

# GLOBALIZATION TO TIBET



Tashi Tsering  
Division of Political Science  
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government  
Portland State University  
Portland, OR 97207-0751

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to D'Arcy Richardson, Gabriel Lafitte, Mel Gurtov, Barbara Dudley, Tsering Choedron, Steven Marshall, Joan Emerson, Hal Nelson, Peter Noordijk, and Jamyang Norbu for commenting on this paper. I am solely responsible for all the views expressed in this essay. Thanks also to Students for a Free Tibet for permission to use the cover photo. The billboard in the photo, which was later taken down, reads, "Pabst Blue Ribbon Celebrates 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet."

This paper was originally written for the Himalayan Research Bulletin, published by the Geography department of Portland State University. Thank you to Barbara Brower, Editor of Himalayan Research Bulletin, for permission to reprint this essay.

## Beginning ...

November 30, 1999 marked a turning point in global history. Tens of thousands of ordinary people took to the streets of Seattle to stop the second round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference. This event made one thing clear--people representing various interest groups, the globalized, are increasingly critical of the management of globalization. This incident also marked an historic event for Tibetans--they took part in the demonstrations, which marked the first time they had joined a global revolt against globalization.

Why would Tibetans, economically one of the poorest and least globalized peoples of the world, oppose this global phenomenon? Apart from a few briefing papers, Tibet has not been looked at in the context of globalization.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to contribute to the scant literature by providing a Tibetan perspective on this huge and relevant subject. The purpose of this paper is a simple one: to articulate what globalization (and thus development) means to Tibetans by explicating its implications for Tibet. In order to achieve this task substantively, it is essential to see it in a matrix of at least three contexts, which are presented in three separate sections. Section I provides a brief discussion of the meaning and nature of the phenomenon of globalization. Section II presents China's logic in transition to a "market economy" and the objectives of "developing" Tibet. The last section explicates certain implications of free trade rules and China's WTO agreements on Tibet. The paper concludes with certain policy recommendations and suggestions for further research.

---

<sup>1</sup> These include, J. Charles, *Livelihoods Lost?: Globalization, WTO Accession and the Future of the Tibetan People*, Free Tibet Campaign, (<http://www.freetibet.org/menu.htm>); Catherine James, *Tibet and the APEC*, Canada Tibet Committee, (<http://www.tibet.ca/english/index.html>).

## Section I: Globalization

### *Meaning and definition:*

Globalization is seen differently by different people. It is commonly understood as a phenomenon of the intensification of international trade due to improvements in technology and financial systems, and the expansion of markets—economic globalization. However, the experience from the last few decades of intensified globalization makes it clear that the forces driving globalization, its impacts, and its implications reach far beyond economics.<sup>2</sup> For example, free trade rules have empowered private investors and corporations with provisions to force signatory governments to change laws that are made to protect citizens' health and environment, or to pay compensations worth millions of dollars. Canada's implementation of two international environmental agreements has been successfully challenged under NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) Chapter 11, and Canada will soon be ordered to pay damages to U.S. investors in both cases.

Globalization as a process of trade and commerce, the spread of cultural influences, and dissemination of knowledge and understanding between nations and peoples is an ancient phenomenon. The perception of, and the debate over globalization, however, is a recent phenomenon. The temporal aspect of globalization is important

---

<sup>2</sup> For critical discussions on globalization, see, Dwight D. Murphy, "A Critique of the Central Concepts of Free Trade Theory," *Journal of Social, Political & Economic Studies*, Vol., 23, No., 4, (November 1998); Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (Eds.), *The Case Against the Global Economy*, (Sierra Club Books, 1996; Ralph Nader (Ed.), at al, *The Case Against Free Trade: GATT, NAFTA, and the Globalization of Corporate Power*, (Earth Island Press, 1993); Lori Wallach and Michelle Sforza, *Who Trade Organization: Corporate Globalization and the Erosion of Democracy*, (Public Citizen, 1999); William Greider, *One World, Ready Or Not: The Manic of Global Capitalism*, (Simon & Schuster, 1997); Kevin Danaher and

because it is really in the recent decades that world trade has expanded so widely and intensively, and has become so structurally interdependent that the use of word “global,” as distinct from “international” has become justifiable.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, for analytic purposes of this paper, we shall refer to globalization as the post World War II wave of intensified world trade led by free trade doctrine. This analytic definition is suitable for our purposes because, as we shall see, it is the rules of this new wave of globalization that will impact the Tibetan people as a consequence of China’s WTO accession.

One of the defining aspects of globalization in the recent decades is the spread of neoliberal policies, also called neo-orthodox policies, guided by free trade doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Following the footsteps of powerful Western economies like the US and England, governments around the globe are adopting policies that emphasize deregulation and privatization, and a minimum role of government in the market. Another defining feature of this wave of globalization is the institutional aspect of the free trade regime. The role of international institutions like the WTO, IMF (International Monetary Fund), and the World Bank and their centralized global trade bureaucracy in managing the world economy has become very significant.<sup>5</sup> For example, as of January 1, 2002, 144 economies, including all the major military and economic powers of the world, have

---

Roger Burbach (Eds.), *Globalise This!*, (Common Courage Press, 2000); Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000); etc.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Dunning, “The Advent of Alliance Capital,” John H. Dunning and Khalil A. Hamdani (eds.), *The New Globalism and Developing Countries*, (United Nations University Press, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> See, Murphy, loc. cit., for a critical discussion of free trade theory.

<sup>5</sup> For setting up common rules and regulations for global trade, bodies like the WTO (formerly General Agreement on Trade and Tariff, or GATT) was instituted. IMF was set up originally for stabilizing global financial markets and to facilitate trade related capital flows and now it works with almost any economy that is facing financial crises and is willing to make “structural adjustments” to change into an “open and free market” for foreign businesses. For a critical reading of the impacts of these institutions, see, *Ibid.*; Ralph Nader (Ed.), at al, loc. cit.; Wallach and Sforza, loc. cit., Danaher and Burbach (Eds.), *Globalise This!*, (Common Courage Press, 2000); etc.

joined the WTO, agreeing to conform to the rules of the free trade regime.<sup>6</sup> These institutions, presumably, facilitate a “level playing field” for countries, or businesses to trade under a single set of rules, which basically means small Tibetan businesses will have to compete with Chinese and powerful Western corporations in a “free market” environment.

*Backlash of globalization for Tibetan society:*

Globalization, then, is a result of a renewed global faith in certain mercantilistic theories of such early British free trade advocates as Cobden, Ricardo and Adam Smith. What is frightening, and laughable at the same time, is the fact that these economic *theories* are taken to be infallible, ignoring their long list of assumptions, and assuming their application will result in profit for “all” parties. For example, based on the theory of comparative advantage, international trade is supposed to be a mutually benefiting transaction between countries. In its simplest form, the logic of this theory dictates that a country should buy low and sell high regardless of a product’s importance to the local culture and economy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, applying this theory to Tibet, if barley (a staple crop/food of Tibetans for centuries) can be bought cheaper than the domestic cost of production, Tibet should stop domestic barley production, buy barley from wherever, and sell products that it can produce more economically than others, i.e., focus on the production and sale of raw materials like timber, wool, oil, minerals, etc. This way, it is theorized that all parties can profit from trade. Interestingly however, the world has chosen to ignore certain other economic theories of that time. For example, the Iron Law of Wages by David Ricardo,

---

<sup>6</sup> For a critical reading of free trade, see e.g., Murphy, loc. cit.; Nader, et. al, loc. cit.

the very person credited to have developed the theory of comparative advantage, states that the natural price of labor will be the amount which permits bare subsistence plus enough to reproduce. No wonder labor groups were amongst the most vocal demonstrators in Seattle. Free trade, as critics argue, has today become a carte blanche for Multinational Corporations (MNCs) to exploit cheap labor wherever they can find it.

In the light of this paper (and beyond), the more important aspect of globalization is the utter absence of moral ideas about social justice and environmental stewardship in its guiding principles. Not only do the Tibetan people have every reason to be concerned about the various negative impacts of globalization like abuse of workers' rights, environmental degradation, privatization of health and other social services, increased poverty, loss of autonomy, and others, but also their fundamental cultural and religious belief systems are under assault.<sup>8</sup> The Tibetan view of "reality" and their attitude towards nature is different from the frontier mentality that drives globalization. Globalization is driven by an ideology of unlimited production and consumption (hence unlimited growth) that views nature as something to be exploited or conquered by mankind. This ideology that sees nature as existing separate from "man" is fundamentally counter to Tibetan (Buddhist) thinking which views humans as an integral part of nature or the environment in which they live. In fact, the Tibetan word for environment, *Khoryug*, is a recently coined term. In traditional Tibetan society there was never a need for such a word. "Environment," to Tibetans, is not something "out there" to be exploited, or saved: people were a part of the environment. These values are now at risk of being lost as

---

<sup>7</sup> David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. John Murray Library of Economics and Liberty. (<http://www.econlib.org/library/Ricardo/ricP2a.html>).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on Tibetan approach to ecology, see Tenzin P. Atisha, "Tibetan Approach to Ecology," Tibetan Government-in-exile, (<http://www.tibet.com/Eco/eco7.html>).

globalization leads to accumulation of power not just in terms of capital but also in knowledge, amongst other forms.<sup>9</sup> Globalization undermines the value of local diversity and offers legitimacy to the dominant liberal agenda.

Globalization has been described as a machine that “throws off enormous wealth and bounty while it also leaves behind great furrows of wreckage.”<sup>10</sup> And most often, the people who reap the bountiful wealth are the already rich (and powerful), and the ones who are left behind to live in the wreckage are the common citizens, and even worse off are the disfranchised peoples. Tibetans are one such people—a people who do not have a say in the policies that sculpt their future. While the free trade rules promise to bring technology and investments into their land, it has no mechanism or provision to protect them from exploitation by powerful self-interested foreign investors, whether American, European, Japanese, or Chinese. Tibetan people’s concerns stem from the understanding that globalization is a double edged sword and that they will be, to a large extent, on the losing side under present Chinese government policies.

## Section II: Tibet under China’s Transition to a “market economy”

### *China’s race to globalization*

Unlike what the neoliberals say about globalization’s impacts on sovereignty, Chinese leaders see it in highly state-centric and state-empowering terms.<sup>11</sup> Globalization

---

<sup>9</sup> UNEP, *Globalization Threat To World’s Cultural, Linguistic And Biological Diversity*, (February 8, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> William Greider, *One World, Ready Or Not: The Manic of Global Capitalism*, (Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> The supporters of globalization, the neoliberals, claim that the present globalization represents a new post-Westphalian global order and the functional demise of the state system assuming precedence and dominance of economics over politics. The skeptics of globalization, the neorealists, maintain that the recent developments fall far short of globalization and is nothing but intensified international trade, and that the state is robust as ever. For discussions on the various debates around globalization, see, Samuel S. Kim,

(*quanqiuhua*) can safely be argued to be one of Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji's main long-term geo-economic and, by extension, geopolitical strategies to make China rich and strong.<sup>12</sup> Beijing has made an uncodified deal with the Chinese people, a social contract, to deliver economic growth in return for the single party's (Chinese Communist Party) unquestioned rule.<sup>13</sup>

Behind China's "miraculous" economic growth since the "opening" (late 1970's) lies a different, less told reality. Although China has been undertaking a series of "reforms" and restructuring of its economic system to be more compatible with rapidly changing global markets and other forces of globalization, deep structural imperfections abound in China, hindering its transformation to an efficient "market economy with Chinese characteristics." Its banking system, for example, is considered one of Asia's weakest and its legal system requires profound changes to become independent of the government.<sup>14</sup> The greed of Western businesses who see China as a vast consumer market for their products, and the fear of Western Realists who propagate the notion of a "China Threat," are ill-founded. Rising inequality, rampant corruption, soaring unemployment, over 100,000 inefficient industrial SOEs (state owned enterprises) that employ more than half its work force,<sup>15</sup> water scarcity and pollution (amongst the major environmental concerns), and bad loans are some of deeper systemic problems veiled by

---

loc. cit.; David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Joanathan Perraton, *Global Transformations*, (Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Thomas Moore, "China and Globalization," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1999, pp. 65-95.

<sup>13</sup> Melvin Gurtov, "The Future of China's Rise," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 109-128.

<sup>14</sup> "China: The 'Middle Kingdom' Takes World Stage," *Financial Times*, (October 8, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> In the 1990s, China had about 100,000 SOEs. See, e.g., Xiaoying Ma and Leonard Ortolano, *Environmental Regulation in China: Institutions, Enforcement, and Compliance*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 50; James C.F. Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Politics: An Introduction*, (Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 306.



China's quadrupled GDP (Gross Domestic Product).<sup>16</sup> Although it would be an exaggeration to say China is on the brink of a social revolution, its leaders no doubt have far more serious problems to handle than the misperceptions of Western businesses and Realists.

To ensure long-term "stability" the Chinese leaders launched the Western Development Campaign in June 1999.<sup>17</sup> Jiang Zemin explicitly said that the campaign "has major significance for the future prosperity of the country and the [Party's] long reign and perennial stability."<sup>18</sup> Chinese strategists see the campaign as a means to reduce regional economic disparities and consolidate its control over Tibet and other politically sensitive and strategically important inner regions. The launch of this campaign can be seen as opportune in light of China's WTO accession: China's plan to 'develop' its west is an old one which heretofore could not be implemented mainly due to lack of capital and technology. It now aims to do that in collaboration with Western businesses, or more appropriately, by using their capital and technology. And Tibet is the key focus of the campaign.

### *The objectives of "developing" Tibet*

---

<sup>16</sup> "Social order and stability have both deteriorated since the late 1970's. Based on crime rates, death rates in traffic accidents, and several other indexes of social stress, a socialist at CASS [Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one of China's leading think tanks] estimated that social order declined at an average annual rate of 1.1 percent in the last two decades. The social stability index (measured in terms of inflation, unemployment, poverty, and inequality) fell at an average rate of 1.6 percent per year over the same period. Even more alarming, the decline in both indexes accelerated in the 1990's (the social stability index fell, on average, 4.2 percent a year in the 1990's)." See Minxin Pei, "Cracked China," *Foreign Policy*, (September/October 2001), p. 80

<sup>17</sup> "Jiang stresses development of western areas," *Xinhua News Agency*, (June 18, 1999); "Chinese President Stresses Need To Narrow Prosperity Gap," *BBC, Asia Pacific – Political*, (June 18, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Tibet Information Network, *China's Great Leap West*, (November 2000), p. 6.

From the Chinese government perspective, based on economic statistics, there has been incredible economic “development” in Tibet since their military invasion in 1949.<sup>19</sup> Official statistics show Tibet Autonomous Region’s GDP growth averaging 12.8% per annum from 1994-1995,<sup>20</sup> with a rapidly expanding tertiary sector.<sup>21</sup> What is little known is the tradition of manufacturing favorable statistics in Chinese bureaucratic politics—manipulation of statistics by officials trying to advance their careers is a common practice.<sup>22</sup> Also little known is the fact that a substantial part of TAR’s GDP figures are investments on large scale infrastructure and fixed assets, which are not based on local needs. What is really needed are investments in education and health services—TAR’s human development index (including life expectancy index and education index) is the poorest/lowest among China’s 31 provinces.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the dichotomy between Chinese government’s rosy picture and the exiled Tibetan government’s refutation that the benefits of these “development” projects do not go to the Tibetan people is also little understood.<sup>24</sup> How and where does all the money that is being pumped into Tibet go if not for the development of the Tibetan people?

---

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description of China’s military take over of Tibet, see Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, (Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> U.S.-China Environment, Science & Technology Cooperation, US Embassy, Beijing, *Environmental Conditions in Tibet*, (March 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Official statistics show that the added value of TAR’s tertiary sector amounted to 5.38 billion yuan in 2000, accounting for 46.2% of TAR’s GDP and a rise of 12.2%. See, Yin Zhili, “Tertiary Industry, New Boom in Tibetan Economy,” *People’s Daily*, (March 16, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Kang Wu, “China’s GDP numbers don’t add up,” *Washington Times*, (May 24, 2002), (<http://www.washtimes.com/world/20020524-8757278.htm>); U.S.-China Environment, Science & Technology Cooperation, US Embassy, Beijing, loc. cit.; “Chinese Admit Misreporting Economic Data,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, (March 1, 2002), ([http://www.sltrib.com/2002/mar/03012002/nation\\_w/715569.htm](http://www.sltrib.com/2002/mar/03012002/nation_w/715569.htm)); “China to crack down on statistic fraud,” *People’s Daily*, (December 27, 2000); Sean Dougherty, “The Reliability of Chinese Statistics,” ([http://www.chinaonline.com/refer/statistics/secure/us\\_prc.asp](http://www.chinaonline.com/refer/statistics/secure/us_prc.asp)); etc.

<sup>23</sup> Cui Zhiyuan, He Zengke, Li Shi, Carl Riskin, Ding Yuanzhu, Hu Angang, Barry Naughton, Wang Shaoguang, *China: Human Development Report 1999*, United Nations Development Programme, (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Some Chinese reports also accept this fact. See, *China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development*, Biodiversity Working Group, Phase Two, Fifth Report (2001). It states,

Beijing's primary economic objective of investment in Tibet is to exploit its rich natural resources. The Tibetan Plateau—the geographical span of which (2.5 million square kilometers) roughly constitutes Tibet—is rich in mineral resources.<sup>25</sup> For example, just in the central and western areas of Tibet, Chinese experts have estimated mineral reserves worth US\$ 81.3 billion, and the Chinese government is investing US\$ 1.25 billion in prospecting and developing these resources.<sup>26</sup> Among the more recent concerns expressed by the exiled Tibetan government include the Chinese government's increasing exploration and extraction of Tibet's oil and natural gas reserves, and the construction of a railway line connecting Beijing to Lhasa.<sup>27</sup> They have already started constructing pipelines to transport oil and natural gas to energy-thirsty East China in collaboration with Western companies.<sup>28</sup> Almost all of these projects facilitate a supply of raw materials (and fuel) to meet the growing demands of China's mammoth economy. Functionally, China uses Tibet as a resource extraction colony.

The political objective of “developing” Tibet is to assimilate Tibet and its people completely into the Chinese “motherland.” Tibetans are a distinct people, and despite Chinese government's relentless efforts to sinocize their identity, Tibetan people continue to resist and adhere to their cultural and national identity. Amdo (Chinese *Qinghai*)

---

e.g., “economic gains from tourism in [Qinghai] do not return to the local people but rest with tour operators from the city [which are mostly Chinese].” For Tibetan Government-in-exile report, see, *Height of Darkness: Chinese Colonialism on the World's Roof*, (December 2001).

<sup>25</sup> What the present government of China describes as “Tibet” refers only to the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region created in 1965 and represents only about half of Tibetan peoples' Tibet.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Information and International Relations, Tibetan Government-in-exile, *Tibet 2000: Environment and Development Issues*, p. vi.

<sup>27</sup> See., e.g., The Milarepa Fund and Project Underground, *Raiding the Treasure House: Oil and Mineral Extraction in China's Colonization of Tibet*, (2000); *Drilling Into the Land of Snows*, ([www.milarepa.org](http://www.milarepa.org), [www.moles.org](http://www.moles.org)); [www.backingpersecution.com](http://www.backingpersecution.com); Department of Information and International Relations, *Statement of Opposition On Sebei-Lanzhou Pipeline and Increased Oil & Gas Exploration On the Tibetan Plateau*, (September 22, 2000) and *China's Railway Project: Where will it take Tibet?*, ([http://www.tibet.net/eng/diir/pubs/rail\\_report.pdf](http://www.tibet.net/eng/diir/pubs/rail_report.pdf)).

Tibetans, for example, are most deeply exposed to an overwhelming Chinese cultural, economic, and political infiltration due to geographical proximity to China. Yet, much owing to the audacious leadership of the late Panchen Lama, Tibetans in this region have become more exemplary upholders of Tibet's unique cultural heritage amongst Tibetans in Tibet. Tibetan people's resilience, and the growing international support for their peaceful struggle, have become a political embarrassment for Beijing, perceived as a serious threat to the integrity of the "motherland." The "final solution" for the "Tibet issue," then, is to make Tibetans insignificant minorities in their own land by transferring millions of ethnic Chinese to settle there. The Great Western Development Campaign, which encourages Han Chinese to "go west," thus, is a perfect umbrella program to further this end. The Chinese government prefers to view "development" from a statist perspective, concerned with making the "motherland" strong and stable, even at the cost of "ethnic minorities." The Tibetan people's opposition comes from a nationalistic perspective, as they struggle under an oppressive regime, whose "developmental" policies are a death warrant to their national and cultural identity.

### *The moral economy of Tibet*

The dichotomy between the two positions is also due to the lifestyle and economic realities of Tibet. Tibetans are an ecological ethnicity—a "people who have developed a respectful use of the natural resources and consequently a commitment to creating and preserving a technology that interacts with local ecosystems in a sustainable

---

<sup>28</sup> Global energy giants like BP, ENI/Agip have shown interests in Tibet's oil and natural gas. Enron has been recently declared insolvent.

manner.”<sup>29</sup> Even today, more than three quarters of Tibetans are engaged in agriculture, pastoralism, and nomadic life.<sup>30</sup> Tibet’s vast area, low density of population, austere technology, and Buddhist culture have resulted in a way of life that skillfully makes use of the few hands available, to maintain a high level of productivity, with sustainable use of the local resources. China has ignored these aspects of traditional Tibetan subsistence economy, and has imposed another economy on top, with “no roots and few linkage to the traditional economy. There is very little processing of Tibetan wool into garments, skins into shoes, milk to cheese suited to distant markets. Even the Lhasa beer factory relies on strains of barley developed by Chinese scientists rather than using traditional one.”<sup>31</sup> The modern large-scale infrastructural economy is overwhelmingly urban, concentrated in Chinese towns and cities and along the transport corridors connecting them, and the beneficiaries are overwhelmingly Chinese.

With few linkages between the two economies, the rapidly growing modern economy impinges upon the livelihood of the majority of Tibetans. For example, Tibetan herders and nomads require vast open grasslands for their lifestyle. With increasing numbers of Chinese coming into Tibet, there are more and more fences, and more and more regulations. Consequently, they are encouraged to give up their traditional lifestyle and to settle at one place. Cooke and Marshall identified four negative economic and ecological consequences of such policies.<sup>32</sup> These are: a) reduction in pastoralists’ claim to their land and its uses; b) increase in land degradation through overgrazing; c) opening

---

<sup>29</sup> Pramod Parajuli, “How Can Four Trees Make a Jungle?,” *Terra Nova: Nature and Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Tibet Information Network, *TIN News Review No. 27: Reports from Tibet*, pp. 59-64

<sup>31</sup> Gabriel Lafitte. Personal communication.

<sup>32</sup> Steven D. Marshall and Susette Ternent Cooke, *Tibet Outside the TAR: Control, Exploitation, and Assimilation. Development with Chinese Characteristics* (CD-Rom), The Alliance for Research in Tibet, as

former pastoral land for mining; and d) forcing former self-sufficient nomads to be dependent on markets.<sup>33</sup> These also mean loss of cultural and economic autonomy. To make these negative trends worse for the Tibetan people, Tibet will now be globalized. Globalization will give Chinese and foreign businesses “legal” tools in the form of free trade rules and WTO agreements that will efficiently marginalize Tibetans in their own land.

### Section III: Implications of China’s WTO obligations for Tibet

Of the current WTO agreements, the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) could have the most direct impacts on the Tibetans, as more than three quarters of them are engaged in the agricultural sector, mostly practicing pastoralism.<sup>34</sup> AoA requires governments to reduce trade distortions (reduce tariffs and subsidies) and allow minimum market access. The dumping of cheap agricultural produce by the large foreign agribusinesses could shrink existing Tibetan markets. Until now such arguments have had little relevance because of the absence of transport infrastructure. But this fast developing sector, most notably the railway connecting Beijing to Lhasa, makes such outcomes possible. And the lifting of domestic subsidies could result in increased costs of production for Tibetan farmers.

Another important WTO agreement with major implications for Tibet is Trade Related Intellectual Property (TRIPs). One of the most controversial Uruguay Round Agreements, TRIPs “requires that WTO member countries protect non-biological and

---

cited in J. Charles, *Livelihoods Lost?: Globalization, WTO Accession and the Future of the Tibetan People*, Free Tibet Campaign, (<http://www.freetibet.org/menu.htm>).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

microbiological processes for the production of plants and animals, meaning that plants and animals are patentable if they are cloned or genetically altered.”<sup>35</sup> Companies can patent the genetic make-up of the plant if they claim that they have "discovered" the gene structure.<sup>36</sup> Depending on profitability, it is conceivable that a firm could, e.g., claim a patent for “Tsampa” (staple food of Tibetans made from barley). The patenting of “Basmati” rice by the Texas-based firm RiceTec is an example that justifies concerns from indigenous people like Tibetans.<sup>37</sup> Basmati rice has been grown by farmers in India and Pakistan for generations, yet RiceTec was granted a patent for making a slight alteration to it.

The danger of appropriation of Tibetan intellectual property is enormous as Chinese scientists have been studying, analyzing, and labeling Tibet’s genetic diversity.<sup>38</sup> What is very likely is companies claiming patents for the different plants and herbs endemic to Tibet, especially those that have been used by Tibetans for medicinal purposes for generations. Tibetans could lose opportunities to make profits from their rich knowledge of the medicinal properties of various plants and other materials that they have developed through centuries of practice. Such a situation is also not without precedent. American and Japanese multinational companies have received patents on different products made from the neem tree, which the indigenous people of India have been using for hundreds of years.<sup>39</sup> The lack of legal expertise and finance will leave

---

<sup>34</sup> Tibet Information Network, *TIN News Review No. 27: Reports from Tibet*, p. 59-64.

<sup>35</sup> Wallach, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Dudley, personal communication.

<sup>37</sup> This patent was later revoked.

<sup>38</sup> Gabriel Lafitte. Personal communication.

<sup>39</sup> See Ibid. There are countless other disturbing possibilities for Tibetans. For example, “through an innovation called “termination technology,” companies can alter plants to make their seeds sterile [called “terminator seeds”] so that a farmer literally cannot save the seed of one year’s crop to plant the next year,” which is a traditional practice in Tibet and most other places around the world

Tibetans not just unable to get patents but these will also leave them disadvantaged in availing other benefits of WTO, like its infamous dispute resolution provisions.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The Chinese word for Tibet, *Xizang*, means the “western treasure house.” Despite China’s unrestrained attempts to take advantage of the “treasure house,” Tibet’s harsh geographical conditions and paucity of human labor, transport infrastructure, modern technology and capital have made it extremely challenging and expensive to exploit its resources profitably. These conditions have kept most of Tibet economically isolated except for certain areas of northeast Amdo.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Tibet is one of the few places of the world today that is not integrated into the global economy. However, the trends in recent decades show that the Chinese government may now be successful in what it has always wanted to do—to put Tibet on the escalator to becoming a profitable resource colony.

This essay does not deny the “development” that China has brought into Tibet. It is possible to chat online or to “buzz” someone on a mobile phone in Tibet today. However, what goes on in the name of “development” in Tibet, like in many economically poorer countries around the world today, is a direct result of *decisions* imposed by foreigners, based on their economic and political interests. The absence of

---

<sup>40</sup> The legal procedures are so expensive that Tibetans will not be able to afford to bring cases. Nor would they be able to pay for their defence if a company sues them within the WTO dispute resolution system.

<sup>41</sup> These areas include the Tsaidam Basin mineral belt, and the intensively Chinese-settled farming belt of northeast Amdo around Siling.



control over policies that sculpt their short and long-term prospects, or even forums for free discussion of government policies, is perhaps at the heart of Tibetan people's opposition to the so-called "development" that is sweeping their land. Neither Chinese law nor free trade rules ensure Tibetans any rights to discuss and debate policies, or negotiate terms of agreements with foreign investors.

To the Tibetans, globalization represents another framework for exploitation, imposed upon by China, without their approval or knowledge. This phenomenon will further constrict their opportunities for economic, cultural, and political development by compounding the severe inequalities of power and resources already in place. Globalization comes to Tibet at Chinese invitation and under Chinese terms to fulfill Chinese goals. Tibetans in Tibet are forced to be silent witnesses as big Western companies like British Petroleum (BP) and Exxon plan to invest in Tibet under "free trade" rules to do business with dummy corporations like PetroChina, which are created and run by the Chinese government to give a privately owned appearance for Western investors.<sup>42</sup>

The observations made in this paper have important policy implications for the Tibetan government-in-exile. Perhaps it should reassess its proposal for "genuine autonomy." Under the framework of "genuine autonomy" that the exiled government has proposed to China (and later made non-binding), Tibet's foreign affairs and, by extension, the terms of international trade, would be under Chinese control. Such an arrangement would not bring any change to some of the broader concerns expressed here. Therefore, this argument supports the request made by the Tibetan delegation at the Asia

Pacific People's Assembly that their government "strengthen its position regarding negotiation with China and claim its legitimate right to fully control its foreign affairs and to choose i[t]s economic model."<sup>43</sup>

### *Further research recommendations*

This essay provides explanations for the existence of Tibetan and Chinese polarized positions on Tibet's contemporary developmental discourse. To bridge the dichotomy between the Chinese government's statist position and Tibetan nationalist concerns, or in other words to carry this developmental debate beyond traditional Tibet-China politics, scholars and leaders will do well to emphasize not just the pursuit of the national interest but also fulfillment of human development and security.<sup>44</sup> From the human security perspective, developmental discourse (and politics) must shift its emphasis (or rather overemphasis) on statist or nationalistic goals to meeting basic needs of people in creating a condition of existence in which human dignity, including meaningful participation in the life of the community is realized. Instead of relying on economic statistics to measure development, the human development approach provides an alternative by stressing the quality of life, as measured by social statistics such as infant mortality, literacy, access to health care, etc.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> PetroChina's parent company (and 90% owner), the China National Petroleum Corporation is a wholly State-owned corporation that is authorized by the State to make investments. See, [www.backingpersecution.com](http://www.backingpersecution.com) and [www.cnpc.com.cn](http://www.cnpc.com.cn).

<sup>43</sup> The request was made by representatives from Tibetan Youth Congress, Australia Tibet Committee, and Canada Tibet Committee. See, "Statement of the Tibet Delegation to the Asia Pacific People's Assembly," *World Tibet News*, (Monday, November 16, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Human security is a concept now increasingly adopted by United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to present their human development reports.

<sup>45</sup> For works representing the human security endeavor, see, the annual Human Development Report(s) published by UNDP. Others include, Mahbub ul-Haq, "Human Rights, Security, and Governance," *Peace & policy*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Fall/Winter 1998); Sudhir Anand & Amartya K. Sen, "Sustainable Human

*One World, Ready or Not*, warned William Grieder, and Tibetans are not ready to face this forthcoming challenge. Unfortunately, there are no programs that would educate the people about the new free trade rules and their implications for their livelihood. Work is needed to identify appropriate economic niches for Tibetans (particularly farmers and herders) in a more competitive “free market” environment; to provide them with trainings (in employable skills) and tools (like small loans for investment in new income-generating activities); to identify foreign business opportunities that would benefit traditional Tibetan socio-economic life; to assess how Tibetans in Tibet view modernization; and to identify their specific developmental socio-economic concerns—short as well as long term. Work to fill in the severe lack of data in all aspects of Tibet’s economy would also be immensely useful.

---

Development: Concepts and Priorities,” *Occasional Papers* (8), Human Development Report Office; Caroline Thomas & Peter Wilkin, *Globalization, Human Security, and the African Experience*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999); T. Matsumae and L.C. Chen (eds.), *Common Security in Asia: New Concepts of Human Security*, (Tokai University Press, 1995); Robert C. Johansen, *The National Interest and the Human Interest: An Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy*, (Princeton University Press, 1980); Mel Gurtov, *Global Politics in the Human Interest*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999); Peter Stoett, *Human and Global Security*, (University of Toronto Press, 1999); Rob McRae and Don Hubert (eds.), *Human Security and the New Diplomacy*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001); Cristobal Kay (ed.), *Globalization Competitiveness and Human Security*, (Frank Cass, 1997); etc.