

## Rethinking China's challenge to human rights: The case of tourism development in Tibet

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, the challenge that the Chinese Human Rights Narrative poses to the human rights regime has gained a special sense of urgency as the issue has become embedded into the larger geopolitical debate on China's threat to the liberal world order. This article shifts the focus from the opposition between the liberal and Chinese Narratives to discrepancies between China's Human Rights narrative and practices and challenges liberal human rights, which have been contentious from their inception. Ironically, the Chinese government does not live up to the narrative based on which it confronts liberal democracies. Through the case of tourism development in Tibet, the article illustrates that while China emphasises the right to development by promoting human rights for all individuals, the government's implementation is anchored into violations of the cultural rights of ethnic minorities. With this perspective in mind, the study calls for a defence of human rights grounded on discrepancies between the narrative and actual practices rather than a status quo defence of the human rights regime.*

**Key words:** *critical studies, development, human rights, narrative, Tibet*

## **1. Introduction: Confronting the Chinese Human Rights Narrative Without Defending the Status Quo**

In recent years, human rights have gained a special sense of urgency in the relationship between China and liberal democracies as the understanding of these rights has become embedded into larger geopolitical confrontations. Indeed, not only have the scale of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP)<sup>1</sup> violations and its foreign policy on the matter been extensively discussed by scholars (Biddulph, 2019; Cohen, 1987; Foot, 2000; Goldman, 1995; Kent, 2019; Kinzelbach, 2015; Millward, 2022; Pils, 2018; Roberts, 2020; & Svensson, 2002). In addition, the literature on the Chinese Human Rights Narrative has analysed in detail what the government tags as 'Human Rights with Chinese characteristics'. This literature highlights China's increasing assertiveness in challenging the human rights regime. Authors have demonstrated China's attempt to rewrite norms and reframe existing procedures at the United Nations (UN) to minimise scrutiny of government violations. Furthermore, they have also pointed to China's reinterpretation of key concepts such as sovereignty, universality and development based on cultural relativism, which other authoritarian countries have also used to disempower human rights (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019; Piccone, 2018; Richardson, 2020; & Inboden, 2021). These observations have been crucial in highlighting how the Chinese Human Rights Narrative is integrated into larger geopolitical considerations in relation to the threat that China poses to the liberal world order (Breslin, 2017; Doshi, 2021; Economy, 2022; Ikenberry, 2008; Jones, 2020; Mitter, 2022; Murphy, 2019; Steinfeld, 2010 & Yue, 2008).

There is no fixed definition of 'Human rights with Chinese characteristics' as its meaning is contingent on the particular agenda of the Chinese government at a specific time (Chen, 2021), but persistent themes can be identified over time. Authors have highlighted how a recurring element which illustrates the ideological opposition between the Chinese Human Rights Narrative and the liberal understanding of these rights is the concept of development. They have described how the Chinese government presents itself as a leading voice in the promotion of the right to development initiated by developing countries and acknowledged in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) while at the same time, its state-centred interpretation contradicts this declaration (Muller, 2019; & Global Times, 2021). The literature also discusses how developing countries affirm their belief in the 'development approach to human rights' which prioritises development policies to improve the capacity of states to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights but does not integrate human

1 The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a one party-state since its creation in 1949, with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ruling the country without interruption. In this article, I use China/Beijing/CCP as synonymous of Chinese government. This should not overlook the fact that the Chinese government is exercising a very controlled censorship on its population, which does not necessarily identify with the CCP's policy.

rights mainstreaming in the process of achieving development (Arts & Tamo, 2016). In this sense, Worden (2017) describes Beijing's push to promote the concept of 'development promoting human rights' in the international human rights system. In contrast, most Western countries adhere to a 'human rights-based approach to development', which involves the mainstreaming of human rights in the achievement of development goals with a set of tools and essential references on how to achieve these goals. Liberal democracies recognise that economic development and the improvement of living standards help in providing support for human rights progress. At the same time, they do not equate development with human rights. In contrast, China not only prioritises economic development as a key element to achieve human rights progress (Zhang, 2012), but its view is also that the state is the primary subject of development, even though the Declaration on the Right to Development clearly states that the human person is the central subject and beneficiary of the right to development (Worden, 2019). These two conceptions of development are seen as opposed to each other and as incarnating two different visions of human rights. The liberal understanding of human rights is referred to as the post-1945 human rights consensus, which China is currently seen as challenging dramatically. In this sense, the literature on the Chinese Human Rights Narrative focuses on this precise challenge, sometimes implying that it is desirable to maintain the status quo to push back against China's weakening of human rights. For example, Richardson (2020: 1, emphasis added), 'details the ways Chinese authorities seek to shape norms and practices globally and sets out steps that the governments and institutions can take to *'reverse'* these trends, including forming multilateral and multi-year coalitions to serve as a counterweight to Chinese government influence'. At the same time, the critical literature on human rights acknowledges that the post-1945 human rights consensus has been very contentious from its onset (Goodale, 2016; Whyte, 2019; & Moyn, 2018). However, the descriptions of China's threats to the alleged post-World War II consensus on human rights have leaned towards forgetting that such consensus was never unproblematic in the first place. Indeed, this assumption ignores the fact that at the outset of the modern 'age of rights', in the post-war era, 'human rights' was a contested discursive terrain, not yet treated as synonymous with the values of Western liberalism' (O'byrne, 2019: 644). Scholars also regularly intuit deficiencies in the human rights system and the need for reforms. For example, one of its main fora, the Human Rights Council, is often criticised for being politicised<sup>2</sup>, ineffective and weak, therefore failing to act in egregious cases (Chauville, 2015; Carraro, 2017; & Freedman, 2014). Nevertheless, these deficiencies and the contentiousness of human rights remain absent from discussions on how to handle China's challenge, positioning potential solutions within a status quo perspective more than an opportunity for reforms. This article argues that the Chinese Human Rights Narrative challenges liberal human

2 For an example of politicization outside the Human Rights Council, see Genoud (2022).

rights, which have been contentious from their inception. Ironically, the Chinese government does not live up to the Narrative based on which it confronts liberal democracies. The identification of these discrepancies offers a ground to confront China that does not focus on differences in narratives and maintenance of the status quo.

To illustrate this argument, the concept of human rights practices is used. Anthropologists (Goodale & Merry, 2007; Sarfaty, 2012) have resorted to practices to underline how transnational ideas become meaningful in local social settings. Interestingly, the focus on practices was part of a move within anthropology to skirt the universalism-relativism debate, which preoccupied anthropologists in the 1990s, and to tackle instead the social processes of human rights implementation and resistance (Merry, 2006). The endeavour to focus on implementation to circumvent ideological debates on universalism is especially relevant in the case of China. The risks that the Chinese government manipulates calls to acknowledge the contingency, contentiousness and deficiencies of human rights (Goodale, 2022; & Genoud, 2022) have rendered the questioning of universalism politically charged. Consequently, the concept of human rights practices is applied in the China case to overcome the limits of focusing on narratives and highlight instead the discrepancies between human rights narratives and practices.

In this article, the case of tourism development in Tibet is used as fostering economic development in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities is of utmost importance for China. The Chinese Human Rights Narrative presents development as the very component on which the government's legitimacy in these regions is based (State Council, 2013). In Tibet, Beijing has justified its presence since 1951 through what it calls the 'Peaceful Liberation' of the region, which it argues brings the necessary development to improve human rights enjoyment (State Council, 2011, 2013, 2019, 2021). In contrast, criticism of Chinese policies in Tibet has highlighted constant violations of human rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of expression and cultural rights, prompting protests and self-immolations of monks. The study is based on the practices of field observations in the Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan and Qinghai between August and September 2020<sup>3</sup>, reports of travel to the Tibetan Autonomous Region

3 The Tibetan areas spread in five provinces: Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. The international community has centered its attention on TAR, which was created in 1965 and corresponds roughly to the territory ruled by the Dalai Lama government since 1642 until the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's exile to India in 1959. TAR requires an authorization from the government to be visited, a constraint that elicits curiosity and fantasy. However, TAR is just one part of the Tibetan areas and Tibetans in the other provinces face the same human rights violations and share the same aspirations to enjoy these rights. To limit the Tibetan question to TAR implicitly

(TAR) by journalists and diplomats and secondary sources on development and tourism in Tibet.

## 2. The Chinese Human Rights Narrative on Development and its Limits

The Chinese discourse on human rights emerged as the government commenced an internal process of self-reflection after the abuses of the Mao era. The current Chinese narrative of development as key to implementing a Marxist vision of human rights was progressively articulated following Mao's death (1976) when China abandoned the conception of human rights as anchored into class struggle. Until then, citizens' rights were occasionally acknowledged as a concrete legal and constitutional existence, but the concept of human rights as natural rights was dismissed as esoteric and bourgeois with little relevance to Chinese socialist society. According to Mao, Marxist principles dictated that only the proletarian class should be accorded rights while the bourgeoisie must be deprived of rights to avoid their use against the achievement of socialism (Jain, 2021; Weatherley, 2000; & Dingding, 2005).

The major trigger for the CCP to engage with human rights has been the international pressure following the Tiananmen crackdown of peaceful protests (Foot, 2000; Weatherley, 2014). The outcry prompted by the People's Liberation Army's use of violence marked a turning point in terms of international attention to China's human rights record, as the country had until then remained largely spared of significant human rights criticism (Cohen, 1987; Kent, 2019; & Kinzelbach, 2019). As a response, the Chinese government issued its first White Paper on human rights in 1991, with the centrality on the right to subsistence establishing the role of socio-economic development to achieve the Marxist vision of human rights. Since then, the CCP has reiterated its strong emphasis on development as the best way to ensure the enjoyment of a Marxist vision of human rights (State Council, 2016, 2018).

As a socialist state with a focus on growth, from the outset China placed its priority on the rights to subsistence and development, actively participating in the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) (Chen, 2019). The Chinese narrative on the necessity of socio-economic development in the achievement of a Marxist vision of human rights has evolved from a focus on the right to subsistence in the 1980s to a focus on the right to development in the 2010s, although the two still tend to coexist (Muller, 2019). According to the 1991 White Paper

follows the Chinese division of the Tibetan populations into different provinces despite their common culture based on Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhism. For a very insightful example of the necessity to consider the region as a whole, see Demick (2020).

on human rights (State Council, 1991), the right to subsistence outranks all the other rights because such rights cannot be achieved without first ensuring subsistence: 'It is a simple truth that, for any country or nation, the right to subsistence is the most important of all human rights, without which the other rights are out of the question'. At that time, the Chinese government prioritised GDP growth and there was an internal consensus on including some elements of the market economy to achieve this goal. Internal debates related to the extent of capitalist reforms, rather than the necessity of the reform themselves (Weber, 2021). Since 2012, Xi Jinping started including new indicators of development to GDP growth, such as managing poverty alleviation (Naughton, 2017), now claimed as one of the President's signature achievements. Progressively, the right to development gained prominence with the publication of White Papers tackling this issue from different perspectives. According to the 2016 White Paper on the right to development: 'The rights to subsistence and development are the primary, basic human rights' and 'the right to development is incorporated into other human rights, while the latter creates the conditions for people to facilitate development and realise the right to development. Safeguarding the right to development is the precondition for realising economic, cultural, social and environmental rights and obtaining civil and political rights' (State Council, 2016).

By Marxist vision of human rights, China generally refers to the protection of national stability and security as coming before individual rights, to a person's entitlement to rights as contingent upon the prior fulfilment of his duties, to collective rights – often apprehended as economic, social and cultural rights – as having priority over individual rights and by extension, to collective rights as also pertaining to the State (and not only the individual). Among these elements, the emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights has been especially important. This is illustrated in various White Papers such as the recent one entitled 'Moderate Prosperity and Human Rights' (State Council, 2021). For the Chinese government, socialism (understood as Marxism), development and human rights in particular economic, social and cultural rights are therefore intrinsically connected.

Concurrently, the relationship that the Chinese government establishes between development and a Marxist vision of human rights is quite overarching and loose. According to the Chinese government, it is not incompatible for socialism to integrate elements of capitalism to reach a certain level of development, which in turn is absolutely necessary to achieve real socialism and enjoyment of human rights, especially of economic, social and cultural rights. As Weber (2021) mentions, this argument goes round and round as any deviation from socialism towards capitalism becomes tolerated in the precise name of socialism if it is perceived as promoting development. Furthermore, as socialism also constitutes the best way to ensure human rights enjoyment and development is necessary

to achieve socialism, development is therefore elevated as the solution to all human rights concerns (State Council, 2021). In this sense, even where the process of achieving socialism has led to mistakes which damaged human rights, only by building socialism can human rights be realised (Nathan, 1994).

In recent years, China's efforts to insert its human rights language at the UN have been translated through the introduction of two resolutions on development at the Human Rights Council. Indeed, China's first sponsored resolution at the council was titled 'The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights' and was adopted by the Council in 2017 (HRC). While the resolution might look straightforward at first glance, closer scrutiny reveals how by tweaking the language, China effectively privileged the right to development over other rights and weakened certain human rights norms. Hence, the resolution has been largely seen as an attempt to reframe the relationship between development and human rights in a way that deviates from consensus texts adopted by the UN (Worden, 2017, 2018). In 2019, China again sponsored a resolution on development, which further builds on the 2017 resolution but further emphasised the need to end poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development (Chen, 2021).

Overall, the Chinese government has tended to prefer the use of developmental language rather than human rights language. In practice, authors have demonstrated how, China's emphasis on the right to development has mixed human rights especially economic, social, and cultural rights and development goals, when the two are not equivalent. In addition, they highlight how development has often been applied in a way that violates human rights in the name of economic development (Philip, 2017; & Pils, 2018). In the same vein, the critical literature on development in Tibet depicts the difficulties for Tibetans to benefit from development and how it serves to extend Chinese control of the region. For Fischer (2015), it is not surprising that the intensive subsidisation of Tibet has generated high rates of GDP growth. However, these subsidies have been dominated by external interests, such as those of the outside companies building most of the infrastructure and have rendered Tibet extremely dependent on China. Fischer (2005, 2014) also describes how although such subsidies alleviate poverty and improve living standards in absolute terms, they have also perversely increased the economic marginalisation of Tibetans because of Han Chinese immigration and the discriminatory effects of the Han-centric economic system. For Yeh (2013), the narrative of the inevitability of the Chinese rule in Tibet and the legitimisation of China's sovereignty rests heavily on subsidies presented as generous gifts. In this sense, receiving development becomes an act of recognition by Tibetans of the Chinese state as their state. In addition, the discourse of development shapes the Tibetans' perception of themselves as lazy and unable to offer this gift to themselves, therefore

relying on China to do so (Yeh, 2007). This image of development as shaping Tibetans' identity is also described by Grant (2018), according to whom implicit in development is the assumption that ethnic Han are carriers of advanced skills that can be imparted to Tibetans. In this sense, urban reconstruction is one of several biopolitical techniques the state has used to enroll Tibetans into Chinese social and cultural norms, especially after the 2008 Tibetan protests.

The critical literature on development in Tibet has analysed the difficulties for Tibetans to benefit from Chinese development as well as the instrumentalisation of development for political purposes, security, stability and reinforcement of the Chinese State. Nevertheless, this literature has not directly engaged with the literature on the Chinese Human Rights Narrative on development. By highlighting the discrepancies between narrative and practices, the next section contextualises the shortcomings of Chinese development in Tibet into the wider assessment of the threat that China poses to the liberal world order. By observing China's Human Rights practices on development, field investigation illustrates how the Chinese government's implementation of human rights falls short of the narrative used to confront liberal democracies.

### **3. Case Study: Tourism Development in Tibet and Violations of Cultural Rights**

The concept of human rights practices refers to 'what actors do and say' at a specific point in time and the overall patterns created by these practices (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). A clear definition of human rights practices is often not provided, but exceptions include Donnelly (2013), who mentions four dimensions to practices: exercise, respect, enjoyment and enforcement. In the project, the use of practices as a core unit of analysis aims to overcome the shortcomings of the focus on narrative.

The Chinese Marxist vision of development as promoting economic, social and cultural rights is an important component of the CCP's policies in Tibet. According to the Chinese narrative, before the 'Peaceful Liberation'<sup>4</sup>, Tibetans were living under feudal theocratic serfdom with no respect for human rights. In this sense, the establishment of a socialist system and the modernisation of the region would have constituted a cornerstone for the human rights of Tibetans with the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights, such as the 'victory over poverty', the 'protection of traditional culture', as well as 'results in ethnic and

4 In 1950, China incorporated Tibet in its territory, affirming its sovereignty but granting the area a certain level of autonomy in the 17 points agreement. Since this 'Peaceful liberation', the Tibetan minority's enjoyment of human rights has been a significant issue of contention. Following the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the Dalai Lama fled to Dharamshala where he is still in exile. For an alternative to the narrative of 'Peaceful liberation', see Demick (2020).



religious work' (State Council, 2021). A crucial moment in China's policies in Tibet was President Jiang Zemin's intensification of the development dynamic with the 1999 Western Development Project launched to address the gap between China's western (including Tibet) and coastal areas. This development was focused on big infrastructure projects such as the building of roads and transportation, which official discourses celebrated for opening natural resources for the benefit of the rest of the country and bringing advancement in living standards (State Council, 2013). Important subsidies were allocated for the projects with the subsequent GDP growth acclaimed thanks to modernisation.

Tourism is one of the main industries that China is pushing forward to develop western regions such as Tibet. Tourism was already one of the touchstones of Deng Xiaoping's modernisation model in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Barabantseva, 2009). Nevertheless, there is a clear tension between tourism promotion in Tibet through its cultural heritage and the political grievances against the CCP that precisely take their roots in violations of cultural rights. Paradoxically, tourism in the Tibetan areas is based not only on the attractiveness of landscape and rural life but also on Tibetan culture, including monasteries and Buddhism. At the same time, monasteries in Tibet have historically acted as cultural and political centres for Tibetans and played a crucial role in their identity. As one key defining feature of Tibetan identity, Buddhism has been targeted by repressive measures, which have exacerbated Tibetans' frustration with the Chinese State and made monasteries nuclei of Tibetan political activism (Han & Paik, 2014; Tibet Watch, 2016). The traditional fusion of religious and political systems in Tibet<sup>5</sup> meant that the Dalai Lama is a core figure of Tibetan culture and is considered by the Tibetan people as the foremost leader of Tibetan Buddhism. However, the Chinese government considers the current Dalai Lama (the 14<sup>th</sup>) a 'splittist' and regularly accuses him and the 'Dalai clique' of using religion for political aims and of failing its people while in exile, whereas the Chinese government has brought lots of economic achievements to Tibet (Global Times, 2019).

Much against the religious sentiments of the monks and nuns, the CCP has implemented an anti-Dalai Lama policy for the last 26 years following its adoption in 1994 during the third Tibet Work Forum (ICT, 2021). This policy has been accompanied by attempts to delegitimise the authority of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, currently in exile in Dharamsala, for example by attributing the merits of development to the CCP. According to one Chinese State media: 'Southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region is getting better, where railways and roads have been constantly open to traffic. Tibet is like a different planet in comparison to Dharamsala, where the 'Tibetan government-in-exile' has been set. Such a striking contrast is sufficient to frustrate every external force and exhaust the gang

5 The Dalai Lama gave up his political role in 2011 (Yardley and Wong, 2011).

of traitors represented by the Dalai Lama (Global Times, 2021a). The CCP's model of development has also been used to justify Sinicisation<sup>6</sup> of Tibetan Buddhism. During the 7<sup>th</sup> Central Symposium of Tibet Work held in Beijing in August 2020, President Xi Jinping declared that: 'Tibetan Buddhism should be guided in adapting to the socialist society and should be developed in the Chinese context' (Xinhua, 2020) while at the same time, efforts should be sped up to advance high-quality development. Consequently, the relationship between economic, social and cultural rights on the one hand and development through tourism on the other hand is very much a vexed one, with the CCP trying to obfuscate ways in which development can infringe upon human rights<sup>7</sup>.

The tension between attracting tourism with cultural heritage and violations of cultural rights is especially visible with the interdiction of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's images and authorities regularly clamping down on possession of his picture. In monasteries, the portrait of his Holiness is nowhere to be seen. Monks in the monasteries in Tibetan areas which can be visited with organised tours, have expressed their sadness not to be authorised to worship the Dalai Lama. In remote areas inhabited by nomads where the CCP's control is more difficult due to seclusion, pictures of the Dalai Lama were exposed in some homes. These are quickly hidden in case of any police search in their homes. In addition, for many years, it is not possible anymore for foreigners to visit the birthplace of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in the village of Takster (Qinghai). During my visit to the Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Gansu, when passing in the proximity of Takster on the road from Xining to Labrang, I asked my Han Chinese driver whether we could stop at Takster. Various foreign and Chinese tourism agencies and guides had already informed me that visiting the birthplace of the Dalai Lama was currently forbidden to foreigners, often after having to check the status. The driver replied that he did not want to go there because the place was under surveillance.

Dalai Lamas are not all construed in the same way by the CCP, depending on the kind of relationship they entertained with China throughout history. While Beijing attempts to undermine the influence of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama on its people, references to other Dalai Lamas might be tolerated. For example, in Litang (Sichuan) it is possible to visit the former residence of the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in an area of the town that has recently been renovated for tourism, with bus shuttles driving visitors from one point of interest

6 Sinicization of religions as an official policy was first initiated during a Central United Front Work conference in mid-2015, reaffirmed during the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016 and finally publicly declared at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017 (ICT, 2021).

7 This focus on how development contributes to human rights, while at the same time neglecting to consider ways in which development can infringe upon human rights has been anchored in a Human Rights Council Resolution sponsored by China: 'Promoting Development over Human Rights' (HRC/31/L.47) (Piccone, 2018).

to another. However, the residence still poses a problem for the CCP, as it is said that Chinese tourists are normally forbidden from entering the building. Access is free and during my visit, there was no other visitor and no visible sign of checking at the entry, except from the usual cameras present everywhere in the region. On one of the walls, there was a painting with a small representation of the Dalai Lama. Considering the size and the design of the drawing, his face was not recognisable. My Tibetan guide explained in a suddenly lower voice that the painting represents the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, but no indication specifies it as such, illustrating the complex cohabitation of the control of religion and the promotion of culture to attract tourism.

Another example of this tension is the Tashi Lunpo monastery in Shigatse, the traditional seat of the Panchem Lama, which is a part of the guided tour of the TAR for foreigners that is allowed by the Chinese government<sup>8</sup>. The Panchem Lama is the second most important spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism. A controversy has taken place regarding the recognition of the current and 11<sup>th</sup> Panchem Lama. Three days after the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama recognised Gedhun Choekyi Nyima in 1995 as the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchem Lama, the Chinese government abducted him and nominated instead Gyaincain Norbu. Since then, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima has disappeared and Gyaincain Norbu is endorsing the role of Panchem Lama without the support of most Tibetans. In this context, the visit of Tashi Lunpo monastery on government-approved tourism tours goes hand in hand with the CCP's imposition of its narrative on Tibetan Buddhism as tourists are explained that the legitimate 11<sup>th</sup> Panchem Lama is the Chinese nominated one.

Such partial acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism shows the stakes for Beijing around the definition of what aspect of Tibetan culture can be tolerated and promoted through tourism. While on the one hand, new tourist infrastructures demonstrate an attempt to enhance the Tibetan standard of living and subsistence through tourism, development remains very controlled to legitimise the CCP's rule and avoid any questioning of its ethnic policy, therefore strongly limiting cultural human rights.

The commercialisation of monasteries shows further contradictions related to the enjoyment of cultural rights in China's promotion of tourism

8 The Chinese government policy related to tourism in TAR has varied over the years. In general, while Chinese tourism is promoted, it is much more difficult for foreigners, especially diplomats and journalists to travel there. A permit must be granted by the Chinese government. After being closed for about 1.5 year because of Covid-19, TAR has been reopened to foreigners in May 2021. However, foreigners can only visit through a government approved travel agency. The visit is a standard one, which includes the presence of a guide and a representative of the Foreign Affairs Office. I have not travelled there myself but accessed reports from people who participated in those organized tours.

development. Indeed, the arrival of Chinese mass tourism in these sacred places has impacted the daily spiritual life of the monks and nuns. For example, Kumbum, a monastery in Qinghai province, has now become a popular stop on Chinese mass tourism tours. With the high number of visitors, monks in the monastery are busy with tourism-related tasks such as ticket checking, queue managing, selling yak butter candles, playing instruments for money and teaching Tibetan prostrations to tourists. Such tasks are usually assigned daily from morning to evening. This example is representative of a wider trend, as monks have reported increasing numbers of tourists coming to their monasteries because of improved rail links and China's government promotion of Tibet as a tourist destination, disturbing their studies and way of life.

Furthermore, mass tourism in monasteries is accompanied by the implementation of infrastructures that enhance surveillance. While monks and nuns in Tibet live under constant surveillance, through security cameras and the presence of police and of CCP cadres in monasteries<sup>9</sup>, tourism engenders more surveillance as the Chinese government's control of religious life expands to interactions with tourists. The risks that monks/nuns take if they engage in a conversation with foreign tourists are visible through their clear gazing at security cameras during the interactions or through their checking of any surrounding presence, with plain clothes escorts often interrupting the exchange<sup>10</sup>. In addition, ticket offices are increasingly built at the entrance of monasteries<sup>11</sup>. Brand new buildings of imposing size and featuring tourist information centres were often closed during my visit. However, they hint at current transformations in terms of tourism development and surveillance. Ticket offices are not only a way for the authorities to earn money, but they also reinforce surveillance by adding scrutiny of visitors. My Tibetan guide was worried that information centres may regulate visits and guides, with the risk of Tibetan guides being surveilled or replaced by Han Chinese guides.

The commercialisation of monasteries is also accompanied by renovations, which are an ongoing activity in numerous monasteries. While the Chinese government claims that renovations are conducted with respect to the authenticity of sacred places, concerns have been raised that commercialisation is harming old structures and local religious traditions (AFP, 2013). Some monasteries have been renovated to turn them into tourist sites, or modified to create space for restaurants, hotels and shops.

9 According to ICT (2021), The state media outlet China Daily stated in fall 2015 that as many as 6,575 cadres from different levels in the party and government hierarchy work in the 1,787 monasteries in the TAR.

10 During my visit, I was sometimes followed by plain cloth escorts.

11 As access to monasteries is essential for spiritual life, Tibetans usually consider that entry should not be charged for. In general, entry is free for Tibetans and only tourists pay. Often, the money of entries goes to the Chinese government and the money of the donations to the monastery.

In the case of the monastery of Larung Gar (Sichuan), renovations have been an opportunity for the Chinese government to limit the expansion of the site and enhance surveillance. Founded in 1980, Larung Gar was considered the largest Buddhist monastic centre with around 40,000 inhabitants (monks, nuns, vow holders and lay people) in 2016, when it was partially destroyed. Destructions and harassment by the Chinese government had already started in the 2000s. However, the government used the opportunity of a fire in 2014 which spread rapidly and burned hundreds of houses because of overcrowding, proximity among houses and poor anti-fire standards to limit the number of inhabitants, as well as to reorganise the space for mass tourism. A small number of new houses have been built in less exposed areas and spatial separation is ensured by destroying a bigger number of houses to prevent the spread of potential future fires. However, there has been criticism of the instrumentalisation of the fire to restrain the influence of Tibetan Buddhism (Das, 2020). Such rearrangements have indeed led to the shrinking of spiritual practice and the 'Chinese government's promotion of Disneyland style tourism', for example by turning ancient Tibetan funerary practices into a tourist spectacle (TCHRD, 2017). While during my visit, foreigners were still forbidden to visit Larung Gar, big hotels that will welcome Chinese mass tourism are being built nearby. The foreigner ban also signals the Chinese government's uneasiness to handle the contradiction in promoting tourism in Tibet through its culture, while at the same time repressing cultural rights.

The construction of tourism infrastructure is also a way for Beijing to spread its narrative on Tibet and to promote a type of tourism that remains under its control, i.e., where any aspects of Tibetan culture and religion that put into question the legitimacy of the government are erased. In this context, Tibetan culture museums are designed to disseminate Chinese propaganda and spread the narrative of the inevitability of Chinese rule in Tibet. For example, Dodge and Keränen (2018) have analysed how Lhasa's Tibet Museum is used to celebrate the success of the CCP's leapfrog development, reproduce the state narrative of triumphant modernisation, and circulate highly questionable depictions of the situation in Tibet before its final annexation by China in 1959. In addition, the conversion of the Potala Palace<sup>12</sup> into a museum void of the history of Tibetan oppression has turned it into an instrument of the Chinese narrative and of the commercialisation of Tibetan culture (Vetter, 2020). The same kind of legitimisation process is at play at the Museum of the Red Army's Long March in Gyalthang (Yunnan)<sup>13</sup>, which is situated on the main square where tourists gather to take pictures. An important part of the museum relates the arrival of Chinese soldiers in Tibet as a 'peaceful liberation'.

12 The traditional residence of the Dalai Lamas, the administrative base of the Tibetan government, and the institutional heart of Tibetan Buddhism.

13 surnamed Shangri-La in 2001.

Overall, in Tibetan culture museums, contentious issues such as the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama are left aside. For example, in the Jyekundo Museum (Yushu Museum in Chinese Kham, Chinese province of Qinghai), the very ancient roots of Chinese Buddhism are put forward, normalising the interference of China in Tibetan Buddhism. The other big cultural museum of the region, based in Xining (Qinghai), has been under renovation and closed to the public for an extended period. Renovations are usually an opportunity for the government to expand its narrative, such as the idea that 'Tibetan culture is an important part of the Chinese culture (...)' (Xinhua, 2019).

Furthermore, the construction of 'new old towns' and tourist routes helps the CCP to control tourism by concentrating areas of interest into a limited space, where only aspects of Tibetan culture that do not threaten the CCP's narrative on Tibet are showcased. For example, in Garze (Sichuan), a 'new old town' built with fake fortifications at the entrance of the city concentrates shops and restaurants for tourists. Separated geographically from the rest of the city and facing a big hotel for Chinese mass tourism, such urban planning allows the government to control what tourists see and experience as Tibetan culture by limiting the space they are tempted to explore. In the same vein, the tourist map of Litang (Kham, Sichuan) with its bus stop route reduces the area that tourists visit to nicely decorated and renovated streets with apolitical photo exhibitions of Tibet's nature and rural life. In addition to the house of the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (see above), which makes no mention of the current revindication of Tibetans in terms of cultural and religious rights, the map already indicates a 'pilgrim mini museum' to 'honour thousands of pilgrims who travel more than 2 million times over 3,000km to reach Lhasa'<sup>14</sup>. Although already indicated on the map, the museum was not built yet at the time of my travel. Pilgrimage has become a manifestation of the political and cultural identity of the Tibetan people. Significant changes in its practice have occurred in the last decades, including in relation to Sinicisation and tourism development (Buffetrille, 2003). Consequently, the control of the narrative on pilgrimage will probably constitute another instrument of the CCP's legitimisation while at the same time conveying a very partial and problematic definition of cultural rights.

#### **4. Conclusion: Practices Rather than Narrative for Liberal Democracies Too**

In this article, I have offered an alternative to assess the challenge that the Chinese Human Rights Narrative poses to the liberal world order by shifting the focus from ideological differences to implementation on the ground. By looking at human rights practices in the context of tourism development in Tibet, I have highlighted the Chinese government's

14 Indication on a tourist leaflet received in a brand-new coffee shop, just in front of the Former Residence of the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

incoherencies in stating that development promotes economic, social and cultural rights. While China has indeed enhanced its standards of living, this improvement has been accompanied by violations of the cultural rights of Tibetans. This observation contradicts a central claim of the Chinese government according to which China is a leader in ensuring economic, social and cultural rights in contrast with liberal democracies' focus on civil and political rights.

The assessment of China's challenge to the liberal order based on practices rather than narrative has the advantage of circumventing ideological debates which have led to the deadlock of human rights discussions between liberal democracies and China. As illustrated by Taylor's (2020) analysis of the China-European Union (EU) human rights dialogue, by dismissing and refusing to engage with the Chinese perspective as well as perceiving its interpretation as uncontested, the EU undermined rather than strengthened its normative power with China. By avoiding disregarding the Chinese Human Rights Narrative out of hands, this article thus aims to open the door to a less polarised exchange, which would make possible an acknowledgement of China's contribution to human rights in terms of poverty alleviation (Bikales, 2021) while nuancing this achievement by recalling that in practice, the government's top-down and GDP centred approach has some profound limits in terms of human rights enjoyment.

Avoiding a blank dismissal of the Chinese Human Rights Narrative through the focus on human rights practices would also prevent a defence of human rights that implies the maintenance of the current status quo. As the context of the post-1945 human rights regime has deeply evolved, it is not surprising that some countries are advocating for changes by expressing disagreements. Considering the acknowledgement by liberal democracies of the deficiencies of the human rights regime, academic analysis of the weaknesses of the current liberal interpretation of human rights (Whyte, 2019; Moyn, 2018; & Hopgood, 2013) as well as calls to reinvent human rights for them to overcome the challenges of our time (Goodale, 2022a), there is a momentum to confront China's narrative by taking stock of these deficiencies, not by ignoring them. Risks of manipulation of these deficiencies by the Chinese propaganda have until now been dissuasive in embarking on such a process.

Considering such risks of instrumentalisation, this path thus might prove fruitful for liberal democracies under the condition that they avoid discrepancies between their own human rights narrative and practices. In discussing complicity in democratic engagement with autocratic systems such as China, Pils (2021) demonstrates how democratic actors are often not mere victims of authoritarian countries' activities, but rather participate or contribute to human rights violations by expanding authoritarian influence beyond national borders through international collaborations

and exchanges. In addition, Genoud and Pils (2022) demonstrate how previously dominant ideas shaping the EU's Human Rights relationship with China such as the change through trade approach have largely failed, entailing the need for the EU to acknowledge the failure of such a model despite the potential economic drawback. Furthermore, as the support that China has gathered for its narrative is also anchored into developing countries' impression of double standards and resentment against colonialism (Khannenje, 2022), only by ensuring strong credibility in Human Rights enforcement, liberal democracies will be able to conduct productive discussions based on practices.

The alternative suggested here is in no way equivalent to a silver bullet solution. As the literature on the Chinese Human Rights Narrative mentioned above (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019; Picconne, 2018; Richardson, 2020; Sceats and Breslin, 2012; & Inboden, 2021) has demonstrated, China's challenge to human rights is very profound and has very devastating and concrete consequences for victims. Nevertheless, the current polarisation of the human rights debate and its anchoring into wider geopolitical confrontations have wiped out the prospect of reinventing human rights because of the risks of manipulation.

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