



## The Tibet Project

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As China continues its rise to global prominence, understanding the complexity of its relationship with Tibet is more important than ever. Recent research suggests we still have a long way to go.

Has China's ethnic policy increased [conflict](#) in Tibet? How do the [development](#) practices and policies of the Chinese state affect Tibetans? Do economic subsidies [disempower](#) Tibetans? Do educational policies disrupt the transmission of Tibetan [language](#) and [culture](#)? Has the attempt to build a 'harmonious society' in China [marginalised](#) Tibetans?

These are some of the questions that scholars and journalists are asking about Tibet today. In emphasising the transformations that Tibet is currently undergoing, they all, in one way or another, take for granted the unity and coherence of Tibet, and its existence as an object that is acted upon by the Chinese state. Here, I want to add another angle to the discussion. Rather than examining the process of transformation, I will look at what is being transformed, and ask, "What is Tibet?"

Let's start with Tibet's location. Many mistakenly think Tibet is only the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). However, this only describes the domain of the Lhasa-based government in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Tibetan world goes far beyond this—the majority of China's 6.2 million Tibetans live outside the TAR. The contemporary Chinese administrative system recognises 10 Tibetan autonomous prefectures and two Tibetan autonomous counties in four provinces outside the TAR, forming a huge contiguous bloc bigger than Greenland. Tibetans are a majority in this area, constituting an estimated 65-70% of the population, though reliable statistics are hard to come by. Tibetans also live outside these areas, in large urban centres such as Chengdu and Xining (the capital of Qinghai Province and the largest city on the Tibetan Plateau) and in rural regions beyond the formally recognised Tibetan areas.

The enormous area inhabited by Tibetans contains a variety of physical and biological environments. The Tibetan Plateau can be thought of as a giant plate, which tilts from high, dry plains of the north and west, to lush wet forests of the south and east. The WWF recognises at least [15 different ecoregions in Tibet](#), including alpine meadows, shrublands, conifer and broadleaf forests, steppe, and desert. Tibet is home not only to highland specialists like the wild yak and snow-leopard, but also a range of animals not commonly associated with Tibet, including pandas, wild dogs (dholes), leopards, and monkeys.

Tibet is not just an environmental mosaic, it is also geographically fractured. Look at a [map](#) of Tibet's rivers and you will see a series of strings, pulling the region in different directions, cleaving its wholeness. Rivers in the south of the Tibetan Plateau, just behind the Himalayas, flow south to the Indian subcontinent. In eastern Tibet, most of the region's rivers flow into the jungles of Southeast Asia, except for the Yangtze, which, after carving a gentle arc southwest from the centre of the Tibetan Plateau, turns north and east once it hits the lowlands. And finally, the Yellow River, the main waterway in northern Tibet, flows north and east from the Tibetan Plateau. Huge mountain ranges separate the river trenches. Populations cluster along the rivers, and patterns of [migration](#) and [exchange](#) follow their flows. In this way, Tibet faces outwards and is connected with wider regional worlds in South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia.

These three different 'faces' of Tibet also reflect broad-scale linguistic and cultural patterns within Tibet. Tibetans traditionally divide the region into three zones: Amdo (northern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet), and Ü-Tsang (geographically in southern Tibet, but politically and culturally best described as central Tibet; the Ü in Ü-Tsang means 'middle'). Vernacular traditions such as music, housing, and clothing are more likely to be similar within these regions than across them, though a great deal of internal diversity also exists at smaller scales: the river basin, the valley, the village.

Tibet's linguistic diversity is often described according to this threefold division. The Tibetan language is said to have three dialects—Amdo, Kham, and Ü-Tsang. However, a perspective currently gaining ground among linguists is that the diversity is far richer than this. [Nicolas Tournadre](#) (Aix-Marseille University) has suggested that what we call 'the Tibetan language' is actually a language family—the Tibetic languages—like the Romance or Germanic languages, consisting of perhaps 50 mutually unintelligible varieties, all connected by an historical relationship with the written standard.

Tibet is not only home to these widely diverse varieties of Tibetic languages, however. Additionally, the region is also home to what I call [Tibet's minority languages](#), which are neither 'Tibetan' nor 'Chinese' (itself a collection of languages). In my survey of the linguistic literature with [Hiroyuki Suzuki](#) (University of Oslo), we found that linguists have identified some 59 such languages in the region. About half of these languages are spoken by Tibetans, constituting approximately 4% of the total Tibetan population. Some of Tibet's minority languages are related to those spoken in Central Asia (Turkic) and Mongolia (Mongolic), while others are indigenous, and not found outside of eastern Tibet (Qiangic).

This linguistic diversity hints at yet another layer of diversity in Tibet: that of [ethnicity](#). Defining who is and is not ethnically Tibetan can be problematic, as discussed by the anthropologist [Jinba Tenzin](#) (National University of Singapore). There are groups like the Baima in eastern Tibet and the Deng in southern Tibet that reject claims that they are Tibetan, even though they are classified as such. Meanwhile, some people have been classified as belonging to other ethnic groups but claim that they are, in fact, Tibetans, such as the Monguor (Tuzu) of Rebgong, in northern Tibet. In addition to these fuzzy, '[borderline](#)' cases, there are also more clear-cut cases of ethnic difference, for example, the Mongols of northern Tibet and the Naxi of eastern Tibet: according to the Chinese state's ethnic recognition program, 14 ethnic groups are found in the Tibetan areas of China, in addition to Tibetans.

A final aspect of Tibet's diversity is religion. Often considered monolithically Buddhist, the reality is far more complex. [Tibetan Muslims](#) live in northern, southern, and eastern Tibet. Christians are also found in eastern Tibet. And Tibetan Buddhism is not only internally diverse—divided into sects, cults, schools of thought, and lineages of authority—but is also, like Tibetan ethnicity itself, fuzzy-edged, often merging seamlessly into other religious traditions, named and unnamed.

What all this suggests is that we need to think about Tibet as a project, not an object. Tibet is an ongoing endeavour to draw together these diverse elements—to overcome ecological and geographical fragmentation, to cross linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries, and to try and forge a shared sense of belonging and common purpose despite all these differences.

The ongoing and dynamic nature of this project is reflected in every aspect of contemporary Tibet. Scholars have studied the Tibet project from the perspectives of [modernisation](#), [gender](#), [literature](#), [education](#), [pop culture](#), [religious revival](#), and [language](#), among others. The dynamism and complexity that these scholars have described suggest that, in addition to looking at how China's policy and practices impact Tibet, we also need to examine how they affect the Tibet project—the ongoing efforts to conjure unity from the region's complex diversity.