

RECLAIMING THE LAND OF THE SNOWS: ANALYZING CHINESE SETTLER COLONIALISM IN TIBET

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Introduction

Among the various ethnic conflicts in areas ranging from Palestine to Yemen and Kashmir lies a hidden struggle for liberation that is overlooked on the world stage. Tibet, a mountainous region that lies in the southwest corner of China, is home to various ethnic groups facing a continuous genocide enabled by the Chinese government. While critiques of empire are traditionally limited within Eurocentric contexts, it is this myopic vision that artificially constrains the application of settler colonialism as an analytic tool to understand state conflict beyond the Western sphere. Through examining the implementation of settler tactics such as economic development, the rhetoric of unification, and technological censorship, I argue that the Chinese government's colonial actions in Tibet constitute and expand the *logic of elimination*, which Patrick Wolfe defines as an ideology that “strives for the dissolution of native societies” while “erect[ing] a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.”¹ In the first part of this paper, I point to research illustrating the relevance and utility of Wolfe's lens in analyzing the strategies executed in Tibet. Then, I analyze the effects and limitations of self-immolation as an agentic strategy of Tibetan protest. Additionally, I draw from Frantz Fanon's writings on the logic of colonization in order to better understand the motivations that drive self-immolation as a tactic of subversion. Centering the body as a co-constitutive part of land reveals the effectiveness of self-immolation in resisting settler colonial structures, namely by acting as a means of reclaiming agency through refusing the Chinese state. In doing so, I hope to shed light on Tibet's predicament as a state that simultaneously occupies and contests settler colonial empire.

History of Tibet

Tibet's development as a region was not organic, but rather a sequence of passage through the hands of various imperial powers. After the collapse of the Qing Empire, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama declared Tibetan independence in 1913. After a few decades, however, the newfound People's Republic of China gradually began the process of incorporating Tibet into its country. A seemingly benign action of declaring Tibet's internal autonomy soon collapsed under the weight of “radical intervention of

¹ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (2006): 387-409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

communists...[who] highlighted their desire to impose their policy and reforms on Central Tibet as well.”² Ultimately, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama fled to India, where he formed a rival government that continues to operate in Dharamshala. While various powers have occupied the region, a vast majority of Tibetan history involves a complicated relationship with its geographic neighbor, whose actions are primarily motivated by a desire for land.

Tactics of Oppression

Wolfe opens by centering territoriality as the primary motive for settler colonialism that can inform our understanding of Chinese encroachment in Tibet. Specifically, he argues that “the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory...settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”³ In doing so, he establishes settler colonialism as a causal foundation for genocidal violence, because land conflict disproportionately affects the citizens who live there. In the context of China, Tibet’s land holds value as a key military and geographic buffer to counter the rising nation of India. The region also has immense economic value, as its environment contains several copper, iron, lead and natural deposits.⁴ More importantly, Tibet is viewed as the solution to China’s water crisis, as its location at the confluence of several major Asian rivers provides an ample supply of freshwater rivaling that of the North and South Poles.⁵ While China intends to utilize such strategic assets, its existing projects are inducing irreparable levels of pollution while rapidly depleting glaciers on the Tibetan plateau, both of which increase the propensity for inter-state conflict between China and Tibet.

Despite its reputation as a Communist country, China has pursued an aggressive policy of marketization in Tibet. For example, Yuchao Zhu and Dongyan Blachford have demonstrated that, while China’s state-sponsored marketization is promoted as a form of economic development, it results in social stratification between Tibetans and the dominant Chinese Han majority. Employing a case study, they analyze the promise of economic prosperity, which induced an influx of Han businesses and temporary migrant workers who worked on construction projects aimed at modernizing Tibet. Specifically, the proportion of Han Chinese people in the population in Lhasa jumped from 28.8% to 34.4% between 1990 and 2000. Jobs reserved for distinctively “Chinese” migrants create a skills-deficit and high illiteracy rates within the local population. Tibetans are economically crowded out and socially

² Stéphane Gros, *Frontier Tibet: Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 30–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvt1sgw7>.

³ Wolfe, 387-409.

⁴ “Factbox: Why Is Remote Tibet of Strategic Significance?” Reuters, Thomson Reuters, March 25, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tibet-strategic/factbox-why-is-remote-tibet-of-strategic-significance-idUSSP2305020080325>.

⁵ Keith Schneider and C. T. Pope, “China, Tibet, and the Strategic Power of Water,” Circle of Blue, May 8, 2008, <https://www.circleofblue.org/2008/world/china-tibet-and-the-strategic-power-of-water/>.

excluded from the Han Chinese population.⁶ The rapid growth of Han people in the region's population demographic has sparked ethnic backlash, as the availability of such opportunities are disproportionately leveraged against the welfare of local Tibetans.

Zhu and Blachford describe this backlash as collateral damage from Chinese neoliberalism, as local development is seen as secondary to its goal in “maintaining stability and curbing separatist demands.”⁷ Through using the free economy as a means of economic expansion that trades off with redistributive policies, China forces Tibetans to face the dual problem of “betting their social and economic conditions while striving to maintain their autonomy and identity.”⁸ In doing so, the cloak of economic development serves as a colonial technology, as it parcels and exploits Tibetan resources while excluding Tibetans from reaping such economic benefits absent a full integration into Chinese society. This conflict between the ethnic Tibetan identity and a unified Chinese majority reflects a broader problem of assimilation that has been weaponized to control Tibet.

The plurality of ethnic identities in Tibet creates conflict with a government that coheres power through a unified Chinese identity. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that colonial domination is enabled by “the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by banishment of the natives and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women.”⁹ Although Fanon writes in the context of French-occupied Algeria, his understanding of the racialized relationship between colonizer and colonized can be applied across transnational contexts. In the context of China, the core of this settler state is defined by a strong national identity that necessitates not only the denial of Tibetan marginalization but also the “cultural obliteration” of Tibetans marked as different. During the country's Great Leap Forward, China sought to collectivize, or transition toward socialism. This campaign was variably implemented in Tibetan areas, with more rigorous policies being focused among Tibetan populations east of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, such as in Qinghai. Yet in areas without a Han majority, such as Tibet, such actions were met with strong opposition and organized riots, particularly between 1956 and 1960. One primary difference between China and Tibet is the latter's emphasis on practicing religion, which is considered a threat to socialist ideology. Chinese political campaigns were motivated to coerce Tibetans “into denunciations of lamas and religion; Party

⁶ Andrew Martin Fischer, *State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Economic Growth* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2005): 130–132.

⁷ Yuchao Zhu and Dongyan Blachford, “Economic Expansion, Marketization, and Their Social Impact on China's Ethnic Minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet,” *Asian Survey* 52, no. 4 (2012): 714–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.4.714>.

⁸ Zhu and Blachford, 732.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pref. Jean-Paul Sartre (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1968), 170.

propaganda claimed that the Tibetan masses had realized the falsity and exploitative nature of religion.”¹⁰ This fear of a power that the state cannot control motivates it to use rhetoric to socialize the mind. In 1990, one interview of Tibetans forced into re-education programs revealed that “we can’t answer that we believe in [Tibetan independence]. The Chinese give their own version and we have to agree. If we don’t agree they arrest us.”¹¹ The use of intimidation as a method of cultural re-education continues to stifle dissent and ensure mastery over the Tibetan people.

In 2020, a study revealed that the forceful vocational training used for the Uyghur people in China was implemented in Tibet, as the program “strengthens [the Tibetans’] weak work discipline’ and reforms their ‘backward thinking’... a process that requires ‘diluting the negative influence of religion’. This is aided by a worrisome new scheme that ‘encourages’ Tibetans to hand over their land and herds to government-run cooperatives, turning them into wage laborers.”¹² This form of re-education expands settler colonialism in two ways. First, it literally dispossesses Tibetan autonomy by stripping their land. Secondly, the program colonizes their minds and converts them into productive units of labor, all while propagating the reformist rhetoric of unifying a national identity while advancing Tibetan society. Such state tactics suggest that the control over knowledge is a tool that is weaponized to eliminate difference, a critical strategy in propagating the project of settler colonialism. Specifically, these Chinese colonialist strategies are not solely aimed at expropriating land but rather to control bodies and force assimilation to national culture or eradication from national history.

While the process of deploying strategies such as economic development and cultural assimilation occurs throughout the history of Sino-Tibetan interactions, one recently developing area of consolidating China’s power is in the digital realm. For example, the Chinese government often forcefully prohibits the release of stories that seek to inform the general public of Tibetan resistance and mistreatment. Such actions infringe upon journalistic authority, as Tibetans have “been the target of digital espionage for over a decade...[and] experienced threats to the confidentiality of information they collected.”¹³ Beyond threats to the journalists that are communicating information regarding the situation in Tibet, their family members are also targeted and intimidated by Chinese authorities despite the journalists’ status in exile. This treatment of the media and citizens within the Chinese settler state reflects the intimacy

¹⁰ Warren Smith Jr., *Tibetan Nation: A History Of Tibetan Nationalism And Sino-tibetan Relations* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 441, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367274771>.

¹¹ “Arrests and Killings,” *Extracts from interviews on situation in Tibet* (London: Tibet Information Network, 1990), 4.

¹² Adrian Zenz, “Xinjiang’s System of Militarized Vocational Training Comes to Tibet,” Jamestown, October 9, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/jamestown-early-warning-brief-xinjiangs-system-of-militarized-vocational-training-comes-to-tibet/>.

¹³ Masashi Crete-Nishihata and Lokman Tsui, “‘The Truth of What’s Happening’ How Tibetan Exile Media Develop and Maintain Journalistic Authority,” *Journalism* (September 2021), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211044899>.

of colonial violence, as censorship is used to disproportionately leverage information and dominate colonial subjects within its empire. In this context, Wolfe's "logic of elimination" does not solely encompass the physical accumulation of land, as terracentricity suggests, but instead extends into the digital terrain through the use of technology as a means of consolidating power.

Self-Immolation as Resistance

While such strategies parcel up Tibetan bodies and exercise the power of the Chinese nation-state, they also leave room for resistance in the struggle for a free, better future. Perhaps the most famous example of Tibetan protest is the use of self-immolation, a Buddhist practice in which one willingly sacrifices their body by setting themselves on fire. While such practices are a way of seeking enlightenment, they also garner a large amount of media attention due to the pure shock and awareness elicited from the action and its conveyed message. This is particularly important given Tibet's predominant religion of Buddhism; using the sensationalism of harming one's own body creates a powerful statement and encourages the spirit of protest while endorsing non-violence as a way of life. John Whalen-Bridge explains that "the self-immolator who dies cannot be 're-educated' into a former protester who disowns [their] prior complaints to avoid torture...Tibetan self-immolation conveys that the person is Tibetan *at all costs*."¹⁴ While the action of self-immolation necessitates the elimination of the physical body, it ensures that the self-immolator maintains their agency and identity as *distinct* from Chinese. Thus, the utility of self-sacrifice as an act of socio-political resistance ensures that the protester and the Tibetan legacy remain immortalized, because "so long as the point is not moot, the movement is not dead."¹⁵ Given the extensive media coverage that has overcome state censorship, this strategy successfully challenges Chinese state sovereignty and preserves Tibetan culture and traditions.¹⁶

This understanding of state tactics to dehumanize bodies demands a shift to focus on the protester's use of their own body as a site of biopolitical resistance. While Chinese strategies such as economic development, technological censorship and cultural re-education attempt to assert domination over the unfamiliar Tibetan terrain, they also assist in creating social order out of the bodies who occupy this land. In this manner, the conflict in Tibet reveals an expanded application of the "logic of elimination"; specifically, accumulating land is one method of fulfilling the state's desire to control and dominate the bodies of colonized subjects, as the former and latter are intertwined with one another. This understanding of the body being

¹⁴ John Whalen-Bridge, *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Protest, and the Rhetoric of Self-Immolation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 39.

¹⁵ Whalen-Bridge, 42.

¹⁶ Self-immolation is certainly not the only method employed by Tibetans as a means of reclaiming agency and resisting cultural erosion. Tibetans generate social life through a variety of strategies such as creating art, civic institutions, and organic scholarship. For more information, visit <https://highpeakspureearth.com/>.

entangled with land facilitates our understanding of biopolitics, as Chinese actions seek to occupy land as a means of controlling the Tibetan population. In doing so, the settler accomplishes the dual mandate of expropriating Tibetans and eliminating their sociocultural identities. The act of self-immolation recognizes this interconnectedness and strategically utilizes it to resist the Chinese state's desire for governability. Self-immolation, however, necessitates a form of destruction that could be easily spun and portrayed as a violent, extremist reaction to Chinese attempts at peace. More importantly, the strategy materially harms Tibetan bodies and, in doing so, advances the momentum of the Chinese empire.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, however, Fanon speaks from the position of the colonized and reminds us that the white man's "relationship with the world is one of appropriation," and that his reclamation of cultural and corporeal agency, or something that the settler could not master, made him feel as though "between the world and me there was a relation of coexistence...[t]he white man had the uncomfortable feeling that I was slipping away and taking something with me."¹⁷ In the context of Tibet, the action of self-sacrifice is a form of stealing oneself and coexisting *with* the world rather than being oppressed *in* the world. Specifically, the transcending of materiality that is commemorated by such suicidal protest is one that implicitly recognizes the immortality of Tibet's spirit. It is this immortality that creates a different relationality with the world; instead of defining Tibet solely as a contested place of extraction, self-immolation acts as generative by rhetorically reclaiming the ability for Tibet to exist, as Fanon writes, "with the world." This action creates settler discomfort that strikes the heart of the Chinese nation-state, as its "appropriation" prevents China from reclaiming the self-immolator who is "slipping away" with the ingrained spirit of an independent Tibet. Viewing the body as its own form of land shifts our understanding of this auto-cremation; instead of being a way of surrendering, it serves as a form of *refusal* by turning to waste the very thing the settler state tries to claim. This new lens reveals that self-immolation is not simply a religious ritual to achieve nirvana, but rather a political strategy of embracing chaos and ungovernability as a means of accelerating the Tibetan liberation movement.

Conclusion

By introducing discourse that centers settler colonialism as a tool to analyze the conflict in Tibet, I hope to provide a renewed awareness surrounding the ongoing tension between the autonomous region and the overwhelming force of the nation-state. Tracing the genealogy of Chinese strategies of control in Tibet, which include economic development, cultural re-education, and technological censorship, reveals the nature of settler colonialism as an evolutionary process and not an event. Instead, such instances of Chinese control over Tibetans reveal that settler colonialism is not

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1968), 128.

merely about expropriating land but is also driven by the desire to create social order out of the bodies that imbibe the land with its value as a resource. Understanding the body as part and parcel of land's value provides a new understanding of the rhetoric behind the act of lighting oneself on fire. While the act of self-immolation materially destroys the body that resists China's settler actions, I argue that it serves as a form of ungovernability, a generative form of refusal that reclaims the spiritual agency necessary for achieving Tibetan liberation. When these perspectives are viewed in tandem, they reveal how the action and rhetoric of protest can challenge the historic and present use of colonial mastery over subjugated bodies. While the ongoing project of Tibetan liberation is incomplete, within this incompleteness lies the spirit of the everyday movement, one which allows Tibetans to resist racial displacement and build communities of care to endure the colonial project of historical erasure.

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