

Richard Gere Testimony for CECC Hearing

Human Rights in Tibet: Survival of a People

Introduction

For decades, the Chinese Communist Party's ethnic policies have been largely predicated on containment, denial, destruction, and assimilation. Repression has been most severe in Tibet- and in East Turkestan it should be noted as well- where CCP policies have included the separation of families, the prohibition of language, the destruction of religious sites and institutions, the collection of DNA and a pervasive surveillance system through which the denial of information or movement is implemented.

I obviously do not have to explain the threat of the Tibetan people's very existence to this Committee who likely knows decades of atrocities behind CCP's "ethnic policies" better than I do.

But briefly, in service to Beijing's long-standing agenda to sinicize Tibet and "manage" individual nationalities, the Chinese Communist Party's policies have been characterized by cruelty, collective violence and persecution.

The saddest truth is that the CCP's process of assimilation and erasure is all too often concealed by Beijing's intricate and powerful propaganda machine. Within China's digital prison, just like all authoritarian regimes, the Chinese government targets the very core attributes that define the continuity of a people. Specifically, the family unit, religious expression, cultural tradition, language, and environment.

Identifiable mechanisms, like arbitrary detention, forcible transfer, rape, torture, disappearance are all tools that have been well-documented throughout the course of Beijing's assimilation practices.

Xi Jinping's recent appointment of Pan Yue to the Central Committee is likely an indication that this aggressive assimilationism will not only continue but perhaps, intensify. And if the Beijing Chairman's recent visit to Moscow is any indicator or a "new era", every one of China's 55 ethnic groups- like Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongolians- are right to be afraid.

It does not have to be this way. As you know, the Dalai Lama has offered a pathway to resolution built on a dialogue process meant to identify a peaceful, stable resolution in Tibet which, grants Tibetans meaningful autonomy within the framework of the Chinese constitution.

It is obvious why a mutual agreement is crucial to Tibet's survival and to avoiding the eradication of the Tibetan people though it might be less clear to Beijing how this benefits China.

There are three key elements of benefit. First, it lends Beijing the legitimacy it so desperately seeks in Tibet. Second, it enables Beijing to reset its relationship with India and third, if

successfully implemented, a reciprocal agreement in Tibet removes- or lessens the international stigma associated with Beijing's human rights record. Ranging from acts of genocide, like those determined by the International Committee of Jurists in 1960 to present day criticism of Beijing's longstanding brutality in Tibet which has only intensified after the 2008 Tibetan Uprising which has been followed by years of self-immolation sacrifices by Tibetans in protest of the Chinese governments violent rule. I would ask the committee to remember Tsewang Norbu, a very popular Tibetan singer who self-immolated last year in Lhasa. Demonstrating a peaceful agreement in Tibet- which includes the rights of a child, the right to mother tongue, the freedom of movement and religious practice is a powerful step up for Beijing sending the entire world the right signal that the Chinese government is genuinely capable of addressing discord through dialogue, with reason and peaceable, human values, rather than by the demonstration of force and denial.

Two steps must be taken to help this happen. First, we must be clear about in the history that brought us to this point of the People's Republic of China in Tibet. Second, the United States, allies and the international community must speak with a unified voice on the need for Beijing and its Chairman to return to the negotiating table.

For the record, the Chinese Communist Party invaded Tibet without provocation of any kind in 1949-50. As the CCP consolidated control over the Tibetan "minority nationality"- which, obviously was not a "minority" in Tibet at the time, the CCP violated human rights standards and contravened its own policy promises to respect Tibetan institutions, Tibet's religion, and the Tibetan peoples' right to self-determination. Open resistance to the Communist's violent policies grew quickly which lead to the National Uprising in 1959 and the Dalai Lama harrowing escape to India, where he and many additional Tibetans sought refuge and thanks to the generosity of India, remain harbored where the Tibetan community has become a vibrant, beloved thread in India's pluralistic democracy.

During the next two decades, the denial and destruction of Tibetan culture, religion and language, arbitrary detentions and torture is estimated by the Tibetan government in exile, to have resulted in the deaths of 1.2 million Tibetans- or, one-fifth of the country's population.¹ Many more Tibetans languished in prisons and labor camps. More than 6,000 monasteries, temples, and culturally historic buildings were destroyed, their contents pillaged. Literally thousands of ancient Buddhist texts, critical to the legacy of Tibetan Buddhism, and the broader Buddhist community, were burned, looted, or lost in the zealotry of the cultural revolution. Tibetans were collectivized leading to unprecedented famine as the CCPs sought to so thoroughly erase identity or any resistance mounted.²

Other than specific methodologies- first honed in Tibet, now refined and in well-documented practice in East Turkestan, not much has changed but the pattern however, gives reason for grave concern that it increasingly expands to match the definition of crimes against humanity.

As the brazenness of meeting with comrade recently indicted by the ICC for war crimes under the diplomatic posture of defining a new world order might attest.

Religious Persecution

Despite being bound to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the ICCPR, the Child Rights Convention and other, Beijing has never demonstrated the standards defined within them in any concrete terms, which makes a mockery of its very vocal claim that China is committed to human rights and the rule of law.

Beijing's assault on Tibetan Buddhism has evolved since its invasion of Tibet and in recent years, exponentially so under Chairman Xi's rule. CCP policy has transitioned from total destruction of Tibetan religious institutions, gatherings and practices to one of insidious control, including eliminating core attributes of Tibetan Buddhism, while coopting Tibetan Buddhists' rights to determine their leaders.

Tibetans who peacefully oppose this are often detained, routinely tortured, permanently injured, or even killed. For the peaceful practice of their religion. Reinforcing this point, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern about "reports of systematic and massive destruction of religious sites such as mosques, monasteries, shrines, and cemeteries, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and in the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region."³

However, we must draw a line when the Chinese state require Tibetan Buddhist monks receive Communist State approval before reincarnating—a demand that is so grossly antithetical to Tibetan Buddhist precepts that it cannot be justified by flimsy or falsified claims of a Communist government professing atheism.

The most visible demonstration of Beijing's aggressive assertion of authority over selecting the next- the 15th Dalai Lama must be opposed and we must note- as a cautionary tale the first aggression by Beijing during the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama—literally kidnapping the child that had been identified at the Panchen Lama when he was six years old, propping a State-sponsored Lama into the Tibetan reincarnation's empty seat. Let us know this is the youngest political prisoner ever and that thirty years later no one knows where the real Panchen Lama is, or whether he is even still alive.

Destruction of Language

As we've learned from the Tibetan Action Institute's recent and critical research, which we are lucky to have, up to one million Tibetan children are currently and systematically being alienated from Tibetan language and culture in compulsory boarding schools.⁴ The Chinese government's educational policies separate children from their families- forcibly transferring the children into schools far from their parents. Children are taught in Mandarin as the CCP is keenly aware that mother tongue is a primary mode of cultural transmission, one of the most fundamental components of the continuity of a people's identity from one generation to the

next, affecting everything from access to arts, literature, song, and religious texts. They also know it is one of the last impasses for their control of Tibet and the Tibetan people.

Uprooting native language is particularly egregious in the case of Tibetan culture considering the role memorization and recitation plays in a rigorous monastic education system. If the CCP's program to sever the transmission of Tibetan language and culture to Tibetan youth proves successful, it will significantly advance the PRC's agenda to contain and assimilate a people.

In its Concluding Observations on the recent third periodic report of China, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights expressed concerns that "reports of the large-scale campaign to eradicate Tibetan culture and language, as well as the general undermining of the linguistic identity of ethnic minorities by the assimilation policy of the State party, known as Sinicization, including the coercive residential (boarding) school system imposed on Tibetan children."⁵

As we argue the risks and "freedom" associated with apps like Tik Tok, the CCPs vicious aim at the future of Tibetan children should send the world a distress signal of the systematic and often secret ruthlessness under which Beijing operates.

Forcible Population Transfer

I hope the Committee will also note the forcible population transfer of Nomads in Tibet. Having thrived for millennia herding and cultivating the vast and incredibly valuable Tibetan Plateau and acclimated to Tibet's unique climate, nomads are proven stewards of the land. Their culture is deeply tied to the environment's demands through a profound belief system that honors landscapes and all living beings. According to Chinese government media sources, at least 1.8 million nomads have been transferred into sedentary houses under Chinese government policies. This estimate is likely conservative. In 2013, Human Rights Watch⁶ reported that over two million Tibetans (two thirds of the entire population of the TAR) had been "rehoused" with hundreds of thousands of nomadic herders forced into "New Socialist Villages"⁷.

Tibetans are not compensated or guaranteed income or employment when resettled. To the contrary, they are often then coerced, or forced, into work programs that a U.N. Special Rapporteur reported may "...amount to contemporary forms of slavery including excessive surveillance, abusive living and working conditions, restriction of movement through internment, threats, physical and/or sexual violence and other inhuman or degrading treatment, some instances may amount to enslavement as a crime against humanity, meriting a further independent analysis."⁸

It is no secret that the Dalai Lama was the first Nobel Peace Prize winner recognized for environment efforts in addition to his advocacy for a peaceful resolution in Tibet and another demonstration of why he must be included in dialogue. In contrast to the Dalai Lama's longstanding wisdom on effective environmental policies, the Chinese government

systematically expels nomads from ancestral lands through forced migration transferring them into concentrated, sedentary dwellings.

Dispossessed of their way of life and ability to make a living, the result is tantamount to the ghettoization of Tibet].

Institutionalized Fear

The CCP has converted Tibet into a surveillance state combining more brutal oppressive techniques with a panopticon of technology that monitors the movements, phone calls, and internet habits of every citizen. Constant monitoring and information control, internet blackouts and intrusive electronic surveillance are now pervasive at all levels of society. Reminiscent of East German Stasi methods, families are encouraged to spy and report on each other, often through coercion or financial incentives.⁹ The most minor “offense” can lead to extreme retaliation, including imprisonment and torture.

A dangerous pattern of death due to torture² has been observed, including the recent deaths of 19-year-old monk Tenzin Nyima³ and 51-year-old tour guide Kunchok Jinpa⁴. We emphasize that in both cases, as with many others, an investigation into deaths in custody and a prosecution of those responsible for them was never undertaken by the Chinese authorities.

Another example is the recent case of Jigme Gyatso, a monk at Labrang monastery who courageously recorded and released a video detailing his torture at the hands of Chinese police in 2008. He was sentenced to five years in prison for that video and was released in extremely poor health, leading to a steady deterioration and his eventual death last summer; Jigme was blacklisted from receiving private medical care as a result of the “crime” he had committed by speaking out about the abuse he had suffered.¹⁰

Chinese companies have developed software that automatically detects and tracks Tibetans and other ethnic minorities within the PRC on camera. A report published by Citizen Lab found that China’s police may have gathered between about 920,000 to 1.2 million DNA samples in the Tibet Autonomous Region over the past six years.¹¹ Those figures represent one-quarter to one-third of the total population of the TAR, which spans most of western Tibet. Human Rights Watch also released a report stating that Chinese authorities are systematically collecting DNA from residents of the TAR, including by taking blood from children as young as five without their parents’ consent.¹²

China’s surveillance no longer halts at the Tibetan border. The CCPs techno-authoritarianism and fear tactics extend to Tibetan communities abroad. This oppression is being perpetrated behind a digital iron curtain to hide reality on the ground. We also must take seriously the pervasiveness of the surveillance in and outside of Tibet and the harm it's doing psychologically the younger generation, who find themselves not only surveilled on platforms such as TikTok,

but also harassed for who they are. The development of these systems of repression, reaching all the way around the world, reflects the lengths the CCP will go to to dismantle the Tibetan civilization.

Policy of Plunder

We must also note that the Chinese annexation of Tibet has serious regional security implications and gives Beijing access to Tibet's abundant natural resources.

Tibet's location and scale provide a commanding position over the entire Himalayan region, a fact certainly not lost on the Communist Party. The CCP's occupation allowed not only an immediate enhanced regional sphere of influence, but also set it on a trajectory toward the hegemonic control it continues to strive for.

Tibet also boasts a host of natural resources the Chinese lack. One of the most illustrative examples is water. China is water poor. In contrast, the Tibetan Plateau is the source of the region's major rivers, the healthy flow of at least 1.5 billion people rely on for food and economic development.¹³ The PRC has erected numerous and massive damming projects, and proposes to continue, along with water diversion projects. Once again, we see dual purposes at play. China's occupation of Tibet provides needed resources to China, while also facilitating infrastructure development that allows it to literally control the tap for South and Southeast Asia. This must not be ignored since water control grants China literal and diplomatic might as well as infrastructure that in and of itself represents yet another potential military build-up along contested borders.¹⁴

Precious metals and minerals serve as another example. Tibet's occupation "provides access to 126 different minerals," including copper, iron, uranium, zinc, gold, and lead. Increasingly relevant, Tibet also has large amounts of lithium, critical to powering modern technologies like cell phones, hybrid, and electric cars, and more.¹⁵

The appropriation of property often coincides with the persecution of a people. The resource exploitation occurring on the Tibetan Plateau overlays with the oppression of the Tibetan people who call it home, and takes place over their objections – clearly stated, despite the serious risks of protests or demonstrations inside the PRC.

Path Forward: The Middle Way

At the heart of the of the Tibet-China conflict lies the fundamental human right of self-determination. According to international law and ethical standards a people deserves the right to determine their own future.

Self-determination does not carry with it any single definition nor does the Dalai Lama's proposed Middle Way. The Middle Way based on this foundation of meaningful autonomy even as it represents a proposal of compromise based on protecting the core interests of both Tibet and China.

Under the Middle Way, Tibetans call for dialogue to identify a solution that is compatible with the People's Republic of China's constitution while allowing Tibetans the self-determination needed to protect their unique cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage.

There are many aspects to the Middle Way approach that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has presented in multiple documents that provide a concrete framework for negotiation.¹⁶ The key fact, however, is that at no time has his Holiness or the Tibetan government in exile, the Central Tibetan Administration, explicitly or implicitly signaled that the ongoing occupation is resolved.

In contrast, China refuses to return to the table. To date, thirteen years have passed since the last round of Sino-Tibetan dialogue. Although the United States regularly calls for the

resumption of dialogue and has multiple laws on the books stating support for negotiations with his Holiness or his designated representatives as the path forward, the Chinese Communist Party continues to snub its nose at the U.S. and like-minded nations.

China's refusal is transparent. It is simply a waiting game. Beijing has sent numerous signals that it intends to designate its own "Dalai Lama" when the current Dalai Lama passes away. Such a strategy must be thoroughly neutralized in advance.

Accomplishing this will entail two main components. Long term, China must be enticed back to the negotiating table. Ideally, this would mean joining in dialogue with the current Dalai Lama who is well positioned to broker an agreement that will remain stable. However, immediate steps also must be taken to ensure China, the world, and the Tibetan people know that the United States' support for the Tibetan people and resolution through dialogue will never waiver, regardless of with whom or when a true settlement is achieved.

Policy Recommendations

- Congress should pass and President Biden sign the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act (H.R.533/S.138) which clarifies that America will back the Tibetan people until negotiations are settled, whether it is with the 14th Dalai Lama or a future Tibetan leader. This is essential to providing the Tibetan people the long-term support needed in their quest for dignity and self-determination. The legislation also empowers the Special Coordinator for Tibet to directly counter China's relentless propaganda machine aimed at Tibet.
- Fully and forcefully implement the Tibetan Policy and Support Act and the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act. The former is a key statute establishing multiple Tibet policies, the later confronts the inequity between United States citizens, including journalists, tourists, and most stringently Tibetan Americans, inability to enter Tibet and Chinese ability to enter the United State.
- Following the example of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its Concluding Observations, call on Chinese authorities to immediately abolish the boarding school system imposed on Tibetan children, allow private Tibetan schools to be established and ensure that Mandarin is not the only language allowed as the language of instruction in Tibet.
- Utilize the United States voice and vote at the United Nations to press Chinese authorities to take all necessary measures to immediately halt expulsion of all nomadic herders, including Tibetan ones, from their ancestral lands. This also should include other rural residents such as small-scale farmers.
- Undertake and present publicly a comprehensive report on the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to manipulate global perceptions of Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai

Lama. This should include countering China's propaganda machine, digital transnational oppression, international investment schemes, and evaluation of human rights violations.

- Set in place concrete restrictions for technology transfer or other U.S company support for forced/coerced DNA or other medical data collection.

¹ See <https://tibetoffice.org/invasion-after>

² Ibid.

³ Concluding observations on the third periodic report of China, including Hong Kong SAR, China, and Macao SAR, China, Pg 13.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2FC.12%2FCHN%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en

⁴ Separated from their Families: China's Vast Colonial Boarding School in Tibet, Tibet Action Network, December 2021

https://s7712.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2021_TAI_ColonialBoardingSchoolReport_Digital.pdf; and OHCHR, 6 February 2023, "China: UN experts alarmed by separation of 1 million Tibetan children from families and forced assimilation at residential schools".

⁵ OHCHR, 6 February 2023, "China: UN experts alarmed by separation of 1 million Tibetan children from families and forced assimilation at residential schools".

⁶ Human Rights Watch, 27 June 2013, "'They Say We Should Be Grateful:' Mass Rehousing and Relocation Programs in Tibetan Areas of China," <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/06/27/they-say-we-should-be-grateful/mass-rehousing-and-relocation-programs-tibetan>.

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/29/beijings-green-fist>

⁸ UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/51/26, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata", p.8.

⁹ <https://www.maxhertzberg.co.uk/background/politics/stasi-tactics/#:~:text=Tactics%20included%20questioning%2C%20repeated%20stop,of%20the%20police%20interest%20etc.>

¹⁰ <https://savetibet.org/prominent-former-tibetan-political-prisoner-dies/>

¹¹ Citizen Lab, 31 September 2022, "Mass DNA Collection in the Tibet Autonomous Region from 2016-2022," <https://citizenlab.ca/2022/09/mass-dna-collection-in-the-tibet-autonomous-region/>.

¹² Human Rights Watch, 5 September 2022, "China: New Evidence of Mass DNA Collection in Tibet," <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/05/china-new-evidence-mass-dna-collection-tibet>.

¹³ <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442249134/Water-Peace-and-War-Confronting-the-Global-Water-Crisis-Updated-Edition>

¹⁴ Chellaney, Brahma, *Water: Asia's New Battle Ground*; Georgetown University Press, 2011, see chapter 3

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 116-117

¹⁶ <https://tibet.net/important-issues/sino-tibetan-dialogue/note-on-the-memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>