

Tibet's Treasure House

From copper for transmission lines to lithium for batteries, Tibet holds immense stores of key minerals craved by the modern Chinese and global economies. Much like the Arctic, the Tibetan Plateau is even a new frontier for fossil fuel extraction.

Until recently Tibet was protected by its remoteness, its vast mineral reserves largely beyond reach. This has changed, as the Chinese Government pours billions of Yuan into new infrastructure, opening up Tibet's once inaccessible riches to industrial exploitation. Since the completion of the Golmud-Lhasa railway link in 2006, and subsequent line extensions and branches in 2014 and 2021, mining in Tibet has exploded with the Central Tibetan Administration reporting more than 240 mines on land formerly occupied by nomads. The consequences for the Tibetan people and environment are, in many cases, already severe. And concern is mounting about flow-on effects for the region.



Expansion of the controversial Gyama mining site near Lhasa (TibetanReview.net)

Tibet, as a consequence of its geology and formation, reportedly has 132 different types of mineral resources, including copper, gold, iron ore, aluminium, chromite, lithium, coal, crude oil, and natural gas. China has long known that immense riches lie beneath Tibet's mountains and plains. The Chinese name for Tibet — Xizang — translates roughly to "Western treasurehouse".

However, large-scale mining in Tibet is a recent phenomenon. Tibet's extreme geography has till now largely prevented resource-hungry China from extracting resources from the high plateau at significant scale and moving them the vast distances to where they might be used.

Long before China's arrival, Tibetans had a rich tradition of metalwork, turning gold and silver into religious objects, coins and jewelry, iron into bridges and armour, and more. However, traditional beliefs, technological limitations, and the kind of acute awareness of the impacts of over-exploitation that a close dependence on the immediate natural environment inevitably fosters, meant mining operations were incomparable to those we see today. Tibetans used alluvial gold (i.e. gold deposited in stream and river beds) rather than digging. When Tibetans did dig for minerals, the mines were invariably small, and did not involve tunneling, chemicals or explosives.

In 2006 China completed the first railway into Tibet, linking Tibet's capital Lhasa to China's national rail network. The 'Qinghai-Tibet' railway is the world's highest railway, extraordinarily costly to build and maintain, and considered one of China's most remarkable feats of engineering. Its completion was a pivotal step in enabling the industrialisation and exploitation of the Tibetan Plateau.

For Tibetans such developments have undeniably been a mixed blessing. At best the benefits of economic development in Tibet have been shared unequally. At worst, Tibetans have been left substantially worse off – edged out of the market

by Chinese migrants, their land compromised, and their traditional livelihoods taken away. By 2014, the railway had been extended to Shigatse. Electrification of railway lines has commenced in Tibet and the first bullet train service is running. Several more lines are already under construction, including those coming from Chengdu in Sichuan and Kathmandu in Nepal, and several others are on the drawing board. These lines are further opening

up the Tibetan plateau for more large-scale resource extraction.

Tragically, Tibet has become a prime example of the resource curse — the all-too-common paradox that sees many people in resource-rich countries, rather than benefitting from their natural endowment, driven into poverty.

Tibet's mines are a major source of lithium and magnesium for China's production of lithium batteries and electric vehicles. They are essential metals for the move to a greener future. Ironically, mining them is leading to environmental degradation of Tibet. Chinese mining is notorious for its accidents and low environmental standards, the production of these two metals from the salts of lakes is also very water intensive. The world must demand higher environmental standards for mining.

In April 2013 a disaster at the Gyama mine, a large mine near Lhasa extracting several metals including copper and gold, brought the impact of mining in Tibet into the international headlines. Reports of the tragedy, in which a 3km-long landslide (according to Chinese state media) buried 83 miners, also documented Tibetans' anger at the environmental damage being caused in the Gyama Valley and by other mines on the Tibetan Plateau. Reports of completed roads into the Gyama Valley have raised real fears the mine will be restarted, and new mines commenced.

Tibet is consistently identified as one of the most repressive places on earth. In its comparative assessment of political rights and civil liberties, US-based non-government organization *Freedom House* has for many years placed Tibet in its 'worst of the worst' category, with the worst possible rating for both political rights and civil liberties. In 2021 it moved Tibet to outright worst as the least free area on earth.

There is little tolerance of protest, particularly in the more restive areas of Tibet's east. Surveillance, control of media, 'patriotic re-education', curbs on religious and cultural activities, forced labour, severe religious repression and harsh punishments for almost all forms of dissent are enduring and, by many accounts, worsening characteristics of today's Tibet.

Nonetheless, there are regular reports of local Tibetans protesting mining developments in Tibet. On 24 August 2015 the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy reported that "Chinese authorities have used intimidation and threats of force to block attempts by local Tibetans to save a sacred mountain from uranium mining" in Ngaba in the north of Amdo. On 23 July 2015, Radio Free Asia reported that a Tibetan village chief, Lobsang Yeshe, detained for his role in protests against a Chinese gold mine in Kham had died in custody. Lobsang Yeshe had reportedly been tortured and severely beaten, eventually succumbing to his injuries.

On 5 May 2015, Radio Free Asia reported that "Chinese authorities have cracked down on villagers protesting road work linked to plans for mining on a sacred mountain" in Kham. On 2 July 2014, Radio Free Asia reported that police in Kham "attacked and beat a group of Tibetan women who had gathered to protest copper mining on land considered sacred by residents living near the site."

On 17 February 2021, Radio Free Asia, reported the death in prison of Kunchok Jinpa who was sentenced to an unprecedented 21 years imprisonment for talking to media about the 2013 protest to stop a uranium mine at the sacred mountain, Naklha Dzamba. Prisoners in Tibet are subject to torture, ill-treatment, forced labour and harsh conditions.

Attempting to protect a sacred site is a consistent theme of environmental protests in Tibet. Traditional Tibetan beliefs and understanding of the land have played an important part in maintaining a harmonious relationship between Tibetans and their environment. Tibetans must be included at the table to have a say over their lands and environment, it is too important for Tibet, and for the world, to exclude those that know Tibet best.

Read our full report 'Tibet: An Environmental Challenge' at
<https://www.atc.org.au/report-tibet-environmental-challenge/>