

## BALANCING DEVELOPMENT AND HERITAGE AMID CLIMATE CRISES IN TIBET

by  
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The Tibetan Plateau, renowned for its high mountains and extensive plateaus, is not only a geographical and natural wonder but also a region shaped by dynamic cultural, political, and social transformations. For China, Tibet's plentiful natural resources are exploited to support its "national development". Despite warnings about the environmental impacts, China continues to invest in large-scale development projects, such as the recently approved construction of the [world's largest hydropower dam](#).

In addition to the environmental degradation caused by such large-scale projects, Tibet's cultural heritage, which is deeply intertwined with its natural landscape, faces the growing risk of erosion. One of the potential consequences of implementing these projects is the increased vulnerability of the region to natural disasters, such as the [earthquake that struck Tingri](#) on January 7, 2025, which resulted not only in deaths but also in ["problems" at some hydropower dams](#). This catastrophe highlights the delicate balance between development and the preservation of both the environment and cultural heritage in the region. Although there are concerns over environmental and cultural impacts, China sees no reason to change its policies. Consequently, Tibet's future hangs in the balance, caught between modern development and the preservation of its heritage.

### China's Green Ambitions

When looking at global environmental strategies, it becomes evident that different regions adopt diverse methods based on their economic, political, and cultural priorities. China's strategy for environmental protection contrasts sharply with European models, focusing more on economic growth and national development than long-term ecological balance. Under Xi Jinping, the focus has shifted from high-

speed to high-quality economic growth within the framework of "[ecological civilization](#)". This top-down model often prioritizes industrial expansion over local environmental concerns, especially in resource-rich regions like Tibet. Tibet, with its vast renewable energy resources and mineral wealth, plays a key role in [China's renewable energy development](#) and is referred to as the "Western Storehouse" (Xizang). Moreover, [Beijing's narrative](#) emphasizes the need to "modernize" Tibet to utilize its resources, framing initiatives as efforts to protect ecosystems while promoting sustainable development. Additionally, China's policies prioritize extractive practices under the appearance of "[green development](#)." This approach threatens Tibet's fragile ecosystem and poses risks not only to the region but also to the two billion people in Asia dependent on its rivers, with broader global climate implications.

China's approach to balancing economic development with environmental protection leans more toward state-driven priorities, serving broader goals of national integration and control over Tibet. The Communist Party of China (CCP) promotes [Tibet as a prosperous and harmonious region under Chinese governance](#), using figures like Tibetan social media star [Ding Zhen](#) (Tenzin Tsondu) to portray a narrative of environmental sustainability and economic growth. His image supports the idea that Tibet's traditional values align with China's policies, claiming both cultural and environmental preservation.

However, there is a discrepancy between the CCP's narrative and the reality: Regions like the Tibetan Plateau are facing environmental degradation and policies that endanger traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage. China's "green development" projects in Tibet go beyond environmental damage and cultural disruption; they may also contribute to seismic instability, as evidenced by the recent earthquake in the region. At this point it is noteworthy that when Tibetans recently came together to provide help to the earthquake victims, they were stopped by the police due to the CCP's ban on gatherings, leaving the victims entirely reliant on state support and suppressing the Buddhist

principle of aiding those in need. The Tibetan [activist Tenzin Yangzom](#) criticized the Chinese government's disregard for the safety and well-being of Tibetans, emphasizing the lack of concern for local populations.

### Tradition, Modernity, and Environment

As Tibet confronts “modernity”, its traditional identity, rooted in religion, language, and communal life, must navigate both preservation and reinvention within globalization and political change. Tibet's traditional livelihoods are closely tied to the land, with many cultural practices rooted in this connection. These livelihoods are threatened by China's policies promoting urbanization, infrastructure development, and land consolidation. Additionally, climate change exacerbates these issues by altering the landscape and making farming and herding increasingly difficult.

Historically, Tibetans practiced a sustainable way of life, relying on agriculture and nomadic herding. For millennia, they have maintained a close relationship with the natural environment, developing a deep understanding of how to manage their livestock in harmony with the grasslands and seasonal cycles that sustain them. Moreover, in Tibet, the landscape is deeply embedded in the cultural identity of the Tibetan people and religious practices, reflecting profound reverence for the mountains, rivers, and animals that sustain life. [Sacred mountains, rivers, and lakes are](#) considered the abodes of gods and spirits, playing central roles in the spiritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön.

Sacred places reflect the longstanding belief in deities inhabiting natural landscapes and the need to keep them content for daily activities. These practices are not just about survival but also play a crucial role in cultural identity, with specific rituals aligned to seasonal cycles and the health of the land. However, the ongoing climate crises, such as rising temperatures, droughts, and changes in monsoon patterns, are having a profound impact on Tibet's environment, which in turn affects religious practices. In response, besides [the Dalai Lama](#) various religious communities in Tibet have taken up

environmental activism, guided by religious views on the responsibility for ecological care. However, China sees no reason to change its policies, continuing to prioritize economic development and infrastructure expansion, often citing energy needs and national stability.

### Power, Profits, and Protests

First, rapid infrastructure development and resource extraction further multiply these challenges, fundamentally reshaping Tibet's physical and cultural landscape. [Infrastructure projects](#) such as roads, railroads, and airports have brought significant disruptions to Tibet's fragile ecosystems, threatening wildlife, drying up grasslands, polluting rivers, and displacing local populations through “environmental resettlement” or “ecological migration.” These [whole-village and individual household relocations](#), often framed as part of [China's national park initiatives on the Tibetan Plateau](#) as well as in the name of the “improvement of people's livelihood,” have raised concerns over their long-term environmental and social consequences. Many relocated individuals struggle to find suitable jobs and report low satisfaction with the relocation, which is largely due to false expectations set by officials. Thus, some [Tibetan activists](#) express concern that the large-scale relocation or displacement of Tibetan communities could ultimately lead to the eradication of Tibetan identity.

Second, the expansion of [mining activities](#), particularly for lithium and copper, poses serious risks to water quality, with government claims of environmental protection measures often criticized for their selective enforcement. The government keeps approving the expansion of mining activities in Tibet, even though mining is connected with high water contamination risks. This is more or less denied by state sources or selectively framed to serve their own interests. According to Chinese official sources, such as [Ecological Protection Law](#), the authorities regularly inspect the implementation of environmental protection measures as well as they suspend projects that do not meet environmental standards.



Meanwhile, Tibetans are silenced by Chinese military forces regarding mining protests, with daily announcements warning that opposition to mining is seen as opposition to the state. For instance, [a 29-year-old Tibetan activist](#), highlighting environmental exploitation by a Chinese company, faced censorship and subsequent imprisonment for his public appeal against illegal sand and gravel extraction. Accused of “disturbing social order,” his case underscores the harsh penalties for environmental advocacy under the guise of “provoking trouble.”

Third, the construction or planning of [193 hydroelectric dams](#) since 2000, which Tibet is increasingly known for due to its vast water resources, has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and threatened biodiversity, cultural sites, and the region’s climate stability. In addition to increased seismic activity, natural disasters such as landslides and floods are expected, while water quality is reduced, and aquatic life is disrupted. Moreover, dams also block the flow of soil, water, and nutrients, which are essential for supporting life in downstream countries. Additionally, the CCP ignores that the rivers affected by dam construction hold not only ecological but also significant cultural importance for Tibetans, as some are considered sacred, with their waters believed to have healing and purifying powers. While pilgrims perform rituals and offer prayers along the banks of these rivers to seek blessings and spiritual merit, China, however, consistently argues that [such projects are essential](#) for regional ecological preservation, renewable resource utilization, and the material development of local communities.

Meanwhile, Tibetans have strengthened their resistance due to the region’s religious and cultural significance, marked by the numerous [monasteries and prayer sites spread throughout the area, which are being submerged](#) as a result of the dam constructions. [Protests and appeals by local Tibetans](#) urging Beijing to halt the construction of hydropower stations were followed by arrests. However, despite frequent natural disasters, [China’s “water-industrial complex”](#) continues to push forward with plans for

hydropower dams in ecologically and politically sensitive regions of the plateau. CCP’s relentless drive for modernization not only deepens environmental damage but also accelerates the erosion of Tibet’s cultural identity, leading to a precarious future for both its natural and cultural heritage.

### **Tibet – Battleground for the Earth**

Tibet is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis that threatens both its cultural and ecological heritage. As a matter of fact, for Beijing, all the above mentioned “modernization” initiatives are central to its vision of sustainable development, framed as essential for utilizing Tibet’s natural resources to drive economic growth and meet the energy demands of a growing population while claiming to balance development with environmental protection. Protests against such projects are systematically suppressed.

International organizations and environmental activists, however, argue that China’s aggressive industrialization is the primary cause of Tibet’s environmental and cultural degradation. They assert that these projects not only endanger the region’s biodiversity but also contribute to the erosion of centuries-old traditions, with the rapid melting of glaciers and depletion of sacred lakes symbolizing the conflict between Tibetan cultural preservation and state-driven development. This tension underscores the struggle to maintain cultural identity and environmental sustainability. Thus, Tibet can be seen as a battleground – one where environmental crisis and cultural survival intersect in a high-stakes conflict, with both the region’s natural wonders and its people’s way of life hanging in the balance.

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