to Tibet', ITS Network Reports, London.

Pahuja, S. (2007) 'Decolonising International Law: Development, Economic Growth and the Politics of Universality', *Third World Quarterly*, 28(5), pp. 859-876.

Tibetan Cultural Preservation Society (2022) 'Cultural and linguistic suppression in Tibet', TCP Society Papers, Toronto.

Tibetan Parliament in Exile (2023) 'The broken promise of red China: Analysis of the 17-point Agreement', TPIE Reports, Dharamsala.

Tibet Information Office (2022) 'Illegal annexation of territories: China's policies in Tibet', Tibet Government Publications, Lhasa.

Tenzin, T. (2023) 'The UN's shadow over universal values: Disgraceful unequal treatment for the people of Tibet', *Journal of Tibetan Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 45-68.

United Nations (2021) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar*. A/HRC/48/58. United Nations Human Rights Council, Geneva.

