

Tibet Facts

10 facts about Tibet (Updated March 2013)

Below are 10 key facts that give background and context to the Tibet issue and the position of Tibet and its people today.

1. China's invasion of Tibet began in 1950, in part to expand its territory and gain control over Tibet's natural resources. China's occupation has resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans, the destruction of over 6,000 monasteries, nunneries and temples, and the imprisonment and torture of thousands of Tibetans.
2. The Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet in 1959 and eventually settled in Dharamsala, India. He was followed by over 100,000 Tibetans and established the Tibetan government in exile, which has evolved into a democratically elected body. In 1989 the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his steadfast dedication to non-violence and in 2007 he received the highest US civilian honour, the Congressional Gold Medal. In 2011 the Dalai Lama relinquished his political duties, transferring the status of political leader to the Sikyong (Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile).
3. Before occupation, Tibet was a nation with an established sovereign government, currency, postal system, language, legal system and culture. Prior to 1950, the Tibetan government signed treaties with foreign nations, including the UK. The Chinese government claims Tibet has always been part of China, yet its invasion in 1950 resembled the same imperialist aggression that it accuses other powers of exhibiting.
4. China refers to Tibet as the 'Tibet Autonomous Region' (TAR). However, the TAR only comprises a small part of traditional Tibet: U-Tsang and the western area of the Kham region. The region of Amdo and the rest of Kham were incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. Traditional Tibet has an area roughly equal to that of western Europe.
5. Fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, assembly and religion, all internationally accepted within the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, are routinely violated in order to suppress the Tibetan way of life and prevent opposition to the occupation. Tibetans are frequently arrested on an arbitrary basis. There are currently over 800 known political prisoners in Tibet, many of whom are subject to systematic torture.
6. The Chinese government increasingly encourages Han Chinese to migrate to Tibet by offering high wages and other inducements. This policy is not only making Tibetans a minority in their own country, but is threatening their very survival. Each year, hundreds of Tibetans still choose to flee from Tibet, making the hazardous journey over the Himalayas into exile.
7. Tibet is the source of five of Asia's largest rivers, providing water for over one billion people. Tibet is known as the world's "Third Pole" as, after the North and South Poles, it holds the third largest quantity of glacially stored water. Currently the Tibetan plateau is experiencing global warming at double the rate of the rest of the world. Its environment is endangered by China's policies of nuclear waste dumping in the '90s and ongoing strip-mining, extensive deforestation and the damming and diverting of rivers.
8. China has invested millions of Yuan in developing Tibet's infrastructure, without the consent of the Tibetan people. The investments mainly benefit Han Chinese migrants and Chinese state-owned companies and contribute to the economic marginalisation of Tibetans. The infrastructure is being developed to support heavy militarisation, allowing China to maintain Tibet as a police state, and to increase resource extraction, allowing China to further plunder Tibet's vast supply of natural resources. Tellingly, the Chinese name for Tibet, "Xizang", translates as "Western Treasure House".

9. The traditional Tibetan nomadic way of life is being dangerously threatened by the Chinese government's aggressive policy of re-settling nomads in inappropriate permanent new roadside estates, stripping them of any means of livelihood. This further marginalises Tibetans and engenders hopelessness and despair. Little is spent on education, healthcare or retraining the thousands of Tibetans whose livelihoods have been lost.

10. The United Nations and the international community have done little to address the core issue of China's illegal occupation of Tibet. Because China represents an enormous market and cheap labour force, governments are reluctant to take substantive measures. Governments, including the British government, are using backdoor diplomacy and 'constructive dialogues' on human rights instead of applying pressure on China. These policies have failed to secure any improvements in Tibet or China. Governments must be encouraged to stand firm on their commitments on human rights and ensure China is held to account.

Other useful background facts

- Tibet covers an area the size of Western Europe and is the world's highest plateau.
- Tibet's culture is magnificent and unique. Until 1950 Tibet retained that ancient culture and was revered by Buddhists throughout the world.
- Tibetans (6 million) are now outnumbered by Chinese (7.5 million) within Tibet.
- It is believed that around one million Tibetans have died as a result of Chinese occupation, through imprisonment, torture and executions and fleeing persecution.
- Over 100,000 Tibetans have fled their country, risking their lives, for uncertain lives as refugees in India, Nepal and elsewhere.
- There are between a quarter and half a million of occupying Chinese troops or security police stationed in Tibet.
- China currently permits no news media in Tibet. Tibetans in Tibet are liable to interrogation, imprisonment and torture for having unofficial contact with foreigners.
- China has looted Tibet's enormous mineral wealth, natural resources and priceless art treasures, transporting them back to China to fuel its own economic growth.
- Tibet's unique culture and Buddhist religion have been systematically suppressed, with the destruction of over 6,000 monasteries and public buildings.
- China has developed limited tourism in parts of Tibet where some rebuilding has taken place. Some monks have been allowed to return to plundered monasteries but their numbers and activities are closely controlled by the Chinese.
- An Apartheid system is in place. Following mass migration of Chinese into Tibet, the economy is now dominated by these immigrants who hold all the best jobs. Employment prospects for Tibetans are virtually nonexistent.
- Coercive birth control policies, including enforced abortion and sterilisation, are completing the policies of wiping out Tibet's identity for ever.

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