

# **Toward Knowledge— —Not Just a Feeling— About Tibet**

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## **The Myths**

Americans feel more about Tibet than they know.

The name alone conjures up mystery and intrigue—the mythical Shangri-la. When added to a history filled with geographical, historical, and legal ambiguity, achieving understanding takes some doing.

When Europeans were exploring the world, climbing the highest mountains, discovering the source of every river, and conquering the world, Tibet remained unassailable, forbidden, out of reach. The more unsuccessful Europeans were in “opening” Tibet, the more the mystery grew.

Westerners created religions allegedly based on Tibetan Buddhism—such as Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophy—full of secret teachings and secret rituals; fantasies of the western mind. One scholar dubbed it: “pseudo-orientalia.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 1920s, James Hilton published *Lost Horizon*, a novel about a secret valley in the Himalayas with no illness, no aging, no need to work, and plenty to eat. For an audience in the midst of a depression, this was a fantasy worth embracing. Frank Capra’s awarding-winning film of the book (in which the Tibetan Buddhist abbot was played by a former New York Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx) added enormously to the mythologizing.

In the 1960s, LSD advocates developed their own Tibet fantasies by celebrating *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a translation of Buddhist rituals for the deceased. They promoted the text as an essential guide to understanding life.

Then came new-age philosophies and the Tibetan diaspora, with hundreds of proselytizing monks. Westerners, especially Americans, fueled by their new-age attraction to the spiritual bazaars of the day, were prepared to accept images of a benign, idyllic society ruled by beneficent lamas practicing secret rituals based on occult knowledge. As a result, an imaginary “Tibet,” a figment of the Western imagination, was sustained and flourished.

The Shangri-la myth, in the words of one scholar of Tibet, is “...a dream from which the English-speaking West has not entirely awoken...”<sup>2</sup>

While the West created this mythical Tibet, China, in the past two decades, has created a myth of its own—although the Tibet the Chinese evoke is quite different from its Western counterpart. Since the internationalization of Tibet in the late 1980s China has produced a blizzard of books, magazines, TV shows, and films on the region. While these have failed miserably to influence people outside the country, internally they have created a mythical Tibet, evoking images of an exotic land and people, clean air, simple living, and, in some instances, notions of “noble savages” and secret Buddhist rituals. Tibetan medicine has become widely popular, and the word “Tibet” is used often in products that have nothing to do with Tibet but are intended to tap into the exoticism of the term to encourage sales.

### **The History**

There is a third Tibet—a real place, with real people and a real history. That history, however, is complicated and controversial, contributing to the difficulties in trying to understand the situation today.

To begin, there are two geographical areas designated as Tibet. One is China’s Tibet, a political entity called the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which corresponds roughly with the political area under the rule of the earlier Dalai Lamas. The other, the Tibet claimed by today’s Dalai Lama, is about twice the size and corresponds to the entire area in which ethnic Tibetans live, including portions of the current provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai and Gansu.

There was no Tibet as a national entity before the 7<sup>th</sup> century when a remarkable man, Songsten Gampo, pulled the various tribes in the region together, introduced Buddhism, developed a written script, and created a Tibetan identity.

Tibet's most important external relationship was—and is—with China. As early as AD 832, the two signed a pact called the “Treaty of Uncle & Nephew.” Later, amidst new tensions, Tibetans invaded China and fought their way to the gates of the capital—present-day Xi’an.

When the Mongols conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), they failed to conquer the Tibetans. To the contrary, the Tibetans managed to convert the Mongols to Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetans and the Mongols developed a “priest-patron” relationship whereby the Mongol armies protected the Tibetans from invasion while the Tibetan monks provided spiritual guidance in return. To reward these spiritual guides, the Mongols created the position of Dalai Lama and the theocratic state which would govern Tibet for the next several centuries.

Tibetans argue this arrangement was exclusively a Mongol-Tibetan relationship; Chinese argue that the Mongols were Emperors of China at the time, so Tibet was incorporated into the Chinese empire.

By the 1600s, China was ruled by Manchus (Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911), who administratively integrated Tibet into China around 1720 and for the next two centuries sent officials (*ambans*) to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa to govern in the name of the emperor. But not all these officials cared about governing. Tibetans discovered that they could pay lip service to the system while continuing to govern themselves largely unhindered.

Herein lies another major dispute: was this relationship solely a Manchu-Tibetan one or did the Manchus represent the state/empire of China?

The debate over the status of Tibet was exacerbated in 1911 when the Qing Dynasty collapsed and China had no central government. Tibet unilaterally declared independence; it had its own government, bureaucracy, army, postal system, currency and foreign relations. So in some ways during the Qing period,

and certainly from 1911-1951, Tibet was, for all intents and purposes, independent.

Despite this *de facto* independence, however, every treaty signed in the post-1911 period and every government (including that of the U.S.) recognized Tibet as a part of China. Legally (*de jure*), Tibet was part of China.

It is easy to see how both those who advocate Tibetan independence and those who contend that Tibet is a part of China have plenty of historical precedence to call upon to argue their cases.

### **Tibet and the PRC**

In October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and both China and Tibet underwent monumental transformation.

The Communists, like all 20th Century Chinese (regardless of their political persuasion), believed Tibet was, and had always been part of China. To Chinese, Tibet has been as much a part of their country as Hawai'i has been to Americans.

After a brief military skirmish on the Tibetan border in 1950, the CCP offered Tibetans a treaty of incorporation: the 17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. This initiative was curious, for if Tibet was historically part of China, why the need for a treaty? Clearly, the new government was acknowledging that Tibet presented a special situation.

Having ratified the agreement, Tibet now actually became a part of the Chinese state; fully incorporated for the first time with the arrival of large numbers of officials and soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). At no time in the previous 1200 years had either of these developments occurred.

In the 1950s the Chinese government created a political boundary in eastern Tibet. To the west was "Tibet" (the TAR) and to the east was "China," albeit inhabited with Tibetans. Mao Zedong's policy in the 1950s was to leave Tibetan society intact, work to win the allegiance of the aristocratic feudal elite and hope they would introduce revolutionary reforms. So nothing changed west of that line. However, east of that line was

“China” and since the entire country was going through revolutionary socialist upheaval, then that area had to as well. Mao’s policy was based on the notion that Tibet was so different and the society so entrenched that radical change would breed resentment. Somehow Chinese bureaucrats did not realize (care?) that there was no difference in how people lived on both sides of the border. So Mao’s premonition about how Tibetans would react to socialist reforms proved correct.

Resentment against Chinese rule grew in eastern Tibet to the point that by 1956 there was a full-blown insurrection which spread westward into Lhasa. In March 1959, events came to a head, and the resulting revolt led to the Dalai Lama and about 50-60,000 Tibetans fleeing into exile in India, Nepal, and Bhutan, where they remain to this day. The Dalai Lama and about 130-140,000 Tibetans live in exile, while about 6 million Tibetans live inside the PRC.

The guerrilla war that developed lasted until the early 1970s, fueled by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its cold-war attempts to destabilize the Communist government in China, but ultimately ended in failure.

Chinese policies over the ensuing 58 years have varied widely, creating a climate of mistrust. In the 1950s and the 1980s Tibetans were free to practice their religion and culture. But the years 1966-1969 of the Cultural Revolution witnessed massive destruction of religious buildings and artifacts, the forced abandonment of religious vows by the large population of clergy, and attempts to destroy traditional Tibetan culture. On the other hand, government policy during the 1960s did assist Tibetan serfs in loosening the bonds that had chained them to powerful landlords and monasteries.

In the 1980s policies had been designed to encourage the flourishing of Tibetan culture. “Their social customs and habits must be respected,” CCP leader Hu Yaobang had declared, “...If we do not do that, we are only speaking empty words.”<sup>3</sup> The idea was to ensure Tibetans cultural security and then proceed to economic development. But these policies did not produce a break-through in the Beijing-Dalai Lama negotiations then underway. Then, in 1989, the Dalai Lama rejected an

invitation to visit Beijing . This was the most serious of several missteps the Dalai Lama made in negotiations with Beijing since Deng Xiaoping had initiated contacts in late 1978. In January 1989, moderates were still in charge of Tibet policy in Beijing. The Dalai Lama's failure to go was the last straw in the demise of these moderates, and hard-liners were able to wrest policy-making away from them.

As a result, the Chinese government chose to employ a different strategy. Now the policies would be based solely on economic development. Beijing has pumped billions of yuan into Tibet, especially since the 1990s. Some 75% of the TAR's GDP is from outside subsidies. Lives have become materially better, life expectancy has soared, child mortality has plummeted, especially in the cities. A nascent middle class of Tibetan merchants, officials, university students, CCP members, and military/police officers, who have a vested interest in the status quo, has been created.

In recent years, international tourism and funding from the Chinese state have helped develop Tibet's urban economy (though the rural areas, where 80% of Tibetans live, remain devastatingly poor). For many Han Chinese (the dominant nationality in the country), more personal freedom and disposable income have led to their choosing Tibet as a tourist destination—and in massive numbers, aided by the newly built railroad. Moreover, the development of the economy has attracted tens of thousands of Han Chinese looking for economic opportunities. Consequently, Tibetans have become a minority in the three urban areas of Tibet.

The contemporary grievances of the Tibetans go back to the introduction of these economic development policies in the 1990s. These policies gave short shrift to cultural issues, and Tibetans have come to resent the religious restrictions, the languishing of their language, the continual debasement of the Dalai Lama, the day-to-day discrimination in wages, and the attitudes of the Han Chinese who have poured into Tibet and have been the disproportionate recipients of the rewards of economic development. Moreover, there has been serious economic displacement: nomads being forced into sedentary

villages and job discrimination against Tibetans in favor of Han Chinese in the cities.

In short, the government's economic stimulus efforts have not been sufficient. The government is seen by Tibetans not as a neutral party protecting the rights of all citizens but as advocates of the Hans. As one Tibetan herder told Nick Kristoff of the *New York Times*, "living standards had improved...yet he had joined the demonstrations against Chinese rule. His priority, he said, wasn't wealth, but freedom to worship the Dalai Lama."<sup>4</sup>

### **The International Campaign**

As mentioned, beginning in 1978, the Dalai Lama and Beijing began talks which have continued, on and off, since. During one break in the 1980s, the Dalai Lama launched an international campaign. The goal was to garner international support for his cause in hopes it would pressure Beijing to compromise at the negotiating table.

Building on the Western mythology of Tibet, utilizing a selective and emotive historical narrative, and employing modern public relations methods, this campaign became extraordinarily successful. Tibet support groups, Hollywood stars, the Noble Peace Prize, etc., all managed to make Tibet and the Dalai Lama household names. For years the Dalai Lama preached independence. The hope was, especially after the demise of the Soviet Union and its allies, that Communist China would go the same route. After some years, the Dalai Lama realized this was not going to happen, and the policy changed to something he called the "Middle Way." He was no longer interested in independence but now wanted only a "high level of autonomy;" an ambiguous phrase that the Tibetan and Chinese negotiators continue to have trouble defining. However, the independence movement has been like a snowball on a steep hill: it keeps getting bigger and harder to stop. This confuses Beijing, which points to the contradiction in the Dalai Lama's claims that he no longer strives for independence while simultaneously, in his name, a movement grows among Tibetan exiles and Western supporters, demanding a separate state. This rift between the

exile community and the Dalai Lama's pronouncements is large, but since it is difficult to openly criticize the Dalai Lama, the dispute is muted.

The exceptional success of this International Campaign in the West, however, has been mirrored by its failure inside Tibet. The Campaign—and the related involvement of governments such as the United States—has been both helpful and unhelpful in advancing toward a peaceful resolution of the situation in Tibet. Helpful in that it keeps the spotlight on the Tibet issue, raises money, brings in recruits, etc.; unhelpful in that external interference in China's domestic affairs is an extremely sensitive issue in its body politic. It reinforces the power of the hard-liners, who want to assimilate the Tibetans, by allowing them to recall the history of Western intrusion into China and the CIA's involvement in the guerrilla war. Separatism, ("splittism," as it is called in China) is, according to the official line, China's "number one threat," and the Dalai Lama-, they argue, is once again aligned with Western forces bent on breaking up the Chinese state.

Beijing's recent policy has been to give Tibetans enough material goods in hopes that they will become less interested in their culture, their ethnic nationalism will diminish, and, in the meantime, the Dalai Lama will die and the international campaign will wither. As the current CCP leader Hu Jintao said recently; "The emphasis should be laid on improving the living and working conditions of farmers and herdsmen; development is the basis and key to tackle *all* the problems in Tibet."<sup>55</sup> [emphasis added] But the events of March 2008 demonstrate clearly that these policies have failed.

### **Recent Events**

The March protests were touched off by various recent developments as well as by long-standing grievances. In spite of the fact that the two sides began talking again— six rounds since 2002— no forward movement is obvious. The Tibetan delegation issued cautiously positive statements while the Chinese barely acknowledged the talks at all.



March 10<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of the failed uprising in 1959, usually commemorated in Lhasa by small numbers of monks unsuccessfully trying to demonstrate. This year was no different; monks came out of their monasteries, gathering peacefully from March 10-13. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, however, a clerical demonstration in central Lhasa was met by police force, and non-clerical Tibetans joined in. The police retreated and an ethnic riot ensued in which random Han Chinese were attacked and Han-owned shops were burned to the ground. Beijing says 18 people died.

These events, remarkable on their own, came after the debacle of the Olympic torch relay around the world in which demonstrators protesting the situation in Tibet threatened, in city after city, to seize or douse the fire. The relay became a public relations disaster for China. For several years, Tibetan support groups around the world had seen the Beijing Olympics as an opportunity to raise the Tibetan issue when the world's attention would be focused on China and they began preparing accordingly.<sup>6</sup>

These circumstances led to an unprecedented series of events. The 2008 demonstrations were significantly different from earlier Tibetan protests on the March 10th anniversary, which had always been small, sporadic and uncoordinated. This time, a substantial number of lay Tibetans became involved. Ethnic violence broke out for the first time. Usually the protests were within the Lhasa region, but now they broke out across a wide swath of greater Tibet, even among Tibetan students in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Protests of the past only lasted a few hours at best, yet in 2008 reports of small protests continued for months, despite the massive show of military force thrown into the region. Moreover, because of the Olympics, foreign governments weighed in, pressuring Beijing to renew talks with the Dalai Lama.

China's initial response was typical of previous such protests; however, because of the overriding concern for stability leading up to the Olympics, the government reaction was heightened. Monasteries were locked down. Clergy were forced

to attend days-long “patriotic education” classes where they were compelled to sign attacks on the Dalai Lama and pledge their loyalty to the Chinese state. Though most have since been released, thousands of people were rounded up, detained, and interrogated. Some 42 individuals have been “tried” and sentenced to death, although there have been no executions to date.

The state has attacked all criticism as “splittist” and deemed it treasonous. The TAR was immediately closed to tourism. But since tourism is the major economic engine for the TAR, within a few weeks Chinese tourists were permitted to return, and by late June small numbers of foreigners as well. The paramilitary authorities remain in large numbers throughout the region, and activities of Tibetans’ daily lives have been curtailed.

Beijing did agree to renew talks with the Dalai Lama, and two short meetings were held. No one knows if China is now serious about negotiating or merely participating in a public relations exercise with regard to the Olympics. Most observers are gloomy. “In the course of our discussions we were compelled to candidly convey to our counterparts,” said the chief Tibetan negotiator, “that in the absence of serious and sincere commitment on their part, the continuation of the present dialogue process would serve no purpose.”<sup>8</sup> The Chinese response has been that these matters are complicated and will take time to work out. Compare that hesitation with the rapid and dramatic policy changes towards Taiwan as soon as the new “one China” Guomindang government in Taipei was elected to replace the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party.

The Chinese government has accused the “Dalai clique” of being responsible for the unrest, thereby refusing to take responsibility for their failed policies. To be sure, pro-independence groups outside China have been in touch with Tibetans inside, especially the clergy from affiliated monasteries; pamphlets, audio teachings, and photos of the Dalai Lama and other materials are routinely brought into Tibet surreptitiously.

Nevertheless, there is no credible evidence that outside forces were responsible for the violence; indeed, despite their rhetorical claims, these groups have never been able to gain any foothold within Tibet itself.

The Sichuan earthquake took the issue of Tibet off the front pages and turned world opinion of China from that of aggressor to victim. But the issues surrounding Tibet remain, and China's policy is in disarray. Some Chinese news outlets and officials hold out the hope for compromise while others vilify the Dalai Lama in crude language unheard since the Cultural Revolution. There have been repeated missteps and political failures on both sides. Today, the onus is on the Chinese government. Economic development will never engage the Tibetans as long as they feel culturally insecure and economically discriminated against. These issues are far more pressing than independence. The question now is what does China want to do?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Agehananda Bharati, "Fictitious Tibet: The Origin and Persistence of Rampatism," *Tibet Society Bulletin*, No. 7 (1974): 1-11.

<sup>2</sup>Laurie Hovell McMillan, *English in Tibet. Tibet in English* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. x

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Zhang Boshu, "The way to resolve the Tibet issue," Beijing, 22-28 April 2008 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2008/05/zhang-boshu-the-way-to-resolve-the-tibet-issue>

<sup>4</sup>Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Terrified Monks," *New York Times*, 15 May 2008, p. A29

<sup>5</sup>Hu Jintao: Harmony, Stability Prerequisite for Tibet Development," *Xinhua*, 5 March 2007. <http://www.seac.gov.cn/gjmw/index.htm>

<sup>6</sup>Denis J. Burke, "Tibetans in Exile in a Changing Global Political Climate," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43:15, 12 April 2008, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup>For a map of the disturbances from March 10-April 5, see: [http://www.savetibet.org/images/images/protests\\_map\\_404\\_LARGE.jpg](http://www.savetibet.org/images/images/protests_map_404_LARGE.jpg)